

The Construction of Community Under the Subprime Crisis in *Sunset Park*

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In *Sunset Park*, the contemporary American writer Paul Auster reveals the political, economic and social problems that have surfaced in America in the wake of the 9/11 incident. Focusing on the image of people on the edge of the city, the author describes how they rebuild their lives after illegally living in an abandoned apartment in Sunset Park, using the art and the community as a spiritual refuge to seek comfort and heal wounds, reconstruct self-identity, and fight against the unfair society. This article analyzes the characteristics of the community in the novel *Sunset Park*, to interpret its functions, and to show the healing power of a caring community.

Keywords: *Sunset Park*, community, subprime crisis, trauma

Introduction

Published in 2010, *Sunset Park* by Paul Auster presents the gloomy pictures of broken homes and fractured lives affected by economic crisis. This story is closer to the reality of those who were suffering one of the worst moments in the history of the United States (Quintero, 2021, p. 175). The novel is set against the backdrop of subprime mortgage crisis which the United States is facing after the 9/11 incident that citizens from different walks of life are troubled by poverty. The subprime mortgage crisis occurred from 2007 to 2010 after the collapse of the U.S. housing market. When the housing bubble burst, many borrowers were unable to pay back their loans. The dramatic increase in foreclosures caused many financial institutions to collapse.

In *Sunset Park*, Auster described four typical people's story at a time when America is suffering the financial crisis, which made many members of the working class homeless. The four characters in the novel, Miles, Bing, Ellen and Alice, are suffering from the deteriorating living conditions under the influence of the economic turmoil in New York. Focusing on portraying these marginalized people who are connected by an abandoned house in Sunset Park, the novel presents us the process of urban demolition and the construction of a community consisting of people who are from different regions, ages, or social status. They still have the same desire or emotional need, which gives their occupation of Sunset Park a communal taste. The interpretation of *Sunset Park* from the perspective of the community under the subprime crisis will help us to have a deeper understanding of the social and economical turmoil in post-9/11 America, and realize the functions of community.

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The Nomadic Features of the Community

The characters in *Sunset Park* can be regarded as the literary representatives of subjects for Deleuze's concept of nomadism. The nomadic features of the community in *Sunset Park* are featured by individuals' continuous journey in their living, strong discontent with and an attack to state apparatus and the desire to experience deterritorialization.

The Continuous Change of Living Places

Nomadism, in the most general sense, can be considered as a spatial movement and transfer from one geographical, social or political place to another. And when an individual feels that his desires cannot be made real in the environment where he already dwells, he wants to leave that area and move somewhere new. At this point, the idea of nomadism appears (Özbay, 2020, p. 253).

The lives of Auster's characters are replete with successive journeys, which can be seen in this novel, as is typically reflected in the protagonist Miles. During the past seven years, Miles never settled at any definite place, always moving just as a nomad does: "When the mobility starts in a place, there is always emptiness, because nomads never stay in somewhere permanently" (Özbay, 2020, p. 259).

Miles belongs to a family which is described as a reconstructed family. "His life is a slow-motion catastrophe, an extended voyage into the soft squalor of menial work and anonymous apathy" (Sayeau, 2010, p. 50). There are some tender and invisible fault lines among his family members, and these fissures are constantly reminding them that they are a patched-together entity, incomplete and artificial. The worst thing in this reconstructed family is that Miles accidentally caused the death of his step-brother Bobby. Thus those fault lines increasingly grow inside Miles, affecting him and starting a break-up in his personality. One night, Miles overheard a talk between his father and step-mother. The effect is like this: "They were chopping him into pieces, dismembering him with the calm and efficient strokes of pathologists conducting a postmortem, talking about him as if they thought he was already dead" (Auster, 2010, p. 25). Miles felt so heart-broken that he resolved to escape from this family and withdraw to his own inner world. At first, Miles left New York for Florida, and lived with a teenage girl Pilar. And failing to tolerate the pressure from Angela and society about his relationship with Pilar, he decided to leave Florida and come back until Pilar turns 18 years old. Then he went back to New York to his friend Bing's house.

For Deleuze, during this continuous change of living place, individuals can learn new features or acquire unusual experience about their inner world. The person can liberate their desire as they migrate from those striated spaces created by repressive authority, to smoother spaces. "These nomadic elements are saturated with implication as each wounded, questing character's story illuminate our tragic flaws and profound need for connection, coherence and beauty" (Seaman, 2010, p. 6).

Discontent with and Attack Against State Apparatus

As the first man who dared to move into Sunset Park, the character Bing is described in the novel as such: "He is the warrior of outrage, the champion of discontent, the militant debunker of contemporary life who dreams of forging a new reality from the ruins of a failed world. Unlike most contrarians of his ilk, he does not believe in political action" (Auster, 2010, p. 55). His stance to the world is rather independent. Due to his own view on life, he has satisfied himself with the least necessities of survival. In a Thoreauvian manner, he is also against technology and argues against Capitalism (Haj'jari & Hajjari, 2019, p. 3). He's fond of collecting "old

commodities” (Maleki & Moradi, 2018, p. 407) and he lives his life according to his own rules and borders. It’s clear that Bing’s rejection to any political party of movement can be seen as the rejection of a settled society. He makes decisions only for himself not for others, which is in accord with nomadism which claims that society shall reduce the freedom of individuals.

Bing’s occupation can be seen as a nomad’s action with his own territorial principle. Moreover, when this kind of nomadic life starts, the conflict between government and individuals begins, so sprouts his anti-violent stance against the limits and borders that governments draw in his life. He has made many small decisions like moving out to live with his close friends, and these are indicators that Bing intends to adhere to the fundamental principle of his life—the discontent to the alienated society. And these are considered as an attack to state apparatus and institutions as well.

The Desire to Experience Deterritorialization

The concept of deterritorialization is one of Deleuze’s core political philosophy, which has its origin in Lacan’s theory. “Lacan depicts territorialization as the maturation of children’s erogenous zones, and when the subject is damaged by territorialization, the deterritorialization aims to protect him from being injured” (Kang, 2016, p. 51). It leads the subject to a new unknown world where there is a chasm from the past, which the subject will forget about, in order to set the desire free. This fleeing can be done either physically or spiritually.

Ellen works as a real estate agent and she is interested in painting. In the past, Ellen sleeps with one of her students who is only sixteen years old, and then she gets pregnant, having an abortion and trying to commit suicide. Thus her psychological world is ruined. Ellen knows that she should have taken anti-depressant pills, but she wouldn’t and instead she regards moving to the abandoned house as a kind of solution—even if it is temporary—for her problems in her inner world. The decision to move excites her and she thinks that moving away from her home to a place where she lives alone can help her cope with the trauma she’s in.

Like all the other residents of the house, Ellen knows very well that she cannot live there for a long period. This situation is also valid in nomadic life because there is no permanent house in nomadic life. “In fact, the sense of deterritorialization—to be free from certain state” (Kang, 2016, p. 50)—is what Ellen really wants to experience. She holds that her psychological problems can only be solved with deterritorialization. When Ellen had set her desires free for the first time sleeping with that boy, the result was devastating for her, and now she listens to her desires and disobeys the rules again, but the aim is to delete the traces of that former mistake.

Community Helping to Treat the Individual Trauma

The community promoted the individuals to treat the trauma under the pressure of mental and material pain when basic survival became the biggest problem.

For Miles, the picture of Bobby’s death is not the memory that he can’t face most, instead the sound of the car coming is the real source of trauma. As is mentioned in the novel, the other voices about Bobby’s death gradually disappeared from Miles’ memory, leaving only the voices that were directly related to the trauma—abusing and quarrelling. He could not believe that he might be the real murderer of his brother. Therefore, in his behavior, he escaped from the original environment. In his memory, he also amplified the voice of the quarrel to avoid the real eruption of the trauma.

At the same time, Ellen’s trauma was having sex with a teenage boy which made her fail to live up to the trust of the boy’s parents, violating secular ethics and, even worse, she became pregnant. Ellen hoped to draw

pictures for the real human body to change the soulless state of her painting. In her eyes, it was supposed to be a trivial matter to invite Alice to be a model, so she felt a strong sense of rejection while being refused. Meanwhile Bing has also been struggling from his secret homosexual love for Miles. Therefore, there is the alliance between Ellen and Bing, with Bing as the mannequin of her painting, which helped Ellen go out of the dilemma to some extent, and they could share loneliness and frustration to each other, and understand the silence caused by the trauma. Ellen also gave Bing suggestions and pointed out the right direction about the forbidden love.

Through the healing process in these two characters, the author made the trauma become not only the reason for victims' self-pity, but also the basis for communication between each other, helping them face their own pain, and promoting the healing of their own wounds.

Community Helping Individual Release Emotions

“Although the novel *Sunset Park* offers disjointed narratives as part of an attempt to deny unification and coherence, it also conveys a longing for connection” (Torkamaneh & Maleki, 2020, p. 1) and a vent to release emotion by constructing a community.

The character Alice was depicted as observant, silent, desperate and always unhappy, but she found a vent to release her emotion during the process when she integrated into the constructed community. Alice moved to Sunset Park mainly because of her economic problems.

When Alice was concentrating on her doctorate, the relationship between her and her boyfriend Jake began to wane at the same time. Jake was an unsuccessful but egotistical writer who taught at La Guardia Community College. Alice was deeply attracted by this omniscient character two years ago since she met him: “there was a gentleness in him that she admired, a charming, ironical approach to the world that comforted her and made her feel they were well matched” (Auster, 2010, p. 68). However the irony of this charming man she admired before has now turned into cynicism and full of untold anger. His continual denigration about his students as “poor, working-class immigrants, attending school while holding down jobs” (Auster, 2010, p. 68) made Alice desperately want to move away from this arrogant man and his mocking criticism—“a frustrated man, a man who is rapidly becoming a failure in his own eye” (Auster, 2010, p. 68), since Alice thought she was one of the victims of his mocking. Therefore, Alice found herself in dire emotional trouble.

Things began to change during the time when she lived in this apartment. Alice started to look forward to preparing dinner with Miles and she was taking pleasure in being around him, touching and talking to this very interesting gentleman. And a sense of unexpected happiness welled up in her heart in every fourth night when Jake would not come by. She felt saved and relieved and she found a vent rather than being tortured by her partner's whims or worrying about her career and her vague future. This emotional connection to Miles leads Alice to “find a new string attached to life, a whisper of hope to make her walk a new path with him” (Sasani & Arjmandi, 2018, p. 9). With Miles's presence, Alice found her pent-up emotions released, “since there is a new love, a new object of desire to cling to in order to subdue the harshness of worry about the unsure future” (Sasani & Arjmandi, 2018, p. 10).

Conclusions

Paul Auster offers the pictures in post-9/11 America of common people's mental sufferings, loss of identity, the disintegration of the family and financial problems in America, and their struggles to overcome all

these troubles and their resistance. Through the analysis, we can see that the community has significant healing power in the following aspects: encouraging vulnerable individuals to face their guilt-haunting past, gathering strength to fight against the unfair society and helping four traumatized victims find an emotional release and treat their trauma. The construction of community not only had great significance in the United States in a certain period, but for all the people in the world today. Nowadays, the globe is in turmoil with sluggish economy, so the situation is calling us to strengthen our faith, and also for mutual help and integrating into the community.

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