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These (Heavy) Boots Are Made for Walking: Space and Trauma in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*

Francisco Aránguiz¹

The present essay aims to illustrate the close relationship between trauma and space existent in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, and how these two concepts are tightly knit together in the novel. The analysis focuses on the way in which the nine-year-old protagonist, Oskar Schell, relates to both public and private space after losing his father and how he manages to work through his trauma by means of wandering around the city. However, urban space cannot offer Oskar complete recovery due to the intrinsic nature of the city as a palimpsest. Therefore, the dynamic nature of urban space bars the protagonist from reaching closure for his trauma as his narrative is persistently interrupted by and mingled with those of strangers. In the case of Oskar's quest for closure leads him to another's trauma instead of his own, thus avoiding a complete recovery. This, moreover, is seen as something positive since it grants him the potential of renegotiating his traumatic memories over time.

KEYWORDS: TRAUMA, URBAN SPACE, PALIMPSEST, JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER, EXTREMELY LOUD AND INCREDIBLY CLOSE.

Jonathan Safran Foer's novel, *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, presents the story of a nine-year-old boy, Oskar Schell, whose father dies during the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, and who is unable to cope with the loss in a healthy way. The novel follows the protagonist's finding of a mysterious key hidden in his father's closet which makes him go out into New York in order to unlock the key's secret—he thinks it will bring him closer to his father. It can be observed that Oskar's quest for the lock to which the key belongs has a therapeutic effect on him as he starts working through his trauma by walking around the city and running into different people and places that have also been affected by experiences of the same nature. However, Oskar is not able to heal

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himself completely. He does, nevertheless, reconcile some aspects of his traumatic experience, which allows him to pass from a melancholic-like state to a process of mourning. Moreover, the impossibility of complete recovery is given by the intrinsic nature of New York City as a palimpsest which implies that people's narratives constantly are being written over by others. Therefore, the constant overwriting of the urban space bars Oskar from reaching closure for his trauma as his narrative is persistently interrupted by and mingled with those of strangers.

In this context, the terrorist attacks on September 11 traumatised New York in both psychological and physical terms. Ground Zero has become a wound on the topography of the city affecting its inhabitants in a myriad of ways. The city and the figure of the home, once familiar, become uncanny, and the necessity for resemantising these spaces, to make them homely again, seems not only necessary but compulsory in order to work through the traumatic experience (Greenberg 23, 30).

As it has been stated, the present essay aims to demonstrate the close relationship between trauma and space existent in the novel, and how these two concepts are tightly knit together in the story. In order to do this, the first thing that seems necessary is to define what this study will understand by space and how this notion can be applied to the city. This framework will take into consideration Doreen Massey's and Michel de Certeau's views on the subject. Both of them coincide in conceiving space as the result of interrelations which, in the case of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, are traumatic in nature.

Once the concept of the city has been established, it will be examined and framed under the light of Judith Greenberg's account of the aftereffects of experiencing trauma at home, together with Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny. Then, we will be able to proceed to analyse how the 9/11 traumatic event personally affects the protagonist of the novel, Oskar, and his relation to space. The latter becomes a key subject, as most of the people he meets during his quest for the lock have experienced the loss of a loved one and this has affected the configuration of their private spaces. Oskar's trauma echoes theirs and, at least to some extent, embodies New York's wound. So, Oskar can be seen as a synecdoche of the city. In order to complement the views on space and relate them with trauma, works of different theorists will be of great help. Among the texts that this study will use we can count Freud's essay on mourning and melancholia, as well as Dominick LaCapra's revision of these concepts, and other readings from the field of Trauma Studies.

Due to the different stances on what space is considered to be, it is necessary to define what this study will understand by this concept. The geographer and social scientist Doreen Massey, in her book *For Space*, attacks the common understanding of space as being static, and advocates for its dynamic nature. In order to prove that, she makes three opening propositions regarding space which are central for this study: first, that it is the result of interrelations; second, that it can be seen as “the dimension of multiple trajectories, simultaneity of stories-so-far” (24); and third, that it is by no means self-contained but rather in constant flux (9). Along with these three claims, Massey establishes a close connection between the self and space, as the latter “does not exist prior to identities/entities and their relations” (10). This is to say that our arrival at a certain place does not only modify it but it also modifies our own selves.

Massey’s views are taken here as a starting point to define the urban space. Then, following her statements, the city presents itself as a space beyond its architectural components. It is made of its inhabitants’ different trajectories and the relations with the places they visit within the city that give meaning to the urban spaces. In addition, the constant flow of people makes the space of the city a dynamic one, as its citizens, in their ceaseless movement, set the urban space on an on-going production. This view confirms what Henri Lefebvre suggests in *The Production of Space*, that space is created by means of human relationships (26), positioning social interaction as one of the essentials for the existence of space.

This view of the city can be complemented with what Michel de Certeau states in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. He emphasises the active role of the city in reinventing itself constantly, and gives the pedestrian an important role: that of giving meaning to the urban space. He conceives the trajectories of the city-walkers as exercises of writing which constantly overlap each other. Therefore,

[t]he paths that correspond in this intertwining, unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others, elude eligibility. It is as though the practices of organizing a bustling city were characterized by their blindness. The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alteration of spaces. (93)

In this aspect, de Certeau's conception of space coincides with Lefebvre's idea of the different rhythms of the city, which "in all their multiplicity interpenetrate one another... [as they] are forever crossing and recrossing, superimposing themselves upon each other" and, thus, giving origin to the dynamics of the urban space (205). Moreover, it can be said that the city, in its endless juxtaposition of trajectories, is shaped as a palimpsest in which the pedestrian/writer can no longer distinguish his or her own path/story in isolation but can understand it only in relation to other paths/stories which might interfere in his or her own narrative. This is to say that, even though space is made of a simultaneity of stories-so-far, it "can never be that complemented simultaneity in which all interconnections have been established, in which everywhere is already...linked to everywhere else" (Massey 95). Then, the city as a palimpsest does not only elude intelligibility but, in a way, immerses the walker in a rhizomatic space which is constantly changing and leads him to blind alleys, to unsought destinations or loose ends.

This conception of the urban space should be kept in mind throughout the present study, as these very characteristics of the urban space will both help Oskar work through his trauma (since his path will meet many others which in one way or another will make him improve his condition) and bar him from finding closure (because his quest will lead him to the other traumas instead of his own). The latter should not be considered, necessarily, as a negative aspect, because, as it will be explained later on, the lack of closure gives the possibility of a "continual re-negotiation" between the subject and his traumatic memories (Eng 88).

The already complex concept of the city becomes even more complicated when we consider the trauma—physical and psychological—that the 9/11 events produced on both the spatial configuration of New York as well as in its inhabitants, among whom the main character of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* can be found.

The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center marked a before and an after in the conceptualisation of New York. As Judith Greenberg states in her essay "Wounded New York," "[f]or those who have made New York our home, the attacks freshly complicated those terms—'home' and 'New York'—and proved anew that they signify not just location but also a relation to identity" (22). In her statement, Greenberg brings two subjects in: first, the jeopardised concepts of 'home' and 'city' and, second, the link between place and identity which harks back to Massey and de Certeau's claims. Focusing on the former, we can say that after the attacks these two spaces became

uncanny. Freud defines the uncanny as a “class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” but not anymore (930). Thus, what once seemed to be safe and reassuring becomes menacing and uncomfortable. As a consequence, the concepts of home and hometown are torn asunder by this traumatic experience, leaving its inhabitants disoriented and wounded. The once ‘homely’ New York becomes unfamiliar as one of its main landmarks is reduced to ashes and debris, while at the same time many homes in the city become strange by the absence of one of the household members. Then, the trauma—a word that means ‘wound’ in Greek—can find its literal representation in Ground Zero, which stands as “an enormous, smouldering ... hole signifying the missing” (Greenberg 25) and an externalization of the selves shattered by trauma. In addition, when the urban space becomes uncanny, the urban uncanny arises. This term adds to the aforementioned characteristics of the *unheimlich* the idea that within the once familiar city, its inhabitants have an extreme “difficulty of demarcating the boundary between the house and the city, or the self and the street” (Machlan 3).

As we have set the notions of the urban space as well as the effects of the 9/11 terrorist attacks upon the city, we can properly delve into their implication in Safran Foer’s novel, specifically in Oskar’s relation to space and his symptoms of trauma. In the opening pages of *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, we are introduced to Oskar, a nine-year old boy, who is on a limousine, together with his mother and grandmother, heading to the cemetery for his father’s symbolic funeral. On their way there, Oskar’s mother scolds him for giving the mailwoman—a stranger for her but not for him—the key to their apartment. However, Oskar seems not to understand why giving copies of the key to one’s house to someone else could bother his mother in any way. He describes the scene saying that “[s]he was obviously mad at me, but I didn’t know why. I hadn’t done anything wrong. Or if I had, I didn’t know what it was” (6). In his response, we can appreciate that Oskar cannot distinguish the private space, which is associated with one’s home, from the public space outside of it. This inability to separate different spaces is given by the fact that Oskar perceives them both as unfamiliar, reinforcing the notion that in the urban uncanny the boundary between home and city is blurred.

We have already explained how New York becomes uncanny for all of its citizens, but the answer to what destroys Oskar’s notion of home is revealed a couple of pages later. The day of the incident, Oskar is sent home early and when he arrives he finds the answering machine with four messages from his father explaining that he is inside one of the Twin Towers. After going through

the four messages, the telephone rings again and Oskar, paralysed by the shock, is unable to answer the call which turns out to be his father's last call before the collapsing of the tower (15). This harrowing experience tears apart Oskar's notion of home, which is supposed to be the safest place to be. As Michael Rothberg explains, in his essay "There Is No Poetry in 'This': Writing, Trauma and Home," after a traumatic event, most of the notions which are taken for granted are challenged. That is how "a relatively stable sense of what home is or was, a sense that there once were clear differences between home and away, inside and outside, peace and violence, innocence and experience... are lost" (151). Therefore, since neither the private nor the public places offer any comfort for Oscar anymore, his inability to differentiate spaces comes from the fact that he does not distinguish the differences from one and the other. And, following the relation between subject and space, as he loses his idea of home, he loses himself by extension.

This loss of identity and the idea of home make Oskar feel uneasy everywhere, to the point that even everyday practices, "like taking showers ... and getting into elevators" (36), present an enormous effort for him. He further enumerates

a lot of stuff that [makes him] panicky, like suspension bridges, germs, airplanes, fireworks, Arab people on the subway (even though [he is] not a racist), Arab people in restaurants and coffee shops and other public places, scaffolding, sewers an subway grates, bags without owners, shoes, people with moustaches, smoke, knots, tall buildings, turbans. (36)

As we can appreciate, many of the things he thinks he is afraid of are both linked to parts of the urban space—public places in general and transportation, which he tries to avoid at all costs—as well as to the origin of his trauma—the association of Arab people with terrorists and places that can be an easy target for them. As it is, we can see that the main character is not able to fit anywhere; in de Certeau's terms, he lacks a place in the world—which implies "its own 'proper' and distinct location" (117). This assumption is reinforced by Oskar's own statement in the same passage, in which he affirms that at times it seems that "everything [is] incredibly far away from me" (36).

Oskar's paranoid reaction to public spaces and his feelings of dislocation are not unrelated; as Greenberg affirms, they represent the struggling with the violation of the concept of home, at

both a personal and a homeland level (22). Furthermore, Oskar's interaction with space also reveals that he is a victim of trauma. This condition has been described only superficially so far and now it seems necessary to delve into the subject in order to understand Oskar's character better, his trauma and the role that the quest for the lock plays in his recovery.

To analyse Oskar's search, it is essential to define what is understood by the concepts which are fundamental to the development of this study. The notion of trauma is given by trauma theorist Cathy Caruth in the introduction to her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. She defines it as an event that "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (4); thus, she frames trauma as a belated experience. In the case of Oskar, we have the experience of his father's loss which came suddenly, as he thought that as "both Mom and Dad worked in midtown, and Grandma didn't work, obviously, so everyone I loved was safe" (14). However, he discovers through the messages left in his answer machine that his father was in one of the Twin Towers. He dared not answer the last phone call his father made, which is abruptly cut at the time that one of the towers fell. Due to the heavy emotional load of the event, Oskar is not able to completely assimilate it and it is only a year after the incident—when he finds the key in his father's closet—that the event comes back to haunt him.

Since Oskar's father dies, it also comes in handy to define the two possible ways of dealing with the loss of a loved one. According to Freud, in his paper "Mourning and Melancholia," a person subjected to a loss has two possible ways of responding to the event: he can either undergo a process of mourning, which is considered the normal response to a loss, or fall into melancholia, the pathological reaction (243). The former option implies being aware that one has lost something and grieving the loss until one overcomes it (255). The latter shares the same characteristics of mourning with the exception that, in this case, one does not know exactly what one has lost, thus, leading to a permanent state of grief (249, 251).

From the description given above, we are tempted to suggest that Oskar's initial response to the loss of his father resembles more melancholia than mourning. This is supported by several symptoms he presents throughout the book. First, Oskar feels constantly depressed, wearing heavy boots, and he does not understand why he should feel any different, since for him "you *should* wear heavy boots when your dad dies, and if you *aren't* wearing heavy boots, *then* you need help" (200). In

this way, Oskar tries to establish his feelings as a normal response to what he has been through. However, this is not so since, besides feeling sad all the time, he presents a highly violent behaviour, mainly against himself but also, less frequently, towards his family. The most obvious example of this is Oskar's automatic reaction to frustration, which is translated into bruising himself. Moreover, he is aware that doing that is wrong, but the compulsion is greater and he cannot control it (37). In a similar fashion, the violence against others, especially his mother, is prompted when talking about the loss of his father, which triggers aggressive thoughts in Oskar, like wishing it were his mother the one who died on the attacks instead of his father (6); he even directly tells her (171).

Oskar's almost melancholic state can find its roots in both the traumatic event of his father's loss and in the shattering of his notion of home. This is given since both things can be said to be contained in one another, and because in the two situations, the protagonist's self sees itself disrupted, devastated.

Freud also sets three other concepts which are quite useful to bear in mind in this analysis: 'remembering,' 'repeating' and 'working through.' In short, 'remembering' consists of the healthy practice of being able to recall events from the past; thus it is good. On the other hand, 'repeating' is pathological and consists in not really remembering what has been repressed or forgot; instead, the person acts it out. In this way, the patient unconsciously repeats an action which stands for the suppressed memory (150). Finally, 'working through' makes reference to the process by which the resistance to remember is overcome (155).

The pathological trait of repetitive compulsion can also be found in different levels in the protagonist. First, we find Oskar's obsession with inventing things, such as a birdseed shirt or skyscrapers that can dodge planes, which can save people from dying in situations like the one in which his father died. Oskar compares this compulsion with the need of beavers for filing down their teeth in order to prevent them from keep growing and killing them (36); thus, it is a way of surviving everyday life. Another obsession is Oskar's fixation with the Hiroshima bombing. This is quite interesting, since Hiroshima and Nagasaki were originally referred to as 'ground zero' (Taylor 263), which is the same term used for the place in which the World Trade Center once stood. Oskar gives a very detailed account of the bombing, which contrasts with the almost complete omission in the description of the 9/11 attacks; moreover, when he does make reference to the event he just calls it 'the worst day.' By means of association, Oskar's obsession with Hiroshima stands as a screen

memory. In an article with the same name, Freud defines the term as those memories which do not guard any special value regarding their content alone but when they are related with some other content that has been suppressed (320). Thus, his fixation with the nuclear bombing is an indirect repetition of his traumatic experience. In addition, these two traumatic experiences can be seen as overlapping trajectories which reinforce the idea of the urban space as a palimpsest.

The five concepts presented by Freud are found reworked by trauma theorist Dominick LaCapra in his book *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. In it, LaCapra associates the terms of mourning and melancholia with loss and absence, respectively. In this relation, loss stands as a historical event, since it can be identified; hence, it can be mourned (45), and in this way it is also related with the concept of working through (65). On the other hand, absence stands as transhistorical (77) and when confused with loss it can lead to melancholia (46)—which LaCapra considers a way of acting out (65). However, the notion of acting out is not limited to the melancholic, he argues. In some cases, repetition is indeed necessary in order to remember (47); thus, it can also contribute to the process of working through.

Even though LaCapra associates the act of constant repetition to one of the symptoms of confusing loss with absence, he also states that acting out can be considered a necessary stage that the trauma victim needs to experience before being able to work through his or her problem. He further adds that, under certain circumstances, there can be found a valorization of the incessant re-enactment of the traumatic episode; this occurs especially when the event entailed the loss of beloved ones and stopping the repetition would be seen as an act of betrayal to their memories (70).

In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, we can find loss as a predominant issue in Oskar's life. On the one hand, it is found in the 9/11 events that destroy Oskar's concept of home and make the city uncanny. The consequences of these two events can be considered historical as they can be traced back exactly to the moment they happened. On the other hand, in a deeper level, it is present in the death of Oskar's father. This turns to be a constitutive loss for him; he was really close to his father and looked up to him. To some extent, then, his father's death also implies the feeling that a part of him is missing, an emotion that is reinforced by the fact that his father's body never appeared. Therefore, due to the magnitude of Oskar's loss, for LaCapra, it "would necessary seem to merge with endless, quasi-transcendental grieving that may be indistinguishable from interminable

melancholy” (76). This is to say that even though Oskar is not strictly a melancholic; his loss has been so immense that the effects on him are of such nature as if he were.

Before going deeply into Oskar’s quest during the novel, it is necessary to explain the circumstances in which his journey begins. One of the games Oskar and his father played together was Reconnaissance Expeditions (8). It basically consisted in his father giving him small missions which could sometimes last up to several weeks (depending on how complicated they were). The last Reconnaissance Expedition Oskar and his father did was never finished (8) as the latter died before his son could complete it.

In this context, the unfinished quest is resumed when Oskar finds a mysterious key in an envelope inside his father’s closet. He describes it as “a weird-looking key, obviously to something extremely important, because it was fatter and shorter than a normal key” (37). It is from the very beginning that Oskar assigns the little key a great value because it presents the possibility of getting closer to his father, along with moving “towards ‘unlocking’ his trauma” (Uytterschout and Versluys 230), helping him cope with his loss in a healthy way. Oskar notices that the envelope in which he finds the key has the name Black on it; this makes him decide to meet and interrogate every person named Black in New York.

Then, under the premise of finding the one Black who can tell him about his key, Oskar goes out into the streets of an unfamiliar New York. As he embarks on this journey, he establishes a set of conditions which begin to differentiate the private from the public space. The first thing he does is to characterise both his home and the city by associating them with parental figures. He antagonises the figure of the mother, which he associates with his home—usually related to the womb—to that of the father who is embedded in the city. This dichotomy troubles Oskar, since every time he leaves his apartment to search for the lock, his boots become lighter because he is getting closer to his Dad, but they also become heavier, because he is getting farther from his Mom (52). Oskar is re-familiarising spaces by setting boundaries. Although they still need to be refined, it is a start. By doing this, he begins to “recover a sense of control over [his] environment” (Brison 45), which is one of the things a trauma victim needs to do in order to heal.

He also establishes some behavioural rules which are space specific. For instance, “[he] would be as secretive about [his] mission as [he] could at home, and as honest about it as [he] could

outside home, because that's what was necessary... [Then,] if one of the Blacks wanted to know something, [he] would tell everything" (87). As a consequence, Oskar starts lying to his mother and people that know him who could interfere in his quest. It is interesting to highlight the fact that Oskar does not trust his mother and does not tell her what he is going through, but opens his heart completely to strangers. This can be interpreted as one of the ways in which Oskar acts out his trauma, since it shows a partial inability to bear witness to his traumatic experience (Uytterschoutand Versluys 230), as such revelation within the private space can threaten the reconstruction of home.

In order to visit every Black, Oskar traverses each of the five boroughs in New York. He does so not by means of public transportation, as it makes him 'panicky', he travels by foot. This fact is of special importance for us, since de Certeau expresses that "[t]he act of walking is to the urban space system what the speech act is to language or to statements uttered" (97). Therefore, it is through his wandering that Oskar becomes a writer of the urban space. In every block he walks, he leaves part of his story-so-far inscribed upon the streets. Moreover, de Certeau also says "[t]o walk is to lack a place" (103), in the sense that the pedestrian does not have a designated or fixed position within the urban plan, in contrast to objects. Inasmuch he does not find his place, the walker of the city is pushed to keep moving around the streets, leaving his trajectory unfinished and his story open to future renegotiations. This can be perfectly related to Oskar's case since, in one way or another, the loss of his father and his concept of home leaves him placeless. Thus, his desire of finding the lock for his key (besides feeding his longing for getting closer to his father), also implies, in a way, finding his place in the world.

This task, however, is further complicated due to the fact that Oskar is not the only pedestrian in the city. There are millions of people who, like him, write over the city on a daily basis. Hence, he becomes part of "the walkers, *wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it" (de Certeau 93). This puts forward two interesting issues to discuss: the immersion of the pedestrian figure into a larger crowd and the inability of accessing your own history. Among the different implications we can count in losing oneself within the multitude, the one which seems most important is that by doing this, the subject loses his identity and particularities. Oskar refuses to blend with the rest of the walkers, and he manages to stand out from the uniform crowd by playing his tambourine during his walks. This helps him to remember that in spite of the fact that he is going through different neighbourhoods,

he is still himself (88). The act of playing music while walking harks back to a literal representation of Lefebvre's notion of the rhythms that make up the city. Moreover, it does not only presuppose the idea of Oskar trying to set boundaries between himself and the other; it also suggests his desire of making himself heard by being louder than the rest. As a consequence, someone else might be able to listen to his story which he is unable to read, to his wound that he is incapable of healing.

In addition, this very wound finds an interesting expression in Oskar; this is the use of 'heavy boots' as a synonym to when he feels sad or depressed. The sadder he feels, the heavier his boots become. Susan Brison explains that under traumatic circumstances the division between mind and body is blurred, thus provoking that one's "mental state feels physiological" (42). Hence, Oskar's depressive feelings find their physical manifestation in the sensation of not being able to walk, to move on, which is exactly what happens with him regarding the loss of his father.

In his search for meeting all the Blacks in New York, Oskar runs into several peculiar people. From all of them, there are four Blacks which are worth analysing in regards to the scope of this study. They are Mr. Black, who lives in the apartment above Oskar's; Georgia Black, from Staten Island; Ruth Black, who lives in the Empire State Building; and finally, William Black, the former owner of Oskar's key. These four characters have all experienced the loss of a loved one and, in the case of the first three, the effects of their losses are reflected in the way they inhabit their spaces.

The interaction of the protagonist with these people, as it has been stated earlier, helps him work through his trauma. In each encounter, the Blacks open up to Oskar and reveal their wounds, and vice versa. It is in this willingness of listening to the other's wound that the protagonist starts realizing how injured he is, and thus, he is presented with the opportunity to improve his melancholic-like state. Caruth states the importance of this process in the dynamics of dealing with trauma, and emphasises the role of the other, since "one's own trauma is tied to the trauma of another" (8). The latter brings the idea of the possibility of a network formed by people's wounds, a community of trustworthy listeners which, according to Brison, is essential at the time of bearing witness to one's trauma (46-48). This leads us to say that, to some extent, at least the trauma of the Blacks echoes Oskar's and, at the same time, they all echo New York's. All these trajectories of stories-so-far are irreversibly knotted together, overlapping, constantly modifying them and their environment.

One of the first people Oskar meets in his quest is the elderly one-hundred-and-three-year-old Mr Black, who lives in the apartment exactly above his. Born on January 1, 1900, he lived every day of the twentieth century (152) and worked most of his life as a war correspondent. At first, Oskar's finds him quite quirky; however, when he enters his apartment he is taken aback by the place. He realises that what makes him feel weird about the place is that "[Mr Black's] apartment looks exactly like [his] apartment... But [Mr Black's] apartment [is] also incredibly different, because it [is] filled with different stuff" (152). Then, Mr Black's home is perceived by him as uncanny, a double of his own home which also feels unfamiliar. This characteristic of both places might work as a bridge for Oskar to establish a unique relationship with Mr Black, in contrast to the rest of the Blacks. He is the only one with whom Oskar develops a friendship and offers him to accompany him in his quest for the lock.

Regarding all that 'stuff' to which Oskar makes reference, they are all souvenirs from Mr Black's countless travels around the world throughout his life. Among the things Oskar finds there are "books in other languages, and little statues, and scrolls with pretty paintings, and Coke cans from around the world, and a bunch of rocks on his fireplace mantel" (156). In short, his apartment is full of souvenirs. The incredibly large quantity of them may account for Mr Black's own personal story and his mechanism of coping with loss. As Susan Stewart points out, "[t]he souvenir reduces the public, the monumental, and the three-dimensional into the miniature, that which can be enveloped by the body, or into the two-dimensional representation, that which can be appropriated within the privatized view of the individual subject" (137-8). In this way, all the memorabilia in Mr Black's home contain all his important memories; they are metonymic objects which work as a bridge between the object and the actual memory. His past is so present within his home that for Mr Black everything seems to have happened just five minutes ago (161).

Therefore, Mr Black lives with his attention displaced into the past rather than to the present (Stewart 151). The latter is explained when Mr Black tells Oskar how much he loved his wife and how little time he had spent with her due to his work as a war correspondent. This makes him turn constantly to the past and treasure his moments with her to the point of making a bed with the tree in which his wife once cut her hand. Furthermore, the first thing he does after waking up in the morning is hammering a nail into his bed as a way of keep on going (162). The weight of the nails, which can be said to represent the spatial representation of his grief, eventually forces him to build a

column in his apartment to support his bedroom. In the same fashion, Oskar realises the loneliness in which Mr Black lives and decides to take the place of his column by taking him out from his apartment and inserting him into the world again.

After visiting several Blacks, Oskar and Mr Black arrive to Georgia Black's home in Staten Island. In it, they find that she has turned the living room of her house into a museum of her husband's life. Every inch of the room is covered with different things which belong to her husband, from his baby shoes and photos of his childhood home to the tie he wore in his mother's funeral (239-40). She guides them through the exhibition and explains what each object is and adds anecdotes regarding her husband in past tense, as if he were dead.

In contrast to Mr Black's home which was full of souvenirs, Georgia's is organised as a collection. According to Stewart, the main difference between these two concepts lies on the idea that while the souvenir takes the present into the past, in the collection the elements that are part of it form a unified hermetic whole which is severed from temporality and made spatial (151-2). Then, Georgia has made of her living room a place isolated from the rest. In addition, taking into consideration the context in which her museum has been built, it can be interpreted as a way of trying to avoid the chaos which surrounds her. As Stewart says, "[o]ne cannot know everything about the world, but one can at least approach close knowledge through the collection" (161). The 9/11 terrorist attacks aftereffects go beyond the comprehension of many of the victims, so it is not unnatural for some to strive for some sense of control.

However, in Georgia Black's museum there is something missing. When Oskar realises that in the whole place there is no trace of her personality, he "start[s] to get heavy boots... [As he wonders] where [are] all of *her* things? Where [are] *her* shoes and *her* diploma? Where [are] the shadows of *her* flowers" (242). She has mounted a museum which leaves her completely out. She effaces her personality in order to devote herself to the care of the belongings of someone else. Furthermore, when Oskar realises this, her husband appears and presents him "almost like he [is] another exhibit in her life" (242). Her husband later invites both Mr Black and Oskar to visit his museum which we can only suppose is like his wife's but devoted to her.

The next important visit they make is to Ruth Black whose address indicates she lives in the eighty-sixth floor of the Empire State Building (243). This is quite peculiar given that the building is

not a residential one but rather a public space. After a great mental effort, Oskar manages to surpass his fear for skyscrapers and he gets to the observation deck in the eighty-sixth floor of the tower. There, he takes a look at New York from the highest building in the city since the destruction of the Twin Towers. He describes the view as it follows: “It’s like New York is a miniature replica of New York, which is nice, because you can see what it’s like, instead of how it feels when you’re in the middle of it. It’s extremely lonely up there, and you feel far away from everything” (245). In his description of the city from above, Oskar makes two interesting observations regarding the urban space. First, he brings up the idea of the miniature which “offers a world clearly limited in space but frozen in time and thereby both particularized and generalized in time—particularized in that the miniature concentrates upon the instance...but generalized in that that instance comes to transcend, to stand for, a spectrum of other instances” (Stewart 48). In this case, the miniaturised city gives Oskar perspective of his wanderings around the city. Thus, the urban space stands as a text that only becomes legible when seen from above which contrasts with the limited perspective that offers to be within the city, writing it (de Certeau 92; Veel 160). Second, he observes the isolation—from the countless trajectories and story-so-far—produced by being far from the pavement.

After a while Oskar, is prepared to leave the place without finding Ruth Black. However, Mr. Black points to Oskar a woman, who seems to stand out from the crowd, probably the person they are looking for. They approach her and she gives them a tour around the place explaining to them different things such as the way in which the skyscraper was built to its exact geographical location. After the tour is done, they keep talking and she reveals why she is bound to the Empire State. She tells them that her husband asked her to come here in order to see him as “he walk[ed] around the New York, [where] he’d occasionally shine the [spot]light up at [her] so [she] could see where he was” (252). From her account, she stands as the reader of the city who is able to decode the urban text which is written by her husband down below. This experience made her feel different than the rest of the visitors since every time she came up here “everyone was looking all over, pointing at the things to see... But [she] had something pointing back at [her]” (252). The urban text in its amplitude and diversity was addressing her and no one else. Nevertheless, once her husband dies she is unable to return to her home knowing her husband would not be there, so she decides to live right on the observation deck.

In a way, Ruth Black gets hold of the miniaturised version of the city because it has the capacity of creating “an ‘other’ time, a type of transcendent time which negates change and the flux of lived reality” (de Certeau 65), thus making her live in a constant present where there is no loss, where her husband’s light is present with the difference that she is just not able to see it. Yet her decision of abandoning the urban text and her potential as a writer of it has its consequences. As Oskar perceived in his appreciation of New York from above, to break away from the urban space and its production leaves the person secluded from the world. Ruth tells Oskar and Mr Black that the day in which she moved into the Empire State, “[she]’d never felt more alone. It was as if the building had become much taller. Or the city much darker. But [she] never felt more alive, either. [She]’d never felt more alive or alone” (254). She has become part of the building in a way, since all the employees treat her like she was meant to be there. Also, she prefers to be insulated from the city, the urban space, because the moment she decides to go down again, the fantasy of the miniature will be broken. The spell keeping time paused will wear off; therefore, she will have to inevitably face the loss of her husband.

The visit to the Empire State Building is the last one Oskar does in the company of Mr Black who excuses himself and says he is finished for the time (254). We later know that one of the reasons that could have triggered his departure from Oskar’s side is the encounter he has with Oskar’s long lost grandfather. Oskar also meets him shortly after without knowing who he really is, but the circumstances and meaning of this encounter will be explained later on this paper. Then, separated from his companion, Oskar continues looking for his key’s lock and starts feeling frustration towards his quest (287). It is in that moment of despair that he decides to check the answering machine where he finds an eight-month-old message from Abby Black, the second person he visited at the beginning of his search. In it, she says she might have information to find what he is looking for. Oskar speeds to her house and does so by taking the subway (288). Even though the event of how he travels to Abby’s house is just briefly mentioned, it reveals a great amount of information to the reader since the first time he visited her it took him around two hours and a half to get there walking. The use of public transportation, which Oskar, at the beginning of the book, tries to avoid at all cost, is reduced later to just a matter-of-fact sentence as if there were nothing peculiar in using it. However, it puts into evidence an improvement in Oskar’s state, as he can now travel through the city by means which would have made him feel ‘panicky’ before. This gives us a clue of how, little by little, he has been mastering his fears, as well as his environment.

At Abby Black's house, "the narrowest house in New York" (90), Oskar is informed that the person who knows everything about the lock has also been looking for him; he is William Black, Abby's ex-husband. Oskar and William have already crossed their paths the very same day of the boy's first visit to Abby. They could have found what they both were looking for if Abby had not intervened in an attempt of hurting her ex-husband.

Oskar visits William Black's office and both of them feel excited about finding what they have been seeking for such a long time. However, when Oskar asks William about what he knows about his father, the answer disappoints him. "The whole *point* of the key is that [Oskar] found it in [his] Dad's closet, and since he's dead, [he] couldn't ask him what it meant, so [he] had to find out [him]self" (295). When he is finally with the person that can elucidate all his queries about it, he receives something totally different in lieu. William Black remembers little about Oskar's father and instead he tells him the story of the loss of his own father, who died around the same time. Both of them end up opening up to each other, listening to the other's wound. They find solace in the other and let their frustration towards the loss of their fathers flow. Oskar discovers that the key he has been holding next to his heart the last eight months has nothing to do with his father, apart from being the one who purchased the base which contained it. Their trajectories overlap; they write themselves upon one another allowing only one to be decoded; yet, due to the striking similitudes they share, one cannot predict which one will be unravelled. They both believe that the other holds in his possession something necessary to unlock their trauma; however, only William Black is right about that. Nevertheless, Oskar unloads one of his heaviest burdens regarding the loss of his father upon William. He asks him to forgive him for not being able to pick up the phone of what it turned out to be his father's last call. William forgives him and receives from Oskar the key to the safe-deposit box but does not give him the key to his home that is in the same piece of string he wears around his neck.

Even after sharing a cathartic moment with William Black, Oskar feels disappointed for spending so much time looking for something that brought him no answers at all. He feels disoriented, does not know what to do. Now that that he has found the lock there is no need to continue looking for it and that gives him heavy boots; this affects Oskar more than finding out that the key had nothing to do with his father, since it is "[l]ooking for it [what] let [him] stay close to [his father] for a little while longer" (304). Therefore, his quest can be seen as a failure only if we focus

on a goal-oriented journey; however, if we focus in Oskar's navigation through the city, we will find that he has obtained far more benefits from it than one might have thought (Veel 167). Then, even though Oskar's quest does not end as expected, the whole process he has to undergo to find the lock holds a therapeutic effect on him; this can be appreciated, for instance, in the fact that he overcomes his fear to public transportation, but more importantly when he achieves to separate his private space from the public. This occurs when Oskar does not give William Black the key to his apartment together with the one that opens the lockbox (302). This contrasts dramatically with the beginning of the novel, where Oskar gives away copies of the key to his home to anyone; thus, by not doing the same this time, he sets a crucial boundary which means he is now more meticulous in deciding who can access his personal space.

Oskar encounters another important character in the book who is not a Black. He is the renter who lives in his grandmother's house. When we first hear about this renter earlier in the book there is certain mystery surrounding him as only his grandmother has seen him in person. Oskar's mother even suggests that the renter is just an imaginary friend of her mother-in-law who was created in order to keep her company after the loss of her son. It is only later in the story that we discover he is Thomas Schell Sr., Oskar's grandfather. He is a survivor of the Dresden Bombing in the Second World War and has lost the faculty of speech which is linked to the loss of Anna, his pregnant girlfriend and his wife's elder sister (16).

After Mr Black tells him he cannot keep looking for the lock with him, Oskar runs to his grandmother's apartment and does not find her; however, he meets the renter. Thomas invites Oskar to enter the guest room where the latter will tell him all the story of his key and his search (this occurs before Oskar meets William Black). This is the first time Oskar tells someone the whole story of his search and shows the last recording left by his father in the answering machine (280). Nevertheless, the room in which Oskar tells his story does not really exist. This is given due to the way in which his grandparents have divided the space of the apartment in 'Nothing Spaces' and 'Something Spaces.' The former classification refers to "non-existent territories in the apartment in which one [can] temporarily cease to exist" (110). Thus, sharing his story with his grandfather produces no cathartic effects on Oskar because of the characteristic of the space where it is told.

Thomas Sr.'s reaction to his grandson's story is also worth noting. His response to the account is to protect Oskar, but in a very specific and spatial way. He says that "[he] want[s] to build

walls around him, [he] want[s] to separate inside from outside” (280). This is quite remarkable since what he wants to do is exactly one of the things that Oskar has been trying to do during his quest, to separate the public from the private, the home from the city.

Oskar’s encounter with his grandfather also augments the number of trajectories to his already tangled path. To the traumatic events of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima, Thomas Sr.’s own narrative adds the tragedy of Dresden in the Second World War. They overlap in Oskar’s narratives as all of them are in some way or another related to him or his immediate environment. This statement takes a graphic representation in Thomas Sr.’s own notebook which runs out of pages shortly before he wishes to write the story of his grandson in it; a problem he solves by writing over the already written pages, making his message unintelligible. This action reinforces the idea of the palimpsest in the novel, since it is not only a figurative overlapping of trajectories in the story but also a literal one that can be seen in the book (see Fig. 1).



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Fig. 1. Palimpsest in Thomas Schell Sr.’s Notebook. Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (New York: Mariner Books, 2006) 283. Print.

Finally, it is with him that Oskar plans to dig up his father's empty grave. Plan that comes to fruition only after Oskar has found out the truth about the key. The idea of doing that comes to Oskar as a "revelation, like a simple solution to an impossible problem" (321). By digging up his father's coffin, Oskar is obliged to confront one of the origins of his trauma: his father's missing corpse. This decision represents in Oskar's new maturity towards his traumatic experience, since the nine-year-old boy we meet at the beginning of the story would not have come to this decision. Moreover, with this choice Oskar tries to overcome the deep wound that the loss of his father left in him and master his traumatic experience by acknowledging his wound. We get a hint of this when his grandfather asks him why he would do something like that, to what he replies: "[b]ecause it's the truth, and Dad loved the truth.'... 'That he's dead'" (321). Another sign of Oskar's improvement towards his trauma is that when they open up his father's coffin, after pondering about what he would fill it with, he decides not to put anything into it, for the reason that "just because you bury something, you don't really *bury* it" (322). Therefore, he does not try to cover the absence of his father, but instead he embraces it and accepts that he is gone, and does so not only to help himself recover but also in a way of honouring his father's memory. As Judith Butler suggests, "[o]ne mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly for ever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation... the full result of which one cannot know in advance" (21). This is exactly what we see in Oskar's process from a state closer to melancholia to one nearer to Freudian mourning. He submits himself to a change to surmount his trauma; however, it does not guarantee closure.

After completing his journey, Oskar returns home different yet the same. He finds his mother awake and in a fit of frustration he cries with her and expresses how hard he has tried to be "happy and normal" and that he does not want to be hospitalised (323). In that moment his mother shares with him that his father called her to her mobile phone the day of the attacks, this takes Oskar by surprise and does not know how to feel about it (324). Nevertheless, as they share a common wound they are brought closer, making Oskar accept that she is his mother and he is her son. This contrasts with the attitude he has at the beginning of the book where he wishes she were the one who had died instead of his father. In addition, at this point Oskar knows that his mother has been aware of his quest from almost the very start. She "had talked to all of [the Blacks] before [Oskar] had" (291); by doing this, she extends the protective relation of home-mother to the rest of

the city. She makes sure to let know all the Blacks in New York that he is coming, setting the grounds for the resemantisation of the urban space from Oskar's side.

The home to which Oskar arrives at the end of his journey resembles neither its pre-traumatic version nor the uncanny version that he left when starting his journey. Oskar's new home defies the rigid structures of the conventional conception. Its boundaries do not separate categorically the private from the public but rather work like "a permeable membrane for the collective reorganization of social relations outside the parameters of private property and Oedipal familial structures" (Lewis and Cho 88). This is to say, Oskar's concept of home is not separated from the city, the outside, but is in constant dialogue with it. This cannot happen, however, without reworking the concept of the city itself.

In his visits to all the different Blacks in the five boroughs of New York, Oskar changes the uncanny city as he unlocks a sense of community within it, making the urban space familiar. The clearest example of this can be found when Oskar's class performs *Hamlet* in his school. Many of the Blacks he has met during his quest show up for the opening night and according to Oskar, they make around half of the audience (143). They do not know, however, that their narratives are all connected by means of Oskar's. They are together because of Oskar's loss (Mullins 308). Thus, the harrowing experience of trauma can be seen not only as an agent of destruction, but can grant the potential of reunion too. It is in this latter aspect that a sense of community can be built, a community which is intimately related by their wounds that, when shared, can help in the process of healing. As Matthew Mullins suggests, "trauma [can function] as a common bond across identity collectives" (323). Thus, the city, seen as a community, stands as a less threatening conception than the one that its uncanny version renders. Nevertheless, this does not imply that the city has recovered from its trauma, because it has not; still, this shift in its perception can at least set the ground for its progressive healing.

From this study, several conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, it can be observed that Oskar's quest for the key's lock holds a therapeutic effect on him as he starts working through his trauma by means of walking around the city and running into different people and places which have also been affected by trauma. In order to start his healing process, Oskar has to necessarily rebuild his notions of home and the city, since one of the requirements to recover from trauma is to regain control over

his environment. Thus, his wanderings around the city act as a way of taking over the urban space while infusing it with a new meaning.

Besides the journey itself, Oskar meets different characters whose relationships with space give him perspective on his situation. In the cases of both Mr. Black and Georgia Black, they show Oskar two different methods for inhabiting one's home. The former turns to the use of the souvenir as means of reliving past memories, a way of coping with the loss of a loved one. The latter loses herself in the space of the collection, which offers a hermetic and controllable world completely isolated from the real one. Neither of these modes of inhabiting space, which reveal the inner struggles of its dwellers, is deemed healthy. On the other hand, Ruth Black shows Oskar the dangers of trying to sever oneself from the urban space. This leads us to the assumption that space can be modified and even affected by the traumatic experiences of its inhabitants.

Regarding the improvement in Oskar's state, this can be detected in small details such as how he reacts to public transportation, how he finally accepts his father's death or how he becomes capable of setting boundaries to his private space. However, he does not achieve results implied in the Freudian conception of mourning, as he does not substitute the lost object for another one, but he embraces it. Therefore, what we witness in Oskar's healing process is that it offers no closure for his trauma. This, however, grants him the potential of renegotiating his traumatic memories over time, instead of getting to a fixed and unchangeable memory.

This lack of closure, moreover, takes place mainly due to the characteristics of the urban space depicted in the novel. New York is like a palimpsest in which the multiple trajectories that shape it overlap constantly. In addition, people's stories-so-far are not contained within space but are in relentless flux, conceding it the characteristic of being open to change rather than fixated. In this context, Oskar's path does not only cross others' but his trauma meets with other historical traumatic events such as the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima and the Dresden Bombing. The perpetual intertwining of trajectories can interfere with other paths. This is the case of Oskar's quest for the key which leads him to another's trauma instead of his own. Then, Oskar's quest raises the need for rethinking the way in which urban space is traversed. This is to change the emphasis from achieving a specific destination, as there is no guarantee of reaching the intended point of destination, and to focus on the journey itself instead.

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