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*Blackfish City: A Place Without a Map*  
A Review of *Blackfish City* (2018)

Reviewed by Lobke Minter

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# **BLACKFISH CITY: A PLACE WITHOUT A MAP**

Review by Lobke Minter

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Miller, Sam J. *Blackfish City*. Ecco Press, 2018. Novel.

A mysterious orcamancer arrives in Qaanaaq, the floating Arctic city, with an orca and a polar bear in tow. Their purpose unknown, the orcamancer immediately becomes a site of speculation and projection for the inhabitants of the overpopulated city. The importance of stories is the first introduction to this post-apocalyptic city, where refugees make up most of the inhabitants. Sam J. Miller makes a point of emphasising how identity is formed through storytelling: "Stories are valuable here. They are what we brought when we came here, they are what cannot be taken away from us" (1). This awareness of storytelling makes *Blackfish City* (2018) a beautiful dystopia.

Qaanaaq itself is beguiling in its complexity, a pastiche of the postmodern city, where no map exists to effectively guide you through the chaos of overpopulation, poverty, and human suffering. Run by Artificial Intelligence (AI) software, the city is owned by secret shareholders, the capitalist elite who manage to profit from the end of the world. They have created a space where technology has effectively replaced human awareness, while in the process also erasing their collusion in the collapse of world systems. The fast-paced narrative is fragmented across four separate characters, each of whom traverses the city in a distinct way. The choice of the inhospitable Arctic as the story's setting enhances the direness of the situation. Qaanaaq, as sketched by Miller, mirrors the sentiments expressed by Mary Shelley's Robert Walton "inspired by this wind of promise, my daydreams become more fervent and vivid. I try in vain to be persuaded that the pole is the seat of frost and desolation; it ever presents itself to my imagination as the region of beauty and delight" (Shelley 2). The four protagonists are alternately enchanted or horrified by the city they live in. The "beauty and delight" of the cityscape cannot hide the "desolation" many of its inhabitants experience while living in deplorable circumstances.

The multiple perspectives seem completely unrelated to one another in terms of outlook and experience; however there are areas within Qaanaaq where their paths cross, even though they never meet. The disease "the breaks" is a point of intrigue throughout the narratives, disrupting the flow of the text in a way which reflects how the symptoms appear:

Bodybreaking, they called it. What happened when the breaks finally killed you. The moment when your mind's hold on the here and now finally ruptured forever and you broke free from your body [...] Midsentence she could see it happening, watch his eyes as one train of thought was abruptly replaced by another. (67)

Once diagnosed, an individual increasingly becomes “interrupted” by memories. As the illness progresses, these interruptions become more and more marked. The mind cannot make sense of the multiplicity within itself, a condition which manifests physically as tremors and tics which become more pronounced over time. There is no cure for “the breaks,” and very little is understood about it.

The sexually transmitted disease that racks the city dwellers seems like a remnant of the past – in Miller’s vision, the mind cannot internalise history or other people’s stories. Stories form part of the power wielded by the resistance ‘Author’ within the text, who remembers on behalf of the individuals listening to the pirate podcast. This podcast, “City Without A Map,” reminds listeners that they are separate from the AI systems that control everything – that the AI systems are not all powerful. The disembodied voice speaks truth, by detailing how suffering empowers those who orchestrate reality from hidden spaces by creating fear and misinformation.

At the turning point in the novel the orcamancer introduced at the beginning of *Blackfish City* is given a narrative segment as well as a name, Maasaraq. This point of view, filled with many different memories, engages directly with the speculation and projection of others regarding the dramatic arrival. This narrative fragment becomes the catalyst driving towards the resolution of the novel, echoing the transformative power of including a completely other narrative. Maasaraq’s bond with the orca is the reason for her immunity to “the breaks”: she explains that culturally “our ancestors do not depart, suggesting there is pre-existing awareness or ability to incorporate multiple realities or memories within one mind (325). The representation of Maasaraq also brings to the foreground the possible antidote for self-disintegration. In a city populated by many different refugees, Maasaraq is a survivor of genocide, and as an outsider driven by vengeance and loneliness, seems initially to embody the anti-hero within the expectations of Post-Cyberpunk. Her story highlights ecological awareness as a counternarrative, implying that mindfulness of environmental cohabitation is preferable to the caged, trapped status of those living in Qaanaaq.

Miller ends on an action-driven stand-off that is followed by a heartfelt reflection on the way forward for the protagonists as well as the city. The characters so clearly differentiated throughout the novel no longer find themselves distanced from each other, understanding that “Home is where we make it. Where we’re together” (324). Maasaraq’s narrative reveals that the characters, though separate and distinct throughout the novel, are in fact family. While this functions as an interesting plot twist, the concept of family seems to settle or gloss some of the complexity of what is presented throughout *Blackfish City*. Family becomes the antidote to all the city’s ills.

*Blackfish City* mirrors current concerns about the future critically. Qaanaaq and the people that live there do not feel incomprehensibly different. If anything, their thoughts, concerns and world feel all too familiar: their fate, Miller speculates, could be ours. Increasing nationalism and fear of immigrants and refugees, along with a denial of climate change and its impact, ravages and destroys the world. Their technological advancement and scorched earth political policies of exclusion and apathy – all of these lead to the floating dystopic city.

Miller uses lyrical prose to write an overpopulated city that is breathtaking in its magnificence and decay. The tension is maintained expertly, jumping between points of view, refugees and the elite, hope and despair, all the while maintaining a crisp insight into the world he has created.

#### WORKS CITED

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus*. 1818. Oxford University Press, 2008.

#### BIONOTE

**Lobke Minter** is an independent researcher living in Cape Town, South Africa. Her research interests include Dark Romanticism, imaginative explorations, Gothic expressions of Speculative Fiction; as well Science Fiction across a variety of subgenres.