From One Desert to the Other: Reconstructing Identity after the Catastrophe

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One of the main features of the desert is its dual quality. As John Beck reminds us, "[t]he desert is glorious and horrible, a refuge and a danger, horizonless and thus a threat to sanity, and so on" (Beck 65). These intrinsic attributes of the desert also bring to mind the fact that it can indicate both an end and a beginning, thus connecting it with the notion of catastrophe. Indeed, one of the main features of catastrophes is that they signal both the conclusion and the birth of something new. The term catastrophe is often synonymous with destruction and death, but it also entails the idea of a new beginning, of rebuilding something on the ruins left by the event. Anne-Marie Mercier-Faivre and Chantal Thomas insist on this twofold disposition of the catastrophe:

> La catastrophe par son ampleur, sa violence, sa soudaineté, est quelque chose qui vous laisse muet, sinon mort. Un effondrement de notre univers familier qui défie la représentation . . . Qui, en pleine panique, peut observer avec minutie l'horreur sur le point de l'engloutir ? . . . Pourtant il y a bien une écriture de la catastrophe, que celle-ci soit évoquée par des témoins directs ou par des narrateurs qui essaient d'imaginer. Peut-être même rien ne fait davantage écrire que la catastrophe. Car, d'une part, elle relève d'un indicible, mais, de l'autre, par le choc du bouleversement opéré, elle provoque indignation et interrogation, énergie de parole et peut-être même redoublement d'énergie vitale. (Mercier-Faivre and Thomas 7)

The fact that catastrophe is unspeakable but, at the same time, needs to be tackled or written about, connects it to the desert and its inherent double attribute. After the 9/11 attacks, writers were confronted with this inability to find words to address the catastrophe. For instance, Toni Morrison writes that she has "nothing to say" concerning the attacks:

> To speak to you, the dead of September, I must not claim false intimacy or summon an overheated heart glazed just in time for a camera. I must be steady and I must be clear, knowing all the time that I have nothing to say–no words stronger than the steel that pressed you into itself; no scripture older or more elegant that the ancient atoms you have become. (Morrison 1)

Thus the 9/11 attacks are, from the start, characterized by the arduousness and the pain that putting words on the event represent. Most novels that deal with this catastrophe underline the difficulty that writers were confronted with, the strain they were under in dealing with the event. Martin Amis' words echo those of Toni Morrison: "After a couple of hours at their desks, on September 12, 2001, all the writers on earth were considering the course that Lenin menacingly urged on Maxim Gorky: a change of occupation" (Amis 11).

In this article, I would like to focus on two books addressing not only the catastrophe of 9/11, but also more personal catastrophes, and see how two male characters try to reconstruct their identities going from one sort of desert to another. In *Falling Man* (2007), written by Don DeLillo, Keith, who worked in the World Trade Center, survives the terrorist attacks of 9/11 but witnesses the death of one of his close friends, Rumsey, with whom he used to play poker. Escaping Ground Zero, he goes back to his ex-wife Lianne in New York. The novel portrays Keith's journey as he tries to make sense of the losses of 9/11. His journey finally brings him to Las Vegas, in the Mojave Desert, where he becomes a semiprofessional poker player.

In the second novel, *Sunset Park* (2010), written by Paul Auster, Miles leaves New York after the death of his brother, an event for which he feels responsible. A car ran over him as they were quarreling on the side of the road, and Miles is filled with remorse. He abandons his parents and his studies to move to Florida, where his job is to empty houses destroyed by their owners who lost them to the banks after the financial crisis of 2008. He falls in love with a young girl, Pilar, but quickly encounters problems with her family. He has to flee these deserted places and he returns to New York to live in a squat near a graveyard. Although this novel deals with the attacks of 9/11 obliquely, the catastrophe haunts the whole novel by its absence, thus creating a paradoxical looming presence. Auster describes the United States as a place in ruin, a desolate and miserable place where it is extremely difficult, almost impossible, to find one's identity.

This article will consider the desert not only as a "dry and barren area of land, especially one covered with sand," but rather as an empty space, a wilderness, that people go to or leave in order to look for meaning and reinvent themselves after a catastrophe. In order to do so, I will first focus on the places left behind and the reasons for the flight. Then I will address the importance of poker and Las Vegas in Keith's quest for identity. Finally, the question of the reinvention of the self will be asked, as well as that of the places where the characters go, wondering if these desert-like places can really act as a blank page on which to start a new beginning.

Ground Zero and deserted places

In *Falling Man,* the empty space left by the collapse of the Twin Towers becomes a void, a site of devastation. Going back to his apartment near Ground Zero, Keith mentions seeing "a skeletal remnant of the towers" (DeLillo 25). The name chosen to describe it, Ground Zero, is the quintessence of destruction. Both because its meaning is "the point at or directly above which a devastating event occurred" (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*), where nothing survives, and because it refers to a site of nuclear detonation, more precisely Hiroshima. According to Birgit Däwes, the term "captures the tensions between the attacks' initial indescribability, on the one hand, and the need to discursively place them within an historical order, and thus within the knowable, on the other" (Däwes 15), once again laying emphasis on the aporia of the catastrophe.

The first sentence of DeLillo's novel suggests a new world order: "It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night" (DeLillo 3). The book starts with a negation, what is not anymore, what has disappeared, suggesting that a reconstruction will have to take place. What is negative is immediately brought out. The author lays emphasis on the disappearance of the towers, the emptiness that replaces them, and the void. The world described at the beginning of *Falling Man* is set up in absence and destruction. Florian Tréguer explains that "what has been exists only as a simple grammatical trace within the text: 'It was'" (Tréguer 95).[1]

The scope of the catastrophe is made visible through the move from "street" to "world," and is so tremendous that it spares neither space nor time. The time frame is also affected: "This was the world now" (DeLillo 3). Both the choice of the adverb "now" and the deictic "this" suggest immediacy, as well as the beginning of a different era marked by destruction and desolation.

DeLillo's first sentence underlines the defamiliarization of this new world, which extends not only to Manhattan, but also to the rest of America, as Martin Ridnour, one of the characters of the novel coming from Europe, states: "'I don't know this America anymore. I don't recognize it,' he said. 'There's an empty space where America used to be'" (DeLillo 193). The towers have become a metonymy for the country. This emptiness, at the heart of Manhattan at first, has contaminated the whole country, and has even become global, having, in a way, "de-centered" America. Following the destruction of one of its symbols, the Twin Towers–symbols of capitalism and finance, emblem of American power (Baudrillard, *Power Inferno* 14)–the place of America in the world is not obvious anymore, and the country has lost part of itself. Thus, DeLillo asks his readers to question not only the void, but the role played by the country regarding the attacks. America as a paradigm has, for the rest of the world, fallen with the towers.

This *incipit* thus depicts a fallen world, a deserted place out of which a man appears, stumbling toward the unknown. His apprehension of this desolate place is made through walking like a stranger, lost in the unknown, as if he were desperately clinging to a malfunctioning compass: "He was walking North;" "He kept going until he had to stop;" "He kept on walking;" "He started walking again" (DeLillo 3-5). These are only a few examples, but they show a character who has been set in motion by the events and might not be able to stop roaming, looking for something he will never find. Jean Baudrillard writes that "le désert n'est que cela . . . une forme extatique de la disparition" (*Amérique* 18). And that is exactly what the reader witnesses with Keith: the event puts him in motion, and he does not stop moving until he finally loses himself in a metaphorical desert made of the rooms of casinos in Las Vegas, devoid of meaning.

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[1] My translation. "D'emblée, ce qui a été n'a plus d'existence que comme simple trace grammaticale dans le texte: 'It was'."

Ground Zero epitomizes emptiness in the novel, and can thus be read as a kind of desert, but the void has also pervaded the streets, the buildings, the apartments and rooms, the whole city, as the following example reveals: "The building seemed empty, it felt and sounded empty. When he entered his apartment he stood a while, just looking around. The windows were scabbed in sand and ash and there were fragments of paper and one whole sheet trapped in the grime" (DeLillo, 26). This quote refers to the moment when Keith goes back to his apartment, not far from Ground Zero, and it is as if the very essence of the desert, sand, had pervaded the interior as well. The whole novel is contaminated by this void, this emptiness, going from the streets of Manhattan to the desert around the city of Las Vegas which becomes an empty desert. After the catastrophe, nothing seems familiar anymore, and one feels as ill at ease as one could in the desert, listening to the emptiness. But once more, the silence alludes to the duality of the desert and an impossibility to talk about it, just like the catastrophe: "the impossibility of telling the desert arises not only from its reality, but also from the fact that this reality ceaselessly points to what goes beyond it, in a nudity that is both radical and irreducible to human ideals" (Mathé 433).

DeLillo insists on this vacuity that pervades all the senses, tainting even the sense of hearing. To quote Baudrillard : "Le silence du désert est aussi visuel. Il est fait de l'étendue du regard qui ne trouve nulle part où se réfléchir. Dans les montagnes, il ne peut y avoir de silence, car les montagnes hurlent par leur relief" (*Amérique* 18-19).

The idea that the gaze cannot find a place to be reflected on echoes the vision of Keith's apartment where the windows are covered in sand and ash and where the outside world has disappeared. Like in the desert, silence has appropriated the surroundings of Ground Zero and men and women seem to have disappeared from the landscape. Only ashes and pieces of paper remain, a hint at the difficulty to put words on the catastrophe. If the ruins at the heart of Manhattan are, of course, no deserts in the geographical sense of the term, they still share some particularities.

Paul Auster's novel, *Sunset Park*, is full of deserted places too, and the defamiliarization that DeLillo uses is also to be found in this novel. Although *Sunset Park* is not a novel about September 11 *per se*, it belongs to post-9/11 literature because catastrophe pervades the narration and the shadow of the towers looms over it. The Twin Towers are only present *in absentia*, but it is impossible not to feel the impact and repercussions of their destruction. The book ends on their evocation, reinforcing their significance: "he thinks about the missing buildings, the collapsed and burning buildings that no longer exist, the missing buildings and the missing hands . . ." (Auster 307-308).

The *incipit* of Auster's novel echoes that of DeLillo's, opening on the same feeling of chaos and destruction. If the buildings described in *Sunset Park* have not been destroyed by a terrorist attack, their degradation is also due to a catastrophe, a financial one. Indeed, the houses described in the first pages belonged to people who went bankrupt after the 2008 crisis, and had to surrender their homes to the banks. However, before leaving, they made sure to damage these places as much as possible, in some kind of scorched-earth policy, and Mike and his coworkers have to clean them before the banks can sell them again. The houses are described not only as deserted places, but also haunted by the ghosts of the people who fled them, and of the lives that will never be:

> The sprawling flatlands of south Florida are filled with these orphaned structures, and because it is in the interest of the banks to resell them as quickly as possible, the vacated houses must be cleaned, repaired, and made ready to be shown to prospective buyers. In a collapsing world of economic ruin and relentless, ever-expanding hardship, trashing out is one of the few thriving businesses in the area. (Auster 3-4)

This quote really lays emphasis on the fact that America has become a wasteland, abandoned by its inhabitants, as the expressions "orphaned structures" and "vacated houses" suggest. Moreover, the choice of "collapsing" and the mention of "economic ruin" to qualify the new world order can be read as a reference to the collapse of the Twin Towers, and highlights the deserted state of this new country, also built on defamiliarization. The description of the houses goes on as follows:

> Each house is a story of failure–of bankruptcy and default, of debt and foreclosure–and he has taken it upon himself to document the last, lingering traces of those scattered lives in order to prove that the vanished families were once here, that the ghosts of people he will never see and never know are still present in the discarded things strewn about their empty house. (Auster 3)

Abandoned and damaged objects have replaced human beings and taken possession of the place, drawing attention to the decay of post-9/11 America, and bringing to mind the debris and ruins of Ground Zero. The accumulation of negative terms within this short paragraph lays emphasis once again on their emptiness and on the disappearance of all traces of life, as suggested by the use of negative adjectives ("scattered," "vanished," "empty"), the repetition of "never" and the mention of "ghosts."

All the descriptions of houses in Auster's novel seem to insist on the fact that the United States has become a deserted space. This idea extends even to houses that are inhabited, like Miles' apartment in Florida–“a small apartment in a poor neighborhood” (Auster 7), “His apartment is a shabby little nothing of a place” (Auster 10)–or the house where he joins his friend in New York–“a small abandoned house on a street across from Green-Wood Cemetery” (Auster 38), “a crumbling wooden house standing empty in a neighborhood as ragged as this one” (Auster 77). The ideas of emptiness and nothingness pervade this building, all the more so because it is located right next to a graveyard:

> A dopey little two-story wooden house with a roofed-over front porch, looking for all the world like something that had been stolen from a farm on the Minnesota prairie and plunked down by accident in the middle of New York. It stood between a trash-filled vacant lot with a stripped-down car in it and the metal bones of a half-built mini-apartment on which construction had stopped more than a year ago. The cemetery was directly across the way, which meant there were no houses lining the other side of the street, which further meant that the abandoned house was all but invisible, since it was a house on a block where almost no one lived. (Auster 81)

This house embodies the melancholy of its inhabitants and seems to have been put there almost by accident, randomly, just like those who decided to live in it, and does not belong to its surroundings. The impression that nothing around it has been completed (“half-built,” “construction had stopped”) indicates a kind of impossibility to come to terms with whatever people have fled to come here. Moreover, the remote location in which the house has been built intensifies the feeling of a deserted place.

However, one could also read this place as a kind of *tabula rasa*, a blank space where Miles can try to make sense of his life, and work out the trauma of the loss of his brother. Thus, this deserted place has a dual singularity because the people living in it still hope for a better life.

In both novels, a catastrophe (the terrorist attacks in *Falling Man*, and a car accident in *Sunset Park*), sets the characters in motion, trying to escape a deserted and unwelcoming place and find a way to reinvent themselves. Yet both characters end up back in deserted places: Las Vegas for Keith, and Miles in a squat next to a cemetery. If, as the house where Miles ends up suggests, it might not be that easy to start anew, Keith tries to do so in reconciling with poker, a game he used to play before the 9/11 attacks.

The timeless present of Las Vegas

Indeed Keith, DeLillo’s character, seeks refuge in Vegas and in poker. He used to play the game before the attacks, but they put a stop to it: “The card games ended after the towers fell”; “he wouldn’t need the table, two players dead, one badly injured” (DeLillo 27, 29). However, despite having lost his companions, he still turns back to the game after a while. As Kristiaan Versluys reminds us, “[he] runs away almost as far as the continent will allow, and in memory of the poker group to which he belonged before 9/11 and partly as a kind of tribute to his poker buddy Rumsey, who died in the terrorist attacks, he ends up as a semiprofessional poker player in Las Vegas" (Versluys 38). According to Kevin L. Stoehr, poker, "like frontier life itself, is composed of a kind of friction between order and chaos, logic and intuition, intelligence and luck, freedom and fate, victory and mere survival, community and individuality" (Stoehr 198). The duality found at the core of both deserts and catastrophes is thus also present in poker.

This decision to go on playing poker has been understood in different ways by critics. For instance, according to Silvia Caporale Bizzini, "[his] search for some kind of healing eventually revolves around two activities: communication and playing poker. . . poker is another of Keith's strategies of survival and rebirth. . . By devoting his life to professional poker games–Keith's final election–he pays homage to all his poker mates that died in the attacks" (48-49). However, if there is obviously some truth in this idea of honoring the dead, it might not be the only reason why DeLillo decides to concentrate on poker. For other critics, like Karim Daanoune for instance, the game could be a possible symptom of his melancholia (117).

Going West in order to play poker could also be read as a will to start a new life, turn a new page, and reinvent himself. Indeed, going West has always been linked to an idea of conquest, and of new territories, in the history of the United States. The westward movement that Keith accomplishes when he decides to leave New York for Las Vegas reminds us of the conquest of the West, and the Gold Rush, which could be symbolized by the game of poker. However, Keith is not interested in money: "The money mattered but not so much. . . He wasn't playing for the money" (DeLillo 228). His longing for the West is not that of a greedy man, but rather that of a man trying to find a way out of the catastrophe that has taken hold of him. Like many settlers before him, his journey West is in search of a new life, which he does not seem to be able to find, trapping himself in a new kind of room, in the liminal space of casinos. Through this journey toward the West, one could also read a reference to the Frontier, "the meeting point between savagery and civilization," as Frederick Jackson Turner stated in 1893–the Frontier with its hopes and its dream of a new beginning. The choice of Vegas, more precisely, with its lights, its infinite possibility of winning money and starting a new life, illustrates the dream and representation that people have of going West.

Moreover, this westward movement also suggests that the West, the Occident (and more specifically parts of the United States), has, in a way, become the East, the Orient. Indeed, Keith leaves a desolated place–New York–located on the East coast, to go west to a safer place. The city in ruins could be read as a reproduction of the cities the United States attacked in the East in the name of the War on Terror and well before that, during the Gulf War in 1990-91, forcing its inhabitants to leave and take shelter somewhere else. It thus suggests, just as Martin Ridnour does in *Falling Man* while talking about the terrorists, that the attacks perpetrated on the United States did not happen "out of the blue": "They[2] strike a blow to this country's dominance. They achieve this, to show how a great power can be vulnerable. A power that interferes, that occupies" (DeLillo 46). This decentering of the conflict and its consequences asks the readers to rethink the central position of the United States on the world stage.

Moreover, the superposition of different geographies also appears in another novel by DeLillo, *Point Omega*. Published after *Falling Man*, *Point Omega* takes place in the desert, an American desert but one that resonates with others: "[Elster had] invited me to join him here . . . somewhere south of nowhere in the Sonoran Desert or maybe it was in the Mojave or another desert altogether" (20). This novel focuses on the War in Iraq, and the desert that is depicted there, the one that is "another desert altogether," has a larger signification, embodying the desert that is the place where the War on Terror takes place.

Playing poker also appears as Keith's own choice, as something he feels inclined to do: "Soon he felt the need to be back there. When his plane came down over the desert he could easily believe that this was a place he'd always known. There were standard methods and routines" (DeLillo 197). The mention of the "standard methods and routines" implies a kind of pattern that helps him deal with his trauma, but, on the other hand, the hints at a rebirth are never really clear in the novel. Indeed, DeLillo describes his stay in Vegas as stuck in its own temporality, a never-ending present: "There were no days or times" (DeLillo 230). Temporality becomes blurred, and the desert strongly connected with this particular time. Moreover, as Linda Kauffman highlights: "[The casino] is a denatured world outside of time (no clock in casinos)" (*Bodies in Rest* 150). Thus, choosing to go west to Las Vegas is no trivial matter, as it is a way to refuse all possibility of dealing with time and the time of trauma, which, as we know, might be belated, and to bury oneself in a present that never ends and only repeats itself. Mary J. Parish reminds us that,

> Keith . . . choose[s] to reconstruct his work life within the work of the casino, an environment in which the future becomes irrelevant and where he is safely shielded from the press and expectations of time, events, relationships. He has entered a physical and psychological stasis characterized by stability, tedium, and predictability in which he endeavors to recreate his lost sense of control and autonomy through his dedication to poker. (Parish 185)

Keith becomes a prisoner of the time and space he has chosen: "He was self-sequestered" (DeLillo 212). Past, present and future are blurred, and meeting Terry Cheng (one of his poker friends from New York) in Vegas has no incidence on time: "[they] went to their designated tables without making plans to meet later. The idea of later was elusive" (DeLillo 200). Only the game matters, time has no meaning anymore. There is no escape for him. This distortion of time in the desert also appears in *Point Omega*:

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[2] "They" refers to the terrorists.

> Day turns to night eventually but it's a matter of light and darkness, it's not time passing, mortal time. There's none of the usual terror. It's different here, time is enormous, that's what I feel here palpably. Time that precedes us and survives us . . . Doesn't happen here, the minute-to-minute reckoning, the thing I feel in the cities. It's all embedded, the hours and minutes, words and numbers everywhere, he said, train stations, bus routes, taxi meters, surveillance cameras. It's all about time, dimwit time, inferior time, people checking their watches and other devices, other reminders. This is time draining out of our lives. (44-45)

The choice of the expression "usual terror" can be read as an echo to terrorist attacks (that of 9/11 or others), but, as Karim Daanoune points out (209), this becomes problematic when one tries to qualify the time of the war or torture. What interests us here is the description of the time of the desert as overwhelming, as encompassing future, past and present.

By choosing to continue his life in Las Vegas, he has decided on a life not only in a place linked with the desert, but also on a desert-like time, where nothing seems to happen. Through this choice, Keith also entraps himself in an activity that will forever remind him of the lost friends and the past, a void-like pastime, offering little answer to this trauma. Poker is indeed linked with memory, with a postlapsarian life. "Keith Neudecker's name seems to augur a new deck of cards, a fresh start–the perennial theme of American literature" states Linda Kauffman (32). However, in spite of his name, and because of his choice of game (poker) and non-place (Las Vegas) to use Marc Augé's term,[3] he seems to sink into a kind of monotonous routine rather than make himself ready to face society again.

An impossible new beginning?

According to Wendy Harding, "inasmuch as it was held to be undiscovered, the land offered a site of invention and of creation. Rather than the site of the nation's memory, it was (at least imaginatively) the blank medium upon which its dreams could be projected and materialized" (4). Reading the land as a kind of *tabula rasa* on which one might project their future and reconstruct their identity is what both Keith and Miles try to do, but what follows will show how this proves almost impossible.

Contrary to Keith, who decides to go West, Miles returns to the place he left, New York. The house in which he chooses to live, lonely and in the middle of nowhere, echoes the character himself, whose name suggests that he does not belong and will never belong, will always feel the need to run away, to get in motion to flee from his ghosts. Indeed, he is not able to stay in one place long: "over the past seven-plus years, he has settled in at any number of new addresses" (Auster 30). At the end of the novel, he gets in motion one more (last?) time, even though it is not his choice:

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[3] See Augé in the list of works cited below. According to Bruce Bégout (14), Las Vegas is even a "non-city" ("non-ville").

> Half an hour later, he is sitting in the backseat of a car-service Dodge, on his way to Downing Street in Manhattan . . . and the name Homer makes him think of home, as in the word homeless, they are all homeless now, he said to his father on the phone, Alice and Bing are homeless, he is homeless, the people in Florida who lived in the houses he trashed are homeless . . . (Auster 306-307)

Through the mention of Homer, one cannot but read Odysseus' impossible return, which characterizes Miles' wandering. This impossibility of going back home, of anchoring oneself in a place one could call home is strengthened by the mention of Pilar–Miles' girlfriend–and the life that they will not share: "only Pilar is not homeless, he is her home now, and with one punch he has destroyed everything, they will never have their life together in New York, there is no future for them anymore, no hope for them anymore" (Auster 307). The glimmer of hope that still existed and was stressed by the use of the adverb "only" is immediately annihilated and the negation of the future takes its place, with the accumulation of negatives. Moreover, the irony of the onomastic is striking here: "Pilar", like "pillar", refers to architecture and hints at someone strong and essential, that provides support. However, this idea is distorted here, as Pilar is the reason why Miles has to leave Florida, and as it seems that the possibility of a life together has been annihilated at the end of the book.

Miles turns inward, having "closed in on himself" (Auster 176). His retreat is born of his inability to come to terms with his past and the traumatic death of his brother, and turning inward thus becomes his way of freeing himself from the past, or rather of displacing himself from it:

> He could have been dead, yes, but on the other hand, the kid had issues, the thing with Bobby had been an absolute devastation, Miles had closed in on himself since then, and it was clear that he had a lot of stuff to work out. Running away was a stupid thing to do, of course, but maybe some good would come of it in the end, maybe being on his own for a while would give him a chance to straighten himself out. (Auster 176)

So, although he tries to escape trauma and reinvent his identity, his trajectory seems to be characterized by failure. He seems, at first, to have intentionally put his vanishing act in motion but is then not able to stop it. Indeed, he leaves New York to escape his brother's ghost, but he then has to leave Florida to escape the wrath of his girlfriend's sisters and possible imprisonment (Pilar, his girlfriend, is underage), only to be dragged out of the uninhabited building where he has found a home in New York. The last words of the novel are tinged with nostalgia and sadness, and foreshadow a very dim future:

> [H]e wonders if it is worth hoping for a future when there is no future, and from now on, he tells himself, he will stop hoping for anything and live only for now, this moment, this passing moment, the now that is here and then not here, the now that is gone forever. (Auster 308)

The whole paragraph–a rather long one for that matter, as this is only a small part, it is almost two pages long without a full-stop, which gives an impression of acceleration and inevitability of the events–is filled with negations, as can be seen in this quote which is the very end of the book. The deathly atmosphere is first that of the city, with the "missing buildings, the collapsed and burning buildings that no longer exist" (Auster 308), but it quickly spreads to life itself, through the image of the "missing hands" first, and finally that of the future–and even a present–that no longer exist. As Georgiana Banita stresses: "*Sunset Park* is firmly anchored in the post-9/11 perpetual present–that is, in the understanding that it would be futile to pin one's hope on the future when irreversible damage can be wreaked at one moment's notice" (11). Just like Keith, Miles is stuck in an everlasting present that keeps them prisoners of their past experience.

Conclusion

Tony Tanner reminds us that "the desert features in nearly all of DeLillo's novels as a sort of 'end zone' of meaning–silent, non-human, absolute, ultimate" (Tanner 203). If the desert mentioned in *Falling Man* is not only the geographical area that one finds, for instance, in *Point Omega*, its presence still looms over the narration, in the manner of the ghosts of the Twin Towers. Both DeLillo's and Auster's novels narrate the story of a man struck by catastrophe and trying to reinvent himself, while roaming over America at the same time. If their trajectories are different, going West or going back East, their inability to find an answer is the same. They differ, however, in their motion: if Miles never stops moving, Keith seems to let himself be trapped in the everlasting present of the casinos. If poker does not offer a solution to the trauma of the 9/11 attacks, it is literature, eventually, that shapes the loss that Michel de Certeau mentions: "Why write unless for an impossible word? At the core of writing is a loss. That which cannot be said–an impossible balance between the presence and the sign–is the assumption of a work always starting over that has as a principle a non-place of identity" (282).[4] Literature appears as the way to fill the void, as well as the deserted space that has been left at the heart of Manhattan.

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[4] My translation. "Pourquoi écrire, sinon au titre d'une parole impossible ? Au commencement de l'écriture, il y a une perte. Ce qui ne peut se dire – une impossible adéquation entre la présence et le signe–est le postulat du travail toujours recommençant qui a pour principe un non-lieu de l'identité et un sacrifice de la chose."

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