



How the Fantastic Spaces in *Memoirs of a Survivor* and *Neverwhere* Destabilise the Notion of a Uniform, Homogeneous Urban Identity

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Abstract: This article discusses how Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor* and Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* question notions of self and identity through engagement with the fantastic urban space. Through the examination of the cityscape, maturity, and reconciliation the fantastic space is seen to have a disruptive and destabilising effect on the narrative and on the characters, which ultimately encourages a recontextualisation of identity. Hence the fantastic functions as a catalyst of transformation. Defamiliarisation of language and known codes of conduct signify a breakdown of the familiar, and the inability to regain ignorance ultimately prompts reconciliation with a new, diverse reality. Ultimately, the fantastic renders the city a heterogeneous, impossible space that leads to a corresponding, if gradual, change in identity from passive to active, from homogeneous to heterogeneous.

Keywords: urban fantasy, identity, cityscapes, transformation, space

Initially Neil Gaiman's portal-quest fantasy *Neverwhere* might not seem to have much in common with Doris Lessing's apocalyptic and psychological narrative *Memoirs of a Survivor* (hereafter *Memoirs*). However, despite their significant differences in narrative structure and tone – *Neverwhere* adopting several familiar fantasy tropes and approaching the city far more humorously – both novels show a distinct concern with space, and especially the urban space and its influence on, and connection to, identity. They proceed to explore

this space through the fantastic mode to disrupt an uninvolved, passive reality and highlight the impossibility of a fully cohesive and understandable urban experience. I will argue that the fantastic is shown to be disorderly and unruly; it disallows denial or ignorance of the city's uncomfortable aspects and thereby prompts personal transformation and reconciliation.

In *Neverwhere*, Richard Mayhew journeys through London Below: an inverted, and subversive world that ultimately leads him to a deeper understanding not only of the London above, but also of his own identity as a inhabitant of the metropolis. Following the portal-quest narrative, the text structurally (as well as thematically) explores cultural hierarchies and the role of the individual in society: it challenges familiar social and linguistic practices by making them appear curious and absurd. Gaiman's novel is widely considered a key text within the genre of urban fantasy; in contrast, Lessing's novel has stirred up debate on the genre in which to approach and discuss it. In her narrative, the fantastic mostly operates on a more personal, internal level, but there is also, within the city itself, an unmistakable tension between the possible and impossible. Thus, accepting the unreal as an integral and absolute part of the narrative unlocks an enriched approach to the text, where the fantastic allows an examination of identity and the urban in a new light. The city's changing nature, its centrality in propelling transformation, and its ability to hold paradoxes suggest that Lessing's text can be fruitfully compared to Gaiman's. Their different (yet surprisingly similar) approaches towards urban fantasy yield a new and interesting angle to an ever-expanding field, thus highlighting the diversity of the genre.

Situated statically at the novel's beginning, the unnamed, middle-aged narrator watches from her flat as the cityscape around her crumbles due to an unspecified societal collapse. When a young girl named Emily is suddenly placed in her care, the ever-changing secondary world behind the living room wall – the narrator's "inner space" – takes on the quality of a dream realm where Emily's childhood memories are revealed and relived. Reading Emily as not so much a character in her own right as comprising part of the narrator's personality, and her memories as thus belonging to the middle-aged woman herself, the story becomes one of reconciliation with the self. This essay thereby argues that the fantastic functions as a catalyst of transformation, where the comfortingly familiar is rejected and the inability to regain ignorance ultimately prompts reconciliation with a new, diverse reality. Thus through an exploration of space and its relationship with language and selfhood, the two texts highlight how fantasy has the ability to destabilise and defamiliarise the notion of a homogeneous, passive urban identity.

Alexander Irvine describes urban fantasy as an ever-expanding genre, which has come to incorporate multiple definitions and a growing number of texts set in an urban environment. Retroactively, he argues, every fantastic text that takes place in a city, or even occasionally includes a city, is subsumed under the genre, with the "result that any particularity the term once had is now diffused in a fog of contradiction" (200). John Clute in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997) traces features of the genre as far back as Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765) and, with emphasis on the centrality of the edifice, nods to contributions by Eugène Sue (1844), Charles Dickens (1839), and Alexander Dumas (1846). However, even though it is a widely loved genre among readers, it has so far received relatively little scholarly attention (Ekman, "Urban

“Fantasy” 452). Although a comprehensive discussion of the genre’s origin, definition and time-line is outside the scope of this essay, my argument emphasises that, in line with Stefan Ekman’s contestations, the study of urban fantasy allows for a convergence of the real and the imaginary, as well as the historical and cultural past and present (“London Urban” 380). Furthermore, in outlining the history of the genre, Ekman points to how it is rooted not only in fantasy, but also in Gothic horror and romance, at times also drawing on mystery, science fiction, and crime fiction (“Urban Fantasy” 452). However, it follows that the genre also borrows ideas from archaeology, history, human geography, and a number of other fields, ultimately with the goal of defamiliarising known physical and cultural structures. A discussion of urban fantasy incorporates ideas of space and place, time and materiality; the fantastic operates (on top of these) to cast the constructions of the city in a new light. It is the concreteness of recognisable settings, in Brian Attebery’s words, that “provide firm ground and vivid detail to the narratives” (137). This then complements Irvine’s notion that “the attempt at historical verisimilitude ... creates a circumstance in which the irruption of the fantastic juxtaposes two common figurative and symbolic vocabularies: those of the fairy tale and the tale of urban initiation” (201). Irvine thus not only emphasises the temporal layers of meaning always present within the city, but also points to the fantastic urban space as a text both read and composed by its citizens. It is a diverse and contradictory space, resisting any single interpretation.

This continuous process of reimagination and rereading underlines the city as inseparable from its inhabitants, and thus establishes the characters in the urban novel as inextricably linked to their setting. A fundamental part of Ekman’s argument of urban fantasy as a “literature of the Unseen” codes it as a literature of the hidden, concealed, and marginalised, with the “social Other” or the generally ignored as a central figure. Following this line of argument, the principal conception of the city I will be engaging with in this essay comes from Hana Wirth-Nesher’s *City Codes*, where she asserts that

the experience of the metropolis ... has more to do with what is absent than with what is present, more with inventing than with physically constructing the cityscape. Cities promise plenitude, but deliver inaccessibility. As a result, the urbanite, for better or for worse, is faced with a never-ending series of partial visibilities, of gaps. (8)

Relevant with regard to *Neverwhere* and *Memoirs*, she views these gaps to be “figures framed in the windows of highrises, crowds, observed from those same windows, partly drawn blinds ... noises from the other side of a wall” and that “faced with these and unable or unwilling to ignore them, the city dweller inevitably reconstructs the inaccessible in his imagination” (8–9). In the light of her argument, the city dweller’s urban identity can thereby be seen as contingent upon the manner in which they interact with their space, and how they traverse and negotiate these gaps. Although Wirth-Nesher’s discussion focuses mainly on “real” cities, these imaginative reconstructions are explored through the invention and integration of impossible, immeasurable spaces. As will be discussed further, this is also done on a linguistic level. The texts display how language as a representative marker falters, and illustrate how the fantastic’s gradual undermining of the cities’ “verbal environments” (Wirth-

Nesser 11) emphasises the fragility of these linguistic structures. Both texts explicitly comment on the relationship between language and identity and highlight how, in the urban space specifically, language is inextricably, yet only artificially, linked to location, class, and perspective. This provides an important framework through which to read the fantastic urban novel, and emphasises the mode as a useful tool to examine significant cultural issues.

In the two texts this fantastic urban space is in continuous communication with the “real” world, and in many ways subverts or contends with the perception of what is considered possible or true. The protagonists, as the stories progress, must continuously expand their understanding of reality. In *Memoirs* the reader encounters two imaginary spaces: the apocalyptic, external city existing outside the narrator’s window, and the physically impossible rooms behind the wall “occupying the same space as, or rather, overlapping with, the corridor” (11). Initially the narrator explains this juxtaposition “as if two ways of life, two lives, two worlds, lay side by side and closely connected. But then, one life excluded the other, and I did not expect the two worlds to ever link up” (25). However, the boundaries do eventually blur, and she later contends that “now began a period when something of the flavour of the place behind the wall did continuously invade my real life” (125). There is thus a clear link between the “inner” and “outer” space, and events happening in one will cause a ripple effect in the other. As the metropolis and everything that goes with it – societal customs, language, and communication – crumbles, the world behind the wall deteriorates, and the narrator at several points has to clean, mend, or repair the rooms. Lorelei Cederstrom reads both these impossible realms as “interior symbolic landscapes” and the world behind the wall specifically as the narrator’s unconscious (115). Regarding the “cultural decline” of the exterior urban sphere, she asserts that the crumbling city is the surrealistic landscape of the ego when its cultural symbols – and therefore its notion of unity with the surrounding, external world – no longer function (116). Although Cederstrom’s reading introduces important functions of the impossible spaces, she misses the significance of the physicality of the other worlds. The narrator says that, eventually, “intimations of that life, or lives, became more powerful and frequent in ‘ordinary’ life, as if that place were feeding and sustaining us, and wished us to know it”, but also that a “wind blew from one place to the other; the air of one place was the air of the other” (Lessing 137). The importance lies in the fact that the fantastic is physically breaking into the urban space, and that the city can gradually incorporate and reconcile these seemingly paradoxical landscapes.

In this way, the fantastic functions to break down the notion of consonance and wholeness as the novel explicitly connects, but simultaneously divides, the personal and the private space. It is done on several levels, from the material to the cultural to the linguistic, and the narrator writes that “for a long time it had been impossible to say: this is a working class area, this is *homogenous*” (10, emphasis added). Homogeneity, then, is replaced by the heterogeneous through the fantastic, as the cultural symbols, the ingrained social codes of the city, gradually mix and disintegrate when people relocate or gather in large groups on the streets. The personal starts to function as part of the group. The juxtaposition and subsequent integration of the impossible into everyday existence speak further to the city’s (and thus also its inhabitants’)

gradual transformation and, as the narrator points out, it was “precisely this which gave that time its peculiar flavour; the combination of the bizarre, the hectic, the frightening, the threatening, an atmosphere of siege and war – with what was customary, ordinary, even decent” (20). However, when concluding that “yes, it was extraordinary. Yes, it was all impossible Could one perhaps describe that period as ‘the ordinariness of the extraordinary?’” (19), the narrator foreshadows the gradual acceptance and reconciliation with the fantastic that is to take place throughout the novel.

Similar notions of inversion and division of space are discussed in Gaiman’s *Neverwhere*, and London Below creates the same sense of alienation from the urban for Richard as the crumbling outside generates for Lessing’s narrator. The more traditional structure of a portal-quest fantasy allows for a tale of exploration and discovery, and thereby also an explicit comparison between the known and unknown space. Upon Richard’s arrival, London Above conveys the sense of a bustling conglomerate of impressions, yet it is pointed out that “three years in London had not changed Richard” (9). He soon grows inattentive to the “city in which the very old and the awkwardly new jostled each other, not uncomfortably, but without respect” (9). Significantly, London Below’s danger and enchantment then intensify this disrespect and further exacerbate the urban space’s awkwardness. Spatially and culturally existing below its counterpart, London Below – operating like the space behind the wall in *Memoirs* – thus recalls Irvine’s notion of the juxtaposition of the real and the imaginary. The recontextualisation of historical events, like the construction of the sewer system improving the life of the Sewer Folk (Gaiman 267), emphasises how historical verisimilitude is constantly in both the foreground and background of the text. Similarly to Lessing’s references to the mixing of archetypal clothing or bygone styles (Lessing 52), London’s temporal layering appears as a primary thematic concern, as well as a backdrop that in itself constantly reminds the reader about its existence. The apposition, as well as the oscillation, between the imaginary and the real rejects stasis but ultimately finds normality unobtainable.

Several characters lament the proximity and overlap, as well as the distinct hierarchy, between the two worlds: “... that two cities should be so near ... and yet in all things so far; the possessors above us, and the dispossessed, we who live below and between, who live in the cracks” (Gaiman 96, ellipses original). Although the spaces never blend to the same extent as in *Memoirs*, *Neverwhere* traces Richard’s movement between the two, focusing on his interaction with the impossible. The integration of the fantastic, as I have outlined, thus transforms the city from a homogeneous to a heterogeneous space, and the characters’ subsequent encounter with the fantastic urban prompts a corresponding change in identity. The function of London Below – and thus of the fantastic space in general – as Züleyha Çetiner-Öktem describes, alludes to a “metaphorical mapping of the self where there is room for transformation and change, allowing the characters to gain awareness and work out issues of self and identity” (132).

One of the main ways in which the novels undertake this transformation of space and identity is through the undermining of what Hana Wirth-Nesher calls the city’s “verbal environment”. Together with the “natural”, built and human environments, the verbal environment constitutes the cityscape in the representation of the city (11–12). It refers to both the written and spoken

language of the urban, and is thus visual as well as auditory, encompassing a dialect as well as advertisements and graffiti (13). In Lessing's apocalyptic universe the breakdown of these structures and conventions is described already at the outset of *Memoirs*. As pointed out earlier, the complex where the narrator now lives among a conglomeration of rich and impoverished "were not flats built by a town council, the walls scribbled with graffiti ... were not the vertical flats of the poor" (Lessing 9). The close proximity of the fantastic contributes to this breakdown, as the mixing of the interior manor, the previously middle-class apartment complex, and the now-clear amalgamation of social categories exist in the same place. The breakdown of societal boundaries has forced the narrator's reconstitution of identity-markers, as space no longer linearly points to class identity. Similarly, the narrator initially reminisces about language as "currency", and how gossip, the grains of truth in rumour, and information gathered in the streets "made us feel safer and gave us identity" (45). However, she then conveys how the city's transformation has changed her mind, and she now thinks "something different: that what we were doing was talking. We talked" (45). Language has been stripped of its currency and the previous uniformity of the spatial, and the linguistic environment has thereby lost its significance, again subverting Wirth-Nesher's point that the "auditory rather than the written verbal environment is often an indicator of social, ethnic, or other subdivisions in the city made evident by dialect or other language usage" (14).

On both a verbal and oral plane the gradual mixing of registers thus epitomises society's fragmentation as communication loses its function and the scattered communities become more isolated. It starts with words losing their currency and their meaning: the ruling class being a "dead phrase" (Lessing 91) and "old words, seduce, immoral, shocking" being used to describe the people on the streets, yet that "they had no force in them was proved by the fact that nothing was done" (85). It continues on the auditory level with June's hardly intelligible manner of speaking, and is epitomised in the sewer children living almost without language altogether. The disintegration of language is followed by a breakdown of communication, as the woman visiting the sewer to help the children describes that "it was like ... talking into a vacuum" (149). The final attempt at unity and connection is countered when, at the gathering, the feral children chant their war song and the narrator realises that the words themselves are meaningless. She remarks that "we could all see how familiar words could slip out of key – how quickly things could change, we could change Had changed: those children were ourselves" (Lessing 153). As the language loses its role in communicating agreed-upon social frameworks, the sewer children's transformation characterises the loss of a cohesive urban identity. While other children of this time "could be handled inside the terms of what was known and understood" (Lessing 147), the sewer children embody the disruptive force that cannot be conceptualised within known frameworks.

Worth noting, however, is that among this disintegration of known modes of communication, the narrator records that new forms of non-verbal transmission of information are springing up, as a result of the societal change; the idea of leaving the city is not announced through the common channels – the loudspeakers, the radio or television – yet it is "coming into everyone's mind at the same time and without intervention from authorities" (11). She further emphasises that "announcements of all kinds were continually being made: yet

these were not absorbed by the populace as was this other information" (11). Her descriptions of "it" function similarly: a commonly agreed upon phenomenon, yet impossible to pin down to a specific signified. She metaphorically writes that "it is in crisis 'it' becomes visible For 'it' is a force, a power, taking the form of earthquake, a visiting comet whose balefulness hangs closer night by night distorting all thought by fear" (130). The notion of language as a fixed point of reference is thereby undermined, as the fantastic renders it unstable; the transformative effect can be traced on a personal as well as on a city-wide level when new notions of reality are incorporated into new linguistic structures.

The notion of "words slipping out of key" is also highly relevant in *Neverwhere*, although it is by contrast used for comedic purposes, as well as for undermining expectations regarding conventional language-use. Wirth-Nesher underlines that authors, when importing elements from "real" cities into their fictionalised counterparts, refer to known maps, landmarks, and edifices that then enable a character to walk down a verifiable street in a "realistic" setting (11). The subversion of familiar landmarks of London Above instead destabilise and defamiliarise Richard's experience, and London's familiar verbal environment is turned upside-down. What would be known markers of realism – Knightsbridge, Earl's Court Station, Blackfriars – become the decisive indicators of the fantastic, where the names are actualised and there is a "real" Earl with a "real" court. For Richard, the familiar signifier links to an unfamiliar signified, and his experiences with the urban fantastic thus prompt a restructuring of his linguistic references. As in *Memoirs*, this shift towards a different conceptual framework is gradual, and Richard starts off by often stating the (to him) obvious (Gaiman 43, 142), or simply repeating phrases confusedly back to the Marquis (46). Gaiman humorously shows us that Richard's understanding of language does not work to give him the right information. However, gradually it is pointed out that "Richard was beginning to catch on. He assumed that the Earl's Court to which the Marquis referred wasn't the familiar Tube station he had waited in innumerable times" (139). He is also "almost proud that he didn't ... point out that you couldn't put a library on a train" (160). Eventually, then, Richard establishes a linguistic framework that allows him to make new and seemingly impossible connections between signifiers and the concepts signified.

The verbal environment of London Below hence builds on, and is in some ways similar to, that of London Above – "loud, and brash, and insane" (109) – but it simultaneously holds a curious quality the bustling above seems to lack. The music at the Floating Market is "being played a dozen different ways on a score of different instruments, most of them improvised, improved, *improbable*" (109, emphasis added). In contrast, the description appears to point to a seemingly indescribable quality inherent to the magical space, something akin to a positive version of Lessing's "it". Hence when Richard, towards the end of the novel, tries to conceptualise these phenomena in his mental diary, he eventually realises that "metaphors failed him, then. He had gone beyond the world of metaphor and simile, into the place of things that *are*, and it was changing him" (Gaiman 311, emphasis original). The disintegration of known language codes thus instigates, as in *Memoirs*, a transformation of worldview and identity, as the familiar grounds of the urban sphere are shifted. The difference is that in *Neverwhere* this is not done on a societal level, but

instead on the personal plane, causing a shift in perspective. To Richard, the fantastic defamiliarises the cityscape as represented through its verbal environment. The other inhabitants of London Above go by unaware and unchanged. Gradually, then, the characters in both texts are seen to adapt a new structure of reference that allows them to accommodate and integrate new notions of reality.

As I have pointed out continually in my reading of the city, the fantastic is seen, through the texts' forms and structures, to have a direct, transformative impact on characterisation. Both novels are in some way engaging with the framework of the bildungsroman, but both texts employ the device unconventionally, and the start and end points of the journey toward maturity are affected by the fantastic spaces. The unifying factor is that both cases mark a change from passivity to activity, and from alienation to reconciliation. Richard's passive position at the start of the narrative is emphasised by his uninvolved stance towards both his career and his relationships. With regard to this Derek Lee observes that in "explicit contrast to the aim of the form, Gaiman writes against accepting one's proper role in adult society, which is to say that his bildungsroman is actually an anti-bildungsroman" (553). I argue that Gaiman goes even further than that, and uses the end point of the traditional bildungsroman narrative to highlight "adult society" as an unstable, ever-changing – even impossible – arrangement. Through the fantastic journey the reader finds Richard growing more and more unsure of his own self, and phrases of anxiety and hesitation regarding his own identity increasingly permeate the narrative: Gaiman writes that Richard "felt like a small child, unwanted, following the bigger children around" (125), and towards the end of the story he had no "idea who he was, any more; no idea what was or what was not true; not whether he was brave or cowardly, mad or sane" (252).

The critical moment with regard to the rejection of a stable, distinct identity comes in the form of the Ordeal – a psychological examination (in the dual sense) of Richard's past, present, and future character. It is also the pivotal moment where the quest's outcome is decided. The scene outlines not only a destabilisation of the self, but also a defamiliarisation as Richard converses with two identical – yet distinctly alien – projections of his past self. It is narrated that "the damp, muddy Richard stared into the face of the clean, well-dressed Richard, and he said, 'I don't know who you are or what you're trying to do'" (245), which exemplifies a clear internal, as well as external, divide between the former and present selves, the earlier versions ultimately discarded at the completion of the trial. The Ordeal is then complemented and mirrored in the labyrinth scene, where Richard faces another trial and instead incorporates a new identity: after slaying the Beast of London he is given the title "Warrior". It functions to epitomise Richard's character growth, as the three times he previously met the beast in a dream, he was killed. As well as addressing the transformative power of language and naming, the ritual of touching the dead beast's blood to his eyes and tongue gives Richard the knowledge of the way forward. Gaiman writes that afterwards, he "ran straight and true through the labyrinth, which no longer held any mysteries for him" (320). The text thereby acknowledges that reality, adult society, the urban sphere, is labyrinthine and tangled – and that Richard now traverses it actively. His quest throughout this

fantastic, hidden, underground space has led to a fundamental change in character and identity.

Like Richard, Lessing's narrator starts off passively observing the city through the window of her flat, and at several points she references a passive acceptance of events going on around her (Lessing 20). She goes as far as stating that "I almost felt myself not to exist, in my own right" (27). However, at the point when Emily suddenly appears in her life, the secondary world behind the wall also starts becoming increasingly important, and the woman has to engage physically and emotionally with the scenes of that realm. Lessing uses the contrasting images of imprisonment and liberation to represent the opposition between the oppressive "personal" – the memories of Emily's childhood – and the changeable manor, where there was a "lightness, a freedom, a feeling of possibility" (39) and "always a liberation" (57). In the other realm, then, passive observation becomes unbearable, as "to enter the personal was to enter a prison, where nothing could happen but what one saw happening, where the air was tight and limited, and above all where time was a strict unalterable law" (39). Transformation is thereby seen to originate in the fantastic, and although it takes the form of a more gradual awakening of character in the "real" world, the impossibility of a fixed adulthood and the instability of maturity are brought forward.

Lessing herself points out in an interview that the world behind the wall "actually represents [the narrator's] own life, her own childhood" and that Emily maturing embodies her adolescence. "Thus, reality and dream, marked off by the wall, complement each other to give an all-encompassing vision to the narrator's past" (Lessing, qtd. in Rousseau 147–48). If Emily is thus read as part of the narrator, and their past as a shared past, *Memoirs* takes the form of a bildungsroman, but as observed and commented on in retrospect from an adult perspective. The narrator observes Emily both in the real world and in the world behind the wall, and the fantastic space functions to bridge the two images of the child to form the identity of the middle-aged woman. The narrator emphasises this notion of incorporation when saying that "being invited into this scene was to be absorbed into child-space; I saw it all as a child might – that is, enormous and implacable" (40). The narrative then continuously underlines the oscillation between woman and child, where Emily, confronted with the impossibility of her world, "wept, a little girl again, thumbs sweeping tears from her eyes; but up she jumped, and said, as an adult: 'Anyway, I have to go there, whether I like it or not'" (122). Lessing's use of the memoir form thereby collapses and dislodges these temporal layers, and Emily's non-linear journey through adolescence is experienced both first-hand and second-hand through the eyes of the narrator. Gayle Green consolidates these notions of form, time, and identity when writing that "our attempts to make temporal connections, to make sense of the chronology, are thwarted, though also weirdly satisfied, when we realize that all are one: Emily, the narrator, Lessing, ourselves" (149). She then emphasises how this experience is simultaneously personal and generalised, emphasising what I consider to be the primary strength and function of urban fantasy: the ability to incorporate the seemingly oppositional into the representation and experience of the city. The two texts highlight a deep concern with point of view, and with a character's place in society. The fantastic urban spaces engaged with in both texts encourage – force, even – a transformation from a

passive to an active position. The journeys of maturity the characters undertake decisively lead to dynamic, unfixed notions of identity, and the structure of the anti-bildungsroman emphasises that adulthood itself is an inherently unstable state.

The two texts portray a reconciliation with the fragmented urban experience, ultimately leading to an acceptance of the destabilising effect of the impossible and the fantastic. The sense of alienation rendered by the fantastic urban experience becomes one of liberation, and both protagonists find themselves fulfilled at the end of their narratives. After the completion of the quest, Richard “for a moment, upon waking, ... had no idea at all who he was. It was a tremendously liberating feeling, as if he were free to be whatever he wanted to be” (Gaiman 339). It is thus emphasised that, in the end, he accepts the alienating effect of the fantastic and realises the diversifying and transformative effect of participating in and engaging with the city’s gaps and partial visibilities. Wirth-Nesser writes that the city is rendered legible by multiple acts of imagination (9), but I argue that the characters instead show an acceptance of the cityscape’s illegibility. Even when Richard is finally given all he had longed for at the novel’s start, he ends up rejecting his new flat, his new job, and Jessica’s love, and he seems content to do so. When she asks if he has met someone else, he calmly and composedly replies no, “I’ve just changed, that’s all”, then “realizing it was true as he said it” (362). This change has led to the ability to see the city’s gaps and hidden underground spaces, but also the inability to settle back into a stable, passive city life. The all-encompassing consequence of the quest becomes a reconciliation with the loss of uniformity. Jessica Tiffin further emphasises this narrative resolution and comments on how

Richard’s immersion in their world is alienating, terrifying and finally, as he negotiates it, fulfilling: the contrasts between his world and theirs, and the cultural shock this causes, are an exploration of fantastic otherness. In his embrace of the fantastic otherworld, his narrative arc moves inevitably towards an identification with this otherness. (35)

As Richard finally moves through the “hole in the wall” (Gaiman 372) at the narrative’s conclusion, he traverses not only between two alien yet familiar worlds, but also between and through contrasting notions of the self: liberatingly diverse and ever-changing.

This final crossing, the narrative resolution of acceptance, is also seen in the last scene of *Memoirs* where Emily, Gerald, Hugo, and the children walk through to the secondary world “as the last walls dissolved” (Lessing 182). The narrator’s serene, impassive tone as she recounts the disarranged, disintegrating space ultimately points to a reconciliation with the impossibility of the fantastic. She writes that “... that world, presenting itself in a thousand little flashes, a jumble of little scenes, facets of another picture, all impermanent, was folding up as we stepped into it, was parcelling itself up, was vanishing, dwindling and going” (182). In addition, when the characters finally all see the wall’s hidden pattern “brought to life”, Lessing emphasises their calm and readiness:

Hugo was not surprised, not he: he stood, all alert and vivified beside the wall, looking into it as if at last what he wanted and needed and knew would happen was here, and he was ready for it. (181)

Thus, the spatial collapse mirrors that of the separate layers of identity the narrator has projected, and as Cederstrom points out, the narrator moves into a space where the personal, impersonal, and real are all one: “All are kaleidoscopic reflections of a reality that exists only within the protagonist” (130). This reading highlights the final bridging of the fantastic spaces as the settlement and incorporation of contrasting, discrete identities. As Cederstrom goes on to point out, the narrator has “become one with the self as she incorporates and reconciles within herself all the contradictions and limitations of the world through which she moved [She] contains all of them now: ego and self, collective and transpersonal, animal and instinctual” (130). The endings of both texts show the reconciliation with a diverse and disparate identity. The journeys through the fantastic cities narrate the encounter with – and finally the acceptance of – the impossible; thus the fantastic urban space undermines the possibility of a single, consolidated, homogeneous self. Ultimately, this representation of the city functions to underline that urban spaces have transformative power, and that they actively reject passive, comfortable interactions with the fantastic world.

In conclusion, this essay has analysed how Lessing’s *Memoirs of a Survivor* and Gaiman’s *Neverwhere* question familiar notions of self and identity through engagement with the fantastic urban space. I have argued that the fantastic space has a disruptive and destabilising effect on the narrative and on the characters, which ultimately encourages a recontextualisation of identity. The texts underline how the fantastic disallows ignorance and prompts an examination of the city’s uncomfortable multiplicity, and both Richard and Lessing’s narrator undertake journeys of maturity that ultimately lead to a reconciliation with this divergent space. I have shown how the fantastic renders the city heterogeneous, and the interaction with the space as such prompts a corresponding change in identity, rejecting homogeneity and instead incorporating the paradoxical. The impossible thereby functions to offer a diverse, active alternative to a passive metropolitan experience, and the gradual breakdown of the known (as seen through the defamiliarisation of language) emphasises the fantastic city as transformative. Gaiman and Lessing thus show both the value and effect of actively interacting with the urban space, and the texts highlight the impossibility of reading the city or its inhabitants as uniform, orderly entities.

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