# VANISHING HOUSES, VANISHED SELVES: A HAUNTOLOGICAL READING OF PAUL AUSTER'S *SUNSET PARK*[1]

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ABSTRACT: «Each house is a story of failure» (Auster, 2010a: 3). So begins Paul Auster's *Sunset Park*, his 2010 novel set against the backdrop of the so-called Great Recession of 2007-2009, the subprime mortgage crash, and the first election of Barack Obama as President of the United States. Critics have argued that while *Sunset Park* seems to promise an engagement with an emerging new landscape of socioeconomic precarity in the United States, the novel's focus seems to remain, however, on the realm of the aesthetic, with characters whose literary and artistic backgrounds –«all with talent and intelligence» (39) and hopelessly underemployed– lead away from a straightforward representation of the material toll of the crisis. The poor remain, as Andrew Lawson (2013) suggests, stubbornly obfuscated, as if the very idea of poverty and precarity were antithetical to the notion of the «American Dream», a symbolic mandate that the novel keeps at the forefront with its invocation of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. This article examines what is entailed by this kind of representational opacity, whether it can be interpreted as a reflection of a «blind spot» in American culture, as suggested by Lawson and, more broadly, by the work of critics like Gavin Jones (2008), or whether it can be read as Auster's hauntological representation of the American present, which is marked by the spectral presence of what Mark Fisher (2014) has called our «lost futures». Amid new waves of austerity and neoliberal acceleration in the twenty-first century, perfectly described in Fisher's theorization of «capitalist realism» (2009) and exemplified by the very occurrence of the global financial crisis, this article argues that a hauntological reading serves to showcase Auster's accurate representation of the affective dimension of the present in the twenty-first century, haunted by the lost potentialities of the American past.

KEYWORDS: mortgage crisis, Great Recession, (un)housing, precarity, Mark Fisher, hauntology, lost futures, Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden*.

# CASAS QUE DESAPARECEN, SERES AUSENTES: UNA APROXIMACIÓN HAUNTOLÓGICA A *SUNSET PARK*, DE PAUL AUSTER

RESUMEN: «Cada casa es una historia de fracaso» (Auster, 2010b: 4). Así comienza *Sunset Park*, la novela de Paul Auster ambientada en el contexto de la crisis financiera e hipotecaria de 2007-2009 y la primera elección de Barack Obama como presidente de los Estados Unidos. La crítica en general ha observado que si bien *Sunset Park* parece prometer una aproximación al nuevo paisaje de crisis económica y precariedad emergente en los Estados Unidos del siglo veintiuno, el enfoque de la novela

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se mantiene, sin embargo, en el ámbito de lo estético, con personajes cuyas sensibilidades literarias y artísticas –«todos inteligentes y con dotes para lo suyo» (24) e irremediablemente subempleados– se alejan de una representación más realista de la crisis centrada en sus consecuencias materiales. Los pobres permanecen, como sugiere Andrew Lawson (2013), obstinadamente ofuscados, como si la idea misma de pobreza y precariedad fuera antitética a la noción del «sueño americano», un mandato simbólico que la novela mantiene en primer plano con su invocación a *El gran Gatsby* de Fitzgerald. Este artículo se adentra en esta opacidad representacional y trata de dilucidar si ésta puede interpretarse como un «punto ciego» en la cultura estadounidense, como sugiere Lawson y, de modo más amplio, el trabajo de críticos como Gavin Jones (2008), o si puede leerse como una representación hauntológica del presente estadounidense, marcado por la presencia espectral de lo que Mark Fisher (2014) ha denominado nuestros «futuros perdidos». En medio de nuevas oleadas de austeridad y aceleración neoliberal en el siglo veintiuno, perfectamente descritas por Fisher en su teorización del «capitalismo realista» (2009) –y cuya ejemplificación perfecta es la crisis financiera global– este artículo sostiene que una aproximación hauntológica a la novela contribuye a demostrar que Auster logra una representación precisa de la dimensión afectiva, si no material, de un presente atormentado por las potencialidades perdidas del pasado estadounidense.

PALABRAS CLAVE: crisis hipotecaria, crisis financiera global, (des)alojo, precariedad, Mark Fisher, hauntología, futuros perdidos, Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden*.

## INTRODUCTION

In a series of interviews conducted between 2011 and 2013 by I. B. Siegumfeldt and published in 2017 in the volume *A Life in Words,* Paul Auster discusses the centrality of a derelict wooden house in Brooklyn as inspiration for his 2010 novel *Sunset Park*, which revolves around the months that one of its main characters, Miles Heller, spends squatting with three other young persons in the working-class neighborhood of Sunset Park during the winter of 2008. As Auster recounts,

> It was a real place, yes. I roamed around the neighborhood a few times, and one morning I came to a street that runs along the edge of Green-Wood Cemetery, with vacant lots and a partially built house that had clearly been abandoned in mid-construction. The wooden house was on that street. It was boarded up. No one lived there. […] I took about a dozen pictures of the house, and I kept them on my desk while I was writing the book. My descriptions of the house are taken directly from the real thing. After the book was published –in November 2010– National Public Radio wanted to do an interview […] and the journalist suggested that we do it while walking around Sunset Park. I said, «Okay, let's go to the house first». When we arrived, it wasn't there anymore! It had been demolished. My photos were the *only evidence that the house had ever existed* –just as the only traces left of Miles' «abandoned things» are the photos he's taken of them. I felt I had been thrust into the world of my own fiction. Very strange. (Auster, 2017: 287-288; emphasis added)

In this fittingly Austerian turn of events –an author entangled in their own fictional universe–, Auster is signaling one of the most enduring images of the novel, the photographs of the «abandoned things» that the main character obsessively collects as

evidence that people used to inhabit the houses he is «trashing out».[2] In this article I want to follow up on Auster's cue but probe instead into how those «abandoned things» are, in turn, markers of an absent presence, how the objects and photographs figure as «traces» of the vanished people who have been evicted from their homes in the wake of the subprime mortgage crisis of 2008-2009 –when the novel is set. Moreover, these vanished persons seem to have been «evicted», so to speak, from the narrative as well. Therefore, this article proposes a hauntological reading of the novel with the aim of offering possible interpretations for the narrative's seemingly glaring absences.

## THE ABSENT CRISIS

*Sunset Park* opens with Miles Heller, the child of a wealthy and educated middle class from New York, trashing out foreclosed houses in South Florida in the wake of the subprime mortgage crash, his latest occupation in a seven-year stint of low-paid jobs around the country. As Miles reflects, «Each house is a story of failure –of bankruptcy and default, of debt and foreclosure» (Auster, 2010a: 3), for he can read in each one of them how «The absent people have all fled in haste, in shame, in confusion, and it is certain that wherever they are living now (if they have found a place to live and are not camped out in the streets) their new dwellings are smaller than the houses they have lost» (3). Miles is fascinated by the traces of the evicted, who he feels are still somehow present in their discarded things. He has taken to photographing the objects left behind, documenting «the last, lingering traces of those scattered lives» (3): «books, shoes, and oil paintings, pianos and toasters, dolls, tea sets, and dirty socks, televisions and boardgames» (5), «an abandoned teddy bear, a broken bicycle, or a vase of wilted flowers» (14). These seem, for Miles, the tangible proof that those people existed at all. Miles is convinced that «the ghosts of people he will never see and never know are still present in the discarded things strewn about their empty houses» (3), and each time he walks into one of them the objects «are calling out to him, speaking to him in the voices of the people who are no longer there» (5). With great pathos and effect, the opening section of the novel creates a haunting image of «orphaned structures» (4) with their abandoned objects and the spectral presence of the evicted. But, as noted, the latter vanish from the narrative from this point onwards and are only fleetingly mentioned a few times towards the end. Miles' tender obsession with the abandoned things as the only remains of absent lives swiftly turns into an examination of his own past, of the residual memories of a younger Miles and the reasons that have led to his estrangement from his family and a deviation form a well-charted future.

It is my contention, however, that the evicted people will continue to haunt the narrative, either by indirect parallelisms, intertextual references or, precisely, by their obvious and glaring absence. They hover at the edges of a story that is, paradoxically, very specific about its temporal location in November 2008 and the first months of 2009, after Barack Obama has taken office as U.S. President for the first time and a few months after the private banks have been bailed out by the federal government. There is very little doubt about the precise period that *Sunset Park* seeks to evoke; for example, chapter three starts thus: «It is 2008, the second Sunday in November» (31). This odd phrasing immediately recalls Election Day, defined by the United States Code as «the first Tuesday

[2] «Trashing out» is the act of clearing and emptying foreclosed properties before they are appropriated by the banks as a result of their owners failing to meet mortgage payments.

after the first Monday of November» (2 U.S. Code § 7, «Time of election»), which means that it is exactly November 9th and that Obama has been elected five days prior. However, this momentous event in U.S. history –the election of the first Black president–is not explicitly mentioned.[3] I suggest that such precise referentiality as regards calendar dates, while at the same time disavowing the events that occurred in them, makes the omissions so glaring that they become explicit, even if unnamed, reference points. It is in this constant play of presence and absence –or presence-as-absence, following the Derridean notion of «trace»–[4] that the novel seems to offer two levels of narrative setting: what is told and described and what is strongly implied precisely by not being named.

In the interviews with Siegumfeldt, Auster notes that *Sunset Park* is the first time that he set out to write «a book located in the *Now*, with a capital *N*», and that he intended to write a sort of «chronicle of the moment –and what a rough moment it was: the closest thing to the Great Depression we've experienced in my lifetime. […] I had never written a novel […] in the space of the present» (Auster, 2017: 288). Just as with the initial engagement with the evicted people, the opening pages of *Sunset Park* refer to this present as «a collapsing world of economic ruin and relentless, ever-expanding hardship, [in which] trashing out is one of the few thriving businesses» (Auster, 2010a: 4). However, after this first chapter in which one of the worst effects of the mortgage crisis is described –the loss of housing for thousands–, the so-called Great Recession of 2007-2009 is hardly ever taken up again and it is only obliquely referenced. For example, when Miles' father wonders whether his small publishing house will stay afloat and how many employees he would have to let go in the event it didn't. But his business has been insolvent ever since its inception, so this is hardly a new concern. Reviewers have generally agreed that the characters' engagement with the crisis remains cold and detached because it is channeled through their own artistic and literary pursuits (as artists, writers, graduate students), even when the novel is «consciously a credit crunch fiction» (Lawson, 2010: n.p.). Writing for *The Guardian*, Mark Lawson laments that «even when an Auster novel marches into the town square with a placard held high, it tends to keep at least one foot in the study» (Lawson, 2010), a concern shared by many critics.

It is safe to say that the ample and excellent scholarship that exists on Auster's postmodernism, his characteristic technique and themes, and the place these hold within his writing project are enough of a warning against hoping for any sudden turn to a referential type of realism, however straightforward the narrative of *Sunset Park* may claim to be. In fact, scholars like Paolo Simonetti (2011) and Jesús Bolaño Quintero (2021), among others, have argued that Auster's post-9/11 work shows an evident «change of sensibility» (Bolaño Quintero, 2021), in which he has tried to «reconcile postmodernism and realism to escape the narcissistic inward spiral of self-referential fiction» (Simonetti, 2011: 32). But a change in sensibility does not necessarily mean a change in technique, style, and craft. Auster was surely not immune to the re-assessment of postmodernism that followed from the broader dialogues initiated around the 1990s and the concerns raised by the New Sincerity writers, as well as what later came to be

[3] Obama's election is mentioned only once, in passing, when Miles Heller moves to the squat in Sunset Park and engages in chit-chat with his new housemates: «Was he happy when Obama was elected last month?» (Auster, 2010a: 133). This is the only explicit reference to Obama.

[4] To put it briefly, the trace can be understood as a presence that marks an absence, a concrete expression of something that is no longer there: the trace acts as the mediator in what Derrida called a «jeu d'absence et de présence» (Derrida, 1967: 426). In her translation of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1976), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak discusses the trace as erasure, as «the mark of the absence of a presence, an always already absent present» (Spivak, 1997: xvii).

argued as «post-postmodernism», an awareness that postmodern language games and irony were no longer adequate to represent or speak to a reality that was already increasingly mediated by consumerism and digital media. However, as Bolaño shows in the article «Post-postmodern Change of Sensibility in Paul Auster's *Sunset Park*» (2021), the understanding «that there was a mismatch between reality and the way he had been shaping it in his works» (174) and the intensification of the discrepancy in the new cultural and social landscape of the twenty-first century, especially «after the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and the bank bailout, when everything changed yet again» (174), did not mean that Auster would divest from his postmodern technique; in fact, argues Bolaño, «Auster actually intensified it» (3).

Indeed, many of the signature metafictional concerns that have come to characterize Auster's postmodernism –issues of fictionality, authorship, writing, and the creation of the space of fiction, as well as recurring themes and literary references– are also present in *Sunset Park.* And when focusing on spectrality, as this article does, one is bound to acknowledge Auster's usual engagement with «ghosts» throughout his body of work. Among them, that recurring Austerian «ghost» that also features in this novel: vanishing, wanderer characters who suddenly take to the road and disappear and leave everything and everyone behind. Such is the case of Miles, who abandons his father's house without notice and embarks on a self-imposed «exile» of seven years that will come to a close when he returns to New York in the winter of 2008-2009. However, in this article I do not engage with Auster's text from a postmodernist perspective, as this is better left to expert scholars in the field, including the editor of this special issue.[5] My aim is to focus instead on how the novel's alleged lack of engagement with «America's fiscal disintegration» (Lawson, 2010: n.p.) and its victims is anything but. That initial, haunting image of economic duress and material dispossession that is seemingly meant to remain that –spectral yet lingering– is read here as a formal choice that serves to give texture and depth to the novel's engagement with the «Now». Even when it seems mostly concerned with the characters' interior lives –including long disquisitions about baseball, another Austerian classic–, I will argue that the events of the winter of 2008 are more than just a backdrop. At the height of the global financial crisis, their presence is reinforced through traces, absences, and textual parallels, of which Thoreau's *Walden* will be of particular interest.

I propose, then, a hauntological approach to the novel following Mark Fisher's articulation of the Derridean notion of hauntology, as it helps to render meaningful the spectral quality of the very real «Now» that Auster is addressing.[6] While Derrida's hauntology (developed in *Spectres de Marx*, 1993) builds its argument around the «spectres» of the past (ideologies, histories, potentialities) that continue to impress on the present either because they are *no longer* or *not yet*, Fisher's notion of hauntology places emphasis on the present being haunted by what he calls «the lost futures» (Fisher, 2022a). At a time of sociopolitical paradigm shift it is the knowledge that certain expectations and trajectories will never materialize under the current regime of neoliberal austerity –or what Fisher called «capitalist realism»– that haunts and explains the depletion of expectations, the civic and political apathy, and a sense of cultural stasis. I will argue that Auster's novel stages both types of haunting, as Miles Heller is doubly haunted by the

[5] See, for example, María Laura Arce Álvarez (2018), *Paul Auster's Ghosts: The Echoes of European and American Tradition* (Lanham, Boulder, New York and London, Lexington Books).

[6] I want to credit and thank my colleague Katarzyna Paszkiewicz at the Universitat de les Illes Balears for pointing me in the direction of Fisher's work to ground my arguments on spectrality, for which I had a mostly intuitive understanding before our discussion.

optimistic promise of an «American Dream» that is always and already out of reach –the novel's evocation of *The Great Gatsby* serves poignantly this purpose– and by the loss of a future that is both collective and personal (and the latter, to a certain extent, he brings upon himself). The hauntological framework operates both at the level of ideology and form, as the totalizing presence of the «Great Recession» –the global financial crisis as the most explicit symptom of the loss of «the Dream»– is showcased precisely by its apparent disavowal, by its glaring absence. My argument is that Auster's declared first attempt «to chronicle the now» results, despite its obliqueness, in a realistic and accurate representation of the affective mood of the present. A hauntological reading brings into relief the depth of his engagement with the crisis, which figures as the final symptom of a longer process of decline and symbolic death, «the loss of the future» which was already hinted at in previous Auster novels.

## THE PAST THAT HAUNTS THE PRESENT: THE LOSS OF THE FUTURE

In their article «Foreclosure Stories: Neoliberal Suffering in the Great Recession», Andrew Lawson examines a number of documentary and fiction works of the period – Michael Moore's *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009), Paul Reyes' *Exiles in Eden: Life Among the Ruins of Florida's Great Recession* (2010), and Paul Auster's *Sunset Park* (2010)– and suggests that even if these texts attempt to contextualize «the human beings caught in the center of the subprime mortgage storm» (Lawson, 2013: 49), they remain largely obfuscated. For Lawson, this representational opacity responds to an inability or an unwillingness on the part of the wider U.S. culture to engage with the fundamental, structural causes of poverty and socioeconomic precarity. Both limit individual autonomy and the ability to make choices and, importantly, they contradict the deeply-embedded ethos of self-reliance, «social mobility, equality of opportunity, and individualism» at the heart of the «American Dream». To the point that, in Lawson's view, this foundational ethos «make[s] poverty almost unthinkable» (57). Lawson draws largely from the work of Gavin Jones, *American Hungers* (2008), where Jones examines the literary and social representation of poverty in the period 1840-1945. His main argument is that even if poverty, «as a term and a concern, emerges with remarkable frequency in American literature» (Jones, 2008: xiii), it is necessary to re-focus how the broader culture, and literary studies since the 1960s in particular, have dealt with the issue of poverty, so as to «restore it as a category of critical discourse» (xiii). In Jones' view, the focus on the cultural identity of the marginalized, centered around issues such as «race, ethnicity, gender, and (to a lesser extent) class» (xiii), has tended to blur poverty as a material and socioeconomic category defined by «a network of shifting factors such as income level, unemployment, homelessness, hunger, and access to educational and health-care facilities» (17). As a result, he argues, «*poverty* has remained a vaguely descriptive term and not a dynamic category that develops structurally and thematically across textual space» (xiii; emphasis in the original). Moreover, understanding poverty in these terms is fundamentally at odds «with national ideals of freedom, equality, and self-improvement» (26), marking the discrepancy «between ideologies of universal equality and the persistence of unequal socioeconomic barriers» (152) «in a nation that is peculiarly one of tremendous wealth and significant poverty –a nation haunted by widespread hunger and malnutrition, growing socioeconomic inequality, and an increasing institutional abandonment of the chronically disadvantaged» (xvi).

While I'm unwilling to suggest that Auster is somehow unable to «read» these «deeply embedded structures of inequality» (Lawson, 2013: 49) in the United States, the

narrative choice to engage in such representational opacity –especially when one is avowedly «chronicling» the moment– does warrant some examination, as Lawson rightly argues. While for Lawson –following Jones' argument– this is the product of the «blind spot» in U.S. culture as regards the structural and material explanations for poverty and precarity –which favors discursive interpretations centered around a moral or meritocratic dimension, a well-made point–, I argue that it is precisely through the oblique intertwining of the personal and the collective that Auster's novel does keep the magnitude of the crisis and the newly precarious hauntingly in the foreground, as unwitting, apparently invisible, victims of larger historical forces. The wake of the global financial crisis of 2007-2009 is represented affectively, rather than materially, as a strong sense of stunted temporality, or the anticipation of a lost sense of futurity that is embodied by Miles Heller's willful lack of ambition, a terminal present, a dead-end that contrasts with the future-oriented mythology of the United States in historical, cultural, and political terms.

In this sense, Mark Fisher's theorization of twenty-first-century hauntology in «What Is Hauntology?» (2012) and *Ghosts of My Life* (2014) is especially useful. As noted above, Fisher's hauntology builds on Derrida's notion but reinterprets it for the twenty-first century, which he reads as dominated by two key characteristics: first, the experience of an altered temporality –a time famously «out of joint» (already argued, for instance, by Frederic Jameson's «waning of historicity», Peter Boxall's sense of «belatedness» or Lauren Berlant's «impasse», to name but a few); and secondly, by a shared awareness of having «lost the future». This idea, not necessarily original to Fisher, emerges from the long-standing dialogue among cultural critics in Fisher's popular *K-Punk* blog around the year 2006, when cultural critic Simon Reynolds (author of *Retromania*, 2012) unearthed an article from 1994 where he had referred to the times being haunted by «the ghost of future-passed, or past-futurism, or bygone-portent-of-the-now…. something uncanny like that, anyway» (Reynolds, 1994 qtd. in Colquhoun, 2022: xiv-xv). The sort of cultural malaise and spectrality that critics like Fisher and Reynolds were trying to pin down inevitably brought back Derrida's notion of hauntology, but with a twist, as the specters that haunted the present were the promised futures that would not materialize. Fisher had long been tracing the long process of dismantling of the social-democratic state initiated by the government of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s and strengthened by New Labor governments in the 1990s, and its impact on British popular culture. As Fisher later examined in *Capitalist Realism* (2009) the process resulted in conditions of neoliberal austerity, the retraction of the social network, and the loss of a certain horizon of expectations, including those that emerged out of post-war popular modernism. In this context, together with the rise and domination of «digital communicative capitalism», Fisher saw the eruption of a «terminal crisis point» (Fisher, 2022a: 16), an experience of time that is anachronistic. Anachronism is not mere nostalgia or outdatedness, but the experience of time as disjointed, the dislocation that is produced when things fail to sound contemporaneous despite their apparent newness, when they simply don't «fit» (Fisher, 2012: 20).[7] And both Fisher and Reynolds read this as a

[7] A similar sense of disjointed temporality and «cancellation of the future» is examined by Franco «Bifo» Berardi in *After the Future*, published in 2011. By «future» Berardi means not «the direction of time» but «the psychological perception, which emerged in the cultural situation of progressive modernity, the cultural expectations that were fabricated during the long period of modern civilization, reaching a peak after the Second World War. These expectations were shaped in the conceptual frameworks of an ever-progressing development» (Berardi, 2011: 18). Fisher's first chapter in *Ghosts of My Life* takes its cue form

symptom of cultural stasis. Thus, in thinking about hauntology and temporality together, Fisher was giving continuity not only to Derrida's hauntology but also to the work of other key theorists of postmodernism and the twentieth century. Most notably, Jameson's characterization of postmodernism– i.e. «the cultural logic of late capitalism» –by its «inability to find forms adequate to the present, still less to anticipate wholly new futures» (2012: 16). In Fisher's reading, Jameson's argument about postmodernism's loss of futurity was the other side of Francis Fukuyama's thesis about «the end of history», an absolute presentism that anticipated culture retreating into the «nostalgia mode» (Jameson, 1991: 20). A culture unable to produce any true formal innovation and constantly rehashing old forms and tropes in ways that disguise its stagnancy. [8]

In short, Fisher found that giving Derrida's hauntology a «second (un)life» (Fisher, 2012: 16) could help to frame and understand the «crashed present» of the twenty-first century, which he described as haunted by «all the lost futures that the twentieth century taught us to anticipate» (2012: 16). Importantly, Fisher insists on the political impact of this «sense of yearning for a future that we feel cheated out of», which is more than simply an aesthetic problem or a «mere question of atmospherics» (2012: 16). The most important consequence of the «disappearance of the future» is «the deterioration of a whole mode of social imagination: the capacity to conceive of a world radically different from the one in which we currently live» (2012: 16). Consequently, politics gets «reduced to the administration of an already established (capitalist) system» (2012: 16) and democratic participation is demoted to casting a vote every four years or so.[9] As Matt Colquhoun writes in the introduction to *Ghosts of My Life*, new ghosts have come to haunt the third decade of the twenty-first century, for example «the spectres of Occupy, Corbynism, or the more literal dead who give furious power to the Black Lives Matter movement» (Colquhoun, 2022: xxiii), collective attempts (and failures) to escape the fatalistic, apathic, hopeless entropy of capitalist realism. In short, what Fisher's hauntology serves to describe with such affective precision is «the inherently spectral nature of our dreams and utopias, and the impact of capitalist realism on their degradation, which, despite its claims to the contrary, is never absolute» (Colquhoun, 2022: xxviii).

Turning to *Sunset Park*, a hauntological reading of the novel in this sense –as the loss of the future– suggests the final demise of the pre-9/11 world, «the end of the American Century» (Šesnić 2014) understood as a world of American hegemony in which the future is still possible, boundless. This was already anticipated by Auster in earlier works: if the two novels that immediately precede *Sunset Park* –*Man in the Dark* (2008)

Berardi and explores how, in the twenty-first century, the «slow cancellation of the future» is now accompanied by «a deflation of expectations» and by «a feeling of belatedness, of living after the gold rush [which] is as omnipresent as it is disavowed» (Fisher, 2022b: 8).

[8] Fisher devoted most of his writings to the analysis of contemporary culture, especially music, television and film, which he read as haunted by lost potentialities. As an example of how hauntology impacts culture, Fisher offers the case of electronic music, which sounded «futuristic» in the 1990s but can no longer deliver that same sense of «the future» in 2005, largely because music, and culture more broadly, has become hauntological, «tangled in entropic cycles of recycling and reenactment, resulting in a kind of frenzied stagnation» that is disguised as newness (Fisher, 2022b: 238). Importantly, this creates «a kind of prolapse of temporality, resulting in that paradoxical combination of standstill and franticity that is the hallmark of digital phenomenology» (Fisher, 2022b: 239).

[9] This is examined in detail in *Capitalist Realism: Is there No Alternative?* published in 2009, which talks to a moment characterized by «reflexive impotence» (Fisher, 2022a: 21), the awareness that nothing can be done. This impotence is reflected in culture by, for example, what Fisher describes as hauntological music.

and *Invisible* (2009)– were Auster's efforts to imagine an alternative (though not necessarily better-off) United States, one that has not experienced 9/11 and the War in Iraq; and if the onset of the «beginning of the end» was strongly suggested in the ominous, proleptic final image of the flying planes at the end of *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005), *Sunset Park*, with its fitting title, is the very closing of that era.[10] A pre-9/11 world that Auster's post-9/11 body of work (and especially *The Brooklyn Follies*) presents in hindsight as –however flawed, however challenging– still future-oriented, still pushing forward with the belief in the possibility of its own redemption. The narrator of *The Brooklyn Follies*, Nathan Glass, begins the novel looking for «a quiet place to die» (Auster, 2005: 1), i.e. to commit suicide, but ends it reinvigorated by a new purpose in life, a literary project to preserve the stories of «vanished lives», «to rescue the stories and facts and documents before they disappeared –and shape them into a continuous narrative, the narrative of a life» (301). This, of course, remains in question as the final image anticipates the «smoke of three thousand incinerated bodies» (304) drifting towards Brooklyn on 9/11. In many ways, Miles Heller encounters the same problem as Nathan Glass –the discarded and messy remains people leave behind, «A few objects, a few documents, and a smattering of impressions made on other people» (Auster, 2005: 301)– and how to make them cohere into a life narrative, how to turn traces and remains into tangible, full-bodied humanity.[11] I am tempted to suggest that, perhaps, this is an additional reason for the evicted to remain invisible, because to cohere them into full-bodied human beings would entail that Miles Heller, as main focalizer, would not only abandon solipsism but would arrive at a type of understanding that seems beyond his capacity, his hands full with, first, trying to make sense of his own self.

*Sunset Park* directly engages with this period that will come to a close –a time range stretching from the American Renaissance of the nineteenth century to the last decades of the twentieth– through implicit and explicit intertextual references. In particular, Henry David Thoreau's essay *Walden* (1854), F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925),[12] William Wyler's film *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), and Samuel Beckett's play *Happy Days* (first performed 1961), among many other works, including Auster's own. What is worth noting about these explicit references is that, in their articulation of core American myths –such as self-reliance, the self-made man,

[10] Paolo Simonetti argues that *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2006) and *Man in the Dark* (2008), together with *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005), could be considered Auster's second «trilogy about contemporary America» (Simonetti, 2011: 14). Also, there are many thematic, temporal, and narrative connections between *The Brooklyn Follies* and *Sunset Park*, but among the most interesting, in my view, is the suggestion that the beginning of Miles' «exile» of seven years roughly coincides with the final section of *The Brooklyn Follies*, a few months before the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in 2001. For a full account of these connections, see Bolaño Quintero, 2021, pp. 173-178.

[11] This is one of the issues that will obsess Bing Nathan: «*Tangibility.* That is the word he uses most often when discussing his ideas with his friends. The world is tangible, he says. Human beings are tangible. They are endowed with bodies, and because those bodies feel pain and suffer from disease and undergo death, human life has not altered by a single jot since the beginning of mankind» (Auster, 2010a: 73).

[12] In line with what I have described as the hauntological play of presence-as-absence that characterizes Auster's text, it is also worth noting that some of these texts pervade the narrative simply by being mentioned. For instance, *The Great Gatsby* is mentioned only twice and fleetingly, yet it remains ominously and forcefully at the forefront as symbol of everything that will be lost, most notably, the optimistic drive to continue pushing forward, Gatsby's «green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter –tomorrow we will run faster, stretch our arms farther…. » (Fitzgerald, 1994: 188).

American exceptionalism and optimism– they also carry implicit the very critique that can deconstruct them. For example, Gatsby's unreachable «green light» will always remain so, or the deeply ironic title of Wyler's film, because the returning veterans will never recover the «best years of their lives» that they spent fighting abroad, and will struggle to re-adapt to a newly-changed postwar society.[13] Or the «happy days» that the character of Winnie cheerfully rememorates as she is stuck to the waist and then to her neck in Beckett's play. It is important to note also that the narrative voice of *Sunset Park*, through shifting focalizations, is not compromised by any of these narratives; rather, it is precisely through focalization (for example, Miles' defeatist and nostalgic outlook, or Morris Heller's undying optimism) that the past is sensed as a bygone era of possibility that cannot be retrieved. The future which Miles has given up and then rebuilt vicariously through the figure of his young partner Pilar –it is *her* dreams and *her* ambition that will fuel any desire for the future that Miles may have– is lost in the final scene through an act of civil disobedience followed by Miles fleeing again, abandoning his fellow squatters in the process and in a fit of hopeless and defeatist lamentation:

> he wonders if it is worth hoping for a future when there is no future, and from now on, he tells himself, he will stop hoping for anything and live only for now, this moment, this passing moment, the now that is here and then not here, the now that is gone forever. (Auster, 2010a: 308)

## THE HOUSE AS THE «ARCHITECTURE OF ANACHRONISM»

In thinking about a hauntological interpretation of the novel it is also worth pausing on the wooden house in which Miles Heller and his friends squat, if it is as central to the story as Auster claims. If *Sunset Park* is Auster's first attempt to «chronicle the now» –the worst period of the crisis of 2007-2009, with thousands of evictions taking place every day– it is interesting to think about how this very peculiar house contributes –plot-wise, formally, ideologically– to the telling of that story. The house is described differently by each of the characters, but every account stresses its anachronistic quality. While Bing Nathan (the «leader» of the squatters) describes it as «a dopey little two-story wooden house with a roofed-over front porch, looking for all the world like something that had been stolen from a farm on the Minnesota prairie and plunked down by accident in the middle of New York» (Auster, 2010a: 80-81), Miles sees it as «merely a shack, a forlorn piece of architectural stupidity that would not fit in anywhere, neither in New York nor out of it» (124-125). The house is a perfect example of what Fisher calls «the architecture of anachronism» (Fisher, 2012: 20), spaces or structures that appear out of time and out of place in their immediate surroundings, that no longer «fit» in their contemporary context (cultural, political, economic, or otherwise) but that persist physically. What these structures produce is an effect of temporal dislocation, by their hauntological residue that evokes, in this case, lost futures and unfinished projects.

One project in particular is strongly evoked by the wooden house in Sunset Park. The fact that it is abandoned and taken over by squatters, together with its isolated location in front of a cemetery, «between a trash-filled vacant lot with a stripped-down car in it and the metal bones of a half-built mini-apartment building on which construction had stopped more than a year ago» (Auster, 2010a: 81), speaks volumes. But the most

[13] For an analysis of the film in relation to *Sunset Park*, see Šesnić (2014), pp. 63-64.

obvious association is the wooden cabin in *Walden* (1854),[14] not only given the recurrence of Henry David Thoreau in Auster's work but also by the explicit parallels established between Miles, Bing Nathan, and Thoreau. Miles is the same age as Thoreau when he goes to live in Walden Pond (twenty-eight years old), he imposes on himself a similar discipline of material divestment, and he is equally focused on the present. Bing Nathan's ruminations about the state of the country have strong resonances with Thoreau's «Resistance to Civil Government» (1849), with many of his ideas «directly extracted» from it (Bolaño Quintero, 2021: 178). Bing is first introduced in the novel as «the warrior of outrage, the champion of discontent, the militant debunker of contemporary life who dreams of forging a new reality from the ruins of a failed world»; but «unlike most contrarians of his ilk, he does not believe in political action» (Auster, 2010a: 71). It soon becomes clear that the parallel is a flawed one, as neither Miles nor Bing will possess «the speculative energy that pushed the transcendentalist forward» (Bolaño Quintero, 2021: 176). As Bolaño suggests, theirs is a «misunderstood» (177), «distorted» (178) and «unattainable» (181) transcendentalism which can get them nowhere near self-knowledge or a liberating spiritual truth. While for Bolaño it is Miles' «way of dwelling in an eternal present [that] paralyzes everything, creating a reality without a future» (177), I am suggesting that Miles' present may already be embedded with a lack of futurity, with negativity and a «reflexive impotence» (Fisher, 2022a: 21) that makes the transcendentalist project impossible to apply.

Bolaño also provides useful insight into why Miles' and Bing's transcendentalism is unattainable in the twenty-first century; essentially, because of the different conceptions of time as either dynamic or static. For Emerson, Thoreau, and the transcendentalists the present was dynamic. They acknowledged that even if, phenomenologically, the present is the only time that can be said to exist, it is always becoming the past in its movement towards the future; hence the past and the future can be understood as «part of a succession of presents» that have slipped by (Bolaño Quintero, 2021: 179). It is this dynamic understanding of time that Thoreau describes so beautifully in the much-quoted line from *Walden* where he expresses a desire to be present in the fleeting moment of the present: «I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line» (Thoreau, 1986: 59). Note how different it sounds from Miles' «now that is gone forever». In contrast, and as Bolaño suggests, in a postmodernist understanding of time «the present means the absence of past and future» (Bolaño Quintero, 2021: 179), a more static temporality or what critics of postmodernism like Jameson and David Harvey theorized as «presentism», the compression of space-time into immediacy, fragmentation, and the absence of past and future trajectories.[15] Intensified in the twenty-first century by the «loss of the future» and its embedded pessimism, as Fisher and Berardi argue, it becomes very difficult for Miles and Bing to translate their misunderstood transcendentalism into effective action, as the possibility of imagining an alternative to the present seems already foreclosed.

[14] Subsequent lines stress the isolation of the house (reinforcing the parallel with Thoreau's retreat in the woods): «The cemetery was directly across [….] the abandoned house was all but invisible since it was a house on a block where almost no one lived» (Auster, 2010a: 81).

[15] I'm referring here to classic works like David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989) and Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991).

If Thoreau insisted that «we cannot afford not to live in the present» (Thoreau, 1862: 673),[16] Bing is equally focused on the present but only because «He takes it for granted that the future is a lost cause» (Auster, 2010a: 72). If «America» was the future, Bing has stopped believing in it; for him «the concept known as *America* has played itself out» and «the country is no longer a workable proposition» (72; italics in the original). He believes that the present must be «imbued with the spirit of the past» (72) and spends his days repairing vintage objects at the Hospital for Broken Things, «a hole-in-the-wall storefront enterprise devoted to repairing objects from an era that has all but vanished from the face of the earth: manual typewriters, fountain pens, mechanical watches, vacuum-tube radios, record players, wind-up toys, gumball machines, and rotary telephones» (73). Bing «refuses to participate in new technologies» (72) and it is only out of a desire to keep the Hospital for Broken Things open –after being demanded a rent increase– that he decides to move to the squat, so that he can meet the landlord's ultimatum, not out of any revolutionary desire for change. Again, we can see here how the notions of temporality are so divergent that any parallel with Thoreau is superficial, performative, nostalgic.

In the case of Miles, the parallel with Thoreau is also strongly suggested, not just by his age but by the very circumstances that find him in Sunset Park. Miles lives austerely and has divested himself «from the trappings of his once-privileged life» (Auster, 2010a: 11) –dropping out of an Ivy-League school and rotating menial jobs around the country for seven years– but this «imperative reduction of needs» (Bolaño Quintero, 2021: 181) seems not motivated by a desire for aesthetic clarity and a true knowledge of life but as a form of self-inflicted punishment, stricken as he is by guilt after accidentally causing the death of his step-brother. Miles is determined to keep perfecting «this ability to live in the present» (Auster, 2010a: 6), «to have no longings or hopes, to be satisfied with your lot, to accept what the world doles out to you from one sunrise to the next» (6). The only possessions he indulges in are his camera and books; he doesn't want «things, but the pictures of things» (6), and has «pared down his desires to what is now approaching a bare minimum» (6). Miles' Spartan living –which for Thoreau meant getting rid of material encumbrances that posed impediments to a full life– also carries with it an aloofness, an inaccessibility in the way that Miles exists in the world that also signals both presence and absence, a being there without being fully there –exactly the opposite that Thoreau expresses in his desire «to live deliberately», «to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life» (Thoreau, 1986: 135). Miles is a ghost, so to speak, and their living unnoticed, almost invisible, in front of Green-Wood cemetery makes the association even more obvious. Deprived of the abandoned objects he obsessively photographed in South Florida, now Miles takes to photographing graveyards, «pictures of the tombs of gangsters and poets, generals and industrialists, murder victims and newspaper publishers, children dead before their time, a woman who lived seventeen years beyond her hundredth birthday, and Theodore Roosevelt's wife and mother, who were buried next to each other on the same day» (Auster, 2010a: 135). Next, the narrator lists several personalities buried in Green-Wood cemetery, including

[16] Thoreau continues: «He is blessed over all mortals who loses no moment of the passing life in remembering the past. Unless our philosophy hears the cock crow in every barn-yard within our horizon, it is belated. That sound commonly reminds us that we are growing rusty and antique in our employments and habits of thought» (Thoreau, 1862: 673). I will come back to the importance of the dawn for Thoreau in the conclusion to this article.

> John Steinbeck, Woody Guthrie, Edward R. Murrow, Eubie Blake, and how many more, both known and unknown, how many more souls have been transformed into smoke in this eerie, beautiful place? He has embarked on another useless project, employing his camera as an instrument to record his stray, useless thoughts, but at least it is something to do, a way to pass the time until his life starts again… (Auster, 2010a: 135-136)

With life stuck in the impasse, Miles' disappearance into the past of American history and even his «assimilation» to ghosts (Bolaño Quintero, 2021: 181) is here complete. The uselessness of his dead-end project, his inability to project onto a future, becomes even stronger against the counterpoints that the novel offers, especially the figure of Pilar, the vibrant and talented teenager full of promise that Miles meets in a park while they are both reading *The Great Gatsby* –and perhaps his obsessive investment in *her* future, his being «ambitious for her» (Auster, 2010a: 11), betrays how dire and untenable his absolute presentism is. There is also Miles' own father, Morris Heller who, unlike Miles, can always see the future as sorting itself out and remains an optimist even in the face of adversity. But these contrasts only serve to highlight Miles' and Bing's lack of any forward-looking, hopeful energy.

If one of «the most widely realized» (Cullen, 2004: 9) iterations of the «American Dream» is the dream of homeownership, and the wooden house in Sunset Park is effectively an anachronism that carries the hauntological and ideological rubble of another era, then the eviction of Miles Heller, Bing Nathan, and their fellow squatters at the end of the novel assumes ontological proportions. It is not only an unhousing from an «American Dream» that is no longer functional –the dynamic sense of futurity lost, the uncertainty of upward mobility, material success, and unrestrained possibility– but it also points at their inability to come up with any alternatives, to dream, to their being stuck in what I have been calling a terminal present. There is no collective agency that can actually realize the promise of alternative communities –can the squat in Sunset Park even be compared to the transcendentalists' communal projects? Their squatting experiment remains tenuous and ineffective at best. After being evicted by the police –in which Miles punches an officer, in a self-righteous gesture of civil disobedience– and flees to the cemetery (where else?), shockingly abandoning fellow squatters Alice and Bing in the process, Miles laments that «they are all homeless now» just as «the people of Florida who lived in the houses he trashed out are homeless» (Auster, 2010a: 307).

## THE RETURN OF THE EVICTED AND THOREAU'S «RUIN PIECE» IN *WALDEN*

At this point in the narrative, the unexpected and sudden reappearance of the vanished people of the beginning sits somewhat uncomfortably, as Miles seems to equate his newfound homelessness with that caused by the wave of evictions at the height of the foreclosure crisis. Critics like Andrew Lawson have argued that the novel seems to blur the distinctions between economic vulnerability, the working class (symbolized by Pilar's immigrant family) and an encroaching sense of precariousness for a liberal-minded middle class, perhaps a nod to the «cognitariat» (Berardi, 2005) who are represented in the intellectual and artistic pursuits of the four squatters (who are graduate students, artists, musicians, writers, and university lecturers living precariously). While Lawson reads in this «an ideological blockage» that keeps the poor and the working class «in the twilight zone of half-knowledge», «seen and unseen, known and unknown, euphemistically named and not named» (Lawson, 2013: 62) –mere «harbingers of a dimly intuited and deeply feared future» (62)–, I have been arguing that it is precisely by their

conspicuous absence that the evicted make their presence felt, haunting the narrative and providing cues to those who will soon be evicted as well.

The return of the evicted suggests yet another parallel with Thoreau's *Walden*, in particular the short chapter «Former Inhabitants; and Winter Visitors», in which Thoreau, to keep himself company during the solitary winter months, feels «obliged to conjure up the former occupants of these woods» (Thoreau, 1986: 303). The evocation of the former inhabitants is not, as Michael Jonik notes in «Thoreau's Unhoused», exclusive to this chapter, for «even in Thoreau's own house there is the haunting presence of the silent poor» (Jonik, 2022: 178); namely, a family of Irish immigrants –the Collins– from whom he buys the cabin and who are displaced in the process. «Collins and his family become living ghosts in Thoreau's house, and their presence as absence is as if installed into the very materials of the house» (178), never too far in the background in a text whose work is, according to Jonik, «to unearth and make visible invisible lives and invisible memories» (179). His transcendentalist project involves «precise, careful observation» (182) of nature, of his surroundings, and of his own self, and while this might resonate with Miles' own trajectory, I will argue that they are fundamentally at odds.

In this particular chapter, the former inhabitants are made present in the text through local memories and stories, including those of enslaved or fugitive African Americans, a tragic Irishman, the village drunk, the potter, a number of local families, and also the Native Americans who used to inhabit the area around Walden Pond before being forced out by the arrival of the whites, who establish the now-ruined village. Reflecting on «How little does the memory of these human inhabitants enhance the beauty of the landscape» (Thoreau, 1986: 311), their traces almost vanished and taken over by nature (or by history), Thoreau is still alert to their lingering presence in the wells they dug and the perennial lilacs they planted, which keep blooming among the ruins. A sort of «archivist of his neighbors' forgotten memories», Thoreau collects «mementos of invisible presences» and brings them back to life by «letting their memories and mythologies germinate anew in the semi-wild garden of his text» (Jonik, 2022: 179).

Additionally, critics have read the first section of «Former Inhabitants» as Thoreau's «ruin piece», arguing that it is written following «the convention of romantic pastoralism» and is indebted to «the 'graveyard' tradition in English and American poetry» (Arner, 1972: 14).[17] As such, the section exploits «Gothic elements commonly associated with ruined architecture» (14), haunted sites, local legends, and the association of «ruined dwellings with ghosts» (14). Certain areas of the woods are evoked as eerie, and Thoreau even ponders about establishing oneself on «the site of an ancient city, whose materials are ruins, whose gardens cemeteries», whose «soil is blanched and accursed» (Thoreau, 1986: 311). Critics have noted how the section's gloomy mood is uncharacteristic in a text that is, otherwise, so upbeat and optimistic (Arner, 1972; Carlet, 2017). For Robert D. Arner, the chapter serves to contrast and anticipate the resurrection of the natural world that will occur in the chapter «Spring» and in the «Conclusion» (Arner, 1972: 14), and the fact «that earlier settlers in Walden Woods have vanished and left scarcely a wrack behind» (15) has no bearing on the probability of Thoreau's experiment succeeding. For Yves Carlet, on the contrary, these darker passages, with all their references to night creatures, spectres, lethargy, disease, decay, and death –however swiftly downplayed by Thoreau's humor– serve to «undermine» or at least «open to question» the «very obviousness» of *Walden*'s optimism (Carlet, 2017: n.p.). Carlet points to the presence of «a network of underground metaphors which introduce a number

[17] Itself part of the long tradition of «ruin literature» dating back to Old English (Arner, 1972: 14).

of disturbing interferences into the text, from slumber, choking or infectiousness to decay and death, and are deliberately concealed by humor or the grotesque» (Carlet, 2017), passages in which Thoreau paints himself as running out of breath, or fearing being buried alive, or the recurrent parallelisms between sleep and death, in contrast to the recurring theme of the dawn and being awake. These dark references serve, in Carlet's reading, to underscore Thoreau's concern about the trajectory of the United States, threatened by opulence, slavish materialism, advancing technology, the miserable working conditions of expanding industrialization and, still unresolved, the scourge of enslavement. As I noted at the beginning, each of the myths that *Sunset Park* evokes in the form of classic texts carries within their own potential disavowal, an underside that calls into question the fossilized optimistic myth, if we care to read it. In this sense, «Former Inhabitants» points at the ambiguity existing in *Walden*, where Walden Pond can be the site of rebirth and awakening to life, of withdrawal from an American life that is marching towards spiritual death, but only after the erasure and expulsion of former inhabitants, of enslaved Blacks and Native Americans.

Critics have noted the significance of «sunset» in the title of *Sunset Park*, which can certainly be read as a metaphor of decline and fall (Lawson, 2010), suggestive of the «end of the American century» (Šesnić, 2014). But when reading *Sunset Park* together with *Walden*, «sunset» further stresses the obvious irreconcilability between the characters and moment that Auster is narrating and Thoreau's transcendentalist philosophy. *Walden* abounds with references to the «dawn» as symbol of being «awake» to life and to the future. In contrast, the final scene of Auster's novel shows a defeated Miles travelling across the Brooklyn Bridge, where the evocation of the evicted persons of the beginning and their shared homelessness is merged with a «ruin piece» of sorts, as Miles

> thinks about the missing buildings, the collapsed and burning buildings that no longer exist, the missing buildings and the missing hands, and he wonders if it is worth hoping for a future when there is no future… (Auster, 2010a: 307-308)

Unlike Thoreau, whose «careful, forensic vision of the architectures of the disappeared» of Walden Woods (Jonik, 2022: 182) is aimed at learning how «to dwell with those who are not there, or who were once there, but are no longer» (Jonik, 2022: 188), Miles' melancholic remembrance of 9/11, of the vanished buildings, of the missing body parts, recasts his collection of images of graves and abandoned objects as futile compulsion. The final image of the novel redefines the meaning of «homelessness» as a metaphysical void, as «the place of nothingness» (Siegumfeldt in Auster, 2017: 302) that is also a recurring theme in Auster. There is a need to record, to document and to preserve –another common theme– when trying to represent an absence, a void. The photographs of the scattered things –which some have also read as the dregs of American consumerism– is recast here as an effort to keep an inventory, a sort of catalogue of what is gone, spurred by the «nothingness» of Miles' future.

If this is Auster's «chronicle of the moment», of the worst periods of the Great Recession, the haunting image of the vanished people endures, and returns, as intimations of an encroaching landscape of socioeconomic hardship that suggest the end of an era. A change of paradigm that certifies the extension of precarity for an ever-expanding group of people, including Miles' own. Rather than a blind spot, what Auster demonstrates in *Sunset Park* is a fine-tuned sensibility to read the affective condition of the «Now», even amidst the «optimistic» and hopeful event of Barack Obama's election (which ran,

precisely, on much-needed hope). In other words, *Sunset Park*, through its focalization on Miles Heller's interiority, his attempted removal into the American past, and the oblique, hauntological representation of the tangible effects of the global financial crisis, draws a mournful picture of what Fisher called «the crashed present, littered with the ideological rubble of failed projects» (Fisher, 2010), especially for the younger generations. The Great Recession, and the subsequent imposition of austerity measures –especially in Europe– would be followed by the brief interlude of the Occupy Movement, of Greece's Syriza, of Spain's Los Indignados and the 15-M movement, of the Arab Spring…. But these windows of opportunity would soon fizzle out and return us to the crashed present, but with a vengeance.

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