

## Eastern Imaginaries

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### ABSTRACT

Orientalist tropes shaped Western ideas about the East in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries through travelogues and fiction, and have persisted into the twenty-first. One central set -piece of these stereotypes is the imaginary Eastern European country, “Ruritania.” The advantages and drawbacks of such an imagined place are explored more thoroughly through two recent pieces of pop culture, Wes Anderson’s film “The Grand Budapest Hotel”, and China Miéville’s novel *The City and the City*. While Anderson’s film entertains and sustains Orientalist stereotypes, Miéville’s novel demands the reader go deeper to empathize with characters and grapple with key issues about collective identity, power, corruption and violence.

**Keywords:** Wes Anderson, China Miéville, World War Two, Stefan Zweig, Bruno Schulz, Identity, Kitsch, Ruritania, Holocaust, Orientalism

Popular culture artifacts often reveal the “terrain” of social and political conflict (Mukerji and Schudson 1). In the West, fantasies about the mysterious, dangerous, inscrutable world of the East have played a central politico-cultural role since the nineteenth century. Travelogues, novels, operas and other works have perpetuated a particular understanding of the East that underlines Western rationality, civilization and power, and such ideas have persisted into the twenty-first century, articulated in film, fiction and by the mass media. It seems that when conflict arises in a part of the world coded Eastern, this Orientalist Western view gains a new voice and audience. Its most recent iteration is media coverage of the rhetorical and physical violence that broke out in Ukraine in 2014. Ukrainians accused each other of being fascists or stooges of oppressive Russian power, replaying conflicts from the 1930s and 1940s (Snyder). It was difficult for U.S. Americans to understand why World War II seemed so unresolved in that part of Europe. While coverage has generally been more sympathetic and contextual than that during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, when Western media all too often talked about “age-old ethnic hatreds” as the cause of genocidal violence (Wachtel 14; Glennly xxi), the popular view of the East as a confusing, nonsensical place peopled with irrational hotheads persists.

A central set piece of these stereotypes is the imaginary Eastern European country. Such countries resulted from Westerners’ ignorance of Eastern realities, given license by those lands’ alleged illegibility and irrationality. Because Westerners perceived on-the-ground conditions as impossible to understand, making up details about the region was a solution for easy “comprehension” through Orientalist codes.

Edward Said’s pioneering *Orientalism* of the late 1970s argued that Western imperial powers looked at the East through distorting, self-interested lenses. The nineteenth-century study and scrutiny of colonial holdings, an exercise in knowledge acquisition and domination, was not a project solely of the Western powers vis-à-vis their imperial lands. This core-periphery dynamic was also at play within Europe itself.<sup>1</sup> German-speakers looked at Slavs and Magyars as lesser peoples, and the West generally viewed Eastern Europe as “irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus the [Western] European [was] rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (Said 40). The violence of World War I, as well as its outbreak in the Balkans, plus the rise of authoritarian regimes and the final catastrophe of the Holocaust seem to give credence to these ideas. After World War II, communism appeared to anchor Eastern Europe in a quagmire of oppression, ignorance and backwardness anew. These projections and stereotypes have persisted past the Cold War era, which itself presented one of the most striking displays of Orientalist thought (Wolff 3), and have only been bolstered in the Western imagination since 9/11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Two recent popular culture artifacts which work with ideas about Eastern Europe by creating imaginary locations, Wes Anderson’s acclaimed film, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), and China Miéville’s novel, *The City and the City* (2009), display the pitfalls and promises popular culture can offer the student of the region. Are these imaginary locations just more “ambiguity about the definition of Eastern Europe,” a place which “is still so often defined in terms of pathology as much as geography” (Zahra 786)? While both artifacts were inspired by the works of Central European Jewish writers of first half of twentieth century and explore the powerful and all too often destructive nature of nationalism, only Miéville’s does so in a three-dimensional way that can actually illuminate human motivations and fears. Anderson’s alluring film features a dazzling array of actors, from F. Murray Abraham and Ralph Fiennes as the leads, to Bill Murray, Jude Law, Tilda Swinton and Jeff Goldblum as supporting cast. What the viewer actually finds in the film is a disappointment, however. Yes, Anderson’s world is fully imagined, but he fails to grasp the magnitude and gravity of the events and decisions facing Eastern Europeans in the late 1930s and 1940s. Choosing to set his film in “Zubrowka,” Anderson simply recasts old Western stereotypes of fear and longing onto Eastern Europe. Miéville’s novel, on the other hand, imagines cities of uncertain location but whose features clearly conjure the history of and current challenges facing East Central Europe, inviting readers to think more deeply about the region’s past and future by exploring questions of collective identity, the origins of conflict, and the possibility of

transcending it. Miéville's imagined world evokes historic and current conflicts in a suggestive, open-ended fashion, inviting the reader to be a participant in understanding.

### **Imagining Eastern Europe**

The "family of ideas" (Said 41) propagated by the Orientalist mindset dates back to the Enlightenment of the late 1700s. Larry Wolff's brilliant study explores how Enlightenment travelers and thinkers created the image of Eastern Europe—: backward, undeveloped, barbaric, in relation to the civilized, enlightened West. The idea of Eastern Europe as a foil to Western European enlightenment and progress was "produced as a work of cultural creation, of intellectual artifice, of ideological self-interest and self-promotion" (Wolff 4). Ideas about the lack of freedom of Eastern peoples, their sexual violence and promiscuity, their superstition and ignorance all clearly reflect back on an enlightened bourgeois agenda. Not only did these ideas serve to bolster Western confidence, they also forwarded a real project of extending Western power. Making Eastern Europe more "legible" by flattening out details and creating broad categories, the West enhanced its ability to extract labor and resources (Scott 25).

Travelers were essential to this constructive work of defining spaces culturally. As they wrote letters and essays about what they saw and encountered in the East, Western travelers participated in constructing the image through the Orientalist lenses they were unwittingly wearing. Often, travelogues attempted to sort out or "unscramble" the populations living in the East into clean, distinct ethnic categories (Wolff 286). Since "so many little wild peoples" settled the region and anthropological and archaeological data was scarce, writers often telescoped time between that of the area's original settlement and their own period, creating a perpetual primitivism (Wolff 305). In the late 1800s, at the height of European imperialism, travel books created "domestic subjects" to engage metropolitan reading publics with expansionist enterprises. Writing, then, helped to produce "the rest of the world" (Pratt 5).

Popular fiction strengthened the trope of the dangerous, barbaric East by the authors' blending of geographic, historical and imagined details. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) begins as a travel narrative with Jonathan Harker's diary excerpts in which he records his journey to Dracula's castle in Transylvania. The pedantic Harker, after assuring the reader of his knowledge of the region, notes that "Buda-Pesth" serves as a gateway to the East, and then lists the regions that make up East Central Europe as well as "unscrambling" their inhabitants by ethnic or national group (Stoker 9). He complains that when he arrived in the country, "we seemed to dawdle" through it, and the peasants are "very picturesque," even though the Slovaks are "more barbarian than the rest," wearing cowboy hats and wide leather belts studded with brass nails. Harker's sense of the slow passage of time (and therefore, of his movement through space) betrays his Western perspective about the ancient, backward East, unchanging and eternal, as well as the inhabitants' lackadaisical ways. Upon nearing the castle, he is surrounded by a crowd of people all making the sign of the cross and pointing two fingers at him, which one man reluctantly explains is a charm against the evil eye. While this detail works as foreshadowing, it also portrays the locals as superstitious, ignorant people (14). His host Dracula welcomes him with the observation, "We are in Transylvania, and Transylvania is not England. Our ways are not your ways, and there shall be to you many strange things" (27). This statement underlines Dracula's dangerousness. He is a threat from the East—, a powerful, well educated creature who possesses an uncertain but dangerous heritage; he is not easily legible. The vampire recounts his lineage in a long monologue: "We Szekelys," he boasts, "when the Magyar, the Lombard, the Avar, the Bulgar, or the Turk poured his thousands on our frontiers, we drove them back" (33). Dracula, too, telescopes time between the conquest of the region and his own present; as he is a vampire, perhaps they are one and the same. Passages like these fall back on "a Western tradition of seeing unrest in Eastern Europe primarily in terms of racial strife" (Arata 628). Dracula himself has a hybrid racial identity of Székely and vampire, two lineages that cannot be unscrambled.

Imaginary people and places that were nonetheless coded "Eastern" were a favorite among British

authors of popular fiction. Like imperial adventure stories, these mysteries and stories of mistaken identity paint “the Other” as backward, particularly in the political realm. Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes story “A Scandal in Bohemia” (1891) echoes many of the clichés and concerns expressed by Stoker. Doyle’s story indulges the Western tendency to blend fact and fiction regarding the East, contributing to the idea of Eastern illegibility. The story revolves around Holmes’ introduction to the scion of the imaginary House of Ormstein, the hereditary kings of Bohemia. When Holmes first meets the aristocrat, Sigismund von Ormstein is dressed richly, “akin to bad taste” with a cape lined by “flame-colored silk,” a “brooch of flaming beryl,” and riding boots halfway up his calves, which were trimmed at the tops with fur. Ormstein embodies, in short, “barbaric opulence” (Conan Doyle 244). The case which the King wants Holmes to resolve is one of sexual impropriety that could bring earthshaking scandal to Europe.

A similar story unfolds in *The Prisoner of Zenda*, first published in 1894 by Anthony Hope. Readers may be more familiar with the 1937 screen adaptation starring Ronald Colman, Madeleine Carroll and Douglas Fairbanks Jr. It revolves around competition and plotting for the throne of a fictional Eastern European country, Ruritania. This idea of an imaginary Eastern kingdom—these stories are populated by aristocrats and monarchs, never republicans and liberals, since freedom has not arrived yet—is so pervasive in the West that an entire genre of adventure stories known as “Ruritanian romances” exists, and the term “Ruritania” is used in academia to refer to a hypothetical country.<sup>2</sup> The Ruritanian trope—a collection of stereotypical characteristics applied without any regard for the actual because of its allegedly nonsensical irrationality—is by its nature a hegemonic construct.

### **World War II and the Holocaust in the Orientalist Imagination**

The fraught 1930s and 1940s continue to fascinate audiences, as the ongoing flood of fiction, film and other forms of popular culture addressing Nazism, World War II and the Holocaust illustrates. It is important for this devastating historical material to reach a broad audience and its events to be addressed in a myriad of ways. The primary purpose of popular culture is entertainment, but it can, as above, also illuminate contemporary cultural values and mentalities. Popular culture also makes claims to artistic status at times, and sometimes achieves it. When pop culture treats the interwar and war periods, the collision of entertainment and historical accuracy can often be disturbing, for example, in the 1997 film *Life is Beautiful*. As Ruth Kluger recently observed, “the arts . . . promise pleasure” (392-393) and taking on serious, morally complex and disturbing topics like World War II and the Holocaust sets up a possible dynamic of conflict. Can horrific historical content still sit comfortably with pleasing or beautiful aesthetics? In short, should we enjoy reading about death camps and gas chambers? For American consumers of popular culture, the mainstream triumphalist understanding of World War II and the Holocaust particularly lend themselves to a kitschy, that is, historically ungrounded or inaccurate, aesthetics. Kluger asserts that art, whether literature or film, “can both enlighten and obfuscate, but if the subject is the Holocaust, it cannot be judged apart from history” (400). If historical truth is not present or if the author relies on well-worn stereotypes, the film “denotes contempt vis-à-vis the very horror for which the author professes his or her humanitarian concern” (403). Unfortunately, Anderson’s Golden Globe best picture winner is guilty of exactly that.

*The Grand Budapest Hotel* creates an entire world, one that reproduces a Mitteleuropean style and atmosphere through Anderson’s customary highly stylized, lovingly detailed production values. The film is set in the late 1930s as his fictional country Zubrowka, “on the farthest Eastern boundary of Europe” faces occupation by hostile German forces and war. The hotel itself, one of the finest in Europe, is situated in the town of Lutz in the Alps. The film combines the genres of “war films, prison break movies, and screwball comedies” (Gross) to produce a kitschy, campy Orientalist result.

The film follows its protagonist, Gustave H., the concierge of the hotel, played by Fiennes, as he trains a new lobby boy, Zero, and seduces elderly ladies passing through the hotel as guests. When one of them

with whom he has conducted an affair for many years, Madame D. (played by Tilda Swinton), dies under suspicious circumstances, Gustave and Zero attend the visitation and reading of the will at her castle. There, the possibility of the existence of a second will is aired and her children are outraged. They are also incensed because she has bequeathed a valuable painting, “Boy with Apple,” to Gustave. Because he knows the heirs hate him, Gustave steals the painting and secures Zero’s aid in hiding it. Gustave is framed for Madame D.’s murder, arrested and thrown into prison. He meets a gang of motley prisoners, plies them with pastries and breaks out of prison. Thereafter he and Zero are rescued by his colleagues from the Brotherhood of the Crossed Keys. Meanwhile, Dmitri, Madame D.’s fascist son, played by Adrien Brody, is searching for the second will. Gustave and Zero make their way back to the hotel, rescue the painting, engage in a shooting match with Dmitri, find the second will and after much struggle, secure “Boy with Apple.”

In an interview with Terry Gross, host of National Public Radio’s *Fresh Air* program, Anderson explained that his choice to create an imaginary country was grounded in the desire to reinvigorate over-familiar World War II material. He claimed, “this series of events in Europe are somehow still right in the middle of our lives . . . we feel the impact in a daily way somehow” (Gross). In order to create the world of Zubrowka in the late 1930s and 1960s, he and his creative team traveled throughout Europe. They made a Ruritanian “pastiche of the greatest hits of Eastern Europe,” casting people they met in Budapest, Prague, Berlin and Poland. The fictional city Lutz was modeled on Budapest, Prague and Vienna. The team found a department store in Görlitz in Saxony, very close to the border with Poland and twenty minutes from the Czech Republic, which they transformed into the hotel itself. The Alpine backgrounds were inspired by Caspar David Friedrich’s paintings, especially his majestic landscapes (Gross). This rich imagination created a visually stunning, complex, entertaining film.

The sets and miniatures do strongly evoke aspects of the German-speaking former Habsburg world. For instance, at Madame D.’s castle, the grand foyer’s rug is adorned with crowns and an eagle. The large marble staircase, encased in dark, carved wood paneling on which coats of arms and antler wreaths hang, could be anywhere in Central Europe. The reading of the will seems to take place in a hunting lodge or the gentlemen’s salon, where there are more mounted heads as well as preposterous stacks of rifles. When Gustave is arrested, he is sent to a “criminal internment camp” whose enormous metal gate reads “Check-point 19,” evoking a gulag. When Gustave steals “Boy with Apple,” he and Zero replace it with a very Egon Schiele-like painting of two women pleasuring each other. While some details do ring with authenticity, many others simply evoke tired clichés and prejudices, such as Gustave’s insistence on wearing his favorite perfume, which is included in several scenes.

Anderson was inspired by the Austrian-Jewish writer Stefan Zweig’s work, and some parallels stand out immediately. Zweig was a cosmopolitan figure known for his popular short stories, essays, and novels of the early twentieth century. The film’s narrator is probably meant to be Zweig, but Zweig’s style shows up more strongly in the character of Gustave H. Gustave’s elegant, formal speech and diction, refined artistic taste (Gustave is an aficionado and writer of Romantic poetry), and sense of despair about the decline in taste and comportment echo Zweig’s *World of Yesterday* (1942). As Gustave’s protégé Zero later observes, “To be frank, I think his world had vanished before he ever entered into it. But I will say, he certainly sustained the illusion with a marvelous grace.” The setting at the hotel, with its moneyed, cosmopolitan clientele, could also be inspired by the fact that Zweig elected to live in Salzburg upon his return from traveling in Russia in the 1920s and 1930s. He and his wife enjoyed offering hospitality as a hotel does to a huge “variety of visitors” while living there (Zweig 347). So while Zweig’s writing and life may have inspired some details and the general diction of the film, Anderson has failed to really understand his source material, particularly in terms of tone. For example, Anderson chooses to punctuate Gustave’s dialogue with unexpected obscenities, sprinkled in for laughs. This is a kind of vulgarity Zweig would likely not have embraced. More serious are the facts of Zweig’s

despair and ultimate suicide. He described in horrified, outraged detail the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914, the heated nationalism of the time and, tragically, the arrival of German National Socialists in Austria and the anti-Semitic violence they encouraged there in the 1930s. To make slapstick comedy from this material misses the mark; making a joke out of Gustave H's fussy, particular taste, love of poetry and elegant diction seems to mock Zweig as well.

Comedic moments generally overwhelm and undermine the film's serious content, primarily through comic-book violence and two-dimensional morality. When Gustave is taken away to prison on murder charges, Zero next sees him with two badly blackened eyes. Given the gulag-like setting, Anderson's reversal, to make those black eyes the result of a prison fight for dominance won by Gustave, who declares you cannot let people think "you're a candy-ass," both relieves the tension and trivializes the violence. Another scene, when Zero and Gustave are interrogated and beaten on a train, has a similar choreographed, comic-book violence about it. An important point about fascism—its contempt for the law—is raised in a scene between Dmitri, Deputy Kovacs and Dmitri's enforcer Jopling. Dmitri wants Kovacs to disregard the possibility of a second, more recent will. Kovacs sternly replies, "I'm an attorney . . . I'm obligated to proceed according to the rule of law." Dmitri angrily gestures to Jopling, who throws Kovacs' cat out the window. This is all filmed in a comic fashion. Perhaps one could accept and enjoy the film simply as comic entertainment had Anderson not evoked Zweig's memoir. In addition, given Anderson's claim that such films as *The Sorrow and the Pity* and *Shoah* "triggered something" in him and "made [him] want to enter into this area" (Gross), his films seems all the more kitschy and immature. In addition to the comic-book violence, the film's morality is also immaturely straightforward and black-and-white, as far from Central European reality during the twentieth century as possible. It is crystal clear who the villains are; they wear black, literally. As the leader of the "Zig Zag Division" modeled on the SS, Dmitri wears long, sabot-like black gowns, a pointed mustache and towering wavy black hair. He is homophobic as well. Jopling, played by Willem Dafoe, is an even more two-dimensional caricature with his death's head rings (or brass knuckles) on all ten fingers, his black leather jacket, sunken cheeks and fangs.

As with costume and set design, Anderson and his team enjoyed playing with names of people and places: a sign in front of a gas station reads "Fuelitz"; one of the local mountains is called Gabelmeister's Peak; the local paper is called the Trans-Alpine Yodel; a famous spa Nebelsbad; and the surrounding forest, the Sudetenwald. Because of these careful appropriations and word play, cognoscenti will enjoy the loving attention to detail, but the pleasure of Anderson's film is only skin deep.

While *The Grand Budapest Hotel* prettifies and trivializes the region's history, Miéville's novel, also set in an imaginary location, invites the reader to think more deeply and empathize with its characters. The novel is a noir-style police procedural. It opens with the discovery of an unidentified young woman's body. While they try to identify the body, Inspector Tyador Borlú and his assistant Lizbyet Corwi learn it was taken to the drop site by a van. Once the body is identified as Mahalia Geary, an American doctoral student studying archaeology, her parents claim her dissertation topic may have led to her death. She had antagonized many scholars at conferences by asking impolitic questions and making unpleasant claims. As Borlú tracks her killer, tracing her connection to other foreigners, extremist groups, historians and politicians, he raises vexing questions about the past and how it is remembered, exposes political corruption and the existence of terrorist cells and ultimately identifies a villain who violates the most basic codes and taboos of the fictional world in which he lives.

The novel is set in two city-states, Beszel and Ul Qoma, which share identical geography. "Grosstopically" then, they are the same location (Miéville 66). Yet within the territory on which the cities are situated, two separate metropolises exist. They exist in a state of permanent tension and distinction deeply imbued in their citizens' minds. The two-in-one territory requires that each city's population fails to perceive the other. They are deeply committed to the differences between the cities and one can see this refusal to perceive as a deep

kind of respect for sovereignty or as the abrogation of civic decency and responsibility. Inhabitants “unsee” features of the other city: its roads, buildings, people, even plants. When Borlú leaves work, he describes his route.

As I turned, I saw past the edges of the estate to the end of GunterStrász, between the dirty brick buildings. Trash moved in the wind. It might be anywhere. An elderly woman was walking slowly away from me in a shambling sway. She turned her head and looked at me. I was struck by her motion, and I met her eyes. I wondered if she wanted to tell me something. In my glance I took in her clothes, her way of walking, of holding herself, and looking.

With a hard start, I realized that she was not on GunterStrász at all, and that I should not have seen her.

She was in Ul Qoma; Borlú was in Beszel (12).

Like Anderson’s film, Miéville’s novel was also inspired by the interwar writing of a Central European Jew. Bruno Schulz’s 1934 short story collection, *The Street of Crocodiles*, chronicles his family’s life in a Galician town, inhabited by Poles, Ukrainians and Jews, that is undergoing slow but visible change. The respectable areas seem to lie in gloom and decay, which relates to Schulz’s own family of textile merchants and the decline of their business brought on by the early twentieth-century oil boom. In the titular story, a sense of mystery, illusion and even deceit linger in the town. “There open up, so to speak, double streets, doppelganger streets, mendacious and delusive streets” (49). The narrator continues, “One’s imagination, bewitched and misled, creates illusory maps of the apparently familiar districts, maps in which streets have their proper places and usual names but are provided with new and fictitious configurations by the inexhaustible inventiveness of the night” (49). Miéville’s cities emphasize the illusory and constructed nature of identity and that apparently evident truths may in fact obscure the true nature of things. As a boy, Schulz’s narrator was obsessed with a wall map his father kept in a desk drawer.

On that map, . . . the area of the Street of Crocodiles shone with the empty whiteness that usually marks polar regions or unexplored countries of which almost nothing is known. The lines of only a few streets were marked in black and their names given in simple, unadorned lettering, different from the noble script of other captions. The cartographer must have been loath to include that district in the city and his reservations found expression in the typographical treatment. (58)

The blank spot on the map, a classic image of European exploration of Africa, conjures associations with imperial power and the backwardness of the town. Maps represent not only physical space, but also, often, its contestation by different demographic groups. Perhaps, already in the early 1930s, Schulz already possessed a sense of foreboding about impending ethnic tensions and his own fate. Caught up in a revenge cycle between two Gestapo officers, Schulz was shot while walking through the “Aryan quarter” of his German-occupied hometown Drohobych in 1942.

Miéville’s cities, corrupt, decaying and mysterious, and full of the foreboding of Schulz’s work, possess a myriad of potential internal frontiers, “where crossing from one side to the other means switching the sovereign political authority under which one lives” (Bartov and Weitz 1). The cities control this process very tightly by creating only one legal method to perform such a crossing, through Copula Hall. Any other crossing constitutes Breach—the transgression of territorial and social boundaries, the cities’ deepest and most terrifying taboo. The two cities depend on their utter discreteness and their citizens’ ability to live in this kind of fiction. Children have to learn early to “unsee” the other city; in places of crosshatching, where the cities interact in a Swiss cheese-like fashion, “Ul Qoman children and Besz children clamber past each

other [on the same tree], each obeying their parents' whispered strictures to unsee the other" (195). Both cities' inhabitants live under intense psychological pressure to deny the reality their senses take in, much as inhabitants of Soviet Communist or other totalitarian states did.

While Miéville is reluctant for readers to "identify" where Beszel/Ul Qoma is located, the cities strongly evoke Central Europe, although this is by no means definitive: some may see parallels to the Middle East. In an interview, Miéville cautions readers that his novel is not allegorical. He suggests the cities are a metaphor; unlike Anderson's film, the reader's task is not to simply decode (320-21). Miéville's invented languages, Besz and Illitan, nonetheless echo many patterns of Central European spelling and names, for example GunterStrász and KüinigStrász in Beszel, as well as its Venceslas Square (9, 65, 44). One can fly direct from Beszel to Budapest, Skopje, and Athens, and Bucharest and Turkey are also close by (72, 31).

The air of paranoia that pervades both cities, as well as Borlú's somewhat hard-boiled affect, contribute to the noir atmosphere. The fact that there is a mysterious entity—Breach—that polices the borders between the cities deepens the sense of diffused Foucauldian power, and Breach is a kind of bogeyman possessed of "powers . . . almost impossible . . . to make out" (66). Here, morality is much more ambiguous than in Anderson's film; the villains are revealed only at the end. One of them is simply a corrupt, greedy politician, while the other, his puppet master, truly has destructive designs.

The political landscape of the city-states features collective identity as a key issue. Both sides are troubled by ultranationalists and unificationists, those who wish the two cities to become one. When talking about the Dissident Units on the police force, Corwi explains that their focus is "all Nazis and reds and unifs and so on" (39). Both Beszel and Ul Qoma have extremist groups willing to use violence to forward their programs: Borlú is sent a mail bomb, and Mahalia Geary faced several death threats for investigating the cities' shared past and origin myths. Because there is no physical frontier demarcating them, the cities' overlapping geographies heighten typical nationalist fears of internal fifth columns; the borderland, so to speak, is inscribed in every minute detail of daily life for the cities' inhabitants, and their own instincts and reflexes can betray them and their cities in turn. It takes great effort to uphold the artificiality of the cities' discreteness.

The languages spoken in the two cities are the anchors for their different national identities and went through the kind of engineering most Eastern European languages did during the nineteenth century. Nationalists "forced linguistic differences to stand for a host of alleged qualitative differences" because the cultures were actually very similar (Judson 20-21). Borlú comments on the cities' languages, Besz and Illitan:

If you do not know much about them, Illitan and Besz sound very different. They are written, of course, in distinct alphabets. Besz is in Besz: thirty-four letters, left to right, all sounds rendered clear and phonetic, consonants, vowels and demivowels decorated with diacritics—it looks, one often hears, like Cyrillic (though that is a comparison likely to annoy a citizen of Besz, true or not). Illitan uses Roman script. That is recent. . . . Read the travelogues of the last-but-one century and those older, and the strange and beautiful right-to-left Illitan calligraphy—and its jarring phonetics—is constantly remarked on. . . . The script was lost in 1923, overnight, a culmination of Ya Ilsa's reforms: it was Atatürk who imitated him, not, as is usually claimed, the other way around. (41)

But language is perhaps only a surface detail: Borlú continues that

these distinctions are not as deep as they appear. Despite careful cultural differentiation, in the shape of their grammars and the relations of their phonemes (if not the base sounds themselves), the languages are closely related—they share a common ancestor, after all. It feels almost seditious to say so. Still. (41)



The cities share an unknown origin. Mahalia Geary's archaeological research at the Bol Ye'an dig in Ul Qoma makes nationalists defensive because it challenges their origin myths. The "uncertainties of history" have been transformed into "readable spaces" (Silberman, Till and Ward 4) by ironing out nuance and uncertainty with totalizing categories. Borlú muses,

It may or may not be Beszel, that we built, back then, while others may have been building Ul Qoma on the same bones. Perhaps there was one thing back then that later schismed on the ruins, or perhaps our ancestral Beszel had not yet met and standoffishly entwined with its neighbor. (42)

The importance of history for shaping identity for both those in Besz and in Ul Qoma is all too present for Borlú. His awareness of the historical revisionism at work in both cities only deepens his pessimism about their futures.

That beginning [of the two cities] was a shadow in history, an unknown—records effaced and vanished for a century either side. Anything could have happened. From that historically brief quite opaque moment came the chaos of our material history, an anarchy of chronology, of mismatched remnants and delighted and horrified investigators. (50)

It is clear that the cities' official arrangement is meant to manage some kind of problem, and the "solution" mirrors that which was common in postwar peace treaties of the twentieth century. Where once diversity and plurality existed, strict segregation was put in place, in Beszel and Ul Qoma's cases, more a "wall in the head" than a border fence; the distinction is enforced every moment by how people "act, dress, or move" (Silberman, Till and Ward 1-2). Both cities at one point worked together at least tacitly to develop the system. Both adhere to it, accept it, although they also need the supervisory power of Breach to enforce the distinction between them. Like Havel's greengrocer, everyone is complicit—all participate in perpetuating the system (Havel 132).

Rather than reifying them, Miéville directly engages the stereotypes and prejudices the West projects onto the East. When Mahalia Geary's parents arrive, clueless and disbelieving not only about their daughter's death but also about the nature of the city where she lived, they have an encounter with James Thacker at the U.S. embassy in which Miéville directly addresses those prejudices and seeks to debunk them. The Gearys want to know why they can't simply go to Ul Qoma immediately, lacking an understanding of the strict diplomatic and security protocols that exist between the cities. As recounted by Borlú, Thacker says,

'Inspector Borlú, I'll be happy to explain this.' He hesitated. He wanted me to go. Any explanation carried out in my presence would have to be moderately polite: alone with other Americans he could stress to them how ridiculous and difficult these critics were, how sorry he and his colleagues were for the added complications of a crime occurring in Beszel, and so on. He could insinuate. It was an embarrassment, an antagonism. (78-79)

Thacker, an agent of the imperial metropole, has adjusted to the unusual local conditions, but he still sees them as unnecessary, irrational, and indicative of their inhabitants' basic otherness. Miéville also addresses the instrumentalization of developing countries during and after the Cold War when the inspectors Dhatt (from Ul Qoma) and Borlú compare each city's socio-economic development. Borlú observes, "Washington loves us, and all we've got to show for it is Coke" (194). Dhatt thinks that the cities are pawns of international power plays, and Ul Qoma's apparent wealth compared to Beszel's is but a temporary condition. "All this is old Cold War bullshit. Who gives a fuck who the Americans want to play with, anyway?" (194). The backwardness

of Beszel in particular reflects Schulz's sense of his town being left behind by the forces of history, neglected to molder into meaninglessness.

Miéville's novel ends much more ambiguously than Anderson's film, with Borlú becoming deracinated in a fashion, as he becomes Breach, the all-powerful authority that enforces the separation of the two cities. What this suggests is unclear—perhaps that national difference and hatred can be transcended? Or perhaps clandestine, authoritarian powers are pulling nationalist strings to serve their own interests, an interpretation presently circulating in East Central Europe? The novel lends itself to myriad interpretations, both historical and contemporary through its fully imagined world, its serious investigation of questions of national identity, borders, political violence and power.

Imaginary places in Eastern Europe have a long history as orientalist tropes. The alleged illegibility, backwardness and barbarity of Eastern lands tempted Westerners to “unscramble” them as well as dominate them. Depicting the East bereft of its full historical context is to be guilty of creating kitschy art, something that may be aesthetically pleasing yet historically inaccurate and therefore, irresponsible. Not only does Anderson's film miss the mark in those terms; it also reifies national identity by perpetuating stereotypes through his exaggerated characters. Miéville's novel avoids this trap through its fully imagined world and its serious investigation of questions of national identity, borders, political violence and power. Miéville seems to suggest that we need to remember how artificial collective identity is and that we can alter it. That hopeful vision has me thinking about it yet again as events in Ukraine and East Central Europe unfold.

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## ENDNOTES

[1] My thanks to Alexander Vari and the journal's anonymous readers for their helpful suggestions on this piece. See Berman, Kontje, and Marchand. See Nina Berman, *Orientalismus, Kolonialismus und Moderne: Zum Bild des Orients in der deutschsprachigen Kultur um 1900* (Stuttgart: Verlag J.B. Metzler, 1997); Todd Kontje, *German Orientalisms* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2004); Suzanne Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[2] See Goldsworthy.

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