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*Space, Memory, and Community in Paul Auster's  
In the Country of Last Things*

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## *Introduction*

*The scope of this work is to understand the ways in which different elements concerning a postmodern view of Paul Auster's In the Country of Last Things come together to conform a comprehensive understanding of this narrative. I plan on considering urban subjects and their movements within the city by means of space —the place they occupy inside the city, their activities—how they plan on surviving, and the ways in which history and memory collide to form a sense of community that is long gone. Also, elements such as the city itself as a place where interactions between people living in duress are conducted, and the space as background for those interactions. All of these aspects will play part in finally acknowledging to what extent is this a city of 'Last things' a place which is on the verge of destruction, but that recycles and transforms the last things into new ones. This will take on the form of the point of view of a newcomer to the city, someone who experiences these new situations as she finds herself into them, with the fresh eyes of someone who has been outside it, and understands what the difficulties are in finding a sense of belonging in a place which does not lend itself to do so, but in doing so finds herself entangled in the city's movements.*

*The concepts of space will be discussed in this work since it is relevant to the development of the subject that roams through the city; in this case Anna's wanderings and the rest of the urban subjects decisions and actions, will provide us a clear view on how much the physical space limits and defines what the urban subjects are and do. The question here is how the city constructs its inhabitants or as Woods in 'Urban Space and the Postmodern in In the Country of Last Things' puts it: "how physical space structures social consciousness and activity." (114). The different groups of people living in the city represent in our eyes, different variations of what their approach to life is, the various ways in which they will try to survive (Scavengers, Ghost people), live off somebody else's disgrace (Robbers, Tollists, tricksters), or in many cases finding ways to end their own lives (Runners, Leapers, assassination clubs). They might find in these groups a sense of community. Regarding this, memory and history will play an important role when trying to determine in which ways do a sense of belonging or a 'togetherness' will conform what might be considered as common past.*

*As Paul Auster tells it, this city is a place in which its elements do not last long, the ever present symptoms of a decaying society are at play here; but one of the most interesting contradictions is the way in which, although being the last things, they do not disappear at once, they carry on being, (not always with a defined and clear sense of purpose) even reconstructing themselves into new things. In this way, Paul Auster's world turns itself into an ever-changing cycle of 'decomposition and recomposition' (Woods 113). Is it there a true sense of ending in this country of last things? Does this city in destruction that so faithfully depicts a postmodern place under fatal condition, actually represent the finish line of things ceasing to be? Or is it just one more state in the transition towards another? Maybe it is in this way in which the city functions, on the surface it appears as something that it's nearly finished, but as Anna Blume herself declares nothing ends at once, but things continue to exist.*

*I will be grounding my analysis of the novel's state on the movement of postmodernism, which in my opinion, helps to highlight the central aspects of the novel. Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory, an Introduction, and The Illusions of Postmodernism* provide an understanding of his postmodern theory, and the way in which he sees this matter as a conflict to be analysed. He states that an absolute postmodern condition does not exist, one under which the ideology of postmodernism as a whole, but with the basic notions of postmodernity he adheres to. Notions such as those of the 'common' and 'subject' under his view of modernity and postmodernity are central to this study, and will help me on the undertaking on delineating the extends to what this city's characteristics conform a postmodern view of matters.*

*Lefebvre on *The Production of Space* will be useful as well with his notions of spatial relations and the ways in which the city produces its space. Also, the relation of language with space, and the creation or not of possible spatial entities that exist only after being uttered in a discourse. This is something that is in a way in accordance with what Augé claims; Marc Augé's *Los No-Lugares* supports the idea when trying to delimitate a particular space which represents past time and shared memory for people, and the space in which the act of remembering takes place. Places are in themselves carriers of history or represent history for some. Language, Augé declares, also functions as means to evoke places that would not exist otherwise. Not only*

*these non places are able to come to life by means of words, but they do so because the characteristics of the society which is “sobremodernizada”<sup>1</sup> produces non-places.*

*Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concepts of History’ outlines the ways in which past becomes history, not as soon as it is complete, but by means of a process which may take years or even centuries. He sees history and progress as something which is impossible to look at in isolation—what ‘historical materialism’ centres on— as something that is bigger than itself, a part of a bigger set of event: “Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal nexus of various moments of history. But no state of affairs is, as a cause, already a historical one. It becomes this, posthumously.” (A).*

*Finally, Bauman’s ideas on communities and unity under a circumstance of liquefied modernity, will aid me as well when using this concepts, since one of my main focus is the way in which this novel and its city despite not giving way to a sense of community they do allow for some last traces of that kind of togetherness.*

*Regarding Literary approach, I will be focusing my analysis on the ideas of Reader response theories, mainly Wolfgang Iser’s view on the matter in Raman Selden’s *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*<sup>2</sup>. The main aspect of Iser’s theory establishes the idea of filling in the blanks the text presents, by means of the interpretation a particular reader might provide. I think this is especially important in a novel such a as *In the Country of Last Things*, since the ambiguity of the novel presents the reader with the opportunity to fill in the blanks with their own belief system and ideology; in this way, this results in a very flexible and numerous possibilities of interpretation.*

*The reason behind the choosing of these sources reflects the way in which I plan on developing this subject of study, which is the city in Paul Auster’s *In the Country of Last Things*. All the different aspects I’m focusing on—namely, urban subjects, space and memory—will help me draw the line regarding what is actually this country made of, and if whether these ‘last things’ are truly the final ones in a process which seems not willing to stop.*

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<sup>1</sup>. See Augé, *Los No-Lugares. Espacios del animat*. 1992.

<sup>2</sup>. Selden, Raman. *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. 5th edition. Pearson Education Limited, 2005.

*Theoretical Framework*

*Since In the Country of Last Things is a novel which centers in a city which is on the verge of destruction, a place in which its inhabitants are not able to find comfort anymore, and which doesn't provide for them anymore, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which this situation depicts an image of a dystopian narrative. When trying to understand the meaning behind this type of narrative, it is important to delineate under what circumstances this novel is found to be postmodern in shape. Is it just its characters the ones that allow for development of the story, or does the city that serves as background allow for some changes as well?*

*Is this the way in which we are going to see how different aspects of what constitutes life in the city come together in the novel. In Literary Theory An Introduction, Terry Eagleton reflects on one of the ways he finds the notion of postmodernity to be a functioning concept. Since our proposal focuses on the fact that the city in destruction serves as background and shapes the actions of the characters, it's important to know until what extent does this city can reflect a postmodern perspective. That is the way in which postmodernism does not try to unify and smooth over a past that might be old or recent, but to understand the ways in which everything is changeable and malleable, how everything that might be accounted for as rigid or total it is not really so, including notions such as truth or objectivity:*

*“Knowledge is relative to cultural contexts, so that to claim to know the world 'as it is' is simply a chimera - not only because our understanding is always a matter of partial, partisan interpretation, but because the world itself is no way in particular. Truth is the product of interpretation, facts are constructs of discourse, objectivity is just whatever questionable interpretation of things has currently seized power, and the human subject is as much a fiction as the reality he or she contemplates, a diffuse, self-divided entity without any fixed nature or essence” (201).*

*Eagleton claims that this is the only form of culture in which it is possible to see a proper postmodernism. He also finds the idea of postmodernism as a period following modernism as*

*something that doesn't really apply to a realistic concept of what history actually is: "postmodernity means the end of modernity, in the sense of those grand narratives of truth, reason, science, progress and universal emancipation which are taken to characterize modern thought from the Enlightenment onwards. For postmodernity, these fond hopes have not only been historically discredited; they were dangerous illusions from the outset, bundling the rich contingencies of history into a conceptual straitjacket" (202). It is, in fact, something that becomes dangerous when given main focus to, without considering what else (like the obvious complexity history has or how chaotic actually is) might be overlooked.*

*In The Illusions of Postmodernity he does not renounce (or depicts as much) the idea of postmodernity in the sense it claims to have regarding philosophic value, but when it tries to unify itself as a whole: "my concern is less with the more recherché formulations of postmodern philosophy than with the culture or milieu or even sensibility of postmodernism as a whole" (9). Eagleton at the same time reflects on the period and what its implications are when deciding to leave behind modernity and move to this 'postmodern philosophy'. It is in modernity when we start to realize that life as was lived before was no longer possible, the conflicting and hopeful interest of living a happy life, become, according to Eagleton, estranged;*

*"The dawning of modernity was the moment when we began to realize that there were many conflicting versions of the good life; that none of these versions could be unimpeachably grounded; and that, strangely enough, we were no longer able to agree on the most fundamental issues in the field. I say 'strangely enough' because one might have thought that we could have agreed on the basics and then diverged on particulars . . . [w]ith the onset of modernity humanity enters for the first time upon that extraordinary condition, now thoroughly naturalized in our heads, in which we fail to see eye to eye on all the most vital matters - a condition which would have been mind-bendingly unimaginable for some of the ancients, and which seem to forestall all possibility of constructing a life in common" (76).*

*According to this, living life alongside someone else, changes its connotation; it no longer means trying to adapt yourself to others, becoming one community where a sense of belonging truly exists, but now everything that we gave importance to before has shifted its path. What we*

might have considered as a possibility to construct a life in common now has turned into something new and identifiable, where we can no longer recognize what is normal or natural to our eyes, and this situation intensifies once we come closer to 'the end of modernity', and what post-modernity reflects. In this way, we can understand the manner in which we see the novel under a postmodern perspective. It is not only that the city in the novel has lost its way, carrying with it everything community entails, but at the same time it changes the relationships that urban subjects have with each other. Also, the way in which their actions (and the reasons behind them) are at first shocking to us, become acceptable to a certain extent. See for example the case of the disposition of bodies. Once someone dies, it is fundamental that the body should be disposed of in one of the transformation centers, and it is not possible to make a ceremony like the one they tried to do in Woburn House after Mr. Frick died.

Although Terry Eagleton presents some conflicting notions regarding postmodernist theories, he does present us with a clear sense of what situating *In the Country of Last Things* as a postmodern novel entails. The sense of lost community is clearly present, the city does not allow for anything more than survival of the fittest (with clear exceptions, such as Anna and Isabel once Ferdinand dies, or Woburn house, and even those moments are meant to be doomed (more to come on this subject later, when discussing community), and this postmodern society will not allow for any sense of absolute truth. This makes even more sense if we think of how much this particular society is ruled by a unilateral force, something that is keeping everyone inside under the worst conditions imaginable, regardless of the fact that outside might be different. It is the same with the urban subjects, Anna and the others. These subjects have become so much enthralled with their own lives they don't see outside their own terrifying realities anymore, and since everyone follows their own truth, nobody trusts anybody else, it's like they're fighting alone against the world.

Another fundamental aspect in our study is the notion of space. Henri Lefebvre in *Production of Space* determines the relation between society and the production of space. He establishes that a particular place is produced by a every society, and that production is conditioned to both natural and interpersonal relationship between the members of that society. Lefebvre claims that first "the (physical) natural space is disappearing. Granted, natural space

was — and it remains - the common point of departure: the origin, and the original model, of the social process —perhaps even the basis of all 'originality'" (30). Nature, which serves as a background for the consolidation of space in a society, is becoming more and more deteriorated and eventually is going to fade completely, especially under the conditions of capitalism. Secondly, every society is to produce its own space by means of the interaction, purposely or not, of the urban subjects, something Lefebvre calls "spatial practice". It is imperative to consider this in relation to what we can see in the novel, the city is a place which is so deprived of any kind of natural landscape, and the relations between its inhabitants are almost nonexistent, which in turn leads to a fragmented space. Lefebvre also states to which extent the concept of space can be extended to, covers not only the physical space, but the geographic and demographic as well, and given this multiplicity of understanding accounts for how much the 'produced space' is actually a product of society:

*"the very multiplicity of these descriptions and sectionings makes them suspect. The fact is that all these efforts exemplify a very strong — perhaps even the dominant — tendency within present-day society and its mode of production" (8).*

Lefebvre also refers to the relation between language and space. He establishes that although the space formed by "practico-social activities" such as landscapes, monuments and buildings, have meaning; under the question "May a social space viably be conceived of as a language or discourse, dependent upon a determinate practice (reading/ writing)?"(131) the answer is not as clear. He determines that the actual capacity for establishing the possibility of a conceivable space through language is of a more refutable nature. Unlike Lefebvre, Marc Augé when referring to Michel de Certeau determines in *Los No-Lugares* that "el relato, en fin, y especialmente el relato de viajes, se compone con la doble necesidad de 'hacer' y 'ver'. . .el lugar es el lugar antropológico" (86). This complements with what Augé adds referring to the quality of that 'lugar antropológico'. He describes "nosotros incluimos en la noción de lugar antropológico la posibilidad de los recorridos que en él se efectúan, los discursos que allí se sostienen y el lenguaje que lo caracteriza" (87) This, alongside the idea of the conditioned existence of certain places based on the words they evoke<sup>3</sup> turn the idea of the non place, by the use of language, into social space:

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<sup>3</sup> *Los No-Lugares: Espacios del Anonimato* p.99

*“La mediación que establece el vínculo de los individuos con su entorno en el espacio del no lugar pasa por las palabras, hasta por los textos. . . [c]iertos lugares no existen sino por las palabras que los evocan, no lugares en este sentido o más bien no lugares imaginarios, utopías triviales, clisés. Son lo contrario del no lugar según Michel de Certeau, lo contrario del lugar dicho (del que no se sabe, casi nunca, quién lo ha dicho, y lo que dijo)” (98-99).*

*We can see how the non-places, which in the novel we will later argue are some places in the city, become representative of this everyday discourse, and in doing so, serve to isolate and describe a social space. Lefebvre argues: “Everyone knows what is meant when we speak of a 'room' in an apartment, the 'corner' of the street, a 'marketplace', a shopping or cultural 'centre', a public 'place', and so on. These terms of everyday discourse serve to distinguish, but not to isolate particular spaces, and in general to describe a social space. They correspond to a specific use of that space, and hence to a spatial practice that they express and constitute” (16).*

*This is a point of infliction with Augé’s point of view, these types of words do carry the capability to define themselves by the uses of those words or discourse: “pero los no lugares reales de la sobremodernidad, los que tomamos cuando transitamos por la autopista, hacemos las compras en el supermercado. . . tienen de particular que se definen también por las palabras o los textos que nos proponen: su modo de empleo, en suma”(99). One of Augé’s main ideas is how postmodernity (or sobremodernidad as he calls it) is able to produce these non-places:*

*“la sobremodernidad es productora de no lugares, es decir de espacios que no son en si lugares antropológicos y que, contrariamente a la modernidad baudeleriana, no integran los lugares antiguos: éstos catalogados, clasificados y promovidos a la categoría de ‘lugares de memoria’, ocupan allí un lugar circunscripto y específico” (83).*

*He refers by this to the production of new spaces that did not exist before under a modern perspective, but that under this “sobremodernidad” become common ground. This relates to what Tim Woods in “Looking for Signs in the Air: Urban Space and the Postmodern in In the Country of Last Things” refers to as Auster’s capacity to “work at the as-yet concealed relations*

*between space and language . . . the city in Auster's work acts as both a scene of textual events and a text for individual interpretation" (115). The city, in In the Country of Last Things, as I will later argue, will be conformed by many of these non places; from the exchanges that give rise to "memory places" (exchanges that allow for the configuration of a dream or a conjoined sense of identity), through the non-places that postmodernity allows for, until we arrive at the places that are shaped by language alone.*

*As secondary sources, I will take on from Tim Woods in 'Urban space and the postmodern' who delineates quite clearly which are the ways in which Paul Auster reflects a postmodern vision into his novel In the Country of Last Things; going from Anna's actions through her narrative, to how the space is the agent that shapes and structures the subject, "Rather than collapsing the local, he [Auster] opens it up. He looks at the way the local has been constructed, what event is being reproduced in what place and how Blume's subjectivity experience of the local is circumscribed by the processes of location". (127). Woods reflects on the relation between language and space, and the illusions of history and past according to Anna's experiences, encounters, and wanderings in the city.*

*As we already established the concept of space, and what its significance will be in the context of this study, we find the need to establish now what will be for Anna her past, and the way in which she is going to settle that memory onto something that is long gone, and at the same time, as a past that almost half the novel constructs her and guides her through the city (by this I mean her recollections of her previous life, especially the ones about her brother, whom she is trying so desperately to find). On this idea of past and history (both with small and capital h), Walter Benjamin in his "On the Concept of History", determines clearly and concisely what these concepts entail, and the way in which we relate and articulate what is our past. He states "to articulate what is past does not mean to recognize 'how it really was.' It means to take control of a memory, as it flashes in a moment of danger" (VI). This we will see clearly when we realize that urban subjects when they start to lose a sense of reality and see themselves submerged into a new unbelievably critical situation, will tend to ignore the present and what led them there, to plunge into a recollection of the past that may or may not be as real as it actually happened, but that is not fundamental, because it results in these urban subjects*

been drawn to one another. Benjamin also states that when referring to the task of the historian, he reflects on how much the job at hand is a matter of empathy, and this level of empathy “its origin is the heaviness at heart, the acedia” (VII). Tim Woods in his essay<sup>4</sup> reflects also on how much history and information about the city is erased: “Anna Blume’s mental vagaries are the course of *In the Country of Last Things*, and they are not controlled by anything other than the logic of thought and sensation. The erasure of history and information about the city is repeated over and over in Anna Blume’s narrative” (119).

When trying to understand the relation between different urban subjects within the city, it is important to note that, even though their lives are not the same (they might have not suffered from the same ailments, or the circumstances that led them to the city are special and different in their own ways), we can see somehow the past for all of them is a break between their lives as they were before and after they came to the city. In this sense we will account for this as a shared past (and present). This sense of apparent uniformity<sup>5</sup> we find does not accord with the general sense of history Benjamin gives, in which:

“Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal nexus of various moments of history. But no state of affairs is, as a cause, already a historical one. It becomes so posthumously, through eventualities which may be separated from it by millennia. . . (The historian) records the constellation in which his own epoch comes into contact with that of an earlier one. He thereby establishes a concept of the present as that of the here-and-now in which splinters of messianic time are shot through” (A).

Instead, the sense of history and shared past for these people is somehow amplified; as the city decays faster and faster, it is understandable to believe that the process is indeed becoming shorter, not only because these people’s lives are lived so much faster that what they would have been, but because of the city with its changes and movements, it turns into something with cycles of progression and production that work almost in fast forward.

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<sup>4</sup>“Looking for Signs in the Air. The Urban Space and the Postmodern”

<sup>5</sup>Apparent being here the key word, I do not mean in history as a total, but to this particular group of people, their history and past is their own, and, as a whole, common to one another.

*Relating this to the idea of memory and community, Zygmunt Bauman, in Liquid Modernity refers to what I will parallel with a postmodern condition of society, and that is the liquidation of modernity and its subsequent effect on community. For him the main loss at stake here is the melting powers of society, the mobility and inconstancy of a liquefied present. When referring to community and unity, Bauman states,*

*“a unity which is an outcome, not an a priori given condition, a shared life, a unity put together through negotiation and reconciliation, not the denial, stifling or smothering out of differences. . . This is the only formula of togetherness which the conditions of liquid modernity render compatible, plausible and realistic. Once the beliefs styles have all been ‘privatized’ – decontextualized or ‘disembedded’ . . . identities cannot but look fragile, temporary and ‘until further notice’, and devoid of all defenses except the skills and determination of the agents to hold them tight and protect them from erosion” (178).*

*The responsibility these agents have, and how that agency may affect the way in which subjects behave is a part of what I plan on elaborating further in the analysis, it is in this way by means of the support of these “agents”, that the idea of a society can be said to maintain some aspects of life in a community as it was before it turned from a solid, sturdy society, to a liquefied community.*

*These are the main concepts I will be working with and if some other concept were to crop up in the developing of the analysis, I will be sure to include it and explain it further in the corresponding context. So far these concepts are what I consider to be sufficient to provide a base ground for the upcoming analysis of the urban subjects and their relationships with one another.*

*As for the Literary approach, Reader Response theory is malleable enough as I mentioned, to be able to be open to interpretation inside the novel. When talking about deciphering and interpreting the different aspects the novel presents, it’s important to consider how much of this interpretation is based on the input we as readers put into it, and this input results in the novel taking a whole new dimension of meaning with those different interpretations. This results in an*

*ideal situation, given that In the Country of Last Things is a novel which permits in many occasions a myriad of possibilities regarding what we, as readers, decide to believe constitute or will constitute background information, or future possibilities. Iser claims that the reader should fill in the blanks in the text, but at the same time, problem arises when determining to what extent does that interpretation reach. Is it the reader the one who judges or the texts own limitations and clues the ones that limit said interpretation? Selden states:*

*“It remains unclear whether Iser wishes to grant the reader the power to fill up at will the blanks in the text or whether he regards the text as the final arbiter of the reader’s actualizations. Is the gap between ‘the perfect man’ and ‘the perfect man’s lack of judgement’ filled by a freely judging reader or by a reader who is guided by the text’s instructions? Iser’s emphasis is ultimately phenomenological: the reader’s experience of reading is at the centre of the literary process. By resolving the contradictions between the various viewpoints which emerge from the text or by filling the ‘gaps’ between viewpoints in various ways, the readers take the text into their consciousnesses and make it their own experience” (54)*

*In other words it is the reader’s experience that absorbs the text in particular ways, and what they are able to draw out of it is what the reader considers to be fundamental. in the course of the analysis of the novel, we will see how much of this process is at play here, I will make some connections and associations that in my view of the matters will resolve in the identification of the different aspects of the city that complete the urban subjects experience, and how that experience is determined by themselves, their relations to others and what surrounds them.*

*Analysis*

## *Production of Space and Social Interaction*

*In In The Country of Last Things, we find ourselves in a city in which its inhabitants are not able to fend for themselves their own lives, they are forced to seek out ways in which to survive, and most of the times, this survival will be brought upon at the expense of someone else. Is in this way in which we can see in the city the state to which the urban subjects are being forced apart from each other, and how this separation will imply placing them in a state in which they are not able to share with others the burdens of everyday work, and their feelings of desperation when their circumstances overwhelms them. Not only does the space configures the way in which the subjects move through the city, but also they find themselves creating and modifying those environments through their interactions with each other.*

*The spatial landscape that serves as background in the city in the novel depends much upon the fact that the physical places determine most of the situations the characters face, and these spaces become crucial when those subjects are reliant on the environment that surrounds them. These spaces are characterized not only for their ability to deteriorate or improve the subjects' living conditions, but also they determine on some occasions the ways in which subjects see themselves in a particular moment. See for example the way in which after Isabel's death, Anna is forced out of the apartment by the neighbors who now claim the space as theirs. Anna goes one moment from having a secure (as secure as it can be) place to live, to living in the streets again: "I had been in the city for more than a year now, and nothing had happened. There was some money on my pocket, but I had no job, no place to live. After all the ups and downs, I was right back where I had started" (Auster 85). The situation does not allow her to be brave or courageous; any kind of fight back would only bring trouble. She understands what this means, how the space she had claim as her own has now been taken away from her, and this makes her realize of the little power she had over her own life, and her decisions. This kind of interaction between the inhabitants of the building is how we can start to see the disintegration*

*of the space; from this moment onwards, the apartment that used to belong to Isabel and Ferdinand, and that for some time served as refuge for Anna, is gone.*

*We can relate this to how we see this space— turned into physical surroundings— reflects the manner in which Anna views the world at this point. What little protection she can muster from the outside results in a stronger sense of belonging and self image for her, and as soon as that barrier of security is stripped apart, we can see how much the space delineates her own perception of who she is, and what surrounds her. The physical space, then, turns into a reflection of her own subjectivity and the way in which she perceives the world around her.*

*There are spaces that serve as comfort for the subject, spaces where it is easier for the individuals to be at ease and not in constant alert. This is, for example, a place in which Anna feels secure, like Isabel's and Ferdinand's apartment. The space itself represents first and foremost a new sense of belonging, something Anna hadn't found yet inside the city, and the consequent physical, geographical place, a roof over her head where she does not have to endure the climate's hardships. It first becomes a place that holds security and some sort of stability, as compared to Anna's previous condition. This sense of security quickly turns into alarm at the foresight that the situation soon will turn quite different indeed. Ferdinand's tendency toward angry outbursts of violence, especially toward Anna, alerts her somehow that things are about to change. For a brief period of time, this precarious condition is at balance inside the apartment, until Ferdinand's sexual and violent attempt on Anna, and she discovers that she is capable of committing acts of violence that she had judged on others before, and the realization that she was no different from the rest of the people in the city dawns on her. The equilibrium of the life inside their apartment was momentarily broken, but Ferdinand's death, and Isabel's and Anna's funeral arrangements, brought about a new balance.*

*By getting rid of the body and selling every last bit of Ferdinand's things, they cleared the space (literally) of his presence which had dominated it before, and now the place represents Anna's and Isabel's love and respect towards each other: "A day or two after the ceremony on the roof, I gathered up all of his possessions and sold them, tight down to the model ships and half-empty tube of glue, and Isabel did not say a word" (76). Although this peace would not last*

*given Isabel's quickly deteriorating condition, the sense of belonging in that apartment does not leave Anna; she still feels it's her own space. Here we can see clearly how much of the relationship between them it is not based around the fact that they need to survive at the cost of somebody else's life, but on the fact that they are put together under that circumstance and they are trying to make the best out of it. This is one of the relations in which we can see how little space the city leaves for gaps like this one, and that is why moments like this one are so rare.*

*The same sense of security and companionship we find again when Anna finds Sam. Their bond is based on the way in which they need each other, and how the prospect of staying together will help with their survival. The apartment they share on the library becomes to them the centre of their universe, and that is how they survive the winter and find the hope to continue with their lives. Anna proposes the idea of living with Sam, so she can share her money with him, in exchange of a place to live. This trade will mean shelter for Anna and a new less obsessive view on his book for Sam, who now starts to understand how much of what he was doing was taking the life out of him:*

*"The problem was that his money was running low, and the odds seemed to have turned against him. He couldn't afford to do the interviews anymore, and with his funds at such a dangerous ebb, he was now eating only every other day. That made things even worse, of course. The strength was being sapped out of him" (104).*

*This serves as a look into Sam's state of mind; he preferred to look at life through somebody else's eyes, without considering how much of his own was deteriorating very quickly. This is how Anna finds him, and once they started to live under the same roof, they began to look at life with a renewed sense of optimism, especially Sam. It is their apartment in the library the one that brings about this change, it brought them together, and now this space facilitates their lives. The library is a place that represents knowledge and a sense of stability; it provides the opportunity for people to live in one of the last remnants of a normal city life. This balance (that allows for the presence of religion and press) presupposes not friendship exactly, but a minimum of courtesy and politeness between the inhabitants of the building, something that doesn't exist outside: "a certain wary camaraderie had developed among the different factions in the library,*

*at least to the extent that many of them were willing to talk to each other and exchange ideas” (111).*

*This library, with its lasting rules, is an example of the last remnants of modernity we can find in the novel. The idea that the building allows for the exchange of news, knowledge and protection, reflects how much this library’s previous status inside the city has been maintained; we can not only see this in the way in which everybody respects each other, but in the way in which as a whole, the building’s pretenses are no longer to bring knowledge in books for those who seek it, but the way in which people interact within it.*

*The city itself with its decaying streets does not allow for the preservation or enjoyment of passers by. It is instead, a place that presents traps at every step, especially to the ones who do not know how to navigate the city. This knowledge of physical orientation and awareness of what surrounds you is fundamental, especially for those who seek out jobs as scavengers. This knowledge, which Anna picks up after spending some time in the city, turns out to be one of the elements that keeps her alive. The constant change and deterioration of the elements that shape the city become part of the city itself, and understanding its changes and fluxes allows the urban subjects to remain alive. It is in this way how Anna keeps tabs of most places where it is most likely to find tolls, or how she navigates the streets by smell to try to avoid them. The city is a place that doesn’t give much to the subjects to work with, and only the ones that are willing to do certain things are going to survive:*

*“New tolls go up, the old tolls disappear. You can never know which streets to take and which to avoid. Bit by bit, the city robs you of certainty. There can never be any fixed path, and you can survive only if nothing is necessary to you. Without warning, you must be able to change, to drop what you’re doing, to reverse” (6).*

*Not only streets and buildings suffer under the changing conditions, but weather does as well. In this city, people are not able to rely on seasons or predictions or forecasts, and the constant changes could be fatal if you get caught under an unfavorable weather condition. Anna makes reference, particularly, to the sudden rains*

*“for once you get wet, you go on paying for it for hours, even days afterward. There is no greater mistake than getting caught in a downpour. Not only do you run the risk of a cold, but you must suffer through innumerable discomforts: your clothes saturated with dampness, your bones as though frozen, and the ever-present danger of destroying your shoes” (24).*

*This, alongside the aftermaths of rain and the havoc weather causes on the streets are responsible for this constant menace. The urban subjects need to keep their eyes open at all times, to prevent falling or crashing against somebody else could be dangerous: “When you walk through the streets, you must remember to take only one step at a time. Otherwise falling is inevitable. Your eyes must be constantly open . . . the rubble is a special problem. You must learn how to manage the unseen furrows, the sudden clusters of rocks, the shallow ruts” (5). This is the situation of the city, the unfriendliness the streets offer the individuals is what guides them, that awareness of their surroundings is what allows them to keep alive.*

*Anna also mentions how she has studied the skies, and has come to the conclusion that it is the same as it was back home “we have the same clouds and the same brightness, the same storms and the same calms, the same winds that carry everything along with them. If the effects are somewhat different here, that is strictly because of what happens below” (21). Anna suggests what I’ve mentioned before, it is not only the physical space that affects the condition of living for the urban subjects, but the state of the city itself the one that makes those subjects see the physical space that surrounds them as different, in this case even more menacing. Under normal living conditions, extreme weather is difficult to manage, but under this heightened state of affairs and with crazy weather phenomena, those already poor living conditions become even more difficult to manage, resulting in an added tension to what is already an impossible situation. See for example, the importance shoes have. Shoes represent being able to walk the streets, and without them, you might as well stop fighting altogether:*

*“if staying on your feet is the single most important task, then imagine the consequence of having less than adequate shoes. And nothing affects shoes more disastrously than a good soaking. This can lead to all kinds of problem: blisters, bunions, corns, ingrown toenails, sores, malformations—and when walking becomes*

*painful, you are as good as lost. One step, and then another step and then another: that is the golden rule. If you cannot bring yourself to do even that, then you might as well just lie down then and there and tell yourself to stop breathing” (24)*

*Relationships between citizens have become so much of a hardship that there is no sense of interaction, except for the ones in which a trade of some sort is in place. We see this, for example, in the process of scavenging. Not only potential scavengers need to find ways to obtain money enough to buy a permit's license, a cart, and probably some shoes (money that in most cases is obtained by robbing it, or doing something similarly illegal), but once they have those things, they need to be smart enough to snatch away as many things of value as they can find in their path, which implies in some occasions, to take those things from someone (by simply robbing them), or by collecting from dead people. Once they have their selection, they then go to the Recollection Agents who will give them some money in return. Most of the relationships we find are of a similar nature. There are also the groups whose basic premise is the idea of dying alongside someone else. Here we find the runners, who train hard only to be able to last enough in all-consuming last run, that will allow your body to finally collapse and die. The nature of this relationship is based on the fact that they have that contact with other people only because that will help them not to stray out of line, and the group pressure will be enough to keep you going. That interaction is once more something that is similar to an exchange, with death on both parts as the result. Interaction in this case equals destruction, the destruction of those individuals, and that destruction is going to reflect the state of the city around them; the city is there as a place that serves as background for its inhabitants transactions, but at the same time, it enhances the sense of loss. This particular loss regards not only how much of the individual's are losing themselves in this overwhelming city, but also the way in which any kind of relationship with others becomes more and more impossible.*

*We can also find in this society how places are defined and isolated, as Augé mentions, by the use of language alone. Such places are only conceived inside the city as 'telltale' but, for the reality of those who believe in them, it becomes a real place. In this way an idea— a mental construction— is what takes form and becomes a possible physical place, the possibility of its existence not limited by anything but for imaginer's expectations. This happens for example with*

*the idea of freedom outside the city into the countryside. It is not real in anyway for anybody inside the city, since nobody knows for sure it actually is a prospect of anything certain, but for the hopeful ones who decide to believe it is true and decide to attempt an escape, it is a reality in that moment. Nobody knows for sure what happens after, but in that moment, it becomes a real place, that hope. This happens to Anna, Sam, Victoria and Boris at the end, when they put all of their hopes in leaving Woburn house. For them, the reality of escaping the city to this unknown, hopefully better place is more real than anything else they might have lived or suffered within the city: “. . . trying to imagine what is ahead of me. I cannot imagine it. I cannot even begin to think of what will happen to us out there. Anything is possible, and that is almost the same as nothing, almost the same as being born into a world that has never existed before” (188). The same applies for Woburn House. It is the stuff of legend, and that by itself is explained by the sheer number of people who wait in line for days, only for the chance of an interview that might turn into a stay in the distant future. We can see how much of what is being said in the streets is mostly fiction, but that is what brings people in; the idea of a paradisiacal house is what they all hope for, but once they actually get in, people start realizing that it is as good as its possible within the situation of the city:*

*“By any standard, Woburn house was a haven, an idyllic refuge from the misery and squalor around it, but that not always seems to be true. Most were grateful, of course, most appreciated what was being done for them, but there were many others who had a difficult time of it . . . other residents seems almost disappointed by what they found at Woburn House. These were the ones who had waited so long to be admitted that their expectations had been exaggerated beyond reason—turning Woburn House into an earthly paradise, the object of every possible longing they have ever felt” (140)*

*These words, the telltales circulating through the city are part of what creates these non places. Alongside the hope and the desires of those who wait outside Woburn House, or inside the city hoping to get to the countryside, is the actual possibility of what they hope for not being actually real. The expectation of a boarding inside the manor could be just a rumor, or when getting to the outskirts of the city, they might not be left through. This possibility does not diminish the amount of power that that longing has, and that is what is important here. Those*

*hopes and dreams are what allow the urban subjects to continue on living, despite the (probably remote or inexistent) possibility that their future might be better than their present.*

*There are other non-places that become memory places, for example, Sam and Anna's apartment in the library. Sam was allowed to stay there because, as an international journalist, he had immunity, and this immunity allowed many more to make the library their temporal homes, including scholars, press, and religion. The library turns into a space that it is not only one of the few places in which we see with care and detail the last remnants of a past that is now gone: "It was a splendid edifice, with portraits on the walls of governors and generals, rows of Italianate columns and beautiful inlaid marble- one of the landmark buildings of the city. As with everything else, however, its best days were behind it" (94), but which allows for the development of a new ephemeral balance, that sustains itself by means of the interaction between its inhabitants. The library is now a place where the information that you can obtain from books is not the main feature of the library (even though those books are the ones that contain the history of the things that led to their current situation), but the place itself, that which allows for one of the last remnants of community we find in the novel<sup>6</sup>.*

*People are able to interact with each other in non-harmful ways we do not see outside the building, but despite all of this, we still find the same ailments from outside, the interactions through trades I mentioned before, as means of destruction for one (or both) of the parties involved. Anna's traumatic event, regarding Dujardin and the shoes soon follows the destruction of that particular space by a fire that consumed the building. We can see this sense of loss in both Anna and Sam, the library was their space, and it went out in flames, and without it they were lost again. Later on we find out that after the fire, Sam searched everywhere for Anna without being able to find her, and that the loss of their apartment almost drove him insane. The loss of that particular space which represented home for them both was gone, and we find once again that the physical spaces that surround the urban subjects reflect the failed attempts at a failed interaction.*

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<sup>6</sup> Later on, I will discuss the ways in which the remnants of a sense of community can be found in the city, where subjects are able to momentarily share their lives.

*Once the physical space is lost to the subjects, they find themselves having to look for a new space that will attempt to provide as much protection as possible, but as we have seen, the conditions of decadence within the city make the probability of the existence of those spaces very low. It is in this way in which we see the urban subject's own personal struggles and conflicts with others reflected in their environment as their exchanges mold their surroundings. This physical, geographical space, then, turns into one more catalyst into finally conforming this city's ability to thwart the urban subjects's possibilities of survival.*

## *History, Stories and Memory*

*History is not something we are able to find many traces of in the novel (one of the few instances being Anna's diary), but the history of urban subjects in particular is what we are focusing on. Especially their stories and the process of story-telling. History for these people is something we are going to see as an aspect of their lives that serves as a tool to connect with others, the characteristics that allow them (to have) something they can call their own memories. Within the city limits, and because of its limitations, it's important to understand why this is such a fundamental thing. The urban subjects are already stripped of everything else they had had or accomplished; every single achievement they might have made in the course of their lives has now stopped being their own. They do not have anything to rely upon except for the memories, the remembrance of who they are and how come they came to be living the way they do now, and all of these memories in turn resolve into something much bigger, something that connects them to everyone else who might have lived under similar conditions as theirs.*

*Stories, then, turn into something that connects them to what they once were, back then when they had a place to live their lives the way they wanted. This sense of permanence and belonging that has been broken because of the city limitations, and its implications upon the urban subjects, is what is going to be replaced by the need to remember a previous period of their lives, a need to tell their stories. This is the way in which storytelling plays an important role here. That need for connection and the knowledge that they have somebody who is listening to what they are saying is what turns this exchange into something that can be more positive or negative depending on the manner of the speech and the outcome that is expected from it.*

*First, we are going to go through what we will consider to be a type of storytelling that is favorable in the sense that it provides for the subject a sense of accomplishment. The speaker will present the listener with information from his or her past, and that process (of sharing will be beneficial for both of them. In the first place, we have Sam finding out about the power of*

stories, when he was writing for his book, and trying to collect as much information as possible from what was happening inside the city. He was interviewing non-stop, even willing to spend the last of his money if that included one more story for his research. He acknowledges the positive aspect of being able to write a story, of forcing himself to work relentlessly, and that is how he manages to survive; through seeing the world from other people's eyes and listening to their stories: "I can't stop. The book is the only thing that keeps me going. It prevents me from thinking about myself and getting sucked up into my own life. If I ever stopped working on it, I'd be lost. I don't think I'd make it through another day" (104). The sense of protection that Sam obtains from his book, however, is only temporary. Being able to acknowledge other people's stories and realities as an outsider does not compare with being able to share his own with Anna:

"We often talked about home then, summoning up as many memories as we could, bringing back the smallest, more specific images in a kind of languorous incantation . . . we were able to share the flavor of these things, to relieve the myriad incidentals of a world we had both known since childhood, and it helped to keep our spirits up, I think, helped to make us believe that some day we would be able to return to all that" (110).

Here we can see how much of this process is beneficial for the listener, in this case, Sam and Anna. They are able to draw something that is positive and optimistic out of the exchange of stories, and that optimism allows them for a renewed sense of hope. This form of belonging and being part of what their own history represents is what we can see clearly in the people being interviewed for an access to a stay at Woburn House. The manor, then, turns into a place that receives stranger's scattered and broken stories and turns them into what shapes the basis and purpose of its very existence: the ability to repair and improve as much as possible those same people's lives, even for a day at a time. These people who wait in line for a spot have different views and opinions on what they expect to find inside the mansion, different as they might be, but all those expectations turn into a pleading voice for admission into the supposedly paradisiacal house. In this case, we see the other side of the matter. It is those subjects who do the talking, and it's them who benefit from it. After Sam starts playing the Doctor, he gets the task of having to listen to their stories, not because it is an obligation, but because it is something that

*comes natural to those being interviewed, once they find themselves in a position where the other person is there to listen. People who are going to be interviewed find a safe place where they can share their stories without restrictions, and stories of their lives just come pouring out:*

*“People responded to Sam. He had a way of listening to them that made them want to talk, and words came flooding from their mouths the moment he sat down to be with them . . . it was like being a confessor, he said, and little by little he began to appreciate the good that comes when people are allowed to unburden themselves—the salutary effect of speaking words, of releasing words that tell the story of what happened to them” (168).*

*The same happens to Anna, but in her case, she is not able to put on a mask the way Sam does. She is most of the time made uncomfortable by the feeling that she has become overwhelmed by all the stories that come pouring out of these men and women, but at the same time she feels a sense of recognition. In all those stories, she can see how similar they are to each other and to her own. Every single story that these people came to share might vary in their shape, and the circumstances that led to their current situation, but underneath it all, we see how much they share the same principle; there came a moment in their lives where there was a breaking point, and they realized of how much the city life had affected their survival conditions:*

*“It was a different story every time, and yet each story was finally the same. The strings of bad luck, the miscalculations, the growing weight of circumstances. Our lives are no more than the sum of manifold contingencies, and no matter how diverse they might be in their details, they all share an essential randomness in their design: this then that, and because of that, this. One day I woke up and saw. I’d hurt my leg and so I couldn’t run fast enough. My wife said, my mother fell, my husband forgot. I heard hundreds of these stories, and there were times when I didn’t think I couldn’t stand it anymore” (144).*

*We can see how much of this process involves one person being able to separate themselves into two: one part that is listening and putting on the ‘placid, professional manner’ exterior, and the one who actually went through a terribly difficult life and whose story is similar*

to the one they are listening to. It is that ability to split into two, the one that allows Anna and Sam to acknowledge those stories, and recognize them as both similar and part of their own:

*“It’s better not having to be myself,” he once told me. ‘If I didn’t have that other person to hide behind—the one who wears the white coat and the sympathetic look on his face—I don’t think I could stand it. The stories would crush me. As it is, I have a way to listen to them now, to put them where they belong—next to my own story, next to the story of the self I no longer have to be as long as I am listening to them’” (168).*

Somehow similar to this, we find Boris Stepanovich mysterious multiple backgrounds. Every time somebody asks where does he come from, or what his story is, Boris will answer with something different. He has an uncanny ability to reinvent for himself a new past every time he tells his stories. Anna declares: *“it was often difficult to follow him in conversation, however, and as I got to know him better, I learned to expect a good deal of confusion whenever Boris Stepanovich opened his mouth” (145).* This process of creating for himself new identities serves as means to disguise what his true origins are, and at the same time it works as a way to create an identity with memories and stories that will suit his current purpose. On the one hand, this constant renewal of background turns out to work in his advantage in his line of work. His easiness with words and his readiness to flip to a different identity in a matter of seconds allows him to be such a fundamental character for the preservation of Woburn House and its sustenance. On the other hand, we see Anna’s take on the matter, and the reasoning she finds behind Boris’s motivations:

*“Boris Stepanovich never really expected you to believe what he said, but at the same time he did not treat his inventions as lies. They were part of an almost conscious plan to concoct a more pleasant world for himself—a world that could shift according to his whims, that was not subject to the same laws and bleak necessities that dragged down all the rest of us” (147).*

This ability that Boris has, according to Anna, serves a way to differentiate him from the rest, somehow finding strength where no one else does. Boris varying accounts of his life, on the other hand, turn into stories and memories of as much validity as any other, since in the moment

*they are being uttered, it doesn't matter if they are real or not. So Boris's ability, is something I find to be remarkable; he finds ways to turn himself and his life into an ever-changing canvass, one that he has to be ready to change at a moment's notice, and that it will do its best to accommodate itself with any particular situation he might be in. Boris's accounts for reality serve as a way to illustrate the different facets of stories, stories he manages to convey in such a fructiferous manner that it does not depend on the truthfulness behind his narrations, but on the willingness of the listener to accept them as truth.*

*On a way that is contrary to these exchanges that represent something positive for the listener and the speaker, we find the language of ghosts. It is not something that creates a bond between people or a means of finding out that your story is in fact just a part of a larger one (with every different piece being not really different at all), but an exchange that is there to remember you of what it felt like to be on the past, where you could live a certain way, without wanting to understand that your actual reality is not going to change. We find this, as Anna first accounts for the different realities within the city, and how urban subjects found different ways to cope with what they were living:*

*"All this belongs to the language of ghosts. There are many other possible kinds of talks in this language. Most of them begin when one person says to another: I wish. What they wish for might be anything at all, as long as it's something that cannot happen . . . you get the idea. Absurd and infantile things, with no meaning and no reality" (10).*

*As Anna claims, it is not a positive view of sharing each other's memories, it is just a way of fantasizing about what is now gone. This language of ghosts is something Anna refuses to succumb to,*

*"I don't want to be like the others. I see what their imaginings do to them, and I will not let that happen to me. He ghost people always die in their sleep . . . it is probably a happy death however. I am willing to grant them that. At times I have almost envied them. But finally, I cannot let myself go. I will not allow it. I am going to hold on for as long as I can, even if it kills me" (11)*

*Language of ghosts is something that applies to a person's secret imaginings and dreams, sometimes even things they don't allow themselves to say aloud because of what it might mean. Boris so clearly predicts the future of what Woburn House will turn into, that is clear that his ability to morph his stories and backgrounds has given him an accurate sense of what to expect from the world:*

*"We all speak our own language of ghosts, I'm afraid. I've read the handwriting on the wall, and none of it encourages me. The Woburn house funds will run out. I have additional resources in this apartment, of course . . . but these too will be quickly exhausted. Unless we begin to look ahead, there won't be much future for any of us"* (155).

*It is not only the subjects in themselves the ones that carry story. As a whole, people living in the city find it challenging to keep up with changes, and the constant decay of what surrounds them. This is the way in which things started to get lost, and this implies not only the inability of the urban subjects to do something about it, but also the capacity the city has to fold in on itself more and more, until nothing is left. Anna mentions that things in the city are lost all the time, and there's no going back from there. There is not even the possibility to bring them back: "Once a thing is gone, that is the end of it" (2). This absoluteness applies not only to physical things that take part in the city's structure, such as building, houses, even streets, but abstract things as well, words and meaning and past, are irreparably lost. Without them, the city and its inhabitants are faced with the impossibility to make any kind of record, or keeping tabs on what is currently going on. It is almost as if the city itself creates a barrier that affects every single one of his inhabitants; they are put upon a situation that is uncontrollable, from which there is no way out of, no ways of escaping, and it doesn't provide anything for the sustenance of its people.*

*At this point we can ascertain surely how many features of a postmodern view on the city are present here; the slow consolidation of the destruction and disintegration of the previous paradigm. Things that were given for granted like notions of time and ownership are now gone. Things themselves are lost to those who don't find use for them anymore, and even if they do, they are lost all the same when there is nobody else you can share them with. Words disappear,*

*meaning disappear out of those words, and in time, the things themselves disappear. In this city there is no way people can remember enough to create a common history. As we said before, stories in particular (the ones that individuals carry with them as means of survival) are the only things left, with the lingering thought of that which came before was much happier and easier way of living life. These stories when put together barely scrape the surface of what actually goes on within in the city, something Sam found out while carrying on with his interviews for the book: "I pay people to come here and talk to me. So much money per interview, depending on how long it takes . . . I've done hundreds of them, one story after another. I can't think if any other way to go about it. The story is so big, you understand, it's impossible for any one person to tell it" (102).*

*It is also important to mention the fact that these urban subjects when put under terribly sad and challenging circumstances, are forced to do their best to try and keep themselves on top of their situation, and try to stay alive any means possible. What they don't understand in the moment is the limitlessness of how much they forget who they are and who they once were, and they are able to look but not really see the situations in front of their eyes:*

*"For the thing before your eyes is not something you can very easily separate from yourself. That is what I mean by being wounded: you cannot merely see, for each thing somehow belongs to you, is part of the story unfolding inside you. It would be good, I suppose, to make yourself so hard that nothing could affect you anymore. But then you would be alone, so totally cut off from everyone else that life would become impossible. There are those who manage to do this here, who find the strength to turn themselves into monsters, but you would be surprised to know how few they are" (20).*

*It is impossible for most of the people, then, to truly separate themselves from what surrounds them, they still feel the (unconscious) need to relate to others by means of their stories, and what other people's stories might mean for each and every single person in the city. This is what Sam remarks, there are just too many aspects to the story and despite his best intentions and expectations, there is no way in which it will be possible to record it all. It is, at the end of the day, interminable.*

## *Community, exchanges and agents*

*Although it is clear that a city like this does not allow for a true sense of community because the metropolis, its society and what it represents has faded down so much, it is still possible to find the last remnants of agents working together. As Bauman mentions:*

*“a unity which is an outcome, not an a priori given condition, a shared life, a unity put together through negotiation and reconciliation, not the denial, stifling or smothering out of differences. . . This is the only formula of togetherness which the conditions of liquid modernity render compatible, plausible and realistic . . . identities cannot but look fragile, temporary and ‘until further notice’, and devoid of all defenses except the skills and determination of the agents to hold them tight and protect them from erosion” (178).*

*It is worth mentioning that community is not something that is possible under the circumstances of the city in its current state, and the city itself forces more and more its inhabitants to situations in which they need to fend for themselves against others, thus creating a animosity against any kind of gathering of people just for the sake of it. This is one of the elements that actually propels forward the derailment of the disintegration in the city; people are been driven apart from each other, and some of the gatherings result, in fact, in the destruction of those who try to unify against it<sup>7</sup>. But we still manage to find a few instances of this ‘outcome’ that result in a living condition that works in favor of the agents, an implausible gathering that resolves into a situation and an exchange that is rewarding for the parties involved.*

*In the beginning of the novel we find Anna new to the city without an actual useful knowledge of how life inside it is really like. She had a naïve hope of finding her brother William and getting out again. Little did she know at that moment, that the task was going to be fruitless,*

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<sup>7</sup> More to come on this later, when analyzing the ways in which different groups gather with the single purpose of dying.

*and that she was going to be left inside the city without chances of ever getting out, and living in an environment that was as brutally different and corrupt from the one she knew, as it was possible to be. Once she realized she had no means of leaving, she quickly acquired whatever skills she needed in order to keep herself alive, but all of this time, she did it by herself. She understood at once that there was no room for trusting anybody within the city, there was absolutely no chance of believing somebody would have your back without wanting to double cross you. All of this insecurity and mistrustfulness came to an end once she found Isabel.*

*Isabel took her in, after Anna saved her from being trampled to death by a group of Runners, and since that moment, they established a relationship that was based on trust and respect. Anna relished in the way being able to look after somebody else apart from her own made her feel; she no longer had to work in order to keep herself alive, but she now had Isabel to share the burden with:*

*“Now I had become a drudge, the sole support of two people y would never even have met in my own life . . . it was all so strange, so improbable. But the fact was that Isabel had saved my life just as surely as I had saved hers, and it never occurred to me not to do what I could. From being a little waif they dragged in off the street, I became the exact measure that stood between them and total ruin. Without me they would not have lasted ten days. I don’t mean to boast about what I did, but for the first time in my life there were people who depended on me, and I did not let them down” (58)*

*Something similar to this happened when Anna found Sam. She knew once she met him, that there was no way they would both survive by themselves during the winter, Anna did not have shelter, and Sam did not have money, so she proposed to him the idea of living together. It wasn’t long after that that they fell in love with the other, and what once was a situation forced upon them by circumstance, was now something that they preferred over everything else, and this exchange now turns them both into agents; they are both willing to establish those ties with each other:*

*“Those were the best days for me. Not just here, you understand, but anywhere---the best days of my life. It’s odd that I could have been so happy during that awful time, but living with Sam made all the difference. Outwardly, things did*

*not change much. The same struggles still existed, the same problems still had to be confronted every day, but now I had been given the possibility of hope, and I began to believe that sooner or later our problems were going to end” (107).*

*In terms of exchanges, there seems to be a trait that runs inherently within all types of relationships when there is a purpose and a wanting to commune with someone else. We find this sense of communion being present clearly in the conversations about previous lives that for example Anna establishes with Isabel, Sam or Victoria. We already saw how powerful the need to tell your own story is, and that act of willingly communicate with other human being reflects the way we are hardwired to act as agents in telling particulars to people that you will know will mean getting closer to them, because it will signify that you connect with them. In these three cases, we see how this bonding comes from a gentle and selfless state of mind, but in others, there is no selflessness behind the act, and this contact turns to be a process that exists with a goal in mind. This type of communication is for example the ones we can see in the interviews. People who come to apply for a stay at Woburn House tell their stories in a manner which makes them almost desperate; they are hoping their stories will be enough to guarantee a spot in. Also, Boris’s stories when he is trying to find a resurrection agent to buy the things from the mansion require only his cunning on his side, and his willingness to believe them true.*

*Inside Woburn House, everyone works together so that they can keep the house afloat. Everyone, even Frick and Willie would help out Victoria in trying to keep the house as closely as it was when the old Doctor ruled it. It is this willingness for the parts of the inhabitants of the mansion that allows them the calmness of mind that the house provides them, even when things started to go wrong. They already had a relationship together, with every integrant as important as the rest. We see this clearly once Frick dies, and Willie goes out of control, because of his actions, Woburn House stopped being a place where people could come and get a little bit better, a place that would allow them survival and assistance. Everybody here, then, who is willing to participate and commune with others becomes an agent, and these agents are the responsible for the preservation of the others, and their environment, the manor itself and what it represents.*

*Other types of relationships we find in the city are for example, the ways in which different groups organize themselves under the same belief. Most of these groups' goal is to find ways to die. There are the Runners, who force themselves to train hard enough to be able to give a last all-consuming race that will kill you, the assassination Clubs, who will put a hit on your head, the Leapers, who take their lives by jumping off buildings and creating a spectacle by doing so, and the ghost people, who will not admit or acknowledge to their current situation and they will focus on the past and how much everything that came before was superior to what things are like now. Almost all of these groups base themselves on the premise that it will be easier to die if you have others with you immediately before or during your actual death. The Runners, for example will run in packs,*

*“most of the time they travel in groups: six, ten, even twenty of them charging down the street together, never stopping for anything in their path, running and running until they drops from exhaustion. The point is to die as quickly as possible . . . the Runners say that no one would have the courage to do this on his own. By running together, each member of the group is swept along by the others, encouraged by the screams, whipped to a frenzy of self-punishing endurance” (12).*

*The Leapers, on the other hand, are partly individual endeavors. They will jump off by themselves, but people will crowd around them to cheer them on:*

*“More common are the solitary deaths. But these, too, have been transformed into a kind of public ritual. People climb to the highest places for no other reason than to jump. The Last Leap, it is called, and I admit there is something stirring about watching one, something that seems to open a whole new world of freedom inside you . . . you would be amazed at the enthusiasm of the crowds: to hear their frantic cheering, to see their excitement. It is as if the violence and beauty of the spectacle had wrenched them from themselves, had made them forget the paltriness of their own lives” (13)*

*There are other deaths like this ones, but they keep with the trend of forcing yourself to share the last moments of your life with others, but again this contact and approach does not serve as means of obtaining insight into the other person but they are a one way communication,*

*the leaper and his or her action presents the viewer with a deeper meaning of what the action actually entails, the fruitlessness of life under a terrible condition, and a quick getaway. So, for the viewer this sort of action will not reflect anything deeper than that realization, there is no true sense of connection with the one about to die; no more than a Runner might have with another Runner.*

*In relation the lost things, community, as I've mentioned before, is one of the last ones to go; we see how despite unconscious efforts to reunite with a sense of community and togetherness, it is mostly pointless, every single relationship Anna develops with someone else is going to be doomed, particularly the ones that are shaped by the form of their environment, like Sam and her apartment, Isabel and Ferdinand's house, and Woburn House. The last one we witness it is not shaped by the environment and the enclosure of a house anymore, but just the people and their relationships: Sam and Anna, Victoria and Boris, after they had tried everything to save Woburn House, but who finally realized that that there was nothing else for it, the mansion did not hold anything that would allow them survival anymore.*

## *Conclusions*

*There is no point to saying again how much of the city in the novel is a place of destruction, where a true sense of connection between people is nearly impossible; the instances analyzed here are the specific ones where this was not the case. The city as a whole represents much more; is a space which doesn't allow for anything to grow, be it relationships or nature, and that disability is what makes the city decay.*

*During the course of this study I discovered, first of all, that the things that were apparent at first sight were not much so when looked at from up close. Assumptions that I might have made, or early conclusions that I might have drawn from the novel weren't really in accordance to what I was expecting to obtain from the reading of *In the Country of Last Things*. At first sight, Paul Auster's novel seems like a narration where you expect the characters to behave in some way, or you expect the situations to develop accordingly, but once you get further into the novel, you start noticing how much of that expectation is not carried through by the characters in themselves, but by the pressure the background forces upon them. Is this the way in which Anna sees herself surrounded and trapped within the walls of the city, when she had hoped to be in and out once she found her brother. Or the way in which people see themselves forced out of their own houses when somebody else decides that is their place now. The uncertainty and precariousness of the world that surrounds them encompasses the entire novel, and the change we see in Anna's mental state.*

*On second place, I noticed how many of those assumptions I made regarding what to expect from the novel regarding the choosing of topics to approach the narration (such as space and physical places, memory, and community), fell into place ones more than others; the ideas of space and non-places by Lefebvre and Augé, respectively, are, in my opinion, the ones that turned out to be more satisfying than the rest. It was interesting for me to see how much of the physical space actually determines relationships, and it was clear once I've seen it through the eyes of the novel, that those relationships were the basis and the core of the novel itself.*

*It seems to me that as much as one can see into the novel (and once again we go back to Iser and his Reader Response Theory) there is much more left to uncover. It is appealing, and it was for me at the beginning of this project, when I hadn't decided yet in which direction I wanted to steer the analysis to, to focus in the sole aspect of power, and power relations within the city. Comparisons to 1984, or a Brave New World jump up at you, because of the similarities of what we uncover behind the shiny exterior; underneath all the power plays, and the overall quality of the lifestyle people might have, we find the slums and the under covered, and the outskirts, and the unknown, the simply different. So, if one were to analyze the novel from a political point, one would find out much more about the secrets just lying behind the rest of the more superficial and pertinent (to us) aspect. This is why I believe what is most remarkable about Paul Auster's novel is the way in which we don't find that shiny wrapper, we approach the city as it is, a place of degradation and suffering, where the things we uncover are the remaining of the last efforts to knit together a sense of belonging. And this is how I approached it from the side of the relations more than the power of extraneous force.*

*It would be ideal to find a way to conjoin those two together and develop a much more comprehensive understanding of the real limitations urban subjects have in a city like this. It would be interesting to see how much of a personal, subjective aspect can be squeezed out of more drastic types of character, such as the Leapers, or the Runners, even the differentiating characteristics of Scavengers versus Treasure Hunters?. Also, on the other side of the scale, it would be useful to dig deeper into the hints Paul Auster lays around regarding the governmental aspect of the city, how they hear the explosions and demolitions, but nobody as actually seen one, for example. Until what extent do this stops being some telltale fanciful inventions and turn into actual manipulative strategies?*

*In general, therefore, it seems that this project accomplished what it set out to do; to determine the ways in which the city in the novel limits the way in which the characters face each other. And the limitations its space presents. There are a number of matters that are left untouched, however. The way in which the urban subjects relate to each other is only a part of what goes on in the city, and the exterior power exerts a tremendous force, as I said before.*

*Paul Auster's narrative, also, allows us the possibility and liberty to interpret as we find convenient, and this is an inflection point for interpretation. The manner in which I approached this subject is from a postmodern perspective, and perhaps, having already established the basic cannons for the comparison, and the subsequent additions that might have cropped up, the nature of the novel, and its decaying society might present itself for more study leaving aside the more conflicting side to community, since its already much of a contradiction and an impossibility.*

*This research was of course, set into a time frame, and with certain limitations of space and length, but it became obvious during its execution that there is so much more that can be said, and many more fields from which to approach the novel. First, for example, regarding Memory and collective memory, we can see how we can approach the study of a book like Paul Auster's from areas such as psychology or social studies. Or, how we can see the relationships undercover in the library from a religious point of view, and the exchanges that go on within the city from a political standpoint.*

*Despite the fact that I understand that a type of research like this one should have as its central focus an approach from a literary perspective, it's important, I believe, to be able to gather this information alongside other perspectives, as I mentioned before sociology or psychology, since those two reflect clearly two of the major aspects of interaction and life within the city.*

*Future research on this subject then, should concentrate on unifying different ideologies and standpoints, so as to be able to create a comprehensive understanding of the complexity a work like *In the Country of Last Things* presents. This complexity does not come from the difficulty of the text itself, but from the many layers under which we find the central story. We have, of course, the journey of a young girl into an unknown country in the hopes of finding her brother. This search then turns into an adventure that gives light to problems that the city presents; not only poverty and social insecurity, but the deeper understanding that this country of lasts things is coming to an end, and that it is in this way in which the urban people cannot connect with each other, or find a true sense of purpose ion their lives.*

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