Lorestan University

Qualitative Inquiry as Praxis in L2 Studies

Journal homepage: https://quipls.lu.ac.ir/

Research Paper

The "Hotel Existence": A Critical Examination of the Concept of utopia in Paul Auster's The Brooklyn Follies

Mohammad-Javad Haj'jari[*, a]

[a]*Department of English Language and Literature, Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran. Email: hajjari.mohammad@razi.ac.ir; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2704-4930*

ARTICLE INFO

Article Type

Original Article

Article History

Received: 2025-05-27

Received in Revised Form: 2025-06-04

Accepted: 2025-06-05

Available Online: 2025-06-05

***Keywords*:**

Brooklyonolgy, Diversity, Existence, Existentialist café, Solitude

ABSTRACT

Utopias frequently fail to materialize because of the constraints inherent in each society. Yet, by unveiling human beings' essential needs in society, not limiting it to the very essential needs of life, envisioning a feasible utopia can happen in practice. This paper critically examines how Paul Auster's utopian impulse in The Brooklyn Follies provides an image of the ideal place regarding individual calm and communal well-being, highlighting the existential authenticity it can bestow upon humanity. In this sense, this study concentrates on Auster's conception of the "Hotel Existence", well-developed throughout the novel, as a metaphor for connecting individual serenity with communal welfare. By exploring the dimensions of Auster's rural and urban utopias in his Brooklyn novel – each imbued with civil tolerance and diversity – this paper examines how the novel portrays Brooklyn as an idealized living space that represents the alternative United States that could exist in Auster's parallel words.

1. Introduction

A reengagement with the classical notion of utopia – after the tradition established by Thomas More in his eponymous work in 1516 – by considering it as a dynamic interplay between place-making and ideological aspiration invites both historical reinterpretation and contemporary

[*]Corresponding Author
Email address: hajjari.mohammad@razi.ac.ir

How to cite this article: Haj'jari, M. (2025). The "Hotel Existence": A critical examination of the concept of utopia in Paul Auster's The Brooklyn Follies. *Qualitative Inquiry as Praxis in L2 Studies, 1*(1), 158-174.
DOI: 10.22034/quipls.2025.2061779.1009

critical analysis. As Kelly and Paz (2023) argue, the prefix "u [meaning 'no'] . . . negates the term topos" or place, implying that if utopia is essentially "non-existent," it can be either a good or a bad place. A good place, however, is expressed by "eutopia, where the prefix eu means good" (p. 7). The interchangeable common usage of the two terms, similarly pronounced, is thus a mistake that never shows the ontological distinction that exists between them. As Sargent argues, "utopias have been written from every conceivable position", including all the real and imaginary isms one may envisage (p. 21). Making distinctions between a non-existent place and an good one is thus important since "with the advent of the industrial revolution and the emergence of global capitalism, new forms of utopian text would emerge" (Kelly and Paz, 2023, p. 7). For the sake of clarity, as 'utopia' is more common than 'eutopia' in utopian studies, the former is used to denote the latter henceforward.

Ruth Levitas, the famous scholar on utopian studies, argues that utopia cannot be strictly defined as far as it involves "form, function or content, or some combination of these" in terms of which "broad/narrow distinction[s]" cut across each other in defining utopia (2013, p. 207). Moreover, foe some scholars, utopias are defined mostly as places with idealistic systems of government and civil rights "imposed from above" (p. 223), the contributions of individuals as the backbones of their societies are rather ignored, particularly when real utopias are concerned. Such portraits, ignoring individual contributions, come from "origin and destination myths, where the good life is not available to us in this world but is confined to a lost golden age or a world beyond death" (Levitas, 2013, p. 1). In this sense, utopia is understood as "a good, but non-existent and therefore impossible, society", stemming from Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (p. 2). Nonetheless, there is a realistic aspect in the formation of a utopia, and that is for each individual to wish the best not only for him/herself but also for others in the community. If, on spiritual terms, life is from Heaven to Heaven, so what about our earthly condition? As far as the human reality stands, we occupy some space in eternity, and that space is the Earth. So, it is up to us to make a heaven or hell out of it. For example, when the earthly utopia is concerned, utopian literature highlights the socio-political aspects of an ideal society or community, as in Plato's Republic, although his world is not utopian per se regarding the unequal distribution of civil rights to all citizens (see Santas, 2018).

On more practical grounds, utopia is about our way of living and the kind of a world we may have only if we tend our manners for the best regarding two essential elements: desire and hope. For Levitas, "the essence of utopia seems to be … the desire for a different, better way of being (2013, p. 209). Desire incorporates "the imagining of a state of being in which

the problems which actually confront us are removed or resolved" (p. 221). Added to that is hope for a world having originated from our desires. Nevertheless, the question is whether human desire can be defined in a way to include all human beings' desires and not just those a few. This is the utopian "impulse" then that "is grounded in the human capacity, and need, for fantasy; the perpetual conscious and unconscious rearranging of reality and one's place in it. It is the attempt to create an environment in which one is truly at ease" (Geoghegan, 2008, p. 2). As such, "no universal utopia" can come true since each human being has different needs (Levitas, 2013, p. 213), but a utopian society that can cover each individual need can be hoped for and is even possible. However, utopia is considered as "a social construct" building upon "a socially constructed response" to fill in the gaps between people's needs and their available satisfaction (p. 209). In this sense, "utopia, ideology and equity" are the integrated variables that "condition and inform urban text[s]" (Kelly and Paz, 2023, p. 7). In other words, imagined utopias draw from certain ideologies for providing equity for all species, while the variables above, in definition and practice, are themselves subject to change from society to society.

Paul Auster's Brooklyn, which seems to be "a communal space", is made up of small and large communities and, consequently, encourages "participation and engagement, and expression of its polyphony" among its citizens. These elements abound in some of his fiction set in Brooklyn (Trofimova, 2014, p. 156). Among his novels, *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005), henceforward *BF*, is Auster's "most humane and most positive book" in this regard (Trofimova, 2014, p. 43). It revolves around the life story of Nathan Glass and his family and friends in Brooklyn as he recounts them in his late fifties. The novel is actually a long episode of Nathan's life written in retrospective in a contemplative manner that not only highlights how he developed a change of worldview in Brooklyn but also how his presence led others to experience similar changes. Meanwhile, termed as "a violent return of socio-political reality into Auster's fictional universe" (p. 251), *BF* expresses Auster's anger at Bush II's election in 2000 that led to a series of socio-political crises and 9/11. According to Auster in an interview with Mary Morris in 2005, *BF* is "a book about a collapsing society" (as cited in Hutchisson, 2013, p. 165). It is within such political turmoil that Nathan appears to deal with not only his own personal problems but also others' existential crises. Auster acknowledges his obsession with Brooklyn in his life and fiction in *BF* in a way that his existential utopia is introduced via the concept of the "Hotel Existence". This term has different meanings for each character as he/she tries to maintain their sense of living despite the discouraging circumstances of what Auster calls "a collapsing society" (as cited Hutchisson 2013, p. 165). In this sense, Auster's

eleventh novel is an exploration of "friendship and family in a metropolitan setting" (Brown, 2007, p. 94), which is definitely Brooklyn. The characters' arguments during the novel over what an ideal place can be lead us back and forward to this initial image of the most populous and racially diverse borough of New York. In this light, *BF* explores "the real Brooklyn" as explored by Nathan (Auster, 2005, p. 100), as if it is a travel guide for any tourist. As such, *BF* explores "two places, one real and one imaginary" (Brown, 2007, p. 96). Brooklyn is the real one as a utopian place for a mindset like that of Nathan who tries his best to help people around him with their self-integrity. In addition, the "Hotel Existence" is the imaginary utopia that constitutes the essence of a possible world away from reality.

2. The "Hotel Existence" as a utopia

Auster's title for the first draft of *BF* was "Dream Days at the Hotel Existence" (Trofimova, 2014, p. 152). The fact he ultimately came up with *The Brooklyn Follies*, however, has not changed anything about the fantastic life within a utopian hotel as the early title suggests, considering the ideal living places that Auster depicts in it. What unites all these places is an element of seclusion from the catastrophic world outside; everyone within these shelters has the possibility to give themselves the possibility of serving themselves away from everydayness and the crowded world outside.

During the course of *BF*, characters are after an ideal place for either living or dying. Nathan begins his story by recalling a time when he "was looking for a quiet place to die". On someone's suggestion, he travels back to Brooklyn, his birthplace, from Westchester after fifty-six years, "crawling home like some wounded dog" (Auster, 2005, p. 1). Nevertheless, what he thinks to be his deathbed turns out to be a haven of life and happiness; he is back to his birthplace to start all over again. For Brown, "The idea of a place of imagination to escape to and remake the self" dominates *BF* (2010, p. 535). The first image of the ideal place to live is thus Brooklyn itself. Auster has declared in an interview that *BF* is "about the spirit of Brooklyn" (as cited in Hutchisson, 2013, p. 172). The late Auster himself lived in Brooklyn for a long time; it was a place affording him "a personal sense of well-being and belonging" (Brown, 2007, p. 94). It is, therefore, not far-fetched to grasp that Auster's Brooklynolgy finds a colorful map in the sole novel that bears the name of the borough of his settlement.

Auster also delineates an imaginary utopia called the "Hotel Existence". Tom, Nathan's nephew, in analyzing some works by E. A. Poe and H. D. Thoreau, initially highlights this concept. Tom's PhD dissertation, "Imaginary Edens: The Life of the Mind in Pre-Civil War

America", was about "nonexistent worlds" in light of Poe and Thoreau (Auster, 2005, p. 14). It was "a study of the inner refuge, a map of the place a man goes to when life in the real world is no longer possible" – for Nathan, that inner refuge is "the mind" (p. 15). Back then, Tom was after an imaginary place to live away from the real world, while Nathan was looking for a peaceful place to die in the real world. Tom's imaginary world is modelled after Poe's philosophy of space in "The Philosophy of Furniture", "Landor's Cottage", and "The Domain of Arnheim", respectively describing "the ideal room, the ideal house, and the ideal … landscape", together constituting "a fully elaborated system of human longing" (Auster, 2005, p. 15). Poe's ideal room, according to Tom, is "a vault of contemplation, a noiseless sanctuary where the soul can at last find a measure of peace. Impossibly Utopian? Yes. But also a sensible alternative to the conditions of the time" (p. 16). 'Utopian,' as Kirkpatrick (1983) explains, means "one who imagines or believes in a Utopia" or "one who advocates impracticable reforms or who expects an impossible state of perfection in society" (p. 143). However, the practical possibility of the term is more at hand in Poe, and likewise in Tom's, view. Tom then refers to Thoreau to examine "the room, the house, and the landscape as presented in Walden" (Auster, 2005, p. 15). Thoreau took refuge in the outskirts of Concord for two years, living on his own to write Walden, and Poe "withdrew into a dream of perfection", as manifested in his "The Philosophy of Furniture" where one can discover his imaginary room set for reading and writing in peace – "a place to read, write, and think" (p. 16). It is implied that, for Poe, "literature and the imagination can create spaces where the self can be recreated and renewed" (Brown, 2010, p. 537). Tom believes that Poe and Thoreau made the best choice in the political turmoil of their era to live their lives in full existential control by taking refuge to their "Hotel Existence". As Levitas says, a utopian imagination can also be "the wish that things might be otherwise," that life "does not have to be like this" (2010, p. 1). Despite the characters' struggles, the utopian vision in the novel incorporates a persistent sense of hope. Auster suggests that even when personal and societal failures are widespread, the potential for redemption and connection still exists. For Tedde (2006), Brooklyn itself represents a microcosm of the "Other America," a "fictional country" as "the combination of ideas and ideals of an intellectual tradition that descends from the nineteenth century fathers of American literature." Tedde refers to Walt Whitman's essay "Democratic Vistas" as "a founding document of this tradition" that turned into a model for the twentieth century to permanently defy "America's materialistic society, backed by the ideals of equality, freedom, and social justice (p. 10).

The concept of an ideal living place away from one's society is further developed through a conversation between Nathan, Tom, and Harry Dunkel, Tom's employer and the owner of a bookstore in Brooklyn. This conversation occupies a whole chapter, "A Night of Eating and Drinking", and resembles a one-act play with the stage scenery at the beginning and lines for three characters throughout. Tom starts the discussion by emphasizing his former points to Nathan: by an ideal place, he is "not talking about saving the world" but himself and those he cares about (Auster, 2005, p. 98). For Harry, "The world stinks" but "we do our best to avoid it". Such optimism raises Tom's objection: "No we don't. We're right in the thick of it, … You'd think World War Two would have settled things . . . But . . . we still hate each other as much as we ever did." In Tom's opinion, politics, economics and greed have made the United States a "horrible place" (p. 99). Consequently, his intolerance of this condition has pushed him toward "Imaginary Edens", or, as Nathan reflects, a place "to live life on your own terms". However, in order to move to such a place, one should be ready to reject society towards the inner sphere when life in the real world is intolerable (p. 100). In Harry's worldview, everyone might have one of these places, including himself whose refuge is called the "Hotel Existence". When he was ten, during WWII, he used to walk past some hotels on his trips downtown with his mother. One Sunday afternoon, he developed a concept about hotels as "special places, fortresses that protected you from the squalor and meanness of everyday life". For him,

> The sole purpose of a hotel was to make you happy and comfortable, and once you signed the register and went upstairs to your room, all you had to do was ask for something and it was yours. A hotel represented the promise of a better world, a place that was more than just a place, but an opportunity, a chance to live inside your dreams. (p. 101)

The same Sunday afternoon, while he was listening to a program on the radio, someone was talking about "human existence", "the laws of existence", and "the perils we must face in the course of our existence". These words stroke Harry with an idea that "existence was bigger than just life. It was everyone's life all together … What happened to you was just as important as what happened to everyone else". Consequently, he invented a place called the "Hotel Existence" as "a retreat", a world to visit in his mind to "escape" (pp. 101-102). Escape as such provides the chance to live in another world away from the laws of existence, if only for a moment. Although Harry confesses that the idea was childish at his age, he revised it in his high school years as "a refuge for lost children" in Europe who had lost their fathers and

mothers in the war and bombings, respectively. Seeing himself as "a fearless, altruistic soul", Harry wanted back then to be their messiah to fulfill his "mission" and aims in life (p. 102). Harry's initial self-comfort in his initial "Hotel Existence" thus changed to a rural place of comfort for the miserable: "It wasn't my job to run the hotel – only to find the children and take them there" until the last moment of war (p. 103). However, as the war ended, Harry gave up on his dreams and shut down his imaginary hotel. He reopened it in his sophomore year as "a much smaller and shabbier" place located in large cities "where real life began only after dark" (p. 103). Those places were filled with "perfume and silk suits and warm skin" and stylish people walking around with highballs and cigarettes in their hands, with a piano bar and a casino and a ballroom, with the infinite pleasure of deciding with whom to sleep later that night (104). Although Tom calls Harry's latest ideal place as somewhere to do adolescent stuff, Harry believes that it was "the product of a rich inner life". His final point is that "each man's Hotel Existence is different from all the others" (p. 105).

Tom then modifies his concept of an ideal place as living differently. It is as Levitas puts it, "to live in a new way"; if he cannot change the world, at least, he can try to change himself; "the function of utopia is necessarily that of change" (2010, p. 1). However, Tom does not want to do it all alone. He does not know what his "Hotel Existence" is, but it may have "something to do with living with others, with getting away from this rat hole of a city and sharing a life with people I love and respect". It is "a community" somewhere far away from city life, with enough land and buildings to accommodate everyone desiring to be with you (Auster, 2005, p. 106). The idea sounds pleasant to both Nathan and Harry, but the money to buy such a land is lacking. Harry makes some promises since he has a plan to raise big money in near future so that they can make their dream come true, "a wild dream of removing ourselves from the cares and sorrows of this miserable world and creating a world of our own" (108). This dream place turns out to be in Vermont. Once that Nathan and Tom are on their way there to leave Tom's nephew, Lucy, with his stepsister, they have to stay a couple of days in a rest resort called "The Chowder Inn". It is "a three-story white house with sixteen rooms and a wraparound front porch". The appearance of the inn invokes Nathan with an image of the "Hotel Existence" they are after (p. 168). "I want to talk about happiness and well-being," Nathan thus begins the chapter in which the Chowder Inn appears:

I want to talk about happiness and well-being, about those rare, unexpected moments when the voice in your head goes silent and you feel at one with the world.

I want to talk about the early June weather, about harmony and blissful repose, about robins and yellow finches and blue-birds darting past the green leaves of trees.

I want to talk about the benefits of sleep, about the pleasures of food and alcohol, about what happens to your mind when you step into the light of the two o'clock sun and feel the warm embrace of air around your body.

I want to talk about Tom and Lucy, about Stanley Chowder and the four days we spent at the Chowder Inn, about the thoughts we thought and the dreams we dreamed on that hilltop in southern Vermont.

I want to remember the cerulean dusks, the languorous, rosy dawns the bears yelping in the woods at night.

I want to remember it all. (p. 166)

Nathan's desire to "feel at one with the world" is fulfilled when he enters the Chowder Inn and witnesses the inherent peace. For Auster in an interview in 2017, the "Hotel Existence" is "a fantasy, a utopia", an "ideal world" and a "dream world". He continues that Tom's paper on Thoreau's Walden and the three pieces by Poe is important in this regard: "The ideal landscape, the ideal house, the ideal room – which for both writers meant a place to think and work, an escape from American reality" bring "a sense of safety and protection" (Auster and Siegumfeldt, 2017, pp. 233-234). There also exists "a rural version" of the Hotel Existence, that is, "the Chowder Inn", as Siegumfeldt tells Auster (p. 233). Since the rural setting is closer to Tom, Nathan, and Harry's ultimate version of the "Hotel Existence", the Chowder Inn stands for Auster's utopia in the novel. Nathan decides to talk Harry into buying the Chowder Inn, a decision that remains unfulfilled due to Harry's death.

The Chowder Inn can also suggest a temporary shelter from state corruption. There in the Inn, Tom talks against the tendency of the right-wing takeover of America, saying, "We are marching backwards. Every day we lose another piece of our country. If Bush is elected, there won't be anything left", and that "the government would be controlled by lunatics" (Auster, 2005, p. 175). Nathan's reference to "the 2000 election disaster" (p. 244), through which "Bush was illegally handed the election" (p. 277), also points to Auster's anger at socio-political corruption of the era. As such, life within the borders of such society, ruled intolerably by the abusers of power, does not make anything but a dystopia. Conversely, as Levitas argues, utopia can even be "the expression of desire [for a better condition], or a criticism of existing conditions" (2013, p. 221).

In contrast to the "Hotel Existence" lies "The Temple of Holy Word", a small group of sixty members, where Reverend Bob has banned everything (Auster, 2005, 251). The information surrounding this place is only available through Aurora, Tom's sister, whose husband was a follower of Reverend Bob. While the "Hotel Existence" helps with personal comfort and mental peace, Reverend Bob's church is harsher than any orthodox religion. Through "Sunday Edicts", everyone must get rid of their television sets, radios, telephones, computers, CDs, tapes, records and books except the Bible (p. 264). The members must even "maintain a full and unbroken silence for twenty-four straight hours" once a week (p. 252). In other words, Bob's ethical principles, which turn out to be debaucheries, focus on the simplification of life to the least means of survival. However, there is no similarity between such restricted way of living and Thoreau's simple life in the woods. Following Bob, David Minor, Aurora's husband, has also turned their house into a dystopia.

Back in Brooklyn due to Harry's tragic death and the probable postponement of establishing the "Hotel Existence", Nathan and Tom make a small community of family and friends. The connotations of "community", according to Brown, is an important theme in Auster's fiction, although it has merely "the conventional sense of place-bound neighborhood" (2007, p. 163). In this sense, "searching for utopia" is a theme of the novel (Egaitsu, 2007, p. 6), making the "Hotel Existence" act as a dreamlike place within the failing American Dream. However, the final revelation for Nathan directs him back to the real world and his search for a realistic utopia. Anxieties about the mundane issues at hand, unexpected events, and "the unstoppable brooding about massacres in distant places," Nathan reflects, "remind me there is no escape from the wretchedness that stalks the earth. Not even on the remotest hilltop in southern Vermont. Not even behind the locked doors and bolted porticoes of the make-believe sanctuary known as the Hotel Existence" (Auster, 2005, p. 189). In other words, these pressing thoughts lead him back to the reality of his house and neighborhood, family and friends, and the routine affairs of humankind. The novel deals with "the themes of urban redemption," as Brown says (2010, p. 67). However, as the ideal rural place to match one's internal peace is not accessible, Brooklyn becomes the last resort.

3. Hotel Existence: The Existential Café of Literary Minds

On a deeper level, Auster's "Hotel Existence" incorporates the community of writers who have inspired him. As Theobald says, "Hotel Existence . . . represents Auster's links to Transcendentalism and American Renaissance fiction, as well as his engagement with French

philosophy . . . it places itself in between . . . intersubjectivity and existence as 'being in and of the world'" (2019, p. 314). The chapter entitled "A Night of Eating and Drinking", discussed above, unfolds in a French restaurant in Brooklyn and introduces the idea of the "Hotel Existence". Together with the chapter entitled "Riding North", Auster points to several writers who directly influenced him. In Brown's view, Auster has "acknowledged his debt to a 'community' of writers and a literary heritage," including Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Nathaniel West, the New York Language poets, European modernists such as Mallarmé and Kafka (2010, pp. 163-64), as well as the writers he has translated, praised in his essays, and reflected on in his fiction, especially Thoreau. This community of writers, dispersed in time, gather around the same table in Auster's mind as a café hosting literary figures talking about the human condition. No matter what Auster's "Hotel Existence", Chowder Inn, Brooklyn or his mind are, they all look like an "existentialist café" that Bakewell has modelled after Sartre's philosophy (2016, p. 26). As Bakewell argues, "the existentialist subculture" of the 1940s had its settlement about the Saint-Germain-des-Prés church on the Left Bank of Paris. Sartre and Beauvoir used to write in cafés, and their favorites were Café de Flore, the Deux Magots, and the Bar Napoléon, all in the same region. In these places, Sartre and Beauvoir met "friends, colleagues, artists, writers, students and lovers", all simultaneously talking and smoking (p. 11). As such, the lives of these existentialists – Sartre, Beauvoir, Jaspers, Camus, Merleau-Ponty, and their readers and critics – were spent in their cafés "reading, writing, drinking, falling in and out of love, making friends, and talking about ideas", as if "life would always be one big existentialist café" (p. 26). The second floor of these cafés had been literally "converted into a kind of a writing room, where dozens of intellectuals did their work" (Stern, 1967, p. 16). Blackwell imagines the intellectuals above all at the same place as if they were involved in "a multilingual, multisided conversation" in "a big, busy café of the mind, probably a Parisian one, full of life and movement, noisy with talk and thought, and definitely an inhabited café" (1967, p. 32). These figures, "Sartre's group of iconoclasts and provocateurs", revolved around him and his friend Paul Nisan, spending their time "sitting in cafés, loudly slaughtering the sacred cows of philosophy, literature and bourgeois behavior to anyone who ventured into their ambit" (p. 111). Cafés such as the Flore were not only centers for the learned and knowledge. Comparing to "the sparse, cheap hotels in which many lived without heating or proper cooking facilities", these cafés were the most preferable places to keep warm even after WWII. The culture emerging in such cafés continued to be "a focus for Parisian life". They also turned into places "to talk, to conspire a little, to keep one's mind alive". They somehow governed Beauvoir's

and Sartre's "social lives" that included ever-increasing acquaintances with "poets, playwrights, journalists, artists like Pablo Picasso and Alberto Giacometti, and avant-garde writers such as Michel Leiris, Raymond Queneau and Jean Genet" (p. 141). As Stern says,

> What the Academy was for Plato, the Lyceum for the Peripatetics, the Café de Flore was for Existentialism, for a long time . . . After the liberation it became the center of what the Argentine philosopher Emilio Esti called "exitencialismo turístico," touristic Existentialism. (1967, p. 14)

It is interesting to know that some of Sartre's examples about his philosophical terms are set in cafés – one's absence in a café, the waiter in a café, the coquette in a café. With regard to Pierre's absence in a café, Pierre being Sartre's first actor for philosophical role-plays in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre reveals that "the café by itself with its patrons, its tables, its booths, its mirrors, its light, its smoky atmosphere, and the sounds of voices, rattling saucers, and footsteps which fill it – . . . is a fullness of being" (1956, p. 9).

Auster's stay in France in the 1970s and his acquaintance with the French culture seem to have affected his own version of the concept of an ideal place for the mind. The French restaurant where the conversation about the "Hotel Existence" happens in *BF* makes it clear why it is a French one and not an American one. "For the French in the 1940s," Bakewell says, "it [Existentialism] tended to be seen as new, jazzy, sexy and daring. For Americans, it evoked grimy cafés and shadowy Parisian streets: it meant old Europe" (2016, p. 167). For the American Nathan and his community at the beginning of the twenty-first century and on the verge of another catastrophe, the 9/11, the restaurants and cafés in Brooklyn have somehow the same freedom that the Parisian existentialist cafés of the 1940s had. It is not surprising that Harry expresses his libertine desires in the company of his friends at a French restaurant, Tom expresses his wishes for a rural utopia in the same place, and Nathan regularly satisfies his taste in Brooklyn public cafés and restaurants not only with drinks and food but also with the feeling of cultural diversity and tolerance. Auster's "existentialist café" thus expands to the size of Brooklyn.

For Solomon, just as Plato's "imagined ideal Republic" resembled his contemporary Athens, "our fantasies hug pretty close to the facts of our reality" (2006, p. 136). On similar terms, Nathan is "perfectly content" with the decision he made "to settle in Brooklyn" as he finds out that the city agrees with him on all grounds (Auster, *Brooklyn,* p. 180). Although the story line in *BF* ends less than an hour before the first attack against the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, Auster has declared that his objective was to talk about "life in New

York before 9/11" (Auster & Siegumfeldt, 2017, p. 229). Auster himself seems to have taken refuge in his writing in this regard. *BF*, as he tells us in an interview, was "an attempt to write a kind of comedy" (as cited in Hutchisson, 2013, p. 155), because he felt sad by the time of the catastrophe:

> when you're feeling really happy, that's the moment to write a tragedy. And when you're feeling low, do a comedy. And I've been feeling so bad about America, and Bush, and the war, and all the terrible things we've gotten ourselves into, that I've tried to keep my spirits up by writing a comedy. (Auster, 2005, pp. 164-165)

In this sense, the word of the novel that stands out as a comedy for Auster seems to be his existentialist café in the midst of socio-political upheavals that America was experiencing at the turn of the century. August's utopian case belongs to the "spaces of imagination" which are "intended by their creators to act as a refuge from the cruel practices of the world" (Brown, 2007, p. 129). Although it is a defense mechanism against reality, it gives the power to imagine what could be done in the past and what can be done to face reality in the future.

4. Brooklyn as an Urban Utopia

Auster's urban utopia does not divert from the tradition, as Kelly and Paz argue:

> The writers that defined the genre of utopian literature from the early sixteenth century onwards into the early modern period. . . could not have developed the idea . . . without the notion of a fixed land on which the utopian community is located. Such imagined lands contain systematic urban visions that utopian citizens inhabit. (2023, p. 4)

Besides, urban utopias designate "full and general equality" as their "axiomatic horizon" (p. 5). It drives from the utopian principle that "social equality is more humane than hierarchy" (Barzun, 2000, p. 127). On this basis, Levites explains "the ontological aspect" of utopia as the individuals that inhabit it as well as "the social configurations" that it enables (Levitas, 2013, p. 177). That is to say, imagining utopia should also include imagining ourselves in a totally different way, as if in a parallel world with different beings. So it is about "who we are and who we might and should be". The utopian impulse this requires "commitment to dignity and grace" on the part of all humans (p. 196). Nevertheless, the question is do humans inherently have the capacity for dignity and grace, or is it a desire that humanity hopes for acquiring?

BF suggests that human beings have some desire within to imagine utopias and hopes for living in them. Throughout the novel, Auster foregrounds Brooklyn to function as a friendly and inclusive habitat rather than a geographic space with particular features. Auster has said that he focused on his own neighborhood because it "has to be one of the most democratic and tolerant places on the planet" (Auster, 1955, p. 14). His sense of Brooklyn as "this one-of-a-kind place" with a multitude of voices and accents (p. 200) is a symbol of "coexistence and tolerance" (Egaitsu, 2007, p. 14), "a friendly little world whose inhabitants' lives are interconnected through various coincidences and chance encounters" (Bollinger, 2014, p. 490). It should be noted that *BF* portrays Brooklyn, a borough, as a happy cheerful place where human friendship rules. Auster tries to show "how people from all races and classes can get along" in Brooklyn (Brown, 2010, p. 167). The "multitude of voices" in Brooklyn operates in two ways: the region is at "the intersection of large and distant geopolitical processes," and it has the specific features that "construct it as a knowable and warm place for Auster" (p. 168). Auster himself has repeatedly expressed his interest in Brooklyn, even in the aftermath of 9/11: "I like it here. It's a comfortable part of town to live. The neighborhood is very mixed and tolerant . . . The first week after September 11th, the neighborhood really pulled together in a beautiful way" (as cited in Epstein, 2001). This mindset is part of Nathan's sense of belonging to the borough:

> I have only recently begun a new life of my own . . . perfectly content with the decision I made to settle in Brooklyn . . . the city agrees with me . . . with its shifting jumble of white and brown and black, its multi-layered chorus of foreign accents, its children and its trees, its striving middle-class families, its lesbian couples, its Korean grocery stores, its bearded Indian holy man . . . its dwarfs and cripples, its aged pensioners . . . its church bells and ten thousand dogs, its underground population of solitary, homeless scavengers . . . (Auster, 2005, p. 180)

To this, we can add Trofimova's comments on Brooklyn when she gave the borough a visit to understand Auster's sense of space on the spot:

> The architecture and urban planning of Brooklyn draw attention to the heterogeneity of elements scattered along its long, wide avenues, … its many cafés and restaurants, the bookshops and barber shops, the laundromats and repair shops, the old people and young people, the people with children in

> strollers or dogs on a leash, ice creams and pizzas, music and chatter, kids playing basketball, and so on and so forth. (2014, p. 155)

It is in Brooklyn itself, through its noise and driven by its force, that we find Nathan shouting his appetite for life and the simple joys of existence.

On September 11, 2001, Nathan is discharged from a hospital at eight o'clock, "just forty-six minutes before the first plane crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center". Writing in retrospect, Nathan did not know at the time what was going to happen. He thus held onto the viewpoint he had acquired during his stay in Brooklyn: "it was still eight o'clock, and as I walked along the avenue under that brilliant blue sky, I was happy, my friends, as happy as any man who had ever lived" (Auster, 2005, p. 304). Part of what is disastrous for Nathan is "the experience of passivity, the complete loss of self" when he is hospitalized (Deshmukh, 2014, p. 206). It lies in contrast to the freedom he craves in the rural "Hotel Existence". It is thus implied that despite the contingency of death, always lying in ambush, Nathan seizes the day as long as there is still time to acknowledge the transiency of life and its pleasures. The sense of social collapse just before 9/11 attacks happen, or "a sense of decline" in general, as Levitas says, "is not in itself an obstacle to utopianism" (2013, p. 226). In other words, "Utopia is then not just a dream to be enjoyed, but a vision to be pursued" (2010, p. 1). Moreover, it "expresses and explores" one's desires that may hopefully be "met in reality, rather than merely in fantasy" if certain conditions hold (2013, p. 221). Brooklyn, which has given Nathan and his friends a tolerant community with temporary but stable identity, remains a haven of peace that is supportive and inspiring even in the face of death, if not a utopia but a utopian place for Nathan and his likeminded family and friends.

5. Conclusion

The philosophy of space plays a colorful role in understanding *The Brooklyn Follies*. The "Hotel Existence" is the ideal habitat as Auster's utopia and is particularly in connection with Sartre's "Existentialist Café". Several characters in the novel desire a place where mental peace, more than physical pleasure, can be granted. For Auster, such places should be ideal for writing and meditation, just like Poe's ideal room and Thoreau's cabin. These places, as far as they have utopian elements at the core of their realistic architecture, are possible utopias. Aspects of these places match the setting and atmosphere of the cafés in which Sartre used to think and write. Auster thus presents us with two versions of his ideal place: urban cafés and rural houses. His French experience seems to have contributed much to his viewpoint about

cafés as ideal places for thought-provoking discussions, following the tradition of Sartrean *café existentialism*. The French restaurant in *BF* where the conversation over the "Hotel Existence" takes place is revealing here. The rural utopia, on the other hand, is the "Hotel Existence" as a retreat from the real world, a place housing people out of love and respect. The Chowder Inn in southern Vermont appears to be a real "Hotel Existence" for all, although it has a transient status in a world built upon urbanity. It bestows Nathan and friends with gaiety and well-being, with a feeling of being one with the world. However, back to Brooklyn, Nathan and others establish an urban (utopian) community as there is no escape from anything. Ultimately back to the reality of his house, neighborhood, family, and friends in Brooklyn, Nathan acknowledges the borough as a unifying stronghold, with a strong sense of democracy and tolerance, coexistence and friendship. As Nathan chooses to change himself for the better throughout the novel by authentically leading his life and guiding others, he can be called the architect of Auster's urban utopia or the manager of the "Hotel Existence" for every member of his family and friends in Brooklyn.

Bio-data:
Mohammad-Javad Haj'jari teaches English and American literature at Razi University, Kermanshah, Iran. He holds a PhD degree in English Literature from Razi University. His scholarly interests include Existentialism, literature and philosophy, postmodernism, metamodernism, as well as literature and science.

Declarations

Funding: The study was not funded as the author declares.
Competing interests: No conflict of interest was reported.
Availability of data and materials: The data is available by the corresponding author upon request.
Authors' contributions: Writing and revising all stages.
Declaration of generative AI-powered tools in the process of writing: No AI-powered tool was used in writing the article.

References

Auster, P. (1955). *Smoke and blue in the face: Two films by Paul* Auster. Hyperon.

Auster, P. (2005). *The Brooklyn follies*. Henry Holt and Company.

Auster, P., & Siegumfeldt, I. B. (2017). *A life in words: Conversations with Paul Auster*. Seven Stories Press.

Bakewell, S. (2016). *At the existentialist café: Freedom, being, and apricot cocktails*. Other Press.

Barzun, J. (2000). *From dawn to decadence: 500 years of western cultural life*. Harper Collins.

Bollinger, H. E. (2014). The danger of rereading: Disastrous endings in Paul Auster's *The Brooklyn follies* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *Unaccustomed earth*. *Studies in the Novel*, *46*(4), 486-506. http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2014.0068

Brown, M. (2007). *Paul Auster*. Manchester University Press.

Brown, M. (2010). Paul Auster: Poet of solitude. In D. Seed (Ed.), *A Companion to Twentieth-Century United States Fiction* (pp. 530-38). Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Deshmukh, P. (2014). *'Then catastrophe strikes': Reading disaster in Paul Auster's novels and autobiographies*. [Doctoral dissertation, Université Paris-Est].

Egaitsu, K. (2007). An aspect of contemporary dystopia: An analysis of Paul Auster's *The Brooklyn follies*. *The Journal of Liberal Arts*, 3, 1-15.

Epstein, D. (2001). An interview with Paul Auster. *3:AM Magazine*. https://www.3ammagazine.com/litarchives/nov2001/paul_auster_interview.html

Geoghegan, V. (2008). *Utopianism and marxism*. Peter Lang.

Hutchisson, J. M. (Ed.). (2013). *Conversations with Paul Auster*. University Press of Mississippi.

Kelly, M. G., & Paz, M. (Eds.). (2023). *Utopia, equity and ideology in urban texts: Fair and unfair cities*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Kirkpatrick, E. M. (Ed.). (1983). *Chambers twentieth century dictionary*. Cambridge University Press.

Levitas, R. (2010). *The concept of utopia*. Peter Lang.

Levitas, R. (2013). *Utopia as method: The imaginary reconstitution of society*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Santas, G. (2018). Plato on inequalities, justice, and democracy. In G. Anagnostopoulos & G. Santas (Eds.), *Democracy, justice, and equality in ancient Greece* (pp. 161-167). Springer.

Sartre, J-P. (1956). *Being and nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology* (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). Philosophical Library.

Solomon, R. C. (2006). *Dark feelings, grim thoughts: Experience and reflection in Camus and Sartre*. Oxford University Press.

Stern, A. (1967). *Sartre: His philosophy and existential psychoanalysis* (2nd edition). Delta Publishing Co.

Tedde, A. (2006). *Marginalisation and Utopia in Paul Auster, Jim Jarmusch and Tom Waits* [Doctoral dissertation, University of New Castle upon Tyne].

Theobald, T. (2019) *Existentialism and baseball: The French philosophical root of Paul Auster* [Doctoral dissertation, Griffith University].

Trofimova, E. (2014). *Paul Auster's writing machine: A thing to write with*. Bloomsbury.