Crossing Borders: International Collaboration and Cooperation in Research

The Possibilities and Pitfalls of Inter-Urban Cross-Border Government on China Miéville's *The City and the City*

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Abstract: This article focuses on China Miéville's *The City and the City*, working towards an in-depth analysis of the role of 'Copula Hall', a fictional municipal government that administrates the concerns of two theoretically independent city-states, in the context of cross-border governance. Having considered the mutually constituting roles of the city, this paper will then examine how Copula Hall is used to create order out of municipal chaos. This article draws from literary analysis, and a number of spatial theorists to address current questions about the feasibility of managing interest groups in our increasingly diverse, and occasionally confrontational, modern cities.

Keywords: Henri Lefebvre, Spatial Theory, Segregation, Urbanism, Divided Cities, Urban Borders, China Miéville

1 Introduction

When Inspector Tyador Borlú of the Besź Extreme Squad arrives at a murder scene in Pocost 'Village', Besźel, the drab, poverty-stricken urban environment is neither cheery, nor particularly unfamiliar. An inattentive reader might barely notice the difference between China Miéville's *The City and the City* and the vast majority of derivative detective fiction. That is, until the Inspector notices an old woman walking by, at the very edge of that "depressed zone"; "With a hard start, I realised that she was not on Gunter-Strasź at all, and that I should not have seen her" (Miéville, 2011 pp. 3-14). It is a terribly unusual circumstance for a police officer to intentionally *unobserve* a passerby at a crime scene. As becomes clear, the conceit at the heart of Miéville's world is both utterly absurd and shockingly believable. Besźel does not exist in isolation, or even as a 'stand-alone' state; rather, it borders, abuts, and even crosses over its neighbour, the "Grosstopically" close (to use the jargon of the novel) fellow city-state of Ul Qoma. For the denizens of the city-states, simply ignoring one-another is not enough – the only way that these surreal borders can be lived is through a complex process of social dissociation known as "unseeing", in which those successfully performing citizenship in Miéville's world do not only identify with their own city, but train themselves to unsee, unhear, and even 'unsmell' conflicting sensory inputs from across the border. Considering that across the cities, neighbouring dwellings or even flats may be ensconced in completely different legal frameworks, social organisations, or theoretically mutually exclusive cultures, this process of marked identification and exclusion is, essentially, the only way to maintain the absurd house-by-house borders of the novel (Miéville, 2011 pp. 29-30). Those who fail to unsee are spirited away by the mysterious 'Breach', a border guard organisation without just one border to police, but rather two – the physical, literal border, and the psychological periphery (Miéville, 2011 pp. 53-65, pp. 79-81). To add further complexity to this already abstract system of border-policing and policing-borders it becomes clear that the murder of Mahalia Geary, the young PhD student whose death Borlú is investigating, was actually committed in Ul Qoma, with her body spirited across the frontier into Besźel (Miéville, 2011 pp. 66-68). If the cities were segregated before this murder, then the cross-border investigation,

detection, and detention necessitated by such a crime will be rather difficult to establish.

The reasons for this bizarre intra-urban divide are myriad. Both cities claim to have completely separate languages (even if they *are* the same language at the root), cultures, architectural styles, governmental systems, and even economies, though in each case there are rather more similarities than differences, and certainly with the governance of Copula Hall (Miéville, 2011 pp. 50-51). As David R. Watson points out very amusingly, the case might be better put as that the denizens of the cities "believe they are living in different realities", as "ideological groups assign causal properties to conceptual abstractions such as *culture, language, society,* and the like" (Watson, 2021 p. 134). Unfortunately, these differences and similarities are by-and-large outside of the scope of this paper. What is key is that the two cities are, throughout the novel, held by the majority of characters, either Nationalist "Nats", or "Liberals" like Borlú, to be *inherently* separate and independent (Miéville, 2011 pp. 71-87).

Those who challenge this absurdity, the Unifs, are a sidelined minority, desperate to unify the cities into one coherent political bloc, even if: "In typical political cliché, unificationists were split on many axes" (Miéville, 2011 p. 52). In a novel replete with grand ironies, this is simply one of many. Critics such as Carl Freedman have broadly focused on these divisions in the novel in the context of Combined and Uneven Development; in other words, the idea that the cities are divided more by the interests of capital, than they are by any 'inherent' cultural values or differences (Freedman, 2013 pp. 25-29). Another useful approach in thinking these cities, might be that of the Spatial Theorist Leonie Sandercock. Sandercock argues that our present economic "Age of Migration", has led to incredibly diverse global urban conurbations, unsettling traditional socio-economic orders in these "World Cities" (in Doreen Massey's parlance), and requiring modern urban planners to act as "spatial police", delineating and regularising division, in our case, with the assistance of the cohering influence of Copula Hall (Massey, 2007 pp. 27-54; Sandercock, 1998 pp. 164-166). In other words, these cities of the modern world come to appear as collections of cities-within-cities, communities divided by other communities, each unable to identify themselves with a broader urban framework, frequently lacking an administrative centre.

One might think of the divided (and without unified government) cities of Nicosia in Cyprus, or Beirut in Lebanon, now effectively both composed of oppositional ethnic groups, governed by their own armed forces, bureaucracies, and legal frameworks (Davis, 2011 pp. 117-143; Buoli, 2023 pp. 79-92). Essentially, these cities go beyond simply being multi-ethnic, or even composed of individual ghettoes or segregated urban zones; these cities have been split into those without even *theoretically* unitary oversight. Historical class, racial, and political tensions have been literalised into the layout and governance of the streets themselves. In the case of Beirut, this has achieved international infamy as the historical "Green Line" – a border between warring factions literalised and 'naturalised' by plant growth. The legendary father of modern urban theory, Henri Lefebvre, described the development of the economic urban unit as becoming an "urban fabric" which "happily crosses national boundaries: the Megalopolis of Northern Europe extends from the Ruhr to the sea and even to English cities... although not without its local differentiations and extension of the (technical and social) division of labour to the regions, agglomerations, and cities" (Lefebvre, 2000 pp. 70-71). What is key is that despite the multiplicity of overlap between these conurbations, the majority of their citizens still believe in the absolute separation of these districts, the reification of the cities, not unlike our real-world examples (Miéville, 2011 p. 59).

Perhaps the most appropriate position for this article is that advanced by Nadya Ali. Ali argues that the novel is critical in making reified, racialised intra-urban borders visible to the readers – rather ironic considering the focus on '*unseeing*' throughout the text – but an excellent argument in that the novel does indeed problematise and advertise the pitfalls of an uncritical approach to 'natural' borders between ethnic groups (Ali, 2020 pp. 583-585). Furthermore, if Thomas Knowles is right, and the cities of the text stand in for real-world divided cities, such as Nicosia and Beirut, then what can we learn about cross-border governance, mediation, and problem-solving? (Knowles, 2019 p. 205). Though the divide between these cities might seem unbridgeable, one of the many ironies of the text is that not only is cross-border governance possible, but it is *critical* to the successful management, and indeed, administration of the cities, not as two, but as *one coherent* bloc, administered from its

centre (and the principal site of our analysis) Copula Hall. Given that the author of this paper is primarily a literary scholar, this article will focus primarily on a literary analysis of this apparent contradiction. Therefore, we will begin with an analysis of how difference between the cities is constituted, and how, ironically, that only underlines the highly relational nature of this division. We will then examine the practices of mediation and cross-border government which thrive, both despite and because of, the arbitrary divisions maintained between the cities. From Copula Hall, the governmental centre of the twin cities, if nowhere else, we can hope to find at least some lessons on the successful management of the cross-border municipality.

2 Nationalism, Division, and Borders

Aside from Borlú's regular jokes about the Besź politicos who "roared as relentlessly at each other as they ever had", he does claim that "many of the new breed of all parties were working together to put Besźel first" (Miéville, 2011 p. 16). When Borlú travels to Copula Hall (the extra-territorial governmental building which mediates between the cities), he is treated to the sight of this "new breed" of cooperation at the Oversight Committee (Miéville, 2011 pp. 71-87). The far-right politician Yorj Syedr interrupts proceedings, first to cast doubt on the question of whether Mahalia's murder constitutes Breach, and then simply to "slander" his opponents as "cosy[ing] up to enemies" (Miéville, 2011 pp. 71-87). Borlú watches "the new nonpartisan spirit I had read about... The splendours of our democracy" (Miéville, 2011 pp. 71-87). Syedr is opposed by a number of his more liberal compatriots, including the young Social Democrat Mikhel Buric, an ambitious politician, whose political interests apparently stretch from commerce and the arts, to state security (Miéville, 2011 pp. 71-87). This divided house seems to be met with some degree of wry amusement from the Besź' Ul Qoman counterparts, though as Borlú notes, "Doubtless they conducted their own squabbles" (Miéville, 2011 pp. 71-87). The ideological character of the Ul Qoman regime appears to be some form of hybrid regime. Though having sided (implicitly) with the fascists during the Second World War, modern Ul Qoma finds itself under blockade from the United States, apparently having sided with the Soviet Bloc during the Cold War (Miéville, 2011 pp. 71-87). However, this elides a rather more interesting truth.

Ul Qoma's "Silver Renewal" "almost a century before" the events of the book has enshrined the father of the nation, General Ya Ilsa, alongside his "brothers" Atatürk and Tito; though the "cliché was that in older offices there was always a faded patch between these [framed photographs], where erstwhile brother Mao had once beamed" (Miéville, 2011 pp. 193-194). Ul Qoma, directed by the sole leadership of the People's National Party, has thus pivoted politically, with Maoist, or otherwise orthodox Marxist ideology having quite literally "faded" into the background. "President Ul Mak...had announced certainly not a repudiation but a development of the National Road, an end to restrictive thinking" (Miéville, 2011 pp. 193-194). Restrictive thinking, such as vulgarly orthodox Marxism, one assumes. Gone are the "donkey carts", "old bangers", and "ugly little local-made Yadajis" on Ul Qoma's streets, replaced by Renaults, and modern sports cars outstripping their unseeing Besź road-partners, in the "Fast Economy Zone" (Miéville, 2011 pp. 91-93, pp. 155-156, p. 233). Clearly any claim to being a classically socialist state has collapsed in the face of "praise from some in the IMF, whatever Washington's sulk", under this brilliant new "National Road" (Miéville, 2011 p. 171). There is little difference between the Ul Qoman and Besź politicians who Borlú describes as "whoring it for the Yankee dollar" (Miéville, 2011 p. 69). Despite the surface differences between these political cliques, both share interests in economic development, nationalism, and some degree of state welfare. As Borlú's Ul Qoman Police liaison Dhatt puts it, "All this [blockades, Besź-Ul Qoman tensions] is old Cold War bullshit. Who gives a fuck who the Americans want to play with, anyway?" (Miéville, 2011 p. 234). Despite the stylistic differences between the cities, their core concerns are much the same; Besźel may be a more liberal-democratic state than Ul Qoma, but aside from references to governmental coalitions, there is no clear evidence that Besźel *is* in fact a democratic state (Miéville, 2011 pp. 71-72). Ultimately, though there are differences in the political elites of the cities, they are able to cooperate in areas of mutual interest and border maintenance.

The Oversight Committee's prime responsibilities lie in the area of "epochal crisis, civil war or catastrophe", mediating concerns that might either drag the cities into conflict or challenge the veracity of existing borders (Miéville, 2011 pp. 73-74). The role of these politicians, in either city, is to maintain the status quo. There can be no clearer

example of this than in the apparently sympathetic Buric, the moderate Social Democrat interested only in pragmatic solutions to everyday problems, visibly disgusted by the crass ignorance of Syedr (Miéville, 2011 p. 78). It is with no small amount of surprise, then, that at the climax of the novel, the grand mastermind of the plan to murder Mahalia is revealed: none other than Buric himself (Miéville, 2011 pp. 337-341). Buric was smuggling priceless artefacts out of Ul Qoma through Mahalia, bringing tech-company investment into an ailing Besźel (Miéville, 2011 pp. 337-341). What is particularly interesting is Buric's collaboration with the True Citizens, an extremist and supposedly unauthorised Nat grouping; "We're all patriots" (Miéville, 2011 pp. 337-341). This is more true than Buric might realise. "I've spent years running this place", he claims, "I've kept the Unifs in line, I've been getting *business for Besźel*" (Miéville, 2011 pp. 337-341). Though, as Borlú notes, Buric appears to be playing to the sympathies of his paid Nat gunmen, his style of appeal is worth noting. Buric's murder and left-liberal sympathies are justified for the far-right based on crushing the Unifs and drawing in business, which he shares with all parties in both cities. In essence, Buric is no different to any other politician or political interest, simply another empty suit piloted by xenophobic hatred, disguising the real interests of capital. Of course, when his flimsy justifications begin to wane, there is always the immense power of nationalistic lying; "Unifs have one thing right... There's only one city... And *that city is called Besźel*. And you're telling my patriots to obey *you*?" (Miéville, 2011 pp. 337-341). At the end of the day, for all his pretence to forward-thinking liberalism, Buric is no different to Syedr, a bitter, vengeful, nationalist, convinced that Breach "protect[s] Ul Qoma" from the all-powerful Besźel, and that these patriots are as much his, as they are for the far-right Syedr (Miéville, 2011 pp. 337-341).

Ultimately, the political structure of the cities is self-regulating and self-generating; it does not matter where one puts oneself on the political scale, since in the end it is meaningless. All political figures in the novel are fired by contempt of the other, a hatred of Unifs, and a love of money; these three things are all that is necessary to generate the requisite "jingo bravery" to ensure business-as-usual (Miéville, 2011 pp. 337-341). Eventually, even Buric recognises that his strategy has been unsuccessful, that the only way to truly keep this absurd system ticking along is the way that it has always been managed: violence. Following a brief shootout, Buric is dead, one avatar of Breach in

wounded, and the Nats and true criminals (a tech company boss, and head of the novel's convoluted conspiracy) flee successfully (Miéville, 2011 pp. 337-345). Despite the shocking ending to the novel, one of the most notable elements is the 'everydayness' of it; the grand reveal is simply that a Social Democratic politician is just as venal, as xenophobic, and self-interested as anyone else, that ultimately, to become a politician in a self-sustaining political economy is to surrender one's own morals or supposed commitment to social equality. Ultimately, Buric is no different to Syedr, or to the Ul Qomans, or any politician of the cities; to rule is to divide, to generate money, and to use violence when the rule of money is questioned. It is exactly as David Watson notes – it is not that the cities are protected by the surveillance state which envelopes them; rather, it is the surveillance state, the Panopticon, that reifies the cities into existence (Watson, 2021 p. 137). Thus, Buric's grand betrayal might be surprising, but that is not the same as impossible, or unforeseeable. A world of borders is a stable world only as long as the violence which maintains them is supported, a fact easily verifiable by the sad reality of Beirut's intercommunal 'Green Line', a border originally maintained by architecture and ethnicity, certainly, but overwhelmingly, by violence (Möystad, 1998 pp. 421-435). With the end of the Civil War, the paramilitaries that maintained this pseudo-natural border were mostly disarmed, and what had been a literalised, reified border in practice, returned to simply being a busy thoroughfare (Möystad, 1998 pp. 421-435).

It is not only the physical forces of nationalistic division which conspire to keep the Unifs from their idealistic city on the hill, unfortunately. As mentioned, the act of unseeing in the cities is, like the borders and supposed ethno-linguistic differences themselves, a socio-cultural practice of exclusion. For Ivan Stacy, unseeing is not necessarily a practice only of group-identification, but rather also a *willed abolition* of cross-border empathy, an Othering that can only ever restrict Unificationist agitation (Stacy, 2015 pp. 231-232). To be Besź is not to be Ul Qoman, and vice versa. Raphael Zahringer's argument chimes here, arguing that unseeing must be understood as the process of constructing 'Self' and 'Other', and that this is the only 'real' difference between the cities (Zahringer, 2017 pp. 194-195). Such an absurd thought process, self-negating at each stage, is of course easily explained by the absurdity of patriotic discourse. Certainly, Freedman notes that the only way to understand the complete

ridiculousness of the practice of unseeing as a whole is if it is read as a mockery of the ideological processes inherent to nationalism – if there are similarities across borders between peoples, I will simply *not see them* (Freedman, 2013 pp. 18-19). Pors, Otto, and Johnsen have argued that it is not unseeing itself which creates the group identities of the cities, but rather it is the knowledge that it does not work, which creates a shared camaraderie (Otto, 2019 pp. 91-101). For them, it is the shared secret that such a process cannot operate, that the cognitive dissonance is simply too great, that allows the formation of communities and a broader group identity (Otto, 2019 pp. 91-101). Ultimately, it may be that the Unifs are right to some degree; a united city could be created from the psycho-social practices of the cities, but only *in place* of the extant psychological bordering.

As Borlú discusses with an avatar of Breach at the end of the novel; "it's everyone in the cities who does most of the work. It works because you don't blink… No one can admit it doesn't work. So if you don't admit it, it does" (Miéville, 2011 p. 370). It is an entire system predicated, not just on the fear generated by Breach, but by this common social contract, this unwritten, unspeakable, and unseen agreement that for the nation to exist, everyone must pretend to believe in it. It is, as Zahringer notes, an act of self-creation and identification, a community that can only be shared if one is willing to negate all other communities, and even willing to dismiss utopia, all in favour of the very human urge to belong (Zahringer, 2017 p. 244). By way of comparison, one might refer to Sandercock's argument that contemporary globalised cities might be seen as a *patchwork* of communities, as several cities inhabiting the same space, sharing urban government but not necessarily a unifying intra-urban identity (Sandercock, 1998 pp. 164-166). As Lefebvre put it, as the urban fabric spreads across national frontiers, the frontiers themselves (even intra-urban frontiers) become more and more notional (Lefebvre, 2000 pp. 71-74). The *division itself* is more important to the denizens of the cities than the logic of that division, which would require a rather more critical approach. Rather, this process of political-cultural-national division is clearly psychologically easier than acknowledging the rather more complex socio-political reality. Indeed, for critics such as Henry Farrell, there *is* a third city; that of the refugees denied a place in either Besźel or Ul Qoma, forming a separate community, a 'district' against their will

(Farrell, 2011 pp. 62-63). Though an interesting perspective, there are serious flaws in this argument. An excellently formulated response is to be found in Cowley and Hanna's argument that, ironically, it is Breach that not only disproves the idea that there are three cities (they see themselves as neither Besź nor Ul Qoman, only an interstice, *not* a 'real' community), but that the very existence of Breach challenges the idea of any natural separation between Besźel and Ul Qoma (Hanna, 2014 pp. 6-21). In fact, perhaps the greatest irony of the text is that it is those organisations created to maintain the separation of the cities that are the greatest proof of there only being *one* single city.

3 Governance Across the Frontiers

If the governments of both cities can only thrive when supported by overwhelming violence, then a rather natural assumption would be that the two bureaucracies are not only mutually supportive, but *mutually determinant*. Ultimately, the two have more in common than not, and despite their pretensions to total sovereignty, are reliant on the other to justify, define, and live the 'self' of their own conurbation. To put it less abstractly, Besźel is only Besźel if Ul Qoma is its opposite, its antithesis, that with which the Besź can compare themselves. Ironically, however, if this dualism is to be preserved, it can only be done by a mediating power, by the combined efforts of the militancy of Breach, and the administration of Copula Hall. Though we will unfortunately not have time for a rigorous analysis of the role of Breach, we will be able to focus on its civil counterpart, the role of the Hall.

This idea of duality permeates the entire novel, from the focus on the city and the city, to the various organisations and oppositions that determine the political, economic, and social realities of this world. One is always either Ul Qoman or Besź, Nat or Unif, Breach or state government – there is, at least in theory, no potential for mediation, for alternatives to this dualism. The very idea of Miéville's work, in mixing the generic formulae of detective fiction and 'Weird' Science Fiction, is in fact to *upset* this dualism, to challenge the idea of fixed, absolute boundaries in world-building, and to suggest the possibility of difference. As Knowles puts it, Miéville can be seen to be playing with the 'border zones' of genre in order to *subvert extant borders*, to generate new pathways of thinking, or even anticipate socio-economic dialectics that could

provide a different way of living the city (Knowles, 2019 pp. 205-210, pp. 220-221). Ultimately, this section will focus on the strange dialectical position of Copula Hall, and its role in mediating the conflicting nationalisms of the city in favour of a politically stagnant status quo – and the ironic potential for such an indolent political organism as a model for a better urban future.

Perhaps some of the best evidence of this is through Copula Hall, the shared, extraterritorial base of intercity (or rather, *intra*city) affairs:

"*The Oversight Committee meets in the giant, baroque, concrete-patched coliseum in the centre of Besźel Old Town, and of Ul Qoma Old Town. It is one of the very few places that has the same name in both cities – Copula Hall…it is not a crosshatched building, precisely, nor one of staccato totality-alterity, one floor or room in Besźel and the next in Ul Qoma: externally it is in both cities; internally, much of it is in both or neither… [it is] a juncture, an interstice, one sort-of border built above another*" (Miéville, 2011 p. 72).

Firstly, it is notable that the last sentence here actually implies that *neither* the Copula Hall, nor the actual borders themselves are *inherent* or fixed, but rather, a constructed differentiation. Secondly, this idea that "much of it is in both or neither" suggests that fundamentally, the absurd logic of the urban borders accepted throughout the rest of the city simply *does not work here* - not only must it be considered part of *both* cities at the same time, but in so doing, clearly, according to the spatial logic of the rest of the city, it can be *neither*. The interiors themselves belong aesthetically to neither city.

"*The corridors of Copula Hall are in a determined style that must have evolved over the many centuries of the building's existence and centrality to Besź and Ul Qoman life and politics; they are antique and haute, but somehow vague, definitionless. The oil paintings are well executed but as if without antecedent, bloodlessly general… The hall feels not collaborative but empty*" (Miéville, 2011 p. 83).

To be both central to the cultural-political life of the cities and at the same moment "without antecedent" seems like something of a contradiction in terms - and it is. If the cities are marked by their immediately recognisable cultural-aesthetic façades,

characteristics supposedly inherent to them, then how could this produce a town hall without these integral cultural elements from either? The answer, of course, is that it could not; it has simply been built in the style of *the cities*. One must remember that later in the novel, Borlú mentions the "Ungir Hall which was also the Sul Kibai Palace", implying that here as well one building associated with governance was split in half; a single construction ruling the cities, but divided in the middle to allow the appearance of true separation (Miéville, 2011 p. 335). This appearance is maintained, even when the logic behind it falters.

As D.R. Watson rather aptly puts it "What sustains the division [between the cities]... is the *belief* in the division" (Watson, 2021 pp. 137-138). Though this belief relies on the mediating influence of Copula Hall, as Watson notes, its very name implies dualism and connection, or rather, that one city cannot fundamentally operate without the other (Watson, 2021 pp. 137-138). Though with its name implying a natural, linguistic connection between the cities, its function, and indeed its very spatial existence, is rather more important in this regard:

"*Copula Hall had over the centuries spread, a patchwork of architecture defined by the Oversight Committee in its various historic incarnations... Its inside was complicated – corridors might start mostly total, Besźel or Ul Qoma... with rooms in one or other city along them... [or] those strange rooms and areas that were in neither or both cities, that were in Copula Hall only, and of which the Oversight Committee and its bodies were the only government*" (Miéville, 2011 pp. 157-158).

In addition to an intriguing similarity to Sandercock's suggestion of the 'patchwork city', composed of different communities within the same urban space, this seems to contradict Borlú's earlier statement that the building is *neither* crosshatched nor alter, in other words, that it is not partly nor wholly in one city (Sandercock, 1998 pp. 164-166). So where is it? If there are still borders maintained between 'Besź Rooms' and Ul Qoman Corridors, then why is it not Breach to cross from one to the other? In many ways, Copula Hall is where the absurdities of the world outside, the insanity of the cities' borders, are allowed to collapse. It is the only place where denizens of either city are allowed to acknowledge that their urban spatial arrangement makes no sense. The committee does not only handle questions of Breach, but "adjudication on any *dissensus*...the

management of shared resources – a few of the larger grid power lines, drains and sewage, the most intricately crosshatched buildings" (Sandercock, 1998 p. 73). In doing so, the Oversight Committee is no longer a mere adjunct of the states which it represents, but rather, has become itself a municipal government – in fact, *it is* the interstitial government of the cities. Indeed, if Shannon Kuehmichel is correct, then while the interstices of the novel could provide hope for the revolutionary Unifs, they also allow the possibility of a united government for the cities (Kuehmichel, 2014 pp. 350-353).

In fact, at every hurdle where the absurdities of national sovereignty collapse, the Committee governs. Clearly, a united city is no more impossible than the status quo – in fact, the united city *is already* the status quo. One might consider this a question of infrastructure:

"*north of Besźel... the tracks themselves cross-hatch with and serve also as Ul Qoman tracks... the miles of north-seeking railroads leading out of both city-states... are also shared, to our borders, where they become a single line in existential legality as well as mere metal fact: up to those national edges, the track was two juridical railroads*" (Kuehmichel, 2014 p. 74).

These tracks are, of course, governed by the Oversight Committee, since to tell any other governing body that one single railroad is the sovereign property *of two different* sovereign states becomes a headache worthy of the United Nations itself. The idea that one shared railroad could simultaneously be an adjunct of *both* states is utterly absurd, as very subtly acknowledged by Borlú towards the close of the novel: "We were west of the river, by the cross-hatched rails, a short stretch of tracks used by the trains of both cities, the timetable agreed internationally" (Miéville, 2011 p. 368). Here again, clearly, it is Copula Hall who governs some of the only routes out of the cities, the links of commerce, trade, and population exchange which provide the life-blood of the cities. Copula Hall governs this critical element of the cities' infrastructure, and it is clearly treated as a matter of logical urban planning that the united city should be responsible for this. Certainly, this rather amusing tension between what Borlú calls the "existential legality" and "metal fact", could be applied quite easily to the cities themselves. They are, as we have argued, merely thought to be different states, though states which share

infrastructure, government, and electrical power might struggle to qualify as sovereign states.

Even traffic is not immune to this mediation, despite Borlú's claim that the "traffic cultures are not identical" (Miéville, 2011 p. 114). Rather, "traffic law is one of the compromise areas where the Oversight Committee ensures close similarity between the rules of Besźel and Ul Qoma... our vehicles and theirs run at comparable speed in comparable ways" (Miéville, 2011 p. 114). Here again we have that old chestnut of the cities. Culture is used as an excuse to distract from not only the fact that Besź and Ul Qoman traffic laws are *the same*, but that they are governed not by the cities, but again by the Committee. It is of course interesting that the cities seem to acknowledge that neither one nor the other can have full control over ingress and egress of their citizens, whether by road or rail; fundamentally, neither have claim over internal transportation, *one of the fundamental requirements* of being a sovereign state. One would be hard-pressed indeed to argue that there *is not* a single government of the cities in many ways – though here difficulties ensue based on *who* comprises this single government.

To return to Borlú's early discussion of the role of Copula Hall, it does seem to function as a unified government should, especially in cases of "epochal crisis, civil war or catastrophe" (Miéville, 2011 pp. 72-73). Important here is this description of *civil* war – either both cities weigh-in on insurgencies particular to only one, or Borlú has accidentally acknowledged that war between the cities would be *civil* rather than international. Under either definition, the claims of Besźel and Ul Qoma to be completely independent of one-another are invalid. "Even when we had been noncombatant supporters of opposing sides in conflicts, such as during the Second World War – not Ul Qoma's finest hour – the Oversight Committee had had to convene" (Miéville, 2011 pp. 73-74). Not only is this fascinating from the perspective of the Committee – i.e. that even when the two cities were effectively at war, *communal co-governance continued*, something unthinkable in real-world examples – but rather more so considering the implications here (Möystad, 1998 pp. 421-435). Though the actual geographic placement of the cities is debatable, most critics generally agree that they are suggested to lie somewhere in the Balkans or the broader *Mitteleuropa* (Farrell, 2011 p. 61; Stacy, 2015 p. 230; Rowcroft, 2019 p. 199). For those readers not versed in history, this

naturally suggests that whether Ul Qoma supported the Fascists, or the Soviets, despite the military annexation of their geographic region, somehow the two cities were able to avoid occupation all-together. This is largely impossible – if the entirety of the Balkans was, as in our history, occupied by Nazi Germany or her allies for the duration of the war, then the only way that Besźel could survive is if it was *recognised as an integral part of Ul Qoma*, and vice-versa.

Of course, this argument could be carried too far. The cities are *not* always recognised as a united body, as underscored by the American-backed economic blockade of Ul Qoma – even if such one-sided embargoes are, obviously enough, unsuccessful in undermining even one of the dual cities (Miéville, 2011 p. 88, p. 95). Fundamentally here, whatever the *legal* circumstances of recognising one city as two, the dualism inherent to the conurbations will always take precedence. The Oversight Committee "had not met, however… during our two brief and disastrous open wars against each other" (Miéville, 2011 p. 74). It is already ridiculous to imagine two abutting city-states, who share streets, apartment blocks, and even *government buildings* going to war, but even more notable that the conflicts were, of course, both "brief" and "disastrous". How could conflict between the two ever be otherwise? To attempt to occupy the other means the *destruction of both*. Of course, at the end of each war, Copula Hall returns. These wars must end, and in their place, the civil, cross-border governance of the Committee returns. No matter how the cities might dispute their unity, what other, possible existence could there be than the mediating, unifying, and peace-making influence of the government-of-governments – Copula Hall, both dividing and uniting the cities, keeping their borders separate, but their interests aligned.

4 Conclusion: Copula Hall and the Interstices of Government

As we have seen, despite the pretensions of Nationalists in both Besźel and Ul Qoma, neither city can truly function with complete independence. Rather, Copula Hall and its Oversight Committee do not only address political crises and aspects of inter-city governance that one city or the other cannot address independently, but actually

forms the basis for *any* stability in inter-city relations. Copula Hall thus becomes the site of governance and mediation for the cities that would otherwise be integral to a truly sovereign city-state. For Kuehmichel, Copula Hall does act as an interstice between the cities, but also, as a *dissensi* (a disputed zone between the cities), as well as a heterotopia (Kuehmichel, 2014 pp. 362-363). It is thus, for Kuehmichel, a space of divergence, where different economics, political relations, or divergent ideologies can be 'tested' by the states, or even simply flourish in an environment without the cloying hands of nationalist determination (Kuehmichel, 2014 pp. 362-363). There are issues, of course, with Kuehmichel's argument here. For a start, it is of vital importance that Copula Hall is *not* the subject of *dissensus*, but rather, the place of "indispensable business of adjudication on any *dissensus*" (Miéville, 2011 p. 73). This might seem to be splitting hairs, but it is critical to establish that Copula Hall is *not* disputed in this manner. Kuehmichel could be forgiven for making this mistake, since the borders of the cities are, of course, entirely relational, and very much the product of this adjudication. Copula Hall itself is, as discussed, "in both and neither" (Miéville, 2011 p. 72). It is not claimed by one or the other because of the simple fact that it is *partly the reason that one or the other exists*. It is the justification of the borders, as well as the governmental mediation that keeps those borders sacrosanct. For one city-state to claim Copula Hall would make as much sense as the United States annexing the U.N. Headquarters in New York. For this criticism of Kuehmichel however, there is one important exception; her suggestion that Copula Hall could be read as a heterotopia. To those not well-versed in spatial theory, a heterotopia is a space fulfilling many functions, ideologies, and socio-economic-cultural attributes – it could be thought of as a space of *difference* to the wider, established urban governmental and societal framework. Certainly, Miéville is no stranger to utilising heterotopias in his work in order to challenge or subvert existing economic-spatial arrangements in favour of critical possibilities, spatial organisations and worlds that *could* exist (Gordon, 2003 pp. 463-468). In many senses, that is Copula Hall's purpose – not just as a present heterotopia that is Besźel, Ul Qoma, and neither all at the same time, but a possible blueprint for one, united city. One might think of it as in the aforementioned metaphor of the United Nations building, or, taken to the extremes of aforementioned real-world divides, to conduct co-governance activities, negotiations, or resource management between communities in the Beirut Green Line,

or in Nicosia's Demilitarised Zone (Möystad, 1998 pp. 421-435; Buoli, 2023 pp. 79-92). In other words, if both communities can recognise one area or the other as *outside* their particular cultural, linguistic, or communitarian territory, then that space can come to act as a depoliticised zone for inter-communal cooperation, rather than contestation.

Despite the claims to the impossibility of a united city, the reverse is true; it is impossible for a city to be divided in the fashion of the novel. If even with these statements of absolute sovereignty, Copula Halls fills the '*dissensi*' of government, then it must be said that a single, unitary government is not only vital to any pan-urban spatial arrangement, but in this case, it is *already extant*. Perhaps, in a world of increasingly divided urban centres, of city districts pitted against each other by race, class, and gender, there is some hope in unity. It may not be the soaring, utopian solidarity of the 'Unifs', but the cold, hard reality of contemporary neoliberal government still marks a city united. If one was to be particularly pessimistic, then the role of Copula Hall in China Miéville's *The City and the City* could be that of any modern, capitalistic bureaucracy – to ensure business as usual, and punish dissidence in an integrated, centralised manner. If, however, one wanted to take away a slightly more positive message from Miéville's work, one could note that for all the divisions, separations, and segregations assailing the unified city, that even those most committed to reifying urban difference are still reliant on a united approach to the urban problematic.

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