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LAS ARTES DE LA VANGUARDIA LITERARIA

EDITORA GENERAL

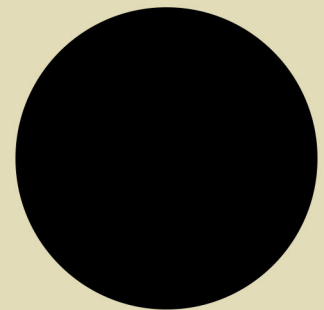
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Hybrid Narratology in Kai-cheung Dung's Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City

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Abstract

This paper deals with the cross-cultural dialogues present in Kai-Cheung Dung's novel, *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City*. Born in Hong Kong, son of an immigrant from mainland China, Dung argues that words, unlike iconic signs, invoke an imaginative power. His work tries to capture the impossible essence of Hong Kong in the year the city passed from British colonial power to the People's Republic of China. Italo Calvino and Jorge Luis Borges figure prominently amid the Western authors that influence *Atlas*. Like them, Dung is interested in processes of meaning and knowledge related to location, habitation, identity, and semiotic displacement. *Atlas* is divided in four parts -theory, city, streets, and signs- each of which can be regarded as a provisional place/site/layer that simultaneously penetrates all others; a "non-place" or space of transience (Augé 1995). The telling encompasses 50 spatial topoi and a final micro-essay that flings the reader back into the "Orbit of time". The book shows that experiential projections of complex hybrid urban identities yield paradoxical forms of multiform existence, fluid and provisional, mapping the city as a semiotic practice. This interest for spatiotemporal issues is one of the characteristics present in avant-garde art.

KEY WORDS: Myths, Spatiotemporal Semiotics, Hybrid Narratives, East-West Intercultural Dialogues, Kai-Cheung Dung, Italo Calvino, Jorge Luis Borges, Michel Foucault.

Resumen

Este artículo explora los diálogos interculturales presentes en la obra de Kai-Cheung Dung, *Atlas: La arqueología de una ciudad imaginaria*. Nacido en Hong Kong, hijo de un inmigrante chino, Dung señala que las palabras, a diferencia de los signos icónicos, invocan un poder imaginativo. Su trabajo intenta capturar la esencia imposible de Hong Kong el año en que la ciudad pasó de del poder colonial británico a la República Popular China. Italo Calvino y Jorge Luis Borges figuran de manera prominente entre los autores occidentales que influyen en *Atlas*. Al igual que ellos, Dung se interesa por los procesos de significación y conocimiento relacionados con la localización, la habitabilidad, las identidades mutantes y la movilización semiótica. *Atlas* está dividido en cuatro partes -teoría, ciudad, calles y signos-, cada una de las cuales se puede contemplar como un lugar o capa provisional que simultáneamente penetra todas las otras; un "no lugar" o espacio de tránsito (Augé 1995). La narración abarca 50 topos espaciales y un micro-ensayo final que arroja al lector a la "órbita del tiempo". El libro muestra que las proyecciones experienciales de las identidades urbanas, híbridas y complejas reportan formas paradójicas de existencia multiforme, fluidas y provisionales, que cartografían la ciudad como una práctica semiótica. Este interés por los aspectos espaciotemporales es una de las características de las vanguardias artísticas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: mitos, semiótica espaciotemporal, narrativas híbridas, dialogo intercultural entre oriente y occidente, Kai-Cheung Dung, Italo Calvino, Jorge Luis Borges, Michel Foucault.

1. Introduction

Cartography has always been important in understanding how civilisations have conquered, settled and shaped territories. This has been so because maps visualise the spatial limitations of nations. However, such illusory boundaries have often erased the layers of interconnected common histories and personal stories. More than any other genre, narrative fiction has been concerned with creating geographies where the real and the imaginary are problematized. With the growth of urban spaces and the rise of an interconnected global world in the 20th century, concern over spatial configurations and the chronoscopic speed of human exchanges continues to occupy a prominent position in narrative fiction as well as critical theory (Virilio 1997). In the West, critical theorists interested in spatiotemporal analytics include Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, E.V. Walter, Edward E. Casey, Guy Debord, Bertrand Westphal, Robert Tally, or Jane Bennett, among many others. As argued by Franco Moretti, in modern European novels “*what* happens depends a lot on *where* it happens” (Moretti 1999: 70).

Despite their attempt to capture reality, maps can also become pervasive fictions, appearing as visual artefacts in Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*, dream locations in J.M. Barrie’s “Neverland” or textual patterns in Paul Auster’s *New York Trilogy*. The text itself becomes mapped onto the act of leisure walking, as in Baudelaire, an inquiry into the functions of narrative in Edgar Allan Poe’s «Man of the Streets» or in Auster’s «City of Glass», as an escape in Walter Benjamin’s «Berlin Chronicle», a political act in Henry David Thoreau’s writings, social activity in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, or as the satire of an epic in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

Story maps, fictional cartography, narrative atlas or geospatial storytelling are some of the terms used to trace the relationships between places, maps and storytelling. As such, they are complex forms of hybrid narratology that explore, for instance, the role of maps in fictions (including cinema), literary geography, the mapping of vernacular knowledge and personal stories (diaries, letters, and so on), as well as the socio-political implications and technological aspects of multi-semiotic cartography. Thus, geocritical representation emerges as a “dialectical process” (Westphal 2007: 187-88) within a fundamental interdisciplinary approach (Westphal 2007: 197-98).

This paper explores the work of Hong Kong’s writer Kai-cheung Dung in his novel *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City*. The study brings to the fore the intercultural dialogue between East and West. Published first in Taiwan in 1997 and translated and published in English in 2012 by Columbia University Press, *Atlas* was conceived during the period from 1995 and 1997, a prolific time for Hong Kong artists who witnessed the disappearance of the city former status as a British Dependent Territory and its transfer to the People’s Republic of China. Several special exhibitions were held in Hong Kong between 1990 and 1997. They highlighted aspects of local history, such as *The Maritime Silk Route: 2000 Years of Trade on the South China Sea* (Hong Kong Urban Council 1996), an exhibition which strategically placed the city in a context that extended way past the British colonial era. The 1997 exhibition, *History through Maps: An Exhibition of Old Maps of China* (Hong Kong Museum of History) inserted the map of Hong Kong within the larger map of China in an attempt to erase Western colonization. The particular situation of Hong Kong has lead critics such as Rey Chow to expose the complex colonial situation of the city, with an “imperialism practiced by East Asian cultures themselves: the territorial and economic aggression of Japan before and after the Second World War, and the imperialist policies practiced in Mongolia, Taiwan, and Tibet by China” (1992: 152), a colonialism that “is not a past but a future.” (1993:186) If Chow describes Hong Kong as site of “the struggle between the dominant and the subdominant within the ‘native’ culture itself” (Chow 1992: 153), Kai-cheung Dung’s work advances a reconciliatory cosmopolitan vision of multicultural coexistence.

Described as a half-imagined location, Dung uses Hong Kong as a semiotic micro-cosmos, producing a heterostopic mapping with a definite political agency. Inspired by Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia (1986), a marginal enclosed place outside social order (a hospital, a prison, a casino, etc.) that serves to relieve social tensions by admitting contradictory narratives, Dung's *Atlas* juxtaposes apparently contradictory textualities which prove to be complementary, capturing 1990s anxieties regarding the political changes brought about by Hong Kong handover. Thus, Dung plays with the idea of a "borrowed place in a borrowed time" (Preface xiii) to provide an imaginary map of the annihilated history of Victoria City.

2. *Narrative Cartography and its Multilayered Labyrinths*

As mentioned, spatiotemporal configurations are an intrinsic aspect of hybrid forms of storytelling encompassing the ekphrastic painting of words, the telling of images, and the mapping of simultaneity (rather than linear time), as well as places, actions and other forms of spatiotemporal plasticity (for example, forms of projected spaces that open new dimensions of plot development –these may include memories, dreams, etc.; for a theoretical inquiry into how the individual and the collective imaginary are constructed, see Martínez-Falero 2008) The multi-temporality of the city emerges as a "rhythm" that "becomes relevant to the way we understand subversive acts within the spatiality of the city" constituting "an order and the coexistence of a series of different worlds and activities." (Lefebvre 1996: 34).

Narrative cartography, however, faces important semiotic challenges. One problem is the simultaneous representation of geographic locations (places) and relationships between them (diagram connections, which may encompass relations between participants/characters) as well as the temporal aspects inherent in storytelling (Massey 2005: 130). In the case of maps, and their appearance in print, the main problem is the projection of a spherical surface (3D) onto a flat one (2D), a problem encountered by Ptolemy in the 1st century CE. His projective techniques, involving a light source and its shadow, as well as shape, size and orientation, inspired scholars and visual artists for many centuries. However, the hermeneutic impact upon narrative requires further investigation (see López-Varela 2014, 2015). The casting of the shadow is a process virtually invisible, as the viewing eye takes the place of the light source. It can only be conveyed in telling, that is, relating the sequential development and selection of projections over time.

This interest in capturing simultaneous spatiotemporal dimensions is present in Dung's *Atlas*, where the author struggles to show the 'matter' of space as a dimension of transformation, rather than a physical unchanged/unchanging environment:

No matter whether we understand them from the perspective of teleology or of utilitarianism, and no matter how scientifically and with what exactitude they are produced, maps have never been copies of the real world but are displacements. In the end, the real world is totally supplanted in the process of displacement and fades from human cognition. (Dung 2011: 10)

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari are of the same mind: "a map is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entry ways and exits and its own lines of flights."(1987: 7)

To a certain extent, Dung's work is a deconstruction of the founding myths of Hong Kong. *Atlas* uncovers the illusory nature of the mythical origins of a territory, questioning the features that contribute to a sense of identity within a community: the common origins in time and space when the community is 'born', the myth of ancestry and descend, the idea of liberation and freedom from a bad past, and a golden heroic age followed by decay and rebirth/restoration to former glory. (Smith 1991:192) Thinking the spatial along the dimension of the temporal can serve to "shake up the manner in which certain political questions are formulat-

ed, [and] can be an essential element in the imaginative structure which enables in the first place an opening up to the very sphere of the political.” (Massey 2005: 9)

Indeed, many 20th century narratives exploring the city have attempted to convey its vibrant rhythm (López-Varela 2013). Jane Bennett has argued that these concerns have arisen from a sense of disenchantment, inherent to the Western predisposition to contemplate nature as inert matter: “Culture can be disenchanted, in that collective life no longer operates according to the cyclical logic of premodern or traditional forms and instead organizes itself along the lines of linear mathematics or rationality; or nature can be the object of disenchantment, in that a spiritual dimension once found in plants, earth, sky is now nowhere to be seen.” (Bennett 2001: 8) Enchantment to her is a “state of openness” (Bennett 2001: 231), the “surprise element that lurks in every object of experience, however apparently familiar.” (2001: 94). In her book *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett proposes the contemplation of nature and matter as vibrant, rather than inert, so that human implication becomes “a political act” that not only disrupts, but “disrupts in such a way as to change radically what people can ‘see’; it repartitions the sensible; it overthrows the regimen of the perceptible.” (Bennett 2010: viii)

Perception and experience are critical for the understanding of the differences between space and place, a question to be briefly explored in the following section. In avoiding place markers, *Atlas* provides an mediating/displacing map based on personal stories, rhythms, objects and fantasies that stand for the (his)story of a dislocated community. Dung believes that “the map concretely shapes our imagination on space/ territory and time/history” and that “a map is neither the evidence of objective facts, nor only a tool to record the territory division; map-drawing itself is the ‘behaviour’ of possessing one land, because the map is an effective practice for rulers to execute their power in the first place” (2012: 154-160).

3. *Space and Place*

Some writers have adhered to the distinction between place and space. For instance, E.V. Walter argues that “a place is a location of experience. It evokes and organizes memories, feelings, sentiments, meanings, and the work of imagination. The feelings of a place are indeed the mental projections of individuals, but they come from collective experience and they do not happen anywhere else.” (Walter 1998: 21) In this way, place not only refers to position and location. It is almost a temporal notion, constructed of successive and simultaneous events happening in the same location. Places are “vibrant” in Bennett’s sense.

While space seems to be embedded in Euclidean terms, places are fuzzy in their spatiotemporal dimensions, made up of the “material landscape and practices of everyday life” (Merrifield 1993: 520), that is, phenomenological experiences and interactions with the more abstract notion of space. “When I inhabit a place – whether by moving through it or staying in it – I *have* it in my actional purview. I also hold it by virtue of being in its ambience: first in my body as it holds onto the place by various sensory and kinesthetic means, then in my memory as I ‘hold it in mind’” (Casey 2001: 687).

Michel de Certeau’s well-known essay “Walking in the City” connects the act of walking in the city to speech acts in language (de Certeau 1984: 97), thus illuminating human agency within urban spaces, a distinction already present in Lefebvre’s work, where the French Marxist emphasized the liquid aspects of the living phenomenon (2009/2011: 33). To all these authors, it is the temporal aspect of place, the rhythms of the city, “which binds urbanity together” (Ibid. 34), speaking “more to our bodily and sensuous experience than it does to our rationality (Ibid.) In this manner, “the city’s rhythm is the precondition for the steady and constant production of new experiential spaces.” (Ibid. 35)

The creation of place happens through being in place; through movement, interaction, map-making and storytelling. If walking spatializes the acts of storytelling to become place accounts (De Certeau 1984: 97), place can be seen to emerge through stories, photographs

and other rendering of memories, dreams and human imaginations, fusing past, present and future in complex intersections and simultaneities. Thus, through content and form, Dung Kai-Cheung's *Atlas*, communicates the way in which place lacks natural boundaries and it is assembled in layered fractal forms with multiple experiences and voices that constitute a fragmented displaced narrative.

The physical space of the city becomes a semiotic place through its inscription in an ambiguous historical-fictional narrative where the story narrators gather information on the city in maps and atlases from 1841 to 1997 in a sort of "intra-textualization", using previous representations to verify its existence (Wong 2000: 174-6), and breaking the linear temporality of the single history into a simultaneity of multilayered stories which place and displace Hong Kong as a multitopia of multiple forms: counterplace, commonplace, misplace, displace, anti-place, nonplace.

Atlas shows how the "identity of place is as much a function of intersubjective intentions and experiences as of the appearances of buildings and scenery, and it refers not only to the distinctiveness of individual places but also the sameness between different places" (Relph 1976: 44), a "fusion of meaning, act and context" (Ibid.,) where "it is not just the identity of a place that is important, but also the identity that a person or group has *with* that place, in particular whether they are experiencing it *as an insider or as an outsider.*" (Relph 1976: 45 emphasis added)

4. *Exiles, Migrants and Identity Politics*

I have emphasized that all narrative forms are profoundly tied up with national myths of land, landscape, and identity. Indeed, for Dung "fiction has always been a means of identity building" (Preface xiv), and "literature always begins with self-questioning, and to write is an attempt to answer these doubts" (Preface xiv). The author explains that although writing is a personal matter, in writing we are wonderfully connected to a common concern that makes us belong: "personal belonging is near oxymoron, joining the private with the public" (Preface xiv). Thus, Dung, like Benedict Anderson, sees the city as an "imagined community", characterized by the way in which it is fantasized and mythologized, and not necessarily by its degree of genuineness (Anderson 1983: 15). Dung's *Atlas* recreates Hong Kong as imagined by colonizers, émigrés, expatriates, and displaced peoples; made up of migratory practices with no definite boundaries; caught up in hybrid East-West identities and mythologies; made up of colonial history, Chinese ancestry belonging, and an uncertain future:

Belonging never closes off possibilities, it is rather the condition for possibilities. It makes possible. Space and time can never be borrowed, nor can they be returned...Belonging is always common, but it is also always multiple. That is why I would never take *Atlas* as a conclusion or ending of a historical period specific to Hong Kong but as the starting point for historical narratives, or histories, that open to us not only the path to the past but also the way to the future. It is in this sense that *Atlas* can be an archaeology for the future. (Preface xiv)

Kai-cheung Dung was born in Hong Kong in 1967 and received his B.A. and M. Phil. in comparative literature from the University of Hong Kong. Like *Atlas*, many of his major fictional works (i.e. *The Thousand and Second Night*, *The Rose of the Name*, *Visible Cities*, *Histories of Time*, *Writing in the World and for the World*) show a clear interest in spatiotemporal semiotics, as well as the influence of Western authors such as Italy Calvino, Jorge Luis Borges or Umberto Eco, among others.

Dung shares with Calvino and Borges a multicultural sense of belonging and hybrid family backgrounds. Borges (1889-1986) grew up speaking English at home and frequently travelled to England with his family. His mother came from mixed Uruguayan descend with English and Spanish roots. His father, the son of a colonel, was also partly Spanish, partly Por-

tuguese. In describing himself, Borges said, "I am not sure that I exist. I am all the writers that I have read, all the people that I have met, all the women that I have loved; all the cities that I have visited; all my ancestors." (In Williamson 2004: 53). Borges was also an admirer of Oriental culture and many of his works feature connections with the East. Similarly, Calvino (1923-1985) was born in Cuba, the son of an anarchist botanist and researcher who had emigrated to South-America. His mother was also a botanist and a university professor from Sardinia.

Dung, like Calvino, is interested in using literature to make visible the invisible. He argues that words, unlike visual signs, invoke an imaginative power where "the 'I' of the author is dissolved in the writing [...] product and the instrument of the writing process" (Calvino 1972: 15). The conversation between Emperor Kublai Khan and Marco Polo in *Invisible Cities* refers to the city as shaped by the narrators in an impossible combination of architectural landmarks, memories, and dreams, shaped onto the texture of a word pattern "so subtle it could escape the termites" (Calvino 1972: 6). Both authors are interested in fusing the real and the fictional, the past, the present and the future (made up of experiences but also of desires).

Dung's work also owes much to Borges's influence. Like many of his short stories, «Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius», first published in the Argentine journal *Sur* in 1940 and one year later in the collection *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (*The Garden of Forking Paths*), questions the notions of sign and analogic representation, becoming a semiotic inquiry. Borges's story speaks about a mysterious country called Uqbar, mentioned only in the closing pages of a single volume (No. 11, a 'mirror' number) of a *Cyclopaedia* of 40 volumes and 1001 pages, where a group of intellectuals, members of a secret society, try to think (and create) a world. There seem to be an ideal second world called Tlön, where the epics and legends of Uqbar come to life, prefigured in a third world inscribed in the cover of another of the *Cyclopaedia* volumes as Orbis Tertius. The narrator (presumably Borges himself) attempts to verify the reality or unreality of Uqbar, but he seems unable to do so because its existence occurs in the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia. The mirror is far more than a mere iconic sign, reproducing the relations of similarity and analogy within reality. It is also more than an index, according to C.S. Peirce, a sign that establishes causal (antecedent-consequent) relationships between objects or events. When curved and not flat, mirrors can introduce the spatial distortions and analogic ruptures present in non-Euclidean spaces. Tlön is described as a world where space cannot be mapped and the universe is conceived as a series of mental processes that do not develop in normal space-time conditions. There are no nouns in the original language of Tlön; they are formed by the accumulation of adjectives. There are also no personal verbs and, thus, no propositions of state or action. As such, there is no possibility of teleology or projective telling. The key to understanding is not succession but accumulation, as the story is made up of layers that take on various significations. 'Orbis Tertius', from Latin 'third world/circle/territory' recalls Jean Baudrillard's notion of "simulacrum" (1981) as well as Karl Popper's 'three world theory' (1978), which envisioned a world 1 of objects and perceptions, a world 2 of mental processes and subjective estates (both conscious and unconscious), and a world 3 of representations and acts where narratives, scientific theories, myths, art and other sociocultural aspects are performed.

Ackbar Abbas has also indicated that Dung's book follows Foucault's concept of heterotopoi, "spaces of disappearance"; countersites where Hong Kong's conflicting histories, those of its Western colonial past, as well as other forms of Chinese colonialism, are contested and deconstructed; "A verbal collection of maps" (Dung 2012: xvii), inspired by Foucault's concept of archaeology, and divided in four parts: theory, the city, streets and signs. Located within the layers of 50 spatial topoi and a final micro-essay that flings the reader back into the "Orbit of time", each layer penetrates the others, Dung's archeology of Hong Kong is somewhat dubious; a 'non-place' in Augé's sense, or a placeless place.

The work, hardly a novel, does not follow along the fictional tradition that includes characters and their interactions, thus conforming a plot narrated under a given point of view and

discourse. Instead, unnamed archaeologists decipher fragments of lost cartographies, histories and signs. Dung maps the city as a discursive practice, like Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau signalled from the point of view of critical urban theory. However, as spatial enunciation, the stories of the city express a telling practice that constructs the city in its spatiotemporal dimensions; giving it a 'body', produced and reproduced through the human subjects that inhabit and move in it (de Certeau 1984: 84).

As indicated above, interactions with places are not restricted to present actions and sensorial experiences of human communication. They also occur in the form of spatiotemporal projections: in remembering, telling and imagining new worlds (Martínez-Falero 2008). As such, places exist in temporal intersections that can follow successive linear patterns as conventional narratives, or overlap in fractal existences that allow a multiplicity of voices to speak simultaneously, as in many avant-garde narratives of the 20th and 21st-centuries.

Writing for the *Los Angeles Review of Book* in 2013, Sophie Kalkreuth indicates that the book captures Hong Kong as a paradoxical place of transit and in-betweenness, a "liminal place and its somewhat uncertain 'both/and,' 'neither this nor that' sense of identity." (n/p) She adds that "in contrast to mainland Chinese cities, where the sense of place is palpable, pungent, inescapable as the morning smog, Hong Kong – however hectic and densely populated – is also characterized by a certain sense of vacancy," a vacancy captured by Dung who writes that "Hong Kong has been a work of fiction from the beginning." (Preface: xi) Indeed, the name Hong Kong appears only in brackets, while Victoria City remains one of its archaeological shadows. The introduction explains:

It is a fictional account of the City of Victoria (Hong Kong), a legendary city that has disappeared, written from the perspective of future archaeologists who reconstruct the form and facts about the city through imaginative readings of maps and other historical monuments [...] It is about the invention of a city through mapping and its reinvention through map reading. (2012: xix-xx)

5. *Patterns and Provisional Conclusions*

Similar to Borges's *Aleph*, Calvino's *Invisible Cities* constitutes a combinatorial geometric structure that maps multiplicity in the one: 55 fictitious cities invented by Marco Polo during his chess-game with Kublai Khan in order to confirm his huge empire, all of which refer to the city of Venice, cornerstone of the structure. Ten cities open and close the book within a set that forms part of seven sets of five. The first chapter and its inverse, the ninth, summon to mind the sequence known as the Fibonacci series (0,1, 0+1=1, 1+1=2, 1+2=3, 2+3=5...), yielding the Golden Ratio, present in many natural forms and used by many other authors and artists to question alphabetic patterns (see López-Varela 2014, 2015). The cities are described under female names, divided in 11 thematic groups. As in Borges's "Tlön", the use number 11, employed in divination and considered a 'mirror' capable of opening up other dimensions, is not casual. Calvino's story forms a matrix around the repetitive pattern of a city called Baucis, referring to the Phrygian woman who hosted Zeus and Hermes in disguise. Ovid's story of Baucis and her husband Philemon became a metaphor for the hospitality of strangers, because under their 'occult' identity, the gods had not been admitted anywhere else. Calvino's symmetric pattern is also harmonic, often alluding to a cornerstone (often a crystal/jewel like the *Aleph*). This fractal structure resembles the layers of an onion, including the following categories: 1. Cities & Memory, 2. Cities & Desire, 3. Cities & Signs, 4. Thin Cities, 5. Trading Cities, 6. Cities & Eyes, 7. Cities & Names, 8. Cities & the Dead, 9. Cities & the Sky, 10. Continuous Cities, and in the last 11 position, the hermetic, "Hidden Cities".

Numerology and patterns are also important to Kai-Cheung Dung, who chooses 51 micro-essays to create an accumulation of layers on Hong Kong (his)tory. Some of these overlap in space and time; others appear contradictory when they are, in fact, complementary. Indeed,

like the works by Borges and Calvino, *Atlas* functions as a palimpsest fractal structure where boundaries and categories disappear, and with them, identity: “There is no actually existing entity that serves as evidence of boundaries between districts or countries. Therefore, we can say that the boundary is a fictional exercise of power.” (2012: xxi)

Atlas is a unique amalgam of hybrid narratologies arranged in four sections/sites which may or may not be read as interconnected. Theory, City, Streets and Signs are a multitopia of countersites where the regimes of British colonization and of Chinese recolonization are enunciated and contested. The city appears as “marginocentric” (Cornis-Pope 2006) in that the multiplicity of its (his)stories tend to challenge the patriotic centripetal pull of empires.

The first part of the book, ‘Theory’ functions at the level of abstract space and fuses philosophical inquiry with geopolitics and history. Using an unreliable narrator, something of a dreamer and a historian, Dung ironically shifts his focus from the colonial past to the neo-imperial future. The cartographic concepts contested in this part -counterplace, commonplace, misplace, displace, antiplace, nonplace, extraterritoriality, boundary, utopia, supertopia, subtopia, transtopia, multitopia, unitopia, omnitopia- show the futility of any attempt to frame the city:

[...] we come to the conclusion that Hong Kong is also a commonplace. It follows that when every place has its commonplaces, each of these places loses its distinctive character and becomes simply a common place. No place can transcend itself to attend an eternal and absolute state. When each and every place reiterates its existence through common means, replicating one another’s commonality and vainly attempting to raise this commonality to the highest degree its repetitive self-affirmation may end up as a stale convention. This is the reason that modern maps of high precision lack imagination. (2012: 6)

The second section ‘City’ abandons abstract space in order to situate itself ‘in place’, providing arguments for the importance of personal and subjective experiences in framing Hong Kong as a living environment, with “as many identities of place as there are people.” (Relph 1976: 45). Thus, if the ‘theory’ section looks at the cartography as seen from above (birds eye vantage point), ‘City’ zooms in on a series of grounded localized texts of those who inhabit the streets below. “The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered.... It is a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and takes on the language), it is a spatial acting out of place.” (de Certeau 1984: 97). Dung first situates ‘City’ as a mirage, as memories of the past, memoirs of early governors, anecdotes of other visitors, and fables of the city. These accounts oscillate between the real and the illusion, and gradually move from the map to the plan.

A ‘plan’ is a plane figure but also a design, a present visualization of future form. On the one hand it does not yet exist and is unreal, but on the other hand it is being designed and will be constructed. A plan is thus a kind of fiction, and the meaning of this fiction is inseparable from the design and blueprint. (2012: 56)

Like in Calvino’s pattern, Kai-Cheung Dung does not pay attention to the lines of demarcation; those that separate the contours of things to render them visible. Instead, he is interested in the “indescribable punctum”, the dotted lines that “represent the extent of projected reclamation work, that is to say, the direction of the city’s future development.” (2012: 55)

The flying (abstract) birds of the Theory and City sections become the parrots that tellingly populate the Street section, and are seen by the reader as she lands at that level in the third part. Roland Barthes is prefigured in some of these episodes, which allude to the differences in signs (iconic, indexical and symbolic, if we use C.S. Peirce triangularization). As mentioned, the narrative moves from maps to plans, ending in personalized photographs. In this part, in close up view, the semiotic gaps between sign and referent are even wider, showing that interactions at street level can be fatal. Dung’s palimpsest turns from a marginocentric

perspective to focusing on the city as a “nodal point” (Hutcheon and Valdes 2002), where the discourses of the city are shown as disfunctional to its inhabitants.

For instance, in the fictional pieces featuring streets and city landmarks, Dung employs an interesting strategy to criticize both British and Chinese imperial pretensions. Naming is shown as an instrument of discursive power in this section. The first piece, “Possession Street,” (previously known as *Sui Han Hau*, ‘the mouth where the water walks entering the sea’) begins with an account of the occupation of Hong Kong Island on January 25th 1841. The act of re-naming the street is satirized when the narrator, who indicates there is no need for local people to know English to find their way in the city. “Scandal Point” refers to the Chinese *han wa*, meaning ‘gossip’ and implying forms of public offense and false talk “which brings harm, shame, or disrespect to others” (43). Dung describes that after attending mass at St. John’s Cathedral, the foreigners would return to their exclusive neighborhood via Scandal Point, where they would start gossiping. Another location, “Possession Point” (Sai Pun Ying) was known as West Camping Site, chosen by the British to station their troops until poor sanitation and hot and humid weather caused so many casualties that the troops were obliged to relocate. The area became re-possessed by itinerant performers who “would gather there at nightfall, casting divinations and telling fortunes, singing and storytelling.” (2012: 115) The story of Major Aldrich, who arrived at the island at the time of the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, shows how although his grandiose plans of colonization never materialized, Aldrich Street became a syncretic place where the local temple acquired the name *Oi Dit Dzui Kung* (Lord/Grandpa Aldrich), and where the Major was venerated as a military god, guardian of evil spirits, until in 1997, the year of the handover, when the temple and the street disappeared.

These are only some examples that unveil the hidden satire within the labyrinthic structure of *Atlas*, a volume that comes to a close using Jorge Luis Borges’ frequent metaphor.

Running around the plaza was a street in the shape of a square. This street did not have a beginning nor did it have an end, instead turning back in on itself. In addition, the four sides were of equal length, and the corners were at a uniform angle. The buildings along both sides of any one of these four streets were perfect matches for the buildings on the other three sides, whether in height, design, or order [...] To enter the square street was to enter an absolutely predictable and calculable geometrical world, where there was only a single length and a single angle. However, it was actually the square street’s regular and monotonous construction that made it a labyrinth from which it was difficult to escape. In fact, a square street, wholly self-contained and with a name matching reality, has neither entrance nor exit. Therefore, the plaza enclosed by the square street was a sealed plaza, and the public nature of the street made it at the same time a private one. (2012: 116)

The above quotation refers to a square mapped as a street line, superimposed upon itself, and whose regular repetitions create “a predictable world”. In this way, the hidden innermost pattern of *Atlas* offers a Barthian photograph, bringing the reader to the cornerstone and final Chinese box. ‘Signs’, the smallest part of the book, lies ‘hidden’, like Calvino’s last section or Borges’ aleph, within the place of ‘Streets’, encapsulated in the plan of ‘City’, mapped within the abstract space of ‘Theory’. The fluidity of the insular city, as captured by Dung, is made up of layers of waves of signs, routes, plans, maps, as we move from the inner to the outer part of the structure. After exhausting its “writing space”, the book ends burying signs in “The Tomb of Signs” in chapter 50, while chapter 51 enters another dimension, “The Orbit of Time” where Kai-Cheung Dung not only maps the city, it captures its rhythm.

The city possesses a multi-temporality in itself, which consists of many pauses, currents and shifts that we experience in the course of what we learn in our everyday lives. Rhythm becomes relevant to the way that we understand subversive acts within the spatiality of the city. In this way, the city’s rhythm constitutes an order and the coexistence of a series of different worlds and activities that are not centrally controlled or monitored top-down

but are nonetheless being noticed and felt as the pulse that controls our lives, our movements and our actions in the city. (Lefebvre qtd. in Juul 2012: 34)

Like in the contrapuntal musical composition known as fugue, “The Orbit of Time” signifies the book’s ‘coda’, its provisional conclusion.

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