

The Paris Métro and urban experience in Annie Ernaux's *Journal du dehors* and Céline Curiol's *Voix sans issue*

MIRKA AHONEN
University of Turku

Abstract

According to Marc Augé, contemporary urban life generates non-places, meaningless spaces of transit and anonymity. I discuss the form taken by the idea of the non-place in contemporary representations of the Paris Métro, with a focus on urban experiences in Annie Ernaux's *Journal du dehors* and Céline Curiol's *Voix sans issue*. I argue that there are no fixed non-places; the experience of place is always subjective. The Métro can be seen momentarily as a non-place when it reflects the character's state of mind, but it can also be a meaningful place, connected to the character's identity and history.

Key Words: Annie Ernaux, Céline Curiol, the Paris Métro, urban experience, Marc Augé, non-place

1. Introduction

The focus in this article is on urban experience in Annie Ernaux's *Journal du dehors* (1993) and Céline Curiol's *Voix sans issue* (2005), both of which are organized around wandering in the city and the construction of identity. *Journal du dehors*, written in diary form, contains autobiographical elements from Ernaux's own life: Ernaux is observing people in different urban spaces and writing her journal. While Ernaux's own memories and remembering are central themes, these issues are explored by observing strangers whom she encounters in these locations. *Voix sans issue*, on the other hand, is a novel about loneliness and isolation in the urban environment. The novel's distant and neurotic female protagonist wanders aimlessly around the city, constantly finding herself in strange places and situations. In both narratives, the consciousness of the self in relation to urban space has an increasingly important role to play. A character's experience is constructed through various urban public spaces, which often reflect urban anonymity, ephemerality, and loneliness: people are in transit, passing by or waiting for something. Such places can be seen as ideal places for description of contemporary culture. My focus is in particular on scenes describing the experience of the Paris Métro. I analyze how the experience of the Métro is constructed in these narratives, and how these representations reflect the modern urban culture. In what follows, I discuss the thinking of the French anthropologist Marc Augé, who has studied the contemporary urban environment, including the Paris Métro. I focus in particular on his considerations of non-places, which have frequently been used to describe contemporary urban space. In this article, however, I suggest a different approach to his theory of non-places, one that focuses on subjective experience of place. Here I start from the idea that it is a character's interaction with the Métro space that

determines how this space will be perceived. The meaning of the Métro is thus constructed through the subjective experience of these female characters. The article highlights the phenomenological notion of 'lived space', which means that 'space always include a subject who is affected by (and in turn affects) space, a subject who experiences and reacts to space in a bodily way, a subject who "feels" space through existential living conditions, mood, and atmosphere' (Buchholz & Jahn 2005:553).

In this article, urban spaces are approached as representations, i.e. as imaginary places, even when they refer to the actual, material places that have inspired these representations. Indeed, as Rosenthal (2011:1) puts it: 'cities are made of dreams, imaginations, and representations as much as they are made of concrete streets, buildings, and people'. Consequently, while the real city and the representation of the city are not identical or reducible to one another, they are likewise not two separate things (see also Balshaw & Kennedy 2000:3). This means that I am not concerned here with the fact that *Journal du dehors* is a first-person narrative containing autobiographical elements, while *Voix sans issue* is a third-person narrative describing fictional events, although I am aware that the narrative strategies chosen may influence the way experience of place is represented in these stories. What is more important here is the fact that whereas *Journal du dehors* portrays suburban places, *Voix sans issue* focuses rather on places located in the center of the city. Their different representations of the city introduce distinct points of view concerning the characters' subjective experience of the Métro, and shed light on different but complementary aspects of the problematic of non-place.

2. From Non-places to Subjective Experience of Place

Augé (1992) discusses contemporary urban places, which he defines as *non-places*. They are spaces of transit, impermanence and anonymity, without any particular identity or historical value (ibid.:100-101). Non-places are often associated with activities such as transport, transit, commerce or leisure (ibid.: 118-119); the relationship between the individual and a non-place is seen as solitary and contractual, since the person who is using the non-place often occupies the role of passenger, client or customer (ibid.:119, 127-128). According to Augé, it is our current culture that produces meaningless non-places. As Lucas (2008:175) points out, Augé sees the contemporary experience of urban spaces as something radically new and different from that of modernity, even though, as Merriman (2004:147, 150) has observed, his description of our time has certain features very similar to nineteenth-century observations of aspects of modernity.

Augé mentions places which can be seen as non-places, such as airports, waiting rooms, highways, service stations and supermarkets; however, while at first glance it might seem that the Métro, an anonymous place of transit, is a typical non-place, surprisingly there is no mention of it. In *Un ethnologue dans le métro* (1986) and *Le Métro revisité* (2008), Augé writes about the Paris Métro and the daily experiences of its passengers: it is quite obvious that for Augé the Paris Métro does not stand for a non-place. Augé's view of the Métro is thus very different from his

view of non-places affected by the contemporary culture. Augé's thinking, in particular the tension between his theory of non-places and his idea of the Paris Métro, serves as an interesting starting point for this article.

Augé also speaks of urban places of modernity, which he defines as *anthropological places* (ibid.:68-69). These places are seen in a nostalgic light (see also Moran 2005: 116); they are related to identity and history. For Augé, the Métro is an anthropological place, carrying the cultural memory of the city. In *Un ethnologue dans le métro*, for instance, Augé discusses what different Métro lines and stops have meant to him at different points in his life, and on the other hand how certain historical events are related to people's experience of the Métro. Augé associates the Métro with the culture of modernity, and gives a rather romanticized view of it. In *Le Métro revisité*, written over two decades later and after he had published *Les non-lieux*, Augé updates his view of the Métro and considers the question whether the Métro too has become a non-place. In the book, Augé (see 2008:33) seems to persist with the idea that the Métro is not a non-place, although he asserts that its character is changing, and that today it increasingly resembles a non-place; this is because it is affected by contemporary cultural phenomena, such as consumption, automation and remote surveillance systems. Moreover, as Conley (2012:75) points out, Augé now sees the Métro more as an auxiliary to the RER (the *Réseau Express Régional*, or Regional Express Network), which runs between the city center and the suburbs and transports large numbers of people. It seems however, as Conley (ibid.:76) suggests, that in *Le Métro revisité* the Métro is seen as some kind of in-between space, with characteristics of both non-place and anthropological place. This somewhat contradictory view of the Métro clearly points to the problematic nature of non-places, and makes it interesting to explore how the Métro is experienced by the female characters of Ernaux and Curliol.

It is evident that the concept of the non-place has been useful in understanding the postmodern world. Technological innovations, increased mobility and the resulting shifts in our sense of proximity and distance have clearly shaped the contemporary human experience of place. There can thus certainly be places where the individual is less conscious of the environment, or with which he or she does not have any particular relationship. Nevertheless, the idea of places with no history or identity seems a strange one. What Augé's theory seems to ignore is that urban places are much more dynamic and diverse (see also Merriman 2004: 162). The meaning of a place cannot be anchored merely in the place itself, as the same place can signify different things to different individuals. I suggest that the distinction between places and non-places is not actually so much related to places themselves, but to the individuals who use them. While the society and the culture do have an impact on the human experience of the city, it is nevertheless individuals themselves (their feelings and behavior in a given place) who transform their environment into meaningful places or non-places. As Merriman (see 2011:30) points out, Augé has been heavily criticized for ignoring the fact that individuals use urban spaces in very distinct ways. He examines physical settings and activities related to them, as well as the common human experience, but does not really

problematize individual experience. Augé (1992:118-119) does suggest briefly that the term 'non-place' can also refer to the relationships that individuals have toward these places. Unfortunately, he does not pursue this side of his theory, nor does he explain what it actually means, although this aspect of his theory, which places the individual's subjective experience in central focus, is much more interesting.¹ As Augé does not deal with this question of subjectivity, I propose a different approach. I suggest that a location can be experienced as a non-place by an individual, but it is his or her personal relationship to the place that generates this sense of non-place. We should thus perhaps speak of a non-place *experience* rather than a non-place as such. Rather than focusing merely on the place itself and its characteristics, we should concentrate on how the individual's personal experience affects the perception of a place.

In this article, it is the characters and their activity that bring literary spaces to life. As de Certeau (1990:173) has argued, a place, which is a static, unchangeable and abstract site, is transformed into a space by walkers or others who use the space.² A place becomes a space when it is experienced by an individual; thus, briefly, a space is a 'practiced place' (ibid.). Therefore, for de Certeau, it is actually movement that creates a space.³ In contrast to Augé, de Certeau's focus is on the urban subject, since urban space is determined by its inhabitants. What de Certeau foregrounds is that a person gives shape to a space by walking through it. De Certeau's idea of walking can easily be associated with literature of modernity, which is characterized by the figure of a *flâneur*, one who actually walks within the city. In *Journal du dehors* and *Voix sans issue* the characters circulate in Paris not only by walking but also by riding the Métro, bus or RER suburban train. The city has expanded; as a result, urban exploration no longer takes the form of walking alone. Portrayals of the city have thus become more diverse, and today include the most remote suburbs, which cannot be reached on foot. We should therefore also extend de Certeau's definition so as to include these various ways of moving about the city.

¹ Augé admits in a subsequent interview that there are no pure or definitive non-places, but that at the time he was more interested in 'le couple lieu/ non lieu qui permet de caractériser un espace donné en fonction de différents critères' (see Augé 2006). ('two poles place/non-place which allow to characterize a certain space according to different criteria'; my translation).

² Here de Certeau, along with certain other French thinkers, differs from many scholars. For geographers, such as Edward Relph (1976), Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) or Tim Cresswell (2004) the term *space* is an abstraction, whereas *place* refers to lived experiences of people. However, my purpose here is not to participate in the extensive debate of the 1990s over the nature of place and space, and I therefore use both terms, place and space, depending on the author I referred to. My starting point, however, is the idea of de Certeau, according to which it is people who transform the abstract environment into a real space.

³ For Relph and Tuan, movement reduces the sense of place (see Cresswell 2004:8), while according to Augé increased mobility generates non-places.

3. The Métro and the RER as a Place of Self Discovery in Ernaux's *Journal du dehors*

Journal du dehors describes the time when Ernaux had first moved to the suburb of Cergy-Pontoise; for Ernaux (1993:8), it was 'une tentative d'atteindre la réalité d'une époque' ('an attempt to convey the reality of an epoch' (Ernaux 1996:7)). The book focuses on everyday life in the Parisian suburbs, where the narrator observes strangers and brief, seemingly disconnected episodes between them. The Métro and the RER play an important role, although observation also occurs in other places, such as supermarkets, waiting rooms, parking lots and stations; in other words in the same kind of places that Augé considers to be non-places.

As part of contemporary urban iconography, the Paris Métro plays an important role in novels describing Parisian life. In her study of contemporary urban novels, Christina Horvath (2007:73, 117-118) points out that the Métro, where very different people from diverse cultural or social backgrounds can meet and mingle, serves as an ideal site for observing different sociological and ethnological aspects of the city space. Nevertheless, while in *Journal du dehors* the Métro and the RER are places where the narrator can draw attention to different types of people, as Ernaux (1993: 8) herself points out *Journal du dehors* is not a study of urban sociology. Instead, it highlights the connection between memory and urban space, portraying the Métro and the RER as places which reveal both personal and collective memories. The Métro and the RER become particularly meaningful through the actions and dialogue of other people. The narrator watches for example a child reading with her mother (ibid.:15-16), a man begging for a coin (ibid.:72, 78) and a woman reading a Harlequin romance (ibid.: 13). These scenes describe very ordinary events, but in a very specific way that focuses only on particular details. Ernaux's own working-class background plays an important role in these descriptions.⁴ They often reflect class difference and social inequality, as in the next example; the narrator describes a man sitting in the RER by focusing on his hands, which reveal his working-class status:

[...] ses mains se mettent à bouger convulsivement, à se frotter l'une contre l'autre. [...] L'homme, un Africain, est d'une immobilité absolue, seules ses mains, inlassables, comme des poulpes. Être un intellectuel, c'est cela aussi, n'avoir jamais éprouvé le besoin de se séparer de ses mains énervées ou abîmées par le travail. (Ernaux 1993:43-44)

[...] his hands start to shudder convulsively, to rub against each other. [...] The man, an African, is completely still; only his hands move, incessantly, like squids. That too is the sign of an intellectual: never to feel the need to disassociate oneself from one's quivering hands, that have been damaged by work. (Ernaux 1996:38)

Here the reader is given only very limited information about the man, because he is seen through the narrator's subjective perspective. As in the example above, the narrator does not speak to people, but merely watches and listens to them.

⁴ In her writings, Ernaux often discusses her own divided class identity and the tension between the working-class past and the academic middle-class present.

According to Welch (2007:133), *Journal du dehors* deals with 'mute observation or voyeurism'; but in fact watching and listening to others has a much more important meaning for the story, in its connection to the self-discovery of this woman and the act of remembering. Thus, although at first it appears that the episodes and the people in the journal are selected at random, this is in fact not the case. All these people and overheard conversations tell something about our time, while at the same time the narrator finds in these people something about herself and her past:

[...] l'émotion qu'ils me laissent est une chose réelle. Peut-être que je cherche quelque chose sur moi à travers eux, leurs façons de se tenir, leurs conversations. (Souvent, 'pourquoi ne suis-je pas cette femme ?' assise devant moi dans le métro, etc.) (Ernaux 1993:36-37)

[...] the emotions they arouse in me are real. I may also be trying to discover something about myself through them, their attitudes or their conversations. (Sitting opposite someone in a subway car, I often ask myself, "why am I not that woman?") (Ernaux 1996:32)

By observing people in the Métro and listening to their conversation, the narrator gains access to her own memories. The way people move or speak reminds her of her own personal history (see also Veivo 2003:227). Thus she is actively participating in other people's stories by remembering details from her past. However, although these strangers participate collectively in shaping the story, the narrator does not actually explain why these brief moments are meaningful to her. Interpretation is left to the reader, although we discover much about the narrator through her choice of the scenes that she describes (see also Scatton-Tessier 2005: 141). The Métro and the RER clearly hold personal values and meanings, which is why travelling by them can be seen as an emotional experience for this woman. They are places in which the narrator's personal feelings and spontaneous memories meet; they clearly do not evoke the sense of a non-place.

As Hugueny-Léger (2011:179) points out, Ernaux emphasizes the relationship between 'the inside (private spaces, memories, feelings and emotions, construction of the self) and the outside (public spaces, the everyday, the political sphere, 'others')'. In *Journal du dehors*, the Métro and the RER are precisely the places where these two spheres (the external and the internal) intersect, and travelling by Métro and the RER becomes simultaneously a personal and a social experience. In his writings of the Métro, Augé (see 1986:63) also accentuates this ambivalent nature of the Métro, the fact that riding the Métro is both an act of solitude and the social experience. However, as Moran (2005:51) puts it, for Augé riding the Métro is a shared but 'ephemeral interaction of strangers with little else in common'. Thus, in Augé's view, the passengers remain strangers to one another, even though they are sharing the space. In *Journal du dehors*, on the other hand, the two spheres of experience, the personal and social, seem to overlap because the narrator feels connected to these strangers. As McIlvanney (2001:134-135) comments, the important aspect of Ernaux's works is 'the role of the Other in promoting self-understanding'. The moments in the Métro and on the RER are thus related to self-

discovery. The people she observes can be seen as a mirror through which the narrator explores her life, including her relationship to literature and writing.

For Ernaux there is an intimate connection between literature, writing and everyday life. The term *everyday life* has often had rather negative connotations. As Rita Felski (2000:79) notes, women and the working class are more often associated with the everyday than others and scholars have typically 'opposed everyday life to critical reflection and speculation'. However, in *Journal du dehors*, Ernaux challenges this view by saying that extraordinary and compelling things can be found

[...] dans tout ce qui semble anodin et dépourvu de signification parce que trop familier ou ordinaire. (Ernaux 1993:9)

[...] in anything that appears to be unimportant and meaningless simply because it is familiar or ordinary. (Ernaux 1996:7).

Ernaux thus stresses the role of everyday life in the writing process: ordinary settings, such as the Métro and the RER, provide material for writing because they expose the writer to aspects of everyday life.

As Scatton-Tessier (2005:135) has noted, in Ernaux's works spaces are marked by social class and gender. This is also the case in *Journal du dehors*, with its particular focuses on suburban locations. In the French literature of the nineties, representations of the suburban environment are actually a very popular theme in urban novels. *Journal du dehors* has often been compared to other suburban stories written in the same period, for example François Maspéro's *Les passagers du Roissy-Express* (1990) and Jean Rolin's *Zones* (1995), where the idea is to portray suburban life by 'traveling' in the Parisian suburbs. In comparing these literary works, Tierney (2006:122; also Welch 2007:128) has interestingly pointed out that while the purpose of Maspéro and Rolin is to portray (marginalized) suburban people, in these works suburban life is nevertheless described from the outside, and the works actually portray the authors' own perceptions of suburban people. *Journal du dehors*, in contrast, portrays – although through the actions of strangers – Ernaux's own everyday life in the suburb. While Maspéro and Rolin are visiting the suburbs and exploring an unknown, different side of Paris, one that does not exist in tourist guides, Ernaux is describing her home environment and daily routines. Moreover, as McIlvanney (2001:136-138) points out, *Journal du dehors* portrays the experience of people living in the suburb directly by allowing them to speak freely, without the interference of a narrator's voice. However, Ernaux does not merely observe them from a distance but is very much part of the scene that she describes, because it is similar to her own childhood environment (see *ibid.*:135,150). Ernaux herself grew up in a working-class family in Yvetot in Normandy (see Jellenik 2007:74-75). Although this provincial town is very different from the suburb of Cergy-Pontoise, it is this shared social background that explains her sense of belonging to this place. Thus, her relationship with place is constructed through the social background. Where for Rolin and Maspéro the

suburb stands mainly for a place to observe the suburban Other, for Ernaux the suburb is rather a place through which she can analyze herself. This personal relationship and sense of belonging to a place can also be seen in the Métro scenes, indicating that the Métro and the RER are not only a transitory place but have a deeper meaning for her. As noted above, for Ernaux, *Journal du dehors* is not a study of urban sociology; she is describing her own social environment, familiar people and situations with which she can identify in some way. For Ernaux, it is thus a way to construct herself. On the other hand, she is also exposing herself to others, because she believes that she is also playing a role in someone else's life. As she says:

Sans doute suis-je moi-même, dans la foule des rues et des magasins, porteuse de la vie des autres. (Ernaux 1993:107)

I myself, anonymous among the bustling crowds on streets and in department stores, must secretly play a role in the lives of others. (Ernaux 1996:95).

Rather than being an external observer, she herself is exposed to the gaze of others and thus participates in the lives of others.

Ernaux apparently does not distinguish between the Métro and the RER, which are both experienced as meaningful places. Here Ernaux's view differs from that of Augé, who sees a clear distinction between them. As noted above, for Augé (2008), the Métro stands for an anthropological place, whereas the RER seems to have at least some features of non-place. Indeed, these two means of transport have different characteristics. In contrast to the Métro, with its history of over one hundred years, the RER lacks this sense of historical continuity; the construction of the RER system started in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, the Métro and the RER are identified with neighborhoods of different socioeconomic status: the Métro serves the urban center, while the RER runs between Paris and its suburbs. Ernaux, however, does not draw attention to historical aspects of these places or to their different status. Rather, she focuses on familiar and ordinary situations and on the mundane behaviors of people who can be found in both places. Thus, for Ernaux, the Métro is not an exception among contemporary urban spaces, as Augé sees it; all the urban places in which the narrator is an observer seem to dispute the concept of the non-place. As Ernaux says in her preface:

La sensation et la réflexion que suscitent les lieux ou les objets sont indépendantes de leur valeur culturelle, et l'hypermarché offre autant de sens et de vérité humaine que la salle de concert. (Ernaux 1993:9)

[...] the feelings and thoughts inspired by places and objects have nothing to do with their cultural content; thus a hypermarket can provide just as much meaning and human truth as a concert hall. (Ernaux 1996:7)

Ernaux thus sees no distinction between urban places; for her, the meaning of a place does not depend on whether the place does or does not carry (collective)

cultural and historical value. This is because these places are experienced mainly through people. *Journal du dehors* thus demonstrates that even ordinary, banal, everyday places, not filled with history or culture, can be experienced as meaningful. Consequently, even though according to Welch (2007:131) *Journal du dehors* conveys a rather negative image of the suburbs by drawing a strict contrast between the old and new buildings – for example between a traditional butcher's shop and a cold and impersonal supermarket – it is nevertheless important to note that these critical remarks are mainly related to the materiality of the city, not to the people occupying these spaces. Moreover, as we saw in the above quotation, Ernaux says that a hypermarket too can be a place filled with meanings.⁵ Despite the critical portrayal of the built environment, the suburbs are not seen in the novel merely as a built environment, without people; it is people and their actions that give meaning to this place. Accordingly, the Métro and the RER, banal places of everyday life, are also experienced as valuable sites of memory and self-discovery.

4. Curiol's *Voix sans issue* and Non-Place Experience

Céline Curiol's *Voix sans issue* depicts many features of the contemporary urban experience, such as anonymity, loneliness and alienation, which can be associated with Augé's definition of contemporary culture. The novel's protagonist is an anonymous woman who works as an announcer at the *Gare du Nord*. She is isolated from the social world and has difficulty in interacting with people. She is obsessed with a man who is in a relationship with another woman, and spends her days wandering passively around Paris waiting for something to happen between herself and him. She meets marginal characters, such a drug dealer or a transvestite, and is drawn into unusual situations over which she has no control. Despite these ephemeral contacts, her urban experience is characterized by solitude and isolation. She drifts passively through life, unable to interact with people around her or to influence the things that happen to her. However, despite her apparent passivity and naiveté, at the same time the woman's way of looking at the world around her is in fact quite sharp and ironic, implying that she is a more conflicted character. Where the subjectivity of Ernaux's narrator is evident, here the character's subjectivity is constructed more implicitly. Like Ernaux, Curiol focuses too on issues of gender and class, and her protagonist often draws attention to socially marginal people: the homeless man, the refugee, the street musician. The woman's experience is closely connected to the various urban spaces within which she wanders; these are situated mainly in the city center, and include a café, a bar, a park, and Métro and railway stations. The Métro scenes in *Voix sans issue* are different from those in *Journal du dehors*, and seem to involve some elements which definitely refer to a non-place experience. In the novel the Métro can be understood as a place without any particular identity; it is merely a place of transit, with anonymous people moving

⁵ In her latest work *Regarde les lumières mon amour* (2014), Ernaux depicts her visits at the supermarket in the suburb of Cergy-Pontoise during one year. This fact also indicates that the supermarket is not a meaningless non-place, but rather holds important personal meanings for Ernaux.

through it. The novel thus demonstrates that the Métro space can also be perceived as a non-place. The Métro scenes describe busy people who have no connection with others. Unlike Ernaux, who focuses on portraying her fellow-passengers, Curiol enters directly into the protagonist’s thoughts and emotions in the Métro. The following excerpt illustrates the way how the woman experiences the Métro and the other passengers:

Elle se tient droite entre deux épaules dures qui n’ont aucune intention de se décaler pour lui faire de la place. Elle sent un parfum entêtant, une respiration sur sa nuque, la transpiration de corps muets, raidis, fourrés dans une rame étroite, trop proches les uns des autres pour s’inspirer autre chose qu’une répulsion contenue. (Curiol 2005:27-28)

She is wedged upright between two stony shoulders that have no intention of budging to give her more room. She can smell the reek of strong scent, feel someone’s breath on the back of her neck, the tension of mute, sweating bodies packed into a narrow carriage, bodies too close to inspire in each other anything but a mutual sense of suppressed revulsion. (Curiol 2008:16)

The example focuses on the woman’s bodily experience. The experience is constructed through the detailed recording of bodily sensations, which are an essential element of the characterization of this woman. This detailed description forces the reader to experience the space from her perspective. Although the woman does not interact with other passengers, she is very much aware of the bodily presence of others. For the woman the Métro is an uncomfortable place, where human bodies inhabit the space and physical contact with strangers evokes feelings of disgust. The people surrounding her also reinforce the woman’s sense of social isolation and exclusion. Here the negative relationship with other people constructs a negative sense of place. This place does not create opportunities for interaction among people, and without a real connection to others the woman feels no sense of belonging to this place.

But if the Métro can here be regarded as a non-place, we may ask: why is this woman portrayed in such a place? What is the role of the place in the construction of the narrative? I argue that it can be seen as an important site of action, within which the character is built up. One could say that she is a product of this environment, of a non-place. Thus the space can be seen as an indication of a character’s state of mind: the same qualities that characterize non-places – transit, impermanence and anonymity – can also be seen in the female character. Here the non-place has an important role to play in the construction of the female character. It serves as a suitable setting for a woman who is described as anxious, distracted, unstable and alienated from other people. Even though the Métro is a crowded space, the woman is alone; she does not know anyone or speak to anyone. In this regard, a literary place can be used to show a particular mental state of a character or to create a particular atmosphere. Here this non-place environment constructs the idea of a woman who feels like an outsider. In other words, the use of a non-place is related to the construction of the woman’s outsideness. Some places are undoubtedly more suitable for portraying a sense of having lost one’s way, of otherness or solitariness. I suggest that the Métro, where people are only

temporarily passing through and are soon replaced by others, can be also seen as such a place. These types of place can more easily be seen as 'places of alienation'. The idea of the non-place can thus help to construct a certain kind of fictional world.

But are these 'places of alienation' produced by contemporary culture? I argue that although the sense of alienation can be associated with contemporary culture and contemporary urban literature, urban alienation is also a very common theme in the literature of modernity. As Sunny Stalter (2007:39) indicates in her study of New York modernist literature, alienation on the part of urban subjects was also manifested in modernist representations of the subway. These similar representations of the subway experience seem to indicate, for their part, that there is no clear distinction, but rather a continuum between modern and contemporary culture, even though Augé sees them as fundamentally different.

In the next excerpt the Métro space also provides a particular atmosphere, one which fits in with the non-place experience. The narrator is describing the woman in the Métro:

Dans le métro, il lui arrive parfois d'avoir l'impression de se désintégrer. Elle est assise sur un siège en compagnie d'autres voyageurs taciturnes. Elle ne pense à rien de particulier, bercée par la progression de la rame. Elle n'est pas endormie, mais ce n'est qu'au coup de frein final qu'elle s'aperçoit que le métro est entré dans une station. Il lui faut alors de longues secondes pour savoir si elle descend ou non à cet arrêt. Elle doit passer mentalement en revue les heures qui ont précédé, suivre la logique des causes et des conséquences pour pouvoir comprendre pourquoi elle est, à ce moment-là, assise dans ce métro, et décider d'y demeurer. Le métro repart. Et tout au long du parcours qui la mène à la station suivante, elle reperd la notion d'espace et de temps. (Curiol 2005: 98)

Sometimes in the métro she has the impression that she is disintegrating. She's sitting in the company of other silent passengers, not thinking about anything in particular, swayed by the motion of the carriage progressing through the tunnels. She isn't asleep, but it is only at the final brake that she realizes the train has entered a station. It then takes her several long seconds before she knows if she has to get out at that stop or not. She has to review the preceding hours in her mind, follow the trail of cause and effect to work out why she is there at that precise moment, sitting in that métro, and decide to stay. The métro sets off again. And in the course of the journey to the next station, she again loses all notion of time and space. (Curiol 2008:73-74)

Here individuals are quite isolated from each other, there is no human interaction, and the protagonist does not really pay attention to other people. In *Journal du dehors* the narrator is consciously observing city life, in *Voix sans issue*, in contrast, the protagonist thus seems to be less conscious of the place. She is lost in her own world, reacting to other passengers with indifference. She has lost any sense of time and place, and does not know where she is going. The space around her apparently has no meaning for this woman. The Métro is a solitary place, in which the protagonist is waiting for something, and highlights her detachment from the reality and self.

While the Métro in *Voix sans issue* evokes the sense of a non-place, at the same time the perception of the Métro space is shaped by the woman's bodily experience.

According to Henri Lefebvre (2000:50, 198-199), the sensory body is a central element in the production of space, because we experience space through the body. The space is thus a bodily lived experience (ibid.:50). In the example above, although the woman is momentarily mentally absent, lost in thoughts, she is physically present. Moreover, despite the emotional distance between the passengers she cannot avoid physical contact with others. The woman's non-place experience is closely related to its momentariness. The feeling of a non-place disappears when her body and the motion of the carriage bring her back to this world. This indicates that the non-place experience exists here only momentarily.

Although the non-place experience has more or less negative connotations, could it also have positive meanings? Augé (1992:127) argues that the anonymity of non-places can also be a liberating experience for the individual, as non-places generate a shared identity among users of the space, such as passengers or customers. It is thus a temporary identity, which may be perceived as liberating. I suggest that in *Voix sans issue* the non-place experience can be understood as a liberating experience for the protagonist. Here, however, the non-place experience is not related to any shared identity, but to the woman's inner state. The woman can be lost in her thoughts, not having to think about anything but simply enjoying the sense of non-place. A non-place can thus be a place, or a certain state of mind, where the individual does not *need* to interact with anyone. Here the lack of interaction with other passengers does not necessarily mean that the place is experienced negatively; it can actually be an important moment for the woman. The non-place thus functions as a space within which the woman can pause and take time out from her distressing life. This means that the protagonist is actually not a powerless character but instead participates in action in a kind of willed passivity, which is why she actually enjoys the sense of disengagement that the Métro offers her.

In *Voix sans issue* the protagonist's urban experience is constructed through rather fragmented and momentary sensations of city life. The Métro space can be experienced simultaneously as a meaningful place and as a non-place. Shifting between these two experiences, the experience of non-place can thus only be partial and momentary. It is important to note that the woman is also portrayed in other urban places, such as the café, the bar and the street, where she meets people and which are lacking in the characteristics of a non-place. Thus her representation is constructed not only through experience of the non-place but also through the tensions between the various forms of urban experience.

5. Conclusions

The Métro scenes in *Journal du dehors* and *Voix sans issue* present many interesting insights into contemporary urban experience, and provide new ways of thinking about the concept of non-place. In *Journal du dehors* the Métro gives the narrator an opportunity to explore city life and to observe strangers. The Métro and its passengers are related to the character's personal memories, which explains her strong sense of belonging to this environment. It is a place of self-discovery, which

helps her to remember fragments from her past. The Métro scenes do not evoke a sense of non-place, but rather show that the Métro is an important place for a character's self-scrutiny. *Journal du dehors* demonstrates that the meaning of a place does not depend on its historical or cultural values, but on people who turn ordinary and banal urban places into meaningful places. In *Voix sans issue*, on the other hand, the protagonist is less conscious of the surrounding environment and has a rather passive attitude towards city life. The Métro space is perceived as a non-place, because the nature of the place reflects the character's mental environment. As a non-place it participates in shaping the protagonist's attitudes and motives. Despite the feeling of non-place, the Métro experience is also shaped by the presence of the body and the motion of the carriage, both of which suspend the experience of non-place. The Métro is thus experienced only partly and momentarily as a non-place.

The Métro scenes in both works describe the inner experience of these two solitary female characters, creating different emotions and feelings in them. Interestingly, however, the physical environment and the woman's experience of place play a central role in these inward experiences. In *Journal du dehors* the inward experience is related to the woman's own memories and self-analysis, whereas in *Voix sans issue* it is associated with the woman's inner thoughts and conflicts, which construct her character. The Métro can be seen momentarily as a transitory non-place, when it reflects the female character's state of mind; at the same time, in these works the Métro is not a place without history or meaning, but is closely connected to the characters' identity and history. Interestingly, in *Journal du dehors* the suburbs, which are usually connected to non-places, are not experienced as such, while on the other hand places in *Voix sans issue* that are situated in the city center can be seen at least partly as non-places. This also indicates that there are no fixed non-places; the interpretation of a place is always subjective. The characters and their representation exert a powerful influence on the nature of literary space; ultimately, it is these that determine how the Métro space is experienced in these texts.

References

- Augé, Marc (1986), *Un ethnologue dans le métro*. Paris: Hachette Littérature.
- Augé, Marc (1992), *Non-lieux. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*. Paris: Seuil.
- Augé, Marc (2006), "L'infinie complexité de la ville contemporaine", Entretien avec Alain Renk & Anne-Marie Morice, *Mutations urbaines*, nro 17 <http://host.uing.net/14338/marc_auga_-_alain_renk.html?m_op=14338&m_is=1> (accessed 24 September 2013).
- Augé, Marc (2008), *Le Métro revisité*. Paris: Seuil.
- Balshaw, Maria & Liam, Kennedy (2000), "Introduction: Urban Space and Representation", in Balshaw, Maria & Liam Kennedy (eds.), *Urban Space and Representation*. London: Pluto, 1-21.

- Buchholz, Sabine & Manfred, Jahn (2005), "Space in Narrative", in Herman, David, Manfred Jahn & Marie-Laure Ryan (eds.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*. London: Routledge, 551-555.
- Certeau, Michel de (1990), *L'invention du quotidien. 1. arts de faire*. Paris: Editions Gallimard.
- Conley, Verena Andermatt (2012), *Spatial Ecologies: Urban Sites, State and World-Space in French Critical Theory*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Cresswell, Tim (2004), *Place: A Short Introduction*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Curiol, Céline (2005), *Voix sans issue*. Paris: Actes Sud.
- Curiol, Céline (2008), *Voice over*. trans. from the French by Sam Richard. London: Faber and Faber.
- Ernaux, Annie (1993), *Journal du dehors*. Paris: Editions Gallimard.
- Ernaux, Annie (1996), *Exteriors*. trans. from the French by Tanya Leslie. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Ernaux, Annie (2014), *Regarde les lumières mon amour*. Paris: Seuil.
- Felski, Rita (2000), *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*. New York & London: New York University Press.
- Horvath, Christina (2007), *Le roman urbain contemporain en France*. Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle.
- Hugueny-Léger, Elise (2011), "Du Dedans au Dehors: Trajectories of the Self in Diaries by Annie Ernaux", in Allison, Maggie & Angela Kershaw (eds.), *Modern French Identities, Volume 73: Parcours de femmes: Twenty Years of Women in French*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 167-179.
- Jellenik, Cathy (2007), *Rewriting Rewriting: Marguerite Duras, Annie Ernaux, and Marie Redonnet*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Lefebvre, Henri (2000), *La production de l'espace*. Paris: Anthropos.
- Lucas, Raymond (2008), "'Taking a Line for a Walk': Walking as an Aesthetic Practice", in Ingold, Tim & Jo Lee Vergunst (eds.), *Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 169-184.
- Maspero, François (1990), *Les passagers du Roissy-Express*. Paris: Seuil.
- McIlvanney, Siobhán (2001), *Annie Ernaux. The Return to Origins*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Merriman, Peter (2004), "Driving Places: Marc Augé, Non-Places, and the Geographies of England's M1 Motorway", *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21(4-5): 145-167.
- Merriman, Peter (2011), "Marc Augé", in Hubbard, Phil & Rob Kitchin (eds.), *Key Thinkers on Space and Place*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 26-33.
- Moran, Joe (2005), *Reading the everyday*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Relph, Edward (1976), *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion Limited.
- Rolin, Jean (1995), *Zones*. Paris: Editions Gallimard.
- Rosenthal, Caroline (2011), *New York and Toronto Novels after Postmodernism: explorations of the urban*. Rochester: Camden House.
- Scatton-Tessier, Michelle (2005), "The Public Becomes Personal: From Ernaux's Passion simple to Journal du dehors", *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*:

- 29(9):135-150. <<http://newprairiepress.org/sttcl/vol29/iss1/9/>>. (accessed 30 November 2014).
- Stalter, Sunny (2007), *Underground subjects: public transportation and perception in New York modernist literature*. Doctoral thesis. New Brunswick: Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.
<<http://mss3.libraries.rutgers.edu/dlr/showfed.php?pid=rutgers-lib:24062>> (accessed 17 December 2014).
- Tierney, Robin (2006), "Lived experience at the level of the body': Annie Ernaux's *Journaux extimes*", *SubStance*, 35(3):113-130.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu (1977), *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*. London: Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd.
- Veivo, Harri (2003), "Lieux, rencontres, littérature: espace et identité dans *Journal du dehors* et *La Vie extérieure* d'Annie Ernaux", in Vion-Dury, Juliette, Jean-Marie Grassin & Bertrand Westphal (eds.), *Littérature & espaces. Actes du XXX colloque de la Société française de la littérature générale et comparée*. Limoges: PULIM, 223-231.
- Welch, Edward (2007), "Coming to Terms with the Future: The Experience of Modernity in Annie Ernaux's *Journal du dehors*", *French Cultural Studies*, 18(1):125-136.