Blanks into Text and Visuality: Heterotopic Coping Mechanisms in Paul Auster's Bloodbath Nation

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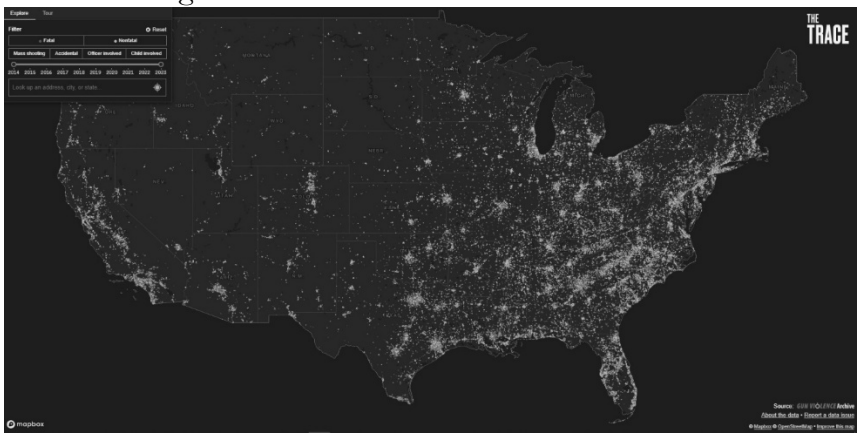
In February, 2024, a deadly shooting erupted at the end of Chief's Super Bowl victory parade in Kansas City, Missouri. One person died and twenty-two were injured including eleven children by the gunfire. Three juvenile suspects were detained. The police later confirmed that the violence is thought to have stemmed from personal dispute. Although 800 law enforcement officers were on duty during the celebration, violence was bound to unfold as the three juveniles in conflict with law and each other were armed to the teeth.

In 2021, Paul Auster, an author oftentimes labelled by critics as a 'trauma writer' (Gibbs 210) took it upon himself to write a non-fiction book against the incessant, unstoppable crisis of gun violence in the USA. The frequency of shootouts that every year results in a death toll soaring up to 40,000 on average is illustrated by an atlas below displaying the following caption: "Ten years. 370,000 shootings."

Figure 1 "An Atlas of American Vilolence."



Source: Gunviolence Archive

In *Bloodbath Nation* (2021) Auster, who "produces a challenging narrative structure through which the characters' numerous experiences of trauma are explored" (Gibbs 2014, 210), sets out to negotiate trauma residing in the aftermath of mass massacres. However, the task at hand is questionable and unsettling as is always the case in the Austerean *oeuvre*. The absence and loss in trauma can only be approximated as compulsive returns to mere symptoms and traces that delimit a domain exhausted and emptied out by intrusive violence and chaotic lacunae. Unexplainable homicide committed in insensible and unremitting acts of terror is beyond any possibility to be narrated.

Paul Auster's work has always been, at least in part, in the center of literary attention for the very reason that his prose seems but a by-product of an ever-failing effort to tell stories never-to-be-told. One of his critics when interpreting the author's first novel insists that it is imperative to analyze his "novels in terms of problematic representation, omission and impersonation conveying a heightened state of loss" (Besbes 2017, 53). Different texts by Auster construe versatile strategies with the same objective to create forms that have the capacity to inversely reach the traumatic core. Alan Gibbs in his critical volume *Contemporary American Trauma* (2014) gives a detailed interpretation of Auster's *Man in the Dark* (2008) as a "neo-naturalist form" (214) and includes *The Invention of Solitude* (1982) and *Invisible* (2009) by the American author as narratives using "techniques such as procrastination, distraction and displaced subjectivity in order to avoid the subject of trauma" (Gibbs 2014, 202). Since Paul Auster's 2021 narrative is written as a nonfiction piece, it takes a different approach with regard to its poetics, which fact is highly emphasized in the full title of the book: "Paul Auster: *Bloodbath Nation* – *Photographs by Spencer Ostrander*." The main body of text in this work is constantly disrupted by sequences of black and white photographs that divide, separate and isolate the ensuing sections of the volume. These textual interludes, detours or digressions, as the narrative itself accentuates, are failing attempts to put sense to the nation as a whole, to explain the unexplainable. In Auster's words,

> The logical next step would be for me to start talking about the growth of the NRA, the Second Amendment, the gun-control movement, and the various positions advanced by partisans on both sides of the issue, but all those arguments and counter-arguments are numbingly familiar to us by now (Auster 2021, 44).

"Numbingly familiar," indeed, yet, despite the evidence, it is exactly these useless arguments that the text compulsively reiterates and repeats. For lack of any chance to get to the crux of the matter, Auster touches upon the most significant aspects of transgenerational curses from colonial skirmishes through the extermination of indigenous peoples to reconstruction era lynching. *Bloodbath Nation* is a futile effort to make sense of the insensible act of mass murders by echoing surrogate narratives of historical, cultural, legislative, ethical, social, existential, and political explication of possible causes for which *Bloodbath Nation* was heavily criticized by some reviewers. The book starts with the obvious by stating the facts and the narrator informs the reader, for instance, that statistics show that "[t]here are 393 million guns currently owned by residents of the United States" (Auster 2021, 39). After such an overture, differing domains offer themselves as points of departure for approximating the inert core of the paradox, especially that of the country's history, as seen by Auster, who writes that

> [T]his is a country that was born in violence but also born with a past, one hundred and eighty years of prehistory that were lived in a state of continual war with the inhabitants of the land we appropriated and continual acts of oppression against our enslaved minority. (127)

alongside the existence of the Second Amendment, which includes that "nowhere in the history of the English language has the phrase 'bear arms' ever carried a meaning that does not refer to the military" (55-57) and a culture as such, where

> Cars and guns are the twin pillars of our deepest national mythology . . . push the gas pedal to the floor, and suddenly you are racing along at one hundred miles an hour; curl your fingers around the trigger of your Glock or AR-15, and you own the world. (42)

Furthermore,

> [T]he truth was that legendary towns such as Dodge City, Tombstone, and Deadwood, the supposed hot spots and capitals of one-on-one armed showdowns . . . were largely devoid of the non-stop violence presented in classic Westerns. (59-60)

In terms of legislation, Auster emphasizes that

> [T]he proliferation of the tommy gun was a direct result of the rise of criminal gangs and gangsterism in the 1920s, and the principal reason for that rise was another amendment to the Constitution, the eighteenth, which outlawed the sale of intoxicating liquors and ushered in the upside-down, topsy turvy years of Prohibition. (61)

Moreover, in terms of ethical considerations, the American writer claims that "we aren't designed to take the life of another person. It damages us. It changes us" (104). The social aspect is also seen critically, as the following:

These grisly spectacles have occurred often enough in the past two decades to qualify as a new form of American ritual: bloodshed and grief transformed into a series of ghoulish entertainments that time and again plant us in front of our television sets . . . Meanwhile, the networks boost their ratings and increase their profits by reversing the old huckster's jingle, "more bang for your buck," into "more bucks from the bang." (80)

In line with the previous ideas, Austers' existential argument is that

> What we don't understand is the arbitrariness of random killing, and each time another mass shooting claims national attention, all of us begin to feel more vulnerable, for if that old person or that young person or that small child can be shot and killed for no reason, why couldn't it happen to my child or to me? (81)

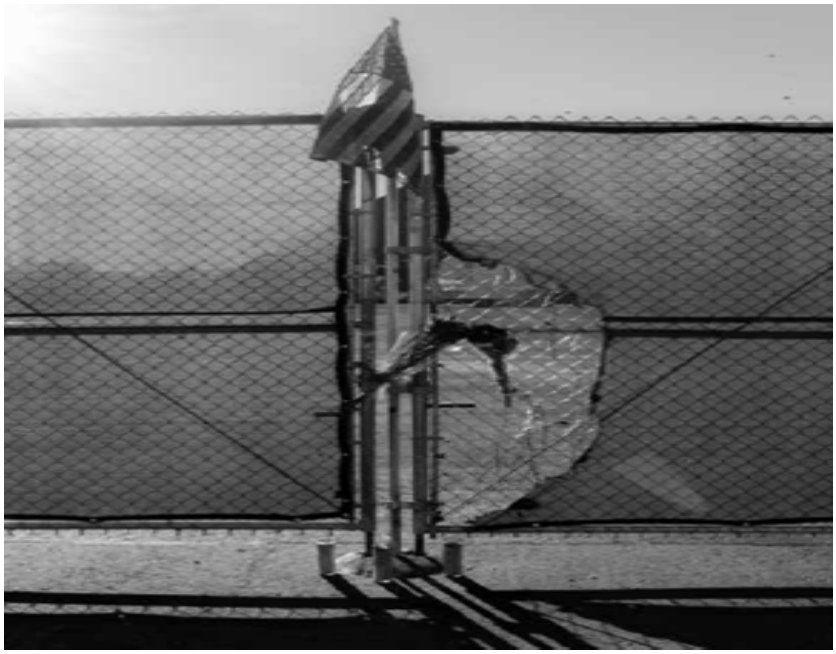
As political framing, Auster maps transformations of culture by observing that

> What happened over that next decade was the transformation of the NRA into one of the most powerful lobbying groups in the country . . . The irony is that a movement which is predominantly white, rural, and conservative should have come into being because it embraced the gun philosophy of a group which was black, urban, and radical: the foundational belief that guns are primarily an instrument of self-defense and, to quote Chairman Mao (as the Panthers did), that 'political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.' (126)

Gary Younge, one of Auster's critics, comments on the above-mentioned angles and approximations with the following sentences on Auster, who

> takes us on a journey that passes by the second amendment, slavery, Native American genocide, Vietnam, the Black Panthers, Black Lives Matter, Donald Trump, neoliberal globalisation and much more. It's a lot of ground to cover in such a small book: arguably too much. Auster, one of the finest storytellers in the English language, makes for an informed and enlightened companion as he meanders through the subject. But his failure to signal a destination, let alone arrive at one, leaves the reader lost and feeling as hopeless as when they started. (Younge 2023)

Therefore, the question remains whether the book completely fails to address the issue at hand. In part, it does, even if it doesn't. The work is a compound artifact, a binary structure erected upon textual and visual archives, gathering and repeating arguments and counter-arguments, which are "numbingly familiar" to the nation while creating a subtext that questions the identity of the very nation. The founding fathers needed rifles because of grievances caused by the oppressors from the motherland, a forming nation needed arms to maintain an economic system built on first indentured than chattel slavery, the new, contemporary nation needs weapons to fend for itself against its own minorities, up to a point when the vicious cycle of gun violence turns firearms into a means to itself, the new Eden, into a space of recurrent senseless mass murders. The 'bookends' of this work are represented by two photographs of the star spangled banner. The cover features a twisted flag while the last photo on the penultimate page of the book gives a dramatic depiction of a torn national banner. Yet, there is no story to be told between these two poles. The barrel of the gun turns against the weapon wilder as the domain of national identity becomes obliterated by a space of repetition.



(Auster 2021, 147)

Yi-fu Tuan in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (2001) creates a distinction between the two terms when insisting that unmarked space gains

meaning and definition by being observed in experiential perception. In his theory, it is the areas of interest and familiar sites that create places. And such is that of the homeland.

> A homeland has its landmarks, which may be features of high visibility and public significance, such as monuments, shrines, a hallowed battlefield or cemetery. These visible signs serve to enhance a people's sense of identity; they encourage awareness of and loyalty to place" (Tuan 2001, 159).

Yi-fu's "perspective of experience" is a concept that is, in essence, phenomenological in nature inasmuch as it places the focus on the observer from whose vantage point the particularities of their surroundings inadvertently turn into intentional objects. However, his book in its function and capacity as an album, does not contain photographs of famous historic battlefields or war graves but are rather visual representations of abandoned buildings, barren fields, and vacuous spaces. Here, experience is being inexperienced and once meaningful places are left 'unsaid,' non-narrated as, in an inverted process, place is reduced to space, the homeland is stripped to its mere set of scapes.

Mongia Besbes's "The Trauma of Existence in *The New York Trilogy*" claims that a "linguistic block impedes the subject from voicing a latent wound that scars his being" (Besbes 2017, 54). What seems evident in the critical reception of Auster's traumatized protagonists is also detectable in the visual installment of the volume. Here, linguistic inexpression as the complete lack of convincing arguments is paralleled by visual voids. Instead of a compulsive return to the traumatic core, the observer arrives at his heterotopic spaces created by a constant oscillation between linguistic and visual inexpression. Just as historic, socio-political argumentative approximations fail to create a narrative to give account for any plausible motivation for some heinous deeds, visual representations of once homely places imbued with a strong sense of American identity began being transformed into undefined spaces devoid of any capacity to reconstruct identity as such. The sequences of sites of recurring massacres are mediated and meditated as nothing but symptoms generating narrative and visual spaces of pure repetition itself. Just as recurrent failings in communication inevitably result in a type of "traumatic speech impediment" (Besbes 2017, 55), in a similar vein, the visual fissures, hiatuses can be seen as ocular impediments. These sites do not entail traces (headstones, monuments, memorials, and so on) pointing to events that could

serve as a basis for family lore, national myths, or narratives of memory politics, they simply denote their own stability in frequent replications. In these pictures, trauma is only made perceptible as effect and symptom, as entrapment caused by the atemporal, stationary state of absence and vacuous spaces.

Mariano Yela in "Behavior and Metabehavior" paraphrases Sigmund Freud's famous motto "Wo Es war, soll Ich warden" (Freud 1964, 80) the following way by stating that "Where the unknown forces that determine human behavior were, let man's subjectively meaningful action be" (Yela 1984, 263). Here, this claim is taken out of the contexts of language, society, and history thus making subjectively meaningful actions impossible. With regard to the "incomprehensible" and self-copying nature of mass shootings, Auster creates a parallel with the twenty-seven grievances enlisted in the Declaration of Independence:

> Family grievances, spousal grievances, sexual grievances, workplace grievances, institutional grievances, political grievances, racial and ethnic grievances (hate crimes), and, as the epidemic of mass shootings continues to spread, the ambition on the part of many of the youngest killers to surpass the death tolls achieved by their predecessors, to break the record and thereby win fame and everlasting outlaw glory as the greatest mass killer in American history. Social media sites swarm with the braggadocio of these would-be destroyers as they prepare themselves to carry out their versions of the armed massacre in a school, a college, or a church, and to read through their communications is to understand that the annihilation of strangers has been turned into both a competitive sport and a sinister new variant of contemporary performance art. (Auster 2021, 45-46)

The labyrinthine circularity of the compulsive return to the static traumatic event would render the subject speechless, yet the visualizations of the lacunae created by the repetitive cycles of surrogate narratives make gateway to what Jacques Lacan first termed the "symptom" which later was transformed into "sinthome" a fort/da mechanism within a narrative chain repetitively describing nothing else but the space of repetition itself (Lacan 106). However, this circularity is further complicated by the inherent tautology of a revengeful crime that is instigated by aimless revenge itself. Just as grievances are described in Auster's work as manifestations of an undetectable source of panic that cannot be directly linked to a yet imaginary but always already arbitrary homicide to be committed, trauma itself becomes doubly unlocatable. The symptom remains short of an original problem, the syndrome stands in

itself without any disorder that could have caused it. Slavoj Žižek comments on this controversy with the ensuing sentences:

> What do we do with a symptom, with this pathological formation which persists not only beyond its interpretation but even *beyond* fantasy? Lacan tried to answer this challenge with the concept of sinthome . . . If the symptom in this radical dimension is unbound, it means literally 'the end of the world'—the only alternative to the symptom is nothing: pure autism, a psychic suicide, surrender to the death drive, even to the total destruction of the symbolic universe. (*emphasis added*) (Žižek 2008, 81)

The aforementioned "beyond" is indexed in the heterotopic ellipses between the peopleless photos and the pointless argumentation of surrogate narratives. In "Of Other Spaces," Michel Foucault choses the cemetery as his primary example for heterotopias, a space that is deprived of its social and cultural context in a way that still connects it to all sites of the citystate as each and every family locates the absence of a family member within it (Foucault 1998, 233). Thus, dwellings and graveyards are in constant dialogue created by the heterotopia, as "heterotopias . . . have a function in relation to all the space that remains" (Foucault 1998, 235). In the still life(less) photos of once populated crime scenes questions and answers remain enclosed within each location. When negotiating the distinction between utopias and heterotopias, Foucault explains that a mirror as a placeless place is both utopia as it projects the absence of the observer, but also heterotopia since the virtual image behind the silver foil, through their own gaze, prompts the observer to reconstitute their identity in the originary location. The tautology generated by the incomprehensibility of senseless mass massacres would render it impossible to create a mirroring dialogue between photographs of the shootings in progress and the audience, thus it is between textual and visual voids that the unreality of the real is made possible to be gazed at; an event placed within, as it were, the foil or tain of the mirroring surface. In his lecture, Foucault references (Foucault 1998, 231) Gaston Bachelard as a major source of inspiration for his theory of other places. Tautological trauma is centered on, when in *The Poetics of Space* (1994) Bachelard demonstrates his dialectics of outside and inside and the domain of the surface in-between by analyzing the prose-poem "L' espace aux ombres" [Shade-Haunted Space] by Henri Michaux (Bachelard 1994, 216-221). Quoting one single phrase from the text, Bachelard insists that

> [i]n this "horrible inside-outside" of unuttered words and unfulfilled intentions, within itself, being is slowly digesting its nothingness. . . . If there exists a border-line surface between such an inside and outside, this surface is painful on both sides. . . . The fear does not come from the outside. Nor is it composed of old memories. It has no past, no physiology. Nothing in common, either, with having one's breath taken away. Here fear is being itself. (Bachelard 1994, 217-218)

As if shooting blanks into the void.

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