**Self-Dispersal and Self-Help: Paul Auster’s Second Person**

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**Abstract:**

This article analyzes Auster’s employment of the second person in his twenty-first-century prose texts – Invisible, Sunset Park, Winter Journal and Report from the Interior – in order to challenge familiar humanistic readings of his work. Using theories of second-person narration, these texts are read with reference to other works that use the second-person, including Ben Lerner’s 10:04, to argue that they can be seen to offer a vision of selfhood commensurate with neoliberal ideals of self-reliance and self-reinvention. Understanding these recent texts in this way, it is argued, demands a reappraisal of Auster’s oeuvre: the traditional readings of his work as describing a never-ending struggle to meet the other, to escape isolation, must stand alongside an alternative reading of his work which emphasizes a continual restaging of individual authority. Thus, the article makes an important intervention in discussions of Auster’s work, as well as making claims about the ethics and politics of literary form with wider implications for the contemporary moment.

**Keywords**

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Second Person establishes a dialogue with the reader, you’ve been told, unlike First Person, a neurotic’s whining, or Omniscience, a dialogue with God [. . .] You think about this. [. . .] Writing, you realize, is a lonely enough proposition. Why not invite some company? Though you’re not entirely sure. Something smacks of gimmick, an easy out, of nuzzling the reader warmly into your work. You become uneasy. (Havazelet 2014)

In Ehud Havazelet’s second-person parody, this uneasiness soon becomes confusion: “You turn around. Who said that? You did. You who? You you. There’s only you. And you? You are? You tell me. You must be the reader, participating?” Finally, after speculations on the “otherness of human existence,” Havazalet settles for self-loathing: “You know, you’re absolutely full of it. You turn around. You swear never to write another piece in Second Person. This time you mean it” (Havazelet 2014). Satire enlightens through accentuation: the truth is that this narrative form, for all its frustrations, has enabled reflexivity, and highlighted writing’s inherent self-division. One important application of the second person, evidently, is self-examination, the assessing of one’s conduct by placing oneself “in the situation of another man,” to “view it, as it were, with his eyes and from his station” (Smith III, 1). As Adam Smith suggests in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), the construction of this imagined interlocutor (for Smith, always male) is an intellectual, sympathetic exercise, a way to observe the self and thus improve it. James Boswell, for example, frequently admonishes himself and calls for future action in light of his mistakes: “Think of the thing you are about and of nothing else, and when you find your mind like to wander, write notes that will fix your attention” (234). This is Enlightenment self-help, without the universalizing drive of contemporary self-help texts. For Paul Auster, writing has always been “a lonely enough proposition” and a form of “self-help,” tormenting enough to make his primary theme.

Here I examine Auster’s use of the second person, from the tight, objectivist poetry of his early career to the frequent employment of the form in his twenty-first century prose. On the one hand, the second person is a means to “invite some company” into the authorial realm, to alleviate the lonely writer’s agonies in the locked room. (Many have written on these aspects of Auster’s work.[[1]](#endnote-1)) The second person – “playful [. . .] original, transgressive, and illuminating” (Richardson 314), producing a wide range of rhetorical effects in different contexts according to the implied relationships between narrator, character, narratee and reader – thus demands to be understood as a medium for the dialectic of solitude and collectivism that has shaped Auster’s career. As such, it joins a number of tropes, including the intra-textual recurrence of characters; destabilizing real-world references, such as “Paul Auster” and “Siri” in *City of Glass* (1987); and most importantly the literary allusions – to American Renaissance writers, to Miguel de Cervantes, Anne Frank, and numerous others – that pepper his work. Seen this way, the second person participates in the endless negotiation between productive solitude and solipsistic isolation, individualism and collectivism, and the vexed relationship between real-world self, authorial self, and characters who resemble both.

Auster’s second-person prose experiments – in *Invisible* (2009), *Sunset Park* (2010) and the memoirs *Winter Journal* (2012) and *Report from the Interior* (2013) – cast new light on these concerns. With reference, first, to theories of second-person narration, and then to other texts that employ it – including Lorrie Moore’s *Self-Help* (1985), Mohsin Hamid’s *How To Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), Ben Lerner’s *10:04* (2014) and Francesco Pacifico’s *Class* (2017) – I go on to situate discussion of these texts within a broader assessment of Auster’s work. Along with the second person, I consider three notable aspects of Auster’s writing in this period: a fascination with the physical body; an apparent renewed concern with history and politics (1960s countercultural protests in *Invisible* and the global financial crash in *Sunset Park*, for example); and a deepening formal engagement with metaxis, exemplified by the second-person. Ostensibly, these characteristics signal what Stefania Ciocia calls “a certain impatience with the gamesmanship of ‘high postmodernism’ – an impatience most likely aggravated by the desire to deal more directly with the ethical sphere, in the wake of 9/11” (Ciocia 112). They might even be symptoms of what Timotheus Velmeulen and Robin van den Akker call “metamodernism,” oscillating between “modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment” (2).

My aim is neither to multiply critical labels, nor to participate in debates about the

“end” of postmodernism. Rather, it is to argue that if there have been formal and thematic

shifts in Auster’s work, they cannot simply be explained by increasing receptiveness to the

external material world. In fact, I resist here a narrative that has become almost axiomatic, one fuelled by Auster’s comments and seemingly confirmed by the expansiveness of *4321* (2017). This is the story of the widening of Auster’s vision as he moves from poetry to postmodern metafiction to postmodern (or metamodern) realism; the increasing historical breadth of his writing; and a concomitant “freedom of self-dispersal” in his novels (Finkelstein 57). Änne Troester describes a gradual “opening up of Auster’s language” as he abandons poetry for prose (534). Mark Brown configures his book chapters as successively widening spaces, beginning with the poet in his room, culminating with “[t]he global metropolis” (Brown 160) and thereby echoing the journey Auster describes from introspective “uni-vocal expression” to the articulation of his “multiple being” on the novelistic canvas (*Art of Hunger* 304). Such accounts describe a trajectory from the book to the world (even if the book remains central to understanding the world) and from singular selfhood to engagement with multiple others. My contention is that “self-dispersal” takes various forms and is not always synonymous with communality. This becomes peculiarly apparent in twenty-first-century second-person texts.

What emerges from reading these texts is a need to reappraise Auster’s oeuvre: to

agitate common readings of his earlier “postmodern” writings and to suggest that tropes of

his later work, including the second person, highlight an omnipresent tension. In so

frequently presenting Boswellian self-interrogation, self-dispersal and reinvention, and in

inviting the many voices in his head to speak, is Auster striving for dialogue with the other,

or a vision of selfhood commensurate with neoliberal ideals of self-determination, renewal and empowerment? Does his characters’ propensity for “obliterating their former selves” (Barani and Yahya 226) reproduce the ideals of the self-help book and makeover show? Furthermore, does the never-ending Austerian search for personal epiphanies take precedence over material circumstances and the lived experience of others? The tension derives, in part, from second person’s own tensions: its expediency for self-interrogation but also for alienation in narratives of neoliberalism such as Jay McInerney’s *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984), Iain Banks’ *Complicity* (1993) and Hamid’s satire. If the second person amplifies questions of insider and outsider, individual and collective, the simultaneous desire for a stable self and interpersonal intimacy, then it is the perfect vehicle for exploring these tensions in Auster’s writing, and explorations of neoliberal selfhood in other authors’ fiction.

Critical accounts of the second person sometimes reflect its complex metaxis and sometimes simplify matters. Claiming that the use of *you* frequently corresponds to a “specific past action of the speaker,” Bruce Morrissette diminishes its range and rhetorical power by making it analogous to the first person and reducing it to a point of view (10). His analysis broadly works for texts such as Karl Geary’s *Montpelier Parade* (2017) and Auster’s *Report from the Interior*, in which narrators explicitly address younger selves, such that the second person becomes an integral part of the coming-of-age genre or memoir, but it sits awkwardly in other narrative situations such as the self-help parody of *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* or *Sunset Park*’s fictional journal entries.

Brian Richardson provides a tripartite taxonomy, thereby attempting to elucidate the

second person’s “shifting relationships” with first and third persons (310). Gerard Genette

dispenses with strict divisions into grammatical persons and instead considers second-person

narration as heterodiegesis, in which a story is told by a narrator external to the plot (Genette

133). As Matt DelConte observes, however, “Genette’s categories are also defined by voice/narrator” and, besides, Genette overlooks myriad examples of homodiegetic second-person narrative: indeed, “a narrator must be on the same diegetic plane as his/her narratee-protagonist (and thus must be on the plane of the story world) to communicate directly with the narratee-protagonist” (DelConte 210). In Pacifico’s *Class*, for example, the second-person passages are from the perspective of someone in the main characters’ social group (later named as “Daria”): “You are La Sposina. You’re the protagonist in a bourgeois story that concerns me only tangentially” (82). In a tale of shifting perspectives, Pacifico’s trick is to render Daria much less tangential as events unfold.

To offer a more extended illustration: when Ben Lerner writes in *10:04*, “You might have seen us walking on Atlantic, tears streaming down her face, my arm around her shoulders,” narrator and narratee are evidently not coincident, but the narrator cannot be considered heterodiegetic, given his implied proximity to the addressee (8). The “you” of *10:04*, addressed only sporadically, is neither the protagonist, who is consistently configured as “I,” nor a disguised, abstracted first person. Rather it is a variable, shifting “point of reception” (DelConte 208) for the musings of Lerner’s thoughtful protagonist and a testing ground for empathy. When discussing specific past events, Lerner’s point of reception is most likely to be an individual: “I walked within range of the camera and tungsten lights and waved; maybe you saw me” (235). In more solicitous moments, “you” represents both an individual companion and the wider community of readers: “You know the embarrassing experience of saying goodbye to someone only to learn that they’re walking in your direction, meaning the social exchange has to extend beyond its ritual closure?” (210). The narrator assumes mutual understanding here, because underlying *10:04*’sexplorations of authorial selfhood is a desire for complicity as much about self-validation as it is inclusivity. That desire only increases the more the narrator appreciates the difficulty of aligning his perceptions with others. Thus, the novel’s end brings an act of both inclusiveness and presumption: “at the time of writing, [. . .] I am looking back at the totaled city in the second person plural. I know it’s hard to understand / I am with you, and I know how it is” (240). In the final lines the narrator addresses a second person to restage epistemological authority.

We learn several things from *10:04* relevant to Auster’s writing. First, the second person is far from a simple pronominal matter (DelConte regards the very term as misleading, for precisely this reason): neither is it simply a question of point of view (DelConte 210). Rather it denotes complex, inherently relational modes of perception and reception. Thus, DelConte proposes an analytical model “based on the triad of narrator, protagonist, and narratee” which describes “multiple variables in the narrative transmission” according to mutable relationships between members of the triad (210). Indeed, what connects different scholarly accounts is recognition of the literary second person’s fluidity and potential for exploring intersubjectivity. David Herman uses the term “double deixis” for “the ontological interference pattern produced by two or more interacting spatiotemporal frames” typical of much literary second person, including Lerner’s, the sense that “you” refers both to the fictional world and apostrophically to the reader (381). Richardson writes that “you” “constantly threaten[s] to merge with another character, with the reader or even with another grammatical person” (312). Lorraine Code goes further and insists that “[p]ersons essentially are second persons”: thus, selfhood is always otherness, too (139). And Mieke Bal, exploring the ways in which subject positions affect the creation and transmission of knowledge, argues that “[s]olicitation by the second person crucially defines first personhood” (302).

And yet what we also learn from such accounts, and what the ending of *10:04* (and

some Auster texts) reveals,is that second-person flexibility presents dangers. Sincere though

its dialogic endeavours appear, it “can easily become self-consolidating” if “you” functions

merely as accomplice or foil to an explicit or abstracted first person (Bal 317-18). So one might revealingly reverse the terms Irene Kacandes employs to discuss apostrophic storytelling modes. As well as “giving life and voice to the other,” second-person narrators “wield power by controlling the other” (Kacandes, 2001 181). This danger is peculiarly apparent in self-help texts, partly because they employ a form of double deixis intended both to address a reader in their specificity and to homogenize experience (of writer and reader), while promulgating, in Angelia Poon’s terms, “the myth of self-determinism, empowerment and the eternal hope of reinvention” (140). Thus, an individualist ideology, filtered through a dialogic form of address, strives for universality.

In a controversial example, Jordan B. Peterson’s *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (2018), the declared pursuit of “a shared cultural system” leads the author to employ second person in just such a universalizing way (Peterson xv). If everyone holds the same expectations, and if everyone follows his imperatives (a typical example being “[c]ompare yourself to who you were yesterday, not to who someone else is today”) the result will be order, harmony, contentment (85). The illusion of inclusion is bolstered by liberal use of the first-person plural *we*. However, the book also contains many first-person singular anecdotes from Peterson’s life, as well as long passages of third-person, supposedly objective scientific analysis (on the power dynamics of lobsters, for instance). The second person never exists in isolation, and Peterson’s aims are understood through the interaction of different narrative forms. Ultimately, he is not giving advice but luring readers into complicity with a neoliberal, masculinist world view. Observations such as “you must be prepared to do anything and everything, in case it becomes necessary” reassert masculine dominance based on fearlessness (17). Any shared beliefs are those of an aggressive, individualist marketplace. Reading Peterson, one is reminded of Banks’ use of the second person in *Complicity*, in which readers are tempted toward sympathy with a serial killer. The difference is that Banks’

story demands readers reflect on their complicity and question the values being espoused.

If the version of selfhood Peterson advocates is inadvertently contradictory – strong, self-aware, consistent, yet capable of transformation; self-determining, authoritative, but willing to follow authority (the writer) – second-person literature which alludes to self-help texts highlights such contradictions in order to satirize neoliberal subjectivity. In Lorrie Moore’s collection, *Self-Help* (1985), the pathos of “The Kid’s Guide to Divorce” and “How” derives from the inadequacy of the second-person to instruct or help in practical ways: it can only catalogue the multiple disappointments of a person’s life: “You will meet another actor. Or maybe it’s the same one. Begin to have an affair. Begin to lie. Have dinner with him and his Modigliani-necked mother” (60). Here, the idiosyncratic specificity of the mother repudiates any claims to universal wisdom; rather, it emphasizes the absolute singularity of experience, as well as the author’s forensic eye.

Likewise, Mohsin Hamid has no intention of helping anyone get rich. *How to Get*

*Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* begins by explicitly acknowledging the paradox of self-help books, that “[y]ou read a self-help book so someone who isn’t yourself can help you, that someone being the author,” before going on to multiply the protagonist’s biographical details: “when a mother like yours sees in a third-born child like you the pain that makes you whimper under her cot the way you do, maybe she feels your death push forward a few decades” (3, 4). That it is impossible for every reader to share such circumstances undermines the second person’s double deictic function in this context. In a productive paradox, ineluctable individuality is emphasized to challenge neoliberal, capitalist-realist assumptions about the individual’s situation within the global marketplace. As Poon notes, Hamid increasingly employs third-person plural and first-person forms as the novel progresses, so that the self might ultimately be “re-imagined through connection and relationships, [. . .] always already plugged into multiple communities” (140). What are affirmed, rather than self-help principles, are the dialogic virtues of a form predisposed to the messiness of experiences, those not amenable to generic recipes for success – the novel. Both Moore’s and Hamid’s texts recognize that “the idea of self in the land of self-help is a slippery one. And slippery can be good”; embracing the slipperiness is the way to pluralism (Hamid 3-4).

As the examples of Lerner, Peterson, Moore and Hamid indicate, the implied

ideological stance of second-person narration depends not only on deployment of the pronoun

“you,” which never occurs in a vacuum, but on the narrative’s wider discursive context. In taking this pragmatic view, I follow Jamila Mildorf, who dissects literary uses of the second person in their wider linguistic contexts to complicate theories of reader “involvement.” For Mildorf, the communicative effects of “you” are revealed in the interplay of the indexical pronoun “and other linguistic features such as particular verbs or markers of a colloquial style” (146). For this reason, it is vital to examine, as I do below, the second person along with other formal characteristics of Auster’s work.

***You / I: Paul Auster’s Poetry***

Auster’s are second-person poems in the sense that they frequently address an unnamed “you,” and in the more profound sense that the individuation of the poetic “I” is only possible through solicitation by the other. Auster’s poems participate in the incessant striving for this recognition and show its elusiveness. Before *The Invention of Solitude* (1982)invites the voices in Auster’s head to join him on the page, his poetry limits interactions to a series of encounters with an unnamed other in a mythical landscape of obsessively recurring images – earth, stones, seeds, walls, roots, deserts and eyes. Auster’s verses describe an exterior world, inhabited by the physical body, which, in the poet’s attempts to render it in words, paradoxically recedes into lyric interiority and ineffability. The poet seeks connection with the outside world but alienates himself from it in attempting to capture it in language that eludes referentiality. With the application of language, the world is internalized and

subjectivized, connections broken.

“Still Life,” from *Wall Writing* (1976), illustrates how integral the second person is:

Snowfall. And in the nethermost

lode of whiteness

a memory

that adds your steps

to the lost.

Endlessly,

I would have walked with you. (*Collected Poems* 77)

Here, the snowy landscape is the blank page, both source (“lode”) of potential meaning and symbol of meaning’s erasure. The poem represents both the attempt to communicate with the second person and its inevitable failure, signified by the yearning modality of the last line. To walk with another in this verbal landscape is an unfulfilled desire or the “memory” of something not achieved, only imagined. Constituted by the “you” but struggling to establish a deep mutual relationship with it, the poetic “I” strives to speak *to* or *with* the other but risks speaking *for* it, subsuming it, like the external landscape, within private imaginings.

A major influence on the poetry is Martin Buber’s dialogic philosophy. Despite eschewing the overtly religious aspects of Buber’s work, the striving for the ultimate “I-thou” relationship with god, Auster shares the struggle to escape confinement within selfhood into a landscape where symbiosis is possible. Individuation in this context must be understood not as individualism, but as a coming-into-being in relation, selfhood made in dialogue. To escape isolation and to establish sympathy with the other requires discipline, rigorous self-scrutiny, and patient attention to the myriad meanings of a single word. This discipline is reflected in the reduced lexis of poems such as “Still Life.”

From this asceticism an ironic fecundity emerges, as recalibrations of recurring

images and subtle collocational variations spark new possibilities, reshaping the textual landscape. All elements – pronouns included – are multifaceted and shifting: the difficulty this causes readers reflects the poet’s difficulties in articulating self and other in relation. It means that “you” remains elusive and multiple. Within this restricted context, the refusal to reduce “you” to a series of ideational properties that can be *described* (and thus controlled or possessed) further expands the second-person’s deictic possibilities. It refers to the reader, struggling to penetrate the poem’s meaning; the poet, externally located in a landscape that is paradoxically generated within; and an abstracted other whose full acknowledgement would both destabilize and liberate the self. It can also be read as the myth of American paradise, addressed directly in lines such as “Do not / emerge, Eden. Stay / in the mouths of the lost / who dream you” (*Collected Poems* 86), and as an ethnic other (possibly the Native American) forced into exile or oblivion by the mythic colonization of the white page that stands for the supposedly unsullied landscape. The rude power of “whiteness” in “Still Life,” for example, bears some responsibility for the fate of “the lost.” This is part of Auster’s bid to reimagine, as Alys Moody argues, “the Christian colonial myth as a deterritorialized, textualized Jewish identity,” to think “beyond his own ethnic identity” and to explore multiple experiences of colonial exile (Moody 78, 89).

With both first and second persons so elusive and fluid, and with such a limited range of imagery to describe them, full recognition of self and other remains only aspirational, such that the poems describe an unending process of negotiation between possible identities. Thus, they are poems of “self-dispersal” in an active, intersubjective sense. This means that the transformative ruptures common in Auster’s prose are impossible in the poetry. Selfhood, so delicately poised between identities, is only ever provisional: self-creation is gradual, painstaking and, most importantly, always unfinished.

In Auster’s novels, which, as Moody notes, approach otherness in realist terms at the level of character and plot (89), narrative linearity and the centrality of the protagonist more readily permit epiphanies, radical transformations or, at least, decisive moments on the road to transformation. That these are frequently enabled by exotic secondary characters is a problematic aspect of Auster’s writing. As the narrator of *The Locked Room* (1987) waits for his friend Fanshawe to finish having sex with an African-American prostitute, he muses “I could only think about one thing: that my dick was about to go into the same place that Fanshawe’s was now”; during the act he becomes distracted by the friend’s shoes he is, metaphorically, desperate to step into (211). The black prostitute is a vehicle on the road to awakening, part of the coming-of-age process focussed on Fanshawe. The latter functions as an externalized “second person,” a cynosure posing an existential problem and causing the protagonist to meditate upon self and otherhood. There are many others in a prose career frequently employing a genre Lawrence Buell calls “observer-hero narrative” (93): Benjamin Sachs in *Leviathan* (1992), Master Yehudi in *Mr Vertigo* (1994), Hector Mann in *The Book of Illusions* (2002) and Rudolf Born in *Invisible* (2009) all fulfil similar functions, provoking the protagonist’s desire and drawing him into existential mysteries. In *The Locked Room,* early in Auster’s prose career, coming-of-age remains provisional, consisting only of the realization that “[n]o one can cross the boundary into another—for the simple reason that no one can gain access to himself” (243), even if the intensity of one’s identification suggests a desire to appropriate or become the other. Thus, what is abstract and implicit in the poetry becomes the explicit reflections of the novel’s central character.

What is striking about many of the novels after *The New York Trilogy* is, firstly, the recurrence of the observer-hero nexus, and secondly the frequency with which it corresponds to self-transformative potential (a type of self-help). If Auster stays committed throughout his career to a vision of selfhood as “incoherence” and unpredictability (*Locked Room* 247), it is nonetheless a vision which entertains the possibility of epiphanies and recreation. In *Moon Palace*, the narrator aphoristically declares that “change is the only constant” (62); after his fall from a balcony, Benjamin Sachs, hero of *Leviathan*, undergoes a dramatic change, reinventing himself as a terrorist (107); in *The Book of Illusions,* the analysis of Hector Mann’s silent movie ends with the assertion, “he is someone else now” (52). In the most sententious example, Walter Rawley, aka *Mr Vertigo*, ends his story with a declaration commensurate with the platitudes of the American Dream and the self-help text: “Deep down, I don’t believe it takes any special talent for a person to lift himself off the ground [. . .] We all have it in us [. . .] You must learn to stop being yourself” (278). Though Auster’s characters respond to historical circumstances and accept the universal principle of chance, they also assume that self-determination and reinvention are viable in moments of crisis.

I return to these ideas presently, but before analyzing Auster’s use of second person in his prose works, starting with *Invisible*, it is important to stress continuities. For as I have noted, the hero in the observer-hero narrative functions as an external second person who embodies the contradictions of identity, dramatizes questions of selfhood and otherness, and models to the observer the efficacy of self-transformation. To differing political ends, Auster turns inward in the second-person sections of his twenty-first century prose, converting the external second-person into a grammatical, internalized one (though with its characteristic deictic complexity), therefore making observer and hero coterminous.

***Youtopia –* Invisible**

If *Invisible* constitutes Auster’s most effective employment of the second person, this is

because it negotiates with first and third persons in the service of the novel’s politics, which are intertwined with Auster’s customary meditations on authorial ethics. Although its engagement with historical events – the Vietnam War, the 1968 Columbia riots, French colonialism – align it thematically with later novels such as *Man in the Dark* (2008), its closest ancestors, formally and ethically, are Auster’s poetry and *The Invention of Solitude*. From the latter, it inherits its reflexive references to grammatical person and levels of authorial distance. For example, one of the novel’s narrators, a writer called Jim Freeman, reflects on his practice in terms that echo Auster’s thoughts on the second part of *The Invention of Solitude* (in which “I” becomes “A”) and his second-person memoirs: “By

writing about myself in the first person, I had smothered myself and made myself invisible

[. . .] I needed to separate myself from myself” (*Invisible* 89). His sharing of this advice with another key character, Adam Walker, has consequences for the form of the entire novel, which includes first, second and third-person sections.

From the poetry *Invisible* inherits its preoccupation with colonial oppression. As an observer-(anti)hero narrative, proceeding from the relationship between the teenage Walker and the malevolent older Frenchman Rudolf Born, *Invisible* depicts a younger generation confronting its ancestors’ historical atrocities. Born’s research specialism is war, which he describes as “the purest, most vivid expression of the human soul” in response to Walker’s sarcastic description of the Indochina conflict as “[t]hat lovely war we’ve inherited from you” (7). Throughout the novel there are veiled hints at Born’s nefarious political activities, as well as explicit references to the Algerian conflict and, in a climactic sequence on the island of Quillia, “the atrocities of the Congo and French Africa” (285). Born’s merciless stabbing of an African-American mugger is a synecdoche for these historical acts of violence against the other and a reminder of oppression on American soil. Walker’s failure to contact the police he regards as “the most reprehensible thing [he has] ever done” (68), and it indicates that Born is also a colonizer of the mind (through charisma, fear and appeal to self-preservation instincts) and Walker the reluctant recipient of an historical and psychological inheritance. As Ciocia observes, Walker’s admission that Born “had shown me something about myself that filled me with revulsion” (71) undermines any strict opposition between the two men (Ciocia 117). Not only does Born relish reminding Walker of the parallels between Nazi expansionism and the American frontier, but also Walker’s complicity in the murder casts him as an American Adam always-already fallen, stained with inherited racist attitudes.

*Invisible* features three narrators: Walker, his college friend Freeman, who attempts to

assemble Walker’s story from manuscripts Adam sends him during a battle with leukaemia,

and Cécile Juin, one of Born’s Parisian acquaintances whom Walker attempts to enlist in a scheme to destroy Born and so assuage his guilt over the events of 1967. What is familiar from Auster’s previous work is self-division and questioning of authority. All three narrators, through biographical details and observations on the art of writing, share much with their creator, but the novel’s complex plurality – each narrator sifting and interpreting the others’ evidence, responding critically to it while employing different grammatical persons – consistently challenges epistemological and representational authority. What is new, or at least accentuated more acutely, is the attendant questioning of moral and political authority. Narrative ethics – the extent to which storytelling is solicitation, an attempt to be with others – is tied to questions of political power. As in Auster’s poetry, storytelling is also the colon-ization of the page, and telling one’s story in the form one chooses a means of dominance.

These issues are most pronounced in “Summer,” the second extract Walker sends to

Freeman. In it he chronicles, in the second person, the events of summer 1967, “the summer of race riots in more than one hundred American cities, the Summer of Love,” when he is living with his sister Gwyn while working at Columbia University (94). While Adam claims that “the bulk of the words you exchange that summer are about the present and the future, the war in Vietnam, books and writers,” it is evident that the twins inhabit a psychological space in which they can confront again the traumatic loss of their brother in a drowning accident aged seven (126). In fact, the apartment where they have “only each other for company” and where inevitably conversations turn to “family matters,” recalls their childhood bedrooms under the eaves of the family home, “a small principality” which became a “refuge” from the grieving parents and the location of the “grand experiment,” their adolescent incestuous relationship (107, 113).

As their sexual relationship is (apparently) rekindled after the annual celebration of

the lost brother’s birthday, it becomes increasingly evident, despite Gwyn’s libertarian

justifications that “all sex is good, as long as both people want it” (131), that it is partly

traumatic repetition. Moreover, Adam’s second-person narrative indicates that the traumas of his brother’s death and the encounter with Born, which he claims have led him into a “cul-de-sac of despair and self-loathing” (132), have inspired passions that are essentially narcissistic. “You” functions both singularly and plurally, denoting both Adam as narrator and the siblings together. Yet they are, significantly, “so alike that you could have passed for male and female versions of the same person” (112). If, as suggested throughout “Summer,” Adam conducts a relationship with a self-projection, then the ambiguity of the second-person serves to conflate narrator and narratee in crucial moments of reflection: “Life-altering events demanded a witness, and what better person to serve that role than one of you?” (115). Adam and Gwyn enact a “monumental transgression” (144), a fantasy of being “the last two people left in the universe” (146), but the second-person’s logic suggests that this is equally an experiment in the erotics of authorial self-division, a fantasy of autochthonous, endogamous textual creation with Adam as both narrator and ideal, sexualized interlocutor. And, in fact, “Summer” often casts doubt on the relationship’s reality – the warning that “[m]ore often than not, what stirs the imagination is best kept to the imagination,” for example (145), and the awkward repetition of Adam’s insistence on “the real body of the real woman you share your nights with, and not some figment who exists only in your brain” (147). Later in the novel, in conversation with Freeman, Gwyn denies the affair ever happened (255).

Ultimately, the question of whether it happened is irrelevant. Of more importance is

the “self-consolidating” (Bal 317) function of the second person, and how real or imagined

incest reveals the underlying narcissism of “Summer.” In *Invisible*’s political context, the siblings’ relationship might ostensibly be viewed as rebellion, a seditious act driven by “an altogether un-American casualness as far as your bodies were concerned” (114-5) and a rejection of the mores of their parents’ generation. However, it is also, as Ciocia observes (noting that “Gwyn” means “white”), a “gesture to America’s history of colonialism on its own soil” (115). It militates against ideals of inclusivity and diversity espoused by liberal members of the younger generation like Adam and Gwyn. Indeed, “the small perfect universe” of their relationship participates in certain utopian, exceptionalist myths with the power to germinate the assumed moral authority that provokes the colonial misadventures criticized elsewhere in *Invisible* (153). The siblings’ “principality” does not counter American political hegemony but is consistent with it.

*Invisible* thus politicizes the self-division of Walker’s authorial practice in the second

person, demonstrating that he impoverishes his work in speaking to a surrogate of himself, and tying his literary practice to the novel’s wider political and historical concerns. If the novel employs the second person more persuasively than subsequent works, it is because the complex, multivocal structure implies its own critique of Walker’s attempts at “youtopia” and forces us to question his motives. For the slipperiness and range of the second person exceeds the bounds Walker places upon it. The layering of Auster’s story means that “you” also refers apostrophically to Freeman, Walker’s literary executor, who receives and interprets the manuscript of “Summer,” and to readers of *Invisible*, who are in a position critically to assess the second-person section as it negotiates with and is reshaped by the first and third-person sections. In *Sunset Park* and especially in Auster’s second-person memoirs, the texts’ less complex formal characteristics restrict the space for such critique.

**Notes to Self: *Sunset Park***

Real or fantasized, the Walkers’ incest is a highly ambiguous dissenting act, an apparent

rebellion against US hegemony through retreat into a countercultural utopia, which ironically subscribes to colonial America’s exceptionalism. On the surface, *Sunset Park* is similarly concerned with youthful rebellion and utopianism. During the 2007-8 financial crisis, a disparate group of young people – Alice Bergstrom, Ellen Brice, Miles Heller, Bing Nathan and, latterly, Miles’ teenage girlfriend Pilar Sanchez – move into an abandoned house in Brooklyn’s Sunset Park. Their initial motives are practical rather than expressly political. Bing conceives of the squat because increased rents on his storefront enterprise render his Park Slope apartment unaffordable; Alice needs a quiet place to finish her PhD; Ellen wishes to reinvigorate her art; Miles needs to escape the wrath of Pilar’s sister. From these personal motives collective resistance evolves, so that when an eviction order eventually arrives, the residents recognize their common enemy and vow to stay (252).

Like *Invisible*, then, with its depiction of the 1968 Columbia riots (revisited in *4321*),

*Sunset Park* seems to offer evidence of Auster’s reinvigorated engagement with historical events, and with collective youthful transgression. And yet its radicalism is compromised in several ways. First, its formal structure militates against communitarian ideals. Mark Lawson’s review astutely observes that the narrative “is divided between a number of characters whose names head their sections like name-badges at a corporate conference” (10). Though these perspectival shifts allow characters to reflect on each other in illuminating ways, and ostensibly reinforce the idea of collectivity through personalism, the paucity of dialogue and the dispassionate, controlled distance between author and characters leave little room for irony, only a studied neutrality. Most importantly, persistent use of the historical present traps characters within their troubled consciousnesses even as the narrative describes their cooperation. The pervasive mood is one of nostalgia for the present, a desire to freeze time. This desire is explicit in Nathan’s shop, “The Hospital of Broken Things,” founded on the belief that “the future is a lost cause, and if the present is all that matters now, then it must be a present imbued with the spirit of the past.” Hence his commitment to the repair of ageing or defunct technologies, “manual typewriters, fountain pens, mechanical watches” (72). Though conceived of as rebellion against capitalism and technological progress, Bing’s project represents at best political inertia or, at worst, commodity fetishism of the highest

order, based on a nostalgic notion of “authenticity” consistent with consumer capitalism.

At the end of the novel Miles Heller echoes Bing’s ideals: “he wonders if it is worth hoping for a future when there is no future and from now on, he tells himself, he will stop hoping for anything and live only for now” (308). If this culminating message further compromises the novel’s radicalism, it is partly because Miles’ and his peers’ narrative authority has already been compromised in an earlier section. It belongs to Miles’ father, Morris, and it takes the form of second-person journal entries. Following a near-fatal bout of pneumonia, Morris begins with meditations on life that presage *Winter Journal*: “We do not grow stronger as the years advance. The accumulation of sufferings and sorrows weakens our capacity to endure more sufferings and sorrows.” Following this, he adopts a self-reproachful tone as he considers his affair and its effect on his wife: “*The straw that broke the camel’s back*. Your dumb-ass penis in another woman’s vagina, for example. Willa was on the verge of collapse before that ignominious adventure” (266, 267). He then reflects on the reunion with Miles after a period of estrangement occasioned by Miles’ guilt over a past tragedy: “January 26. Now that you and the boy have spent an evening together, you find yourself curiously let down. Too many years of anticipation, perhaps” (268). Other key events in the journal include Miles’ admission of guilt over his brother’s accidental death; Morris’ first meeting with Pilar, “a small luminescent being who carries the flame of life within her”; and Pilar’s scholarship to Barnard (276, 282, 283). In between, Morris reflects on the parlous state of the publishing industry, great writers’ deaths, his waning vigour.

The second-person journal form accords Morris privileges denied to the younger characters, and in so doing incites a generational split captured in his repeated reference to Miles as “the boy.” Morris casts himself as priest, hearing Miles’ “confession,” and explicitly using the language of “penance” and “hell” to explain Miles’ behaviour in the intervening years. Likewise, he offers a positive judgement on Pilar in self-regarding terms: “There are many things in this world for you to worry about, but the boy’s love for this girl is not one of them” (284-5). Despite claiming that “it is best to refrain from writing another person’s future, especially if that person is your son,” Morris is given space to reflect on both Miles’ recent past and his possible future and to narrate many of the most significant events in the lives of Miles and his companions (279). Miles’ perspective on the meetings with his father is curiously absent. Moreover, the apostrophic second person, unique to this section, which attempts “to put the reader in the text” (Kacandes, 1993 139), gives Morris a more authoritative channel of communication than Miles and his friends. What Herman calls the second person’s “uncanny” quality (381) derives first, in this context, from its combination with the historical present, and secondly from the implied positioning of the reader as the father’s ideal interlocutor, a recipient of his experiential wisdom doubling as Morris himself.

When Morris alludes to his “split life,” he refers to a life divided between Miles and the mother who cannot forgive her son (284). However, the term aptly describes second-person address that enacts a division, which is uncannily also a conflation, of self and interlocutor, observer and hero. Unlike *Invisible*, which as we have seen consistently challenges claims to authority, *Sunset Park* devolves authority to the older male narrator in a novel ostensibly about the travails of the young. As its title suggests, *Sunset Park* is ultimately about ageing, decline, the resistance to a future promising only death. As Morris writes: “Nor can the sight of your weakened, emaciated body inspire much confidence about the future [. . .] Nothing like a brief chat with Death to put things in perspective” (270). With its ruminations on Morris’ frailty, its lists of dead writers and its elegy to baseball legend Mark Fidrych, the journal section of *Sunset Park* reveals the novel’s underlying aims (285). Like *Travels in the Scriptorium* and *Man in the Dark,* it concerns itself with an ageing male taking stock of his life and his attempts to regain authority over life and text through reader complicity. With the second-person journal, Morris finds an effective form for this, and

predicts the work of Auster’s second-person memoirs.

***Old Age of Enlightenment:* Winter Journal *and* Report from the Interior**

In his twenty-first century memoirs Auster extrapolates from *Sunset Park* and makes the second person the dominant mode of his collections of “autobiographical fragments” (Auster and Siegumfeldt 55) or, as Jack I. Abecassis sees them, Montaignian essays (1037). In so doing, he fully embraces a new formal strategy for themes with which he has been preoccupied since *The Book of Illusions* (2002): ageing, vulnerability, posterity, the work’s persistence beyond the artist’s death, the artist’s position in the marketplace. Such ideas are introduced with urgency in *Winter Journal*’sopening paragraphs: “Speak now before it is too late, and then hope to go on speaking until there is nothing more to be said. Time is running out, after all. [. . .] It is an incontestable fact that you are no longer young” (1, 2). The tone is both recognizably Boswellian, combining advice, self-reflection and hints of self-chastisement, and inherently metafictional, in the sense that the discursive address to “you”

continually lays bare the process of the text’s construction.

Auster explains that his desire in writing these books in the second person was to “open up a little space between myself and myself in which I could engage in a kind of intimate dialogue with myself,” one less distancing than the third person. At the same time, he wished to extend “an invitation to the reader to explore his or her own memories” (Auster and Siegumfeldt 55). His comments make explicit the second person’s double deictic virtues, its gestures toward inclusivity, and also its utility in dramatizing the self-dispersal inherent in the act of writing. They suggest that these closely related texts – the first focusing on Auster’s old age and the second his youth and early adulthood – reveal the author’s processes of memorial excavation and serve as expeditious models for readers.

Moreover, *Winter Journal* reprises *Sunset Park* and *Invisible*’spreoccupation with

corporeality, retrieving memorial fragments through reference to the physical body as a

means of perception, a phenomenological tool, a “catalogue of sensory data” (*Winter Journal* 1). As Jennifer Brady, following Merleau-Ponty, notes, the body Auster represents is “both the subject and the object [. . .] perpetually present and absent”: inseparable from one’s selfhood as it is experienced, it cannot be objectively understood or considered distinct from the observing mind, and thus both manifests and obfuscates subjectivity (Brady 51). Auster’s “*phenomenology of breathing*” is an attempt “to examine what it has felt like to live inside this body from the first day you can remember being alive until this one”: it requires the second-person’s paradoxical tension between distance and identity (*Winter* 1). In the *Report*, the form’s deployment serves a different, yet equally paradoxical purpose: to explore “your mind as you remember it from childhood,” to reflect on the adolescent consciousness, both distinct and inseparable from the adult writing self’s mind (*Report* 4).

Though Auster claims not to be a dualist (Auster and Siegumfeldt 65), the implied split between mind and body across the books, coupled with the shift from the historic present that characterizes *Winter Journal* to the past tense that dominates the *Report*, tests his assertion that “the six-year-old boy is the same person, finally, as the sixty-four-year-old man” (Auster and Siegumfeldt 55). It leaves the texts, considered together, hovering in a space between authentic, stable (but evolving) selfhood, and the self-dispersal of previous novels such as *The Brooklyn Follies*, in which the narrator observes: “All men contain several men inside them, and most of us bounce from one self to another without ever knowing who we are” (*Follies* 122-3). One might thus understand the second-person memoirs as attempts to confront incoherence, the paradox that “you are still who you were, even if you are no longer the same person.” Consequently, the tone is frequently instructional: “Dig up the old stories, scratch around for whatever you can find, then hold up the shards to the light and have a look at them”: the memoir here adopts the suasions of the self-help text (*Report* 5).

If the linguistic features complicate the version of selfhood Auster presents, exploiting

the second person’s destabilizing power, they have greater implications for the apostrophic address to the reader. The exhortation to “dig up the old stories” applies to readers insofar as, the narrator assumes, the urge to reflect on one’s youth, the passing of time and increasing decrepitude, is universal. Moreover, Auster offers himself as a model “[n]ot because you find yourself a rare or exceptional object of study, but precisely because you don’t, because you think of yourself as anyone, as everyone” (*Report* 4). This declared belief underpins the powerful, double deictic opening sentence of *Winter Journal*:“You think it will never happen to you, [. . .] that you are the only person in the world to whom none of these things will ever happen, and then, one by one, they all begin to happen to you, in the same way they happen to everyone else” (1). Evidently, the warning is for a narratee that conflates Auster and reader: what unites us, ironically, is our potential failure to recognize common experience.

And yet, as Christina Schönberger argues in her discussion of *Winter Journal*,

Auster’s advocacy for the “universality of the narrated events, the exchangeability of

experience” assumes the attention of an *idealized* reader (not dissimilar to Adam Smith’s

imagined interlocutor, or the narratee of Morris Heller’s journal, or even Adam/Gwyn in *Invisible*), one who identifies with the narrator’s experiences despite their specificity (Schönberger 95). Schönberger’s analysis is both subtle and overly generous. Recognizing that precisely because of the minutiae of the life presented, “one must not assume a homogenous readership that empathizes with the narrator or with the narrated experiences,” she nonetheless argues that even where Auster’s didactic tone or plethora of detail might alienate the reader, alienation, like identification, constitutes “active involvement in the narrative” (96, 97). Engaged in the interplay of distance and identification, the second-person memorial form, she suggests, inspires “a complex process of dialogism” enabling author and reader to reflect on themselves and their relations with others whose experiences might differ profoundly, but whose ability *to reflect* is shared (98).

While Schönberger is faithful to understandings of the second person as complex,

fluid and metaxic, she does not deal with a recurring discursive feature of both memoirs that might problematize her analysis: what I term the *inventory*, which takes the form of literary list-making, exaggerated parataxis and asyndeton. Though it is significantly amplified in these memoirs, Auster has long employed the trope in his prose. In an early example, *City of Glass,* as Quinn’s grip on the Stillman case loosens, he begins to pay more attention to the world around him, observing material conditions for the first time: “the tramps, the down-and-outs, the shopping bag ladies, the drifters and drunks” (108). Here, the inventory has an apparent ethical purpose – Quinn’s new-found recognition of his fellow New Yorkers’ economic circumstances – but also an aesthetic purpose that risks vitiating its ethical potential; destitution is, as the subsequent action of the story reveals, “a condition which permits access to more profound states of being” (Jarvis 91). Inventory thus functions more

as a necessary authorial exercise on the road to the beatific, abstracted solitude Quinn

achieves at the tale’s climax than as an attempt to understand material hardship.

As Auster’s prose style has become looser and more expansive in his twenty-first-century works, so inventories have proliferated. *Brooklyn Follies*, itself an inventory of intertwining anecdotes, delights in a picturesque mode characterized by lists. Towards its end, the narrator reflects on the “entirely feminine universe” of his partner Nancy’s house: “The interior of the brownstone was a living museum of female artifacts, with galleries devoted to the display of bras and panties, blowdryers and tampons, makeup jars and lipstick tubes, dolls and jump ropes, nighties and bobby pins, curling irons and facial creams and endless, endless pairs of shoes” (284). In *Sunset Park*, a text concerned, like *Winter Journal*, with corporeality, the inventorizing gaze is directed toward the human body. Artist Ellen’s fantasies about passing strangers involve lists of body parts: “the assholes of old men, the hairless pudenda of little girls, luxuriant thighs, skinny thighs” (109). Her pornographic

sketches are described in similar terms.

In both cases, the inventory might present as a symptom of Auster’s retreat from postmodern metafiction into postmodern realism (or, perhaps, a form of social novel that requires, in Tom Wolfe’s words, “cramming as much of New York City between the covers as you could”) and as evidence of his increased engagement with the material world (Wolfe 45). However, they are more accurately understood as lists of things subjected to a capitalist realist gaze, because the sensory and intellectual stimulation characters derive from them cannot exist outside the marketplace, but is shaped by what Richard Godden, in his against-the grain reading of Hemingway, terms “fundamental economic relations” (49). Quinn’s street-dwellers, Glass’ “feminine” products and Ellen’s body parts are both material things and abstracted, metaphorical parts of an individualized perceptual economy, stock-taking elements in an accretive gaze. Such “perfect and disembodied moments of isolate perception” emphasize acquisition and consumer choice. In each inventory, objects and people are placed, to use Godden’s evocative phrase, in the “shop window” (Godden 50).

In the second-person memoirs the shop window is the author’s life, and the urge to

inventorize is turned to his own experience. This extract, from early in *Winter Journal*, introduces Auster’s thematic and formal approach: “The inventory of your scars, in particular the ones on your face, which are visible to you each morning when you look into the bathroom mirror to shave or comb your hair. You seldom think about them, but whenever you do, you understand that they are marks of life” (5). Lacking a predicate, the first sentence is an explicit, performative statement of the inventorizing impulse, presenting the scars phenomenologically as both subject and object. The next sentence highlights their significance in playfully ironic terms and lays the foundation for the memoirs’ pervasive

mode of autobiographical reconstruction through list-making.

Pages 59 to 112 of *Winter Journal* are devoted to an annotated list of the twenty-one

addresses Auster has lived in, introduced by another corporeal sentence fragment: “Your

body in small rooms and large rooms, your body walking up and down stairs, your body swimming in ponds, lakes, rivers, and oceans [. . .]” (58). Elsewhere in the same book there is a two-page list of the actions of his hands over the years: “Opening and closing doors, screwing light bulbs into sockets, dialling telephones, washing dishes, turning the pages of books [. . .]” (166). As if its lists have failed to satisfy an autobiographical completist’s compulsion, *Winter Journal*’s final pages contain questions that betray a desire for precise calculation: “How many stubbed toes, smashed fingers, and knocks on the head? How many stumbles, slips, and falls?” (229-30). *Report from the Interior* reprises these tendencies. There is a list of bird species Auster remembers seeing in his youth (10); a list of events, including significant publications, from his birthyear (63-4); the last prose section is devoted to the reproduction of letters Auster wrote to his first wife, Lydia Davis (181-271).

Leaving aside the irony of my listing Auster’s inventories, it is important to note that

the collection of letters extends the list-making tendency into the realm of the *archive*. Other historical documents archived in the memoirs include Siri Hustvedt’s satirical notes from the Park Slope co-op residents’ meeting (*Winter Journal* 103-6); the protracted synopses of movies that have profoundly affected Auster (*Winter Journal* 153-63; *Report* 103-74); and the “Album” of photographs related to episodes in the author’s life, each one captioned with a quotation from the book, that concludes *Report*. It is through what David Huebert calls “the archival impulse,” in which the second person here plays an integral role, that Auster’s attitude to his life, career and mortality are revealed (Huebert 248). If *Travels in the Scriptorium* wrestles with longevity, imagining a dystopian scenario in which an ailing writer appears to cede control to his own characters and situations, then *Winter Journal* and the *Report* wrest back control, by uniting author, narrator and narratee, observer and hero, and allowing them to co-curate an archive of the author’s life. As Huebert’s Derridean reading argues, although archives are commonly associated with the past, the accumulation of artefacts connotes “an urge toward the future” or “being-towards posterity,” a desire that subsequent generations see the work (248, 251). In previous texts, notably *The Book of Illusions*, in which David Zimmer’s archival obsession is a reaction to traumatic loss, a fantasy of preserving life, Auster critiques such obsessions, advocating instead an “An Art of Hunger” or asceticism. By contrast, the second-person memoirs demonstrate “a will to posterity that risks turning art into a catalogue and the world itself into a library” (Huebert 259). That it is laced with anxiety is suggested by the final question on the last page of *Winter Journal*: “How many mornings are left?” (230). In reading this one understands, like the author, the paradox of the archive – that it is complete *in itself* but never a complete record, that it is also constituted by the supplement or excess of what it does not include.

As Huebert states, the archive is not synonymous with memory or reality; it is a

representation or “prosthesis” (251). In the case of Auster’s second-person memoirs, it is also a commodity within the publishing industry; the book is the object in which archive and shop window coalesce. Ultimately, the adducing of specific details, which reaches its apotheosis in the descriptions of movie plots, militates against any claims for universality, and instead reads as a proclamation of authenticity, a unique selling point. Both memoirs contain sententious claims for shared truth; for example: “We are all aliens to ourselves, and if we have any sense of who we are, it is only because we live inside the eyes of others” (*Winter Journal* 163-4). If this echoes the language of self-help, one should not be surprised. The second-person book-as-archive achieves many of the aims and embodies many of the contradictions of the self-help text. It constructs a self-determining, authentic identity, yet in so doing enacts a transformation into commodity form. It responds to authoritative guidance but, crucially, in employing the second person throughout it ensures that guide and guided are synonymous, that the second person acts as the first person’s “accomplice,” to recall Bal’s term. Thus, for all the double deictic possibilities of the form, the memoirs’ revelations and transformations feel carefully policed. “The eyes of others” are permitted to scrutinize the archive only once it has been assembled and purchased.

***Fourth Person to the Power of Four –* 4321**

*4321* offers four *bildungsroman* narratives about the same character, Archie Ferguson. Tom Perrotta’s Whitmanian allusion is apt: it is“a novel that contains multitudes” (8). Beginning “on the first day of the twentieth century” (1) with the arrival at Ellis Island of Isaac Reznikoff (soon to become “Ichabod Ferguson” after a comic misunderstanding with the customs official), and ending in the 1970s when Ichabod’s grandson decides to write a uchronic novel about the different directions his life might have taken, Auster’s epic ravenously fills itself with period details and historical events. Its encyclopaedic ambition is reflected in sentence-level inventories surpassing its predecessors in scale. For example, when Ferguson 1 and Amy Schneiderman, who appears in three of the four versions of Ferguson’s life, first visit Paris, Auster adopts the consumer picturesque mode familiar from *The Brooklyn Follies* and his second-person memoirs: “they dug into foods and dishes they had never encountered in New York or anywhere else, *poireaux vinaigrette, rillettes, escargots, céleri rémoulade, coq au vin, pot au feu, quenelles, bavette, cassoulet, fraises au crème Chantilly*, and the beguiling sugar bomb known as *baba au rhum*” (498).

Also reprised, from *Sunset Park* in particular, is the atomizing approach to human bodies. When Ferguson 1 first meets Schneiderman, his description is stylistically typical:

at least five-eight, perhaps five-nine, a big girl with an impressively handsome face, not pretty or beautiful but handsome, solid nose, forthright chin, large eyes of still undetermined color, neither heavy nor slight of build, smallish breasts under a blue short-sleeved blouse, long legs, round ass encased in a pair of tight-fitting tan slacks, and an odd sort of galumphing walk, torso pitched forward ever so slightly, as if impatient to be barreling forward, a tomboy’s walk, he supposed, but fetching and unusual, signaling that she was someone to be reckoned with, a girl different from most sixteen-year-

old girls because she carried herself without the slightest trace of self-consciousness (171).

The asyndetic structure demonstrates Archie’s stock-taking and the simultaneous process of interpreting Schneiderman’s composite physical details. As the passage develops, tentativeness – signalled by “perhaps,” “smallish,” the mimetic clumsiness of “an odd sort of galumphing walk” – makes way for more considered suppositions about character and ends with an assertion of distinctiveness, her unique selling point. This reads as an exercise in appraisal and product differentiation, Schneiderman very much “in the shop window” here.

However, in the context of *4321*’s parallel narratives “Amy” is not a unique

commodity. Recurring, with small but significant variations, in the stories of Fergusons 1, 3 and 4, she obeys the logic of the franchise in being both recognizably uniform-enough and tailored to local conditions: that is, the context of each Ferguson’s tale. The same logic applies to Archie Ferguson. Though the Fergusons’ life trajectories encompass different personal episodes and emphasize different historical events, they are all born on 3 February 1947 (Auster’s birthday) and all become writers: it is Ferguson 4 who decides to create, in the culminating metafictional move, a novel called *4321*. In the enumeration of authorial surrogates, then, one witnesses an *inventory* of writing selves which self-consciously retains the sense of *invention*. In the proliferating impulses of Auster’s longest work, invention and inventory become virtually synonymous.

Far from destabilizing authorial identity, then, the climactic metafictional twist further serves the franchise. One of the fictional author surrogates creates a text containing four more versions of himself in which, presumably, self-dispersal will be endlessly repeated: this represents the proliferation of the author franchise for “as long as the market would bear” (Buzard 21). It is significant that this recursion echoes the effect on the packaging of two consumer products, Quaker Oats and Land O’ Lakes butter, over which Ferguson 2 muses earlier in *4321*: “the smiling Quaker in the black hat receding to some distant vanishing point beyond the grasp of human vision, a world inside a world, which was inside another world, which was inside another world” (130). In Auster’s oeuvre the most obvious ancestor is the “City of the World” in *The Music of Chance* (1991), in which a model within the city model, complete with figures representing its owners, theoretically demands the endless construction of ever-smaller models (*Music* 81). In the earlier novel, the city is a satirical hypostasis of postmodern *mise-en-abyme,* an image of surveillance, and a fantasy of absolute control.

In *4321* there is no obvious satirical or critical impulse. Instead, one observes the

culmination of a process beginning with *Travels in the Scriptorium* and continuing through texts that experiment with the second person: a paradoxical turn inward even as Auster appears to turn outward and engage more expansively with history. It is not the desperate retreat into isolation one sees in *City of Glass* and *The Book of Illusions*, but in the context of a voluminous novel obeying the logic of the franchise, a saturation of the marketplace with authors self-consciously reflecting on authorship. Representing an act of self-consolidation, and one in its own way as utopian as the incestuous fantasy of *Invisible*, it embeds self-consolidation in the novel’s very structure. While not in the second person, *4321* extends through the potentially limitless generation of author figures the tendencies of some of Auster’s second-person prose. These are: the attempt to universalize the particularities of individual experience which, combined with increased list-making and stock-taking, reveals a “fidelity to archival futurism” previously the province of protagonists such as David Zimmer (Huebert 259). Stemming from concerns about the author’s ageing body in the literary marketplace, these characteristics contribute to an aesthetic of *inventory* etymologically and politically connected with a commitment to re-*invention* in Auster’s recent work sharing much with neoliberal ideals of empowerment, self-help, and transformation. These are ideals, as I have shown, satirized in texts such as *Self-Help* and *How To Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* and with which the second person has an uneasily close relationship.

I would suggest, finally, that these observations necessitate a reappraisal of Auster’s

prose career. My dissenting view on Auster’s recent writing does not invalidate what Evija

Trofimova describes as “humanist” analyses of his work that focus on “one author’s existential journey, a genuine philosophical question” about the possibility of fulfilling encounters with others (16). Rather, my desire, like Trofimova’s, is “to reveal another side” to the humanist story that, in the light of my reading of recent texts, can be seen always to have lurked there (Trofimova 14). Trofimova echoes Aliki Varvogli in taking seriously Auster’s claim that all his books are ultimately the same book, and in acknowledging the repetition of motifs “recognized as belonging to the great commonplaces of human existence” (Varvogli 12). Each book can be regarded as an autonomous entity in which various elements constellate to paint a picture of “how the individual locates her or himself in the world” (Brown 2). And yet each book is also part of a postmodern, intratextual, metafictional realm, a recycling of motifs, a constant “multiplying and transforming” of an overarching career-text (Trofimova 14). Trofimova argues that one should resist readings of Auster that infer a strict critical dichotomy between humanist and postmodern. She is right because the most “postmodern” aspect of Auster’s vision, for all the flirtation between fictional and real worlds, all the metafictional impulses, is, as Adam Kelly argues, the cataclysmic rupture, the epochal moment of self-transformation after which the world is changed forever (Kelly 314). This moment, in so many texts including *Leviathan* and *Winter Journal*,can never be entirely separated from the Buberian ethics of engagement with others.

Neither, however, can it be cleanly separated from neoliberal ideals of self-reliance

and reinvention, ideals that have long shadowed Auster’s humanist narratives. As I have

shown, paying attention to the formal characteristics of Auster’s work – including the second

person, parataxis and inventories – reveals that the most significant variances between texts

consist in the extent to which epiphanic moments result in radical instability or

“undecidability” (Kelly 326), and porous selfhood in the world of others; or in a clearly defined selfhood, through proliferation of details and claims to universality that founder on textual specificity and the restaging of individual authority. Any Auster text, and any key moment within it, carries both possibilities. However, particulars of the narrative and linguistic environment orient each text toward a different point on a spectrum: one running from Auster’s poetry, in which there are no epiphanies, only a process of unfulfilled yearning for completion by the elusive “you”; through observer-hero narratives in which charismatic others force protagonists to consider their place in the world; to memoirs in which the unceasing use of second-person (a revision of the observer-hero mode) risks tipping over into “delusional self-recognition” (Fludernik 119); and finally to the gargantuan author-franchise of *4321*. While a familiar quest in Auster’s world – exemplified in his poetry and in prose works such as *Ghosts* and *The Book of Illusions* – is to meet the other, whose look, according to Ilana Shiloh, “makes me a gift of my identity” but “at the same time destabilizes” it (62), recent Auster writing has raised the question of what happens when “I” and “you” are the same. Perhaps meeting the other in these recent Auster works is tantamount to “poring over himself and the relation with his aesthetic representation of himself” (Barani and Yahya 10).

What happens when the constitutive other was “me” all along?

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11,855, including list of works cited (which is 967 words), not including title page.

1. For a recent example, see Álvarez, María Laura Arce. *Paul Auster’s Ghosts: The Echoes of European and American Tradition.* Lanham: Lexington, 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)