

Reestablishing Connection and Continuity through Solitary Writing — Solitude as Contextualized within Postmodernity in Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*

R. Chen

Abstract—In his examination of solitude and its place in the postmodern society, Paul Auster reinvents the supposedly reclusive, enclosed, and self-sufficient phenomenon into one that is open, explorative, and inter-reaching. The ambiguous and indeterminate concept serves as an apt epitome of postmodernity that signifies both connection and disconnection. Contemplating the fragility of continuity and connection in the face of prevalent contingencies, Auster proposes for those contextualized by postmodern solitude an active engagement in writing and memory to retain a continuous vision in time, space, language and interpersonal relation. With that tentative solution in mind, he continues to explore and invent meanings for solitude in reservoirs of existential experiences that contain and exceed postmodernity.

Index Terms—Solitude, writing, postmodernity, continuity, contingency.

I. INTRODUCTION

What is solitude, and what is so special about it that writers and philosophers insist on writing and living it? Henry David Thoreau spent two years leading a solitary life by the shore of Lake Walden, declaring that, “I love nature partly *because* she is not man, but a retreat from him.” [1]; Paul Auster finished *The Invention of Solitude* (1982) in a room of solitude, dreading the thought of leaving it while at the same time fearing he might be consumed in solitary contemplation; and Michel de Montaigne advocated fervently that everyone, especially those who had spent their life serving society, should withdraw into solitude, attending their heart and mind, rather than the business of others. The complexities of solitude in terms of motivation and manifestation are already evident. In addition, the phenomenon is never a privilege for the academic, artistic, and reflective few but instead has long been a common condition of human. Even in the highly interactive, social media rampant postmodern age, there has never been any shortage of solitary minds. Naturally, the inquiries into solitude have never ceased, and evolution and expansion regarding its meanings, values, and representations have been constantly recorded and reviewed.

Paul Auster (1947-), a postmodern writer famed for his frequent application of meta-fictional techniques, highly

Manuscript received March 23, 2018; revised May 29, 2018. This paper is inspired by and based on my PhD dissertation. R. Chen, “‘It is one of the conditions of being human’ —Paul Auster’s Intertextual and Intersubjective Invention of Solitude,” PhD dissertation, Dept. English, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China, 2016.

R. D. Chen is with the School of Foreign Studies at Guangdong University of Finance and Economics, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China (e-mail: dannyr_chen_cuhk@163.com).

allusive composition and enigmatic anti-detective fictions, is the author of such works as *The Invention of Solitude*, *The New York Trilogy* (1987), *In the Country of Last Things* (1987), *Oracle Night* (2003), *Man in the Dark* (2008), and many others. As a lifelong practitioner and writer of solitude, he believes the realm of solitude is never enclosed but instead open, intertextual and intersubjective. His perpetual examinations dig in such apparently opposing concepts as solitude and community, as well as continuity and contingency, and hence provide insight into how solitary individuals live and face the predicaments of postmodernity.

This paper, interested in Auster’s postmodern rendering of solitude, proposes that in his texts, the notion works primarily as an essential means of constructing the self but also facilitates an existential recognition of the other. Additionally, it argues that his solitary individuals in the postmodern age are more than often in search of communities loosely tied by unpredictable chances. Those men and women, struggling to search for a sense of continuity out of prevalent contingency, take to solitary writing to restructure a continuous perception of time, space, language, and personal connections, albeit such a solution seems perilously tentative and unreliable.

II. PAUL AUSTER’S INVENTION OF SOLITUDE

A. Auster and His *Invention of Solitude*

Solitude has been a prominent recurring theme in Auster’s career, to which he devoted an entire book—*The Invention of Solitude*. The exploration started only weeks after his father’s death, for he feared that “[i]f I do not act quickly, his entire life will vanish along with him” [2]. The examination has then extended to each and every one of his seven life writings and article collections, as well as his nineteen fictions. Though his inquiry seemed to be motivated by an urge to encapsulate his father’s invisibility, it is in fact also a journey of Auster’s self-searching, since he is essentially a solitary figure who seeks for his solitude meanings that defy simple unification. In recognition of the complicity of solitude, he has once commented,

But solitude is a rather complex term for me; it’s not just a synonym for loneliness or isolation. Most people tend to think of solitude as a rather gloomy idea, but I don’t attach any negative connotations to it. It’s a simple fact, one of the conditions of being human, and even if we’re surrounded by others, we essentially live our lives alone [3].

Solitude, often mistaken with loneliness and isolation, has been misconceived as a pitiful, unwanted experience. However, Auster harbors no particularly negative thoughts

towards solitude, but instead perceives it as a natural state of living and even the essence of existence. His life-long journey into the core of solitude has witnessed frequent revisions. The more pessimistic moments are usually related to the failed attempts to understand his father, Sam. After thirty-one years of first-hand experience of the old man's intentional alienation, Auster sighs, "Impossible, I realize, to enter another's solitude" [4]. The failure to know and penetrate another person's solitude, subsequently, induces the more solipsistic side of his examination: "Our sense of self is formed by the pulse of consciousness within us—the endless monologue, the life-long conversation we have with ourselves. And this takes place in absolute solitude." [5] Self-knowledge, in this sense, is to be attained on condition that we are secluded in self-searching. It appears that the only possible communication in solitude is the kind conducted with the self, while other individuals' existence, experiences, and thoughts are inaccessible. However, a paradox is found in 'monologue' and 'conversation'; while the former implies a one-way delivery of words, the latter demands participation of more than one party, or at least the party of two selves of one person, making the co-existence of 'self' and 'other' known to the solitary subject. In this sense, even in his most dejected moments, Auster is still aware of the possibility of encounter and community in solitude.

In fact, it is his belief that solitude constitutes a necessity for an in-depth comprehension of interpersonal relation, because it is only when separation becomes normality that an individual realizes her/his identities are largely constructed by the knowledge of and connection with others. As important as self-contemplation is, it suffices in no way a comprehensive understanding of the entire spectrum of existential experience. Auster thus announces, "[y]our language, your memories, even your sense of isolation—every thought in your head has been born from your connection with others" [6]. That is to say, an individual's acquisition, perception and meditation, even her/his most private inquisition in solitude, are inevitably featured and nurtured by an awareness of the other, without which s/he cannot make sense of the meanings of solitude. On the basis of this recognition of 'the other,' Auster furthers his argument, admitting it is essentially impossible to attain a state of absolute solitude. Isolation is possible, in a physical sense, but a connection-free solitude is ruled inaccessible given human's mental and intellectual capacities. Since all his ideas are relation-bound to a much larger reservoir, Auster concludes, "I felt as though I were looking down to the bottom of myself, and what I found there was more than just myself—I found the world" [7]. Such a collective vision, instead of contradicting directly with some of his comparatively individualistic and solipsistic views, is complementarily conductive to his further investigations.

A clear recognition of the coexistence of 'self' and 'other' is demonstrated in his writing, which for him, is in essence an in-depth expedition into the complex relation between the inner and the outer. In *The Invention of Solitude*, he confesses, "[a]s he writes, he feels that he is moving inward (through himself) and at the same time moving outward (toward the world)" [8]. The exploration of his personal existence and his eagerness to connect to the outside world coexist side by side in the process of literary creation. In this sense, solitary

writing constitutes self-examination and simultaneously an adventure into the unknown. Writing, then, as an act that facilitates self-inspection and interactive communication, enables a writer to assume dual roles of participant and observer in memory. Perceiving reminiscent recollections as an intersubjective reservoir that carries temporal continuation, Auster explains, "Memory, therefore, not simply as the resurrection of one's private past, but an immersion in the past of others, which is to say: history—which one both participates in and is a witness to, is a part of and apart from" [8]. As 'a part' of memory, a writer manages to indulge in temporal continuation and hold on to inter-relations with others, so "even alone, in the deepest solitude of his room, he was not alone" [8]. Then as he is 'apart from' it, he is able to sit back and meditate to obtain a relatively more detached point of view of his existence. In this way, memory constitutes a connection between past and present, and more importantly a strong bond among individuals. With collective memories, interpersonal connections are made possible in seemingly enclosed solitude.

B. Solitude within Postmodernity

Auster is certainly far from being unique in his expeditions into solitude and solitary writing—he is merely one of the postmodern souls following the tradition of Garcia Marquez, Thomas Pynchon, J. D. Salinger, Philip Roth and many others to go after meanings for the solitary, helpless state of human beings in an era that is ingrained by de-centering, defamiliarization and deconstruction. Nonetheless, Auster's interpretations of solitude are markedly homogenous to certain key concerns of postmodernity, particularly regarding his investigations of post-war/catastrophe traumas, of the difficulty in forming communities for the solitaries, and of his highly metafictional approaches in search of the meanings of solitude. In Introduction, I have categorized Auster and his writing as 'postmodern', yet since this paper focuses on certain social phenomena depicted in literary texts, I prefer 'postmodernity' to 'postmodernism' when contextualizing Auster's solitude. Clarity might be shown with Ihab Habib Hassan's distinction between the two terms in his geopolitical concerns of the postmodern:

Think of postmodernity as a world process, by no means identical everywhere yet global nonetheless. Or think of it as a vast umbrella under which stand various phenomena: postmodernism in the arts, poststructuralism in philosophy, feminism in social discourse, post-colonial and cultural studies in academe, but also multinational capitalism, cybertechnologies, international terrorism, assorted separatist, ethnic nationalist, and religious movement—all standing under, but not causally subsumed by, postmodernity. [9]

For Hassan, postmodernity is distinct from postmodernism in its inclusiveness and its planetary, geopolitical contexts. As it simultaneously contains and exceeds the literary schemes of postmodernism, it lends itself conveniently to a broader spectrum of social, historical and political inquiries. He then carries on his argument by featuring postmodernity with 'indeterminacy', adding to it a long list of traits such as heterodoxy, ambiguity, discontinuity, pluralism, textualism, immanence, and historical and epistemic self-reflexivity. These characteristics are not exactly 'new', as they descend from a long line of researches concerning the postmodern age,

but the ever enlarging pool of vocabulary has indeed testified to the indeterminacy of postmodernity. Then the question remains, how solitude, a phenomenon and a way of living that prioritizes aloneness, privacy, and self-exploration, is to be understood and interpreted in the ever intertextual, ever intersubjective, ever planetary postmodern society? That is exactly one of Auster's literary concerns.

An endeavor to contextualize Auster's solitude into postmodernity is reasonable on account that his textual endeavors have been largely considered 'postmodern' for his highly allusive, intertextual and metafictional approaches, as well as his keen socio-political senses. To begin with, he inspects individuals who retreat into solitude after falling victim of wars or life-changing events—the same postmodern dilemmas into which he was born. Postmodern literature and art are frequently visited by the threats of massive destruction and imminent devastation, as well as the conundrum of humanity under such depressive pressures. Individuals, whose existence and identity are impaired and endangered, seek comfort, consolation, and answers in solitary reflections and even reclusive lifestyles. Following this tradition, Auster is urged to examine traumatized, solitary individuals under the shadow of fatal destruction, largely because of his experiences as a Jewish descendent and his own witnesses of the catastrophic ramifications of 9/11. To a considerable extent, the solitary individuals in his writings, both fiction and non-fiction, are structured by their unbearable sufferings and the ontological uncertainty brought along by such terrors.

Within the post-trauma settings, some solitary individuals are keenly aware of the fulfillment of being attached to others and hence become inquisitive about their position in postmodern communities. The companionships they form differ drastically from those in the conventional sense, for the postmodern communities, instead of demanding their members to concede to commitment and formality, support their needs to remain independent, detached, and undisturbed. Lori Newcomb, in her dissertation "'A Little Universe for Themselves': Narrative and Community in Postmodern American Fiction", draws clear distinctions between traditional and postmodern communities. She explicates that a conventional community is usually unified by place, heritage, and dominant meta-narratives, and it closes its doors to those who question or threaten its existence. In contrast, a postmodern community, which is most likely formed by individuals excluded from conventional norms and values, is anti-foundational, pluralistic, and fragmented. Unlike traditional communities that are formalized under authorial narratives, communities formed within postmodernity are open with multiple layers, the 'members' of which are not bound but rather interrelated based on their "shared humanity" and "the contingency of social experience" [10].

Since a keen awareness of 'the other' has remained a constant reminder of his position in a larger, inter-connective pool of being, Auster retains a dialectical perspective with regard to the relation between solitude and encounter, solitude and community. Writing solitarily, Auster is well aware of the positive as well as negative effects brought by long-term solitude. He confesses in "Ghost" that "[w]riting is a solitary business. It takes over your life. In some sense, a

writer has no life of his own. Even when he's there, he's not really there" [11]. In other words, absorption in solitary writing risks spatial and perceptual dislocation—even when an individual is present in a room where her/his body posits, s/he is largely lingering in her/his mind. Furthermore, utter isolation can incur catastrophic outcomes, such as self-doubt, emotional detachment and an inability to relate and sympathize. Considering that, Auster proposes a solid situation in memories, because memory, as an immense reservoir of images, sounds, and meanings of past events, is in nature communal and continuous. An immersion in one's recollections can remind the person of her/his position in the continuation of time; additionally, since recollections are formed with clear knowledge of 'the other,' they exist as the very exhibition of communities and inter-communication. Therefore, in Auster's fictions, it is only through a willingness to resume a strong grasp of memories—the carrier of temporal continuation, that his writer characters in solitude manage to hold on to a firm sense of self-knowledge.

Eventually, he discovers that the solitary individuals in postmodern societies, be they solitude or community prone, are inevitably subject to omnipresent ambiguities and contingencies. 'Chance', then, becomes a fascination in his textual examination of solitude. In his works, contingencies frequently represent unanticipated changes in real life. Firmly, he espouses the validity of 'chance' in fiction, saying, "Chance is a part of reality: we are continually shaped by the forces of coincidence, the unexpected occurs with almost numbing regularity in all our lives...What I am after, I suppose, is to write fiction as strange as the world I live in" [12]. 'Chance,' in this sense, is rather what realities have to offer than a literary device applied in acceleration or enrichment of the plot. It should be noted that Auster's embrace of contingencies does not deny the existence of ontological and epistemological certainties; it is just that they are easily demolished in the face of chance. Though a sense of security is greatly treasured by his protagonists, it is through their acceptance and subsequent inquiries of contingency that they regain a sense of continuity in time, space, language and interpersonal connection. Compared with 'chance,' 'continuity' is a less obvious but equally important term in comprehension of Auster's work, which has not been mentioned directly but can be perceived in most of his texts with close inspection. It might seem as he advocates 'chance' as the universal rule of existence, he is very unlikely to espouse a sense of continuity, for it is destined to subject to the impact of contingency. However, it remains my strong belief that his writer characters manage to reconstruct their self-knowledge in connection to other individuals in their striving to retrieve temporal, spatial and linguistic continuity. The following analysis of one of Auster's novels, *In the Country of Last Things*, supplies an insight into his dialectical and even paradoxical perceptions of solitude, community, contingency, and continuity. It is also an apt exemplification as to how he perceives solitude as an existential condition for individuals within postmodernity.

III. IN THE COUNTRY OF LAST THINGS

A. A Postmodern Country of Last Things

In the Country of Last Things was published in 1987, when

Auster was 40, but as he confesses in *The Art of Hunger* (1998), he started conceiving the plot and ‘met’ Anna Blume, the heroine, when he was in his early twenties. As he was too young and didn’t know how to deal with either her or the plot, he kept losing trace of both. When he finally finished the novel almost two decades later, he calls it “the most hopeful book I’ve ever written” because even under the cruelest circumstances Anna still “struggles to remain a human being, to keep her humanity intact” [13]. Optimistic as Auster may have sound, the grilling experiences of Anna contradict the author’s words in many cases. A young girl of 19, she volunteers to go to the end of the world because she worries about her missing brother, William, who was sent to the Country as a journalist. Surrounded by utter blackness at her arrival, she fears “we were entering an invisible world, a place where only blind people lived” [14]. As it turns out, the hellish Country is not a place for the blind but the very location of hopelessness, where men, women and children are brought to their lowest so as to sustain mere survival.

In this twisted, confusing Country, chaos breeds perceptual disorder in time and space. The story is predominantly told by Anna, who relates her desperate isolation in the present tense as “I don’t expect you to understand” [15] and “This is how I live” [16]. But when is the ‘present’ for Anna? Her words have never made distinct any age or era, let alone any specific years. The narrative is further complicated, since there is actually another layer of heterodiegetic narration other than Anna’s autodiegetic voice. It is confirmed that the letter has finally reached its destination, for in-between Anna’s words, there are almost imperceptible, past-tense insertions of “she wrote” [15] and “her letter continued” [16] in the beginning, though they soon disappear and leave the rest of story as if it were narrated solely by Anna. Since the transportation between the Country and the outside world, as Anna depicts, is largely blocked, the letter might have travelled years before it finally gets to David Zimmer, the alleged receiver, and days, weeks, or even years might have passed before he shares the story. Considering that, it is almost impossible to pinpoint the time period of Anna’s narrative. Judging from the decadence and regression of the unnamed metropolis, Elizabeth Wesseling, together with other researchers, suggests the story “begins and ends in the period of transition which supposedly precedes the apocalypse” [17]. Instead of a precise definition of any age or era, the biblical term is more of a description of the scenes exhibited, which has been marked with absurdity and cruelty.

The Country is not only chronically but also geographically elusive. It seems to adopt a drastically different approach of existence than the world outside of it, yet the story implies that it exists almost side by side with the so called civilized societies. On the one hand, the representation of the Country seems surrealistic, since every institution and system of civilization, from education, art to legal and medical systems have evaporated into thin air, while starvation, stealing, robbery, rape, homicide, suicide, and even human flesh transaction are recorded on an astonishing scale. Yet on the other hand, it is highly realistic, for the things happening on the land have already been witnessed in not only politically turbulent areas but even the most civilized countries as well. Tim Woods looks into the relation between urban space and the postmodern in *In the*

Country of Last Things, seeing the despotic social and political climate in the city as a representation of “the 20th century totalitarian attempt to dominate spatiality” [18]. This analogy between the fearful metropolis and some of the violently dominated areas can easily find concurring minds in Peacock and Varvogli, who discover similarity between the invisible but deadly tyranny of the Country and some of the most terrifying regimes and political threats in the 20th century. Peacock reminds the readers that according to Auster, it is “a book about our own moment ... and many of the incidents are things that have actually happened” [19], while Varvogli, considering Anna’s Jewish heritage and her constant hunger, relates the Country more specifically to the ghettos, concentration camps and cities under siege or occupation.

Though the Country corresponds neither chronically to any time period nor spatially to any specific geographic existence, it has assumed, undeniably, certain historical and social reality of the postmodern age. To a certain extent, it is precisely its ambiguity and indeterminacy that marks it as postmodern, and Anna’s struggle, in this sense, represents a solitary, disconnected individual against the chaotic, defamiliarizing backdrop of postmodernity.

B. Temporal, Spatial, Linguistic, and Interpersonal Disconnection

Under the great pressure of a foreseeable doom, the connections between past and present, the significance of interpersonal relationships, as well as words, meanings, and concepts of objects that once existed, are largely ignored and gradually forgotten. Anna, in stark realization, remarks: “These are the last things. One by one they disappear and never come back. It is all happening too fast now, and I cannot keep up” [15]. Living in conditions where objects vanish and language deteriorates, where nothing has left for people to relate to or ponder on, everyone from the scavengers to the runners¹, from the crawlers² to the smilers³, has lost their identities and the ability to imagine and sympathize. They become nameless ‘ghosts’ roaming the streets, melting into the hopelessness of the Country. Threatened by the unpredictable environment, Anna has to stay watchful so as not to fall a victim of violence or deception. She determines to be as flexible and changeable as possible and live solely in the moment, because “Bit by bit, the city robs you of certainty. There can never be any fixed path, and you can survive only if nothing is necessary to you. Without warning, you must be able to change, to drop what you are doing, to reverse.” [20] The streets here are only used as an example or a symbol of the sinister city, where food, accommodation, clothes, jobs, and all other things are equally changeful and unreliable. In order to adjust to the constant transformation of the cityscape as well as the transient social

¹ The ‘runners’ are those who run through the streets as fast as they can, never stopping for anything in their path, until they drop dead from exhaustion.

² The ‘crawlers’ are a group of people who believe that conditions will worsen if the citizens do not demonstrate persuasively how ashamed they are of their past. Accordingly, they decide to crawl on land like dogs and snakes to show their humility.

³ The ‘smilers’ believe that bad weathers come from negative moods. The solution, in their opinion, is to maintain a positive attitude and steadfast cheerfulness.

relations within, Anna frequently reminds herself that habits are deadly. Although her deliberate detachment from habitual behaviors deprives her of the possibility of engaging in any long-term and trusting relationship, it has granted her temporary safety under such severe circumstances. Then, if it is insensible to form habits, it is even more impractical to cling on to one's memories, for they offer only ephemeral comfort. Anna, thus, tries not to remember anything from the past for fear that it might compromise her effort to manage the discomfort and hardship at hand. She confesses, "Memory is the great trap, you see, and I did my best to hold myself back, to make sure my thoughts did not sneak off to the old days" [21]. Once a comparison between the two worlds is formed, melancholy will follow, dulling her sharp senses and instincts, which would greatly endanger her chances of survival. Accordingly, she makes up her mind to confine her thoughts solely, strictly to the present, treating every moment as separated from the last and the next, as if it were fragmented and disconnected.

She is fully aware that the monstrosity of the Country lies in its gradual erosion of humanity. In her struggles, she is ever so perplexed by the paradox that she might have to give up what has made her human if she were to survive. A disrupted vision of time, together with a muddled self-understanding, has accordingly caused a sense of utter isolation and separation, and a connection is to be reestablished via demonstration of humanity, which is risky and unadvised. Anna, for one, has been leading a solitary life in the Country, determined to defamiliarize and disconnect herself from the rest of the crowd, until one day she meets Isabel, an aging female scavenger, during one of her scavenging tours. Auster once explains, as bleak as the circumstances are, *In the Country of Last Things* remains the most hopeful book he has ever written because of Anna's struggle "to remain a human being, to keep her humanity intact" [22]. When Anna risks her life to save Isabel from being trampled by a group of frantic runners, she has reconnected her life to substantial communication. Isabel, in turn, perceives Anna as "the dear, sweet child that God has sent to me" [23], and happily offers her accommodation. Unfortunately, any inter-relation or sense of security is only transient under the menace of the city. As it turns out, Isabel's apartment provides neither safety nor hope, for her husband, Ferdinand, a vulgar, unkempt and malicious figure, goes out his way to upset and even molest Anna. In many ways, Ferdinand, obsessive with his construction of diminishing ship models using the bones of mice that he has trapped and killed, symbolizes the nihilism of the Country. His unbearable malice eventually threatens Anna's strong hold to her conscience. One night, when Ferdinand makes moves to assault Anna, she fights back and nearly chokes him to death. As she gradually comes to her senses, she is astonished by her coldness that "I was not killing him in self-defense—I was killing him for the pure pleasure of it" [24]. It is the closest time of her loss of humanity, and the sheer urge to annihilate another human has served as a warning of the inescapable grasp of the Country over its victims.

Anna is soon to find out it is not only her inter-human connections that are at risk but her spatial cognition as well. Having lived in the Country for months, she eventually forgets about how people used to interact and form relations,

and comes to see the city as the only tangible place in the universe. Maya Merlob, while studying the relation between ontological split and experiential space in the novel, suggests that the first split is presented with the two worlds with which Anna is linked—her 'home' where she comes, a world that has not gone under the shadow of the apocalypse, and the unnamed Country where she dwells now, a world that is featured by destitution and hopelessness. Anna's tactics of survival is to resist any temptation to draw comparison between them so as to stay vigilant at the current moment. Such an intentional ontological split, as it turns out, inevitably hinders her perception of actual spatial relation. After Ferdinand's death⁴, she climbs up with Isabel, difficultly, onto the roof of the building, when she feels "startled to discover the ocean" and amazed at the fact that, "the city was not everywhere, that something existed beyond it, that there were other worlds besides this one" [25]. The city has taken away her liveliness, her memory and even her sense of spatial relation. The building is not tall, but still it provides a vision that reminds Anna of all the alternatives other than the crude scarcity of the Country, which eventually ignites her desire to leave.

It is observed that after a long time of inhabitation in the city, deterioration in mind and language capacity would occur concurrently with a discontinuous perception of time and space, since the latter has strong bearings on how an individual contemplates and expresses. A disconnection with language is first and foremost demonstrated as an incapability of expression, which Anna has witnessed in person taking care of Isabel in her deterioration into alalia – paralysis of the vocal cords resulting in an inability to speak. Facing Isabel's declining health and imminent death, Anna is forced into recognition that in order to reestablish and maintain her identity, she has to hold on to an interaction with others via the use of words. She records her feelings towards Isabel's loss of vocal functions: "A disintegrating body is one thing, but when the voice goes too, it feels as if the person is no longer there. ... Bit by bit, the whole world had slipped away from her, and now there was almost nothing left" [26]. An irreplaceable and complete identity, to a certain extent, is bound up with one's unique way to deliver her/his intentions. Having lost her control of the vocal cord, Isabel's contact with the world is then limited to her ability to write, which she loses soon after. Day by day she becomes even more isolated from the world and feels shut in an enclosed space where no sound is voiced and no words are written. She dies voiceless, wordless, with no substantial relation to the world, which yet again proves the transiency of continuity and connection in the Country of last things.

Isabel's infirmity and her gradually diminishing linguistic capacities serve as a constant reminder for Anna of the significance of language in relation to personal communication. Unfortunately, her new-gained vision is soon shattered. When she goes to the shore in the hope of leaving, she is shocked to discover an enormous sea wall is under construction, blocking the only way to escape. What is even more upsetting is her finding of how the city's

⁴ Anna has stopped before actually squeezing Ferdinand to death. But to her surprise, when she tries to wake him up the next morning, he has already died mysteriously. In Isabel's insistence, Anna assists her in moving Ferdinand up to the roof to pretend that he is a leaper.

monstrous consumption of objects has gradually devoured words and ideas about them. Simple words and concepts like 'plane' that have been engrained in the mind of every modern individual are slipping away from people's memory; she is even warned that she might get into trouble by mentioning this kind of ridiculous nonsense. Later in her letter, she tries, with difficulty, to explain how the relation between things and language has been deformed irrecoverably: "It's not just that things vanish—but once they vanish, the memory of them vanishes as well. Dark areas form in the brain, and unless you make a constant effort to summon up the things that are gone, they will quickly be lost to you forever" [27]. Having ignored her own memory for a long time, Anna's sense of connection is revived after her witness of linguistic deterioration as respectively manifested in Isabel and the sea-wall builder, one caused by disease and the other on account of fading memories. As she goes on pondering on the severity of the situation, she realizes that "the problem is not so much that people forget, but that they do not always forget the same thing" [28]. As people's memories weaken with missing pieces of words and expressions, it becomes even more difficult to form effective communication, for their respective image reservoirs as well as word pools have become fundamentally incompatible. This process represents essentially annihilation of meanings and relations. When eventually everyone harbors his own fractured memory and speaks his own incomprehensible language, interpersonal interaction, together with a continuous sense of time and space is made impossible in the Country.

C. Reestablishing Continuity out of Contingency

Continuity, be it a continuous perception of time or a sense of belonging to a community, is constantly under threats of universal contingencies, which is particularly true considering the unpredictable malice of the Country. Anna finds it almost impossible to reestablish her identity in relation to other human beings after Isabel's death, and though she has later found short periods of comfort and tranquility in the City Library and the Woburn House, which stand for a hopeful preservation of human intelligence and integrity, she soon learns such communities are but transient and illusive in the face of malicious schemes and inevitable chances.

It is in the library that Anna encounters Samuel Farr, who has been sent into the Country in place of her brother. To her great disappointment, Sam has no information about William, nor has he any intention of finding him. All he is capable of is to focus on a desperate endeavor to string the history of the Country in order to maintain a continuous, flowing sense of time. His approach is to conduct as many interviews as possible on his tightening budget, in the hope of encapsulating a panorama. Anna stays with Sam, and even participates in his project, yet she sees it as utterly useless and senseless. Responding to her anger and confusion, Sam explicates that the existence of the book serves as a necessity for him to maintain temporal and spatial connection, saying "If I ever stopped working on it, I'd be lost, I don't think I'd make it through another day." [29] More importantly, he is intent on taking the manuscript back home to disseminate the horrendous facts of the Country. Anna finds the daydreams nonsensical, but these ideas of preserving relation through

words later serve as her savior in constructing an uninterrupted perception of her own identities. Unfortunately, in the Country that devours humanity, any endeavor to preserve individual ideas is just as futile as the subsistence of collective intellect. The library, which, out of a policy of 'tolerance', provides asylum for scholars, writers, religious practitioners, and other remnants of flowing, interchanging human civilizations, is soon to become hostile to its lodgers due to the transient moods of the government. And even before the policy is implemented, contingency strikes, when the library, together with all of Sam's pages, is burnt down in a mysterious fire. Anna is once again lost in her connectionless solitude.

If the library, a colossal accumulation of words and wisdom, is in no defense of contingent happenings, the Woburn House, which stands for the last beacon of human decency and charity, is equally defenseless and futile. Run by Victoria Woburn, the house is dedicated to comforting the down-trodden on the street, offering food and accommodation for a few days. After Anna escapes from the human flesh mongers⁵, she is luckily kept in the House, where she is admitted to the community of the kind residents, and manages to establish a meaningful and productive relationship with Victoria. But as a member of the House, Anna is to contribute her part to help with the project, and she does so by taking interviews to determine the fortunate few who can earn temporary lodging and security. Eventually, she comes to believe that instead of offering hope and assistance, the House can supply no more than illusion and destruction, and she feels desperate, as "[t]hey all wanted to tell their stories, and I had no choice but to listen. It was a different story every time, and yet each story was finally the same. The strings of bad luck, the miscalculations, the growing weight of circumstances." [30] These interviews, not unlike the ones conducted by Sam with the inhabitants of the Country, are but disjointed insights of the disorganized, malfunctioning, and morally degenerated city. Continuity is out of the question, for none of the participants can will her/himself into a continuous, interrelated account. Every single story is discontinuous and connectionless save for their common element of contingencies. In the very core, all speakers are restrained by the same language pattern, and due to their deteriorated ability to remember, contemplate, and imagine, they are caged in the same spatial and temporal prisons. Although she is flooded with words, Anna is yet to figure out how to relocate herself in the continuous flow of community.

In the end, it is Boris Stepanovich, the Woburn House supplier, who has brought Anna fully back to life by showering her with his affluent reservoir of words and boundless self-accounts. During the first days of their acquaintance, Anna often feels lost in his "obscure pronouncements," "elliptical allusions," and simple remarks "embellished...with such ornate imagery" [31]. Gradually she realizes that all the flamboyance is but a camouflage of his fear of being pinned down. Out of that fear, he creates a

⁵ Sam and Anna fall in love and become life partners when staying together in the Library. However, Anna later loses her unborn child when she jumps out of a window, escaping from the human flesh mongers, while Sam becomes homeless after the Library fire. They reunite at the Woburn House, and together, they stay and help Victoria maintain her project.

language that is as swift and darting as himself, telling stories with paradoxical details until Anna gives up finding out the truth or believing in any single version. She is particularly impressed with Boris' poised ease in his production of texts, for he does not expect others to accept his accounts as real but meanwhile has never treated his imaginations as lies. Amazed by his vitality, which constitutes stark contrast to the staleness of everyone else around him, Anna ascribes his unrestrained, highly inflated and ostentatious invention as a means to alter his perception of the apocalyptic scenes, commenting, "They were part of an almost conscious plan to concoct a more pleasant world for himself—a world that could shift according to his whims, that was not subject to the same laws and bleak necessities that dragged down all the rest of us" [32]. Because he has applied a more liberal attitude towards language, never imposing any authorial control on his meanings, he is able to create endless texts of immense freedom as a defense against the despotic rule of the Country.

With Boris' exhibition of limitless creation, Anna has come to consider actively engaging in solitary writing to contain her shattered perceptions of time in flowing, vibrant continuity. Her state of solitude is a result of both circumstances and personal choice: she remains solitary during her days of street roaming, and even after she lives with Isabel and Ferdinand, and later Samuel and Victoria, she preserves her moments in solitude to reflect and meditate, the outcome of which is a detachment from her imminent danger and a more insightful observation of the destructive effects of the Country on its victims. Though never a particularly literary figure, she now picks up a pen and starts her story of the apocalyptic Country, writing on the notebook that Isabel has left behind, Anna feels part of her dear friend has been inherited by her—the words she is writing are the ones that Isabel would have written, and the disintegrated Isabel has passed on to Anna's identity and lives on with her. She cannot help but contemplate: "If Isabel had not lost her voice, none of these words would exist. Because she had no more words, these other words have come out of me." [33] In this sense, the story that she produces is not just a record of the present but also a passage to link the past to the current and probably to a historically intersubjective future.

A taste of remembrance and connection soon stirs a reflective urge within Anna, and she is torn between her desires to communicate with herself and to reach out to a particular reader, someone who is distant from her not only in space but in mentality as well. She confesses that her desire to form relation has been recent, while her desire to write is irresistible—"if I don't quickly write it down, my head will burst. It doesn't matter if you read it. It doesn't even matter if I send it—assuming that could be done" [34]. Although her narration has addressed to 'you' from beginning to end, she is clearly aware of the necessity of her writing as a means to communicate not only with the recipient but with herself as well. Accordingly, her narrative is simultaneously a diary and a letter, where she explores within and reaches far away. With luck, the letter is finally received and read by its receiver, making Anna's memories communal. Knowledge of the destitution and dissolution of the city, which previously evades the recipient, has thence become part of his intersubjective memory. Just as Sam has anticipated for his own book, Anna's detailed depictions of the Country, mixed

with her confusions of disintegration and disconnection, have served as an aperture for the outsiders to glimpse into the ruthless oppression of the city, facilitating inter-relative communication between the worlds. In this sense, even though Anna has remained solitary, she is never really alone. Instead, she has found a way to reconnect to herself, with the Country, and even to the world beyond.

Writing in the Country of last things requires not only perception but also self-inspection and a keen sense of inter-relation. Most of Anna's endeavors to seek connection and continuity, together with efforts made by the people around her, have been frustrated by chance catastrophes and inexplicable contingencies. Yet, the confidence of retaining sustainable communities, as reflected by Isabel and Victoria, and the insistence on maintaining a continuous sense of the self, as demonstrated by Sam and Boris, have all become collective, intersubjective experiences of Anna, urging her to pursue continuity out of contingency. When she at last takes the initiative to write, she separates herself from the rest of the citizens in that she becomes a participant of an intersubjective and intertextual history. She strives to look back and forward, so as to inspect inward and outward. Though any kind of continuity in time, space, language or interpersonal bonds is but tentative and transient, she is capable of envisioning her solitary self in relation to a larger community in the flow of continuous human history. Approaching the end, Anna plans to leave the Country with Samuel, Victoria and Boris to "a world that has never existed before" [35]. Traveling in utmost gloominess, she still promises to write again after they get to their destination; thus, the unfinished letter with no further information symbolizes hope rather than despair, and if her solitary writing survives, part of her will get to live on.

IV. CONCLUSION

In the Country of Last Things serves as an apt example of Auster's concerns of solitary individuals within the context of postmodernity, as it demonstrates a sharp historical and social sense in its depiction of the gruesome Country. The description might be an exaggerated, overly depressive version of the postmodern society, yet it has nonetheless shed light on the conundrum an individual has to face in a defamiliarizing, indeterminate age. Examining Anna's struggle of striking a balance between retaining her solitary self and committing to a community, Auster speaks to the universal dilemma of postmodernity and presents solitude as a common, global, human condition. On the other hand, he has never forced any continuity into the postmodern; he is simply seeking a relatively continuous sense of time and personal contact through recognizing one's place in the flow of historical existence. While he appears to have repeatedly suggested solitary writing as the solution to discontinuity, his attitude remains tentative and uncertain. Or at the very least, he believes it is through a willing, proactive participation into collective, intersubjective experiences that a writer stands a slim chance of restoring continuity out of indeterminacy and contingency. Auster's exploration is still in process, and with his effort, the concept and meanings of solitude will be inspected in endless reservoirs of existential intertexts that include and go beyond postmodernity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The deepest gratitude I owe is to my supervisor, Prof. David Huddart at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, who has been most instructive and insightful. My husband, Huang Chunyong, with his sustained love and patience, deserves all the compliments in the world.

REFERENCES

- [1] P. Koch, *Solitude, a Philosophical Encounter*, Open Court Publishing Co., 1994, pp. 231.
- [2] P. Auster, *Collected Prose*, Picador USA, 2005, pp. 4.
- [3] P. Auster, *The Art of Hunger*, London: Penguin Books, 1998, pp. 313.
- [4] P. Auster, *Collected Prose*; Picador USA, 2005, pp. 15.
- [5] P. Auster, *The Art of Hunger*, London: Penguin Books, 1998, pp. 314.
- [6] P. Auster, *The Art of Hunger*, London: Penguin Books, 1998, pp. 315.
- [7] P. Auster, *The Art of Hunger*, London: Penguin Books, 1998, pp. 315-316.
- [8] P. Auster, *Collected Prose*, Picador USA, 2005, pp. 118.
- [9] I. H. Hassan, "From Postmodernism to Postmodernity: The Local/Global Context," *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 1-13, 2001.
- [10] L. Newcomb, "'A little universe for themselves': Narrative and community in postmodern American fiction," PhD dissertation, Dept. English, The University of South Dakota, Dakota, U. S. 2014.
- [11] P. Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, London: Faber and Faber, 1987, pp. 178.
- [12] P. Auster, *The Art of Hunger*, London: Penguin Books, 1998, pp. 287-288.
- [13] P. Auster, *The Art of Hunger*, London: Penguin Books, 1998, pp. 284.
- [14] P. Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, pp. 18.
- [15] P. Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, pp. 1.
- [16] P. Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, pp. 2.
- [17] E. Wesseling, "In the country of last things: Paul Auster's parable of the apocalypse," *Neophilologus*, vol. 75, no. 4, pp. 496-504, 1991.
- [18] T. Woods, "'Looking for signs in the air': Urban space and the postmodern in *In the Country of Last Things*," in *Paul Auster*, H. Bloom, Ed. Chelsea House Publishers, 2003, pp. 137-60.
- [19] P. Auster, *The Art of Hunger*; London: Penguin Books, 1998, pp. 285.
- [20] P. Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, pp. 6.
- [21] P. Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, pp. 38.
- [22] P. Auster, *The Art of Hunger*, London: Penguin Books, 1998, pp. 321.

- [23] P. Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, pp. 49.
- [24] P. Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, pp. 65.
- [25] P. Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, pp. 74.
- [26] P. Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, pp. 78.
- [27] P. Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, pp. 87.
- [28] P. Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, pp. 88.
- [29] P. Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, pp. 104.
- [30] P. Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, pp. 103-104.
- [31] P. Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, pp. 145.
- [32] P. Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, pp. 147.
- [33] P. Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, pp. 79.
- [34] P. Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, pp. 3.
- [35] P. Auster, *In the Country of Last Things*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, pp. 188.



R. Chen was born in Guangzhou, China, on September 27, 1982. She obtained her B.A. in English education from Guangzhou University (Guangzhou, China) in 2005, before she pursued her graduate studies in literary theory at Sun Yat-sen University (Guangzhou, China) and earned her M.A. in 2008. Following that, she furthered her study at the Department of English at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (Kong Kong, China) and received her PhD degree in literary studies in 2017 with her dissertation "'It's one of the conditions of being human'—Paul Auster's Intertextual and Intersubjective Invention of Solitude".

She is now a teacher of the School of Foreign Studies at Guangdong University of Finance and Economics (Guangzhou, China), specializing in literature and translation. Her previous experience consists of 4 years of teaching at 2 colleges in Guangzhou and 3 years of tutorship at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her research interests include postmodern literature, literary theory, existential phenomenology, and translation.

Dr. Chen is now in the process of translating several books, including *Night and Day*, *The Haunted Bookshop*, *A Wayfarer in China: Impressions of a Trip across West China and Mongolia*, and *Glimpses of an Unfamiliar Japan*.