



COMING OUT OF THE HOUSE AND INTO THE WORLD: FORMS OF UNHOUSING IN US LITERATURE

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UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA, THURSDAY AND FRIDAY JANUARY 16-17, 2025



UNIVERSITAT DE
BARCELONA

ADHUC

Centre de Recerca
Teoria, Gènere, Sexualitat
UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA

THURSDAY JANUARY 16, 2025

SALA GABRIEL OLIVER

EDIFICI JOSEP CARNER

UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA

C/ ARIBAU, 2, PLANTA -1, 08007

BARCELONA

09:30-10:00 Welcome and Opening Remarks

10:00-12:00 Unhousing as Effect of / Response to Capitalism

Dolores Resano (Universidad Complutense de Madrid): “‘Each house is a story of failure’: Paul Auster’s *Sunset Park*”

Cristina Alsina Rísquez (Universitat de Barcelona): “The Political Value of Willing Unhousings in George Saunders’s Short Stories”

Cynthia Stretch (Southern Connecticut State University): “Property and Precarization: Reading Seth Tobocman’s *War in the Neighborhood* in the Last Days of the Biden Administration”

12:00-12:30 Coffee Break

12.30-13:00 Memory Loss and Domesticities

Cristina Garrigós (UNED): “Redefining Spatial Memory: Unhousing in Narrative Representations of Alzheimer’s Disease”

13:00-15:30 Lunch Break

15:30-16:30 Unhousing to the World

Michael Jonik (University of Sussex): “Sarah Orne Jewett and Radical Hospitality”

Rodrigo Andrés (Universitat de Barcelona): “On Gay Writers’ Fire Escapes. Unhousings in James Baldwin, Tennessee Williams, and Ocean Vuong”

16:30- 17:00 Coffee Break

17:00- 18:30 Research Team Meeting: Unhousing 2021-2025, Evaluation.

**FRIDAY JANUARY 17,
2025**

SALA GABRIEL OLIVER

EDIFICI JOSEP CARNER

UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA

C/ ARIBAU, 2, PLANTA -1, 08007

BARCELONA

10:00-12:00 (Trans)national Unhousings

Marina Bernardo Flórez (Universitat de Barcelona): “Unhousing the Border: Mestiza Heroines”

Vicent Cucarella-Ramon (Universitat de València): “Dis/Placing the Afro-Caribbean in the U.S.: Junot Díaz’s Unhousing Aesthetics”

Elena Ortells (Universitat Jaume I): “Displacement and Alienation in Sefi Atta’s *The Bad Immigrant*”

12:00-12:30 Coffee Break

12.30-13:30 Unhousing as (Failed) Emancipations

Arturo Corujo (Independent Scholar): “Redburn’s Ritornello”

David Fontanals (Universitat de Barcelona): “Exploring Radical Forms of Unhousing in the Jamesian International Theme”

13:30-15:30 Lunch Break

15:30- 17:00 Research Team Meeting: What’s Next?

ABSTRACTS

DOLORES RESANO (UNIVERSIDAD COMPLUTENSE DE MADRID)

“EACH HOUSE IS A STORY OF FAILURE’: PAUL AUSTER’S *SUNSET PARK*”

“Each house is a story of failure.” So begins Paul Auster’s *Sunset Park*, his 2010 novel set against the backdrop of the so-called Great Recession of 2007-2009 and the election of Barack Obama as US President. Miles Heller is the child of a wealthy middle class who is now living in a squat in the rough neighborhood of Sunset Park in Brooklyn, as a “young man without ambitions” (Auster 2010, 11) and with a deep sense of being stuck. His last job had been emptying (“trashing out”) foreclosed houses in Florida, in the wake of the subprime mortgage crash, where he had also taken to photographing the objects that the evicted persons had left behind. Miles is fascinated by the “lingering traces” of those vanished residents, who are still somehow present in their “discarded things” (3). His almost tender obsession with the “abandoned things” as the only remains of a former life, however, quickly turns into an examination of his own past, of the residual traces of a younger Miles and the reasons that led to his estrangement from his family and his deviation from a charted future. Critics have argued that while *Sunset Park* seems to promise an engagement with an emerging new landscape of precariousness in the wake of the subprime mortgage crisis, the plot seems to remain on the realm of the aesthetic, with characters whose literary and artistic backgrounds—“all with talent and intelligence” (Auster 2010, 39) and hopelessly underemployed—lead to loftier reflections on their own condition. The poor remain, as Andrew Lawson suggests, stubbornly obfuscated, as if the very idea of poverty were antithetical to the notion of the American Dream, a symbolic mandate that the novel keeps at the forefront with its invocation of *The Great Gatsby*. The possibility of forming alternative communities and affiliations hovers at the edges of the narrative but is never fully realized. This paper will examine what is entailed by this kind of representational opacity, how it can be interpreted as a reflection of a “blind spot” in American culture, and how the novel can be located within/outside an emerging corpus of US novels dealing with precarity.

CRISTINA ALSINA RÍSQUEZ (UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA)

“THE POLITICAL VALUE OF WILLING UNHOUSINGS IN GEORGE SAUNDERS’S SHORT STORIES”

A significant number of Saunders’s short stories are set either in homes turned into units of production and population control or in workplaces that are examples of the “experience economy” paradigm, featuring among them, particularly, an array of decadent and surreal theme parks. These choices show his concern over the effects of capitalism on the lives and the bodies of what David P. Rando has called the postmodern working class: “the losers of American history—the dispossessed, the oppressed, or merely those whom history’s winners have walked all over on their paths to glory, fame, or terrific wealth” (437). Saunders engages in a biting and painfully funny criticism of our conditions of existence and zooms in on the particular circumstances generated by the confluence of two contemporary social and economic developments: on the one hand, the transformation of the Global North into what Byung-Chul Han has called “information society” which is based on a free circulation of information that has the paradoxical effect of imprisoning people: “By communicating and producing information, they shackle themselves. *The digital prison is transparent*” (5); on the other hand, and dovetailing with this transformation, the economy has shifted towards what Pine and Gilmore

labelled the “experience economy” in 2011, an economic structure in which profit is made by trading experiences instead of goods (1-3). Both developments depend strongly on elements of theatricalization: workers *act* in events *staged* by their companies and, as Hochschild defends, find their feelings are part of what they commercialize as workers; in the information society, “people seek to be visible” (Han, 5) and *expose* themselves in —or perform for— open networks. As a result of both, privacy and intimacy —so central to our traditional understanding of home— are compromised. In most of his short stories, Saunders describes this process of forced unhousing inflicted on the working and middle classes by the social and economic structures at play in US society. In a few of his stories, he includes characters that manage to step aside from the structure that is crushing them. Interestingly, that gesture is not a nostalgic return to the normative, traditional household, but a step further toward a more radical unhousing: these characters become free from the structures that hold and dehumanize them but also completely ineffectual and irrelevant to those structures. This paper reads those apparently futile gestures as political and propulsive of a new collective subjectivity.

CYNTHIA STRETCH (SOUTHERN CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY)

“PROPERTY AND PRECARITIZATION: READING SETH TOBOCMAN’S *WAR IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD* IN THE LAST DAYS OF THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION”

On March 14 last year, a 24-year-old man named Lance White-Hunt filed a lawsuit against a homeowner, the homeowner’s real estate broker, and the broker’s property management group in Jamaica, Queens, claiming that he was the victim of an illegal lockout: business as usual in New York housing court. But the legal documentation staking White-Hunt’s claim to the property was all forged—including a lease signed by the broker and bogus electric and telephone bills submitted as proof of residence. In a small-scale but surreal legal drama, the squatter had taken the property owner to court in what the district attorney called an “especially egregious” and “brazen act” aimed at finding a place to live.

This story played out in a local Queens newspaper, but it echoes in content and tone recent press coverage of squatters in a range of New York and national media outlets from the *Times* to Fox News. In the aggregate, these stories suggest that the practice of squatting is growing; that it is a menace associated with drug use and vandalism (and migrants); and that those who are most threatened are the housed. This essay will begin by reading coverage of squatters in Biden-era US media as contributing to what Isabell Lorey terms “precaritization,” a neoliberal process that produces insecurity as “a central preoccupation of the subject” (iiiiv). Although it focuses on the squatters on the Lower East Side of New York City in the late 1980s and early ‘90s, Seth Tobocman’s graphic narrative, *War in the Neighborhood* (2016) offers a compelling representation of Lorey’s argument for an “activism of the precarious” as a form of unhousing. In its attention to the materiality of the squatted building and the social relations of the squatters, *War in the Neighborhood* lays bare the false promises of security while positing an iterative and prefigurative praxis in which housing—that supposed *sine qua non* of security—and its attendant subjectivities are made and unmade.

CRISTINA GARRIGÓS (UNED)

“REDEFINING SPATIAL MEMORY: UNHOUSING IN NARRATIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF ALZHEIMER’S DISEASE”

The loss of spatial memory brought by neurological deterioration in Alzheimer's processes causes disorientation when the person navigates a space that used to be familiar, such as one's house. Spatial memory is the ability to remember places and things and as such, spatial disorientation is one of the first signs that may lead to an Alzheimer's disease diagnosis. This disorder involves being unable to find spatial frames of reference, both the egocentric frame, which includes spatial information about the location of the individual in the environment, and the allocentric frame, which involves spatial information about the position of objects relative to each other. This results in problems with spatial navigation and with the ability to remember and recognize locations and objects. The house goes from being a place, a site of culture located in time and space, to a place that the person with Alzheimer's does not recognize. In novels where the protagonist is a person with Alzheimer's disease, spatial memory plays a central role since the action usually takes place either in the house where the person lives or in a residential facility where they are almost inevitably taken. Thus, this paper explores unhousing associated with Alzheimer's in contemporary US fiction focusing on the redefinition of spatial memory. The moment our spatial memory does not recognize that space, we are deprived of any tie to the past. We are living in the present and the now, a situation where we are free, unchained, but also vulnerable. We are unhoused.

MICHAEL JONIK (UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX)

"SARAH ORNE JEWETT AND RADICAL HOSPITALITY"

This paper will explore the fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett among different approaches to "unhousing." Doing so allows us to better understand how Jewett articulates relationalities and habitabilities within and beyond the domestic and domesticated, as well as in alternative subjectivities such as those of the transient, the wayfarer, the foreigner, stranger, the islanded, all those homebound with "far-off look[s] that sought the horizon," housekeepers and house-breakers –all those subjectivities perhaps ready to exit the house *to* the world, to live *for* human and nonhuman and who might risk an escape from the larger body of the house into a different space of ontological exposure and fragility, if they only could get out the door. While I will couch my interpretation of her work in relation to Jewett's better known works such as *A White Heron* and *A Country of the Pointed Firs*, I will specifically focus on Jewett's fascinating short tale from her collection *Folly Island*, "The Landscape Chamber." In this story, I will posit, what is at stake is how we might understand radical hospitality in relation to the question of unhousing.

RODRIGO ANDRÉS (UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA)

"ON GAY WRITERS' FIRE ESCAPES. UNHOUSINGS IN JAMES BALDWIN, TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, AND OCEAN VUONG"

In my contribution I would like to connect three texts – a letter, a play, and a novel – addressed by a self-positioned-as-gay US writer to a member of his immediate family: James Baldwin's "A Letter to My Nephew" (1964), Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). In Baldwin's text he tells his nephew not to be afraid in racist America, and with the help of his racial brothers to begin to change his country "for this is your home, my friend. Do not be driven from it". Although in his letter Baldwin urges his nephew to realize that Blacks belong

in the country, the fact that the adjective chosen for home is “your” and not “our” proves that Baldwin positions himself as irrevocably driven from this home, that is, as unhomed from it. In Tennessee Williams’s play, his alter ego Tom Wingfield finishes the “memory” play he shares with the audience by urging his sister Laura to “blow out [her] candles so that he can finally say a definite and last goodbye to the home from which he had only physically unhoused himself a number of years ago, for all this time he has been “more faithful to [that memory] than [he] intended”. Ocean Vuong’s novel is a long letter to his illiterate mother in which he, like Williams, attempts to exorcise the haunting memory of a house that needs to be transcended as it was a space of trauma, unbelonging, and failed communication. My contribution will connect these three unhousings through the image of the fire escape as both a literal space in Williams’ play and as a metaphor in Vuong’s essay “The Weight of Our Living: On Hope, Fire Escapes, and Visible Desperation” (2014). For all three writers, in the same way that the fire escape is the risky structural element of the house that paradoxically enables us to save ourselves from it, literary language is the always uncertain form of language that can save us from lack of language or from language as failed (or as mis)communication. From the perspective of their apparently exposed, vulnerable, unhoused position, these three writers reflect on salvation. For them, salvation –not necessarily/just *their* salvation, but *salvation*– will only happen if we take the leap of faith which is escaping the void of isolation by stepping out from empty language and into a language that can give us the truth of meaningful, honest interpersonal communication, instead of the illusion of domestic safeties.

MARINA BERNARDO FLÓREZ (UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA) **“UNHOUSING THE BORDER: MESTIZA HEROINES”**

Movement and going across borders define the Chicanx experience and are at the very core of its literary representation. During El Movimiento, an integral part of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and especially the 1970s, the Myth of Aztlan, the historic-geographical place from which various tribal groups, among them the Mexicas, migrated to central Mexico, served as a unifying force to reaffirm Chicanx ethnicity. Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* begins with her own account of the history of the US Southwest, of “The Homeland, Aztlán / El otro México”. It is the narrative of movements of people, of a third country which is the result of the merging of two worlds, of borderlands as undetermined places, the home of the mestiza as a transient subject. Following Paula Geyh in “Burning Down the House? Domestic Space and Feminine Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*”, subjectivity and space are mutually constructing, and “unhousing” implies going across boundaries and denying them, thus resulting in a transient subjectivity.

The Chicano Movement also entailed the birth of Chicanx children’s literature, which especially in the 1990s, as a part of the rising trend of Multiculturalism and as a cultural product and a reflection of power relations, strove to provide Chicanx children with representations of their identities to counteract the representation of Mexican Americans in children’s literature until then, which had been based on cultural homogeneity, historical distortion, and stereotypes.

My proposal analyses three children’s picturebooks by Chicanx authors published from the 1990s and early 2000s in order to discuss how spatial and subjective construction intertwine through word and image. I focus on the work of Chicanx authors Gloria Anzaldúa, Juan Felipe Herrera, and Amada I. Pérez, whose young mestiza heroines represent the Chicanx transient subjectivity moving across the border as an (un)dreamed domestic space.

VICENT CUCARELLA-RAMON (UNIVERSITAT DE VALÈNCIA)

“DIS/PLACING THE AFRO-CARIBBEAN IN THE U.S.: JUNOT DÍAZ’S UNHOUSING AESTHETICS”

In Junot Díaz’s short story “Otravida, Otravez”, included in his collection *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012), Ramón de las Casas, one of the main characters, declares his uncritical adherence to the United States idiosyncrasy, admitting that “[t]o own a house in this country is to begin to live” (69). Thus, owning a house is established as a means for Caribbean migrants to achieve and live out the American dream. Yet, such analogy is contested by Ramón’s very own family, especially by his wife. Díaz’s short story cycles in *Drown* (1996) and *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012) provide fertile ground for analyzing the fallacies of U.S. ideologies. Some of the stories have been aptly examined through the lens of hospitality/hostility, auto-ethnography, language emotionality or affect theory. I would like to contribute to these critical readings by incorporating the perspective of spatial studies, specifically by reflecting on the unhousing aesthetics that punctuate some interrelated stories from both collections. In so doing, I wish to explore Díaz’s representation of unhousing by tracing Ramón’s Afro-Caribbean family’s journey from the Dominican Republic to the United States. By drawing on Geyh’s and Ahmed’s unhousing theories, Massey’s spatial studies, Braidotti’s nomadic reflections, and McKittrick’s research on Black geographies, I will analyze three interconnected stories about the de las Casas family. This analysis will assess how the ultimate power takeover that materializes in the United States involves a gendered embrace of unhousing politics. Accordingly, this move serves not only to counteract and criticize U.S. racist and nationalist policies but also to challenge the notions that link the house to the country. Díaz’s unhoused short stories also serve as a didactic and constructive exercise that validates the ongoing exploration of flexible spaces and mobilities, potentially paving the way for a truly egalitarian and habitable future.

ELENA ORTELLS (UNIVERSITAT JAUME I)

“DISPLACEMENT AND ALIENATION IN SEFI ATTA’S *THE BAD IMMIGRANT*”

Over the first two decades of the twenty-first century, a remarkable group of Nigerian American novelists has emerged. Many of these writers are members of the new African diaspora, which has formed as a result of recent African migration to the United States and Europe. Most of them are the emblem of what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls “rooted cosmopolitanism” (2007, 213). They may live in London, in New York, etc. but they still look back to their old home. They live abroad but, most of the time, write about Nigeria, about its history, about the role of women there. Additionally, they also deal with the experience of being Nigerian and living in the United States or in England. Sefi Atta is, together with Chimamanda Adichie Ngozi and Chinelo Okparanta, one of the most representative authors of this diasporic literature.

In *The Bad Immigrant* (2021), Atta makes use of Lukmon Karim, her first male protagonist, to lay bare the realities of migration from Nigeria to the USA. Through the ironic voice of this British-educated university professor of Nigerian origin, the Afropolitan author manages to offer a powerful counternarrative to the American dream. As beneficiaries of the Diversity Immigrant Visa Program, popularly known as the Green Card lottery, Lukmon and his family serve as an exceptional example of the dissonance between the promises of the American dream and the reality of segregation and marginalization experienced by many of these diasporic subjects.

The abandonment of home stands as one of the most profound disruptions in the lives of these migrants. Whether resulting from voluntary or forced displacement, the movement entails leaving behind a familiar environment and confronting the challenge of constructing a new place of abode. In navigating this transition, these individuals are likely to experience both a sense of displacement and alienation. With the unhousing process of the migratory subjects, with the disentanglement of their material and cultural roots also comes, for many, the exclusionary and unattainable nature of the American dream. My intention is to bring to the fore how, by exposing the systemic barriers the Karim family face, Atta manages to deconstruct the American dream and to provide a critical lens to reflect upon today's transnational interactions and ideological conflicts.

ARTURO CORUJO (INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR)

"REDBURN'S RITORNELLO"

On June 5, 1849, Herman Melville wrote a letter to his then publisher Richard Bentley informing him that his new project was "a thing of a widely different cast from 'Mardi' –a plain, straightforward, amusing narrative of personal experience." After the commercial failure of his archipelagic fantasies about island hopping, Melville had decided to shift his ground "from the South Seas to a different quarter of the globe—nearer home" (*Correspondence*, 132). *Redburn* (1849) revolves around a boy who leaves his family house on the Hudson River and embarks on the *Highlander*, a merchant vessel bound for England, in a romantic attempt to flee the "[s]ad disappointments" for what could have been, do something for himself, and honor his dead father's "naturally roving disposition" (3). To do so, the sailor-narrator puts on his brother's shooting-jacket and packs up his father's guidebooks as he intends to become "a great voyager" (7). Sadly, upon arrival in England, he realizes that his fraternal garment is a source of ridicule, that his father's guidebooks are misleading, and that, away from the docks, Liverpool is like New York. What at first seems to be a narrative about domestic emancipation becomes one of disillusionment: Melville's hero eventually returns to his mother's house sadder, poorer, and lonelier than before. This three-part structure (a voyage to England, the experiences there, and a return to New York) supports the author's observations that *Redburn* was straightforward. But Melville enlarged his manuscript after his first correspondence with Bentley, so much so that the book wasn't out until September 29. During those weeks, Melville might have added a key character: Harry Bolton, the narrator's only hope for human connection outside his limiting sense of belonging. Bolton, whom Redburn meets in England, embarks on the *Highlander* on its way back to his friend's native soil. But Redburn returns home and leaves Bolton to his tragic fate: suicide at sea. In my presentation I want to suggest that, in adding Harry Bolton, Melville complicates this sea novel as a homecoming narrative where the return doesn't result in the restoration of selfhood that critics have traditionally claimed, but rather in its rupture: the loss of the possibility of love, but also the impossibility of separating oneself from a significant other who left too soon. In *Redburn*, the narrator's process of disidentification is aborted overseas. And yet, his failure to return leaves him forever unhoused.

DAVID FONTANALS (UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA)

"EXPLORING RADICAL FORMS OF UNHOUSING IN THE JAMESIAN INTERNATIONAL THEME"

Henry James's international theme was a means for the Anglo-American author to dramatize his

own biographical experience of crossing geographical and sociocultural boundaries, thus becoming an exploration of the lifelong quandaries, frustrations, and opportunities of a life lived “in transit”. The resulting transatlantic aesthetics and ethics offer us a vast corpus for the study of subjects on the move, of individuals who leave their homes behind to meet their—professional, artistic, and affective—fates. Viewed through the lenses of unhousing, understood, following Paula Geyh, as “the going across [...] boundaries”, and the resulting processes as “expressions of transience” that eventually lead to the “physical and symbolic dissolution of the house”, it could be argued that the Jamesian (international) character is exposed to a potential revision and unlearning of the inherited structures of thought and feeling that orient how they both read themselves and look at the world. However, even if these characters see their ethical and political limitations challenged, conceiving the resulting gesture as a radical departure from home would be problematic, as they either end up coming back yearning for stability or settle themselves in new environments where they reproduce old dynamics that thwart their emancipation.

Bearing this in mind, this paper seeks to examine James’s sea narrative “The Patagonia” (1888) [TP] as an exception within my otherwise cautious assessment of the unhousing potential of James’s international fiction, as it dramatizes a radical form of unhousing that entails not only the refusal of one’s destiny as it has been prearranged at home but also the non-negotiable location of one’s happiness in a temporal, transient, unstable domestic milieu. Thus, I will argue that, in contrast to the quintessential Jamesian stories of encounters between America and Europe, in this text, the journey is placed at the center of the narrative; the *Patagonia*—which was initially just the means to deliver the heroine Grace Mavis to her fiancé in Europe—becomes a Foucauldian heterotopia and thus fertile ground for the reorientation of Grace’s self and, accordingly, the realignment of her desires. Taking cue from Sara Ahmed, I will claim that Grace’s suicide—triggered by the first sight of land, signified as “a return to reality” (TP)—should be understood as her refusal to reproduce inherited lines once she has disposed of the burden of origin, a conscious act of, literal and symbolic, deviation from the “path well trodden”.