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Unveiling the Unseen: Objective Violence and Its Silent Presence in Auster's Sunset Park

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study examines Paul Auster's Sunset Park (2010) as a literary space in which violence is rendered ambiguous and largely invisible. Drawing on Slavoj Žižek's concept of "objective violence," the research aims to uncover how systemic, ideological forms of violence embedded in capitalism operate beneath the surface of everyday life and how the novel's characters are exposed to and respond to these forces.

Methods: Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, the study employs close textual analysis informed by Žižek's theoretical framework of objective violence. This concept is used to analyze the structural and ideological dimensions of violence in Sunset Park, focusing on capitalism's social, economic, and cultural mechanisms and their effects on individual subjectivities.

Results: The analysis reveals that objective violence in the novel functions silently and pervasively, shaping the characters' lives through inequality, precarity, and marginalization. The characters' responses to this violence are diverse and contingent upon their social positions and personal perspectives. While some attempt to resist or negotiate these oppressive structures, others remain constrained or entrapped by them, often without fully recognizing the source of their suffering.

Conclusions: The study argues that Auster's narrative compels readers to actively engage in uncovering the hidden layers of objective violence that permeate contemporary capitalist society. Recognizing and addressing this silent form of violence is essential for understanding trauma, suffering, and social fragmentation in contemporary American life, as represented in Sunset Park.

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Introduction

Whether employing fictional characters or real-life experiences, Auster consistently champions the voices of those navigating loss and its aftermath. He becomes a "flag-bearer" for those carrying the scars of these experiences, their unseen wounds echoing in his narratives (Auster 2012: 11). Frédéric Hugonnier argues that Auster's fictional works function as a form of post-traumatic shelter, offering a space to explore and express the lingering effects of absence of certainties through artistic expression and narrative structures (2020: 2).

Among his literary legacy, *Sunset Park* (2010) explores trauma, displacement, and the search for meaning in a world defined by personal and social unrest. The narrative unfolds through the eyes of a cast of characters, primarily artists and intellectuals. They have been adversely affected, in some manner, by the financial downturn that started in the year 2008. Miles Heller, Bing Nathan, Alice Bergstrom, and Ellen Brice – are united in an illegal squat located "in an area of Brooklyn called Sunset Park … [where they] took over a small abandoned house on a street across from Green-Wood Cemetery and have been camped out there as squatters ever since" (Auster 2010: 28). They tussle with hardship and become entangled in a narrative that reflects the theme of their societal decline, the state of their traumas, and the violence imposed on them in a temporary place. Hugonnier asserts that each character's wounds resonate with the others, forming a network of shared pain that embodies the cyclical nature of trauma and its ability to transcend individual narratives (2020: 30). *Sunset Park*'s characters grapple with the traumas of economic hardship and personal struggles as the 'unseen' intricate network of objective violence arising from the underlying systemic violence of capitalism (Auster 2012: 49).

In *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (2008), Žižek discusses objective violence as concealed violence woven into the fabric of everyday life—economic inequalities, social hierarchies, and systemic injustices. This violence operates beneath the surface, shaping reality and perceptions without being immediately apparent. It can manifest as economic exploitation, discrimination, and the fundamental contradictions within political and social systems.

The silent power of objective violence punctuates its subtle, underlying nature, making it less visible than overt violence. Consequently, it operates in the background, influencing societal dynamics, power structures, and individual experiences in ways that may not be readily apparent. By highlighting objective violence, Žižek encourages critical examination of hidden dynamics that

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shape social reality and recognition of the impact of seemingly neutral or normal aspects of society that may reinforce inequalities and injustices.

Despite the prominence of violence in some of Paul Auster's works (like *Bloodbath Nation*), many critical studies focusing on his novels, such as *Sunset Park*, have tended to prioritize his themes of chance, identity, and the labyrinthine plot, thereby often neglecting to fully investigate the implied, systemic, or even economic violence embedded in his characters' daily lives. Shortly after the novel's release, Lawson, in his review published in *The Guardian* (2010)*,* refers more specifically to *Sunset Park* as a credit crunch fiction that illustrates a particular time in economic world history. These recession writings take the financial crisis as one of the central narrative concerns, generating a new wave of literary works that criticize the roots and results of the capitalist system, consumer culture, and rapid credit growth. In this way, the present study aims to open a different window for reading Auster's *Sunset Park*, exploring how the novel's critique of capitalism and economic turmoil unveils the objective violence and highlights its silent presence.

Literature Review

As evidenced by the following, a rich body of scholarship has emerged not only surrounding Žižek's view on violence or the social and individual impacts of capitalism but also concerning the exploration of Paul Auster's works from the viewpoint of other significant critics, but none of them has focused on studying Paul Auster's *Sunset Park* from a Žižekian standpoint to examine the objective violence within the work.

The Other America of Paul Auster, Jim Jarmusch and Tom Waits (2019) is Adriano Tedde's Ph.D. dissertation which employs popular culture texts, works of literature, film, and popular music whose authors are novelist Paul Auster— filmmaker Jim Jarmusch, and musician Tom Wait— as companions to the understanding of contemporary America. It is a critical study concerning artworks that form a cultural resistance resulted in the appreciation of social issues and cultural decline in the United States. The texts examined in this research are ideal guides to the recent history of the United States. Although these works were not created with an obvious political intention, their authors assume an accidental role of social commentators, by challenging the values of the dominant U.S. culture. Against the dominant culture, these artists propose a return to an ideal human brotherhood that is the main principle of a long tradition of Americans who, throughout the decades, formed a resistance against the surrounding culture.

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François Hugonnier in “Paul Auster’s Post-9/11 Writing” (2020), scrutinizes Auster’s response to the 2008 financial crisis and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. He reveals the unreliability of language in conveying meaning. Accordingly, the novelist needs to bypass their inner flaws to express what resists perception and verbalization, what resists witnessing and testimony (2020: 30). He foregrounds Auster’s vision to indicate the related evidence in unexpected ways, through silence, repetition, fragmentation, and obliqueness, to unveil their complex connections with world history and its violence (39). He argues that Auster's writing underscores the continuity of traumatic violence and the ineffable.

Mercè Cuenca’s in her article, “Reconfiguring the Male: Masculinities beyond Capitalism in Paul Auster’s Sunset Park” (2014), examines how the novel presents a potential new American masculinity emerging from the 2008 economic crisis. Cuenca argues that the protagonist, Miles Heller, constitutes an “ironic reversal” of the archetypal American striver like Jay Gatsby, embodying an “alternative to the contemporary shaping of successful masculinities” (199). She contends that Miles, a college dropout with a low income but high cultural level, deliberately rejects the American Dream pursuit of wealth and “hegemonic masculinity” based on capitalist parameters (196). Cuenca ultimately concludes that Miles Heller’s very existence, as an American (anti)hero who dares to embrace difference and liberate his emotional life from external pressure, testifies to Auster’s hope that the 2008 economic crisis can result in a revival of ethical values and a new model of male identity, one liberated from constricting gender roles.

“Speaking the Unspeakable: Auster’s Semiotic World” (2012) is another article by François Hugonnier. He asserts that Auster endlessly questions the nature of reality and language, and his books always deal with language and the world’s interconnectedness (2012: 259). Language restrictions often confine the characters to the room and the act of writing, depriving them of speech. The limits of the self, of the book, and the language generated a literary work that is reminiscent of the Objectivists and the Jewish tradition, and Auster’s fiction still bears witness to these early influences. Hugonnier shows how the writer enhances the power of language by wandering in its margins, using new narrative forms and voices to speak the unspeakable in his post-9/11 fiction.

The existing critical perspectives offer valuable insights and employ various approaches to analyze Auster’s oeuvre, especially *Sunset Park*. However, they often overlook the unseen violence

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ingrained within the socio-economic structures of Auster's *Sunset Park,* and the characters' response to it, a gap the present research intends to address.

Theoretical Framework: Žižek's Encounter with the Concept of Violence

The strength of the capitalist system lies in its ability to automatically reproduce the class differences necessary for the stability of liberal democracy. Liberal democracy and capitalism are often intertwined, with the former providing the political framework and the latter the economic system. Liberal democracy, with its emphasis on individual rights and freedoms, typically supports capitalist principles such as private property, free markets, and limited government intervention. However, the relationship is complex. While capitalism can foster economic growth and individual prosperity, it can also lead to inequalities that challenge democratic ideals.

Žižek emphasizes that economic exploitation is central to capitalism, which is naturalized and inscribed into the economy's functioning (Butler 2014: 17). He suggests that liberal-democratic societies, far from their definitive social formula, are entering a period of self-destruction due to the "contradictory dynamics of global capitalism" (110).

The structure that supports this seemingly seamless social order contains a form of political violence within itself, yet insists on that its social order is the best possible one, reducing meaningful political action to the superficial task of "fixing mistakes" rather than initiating radical social change. (Neves et al. 2017: 47). Such a governing system or doctrine is both indebted to the manifest violence that established it and dependent upon the hidden violence that imposes it on society.

Violence matters. It smashes and diminishes life chances, engenders pain and grief, and is often associated with rapid social changes. The realm of violence includes war, terrorism, ethnic cleansing, domestic violence, violent crime, and hate crime. It has gained more attention and has become a topic for public discourse and action by governments and various organizations.

In *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, Žižek elucidates the difference between subjective and objective violence. Subjective violence has an identifiable agent and provokes clear ethical responses, leading to moral and legal measures. Whereas objective violence is symbolic or systematic, lacking a tangible, observable agent. He describes objective violence as "'real' in the precise sense of determining the structure of the material social processes" (2008: 24). He asserts that it is prevalent, capitalist by nature, and functions even when people are not aware of it.

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People's daily exposure to news, the internet, and even diverse films bombards them with various forms of subjective violence. This constant focus on immediate and personal forms of harm, however, can make them blind to the more systemic and underlying objective violence that shapes their world (2). This lack of awareness hinders the individual's ability to address critical, ethical, political, and social issues effectively (Gutierrez 2016: 1).

In contrast to subjective violence, which involves direct physical harm or conflict between individuals, objective violence is more subtle and pervasive. Žižek's exploration of objective violence is part of his broader critique of ideology and how power structures operate in society. Žižek's concept of objective violence often includes a form of silent or unnoticed violence that may not be immediately perceived as harmful in the ordinary sense.

Symbolic and Systemic Violence

As Žižek posits, objective violence encompasses the unseen and often unnoticed forces that permeate everyday life, manifesting in economic inequalities, rigid social hierarchies, and groundless injustices. He introduces two subcategories for objective violence, namely, symbolic violence and systemic violence.

Symbolic violence manifests in language and various modes of representation (Wood 2012: 257). While the fear of the Neighbor is seen as the main driver of violence, Žižek contends that symbolic violence is intrinsic to language itself and, as such, influences our speech and communication practices. It encompasses not just the patterns of domination reflected in how we speak, but also "a more fundamental form of violence that relates to language itself, specifically its establishment of a particular universe of meaning" (Žižek 2008: 2).

He asserts that humans are capable of more violence than animals because they speak (61). Thus, language constitutes human desire as inherently transgressive (65). Following a person who witnesses a scene of a raging crowd burning and lynching, the words these protesters carry on the signs will sustain the violence in the mind of the observer of such scenes (67). Žižek concludes that to understand the seemingly inexplicable outbreaks of subjective violence, one must consider systemic violence, which is tied to the capitalist political-economic system. He firmly dismisses the hypocritical stance of those who oppose subjective violence while simultaneously engaging in practices that perpetuate systemic violence (2008: 22).

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Systemic violence arises from the continuous operation of economic and political frameworks and remains concealed; a critique of political economy is necessary to uncover the connection between this functionality and its often-disastrous effects. For instance, in countries like the U.S., the lack of political-economic analysis leads relatively privileged citizens to wonder, "Why do they (the protesters) hate us (American politicians)?" in response to visible acts of violence (75). Therefore, recognizing systemic violence is crucial for explaining the ambiguities surrounding subjective violence. This distinction is the initial step in Žižek's bold exposure of the dishonesty of those who comment on subjective violence while supporting systemic violence (Wood 2012: 257).

The Real of Language in Symbolic Violence

Žižek defines symbolic violence as the violence "embodied in language and its forms." This type of violence is fundamental, relating not only to the obvious cases of social domination reproduced in speech forms but also to a more fundamental violence pertaining to language as such, and its imposition of a certain universe of meaning. Žižek, following Lacan, argues that every existing space of discourse is ultimately grounded in a "violent imposition of a Master-Signifier" which is essentially "irrational". This Master-Signifier "quilts" and holds together the symbolic field (2008: 62).

For Žižek, the law (the Symbolic order) by definition implies exclusion of some part of society which reject its dominance. Therefore, the marginalized or excluded group functions as the necessary remainder, the "abject cultural and political space," against which the dominant order defines its universality (2009: 131). The excluded class is conceptualized as the Real that resists "social integration" (Butler 2014: 185).

In a crucial part from his book, *Violence*, Žižek states that "the solution [to looming ecological disaster and the threat of world war] is to become fully aware of the explosive set of interconnections that makes the entire situation dangerous. Once we do this, we embrace the courage that comes with hopelessness" (2008: 298).

The philosophy surrounding violence often lacks a clear categorization of different violent acts. From Žižek's perspective, the terminology related to violence is fraught with biased definitions. He points out that asserting a specific purpose behind a violent act inherently involves making a politically charged value judgment, representing an ethical and political imposition of norms (Vinokur 2019: 3).

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As mentioned earlier, for Žižek, symbolic violence is "incarnate" in language since "there is an even more fundamental form of violence that belongs to language as such, to the imposition that language comes from a certain universe of meaning" (2008: 58). Žižek's perspective suggests that the yearning for a new, peaceful community requires addressing distinct roots of violence within the existing world order. Violence is not a natural characteristic but a problem produced by the structures that shape the understanding of humanity. Žižek's notion of objective violence indicates how language and symbolic systems can be forms of violence themselves. The specificity of the human world, both in its organization and representation, is tied to experienced manifestations of violence.

This study traces symbolic violence through characters' narratives, the narrator's language of articulating violence and the novel's thematic backdrop. Then, it demonstrates how the characters separate themselves from their environment to avoid the existing violence, and how they select their own language of communication or objection —literature, painting and music— to treat or to resist the traumatic condition.

The Real of the Capitalism in Systemic Violence

The crisis depicted in *Sunset Park* aligns powerfully with Žižek's concept of systemic violence, and potentially with objective violence, which are often concealed by the focus on subjective acts of aggression. Subjective violence, though disruptive, is reactionary and a subtle, normalized violence underlies it (Drahos 2012: 17).

Žižek argues that capitalism's Real dimension controls individuals, shaping their symbolic reality and identity (2008: 93). This Real, a self-propelling drive for expansion, causes symbolic inconsistency masked by ideological fantasy in the global capitalist order. Thus, even knowing capitalism's potential collapse, people act as if they don't (Wood 2012: 272).

Žižek's analysis extends to the role of ideology in perpetuating this system. During a lecture in Athens in 2007, he asserts that, the rich get richer while capitalism as an ideology turns ordinary citizens into "mushrooms," kept in the dark and fed falsities. He also condemns the West's benefiting from global suffering, yet notes capitalism's adaptability across cultures, as well as "detotalising meaning" and the lack of a single global meaning. For Žižek, ideology is a network of prejudices that structure thought and action, mystifying social violence and distorts the

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underlying reality of systemic violence to protect the status quo. (Žižek 2008: 79). Accordingly, the issue of the politics of fear as an exemplary of capitalist system is examined in *Sunset Park*.

In a capitalist system, the fear of the Neighbor is considered as the main driver of violence. The Neighbor, or whom he calls "the main threat today" (Žižek 2002: 132) includes both those who live within the U.S. as the immigrants and those who live out of the U.S. borders. The explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions injected by the capitalist system has formed an obsessive fear in American society. Žižek claims that today, in a capitalist system, the only way to mobilize people actively in the name of democracy is through fear, as fear has become a "basic constituent of today's subjectivity." Consequently, the "politics of fear— fear of immigrants, fear of crime, fear of ecological catastrophe, fear of other countries" or even fear of other's judgment – has emerged. The focal point of such fears is the defense against potential victimization or harassment (Žižek 2008: 40). In the first world, this awareness, injected through political mystification that the people "live in an insulated artificial universe" (33), creates a paranoid mindset among them, a sense that they are perpetually under threat of harm to others. No one can imagine the consequences of such an attitude since the root cause of apparent acts of terrorism, for instance, is the invisible systemic violence of capitalism driven by this anti-other policy (Wood 2012: 197).

On the other side, liberalism itself privileges a certain culture: the modern Western one. As to freedom of choice, liberalism is also marked by a strong bias. It is intolerant when individuals of other cultures are not given freedom of choice (Žižek 2008: 145). While Žižek highlights the political strategy of using fear, specifically "the fear of harassment" (41), to maintain the status quo, this fear might actually be a symptom of non-political, everyday societal pressure.

In a capitalist consumerist environment, individuals are constantly under internal and external scrutiny (the threat of others' judgment). Therefore, their resulting defensive reactions are a matter of personal psychology or social conformity rather than a militant political opposition demanding change. This perspective implicitly suggests that there is a gap between the appearance of equality and the social reality of economic and cultural differences, resulting in significant challenges. Thus, the focus should be shifted away from high politics and return to the complex psychological dynamics of everyday life under capitalism.

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Material and Methods

The study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, grounding its analysis in Slavoj Žižek's tripartite schema of violence found in Violence (2008):

Subjective Violence: The visible, sensationalized acts of violence (e.g., the physical assault in Sunset Park) that the public and media focus on.

Objective Violence (Structural): The invisible, systemic violence inherent in the smooth functioning of the economic and political order (capitalism, gentrification, labor exploitation).

Subjective Violence as a Reaction: The analysis posits that subjective violence is often a symptomatic explosion triggered by the repression of objective violence.

The study uses Close Textual Analysis to identify how the narrative structure of Sunset Park oscillates between these forms, arguing that the "violent" acts of the protagonist are not the cause of social dysfunction but a symptom of the objective violence of the post-industrial economy.

Analytical Procedure: Deconstructing the "Big Other"

The research employs a specific iterative process to apply Žižek's framework:

Step A: Identification of the "Big Other" (Ideological Fantasy)

The text is first scanned for the implied "Big Other"—the symbolic order (the American Dream, the myth of upward mobility) that characters believe in. The analysis reveals how the novel deconstructs this fantasy, showing the "cracks" in the ideological veil where the structural violence of capitalism becomes visible.

Step B: Mapping the Mechanisms of Objective Violence

Using close reading, the study maps specific narrative elements to Žižek's definition of objective violence:

Economic Mechanisms: Analysis of rent prices, precarious employment, and the commodification of space in Sunset Park as manifestations of systemic violence.

Social Mechanisms: Examination of the alienation between characters as a result of the market's logic rather than individual malice.

Cultural Mechanisms: Investigation of how cultural narratives (e.g., "pull yourself up by your bootstraps") serve to mask the structural impossibility of success for the marginalized.

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Step C: The Dialectic of Subjectivity

The method traces the trajectory of the protagonist's subjectivity. Instead of viewing their actions through a moralistic lens (good/evil), the analysis interprets their subjectivity as a reaction to the "symbolic castration" inflicted by the system. The research asks: How does the character's psychological breakdown mirror the breakdown of the social contract?

Interdisciplinary Integration

Critical Theory & Literary Studies: Blends Žižek's philosophical concepts with the narrative tropes of contemporary American realism.

Sociology of Space: Integrates the concept of "gentrification" not merely as a background setting but as a form of spatial violence that reconfigures human subjectivity.

Psychoanalytic Critique: Applies the concept of "disavowal" (Ich weiß, aber… / I know that, but…) to explain how the characters (and the reader) simultaneously know the system is broken yet continue to participate in it.

Data Processing and Interpretation

Coding for Symbolic Gaps: The text is coded for moments where language fails, where characters are silent, or where the narrative breaks down. These "silences" are treated as the sites where objective violence is most potent.

Comparative Analysis: The findings are compared against the public discourse surrounding the novel to demonstrate the gap between subjective interpretations (focusing on the criminal act) and objective realities (focusing on the systemic conditions).

Expected Contribution

This method moves beyond traditional literary criticism by reframing the novel not just as a story about a character, but as a symptomatic reading of the current neoliberal epoch. The study aims to demonstrate that Sunset Park does not merely depict poverty; it exposes the violent machinery of capitalism that produces the conditions for such despair, thereby reorienting the reader's gaze from the "violent individual" to the "violent system."

Results

Žižek analyzes capitalist society, discloses its symptoms, diagnoses its pathology, and, most importantly, reveals its disregarded ideological reality. On the other side, Auster has illustrated the

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picture of the American economic crisis in *Sunset Park* to represent the true face of capitalism, the same system so efficient and successful in concealing the significant forms of violence in society. The aim of this research is to answer the question how the characters are exposed to objective violence, and how they respond and react to this form of violence.

Articulation of Symbolic Violence in *Sunset Park*

Auster, in his *Sunset Park,* exposes symbolic violence in the form of unique and dissimilar articulation. To grab the reader's attention, in the initial part of the novel, he confronts them with symbolic violence represented in the form of a very special language: the language of things. Auster introduces this concept by immediately immersing the reader in the discarded remnants of lives, "the things, the innumerable cast-off things left behind by the departed families" (Auster 2010: 1). Auster narrates how Miles feels and what he observes each time he walks into "a vacated house for trashing out," highlighting the unsettling stories embedded within these abandoned objects:

In the beginning, he was stunned by the disarray and the filth, the neglect. Rare is the house he enters that has been left in pristine condition by its former owners. More often, there will have been an eruption of violence and anger, a parting rampage of capricious vandalism. (2)

He keeps on recounting that whenever Miles enters a house, "he senses that the things are calling out to him, speaking to him in the voices of the people who are no longer there, asking him to be looked at one last time before they are carted away" (٢). There is no need for anyone to shout out their anger now, as the mass inside the house signifies the violence has taken place previously, and "the objects, the forgotten possessions, [and] *the abandoned things*" [emphasis original] are harsh examples, maybe, "impulsive acts triggered by the rage of the dispossessed, disgusting but understandable statements of despair" (٢). No doubt, these are signs of the traumatized state of the former residents who suffered from both symbolic and systemic violence.

This suffocating atmosphere and "the stench of defeat" has silenced Miles. He wants "not things, but the pictures of things" (Auster 2010: 2). Then Auster underlines that this house and most houses Miles enters daily are messy and untidy, announcing harsh, violent conditions that the ex-dwellers had once experienced, and now he is confronting them.

Miles comes from a wealthy family; however, his daily disturbing observations approach him to a point where his desires become minimal: "just a cell phone for capturing images; his automobile

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for commuting to work; and his collection of books as necessities, since "reading is an addiction, he has no wish to be cured of" (٣).

Even returning to New York, his hometown, Miles insists on articulating the present condition through a distinctive language: through taking pictures, but this time of Green-Wood-Cemetery, which Auster mentions as a useless project: "He has embarked on another useless project, employing his camera as an instrument to record his stray, useless thoughts, but at least it is something to do, a way to pass the time" (71). However, Žižek confirms that this sort of social avoidance is not worthless at all. Such discourse is, in itself, "authoritarian" (2008: 61), and language is what "constitutes human desire as inherently transgressive" (65). This is why Miles prefers utilizing the language of pictures rather than speaking. He has detached himself not only from the people around, but from their possible verbal violence also. He has spent his time with those who are quite incapable of articulation, the dwellers of "the City of the Dead" (Auster 2010: 80):

The cemetery is more than half the size of Central Park, ample enough space for a person to get lost in there, to forget that he is a prisoner serving out his time in a dreary part of Brooklyn, and to walk among the thousands of trees and plantings, to climb the hillocks and traverse the sweeping paths of this vast necropolis is to leave the city behind you and enclose yourself in the absolute quiet of the dead. (81)

Miles Heller has chosen to be the silent witness of the present desolated atmosphere of which he keeps a trace by taking photographs. He thus frames the fracture of the Real, which is depicted anywhere by "the emptiness and the void that returns to haunt a country which tried desperately to hide its vulnerability under excessive profitability and false promises" (Peteghem 2012: 6).

Alice Bergstrom, a PhD student, works at the PEN American Center, serving the Freedom to Write Program, which defends writers imprisoned, threatened with death, or banned from publishing by unjust governments. Alice actively works on protests, such as writing emails "support for the massive protest Paul wants to mount in Liu Xiaobo's defense" (Auster 2010: 123). Alice's work fighting for writers involves confronting the state's subjective violence, but her recognition regarding the immense power and inherent danger of words does strongly signify the articulation of symbolic violence.

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Auster, about Alice, states that when she was ten years old, she heard about some writer who had been threatened to kill for writing a novel. "This was incomprehensible to her. Books weren't dangerous, she said to herself, they brought only pleasure and happiness to the people who read them" (121). Alice's initial position reflects the general modern assumption that language is a neutral tool, but "the older she grew the more she understood about the danger of words, the threat to power words can represent, and in states ruled by tyrants and policemen, every writer who dares to express himself freely is at risk" (121). Consequently, her critical adult awareness leads her to recognize symbolic violence. She understands that the persecution of writers is not due to accidental hostility, but resulted from the word's inherent capacity to rupture the authoritative ideological framework upon which the oppressive regime is founded.

Demonstration of Systemic Violence in *Sunset Park*

As previously stated, the rapid increase in social divisions and exclusions injected by the political system has formed an obsessive fear in American society. In this regard, Auster exhibits two distinct orientations in *Sunset Park*. On the one hand, he introduces the dominance of politics of fear in American society and even beyond the U.S. borders injected by American policy. On the other hand, he depicts the characters' opposition to this policy, which is discussed as well.

In the first place, he highlights the fear of immigrants by introducing Pilar's clan when he says, "The problem is that Pilar is more than just Pilar. She is a member of the Sanchez family" (Auster 2010: 29). Paul Auster seems to resort to a naturalistic or even pessimistic approach to this immigrant family by foregrounding all the clichés associated with the Hispanic community in Florida: high birth-rate, limited education— one is studying to be a beautician, the other is a hostess in a cocktail lounge, and the third works at the bank as a teller (3)— and no traditional patriarchal authority. Men are notably absent from the house: the father is dead, sister's husband is in Iraq, and occasional male friends just show up for meals(112) throughout the novel (Peteghem 2012: 8).

Angela is "the oldest Sanchez girl, the major breadwinner of the clan and therefore the one with the final word on all family decisions" (Auster 2010: 5). She tries to blackmail Miles into stealing goods from the foreclosed houses. The novel highlights that Miles's devotion to Pilar, despite her sister's attempt to "blackmail" him, functions as a refusal of the corruption endemic to their desperate financial environment, which is directly tied to the hard times of 2008. As he refuses,

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she organizes his beating up by two friends and threatens to report to the police his relationship with Pilar, who is still a minor. "Angela represents an immigrant who is determined to make the most of the situation and ruthlessly exploits Miles' vulnerability. Her suspicion and greed manifest the new face of multicultural America. Auster, therefore, in a politically tough way, shatters the stereotyped vision of the melting pot and community spirit of the U.S." (Peteghem 8) to demonstrate the rise of individualistic strategies for survival among strangers.

Such behaviors would justify the capitalist system's emphasis on applying the politics of fear. However, Miles is not intimidated by the slogan as fear of the neighbor and disregards the socio-economic and ethnic clichés. Miles's decision to embrace Pilar and devote himself to advancing her education ("he starts the SATs drills and introduces her to calculus" (4)) is a rejection of the dominant politics of fear because it focuses on an ethical, personal relationship over external political or social antagonism. Miles sees Pilar as "a small piece of luck he stumbled across" and an "exception to every rule" (Auster 2010: 5).

Somewhere else in the novel, wandering around Sunset Park, Miles is confronted with the distressing condition of people. He ponders over this part of New York as the empty signifier of a cultural wasteland where "the fractured masses of this defunct nation" (47) live:

There is something dead about the place, he finds, the mournful emptiness of poverty and immigrant struggle, an area without banks or bookstores, only check-cashing operations and a decrepit public library, a small world apart from the world where time moves so slowly that few people bother to wear a watch. (80-81)

This is the setting of Sunset Park, "a rougher neighborhood," characterized by its economic exclusion and defined by what it lacks rather than what it possesses. It is the "home to more than a hundred thousand people, including Mexicans, Dominicans, Poles, Chinese, Jordanians, Vietnamese, American whites, American blacks," and how sarcastic it is when "a view of the Statue of Liberty" is observable from there (51).

Sunset Park neighborhood acts as a demonstration of the precise social and economic collapse or what this research introduces as objective violence, that exposes the inadequacy of the capitalism built upon the politics of fear. The fear of other or neighbor operates by isolating and demonizing a "constitutive outside" or the excluded other. This "Other", however, is not necessarily as an immigrant or a foreign terrorist, but as a class of people systematically excluded by economic

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reality. Miles is not a foreigner, a stranger or a neighbor; rather, he is one of those "American Whites" attempting to "create an alternative life style"— a space for "potential co-existence and temporary healing." Miles and his friends consider this location not merely a "temporary home, a glitch in the system" (19), but a "grand experiment" (155) designed to shatter the dominance of fear imposed by capitalism.

Although war and its consequences are not the focus of this article, the reference to the politics of fear or illusion of conspiracy that can lead to war is still noteworthy here. Auster indirectly pinpoints the effect of war on the lives of those Americans involved in the war or who lived during wartime. Sergeant Lopez, father of eighteen-month-old Carlos and Pilar's brother-in-law, is one of them:

He has not been home for ten months, and the meal begins with a silent prayer for his continued safety. … [E]veryone looks up as Teresa sniffs back a sudden onrush of tears. … [Mike] imagines George Bush and Dick Cheney being lined up against a wall and shot, and then, … he hopes that Teresa's husband will be lucky enough to make it back in one piece. (Auster 2010: 33)

Auster uses this specific, intimate scene—Sergeant Lopez's absence during a family meal—to make a sharp political critique, drawing a clear line between the political decisions of leaders and the resulting emotional suffering and hatred of ordinary people, like Teresa and Mike.

Auster confronts the reader once more with war through Alice who is a PhD student of literature "with her part-time job at the PEN American Center," where she fights "for the Freedom to Write Program" (43). Alice's dissertation subject is William Wyler's 1946 film *The Best Years of Our Lives* which provides ample material to explore how different generations face traumatic situations. She considers it to be "the national epic of that particular period in American history—the story of three men broken by war and the difficulties they confront when they return to their families, which is the same story that was being lived out by millions of others at the time, including the life story of Teresa and her husband" (60). Alice's doctoral dissertation links historical and contemporary systemic violence, exposing how war necessitates the traumatic "reinvention" of American life (50).

The underlying systemic forces that caused armed conflict imply a form of objective violence imposed on humanity, which is giving rise to what Paul Auster calls "the generation of men who

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cannot talk" (63). This is what Alice mentions in her notes referring to Bill Bergstrom, an ex-soldier who survived the Vietnam War in the film:

[I]t simply isn't possible for him to talk about those years, they all came home insane, damaged for life, and even the years after the war were still part of the war, the years of bad dreams and night sweats, the years of wanting to punch your fist through walls. (63)

When she thinks of that generation of silent men, she never blames them for refusing to talk or resisting reminders of their harrowing past. There is a sense of discontent for her that the younger generation is overly talkative about trivial matters. In contrast, the older, silent generation of Vietnam War veterans has profound insights to share if only they would speak. She laments that they are "nearly gone now," under the pressure of violent decisions of their political system. This indicates that she touches a sense of loss and regret at not being able to listen to their sorrowful, untold stories before they pass away (Auster 2010: 63).

The defensive reaction against "potential victimization or harassment" on which Žižek persists is not necessarily political: sometimes it can be a social, cultural, or psychological matter. In a capitalist consumerist society, any individual can feel pressured and frightened under the threat of other's or her judgment. (2008: 144-45). Look at Alice how she judges herself:

She no longer has the courage to look at herself in the mirror. I'm fat, she says to Jake. Again and again, she says it, I'm fat, I'm fat, unable to stop herself from repeating the words, ... she knows better than to think that love is simply a question of bodies, the size and shape, and heft of bodies, and if Jake can't cope with his somewhat overweight, furiously dieting girlfriend, then Jake can go to hell. (Auster 2010: 5)

There exists no freedom of choice for Alice; the liberal democratic notion of human rights in the Western "tolerant" multicultural sense is, in fact, hypocritical. The system first violently tears her out of her world and then cuts her off from her style, thought, and origin (2008: 146), resulting in hating herself, as Alice feels.

Characters' Responses to Objective Violence

Sunset Park's characters employ diverse methods to cry their objection or resistance. They may even avoid to react or resist and take refuge in silence. In line with his criticism of the systemin violence, Auster depicts some slices of the characters' lives affected by this capitalistic attitude

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where instead of fearing others, they strive overcome such inner fears and reject this policy's effects.

Bing Nathan, Miles's friend, is "the warrior of outrage, the champion of discontent, the militant debunker of contemporary life who dreams of forging a new reality from the ruins of a failed world. Unlike most contrarians of his ilk, he does not believe in political action" (Auster 2010: 47). His battle is thus limited to an individual, symbolic, and ultimately non-political opposition. Every day, Bing "struggles to adhere to the fundamental rule of his discontent: to stand in opposition to things-as-they-are, to resist the status quo on all fronts" (47).

Bing runs a shop correctly called a "The Hospital for Broken Things" (48), which exceeds mere physical space and becomes a haven for both outdated objects and the characters themselves, offering relief and a sense of belonging amidst their fractured lives (Hugonnier 2020: 30). Bing's repairing old electronic equipment, and restoring it to life in his hospital highlights a creative, restorative practice focused on discarded objects, contrasting with capitalist consumerism. Moreover, his limited relation with old friends demonstrates that he avoids confrontation with others' judgment and flees the violence implied behind it. Auster bluntly introduces Bing as a young man who:

shuns cell phones, computers, and all things digital—because he refuses to participate in new technologies. That is why he spends his weekends playing drums and percussion in a six-man jazz group—because jazz is dead and only the happy few are interested in it anymore. (48)

This sort of resistance manifests not as organized struggle, but as personal isolation, such as shunning cell phones and other things digital retreating into the esoteric performance of a "dead" art form: jazz. Bing's individualistic, cultural rebellion perfectly implies the very impact of objective violence of the political atmosphere, where structural critique is transformed into gestures of personal refusal, and cannot challenge the silent presence of violent cynical system he detests.

Ellen, on the contrary, exhibits "a revolutionary work of art" (Auster 2010: 127) through which she targets the politics of fear anxiously and angrily. Bing describes her condition as follows: "She projected an aura of anxiety and defeat, and with her too pale skin and flat, lusterless hair … if she wasn't mired in some sort of depression, living out her days in an underground room at the Hotel Melancholia" (51).

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Ellen suffers from insomnia. Her psychologists once described her problem as "fear without an object", but Ellen refuses to accept it and doesn't want to go back on the medication", since "She doesn't want to shut down her life to survive her life. She wants her senses to be awake" (65). She believes that it is "fear of dying without having lived" (66). Hence, she decides to behave differently and to unveil the unrepresentable Real:

She wanted to make pictures that would evoke the mute wonder of pure thingness, the holy ether breathing in the spaces between things, a translation of human existence into a minute rendering of all that is *out there* beyond us, around us… There will be no hope for her unless she starts again from the beginning. (Auster 2010: 70)

Ellen begins to draw the naked human body as it is "an instrument of knowledge" for her (125). Such drawings, which she calls "intimate, not erotic, are rough and usually left unfinished. She wants her human body to convey the miraculous strangeness of being alive. She doesn't concern herself with the idea of beauty. Beauty can take care of itself" (126).

This is in harmony with Žižek's view to critique the contemporary experience of reality and encourage any individual to be mindful of its limitations. He argues that by seeking only a "decaf" version of reality, people miss out on the essential aspects of life, even if they are complex or challenging (Žižek 2008: 44). Ellen, like Žižek, is protesting "aesthetically handicapped" (Auster 2010: 127) society, which often offers experiences that seem real but lack the depth and complexity of actual reality, leading her to a sense of emptiness, dissatisfaction, and marginality.

While the act of a female artist drawing naked sketches may seem personally daring, it also reveals and critiques the objective violence underlying societal norms and expectations about femininity and body image that the consumer culture of the capitalist system imposes on American society. Through Žižek's lens, this artist's act functions as both a confrontation with and a reflection of the ideological structures that affect individual identity, sexuality, and the very experience of selfhood.

Discussion

This research undertook the central task of unveiling the silent yet pervasive presence of objective violence in Paul Auster's *Sunset Park*. It grounds its analysis in Slavoj Žižek's theoretical framework which distinguishes between readily perceptible subjective violence and its often-disregarded objective manifestations—the systemic and symbolic forms that structure

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contemporary society. The study confirms that *Sunset Park* functions as a critique of capitalism by illustrating the devastating realities of the American economic crisis, which brought to the center of major United States cities severe financial downturns threatening the employment and housing of common people.

The novel illustrates the insidious emergence of systemic violence—the objective force arising from the catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of political and economic systems—primarily through the pervasive imagery of foreclosed and abandoned houses that Miles Heller confronts. In fact, it portrays the breakdown of the American Dream into bankruptcy and default. Crucially, the analysis demonstrates that this systemic pathology can culminates in the imposition of the ideological reality of the politics of fear, which manifests as generalized anxiety and fear of the Other (immigrants, crime, or catastrophe), used effectively to stabilize the American political order.

The core findings have established a fundamental duality in the characters' responses to this violence. On one hand, the provisional community formed within the abandoned Brooklyn house represents a conscious act of resistance, an attempt to carve out a non-capitalist space and achieve self-healing by waging "their own war" against systemic pressures. Their individual artistic and intellectual pursuits served as counter-narratives to the systemic degradation: Miles's photography documented the discarded traces of lost lives, Ellen's painting experimented with forms to expose symbolic violence, Bing's "Hospital for Broken Things" repaired forgotten artifacts, and Alice pursued her challenging dissertation on Vietnam war. These creative and vocational endeavors function as crucial subjective efforts aimed at overcoming the fragmentation and alienation induced by objective violence, providing temporary meaning to identities otherwise marked by loneliness and financial desperation.

On the other hand, the study illustrated the inherent fragility and ultimate futility of this subjective resistance. The characters' individual traumas, financial instability, and lingering sense of isolation reveal that they cannot fully escape the pervasive reach of objective violence. The cumulative emotional, physical, and psychological problems of the characters become externally manifested in their unavoidable, forceful eviction from the abandoned home by the police. This moment unequivocally exposed the state's enforcement of property law as the material reassertion of systemic power, dissolving the community and scattering its members. Thus, the objective silent

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violence transitioned into a decisive physical which destroyed their communal shelter and scattered their hopes for recovery.

In conclusion, *Sunset Park* provides a compelling unveiling of objective violence, and demonstrate how the subtle structural forces embedded in capitalist ideology relentlessly overwhelm human attempts at subjective autonomy and political resistance. While the novel offers a powerful image of resistance through communal action and artistic endeavor, the conclusion ultimately underscores the tragic realization that even the most determined individual struggles are precarious when confronted with the full implacable force of systemic determination. It leaves the characters with a gloomy, inevitable return to homelessness and reminding the reader of the ever-present, yet unseen, fissures at the core of the contemporary American experience.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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