

**“To Forget their Concrete Reality”:
Deconstruction, Abjection, and Ethics in *Perdido Street Station***

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Abstract:

This paper explores the monstrous slake-moths in *Perdido Street Station* as an abject threat, destabilizing the modes of categorization by which society is organized but also by which a meaningful subjectivity is maintained. Reconsidering the novel's critical treatment with regard to Miéville's Marxism, I ask what psychological and ethical valences the first of the Bas-Lag trilogy asks of the possibilities of radical deconstructionism which is frequently deployed as the discursive precursor to collectivist politics. I suggest that the text stages a critique of existing modes of rigid categorization, including a particularly troubling mind/body dualism, via the slake-moths' abject destruction in society. However, I show how the text registers a dissatisfaction with poststructuralism as an endpoint or even as an unchecked tool, maintain the need for internal systems of discrimination, crucial to subjectivity, which must be preserved.

Keywords: Abject, deconstruction, ethics, poststructuralism, subjectivity, heroism

I. Subjectivity and Collectivism

In Ursula Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* the protagonist discovers his dreams alter the nature of reality. When his therapist discovers this and uses hypnotism to induce a dream that brings about a utopia without racial oppression, the protagonist awakens to a grey world devoid of racial difference but populated instead with flavorless food and undifferentiated ideas. *The Lathe of Heaven* joins a long list of texts which worry that the process by which society might dissolve those distinctions which determine first difference and then, all too frequently, power dynamics, might also eliminate the keys to individual subjectivity itself. Dystopias like Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron" make this critique explicit, imagining a future in which enforced equality destroys everything from human excellence to artistic expression. Frequently, this critique is leveled by reactionary narratives which juxtapose a cold-war communist collectivism against what gets characterized as a capitalist individualism. But as both Le Guin's and Vonnegut's politics can attest, these concerns are hardly relegated to reactionaries across a

tidy Left/Right divide. Indeed, China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* should be considered among these texts, registering a pointed critique of the voracious political impulse to disturb the boundary lines of social and cultural systems, despite the promising political potential of doing so.

The kraken's share of Miéville scholarship has been animated by the author's avowed Marxist sympathies and the various, elusive, and sometimes contradictory ways they emerge in the worlds he depicts. Likewise, much notice has been paid to Miéville's formal and genre play—a play, it has been argued, itself motivated by an interest in both the realist denunciations of capitalist excesses and fantasies of alternative systems, always so difficult to imagine. But the central metaphors of the first novel in Miéville's celebrated Bas-Lag trilogy, *Perdido Street Station*, asks questions of a psychological dimension that exist in tension with the novel's political concerns. In this paper, I argue that the implications of the novel's primary narrative device, the slake-moths' attack, moves forward the cause of social disruption necessary to radical political revolution but by the same methods abjectly threatens the interiorities of the characters for whom the reader roots and with whom they sympathize. With this device, Miéville structures a critique of a possible endpoint of the tools of deconstructivism towards utopianist ends, depicting a destabilization evacuated of referent, the implications of which sees the dismantling of oppressive social structures but also threaten the subjectivity of individuals. The text's dual ending—the defeat of the monstrous threat external to the protagonists and the reveal of a monstrous element internal to their group—help delimit those deconstructive methods which undermine subjectivity in dissolving the apparatus of social and political hegemony.

The characterization of the Bas-Lag trilogy carefully negotiating the promises of political revolution alongside its dangers and cognitive elusiveness has already been critically established, and unsurprisingly so, given Miéville's refreshing depictions. The gritty "realism" of the novels extends beyond rounded characters and convincing world-building into nuanced and multifaceted depiction of the trilogy's political aspirations. Sherryl Vint writes of the second novel that its "dissatisfaction with the present and longing for a better world can be articulated in repressive as well as liberatory ways. The power of Miéville's *The Scar* derives precisely from its appreciation of this tension" (Vint 2009, 277-278). Likewise, Nicholas Birns suggests of the third, that "*Iron Council* suspends the coming of a new era, without deferring it. It sees what obstacles lie in the way of revolution, but does not relapse into defeatist cynicism. The novel's ending admits a realistic inadequacy, while keeping faith with the fantastic hope for transformation" (Bint 2009, 210). My reading of the first novel in the trilogy suggests a similar, cautious optimism. But instead of revolutionary aspirations tempered with a concern for repressive practices, I see the abject force of the slake-moths representing a psychological danger inherent to the method of social destabilization that the text's politics relies on. Echoing Emile Durkheim's concept of anomie, a normlessness associated with the increasing dissolution of social and cultural norms in modernity, Miéville registers a concern for the destructive dangers of deconstructivism, that frequent implementation toward Marxist aims in cultural discourses.

Miéville's novel introduces the neo-Victorian world of Bas-Lag and the major metropolis of New Crobuzon, where humans and nonhumans, as well as a ruthless mercantile class and a brutalized lower class, live in uneasy cohabitation. This world is powered by a bizarre mixture of steampunk technologies, and magical processes conducted by thaumaturges. The protagonist, Isaac, a university professor and scientific researcher, accepts a private project from a disgraced and disfigured member of winged nonhumans called Garuda, asking Isaac to create new wings to replace those his tribe saw fit to cut away. Isaac's subsequent employment of petty criminals and street urchins to acquire all manner of flighted species for study produces a strange larva which turns out to be an unborn slake-moth, the soon-to-be monster of the plot. After a short incubation period in Isaac's lab the young slake-moth escapes and frees its kindred from an illegal drug operation which harvests slake-moth fecal matter for its psychedelic properties. Over the next days the slake-moths prey on the New Crobuzon populous and nearly topple the drug empire, the University, and the city government. Isaac leads a small group, including the disgraced, wingless Garuda, a pro-labor journalist, and an emerging artificial intelligence called The Construct Council against the slake-moths; their ultimate success relying on a new technology called the Crisis Engine.

The conventional nature of the plot—hero opens a can of worms (almost literally), hero battles the consequences, hero succeeds—belies the refusal of other narrative conventions. One such refusal lies in the depiction of slake-moths as abject disruptions of oppressive social and political status quos. The slake-moth's function in the text showcases the power of dismantling the categories and systems of order by which hegemony is preserved. Their disruption of binary systems and this disruption's political promise comprise section two of this paper. But another refusal of convention emerges in the novel's uncomfortable ending in which the reader learns with Isaac that the hitherto ally and sympathetic Garuda, Yagharek, whom Isaac is helping to reshape for flight, had his wings stripped according to cultural custom as punishment for a brutal rape, a crime is categorized by his people a "choice theft." The phrasing anticipates Isaac's own crucial choice regarding his contract with Yagharek, on which he recants his commitment. The final section of this essay examines this moment of crucial subjective choice as a counterpoint to the deconstructionist impulses represented in the slake-moths, whose attacks would have rendered Isaac unable to make such a choice, even as the attacks dismantle other forms of oppressive constraints.

This reading, focused on the ethical and psychological subjectivity of the individual, necessarily requires some defense, as it flows against the more obvious tenor of the Marxist interpretations illustrated of Vint, Birns, and Steve Shaviro, who reads the slake-moths as "just capitalism with an (appropriately) inhuman face" (Shaviro 2002, 288). Miéville's work thoroughly resists classical models of "heroic" fantasy and science fiction, indeed, has spoken in interviews of his suspicions of "high fantasy," characterized by savior-like heroes and what has been criticized as consolatory nostalgic politics. Despite his vocal (though, perhaps rhetorically

motivated dismissal of Tolkien and his followers), Miéville's fiction is not without an individualist impulse as well. Christopher Palmer has shown Miéville's own heroic fellowships to be comprised of both a diversely democratic group working toward collectivist goals but also a few key solitary figures. Palmer writes that "Miéville repeatedly dramatizes group solidarity and achievement [...] Yet Miéville is equally preoccupied with the loner, the private or secretive individual, or the irresponsible individualist" (Palmer 2009, 277). This model, apparent in Isaac's relation to the fomenting collectivist revolution in the text, evinces a concurrent concern for individual questions of subjectivity as well as for broader political and social advancements. What is more, toward these jockeying concerns, the slake-moth's dually abject role both promises liberation from the limiting structures supporting capitalism and threatens the individual which might be liberated from them.

In using the term "subjectivity," I rely on the most fundamental definition: the "quality or condition of being based on subjective consciousness, experience, etc." according to the OED. I am particularly interested in the way subjectivity is made manifest in the text as an individual's capacity to make meaningful, ethical choices. But it is worth noting that Miéville's is hardly a naïve or idealistic representation of it as an autonomous, pure, or individual concept. In keeping with the author's socially conscious work, the text shows subjectivity itself to be always inter-subjective, contextualized by social frameworks, produced in part by economic forces. And this is exactly why the slake-moths almost must function both promisingly *and* threateningly—the systems which constrain economic and social freedom which the moths disrupt are also markers which provide crucial references for making choices. That the novel sustains a politically subversive side-plot, with Derkhan (whose name is tantalizingly close to Durkheim's), Jack Half-a-Prayer, and the fReemade, also seeking to dismantle codified systems toward their collectivist aims, cannot help but fuse with the similar slake-moth disruption of such systems and illustrate the interconnected concerns of collectivism and subjectivity.

Miéville is not alone in asking these questions, admitting that he is exploring "models of consciousness that [...] explain social agency" (Gordon Int. 2003), nor is he alone in imagining the role of the individual hero in collectivist struggles. In his disquisition on heroism in literature, Mikhail Bakhtin writes:

From within himself, a living human being positions himself in the world actively; his consciously lived life is a process of performing actions at every moment of it. I act through deed, word, thought, and feeling; I live, I come-to-be through my acts. However, I neither express myself nor determine myself through my acts; I actualize through them something that has validity with respect to objects and meaning... (Bakhtin 1990, 138)

I turn to Bakhtin who helps, in the words of his translator, Michael Holquist, "provide what has often felt to be lacking in Marx: a more complex theory of the individual subject in such otherwise collectivist phenomena as class struggle" (Holquist 1990, XLI), "inscribing a

Marxist emphasis on politics, economics, and social theory into dialogism's obsession with the personhood of individuals" (Holquist XLV). This Bakhtinian sense of the hero and of meaningful choice helps to measure the limitations of the abstract, pluralizing forces of deconstruction represented by the slake-moths in the novel.

II. Binaries and Abjection

One of the primary targets of abject deconstruction which the slake-moths affect, and one with specific contributions to hegemony, is the social construct of mind-body dualism as it is used as an organizing principle of society. *Perdido Street Station's* setting of New Crobuzon evinces mind-body distinctions in its very structure, which contributes to its gentrification and racial demarcation. The city is semi-segregated into racial neighborhoods for the vodyanoi, the khepri, the cactacae, and "stratified," "divided spatially [...] in terms of economics and social privilege" (Langer 2010, 178). The lower class and the racially marginalized, however, are forced to contend with their body in ways from which the upper class appear exempt. For instance, the poor are often victims of cruel practices of "remaking," a process of bio-grafting used to alter individuals for specific jobs or punishment. "There's so much contempt, prejudice against them" (Miéville 2001, 93), Derkhan, the novel's altruistic journalist, laments before relating the story of a poor woman punished for smothering her baby by having its arms grafted to her forehead. Individuals are remade to serve as soldiers, gladiators, even fetishized sex objects. Rich Paul Cooper situates the remade in terms of social order: "Remade in New Crobuzon, as a created race, serve to splinter and subdivide the social field [...] Certain fragmented groups are designated 'abnormal,' a designation that allows 'normality' to flourish in contradiction to the abnormal other" (Cooper 2010, 217). Like gothic monsters of the past, whose expulsion as other unifies the community in normality, the distinction of racial difference is a means of preserving hegemony. Even those not remade but just inhuman are *defined* by their bodies, specifically, the ways their bodies differ from humans. For instance, the reader learns of the cactacae's limited sovereignty in their city sector due to a reformed "Sapience Bill" which finally gave the "cactacae something approaching citizenship" (Miéville 2001, 512). That a "sapience bill" grants citizenship demonstrates how inclusion within the society is determined by the capacity of the mind, just as exclusion is predicated on differences of the body.

Following the same logic as the deep embodiedness of New Crobuzon's poor, the notion of the mind solidifying citizenship and separating the powerful from the powerless is reinforced by the description of the city's governmental figures and the academic community, who enjoy patronage from high-ranking officials. The most striking aspect of these figures, given the novel's almost obsessive description of the grime in the street, is that most of the upper class are not described at all. The mayor, his cronies, the professors with whom Isaac works, are all simply... human. Their bodies are not factored into their existence, instead they occupy their bodies as mere vessels to pursue their work of intellectual pursuits and control. What is more, their *method*

of control is bodiless, just as the method of punishing the poor is completely bodily. The secretive "militia," the police state enforcers, "didn't like to be seen" but relied on, "a vast network of informers" (Miéville 2001, 267). Rather than employ the frightening presence of imposing bodies like the warrior *cacatae*, the "invisible" militia opted to "blend in" (Miéville 2001, 268) before striking out at subversive elements of society. All this is to say that, like the university, the powerful military police are defined not by their bodies but by the unimportance of their bodies. Another example of this divide are the handlungers, a race of "parasitic" (Miéville 2001, 441) and "psychic" (Miéville 2001, 467) beings who latch on to other bodies to use and control with their thoughts. It is no surprise that these beings of primarily mental capacity seem to be the highest ranking nonhumans the city of New Crobuzon has to offer, often working with the government at the highest levels.

These descriptions of New Crobuzon replicate binary distinction between mind and body which the slake-moth event dissolves, abjectly disrupting the ordering structures of the city, the very process of categorization. The creatures function in a manner similar to what Barbara Creed defines in the landmark essay, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," whose source material, the film *Alien*, Miéville has cited as specifically influential to his own work (Gordon Int. 2003). Creed's theoretical framework of abject monstrosity, and Kristeva's psychological research from which Creed draws, help define the abject as precisely this mode of disturbance whereby Miéville calls into question systems of organization, particularly those set up as binary oppositions and those set up to police the populous of New Crobuzon. Kristeva's most cogent articulations of the abject insist on the instability of the abject in relation to the law and order and with which the ego contends and defines itself.

It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite . . . Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law (Kristeva 1982, 2)

Creed uses the term in tandem with a modern sf/horror film and shows Kristeva's abject as a fecund space for thinking through monstrosity in relation to the divisions and systems which organize the social structures in imagined worlds such as Miéville's. The slake-moth's dissolving power in New Crobuzon mirror Creed's insistence that, "abject things are those which highlight the 'fragility of the law' and which exist on the other side of the border which separates out the living subject from that which threatens its extinction" (Creed 1986, 48). This construction of a threat wholly opposed to me without being other (rather, being un-me) and threatening the laws by which the self and otherness are organized describes the unsettling and intriguing crisis of *Perdido Street Station*, a crisis first made manifest in its disruption of the "systems and order" of the city's most persistent categorizations.

The moths' disruptive act is in part the arbitrariness of its feeding, ignoring the categorizations and order of the city. Derkhan writes in her subversive pamphlet that the militia do not protect the

poor as they do the wealthy: “*it’s one law for the rich, another for the poor!*” (Miéville 2001, 127). The slake-moth’s equal opportunity attacks, however, throw into an uproar the ruling powers by ignoring the unspoken, or perhaps too loudly spoken, boundary between rich and poor neighborhoods—it does not respect borders. “We’re all *food*,” (Miéville 2001, 275) the Mayor points out to his defense committee, more concerned with the collapsing distinction between his constituency and the poverty stricken streets than with the danger of the slake-moth itself. It is this equalizing quality of the moth attacks which so demands attention, not just because the upper class were vulnerable but because the equality of vulnerability questions the logic of the city’s organization. The epidemic which increases in magnitude throughout the text makes these terms perfectly clear. “The plague of mindlessness” which the slake-moths cause, “was not discriminating. Whole and Remade were taken. Human [victims] were found, and khepri and vodyanoi” (Miéville 2001, 435). In this fashion the moths operate abjectly, destroying the structures that operate, as Creed writes, “as a means of separating the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject” (Creed 1986, 45). The first victim of the moths’ attack is precisely this organizing structure and the possibility of cleanly separating the human from the non, or, the more-sentient from the more-bodily as the two are figured in New Crobuzon. And it comes as no surprise that this disruption is used by the fReemade movement to further their rebellion against the oppressive system (Miéville 2001, 642).

I should take a moment here to address one of the major theorizations of the slake-moths, in both Shaviro’s and Carl Freedman’s work. Echoing Shaviro’s claim that the slake-moths represent the unslakable, voracious hunger of capitalism, Freedman agrees that their vampiric nature literalizes Marx’s theory of capitalism, “sucking the creative powers and life out of the wage-earning proletariat” (Freedman 2015, 33). In a lovely and moving turn, Freedman argues that the dominating nature of the “slake-moths must be understood as something like the precise opposite of the lovemaking” (Freedman 2015, 31), which he examines in the inter-species relationship of Isaac and Lin. Freedman writes that a “utopian figure for the species and class politics [lies in an] Adornian peace—the interinanimation of distinct entities without domination—that is figured in the lovemaking of Lin and Isaac is the principle that guides the revolutionary movement” (Freedman 2015, 28-29). Against this, and “[a]ntithetical to the peaceful love” lies the “voraciousness of these monsters [...] who stand for utter domination and the crushing of all distinctness” (Freedman 2015, 31). Freedman, notes that the process of the slake-moth’s attack, causes “utter leveling of all distinctness among the various intelligent species” such that “[i]ndividuals who have their minds stolen become [...] interchangeable with one another” (Freedman 2015, 31). My reading is predicated on the same view of the effect of the moths’ attack but argues a different sense of what the moths may represent. While it is certainly possible to interpret the slake-moths as a cypher for capitalist rapacity, there is also evidence (provided already and to come) for reading them as the literalization of the deconstructivist impulse of postmodernity. This impulse, unchecked, can likewise destroy

categorization and, as Miéville argues, has its own rapacity for "colonizing lots of techniques and implying that anything like those techniques is therefore 'postmodernist.'" (Gordon Int. 2003). And like Freedman, I see a crucial counterpoint to the dominating and flattening effect of the slake-moths, not in Isaac and Lin's relationship, but in Isaac's relationship to his own interior system of ethics.

To discern how we might see the slake-moths manifesting the cataclysmic destruction of distinctions represented by the instincts of postmodern deconstructionism, we must look beyond the equal opportunist nature of the slake-moths that abjectly calls into question binary systems, to the manner of the slake-moth attack and the ambiguity of the moths' biology which challenge such demarcation. Just as the slake-moths collapse the social distinctions of the city, so too does its attack abjectly disrupt conceptions by being both mentally and physically monstrous, sublime and grotesque as the two are formally figured. Early on Isaac makes the distinction that "[w]hatever energy" the slake-moths get from feeding "it's not physical" (Miéville 2001, 188). Indeed, similar to the Weaver, they are beings of "unstable dimensions [...] various planes" (Miéville 2001, 374) and are not limited to "regular space" (Miéville 2001, 543). Like their slipping forms, their attacks come ambiguously, a mixture of their licking, "ambiguous tongues," (Miéville 2001, 469) and some extra-physical syphoning. This strange combination of images and ideas doesn't just leave the reader unsure, questioning what precisely has taken place, even the scientist who harvests the moths for the government concedes that the "*manner* of [the victim's] death is not specified" (Miéville 2001, 378). Even after the fact, the text suggests, the irresolvability of the creatures' disturbance defies categorization.

At first glance it may appear that the slake-moth's feeding on the *mind* and leaving behind the empty *body* would again reinforce the idea of the mind and body as separate, justifying the city's organization and impulse to hierarchize its races. To this question, Langer reads into the porous terminology of the minds in Miéville's New Crobuzon novels, registering, "a tension between embodiedness and disembodiedness of minds, the idea that minds can become disembodied when their bodily boundaries are crossed" (Miéville 2001, 182). But Langer's account still falls back on too easy a distinction of the moths "eating minds" only to "leave the rest—bodies" (Miéville 2001, 184). The distinction is complicated when one reads the subtle details of exactly what the slake-moths feed upon. The slake-moth's diet is specifically *not* just thoughts or minds but the space of contradiction that minds can create. The resident slake-moth expert in the novel insists that they "did *not* eat anyone's brain" nor their consciousness (Miéville 2001, 374-5). Instead, we are told that it is the hidden crannies of minds, the "guilty thoughts [...] self-reflexive thought" and, most crucially, the "subconscious" with its ability for contradictory emotions which is the moth's "peculiar brew" of choice (Miéville 2001, 374-5). In this way, the moths feed on precisely what they are: things which conflate, which sustain contradictions and paradoxes. Locating their nutrients only in the subconscious and guilty self-reflective desires, we see that they seek the simultaneous desire and guilt-for-that-desire which occupies the deepest

recesses of dreams and nightmares. Just as they are creatures of dissolving binaries, so too do they grow and subsist off, not a mind as opposed to a body, but a being's deep investment in contradictions. What is more, the leavings of their feast in the seeming-lifeless body is the primary symbol of the abject. Creed writes, that the "ultimate in abjection is the corpse" (Creed 1986, 47), calling it the thing which destroys the very differentiation between life and death—the more so in this case, as the catatonic victims are even less distinct with regard to the boundary between death and life. In these ways, the slake-moths continually function abjectly, transgressing against the existing codes and categorizations of society by disrupting their boundary markers.

Another way we see how the abject disruption of fixed binaries initially destabilizes social order, is with attention to the peculiar sexualization which the slake-moths' attacks elicit. Like the xenomorph from *Alien*, the confusing and compounding imagery of slake-moth feeding invokes both the trope of a masculine rape, complete with phallic penetration, and the trope of a feminine seduction, creating the desire for the very danger it threatens. The moth encounters of the novel usually occur as a strange balance of the ultra-violent penetration of the moth's many dangerous devices and the entrancing dance of colors and shapes which are irresistible to the onlooker. Despite the fear evoked by an almost absurd array of phallic appendages: "monstrous [...] enormous tongue" (Miéville 2001, 466), the "tentacles," "massive teeth" (Miéville 2001, 465), and "tail-harpoon" (Miéville 2001, 471), the victims are first entranced by "something extraordinary" (Miéville 2001, 667) which the slake-moth's wings offer, their "color and light and shadow, by the interplay of shapes and lines, negative and positive spaces" (Miéville 2001, 667). The attacks disrupt both the mind/body distinctions of the sublime and grotesque as well as gender binaries by the stubborn and insistent irresolvability. And like their previous disruptions, this act carries with it a distinctly liberatory quality in dismantling gender roles.

The gendered associations of the slake-moths themselves, like those of their method of attack, disrupt concretized binary gendering. Initially, a scientist claims that they "are hermaphrodites" (Miéville 2001, 379) but later a more complex relation to gender is revealed. Similar to Le Guin's androgyne Gethenians from *The Left Hand of Darkness*, the slake-moths enter into a mating ritual in which one assumes the role of the soon-to-be mother. In the novel's only mating scene the creatures fight viciously in the air above New Crobuzon, they "became suddenly fertile and aggressively aroused [...] and] bickered lecherously to be female," until all but one "accepting defeat and masculinity" (Miéville 2001, 499-500). With this final clause, and in a manner not dissimilar to Le Guin's playfully self-conscious line, "The king was pregnant" (Miéville 2001, 100), Miéville makes us privy to the slake-moth mating ritual and toys with our perceptions about dominant sexuality roles and gender binaries. And yet, even these eventually identifiable roles the moths embody are not permanent. Later in the story one of the moths refers to its companions as "sisterbrother" (Miéville 2001, 648) and suggests that next time another might assume the role of female, ensuring that even the biological necessity of roles in the mating process is subject to change in future mating cycles.

Several of these examples carry with them potent political possibilities—challenging mind-body dualism, racial and class categories, and the gender binary. But Miéville hints that the dangers in the moths lay in the ways that the deconstructive process begins to undo even the systems of language which form the core of meaning-making. Like many of the deconstructive ur-texts, including Jacques Derrida's and Jean Baudrillard's, the slake-moth's dissolution of structure functions linguistically as well, or rather, in the failure of language to properly signify. As extra-dimensional creatures, the slake-moths are called "utterly alien" (Miéville 2001, 331) and seem nearly impossible to comprehend, predict, or describe. But more important than this abstract incomprehensibility is the specific language used to describe crucial aspects of the moths. During an attack the protagonists witness, it is the "unspeakable tongue" (Miéville 2001, 365) which threatens physically but also abjectly as it threatens both unspeakable tongues and unspeaking tongues, the sublime fear of being inarticulatable and the grotesque, castrating fear of being made unable to articulate. Moreover, the slake-moth is called an "unthinkable creature" (Miéville 2001, 543), whose hypnotic appendages extend as "unthinkable wings" (Miéville 2001, 665). Even more disruptive than the possibility of being unspeakable and making one incapable of speech, is the slake-moths' being impossible to think and making their victims incapable of thinking. This frightening disturbance of systems of ontology and signification contributes to the moth's overwhelming abjection, their tsunami-like overturning of the most fundamental system of categorization in language.

The Construct Council, a foil for the moths narratively, helps contextualize the moth's irreconcilability with a similar combination of sublimity and grotesqueness. The Council is an AI born in a scrap-heap which collects society's cast-off machines into itself in search of greater knowledge. In a scene where the Council kills a moth, it is the remarkable, unspoken similarities between them which stand out. The "complex unity" of the slake-moth is praised just after we are told of the awe-inspiring unity with which the Council's varied parts operate together (Miéville 2001, 472). Likewise, the slake-moth's "intricate flesh," "rapacious totality" and "unthinkable, inhuman symmetry, cells multiplying like obscure and imaginary numbers" (Miéville 2001, 473) could almost describe the Council which surrounds it, which is growing exponentially and geometrically. It is not just sublimity which the monstrosities share but a grotesqueness as well. The first slake-moth attack begins when the moth's "terrible shape squeezed and folded [...] to push its organic folds and spines and bulk through the window [...] contracting in invisible, impossible directions" (Miéville 2001, 361). Miéville writes that the "impression was of an impossible birth" (Miéville 2001, 361), arousing the death/life conflation of the abject but also the abject disruption of language with the repetition of impossibility. Similarly, the Construct Council extends its own tendrils through the city. We watch as one of its worshipers "grabbed the rough end of the cable and tried to thrust it between the bars" until he eventually "shoved the cable hard into the ragged hole," (Miéville 2001, 611) mirroring the strange movements and entrance of the slake-moth. And of course, the text describes this too as

“some grotesque inversion of birth” (Miéville 2001, 611). The two figures, the slake-moths and the Construct Counsel, parallel each other’s abject mockery of procreation, and it is the very difference of these two figures which likewise encourages the notion of deconstructed binaries. The abject horrors don’t just dissolve the boundaries structuring systems of meaning, they likewise dissolve the very boundaries which distinguish themselves.

The slake-moths’ abjectness and its embodiment of endless rapacity and procreation signals the dangers inherent to its deconstructionism: that it knows no ends. And in the novel’s climax it is significantly the collapsing of binary distinctions which is the moth’s undoing as well. The first suggestion that combined oppositions defeats the slake-moths comes in the form of the mirror. The characters and the scientists admit to not knowing why viewing the hypnotizing patterns through a mirror protects the viewer (Miéville 2001, 374), but it likely has something to do with the bringing together of reciprocals—in this case, it is combination of the thing with its mirrored reflection. That the combination of opposites deflects the slake-moths is reinforced by the finale in which Isaac uses the Crisis Engine to bridge together the disparate beings of the Weaver and the Construct Council. Isaac is in essence bridging two minds which we are told are at odds—the Weaver defined as driven *purely* by the desire to manipulate reality into an *aesthetic* “worldweave” (Miéville 2001, 334) and the Construct Council which is “a calculating machine [with] no neuroses, no hidden depths” (Miéville 2001, 477). Even more pronounced is the Crisis Engine, which connects the two powerful minds, and is itself predicated on opposites. Isaac describes the mathematics behind the engine as defying the most basic logic wherein “y and z were unified, bounded wholes” (Miéville 2001, 633). The explosive power of the engine requires the unstable, it needed the “paradoxical, unsustainable, the application of logic tearing itself apart” (Miéville 2001, 633). This is remarkably similar to the slake-moth’s own power, described as projecting wing-images “random and inconstant as oil,” yet having a “perfect reflection” (Miéville 2001, 362) on the opposing wing. The Crisis Engine which defeats the moths, like the moths themselves, combines the incalculable with perfect mathematical symmetry.

III. Politics and Ethics

But what is the significance of this combination and why does it eliminate the slake-moths? It may be that such fusion is merely another way of depicting the constructed nature of binary systems by showing their proclivity for collapse. That the two sides can merge suggests a sympathy between them belying their systematic disavowal. Christopher Palmer writes of Crisis energy, “that when opposite qualities or entities meet, this meeting exacerbates the energies in each, producing an unstable situation in which the opposites exist in a zone of interaction or overlap and are no longer opposites” (Palmer 2009, 226). The paradox defies the sorts of binary oppositions which this paper catalogues as the framework of hegemony. The moths, like the Crisis Engine, produce instability and interaction which disrupts the powers in place and their primacy as the only eventuality. There persists in *Perdido Street Station* a sense that the slake-

moth's threat to systems of order and the moth's sustenance on a being's deepest repressions describes a critique of such *internalized* categorizations and identifications. That mirrors inoculate would-be victims could indicate that reflecting on one's own inner inconsistencies makes one impervious to the threat of abjection—we are vulnerable to the abject only insofar as we grant power to the order it dissolves. Likewise, that bridging disparate consciousnesses through the equally disparate Crisis Engine evaporates the slake-moths entirely, suggests that society coming to grips with its plurality, paradoxes, and incalculability eliminates the threat, like a controlled burn does a ravaging fire. The abject's threat to subjectivity and order, preying on deep investments in constructions of ourselves and the world based on the rule of law, is stemmed should that subjectivity or that order itself embrace a fractured plurality.

Yet, the moths' attack on the order and distinctions of systems traditionally bound up in protocols of restriction and privilege *also* threaten any possibility of meaningful subjectivity. This occurs in a manner tellingly parallel to the political abstraction which offers only an indefinite waste in the place of capitalist hegemony. If we compare the power of the Crisis Engine to the similarly disruptive Possibility Sword in *The Scar*, it suggests these precise dangers. In discussing the Possibility Sword, Kendrick argues that "Miéville's Marxism expresses itself in [a protagonist's] dislike for the [...] 'vague, pluralist reality'" these devices promise (Kendrick 2009, 271). Vint too has registered this latent problem at the heart of these machines of change which destabilize concreteness, noting that, even with their power, "[i]t is difficult to walk this line between the risks of pluralist openness, which lacks any drive toward a better world, and those of utopia turned into constrained program, which attempts to impose a common vision" (Vint 2009, 288). I'd suggest that both the Crisis Engine's ultimately unfulfilling promise of radical openness and the slake-moth's erasure of the subconscious, structure a consistent concern for the limitations of abstract deconstruction without meaningful subjective, ethical distinctions. If the abject is that which troubles the ordering of the social, "[w]hat does not respect borders, positions, rules" then it is also "what disturbs identity" (Kristeva 1982, 4), troubles the productive tensions within the self. The radical openness enabled by the abject, deprived of immobile monuments of definition, is a boon to collective revolution but should be toward the ends that one may exercise a subjectivity these possibilities promise. The novel makes this clear and indicates the terms of this subjectivity in the final pages as meaningful ethical choices and communal values left undissolved by the moths.

In the novel's secondary ending, it is the moments of individual ethical choice that matter most, especially as they are shown to stand alternative to systems of politics and law. Isaac learns of Yagharek's choice-theft, what we would call a rape against a Garuda, who proudly describes herself as a "concrete individual" (Miéville 2001, 691). And Isaac likewise faces a difficult choice, whether to follow through on his own obligation to Yagharek or respect the tribal law handed down which left him earthbound. It is not the result of Isaac's choice which is so crucial in the end but the fact of it, the necessity of his subjective decision which must come at the expense of one system of social expectation. Kar'uchai, who Yagharek attacked, makes it clear that "[i]t is up

to [Isaac] to let justice be” (Miéville 2001, 691). “It is the only crime we *have*” Kar’uchai goes on, “[t]o take the choice of another... to forget their concrete reality, to abstract them, to forget that you are a node in the matrix, that actions have consequences. We must not take the choice of another being. What is community but a means to... for all we individuals to have... our *choices*” (Miéville 2001, 692). Though a new-comer to New Crobuzon, Kar’uchai immediately notes the opposite tendencies of the structures of the metropolis. “Your city institutions,” she criticizes, “[t]alking and talking of individuals... but crushing them in layers and hierarchies... until their choices might be between three kinds of squalor” (Miéville 2001, 691). Kar’uchai recognizes both the dangers of hierarchy and institutions, those things threatened by the moths’ abjection, but also clarifies the crucial need to sustain communal values as a means to preserve identities which must not become vague abstractions themselves. That the moths would destroy both suggests precisely the dangers of this sort of abject deconstruction.

It is crucial to note that Kar’uchai demands that Isaac *not* think of the crime in the terms of his world—it “cannot translate into your jurisprudence,” she says. Her insistence arises precisely from the accumulated meanings that arise within a patriarchal society’s “laws and morals” and she dismisses terms like “*violated*,” “*ravaged*,” “*abused*,” or “*defiled*” (Miéville 2001, 694); instead she says it is purely choice-theft. And, fittingly, she leaves it to Isaac’s own choice as to whether he will respect their justice. The terms in this closing episode of the novel like “individual,” “action,” “justice,” and “choice” feature conspicuously and signal the ethical valence of this final meeting. And so does the Kar’uchai’s insistence that their difference must be acknowledged—a reconstruction of a classical I/other event. But here, opposed to so much of the rest of the novel, difference, that between Isaac’s assumptions and the Kar’uchai’s, must be preserved and law, in terms of tribal law rather than Yagarek’s economic contract, must be upheld.

Left to his own reasoning Isaac looks inward, sits and reflects. Unlike the moth-attacked and now vacuous Lin whom he sits beside, Isaac can and must confront the conflicting desires, hopes, and anxieties within him, those left untouched by the slake-moths. It is the fast structures there in his interiority which guide his ultimate decision—in “cold distaste and fury” he could not “imply that Yagharek’s actions were *acceptable*” (Miéville 2001, 697). In the same manner that Miéville’s Marxism announces in the slake-moths and Crisis Engine a critique of political abstraction deprived of positive political content, the novel’s advocacy for individual subjectivity persists in Isaac’s final ethical choice to honor the sovereignty of one “concrete individual” rather than to “abstract” her. Isaac must choose between two conflicting systems of law—the transactional one of his tribes, and the jurisprudence of the Garuda. “I neither express myself nor determine myself through my acts,” Bakhtin wrote of heroic individual action, “I actualize through them something that has validity with respect to objects and meaning” (Bakhtin 1990, 138). These things both within the self and without the self against which we are able to enact meaningful choice, are those threatened by the abject, leading toward Durkheim’s anomie or, more appropriately, the nihilism which Baudrillard sees as the endpoint

of deconstructionism, "which corresponds to the destruction of the order of meaning" (Baudrillard 1994, 160). Isaac asserts his subjectivity against these impulses not by the act itself, but by the act's relation to exterior referents not disrupted by the slake-moths, in this case the law of the Garuda. And in refusing to remake Yagharek, Isaac also helps to preserve the subjectivity, the concrete individuality, of Kar'uchai and of himself. Read in light of the slake-moths' threat to systems of law in New Crobuzon, which we have seen in all their failure, and their threat to the inner workings of subjectivity, the very place that Isaac must go to discern justice, the strange ending of *Perdido Street Station* is not the upending of a heroic narrative but the culmination of one.

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