

## **Anna Kérchy. 'Whichever way you go, you are sure to get somewhere.' Dysgeographic mappings of playable loci and the 'compass' of girlish curiosity in Lewis Carroll's and China Miéville's spatial fantasies**

The embodied experience of spatial and narrative disorientation are epitomized by Lewis Carroll's Victorian nonsense fairy-tale fantasies about Alice's adventures (1865, 1871). Falling down the rabbit hole, crossing through the Looking-Glass, wandering aimlessly in Wonderland, getting lost in the woods where things have no names, or returning to an unhomey home that will never be the same after the incredible journeys are all affectively charged, transgressive moves in and out of enchanted loci, driven by the heroine's relentless, girlish curiosity. The aim of this essay is to explore how Alice's journey (in Carroll's classic and Miéville's contemporary adaptation alike) invites readers to reinterpret the notion of space along the lines of affective psychogeography: much more than just a category of ontological locatedness, place becomes meaningful as an "epistemologically and metaphysically conceived way of seeing, knowing, sensing the world" (Dewsbury 148) and of sensitively relating to other inhabitants of this space and their ideas thereof. I wish to prove that Alice's aimless movement, her readiness to meander deviating from the path is just as stimulating in a philosophical as in a feminist political sense. The dreamchild's fluid ego boundaries – fitting the coming-of-age subtext of the young adult adventure novel genre – do not only bring about a nomadic wanderlust but become also responsible for empathically opening up the borders of oneself to the needs, cries, and visions of others, both fellow human subjects and further living beings on the green continuum. Eventually, the reluctance to fear getting lost allows for a harmonious cohabitation with nature, even in an urban environment – especially if we can turn our surroundings into a playground to reinforce communal belonging. My spatially engaged study of emotions represented in and elicited by literary texts with a focus on interconnections of geographical, corporeal, and psychic transformations in fact adopts an affective psychogeographical methodology, too in so far I "form new linkages or assemblages of (and between) ideas that connect different knowledge systems [literature, geography, feminism] so as to form new connections and possibilities for meaning" (Dewsbury 148).

### **Curious spaces of nomadic meanderings and empathic relationality**

In the preface to *Alternative Alices* (1997), a collection of rewritings of Carroll's classic, editor Carolyn Sigler summarizes the quintessence of "the Alice type story" along the lines of the significance of spatial mobility. According to her formula, a typically polite, articulate, and assertive heroine is involved in a transition from the 'real,' waking life to a fantasy dream world; she undergoes rapid shifts in identity, appearance, and location in an episodic structure centering on chance meetings with nonhuman fantasy characters based on nursery rhymes, nonsense language games, verse parodies, or songs destabilizing conventional signification; and after the curious adventures in an alternate universe returns to a domestic consensus reality (xvii). Although Alice remains all the way through her adventures a "nondescript every girl" and a relatively static figure without any real personality development, her internal monologues are infiltrated by emotions triggered by her unpredictably changing surroundings – emotions, ranging from anxiety to awe, which fundamentally define her character, inherently associated with the space she inhabits.

Tellingly, Alice's endlessly muttering "Curiouser and curiouser!" to herself constitute psycho-narrations encapsulating her ambiguous affects, cognitive dissonance, and corporeal crisis stimulated by the strange sequence of her dislocations in a wondrous setting shaped by her own feelings and fantasies, as she is the one make-believing these dreamscapes into being.

Her ponderings can be regarded as psychic manifestations of her camouflage, elaborate attempts at mentally mapping unimaginable and unspeakable impossibilities she must increasingly grow accustomed to in Wonderland, where madness becomes for her the order of the day.

The interpretive approaches to Carroll's classic Alice tales hold an impressive variety of spatial implications which all deal with the negotiations of emotional landscapes. Instead of mundane spaces devoid of passions, ordered by rational principles, and demarcated according to political, economical, or technical logics that the geographical discipline is traditionally interested in (Bondi 1), the random stations of Alice's journey are emotionally charged terrains which foreground the ambiguous affective elements at play beneath our experience of (real and fantastic) topographies.

The critique of hegemonic power relations and the carnivalesque subversion of tyrannical rule (of adults over children, reason over fantasy, bureaucracy over spontaneity, animals over humans, meaning over nonsense, etc.) are mapped onto absurd versions of Althusserian ideological state apparatus. In a Wonderland courtroom the verdict is brought before the trial, while at the carefully policed royal terrain of the Queen's croquet ground the rules of the game are malleable at the whimsy of the monarch who can force all to see flamingos as mallets and hedgehogs as balls.

The Victorians' excitement about ground-breaking scientific ideas such as the Darwinian evolutionary theory's controversial notions of natural selection and the competitive struggle for survival are reflected in odd spatial manoeuvres, too. During the Caucus race no one can tell the difference between the chaser and the chased (Lovell-Smith 27), in the 'inverted zoo' of the White Rabbit's house Alice is stuck to be redefined by the degenerate anthropomorphic animals' gaze, and possibly even the title of *Wonderland's* first manuscript version (a giftbook for Alice Liddell handwritten and decorated by Carroll) called *Alice's Adventures Under Ground* (1863) makes a nod towards Darwin's decades-long scientific interest in earthworms, lowly creatures who could lead us back to the real origin of species instead of make-believe fairylands.

Psychoanalytical readings find in the novels symptoms of the introvert author's fear of growing up or the growing pains of the girl troubled by an unstable relation to space fundamentally defined by her misbehaving body and unruly conduct of language, dwelling in an ambiguous sphere of in-between, almost thereness, between child and adult. The stories can be alternately criticized for trapping the heroine within a child body or praised for granting an adventuress' freedom to a female figure historically confined within the drawing room privacy. They can offer a feminist critique of the claustrophobic anxiety of the Victorian 'Angel in the House' via the infernal site of the Duchess' kitchen, emerging as a parody of a domestic feminine space, where a latent maternal violence is brought to surface in a wicked lullaby fuelled by deathjokes permeating the text from the beginning, topographically mapped onto the heroine's downward movement, initiated by the fall down the emblematic rabbit hole.

Narratological takes on the fairy-tale fantasy genre study the amazing worldmaking capacities of Carrollian nonsense's unconventional language use reinforcing a famous assumption of young adult fantasy: "To change a rock into a jewel, you must change its true name. And to do that [...] is to change the world." (Le Guin 51) and assuming that neological word coinages 'that can be made to mean whatever you want them to mean' can constitute cornerstones of an unreal yet feasible fictional universe.

Poststructuralist literary analyses' paradigmatically metaphorical readings follow in a similar direction by investing Alice's spatial manoeuvres such as her legendary fall down the rabbit hole with affective charge. Gilles Deleuze's schizoanalytical approach interprets the Alice tales in terms of a traumatic combat of depths and surfaces. For him, Wonderland

narrates the struggle to leave the horrific, suffocating underground where “boxes are too small for their contents,” toxic food stretches entrails and bursts bodies, things and words weld together into nondecomposable blocks, until Alice manages to gradually rise and return to the surfaces she creates to survive, making the chimeras of nonsensical depths become cards without thickness, and allowing the frustrating “movements of penetration and burying give way to lighter lateral movements of sliding” (21) peaking in her subsequent passing through the all transparent Looking Glass. For French feminist Hélène Cixous, Alice’s diving into dreamlands is a blissful experience that results in the blurring of the dividing line between reality and imagination, presence/surplus and absence/loss of sense, and a succeeding free, uncorrupted eroticization of the indeterminacy of meaning that can outline subversive “libidinal” writing/reading strategies motivated by feminine bodily energies, allowing for any woman artist’s free self-expression. If the fall down the rabbit hole means falling in love while falling deep into the story’s transversal regions, the passage through the looking glass leads to the “sonorous other side of words” “to the outside of the inside of this outside, to this place where language is situated between monologue, soliloquy, and dialogue” (235) a transitional realm where women’s speak can flourish beyond pahllogocentric discourse. Jacques Derrida’s analysis celebrates Alice’s treading in the footsteps of the white rabbit as a revolutionary step towards the posthuman recognition of one’s own animal alterities. With a Carrollian pun the phrase “l’animal que je suis” (369) – the animal that I am, that I follow, that I am to follow – undoes the hierarchical positioning of humans over non-human entities and calls forth a deconstruction of our anthropocentric worldview and an emancipation of othereds within oppressive social and semiotic systems of meaning.

In the light of her episodic adventures, Alice’s figure can be regarded as an oddly twisted take on the traditional picaresque novel’s protagonist. She is an honest, bourgeois, juvenile, female *picara* who encounters throughout her adventures many surprising creatures – each representing different worldviews and apparently illogical ways of thinking – in an indifferent environment that fosters misunderstanding and celebrates the nonsensical nature of being. Despite the innovatively anti-didactic, non-moralising agenda of this children’s classic, Alice communicates a lesson in *empathy* by willing to identify with a multitude of unusual perspectives, readily alternating between a variety of viewpoints attributed to Wonderland’s locals, animals, things, and in-between hybrids. In this respect, Alice is humane because of her toying with the option of becoming non-human, repeatedly re-considering the odds and implications of her serial dislocations, her transformations into a beast, a thing, or a mythical monster.

Her survival skills in a maddening universe so radically different from her own consensus-reality spring from her embracing personas of an adventurer longing to be enchanted by any new terrain she explores. She is a child at play reconceiving its surroundings as if a playground’s semi-public safe terrain where all dangers belong to pretence play. Mimicry, the adaptation to one’s environment is part of the game in lands inhabited by humans fused with playing cards and chess figures. Alice performs a rather sophisticated camouflage taking on properties of her special surroundings. Her numerous shrinkings and growings represent a kind of experimentation with protective coloration, an assimilation into the nonsensical functioning of a wondrous realm where a baby can transform into a pig, a grin can remain without a cat, creatures based on neologisms and portmanteaux word coinages – like bandersnatches, bread-and-butterflies, or slithy toves – and anthropomorphical animals prosper, and metamorphoses rules on discursive, corporeal, and societal planes alike (in flexible meanings, shapeshifting bodies, changing, illusory power relations, and roads running into each other like Moebius coil).

When in Wonderland, Alice does what Wonderlandians do. Respectful of the beliefs and practices of the local culture, no matter how anarchic they seem, she conforms to the strange discursive customs too, and her polite conversations with Wonderland creatures share rhetorical similarities with the Socratic dialogue's attempt to explore others' views of moral, philosophical issues by means of gentle questioning, as Gillian Beer (2015) suggests. By familiarizing herself with the unfamiliar nonsense discourse, excelling in turning meanings inside out, Alice trains herself in a verbal implementation of *dysgeographia*, a tendency to miss the correct path and lose one's way – that is, in her case, not an inaptitude but a joy the wanderer can revel in, on recognizing the relativity of the right directions. Just how much carefreeness this self-afflicted directional disability can grant is perfectly illustrated by the dialogue of Alice and the Cheshire Cat in which the pair communally trace a tentative psychogeographical agenda. Their phrases complement each other's to encapsulate the essence of Guy Debord's notion of the *derive* (1956), a semi-conscious drifting, an unplanned journey through a landscape where the subtle aesthetic contours of the geographical and built environment imperceptibly direct the traveller's path towards entirely new and authentic experiences of being.

'Cheshire Puss,' she began, rather timidly, as she did not at all know whether it would like the name: however, it only grinned a little wider. 'Come, it's pleased so far,' thought Alice, and she went on. 'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'

'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.

'I don't much care where—' said Alice.

'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat.

'—so long as I get SOMEWHERE,' Alice added as an explanation.

'Oh, you're sure to do that,' said the Cat, 'if you only walk long enough.' (Carroll 67)

Alice's journey has nothing to do with the masculine appropriation of space, it lacks a conquistador's colonizing intent, it never aims to reach a final destination, nor does it give account of a teleological development. More of an 'armchair flanerie,' it provides a metafictional celebration of wondering about wandering, a speculative strolling towards a multitude of possible becomings in a Deleuzian fashion. It remains rather indecisive just how her interactions with the Wonderland or Looking-Glass space transform Alice's character. Even her coming of age and mature separation from the dream realms remain highly dubious. It is so, because her attitude to space is not in the least possessive but tentative, re-negotiable, fluid and relational. She never wants to conquer or to chart Wonderland in terms of objective knowledge claims but rather her attitude to space is characterized by a heterogeneously embodied, subjective lived experience embracing the dynamics of uncertainty. The adventurer Alice's reaction to Wonderland is an overwhelming enchantment that is primordially a spatial experience implied in the etymology of the word "amazement," a stupefaction by the recognition of maze-like, labyrinthine structure of reality that entails 'getting lost' as an enriching self-exploration, not a traumatising identity crisis.

More like a nomadic subjectivity in Rosi Braidotti's understanding of the term: a multidifferentiated, non-hierarchical sense of the self is always in the process of becoming and gets perpetually engaged in creative relations via a strategic deterritorialization that unsettles the fixed borders and power foundations of patriarchal hegemony. Alice neither really strives to get back home nor aims to stay in Wonderland, and her aimless strollings are driven by this strange realm's major geographical guideline she quickly masters: "whichever

way you go, you are sure to get somewhere.” As a child-woman dwelling in the ‘in-between,’ she re-embodies her modernist foremother Virginia Woolf’s woman artist who has no country, and wants no country, since her country is the whole world (Woolf 197) – mappable from within the space of a room of one’s own, too. Unlike the privileged, bourgeois, male *flâneur*, the participant of the *dérive* playfully suspends class and gender belongings and instead of detached omniscient observing, daringly interacts with her environment and puts herself ‘out of place’ to reach a heightened receptivity of the “psychogeographical relief” (McDonough 257) of the public and private arenas experienced as sites of surprising explorations and connectibility to previously unknown realms of being, thinking, feeling. Paradoxically, Braidotti’s nomadism, like Alice’s wanderings, is grounded in an insistence on intensive interconnectedness and empathic proximity.

Just how much locatedness or rather dislocatedness holds a phenomenological, existential significance is reflected in Alice’s recurring self-questioning: instead of the obvious enquiry “Where am I?” she keeps asking herself “Who am I?” projecting spatial destabilization inward, attempting to find meaning in an irrational universe by embracing existence, freedom, and an endless array of choices, including the choice of not choosing.

### **Urban Fantasy Wonderlands**

Because of their numerous anthropomorphic animal and plant characters, and the memorable mock pastoral scenes – the pool of tears, the forest of nameless things, or the garden of live flowers – the Alice tales are associated with a natural environment, albeit the cognitive dissonance provoked by Carroll’s nonsense fantasy is enhanced by the fact that instead of an environmentally induced awe and love for a natural environment felt inherently worthy of protection and respect we keep being stupefied by the radically strange surroundings. This surprising defamiliarization is further complicated by contemporary adaptations when the fantastic topoi of Wonderland are redeployed in an unfamiliar context: the urban sphere of the city.

The ‘urban’ descriptor applied to the fairy-tale fantasy increases the spatial fantasy features of the source text, while the collision of the make-believe, magical motifs with the realistic urban milieu of a more or less recognizable city turns the mapping of the fantasy space into a genuinely challenging experience. In (post)millennial young adult urban fantasy Wonderlands, “two common figurative and symbolic vocabularies” (Irvine 201) are juxtaposed, those of the fairy tale adventure and the tale of urban initiation. However, these stories also bear characteristics of Alexander C Irvine’s other category of urban fantasy in which “the city is not just a field on which the naturalist and the fantastic play out a series of thematic collisions” but rather embodies a genius loci that animates all the fantastic elements derived from the history and character of the city. Certainly, these two urban fantasy modes are difficult to be neatly separated in terms of hard binary oppositions and rather constitute two far ends of a literary axis, with ‘urban’ as one terminus and ‘fantasy’ as the other, as Irvine suggest. (201).

An almost real city hosts fantastic events in Jeff Noon’s *Automated Alice* (1996), a dystopian steampunk fantasy about Alice and her doll Celia who pass through a grandfather clock to solve a murder mystery in a futuristic Manchester city ruled by chaos theory, jazz music, puns and puzzles, along with human-machine-animal hybrid Newmonians, and Alice’s termite-driven, robot “twin twister,” the title character. The landscape, an actual geographical region emerges as a source of fantastification in Bryan Talbot’s *Alice in Sunderland: An Entertainment* (2007), a graphic novel fantasy inoculated with history, detective story, biography, literary theory, music-hall turns, jokes and homages mapping how Carroll’s Alice tales gained inspiration from the Sunderland area’s rich folklore heritage, local legends like

that of the Lambton Worm, the Walrus in Whitburn, and a monkey hanged in Hartlepool. China Miéville's YA urban fantasy girl's adventure story *Un Lun Dun* (2007) does not simply locate magical happenings in a fantastic city, but tells the story of this fantastic city itself, a nonsensical mirror version of London mostly constructed from trash discarded by Londoners, a complex space I will analyse in depth in the follows.

These contemporary young adult fantasy rewritings of the Alice-theme remain faithful to the original in so far as their heroines' mapping of make-believe spaces allows for an affirmation of women's creative spatial agency in diegetic universes which lend themselves even more easily to be studied in terms of affective psychogeographical notions, given that they relocate Carroll's originally solitary character into densely inhabited regions of metropolitan setting. The stories recycle and challenge archetypal figures like the 'lost little girl' associated in cautionary tales with the vice of curiosity and a resulting debilitating spatial dyslexia; the 'nymph' as an eroticized tutelary divinity of a landform, a *genius loci* reduced to a mere symbol of the fertility of nature; or the modernist *haute bourgeois* 'flâneuse' whose 'spectacular invisibility' participated in the 'ocular economy' of the city (Pollock 1988, Wolff 1990, Nead 2000) and was both threatening to and threatened by the white, masculinist urban space. Disgeographia and curiosity are identified with a multiplicity and mobility of perspectives and sensations, a resulting environmentalist empathy and a female authorial empowerment fuelled by the embracement of unpredictability. They are reinterpreted in terms of the feminist psychogeographer's self-reflective, metafictional gambit, a feminist pedestrian politics and poetics, a capacity to explore "a new way of walking [or meaning formation!] that changes our city [or fictional!] experience, a whole toy box full of playful, inventive strategies for exploring cities [or narratives!]... just about anything that takes pedestrians [or readers!] off their predictable paths and jolts them into a new awareness of the urban [or literary!] landscape" (Hart in Bucher-Finka 2008).

In Clute and Grant's seminal *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* the entry "urban fantasy" defines spatial experience in terms of the subjective filter of the city-dweller rendered an unreliable narrator because of the emotional investment of her geographical locatedness.

A City is a *place*; urban fantasy is a *mode*. A city may be an Icon or a geography; the urban fantasy recounts an experience. A city may be seen from afar, and is generally seen clear; the urban fantasy is told from within, and, from the perspective of characters acting out their roles, (hence) it may be difficult to determine the extent and nature of the surrounding reality.

What strikes me in this definition is how it resonates with the notions of the partial perspective and situated knowledges celebrated by contemporary feminist thinkers like Donna Haraway who argues that "having multiple viewpoints that are put into dialogue with one another is what gives our individual knowledge value and worth." She argues in favour of putting feminism' partial, even fallible, and self-admittedly vulnerable objectivity into practice in order to yield productive "knowledges from limited locations potent for constructing worlds less organized by axes of domination" by doing away with illusory transcendence and the splitting of subject and object in favour of collective connectability (Haraway 583). These ideas remarkably match urban fantasy's notion of the city as a site of social and imaginary interactions, a heterogeneous web of real and fictitious knowledges each coming from distinct yet interrelated cities within the city. Moreover, the 'cities within the city' as a labyrinthine spatial structure, augmenting playfulness and uncertainty, conforms to today's urban political aesthetic trends shaped both by local colors of institutionalized city districts and metropolitan hotspots as well as those micro-spatial urban practices – from

community gardening to shock tactics of graffiti and flash-mobbing – which perform a certain “do-it-yourself urbanism” to express differing, individual “rights to the city” (Iveson 941)).

This fuziness of our surrounding reality has been remarkably represented by China Miéville, a figurehead of contemporary urban fantasy, who earned reputation for trespassing generic boundaries, combining maps and methods of epic and urban fantasy, social and hard science fiction, crime, and horror into a literary bricolage alternately coined by critics as “new weird,” “fantastika,” “literary speculation” and “hauntological slipstream.” His obsession with the urban milieu shows already in the titles of his bestsellers ranging from *Perdido Street Station* (2000) to *The City & the City* (2009) to *Embassytown* (2011). Several of his novels take place in a more or less fictionalized version of London. *King Rat* set in the ’90s suburbia is a modern-day sequel to *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, *Kraken* presents a dark comedy about a squid-worshipping cult and the end of the world, while *UnLunDun* – admittedly inspired by Carroll’s *Wonderland* and Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere* – guides into a parallel universe version of the city, with not one but two Alice type protagonists, plenty of Carrollian language games, a living radioactive cloud attacking the city as an ungraspable arch enemy replacing the monstrous Jabberwocky, and many strange creatures – grotesque mixtures of humans, animals, plants, objects, and ideas – matching an equally amazing urban landscape and architecture.

### **Parallel Universe in an Organic Junkyard. Saving a green city built on waste**

In *UnLunDun*’s opening scene set in contemporary London, four girls come across a fox in their school playground. The wild animal incompatible with the civilized urban environment is an uncanny embodiment of the invisible, all-knowing underworld lurking beneath the mundane consensus reality that is threatened by an emerging thinning/wrongness conforming to the conventions of the fantastic fictional genre. The stillness of the beast contrasted with the bustling of the metropolis, the meeting of human and animal eyes invites characters and readers to explore their habitual surroundings from a whole new different perspective. The fox acts as a harbinger to the strange things which have been happening to the protagonists who, as emerging flâneuses-detectives, gradually learn to read the city space, decoding hidden signs – graffiti on walls, smoke boiling out of drains, and an odd version of London travel card with the name Shwazzy (distorted phonetic transcript of the French word *The Chosen One*) – all messages from a parallel universe that needs to be saved by them. “Zanna[’s gaze meeting] the fox’s gentle vulpine stare [that] seemed to get lost in something” (7) signals the initiation of adventures, the opening of an alternate world by virtue of the intimate encounter with the non-human other. However, instead of Alice’s White Rabbit, the girls watching the fox are reminded of the Big Bad Wolf, and hence the story of Little Red Riding, a classic cautionary fairy tale about misbehaviour resulting from feminine curiosity, where the straying off the parentally prescribed path is punished in the brother Grimms’ *Kinder und Hausmärchen*. This association is crucial in so far as the novel very consciously plays with overturning of normatively gendered cultural scripts and narrative patterns. Besides rejecting the misogynist moralizing of traditional bed time stories, *UnLunDun* plays a trick with the mythical hero figure, the portal quest fantasy genre, YA writing, and fictitious urban spaces, too.

The two little heroines descend down to a cellar, turn a giant wheel on waste water pipe that turns off all the traffic, all the lamps and lights, and eventually all London, to transport them to a parallel universe, the titular *UnLunDun* where Zanna is meant to fulfil a prophecy, defeat the Smog, and liberate the land. However, with an unconventional plot twist, Zanna shwazzy the Chosen One falls in the first battle, and returns to London amnesiac, forgetful of her adventures. So it is her friend Deeba, catalogued in *UnLunDun*’s talking and sentient book

of prophecies as just a “funny sidekick” who decides to explore the two cities, collects evidence and weapons, and with the help of allies supporting her manages to save both worlds. With a unique skill of adaptation, a daring challenging of narrative conventions, a readiness to ‘write beyond/against the (set) ending’ (see DuPlessis), and a series of clever Carrollian puns, she becomes the Unchosen to free UnLunDun with the help of the Ungun from Unstible, a propheser turned smombie (a corpse reanimated by the smog), Brokkenbroll the master of broken umbrellas, and other villains.

Reimagining the protagonist and sidekick relationship beyond a hierarchical arrangement points towards a challenging of the engendered spatial arrangement of the predominant, masculinized foreground vs the lesser, feminized background, a distinction so often criticized by feminist geography. In Marilyn Frye’s words, a phallogocentric reality of space, figures, motion and adventurous action defines itself ‘against’ the monotonously repetitive, uneventful activities of women constituting the background scenery. “It is essential to the maintenance of the foreground reality that nothing within it refer in any way to anything in the background, and yet it depends absolutely upon the existence of the background.” (Frye in Rose 5) Deeba’s story taking over Zanna’s plays with unsettling this spatial exclusion/domination.

The questioning of masternarratives’ authority is a major theme of leftist juvenile fiction that strategically aims to avoid the moralizing and manipulation inherent in the genre of children’s literature, and instead encourages young readers to think for themselves (a major feat of the Alice tales, according to Jack Zipes), to believe in social justice, and to take part in political engagement, and become involved in issues which could affect one’s environment and community. (see Mickenberg and Nel 2008) Deeba’s agility and commitment are reflected in the mode of her second entry to UnLunDun: instead of an accidental fall down the rabbit hole, or a tentative turning of a wheel, she very self-consciously climbs up on booksteps, on “storyladders” – the portal is next to a book called *Wasp in a Wig*, the title of a chapter omitted from Carroll’s *Wonderland*, and a metafictional allusion to the possible continuations of Alicedellic adventures. After she finds out that the weatherwizards Armets are just a mishearing of the Royal Meteorological Society’s name, and that klineract is not a magic weapon but the rather dubious Clean Air Act that seeks to channel back all London’s polluting material into UnLunDun, Deeba decides to rewrite her own place in story. She questions the reliability of the prophetic book and urges her allies to communally co-author their own adventures by constantly negotiating and challenging the ambiguous prophecies of the animated Book they kidnap (“booknap”) to learn and unlearn about their mission, and ways of defeating the Smog. Leftist and urban children’s fantasy fuse: reading is never an isolated act of class-privilege but a collective partaking in social action prompting environmental protection, anti-consumerism, and democratic egalitarianism.

Never a lonely *flâneuse*, Deeba relates to the city as a site of social interactions, a heterogeneous web of knowledges accessible via the partial perspectives of different urban regions’ inhabitants. Her friends assist her quest with different spatial skills. Hemi the half-ghost boy from Wraithown can pass through things and knows how memories can infiltrate the built environment haunted by “ghosts of earlier forms,” Curdle the milk carton comes from a deserted alleyway, the Backwall Maze full of discarded detritus and hence knows about the trashpack’s desire to overtake order and cleanliness, Obaday Fing the pincushionheaded couturier dressed in neatly sawn bookpages from a market called Location Location knows how to stitch a few wrinkles in space, while bus conductors “UnLundun’s champions, protectors of the transit, the sacred warriors” (58) know secret passageways to hardly accessible locations and also know how to conduct electricity in their enemies. With the help of these Unlunduners – each coming from distinct cities within the city conforming to



today's strange urban political aesthetic – Deeba breaks rules to reclaim the city from Smog. In Gillian Rose's view, the relational mode of identity formation and the contextual epistemology – Deeba excels in – constitute specifically feminine ways of mapping the space, while deliberately contradicting masculine hegemonic mapping methods based on the conquest, marginalization, domination, or closure of socio-scientific space. (Rose 112)

At another station of her picaresque journey, a feat of her rebelliousness, embodied locatedness and an example of Miéville's leftist politics and postmodernist metafictional penchant, Deeba teaches animated words that they can rebel against their speaker and deviate from their intended meanings. The Utterlings are strange creations sprung from the "despotic logorrhoea" of Mr Speaker. Whenever the tyrant of Talkland says something, his utterings take the form of mouthless grotesque creatures: "search" is a tiny beakless bird, "cartography" is a bowler hat with several spidery legs and a fox's tail, and Deeba's allies "bling," "brer", and "cauldron" are a silver-furred locust; a bear with a pair of legs too many; a four-armed four-legged several-eyed little man, respectively.

Deeba's argument on words not necessarily meaning what their users want them to is certainly a nod towards Carroll's famed eggman Humpty Dumpty's mock language philosophical rant boasting about the mastery over meanings being just a question of willpower. But, as Joe Sutliff Sanders highlights, Deeba's reasoning also performs ideology criticism by turning inside out Althusser's classic example for the unescapable interpellation of the social subject whose identity is prefabricated by institutions, ideological state apparatus, and discourses 'hailing' them into social interactions. (293) Deeba's wording hints at the possibility of relocating ourselves in alternative, new, shifting subjectivities defined along the lines of dysgeographia, a readiness to stray off prescribed paths, to deviate, to wander, and to dare to get lost in a variety of inventive ways. „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." (297) Fluid subjectivities, unstable nonsensical meaning, and disorienting topographies fuse to map the leitmotif of the novel. We are also reminded of Henri Lefebvre's famous argument about how "every language is located in a space; every discourse says something about a space; and every discourse is emitted from a space" and how, as a result, space becomes a "language that can be employed to articulate social relationships, with realms of multiple discourses, and fluctuating centres, mirroring the stages of identity formation" (132).

The illusorily homogenized bourgeois mode of subjectivity gets challenged by new sets of unsettling subjectivities imagined for word, books, things, and even buildings. UnLunDun is a nonsensical mirror version of London inhabited by twisted versions of the objects typical of the London city space, like double decker buses rolling on caterpillar treads, leaping on enormous lizard legs or coasting on skirts of air like hovercrafts, karate fighting warrior dustbins called binjas, friendly milk cartons and broken umbrellas recruited into an army. Miéville's affective psychogeographical agenda recycles commonplaces about the British capitol to shed a new light on the habitual environment and to reveal the ordinary as curious and exceptional. Part of the enchanting quality of UnLunDunian city space comes from the defamiliarizing effect that strikes the interpreter of literary nonsense or the grotesque aesthetics alike, the ability to recognize the unmarked original beneath the spectacularly distorted new version's bizarre palimpsest.

This bifocal multiperspectivism capable of grasping the complexity of the cityscape characterizes the girl adventurers, when Deeba spots a "bridge like two huge crocodile heads, snout-to-snout" and starts humming a tune "*Dum dum dum dum dum, deee dum,*" the theme song to the TV program *EastEnders*, which starts with an aerial shot of the Thames, Zanna snorts with laughter and joins in, and they sing together looking down at the water below,

while passengers look at them as if they were mad. (71) The apparently nonsensical lyrics do not only signal a rebellious act violating social expectations regarding politely restrained feminine behaviour in the public space, but also reimagine the city as an always already fictionalized terrain, a site and source of endless stories to be told and retold. Via a strange *trompe l'oeil* affect, UnLunDun seems both familiar and unfamiliar, very real and genuinely fantastic to the heroines. As Miéville explains in an interview, he seeks to express the immediacy of the urban experience by fictionalizing the bewilderment of a man looking for a post box in a foreign city; a completely everyday thing may seem unrecognizable via “a very low-level of alienation:” “the uncertainty about how do you hail a taxi, how do you buy food in this place, if somebody yells something from their top window, why does everyone move away from this part of the street and not that part?” (Manaugh 2011) As UnLunDun mirrors London, the curiosity of the quotidien and the mundanness of the magical overlap.

UnLunDun is also very much a living city, full of organic architectural constructs (Yorick Cavea, for example, inhabits a human body with a bird cage in place of its head with the little bird inside controlling the anthropomorphic mechanism). The bustling cityspace blurs boundaries between buildings, vehicles, and inhabitants which mimic each others’ metamorphic flux to endlessly amaze visitors. It is perhaps worthwhile to quote a passage at length to show how Miéville projects onto the unrestrained dynamism of the urban sphere the fabular (il)logic he associates with the imaginative frenzy of children’s literature where a sense of wonder can overwhelm cognitive estrangement.

Most people looked human (if in an unusual range of colors), but a sizeable proportion did not. Deeba and Zanna saw bubble-eyes, and gills, and several different kinds of tails. The two girls stared when a bramble-bush walked past, squeezed into a suit, a tangle of blackberries, thorns, and leaves bursting out of its collar.

There were no cars, but there were plenty of other vehicles. Some were carts tugged by unlikely animals, and many were pedal-powered. Not bicycles, though: the travelers perched on jerkily walking stilts, or at the front of long carriages like tin centipedes. One goggled rider traveled by in a machine like a herd of nine wheels.

“Out of the way!” the driver yelled. “Noncycle coming through!”

They passed curbside cafés, and open-fronted rooms full of old and odd-looking equipment.

“There’s loads of empty houses,” said Zanna.

“A few,” Obaday said. “Most aren’t empty, though: they’re *emptish*. Open access. For travelers, tribes, and mendicants. Temporary inhabitants. Now we’re in Varmin Way. This is Turpentine Road. This is Shatterjack Lane.” They were going too fast for Zanna and Deeba to do more than gain a few impressions.

The streets were mostly red brick, like London terraces, but considerably more ramshackle, spindly and convoluted. Houses leaned into each other, and stories piled up at complicated angles. Slate roofs lurched in all directions.

Here and there where a house should be was something else instead.

There was a fat, low tree, with open-fronted bedrooms, bathrooms, and kitchens perched in its branches. People were clearly visible in each chamber, brushing their teeth or kicking back their covers. Obaday took them past a house-sized fist, carved out of stone, with windows in its knuckles; and then the shell of a huge turtle, with a door in the neck hole, and a chimney poking out of its mottled top.

Zanna and Deeba stopped to stare at a building with oddly bulging walls, in a patchwork of black, white, and gray bricks of varying sizes.

“Oh gosh,” said Deeba. “It’s *junk*.”

The entire three-floor building was mortared-together rubbish. There were fridges, a dishwasher or two, and hundreds of record players, old-fashioned cameras, telephones, and typewriters, with thick cement between them.

There were four round windows like a ship's portholes. Someone inside threw one open: they were the fronts of washing machines, embedded in the facade.

"Shwazzy!" Obaday called. "Shwazzy...I mean, Zanna. You'll have time to stare at moil houses later." (56)

"I know that look," he said to Zanna, smiling. "Astonished, bewildered, excited, frightened...awed. That's the taste of the first few days in UnLondon." (59)

If the built environment is – as Leslie Kane Weisman suggests – a “cultural artifact shaped by [socio-historically specific] human intention and intervention, a living archeology through which we can extract the priorities” of decision makers, standards of normative behavior as well as ways in which we build our own self-image (Rendell et al. 1), the dizzying space of the living, organic, self-(de)composing ‘city in flux’ described above offers an adequate spatial metaphor, an architectural icon for the heterogenous, post-human, postmodern “subject in process/on trial” (Kristeva in Moi 91). The passage is also exciting because it shows how spatial descriptions of things like architecture and landscape can have compelling effects, augmenting both plot and emotion. The city is defined in terms of the psychic, affective reactions of its observers, mostly a unanimous amazement shared by the two girls. (Their collective experience is reflected in how they finish each other's sentences, like Alice and the Cheshire cat did, on spotting an enormous tree of firework bursts complete with fireproof red squirrels: “It's...” Deeba whispered. ‘...beautiful,’ Zanna said” – and as a genuine accidental tourist she adds that she wishes her phone were there to capture the sight on a photo. (89-90))

However, unlike Carroll's Alice, these heroines yearn to get back home, and instead of forgetfully enjoying timeless wandering they are troubled by how much days can pass before their families forget them. Hence each new beautiful view produces affective dissonance by combining awestruckness with homesickness. Miéville produces some truly poetic passages for how the city's built environment can be literally read along the lines of emotional belongings. When they pass “a stepped pyramid, a corkscrew-shaped minaret, a building like an enormous *U*,” Deeba whispers “I wish my mum was here “I wish my mum was here,” [...] And my dad. Even my brother Hass.” and Zanna shares her longing. (90) The materiality of the letter takes an architectural form here as *U* shaped building reminds of the homonymous second person singular personal pronoun “you” and picture postcards of fabulous landscapes featuring the cliché line “I wish you were here,” placing lack, some sort of psychic insufficiency in the heart of the sublime aesthetic experience. This is a perfect example for one's emotional involvement with places, and for affective geography's understanding of feelings in terms of their socio-spatial mediation and articulation rather than just entirely interiorized, isolated subjective mental states (Bondi et al 3).

However, most prominently, in line with the environmentalist message of the novel, UnLunDun constitutes the negation of productive urban space in so far as it is an uncanny double, a fantastical city entirely built on discarded waste and powered by the MOIL technology, an acronym for “Mildly Obsolete In London.” Whatever is thrown away declared obsolete, in London – “an old computer, a broken radio, or whatever left on the streets” – It's there for a few days, and then it's just gone. ... It seeps into unLondon.” and “sprouts like mushrooms in the streets” of the undercity where “people find other uses for it.” (37) London above is portrayed as a hegemonic power structure blinded by capitalist consumerism,

contributing to environmental damage, discharging pollutants, chemicals, smoke from factories, power stations, and chimneys which take the monstrous embodiment of the arch-enemy Smog that threatens ‘lesser,’ imperceptible territories outside the home of the privileged few who are also responsible for circumscribing the realm of visibility. Cities in our reality are mirrored in skewed fashion across the trans-dimensional barrier known as the Odd, creating Abcities like Parisn’t, No York, Helsunki, Lost Angeles, Sans Fransisco, Hong Gone, Romeless, or UnLunDun.

Both the abcities’ attempt to fight environmental catastrophe by recycling waste (creating odd buildings, vehicles, clothes from trash) and the UnGun’s way of fighting the Smog by growing plants can be identified as feats of green urbanism. This is a fictional warning against the idea of cities being “parasites” on the natural and domesticated environment, since they make no food, clean no air, and purify only a limited amount of water to reuse (see Odum 1989). UnLunDun is a green city from many respects: apart from its zero-waste urban planning, its amazing variety of non-motorised transport, strange means of cycling and walking reduce carbon emission and facilitate a more sustainable, healthful lifestyle; odd buildings – like the house with a whole jungle inside – evoke inner-city gardens and green roofs’ capacity to purify air, absorb CO<sub>2</sub>, to maximize the resilience of the ecosystem through urban landscape, and most importantly, the connectedness of London and UnLunDun guarantees the acknowledgment of the connections and impacts on other cities, communities, and the larger planet, and hence the recognition of the necessity to live within one’s ecological limits. UnLunDun as a living, breathing, changing city makes these nearly spontaneous moves to reduce its ecological footprint, hence the adjustment of the relationship between natural and urban environment seems feasible, yet far from utopian idealism. Miéville’s city embraces a rather chaotic harmony reminiscent of an ever so busy playground.

### **Playable Cities**

The imaginativeness with which Miéville describes his fictional city is appealing because it resonates with a fashionable idea of contemporary urban planning. The notion of the Playable City toys with temporary experiments – of an interdisciplinary, architectural, design, and performance nature – which interrupt the cold anonymity and utilitarian efficiency of the metropolitan environment. It encourages collective public interactions that actively bring joy, and build a community of *homo ludens* who, by playing in the city, also can embark on a creative adventure thinking about what makes us human, and how we can reimagine a happier, more cohesive urban future for ourselves.

Playable Cities can be associated with the need for “an affectionate re-appropriation of public places” to redeem city-life from isolation and to facilitate a collective ludic interaction with our spatial surrounding “reinvested with meaning, history, and narratives” (Marinho in Baggini 2014). Many of Miéville’s fantastic architectural structures demand a creative attitude from the city dwellers, who will have to find their own ways in/to the building. The edifice of Manifest Station is perforated in several places “with what looked like random holes, and bursting from them were railway lines [springing] in different directions: horizontal; up like a roller coaster; corkscrewing down. A few hundred meters from the great building, they plunge(d) into holes in the street, and down into darkness” (66). Pons Absconditus is an evasive bridge that surely connects somewhere to somewhere but it largely depends on the pedestrians thoughts and feels about their destinations where it will eventually take them; while Wraithtown is kaleidoscopically surrounded by ghosts of earlier forms, just to mention a few examples.

Surprisingly, many of Miéville’s strange ideas have real life equivalents realized by creative gambits of contemporary urban design striving to create playable cities. Paolo Cirio’s

2012 “Street Ghosts” an ongoing international street art project featured life-sized, low-resolution pictures of people found on Google’s Street View printed and posted without authorization at the same spot where they were taken. The vague colors and lines on the posters – a result of Google’s facial blurring algorithm – give a ghostly aspect to the human figures, “unveiling their presence like a digital shadow haunting the real world,” exposing the “specters of Google’s eternal realm of private, misappropriated data.” The pedestrians are “casualties of the info-war taking place in the city” but the elusive nature of their physical presence also hold philosophical connotations along the lines of the *memento mori* tradition. (<http://streetghosts.net/>)

“Shadowing” designed by Jonathan Chomko and Matthew Rosier, “gave memory to city lights, enabling them to record and play back the shadows” of previous passerbyes to the next person who passed underneath them. The design duo aimed to “reanimate the city streets with ghostly time-travellers” in a playful communal memorial experience that also evoked the darker implications of shadows and the potential dangers pedestrians had to face in some suburban regions. Shadowing turned technological disconnectedness into a bond between strangers, while tackling the role of natural and artificial light in defining a city’s character, and the surveillance culture pervading contemporary urban spaces. (<http://shadowing.cc/>) It also resonated with the political message of the “Take Back the Night” marches which have been protesting and raising public awareness about the violence threatening women while walking in public alone in the dark.

“Urbanimals,” winner of the Playable City 2015 Award – introduced a playful pack of wild creatures created by Polish architects LAX (Laboratory of Architectural Experiments) to offer Bristol citizens the opportunity to “leap with graceful dolphins, chase a shy rabbit, find the secretive beetle or skip with a cheeky kangaroo. “Lurking behind walls, hiding in dark corners, curious creatures appear in unexpected areas of the city, in places of transition, places where people often do not contemplate their surroundings.” Urbanimals were designed with the intent to unsettle the process of habituation in which people get used to the affordances of built environment, “they aimed to lift your spirit with an invitation encouraging you to play.” ([http://lax.com.pl/portfolio\\_page/urbanimals/](http://lax.com.pl/portfolio_page/urbanimals/))

Tom Armitage and Gyorgyi Galik’s citywide platform for play, “Hello Lamp Post” invited people to attempt a whole new way of posthuman connectivity and communication, through lamp posts, post boxes and other familiar street furniture, by texting the unique codes found on each object. The codes normally used to identify public objects when in need of repair, became secret passwords that helped you to ‘wake up’ a sleeping object and discover what it had to say. “Would it be pleased to see you? Irritated at having been left in the rain? Or would it tell you a secret? Each exchange lasted for a few messages before you were asked to come back and talk some more another day. The more you played, the more the hidden life of the city was revealed.” (<http://www.hellolamppost.co.uk/>)

Many playable city projects offer low budget means to reimagine public spaces: installing pianos on streets to invite passerbyes to fill the city with melodies (“Play Me, I’m Yours” projects), growing fruit and vegetables in public spaces for everyone to share (“Incredible edible cities”), turning avenues into crowdfunded “park and slide” urban water slides (Jerram 2014), or organizing city-wide flashmobs from zombie chase games to mass pillowfights. The idea is to recuperate the long lost experience of the whole city being a child’s playground with the aim to “make cities new and renewed with landscape (urban memories), texture (human scale) and affection (place appropriation)” (Marinho in Baggini 2014).

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