IDENTITY FORMATION IN PAUL AUSTER'S FICTIONAL URBAN SPACE

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Abstract: *How does the contemporary self depicted in Paul Auster's fiction constitute himself in the metropolis New York City? I will investigate the extent to which New York City influences the shaping of a metropolitan identity in two selected literary works by Paul Auster: City of Glass and Sunset Park.*

Keywords: *American literature, heterotopia, identity, urban space*

"In New York I feel plugged into a strong alternating current of hope and despair."

Ted Morgan

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the process of identity formation in the urban space created by the contemporary US-American writer Paul Auster in two of his novels, *City of Glass* (the first part of *The New York Trilogy*) and *Sunset Park*. In these two narratives, the protagonists' struggles to constitute their identities are based on their relationships with the metropolis as well as their professions, which are inextricably linked to the process of identity formation. The two narratives differ, however, in regard to the locations within New York City, the urban space in both narratives: in *City of Glass* the protagonist Daniel Quinn moves from the domestic space to the public streets of Manhattan, whereas *Sunset Park's* protagonist Miles Heller and his three friends seek refuge in a house in Brooklyn.

Based on this shift from Manhattan to Brooklyn and the characters' transition from the private space to the public space in *City of Glass* and vice versa in *Sunset Park*, I claim that Auster takes on a more political stance in his writings. The two places represent two different concepts of identity formation in urban space: Quinn attempts to find his lost self in a Manhattan neighborhood that stands for the successfully established urban life and "a sophisticated life of art", as Martha Nadell describes it in "Writing Brooklyn" (Nadell 2010:111), while Miles and his friends move to Brooklyn, "the site for mediations on the language befitting modern urban life; on the contrast between an imagined New York cosmopolitanism and an ostensibly authentic ethnic, working-class; [...] on the spatial and temporal construction of collective and individual identity" (Nadell 2010:110). Auster replaces Manhattan with Brooklyn as his literary *topos*. Quinn fails to reestablish his identity in the streets of Manhattan, but the new setting in *Sunset Park* offers a different approach to the process of identity formation and provides the characters with the opportunity to

temporarily turn their moment of crisis into a moment of calm and productivity. When the characters' artistic minds engage in discourse with each other, "nothingness" can be avoided and meaning and identity can be established. Though the achievement is not permanent, the period of time in which the characters successfully proceed to (re)construct their identities stresses what art, education, communication, and togetherness can achieve.

2. The Postmodern New York City and Its Con- and Destruction of Identity in *City of Glass*

As Frederic Jameson claims, "[s]pace is for us an existential and cultural dominant" (Jameson 1991:365). Auster depicts New York City as the postmodern urban space in which Quinn's fragmented self attempts to reconstruct a coherent and meaningful identity. From the very beginning of the novel, the streets of Manhattan are presented as a space in which one can easily be lost. Quinn feels "lost [not only] in the city, but within himself as well" (Auster 1988:4). He is a man who has distanced himself from society and from interaction and communication with others in reaction to the deaths of his wife and his three-year-old son five years earlier (Auster 1988:3). The loss of his family has caused him to feel incomplete and made it impossible for him to continue to play the role that he used to in Manhattan society. Quinn's mourning process has also affected his work, which used to be an essential part of his former self as a father and a husband. Quinn secretly adopts an additional role, that of his pseudonym "William Wilson:"

William Wilson, after all, was an invention, and even though he was born within Quinn himself, he now led an independent life. Quinn treated him with deference, at times even admiration, but he never went so far as to believe that he and William Wilson were the same man. (Auster 1988:4)

He needs another identity to take the place that he thinks to be discredited and to avoid the obliteration of his self altogether. "William Wilson" enables him to continue writing his novels as well as to negotiate his business deals (Auster 1988:5). In addition to "William Wilson," the private investigator Max Work – the main character of Quinn's novels – becomes part of his 'original' identity, "a presence in Quinn's life, his interior brother, his comrade in solitude" (Auster 1988:6). Although Quinn is aware of the fact that Max Work, like "William Wilson," is an "imaginary person" (Auster 1988:9), Work serves as a substitute identity for Quinn. Even more than "William Wilson", Max Work embodies male strength and domination; in contrast to Quinn, Work is "aggressive, quick-tongued, at home in whatever spot he happened to find himself" (Auster 1988:9). Work is in charge of the narrative that was being created for him to the point where he "demands that the world reveal itself to him" (Auster 1988:8).

In addition to this pseudonym, William Wilson, and the fictional character, Max Work, Quinn decides to take on one more role – that of the alleged private detective, Paul Auster, a fictional character in the novel who shares its author's name. After someone apparently dials the wrong number and asks to speak to the private detective Paul Auster in order to get his professional help, Quinn decides to say he is Auster and take the job; his decision to accept

the job offer underlines his struggle with his own identity as well as the determination to find and create a new one. Through his adoption of the identity of a third character he seeks one more opportunity to further escape his lost self and to regain authority and stability through a new figuration.

At the same time, the metropolis provides a place of refuge for him. Whenever he needs to escape the closeness of his small apartment, Quinn walks around in the “inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps” (Auster 1988:3). He leaves the domestic sphere with the intention of freeing himself from his changed life and escaping the struggle of reestablishing his identity. While moving through the streets of Manhattan, he distances himself from the world, the people around him as well as from his own self, and experiences a peaceful state of mind:

Each time he took a walk, he felt as though he were leaving himself behind, and by giving himself up to the movement of the streets, by reducing himself to a seeing eye, he was able to escape the obligation to think, and this, more than anything else, brought him a measure of peace, a salutary emptiness within. (Auster 1988:4)

Even though Quinn physically becomes a part of the metropolis, he mentally distances himself from his surroundings:

On his best walks, he was able to feel that he was nowhere. And this, finally, was all he ever asked for: to be nowhere. New York was the nowhere he had built around himself, and he realized that he had no intention of ever leaving it again. (Auster 1988:4)

At this point Quinn claims authority over New York. He uses the metropolis for the personal aim of constructing a space for himself where escape and existence are possible for him at the same time. This is essential, since the adoption of three other identities only leads to “being a man with no interior, a man with no thoughts. And if there were no thoughts available to him, if his own inner life had been made inaccessible, then there was no place for him to retreat to” (Auster 1988:61). In order to construct such a place, Quinn successfully establishes his own version of New York, his personal heterotopia. In his 1969 essay, “Of Other Spaces,” Michel Foucault distinguishes between three different spaces: Utopias, heterotopias and mirrors. He defines heterotopic spaces as

places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. (Foucault 1986:24)

During the first half of the narrative, Quinn seems to be able to construct a new form of identity, one that depends on the synergy between the physical and mental self and the

metropolis: “His excursions through the city had taught him to understand the connectedness of inner and outer” (Auster 1988:61).

Over the course of the investigation that he pursues as PI Paul Auster, Quinn distances himself increasingly from his domestic space, his apartment, and ultimately becomes a part of the city: “Remarkable as it seems, no one ever noticed Quinn. It was as though he had melted into the walls of the city” (Auster 1988:117). He leaves his former identity as well as those of “William Wilson” and Max Work behind and dissociates himself as far as possible from any social contacts and interactions. Quinn almost vanishes in the city, into the urban space, which offers anonymity to those who want to escape their past lives and identities.

At first, the intimacy with the metropolis, with its maze of walls and alleys, suggests a new beginning for Quinn. However, this project fails on two occasions. When he

wrote his initials DQ (Daniel Quinn), on the first page [of the red notebook]. It was the first time in five years that he had put his own name in one of his notebooks. He stopped to consider this fact for a moment but then dismissed it as irrelevant. (Auster 1988:39)

Instead of facing his past and his own former identity, Quinn refuses to reflect upon the significance of this moment and his situation in general and continues to lose himself in his adopted identities.

The second occasion in which Quinn has a chance to reestablish his own former identity is the moment when he actually meets (the character) Paul Auster, who tells Quinn that he himself is a writer and not a private detective. The fact that Auster has a wife and a son with whom he lives in an apartment in the city enrages Quinn: “It was too much for Quinn. He felt as though Auster were taunting him with the things he had lost, and he responded with envy and rage, a lacerating self-pity. Yes, he too would have liked to have this wife and this child...” (Auster 1988:101-102). Quinn is confronted with the fact that he no longer exists in the organized structures of his family and the metropolis. This very moment could have been a turning point for Quinn; he could have chosen to regain his lost – his own – identity by transforming his rage into psychological strength and rebuilding his life. Instead, he becomes desperate and gives in to nothingness: “Quinn was nowhere now. He had nothing, he knew nothing, he knew that he knew nothing.” (Auster 1988:104) He adapts to the streets and even comes to resemble a homeless person (Auster 1988:121).

“But it was only now, as his life continued in the alley, that he began to understand the true nature of solitude. He had nothing to fall back on anymore but himself.” (Auster 1988:118) In this situation, Quinn’s solitude prevails; he has lost the power over his life, other people and the metropolis, and finally, over the identities he had constructed and adopted. All that is left is a disintegrated and lonely self that has left its domestic space and transitioned into the streets of its self-created heterotopic space. Once again, Quinn attempts to distance himself from the circumstances and surroundings that threaten and even destroy what is left of his identity. New York City no longer enables the constitution of his identity. “Everything had changed” (Auster 1988:124). Quinn is about to disappear into the narrative, to vanish altogether into the metropolitan space and, because of this obliterate every notion of his identity. For Quinn, Auster’s Manhattan has become a “tragedy of a utopian dream made

reality” (Baudrillard 1989:30) much as Quinn himself has become what Baudrillard calls one of the “Americans [who] have no identity” (Baudrillard 1989:34).

3. The Quest for an Alternative Living Environment in *Sunset Park*

Auster’s concern with the discourse of identity formation manifests itself not only in the Manhattan of *City of Glass* but also in the Brooklyn of *Sunset Park*. The struggle of the self to (re)construct one’s identity continues in this New York City neighborhood as a quest for an alternative living environment, which is inextricably connected to the characters’ quest for their individual identities. By moving into the house in Sunset Park, Miles, Bing, Ellen, and Alice construct a heterotopic entity, in which they are temporarily able to materialize their longings. This ephemeral heterotopic entity, however, represents different kinds of heterotopic spaces that depend on each character’s personal circumstances.

The struggle to support themselves financially and the attempt not to lose themselves in their existential struggle bring the characters together in the house in Brooklyn. The occupation of this house becomes the project in which they attempt to constitute their identities and rebel against their current personal working and living conditions:

When Ellen Brice told him about the abandoned house in Sunset Park this past summer, [Bing] saw it as an opportunity to put his ideas to the test, to move beyond his invisible, solitary attacks on the system and participate in a communal action. It is the boldest step he has yet taken, and he has no trouble reconciling the illegality of what they are doing with their right to do it. These are desperate times for everyone, and a crumbling wooden house standing empty in a neighborhood as ragged as this one is nothing if not an open invitation to vandals and arsonists, an eyesore begging to be broken into and pillaged, a menace to the well-being of the community. By occupying that house, he and his friends are protecting the safety of the street, making life more livable for everyone around them. (Auster 2010:77)

Bing cites the current collective economic situation to justify their occupation of the house. He further imagines this act to be a service to the people of the neighborhood of Sunset Park. This act allows Bing and his friends to regain partial control of their lives. The regain of partial control motivates them to follow their individual dreams and projects, and in order to structure their own little community, they produce their own routine and rules:

Bing is telling [Miles] about the various routines and protocols that have been established since they moved in. Each person has a job to perform, but beyond the responsibilities of that job, everyone is free to come and go at will. (Auster 2010:126)

According to Foucault, a “heterotopia of compensation” is constructed in order to function as “a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled. This [...] type would be the heterotopia, not of illusion, but of compensation [...]” (Foucault 1986:27). The friends create their heterotopia of compensation out of a real space in which each contributes to the little community and works to establish his or her individual life. The “job” inside the house

enables the characters to compensate for their work failures outside of the heterotopic space and to create an environment that serves their personal purposes.

Miles's perception of what the move and the occupation signify differs from that of his friends. Miles is in a relationship with Pilar, an under-age high school student in Florida, whose family has blackmailed him into leaving her alone. Afraid of being arrested for seducing a minor, he escapes to New York City. The metropolis and the house in Brooklyn represent a place of refuge, but the house also feels like a prison:

The only problem is cash, the same problem all the others are facing. He no longer has a job, and the three thousand dollars he brought with him amount to little more than pennies. Like it or not, then, for the time being he is stuck, and unless something comes along that dramatically alters his circumstances, he will just have to make the best of it. So his prison sentence begins. Pilar's sister has turned him into the newest member of the Sunset Park Four. (Auster 2010:127)

Miles's situation differs from that of his friends because he has had to leave his established living and working environment in order to protect himself from possible arrest and a prison sentence. Thus, he experiences the housing situation in Sunset Park as an alternative version of a state prison: for him the house could be described as a heterotopia of deviation. Foucault suggests that heterotopias of deviation are places where those "individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed [...] of course prisons" (Foucault 1986:24-25). In Miles's case the heterotopia is created based on two factors: first, he breaks the law of society by engaging in a sexual relationship with a minor, and secondly, he punishes himself by leaving Pilar. Hence, both parties – society and Pilar's family on the one hand and Miles on the other – contribute to the creation of this particular heterotopic space.

Miles distinguishes himself and his fellow housemates from the rest of the world by labeling the group the "Sunset Park Four" (Auster 2010:127). Although he feels like a part of this group, he has trouble adjusting to the neighborhood outside of the house:

He wanders around in the streets, trying to familiarize himself with the neighborhood, but he quickly loses interest in Sunset Park. There is something dead about the place, he finds, the mournful emptiness of poverty and immigrant struggle [...], a small world apart from the world where time moves so slowly that few people bother to wear a watch. (Auster 2010:132)

According to Foucault, "[t]he heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time" (Foucault 1986:26). This form of a heterotopia is then referred to as a heterochrony (Foucault 1986:26). The despair of the people living in the neighborhood of Sunset Park has led them to construct a heterochrony in reaction to the "poverty and immigrant struggle" (Auster 2010:132). But this is not Miles's struggle and therefore, he does not identify with the neighborhood. He is from the "West Village in Manhattan to be precise" (Auster 2010:16) and his attitude towards the neighborhood in Brooklyn depicts that, although he physically left Manhattan and Florida behind, he never did so mentally. Like Quinn in *City of Glass*, Miles feels that he cannot continue as he used to in the mainstream society of the metropolis. His behavior is a reaction

to the events and circumstances in his life and is owed to the fact that Miles does not have the courage to confront his past and his problems and take on responsibility: “He has turned himself into a black sheep. That is the role he has willed himself to play, and he will go on playing it even in New York as he wanders back to the flock he left behind.” (Auster 2010:68)

Ellen is also troubled by the new situation but for different reasons. While her financial burden is lifted by moving into the house, the inner conflict caused by her emotions weighs heavy on her mind since “she is advancing now, traveling deeper and deeper into the netherworld of her own nothingness, the place in her that coincides with everything she is not” (Auster 2010:215).

Unlike Bing, Ellen knows that the living situation in the house in Sunset Park is temporary. She is convinced that “sooner or later you will be gone from Sunset Park, this ratty little house will be torn down and forgotten, and the life you are living now will fade into oblivion, not one person will remember you were here, not even you.” (Auster 2010:224) Ellen’s statement underlines the despair and disillusionment of the “Sunset Park Four” and links their possible destiny to that of Quinn in *City of Glass*.

After the squatters’ physical confrontation with the police, who have come to evacuate the house, Bing is arrested, Alice ends up in the hospital, and Ellen and Miles manage to escape. Their heterotopic space is destroyed, and in losing the house in Sunset Park, they lose their hope and faith in a promising future. At this moment the destruction of their heterotopias results in the destruction of their calm and productivity. Therefore, the house in Brooklyn serves as a place of refuge only within its limits of space and time, as an ephemeral heterotopic entity.

4. Conclusion

City of Glass and *Sunset Park* both depict the struggle to (re)establish identity through a self-created heterotopia in New York City. This process is truly the “strong alternating current of hope and despair” (“New York in Quotes” 2008:n.p.) that Ted Morgan describes. Auster allows Miles and his friends to turn their moment of crisis into a moment of calm and productivity as they unite in the house in Sunset Park. “The Sunset Park Four” demonstrate that identity can be (temporarily) achieved and “nothingness” replaced through art, education, communication, and togetherness, leaving us with a notion of hope rather than despair.

Both narratives, however, leave the reader with an inconclusive ending. Quinn seems to have vanished into the metropolis, and “at this point the story grows obscure” (Auster 1988:132). Miles concludes that “there is no future for them anymore, no hope for them anymore” (Auster 2010:307), while traveling back to Manhattan on Brooklyn Bridge. The Brooklyn Bridge has been a favorite motif for writers, especially during the twentieth century, representing the hope of “moving literally from Brooklyn to Manhattan and figuratively from an ethnic, working-class community to a sophisticated life of art” (Nadell 2010:111), but since Miles actually comes from this “sophisticated life” (Nadell 2010:111) and his family would welcome him back into it at any time, this journey is a journey of *méconnaissance* for Miles. Neither Quinn nor Miles own up to New York City.

Do Quinn's and Miles's failures indicate that we are left with broken individuals in a "city of ruins", as Marshall Berman (2007:38) refers to New York City? Stillman Sr., another character in *City of Glass*, explains his reason for coming to the metropolis as follows:

I have come to New York because it is the most forlorn of places, the most abject. The brokenness is everywhere, the disarray universal. You have only to open your eyes to see it. The broken people, the broken things, the broken thoughts. (Auster 1988:78)

This dystopian portrait of New York City and its "brokenness" in every respect manifests the emotional bankruptcy of the characters in the postmodern urban. As we transition from *City of Glass* to *Sunset Park*, from Manhattan to Brooklyn, the emotionally bankrupt self has contributed to, as Bing observes, "a throwaway culture spawned by the greed of profit-driven corporations, the landscape has grown ever more shabby, ever more alienating, ever more empty with meaning and consolidating purpose" (Auster 2010:72). Art, education, communication, and togetherness have been abandoned in this empty and meaningless society of the metropolis and been replaced through new technologies, "all things digital" (Auster 2010:72). Even though the metropolis has always been a place for and of innovation, these new technologies complicate the interrelation between the self and the metropolis even further. We will continue to observe, admire, and criticize the interaction among these three constituents as they progress both in the real and in the fictional world.

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