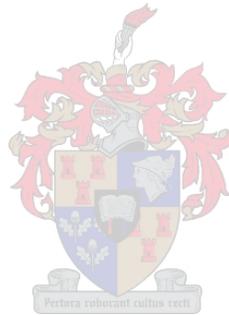


# **Complex Urban Identities: An Investigation into the Everyday Lived Realities of Cities as Reflected in Selected Postmodern Texts**

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Dr Ralph Goodman  
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**DECLARATION**

By submitting this dissertation, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the owner of the copyright thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

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## **Abstract**

The concept of the city has evolved over time with generations of city dwellers. The rapid advance of technology has promoted globalisation, which has brought about increased familiarity with diverse cultures, but has also exposed issues of marginalisation among communities in cities.

In order to approach a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the “open” postmodern view of the city it is essential to consider the relevant literature that grapples with issues of human identity and appropriation in the city.

This dissertation examines narrative perspectives in the literary works of four postmodern writers: Jonathan Safran Foer, Neil Gaiman, China Miéville, and Lauren Beukes. References to underlying philosophical viewpoints, various perceptions, both “real” and fictional, were incorporated in the discussion.

Close attention is paid to the correlation between the novel and the city, and to what extent the city itself can be viewed as a narrative – since, within a postmodern approach, fictional narratives may form discourses that represent, and in a fashion constitute, the city, while subjects at the same time form themselves in terms of their environment. Fiction becomes an invaluable tool for exploring the cityscape and commenting on contemporary issues.

In conclusion, the urbanised human subject may be said to play a vital role in establishing the concept of the city, both in “real” culture and in fictional narrative. The representation of the contemporary South African urban milieu in the discussed literature serves to confirm the relevance of local as well as global influences. To justify multiple perspectives on the city consequently means to grant each individual viewpoint validity.

## Opsomming

Die konsep van die stad het deur die jare ontwikkel saam met geslagte van stadsbewoners. Die vinnige vooruitgang van tegnologie het globalisasie bevorder, wat op sy beurt weer bewustheid van diverse kulture bevorder het, maar ook kwessies blootgelê het rondom marginalisasie in stadsgemeenskappe.

Ten einde 'n meer omvattende begrip van die kompleksiteit van die “oop” postmoderne perspektief op die stad daar te stel, is dit belangrik om te kyk na die relevante literatuur wat bemoeienis maak met kwessies van menslike identiteit en eienaarskap in die stad.

Hierdie dissertasie het gekyk na vertellerperspektiewe in die literêre werke van vier postmoderne skrywers: Jonathan Safran Foer, Neil Gaiman, China Miéville, en Lauren Beukes. Met verwysing na onderliggende filosofiese gesigspunte is verskeie persepsies, gegrond op die werklikheid sowel as fiktief, in die bespreking ingesluit.

Daar is aandag gegee aan die verband tussen die roman en die stad, en in watter mate die stad self as 'n teks beskou kan word, aangesien die teks volgens 'n postmoderne aanslag die stad kan “representeer” en “laat ontstaan”, terwyl menslike subjekte hulself terselfdertyd vorm in terme van hul omgewing. Fiksie word dus 'n waardevolle werktuig vir waarneming van en kommentaar lewer op kontemporêre sake.

Ten slotte kan gesê word dat die verstedelike menslike subjek 'n belangrike rol speel in die bevestiging van die stad as konsep, beide in reële kultuur en in fiktiewe vertelling. Die verteenwoordiging van die kontemporêre Suid-Afrikaanse stedelike milieu in die bespreekte tekste bevestig die relevansie van lokale sowel as internasionale invloede. Om veelvuldige perspektiewe op die stad gelyk te beregtig beteken gevolglik dat elke individuele gesigspunt geldig is.

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## **Introduction**

This dissertation seeks to gain a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary cities and urban communities through an investigation of a selection of popular culture texts, which include the following genres: postmodern writing, speculative fiction and science fiction. The specific focus will be on the intersection between realism and fictionality within the city. Some of the theoretical paradigms that prove useful for my study are: post-structuralism, postmodernism, utopian studies, urban studies, cultural studies, political science, architectural design, and urban planning.

In the context of this dissertation post-structuralism refers to the theoretical approach which views the text as an independent entity, leading to multiple interpretations, the text being fashioned by the reader as well as the author. Both scientific discovery and postmodernity have pronounced the loci of time and space to be no longer unconditionally fixed, and these changed perspectives have led to a reassessment of the structural foundations of the universe and a decentralised approach to structure. Postmodernism blurs and fragments recognised ideas in an ironic reflexive way in order to challenge the established status quo. In conjunction with this, utopian studies – and more specifically the concepts of dystopia or heterotopia (a decidedly postmodern notion of space “outside” or on the fringes) – afford a different perspective on the norm.

Chapter 1 examines the concept of the city and looks at some of the problems that face contemporary cities.

Chapter 2 examines the correlation between the novel and the city, and considers to what extent the city itself can be viewed as a narrative – since, within a postmodern approach, fictional narratives may form discourses that represent, and in a fashion constitute, the city. For this purpose, various street culture phenomena are discussed. Subsequent chapters investigate this use of the fictional narrative by consistently considering a given novel in conjunction with a specific city (and type of city).

Chapter 3 discusses how fiction becomes an invaluable tool for exploring the cityscape and commenting on contemporary issues. An extract from the novel

*Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer is discussed in parallel with an examination of some features of New York City.

Chapter 4 – on *Neverwhere* by Neil Gaiman – comments on and illustrates the significance of interaction between a realistic and a fantastical/imaginary London. The focus of this chapter is on how the city is interpreted and experienced from various angles, i.e. from the view of the possessor as well as the dispossessed.

Chapter 5 explores the importance of narratives that feature fictional cities, also focussing on the interplay between realism and fictionality, with specific reference to *Perdido Street Station* by China Miéville. The main focus of this chapter falls on hybridity, communities within cities, and the way subjects form themselves in terms of their environment.

Chapter 6 considers the concept of virtual cities, based on a discussion of *Moxyland* by Lauren Beukes, and also addresses the social issues, both contemporary and future, in Cape Town and South Africa.

## **Chapter 1: The Concept of the City**

Cities are created, inhabited and adapted by humans whose culture becomes urbanised, leading to a reciprocal relationship and mutual impact – and attracting an increasingly larger portion of the population. Delhi is the “site of eight former cities”, while the cities of Sumeria made the southern part of Mesopotamia 80 per cent urban about four thousand years ago (Seabrook, Jeremy 9). So while society seems to become increasingly more urbanised, as can be (and later will be) illustrated, city life has been an integral part of humanity almost as far back as recorded human history begins. In the last 60 years the percentage of city inhabitants has at least doubled, indicating the unstable nature of population demographics and a prolific increase in urbanisation. Simon Bekker’s 2007 publication, *Reflections on Identity in Four African Cities*, points out that, for the first time in history, the majority of the world’s population now resides in cities (3), while in 1950 it was just 18 per cent of the population of developing countries (Seabrook 7). The prediction is that in the next 40 years 93 per cent of urban growth will happen in developing countries (United Nations qtd. in Pieterse, Edgar 16-18). In some areas, such as sub-Saharan Africa, “urban growth will become virtually synonymous with slum formation”, since it has the “highest annual urban growth rate ... and the highest slum growth rate” (Moreno and Warah qtd. in Pieterse 31-32). In other words, urban growth in the developing world – the predominant area of urban growth in the future – will be synonymous with poverty and social problems.

For Ida Susser there are two distinctions in aspects to urbanisation: firstly, the “spatial concentration of a population on the basis of certain limits of dimension and density”, and secondly, “the diffusion of the system of values, attributes and behaviour called ‘urban culture’” (Seabrook 21). Physically, modern cities have a considerable “ecological footprint”, since they need vast areas of land to supply the “food, energy, water and natural resources to keep them operating” (Evans, Bob, Joas Marko, and Susan Sundback 1), and are responsible for the consumption of most raw materials – as well as for pollution. Socially and economically, cities

are the heart of our civilization, the primary source of wealth and enterprise, places of inspiring architecture and the great centers of learning, culture and politics. Perhaps

most importantly, though, cities are the locus for change and innovation in all of these things, the places where new ideas, concepts and political visions are moulded into life. (Evans, Marko, and Sundback 1)

James Donald argues that it is exactly because one's sense of the city is "mediated through a powerful set of political, sociological and cultural associations" that the city is condensed into a symbolic space (181), which leaves the concept of the city open to interpretation.

On the most obvious level there is interaction among "physical, social, economic, political, ecological and cultural systems" within cities, which leads to "unpredictable dynamics" and the ongoing potential for "new alignments in social initiatives" (Pieterse 3-4). This implies, firstly, that discussing the myriad of different influences on the city is a complex matter; secondly, it is impossible to keep all these fields separate when attempting a discussion; thirdly, the rich space of the city has an unpredictable and changeable character, and lastly, every city community – and thus every city – has its own set of dynamics, so that while the city can be discussed as a general concept, every city should ideally be discussed in its own right. The limited scope of this dissertation dictates that the discussion will focus mainly on the general interaction among the physical, social, economic and political aspects of the city and examine how these variables shift in a rapidly globalising world. The discussion will at various points be linked to the fictional texts that are to be considered, in an attempt to gain insight into "everyday urbanism" or "the lived realities of the city" (Pieterse 108, 15).

Cities illustrate that there is a disconcerting gap between the wealthy and the poor (Evans, Marko, and Sundback 1). According to Pieterse it is not possible to come to any conclusions or to understand the "complex circuitries of power" in the city, without having insight into the impoverished side of the city spectrum, and rightly so, since a United Nations programme called *The Challenge of Slums* noted that 924 million people – that is 31.6 per cent of the urban population – were residing in slums in 2001 (Pieterse 3-4; Seabrook 10), which, according to current estimates, encompass a sixth of the world's population. Living conditions in slums are devastatingly difficult and the people who inhabit these spaces are exploited by governments,

corporations, land-owners and criminals. Many city dwellers struggle to gain access to basic health services, employment, housing and education.

These struggles are commonly reflected in literature about the city. Phaswane Mpe argues that there is a school of writers, from Charles Dickens to Mongane Wally Serote, that associates the “apparent structural decay” and pollution of cities with a “decline in moral fibre, as well as a [decline in a] general sense of social, political and cultural responsibility” (181). At the same time, the fact that some of the literature available on the lives of the urban poor puts pleasure into stark contrast with pain is not done to romanticise “the difficulties and brutalities of grinding poverty”, but rather to capture the “humanity” of the people who inhabit these spaces (Pieterse 10). Pieterse says that the “everyday realities” of cities are best captured in art and literature because these media can offer social comment, especially about problematical and hurtful conditions, while highlighting the “desires and pleasures that can coexist in even the most abject of conditions” (Pieterse 9). Seabrook makes a similar point when saying that slums are not only “sites of breakdown, violence and despair”; they may offer communal belonging and refuge to people with the same rural roots (11). This simultaneity of migration and rootedness functions in the same way as the retention of a communal identity and remembrance of traditions from the place of origin function for people who have been through the diasporic process.

On the economic front of urban development the most significant problem is “urban inequality” (Pieterse 8). In a globalising world cities need to “reinvent themselves” to attract investments, which means that the “infrastructure needs of the poor” are neglected in favour of what the cities need to be able to compete in a global market – whether this market is “export-oriented” or for a “growing service sector” (Pieterse 9, 35). This prejudices the allocation of public resources, because “economic” infrastructure is prioritised above “social reproductive” structures, so that “inhumane” living conditions are perpetuated and the marginalisation of the city poor is promoted (9, 35, 38). Resources here refer to the basics, such as water, nourishment, sanitation, transportation, electricity, housing, education, health and employment. Although cities across the globe have similar social problems, we should take cognisance of the increasing predominance of slums in developing countries, as opposed to the West.

Theorists of the modern urban condition agree that the essence of the city is based on commodities and capital. Max Weber believes it is the “culture of the built environment and its historical development” that leads to cities being based on “trade and commerce rather than agriculture”, and thus ultimately centred and developed around consumption (Parker, Simon 5, 10). George Simmel sees cities, above all, as “market settlements and places of commerce and trade...” (Parker 5), while Walter Benjamin suggests that the city developed around struggles in the workplace and between capitalists (Parker 5). Henri Lefebvre believes that there was a better alternative to the current class-divided city, if one could move “beyond the realm of commodified space” (Parker 5).

Capitalism is an economic system that is based on the commercial exchange of commodities. An expansion of this process leads to globalisation, a concept that Pieterse calls the “contemporary political economy of territorial development” (Pieterse 17). This means that globalisation can be defined (or rather interpreted) as the impact of technological, political and economic forces on a global scale, and suggests how these forces influence social behaviour and the functioning of cities and markets. So the constant interaction between different economic processes, albeit on a much larger scale than just within cities themselves, can be seen as globalisation. As economic globalisation needs “market access”, it has implications for infrastructure (Pieterse 17). According to Seabrook, the rich and the poor are both “fashioned in the image of the global market, for lives of mobility, choice and freedom”; however, the poor are invariably “excluded from the opportunity to express themselves in the great hypermarkets in which global choice and freedom are located” (17). Therefore the striving of cities to compete on a larger scale, in other words globalisation, can be blamed directly for some of the social problems of the urban poor. Apart from a lack of resources, the poor also have to deal with their desire to mimic the global markets of consumers from which they are excluded, which leads to “illegal migration” as the rural poor, looking for better opportunities, flee to cities where they squat on public and private land, because of the shortage of and desperate need for shelter. A need for basic services gives rise to the improvising of pirated services and goods, and making use of “network hackers”; poor economic conditions promote the activities of pickpockets and illegal lotteries; scant regard for the law in the face of the struggle to survive leads to the support of dangerous drug cartels and networks of fraud,

prostitution, smuggling and human trafficking (Seabrook 17, 60). Other social problems that afflict the urban poor include xenophobia – where outsiders pose a threat of competition to the money-generating ability of the more dominant group – and abuse by more assertive elements; alienation from their communities, roots and values; and disease, as a result of crowded and unsanitary living conditions (Mpe 180-197).

It is easy to see the problems of city life; it is not nearly as easy to find solutions. Yet Pieterse suggests that it is imperative, when looking for a solution to urban dilemmas, to be aware of the cultural turn in urban theory and social theory, and the idea that “language, discourse and symbolic meanings are central to the incessant processes of identity construction and the realm of agency in the spaces of the everyday” (85). The way to gain insight is by appreciating the structure lent by an economic backbone without losing sight of the importance of agency, since it is more important that the city should be a “place of experience” rather than a simple collection of buildings (Pieterse 110). At this level literature can offer great insight into the lived or everyday realities of the city.

As a unique individual every city dweller is subject to unique conditions and circumstances. He or she has his or her own limited view on everyday experiences and their significance within the order of things. These can be reconstructed in literature, though limited by virtue of the subject’s or narrator’s or author’s perspective, space and time, it does not mean that these limited renditions are not valid, each in its own right, but together all these varied perspectives can still at best present only an approximate interpretation of the city in its entirety. It follows therefore that within the scope of this dissertation it will be possible to address only a limited range of relevant considerations.

## **Chapter 2: The City: in Narrative, and as Narrative**

Initially, modern urban theorists presented “universal theories” of the urban condition. Poststructuralist and postmodern investigation of the modern city, however, dismisses “totalising epistemology” and argues “instead for ‘open’ readings of urban phenomena that contest and debate positions rather than assert the primacy of certain deductive models” (Parker 148). Peter Preston and Paul Simpson-Housley insist that while “empirically conceived models”, such as the classical geographical account, cannot be dismissed, these do not succeed in relaying the “human experience ... contained by the city” (1-2). An alternative perspective, such as the one offered by the novelist /writer, may give an affective insight into the social and cultural aspects of the city, as opposed to the built environment. Foucault argues that “every discourse ... will exhaust itself as the context of its production shifts and changes; producing new, competing discourses and a fresh set of myths on which to build another narrative” (Parker 149). As power structures change, so do the discourses representing urban life. While deconstructing the discourse might not lead to any “utopian finale”, it has for many cultural theorists been a useful exercise around issues pertaining to urban life (Parker 149).

Jonathan Raban argues that one of the results of the creative magnitude of the city is the “utopia/dystopia syndrome” (29). Whether the ambiguity is on a social, cultural or political level, it may often be accompanied by violence, “acute feelings of dislocation, insecurities and anxieties” on the one hand, and hope for the future on the other (Mpe 182). While the interplay between good (hopefulness) and evil (alienation, frustration, discord and pain) is a frequent phenomenon, it is not necessary to subscribe to either of these value judgements. Mpe argues that it is the very ambiguity of the city, both in its “physical structure and social fabric”, that “provides impetus” for writing and leads to the importance of the city in literature (182-183). The city as subject matter allows writers to put forward “new sets of expectations”, which raise “critical awareness” and allow readers to “challenge their own deeply-held values, stereotypes and prejudices” (Mpe 184, 191, 195).

Katherine Shonfield believes that “fiction, particularly in film and the novel, can be used in a number of ways to reveal unseen workings of architecture” in the city (154).

This implies interplay between the different types of narrative: the city as narrative, and narratives about the city. Robert Alter discusses the rise of the novel in conjunction with the rise of the nineteenth-century city. He states that since the novel was a middle- to upper-class pursuit and the only major genre to emerge since the start of the printing press, it is repeatedly focused on the city, which was the “principle theatre” for the middle to upper-classes then, and is still the form of collective existence which has undergone the most spectacular growth in the modern period (ix). He states that literature, similar to the visual arts, becomes an “innovative language to represent ... basic shift[s] in modern consciousness” (3-4). Alter argues that the nineteenth century city both contributed to change and was the result of change, because of its dynamic historical character (4). One may argue, as Evans, Marko, and Sundback do, that this is true not only for the nineteenth century, but that the city remains a locus of change and evolution today. In accordance with this, Pieterse argues that contemporary literature focuses the gaze on the “informal, the interior and the interstitial” (10). According to him, even these traditionally minor aspects influence the transformation of the city. This suggests that the special relationship between the rise of the city and the rise of the novel has implications for the awareness and respect with which the novelist handles his/her material – in other words, the experience of the city. The novel’s potential to highlight or elaborate has made it an apt means of commenting on all contemporary issues.

Shonfield believes that allegories and narratives offer important possibilities for using fiction for understanding space. “Th[e] hidden quality of reality can only be ... expressed by symbol, by allegory or parable” (Shonfield 160). She also feels that the city (or space) can be an autonomous character in a narrative. Characters’ feelings are often projected onto the landscape, and perhaps less often, though not uncommonly, the landscape will have an “identity” which is in opposition to that of the characters. In James Joyce’s *Dublin* for instance, the city is “internalized as consciousness”, while in Virginia Woolf’s novels the “subjectivities of characters are constituted in the very spaces of the city” (Bridge, Gary and Sophie Watson 8-9). The city acts as both setting and protagonist in the works of Woolf and Joyce (Preston and Simpson-Housley 6), and the streets of London are always presented through the eyes of a character, which renders London a “psychic space” by means of the use of “subjective thoughts” (Bridge and Watson 9). Since fiction tries to relate a story, its

representation of architecture can be “self-consciously loaded with meaning” (Shonfield 165). Images rendered in fiction form a dominant discourse that is never free of a hidden agenda, or as Alter suggests, it always contains the aim of the novelist. So the question for the writer (and also for the reader) becomes not whether to represent the city, but rather *how* to do so.

The city as a character can be distinguished from the city as a setting. This means that the city gains an identity through narrative that can consciously be explored. The city can either complement or contradict its inhabitants, but using specific parts of the city in the narrative, or using particular language or symbolism to describe the city, all subtly impact on how the city is interpreted and how dwelling within the city is viewed. Thus, deliberately employing a certain diction or selection of literary devices can entirely alter the reader’s perceptions of the city. The notion that the city acts as either a character or a setting to be interpreted renders the city itself as a text that holds signs and symbols to be understood and deciphered, which in turn leads to a poststructuralist interpretation of the city as a text. Shonfield recognises structural patterns in the cityscape, and believes that modern city life is so “disjunctive” that the “habitual deciphering of everyday life ... can be described as the fictional imagination’s attempt to describe a pattern” (Shonfield 160). However, since the many people who live in communities in cities are strangers to one another, they can only act on hints and symbols. As Raban argues, the mobile nature of the city means that one acts on “hints and fancies”, since one is exposed only to fragments and “isolated signals”, which means that city life is one of disjointed gestures that “resist” all efforts at extricating meaning (8-9). Preston and Simpson-Housley refer to the “aggrandizing potential” of the novel, which can also be compared to the “development of the city as a location for an enormous range of people and activities” (6). Therefore, while the city has a narrative aspect within which is contained certain symbols and signs, the narrative may be arcane, so that flexibility is essential in the attempt to objectively interpret the city as text.

As Italo Calvino suggests in his novel *Invisible Cities*, the city “does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand written in the corners of the streets, the grating of the windows ... every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls” (11). For him the city signifies a narrative that can be deciphered and read, if one

meets the challenge of understanding the symbols that constitute it. *Invisible Cities* deals with invisible or hidden parts of Venice. It appears as if Marco Polo is telling Kublai Khan of all the cities he has visited, but actually he is repetitively telling the Khan about Venice. By using his imagination and focusing on a different aspect of the city each time, Polo manages to make Venice sound like at least fifty-five different places. This interpretation indicates the rich changeable nature of the city and suggests that it can be a place of the imagination with such an abundance of (contrasting) aspects that it is impossible to narrow the city down. Calvino elaborates on how signs and symbols feature in the city: “the eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things...” (13). When looking at the Eiffel Tower or World Trade Centre, for instance, one does not see only the building, but also what it stands for. According to Raban another result of the city’s “imaginative cumbersomeness” is the inability to distinguish its parts from its whole – what he calls “moral synecdoche” (29). Brian Robson adds that these symbols are “endless[ly] similar, and similarly evocative, images” (Pile, Steve 5) which, because they represent the whole, come to constitute the city. Calvino concludes that “the city must never be confused with the words that describe it. And yet between the one and the other there is a connection” (61). This does not mean that narrative is not an apt medium through which to explore the city, but rather that there is always more to the city than the words describing it. So while the imagination has an impact on the city, and vice versa, the two entities, the “real” and the discursive, still retain separate identities.

The poststructuralist view that the city can be interpreted as a text gives new life to the interpretation of literary and cultural texts. Fiction has the ability to lend insight into the larger scale of the experience of the city, transforming the city into a text to be read. Fiction can take on a challenging role, because while the readers are involved in the fiction, they also have to suspend their own disbelief because of the text’s fictional nature. Since the reader is forced to accept the fiction as truth, during the duration of dealing with it, the fiction gains the ability to challenge, or at the very least complement, more traditional and empirical interpretations of the city. In this way the “active operation” of fiction can have a “subverting” quality (Shonfield 161), but it can also validate city theory. Fiction’s transgressive role means that “it legitimates architectural and urban insights and the experiences of the non-expert (as manifest in films and novels)” (Shonfield 161). As Mpe suggests, if the city is a text,

then it begs to be deciphered, and different observers or readers, for the sake of the metaphor, will come to it with diverse expectations, experiences and ways of reading it (183). However, Anthony D. King argues that the “intertextual implosion of representation where architecture becomes the subject of film, film the subject of history, history the subject of criticism, criticism the subject of deconstruction, deconstruction the subject of architecture, and so on ad infinitum”, has led to the collapse of the “boundary between social reality and representations of that reality” (3). This problematises the relationship between the “real” and the “discursive” city (King 3) – the one cannot exist without the other, and the porous interplay between the two leads to critical self-awareness.

An invaluable structured approach to the city is that of the utopian narrative. Amy Bingaman, Lise Sanders, and Rebecca Zorach are interested in how “scientific and engineered proposals for “real”, inhabited places on the one hand, and utopian political aims expressed in fiction and theory, on the other, converge to bear upon ... [one’s] understanding of ‘the good place’” (1-2) or utopia. Many city planners have had ideas about what the ideal (and workable) city should be. Good examples are Sir Ebenezer Howard’s “Garden Cities” and Le Corbusier’s “Radiant City” (Macionis, John J. and Vincent N. Parrillo 408, 418). Howard thought the formula for the ideal city was decentralisation and the building of many small cities, while Le Corbusier wanted large cities, consisting of skyscrapers that could house everybody – structures so huge that they would keep 95 per cent of available land free from buildings (Macionis and Parrillo 418). On the other hand, there is also an array of utopian fiction featuring the perfect city, starting traditionally with Thomas More’s *Utopia* (written in 1516). Since the city is so frequently featured as “a physical embodiment of the Utopian community [it] reminds us of its perceived potential to achieve a kind of contained perfection” and to offer a safe haven from the disorder found outside its protective shell (Preston and Simpson-Housley 2). Such dominant fictional representation at least partially reflects the actual politics prevalent at the time it was written. Both theorists’ and novelists’ attempts at utopian narrative can thus be interpreted as attempts to resolve or address very real social and political conflict. Buck-Morss, however, points out that “the most inspiring mass-utopian projects – mass-sovereignty, mass production, mass culture – have left a history of disasters in their wake ... the dream of culture for the masses has created a panoply of

phantasmagoric effects that aestheticise the violence of modernity and anesthetize its victims” (Bingaman, Sanders, and Zorach 2). However, the utopian novel still exists in contemporary fiction, which speaks of a continued need to address social and political issues.

The ideological symbols and signs hidden in a text relate to Shonfield’s warning against simply seeing the city as a text “up for interpretation” (161). Trying to engage with the city as a narrative text or analysing it according to the ideas of writers and theorists is fine, but she thinks that having “an intentionally paradoxical” view can complement the examination of the city (162). Fiction lends itself well to such a paradoxical investigation, since it grants a large measure of flexibility by allowing the reader to explore ideas in different ways and on different levels. The concept of having an intentionally paradoxical view of the city opens up the discussion for a postmodern investigation that allows for contestation and debate.

Preston and Simpson-Housley refer to postmodernism as a “widespread mood in literary theory” (9). Postmodernism, which is also a movement in architecture, thus proves to be invaluable in the discussion of the city, since it allows interplay between narrative and architecture. Since postmodernism deals with ambiguity, fluidity and discussion, rather than a rigid search for answers, it allows for a “plurality of perspectives” (Preston and Simpson-Housley 9). To illustrate the postmodern view of the city, it is important first to focus on the narratives that are visible at street level, before addressing general (traditional) narratives about the city, such as films and novels. “Space can be variously understood as extension, as directionality, as uniqueness, as the layering of memory, as sensuality, as representation, as intersubjectivity” (Bingaman, Sanders, and Zorach 4). Space, and thus the city, has a certain fluidity. This would imply that space, as the product of social relations, would be constantly changing. As Parker and Foucault suggest, there are dominant discourses within the city which shift and change, leading to new, competing discourses that allow the construction of new narratives. As power structures change, so do discourses. With the city in constant flux around individuals, new ways have to be found to understand it and interact with it. Parker makes two points about the relation between cities and narratives. First, he claims “all cities are products of the human imagination”, because individuals are constantly examining the image they

have of their “environment, social relations and habitat”. Secondly, narratives do not have to be written down. They can, for instance, be in the form of architecture, songs and street culture (149). Whether space is seen as the product of the architects who designed the buildings in such spaces, or of the individuals or communities that inhabit the space, “space becomes a phantasmatic medium through which an imagination expresses itself” (Bingaman, Sanders, and Zorach 5).

It is in this ambiguous space that embodies both the dangerous and the safe that cultural production, and thus counter or street culture, is at its most creative. The city is an “active organism” that acts as a site both of “culture and inspiration” (Preston and Simpson-Housley 10). The urban environment thus lends itself to subversive art, because of its complex and inspirational nature. Parker summarises this well when he points out that:

Social identity ... as [constituted in] ... cultures of difference ... is always defined and redefined against ‘the other’. Cultures of difference are to be found in even the remotest village ... but only in cities ... does the process of sociation allow the formation of new identities, new narratives and new cultures. Urbanity is [thus]... a site of representation, contestation and identification. (149)

The urban environment – by supplying a site for challenge – leads to the formation of new narratives and new identities. Raban argues that cities are “soft” and that they are always awaiting the “imprint of an identity” (2). By consolidating the city “into a shape [one] can live in”, the subject decides who he/she is and at that point the city “assume[s] a fixed form” around him/her. Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift find that new narratives need to be formed, such as the city in motion, and Parker suggests that the growth of the private sphere and the “increase in geographical mobility” have led to subjects being able to construct or reconstruct their “identities in new and sometimes radical ways” (Parker 138), while Moretti believes what “distinguishes” the city is not so much “spatial mobility” as “social mobility” (Bridge and Watson 7). This means that the movement and contact of different groups and cultures, whether within a specific geographical space and community or between different ones, have a large impact on how identities are formed and diversified in the urban environment.

Bridge and Watson explain that the “city speaks through everyone and everything, in a multitude of voices” (8). The question is then whether the city is merely the

backdrop for human activity or whether there is more to it. Walter Benjamin's 1920s reflexive walker or *flâneur* popularised the concept of a person walking through the city, contemplating and interpreting space and using the imagination to express what is seen (Amin and Thrift 10). Implicit in the *flâneur*'s comments is an attempt to understand the environment. Amin and Thrift claim that transitivity "allows the city to continually fashion and refashion itself" (10) and it is the "silent improvisation of individuals" that lends it this changeable nature. So it is the presentation of the city as a type of theatre that allows it to be unpredictable. The *flâneur* can be simply a viewer of the scene he walks through, but can also act as a participant in this theatre. This ambiguous inside-outside perspective allows him the chance to reflect on the city and its nature. According to Parker, the *flâneur* is in search of the "true experience" of the city that is impossible to pin down and thus he has to embrace the city in its "profound totality" and "take refuge in the landscape of memory" (Parker 18). Thus the landscape the *flâneur* navigates is one of varied parts. He does not see the landscape merely as it is; he also experiences the influence on it of imagination, culture and diversity. In other words, he experiences the things that give a city its unique and distinctive character. This interaction between a human walker and the city can be described as "mobility by flesh and stone in interaction" (Amin and Thrift 10). Maps, or geographical interpretations offer only a limited or singular view of the city, but the reflexive walker can grasp the city "through sensory, emotional and perceptual immersion in the passages of the city" (10-11) – and it is this mental and physical interaction with the city that offers alternative narratives and allows for discussion and understanding of the complexities of the city.

The *flâneur*'s ability to link "space, language and subjectivity" is invaluable in reading or understanding the city (Amin and Thrift 11). *Flânerie* reveals the intimate secrets of the city, yet these secrets can never "authenticate" the city since they are from particular parts of the city and thus from "distinctive subject positions" (Amin and Thrift 13). The *flâneur*, like so many others, simply offers a certain dimension from within which to explore the city, or an interpretive narrative about the city, but his view is not necessarily an accurate one, or the only one. What is important, however, is that the *flâneur*'s "interactive" wandering through the city discredits the idea that the city is merely a backdrop for human activity.

While the *flâneur* can offer some insight, the city's transitivity can also be grasped through other means, such as "imaginaries which illustrate the city in motion... and books or films" (Amin and Thrift 14). Most of the advanced movements in art, literature, music, architecture, design and fashion, as well as the "quintessentially urban art form, the cinema", are located in the bigger cities (Parker 138). While cities seem naturally conducive to artistic expression, it can also (in keeping with its nature) feature as a commodity, and its representation in the arts or the way that city inhabitants express themselves can in turn also be commodified. "Alternative, subaltern visions of the metropolis in their various forms combine to undercut and disrupt ... dominant cultural strategies – from street art (graffiti), to rap, to skateboarding – even though each 'counter-culture' is constantly prey to cooptation and commodification" (Parker 140). Even though any movement in street culture or subculture runs the risk of becoming commodified, it is at first a way to challenge the so-called dominant narratives within the city.

"One only has to look at the importance of a fashionable brand ... [of clothing], the latest street slang, or the greeting rituals of teenage urbanites to appreciate how language and the use of the body helps us to locate ourselves within a given urban milieu" (Parker 143). The language (or grammar) of the city is also the language of its inhabitants, and these inhabitants / subjects are never separate from this language. Yet "... it is the possibilities the city offers for re-inventing itself and the lives of its citizens that give urban life its peculiar quality. Intimacy and anonymity are equally present in urban exchange" (Parker 9). Raban sees the "classic symptoms of alienation" – which is usually seen in a negative light – as something positive, and he argues that exactly these symptoms make the city malleable and thus offer the opportunity for both the city and its subjects to be reinvented (2). Parker says that urban culture might be influenced by the rich and powerful, but "the complexity and contradictions of urban civilization are [still] its wellspring" (Parker 142). Thus, street culture might be commodified, but it still offers a richness and an opportunity for creating new narratives as it allows the imagination to work with the city, granting city dwellers the chance to form new identities. This suggests that consumption does not ruin the artist's "gesture", but that to understand its importance the individual must be "alive to its inner contradictions" (Parker 142).

The urban landscape as a playground thus grants people meaning and identity. New narratives and street cultures at first challenge the dominant and then later become *en vogue*. Graffiti, especially because of its use of language and its subsequent link to narrative, is an obvious example of street culture, but street art is not limited to graffiti. Thomas A. Markus sees activities such as graffiti or the illicit construction of squatter housing as a form of resistance that expresses a vision of counter-utopia. For him this is related to questions such as “whose forms?” and “whose construction?” (Markus 19). The inference is that activities such as graffiti allow the inhabitants to mark space in such a way as to make it their own mental space through interaction. So while there are professional graffiti artists, such as Banksy, who have made a living out of their subversive activities, on a grass-roots level graffiti usually appeals to a young rebellious crowd trying to make a statement – desperate to make the city their own territory. These activities of resistance can create maps for the dispossessed. While not yet commodified, street culture can serve as a way to erase dominant discourse and to take the landscape away from those in power and shape it into something that the marginalised inhabitants can use, appreciate and interact with.

Iain Sinclair speculates that graffiti can be seen as an arcane language. It consists of “playful collages of argument and invective, ... editorials of madness...” (Wilson, Elizabeth 260). It “constitutes an alternative language bubbling up from the postmodern chaos of the inner city” (Wilson 260). He refers to graffiti not only as that which is seen alternately as street art or vandalism, but also as, for instance, fragments of newspaper and advertisements in newsagents’ windows – what Wilson refers to as “flotsam cast up on the urban shore” (260). For him, trying to catalogue all the “unceasing murmur[s] of the dispossessed” is what will reveal the hidden city (Wilson 260-261). This is a romanticised vision of the search for meaning in the city (Wilson 261), yet the idea of graffiti as flotsam indicates its fragmented and flexible nature and thus its ability to act as social commentary. Calling it the murmurs of the dispossessed goes a step further by granting those that have been cast out a voice within the city.

A recent development or twist added to traditional graffiti is that of “throwies” – a technologically advanced version of graffiti. The main adherents of the trend are a group called the Graffiti Research Lab. Their slogan proclaims them to be “dedicated

to outfitting graffiti artists with open source technology for urban communities” (“LED Throwies”). The “throwie” is essentially made up of a cluster of little LED lights stuck to a battery and a “rare-earth magnet” (“LED Throwies”). These small devices are then thrown against the sides of buildings where they adhere and will glow for several hours until their power source runs out. The Graffiti Research Lab’s website claims them to be “an inexpensive way to add color to any ferromagnetic surface in [one’s] neighborhood” (“LED Throwies”). They suggest in a rather tongue-in-cheek manner that one should throw “it up high and in quantity to impress your friends and city officials” (“LED Throwies”). This takes graffiti to the next level. It is not simply about putting slogans on buildings any more; it appears that technology, the very essence of the urban lifestyle, is slowly encroaching on even something as simple and straightforward as graffiti. This form of graffiti clearly has a similar aim to traditional graffiti, as is suggested by the ‘impressing’ of the city official. As a way to make a statement, and because it changes (whether it enhances or defaces) the urban landscape, graffiti has a subversive quality. While LED graffiti has a similar aim, it appears to appeal to a different crowd of city-dweller, though. Since throwies offer a technological approach they broaden the playing field and allow a wider range of people to participate in the subversive activity, because while throwies are appealing when the lights are still glowing, when those lights fade the same arguments apply that see graffiti as a criminal and defacing activity.

Aside from throwies, other recent phenomena in urban culture include a sport called “parkour”, which is a coined word based on the French for “route”. This extreme sport is a “system of leaps, vaults, rolls, and landings designed to help a person avoid or surmount whatever lies in his path” (Wilkinson, Alec “No Obstacles”). At first it was a rather low-profile sport, but an awe-inspiring opening scene in the 2007 James Bond film, *Casino Royale* – which features a parkour chase – changed that. Parkour’s usual “obstacles are walls, stairwells, fences, railings, and gaps between roofs – it is an urban rather than a pastoral pursuit. The movements are performed at a dead run. The more efficient and fluid the path they define, and the more difficult and harrowing the terrain they cross, the more elegant the performance is considered by the discipline’s practitioners” (Wilkinson “No Obstacles”). In the 1990s David Belle started this sport on the rooftops of the French suburb where he grew up. He was trying to emulate his father, “an acrobat and a hero fireman” (Wilkinson “No

Obstacles”). While Belle was estranged from his father, his grandfather would tell him stories about his father’s exploits. Belle calls them “Spider-Man stories and Tarzan stories” – he wanted “to be Spider-Man when he grew up” (Wilkinson “No Obstacles”). Belle appears in a few films which showcase his talents. “All of the films have the kind of vaudeville improbability of a video game” (Wilkinson “No Obstacles”). He jumps the “impossible” gaps between rooftops; he jumps between flights of staircases; he jumps from tall buildings onto lower ones.

While parkour is a rather eccentric sport started by one man and based on movement, it has many followers today. Belle clearly had an affinity with the urban landscape that he grew up in, a landscape he would appropriate to aid him in his sport, but he also had his imagination fuelled by the possibilities of the urban landscape, though the sport is so peripheral to acceptable sports codes that it appears unreal. Belle moulded himself after a superhero, and in that way founded a sport that engages the landscape in the ultimate interaction between stone, flesh and imagination. And while practitioners find solace in their runs in the city (and above the city), it is a way both to interact with and distance themselves from the city. While the city becomes their playground, parkour is mostly a solitary pursuit – the fact that a practitioner leaps from building to building and soon disappears from sight excludes it as a spectator sport. Parkour lifts the practitioner above the everyday life of the city to give him/her a different view, if not a bird’s eye view, of the city.

Jan Morris’s 1986 novel *Last Letters from Hav* is a piece of fictional travel writing based on the imaginary city of Hav. In this novel she writes about a roof-race that takes place in the city once a year. Many of the young people in the city participate in the race, which leads them to scale the city wall and to jump “over more than thirty alleyways”, the race culminating in a “prodigious leap over the open space in the centre of the Great Bazaar” (73). Like parkour, this race is difficult to watch, if not done through the lens of a camera, and yet everybody in the city comes to watch, even if only to catch a glimpse of the people jumping overhead. This suggests that while in practice a sport such as this might be impossible for the masses to enjoy, it captures the imagination of city inhabitants. That most people cannot physically take part does not prevent them from being fascinated by the concept of this physical interaction with the city – and from also imagining themselves on the roof-tops: invincible in

ruling over the city space. Morris's account indicates that the average person yearns to see the city from an angle from which he/she can have both the excitement *of* the city and a perspective *on* the city.

Transport for London and the London Underground have taken an organised approach to "platform art". Their giving young artists a platform to exhibit their work demonstrates both an attempt to discourage random graffiti and their interest in promoting art. One of the main ventures of this movement is the use of one of the Underground stations as a space for installation art. The seventeen arches of the Gloucester Street Station are used as a small gallery, and about once every nine months a new artist's work is displayed. Rarely is the marriage between the urban and what an individual perceives as natural seen more clearly than in the platform art of Chiho Aoshima. In this specific temporary art project, called "City Glow, Mountain Whisper" (see fig.1), that ran from July 2006 to January 2007, there was a transposition from the urban to a natural landscape, or from a natural to an urban landscape, depending on the viewer's perspective. The installation adorned the "seventeen panels [that] expand[ed] along the arches of the platform, representing a landscape that morphs from night cityscape to daytime countryside, complete with girls costumed as both skyscrapers and hills. [It is] meant to mirror the journey of the passengers as the tube rides pass it" (Cris, Rea "Chiho Aoshima"). Aoshima's art deals with serious issues and her work is not purely "commercialised manga"; rather it is "a mixture of traditional Japanese scroll techniques, digital technology and a wide range of cultural influences" (Cris "Chiho Aoshima"). Keeping this in mind, since the artist is Japanese and Japanese texts are traditionally read from right to left (the artist is also obviously familiar with Japanese scroll work), it can be viably argued that the little hills turn into the skyscrapers, rather than the other way around – a definite comment on the increasing urbanisation of the world: this is Japanese art in a British city, which reflects the cultural influence of art on a global scale. "...City Glow, Mountain Whisper feels like a psychedelic manga utopian version of travelling through society, which provides a perfect escape for the Londoners as they cramp up against each other during rush hour" (Cris "Chiho Aoshima"). The suggestion that the city encroaches on nature is not necessarily a positive one, and the presentation of the city as glowing and the mountain as merely a whisper reinforces this idea. The installation leads to the urban itself becoming a decoration in an urban environment.

This signifies the ultimate commodification of the city, and while it seems to offer escape to somewhere more idyllic, in reality it strengthens the vision of the urban environment as being all-encompassing. The fact that the hills and skyscrapers have faces also indicates that humanity is inextricably inscribed in the environment it inhabits.



Fig. 1 *City Glow, Mountain Whisper* by Chiho Aoshima photo taken by Adalet Snyman in January 2007

Another subversive activity that has recently entered the urban environment is that of the flash mob – a crowd of people who unexpectedly gather in some public space, to do something atypical for a short period of time, and then quickly disband. In an article by Bill Wasik, the organiser of the first flash mob, he “claimed that he created flash mobs as a social experiment designed to poke fun at hipsters, and highlight the cultural atmosphere of conformity and of wanting to be an insider or part of ‘the next big thing’” (“Flash Mob”). While flash mobs originally started as a “pointless stunt”, or perhaps rather as an activity that made a mild social comment on the commodification of street culture, “the concept has already developed for the benefit of political and social agendas” (“Flash Mob”). A good example of a more politicised flash mob is one that took place in December 2004 in Bucharest, where about 70

people stuck duct tape over their mouths while participating in a stationary jogging session. This was a way of commenting on a Romanian expression that says, “Do as you are told, do not comment,” with the flash mob’s ultimate aim being to criticise “the limits to freedom of speech placed upon journalists” in Romania (“Flash Mob”). It sparked a debate about the issue and generated healthy discussion among the public. While Wasik did not intend flash mobs to be a serious activity, it was almost instantly grasped by protesters and changed into a potentially subversive trope. This indicates that it is nearly impossible to predict what street culture will do and whether it will be instantly commodified or not. The use of people to make a public comment reflects the importance of community in the city. If the city were not a crowded space, it would not have been possible for flash mobs to form inconspicuously and then make an unexpected statement, so this activity uses the very characteristics of the urban environment to further its agenda. Aptly enough, the roots of this new narrative of protest are linked to a more traditional narrative. Science fiction writer Larry Niven’s 1973 story *Flash Crowd* portrayed a notion somewhat like flash mobbing. The coined term, flash mob, which seems to be based on Niven’s title, was first used in a blog entry after Wasik’s first organised event, illustrating the impact of narrative on potential social commentary.

While the urban can thus be a site of contestation, urbanisation classically carries the image of potential progress and modernisation. However, in large cities the opposite applies in slums or districts that have fallen victim to processes of urban decay: industrialisation, abandoned warehouses and parking lots abound. The people who inhabit such areas are usually homeless or of the lower classes. Such areas are also associated with violence, gangs and drug abuse. The image of this abandoned landscape is one of menace and sleaze. Yet in modern popular culture such landscapes seem to occupy an important and even affectionately regarded (if not completely aesthetically romanticised) position. This becomes glaringly obvious in the world of fashion and cinema, where in the 1990s heroin chic ruled the catwalks, and in fashion magazines photos of emaciated models with circles under their eyes were spread across the pages. These young girls were popularly photographed on rooftops, in dark grimy alleys and on the streets of the urban landscape – still a popular backdrop for fashion pages today. While that era in fashion slowly faded, something of the “magic” remained in cosmetics lines, such as the one that is quite aptly called Urban Decay.

This brand of grungy fashion make-up includes products with names such as Acid Rain, Oil Streak, Soot, Spare Change, Smog, Asphalt, Exhaust, Shotgun, Mildew, Graffiti, Air Guitar, Crash and Speed – to name but a few. The rainbow colours of a petrol stain on a pavement suddenly become the embodiment of aesthetic beauty, which largely celebrates that which is negative about city life, as it romanticises pollution, industrial buildings, fast living, drugs, violence, homelessness and counter-culture. This can be seen as the epitome of the commodification and aesthetification of the city, especially those parts which are generally viewed in a negative light.

The same can be said for subculture movements such as Gothic. The industrialised fashion worn by adherents is brash and shows a ubiquitous use of metal, barbed-wire motifs, spikes and dark colours. Some of the individuals in these subcultures even collar themselves as part of their fashion statement and this can be seen as a symbolic bonding with their urban playground. The music some of these groups listen to is called industrial music, and some of the background and more prevalent sounds in this genre are those of machines of industry. A similar phenomenon comes to the fore in cinema, where the film *Blade Runner* features a bleak urban environment of decay – which Tom Moylan refers to as the “new maps of hell” (189). This film appears to be more of a celebration of the potentially dark cityscape than any type of critique – and the *Batman* films, *Gotham City*, *The Crow* and *Dark City* all follow in the footsteps of *Blade Runner*. These films perpetuate “frightening images of dark, out-of-control cities” (Markus 19).

The trend of dark cities continues in the twenty-first century, with an overwhelming number of fantastical superheroes on screen. While many of these imposing figures are taken from the comic books of previous decades, there is a revival of interest in the superhero and the landscape that he/she inhabits. In fact, one could argue that parkour stems almost directly from a fascination with the superhero Spiderman. In the third *Spiderman* film, for example, the viewer sees Spiderman sitting atop the spire of a Cathedral and gazing at the night city – a dark and solitary figure that in a way becomes the gargoyle that watches over the city. With this dark symbolism the film moves us away from a cheerful New York to a darker one, as found in the *Batman* films (given that Gotham is the embodiment of everything that is brutal in New York). This suggests that there is something intrinsically violent, but also exotic,

about the city. It is perhaps this exoticism or the excitement of danger that attracts the attention of some of the viewers. Inherent in the romanticisation of the city there lurks a dilemma, though. Does a celebration of the dark, violent side of the city offer true insight into the complexities of the city and does it offer any critical engagement? Mpe, for instance, feels that gloomy city writing should not be simply condemnatory, but should offer insight into the problems and possible solutions to the problems (181). By the same token, city narratives are not only celebratory, but should offer (or be seen to offer) some type of understanding of or insight into the plights associated with cities.

Parker argues that people go “back to the city time and time again in pursuit of that true experience that constantly eludes [them], and so, unable to embrace the metropolis in its profound totality, [they] take refuge in the landscape of memory” (18). Similarly, as the origins of flash mobbing and parkour illustrate, “the literature of the city yields experiences that become integral parts of our lives through time; we seek to revisit, discover, locate or avoid, or create those imaginative impressions and journeys anew” (Jaye and Watts qtd. in Bridge and Watson 7). Because the city offers such a vast range of experience, the urban dweller cannot deal with it in its totality and is thus forced to make do with what he/she can remember and experience about the city, memory being invariably tainted by the imagination. For Benjamin, his recollections of the city mean the “‘re-collection’ of impressions of a fragmented and scattered experience and their reconstitution as a meaningful narrative that seeks in its own imperfect way to assume the dimensions of a social and psychological totality” (Parker 18-19) – in the end, therefore, a more personalised and less alienating experience. In other words, by collecting experience and transforming it into a type of fiction about the city it is possible to gain a more encompassing sense of the city and individuals within that space.

All the activities mentioned above indicate how the urban can give rise to new narratives and identities. In the city one “see[s] a reflection of language back on itself in order to disrupt or to ‘play’ with the established meanings embodied in the [dominant] discourse” (Parker 152). It becomes clear that narrative, language and representation are a significant part of the city. The examples that have been discussed strengthen the claim that all cities are products of the human imagination. Both

parkour and throwies demonstrate the constant awareness and interaction of individuals with the urban landscape, which alters the picture they have of their environment, social relations and habitat. Chiho Aoshima's work, with its global allure, illustrates that narratives do not have to be written down, and that some experiences that are part of everyday urban culture comment on the very prevalence of this culture. Lastly, the discussion has illustrated how these different narratives stand in opposition to the norm, and allow resistance against a number of the dominant discourses intrinsic to city life. As Bridge and Watson claim then, "new art [boldly] renders the city, but refuses to present it." (8).

It is possible for these activities to inspire fresh ideas about the city, yet because of the ambiguous nature of street art it is impossible for these ideas to capture the city, or confine it to something static. This, as illustrated, makes a postmodern approach to understanding the city ideal, because of its ability to allow open readings of the city. It avoids boxing in and categorising the city and rather encourages open and interpretive discussion. It also allows for the variable human perspective – something that is invaluable in understanding the city, since these are the dynamic spaces where communities interact and identities are formed. The next chapter will take the discussion forward, dealing with the city as a cultural phenomenon, and showing how fiction becomes an invaluable tool for exploring the cityscape and commenting on contemporary issues such as globalisation and the formation of individual and community identity.

### **Chapter 3: The City, “Real” and Imaginary: New York**

The relation between the novel and city, then, is not merely one of representation. The text is actively constitutive of the city. Writing does not only record or reflect the fact of the city. It has its role in producing the city for a reading public. (Donald 187)

Theoretical imaginings of the city can give rise to projects that constitute an altered reality. Society’s relationship with cities is not only a purely physical one, but also a mental one, since it is people’s image of the city that ultimately forms the city. This section will focus specifically on the importance of the city in narrative and representation, and will suggest to what extent the city itself becomes a narrative, and thus a structuring framework for society. What are the changing discourses and narratives in the city and what is their social significance, both physically and in the imagination?

According to Brian Robson, “the urban environment” as an idea is misleadingly straightforward. It makes one think of “endlessly similar” images: a busy shopping street, “pictures of slum life under the railway arches of Victorian London, the pyramid skyscrapers on the skyline of New York” (Pile 5). He says one tends to confuse “the physical and the human aspects” of the city, and while one can say with some assurance what one means by “‘urban’ in physical terms, it is much more difficult to spell out its social significance” (Pile 5). Instinctively one knows what a city is, regardless of its symbolic connotations. Whether changeable or stable, the city in isolation is insignificant, since it is the changing social significance and interpretations of the city, both in fact and in fiction, that form a more complex entity. As Lefebvre claimed, urban space is not truly natural, but rather a social and historical product, and any representation of the city is a “reductive entity” (193). While representations may not offer a complete picture, they become the only way for individuals to navigate and accumulate information about the city. They allow for new options and ventures, and in the long run cannot be separated from the city, offering a way for people to understand their surroundings (193). Because representations of the city are then “absolutely embedded in the culture of cities” (193) one may argue that the representation of the city, such as in narrative, can never be separated from the tangible city, and thus the narrative inevitably structures social ideas about cities – and ultimately urban society itself. Larry Ford, in line with Sharon Zukin and Lefebvre, views the city in narrative as part of a “complex cultural

process” in which meaning can be communicated or even produced and ultimately consumed by the public (325). This means that the city as a social product is shaped by the “larger public’s collective knowledge of urbanism” (Ford 325).

From a Western perspective New York and London are naturally evoked when one is discussing the city. These cities are not only enormous in size, they also play a huge role in the imagination, since both are repeatedly used as settings in novels and in film. New York has become so ensconced in the public imagination and in popular culture that Zukin has gone so far as to call New York City a site of “cultural consumption” and “an icon of modernist excess” (Parker 139). Thus it has become both a commodity and an idea that is broader in the abstract than in physical reality.

According to Pile it is the skyline of New York that captures people’s imagination and makes the city unique. In his book, *City Worlds*, an image of New York follows his initial mention of it, the caption to which reads: “Skyline of Manhattan, showing the twin towers of the World Trade Center” (6). As this book was published in 1999, the World Trade Centre is still intact in the photo and had not been destroyed yet by the events that occurred on 11 September 2001. What is of interest is the reference to the specific towers, as if this feature were more significant than the rest of the New York skyline. Undoubtedly this distinctive building dominated the New York skyline. The mention of the Twin Towers indicates their symbolic value for New York, linking them to the power and dominance of their status as part of the tallest building in the world at that point. As Michel de Certeau claims, “The World Trade Centre is ... the most monumental figure of Western urban development” (128). This is a shining example of Raban’s “moral synecdoche” and a clear indication that the city can be textualised and read.

Both Donald and Mpe view the city as a discourse that needs deciphering. Mpe thinks that different observers will have different expectations and experiences of the city and thus different ways of reading it, and ultimately interpreting it: “The city, in this sense, could be viewed as a form of discourse with which another form of discourse, namely literature, engages” (Mpe 183). At first the World Trade Centre was a “symbol of advancement” and a “source of pride”, but it has now come to represent “fear”, but also “patriotism”, and while Mpe’s article is actually about Johannesburg,

the impact of 9/11 is clear, since he speculates on the impact this “most spectacular terrorist attack on any civilization” will have on literature (183). Mpe’s speculation is worth taking into account, since if the city is a discourse that is linked with literature, such a major shift in the very fabric of what is seen as the epitome of the Western city, is bound to have a vital impact on the literature linked to both this city and cities in general.

Pile suggests that Hollywood is responsible for making the skyline of Manhattan one of the most well-known on the planet (7). Moreover, the skyline becomes New York, since it is the first and sometimes only image evoked when considering this city. In this way the skyline may hide or belie the inherent power of the denizens of the city, on the one hand, and on the other, also the actual squalor that is underneath. As Mpe suggests when he claims that there will be different interpretations of a text, urban theorists have spoken deferentially, but also ambiguously, of the New York skyline. Kevin Lynch proposes that the “image of the Manhattan skyline may stand for vitality, power, decadence, mystery, congestion, greatness...” (Pile 7). These are all connotations of Western capitalist ideology. While the skyline projects an image of vitality and power, its solid-looking, close-stacked buildings also project an excess of opulence – something that hints at decadence and corruption beneath a surface of apparent splendour.

In his now famous 1984 article “Walking in the City”, de Certeau says about looking at Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Centre:

It is transformed into a texturology in which extremes coincide – extreme ambition and degradation, brutal oppositions of races and styles, contrasts between yesterday’s buildings, already transformed into trash cans, and today’s urban irruptions that block out space. (127)

De Certeau’s view links well with the image of New York as decadent. He draws the city as a harsh, dark environment, a narrative of clashes, waste, and human greed. Similarly Claude Levi-Strauss saw New York as “an immense horizontal and vertical disorder ... [and] despite the loftiness of the tallest buildings and the way they were piled up and squeezed together on the cramped surface of an island ... on the edges of these labyrinths the web of the urban tissue [is] astonishingly slack” (Wilson 262).

He feels that it is “at these slack edges that the gap in the fabric of the city may be found” (Wilson 262). It is here that he finds a language “that is adequate to the mystery and uncertainty that is [the] ever-unfulfilled, romantic promise” (Wilson 262). While he agrees about New York’s chaotic nature, he sees something romantic and promising in the darkness or the shadow of that chaos. It is this chaotic promise of ambiguity that appeals to the writer and prompts him/her to try and capture the elusive essence of New York. As de Certeau suggests, it is a place of “brutal oppositions”: it is a “vital”, “powerful”, “mysterious” and even “romantic” space, and at the same time it is also a “brutal”, “disorderly” and “degrading space”.

A good example in popular culture of the ambivalent nature of New York is the contrast between Superman’s Metropolis and Batman’s Gotham. Both these imaginary comic-book cities are based in New York, so that it is difficult not to argue that New York is seen as the ultimate metropolis, especially as Gotham is an existing nickname for New York. This suggests that there are different interpretations of New York in narrative. The editor and writer of *Batman*, Dennis O’Neil, has claimed that Superman’s Metropolis is New York above Fourteenth Street on a balmy spring day while “Batman’s Gotham City is Manhattan below Fourteenth Street at eleven minutes past midnight on the coldest night in November” (344). Thus the author of *Batman* himself feels that Gotham is a dark and dreary version of New York. This is a very precise division, which hints at a New York of qualified parts. Metropolis and Gotham are polar opposites, as different as their respective superheroes. “In contrast to the dark, gritty, and raw way Gotham City has been portrayed, Metropolis has almost always been depicted” as a clean, warm and wealthy city (“Metropolis”). So it seems that both these fictional cities embody an aspect of New York, albeit in a limited fashion. Gotham plays up the dark side of New York city, revealing it to the reader as gloomy and sinister, and at best dangerous to traverse at night. Metropolis, on the other hand, focuses rather on the Western ideal and portrays New York as a secure and affluent space.

Pile suggests that the theorists who try to define New York are trying to say something about New York’s social significance, but that they are simply moving further away from grasping it, with every adjective they use. This, however, does not mean that their descriptions do not apply. Pile says that in “Walking in the City” de

Certeau sees “buildings rising and others falling away. Each building represents a yesterday that enabled it to be built and a today that might tear it to the ground – to replace it with something better, something taller. Behind the buildings are the storms of social processes that build; that tear down; that build again” (7). Quite ironically, and unbeknown to de Certeau, the very building he is in when he is surveying the city is doomed to become a building of “yesterday”. The building that seems to be in a league of its own, the building that acts as a central point here, is one that is destined to be razed to the ground. Unlike most demolished buildings, the people of the city did not plan the demise of the World Trade Centre, but its very violent destruction still aptly describes the volatility of the city where every manifestation is relative: what symbolises the city now may be gone tomorrow. According to Pile, what will be erased will be replaced by “something better, something taller”, yet de Certeau does not appear to see it in quite this light. He says that New York’s “present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future” (de Certeau 127). In an attempt to get ahead the city tramples on its own past and seems to have little or no respect for its roots, since it is impossible to argue that the future will definitely be better than what has gone before. It is unlikely that Pile’s view will be generally adopted though, given that in dominant Western ideology progress is usually viewed as positive.

Ford clearly shows that film has a complex relationship with cities, and that as cities and technology have shifted and changed, so have people’s representations and perspectives of cities altered. At first the city was “just there” and simply a convenient setting, because it was close to the film studios (Ford 326). According to Ford, much of Los Angeles’s history has been accidentally recorded through films, because the city was a suitable, convenient stage. Yet later, the city becomes a player and starts acting as the counterpart of characters. The city may for instance be seen as a villain that can add to the despair of humans, or as a “neurotic element” that can trap or enclose characters (Ford 327, 329). On the other hand, what might appear claustrophobic to some can be reversed and depicted as comforting. This suggests the ambiguity of the urban environment, and underscores alternative possibilities for aesthetics in cities. Ultimately, films afford one the opportunity to view a “controlled” and “replicated” experience by means of which to gain insight into “the ways in which people and places interact as stories unfold” (Ford 326).

In popular culture the impact of the cinema is clearly shown by the public's sensitivity to film material. The June 2001 film *AI: Artificial Intelligence* portrays the Twin Towers still standing in the year 4142, a long time after human life has ceased. Yet a mere three months after the film's release the building was no more, and what was once a point of pride, had suddenly become a sensitive subject. The 1998 film *Armageddon* has a scene in which both the North and the South tower of the World Trade Centre are destroyed in part. "As a result of the September 11, 2001 attacks, the scene showing the towers getting hit and being on fire was cut when the film aired on ABC in April 2002" ("World Trade"). At that point the American public's attitude towards New York had changed in such a way that the media chose to edit an already existing film, so that no upsetting perspective would allude to the disaster six months prior to the film's screening.

The delay of the 2002 *Spiderman* film is another example: its trailers and posters were recalled, as it was largely set in Manhattan and the film studio was afraid that this might offend viewers. The posters had sported Spiderman with the Twin Towers reflected in the eyes of his mask. Once again, the Twin Towers were used as a symbol of New York. The main trailer for the film contained a scene that had Spiderman spinning a web between the Twin Towers in which he caught an escaping helicopter. The trailer, as well as the posters, was however, withdrawn after the 9/11 incident. If the release date of the film had not been so close to the disaster, Columbia Pictures might not have chosen to withdraw their advertising campaign. The film was eventually released, later than expected, in May 2002, and it appears that at that point the media, as well as the American public, still wanted to avoid the emotional turmoil and hurt that accompanied the eradication of a physical and symbolic part of their landscape. On the other hand, the fleeting shot in the actual film where the Twin Towers are visible in the background, and in Spiderman's mask, was not digitally edited from the film ("Trivia for Spiderman").

Not only did the *Spiderman* publicity campaign need changing; comic-book company Marvel felt it necessary to comment on the disaster. They wanted at least one of their books to address 9/11, and in an e-mail instructed Michael Straczynski, the writer of *Amazing Spider-Man*, accordingly. "Their feeling was that the one character best suited to this was Spider-Man because after all, he's a native New Yorker"

(Yarbrough, Beau “Marvel”). For Marvel to feel the need to have a fictional character make a statement about the disaster is a classic example of how the imagination impacts on a city. It illustrates the colossal impact that a catastrophe like that of the World Trade Centre may have on a city. It does not only force a material change, but also changed the image of New York in people’s imagination. Made in late 2002, the film *25th Hour* takes place in a post-9/11 New York, where the fact that the World Trade Centre is no longer standing is a given, and is referred to at various stages in the film (“Finest Hour”), proving that people can eventually accept a radical shift in the environment and engage critically and creatively with such a change.

The impact of this attack on the inhabitants of New York cannot be much better illustrated than in the 2005 novel *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer, a story about how a ten-year-old boy copes with the loss of his father in the World Trade Centre disaster. Oskar, the extremely inquisitive and quirky narrator, finds a key among his father’s belongings, and in his quest for the appropriate lock, he attempts to become closer to his father. At one point, New York seems mazelike, because Oskar keeps repeating the same steps, but reaches no conclusion. The city becomes what Benjamin sees as “the inside-outside world of the dimly lit labyrinth ... a universe of possibilities and transgressions that only the modern metropolis can offer” (Parker 18). Oskar’s search ironically inverts the “normal” quest narrative in which one has the lock, but no key to it. This becomes a doomed search through endless possibilities for the significance of a horrible incident and its impact on both the inhabitants and the worldwide image of the city of New York. While New York might not hold the lock Oskar is searching for, there is the suggestion that it does hold some positive possibilities.

Seeing this building as the next obvious target for terrorists, Oskar is terrified of making the journey to the top of the Empire State Building, which has now ironically “inherited” the role it initially had as the tallest building in New York. As the lift takes him to the top, he starts imagining that the cables might snap and the lift might fall. The very architecture, which is concrete and usually trustworthy, is brought into question. It becomes clear that Oskar finds, not only skyscrapers, but buildings per se, highly suspicious, which mirror’s de Certeau’s observation that buildings are linked to time frames, making them volatile.

Oskar's childlike narration gives a candid, affective glimpse into the tragedy when he says:

Even though I knew the view was incredibly beautiful [from the observation deck], my brain started misbehaving, and the whole time I was imagining a plane coming at the building, just below us. ... Then there would be an enormous explosion, and the building would sway, almost like it was going to fall over, which is what it felt like from descriptions I've read on the internet, although I wish I hadn't read them. (Foer 244)

Later he continues, "everything that's born has to die, which means our lives are like skyscrapers. The smoke rises at different speeds, but they're all on fire, and we're all trapped" (Foer 245). Ironically, something that is much less perishable than human life now takes on a volatile nature. Skyscrapers, cities, the landscape itself, has become more fragile than human life. Cities – human shelters – can no longer properly protect people.

Oskar uses the Empire State building as both a platform from which to scrutinise New York, and a device to distance himself from the city, and simultaneously from the pain of his loss, which becomes inextricably entangled with the urban landscape. He has read that people are supposed to look like ants from the top of the building; however, he finds that this is not true. Instead they "look like little people" (Foer 245) – a refusal on his part to take people's humanity away from them by allowing the building and/or city to overshadow the people who roam beneath it. In the same breath Oskar says that the view from the observation deck gives one the idea that "New York is a miniature replica of New York, which is nice, because you can see what it's really like instead of how it feels when you're in the middle of it..." (Foer 245). This recalls Jean Baudrillard's postmodern idea of simulacra and how the city can be seen as a copy of itself – or as something artificial: "Baudrillard is usually associated with what is known as 'the loss of the real', which is the view that in contemporary life the pervasive influence of images from film, TV and advertising has led to a [loss of] distinction between real and imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth" (Barry, Peter 87). Baudrillard calls the current era one of "the counterfeit, the double, the mirror and the theatre, games of masks and appearances..." (426). He substitutes for representation the idea of simulation. One of his arguments is that a sign can misrepresent or distort the reality behind it, and

Baudrillard sees having two versions of the same thing as a “means of murdering the original” (432). By simulacra Baudrillard does not even suggest “pure repetition, but minimal difference, the minimal inflexion between two terms, that is, the ‘smallest common paradigm’ that can sustain the fiction of meaning” (432). One may therefore argue that fictions or narratives about cities hide the actual reality of the city, yet these images still play a major role in how the city is perceived by the interpreter. If the city is painted as something different, this interpretation, whether it be representation or simulation, is bound to shape the way that the space is viewed. Ironically, Oskar uses his position of distance, his viewing of the city as a replica, as a way to get to the actual essence of the city. The model of the city becomes as real, if not more real, than the actual city. In this case distance offers perspective and does not necessarily misrepresent the city.

De Certeau wonders whether the “immense texturology spread out before one’s eyes” is anything more than an “optical artifact” (128). He believes it to be a “facsimile” fashioned by a “projection” that is a way of keeping one’s distance (de Certeau 128). “The panorama-city is a ‘theoretical (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices” (de Certeau 128). Oskar, on the other hand, is aware that by calling the city a replica, he is able to distance himself while *in* the city, since he also has an outside perspective of it. His bird’s eye-view allows him literally and figuratively to go “high above” his emotions and look at the city as if from an outside perspective. He does, however, yearn for human contact, because “up there” he feels “extremely lonely” and “far away from everything” (Foer 245). This hints at the ambiguity of city life, indicating that the size of the city (and its ability to sweep everything away) is always looming. When Oskar uses a telescope to look at the city, he specifically notices “the gigantic hole where the World Trade Center was” (Foer 245). This shifts our perspective from the people who inhabit the city to the impact that the city – and a tragedy – can have on their lives.

De Certeau can also make out the people on the street below, though he suggests that they, in turn, cannot see the ones who are looking down at them and are thus blissfully unaware that they are being watched. In contrast to Oskar, de Certeau sees this as a false perspective of power for the watcher. He finds being above New York puts him

in the same position as Icarus. So while he is “lifted out of the city’s grasp”, “put at a distance” and “transfigured as a voyeur”, his view becomes that of one no longer “possessed” by the world, but instead that of one “viewing a text ...[lying] before one’s eyes” (127). He claims that the “fiction of knowledge” is embedded in the desire to be nothing more than a “viewpoint” (127). Yet one must return to the city below; man is after all a gregarious creature; the view one is granted is but temporary and appears perhaps more visionary than it is, because while one feels godlike in the perspective of being able to grasp the city by simply gazing at it, can one really achieve that? While it is natural to associate with Oskar’s view that being lifted above the city grants some perspective, in taking the power of observation away from the people that he looks down upon de Certeau limits his view of the city. However, Raban suggests that when people are treated morally in terms of “single synecdochal roles” their lives are turned into a “formal drama”, which in turn renders the city an “allegorical backdrop” steeped in “symbols of the very good and the very evil” (Raban 32). This “unwittingly” turns urbanites into actors and can lead to city life being seen as a “disembodied stage life” (Raban 32). While New York might be a space of brutal oppositions, as de Certeau suggests, a complex space such as a city – because it is a disorderly space – can never be viewed simply in black and white, and the possibility for ambiguity must always be allowed. De Certeau might believe that the people on the street are blissfully unaware of the fact that they are being watched, but the character of Oskar would suggest otherwise. He sees the people on the street not merely as objects to be watched, but rather as self-aware subjects, like himself. Oskar as a subject (and character) insists that there were real people involved in the anguish of the World Trade Centre tragedy, and that one cannot merely reduce the city to a stage.

While the film *Blade Runner* is set in a city akin to Los Angeles instead of New York, the perspectives granted the viewer from the rooftops are valuable in this discussion. Wong Kin Yuen claims that in *Blade Runner* it is the cinematography that “celebrates [the] dominance of visual representations, [that] functions to bring out ‘fragmentary temporality’ and ‘schizophrenic vertigo’ – the setting in which the replicants [androids] are destined to seek in vain for the meaning of their lives” (“On the Edge”). There is a scene in which Deckard, the protagonist, runs “for his life on the rooftop of a hundred-story building, a place where one’s being is lifted up from

the firm ground and exposed to the destructive power of the machine” (“On the Edge”). Yuen evokes Wilson’s ambiguous gaps in the fabric of the city, or heterotopia (still to be discussed), when he suggests that the roof becomes “a radical space” which is similar to the “counter-site” Edward W. Soja refers to (“On the Edge”). This is “a space created for ‘oppositional practices,’ for ‘critical exchange,’ and for ‘new and radical happenings’” (Yuen “On the Edge”). Yuen continues, “dreaming/constructing an identity while perched on a rooftop establishes one’s past through memory, even if that memory be prosthetic” (“On the Edge”). He says that “...the rooftop chase ... and the jump between the edges of buildings” are examples of what Lefebvre refers to as spaces of representation, or lived space, while Soja links them “to the ‘clandestine or underground’ (high, high up above the ground in *Blade Runner*) side of social life” (Yuen “On the Edge”).

*Blade Runner*, while offering the viewer a cinematic, romantic representation of the city, (which one cannot get from the ground) also echoes the suggestion (of, specifically, parkour) that perspective can be granted, and even that identity can be formed, when an individual is elevated above the city itself and placed in a contentious or radical space ‘above’ (or outside) the city. When one considers this suggestion, it is possible to surmise that Oskar can gain something from his distancing from the city, and that it is not a completely false perspective as suggested by de Certeau.

Yuen finds the following aspect of city life significant:

Are people then like tiny insects caught in an enormous spider web? No, it cannot be. Humans are not tiny insects trying to escape from the web. It’s not like that. In fact humans have willy-nilly become part and parcel of the spider web. Humans now have no idea of what their destination might be; they are like one of the silky-threads of the spider web. (Nazaki qtd. in Yuen “On the Edge”)

Here he echoes Oskar’s view of the city, and finds that being on the roof, high above the ground, places him in a radical space that allows reflection on the meaning of life. Both the theorist Yuen and the character Oskar deem it necessary to reflect on the people who inhabit the streets below, implying that people cannot escape the city, since they do not even realise that they have become so embroiled in city life that they can never entirely be removed from it.

A narrative such as *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* gives a useful account of the city and the complexity of the struggles of its inhabitants. As Shonfield states, fiction can be used to reveal the “unseen workings” of architecture (154), and one can assume, through this, the working of the people who inhabit this architecture. According to Alain de Botton, “architecture can render vivid to us who we might ideally be” (14). In other words, one can establish or get to know oneself through architecture. If the city is one’s environment, then it can be argued that, subconsciously, people try to establish themselves in terms of the city – one can even say that people become extensions of the city. The city influences the inhabitant, and in turn the inhabitant influences the architecture by which he or she is surrounded. In line with Pile’s argument, De Botton argues that architecture is, however, fluid, which means that it is possible for civilisation to “be reduced to fragments” (16). This implies, as Oskar fears, that architecture, as well as the impact of architecture, is not stable and can always change, and De Botton suggests that people may have some of the qualities of the buildings they are drawn to (18). However, even if this is true, and perhaps especially because this is true, buildings cannot truly protect or shelter people. While architecture may have intrinsic ethical messages, buildings can really only offer suggestions, which means that people cannot blame buildings, which are simply the projections of individuals, for their own failures and weaknesses (de Botton 20). This is a valuable lesson that Oskar learns, that it is not necessary to distrust the very buildings, since it is wiser to be aware of or even cautious of the people who inhabit these buildings: it is the people and not the buildings that one interacts with, and who can let one down. De Botton’s belief – that all surroundings can offer beauty, and that it is only through a touch of sadness that beautiful surroundings may come to have meaning or be appreciated (20-25) – seems simplistic. However, it is clear that the interaction between city and inhabitant can be brutal at times. In the case of a tragedy such as that of the World Trade Centre, acute grief and pain can taint and change the perspective of the individual on the city. By removing the synecdoche of the World Trade Centre from the text, it is possible to rewrite the text, rendering New York as something new or different that has to be re-assessed. The possibility of such a re-assessment suggests that an appreciation and understanding of one’s environment is sometimes accompanied by conditions of disintegration or instability. This supports Donald’s suggestion that the novel does not simply represent the city, but that texts actively constitute the city. Society’s complex

relationship with cities is indeed not a purely physical one, but also a mental one. Films and novels investigate, interpret and produce the city for the public – which means that the city itself becomes a narrative, and thus a structuring framework for society.

Cities have been exposed to cultural globalisation on a worldwide scale, so that the osmotic process between the image and the reality of a city like New York is a phenomenon that also applies to other cities. This process confirms the dominance of people over the city: though demographics may vary, the human subject is central in creating and recreating the text of the city, written or spoken. Thus, all the variable individual human perspectives, contained by the dimensions of space and time, together constitute the “readable text” that reflects the ever-evolving city, which is always open to re-assessment. This suggests that any consensual concept of city identity is related to the realm of myth, something that can be analysed only with hindsight, since time can be reclaimed only in the human imagination.

#### **Chapter 4: The City, “Real” and Imaginary: London**

London is a labyrinth, half of stone and half of flesh. It cannot be conceived in its entirety but can be experienced only as a wilderness of alleys and passages, courts and thoroughfares, in which even the most experienced citizen may lose the way; it is curious, too, that this labyrinth is in a continual state of change and expansion. (Ackroyd, Peter 2)

Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson point out that “no city stands in bricks and mortar which is not also a space of the imagination or of representation” (3). Their subsequent postmodern claim is that “the boundaries between the real and imagined city are ill-defined, shifting and slippery” (Bridge and Watson 7). It is a challenge to distinguish between the imaginary city and the actual or tangible city: depending on whether one is an inhabitant or a tourist/spectator/*flâneur*, one’s perspective on the city will be uniquely subjective. This chapter discusses China Miéville’s *The Tain* and Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere* with reference to the identity of a city as reflected in a marginalised version of itself, as well as the interplay between city actuality and the conceptualised or imagined city. The focus will be specifically on urban space in narrative, especially in science fiction, and also on the construction of that city as either a utopian or dystopian space. This will include a discussion of the city as a heterotopic or third space. The romanticisation and defacement of the city will also be considered.

In Miéville’s *The Tain* the reflections of the human characters turn out to be an ancient race of Imagos, who were initially trapped behind the other side of reflective surfaces, or the “tain”, and forced to mimic humans. The action in the novella is set in a devastated London where the Imagos have revolted, and the war between them and the humans is still raging. Not only are they themselves forced to reflect humans, but they have built their world to mirror the human world in an attempt to ease their punishment. When the Imagos break free from their reflected prison to wreak havoc on the London the reader knows – called London “Prime” – they abandon the reflected London. While London “Prime” lies in decay, the abandoned London on the other side of the tain reflects an eerily deserted, perfectly maintained and nearly forgotten pre-war London.

Miéville takes the idea of Imagos from Jorge Luis Borges's *The Book of Imaginary Beings* (Miéville, *The Tain* 303). Michel Foucault, in turn, in his preface to *The Order of Things* quotes a passage from Borges to set the scene for heterotopia. The passage is from Borges's *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins*, where he quotes from an imaginary book – “a certain Chinese encyclopedia, the *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*” – which explains the taxonomy of animals. This postmodern taxonomy includes some imaginary beings such as “sirens”, and the animals are classified in an unusual manner, by using epithets like “fabulous”, “frenzied” and “that from a long way off look like flies” (Foucault, “Preface” xv).

Heterotopia, a medical term signifying a “misplacement of an organ, or a growth abnormally situated in the body” (Marckwardt 593), was first assimilated into cultural studies by Foucault in the 1960s. Kevin Hetherington, among others, has argued that Foucault uses the concept of heterotopia in distinctly different ways: as actual representable places, or as imaginary spaces, or as unusual or unreal ways of interpreting or understanding space.

Foucault ponders Borges's taxonomy in wonderment, and says:

the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*. (xv)

The following discussion will show that heterotopia is a paradoxical and liminal space of movement – a space that constitutes a social order different from the norm – but also that it is a different way of thinking about space. Heterotopias deal with relationships, perspectives, and the flow that surrounds places, rather than the places themselves. Moretti believes that what “distinguishes” the city is not so much “spatial mobility”, but “social mobility” (Bridge and Watson 7). Heterotopia, then, is an ideal conceptual tool with which to explore the social mobility or flow that exists in cities.

Foucault defines heterotopia as

the disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, ... in such a state, things are ‘laid’, ‘placed’, ‘arranged’ in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible to

find a place of residence for them... *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter and tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together'... heterotopias (such as those found so often in Borges) desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source.... (xviii)

Heterotopia, in other words, calls into question the conceptual 'glue' with which words, ideas and spaces – as one traditionally knows them – are kept together, and markedly changes one's perception of this traditional reality. Heterotopia comes to signify "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" and are "outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 24).

Foucault names two principal categories of heterotopia: crisis heterotopia and heterotopia of deviation. Crisis heterotopias constitute sacred, privileged or forbidden places, which are for people who are in a "state of crisis" towards the "society and the human environment in which they live" (Foucault 24). Heterotopias of deviation are places for "individuals whose behavior is deviant" from the norm, such as prisons and psychiatric hospitals (Foucault 25).

Heterotopia can also be constituted through people's relation to different sites: in different cultures or societies different spaces take on different meanings. In addition, heterotopia is also "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 25). Soja points out that it is this "complex juxtaposition" that renders heterotopic sites mutable, vibrant and dialectical (15). This mutable character can be seen in the London of the texts to be discussed. Heterotopia is also linked to "slices in time" or "heterochronies" (Foucault 26) in a "periodization of spatialities" (Soja 15), which means that the "heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at some sort of absolute break with their traditional time" (Foucault 26).

Heterotopias play a role in relation to all the spaces that are left over and do not fall within the categories of heterotopia. Either their role is to act as heterotopias of

illusion, exposing “every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory”, or, contrary to this, to act as heterotopias of compensation where “their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (Foucault 27). These ideas link heterotopia closely with utopia, but heterotopia does not exist in the same static space as utopia.

According to Foucault:

*Utopias* afford consolation: although they have no real locality, there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where the life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical ... This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the *fabula*. (“Preface” xviii)

This means that while utopias can be used to relate fables, their essence is described in conventional terms that can be grasped and understood. Heterotopia, on the other hand, inverts, twists, and pushes the boundaries of spaces which could be “real” and “unreal”, and also of ideas about space – both inside language, and as fiction. Both these places of language and real places signify spaces that have a different order from physical space – changeable spaces whose relationships are never static and regarding which our relationships are also always changing.

Mirrors play an important part in Foucault’s distinction between utopia and heterotopia. He says,

The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there. (“Of Other Spaces” 24)

Soja further explains the distinction by saying:

Foucault qualifies the opposition between utopias and heterotopias through a lateral glance in the *mirror*. The mirror represents both ‘in a sort of mixed, joint experience’, at once a placeless, virtual unreal place in which I see myself where I am not, over there where I am absent (utopia); and a real, counteracting space in which I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there, a realization that

makes me come back to myself, to reconstitute myself there where I am (heterotopia).  
(14)

According to Parker, “urban writers have long used the metaphor of the mirror to emphasise the city’s unique capacity to project back at us the image we have of human subjectivity and human society” (138). In *The Tain* mirrors (and other reflective surfaces) divide one city from another. This means that the urban landscape in *The Tain* can be related to heterotopia – specifically heterotopia of compensation.

*The Tain* has two narrators: a third-person narrator called Sholl – a human Londoner – and an unnamed first-person narrator who aligned himself with the Imagos long before the war. The first-person narrator, believing that he does not fit in since he feels neither human nor Imago, flees from London “Prime” to the other side of the tain to live in the place that is “more like London than London [is] now” (294). Sholl strikes a bargain with the Imagos in London “Prime” and the reader can deduce that the remaining humans will be able to live in London as subjects of the Imagos. This embodies a heterotopia of compensation, since the reflected London can be seen as “another real space” which is as “perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged” as London “Prime” has now become “messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (Foucault 27). The unnamed narrator explains that “it is as if London has been blotted, and [he] walk[s] in the paper” (Miéville 294). While Sholl tries to constitute himself in London “Prime”, unaware that on the other side of what used to be reflective surfaces there lurks an alternative, unscathed London, the first-person narrator sees London “Prime” as dystopia and moves to Imago London – something akin to an abandoned filmset – which can be perceived as heterotopia. Language and communication play an important role in the story. It is Sholl’s ability to communicate with the Imagos that leads to humanity’s ultimate surrender, but also to their salvation. In Imago London, which is literally a reflection of London, the very language of this heterotopic space is contested, tangled and inverted. The actual name of Imago London is London written backwards, as one would see it reflected in a mirror: “Right is left, here, and left right,” which means the “signs” are inverted (294) – where the “signs” can be taken to mean both the literal street signs, as well as the signifiers used to construct this space, a subtly different London.

The Imago London, as if transferred onto blotting paper, becomes a text, or even a palimpsest, open to interpretation. In the process of fleeing, the unnamed narrator gains a perspective of London from the periphery and he comes to see that a London that is fake can be more 'real' than the real London. This links with Baudrillard's postmodern idea of abyssal vision, which is a "game of splitting the object in two and duplicating it in every detail" (431). The process of splitting suggests a "critical metalanguage", which means that there is a "reflective configuration of the sign in a dialectic of the mirror" (Baudrillard 431). Marx believes that humans can only recognise themselves in interacting with other humans within a community and, because of the anonymity of urban life, subjects sometimes have to seek recourse to communal life – according to him specifically in "traditional communities" (Parker 138). By contrast, the unnamed narrator in *The Tain* – who represents every person's search for identity – chooses to align himself with the Imagos because he has lost a sense of his human subjectivity, and thus flees London, and human society, to re-establish himself on the edge. What was once real to him has now become surreal, while Sholl, who is unaware of a second London, tries to reconstitute human subjectivity in such a way that humans are allowed to continue as a community, while taking the Imagos and their desires into account.

Similarly, in Neil Gaiman's urban fantasy novel *Neverwhere*, the protagonist, Richard Mayhew, observes and negotiates power relations in a real London – London "Above" – and a second, invisible, marginalised London – London "Below". Aesthetic romanticisation of the cityscape is typical of this genre, as depicted in *Neverwhere*. While the romanticisation of the city is certainly not something new, in this branch of science fiction one finds the city as an entity taking on a life of its own. Bleak settings, lurid colours, decaying/high-tech buildings, corroded metal – all these contribute to a blending of the actual and the imaginary. Bridge and Watson quote Burgen as saying that "the city in our actual experience is *at the same time* an actually existing physical environment, and a city in a novel, a film, a photograph, a city seen on television, a city in a comic strip, a city in a pie chart..." (3). The visual aspect of the city is complemented by a "distanced perspective of rational vision" (Bridge and Watson 4), and presenting the city from a bird's-eye view also serves as a way of romanticising it, as it is offering a perspective that would not ordinarily feature in the audience's daily lives. In this way people are "disconnected" from the city and can

have an almost voyeuristic view of it, but from a safe standpoint. For instance, surveying a presentation of the city at night might lend the audience a certain power to navigate the city, which people do not always have in reality.

Joyce Carol Oates asks: “If the city is a text, how shall we read it?” (Bridge and Watson 7). While Bridge and Watson claim that the city can both stimulate and constrain one’s imagination, the influence of the imagination on the city is also relevant: there is a constant interchange between the space of the city and the inhabitants of that space. Cities have traditionally been represented both as spaces that grant freedom from everyday constraints and spaces of alienation. Ironically, the very thing that allows cities to offer freedom – living the life of an anonymous individual among many – alienates people from one another. The city appears to be both a space of aspiration and a place of disquiet, and urban subjectivity is constituted in both the “real and imagined... spaces of the city”, since “individual and collective activities” become “interdependent and central to urban experience” (Bridge and Watson 4).

The substance the city apparently presents and what its inhabitants imagine the city to be “are influenced as much by the literature we have encountered as by lived experiences...” (Bridge and Watson 7). In this mutually constitutive relationship space then “becomes a phantasmatic medium through which an imagination expresses itself” (Bingaman, Sanders, and Zorach 5). This becomes more complex when one views the space people inhabit as a dominant fiction, accepting, with Bingaman, Sanders, and Zorach, that spatial boundaries can “become psychologically coded barriers: walls, gates, one-way and dead-end streets, decaying buildings, parts of the city” where the normative subject does not go (4). The fact that there is a divide between, or exclusion of, certain city dwellers indicates that there are power structures in place within the city. In this way, space is endowed with an inherent meaning, or forced to take on a certain symbolism, which readily converts to ideology. This relates to what Raban refers to as the utopia/dystopia syndrome, where the city is seen as either good or evil, though it is an oversimplification to narrow the city down to utopia or dystopia. The city, as we know it, is an ambiguous space, being inevitably a “mental” city or space, and not merely a physical one.

The title of *Neverwhere* lends itself to a discussion of the utopia/dystopia interaction: Neverwhere, so close to no-where, or for that matter no-place (one of the definitions of utopia), takes a step away from nowhere in that the word does not simply relate to space, but also to time. Neverwhere thus indicates a combination of both time and space, and the title is an early warning of potential shifts in these loci. Since the novel was originally adapted from a screenplay for a BBC series of the same name, the visual perspective of the city is well executed in Gaiman's detailed and visually expressive writing. *Neverwhere* is set simultaneously in London and in Neverwhere. The reader is presented with London "Above" – the known city, or close enough to it – and London "Below" or Neverwhere – the city set under and parallel to the streets of London. This Neverwhere is both similar to the known London and familiar, but also one that alters the reader's perception of London. It is described as "two cities that should be so near ... and yet in all things so far..." (Gaiman 96). London is seen as inhabited by "the possessors above" and Neverwhere by "the dispossessed, [they] who live below and between, who live in the cracks" (Gaiman 96).

In *Neverwhere* Richard, a young man from Scotland, is an outsider when he first comes to London, but he is soon assimilated into city life:

Richard had originally imagined London as a grey city, even a black city, from the pictures he had seen, and was surprised to find it filled with colour. It was a city of red brick and white stone, red buses and large black taxis (which were often, to Richard's initial puzzlement gold, or green, or maroon), bright red postboxes, and green grassy parks and cemeteries.

It was a city where the very old and the awkwardly new jostled each other, not uncomfortably, but without respect; ... a city of hundreds of districts with strange names ... and oddly distinct identities; a noisy, dirty, cheerful, troubled city, ... a city inhabited by and teeming with people of every colour and manner and kind.

When he had first arrived, he had found London huge, odd, fundamentally incomprehensible, with only the Tube map, that elegant multicoloured topographical display of Underground railway lines and stations, giving it any semblance of order. Gradually he realized that the tube map was a handy fiction that made life easier, but bore no resemblance to the reality of the shape of the city above...

He continued slowly, by a process of osmosis ... to comprehend the city... (Gaiman 9-10)

Richard first moves from outsider to so-called Londoner (Above), and then to outsider in the world of London Below. Implicit in his status as Londoner (Above) is his exclusion from the knowledge of London Below and the fact that the inhabitants of London Below are not accepted as Londoners. While they also inhabit parts, albeit

hidden parts, of London, they remain outsiders, and in this way remain marginalised. There are no maps or clear representations of the spaces that comprise the underside, which renders the space fluid and indeterminate. So, as Bingaman, Sanders, and Zorach suggest, “physical space, mapped to mental space, came to be practised not only as a set of relations, trajectories, or lived material realities, but as an open field for the projection and playing out of fantasies” (6). The modern subject, on the other hand, can be said to seek control over physical and symbolic space by “mapping, enclosing and surveying” (Bingaman, Sanders, and Zorach 4), and the modern approach to space is thus to map it, both as spatial map and a map of social relations. Richard experiences his London (Above) as a colourful, cheerful place. He buys into the tourist depiction of London: red phone booths and red double-decker buses. Ironically, he later finds that London Below is more like he initially envisaged London, grey and sometimes even black, proving his gut instinct about the city to have been reliable.

Stephen Crane’s description of London being “a dark region of gruesome doorways” (Bridge and Watson 3) is rather apt in the case of *Neverwhere*, due to the disjunction of time and space in London Below and the fact that one door might take one to an alleyway on the other side of the city. The strangely twisted *Neverwhere* London is set on roofs and in alleys, sewer pipes, the underground railway system and cellars. Gaiman paints a frightening picture of desolate alleys and doorways – inhabited by the dispossessed. Richard, the anti-hero (because he is not a typical hero, but also because in London Below he is surrounded by “real” heroes who hunt mythical beasts) introduces the reader to two parallel spaces. When Richard enters this alternate underworld reality of London Below he becomes marginalised, like the ones already inhabiting it and, ironically, the people from London Above cease to be able to see him. He meets a host of characters: a girl called Door Portico, of the house of Arch; the Marquis de Carabas, a dusty and dandyish figure who navigates the underworld with flair and ease; Old Bailey, a man who lives on rooftops; Hunter, a woman who hunts mythical beasts in the labyrinths under cities; a deranged angel called Islington; two psychopaths, Mr Croup and Mr Vandermar; Rat-speakers and Sewer people.

Early in the novel Door randomly creates doorways through the architecture of London as she flees her family's killers, and the last door she opens is through a brick wall, so that she tumbles out onto the street at Richard's feet in London Above. Tellingly, Richard's fiancée, as a stereotypical Londoner, does not even notice the girl, and wants to ignore her when Richard points her out. He, on the other hand, attempts to save Door from her pursuers, but associating with Door makes him accidentally fall through the cracks to join the marginalised population of the city. It is perhaps the very fact that Richard was an outsider to begin with that makes him sensitive to the plight of the marginalised people of London. Richard's quest for most of the novel is to turn himself back into a "possessor", so that he may relocate to London Above. As he is cast out, however, London Above takes on a sinister "character"; suddenly he becomes all but invisible, as if he has stopped existing. Anaesthesia, a girl he meets in the underside or London Below, confirms his fears that the marginalised stop existing for the dominant group, both figuratively and literally. It is only once Richard faces his own fears of being insignificant that he can successfully finish his quest, and return home to London Above, but he finds that he no longer fits into that society and he now wants to return to London Below. In the end, ironically, Richard remains an outsider, suggesting that viewing a situation from an outsider perspective is a gift and an essential prerequisite for gaining insight into one's own life as well as that of society.

London Below successfully satirises London Above from the perspective of the marginalised. The implication is that some segments of society are simply "invisible". The fact that people can "fall into the cracks" into an alternative underworld depicts the alienating reality of city life, as Richard's friend Gary points out to him about his "magical London underneath". He says, "I've passed the people who fall through the cracks, Richard: they sleep in shop doorways all down the Strand. They don't go to a special London. They freeze to death in the winter" (Gaiman 368). Gary's point is an important one: there are groups of marginalised people in cities who might be able to offer a different and even colourful perspective of the city, as they are familiar with aspects of the city hidden from others, and yet these people experience a difficult and harsh reality.

Richard has to face his own demons, as part of an “ordeal”, to be able to save London Below. One of the first scenes to play out is that a child views him as a homeless man at a tube station:

Melanie looked at Richard, staring in the way children stare, without embarrassment or self-consciousness. Then she looked back at her mother. ‘Why do people like that stay alive?’ she asked curiously. Melanie risked another glance at Richard. ‘Pathetic’, she said. (Gaiman 244)

This gives the reader a very candid view of exactly how society views the people who have fallen through the cracks. Even children, who are supposed to be open and innocent, find those who live outside the norms of society threatening and pitiable. One realises that what is romantic or magical to the outsider is grim reality to an ignored segment of the population, since one’s perspective is subject to the constraints of one’s peculiar conditions. In an appendix to *Neverwhere* the question is posed as to why an imaginary place can be so plausible and whether it is simply metaphor and vivid description that sustains this other world. This ties in with the question of the influence the city has on the imagination: to what degree does the city stimulate and to what degree does it constrain? It can be deduced that this space is plausible, because while there is no actual London Below, the existence of this construct is based on a very real mental space or attitude of the rich.

Richard’s surname – Mayhew – is significant, since “in the nineteenth century, the man who [stood] out as an observer of the London poor [was] Henry Mayhew” (Wilson xvii), who wrote an investigation of the social conditions in the city called *London Labour and the London Poor*. Mayhew focused, inter alia, on beggars, rat catchers, street-entertainers, prostitutes and street vendors. He also looked at the mudlarks, people who used to scavenge in the mud on the banks of the River Thames for anything valuable that might have been discarded, and the pure-finders who gathered dog excrement to sell to tanners (Seabrook 85). Henry Mayhew described their background and living conditions in detail, and showed how marginal and unstable many people’s lives were, in one of the most progressive cities in the world. At the floating market in London Below, Richard Mayhew meets many different vendors: there is a stall that sells nightmares, and one that sells rubbish. While this may be a commentary on the consumer market and what one may buy in London

Above, it also gives the reader the insight that stall-holders are forced to peddle useless wares for a living. The rat speakers and sewer people seem to reflect some aspects of the real people found in London in the nineteenth century, and while many parts of the book take inspiration from London's past, it is a comment on London's present too. There may not be mudlarks in London at the moment, but there are people who struggle and are forced to live from hand to mouth. One gets the impression that London is a city like many cities – made up of layers: when one part is destroyed, another will be built upon it. Buildings will perhaps be appropriated for a completely different use, or simply be abandoned, and that which is left can be excavated and explored. Zorach suggests that the city is “a palimpsest, ... layers of strata and traces of a series of political, economic, and social forms” (Zorach 221). This means that, as with a manuscript that has been erased and written over, there are echoes from the past, and cities reflect their history, not only in architecture, but also on a social and cultural level.

Iris Murdoch writes that “some parts of London were necessary and some were contingent” (Wilson 256). Wilson believes that this is true for any city, but she was at first convinced that the necessary parts are the central districts and shopping areas. The contingent parts: “suburbs, industrial estates, rubbish tips, railways sidings, dead ends, unused bits of land...” (Wilson 256) were not the “real” London. Even the space surrounding cities – the spaces one must traverse to get to the essence of the city – was contingent. These outside spaces “were unfortunate accidents” on the way to the transcendental experience that was the truth of the city. However, if parts of the city are separated and left unconnected by inconsequential gray areas, then the city itself as an entity is in fact lost, and the journey becomes a “non-event” or a “kind of limbo” (Wilson 256-257). London's extensive public transport system means that many city inhabitants make use of trains and buses, and facets of the city would be lost to the viewer if hours spent commuting were seen as being simply “in limbo”. Viewing transit as a potential catalyst or as an activity that can amount to a rewarding experience of the city makes more sense.

In fact, Wilson does come to see the importance of the so-called “contingent” areas on a train journey through some of the very old sections of the London metropolis.

The viaduct passes over these areas and as it does so the traveler catches sight of the backs of many different buildings, both important and obscure. There are glimpses of alleys, decaying pubs and offices, new apartment blocks, old warehouses and even a few remaining bomb sites left from the Second World War. The bird's-eye view from the railway line above the urban maze reveals the way in which these buildings have accumulated like geological strata, sedimented one on the other, so that the sight proves an awareness of a city almost organically developing over time. (Wilson 257)

Wilson, at first, wanted to call her article “The Backs of Buildings” – a title that slots in comfortably with the setting of *Neverwhere*. However, a train journey through the “back lands” of middle south London later granted her an authentic, ground level view and a deeper awareness of London's history than, for instance, the usual view across the Thames river of St Paul's cathedral (Wilson 257), of which there are many perspectives. In *Neverwhere* Old Bailey speaks quite affectionately of St Paul's when he pitches his tent on a roof opposite the cathedral. While St Paul's is now “more or less white again” after being cleaned of soot in the 1970s it remains St Paul's as it has been for 300 years and in this way it embodies the history of London for Old Bailey (Gaiman 165). Wilson makes the point that sometimes meaning is found in unexpected places and that one could argue that the traditional sights, and thus “symbols” of London culture or history, might be quite unable to convey the meaning of the city, because they have been overused and are rarely regarded with respect any more. However, St Paul's retains its synecdochal character in representing London, despite having lost most of its meaning for some.

In *Neverwhere*, Door belongs to a family of “openers” – she can manipulate architecture and open both obvious and obscure doors, creating doorways in brick walls, allowing the characters who accompany her the freedom to roam the world under London. Door thus becomes the porthole through which Richard – as well as the reader – discovers *Neverwhere*. The house that Door's family lives in, before they are brutally slain, is the ultimate fragmentary or indeterminate space, since the “House Without Doors” is made up of rooms “scattered all over the underside” (Gaiman 80-81). In other words, the house is not in one location. There are a few entrances into the house, some of them situated in one of a “hundred ... little courts and mews and alleys in London ... tiny little spurs of old time, unchanged for three hundred years” (Gaiman 79), while “the door [to the original house] was roughly boarded up, and covered with stained posters for forgotten bands and long-closed night-spots”

(Gaiman 79). The huge white entrance hall can take any of the “openers” across the city to any of the rooms they choose to enter, while each room “adjacent” to the hallway is represented simply by a painting. Some of the rooms are from different eras and spaces, such as the Victorian swimming pool that her father found when it was about to be demolished and “had woven ... into the fabric of the House Without Doors” (Gaiman 80). It becomes difficult to determine whether the rooms are in fact tangible rooms in different locations or whether they are in a different space-time continuum altogether: “Perhaps in the world outside, in London Above, the room had long been destroyed and forgotten. Door had no idea where any of the rooms of her house were, physically” (Gaiman 80-81). These rooms ultimately seem to have fallen through the cracks, just like the people who inhabit *Neverwhere*.

As the Underground plays an important role as a setting in *Neverwhere*, the tube map is relevant, since city-dwellers depend on maps not to get lost in the urban sprawl. When he leaves for London, Richard is given an umbrella with a diagram of the tube map on it, but he gives it away that same evening, foreshadowing that where he is going, a tube map will not be of any use to him. In the *Above*, the map on the umbrella is simply an artist’s stylised impression that is a basic indication of the Underground Stations, but without reliable features of the actual London. The tube map that all Londoners now know was designed by Harry Beck, an electrical draughtsman, and it was based on an electrical wiring circuit diagram (Smart, Lez 114-115). He managed to couple functionality with “pleasing aesthetics”, and realised that tube commuters did not “need to know, or care, what surface features they were travelling under” (Smart 115, 117), though the inclusion of the River Thames on the map seems to have as much to do with artistic as practical considerations (Smart 117). So, while the map is not a classic one, and therefore no true reflection of the city from above, it has value as a text that serves as an approach to the city from below, and remains a very effective, while different, map of London. In *London Below* the topography becomes infinitely more complex, and the map loses its usefulness.

Simon Parker examines some of the theoretical approaches to and interpretations of the London Underground tube map and its place in urban culture. He points out that what the “reader” of the tube map sees is not an actual reflection of the geography of the tracks and landscape upon which the underground system is built, but rather a

“topographical abstraction aimed at reducing to its most linear form a highly complex engineering system” (2). He says that the interpreter of the map is well aware that it is not to scale, but the distances themselves are less important than the sequence and the number of stops, as well as the travel time (i.e. sequential and temporal aspects). “Hence, spatial representation is shrunk or stretched to fit” the Underground map (Parker 3). The map can be seen as a representational space: “the imagined city of the Underground provides us with a powerful mental image of London to set alongside other familiar place markers such as ... St Paul’s Cathedral, Buckingham Palace, Piccadilly Circus...” (Parker 3) The implication here is that the Underground forms a parallel city that mirrors London, and the tube map that represents this mirror image gives the user a tool for understanding and interpreting London.

The tube map also represents the city as a symbolic space, as the “circle and bar motif immediately conjures up an entire system of destinations and rail networks in a single instantly recognisable sign” (Parker 3). This interpretation of the Underground as a symbolic space that can be interpreted as a text is directly related to the suggestion that the Underground map also represents narrative space: each station or tube line can be seen to represent a different story for each city dweller (Parker 3). Stops are significant indicators of a number of things: where people live, where they work and where they shop. All these meanings of the places are then interwoven on the grid of the tube map, to form their own story. The map can also be seen as a “cultural trace”, and “the classic quality of Beck’s 1930’s ‘map’ incorporates nostalgic associations of that period – such as families sheltering on Underground platforms during the war time bombardment – stressing the ‘unity’ of London and Londoners” (Parker 3). One can also argue that not only does the map conjure up nostalgia for the early period when the map was first introduced, but also for all the years to follow in which the map has been used. The map has not only survived a world war, but many other cultural changes over the past 75 years as well. In a rapidly changing and developing London the tube map is one of the few things that have remained constant.

The map also plays a role in “commodity fetishism”, connected with the selling of Underground merchandise (Parker 2). Many consumer products are available with the tube map printed on them – such as Richard’s umbrella. The umbrella is a representation of the city, in its role as a cultural commodity. If you own something

on which the tube map is printed, it proclaims you as familiar with London – you have the cultural capital to prove it. Representations of the tube map then become representations of the being of London. This relates to Zukin’s idea of “tourists and visitors who pass through the world’s major cities each year who are sold ‘a coherent visual representation’ of the city as symbolic commodity” (Parker 140). Parker says that the map represents a second city that mirrors the first to a certain extent, and helps comprehend the first. He calls it a “hidden map of the ‘dual city’” and says that “... seventy years on from the Underground described in Beck’s map, one of London’s poorest boroughs, Hackney, is still not served by a single underground station, while wealthy Kensington and Chelsea have six within a short distance of each other” (3). In this manner, the map reveals London’s social structures to the observer.

London Below offers us a glimpse of a dual city when abandoned and mythical stations encroach on the Underground Richard is familiar with. In an amusing twist, he is shocked by the appearance of an unfamiliar tube station, and his unwillingness to accept it marks him, in a tongue-in-cheek way, as a Londoner.

Somehow, this was an oddity too many ... like all Londoners, he knew his tube map and this was going too far ... the train moved away, and Richard found himself staring at a sign which, no matter how many times he blinked – nor even if he looked away from it and looked back suddenly to take it by surprise – still obstinately persisted in saying: BRITISH MUSEUM. (Gaiman 162-163)

The British Museum tube station did once exist as a functioning station and was closed in 1933, because Holborn station had extra platforms added to it, when British Museum station was too close to Holborn and thus deemed not necessary any more (“Ghost Stations”). The Underground tunnels make an excellent setting for a London “Below”, since there are almost 40 abandoned or displaced “ghost” stations under London (“Disused Stations”). Hunter informs Richard that some of the stations have been sealed off and that not all of them are even accessible to London Below (169). Some of them have completely disappeared, so lost that they are not even hidden in the cracks anymore. On the other hand, the latest ghost station, Aldwych, was closed in 1994, but has been preserved as a scene location for film companies – which proves that taking a place off a map, does not mean that the place is no longer of use.

Wilson points out that an interest in “the obscure, forgotten, hidden parts” of the city is not new – they held a vast appeal for the *flâneurs* of the 1800s (258). Writers such as Dickens and Baudelaire were opposed to planners who wanted to reform the city in such a way as to expel squalor. The fact that they were interested in these interstitial sites indicates to Wilson that they rejected or were “suspicious of urban space as utopia” (258). Wilson herself is not so much against a planned city, which heeds the needs of the inhabitants, as she is against the prescriptions that might come with utopian planning and the fact that in a utopian city nothing is hidden (258). Yet the unplanned also needs to thrive, because with it comes the unexpected, and it is this spontaneity that leads to hidden places of creativity (Wilson 258). Utopia might also, less rigidly, simply point to aspiration, but still this does not describe the essence of “interstitial places of unspecified possibility” (Wilson 258-259). It appears that Wilson is slowly venturing into the complex area of Foucault’s “effectively enacted utopia” – the heterotopia. For her “‘non-places’, interstitial or indeterminate spaces” are depicted in London by the “panorama of the backs of buildings from Blackfriars to King’s Cross”. This “is the wrong side of the fabric of the city, a hidden and secret aspect of urban life where traces of former worlds and lives may be found” (Wilson 259). Michel de Certeau writes that it is in spaces “such as these that the dominated weave a language as they make a path through the city (or their fragment of the city) the place in which they ‘poach’ on the preserves of the powerful and manufacture a silent or surreptitious resistance” (Wilson 259). De Certeau’s view also offers a way for the dispossessed to stake their claim and appropriate part of the city as their own.

According to Bridge and Watson:

Many planning or architectural imaginations have characterized the city as irrational; subject to disruptive internal forces, chaos, disorder, and disease. And thus many city plans and designs have been motivated by a desire to impose order and rationality on the unplanned, fluid, complex and fragmented city. Le Corbusier, with his desire to produce the transparent and readable city, was a key figure of this kind of modern utopianism. (5)

From the literary texts in question it becomes clear, however, that the so-called “fluid” city survives, and even thrives although it defies being mapped. And while cities can be planned in great detail, what the inhabitants will make of that space still

plays the major role. So, short of having a totalitarian system in place, telling inhabitants how to live in the city, the city will develop, along with the inhabitants, at its own pace.

In *Neverwhere* it is clear that interstitial or heterotopic spaces hide something of former worlds and lives. Richard says that being in London Below is “like walking through history” (Gaiman 169). A character like de Carabas calls to mind the *flâneur* or even the precursor to the *flâneur*, the dandy, both gentleman and rogue – an idler who keeps his eye constantly on his urban surroundings. In the novel there are many other examples of a hidden past that is still very much part of the fabric of the city: complicated sewerage systems with “ornamented brickage” that lie all but forgotten under the city, long-abandoned buildings, and even a dense yellow fog that afflicts London Below – a ghost from London Above’s past. In the end Richard chooses to go back to the interstitial spaces of London Below, rather than stay in London Above, where he feels insignificant. One could say that moving into an in-between space on the margins grants him the creative freedom that he seeks.

Wilson quotes from a flyer:

We are ever increasingly in transit through ‘non-places’. Corners that lurk on the edge of activity. Passageways where activity occurs but the relationship between use and place remains unnamed. Places where names are incidental, meaningless because the need for communication – or the passage of time spent – is already deemed to be transient, insignificant, minimal, empty. Street corners, bus stops, shopping malls, motorways, airport lounges... (260)

While these spaces seem meaningless out of context, their constant flux and mutability give them the potential to facilitate the imaginative. There is a search for a new way in which to articulate the narrative of urban space. It is something that is “hidden, pre-conscious almost, inarticulate, the secret experience of the underside of cities” (Wilson 260). One might argue that the literature in which these non-places, or non-cities, are depicted might be the very language of these places, and because these places are appropriated by the “invisible” people, they are granted a narrative, and thus a language.

In *Neverwhere* we are granted the secret experience of the “underside of cities”. While some of *Neverwhere* is completely fantastical, it also offers an imaginary view of the “other side”. An example is the image of Knightsbridge, not as an upper-class shopping area, but as Night’s Bridge, a dark bridge inhabited by fears and nightmares. This hints at how the dispossessed might view an apartment store for the rich such as Harrods. The Floating Market changes its location from month to month. On one occasion the inhabitants of London Below need to cross the dreaded Night’s Bridge to enter the market. Markus points out that “all built space inevitably structures social relationships, by creating ‘insides’ and ‘outsides’, categories of ‘inhabitants’, ‘visitors’, and ‘strangers’, and it separates those with power from those who lack power. In other words all space is political” (17). One can say that this bridge indicates boundaries put in place by the privileged to sanctify their space and keep outsiders out – a comment on the segregation between the rich and the poor. Anaesthesia never makes it over Night’s Bridge; she is taken by the darkness, but the inhabitants of London Below are constantly subverting these hurdles – sometimes at great cost.

Ackroyd says that “contemporary theorists have suggested that time is itself a figment of the human imagination, but London has already anticipated their conclusions. There are many different forms of time in the city, and it would be foolish ... to change its character for the sake of creating a conventional narrative” (2). In other words, he suggests that time is not as reliable as one might imagine, and can be fleeting or transitory. The idea of the fragmented city that is continuously being reassembled – whether through a locus of time or space – and does not have a permanent character, is in keeping with the postmodern conception of a present-day urban existence. London Below is an embodiment of the rapid change that London has experienced through the years, and it is already intrinsically linked to heterotopia – now also to the heterochrony, since heterochronies are defined as absolute breaks with traditional time. For Foucault there are also sites which combine the aspects of accumulated time and of temporality – sites which seem at once eternal and ephemeral. London Below is full of examples of old hidden-away spaces. Door explains that “there are bubbles of old time in London, where things and places stay the same ... There’s a lot of time in London and it has to go somewhere...” (Gaiman 229). The idea that time cannot be lost and must go somewhere is foreign to the

reader – time and space are perceived differently in London Below, which signifies the break in traditional time that indicates a heterochrony. “There are heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time” such as libraries and museums. Such “general archives” are places of “all times”, but are outside the “ravages” of time (Foucault 26). Door’s house functions as such a space, by cataloguing and preserving rooms from previous times: the Victorian swimming pool was already demolished in London Above, and yet it remains in existence in London Below. Significantly, Door and Richard on their quest also end up in the British Museum. This is one of the spaces where they are closest to London Above, since they are mingling with the Londoners, and yet the fact that they are barely noticed still places them in London Below.

Some heterotopias are linked to the “absolutely temporal”, to “time in its most fleeting, transitory, precarious aspect, to time in the mode of the festival” (26). An example is fairgrounds, which leads Hetherington to explain the carnivalesque as spaces in which the “existing moral codes and norms of behaviour are momentarily mocked and overturned” (28). The Floating Market is thus another example of a heterochrony, since it has links to the same carnivalesque nature as the fairground, which Foucault calls “marvelous empty sites on the outskirts of cities that teem once or twice a year with stands, displays, heteroclite objects...” (26). In the case of the Floating Market, it also moves around, and once a month emerges with its stands and heteroclite objects on display. The only Floating Market that takes place in the book is held in Harrods at night, and it inverts the idea of the high-class department store. The vendors and buyers at the Floating Market have no interest in the valuable stock that is displayed in Harrods, and there is an example of a fish vendor working on top of a jewellery counter.

Hetherington links heterochrony directly to marketplaces when he speaks of Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque:

The market-place has in the past been a pre-eminent paradoxical space associated with strangeness and Otherness: it creates a world of the unfamiliar, the exotic, the pleasurable, and with throwing off social constraints in which the centre and the margin as distinct spaces are blurred. (29)

This means that market places can be considered as heterotopic in their own right, in fact Hetherington calls the marketplace the “forerunner of department stores” and arcades, implying that even in structured commercial areas something remains of the fair (28). Gaiman combines and extends the concept by giving the market fair like qualities and by taking it out of its usual context. Where a market would normally be situated in an open field or an unoccupied space, in this specific case he places it in Harrods, a space that is already occupied, and ironically contains the exact opposite spectrum of wares that is available at the Floating Market.

Markus successfully uses the powerful image of the eighteenth century *Carceri* etchings done by Piranesi to describe his view of utopia and anti-utopia:

[These etchings] show dark underground scenes of great massivity, complexity and contradiction. The spatial order is subverted by an impossible perspective – staircases which lead nowhere, and bridges which could not connect the spaces on either side of the chasms they span. They anticipate Escher’s impossible figures. There are machines that could be for torture or for construction. There are figures that could be prisoners or their gaolers. In some etchings there is a glimpse of a world above which is light, orderly, rational and obeying the conventional rules of classical design. The *Carceri* are not prisons. As I read them, it is the over-ground which is the alienating prison, sitting on a subterranean domain of paradox and free, radical creativity. In the present context we might read the underground as the anti-utopia which is not dystopia, a powerful structural spatial order of free relations. (31-32)

This view of a stifling world above links perfectly with Gaiman’s vision of London Above, as opposed to a domain of radical creativity in London Below, which perfectly constitutes the anti-utopia or heterotopia, a place that steers clear of all conventional rules.

William Gibson’s cyberpunk science fiction classic *Neuromancer* opens with the words: “The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel” (3). This line introduces the dark city so typical of cyberpunk novels, and has become famous in its own right as it sets the atmosphere for the entire novel. Gibson writes: “By day, the bars down Ninsei were shuttered and featureless, the neon dead, ... waiting, under the poisoned silver sky ... Ninsei wore him down until the street itself came to seem the externalization of the death wish...” (6). It is this very helplessness that Gaiman evokes in one of the final chapters of *Neverwhere*, where he echoes Gibson’s words with a slight twist: “The sky was the perfect untroubled blue of a

television screen, tuned to a dead channel” (Gaiman 353). These words, with their surely conscious allusion to the earlier novel, announce that Richard is back in London Above. He is extremely relieved that his friends and colleagues once more recognise him, yet the echo of Gibson unsettles and warns the reader: London Above might seem calm and tranquil, but Richard’s relief will be short-lived, as he is not content to live in a city where people can fall through the cracks. Early in the novel Richard sees London Above as “a world of safety and sanity”, a world where nobody has to fight for their survival. At that point he views this as something negative, but later it is the passion and the human aspect of the fight that he misses when he returns to London Above (Gaiman 122). He realises that in London Below he had to be courageous, living by his wits, in order to establish himself as individual. Back in London Above, he feels stifled. Predictably, he shuns London Above to return forever to his marginalised life in Neverwhere. London Above then comes to constitute utopia (or dystopia), while Neverwhere, which at first glance seems to be a dystopia, turns out to be heterotopia – a fluid space situated on the margins, a space of very few rules. One can argue that it is in this space that Mayhew can reconstitute himself. This counter-city becomes a place of freedom, as opposed to the stifling presence of an “actual” London.

How can those individuals who have less control, like the inhabitants of London Below, “negotiate spaces that are structured by others”? (Bingaman, Sanders, and Zorach 5) Can one, in fact, imagine alternatives to the status quo, or is the subject always caught in the structure created by the dominant power? (Bingaman, Sanders, and Zorach 5) In *Neverwhere* it appears that London Below is shaped wholly by London Above, and yet one finds that the inhabitants of London Below have no need for London Above. By asserting their individuality the inhabitants of London Below manage to resist the dominant structure of London Above. “... over the course of time, inhabitants find contingent, tactical, ways to make space their own. If the utopias of the early twentieth century now appear arrogant and dangerous, the current place of the utopian, if there is one at all, appears to be a matter of mobility, of wandering amongst, reappropriating and reinhabiting forgotten and interstitial spaces and non-places” (Bingaman, Sanders, and Zorach 11). Bingaman, Sanders, and Zorach assert that “the bounded subject is reflected in spatial boundaries – rooms, buildings, neighbourhoods, cities, nations – as well as textual ones. The separateness

produced by certain boundaries not only disables some kinds of corporeality but also enables the kinds of spatial representation Foucault refers to as heterotopias, ‘effectively enacted utopias’ which have the potential to comment on the larger social space in which they occur” (7). So not only do the doorways, alleys and bridges in *Neverwhere* point to the separation between “them” and “us”, they allow separate spaces of resistance to exist.

Cracks in the division between the world of actuality and that of the imagination signify the permeability of supposed fixed boundaries, a merging of reality and narrative. In the context of *Neverwhere*, both the literal cracks in the city and the figurative cracks in which the marginalised are lost denote a deviation from the desired perfection, and therefore may imply decay or even danger – also an emotional connotation that relates to the supposed inferiority of the people who inhabit the imagined space Below, but Gaiman’s novel does not indicate that they aspire to a life Above, suggesting that it is possible to “make a life” in a space and time that do not conform but run parallel to the generally agreed norms of society. The binding factor between the two spheres of reality and the imagination is language – the factor that distinguishes people from animals, humans from nature – even though the language, to be fully functional, may necessitate the intervention of a narrator/interpreter. In this case both the narrator and interpreter is Richard, who gives the reader insight into the world of the marginalised. Ironically, language can only be an approximation, however, as it is dependent on mutable perspectives, both of the individual and society – though its interpretation would seem to reside in the domain of the imagination.

**Chapter 5: The Imaginary City and the Search for Identity: New Crobuzon in *Perdido Street Station***

It is the possibilities the city offers for re-inventing itself and the lives of its citizens that gives urban life its peculiar quality. Intimacy and anonymity are equally present in urban exchange ... and for [Walter] Benjamin this sets urban society and its constellation of writers, artists and poets apart from both classical and provincial society. (Parker 9)

Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* poses some of the classic questions in cultural studies and critical theory. It explores issues of subjectivity and identity, agency, and the impact of diaspora and hybrid identities, as well as the urban as a cultural space. *Perdido Street Station* is set in the city of New Crobuzon, the metropolis of the meticulously actualised world, Bas-Lag. Intrinsic to the name New Crobuzon is the suggestion that there was once a city somewhere called simply Crobuzon, which means that while the later city is new, it is based on the known. With its many boroughs, and its backbone of a public transport system (hence the title, which is the name of the main station) this fantastical city in many ways reflects the city of London.

There has been much debate as to which genre of fiction Miéville's Bas-Lag work belongs to, and Miéville himself has simply dubbed *Perdido Street Station* "weird fiction" (Gordon 462). Joan Gordon argues that giving it "an unstable, liminal sort of name" fuels the argument and creates an expectation of a work that is "radically unstable" and hybridised (462). Miéville's fiction is self-conscious and offers the reader a complex heterotopic reality. Miéville says he is strongly influenced by Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera. He admires the fact that Marechera "demands sustained effort from the reader, so that the work is almost interactive – reading it is an active process of collaboration with the writer – and the metaphors are simultaneously so uncliché and so apt that he reinvigorates the language" (Gordon "Reveling in Genre"). Similarly, Miéville's complex tale and diversity of characters "build" a complicated and confusing world that constantly demands that the reader engage with the intricacy of the plot and the dynamics of the relationships between individuals divided by intricate foreign race delineations. The process of reader collaboration with the author is similar to the process in which a player of an

electronic game assumes a role in the context of a game. On another level it can be compared to the way city inhabitants interact with the city to form it in creative ways. By the same token, Foucault's concept of heterotopia, as a creative liminal space or a concept that can stop syntax in its tracks, is evoked by the possibility of reinvigoration – or reinvention – of language.

At the start of the novel a detailed diagrammatic map of New Crobuzon meticulously actualises the city, based on boroughs, major roads, skyrail and railways. Cutting through the city is the River Gross Tar, which divides into the River Tar and the River Canker. Apart from the split, the river's snaking way is reminiscent of the River Thames that cuts a similar path through London. Perdido Street Station, the centre of the public transport system and of the city, lies in the fork formed by the Tar and the Canker. It is plausible that a city would ideally be established here because of the fertile soil and prosperous river trade. The aptly named rivers, however, hint at a different interpretation. While they might once have straddled productive land, the cityscape has sprawled to encompass the land between and around the rivers. The city still has a prosperous trading port, but now shows urban decay – ironically removed from the idea of fertility that the rivers might suggest.<sup>1</sup> The analogy of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates adds to the irony. In Dog Fenn, a poor district of the city, “graffiti cover[s] every wall” and a particular slogan reads as follows: “Tar and Canker spread like legs / City wonders where her Lover went / Cos now she's being Ravished blind / by the Prick that is the Government!” (Miéville 159). The suggestion that the Tar and the Canker are female legs, and New Crobuzon a female who has lost her lover, and that the government is ravishing the city, implies that at least the graffiti artists are aware of both the fertility and the corruption that lie parallel within the city.

Jane Jacobs suggests that “designing a dream city is easy; rebuilding a living one takes imagination” (Bridge and Watson 5). This becomes relevant to *Perdido Street Station*, since

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<sup>1</sup> In *Perdido Street Station* a part of the River Gross Tar is cut off in a dock strike, which momentarily poses a threat to the city's livelihood. The river holds the key to trade in the city, and while at times it is depicted as fetid and dirty, at other times it is shown to be a moving and life-giving source.

The city itself is a hybrid, built among the bones of some vast long-dead creature, a collection of neighbourhoods distinguished by strange architectures, full of immigrants, a bit like a very far-future London, but not quite: a hyperbolic metaphor for the hybrid nature of the great cities of the contemporary world. (Gordon 460)

It follows that New Crobuzon is an amplification of city diversity, which puts favourable possibilities as well as potential problems under a magnifying glass. Closely associating this fantastical hybridised city with London makes the book a powerful tool for commenting on contemporary city life. Miéville parodies London, saying the following about New Crobuzon:

In a very straightforward way, the city of New Crobuzon is clearly analogous to a chaos-[damaged] Victorian London. But it's more than just the geography (river straddling, near the coast) and the industry (heavy, riddled with class conflict). It's the way the city intersects with the literature that chronicles it. London is a trope for literature in an incredibly strong way: "Hell is a city much like London," Shelley says, and through Blake and de Quincey, ... and Ackroyd, and Gaiman, and all the others, London is a neurotic tic for literature. Take those ideas – the danger, the intricacy, the mystery, the rich fecundity, the semi-autonomous architecture – and magic/surreal/acid it up a bit: that's New Crobuzon. Though New Crobuzon contains other cities – Cairo in particular – it's London at heart. (Gordon "Reveling in Genre")

As argued in Chapter 2, there is a contextual link between the nineteenth-century city, especially London, and the novel. Thus London has become a trope for literature. However, Miéville admits that New Crobuzon is also based particularly on Cairo, and the overpopulated hodge-podge quality of certain parts of Cairo can be sensed in the hybridity of the setting. By basing New Crobuzon on more than one city he can offer a wider spectrum of commentary: he can consider both Western social problems and, to a certain extent, also those of the East.

Miéville draws his "world-building" (a term common in science fiction and gaming) from *Viriconium* by M John Harrison and the role-playing game (RPG) *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gordon 462). His world-building exercise is not only about architecture – it spills over into all the aspects of the world that is being created. He says in an interview with Gordon:

There were two things about [RPGs] that particularly influenced me. One was the mania for cataloguing the fantastic: if you play them for any length of time, you get to know pretty much all the mythological beasts of all [the] pantheons out there ... I collect fantastic bestiaries, and one of the main spurs to write a secondary-world fantasy was to invent a bunch of monsters...

I start with maps, histories, time lines ... I spend a lot of time working on stuff that may or may not actually find its way into the novel, but I know a lot more about the world than makes it into the stories. That's the "RPG" factor: it's about systematizing the world. (Gordon "Reveling in Genre")

This means that Miéville meticulously constructs his densely textured world in which no information is offered without relevance. He says his work is also influenced by M.C. Escher, Max Ernst and Mervyn Peake – mostly works about “the aesthetic of alienation, of the macabre and grotesque” (456). The Escher-like aspect is apparent, since it is never quite clear where a street will double back on itself and take the reader right back to where he/she started. The twisted, sinisterly intricate and macabre sense of Peake's *Gormenghast* is also in evidence. A preoccupation with the monstrous in human nature, and with hybridity and alienation, lies at the centre of the novel. The effect is somewhere between surrealism and pulp fiction.

The creation of a world with its own idiosyncratic taxonomy relates to heterotopia by means of the example Foucault uses, in *The Order of Things*, of Borges's taxonomy of animals. Miéville even echoes the taxonomy of animals by calling a textbook that the character Isaac uses: “A Bestiary of the Potentially Wise: The Sentient Races of Bas-Lag” (68). Foucault reminds us that heterotopia is about the wonderment or “stark impossibility of thinking *that*” (“Preface” xv). Which means it deals with the unimaginable or unexpected. This is something one constantly experiences while reading *Perdido Street Station*: the wonderment of thinking – or in this case creating – “that”.

Daniel Punday refers to the “hybrid” nature of the original Dungeons and Dragons game, pointing out that role-playing games involve “borrowing from various sources” (122-123). The same game might, for instance, employ figures from both classic mythology and literature-generated fantasy. Punday calls this confusing mixture of information “a messy intertextuality” (122). He states that the best RPG worlds are usually based on a novel or some literary world, because these have some kind of internal logic, and to a large extent this makes the concept of intertextuality obvious. The relation between the literary world and the RPG becomes significant, specifically in the case of *Perdido Street Station*, when there is a suggestion that one cannot exist without the other. RPGs have rule books or manuals which help players to set up their

world, but they may also draw on existing works of literature. Miéville uses these rules to set up a unique world, distinct from other literary texts, while utilising the inherent creative freedom to borrow from both classic literature and a vast mythological source.<sup>2</sup> As Miéville's characters clearly demonstrate an ability to make decisive choices in problematic situations, the novel is analogous to a quest narrative or quest game.

Miéville draws on classic mythology for his complex race delineation. The term "khepri" is derived from a minor Egyptian deity, not predominantly female as in this novel, though, ironically, there is a sect in the novel called Insect Aspect, of which the male khepri are revered as deities. "Garuda" is taken from Hindu mythology and "vodyanoi" is a Slavic water spirit. New Crobuzon is filled with a host of diverse inhabitants, such as various human races, some major and minor xenian races, and even some deities. The xenians can best be described as natural human hybrids, usually a mixture of human and animal. There is an almost inexhaustible number of these hybrids: vodyanoi, cactacae, garuda and khepri all feature strongly in *Perdido Street Station*. The vodyanoi are frog humans, while the cactacae combine elements of cacti and humans. The garuda, a nomadic race of birdmen from the desert, have human bodies with wings, claws and the heads of birds of prey. They hunt like eagles, but with the aid of human weapons. The social structure and identity of this complex and alien race differ vastly from human notions, however. In contrast to their savage instincts, for instance, they are community driven and they take knowledge seriously – as indicated by the library that they carry around with them in crates as they fly from one hunting ground to another. The khepri are combinations of human and scarab beetle whose two sexes are differentiated: females have red skin, "human" bodies from the neck down, and scarab beetles as heads; males are simple scarab beetles, without a humanoid body or any human consciousness. This chapter will look specifically at how the khepri function as a community within New Crobuzon and how they interact with one another.<sup>3</sup> The three characters that will especially be focussed on are Isaac Grimnebulin, Lin and Yagharek. Isaac is a human scientist who

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<sup>2</sup> It comes as no surprise that there is already an RPG based on Miéville's New Crobuzon under construction at the following link, [www.curufea.com/games/crobuzon/characters.php](http://www.curufea.com/games/crobuzon/characters.php).

<sup>3</sup> Miéville does not explain whether these races are 'natural' or not. They might also be the product of genetic design, yet they seem to be accepted as natural occurrence. Miéville refers to "ten thousand years of khepri history", for instance (258).

tries to harness crisis energy; Lin is Isaac's lover, an outcast female khepri and an artist; Yagharek is a male garuda without wings who approaches Isaac to help him regain his flight. The plot, in short, involves Isaac trying to harness crisis energy to help Yagharek fly, and in the process they accidentally unleash on the city the fearsome slake moths that were initially held in captivity by the gangster, Mr Motley, who sells their faeces as a mind-altering drug. Lin is working on a sculpture for Motley, who kidnaps her in retaliation, as he suspects her of foul play. Isaac and Yagharek struggle to save Lin and at the same time exterminate the moths, as these moths prey on people's thoughts and dreams, leaving them in a permanent zombie-like state.

One of the spectacularly grotesque "human" races of Miéville's taxonomy is the remade – unnaturally hybridised characters (in contrast to the xenians) – who have literally been re-made by the government in "Fear Factories". Their status as remade usually comes as a punishment. A grisly example of a re-making is a woman who accidentally lets her baby die and the New Crobuzon court declares that her infant's arms be grafted onto her face so that she never forgets her crime (Miéville 115). As the term "Fear Factory" suggests, their commercial role reduces them to commodities: while the ostensible reason for the Fear Factory's existence seems to be punishment, the ulterior motive is to provide bodyguards and workers for the sex industry. This reflects Miéville's commentary that calls into question the attitude of governments towards the disenfranchised and also their practices with regard to encouraging industry. The monstrous group of remade people drifts through the city as freaks, slaves, abominations and prostitutes, while the metallically remade – or obviously cyborg – usually take on the role of bodyguards or fighters. There is an example in the novel of a Fear Factory prostitute who has a vagina for a mouth, something that deprives her of the ability to speak, objectifying her completely for the purpose of sex. This unnerving example comments on the commodification of human life in cities, where the sex trade takes women's options away from them. However, some women choose to have these modifications done, because they can make a living from their remade bodies, which further illustrates how prostitution becomes a cycle of exploitation that remains a major social problem in urban areas.

Jack Half-a-Prayer is an important remade individual who has a praying mantis arm and uses his punishment to become a vigilante, which leads to his being dubbed a fReemade. He is a reminder that a system can be subverted from the inside because, while he is made in a Fear Factory, like all the other remade, who fear the government and are scorned by the other inhabitants of the city, he is ultimately feared by the government and respected by the people. He is a hybrid who becomes a hero, because he understands that something good can emerge from something monstrous. The concept of crisis energy – the transforming energy that uses crisis to change something from one state of being into another – comes into play as the Fear Factories change humans into “monstrosities”, which makes these factories spaces of crisis and chaos. Foucault’s crisis heterotopia that constitute forbidden places – for people who are in a “state of crisis” within the “society and the human environment in which they live” (“Of Other Spaces” 24) – are relevant to the remade and the space they inhabit as a group in society, since their status as remade humans has rendered their relationship towards other humans ambivalent. They are now something more than human, and do therefore not slot smoothly into human society. The Fear Factories, in turn, evoke the uneasy space of the heterotopia of deviation which is for “individuals whose behavior is deviant” from the norm (Foucault 25), such as prisons and psychiatric hospitals. The Fear Factories encompass at least both these examples, since both a mental and a physical predicament are implied in the remaking of a human.

In contrast to Jack Half-a-Prayer, Mr Motley, a crime boss, is no hero, but a living collage who has voluntarily had bits and pieces added to himself for aesthetic reasons, and probably to intimidate people. When Lin makes a sculpture of Motley, she tries to capture what she sees as an embodiment of layers of reality. Motley says of the city:

Perched where two rivers strive to become the sea, where mountains become a plateau ... New Crobuzon’s architecture moves from the industrial to the residential to the opulent from the slum to the underground to the airborne to the modern to the ancient to the colourful to the drab to the fecund, to the barren. (Miéville 51)

He is clearly interested in fluidity and diversity, but especially at the point “where one thing becomes another” or where “the disparate becomes the whole” – which he dubs “the hybrid zone” (Miéville 52). Motley himself is a human embodiment of the hybrid

zone who sees his changes as aesthetic enhancements – visual artistry that has hybridic merit and is therefore the opposite of grotesque. This hybridity is alien even to Lin, herself a hybrid.

The city of New Crobuzon is introduced by using both Lin and Yagharek alternately as focalisers.<sup>4</sup> Both of them signify a type of inverted alien *flâneur*. When they walk the streets they offer the reader a panoramic insider/outsider view of the city as a fragmented landscape that can be associated with their fragmented identities, which means that exploring the city becomes a way of exploring the nature of human character. To understand the interaction with the city of both Yagharek and Lin it is imperative to look at them as subjects: what endows these characters with identity and agency; how their environment shapes them, and vice versa.

In the first short section as well as at the end of each of the following eight parts of the novel, Yagharek's first-person narration leads the reader into and through the book, up to the conclusion. As he is an outsider, like the reader, his unique view of New Crobuzon is valid as a means of "creating" a city which is, while "obscene", presented as fascinating and within the first page is established as an entity in its own right. Yagharek relates "worship" to the "new landscape of [the] wasteground" (1) in his narration:

Its dirty towers glow. I am debased. I am compelled to worship this extraordinary presence that has silted into existence at the conjunction of two rivers. It is a vast pollutant, a stench, a klaxon sounding. Fat chimneys retch dirt into the sky even now in the deep night. It is not the current which pulls us but the city itself, its weight sucks us in. Faint shouts, here and there the calls of beasts, the obscene clash and pounding from the factories as huge machines rut. Railways trace urban anatomy like protruding veins. Red brick and dark walls, squat churches like troglodytic things, ragged awnings flickering, cobbled mazes in the old town, culs-de-sac, sewers riddling the earth like secular sepulchres, a new landscape of wasteground....  
(Miéville 1)

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<sup>4</sup> Miéville also uses the evil slake moths to describe the city later in the novel. He appears to do this simply to give us a 'panoramic' view of the city – similar to the effect Gaiman uses when Richard climbs the roof to visit Old Bailey. Miéville uses this 'camera vision' to give the reader both a sweeping, voyeuristic and normally impossible view of the convoluted city and to distance the reader slightly from the tangled complexity of New Crobuzon. By using the fearful slake moths as windows or 'cameras' directed at the city Miéville can effectively present the "dangers, fears and, eroticism" of the streets (Bridge and Watson 4).

Yagharek's description captures the disparate quality of the city, and at the same time makes the city sound like a sick beast. The description has a forlorn and desperate tone which marks Yagharek as one of the dispossessed and marginalised of the city.

Yagharek is punished and cast out by the garuda because of what one would call rape in human society, though in garuda society the only recognised crime is taking another's choice away from him/her. In respecting the choices of others, the garuda ultimately define themselves in terms of community instead of individuals. By raping another garuda Yagharek deprives her of choices and it is that deprivation that leads to his severe punishment, which takes away his communal identity, strips him of his wings and rank and renames him from "Concrete Individual and Respected Yagharek" to "Too Too Abstract Individual Yagharek Not To Be Respected" (Miéville 55, 60).

Isaac decides to utilise crisis energy in an attempt to offer Yagharek a chance of wingless flight. He explains crisis energy as the potential energy formed when "something [is] in a situation where it's about to change its state" (Miéville 206). Not only has this energy the potential to offer Yagharek flight, it is also harnessed in a crisis engine to dispel the slake moths from New Crobuzon. Thus, crisis energy becomes an essential underlying theme: Isaac investigates crisis energy to offer Yagharek flight; in this process he accidentally frees the slake moths; he then utilises the crisis energy to stop the onslaught of the slake moths. This liminal energy that exists in the space of change links with the liminal space New Crobuzon itself offers, and Gordon refers to crisis energy as heterotopian, dialectical and dynamic (466). It also links with the theme of "identity construction" or identity created in crisis (Barker, Chris 255), which Yagharek experiences as follows:

*...The wind tugs me harder when I am here: it feels betrayed. It knows that when I am made whole it will lose its night-time companion in the brick mire and midden of New Crobuzon.*

*I sleep in old arches under the thundering railtracks...*

I hide like a parasite in the skin of this old city that ... grows warty and pugnacious with age. ...

Sometimes I clamber to the top of the huge towers ... [where] the winds lose the melancholy curiosity they have at street level...

I can dig my claws into the rim of a building's crown and spread my arms and feel the buffets ... of boisterous air ... close my eyes and remember, for a moment, what it is to fly. (Miéville 73-74)

Yagharek becomes an extension of the city: he capitalises on the opportunity the city offers to be anonymous and to create a new identity, albeit fragile, for himself. At the same time he is being shaped by this very close association with the city. Paul Patton mentions in his discussion of imaginary cities how the city can offer the inherent possibilities of the theatre (115), as the subject can re-create himself in its dynamic space. Raban calls this interaction “the continual creative play of urban living” (116). According to Simmel, Benjamin and Lefebvre, the urban dweller plays a performative role and post-enlightenment philosophers saw the city as a stage or theatre on which the human drama was played out (Parker 139). “Culture has become the equivalent of what Lefebvre calls a ‘milieu’ where social actors communicate through shared knowledge systems that may or may not be exclusive to its habitués” (Parker 139). But Yagharek also fears that he might lose himself in the city.

His fear of abandonment makes him shy away from seeking out a new community in New Crobuzon. In defining himself as a desert-living hunter forced to become a city-dweller, Yagharek establishes a space where he can be marginalised on his own terms, by conscious choice, so that he will not be subjected to forced marginalisation. Yagharek is always aware of his lot, and this specifically makes him a tragic figure. He marginalises himself, only to learn that he does need companionship. Yagharek's paranoia foreshadows his lot. His past sin (rape) catches up with him and Isaac does forsake him.

Language is closely related to the formation of identity. Yagharek is forced to communicate in a different language from his own, in an attempt to get what he needs, which means his voice highlights him as an Other. Yagharek struggles to pronounce words, because he has a beak. His language is closer to bird-sounds than to the predominantly human Ragamoll, the language of New Crobuzon. “It [is] difficult to discern emotion in Yagharek's scraping voice” (Miéville 57), since he produces “avian moans” and his voice is “harsh and monotone”, which makes him “difficult to understand” (Miéville 54, 60, 182). He speaks infrequently and, when he does, quietly and little. Yet on one occasion he panics and screeches at Isaac:

‘Have you forsaken me, Grimnebulin?’  
Yagharek was shrieking like a tortured bird. ...  
‘...Where’ve you been?’  
‘On your roof, Grimnebulin’ ... [Yagharek] radiated a massive sadness. ‘On your roof, where I perch, night after night, waiting for you to help me. I saw you release all the little subjects. Why have you given up, Grimnebulin?’ (Miéville 197).

His ability as a narrator to vividly relay in an almost poetic fashion his views of the city, and, on this rare occasion, his fear of abandonment, to Isaac, is set in contrast to his usual struggle to express himself, and his mostly quiet and rare speech. This underscores Yagharek’s tragic nature, and shows not only how the loss of his wings has fettered him, but also how his intelligence and insights are frustrated and restricted by physical restraint and a brutal separation from his culture. This struggle elucidates Yagharek’s position as agent within the city, especially since the reader is at times allowed into Yagharek’s thoughts when he is not able to express himself.

In Isaac’s search to help Yagharek, he comes across a group of urbanised garuda that lives in a community on the rooftops in Spatters, a dangerous part of the city. Their natural habitat, on the roofs and in the sky high above the city, is obviously where Yagharek would like to be, but he cannot reach them. In contrast to him, they are tough and display superior physical abilities. Their wings allow “spectacular” flying acrobatics, while Yagharek has to “clamber” to the rooftops where he loves to perch (Miéville 73, 180). However, this is not the variety of garuda Yagharek wants to be, as they are inconsiderate and crass, wild and entirely urbanised. These garuda are glib and eloquent speakers, in stark contrast to Yagharek, and they highlight his loss of both his physical abilities and his tribe: even if he could fly, as a city garuda he would never again be “Individual and Respected” Yagharek.

According to Miéville, *Perdido Street Station* could lead to “a more powerful sense of social agency and interaction with both real and fictional landscapes” (Gordon “Reveling in Genre”). This becomes apparent when considering Yagharek’s ambivalence towards himself and towards the landscape that surrounds him: he sees himself reflected in this landscape and formed by it, and at the same time restrained by it. Miéville admits that some of the issues he touches on can be related to actual events – “the dock strike by Vodyanoi dockers is a direct reference to the long-

running labour dispute in Liverpool” – while he also makes some “general points about the depiction of social tensions”. However, he believes he does not write as a commentary on daily life, but rather that his writing has to do “with coming to terms with a new sense of social agency” (Gordon “Reveling in Genre”).

When one looks at social agency within the city, Lin becomes an important character, as she is also a hybrid who is an outcast from her community because she has moved out of the khepri district, and chooses to distance herself from both the khepri slum, Creekside, and the more upper-class khepri neighbourhood, Kinken – a great offence in the eyes of the khepri community. In addition to this, she is also a female and an artist, who gives the reader a less introspective and embittered view of the city than Yagharek. She is a marginal figure by nature because she is half “bug” – a derogatory term for khepri – and does not “belong” in human society. Miéville makes her skin colour red, a choice that is consonant with his interest in “social tensions”. Using science fiction, Miéville is able to comment on marginalisation, as well as class and racial issues in society, without having to deal with the prevailing bias and prejudice. According to Seabrook “women now outnumber men in the migrations of the world” (53). This means that the female figure in the city is becoming increasingly more prominent and since the khepri are ultimately a female race – the mindless male khepri are simply used for procreation – this means that the khepri are the perfect reference to explore the female migrant and city dweller.

Lin views the city through compound insect eyes – which is one way of presenting a fragmented postmodern view of the city. For instance, she keenly observes the city, calling her “journey to these despised streets [of Kinken]... a walk back through the city of her memory” (Miéville 256). This interplay between the tangible city and the city of the imagination promotes a critical consciousness of the city and sharpens her interaction with it, which establishes her as a “flâneuse” figure to whom sight and observation are paramount (Janet Wolff qtd. in Wilson 63-65).

Lin had tried to describe to Isaac how she saw the city.

*I see clearly as you, clearer. For you it is undifferentiated. In one corner a slum collapsing, in another a new train with pistons shining, in another a gaudy painted lady below a drab and ancient airship ... You must process as one picture. What chaos! Tells you nothing, contradicts itself, changes its story. For me each tiny*

*part has integrity, each fractionally different from the next, until all variation is accounted for, incrementally, rationally.*

... The human mind was incapable of processing what the khepri saw. (Miéville 20-21).

Lin offers not only a unique view of the city, but one of cognitive estrangement, signifying that the reader can grasp the fractional, diverse nature of the city, but never completely comprehend it, since her view of the city is “clearer” than the human view. She turns the conventional view of urban life on its head. One glimpse of the city through her compound eyes would present chaos to the human mind, yet she believes this disjointed perspective of the city allows her to grasp its diverse nature more fully. Ironically, this implies that to appreciate the world in its totality one should preferably perceive it in fragments. As Lin walks to an appointment with Mr Motley she describes her environment:

The cross-bred architecture of that outlandish quarter confused her: a syncretism of industrialism and the gaudy domestic ostentation of the slightly rich ... The different forms segued into ... [an] urban ... wasteground where wildflowers ... pushed through plains of concrete and tar. (Miéville 39)

The streets opened out around her and she found herself before another abandoned-looking lot ... It did not look like a square but a massive unfinished hole in the city. The buildings at its edge did not show their faces but their backs and their sides, as if they had been promised neighbours with elegant facades that had never arrived. (Miéville 39-40)

The “cross-bred architecture” picks up the images of hybridity that relate to the characters of the novel. In keeping with its many hybrid characters, the city becomes an extension of its citizens and reflects them in its own hybrid qualities. Furthermore, the city is depicted as alive; through personification it becomes an independent entity. The depiction of the buildings as alienating and alienated reflects Lin’s alienation and isolation as a subject in the city. Yet there is also beauty amid the desolation: she sees the wildflowers challenging the industrial wasteland. Just as the “back lands” of middle south London grant a more accurate knowledge of London’s history and identity than other more iconic parts, so do the “back lands” of New Crobuzon (as a variation of London) grant an insight into the identity of this city. The description of Bone Town, the Thieves’ Quarter, allows the reader to see that in this labyrinthine quarter urban decay jostles with wealth. The thieves, though not discernible on the surface, are rich and thriving. “A massive unfinished hole in the city” indicates

something hidden, but also something menacing – ultimately an indication of the corrupt and dangerous nature of the city.

Intellectually, Lin is critical of the mating rituals of young humans, but emotionally she “rather liked it” (Miéville 171). The “flirtation” and “tongue-tied nervousness” between her and Isaac are what make their “companionship” grow, which happens when they “walk the streets” together (Miéville 171). By choosing the street as a setting for Lin and Isaac to grow closer, Miéville consciously implicates the city as a space where they can potentially form a partnership and a community. Just after their “walk together” when Lin and Isaac make love, Isaac pays close attention to the erogenous zones on both Lin’s “head scarab” and on her “human” body (Miéville 171). This suggests complete acceptance, which in turn suggests the possibility of sharing a lasting bond.

Isaac, while an unconventional scholar, and involved with a hybrid, still fears being “ostracized” from the scientific community for being involved with a xenian (Miéville 17). Lin is less concerned with public perception – perhaps because she is already marginalised, but also because she is from a more liberal artists’ background that is in contrast to Isaac’s scientific community. She suggests that the hidden nature of her and Isaac’s relationship points to his being either “cowardly” or “bigoted” (Miéville 15). He is not as sensitive to the position of the marginalised as one might expect him to be, and his attitude is typical of the bigot. He accepts Lin as the same kind as himself and as a legitimate inhabitant of New Crobuzon, arguably because she is his lover, but does not do the local garuda the same courtesy: they remain “other”. He pays lip-service to racial tolerance and understanding when he says to Lin that it is “important to learn how other races live in our fair city”. (Miéville 178) By these casual words Isaac appropriates New Crobuzon for both Lin and himself: it is “their” city. However, it is her involvement in the relationship that makes it a scandal. Ironically, her friends delight in this scandal, and see her “love-life” as an “avant-garde transgression” or “an art-happening” (Miéville 15).

In the Creekside slum the khepri appropriate what used to be human, and by applying their insect “cement” – body fluids which they use to build – they change the environment so that it becomes foreign and fundamentally khepri. Yet the borough of

Creekside remains a slum, the khepri inhabitants are “disreputable and hungry”, and they work in the factories and as prostitutes on the street. They are subtly pressurised into “living in ghettos; [being] preyed on, sometimes by bigots and thugs” (Miéville 258). While their physical appearance marginalises them, their solidarity as a surviving community ironically alienates them from the communities around them. They do themselves a disservice by building such solidarity that they do not embrace the city they live in, and they are fated to lead a static existence with little opportunity for growth of the community. Miéville suggests here that becoming too embroiled in traditional communities within the city can limit the individual’s diverse urban experience. Rejecting the solidarity of the khepri in an attempt at gaining agency, Lin separates herself from such a traditional community and establishes herself as an individual:

Other khepri glanced at Lin. Her skirt was long and bright in the fashion of Salacus Fields: human fashion, not the traditional ballooning pantaloons of these ghetto-dwellers. Lin was marked. She was an outsider. Had left her sisters. Forgotten hive and moiety.

*Damn right I have*, thought Lin, defiantly swishing her long green skirt. (Miéville 26)

She felt the linen dresses and coats hanging from the stalls, ignoring the passers-by staring rudely, wondering at the khepri shopping for human clothes. (Miéville 254)

By adopting a different, human, fashion Lin realises that she is being controversial – with regard to both the khepri and the human standards of behaviour. She chooses not to appear to belong to the artist sisterhood of her race but, ironically, she is adamant that the khepri are not hybrids: she tells Isaac that “humans have khepri bodies, legs, hands; and the heads of shaved gibbons” (13). This comments on the complicated relationship between different races, or even just different communities: while xenians are labelled as other by humans, xenians likewise view humans as other.

The khepri search for salvation in radical ideas and religion, but some of them are unfamiliar and angry with their own gods and so they turn to other gods. Lin’s broodma follows Insect Aspect, a religion that believes in the superiority of the male khepri, a bug without “human” body or any type of consciousness. To be devoid of thoughts, “motive or awareness” is seen as pure by this sect (Miéville 260). Lin’s broodma discourages her from even using the language of the khepri, and says that

not thinking at all is even better. From the time that Lin reaches “consciousness with language and thought” at the age of six, she is taught by her broodma to have a distaste towards herself, and inwardly she protests against everything that she intrinsically is (Miéville 260). She becomes aware of the scented “chymicals” that khepri use to communicate with one another. The radical shift from not thinking at all to later thinking and communicating exclusively in a foreign language illustrates the power of the mind to transcend the traditional form in which it is moulded in order to adapt to an ever-changing universe and society. Here the narrative touches on the theme of the roles of consciousness and of the community.

At the age of fifteen Lin, capable of communicating, spurns her broodma, and runs away to Kinken, the “upper-class” khepri neighbourhood. She learns about khepri art, and liberated and sensual activities such as “pleasuresex”. This reconciles her with her body and helps her to accept her hybrid nature as a thinking and feeling subject. She starts using the consciousness that she was taught to loathe, and adopts both a khepri and a human name for herself. This freedom to name herself and to embrace her capacity to think and use language establishes the next step towards appropriating an identity for herself – and dealing successfully with the fragmentation. Barker explains that “language does not express an already existent ‘true self’ but brings the self into being” (229). However, since there is “no ‘I’ outside of language, thinking is being; ‘I’ is a position in language” (Barker 229). It becomes clear that language is imperative for and inseparable from identity formation.

In Kinken, Lin also experiences the value and stability of a social structure or community, so that, in an attempt to belong, she simply adopts the name of a khepri hive, should people ask where she comes from. Ironically, even though she despises her Kinken “sisters to whom she is an outsider”, she maintains her ability to draw a certain “strength” from Kinken that she does not fully understand (Miéville 264). This illustrates that agency is fundamentally shaped in relation to the formative structures of environment and community, even if they are later rejected. She is disillusioned by the badly-executed art of this close-knit community. In their self-important callousness these “sisters” disdainfully look down on the female khepri “bugs” or “insects” of Creekside, rejecting them as lesser creatures. These social dynamics revolve around sexuality and class, a concept Lin rejects, and yet her ambivalent

nature stems from the fact that while class can be ignored, it remains a focal point in her community, and cannot be escaped.

Lin's experience with her khepri sisters underscores the prominence of sex in relation to the city. One reason Lin chooses to distance herself from the Kinken community is that she is confronted – and shocked – by the promiscuity of the khepri women who also have no respect for the mindless male beetles of their race, and would even tread on them. The “pleasuresex” among the female creatures of Kinken puts the focus on feminism and liberalism, but also on the pitfalls of promiscuity and a possible loss of identity. While the khepri in Kinken are focusing on pleasure, many of the destitute Creekside khepri on the other side of the spectrum are forced to earn a living as prostitutes. Lin feels that the women in Kinken also “prostitute” themselves on another level as, while they are liberal within their own community, and outspoken about community values, they are forced to sell their art to “people who mock [them] as bugs” (Miéville 27), in the process selling themselves and their culture, and diminishing the value of their art. So, while they imagine themselves to be above the system of capitalism, they are also “scrabbling for potatoes” in their struggle to survive (Miéville 26) – just like the khepri from Creekside.

To equip herself for leaving Kinken, and to distance herself from exploitation, Lin, who lacks human speech, must give herself a voice, both literally and figuratively. Though ultimately striving to express herself in her art, she must communicate with humans in either sign language or writing on paper. She teaches herself sign language, before she realises the need to learn the (human) language of Bas Lag, Ragamoll. Miéville stresses that Lin “signed” her life story to Isaac (Miéville 260), instead of simply telling it. Once again he indicates the importance of language in the formation of identity. Lin's inability to communicate in spoken “human” language – a natural inability, since she does not possess the proper “mouth-parts”, making it impossible for her to escape or overcome this part of her identity – forces her to compensate in different ways, and her art becomes a substitute for language.

Lin stays aware of her difference as she moves into a more human realm. She is “never so foolish as to think she could stop being defined by being khepri...” (Miéville 263). Nevertheless, she stops “*trying* to be khepri” (Miéville 263). In other

words, just as she stopped trying to be an “insect” as her broodma wanted her to be, she stops trying to be defined as the typical khepri of the Kinken community. Her attempt to reclaim or rewrite her identity, similar to Yagharek’s search for identity and community, is indicative of how the dispossessed attempt to reposition themselves within a dominant narrative. Thus the marginalised community, not recognised as fully human, constantly has to strive for acceptance and recognition by humans.

The haphazard and fearful khepri diaspora is the result of a genocide that is only hinted at, as the language barrier makes proper explanation and understanding impossible. Just as it is difficult for the inhabitants of New Crobuzon to understand the khepri diaspora, so it seems difficult for the khepri themselves to grasp the true history of the two khepri districts, Kinken and Creekside. This is due to the communication gap, but also “the systematic mental erasure that the settlers had undertaken” (Miéville 258). While the khepri might long for a past, it is a forgotten past which leaves them stranded in an inbetween space. By calling this era in khepri history the City Cycle, Miéville puts the focus on modern diaspora and how the urban environment can play a role in the dispersal of a nation.

Stuart Hall examines the need diasporic people have for re-representing themselves from “the positions of *enunciation*” (Hall 392). To him identity is not an apparent and uncomplicated construction; it is fragmentary, an ongoing production. It is “constituted within”, and not “outside ... [of] representation” (Hall 392). This outlook challenges the legitimacy of a term such as “cultural identity” (Hall 392). This fragmented identity is the one that art must and can highlight, and it is this identity that post-colonialism mostly focuses on. New forms of “cultural practices” become important, because the “past of oppressed people” is distorted, disfigured and destroyed (Fanon qtd. in Hall 393). Whether visual representation leads to a rediscovery of what has been hidden or suppressed, or whether it leads instead to a newly produced identity, the artist’s text is a means of reuniting a group through the imagination – “imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas” (Hall 394).

Lin views the art of the khepri in Kinken as indicative of “dedication and community”, but at the same time also of “bankrupt imaginations falling back on cod-heroic grandiosity” (Miéville 25). This implicit comment on the bias in her community makes her an outcast, so that she chooses to live, eat and spit her art alone. Sculpting with a paste she secretes from her head, Lin practises an art technique unique to the khepri. However, she boldly experiments with her medium, unlike the other khepri that huddle together in Kinken. This sets Lin apart from her khepri sisters who are not actively trying to re-represent themselves through their art. By moving away from her community of origin, by ignoring the glances of others and by searching out an original “voice” in her art, she succeeds in forming a new identity for herself out of her fragmentation. With her new identity Lin also sets out to appropriate the city for herself. Since as argued by Bingaman, Sanders and Zorach space can be understood as an extension, as representation and as intersubjectivity (4). Lefebvre insists that a fusion of physical, mental and social space is possible. Lin’s perspective and rejection of, first Creekside, and then the class and gender-based Kinken, changes the way she views the city around her. As she is very aware of the differences between herself and Isaac, she perceives the city as racialised, but she keeps grappling with space by describing it in her own terms.

Hall’s approach to cultural identity focuses on similarity, but even more on difference. Critical differences constitute our true being, or – because history has interceded – “what we have become” (Hall 394). This stance on cultural identity focuses on the emotional hardship of being assimilated into a foreign community. In the final analysis cultural identity is firmly rooted in history, as well as changeable: “being” as well as “becoming” (Hall 394). Where the inner identity of a culture is not active, individuals are “without an anchor, without horizon, colourless, stateless and rootless...” (Hall 395). The khepri of Kinken resist the inner identity granted to them by a narrative of dispersal, and by clinging to static symbols risk losing their anchors, since diaspora should actually help establish identities as contingent, indeterminate and conflicting (Barker 256). In her conflict, her breaking free, and her search for new ways to express herself, Lin represents what is possible for the diasporic individual, and thus for the diasporic community.

The crux of Hall's article is that he sees diaspora as potentially positive and formative. Transformation, as Barker suggests, is about "routes" rather than "roots" and diasporic identities are defined as "being in motion" (256). As the khepri have no homeland to return to, they need to seek out new heterogeneous and hybrid identities. Yagharek is a case in point: cast out from his tribe and unable either to fly or go back, he needs to seek out a new identity.

Travel, displacement, dislocation and hybridity play an important role in how identity is created and understood in this novel. One must be open to the redefinition of one's identity and be able to redefine one's margins; one needs to suspend one's adherence to absolute spatial and temporal values. For James Clifford, "tangled cultural experience" and displacement lead to "...an increasingly connected but not homogeneous world" (2). He points out both negative aspects ("transience, superficiality, tourism, exile, and rootlessness") and positive aspects ("exploration, research, escape [and] transforming encounter") of travelling (Clifford 31). He uses the term "dwelling-in-travel" (2) in his introduction to *Routes*. Yagharek, for instance, has to travel thousands of kilometres from outside the community of New Crobuzon where he dwells while waiting for his ability to fly, but it is never clear whether it is his intention to stay. As Yagharek moves from one setting to another, his identity moves and shifts with him, leading to redefinition. In the desert, before his disgrace, he is a hunter by nature; later he uses his brutal, instinctive side to take part in staged fights to pay for his passage to New Crobuzon. These fights represent his struggle to regain his prior identity. In New Crobuzon he is seen as a forlorn figure, who, despite his struggle and deliberate dislocation, expects the worst outcome. Lin, by the same token – if one discounts her later forays into the city – belongs to a hybrid group that is a classic example of the "rootlessness" that an entire race of people can experience when traumatically displaced. She epitomises the influence of diaspora, not only on the first displaced generation, but also on the generations to follow.

Where diaspora is concerned, the dominant society often forms a grid into which the other cultures must fit. "Allowing" diverse cultures to co-exist depends on the goodwill of the dominant group, one might say, and it thus leads to the "containment of cultural difference" (Bhabha, Homi K. 208), so no development of the accommodated culture may take place. It follows that racism is, ironically, still rife in

societies where multiculturalism is encouraged, as “the universalism that paradoxically permits diversity masks ethnocentric norms, values and interests” (Bhabha 208) – which becomes increasingly clear in *Perdido Street Station*. While the inhabitants of the city are extremely diverse and constantly becoming more diversified by the Remade, the Khepri remain on the fringes, the Cactacae seclude themselves in a large greenhouse, and Yagharek eventually decides to transform himself into a “[hu]man” (Miéville 867), on the premise that to be a man, one simply needs to be an unfeathered biped. He says, after plucking his own feathers, “I turn and walk into my home, the city, a man.” (Miéville 867). In this literal and symbolic rejection of what he used to be, he takes on a new identity, and views himself as no longer a garuda. For the first time he is able to see the city as home, and no longer a menacing, melancholy force. As Lacanian psychoanalysis notes: “The unified narrative of self is something we [gain] ... through entry into the symbolic order of language and culture. Through processes of identification with others and with the subject positions of social discourses we create an identity which embodies an illusion of wholeness” (Barker 107).

While this chapter has already considered the conditions of diaspora and marginalisation, the theory of identity underpins the whole discussion. Barker argues that “personhood [is] a cultural production” (220), in other words, of social significance. According to him all the cultures the Western world is aware of use the pronoun “I”, are thus aware of the “self”, and have a conception of “personhood” (Barker 220). He, however, points out that the way in which this “I” functions, differs from one culture to another. Elias claims that:

‘I’ as a self-aware object is a modern western conception that emerged out of science and the ‘Age of Reason’. People in other cultures do not always share the individualistic sense of uniqueness and self-consciousness that is widespread in western societies. Instead personhood is inseparable from a network of kinship relations and social obligations. (Barker 220)

This idea of personhood “inseparable from a network of kinship” comes to the fore in Yagharek’s relationship with his tribe – one which seems foreign to both the other characters from *New Crobuzon* and the reader, until it becomes clear, from what Elias states, that it is simply not the dominant Western view. By making Yagharek reluctant to explain exactly what a choice crime is, and by insisting that it might be called rape,

but can never be understood in those terms, Miéville presents the idea as too foreign for Isaac – and the reader – to understand, thus emphasising the strangeness of Yagharek’s interaction with his tribe. The reader accepts this explanation – either waiting for a future explanation, or seeing it as a device of cognitive estrangement – as it is similar to human culture, albeit incomprehensible. However, the reader’s dilemma remains: How can the situation be understood? Can the reader occupy a liminal or outside space that will allow immersion in a culture so as to understand it while still remaining on the fringes, in order to have a critical view of the interaction? This cultural perspective means that one is not an individual of one’s own, but rather part of a community; yet it is not impossible to envisage how something like this might work. Miéville explains the garuda community as follows:

They’re egalitarian because they respect the individual so much, right? And you can’t respect other people’s individuality if you focus on your own individuality in a kind of abstract, isolated way. The point is that you are an individual inasmuch as you exist in a social matrix of others who respect your individuality and your right to make choices. That’s concrete individuality: an individuality that recognizes that it owes its existence to a kind of communal respect on the part of all the other individualities, and that it had better therefore respect them similarly. (88)

We are confronted with this same issue again when looking at Lin, who comes from what is known as the “sisterhood”. The khepri, as a displaced community, is extremely close-knit, and Lin’s moving out and negotiating the city on her own, means rejecting her people’s beliefs, attitudes and lifestyle, and in this act of revolt breaking her bonds with her community. She moves away from an alternative identity through kinship, towards a more Western and postmodern, fragmentary identity, expressed, through her art, as individual and personal. “...identity is an essence that can be signified through signs of taste, beliefs, attitudes and lifestyles” (Barker 220).

According to Barker “...identities are changeable and related to definite social and cultural conjunctures” (221). In a way, Lin realigns herself with Isaac’s culture. She even takes on the dress of the human, bohemian artist crowd. Identity, then, is not something tangible, but merely a “description in language”; it is a construction that can change according to “time, place and usage” (Barker 221) and we see Lin’s identity reform itself. Her identity, and consequently her subjectivity, becomes malleable – like her art, her best medium of self-expression. “Self-identity”, it is also

argued, “is constituted by the ability to sustain a narrative about the self” (Barker 221) and Lin’s art becomes an almost too obvious example of such a narrative. A less obvious example is her interaction with the city. In her attempt to describe, or re-describe, the city on her own terms she offers the reader a new complex and fragmented narrative that is linked with her identity as a postmodern subject.

Stuart Hall points out that there are three aspects of identity: the enlightenment, the sociological and the postmodern (Barker 223). The postmodern subject is defined by “shifting, fragmented”, “multiple” and at times “contradictory” identities (Barker 224). This means that a person can take on diverse identities from time to time. Hall points out that subjects see themselves as having a constant “unified identity ... only because we construct a comforting story or ‘narrative of the self’ about ourselves” (Barker 224).

The foregoing discussion mostly focuses mainly on language and Foucault’s power relations in terms of space (heterotopia) as important influences in the constitution of the subject with regard to its environment, but Marxism, psychoanalysis and feminism all play a role in *Perdido Street Station*. Freud’s “unconscious” is one of the most prominent displacing devices of the *modern* subject. Psychoanalysis largely influences how the subject is perceived today, and it has given us the idea of the fragmented or fractured subject (Barker 107). It is not difficult to relate Miéville’s *postmodern* subjects to a theorist such as Jacques Lacan, but to appreciate the link it is necessary to note how the fragmented postmodern subject is perceived: “To speak of the self in terms of fragments, flux and an endless process of self-creation is to adopt a highly contemporary – sometimes labelled ‘postmodern’ – slant on identity” (Elliot, Anthony 131). According to Lacan, the subject recognises him/herself in the mirror as one, but because people are fragmented subjects, this is a “misrecognition” (Barker 108). People imagine that they are whole and unified subjects and in the mirror stage people are unable to distinguish themselves from their surroundings. When they experience separation or loss – usually from their mother – they start to recognise themselves in a mirror and they are able to enter the socio-symbolic realm, as they can interact with other people – and through this interaction they are formed as subjects. For Lacan the central feature of the human is lack or loss – “fragmentation, mourning and loss are at the heart of the psyche” (Elliot 137).

It seems that in the case of a subject like Yagharek, an actual traumatic event – his loss of respect and of his wings – causes separation from his tribe, which leads to an even more profound sense of loss. Subjects keep seeking “various emotional substitutes for loss” (Elliot 137). Yagharek pursues the ability to fly, and later he also seeks a bond with a new “tribe” – which bond, when lost, leaves him betrayed and bereft. Both Yagharek and Lin search for emotional substitutes – be it in flight or in art – and a new bond of community. The interaction of both these characters with the city reflects a dual, split or ambiguous relationship with the world.

Miéville’s novel reflects the same ambivalent view of space and the city as is present in Foucault’s “counter-sites”, which are sites that are in relation to all other sites, “but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror or reflect” (Foucault 24). For Foucault these counter-sites are utopias and heterotopias, which he sees as postmodern spaces of marginality and liminality. Heterotopias are places “outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality” (24). For Foucault heterotopias are also linked with slices in time – or heterochronies. Since time and history are so inextricably linked, one can say that for heterotopia to function one must break with history, which seems to imply a break in one’s life story or narrative. It is these breaks that constitute the postmodern subject, as we have seen in the case of Yagharek whose perspectives shift continuously. He moves from being a respected entity in his kin-group, to an exiled one, to a travelling fighter, to a broken individual searching for absolution through regaining his flight – even though his conscience would not allow him to be absolved – to an individual who tentatively belongs to a new group again, to an individual once more rejected. In the end he attempts to reconstitute himself as a man, through these events. Ironically, however, by rejecting the kinship offered to him by Jack Half-a-Prayer, a character who also inhabits the fringes, and by painstakingly removing his own feathers, he punishes himself even more, and also marks himself as a disenfranchised garuda. Because he can never remove his beak and feet, he cannot get away from his heritage; now he is not simply a garuda without flight, he is also one without feathers. This new identity that he picks out for himself among the fragments is also one in which he hopes to stop yearning for flight. When he comes down from the rooftop for the last time one gets the impression that Yagharek also rejects the “surrogate” city landscape he revelled in. The tall buildings

and wind have featured as companions, but now, without feathers and wings, Yagharek rejects that aspect of the city.

Miéville attempts, in his text, to indicate how the major characters are articulated within the city. He says that he classifies his characters like dungeons and dragons characters in a role-playing game. Yagharek defies the classification forced on him: while not a man, he sees himself as such in the end. When he rejects doing something greater and feels the need to simply blend in, he thinks of himself as a man, which can be seen less as his finding a community, and more as a criticism: if a man (person) is able to function anonymously within the city, he is unable to make meaningful connections with a community.

In terms of creating something “new”, and “re-inventing [the city] and the lives of its citizens”, Miéville has constructed a novel that, in its strangeness and diversity, and simultaneously its groundedness in the familiar, uses language to compose a complex, layered order. By using the tools of parody, satire, myth and role-playing games to demonstrate issues of subjectivity, agency, alienation, identity, and the impact of hybrid identities on the urban as a cultural space, the novel approaches the nature of a mystery. The names, images and symbolical references that cannot neatly be explained in allegorical terms give an indication of the difficulty in fiction of interpreting and presenting the multiple layers of the human psyche in its multivalence, which incorporates both the monstrous and the intelligible. The novel is one “station” on the journey towards understanding the complexity of human existence and co-existence as well as the interaction with metaphysical influences such as conscience, moral responsibility and obligation. Fiction, and therefore the imagination, has been used as an interactive medium between reader and writer to illustrate that – in the city above all – individual human identity is reliant on the identity of the community, and vice versa.

**Chapter 6: Future Cities: “Real” versus Virtual – the Dynamics of Identity, Community and Space as observed in *Moxyland***

Lauren Beukes’s 2008 novel *Moxyland*, a dystopian vision of a future Cape Town where corporations govern and the police enforce obedience, speculates about what happens when the lines of separation between groups (or individuals) no longer coincide with race, but rather with money, technology (and one’s ability to afford it) and class. The escalating role of technology and commerce in the city, and the interaction between individuals and communities in cyberspace, as well as the interaction between these communities and “real life” or traditional communities are central to the novel and pose important questions about the ultimate destiny of communities and the city of the future. Issues to be considered, in conjunction with Manuel Castells’s view of the “network society”, a society that has technological networks such as the Internet as a foundation, are: the progress of the city through technology and commerce; the change effected by technology and commerce on society as we know it; traditional communities in a technologically advanced or network society; the identity of the virtual individual; virtual communities; the influence of virtual communities on traditional communities, and vice versa.

In 2000 Martin Hall suggests in his article, “Digital SA”, that there is a utopian aspect to “being digital”, a world “freed from the constraints of time and space”, where there is the opportunity for a virtual community “sharing” with unseen others a “space of communication” (462). He stresses the role of language as a communication medium which allows the subject to be formed and reformed in words across distance, pointing to the postmodern or “decentred subject” (462). This means that identity is shared through the “liaison of human and machine” and that we have in a figurative sense entered a world of “digital signals” as opposed to “atomic particles” (462). “But every utopia has its opposite, and the technological dream of instant gratification, commercial prosperity, and family life is matched by a dystopia of cyborgs, nightmarish cities, and gated suburbs” (462). Hall speaks of the cities in cyberpunk novels as “dysfunctional cit[ies] of the future” (462).

Hall asks an important question:

Does the digital world of the Internet offer a new politics, a ‘public sphere’ of accountability and transformation, new possibilities for culture and prosperity? Or is the new medium remapping old divisions, and widening the gap between rich and poor? (463)

He argues that “without interactivity, digital democracy is an illusion, and can aid the intensification of bureaucratic control through a surfeit of information” which would lead to a “technopoly” (Hall 469). Having too much information available means that citizens cannot interact with it, which means that established controls are preserved and open access to government is denied. The current status quo can only change if access and availability change.

*Moxyland* is arguably the first South African cyberpunk novel, and the Cape Town of 2018 depicted in the novel is a good example of a dysfunctional city of South Africa’s future. This 2009 novel raises many of the same concerns as Hall’s with regard to the dismantling of family life, dystopia, cyborgs, nightmarish cities, and gated suburbs. There are four main characters: Tendeka, Lerato, Toby and Kendra, each representing a segment of society. Tendeka is a wealthy Zimbabwean-born black man, who has given up his claim to wealth and lives in an informal settlement or slum with his boyfriend, Ashraf. He is a small-time activist who is passionate about exposing corporate apartheid in South Africa, as opposed to the former race-based apartheid. He feels that South Africans have lost their right to freedom of speech, because people are being closely monitored and life revolves around the interests of large corporations.

Lerato is a highly intelligent and talented young black woman who refers to herself as an “Aidsbaby”. As a scholar she was sponsored and later employed by an IT corporation that supplies electronic billboards for ideological advertising, maintains them and writes new programs to run them. The corporations take in talented young orphans, such as Lerato, who are easy to exploit. AIDS seems no longer to be a problem, since she is living a healthy, productive life. However, her poor beginnings have made her obsessed with climbing the social ladder.

Toby is a young white man from a wealthy background whose parents have cut him off financially because they no longer want to support his drug habit. He makes a

living out of doing live streamcasts (much like podcasts) and being a DJ. Like Tendeka, he believes that what he is doing is somehow in aid of freedom of speech. Unlike Tendeka, he does not take it very seriously and has a superficial attitude. He ineffectively tries to be subversive from within the system, mostly for his own amusement.

Kendra is a middle-class white girl, a university drop-out, photographer and “sponsor baby”. This means she is the mascot for a corporation trying to sell their soft drink, Ghost, to a hip young crowd. The corporation she agrees to work for enhances her genes, and so she becomes, not quite a cyborg, but definitely superhuman and a living, breathing advertisement for their product, but she also becomes addicted to the drink and, even worse, becomes the intellectual property of the corporation. The fact that she loses autonomy over herself is implied in the nickname, Ghostgirl, which Toby gives her.

The Cape Town of Moxyland has all the familiar landmarks, but fundamentally it is a changed city. Tendeka describes his and Ashraf’s journey home from the pool hall, Stones, in Long Street (presumably the same one situated in Long Street in Cape Town today): “We cruise down Adderley towards the station, past the Grand Parade, and the blaring logos and adboards squatting on the façade of the old library like parasites” (Beukes 25). Classic names like Adderley Street and Grand Parade remain unchanged, but now technologically advanced billboards encroach on the city. The use of the loaded word “squatting” in a South African context conjures up images of squatter camps, and thus something that was once viewed as unlawful residence or unwanted activity. In this case squatting refers to intrusive advertising, rather than to temporary housing. Tendeka is angry about how people from the informal settlements are treated by a corporate-based government, and he sees the billboards as the tangible, unacceptable influence of corporations on cities.

He continues:

The taxi rockets around Hospital Bend, which used to feature an actual hospital, home of the world’s first heart transplant, before it got turned into luxury apartments, past the nice middleclass burbs, Obs and Rosebank and Pinelands and Langa, and into the loxion sprawl proper. Don’t be fooled by the cosy apartment blocks lining the highway, it’s all Potemkin for the tourists. You just need to go a couple of blocks in

to find the real deal, the tin shacks and the old minders' hostels and the converted containers now that the shipping industry has died together with the economy. All the same shit they've been promising to fix since the 1955 Freedom Charter or whatever it was. And despite the border patrols, the sprawl just keeps on spreading. You can't keep all the Rurals out all the time. (Beukes 28)

The fact that Langa, a well-known township near Cape Town, has become a “nice middleclass [su]rb”, illustrates how much the city and surrounding area has changed from the city the reader knows. Even Groote Schuur is gone, but the name “Hospital Bend” remains as a reminder of the past. Tendeka mentions the pioneering heart transplant in passing and, while he does not seem proud of it, he does not deride it either; instead he seems unhappy that the hospital (so necessary for general health) has been turned into luxury apartments. While the heart transplant was done in an era of racial oppression in South Africa, this means little to Tendeka who was born in Zimbabwe in 1986. He simply sees the problems as related to corporate-based oppression which society is facing now. He attacks the ruling ANC when he mentions the 1955 Freedom Charter which promised that the people would govern. In line with globalisation, corporations are now governing, rather than people. By referring to the Freedom Charter as “whatever it was”, he underscores that the past is of little consequence here and unimportant to the current dilemma – of people living in shipping containers, and a society in which people from rural areas have been marginalised and are unwelcome in the cities. In the novel the proper nouns Rural (area) and Rurals (people) delineate the areas outside of cities as other than urban, and lump together in a specific group all people from rural areas, othering them by the defining trait of their rural origin.

It is predicted that the majority of populations in Asia and Africa will still be rural until around 2025 (Pieterse 20), and yet it is increasingly difficult to sustain a distinction between the urban and the rural, since “few areas in the world have remained closed to the influence of industrial society”, and “communications systems ensure that the imagery of the metropolis penetrates more and more deeply into the consciousness and imagination of country people everywhere” (Seabrook 7). Although at the moment people are still making a living from agriculture, these systems are becoming more technologically advanced, and are being “dominated by industrial inputs” (Seabrook 7), which means machines take over the work – with a

direct effect on the labour force and a resultant rapid migration of rural workers to urban areas. In China it is estimated that 100 million people are in “perpetual migration between country and city” (Seabrook 7). While sub-Saharan Africa is still only 39 per cent urbanised, 89 per cent of the gross domestic product already comes from services and industry, and merely 11 per cent from agriculture (Pieterse 20-21). Although urban expansion in Africa has yet to stabilise, the urban is already dominating the rural in a market increasingly trying to compete on a global level. The problem with this rapid migration is, however, that the cities do not have the infrastructure to support the sudden escalation in population. This is one of the reasons that Rurals are seen as the other in *Moxyland*: because city dwellers want to protect themselves against outside forces that might take away their space and their livelihood, and in the face of the blurring of the delineation between rural and urban they seek to draw a clear distinction between the two.

When Tendeka says the apartment blocks are Potemkin for the tourists, he is alluding to the sham villages purportedly constructed in Russia in the eighteenth century by Grigori Aleksandrovich Potemkin. The fake constructions were built along the uninhabited Dnieper River to either impress or deceive Empress Catherine II about her new conquest (“Potemkin Village”). One inference here is that the apartments are a pretentious façade which hides the true situation; the other is that the apartments represent over-compensating architecture that is of little use to the masses. Tendeka says they go

...past the tourist zone, where the rubbernecks come to get their taste of poverty and their photographs with the kiddies, maybe some love *muti* from the sangoma, or a taste of *mqombothi* beer shared around in a can between men who are only there to lend the scene authenticity, to earn a little cash to buy a Zamalek, real beer in a real bottle, because nobody cares about tradition anymore. (Beukes 28-29)

He explains that the tourists hover on the fringes of the township, taking part in activities such as drinking home-made beer. However, this beer is made expressly for tourists, while the inhabitants drink the same beer as everybody else, put on the market by the large corporations. The implication is that corporations are killing tradition. Beukes is also making a satirical comment on township tours, a growing sector of the South African tourism industry. While some people accuse those who offer and take township tours of exploiting the poor and gawking at them, infringing

on their lives, others believe it is the best way to spread the word about poverty and show first-hand what living in a township entails, at the same time boosting the economy of the township. This is an ironic comment on the commercial cycle: the township dwellers make money out of the tourists, but in the end the big corporations still exploit those who live in the townships (as well as the tourists) – and their living conditions remain bleak. Beukes's descriptions illustrate that little has changed for the disenfranchised in 2018, since the settlements appear exactly like the ones found around South Africa today, with electrical wires chaotically linking the shacks to one another in order to share in the more technologically advanced world outside, even if they appropriate that part for themselves.

According to Ashraf it is “the good stuff” in the townships that the tourists are missing, like the “...jazz at the shebeen ... and the sense of community and how transformation has been real and important” (Beukes 29). In contrast to this, Tendeka feels that the transformation is a “total wank”, because “people are just as economically fucked as they were before, only now they're sick as well, or, worse, trying to escape being sick and bringing it in with them from the Rural” (Beukes 29). While Ashraf feels that tradition and community are important aspects of transformation, Tendeka realises that in the grand scheme of things focusing on tradition is just another eye-blind to keep people from realising how difficult their circumstances actually are. Beukes is commenting on the current situation in squatter camps in South Africa, where diseases such as Aids and tuberculosis are rife. The Rural is once again set up as a significant outside threat. In *Moxyland* the approach is very urbanised, since the city, while tumultuous, also offers a safe haven from the threat posed by the Rural. When Kendra visits her photography mentor, Mr Muller, his “wall2wall is set on Karoo” which she describes as “an idealized version of the Rural, peaceful, as far removed from the real thing as you can get” (Beukes 59). This implies that the Karoo, as the reader knows it, either no longer exists, or is an anomaly, which means little peace is to be had outside the city. Beukes thus turns the stereotype around and predicts that, as the urban lifestyle evolves and predominates, an encroaching underprivileged, non-ideal rural lifestyle will threaten the city. The obvious conclusion is that Rurals are thought to usurp city dwellers' opportunities and also to carry diseases, but the novel does not clearly explain the reasoning behind this thinking. Since rural areas can be viewed as the opposite of advancement or

corporatisation, it is plausible that promoting ideas of the rural as a threat is part of the tactics used by corporations to keep city people on their guard against what might be outside, in this manner keeping them tractable.

Tendeka and Toby interact throughout the novel, but the latter's Cape Town is a different space from Tendeka's – both in perspective and environment. Toby's first mention of his apartment or "swivel" is incidental, and it is not clear that he is referring to his abode when he informs his mother that his "Swivel's cool, [and a] bit disarrayed..." (Beukes 9). Here disarray hints at unsettled space, and "swivel", in conjunction with disarray, conjures up movement – a non-permanent or adaptable living space. The word "swivel" is later clarified when Toby elaborates: "Luckily the door has already started to rotate away. A lot of people don't like the whole cog system of floors, the entire building like a gyroscope in perpetual motion, but hey, it saves space on doors..." (54) Toby's apartment is a radical experiment with space, since it literally swivels about on its axis in an attempt to save space. It is apparent that he lives in an up-market or "wealthy" part of the city; the moving floors are high-tech, and offer an aesthetically pleasing environment with better views of the city. This is set in contrast to the "loxion" – slang in the novel for informal settlement and coined from the Afrikaans word *lokasie* – where Tendeka finds himself among the poor that are being bypassed by a corporate system. The swivel is one of the instances that illustrate Beukes's vision of what large cities might offer in the future. The book was published in April 2008, and it was only in late June 2008 that architects unveiled their plans to build the Dynamic Tower, a 420-metre shape-shifting skyscraper, in Dubai. Architects claim that the floors of the planned tower will be able to rotate independently, creating an ever-shifting shape, thus making it the "world's first building in motion" ("Dubai") – an eerie echo of the swivel's "perpetual motion". The estimate is that a unit in the Dynamic Tower would be in the price range of \$40 million. If the tower block Beukes has in mind is similar to the Dynamic Tower, Toby's city apartment and environment thus stand in stark contrast to the muddled squatter camp environment to which Tendeka introduces the reader. In *Moxyland* the divide between rich and poor increases with the advance of technology.

By taking Cape Town out of its current context and placing it in the future, and also by subtly – and not so subtly – changing it, Beukes can comment on current problems

in the city in terms of a future perspective. In addition, it allows her to comment on future problems – not only in this city, but in all cities with similar demographics. In this manner, *Moxyland* takes on the role of predictive science fiction, allowing the author to dissect current problems and predict, or even warn, where these problems might lead. The city Tendeka and Toby really inhabit forms a contrast with the virtual reality or cyberspace in which they also spend time. Because Tendeka inhabits a less privileged social sphere, the difference between his online experience and his real life is apparent, since as soon as he comes home he logs into the virtual world. “I plug in the headphones, ignoring the ... background ... , connect to the Plus server and I’m gone” (Beukes 31). The idea of being gone implies that when one is online or in gametime – this means busy inside a virtual reality game – one all but disappears from the “realworld” or “real life”. IRL or “in real life”, is a popular Internet relay chat abbreviation dating from the 1990s, and signifies the opposite of online activity. The online environment engages the players – in this case Tendeka – to such an extent that they become unaware of what is going on around them in reality. Toby, who belongs to a more privileged set, has a much more fluid and continuous interaction with the virtual, and although on occasion he logs into an online environment, his actual environment is in constant interaction with his virtual environment. The actuality of physical space is confronted with the relativity of cyberspace.

The word “cyberspace” was coined by William Gibson in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, where “cyberspace” is also called a “consensual hallucination”: the protagonist, Case, would “jack” “...into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix” (5). Since the fictitious origin of “cyberspace”, the concept has grown to be much more important and “real” than a mere disembodied hallucination. Represented by networks such as the Internet, cyberspace has become an everyday part of what Castells calls the “network society” (83) – of which he names a few important characteristics that deserve scrutiny. First he finds that the Internet and progressive telecommunication systems have led to “simultaneous spatial concentration and decentralisation” that forms a new network of “urban nodes” across the world (Castells 83). Secondly, he states that virtual and physical communities develop in close interaction. Thirdly, he deduces that defensive spaces form, because some people are included in the network and others are excluded, according to the spaces they inhabit. His fourth point is that

the involvement of citizens in society is on the decline, and in conclusion he finds that the resulting segregation can ultimately lead to the breakdown of society.

All these characteristics of the network society are relevant to the present discussion of *Moxyland* and the role of online communities. In the first place, progressive “telecommunications, Internet and fast computerized transportation systems” allow a new system of networks and “urban nodes” across the world (Castells 83), paradoxically “shrinking” space between people as well as expanding the scope of interaction between them. A good example of this is where Tendeka, who is living in Cape Town, meets skyward\*, who is supposedly resident in Amsterdam, in an “Asia-centric” online environment. Their interaction links three disparate, recognisable spaces: Africa, Asia and Western Europe.

When discussing Castells’s second point about virtual communities, space and cities, one must first explore the role of individuals on the Internet, as it is through individuals that cyberspace exists and grows. Tim Jordan refers to the stable identity of a person in cyberspace as an “avatar” (59), which means that other people can recognise one on the Internet by some defining characteristic, be it a name or a style. Going into cyberspace means a “moment of self-definition” when the subject chooses a name (Jordan 60) and an “identity”. For Shawn Wilbur, cyberspace means an “unshackling from real life constraints”. There is transcendence as well as emancipation in that one can both “step beyond” and remain oneself “through virtual identity play” (48). In Multi-user domains (MUDs) people provide descriptions of themselves, which allow them to recreate themselves. Though some people want their avatar to portray their actual identity – “the real me” (Jordan 77) – the markers of “real life” are absent, so that it is possible for subjects in cyberspace to be seen only as that which they project. This practice takes a step away from what Lacan calls identity formation through relationships with others, as the Internet user decides on, and forms, an identity to be presented *before* interacting with others on the Internet. Naturally, personality traits and style can filter through, so that an avatar is never truly disconnected from the real person, even if the person wants it to be disconnected. Jordan points out that Internet-users learn different ways to discern who the real person behind the avatar is. These include looking for a recurring style in language

use, and looking at e-mail addresses, webpage names and handle<sup>5</sup> names. Thus, identity or communication on the Internet is not lost – just reinvented. “It is not that cyberspace is inherently free of gender or race or any of the other key constituents of offline identity, but that these are recreated with different resources, in different ways and with different variable connections to offline identity” (Jordan 67).

Tim Jordan starts his book *Cyberpower* with a definition of what cyberspace and “virtuality” have come to mean in the network society:

Cyberspace can be called the virtual lands, with virtual lives and virtual societies, because these lives and societies do not exist with the same physical reality that ‘real’ societies do. With the emergence of cyberspace, the virtual becomes counterposed to the real. The physical exists in cyberspace but is reinvented. Virtuality is the general term for this reinvention of familiar physical space in cyberspace. (1)

While the interaction in cyberspace takes place in a virtual and partly imaginary sphere, one is still dealing with land, space, lives and societies – all the things that are central to life – be it city life or rural life and communities. According to Rhiannon Bury, what gives communities “substance” is the same trait that gives bodies consistency, and that is the repetition of “various acts”, which can be translated as “communal practices” (14). Creating online communities is not simply a social practice, but also a spatial one, since as Doreen Massey claims, all social relations “exist necessarily *in* space”, that is, “in a locational relation to other social phenomena” and “*across* space” (Bury 15):

And it is the vast complexity of the interlocking and articulating nets of social relations which is social space. Given that conceptualization of space, a ‘place’ is formed out of the particular location. And the singularity of an individual place is formed in part out of that specificity of the interactions which occur at that location (nowhere else does this precise mixture occur) and in part out of the fact that the meeting of those social relations at that particular location... will in turn produce new social effect. (Massey qtd. in Bury 15)

By extension, this indicates that communities, whether physical or virtual, have in common particular actions and a particular location, so that space and community are not mutually exclusive. A community formed in cyberspace can still be likened to a regular physical community, and can, because of its difference, revolutionise the way

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<sup>5</sup> “Handles are the self-chosen pseudonyms many employ on the Internet” (Jordan, 73). These names can also be called nicks (for nickname) as within Internet Relay Chat (IRC) communities.

socio-economic interaction occurs. Bury goes so far as to say that cyberspace communities can be “potentially heterotopic” because of their “reworking and transgressing of normative spatial practices and relations” (18). Cyberspace can most definitely be viewed as a place that is “outside of all places” where “other sites that can be found within ... culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted” (Foucault 24). The distance between users in cyberspace is a relative concept that is not measurable – and therefore not limited.

Online phenomena, social networks and communities, such as MySpace, Twitter and Flickr, that particularly allow the writing of notes, online diary entries, uploading of pictures, interactive game-play and keeping people updated as to the thoughts and whereabouts of their friends, have gained great popularity in the last decade – to such an extent that the social network Facebook has become a household term in less than three years. Though this has increased people’s interconnectedness, it also ironically means that citizens withdraw from real society – as mentioned by Castells – and transfer their social involvement to the sphere of virtual communication, at the same time changing the way traditional communities work.

For Jordan, the Internet is anti-hierarchical. This means “distribution of authority online mimics the Internet’s technology because it is decentered, with no central authority...” (79). He points out that attempts to censor or restrict can simply be circumvented, and because communication is “many people to many people”, rather than one to many, there is “open participation in decision making, creating the potential for conclusions to be reached in more egalitarian ways than offline” (Jordan 79). Online hierarchies can “subvert” offline ones by the removal of “signs of identity and removal of certain tactics of maintaining hierarchies” (80). This removal of signs of identity allows hierarchies to change. It is no surprise that skyward\* chooses to approach Tendeka in an online environment without the obvious authority of the corporations of real life. Yet it is as a result of corporate-instigated constant surveillance that Lerato, within the company, can follow Tendeka’s moves, and she herself is constantly surveyed. The presentiment – which is also a forewarning – is clear: such a promising new way of interacting, and counteracting socioeconomic problems, can easily create a whole new wave of social and economic problems.

From the above discussion it is clear that individuals using the Internet quickly form communities according to specific interests – as in real life. Flickr is an example of a discussion group that has formed around a specific topic, as it allows members to discuss and showcase their photography. Websites and communities such as these aid concentration and decentralisation. Wilbur points out that communities on computer networks are forming, ironically, because “‘real life’ communities are under attack, perhaps even by the same techno-cultural forces that make Internet culture possible” (45). Among the many definitions of virtual communities is that of Jordan who says that “communities emerge in cyberspace when a number of users create avatars that return again and again to the same informational space” (100). Social behaviour emerges from individual endeavour – and from this communication comes a feeling of “collective responsibility” (102). Jordan offers one of the many definitions of virtual communities:

The most important element in cyberspatial social relations is the sharing of information. It is not sharing in the sense of transmission of information that binds communities in cyberspace. It is the ritual sharing of information ... that pulls it together. (Jones qtd. in Jordan 109)

A good example of this sharing of information is blogging, which is basically the keeping of a journal online for all to read, or for some to subscribe to. It has become so popular that some high quality blogs are being published in book form, and the term “blogosphere” which refers to the realm of blogs has become commonplace on the Internet. Facebook and Twitter even allow mini-blogging: users can update their “status” with their whereabouts and their musings as often as they like in order to communicate with friends or subscribers who can leave comments in return. Another form of interaction is provided by podcasts, which are audio or video files that are available either for download to listen to on portable devices such as MP3 players or cellular phones, or for streaming live, directly from the computer. All these options mean people can now comfortably communicate on the Internet by means of typed text, audio and image. It follows that the basis for social relations has been changed incontrovertibly by these virtual platforms. In *Moxyland* Toby constantly sends out a live feed, called a “streamcast”, to a network similar to the Internet. He wears a coat (“BabyStrange”) which is a piece of technical equipment that is basically a garment with embedded cameras. He posts interesting or controversial footage of the world around him online and is always on the lookout for material that might boost the

number of hits his cast gets, or that will be exclusive and make him some money. Because Toby transmits what is happening around him, he is constantly projecting the tangible into the virtual. Ironically, his other job seems to achieve the opposite, since he participates in a computer game that mimics the virtual environment but is partly played in real-life settings. The interdependence of the real and the virtual consequently necessitates a perusal of one's perception of identity.

Howard Rheingold's authoritative study on virtual communities<sup>6</sup> claims that they are "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Rheingold qtd. in Wilbur 46). Wilbur is of the opinion that "sufficient human feeling" is full of "assumption" and "imprecise measure" and does not explain the development of communities. He points out that Rheingold is inclined to see Internet users as a community only when they move on to meet face to face or share details about their "real life" (Wilbur 46). Yet one knows, as Jordan has also stated, that communities can form out of avatars that sometimes do not resemble the "real" people at all. For Wilbur the "roots of community are sunk deep into rather abstract terrain" (47). He states that "Paul Virilio has suggested that technologies of the virtual are destined to not only simulate the real, as Jean Baudrillard has suggested, but to replace it" (Wilbur 48). In other words, there is a blurring of the lines between "fact and fantasy": virtual communities become not so much an imitation of life as a whole new way of life.

Edgar Morin (qtd in Robins) as well as Castells points out that the social bonds that one used to have with extended family are disappearing. In *Moxyland* Lerato is constantly annoyed with her sisters who want to plan family get-togethers while she would rather be working on her programming. She dubs Mpho, the man she was previously involved with, a "stalker boy" as he gives her flowers (Beukes 76), and lets an online dating service run by her employers organise her social life. Her pre-approved potential matches are people from affiliated companies, "which means no lengthy mutual non-disclosure contracts to sign before you can move on to the sex" (Beukes 77). She deletes the "civilians" that match with her, because she is "biased",

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<sup>6</sup> *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier.*

and contacts a man “tagged as questionable”, because it probably means he is a headhunter – which would indicate either that her employing company is watching her, or that she could obtain career advancement (Beukes 77). In other words, Lerato conducts her social life like a business, and seems to have no or little sentimentality about family bonds. Corporatisation influences every iota of her life, down to who she will have sex with, and she has little interest in people who function outside of this structure. People like Lerato are searching for new forms of solidarity – which the Internet and virtual communities can provide (Robins, Kevin 89). There is, however, something synthetic about the experience – for Robins it means a city with citizens, but no “residents”: “What we have is the preservation through simulation of the old forms of solidarity and community. In the end, not an alternative society, but an alternative to society” (Robins 89). It stands to reason that the occupants of this alternative society have to adapt to fit the new society, and no longer conform to the norm of human reference.

Apart from streamcasting, Toby also makes money by playing and testing prototype online games. The Moxyland of the novel’s title is an interactive online children’s game that Toby refers to as “the special hell that is Moxyland” (Beukes 85). Toby’s participation in the game borders on the illegal, since he is no longer a child, and he uses his intellectual advantage to gain information for a client who is paying him for his services. He justifies his highly competitive and selfish participation by saying “...at least [we’re] not drug dealers or human traffickers or anti-corporate terrorists, which are all the cops really care about” (Beukes 55). It is logical that the police are loyal to the corporations, even unquestioningly so, as the corporations basically finance society and are therefore reliant on law enforcement to protect them – and indirectly society – from invasive criminals. The novel shows that, aside from corporations, the police force is the only apparent authority remaining, and it is supported by corporations that provide high-tech “toys” such as genetically altered dogs with which to terrorise citizens who step out of line.

Although the Moxyland game action features in only a few paragraphs of the novel, Beukes significantly uses the name of the game as her title. The novel is set in Cape Town and suggests that this city has become a special hell where grown-ups are brutally competitive and play games of espionage and information-seeking on both a

virtual and a physical level. The implication is that community life is weakened, and that in the corporate society each citizen fends for him/herself. Lerato and Toby are both prime examples of citizens selfishly watching out only for themselves. While Robins does not see cyberspace as a negative, he does stress that the world has always been about difference and conflict rather than about community (Robins 91). Toby illustrates this when, in playing Moxyland, he takes joy in killing some of his child opponents, and says, “although sorry to say, it being a kid’s game, they die in splatters of sparks rather than bloody gibbs” (Beukes 86). Although the game seems too violent for a children’s game, the child players are still sheltered from reality to an extent: the death of a character is made into something shimmering or even entertaining. However, this does not amuse Toby, who craves something more violent and closer to reality. In the “real” Moxyland, Cape Town, regardless of the fact that there is no purported violence from one citizen against another, inhabitants are not as protected, since Tendeka dies in a literal mess of “bloody gibbs” when he “...starts bleeding from every exit point. ... It’s like someone turned on a liquidizer inside him” (Beukes 234).

In contrast with Toby, Tendeka craves the “idyllic retreat” from “socioeconomic pressures” that cyberspace can offer (Proietti, Salvatore 123). He can create a different life for himself online and is a prototype South African Internet user, as described by Hall: one of the people from less privileged sectors of the population who access the Internet from a community centre or a cybercafé, and will “send awkward messages to public representatives about crime, education, health care or housing, and will mobilise like-minded digital citizens to spam recalcitrant bureaucrats” (475). It is this need to help others – such as the street children – that leads Tendeka to look on the Internet for other people who are fighting for a cause, and it is through this means that he starts speaking to skyward\*.

The game “neighbourhood” in which Tendeka chooses to act out his “Pluslife” is called “Avalon LA”. Avalon is based on an online program called “Pluslife”, also referred to as just “Plus” or the “Plus server”. Pluslife suggests that an online life offers more than a real one. Tendeka refers to having an online identity as having an “alternallife” (Beukes 32-33). This implies that being online constitutes a type of extra or second life. It is seen as something that is in opposition to a real life, since Tendeka refers to the world outside of Pluslife as the “realworld”, much like Internet users

today refer to life outside of chat rooms as “real life”.<sup>7</sup> Pluslife, as used in the novel, is a reference to Second Life, which is an existing online game where players can reinvent themselves and have a second life. Ashraf objects to Tendeka’s spending too much time online, asking him: “Our life not good enough for you?” (Beukes 31). LA is a reference to the city of Los Angeles, a modern day city that outwardly projects wealth, dazzle and dreams, and Avalon refers to a rich utopian island of dreams and abundance from Arthurian legend. All of this draws on an idea of a perfect imaginary space that still has its roots in something real, and it presents the players with a scenario where anything is possible. The perfect utopian island may suggest a snare, as it is actually stale, static and unchanging. At the same time LA suggests a corrupt, capitalist space where individuals are sacrificed to a larger industry. Together these interpretations constitute a warning that, as in Arthurian legend, a determined search for perfection may lead to tragedy.

Castells notes that virtual communities do not have to mean “escaping into an electronic world of fantasy” (Castells 87). Yet, for some people online interaction does mean simply disconnecting and paying no heed to the harshness of the outside world. Tendeka uses the Plus server specifically to meet with an unknown supporter and beneficiary, skyward\*, who is constantly spurring him on to take his activism a step further. “skyward\* is waiting for me in Monomotapa, which is what I call my house in Avalon. With 59.3 million registered users, it’s one of the world’s favourite virtual escapes, which makes it easier to blend in unnoticed.” (Beukes 31) The idea of a virtual escape strengthens the argument that people “inside” the server escape to another world, out of the real one that they physically inhabit.

Tendeka explains that “despite the Euro-traditional name, Avalon is Asia-centric” which means that the game world is in a different time zone, and a large part of the “population” cannot speak English (Beukes 31). Tendeka finds that the contrast suits him perfectly, because “what’s the point of escaping to Plus if the world is too close to the one you just left?” He also points out that one “can make an okay living, earning Avalon guineas ... teaching other residents English” (Beukes 31). Here the image of escaping to somewhere else, or somewhere imaginary, recurs. The fact that

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<sup>7</sup> IRL, ‘in real life’, is a popular Internet relay chat abbreviation dating from the 1990s.

one can make a living online, while linking the online activity to a very important real-life activity, suggests that one's participation in the real world is declining. For some individuals the game world may become the real world if even their work is grounded there.

Tendeka does treat the virtual neighbourhood he “inhabits” like actual space in his attitude towards and interaction with it. He speaks of skyward\* and himself going for a walk and “head[ing] up towards a hill”, and also mentions that skyward\* is worried about potential “eavesdroppers” in Tendeka’s “home” (Beukes 32-33). Tendeka specifically selects this “location” that is a “recreation of the LA hills”, because he wants to contrast his “humble”, “bio-friendly” house – which is made of “recyclable materials” and has an inoperative token “wind farm in the garden” – with a neighbourhood that attracts “excesses” and “celeb clones”, people who mimic celebrities in an online environment, living in houses exactly like those of the celebrities and even stocking their virtual fridges with what the celebrity they are imitating is purported to eat. Tendeka finds this to be a “symptom of everything that’s wrong with our culture” (Beukes 31-32) – presumably capitalist culture as a whole. It implies greedy materialism as well as escapism: privileged people with too much money and too much time on their hands emulate celebrity idols in a search for acceptance, meaning and excellence in their lives. Yet the fact that Tendeka can use virtual, recyclable material to build his imaginary house and can have a pretend wind farm in his garden indicates that the society he is from has other problems. Seemingly jaded in outlook, Tendeka is actually childlike in his understanding; the culture he finds himself in allows him freedom in an imaginary space, but not freedom of speech in his actual day-to-day movements. Tendeka’s blatantly obvious attempt to be different marks him as a member of a subculture. The fact that the program caters for his having a bio-friendly option means that his rebellion is pre-determined and thus controlled by the system. In this way he is as guilty of being an adherent of popular culture as the “celeb clones” are.

Monomotapa (the name Tendeka gives his house) is the Portuguese name for the medieval kingdom of the Mutapa empire that dates back to 1450 – 1629. It was situated “between the Zambezi and Limpopo rivers of Southern Africa in the modern states of Zimbabwe and Mozambique” (“Monomotapa”). The irony is that, while

Tendeka's online dwelling is situated in a mythological Avalon, he names it after a medieval African kingdom, implying that while he has some affinity with the unreal, he does want to pay homage to his African roots. But he does so, in true Tendeka style, in a farfetched, idealistic, romantic fashion. The name Monomotapa also foreshadows Tendeka's fate. The original city fell to the Portuguese after most of the tribes that used to pay tribute to Monomotapa stopped doing so, and they had no choice but to turn to Portuguese land-owners for support. Consequently, the Portuguese slowly infiltrated the capital and eventually managed to choose who they wanted for the throne. Tendeka turns to skyward\* for support, but it is this very support that will be his undoing.

skyward\*'s avatar fulfils a traditional function as a disguise, guarding his personality from other online users. Tendeka finds that

skyward\*'s avatar is looking uglier than usual, a stubby obese woman with a lumpy bald head and features on the wrong side of a mix of Asian and black. He says it is so people underestimate him, because even in gamespace everyone wants to be skinny and beautiful. (Beukes 31)

While skyward\*'s avatar portrays the image of a woman, Tendeka knows that he is male and he refers to skyward\* as "him". Tendeka either simply assumes so from personality traits that have filtered through, or he was told so by skyward\* and accepted his word for this. In an online environment where people are obsessed with beauty Tendeka accepts skyward\* at "face value" and makes the mistake of trusting this character. skyward\*'s avatar – the way it portrays him and allows him to successfully hide behind it – becomes an effective way of manipulating Tendeka. The latter is a good example of an individual who does not hide his personality online at all. He believes in being open and honest and wants to portray "the real" Tendeka, as Jordan refers to it. He "... couldn't be bothered with customising, [he] just uploaded a photograph and skinned it direct to [his] avatar. It's more honest" (Beukes 31). This is highly ironic, because, while he implies that skyward\* is being dishonest, he implicitly trusts skyward\* for no particular reason the reader can discern, and so he falls for the ploy and underestimates skyward\*, relating to skyward\*'s attempt to make a blatant statement in a beautiful system, just as he, Tendeka, is doing with his "home" in gamespace. Tendeka, on the other hand, is so open about his personality

that his “handle” is 10, short for Tendeka. His “moment of self-definition” in an online environment is much more obvious by means of his modification of his online environment than through his handle and personality. Later, this openness and lack of stealth counts against him, because he is easily traced via the online gateways he uses, and the fact that he does not disguise these, his online interaction or his identity. Lerato calls him “sloppy” and sarcastically refers to his nickname as “the impenetrable moniker ‘10’” when she tries to clean up after him (Beukes 196). “Moniker” here does not only mean the traditional sense of the word as in a nickname, but also as a “...general abstraction of [a] file name and file path. Monikers are more precise than file names because they can identify an object within a document, and they can be combined to form composite monikers in the same way a directory is added to the file name to get the complete path” (“OLE DB”). It means that, rather than disguising him on a virtual level, Tendeka’s nickname ironically succeeds in identifying him. This raises questions about the integrity of online meetings and the fact that people can hide who they are while communicating in a system that is open to anybody who has the money and the skills to join. Ironically, Tendeka’s desire to be honest is ultimately his undoing: as he does not subscribe to having an online identity like the rest of his culture he becomes an obvious target for exploitation by a corporate system.

The techno-jargon and slang of cyberspace are exploited in *Moxyland* to evoke a sphere of pseudo reality where this language usage both dictates individual expression and demarcates the boundaries of space in a virtual community still ironically bound by the limits of conventional syntax and semantics. However, Beukes, in an attempt to move beyond the language available to her, manipulates and modifies words in an attempt to break away from what is established. An example of this is Pluslife – the name she uses to denote a game similar to an existing game called Second Life. Another example is the use of the word “defuse” applied to humans, meaning to neutralise them when they become what is deemed threatening – as if they were bombs. In this manner she subverts the language she uses. The title of the novel, *Moxyland*, is a play on words and could be interpreted to mean mock land – which would mean that this Cape Town is seen as a fake or an empty shell of its original. “Moxie” in informal North American use also indicates courage or determination,

which implies that while this Cape Town is a fake, there might still be hope within and for the community which inhabits this space.

Tendeka explains that the Avalon L.A. is a “freeworld”, and while it is not as well rendered as an “alternatlife” world that one pays for, it is still quite acceptable. The obvious deduction is that the game space is free and one does not have to pay to take part. Less obviously, freeworld implies that game space is less oppressive than the real world, that here, as opposed to everyday life, one can actually be free. Tendeka admits this much himself when he says, “... I figure that somebody has hacked the sky. ... And that’s the beauty of Pluslife. That here you can actually have an influence on the world” (Beukes 33). Apart from Tendeka’s terrorist activities, he also tries to help some of the street children he interacts with, by giving them opportunities to play soccer at a club he started and to practice graffiti in a safe environment, as “a way of letting [the children] make a mark on a city that usually filters them out like spam” (Beukes 26). The use of an idiom created from e-mail jargon effectively and ironically illustrates how little society cares for these children who have no opportunity to experience technology, and specifically e-mail. Since most e-mail programs automatically detect spam or junk messages and delete them or send them to a folder where the user never has to see these messages or ever be aware of them, it is implied that these children and their plight is something society does not want to know about and chooses to ignore.

Tendeka feels violated when skyward\* changes and hacks his “home” in Pluslife: “...it’s a shock logging into Avalon. My enviro-friendly house and the three houses surrounding it have been replaced with loxion shelters, the tinshacks appallingly incongruous among the mansions and manicured lawns” (Beukes 92). skyward\* drags Tendeka’s real life into his online world and consequently contravenes the rules of online community, infringing on Tendeka’s rights. Tendeka reacts forcefully when skyward\* asks whether he likes it: “What the fuck? I didn’t authorise this. You can’t just hack my dwell” (Beukes 92). It is ironic that, earlier, he liked the freedom Pluslife gave him – the freedom to change his environment and, in that specific case, hack the sky – but when it touches him personally, he finds it invasive. skyward\*’s reaction is that what happens in the virtual world does not matter, because it is not real, and yet he knows that it does matter, since it will anger Tendeka and spur him into action. So

by changing Tendeka's virtual environment he manages to goad him into challenging his actual environment.

By the end of the novel it becomes clear that skyward\* represents a major corporation and simply wants to use Tendeka as a warning to society of what will happen to those who stand up against major corporations. He manipulates Tendeka to such an extent that the latter accepts money from a corporation to fund his street children project – something he had not wanted to do, because he saw the money as tainted. With this money he purchases a more technologically advanced form of graffiti, very similar to Throwies. The children first do the graffiti with a special magnetic paint to which little light bulbs, LEDs, can stick, but unknown to them the paint also harbours explosives. The magnetic paint and LEDs are “what sold Chase Standard on the project – that we could embed lights in the shape of their logo, which would blink all night for all the incoming traffic to see. You can pre-program patterns to add dimension or words. ‘Peace’. ‘Love’. ‘Ubuntu’. ‘Revolution’. It’s easy to embed other things in magnetic paint too. Totally stable, skyward\* assured me. I wouldn’t expose the kids to unnecessary risk” (Beukes 125). The use of the slogans Peace and Ubuntu – a Zulu word that roughly translates as goodness towards other humans while referring to the values associated with the well-being of the community, and is also associated with camaraderie – in the same breath as Revolution is ironic: while Tendeka imagines a revolution, the usual subversive character of graffiti is lost when a company appropriates it as part of an advertising campaign. In the end the explosions hurt some of the very children he cares about and scare the rest of society into being even more obedient to the corporate-driven government. Zuko, the child that becomes Tendeka's trusted second towards the end of the novel, is arrested and displayed on television like “Osama” (Beukes 235). The corporation skyward\* works for uses this rebellion, that skyward\* instigates, to turn Tendeka and his allies into terrorists, which gives the corporation the opportunity to present them as an example and utilise this as a tool to oppress the rest of society. Consequently, Tendeka's visions are empty, as there is no peace, love, ubuntu or true revolution in the outcome. By accepting the tainted money Tendeka himself becomes tainted, because just as skyward\* uses Tendeka, he in turn uses his charges as a means to an end. In the resultant lock-down of Adderley Station (the climax of the novel) after the graffiti have exploded, Tendeka, Toby and Kendra all have their phones disconnected and

they are poisoned by a police-endorsed gas in an attempt by the police to force all involved to give themselves up. Tendeka fights to the end, refusing to turn himself in to get the antidote. His struggle is futile: whether he dies or survives matters little to the corporation. Tendeka dies a gruesome and lonely death in the company of the ever upbeat Toby, who thinks it is all a jest until Tendeka starts coughing up blood.

Castells's second point is that "social relationships are characterized simultaneously by individuation and communalism, both processes using at the same time spatial patterning and online communication. Virtual communities and physical communities develop in close interaction ..." (83). It has become apparent that in an increasingly visually stimulated society there has been a shift away from IRC – Internet Relay Chat – and the other purely text-based interactions of the 1990s, towards interactions such as Second Life that simulate real life. Tendeka's mention of an online career is not a prediction of the future, but rather a comment on an existing phenomenon, since it is already possible to make money from the online currencies in online role playing games. Some online games, such as Maple Story and Second Life, have become common enough for individuals not only to make money from virtual jobs, but also have virtual relationships that can potentially end in virtual marriage – or virtual divorce. Beukes understands the importance of cyberspace, and how changing or influencing data and information has become important to such a degree that Internet Law has become a new subsection in legal practice, and hacking can have far-reaching effects on a personal level. In a prominent example in October 2008 a 43 year old Japanese woman from Tokyo was arrested and jailed, because she had "killed her online husband's digital persona" on the interactive game Maple Story (Yamaguchi, Mari "Online divorcee"). She was arrested, not for actual murder, but rather on suspicion of hacking and "illegally accessing a computer and manipulating electronic data" (Yamaguchi "Online divorcee"). The "virtual murder" happened because the woman was "suddenly divorced" by her "husband". It is reported that the virtual divorce hurt her so much that she deleted her online husband's avatar by using information she gained when they were still "married". The repercussions were quite severe: she was facing either a \$5,000 fine or a five-year prison term. The crux of the problem is not that she murdered this man's character in a virtual environment, but rather that she committed fraud by manipulating his intellectual property, or his data. That the manipulation of online data carries such a heavy prison sentence suggests

how important virtual space and digital interaction have become in our society. That Tendeka is so affronted by skyward\*'s hacking of his "dwell" simply illustrates this. The possibility of a life that includes work, marriage and divorce online backs up Virilio's suggestion that the virtual is destined to not only simulate the real, but to replace it, and that virtual communities are no longer simply an imitation of life, but rather a whole new way of life. This means that the delineation between online and offline communities is becoming increasingly blurred and the interaction between the two more fluid.

In his search for something more violent and closer to reality Toby becomes involved in FallenCity™ Underworld, one of the prototype games which is a mix of "gamespace" and "meatspace". The online gamespace component falls into the category of shooter and detective games, while the "meat" involves real-time role-playing games in "publisher approved locations" (Beukes 58). Toby plays in a specific scenario which is set in a busy train station, The Adderley Station Deck, in Cape Town. The name FallenCity is a more obvious indication of Cape Town's dark side than the association between the Moxyland game and Cape Town. The existence of a shooter game that is played out in a busy station amongst the rest of society arguably indicates that there is a hankering after violence, or at least rebellion, in this rigid society. Toby's team receives data which has been tampered with and is corrupt – and the team ends up being betrayed in much the same way as Tendeka, since they appear to the public to be real gunmen, further adding to the panic Tendeka's explosions cause. The police and corporations do not seem to mind their playing their game in public, but they also have no qualms about using the players for their own ends. According to Toby there is a proviso, "Disclaimer: FallenCity™ is not real" (Beukes 120), which indicates that the relationship between meat and game space is so fluid and the participating players are so far removed from reality that they have to be reminded that their gaming is not real. In this specific case, however, the game does become real, with real consequences. A woman in the station is terrified of Toby because she believes he is about to kill her when he presses his gun against her forehead. He is completely unaware that she does not realise he is playing a game, and says – about what he thinks is fake fear – that "you'd think she was the real deal" (Beukes 161). Ironically, when Toby is confronted with a real situation and somebody who really fears him, he cannot see it for what it is. Toby's search for something more

real on a virtual level thus backfires. Beukes is commenting on violence in society: violent games can become violent real life, without people realising their transition from a virtual world to a real one – a good example of the relativity of “mind” distance.

According to Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia, virtual communities can never be seen as a “zero-sum game” (181). Just because people participate in virtual communities it does not mean that they will neglect their real communities, or that these become less important. Wellman and Gulia feel it is impossible to divide communities into “two discrete sets” (182) – on-line and off-line. It follows that “familiar physical space” is reinvented in cyberspace, as is implied by “virtuality”. Notwithstanding this, there is something that Herman Wasserman calls the “digital divide” (87), which means that while the hierarchies of the Internet may be egalitarian, access to the Internet is not.

This leads to Castells’s third point, that “the breakdown of communication ... between individuals and between cultures” has led to the formation of “defensive spaces” which have brought about segregated areas such as gated communities for the wealthy and “territorial turfs for the poor” (84). Consequently, in a more urban society there is a concurrent “movement of inclusion into transterritorial networks and exclusion by the spatial separation of places” (Castells 84). As the monetary value of people’s assets and properties rises, people’s connection to “interactive networks” also increases: “The lower their value, the lower their connection” (Castells 84). This results in the exclusion of places such as underprivileged rural regions and “urban shanty towns” (84). In *Moxyland* Tendeka sees his online endeavours as an escape from his oppressed environment. Moreover, the online environment he visits is free of gated communities. He sees it as “modeled on an idealized movie versioning of Mulholland Drive, so no gated communities ...” (Beukes 32) This suggests that gated communities are common in Tendeka’s actual life and that he does not approve of them since they exclude the poor in a world ruled by capital-hungry corporations.

Putnam argues that suburbanisation is an important factor in “spatial fragmentation”, since the separation of abode and workplace can impair “civic involvement” and interest (Evans, Marko, and Sundback 17). By the same token, urban sprawls disrupt

“community ties”, owing to a marked lack of activities in public spaces – and thus diminished community participation (Evans, Marko, and Sundback 17). In this regard Pieterse states that the most significant problem facing urban development is that of “urban inequality” (8). The more the rich are enclosed and isolated in protected areas and the more their projects are subsidised by the state, the better the chance is that the urban poor are being ignored or neglected. This inequality spawns a set of social and political problems of which violence is just one. Evans, Marko, and Sundback suggest that another resulting problem is a “general trend” towards a decline in “public participation in formal political activity” (17). A lack of a “responsive civil” populace (Evans, Marko, and Sundback ix) can make a city very difficult to govern. Pieterse declares that South Africa has “maximize[d] political potential in all spheres of citizenship and political practice”, by the “constitutional entrenchment of all human rights” (85-86). One could, however, argue that this liberal constitution has maximised the potential for citizens to participate in political practice only in theory, since lack of infrastructure, lack of resources and expensive legal fees mean the courts are overworked and have to an extent been rendered accessible for civil procedures to only the rich. In this way the constitution cannot achieve its lofty aims.

Castells notes that “urban poverty, racial and social discrimination and social exclusion” remain important questions (89). “In fact, recent studies show an increase of urban marginality and inequality in the network society” (Castells 89). The breakdown between individuals and between cultures has led to the formation of “defensive spaces” which, in turn, has led to segregated areas. People’s monetary worth determines whether they will have access to the systems that allow the network society to exist. As recently as 2003 large groups of people in South Africa were still excluded from access to the Internet (Wasserman; Hall), and while the situation has slowly been changing (Wasserman 87; Hall 473), Jordan rightly points out that basics like “clean running water” should be a first priority in developing countries (90). It is something South Africa still struggles with – and something that *Moxyland* predicts South Africa will struggle with for some time, as Tendeka’s description of Cape Town indicates. These problems are difficult to address if the rich increasingly move to safe technological havens – or “gated communities” – which grow in popularity because of a “discourse of fear” (fear of crime and violence) and because of “increasing class separation” (Low, Setha M. 387). While these matters are the

government's responsibility, an increasingly corporatised private sector is depended on for financing services, so that the division between government and corporation, and thus between government and the rich, is not clearcut any more.

Castells's fourth point is that because people are living more individualised lives, the participation of citizens in community life is weakened, as is political administration. In *Moxyland* the political administration is weakened to such an extent that it is difficult to distinguish between the government and corporations. There is no explicit mention of government or the judicial system, implying that the South African trias politica that establishes the legislative, executive and judiciary bodies as separate – and thus also one of the most liberal constitutions in the world – has been lost.

In contrast to the lack of Internet connectivity, nine years into the future finds almost all the citizens of Cape Town in possession of cellular phones – communication accessories that have become a way of life for most people. By tracking phone SIM cards the police force keeps track of citizens, and ironically, also keeps them in line. The police subdue people by sending an electrical pulse through their phones to force them into submission or “defuse” them. They can also mete out the ultimate punishment in this true network society by disconnecting from the network anybody who carries a registered phone. Society is so subdued and is so dependent on cellular phones that the threat of being disconnected far outweighs the fear of being shocked. To be linked to the network is so essential that a disconnection (even a temporary one) means to be shunned and pitied by the rest of society. Even Tendeka, the “activist”, cannot properly function without his phone, and though he has given up his life in the suburbs, he cannot give up his phone. Without access to a cell phone one becomes an outcast from society (or literally from the virtual or network society). Toby explains the severity of the situation when he says: “It’s a disconnect offence to tamper with a defuser. You can’t play nice by society’s rules? Then you don’t get to play at all. No phone. No service. No life” (Beukes 17). Tendeka, clearly disillusioned by the system he is a part of, is jealous of the street children, because they do not own phones – which he sees as a measure of freedom: they cannot be disconnected from society, because they have never been connected. As mentioned earlier, he feels that society views these children as “spam” anyway, so that they are better off not knowing what it is like to be a part of this society and the “network” that can keep

them in order with defusers. To him these children are above the rigidity of the society as they live outside or around the fringes without deeming themselves outcasts. Ironically, the citizens who carry phones subject themselves to the rigid order of society as they are part of the corporate-driven machine that can be controlled by the police by means of technology. Ordinarily the ones without phones, and thus no access to the network society, may potentially be more dangerous to society, yet there is no easy way to subdue them. Tendeka mentions in passing that there are people who choose not to be part of the network, but he views this almost as a myth, since he has not met anyone who has shunned the network society to such an extent. The issue of those outside the network is thus not truly addressed in the novel, especially because choosing not to own a phone seems unimaginable – not only is it your identification, it is a way of communicating in the network society and allows access to public services. For instance, phones are scanned when people use public transport, which means that without a phone one cannot function normally within society.

There is some indication in the novel of how or why society has changed so much in nine years. Mr Muller complains to Kendra that the “world has evolved for the worst, although at least crime is down” (Beukes 59), but later he tells her that she cannot imagine what the violence used to be like, and although they might still complain about the rigid society, their present lifestyle is superior by far. “Compared to living in fear” he would take “cellphone electrocutions” rather than “tik junkies ready to kill you, shoot you, stab you, for a watch or a camera” (Beukes 207-208). He is so terrified of society returning to the way it was that, although he takes care of Kendra throughout the novel, when he realises that she has been disconnected, he immediately assumes she has done something wrong and he threatens to phone the police. This poses the question of how far society will go to change if it is threatened, and what changes society can undergo. It also criticises the act of giving up one’s personal freedom in order to avoid violence.

Lastly, Castells points out that individualised living and segregation can contribute to “spatial fragmentation”, which can ultimately cause the “breakdown of society” (85). While this seems like an ominous worst-case scenario, society, as the reader knows it, has mutated in *Moxylant* to become consumer-driven, with little genuine social

interaction among the people who have enough money to be part of this society. Both Toby and Lerato cultivate artificial relationships, while they are aware of their superficiality. By comparison, Tendeka and Kendra come across as much more human in their turbulent emotions and struggle to fit in and understand others, which makes it easier for the reader to empathise with them, as these characters are searching for some human connection. Tendeka, though somewhat misguided, tries to help the needy and Kendra searches for affection, love and – more importantly – approval. However, even Kendra, who seems more in touch with her emotions than the others, does not understand compassion. When she sees a police dog attack somebody she is confused about what compels her to want to help, and she tries to reason away the compassion she feels as curiosity. This means that even she, who appears rather human in her reactions, is unable to truly reach out to those around her. Tellingly, neither Tendeka nor Kendra survives. Tendeka dies feared and an outcast, while Kendra, infected with the same virus as Tendeka, is euthanised when the company to which she signed herself over takes back their “intellectual property” – indicating that she is not seen as human. Ironically, she enters their headquarters in confusion and fear of being infected and disconnected, even though she fears that her death might be the eventual outcome. Toby and Kendra sleep together, and in the process his genes are also modified, and he realises that he is immune to the virus. Kendra thus unnecessarily sacrifices herself to a corporate society, as she does not have the strength or the knowledge to fight a system from which she has been disconnected, while Toby bounces back with the type of luck that seems to go hand in hand with ruthlessness. The fact that both Tendeka and Kendra die suggests that society cannot accommodate true human emotion and connectedness any more.

Toby records Tendeka’s death on his BabyStrange because he does not take Tendeka seriously, and thinks he can humiliate him later with what Toby believes to be a case of hypochondria. When Tendeka suddenly starts convulsing and coughing up blood Toby reacts violently and tries simultaneously to help Tendeka and get away from him. He says: “I can’t handle this, can’t handle him pooled around me, can’t handle how I’ve violated his remains. Please” (Beukes 235). Less than a page later he is crying next to Tendeka’s body; he “probes” how he feels and finds he is: “Freaked. Definitely. But not sick” (Beukes 235). Seconds later he starts worrying about the trouble he himself is in, on which follows the realisation that he has “...the total sony

exclusive on the untimely and grotesque death of a terrorist. Or a martyr. Depends on who's paying" (Beukes 236). He abandons his apartment and steps out of the door into "a whole new bright world"<sup>8</sup>, feeling exhausted and exhilarated" (Beukes 236). In two pages Toby goes from cynically clownish, to shocked and sobbing, to guilty and remorseful for his actions, to simply shrugging off Tendeka's death, and spotting, without delay, a lucrative rather than a potentially hazardous outcome to the situation. There is a suggestion here that while Toby himself is not physically sick, he is part of a sick society, because he recovers almost instantly from having seen something horrific, and then starts thinking along the lines his society dictates. He wonders whether he can advertise to the world what he has seen and how he can benefit from the situation. He does not care about the consequences, and while seconds ago he felt remorse and guilt for not helping Tendeka, he now does not care how he paints him – either martyr or terrorist – as long as Toby gets away scot-free and makes something out of the transaction. Toby is "street smart", an opportunist who has learned to function within the limitations of the corporate society, constantly testing the boundaries, but never pushing beyond what he can get away with. He is an intelligent character who has great insight into what the limitations of this society are, but his callous and disinterested nature ironically marks him as brainwashed by the society he imagines he is undermining.

According to Mark Lajoie, the fact that cyberspace allows people to choose their identities means that these chosen identities can never become true subjects. Cyberspace becomes "a space in which all desires can be fulfilled" (Lajoie 163), which means, in Lacanian terms, a moving away from reality. In the end it would be "too easy" to imagine cyberspace as "make-believe" and it would also be "too easy" to think that it is real life (Wilbur 54). Instead, cyberspace becomes something different – but also something much more real than fantasy. According to Kevin Robins, we are living in a "real world" and we should not wait for a perfect future granted by cyberspace (78). At the same time we are aware that "ethnic conflict, resurgent nationalism and urban fragmentation" are very closely linked with "virtual space" (Robins 79) – in order to avoid pessimism and despair people need to hope for and aspire towards a better world, elements of which they find in cyberspace.

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<sup>8</sup> "...new bright world" echoes the title of Aldous Huxley's 1932 dystopian novel *Brave New World*. The use of 'bright' implies a garish world filled with the glare of lights from billboards.

As a result of past transgressions against human rights in South Africa, The Bill of Rights of the South African constitution, the cornerstone of democracy in South Africa, is very liberal, in stark contrast to earlier conditions. It enshrines the human rights of dignity, equality and freedom – even above the right to life. Owing to factors mentioned earlier in this chapter, the lofty aims of the constitution are not always met, and this is echoed in *Moxylant* where the *trias politica*, as set out in the constitution, has collapsed, and social justice is the responsibility of corrupt policemen who torture people with electrical charges on a whim, infringing their right to “freedom and security of the person” and freedom from torture, as set out in section 12 of the South African constitution (7). The weak, such as street children, are not protected at all – they are not even seen as proper citizens – although section 28 of the Bill of Rights specifically enshrines the rights of children. Tendeka, in an attempt to take back social justice for the weak, also twists it and is killed by the police by means of a deadly virus, since he is simply seen as a pawn, and he dies in a very undignified and cruel manner. He could have lived if he had received help, but he would also have been locked up, or perhaps killed. Ironically, by choosing to exercise the only right left to him, his right to freedom of choice, he dies. Kendra has also lost the constitutional right to “bodily and psychological integrity”, which includes the right “not to be subjected to medical or scientific experiments without informed consent”, since she does not fully understand the experiments done on her and how they take away her freedom of choice (South African Constitution 8). She has also lost the right to freedom and security of the person, because she is “detained without trial” (South African Constitution 7). The fact that she is killed by a corporation as if she is property, means that she is not “free [of] violence from either public or private sources”, and the punishment of death for something she does not fully understand is “cruel, inhuman [and] degrading” (South African Constitution 8). Kendra chooses to go to the corporation for help when she is infected and, ironically, as with Tendeka, her exercising her right to freedom of choice ultimately causes her death. She is killed in order not to make public that she is now immune against a virus that potentially keeps the public passive. The inference is that even freedom of choice is meaningless. *Moxylant*, a novel set in a not so distant future, is a warning that the government’s ideals of only a few years ago for Cape Town are not being attained, and if the current

course of action continues, the very constitution, which is the backbone of South African ideals, will simply be an empty promise.

In the world of *Moxyland* there is no social consistency. Lerato and Toby are consistently doing what is best for themselves, and there is little significant engagement between either communities or individuals. Entrepreneurship, originality and innovation, basic aspects of a democratic environment, are not promoted; Tendeka's ideal of giving street children a creative outlet is shot down on numerous occasions, and helping them is a constant struggle; entrepreneurship or the promotion of small businesses plays a very small role, and almost everything that does not fall within the arena of the large corporations seems to be on the borderline of legality. The economy is fuelled by huge corporations, so that there is an economic basis, but it brings prosperity to only a faceless few in the private sector. The ones being beneficiaries are so far removed from the rest of the citizens that they are almost completely absent from the novel. skyward\* is the closest glimpse the reader has of those behind the corporations, but his identity is never revealed and it seems unlikely that he is even close to the top of the corporate ladder. In *Moxyland* little attention is paid to South Africa's history: Kendra is told about the past as if it is something that happened many years ago, and Tendeka has absolutely no use for the past. He is consumed with the present, and fails to see that the problems of corporate apartheid that are faced in the novel are very similar to the problems that accompanied racial apartheid in the past. Tendeka views the city as a very dark space, and the glimpses we get of the ordinary people in the novel show that they are all living on the edges in run-down parts of the city. In South Africa specifically, with a liberal constitution sworn to protect human rights, there is the potential to build communities which will form cities that can be seen as places that are welcoming to everybody. While Tendeka seems bitter, it is his remaining idealism, that which makes him human, that gets him killed in the end. Aspiration and hope are both quashed in *Moxyland*, and the warning is that when society becomes so controlled that human aspects are sacrificed, and human sensibilities and virtues are subverted – by money, power, greed and the private economic sector – the protocol of machines takes precedence over that of humans. Thus the role of corporations is inflated to such an extent that they rule supreme. There are no more human faces to fight, and human rights become null and void.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this dissertation was to gain a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary cities and urban communities through an investigation of a selection of popular culture texts. There has been a specific focus on the relation between realism and fictionality within the city, and the power of literature – in this case urban fantasy – as a distancing device, and thus as a means of offering comment on social problems and identity formation within the city.

In the context of the dissertation both post-structuralism and postmodernism, and specifically the concept of heterotopia as liminal space, have been used to show that society's perceptions of time and space are no longer unconditionally fixed and are constantly shifting, just like the identity of cities and of the postmodern subject. This changed perspective has consequently led to a reassessment of the structural foundations of the universe and a decentralised approach to structure.

Chapter 1 examines the city as a concept and looked at some of the problems that contemporary cities face. A lack of services, scarcity of employment, insufficient housing and under-financed education were highlighted as urban dilemmas. The chapter established, amongst others, the following as major urban problems: inadequate shelter for some city dwellers; marginalisation of classes, races and minority groups; alienation within the city, and prostitution or exploitation. These problems repeatedly came to the fore, as texts about cities were investigated in the consecutive chapters, suggesting that in trying to gauge the identity of the city one cannot disentangle it from the social problems that go hand in hand with its character. Cities are created by, inhabited by and adapted according to human needs. This means that the human aspect can never be separated from the city, which implies that the city will always be a complex space and never simply a clinical one that can easily and summarily be discussed. Complexities, struggles and attitude shifts toward the city are commonly reflected in literature about the city, since, as Pieterse says, it is the “everyday realities” of cities that can best be related by means of literature (9).

Chapter 2 provides evidence that universal theories of the urban condition are stagnant and that open readings according to a postmodern approach promote

effective discussion of the city, since this method allows more freedom for understanding and discussing the open and diverse nature of the city. It is ultimately the diverse “human experience ... contained by the city” that will allow one to understand the city to any marked extent. And, once again, it is the alternative perspective of the novelist or writer that is highlighted and that gives the reader an affective insight into the social and cultural aspects of the city, as opposed to reducing the city simply to a built environment. By analysing street art it is possible to see that these creative and humanly affective activities inspire fresh ideas about the city. Open readings of the city are consequently encouraged and are able to relate to the constantly shifting identity of the city and the people within the city. Subsequent chapters specifically investigate the use of fictional narrative, showing that fiction becomes an invaluable tool for exploring the cityscape, and commenting on contemporary issues such as globalisation and the formation of individual and community identity.

In Chapter 3 the novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer is examined, to show that society’s relationship with cities is not only a purely physical one, but also a psychic one, since it is people’s image of the city that ultimately forms the city. In fact, the city itself can be viewed as a narrative, and thus a structuring framework for society. The chapter establishes that cultural globalisation has brought about a degree of osmosis between the image and the reality of cities, making the particular universal. This process confirms the dominance of people over the city: though demographics may vary, the human subject is central in creating and recreating the text – written or spoken – of the city. It should be noted that this universal principle of humans as central within the city should not be viewed as reverting to universal theories about the city, but should rather be viewed as humanity grappling with its environment and trying to grasp the city – and ultimately reading it with an open mind. In other words, producing a readable text does not mean that it is not constantly faced with changing variables and therefore open to interpretation and evolution.

In Chapter 4 the discussion of *Neverwhere* by Neil Gaiman considers the significance of different human views of the city. The city as a concept is elusive and difficult to define, but cities are not made only of bricks. The tourist, spectator, inhabitant and

*flâneur* can all give insight into the city, which means a multi-faceted insight can be gained by means of individual subjective perspectives on the city. Each individual has, after all, his or her own limited view of everyday experiences and their significance within the order of things. Subjective problems such as marginalisation and the alienation of the city poor come strongly to the fore in the novel and draw attention to the everyday realities of many different classes. The city is established as heterotopic or third-space, since the diverse human character of the city leads to flux and ultimately to liminality. Alongside heterotopia the romanticisation and defacement of the city are also considered, and yet for the poor the city is not a romantic space, but rather a space to inhabit, make their own and survive in. While they make the best of the city and can have authentic interaction with the space of their abode, the city can be dangerous, and in fact deadly to them. Language again features as an important factor, since it is the means of communication and thus the ultimate means by which to understand the city.

Chapter 5 explores narrative that features fictional cities. The focal point was once again the human aspect of cities, with the main focus on hybridity, on communities within cities, and on how postmodern subjects form themselves in terms of their environment. Some of the classic questions of cultural studies and critical theory were discussed, based on an interpretation of *Perdido Street Station* by China Miéville. Significant issues were: subjectivity and identity; agency; the impact of diaspora and hybrid identities; and the urban as a cultural space. City inhabitants have diverse and sometimes difficult lives, which are reflected in this novel. In terms of “re-inventing [the city] and the lives of its citizens” (Parker 9), and gaining an understanding of the human aspect of the city, the language of Miéville’s novel, in its strangeness and diversity, and simultaneously its groundedness in the familiar, composes a complex, layered order. Yagharek comes to the conclusion that one needs the human experience in the city, and ultimately this leads to his trying to reinvent himself as a man. The novel ventures into interpreting the shifting and complex postmodern human psyche – it highlights its ambivalence by showing that it incorporates both anguish and depravity, balance and reason.

Chapter 6 considers virtual cities, based on a discussion of *Moxyland* by Lauren Beukes, and it also addressed the social issues that Cape Town faces today and will

face in the future. *Moxyland* is a dystopian vision of a future Cape Town where corporations which are insensitive to human subjectivity govern, and separation between groups is enforced along the dividing lines of class and access to technology. The escalating role of technology and commerce in the city also means a move away from traditional communities to virtual communities which, in turn, means that the human aspect becomes threatened and ultimately even lost. On taking a closer look at the novel one realises that almost every right in the South African Bill of Rights is being ignored or violated, which means in this future South Africa aspiration and hope are quashed. The implicit warning is that when society is as thoroughly controlled as Beukes depicts it, treasured human rights and sensibilities are sacrificed and machines can take precedence over humans and human life. Cities are in the first place shelters for humans; however, cities are constantly growing, and *Moxyland* warns that ignoring the human aspect will lead to urban dystopia. Instead of the possibility of liminality as granted by heterotopia, spaces will become stifling, and that which is viewed as different or other will be kept at bay, leading to the loss of true diversity in the city and ultimately a denial of the human aspect of life – to such an extent that it will bring about the loss of treasured human rights.

Society is increasingly becoming more urbanised, both in the growing percentage of city dwellers and in the attitude of the inhabitants of these spaces. This overbearing urban attitude, in stark contrast to the rural, is highlighted in *Moxyland*. In conclusion, urban lifestyle is on the rise, as people become increasingly involved in cities and understand them as hubs of habitation. Comprehending the varied character of the city is no easy task, but considering these shifting spaces in the light of people living in these spaces, making the spaces their own, and evolving, like the city, appears to yield the most comprehensive results. This human aspect and the everyday lived realities as reflected in literature remain most important in cities. In order fully to grasp cities and the lived realities of the people inhabiting these spaces, one needs to understand and address people's passions, as well as the social problems affecting them – such as poverty and lack of services, which go hand in hand with emotions of isolation, self-denial, suffering and humiliation – because a city loses its function when it is not catering to its human inhabitants. Ultimately, an investigation of cities is an investigation into the evolution of human life.

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