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[Secrets and Lies: *Embassytown*, Ethics and Eating in the Darkness](#)

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This essay assays communication in China Miéville's 2011 novel *Embassytown*.¹ To do so I emphasise the metonymy between the ingestion of food and the absorption of language thematised within *Embassytown* and theorised as a crucial ethical zone by Jacques Derrida. While the matter of language in *Embassytown* has drawn widespread critical appreciation (unsurprising since this is what the novel most self-consciously concerns), the link with an ethics of ingestion has escaped notice.²

Recent years have seen the humanities energetically engage with how we might review relations between humans and other animals, especially in light of Derrida's posthumously published book *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008). I draw on this late work along with such crucial earlier texts as his interview "'Eating Well" or the Calculation of the Subject' (1995) in order to sustain a critical engagement with *Embassytown*. These texts matter because they bring to attention the way in which a major division is drawn and maintained between humans and other animals through philosophical means. In the context of science fiction we are often asked to rethink our own concerns through their allegorical displacement onto alien worlds. By keeping in mind Derrida's critical transformation of any hard distinction between humans and animals, as well as our linked habit of using animal figures in fables as a ruse for human interests, I examine the extent to which *Embassytown* repeats the question of the animal through that of the alien.

Most critical engagements with Derrida's 'Eating Well' focus on the problem that he identifies as our continued failure, philosophically and symbolically, to '*sacrifice sacrifice*' even within fields described as 'Ethics' (Derrida, 1995: 279, italics in original). This failure preserves a loophole that ostensibly positions itself against murder but which nonetheless allows for the 'non-criminal putting to death' of those gathered under the violent concept of 'the animal.' Yet the metonymic connection between Derrida's figuration of eating and the psyche-forming process of introjection is crucial to this argument. The combination of ingestion and identification alone should strike an uncanny familiarity—it is intrinsic to the ritual feasts of totemic cultures (as emphasised by Sigmund Freud in *Totem and Taboo*). But their metonymy is underlined in an ethical sense when Derrida poses the question: '*how* for goodness sake should one *eat well*?' (Derrida, 1995: 282, italics in original).

Among the means of communication conducted by non-human life imagined in *Embassytown* are various oral processes, such as speech articulated through regurgitation. The latter process is not fleshed out but, in light of a re-reading of Derrida, we can envision food resurfacing through regurgitation as a kind of writing in his generalised sense:

And thus we say "writing" for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice [...]. (Derrida, 1976: 9)

However, the novel concentrates on the specific fascination for the Language of the Hosts (the dominant sentient species native to the planet Arieka on which Embassytown is

situated), capitalised due its requirement that all figures of speech be rooted in a literal referent. This has the concomitant effect that the Hosts cannot lie – since only what has happened can be re-presented – and are therefore innocent. Human travellers and colonists trade on this fascination inadvertently provoking a near-catastrophe with Language through the mendacious appearance of a new Ambassador in the frontier town of the title.

The central means by which the lead human character Avice, through whose point of view we encounter the communities of Embassytown, literally becomes a figure of speech – a simile – for the Language of the Hosts is striking: she becomes the girl who ‘was hurt in the darkness and ate what was given to her’ (301). With the ethical invocation of Derrida’s ‘Eating Well’ in sight, I want to pay specific attention to the difficult manner of Avice’s ‘enLanguaging’ (the term Miéville uses to describe the Ariekene making of figures of speech, 125) and her key role in averting an all-out war on Arieka. Miéville’s work often contains prominent, complex female protagonists, yet the events figuring the centrality of Avice to *Embassytown*’s scenes of metaphoric ingestion and digestion have drawn feminist criticism. This too will be reconsidered in light of Derrida’s critical insistence that the autonomous subject – the one who might pick and choose his diet! - is a virile, masculine fiction (Derrida, 1995: 280-81) and that both sexual and animal differences eat away at this supposed autonomy (Derrida, 2008: 36).

1. Say the Alien Responded

“You were with the *Hosts*? That’s *import*, Avvy! Swear? Say it like a Host?”

“Say it like a Host,” I said, appropriately solemn for the oath. (*E*, 27)

The eponymous Embassytown is a frontier settlement on Arieka, in a not especially significant but distant reach of the Universe fleshed out by Miéville in the novel. The resident Ambassadors represent the major off-world power, Bremen, and are the only ones capable of speaking the Language of the Hosts, or Ariekei. In this novel, Miéville suggests that humans have shed the conceit of meaning as present-to-hand and embraced a poststructural detachment of signification from reference. Attracting a theological fascination for the human population, the Hosts are the only beings to ‘hear the soul in each voice’ (*E* 63). While various off-world sentient species (or ‘exoterres’, *E* 13) pass through Embassytown, we are told that it is only the Ariekei who focus this linguistic fixation on the presence of the word. Their Language develops by obliging others to literally undergo particular actions in order to generate figures of speech and thus incrementally supplement Language. Within the narrative of *Embassytown* these others are all non-Hosts, but we are informed that they have previously expanded Language ‘[w]ith anything they could get their hands on’ even with members of their own species (*E* 63). With this intimation of having appropriated the bodies of their own kind, there is a hint of a Freudian ‘primal meal’ in the history of the Hosts. Those chosen by the Hosts submit to this process with some reverence, albeit in anticipation of the notoriety and even envy they will elicit from their respective communities.

Speaking with two voices, from two mouths in unison, the Linguistic articulation of the Hosts has required a regimented Ambassadorial training. Although not technically twins, each Ambassador is composed from two people, cloned to be effectively identical and committed to preserving this illusion of oneness; they are thus able to pronounce the doubled Language of the Hosts uttered by their two differently situated mouths named by

human linguists ‘Cut’ and ‘Turn’ (E 91-2). The Ambassadors’ bi-syllabic names are therefore split in reflection of their idiosyncratically composed form: CalVin, MagDa, BenTham, etc.

In his 1962 treatise, *How to Do Things With Words*, J. L. Austin laid out the ways in which what he termed ‘performative’ speech acts could take effect (uttering marriage vows, for example). He did however make an exception for those speech acts uttered on stage because, he felt, they were ‘pretended’ and thus did not truly produce the result they superficially named (Austin, 1976: 22). Similarly, the Hosts require Language to be uttered by an intelligent being if they are to ‘do things with words’, that is, to communicate. This logic reminds us of the metaphysical debt that Derrida locates in Austin – the faith in presence from which it is so difficult to cut loose. In contrast, for Derrida, speech acts *cannot* be guaranteed by the presence of an intending subject, nor can the sense of machinic repetition given by uttering such acts on stage be decisively excluded from serious consideration (Derrida, 1982: 321-328). Like actors playing a part, machines learning the Language of the Hosts in *Embassytown* fail to communicate, no matter how expertly they grasp the grammar (this is a universe that ultimately maintains a division between organic life and synthetic machine, Ariekei ‘bio-rigging’ or the bioengineering of other life forms notwithstanding). Doing things with words – *without* pretence – means that the Hosts cannot lie. Yet, they are fascinated with the concept of deceit, and hold Festivals in which they compete in what is, for them, an intense physical effort to enunciate an untruth. The novel does not state that this ambition was inspired by contact with mendacious humanity but one of the core sentences rearranged by the Hosts at such Festivals implies as much:

‘Before the humans came we didn’t speak so much of certain things’. This, stutteringly, becomes ‘Before the humans came we didn’t speak’ (*E* 148).

The third chapter of *The Animal that Therefore I Am* called ‘And Say the Animal Responded’ continues Derrida’s unearthing of the supposed opposition between human response and the mere reaction of animals and machines (or animal-machines) developed at length in the first and titular essay. His deconstruction of Descartes’ influential division between response and reaction follows the pattern of reverse and displace (the pattern most closely approaching a deconstructive ‘method’ affirmed towards the end of ‘Signature Event Context’, [Derrida, 1982: 329]). Thus, it is not a question of redistributing the autonomy of response amongst all or some species (rather than retaining it for the exceptional *Homo sapiens*), but of displacing what we mean by response, infecting it with reaction. Displacing the fiction of one grand divide of ‘man’ from ‘animal’ and refusing a more detailed taxonomy in which all would have their more defined proper place, Derrida advocates a challenging theory of difference as that which ‘grows’ (Derrida, 2008a: 29-31).

The metaphysical frame that aligns presence with meaning, discussed in relation to Austin earlier, also licenses the division between (responding) human from (reacting) animal. ‘And Say the Animal Responded’ finds this repeated in the theory of the – human – subject laid out by Jacques Lacan in his *Écrits* (1966). Marking Derrida’s second, substantial, and deeply critical reading of Lacan, this chapter has drawn far less commentary than the book’s now canonical titular one.⁴ *Embassytown* is preoccupied with the possibility of the lie: Lacan bases the supposedly unique power of human signification on the ability to perform this very deception. For Lacan, animals may be able to pretend in

certain situations. His central examples of such situations are those that involve seduction or combat, and thus animal pretense can be reduced to need-driven, reactive behaviours (the need to reproduce; to fight for a mate; life or death situations). But ‘*an animal does not pretend to pretend*’ (Lacan qtd in Derrida 2008a: 129, Derrida’s italics). Lacan reserves this doubled ability for humans alone. Ostensibly outpacing need in favour of desire, this ability lays the ground for language as hedged within the field of the signifier:

it is clear that Speech begins only with the passage from “pretence” to the order of the signifier, and that the signifier requires another locus—the locus of the Other [...]
(Lacan qtd in Derrida, 2008a: 131).

Again, a supposedly universal division drives humanity towards this detached field of signification: humans are born immature and are thus spurred to overcome this weakness with the dialectical seizure of the technicity of language. With language as a tool, humans are thought to master both themselves and the world. In contrast, animals are supposed to be born perfectly adapted to the world. In this imagined state, through this imagined logic, animals thus lack the impetus to change, to spring forward into history. Derrida’s bestiary however, nurtures a different story.

Where Austin held that speech acts in the theatre were exempted from performative felicity since they were intrinsically pretended rather than intended, Lacan allows animals the ability to pretend only on nature’s stage. Both exceptions provide loopholes for Derrida to exploit. For the latter, *all* speech acts are conditioned by convention rather than intention, and all pretence can always be the pretence of pretence. As Derrida puts it:

Pretense presupposes taking the other into account: it therefore supposes, simultaneously, the pretense of pretense—a simple supplementary move by the other within the strategy of the game. That supplementarity is at work from the moment of the first pretense. (Derrida, 2008a: 133-134)

The question is especially pertinent given the psychoanalytic investment in the concept of the Unconscious, i.e. when meaning what one says can always be radically undermined, and a pretence could always be pretending to pretend and vice versa.⁵

In *Embassytown*, we can deduce that the Hosts form a sophisticated society since they have a history; they farm the land; they enter into relations of exchange with the foreign Ambassadors; they produce technology, including that which is ‘bio-rigged.’ The latter assemblage of living tissue and technology signals their appropriation of other species. Indeed, Avice wonders if the Hosts only recognise those beings who also speak Language as harbouring intelligent life (thereby repeating a familiar human exceptionalism – the logic that allows for both a law against murder as well as the possibility of a ‘non-criminal putting to death’).

Mieville’s presentation of the Ariekei is reminiscent of that of the Nambikwara, in Claude Lévi-Strauss’s account in which he laments that they were a people without writing and without violence until the ‘forced entry of the West’ (in spite of the several dialects that they spoke and numerous examples of violence within their culture that he himself observed (Derrida, 1976: 110, 135-6)). Although Avice’s onetime husband, the theologically fixated Scile, wonders how the Hosts can possibly communicate without

symbolic language (E 93), we can deduce that nevertheless they do engage in some form of symbolism or, as Derrida would name it, writing.

Before the events of the novel take place the Hosts, we are informed, made use of the bulging girths of their elderly as a living food supply for others: '[t]hey could gnaw at the nutritional swathings of its abdomen for days without killing it' (E 91). After the implied formation of a law against such a practice, they now respect these elders and refrain from cannibalising them. Rejecting their earlier 'barbarism' (E 91) the Hosts care for their elders until they die naturally. This legend, which narrates how what was once cannibalism has been transformed into respect, recalls the founding of culture through the committing of a crime as Freud famously suggested in *Totem and Taboo*. There, Freud imagined a band of brothers killing and eating the so-called primal chieftain, their father. However, becoming so guilt-ridden after committing such a crime they revivify the Father as Law and maintain his restrictions (signally regarding sexual access to women) (Freud, 1950: 141-142). It does not even matter whether such cannibalism ever really took place: the dark thoughts of such a thing is motivation enough for culture-generating guilt to perform its work. As Freud affirms:

the mere hostile *impulse* against the father, the mere existence of a wishful *phantasy* of killing and devouring him, would have been enough to produce the moral reaction that created totemism and taboo. (Freud, 1950: 159-160, italics in original).

In such a scene eating and the writing of the law come together.

The turning point in the history of *Embassytown* is provoked through the arrival of a new Ambassador. Unlike those Ambassadors who preceded them, EzRa comprises two easily distinguishable people, rather than the carefully coached performance of genetically engineered, identical twins. Most disconcertingly, unlike all the other Ambassadors whose ritual communications proceed without event, Ezra's mysteriously intoxicating voice enslaves the Hosts. By the time Embassytown comes under siege from the progressively enraged Hosts, it becomes clear that EzRa's voice is the product of deception. Given what appears to be universal belief that the Ariekei absolutely cannot lie – and that any communication with them in [their] Language must issue from similarly meaningful intending beings, this eventuality is incomprehensible to the novel's human characters. It transpires that EzRa are infiltrators, constructed from a technologically enhanced near-telepath and his fellow political operative, initially working on behalf of the colonial metropole Bremen to undermine the Linguistic specialism of the Ambassadors, and subsequently at the whim of the infiltrators' own intoxication with power. The enslaved Hosts do not require EzRa to pronounce on anything in particular; in order to achieve a state of intoxication, they merely want to hear Ezra's voice:

'EzRa, it said. Talk.

EzRa will speak to us or we will make it speak' (E 155, italics in original).

Even after the relationship between EzRa deteriorates to such an extent that Ez murders Ra, the Ariekei demand for the voice is unabated (E 231). In a bid to manage the crisis of amassing voice-addicted Ariekei, some of the other Ambassadors fabricate a new speaker.

Using the technology that allowed Ez to seem at one with Ra, they requisition Cal, who has been recently and painfully separated from Vin by the latter's suicide in the increasingly chaotic Embassytown. With the emergence of the newly forged Ambassador EzCal, the Ariekei begin to respond to the content of EzCal's proclamations, rather than the sound of the voice-god-drug alone. Catastrophically for Embassytown, EzCal too ceases to be one amongst other Ambassadors and assumes the role of Sovereign.

The manner in which the Hosts come to resist the voice-god-drug is crucial in the unfolding of the planet's incipient war, and the rethinking of how language matters within it. The Hosts possess at least two types of wings as part of their anatomical structure; giftwings and fanwings. The latter, we are told, are 'at least as sensitive as human eyes' (*E* 315) yet function as organs of hearing and are also described as 'the mind's main doorway' (*E* 317). Loathing the power that EzRa's voice has over them, some of the Hosts start to self-mutilate by ripping away their fanwings to prevent themselves from hearing the addictive voice. To the astonishment of the ad hoc group, including Avice, trying to prevent war, self-mutilation builds into an organised group mutilation of a large number of now inhospitable Ariekei. As she watches footage of this turning point in the Ariekei resistance, Avice observes:

One by one at first, then countless at a time, the murder-squad of Ariekei arched their backs. I saw the quivering of scores of fanwing stubs [...].

"They know we can see them," I said.

Following speechless giftwing-jabbed instructions from their larger comrade, self-mutilated Ariekei stood either side of the entranced farmhand, and

held it. It didn't even notice. Stop what you are doing, release your grips, we heard EzCal say. Their Language petered out. [...].

The big Ariekees tugged the biorigging-farmer's fanwing. I winced. It twisted. Its victim screamed doubly and tried and failed to get away. Its tormentor's giftwing moved like a human hand uprooting a plant. The fanwing wrenched free: roots of gristle and muscle parted and with a burst of blood came finally away, pulling fibres out of the quivering back, trailing them. (*E* 315)

In this manner these erstwhile Hosts forcibly recruit all of their Ariekei kind to an army. At first, it seems as if the novel is moving to install a figure of castration (and Joseph Weakland understands it in this way).⁶ According to a Lacanian psychoanalytical reading of this scene, such a figure constitutes a symbolic cut upon the body, marking the loss of immediate, full, presence. This loss is the prerequisite for human, signifying language, as opposed to the capitalised, non-figurative Language of the former Hosts. For Derrida, however, psychoanalysis displaces immediate presence with the signifier only to relocate it within the Unconscious; and insofar as signification retains consistency, retains presence all the same (see Derrida, 1985). But it is not quite as simple as a binary opposition between either/or here, since Miéville's problem in the final stages of *Embassytown* is how to narrate the advance of an army that is both deaf and without a mental doorway onto the world. That is to say, with the Ariekei link between hearing and understanding broken, 'their discipline [...] was absurd, impossible' (*E* 323). Miéville is careful to note that deaf humans are not similarly isolated – indeed he writes that 'Embassytown's human deaf objected' to the initial naming of the Absurd as the Deaf (*E* 323). According to his

presentation of Ariekei Language thus far, this mutilated army should not be able to communicate, still less organise itself into a resistance. Yet still, with dread fascination, they come. Here we might remember those exemptions of seduction and combat that Lacan argued afford the animal the ability to pretend: the animal may pretend in the ‘*vital situation*’ of combat (Lacan qtd in Derrida, 2008a: 129, Derrida’s italics). While this is just such a situation - combat, it is not a single being that stalks its prey but, terrifyingly, a coordinated army.

Avice is the one who notices these mutilated Absurd, as the Hosts are now referred to in the text, gesturing to each other and pointing with their giftwings. As Avice narrates, this name of the ‘Absurd’ is arrived at after the defending Embassytowners have first referred to the newly Languageless, self-mutilated Ariekei as the ‘*Surdae*’, which means deaf in an ‘antique language’ (*E* 323). Avice gradually realises that the Absurd are not pointing randomly but are indicating their decision to forcibly recruit one of their kind which they believe still to be under the spell of the god-drug-voice. Crucially, it is their *giftwings* that point. The indexicality of this gesture – metonymically reminiscent of the human index finger – recalls Derrida’s interrogation of Martin Heidegger’s delimitation of the category of the animal as the species that lacks hands (a delimitation that again shores up a fundamental distinction between the human and the animal). For Heidegger, animals may ‘[...] have organs that can grasp but they do not have hands’ (Heidegger, qtd in Derrida, 2008b: 40). Rather than giving empirical attention to, say, the thumb, Derrida shows how Heidegger’s insistence on a radical disequivalence between the human hand and any paw, flipper, or indeed wing, rests on a special attribute. The hand is bound to the human ability to index the ‘as such’. ‘Heidegger’s hand’ is the hand that *gives*. Yet

Heidegger positions this giving – already inviting another problematic binary with taking – beyond empirical action in order that the hand may give of itself. Indeed ‘the thinking of the hand belongs to the essence of the *gift*’ (Derrida, 2008b: 40, italics in original). This is the hand that signs, that autographs, the hand of the ‘autobiographical animal’ *par excellence*. Yet Derrida does not confirm this reflexive ability to sign, to autograph, to point out the ‘as such’ as an ability of the human (an ability that again embraces the metaphysical logic of presence). Rather he opens this gesture to the same case of ‘iteration’ that upsets Austin’s faith in the intentionality the latter attributed to the performative speech act. Derrida’s emphasis on the term ‘iteration’ over ‘repetition’ here does not efface the duplications possible within the latter, but underlines the relation to the other since ‘*iter* [...] comes from *itara*, other in Sanskrit’ and ‘structures the mark of writing itself, and does so moreover for no matter what type of writing (pictographic, hieroglyphic, ideographic, phonetic, alphabetic, to use the old categories)’ (Derrida, 1982: 347). In other words, all types of writing involve repetition, and all types of repetition are open to difference. To re-phrase the terms of Derrida’s argument in ‘Eating Well’, one never signs alone: signatures are themselves counter-signed by counter-signatures, and can always be forged. According to this reading, ‘the hand’ ceases to organise a special, self-contained human capacity. It might point to the world, but what it grasps in so doing is not necessarily determined in advance.

While Avice has observed the Absurds’ ability to point using their giftwings, Miéville restricts her grasp of the consequences of this observation, letting doubt about Language slowly dawn on her and her fellow Embassytowners. Thus, at first glance the Absurd are not able to point to themselves, as humans do for Heidegger. Nor can they

embed this indexicality in a wider form of mark-making – or ‘writing’ – that is subject to the counter-signature or reading by the other in Derrida’s framework. Rather, to maximise the narrative tension of this inexplicable Ariekei war Miéville limits such giftwing pointing to a first stage (similar to the notional first stage of pretence maintained by Lacan). He further distinguishes this first stage from a supposed second stage of self-consciousness (analogous to the notion of pretending to pretend).

There is rhetorical power for *Embassytown* in maintaining that this army cannot speak, cannot think, and yet advances nonetheless in an apparently disciplined fashion. It draws on an uncanny uncertainty regarding what constitutes the living, or on what entity might be capable of bearing a purpose, or indeed who – or what – might be a friend or an enemy, a Host or hostile. It is also a structural part of the novel that prepares for the greater narrative agency of Avice and a revision of the conditions of communication in those political events that form the novel’s denouement. Her agency and this revision are thus focused through rehearsing the scene of the lie that is central to the Hosts’ movement from non-figurative, capitalised Language into a fully signifying language, with its embedded possibilities of dissimulation and pretense.

2. Eating Your Words.

For *everything* that happens at the edge of the orifices (of orality, but also of the ear, the eye-and all the ‘senses’ in general) the metonymy of ‘eating well’

[*bien manger*] would always be the rule. (Derrida, 1995: 282)

i. Session One

Embassytown does not tell us exactly what happens to Avice when she undergoes the privilege of becoming a simile for the Language of the Hosts in her youth. In this respect the event is foreign to representation. The scene is described like this:

The Ambassadors spoke to me in the language of the Hosts. They spoke me: they said me. They warned me that the literal translation of the simile would be inadequate and misleading. *There was a human girl who in pain ate what was given her in an old room built for eating in which eating had not happened for a time.* ‘It’ll be shortened with use,’ Bren told me. ‘Soon they’ll be saying *you’re a girl ate what was given her*’ (E 28, italics in original).

Kirsten Tranter has voiced concern regarding the place of this trauma in *Embassytown*, the closure of which, she suggests, ‘is predicated on the unacknowledged suffering and exploitation of a powerless girl’ (Tranter qtd in Strahan, 2011: n. pag.). Tranter is not wrong to ask us to readdress what happens to Avice, but her interpretation requires some careful refinement. Avice is hardly a simple innocent, ‘without vice’ (literally a-vice), and as the novel progresses she moves from the instinctive skill of ‘floaking’ (E 18) to becoming a key political agent in events on the planet of Arieka.

To an extent, however, the pain inflicted upon Avice as a girl does lie at the heart of *Embassytown*’s ethical structure. She refers to this pain as ‘unpleasant enough’ but ‘quite bearable’ (E 124, 26). In contrast, Hasser, who was appropriated by the Hosts to form the figure of ‘*the boy who was opened up and closed again,*’ describes his equally oblique experience as ‘terrible’ (E 115, 125, italics in original). What is more traumatic for Avice

is her inability to process – or, to return to metaphors of ingestion, to digest – the scene in which she figures: ‘It was [...] the least comprehensible thing that had or has ever happened to me. I was surprised how much that upset me’ (*E* 26). This inability to process the event strings it out, muddying its ostensible past tense. That Avice’s enLanguaging takes place in the spatially and temporally strange ‘old room built for eating in which eating had not happened for a time’ (*E* 28) sets the primal tone to this scene. The old room recalls the Hosts’ older practice of eating their elderly alive. Again, there are shadows of the cannibalistic primal feast. The Hosts have not sacrificed the ritual practice of sacrifice itself: they maintain a mystical process of ‘eating the other’. Their symbolic rituals take place upon the body of the other. Obliging Avice to eat what was given her, they ingest her as simile into Language. The scene thus establishes the novel’s core interest in the relations between eating and speaking. While it is the Hosts who utter Avice in the form of her simile, the second time, near the novel’s conclusion, it is at her behest. Then, she inflicts language as that which must be swallowed – *and* as something that is difficult to digest – upon the Hosts.

Ingesting Avice as a simile might assume her total digestion (or negation, in the terms of dialectics), but it proves troubling for the Hosts.⁷ In terms of gender politics, *Embassytown* admirably emphasises Avice’s narrative agency in turning events around towards the end of the novel: she becomes the one who comes to best understand the linguistic stakes of the planet’s war and how it might be averted. Yet, in my reading, Avice is *already* an unstable resource through which to ground a comparison. Perhaps we can say that she does not provide a simile but, rather, what Derrida calls a ‘staggered analogy’: a comparison without either term guaranteeing firm footings, that is, without either term

maintaining meaning as always consistent or present (Derrida, qtd in Lawlor, 2007: 78). Avice's connection with the Hosts is prefigured etymologically by her name's homophonous link with *Avis*, a bird. She is already in poetic proximity to the bird-like Hosts (with their avian fanwings and giftwings) whose Language she will not simply expand but reorganise. Avice's full name, we should remember, is Avice Benner Cho, the initials of which offer the first three letters of the alphabet ('ABC'). Moreover, Avice is someone with relatively unusual skills. She is an 'immerser'; her skill set enables her to work as a navigator through what *Embassytown* designates as 'the immer.' Miéville uses this term to refer to a kind of hyper-space through which space-faring species travel in order to shrink the time of such crossings; a conceit that is commonly, if variously, imagined in science fiction. But the 'immer' also imports a temporal sense from its origins in the German word for 'always', even if this 'always' is rough, split by 'violent streams' (*E* 34). She was identified as one who has an aptitude for immersing in school when she stands out 'without knowing what it was [she] was doing', whilst engaged in 'certain activities the purposes of which [she] couldn't divine' (*E* 30). This calm in the face of non-knowledge mitigates Avice's trauma of undergoing her 'enLanguaging' at the hands, or wings, of the Hosts. It also gives her a sense of negotiating with the world without words, in spite of Scile's denial of such a possibility (*E* 32). To those whose curiosity and envy lead them to comment 'You were in a simile', Avice replies 'I *am* a simile' (*E* 41). The shift from comparison to performative assertion of her metaphoric identity is the one that Avice more explicitly engineers in her revised 'language classes' with dissident Hosts.

When Derrida sketches the metonymy of eating and introjection as the juncture intrinsic to an ethics of infinite hospitality, he implicitly borrows from the work of Freudian

psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, albeit with his own modifications (hospitality, in Derrida's terms must be infinite, or without condition, for it to have any ethical force). Buried within the complex 'Foreword' he had previously written for their book *The Wolf Man's Magic Word* (1986), come insinuations of the practice of 'eating well' that might depart from a reading of their work that is overly focused on language, as it is narrowly construed. That is to say, it might depart from the privilege they accord the mouth as the organ singularly anticipating speech as the telos of the human subject (Derrida, 1986: xxxvii). It is nevertheless clearer in the later interview, 'Eating Well', that Derrida also departs from apprehending the face as the prosopopeia of the human, to consider the metonymy of eating and introjection as the rule for any bodily orifice (Derrida, 2008a: 282). In radically opening bodies via this metonymic ethics, the work of figural language is unbound from the signifier. This implication is perhaps not emphasised enough in Derrida's own writing nor in commentary on his relation to psychoanalysis, but in my reading, it is implied every time he insists that deconstruction is not limited to language.⁸ Moreover, it suggests a vast and fascinating question regarding how symbolic carnivorousness might be practised in non-human animals. That is to say, if via a metonymic mode of identification 'eating meat' does not necessarily involve using the mouth, but might occur through the ear or eye, perhaps other animals too may 'eat meat' in ways which exceed the ostensibly simple ingestion of animal proteins. This orificial ingestion or 'taking in' speaks suggestively to the sense that Avicenna's enLanguaging as an obligation to eat echoes a scene of sexual penetration – the scene that Tranter implicitly worries mystifies her assault.

Of particular note for my reading of Avicenna's digestion is Derrida's suggestion that the strict binary division maintained by Abraham and Torok cannot hold: their writing

explicitly names introjection *or* incorporation, mourning *or* melancholia as successful *or* failed responses to loss. The digestion and recirculation of the analytic lost object through introjection parallels the intake of Avice, as simile, by the Hosts. In Abraham and Torok's terms, her simile would be on the side of the social (since *The Wolf Man's Magic Word* opposes the sociality of introjection to the silent 'crypt' of incorporation: 'successful' mourning digests the lost other and recirculates them symbolically through language). Meanwhile the self-mutilated Absurd are effectively on the side of unsuccessful mourning, burying their former voice-addiction in a silent inaccessible interior crypt. That Avice is not so simply or successfully assimilated speaks to Derrida's ethics and opens an ethical force in *Embassytown*. By this I mean that Avice as figure is not destined to always mean the same thing, to circulate along a calculated trajectory. Unbeknownst to the Ariekei, I suggest that Avice advances a staggered analogy.

ii. Session Two

In contrast to Avice's ritual of becoming-simile, we learn rather more of what she does to augment figural language for the erstwhile Hosts at the novel's denouement. For the second session, when we are told that Language changes, we are invited to follow Miéville's commitment to a dialectical unfolding of history (found in his non-fiction writings, such as his 2005 monograph *Between Equal Rights: A Marxist Theory of International Law*).⁹ *Embassytown* presents language (no longer capitalised) as that which is driven by the 'motor of antithesis' (E 344). At this point in *Embassytown's* narration, Avice revises her understanding of what she has seen the Absurd do – communicate – in spite of her

incredulity that they could do so: the ‘that’ that the Ariekei giftwings are able to point out is opposed to a ‘not-that,’ as thesis is opposed to antithesis, ‘*That. That? No, not that, that.*’ (E 344). Miéville proposes that this binary abstraction – that/not-that – propels the Hosts’ Language away from direct reference and toward abstract signification as part of a self-contained linguistic system. Avice remarks: ‘We [the Ambassadors] could never learn to speak Language [...] We only ever pretended. Instead the Absurd have learnt to speak like us. [...] Not referring: signifying’ (E 344-5). Identifying language as signification aligns Miéville with Lacan, whose Hegelian inheritance aligns him, too, with the dialectical tradition (the tradition embedding ‘*the* concept of history and of teleology’ as Derrida critically remarks in *Of Grammatology* [Derrida, 1976: 25, italics in original]). Signification is the law of sentience affirmed by Miéville in *Embassytown*, not writing in its expanded Derridean sense.¹⁰ Even if some non-human species can speak and are therefore sentient in Miéville’s universe, this alignment belongs to the same metaphysics that draws an absolute distinction between the human and the animal. Described as ‘shar[ing] conceptual models’ with humans, exoterres such as the Kedis and Shur’asi (E 13) are humanised by this sharing. The possibility of a radical otherness in the form of the Ariekei is foreclosed when they learn ‘to speak like us’. This is not because Scile was right to murderously defend them from what he saw as a Fall from Language into signifying language, a move which preserves the Ariekei not just as pure exponents of the metaphysics of presence but also as innocents, incapable of lying or uttering deceit. Through giving emphasis to the role of Avice and the insecure figural boundaries that she lets loose, I solicit a form of communication – what Derrida calls writing – for which there is always the possibility of incomprehension, of mistranslation, of alterity.

Pretending without realising that one pretends – the only explanation for Avice’s belated diagnosis of the Ambassadors’ stance – undermines the notion of a distinction between two levels: pretending versus pretending to pretend. In this sense *Embassytown* can be read as reproducing Derrida’s critique of Lacan, through the form of fiction. Similarly, in a subsequent moment of retrospective narration, Avice remarks: ‘We weren’t teaching the deafened to communicate: we were showing them they already could, and did’ (E 381). The Ariekei, Miéville reveals to his readers, were already communicating without realising it. Both humans and their Ariekei counterparts in Embassytown pretend, and both appear to be cut off from full consciousness of whether they do so.

While the army of the Absurd advance towards the city of Embassytown in the novel’s final chapters, a handful of dissident Hosts attempt to free themselves of voice-addiction not by mutilation but by resuming the attempt to lie. The increasingly desperate secret club of dissident Host liars make such progress that Avice leads their assembly to the front lines of the war to deliver a peremptory language lesson to the Absurd. Her aim is to show the Absurd that they do not have to undergo the literal trauma of tearing themselves open. Preparing the ground for a final encounter with Language, the Absurd and language, Avice obliges relentless play on her simile such that it breaks from comparison. Letting metaphor loose lets lies arise. This time the lesson is in Avice’s hands: it is she who forces repetition and hence variation, insinuating herself into language – not Language – while the Ariekei submit to the lesson. Obliging them to hear, think and speak anew she says:

You want change like the girl who ate what was given her. So you're like me. Those who aren't trying to change anything are like the girl who didn't eat what she wanted but what was *given* to her: they're like me. You're like that girl who ate. You are the girl who ate. You're like the girl. You are the girl (*E* 351, italics in original).

Eating Avice as figure this time solicits inconsistency and difference. Lying itself is given an evocative culinary character: it is 'succulent' (*E* 351, 363). Yet Avice cannot allow for the savouring of figural progress, she is 'relentless' in her tutelage (*E* 353). in the face of the dramatic lies of her successive metaphors – 'I'm so tired, I *am* dead' – '[t]he Ariekei were staggering' (*E* 360-1, italics in original). Eventually they utter these figurative transitions: 'We are the girl who was hurt' (*E* 362). Making many sounds throughout the succeeding night, Avice hears Ariekei 'agonies': 'learning to speak, and to think [...] hurt' (*E* 365). These enlightened Ariekei go on to teach the Absurd that they are communicating without Language and without their fanwings. Extending the gestures of pointing, they scratch the surface of the earth, devising an ideogrammatic form of transmitting information, or a mode of what we can call writing (*E* 380). Yet while Ariekei giftwings have learned to write, this mode of communication still risks remaining caught within the vulgar view of writing as the subsequent representation of speech rather than its condition. Their giftwings are upheld by the human hand of Heidegger and thus point both to the world *and* to themselves. Being 'even handed' in this fashion grants capability and consistency to communication that otherwise goes by the name of presence and is the

signature of the humanist subject. It is in the last lines of the novel that this capability is more productively shaken.

Miéville's narration of the language lesson that the Ariekei are obliged to undergo thus noticeably involves more pain than that experienced by Avice during the process of her becoming-simile. Perhaps now a feminist critique of Miéville's text – that exclusively focuses on the way in which enacting a trauma upon the body of a young, exploited girl is central to the symbolic economy of *Embassytown* – can be allayed. Avice has not simply turned the tables and obliged the Host[s] to become hostage to herself as guest.¹¹ This is not simply a gesture of revenge, but one that reposes this trauma of forcible ingestion visited upon the girl as a general condition.

Avice subsequently has an uncomfortable conversation regarding violence and language with Bren, a member of the ad hoc Embassytown resistance and one half of a former Ambassador known as BrenDan (Dan having died prior to the beginning of the novel's story-time). Bren speculates on whether a violent 'coercion' is intrinsic to identifying oneself within the signifying structure of any language, while Avice attempts to retain a frame of 'cooperation' that allows the individual subject to retain a measure of agency within linguistic structures (*E* 370). Even Avice, however, sounds doubtful of her own assertion as she points to the distant fumes of smoke, indexing devastation (*E* 370).

Violence in *Embassytown*, however, does echo the metaphysical struggle in Rousseau's *Social Contract*. In the latter, in Derrida's analysis, speech (signifying the speaker's presence and thus apparently offering a more reliable gauge of truthfulness) is privileged over writing (which, by contrast, signifies the absence of the speaker and so connotes a host of rhetorical strategies that are open to dissimulation). Indeed, the

association of writing in the narrow sense with violence – of which Derrida is critical – poses writing itself *as* violence: it is always writing that seduces, that leads astray, that brings ruin from without. Rather than the supposed guarantee of innocence and trustworthiness implied within direct speech and the presence of the speaker (the Edenic scene in which Scile believes), we might consider this privileging of speech over writing as a mistaken case. Derrida argues that ‘violence is writing’ in an original sense, which means that the violence of writing conditions any possible communication, including speech (Derrida, 1976: 133). It is the general condition. If we recall Miéville’s alignment in *Embassytown* of writing with both eating and the law, we can only conclude that violence is hardly exterior to Ariekei society, even in its supposed ‘innocent’ state before contact with humans and their practice of linguistic signification.

In their earlier incremental expansion of Language, the Hosts systematically ingested figures one at a time, attributing a fixed purpose to each – including in the case of Avice. That systematicity and fixity is the kind of violence that Derrida would challenge since it negates the other that he calls iteration (i.e. repetition including alteration). Yet within a Derridean ethics of infinite hospitality – another way of naming ‘eating well’ – we cannot definitively choose whether or not to eat: one *must* eat. This is not/just because organisms require nutrition, but because selves require identification, and that act of taking in - that introjection, is metonymic with eating. However, taking ‘place’ in the confounding of literal and figural that every orifice proposes, one cannot consume every last drop of the other – Avice is not totally digested even if the Ariekei can now say that they ‘are’ the girl rather than simply ‘like’ her. Neither can one guarantee how that other will re-emerge. These codicils move the Derridean ethics of ingestion away from a dialectical assimilation

(that would digest, consume, know, everything). Obliging Avice to eat does not simply imprint her - or simply visit violence upon her. Digestion, taking place in the darkness of the Unconscious, is always partial.

Even if 'eating' Avice enables an Ariekeine sociality that *Embassytown* names 'signification,' her figure might now license any other. As she intimates: 'It would be foolish to pretend we know what'll happen. We'll have to see how Embassytown gets shaped' (*E* 405). Ending *Embassytown* on this note of open curiosity aligns feminine, animal, alien others, those who, unlike the vain authority of the masculine, human subject of metaphysics, face the future without a program. While Avice is now Captain of a ship crewed by Ariekei newly able to leave their former community, she figures a new type of head: together they take in the experience of traversing the immer, the uncertainty of which is as slippery as the practice of writing itself.

You're like the girl. You are the girl.

Notes

¹ This essay is developed from a conference paper first given at *Cosmopolitan Animals*, Institute of English Studies, University of London/University of Kent, 2012. I thank the persistence of Paul March-Russell for persuading me to revisit it.

² A strong example of which is Joseph P. Weakland's "Forked Tongues": Languages of Estrangement in China Miéville's *Embassytown*' in *Science Fiction Studies*, 42:1, 2015, pp. 78-98.

⁴ The first of which was his essay – which also specifically focused on Lacan's *Ecrits* - 'Le Facteur de la Verité'[1975] in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987) 411-98.

⁵ There is a much longer discussion to be had regarding the possible deconstruction of need and desire and the dialectical motor of the psychoanalytic history of the subject.

⁶ Weakland, 'Forked Tongues,' 90.

⁷ Hegel too used digestion as a key trope of dialectical negation, see Richter. Classically, negation does not leave any remainder whereas digestion for Derrida is always partial.

⁸ I elaborate on this possibility in ‘Animal Melancholia: on the scent of *Dean Spanley*’ in *Animal Life & the Moving Image*, Laura McMahon & Michael Lawrence, eds. Palgrave/BFI Publishing, 2015, pp.134-152.

⁹ See ‘Materialism and Dialectics’ in *Between Equal Rights* (4-5).

¹⁰ In contrast, I discuss the earth moving activities of the Caliban in C. J. Cherryh’s *Forty Thousand in Gehenna* precisely as writing in Derrida’s terms – and the novel as a writing-lesson – in my article ‘Animal Transference’ (Turner 2011). For an indication that Miéville assimilates Derrida to semiotics, in his earlier novel, *The Scar*, his character Bellis Coldwine is the author of a book named *High Kettai Grammatology* (26). Such a book would mistakenly assume that *Of Grammatology* pertains to specific languages in the manner of a grammar, rather than as the wider textual condition affecting all species of communication.

¹¹ Echoing Derrida’s notion of infinite hospitality in *Of Hospitality*.

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