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CONFRONTING MODERNITY: URBANIZATION
AND AMERICAN FICTION, 1880-1930

by

John Eckman

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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Approved by Sydney J. Kasler

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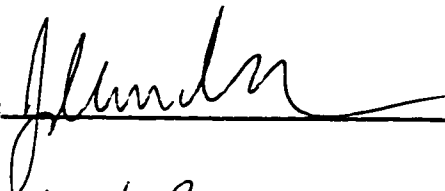
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Doctoral Dissertation

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Abstract

Confronting Modernity: Urbanization and American
Fiction, 1880-1930

by John Mark Eckman

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This dissertation examines both “realism” and “modernism” in U.S. fiction between 1880 and 1930 as reactions to the capitalist, industrial city, which serves as the site of the changes and the subject of the fiction. Urbanization made modernity manifest in three ways: the close proximity and racial diversity of city life, the (limited) mobility urbanization offered women, and the growth of consumer culture. Drawing on debates from turn of the century urban planning and sociology, as well as current history and urban studies, I examine literary representations of the crisis of “modernity” as a broad cultural phenomenon, rooted in material historical changes. While studies of “realism” and “modernism” have been reinvigorated by attention to the relationship between historical change and narrative form, the disciplinary division between these categories has obscured the central concerns they share. Recognizing the formal complexities of realism and the political engagements of modernism enables an understanding of this relationship which is neither reductively formalist nor simplistically historicized.

Chapter one, “Utopian Modernity,” examines the modern urban spaces of Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* and the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in terms of the conflicts they elide and the return of those elisions in sublimated forms. Chapter two, “Modernity Begins at Home,” examines modernity and domesticity in Jane Addams’s Hull-House writings and William Dean Howells’s *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. In chapter three, “Women on the

Verge,” I examine Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* and Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, which articulate a gendered modernity, offering women access to the public sphere yet severely restricting female agency. Chapter four, “Metropolitan Modernity,” examines John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* and Mary Borden’s *Flamingo*: Both are formally experimental yet evince the same contradictory impulses evident in “realist” texts. In chapter five, “At the Heart of the Metropolis / At the Margins of Modernism,” I examine the formal disruptions of Nella Larsen’s novels in relation to the contradictions urban modernity held for biracial women. Finally, the conclusion considers Michael Gold’s *Jews Without Money* as an example of the challenges of urban modernity continuing into the depression era.

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DEDICATION

For Wallis: It's going to snow soon . . .

Introduction: Realist and Modernist Fiction as Responses to Urbanization

Rather than inscribing a homogeneous cultural consensus, the discourses of modernity reveal multiple and conflicting responses to processes of social change. (Felski 15)

... the boundaries between ... realism and modernism are not as rigid as generally thought. (A. Kaplan, "Realism" xvii)

American literature between 1880 and 1930 is a literature of modernity, evincing the cultural anxieties of a newly industrial, urban nation. Conventional literary history, by dividing this era in half— into "realism" and "modernism"— has obscured the continuity of concerns about the challenges posed by these changes which link a wide variety of texts. This dissertation examines the multiple, conflicting, and critical responses of U.S. novels to the experience of modernity, specifically as focused through the discourses of urbanization. In reacting to, and helping to construct, representations of modern industrial America, the authors of purportedly realist, naturalist, and modernist texts articulate a consistent set of concerns, which are simultaneously represented by and embodied in the metropolis. First, the metropolis makes unavoidably and irrevocably visible the racial and ethnic variety of modern America. Second, the metropolis challenges the ideology of domesticity: as women move into the public spaces of the city more frequently

and more freely, the doctrine of separate spheres becomes increasingly tenuous.¹ Finally, the metropolis is the spatial, concrete manifestation of the new corporate capitalism represented by the trusts, managerial capitalism, and the scientific management of labor.

I. Modernity and the Discourses of Urbanization

Marshall Berman's *All That is Solid Melts Into Air* articulates a model of modernity as an ambivalent experience:

I call this body of experience "modernity." To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world—and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. . . . To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, "all that is solid melts into air." (15)

Berman goes on to link this modernity to urban experience, most emphatically in Baudelaire: "Baudelaire shows us something that no other writer sees so well: how the modernization of the city at once inspires and enforces the modernization of its citizens' souls" (147).

While Berman doesn't specifically focus on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century U.S. city, American urban dwellers experienced a similar sense of transformation, both enticing and frightening at the same time; a series of discourses of urbanization developed, which attempted to describe, understand, and control these transformations. In 1905, for example, Frederick Howe claimed that "Through [urbanization], a new society has been

created. Life in all its relations has been altered. A new civilization has been born, a civilization whose identity with the past is one of historical continuity only” (9). Writers of various backgrounds and in various disciplines—academic and nonacademic—focused their attention on the metropolis and attempted to come to terms with the changes it represented. The discourses of urbanization throughout this period, fictional and non-fictional, are pervaded by references to the city as the site and symbol of modernity.²

American cities began to grow with astounding rapidity in the last decades of the nineteenth century: “In 1870, 26 percent of Americans lived in urban areas, and thirty-eight cities had populations greater than 100,000” (J. Howard 33). If it is an exaggeration to claim, with Richard Hofstadter, that “the United States was born in the country and has moved to the city,” the population was clearly undergoing a major geographic shift towards urban centers (23).

In addition to the movement from country to city, late nineteenth century America experienced massively high levels of immigration. According to Blake McKelvey,

The 5,248,568 immigrants who came in the 1880’s exceeded the sum of any two consecutive earlier decades, and although hard times in the nineties temporarily checked the flood, it surged to 8,202,388 during the ten years following 1900. The great majority of these later immigrants settled in cities . . . (63)

In addition, the sources of immigration were shifting. “Although,” notes John Higham, “the differences between ‘old’ and ‘new’ immigrants were much less sharp and the shift occurred much less abruptly than twentieth century

nativists have taught us to believe, those abstractions do summarize a significant transition" (65). If, as Sidney Bremer argues, "the poor . . . became more visibly distinctive as immigrants from eastern and southern Europe and even from Asia . . . entered cities in large numbers," that visibility resulted from changes in perspective as well as in immigration sources (37). Many contemporary observers noted, with varying degrees of dismay and fear, what Bremer describes as "the darkening of urban populations," as African Americans migrated North and more generally toward urban centers. The concern over what were seen as troublesome populations, however, represents a shift in reactions as much as a shift in demographics.³

In addition to the "new immigration," turn-of-the-century U.S. cities also witnessed the much touted rise of the "new woman": single, employed, and free to roam the city streets— at least, during daylight hours and in the shopping districts. As Elizabeth Wilson argues, "urban life created a space in which some women could experiment with new roles" (65). These new roles and new spaces challenged existing ideologies of femininity. In Rita Felski's explication, "the divisions between public and private, masculine and feminine, modern and antimodern were . . . made and remade in new ways":

Thus the ideology of separate spheres was undercut by the movement of working-class women into mass production and industrial labor . . . The expansion of consumerism . . . further blurred public/private distinctions, as middle-class women moved out into the public spaces of the department store . . . feminists and social reformers provided one of the most visible and overtly political challenges to existing gender hierarchies. (19)

Again, the shift is as much about perception as about reality: if “many writers . . . posed the presence of women as a problem of order,” that says as much about those writers as it does about the gender composition of the urban populace (Wilson 6). While the city appeared to offer women mobility, their freedom was the subject of considerable anxious reflection and was often restricted in both formal and informal ways.

One of the most popular representations of the combination of “woman” and “city” was the figure of woman-as-consumer: so long as the women visible on the urban streets were shopping rather than working, they remained within a “safely” feminine role. As Rachel Bowlby notes, “the making of willing consumers readily fitted into the available ideological paradigm of a seduction of women by men, in which women would be addressed as yielding objects to the powerful male subject forming, and informing them of, their desires” (20). Of course, women’s presence in the city was equally organized around women as commodities for consumption— they were on the market as well as in it.⁴ Having transgressed the ideological boundary line between public sphere and private, women had limited control over how their presence in the market was interpreted and represented.

In addition to their focus on ethnic and racial minorities, as well as the highly visible, if restricted, new consumer mobility of white middle-class women, the discourses of urbanization also regularly invoked and encouraged anxiety about the development of what later critics would characterize as consumer culture. “From the 1890s on,” William Leach argues, “American corporate business, in league with key institutions, began the transformation of American society into a society preoccupied with consumption” (xiii). This

change involved new marketing techniques aimed at molding consumer desire, new management techniques aimed at the rationalization of production and distribution, and new economic and legal systems which consolidated power in the hands of economic elites. The anxieties generated by the increasing power of "commerce" over "culture" is evident throughout the debates relating to— and the fictional representations of— urbanization in this period.

II. Social Change and Narrative Form: Realism, Naturalism, Modernism

If "modernity" is, in Douglas Tallack's characterization, an "intriguing but rather vague term," the same applies to the terms "realism," "naturalism," and "modernism" as well (2). Compare, for example: Michael Davitt Bell's claim that "What Vladimir Nabokov said of 'Reality' is equally true of its close cousin, 'realism': it is one of those words 'which mean nothing without quotes'" (1), June Howard's, that "One must for the sake of economy of expression speak of 'naturalism,' and thus I may sometimes seem to suggest that an evolving entity exists somewhere, but my intent is rather to evoke a sense of naturalism as a mediating concept" (30), and Astradur Eysteinnsson's, that "Although the concept 'modernism' may seem intolerably vague, it has come to serve a crucial function in criticism and literary history, as well as in theoretical debates about literature" (1). In all three cases, the descriptive "ism" carries more weight than a simple approach implies. None of these terms is purely descriptive; each carries the weight of historical association with particular authors and literary works. Indeed, each has served as a periodizing term but also as an evaluative marker.

Much recent work on American realism and naturalism has focused on elucidating the relationship of that fiction to the social changes accompanying rapid urbanization and industrialization.⁵ Realism and naturalism have come to signify, in contemporary critical discourse, as much a set of historical/political concerns as a style or genre. Daniel Borus, for example, claims that the realists “regarded their fiction as a form of political intervention designed to repair the fissures that had run through nearly every aspect of American life” (139). Or, in Amy Kaplan’s more nuanced (and less biographical/intentional) formulation: “naturalism is shaped by and imaginatively reshapes a historical experience that, although it exists outside representation and narrative, we necessarily approach through texts” (*Social* 70). Rather than embodying a mimetic, objective report of actual conditions, realist fiction is increasingly understood as a form of reaction (and a reaction in narrative form) to the historical changes of modernity.

Modernism, similarly, has been defined as “a response by clusters of intellectuals and artists to the converging processes of modernization as they presented themselves and were perceived at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries . . . between 1890 and 1933” (Wohl 68). In other words, modernism is a reaction to modernity. Anglo-American literary history has, however— at least since the New Criticism— separated the realists and the modernists on the basis of form. Modernism has been defined as the reaction against the concerns of the realists— a turn toward form and away from engagement with history. In Fredric Jameson’s words, “The concept of realism which thereby emerges is always that with which modernism has had to break, that norm from which modernism is the deviation, and so forth”

(233). From this perspective, modernism is not linked to realism, in the sense that both are responses to modernization, but rather, it represents a formal revolution against realism.

What modernism truly signifies, in most literary histories of the era, is not just *any* reaction to modernity, but one which is manifested in experimental, avant-garde literary forms.⁶ Eric Homberger, for example, in “Two Versions of American Modernism,” argues that “the decline of Boston, and the rise of the great commercial centres of New York and Chicago, mark the beginning of ‘modern’ American culture” (151). Yet modernism, for Homberger, names a very specific set of issues (defined here by exclusion): “one cannot find in the Chicago milieu,” he writes, “anything like the programmes, manifestoes and obsessive concern for technique which existed in New York and the cosmopolitan centres of Europe” (154). The important distinction, in Homberger’s account, is not geographic but stylistic: the “canons of realism” versus the “obsessive concern for technique.” What such a definition accomplishes is twofold: it simultaneously defines a narrow set of texts and authors as worthy of the designation “modernist,” and projects onto “realist” texts a lack of formal concern.⁷ In its most reductive form: realists worry about content, modernists about form.

Although not explicitly employing the terms “modernism” and “realism,” Cecelia Tichi’s *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America* makes a similar division between authors on the basis of formal experimentation. Tichi argues that “gear-and-girder technology,” the mechanical manifestation of modernity, “summoned new literary forms suited to its perceptual values” (16). These new literary forms, in the writings of

John Dos Passos, William Carlos Williams, and Ernest Hemingway, “introduced a radically new conception of the arts of the written word” (16). Willa Cather and Sherwood Anderson, on the other hand, “failed to recognize the opportunities intrinsic to the gear-and-girder technology and consequently suffered artistically” (16). In short, realism belongs to the past (and therefore to the countryside), modernism to the present (and therefore the city).⁸ When only specific formal innovations are selected to receive critical value, modernism becomes an era of literary Darwinism: some adapt and thrive, others simply survive: some authors belong to the “Modernist America” of the subtitle, others to an implied realist, or traditional America.⁹

Modernism can be seen, more usefully, not merely as a set of formal strategies adequate to the representational needs of modern life, but as series of aesthetic programs designed to create a safe distance from the challenges modernity represents. Marianne DeKoven’s *Rich and Strange*, for example, focuses on a set of novelists and their reactions to social changes. Noting that “Modernist formal practice has seemed to define itself as a repudiation of, an alternative to, the cultural implications of late nineteenth and early twentieth century feminism and socialism,” DeKoven argues instead that “modernist form evolved precisely as an adequate means of presenting their terrifying appeal” (4). Specifically, she claims that “Male modernists generally feared the loss of hegemony the change they desired might entail, while female modernists feared punishment for desiring such utter change” (4). These ambivalent reactions generated a specific formal construction she calls, after Derrida, “*sous-rature*”: “an unresolved contradiction or unsynthesized dialectic . . . that enacts in the realm of form an alternative to culture’s

hierarchical dualisms, roots of those structures of inadequacy that socialism and feminism proposed to eradicate” (4). Without accepting DeKoven’s broadly biographical characterization (based on what the authors desired and feared as individuals) or her polarizing use of gender (categorizing reactions into two categories on the basis of the author’s sex), her reading of early modernism exposes an ambivalence similar to that encoded in the discourses of realism and naturalism.

This dissertation, in other words, engages in two on-going critical conversations— conversations which overlap but do not often interact. While both “new historicist” readings of American Realism and Naturalism and the “new modernist studies”¹⁰ investigate the interactions between historical and formal changes in fiction from the turn of the century, the disciplinary mechanisms of periodization still reflect and perpetuate a realist/modernist split. Amy Kaplan’s provocative claim that “The ‘unrealistic’ endings of realistic novels embody the desire to posit an alternative reality which cannot be fully contained in the novels’ construction of the real” needs to be set alongside DeKoven’s discussion of unresolved contradictions in modernism. Both theorize a relationship between social change and fictional form, yet both limit their discussion of formal changes to those recognized as alternately realist or modernist, missing the historical connections between them.

III. Writing the Metropolis

The chapters which follow explore both “realism” and “modernism” in the literature of the United States as reactions to the social and historical

conditions of modernity, focusing on the urban, industrial city as simultaneously the site of the changes and the subject of the fiction.¹¹ Part of this project involves reading the fiction of both periods against the grain of traditional generic expectations: reading realist texts as though they were modernist texts (close attention to form, aesthetics, expressions of epistemological and philosophical uncertainty, ambiguity, self-referentiality) and reading modernist texts as though they were realist texts (close attention to details, reference to contemporary events, political project). The goal is neither to “discover” a proto-modernism in realist texts nor a residual realism within modernist texts, but rather to examine the varied responses to modernity the fictions imagine. Similarly, though the chapters do follow a (roughly) chronological order, no teleology should be inferred.

Chapter One, “Utopian Modernity,” examines The World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 and Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888). The fair and the novel both imagine a modern metropolitan space in which aesthetic beauty simultaneously results from and reinforces social order. Where Bellamy’s utopia imagines an homogenous population, the White City specifically hierarchizes and orders the urban crowd. Despite their exclusion, however, the specter of a rebellious, working-class, non-WASP immigrant returns to haunt the utopian imaginary in the dystopian novels of the later nineteenth century and the “real” Chicago within which the fair took place.

Chapter Two, “Modernity Begins in the Home,” considers the Hull-House related writings of Jane Addams and William Dean Howells’s *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890): Addams attempts to modernize domesticity, while Howells attempts to domesticate modernity. In these texts, the changes associated with

modernity are domesticated— brought within an existing framework which is simultaneously home-based (the usual semantic weight of “domesticity” in studies of U.S. culture) and nation-based (domestic as opposed to foreign).¹² Again, however, that which they attempt to contain returns in repressed form, disrupting the narrative closure and disciplinary coherence both seek.

Chapter Three, “Women on the Verge,” focuses on Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) and Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* (1905), as texts in which unmarried and unanchored “new women” experience the limited mobility the city delivers. Dreiser’s endlessly consuming Carrie Meeber and Wharton’s endlessly consumed Lily Bart represent opposite yet matching sides of the precarious position of women in the modern city. Both novels rely heavily on metaphors of mobility and stasis, production and consumption, and imitation and authenticity in elaborating the challenges modernity poses. Similarly, both novels incorporate elements of sentimental fiction and social criticism, yet neither novel offers a clear conclusion. These “problems,” I argue, represent not the failure of either novel but the success of both in presenting the irresolvable contradictions white middle-class women experienced in the capitalist metropolis.

In Chapter Four, “Metropolitan Modernism,” I turn to two novels about New York in the 1920s, John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and Mary Borden’s *Flamingo* (1927). Although both of these texts exemplify the “experimental . . . language-centered” definition of modernism,¹³ what they reveal is not a break with the concerns of the realist texts discussed in the previous chapters, but in fact a culmination of those concerns. Dos Passos’s cubist-futurist-montage narrative in fact encodes an ambivalence about the

city which is strikingly similar to Howells's, Dreiser's, and Wharton's. Jimmy Herf and Ellen Thatcher face a metropolis dominated by commercial concerns and consumer culture. In Jimmy Herf's flight from the city, and Ellen Thatcher's conflicted acceptance of it, Dos Passos presents the irresolvable tensions of modernity. Mary Borden's novel combines racialist primitivism with visionary futurism in the figure of Peter Campbell, the New York architect of mega-block skyscrapers who is simultaneously drawn to the jazz clubs of Harlem. As the narrative gains momentum, however, Campbell's concerns— and the narrative which represents them— become increasingly confused. Unable to keep separate his futurist worship of the built environment of the modern city and the nostalgic primitivism through which he views the city's non-white inhabitants, the novel disintegrates into suicide and resignation.

In Chapter Five, "At the Heart of the Metropolis / At the Margins of Modernism," I turn to the novels of Nella Larsen, as a figure uniquely situated on the borders between the Harlem Renaissance, Modernism, and Realism. Larsen's novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), demonstrate the conflicting restrictions imposed by class, race, and gender in the modern metropolis. Situating Larsen within the urban framework evolved in the previous chapters, rather than within the "tragic mulatto" tradition, allows us to understand the ambiguities and aporias just beneath the surface of her apparently "realist" style: again, not as evidence of the failure of realism but as manifestations of the ambivalent experiences of modernity.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I discuss Michael Gold, and especially *Jews Without Money* (1930), as a final example of the way that the critical

opposition between “realism” and “modernism” has obscured what otherwise appears as a consistent set of concerns about the effects of modernity. Gold’s proletarian realism stands at the endpoint of this project, pointing towards a reading of the “realist” thirties not as a reaction against the “lost generation” twenties but as a continuation of the concerns of American fiction throughout 1880 to 1930, as the challenges urbanization posed to existing U.S. ideologies increasingly affected the countryside as well.

Raymond Williams, in “The Metropolis and the Emergence of Modernism,” calls for a criticism that sees “the imperial and capitalist metropolis as a specific historical form,” which he argues “involves looking . . . from outside the metropolis: from the deprived hinterlands, where different forces are moving, and from the poor world which has always been peripheral to the metropolitan systems . . .” (23). This dissertation proposes taking seriously Williams’s assertion that “the metropolitan interpretation of its own processes” (23) needs challenging, but also challenges the assumption that it is only from “the deprived hinterlands” that such a critique might be launched.¹⁴ Indeed, contemporary observers of late nineteenth and early twentieth century United States cities— writing both fictional and non-fictional texts— posed vigorous critiques of their ongoing development. Within the capitalist metropolis itself are found a wide variety of discursive responses to confrontations with modernity.

Notes to Introduction

- ¹ This is not to say it is rendered obsolete, nor that it was ever an accurate picture of lived reality: rather, I mean to emphasize that separate spheres becomes increasingly difficult to maintain *as an ideology* which appears natural, inevitable.
- ² Modernity did affect those living in rural areas, but it was most visible— most often articulated and recorded— in metropolitan contexts. Cf. Raymond Williams: “in realising the new fact of the city, we must be careful not to idealise the old and new facts of the country” (*Country*, 165).
- ³ Higham writes: “The points of departure for modern American nativism lay not in external stimuli but in internal conditions, not in new people or ideas but in new problems reacting upon the recessive traditions of American nationalism” (67).
- ⁴ As Felski notes, “a number of critics have commented upon the significance of the prostitute in the nineteenth-century social imaginary and her emblematic status in the literature and art of the period” (19). See also Bowlby and Wilson.
- ⁵ e.g., Amy Kaplan’s *The Social Construction of American Realism*, June Howard’s *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*, Michael Davitt Bell’s *The Problem of American Realism*, Walter Benn Michaels’ *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* and Daniel Borus’ *Writing Realism*.
- ⁶ It is in response to this sense that Bonnie Kim Scott writes, in the introduction to the critical groundbreaking anthology *The Gender of Modernism*, “while the word *modernism* appears in the title of this book, the editors involved in this project have worked restively with it, and introductions to specific authors repeatedly manipulate the term” (4).
- ⁷ Art Berman makes this explicit: “To qualify as modernism, the consideration of aesthetic form must take precedence over content” (28).
- ⁸ Thus it is not only “realism” which this definition of modernism excludes, but also writing categorized as “regionalism” or “local color”: “Historically,” as Holly Laird argues, “the division between modernism and naturalism has been closely linked to differences of gender, race, and class” (93).
- ⁹ Of course my summary of Tichi here is inherently reductive, and I continue to find her work both inspirational and influential in its ability to read across a broad series of discourses and disciplines.
- ¹⁰ Friedman chaired a three-session series of panels at the 1994 MLA convention in San Diego on “the definitional problematics,” “cultural narratives,” and “contemporary understandings of modernism.” (C. Kaplan 164, 167n18).
- ¹¹ This project thus resembles both Hana Wirth-Nesher’s *City Codes* and Kevin McNamara’s *Urban Verbs*, two recent studies of representations of modern cities. Wirth-Nesher focuses on “the problematizing of home and the

indeterminacy of public and private realms” as represented in “both the theme and the form of modern urban novels” (21); McNamara on “three moments in the history of American urbanism,” drawing (or relying upon) a distinction between “realist” and “modernist notions of the nature of a city” (4).

- ¹² Amy Kaplan notes that “*domestic* has a double meaning that not only links the familial household to the nation but also imagines both in opposition to everything outside the geographic and conceptual border of the home” (“Manifest” 581). Both Addams’ statements about Hull House’s aims and Howells’ exploration of domesticity in the modern city implicitly invoke both meanings of “domestic,” in that they explore very public domestic scenes.
- ¹³ Bonnie Kime Scott describes the inclusion of “nonexperimental” writers in *The Gender of Modernism* alongside “the more traditional experimental canon” in order to challenge “language-centered interpretations of modernism favored in the canonization process” (5). My labeling of Dos Passos and Borden as “Metropolitan Modernists” should not be taken to mean an acceptance of the experimental, formalist strand as the only way to define modernism, but as an acknowledgement of the way the term has functioned, and largely continues to function, in critical discourse.
- ¹⁴ This is not to argue, of course, that such critiques are not also found in texts which do represent the “deprived hinterlands”; this project focuses on urbanization because the discourses of the time so consistently cite the city as the source and symbol of modernity.

Chapter 1: Utopian Modernity: The White City, Bellamy's Boston, and the Metropolis

The dream that is dying and the dream that is coming to birth do not stand in sequence, but mingle as do the images in a dissolving view . . . (Mumford, *Sticks* 76)

The World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 evinced both a nostalgic vision of a classical order and a utopian vision of the modern metropolis. Held in Chicago from May through December, 1893, the fair represents a crucial transitional moment, as "expositions gave form and substance to the meaning of modernity" (Rydell and Gwynn 8). By linking commodity fetishism to beaux-arts architecture and carefully planned landscape design, the fair presented a totalizing, if temporary, vision of modern America as a place of order and stability. Against the disarray and chaos of the late nineteenth century city, the fair offered order and beauty; in the context of industrial, stockyard Chicago, the fair offered a vision of high culture and public philanthropy; at the historical moment of the appearance of the New Woman, the fair reasserted domesticity. Finally, in the midst of great racial and ethnic conflict, the fair offered a commodified and exotic spectacle of non-white, "primitive" cultures.¹ In the modern spatial imagination represented by the fair, aesthetic order both reflects and (re)produces social order.

Utopian (and dystopian) fictions produced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century work within a similarly paradoxical situation: projecting the future of modern America based on currents and trends

perceived in their present, these fictions provide useful indications of the tensions Americans associated with urban modernity in the late nineteenth century. Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888), the most popular utopia in the "golden era" of utopias in America² presented a future of peaceful prosperity based on cooperative capitalism. In Bellamy's Boston of the year 2000, ethnic and racial conflict— indeed ethnicity and race as categories— have been deliberately excluded, while nineteenth-century ideals of domesticity and separate spheres gender ideology are reasserted. Chauncey Thomas's *The Crystal Button: Or, Adventures of Paul Prognosis in the Forty-Ninth Century* (1891) similarly focuses on the urban prosperity made possible by industrialization and technological development while eliminating the ambiguity and tension experienced by those actually undergoing those historical processes. Both exemplify Leonie Kramer's definition of urban utopias, in that they

accept technological change, and use it as the basis for an ideal society and political organization. They posit a world from which drudgery and conflict have been banished, and in which equality is guaranteed by social planning. The central metaphor for the triumph of a planned economy is the city; and its physical appearance is an emblem of the forms of social organization it contains. (134)

These late nineteenth-century visionaries— authors, architects, and planners— imagined an ideal of urban modernity based on discipline, order, and the careful policing of social difference, and mapped this order onto American cities.

This chapter begins with the aesthetic ideology of the City Beautiful, as exemplified by the White City at the 1893 World's Fair and resonant with the built environments imagined in the utopian fictions. In the second section, I examine the relationship between these environments and the department store, an urban manifestation of the "consumer culture" which was coming into being in late nineteenth century US cities. Section three examines the politics of representation and space: who is and is not represented in these fictions, how do these fictions imagine people in the spaces they create, and why? The final section introduces a drastically different image of modernity—the catastrophic vision of Ignatius Donnelly's *Caesar's Column* (1891)—which disturbs the facile reconciliation of the utopian modern space.

I. Planned Modernity: Monumentality and the Ideal City

The most significant impression of the fair, for most visitors, was the ordered and integrated landscape and architectural design employed in the central Court of Honor. Arrayed around a central lagoon (figs. 1.2, 1.3) were the buildings of Manufactures and Liberal Arts, Agriculture, Electricity, Machinery and Administration. The Court of Honor, due to the uniform white classical facades of the major buildings, was popularly called "the White City."³ The uniform cornice heights and modular bay sizes, agreed upon well in advance by the architects under the supervision of Daniel Burnham, allowed the presentation of a coordinated façade despite differences in architectural detail: "designers will be obliged," Burnham claimed, "to abandon their incoherent originalities and study the ancient masters of building" (Rubin

343). In the place of the chaotic late nineteenth century metropolitan center, the fair offered unity and order (fig. 1.4).

This unity of façades, and its deliberate classicism, has led many architectural and social historians to see the fair as essentially nostalgic: the last gasp of a dying nineteenth-century elite culture. Indeed, the contrast between the disordered, eclectic and explicitly commercial Chicago in the eighteen-nineties and the unified beaux-arts “White City” of the fair often makes the latter seem a nostalgic counterpoint to the modernity of the former (Compare, for example, the map of Chicago in fig. 1.1 with the layout of the fairgrounds in fig. 1.2). Arnold Lewis writes of the “real” city:

Its weight and value as a barometer of transition at the beginning of the modern period were substantially greater than that of any novel, the entire oeuvre of an avant-garde artist, or any successful scientific or technical experiment of the day. It was not an event of a summer like a great international exposition, but an evolving organism of a million people. It grew from necessity, not pretext, and its legendary existence was not fiction but fact. (20)

Compared to historical Chicago—the “classical center of American materialism”— with its skyscrapers, department stores, stockyards, and tenements (all of which were already present in the 1890s), the fair represented a beautiful illusion of culture divorced from commerce.⁴

Yet just as fictions may be more influential than facts, the fair has always seemed to be more than the “event of a summer.” To contemporary critics and more recent commentators alike, the significance of the White City

is not decreased by its very impermanence and willful, deliberate construction. Louis Sullivan, the first in a long line of modernist critics of the fair, claims (in 1924) that “the damage wrought by the World’s Fair will last for half a century from its date, if not longer. It has penetrated deeply into the constitution of the American mind, effecting there lesions significant of dementia” (325). For decades the canonical criticism in architecture continued to portray the White City as an unfortunate regression into un-American nostalgia.⁵ Lewis Mumford, an early partisan of Sullivan— ideologically and architecturally— writes: “So low had American taste sunk in the generation after the World’s Fair that people habitually characterized as an advance what was actually a serious retrogression” (*Brown* 141-42).

Indeed, the White City was taken by many contemporary attendees as not only an advance over existing urban spaces but also as a model for U.S. cities of the future. John Coleman Adams, for example, writing in *The New England Magazine* in 1896, argues that the fair demonstrates “a great many features of what an ideal city might be, a great many visions which perhaps will one day become solid facts, and so remove the blot and failure of modern civilization, the great city of the end of the century” (3). Similarly, William Dean Howells’s *Altrurian Traveller, Homos*, found in the fair true Altrurian principles, diametrically opposed to those which ordinarily reigned supreme in the United States:

. . . after seeing the World’s Fair City here, I feel as if I had caught a glimpse of the glorious capitals which will whiten the hills and shores of the east and the borderless plains of the west, when the New York and the Newer York of today shall seem to all the future

Americans as impossible as they would seem to any Altrurian now. . . . the Fair City is a bit of Altruria: it is as if the capitol of one of our Regions had set sail and landed somehow on the shores of the vast inland sea, where the Fair City lifts its domes and columns. (20-21)

The “Newer York” of the 1890s, Chicago is the real absurdity, Howells implies, not the White City of Jackson Park. For Homos (and Howells), as for many of the fair’s millions of visitors,⁶ the cooperation and shared ideals behind the fair held a promise desperately needed in the face of real, and growing, conflict: “To walk its pseudo-marble avenues must have been an awe-inspiring revelation of a world of taste and splendor, harmony and beauty, grace and magnificence that was almost totally absent from American life” (Cawelti 335).

The influence of the fair was not entirely, however, in the intangible realms of inspiration and awe. Daniel Burnham would later claim, in the 1909 *Plan of Chicago* he co-authored with Edward Bennett, that “the World’s Fair of 1893 was the beginning, in our day and in this country, of the orderly arrangement of extensive public grounds and buildings” (4). While Burnham undoubtedly exaggerates the singular importance of the fair, it did have an influence on the City Beautiful movement. The fair coincided with the origins of city planning as a professional discipline: “City planners had existed before, but the profession had not existed in the United States in a significant way before the Chicago World’s Fair of 1893” (Chappell, “Chicago” 14). Indeed, in the years following the Fair, Burnham was closely involved in municipal plans for Washington D.C., Cleveland, San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago, and

Baguio, a “summer capital” in “the newly-pacified Philippines” (Van Zanten 28).

Burnham’s version of city planning was well suited to the colonial site, which provided the kind of centralized control difficult to obtain in the metropole. Mario Manieri-Elia usefully contextualizes Burnham’s municipal ideology in relation to U.S. imperialism at the turn of the century:

[Burnham] found in America’s imperial policies the perfect outlet for what he most believed in: the possibility of order and the usefulness of beauty. Through his tools of design he was confident of commanding the power of American capital: capital by far more fully evolved and readily controlled than that which had provided Haussmann with the means of transforming Paris. Nor was he impeded by social or sociological scruples; as a good reader of Kipling, he seems to have considered these newly conquered people “half devil and half child” and, on the whole, a rather surly lot. (81)

The example of Georges Haussmann’s mid-nineteenth-century reconstruction of Paris, under the authority of Napoleon III, is one which appealed to Burnham himself: in the *Plan of Chicago*, Paris is said to be “the international capital because [it] . . . satisfies the craving for good order and symmetry in every part” (89). Haussmann’s top-down, even dictatorial leadership was also admired.⁷ Burnham and Bennett write, “Taking counsel neither of expediency nor of compromise, he ever sought the true and proper solution. To him Paris appeared as a highly organized unity” (18). What the architect-city planner of turn-of-the-century Chicago and the mid-nineteenth-century Prefect of Paris

shared was an interest in the design of the urban space as a coherent and cohesive unit. While Chicago did not have an official, centralized authority à la Haussmann, it did have a commercial elite, closely tied to the city's political machine: "By the time of the 1893 Columbian Exposition," Gerald Suttles argues, "the city could almost be said to have a private government" (156). This commercial elite (institutionalized in the Commercial Club) supported the World's Columbian Exposition— and, less successfully, the 1909 *Plan*— in its focus on aesthetics and the facilitation of commerce.

The focus on aesthetic order, of course, neglected many other urban problems. Buried amongst the numerous Guerin watercolors of panoramic cityscapes, in a single, brief allusion to the dense concentrations of the urban poor, the 1909 Chicago plan notes:

. . . the slum conditions will remain. The remedy is the same as has been resorted to the world over: first, the cutting of broad thoroughfares through the unwholesome district; and, secondly, the establishment and remorseless enforcement of sanitary regulations which shall insure . . . absolute cleanliness in the street, on the sidewalks, and even within the buildings. (108)

Hausmannian boulevards plus "remorseless enforcement" signals the full extent of the Chicago plan's treatment of the "Other Half" of the modern city. The properly beautiful, planned urban space literally had no place for the "unwholesome district."

Perhaps the career of Burnham's city planning is ultimately summed up best in his own words: "Make no Little Plans . . . Make big plans . . . remembering that a noble, logical diagram once recorded will never die . . . Let

your watchword be order and your beacon beauty" (*Plan v*). Aesthetic order represented sociopolitical order: if the built environment were beautiful, symmetrical, and orderly, the populus would be as well. In John Hancock's words, "Convinced that physical order equaled social order, viewers [of the fair] went home to plan more fairs and to plant, paint, clean, and partially rebuild their cities" (599). The professional city planners attempted to use aesthetic form to regulate, normalize, and ultimately control the disruptions of the modern city.⁸

The World's Columbian Exposition, in short, represents an attempt "to transform the harsh and ugly world of urban industrialism into a utopian vision of harmonious beauty and monumental splendor" (Cawelti 341-42). Bellamy's novel, *Looking Backward*, provides a similar version of urban modernity, linking the early American vision of "a city on a hill" with the concerns of a modern, industrializing metropolis.⁹ Like the fair, the book was enormously successful, and led to the formation of "nationalist clubs" all over the United States, devoted to making Bellamy's futuristic visions a reality.¹⁰ As Manieri-Elia notes, "The publication of *Looking Backward* and the Columbian Exposition were, in fact, two of the most popular and successful events in the United States in the late nineteenth century" (36). While Manieri-Elia's argument that "their outlook was identical" (36) is overstated, the concerns Bellamy develops in the novel link modernity and urbanization to cooperation, commerce, and aesthetics. Like the White City, *Looking Backward* creates a utopian space: a vision of the metropolis cleared of the conflicts and tensions obtaining there in the late nineteenth century.¹¹

Julian West, Bellamy's latter-day Rip Van Winkle, is a wealthy nineteenth-century Bostonian. Prone to insomnia, he employs a "Professor of Animal Magnetism" to induce mesmeric sleep. Due to an unlikely series of events (a house fire, a secret sleeping chamber beneath the foundations, his Doctor's relocation, and the apparent death by fire or accident of his servant¹²), West remains in a trance state for "one hundred and thirteen years, three months, and eleven days"; he is awakened by Dr. Leete in the year 2000. When Dr. Leete is unable to convince him that a century has in fact passed, they go out onto the roof of Leete's house— built on the spot where West's own once stood— to view the city. The first thing West notices about the Boston of 2000 is its cleanliness, order, and beauty:

At my feet lay a great city. Miles of broad streets, shaded by trees and lined with fine buildings, for the most part not in continuous blocks but set in larger or smaller inclosures, stretched in every direction. Every quarter contained large open squares filled with trees, among which statues glistened and fountains flashed in the late afternoon sun. Public buildings of colossal size and an architectural grandeur unparalleled in my day raised their stately piles on every side. (18)

The description, replete with tree-lined boulevards, open squares, public statuary and monumental architecture, is a mix of late nineteenth century improvement schemes: the city parks movement of Olmsted¹³ and Downing plus the Haussmann-Burnham emphasis on broad streets and public neo-classicism. "He had left a city," Sylvia Strauss notes, "so noisy that he had to build a soundproof room underneath his house in order to sleep; the air outside was so

begrimed and fetid with the odors emanating from the working-class slums that it inhibited breathing. He awakens to a city straight from the drawing boards of nineteenth-century futurists” (72). Given that the White City was built only five years after West’s last nineteenth century experience, and indeed Baron Haussmann’s reconstruction of Paris occurred several decades before, his surprise at the sights he describes is overdone: he nearly faints.

Bellamy’s juxtaposition of the two Bostons is part of an extended polemic for cooperation, which the new society of the year 2000 exemplifies. The built environment of the modern metropolis merely reflects the new social order. When West, in a nightmare, revisits nineteenth-century urban space he is everywhere overwhelmed by the disorder and chaos endemic to competitive capitalism, as well as the inequalities of wealth it encouraged: “The squalor and malodorousness of the town struck me, from the moment I stood upon the street, as facts I have never before observed” (151). In the retail district on Washington Street he is moved to laugh aloud at the redundancy and inefficiency of the nineteenth century model:

For my life I could not have helped it, with such a mad humor was I moved at the sight of the interminable rows of stores on either side, up and down the street so far as I could see,— scores of them, to make the spectacle more utterly preposterous, within a stone’s throw devoted to selling the same sort of goods. (152)

In the manufacturing districts of South Boston, West finds the same intense competition and unnecessary duplication of labor: “not only were these four thousand establishments not working in concert . . . they were using their utmost skill to frustrate one another’s effort” (154). Just as the World’s Fair

had been praised as a cooperative effort (in implicit comparison to Chicago proper), the difference between the two Bostons is as basic as cooperation versus competition. The World's Fair suggested that proper control of urban populations could be ensured through classical aesthetic design; Bellamy's novel suggests that the principle of cooperation leads to peaceful industrialization.

What makes the Boston of the year 2000 cooperative, according to Bellamy, is the nationalization of industry; the efficiency gained from the re-organization of capital and labor creates massive surpluses, which are used to improve public spaces. Bellamy describes the organization of the "industrial army" in extensive detail; so much so that it paradoxically seems unimportant how it is organized. More crucial is that it *is* organized: production and consumption are joined in one well regulated, efficient system.¹⁴ If the design of the White City praised "order," Bellamy's novel is an epic of organization. The distinction between "the age of individualism" and the age of "concert" is figured as the difference between the umbrella and the covered walkway: "in the nineteenth century, when it rained, the people of Boston put up three hundred thousand umbrellas over as many heads, and in the twentieth century they put up one umbrella over all the heads" (74). The truly modern is figured by Bellamy as the ultimate corporation— an odd combination of a critique of capitalism and a techno-utopian belief in the promise of scientifically managed industrial production.

Chauncey Thomas's *The Crystal Button: Or, Adventures of Paul Prognosis in the Forty-Ninth Century* was published just three years after Bellamy's novel, and resembles it in many respects.¹⁵ The 49th century city of Tone— the

name is the imagined result of an evolution from St. Botolph's Town, to Boston, to Tone— is also an architectural utopia:

To his surprise, he found himself standing in a public square, that was wholly unfamiliar to him, surrounded by buildings vast and magnificent. Everywhere novelty, everywhere order, everywhere beauty! Great structures on every side, aglow with the morning sunshine appalled him by their majestic proportions; while unbroken vistas of wide avenues, opening up on every side, revealed the extent and grandeur of the city. With eyes of wonder he gazed upon the colonnades, triumphal arches, monuments, towers, façades alive with sculptured decorations, and domes like cumulous clouds that wall the horizon. And in the centre of the square rose a white column that pierced the very zenith. (15-16)

Just as Julian West is at first unable to recognize the basic topography of late twentieth century Boston, claiming "Surely I have never seen this city nor one comparable to it before" (18), Thomas's hero, Paul Prognosis, exclaims "If this is Boston, then I'm no Bostonian" (17). Just as West awakens 113 years later in geographically the same spot,¹⁶ Prognosis is transported mysteriously to the 49th century only to end up in the same city from which he came: the topography of the new "Tone" recalls the old Boston as though it were simply superimposed. Bellamy's 20th century Boston and Thomas's 49th century "Tone" share an ideology linking order and beauty which was central to the World's Fair and to later attempts to envision modernity for the city.

These utopias were not, however, pastoral or agrarian: Bellamy and Thomas “believed that the industrial city needed to be tamed and civilized through the elimination of excessive competition and inequality of income, but that basically it provided an adequate setting for . . . utopia” (Parssinen 261). In Jean Pfaelzer’s terms, these utopias are “progressive,” as opposed to “retrogressive” utopias, which “sought a return to a lost age of a simple agrarian arcadia, which they claimed existed in preindustrial America” (“Impact” 127).¹⁷ According to Milton Cantor, Chicopee Falls— Bellamy’s hometown— was already industrialized as early as the 1820s:

The new industrial army entered a rural community in the 1820s and 1830s and transformed it, with the cotton mills becoming the town’s economic heart and with many small manufacturers dependent on continuous mill operations. By the late 1840s, Irish women began to replace the Yankee operatives, and in the 1850s, a time of economic slump, complaints of rowdyism in the streets began to be heard. . . . Additional changes occurred when French Canadians began to replace the Irish mill operatives in the late 1850s. By now a permanent factory labor force had been established. Intermittent depression characterized the decade, which produced severe work conditions and, after 1860, very considerable ferment in the ranks of labor. By then the old order had completely changed. Polish Catholics were coming into Chicopee. . . . Bellamy grew to maturity in the midst of this mounting social and economic crisis. (22-23)

Considering that Bellamy was born in 1850, its difficult to see how he could be “nostalgic for the days when Chicopee Falls . . . was a pastoral haven” (Strauss 70). What Bellamy (and Thomas) imagined was that urbanization and industrialization could occur without the problems which had attended it in the nineteenth-century: modernity without tears.

II. “The World a Department Store”: Selling Culture

The Fair was not all about architectural beauty, however, even within the Court of Honor: what these classically faced buildings contained were, primarily, shrines to the productive power of industrial capitalism. Judith Adams provides one limited catalogue of the kinds of commodities the fairs demonstrated:

The 65,000 exhibits, mostly the products of American factories, included massive and powerful steam engines, electric dynamos, railroad engines and cars, elevators, concrete paving, paper making machines, mechanical devices for everything from sewing and cooking to mining ore and manufacturing industrial screws. The zipper made its auspicious debut, presented by the Universal Fastener Co. in the form of a “clasp locker” for shoes, along with many processed foods from spicy Texas chili, to sweet and festive Cracker Jacks, to bland and ordinary pancake mix touted by a new living trademark, Aunt Jemima herself.¹⁸ (xx)

Once inside, the visible skeletons of these monumental palaces revealed their modernity: while the effect of the exterior was classical, the construction methods borrowed heavily from the same techniques as the commercial

buildings (department stores, warehouses, and what would later be labeled skyscrapers) being erected within the Loop in the actual city of Chicago: “Behind the white staff façade of the World’s Fair buildings was the steel and glass structure of the engineer” (Mumford, *Sticks* 128). The Manufactures Building, for example, was “the largest in the world up to its time, spanning an area of 732 by 1,687 feet under its twenty arched steel trusses . . . a stunning feat in iron and steel technology” (Cawelti 343-44). (See Figs. 1.5 and 1.6). What the buildings resembled was not a classical Roman forum, as the facades suggested, but a modern department store.

Indeed, the International Expositions and the department store developed concurrently. As Susan Carter Benson argues, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century a “broad-based shift in urban retailing was occurring, and— by about 1890— a public and industrial consensus about the nature of the new beast had crystallized” (14). Like a department store, a World’s Fair was “primarily a commercial event whose main goal was selling the idea of consumption to the public by creating elaborate images of luxury and prosperity” (R. Lewis 47). The fair sold not only specific goods but the idea of goods, increasing the level consumer demand in general.¹⁹ Like the fair, the department store was “an extension not of urban reality but of urban ideals of public comfort, safety, and convenience” (R. Lewis 47). In the American city of the late nineteenth century, the department store was *the* commercial venue, and like the modernity represented by the White City, the modernity of the department store was based on order, beauty, and safety: “World’s fairs built idealized consumer cities within their walls. They presented a sanitized

view of the world with no poverty, no war, no social problems, and very little nature. Everyone was presumed to be able to buy” (Benedict 5).

Looking Backward, similarly, imagines mass production and consumption as an integral facet of a non-threatening modernity. While Leach oversimplifies Bellamy’s relationship to the new mode of consumption, writing that “Bellamy . . . put the department store at the epicenter of American society,” he is correct to note that *Looking Backward* imagines “a centralized system of mass consumption that guaranteed everybody, in exchange for acceptance of a disciplined industrial regime, instantaneous access to the same consumer goods and services” (28). What Bellamy imagines, in fact, is the organizational acumen and extensive merchandising represented by the new stores, but without the competitive aspects represented by marketing and advertising. When Edith Leete, Dr. Leete’s daughter (and West’s love interest in the Utopian Romance) takes him to “the store” (there is only one in each ward), he is confounded by the absence of *selling*. Goods are ordered and purchased, certainly, but the buyer is completely active, the store and its employees passive. In direct contrast to the department store’s emphasis on generating and maintaining demand, the stores in the year 2000 are imagined as little more than distribution depots: merely another link in the systematic regulation of industry. “There was nothing in the exterior aspect of the edifice to suggest a store to a representative of the nineteenth century,” Bellamy writes, “There was no display of goods in the great windows, or any device to advertise wares, or attract custom” (49). In contrast to the extravagant lengths to which department stores went to encourage sales, Edith informs Julian that “it is not

the interest of the clerk or of the nation to dispose of a yard or a pound of anything to anybody who does not want it" (50).

Advertising and marketing, Bellamy argues, are only necessary as the result of competition— his utopia is obsessed with production and distribution, but minimizes evidence of consumption: "we would be hard pressed to find any activity," Auerbach notes, "that really amounts to consumption" in the novel.²⁰ When West dreams of nineteenth century Boston, he sees advertising as a kind of perverse spectacle: "This horrible babel of shameless self-assertion and mutual depreciation, this stunning clamor of conflicting boasts, appeals, and adjurations, this stupendous system of brazen beggary, what was it all but the necessity of a society in which the opportunity to serve the world according to his gifts . . . had to be fought for!" (152). Just as West is able to see new resonance in the advertisements covering "the walls of the buildings, the windows, the broadsides of the newspapers . . . [and even] the very pavements" (152), he becomes more aware of the function that department stores serve:

I took wondering note of the show windows of the stores, filled with goods arranged with a wealth of pains and artistic device to attract the eye. I saw the throngs of ladies looking in, and the proprietors eagerly watching the effect of the bait. I went within and noted the hawk-eyed-floor-walker watching for business, overlooking the clerks, keeping them up to their task of inducing the customer to buy, buy, for money if they had it, for credit if they had it not, to buy what they wanted not, more than they wanted, what they could not afford. Why this effort to induce

people to buy? Surely that had nothing to do with the legitimate business of distributing products to those who needed them. (153)

What Bellamy rejects is the “inducement” on which the modern department store is based, and around which it is organized. While Bellamy does propose “a centralized system of mass consumption” he rejects the very marketing strategies and consumerist ideology Leach describes.

III. “Everyone in His Place”: Modernity and Difference in the Metropole

Anne McClintock argues that an “epochal shift” occurred “in the culture of imperialism in the last decades of the nineteenth century,” as racism became increasingly connected to consumption:

Commodity racism- in the specifically Victorian forms of advertising and photography, the imperial Expositions and the museum movement— converted the narrative of imperial Progress into mass-produced *consumer spectacles*. (33)²¹

This was fundamentally true of the World’s Columbian Exposition: in addition to the commodity worship within the palaces of the White City, the fair also included the Midway Plaisance (figs. 1.7, 1.8), a strip of entertainments and concessions devoted to the ethnographic display of “primitive” cultures (and people).²² In Rydell’s terms, “on the midway at the World’s Columbian Exposition, evolution, ethnology, and popular amusements interlocked as active agents and bulwarks of hegemonic assertion of ruling class authority” (*All* 41). What was repressed (or at least hidden behind the monumental facades) in the White City returns as spectacle on the Midway: racial difference is made non-threatening, because packaged for consumption.

William Cameron describes the transition from White City to Midway Plaisance:

To pass out of the western portal of the Woman's Building, and to enter the broad, graveled walkway which leads thence into Midway Plaisance, is the task of a moment; but in that time one is transplanted from the sights and sounds of modern civilization into a strange land, peopled with barbaric noises, and given over to strange customs, costumes, tongues, diet, dwellings, and gods. . . . one goes back centuries at one step. . . (642)

Significantly, the transition takes place from the Woman's Building, which was located where the Midway met the fairgrounds in Jackson Park proper (the Midway begins just off the map in fig. 1.2): "women, in the eyes of the exposition's male sponsors, came close to slipping into the category of 'otherness' reserved for 'savages' and 'exotics.' They were redeemed only by their capacity to serve as mothers of civilization" (Rydell, "Frankenstein" 157). Indeed, the very arrangement of the exhibits within the Midway Plaisance (fig. 1.7) implies a "primitive-civilized gradient," moving further away from "civilization" as one moves westward from the (white) Woman's Building (Fogelson 77).

The Midway was "officially classified under the auspices of the exposition's Department of Ethnology," but quickly became known as the entertainment section of the fair.²³ Yet, consistent with McClintock's explanation of "commodity racism," there was no conflict between the racialized and commercialized aspects of the "amusements." As Curtis Hinsley

notes, to experience the Midway Plaisance's "department store of exotic cultures" (355) was to participate in a central experience of modernity:

. . . the modernism of the Midway was neither the hucksterism of Barnum nor the public science of Goode, Mason, Putnam, or Boas. Rather, it was the modernism of Baudelaire as described by Benjamin . . . The eyes of the Midway are those of the *flâneur*, the stroller through the street arcade of human differences, whose experience is not the holistic, integrated ideal of the anthropologist but the segmented, seriatim fleetingness of the modern tourist "just passing through." (356)

The utopian space imagined by the built environment of the fair, both in the White City and in the Midway Plaisance was *white*— arranged for the safe enjoyment and moral edification of the normative "American."

Bellamy's *Looking Backward* also presents a white world, in the guise of a racially neutral one. In chapter two, the only chapter which narrates action supposed to have taken place in 1887, we learn that West's family mansion is "elegant in an old fashioned way within, but situated in a quarter that had long since become undesirable for residence, from its invasion by tenement houses and manufactories" (10). West is the "only living representative in the direct line" of his family, and shares his house only with "one servant, a faithful colored man by the name of Sawyer" (10). Once West is awakened in the year 2000, none of the characters are ever referred to by race. Even when West dreams of returning to the nineteenth century, and visits "a scene of squalor and human degradation such as only the South Cove Tenement district

could present,” the racial and ethnic character of the residents is blurred, if not completely elided:

From the black doorways and windows of the rookeries on every side came gusts of fetid air. The streets and alleys reeked with the effluvia of a slave ship's between decks. As I passed I had glimpses within of pale babies gasping out their lives amid sultry stench, of hopeless-faced women deformed by hardship, retaining of womanhood no trait save weakness, while from the windows leered girls with brows of brass. Like the starving bands of mongrel curs that infest the streets of Moslem towns, swarms of half-clad brutalized children filled the air with shrieks and curses as they fought and tumbled among the garbage that littered the court yards. (157)

While the “slave ship” reference might be said to suggest an African-American presence, the metaphors and images do not resolve into any specific ethnic or racial division: the residents are alternately black, pale, brass(?), mongrel, and Muslim. West racializes the tenements' residents without providing a specific marker: they are those who must be organized out of existence, and that is all that matters to him.²⁴ As Fabi notes, “in a cultural context of widespread, Darwinist, pseudo-biological theories of racial superiority and white supremacy, Bellamy did not need to talk about black characters in order to make comments about race” (348).

When a contributor to *The New Nation* noted the absence of African-Americans from the utopian space of *Looking Backward*, Bellamy replied that “Nationalists are color-blind”:

For anything to the contrary that appears in the book, the people referred to in its pages, so far as we remember, might have been black, brown, or yellow as well as white. Men, women and children are all the book discusses, and as to their rights and duties the author no more thought of dividing them into classes with reference to complexion, than as to height, width or weight. (qtd. in Rosemont 173)

Yet, the Leetes of the year 2000 are rather like the Julian West of 1887. In a footnote, West tries to explain why he was not more distracted by his miraculous 113 year slumber: “In accounting for this state of mind it must be remembered that, except for the topic of our conversations, there was in my surroundings next to nothing to suggest what had befallen me. Within a block of my home in the old Boston I could have found social circles vastly more foreign to me” (22). In short, while Bellamy in *The New Nation* might plead color-blindness, the Leetes obviously resemble Julian West, a wealthy, cultured Bostonian from a family at least three generations American, more than Sawyer or the vague tenement residents invading Boston. How the population came to be so homogeneous is never specified,²⁵ though Dr. Leete’s claim that “for the first time in history the principle of sexual selection, with its tendency to preserve and transmit the better types of the race, and let the inferior types drop out, has unhindered operation” suggests (as do the “mongrel,” “infest,” and “swarm” in the description of the tenement residents) at least parallels to eugenics and social Darwinism (129).²⁶

The only overt reference to race²⁷ is in terms of international relations, where the “more backward races . . . are gradually being educated up to

civilized institutions” (68). In an article discussing the writing of *Looking Backward*, Bellamy phrases it this way: “It would be preposterous to assume parity of progress between America and Turkey. The more advanced nations, ours surely first of all, will reach the summit earliest and, reaching strong brotherly hands downward, help up the laggards” (“How” 24). Bellamy’s “fleeting references to foreign affairs,” Matarese writes, “reflect . . . a messianic outlook which tends to see the United States as a paradigm for others, a chosen people destined to redeem the world through their example and guidance” (46). Just as Burnham’s city planning methodologies were deployed to the colonial Philippines, Bellamy’s reform strategies assume that domestic control can and should be exported.

Just as Bellamy imagines the United States acting toward “the laggards” abroad, Edith Leete serves, in the novel, to redeem Julian West. Roemer notes that *Looking Backward* has many “crucial intersections” with “popular eighteenth and nineteenth-century domestic fictions”:

. . . the narrative structure, particularly the use of the separated lovers’ plot and episodes designed to evoke grief and guilt . . . the domestic locales, notably the dining and bedrooms and the home library . . . the angelic heroine— Edith Leete is the obvious embodiment of this familiar and nurturing figure . . . a narrative voice that bears striking resemblances to the voices of hysterical female heroines and didactic female narrators. (101)

Thus the domestic, in the sense of the explicitly female home space, overlaps with the domestic in the sense of the non-foreign. “If writers about domesticity encouraged the extension of female influence outward to

domesticate the foreign,” Amy Kaplan argues, “their writings also evoked anxiety about the opposing trajectory that brings foreignness into the home” (“Manifest” 589). Edith Leete domesticates Julian West, in both senses: he is the foreign brought into the home, who turns out to be perfectly at home in her domestic space.

While ethnicity and race are excised from— or repressed in— the novel, gender returns as a primary category of classification: while the population of Boston in the year 2000 appears racially homogenous, men and women have become more distinctly different. As part of the modern order, women are organized into an industrial army just as men are, though “they are an entirely different discipline . . . and constitute rather an allied force than an integral part of the army of men” (125). In fact, it is the separation of the “disciplines,” male and female, that constitutes the greatest of the “alterations in the social position of women” in the new order:

It is in giving full play to the differences of sex rather than in seeking to obliterate them, as was apparently the effort of some reformers in your day, that the enjoyment of each by itself and the piquancy which each has for the other, are alike enhanced. In your day there was no career for women except in an unnatural rivalry with men. We have given them a world of their own . . . and I assure you they are very happy in it. (126)

Like the Woman’s Building at the Chicago World’s Fair, this “world of their own” represents nineteenth century gender ideology, this time imaginatively mapping those ideologies onto twentieth century gendered subjects. By allowing “full play to the differences of sex,” Bellamy’s utopian society is able

to continue to enjoy “the piquancy which each has for the other,” just as the commodity racism of the World’s Fair allowed the consumption of race as an “exotic” object: the change which threatens the stability of the organization is neutralized by solidifying difference. “Despite *Looking Backwards’s* expression of economic equality,” Jean Pfaelzer notes, “Bellamy’s utopia preserved the existing political, social, and sexual relationships, because Bellamy accepted as ‘givens’ contemporary ideas often used to justify capitalism: Social Darwinism, the rights of private property, and the inferiority of women and working-class people” (“Political” 118). Ultimately, *Looking Backward’s* message is that modernity can be controlled: the metropolis can be made ordered, and therefore safe.

Similarly, in *The Crystal Button*, although most of the focus is on the explanation of “modern” technologies and architectural methods, we are explicitly told that “the population has again become homogenous” (260). Echoing Dr. Leete in Bellamy’s novel, Professor Prosper tells Paul Prognosis that “We have abolished classes,” and suggests that, among other things, eugenics has certainly been employed: “no diseased or deformed person who is liable to communicate serious imperfection of any kind of offspring is ever allowed to marry” (68). This extends, of course, to the “imbeciles and the insane” and well as the “morally deranged” (68-69). Indeed, a few pages later, Prosper adds a detail he “did not mention, but which has proved of supreme service in the work of purifying the blood of successive generations” (71). Anyone admitted to the “hospital” (which houses all the “unfit”) who is pronounced “incurable” is “by an instantaneous and painless operation . . . rendered forever sterile” (71). In a later passage, Thomas writes: “In

rehumanizing degraded humanity, the head must be enlarged at certain points, the neck reduced, the nose straightened, the cheekbones and jaws remodeled” (166-67). Thomas presents eugenics as a kind of social architecture, remodeling the urban population to ensure order.

When Prognosis is shown to the giant pyramidal residential buildings, he argues that “if the tenement class of my day were given the freedom of this place, they would soon reduce it to their own level of disorder, filth, and degradation” (85). Reversing Bellamy’s argument, Prognosis assumes that the beauty of the built environment results from rather than produces the people who inhabit it. Professor Prosper reminds him that the “tenement class” of the late nineteenth-century needed instruction:

The women are mainly responsible as the home-makers. One reason why your mechanics had such poor homes is perfectly clear; the women of their class, whom they naturally took as wives, received little instruction in the serious duties of life which they ignorantly undertook. They did not know what housekeeping really meant. They did not know what home really means. (85-86).

Thomas (through Prosper) here projects working-class women— many of whom worked as “domestics”— as being never fully integrated into the home, like the immigrant who became a citizen (domestic) but always remained marked as foreign (never knowing what “American” really means).

The responsibility of making homes is projected forward to the women of the 49th century, and the benevolent guidance and leadership Bellamy imagined for the United States abroad is here offered within the metropolis.

Prosper further reveals that not only was universal suffrage *not* granted, but “the time came when the sacred freedom of the ballot had to be protected by more and more stringent laws, until the balance of power could be assured to the saving minority who knew right from wrong and liberty from license” (259). Like the White City, the city of Tone is a Utopian space created by imposing order: the modern metropolis domesticated.

IV. Troubling Utopian Modernity: *Caesar's Column* and the Return of the Repressed

The Janus-faced character of the World's Columbian Exposition must be situated in a more complex relationship to the onset of urban modernity. The fair was neither a purely nostalgic attempt to control and contain the changes engendered by urbanization, immigration, and industrialization, nor a simple, celebratory acceptance of those changes. “The fruition of the alliance between ‘the word Culture’ and corporate powers, [the White City] closes out an era,” writes Alan Trachtenberg; “But it also inaugurates another. Like the Gilded Age, White City straddles a divide: a consummation and a new beginning” (*Incorporation* 209). The same can be said of utopian literature in the United States between 1888 and 1900. While “the utopists were disciples of Victorian culture in America . . . they were preaching Victorianism strained to the breaking point by the changes occurring in late nineteenth-century America” (Roemer, “Utopia” 324).

As many have noted, the World's Fair took place in the middle of increasingly difficult struggles in the U.S. economy, framed by the Haymarket riots and the Pullman Strike:

The Exposition's opening in May 1893 coincided exactly with the worst economic decline to date in American history. Banks were closing, as were factories. Seventy-four railroads would be in receivership by the end of that summer, nearly 100,000 businesses failed, and masses of people became unemployed.

(Adams xxi)

Given these conditions, it is not surprising that visionary texts of the turn of the century were often not as optimistic as Bellamy's and Thomas's. Ignatius Donnelly's *Caesar's Column : A Story of the Twentieth Century* (1890) imagines not a peaceful modernity achieved through technological improvement and rational, planned organization but through catastrophic class warfare.²⁸

Caesar's Column presents the story of Gabriel Weltstein, who comes to New York in 1988 from a small village in Africa,²⁹ moving from "the primitive, simple shepherd-life" to the "roar of the mighty city":

New York contains now ten million inhabitants; it is the largest city that is, or ever has been, in the world. It is difficult to say where it begins or ends: for the villas extend, in almost unbroken succession, clear to Philadelphia; while east, west and north noble habitations spread out mile after mile, far beyond the municipal limits. (8)

At first, Donnelly's New York seems to be another utopian space: "the wonderful city!" complete with geothermal power, twenty-four-hour lighting over the entire city, covered streets, high-speed elevated monorails, intercontinental airlines, even artificial (residential) islands in the sky. When Weltstein sits down to dinner at the appropriately-named Darwin Hotel, he is

awed by an internet-like device which allows one to receive local news from anywhere in the world, projected on an individual screen.

The utopian veneer fades quickly, however, as Weltstein gets caught up in the intrigues of the “Brotherhood of Destruction,” after a chance meeting with Maximillian Petion. He discovers that the wealth and splendor he has experienced at his hotel is only one side of urban modernity: “The ruling class lives in the cities of incomparable splendor, idleness and luxury . . . [While] on the underside of the marvelous looking city dwells the canaille— the class of workers who make up seven-tenths of the world’s population” (Ueda 2, 3). Although Weltstein continually reminds the reader that he abhors violence, he ends up (partially due, in this utopian-dystopian-romance-sentimental detective story-history, to his love of a virtuous woman) intimately involved in the revolution the Brotherhood of Destruction is fermenting.

The impending class warfare is overdetermined: as though the gulf between rich and poor Donnelly describes were not enough, he provides two stock villains: The Brotherhood of Destruction is lead by a crippled Russian Jew and a gigantic bestial Italian, Caesar Lomellini. After spying (from, of course, a concealed secret chamber) on the council of the Plutocracy, Weltstein is asked to speak before the council of the Proletariat, the Brotherhood of Destruction. His descriptions anticipate what June Howard has called “the image of the brute that is characteristic of American naturalist novels” (78), and need to be quoted at length:

Such a man I had never seen before. He was, I should think, not less than six feet six inches high, and broad in proportion. His great arms hung down until the monstrous hands almost touched

the knees. His skin was quite dark, almost negroid; and a thick, close mate of curly black hair covered his huge head like a thatch. His face was muscular, ligamentous; with great bars, ridges and whelks of flesh, especially about the jaws and on the forehead. But the eyes fascinated me. They were the eyes of a wild beast, deep-set, sullen and glaring; they seemed to shine like those of the cat-tribe, with a luminosity of their own. (149)

In perfect contrast to the “negroid” beast, though equally based in late nineteenth-century racism,³⁰ is the “Russian Jew” characterized as “the brains of the Brotherhood”:

He was old and withered. One hand seemed to be shrunken, and his head was permanently crooked to one side. The face was mean and sinister; two fangs alone remained in his mouth; his nose was hooked; the eyes were small, sharp, penetrating and restless; but the expanse of brow above them was grand and noble. It was one of those heads that look as if they had been packed full, and not an inch of space wasted. His person was unclean, however, and the hands and the long finger-nails were black with dirt. I should have picked him out anywhere as a very able and a very dangerous man. (149-50)

The repressed other at the heart of Bellamy’s utopian space and the White City has returned with a vengeance. Donnelly imagines a troubling modernity, in which all the tensions excised neatly by Bellamy and the planners of the World’s Fair have been correspondingly exaggerated.

Caesar's Column “went through twelve editions in its first six months, sold over 700,000 copies and ranked second in popularity to *Looking Backwards* as a novel of social commentary” (Ueda, 1). Donnelly can thus be seen as a starting point for the destructive vision of modernity,³¹ which made explicit the tensions that the utopian vision obscured. Peter Hales describes the World’s Columbian Exposition as “the peak of a consolidating movement, whereby an American urban elite gained control over the production of an urban vision, even as that vision became clarified, organized, and compartmentalized” (269). At the same time, however, “City Beautiful designers found their own utopian visions redefined by public exposure of the urban realities of the ‘other half.’ But that is another story” (270). It is to this story which I turn in the following chapter.

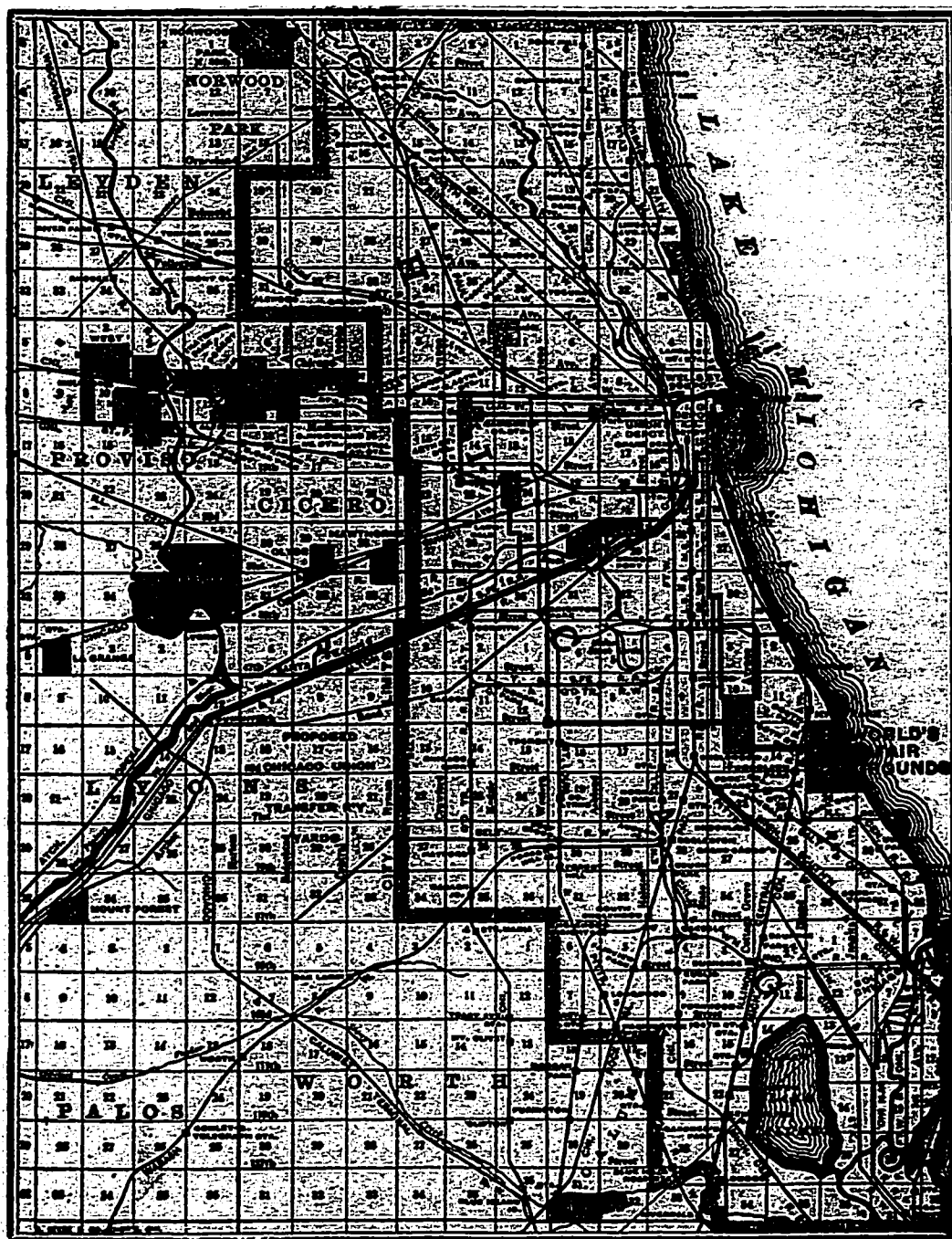


Figure 1.1: Map of Chicago, 1893. (Cameron 147)

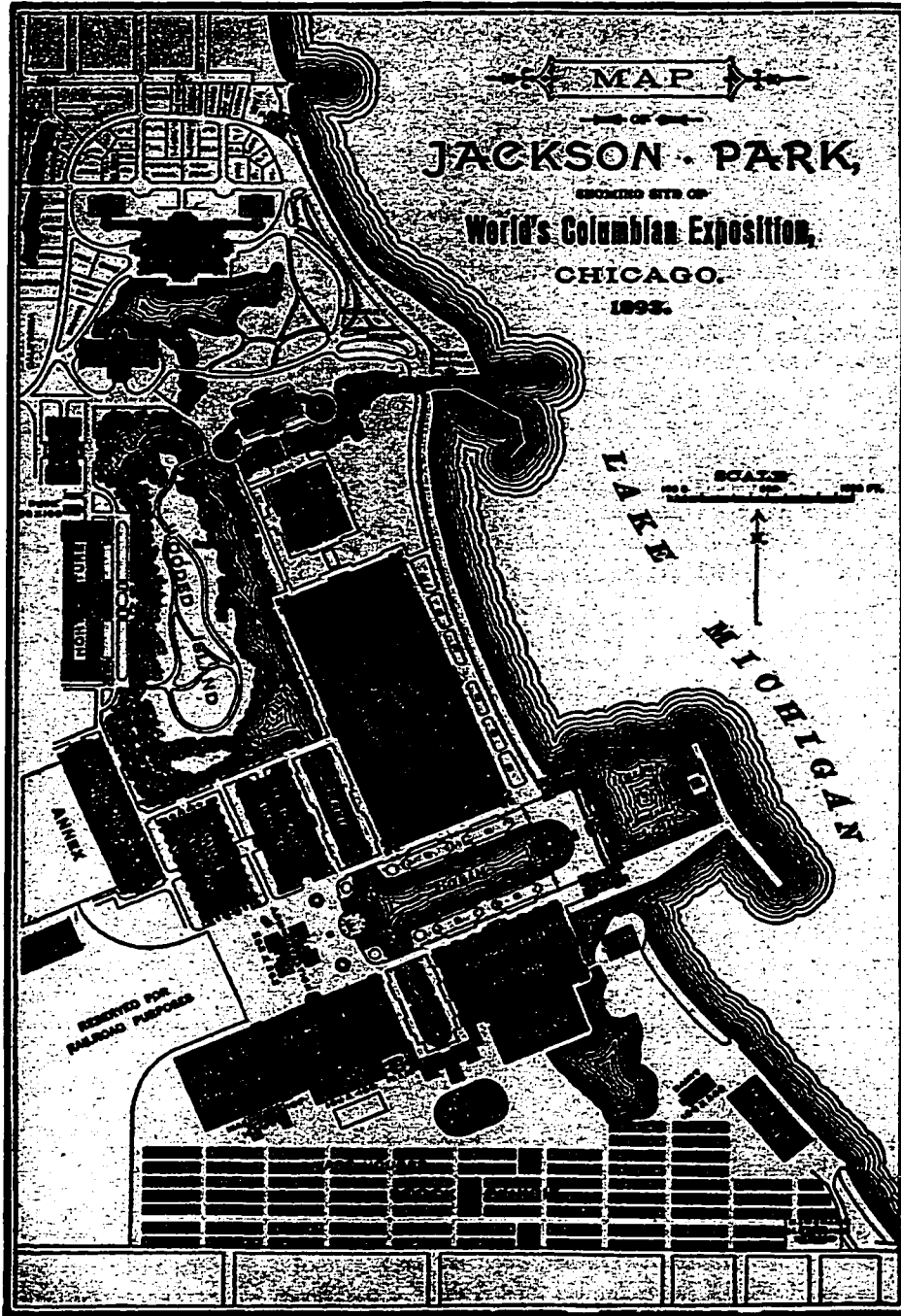


Figure 1.2: Map of Jackson Park Fairgrounds (Cameron 162).



Figure 1.3: Bird's-Eye View. (Cameron 36)



Figure 1.4: Court of Honor, Looking West (Shepp n. p.).

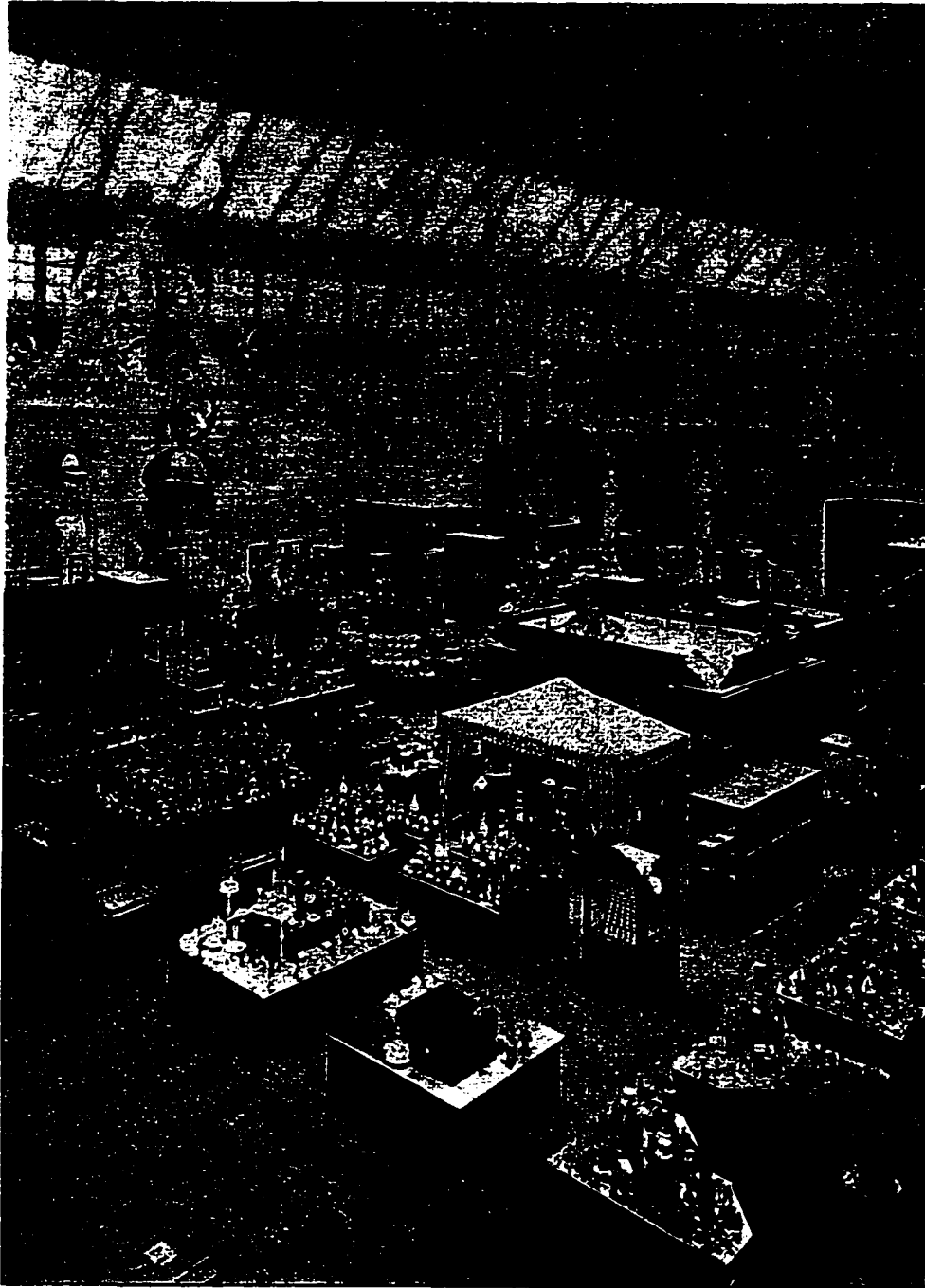


Figure 1.5: Interior, Manufactures Building (Cameron opp. 220).

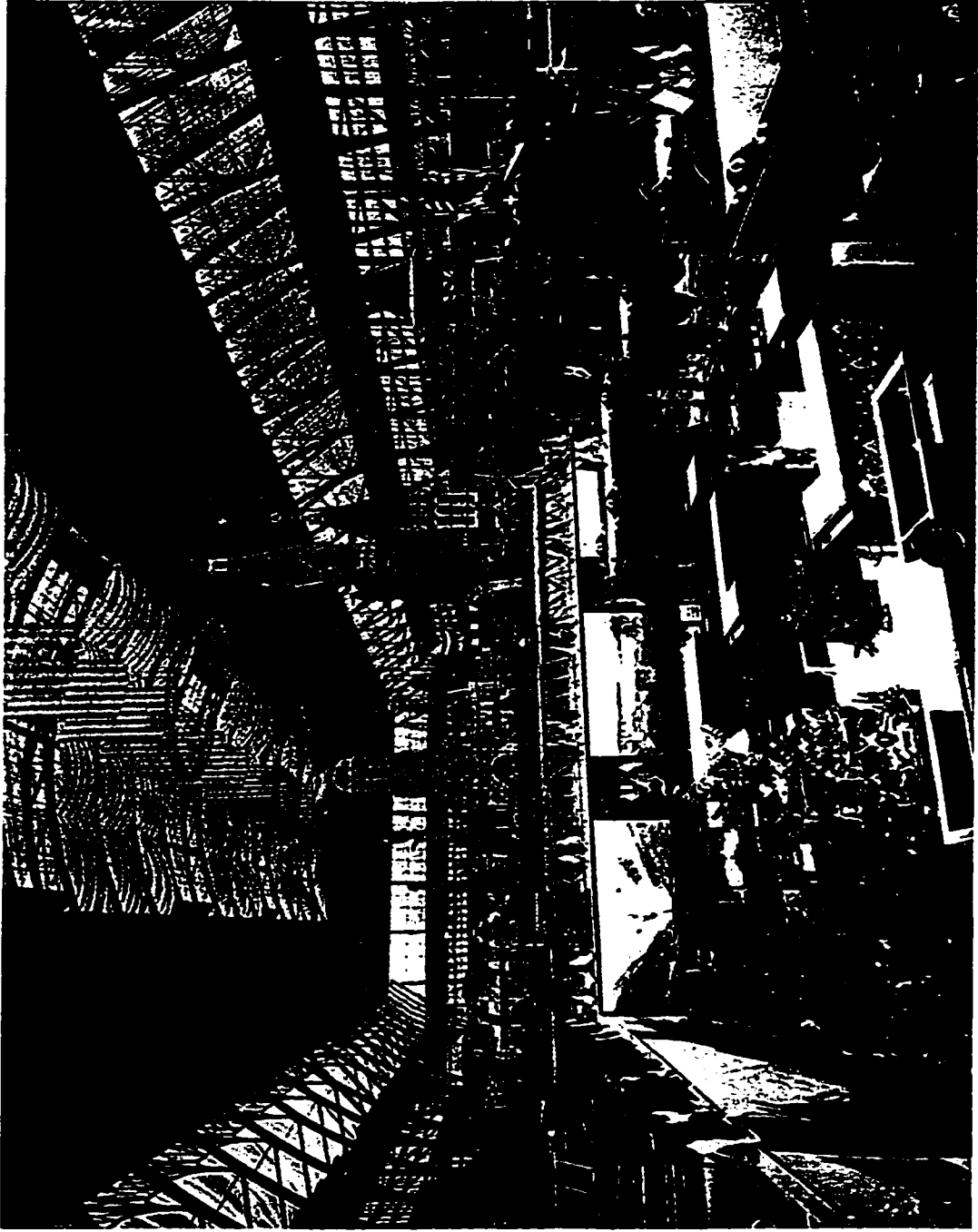


Figure 1.6: Interior, Manufactures Building (Shepp n. p.).

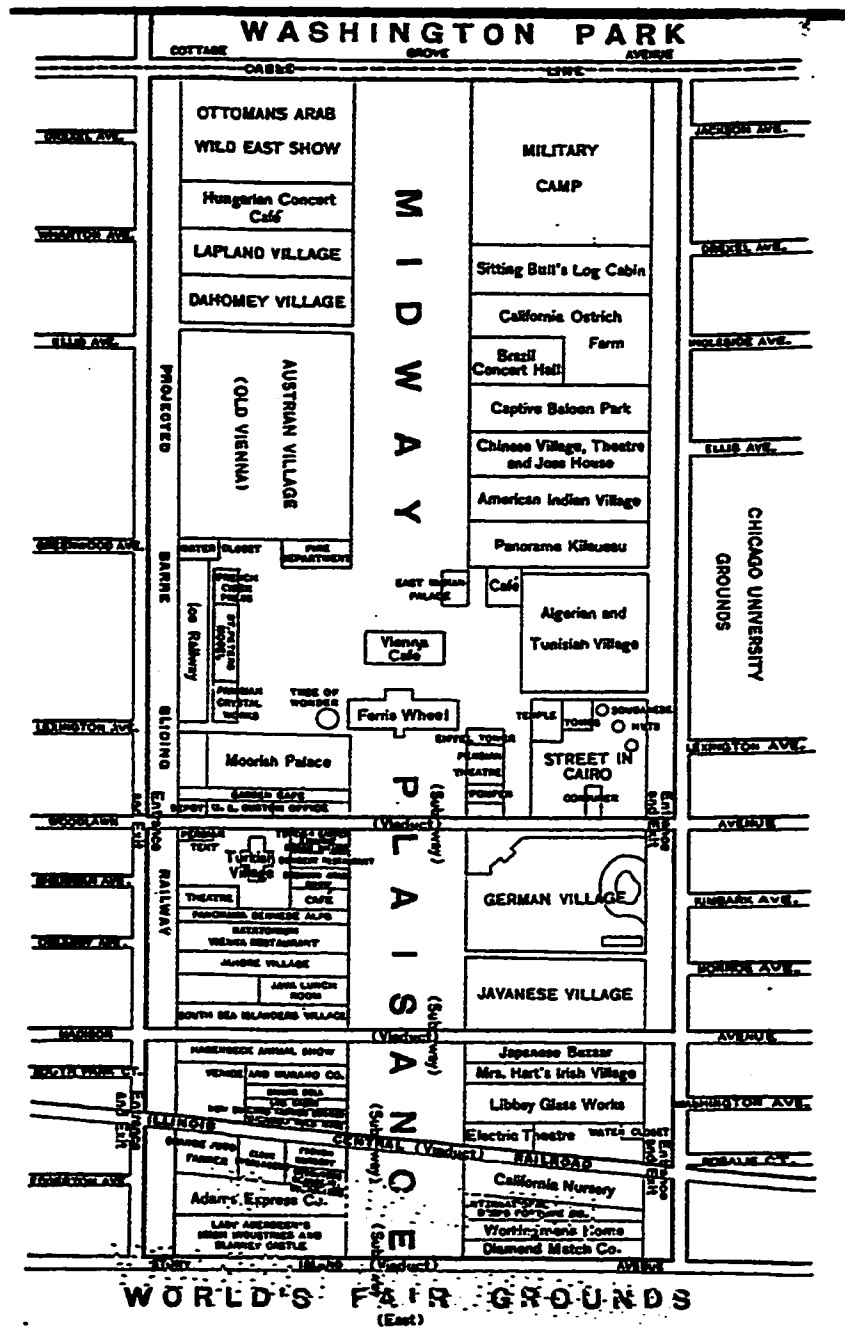


Figure 1.7: Layout of the Midway Plaisance (Flinn frontispiece).

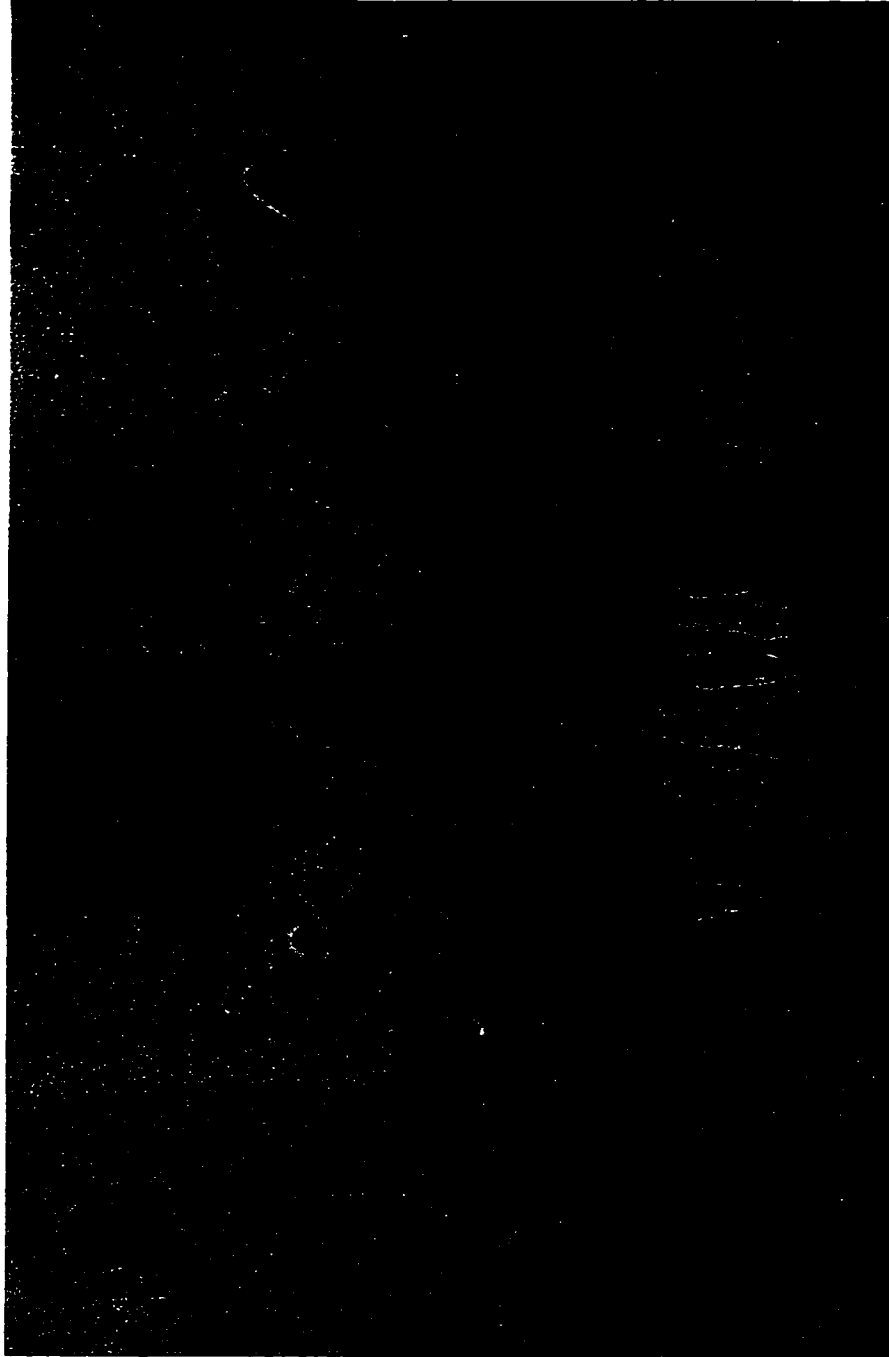


Figure 1.8: Wedding in Cairo (Cameron opp. 300).

Notes to Chapter One

- ¹ Rydell contextualizes the date effectively: The fair opened “thirty years after more than a half-million Americans died in a bloody civil war, five years after a terrorist threw a bomb in Chicago’s Haymarket Square, one year before the massive strikes in Pullman’s company town outside the city, and three short years after the U.S. Army’s assault on Native Americans at Wounded Knee” (“Frankenstein” 143).
- ² See Roemer, “Utopia” 305; the reference to the Gilded Age is apparently unintended.
- ³ Barbara Rubin argues that “technicians were unable to introduce pigment successfully into the stucco,” and that the title “White City” was a way to make “a virtue out of a limitation” (350). This is contradicted by the majority of accounts. (See especially Fogelson, 74 and note 20). Laura Roper, in her biography of Frederick Law Olmsted, claims that “unable to agree on color, the architects finally settled for white” (426).
- ⁴ The phrase is Saul Bellow’s. See Claridge, 103.
- ⁵ In the Foreword to the Museum of Modern Art’s catalog for the first exhibition on “Modern Architecture,” Alfred H. Barr, Jr. made Sullivan’s critique even more polemic, claiming that the fair, and the “flood of revivalism” which followed it, “very nearly stifled the one genuinely important tradition in modern American architecture, the thread which passed from Richardson to Sullivan, from Sullivan to Frank Lloyd Wright” (12).
- ⁶ Rydell claims that “Admissions totaled 27,529,400 adults and children” (*All* 40). Harris provides a useful context: more than 25 million visits, at a time when the U.S. population was 70 million (59).
- ⁷ Wojciech Lesnikowski and Callu Spheeris link Haussmann, Burnham, and the Soviet Government of the 1930s, though they ultimately rely on American exceptionalism to praise Burnham: “. . . there is a singular and important lesson to be derived from Burnham’s performance. This is that broad visions and their realizations do not have to belong solely to centralized, absolutist governments such as Napoleon’s or, much worse, Stalin’s or Hitler’s. What is so comforting about Burnham is that he was able to achieve so much under a democracy, where the public can decide it’s own aspirations” (49).
- ⁸ Stanley Tigerman, writing on Burnham’s legacy for “Postmodern America,” writes that Burnham “would influence the way in which successor generations of architects and planners would attempt to pursue the cohesive development of American cities” (61).
- ⁹ In this context it is unsurprising the Ebenezer Howard, the central figure in the Garden City movement “was instrumental in bringing [*Looking Backward*] out in book form” in the United Kingdom (MacDonald, 76).

- ¹⁰ The clubs counted among their numbers both Howells, who reviewed *Looking Backward* favorably, and Charlotte Perkins, later Gilman (See Scharnhorst).
- ¹¹ As Neil Harris notes, utopian fictions of the era consistently demonstrate an “obsession with order and regularity,” and rely on three primary strategies in imagining their societies: “First, avoidance of situations that involve social pressure . . . Second, construction of facilities which ordered public life and protected personal spaces simultaneously. And finally, encouragement of qualities of character and temper which preferred these controlled environments” (165).
- ¹² West’s “servant, a faithful colored man by the name of Sawyer” (10), is assumed to have perished in the fire which demolishes West’s house but leaves his sleeping chamber intact. “Pre-technological and one-dimensional in his utter faithfulness,” writes M. Giulia Fabi, “the black servant Sawyer fulfills at last one critical structural function in the novel: by dying, he preserves the secret of his owner’s survival and therefore effectively, albeit unwittingly, launches Mr. West into the utopian future” (349). I return to the question of racial difference in *Looking Backward* below.
- ¹³ Cecilia Tichi argues that “Probably it was Olmsted’s ‘Emerald Necklace’ of Boston’s parks, together with his Central Park, which Bellamy had seen during his year in New York City, that suggested the suitable environmental design” (“Introduction” 21).
- ¹⁴ Jonathan Auerbach, in “‘The Nation Organized’: Utopian Impotence in Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*,” argues that “the novel has less to do with socialism . . . and more to do with registering changes taking place in market society itself,” namely “the increasing division between ownership of capital and its control by bureaucratic administration; the shift from blue collar to professional and service oriented jobs; and the growth of the welfare state, with the centralized state regulating and redirecting economic resources” (25).
- ¹⁵ So much so that the original editor, George Houghton, appended a preface noting the “remarkable similarity” and attesting that it had been composed before Bellamy’s novel was published.
- ¹⁶ West is therefore intriguingly *unheimlich*. Richard Widdicombe argues that “the presence of the *unheimlich* in the novel . . . finally overturns the distinction between the real and the imagined so that the polarity upon which Bellamy’s didacticism depends crumbles” (79).
- ¹⁷ Her “retrogressive” example is W. D. Howells’ *A Traveller from Altruria*.
- ¹⁸ The presence of Aunt Jemima as a “living trademark” should be interpreted quite literally: Nancy Green’s “debut in her lifetime role,” took place at the fair, where “She presided over a pancake demonstration which proved to be almost as gala an attraction as the flamboyant Midway’s belly dance Little Egypt” (Marquette 145). See also Berlant 187-88. I return to the connections between commodification and racism below, in discussing the Midway.

- ¹⁹ Cf. Rosalind Williams on French department stores: “As environments of mass consumption, department stores were, and still are, places where consumers are an audience to be entertained by commodities, where selling is mingled with amusement, where arousal of free-floating desire is as important as immediate purchase of particular items. Other examples of such environments are expositions, trade fairs, amusement parks . . .” (67).
- ²⁰ Alexander MacDonal notes, in comparing *Looking Backward* to William Morris’ *News From Nowhere*, Bellamy’s reliance of the image of the “mill” as a positive metaphor for the organization of the entire society (84).
- ²¹ Cf. Rydell: “Through such displays, the commodity fetish became an imperial fetish as well” (“Imperial” 198).
- ²² Rubin’s otherwise insightful and persuasive argument mistakes the relationship between the Midway and the White City: “. . . because the emerging ideology of urban aesthetics could not admit commerce,” she writes, “and since by definition commerce could not be aesthetic, a separate quarter within the walled precincts of the Chicago Exposition was set aside for these commercial activities” (345). While a different kind of commerce took place in the midway (separate charges for admission, souvenirs, etc.), the Court of Honor itself was certainly commercial in a more general sense.
- ²³ In fact, the phrase Rydell uses to categorize the midway is “the honky-tonk section of the fair”— but of course the “honky” in honky-tonk suggests a white space (*All* 40). “This is why one of the white man’s places is called a honky-tonk; tonks are shacks, and we all know what honkies are” (Ching 121).
- ²⁴ According to *The City Wilderness*, a settlement house study edited by Robert Woods in 1898, the “South Cove section” included the areas “East of Harrison Avenue, between Broadway and Kneeland Street,” was primarily inhabited by Irish “immigrants of the first and second generations” (39, 62).
- ²⁵ Fabi discusses the fire in which (West and the novel’s characters assume) Sawyer perishes as “the initial, paradigmatic, literal and at the same time metaphoric melting of racial differences into a homogeneously white America of the future” (348).
- ²⁶ J. Thomas notes that Bellamy’s journals, at the same time as *Looking Backwards* “was assuming definite form in his mind,” contain “references to eugenics and ‘stirpiculture’- ‘an enlightened sort of stock raising’- with which a future society might breed a superior race” (47).
- ²⁷ Fabi notes that, in fact, Edith Leete is praised for her “deep blue eyes,” “pink fingertips,” and “roseate tinge,” though the novel never gathers these observations into an explicit racial identity as “white” (350).
- ²⁸ “Donnelly’s dystopian catastrophe was an expression of the utopists’ worst fears about modernization” (Roemer, “Utopia” 315).

- ²⁹ Welstein and his brother Heinrich are “third generation Swiss settlers” in Africa, which returns in the end of the novel as a pastoral haven from the destruction of modernity. See Anderson 68.
- ³⁰ On Donnelly’s racism, see Patterson, who argues that “Donnelly’s intentions can certainly not be equated with those of writers like Dixon, Scamp or Senator Eustis. While they were endorsing vigilante justice, lynch law and the disenfranchisement of blacks, Donnelly was exploring the possibilities of a coalition of Southern blacks and whites. Nevertheless, his images of black revolt and his description of the leader of the Brotherhood of Destruction— Caesar’s physical attributes and mental organization, the nature of his transgressions and the manner of his death— connect *Caesar’s Column* with the emotional appeals of late nineteenth-century Southern white supremacists and with the fictional world of *The Clansman*” (30).
- ³¹ “The version of apocalypse pioneered by Donnelly was an American precursor of Fritz Lang’s cinematic masterpiece, ‘Metropolis’ . . . Donnelly gave initial shape to the apocalypse as a modern myth-vision” (Ueda 8). It also has an intriguing relationship with Jack London’s 1907 novel, *The Iron Heel*.

Chapter 2: Modernity Begins in the Home: *A Hazard of New Fortunes* and Jane Addams's Hull-House

Somewhere between Haymarket and the Columbian Exposition . . .
the modern soul had emerged in America . . . (Kazin 51)

The utopian modernity imagined in the White City and Bellamy's 20th century Boston stands in stark contrast to the realities of the late nineteenth century city. In Hales's terms, the "Grand-Style" represented by C. D. Arnold's photographs of the White City circulated simultaneously with the "Reform Photography" of Jacob Riis. Riis not only "enlarged the vista of urban photography" to include new subjects, but "firmly linked photography to the cause of social reform" (*Silver Cities* 163). Hales argues that Riis's photographs were "to be deliberate, shocking antitheses to the cultural demands of his age—the demands for order, cleanliness, light, uniformity, spaciousness, and all the other accoutrements of the Victorian mindset so clearly evident in Arnold's views of the World's Columbian Exposition" (*Silver Cities* 197).

William Dean Howells's *Altrurian Traveller* approves of the White City, and Howells as editor appreciated *Looking Backward*. Yet Howells also challenges the homogeneity and stability on which their versions of utopian modernity are based in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), which attempts to apply the doctrines (if they can properly be called doctrines) of literary realism to late nineteenth century New York, including Riis's "other half." Similarly, while the Settlement House Movement— and Hull-House in particular— has been criticized as an homogenizing strategy intended to

impose social control on immigrants through assimilation, neither Addams nor Hull-House can be said to participate in the complete elision of conflict represented by utopian modernity. That a vocal defender of the convicted Haymarket anarchists (Howells) and a radical progressive reformer (Addams) should come to be seen as defenders of the old order suggests an oversimplification of the context(s) in which they worked and wrote.¹

Both Jane Addams and William Dean Howells are representative cases of culturally prominent figures of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century whose approach to the dilemma of urban modernity engaged, rather than avoided, the conflicts evident in the transition. This is not to argue, however, that Howells or Addams should be seen as self-consciously celebrating chaotic difference: both believed in the liberal humanist vision of shared (American) culture. The utopian city and the realist city are different not in the desire for order, but in the extent to which the metropolis is imaginatively purged of disorder. Thus Howells's voyeuristic exploration of New York via the Marches offers the novel opportunities for imagining difference and disorder, yet the novel seeks closure founded on stability imposed by aesthetic framing. Addams, geographically embedded in difference and vocally as well as materially working to oppose the injustices which often accompanied such difference, also seeks to establish a harmonious order based on pragmatic reforms to existing arrangements. Howells's novel domesticates modernity, trying to bring the chaos of modernity under the control of the traditional, ideological marker of stability, the home. Jane Addams, especially in her works associated with Hull-House, modernizes domesticity, trying to

bring the control associated with the home into the public modern space of the metropolis.

The realist novel and the settlement house share with Riis an ideological attempt to map the spaces of the modern city in order to comprehend its disorder, and simultaneously create the proper social order. Foucault's notion of discipline provides a useful model of the operations of knowledge and power in the progressive era. Through the professionalization of social work, psychology, and medicine, *knowledge of subjects* came to result in (and was motivated by the desire for) *control over* them. However, we must be wary of any easy binary between benevolent and repressive reform strategies; Progressivism, like Howellsian realism, is not merely a mass exercise in false consciousness driven by fantasies of social control, but a complicated, multivalent set of strategies, negotiations, and sites of resistance.

I. Constructions of Domesticity: William Dean Howells and Jane Addams

Alfred Kazin's *On Native Grounds* begins with "the great symbolic episode in the early history of American realism- the move from Boston to New York of William Dean Howells, the Brahmins' favorite child but the first great champion of the new writers" (Kazin xv). The contrast between genteel Boston and commercial New York is figured, by Kazin and many critics after him,² as the contrast between the modern spirit and the Victorian age: if Bellamy could imagine Boston as a utopian city, not even Howells (or so the argument goes) could imagine New York as one.

Kazin credits Howells as "the first great interpreter" of "that moving and perhaps inexpressible moral transformation of American life, thought,

and manners under the impact of industrial capitalism” (xiv). While this description makes Howells sound like a proto-modernist, or at least a chronicler of the transition to modernity, Kazin doesn’t allow Howells to move so easily: neither from Boston to New York nor symbolically from the nineteenth century to the twentieth. Howells brings some of Boston with him:

His interest was in the domesticities of society, homely scenes and values, people meeting on trains, ships, and at summer hotels, lovers on honeymoon, friendly dinners, the furrows of homespun character, housekeeping as a principle of existence, and the ubiquitous *jeune fille* who radiated a vernal freshness in so many of his early novels . . . (Kazin 8)

He may have written most of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* “in a house overlooking Stuyvesant Square . . . a short walk from the Lower East Side,” (Bender 193) but his focus remained essentially Bostonian: domestic, genteel, bourgeois.³

Indeed, Kazin’s account is important not only because of the way he employs the New York-Boston antithesis— relying on geographical distance to communicate historical change— which has become a consistent trope in criticism on the novel, but because the deeply ambivalent image of Howells he presents concisely encapsulates the two major readings of the novel. In short, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* occupies a canonical space as a transitional work: like the White City, it figures as either the last gasp of a dying elite or as the first breath of a modern culture.

Arguments about *Hazard* consistently focus on the representations of the city, the ethnic and class conflicts occurring there, and the extent to

which Basil March (and by implication Howells) is affected by them. In fact, the crucial difference between the modern and the genteel Howells is often focused through the question of walking versus riding. Thomas Bender, for example, writes that Howells “came to know about the city by walking its streets and neighborhoods, and he let the life of the city touch him” (192). Michael Cowan, placing Howells in a long line of “walkers in the street,” argues that “walking in the modern city provided these writers with a crucial way to experience that city— a mode often explored consciously as a counterpoint to such tempting perspectives as those made available by modern technology in the form of views from skyscrapers or from rapidly moving vehicles” (282).⁴ Jay Martin claims, this time describing Basil March (though the distinction between author and character is often, especially in discussions of this novel, blurred⁵), that “wandering alone through the New York streets he now understands as striving and suffering life what he had earlier seen only as spectacle; Basil moves, like Howells, from aesthetics to ethics” (44). Cutrer, giving perhaps the most modern description, makes Howells into a *flâneur*, who “learned about the conditions of modern life by literally seeing them” (265).

When critics see March— and behind him Howells— as a pedestrian, experiencing the city at street level, they assume an engagement with the conditions of modernity. Thus Cowan claims that “Howells at least seems to suggest that the most morally defensible way” of dealing with modernity “may be to leave the securities of middle-class flats and rapid trains and take to the street as a compassionate walker” (288). Martin, similarly, finds March “transformed and dignified by his hazard, for he alone risks his fortunes,

fully recognizing both the possibilities of loss and his commitment to truth” (44). Cutrer, finally, argues that while he is “At first a detached spectator . . . by the end of the novel March has become a pragmatic seer,” which means that “He sees how the other half lives, and it touches him” (265, 270). If March is seen as emerging from the Victorian domestic interior and truly experiencing the modern urban exterior, Howells is seen as redeemed.

The image of respectable Victorian domesticity in the midst of modern metropolitan disorder suggests a parallel between Howells and Jane Addams. On September 18th, 1889, Addams and Edith Starr moved into “a fine old house, sitting well back from the street, surrounded on three sides by a broad piazza which was supported by wooden pillars of exceptionally pure Corinthian design and proportion” (Addams, *Twenty Years* 77). Like Howells’s move to New York, this was no ordinary relocation. Addams and Starr were college educated women from respectable families, and they were moving into the West Side Tenement district of Chicago.⁶ As in the case of Howells, their move has been seen as a chronological as well as geographic relocation: Howells became modern by moving to New York, Addams became modern by moving to Hull-House. Like Howells in *Hazard*, Addams locates a “domestic” space within the supposedly “public” space of the inner city, deliberately juxtaposing (public) modernity and (private) domesticity.

For many, the settlement house represents a radical movement for social reform: “one of the most outstandingly successful and longest-lived feminist collectives in American history” (Rudnick 154). For others, the settlement house is still a house: settlement house workers reinforced a vision of separate spheres, emphasizing housework and childcare for women, and

foisted middle-class WASP traditions onto not-rapidly-enough-assimilating immigrants in an exercise of social control.⁷ As Felski notes, many “late-nineteenth century feminists . . . appealed to a distinctively feminine moral authority as a justification for their occupation of the public sphere” at the same time that they were “asserting their rights to political and legal equality” (19).

Hull-House has indeed been read as a feminist utopian space: “There they created an independent women’s culture beyond society’s influence and interference” (Sherrick 51-52). This vision of Hull-House as outside of society sometimes even obscures the fact that it was by moving *into* Chicago that the settlement movement operated. In a reading of *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, for example, James Hurt argues that like Thoreau in *Walden*, Addams “finds herself increasingly discontent with the received culture and withdraws to a ‘sacred’ space physically and emotionally outside it” (185). Marianne DeKoven, in establishing a link between Addams and Gertrude Stein,⁸ notes that “An enormous gulf would seem to divide Jane Addams’s immigrant Chicago from Gertrude Stein’s expatriate Paris,” but then goes on to argue that “immigration and expatriation suggest at least a symbolic mutuality” (“Excellent” 321). Of course, Stein was an expatriate, but Addams was not an immigrant: she merely lived near (and with) immigrants. Addams created a domestic space within the metropolis: she modernized domesticity by blurring the line between public space and private space.⁹

Similarly, Addams accommodated the separate spheres ideology of Victorian womanhood by engaging it head on, using the traditional rhetoric of domesticity to enable social reform. Hull-House, like Stein’s salon, was not

only a space where people of different national origins met, it was specifically a gendered, domestic space: “In that homosocial setting, they were free to develop an alternative to woman’s traditional world of marriage and motherhood and to satisfy their own needs for companionship and love” (Sherrick 52). Addams’s autobiography, while it does make use of the rhetoric of traditional feminine domesticity, does not follow the normative heterosexual romance plot: rather, it breaks off from the individualist narrative into the “we” of collective action.¹⁰ After the first four chapters, which recount Addams’s youth and schooling, the narrative shifts into a thematic focus on the activities at Hull-House and related institutions.¹¹

The closest that *Twenty Years at Hull-House* comes to a romance narrative (focusing on the establishment of “proper” heterosexual domesticity) is the moment when Addams first reveals the plan for the settlement to her “old-time school friend” Edith Starr:

I can well recall the stumbling and uncertainty with which I finally set it forth . . . I even dared to hope she might join in carrying out the plan, but nevertheless I told it in the fear of that disheartening experience which is so apt to afflict our most cherished plans when they are at last divulged, when we suddenly feel that there is nothing there to talk about, and as the golden dream slips through our fingers we are left to wonder at our own fatuous belief. But gradually the comfort of Miss Starr’s companionship, the vigor and enthusiasm which she brought to bear upon it, told both in the growth of the plan and upon the sense of its validity . . . (74)

The narrative echoes the sentimental novel's emphasis on the establishment of domestic space, as Addams "dared to hope she might," yet it is an echo with a difference: the "golden dream" here is not normative heterosexuality but social-political action.

Indeed, as Allen Davis notes, the living together of large numbers of unmarried women led to "whispers of homosexuality" (34). Lois Rudnick has argued that *Twenty Years at Hull-House* "More symbolically than overtly . . . suggests the commitment of her erotic self to women, a self which she is careful to exclude from her life story, along with any mention of Mary Rozet Smith, who was her companion and lover for forty years" (152).¹² DeKoven, whose argument about Addams's "symbolic mutuality" with Stein might be aided by "outing" Addams, is more cautious: "it is most likely that Addams's two primary romantic friendships, with Ellen Starr and later with Mary Rozet Smith, never became overtly erotic," yet "relationships with female partners were crucially enabling for the lifeworks of both women, and also were literally at the heart of the houses where those lifeworks transpired and in which they were to a large extent incarnated" ("Excellent" 328).

Addams can be more accurately understood, however, not as a further instance of the "feminization of American culture" described by Ann Douglas, but as one of "Classical American Philosophy's Invisible Women."¹³ As Mary Jo Deegan has demonstrated, "Hull-House was for women sociologists what the University of Chicago was for men sociologists: the institutional center for research and social thought" (33).¹⁴ Contrary to Hurt and DeKoven's positioning of Hull-House as "outside" turn-of-the-century Chicago culture, Deegan documents the relationship between the settlement movement and the

Chicago School of Sociology: “Although each sex worked in an institution dominated by one sex, both groups engaged in a considerable exchange of ideas and interests” (33). Addams is outside of the public sphere role of social scientist, yet she is attempting to bring the private sphere domestic role assigned to women into the public sphere in her own way.

While discussions of Chicago School Sociology have become a canonical episode in most histories of urban America (as well as an increasing number of studies of American urban fiction¹⁵), the connection between the Chicago School and the settlement house movement has often gone unremarked.¹⁶ Yet, as Rudnick notes,

No Progressive reformer understood better than Jane Addams the profound cognitive dissonance Americans experienced as they applied the standards of behavior, work, and values of nineteenth-century, rural, Anglo-America to a twentieth-century, urban, industrialized society suffering from increasing poverty, class divisiveness, political corruption, and crime. (146)

While Park, Burgess, Wirth, Thomas et al. are frequently cited in discussions of early urban studies, Addams’s profound early influence on the methods and philosophies of the school is not.

In part, the exclusion of Addams stems from the different courses to professionalism taken by Sociology and Social Work: Addams is linked to early Social Work efforts, and is therefore more likely to be mentioned by historians of progressive reform than of academic social science.¹⁷ But the exclusion of Addams is also consistent with the repression of the domestic and the sentimental Suzanne Clark has diagnosed as one the cultural subtexts of

American modernism. The movement “against the sentimental helped to establish beleaguered avant-garde intellectuals as a discourse community, defined by its adversarial relationship to domestic culture,” as Clark persuasively demonstrates: “The richness and complexity of the sentimental were disguised in the process” (1). One way to answer Clark’s call to “restore the sentimental *within* modernism” is to examine Addams’s engagement with “municipal housekeeping”:

While ostensibly repudiating art and embracing politics, and while ostensibly rejecting her college education in favor of an earlier, Victorian feminine model of social engagement, Addams found a feminist-modernist space in which art, politics, and the ambitions for work in the public sphere she acquired in college could coalesce in new ways. (DeKoven, “Excellent” 337)

This “feminist-modernist space” parallels the image of Howells as “compassionate walker.” Both Howells and Addams can thus be seen as merging domesticity and modernity: constructing their homes in the metropolis.

II. “That Sad Knowledge of the Line”: Hull-House, *Hazard*, and the Mapping of Modern Difference

When realism becomes false to itself, when it heaps up facts merely, and maps life instead of picturing it, realism will perish.
(W. D. Howells, *Criticism* 15)

Opposed to Howells as the “compassionate walker,” pounding the pavement for the social good, is the Howells who either stays at home (Kazin’s “homely scenes and values”) or rides: “In particular, the El . . . becomes to the

Marches the mechanical instrument of their initiation to the city” (Maffi 37).¹⁸ Just as the “compassionate walker” image of March-Howells suggests an urban modernity, the image of March-Howells as rider suggests a bourgeois, nostalgic Victorianism:

His propensity to reduce the urban milieu to a purely theatrical dimension, to a *façaderie*, points to the inadequacy of traditional literary form to interpret and make manifest an urban world that, finally, baffled both Howells and the remnants of the “genteel tradition” to which he claimed kinship. Ultimately, Howells withdraws to safer, more familiar aesthetic territory.

(Maffi 38)

Paradoxically, it is precisely by riding the El, which for urban historians is often a signal technology of modernity, that March is said to adopt “the reassuring stance of the spectator,” and view “the bewildering anonymity of the tenements” as homey tableaux” (A. Kaplan, *Social* 50). As Kaplan argues, “Howells’s narrative strategies for representing the city parallel the Marches’ strategies for settling it” (52). “In their search they were obliged,” Howells writes, “to the acquisition of useless information in a degree unequaled in their experience. They came to excel at the sad knowledge of the line at which respectability distinguishes itself from shabbiness” (*Hazard* 51). But this “sad knowledge” is also exactly what Howells’s narrative reproduces for the reader— the text constructs the line at the same moment that the Marches learn to recognize it.¹⁹

Isabel March’s vision from the elevated train also echoes the position of the novel’s reader: she notes that “the fleeting intimacy you formed with

people in second- and third-floor interiors, while all the usual street life went on underneath, had a domestic intensity mixed with a perfect repose that was the last effect of good society with all its security and exclusiveness” (66). Indeed, the reader is placed in the same relationship to urban modernity that the Marches are to the scenes viewed from the elevated train. What Howells presents, in this view, is a carefully controlled, domesticated experience of modernity.

In a related argument, Maffi claims that “We can even consider the development of literary realism a form of cultural mapmaking . . .” (35). One of the cultural responses to the disorder which characterizes urban modernity has been the attempt to (quite literally) map the metropolis; Howells and Addams share, in this view, an attempt to frame ethnic and class differences in such a way that they become understandable. If Howells’s mapping is most clear in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Addams’s is evinced by *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, the text which “established the major substantive interests and methodological technique of Chicago Sociology that would define the school for the next forty years” (Deegan 24).²⁰

Published in 1895, *Hull-House Maps and Papers* was not alone in its desire to map the metropolis. Robert Woods and the South End House in Boston published similar maps in *The City Wilderness* (1898) and *Americans in Process* (1901). In Chicago, the Investigating Committee of the City Homes Association published *Tenement Conditions in Chicago* (1901). Even W. E. B. Du Bois, in *The Philadelphia Negro* (1900) relied on maps representing income levels and racial identification of residents.

Agnes Sinclair Holbrook, in the first essay in *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, identifies the volume as “an attempt on the part of some of the residents of Hull-House to put into graphic form a few facts concerning the section of Chicago immediately east of the House” (3). Indeed, the “graphic form” allowed Hull-House to do much more than communicate a few facts: the book offers an exhaustive and thorough description of the neighborhood in which the settlement is located, including residents’ nationalities, incomes, occupational structures, labor organizations, relationship with Chicago charities, and cultural habits.

The maps are incredibly detailed, indicating individual tenements block by block (see Figs. 2.1, 2.2). Holbrook notes the influence of Charles Booth’s maps of London, but indicates that “the aim and spirit of the present publication will recommend it as similar to its predecessor in essential respects; while the greater minuteness of this survey will entitle it to a rank of its own, both as a photographic reproduction of Chicago’s poorest quarters on the west, and her worst on the east of the river, and as an illustration of a method of research” (11). Holbrook thus indicates two specific aims of the volume which are reproduced throughout: the “minuteness” of the “photographic reproduction” and the “method.” In other words, the volume has two goals: accuracy and efficacy.

In much recent criticism,²¹ however, the “photographic reproduction” implicit in both the realist novel and the sociological study have been seen as part of— that is, helping to construct as well as reflecting— a modern disciplinary regime of surveillance:

In this view, literary realism works *with* the other ideologically loaded tropes that promote the persistence and dominance of that [hegemonic capitalist] class: positivism, elitism, aestheticism, sexism, racism. Thus, it produces and reproduces the political and cultural agenda of corporate liberalism. (Corkin 17)

Mark Seltzer, for example, writes of Jacob Riis and Stephen Crane: “the realist vision of the urban underworld posits and fantasizes a disciplinary relation between seeing . . . and the exercising of power: the realist investment in seeing entails a policing of the real” (Seltzer 96). Yet, as Keith Gandal has pointed out, in response to Seltzer: “this gaze does not supervise; it flatters” (19). That is, in both Riis and Crane, the effect of the representations exceeds surveillance: in becoming the focus of narrative interest, the represented figure is ultimately not contained.

III. The “Devil Baby” and “the vanishing socialist”: Escaping Social Control

The maps of Chicago produced by the Hull-House residents could be seen, in fact, as the ultimate example of the repressive scopic regime vividly described by Seltzer. But the excessive detail, what Holbrook refers to as the “minuteness” of description, combined with the socio-political context of Hull-House, should make us wary of Seltzer’s reading of realism: the Hull-House maps, when read alongside Addams’s autobiographies and the essays in *Hull-House Maps and Papers*, do not reduce to a regime of surveillance. In fact, Addams, in the “Prefatory Note,” addresses the question of intent, noting of the volume’s authors that “their energies . . . have been chiefly directed, not towards sociological investigation, but to constructive work” (vii-viii).

Perhaps the most vivid illustration of Hull-House's distance from the scopoc regime of disciplinarity comes in Addams's *Second Twenty-Years at Hull-House*, in the chapter on the "Devil Baby":

The knowledge of his existence burst upon the residents of Hull-House one day when three Italian women, with an excited rush through the door, demanded that the Devil Baby be shown to them. No amount of denial convinced them that he was not there, for they knew exactly what he was like with his cloven hoofs, his pointed ears and diminutive tail; the Devil Baby had, moreover, been able to speak as soon as he was born and was most shockingly profane. (50)

The spectacle of the satanic infant, and the tale of the Hull-House residents' attempts to explain his/her non-existence, is oddly incongruous with the whole tone of Addams's recollections. Throughout both *Twenty Years* and *The Second Twenty Years*, Addams outlines the work Hull-House has accomplished: listing reforms underway and quietly but persistently arguing for reforms still needed.

The Devil Baby, despite having never existed, is not easily dismissed: "for six weeks from every part of the city and suburbs the streams of visitors to this mythical baby poured in all day long and so far into the night that the regular activities of the settlement were almost swamped" (*Second* 50). Addams argues that the Devil Baby's staying power derives from the way the narrative meshes with the needs of its audience, claiming that it "evolved in response to the imperative needs of anxious wives and mothers" (64). Because the Devil Baby, in most versions of the tale, was the result of a husband's blasphemy and

mistreatment of his wife, it exercised a social control function, serving as a both a warning and the fulfillment of a prophecy: curse your wife, and you will suffer retribution.

Addams ultimately decides that the Devil Baby was not simply “impelled by a longing” on behalf of its avid tellers “to see one good case of retribution before they died” (67). Rather, “it is more probably that the avidity of the women demonstrated that the story itself, like all interpretive art, was one of those free, unconscious attempts to satisfy, outside of life, those cravings which life itself leaves unsatisfied” (67). Addams uses the narrative of the Devil Baby, and the people who come to witness it, to demonstrate the way suffering can be turned into a spectacle. Although it is never explicitly stated, the Devil Baby implies a distinction between art and truth: or, in more Howellsian terms, between romance and realism. That is, the Devil Baby represents the function of representation in making spectacles: the Devil Baby is the “spectacular” subject to which Addams will not allow the residents of the neighborhood to be reduced.

Addams’s reliance on anecdotes is often remarked; but she was also always concerned that such anecdotes increased the likelihood of reform. Addams uses stories of the residents and neighbors of Hull-House, in other words, not in order to make spectacles of them for consumption by others, but in order to “domesticate” the foreign subjects, making them available to sympathetic reformers. Representation, Addams discovers, can make the domestic (in the sense of living within the “home” space) into an exotic spectacle, but should make evident the familiar which is already present within the apparently exotic.

Just as Addams discovers that representation can serve both to domesticate and to make exotic, Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* cannot ultimately maintain the scopic regime Kaplan and Trachtenberg identify: the city refuses to remain framed and domesticated. Kaplan and Trachtenberg, Cutrer argues, "implicitly identify Howells's theories and art with a Cartesian scopic regime and its distanced and dispassionate perspective; in doing so, however, they miss part of the picture" (265). Cutrer suggests instead that Howells is representing a "pragmatic mode of seeing," in which actual sights serve to upset preconceived frames: "Howells . . . showed how pragmatic seeing could be a prelude to touching and ultimately changing the lives of others" (275). March is always on the march, so to speak, and the character of Lindau becomes more interesting than his containment: rather than being controlled by the narrative, he becomes, like the Devil Baby, a spectacular subject. Just as the Devil Baby's narrative exceeded Addams's control, the figure of Lindau remains spectacular despite the narratives attempts to contain him within a vision of domesticated modernity.

The scene which introduces Berthold Lindau comes crucially between the Marches' real-estate search and Basil's final decision to take the Grovsnor Green apartment. It is as though Lindau takes the place of the representations of the city which occupied the beginning of the narrative. If, as Kaplan argues, "the city disrupts narrative continuity as something that must be brought under control" during what she calls "the apartment-hunting scene," Lindau serves that function after his introduction. Indeed, the very fact that the Marches, in the end, "take one of the first flats they see" suggests that the placement of Lindau's meeting with Basil March is significant.

Mrs. March has left for Boston, leaving Basil with a list of requirements: “it was not to be above Twentieth Street nor below Washington Square; it must not be higher than the third floor; it must have an elevator, steam heat, hallboy, and a pleasant janitor” (67). March continues the search, but returns to the hotel “prepared for any desperate measure,” and increasingly convinced that “the Grovsnor Green apartment was not merely the only thing for him, but was, on its merits, the best thing in New York” (70). March and Fulkerson go to dinner in a restaurant populated by “all nationalities and religions apparently— at least, several were Hebrews and Cubans” (71).

In the middle of narrating the story of Dryfoos, the town of Moffitt, and the wealth of natural gas deposits, Fulkerson interrupts himself: “‘See that fellow?’ Fulkerson broke off and indicated with a twirl of his head a short, dark, foreign-looking man going out of the door. ‘They say that fellow’s a socialist’” (74). While Fulkerson’s reaction to the *alleged* socialist is perhaps to be expected, what is more interesting is what March notices:

March did not notice the vanishing socialist. He was watching, with a teasing sense of familiarity, a tall, shabbily dressed, elderly man, who had just come in. He had the aquiline profile uncommon among Germans, and yet March recognized him at once as a German. His long, soft beard and moustache had once been fair, and they kept some tone of their yellow in the gray to which they had turned. His eyes were full, and his lips and chin shaped the beard to the noble outline which shows in the beards the Italian masters liked to paint for their Last Suppers. His carriage was erect and soldierly, and March presently saw that

he had lost his left hand. He took his place at a table where the overworked waiter found time to cut up his meat and put everything in easy reach for his right hand. (74)

Lindau, in full messianic “noble outline,” interrupts the story of Dryfoos’ wealth. Indeed, the paragraph is full of significant detail. March misses the “vanishing socialist” to focus on the appearing Lindau; the “teasing sense of familiarity” refers both to Howells’s narrative slight-of-hand, introducing the character in the middle of an episode only to fully present him pages later and to March’s empathetic vision; Lindau’s profile is uncommon for Germans yet immediately recognizable (for March) as German; Lindau is at once meek and soldierly, and the “overworked” waiter attends quickly to his needs. If Lindau’s eyes are full, so are March’s, and the readers.

After Fulkerson finishes his country-bumpkin-to-rich-New-Yorker tale of Dryfoos and the Moffitt natural resources, March decides to go up and speak to Lindau. “In compensation for his prudence in regard to the Dryfooses,” the narrative states, “he now indulged an impulse” (81). In response to Lindau’s question, “What gountry hass a poor man got, Mr. Marge?,” March tries to reply in kind: “Well, *you* ought to have a share in the one you helped to save for us rich men” (82). Fulkerson, on the other hand, serves as March’s foil, looking distracted, glancing at his watch, and trying to get March out the door. As they leave, the narrative characterizes Fulkerson’s reaction: “He was one of those Americans whose habitual conception of life is unalloyed prosperity. When any experience or observation of his went counter to it he suffered something like physical pain. He eagerly shrugged away the impression left upon his buoyancy by Lindau . . .” (82).

Where Fulkerson quickly recovers, “getting back some of his lightness,” March is more deeply affected: “March . . . went along half-consciously tormented by his lightness in the pensive memories the meeting with Lindau had called up. Was this all that sweet, unselfish nature could come to?” (83). It is in this frame of mind that he finally settles on the Grosvenor Green apartment:

March felt the forces of fate closing about him and pushing him to a decision. . . . Then, baffled and subdued . . . he took it. He was aware more than ever of its absurdities; he knew that his wife would never cease to hate it; but he had suffered one of those eclipses of the imagination to which men of his temperament are subject, and in which he could see no future for his desires. He felt a comfort in committing himself and exchanging the burden of indecision for the burden of responsibility. (84)

If “Howells’s narrative strategies for representing the city parallel the Marches’ strategies for settling it,” then March’s abrupt decision suggests that neither strategy is very deliberate (A. Kaplan, *Social* 52). That is to say, March’s ambivalence suggests not a conscious and intentional choice, but an accidental and almost arbitrary conclusion. As Trachtenberg notes, “Howells frequently felt he needed to force his picture into its proportions and balances even if by acts of arbitrary plotting, by transparent devices of romance . . .” (*Incorporation* 192).

Indeed, Kaplan is careful to note the difficulty Howells encounters, always framing her discussion in terms of struggles, attempts, tension, and the drawing and redrawing of boundaries. It is not just that the Marches know

where the line between themselves and the other half is, but rather that they must constantly redraw it. For example, when the Marches are confronted by the “decent-looking man with the hard hands and broken nails of a workman” who has eaten “a dirty bit of cracker from the pavement” and is “hunting for more in those garbage heaps,” Kaplan notes that the “unsettling appearance of the beggar shifts the course of the narrative and brings the Marches’ search to an unresolved halt” (*Hazard* 60, A. Kaplan, *Social* 52). Yet Kaplan claims that “suddenly recalling him at the end of the novel, Basil speculates that he was probably a confidence man, and thereby negates his reality” (52). This is a significant misreading, however, and not just because his “reality” cannot be negated so easily.

What actually happens in the incident Kaplan alludes to is more complicated than she suggests. Basil and Mrs. March are discussing the possibility of his losing his “place” at *Every Other Week*. Basil uses the story to demonstrate his resolve:

But as to being uneasy, I’m not in the least. I’ve the spirit of a lion when it comes to such a chance as that. When I see how readily the sensibilities of the passing stranger can be worked in New York , I think of taking up the role of that desperate man on Third Avenue who went along looking for garbage in the gutter to eat. I think I could pick up at least twenty or thirty cents a day by that game and maintain my family in the affluence it’s been accustomed to. (382)

What Basil imagines here is a resemblance between himself and the “desperate man” which, paradoxically, gives him comfort. It is, after all, Basil

(and again Howells behind him) who is in the business of working “the sensibilities of the passing stranger.” Because the goal of the novelist, and the publisher, is to engage the interest of strangers, Howells, through Basil March, imagines himself in the position of the “desperate man.” Far from “negating his reality,” the reappearance of the *image* of the desperate man serves to recall, for the reader, a minor character who might otherwise be forgotten.

Mrs. March is outraged at the idea that the man was not, in reality, desperate: “I’ve gone about ever since feeling that one such case in a million, the bare possibility of it, was enough to justify all that Lindau said about the rich and the poor” (382). The link to Lindau is suggestive: Lindau stands in for exactly the tensions earlier embedded in the apartment-hunting section. March responds, “Oh, I don’t say he was an imposter. Perhaps he really was hungry; but if he wasn’t, what do you think of a civilization that makes the opportunity of such fraud?” (382). As he continues, it becomes almost impossible not to see Howells, the champion of realism, peering over his shoulder: “Suppose that poor fellow wasn’t personally founded on fact; nevertheless, he represented the truth; he was the ideal of the suffering which would be less effective if realistically treated” (382). For the novelist, it is the “ideal of the suffering” which is important. Thus, contrary to Kaplan, the scene serves not to explain away the desperate man but to ensure that he is remembered for what he makes spectacularly present: suffering.

The “desperate man,” in other words, is resurrected by the narrative rather than erased by it. Lindau, similarly, cannot be erased by either the dialect used to represent his speech²² nor his death, which occurs outside of

the narrative view. Thus when Kaplan argues that Howells “kills off Lindau at the end of the novel . . . to protect the unifying goal of realism from conflict and fragmentation,” I would argue that Lindau’s death is precisely what demonstrates the failure of this goal. As Kaplan correctly notes, “the search for an ending in *Hazard* only arrives at the impossibility of closure by reenacting the narrative fragmentation it strives to contain” (61).²³ In his attempt to domesticate modernity— to bring the social chaos of the late nineteenth-century urban space into a coherent narrative— Howells constantly confronts the limits of representation.

IV. Domesticated Modernity

What both *A Hazard of New Fortunes* and *Hull-House* represent, ultimately, is a version of modernity which, unlike the ordered modernity of the White City, the commodity racism of the midway, or the utopian homogeneity of *Looking Backward*, attempts to engage with the reality of urban life in the late nineteenth century. Both Howells’s novel and Addams’s political reform work represent attempts to come to terms with modernity: to find a place within it for the values they hold:

The moral logic of Basil’s thinking, like all of the Marches’ efforts to make sense of the bewildering New York environment, is inflected by their fundamentally bourgeois values— values that Howells himself shared but that he felt were disintegrating under the weight of social disorder. (Crowley 100)

Yet Howells's novel, like *Hull-House* itself, represents exactly the failure of those "fundamentally bourgeois values" to remain integrated. The novel cannot finally contain the disorder it consistently evokes.

Basil March's observations are once again germane. Viewing the scenery outside the train between New York and Boston, March asks: "Do you see how the foreground next the train rushes from us and the background keeps abreast to us, while the middle distance seems stationary? I don't think I ever noticed that effect before. There ought to be something literary in it; retreating past, and advancing future, and deceitfully permanent present—something like that?" (35). This "deceitfully permanent present" nicely represents the brief moment of formal stability produced in response to the modern metropolis.

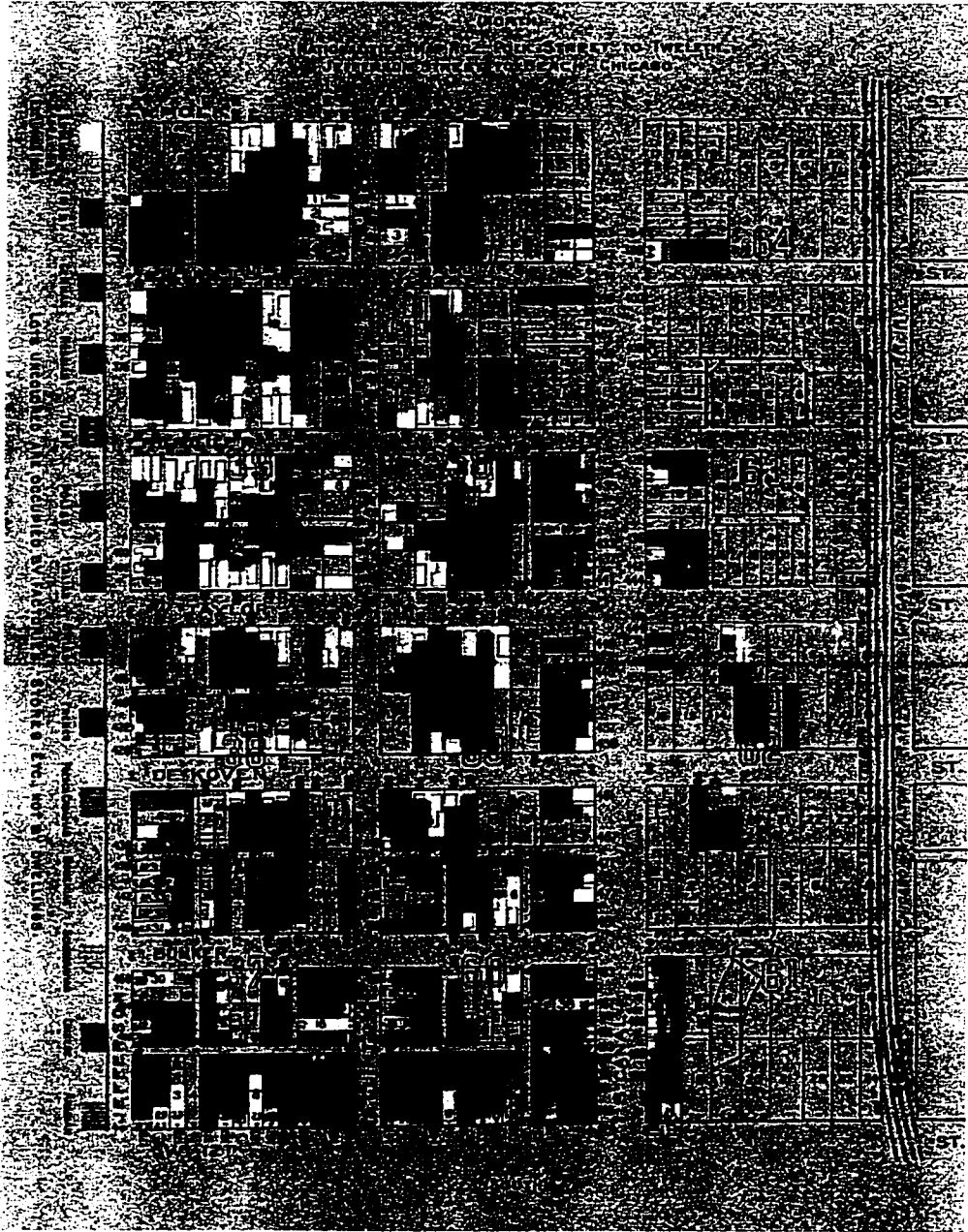


Figure 2.2: Nationalities Map No. 2 (*Hull-House Maps and Papers* n. p.).

Notes to Chapter Two

- ¹ “Instead of being remembered as perhaps our most politically radical writer,” Timothy Parrish argues, “Howells is remembered for an unlucky remark he made . . .” (25). The unlucky remark is the one about the “smiling aspects of life”; See W. D. Howells, *Editor’s Study*, 40.
- ² Trachtenberg’s widely cited, recent account closely parallels Kazin’s: “The move corresponded to a shift in his own fiction, away from the courtship romances and polite travel narratives he had produced in the 1870s, toward the novel of social realism . . .” (*Incorporation* 186). The antithesis between “the touch-and-go quality of New York life” and “the intense identification of Boston life,” is also present in George Dunlap’s 1934 study of the city novels, which stresses the “foreign faces and vestures” the Marches find in New York (27).
- ³ In David Shi’s less nuanced reading: “Howells was not so much interested in conveying ideas as he was preoccupied with exploring the texture of social intercourse. His novels displayed more poise than penetration, more warmth than insight, more charm than drama. . . . He pushed realism only to its nearest limits” (105). Shi’s description in fact genders Howells, using the terms of the “feminization of American culture” Ann Douglas has described.
- ⁴ What Cowan ignores is gender in relationship to the authors’ pedestrian experiences: if his “walkers in the street” were women, they would be taken for streetwalkers, i.e., prostitutes. Jane Jacobs is the first, and only, woman whose writings he discusses, thus inadvertently supporting Janet Wolff’s contention that “the dandy, the *flâneur*, the hero, the stranger— all figures invoked to epitomise the experience of modern life— are invariably male figures” (41).
- ⁵ For example, Martin writes of Howells’ public statement criticizing the trial of the Haymarket anarchists: “‘Howells’ heroism in this moment’ . . . ‘has almost never been adequately recognized.’ *He could not be a Basil March*” (41, emphasis added). The internal quotation is from Edwin Cady’s *The Realist at War*.
- ⁶ In a letter to his sister, Anne, in Nov. 1887, Howells writes “Elinor and I both no longer care for the world’s life, and would like to be settled somewhere very humbly and simply, where we could be socially identified with the principles of progress and sympathy for the struggling mass” (M. Howells, 1: 404). Perhaps they too should have considered the corner of Polk and South Halstead streets in Chicago. (Perhaps not coincidentally, Carrie Meeber’s first residence in Chicago is also on South Halstead: see chapter three, below).
- ⁷ A relatively even-handed example is Paul Boyer who differentiates between the Settlement-House Movement and the “Charity Organization Movement,” but then notes that “the two had more in common than either liked to admit. . . . While the social-control impulse was present in the settlement

movement, it was usually expressed in more nuanced terms, and subjected to more soul-searching scrutiny than in the aggressively moralistic” charities (156-57).

- ⁸ She argues that they “opened remarkably similar spaces: borderlands that served as powerful mediations, if not resolutions, of the contradictions of gender, politics, and culture in the early twentieth century” (“Excellent” 321).
- ⁹ “Most settlement workers had an ambivalent attitude toward the city; they hated it, were fascinated by it, and they loved it,” notes Allen Davis: “Their movement was an attempt to deal with the problems of the city, not to escape them” (23).
- ¹⁰ “A central paradox of Hull-House, then, is that an intentionally reactionary rhetoric . . . is used in the service of a progressive political agenda” (Sawaya 512).
- ¹¹ Henry Steel Commager’s foreword compares Addams’ rhetorical style to that of Henry Adams: “Henry Adams pretended to impersonality by using the third person, but it is Adams, Adams, all the way, and in the end the cosmos is invoked to explain the Adams family. Miss Addams does not ask us to consider her, but only the society she served . . .” (xvi).
- ¹² Blanche Wiesen Cook notes that historians have been more than willing to continue Addams’ exclusions: “historians tended to ignore the crucial role played by the networks of love and support that enabled political women to function,” noting that “Jane Addams slept in the same house, in the same room, in the same bed with Mary Rozet Smith for 40 years. (And when they traveled, Addams even wired ahead to order a large double bed for their hotel room.)” (45, 48).
- ¹³ See Charlene Haddock Seigfried, who argues that “Addams, [Elsie Ripley] Clapp, and [Lucy Sprague] Mitchell literally created their own environments by developing and living in educational communities as a means of radical social change” (102).
- ¹⁴ See also Anne Firor Scott, who places Addams as “clearly one of the seminal philosophers of the new urban world,” and anticipates in brief Deegan’s arguments about both priority and influence.
- ¹⁵ See, for example, Cappetti and McNamara.
- ¹⁶ For example, Stow Persons’ *Ethnic Studies at Chicago* never even mentions Addams by name.
- ¹⁷ Eugene Rochberg-Halton argues that “In seeking to legitimize sociology as a science, academic sociologists at the University of Chicago had to distinguish sharply their efforts not only from social workers and settlements but also from the research of settlement workers,” referring to *Hull-House Maps and Papers* as an example of “nonacademic works” (329).

- ¹⁸ Cf. Kaplan: “the newly constructed elevated railroad replaces the horse-drawn coupe as an updated lens for viewing and controlling this urban spectacle” (*Social* 50).
- ¹⁹ Indeed, the Marches’ experience could be read as a primer for Bourdieu’s discussion of taste in *Distinction*: “Objectively and subjectively aesthetic stances adopted in matters like cosmetics, clothing or home decoration are opportunities to experience or assert one’s position in social space, as a rank to be upheld or a distance to be kept” (57).
- ²⁰ It must be noted that Addams herself neither wrote nor is credited on the title page as having edited this collection. Thus “Jane Addams” is used here as an “author function” rather than a biographical marker for the author herself.
- ²¹ I’m thinking her of Kaplan, Trachtenberg, Corkin, and Seltzer, among others— but none of them individually represents the trend as a whole.
- ²² Thus whereas Nettels argues that “Of all the characters, Lindau is the most seriously compromised by his speech in that in its effects it jars the most with the sentiments and ideals it conveys” (94), Parrish is correct to note that Howells “also chose to let Lindau speak many of his strongest words in English, so their force would not be lost, or the subject of casual dismissal by hi audience” (27). Ultimately I find Parrish more persuasive, in outlining a “pattern of Howells’s identification with Lindau” which is established with “the following critical difference: while they can share the same opinion, their actions must at all costs be differentiated” (28).
- ²³ Or, in Trachtenberg’s terms, “as a doctrine, realism gave Howells a stand on an imagined middle ground. In literary practice, however, it often caused that ground to shift under his feet” (*Incorporation* 185).

Chapter 3: Women on the Verge: Gender, Capital, and Consumption in *The House of Mirth* and *Sister Carrie*

The problems of consumption, shopping, and materialism were, by the late nineteenth century, increasingly identified with the classes and masses of the great cities, and it was probably inevitable that American novelists of the era, particularly those identified with a concern for realism, should analyze the relationship between consumer desire and personal wealth.

(Harris 178)

The turn of the century is increasingly described in terms of the origins of consumer society: the modern subject is, first and foremost, the consumer of commodities. (White) women functioned as both desiring subjects emblematic of the modern focus on consumption, and as desired objects: as that which was to be consumed. In Felski's terms: "if women could be seen as objects of consumption, some women were also becoming consuming subjects, as the advent of mass production and distinctively modern retailing strategies began to dramatically alter the fabric of social relations between people and things" (64). Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) exemplify this problematic nexus of consumption, gender, and modernity.¹

Any attempt at comparing *Sister Carrie* and *The House of Mirth*, of course, immediately runs into the difficulty of the difference in social positions between Theodore Dreiser and Edith Wharton. Perhaps the most infamous and influential account of the comparison is, once again, Kazin's. He

describes them, in 1941, as “two distinguished novelists whose careers, precisely because they were so diametrically opposed, help to illuminate the spirit of American experience and literature after 1900” (73).² His portrait of Wharton places her firmly in the world of “the predominant American aristocracy” (73):

. . . a society superbly indifferent to the tumultuous life of the frontier, supercilious in its breeding, complacent in its inherited wealth. It was a society so eminently contented with itself that it had long since become nerveless, for with its pictures, its “gentlemen’s libraries,” its possession of Fifth Avenue and Beacon Hill, its elaborate manners, its fine contempt for trade, it found authority in its own history and the meaning of life in its own conventions. (74)

How such a society could produce a major American realist, and especially one who “accepted it from the first and admired its chivalry to the end,” is the puzzle of Kazin’s chapter, entitled “Two Educations.” Wharton, he explains, “was educated to a world where leisure ruled and good conversation was considered fundamental” (74).

The contrast is by now easily predicted: Theodore Dreiser “had no such handicap to overcome.” Dreiser is essentially excluded from everything with which Wharton is associated:

From the first he was so oppressed by suffering, by the spectacle of men struggling aimlessly and alone in society, that he was prepared to understand the very society that rejected him. The cruelty and squalor of life to which he was born suggested the

theme of existence; the pattern of American life was identified as the figure of destiny. It was life, it was immemorial, it was as palpable as hunger or the caprice of God. (83)

Thus in comparison to Wharton, who “became a writer not because she revolted against her native society, but because she was bored with it,” Dreiser “stumbled into the naturalist novel as he had stumbled through his life” (75, 87). In both cases, however, the novelist’s career is read transparently from biographical details: “it was in the very nature of things that [Wharton] should rebel not by adopting a new set of values or by interesting herself in a new society, but by resigning herself to soundless heroism” (80); whereas “Naturalism was Dreiser’s instinctive response to life” (87). While Kazin ultimately favors Dreiser, finding Wharton “not a great Artist but an unusual American” in comparison to a Dreiser “stronger than all the others of his time, and at the same time more poignant,” neither is credited with much more than submission to the whims of instinct and nature (82, 89).

I’ve followed Kazin’s account here because, as was true of his description of W. D. Howells’s move from Boston to New York discussed in chapter two, above, many elements of his contrast between the authors— often extended to their novels—have remained standard assumptions in later criticism. So many, in fact, that while both *Sister Carrie* and *The House Of Mirth* are rather canonical novels, and are often discussed in standard histories, it is rare to find them grouped together.³

Taken together, however, *Sister Carrie* and *The House of Mirth* function as mirror images of each other: the view from both the right and the wrong side of the tracks of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century American

literary history.⁴ The figure of Carrie Meeber in Dreiser's novel, for example, has often been taken as "representative of all desire."⁵ Wharton's Lily Bart, similarly, is consistently presented by the narrative as a "highly specialized" and expensive commodity in search of a buyer.⁶ There are significant relationships between the novels: Lily's fall from conspicuous wealth to invisible poverty is the inverse of Carrie's rise from anonymous waif to celebrity; Hurstwood's fall, as structural counterpoint to Carrie's rise, serves the same balancing function as Rosewood's rise, which serves as structural counterpoint to Lily's fall; and Selden's failure as Lily's ambassador to the republic of the spirit resembles Carrie's abandonment of Hurstwood. Reading these two novels together provides the opportunity to examine the conjunction of modernity, gender, and consumption in the turn-of-the-century city.

In addition, both novels have critical histories that demonstrate the difficulties readers have had in discerning an authorial position: is Wharton a feminist at heart despite her disparaging remarks about the New Woman? Is she parodying, or revising, or complicit with the late nineteenth century sentimental romance? Similarly, for Dreiser: Is he parodying sentimentalism and melodrama, or engaging in it? Is he positing a naturalist, determinist world controlled by impersonal forces, or an individualistic romanticism? Ultimately, both Dreiser and Wharton— or more accurately, both *Sister Carrie* and *The House of Mirth*— carry such difficulties because they represent women on the verge of modernity and attempt to confront the challenges urban modernity presented to white middle-class women. While Amy Kaplan correctly notes that "Realist novels have trouble ending because they pose

problems they cannot solve, problems that stem from their attempt to imagine and contain social change,” their problems stem not only from “the very premises that make the problems visible and available to representation,” but from the social and historical materiality they attempt to represent (*Social* 160). In other words, rather than faulting “the realist’s enterprise”— rather than interpreting the varying discourses within the novels as a problem of their representational strategies— I see them as evidence of the impact of modernity on the specific novels, on the novel as a genre, and more generally on narrative as a whole.

Marianne DeKoven’s description of the effect of social and political change on the texts of early modernism is helpful here. Noting the critical tradition of defining modernism as “a repudiation of, and an alternative to, the cultural implications of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminism and socialism,” DeKoven argues instead that “modernist form evolved precisely as an adequate means of representing their terrifying appeal” (*Rich* 4). DeKoven’s analytical framework, based on an historically grounded “unresolved contradiction or unsynthesized dialectic” helps us to see the ambivalent and contradictory aims within these texts as evidence of cultural transition rather than authorial weakness. Yet I stop short of endorsing DeKoven’s binary reading of gender in this paradigm. “Male modernists,” she argues, “generally feared the loss of hegemony the change they desired might entail, while female modernists feared punishment for desiring utter change” (*Rich* 4). Admitting the caveat “generally,” the authors here represent significant exceptions: Wharton seems more to fear the loss of

a class-based cultural hegemony, while Dreiser seems to have more reason to fear punishment (poverty and rebuke) for desiring such change.

I. Desiring Women: *Sister Carrie*, *The House of Mirth*, and the Birth of Commodity Culture

When eighteen-year-old Carrie Meeber boards the train from Columbia City to Chicago, she puts herself on the track to modernity. Her independent rural-urban migration is already (by 1900) a well-established trope in the discourses surrounding the metropolis. Yet Carrie's emotions on leaving home are all forward looking: "whatever touch of regret at parting characterized her thoughts, it was certainly not for advantages now being given up. . . . the threads which bound her so lightly to girlhood and home were irretrievably broken" (1). From the beginning of the novel to the end, Carrie expresses little nostalgia for what has come before, and much anticipation about what lies ahead: "A half-equipped little knight she was, venturing to reconnoitre the mysterious city and dreaming wild dreams of some vague, far-off supremacy, which should make it prey and subject—the proper penitent, groveling at a woman's slipper" (2). From the beginning, Carrie represents desire.⁷

Chicago, as the narrative reminds us, is the perfect place for the desirous heroine: "Its many and growing commercial opportunities gave it widespread fame, which made of it a giant magnet, drawing to itself, from all quarters, the hopeful and the hopeless" (11). And yet, as the very magnet image itself suggests, Carrie's desire is peculiarly passive: other people, other places, and other things constantly impel Carrie to a desire she doesn't fully comprehend. "The entire metropolitan area," the narrator informs us, "possessed a high and mighty air calculated to overawe and abash the common

applicant” (12). Even Carrie’s search for employment embodies this combination of desire and passivity:

The great streets were wall-lined mysteries to her; the vast offices, strange mazes which concerned far-off individuals of importance. She could only think of people connected with them as counting money, dressing magnificently, and riding in carriages. What they dealt in, how they laboured, to what end it all came, she had only the vaguest conception. It was all wonderful, all vast, all far removed, and she sank in spirit inwardly and fluttered feebly at the heart as she thought of entering any one of those mighty concerns and asking for something to do— something she could do— anything. (13)

When Carrie enters the department store “The Fair,” the goods themselves exert an influence on her: “She could not help feeling the claim of each trinket and valuable upon her personally . . . The dainty slippers and stockings, the delicately frilled skirts and petticoats, the laces, ribbons, hair-combs, purses, all touched her with individual desire” (17). It is not that Carrie, as an individual, desires the objects, but that they— individually— desire to be desired by her.⁸

As is typical of the movement of the plot of *Sister Carrie*, it is only when Carrie has in essence given up on her search that she finds employment. “It seemed as if it was all closed to her,” the narrative reports, “that the struggle was too fierce for her to hope to do anything at all” (20). Discouraged, she turns toward the Hanson’s Halstead street flat, and on her way she encounters “a large wholesale shoe house,” the proprietor of which says “I think I can

find something for you to do” (20, 21). Carrie’s desire is immediately reinvigorated:

He left her revived by the possibilities, sure that she had found something at last. . . . She walked out into the busy street and discovered a new atmosphere. . . . She noticed that men and women were smiling. Scraps of conversation and notes of laughter floated to her. . . . Ah, the long winter in Chicago— the lights, the crowd, the amusement! This was a great, pleasing metropolis after all. Her new firm was a goodly institution. Its windows were of huge plate glass. She could probably do well there. . . . She would have a better time than she had ever had before— she would be happy. (21)

In fact, the image of Carrie imagining future happiness becomes an incessant refrain in the narrative: “‘I will have a fine time,’ she thought” (22); “She could think of things she would like to do, of clothes she would like wear, and of places she would like to visit. These were the things upon which her mind ran” (38); “Her imagination trod a very narrow round, always winding up at points which concerned money, looks, clothes, or enjoyment” (39); “Ah, money, money, money! What a thing it was to have. How plenty of it would clear away these troubles” (51); “If she could but stroll up yon broad walk, cross that rich entrance way . . . and sweep in grace and luxury to possession and command— oh! How quickly would sadness flee; how, in an instant, would the heartache end” (86); “Yes, she would get ready by Saturday. She would go, and they would be happy” (151); “Perhaps she would come out of bondage into freedom— who knows? Perhaps she would be happy” (204); “. . . she longed to

feel the delight of parading here as an equal. Ah, then she would be happy!” (227). Indeed, in characteristically Dreiserian prose, “She longed and longed and longed” (87).

If Carrie Meeber is characterized by her desire for objects, Lily Bart is from the very beginning an object intended for the desire of others. When Selden encounters her in Grand Central Station at the opening of the novel, the narrative informs us that “it was characteristic of her that she always roused speculation,” and that she “was a figure to arrest even the suburban traveler rushing to his last train” (5). Selden’s own “speculations” quickly turn to Lily as a product: “He had a confused sense that she must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to make her” (7). Mrs. Bart is said to be consoled by Lily’s beauty: “It was the last asset in their fortunes . . . She watched it jealously, as though it were her own property and Lily its mere custodian” (29). Indeed, an early title of the novel, in manuscript, was “A Moment’s Ornament”: Lily Bart’s role in the society in which she flourishes is to be ornamental, to serve as a marker of conspicuous wealth of her (assumed) husband. In Judith Fetterley’s reading, “all things conspire to make marriage Lily’s sole significant option: the beautiful object must be bought” (204).

II. Acting Naturally: Performing Modern Identities

While Carrie is figured as desiring consumer, and Lily as desired commodity, both are intimately linked to the theater: they are often described as acting their roles.⁹ Carrie Meeber Drouet Madenda Murdock Wheeler Madenda¹⁰ ultimately becomes a professional actress, but she is presented in

theatrical terms well before she actually gets on stage.¹¹ Carrie's first exposure to the theatre is when Drouet takes her to see *The Mikado*. The scene is framed so as to contrast Carrie's experience of the theatre with her experience of work. Walking to dinner, Carrie recognizes one of her former coworkers:

Carrie felt as if some great tide had rolled between them. The old dress and the old machine came back. She actually started. Drouet didn't notice until Carrie bumped into a pedestrian.

"You must be thinking," he said.

They dined and went to the theatre. The spectacle pleased Carrie immensely. The colour and grace of it caught her eye. She had vain imaginings about place and power, about far-off lands and magnificent people. (59)

The narration jumps immediately over Carrie's recognition of her fellow worker. In a novel which ordinarily places great importance on Carrie's dinners out, this one is elided— as though even in a fancy restaurant Carrie might do still more thinking, which Drouet seems to suspect is unhealthy.¹²

Carrie is also acting, of course, the part of Drouet's wife. Though upon renting her rooms, he tells her "Now, you're my sister," the role quickly evolves: "You're Mrs. Drouet now" (54, 71). In fact, Carrie learns from both Drouet and Hurstwood about creative self-presentation.¹³ Drouet is a "masher," which Dreiser defines as "one whose dress or manners are calculated to elicit the admiration of susceptible young women" (3). Drouet teaches Carrie to imitate the women she sees on the street:

Drouet had a habit . . . of looking after stylishly dressed or pretty women on the street and remarking on them. . . . He saw how they

set their little feet, how they carried their chins, with what grace and sinuosity they swung their bodies. . . . Carrie looked, and observed the grace commended . . . Instinctively, she felt a desire to imitate it. Surely she could do that too. (76)

As many critics have noted, Carrie's instinct for imitation is nourished by Drouet: He, performing a role which will be played by numerous characters in the novel, teaches her what to want.¹⁴

Hurstwood is a similar kind of performer in his role as manager for Fitzgerald and Moy's:

For the most part he lounged about, dressed in excellent tailored suits of imported goods . . . He had a finely graduated scale of informality and friendship, which improved from the "How do you do?" addressed to the fifteen-dollar-a-week clerks and office attachés . . . to the "Why, old man, how are you?" which he addressed to those noted or rich individuals who knew him and were inclined to be friendly. There was a class, however, too rich, too famous, or too successful, with who he could not attempt any familiarity of address, and with these he was professionally tactful . . . (33-34)

Hurstwood also presents himself quite carefully to Carrie: "In a pretty young woman of any refinement of feeling whatsoever he found his greatest incentive. . . . He pretended to be seriously interested in all she said" (72, 73). When Carrie protests, "I don't know how to play," Hurstwood says "we can show you" (73).¹⁵

When Carrie and Hurstwood begin seeing each other in earnest behind Drouet's back, the theatrical metaphors become more common. Hurstwood, in the beginning, seeks nothing more than he gets. That is, he doesn't intend to divorce his wife to marry Carrie. In the novel's arithmetic explanation, "He would enjoy this new gift over and above his ordinary allowance of pleasure" (98). Nevertheless, "he soon realized that Carrie took his love upon a higher basis than he had anticipated," and so he accepts the role: "Since he feigned to believe in her married state he found that he had to carry out the part" (98, 99). When all three attend the theatre together, Hurstwood coaches her: "Don't show any more interest in me than you ever have" (102). The "show" comes off successfully through a combination of Hurstwood and Carrie's mutual acting ability and Drouet's limited perceptions.¹⁶

The limits of Drouet's acting ability, as well as his perceptions, become increasingly evident in comparison with Hurstwood's.¹⁷ When Drouet's lodge asks him to locate an actress for a fund-raising theatrical production, he doesn't think to ask Carrie, but once the idea strikes him, he tries to act as though he had thought of her from the first:

"Say," he said, "how would you like to take the part?"

"Me?" said Carrie. "I can't act."

"How do you know?" questioned Drouet reflectively.

"Because," answered Carrie, "I never did." (115)

Drouet encourages her to take the part largely "as an easy way out" (115). He tries to cover up the fact that he has only thought to ask her at the last minute: "Do you think I'd come home here and urge you to do something I didn't think you would make a success of?" (116).

Hurstwood, when she informs him, works behind the scenes to make the event “more noteworthy than was at first anticipated” (120). He orchestrates a large and illustrious audience and arranges for wide publicity, all without making his own part in it known.¹⁸ Carrie’s performance moves not only the assembled crowd:

Both Hurstwood and Drouet viewed her pretty figure with rising feelings. The fact that such ability should reveal itself in her, that they should see it set forth under such effective circumstances, framed almost in massy gold and shone upon by the appropriate lights of sentiment and personality, heightened her charm for them. (137)

Carrie’s acting makes both men resolve to act more truthfully. Drouet “was resolving that he would be to Carrie what he had never been before. He would marry her . . . she was worth it” (139). Hurstwood resolves that “he would have that lovely girl if it took his all. He would act at once” (140).

It is immediately after the performance that the whole Chicago section of the novel comes to a resolution. Carrie begins to realize “the independence of success,” and feels that “she was looking down, rather than up, to her lover” (141) at the end of chapter 19, which presents the performance. All of the narrative tensions which have been building since the first chapter begin to unravel. In chapter 20, the tensions in Hurstwood’s family life nearly reach a breaking point, as he fights with Mrs. Hurstwood, and Drouet begins to suspect “the shadow of something which was coming” (144). Drouet flirts with the chambermaid, who informs him of Hurstwood’s visits during his absences. In chapter 21, Hurstwood convinces Carrie to run away with him. In chapter

22, Mrs. Hurstwood confronts him with the affair and threatens divorce. In chapter 23 Drouet and Carrie have a major fight, and he reveals to her that Hurstwood is married. In chapter 24 Hurstwood finds that his wife has locked him out of the house, and in chapter 25 he finds that she has in fact filed for divorce. In chapter 26, Carrie makes the rounds of various Chicago theatres to find work, and is told by both managers she sees that she ought to be in New York. Finally, in chapter 27, Hurstwood comes to get Carrie, telling her that Drouet is in the hospital to get her into the cab and puts them on the train, the ten thousand dollars from the Fitzgerald and Moy's safe in his hand satchel. In short, the novel makes several major shifts in just seven short chapters. Ultimately, of course, all of these actions are over-determined; that is to say, they have multiple causes. But Carrie's performance, in terms of the structure and pacing of the novel, is the action which sets the wheels in motion.

The flight to New York puts Carrie's theatrical career temporarily on hold. It is only when Hurstwood's business fails and their money begins to run out that she returns to the stage. What she finds, at first, is that "Girls who can stand in a line and look pretty are as numerous as labourers who can swing a pick" (276). She is finally able to get a part, however, and begins her infamous rise to celebrity, intercut with scenes of Hurstwood's fall. She moves up quickly, from "the fourth girl on the right" of one of the chorus lines to the head of "the white column":

The white column consisted of some twenty girls, all in snow-white flannel trimmed with silver and blue. Its leader was most stunningly arrayed in the same colours, elaborated, however,

with epaulets and a belt of silver, with a short sword dangling at one side. (290)

In a sense Carrie is again playing the role of “the little soldier of fortune” of “half-equipped knight” she was assigned in the beginning of the novel: but this time, she gets eighteen dollars a week, and is on her way to success.¹⁹

Lily Bart, of course, does not have Carrie’s dilemma of looking for work. Indeed, her dilemma is how to avoid the appearance of work.²⁰ Nevertheless, Wharton’s novel is also permeated with references to self-presentation of a theatrical nature.²¹ Lily must constantly work to control the impressions she makes on others: “Within the novel the art of representation is seen both as irrepressible inner need and as calculated, often risky, public performance” (Hochman, “Rewards” 147).

As Lily leaves Selden’s flat at the end of the first chapter, she pauses in an emblematic moment:

There was a thousand chances to one against meeting anybody, but one could never tell, and she always paid for her rare indiscretions by a violent reaction of prudence. There was no one in sight, however, but a char-woman who was scrubbing the stairs. Her own stout person and its surrounding implements took up so much room that Lily, to pass her, had to gather up her skirts and brush against the wall. As she did so, the woman paused in her work and looked up curiously, resting her clenched red fists on the wet cloth she had just drawn from her pail. . . . The woman . . . continued to stare as Miss Bart swept by with a murmur of silken linings. Lily felt herself flushing under the

look. What did the creature suppose? Could one never do the simplest, the most harmless thing, without subjecting oneself to some odious conjecture? (13)

The answer, of course, is that one cannot, at least not in the world Lily inhabits. As Ruth Yeazell notes, “as if help in old New York had already become uncannily scarce, the same woman will later reappear scrubbing the staircase of the house where Lily lives with her Aunt” (714).

In another uncanny coincidence, as she leaves Selden’s building, she runs into Simon Rosedale, who just happens to own it. She quickly escapes into a hansom, after attempting to fend off Rosedale’s questions with a lie about visiting her dress-maker. Once in the safety of the cab, however, she realizes she has “blundered twice in five minutes”: first by lying to Rosedale and second by not allowing him to drive her to the station. “Why could one never do a natural thing,” she wonders, “without having to screen it behind a structure of artifice?” (15).

Lily quickly reveals that her own ability to act far exceeds her blundering performance with Rosedale. Having “arranged herself” in the train car “with the instinctive feeling for effect which never forsook her,” she discovers Percy Gryce in the same car, “dissembling himself behind an unfolded newspaper” (17). Lily considers herself lucky and prepares to perform, “tranquilly studying her prey through downcast lashes while she organized a method of attack” (17). Knowing that Gryce is timid, she is reassured: “She had the art of giving self-confidence to the embarrassed, but she was not equally sure of being able to embarrass the self-confident” (17). She successfully manages to get Gryce to move to the seat next to her, and

much to his admiration establishes a familiar domestic scene in the midst of the hectic, public train: “It seemed wonderful to him that any one should perform with such careless ease the difficult task of making tea in public in a lurching train” (18). The scene is working to Lily’s advantage, and her delicacy allows her performance to come off as careless ease: “she resolved to impart a gently domestic air to the scene” (18).

Unfortunately, however, “conversation flagged after the tray had been removed,” and Lily is forced to resort, as a “last resource,” to the subject of Americana, which Gryce collects. Lily has had the foresight to gather some “points” from Selden, “in anticipation of this very contingency,” and they “were serving her to such good purpose she began to think her visit to him had been the luckiest incident of the day” (19). While Gryce carries on about his collection, Lily’s mind wanders: “Miss Bart had the gift of following an undercurrent of thought while she appeared to be sailing on the surface of conversation; and in this case her mental excursion took the form of a rapid survey of Mr. Percy Gryce’s future as combined with her own” (20). Just as she is beginning to feel “so completely in charge of the situation” that “all fear of Mr. Rosedale, and of the difficulties on which that fear was contingent, vanished beyond the edge of thought,” Bertha Dorset boards the train, and derails Lily’s carefully orchestrated scene, setting another pattern for the novel— just when Lily seems most in control, something upsets the stage.

Lily’s most spectacular performance, and the first indication of the very public nature of her fall, is the *tableau vivant* she presents at the Wellington Brys’: “Lily was in her element on such occasions. . . . her vivid plastic sense, hitherto nurtured on no higher food than dress-making and

upholstery, found eager expression . . . Her dramatic instinct was roused” (103). The whole setting is theatrical: the Brys, new money, have “live[d] up to their calling as stage-managers” in building and decorating their showy new house: “The air of improvisation was in fact strikingly present: so recent, so rapidly-evoked was the whole *mise-en-scène* that one had to touch the marble columns to learn they were not of cardboard, to seat one’s self in one of the damask-and-gold arm chairs to be sure it was not painted against the wall” (104).

When Lily appears as Reynold’s “Mrs. Lloyd,” it at first appears as an artistic triumph of self-presentation: “even the least imaginative of the audience must have felt a thrill of contrast when the curtain suddenly parted on a picture which was simply and undisguisedly the portrait of Miss Bart” (106). Paradoxically, Lily becomes “simply” herself by assuming the most carefully controlled and arranged of all of her poses:

Here there could be no mistaking the predominance of personality— the unanimous “Oh!” of the spectators was a tribute, not to the brush work of Reynold’s “Mrs. Lloyd” but to the flesh and blood loveliness of Lily Bart. She had shown her artistic intelligence in selecting a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself. It was as though she had stepped, not out of, but into, Reynold’s canvas . . . (106)

This time the scene is upset not by the intrusion of the noisy Mrs. Dorset, but by the reactions of the audience, which she cannot control. Grace and Theodore Hovet argue that Wharton, in this scene, “reveals the pitfalls of

using masquerade as a means of asserting a personal identity” (349). Ned Van Alstyne’s “Deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up” deflates the image of “soaring grace” and “the touch of poetry in her beauty” Selden— and the reader— has been interpreting the scene to be.

III. Realism, Naturalism, Melodrama, Sentiment, and Modernism

Indeed, in a sense the *tableau vivant* represents the last plateau for Lily as she begins her fall. If, as W. D. Howells once wrote, “the archetype of the new era was ‘the man who has risen’” (Qtd. in Kazin 79), the scales of women’s mobility are the obsession shared by *Sister Carrie* and *The House of Mirth*. Carrie Meeber’s “rise” seems to offer an inverted parallel to Lily Bart’s “fall.” Specifically, Carrie Meeber rises through material success to become a famous (and wealthy) actress, moving from the dreariness of her sister Minnie’s flat to luxurious suites at the Wellington— and eventually Waldorf— hotel. Lily Bart, on the other hand, falls from a position of wealth in Mrs. Peniston’s frumpily decorated but undeniably wealthy home to a “hall bedroom” in a boarding house. Paradoxically, both are said to have been enlightened by their trajectories. Carrie Meeber learns that the wealth she has sought throughout the novel doesn’t bring her the happiness with which she’s associated it; Lily Bart learns that her resistance to her role as conspicuous consumer is not a defect but evidence of strength.

Linked to the arcs of Meeber and Bart are the opposed trajectories of the men in the novels. Hurstwood’s fall is said to parallel Meeber’s rise, just as Rosedale’s rise is said to parallel Lily’s fall.²² Again, it is not just the trajectories but the disillusionment they are said to imply that are parallel:

Hurstwood is said to demonstrate Dreiser's conviction that mysterious social forces and chance, rather than talent and hard work, make the difference between success and failure. Rosedale, on the other hand, is said to demonstrate Wharton's belief that crude wealth and the deliberate cultivation of the right connections lead to social success, rather than the (real) merits of individuals. Thus, in the end, both male characters are said to reflect their authors' condemnations of turn of the century American culture.

Finally, both *Sister Carrie* and *The House of Mirth* are structured around a series of possible marriages. Carrie meets Drouet on the second page of the novel, later runs off with Hurstwood, and has a hypothetical relationship with Robert Ames at the end of the novel. Lily, met by Selden in the opening scene, is paired in possible marriages to Selden himself, Percy Gryce, Simon Rosedale, and George Dorset, not to mention early suitors outside the main action of the novel (the "Dillworth" Selden mentions in the first scene (10), Herbert Melson "who had blue eyes and a little wave in his hair" (52), and her near-rape experience with Gus Trenor). Both have one possible suitor who is held up as a kind of ideal, though with varying degrees of irony: Lawrence Selden, flawed as he undoubtedly is, represents for most readers Lily's best hope; Robert Ames, similarly, has often been taken as Dreiser's spokesman and been said to represent a new Ideal for Carrie (her true "aims").

One way in which the critical attention to the vicissitudes of Wharton's and Dreiser's characters has been focused is through the categories of literary genres. Both are in essence canonical within their eras, yet exceed the "proper" textual strategies and modes of realism. *Sister Carrie*, while generally classified as a major text of Naturalism, also contains much melodrama,

sentiment, and arcane moral philosophy. *The House of Mirth*, similarly, is in the main a realist capstone, but it is also claimed as a sentimental novel, a melodrama, and a novel of manners, all of which are often opposed to realism as categories. Because Dreiser and Wharton rely on Victorian sentimental tropes of the fallen woman and/or the virtuous heroine, they are nostalgic: caught up in pre-existing fictional forms rather than originating new ones. If, on the other hand, they subvert, parody, or otherwise violate those conventions, they are validated as original, progressive, and modern.

As Trachtenberg has recently noted, “Talk of power and mystery, somehow connected with boring, slovenly writing, can still be heard in Dreiser criticism” (“Who” 89).²³ Sandy Petrey traces this discourse of flawed artistry back to Saul Bellow’s comment “on the oddity of no one asking what bad writing in a powerful novelist signified” (qtd. in Petrey 102). Indeed, I agree with Petrey that “the bad writing remains a quandary” (102) in this novel. How is the reader to take the moral philosophical asides, the neo-Broadway musical chapter titles, or the elements of sentimental Victorian fiction and stage melodrama in a novel otherwise characterized as naturalist and deterministic?²⁴ Petrey’s answer relies on separating effect from intent. While arguing that “the text of *Sister Carrie* is so structured that its moral passages stand as formal parodies of the language of sentimentality,” Petrey is careful to establish that “Not only is there no reason to suppose Dreiser intended such a parody, there are many reasons to believe he would have been outraged and appalled at the thought that such a reading was possible” (102).

Petrey discusses three forms of sentimentality in the novel: “melodrama . . . the Sentimental Love Tradition, and the maudlin songs of composers like

Dreiser's brother, Paul Dresser" (104). Comparing the strains of these to the social realism and naturalism elsewhere in evidence, Petrey argues that what Dreiser achieved, unintentionally, is "two stylistic registers": "One recounts the classic realist tale of success and failure in a specific society at a precise moment, the other cloaks cant about the eternal and universal meaning of life" (102-3). The former, Petrey argues, reveals the vacuity of the latter: "social realism exposes sentimental posturing as absurd" (110). Petrey's very insistence on bracketing Dreiser's intentions is not merely a nod to biographical accuracy or a refusal to elevate "the intentional fallacy" to an "absolute critical stricture" (102). Petrey notes that "The bulk of extra-textual information does not support the thesis that opposing levels of discourse in *Sister Carrie* are thematically functional elements which embody the gulf between social myths and social reality. The major justifications for this essay are in the final text" (109).

The distinction between these two "stylistic registers," or the "gulf between social myths and social reality," however, is not so easily noted in "the final text." While I find myself very much in agreement with Petrey's reading of the *effect* of many of the sentimental passages, there is a good deal more in the novel which seems to operate on both sides of the gulf than he acknowledges. In other words, it isn't just that extra-textual information suggests Dreiser's investment in the "social myths" that are discursively intertwined with "social realism" in the novel: it's the novel's own investment in those myths. The sentimental, melodramatic, and maudlin elements are difficult not because they are, in Petrey's terms, "marked as foreign by the

form of [their] expression”; rather, they are difficult precisely because they are so well assimilated.²⁵

From the very title, *Sister Carrie* carries suggestions of sentimental romance: the title suggests, even to modern readers unfamiliar with it, either a domestic, family drama or the story of a nun.²⁶ The chapter titles, omitted from the Pennsylvania edition, may be seen by some twentieth-century readers as “mellifluous drivel,” but it is the very fact that they fit so well with the overall force of the novel that makes them significant.²⁷ If they do not comport well with the language of social realism, embodied for Dreiser generally by specific, concrete details, they do fit well with the general outline of the narrative.

For example, the language of the inevitability of Carrie’s fall may be read as sentimental or maudlin. Dreiser writes:

When a girl leaves home at eighteen, she does one of two things. Either she falls into saving hands and becomes better, or she rapidly assumes the cosmopolitan standard of virtue and becomes worse. Of an intermediate balance, under the circumstances, there is no possibility. . . . There are large forces which allure with all the soulfulness of expression possible in the most cultured human. . . . Without a counsellor at hand to whisper cautious interpretations, what falsehoods may not these things breath into the unguarded ear? (1-2)

Yet, if this is not exactly what happens to Carrie, it is enough like what happens to blur the distinction between social realism and social myth. Indeed, one paragraph later, Drouet is introduced: “‘That,’ said a voice in her ear, ‘is one of the prettiest little resorts in Wisconsin’” (2). Throughout the novel,

unnamed voices speak. When Hurstwood is confronted with the opportunity to take the money from Fitzgerald and Moy's, the unnamed voice speaks to him as well: "'Count them,' said a voice in his ear" He does, noting in a typical moment of what Petrey characterizes as social realism, "they were bills of fifty and one hundred dollars done in packages of a thousand." He wonders why he doesn't shut the safe and leave. "For answer, there came the strangest words: 'Did you ever have ten thousand dollars in ready money?'" (191).

The problem, in other words, is not confined to isolated patches of melodramatic explanation, chapter titles, or moral philosophy: the problem of what motivates characters is consistent from beginning to end, and the novel at least as often endorses the explanations as it critiques them. If Dreiser is read as a naturalist, in terms of social Darwinism derived from Spencer,²⁸ the novel indicates no clear distinction between the multiple explanations offered for behavior. What ultimately makes *Sister Carrie* a novel appropriate to modernity is not that it makes clear the "false consciousness" of sentiment, but precisely that it makes unclear the authorial stance.

The passage about Carrie's inevitable fall or rise cited above is echoed throughout the novel. In a passage cited above, at the end of Carrie's first theatrical appearance, we're told that "With the tables turned, she was looking down, rather than up, to her lover" (140). Later, when Hurstwood is in essence in Carrie's position, after their move to New York, Dreiser writes: "Whatever a man like Hurstwood could be in Chicago, it is very evident that he would be but an inconspicuous drop in an ocean like New York" (214). Hurstwood has now become the waif amid forces: "All this he realized, now quite sharply, as he faced the city, cut off from his friends, despoiled of his modest fortune, and

even his name, and forced to begin the battle for place and comfort all over again" (215). Just as the "girl" who moves to the city either rises or falls, the same inherent instability affects Hurstwood: "A man's fortune or material progress is very much the same as his bodily growth. Either he is growing stronger, healthier, wiser, as the youth approaching manhood, or he is growing weaker, older, less incisive mentally, as the man approaching old age. There are no other states" (239). Thus, just as the tables turned between Carrie and Drouet at the end of the Chicago section of the novel, so they turn between Carrie and Hurstwood here. While some might want to dismiss such philosophizing in the narrative as the first-generation-American Dreiser's "uncultured" attempts at high culture, easily marked as foreign, the problem is that these predictions are ultimately accurate: however invalid the prediction might be as cultural criticism, in the novel it is fatally prescient.

The House of Mirth presents similar difficulties. Wharton's inclusion of attitudes, judgements, and scenes derived from sentimental and melodramatic traditions has generated much critical debate about Wharton's intent. Lily's transformation into an iconic, pure, suffering woman seems to contradict the fuller, more complex portrait of the rest of the novel.²⁹ If, as Kristina Brooks argues, Wharton combines "in a single body . . . the Victorian figure of the fallen woman and the modern figure of the New Woman," the problem for critics has been to identify which one ultimately triumphs (91). Where Petrey opposed social realism and social myth in *Sister Carrie*, the opposition in *The House of Mirth* is generally feminism versus sentimental Victorianism.

Two crucial scenes function as touchstones for these questions: Lily's vision of domesticity at Nettie Struther's flat, and the passing of the un-

written word between Selden and Lily after her death. Whereas Bazin argues that these final scenes represent “Wharton’s sentimentalization of the domestic ideal, the working class, the early pieties, and death weakens her novel” (107), M. Howard argues that “her heroine, homeless to the end, finds personal and social enlightenment on the city streets and in a boarding house in this very housey novel” (3). C. Wolff explicitly links Lily’s death to Wharton’s reliance on nineteenth-century dramas of beset womanhood:

Perhaps Lily’s deepest need is to enact the closure of some recognizable theatrical scenario. . . . It is not simply that Lily chooses to die. In nineteenth-century theater, heroines *did* die. If they had been virtuous, they died tragically; if they were no more than fallen women, they died trivially. In either case death was a suitable ending, and Wharton’s theatrical heroine had no where else to go. (“Lily” 83)

The drive for closure in these descriptions is less Wharton’s, however, than Lily’s. Is it Wharton herself who feels the need for closure?³⁰

Marianne DeKoven’s incisive reading of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* in terms of modernist ambivalence offers the most useful reading of Lily’s ambiguous death.³¹ Wharton’s novel, like Chopin’s, “has been carefully located by critics within various nineteenth-century or nonmodernist subgenres”: realism, naturalism and the novel of manners in particular.³² It has also been “seen as defined by the influence of (at least) [one] male predecessor,” Henry James.³³ When “judged by the standards of realistic convention,” *The House of Mirth* too “appears problematically inconsistent or even badly written.”³⁴ DeKoven’s conclusion about *The Awakening*, that “this troublesome

‘inconsistency’ is the radical disjunctiveness of modernist *sous-rature*,” applies to Wharton’s novel as well (*Rich* 139-40).

Rather than a failed realist novel, *The House of Mirth* is a successful modernist one:

. . . if we understand that the novel is purposely rent in two, the confusion, if there is any, can be seen as the insoluble dilemma of Lily Bart. She is in transit, literally- between trains, house parties, friends and false friends, high life and low life. Wharton was also on the move, professionally speaking, and in writing *The House of Mirth* she found that there was no prefab house of fiction, no format of social satire or deterministic naturalism, that would accommodate Lily, a modern heroine. I read Wharton’s novel as a modernist work which denies the comforts of genre and its available views. (M. Howard 7)

It is in terms of this lack of predetermined scripts that the farewell scene between Selden and Lily’s body should be read. Selden returns because the text has so consistently represented him as Lily’s destination. Thus even the final paragraphs of the novel embody DeKoven’s modernist *sous-rature* in Selden: “He knelt by the bed and bent over her, draining their last moment to its lees; and in the silence there passed between them the word which made all clear” (256). In other words, Selden is both the hypocritical self-congratulatory mis-reader that many critiques have noted *and* Lily’s ideal reader. At the same time that he is “draining their last moment to its lees,” which suggests a parasitic Selden, the word “passed between them” which suggests a more equal relationship. Significantly, however, the word passes in silence; in the

ultimate *sous-rature* of the text, the reader is never told explicitly what the word is.

IV. “What’s the Use?”: Representing Social Anxiety

These concerns about genre-mixing, failure, and ambivalence take on new significance in light of the recent re-reading of naturalism and realism as complicit with the emergence of consumer culture, and its interaction with late nineteenth century gender ideologies. In Merish’s reading of *The House of Mirth*, for example, “naturalist texts enact gendered fantasies of surveillance that work to contain the radical potential of feminine consumer desire, and to redefine the female consumer subject as commodity *object*” (Merish 323-24). In Walter Benn Michaels’s reading of *Sister Carrie*, its power “derives not from its scathing ‘picture’ of capitalist ‘conditions’ but from its unabashed and extraordinarily literal acceptance of the economy that produced those conditions” (*Gold* 35).³⁵ Thus it is not simply a question of whether Wharton and Dreiser are late-nineteenth or early-twentieth-century authors, late Victorians or early modernists— it is a question of the very possibility of critique in fiction.³⁶

Where Michaels goes wrong is by overlooking the different narrative voices at work in the novel. In establishing the concept of “popular economy,” Michaels argues that Dreiser misses a discrepancy. The narrator states that when the “usurped privilege” of capital is replaced by honest distribution, political and social problems will disappear: a kind of socialism in essence. But then the narrative goes on to consider the “relative value” of money:

But Dreiser's second assertion about money, that it has a 'relative value,' is not exactly on all fours with the first version of money as symbolic of labor and especially of the value of labor as fixed. For the value of money to become relative, either money must be divorced from labor or, infinitely more disturbing, the value of labor itself must be seen as relative. (32)

Of course, this is exactly true— in both ways. Under capitalism, money is divorced from labor, and the value of labor itself is relative— as Dreiser indicates in the comparison between Carrie's wages in the shoe factory and on stage, as well as the comparison between Hurstwood's wages as manager and as scab trolley driver. Thus, the two accounts are irreconcilable— either money represents equal labor or it doesn't. Which, in fact, is Dreiser's point: if it were the way it should be, rather than the way it is, money would not be divorced from labor, and therefore would not have a "relative" value. Thus it isn't clear what Michaels means in noting that "Dreiser doesn't even seem to notice there is a discrepancy" (32). Indeed, the "two accounts" which Michaels attributes to "Dreiser" are oppositions within the novel itself: Dreiser specifies that "one of her order of mind" believes in the power of money, which it in itself does not have. In other words, Dreiser does not argue that money *should* have a relative value, merely that it *does*.

When Michaels moves on to Carrie's other definition of money, as "something everybody else has got and I must get," he takes this statement to be a general truism of the novel, and goes on to argue that "if money, by definition, is the desire for money, then money can never be quite itself" (34). But, of course, Dreiser didn't say that money was the desire for money— he said

that, for Carrie, at that moment, money was primarily defined as something she wanted and felt others had. Michaels notes that “the equation of power with desire makes no sense” for Dreiser or for Ames; both operate, according to Michaels, on the model of an economy of scarcity, in which power, happiness, and moral virtue all seem to depend on minimizing desire” (35). Thus, “the enemy . . . is a conception of desire as disrupting this equilibrium, desire that, exceeding and outstripping any possible object, is in principle never fully satisfied” (35). Yet, if Carrie’s “economy of desire,” in the beginning, “involves an unequivocal endorsement” of unrestrained capitalism, how does that extend to Carrie throughout the book, let alone the novel itself?

In the final scene of Carrie’s rocking-chair dreaming, she is explicitly imagined as having surpassed the desire for money and the illusion that it represents happiness: “In her walks on Broadway, she no longer thought of the elegance of the creatures who passed her. Had they more of that peace and beauty which glimmered afar off, then they were to be envied” (369). Carrie still desires, but her desires have changed. She reflects back on the influence of Hurstwood and Drouet:

Time was when both represented for her all that was most potent in earthly success. They were the personal representatives of a state most blessed to attain— the titled ambassadors of comfort and peace, aglow with their credentials. It is but natural that when the world which they represented no longer allured her, its ambassadors should be discredited. Even had Hurstwood returned in his original beauty and glory, he could not now have allured

her. She had learned that in his world, as in her own present state, was not happiness. (369)

Thus while Carrie still longs, and is still unsatisfied, she is unsatisfied because money is now something she has, and no longer wants. Both Hurstwood's death and Carrie's dreams represent attempts to escape the "relative value of things," rather than the acceptance of those values.

It is for this reason that we must reject Michaels's assertion that "the only relation literature as such has to culture as such is that it is part of it" (27). To do so is not to imagine literature as a force from outside culture, but rather to enrich our understanding of what "culture" is and how to approach the study of it: For Michaels there is one culture, and one can do nothing but be inside it. But cultures are always plural, and are built out of disagreements, conflicts, and struggles: thus literature is indeed within culture *by virtue of*, not in spite of, its varying disagreements and agreements with actually existing social relationships. *Sister Carrie* and *The House of Mirth* demonstrate neither a wholesale acceptance nor a total rejection of the social changes accompanying urbanization, and the movement of white, middle-class women into the public sphere. Lily Bart's death and Carrie Meeber's "success" are both ambivalent conclusions. What they evince, rather than the failure of Dreiser's or Wharton's technique, is the cultural anxiety over modernity: the contradictions within the culture of urban turn-of-the-century America, and the impossibility of definitively answering the questions raised by the combination of "woman," "city," and "commerce."

Notes to Chapter Three

- ¹ I focus throughout this chapter on the position of white women within the discourses of urbanization. I want to note, however, that this is not meant to imply that gender is most usefully (or accurately) understood in the absence of race and class.
- ² In “The Lady and the Tiger: Edith Wharton and Theodore Dreiser,” first published in *Virginia Quarterly Review* 17 (Winter 1941): 101-19; reprinted as a chapter in *On Native Grounds*. Citations here refer to the chapter. See also Millicent Bell’s “Introduction: A Critical History,” 1-19 in *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton*, which she also edited.
- ³ Two notable exceptions here: Maureen Howard writes that “Wharton took from her reading what could help her to write Lily’s story, turning, most particularly, to Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*” (18), and Lori Merish uses the example of *Sister Carrie* as an introduction to her discussion of the relationship between naturalism and “late-nineteenth-century economic conditions and popular anxieties about them” (321).
- ⁴ Matthiessen writes: “Dreiser was the immigrant’s son from the wrong side of the tracks, who broke through the genteel tradition by no conscious intention, but by drawing on a store of experience outside the scope of the easily well-to-do— experience which formed the solid basis for all his subsequent thought” (172). See also Trachtenberg’s reference to the novel and the author as “both from the other side of the tracks, so to speak” (“Who” 89).
- ⁵ *Sister Carrie*, page 356 in the Norton Critical Edition, edited by Donald Pizer. I rely on this edition throughout the chapter.
- ⁶ *House of Mirth*, page 7. Of course, this description of Lily, and the one applied to Carrie, above, are from unreliable sources: not only in the sense that the narrative voice of both novels is unreliable, but specifically in the sense that Lawrence Selden and Robert Ames, respectively, have profoundly ambivalent relationships to the female protagonists.
- ⁷ Indeed, from the beginning she represents a desire presented as transgressing gendered boundaries: the city grovels at her slipper, and yet she is a knight.
- ⁸ “Carrie’s immersion in commodity production (the shoe factory) and circulation (the department store),” Livingston argues, “announces that there is no choice to be made between domesticity and the marketplace because there is no escape from the latter, not even for a young woman from the country” (229).
- ⁹ Irene Gammel’s observation, about Dreiser criticism, applies to Wharton’s critics as well: they “have generally discussed the theatricality . . . in such negative terms as ‘deception’ and ‘inauthenticity,’ a diction that tacitly assumes the existence of an ‘essential self’ which is claimed to be lost in the

process of role playing” (“City’s” 214). Yet I think that both novels encourage such a reading: neither Wharton nor Dreiser seems precociously post-modern enough to have dispensed with the notion of the essential self entirely.

- ¹⁰ These are the names she takes throughout the novel (See Lenard 36).
- ¹¹ Gerber writes that “by the time she enters upon her stage career she is prepared for professional role-playing through much experience and in many different modes” (“Tangled Web” 1).
- ¹² Indeed, in characteristic, understated Dreiserian humor, Drouet is only able to recognize that Carrie is thinking because she runs into someone else.
- ¹³ “In *Sister Carrie* living is acting- each main character assuming a role or roles with Thespian ease” (Garfield 223).
- ¹⁴ For example, Gammel claims that Dreiser “emphasizes that Carrie’s desire for beauty and clothes is not her own, but is always already mediated in her society’s power structures. It is usually male lovers who play powerful roles in the ‘mediation’ of female desire . . .” (“Sexualizing” 45).
- ¹⁵ They’re talking about Euchre, but the extended references to— and puns on— acting, roles, taking parts, and playing in the novel justify the reading.
- ¹⁶ Drouet’s ignorance of the situation is revealed by his reaction to the play: he says of the cuckolded husband “I haven’t any pity for a man who would be such a chump as that” (103).
- ¹⁷ “As the love triangle deepens, all three players dissemble,” Gerber notes, “but Carrie and Hurstwood, who are more naturally expert, pretend to the point of deception” (“Tangled” 5).
- ¹⁸ Scott Zaluda’s insightful examination of the “Order of Elks”— the fraternal organization to which Drouet and Hurstwood belong— argues that Dreiser “represents a self-serving and aggressive middle-class, American male type who finds his identity both among and against a community of other men who look, talk, and act just like him” (77).
- ¹⁹ She becomes, as Philip Gerber has noted, a celebrity, as we use the term today. See “A Star is Born.”
- ²⁰ Susan Gubar places Lily in the context of “the deflection of female creativity from the production of art to the re-creation of the body” (250).
- ²¹ Abbott argues that Lily “functions as an actual personification of Art Nouveau, from its beginning as a vital and fashionable decorative movement to its decline and death” (74). In addition, see C. Wolff, *Feast* and “Lily.”
- ²² Fetterley argues that *The House of Mirth* “is to a considerable extent structured upon the inverse parallelism of [Rosedale’s] rise and [Lily’s] decline” (207). Barbara Hochman notes that “insofar as *Sister Carrie* has been said to possess any coherent structure, that structure has been seen to

reside in Dreiser's use of contrast. Critics have especially stressed the pivotal juxtaposition of Carrie's rise and Hurstwood's fall" ("Self-Image" 108).

- ²³ Trachtenberg links this to the portrait of Dreiser I discussed above in Kazin: this paradox is "a continuing sign, surely, of a still unresolved ambivalence toward this author and this novel, both from the other side of the tracks, so to speak, of the James house in which well-crafted fiction thrives among its other Anglo-Saxon and well-off inhabitants" ("Who" 89). See also Riggio on Dreiser as "hidden ethnic."
- ²⁴ In Grebstein's terms, "Since there is little doubt that Dreiser was the trailblazer for modernity and that *Sister Carrie* marked a radical departure from what had been written before it, we may well inquire why it now seems such an old-fashioned book . . ." (542).
- ²⁵ My argument is thus closer to James Livingston's: "the long-standing conflict between romance and realism," he argues, is in *Sister Carrie* "registered if not resolved in a fictional discourse that incorporates both without becoming either" (224).
- ²⁶ Riggio offers multiple readings of the "Sister" in "Notes on the Origin," including literary (Balzac's influence) and biographical (Sara White Dreiser's sister Rose); he primarily focuses on Carrie Rutter, a girl Dreiser knew as a child.
- ²⁷ Philip Williams argues that "there is no evidence that he was either ironic or callous in composing the titles" but rather "earnestly sought the best symbols for each chapter" (361).
- ²⁸ Christopher Katope argues that "while Dreiser was composing *Sister Carrie* [he] was markedly influenced by the 'laws' of nature which Herbert Spencer described in his *First Principles*" (75).
- ²⁹ Robin Beaty argues that "Is it possible that Wharton, under pressure to meet the serialization deadline, may have compromised her usual commitment to 'high art' and finished the novel in a more popular vein than the careful, ironic unfolding of the earlier narrative leads us to expect" (274). I would argue that the increase in sentimentality towards the end of the narrative is neither a "compromise" nor even a contrast to the "earlier narrative." The ending is as "careful" and "ironic" as the beginning.
- ³⁰ The elision of the author has become a common symptom of the novel's problematic: either Wharton is seen as struggling against her own text, or she is elided from view. Ellen Goldner, for example, writes: "Lily dies to assuage cultural anxieties over widespread interdependencies by reaffirming a belief in individualism" (302).
- ³¹ C. J. Wershoven compares the two novels in different terms, concluding that "In both [novels], analysis of the heroine's failures reveals a final, missing step to selfhood" (35), and that the heroines "choose a way to preserve what little identity they actually have: self-annihilation, the freezing of the self in death" (37). I would suggest that the heroine's death, in both cases, is

more problematic than a “choice” or a “failure.” Indeed, “between the oppressive darkness of Mrs. Peniston’s drawing-room . . . and the vulgar glare of a place like the Emporium hotel,” Wharton’s “novel does not really offer its heroine anything to choose” (Yeazell, 731). In fact, the narrative continues to suggest that there are choices, even as it demonstrates that there aren’t. Showalter also marks the parallel in different terms: “Like Edna Pointellier, Lily is stranded between two worlds of female experience: the intense female friendships and mother-daughter bonds characteristic of nineteenth-century American women’s culture, . . . and the dissolution of these single-sex relationships in the interests of more intimate friendships between women and men” (25).

- ³²Robin Beaty analyzes the novel’s interaction with the sentimental novel: “Wharton infuses new vigor into the popular sentimental form so that psychological realism and sentimentality are once again closely connected, held in an uneasy alliance by Wharton’s genius” (266). Bruce Michelson writes that the novel “is at once sentimental and naturalistic, conventional as well as radical in its structure” (201). Catherine Quoyeser analyzes the text’s blend of realism, naturalism, sentimentalism, and melodrama.
- ³³Carolyn Karcher argues that “James was more than a precursor for Wharton; he was a mentor, and one who took a notoriously authoritative stand on matters of narrative technique and proper choice of subject” (228).
- ³⁴See Diana Trilling, for example. Wai-Chee Dimock critiques the Nettie Struther episode as “the only romanticism she *permits herself* in the book” (791, emphasis added). Bazin considers Wharton to be “mystified by capitalist, Christian, and patriarchal ideologies” in her use of Nettie.
- ³⁵See also Bowlby, Fisher, and Corkin. Corkin is perhaps the most explicit, introducing the idea of consumer culture, and concluding: “*Sister Carrie* . . . effectively reflects this world view, while arguing for its correctness and promoting its acceptance” (“*Sister*” 607).
- ³⁶Livingston, considering the same question from a different perspective, argues that “the ethical or utopian principle of romance remains,” arguing that the novel is “the representation of the historical from the standpoint of the ethical, or, more simply, realism in the narrative form of romance” (240).

Chapter 4: Metropolitan Modernism: Getting to the “Center of Things” in *Manhattan Transfer* and *Flamingo*

The ancient city grew up around a fortress; the modern city has grown up around a market. (Park, “Urban Community” 9)

In 1925, Chicago sociologists Robert Park, Ernest Burgess, and R. D. McKenzie published *The City*, a collection of essays examining the city as “something more than a congeries of individual men and of social conveniences . . . something more, also, than a mere constellation of institutions and administrative devices” (1). Rather than the exploration of the metropolis as “merely a physical mechanism,” they sought to explain the city as “a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions” (1). The shifting focus of urban sociology in the nineteen twenties— attempting to recognize the city as an entirely new kind of ecological social system with its own norms, organizations, and structures— reflects an understanding that modernity was here to stay. Where earlier urban critics had still held at least the idea of rural life up as an alternative to the metropolis, by the twenties one could no longer deny that the United States had become a predominantly urban nation.

In the introductory essay to the collection, Park argues that “The attraction of the metropolis is due in part . . . to the fact that in the long run every individual finds somewhere among the varied manifestations of city life the sort of environment in which he expands and feels at ease” (41). Whereas “the small community often tolerates eccentricity,” he argues, “the city . . . rewards it” (41). Because of the vast, impersonal, transitory nature of

interpersonal contact city life encourages, “neither the criminal, the defective, nor the genius has the same opportunity to develop his innate disposition in a small town that he invariably finds in a great city” (41). The problem, according to Park, is that the city fails to provide the social controls which had been provided by the integrated culture of small towns: “with the growth of great cities . . . the old forms of social control represented by the family, the neighborhood, and the local community have been undermined and their influence greatly diminished” (107). In the metropolis of the 1920s, “everything seems to be undergoing a change” (107). Ultimately, Park is led to hypothesize that “anything that makes life interesting is dangerous to the existing order” (108).

John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and Mary Borden’s *Flamingo* (1927) reflect similar anxieties about the interest and danger of the modern city, which represents speed, excitement, and commerce but also danger, difference, and destruction. Jimmy Herf and Ellen Thatcher, around whom Dos Passos’s novel is constructed, face a metropolis at once irresistibly attractive and inherently dangerous to social stability: Herf’s rejection of the city at the end of the novel and Thatcher’s troubled acceptance of the life it offers her are both figured by the novel as unsettled and unsettling conclusions. Borden’s novel more explicitly figures New York, and the modernity it represents, as a threat to “civilization.” Peter Campbell, the protagonist of Borden’s novel, is torn between the excitement of modernity in the city and the challenges to social order such excitement represents. In the end, Campbell is unable to integrate his quasi-futurist love of modernist architecture and his nostalgic primitivism, represented in the novel through

African Americans who are figured as unchanged by the forces of the modern city. For Borden, the pace of change in New York city is too rapid, yet the alternatives she presents— London as a more gradually modernizing city and the American small town as less affected by modernity— are quickly being drawn into the social configuration New York creates and manifests. Despite their experimental formal structures, Dos Passos's montage of urban fragments and Borden's primitivist racism are rooted in the discourses of urban modernity reaching back into the "realist" novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

I. Writing Manhattan: Modernism and the City Novel

Manhattan Transfer has long been regarded as demonstrating affinities with two traditions: naturalism and modernism. Sinclair Lewis, reviewing the novel in *The Saturday Review of Literature*, compares Dos Passos favorably to the literary giants of modernism:

I regard "Manhattan Transfer" as more important in every way than anything by Gertrude Stein or Marcel Proust or even the great white boar, Mr. Joyce's "Ulysses." For Mr. Dos Passos can use, and deftly does use, all their experimental psychology and style, all their revolt against the molds of classic fiction. But the difference! Dos Passos is *interesting!* Their novels are treatises on harmony, very scholarly, and confoundedly dull; "Manhattan Transfer" is the moving symphony itself. (361)

The difference, for Lewis, is what Dos Passos makes of the techniques of experimental modernism, in joining the "revolt against the molds of classic

fiction” to the reality of New York. Lewis concludes that “he prefers the breathless reality of ‘*Manhattan Transfer*’ to the laboratory reports of ‘*Ulysses*’” (361).

Lewis explicitly places *Manhattan Transfer* not only in the tradition of Joycean experimentation, but also in the tradition of American realism: “There is nothing here which is not real, instinct with real as we all know it and all veil it; there is not one character without corpuscles . . .” (361). *Manhattan Transfer* is thus posed between a “naturalist” tradition derived from realism and a “modernist” tradition said to be opposed to it.

Ultimately, however, the urban scene unites these two images of Dos Passos: *Manhattan Transfer* combines explicitly “modernist” form to the concerns about urbanization evident throughout realism and naturalism, bringing the experimental techniques of the canonical modernists to bear on the content of the canonical realists. Blanche Gelfant positions *Manhattan Transfer* as a “text on the art of the city novel,” but also notes that “its achievement is also its serious social and moral interpretation of a twentieth-century way of life” (*American* 133). As William Brevda has recently argued, “As much as any work of art,” this novel “underlines the statement that in the twentieth century ‘the city is both massive fact and universally recognizable symbol of modernity, and it both constitutes and symbolizes the modern predicament’” (79).¹ *Manhattan Transfer* represents, in short, a crucial intersection of the experimental techniques ascribed to “modernism” and the social changes of modernity.²

While *Manhattan Transfer* has been seen as a key text in both modernism and naturalism, Mary Borden’s *Flamingo* (1927), although it was widely read

(and reviewed) at the time, has disappeared from the critical scene. Borden was born into the wealthy Borden Dairy family in Chicago in 1886,³ and graduated from Vassar in 1908. Upon graduation, she went abroad, was briefly married to a Scottish missionary named Turner, “organized and ran a large field hospital for the French army” during the first world war,⁴ divorced Turner, and married (in 1918) to Edward Louis Spears.⁵

Borden’s connections to canonical Anglo-American modernists are intriguing but difficult to trace, as she appears briefly in numerous modernists’ memoirs, but as a full-fledged character in none. Wyndham Lewis recalls meeting Bernard Shaw at her home near Westminster Abbey. In fact, Lewis was at a country house rented by the Turners in Berwickshire, with Ford Madox Ford and Violet Hunt, when the First World War broke out (W. Lewis *Blasting* 60-63). Ford Madox Ford remembers that Borden, “who has become a novelist of really great gifts and authenticity read from some magazine the installments of the work of a writer of whom I had never heard”: James Joyce.⁶ In addition, Gertrude Stein recalls meeting Borden in Paris just after the First World War:

Mary Borden-Turner had been and was going to be a writer. . . .

Mary Borden was very Chicago. Gertrude Stein always says that chicagoans spend so much energy losing Chicago that it is often difficult to know what they are. They have to lose the Chicago voice and to do so they do many things. . . . Mary Borden was very Chicago and Gertrude Stein was immensely interested in her and in Chicago. (160-61)

Finally, Borden is also mentioned in Storm Jameson's memoirs, but again she is purely a name, with no attempt made to represent how she was perceived by the modernist and avant-garde crowds in which she circulated, at least for a time.

Borden published (generally under her maiden name⁷) twenty-four volumes, including novels, short stories, and non-fiction. In addition she published poems, stories, and articles in *The English Review*, *Harper's*, and *Forum*. She died in England in 1968.⁸ *Flamingo*, which appeared in 1927, was reviewed in *The Century*, *The Spectator*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Saturday Review of Literature*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and *The New York Herald Tribune Books*.⁹ Most of the reviewers offer mixed praise, saluting Borden's ambitious scope and intent, but finding the result weak in characterization and control. "This imaginative effort to put the greatest of modern cities on paper is quite remarkable," writes the reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement*, noting that while Borden "is inconsistent and sentimental, . . . she has written a notable book." Louis Kronenberger, in a review for *The New York Times Book Review*, praises the novel as "far more ambitious than any of her others," but complains that "the themes and elements of 'Flamingo' are so numerous and often so irreconcilable that the book eludes all sense of form, all basic unity." Eugene Lohrke similarly recognizes *Flamingo* as a "rather astonishing novel," into which "passages of pure, translucent beauty are woven like bright threads in a faded old carpet." He continues, however, to criticize Borden for the use to which she puts her Manhattan setting:

We are held at an amazing perspective above the life of the most spectacular of American cities. And from this point of vantage the author, instead of bending to life, has arranged a stock company performance on the stage below, trapping her characters in the net of a banal and mechanical romance and smothering them in words and gestures like a hasty playwright determined on a melodrama.

As we have seen in the criticism of Dreiser and Wharton (see chapter three, above), the perceived shift toward melodrama draws the harshest critique: the novel's difficult conclusion is treated as a failure of the author's technique, a weakness of the author's mode of representation.

Ernest Bates was the reviewer most consistently pleased by the novel, claiming that "Mary Borden . . . is a distinctly major writer." In part, Bates's reaction results from his understanding that what Kronenberger saw as a lack of "basic unity" could be seen as a strength. *Flamingo*, he claims, "shows a splendid scorn for all the popular devices of the novel." Bates focuses on the novel's experimentation with narrative form and plotting:

In the first two hundred pages there are hardly more than a dozen of dialogue, and in all that space nothing whatever seems to happen. A group of characters in New York; another group approaching them across the Atlantic; the lowering shadow of the metropolis extending over both; that is all. . . . It is as if we were being taken through the inside of some enormous machine and were shown its wheels and bands and cylinders, its saws and blades, until we grasp its potential power and impatiently long to

see it start; then (at about page 200) slowly and imperceptibly the wheels begin to turn; they move faster and faster with increasing momentum and we perceive with terror that men and women are being ground up in it and that no human power can stop it.

Because Bates recognizes that Borden's narrative plotting is deliberate and methodical, rather than accidental or merely clumsy, he finds a successful modernist novel rather than a failed realist one.

Because *Flamingo* is relatively unknown even among literary historians, a limited summary is necessary. The primary narrative thread in the novel is the story of Peter Campbell and Frederika Joyce, who are linked in a mystical relationship. Having been friends briefly in their youth, their adult lives are entirely separate: Campbell is an architect in New York, Joyce is the wife of a prominent British official. Throughout the novel, they are represented as mysteriously connected, despite the geographical distance between them, and without their conscious knowledge, by two things: their mutual admiration for modern technology and Campbell's telepathic visions of Frederika's world. He has visions, for example, of the house Frederika and Victor Joyce inhabit in England, building an exact replica of it on Long Island despite his having never literally seen it. He also sees visions of a painted screen with a flamingo on it, a screen Frederika Joyce has in her bedroom—this provides the novel's title. Despite their mystical connection, however, when the plot of the novel finally brings them (geographically) together, they do not connect. That is, the structure of the novel follows a conventional (heterosexual) romance pattern throughout the first half, but at the moment

where their relationship would be expected to occur, it doesn't: the closure which the majority of the narrative implies never arrives.

In addition to this central but never consummated romance plot, the novel revolves around contrasting geographic locations and the values associated with them.¹⁰ The frightening modernity that New York City represents is opposed both to London— as an example of modernity which is, according to Borden, properly controlled and gradual— and the American countryside in the form of Campbelltown, where Peter Campbell's mother, Amanda, lives his brother Christopher. Christopher is a kind of idiot-savant, who is also mystically linked to Peter: he knows, telepathically, when Peter is in trouble.¹¹ The problem, for Borden, is that both London's elegant civility and Campbelltown's agrarian heritage are being drawn into the vortex of modernity centered on New York City. Thus Frederika and Victor Joyce are, at the beginning of the novel, on their way to New York to negotiate post-war financial arrangements between England and the United States;¹² Ikey Daw, who is on board with them, owns the mortgage on the old Campbell estate in Campbelltown. Borden's nostalgia for agrarian America and idealization of modern London are threatened by their increasing dependence on— and interactions with— the metropolis.

The novel also invokes both the rural American South and Africa as non-modern spaces, transposing New York City's African American residents both geographically and temporally. The residents of Harlem, to whom Peter Campbell is irresistibly drawn, are figured as *in* the metropolis but not *of* it. Like Dos Passos's metropolitan novel, Borden's *Flamingo* is highly critical of modern urban society, but at the same time vitally invested in it, drawing

power and vitality from the changing city but also anxiously fearful of the profoundly unstable modernity it represents. Unlike *Manhattan Transfer*, however, *Flamingo*'s vision is fundamentally racist and conservative: while Dos Passos figures the capitalist metropolis as threatening to all its inhabitants, Borden figures the city's non-WASP inhabitants as the very source of the threat.

II. "All Mixed Together and Shouting and Kicking": Race in the Metropolis

Flamingo, published not coincidentally the year after Carl Van Vechten's infamous *Nigger Heaven*, is centrally concerned with ethnic and racial difference as it is made visible in the metropolis. In fact, it is often quite explicitly racist, filled with sensuous, primitive, jazz-loving African Americans and presenting a miserly, wealthy, devious Jew as a major character. Borden characterizes the city of New York as "one of the characters of our story, perhaps the principal character" (14). Borden's narrative focuses on ethnic and racial difference as one of the city's primary traits, describing

A strange feverish city, a sort of long-necked restless monster, a man-eating dragon, its belly crammed with black men and yellow men and coffee coloured men, with Africans and Chinamen and Slavs and Swedes and Armenians and Germans and Jews and with a sprinkling of Anglo-Saxons, thrown in like a pinch of salt into a pudding, all mixed together and shouting and kicking inside it.

(14)

Indeed, throughout the novel, both the narrator and many of the characters exhibit a simultaneous fascination with and fear of ethnic and racial

difference. While the “shouting and kicking” helps to make the city such an awe-inspiring spectacle, it also threatens, Borden implies, to destroy the metropolis from within.¹³

The two primary African-American characters in the novel are Joseph Jefferson, “a big black man who plays the piano in a Negro night club called the Crib,” and Carolina Sal, “a Negro girl . . . who sings there” (18). The narrative locates the characters in Harlem, but links them metaphorically with Africa, the past, and sexuality: “They paid no attention to those straining skyscrapers on top of them. They went on breeding and singing and laughing and yelling and dancing and being lazy and getting religion just as if they were in Africa with no clothes on” (18-19). Indeed, the descriptions become charged with an obsessive racism, fetishizing black bodies at the same time that it ignores the possibility of black minds. Of Carolina Sal, Borden writes: “Her smile split her brown face in two. Her big white teeth flashed between thick, soft, purple lips, juice of pomegranate staining them. . . . Her hair was a shadowy thicket through which her eyes, dreamy with cocaine, gleamed, delirious and kind” (180). On the occasion of one of Peter Campbell’s visits to a Harlem Nightclub, Borden makes explicit the geographic analogy implied by Carolina Sal’s name:

. . . a warmth came from the brown fields where the cotton was pushing, and there was a drowsy pulse beating somewhere, down, down under his feet in the living earth, that was the lazy gentle mother of all men, black and white. Sal was the mother of all men. She was a rich, deep fertile field, and her children, her pickaninnies, were playing in the sun on her breast, tumbling

about and rolling in the dust, laughing and turning somersaults, their little round bottoms top-side, and now they were all stamping their feet and clapping their hands and banging on tin cans and shouting “Halleluja!” and making a hell of a noise. (180-81)

Carolina Sal is at one and the same time the “mother of all children” and the mother of “her pickaninnies”; she may live in the middle of the metropolis, but she is always from (and linked by some mysterious racial essence to) both the rural American South and Africa.¹⁴ Located geographically in the heart of the modern city, African Americans nevertheless represent, for Borden as for Peter Campbell, the rural (and foreign) countryside untouched by modernity.¹⁵

Borden’s attempts at describing the “atmosphere” of the Harlem nightclubs lead her into surrealistic, stream of consciousness narratives of primitivism:

Jiggity, jig a jig, jig a jig, bang. Jig a jig, jiggity jig, jiggity jiggity jiggity jig, boom.

Parrots were squeaking in the trees and monkeys chattering, and the depraved, the sophisticated, the complicated, syncopated tom-tom was beating wildly, was beating softly, and the gorillas were shaking, shaking, on their huge feet, their great arms, jerking— was it with laughter? was it with ecstasy? (181)

Borden’s chain of images links African Americans both to Africans¹⁶ and to animals: is Peter Campbell here dreaming of gorillas, or mistaking the black men and women around him for gorillas? The point is that for Borden, it

doesn't seem to make much difference. Similarly, while the drumbeat is simultaneously "sophisticated" and "complicated," it beats "wildly."

In addition to the racism with which Borden treats her African-American characters, *Flamingo* also relies on anti-Semitism in portraying Ikey Dew, "the New York Jew who lends money to this and that government, helping them to fight each other, and who hates all men, coldly and secretly, individually and in the swarming masses" (14). The narrator describes Dew as "the Mephistopheles of the piece," claiming that he "represents the greatest power left on earth, international finance" (14). The concerns evident in realist novels about the increasing power of commercial concerns is displaced onto the figure of the "New York Jew," who is said to represent "a power that appeared to be even greater than the power behind such a man as Victor Joyce, who merely represented the British Government" (89). Throughout the narrative, the city's racial and ethnic heterogeneity is cited as the source of its energy as well as its danger: massive capital is clearly required to create the metropolitan environment, but such financial strength becomes associated, for Borden, with excessive power in the hands of the racial other.

Borden represents New York City as a synecdoche for the racial diversity inherent to American modernity, which she finds inherently threatening; *Manhattan Transfer* also represents characters identified as "other" in terms of ethnicity and class.¹⁷ In Dos Passos's novel, however, differences serve to emphasize the mobility the metropolis offers. This is not to say that there is no anxiety about difference in *Manhattan Transfer*, but that Dos Passos's characters don't coalesce into essences; they are always changing,

and all of the city's inhabitants are affected by the city itself, rather than by some inherent racial instinct.

Towards the end of the first section, Jimmy Herf attends a dinner with Emily and Jeff Merivale, his aunt and uncle, as his mother is dying. Uncle Jeff declares "in a booming voice":

No, I tell you, Wilkinson, New York is no longer what it used to be when Emily and I first moved up here about the time the Ark landed. . . . City's overrun with kikes and low Irish, that's what's the matter with it. . . . In ten years a Christian won't be able to make a living. . . . I tell you the Catholics and the Jews are going to run us out of our own country, that's what they are going to do.

(101)

Uncle Jeff's jeremiad about "kikes and low Irish," however, is not endorsed by Dos Passos's novel, as similar anxieties are in Borden's. Indeed, Dos Passos critiques Jeff's position throughout the novel, as incidental characters move in and out of the narrative perspective. Dos Passos attempts to embody the vast ethnic differences of Manhattan in the 1920s in order to emphasize the pervasiveness of the modernity the metropolis represents: what is important for Dos Passos is the way in which the city proves irresistible, drawing populations toward it like a magnet.¹⁸

Throughout the whole first section of the novel, Dos Passos figures assorted characters who set the scene of the modern city through difference. In the opening chapter, for example, Bud Korpenning watches a violinist with "a monkey's face puckered up in one corner" as he takes the ferry into Manhattan (3). As Ed Thatcher leaves the hospital after Ellen Thatcher's birth,

he gets cheated out of the price of four bottles of imported beer by Marcus Antonius Zucher, who speaks in a dialect reminiscent of Howells's Lindau: "Would it be indiscreet, Mr. Thatcher, to inquire what might your profession be?" (8). The chapter closes with the image of "a small bearded bandy-legged man in a derby . . . picking his way among packing boxes and scuttling children," who sees an image of "highbrowed cleanshaven distinguished" King C. Gillette on an advertising card, and shaves off his beard, to the amazement of his wife and children: a familiar rite of passage (and first step toward assimilation) for many Jewish immigrants.¹⁹ At the end of the third chapter, a family of Sicilian immigrants is seen at the ferry landing (77). Indeed, the chapter titles of the first section, "Ferry-slip," "Metropolis," "Dollars," "Tracks," and "Steamroller," all represent the ceaseless migration (and immigration) of people and capital to the city.²⁰ In contrast to Borden's novel, Dos Passos represents the city as threatening because of the effects it has on those it draws, rather than threatening because of the diverse population of which it is made.

Although *Manhattan Transfer*, like *Flamingo*, is filled with African-American characters, most are unnamed and non-speaking in the novel: housekeepers, doormen, porters. Congo Jake, however, is a major character, and he suggests at least an "Africanist" presence.²¹ Where Borden relied on a primitivist vision of African Americans, Dos Passos presents Congo Jake in a manner consistent with Morrison's description of "the way an Africanist idiom is used to establish difference or, in a later period, to signal modernity" (52). Congo is described as having "dirty feet," his head is "thick with kinky black hair," and he has a "dark smootsmudged face" (20, 21). These early

physical descriptions are later more explicitly linked to race: “When I very leetle I first go to sea dey call me Congo because I have curly hair an dark like a nigger. Den when I work in America, on American ship an all zat, guy ask me How you feel Congo? And I say Jake . . . so dey call me Congo Jake” (226, ellipses in original). While Congo is literally identified as French, the narrative’s descriptions clearly link him with African Americans.

Congo’s “blackness” is associated, throughout *Manhattan Transfer*, not with immutable primitivism, but with the flexibility Dos Passos links with modernity. Congo’s willingness to adapt to the labels he has been assigned is emphasized throughout the narrative: it is his ability to assume different roles which makes him successful. Congo’s constant rise, in fact, is explicitly compared in the novel to Jimmy Herf’s constant fall: “The difference between you and me is that you’re going up in the social scale,” Herf tells him, “and I’m going down” (383). Despite Herf’s advantageous beginnings— “When you were a messboy on a steamboat,” Herf notes, “I was a horrible little chalky faced kid living at the ritz” (383)— Congo Jake finds financial success as a bootlegger during prohibition, while Herf constantly struggles to make a living. Congo Jake’s success is based in his ability to assume different roles, as emphasized both by his name changes (his professional moniker is Marquis Des Coulommiers, and he later changes his name to Armand Duval) and his changes of address: Herf last encounters him on Park Avenue, driving a Rolls Royce (300, 382). Congo Jake’s willingness to innovate, to accept the shifting of roles the city requires, enables him to succeed where Herf cannot.

Similarly, while Borden associates the “New York Jew” with control over the forces of international finance, Dos Passos pointedly includes Anna

Cohen, a young Jewish woman who presents (despite Uncle Jeff's prediction) no danger of running the Merivales or their business out of town.²² Cohen's presence in the narrative is associated with sexuality and labor: at the beginning of the third section, we're introduced to Anna, grappling with her boyfriend "In the dark of the stoop in front of the tenement door" (274). Later, we see her dancing with various other men: "This one Anna's dancing with is a tall square built Swede . . . Now it's a little blackhaired slender Jew. . . . An Italian breathes garlic in her face, a marine sergeant, a Greek, a blond young kid with pink cheeks . . . a drunken elderly man who tries to kiss her" (303, ellipses added). We also encounter Anna at work in the garment district, where her coworkers discuss the dangers of city life for independent women, through the story of a neighbor who walked home alone one evening: "the next morning when her folks began looking for her they found her behind a Spearmint sign in a back lot. . . . A negro had done somethin terrible to her and then he'd strangled her" (347, ellipses added). As the "Spearmint sign" signals, Dos Passos links—in the character of Anna Cohen and others—sexuality, commerce, and danger.²³

In fact, the difference between Ellen Thatcher and Anna Cohen's trajectories emphasizes the difference class makes in the opportunities the city presents women. In the single scene in which explicitly links Anna's story with one of the primary storylines, Ellen Thatcher comes to Madame Soubrine's to pick up a dress. While Ellen is trying on the dress, "in the back room of Soubrine's Anna Cohen sits sewing the trimming on a dress with swift tiny stitches" (397). She nods off, daydreaming, and is horrifyingly burned:

Through the dream she is stitching white fingers beckon. The white tulle shines too bright. Red hands clutch suddenly out of the tulle, she cant fight off the red tulle all around her biting into her, coiled about her head. The skylight's blackened with smoke. The room's full of smoke and screaming. Anna is on her feet whirling round fighting with her hands the burning tulle all around her. (398)

The narrative mixes Anna's dream with what has actually occurred, locating the moment at which the fabric catches fire in the shift from "white fingers" to "too bright," and the moment when the flames reach Anna herself in "red tulle . . . biting" and "coiled about her head" (398). Ellen, who has meanwhile been waiting in the fitting room, notices "the smell of singed fabrics," and goes into the workroom where she finds Madame Soubrine extinguishing a "charred pile of goods about a table": "they were picking something moaning out of the charred goods. Out of the corner of her eye she sees an arm in shreds, a seared black red face, a horrible naked head" (398). Cohen is literally commodified: she is the "something moaning" which has become part of the "charred pile of goods." Ellen Thatcher's present at Madame Soubrine's as a consumer differentiates her from Anna Cohen's presence as a worker: where Borden presented "Jewishness" as an inherently threatening difference, Dos Passos uses the class difference between them to emphasize the different effects the city has: Ellen and Anna are both threatened by the city, but Ellen's position as consumer (and later professional) enables her to avoid the physical dangers associated with manual labor.

III. The Absent Center of *Manhattan Transfer*: Ellen Thatcher and Jimmy Herf

Although *Manhattan Transfer* appears at first to have no central characters, other than the city itself, Ellen Thatcher and Jimmy Herf become increasingly prominent as the narrative evolves. Jimmy Herf becomes the closest thing the novel has to a protagonist: a position solidified, for many critics, by his resemblance to earlier Dos Passos protagonists as well as Dos Passos himself. Ellen Thatcher, similarly, becomes a central object around which the narrative revolves, if not exactly a protagonist or an antagonist.

Ellen Thatcher functions as a sign for the position of white, upper middle-class women in the modern urban economy. As was the case for Lily Bart and Carrie Meeber, the critical history of Ellen's reception is divided and divisive: some see Ellen as "one of Dos Passos's soulless careerists . . . the character most thoroughly enlisted in the service of things" (Sanders 177, 178). Others, notably Linda Wagner, have argued that Ellen is in fact the protagonist, and have emphasized Dos Passos's evident sympathy: "Taking Ellen's story as the primary narrative thread of *Manhattan Transfer* seems consistent with the amount of attention Dos Passos gives her and with his obvious sympathy for her as a character" (52). In an important sense both characterizations are accurate. Thatcher is at the same time a figure of "obvious sympathy" and "the character most thoroughly enlisted in the service of things": she is trapped between impossible alternatives as a woman in the modern metropolis. In order to succeed on the city's terms, she has to accept the dominance of consumer capitalism and the roles reserved for women within consumer ideology.

From the earliest scenes of her childhood, Ellen is represented as rebelling against the restrictions imposed on her: “Oh mummy I want to be a little boy. . . . I want to be a little boy. . . . Oh daddy I want to be a boy. . . . Ellie’s goin to be a boy, Ellie’s goin to be a boy” (22-23, ellipses added). In her imaginative desire, she takes on various roles, prefiguring the later shifting of her name: she is identified in the novel as Elaine, Ellie, and Helena, with Thatcher, Oglethorpe and Herf as last names.²⁴ Playing in Central Park as a child, she names herself “Elaine the lily maid of Astalot” (54). As the “lily maid” implies, she imagines herself as bride.²⁵ Even in her childhood fantasy, however, the role of bride is dangerous. When her friend Alice is afraid of the “dreadful men sitting on that bench,” Ellen goes off on her own, and the narrative becomes a mixture of limited third person description and first person interior monologue, imitating the child’s consciousness:²⁶

Ellen in her new dress of Black Watch plaid mummy’d bought at Hearn’s walked down the asphalt path kicking her toes in the air. There was a silver thistle brooch on the shoulder of the new dress of Black Watch plaid mummy’d bought at Hearn’s. Elaine of Lammermoor was going to be married. The Betrothed. Wangnaan nainainai, went the bagpipes going through the rye. The man on the bench has a patch over his eye. A watching black patch. A black watching patch. The kidnapper of the Black Watch, among the rustling shrubs kidnappers keep their Black Watch. Ellen’s toes dont kick in the air. Ellen is terribly scared of the kidnapper of the Black Watch, big smelly man of the Black Watch with a patch over his eye. (54-55)

The scene is a set piece of modernist narrative form— full of linguistic games and shifts in perspective— and in the context of the novel it signals Ellen’s position within the novel’s economy. She is both watcher and watched, and the implied threat is both economic and sexual: “She ran until her mouth tasted like pennies” (55) and kidnapping implies ransom, but the watching implies pedophilia, and the threat is linked to her imagined betrothal. Ellen’s self-imagining associates the roles available to her with threats which involve, and interlace, commerce and sexuality.

Later, when she sees her father talking with “a frayed creakyvoiced man” on a bench in the Battery, the threat of kidnapping returns, and this time the gendered roles involved are made explicit. When she reminds her father that “mummy said never to let people speak to you in the street an to call a policeman if they did . . . on account of those horrible kidnappers” (63), he educates her on the vulnerabilities of little girls:

“No danger of their kidnapping me Ellie. That’s just for little girls.”

“When I grow up will I be able to talk to people on the street like that?”

“No deary you certainly will not.”

“If I had been a boy could I?”

“I guess you could.” (63-64)

Ellen learns, in other words, that the options available to urban men— as *flâneurs*, as “walkers in the street”— are unavailable to women of any age.²⁷

Ellen’s first marriage is figured in ways which add to the metaphoric linking of (hetero)sexuality and female vulnerability. As she embarks on her

honeymoon with Oglethorpe, whose name recalls “ogling,” the narrative notes that the “thumb of Ellen’s new kid glove had split,” linking this scene to her earlier imagining of herself as bride and the dangers it evoked.²⁸ Oglethorpe goes to sleep, and Ellen (now Elaine) lays next to him, “staring at the ceiling” (117). She gets up, goes to the bathroom, and gets sick: “When she had vomited she felt better. Then she climbed back into bed again careful not to touch John. If she touched him she would die” (117).

For Ellen Thatcher, being a woman means being constantly in danger of being turned into an object. Walking to meet George Baldwin one day, she encounters the surveillance of men in the street:

Two sailors were sprawling on a bench in the sun; one of them popped his lips as she passed, she could feel their seagreedy eyes cling stickily to her neck, her thighs, her ankles. She tried to keep her hips from swaying so much as she walked. . . .

Everything was itching sweaty dusty constrained by policemen and Sunday clothes. . . . She was looking in the black eyes of a young man in a straw hat who was drawing up a red Stutz roadster to the curb. His eyes twinkled in hers, he jerked back his head smiling an upsidedown smile, pursing his lips so that they seemed to brush her cheek. (136-37, ellipses added)

Ellen finds herself constantly on display, but she is unable to control the audience’s reaction: her image is her product but she has only tenuous control over its consumption.²⁹ Dos Passos represents the city as the site of limited mobility for women, in which they are both in the market as consumers and on the market as commodities.

Ellen's affair with Stanwood Emery is also presented as dangerous: "We'll probably get arrested," Emery says as they get into his car: "my muffler's loose and liable to drop off" (142). In addition, the affair links Ellen to commodities through the figure of the "Great Lady on a White Horse," the chapter's title. When Baldwin introduces them to each other, Ellen mentions having seen "the danderine lady," and Emery not only recognizes the figure but sings the appropriate advertising jingle: "With rings on her fingers and bells on her toes, And she shall make mischief wherever she goes" (140). When Emery offers her a ride, the narrative reasserts the link: "At thirtyfourth Street they passed a girl riding slowly through traffic on a white horse; chestnut hair hung down in even faky waves over the horse's chalky rump and over the giltedged saddlecloth where in green letter point with crimson read DANDERINE" (142-43). Like the equestrian advertisement negotiating traffic, Ellen is simultaneously an object of consumption and an acting subject.

In two situations, the threat Ellen faces is literalized, as men hold her at gunpoint,³⁰ both in association with her position in the heterosexual romance market. In the first instance, Oglethorpe brandishes a revolver, upset over her affair with Emery. Ruth Prynne presents the encounter to Jimmy Herf in theatrical terms:

Well at last the Ogle got tired of his big scene and cried out in ringing tones, Disarm me or I shall kill this woman. And Tony Hunter grabbed the pistol and took it into his room. Then Elaine Oglethorpe made a little bow as if she were taking a curtaincall,

said Well goodnight everybody, and ducked into her room cool as a cucumber. . . . (156)

Although Ruth minimizes the danger, mocking Oglethorpe and Tony Hunter as “peculiar poissons” (155) as though their homosexuality precluded the possibility of real violence, Dos Passos consistently links Ellen’s sexuality with danger. George Baldwin, several chapters later, creates a similar scene, telling Ellen: “Some day some man’s going to take a gun and shoot you,” and then brandishing a gun. Sex, violence, and commerce are intimately linked throughout the novel, limiting the possibilities open to Ellen.

Just as Elaine Oglethorpe is about to become Ellen Thatcher again, getting her divorce from Jojo, Stanwood Emery marries someone else. As if that weren’t enough trouble, Ellen quickly realizes she’s pregnant with Emery’s child. Thus, as section II of the novel comes to a close, two major events occur: World War One breaks out, and Ellen has an abortion: “In an hour it will be forgotten. . . . I am sorry. . . . It is very sad such a thing is necessary. . . . Dear lady you should have a home and many children and a loving husband” (268, ellipses in original). The abortionist’s “should have” serves to remind the reader of the traditional, domestic role not in order to argue that Ellen should have it, but in order to emphasize its impossibility for her: Dos Passos represents Ellen as caught between a traditional role that is no longer fulfilling and a modern role which is severely limiting

As section III opens, Jimmy Herf and Ellen Thatcher Herf are returning from Europe with their baby, Martin. The narrative reveals that they have been “in the same department of the Red Cross— the Publicity Department” (284), but never explains how they came to be married: Herf later says “You’d

[sic] certainly didnt have your wits about you Ellie when you married me,” and she simply responds “Oh let’s not talk about it anymore” (298). In fact, when Mrs. Merivale complains “I think it is just terrible . . . the way you fellows wont tell us any of your experiences over there” she points to the absent presence of not only the war but the crucial center of the romance plot between the two primary characters. Their marriage quickly (in narrative terms— it is never exactly clear how long they have been married in the interstice between sections II and III) deteriorates, as Jimmy struggles to find an occupation and Ellen begins working as the editor of *Manners*, a fashion magazine. From Herf’s perspective, the narrative describes Ellen as becoming literally objectified:

She sat opposite him in a gray tailoredsuit, her neck curving up heartbreakingly from the ivory V left by the crisp frilled collar of her blouse, her head tilted under her tight gray hat, her lips made up; cutting up little pieces of meat and not eating them, not saying a word. . . . He felt paralyzed like in a nightmare; she was a porcelaine figure under a bellglass. (300, ellipses added)

While Herf is remembering their evenings together in France— “Sitting in the restaurant of the Gare de Lyon, side by side on the black leather bench”— the woman he now refers to as “the Elliedoll” is speaking, but he’s not listening.

After she and Herf decide to divorce, she begins to imagine herself as a mechanical doll: “Ellen felt herself sitting with her ankles crossed, rigid as a porcelain figure under her clothes, everything about her seemed to be growing hard and enameled, the air bluestreaked with cigarettesmoke, was turning to glass” (375).³¹ The predatory relationships the metropolis

engenders offer Ellen nothing but self-objectification: in order to survive, Ellen must submit to the demands of the market.

Despite, however, all of the attention the narrative gives to Ellen Thatcher, Jimmy Herf has more often been seen as the novel's protagonist.³² Where Ellen Thatcher faces danger because of her position as both consumer and consumed, Herf is placed within a discourse which expects him to be a producer of wealth, and yet also threatens to make him merely a product of the system. In other words, while Herf feels a desire for the masculine self-sufficiency— that is, he thinks self-sufficiency should be his prerogative as a man— he is unable to disentangle himself from the consumer capitalist, spectacle-oriented metropolis.

Jimmy Herf's arrival— his simultaneous entrance into New York and into the novel— places him in the midst of a discourse of freedom and independence. All of the early sections of the narrative concerned with Jimmy revolve around his independence: arguments with his mother about what he can and cannot do, what he can and cannot buy, and where he can and cannot go. After his mother, Lily Herf, suffers a stroke, Jimmy goes to dinner at the Merivales, and plays with his cousins Maisie and James:

“I'll tell you what lets play stock exchange. . . . I've got a million dollars in bonds to sell and Maisie can be the bulls an Jimmy can be the bears.”

“All right, what do we do?”

“Oh juss run round an yell mostly.” (106)

Jimmy's education about the financial world begins in this childhood game, and his knowledge of financial success never progresses far beyond this point.

After his mother's death, Uncle Jeff informs him he has inherited enough money for college, but no more. He offers him a job, but is concerned about how Jimmy will do:

You are a very lucky fellow in my estimation. At your age I was sweeping out an office in Fredericksburg and earning fifteen dollars a month. Now what I wanted to say was this. . . . I have not noticed that you felt sufficient responsibility about moneymatters . . . er . . . sufficient enthusiasm about earning your living, making good in a man's world. (119)

Indeed, when Jimmy starts to consider his uncle's offer— the chance to work his way up in the firm— he is revolted at the idea of himself “fed in a tape in and out the revolving doors, noon and night and morning, the revolving doors grinding out his years like sausage meat” (120). Echoing Huck Finn, he decides that “Uncle Jeff and his office can go plumb to hell” (121).

Jeff Merivale's predictions, however, turn out to be fairly accurate: Herf's struggle to “make good in a man's world” without “sufficient enthusiasm” for business occupies him throughout the novel. Herf's relation to the job market resembles Lily Bart's relation to the marriage market: he keeps trying to convince himself that he wants the success society has defined as his natural goal. In fact, Herf and Stanwood Emery have a discussion which recalls Lawrence Selden and Lily Bart's discussion of the “republic of the spirit”: “Why the hell does everyone want to succeed?,” Emery asks. “I'd like to

meet someone who wanted to fail. That's the only sublime thing." But Herf's income, as Uncle Jeff had predicted, is not enough: "It's all right if you have a comfortable income," Herf responds (175). Herf constantly insists that what he wants to do is leave New York: "I imagine what I want most is to get out of this town, preferably first setting off a bomb under the Times Building" (176).

Again, Emery plays Selden to Herf's Lily:

"Well, why don't you do it? It's just one foot after another."

"But you have to know which direction to step."

"That's the last thing that's of any importance."

"Then there's money."

"Why money's the easiest thing in the world to get."

"For the eldest son of Emery and Emery." (176)

Where Lily Bart was only allowed the possibility of marrying well, Herf only allows himself the option of escaping the city: "I'm going to light out of it all," he claims, "and go to Mexico and make my fortune" (177). Even in his visions of lighting out for the territory, however, he still imagines fortune at the end of the journey.³³

Herf finally does quit his newspaper job and prepares to leave town, but even this decision is— like Ellen's decision to stay— ambiguously presented. "Everybody says you've given up newspaper work and are going to write," Alice says; "I think I'll be getting along out of here" is all he can reply. The last few times Herf appears, he's wandering the streets at night, drunk:

All these April nights combing the streets alone a skyscraper has obsessed him, a grooved building jutting up with uncountable bright windows falling onto him out of a scudding sky.

Typewriters rain continual nickelplated confetti in his ears.
 Faces of Follies girls, glorified by Ziegfeld, smile and beckon to
 him from the windows. Ellie in a gold dress, Ellie made of thin
 gold foil absolutely lifelike beckoning from every window. And
 he walks round blocks and blocks looking for the door of the
 humming tinselwindowed skyscraper, round blocks and blocks
 and still no door. (365)

While some of the other characters assume that Herf is “throwing away a career for an ideal” (360), Herf is far less certain: “There’s no where in particular he wants to go” (366). Herf’s inability to find a door into the “humming tinselwindowed” skyscraper represents in urban metaphors his inability to find a “place” on the market.

Even when Herf does get out of the city, his future is at best uncertain. When the man driving the “huge furniture truck, shiny and yellow” asks him “How fur ye goin?,” Herf replies vaguely “I dunno. . . . Pretty far” (404). While some critics have read Herf’s departure as the culmination of Dos Passos’s critique of American society— a kind of metaphoric expatriation— Amy Kaplan describes Herf as “riding the crest of metropolitan expansion outward, toward the burgeoning suburbs and beyond,” arguing that “Jimmy’s ‘escape’ heralds the advent of the metropolis”: rather than escaping urban modernity he will spread its influence (“Realism” 227). In the 1920s, the social organization represented by the metropolis is spreading.

IV. "They all Behaved Extremely Badly from the Story-Teller's Point of View":
Flamingo's Inconclusive Romance

Dos Passos presents Ellen Thatcher as caught between a traditional domestic role, which is thoroughly discredited, and a modern role which seems to offer her nothing but self-objectification. Frederika Joyce, *Flamingo's* central female character, is similarly caught between a traditional domestic role that no longer exists, and the role of "new woman" which is only partially available to her. However, where Dos Passos represents the capitalist metropolis as limiting Ellen's agency, Borden displaces the problem onto Frederika herself: it isn't that modernity offers no fulfilling role for women but that Frederika herself is unfit.

Like Ellen, Frederika has an ambivalent relationship to gender throughout the novel, but Borden represents this relationship not in terms of Frederika's rebellion against socially constricting roles, but as a natural defect in Frederika: "Frederika Joyce was a rather masculine woman— not that she looked like a man; her small close-cropped head was boyish but not manly" (34). What makes Frederika "masculine" is her interests:

There were in her mentality and her general make-up more masculine elements than feminine. Nature, it seemed, had started out intending her to be a man, but something had happened to her before she was a complete infant, and she had been born a girl. This was unfortunate. She had a natural taste for mechanics and might have made a good mechanical engineer or something of that sort had she be trained to do it, but she had been brought

up as the daughters of badly off English gentelfolk are brought up in the country and had no education. (35)

While her gender, upbringing, and lack of education prevent Frederika from becoming an engineer, she retains an avid enthusiasm for the mechanical and scientific breakthroughs of the early twentieth century.

Frederika cannot share her scientific interests with her husband: “She took a paper called the *Engineer* and another called the *Scientific American*,” the narrative informs us, “but she kept these in her bedroom and said nothing about them to Victor” because of his horror at her un-feminine interests (57). Once, when Victor is exposed to her delight in machine civilization, he reacts with horror while she reacts with laughter:

He had been horrified. He had discovered that for an hour she had been absorbed in an engineer’s catalogue. He had taken the paper from her and read aloud, “waugh-hammer, drifters, drills, clinching lathe, duty sloper, slotter.” While he read, she had screamed with laughter. “Steam-driven hydro-extractor, centrifugal pumps, vertical steam-driven double-ram pumps.” “Oh, Victor, darling!” “Gyrating stone crushers— Good God! Caterpillar tractors, heavy guillotine shearing machine, large inductive motors, mechanically robust, electrically perfect, washers made of cold rolled steel bright all over, turned and chamfered edges— Of all the— my dear girl— *you— you—*” (57)

In short, what Frederika finds “thrilling . . . poetry,” he considers nonsense, bordering on insanity.

Frederika's interest, and Victor's disdain, are explicitly linked to modernity: "Science was not the fashion in Victor's England. It smacked of the city, the metropolis, the urban professional world that had no love for the land" (65). Frederika is, ultimately, not only interested in science and mechanical inventions, she exhibits a futurist aesthetic worship of them: "What she liked was certainty, exactness, perfect efficiency. Turbines, dynamos, and hydraulic tractors were soothing. It was their immense power and delicate precision that thrilled her. Besides . . . they were beautiful" (68-69). Indeed, given the lengths to which Borden goes to establish her character, and her crucial difference from Victor, the threat to their marriage, when it comes several hundred pages later, is anticlimactic at best.³⁴

In opposition to Frederika and Victor Joyce's English-ness, the party of characters travelling from London to New York in the first section of the novel includes Bridget Prime, who is the consummate object for consumption, and thus fit for American modernity:

Her face would have done admirably as an advertisement for a new skin food, tooth powder, hair tonic, or disinfectant. It would have sold any commodity in enormous quantities. There were millions to be made out of her face, and she knew it. She was on her way to America to make money out of having her face photographed . . . (13)

Bridget resembles Carrie Meeber, adrift without family anchor or stern moral sense:

She had been brought up to be bad. It had been her family's peculiar distinction to lend every kind of wickedness a grace and

a charm that gave their immoralities the appearance of having a much rarer value than decency. And she loved her family, beautiful, lackadaisical, vicious, ne'er-do-wells and spendthrifts, all of them; so where and how was she to get for herself any moral sense? (44)

Borden thus distances Frederika from both the Victorian England of her husband *and* the modern America of Bridget Prime: Frederika is caught in between modernity and Victorianism, between masculinity and femininity, and between city and country.

In addition to Bridget Prime, Borden represents the modern American woman in the character of Adelaide Campbell, Peter's wife, who is the daughter of the "great steel magnate" John J. Jamieson (134). If Bridget Prime represents the perfect commodity advertisement, Adelaide Campbell is the perfect American consumer: "I fancy she could only exist," the narrator says, "in a country populated largely by Ford cars, McCormick reapers, and Singer sewing machines . . . Wrigley's chewing gum and Camel cigarettes" (141).

Borden presents Adelaide Campbell as a kind of jazz-age flapper:

In any old world, people would long ago have tired of Addy Campbell, but in New York, she is one of the most attractive members of the younger set. They are like a gang of beautiful children, that crowd. They have the most elaborate and expensive toys, steam yachts and motor boats and sailing boats, polo ponies and racing cars, private wireless stations, and all sorts of talking and singing machines. I see them against the gayest and brightest of backgrounds. . . . There is a tinkling of glass in the

evening, the sound of signing mingled with laughter, the sound of the cocktail-shaker shaking, and always there is jazz going on, a syncopated jig that makes their toes tingle and sets them dancing. (142, ellipses added)

What Adelaide represents, for Borden, is the threat of the American nouveau riche to established society.³⁵

Perhaps the only character in the entire novel who really receives Borden's sympathy is Amanda Campbell (Peter's mother). Indeed, the narrator explicitly identifies with Amanda: "I feel something of . . . [what] Amanda Campbell feels . . . for I love Amanda Campbell" (20). Borden represents, through the figure of Amanda, what she sees as the proper relationship between respect for tradition and modernity: Amanda does not attend church, "but is not in the least vague about right and wrong" (20); she prefers to remain in the small country town, but reads avidly in modern philosophy. In fact, Amanda Campbell's concerns mirror the concerns Borden expresses in her essays: "What sort of standard of morals or taste," Amanda wonders, "could that polyglot concourse of uprooted races supply, with its mushroom religions, its hysterical enthusiasms, its vast provincial ignorance?" (198). Yet at the same time that Borden presents Amanda Campbell as a sympathetic figure, she quick to note that while "Amanda Campbell is important in this story . . . she doesn't do anything very much" (19). Amanda receives the narrator's sympathy, but is unable to significantly affect the events the narrative describes: "She is nothing but a little old woman of sixty, tired but defiant, . . . living in seclusion in a small country town" (19). Amanda, like the

Campbelltown she calls home, is a remnant of civilized life in the process of being overwhelmed by the metropolis.

Peter Campbell, on the other hand, identifies completely with the city and the modernity it embodies:

The city clanged and roared round him. It was a portrait in stone and steel and reinforced concrete of his young raw people and his boisterous, bumptious, incredible aspiring, tumultuous age—but more than a portrait, it was a living thing to him. He saw and felt it as a monster, alive with an energy only different from his own in that it was a million times greater. The force of electricity beat in its steel veins and animated its stone sinews. Well, wasn't it that same force essentially that kept his puny body going? (5)

Not only is Campbell an architect, he's a modernist.. He is not only “one of the first to see that horizontal lines must be obliterated from the façades of skyscrapers if these great buildings were to come into their own as a logical and convincing architectural form of the highest rank” (16-17), he's also arguing for coherent whole-block skyscrapers, re-visions of the entire city grid. Like Le Corbusier, he wants to be a latter-day Baron Haussmann: “This place needs a gardener. You let me take a pick and shovel and clear away a few streets full of little brick houses and dirty newspapers, and I'll show you how to carve a skyline. I'll build you a cathedral to your machine gods that'll make Chartres and Bourges and Peterborough look like toys” (219). The representative modernist, Campbell lacks the proper respect his mother demonstrates for tradition.

Ultimately, Campbell argues, the skyscraper is both a product of modernity and the symbol which spreads its influence:

Every Polack and Slovak and Italian and Dago is aware in his tenement, every Chinese boy in Chinatown, every Swede in her kitchen, every nigger in Harlem, and the Jews on Fifth Avenue, they are all under the influence, they all feel the daring, the defiance of these buildings, their massive lightness, their exultation, the miracle of the immense weight that seems to float upward; and they respond, and it drives them crazy, though they don't know it. It's because the poor boobs take part in the fantastic drama of New York architecture that they're all in a state of perpetual excitement, have monstrous dreams, believe in miracles and get drunk. By God! It's crazy! It's terrible! (165)

Like Dos Passos, throughout *Manhattan Transfer*, Borden presents the city, and the modernity it represents, as both terrifying and alluring—irresistible and frightening.

Peter Campbell's modernism— and by extension Borden's— is not all futurist worship of speed and energy or the purity of form. He's also thoroughly primitivist, drawn to the Harlem nightclub scene Borden presents as a welcome relief from the modernity of the city:

He sees New York as a city of three layers. His working life is lived in the air, on the top layer; his married life goes on down on the ground or near it, in the smart world where his wife's set skim about in ballrooms or up and down smooth roads to Long Island. Below this there is another world, subterranean, the

world of blazing night cellars, where the Negroes gather, and this world to draws him irresistibly down into it. (17)

It is Campbell's attraction to this "subterranean" world which offers Borden the opportunity for her descriptions, quoted above, of the jazz abandon both she and Campbell attribute to African-Americans.

Borden's novel draws an explicit contrast between New York and London, placing modernity in one city and tradition in the other. "Life for a mere man in [New York] is a precarious business," Borden writes: "He is about as safe and comfortable there as a tight-rope walker above a roaring iron river" (8). Yet, she continues, "In London, keeping alive isn't quite such a dizzy business. The difficulties are of another kind. London sprawls on a muddy bottom. It is heavy and lazy and comfortable. There is no chance for skyscrapers" (8).

Peter Campbell and Victor Joyce— the American architect and the British aristocrat— are contrasted in similar terms. Whereas Campbell embraces change, Joyce desires tradition; whereas Campbell has visions of catastrophic renovations, Joyce cannot imagine anything changing:

He is convinced or professes to be convinced that each time the earth revolves on its axis, it is slightly changed for the worse, and he seems to consider it his duty to stop this. He hates change. He knows, of course, that the English are the greatest race on earth, and although he grumbles as much as most of his friends about England going to the dogs, he does not really believe that it will. He thinks that England, his England, will endure forever. He cannot conceive of the deep green fields, the snug villages, the

great patrician houses, the old furniture and old customs and habits that he likes, and the old ideas that he is used to, passing away. (11)

Where Campbell focuses on change, wanting to tear down the built manifestations of customs and habits, Joyce is unable to imagine modernity. While Borden doesn't urge acceptance of Joyce's unthinking traditionalism, she is ultimately more threatened by Campbell's (perhaps equally unthinking) acceptance of modernity.

As section three of *Flamingo* opens, the Joyces arrive in New York, and the tidy oppositions and connections the narrative has been establishing begin to unravel:

From now on this story becomes very confused. It is going to be very difficult to keep track of these people once the *Aquitania* is tied up to the Cunard pier in the North River. It is going to be like a game of hide and seek, a sort of treasure hunt on switchbacks, in a crowd, in the dark, that jangles and jiggles, in a great confusion of noises, and it will be impossible to keep my eye on the clock and tell a straight narrative of how one thing happened after another, for it wasn't like that. All sorts of things happened at once, and things that should have happened first happened last, and some things that ought to have happened never happened at all. (239)

When Bridget Prime and Frederika Joyce encounter Peter Campbell and Carolina Sal at the Crib, Peter falls in love with Bridget Prime, despite the mystical connection he shares with Frederika. Frederika, despite recognizing

Peter Campbell, leaves the club rather than going to meet him. "It is exasperating," the narrator notes: "I could have written such a romantic love story about them, had they given me half a chance. . . . They all behaved extremely badly from the story-teller's point of view" (247-48). After establishing carefully and at great length a narrative which will bring the characters together in controlled ways, the final sections of the novel follow the characters down contradictory, aimless, and destructive paths, as though the city itself has taken control of the story.

Campbell's affair with Bridget infuriates the jealous Ikey Daw, who has fallen in love with her during the crossing of the Atlantic, and he manages to block Peter Campbell's project for a multiblock skyscraper. Victor Joyce very nearly has an affair with Adelaide Campbell, Peter's wife, but at the last minute returns to Frederika, having seen (among other things) Adelaide's mistreatment of Christopher Campbell, Peter's "idiot" brother. Carolina Sal is killed during a raid on the club, which we discover is largely funded with Campbell's money, and Joe Jefferson is arrested. Adelaide plans to use Peter's affair with Bridget Prime as a final reason to divorce him, and go live in England. Bridget Prime tries to convince Frederika to divorce Victor and marry Peter Campbell, because she realizes their mysterious connection. But Frederika ultimately decides to stay with Victor: "although the giant profiles of those tapering American towers had thrilled her, New York City, exciting as it was, wasn't her home. . . . She preferred, when it came to the point, deep, somnolent, troubled England, and her life there with all its boring round of official duties" (410). In a very real sense, New York City disrupts the story,

pulling apart the carefully planned narrative because none of the characters act appropriately.

What finally does bring the narrative to a close, if not a conclusion, is Peter Campbell's suicide. After the big development project he's been working on throughout the novel is blocked— through Ikey Daw's intervention— he returns to his office high in the skyscraper he became famous for designing:

Peter sat in his little cubbyhole high up in the sky, tearing up papers, and drinking every little while from that whiskey bottle, while 'way down underneath him in the lighted cellars of the city the syncopated yowl of the Twentieth Century went on, beating, beating, and whining, as if a lot of sick animals were locked up in the city's basement . . . (415)

Campbell sees another vision of the flamingo, but this time instead of soothing and relaxing him, it enrages him. He leaps out of the office window to his death. Borden emphasizes the city's indifference: "no one heard his tiny cry or saw him fall, a whirling speck, rolling over and over, down the immense stone precipice, past the many tiers of dark, vacant windows" (416).

Thus the city overwhelms not only the characters who confront it, but the narrative itself. "We've no more to do with these people," Borden writes; "we can't follow them any longer, or keep track of them in the swarm" (416). The spectacle of modernity, which brings together all of the novel's characters, drawing them with its energy and excitement, breaks the narrative apart, disrupting the careful narrative plotting and character development, overwhelming whatever traditions they held.

In *Manhattan Transfer*, Jimmy Herf leaves the city, but with no clear destination and vague (at best) prospects for escaping the modernity it represents. Ellen Thatcher remains in the city, but it is impossible to conceive of her finding fulfillment there in the narrative's terms. In *Flamingo*, Victor and Frederika re-board the *Aquitania* and return to London and Amanda Campbell remains quietly in Campbelltown: but the narrative menacingly insists that the influences which make the metropolis powerful are also drawing London and Campbelltown into its influence. Peter Campbell's suicide, in fact, may represent the only real way to escape: but even this gesture is represented as futile in the face of the metropolis' overwhelming power.

Notes to Chapter Four

- ¹ The statement within the quotation is drawn from Spears, p. 75.
- ² In Robert Gorham Davis' terms, "Much of his fiction, with its language borrowed from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, is an extended illustration of *The Theory of the Leisure Class* and *The Engineers and the Price System*" (8). See also Amy Kaplan's discussion of *Manhattan Transfer's* "allegedly modernist structure" and the "recurring tensions between fragmentation and coherence, and conflict and community, that inform . . . American realism" ("Realism" 254-55).
- ³ Max Egremont's *Under Two Flags*, a biography of Major-General Sir Edward Spears (Borden's second husband) is the best source available for information about Borden's life.
- ⁴ In 1930, Borden and Ford Madox Ford were interviewed by the *New York World* about the manners of English versus American women. Gladys Oaks, the interviewer, incorrectly claims that Borden "owned and financed a wartime hospital in England."
- ⁵ The quotation is from the entry on Mary Borden in Tante. Information on Borden can also be found in Kunitz and Haycraft, and Kunitz and Colby.
- ⁶ Versions of the story appear in Ford 413-17, Hunt 255, and Lewis' "The Countryhouse Party, Scotland." Kunitz and Haycraft claim that Borden was in France at the outbreak of the war. For more on Borden and W. Lewis, see Michel 81, 155n, 447; and W. Lewis *Letters* 41-42, 66-67, 73-74, 83-84. The incident also figures in most Ford biographies. See Mizener, 248-49, Judd 238-39, and Saunders I: 466-67, II: 376-77, which notes that "Ford had already spoken to Pound about *Portrait*" before hearing Borden's reading.
- ⁷ She published three early novels under the pseudonym "Bridget Maclagan." She also published several poems in *The English Review*, first under the name Mary Borden-Turner and later Mary Borden Turner. (On Borden's poetry, see Montefiore, 122-25).
- ⁸ "Miss Mary Borden: Writer and Head of Hospital Unit," obituary, *Times* (London) 3 Dec. 1968, 10.
- ⁹ See Anthony, Bates, Kronenberger, Lohrke, and two unsigned reviews listed under *Flamingo* in the works cited.
- ¹⁰ Though I have not had the opportunity to examine Borden's papers, which are collected at Boston University, it seems as though she was at least broadly familiar with Chicago School Sociology. Park's description of space, for example, fits perfectly with Borden's use of spatial designations throughout the novel: "Since so much that students of society are ordinarily interested in seems to be intimately related to position, distribution, and movements in space, it is not impossible that all we ordinarily conceive as social may eventually be construed and described in terms of space and the changes of

position of the individuals within the limits . . . of an area of competitive co-operation" ("Urban" 12).

- ¹¹ In fact, at one point Christopher is also linked to the flamingo which links Peter and Frederika. He gives Peter a pocket-watch that runs backwards, so as to give the always-busy architect more time. When Peter is suitably impressed by the gift, "Christopher, radiantly happy at the great success of his surprise," is seen "standing ecstatically on one leg" (213).
- ¹² "London and New York had been talking to each other all that summer. They had been trying to understand each other, but with very moderate success. They saw things differently, or perhaps New York didn't try very hard to understand that old woman across the Atlantic, that old fogey" (25).
- ¹³ Borden's essays throughout the thirties are even more explicit. "The ingredients of the social pudding in America are not right and they are badly mixed," she writes: "there are not enough gentlefolk and, in fact, not enough Americans. There are too many savages and too many half-breeds and too many questionable foreign adventurers. this makes, particularly in New York, for confusion and chaos in matters of taste and it drives the well-bred people out" ("Society" 441).
- ¹⁴ Similarly, Borden writes of a black railway porter: "He seems to be dreaming, of cotton fields, perhaps, and 'possum hunts and little fat pickaninnies tumbling in the sun. There is a warmth round him and a great laziness; almost the drone of bees is audible" (128).
- ¹⁵ Borden distinguishes, in racialized terms, between the undeveloped countryside associated with primitivism, and the cultivated countryside associated with Campbelltown, which is categorized as a "small country town" (19).
- ¹⁶ The link to Africa is made explicit many times. For example: "Back in New York was the heart of Africa. Darkest Africa, it was called in the Sunday-school books. Livingstone had gone there years ago, a missionary to the heathens; but all Peter had to do when he wanted to be saved was to hop into a yellow cab and go whizzing up Lexington Avenue, past a few dozen lamp posts. There, round about One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth street, under the shiny pavement of the flat, monotonous streets . . . lay the dark, mysterious continent" (179).
- ¹⁷ As well as sexual orientation. While I do not discuss it here, Tony Hunter and John Oglethorpe are both, in the novel's term, "that way": i.e., gay men. In fact, Oglethorpe's affected accent is rendered in dialect as well: "Certainly my deah, nothing could give me more pleajah" (141). In *Flamingo*, Adelaide Campbell finds her husband Peter's copy of Edward Carpenter's *The Intermediate Sex*, and accuses him of being "an intermediate" (152). Of course, "the homosexual" was also the subject of sociological investigation by the Chicago School Sociologists throughout the 1920s.
- ¹⁸ I mean to recall, of course, Dreiser's famous description of Chicago as "The Magnet Attracting" (1).

- ¹⁹ A similar scene, for example, occurs in Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917). The billboard, a common element in Dos Passos' city, emphasizes the link between assimilation and (expected) upward mobility.
- ²⁰ "Steamroller" less obviously, but the vehicle is said to be "clattering back and forth over the freshly tarred metaling of the road at the cemetery gate" (112). The paving of the "suburban road, laced tight on both sides with telegraph poles and wires" (112) links the suburbs with the city, drawing the suburban residents into the expanding metropolis.
- ²¹ See Morrison on the concept of an "Africanist presence."
- ²² Although I focus on Anna's ethnicity, here, she is of course marked as Jewish, female, and working class: all intersecting and overdetermining Dos Passos' representational strategies. I focus on gender in *Manhattan Transfer* in my discussion of Ellen Thatcher, below, but by doing so I do not intend to imply that "gender" is only of significance to "white" women; similarly, my discussion of masculine insecurity should not be restricted to Jimmy Herf. Rather, I focus in that section of Ellen and Jimmy as the two primary characters of the novel.
- ²³ Though Dos Passos' reference here to "A negro" as the source of the danger, there is no indication in the text that the racial identification of the attacker— by Anna's coworkers— is substantiated.
- ²⁴ As Cassie puts it— in her characteristic lisp— "it's so hard to keep twack. . . ." (339). For simplicity's sake, I refer to her as Ellen throughout.
- ²⁵ Also once again recalling Lily Bart. Though Dos Passos castigates Wharton as an example of what is wrong with American Literature in an early essay— writing that *The House of Mirth* "leaves an abstract impression of intellectual bitterness" and that the "tone of the higher sort of writing in this country is undoubtedly that of a well brought up and intelligent woman, tolerant, versed in the things of this world, quietly humorous, but bound tightly in the fetters of 'niceness,' of the middle-class outlook" ("Against" 38)— echoes of *The House of Mirth* are frequent in *Manhattan Transfer*.
- ²⁶ Both these early scenes with Ellen, and the similar interior dialogue of Jimmy Herf imitate, of course, the opening of Joyce's *Portrait*.
- ²⁷ The phrase is Cowan's. See also chapter two, note 4 above.
- ²⁸ In addition, he refers to her as "prince's daughter" and "little girl," and addresses her in the same language of romance she employed in her daydream: "Behold thou art fair my love. . . . Oh stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples for I am sick of love" (116, ellipses added).
- ²⁹ Once more, like Lily Bart: "Instead of being aggressive herself in choosing a suitable lover or husband, Ellen is the female continuously acted upon" (Wagner 50).
- ³⁰ She also, of course, wards off an attempted burglary, this time holding the revolver herself. Even in this case, however, the danger is associated with

her relationship with Emery, as she first suspects the burglar is Oglethorpe (148-52).

- ³¹ The shift from Herf's "porcelaine" (300), including the final "e," to Ellen's "porcelain" (375), excluding it, is in the original. Intriguingly, Herf's version makes the noun feminine, Ellen's masculine; I have retained Dos Passos' idiosyncratic spelling and syntax intact throughout.
- ³² R. Davis, for example, reads Jimmy Herf as a version of Dos Passos: "His return to America . . . is reflected in the beginning of *Manhattan Transfer*, where Jimmy Herf is first seen as a boy debarking with his mother from an ocean liner in New York on the Fourth of July" (7). According to Sanders, "Jimmy Herf is that character closest to Dos Passos' point of view if only because the others directly oppose it" (Sanders 178). Rather than trying to determine "Dos Passos' point of view," and evaluating Herf's story in relation to it, a more useful strategy is to see Herf as a figure produced by the tensions about masculinity in market society.
- ³³ In addition, most of his projected destinations are neocolonial: Africa, Mexico, and Columbia, for example. The "territory" to which Huck "lit out" is no longer ideologically available, as the rural United States is already becoming too much like the metropole: the colonies are further out, beyond the national boundary.
- ³⁴ Victor is clearly marked as Victorian: Frederika's name is perhaps meant to suggest some mixture of masculinity (Frederick) and scientific discovery (Eureka).
- ³⁵ As she puts it in a 1929 *Harper's* article, "There are a great many Coney Islands in the world, but there is very little good society; for taste and a sense of the proper use of leisure are not acquired in a day. Merry-go-rounds and joy barrels, jazz bands and football have nothing to do with the social life of civilized people. They are merely the sign of its non-existence" ("Society" 438).

Chapter 5: At the Heart of the Metropolis / At the Margins of Modernism: Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*

. . . judgements on Afro-American “modernism” and the “Harlem Renaissance” that begin with notions of British, Anglo-American, and Irish “modernism” as “successful” objects, projects, and processes to be emulated by Afro-Americans are misguided. . . . Africans and Afro-Americans . . . have little in common with Joycean and Eliotic projects. Further, . . . the very *histories* that are assumed in the chronologies of British, Anglo-American, and Irish modernisms are radically opposed to any adequate and accurate account of the history of Afro-American modernism, especially the *discursive* history of such modernism. (Baker xv-xvi)

Houston Baker's *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* projects a discursive history which delineates “the mastery of form” and “the deformation of mastery” within the African American literary tradition explicitly opposed to an “optically white” modernism. Cataloguing the descriptions of modernism by various critics, Baker notes that many rest on an “acknowledgement of radical uncertainty” as the philosophical basis for literary modernism (3). Yet, Baker argues, “What really seems under threat are not towers of civilization but rather an assumed supremacy of boorishly racist, indisputably sexist, and unbelievably wealthy Anglo-Saxon males” (4). Thus, African-American writers, excluded by definition from the “bourgeois,

characteristically twentieth-century, white Western mentality” Baker associates with modernism, founded a separate and opposed tradition: “a specifically Afro-American modernism” (8).

As George Hutchinson has recently argued, Baker’s model makes explicit the terms in which the Harlem Renaissance and modernism are still discussed:

it is still the case that discussions of modernism and the Harlem Renaissance often pit black writers against white writers . . . who inhabited a very different space (literally!) in the modernist landscape, while ignoring or giving little careful attention to the forms of uncanonical, ‘native’ (white) modernism with which the African American Renaissance was intimately related.

(Harlem 14)

In other words, the racial binary of Baker’s reading, and others like it, obscures two fundamental aspects of American modernism: first, the American modernists who do not fit the expatriate, experimental, avant-garde tradition, but remained in the U.S. and worked in other formal modes; second, the interactions between writers identified as African-American and those identified as white.¹

The Harlem Renaissance provides a site for the exploration and critique of both the traditional, exclusionary model of “modernism” and the racial logic which continues to underscore explorations of writing by African Americans. Studies of Modernism have primarily ignored the Harlem Renaissance altogether, focusing on European writers, and American writers only when they write in Europe. While tracing the lines of connection back from 1920s

Harlem to the nineteenth century slave narrative, or forward to contemporary African American fiction is undoubtedly an important critical project, the exploration of separate lines of tradition has allowed a literary-historical color line to stand: the novelists and poets of the Harlem Renaissance remain tributaries to the main stream of American literature. Restoring the Harlem Renaissance to a central position *within* American modernism usefully complicates both the literary-historical definitions of modernism and the racial binaries which structure discussions of the Harlem Renaissance. To paraphrase Friedman and Fuchs, it is time to study Melanctha not only as she has been written by Stein, Picasso, and their Paris contemporaries, but also as she has been written by the authors of the Harlem Renaissance.²

I. "The City of Refuge": Harlem and the Racial Limits of "Modernism"

In "The City of Refuge," a Rudolph Fisher short story which appeared in the 1925 anthology *The New Negro*, edited by Alain Locke,³ King Solomon Gillis emerges from the "strange and terrible" underworld of the subway into the "Clean air, blue sky, [and] bright sunlight" (57) of Harlem. Gillis has heard stories about Harlem in his home state of North Carolina; he has seen copies of Harlem newspapers, which "mentioned Negroes without comment, but always spoke of a white person as 'So-and-so, white.'" The narrative continues: "That was the point. In Harlem, black was white. . . . Everybody in Harlem had money. It was a land of plenty" (58). Harlem represents, for Gillis, both "the city of refuge" from conditions in the South and "the promised land," where America's debt to African Americans is finally being paid (58).

James Weldon Johnson's "Harlem: The Culture Capital," in the same anthology, describes Harlem as "the greatest Negro city in the world." He elaborates: "It is not a slum or a fringe, it is located in the heart of Manhattan and occupies one of the most beautiful and healthful sections of the city . . . 175,000 Negroes live closely together in Harlem . . . and do so without any race friction" (310). However, many African Americans moving north did not experience cities like Harlem as utopias of intraracial harmony and pride; they also found crowded, overpriced, segregated urban ghettos. In Carole Marks's terms, "black migrants going North found little to satisfy their search for economic equality or social justice" (1). Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* and Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* evince this dual context of Harlem; it functions as an index of both possibility and limit; urban modernity for African-Americans held both promises and threats.

Nigger Heaven, the 1926 best seller by Carl Van Vechten, popularized the city in the literary marketplace. Van Vechten's decision to use the term "nigger" in his title, however, despite his own recognition that "its employment by a white person is always fiercely resented" (26), is merely symptomatic of a more fundamental set of problems. While the novel is undoubtedly more often alluded to than read today, it was widely read and discussed when it was published.⁴ David Levering Lewis claims that "it was considered bad form among Afro-Americans to be caught reading *Nigger Heaven*, and virtually everyone in Harlem discovered never-before-expressed misgivings about Carl Van Vechten or remembered some telltale incident about his racial insincerity" (*When* 181). Yet Lewis's "virtually everyone in

Harlem” ignores those writers who, like James Weldon Johnson, felt that “the book is packed full of propaganda” (Qtd. in B. Kellner, *Keep* 74).⁵ While Du Bois did describe the novel as “a blow in the face” and “an affront to the hospitality of black folk and to the intelligence of white,” Walter White, James Weldon Johnson, Rudolph Fisher, and Langston Hughes— as well as Nella Larsen— all praised the novel, and its author.⁶

The title promised, in 1926, scandalous stories of nightclub goers, numbers runners, and the sexual promiscuity white America expected from Harlem’s black residents. Indeed, the prologue, though tame by today’s standards, fulfills the title’s promise, following the character “Scarlet Creeper” on a stroll down Seventh Avenue and into the “Black Venus” nightclub. Van Vechten describes the scene in primitivist, racist terms: “Couples were dancing in such close proximity that their bodies melted together as they swayed and rocked to the tormented howling of the brass, the barbaric beating of the drum” (12).

After the first sixteen pages, the novel quickly turns to respectable Harlem, presenting the “Talented Tenth” through Mary Love, a librarian, and Byron Kasson, a novelist. Byron explains the title phrase in a crucial soliloquy:

Nigger Heaven! That's what Harlem is. We sit in our places in the gallery of this New York theatre and watch the white world sitting below in the good seats in the orchestra. . . . It never seems to occur to them that Nigger Heaven is crowded, that there isn't another seat, that something has to be done. It doesn't seem to occur to them either . . . that we sit above them, that we can drop

things down on them and crush them, that we can swoop down
from this Nigger Heaven and take their seats. (149)

Byron images Harlem as both a legally limiting and limited space— the balcony bearing the sign “colored”— and as a possible space of racial solidarity and action, figuratively both close to and above white New York.

Van Vechten’s novel encourages, through the character of Durwood, black artists to make use of the urban poor of Harlem as material for novels. At the same time, however, he presents his own novel as the first of the projected genre. That is to say, Van Vechten complicates the formula as he creates it. Even as he plays upon the white readers’ expectations in the prologue and conclusion, he deliberately writes into the novel several characters which defy those expectations; when Mary Love, for example, quotes pages from Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens from memory, she can hardly be said to fit primitivist stereotypes.

Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* is both an extension of and a reaction to Van Vechten’s portrayal.⁷ McKay’s novel does provide much of the same primitivist voyeurism as Van Vechten’s. Jake, having decided to return to Harlem after the First World War, remembers primarily the women of Harlem: “Brown girls rouged and painted like dark pansies. Brown flesh draped in soft colorful clothes. Brown lips full and pouted for sweet kissing. Brown breasts throbbing with love. . .” (9). Where Van Vechten presented Scarlett Creeper as a “type” of the Harlem strutter, McKay amplifies the type, in the figure of “Strawberry Lips”: “Strawberry Lips was typically the stage Negro. He was proof that a generalization has some foundation in truth. . . [he was] a type by

far more perfect than any created counterpart" (63-64). McKay presents as fact the very stereotype the minstrel stage presented as fiction.

McKay's novel does not, however, merely extend Van Vechten's sensationalist account. McKay responds directly to Van Vechten's segregated balcony metaphor, when Susy, a representative of the upper bourgeoisie, declares her preference for "the nigger heaven of a downtown theatre" over "this here Harlem": "This here Harlem is a stinking sink of iniquity. Nigger hell! That's what it is" (99). He also responds to Durwood's advice to young black novelists— While McKay presents life in Harlem within the established image of sexual promiscuity and sensual abandon, he implicitly critiques the racial solidarity assumed in this image, representing it as an impossible home for his young novelist figure, Ray. Despite the novel's title, the primary focus of the novel is on the limitations of Harlem as a space culturally proscribed for African Americans.

Ray's reaction to the Harlem masses naturalizes their lower status while writing Ray out of it: "These men claimed kinship with him. They were black like him. Man and nature had put them in the same race. . . . They were chained together and he was counted as one link. Yet he loathed every soul in that great barrack-room, except Jake. Race. . . . Why should he have and love a race?" (153). McKay's text confronts the political geography of 1920s America, which classifies according to a racial binary exclusive of all other concerns— in this case, class and nationality.

Ray's reaction to the blues he and Jake hear at a brothel in Philadelphia expresses his ambivalence toward the racially constructed role: "he would like to be touched by the spirit of the atmosphere and, like Jake, fall naturally into

its rhythm" (194). Like Van Vechten's *Mary Love*, Ray consciously desires a reaction at the same time that he presents that reaction as "natural":

The piano player had wandered off into some dim, far-away, ancestral source . . . The notes were naked acute alert. Like black youth burning naked in the bush. . . . Like a primitive dance of war or of love . . . (196)

While the piano player is lost in this pseudo-ancestral revelry, Ray slips out of the room. In fact, the narrative obscures the moment of his departure— not only is Ray unable to achieve the reaction he presents as "natural" for Jake, we don't know if he's even heard the music.

Ultimately, Ray cannot bring himself to "naturally" act like Jake: "If he could have felt about things as Jake, how different his life might have been" (263). Ray's decision to leave Harlem is figured as a rejection of Jake's sensual primitivism: "He was afraid that someday the urge of the flesh and the mind's hankering after the pattern of respectable comfort might chase his high dreams out of him and deflate him to the contented animal that was a Harlem nigger strutting his stuff" (264-5). Ray's decision is also linked to his desire to write: "But he drank in more of life that he could distill into active animal living. Maybe that was why he felt he had to write" (265). McKay's Harlem is no place for the writer.

The narrative accelerates after Ray's departure, quickly and arbitrarily reuniting Jake with "his little brown": the prostitute/lover he has been hoping to regain since the beginning of the novel.⁸ The primitivist vision of Harlem returns, and provides closure to the novel, with Ray neatly excised from the picture:

They were all drawn together in one united mass, wriggling around to the same primitive, voluptuous rhythm. . . . Haunting rhythm, mingling of naïve wistfulness and charming gayety, now sheering over into mad riotous joy, now, like a jungle mask, strange, unfamiliar, disturbing, now plunging headlong into the far, dim depths of profundity and rising out as suddenly with a simple, childish grin. (337)

McKay at least briefly hints, however, towards the problematics of this cultural image of Harlem: “And the white visitors laugh. They see the grin only” (337). Although much of the novel itself has re-presented the racialized grin, McKay reminds his readers of the limitations of the stereotype of Harlem.

II. Nella Larsen, Novelist of Modernism

Nella Larsen, as a biracial woman writing in Harlem, is excluded from the traditional Americanist canon of the “Lost Generation.” However, her middle-class heroines and her decorous language, suggesting affinities with the novel of manners,⁹ places her outside of traditional explications of the Harlem Renaissance; she does not take part (at least explicitly) in the “guerrilla warfare” Baker describes, for example.¹⁰ She is also excluded from most definitions of modernism: she’s not experimental enough, she is not an exile, and her novels, though not “race conscious” enough for some versions of the Harlem Renaissance, are simultaneously too referential (or too realist) for Modernism. Considering Larsen’s work, then, can illuminate some of the gaps in the traditional conceptions of Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance.¹¹ I am not so much interested in abandoning these traditions as

in demonstrating how works (and authors) can cross their borders. This border crossing, like all true border crossings, is not easy; but the contradictions it reveals can renew our sense of Modernism as new: disruptive, interrupting, and challenging.

Nella Larsen is a paradigmatic example of being simultaneously within and without. As Hutchinson argues, despite their geographic and chronological coexistence, a separation between Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance is well established in U.S. literary studies:

Because realism and naturalism together have served as the straw man designating whatever modernism *is not* in Europe and the United States since the 1930s, the modernism of the Harlem Renaissance has been difficult . . . to detect. (*Harlem* 118)

If Larsen has been excluded from modernism for being, in Hutchinson's terms, "unabashedly 'realistic,'" however, she has also been at times marginalized within the Harlem Renaissance. In 1958, for example, Robert Bone characterized Larsen as part of the "Rear Guard" of the Harlem Renaissance. Bone writes,

The more conservative novelists of the period stopped short in the midst of the revolution . . . they remained strangers to that profound crisis of belief which motivates the modern novel. . . . the Rear Guard continued to write as if the Victorian world were still intact. (99)

Bone describes Larsen's response to modernity as a temporal lag— as though Larsen stands with one foot in the twentieth century and one in the nineteenth, all the while trying to "orient Negro art toward white opinion"

(97). Given the contortions involved in Bone's image, one wonders she managed to write and publish at all!

With the recovery of Larsen signaled by Deborah McDowell's 1986 edition of *Quicksand* and *Passing*, this "rear guard" argument has been discredited, and Larsen is more often now acknowledged as being rather intimate with the profound crisis of belief Bone ascribes to the modern novel. Yet these descriptions often pathologize Larsen: while modernism signals a *general* crisis, Larsen's crises are read as evidence of some personal psychological lack.¹² McDowell writes:

Never feeling connected to this . . . family, Larsen searched vainly for the sense of belonging it could not provide. Fickle and unsettled, Larsen roamed from place to place, searching for some undefined and undefinable "something." (x)

In other words, if Larsen is no longer Victorian, her reputation as modernist is far from secure.

In fact, Larsen saw herself as part of a larger "modern" movement. As Thadious Davis notes, Larsen's 1926 letter to the editor of *Opportunity* places her within the literary field of modernism, if only as a reader. The letter, as published, mentions a mind "warped . . . by the European and American moderns." The full text elaborates:

He grumbles about the lack of "clarity", "confusion of characters," [and] "faulty sentence structure". These sins escape me in my two readings, and even after they had been so publicly pointed out, I failed to find them. Even the opening sentence seems to me all right. But then, I have been recently reading

Huysmans, Conrad, Proust, and Thomas Mann. (qtd. in T. Davis 205)

Thus, in the years immediately preceding the appearance of her first novel, Larsen saw herself as having modernist sensibilities.¹³

When *Quicksand* appeared, Larsen sent a copy to Gertrude Stein, along with a letter in which she writes: “Carl asked me to send you my poor first book, and I am doing so. Please don’t think me too presumptuous” (qtd. in Gallup 216; see Blackmer, “African” 230 and T. Davis 251). Larsen’s self-depreciating tone represents her transatlantic self-presentation as simple obedience to Van Vechten’s suggestion and disclaims presumption. Yet, Larsen’s tone in the letter is deceptive. In fact, Larsen begins the letter by mentioning Stein’s “Melanctha,” claiming “I never cease to wonder how you came to write it and just why you and not some one of us should so accurately have caught the spirit of this race of mine” (qtd. in Gallup 216). Leaving the thornier question of Larsen’s “honest” opinion of Stein’s accuracy aside, Larsen’s “I never cease to wonder . . . just why” quietly speaks volumes, leaving just below the decorous surface a serious challenge to the exclusivity of (white) aesthetic modernism.

Quicksand contains similar challenges shallowly buried. The reader first finds Helga Crane at Naxos, an all black college modeled after the Tuskegee Institute. Helga is making preparations to leave the school, because of its homogeneity: “This great community, she thought, was no longer a school. . . . It was, Helga decided, now only a big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man’s pattern. Teachers as well as students were subjected to the paring process, for it tolerated no innovations,

no individualisms” (4). She finds herself unable to fit in— or rather, she finds Naxos unable to accept her; the “general atmosphere of Naxos” is described as “intolerant dislike of difference” (5). Larsen writes, “Negro society, she had learned, was as complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society” (8). Helga’s (and evidently Larsen’s as well) fundamental disagreement with the policy of “uplift” as practiced at Naxos represents only the first in her many breaks with a community.

In fact, what Helga does throughout the novel is move from community to community: from Naxos to Chicago to Harlem to Copenhagen to Harlem and finally to Alabama. Helga’s inability to “settle down,” however, should not be read as Larsen’s failure to get beyond the tragic mulatto plot. Rather, Larsen is sensitive to the difficulties presented by “intolerant dislike of difference”; her flight from various communities resembles in this way Stephen Dedalus’s voluntary exile at the end of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.¹⁴ The problem with Helga-as-exile, though, is that in order to be an exile, one must first have an established community from which to exit. The common conception of the modernist expatriate requires (and reinforces) the notion of the *patria*.

Helga first encounters what appears to be a sustainable community in Harlem, with Anne Grey, whose husband died in World War One. Helga’s first taste of happiness thus occurs in a gendered and racialized space, without men, and predominantly without whites:

[W]hile the continuously gorgeous panorama of Harlem fascinated her, thrilled her, the sober mad rush of white New York failed entirely to stir her. Like thousands of other Harlem

dwellers, she patronized its shops, its theatres, its art galleries,
 and its restaurants, and read its papers, without considering
 herself a part of the monster. And she was satisfied, unenvious.
 For her this Harlem was enough. Of that white world, so distant, so
 near, she asked only indifference. No, not at all did she crave,
 from those pale and powerful people, awareness. Sinister folk,
 she considered them, who had stolen her birthright. Their past
 contribution to her life, which had been but shame and grief, she
 had hidden away from brown folk in a locked closet, "never," she
 told herself, "to be reopened." (45)

Here Helga accepts, temporarily, the "nationalist implications" of Harlem; she
 accepts the community which is prepared for her by a racialized (and racist)
 America. However, her dissatisfaction with this community is already
 suggested by the over-insistence of the narrative voice. In fact, the narrator's
 voice blends with Helga's here: the locked closet metaphor, begun by the third
 person narrator, is completed by Helga.

The narrator's descriptions of Helga's dissatisfaction reveal the tension
 between realist verisimilitude and modernist suggestion which characterizes
 much of the novel: "Somewhere, within her, in a deep recess, crouched
 discontent. . . . As the days multiplied, her need of something, something
 vaguely familiar, but which she could not put a name to and hold for definite
 examinations, became almost intolerable" (47). One of the possible referents
 for this unnamable desire is Dr. Anderson, the former principle of Naxos to
 whom she submitted her resignation. When Helga meets him again in Harlem,
 the narrator lapses back into the language of indeterminacy: "At his speech

there dropped from her that vague feeling of yearning, that longing for sympathy and understanding that his presence evoked" (50). Partially, Larsen is using the rhetoric of ineffability here to avoid placing Helga in the stereotypical role of sexually voracious black woman.¹⁵ But the narrator also keeps Helga's dissatisfaction incompletely articulated in recognition of its complexity—Larsen is as aware as any modernist of the difficulty of adequately representing consciousness in language.

The unnamed repression is finally broken by the arrival of her Uncle Peter's bequest; the conscience clearing gift from the white relative who can no longer recognize Helga as a relation enables her travel to Copenhagen. However, Helga's epiphany is not as clear as many critics have made it out to be:

But later, while on an errand in the big general office of the society, her puzzled bewilderment fled. Here the inscrutability of the dozen or more brown faces, all cast from the same indefinite mold, and so like her own, seemed pressing forward all against her. Abruptly it flashed upon her that the harrowing irritation of the past weeks was a smouldering hatred. Then, she was overcome by another, so actual, so sharp, so horribly painful, that forever afterwards she preferred to forget it. It was as if she were shut up, boxed up, with hundreds of her race, closed up with that something in the racial character which had always been, to her, inexplicable, alien. Why, she demanded in fierce rebellion, should she be yoked to these despised black folk? (54-55)

The same images of repression and enclosure that characterized her rejection of white society are echoed here.¹⁶ The “locked closet” which represented (and, one could argue, made possible) her happiness in Harlem has become the experience of being “boxed up” which “forever afterwards she preferred to forget.” While her happiness in Harlem had been represented as “a sense of freedom,” after making her decision to go to Copenhagen, she thinks “And now she was free” (47, 55). Significantly, Helga’s rejection of whiteness and her rejection of blackness appear in the same language; the narrative refuses to settle the dialectic which traditionally confronts the tragic mulatto.¹⁷

Helga’s decision also follows closely her meeting with Dr. Anderson; the unnamed desires which were attached to his presence earlier in the narrative are displaced now onto Copenhagen. Significantly, between the narrator’s announcement of Helga’s decision to exile herself to Denmark and her actual departure, Helga visits a Harlem cabaret. Larsen problematizes the relationship of her protagonist to the black community she is preparing to leave. Helga loses herself in the music: “She was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra” (59). The contradictory descriptions pile up without explanation as Helga is both nearly destroyed and empowered by the Harlem Jazz. “And when suddenly the music died,” Larsen continues, “she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her” (59). The literally bewildering experience only deepens Helga’s determination to separate herself from racialized experience: “She hardened her determination to get away. She wasn’t, she told herself, a jungle creature”

(59). Again, the narration belies the complexity of Helga's situation, rather than reducing it to a question of black and white.¹⁸ Again, the narrator reports to the reader what Helga tells herself— Helga's over-determined insistence on asserting her difference in the face of culturally constructed community.¹⁹

What Helga finds in Copenhagen, however, is not the absence of racial categories. Instead, she finds a role which has already been constructed for her by the white Danes: the exotic savage. "You're a foreigner," her Aunt says, "and different. You must have bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things. You must make an impression" (68). Helga explicitly compares her Aunt's attitude towards difference to her own experience in America: "Did it mean that the difference was to be stressed, accented? Helga wasn't so sure that she liked that. Hitherto all her efforts had been toward similarity to those about her" (72). What Helga decides, ultimately, is that she most definitely does not like that; her Danish Aunt and Uncle make her into an attraction— they make her into an aesthetically pleasing object. In the novel's own terms, Helga becomes "A decoration. A curio. A peacock" (73).²⁰

Larsen links Helga's situation to the European Modernists interest in primitivism, through the character of Axel Olson: "Brilliant, bored, elegant, urbane, cynical, worldly, he was a type entirely new to Helga Crane, familiar only, and that but little, with the restricted society of American Negroes" (77). She places Helga and Axel carefully,²¹ suggesting the uncomfortable tension behind a painting like Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* or a novella like Stein's "Melanctha": "she had never quite, in spite of her deep interest in him, and her desire for his admiration and approval, forgiven Olson for that

portrait. It wasn't, she contended, herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her features" (89). Although Larsen explicitly praises Stein's story, it's difficult to read her descriptions of the interaction between Axel and Helga without wondering what she really thought of Melanctha Hubert.²² "Yes," the chapter concludes, "anyone with half an eye could see that it wasn't she" (89).

Axel's interest in Helga is more than aesthetic, though, he is also interested in her sexually.²³ The narrative doesn't report his first suggestion in this direction, but rather emphasizes its ambiguity by not reporting his actual speech:

True, he had made, one morning, while holding his brush poised for a last, a very last stroke on the portrait, one admirably draped suggestion, speaking seemingly to her pictured face. Had he insinuated marriage, or something less— and easier? Or had he merely paid her only a rather florid compliment, in somewhat dubious taste? (84)

The narrative voice, again at a moment of tension (in the content), becomes increasingly careful, fluid, and modernist. Axel's Freudian brush, poised on the threshold of finishing the portrait; his "suggestion," which takes on the "admirably draped" qualities of Helga; the narrator's indecision about to whom he speaks, "seemingly to her pictured face," and the hyphen between "less" and "and easier," all register the narrative's move away from traditional referential realism.

Having rejected Axel Olson, and by extension the role of exotic available to her in Denmark, Helga returns to Harlem. After the possibility of an

adulterous relationship with Dr. Anderson, now married to Anne Grey, is briefly suggested and denied, the novel moves rather abruptly to its conclusion. Helga converts to Christianity, marries a minister, and moves to a small town in Alabama, where she quickly becomes overwhelmed by the physical demands of childbirth. The novel leaves her about to give birth to her fifth child, and implies that she is near death.

Helga's conversion to Christianity and marriage to Reverend Green has been read by many critics as an unsatisfactory resolution to the tension the novel has generated. Indeed, on the surface, the narrative moves too quickly from the denial of the projected relationship with Dr. Anderson in Harlem to the unpleasant pastures of rural Alabama. When the novel is read in the context of modernism, however, the final scenes can be seen as a critical rewriting of narrative conventions: Larsen's swift and indeed illogical conclusion denies the logic of realism, and demonstrates the inability of traditional narrative structure to convey the modern experience of the mixed heroine.²⁴ In Hazel Carby's terms, "The *Quicksand* of 1928 did not just explore the contradictory terrain of women and romance but its sexual politics tore apart the very fabric of the romance form" ("Quicksands" 81).²⁵ The rapidly quickening pace of the narrative, in other words, rather than evincing Larsen's inability to handle novelistic conventions, demonstrates her understanding of the inadequacy of those conventions for representing Helga's experience.

The scene of Helga's "conversion," in fact, is the most carefully controlled episode in the novel— and a set piece of modernist textual difficulty.

In this carefully orchestrated scene, Larsen echoes the conventions of spiritual autobiography, but modernizes them:²⁶

And as Helga watched and listened, gradually a curious influence penetrated her; she felt an echo of the weird orgy resound in her own heart; she felt herself possessed by the same madness; she too felt a brutal desire to shout and sling herself about.

Frightened at the strength of the obsession, she gathered herself for one last effort to escape, but vainly. In rising, weakness and nausea from last night's unsuccessful attempt to make herself drunk overcame her. She had eaten nothing since yesterday. She fell forward against the crude railing which enclosed the little platform. For a single moment she remained there in silent stillness, because she was afraid she was going to be sick. And in that moment she was lost— or saved. (113)

Sexuality and religion are curiously intermingled here; the first time Helga is “penetrated” in this novel, this moment of sexual abandon takes place inside the black religious community.²⁷ However, what Larsen registers here is not Helga's religious conversion but Helga's madness. Larsen ironizes the trope of surrender by registering Helga's physical state; she is not so much saved as committed. The foreshadowing in “she was afraid she was going to be sick” is actually accurate— Helga's conversion is not a salvation but an illness. Larsen creates an unsettling combination of primitivism, religion and insanity. The “weird orgy” by 1928 conjures images of jazz bohemia, but this is a church, not a nightclub, and Larsen is careful to remind the reader of Helga's “unsuccessful attempt to make herself drunk.” The aporia at the critical

moment— the dash between lost and saved— ironizes the trope of religious surrender; she is not so much saved as insane.

The valence of Helga's salvation becomes clearer as the novel follows her to Alabama, and toward "the regaining of simple happiness, a happiness unburdened by the complexities of the lives she had known" (114). Helga's conversion is in fact her reaction not only to racism, but to modernity: "Gradually the room grew quiet and almost solemn, and to the kneeling girl time seemed to sink back into the mysterious grandeur and holiness of far-off simpler centuries" (114). The end of the novel represents not Larsen's capitulation to the tradition of the "tragic mulatto" but her registering of the very "crisis of belief" Bone accuses her of missing.²⁸ In Ann Hostetler's terms, "what finally emerges in this fictional meditation on race and gender is a complex representation of the world in which there is not such thing as blackness, whiteness, masculinity, femininity, or art in and of itself" (36).

Larsen's presentation of the rural southern African Americans is perhaps even more negative than her presentation of Harlem and Denmark. Carby writes: "Unlike [Zora Neale] Hurston's folk, who were represented as embodying in their culture and language the unique 'truth' of the Afro-American experience, Larsen represented the folk as deluded" ("Quicksands" 88). Trapped once again in a community intolerant of difference, trapped literally by her own body in numerous pregnancies,²⁹ Helga's only respite is a kind of exile of the mind: "the ballast of her brain had got loose and she hovered for a long time somewhere in that delightful borderland on the edge of unconsciousness, an enchanted and blissful place where peace and incredible quiet encompassed her" (128). This "delightful borderland," of

course, is the only resolution available to Helga— the episode with Axel Olson in Denmark has already demonstrated what happens to the black American expatriate.

To read the ending of the novel as a failure, however, is to miss the point.³⁰ As Hostetler argues, “Larsen dared to explore the failure of her heroine to adjust to such a life. *Quicksand* thus marks the beginning of greater freedom for self-examination and narrative experimentation in the writing of black American women, as Kate Chopin’s *Awakening* did for white American women. In this respect Larsen, like Chopin, was ahead of her time” (36). To read the rapidly quickening pace of narration and the ambiguity which permeates the ending of *Quicksand*, however, it is useful to turn to Larsen’s second novel, in which Larsen’s challenge to the traditional linear, teleological plot structure of the *bildungsroman* and the novel of manners is even more apparent.

Whereas early critics focused on *Quicksand*, *Passing* has received considerable attention since the critical rediscovery of Nella Larsen. Moving the critical discussion of this novel past the “best treatment of the subject in Negro fiction” (Bone, 102) category, recent critics have shown that the novel is ambiguous throughout: the relationship between the narrator and the two main characters does not resolve into protagonist/antagonist,³¹ the novel’s erotic tension does not resolve into normative heterosexuality, and the novel’s treatment of racial passing does not resolve into the prescribed nationalist stance.³² Additionally, the novel’s abrupt ending dramatizes more clearly than *Quicksand* how Larsen’s narrative strategies relate to Modernism as it has been traditionally understood.³³

Passing is the story of Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, two racially mixed women who, after being childhood friends, are reunited as adults in the rooftop restaurant of an all white hotel in Chicago.³⁴ Clare Kendry has crossed the color line wholly; she is married to a racist white man, and lives in a world of class and racial privilege. Irene, though she is engaged in passing herself when the women meet, lives a life of class privilege within black society. The central irony of the novel's title is that "passing" could apply to both characters; Clare literally passes, but Irene's approximation of the values culturally coded as white allows the term to apply to her as well.³⁵

Deborah E. McDowell, in the introduction to the Rutgers reprinting of *Quicksand* and *Passing* notes that the second novel's title might also apply to the homoerotic undertones in the relationship between Clare and Irene. Larsen's text, in this reading, passes for straight;³⁶ the trope of racial passing is used to explore the possibilities of lesbian sexuality: "In *Passing* [Larsen] uses a technique found commonly in narratives by Afro-American and women novelists with a 'dangerous' story to tell: 'safe' themes, plots, and conventions are used as the protective cover underneath which lie more dangerous subplots" (xxx). McDowell's placing of Larsen's technique within racial and gendered traditions, however, elides the parallel between Larsen's novel and Modernism.³⁷ Larsen's text, I would argue, is also a modernist narrative passing as a traditional novel.

At the conclusion of *Passing*, Clare's husband John Bellew barges in on a party which Clare is attending with Irene in Harlem:

Clare stood at the window, as composed as if everyone were not staring at her in curiosity and wonder, as if the whole structure

of her life was not lying in fragments before her. She seemed unaware of any danger or uncaring. There was even a faint smile on her full, red lips, and in her shining eyes.

It was that smile that maddened Irene. She ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare's bare arm. One thought possessed her. She couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn't have her free.

Before them stood John Bellew, speechless now in his hurt and anger. Beyond them the little huddle of other people, and Brian stepping out from among them.

What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly. (238-39)

The narrator, who at other points is able to report what Irene does not know, does not communicate to the reader what has happened; at least, never clearly.³⁸ What happens, of course, is that Clare plummets to her death.

Interestingly, Clare is presented as an aesthetic figure: she is "composed," and she refuses to acknowledge the "fragments before her." Clare is, in fact, a figure of artistic unity in the face of modern fragmentation; T. S. Eliot's Tiresias notwithstanding, she makes no attempt to shore them up. As Brody argues, "although Irene Westover [sic] succeeds in squelching the revolutionary possibilities inherent in Clare's character, Clare Kendry remains an intriguingly problematized and formidable 'Black' adversary in Irene's world of rising towers, conventional romance, and stable class structure" (1064). The ambiguities which have surrounded Clare's life continue to signify beyond the narrative's conclusion.³⁹

McDowell extends the destruction Irene accomplishes in the text to Larsen as well: “In ending [*Passing*] with Clare’s death, Larsen repeats the narrative choice which *Quicksand* makes: to punish the very values the novel implicitly affirms, to honor the very value system the text implicitly satirizes” (xxx-xxxi). In other words, Larsen sacrifices Helga and Clare to tradition— she denies the subversion promised by the narratives’ ambiguous possibilities⁴⁰. However, McDowell closes her introduction by placing Larsen as a precursor to “contemporary black women’s novels,” as a “trailblazer in the Afro-American female literary tradition” (xxxi).

Reconceptualizing Larsen’s work as a part of the modernist literary tradition, however, puts a different spin on the novels’ abrupt and tragic endings. Friedman and Fuchs write that “Plot linearity that implies a story’s purposeful forward movement; a single, authoritative storyteller; well-motivated characters interacting in recognizable social patterns; the crucial conflict deterring the protagonist from the ultimate goal; the movement to closure— all are parts of the dominant fictional structure” (4). Larsen’s novels work to disturb this structure: the narrative’s forward movement is not “purposeful” but meandering, the primary storyteller is not authoritative, the characters’ motivations are shrouded in adjectival mystery, the crucial conflict is revealed to be socially constructed, and the movement to teleological closure is replaced by a violent interruption.⁴¹

III. Decentering (and) Modernism

What makes *Quicksand* a successful modernist novel, rather than a failed realist one, is the way its form registers the contradictions inherent in

the life of a mixed-race woman in 1920s Harlem. Similarly, the unresolved contradictions in the final scene of *Passing* demonstrate the text's radical ambivalence towards Clare and Irene. Clare is offered throughout the narrative as an enchanting figure; she is idealized and criticized simultaneously. To paraphrase DeKoven's reading of *The Awakening*, Larsen has two irreconcilably contradictory assessments of Clare, and of Irene; these contradictory assessments are embedded in the language of the text.⁴²

What does all this have to teach us about modernism? DeKoven's articulates *sous-rature* in relationship to alternatives: "the text enacts precisely the modernist moment of simultaneity, of dualism that seeks neither a unitary resolution (one term over the other) nor a transcendent third term, a dialectical synthesis, but rather a simultaneity that, *from within dualism*, imagines an alternative to it" (*Rich* 25, emphasis added). Astradur Eysteinnsson frames modernism as a paradigm of literary history in a strikingly similar vision:

The various individual devices of modernist disruption or interruption are elements of a paradigmatic effort to interrupt the "progress" or rationality and perhaps initiate a "new" discourse, which we can, however, not really know, since it is (still) the negativity of the discourse in which we are immersed. It is the other (of) modernity, or, to put it differently, it is modernity held in abeyance. (240)

Given Eysteinnsson's discussion of the concept of modernism as an attempt to control the changes of modernity, drawing out the connections between the writers of the Harlem Renaissance and the literature of (European) Modernism

is itself an interruption. "By interrupting a discourse," Eysteinnsson continues, "we are implicitly claiming the right to participate in and even change that discourse" (240). By challenging disciplinary definitions of "modernism," interrupting the process of its rational encoding, we can hold Modernism itself in a state of *sous-rature*.

Notes to Chapter Five

- ¹ Donald A. Petesch writes: “At the same time that Harlem’s star was rising, white America’s seemed to be setting— at least this was the majority report of white intellectuals and artists, many of whom lived out the 1920s in Europe, largely abandoning the various Greenwich Villages to the real estate developers” (179). Petesch’s re-mapping foregrounds how far American literature scholars have been willing to go geographically to maintain a concept of American Modernism through the expatriates, rather than exploring the writing done in the U. S.
- ² Freidman and Fuchs write “It is time, indeed, to read Molly not only as she has been written by Joyce and his brothers, but also as she has written herself from Gertrude Stein to Kathy Acker” (42).
- ³ The anthology, of course, was an edited version of *Survey* magazine’s March 1925 Harlem issue. *Survey*, which alternated between “graphic” issues and regular issues, was part of the progressive movement’s emphasis on municipal reform; thus, *The New Negro* could be seen as a descendant of *Hull-House Maps and Papers*. (See chapter two, above).
- ⁴ Blackmer argues that “Few, either at that time or subsequently, have been able to read past the title” (“Selling” 222); She’s perhaps more correct about current critics than about Van Vechten’s contemporaries. See Kellner for a discussion of the book’s various editions and reprintings up to 1972 (*Keep* 77).
- ⁵ Lewis anthologizes W. E. B. Du Bois’ review of the novel along with Johnson’s, in a section of *The Harlem Renaissance Reader* titled “Critiques of Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*.” But Johnson’s piece, which concludes with the observation that “From the first, my belief has held that *Nigger Heaven* is a fine novel” could hardly be characterized as a critique (109).
- ⁶ Indeed, when Van Vechten ran into legal trouble for incorporating lyrics from popular songs without permission, Hughes supplied verses to fit in the same spaces (See Kellner, “Langston”). For a more careful and complete examination of the novel’s reception, see Worth.
- ⁷ Hazel Carby reads both *Nigger Heaven* and *Home to Harlem* as “fictions of black urban classes in formation” which use representations of urban black women “as both the means by which male protagonists will achieve or will fail to achieve social mobility and as signs of various possible threats to the emergence of the wholesome black masculinity necessary for the establishment of an acceptable black male citizenship in the American social order” (“Policing” 747).
- ⁸ On the trope of the prostitute in McKay and Larsen, see K. Roberts.
- ⁹ Hiroko Sato’s assessment is typical of early critics in the way it both praises and damns her: “She knows the craft of fiction: how to write effectively and economically, how to keep artistic unity, and how to maintain the proper

point of view. Her interest lies mainly on the psychological and not on the social side of the matter" (84). Mary Sisney argues that Fauset and Larsen "were the first black novelists of manners," and "Their novels . . . have more in common with the works of such literary ancestors as Edith Wharton and Jane Austen than with those written by such black contemporaries as Claude McKay and Countee Cullen" (173). For more critical considerations of Wharton and Larsen, see Dittmar and Goldsmith.

- ¹⁰ Similarly, because she does not use dialect, she is outside of the connection Michael North outlines in *The Dialect of Modernism*, in which "the story . . . of becoming modern by acting black" is the "story that links the transatlantic modernism Eliot and Joyce inaugurated in 1922 with the Harlem Renaissance that began, with Claude McKay's *Harlem Shadows*, at exactly the same time" (8).
- ¹¹ Connections have been drawn between Larsen's novels and Sinclair Lewis (Fleming) and Henry James (Lay). While these re-conceptions do cross the critical color line, they are primarily influence studies, noting similarities between characters and plots rather than narrative techniques.
- ¹² The "pathologized" Larsen is strikingly in evidence throughout Thadious Davis' recent biography. Focusing on Larsen's bi- or multi-racial background, Davis writes: "The paternal legacy that she carried . . . was the emotional baggage of familial rejection and color consciousness, and her maternal legacy was emotional ambivalence toward women and African-Americans" (*Nella*, 4). See Hutchinson's "Nella Larsen and the Veil of Race" for a trenchant, and I think persuasive, critique of the way Davis' hypotheses about Larsen's family affect her reading of Larsen's fiction. For a less pathologizing, Lacanian reading of *Quicksand*, "regarding the text of the novel as a psyche," see Tate ("Desire" 236).
- ¹³ In fact, Larsen continues: "Naturally these things would not irritate me as they would an admirer of Louis Hemon and Mrs. Wharton" (T. Davis 205). For a different take on the Wharton-Larsen relationship, see Goldsmith, who argues that "*Quicksand* functions as a critical rereading of the Whartonian plot, specifically that of *The House of Mirth*" (3).
- ¹⁴ Again, Thadious Davis' focus is on the autobiographical, familial resonances of the novel: "Given the specific details of Larsen's early life, the text brings to the surface the unseen antagonist confounding and compelling the author. Her absent and often nameless mother . . ." (257). Charles Larson similarly argues that Larsen is "converting the raw materials of her life into an often spellbinding psychological portrait of her heroine" (Introduction xiv; see also his *Invisible Darkness*).
- ¹⁵ Deborah McDowell's introduction to the Rutgers reprinting of both of Larsen's novels, though it focuses more on *Passing* than on *Quicksand*, outlines the problem Larsen faced in allowing her female protagonists to express sexuality without furthering stereotypes. See especially xii-xvi.

- ¹⁶ Mary Esteve writes that “Helga embodies a subjectivity that turns out to resist and at times disrupt the order and practices imposed on her by the determinations not only of Anglo-American but also African-American culture” (269).
- ¹⁷ Petesch writes that “Helga’s discontent grows out of her yearning for a place where she can be herself and an ambivalence regarding what her self really is” (187). But he considers the categories clear: “She is drawn to the order, restraint, and inhibition of white culture but also attracted by the excitement, spontaneity, and disorder of black culture” (183) — I would argue that the terms are more evenly distributed; Larsen’s text rejects the very notion of having to choose. In Jeffrey Gray’s terms, “*Quicksand* offers the much more profound . . . idea that there is no essence, black, white, or mulatto, that arrival at essence is always deferred.” Yet we need to beware, I would argue, of abstracting Helga entirely from the racial politics of the U.S. in the 1920s, as Gray does: “in our awareness of ourselves as difference, everyone is a mulatto, born of and self-located between two differences” (268).
- ¹⁸ Ann E. Hostetler, tracing the “emphasis on color” in relation to race in *Quicksand* writes that “Through her love of color Helga attempts to create a spectrum rather than an opposition, a palette that will unify her life rather than leave it divided” (35).
- ¹⁹ In Petesch’s terms, “these feelings, as others, seem overly-willed. She cannot still her ambivalence” (191).
- ²⁰ “By focusing on the elaborate process by which Helga, a black woman character, becomes an object of art,” writes Pamela Barnett, “Larsen critiques a tradition of representation that purports to be mimetic but actually reproduces stereotypes of the black female. . . . *Quicksand* suggests that portraiture, both verbal and visual, also reflects the symbolic resonances culturally assigned to the human body” (577).
- ²¹ Carby interprets the representation of Axel as much closer to home: “Larsen displaced to Europe an issue of central concern to the intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance— white fascination with the ‘exotic’ and the ‘primitive’” (“*Quicksands*” 85). Given Larsen’s knowledge of Stein’s work in primitivism, and the presentation of Axel as artist, not merely onlooker, I would argue that Larsen displaces European *modernism* to Scandinavia.
- ²² Debra B. Silverman argues, in fact, that “even though Larsen praised Stein’s text, she effectively rewrote Melanctha’s narrative to deconstruct the very stereotypes which kept Stein from fully writing black women’s experience in a way that was empowering” (606).
- ²³ Ann DuCille discusses the connection between primitivism and racist notions of black female sexuality: “Primitivism . . . is characterized by an exuberant enthusiasm for the simple, the at-once innocent and sexually uninhibited— qualities the primitivist ascribes to the racially othered, whose alterity is fetishized. . . . It is this iconography that Nella Larsen critiques . . . [when

Axel] propositions the novel's mulatto heroine . . . assuming that 'the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa' will make her eager to become his mistress" (426-27).

- ²⁴ Goldsmith, again, focuses this reading in relation to *The House of Mirth*: "Perhaps Larsen's most critical revision of the Whartonian plot is the translation of motherhood from rosy blur to painful, dulling reality" (5).
- ²⁵ Carby later continues: "in the process of this critique, Larsen not only revealed the inability of the structure of the romance to adequately express the experience of women but also posed a challenge to the readers' expectations of the form of the novel" ("Quicksands" 86). Carby, however, does not make the link to modernism explicit.
- ²⁶ Sterling Brown disagrees: "The attempt to reveal a self-centered, harassed personality is commendable, but is not helped by scenes like the one in which the sophisticated heroine attends a church meeting, and there, overwhelmed by the frenzy, begins to yell like one insane, and to weep torrents of tears" (142). However, given Brown's overall treatment of Larsen's novels (under the heading "The Tragic Mulatto Passes For White"), it is perhaps fortunate that he does not explain his objection.
- ²⁷ This connection to an established black cultural tradition is perhaps what inspires Margaret Perry to claim that "at this point Helga finds release from false values and commences the backward journey into her true black self. She selects religion to carry her back into the bosom of blackness" (76). Perry admits that, to her, "the portrait of Helga from this point to the end becomes blurred and confusing" (76).
- ²⁸ In Carby's terms, the novel "represented the full complexity of the modern alienated individual" ("Quicksands" 83).
- ²⁹ Hortense E. Thornton argues that "Helga's tragedy was more a result of sexism than of racism" (288), based on the fact that "Helga's inability to allow herself authentic sexual expression assumes a significant role in her tragic dilemma at the novel's end" (290). While Thornton is correct to establish that gender issues play an important role in the novel, I don't think it's possible to discuss either sexism or racism in the novel independent of the other. B. Williams argues that "Helga empowers herself through self-knowledge," though it isn't clear how the following is empowering: "At last, she recognizes her inability to alter her marital state and the dilemma of children" (177).
- ³⁰ Cary D. Wintz's version of failure criticizes Larsen for not creating positive outcomes to her novels: "Nella Larsen . . . projected very negative images of women who were essentially hopeless and powerless to control their circumstances or their destinies" (211). Lillie P. Howard criticizes the character, rather than the author: "Crane . . . seemed always on the verge of meaningful discovery but . . . lacked the necessary mettle for real insight and change" (226). Of course, Howard also argues that "the Danes show Helga

the essence of herself, that there is something precious, to be valued, about her Blackness” (232).

- ³¹ For example, Mary Mabel Youman writes that “critics feel that the novel is Clare Kendry’s story, and it is about the problems of a Black ‘passing for white’ and then desiring to return to a Black world. *Passing*, in my opinion, is a novel which shows that Blacks can and do lose the spiritual values of Blackness though they remain in a Black world. Thus, Irene Redfield [is] the true protagonist” (235). Youman’s acceptance of concepts like “the spiritual birthright” of African Americans presumably sounded less essentialist in 1974. But see also Sisney, who finds it quite clear (in 1990) that Larsen believes “the best place for a black woman is beside a black man within black society” (179).
- ³² For a contrasting view, which argues that “the other themes and issues in *Passing* . . . are reducible to the issue of racial identity” see Horton (31).
- ³³ See also Cutter, who argues that in contrast to Helga Crane’s desire for “a unitary sense of identity, . . . in her second novel, Larsen raises ‘passing’ to a subversive narrative strategy and to an artful method for keeping open the play of textual meaning” (75).
- ³⁴ Jennifer DeVere Brody notes the moment of Irene’s passing: “A remarkable exchange occurs in the blank margin and moment between Irene’s statement to the taxi driver that she ‘might benefit from some tea’ and his suggestion that she go to the Drayton Hotel. In this moment, Irene passes; and yet, neither the omniscient narrator nor Irene comment upon this transgression. The entire event merely occurs in the blank margin of the page” (1057). However, Brody reads this moment only as evidence of Irene’s comfort with the act of passing, without commenting on its modernist sense of narrative omission.
- ³⁵ Blackmer makes a different distinction between them: “Larsen establishes a dialectic between Clare Kendry, who embodies the ethos of the ‘New Negro’ and the non-mimetic, modernistic, and kinetic aesthetic principles of the African mask, and Irene Redfield, who erases her own racial difference and exoticizes Clare in order to displace her erotic attraction to her friend onto constructs of race” (“African” 253).
- ³⁶ In David Blackmore’s terms, “Focusing ostensibly on Clare’s racial duplicity, the novel can ‘pass’ as a text exclusively about racial identity when in fact it is just as fundamentally concerned with same-sex desire” (476). Lauren Berlant inflects the relationship differently: “There may be a difference between wanting someone sexually and wanting someone’s body, and I wonder whether Irene’s xenophilia is not indeed a desire to occupy, to experience the privileges of Clare’s body, not to love or make love to her, but rather to wear her way of wearing her body, like a prosthesis, or a fetish” (175).
- ³⁷ The same links are made by Charles Larson: “Above all, hers is a portrait of loneliness and pain, despair and sorrow- qualities which bind her to the

heroines of any number of later works by black women writers: Zora Neale Hurston, Ann Petrey, Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor” (Introduction, xiv). T. Allan, though following Davis’ biographical focuses, links Larsen to Woolf: “Their arm linking across the deep racial and cultural divide that separated them is a signpost that will guide contemporary black and white feminists through a loose alliance into a cohesive feminist firmament” (112).

- ³⁸ Judith Butler writes: “Larsen’s narrator serves the function of exposing more than Irene herself can risk. In most cases where Irene finds herself unable to speak, the narrator supplies the words. But when it comes to explaining exactly how Clare dies at the end of the novel, the narrator proves as speechless as Irene” (169). Blackmer reads the narrative interruption in terms of encoded sexuality: “In the miscommunication that ensues, Irene, who not only fears losing her tenuous social position but also her self-identity, attributes false motivations to Clare and reacts in a manner that can only be described as ‘lesbian panic,’ resulting in Clare’s death” (“African” 252). See also Madigan on the novel’s final paragraph, which Larson includes in *Intimation of Things Distant* but McDowell relegates to a footnote in the Rutgers UP edition.
- ³⁹ Blackmer writes: “In death, Clare Kendry becomes the tragic symbol for the unrealized social and aesthetic potentialities of the Harlem Renaissance, both of which were destroyed by the forces of bourgeois propriety, racism, and homophobia” (“African” 261-62).
- ⁴⁰ Blackmore, who adds considerably to McDowell’s reading of “the homosexual subtexts” of *Passing*, essentially agrees with her assessment: “Larsen obliquely suggests this alternative order, but ultimately her narrative crushes its own subtext because of the cultural power of the ethic of bourgeois respectability” (475). Although Blackmore does not explicitly criticize Larsen for her “failure” to imagine a successful version of this “alternative order,” nonetheless reads Clare’s death at the end of the novel much the same way McDowell does, as a necessary failure.
- ⁴¹ Petesch notes that “the wrenchings of racial ambivalence and desire are violently stilled,” but does not distinguish between the violence portrayed in the text and the violent suddenness with which the narrative concludes (194). He reads the novels only as indications of racial values in the 1920s, not as self-consciously narrated stories. See also McMillan, who argues that “Larsen’s conclusions function in various fashions as sites of resistance to dominant discourses” (134).
- ⁴² DeKoven writes: “Clearly, Chopin has two irreconcilably contradictory assessments of Edna, exactly as Conrad has of his hero in *Lord Jim*; in each work these contradictory assessments are embedded in the language of the text” (*Rich* 144).

Conclusion: Modernism, Urbanization, and the 1930s

1930 has long served as a critical watermark for discussions of American modernism. In 1930, according to the traditional literary historical narrative, the era of jazz abandon represented by the 1920s gave way to a committed social realism, as the United States sank into a deep depression. 1930 is also the year of Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money*. In this conclusion, I turn briefly to Gold as a final example of the way that limited formalist conceptions of "realism" and "modernism" as aesthetic strategies have obscured the significant connections across styles; connections evident in the discourses surrounding urbanization.

Whereas Larsen identified herself with the self-consciously modern, Michael Gold presented himself as opposed to the kind of aesthetic-experimental modernism traditional literary history has canonized. He writes, for example, in a piece titled "Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot":

They destroyed the common use of language. Normal ways of using words bored them. They wished to use words in a new, sensational fashion. They twisted grammar, syntax. . . . In this light, one can see that to Gertrude Stein and to the other artists like her, art exists in the vacuum of private income. (*Change*, 24-25)

For Gold, the "modernists" were bourgeois individualists, denying their responsibility to American society. In a review of *Manhattan Transfer*, he even lectures Dos Passos, suggesting that the author "must read history,

psychology and economics and plunge himself into the labor movement” (“Barbaric” 25).

In 1941’s *The Hollow Men*, Gold would in fact repudiate the entire decade of the twenties, this time naming Eliot and Mencken, but again claiming they represented broader tendencies: “both were anti-people, and fascist minded, and both were washed away like rotten piers in the flood of new insight that the depression brought to American writers” (21). Gold’s polemic, however, should not obscure his own presence within the literary field of American modernism, for Gold was a presence throughout the 1920s: editing *The Liberator* and *The New Masses*, composing and staging plays at the Provincetown Playhouse, and writing reviews and essays. “Towards Proletarian Art,” for example, appeared in February 1921. It echoes the canonical manifestoes of the modernist era: “In blood, in tears, in chaos and wild, thunderous clouds of fear the old . . . order is dying. . . . But it must die. The old ideals must die. But let us not fear. Let us fling all we are into the cauldron of the revolution” (*Anthology*, 62). Of course, I’ve omitted the key term from its opening salvo, which marks its difference: it is “the old *economic* order” which “is dying.” Does Gold’s insistent communism make this a modern, but not modernist manifesto?

Perhaps Gold’s absence from canonical modernism is not the result of his politics, but of the formal characteristics of his fiction: his realism. Gold clarified the formal principles he sought, in listing the elements of “Proletarian Realism” in 1930. The list includes:

. . . technical precision . . . real conflicts . . . Every poem, every novel, must have a social theme . . . As few words as possible . . .

the courage of the proletarian experience . . . Swift action, clear form, the direct line, cinema in words . . . Away with drabness . . . away with all lies about human nature. . . . No straining or melodrama or other effects. (*Anthology*, 206-8)

In other words, while continuing to criticize the modernists— this time he indicts Proust as “the master-masturbator of the bourgeois literature”— Gold calls for a set of representational strategies appropriate to the new age. Indeed, Gold’s exhortations mirror “the programmes, manifestoes and obsessive concern for technique” which are often central to formalist definitions of modernism (Homburger 154).

In the 1926 short story “Faster, America, Faster!,” we get some idea of what Gold means by “cinema in words.” Set on a speeding train, the story turns on three sets of characters: a group of Hollywood movers and shakers (including the mogul who has chartered the train), two African-American porters who both serve and comment upon them, and the train’s fireman and engineer. The movie mogul has promised the engineer a bonus if the train gets to Hollywood quickly, and so the engineer pushes the train beyond its capacity, with predictable results: it jumps the rails. A farmer with a sickle and a “worker,” complete with hammer, appear to begin the rescue of the passengers, and “the red morning star” appears.

However, as is common with modernist texts, this summary fails to give any sense of the story’s effect, and overemphasizes both the forced extended metaphor— “America is a private train crashing over the slippery rails of History. Faster, faster, America!” (*Anthology*, 141)— and the strained allegory

of the denouement. In fact, the narrative shifts abruptly and flexibly between and within scenes, montage-style. In one of the scenes in the luxury cars:

They were wasting life. They screamed, wrestled, frazzled, mused, rubbed, goosed and ate huge chicken and bacon sandwiches. An executive and an actress stole off into a stateroom. The others petted laughed, screamed, gobbled. They smeared mustard on each other. A dress was torn. The floor was cluttered with napkins, salad dressing, corks and cigarette butts. The radio yammered. The night flew by. Through the windows all the dark farmhouses, trees, rivers, flashed by like a cheap movie. The dark, old American fields roared with a mighty voice. There was a protest against this new thing. But the private train never stopped.

Haw, haw, let's serenade Dot and Pop.

No, let's tell the engineer to go faster, shrieked Gladys.

(*Anthology*, 144)

When the derailling occurs, the narrative retreats into a kind of morbid prose poem:

The world shot from a cannon in flame. Coney Island fireworks.
Crucifix pain.

Tidal wave, earthquake, last lonely screams of little children eaten by a giant. Snap and crack. Fade out. Then quiet. A bird sang in the sudden sweet gloom. There was a smell of roasted flesh. (*Anthology*, 146-7)

The story shows that while Gold presents his program for literature as a “realism,” his work often reveals a consistent openness to formal experimentation.

Gold’s most widely known work, the 1930 novel *Jews Without Money*, simultaneously celebrates the dynamic, energetic frenzy of the masses and foregrounds the material conditions which industrial urban poverty fostered. The novel begins with the streets:

I can never forget the East Side street where I lived as a boy.

It was a block from the notorious Bowery, a tenement canyon hung with fire-escapes, bed-clothing, and faces.

Always these faces at the tenement windows. The street never failed them. It was an immense excitement. It never slept. It roared like a sea. It exploded like fireworks.

People pushed and wrangled in the street. There were armies of howling pushcart peddlers. Women screamed, dogs barked and copulated. Babies cried. (13)

The streets, in Gold’s words, are “Excitement, dirt, fighting, chaos!” (14). The narrative voice is similarly chaotic: an unsettling combination of polemic, reportage and montage.

True to his manifesto, the novel serves a social purpose: Gold sketches a materialist history which foregrounds the dual nature of urban modernity, in the figures of the skyscraper and the tenement. “America is so rich and fat, because it has eaten the tragedy of millions of immigrants” (41). The narrator’s father recalls having seen a photograph in his native Romania:

It was called a skyscraper. At the bottom of it walked the proud Americans. The men wore derby hat and had fine mustaches and gold watch chains. The women wore silks and satins, and had proud faces like queens. Not a single poor man or woman was there; every one was rich. (102)

The image of the skyscraper, displayed in the village store selling Singer Sewing machines, is aptly answered by Gold's insistent evocation of the tenement.

Like Larsen, Gold concludes the novel with a salvation narrative. The abrupt end to *Jews Without Money*, like that of *Quicksand*, is not evidence of a failed realism, but of a commitment to different principles. Whereas the conclusion of *Quicksand* needs to be understood within the culturally imposed limitations on African-American modernity in the 1920s, the conclusion of *Jews Without Money* bespeaks Gold's commitment to the aesthetic principles of proletarian realism:

O worker's Revolution, you brought hope to me, a lonely suicidal boy. You are the true Messiah. You will destroy the East Side when you come, and build there a garden for the human spirit.

O Revolution, that forced me to think, to struggle, and to live.

O great Beginning! (309)

Gold's presentation of the beginning at the end, so to speak, breaks with realist convention by postponing the resolution of narrative tensions into the revolutionary future, in effect displacing them back into the world of lived social relations. In other words, Gold presents not a failed realism, but a

thoroughly modernist practice: changing those conventions in reaction to new conditions.

Examining American fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries— whether characterized as realist, naturalist, or modernist— as a literature of modernity offers a more flexible critical framework than that provided by other literary historical methods. Literary studies of modernism need to consider more varied, multiple valences. Sieglinde Lemke, for example, identifies four “aesthetic lines or trends” within modernism:

One is the highly experimental, iconoclastic avant-gardism that implicitly followed Ezra Pound’s dictum to “make it new.” . . . A second trend is to minimalism, the Bauhaus ethos that “less is more.” . . . A third trend is a realist aesthetic . . . [which] includes a politicized aesthetic that criticizes bourgeois attitudes, speaks on behalf of the proletariat, and envisions the liberation of the working class. . . . [The fourth trend,] a primitivist modernist aesthetic, is composed of art works in which formal and cultural differences are interrelated. (145)

Lemke’s schema is derived from art history, and as she suggests “is certainly not commonly accepted” in other disciplines. Yet, literary history, in separating the modernists from the merely modern, projects an image inaccurate in both its exclusivity and its homogeneity.

Literary historians of modernism might take as their inspiration, I suggest, Cary Nelson’s different set of goals:

to suggest the range of voices, styles, and discourses at work in the period, to point toward rather than wholly represent their

working practices, to provide possible entrances into their work, to raise interest in rather than settle the status of these [writers]. to identify [writing] that may be able again to do useful cultural work in our own time. And finally to propose a general reconsideration of the relations between [literature] and the rest of social life. (19)

In the case of American fiction between 1880 and 1930, this means reconsidering the relationship between literature and modernity, examining the impact the social changes encountered in the metropolis had on the narrative form, and the impact these narratives had on the discourses of urbanization.

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- "Designing Modernity: Urban Studies and American Fiction at the Turn of the Century." *Fifth Annual Conference of the American Studies Colloquium*, University of Washington, Seattle, May 28-30, 1997.
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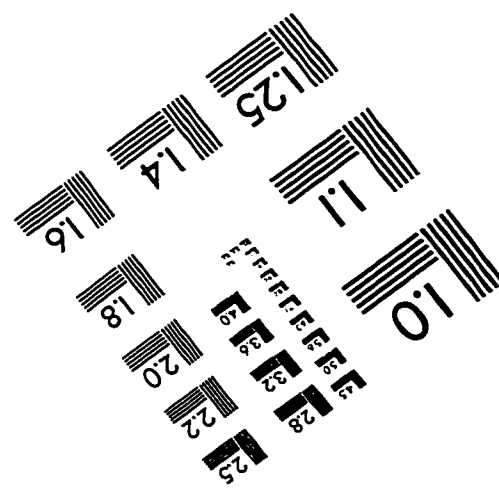
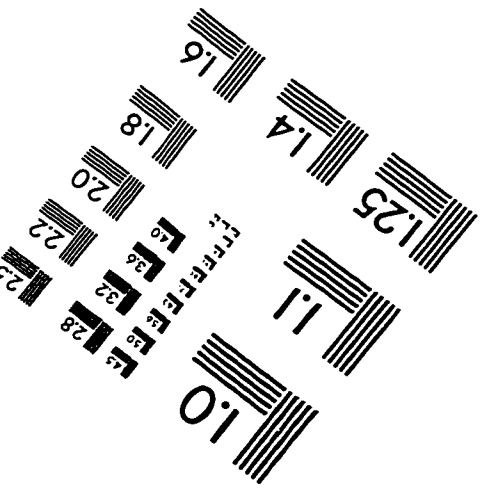
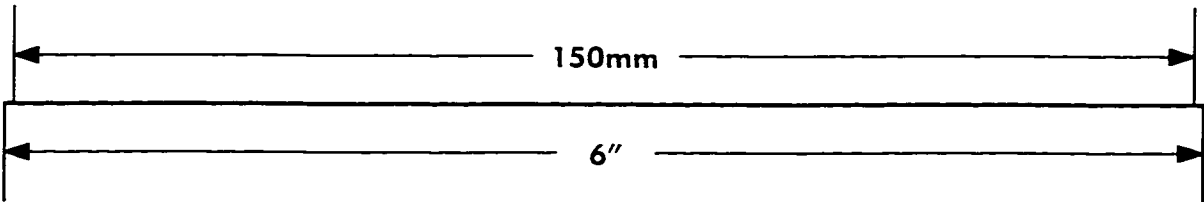
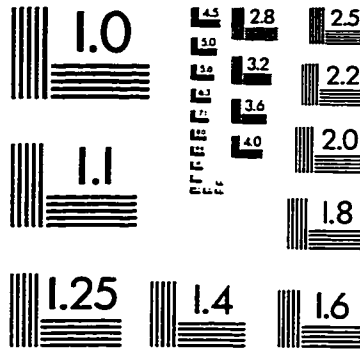
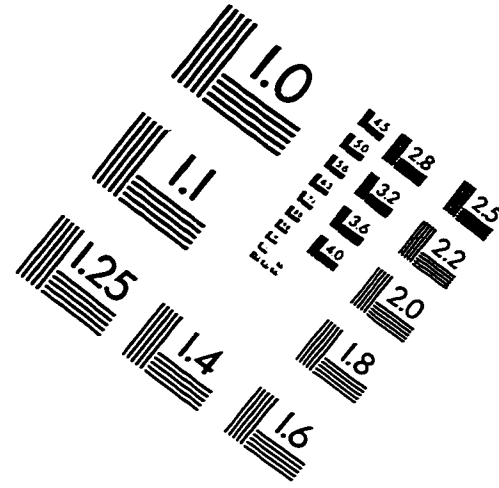
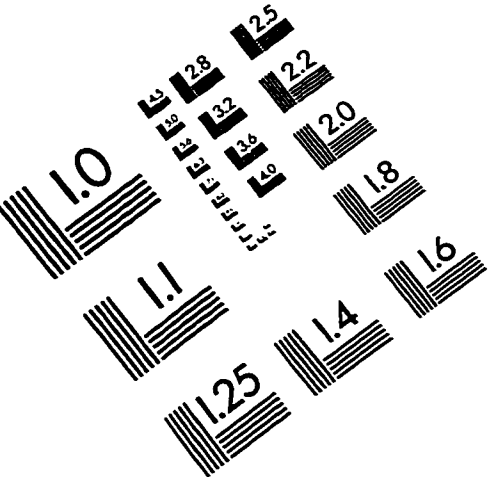
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