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Spaces of Memory: Performing Identity in

Travels in the Scriptorium

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Abstract

As Michel Foucault said in his text *Of Other Spaces,* "the great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history" (22). Although with the turn of the century this obsession has been gradually diluted, giving rise to a balanced equilibrium between the studies of time and space, there are still many authors in whom this change of perspective has not been studied. In books such as *The New York Trilogy*, American author Paul Auster has discussed questions of space, but also of identity.

This Master's thesis studies how space and identity are applied in Auster's book *Travels in the Scriptorium,* a novel that has been briefly studied and whose main character, Mr. Blank, develops a fragmented identity within a contingent space. To this end, it will focus on two themes: first, memory, and second, the aforementioned space. The Master's thesis will attempt to articulate how a character with a fragmented memory in a closed and uncertain space can (or cannot) construct and deconstruct his own identity from different elements. Thus, firstly, it will be studied how his fragmented memory affects this character not in the recovery of his identity, but in the creation of a new one based on his lack of empathy and in the disruption of his personality. Secondly, it will be studied how the closed space in which Mr. Blank appears influences his construction of an identity, considering the concepts of spatiality and agency, and studying how fear manipulates space. Finally, it will be studied how the spaces created along the plot develop in a parallel way resulting in a series of heterotopias.

Keywords

1. Introduction

Although the concepts of space and spatiality have been widely studied in recent times, both are recent in their current conceptualization. The study of space began in Descartes' time, albeit in a different manner to how it is studied today. For Henri Lefebvre, Descartes' concept of space had already shifted the Aristotelian definition:

> The status of such categories had hitherto remained unclear, for they could be looked upon either as simple empirical tools for ordering sense data or, alternatively, as generalities in some way superior to the evidence supplied by the body's sensory organs. With the advent of Cartesian logic, however, space had entered the realm of the absolute. As Object opposed to Subject, as *res extensa* opposed to, and present to, *res cogitans,* space came to dominate, by containing them, all senses and all bodies (Lefebvre 1).

Since this change in focus, space began to be understood "as an arena for human action" and "subordinate to the concept of revolutionary time" (Alford 622). Space, therefore, was considered a container of objects, always subordinated and modified by time. During the nineteenth century, scholars continued to focus specially on time and history, the former being considered the most important dimension for modernist aesthetic. However, gradually, as Bertrand Westphal has suggested, the recovery of societies during and in the aftermath of the Second World War led to the decline of the obsession with time in favor of the studies of space (Tally 12*).*

This change in thinking, better known as *the spatial turn,* meant a new perspective of study to which artists and thinkers responded with different movements,

among which *postmodernism* is the most remarkable. As Fredric Jameson[1] explains to describe his own sense of displacement:

> [T]his latest mutation in space—postmodern hyperspace—has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world (*The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 44).

The discipline of space is no longer considered a recipient of ideas but an exporter of them (*The Spatial Turn* 1). According to Barney Ward and Santa Arias, "geographers are increasingly being read by scholars in the humanities and other social sciences" (*The Spatial Turn* 1), and, today, the idea of space as a social construction is relevant in all fields of study to understand how human history and culture work.

Important theorists, such as Henri Lefebvre, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, David Harvey, and Edward Soja, have studied the concept, and several postmodern authors have used it in their novels. Among the authors who have experimented with it, Paul Auster is specially noted for including space as a living and changing element that influences people's identity in his novels, and his narratives have been studied in a variety of different publications. For example, in "Spaced-Out: Signification and Space in Paul Auster's The New York Trilogy", Alford starts his article by explaining that,

> In Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy,* we encounter genuinely puzzling
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> characters and spaces: characters disappear from the space of the novel,

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[1] Although many scholars have studied the relationship between postmodernism, epistemology, and art, including Jean-François Lyotard, Christopher Norris, or David Harvey, this thesis is only using Jameson's quotation because it is considered the most appropriate in this particular context.

characters seek to lose themselves by wandering through unfamiliar space ….

By looking at how three spaces … function in the novels, we can see that

thematically a relationship is established between selfhood, space, and

signification (613).

In "A Place both Imaginary and Realistic: Paul Auster's *The Music of Chance",*

Ilana Shiloh also analyzes Paul Auster's play "Laurel and Hardy Go to Heaven", where,

once again, Auster experiments with the concept of spatiality:

When I think of the wall, it's as if I were going beyond what I can think. It's so

big, so much bigger than anything else. (Pause).And yet, in itself... in itself... it's

just a wall. A wall can be many things, can't it? It can keep in or keep out. It can

protect or destroy. It can help things... or make them worse. It can be part of

something greater... Or only what it is. Do you see what I mean? It all depends

on how you look (149).

Shiloh analyzes here the function of the wall not only as a physical element, but also as

a changing space with multiple and contradictory meanings.

In addition to these contributions, there are other authors who have analyzed

Auster's work. In *Auster's Posmodernity,* Brendan Martin investigates "Auster's

literary postmodernity in relation to a full range of his factual and fictional

writings" (9). The author explains that Auster constructs postmodern autobiographies

and that his characters share Auster's experiences. Martin also explains that he

"explore[s] Auster's evocation of a postmodern autobiography, and suggest[s] that this

blurring of fact and fiction contributes towards thorough skepticism and the lack of any

definitive sense of coherent certainty (9). Throughout the chapters of the book, he

studies self-invention and memory as recurrent resources in Auster's novels and how his books represent his life in a fragmented way.

As it is reflected in the different papers, Paul Auster's books are analyzed from different perspectives, but almost all related to space or identity. Among all his books, *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006) is one in which both concepts have been minimally studied, despite the fact that it emphasizes the function of space as an exporter factor that is not only dynamic, but also crucial throughout the plot. Some of the authors who have investigated the book are Eduardo Barros Grela, who articulates the space of contingency in "Performances of Uncertainty in Spaces of Contingency: Aesthetic Confinement and Mechanisms of Silencing in Paul Auster, Haruki Murakami, and Park Chan-wook"; Hana Lyčková, "The Problem of Identity in Writing by Paul Auster", and Martin Butler and Jens Martin Gurr, who study *Travels in the Scriptorium* as a metafiction, and relate the novel to the rest of his works, articulating how the latter functions as a nexus of previous ones in "The Poetics and Politics of Metafiction: Reading Paul Auster's *Travels in the Scriptorium*".

Specifically, in the latter, the authors explain how the themes of the text and its narrative have led several critics to "disparage it as self-indulgently brainy but ultimately somewhat pointless" (195), and claim that it has often been read as nothing more than a clever "recycling of Auster's own material" (Royle 2006). Therefore, one of the objectives of this Master's thesis is to demonstrate that *Travels in the Scriptorium* not only is the story of an author and the characters he created in the past, but a novel that deals with the de/construction of a fragmented identity in a space of contingency. Thus, it will be studied how the closed space is a crucial element in the creation of an identity. In addition, memory will be studied from a different perspective to that seen in

previous critique: while prior authors have studied memory in Paul Auster by comparing this element with the author's life in an autobiographical way, in this case, this Master's thesis will study how memory —or the lack of it— affects the creation and fragmentation of a character's identity.

2.   Context

Paul Auster, or Paul Benjamin Auster, is a novelist, essayist and translator born in 1947 in New Jersey. He graduated from Columbia University and started his career by translating the works of different French writers. In 1987, his first novel, *City of Glass,* was published, and the next year he published the other two books with which it was formed a trilogy of detective stories known as *The New York Trilogy* and that marked the start of his literary career. Auster has published several books after *The New York Trilogy*[2]*,* and he has written five screenplays. Although his books are full of different stories, they all have something in common: they all deal with themes as identity, language or space.

These common features represent the movement with which Auster's narratives are normally associated: postmodernism. The movement, as the name suggests, indicates a coming after modernism, and in the field of fiction, the most remarkable difference between the two movements is that, as Brian McHale suggests, while modernism is concerned with matters of understanding and knowledge (therefore, it is epistemological), postmodernism is concerned with the creation and the interrelation of worlds of being (therefore, it is ontological) (38).

The spread of the movement during the twentieth century was possible by the fact that its followers arose out of a reaction against the established forms of modernism (Jameson *Consumer Society* 111). According to Jameson, postmodernism is a diluted version of modernism. The author identifies this era with the growth of the media, and suggests that the movement is "a periodizing concept whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social

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[2]At the end of this work, an appendix with the list of all the publications by Paul Auster is included.

life and a new economic order –what is often euphemistically called modernization, postindustrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism" (*Consumer Society* 113).

Ihab Hassan, who highlighted the problems encountered by the scholars who define the concept, explains:

> The word postmodernism sounds not only awkward, uncouth; it evokes what it wishes to surpass or suppress, modernism itself. The term thus contains its enemy within … Moreover, it denotes temporal linearity and connotes belatedness, even decadence, to which no postmodernist would admit. But what better name have we to give to this curious age … shall we call it in the Age of Indetermanence (indeterminacy + immanence) … Or better still, shall we simply live and let others live to call us what they may? (qtd. In *Auster's Posmodernity* 4).

The movement, whose name was first coined by the historian Arnold Toynbee in the early 1950s, covers different fields, such as philosophy, arts, or architecture, among others, but literature is one of the most notable ones. In fact, according to Steven Connor, "literature can certainly claim to be one of the most important laboratories of postmodernism" (62). Hillary Chute, in an article analyzing postmodernism, explains "architecture is one of the key objects of postmodernism" (359). According to her, literature, and specially comics, place the reader within the space of narrative and amplify the postmodernism's concern with "location, boundaries, depth, and mapping" (359). Not only in the comic industry, but also in all literature, the concept of spatiality is used, and, as Chute asserts, boundaries and mapping are discussed within the field. From among the authors who deal with these issues, Connor highlights Paul

Auster's narrative as fragmented in space and time (62). He argues that the author has been attributed the label of postmodern, but he moves away from it and states that his literary style cannot be categorized (Martin 2).

Many of the characteristics associated with postmodernism are present in *Travels in the Scriptorium*. This is a novel in which Paul Auster studies, without explicitly naming it, the concepts of identity and space, deforming them and de/constructing them several times over the course of the story through the protagonist of the book, Mr. Blank. *Travels* is one of the novels in which Auster plays a metafictional game—together with *City of Glass* or *Man in the Dark*, to name just a few—, in which characters, narrators, authors and readers are presented as inhabitants of the same world of multiplicity. A contradictory spatial machinery of this kind raises questions about the validity of reality, subjectivity, and objectivity, as well as the corresponding contradictions derived from the suspension of identity. *Travels* is, therefore, the epitome of postmodern narrative inconsistency, and contributes significantly to the understanding of Auster's oeuvre.

3.   Theoretical Framework

Given that the central focus of this Master's thesis will be on the construction of identity from a fragmented memory and within a closed space, it is necessary to establish some theoretical parameters that will serve as conceptual axes to support the Master's thesis' objectives.

First, both memory and space, not separately but together, are understood as necessary elements in the construction of identity in Mr. Blank, the protagonist of *Travels in the Scriptorium.* Secondly, it is important to understand that the memory of the past is projected into the self of the present. As early as the Modern Age, Descartes identified the experience of the self with thought, after which John Locke identified personal identity with memory, that is, with everything a person can remember, both about themselves and about outside events (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*). Locke opposed Descartes' principle, considering that without the ability to store remembrances in memory, there can be no self, only a body that responds to external stimuli. David Hume, in his *Treatise of Human Nature,* reaffirmed the connection between identity and memory, but adding that the role of memory is to be able to comprehend relations between events.

In order to study personal identity in the case of Mr. Blank, it is also necessary to understand that, as Klein and Nichols explain,

Memory is at the heart of the way most people think about personal identity. It is because I remember my first kiss than I think I am the same person as that awkward adolescent. If I had no memory of past experiences, the sense that I existed in the past would be dramatically compromised (677).

Therefore, to construct, reconstruct, and deconstruct Mr. Blank's identity, it is necessary to focus on personal identity. Thus, it is necessary to take into account that the few memories this character has may come from his past or be a product of his present thoughts.

One of the major distinctions between postmodernism and earlier movements is, as Harvey, Jameson and Soja among others noted, the importance of space and spatiality. For Jameson, the postmodern epoch implied "the waning of the great high modernist thematics of time and temporality" (qtd. in Tally 40). Jameson asserts "Our daily life, our psychic experiences, our cultural languages, are dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time" (qtd. in Tally 40). Jameson also identifies three types of space, or three stages of capitalist space, and suggests that

> The new [postmodern] space involves the suppression of distance … and the relentless saturation of any remaining voids and empty places, to the point where the postmodern body –whether wandering through a postmodern hotel, locked into rocks sounds by means of headphones, or undergoing multiple shocks and bombardments of the Vietnam war as Michael Herr conveys it to us— is now exposed to a perceptual barrage of immediacy from which all sheltering layers have been removed. There are, of course, many other features of this space one would ideally like to comment on … but I think that the peculiar disorientation of the saturated space I have just mentioned will be the most useful guiding thread (*The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 412).

According to Jameson, this space is different from the space conceived in modernism, since the elements that now compose it are fragmented and disordered. For Harvey, postmodernism implies a "time-space compression" (505) that he describes as follows:

Disruptive spatiality triumphs over the coherence of perspective and narrative in postmodern fiction, in exactly the same way that imported beers coexist with local brews, local employment collapses under the weight of foreign competition, and all the divergent spaces of the world are assembles nightly as a collage of images upon the television screen (505).

Concretely, in *Travels in the Scriptorium,* urban space is not articulated, but it is rather a space of contingency in which the agency of the main character is eliminated. To this aim, the spatial theories of different scholars, such as those mentioned above, are applied to Auster's narrative, and concepts related to closed spaces, such as Foucault's panopticon, are studied to explain the novel. Finally, it will be studied how fear is a fundamental element for manipulating space, and how the barrier of authorship is broken by the creation of a series of heterotopias, a concept introduced by Foucault, who defines them as spaces that function as a mirror and that, in contrast to utopias, reflect real places that are, at the same time, completely unreal ("Of other Spaces" 24).

4. Deconstructing Identity through Spaces and Memory

According to Tally, literature can be defined as mapping, as describing different places and situating readers in their interior to facilitate their orientation and understanding of the world they are living –or reading (2).In the specific case of *Travels in the Scriptorium,* space functions as a map, a closed world where the author plays as a mapmaker and "projects a world" (51) for the reader. This world, together with Mr. Blank's own memory, is the principal modifying factor in his identity, as Mr. Blank projects himself into the closed space and tries to reconstruct himself through it.

At the beginning of the story, all the reader knows is that a camera (which will function as the narrator of the plot) is recording a man who has woken up from an uncertain period of time in an uncertain and claustrophobic locked room. This man is disoriented, as he does not remember anything about who he is, his past, what that place is or why he is there. Along the first pages of the book, the camera repeatedly asks, "Who is he? What is he doing here? When did he arrive and how long will he remain?" (1). Mr. Blank (an appellative given by the narrator) is a subject without subjectivity[3] who tries to understand his situation by using a number of different objects in the room. With different photographs, a manuscript, and his own blurred memories, he tries to reconstruct his identity while looking for a way to know what he is doing in the room and how to get out of there (although the latter in a more passively way).

As Mr. Blank begins to read the manuscript with the story of another prisoner in an alternative world, he seems to be reading the story of his own life, although he does not recognize any of the facts described within it (in the manuscript, the author explains

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[3] Play on words based in the book title *Subjectivity without subjects: From abject fathers to desiring mothers* (Oliver, Kelly, Rowman& Littlefield, 1998).

how he was betrayed and locked up when he was on a mission, while nothing is known about Mr. Blank's adult life). As the reading advances, both he and the writer of the manuscript seem to converge and this provokes in Mr. Blank a state of uncertainty where he has a liminal existence in which his identity is faded between the person who is reading the manuscript and the one who wrote it.

This blurred and vague identity is presented in a very similar environment. Mr. Blank's room is a claustrophobic space without any sign of personal identification, a type of place that is defined as a *terrain vague* by Ignasi de Solá Morales to refer to a vacant and empty place without limits or horizons:

> The last of the categories here proposed [*terrain vague*] refers to a historical time. The cultural experience of the big city is made up of a human fiber in which the persistence over time of the meaning of places cannot be underestimated. … On the one hand, `vague´ in the sense of vacant, empty, inactive, unproductive, and in many cases obsolete. On the other hand, `vague´ in the sense of imprecise, undefined, vague, with no specific limits, without a future horizon (qtd. in Barros 391).

The empty space develops in a parallel way as Mr. Blank's identity: the configuration of identity and the configuration of space have, in *Travels in the Scriptorium,* a connection that allows them to function in parallel, that is, both elements develop along the plot following similar patterns. The protagonist seems to be an empty subject, who has no identity, past, present or future, and whose limits and subjectivity are yet to be defined. This emptiness is represented along the first lines of the book, where the narrator describes: "The old man sits on the edge of the narrow bed, palms spread out on his knees, head down, staring at the floor. He has no idea that a camera is

planted in the ceiling directly above him … Even if he knew he was being watched, it wouldn't make any difference" (1). Mr. Blank is described here as an empty space without any kind of agency, as he does not have an identity that could identify him as *different.*

This blurred identity multiplies increasingly in several personalities due to the memory of Mr. Blank. The few memories he has are images of a supposed childhood, and these are intermingled so that the protagonist ends up more confused than he was at the beginning of the story. Auster utilizes different elements throughout the story, not only Mr. Blank's own pseudonym, but also the name of his horse (Whitney), or the photographs he finds on his desk, to interact with spaces and perspectives and create an atmosphere of confusion.

The aforementioned parallelism between man and space seems to be a reflection of what Michel Foucault discusses in *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason,* where he claims, "These madmen are so intractable only because they have been deprived of liberty" (253). Foucault asserts that confinement provokes alienation and that prisons are fundamental factors in the proliferation of madness among men. This confinement causes in Mr. Blank the lack of agency as he, instead of asserting or adopting an identity, questions himself about it, which ultimately leads him to the diluted and blurred identity previously referred.

Therefore, the apparent loss of memory and the shaping of Mr. Blank's recollections form one of the main factors in the development of his identity. In order to understand how Mr. Blank evolves, it is thus necessary to study his identity from the perspective of memory, articulating whether the past he remembers has existed or not, and how this fact influences his present.

5. Memory

Mr. Blank's memory is one of the two main elements that shape the construction of his identity. His memories form him as a subject, so that the lack of them and even the alteration of some of them may provoke in Mr. Blank a diluted and multiplied subjectivity. Through the different memories that the protagonist shows to the reader, it can be glimpsed that or he only remembers facts related to the present, or his memories are modified or implanted in a way that alters his identity.

Furthermore, this multiplicity of subjectivities and the different remembrances imply in the protagonist a series of identifications with the different objects of the room through the memory, for example with the photographs and the manuscript, which creates a detrimental link, as these identifications provoke in Mr. Blank a complete lack of empathy with the rest of the characters. Since Mr. Blank does not have the agency to place himself in a time or a space, as he increasingly dilutes his identity through these objects, he cannot place himself in empathic situations with other people either. This chapter will focus on how these factors affect Mr. Blank's actions and how this shapes his identity.

5.1   Writing Identity through Memory

Memory participates in the active construction of identities. We perform a subjective production of our *selves* by reproducing memories from our past, and we represent those memories with visual images and stories. In *Travels in the Scriptorium*, Mr. Blank's memory is a blank sheet of paper, and his body is an empty space that serves as the starting point for the creation of his identity. The clearest example of this emptiness is given at the beginning of the book, when the narrator says, "We will therefore drop the epithet *old man* and henceforth refer to the person in the room as

Mr. Blank. For the time being, no first name will be necessary" (3). The name is part of a person's identity, and in this case, it is removed by the narrator to create a sense of disorientation, not only in Mr. Blank, but also in the reader: it is the starting point of the deconstruction of Mr. Blank's identity, although, at the same time, it is also the onset of the frameworking of the chaotic mental state of the protagonist.

In *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas,* José Esteban Muñoz theorizes about memory and identity. He explains that without memory, one may have a blurred identity: "The enactment of self via the routes of memory performance is the mode of managing identity that Alfaro calls upon" (93). Although Muñoz is referring to Luis Alfaro's ability to represent his identity through memory performance, his words also convey that human beings build their identity through their life experiences, their actions, their bodies and their names. Therefore, a simple act such as removing a person's name and replacing it with another that is intentionally related to an empty space is yet another way of taking away their identity. The right to an identity, which is a fundamental human right and which begins by giving a name and surname to a person, disappears. In this way, the subject ceases to be able to identify himself with a name, thus losing identity and becomes, as in Mr. Blank's case, an empty container.

Moreover, this relationship between memory and identity is represented along the story in several parts, but specially in one conversation between the protagonist and one of his visitors, Mr. Flood, in which he asks Mr. Blank to remember something he wrote about him, and he says to Mr. Blank "It's important to me, Mr. Blank. My whole life depends on it. Without that dream, I'm nothing, literally nothing" (53). The sentence is also connected to another from one of Luis Alfaro's memory performances, in which a couple is fighting and the man threatens to leave the woman, to which she

responds: "Aw, no baby, you're the only thing I *remember"* (emphasis added) (91). Although in the second sentence, Alfaro is also associating identity with the diaspora, both sentences represent how the existence of one character depends entirely of the existence of the other. Without his husband, the woman is nothing, and she is afraid that her own existence will depend on his presence. The same happens with the characters in *Travels in the Scriptorium;* one character depends on the memories of the other, but in a different way. In this version there is also a spatial conflict, but in this case directly related to memory and the transgressions of spaces. Since the character who speaks to Mr. Blank was created in "real life" from a dream, he needs that dream to be maintained and remembered, in order to continue with his own existence.

This dependence is directly associated with Nicola King's claim about the ability to tell the story of our lives as the vehicle to form our identity: "In *Remind me Who I Am, Again,* Linda Grant describes how her mother, suffering from dementia and memory-loss, was forced to improvise and continuously re-establish a precarious sense of identity" (23). As Linda Grant, Mr. Blank, who seems to remember nothing more than a series of images connected with the present, knows nothing about his self. As a result, he intends to create an identity by trying to obtain clues about who he is from the people he talks to throughout the book. He has a series of memories that seem to be from his childhood and that are evoked by different objects or situations in the room: "As Mr. Blank continues to indulge in these pleasurable oscillations, he remembers the rocking horse that sat in his bedroom when he was a small boy... [the] horse, whose name was Whitey ..." (3). The connection between this supposed memory and the present is tangible, which suggest an influential relationship between a past and a

present in Mr. Blank, although it is never known whether these past events occurred or are a product of his imagination.

As a consequence of these unconnected images, he becomes obsessed with the story of the manuscript, which appears to intermingle with his own life. At a certain point of his reading, the manuscript ends abruptly, which seems to affect the protagonist enormously: "Mr. Blank tosses the typescript onto the desk, snorting with dissatisfaction and contempt, furious that he has been compelled to read a story that has no ending, an unfinished work that has barely even begun, a mere bloody fragment" (65).

The protagonist's reaction to the abrupt end occurs because he has begun to identify himself with the writer of the manuscript, which had made him start to construct his own identity. After this end, another of the visitors, the doctor, asks Mr. Blank to finish the story, and throughout his narration, his identity seems increasingly entangled with that of the writer of the manuscript, and, at the same time, more tangible. According to King, "It is commonly accepted that identity, or a sense of self, is constructed by and through narrative: the stories we all tell ourselves and each other about our lives" (2). She claims that it is not only the content what constructs a sense of identity, but also the processes of memory and how one accepts those memories. That is why Mr. Blank's identity is increasingly blurred; by ending the story himself, he identifies further and further with the initial writer, adopting his memories and making them part of him. Thus, his memory, which, except for a few recollections, seemed empty, is filled with new memories and ideas through the narrative of the manuscript: Mr. Blank, now knowing who he is, is capable, up to certain point, to place himself in the role of the manuscript's writer, so that he eventually finishes the story as he himself

had lived it or written it before. In this manner, he constructs his own narrative and identifies himself with a series of processes and responses to them.

This in turn provokes two reactions. On the one hand, his identity seems to be beginning to develop in a solid way, since, as he creates his own narrative, not only do memories shape his identity, but, as in King's quote, the fact of creating a narrative also shape it. Thus, his memory seems to become alive and give a new form to his personality. On the other hand, as a result of this loss of memory, which seems gradually more difficult for Mr. Blank to recover, his identity is not only blurred, but also multiplied and decentered. In this way, Mr. Blank feels increasingly more attached to any reality that the rest of the characters present to him. His identity, which is dispersed between his supposed memories, what he read in the manuscript, what the other characters tell him and his own thoughts, provokes in him a chaotic condition in which instead of affirming, he can only ask and wonder who he is: his identity becomes a rhizome, a body without center that is scattered in several personalities, which causes him a greater disorientation.

5.2   Mr. Blank and the Rhizome: Multiplicity and Decentering

To analyze Mr. Blank's identity as rhizomatic, one should first know the characteristics of the rhizome. In their book *A Thousand Plateaus,* Deleuze and Guattari define the rhizome as an entity completely opposed to an arborescent structure, a body that "connects any point to any other point... is reducible neither to the One nor to the multiple ... It has neither beginning nor end, but always middle from which it grows and which it overspills" (23). The authors continue explaining several characteristics associated with this centerless entity, but for the study of the protagonist of *Travels in the Scriptorium,* the most relevant will be used. Mr. Blank, who remembers almost

nothing and knows nothing about himself or his surroundings, appears as an empty being that, like a sponge, absorbs everything he finds around him in order to recover his own identity, although what he actually does is to construct and deconstruct several times a new one based on a number of different factors, which transforms him into a parallel entity to Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome. The rhizome, therefore, is important not only because it has a parallel development to Mr. Blank's, but also because its evolution runs parallel to contemporary society. Thus, in the same way, Mr. Blank and today's society develop in a way in which they are centerless, dehumanized and lacking empathy (Briones 2013), and both present other characteristics shown by Deleuze's rhizome.

Connectivity has already been named as one of the main features of this concept. Throughout the plot, Mr. Blank tries to connect not only his present but also his past, to everything around him, starting with Anna, one of the first characters to appear in the story: "I've done something terrible to you. I don't know what it is, but something terrible…" The protagonist tries here to understand his feelings in order to create a connection with his surroundings, as well as with Anna and the rest of the characters in the plot, with whom he relates, mainly, by creating a list of names:

In order not to forget what has happened so far today –for Mr. Blank is nothing not forgetful— he writes down the following list of names:

James P. Flood

Anna

David Zimmer

Peter Stillman, Jr.

Peter Stillman, Sr. (29)

Mr. Blank shows, in this way, a desire to remember, to connect his past (and his present) to all the people who appear throughout the story.

Another of the main characteristics of the rhizome is its development: "it has neither beginning nor end" (23). This feature is also present in Mr. Blank, above all, at the end of the book: "It will never end.... He will always be lost" (129). When one is lost, there is neither beginning nor end, and Mr. Blank does not know where he came from, what is he doing or where he is going. He, again within a space shaped as a map, is lost within his own path.

The third remarkable characteristic is multiplicity: "There is no unity to serve as a pivot in the object, or to divide in the subject. There is not even the unity to abort in the object or "return" in the subject" (8). Mr. Blank does not have a center or a unity to serve as a pivot, nor nothing that determines or divides him as a subject. The only information he seems to know along the plot is that he is a man: "Just like a woman, he says to himself, suddenly amused by the thought of how different his life would have been if he hadn't been born a man" (75). This is the only feature with which he defines himself or the only one that the camera shows. Besides this, his memory continues to look like a blank piece of paper.

These three characteristics are deeply associated with Mr. Blank's identity. On the one hand, his memory functions in a manner in which, without knowing it, he tries to tie himself to the different objects in the room and associate himself with each of the characters, including those he does not know (the author of the manuscript). On the other hand, his development has neither a turning point, nor a beginning nor an end: although for moments it seems that his identity begins to establish (for example, when he ends the story of the manuscript), at the same time, these moments are crucial in the

dissolution of his identity, as they result in several personalities. Finally, this also causes him to be a body without a center, an expanded entity from which agency is also deprived.

Something that divides further Mr. Blank's identity and that makes it increasingly rhizomatic throughout the plot is his digression of time. Foucault had already explained that while time was the great obsession of modernism, space was the postmodern obsession ("Of other Spaces" 22). Auster's postmodernism along this novel is based on a completely parodied urgency of time, which results in a protagonist always in a hurry to remember and to retain his memory as much as possible before the end of the day arrives, as this translates into forgetting all that he learned throughout the period. Not only Mr. Blank but also all the characters throughout the plot accentuate this parody, not only creating the feeling that Mr. Blank has to do everything quickly to reach somewhere, but also making him waste time, adding different factors to the story that make the protagonist never get to do what he wants: he cannot finish reading/narrating the manuscript, nor can he know if he is locked up, nor can he talk to his doctor, nor see Anna again.

Digressions start at the beginning of the book, shortly after Mr. Blank finds the manuscript, and take place several times throughout the story, causing Mr. Blank to never achieve any of his objectives. A notable example of them occurs when Mr. Blank has almost finished reading the manuscript and his doctor calls him to ask whether he has finished it, to which Mr. Blank answers "If you hadn't interrupted me with this goddamned call, I'd probably be at the end by now" (70). In this case, it is necessary to highlight the fact that his doctor calls him instead of going to his room, which may happen because they are not in the same building. However, if they were both in the

same place, it is important to consider why he is calling Mr. Blank, because, since the protagonist is being watched through the camera, there would be no reason to call him to ask unless the call had other intentions.

Something remarkable about the digressions is that it is never shown whether Mr. Blank really becomes distracted or is so afraid of missing out the space in which he is that he continually seeks excuses not to discover the truth:

> Mr. Blank wonders if the moment hasn't finally come to investigate the matter for himself. Afraid though he might be, would it not be better to learn the truth once and for all instead of living in a state of perpetual uncertainty? Perhaps, he says to himself. And then again, perhaps not. Before Mr. Blank can decide whether he has the courage to travel over the door at last, a new and more urgent problem suddenly asserts itself... (57)

Thus, throughout the book one can see how the protagonist discovers "new forms of pleasure" (58), just like someone who has just come into the world, and gradually he ends up being content to stay in the room, without trying to leave other than mentally

Throughout the plot, Mr. Blank crosses different physical and mental states that turn him into a rhizomatic and schizophrenic being. On the one hand, there are the characteristics of the rhizome itself, to which Mr. Blank adheres as a consequence of his actions, such as creating memories and associating with other people's memories, or his constant feeling of being lost, and the lack of structure, both in Mr. Blank's mind and in the room. On the other hand, there are the digressions of time, which provoke in him an even greater sensation of absence of center, because, not being able to ever achieve his goals, and always getting lost in his actions, he ends up in a much greater state of

confusion. All this, therefore, causes a dislocation of Mr. Blank's identity in different representations of the objects in the room.

Mr. Blank's dislocation into different objects also functions as a parallelism with the contemporary state. While modernism was a movement marked by paranoia, postmodernism is marked by schizophrenia, something that can be seen in Mr. Blank's own development. In this way, Paul Auster shows this character the condition of contemporary society, which is not only reflected in its rhizomatic structure, but also in Mr. Blank's schizophrenic state. His exponential production of identities does not allow him to focus on a single subjectivity, but on a continuous displacement of identity. This dislocation causes in the subject an apathetic condition, since, by displacing himself from his own identity, he is not capable of identifying his feelings or relating them in an orderly manner with others, and therefore he suffers from a severe lack of empathy.

5.3   Spaces of Empathy

There are two fundamental factors related to Mr. Blank's loss of empathy. The first is his ability to relate to others, which seems obsolete, as he does not have a fully developed personality (as a result of his schizophrenic identity). Although throughout the plot he tries to identify with other characters and objects, he cannot relate normally to them because these identifications are not genuine, as he does not have perception of himself. As a result, he is never able to understand the rest of the characters and he only seems empathetic when it is for his own benefit. For example, when he talks to Mr. Flood and laughs at him, instead of truly regretting it, he seems to decide to apologize so that the other character feels good. For Mr. Blank to feel empathy, he must first recognize his own identity as a self, and not as an Other. This seems to be, however, a

rather impossible task for him, whose only identifications are based on parallel associations with objects in the room and with characters throughout the plot.

The second factor is Mr. Blank's inability to verbalize guilt, which occurs as a result of all of the above. His guilt arises several times throughout the plot: "His heart is filled with an implacable sense of guilt" (2), "the crushing sense of guilt that largely disappeared during Anna's visit suddenly returns" (28). Although Mr. Blank seems to feel this guilt constantly, he does not talk about it with anyone, but occasionally talks about having done something wrong. For example, in a conversation with Anna, he says to her "I've done something terrible to you. I don't know what it is, but something terrible… unspeakable… beyond forgiveness" (21). Through his thoughts and conversations, it can be seen that he is not able to identify many of the feelings he has (except guilt) and that he does not verbalize any of them, because he is not able to identify them correctly. Despite being a recurrent element, it is not known how guilt arises, since Mr. Blank does not express having memories associated with this feeling. Nevertheless, throughout the creation of his identity, the protagonist tries to learn about the different feelings and uses them to position himself spatially and thus to construct a sense of place. In this way, guilt remains throughout the book and functions as a crucial element along the plot.

One of the first symptoms of his lack of empathy begins when he starts reading the manuscript "... and why does the prose sound like something written in the nineteenth century?" (10). Mr. Blank, in spite of showing interest in the manuscript, detaches himself from it. He does not want to identify it as a familiar element and, for that end, he dissociates from the reading. However, as the novel progresses, the protagonist approaches the manuscript to the point where he feels so identified with it

that he is capable of telling the end of the story as if it were his own. Throughout this process, several factors show how his identity is being constructed rather than recovered, for example, when he is asked about how the writer of the manuscript crossed the border, and he answers, "I'm not sure. Probably a bribe of some sort" (84). Mr. Blank, instead of simply answering the question, thinks about what to do, what is relevant and what is not, and in this way he creates new processes in his mind. King suggests this process when she explains, "The construction of the self is a provisional and continuous process, rather than the 'recovery' of an 'original' identity" (17). In creating the end of the manuscript's report, Mr. Blank tries to understand what he would do in the protagonist's place, to position him in a different stance and to stimulate his empathy. By doing this, as when he tries to identify the source of his guilt and understand his feelings, as King asserts, he is not recovering an initial identity; he is building a new one.

In addition to the manuscript, his lack of empathy seems to be constantly diluted with another elementary factor: the photographs on the desk. Some of the images show characters much younger than at the present. Others, on the other hand, present a time lag of one or two years. This causes a considerable confusion in Mr. Blank, who does not seem to know how to dissociate even his own reality from fantasy. Mr. Blank does not distinguish the reality of the room from the reality of the photographs: he begins by no recognizing Anna, given the discrepancy between her appearance and the one in the photograph, and then he becomes confused with the doctor, since between the two realities the period is much shorter. According to King, "Two dominant and distinct ways of imagining memory... are as a series of photographs or visual images, or as a form of language or narrative" (25). Thus, by creating this time gap between

photographs and reality, Mr. Blank's existence is jeopardized. Moreover, his ability to distinguish between realities is undermined.

This dissociation is reinforced by the surveillance camera, which provokes in the reader the illusion of reading an objective report. Nevertheless, as objectivity only exists as ideological subjectivity (Sobel), this illusion makes the reader contribute in Mr. Blank's identity turn. The reader is not aware that the created environment is subjective, as it is conditioned under the mind of the narrator. Instead of being a mere spectator, the reader becomes an active element of the story.

As the day goes by, Mr. Blank tries to understand more feelings, many of which he does not know exactly how to associate or determine ("A sudden feeling of pressure invades his stomach, and before Mr. Blank can decide whether to call that feeling one of pain or simple discomfort... " (47); "A feeling of overpowering love washes through him" (4)). In this case, it is no longer a feeling of guilt, as it was at the beginning, but rather new sensations that he does not fully recognize or associate. This may be a symptom of the rhizomatic identity, as he tries to tie these new feelings and his own identity with the different objects he discovers.

The main reason why this occurs is because, given his specific identity and his attempts to associate himself with different objects, Mr. Blank has no ontological proprioception; that is, he is not aware of where his identity begins or ends, and where others' identities begin and end (something related to the aforementioned *terrain vague,* as he is depicted as a vacant entity without limits or horizon). Both the camera and the rest of the characters play with this lack of empathy and provoke in the protagonist the sensation of being completely disoriented. For example, in a conversation with James P. Flood, the latter says to him "I might be ridiculous, but you, Mr. Blank… you're

cruel… cruel and indifferent to the pain of others. You play with people's lives and take no responsibility for what you've done" (53). As the conversation continues, Mr. Blank apologizes to Mr. Flood: "Please forgive me, Mr. Flood. I'm sorry I laughed at you" (54). Mr. Blank does not seem to be aware of his lack of empathy at first, something he remedies by apologizing. This does not imply that he has understood Mr. Flood's reasons, only that he knows that he has done something wrong: he does not know how to verbalize guilt, only how to react to the comments of the rest of characters.

Based on all the aforementioned characteristics, Mr. Blank's identity is subjected not only to his memory, but also to his way of performing his own perceptions of reality and his empathy. All the features that he presents along the plot make his identity something changing and diluted, which is determined not only by the above, but also by an element with which all the components operate and interact: the closed space inhabited by Mr. Blank.

6. Space

Studying Mr. Blank's identity from the perspective of memory is not possible in itself; it is necessary to include another essential element: space. This Master's thesis has already stated that space can be defined as "neither a `subject´ nor an 'object´ but rather a social reality—that is to say, a set of relations and forms." (Lefebvre 116). Lefebvre defines space in a very precise way, presenting a meticulous exposition of the production of it, as he explains:

> Space is not produced in the sense that a kilogram of sugar or a yard of cloth is produced. Nor is it an aggregate of the places or locations of such products as sugar, wheat or cloth. Does it then come into being after the fashion of the superstructure? Again, no. It would be more accurate to say that it is at once a precondition and a result of social superstructures. The state and each of its constituent institutions call for spaces –but spaces which they can then organize according to their specific requirements; so there is no sense in which space can be treated solely as an *a priori* condition of these institutions and the state which presides over them (85).

According to Lefebvre, space is also a product and a social relationship. One that, concretely, "is inherent to property relationships and also closely bound up with the forces of production..." (85). For him, "though a *product* to be used, to be consumed, it is also a *means of production;* networks of exchange and flows of raw materials and energy fashion space and are determined by it" (85).

Therefore, if space is a created product, it must have a subject (or several) who produce it. According to Lefebvre, it is the body that creates space, but "not in the sense

that occupation might be said to `manufacture´ spatiality; rather, there is an immediate relationship between the body and its space, between the body's development in space and its occupation of space" (170). Thus, according to the author, each body not only produces and has space, but it is itself space. As a result, when people place themselves in any area, they create a space around themselves and designate themselves as the center of it (182). This is directly related to the three spatial concepts that Lefebvre explains, and specifically, to the third one: representational space. This is a type of place that is "directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users' … This is the dominated –and hence passively experienced—space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate" (39).

With this concept of representational spaces, the struggle for the de/territorialization of space, introduced by Deleuze and Guattari, becomes a reality. As it has been explained, when someone is placed in a space, or when they think about it, they consciously or unconsciously appropriate it. When there is more than one subject in that space, a struggle is created for the territorialization of this space, that is to say, a struggle for each of the subjects in it to appropriate it.

This confrontation, which takes place in open and closed, public and private spaces, is not a struggle for a physical space, but rather one for a redefinition of this space. Each of the characters involved in a space wants to appropriate it, make it their own; they turn their discourse into a weapon with which to demonstrate their power. This is explained by Foucault, who, besides affirming that space also produces us, introduces a new interpretation for the term "Panopticism". In *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault gives a new interpretation to the *Panopticon*, a model prison and architectural apparatus created by Jeremy Bentham in 1791 in which "those inside are subjected to

continual surveillance; the subjects of the panopticon's machinery are permanently aware of being located within a well regulated, well monitored, social matrix" (Tally 126). Foucault takes this model as a reference and applies it to the city space. For him, this enclosed space is "the utopia of the perfectly governed city" (*Discipline and Punish* 6), and he defines it as:

> This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and the periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchal figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead –all this constitutes a compact model of disciplinary mechanism (198).

Later in the same volume, he states that the panopticon,

> is polyvalent in its applications; it serves to reform prisoners, but also to treat patients, to instruct schoolchildren, to confine the insane, … It is a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchical organization, of disposition of centres and channels of power, of definition of the instruments and models of intervention of power, which can be implemented in hospitals, workshops, schools, prisons (205).

Therefore, the panopticon has a fundamental role in surveillance and confinement, but, as Greg Elmer explains in *The Panopticon, Discipline, Control,* what differentiates the concept in Foucault and Bentham is perspective, since Bentham's prison consists of a

place of surveillance, whereas for Foucault this is not reduced to the gaze of the one who watches, but it is also focused on the gaze of the watched. According to Elmer, for Foucault, the act of observing without being observed implies something else; it is directly related to power (7).

In the following sections, these different concepts will be studied and applied to Mr. Blank's identity to determine how they influence the spatial conception, and how they not only shape Mr. Blank's identity, but also how they make the reader an active component of this configuration.

6.1   Secluded Agency

According to José Esteban Muñoz, "bodies and cities define each other" (90). Although in his paper, he refers specifically to the bodies of Chicano people and their parallel relationship with Los Angeles, if one changes "cities" for "rooms" or "closed spaces", this is a sentence that can also be applied to *Travels in the Scriptorium.* In the book, Auster creates a secluded space, and he places Mr. Blank inside, a man without identity and, therefore, without agency. Although Mr. Blank tries to reconstruct his identity through memory, this secluded space denies him to create defined one, and provokes continuous desperation in the protagonist for not being able to recognize himself as a subject.

The disfigurement of Mr. Blank's identity begins at the outset of the story, when the camera explains that even if he knew he was being observed, there would be *no difference* (1). The emphasis (added) is the most important part of the sentence; the fact that it does not matter whether Mr. Blank knows that he is being observed or not indicates two different facts. The first one is that Mr. Blank's identity is so diluted that it causes in him a lack of agency

The distortion of the protagonist's identity is parallel to the manuscript's author. The latter, in a part of his manuscript, declares, "In the end, it is probably just as well to put those dreams behind me. … The only thing I can do is tell the story. Given the story I have to tell, that will be difficult enough" (34). The author of the manuscript seems to have lost hope and to be aware that he cannot change his reality. On the contrary, Mr. Blank seems to have an inner struggle. Although at certain moments, he lets himself be carried away by the situation, at others he wants to change his reality: "When is this nonsense going to end?" (129). The development of these two characters shows a conflict between structure and the lack of it along the novel. The difference between both is that while the main character in the manuscript seems to surrender to this rhizomatic structure when he explains that all he can do is tell his story, Mr. Blank seems exasperated until the end.

This type structure, which is the major cause of the sensation of confusion in both the protagonist and the reader, can be found throughout the book on several occasions, but this Master's thesis aims to highlight, mainly, two of them: the labels that appear within Mr. Blank's room and the physical development of Mr. Blank himself. On the one hand, the physical development focuses, among other aspects, on Mr. Blank's clothes. Not only his name and his memories denote his lack of identity (both Mr. Blank and Whitey, the name of the toy horse he says he had as a child, seem to allude to his empty identity), but also his outfit. In a first meeting with Anna, he is wearing his pajamas, and she asks him to dress all in white: "The clothes turn out to be all white: white cotton trousers, white button-down shirt, white boxer shorts, white nylon socks, and a pair of white tennis shoes" (25). After a few hours, Mr. Blanks feels uncomfortable with his tennis and wants to put his slippers back on, although he decides

not to, because "the slippers are black, and if he put them on he would no longer be dressed all in white, which was something Anna explicitly asked of him" (27). His discomfort increases until, after removing one of the tennis, he decides to remove the other as well: "No, he says, with a tinge of sarcasm in his voice, I don't want to put it on. I'm sick of these goddamned shoes. If anything, I'd rather take the other one off, too. The moment these words escape his mouth... [he realizes that] he can take matters into his own hands" (49-50). The protagonist realizes that he can have, for the first time in the whole plot, control over something. Auster plays with agency and the lack of it in Mr. Blank's actions, who, in spite of this act of supposedly rebellion, doubts whether he is still dressed in white or not, which is translated into the fear of facing the unknown. This process ends with Mr. Blank taking off the rest of his clothes (first the pants, after accidentally staining them, and then the shirt, for the same reason): "Mr. Blanks is obliged to remove the shirt, which is the last article of white clothing he has on, and replace it with the pajama top, thus *reverting* to the same attire he was discovered in at the beginning of this report" (emphasis added) (100). Although in a subtle way, the process of continuous advancement and regression in Mr. Blank is strongly associated with the concept of *palimpsest*. This concept was defined in a metaphorical way by Thomas De Quincey, who explained that the outer structures of layered texts were nothing more than deepening of the thoughts already present in the text (Powell 6). Kimberly A. Powell, who analyzes the concept, explains, "The term has been used in disciplines such as literary theory, architecture, geography, media studies, and technology, evidence of its metaphoric prowess and possibility". For her, "post-structural uses of the term have underscored palimpsests as a metaphor for the reinscription and legibility of discourses situated within institutional power structures, and for the reexamination of subjectivity" (7).

Therefore, Mr. Blank's clothes function as a palimpsest in which the protagonist struggles to rewrite his own appearance, which is directly related to the territorialization and power struggles. Consciously or not, Mr. Blank takes control of his own body, showing at first just displeasure with the change of clothes and finally returning to his original state, the one in which he feels more comfortable and in control of his own space.

In addition to clothing, the book presents another depiction of this chaotic structure in which the characters struggle to appropriate space: the labels that appear inside the room. At the beginning of the story, the narrator tells:

> There are a number of objects in the room, and on each one a strip of white tape has been affixed to the surface, bearing a single word written out in block letters. On the bedside table, for example, the word is TABLE. On the lamp, the word is LAMP. Even on the wall, which is not strictly speaking an object, there is a trip of tape that reads WALL (1).

The labels no longer appear along the plot, until, almost at the end, Mr. Blank realizes that someone has moved them and does not know who, how, or when:

> As the old man goes on tipping back and forth in the chair, however, his eyes fall upon the strip of white tape affixed to the surface of the desk. He has looked at that piece of tape no fewer than fifty or a hundred times during the course of the day, and each time he did so the white strip was clearly marked with the word DESK. No, to his astonishment, Mr. Blank sees that it is marked with the word LAMP. His initial response is to think that his eyes have fooled him in

some way, so he stops rocking back and forth in order to take a closer look (103).

The narrator continues by explaining that, for Mr. Blank, there may be different explanations: brain damage, he has lost the ability to read, or someone is playing with him. If it is the last option, he fails to find out who the author was. The protagonist loves order and believes that is important that everything is done accurately, so "to indulge in such infantile whimsy is to throw the world into chaos, to make life intolerable for all but the mad" (105). As explained above, unlike the protagonist of the manuscript, who seems to accept chaos, Mr. Blank finds it very difficult to accept it. He tries, by all possible means, to change the labels, until, half an hour later, he succeeds.

Although the narrator makes no mention of who did it or why, when analyzing the behavior patterns of the characters throughout the story, it can be seen that this conduct, like the change of clothes in Mr. Blank, leads to a struggle for the deterritorialization of space. Both the protagonist and the people with whom he interacts try to dominate the space in which Mr. Blank finds himself, either in a visible way, as happens when they go to visit him in his room, or through different methods, such as the labels. Mr. Blank, in his attempt to define his own identity, struggles, in one way or another, against that territorialization of space by those he considers "the others", redefining the space according to his reality.

In addition to these characteristics, this struggle for de/territorialization is marked in *Travels* by another factor: fear. Although in a subtle way, fear plays a major role in the plot, and modifies the different spatialities in which the characters are found, so that it functions as a guide that drives the development of Mr. Blank's identity.

6.2   Fear and Spatiality

In *History of Madness* Foucault proposes the idea of a boat as a place to which all the people considered mad or insane were sent and which crossed the rivers of Rhineland in search of a port in which to dock, since nobody wanted to welcome these mad people in their city. This story by Foucault explains how fear is not only related to space, but can also manipulate spaces. In *Travels in the Scriptorium,* one encounters an unidentifiable room whose dweller actions are guided by fear all the time. This fear not only affects Mr. Blank's identity in the enclosed space, but also causes in the protagonist a fear of what he considers *the other*, (which also leads him to fear the unknown part of his identity). This *other*, represented by the rest of the characters, is also afraid of Mr. Blank. It is a continuous battle for power led by fear that not only affects the way Mr. Blank acts, but also the construction of his identity.

This fear is guided by several factors throughout the plot, but it always operates, at it has been explained, in the confined terrain of the room, which does not limit its performance, but rather expands it. According to Eduardo Barros Grela, in *Travels* two fundamental factors belong to the confinement terrain described by Foucault: "first, the passive disposition of the body in the room, which confers a state of inertia and a lack of agency; secondly, the inevitability of a permanent surveillance apparatus that is subconsciously perceived by the subject" (393). This section focuses on the study of constant surveillance, as it is a contributing factor to fear. For Barros, the spatiality that is created from the elements cited "privileges [in Mr. Blank] the *questioning* rather than the *asserting* of an identity" (393). Therefore, through fear, Mr. Blank can never construct his identity, but continually asks himself what he is and what he is not,

considering himself both the *self* and the *other*, which is causes his identity to be closely linked to any of the object in the room and, in particular, to the manuscript.

In this manipulation of identity through fear, the structure of the room plays a fundamental role. Being locked in an aseptic place like the room where he is, without any trace of identification, causes a constant state of alert in the subject. Although Mr. Blank does not know that there is a surveillance camera in the room, he knows that there are people constantly entering and leaving the room and he cannot assert with certainty whether he is locked or not, for which reason he acts cautiously when interacting with his surroundings:

> Mr. Blank hears someone rapping on the door, and then the sound of a key entering the lock. Does this mean that Mr. Blank is imprisoned in the room, unable to leave except through the grace and good will of others? Not necessarily. It could be that Mr. Blank has locked the door from within and that the person now trying to enter the room must undo that lock in order to cross the threshold, this sparing Mr. Blank the trouble of having to stand up and open the door himself (12).

Not knowing what to expect from his environment, whether he is locked up or not or whether he can trust someone or not, Mr. Blank acts cautiously at all times. The closed space plays a fundamental role, since, according to Soja, "space is where the discourses about power and knowledge are transformed into actual relations of power" (234). Soja explains that none of these disciplines can be studied separately, as they only work together. Mr. Blank plays with the difficulty of being enclosed in an uncertain space in order to appropriate it, creating constant struggles of discourse with the characters who are visiting him.

In this struggle for discourse and power, the panopticon appears again as an element of paramount importance. Jeremy Bentham's proposal for institutional buildings is considered, according to Soja, "the most famous instance of a concretization of power applied through architecture" (234). As it has been explained, the panoptic functions as a surveillance mechanism in which the struggle for power becomes the main component. It applies not only to prisons, but also to schools, cities, and, in this case, Mr. Blank's room. This space not only serves Mr. Blank to be watched, but also for him to watch and maintain control of the situation. The room works like a map in which both Mr. Blank and the rest of the characters, as if they were writers, constantly create and reconstruct the space they inhabit. Like Tally's writer/cartographer who "must determine what elements to include in the story or map" (50), the characters determine what their reality is like and how to depict it in space. Thus, the characters constantly struggle in space using fear as their main discourse. At a certain point, even Mr. Blank himself, still disoriented and full of uncertainty, recognizes that fear is a powerful tool:

> [Mr. Blank] ponders the details of Sophie's recent visit, chasing himself for not having asked her any questions about the things that concern him most. Where he is, for example. Whether he is allowed to walk in the park without supervision. Where the closet is, if indeed there is a closet, and why he hasn't been able to find it. Not to mention the eternal enigma of the door –and whether it is locked from the outside or not. Why did he hesitate to bare his soul to her, he wonders, she who is nothing if not a sympathetic person who holds no grudge against him? It is simply a question of *fear,* he asks himself, or does it have something to do with the treatment …? (101).

As it can be seen in this paragraph, the protagonist spends the whole story asking himself questions, trying to find out if he is locked up or not and why they treat him the way they do it, but he never asks them and, each time he ask something, the rest of the characters responds either evasively or silently. Mr. Blank knows that no matter what they say, it is not necessarily true, but silence itself functions as an element of fear that makes him increasingly afraid to know the answers.

There is a further element that encourages discourse struggle and conflict between structure and the lack of it within space. This is created through various parallelisms in *Travels,* and functions in such a way that the characters are forced to leave their own spaces and enter, consciously or not, new spaces that are not their own. This element corresponds with the aforementioned Foucauldian heterotopias, which cause that all the characters in the book enter in conflict with themselves, as they become the self and the other at the same time.

6.3   Transgression of Spaces and Spaces of Transgression

The idea of an author has been studied since Foucault raised the question "What is an author" (114). Although, at that time, for Foucault the author was a figure "who is outside [the text] and precedes it" (114), in *Travels in the Scriptorium* the roles defined by convention are reversed in a sense that all characters are more than just characters; the author is both an author and a character (Paul Auster and John Trause, who is, at the same time, a character in the book *Oracle Night*), Mr. Blank is a character and an author, N. R. Fanshawe (from *The Locked Room)* is a character and the author of the manuscript, and the rest of the characters also come from other books written by Paul Auster. Among others, Samuel Farr and Anna Blume come from *In the Country of Last Things,* and in *Travels in the Scriptorium* are Mr. Blank's doctor and nurse; James P.

Flood and Sophie are characters from *The Locked Room;* Benjamin Sachs is from *Leviathan;* Marco Fogg from *Moon Palace,* and Daniel Quinn, who is Mr. Blank's lawyer in *Travels in the Scriptorium, comes* from *City of Glass.*

The first transgression of spaces occurs with Paul Auster himself, who, at a certain moment in the plot, appears as John Trause:

> Who wrote that piece of drivel, by the way? The bastard should be taken
>
> outside and shot.
>
> A man named John Trause. Ever heard of him?
>
> Trause… Hm… Perhaps. He wrote novels, didn't he? It's all a bit fuzzy now,
>
> but I think I might have read some of them (79).

Trause, which is an anagram of Auster, besides being a character in *Oracle Night,* is the supposed author of a book. The character of Daniel Quinn, the lawyer, is also of great importance in this section. Mr. Blank's "heart is filled with an implacable sense of guilt. At the same time, he can't escape the feeling that he is the victim of a terrible injustice" (2). The protagonist of *Travels in the Scriptorium* has a relentless sense of guilt throughout the book. In the end, it is discovered that he is in charge of having sent all the characters that appear along the book to different missions, and he is accused for different crimes: "from criminal indifference to sexual molestation. From conspiracy to commit fraud to negligent homicide. From defamation of character to first-degree murder" (121). Although a fictitious character, Mr. Blank is also an author, a demiurgic figure who intervenes in the characters' lives and who manipulates them at will. His identity is diluted between that of the author who controls the plot, and that of the character who does not understand what is happening around him. He also depicts the figure of an author when he continues the unfinished story of the manuscript. In this

manner, not only the identity of Mr. Blank himself and that of the writer of the manuscript converge, but also that of the author of the book, Paul Auster. The three figures are crossing different barriers in which the author becomes a character and vice versa. In this case, instead of just trespassing from author to character, as occurs in the first example, the author creates a character that transgresses the barrier outwards, that is, from a character to an external author.

As with space and memory, order and hierarchies are again transgressed. Mr. Blank, who in the past had been the one who apparently controlled the situation, is now the manipulated one, the one who is situated in a space that it can be controlled; in a room that functions as "a sheet of blank paper" (107). His mind, divided between that of the author in the past and that of the character in the present, shows him different images, spectra and shadows that follow one another, just as happens with the characters that enter Mr. Blank's room. For him, the spectra "[a]re coming after me now to take their revenge" (81). This is related to the guilt he feels from the beginning, as he is aware that he has done something wrong, even if he does not know how to identify it; his identity is diluted and his memory tries to show the fictitious characters of his past, although he does not remember anything and does not know who they are or why they are hounding him. Moreover, at a specific moment in the story, the reader does not even know with certainty whether Mr. Blank is the author, a character, or the projection of another character, since, in a conversation with Farr, in which he tells Mr. Blank "I'm just as alive as you are" (78), he replies: "Well, who's to say if I'm alive or not? … Maybe I'm dead too" (78). He seems to hesitate at all times and doubts, as the dialogue reflects, his own existence. The camera itself makes the reader perceive this doubt, which seems to have been resolved at the end of the book: the rest of the characters

have trapped Mr. Blank on a sheet of paper, in order to turn the author into a fictitious character and thus make both him and themselves eternal.

"For Mr. Blank is one of us now, and struggle through he might to understand his predicament, he will always be lost. I believe I speak for all his charges when I say he is getting what he deserves –no more, no less. Not as a form of punishment, but as an act of supreme justice and compassion" (129). In this sentence, the narrator expresses that he is just another character, and shows his desire that justice be done to Mr. Blank. He believes in "supreme justice" and does not seek the punishment of the author, but an act he considers "of compassion". "Without him, we are nothing, but the paradox is that we, the figments of another mind, will outlive the mind that made us, for once we are thrown into the world, we continue to exist forever, and our stories go on being told, even after we are dead" (129) . The narrator summarizes the paradox in which the Auster's transgressions of space result: although the figure of the author may disappear, once created, the characters, even without life, exist forever.

Finally, the narrator reinforces his power again, showing himself as an author and a demiurgic figure: "In a short while, a woman will enter the room and feed him his dinner. I haven't decided yet who that woman will be, but if all goes well between now and then, I will send Anna … he has probably suffered enough for one day" (130). With the first sentence, he shows his power: he, as Mr. Blank before, sends the characters he wants to different "missions" (for example, sending Anna to Mr. Blank's room). In the last part of the sentence, he reinforces again his image as an author: he decides who suffers and who does not, and when to end that suffering.

As can be seen throughout the different examples, Paul Auster constantly gambles with the idea of the author and with his own figure. Not only does he represent

himself as a character, but he also presents other characters as authors and, in the end, he does not reveal who is an author and who is a fictitious character, so that his character ends up remaining both intradiegetically and extradiegetically. He thus plays with the identity of the rest of the characters and with his own identity, not only with that of Mr. Blank, as it seemed at first. The plot contains, in that way, a series of mirrors that recreate the image of what Foucault defines as "heterotopia" in both directions. As he defines it, "the mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there" ("Of Other Spaces" 24). Heterotopia is, therefore, a concept that defines a space that is considered an "other": a world within another world, or a reflection that alters something of what it projects. Thus, the manuscript that Mr. Blank reads works like a heterotopia: it is a mirror of the space in which he is, although it is not exactly the same space. And vice versa: seen from the manuscript, Mr. Blank's world is a heterotopia that reflects a distorted reality. By mixing the figure of the author and the fictional character, Auster creates different parallel heterotopias that function in both directions and that causes all narrative levels to be similar but at the same time different.

7. Conclusions

After having examined the different sections of this Master's thesis, several conclusions have been reached. First, this Master's thesis will present the answers to the questions that have been established during the research and, secondly, it will explain the different limitations to which it has been exposed, as well as a series of proposals for improvement and future research.

The objectives of this Master's thesis have been twofold: first, it presented the need to study how Mr. Blank's identity is performed through memory, and then, it discussed how closed spaces influence and act as a crucial element in this configuration of identity. Throughout the different sections, it has been studied how these two factors affect the protagonist of *Travels in the Scriptorium*, and the conclusion is that, in the first place, identity cannot be recovered, only constructed and deconstructed. Mr. Blank, throughout the whole process, keeps asking himself: who am I? What am I doing here? Why am I here and for how long? In this manner, the deeper he gets into his own identity, instead of reaching an end, he becomes an increasingly rhizomatic entity. His identity never becomes fixed, and his being is, ultimately, that of someone who, the more he seeks order, the more he reaches chaos. This way, Auster manages, through the different characteristics applied, to capture within a character the representation of the subject of the early twenty-first century.

This rhizomatic chaos increases more and more through the different factors studied. On the one hand, the fact that Mr. Blank continues the narrative of the manuscript means that the manuscript is creating its own narrative, which makes its identity even more fluid. On the other hand, the different spatial heterotopias that Paul Auster provokes throughout the story only reinforce this chaos, since all the characters

become mirrors of each other and the spaces in which they are situated become parallelisms between them. In this way, all the aspects that have been discussed throughout this Master's thesis come to the same conclusion: memory is a fundamental factor in the construction of an identity, but so is the closed space in which an identity develops. Furthermore, in this specific case, the loss of memory and the fact that the spaces are secluded provokes a diluted, decentralized identity with a lack of agency.

After reaching these conclusions, this Master's thesis seeks to add that, although the expected results have been obtained and it has been possible to investigate the factors initially proposed, it has not been possible to study them in the depth desired by the specific requirements established. Thus, it is considered that, in the first place, objectivity and subjectivity in the novel, two factors that run along the plot thanks to the camera that gives the report to the reader, need an in-depth study to understand how the reader also influences and affects the identity of Mr. Blank. And secondly, it is also important to consider the role played by female characters throughout the plot, which has not been studied for lack of space. These two factors are fundamental and necessary at the time of making a complete study, and both would need a deeper development in the first case, and a complete parallel study in the second one.

Finally, in addition to these two limitations and proposals in this Master's thesis, there is a need to give importance to the relationship that has been established between Mr. Blank's identity development and contemporary society. The study and development of this parallel relationship, together with the two limitations mentioned above, should be taken into account for future research.

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9. Appendix

List of books published by Paul Auster

Fiction

Squeeze Play (1984)

The New York Trilogy

   City of Glass (1985)

   Ghosts (1986)

   The Locked Room (1986)

In the Country of Last Things (1987)

Moon Palace (1989)

The Music of Chance (1990)

Auggie Wren's Christmas Story (1990)

Leviathan (1992)

Mr. Vertigo (1994)

Timbuktu (1999)

The Book of Illusions (2002)

Oracle Night (2003)

The Brooklyn Follies (2005)

Travels in the Scriptorium (2006)

Man in the Dark (2008)

Invisible (2009)

Sunset Park (2010)

Day/Night (2013)

4 3 2 1 (2017)

Poetry

Unearth (1974)

Wall Writing (1976)

Fragments from the Cold (1977)

Facing the Music (1980)

Disappearances: Selected Poems (1988)

Ground Work: Selected Poems and Essays 1970-1979 (1991)

Collected Poems (2007)

Essays, memoirs, and autobiographies

The Invention of Solitude (1982)

The Art of Hunger (1992)

The Red Notebook (1995)

Hand to Mouth (1997)

Collected Prose (contains *The Invention of Solitude, The Art of Hunger, The Red Notebook,* and *Hand to Mouth* as well as various other previously uncollected pieces) (first edition, 2005; expanded second edition, 2010)

Winter Journal (2012)

Here and Now: Letters, 2008–2011 (2013)

Report from the Interior (2013)

A Life in Words: In Conversation with I. B. Siegumfeldt (2017)

Edited collections

The Random House Book of Twentieth-Century French Poetry (1982

True Tales of American Life (2001)

Translations

The Uninhabited: Selected Poems of André du Bouchet (1976)

Life/Situations, by Jean-Paul Sartre, 1977

A Tomb for Anatole, by StéphaneMallarmé (1983)

Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians (1998)

The Notebooks of Joseph Joubert (2005)

Vicious Circles: Two fictions & "After the Fact", by Maurice Blanchot, 1999

Fits and Starts: Selected Poems of Jacques Dupin, 1974

Screenplays

The Music of Chance (1993)

Smoke (1995)

Blue in the Face (1995)

Lulu on the Bridge (1998)

The Inner Life of Martin Frost (2007)

Miscellaneous

The Story of My Typewriter with paintings by Sam Messer (2002)

"The Accidental Rebel" (Wed. April 23 article in New York Times)

"ALONE" (2015) Prose piece from 1969 published in six copies along with "Becoming the Other in Translation" (2014) by SiriHustvedt. Published by Danish small press Ark Editions.