

Possible topics for *The City and The City* papers – ENGL 1158.107 - Lennon

- After reading China Mieville's essay on the problem of crime fiction, do you think that this book, his first (perhaps only) crime novel, avoids the pitfalls of the genre? Or, alternately, does it embrace them fully? Subvert them? Substitute them for other, different problems?
- In the end, this novel centers around a “city” – Orciny– that doesn't exist; the criminals here use people's desire for it to exist as a way of controlling them, of making them accessories to the crime. Similarly, Mieville is manipulating us: *we* want there to be an Orciny, hidden in the folds of the city. How do this novel, and other readings from this semester, play upon our desires in order to show us something?
- Like many stories and novels we've read, this book is about boundaries: specifically, the extent to which they are inventions of human society, subject to change given the political, sexual, economic, and cultural needs of the moment. Write an essay about borders and boundaries in crime fiction.
- One of the “fantastic” conceits in this novel is the notion of “unseeing”: that, if a citizen of one city accidentally notices a citizen of the other, he must “unsee,” using a series of physical and cognitive gestures to deny the other's existence. But how fantastic is this really? Don't other stories we've read address this notion– that of selective perception, of intentionally failing to notice what is before us?
- Do you think a society like that of Beszel and Ul Qoma is possible in the real world? How different is it, really, from the complex arrangements between, say, Israel and Palestine? Do you regard *The City and The City* as a work of speculative fiction, of fantasy? Or is it a really specific kind of realism? Mieville, in his essay, calls all detective novels fantastic– why not try a paper exploring this notion, using this book as a springboard for talking about other crime stories in the same way.
- When the small revolution happens at the novel's end, we are given to wonder how much of human law, of social order, is not enforced, but merely voluntary. To what extent do we desire and require order? Why do we choose not to “breach”? Explore, in an essay, people's relationship to obedience and transgression, with attention to the semester's readings.
- This novel can be confusing to read at first, thanks to Mieville's rather baroque prose style and, more significantly, Borlú's unwillingness to explain the social customs of the two cities. Instead, we are immersed in this world, as we might be if dropped there at random and forced to figure it out on our own. The semester has been filled with examples of people faking their way toward understanding, and of information being meted out slowly, keeping us (and some fictional characters) in the dark. Try a paper on the methods writers use for revealing necessary information.
- This book is, at least in part, about surveillance– the extent to which we are watched and controlled by the forces of authority, and how our observed actions are perceived. Consider the apparent “magical” powers of Breach, which turn out to merely consist of skillful observation, combined with intimidation and fear; recall as well the very low-tech way that Mahalia managed to smuggle artifacts out of Ul Qoma without detection. Explore in an essay this theme of spying and deception, as expressed in the stories we've read.