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(Ir)rational Actors and the Politics of Unseeing: Resistance, Resilience, and the Lessons of the Plague Years

In China Miéville's 2009 novel The City & the City,<sup>1</sup> two independent city-states—Beszel and Ul-Qoma—occupy the same geographic space in an unspecified corner of the Balkans. More than simply existing side by side, Beszel and Ul-Qoma adjoin and interpenetrate one another, which means that a row of houses might be in one country, and the park across the street in the other. Exactly how this came about is left vague: Miéville implies it is an accident of the region's bloody, tangled history. In the process of learning where the boundaries between Beszel and Ul-Qoma are, residents must learn and internalize subtle differences in dress, in accent, and in architecture—a system that permits the city-states' interwoven coexistence to continue. One aspect of this peculiar state of municipal coexistence is the necessity of “unseeing” any foreigners who are on the other side of the border but within one's field of vision, no matter what they might be doing. Residents of that hypothetical row of houses in Beszel, for example, would not be able to see or hear a concert in the Ul-Qoman park opposite,

<sup>1</sup> China Miéville, The City & the City (London: Macmillan, 2009).

although by the end of the novel, the veracity of this shared assertion is very much called into question.

As an expatriate gay American man who by an accident of age and geography missed the grimness and trauma that residents of major cities such as San Francisco and New York had to survive (or not), and as a creative practitioner looking from the relative safety of Hong Kong at the train wreck the United States has turned into, I am interested in the tension that exists in literatures of difference. The City & the City is a fascinating take on difference because it places two nations side by side in plain sight of each other, yet has them operating under a sociopolitical façade of otherness and mutual invisibility. In many ways, my identity was formed by the distinct sense of belonging to a country next to and inside of another country that one acquires by being from the rural American South. Being gay only amplified this, as the risks (worse back then, better today, still precarious) associated with queerness often require constant monitoring of one's speech, actions, and movements in relation to one's surroundings. Like the novel, I lived in a narrative dominated by seeing and unseeing, of attempting to control the markers and mannerisms that would indicate my national orientation, so to speak. Those of us from the South in particular lived as Miéville's characters did, coexisting next to and among people

who did not want to see us for fear of the consequences. If they allowed themselves to acknowledge us, it would mean asking and perhaps answering discomfiting questions about things Americans can't talk about well: sexual identity, gender roles, regional identity, racism, and Dixie's place in modern American society. In both of these constructs, Miéville's novel and today's United States, what is fact and what is fiction?

In the novel, the only means of passing legally from one city to another is via the aptly named Copula Hall, a portal that occupies the same "grosstopic" (a term Miéville coined for the book, acknowledging physical/spatial proximity while allowing residents to maintain the illusion of unseeing one another) territory in both countries. Agents of a transnational entity known as Breach covertly maintain constant, near-ubiquitous surveillance. Not only is it illegal to cross these borders, even if one were literally walking across the street from Beszel into Ul-Qoma, but to do so would result in swift and severe consequences. Tourists wishing to visit either of the city-states are required to undergo training upon arrival in order to avoid inadvertently breaching the border by wandering down the wrong street or into the wrong building. This system has managed to function, Miéville implies, for centuries, an oddity to the outside world but one that endures despite and perhaps because of its complexity. But as might be expected, there is

resistance: the Unificationists, or "Unifs," an underground group that exists to challenge the necessity of the borders. According to their logic, of what use is maintaining the façade of invisible borders, needless divisions, and contrived differences? Considering when and where I grew up and came out, I understand the Unifs' argument against citizens seeing each other without seeing each other very well.

In The City & the City, there is little interaction between the two nations despite their "grosstopic" proximity; thus, a mythology accretes around each, much as is the case with the LGBT community and the segment of society that would prefer not to see us. Growing up in that environment, one learns to identify markers of membership in the opposing nation: the religious zealot, the gun-toting good ol' boy, the frat boy who might beat you up after you drunkenly fool around, the heterosexually married but obvious closet case who can't stand you because he can't stand himself. With time and experience, one improves at navigating the subtle boundaries between stereotype and survival. In the real world, queer transgressions of the border between invisibility and acknowledgment were not met by agents of Breach emerging from the woodwork to drag you away to a transnational oubliette that didn't officially exist; instead, the repercussions were more likely to involve a different and more literal form of violence. In the real world,

the opposing nation did not want to entertain the suggestion that it had gotten us all wrong. In both the real world and the fictional one, erasure was and still is often seen as the more expedient and less challenging way of dealing with unmentionables.

In my adult lifetime, I have witnessed the formation of several organized-resistance movements, starting with ACT-UP, Queer Nation, and their associated groups back in the '80s and early '90s. Although there have been others—Occupy Wall Street, the Umbrella Revolution here in Hong Kong, and arguably even Anonymous—my focus here is on the lessons learned from those early (to me) years of queer resistance. Apart from the obvious focus on improved medical treatment, what these groups all had in common was a demand to be seen. The most famous example of our invisibility was Ronald Reagan's refusal to address the HIV/AIDS crisis in word or in deed until after it had been going on for years.<sup>2</sup> Refusing to acknowledge us was literally killing us. Our resistance came from those of our community who were no longer willing to tolerate this enormity and demanded an end to it; our resilience came about because of the horrors we survived—not only death and disease but also the profound

<sup>2</sup> Randy Shilts, And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic (New York: St. Martin's P, 1987).

indignity of being considered too vile to be discussed in polite company. I joined in chants of "We're here! We're queer! Get used to it!" at any number of Pride marches and events back in the day. In a way, the Unificationist plot thread in The City & the City mirrors this demand to be seen—and to stop being others.

The City & the City is essentially a murder mystery, even if it takes a while to get past the initial "What's going on?" bit and into the story. In it, a young American woman, a graduate student, is murdered in a manner that makes it clear to investigators that the killer has taken advantage of the borders and the culture that perpetuates them. Thus, the system faces a serious existential challenge, and what sets things in motion is essentially a catastrophe of suffering. In the novel, the death that gets the story started only results in the end of unseeing for one character. The activism of the plague years was about more than a demand for treatment and research: it was a very public rejection of homophobia and of the closet—unseeing writ large. This process that had already been underway since at least the '60s,<sup>3</sup> but in the space of less than a decade, and as

<sup>3</sup> Roy Cain, "Disclosure and Secrecy among Gay Men in the United States and Canada: A Shift in Views," Journal of the History of Sexuality 2.1 (1991): 25-45.

the death toll from HIV/AIDS worsened, homosexuality itself was suddenly no longer the affliction of deviants.

By refusing to see anything but a sinful otherness, the opposing nation has sometimes tacitly and sometimes openly called for wholesale eradication. To present, to pass, to perform gender according to societal norms; to die in abjection, disposed of and quickly forgotten: the lesson from this era was that resistance, to be effective, must be rooted in absolute moral and intellectual clarity about the utter rejection of these toxic systems.

One sees this in the work from the authors of the day: Paul Monette's memoirs Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir (1988) and Last Watch of the Night (1994); in the novels of Armistead Maupin (the Tales of the City series [1978-1982]) and Felice Picano (Like People in History [1995]); and in journalistic accounts of this era such as Randy Shilts's And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic. The fiction of the pre-AIDS years was in and of itself a form of resistance born of the same refusal to go on tolerating this state of not-to-be-spoken-of-in-polite-company invisibility. The elegia of Andrew Halloran's Dancer from the Dance (1978) and Edmund White's A Boy's Own Story (1982), the punishment-for-daring-to-exist narrative of Patricia Nell Warren's The Front Runner (1974), and the brutal self-loathing of Larry Kramer's Faggots (1978) all

conjure a bygone era that may have been safer, virally speaking, but that we still wouldn't want to revisit. Even the outwardly childlike simplicity of Keith Haring's artwork was like a bud vase affixed to the dashboard of a tank: unexpected whimsy atop unstoppable movement. We, the people who had existed sight-unseen in plain sight like the characters in Miéville's intertwined cities all our lives were suddenly, horrifyingly visible, and it was because we were dying. Whether our resistance was strident or quiet, it remained absolute.

There are, of course, major differences. In Miéville's fictional universe, the unseeing is mutual, cultural, not exactly a choice (because of the consequences Breach imposes upon transgressors) but also not overtly oppressive. In the real world, however, the queer world and the straight one do not exist side by side as more-or-less equal partners. The unseeing was and still is mostly a one-way process: straight people did not want to see us in the public sphere, and for a long time, until we started dying, they didn't have to. Another significant difference between the book and real life is the baggage that comes with identity: the gay men of Generation X who came out during the '80s—those years of terror and bereavement—tended to experience a commingling of our gay identities with the likelihood of being disease vectors unlikely to survive into our fifties. That was how we saw ourselves; that was how we were

seen.<sup>4</sup> No one expected us to live, least of all us; and yet, some of us did. In The City & the City, certain mythologies exist: the Beszelites think the Ul-Qomans are rich snobs, and the Ul-Qomans think the Beszelites are backward Eurobumpkins. But neither side is marked for death merely because it exists. In some respects, today's world is much better than it used to be, but the illegitimate Trump kakistocracy is rolling back any and every LGBT-related form of legal protection enacted during the Obama administration or before. As a queer American who survived by resisting a surrounding culture that I never completely belonged to, I appreciate the lesson in uneasy coexistence that Miéville's novel teaches. At the same time, I can't help but wish for a sequel, one in which the resistance scores a massive victory, smashing the power structure that mandates unseeing.

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<sup>4</sup> Carrie A. Springer and Suzanne H. Lease, "The Impact of Multiple AIDS-Related Bereavement in the Gay Male Population," Journal of Counseling and Development 78.3 (2000): 297-304; Robert M. Kertzner, "Entering Midlife: Gay Men, HIV, and the Future," Journal of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association 1 (1997): 87-95.