A Queer Domestic Space As an Alternative to the (Re)Productive. Herman Melville’s “Jimmy Rose”

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A Queer Domestic Space As an Alternative to the (Re)Productive. Herman Melville’s “Jimmy Rose”

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I bethink me of those undying roses which bloomed in ruined Jimmy's cheeks. Transplanted to another soil, all the unkind past forgot, God grant that Jimmy's roses may immortally survive!

Herman Melville, “Jimmy Rose”

Melville, to be sure, has us essay the possibilities of a new planetary organization, of a new world of blissful nobodies.

Michael Jonik, Herman Melville and the Politics of the Inhuman

American literature has provided a number of fascinating explorations of the relationship between the spaces where humans live and the lives they live in them. In her seminal volume Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction, published in 1991, Marilyn R. Chandler defined the house in American fiction as “a unifying symbolic structure that represents and defines the relationships of the central characters to one another, to themselves, and to the world” (1). Already in 1854, Henry David Thoreau wrote in Walden that “Most men appear never to have considered what a house is” (225). Like Thoreau, many other renowned American writers have considered what houses are and, particularly, what houses do, and they have created fictional dwellings that function not only as settings, but also as actual central characters in their works. Some of these writers constitute the core of the canon of American letters: Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, William Faulkner, Willa Cather, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Toni Morrison, and Sandra Cisneros, to name but just a few. Their writings reflect again and again the centrality of the house in the American literary imagination.

One of the authors who dives deeper into the question of the relationship between the American domestic space and the American self is Herman Melville who, in spite of being mostly celebrated for his work on life at sea, has provided some of the most fascinating examinations of American houses. In this essay I argue that a number of
Melville’s works address questions such as: what are the ideological valences of cohabitation in the domestic space in terms of family, lifestyle, gender, and sexuality? How are those valences actually determined by the space itself? What is the relationship between the house a subject inhabits and the past—both the historical past of the house and the personal past of the subject? And: is the domestic space an actor in a larger social system of production, reproduction, and transmission of conservative ideology or a site of potential resistance to it? Readers familiar with Melville’s vignette “Rip Van Winkle’s Lilac” (1924)—and Rip’s observation of his own now abandoned ruinous house—Israel Potter (1855)—and its eulogic depiction of Potter’s return to visit his family home, now reduced to a little heap of ruinous burnt masonry, at the end of the novel—and/or with Pierre; or, The Ambiguities (1852)—about the inextricable connection between the “house” (building) of the Glendinnings and the “house of” (lineage) Glendinning—know how rich and complex the meanings of the domestic space in the psyche of the characters in Melville’s texts really are.

It is my contention, however, that the literary works where Melville fully engaged with the questions of the relationship between dwellings and their inhabitants are his short stories. In them Melville invites readers to reconsider our understanding of the kind of sociabilities that we contemplate as possible both within and from the domestic space.

In “The Piazza” (1856), for instance, the narrator inhabits a house which is simultaneously the object of speculation of his distant female neighbor, Marianna, and the space from which (after a meeting in which both characters refuse to offer an account of themselves and to elicit one from the other) the narrator will continue to look toward Marianna’s house, “haunted by Marianna’s face, and many as real a story” (12). The narrator’s piazza—an architectural space which both opens to the public arena (the political) and shelters the dweller in the private sphere—is, therefore, both a domestic and a mental space from which a character who could have opened up to the other ends up not doing so. The actual opening of the house in the form of a piazza does not, in this case, lead to the narrator’s openness in exposure, vulnerability and potential cohabitation. Instead, it grants him the solipsism and fake security of the domestic. “The Piazza” makes us wonder, therefore, if we are able to contemplate the neighbor as somebody with whom we have, whether we want it or not, a set of ethical obligations that come with cohabiting in a neighborhood or whether the neighbor is a radical Other who lives beyond the reach of the political self.

“I and My Chimney” (1856) is the story of a huge chimney which occupies the central room of a rural house. Whereas the narrator’s wife and daughters want to have the chimney removed so as to gain space and increase the value of the house, the narrator objects to having it torn down, as he especially values the centripetal orientation that the presence of the chimney generates among its dwellers. Without the chimney, that domestic orientation would be centrifugal, toward the little chimneys that would be built in the peripheral rooms. Removing the chimney would also imply transforming the layout of the house, which is now labyrinthic and forces the residents and the workers in it to run into each other, interact, and become interested in one another. Rather than as an expression of the narrator’s stubbornness, I read the defense of the chimney as a gesture of resistance to the architectural layout and, most importantly, to the social and political values of the incipient bourgeois middle-class family of the mid-19th century.
In “The Apple-Tree Table; or, Original Spiritual Manifestations” (1856), the narrator moves into a house, finds a key in the garden, finds out that it is the key to the attic, and decides to explore that attic for the first time. Among the objects he discovers in it there is a table which he finds interesting and brings down to the parlor. To the household’s shock and increasing terror, the narrator, his wife, their daughters, and the maid start hearing strange noises coming from the table, until a worm and, two days later, another worm emerge from the wood, two events which make the family members disperse away from the center of the house. This emergence of the worms mirrors the events that had just happened in the narrator’s visit to the attic, where he tried to emerge from it through a tiny window as he felt suffocated in the stale air of the closed space. As in the previous story, “The Apple-Tree Table” suggests that the unexpected exposure to objects that belonged to past owners or occupants of the house can trigger a rearrangement of domestic orientations and dispositions. In these stories, exposure to architectural elements or to objects that act as reminders of a past dweller of the house lead the current inhabitants to interrogate themselves about what they are opened to, both in terms of affects and of affections. In Melville, alternative domestic genealogies that are not biological enable retroactive intergenerational bonds and other types of relationality that challenge what is given (in terms of the temporal, the biological, the spatial, and the relational). These interactions between the house’s present and its past generate the mental and the affective space for new possibilities, new affiliations, new relationalities beyond the familial and the normative.

After this brief journey through a sample of Melville’s stories of the domestic, this essay turns to “Jimmy Rose,” another story by Melville which, like the last two stories just mentioned—and, I would dare to say, even more poignantly so—explores the affective valences of the relationship between the current and the former inhabitant of an American house.

The Story

First published anonymously in Harper’s New Monthly Magazine on 1 November 1855, “Jimmy Rose” is the story, narrated in the first person, of a man named William Ford who has recently and unexpectedly inherited a house in New York, has moved into it with his family, and is resisting his wife’s and his daughters’ initiatives to redecorate. His wife and daughters want, among other things, the removal of the parlor’s wallpaper, which features peacocks and roses. There has been a leak in that part of the house and the humidity has made the peacocks look saggy, as if they had lost their plumage. The narrator, however, opposes that alteration, for the roses in the wallpaper remind him of the rosy cheeks in the face of the late Jimmy Rose, a former owner of the house. Jimmy Rose had been a sophisticated, gregarious, and incredibly generous man who had famously entertained friends and acquaintances with wonderful parties and abundant and excellent food and wine. However, an economic crisis and the wreck of two of his ships bankrupted him overnight. His friends and acquaintances immediately turned their backs on him in his new and sudden poverty. For the rest of his life, a literally starving Jimmy Rose had no choice but to visit those very friends and acquaintances around tea time to feed himself on the tea served at their social gatherings. Jimmy’s humiliation consists in having to depend on “the daily dole of charity; charity not sent to him, either, but charity for which he had to trudge round to
their doors” (342). What the narrator admires in Jimmy Rose is his constant gentleness. In spite of his having become an obvious social failure, the roses in Jimmy’s cheeks continued to bloom and to match the vivacity of his perpetual smiles, of his kindness, and of his “gentle, peaceable heart” (343) until the moment of his death. “Ah, poor, poor Jimmy—God guard us all—poor Jimmy Rose!” the narrator laments to himself (342).

In the following pages I will analyze this story in relation to Melville’s memories of a particular house, “Broadhall,” in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and of the man who had formerly inhabited the house, Melville’s uncle Thomas Melvill. This house was especially near and dear to Melville, not only emotionally but also physically, while he was writing “Jimmy Rose.” Four years earlier, in October 1850, the writer had moved his family to “Arrowhead,” a farm adjacent to Broadhall where the Melvilles would reside until 1863.

I am particularly interested in the fact that, in his fictionalization of his personal memories of Broadhall, Melville transforms the figure of his uncle, a Major, a prominent, married man and the father of fourteen children, into the figure of Jimmy Rose, an unproductive, un(re)productive man who is considered by his former friends and acquaintances as a social failure. My question when analyzing this story is: why did Melville’s gesture of familial “filiation” to this uncle’s house in real life become fictionalized as a gesture of “affiliation” to the figure of a subject that I will be defining as queer?

The House

In this old house of mine, so strangely spared, some monument of departed days survived.
Herman Melville, “Jimmy Rose”
So much of real elegance still lingered in their shapes.
Herman Melville, “Jimmy Rose”

In his 1957 article “The Ghost of Major Melvill,” Merton M. Sealts argued that, in spite of the fact that the house in “Jimmy Rose” is located in lower Manhattan, the most important elements in that fictional urban domestic space were modeled after Broadhall, a real old farmhouse located in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, that had belonged to Melville’s uncle, Major Thomas Melvill, who had died in 1845:

the same old farmhouse in Pittsfield [...] provided the setting for the introductory section of “Hawthorne and His Mosses” (1850), parts of Pierre (1852), and at least one of his short stories, the little-noticed “Jimmy Rose” (1855). Though in this sketch the “great old house” described in the opening paragraphs is given an urban rather than a rural setting, its identity with Broadhall, as the house was then known, is unmistakable. (Sealts 297)

Among the many architectural and decorative elements that featured in both Broadhall and the fictional house, such as the carved wood-work and the solid oaken timbers, Sealts highlights the design adorning the largest parlor in the house and, in particular, the wallpaper, which in the short story is described as

of great diamond lozenges, divided by massive festoons of roses (onions, Biddy the girl said they were, but my wife soon changed Biddy’s mind on that head), and in those lozenges, one and all, as in an overarborized garden-cage, sat a grand series of gorgeous illustrations of the natural history of the most imposing Parisian-looking birds; parrots, macaws, and peacocks, but mostly peacocks. (337)
13 Bearing in mind the connection between this decorative element in both the literary and the actual house, I propose to read “Jimmy Rose” as a fictionalized account of Melville’s reminiscences of the house that Melville associated with fond memories of his uncle. Melville’s relationship to Broadhall, I argue, can be interpreted as an illustration of anthropologist Paulina Garvey’s thesis that “the home is an intersubjective space, a catalogue of memories of emotions” (51). In fact, in those cases when we mentally or physically revisit the house of a beloved person who has died, the house may even become, as Lévi-Strauss argued, the “objectification of a relationship” (195).

14 In the short story, one specific room of the house is, as we have seen, particularly connected for the narrator with the memory of Jimmy Rose, and this is the reason why Ford will “permit no violation of the old parlor of the peacocks or room of roses (I call it by both names) on account of its long association in my mind with one of the original proprietors of the mansion—the gentle Jimmy Rose. Poor Jimmy Rose!” (338). In Melville’s tale, the parlor interestingly contradicts its etymological meaning, which was a place for speaking (parler), and becomes instead one of those typically Melvillean sites of reflection that combine “both the isolation and the intimacy that form the poles of Melville’s experience” (Anderson 137). The intimacy would be that between the narrator and the aesthetic sensibility of the previous owner, as expressed in the decoration of the house, an intimacy of the sort that Mario Praz calls Stimmung. Witold Rybczynski summarizes Praz’s “philosophy of interior decoration” this way:

\[ \text{Stimmung [is]} \text{ the sense of intimacy that is created by a room and its furnishings.} \]

\[ \text{Stimmung is a characteristic of interiors that has less to do with functionality than with the way the room conveys the character of its owner—the way it mirrors his soul, as Praz poetically put it.} (\text{Rybczynski 43}) \]

15 Keeping in mind the etymology of “nostalgia” as the pain of the yearning for the return to the home, the narrator’s nostalgic intimacy with the memory of Jimmy Rose’s sensibility is what gives particular value to the wallpaper of roses and peacocks, for, as Alain de Botton argues,

It is in dialogue with pain that many beautiful things acquire their value.

Acquaintance with grief turns out to be one of the more unusual prerequisites of architectural appreciation. We might, quite aside from all other requirements, need to be a little sad before buildings can properly touch us. (de Botton 25)

16 Connections abound between Melville’s nostalgic identification with his uncle—“of whom Melville was very fond despite or, perhaps, because of his many misfortunes” (Gilman 65)—and his fictionalization of that nostalgia in the narrator’s identification with the very unfortunate Jimmy Rose, for Thomas Melvill and Jimmy Rose, as Merton Sealts points out, have much in common:

Like Major Melvill, Jimmy in his prime “had an uncommonly handsome person,” with bright eyes, curling hair, and red cheeks glowing with “health’s genuine bloom, deepened by the joy of life.” [...] But for Major Melvill and his fictional counterpart times changed, both experiencing the “sudden and terrible reverses in business” [...], both fell from prosperity to adversity; both were pursued by creditors “as carrion for jails”; both had an old-fashioned courtliness, a taste for French furnishings, and a measure of “military learning”—contrasting strangely with the “gentle, peaceable heart” that saved both from misanthropy despite their misfortunes. (Sealts 298-300)

17 These connections led Sealts to the logical conclusion about Melville’s source material:
After Jimmy Rose’s death, the narrator, within the parlor of the peacocks “still must meditate upon this strange example” [...] just so did Melville remember his uncle’s “pleasing complexion,” and his “mild and kindly” manners, with their “faded brocade of old French breeding”—symbolized by the “faded peacocks” amid the “undying roses” in the parlor of Broadhall. (301)

There is, however, a major difference between the biography of Major Melvill and the characterization of Jimmy Rose. Whereas the former was married twice—“the first time to Françoise Raymonde Marie des Doleurs Lamé Fleury [...], who bore him six children,” (Sealts 293) and the second time to Mary A. A. Hobart, with whom he had eight more children (Parker 2002, 926)—the character of Jimmy Rose is a bachelor without descendants. In this sense, Major Melvill’s failure in economic terms as an unproductive man is extended, in the case of Jimmy Rose, to a failure in social terms not only as an unproductive man, but as an unreproductive man to boot.

**The Negativity of Social Failure: Unproductivity, Unreproductivity, Non-Futurity**

Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp, or a way of life, to cite Foucault.

Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*

By 1854, after the devastating critical and commercial receptions of both *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852), Melville was well aware that economic failure defined not only his uncle’s life but would also define his own. In the next pages I will argue that “Jimmy Rose” can be read as one more of Melville’s invitations to examine the notion of social value and to reevaluate that which is considered socially un(re)productive and, by extension, socially unsuccessful and/or failed. I will ask what motivated Herman Melville to make his narrator’s object of nostalgia a childless bachelor who is not only unproductive, but also unreproductive? And why does the narrator, a husband and a father, hold on nostalgically to the image of the peacocks and the roses of this house’s parlor’s old-fashioned wallpaper in a gesture that seems to honor everything that is considered failed in a capitalist and heteronormative society?

I base the correlation of these two questions on the semantic and ontological correlation of both social failures—in finance and in sexuality—for, as Judith Halberstam argues, “success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation” (2011, 2) which exclude non-reproductive subjects and, very especially, homosexuals, from the logics of capitalism itself: “Capitalist logic casts the homosexual as inauthentic and unreal, as incapable of proper love and unable to make the appropriate connection between sociality, relationality, family, sex, desire, and consumption.” (95) This connection between economic failure and the failure to (re)produce and to project himself into the future shapes the profile of the character that the narrator honors with his story. Jimmy Rose’s bankruptcy means, in fact, a failure for his present and for his posterity, as it represents an economic rupture in temporality and, especially, with futurity, for when he dies he has no possessions to bequeath and/or nobody to bequeath them to. In his financial failure, his bachelorhood, and his childlessness Jimmy Rose becomes a failure in the realms of the economic, of the familial, of linearity, of progress, and even of meaning. It is worth remembering Halberstam’s claim that “what family promises [...] is not simply acceptance and belonging but a
form of belonging that binds the past to the present and the present to the future by securing what Lee Edelman has called ‘heterofuturity’ through the figure of the child” (72-73). As a matter of fact, for Halberstam,

heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope. Other subordinate, queer, or counterhegemonic modes of common sense lead to the association of failure with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, nonreproductive life styles, negativity, and critique. (2011, 89)

Jimmy Rose’s double failure in social productivity, in both money/legacy construction, on the one hand, and in family/legacy construction, on the other, thus turns him, I claim, into a queer figure. My understanding and usage of the notion “queer” here corresponds to that of Sara Ahmed, for whom “queer’ does not only refer us to nonnormative sexualities but to the moments in which norms fail to be reproduced” (2006, 198) and to that of Mark Rifkin, for whom “to be queer means to be askew with respect to dominant, institutionalized modes of household and/or family formation” (25).

Failure in—or resistance to—reproduction, the cancellation of continuities, and the blockage of successions are the most distinctive features of queerness, and that is the reason why “work in queer studies has sought to trace how non-heteronormative subjectivities, identifications, practices, and processes of world-making enable the potential for orientation that decenter official mappings and narratives of historical continuity and succession” (Rifkin 25).

José Esteban Muñoz summarizes the relationship between queerness, discontinuity, success(ion), and socially failed and devalued lives stating that “queer failure is often deemed or understood as failure because it rejects normative ideas of value” (173). This historical failure of the queer subject to form part of the dynamics of futurity (both in productive and reproductive terms) of heteronormative temporalities has led to the historical negativization of queerness. For Lee Edelman, “what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure” is “the negativity opposed to every form of social viability” (9). The negativization, with the consequent social shaming, of the queer subject has become so central to the experience and the interpretation of the queer self that over the last two decades queer theorists have paid special attention to that negativity, but have ceased trying to combat it. On the contrary, queer theory has become interested in valuing negativity as a) a constitutive element of the queer experience and, therefore, of queer subject formation, and b) the possibility of establishing intergenerational identifications and alliances between queer subjects. As Halberstam notes, “queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. They also develop according to other logics of location, movement, and identification” (2005, 1). Linearity, lineage, historicity, and meaning may be found, thus, not only in a given biological succession across reproductive generations, but also in a non-biological affiliation of choice from one queer subject of today to another non-reproductive, socially failed, and oftentimes shamed subject from the past. For Halberstam, “In any project on queer temporality, one has to grapple with the meaning of intergenerational dialogue outside the frameworks of conflict or mandatory continuity” (2005, 185). This rereading of negativity has resulted in the work of queer theorists who argue the validity, the convenience, and the interest not only of analyzing, but also of subscribing to, negative representations of queer subjects. Lee Edelman, for instance, puts it this way: “Rather
than rejecting, with liberal discourse, the adscription of negativity to the queer, we might, as I argue, do better to consider accepting and even embracing it.” (4) In embracing that negativity, queer critics claim, contemporary queer subjects will be acknowledging our irrefutable connection with subjects of the past whose queerness was characterized by feelings such as shame and unhappiness. Heather Love believes that “we need a genealogy of queer affect that does not overlook the negative, shameful, and difficult feelings that have been so central to queer existence” (127), and Sara Ahmed considers that negativity has to be one of the core elements of that genealogy: “My aim […] is to consider unhappy queers as a crucial aspect of queer genealogy.” (2010, 89) Queer unhappiness in particular has been analyzed in its connection to a social reality—stigma—and to a specific affect associated to that reality: shame. According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “at least for certain (‘queer’) people, shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity: one that […] has its own, powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities” (64-65), a statement with which even a critic whose work has rejected negativity and focused instead on queer optimism, Michael Snediker, concurs: “I don’t disagree with Sedgwick on the point of shame’s interlineation and coloring of queer experiences.” (21)

The Embrace of the Negative and the Shamed as Alternative to the (Re)Productive

These and other works confront, on an affective register irreducible to traditional historical inquiry, what has been forgotten, abandoned, discredited, or otherwise effaced.

Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*

In “Jimmy Rose,” Melville presents a household in which wife and daughters embrace the forward-propelling logics of capitalism, of pragmatism, and of futurity, while the husband holds on to an aesthetic representation—the wallpaper of roses and peacocks—in a backwards-oriented gesture of commitment to the memory of the failed, the shamed, the negative, the antiproductive, the decayed, and the de-valued, in the figure of a queer man of the past. The contrast between value understood as profit, by the women of the house, and value understood as connected to the sentimental in relation to the wallpaper of roses and peacocks, by the narrator, is evident from the moment that Biddy, the maid, refers to the roses as “onions” (337) and to the peacocks as “a hen-roost” (338). This reference to the ornamental with metonyms that displace the semantic load from the (unnecessarily) beautiful to the practical and the profitable (unlike peacocks, hens are a staple food and, unlike roses, onions are edible) lays bare the identification of the narrator with the world of the impractical and the unprofitable, in contrast to a world that only attaches value to what is socially understood as productive. This profound discrepancy between the sentimental spirit of the narrator—he unashamedly refers to “these tears I drop” (342)—and the cold, pragmatic, and unpoetic nature of the rest of the household’s inhabitants is replicated in the valences of the use the narrator gives to the room with the wallpaper. Whereas, for the narrator, this “parlor” (his daughters refer to it as the “drawing room”) is the space where he can meditate, be pensive, and reminisce about the late Jimmy Rose, other occupants of the house had used that very room as a space to store fuel and to dry their clothes. In opposition to the utilitarian and pragmatic mentality of the
house’s residents, past and present, only the narrator and Jimmy Rose appreciate the ornamental and the impractical. It is this appreciation that binds both Jimmy Rose and the narrator to a specific kind of social failure associated with the notions of unproductivity, unprofitability, and unpracticality.

The story thus illustrates the narrator’s relationality and identification with a queer figure across time instead of with his biological family in the present. I read this intergenerational identification across time with a nonbiological ancestor of choice as a phenomenon that Christopher Nealon defined, in his analysis of Willa Cather’s work, as “affect-genealogy,” (5) a sort of bond oftentimes based on shared isolation, and which, for Heather Love, finds its expression in “nonbiological inheritance, new forms of kinship, ‘the friendship ethic,’ queer families, stigma- or shame-based alliances, and so on” (Love 37). What Nealon called affect-genealogies are, in fact, “alternative modes of filiation across time” (Freeman 123) in itineraries that for Mark Rifkin travel “not through the lineality of procreation but along collateral pathways (crooked lines of transmission...)” (85) which for Elizabeth Freeman constitute “replicative but not procreative means of intergenerational continuity” (167).

In Melville’s story, the affect-genealogy that draws the narrator to the figure of the failed Jimmy Rose is, I contend, a mode of relationality based on the chosen affiliation with a queer type of failure that, for Halberstam, is “associated with futility, sterility, emptiness, loss, negative affect in general, and modes of unbecoming [which] propose a different relation to knowledge” (Halberstam 2011, 23). This different relation to knowledge, which is based on unbecoming, is what allows the narrator to recognize and to honor Jimmy Rose as the bearer of a set of values, such as gentleness, kindness, and softness, that were considered obsolete and unnecessary by his materialistically-driven contemporaries. The narrator’s intimate admiration for those values may be the first, I argue, in a chain of re-cognitions of those socially unproductive values: the narrator’s personal re-cognition of a socially unrecognized Jimmy Rose, Herman Melville’s sensitive recognition of a familially unrecognized William Ford, and—I dare to suggest—the reader’s artistic recognition of a critically unrecognized Herman Melville.

**Conclusion**

The material by-products of past failures write the poetry of a different future. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*

Melville’s story invites us to look at an empty parlor, with wallpaper featuring both faded peacocks and struggling-to-keep-blooming roses, which becomes to the narrator a space of revery. In this room in a house that the narrator has (not) inherited from a non-productive and non-reproductive man, he remembers Jimmy Rose’s struggling-to-keep blooming cheeks and how, assuming his failure in a capitalistic, materialistic, productivist, selfish, and heartless society, Jimmy Rose responded to it with old-fashioned aestheticism, generosity, and gentleness. In this room, the narrator, reluctant to live in the evolving prosaic times into which he is propelled by his family and contemporaries, chooses to linger in the obsolete and resists chronological sequencing by holding on to a poetic space of alternative values to his materialistic environment. Melville’s invitation can be read, in the frame of recent discussions of notions such as queer failure and shaming, as a gesture of honoring the “failed.” With this gesture Melville resignifies the semantic valences of failure in the hope that the
social failures of today may become the basis for alternative futures, a hope that the narrator expresses in his final wish: “Transplanted to another soil, all the unkind past forgot, God grant that Jimmy’s roses may immortally survive.” (345)

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NOTES

1. This article is a result of the Research Project “(Un)Housing: Dwellings, Materiality, and the Self in American Literature” (PID2020-115172GB-100 (Des)Alojo: Viviendas, Materialidad y Subjetividad en la Literatura Estadounidense), co-IPs: Rodrigo Andrés and Cristina Alsina Rísquez (Universitat de Barcelona) funded by the Spanish Ministerio de Ciencia e Innovación.

3. Recent readings of the connection between architectural tropes and discourses of both the familial and the familiar in Melville’s short stories through the lens of queer theory have focused on “the narrator’s resistance towards normative living arrangements of the nineteenth century” (Simonsen, 38). See also my forthcoming “Original Coming Outs in the Domestic as Alternative to Normative Orientations and Temporalities in ‘The Apple-Tree Table’” and “The House as Alternative to Familial Space and Time in Herman Melville’s ‘I and My Chimney.’”

4. The centrality of the narrator to the story has been widely discussed by critics. Lea Newman, for instance, claims: “as one of several of Melville’s stories in which the narrator is as central to the meaning as the alleged protagonist, ‘Jimmy Rose’ has generated as much commentary on behalf of William Ford, who tells the story, as of Jimmy, who is his subject” (263).

5. “The farm Thomas Jr. lived on south of Pittsfield, then [in the 1820s] known as the Watson place (later the Melvill place, then Broadhall, and later still the Pittsfield Country Club), was not his own but his father’s, purchased in 1816.” (Parker 1996, 12)

6. Melville was able to re-visit his uncle’s former house not only mentally, but also physically, given his friendship with the current owners of the house, the Morewoods, who christened the house as “Broadhall.” For an analysis of Melville’s relationship with his neighbors while the writer was living in Arrowhead, and in particular with Sarah Morewood, see Wyn Kelley’s “Melville’s Carnival Neighborhood.”

7. “The precedent for the modern living room was, in fact, the parlor found in medieval monasteries, the room where visitors convened to speak with those within the religious order. Hence the name of the room, from the French parler” (Busch 153).

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ABSTRACTS

In Herman Melville’s short story “Jimmy Rose” (1855) the narrator has inherited a house that once belonged to a socially unproductive and unproductive man named Jimmy Rose. The story focuses on the narrator’s intimate identification with the elaborate and old-fashioned wallpaper in the house’s parlor. This is a space where, reluctant to live in the evolving prosaic times into which he is propelled by his family and contemporaries, the narrator chooses to linger in the obsolete and resists chronological sequencing. Honoring the memory of that socially failed earlier inhabitant of the house, he experiences this poetic room as a space of alternative values to his materialistic environment. In the frame of recent discussions of notions such as queer failure and shame this article reads the narrator’s bond with Jimmy Rose as a mode of relationality based on affect-genealogy, or chosen affiliation, with a queer type of failure, as well as as a gesture with which Melville invites readers to examine the notion of social value and to reevaluate that which is considered un(re)productive and, by extension, socially unsuccessful and/or failed
valeurs alternatives à son environnement matérieliste. Dans le sillage de discussions récentes sur des notions telles que l’échec et la honte queer, cet essai considère le lien entre le narrateur et Jimmy Rose comme un mode de relation fondé sur une généalogie de l’affect, une affiliation choisie, qui comprend une forme d’échec queer. C’est aussi un geste par lequel Melville invite ses lecteurs à examiner la notion de valeur sociale et à réévaluer ce que l’on considère comme non (re)productif et, par extension, socialement non réussi et/ou raté.

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**Keywords:** “Jimmy Rose,” Herman Melville, domestic spaces, queer spaces, queer temporalities, queer affiliations

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