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Genre Reinvention and Environmentalism in China Miéville's *Un Lun Dun* as Critical *Un*-Topia

Abstract: China Miéville's macrotext is strikingly marked (or even haunted) by a recurrent attempt to decode and reconceptualise the city through the lenses of science fiction and fantasy, thus paving the way for a deconstruction that simultaneously targets normative conceptions of genre and of the urban environment. His 'young-adult novel' *Un Lun Dun* (2007) is perhaps one of the best examples of this. Here, critical dystopia and portal-quest fantasy give rise to an alternative, heterotopic version of London, inextricably bound up with the 'real' city and at the same time totally distinct from it. In particular, by literalising the metaphor of dislocation, Miéville shows how some of the correctives to pollution found by modern metropolises are tied to issues of social hierarchy that actually hamper any long-term project regarding a more sustainable environment for the entire community. This paper aims therefore at identifying some of the strategies that underlie such a subversive reimagining. In particular, it looks into how the teleological trajectory of the portal-quest fantasy and its selection of static actants is problematised and upturned. Moreover, the creative use of figurative language in the novel is shown to establish a continuous parallel between London and UnLondon, while also questioning the primacy of the former over the latter. Finally, Miéville's knowing hybridisation of forms and stances is seen as leading to an '*un*-topia', a site of reinvention that opens the city up to new readings and interpretations.

Keywords: China Miéville. Portal-quest Fantasy. Critical Dystopia. Urban Environmentalism.

China Miéville's SF and fantasy production has long been characterised by a programmatic combination of formal experimentalism and political engagement, as well as an almost obsessive fascination with the urban environment. From *King Rat* (1998) and the Bas-Lag series to *The City & the City* (2009) and *Embassytown* (2011), Miéville has repeatedly played with genre conventions to defamiliarise the city, drawing on its apparent fragmentariness in order to achieve a simultaneously formal and thematic subversion. In *Un Lun Dun* (2007), this reimagining is achieved by integrating a utopian/dystopian universe within the structure of the 'portal-quest fantasy', a strategy the author uses to discuss environmental issues with his readers – in this case, a younger audience.

In this article, I would like to illustrate how the alternative version of London depicted in *Un Lun Dun* does not conform to any clear demarcation between an 'ideal' city and a 'degenerate' counterpart: it is rather a land of possibilities, both positive and negative. I suggest that by avoiding to conform to either utopian or dystopian canons, but rather constructing a liminal space between the two, Miéville gives rise to a "thirdspace": a place both real and imagined, able to encompass "subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history".[1] The cre-

[1] E. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journey to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Cambridge, Blackwell, 1996, pp. 56-57.

ation of this '*un*-topia' runs parallel to both the progressive deconstruction of the novel's broader formal framework and the portal-quest fantasy, with its related functions of plot and characters. My aim is therefore to showcase how generic reinvention and hybridisation are not confined to stylistic innovation, but can be seen to open up new paths for relevant socio-political stances.

The centrality of environmental and ecocritical stances in fantastic fiction has long been recognised, albeit primarily in connection with a specific form, i.e., the representation of 'thinned' lands in Tolkienian high fantasy and, on a larger scale, in portal-quest fantasy. In discussing this category, Farah Mendlesohn remarks that "the primary character in the portal fantasy is the land",[2] a space in danger of disappearing or being corrupted, to be navigated and possibly salvaged by an unexperienced protagonist and his trustworthy, expert guide.[3] Evidently, this form has many similarities with traditional utopia, as regards first of all the sequence of actions undertaken by the protagonist, the focalising character who generally voyages to an unknown land. There, he relies on the expertise of a local resident and gradually becomes acquainted with the defining rules of the new environment through a series of significant experiences. The traveller is then set to return to his place of origin, which is often a more 'realistic' depiction of the author's own world. By virtue of his adventure, the protagonist finally appears more competent and mature.[4]

However, two prominent elements, one formal and the other purely conventional, have long kept the two speculative strands separated in the theoretical debate. The first one has to do with the nature of the land itself: while portal fantasy is often animated by a pastoral undertone and largely features rural settings, traditional utopia mainly turns its focus upon the city and the social conventions it engenders. The second one is epitomised by Darko Suvin's position regarding the difference between science fiction and fantasy: his renowned definition casts science fiction as a "literature of cognitive estrangement",[5] in the sense of a participative rediscussion of the normative systems of consensus reality. In keeping with Lyman Tower Sargent's assessment, literary utopia (and dystopia) figure as sub-genres of SF,[6] and in particular as its sociopolitical iteration,[7] endowed with the potential to foster a critical reappraisal of the 'real' world. Fairy tale and fantasy, on the other hand, would be indifferent and even inimical to "the empirical world and its laws",[8] thus crucially embodying an escapist attempt that does not allow for parallels to be traced and for reality to be dialectically reconsidered. Suvin therefore initially considered fantasy unworthy of serious

[2] F. Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Middletown, Wesleyan U.P., 2008, p. 28.

[3] See also J. Clute and J. Grant (eds), *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, London, Orbit, 1997; D. Wynne Jones, *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*, New York, Firebird, 2006.

[4] See G. Claeys (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, Cambridge, CUP, 2010; especially F. Vieira, "The Concept of Utopia", pp. 3-27, and P. Parrinder, "Utopia and Romance", pp. 154-73.

[5] D. Suvin, "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre", *College English*, 34 (3), 1972, p. 372.

[6] On the well-researched subject of the connection between SF and utopia/dystopia, see also P. Parrinder (ed.), *Learning from Other Worlds: Estrangement, Cognition and the Politics of Science Fiction and Utopia*, Liverpool, Liverpool U.P., 2000; P. Fitting, "Utopia, Dystopia and Science Fiction", in G. Claeys (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, pp. 135-53; K. Kumar, "The Ends of Utopia", *New Literary History*, 41 (3), 2010, pp. 549-69; T. Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, ed. R. Baccolini, Bern, Peter Lang, 2014.

[7] D. Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, New Haven, Yale U.P., 1979, p. 61.

[8] Id., "On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre", pp. 375-76.

intellectual consideration, and saw the blurring of boundaries between the two genres as a sort of capital sin, a "rampantly sociopathological"[9] misreading. Yet, as also pointed out by China Miéville, Suvin was later to partially reconsider his position, recognising the increasing prominence of the fantastic against the "ebbing of SF".[10] Such an acknowledgment, however, does not seem to be "predicated on any erosion of the proposed firewall between fantasy and SF", being rather an "unfortunate necessity" dictated by the "quantitative explosion of fantasy" with which the intellectually honest critic could not avoid engaging.[11]

While prominent scholars have maintained the same compartmentalised critical outlook, Miéville exposes it as "untenable"[12] and detrimental, stating that "the embedded condescension and even despite towards fantasy that this paradigm has bequeathed stands as perhaps the major obstruction to theoretical process in the field".[13] In his distinctive fashion, Miéville refuses to award pre-eminence to one form over the other, remarking that while neither mode is inherently subversive or "resistant to ideology",[14] the *potential* for the articulation of antinormative stances is actually common ground between the two. As he contends, "utopias (including dystopias) are, rather, specific articulations of *alterity*, and [...] it is of that that SF/fantasy is the literature. In this model, the atom of SF's *and* fantasy's estrangement [...] is their unreality function, of which utopia is but one – if highly important – form".[15]

Literary utopia and dystopia, in other words, could be 'escapist' or 'institutionalised' as any other form, and Miéville's work clearly shows that their capability for subversion and cognitive estrangement thrives when put to the test through deconstructive strategies. If the articulation of alterity brings with itself a reconfiguration of introjected socio-cultural patterns, formal hybridity continuously interrogates our models for representing and consequently enforcing such structures. In binding the two together, Miéville creates a new, proactive path towards meaning-making.

In *Un Lun Dun*, he juxtaposes a parodic approach to the canonical portal-quest with an urban framework, all the while exploring the liminal space between utopia and dystopia and giving voice to pressing environmental concerns. It is worth noticing that *Un Lun Dun* is marketed under the commercial label of 'young adult fiction' (whatever this might mean), and indeed clearly addresses a younger readership with respect to the vast majority of Miéville's production. All the same, this feature does not lessen the author's political engagement nor his formal experimentation; rather, it laces them with a playfulness that possibly enhances the reversal effects he looks for.

As correctly evidenced by Cassandra Bausman, if the immediate frame of reference for *Un Lun Dun* is the conventional structure of the portal-quest, Miéville proceeds to systematically challenge its most prominent aspects.[16] In fact, like many similar contemporary

[9] ID., *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, p. 9.

[10] C. MIÉVILLE, "Afterword. Cognition as Ideology: A Dialectic of SF Theory", in M. BOULD and C. MIÉVILLE (eds), *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction*, Middletown, Wesleyan U.P., 2009, p. 232.

[11] *Ibidem*.

[12] *Ibidem*.

[13] *Ibidem*.

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 242.

[15] *Ibidem*, p. 244.

[16] See C. BAUSMAN, "Convention Un-done: Un Lun Dun's Unchosen Heroine and Narrative (Re)Vision", *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 25 (1), 2014, pp. 28-53.

narratives (be they closer to the genre of utopia or more akin to urban fantasy), the novel is set in an urban environment, partially recognisable as our own, and in a present moment that is "no more than twenty minutes"[17] projected into the future. The chronotope of portal fantasy would instead normally call for a pastoral setting and an indistinct, almost mythical time. Moreover, in *Un Lun Dun* the familiar metropolis – London – is subjected to an uncanny reduplication, given that on the other side of the portal lies UnLondon, a different and yet eerily similar 'abcity' coexisting with its 'actual' counterpart in a hierarchically oriented and osmotic relationship.

While apparently based on a straightforward reversal, the strategy employed by Miéville to push the boundaries of the form and interrogate the related genres of utopia and dystopia is multiplanar and nuanced. That is to say, it targets traditional modes of characterisation, the linear progression of the quest and the cardinal functioning rules of the portal itself. In addition, it reflects in a metaliterary perspective on the use and misuse of figurative language, in connection with the tenets of the genre as well as with the relations of power it purports to establish. This allows the author to project the ecological concerns that orient the narrative – i.e., the impact of pollution upon society and the sustainability of practices like recycling and reuse – into the same, stratified discursive system.

Structure and Characters: Subverting the Teleological Hero-Quest

Up to the first encounter with the main antagonist, Bausman argues, *Un Lun Dun* appears to follow the trajectory and tone typical of a portal-quest story.[18] Nevertheless, when analysed in detail, the first introductory chapters already disrupt the fixedness suggested at the formal level, in a way that prefigures the strategy employed on a larger scale in the course of the novel.

We are here introduced to a group of secondary-school students, whose main standouts are Zanna, the tall, blonde, sociable girl towards whom everyone almost involuntarily gravitates, and her funny and caring friend, Deeba. Strange signs have recently begun to manifest themselves when Zanna is around: animals bow to her, clouds assemble so as to reproduce the shape of her face, and graffiti spelling "Zanna forever" appear around the neighbourhood. As it happens, her exceptionality is also confirmed by negative events. For example, she is attacked by an oily cloud of fumes that causes one of her friends to be injured and is later spied upon by an animated umbrella. While the ambush by the Smog, which serves as the novel's main antagonist, is narrated with a sense of urgency and threat, the remainder of the prodigies is generally treated with subtle humour:

> The sky was unnaturally flat, as if a huge gray sheet had been pegged out from horizon to horizon above them. The air was still. Very faint dark stains coiled and disappeared, and the road was unmarked again. "Today…" Deeba said. "It's not a normal day." Zanna shook her head. Birds arced, and a clutch of sparrows flew out of nowhere and circled Zanna's head in a twittering halo.[19]

[17] T. MOYLAN, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, Boulder, Westview Press, 2000, p. 106.

[18] C. BAUSMAN, "Convention Un-done: Un Lun Dun's Unchosen Heroine and Narrative (Re)Vision", pp. 31-33.

[19] C. MIÉVILLE, *Un Lun Dun*, New York, Del Rey, 2007, pp. 11-12. All further references are to this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text.

Juxtaposing the ominous darkness that quite literally creeps at the corner of the character's eyes with the inflated quaintness of the "twittering halo", the author stages a contrast that reveals the staleness of heroic tropes, especially in connection with female figures. Defying hierarchy, the narrator is not the sole voice entitled to this kind of deconstruction: the solemn tone that would be expected from the apparition of signs revealing Zanna as the 'Chosen One' is also often undermined by Deeba, whose unfaltering witticisms and rationality sharply contrast with the tone required of this type of fantasy:

> Some days later Deeba had been with Zanna, walking under the old bridge over Iverson Road. There behind the pigeon net, far higher than anyone could have reached, was painted in vivid yellow: ZANNA FOR EVER! "Cor. Someone else called Zanna," Deeba said. "Or you've got long arms. Or someone massive loves you, Zan." "Shut up," Zanna said. "It's true though," Deeba said. "No one else's called Zanna, you're always saying. Now you've made your mark." (p. 8)

It is perhaps improper to bring Ursula Le Guin's call for a stylistic differentiation between fantasy and other kinds of literature[20] into the present discussion (and perhaps the terms she sets are too constrictive for contemporary forms). Nonetheless, Mendlesohn is adamant when affirming that, to be effective, portal-quest must rely on a monologic point of view. This perspective can be voiced by different characters, but should be unequivocal and shared: history must be fixed and received, possibly passed on via reputable documents (such as diaries, letters, books, scrolls, or prophecies), and a sense of inevitability is to pervade the adventure.[21] On the other hand, irony, even at its gentlest, always entails a certain amount of plurivocity: it points to new possibilities for interpretation, "creating new levels of meaning".[22]

Though the incursions of the supernatural are not fully comprehended by the rest of the group (with the notable exception of Deeba), Zanna's extraordinariness is readily recognised by her friends, who manifest ambivalent feelings towards her, instinctively alternating between awe and fear: her heroic stature sets her apart in a way that her companions register, but fail to bring to consciousness. This is in part due to the 'phlegm effect': the inhabitants of London tend to close off against UnLondon in all its manifestations, so that it becomes impossible to focus on any incident, individual or object which has to do with it. The device is not uncommon in fantasy fiction, although it is not always so strictly formalised: Miéville even introduces a specific time frame (nine days) after which people travelling to UnLondon are forgotten in London. Interestingly, while Zanna's friends seem all to fall victim to the phlegm effect, Deeba appears to be immune to it. Furthermore, she is the only character whose emotional intelligence allows her to identify and name the sense of separateness elicited by the heroine. This metanarrative reflection upon the traditional role and representation of the hero(ine) brings to light usually unspoken considerations that are part of the horizon of expectations envisaged by portal-quest stories, thus adding to the subterranean undermining of the form already enacted through irony.

Intriguingly, one should also pay attention to the fact that the most notable infraction of genre conventions is hinted at almost immediately in the text, since "although individuals might cross both ways", as Mendlesohn postulates, "the fantastic does not. Such an effect

[20] See U. LE GUIN, "From Elfland to Poughkeepsie", in D. SANDNER (ed.), *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*, Westport, Praeger, 2004, pp. 144-55.

[21] See F. MENDLESOHN, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, especially Chapter 1, "The Portal-Quest Fantasy".

[22] L. HUTCHEON, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, New York, Methuen, 1985, p. 30.

would move the fantasy into the category of *intrusion*, which [...] uses a very different grammar and tone".[23] No matter how subjective, our appraisal of reality is uniform enough to exclude the possibility of intelligent umbrellas and animated pollution. Be that as it may, their supernatural provenance is ascertained by Zanna: followed by Deeba, she retraces the oily tracks left by her spy, and ends up into an unassuming basement cluttered with debris. There, she feels compelled to turn a rusty wheel lodged into a pillar of piping, thus opening a portal to UnLondon, a heterotopic[24] mirror version of London which enjoys a peculiar relationship with the 'real' city:

> "Abcities have existed at least as long as the cities," it said. "Each dreams the other. There are ways to get between the two, and a few people do, though very few know the truth. This is where the most energetic of London's discards come, and in exchange London takes a few of our ideas." (p. 99)

It is clear that something supernatural (or, better, *un*-natural) travelled from the abcity to London, and then back again through the same threshold crossed by Zanna and Deeba, and that this permeability is a natural state for the two. We could perhaps conclude that *Un Lun Dun* is to be categorised as 'intrusion fantasy', were it not for the fact that Miéville quite deliberately makes use of the portal-quest structure and its teleological progression. Moreover, this configuration would not fit the criteria relating to intrusion fantasy, either, because the intrusion itself is not limited in time or space (the signs appearing to Zanna are numerous and scattered all around London). And, again, Miéville's narration does not always and uniformly elicit the wonder it should, so that, in Mendlesohn's view, this kind of irony would be best suited to a third category, i.e., liminal fantasy.[25] However, such a taxonomical undoing does not seem to compromise the efficacy of the narrative: rather, by pushing the boundaries of generic norms, it encourages the reader to tackle a certain amount of 'insubordination' towards preconceived notions.

The metanarrative game only picks up as the adventure progresses: after a series of curious encounters with helper figures, Zanna and Deeba meet the Propheseers, a group of guardians of UnLondon's stability protecting a sentient book of prophecies. Half encyclopaedia and half bearer of mystical knowledge, this book contains details about how the Smog came to be and found its way to UnLondon. Starting from the Industrial Revolution, the book explains, the fumes and chemical agents produced in London coalesced into a mass; what Londoners do not know is that over time the smog developed a conscience, becoming greedy for more sustenance and burning everything it could in order to expand.

It is worth noticing that the Frankensteinian mutation did *not* happen in the heterotopic UnLondon: not only does the magic cross both ways, then, but while UnLondon seems to be more attuned to it, the supernatural is evidently also native to London. While foreshadowing the extensive use of metaphoric literalisation in the novel, the paragraph also sets the tone for Miéville's ecocritical reflection. Hence the question concerning when one possibly starts acknowledging that a phenomenon has grown out of control, to the extent that its development becomes potentially unpredictable.

Contributing to the subversion is the book's description of the Great Smog of 1952, a historical report that turns into the reminiscence of an almost legendary battle for the pos-

[23] F. MENDLESOHN, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, p. 2.
[24] See M. FOUCAULT, "Of Other Spaces", Engl. trans. J. MISKOWIEC, *Diacritics*, 16 (1), 1986, pp. 22-27.
[25] F. MENDLESOHN, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, especially Chapter 2, "Intrusion Fantasy".

session of the city, a battle that citizens did not realise was underway: "for five days, half a century ago, it assaulted London. It killed *four thousand people.* Its worst single attack. And still, most of you didn't even know you were at war!" (p. 101). After this event, London rallied against its enemy; yet, the book remarks, its subject is UnLondon rather than London, and the plan devised by the city to win the final battle is hazy, at best. Indeed, the book's report becomes closer and closer to a tale, recounting how Londoners first beat the Smog with the aid of a group of "weatherwitches":

"The Armets. It's an old word for helmet, and they were like London's *armor*, you see? And we've heard how they won. They had a magic weapon." "The *Klinneract*," announced Lectern. […] "So with magic and a secret war, Londoners drove the Smog away, but they didn't manage to kill it. It got away." "By coming here," the book said. (p. 101)

The fact that the book contains only a portion of the information that normally accompanies portal-quest plots and is vague about a relevant part of it – how the enemy was defeated by Londoners – decisively undermines its reliability. Nonetheless, it remains quite smug about being always right, foretelling that Zanna, as the "Shwazzy" (the heroine that the abcity is waiting for), is destined to prevail in her first encounter with her enemy, then to embark on a journey to recover a series of precious objects, each one crucial to obtain the next, and finally to wield the most powerful of them (the UnGun) to defeat the Smog once and for all.

When the Smog reaches Zanna and the first battle ensues, however, things refuse to follow the preordained path: Zanna is immediately defeated, and she and Deeba are sent back to the portal, leaving UnLondoners to their own devices as to the handling of the Smog problem. This anticlimactic end to the Shwazzy's adventure markedly contrasts with the traditional ending of the portal-quest under two respects: here, there is no eucatastrophe,[26] no resolution of the conflict and repristination of the existing order; more interestingly, the character whose perspective frames the journey back home is Deeba, the 'helper' figure. Atypically, the narrator reveals *her* thoughts and we follow *her* return to everyday life, while Zanna obstinately refuses to remember:

For a while, Deeba tried not to think about UnLondon, because it made her miss it. She soon realized, however, that she couldn't stop herself. In the streets, she would eye passersby and wonder if they knew of the abcity's existence. […] Deeba wanted to know about the UnLondoners, and UnLondon, and the Smog, and the secret war. That war with the Smog, in particular, fascinated her. The idea that something like that had once gone on in her own city made all the impossibility she had seen feel closer to home. *There must be UnLondoners who've moved to London, as well as the other way round,* she realized. (p. 151)

The time spent in UnLondon has effectively defamiliarised the city in Deeba's eyes, so much so that her movement through it is closer to the purposeful investigation of a modern *flâneur* than to the aimless strolling of an apathetic urbanite.[27] The metaliterary analysis

[26] See J.R.R. TOLKIEN, "On Fairy-Stories", in ID., *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. C. TOLKIEN, Hammersmith, Harper Collins, 1997, pp. 109-61.

[27] See M. DE CERTEAU, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Engl. trans. S. RENDALL, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 1988; W. BENJAMIN, "Il *flâneur*", in ID., *I "passages" di Parigi*, a cura di E. GIANNI, Torino, Einaudi, 2000, pp. 465-509; N. PLESSKE, *The Intelligible Metropolis: Urban Mentality in Contemporary London Novels*, Bielefeld, Transcript Verlag, 2014, pp. 350-52.

she is entrusted with systematically points out all the infractions of the portal-quest fantasies canon in one smooth paragraph, concurrently arousing the reader's curiosity as to the impenetrable legend. Keeping in mind that Deeba roughly embodies the target age-group for this novel, her step-by-step considerations work at a double level. Semantically, they convey a reappraisal of the city meant to promote a similar critical thinking without falling into didacticism. Formally, they introduce an antinormative attitude towards the conventions of a given genre in an audience that is, in all probability, still in the process of apprehending those very norms. If, as Mendlesohn states, "[t]he genre accrues formalisms, and authors negotiate with these forms", and "one aspect of this negotiation is experimenting with which positions and rhetorics best familiarize (or defamiliarize) the reader with the fantastic",[28] Miéville's strategy brilliantly uncovers a series of discursive elements to new generations of readers.

Deeba's next moves, and especially the thought process that informs them, are similarly revolutionary: in contrast with Zanna, Deeba feels no grand call to fulfil a preordained destiny, nor any inexplicable force urging her to become the champion of the UnLondon cause. Her decision to return to the abcity comes after much ponderation, and the dynamics of this second journey is nowhere as straightforward as that of the first. Driven by her curiosity and her need to believe UnLondon safe, Deeba investigates the legendary Armets and the Klinneract through the most magical instrument at her disposal, a browser, and is shocked by what she finds out. The first is not a group of powerful witches (at least, not overtly), but the British RMetS, the Royal Meteorological Society, while the Klinneract is nothing but the 1956 Clean Air Act. This unequivocally unmasks Benjamin Unstible – a London scientist and the most influential man in the abcity – as a villain and fraudster: though knowing the truth, he has inexplicably endorsed the 'magical' version of the events.

Despite having conclusive proof right in front of her, Deeba is filled with self-doubt, wondering "[*m*]*aybe it's me getting it wrong* […]. *Maybe* […] *I got the wrong idea*" (p. 154). A teenager, a girl and a sidekick, Deeba voices her insecurities from a subordinate position, in a way that undoubtedly resonates with a vast portion of *Un Lun Dun* readers:

> *They'll be fine,* Deeba told herself. She told herself that again and again. *UnLondon'll get through.* […] *Maybe I'm the one with the wrong idea. Maybe everything's fine. Anyway, the Propheseers'll see to it, one way or the other.* Whenever she thought that, though, Deeba could not help remembering all the confusion about the Shwazzy and the prophecies […]. *Still,* she thought, *they'll have learnt their lesson.* […] UnLondon would have to look after itself. She wasn't the Shwazzy. She was just someone. How could just someone be any help, whatever was going on? (p. 158)

Questioning her role in the narrative in conjunction with her own capabilities, Deeba humanises and flashes out the conventionally flat hero of the portal-quest, "more often an actant than an actor, provided with attributes rather than character precisely to compensate for the static nature of his role".[29] It is indeed her empathetic character that pushes her to reach out, and her ingeniousness that allows her to reconstruct, from bits and pieces, a different – and much more arduous – way to enter UnLondon.

Once there, her resolve is tested again: her intention had been to warn the Propheseers and leave the struggle to them, but it becomes immediately clear that the scholars are

[28] F. Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, p. 17.
[29] *Ibidem*, p. 7.

not receptive to her warnings. On the contrary, they stubbornly refuse to acknowledge the truth, as if unwilling to recognise their own role in the gradual surrender of the abcity to the Smog. Quite innovative for this kind of fantasy is also the multi-layered characterisation of the council-like group, where the Propheseers are neither wise but temporarily ousted, as Gandalf, nor corrupted by the evil power, like Saruman. They are, much more realistically, complacent: too enveloped in their own system of beliefs and established truths to maintain a critical outlook on what surrounds them.

At the same time, there is a political group of UnLondon citizens, hypocritically called the "Concern", who actively work with the Smog for their own financial gain, and these people are singled out by free-thinking citizens as a dangerous force. The Propheseers, on the other hand, are not questioned until the consequences of their inaction stares them in the face, insulated as they are by their intellectualism and supposed trustworthiness.

The concept is not easy to grasp (even for 'competent' adults), and Miéville drives it home through the figure of Mortar, the head Propheseer. As the Smog has taken possession of the body of his dear friend, the scientist Unstible, Mortar keeps working with it, unwittingly buttressing its machinations and ignoring the literal cloud of fumes that thickens around him. Ultimately, his parable concludes with other people shouldering the responsibility of his mistakes. In this sense, parallels with younger generations having to bear the burden of an impaired environment that they have inherited from wilfully blind elders are almost too easy to draw. Still, the insertion of these passive characters in a mode of writing that traditionally draws a clear-cut distinction between 'good' and 'bad' illustrates how shades of grey can be just as dangerous as pure, intentional evil. On yet another level, this undermines the mystique of the 'wise figure' in portal-quest stories.

Deeba's subsequent route is more in line with the staples of the genre: she is aided by a local guide, the half-ghost Hemi, and traverses different portions of the unknown land, thus acquiring new knowledge and skills and forging meaningful relationships along the way, creating what is for all purposes a 'company'. Nonetheless, built into her progression is a strong reconsideration of the role of the heroine, together with her trajectory and the element that epitomises these *topoi*, namely the prophesy book. According to Mendlesohn, the 'found document' revealing the past and foreseeing the future functions as a surrogate for the narrative itself, and must therefore be masterfully concocted for the tale to hold:

> We can no longer debate history, in the sense of interpretation, analysis, discovery; we can only relate the past. This scholasticism permits only macronarratives: the past in these books is always what has been recorded about the greats, and it has always been recorded *somewhere*. Yet concomitant with this is a reverence for *the* book […] perseverance is defined in part by the ability to stay on the straight and narrow path, to follow the words of prophecy and the delivered interpretation – in effect, for the hero to maintain his own position-as-reader.[30]

In *Un Lun Dun*, instead, the book is literally embodied, becoming an opinionated and at times demonstrably fallible character. As a matter of fact, it offers an interpretable version of the past and proposes a line of action for Zanna that turns out to be a dead end, thus indicating that the future is open to reinvention. Once existing in a canonical space, the book takes some time to mourn the loss of a fixed frame of reference and to truly accept that not all that is written must be passively received. For instance, it attempts to impose

[30] *Ibidem*, pp. 14-15.

a normative quest structure to the process of recovery of the magic weapon, calling for a "standard Chosen One deal" (p. 249) made of seven interrelated tasks. After completing the first of them, with much effort and at the cost of the lives of some good friends, Deeba is led to rebel against this notion:

"We'll skip the rest of the stuff. Save us some time. We'll go straight to the last stage of the quest. Let's go get the UnGun. Then we can deal with the Smog, and I can go home." […] "Look," said the book frantically. "You can't pick and choose bits from a prophecy. That's not how they work." "Let's be honest," Deeba said. "We all know you have no idea how prophecies work." […] "In fact […] it looks a lot like prophecies *don't* work. […] We are *not* walking through each of your chapters, book!" (pp. 302-304)

Deeba's rebellion against linearity quite overtly contravenes theoretical reasonings such as Mendlesohn's, according to which portal-quest fantasies should firmly adhere to an established set of rules. In addition, the character's rebellion challenges the basic premise that fantasy as a genre may not engage in overt metaliterary practices which would spoil the suspension-of-disbelief effect.[31] Steadily staging little revolutions that add to one another, *Un Lun Dun* therefore constructs the abcity in such a way that subversion and explicit commentary become embedded in the narrative itself. Rather than breaking the enchantment or undermining our enjoyment of the quest, this strategy seems to aim at liberating us from preconceptions: if we may no longer savour the emotional payoff of having our anticipations confirmed, we soon realise that surprises are still in store for us.

Furthermore, some of Deeba's expressions – "we'll skip the rest of the stuff" and "we are not walking through each of your chapters, book!" – quite evidently refer to unsanctioned readerly practices. While a parallel between the main character and the reader can undoubtedly be traced, here it is not the heroine that must attune to the passive 'position-as-reader', as happens with portal-quest stories, but the audience that should virtually be 'infected' by Deeba's antinormative, rebellious attitude. If prophecies and, by extension, plotlines no longer seem to work, neither does their definition of the characters' role and scope.

The "straight and narrow path" that Mendlesohn invokes is no longer there to guide our interpretation. Deeba's understanding of her original role in the quest, and the book's reaction to it, are in this sense exemplary:

There it was, in the index. "Shwazzy, Sidekicks of the." Below that were subsubheadings, each with a single page reference. "Clever One," she read. "Funny One." "Look…" the book said. "It's just terminology. Sometimes these old prophecies are written in, you know, unfortunate ways…" […] "So… I'm the funny one? I'm the *funny sidekick*?" "But, but, but," the book said, flustered. "What about Digby? What about Ron and Robin? There's no shame in –" Deeba dropped the book and walked away. It yelped as it hit the pavement. […] "Deeba." It was the book. Hemi carried it closer. "I want to apologize. I didn't write me. I've no idea who did. But we already know he or she was a moron." Deeba refused to smile. "They didn't know what they were on about. […] Even if my idiot authors didn't know it, *I* know you're not a sidekick –" "No one is!" Deeba shouted. "That's no way to talk about anyone! To say they're just hangers-on to someone more *important.*" "I know," said the book. "You're right." (p. 248)

[31] See on this point B. ATTEBERY, *Strategies of Fantasy*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana U.P., 1992.

In keeping with the general design of the novel, metanarrative reconsiderations are realised through empathy: the sentient book must come to terms with the shortcomings of tradition and negotiate a fresh, less hierarchical perspective. Its attempt to deflect responsibility on the staples of the canon and on an established, well-loved lineage of "funny sidekicks" rings empty, and fails to convince Deeba, the reader, and ultimately the book itself. Convention is thus revealed to be a self-serving artifice which is generally adopted because it is *easy*: codified *topoi* are readily constructed and identified, and do not ask much of either the author or the audience. For his part, Miéville's can instead be shown to explore the possibility to forge intelligent and well-rounded characters within 'genre literature' and its related media.

Nor is it Deeba's inherent specialness that is seen to make her stand out from the company of UnLondon rescuers; later, when other characters attempt to elect her as the new Shwazzy, she resolutely refuses, stating "I'm *not* the Shwazzy. I'm completely unchosen" (p. 353). Significantly, "Unchosen One" is the title that she ultimately claims for herself. The pun naturally works because of its ambivalence: Deeba decides to embark on this mission of her own volition; in the process, she also becomes somewhat of an UnLondoner, and an aid for the abcity. However, she is not the sole, universally acclaimed hero(ine) in the war against the Smog: while she is undoubtedly the protagonist of the novel and the focaliser of the quest, Miéville is quite careful not to turn her into a world-historical individual within the context of the adventure. The complexity he strives for through a masterful modulation of tone, plot and character-construction is perfectly summed up in the paragraph describing the aftermath of the final battle:

> It was only one full day after that extraordinary battle, but UnLondon was adjusting to the news and ways of postwar life impressively quickly. All over the abcity, stories of heroism and betrayal and incompetence and luck were emerging. There were plenty of champions Deeba had never heard of, who'd done amazing things, in parts of UnLondon she'd never been. (pp. 457-58)

There is no clean resolution to a war that took over an entire city, nor can a single girl or group of heroes/heroines save it simply by their own means. The act of saving comes from the cumulative efforts of multiple individuals, and "betrayal, incompetence and luck" are equally relevant factors to the outcome of a war. Introducing the notion of a "postwar" at this stage also goes against expectations with regard to portal-quest schemata, as it takes away from the finality of the Smog's defeat and leaves the door open to new developments. Similarly, Deeba's return to London should conclude her adventure in the otherworld and close its doors to her forever, while instead her crossing of the threshold becomes another (possibly fatal) blow to the rigidity of the form:

> "[I]t isn't easy to cross between the worlds. Every time […] the membrane between two whole *universes* is strained. Think what that means. […] We'll miss you if you go, Deeba. But you have to choose." […] "The stuff that happened here," Deeba said, "I'll never forget. What we did. I'll never forget *you.* Any of you. […] And part of the reason I won't forget you," she said, "is 'cause I'll be back all the time." […] "Come *on,*" she said, smiling. "What you even *talking* about, Mortar? It's *easy* to get from London to here. […] People are *always* going between, and you don't see either universe collapsing, do you? You just think it's hard to go between the two 'cause you've always thought it must be. You're just saying that 'cause you sort of think you should." Deeba's friends stared at her, and at each other. "She has a point," Mortar said eventually. (pp. 460-61)

The two universes are not distorted by coexistence: intercommunication does not necessarily make the supernatural plane less 'magical', or the 'real' one less relevant. By extension, the hybridisation of modes and genres and the reinvention of their rules by contamination do not take away from the significance of the work. Through her customary wit and humour, Deeba wedges the portal between worlds open, effectively pointing to the elephant in the room: it had always been there, and convention only had kept its users from crossing over.

Figurative Language and the Creation of London's Un-*topia*

The subversion of the portal-quest structure is also connected with Miéville's characterisation of the 'otherworld', which innovatively takes advantage of a paramount feature within the rhetoric of fantasy fiction, namely the literalisation of metaphor, so as to carve out an interstitial space between ecological utopia and dystopia. It is also worth noticing that, together with the deconstruction of the quest structure and of fixed character roles, the extensive and creative use of figurative language manages to link ideological and formal stances. This is a strategy that Miéville consistently employs, as underlined by M.P. Williams:

> To the mediated and genre-varying extent that China Miéville's fictions as a whole can be said to have an 'essential' core, I believe we might suggest that it is something akin to the following: the place of the socially constructed individual within social collectives, or, more abstractly, about multiplicity within singularity – and vice versa (of both). Or, perhaps we could say they are 'really about' how the fantastic can help us to understand how the above (and their reversals) work *in reality*.[32]

Building on Miéville's extensive reimagining of the city of London, Williams goes on to describe "Un-Londons" as "urban fantasy fictions which posit hidden places *under* or *unseen by* the real London […] which create a fantastic London located interstitially beneath or between the existing London. Un-Londons are para-cities in the sense of both parallel and, occasionally, para*site*".[33] He then distinguishes them from "Ab-Londons", which are "instances of London becoming estranged by means of something apocalyptic or transformative, and moving *away* from the familiar London and towards something definitively more estranging".[34]

However, while Williams places UnLondon firmly within the category of urban fantasy fictions, I believe that the continuous exchange of people, items and magic between the real and the imagined city – with the consequent rethinking of London as a whole – ultimately blurs the distinction between the two. Moreover, Miéville firmly refuses to elect either city as a privileged model, pointing to the dangers and possibilities expressed by both. In the upshot, I believe that the term '*un*-topia' could better encompass the author's open engagement with the utopian/dystopian model as well as his original dialogical model for the reconfiguration of the urban space.

[32] M.P. Williams, "The Un-, Ab- and Alter-Londons of China Miéville: Imaginary Spaces for Concrete Subjects", in N. Hubble and P. Tew (eds), *London in Contemporary British Fiction: The City Beyond the City*, London, Bloomsbury, 2016, p. 177.

[33] *Ibidem*, p. 179.

[34] *Ibidem*.

The macroscopic and most recognisable metaphoric literalisation that we encounter is represented by the abcity itself. UnLondon is a hypostatisation of the repressed, a place where "the most energetic discards of London" traverse (p. 99), be they objects or people: it is *un*canny in the full sense of the word, familiar and profoundly disquieting at the same time. Recognition is often triggered only to be immediately undermined via an estranging process: nothing can be taken for granted in a place that gives the everyday, the overlooked, and the 'secondary' a chance to find a new *raison d'être*.

Zanna and Deeba's first impression of UnLondon is decidedly dystopian: the basement door that they go through leads them to what appears to be a maze-like landfill, illuminated by a strange, dimmer sun with a hole at its centre. Furthermore, the girls are immediately attacked by a pack of aggressive rubbish. The episode seems to position UnLondon as hierarchically inferior to London, a place where what is unwanted, thrown away and forgotten in the city ends up and is abandoned. Indeed, on paper, UnLondon does not sound particularly appealing: while "energetic", the objects that come through the "Odd" (the buffer space between universes) are called "Moil":

Mildly Obsolete In London. Throw something away and you declare it obsolete. You've seen an old computer, or a broken radio or whatever, left on the streets? It's there for a few days, and then it's just gone. [...] Sometimes rubbish collectors have taken it, but often as not it ends up here, where people find other uses for it. It seeps into UnLondon. You might see residue: maybe a dried-up puddle on a wall. That's where moil dripped through. And here, it sprouts like mushrooms on the streets. (p. 57)

And yet, the new uses that are found for these objects are strikingly inventive. For instance, while walking through a market, the girls notice colourful flower bouquets that, on closer inspection, turn out to be made of tools – screwdrivers, hammers and levers, all arranged in a neat bunch. Things that had a concrete material function in London become an aesthetically pleasing ornament in the abcity. Conversely, Obaday Fing, a tailor, fashions clothes out of book pages: "Never again need you face the misery of unreadable clothes. Now you can pick your favorite works of fiction or nonfiction for your sleeves. [...] Learn while you dress!" (p. 35). These breaks with our preconceived notions of purpose-oriented and functionally-devised objects already indicate that the girls' first apprehension of UnLondon might be wrong: the abcity finds beauty in usefulness, and usefulness in beauty.

Fing's work is particularly noteworthy, because UnLondoners tend to dress in old-fashioned uniforms. Those who think themselves well versed in the rules of *Un Lun Dun*'s otherworld by now would probably surmise that this is because uniforms rapidly fall out of use in London. But Miéville sweeps the rug from under our feet, since the nature of the communication between the two cities proves neither monodirectional, nor hierarchical, as Conductor Jones (a former Londoner) explains:

"The UnLondon-I," Jones said. "It's what gave them the idea for that big wheel in London [...] Ideas seep both ways, you know. Like clothes – Londoners copy so many UnLondon fashions, and for some reason they always seem to make them uniforms. And the I? Well, if an abnaut didn't actually come here and see it, then some dream of it floated from here into their heads. But what's the point making it a damn fool thing for spinning people round and round? The UnLondon-I has a purpose." He pointed. What had looked at first like compartments were scoops, pushed around by the river. The UnLondon-I was a waterwheel. "The dynamos attached to that keep a lot of things going," Jones said. Above the wheel was the ring of sunshine. The two circles echoed each other. "Some people say," Jones said, "that the bit missing from the middle of the UnSun was what became the sun of

London. That what lights your days got plucked out of what lights ours." Zanna held out her thumb. The hole in the UnSun's center *was* about the same size as the sun from their usual life. "Every morning it rises in a different place," Jones said. (p. 64)

If there is no pre-ordinate directionality in the exchange of items between the city and the abcity, there is a clear distinction in the functions assigned to them. From this perspective, London seems at the very least to lack the inventiveness of UnLondon in finding value in things and in catering to its inhabitants, rather than to an unsustainable economic system. Sometimes, London's stance is decidedly predatory: the ideas it inherits from UnLondon are emptied of their usefulness, and even the Sun seems to have been forcefully torn from the abcity's skies. All in all, the spirit animating the two cities fundamentally diverges, or better, it rests on a radical opposition: while the one thrives in chaotic imagination, the other imposes a dehumanising uniformity, as suggested by the way it transforms UnLondon's clothes into uniforms.

This liberating possibility is showcased by Deeba's second entrance into the abcity, one she pulls through by following to the letter the indications provided by the book: "[e]nter by booksteps […] [a]nd storyladders" (p. 163). Armed with an emergency backpack, Deeba proceeds to climb the shelves of the local library, ascending higher and higher, always looking straight ahead. Progressively, the names of the volumes she comes across become less and less familiar, as in *The Wasp in the Wig*, *A Courageous Egg*, *A London Guide for Blazing Worlders*, and *A Bowl of Shadows*. These may of course sound outlandish, but most of them hide a more or less overt nod to other works: noticeably, "The Wasp in a Wig" was originally conceived as a chapter of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1871); suppressed, the proofs resurfaced in 1974 at a Sotheby's auction. Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666) is a satirical utopia, sometimes considered one of the first examples of science fiction. *A Bowl of Shadows* could perhaps refer to a verse by Polish author Zbigniew Herbert, while *A Courageous Egg* is a fictional book featured in Miéville's own *The Scar* (2002). The metaphor literalised here is of course that reading grants access to a different world; at the same time, Miéville takes the opportunity to recognise the works that influenced him and helped shape the genre, like steps through which we ascend in literature. Naturally, the hypostatisation is relevant to the story, since Deeba does reach UnLondon through her own effort, and in the abcity things are at the same time both what they claim to be and something else, too.

Under this respect, UnLondon is decidedly closer to the conception of utopia as a medium that attempts to "restore wholeness to the fragmented social spacetime".[35] Its inhabitants, for instance, are a motley array of human and non-human types that live side by side without this being an issue, or even considered as a strange predicament. All seem to come to UnLondon to find self-actualisation. Jones, for instance, feels like he had become "mildly obsolete in London", while in the abcity he might fulfil his potential:

[T]hey decided they could save money if they got rid of half of us. Of course it messed things up. But them who made the decision were people who never took buses, so they didn't care. "We knew what we did was important. Look in the dictionary. 'Conduct: verb. To lead, control, or guide.' Some of

[35] E. GOMEL, *Narrative Space and Time: Representing Impossible Topologies in Literature*, New York, Routledge, 2014, p. 20. See also M.D. GORDIN, H. TILLEY and G. PRAKASH (eds), *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility*, Princeton, Princeton U.P., 2010.

us weren't prepared to stop being guides. We look after travelers. It's…" Conductor Jones looked down, suddenly shy. "Some people say it's a sacred duty." "UnLondon… Well, sometimes, it can be a dangerous place. We had to be really ready to conduct […]. The drivers who came down swore to get the passengers from where they are to where they want to go. And to protect them." (pp. 57-58)

When citing the dictionary entry for 'conductor', Jones remarks that he identifies with all of these shades of interpretation, simultaneously: UnLondon lets him be – *needs* him to be – as semantically complex as the name for its role suggests. Other members of the company are possibly even more brilliantly characterised: the explorer Yorick Cavea is a man up to the shoulders, but has (of course) no head; his intelligent self is actually a little bird, whose cage is placed above the body's neck. Skool, which appears as a big man in an antiquated diving suit, is literally a school of fish: "They spent years refitting the suit, trudged all the way out of the sea to come and live with us" (pp. 397-98), explains Obaday, who in turn carries his tools on himself, having pins instead of hair. This decidedly anti-anthropocentric perspective resonates with the underlying issue expressed by the novel, that is to say, the ecocritical denouncement of unsustainable practices especially in the urban environment. Figurative language and metaliterary intertextuality both contribute to this blurring of clear demarcations between self and other, natural and unnatural, human and non-human, underscoring how artificial the difference sometimes is.[36]

Inherent in diversity and polysemy, however, is also the risk of misinterpretation and of partial readings, so that the notion becomes a double-edged sword questioning the stability of the utopian project. This ambiguity is signalled early in the narrative, and throughout the adventure, by a creative use of language which always underscores the inventive re-functionalisation and the antinormative, cooperative stance that animate UnLondon. By going through the portal, key expressions of the prophecy undergo a semiotic metamorphosis: the term 'Shwazzy', for instance, is a play on the French *choisi*, 'chosen one'. Likewise, the Armets and the Klinneract are transliterations and contractions of English words. Moreover, these terms are basically unmoored: they never quite correspond to the 'real' object they are supposed to designate, thus suggesting a semantic slipperiness that defies interpretation. The 'UnLondonisation' of such relevant terms renders them more suited to their changed environment and cloaks them in magic; however, the misunderstanding also renders the prophecy itself null.

The most evident instance of this can be found in the episode of the "Talklands", a separate realm within UnLondon ruled by the tyrannical Mr Speaker, who has the power of speaking words into existence:

"QUIET!" Mr. Speaker shouted, and Deeba gasped to see something living slip from his mouth, scuttle like a millipede down his shirt, and disappear. "NO TALKING WITHOUT PERMISSION!" With each word, another strange animal-thing seemed to coalesce and drop from behind his teeth. They were small, and each a completely different shape. They flew or crawled or slithered into the room, where, Deeba realized, hundreds of other creatures waited. Again, none had mouths. "SOOOOO," Mr. Speaker said slowly, watching her, a snail-thing popping out from between his lips. "YOU'RE JEALOUS OF MY UTTERLINGS?" Five more animals emerged. One, when he said *jealous,* was a beautiful iridescent bat. (p. 263)

[36] See M.H. JACOBSEN and K. TESTER (eds), *Utopia: Social Theory and the Future*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2016; especially K. RIGBY, "Utopianism, Dystopianism and Ecological Thought", pp. 141-60.

Mr Speaker's court is entirely formed of such mouthless creatures, which have to obey him in everything and, being mouthless, literally have no voice; within his dominion, moreover, nobody is allowed to talk without permission, so that the Talklands are effectively an echo chamber for their ruler. The whole setting and the "utterlings" in particular offer a sharp commentary on referentiality and on the hegemony over language: their appearance seems to iconically represent their meaning and, coherently, it is also dependent on context and intonation. One word differently pronounced generates utterlings that are similarly shaped but different in colour and number of limbs; presumably, polysemic words spoken in different contexts would give rise to different utterlings altogether. Just like words, not all utterlings are equally effective: when Deeba tries to negotiate with Mr Speaker to leave the Talklands, he demands that she utter new words, and she chooses 'bling', 'lairy', 'diss', and 'brer'. In comparison with other utterlings, those embodying slang words are "particularly healthy and energetic" (p. 266), signalling that, despite being stigmatised as non-standard, demotic language is actually livelier. This egalitarian revolt against linguistic and political monocracy is then further expanded:

> "I CAN DO WHATEVER I WANT," Mr. Speaker said. "[…] I'M MR. SPEAKER! WORDS MEAN WHATEVER I WANT. WORDS DO WHAT I TELL THEM!" […] Deeba looked around at the utterlings holding her, felt the strength of their grip. She thought quickly. "I don't think that's true," she said. Silence settled, and all the eyes in the room turned to Deeba. […] "Words don't always mean what we want them to," she said. "None of us. Not even you […] Like… if someone shouts 'Hey you!' at someone in the street, but someone else turns around. The words misbehaved. They didn't call the person they were meant to. […] Or even […] like some words that mean something but they've got like a feeling of something else, so if you say them, you might be saying something you don't mean to. Like if I say someone's really *nice* then I might mean it, but it sounds a little bit like they're boring. You know?" […] "The thing is," Deeba said, eyeing Mr. Speaker, "you could only make words do what you want if it was just you deciding what they mean. But it isn't. It's everyone else, too. Which means you might *want* to give them orders, but you aren't in total control. No one is." […] "So, you might think all these words have to obey you. But they don't." (pp. 267-68)

In her incendiary speech, Deeba ponders on illocutionary force, misfires and pragmatics in general in a way that is accessible to a non-specialist readership. This effectively causes a revolt against the tyrant, where the utterlings rebel against Mr Speaker and, by extension, the authoritarian and oppressive misuse of language. Despite being apparently self-conclusive, this episode is inseparable from the rest of the narrative: first, because three utterlings – Cauldron, Diss and Bling – join the quest and become full-fledged members of the company. Secondly, because this experience teaches Deeba a valuable lesson which she later applies in defeating other villains: her critical questioning of power is rooted in the understanding that people, events and even cities are never reducible to one readily apprehensible facet. While both utopia and dystopia frequently showcase such cooperative political reconfigurations, it is clear that the metalinguistic component of fantasy fiction is integral to *Un Lun Dun*.[37]

Genre hybridity and its conductivity to critical estrangement also frame UnLondon's subordinate relationship with London and the related issue of the Smog, which is allowed to exist and to flourish by virtue of a shrewd pact sealed with London politicians. This

[37] For an interesting new perspective on the connections between utopia and rhetoric, see M. PORTOLANO, "The Rhetorical Function of Utopia: An Exploration of the Concept of Utopia in Rhetorical Theory", *Utopian Studies*, 23 (1), 2012, pp. 113-41.

naturally excludes a fully utopian reading of the abcity, inviting all the while a dystopian interpretation of London. Unbeknown to all but a few self-serving parties, the Environment minister herself has the city's pollution funnelled over to UnLondon, myopically believing to be in control of the agreement. The not-so-thinly veiled metaphor is multi-layered. First, it comments on our society's short-sightedness in dealing with environmental issues, which are here literally swept under the rug. Secondly, and of course relatedly, it highlights the hypocritical attitude of Western people taking advantage of the resources and workforce of LMI countries and using them as dumping grounds, while censoring their involvement in global pollution. Finally, it more broadly underscores the unsustainability of the economic system that leaves room for these disparities: namely, exploitative Western capitalism. This might seem a far-fetched extrapolation, but Miéville himself has thrown light on such an interpretative key in his essay "The Limits of Utopia", published on the platform *Climate & Capitalism*, where he argued:

> The utopia of togetherness is a lie. Environmental justice means acknowledging that there is no whole earth, no "we," without a "them." That we are not all in this together. Which means fighting the fact that fines for toxic spills in predominantly white areas are five times what they are in minority ones. It means not only providing livings for people who survive by sifting through rejectamenta in toxic dumps but squaring up against the imperialism of garbage that put them there, against trash neoliberalism by which poor countries compete to become repositories of filth.[38]

Considering its target audience, *Un Lun Dun* could hardly have addressed these issues in the same forceful tones. Nonetheless, I would argue that the metaliterary playfulness that orients the novel provides Miéville with a different but no less sharp tool to advocate for a revaluation of what utopia means to us and how it can easily turn into dystopia for others. The abcity hangs in the balance between the two, and liberating possibilities come with the warning that anyone can take advantage of them, even manipulating them to their ends.

It is worth mentioning at this point that Margaret Atwood, too, has recently coined a new word, 'ustopias', to refer to liminal forms containing the marks of both utopia and dystopia, "the imagined perfect society and its opposite", each comprising "a latent version of the other":[39] "scratch the surface a little, and – or so I think – you see something […] like a yin and yang pattern; within each utopia, a concealed dystopia; within each dystopia, a hidden utopia, if only in the form of the world as it existed before the bad guys took over".[40]

Yet, I am not convinced that this notion could aptly describe *Un Lun Dun*, specifically because of the latter's programmatic hybridisation of utopia/dystopia and fantasy fiction. In Miéville's text, the narrated world is not removed in time or space, but coexists with the 'real' city, only situated on a different plane. A more viable frame of reference for this kind of experiment seems to be that of 'critical dystopia',[41] a form that questions the genre

[38] C. MIÉVILLE, "The Limits of Utopia" (2018), https://climateandcapitalism.com/2018/03/02/china-mieville-the-limits-of-utopia/ (last accessed on 31 July 2020). See also K. STANLEY ROBINSON, "Remarks on Utopia in the Age of Climate Change", *Utopian Studies*, 27 (1), 2016, pp. 1-15.

[39] M. ATWOOD, "Dire Cartographies: The Roads to Ustopia", in EAD., *In Other Worlds: Science Fiction and the Human Imagination*, London, Virago, 2011, p. 66.

[40] *Ibidem*, p. 85.

[41] See T. MOYLAN, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, p. xv. See also L.T. SARGENT, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited", *Utopian Studies*, 5 (1), 1994, pp. 1-37, and P. SEYFERTH, "A Glimpse of Hope at the End of the Dystopian Century: The Utopian Dimension of Critical Dystopias", *ILCEA*, 30, 2018, http://journals.openedition.org/ilcea/4454 (last accessed on 31 July 2020).

from within its boundaries and with a constructive intent. Indeed, the open ending of *Un Lun Dun*, as opposed to the portal-quest one, is well suited to critical dystopia, seen as "a textual mutation that self-reflexively takes on the present system and offers not only astute critiques of the order of things but also explorations of the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of political activism can derive imaginative sustenance and inspiration".[42]

Clearly inscribed into Thomas Moylan's examination of critical dystopias is also the issue of the relativity of the interpretation of a work as either dystopian or utopian, because political and cultural biases are bound to lead to variously oriented readings. Considerations of genre hybridity further enter the discussion when looking at Raffaella Baccolini's proposition that dystopian fiction's recent strategy of drawing recognisable tropes from other forms increases "rather than diminish its creative potential for critical expression".[43] Moylan, however, envisions a precise structure for critical dystopias:

> [S]tepping inside the ambient zone of anti-utopian pessimism with new textual tricks, they expose the horror of the present moment. Yet in the midst of their pessimistic forays, they refuse to allow the utopian tendency to be overshadowed by its anti-utopian nemesis. They therefore adopt a militant stance that is informed and empowered by a utopian horizon that appears in the text – or at least shimmers just beyond its pages.[44]

Miéville's dialogue with fantasy fiction leads him to juxtapose two imperfect twin versions of London and to have them stare into each other's eyes in a way that does not clearly foreground where utopia and dystopia respectively reside. The stylistic and linguistic disruption of portal-quest fantasy, furthermore, allows Miéville to enact a didactic strategy that has readers follow Deeba's progress and imbibe her discoveries as their own; these discoveries are not treated as revelations, but rather as tools to conceive a discursive approach capable of interpreting reality.

It is my contention that the programmatic hybridity brought into being through the mutual contamination of utopia/dystopia and quest fantasy gives rise to an innovative experiment that might be described as '*un*-topia'. UnLondon is an elusive reality that resists panoptic perception, because here new details reveal themselves at every glance and shapes continuously shift. Even the Propheseers are to change their name and become 'Suggesters', thus indicating that fixedness of meaning is unattainable – and ultimately undesirable. Existing between utopia and dystopia, the prismatic multiplicity of the abcity holds an immense potential for deconstruction.

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[42] T. MOYLAN, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, p. 189.
[43] *Ibidem*.
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