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THE CONSTRUCTION OF ETHICAL SUBJECT AND HETEROTOPIAS IN PAUL AUSTER'S CITY OF GLASS[1]

Abstract: *The initial stimulus for this article came from my observation of the widespread fixation on the crisis of the city in recent urban studies and urban fiction. It is a space that looms large and monstrous over the urban individual who is either relegated to the position of an observant walker or who assumes assimilation to the environment of image.*[2] *Paul Auster's* City of Glass *allows me to take issue with the common discourse on cities as homogenized, sinister and culturally uniform spaces and the subjects as victimized and passivized entities.*[3] *In fact, Auster's urban space deals with a wider range of issues beyond those of contemporary urban crisis. Embedded in Auster's urban novel are provocative theoretical perspectives on how the characters defy the traditional view of power as a centralized force and resistance only in oppositional terms, as that which is mounted from outside and against those who hold power. Within the framework of Foucault's notions of heteretopia and power, it will be argued that the spaces of power and resistance are intricately connected and power is enabling as it enables the emergence of resistance (heterotopias of deviation) and alternative ways of becoming otherwise. Accordingly, this article investigates how spaces are power-ridden and contested sites and how it is possible to 'ethicalize' spaces by a participatory and relational enactment of neglected and underimagined city spaces and denizens. Eventually, it will be argued that* City of Glass *to some extent creates an urban vision which highlights the always emergent, processual and progressive spaces that enable the construction of a subjectivity that is transgressive and moral (responsive and responsible) as well as a space that is ethical (inclusive and democratic).*

Keywords: *city; power; heterotopias; ethics; resistance; subjectivity*.

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[2] Livingstone notes that human geographers are concerned about "the disappearance of the human agent as thinking, feeling subject from the geographical conversation" (339). Like Livingstone, sociologist Giddens asserts that the new experience of the metropolis is marked by the loss of human dominance over the spatial environment. He maintains that though the latter is produced by the humans, it turns into a field of overpowering force all its own and transcends "the capacities of the individual human body…to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually and cognitively map its position in a mappable external world" (44).

[3]Notably, the metropolitan spaces of Auster's work, too, have either been neglected or they have been charged with negative meanings. For instance, Brian Jarvis in his article "Reflections on the 'City of Glass': Paul Auster" points out that Auster assiduously avoids urban pastoral and picturesque and presents a description of a journey which amounts to little more than a page of street names" (88). According to William G. Little, *City of Glass* has a specific geographical and historical setting but the location frequently transforms into a kind of anti-*topos*, a place of absence (150). Similarly, analyses of Auster's novels in terms of subjectivity revolve around fragmentation, self-loss and disappearance of the individual from the spaces of New York. Matthew McKean, for instance, states that *City of Glass* is about "multiple, mistaken, and confused identities" (103).

The "city" in the title refers to New York and it is walked through and interpreted by the writer Daniel Quinn and the philosopher and former convict Peter Stillman. Before Stillman, Auster introduces Quinn, who in the middle of New York has been living a solitary life since the loss of his wife and the infant child five years ago. After his bereavement, he becomes disillusioned with the world and as a consolation, he takes idle walks daily in the streets of New York. However, it soon becomes clear that he experiences New York as a negative space:

> New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps, and no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighbourhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well. Each time he took a walk, he felt as though he were leaving himself behind, 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…The world was outside of him, before him, and the speed with which it kept changing made it impossible for him to dwell on any one thing for very long…. By wandering aimlessly, all places became equal and it no longer mattered where he was. On his best walks, he was able to feel that he was nowhere (Auster 3-4).

At first glance, power of normalization is at work here: Quinn experiences New York as a space of existential nowhere; a space of homogenization, indifference and estrangement. However, Quinn does not succumb to the estranging spaces; instead, through walking he enacts heterotopias,[4] which help him escape the society of normalization and prevent him from perpetuating the regularity of the city and becoming a regularized denizen of New York. To be more precisely, against the alienating system and outer spaces of loneliness, Quinn embarks on writing detective stories and creating fictional characters which keep him company. He invents William Wilson, publishes his mystery novels under his name and Max Work is his private eye narrator:

> In the triad of selves that Quinn had become, Wilson served as a kind of ventriloquist. Quinn himself was the dummy, and Work was the animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise. If Wilson was an illusion, he nevertheless justified the lives of the other two. If Wilson did not exist, he nevertheless was the bridge that allowed Quinn to pass from himself into Work. And little by little, Work had become a presence in Quinn's life, his interior brother, his comrade in solitude (6).

As this quotation shows, Quinn attempts to populate his lonely urban existence; however, his endeavour is too imaginative and as Alison Russell states, "dominated by signifiers and assumed solutions" (72). That is to say, despite his creativity, Quinn still has a disengaged and superficial relation to the city and its inhabitants. Aptly, Auster introduces the characters of Peter Stillman so that Quinn can embark on critical, relational and response-

[4]Foucault in "Of Other Spaces" describes heterotopias as different spaces, which are "outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality," and as places which constitute a "simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live" (Foucault, "Other Spaces" 24). He further states that heterotopias are counter-sites, which have "the curious property of being in relation with all other sites, but in such a way to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (ibid.).

able deviations and display the convoluted yet productive intersections of space, power, subjectivity, resistance and ethics.

The pivotal moment that initiates Quinn's process of ethical and 'powerful' subject formation and enactment of radical transformations of the American space, which are shaped by his relations and interactions with others and other spaces in New York takes place when Quinn receives a phone call from Peter Stillman, the son and victim of his philosopher father Peter Stillman. Significantly, this study conceives ethics neither as prescriptive rules of conduct, nor as the conformity of the subject to the social norms. Instead, this study draws on Levinas's ethics. Levinas claims that

> I am defined as a subjectivity, as a singular person, as an 'I,' precisely because I am exposed to the other. It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that makes me an individual 'I.' So that I become a responsible or ethical 'I' to the extent that I agree to depose or dethrone myself –to abdicate my position of centrality- in favour of the vulnerable other. Ethical subjectivity dispenses with the idealizing subjectivity of ontology which reduces everything to itself" ("Ethics of the Infinite" 78).

The young Stillman mistakes Quinn for Paul Auster, a detective and asks him whether he can follow his father, who is soon to be released from the prison, so that the latter cannot harm the former. Quinn accepts the assignment intended for Paul Auster and soon begins to follow philosopher Peter Stillman. Quinn expects Stillman to plot against his son but he observes that Stillman harmlessly roams the streets of New York. Quinn states that "Stillman never seemed to be going anywhere in particular, nor did he seem to know where he was. And yet, as if by conscious design, he kept to a narrowly circumscribed area, bounded on the north by 110th Street, on the south by 72nd Street, on the west by Riverside Park, and on the east by Amsterdam Avenue" (Auster, 57-58). After thirteen days of following Stillman's aimless wanderings, Quinn, for no particular reason, begins to map Stillman's walks, day by day. Doing so, he comes to a stunning realization: Stillman's walks were not random at all, but a mapping out, with his footsteps, actions and movements through the streets of Manhattan, of some certain words. On the first day that Quinn transcribes Stillman's course throughout the city, he realizes that the footsteps of his suspect form the letter O. The second day Quinn deciphers a W, and on the third an E; after a few days, Quinn deduces that Stillman is in the process of spelling out THE TOWER OF BABEL (70).

Apart from creating these letters by the movement of his steps, Stillman simultaneously picks up valueless items and restores their "original" value by assigning them proper names in a red notebook:

> Each day I go out with my bag and collect objects that seem worthy of investigation. My samples now number in the hundreds-from the chipped to the smashed, from the dented to the squashed, from the pulverized to the putrid…I invent new words that will correspond to the things (Auster 78).

Stillman's inscription of Tower of Babel into the streets of New York and his attempt to assign new words to the broken objects actually refer back to Stillman's book *The Garden and the Tower: Early Visions of the New World*. In this book, through the mouthpiece of Henry Dark, Stillman propagates the idea that America is the Promised Land, in other words, the chosen land where the new Tower of Babel can be built and with the building of the new Babel in

America, "the whole earth [could] be of one language and one speech. And if that were to happen, paradise could not be far behind" (Auster 48). In this new physical Tower, according to Stillman, "[t]here would be room for each person, and once he entered that room, he would forget everything he knew. After forty days and forty nights, he would emerge a new man, speaking God's language, prepared to inhabit the second, everlasting paradise"(Auster 49). In fact, Stillman's assumptions resonate well with Foucault's argument in *Discipline and Punish* with regard to disciplinary spaces, which are applied to the prison but are also adapted and adopted to other spheres and spaces. Foucault explains that particular places and institutions were designed to be at once architectural, functional and hierarchical, hence, disciplinary:

> Disciplinary space tends to be divided into as many sections as there are bodies or elements to be distributed. One must eliminate the effects of imprecise distributions, the uncontrolled disappearance of individuals, their diffuse circulation, their unusable and dangerous coagulation; it was a tactic of anti-desertion, anti-vagabondage, anti-concentration. Its aim was to establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communications, to interrupt others, to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual, to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities or merits. It was a procedure, therefore, aimed at knowing, mastering and using. Discipline organizes an analytical space (*Discipline* 143).

Stillman's rhetoric of the Promised Land and his mapping through his walking at first glance seem to be far-fetched; however, as Foucault's statements also testify, they have grave ideological and political implications which may concern contemporary American politics and which help the reader see space, power and subjectivity from fresh angles. Firstly, following Foucault's heterotopian theory of power and Stillman's trajectories, it can be observed that power is both experimental and experiential. Therefore, it is difficult to take for granted the hegemony of power. In fact, neither power nor space is pre-given; on the contrary, they are actively and perpetually constructed. As John Allen in *Lost Geographies of Power* also states, power is actively constituted in space as an immanent, rather than external, force (64). Secondly, considering Stillman's perambulations it is crucial to emphasize the invalidation of liberalist assumptions of a private and de-politicized everyday existence and daily habits because, as Foucault claims, all relation of everyday life bears a certain stamp of power: "power is everywhere…because it comes from everywhere" (*History* 98).

Furthermore, Stillman's appropriation of the spaces of New York demonstrates that the spaces of the everyday are the sites through which subjectivity is immanently produced. Upon closer examination, it is seen that Stillman through spatial practices and his mappings aspires to a hierarchical view of identity and space that eliminates difference, alterity and diversity. As Hazel Smith in "A Labyrinth of Endless Steps" too argues, Stillman has a colonialist, westernized and masculinist view of America (44) and his desire to repress difference in language is paralleled by his desire to homogenize history and reduce the complexities of nationhood (43). At the most obvious level, we can see how a totalitarian vision of space and identity might easily devolve into a dystopian nightmare. Stilmann's experiment with his son whom he locked up in a room for nine years so that he could speak the language of God bears this out. When Quinn meets Stillman's son, he strongly resembles an automaton: "machine-like, fitful, alternating between slow and rapid gestures, rigid and yet expressive, as if the operation where out of control, not quite corresponding to the will

that lay behind it" (Auster 15). Moreover, the young Stillman babbles incoherently to Quinn: "Wimble click crumblechaw beloo. Clack clack bedrack. Numb noise, flacklemuch, chewmanna. Ya, ya, ya" and is unable to affirm his own identity: "For now, I am still Peter Stillman. That is not my real name. I cannot say who I will be tomorrow. Each day is new, and each day I am born again" (Auster17, 22). His condition perfectly illustrates why the solitary ego cannot be a source of meaningful existence. The self is not a self-contained or self-originating entity, but a relation. Put differently, the other is a prerequisite for the subject to be human and to lead a meaningful life.

On the other hand, to a significant extent, Stillman achieves his goal of "one language and one speech." This is evident in the fact that the phrase "the Tower of Babel" refuses translation into another language. As Pascalle-Anne Brault also points out, also points out, Stillman's footsteps lead us towards an original Tower of Babel since they withstand translation; hence, it is curious to see how the language of the novel, the English language, ends up controlling or usurping the place of any foreign language (230). Remarkably, it is not that "The Tower of Babel" is untranslatable; but because the maps Quinn draws on his notebook are indissociable from the city streets in which they are embedded. Brault further elaborates this point by stating:

> Because *the Tower of Babel* is inscribed in a particular city, along specific streets, one would, in order to translate *the Tower of Babel* into the Old World, into [German], [into Germany], for example, have to translate the whole city so as to reorient Stillman's footsteps to spell [*der Turm zu Babel*] (235).

Apparently, Stillman partially achieves his dream: the vision of "a whole world of one language and of one speech" and America as the place of a new Tower of Babel (Auster, 44). Ultimately, an ordinary individual through his discursive and spatial practices may subsume other spaces; thus, exercising power and threaten the variety of social, political, cultural spaces of New York City. Generally speaking, Stillman's constructions, although radically imaginative, disclose the hidden relationship between ideology, power, subjectivity and space. Now that power is something that is exercised and contested; it can be asserted that through his detournements, Quinn invites the reader to deviate from Stillman's as well as New York City's vertical, segregating and homogenizing spaces to the ones that generate cultural diversity, connection with others and responsibility. Eventually, by wandering on eccentric and ex-centric paths and detours, Quinn wards homogenization off, creates spaces of resistance and expands the spatial possibilities of the city.

The very first time Quinn is introduced in the novel, his deviations are made clear by the descriptions of his imagination and writing of detective fictions. In Auster, heterotopias of deviation are not only characterised by a principle of creativity, though. They are also notably marked by a journey towards others, interconnection and response-ability. This becomes clearer when Quinn after losing the trace of Stillman begins to truly observe and take notice of his actual surroundings. Rather than taking refuge in his imagination or thinking about the Stillman case, Quinn surveys and documents the people around him. He writes as follows:

> Today, as never before: the tramps, the down-and-outs, the shopping-bag ladies, the drifters and drunks. They range from the merely destitute to the wretchedly broken. Wherever you turn, they are there, in good neighbourhoods and bad.

> Some beg with a semblance of pride. …Others have given up hopes of ever leaving their tramphood. They lie there sprawled out on the sidewalk with their hat, or cup, or box, not even bothering to look up at the passerby, too defeated even to thank the ones who drop a coin beside them…Some tell stories, usually tragic accounts of their own lives, as if to give their benefactors something for their kindness-even if only words (Auster 108).

The quoted passage is exclusively significant in many respects. First and foremost, through this account Quinn draws the map of the "other" aspect of New York, of what lies below and beyond the grid of the city. Such a mapping of the unheard, the unwanted, or the unofficial shows the city in notably unusual ways. It portrays the other rhythms and voices of the city such as the homeless who are often unnoticed and, therefore, only rarely inscribed into the histories and geographies of a place. Thus, by extensively recounting his observations on the homeless people, Quinn, to some extent, turns the spaces of those who are sidelined from both public and discursive spaces into the center. In this aspect, Chris Westgate indicates that the language employed when referring to the homeless defines homelessness through degeneracy, marking the homeless as different from and dangerous to the middle class (20). Thus, the lengthy presence of the other in Quinn's narrative is also an apt intervention to the "discursive violence" committed by Stillman, who aims to position persons or groups in fixed places and determine their identities. In this sense, power is about capacity, capacity of the individual to relate, recognize, to be accountable and responsive towards the other. Briefly put, as Foucault would put it, the situation of Stillman and Quinn is not that of a "binary structure with 'dominator' on one side and 'dominated' on the other" (*Power/Knowledge* 142). Indeed, relations of power are protean and reversible. The once-powerful may be eventually contested and rendered powerless and vice versa.

What is more, Quinn's remarkable visitation to the neglected territory of the homeless also illustrates that spatial practices may be ethical, and ethics may be spatial and enacted performatively, namely, through divergent walkings as Quinn exemplifies. Indeed, as Stillman's walkings illustrate, the hierarchization, classification and manipulation of spaces of New York premised on egoistical philosophy and totalitarian politics is repressive of everyday social relations and a serious threat to the viability of the ethical sphere itself. Heterotopian spatial practices, however, play a vital role in the subject's ethical transformation and becoming a catalyst in his casting off his ego and his desire to move away from himself to the other. Above all, space allows the subject to practice a model of responsible geography. According to Doreen Massey, responsible geography challenges people both inside and outside of the discipline [of geography] to acknowledge the "geographies of our social responsibility" (10). What is necessary, she therefore argues, "is to uproot 'space' from that constellation of concepts in which it has so unquestioningly so often been embedded (stasis; closure; representation), and to settle it among another set of ideas (heterogeneity; relationality; coevalness... liveliness indeed) where it releases a more challenging political landscape" (13). Quinn notably tries to democratize space by recognizing alterity and difference. Indeed, although Quinn does not actively help the homeless people, he at least invites the reader to look more closely at the ethics of space, and call for justice, equality and responsibility in representing space. From here we can conclude how space, as Kathleen M. Kirby notes, "might form the basis for advancing a responsive and responsible model of subject, one that abandons neither political realities nor personal histories, nor arrests possibilities for change" (189).

Through his indeterminate journeys and wanderings on forgotten paths, Quinn continues to create heterotopias and, at time same time, to construct ethical subjecthood. After he loses track of Stillman, Quinn forsakes his home and stows himself away in a garbage can outside the residence of young Stillman so that he can protect him around the clock. For the sake of the other, Quinn reduces his food intake, his need for sleep and shelter, and adapts himself to a bare life. As the time passes, it is recounted that Quinn

> had turned into a bum. His clothes were discoloured, dishevelled, debauched by filth. His face was covered with a thick black beard with tiny flecks of grey in it. His hair was long and tangled, matted into tufts behind his hears and crawling down in curls almost to his shoulders More than anything else, he reminded himself of Robinson Crusoe, and he marvelled at how quickly these changes had taken place in him. It had been no more than a matter of months, and in that time he had become someone else. (Auster 121)

This comportment of Quinn establishes him as a quintessential ethical subject because the encounter with the other makes him responsible and, for Levinas, the essence of this responsibility is service. The face of the other commands the self to give all he has, to not solely be, but be for the other. It is narrated that, "If Stillman was the man with the dagger, come back to avenge himself on the boy whose life he had destroyed, Quinn wanted to be there to stop him. He knew he could not bring his own son back to life, but at least he could prevent another from dying"(Auster 35).[5] Similar to Levinas's account, Quinn expresses how his responsibility towards the other is infinite, unconditional and service oriented. Paradoxically, this servitude does not diminish his subjectivity but endows him with "supreme dignity of the unique" (*Ethics* 101). Furthermore, Quinn's immersion in the garbage can allows him to be in touch with nature and be gifted with a real life, which he would not have possessed otherwise. Perhaps for the first time in his life Quinn seems to have some consciousness of the material world that lies outside his phantom-like existence. His response to exteriority is described in terms of openness and receptivity:

> He spent many hours looking up at the sky. From his position at the back of the alley, wedged in between the bin and the wall, there were few other things to see, and as the days passed he began to take pleasure in the world overhead. He saw that, above all, the sky was never still…The spectrum of variables was immense, the result depending on the temperatures of the different atmosphere levels, the types of clouds present in the sky, and where the sun happened to be at that particular moment. From all this came the reds and pinks that Quinn liked so much, the purples and vermilions, the oranges and lavenders, the golds and feathery persimmons. (Auster 118-9)

Obviously, through the heterotopia Quinn constructs, he subverts the affectless, symbolic and insensitive experience of New York and transforms it into a means to commune with nature, its colors and the larger world in general. Exposed again and again to the other, Quinn moves unceasingly forward, slipping into transcendence.

[5]Quinn's ethical stance of one-for-the-other also becomes obvious as Quinn cares for young Stillman for free. When Stillman writes a cheque made out to Paul Auster, Quinn is relived. It is narrated that "The fact that he would never be able to cash the cheque did not trouble him. He understood, even then, that he was not doing any of this for money" (Auster 31).

Quinn has to desert the garbage can when nothing remains there to sustain him. When he decides to return to his own house, he finds it is rented to a woman and he learns that Stillman committed suicide months ago. On top of this, he finds out that the younger Peter Stillman has also vanished without a trace. Therefore, there is nothing left for him except settling in young Stillman's house and embarking on a new phase - the last phase we know about. We are informed that Quinn, in a naked position, spends endless days in a room transcribing his own thoughts about "the stars, the earth, his hopes for mankind" (Auster 131). Besides, we are told that, "[h]e remembered the infinite kindness of the world and all the people he had ever loved. Nothing mattered now but the beauty of all this" (Auster 131-132). In a similar mood, the final image of the city is sanguine and invested with redemptive hope. It is stated that, "The city was entirely white now, and the snow kept falling, as though it would never end" (Auster 202). As can be observed, there is a huge difference between Quinn's self, his perception of the city and life in general before and after he meets the other. While at the beginning of the novel he roamed around the indifferent spaces of New York in a phantom-like fashion, now by his contact with the alterity, he is endowed with inner tranquility, authentic individuality and an ethical self.

In conclusion, it can be argued that Quinn's narrative is a struggle for existence, accountability and a struggle to keep moving. Through his personal narrative, Quinn who does not fit in the traditional American mappings of career, prestige, family and wealth, nonetheless, to some extent, emerges as a critical, ethical, creative and thus a 'powerful' figure. His narrative enables Quinn to gain existential insideness and make the story of his as well as others heard, read and disseminated. Through his acts of heterotopian deviations it becomes obvious that while autonomy is significant, a subject is a permeable, processual and relational being, open to and responsible for the other, the world and humankind in general. Furthermore, the counter-mappings and countervailing practices of Quinn make it obvious that the urban is not a fixed, homogenised and regular space but a series of overlapping counter-sites which are permeated by power relations. Viewed from this angle, the urban space is a space where power dynamics change frequently. The ones once in the centre and power may be deposed to the periphery and powerlessness and vice versa. Thus, hierarchically ordered spaces, centers, margins and upper-lower status spaces are perpetually disrupted. On the whole, however, throughout the narrative Quinn partially contests authoritarian and 'proper' orderings of space and demands a re-imagining of the possibilities of New York as a city of inclusive democracy and open possibilities. In the end, therefore, the artistic, ethical and critical as well as the incomprehensible and uncomfortable urban deviations, in some measure, come to replace the position of the egoistical and indifferent urban spatiality.

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