

**NEIGHBORHOOD NOVELS IN  
AMERICAN LITERATURE**

by

Monica Zaleski

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

Fall 2014

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by

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## ABSTRACT

The first urban capitals that emerged in the United States remain among the ranks today: Philadelphia, Boston, and New York. Novels that portray the development of neighborhoods within these cities comprise the focus of my dissertation during a crucial period of American literature that saw a push toward internationalism and a consequent re-imagining of what constitutes the American identity. As seats of the nation's economic and cultural production, nineteenth-century American cities became exponents of modernity and ubiquitous subjects of literary endeavor. An analysis of narrative methods and genre, *Neighborhood Novels in American Literature* traces numerous forms of writing the city, including travel accounts, journalism, and sociological studies, that authors incorporated into quintessential, and lesser known, city novels.

Walking narratives set in distinctive neighborhoods prove crucial to showing the adjustment to life in the big city. The Philadelphia novels of George Lippard and Frank Webb reveal how remarkably integrated the city is through an awareness of its social geography; the neighborhood alternately festers with greed, corruption, and scandal among its loftiest ranks and stands as a bastion of civility for an insurgent middle class during a period of social conflict that distinguishes this period of Philadelphia history. As antecedents to the social reform impulse evident in novels of realism at the end of the century, Lippard's *The Quaker City* (1844) and Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1858) have other patterns in common with their descendants. Narrative tours of Philadelphia, Boston, and New York dramatize and also lend eyewitness authenticity to their fictional retelling.

The eye of a tourist, a returned expatriate, a journalist, a literary magazine editor, and a musician, all guide the reader on walking tours throughout the expanding purlieus of Boston and New York, as well. Conceptualizing the state of American cities as transformational, rather than monumental, the novels of William Dean Howells, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and James Weldon Johnson also recognized that neighborhoods, defined by race and class, as well as geography, provided microcosms of culture central to what Henry James foresaw as “the dauntless fusions to come.” In Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), *An Imperative Duty* (1892), and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890); in Dunbar's *Sport of the Gods* (1901); in Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), migrants to and settlers in Boston and New York neighborhoods changed the cultural landscape of the city as much as those neighborhoods changed the lives of the characters themselves; this group of writers would find in the American cityscape the great untold story of the new century.

*Neighborhood Novels in America Literature* is also a study of genre. Adapting forms such as the travel narrative, the journalistic exposé, and the editorial commentary, “the neighborhood novel” promises to change our understanding of the evolution of the American form of the novel, as well as the fluid boundaries between fields as supposedly different as journalism and fiction, the arts and sciences.

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

Head bowed, at the shrine of noise, let me try to recall  
What building stood here. Was there a building at all?  
I have lived on this same street for a decade.  
—James Merrill

When we think of city neighborhoods we might picture apartment buildings lining adjacent and intersecting streets, which occasionally square off into parks, fountains, or commons. There would be local shops like a grocery, a laundromat, a bakery, a bank, a locksmith. Afternoons, the shouts of children signal the close of another school day. Has the neighborhood looked like this for decades? James Merrill reminds us that city neighborhoods are always poised in a state of transition; they seem to dwell in impermanence. Streets fall to disrepair, strained and sinking under the press of traffic. Back hoes drip with chewed up concrete and bristle with sticks of re-bar. Reconstruction of the city is ongoing. As fundamental as neighborhoods appear, they are perhaps best conceptualized by their impermanence. Like living languages, contingent upon the meanings from which they evolve: archaisms fall into disuse; neologisms popularize new concepts; slang evolves into formal speech; so too neighborhoods offer temporary sites for narrating the social story of urban habitats.

My examination of novels set in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York positions transitional neighborhoods as frontiers of migration and settlement, bringing a sense of

the local and familiar to environments often maligned for bringing out the worst in human nature. With population increases, fluctuations in real estate, and the incorporation of outlying neighborhoods into municipal jurisdiction stimulating a race for big city status in the nineteenth century, the city became a ubiquitous subject of literary endeavor and the quest of writers seeking to write the great American novel. The eternal regeneration of pocket communities stirred the imaginations of George Lippard, Frank J. Webb, William Dean Howells, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and James Weldon Johnson, who found their subjects in distinctive neighborhoods of particular cities. Whether generating sensational exposés, promoting a humanist agenda, or experimenting with aesthetic forms, these writers associated the city with novelty, reinvention, and growth. Their novels accommodated an increasingly mobile populous adapting to new and strange environments throughout the country and the world at large. My reevaluation of neighborhood narratives in city novels sidles along the discursive boundary lines separating city from country, natives from foreigners, and insiders from outsiders, with the focus on neighborhoods as locales of interregional exchanges among urban migrants in the context of a nation that prided itself on becoming more cosmopolitan and less rural. Viewed through the lens of a neighborhood, city novels foster cultural exchanges that signal the decline and rise of great American cities as the nation's cultural capitals.

In the nineteenth-century city novel, the deleterious effects of industrial capitalism presented a stratified society that has since become associated with city living: a disconnected elite, a complacent bourgeoisie, and a poverty-stricken underclass. Environmental influences of the industrialized city determined the fate and moral

dissolution of characters born into its various quarters. Chicago sociologist Robert Park called the city a laboratory for the scientific observation of human interaction and adjustment to the environment; he credited writers of fiction, like Emile Zola, “for our more intimate knowledge of contemporary urban life.”<sup>1</sup> Naturalist writers like Zola approached their city subjects as fully-formed, indifferent to human endeavor, and mechanistic. Such “realistic” views of cities left little power to individuals and the community to determine their conditions of existence. While Zola wrote about urban decline in Paris of the Second Empire, American writers viewed the rise of American cities as a means of exploring issues of national identity against an emerging pluralism that was modeled on the conception of a rapidly urbanizing America.<sup>2</sup> However, absorption into city life mediated by the neighborhood shows how porous these distinctions are. The neighborhood novels examined in this study readily adjust to endless reconfigurations of social space, as well as literary forms, proving that the domain of American literary history continues to be as flexible to the alterations necessary whenever geography intersects with social stories to make American life more habitable and humanistic, from William Bradford's telling of Plymouth plantation to the ceaseless adjustments that have transpired since.

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Robert E. Park, Ernest Burgess, and Roderick McKenzie, *The City*. (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1925), 3. This study extrapolates from Park's configurations of race discourse to a generalized and perhaps more inclusive understanding of urban interaction based on neighborliness.

<sup>2</sup> Carrie Tirado Bramen, *The Uses of Variety: Modern Americanism and the Quest for National Distinctiveness*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). Bramen's study responds to the seeming emphasis of nineteenth-century regional distinctiveness using her theory of the “urban picturesque,” to argue for the literary incorporation of inner-city ethnic enclaves into the national consciousness through popular media sources that emphasized urban aesthetics.

This study is set in the golden age of growth for the American city, which stretched from the 1850s to the early 1900s. As migrants from rural America and abroad flooded in, cities expanded outward. Anthony Trollope observed this trend on his tour of America in 1861. Cities swallowed up nearby locales connected to them “by railway, but separated by large spaces of open country.” He continues, “American cities are very proud of their population; but if they all counted in this way, there would soon be no rural population left at all.”<sup>3</sup> For example, Philadelphia's population surged after an act of consolidation in 1854 joined neighborhoods like Kensington and Southwark to the larger city.<sup>4</sup> In 1873, Charlestown, Brighton, and Roxbury became incorporated into the city of Boston.<sup>5</sup> The boroughs of Brooklyn, Manhattan, Staten Island, and Queens joined together to form the city of Greater New York in 1898.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, throughout the nineteenth century, the race for big city status in America was marked by attempts to exert control over rural hinterlands by annexing surrounding neighborhoods.<sup>7</sup> Trollope's hyperbole also proved a prophetic observation in the growing international significance of American urban planning. After the great London fire of 1666 inspired Christopher Wren to completely redesign Shakespeare's and Chaucer's London and as Haussmann embarked on the modernization of post-Revolutionary Paris in the 1830s, the United

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony Trollope, *North America*. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1861), 266.

<sup>4</sup> See William W. Cutler, *The Divided Metropolis: Social and Spatial Dimensions of Philadelphia, 1800-1975*, eds. William W. Cutler and Howard Gillette, Jr. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980) for an in-depth study of the causes and consequences of Philadelphia's Consolidation Act of 1854.

<sup>5</sup> Jim Vrabel, *When in Boston: A Timeline and Almanac*. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 194.

<sup>6</sup> James Trager, *The New York Chronology: The Ultimate Compendium of Events, People, and Anecdotes from the Dutch to the Present*. (New York: HarperResource, 2003), 256.

<sup>7</sup> William Cutler, *Divided Metropolis*, xv.

States became more concerned with the heritage and history written in its dominant cityscapes. Considering William Penn designed Philadelphia's grid in 1681, among Western civilizations' great metropolitan centers, American cities were beginning to mature. New York City adopted Penn's innovative street plan in 1811, while Boston continued its tangled sprawl late into the nineteenth century, with the gridded streets of the Back Bay (constructed through 1870s) being the closest approximation to grid planning in that most medieval of American cities. James Muirhead, who wrote the first American Baedeker in 1893, began his own travel memoir with a disclaimer that references to American civilization were based on the older communities, like New York and Philadelphia. Indeed, Muirhead claims, the student of history would find “how relative a term antiquity” is upon a visit to the old Eastern cities of the United States.<sup>8</sup>

My review of neighborhood growth patterns in exemplary American city novels of this period begins with a view of the antebellum days in Philadelphia. The second half of the nineteenth century marked a shift in representations of the city. In the wake of municipal consolidation emerged a fascination with exploring distinctive urban regions—fashionable promenades, back-alley tenements, neoclassical architecture, theaters, parks, gambling dens, and brothels. A precedent to such literary explorations, George Lippard's *The Quaker City* (1844)—the quintessential Gothic exposé of Philadelphia—rooted out the city's scandals and mysteries that pervaded all these types of regions. The dangers underlying Penn's neatly arranged streets—tales of innocent girls ruined, of criminals power-brokering with the elite—lurked around every corner, often indiscriminately in

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<sup>8</sup> James Fullerton Muirhead, *America The Land of Contrasts*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 4.

genteel quarters and the most destitute sections of the city. As a newspaper reporter and soon-to-be labor activist, Lippard hoped the novel would inspire social reform.<sup>9</sup> A bestselling novelist, he aggressively marketed *The Quaker City* in a preface to the 1849 edition. He touted the controversy the novel generated, which was alternately “cited as a Work of great merit” and “denounced as the most immoral work of the age.”<sup>10</sup> In an almost deliberate effort to position *The Quaker City* as a great city novel, Lippard declares his motives to present a screed against “the colossal vices and the terrible deformities, presented in the social system of this Large City in the Nineteenth Century.”<sup>11</sup>

The Philadelphia novels of Chapter 2 recreate urban social reality, anticipating one of the strongest impulses in late-nineteenth-century American literature. Philadelphia's reputation as the city of firsts includes the first bestselling big city novel presenting a city divided by race and class conflict. As a frontier during the gradual emancipation of slavery in the North, Philadelphia received the most rural migrants from bordering slave-holding states than any other northern or western city.<sup>12</sup> The denizens of Lippard's Monk Hall share their stories of inciting riots, burning churches and schools, and killing innocent civilians as casually as recounting ordinary weekend plans: “Why, you see, a party one Sunday afternoon, had nothin' to do, so we got up a nigger riot. We

<sup>9</sup> For more on Lippard's contributions to working-class politics via his journalism and the intersections with his fiction see Shelley Streeby, “Opening up the Story Paper: George Lippard and the Construction of Class,” *boundary 2* 24.1 (1997): 177-203. Accessed November 28, 2013, J-Stor.

<sup>10</sup> George Lippard, *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall: A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery, and Crime*. ed. David S. Reynolds (Amherst, Mass: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 1.

<sup>11</sup> George Lippard, *The Quaker City*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> Carter G. Woodson, *A Century of Negro Migration* (Lancaster, PA: The New Era Printing Company, 1918), 162.

have them things in Phil'delphy, once or twice a year, you know?"<sup>13</sup> These were typical events one could read about in the daily paper, but the riots occurred in the city's transitioning neighborhoods, spreading out to the commercial downtown from its southern and northern edges that were beginning to accommodate a new class of homeowners, a theme central to my discussion of Frank Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends* (1858). Traditionally, criticism surrounding Lippard's novel has focused on the effects of capitalism in re-creating a society stratified by class, whereas scholarship written about *The Garies* engages the novel's themes of interracial marriage, passing, and miscegenation. However, the critical inquiry into these powerful themes is boundless and passages elucidating the local life of city neighborhoods tend to be overlooked by scholars immersed in discussions of the triple constraint of race, class, and gender.

The same year George Lippard's Philadelphia novel appeared in book form, major filling of Boston's South Bay began.<sup>14</sup> In Henry James's words, "the concentrated Boston of history"—the Boston of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Longfellow—began its spread southward and westward.<sup>15</sup> The creation of two Boston neighborhoods during the second half of the nineteenth century signified a "new Boston" to James, who routinely enjoyed the pleasures of a stroll with William Dean Howells. During his tenure at *The Atlantic Monthly*, Howells and James ambled along the streets of Boston and Cambridge, discussing ideas for their stories, reading their work to one another, and debating the art

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<sup>13</sup> George Lippard, *The Quaker City*, 482.

<sup>14</sup> Jim Vrabel, *When in Boston*, 144.

<sup>15</sup> Henry James, *The American Scene* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), 245.

of novel writing.<sup>16</sup> Though Boston represented America's hallowed intellectual tradition, Howells's Boston writings, the focus of Chapter 3, introduce readers to a Boston of new acquaintance. Narrative rambles in *Suburban Sketches* (1871-1872), *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), and *An Imperative Duty* (1892) reflect a gradual discovery of the city on a neighborly level that mirrors the author's own encounter with, assimilation to, and eventual removal from the city. For Howells, Boston signified much more than the elite Back Bay, which had come to be a referent for the city at large—a Boston of high and lofty tastes.<sup>17</sup> Instead, Howells introduces the reader to a broader cultural geography: the north side of Beacon Hill, the Charlestown outskirts, the North and South End, the immigrant and middle class neighborhoods, the Commons, and sweeping vistas of the Charles River basin from the newly constructed Mill Dam Road. Real-estate values, particularly in Howells's and Webb's novels, externalize domestic virtues and purchase inhabitants a neighborhood pedigree. City life became the material of writers, who shaped literature about urbanization while the cities they explored shape them.

Van Wyck Brooks touted Howells as the consummate *flaneur*—a narrative mode that underlies to varying extents all the major authors featured in this study and contributes to its discussion of the myriad forms city writing took in its route to the novel.

Brooks recounts how the “touch-and-go” quality of New York amused and stirred

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<sup>16</sup> For his reminiscences of their Cambridge days see the Howells and James chapter in Van Wyck Brooks, *Indian Summer 1865-1915* (Boston: E.P. Dutton, 1940).

<sup>17</sup> The tendency to metonymize the city through its neighborhoods is a leitmotif throughout this study, but most explicitly discussed in Chapter 2 in regard to Boston. The Back Bay used as a signifier for Boston as a whole persists through several writings about the city, for example in a city sketch book by David McCord, *About Boston: Sight, Sound, Flavor & Inflection* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1948), the author writes, “Ask the stranger within our gates for Boston’s second name and he will probably reply Back Bay. It is queer how this alliterative tag for the most recent man-made land of the city has grown in popularity until it means far more than the tributaries of Commonwealth Avenue,” 67.

Howells: “A whole world of the new types for which he was always in search crossed his path in offices, in the streets, in the shops, clerks and bankers, promoters, editors, newspaperwomen and shop-girls, publishers, art students, visiting Southerners, self-made men from the West.”<sup>18</sup> Chapter 4 follows the footsteps of Howells from Boston to New York. It also follows the novelist's conflicted engagement with the various phases of city life through the “intra-urban walking tours” of Basil March in Howells's panoramic New York City novel, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890).<sup>19</sup> With Basil March, Howells pieces together the aesthetic and ethical concerns central to selling the city as literature. As a writer and a resident, March must position himself among the infinite variety of New York life. At the same time, Howells offers a critique of literary production that equated urban sketches with the destitute locales of the city, and implicitly, the multiform ways in which magazine writers contrived to obtain it. Contouring these locales through literary trends with special attention to how writers perceived them changes the discussion of city writing from systemic conceptions of the city organized or dictated by institutions to the more subtle, even strategic, adjustment of city dwellers that inheres in the natural process of neighborhood formation.

The northward expansion of literary neighborhoods proceeds uptown in Chapter 4 from the Lower East Side and Greenwich Village environs of Howells to the Tenderloin precinct of Paul Laurence Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson. Keeping with the theme of New York's early stages of gentrification together with the growing popular appeal of

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<sup>18</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, *Indian Summer*, 389.

<sup>19</sup> In *The Uses of Variety* and in several of her articles leading up to the book's publication, Carrie Tirado Bramen discusses “intra urban walking tours” as a narrative mode featured in popular periodical literature.

marginal groups, both Dunbar's and Johnson's Tenderloin novels follow the settlement of urban migrants in a neighborhood notorious for hosting popular entertainment. Thomas Morgan has previously paired Dunbar's *Sport of the Gods* (1901) and Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) to demonstrate how each novel dramatizes the "limited possibilities offered to African Americans in American social space."<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, removal to the city did little to erase stereotyped depictions of black Americans of the plantation tradition established by Reconstruction authors such as Joel Chandler Harris or Thomas Nelson Page. As a "location for black representation," black American life disintegrates "under New York's influence."<sup>21</sup> In both novels, goes the argument, black migrants misread the city as a refuge from the rural South.

To the contrary, my reading positions the Tenderloin as a viable social space, attracting artists, musicians, and writers promoting a modern image of city life and American culture. Finding community and sociability in the neighborhood and adapting to New York vis-a-vis the Tenderloin turns out to be a surprisingly effortless affair for both Johnson's narrator and the Hamilton family of Dunbar's novel. Dunbar and Johnson were aware of the city's reputation for affording individuals the security of anonymity; its indifference to one's origins; and its ability to swallow up one's past to confer the benevolent title of New Yorker. Benevolent is the right word to use because being a New Yorker was desirable. It conferred status upon the city's inhabitants: even a pauper living in New York can feel like a prince on the streets. The city's ability to absorb people from

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas L. Morgan, "The City as Refuge: Constructing Urban Blackness in Paul Laurence Dunbar's 'Sport of the Gods' and James Weldon Johnson's 'The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man,'" *African American Review* 38.2 (2004), 219. Accessed January 8, 2012, J-Stor.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas Morgan, "The City as Refuge," 220.

all walks of life was already a popular notion in the national consciousness when Mariana Van Rensselaer wrote a piece on “Picturesque New York” for *The Century* magazine in 1892, in which she asserted “the most characteristic trait of our city is the quick and thorough way in which it makes good New Yorkers of its immigrants, foreigners or Americans, and the tenacious way in which it retains its hold.”<sup>22</sup> Or, as the Hamilton family's first guide upon arriving to the city reassures them, “I'm never strange with anybody. I'm a N'Yawker, I tell you, from the word go.”<sup>23</sup> When Ms. Van Rensselaer claimed “the essence of picturesqueness is variety,” ethnic neighborhoods inform just a fraction of the New York aesthetic.<sup>24</sup> Her article spotlights sketches of Fifth Avenue, Union Square, Madison Square, Central Park, the Bowery, and the southernmost reaches of City Hall in various seasons and at different times of day, painting a colorful picture of a city that “all the world has taken possession of.”<sup>25</sup> Casual intimacy and an assumed openness foster the touch-and-go quality of the city that made it beguilingly adaptive to newcomers and a limitless source of inspiration for sketch-writers.

As Carrie Tirado Bramen has illustrated in her landmark study *The Uses of Variety*, scholars tend to associate keywords like “color” and “variety” primarily with New York's ethnic neighborhoods in their evaluation of urban sketches, which became a ubiquitous periodical genre at the end of the nineteenth century. Bramen demonstrates

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<sup>22</sup> Mariana G. Van Rensselaer, “Picturesque New York,” *The Century* 45.2 (December 1892), 173. Accessed through *Making of America*, Cornell University.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings*, eds. Shelley Fisher Fishkin and David Bradley (New York: The Modern Library, 2005), 360.

<sup>24</sup> Mariana G. Van Rensselaer, “Picturesque New York,” 174.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

that the literary appropriation of such terms mollified anxieties caused by immigration and urban poverty by making those quarters of the city quaint and charming, offering middle class readers a peek into Old World customs as if taking a tour of a foreign country. Sketches of the urban picturesque, through the medium of magazine literature, seized upon the defamiliarizing forces of urban space, its diverse immigrant populations, its crowded markets, its noisome quarters, and transformed them into “expected elements of modernity.”<sup>26</sup> However, readers' otherworldly fascination with “low others” and money-minded writers eager to capitalize on the appetite for the exotic and potentially dangerous terrain of the city entered into a supply-demand relationship that kept these expected elements of big city life to be pitied, or studied, or amused by, in the pages of magazines from the safe distance of the parlor room armchair.

Conceptions of local space in large cities have considerable implications in nineteenth-century literary history.<sup>27</sup> While William Dean Howells credited Zola's and Balzac's depictions of Paris with giving a comprehensive view of modern city life, he also defended the terrain of American fiction that was being charged with accusations of “narrowness.”<sup>28</sup> Committed to pursuing what he called “democracy in literature,”

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<sup>26</sup> Carrie Tirado Bramen, “The Urban Picturesque and the Spectacle of Americanization,” *American Quarterly* 52.3 (2000), 446. Accessed through Project Muse.

<sup>27</sup> In her discussion of the sociological underpinnings of the American city novel, Blanche Gelfant proposes that the idea of community is antithetical to the urban environment. “Social unanimity, characteristic of a community, cannot survive in a milieu in which various and conflicting cultural patterns exist side by side”(33). However, this claim does not account for the constant adjustment of neighborhoods or their integration within the larger fabric of the city. Too often, the idea of city neighborhoods is conflated with inner-city slums, anathema to the social cohesion of the urban community. This study seeks to destabilize such assumptions of city neighborhoods, even slum districts, as static entities. Blanche Housman Gelfant, *The American City Novel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954).

<sup>28</sup> William Dean Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1891), 141-142.

Howells promoted fiction writers who documented the customs, values, and everyday life of everyday people throughout the country's diverse regions.<sup>29</sup> Rural environments became central to regional writings such as Mary Murfree's novels of Tennessee mountain folk; Paul Laurence Dunbar's verses in the Southern dialect of plantation-era slaves; or Sarah Orne Jewett's stormy New England stories. Invoking regional distinctiveness had value worth a reader's attention and currency in the marketplace. A distinctively American genre, regional and local color writing became linked with rural environments.<sup>30</sup> Regional fiction attempted to question the common wisdom that cities were the locus of the nation's artistic, cultural, and intellectual life. However, in popular selling narratives that highlighted the local life of provincial communities, rural/urban paradigms persisted, resting on these assumptions even if seeking to undermine them.

Vignettes of city neighborhoods took various forms and had deep roots in travel literature and journalism. In turn, novelists redacted these forms into their fiction. Lippard responded to several textual modes and emerging traditions in *The Quaker City*. Translations of Eugene Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris* (1842-1843) incited a craze for the city-mysteries genre that “stimulated a taste for lurid exposés in local settings” that Lippard and his imitators hooked into.<sup>31</sup> After Lippard, Ned Buntline published *The*

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<sup>29</sup> William Dean Howells, *Editor's Study*, ed. James W. Simpson (Troy, NY: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1983), 96.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Brodhead, *The Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Richard Brodhead argues that in the second half of the nineteenth century, “a setting outside the world of modern development, a zone of backwardness where locally variant folkways still prevail” provided the “principal place of literary access in America in the postbellum decades”(116).

<sup>31</sup> Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, “The Novel in the Antebellum Book Market,” in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, eds. Leonard Cassuto, Clare Virginia Eby, and Benjamin Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 68.

*Mysteries and Miseries of New York* in 1848 and a Philadelphia version written by “An Old Amateur” came out that same year. George Foster followed with *New York in Slices* in 1849. These sensational explorations focused on the lowest strata and the most lurid activities of city neighborhoods with the zeal of a journalist chasing a story. *The Quaker City* also responded to touristic literature, particularly to Charles Dickens's *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842), and to other travel writers visiting from abroad such as Fanny Trollope, Frederick Marryat, and Harriet Martineau, with their views concentrated on old city and center city Philadelphia, which they characterized as provincial in comparison to London. Although literary critics prefer genres to be distinct for easy categorization and generalizations, an analysis of neighborhood narratives in city novels highlights how these forms blend and borrow from one another and yet in their incompleteness in creating a unified view of city life they affirm the arbitrariness of such distinctions.

By the end of the nineteenth century, scores of ambitious reporters and aspiring writers had dredged the city slums. Street urchins, ragpickers, and immigrant sweatshop workers in human-interest journalism or local color fiction dominated representations of city life. Journalists with literary aspirations, and writers with anthropological or philanthropic interests, play a supporting role in my study of how neighborhood change activates the literary imagination and vice versa. Jacob Riis's photojournalistic exposé of the Lower East led to the clearing of tenements, the creation of parks, and the implementation of sanitation and fire codes throughout New York City. Lincoln Steffens contributed his muckraking journalism to popular magazines like *McClure's*, while

attempting to write urban sketches of the low life for a periodical market already saturated with the form by the early twentieth century. A minor character in *The Sport of the Gods* named Skaggs does some investigative journalism of his own that eventually leads to the innocently imprisoned Berry Hamilton's release; however, the character occupies an ambivalent position among the Tenderloin regulars. As an insider he has unrestricted access to the neighborhood gossip. As a muckraker, the material he uses in his stories is highly salable and the sensational story gets his name printed in the bylines of the national press. Such newspaper anecdotes also demonstrate the strong ties between journalism and literary imaginings of the city that took shape in the minds of the group of writers studied here, all of whom asked questions about how to write the city, how to capture its immense proportions, and what elements of city life mattered most.

The task of writing the city took different avenues as cities themselves changed throughout the nineteenth century. Authors who lived and worked in the cities they wrote about took their material from their surroundings, constantly adapting and emending forms. My work builds on the framework of Carlos Rotella's *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature* (1998), which tells “the composite story of the postwar transformation of American Cities” through Chicago's Polish Triangle, Philadelphia's South Street, and Harlem, respectively in the neighborhood novels of Nelson Algren's *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1949), Jack Dunphy's *John Fury* (1946), and Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965), to name a few. The processes driving urban transformation evaluated in these novels—industrial decline, ghettoization, and gentrification—my project traces back to their nineteenth-century

antecedents to show how stories of neighborhood transformation restore a sense of community often overshadowed in discussions of urban literature without undermining the conflict and negotiation that such contact brought to the attention of the nation at large. In the literary imagination, neighborhood narratives contour city life on a humanistic level: whether depicted by casual strolls punctuated by incidental encounters with neighbors; romances with real estate actuated by fickle reversals of fortune; or incendiary conflicts precipitated by demographic change. The following case studies of Philadelphia's Southwark, Old City, and Center City; the South End and Back Bay of Boston; and New York's Lower East Side, Greenwich Village, and Tenderloin present, more than an urban surface in the novels which host them. They form a collection of impressions that invite the reader to stroll through an environment that unrelentingly challenged its writers to press the creative forms in which they chose to depict them.

## Chapter 2

### **A DISTRACTINGLY REGULAR CITY OF MYSTERIES**

When William Penn laid out the plan of Philadelphia in 1681 he could not have known the impact his grid design would have on shaping modern American cities. Neither could he have predicted how rapidly the real city would diverge from the one he imagined. Penn had envisioned a landscape of tidy farm estates surrounded by gardens and orchards, a bucolic purlieu free from the corrupting influences of commerce and a land of religious toleration. A plate published in London in 1683, titled *Portraiture of Philadelphia*, depicts wide streets, running parallel and perpendicular, with the Schuylkill and Delaware rivers forming the eastern and western boundaries and today's South Street and Vine Street, the northern and southern edges of the city. Its main thoroughfares, High Street (now Market), running east and west, and Broad Street, running north and south, divided the land into quadrants. Penn reserved the area where these streets intersected to be an open plaza perimetered by municipal buildings, which he called Central Square (today's City Hall). Originally named after prominent settlers, east-west streets were given the names of local trees. From south to north, they are: "Cedar (now South), Pine, Spruce, Walnut, Chestnut, Mulberry (now Arch), Sassafras (now Race), and Vine."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Mary Maples Dunn and Richard S. Dunn, "The Founding 1681-1701" in *Philadelphia: A 300 Year History*. ed. Russell F. Weigley. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1982), 7.

Numbered streets running north and south ran parallel to the rivers and intersected with east-west streets at right angles.<sup>33</sup>

In the life cycle of American cities, Philadelphia was an early bloomer, enjoying a series of firsts in its colonial and early Republic era, superseding Boston as “the Athens of America” and preceding New York as the first modern American city. In terms of population, Philadelphia had already achieved first city status by the onset of the 1800s.<sup>34</sup> By 1830 the population more than doubled, making it the fourth-largest city in the western world, and second in the United States.<sup>35</sup> From the 1830s to the 1860s, a time frame historian Sam Bass Warner designates America's first “big city” era, Philadelphia attracted workers, tourists, businessmen, diplomats, artists, and writers, many of whom documented their impressions of the city.<sup>36</sup> This period explains both the scope and the rubric of Philadelphia's place in American letters—an imagined and geographical nodal point that a cultural vanguard attempted to situate within a larger discussion of American manners, values, and customs in Western civilization. As with all centers of civilization, a founding myth needed to be established first. The myth of Philadelphia as has been presented in the opening paragraphs of this chapter begins with William Penn's creation of a planned city on a grid.

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<sup>33</sup> Mary Maples Dunn and Richard S. Dunn, “The Founding 1681-1701” in *Philadelphia: A 300 Year History*. ed. Russell F. Weigley. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1982), 1-32.

<sup>34</sup> Edgar Richardson, “The Athens of America.” in *Philadelphia: A 300 Year History*, 218. With a population of 67, 787 (including its suburbs of Southwark and the Northern Liberties) in 1800, Philadelphia was the biggest city in the United States.

<sup>35</sup> Russell Weigley, *Philadelphia: A 300 Year History*, 363. By 1860, Philadelphia had 565, 529 inhabitants.

<sup>36</sup> Sam Bass Warner, *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of its Growth*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), 49. “By 1860 the flood of change had so far run that Philadelphia had become something new to the world and new to America—a modern big city.”

As William Penn's "greene country towne"<sup>37</sup> grew into an industrial center, it became conventional among chroniclers to muse on the disparities that arose between the planned city and the real city that had grown and developed over time. However much the actual city diverged from Penn's idyllic land of religious toleration and gentleman farmers; however much it grew in wealth, population, and area; Philadelphia has always maintained a sense of its proportionality. The original plan was scaled to human proportions—the farmer, the merchant, the shopkeeper—as if designed to be walkable, and neighborly. The Philadelphia narratives here reviewed, support Carlo Rotella's observation that the neighborhood has been "the organizing principle of Philadelphia's social history."<sup>38</sup> As the physical expansion of the city outgrew Penn's original grid, readily recognizable neighborhoods would become incorporated into the geographical city as well as into imaginative renderings of the city. Metonymically, novels about Philadelphia's neighborhoods dramatized the anxieties of urbanization in more acute and shocking ways than whole cloth renderings offered in the boom of travel literature published contemporaneously. Readily recognizable neighborhoods in urban novels written during Philadelphia's big city era, particularly George Lippard's *The Quaker City* (1842-1843) and Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and their Friends* (1857), destabilized mythic conceptions of the city as a subject; no longer encouraging imaginative coherence, as conceived by travel writers, the novels emphasized the ruptures occurring

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<sup>37</sup> "Instructions of Wiliam Penn to the Commissioners for settling the colony, 30 7<sup>th</sup> Mo. 1681," Mary Maples Dunn and Richard S. Dunn, eds. *The Papers of William Penn, 1680-1684* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982, 121.)

<sup>38</sup> In *October Cities* Carlos Rotella has examined urban decay and renewal in Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York "neighborhood novels" set in the postindustrial city. This study focuses on the Philadelphia's antebellum period. Carlos Rotella, *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 119.

in these communities as signs of degeneration and harbingers of social change in the city at large. Philadelphia assumed its present form from Penn's grid design. Its mythic history began with its planned geography; however, the causes that lead to the incorporation of its outlying neighborhoods made Penn's "greene country towne" seem like a distant pastoral legend during the antebellum period.

From the 1830s through the 1850s social conflict in the seemingly settled city-on-a-grid provided writers with a convenient metaphorical framework to present their perspectives about the city they observed.<sup>39</sup> A sample of nineteenth-century travel writings and memoirs portray a quietly composed and genteel city, in keeping with its founding Quaker principles. On the other end, this period saw the publication of what is perhaps the first muckraking novel in American literature. George Lippard's *The Quaker City* (1843) was a crusading exposé of the city's vices and corruption. Fictionalizing scandals taken from real life, Lippard fused romance and mystery with newspaper reportage revealing the city as a network of anxiety and a site where those anxieties could be played out. If travel narratives showed a composed and quiet city, Lippard's city is an alienating place, where identity and personal responsibility are overcome by institutional forces. In *The Garies and their Friends*, Webb puts pressure on the limits of good civic conduct and neighborliness (social networks and practices that seem hopeless in Lippard's atomized world). Textual codes of the city in both novels are carried in the characters' clothes and deportment, chained up in secret letters, claimed as fact upon

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<sup>39</sup> Samuel Otter, *Philadelphia Stories: America's Literature of Race and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11. "Figurative play with the grid helped to structure literary responses to Philadelphia, as writers charted the gap between abstract and actual space." Samuel Otter most recently has observed analogies writers have made to Philadelphia's grid design.

fraudulent legal documents, or emblazoned in newspaper headlines. Both authors organize dramatic events against specific locations in transitional neighborhoods where the meanings of these textual codes break down. The form of the novel allowed both authors the flexibility to incorporate layers of textuality to illustrate the side-effects of urbanization that intrigued them. Their material, like the material of a flaneur came from the everyday life of the city around them. The changing social geography of Philadelphia has determined the form of its representation in imaginative fiction. An account of the events Lippard and Webb responded to will foreground a discussion of how Philadelphia was perceived by contemporary travel writers as a basis for comparison to how the city was being imagined in fiction.

What is generally agreed upon is that the gridiron filled in somewhat haphazardly from the 1830s to the 1850s, engendering distinct neighborhoods separated by occupation, class, and ethnicity. The Old City, clustering along the banks of the Delaware River, was the colonial mercantile center and the historic cradle of government and banking. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, physical expansion had spilled into Southwark, of Moyamensing county. The region that the Old City imbricated upon came to be known as the Cedar neighborhood, or the South Street corridor. Bound by Lombard to the north, Bainbridge to the south, the Delaware River to the east, and Broad Street to the west, this transitional zone joined the two very distinct neighborhoods.<sup>40</sup> Through the 1840s, prosperous merchants and bankers expanded westward along Market,

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<sup>40</sup> Emma Jones Lapsansky, *Neighborhoods in Transition: William Penn's Dream and Urban Reality* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994). For a full account of the historical incorporation of Southwark into Penn's grid design see Chapter 1: Space Defined: The Cedar Neighborhood and the Geography of Prestige.

Chestnut, and Walnut, to Broad Street, forming the modern Center City of fashionable shops and spacious row homes.<sup>41</sup> The Cedar neighborhood was the historic center of the black population.<sup>42</sup> But it was far from homogeneous, attracting Italian, German, and Irish immigrants. Regions north of Vine such as Kensington and Northern Liberties and south of South Street, such as Southwark and Moyamensing, retained the bulk of the city's immigrant populations, where they found employment in manufacturing jobs.<sup>43</sup> Outside of the city's political jurisdiction, these transitional communities were perceived as lawless and crime-ridden, mostly because of the incidents stirred up in response to the populations inhabiting them. City authorities responded by asserting administrative control over these neighborhoods; however, the novels of Lippard and Webb reveal that the hostilities emanating from these contact zones proceed from a dominant narrative of what Philadelphia ought to be, not what it actually was becoming. For example, in Webb's novel, Philadelphia's reputation as being a peaceful, residential city compelled the Garies to migrate there from their Georgia plantation; however, as a mixed-race family they are unwelcome in their neighborhood and this has devastating consequences for their friends and neighbors living in Southwark and the Cedar neighborhood. Whereas plot lines inspired by local news stories became a motive for Lippard's imaginative renderings of the city, most notable travel writings of the day glossed over them, probably because travel writers avoided these neighborhoods.

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Baldwin and J. Thomas, *A New and Complete Gazetteer of the United States*. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1854), 909.

<sup>42</sup> W.E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1899), 58.

<sup>43</sup> Samuel Otter, *Philadelphia Stories*, 132-133.

During this period a rash of mob violence, race riots, and church burnings broke out in Philly's outlying neighborhoods, as well as in its core. In August 1834, an argument between a group of black and white youth over the course of several days in the Cedar neighborhood escalated into a race riot. A group walked south on Seventh Street to Moyamensing armed with bats and bricks, attacking innocent blacks in the streets and destroying their property. On the final day of these brutal skirmishes, whites leveled a small black church. Law enforcement officials eventually arrived on the scene, but it was too late. Anti-slavery agitation also increased in Philadelphia after 1838, when the state legislature made being white a requirement to vote. In May 1838, nationally prominent abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison, Angelina and Sarah Grimke and Maria Chapman gathered in Philadelphia for three days of lectures and events to celebrate the opening of Pennsylvania Hall, the movement's new headquarters on Sixth Street and Haines.<sup>44</sup> A symbol for the abolitionist movement, the handsome building did not survive long. Anti-slavery propaganda roused so much resentment among the masses that on the final evening of the event, the building was burned to the ground. Such acts marked the city as contested territory in divisive national debates.

Indeed arson and street riots were so prevalent in the ensuing decade that Warner writes “any year in the early 1840s could have been the year of prolonged rioting”: 1844 proved to be a banner year.<sup>45</sup> By that time the “Native American” political party crystallized, advocating a longer a naturalization process for foreign nationals, positions

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<sup>44</sup> For a full account of these riots, see Sam Bass Warner. *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of its Growth* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), 128-130.

<sup>45</sup> Warner, *The Private City*, 143.

in public office restricted to citizens born in the United States, and a Protestant version of the Bible in public schools.<sup>46</sup> Demonstrations turned into street fights and Catholic church burnings among rival factions of nativists and immigrants in Kensington and Southwark. Local fire brigades, notorious for accepting bribes, exacerbated the damage, protecting some houses and letting the flames consume others if they sympathized with the arsonists. Structure fires, damage to personal property, scores dead and thousands injured proved that municipal authorities could not effectively suppress the urban warfare taking place in zones beyond their jurisdiction and attested to the need for an expanded city government.

The riot years in Philadelphia led to an act of consolidation in 1854. Penn's city of two square miles "joined with the six boroughs, nine districts, and thirteen townships surrounding it, becoming a jurisdiction of 129 square miles," including the closest neighborhoods to the original city center, the Cedar neighborhood and Southwark.<sup>47</sup> A unified police force, fire department, and public schools would provide their services evenly throughout the districts, supported by a consistent tax code. Ward districts were redrawn in an effort to standardize political representation.<sup>48</sup> Real changes in how the city was mapped and administered during the second half of the nineteenth century came from collisions in Philly's preconsolidation neighborhoods. The stories that emerge from these contact zones tell of the city's unstable social conditions. Emanating from a dominant narrative of Philadelphia's residential appeal and national historic significance,

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, 144.

<sup>47</sup> Samuel Otter, *Philadelphia Stories*, 137.

<sup>48</sup> William Cutler, Jr., *The Divided Metropolis*, 9-11.

in a nation of cities, the Philadelphia we read about in this time period is polarized: a city of neighborhoods in a land of contrasts.

### **Philadelphia's Visitors**

During the big city era, Philadelphia hosted notable diplomats, writers, and politicians. What they saw, a clean and quiet domesticated city had already become an established trope in earlier writings (and persisted in the rhetoric of histories, travelogues, and memoirs through the nineteenth century). However, in just a couple of years two Philadelphia novels shattered these genteel conceptions. Written in the turmoil of the city's riot years, George Lippard's *The Quaker City* (1842-1843) and Frank Webb's *The Garies and their Friends* (1857) re-enact the most shocking acts of violence and corruption the city had seen on its streets. The neighborhood settings localize the dramatic action of the stories so they appear as momentous disruptions to the cultural status quo. Travelogues affirmed the city's coherence by circumscribing specific locales that became synecdochal equivalents for the how city as a whole was imagined. They pose a striking contrast to the local life of the Philadelphia described by Lippard and Webb. In reviewing travel narratives about the social and literary life of Philadelphia from the 1830s through the turn of the century, neighborhoods alternately designate a city of discriminating tastes and insipid moral platitudes, a private city and one that is “distractingly regular.” Some neighborhood narratives portray how remarkably integrated the city was. Some, how narrow and sectarian its denizens. As a form, however, travel narratives and memoirs set up these binaries against a static portrait of Philadelphia.

The most notable writers of the day passed through Philadelphia. Their memoirs and travelogues framed sites of the city still recognizable today: the old State House and Constitution Hall in neat Federalist brick; Classical temple of commerce—The United States Bank—in touchable marble; tree-lined sidewalks and row homes; a collection of cobbled churches; public squares with shady greens and fenced walkways: readers fancy that they are peeking into a doll house city with the parti-wall swung open. Improvements in infrastructure and the growth of cultural institutions typify the city's early advances. Nineteenth-century writers noted Philadelphia's distinct modernity: several daily newspapers, a municipal water system, theaters, an art school, a medical school, a scholarly society, and numerous hospitals and missions. Together with its residential appeal, Philadelphia looked like an advertisement for good urban living. This was the Quaker City: the picturesque antebellum Philadelphia that had bloomed early and appeared to have settled early into comfortable domesticity.

Philadelphia was always a popular layover travel writers on their grand tours of America. Especially through the 1830s and 1840s, writers from abroad visited the United States and published their impressions of American scenery, people, and institutions. With Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835) as the definitive intellectual work on the United States, writers such as Frances Trollope, Harriet Martineau, Captain Frederick Marryat, and Charles Dickens followed an itinerary that was becoming ever more standardized as the genre increased in popularity. As they passed through the Quaker city, they observed the outlying countryside with its natural wonders: the Wissahickon Creek ragged and wild, Fairmount Gardens neatly landscaped with walking

paths and gazebos punctuating lookout points, the elegant Waterworks building edging the Schuylkill. The city proper received notice for its banking and government buildings, its gridded streets, and its blocks of row homes. Philadelphia's cleanliness, quietness, and composed society became standard motifs in travelogues.

The writings of a Russian diplomat named Paul Svinin in 1811 attest to the neat and orderly appearance of the residential neighborhoods: “On either side of the street are sidewalks, lined in some places with...trees which offer heavy shade in the summer...There is no city in the world where the inner and outer cleanliness of houses is kept up to such an extent; this cleanliness makes up completely for the monotony of the architecture.”<sup>49</sup> Svinin's touristic observations are notable because they present an early example of what would become a persistent vocabulary in later travel writings about the city.

Intertextual references among nineteenth-century travelogues suggest these writers were reading each other's works in addition to reading the city. Their impressions, as well as narrative approach became standardized. Writers described their transport; the first views of the city, which was “handsome” but “unremarkable”; they described walking the streets with “stiff regularity”; their “wholesome” “cleanliness”; and the “quietness” of a staid and self-satisfied society. While these motifs about the general qualities of Philadelphia are unsurprising, what is revealing is the extent to which travel writers believed they had the city figured out. A postage stamp portraiture emerged from its open grid, easily navigated and predictable to the point of weariness.

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<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Lapsansky, *Neighborhoods in Transition*, 53.

The city plan appeared unimaginative and monotonous to many foreign travelers. Fanny Trollope in the controversial popular seller, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), wrote, “you have nothing to do but to walk up one straight street, and down another, till all the parallelograms have been threaded.”<sup>50</sup> Just one year later Scottish author, Thomas Hamilton, condescended that the grid's “rigid and prosaic despotism of right angles and parallelograms” compelled in the author “a silent but prolonged yawn.”<sup>51</sup> British naval officer, writer, and friend of Charles Dickens, Captain Frederick Marryat wrote that the first impression on arriving to Philadelphia, is that it is “Sunday: everything is so quiet, and there are so few people stirring.”<sup>52</sup> Dickens must have read the accounts of the travelers that preceded him. He found the plan so “distractingly regular,” that “he would have given the world for a crooked street.”<sup>53</sup> Thirty years after his mother's visit, Anthony Trollope repeated the trend. He found the “right-angled parallelogramical city...odious” preferring “a street that is forced to twist itself about,” like the ones he walked and wrote about in his own London town.<sup>54</sup> These writers conjured an antithesis to Philadelphia's toy box appeal by invoking the grid: the dialectical inverse of its patterned plan was, they seemed to say, rigid, parochial, and narrow, and this reflected an insular, sectarian society. What's interesting is that their language and observations seem stuck in affirming the textual tradition rather than

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<sup>50</sup> Frances M. Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, Vol. II (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (London: Whittaker, Treacher & Co., 1832), 79.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Hamilton, *Men and Manners in America*, Vol. I (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1833), 337.

<sup>52</sup> Frederick Marryat, *A Diary in America with Remarks on its Institutions* (New York: Wm. H. Colyer, 1839), 79.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation* (Carlisle, Mass: Applewood Books, 1850), 67.

<sup>54</sup> Anthony Trollope, *North America*, 66.

actually scrutinizing the local life of the city, something that the novels accomplish by penetrating the grid at street level.

These travelers observed the manners and society of the country and sought to return to their island kingdoms with an explanation of the American people and their progress. Their descriptions of Philadelphia were not particularly flattering. In her memoirs, prominent lecturer, essayist, and proto-sociologist, Harriet Martineau reflected on the custom of middle class ladies to be shielded from what she saw as the nation's foremost social problem: slavery. Ladies she visited with in New York and Philadelphia, she noticed, pretended not to know of the race riots plaguing some districts of the cities they lived in. She saw this willful ignorance as emanating from rigid class distinctions among the city's neighborhoods. For example, inquiring into the reasons as to why ladies who lived on Chestnut Street did not associate with the ladies who lived just a few blocks north, on Arch Street, Martineau ironically repeats an anecdote given her: One of her Philadelphia acquaintances, "declared it was from the Arch Street ladies rising twice on their toes before curtseying, while the Chesnut Street ladies rose thrice."<sup>55</sup> Martineau knew that the origins of these idiosyncratic social cues, of course were class based, and that familiar antagonisms between new and old money could be traced to the streets they occupied, "the fathers of the Arch Street ladies having made their fortunes, while the Chesnut Street ladies owed theirs to their grandfathers."<sup>56</sup> Captain Marryat also emphasized the narrowness of Philadelphia's social sets in his travel memoir *Diary in*

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<sup>55</sup> Harriet Martineau, *Society in America, Vol. II* (New York: Saunders and Otley, 1837), 173.

<sup>56</sup> Harriet Martineau, *Society in America*, 173.

*America* (1839). Like Martineau, he noted that families a doorstep away kept separate from each other from aristocratic pretense, concluding, “that in no city is there so much fuss made about lineage and descent; in no city are there so many cliques and sets in society.”<sup>57</sup> To London writers such as Martineau and Marryat, Philadelphia seemed rooted to the values of its upscale residential core—metaphorically grafted onto the grid in their travelogues as exclusive and sectarian.

From another perspective, Philadelphia's reputation of settled comfort was seen as an admirable feature, particularly after decades had elapsed and the nation's urban centers became associated with crime, poverty, and filth. No less than cities like New York, Boston, and Chicago, Philadelphia experienced the gross consequences of urbanization, but commentators always returned to the rubric of the quiet proportional city as a basis for comparison. They seemed to be reading the guide books rather than the city itself, as if the descriptive potential of the city had been depleted after the 1830s, and the guide books that came after this period merely derivative. Take for example Lady Duffus Hardy's naïve gloss of the city's residential conditions in 1881: “There are no overcrowded quarters here, no narrow courts or gloomy alleys, no tall tenement houses.”<sup>58</sup> This was fifty years after Thomas Hamilton confessed, “You see here no miserable and filthy streets, the refuge of squalid poverty.”<sup>59</sup> It's as if the city had frozen in time, or put another way, fixed in text. As can be extrapolated from Martineau's account of the city's genteel residential core, indeed as the locales these travel writers

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<sup>57</sup> Frederick Marryat, *A Diary in America*, 80.

<sup>58</sup> Lady Duffus Hardy, *Through Cities and Prairie Lands: Sketches of an American Tour* (New York: R. Worthington, 1881), 13.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas Hamilton, *Men and Manners in America*, 338.

routinely visited suggest, the more imperiled neighborhoods outside the center of the city were rhetorically, if not physically avoided.

By the twentieth century when sensational exposés of the nation's cities filled the columns of newspapers, muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens gave Philadelphia an enduring subtitle, “Corrupt and Contented,” in a series of investigative articles written for the *McClure's* (collected and published in book form in 1904 as *The Shame of the Cities*). Steffens contended that civic corruption cut through all socioeconomic classes. So comfortable, so contented, was the populace in this “pure” “city of homes,” the quest for progress and change seemed hopeless. Henry James might have read Steffens's contributions to *McClure's* during his travels in America; however, unlike Steffens, the expat novelist and literary critic continued to promote Philadelphia's contentment with contraction. Like Marryat, he characterized Philadelphia by the comportment of its aristocracy: “Philadelphia, manifestly, was beyond any other American city a *society*, and was going to show itself as such...settled and confirmed and content.”<sup>60</sup> Rather than the expanding waistline of Tammany bribes fed by New York's constant taking in of outsiders (i.e., its open-armed and open-pursed reception of immigrants), or Boston's showcasing (i.e., podium pounding) its unattainable and unassailable Puritanism, Philadelphia seemed prepossessed of its runner-up status among the nation's more prominent urban cities. In *The American Scene* (1907), James illustrates. He pointed out that, curiously, Philadelphia was one of the large American cities that “didn't *bristle*” – to its credit and its genius. Unlike New York, where the analyst must brace himself to make

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<sup>60</sup> Henry James, *The American Scene*, 277.

sense, unity, and coherence out of non-uniformity, Philadelphia possessed “the very note of homogeneous.”<sup>61</sup> Even “Boston was conceivable as a subject of mutation.”<sup>62</sup> Not so Philadelphia. Supine, rather than eager, grasping, or pushing with tense anxiety, from James's point of view, Philadelphia had achieved an acute and satisfied veneer antedating the grimier side-effects of modernity that it justifiably evinced no compulsion to move on from. James's commentary elided engaging with the dark side of the city's political life. If the city was a picture book, its exhibition, “prohibitively,” he writes, would be “the exhibition of private things, of private things only, and of a charmed contact with them.”<sup>63</sup> Henry James could not overestimate the importance of kinship and bloodline in asserting the city's merits. Finding in New York excessive motley and the pandemonium of unchecked growth; finding in Boston a Puritanical striving for achievement and civic service; Henry James lauded Philadelphia's Quaker preference for moderation. He saw this “backward extension,” as “the very making of Philadelphia.”<sup>64</sup> James ratifies the rhetorical commitment to keeping Philadelphia a quaint, historic town, with a polite society; however, he also alludes to its darker side:

The place, by this revelation, was two distinct things—a Society, from far back, *the society I had divined*, the most genial and delightful one could think of, and then parallel to this, and not within it, nor quite altogether above it, but beside it and beneath it, behind it and before it, enclosing it as in a frame of fire in which it still had the secret of keeping cool, a proportionate City, the most incredible that ever was, organized all for plunder and rapine, the gross satisfaction of official appetite, organized

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<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, 282.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, 278.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, 279-280.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, 280.

for eternal iniquity and impunity...it positively added the last touch of colour to my framed and suspended picture.<sup>65</sup>

James's imaginative conception of Philadelphia conspicuously omits commentary on social hardship, but acknowledges that the city managed to balance “the way in which sane Society and pestilent City, in the United States, successfully cohabit, each keeping it up with so little fear or flutter from the other...as a thorough good neighboring of the Happy Family and the Infernal Machine.”<sup>66</sup> With the contrivances of allegory, euphemism, and rhetorical redirection to its Quaker origins, its symmetrical grid, and its aristocratic society, Philly's touristic, travel, and historical commentary provided writers opportunities for ironic associations with the city. However, while obliquely acknowledging the city's corruptive forces, they tended to keep the grosser elements associated with the city just below the surface of their picturesque projections.

Like Henry James, some nineteenth-century travel writers did apprehend the paradox of the city's grid and tempered its dead-level regularity with the disconcerting effects it evoked. Possibly in response to Mrs. Trollope's impressions, Dickens conveyed a sense of Philadelphia's gloom. She first sketched a view of the United States Bank that Dickens' description of the same site echoes ten years later:

This darkness, this stillness, is so great, that I almost felt it awful. As we walked home one fine moonlight evening from the Chestnut Street house, we stopped a moment before the United States Bank, to look at its white marble columns by the subdued lights said to be so advantageous to them; the building did, indeed, look beautiful; the incongruous objects around were hardly visible, while the brilliant white of the building, which by daylight is dazzling, was mellowed into fainter light and softer shadow.

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<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, 283.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*, 283-284.

While pausing before this modern temple of Theseus, we remarked that we alone seemed alive in this great city; it was ten o'clock, and a most lovely cool evening, after a burning day, yet all was silence.<sup>67</sup>

The city was modern but disconcertingly vacant, as if the institutions built to organize it had actually consumed the life within it. As the city went beyond its human scale, it began to be imagined in terms of its impersonal and bureaucratic institutions—its banks, colleges, prisons—structures that delimit, define, and sometimes hinder individual progress. The streets, homes, neighborhoods, its people, present a remarkable absence in representing the city's rapid growth. Arriving to his Philadelphia lodgings on Chestnut Street late at night, Dickens glimpsed across the street a stately columned building that possessed a “mournful, ghost-like aspect, dreary to behold.”<sup>68</sup> The writer was nonplussed the next morning to see that even in the broad light of day, the “door was still shut tight,” and “the same cold, cheerless air prevailed.”<sup>69</sup> He observed the monument vacant within, and unpeopled all around standing there, right in the heart of Old City. Dickens well knew of the financial crisis that closed several U.S. banks during the Panic of 1837. By 1841, just one year prior to his visit, The Second United States Bank in Philadelphia had closed its doors and liquidated all its assets. In Dickensian euphemism, this was the “Great Catacomb of investment” and its closing had “cast a gloom on Philadelphia.”<sup>70</sup> For a writer like Dickens, Philadelphia possessed a mixture of unassuming Quaker piety on the surface and shadowy inaccessibility that made it an appealing subject of literary

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<sup>67</sup> Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of Americans*, 89.

<sup>68</sup> Charles Dickens, *American Notes*, 67.

<sup>69</sup> Charles Dickens, *American Notes*, 67.

<sup>70</sup> Charles Dickens, *American Notes*, 67. The very title of Dickens' travelogue was a play on the worthlessness of unbacked American currency.

endeavor. Between artful hyperbole, terse irony, a documentarian impulse, and ever earnest humanitarianism, *American Notes for General Circulation* readied the nation's city writers to deliver a rebuke and imaginatively circumscribe what was uniquely urban in America to the literary world. Philadelphia, with its tessellated geography, was the place to do it.

One might have assumed that the inventor of the great Boz would have ventured further in creating colorful sketches of Philadelphia and its characters; however, the travelogue would not be the form in which to do it. Neither would Dickens's outsider status facilitate easy access to this “distractingly regular” private city of mysteries. A scant and rather oblique two pages of *American Notes* relays Philadelphia as Dickens saw it during his brief visit, while the rest of the lengthy chapter describes his impressions of Eastern State Penitentiary in grim detail. Dickens thrust the prisoners, their crimes, and the inhumanity of Philadelphia's innovative penal system on display to give his readers a cell block view of the city's miseries. While literary Philadelphia had awaited Dickens' visit with rapt anticipation, the famed writer left with a compromising depiction. Appropriating and revising Fanny Trollope's account, however, the author who had exposed the dehumanizing forces of urbanization in London evoked similar thematic possibilities in his descriptions of the Quaker City.

As working writers living in the city and engaged in larger conversations of the nation's literary and cultural life, Edgar Allan Poe and George Lippard responded to Dickens' incantations of Philadelphia, and to the problem of narrating modern cities in

general. Poe positively reviewed Dickens' *Sketches by Boz* (1836), admiring the author's use of the sketch-writing as a form to unify a subject as unwieldy and vast as the everyday life of everyday people in London. From Dickens he borrowed a narrator like Boz, easily passing through the crowds of London unobserved, threading through its patchwork districts, and recording his impressions in short, seemingly slap-dashed vignettes. The de-centered narrative perspective became established as a narrative mode and an urban form in Poe's "Man of the Crowd" (1840).

A meandering narrator's route through crowded city streets evokes the alienating effects that became associated with major cities in the Western world. Cities became overwhelming, mysterious, and dangerous entities in the popular mind—repositories of fear and repressed anxieties attendant on an increasingly mobile culture flowing through regions of striking geographic and demographic discontinuity. Lippard's Philadelphia novel uses a similar narrative approach grounded in traversing the city's neighborhoods. These scenes assembled into the pamphlet novel incorporated the textual richness of Philadelphia's urbanization: Lippard's appropriation of the city's newspaper reportage and its magazine industry in *The Quaker City* layered Philadelphia's broadly familiar guidebook appeal with political disorder and social chaos happening on the local level. His insurgent rhetoric appropriated the strategies of sensationalism in the press to expose reform measures as feckless in the novel. Popular political movements such as abolitionism, religious strife, and race riots inserted into *The Quaker City* expressed a breach in the representation of Philadelphia, and of modern cities in general, from the picturesque scenery of guide books earlier in the nineteenth century. From planned order

to increasing chaos, the social and geographical expansion of Philadelphia paved the way to literary renderings of American cities as sites of amorphous morality.

### **From City Sketches to the Philadelphia Novel**

Poe began a job as assistant editor and contributor to *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* in 1837.<sup>71</sup> The Philadelphia-based magazine aimed for a widespread audience and so printed topical material on a variety of subjects. As a working writer, Poe conceded to contribute assignments on subjects ranging from interior décor to road construction and the benefits of wood as a building material. In 1840, he assumed an editorial position with *Graham's Gentleman's Magazine*, formed when Philadelphia publisher George Rex Graham bought Burton's magazine. The new magazine achieved national literary brilliancy according to historian of American magazine literature, Frank Luther Mott.<sup>72</sup> With Poe's name on the front cover, the first edition of *Graham's Magazine* published "The Man of the Crowd" to a subscription list that reached far beyond Philadelphia's borders.

Starting in the 1830s, Philadelphia publishers like *Lippincott's*, *Godey's*, and *Graham's* sold magazines nationally and competed with houses in New York and Boston for subscribers, filling their columns with popular politics, travel sketches, occasional

<sup>71</sup> Kenneth Silverman, *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991). Biographer Kenneth Silverman describes the relationship between Poe and his boss as an inherent mismatch. The magazine's founder was, "Bluff, worldly, and money-minded," and Silverman concludes, "Burton made an unlikely colleague for Poe" (142). The magazine was not entirely suited to Poe's literary tastes, "In addition to the standard menu of poems, fiction and essays, it gave special attention to sporting life, offering articles on sailing, cricket, or hunting to appeal to men-about-town" (143).

<sup>72</sup> Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines 1741-1850 vol. I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 344.

pieces, poetry, and fiction. According to Mott, during the 1840s Philadelphia monthly magazine circulation exceeded all other cities. Sketches of literary miscellany garlanded the columns of these magazines. Critics of periodical literature have surveyed the generic distinctiveness of antebellum literary sketches, characterizing the form as a mediator of modernity, part of “the cultural processes that were already replacing the centered, idealized observer of a stable, objectively known world with a decentered (transient), observing subject of flitting images and fleeting moments.”<sup>73</sup> Urban sketches, in particular, narrated by a flaneur figure increasingly made American cities exponents of modernity. The appropriation of the flaneur figure was “a reaction against the antiurban romanticism” prevalent among New England writers who advocated self-reliance, communion with nature, and emancipation of spirituality under the rubric of an expansive America of infinite wilderness.<sup>74</sup> To the major literature of Emerson, Thoreau, and Hawthorne, urban sketches added the unfathomable city and tied American urban locales to broader, cosmopolitan cultural imaginings of the nation. As Kristie Hamilton and Dana Brand have illustrated, the American strain of flaneurie had its European antecedents (as well as American predecessors such as Irving's Diedrich Knickerbocker). However, Poe's “The Man of the Crowd” has become the veritable touchstone theoretically and historically linked to the archetypal figure. Charles Baudelaire, one of Poe's first French translators, first compared the story's narrative mode to the flaneur, a detached but impassioned observer who relays the experience of modern life on his

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<sup>73</sup> Kristie Hamilton, *America's Sketchbook: The Cultural Life of a Nineteenth Century Literary Genre* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998), 138.

<sup>74</sup> Dana Brand, *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

ambles through the city.<sup>75</sup> The story challenges assumptions about a provincial antebellum America by infusing the illimitable interpretive possibilities associated with narrating the modern city. If Poe's story—a series of fleeting sketches collected by a meandering narrator on his course through a city at all hours of the day and night—became an allegory for a new urban subjectivity, Lippard's use of this narrative approach in *The Quaker City* positions Philadelphia as an early setting for the modern American city novel. A narrative perspective that refuses a totalizing conception of the city, unlike for example the twentieth-century Chicago of Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* or Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, convincingly expresses the literary impulse to express the essential meaning of city life—one that is discontinuous, dynamic, and constantly evolving—one that exchanges the static framing of travel literature for the impressionistic effects of a series of discrete moments accomplished through perambulatory sketches.

As an editor, Poe was no stranger to the popular sketch form.<sup>76</sup> He had read and reviewed Nathaniel Parker Willis' London sketches for the *New York Mirror*, which were collected and published as *Pencilings By the Way* (1839). He also reviewed Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes* (1837) for the *Southern Literary Messenger*. In “How to Write a Blackwood Article” (1838), he parodied the vogue for sketch writing in a satirical meta-commentary on the form. After consulting with the editor about “the chief

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<sup>75</sup> The story was first translated by Baudelaire in his *Nouvelles Histoires Extraordinaires* in 1856. He compares the convalescent narrator to Constantine Guys, whom he typifies as a flaneur in *The Painter of Modern Life* 1863. Walter Benjamin's essay “The Flaneur” elaborates on this definition and revises it in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.”

<sup>76</sup> Poe reviewed Dickens' *Sketches by Boz*: “Review of Watkin's Tottle and Other Sketches, Illustrative of Every Day Life and Every-Day People. By Boz,” Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales*, and Augustus Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes*, commenting on the versatility of the sketch form. See Edgar Allan Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*, ed. David Galloway (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

merit of the *Magazine*...its miscellaneous articles,” the narrator, a Philadelphia woman, resolves “to get into some immediate difficulty, pursuant to his advice,” and proceeds to spend, “the greater part of the day in wandering about Edinburgh, seeking for desperate adventures...”<sup>77</sup> Without the requirement of an elaborate plot, or extensive character development, sketches were predicated on incidental happenings about town. Poe’s satirical rebuke of the popular form attests to its pervasiveness, and as he saw it, editors had made them formulaic. Touring European capitals or exploring home terrain, American sketch writers supplied publishing houses with skeins of printable material thanks to the mutable (and portable) genre.

Although the “The Man of the Crowd” is set in London, it could have been set in any big city. The story fits into a chronology of Philadelphia as a setting for localizing urban subjectivity because Poe wrote the story while living there and because a prominent Philadelphia magazine first published it. Furthermore, the story evokes a way of seeing and a way of narrating the modern metropolis that has become a trope in high modernist literary fiction (consider James Joyce’s Dublin in *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf’s London in *Mrs. Dalloway*). Formally, Poe’s peculiar urban sketch challenges prevalent notions that antebellum American cities were not yet suitable terrain for such imaginings. American cities could be now be imagined as complex and modern, with distinctive regions that otherwise would never have made it onto the itineraries of even well-heeled travelers.

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<sup>77</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Rufus Griswold (New York: J. S. Redfield, 1850-1856), 240. e-text edition from <http://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/blkwde.htm>

How life organizes itself in the city, as traced by Poe's creeping walking tour, portrays a moral topography. The deepening of night brings on changes in the makeup of the crowd, as well as changes in the locales of its distribution. After leaving an emptying bazaar, the narrator continues his pursuit of the man, and the pair return to the region where he was first spotted. Finding the area around the hotel deserted at this time of night, “[h]e walk moodily some paces up the once populous avenue, then, with a heavy sigh, turned in the direction of the river, and, plunging through a great variety of devious ways, came out, at length, in view of the principle theatres.”<sup>78</sup> As soon as the crowd of theater-goers subsides, the man scouts out new neighborhoods. They enter upon “the most noisome quarter of London, where everything wore the worst impress of the most deplorable poverty.”<sup>79</sup> Here the narrator offers a sketch of the neighborhood's central attraction, where even during the most ungodly hours of night “a blaze of light” and “the sounds of human life” revive the old man's spirits, which “again flickered up”(139). They now “stood before one of the huge suburban temples of Intemperance – one of the palaces of the fiend, Gin” (139). Their circuit turns out to be re-iterative, as soon as the drinking den closes, the narrator follows the crowd-searching man, who “did not hesitate in his career, but with mad energy, retraced his steps at once, to the heart of the mighty London.”<sup>80</sup> A day of ceaseless wandering has passed. After completing their second circuit of the city, the narrator “grew wearied unto death, and stopping fully in front of the wanderer, gazed at him steadfastly in the face.”<sup>81</sup> The unreturned gaze of the man is

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<sup>78</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Man of the Crowd” in *Edgar Allan Poe: Poetry Tales and Selected Essays*, 395.

<sup>79</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, “The Man of the Crowd,” 395.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, 395-396.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, 396.

enough to bring the suspenseful tale to an unresolved conclusion. The closing lines of the story echo the lines of the opening paragraph: '*es lasst sich nicht lessen*' – it does not permit itself to be read.

Scenes of the city collected along the way are seemingly incidental to the main plot. But they are the more memorable. The startling effects of shadows flickering, distorting, illuminating and obscuring in artificial and natural light make a vivid, even lurid mobile panorama of the city's purlieus and people. The narrator is the medium of these scenes and the anonymous man, his cipher in navigating the unreadable city. Even though the flitting scenes the narrator relays seem only a by-product of the main plot, they reveal a discontinuous physiognomy of the city that convincingly replicates the experience of navigating it. The scenery, the neighborhoods, events, and attractions are activated and unveiled by pursuing the man of the crowd.

Disturbingly anti-climactic, the absence of resolution epitomizes Poe's rejection of the didactic in his imaginative literature. Instead the inscrutable, fragmentary scenes, seams, and regions of the city recreate the experience of navigating it. "The Man of the Crowd" presents an unintelligible catalog of urban ephemera, a mobile of shifting scenes without fixed focus. However, historical time, geographical locus, and social issues were not the motive of Poe's deliberately apolitical tales. On the other hand, George Lippard, Philadelphia's native son, saturated the streets of his discursive city with the bloodied bones of social commentary and radical politics. Whereas Poe rejected the primacy of moral instruction as the basis for which imaginative literature should be

judged, Lippard famously protested that, “a literature which does not work practically for the advancement of social reform, or which is too good or too dignified to picture the wrongs of the great mass of humanity, is just good for nothing at all.”<sup>82</sup> With so much material at their disposal writers of the city must have felt the pressure to innovate, to fashion new styles and new ways of presenting the infinite variety of everyday life to a clamorous public.

As the newspaper became central to the geography and commerce of the city, literary approaches to narrating urbanization became influenced by the equivocal strategies of sensationalism in the press. A walk through Lippard's Philadelphia illustrates the writer's commitment to penetrating the mysteries of city in ways that picturesque discourse, which only concerned itself with superficial appearances, or flaneurie, with its detached impressionism, could not.

The best-selling stories of the day, indeed, were fictionalized mash-ups of sensational current events coming from the nation's burgeoning metropolitan centers. Serialization in penny newspapers and low-cost pamphlet novels made literature accessible to the lower classes. However, the marriage of sensationalism in the press to the city as a subject of literature was not unique to America. French newspaper novels, called *roman-feuilletons*, proliferated as a popular form during the 1840s.<sup>83</sup> *Feuilletons*,

<sup>82</sup> George Lippard, *George Lippard: Prophet of Protest*, ed. David Reynolds (New York: Peter Lang, 1986), 281.

<sup>83</sup> Such serialized newspaper fictions spread internationally via an increasingly connected popular culture. The first remarkably successful *roman-feuilleton* was Eugene Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris* (1842-3) printed in the *Journal des Debates*. Throughout the 1840s spin-offs abounded, set in cities such as London, Berlin, New York, and Philadelphia. David Reynolds brought attention to this genre shift in *Beneath the American Renaissance* (1989), examining the influence of the “city-mysteries” genre, of which *The Quaker City* was the preeminent American example, on the major literature of Hawthorne and Melville. Once perceived as a

the French word for leaves, referred to a section of newspapers featuring society news and gossip, political scandal, literature and art reviews, commentaries on fashion, and other topical trifles.<sup>84</sup> With swift grace and casual wit, feuilletonistes approached the reader as men-about-town divulging the city's offerings and shaping public opinion. Similarly, serialized stories, which were collected and resold in book form after their run in the newspapers, took everything the metropolis had to offer fictionalized and spun around an episodic plot structure to re-create a startling portrait of city life. As novels became embedded in newspapers, so too did journalistic forms become embedded in novels. The feuilletonist embodied the voice and consciousness of the city and if such a figure ventured into novel writing, as Lippard did, the local life of the city could be brought before the public on an unimaginable scale.

*The Quaker City* is the preeminent example of a roman-feuilleton set in an American city—a real-time city-mysteries novel that exposed how insidious crime and corruption was, permeating all classes, tying seemingly discrete regions of the city together, and introducing a new local lore that resonated well beyond the city's

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stronghold against the unknown frontier, the city became the new wilderness of the mid-nineteenth century. Adrienne Siegel has also located the rise of the city novel in American literature in the 1840s, examining its publication history in Adrienne Siegel, *The Image of the American City in Popular Literature 1820-1870* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1981). According to Siegel, “between 1774 [and] 1839 only 38 urban novels were published (20 of these being written in the 1830s), [but] in the single decade of the 1840s writers flooded the market with 173 works of city fiction; [followed] in the 1850s, with yet another deluge of 167 books.” (8)

<sup>84</sup> Katia Dianina, “The Feuilleton: An Everyday Guide to Public Culture in the Age of Great Reforms,” *The Slavic and Eastern European Journal* 47.2 (2003), 187-210. Katia Dianina provides a historical overview and definition of the genre and its noteworthy practitioners. She and other scholars generally agree that the form has its origins in Europe, particularly in France, Russia, and to a lesser extent Germany, and that there has been no American equivalent to the genre. However, the influence of Sue's *roman-feuilleton* on Lippard and other American writers proves that the cross pollination of American and European literary-journalistic forms goes back to the earliest iterations, as well as derivations, of the form.

geographical boundaries. With Philadelphia's physical expansion came increased disorder that vast civic institutions such as the press attempted to control and manipulate for economic advantage. At the same time, the lower middle classes sought reading material that might give them a view of the privileged set that both intrigued and repelled them. Lippard bated a mass audience with the revelation of private corruption among Philadelphia's elite, and *The Quaker City* had a great impact on storytelling that critics have overlooked. Using the many voices and layers of the city, the pamphlet novel possessed a versatility and timeliness that kept up with an age that was seen as marked by a new momentum.

It would take an insider and a rogue to drudge up Philadelphia's mysterious interstices in ways that Dickens had only begun to hint at and in ways that Lincoln Steffens would attempt to more than half a century later. While struggling to make a living as a magazinist, Lippard created opportunities for himself to be a fearless interlocutor in the literary discourse of the city he lived in. As a columnist for a local penny paper, called *The Spirit of the Times*, he accused Philadelphia's leading editors and publishers of hypocrisy and lowbrow standards. From May to August of 1843, he ran a column called *The Spermaceti Papers*. These satirical sketches satirized publishers and editors affiliated with George R. Graham and Co, publisher of the *Saturday Evening Post*, *The Casket*, and *Graham's Magazine*. According to Frank Luther Mott, during the 1840's, *Graham's* magazine became "one of the three or four most important magazines in the United States."<sup>85</sup> Lippard's concern with Philadelphia's reputation as an exponent of

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<sup>85</sup> Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines 1741-1850* vol. I, 344.

American literary and cultural life demonstrates how closely he aligned local interests with broader conceptions of the nation. In his article on “Boz Fever,” written in anticipation of Charles Dickens' visit to the city, Lippard writes in his trademark soaring prose that, “the man of the age!” has turned “sober, quiet, steady Philadelphia” into “one vast hospital of Boz Bedlamites.”<sup>86</sup> He correctly foresaw that Dickens would denigrate the city and the country in his notes on America, as Martineau and Marryat had done in their own writings not so long ago. Moreover, it was inconsistent with his own political views and he found it absurd that a writer like Dickens, who strove to bring to light the harmful effects of industrialization on the poor working classes, should be lavished with “a festive ball, the social banquet, or the variegated *soiree*.”<sup>87</sup> His sharpest needles pierce the self-selected Philadelphia literati who were tripping over themselves to host the writer; he derided the circle of “the respectable sixpennies,” and “such individuals particularly as belong to the 'Tickle-me-and-I'll-tickle-you' Club of this extraordinary city.”<sup>88</sup> In his criticism as well as in his fiction, Lippard showed Philadelphia's two sides—one benign, the other corrupt—like the Roman god Janus, his two faced representation of the city captured a transitional period in literary conceptions of the city.

### **Lippard's City**

In 1843 a young Philadelphian named Singleton Mercer was acquitted on charges of murder. Especially *The Philadelphia Public Ledger* proclaimed justice had been

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<sup>86</sup> George Lippard, *George Lippard: Prophet of Protest*, 228.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, 229.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*, 229.

served. The case centered on Mercer's revenge for the seduction and rape of his 16-year-old sister by Mahlon Heberton. One day, Sarah Mercer was strolling along Chestnut Street with a friend. She bumped into the handsome stranger and struck up conversation with him. Three days later, after Heberton had arranged a few strategic encounters with the girl, he had gained her confidence enough to lure her into a brothel for sex. To redeem her honor, her brother tracked Heberton to the Delaware River where the doomed lothario was to board a ferry destined for Camden. Mercer fired off four shots, one of which struck and killed the seducer.<sup>89</sup>

George Lippard immediately seized upon the popular scandal and made it the catalyst for his serial novel *The Quaker City, or The Monks of Monk Hall: A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery and Crime*. Part society gossip, part political screed, part urban exposé, and thoroughly sensational—the novel was an instant success, not in small part due to the high-profile news story that inspired its writing. *The Quaker City* appeared serially in ten paperback pamphlets between the fall of 1844 and the spring of 1845. By May an expanded edition was published. Publishers claimed that within a year 60,000 copies had sold.<sup>90</sup> Record-breaking sales continued with editions reprinted in London and translated into German.

Intersecting and convoluted plot lines rendered a side of the city incongruous with its comely external appearances. Disorienting as Lippard's Philadelphia appears, the

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<sup>89</sup> Summary of David Reynolds's accounts of the incident given in *George Lippard: Prophet of Protest*, 18-19; and David Reynolds, *George Lippard* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982), 32-33.

<sup>90</sup> David Reynolds, introduction to *The Quaker City*, by George Lippard (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), xii.

novel focuses on the spirit of its times and the writer's invective targets social injustice with no regard for sidestepping taboos. These injustices are perpetrated in secret by the most eminent bankers, lawyers, preachers, editors and publishers, prosperous merchants, and politicians of the city, who collude with and betray one another as procurers, con-men, and common thieves. Using Monk Hall, a decaying mansion of dank passageways, spring-loaded trapdoors, and secret stairwells, as a portal to the rancorous lives of the city's social elite, Lippard defamiliarizes the proportionate, distractingly regular, doll house city of guide books and travelogues, rendering it strange, uncanny, and yet instantly recognizable to its citizens.

It is fitting that Lippard situates Monk Hall in the lower reaches of the city, where lawlessness could escape public scrutiny and policing. Located in the Southwark neighborhood (today's South Philadelphia), Lippard's descriptions of the region portray a zone of urban-suburban transition. Incorporated into the city's grid plan in 1762, by the time of Lippard's writing, the neighborhood had a fire company, a commissioner's hall, and a public theater.<sup>91</sup> Outside of the city's municipal jurisdiction until an act of consolidation in 1854, Southwark typified the stride of Philly's urbanization during the 1830s and 1840s. With Monk Hall, Lippard exchanged the crumbling medieval castle of Gothic lore for dilapidated mansion in a tenement district. Similarly evoking decay and a fallen world, the effects of growth and urbanization close in on Monk Hall, precipitating

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<sup>91</sup> John Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia: 1609-1884* vol II (Philadelphia: L.H. Everts & Co., 1884), 1575. Scharf tells of the churches, theaters, schools, and social life of Southwark leading up to its incorporation into the city limits in 1762.

real changes in how the city was to be organized in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Erected upon a sprawling country estate dating back to prerevolutionary times, Monk Hall seems unable to fend off “the city in its southern march.”<sup>92</sup> Trees were cut down, walls overturned, gardens leveled, all to make room for “building lots,” partitioned by “streets and alleys into a dozen triangles and squares.”<sup>93</sup> Street paving and new construction hem in the now ancient fortress as, “fine bricks began to spring up along the streets which surrounded the garden, while the alleys traversing its area grew lively with long lines of frame houses...whose denizens awoke the echoes of the place with the sound of the hammer and the grating of the saw.”<sup>94</sup> The familiar South Philadelphia now emerges, with “long rows of dwelling houses, some four-storied, some three or one, some brick, some frame, a few pebble-dashed, and all alive with inhabitants.”<sup>95</sup> The Southwark seat of Monk Hall exemplifies the lopsided ways in which Philadelphia was developing. Even though the outlying neighborhoods were often the scenes of violent outbreaks as the city adjusted to its growing population, the city government was largely inadequate in responding to unrest in these communities. As the city expanded into new territories, Lippard revealed that its problems originated in the city core—one that, to borrow Lincoln Steffens's phrasing, was corrupt and content.

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<sup>92</sup> George Lippard, *The Quaker City*, 47.

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*, 47.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, 48.

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, 48.

In spite of all the development surrounding it, Monk Hall remains surprisingly inconspicuous. It would take a guide with an intimate knowledge of the city's devious byways to come across. In conjuring such a journey, this perambulatory introduction to Monk Hall verges on the abstract and surreal. The original proprietor of the estate, were he to attempt to locate the Hall:

would have to wind up a narrow alley, turn down a court, strike up an avenue, which it would take some knowledge of municipal geography to navigate. At last, emerging into a narrow street where four alleys crossed, he would behold his magnificent mansion of Monk-hall with a printing office on one side and a stereotype foundry on the other, while on the opposite side of the way, a mass of miserable frame houses seemed about to commit suicide and fling themselves madly into the gutter, and in the distance a long line of dwellings, offices, and factories, looming in broken perspective, looked as if they wanted to shake hands across the narrow street.<sup>96</sup>

The Hall crouches between a printing office and a stereotype foundry and is yet unknown, altogether unperceived, in spite of all the intrigue and scandal it breeds. Considering the salacious vein of journalism Lippard would so vehemently denounce in *The Spermaceti Papers*, one imagines the offices shouldering the nefarious rookery humming with material to print about the place. Lippard's critique is more subtle. In the Quaker City, as it turns out, publishers and editors are more deeply entrenched in profiteering than with reporting news to the public. They fashion stories to sabotage or puff up depending on who pays or to settle scores. Buzby Poodle, editor of *The Daily Black Mail*, with his legs shaped like inverted parenthesis, or sickles with their backs turned against each other, is a hilarious representative of such debased news mongering.

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<sup>96</sup> George Lippard, *The Quaker City*, 48.

While an atmosphere of gloom pervades the fortress, unlike traditional Gothic settings, Monk Hall is not isolated in time or space, or cut off from civilization. Integrated into the fabric of Philadelphia, both geographically and socially vis-a-vis the city's high profile denizens, within its interiors the monks conspire only to dispatch their ploys on the open streets of the center city. The newspaper pages distort their crimes to protect their public reputation or just as quickly reverse them to expose their crimes.

Lippard forges a constellation of plots surrounding the central tale of seduction and revenge. Once Byrnewood Arlington learns that the dashing Gustavus Lorrimer has lured his sister, Mary, to Monk Hall, shamming a wedding ceremony in order to seduce the virgin bride, he vows to kill Lorrimer to redeem her ruined virtue. Trickery, seduction, and revenge destroy a real marriage between the beautiful Dora Livingstone and her husband Albert Livingstone, a prosperous broker. She plans to run away with her lover, Col. Algernon Fitz-Cowles, who tells her is heir to an English lordship and an aristocratic fortune. Prior to Fitz-Cowles, Dora had an affair with Luke Harvey, partner in her husband's firm. Driven to madness by his wife's betrayal, Albert Livingstone poisons her in their country estate and himself perishes there in a fire. Violations of marriage contracts, forgeries of wills, and false identities lurk everywhere in the private lives of Lippard's characters. With the curious story of Mabel, illegitimate daughter of Devil-Bug, Lippard unravels the twisted piety of religious institutions. Devil-Bug, the monstrous gatekeeper of Monk Hall, rescues Mabel from an incestuous rape by her adopted father, the lecherous Reverend F.A.T. Pyne.

Lippard's characters are both archetypes and parodies of the Gothic tradition. The deranged and disfigured Devil-Bug assists the monks in carrying out their hideous crimes. Yet, for all his inhumanity and degradation, his conscience can't shut out gruesome visions of his victim's crushed skulls. The traditional villain, the epitome evil, heroically saves Mabel from rape. The protagonist, Byrnewood Arlington, who takes on the heroic mission of redeeming his sister's virtue by slaying her seducer, actually spends most of the novel in a drug-induced stupor within a chamber of Monk Hall. Gustavus Lorrimer, the handsome cavalier of Chestnut Street, commits a crime no worse than his sworn enemy, for Arlington also slept with a virgin he had no intention of marrying and left her ruined and scorned. To this ensemble, Lippard introduces two new stock characters: newspaper editor Buzby Poodle and magazine publisher Sylvester Petriken. Although relatively minor characters in the novel, they represent the crooked practices of Philadelphia's literary establishment. They keep informed of the inside stories behind the scandals they devise in bribed and exploitative print.

The novel carries off these elaborate and intersecting plots using an omniscient narrative perspective tied to disclosing the events using an array of journalistic techniques. The double-throated critique of newspaper reportage comes from Lippard's status as both an insider and an outsider of the city's publishing industry. Laced with authorial asides, editorialized footnotes, interpolated lamentations invoking contemporary scandals, and apostrophes to the reader, if there is any order to be salvaged from George Lippard's twisted and meandering tale, it would be through a survey of these meta-textual devices. From these plot digressions emerges a fragmented, broken Philadelphia so

inured to the machinations of power-brokering that the facts and commentary are inserted interstitially. Poised in an era when historical constructions of the city tended to hearken back to its founding democratic principles in spirit, *The Quaker City* banishes hackneyed sentimentalizing and anticipates the objectives that social progressivism attempted to realize in practice, and as realism tried to conceptualize in the novel at the turn of the century. Lippard announces: “Our taste is different from yours. We like to look at nature and at the world, not only as they appear, but as they are!”<sup>97</sup>

Lippard's screed targets Philadelphia's publishing industry through the characters of Buzby Poodle, editor of *The Daily Black Mail*, and Sylvester Petriken, publisher of *The Ladies Western Hemisphere*. The two can often be found together wandering Chestnut Street or in the oyster cellars and drinking dens of center city, unscrupulously holding forth on the profitable vagaries of their business ventures. Petriken gleefully boasts of the prices he can fetch for printing fashion plates and engravings, and frequently waxes sentimental recounting the quality of verse printed in his magazine (which Poodle sardonically attests has the effect of laudanum). “You ought to see the last number! Two engravings, one tragic, one comic! Tragic—the death o' Cock Robin...Comic—Nigger church on fire, with the Sheriff and Court looking on, to see that it is done in an effective manner.\*”<sup>98</sup> Lippard invites readers to come to their own conclusions about the magazine owner's perverse sentiments by appending an extensive footnote:

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<sup>97</sup> George Lippard, *The Quaker City*, 305.

<sup>98</sup> George Lippard, *The Quaker City*, 277.

\*See the charge of a certain Judge, in which he instructs the Grand Jury to present a certain Hall as a nuisance, because it was threatened by a mob, and, therefore, it endangered the surrounding property. It was owned and used by Negroes for benevolent purposes. This latter fact furnishes sufficient apology for any act of outrage in a city where Pennsylvania Hall was burnt by the whole population, because the object for which it was built happened to be unpopular.<sup>99</sup>

The burning of Pennsylvania Hall in 1837 made Philadelphia a tinderbox of abolitionist agitation. By contextualizing Petriken's satirical depiction of the event in the paratext, Lippard demonstrates how effortlessly the press and the law can squelch dissent and thwart the voices of reform movements.

Poodle, Petriken's newspaper counterpart, is always slipping expressions in French (so much so Lippard sardonically inserts another footnote to enhance the editor's pretensions: "The author does not hold himself responsible for Mr. Buzby Poodle's violent assaults on Louis Phillipe's French"). The "editorial genius" of the Quaker City keeps close accounts of scandals and accepts bribes that determine how those stories get fashioned. In an ironic apostrophe addressed to the "glorious Liberty of the Press," Lippard transparently decries this representative character: "what a comfort it must be to you...that Buzby Poodle...is no reality, no fact."<sup>100</sup> In the "Ideal town," "so pure, so spotless," Buzby Poodle is just a "rare invention" of the author's imagination.<sup>101</sup> Evidently, Lippard knew ideal conceptions of Philadelphia papered over the scandal and turmoil he sought to expose. The author enjoins his reader to speculate as to whom he

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<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, 277.

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*, 164.

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*, 164.

may be referring: “Buzby Poodle—long may it be, ere a thing like you shall start into tangible existence, and all be-wigged and sickle-legged, walk visibly along Chesnut Street; a diminutive incantation of a most nauseous emetic.”<sup>102</sup> Philadelphia magazines like *Godey's Ladies Book* and *Graham's Gentleman's Magazine* with their fashion plates, sentimental poetry, and idle gossip, envisioned an ideal town with a saccharine literature that Lippard saw as a misrepresentation of a city teeming with corruption.

Conceptually, Lippard's critique of literary Philadelphia, much like the caricature of Buzby Poodle's legs, can be understood parenthetically. The exposition of the novel lays the main plot of seduction and revenge, fictionalizing the popular Mercer trial. The novel ends with newspaper headlines reporting, or rather spinning, the scandals that had been relayed throughout the novels' pages. A series of authorial interventions, the narrative parenthetically conceals and therefore elaborates on the deviance, intrigue, and collaboration among the denizens of Monk Hall, representatives of Philadelphia's civic and social leaders. Together, Buzby Poodle and Sylvester Petriken shape the news and literature of the city and the country at large, not unlike the powerful conglomerates of publishers like George Graham. A chance encounter between these two, Lorrimer the seducer, and Arlington the avenger finally sets in motion Lorrimer's ill-fated demise. Poodle and Petriken idly stroll along Walnut Street making plans to merge their mutual enterprises into a new magazine to “become the Focus of American Literature,” or put another way (as Lippard always does), “the Out-cast Literature of the Quaker City.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> George Lippard, *The Quaker City*, 164.

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*, 148.

Here Lippard reinforces the second-class status of literary Philadelphia among American cities. *The Quaker City* might also be subtitled *An Introduction to an Underdog City*. They bump into Lorrimer, in high spirits thinking Byrnewood Arlington had plunged to his death in Monk Hall the previous night. Astonished to see his nemesis and avowed executioner approaching him, in the broad light of day upon the the city's most fashionable promenade, Gustavus Lorrimer feigns a disguise so adept, he simply conceals himself in the city's anonymity, melting, or at least distorting Arlington's recollection of him. Petriken helps Lorrimer pull off the trick. "*deny everything, d'ye hear?*" "I have a few words to say to you, Sir," says Arlington in sepulchral tones as he approaches Lorrimer. "I beg your pardon, Sir!" Lorrimer tips his head, "You have the advantage of me. I do not know you Sir!"<sup>104</sup> Here Lippard re-enacts the elusive man of the crowd moment in which two strangers are confronted with near infinite possibilities for illegibility or recognition, where putting on or rubbing out one's identity, or one's life, seems so arbitrarily and casually carried out. Pet confirms Lorrimer's shamefaced lie. And well, Arlington questions the soundness of his own memory. After all, the night they met as strangers carousing in brotherly love on the streets of Philadelphia was awash in champagne and then he was drugged in Monk Hall after being led there by Lorrimer. "Oh madness! madness" Arlington mutters to himself, "I am indeed the victim of some dark delusion. Excuse me, gentleman, for this horrible intrusion."<sup>105</sup> In confronting Lorrimer, he must also confront himself, Lippard seems to say.

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<sup>104</sup> George Lippard, *The Quaker City*, 429.

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*, 430.

In Lippard's city, as in Lincoln Steffens's exposé, no one is entirely without guilt; everyone is flawed. Judge someone harshly; look in the mirror. Lorrimer reminds Arlington of this fact later that night when confronted once again in the oyster cellar, where three nights prior they laid the bet that Lorrimer would seduce an innocent virgin. Lippard reiteratively returns the duo to the opening scene of the novel—as the pair of city strollers in Poe's story—and Arlington faces a startling revelation. For on the night they met, Arlington had boasted his seduction and abandonment of a poor girl to his foil. “Fool,” cries Lorrimer, “Look, my face in yonder picture changes to yours.”<sup>106</sup> Arlington got away with the same crime that he is prepared to kill Lorrimer for. Mockingly, the fiend pushes the dazed brother into the street to wander among the crowd stunned, “like a man in a dream.”<sup>107</sup> The death vow holds firmer resolve than sound reason and soon the pursuit begins anew: Arlington dashes down Chestnut Street toward the Delaware River in a frenzy. The dusky scenes flit before him as the crowd gives way, “he passed the marble columns of the massive Bank,” “he passed a long array of glittering stores, and then his path was thronged by a crowd of ragged boys, who made the air ring with shouts and cries.”<sup>108</sup> To his horror, “They held papers under their arms and in their hands, shouting their contents in loud and boisterous tones. For a single moment, Byrnewood listened. 'The seduction of Mary Arlington with a portr-a-i-t ! Daily Black Mail—only one cent!’”<sup>109</sup> The shame of his sister exposed in the papers is the final brutal assault—

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<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*, 561.

<sup>107</sup> George Lippard, *The Quaker City*, 561.

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*, 562.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*, 562.

the final coup to complete the scandal and end the story—the gossip pages have spread his sister's ruin to turn a profit at such a low cost.

After the murder is carried out, Byrnewood Arlington moves with his sister to a cottage in Wisconsin. Even here, the Philadelphia headlines reach him, tormenting him with their twisted half-truths and hidden crimes. Perusing them, he discovers that the Reverend Dr. Pyne is praised for his speech on “the Iniquities of the Pope of Rome” (entrenching the city's anti-Catholic hostilities) and for restoring his adopted daughter to her rightful home; damaging rumors surrounding Fitz-Cowles' business exploits “have been effectively crushed.”<sup>110</sup> Their crimes have been cleared in the court of public opinion. Then, in an obscure portion of the same paper, easily passed over, news of Fitz-Cowles' arrest for forgery and Reverend F.A.T. Pyne's attempted rape of his adopted daughter: the two conflicting voices of metropolitan news. In a private room of the cottage Byrnewood keeps a portrait of his victim, so that “At his board, on his pillow, in the walk through the wild wood or the crowded city, that face of Lorrimer was ever with him.”<sup>111</sup> A look into Lippard's *Quaker City* is a horrific look into the darkest recesses of the human mind. The two sides of Philadelphia's urbanization—its growth into the southern districts and its festering core—show a city divided from within. Efforts at civic control, whether annexing geographical precincts or manipulating public opinion, are as fragile as the human condition, constantly suspended in a state dissolution and incorporation. The geography of Lippard's Philadelphia is as fractured as the humans

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<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*, 571.

<sup>111</sup> George Lippard, *The Quaker City*, 574.

living in the city. There is no moral center and the story of the city is as multivalent and contradictory as the contents of its local newspapers, which radiate from Philadelphia out to the rest of the country.

### **Frank Webb's *Garies in Philadelphia***

Both *The Quaker City* and *The Garies and their Friends* disrupt the platitude commonly repeated by visitors and residents of Philadelphia's symmetry and fixed regularity by situating episodes of dramatic conflict both on and off the grid. Moreover, they show the threat imposed by an emerging order that adapts, alters, establishes, and fiercely defends a new plateau of civic growth. Lippard issues a jeremiad against the established order, seeking to indict the practices of newspaper reportage and saccharine (apolitical) periodical literature with dialogic techniques that link transitioning neighborhoods and geographical growth to a state of increasing entropy. Disrupting the linear narrative with the infusion editorial commentary, authorial asides, and redacted newspaper headlines, Lippard conveys that certain stories of public interest get printed or elided for exploitative purposes. Lippard's whistleblowing tactics stand in contradistinction to the theme of urban decline and renewal evident in Frank Webb's *The Garies and their Friends*. If Lippard distorts the rhetoric of the grid to undermine the treachery of Philadelphia's higher orders, Webb uses the open plan to fortify the position of a burgeoning black middle-class insisting on maintaining a space for themselves in a South Philadelphia neighborhood.

As a novel about free blacks living in a northern city, unlike the accepted canon of African American literature written during the time, *The Garies and their Friends* does not overtly push an abolitionist agenda, in spite of coming with abolitionist credentials.<sup>112</sup> The novel focuses on the establishment and defense of black domesticity within the cityscape. Werner Sollers, editor of Frank Webb's collected writings classifies the novel in his introduction as "thoroughly bourgeois," a claim supported throughout the narrative with evocative passages reveling in elaborate descriptions of food preparation and feasts, sumptuous interiors adorned with plush carpets, oil paintings, and gilded candelabras, burnished with extended scenes in which the duties of scrupulous household maintenance are proudly attended to.<sup>113</sup> In his introduction to the 1997 edition of the novel, Robert Reid Pharr aptly suggests, "Webb's particular genius was that he refused to recognize a clear distinction, not so much between the slave and the free, the southern and the northern, but rather, perhaps more importantly, between the domestic and the political."<sup>114</sup> He concludes, "Webb suggested that, at least for the African American, the domestic sphere represented a sort of ground zero in the struggle for both the liberation of the slaves and the just treatment of free black populations."<sup>115</sup> In her introduction to the original 1857 edition Harriet Beecher Stowe frames the novel squarely within an abolitionist agenda: "Are the race at present held as slaves capable of freedom, self-

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<sup>112</sup> Robert Reid-Pharr, introduction to *The Garies and their Friends*, by Frank J. Webb (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). Reid-Pharr writes that the novel, "was not conceived as a tool of the abolitionist movement," a claim I follow in the analysis of the novel, xi.

<sup>113</sup> Sollers quoted in Robert Reid-Pharr, introduction to *The Garies and their Friends*, xi.

<sup>114</sup> Robert Reid-Pharr, introduction to *The Garies and their Friends*, xi.

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*, xi.

government, and progress?”<sup>116</sup> While the novel goes far in addressing the exigency of these issues, Samuel Otter has pointed out that “the questions Webb asks are different,” claiming that the novel “does not equate black with slave,” and that Webb recognizes “the absurdity and redundancy of confirming natural rights and verifying human equality.”<sup>117</sup>

Obviating the debate of whether blacks are capable of citizenship, taking it instead as a given, *The Garies and their Friends* defends increasingly politicized values of domesticity, respectability, and manners by presenting a scenario of organized conflict aroused in response to black homeownership. Threats typically associated with the urban community – vagrancy, pauperism, and criminality – are marginalized in this novel. In fact, Webb's work responded in earnest to a stream of commentary that burlesqued upward mobility in Philadelphia's black community. For example Edward Clay's popular series of cartoons *Life in Philadelphia*, published in the late 1820s, racially satirized middle-class respectability by featuring vignettes of black people dressed in the most current fashions, promenading about town, making social calls, and engaged in parlor music and dance. Printed with captions of their barely coherent utterances, their manners were portrayed as imitative and awkward.<sup>118</sup> Such condescension proved insidious, stripped of satire, and taken for common knowledge in historical accounts of the city.

The opening sentence of a chapter entitled “Negroes and Slaves” in John Fanning

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<sup>116</sup> Frank Webb, *The Garies and their Friends*, xix.

<sup>117</sup> Samuel Otter, “Frank Webb's Still Life: Rethinking Literature and Politics through *The Garies and their Friends*,” *American Literary History* 20.4 (2008), 731.

<sup>118</sup> Julie Winch, introduction to *The Elite of Our People: Joseph Willson's Sketches of Black Upper-Class Life in Antebellum Philadelphia*, by Joseph Willson (University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2000), 36. Julie Winch supplies helpful context for the literary representations of Philadelphia's black community in her description of Clay's caricatures.

Watson's *Annals of Philadelphia* (1830) reifies this conception of the black higher classes: “in the olden time, dressy blacks and dandy *coloured* beaux and belles were quite unknown...Once they submitted to the appellation of servants, blacks, or negroes, but now they require to be called coloured people, and among themselves, their common call of salutation is—gentlemen and ladies.”<sup>119</sup> So widespread was the prejudice against the emergent higher classes of black people that claiming a social space for themselves became an urgent public affair. A Georgia transplant apprenticed in the printing trade and later a dentist, Joseph Willson published his *Sketches of the Higher of Colored Society in Philadelphia* (1841). The preface tells prospective readers “who like to see their neighbors' merits caricatured, and their faults distorted and exaggerated” will find no such diversion in his pages.<sup>120</sup> Instead, Willson's earnestly chronicles the home, work, and social life of the Philadelphia's African American elite and middle class.

*The Garies and their Friends* springs from the same sentiment as Willson's, that taste and manners have long been the strivings of an American democratic culture, and the quest for the right neighborhood could assist in this pursuit. In the context of antebellum Philadelphia, the middle class quest was well underway as the black community accumulated a measure of wealth and property. These classes met a hostile environment, as evidenced in both comical portrayals and in the most heinous acts of street brutality. The novel shows how the city responds to their efforts in establishing domesticity. Webb alternately splices domestic scenes with scenes of graphic violence

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<sup>119</sup> John F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia vol. I* (Philadelphia: J.M. Stoddart & Co., 1881), 261

<sup>120</sup> Joseph Willson, *The Elite of Our People: Joseph Willson's Sketches of Black Upper-Class Life in Antebellum Philadelphia* (University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2000), preface.

encroaching on the homes and neighborhoods of an increasingly heterogeneous Philadelphia. Rupturing idyllic conceptions of the city of brotherly love, *The Garies* fits into a scheme Samuel Otter has called “Philadelphia's pattern of regressive of regressive advance.”<sup>121</sup> The novel portrays its social urgency by drawing on real events from the milieu. As an urban novel that defends neighborhood transformation, *The Garies* anticipates motifs that became incorporated into the realist novel. As we shall see in Howells's city novels, the concept of neighborhood as a site of the urban transformation, of cultural renewal, could be viewed in contradistinction to prevailing stereotyped depictions of urban dwellers mired in grit and living in poverty.

### **A City of Homes**

The story is about two families and three homes. The Garies, recent transplants from a Georgia plantation, move to a respectable Philadelphia neighborhood. Clarence Garie is a wealthy white planter in a common law marriage with his ex-slave Emily. They hope to make a better life for their children, also named Emily and Garie, living among the black community in the free urban North, hearing “what a pleasant social circle they form, and how intelligent many of them are” up north.<sup>122</sup> They befriend the Ellis family, who live in a neat and modest home located in the southern district. Charles, the head of the household, is a carpenter, and his wife, Ellen, is a seamstress and washerwoman. Charles and Ellen have three children, Caddy, Esther, and Charlie. The third home belongs to real-estate entrepreneur, Mr. Walters. Located in the South Street corridor

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<sup>121</sup>Samuel Otter, “Frank Webb's Still Life: Rethinking Literature and Politics through *The Garies and their Friends*,” *American Literary History* 20.4 (2008), 731.

<sup>122</sup> Frank J. Webb, *The Garies and their Friends*, 57.

(also called the Cedar neighborhood), a glimpse into the “stately house, with its spotless marble steps and shining silver door-plate,” reveals Walters' impeccable taste and incomparable wealth: “richly-papered walls” adorned with “paintings from the hands of well-known foreign and native artists,” carved walnut furniture displays “charming little bijoux which the French only are capable of conceiving,” and mantelpieces appointed with “vases and well-executed bronzes.”<sup>123</sup> Spread throughout three regions of the city, these households represent the spectrum of Willson's “higher classes”: the industrious Ellises, the Garies—fortunate heirs, and Walters, the scrupulous business man.

The Philadelphia home that greets the Garies upon arrival could have been lifted straight from a travel book, and the city overall compares favorably to the harried bustle of New York, as they observe during a brief stopover along their journey by steamer and then rail from Savannah: “How this whirl and confusion distracts me,” proclaims Mrs. Garie, “I hope Philadelphia is not as noisy a place as this.”<sup>124</sup> Her husband assures her with Philadelphia's reputation as “one of the most quiet and clean cities in the world.”<sup>125</sup> They are delighted with what they see from their carriage as they approach their new home: “everything is so bright and fresh looking; why the pavements and doorsteps look as if they were cleaned twice a day.”<sup>126</sup> However, Philadelphia's lexicon of picturesque language, with its trope of residential cleanliness, is soon undermined by the appearance of their malicious next door neighbor.

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<sup>123</sup> *ibid.*, 121.

<sup>124</sup> Frank J. Webb, *The Garies and their Friends*, 115.

<sup>125</sup> *ibid.*, 115.

<sup>126</sup> *ibid.*, 116.

Webb demonstrates that racial violence was so insidious it crossed class and neighborhood lines and entered the homes of the “higher classes,” which were as, if not more, vulnerable to the vexation of whites who “vented their rage against those of their neighbors who had the audacity to be both black and prosperous.”<sup>127</sup> Webb dramatizes Philadelphia's pattern of “regressive advance” – indeed, conflicts emerge within the city just prior to the consolidation of its increasingly expanding and heterogeneous communities. It spread its borders because it saw an economy, a home life, a unified tax base, and a constituency of voters. This sign of progress in the Garies is seen as a threat to Mr. Stevens. Although the Garies's new neighbor successfully engineers a race riot and masterminds the murder of Emily and Clarence Garie in an attempt to claim their children's inheritance, his failures to read and extrapolate meaning from neighborhood codes of conduct are comically and then tragically undermined by his demise.

After Mr. Stevens discovers he lives next door to a mixed race family, he cuts off social ties with the Garies, tossing off an occasional sneer in their direction when coming in and out of his home. Family ties become a motive for murder once the “pettifogging attorney” learns he is second in line to Clarence Garie's fortune, through some distant relation. “Slippery George” exhorts criminals into carrying out his nefarious plot; he unconscionably plays both sides of the law for personal gain. He foments a race riot that leaves the Garie children orphaned and homeless. In doing so, he also hopes to induce a real-estate coup in the southern neighborhoods of the city. He tells one of his cronies:

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<sup>127</sup> Julie Winch, introduction to *The Elite of Our People: Joseph Willson's Sketches of Black Upper-Class Life in Antebellum Philadelphia*, by Joseph Willson (University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2000), 3.

“we can render the district unsafe, that property will be greatly lessened in value—the houses will rent poorly and many proprietors will be happy to sell at very reduced prices.”<sup>128</sup> He hopes to intervene on the natural process of the neighborhood's gentrification by displacing its black middle class. Social networks within an urban community, based on the concepts of family and neighborhood are subject to sudden, even arbitrary change, Webb seems to suggest. The novel inscribes social networks with specific codes of conduct and deportment that could land someone inside or outside of the neighborhood's protection.

George Stevens's ignorance of certain territorially inscribed social cues ends in a darkly humorous contrapasso for the villain. In the days leading up to the riot, he ventures into the southern district of the city to consult with his collaborators and to deliver instructions detailing the particular houses to be attacked. To blend in, he purchases an old coat from a neighborhood thrift shop owned by a friend of Mr. Wilson, unwittingly dropping a list of addresses when checking out. Later that night he is attacked by a local gang of firemen, who recognize his coat as those worn by members of a rival hose company. Brutally beaten and tarred, “he had not even an acquaintance in the neighborhood to whom he might apply” for help.<sup>129</sup> Another group of drunken ruffians, now mistaking him for a black man, add to his humiliation, dunking him in a barrel of water to make “a white man of him.”<sup>130</sup> Tragicomic victim of the fractious hate he espouses, the rest of Stevens's retribution will be a gradual and solitary one, marked by

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<sup>128</sup> Frank J. Webb, *The Garies and their Friends*, 166.

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*, 189.

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*, 191.

complete withdrawal from Philadelphia. A relic from the past, George Stevens is no longer relevant to the city-building at work in Webb's novel.

If Stevens's satirical coat scenario embodies the metropolis divided against itself, Mr. Walters is a unifying force. He interprets and responds to city codes in defense of the community, something that even municipal authorities are unable (or unwilling) to do. He criticizes newspaper stories (editorials penned by Mr. Stevens) that deliberately misrepresent the sources of arson and street fights in the southern neighborhoods, placing the blame on black people when Walters knows firsthand that the aggressors were white. Moreover, as a counterpoint to Stevens's devious exploits of the city's neighborhoods, Walters renders his defense openly. Once the list of homes to be attacked lands in his hands, he goes through the proper channels first. With his knowledge of the city, its neighborhoods, and homes, including his own, the Ellises', the Garies's, and many of his other colored tenants, he appeals directly to the mayor. The mayor denies police protection to the addresses outside of Philadelphia's jurisdiction and offers to send only two or three officers to Walters' home, located in the South Street corridor, the edges of the city limits. Walters then takes matters into his own hands. He converts his mansion into a bulwark and sends messages across the city to prepare themselves for defense, an almost practiced response to previous outbreaks. He offers the Ellises the protection of his home, since their neighborhood teems with "the class of which the mob was composed."<sup>131</sup> A unified home front turns out to be indispensable for survival in a city, and a nation, torn apart by the selfish greed and intolerance typified by Stevens. The

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<sup>131</sup> Frank J. Webb, *The Garies and their Friends*, 204.

juxtaposition of Stevens's and Wilson's acts of neighborliness, Webb seems to say, demonstrates that transitioning neighborhoods are crucial but contested sites in the growth and organization of the city.

### **Fleeting Scenes Spliced into the Still Life**

Whereas Monk Hall is a lure and a trap rigged to consume its victims, Wilson's fortress remains a stronghold throughout the riot scene, successfully fending off attack. Violent crime festers within the Southwark seat of Monk Hall; in Webb's manor the threat comes from without. There is a symmetry between the buildings, in their neighborhood settings, as well as their placement in both novels' most dramatic moments. As we have seen, once Arlington springs free from Monk Hall, he embarks on a frenzied pursuit through the city culminating in the murder of Lorrimer. Lippard splices the scene with signifiers of the city's enormous indifference: faceless crowds, soulless buildings, and bloodless headlines flicker past, energizing his resolve to assassinate the seducer. Charles Ellis's heroic act means leaving the protection of Wilson's at the onset of the riot to warn the Garies of the impending attack on their home. Like Arlington's, his journey through the streets precipitates the novel's most operatic act of violence. When compared with the chase that precedes George Stevens's plunging death, Webb offers another view of Philadelphia, one that formally resembles Lippard's flitting panorama of psychic duress. Sending characters on chases, through the streets, up and down the stairwells of row homes, swallowed into mouse-hole alleys that turn into dead ends, pressing through crowds of people or conspicuously solitary on some vacant street, both authors capture

tremendous vitality in these cliffhanger scenes. They palpitate with the city's anxious energy.

Critical readings of the iconic wedding feast have duly credited Webb's decadent aesthetic. His “verbal still lifes” – oil thick in sumptuous depictions of tables overflowing with bounty – have been interpreted as analogues of the Dutch Renaissance painting tradition.<sup>132</sup> Technically masterful in realism, and richly symbolic in associations to spiritual versus fleshly existence, they invite the reader to delight in sensual abundance and contemplate how fleeting it is. Set years after the riot, the scene is at least temporarily emblematic of the success of black Philadelphia's higher classes. Yet to pause in aesthetic delight over the wedding supper would be to read only half of the chapter. Webb overlays the happy matrimony with Lizzie Stevens's mad dash through the city in a last desperate effort to protect her decrepit father.

Charles Ellis sets out from Wilson's home in the South Street corridor destined for the Garies's, located in the northern edges of the city limits. This means traversing the entire city on foot and risking assault. He cuts through the city core uninterrupted; however, the empty streets make him a vulnerable target when he arrives to within a few blocks of the Garies's home. Having been spotted by a group of rioters, he turns into a side street closed off with a dead-end. Pursued by the gang, he breaks into an abandoned building and climbs to the roof. Failing to ward off his attackers, they soon push him to

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<sup>132</sup> Samuel Otter's reading of Webb's aesthetics, particularly in his analysis of the wedding scene has redirected discussions of Webb's novel in decidedly fruitful ways. Through the wedding scene and other still-life portraits of the home life that we see in the novel, Otter considers Webb's painterly attention to details and argues that the novel should be viewed as a literary text and not just a historical artifact because of its racial themes.

the edge of the roof top. Ellis loses his balance and clings to the precipice, holding on for dear life. One of the mob hacks off two of his fingers, and Ellis falls to the street below. Ellis's condition at the end of the scene literally freeze-frames his character for the rest of the novel. Dumb, mute, and permanently disabled, Charles Ellis has been converted into a hallowed and commemorative figure.

The riot scene and wedding scene organize the theme of black middle-class ascendancy in antebellum Philadelphia. Through the preservation of home, family, and community, the position of the Garies and the Ellises becomes increasingly less contentious as the story comes to an end. Midway through the novel and spliced into the riot scene, Charles Ellis's attack turns him into a tragic figure sacrificed to the city's fractious violence. At the novel's end and spliced into the wedding scene, the demise of George Stevens renders reciprocal retribution to the villain. Webb accomplishes this by overlaying the triumphant wedding feast with Lizzie Stevens's dash through the city to save her villainous father. The denouement finds George Stevens in his Fifth Avenue mansion in New York City. His life since the murder of Clarence and Emily Garie has been dedicated to keeping the secret of his wrongfully attained fortune. Tortured with guilt, weak and infirm, the old man resembles an undead figure, a ghastly counterpoint to Charles Ellis's sanctified martyrdom. His daughter and caretaker, Lizzie Stevens, who used to play with the Garie children as a little girl, embodies the moral ambivalence of family ties central to the novel. Even though she ideologically rejects her father's racist views, when she discovers his secret, she hastily departs on an errand to her native city in

the hopes of persuading McCloskey not to reveal the Garies's will to the authorities, a piece of evidence with which he has been blackmailing Stevens for all these years.

Lizzie Stevens's trek through Philadelphia takes her into the city's less savory locales, places of squalor and disease. Her search leads her to the landlady of McCloskey's tenement building, who redirects her to the hospital where he had been taken the previous night in the throes of typhoid fever. She races to the hospital but is denied access until the next morning. Upon her return, she discovers he delivered a deathbed confession before passing away in the middle of the night. She then flees for New York, intent on outrunning a detective armed with an arrest warrant for her father. She breathlessly arrives at her father's mansion only to find, “the mangled form of her father, who had desperately sprung from the balcony above.”<sup>133</sup> Webb times Lizzie's abortive chase through Philadelphia as the wedding feast is underway, supplementing the excitement of preparations and the celebration with the deadly futility of Lizzie's mission: “Whilst Lizzie Stevens was tremblingly ringing the bell at the lodge of the hospital, busy hands were also pulling at that of Mr. Walters's dwelling.”<sup>134</sup> Wedding bells chime in anticipation of the death knell of McCloskey (and soon, George Stevens). Faceless hands that once attempted to breach and destroy Wilson's home have been replaced with the hands of honored guests pulling at Wilson's doorbell. Once the exquisite feast is set – the turkeys, the reed-birds, the stewed terrapin, oysters of every variety – Webb interrupts the scene and transports the reader to the grim bedside of McCloskey, bringing into double

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<sup>133</sup> Frank J. Webb, *The Garies and their Friends*, 368.

<sup>134</sup> *ibid.*, 371.

focus the implications of a still-life: a memento mori situated among a bounty of earthly delights. For two guests – the minister and the alderman – the party is over. Summoned to the city hospital from the luxe banquet, they must hear the confession and take the dying man's testimony. The failure of Lizzie's harried mission overagainst the matrimony of young Emily Garie to young Charlie Ellis effectively affirms the legitimacy of their lot within Philadelphia's municipal framework. No longer constrained by the pernicious Stevens, or the threat of the neighborhood degenerating into the slums Lizzie encountered in her pursuit of McCloskey, Webb secures the position of his characters within the neighborhoods they fiercely protected.

Through his analysis of the wedding feast, Samuel Otter puts pressure on Webbs' descriptions of surfaces, arguing that “details of gesture, tone, and ornament are not only expressions of personal identity, but also part of a struggle for status, authority, and even survival.”<sup>135</sup> In short, Webb's aesthetics of manners and domesticity is not superficial or imitative like Clay's caricatures: the elaborate feast, or the lavish décor of Wilson's home, do not “displace social realities” concerning the contentious status of free blacks in antebellum Philadelphia.<sup>136</sup> Instead social realities, like the gentrifying neighborhoods of the novels' three homes, are shown to precariously balance on the verge of constitution, degeneration, and reconstitution, as evinced by the Garies's move to Philadelphia, their murder during the riot (and the subsequent displacement of their children), and the wedding that unites Emily Garie with the Ellis family. When Webb superimposes the

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<sup>135</sup> Samuel Otter, “Frank Webb's Still Life: Rethinking Literature and Politics through *The Garies and their Friends*,” *American Literary History* 20.4 (2008), 748.

<sup>136</sup> Samuel Otter, “Frank Webb's Still Life,” 748.

prettily composed wedding scene upon Lizzie's chase, McCloskey's confession, and Wilson's suicide, these snapshots tell a larger story of antebellum Philadelphia's patchwork progress: a city of freedmen, but deprived of the right to vote in 1837; with a building devoted to abolitionism, but burned to the ground in the midst of its grand opening in 1838; a decade of sporadic street riots, but followed by the consolidation of the city's outlying neighborhoods under a stronger centralized government in 1854. In *The Garies and their Friends*, the recognition by municipal authorities of changes in the social configuration of Philadelphia fits into this general pattern of the city's progress, leaving a matrimonial portrait alongside a chalk outline stamped on to the pavement.

### **A City of Firsts to the Last**

The aphorism that all history begins with geography rings true for Philadelphia. Philadelphia was the first North American city to be planned out before it actually filled in. The first newspaper, the first magazine, the first lending library, all gives the city a distinguished position in the story of our national growth. During the nineteenth century, when foreign travelers came stateside to tour the country, metaphors inspired by the grid structured their literary responses the city.

Literary conceptions of Philadelphia during the 1830s and 1840s showed a city divided against itself. On one side, travel writers worked from the premise conjured by William Penn's grid plan and from there elaborated upon its geographical, social, and political evolution. The sites they routinely visited led to generic observations about the city. Travel literature emphasized the city's imaginative coherence; its row homes,

institutional buildings, its gridded streets, were homogeneous and orderly; especially when compared with cities like New York and Boston, Philadelphia seemed diminutive, even provincial. At least it appeared so in the lexicon of travel narratives.

At the same time, local authors such as Frank Webb and George Lippard saw the city in a period of social crisis. Amid national debates about the negative consequences of urbanization, these novelists took their material from the actual events and places within the city to expose the city's other side: the living conditions of the working classes and the poor, racial conflict exploding into street riots, labor disputes, and political corruption. Through the city's and the nation's thriving periodical industry, both authors contributed their voices to reform movements. In 1847, soon after the runaway success of *The Quaker City*, Lippard founded the country's first labor organization, The Brotherhood of the Union. Two years later he began his own newspaper called *The Quaker City Weekly* (1849-1851). In it, he printed material about working-class politics, public lectures, meeting announcements of unionist causes, stories, poetry, and excerpts from novels.<sup>137</sup> Webb wrote for *Freedom's Journal* (1827-1829), the country's first African American periodical, decades before he published his novel. He later contributed articles and stories to *The New Era: A Coloured American National Journal* (1870-1874) spearheaded for a time by Booker T. Washington.<sup>138</sup> With their journalistic approaches to

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<sup>137</sup> Shelley Streeby, "Opening up the Story Paper: George Lippard and the Construction of Class," *boundary 2* 24.1 (1997): 177-203. Accessed November 28, 2013, J-Stor. Streeby's article provides an overview of Lippard's contributions to the city's as well as the nation's discourse on working class politics in exploring the intersections of his literary and journalistic writings, and discusses the mutual influence of these forms in the periodicals Lippard wrote for and edited.

<sup>138</sup> Robert Reid-Pharr, introduction to *The Garies and their Friends*, by Frank J. Webb (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), xiv, xvii.

narrating the city, both Webb's and Lippard's novels imagined a violent Philadelphia riven by class and race conflict. They marked transitioning neighborhoods, namely Southwark and the Cedar neighborhood, as crucial sites in the negotiation of these conflicts. In telling a social history of the city, *The Quaker City* and *The Garies and their Friends* reveal neighborhood narratives as artifacts not to be overlooked in the adjustment and renegotiation of social orders. If Lippard created a centerless city deprived of a moral order, Webb resurrected a bastion of civility, tied to the home and to the local community and showed these values to endure in spite of a hostile environment.

Journalism and journalistic methods seemed less clearly distinguished from “literature” during the antebellum period. The relationship between the two forms would become more contentious later in the nineteenth century, as William Dean Howells developed his theories of realism. By including sketches of local street life and neighborhood vignettes in these early Philadelphia novels, Webb and Lippard paved the way for novelists like William Dean Howells and later Paul Laurence Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson who also made particular cities the setting of their novels and experimented with their prose in locales of Boston and New York. With the city as the location of the “real” in literary fiction, swiftly changing social geographies intrigued writers. American cities loomed large and impersonal, and yet continued to draw people from all over the world. These writers immersed their readers in the practical, lived experience of cities on a local level.

The South End or the Back Bay; the Lower East Side or Greenwich Village; Southwark or Center City; Commonwealth Avenue, Fifth Avenue, Market Street; the appearance of these names conjures a wealth of meaning about Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Upon continuing an examination of transitional neighborhoods in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, *The Sport of the Gods*, and *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, vignettes of the local life within American cities made them more accessible, and more representative of reality, to readers, visitors, and city dwellers alike.

## Chapter 3

### NEIGHBORHOOD TOURISM IN BOSTON

I cannot think that the sense of neighborhood can be a bad thing for any artist...if it narrows it deepens and this may be the secret of Boston.

—William Dean Howells

Home of the American Revolution, bluestockings, and baked cod, Boston in the second half of the nineteenth century was a city on the make. People came from all over the country— people interested in the arts and sciences, people looking for employment in manufacturing and trade, and people touring the ancient (and prophesied) “city upon a hill.” Boston became a national destination for American art, letters, and culture. Visitors also came because there were other social revolutions afoot. Leaders of abolitionism, woman’s suffrage, and settlement house reform came to the city’s lecture halls and churches to gain a national podium. At the same time, like barnacles clinging to a water-locked city, lodging-houses filled up with boatloads of European immigrants eager for work and a new home. Looking for the same stability, black migrants sought refuge from the Jim Crow South. Between 1850 and 1890, the population of Boston more than tripled in size, making it the nation’s sixth largest city.<sup>139</sup> Socially and geographically, the city showed signs of growing pains. If Boston were a house, it needed an addition, and city officials were charged with finding creative solutions to accommodate a population growing in size and diversity.

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<sup>139</sup> Jim Vrabel, *When in Boston: A Timeline and Almanac* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 154, 222. Vrabel provides U.S. Census Bureau Statistics for the population of Boston proper.

Demographically and geographically, like most old cities not constructed on an orderly grid, Boston had already been spreading haphazardly for two centuries. Since the 1830s, railroads, bridges and toll roads crossing the peninsula and darting out to the suburbs afforded some of the populace more living space. Infilling the land and annexing the surrounding suburbs to accumulate a hefty population appeared to be a national trend among the country's metropolitan areas in the last quarter of the century—and the city of Boston was no exception.

The geography of Boston confounds twenty-first century visitors to the city. Like most old cities, it spread and bulged and criss-crossed as it aged. The settlement founded by the Puritans on the Shawmut Peninsula in 1630 encompassed an area less than one square mile. Connected to the Atlantic Ocean on the east within the recesses of a protective harbor and cut off from the mainland on the west by the Charles River and its estuaries, with a narrow isthmus tapering down to adjoin the small landmass to rest of the continent, the geography of the Massachusetts Bay Colony remained essentially in the same configuration until late into the eighteenth century. Deep coves cut into the land on the southeast, northeast, and northwest, while the southwestern quadrant formed the brackish estuary of the Charles River. Tidal flats of the river's delta became known as the Back Bay.<sup>140</sup>

As Boston gained prominence in the arts, it also became the center of Commonwealth politics, business, and trade. Public officials and land developers

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<sup>140</sup> Nancy Seasholes, *Gaining Ground: A History of Landmaking in Boston* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), 7. An extensive history of Boston's landmaking projects by Seasholes is here summarized.

determined that the expanding burg needed to gain ground. This would be accomplished, as one developer put it, by “cutting down the hills to fill in the coves.”<sup>141</sup> Before the city was flattened and paved, a cross-section of Boston proper at the opening of the nineteenth century would reveal features that today are a matter of geographical record. The “city upon a hill” started as a small town crested with three hills called the Trimountain, or Tremont. The tallest of these three (and the only one left standing today, though sizably diminished,) is Beacon Hill, which was flanked on either side by Cotton Hill and Mount Vernon. Excavation of the Trimountain began during the last years of the eighteenth century, when construction efforts were focused on building a new State House designed by Charles Bulfinch. A hollow gored out of the base of Beacon Hill went into the building’s foundations. The peak of Beacon Hill was also sheared away as property owners began to excavate their own land to sell gravel to contractors filling in lots along the shoreline. By 1803 plans had been made for the use of Mount Vernon land in creating Charles Street.<sup>142</sup> Forming the perimeter of the Commons at the base of Beacon Hill, Charles Street comprised the first steps in the evolution of the amphibious Back Bay onto terra firma.

In the next two decades the Back Bay began to grow legs with the construction of the Mill Dam and the toll road that ran its length. Real estate developer and amateur civil engineer Uriah Cotting pitched a plan to the town committee in 1813 for the construction of an elaborate system of dykes and dams, which would use tide water to power factories

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<sup>141</sup> Qtd. in Walter Muir Whitehill and Lawrence W. Kennedy, *Boston: A Topographical History* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2000), 73.

<sup>142</sup> An overview of the demolition of the Trimountain is given in Bainbridge Bunting, *Houses of Boston's Back Bay: An Architectural History 1840-1917* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1967), 28.

that would be built along the shoreline. Actual construction of the Mill Dam began in 1818, with its toll road officially opened to traffic in 1821.<sup>143</sup> In its final form, the dyke contained the waters of the Back Bay and continued the line of Beacon Street from Charles Street, charging across the Charles River basin, and connecting Boston to the suburb of Brookline. With its views of the Public Gardens, the State House, and Beacon Hill, the toll road also formed a fashionable promenade for pedestrians. However, the plan was stalled by a series of revisions and expansions and over the next two decades the brackish Back Bay, hemmed in by the Mill Dam, became a noisome public nuisance. Waterfront industries never became as financially lucrative as Copping had envisioned; however, the toll road created a convenient margin to infill the marshy waters. Over time, the plan for industrial development was replaced with a concerted effort to develop the land for residential real estate and would become the city's largest land development project in the second half of the nineteenth century.

As the Back Bay grew so did the fortunes of one of its adopted sons. In 1866, William Dean Howells moved to Cambridge with his wife and their three-year-old daughter to begin a new job as assistant editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*. Howells's residence in Boston coincided with the largest landmaking ventures in the city's history. In fact, the time line of his tenure with the *Atlantic* is a near perfect match with what appears to be a ten-year sprint in the making of both a modern American city and a "Dean of American Letters." Literature written in the wake of this activity echoes the ground-rumbling expansion throughout Boston's metro area. Major filling of the Back Bay

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<sup>143</sup> Nancy Seasholes, *Gaining Ground*, 15.

began the year after the formation of *The Atlantic Monthly* (1857), with most of it completed by 1886.<sup>144</sup> That year, Henry James published *The Bostonians*, which featured the newly-filled Back Bay neighborhood as the home of the city's social leaders.<sup>145</sup> A year prior, in 1885, Howells had framed the construction and subsequent ruin of a new home in the neighborhood as the turning point of an entrepreneur's career in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. Both novels bore the imprimatur of the land-filling project's success. By the time Oliver Wendell Holmes moved from his Beacon Hill home to the Back Bay, committing “justifiable domicile,” the neighborhood began to supplant the South End as the coveted place to live.<sup>146</sup> However insalubrious its origin, the Back Bay became the home of Boston’s elites.

Geographically, the term “Back Bay” originally referred to the Charles River estuary along the back side of the Boston neck. As the area gradually filled with made land, two distinct neighborhoods emerged. Socially, the Back Bay spanned “Arlington Street to Massachusetts Avenue between Boylston Street and the Charles River.”<sup>147</sup> As the need for more residential land grew, the bay area became contested territory among private business, the city, and the state.<sup>148</sup> Because most of the Back Bay existed outside the riparian line of the Charles River, the State, not the city, had political jurisdiction over the area. The land that grew out of the necklands became known as the South End and

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<sup>144</sup> Jim Vrabel, *When In Boston*, 169.

<sup>145</sup> Jim Vrabel, *When In Boston*, 217.

<sup>146</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, “The New Portfolio,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 55 (1885), 253. Accessed from Cornell's *Making of America*

<sup>147</sup> Nancy Seasholes, *Gaining Ground*, 153.

<sup>148</sup> Nancy Seasholes, *Gaining Ground*, 173-174.

belonged to the city. After 1850 the South End referred to “the new lands South of Dover Street, developed in the area where the neck widened as it approached Roxbury.”<sup>149</sup> Thereafter the South End and the Back Bay grew in tandem, but in relative isolation from one another. With their main thoroughfares, Washington Street and Mill Dam, respectively, running along different axes, there was no direct contact between the two areas.<sup>150</sup> It is as if the two neighborhoods turned their backs on each other. As business and trade took off in the city center, public officials wanted to retain enough living room to accommodate the immigrant and laboring classes as well as the wealthy business owners, merchants, and the entrepreneurial classes. The Commonwealth's agenda for the Back Bay was to create “attractive residential areas so that upper-middle-class Yankees, who were valued as both voters and taxpayers, would remain in the city to counteract the Irish immigrants pouring into Boston at the time.”<sup>151</sup> Soon after all the new construction, South End landowners began to subdivide row homes to create lodging-houses and this has been attributed to neighborhood's slip into squalor while the city's social elite snatched up Back Bay lots.<sup>152</sup> As Commonwealth Avenue, the grand boulevard of the Back Bay, began more and more to resemble Haussmann's Champs-Elysees, after which it was modeled, the South End, with its crowded rooming-houses, day-laborers, and Irish immigrants, began more and more to take on the characteristics of New York's Lower East Side.

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<sup>149</sup> Walter Muir Whitehill and Lawrence W. Kennedy, *Boston: A Topographical History*, 121.

<sup>150</sup> Walter Muir Whitehill and Lawrence W. Kennedy, *Boston: A Topographical History*, 129.

<sup>151</sup> Nancy Seasholes, *Gaining Ground*, 178

<sup>152</sup> The decline of the South End at the end of the twentieth-century is documented in settlement studies such as Robert A. Woods, ed., *The City Wilderness: A Settlement Study by Residents and Associates of the South End House* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1898).

Whether depicting the sordid living conditions of the urban poor or a bourgeois Sunday stroll in the park, city-sketches emerged as a popular form in the periodical press of Howells's time. Using the magazine as a platform, Howells began to write about the prominence of urban centers during a time of concentrated metropolitan development. But Howells's ties to the periodical press precede his time in Boston, and the contentious relationship that formed in Howells's mind between the writing of journalism and the writing of poetry, travel sketches, or prose, actually had its roots in his Ohio upbringing. Journalism was a cottage industry in the Howells's household throughout the young writer's formative years, accounting for his first income and providing a substitution for more traditional means of education. On his first visit in 1860, he came to Boston as a journalist and aspiring writer, with some newspaper sketches and poems having been published in the *Atlantic*.<sup>153</sup> When he returned to assume his new role at the magazine six years later he also came back like a tourist, with a friendly eye for place. The place that shaped the young writer's imagination into his first manuscript lay as far away from the typesetting room of his father's newspaper bureau in Ohio as it did from the *Atlantic* offices in The Old Corner Bookstore on Tremont Street. As a gesture of appreciation for writing his campaign biography, fellow Westerner Abraham Lincoln awarded Howells a consulship in Venice spanning the Civil War years. The duties, from routine paperwork to hosting diplomats, left Howells time enough to spend writing and touring the city and the countryside. From recounting nights at the opera to lamenting the drudgery of household chores, Howells's touristic, peripatetic mode melded the domestic and the

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<sup>153</sup> Howells's first trip to Boston is recounted in his memoir, *My Literary Friends and Acquaintance*, and in Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson, *William Dean Howells: A Writer's Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 52-56.

social. The method produced results. He formed his impressions into travel sketches that were serialized in the *Boston Advertiser*.<sup>154</sup> Upon his return to the U.S. in 1865, Howells had his first manuscript in hand. *Venetian Life* debuted in 1866 to enthusiastic reviews. As the bond between journalism and literature solidified in the periodical press in the form of travel sketches and vignettes of city life, Howells's newspaper reportage and travel experience influenced the form and style his novel writing would later take.

City sketches had their antecedents in early nineteenth-century Europe, where they were called *feuilletons*, the French word for leaves.<sup>155</sup> These leaves were inserted into newspapers and eventually became regular columns, most often featuring the city's art and culture news. With this novel way of approaching the public, the *feuilletoniste* personified the man-about-town, writing about everything from theatrical debuts and art exhibitions to literary gossip and society scandals. In part because of its bricolage content, the form gained wide appeal. Constant demand for the next installment guaranteed aspiring writers paid work and the freedom to experiment with their longer length pieces. Originally sketches of the writer's city in which voice, persona, and description took priority over plot and characterization, *feuilleton* writing evolved to encompass serial narratives. What began as marginal content, the *feuilleton* inaugurated a period of urban literature in which newspaper fictions were transformed from ephemeral journalism to the nineteenth-century novel of realism.

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<sup>154</sup> William Dean Howells. *Literary Friends and Acquaintance: A Personal Retrospect of American Authorship*. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1900), 92.

<sup>155</sup> See Katia Dianina. "The *Feuilleton*: An Everyday Guide to Public Culture in the Age of Great Reforms," *The Slavic and Eastern European Journal* 47.2 (2003): 187-210.

The formal evolution of the feuilleton parallels the transition of Howells's own career, from writer of charming travel narratives to chronicler of Boston (and later, New York). Poised at a crucial point in his career, the former diplomat exchanged picturesque travel sketches of Venetian life for varied scenes of Boston, compiled into a quasi-city guidebook that was published in 1871 as *Suburban Sketches*, the same year he assumed editorship of *The Atlantic Monthly*. A columnist for *Harper's* when the *The Rise of Silas Lapham* was serialized in *Century Illustrated* between 1884 and 1885, by this time Howells had gained enough audience to earn a sabbatical from editorial duties and could afford to turn his attentions to novel-writing full time. In the context of city writing, *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, and subsequently, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889), were widely recognized as the standard of literary achievement. Through an expatriate's return to Boston and to Howells's own travel sketch beginnings, in *An Imperative Duty* (1891), the familiar perambulatory neighborhood narrative features the controversial topic of interracial marriage. Poised in precarious states of their personal lives, Howells's characters journey through neighborhoods in transition, illustrating ongoing social change in America. In the form of city sketches, serial installments, and finally the city novel, walking narratives in Howells's Boston writing reveal a city—and a writer—on the make.

Howells would use the open style of the feuilletoniste to translate everyday life in Boston into an aesthetic that could possess broad national appeal because it was written when American cities started to gain recognition as cosmopolitan centers, and the growth of periodical journalism was there to spread the word. Actions as seemingly mundane as moving in and around the city became both narrative approach and subject matter in a

series of vignettes appearing in the *Atlantic* between 1868 and 1870. In addition to possessing the qualities of a literary Baedeker, these short installments featured changes that were occurring in neighborhoods as the city limits spread. The former diplomat, exchanging Venice for Boston, compiled a quasi-city guidebook that was published in 1871 as *Suburban Sketches*. This first foray into publishing a longer-length volume on life in an American city contains the seeds that would make the qualities of neighborhood life so important in his future city novels. In a casual, rambling tone that coaxes the reader to meander along as the environment evokes observations, tangents, and digressions within the narrator's purview, this narrative approach makes the cityscape more accessible by breaking up the city into neighborhood entities, manageable units. The method would prove to make titanic New York both demystifying and sublime for Basil March in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*.

On approaching the doorstep of his new home the narrator begins his account, like so many New England stories, in deference to the weather. With umbrellas up on feeble guard against the freezing rain, the new residents observe construction sites on their block thawing after a long winter's inactivity: "Here and there in the vacant lots abandoned hoop skirts defied decay; and near the half-finished wooden houses, empty mortar-beds, and bits of lath and slate strewn over the scarred and mutilated ground, added their interest to the scene."<sup>156</sup> When the warm weather finally comes, the animal and vegetable life of the suburb awakens to ever more curious combination with the surroundings. Here, in Charlesbridge, a fictional mash-up of Charlestown and Cambridge, Howells sets

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<sup>156</sup> William Dean Howells, *Suburban Sketches* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1888), 11.

the stage for the advance of the city into the countryside. When “the several voices of the cows pastured in the vacant lots,” mix with “the different whistles of the locomotives passing on the neighboring railroad,” it is fittingly said that, “The neighborhood was in all things a frontier between city and country.”<sup>157</sup> More and more the hassle of fugitive chickens feasting on vine-ripe tomato plants in vacant lots becomes a thing of the past in a neighborhood where, “All around us carpenters were at work building new houses.”<sup>158</sup> These observations are as insightful as they were timely. Two years after the publication of *Suburban Sketches*, the residents of Brighton, Charlestown, and West Roxbury voted for annexation to Boston and the following year the lands were added to the metro area.<sup>159</sup> Neighborhood expansion encompassed more than geography; they became inscribed by the populations that settled them.

With unofficial names referring to locales such as “Dublin” “little Italy” and “little Africa,” neighborhoods in these sketches are shown to grow in ethnic diversity as well as area. Moreover, Howells's observations do not pretend to delimit residents to the insular confines of their own “colonies.” The modernizing city was coming to resemble a miniature cosmos of loosely-federated nations, communities without borders. Through the streets of Boston people moved about freely and unobstructed, a leisurely way to pass the time, as especially does the narrator of *Suburban Sketches*. On one of his walks through “Ferry Street, in which so many Italians live that one might think to find it under a softer sky and in a gentler air,” he encounters doorstep acquaintances, such as an

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<sup>157</sup> William Dean Howells, *Suburban Sketches*, 14.

<sup>158</sup> *ibid.*, 14.

<sup>159</sup> James Vrabell, *When In Boston*, 194, 196.

itinerant Italian organ-grinder. A view of the street transports the observer to Italy, “with houses stuccoed outside, and with gratings at their ground-floor windows; with mouldering archways between the buildings.”<sup>160</sup> His Ferry Street neighbors stop off at his doorstep summer afternoons to share family histories and future plans over a glass of wine. To his annoyance, they respond to this Yankee's use of Italian with “nonchalance...which tacitly implies that there is no other tongue in the world but Italian, and which makes all the earth and air Italian for the time.”<sup>161</sup> One doorstep acquaintance unwittingly denigrates the proffered wine, asking after tasting if it is even made of grapes so poor an imitation of the kind he is accustomed to. Using this humorous anecdote, Howells tempers cultural pretension with idle chatter between neighbors and presents cultural exceptionalism as a two-sided story. By affectionately playing on rivalries that arise between neighbors, Howells's neighborly narrator enacts personal contact as the first, small but vital step in incorporating American domestic culture with its growing international population. Small acts of humanity on a neighborly level send the message to Howells's audience that urbanization is not something to fear.

Even though neighborhoods are identified by the race, class, or nationality of the predominant population living in them, Howells also sees their settlement as a temporary stage within more complex patterns of migration in America's social geography. As quickly naturalized as the Italian neighbors have become to their environment, more than one acquaintance divulges the wish to earn enough money in America to return to the

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<sup>160</sup> William Dean Howells, *Suburban Sketches*, 36.

<sup>161</sup> *ibid.*, 39.

homeland. In this detail, Howells discerns quite early a common trend (later termed chain-migration) among many Italian immigrants coming to America after the 1850s.<sup>162</sup> Howells also plays on the familiar rivalries that surface between different immigrant groups, as the narrator observes his Italian friend “viewed with inexpressible scorn those Irish who came to this country, and were so little sensible of the benefits it conferred upon them.”<sup>163</sup> Petty prejudices between old and new generations of immigrants are treated with humor and levity. If not biologically, then culturally, Howells sees an eventual melding of different ethnicities into one common, though pluralistic, American identity. In his early observations of American immigration, his attempts at discerning a domestic culture of democracy dovetail with his later realist agenda. Through these views of transient neighbors and ephemeral neighborhood life in *Suburban Sketches*, the culture of American democracy is represented anthropologically, i.e. as all-inclusive and everyday, rather than through the Manichaeian dichotomy of “high” and “low.”

Passages that exemplify the patterns of settlement in and around the suburb of Charlesbridge in *Suburban Sketches* would have been something Howells could easily have summoned based on his own walks throughout Boston's neighborhoods, a leisurely pastime he often enjoyed with friends like Henry James, James Russell Lowell, and John Fiske. Visiting Boston in 1860, Howells would have seen the filling of Charlestown, Cambridge's less prosperous neighbor to the north. Up rose an industrial sector with brick-yards and smokestacks and a high population of resident immigrant laborers in the

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<sup>162</sup> John S. MacDonald and Leatrice D. MacDonald, “Chain Migration Ethnic Neighborhood Formation and Social Networks,” *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly* 42.1 (1964): 82-97.

<sup>163</sup> William Dean Howells, *Suburban Sketches*, 42.

midst of overtaking the Saxon populations, who moved to Somerville. “By 1860,” writes immigration historian Oscar Handlin, “approximately 10,000 of Charlestown’s 25,000 inhabitants were Catholic—almost all Irish.”<sup>164</sup> Howells recreates the settlements of these new Bostonians in the installment entitled, “A Pedestrian Tour.” Here, the effects of city-walking on the narrative imagination are explicitly aligned: “As I sally forth upon Benicia Street, the whole suburb of Charlesbridge stretches about me, —a vast space upon which I can embroider any fancy I like as I saunter along.”<sup>165</sup>

The Fitchburg Railroad is the first stop on this walking tour through the Cambridge and Charlestown that would have met Howells's eye. Nearby French-Canadians toil in the brick-yards while the perambulating narrator imagines scrupulous landladies hurrying about their lodging houses “with smoking bowls of *bouillon* or *cafe-au-lait*.”<sup>166</sup> Next comes Howells's specialty, that familiar tableau of street life that he makes rise to greet even the weariest traveler with the hospitality of home:

So much of the local life appears upon the street; there is so much gossip from house to house...the women, bear-headed, or with a shawl folded over the head and caught beneath the chin with the hand, have such a contented down-at-heel aspect, shuffling from door to door, or lounging, arms akimbo, among the cats and poultry at their own thresholds, that one beholding it all might well fancy himself upon some Italian *calle* or *vicolo*.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants, 1790-1880: A Study in Acculturation* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1991), 98.

<sup>165</sup> William Dean Howells, *Suburban Sketches*, 61.

<sup>166</sup> *ibid.*, 63.

<sup>167</sup> *ibid.*, 66.

He then makes his way north through the brick-yards to the Irish settlement, which he proceeds to call Dublin. As he travels from the French-Canadian quarter to Dublin, it becomes even more apparent to the narrator how dynamic the forces of migration and settlement in this country truly are. This human admixture available for unattached and undetected scrutiny in piebald American cities was a novelty to most Americans in the late 1860s that Howells attempted to reproduce in his narration. He describes the prejudice against new arrivals to the neighborhood with sympathetic understanding, almost as if to explain away a personal flaw and gently nudge a national tendency: “it is encouraging, moreover, when any people can flatter upon a superior prosperity and virtue, and we may take heart from the fact that the French Canadians, many of whom have lodgings in Dublin, are not well seen by the higher classes of the citizens there.”<sup>168</sup> Inscrutable as it is, in Howells's version, American superiority is passed along the line like something inherited that can be exchanged for a higher station with time. Perhaps because he spent his thirteenth year in a log cabin and now lived on Sacramento Street, he, like many Americans, could relate to not only moving around, but also to the dream of moving up. The buildings the Irish move into, “were dwellings of an older sort, and had clearly been inherited from a population now as extinct in that region as the Pequots.”<sup>169</sup> Previous dwellers in this region fled on newly built streetcar lines before the Irish settlers and moved to the farther reaches of Boston's suburbs. Throughout his walking tour, the narrator notices not only demographic change in the settlements but also that settlement engenders a recurring pattern of displacement: “It is

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<sup>168</sup> William Dean Howells, *Suburban Sketches*, 70.

<sup>169</sup> *ibid.*, 69.

amusing to find Dublin fearful of the encroachment of the French, as we, in our turn, dread the advance of the Irish.”<sup>170</sup> New arrivals displace their predecessors who move away from the city-center seeking homeownership and settling the outer suburbs.

Howells accurately describes the effect that new settlers have on neighborhood real estate in this lengthy passage:

The householders view with fear and jealousy the erection of any dwelling of less than a stated cost, as portending a possible advent of Irish; and when the calamitous race actually appears, a mortal pang strikes to the bottom of every pocket. Values tremble throughout that neighborhood, to which the new-comers communicate a species of moral dry-rot. None but the Irish will build near the Irish; and the infection of fear spreads to the elder Yankee homes about, and the owners prepare to abandon them, — not always, however, let us hope, without turning, at the expense of the invaders, a Parthian penny in their flight. In my walk from Dublin to North Charlesbridge, I saw more than one token of the encroachment of the Celtic army, which had here and there invested a Yankee house with besieging shanties on every side, and thus given to its essential and otherwise quite hopeless ugliness a touch of the poetry that attends failing fortunes, and hallows decayed gentility of however poor a sort originally. The fortunes of such a house are, of course, not to be retrieved. Where the Celt sets his foot, there the Yankee (and it is perhaps wholesome if not agreeable to know that the Irish citizen whom we do not always honor as our equal in civilization loves to speak of us scornfully as Yankees) rarely, if ever, returns. The place remains to the intruder and his heirs forever. We gracefully retire before him even in politics, as the metropolis—if it is the metropolis—can witness; and we wait with an anxious curiosity the encounter of the Irish and the Chinese, now rapidly approaching each other from opposite shores of the continent. Shall we be crushed in the collision of these superior races?<sup>171</sup>

While the ironic tone does little to mask the underlying paranoia, the passage reveals some truths about the neighborhood development that still resonate today.

Whether Howells sought to lampoon such perspectives or himself ascribed to them is

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<sup>170</sup> *ibid.*, 70.

<sup>171</sup> William Dean Howells, *Suburban Sketches*, 71-72.

somewhat beside the point. It's the scramble for resources, for jobs, for home, for money, for culture and civilization that keeps up the competition among generations of the country's settlers and wage earners. In his rambles, Howells presents neighborliness as a practical way to cope with and ameliorate the racial tensions and cultural pretensions. Rather than statically sewing these people piecemeal into the fabric of the neighborhoods they represent, Howells accomplishes their distribution throughout Boston and its suburbs as a dynamic process, reflecting on various neighborhoods as seats of transformation. The passage shows that neighborhoods change according to and are characterized by the people who live in them; they are self-formed and only temporarily self-sustained; they play an important role in the process of community formation and assimilating newcomers to a strange environment.

More than geographical entities, neighborhoods are identified with the communities of people who live in them. Howells must have intuited the impermanence and porosity of their borders which may account for his leaving out sign posts and address numbers or fictionalizing street names in *Suburban Sketches*. After journeying through several Boston neighborhoods, the narrator ends the series with the family moving out of their Benicia Street home. The Howells family had a pattern of moving that went back to the father, and Americans in general were far more peripatetic than we realize in earlier times. While the topography of the narrator's wanderings throughout *Suburban Sketches* can be triangulated on a contemporary map of Boston, the narrator comprehends their ephemerality: "and if the reader whom I have sometimes seemed to direct thither, should seek it out, he would hardly find Benicia Street by the city sign-

board. Yet this is not wholly because it was an ideal locality, but because much of its reality has now become merely historical, a portion of the tragical poetry of the past.”<sup>172</sup> From his earliest writings, Howells deployed narrative walks through Boston's neighborhoods as a structuring device in his characters' adaptation to life in the city. Ultimately, for Howells, the commitment to showing neighborhoods as a nexus of social change works toward domesticating the nineteenth-century city.

### **You Are Where You Live: “A critical fastidious and reluctant Boston”**

In *Suburban Sketches*, Howells contends that almost everybody is from somewhere else. His observation informs his subsequent narratives of neighborhood tourism as they examine the impact of place on personal identity. The major theme of Howells's fiction concerns the movements of populations, and *Their Wedding Journey* (1871)—a fictionalized travelogue about a repatriated American couple's domestic honeymoon—and *A Chance Acquaintance* (1873)—the story of the loveable Kitty Ellison's engagement caper with a Bostonian through the streets of Quebec—prove no exception. These, too, can be considered Boston novels because both were written while Howells was residing there and because the city is always in the background, despite not being the central setting. In fact, in both novels, the city exists by contrast, always in the imaginative foreground of the main characters. For example, while the Marches await the departure of their Hudson River boat for its journey to New York City, Isabel observes “a very stylish couple—from New York, she knew as well as if they had given her their address on West 999<sup>th</sup> Street. The lady was not pretty, and she was not, Isabel

<sup>172</sup> William Dean Howells, *Suburban Sketches*, 242.

thought, dressed in the perfect taste of Boston; but she owned frankly to herself that the New-Yorkeress was stylish, undeniably effective.”<sup>173</sup> For Isabel, deportment and dress can substitute as credentials of one's city as adequately as one's address, and yet Bostonians, according to Isabel, still lead the country in aesthetic matters. Nevertheless, a marked insecurity about the status of Bostonians seems to underly the civic boosterism expressed here as Isabel March prepares to depart for New York. Going into and out of distant and distinct locales, Howells's characters carry and reflect their place even when they are traveling.

Boston remains at the fore of the Marches' perspective and the basis for comparison in all things New York. Arriving early in the morning they observe the press of the city's workers on the paved sidewalks streaming right alongside intimidatingly large-scale construction projects. With her senses assaulted by the surrounding tumult caused by the “eternal building up and pulling down” of structures, Isabel can't help herself in “contrasting this poor Broadway with Washington Street.”<sup>174</sup> She refers of course to the spacious thoroughfare occasionally branching out into shady parks and neat iron-fenced squares of the South End as a foil to the main artery glutting midtown Manhattan. She even uses New York's commuter suburbs to upgrade the status of her declining neighborhood. On a visit to some friends in New Jersey, when Isabel discovers that Leonard must travel fifty miles by rail everyday to his job in New York, she refers to his unfortunate commute in a glib side-comment to her husband, “Then, darling, there are

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<sup>173</sup> William Dean Howells, *Their Wedding Journey* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1872), 10.

<sup>174</sup> William Dean Howells, *Their Wedding Journey*, 28.

worse things in this world than living up at the South End, aren't there?"<sup>175</sup> It would seem the Boston couple, proud as they are of their city, are self-conscious about what their neighborhood says about them. In these early novels, characters emit an almost purblind dedication to upholding Boston as the nation's cultural capital, an airy castle that Howells begins gently to nudge in his characterization of the Marches and subsequently of Miles Arbuton in *A Chance Acquaintance*.

Place describes character to such an extent in Howells's next travel narrative that the two merge to become the subject of a satirical portrait. In *A Chance Acquaintance*, Howells deploys the archetypal acolyte of Boston and this time introduces a delicately-wrought counter-weight to offset Bostonian pretension. A volley of prejudices, misconceptions, and assumptions build up and ultimately break down the courtship of two travelers from very different places when they chance to meet while vacationing on a Canadian steamboat. When Mr. Miles Arbuton of Boston, Massachusetts makes his first appearance the other passengers mistake him for an Englishman, suggested by his scrupulous dress and air of indifference—a misperception that perpetuates Boston's roots in Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism and makes Arbuton hold himself as somehow superior to his fellow travelers. Kitty Ellison's forbears, on the other hand, hail from West Virginia and have since settled in northwestern New York in the sleepy town of Eriecreek. Orphaned many years ago and left to the care of older cousins lovingly referred to as Aunt Fanny and Uncle Dick, Kitty's modest background is deciphered from Arbuton's first glance at the family when he makes the hasty decision not to associate with “these

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<sup>175</sup> *ibid.*, 36.

people...in spite of the long-lashed grey eyes.”<sup>176</sup> His snap judgment proceeds from a prejudice that pegs the Ellisons as provincial, and therefore unworthy. He had “a conscience against encouraging people whom he might have to drop for reasons of society.”<sup>177</sup> As the party makes their way down the St. Lawrence, Howells's famed guide book descriptions of the Saguenay and his gilded social commentary hold the tourists in thrall, alternately with the natural surroundings, and increasingly with each other. Against this backdrop of foreign travel, local prejudices and regional stereotypes bloom into an unconventional happy ending that will be a parting of ways rather than a marriage for the mismatched pair.

Miles Arbuton and Kitty Ellison's misalignment is a misalignment grounded in social geography. After the family's first encounter with the gentleman, Aunt Fanny, the well-intentioned matchmaker of the novel, airs her reservations about their fellow-traveler to her husband in the privacy of their state room: “They say Bostonians are so cold.”<sup>178</sup> Meantime, Arbuton has his own scruples: “His doubt of these Western people was the most natural, if not the most justifiable thing in the world...”<sup>179</sup> As incidents throw the young people into closer contact with one another, Arbuton's fickle fascination with Kitty stems from a seemingly unconscious desire to assert his superiority, “which, if he had given it shape, would have been *noblesse oblige*.”<sup>180</sup> He flatters himself in believing his attentions to this spirited Western girl are benevolent and charitable, when

<sup>176</sup> William Dean Howells, *A Chance Acquaintance* (Toronto: Belford Brothers Publishers, 1876), 23.

<sup>177</sup> *ibid.*, 23.

<sup>178</sup> *ibid.*, 43.

<sup>179</sup> William Dean Howells, *A Chance Acquaintance*, 73.

<sup>180</sup> *ibid.*, 36.

the folly of this courtship actually proves to be the Bostonian's self-love and his preoccupation with preserving an image of himself as a proper Bostonian. Ironically, their ultimate incompatibility rests on the chauvenistic habits and behaviors developed in the locale of Arbuton's origins.

If, as in the case of Miles Arbuton, “you are where you live,” Boston comes to mean much more and much less than coordinates on a map or a vaunted history when Arbuton escorts Kitty on several tours of Quebec, where they have landed for an unexpected stay. An injured Aunt Fanny plans the young pair's itinerary, as Kitty tells Arbuton, she “has nothing to sustain her now but planning our expeditions about the city. She has got the map and the history of Quebec by heart, and she holds us to the literal fulfillment of her instructions.”<sup>181</sup> The vicarious tourist makes a fine pair with her husband the Colonel, an amateur historian with a ready reservoir of local trivia and lore. In one of many flirting matches, Kitty playfully ribs her Boston acquaintance claiming her cousin probably knows and loves Boston even more than he does. The avuncular chaperon proves this to be true on their tour of the Old Town of Quebec. Recounting an eighteenth-century battle that occurred in this very spot with troops marching down this very alley, Uncle Dick goes on to compare anecdotal trivia about the battle at Bunker Hill with Arbuton. When Arbuton offers nothing in reply, Uncle Dick secretly gives him the ironic (and metonymic) nickname, “Boston.”

In his characterization of Miles “Boston” Arbuton, Howells satirizes prejudices about American geographies that have become even more localized than traditional

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<sup>181</sup> *ibid.*, 129.

city/country or North/South dichotomies. Because Arbuton is only trained in a very narrow way about the manners, etiquette, and what is considered proper in an insular circle of Boston society, he is more provincial than these “Western” people. In this regard, *A Chance Acquaintance* can be read as a satirical spin-off of *Their Wedding Journey*. Though the Marches only surface by name in the former—as the lone Boston acquaintances of the Ellisons—they play a crucial role in bringing “Boston” Arbuton, i.e. the caricature of Uncle Jack's creation, into relief. Upon hearing from Kitty that the Marches live in the South End, Arbuton hastily denies knowing them. And Kitty, “having perceived that her friends were snubbed,” discerns that according to Arbuton's elusive measure it is not enough to live in Boston but to live in the right neighborhood, as if the right neighborhood is a synecdoche for the entire city.<sup>182</sup>

So inscribed is Boston on the mental landscape of both the Marches and Arbuton, between them there might be a distinction without a difference. However, the values they each place on the city influence Kitty to discontinue her engagement to a “critical fastidious and reluctant Boston.”<sup>183</sup> For the Marches, their South End home on Nankeen Square is tranquil and quaint. They have traveled to Europe; they have endured New York. Over and over, their dialogues are beaded with remarks about never leaving Boston for this place or that. Arbuton, on the other hand, holds his association with the city to the personal disadvantage of non-Bostonians, particularly Kitty Ellison, who begins to form conflicting views of the city. There's “the jesting, easy, sympathetic

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<sup>182</sup> William Dean Howells, *A Chance Acquaintance*, 120.

<sup>183</sup> *ibid.*, 160.

Boston of Mr. and Mrs. March” and “This new Boston with which Mr. Arbuton inspired her. . . a Boston of mysterious prejudices and lofty reservations; a Boston of high and difficult tastes.”<sup>184</sup> Whereas Arbuton remains tethered to the increasingly arcane notion of Bostonian exceptionalism, Howells continues his neighborhood critique through the meanderings of the Marches (and the Laphams), and through their eventual removal from Boston, goes on to capture the social metamorphosis of the South End (as well as several vicinities within New York), in his two great novels of urban realism, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *A Hazard of New Fortunes*.

### **Unyielding Ground: Lapham's Back Bay**

Perhaps of all literary accounts of the movement of society away from the South End, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) has received the most attention among literary critics and historical topographers.<sup>185</sup> The time line of the Laphams' residence in the South End coincides perfectly with the decline of the neighborhood. For Howells, the adaptation of fictional characters to an ever-changing environment was a means to satisfying the dual (and not always complementary) aims of literary realism—of developing both a social critique and an aesthetic form. While depictions of the Boston cityscape in this novel achieve a muted dignity reminiscent of a Childe Hassam painting, socially, the *The Rise of Silas Lapham* codifies neighborhoods in a much more restrictive and sinister way than in Howells's prior work. In *Suburban Sketches* a freewheeling

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<sup>184</sup> *ibid.*, 159.

<sup>185</sup> Whitehill, Vrabel, and Bunting have all correlated the South End's decline and Howells's representation of it in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* in their histories of Boston.

narrator explores the different people of the city on the basis of curiosity and neighborliness; in *A Chance Acquaintance*, Kitty can breezily dismiss Arbuton and his overblown pretensions, particularly unsubstantial when aired outside of their context. Not so in *Lapham*. Howells shows un-neighborliness to prevail in the Back Bay, where casual acquaintances are earned or shunned, transacted or dispatched, but never given freely.

Bostonians no less than other urbanites have a tradition of categorizing people according to their street address. An architectural history of the Back Bay classifies, “the old rich on Beacon Street, the old poor on Marlborough, the new rich on Commonwealth Avenue, and the new poor on Newbury,” it goes on, “Within this hierarchy an even loftier rank was conferred on the 'water side' of Beacon Street or the 'sunny side' of Commonwealth Avenue.”<sup>186</sup> Howells explicitly uses the former address to frame the construction of the Laphams' new Back Bay home. Crowded predominantly with lodging-houses by 1885, the same year the novel was published, the South End's decline coincides with the Lapham's move to the water-side of Beacon Street.<sup>187</sup> For Howells, the South End and the Back Bay challenged assumptions of what it meant to represent Boston society. After all, in *The American Scene* Henry James wasn't only describing a piece of land when he referred to the Back Bay as a “tract pompous and prosaic.”<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> Bainbridge Bunting, *Houses of Boston's Back Bay: An Architectural History 1840-1917* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1967), 28.

<sup>187</sup> Albert B. Wolfe. *The Lodging-House Problem in Boston* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1913), 14. In his settlement house study, Wolfe writes: “By 1885 the South End had become dominantly a lodging house section.”

<sup>188</sup> Henry James, *The American Scene*, 245.

Bartley Hubbard, feature reporter for the city paper, concludes his “Solid Men of Boston” series with a profile of paint entrepreneur Silas Lapham. So amused is Hubbard by the effect of “burly simplicity” left by Lapham's upbringing in the Vermont countryside, the writer cannot resist the impulse to give his character portrait the unflattering shadings of an Horatio Alger parody. Hubbard ends his rags-to-riches rhetoric with a neighborhood critique, encoded in the address of Lapham's new home:

The subject of this very inadequate sketch is building a house on the water side of Beacon Street, after designs by one of our leading architectural firms, which, when complete, will be one of the finest ornaments of that exclusive avenue.<sup>189</sup>

Lapham's prosperity and what Hubbard perceives to be a shameless display of new-moneyed wealth in his real-estate purchase provokes the reporter's tongue-in-cheek tone. If where one resides may be the measure of personal and professional success, the self-conscious Hubbard would likely have misapprehended condescension when during their interview Lapham casually asked him where the reporter and his wife live. Howells's readers already would have known that his domestic situation is a sensitive topic with Hubbard; and he answers Lapham contritely, “We don't live; we board. Mrs. Nash, 13 Canary Place.”<sup>190</sup> Boarding, as opposed to owning, implicitly demotes Bartely to a lower social status than Lapham—a personal insecurity that he seems more aware of than Lapham is. By comparison with himself, the Lapham family portrait Hubbard gazes at during their interview possesses all the markings that would make it vulnerable to the middling newspaper writer's contemptuous pen. Although Silas Lapham is hardly a

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<sup>189</sup> William Dean Howells, *Novels: 1875-1886* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 878.

<sup>190</sup> William Dean Howells, *Novels: 1875-1886*, 871.

newcomer to New England's metropolis, from the very first scene, Hubbard's profile piece marks Lapham as the perennial outsider in his adopted city of Boston.

Also from the start of *Silas Lapham*, Howells imbues Boston street addresses with certain embedded values that parallel the moral and economic fluctuations of the novel's titular character. After his interview with Bartely Hubbard, we follow Lapham to his home and discover that his current neighborhood is no longer the fashionable place to live.

Lapham drove down Washington Street to Nankeen Square at the South End, where he had lived ever since the mistaken movement of society in that direction ceased. He had not built, but had bought very cheap of a terrified man of good extraction who discovered too late that the South End was not the thing, and who in the eagerness of his flight to the Back Bay threw in his carpets and shades for almost nothing.<sup>191</sup>

Buying a brand new home during a buyer's market and living in a declining neighborhood while the family business expands proves a sound real-estate investment for Lapham. However, it does not pay dividends in social credibility. Prelude to the novel, the family had lived in Nankeen Square prudently and simply, entirely unconcerned with climbing society's rungs: "The fact that they lived in an unfashionable neighborhood was something that they had never been made to feel to their personal disadvantage."<sup>192</sup> That is, until Beacon Hill pays a visit to Nankeen Square. When Mrs. Corey and her daughter call to personally thank Persis for ministering to her illness when the two families met while vacationing on the St. Lawrence, she "let drop, in apology for their calling almost at nightfall, that the coachman had not known the way exactly."

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<sup>191</sup> *ibid.*, 881.

<sup>192</sup> William Dean Howells, *Novels: 1875-1886*, 881.

Hurriedly Mrs. Corey explains, “Nearly all our friends are on the New Land or on the Hill.”<sup>193</sup> After the Corey ladies depart, Persis confides in her husband: “I don’t believe but what we’re in the wrong neighborhood.”<sup>194</sup> When it comes to the real estate market, as it turns out, the Colonel from the back woods of Vermont is not as simple as the Coreys, or indeed Bartely Hubbard, believe him to be. That night Silas reveals to his wife his purchase of a lot in the Back Bay, also then referred to as the “New Land,” that has already doubled in value. He elaborates, “there aint a prettier lot on the Back Bay than mine. It’s on the water side of Beacon...Let’s build on it.”<sup>195</sup> While there are other causes that factor into the Lapham family’s rise and fall, the Back Bay construction project dominates the plot line of Howells’s neighborhood novel.

Lapham intends to build more than a house when he decides to break ground in the Back Bay. He’s buying entry into the elite, a new husband for his daughter, and a certain notoriety that Persis is hesitant to accept. Their symbolic passage into the Back Bay begins as a pleasant carriage-ride along Beacon Street in the red light of the afternoon sun. Lapham’s beautiful mare jounces leisurely along while the Laphams pretend to imagine their daughters peeking out at gentleman callers from the curtained windows of the homes they pass. Their idle musings are interrupted when Lapham pulls the coach up to the new property. Pausing there, the prospect they behold, though “sightly,” seems ominous and cold. Confronted now with the specter of social change, the couple “turned their heads to the right and looked at the vacant lot, through which

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<sup>193</sup> *ibid.*, 885.

<sup>194</sup> *ibid.*, 888.

<sup>195</sup> *ibid.*, 887.

showed the frozen stretch of the Back Bay, a section of the Long Bridge, and the roofs and the smoke-stacks of Charlestown.”<sup>196</sup> This impressionistic backdrop fades behind them as they leave the quiet Back Bay and enter the noisy, public atmosphere of the Milldam Road, with “[t]he sleighs and the cutters thickening round them.”<sup>197</sup> Lapham makes his horse respond to the flux of scenery accordingly, letting her out on the boulevards and reining her in on the residential streets. Their uneven pace throughout the ride matches Persis's mood, alternately hopeful and apprehensive. She suspects that trouble lies in change, because in the world of Howells's novel, people like the Laphams have to be especially sensitive to whispers of social climbing or to being perceived as parvenus. The uncertain future of the Back Bay itself also lay before the Laphams as they traverse the Milldam road.

Even among the wealthy classes, Back Bay development was not without its detractors. As lots began selling on the newly made land throughout the sixties and seventies, urban myths about the threat of malaria persisted. Popular belief held that unsanitary materials went into the mud-basin that had stood empty and stinking for almost half a century, when in Howells's day ostentatious mansions shouldered one another along the corridors of broad and scenic avenues. Persis also must have heard tell of these hazardous conditions. “They say it's unhealthy over there,” she replies, when Silas first tells her about the lot and tries to persuade her they should build on it.<sup>198</sup>

Howells continues to give air to the rumor as construction begins:

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<sup>196</sup> William Dean Howells, *Novels: 1875-1886*, 891.

<sup>197</sup> *ibid.*, 891.

<sup>198</sup> *ibid.*, 888.

The neighborhood smelt like the hold of a ship after a three years' voyage. People who had cast their fortunes with the New Land went by professing not to notice it; people who still 'hung on to the Hill' put their handkerchiefs to their noses, and told each other the terrible stories of the material used in filling the Back Bay.<sup>199</sup>

With the onset of summer heating up the Back Bay, residents could easily pretend not to notice the air quality (or their new neighbors, for that matter) because they had “board[ed] up their front doors” and headed for the upscale seaside resorts of Nantasket. Significantly, Howells concludes the construction phase of the Beacon Street property just as the neighborhood begins to drain of its life for the season. When Boston becomes a ghost town for the summer, Howells introduces the novel's romance plot—an experiment in mixed-signals and cross-neighborhood relations further obfuscated by a love triangle involving Lapham's two daughters and his young business associate from Beacon Hill, Tom Corey.

The romance plot in *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, usually associated with marriage, is tied to a romance with real estate in the neighborhood novel. Whereas Irene, with her dresses and her shopping trips and all the other trimmings of her innocent ostentation, shares her father's enthusiasm for the move, the irreverant Penelope, with her critical habit of mind, constantly vocalizes her mother's tacit trepidation. Irene expects her new address will assist her good looks and expensive clothes in gaining a betrothal from the dashing Tom Corey. To “tinder” the romantic and dramatic events of the novel, Howells introduces a motif of spiral wooden shavings, leftover construction debris at the site of the Back Bay home. After submitting to an insipid conversation about *Middlemarch* in

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<sup>199</sup> William Dean Howells, *Novels: 1875-1886*, 899.

one scene, Tom takes his leave of Irene by ceremoniously presenting her with the spiral wooden shaving she had been nervously poking with her parasol. In the absence of her sister, the true object of Tom's secret and growing admiration, Irene easily mistakes the affectionate gesture to be romantic rather than friendly. She would tie that wooden shaving with ribbon and rest it in the lavender-scented folds of her bedroom dresser drawer, where it quietly smolders. Like the twists of Irene's wooden nosegay, Tom Corey's involvement with the Lapham family becomes increasingly convoluted. Howells sets up the romance plot by tying Irene's shallowness to the values of the neighborhood—and love-match—she is aiming to become part of. The critique of those values surfaces when it is later revealed that contrary to everyone's assumptions, Tom Corey seeks to court the sister who is unconcerned with the trivialities of trends in clothing, literature, and especially the right neighborhood. Through a twisted romance with real estate, Howells criticizes the shallowness of those values embedded in or dictated by certain places.

Perched comfortably in their Beacon Hill home, the old-moneyed Coreys perpetuate the tribal sectionalism of a society they simultaneously scorn. And yet the timing of their dinner for the Laphams shows them to be slaves to convention. Just as Tom uses the opportunity of an evacuated Boston to attempt his courtship, his parents can entertain the Laphams without fear of their neighbors' judgment: it is bad enough that their son works for the Mineral Paint King, worse still, he has professed to his parents a growing interest in one of his daughters. Nevertheless, the Coreys play gracious dinner hosts as the piteous Lapham overcompensates as worthy guest. With the Lapham home

the lone sight of activity throughout the crackling heat of summer, Bromfield Corey takes the occasion to criticize the Back Bay residents' flight from the neighborhood for their breezy seaside homes. Deriding their profligacy, he sarcastically proposes a new type of urban philanthropy to another dinner guest who does settlement work in the North End.

I tell you that in some of my walks on the Hill and down on the Back Bay, nothing but the surveillance of local policeman prevents me from applying dynamite to those long rows of close-shuttered, handsome, brutally insensible houses. If I were a poor man, with a sick child pining in some garret or cellar at the North End, I should break into one of them, and camp out on the grand piano.<sup>200</sup>

Bromfield Corey makes a radical argument against the unequal allotment of living space among the city's rich and poor. His explosive rhetoric responds to the growing agitation among the country's factory workers with unhealthy and unfair working conditions that would culminate in the Haymarket Riots one year after the release of *Silas Lapham*. Even though the piano squatters, like the Laphams, would be perceived as social misfits and shunned, Corey's sarcastic remark shows that he would welcome social change in the Back Bay: new residents would at least put some life blood into the anemic neighborhood. In Corey's hypothetical scenario Howells extends his critique of Back Bay clannishness and augurs the future of the Lapham family's residence there.

A seemingly offhanded social commentary precipitates the incendiary demise of “one of the finest ornaments” on Beacon Street (to borrow Bartely Hubbard's prosaic description). Perhaps its most subversive application in the novel, Howells reintroduces the wood shaving motif as Lapham ominously meditates on his failing business

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<sup>200</sup> William Dean Howells, *Novels: 1875-1886*, 1041.

investments by the music-room hearth of his skeletal home. Testing the new chimney, a distracted Lapham draws on his cigar while stoking a glowing heap of pine tendrils and some wooden blocks when he is interrupted by a policeman on neighborhood rounds. They exchange a few pleasantries and the officer returns to his beat. Exactly what resolution the house spirits may have inspired in Lapham can be guessed but never known for sure. Nevertheless, when Lapham finishes his cigar, stamping out the burning embers in the fireplace, he returns to Nankeen Square with his mind temporarily at ease. He even takes the pleasure to escort Penelope downtown for an after-dinner play. Of the Lapham pride, Pen has been the most reluctant to accept relocating to the Back Bay, but to keep up her father's changed spirits, she agrees to take a detour and see progress on the new house as they walk back to the South End. They stand aghast watching their Beacon street property ensconced in flames:

As they drew near Beacon street they were aware of unwonted stir and tumult, and presently the still air transmitted a turmoil of sound, through which a powerful and incessant throbbing made itself felt. The sky had reddened above them...they saw a black mass of people obstructing the perspective of the brightly-lighted street, and out of this mass a half dozen engines, whose strong heart-beats had already reached them, sent up volumes of fire-tinged smoke and steam from their funnels. Ladders were planted against the facade of a building, from the roof of which a mass of flame burnt smoothly upward, except where here and there it seemed to pull contemptuously away from the heavy streams of water which the firemen, clinging like great beetles to their ladders, poured in upon it.”<sup>201</sup>

Howells's vivid imagery in this scene summons up something akin to Goodman Brown's black Sabbath mass. Appearing for the first time in the novel, Lapham's Back Bay neighbors—a nightmarish crowd of undifferentiated faces—look upon the furnace in

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<sup>201</sup> William Dean Howells, *Novels: 1875-1886*, 1153.

fiendish glee, “gazing, gossiping, with shouts and cries and hysterical laughter.”<sup>202</sup> Under cover of night, the flock had hastily left their dinners to gaze on the infernal spectacle with rapture. The Lapham family eventually flees this shameless display and with it Howells's “death-in-life” image of Boston for the Vermont countryside.

### **Doubtless She Exaggerated; The World Slowly Changes**

After moving away from Boston to take on novel writing full time, Howells's literary return to the city came as a perambulatory exploration of interracial marriage in *An Imperative Duty* (1892). Although identified by many critics as a novel of passing, *An Imperative Duty* is also a novel about neighborhoods. The transitory phases of urban life in America put Howells's protagonist, a repatriated nerve specialist named Edward Olney, to the test when he returns to Boston after sojourning in Italy for five years. Howells approaches his subject in a seemingly innocuous and in a decidedly circuitous way—by having his protagonist adopt a tourist's perspective and continue “his foreign travels in his native place.”<sup>203</sup>

The novel opens with the doctor casing Boston's central attractions, remarking how the sights and sounds of the city have changed—the Public Gardens, the Commons, and the newly laid lawns of Commonwealth Avenue. Instead of “the ghost of our old Puritan Sabbath,” a brass band tunes up for a Sunday afternoon performance in the Common. Olney pays special attention to the young Irish factory girls in the crowd, as though they represent some keyhole to the future prospects of his native land. At first

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<sup>202</sup> *ibid.*, 1153.

<sup>203</sup> William Dean Howells, *An Imperative Duty* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1893), 1.

glance he observes that they are used rather sorely in this country. Working conditions have translated them into bent and pale reflections of what they could be. And yet, on closer examination, he admits they have “an effect of physical delicacy...which might later be physical refinement.”<sup>204</sup> The more comely aspects of their appearance beguile the bachelor's roving eye. He notices “their lank arms round one another's waists,” as they lounge, “upon the dry grass...wearing red jerseys, which accented every fact of their anatomy.”<sup>205</sup> “Looking at them scientifically,” which is to say sexually, “Olney thought that if they survived to be mothers they might give us, with better conditions, a race as hale and handsome as the elder American race.”<sup>206</sup> A detached observer in crowded public spaces, Olney freely admires the young Irish women, a benign way of transgressing seemingly fixed but decidedly unstable social boundaries.

In this novel, Howells revisits the motif of city walking as a way of exploring two characters' journeys toward overcoming sexual taboos to find their way, eventually, to each other. An analysis of their perambulatory narrations will attempt to sort out the biological from the social underpinnings of interracial marriage that were so convoluted in the post-Reconstruction U.S. It is appropriate that Howells sets these narratives in the neighborhood of North Beacon Hill. In the late 1800s immigrants and freedmen gravitated to the north slope of Beacon Hill because of its proximity to the more affluent Beacon Hill neighborhood, where the lower classes were hired to work as domestic

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<sup>204</sup> *ibid.*, 3.

<sup>205</sup> *ibid.*, 3.

<sup>206</sup> William Dean Howells, *An Imperative Duty*, 3. This quote has also been cited by Paul Petrie as evidence of Olney's progressive and liberal racial attitude by nineteenth-century standards. Olney's views of women throughout the novel, demonstrate Howells's and the novel's, “theoretical acceptance of an eventual increase of racial integration.” Paul Petrie, introduction to *An Imperative Duty* (Toronto: Broadview Editions, 2010), 18.

servants for families like the Coreys. In representing the people of several Boston neighborhoods, Howells takes an anthropological approach to exploring urban race relations. With a character like Olney, the line between “scientific” observation and voyeurism becomes blurred when the doctor wanders over to the neighborhood out of sheer interest. On the other end of the novel, and in contrast to Olney, Rhoda Aldgate passes into the same neighborhood after learning of her slave ancestry. Culminating at a service in the famous Charles Street Meeting House, the scene reaches tragicomic proportions when a procession of racial types and gruesome caricatures dramatize the identity crisis endured by Rhoda. By outsize Rhoda's response in the church scene, the climax of this inter-racial neighborhood love story is larded with an irony that brings unexpected poignancy to the decidedly anti-romantic—and practical—ending.

In Howells's city novels, tentative protagonists cross boundaries separating races and classes by crossing neighborhood lines. As Olney walks, he ponders with civic benevolence that though black people in Boston “were just as free to come to the music on the Common that Sunday afternoon as any of the white people he saw there,” he concedes that, “the whites would have kept apart from them.”<sup>207</sup> When Howells sends Olney, city-stroller, detached observer, into the black neighborhood, he asks his readers to also consider “how entirely the colored people keep to themselves, they have their own neighborhoods, their own churches, their own amusements, their own resorts.”<sup>208</sup> White and black society, seemingly, can coexist but do not as easily commingle. The analyst's

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<sup>207</sup> William Dean Howells, *An Imperative Duty*, 5.

<sup>208</sup> *ibid.*, 5.

growing awareness of segregation leads him to follow a clique of African American youth away from the Commons. Olney descends Beacon Hill and makes his way to North Beacon Hill, while Howells traces his steps:

It was not until he followed a group away from the Common through Charles Street, where they have their principal church, into Cambridge Street, which is their chief promenade, that he began to see many of them. In the humbler side-hill streets, and in the alleys branching upward from either thoroughfare, they have their homes, and here he encountered them of all ages and sexes.<sup>209</sup>

In the manner of a flaneur, Olney critically and sympathetically examines the social text spread out before him—and finds the scene altogether agreeable to behold. Admiring the taste and decorum exhibited by the young people in this precinct, he catalogs their flourish of style by launching into a glowing ode to urban attire. They were, to this spectator, “clothed through and through, as to the immortal spirit as well as the perishable body, by their cloth gaiters, their light trousers, their neatly-buttoned cutaway coats, their harmonious scarfs, and their silk hats.”<sup>210</sup> Olney's observations, again, veer toward rituals of courting. Dandies “carried on flirtations with the eye with the young colored girls they met, or when they were talking with them they paid them a court which was far above the behavior of the common young white fellows with the girls of their class in refinement and delicacy.”<sup>211</sup> The girls, with “their brilliant complexions of lustrous black, or rich *cafe au lait*, or creamy white” and their “high, piping voices,” become the subject of his rapt attention, imparting on the spectator “an

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<sup>209</sup> *ibid.*, 6.

<sup>210</sup> William Dean Howells, *An Imperative Duty*, 7.

<sup>211</sup> *ibid.*, 7.

effect of both gentleness and gentility.”<sup>212</sup> The problems faced by colored society, as opposed to black or white, had become typified in nineteenth-century literature as tragic; however, the incarnations of race-mixing which Howells draws here are nothing to fear and certainly more joyful than tragic. Just like the offspring of the Irish women he had envisioned on his walk in the Commons, Olney foresees the numerous races and ethnicities eventually absorbing each other, and yet formulates a problem with no apparent answer, that race in America is in a state of solution.<sup>213</sup>

The scrupulous dress and good manners, the fête of fashion and good-nature that Olney has found in North Beacon Hill both rank highly in his estimation, especially when compared with the vulgar displays of courtship exhibited by the young white couples whom he “saw during the evening in possession of most of the benches in the Common and the Public Garden, and between the lawns of Commonwealth Avenue.”<sup>214</sup> In adapting to life in the urban North, the black community he observes assimilates the best of manners and style whereas their white counterparts, who “apparently did not wish to be like ladies and gentlemen in their behavior” seem to be backsliding.<sup>215</sup> From Olney's perspective, it seems, the progress of black people compares favorably to the cultural regression of the whites. Howells upholds this critique in Olney's observation of the infamous and exclusive Back Bay.

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<sup>212</sup> *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>213</sup> Biographers Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson remark, “As early as 1860, Howells had endorsed racial marriage, and *An Imperative Duty* provides a model for what his contemporaries called 'absorption,' or the mingling of separate races into one race,” however, Howells believed race prejudice to be “a product of social rather than inherited characteristics,” Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson, *William Dean Howells: A Writer's Life*, 311.

<sup>214</sup> William Dean Howells, *An Imperative Duty*, 7.

<sup>215</sup> William Dean Howells, *An Imperative Duty*, 7.

Walking through North Beacon Hill has a positive, even soothing effect upon the returned expatriate. On the other hand, an atmosphere of notable contrast marks Olney's impressions of the Back Bay. In spite of his touristic interest taking in the new sites and people of Boston, especially the fairer sex, after two days of touring Olney feels hopelessly estranged in the once-familiar places. Part of him would have preferred to stay in Florence to minister to "nervous Americans" traveling abroad, but financial hardship caused his—and their—return. With the U.S. economy in the grips of financial panic, Olney came home to Boston, all-told, half-reluctantly, to establish a practice where he thinks his specialty will be needed most—the Back Bay. The once-familiar neighborhood now seems alien and unwelcoming. These Back Bay houses "where nervous suffering, if it were to avail him, must mainly abide, struck a chill in his spirit; they seemed to repel his intended ministrations with their barricaded doorways and close-shuttered windows."<sup>216</sup> The thought of ministering to Back Bay neuralgia, has, as yet, "no attraction of novelty in the future before him."<sup>217</sup> Finding no clients in the familiar places he had expected, the salutary effects associated with North Beacon Hill overshadow the unwholesome Back Bay. Leaving behind this stultified image of the Back Bay for the remainder of the novel, Howells makes a case for an ascendant moral order in the United States—one that was foreshadowed by, and symbolized in, the simple act of Olney crossing neighborhood lines into North Beacon Hill.

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<sup>216</sup> William Dean Howells, *An Imperative Duty*, 12. The way Howells's characters interact with architecture tells of the civility one finds in a neighborhood. Closed doors and closed shutters mark a neighborhood as unwelcoming; whereas, doorsteps, thresholds, parks, and promenades allow for civil interaction needed for communities, and neighborhoods, to coalesce.

<sup>217</sup> William Dean Howells, *An Imperative Duty*, 9.

Perhaps establishing his practice is not the only reason for Olney's return from abroad. Howells also leaves some room for conjecturing the urgency Olney feels to get married. Unsuccessful in finding a fiancée on his European travels, Olney may have returned to Boston in search of a wife. After observing the Sunday afternoon promenade and returning to his hotel, the anxiety of permanent bachelorhood settles upon him: "He belonged to a family that became bald early...there was already a thin place in the hair on his crown."<sup>218</sup> All of thirty, "Olney was no longer so young as he had been."<sup>219</sup> Considering the types of women that had captured his interest that afternoon, taken with a precept that the roving bachelor was in search of a fiancée while abroad—where there are obviously fewer American women—Olney may favor foreign women, even if he is not entirely conscious of this inclination. Nevertheless these first few days in Boston leave Olney homesick for Europe and frustrated with his personal prospects, as well as his professional ones.

Moments later, Olney's stalled personal and professional lives prepare to collide when a bell hop solicits his services on behalf of some hotel guests. The late-night call especially piques Olney's curiosity when he discovers a young lady he knew from his travels in Florence had dispatched the message. Irish factory girls, fashionable black girls, and Commonwealth Avenue's vulgar white girls are a benign preamble before the beautiful and carefree Rhoda Aldgate and her long-suffering aunt, Mrs. Meredith, enter into Dr. Olney's observation.

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<sup>218</sup> William Dean Howells, *An Imperative Duty*, 13.

<sup>219</sup> *ibid.*, 12.

Critics have continually honed Howells's ostensible typification of Rhoda as a tragic mulatta figure, even as fetishized and exotic imagery surrounds her.<sup>220</sup> However, her character is far more liminal than typical, especially to Olney's imagination. For example, when her note first arrives, Olney notices it was written in a young lady-like hand, and the perfume it emits spurs his memories of Europe. As he wends his way to her room, up and down flights of stairs, through the lengthy corridors of the hotel, like a walk through his imagination, he recalls the "particulars of her beauty," which turn out to be rather general and abstract. With every step, he attempts to retrace her portrait, as if finding his way back to an antiquated memory. He remembers, "her slender height, her rich complexion of olive, with a sort of under-stain of red, and the inky blackness of her eyes and hair."<sup>221</sup> She possessed a beauty of "classic perfection" that expressed itself in multiform and contradictory ways. Her hair and brow evoke a bust of Clytemnestra; her family face had the "tragic beauty" of a mask, which, taken with her sunny disposition emitted an animated "succession of flashing, childlike smiles."<sup>222</sup> Combining the perfect composition requisite of Greek statuary, the depth of emotion that brings dramatic verisimilitude to the greatest tragedies, alternately dissembled by the unequivocal mirth in the foibles of our common humanity, Olney reconstructs a portrait of Rhoda Aldgate as

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<sup>220</sup> Elsa Nettles, *Language, Race, and Social Class in Howells's America* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1988). When engaging the language of ethnic stereotype Howells seemingly undermines the principles of realism, "that human nature is essentially the same in all times and places and that human character is not fixed but variable"(95). Henry Wonham, "William Dean Howells and the Touch of Exaggeration that Typifies," in *Playing the Races: Ethnic Caricature and American Literary Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), has demonstrated that Howells deliberately burlesques racial caricature, "to repudiate its use"(46). Paul Petrie states that Howells "subjects the tragic-mulatta literary conventions to the standards of lived reality, revising the conventional plotline...and relentlessly ironizing its characters' every attempt to script their lives according to the literary conventions"(15).

<sup>221</sup> William Dean Howells, *An Imperative Duty*, 16.

<sup>222</sup> *ibid.*, 17.

mysterious and oblique as the hallways as he wanders to find her. Reminiscent of classical civilization, an acquaintance he made in a distant land, and as he later finds out, with traces of an African bloodline, her undefinable virtues may be part of the allure of Rhoda Aldgate. The not entirely flattering reference to Clytemnestra—slayed by her own children, Orestes and Electra—foreshadows the symbolic death of her white identity if her African ancestry were to assert itself atavistically upon her children. With the truth of her ancestry unknown as yet to Rhoda, these are the fears that assail her aunt's conscience and compel Olney's summons.

Just like walking through neighborhood labyrinths or through hotel corridors to find his way eventually to Rhoda, Olney finds himself walking the minefield of the Mrs. Meredith's neurosis when he undertakes her care. Olney accedes to his role as Mrs. Meredith's confessor reluctantly, and perhaps not only out of professional duty. From the start, he has a romantic interest in her niece; however, Rhoda's aunt, too, seems to have ulterior motives in soliciting Olney's care. After he finally arrives to her hotel room and they exchange some pleasantries, Mrs. Meredith wastes little time before asking him if he believes in interracial marriage. The conversation springs from both parties acknowledging the demographic changes they had observed in Boston since arriving from abroad. Both he and Rhoda reply with a resounding no. Howells designs these conversations to trace the revolutions of Olney's ethical point of view. With her ensuing interrogations, Mrs. Meredith grooms Olney to eventually confide in him the secret of Rhoda's heredity. In harvesting the doctor's views of race under the guise of seeking his objective medical advice, she may be credited with masterminding the marriage plot by

manipulating Olney into offering for Rhoda. The convoluted motives of both Olney and Mrs. Meredith with regard to Rhoda continue Howells's meandering approach toward the social complications of interracial marriage in the U.S.

Examining the twisted turns of Mrs. Meredith's questions, the reader, along with Olney, is left wondering if these are the disconnected ravings of a troubled mind or the tactics of a strategic interrogator. In a reversal of roles, the patient ends up examining the doctor, continuing the search for symptoms of racial hypochondria. Upon his next visit, Mrs. Meredith asks the Olney if he believes in heredity, forwarding the interracial marriage plot through a seeming a non-sequitur. Olney's reply turns out to be as circumspect as Mrs. Meredith is about the topic that torments her to ask the question. He submits to her that heredity—the natural tendency of offspring to inherit the traits of parents and ancestors—is a “theory,” based on “some truth,” “in a state of solution.”<sup>223</sup> Heaped with qualifiers, the doctor's explanation is tentative, at best. She presses on. Mrs. Meredith is curious to know the doctor's opinions about “the persistence of ancestral traits; the transmission of character and tendency; the reappearance of types after several generations.”<sup>224</sup> While Olney rejects atavism, easing Mrs. Meredith's fears of Rhoda giving birth to Desiree's baby, the underlying assumptions about human evolution this rejection rests on are more insidious than a plot device in a pretty piece of melodrama. In discounting the probability of atavism, he implicitly accepts the evolutionary principles of Darwinism applied to humans. He claims, “The natural tendency is all the other way,

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<sup>223</sup> William Dean Howells, *An Imperative Duty*, 37.

<sup>224</sup> William Dean Howells, *An Imperative Duty*, 36-37.

to the permanent effacement of the inferior type.”<sup>225</sup> To illustrate his point, he explains that,

The child of a white and an octoroon is a sixteenth blood; and the child of that child and a white is a thirty-second blood. The chances of atavism, or reversion back to the black great-great-great grandfather are so remote that they may be said hardly to exist at all.<sup>226</sup>

An optimistic reading of Olney's analysis here suggests that “inferior” may be taken to express numerical value, a fraction in a family tree, not a qualitative judgment against the African in the American bloodline. Moreover, read in this way, Olney's formulation is consistent with his implicit prognosis of an eventual melding of the races in America. Still, Olney's answers can only be hypothetical since the reason for Meredith's questions remain a mystery to him. Once she chooses to disclose Rhoda's ancestry, Howells forces Olney's views on interracial marriage to become even more attenuated and less convicted. As the plot draws nearer and nearer to the revelation of Rhoda's slave ancestry, more and more, Howells demonstrates through the convolutions of Olney's race-ethics that a holistic interpretation of race is increasingly untenable, especially in an increasingly mixed race society.

Howells makes Olney's approach to marrying Rhoda as convoluted as both characters' racial logic. Before the issue of racial difference touches their personal lives, the metonyms used by Olney and Rhoda to describe Boston's newly transplanted immigrant and black population caricature their habits and behaviors: The Irish waiter's hairy paw unabashedly gropes for tips; the black L-shaped bell hop that is so loveable

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<sup>225</sup> *ibid.*, 38.

<sup>226</sup> *ibid.*, 38.

and servile, Rhoda should have liked to own him. In metaphorically tying racial and ethnic difference to their body parts, Howells seemingly undermines the novel's anthropological approach to racial theory, which advocates that race is a cultural construct, not a biological one.

The Victorian scientific principles Howells was heir to posited that the human races were separate and stable categories that could be arranged on an evolutionary hierarchy from primitive to civilized. It was accepted that race formed a biological or essential basis of identity that was manifest in physical traits as well as temperament. Further illustrating the different permutations of Olney's ethical view of race, Howells at first gives Olney a reaction of physical repulsion when Mrs. Meredith tells him of the few drops of African blood in Rhoda's veins. But his personal relationship with Rhoda quickly takes priority over the bogies of her racial lineage:

His feeling was *unscientific*; but he could not at once detach himself from the purely *social relation* which he had hitherto held toward Mrs. Aldgate. The professional view which he was invited to take seemed to have lost all dignity, to be impertinent, cruel, squalid, and to involve the abdication of certain sentiments, conventions, which he was unwilling to part with, at least in her case (*italics added*).<sup>227</sup>

This postulation advances Olney's progress toward marrying Rhoda and, at least for Olney, demonstrates that personal contact, rather than racial make-up, becomes the overriding measure of character in a neighborhood love story. Howells's neighborhood love story, in turn, reinforces civility and social discourse as a measure and mode of categorization in an increasingly post-race and uniquely American culture.

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<sup>227</sup> William Dean Howells, *An Imperative Duty*, 45.

The revelation of racial difference sets off both neighborhood perambulations, dramatizing each character's differing perspectives in their journeys through North Beacon Hill. Whereas Olney had focused on the black community's successful adaptation to their social environment, examining his subjects' dress, decorum, and leisure activities as a cultural critic would, Rhoda's perambulation is far more traumatic, and tragic. When Mrs. Meredith finally reveals the secret of her niece's ancestry, Rhoda feels a need to go back to her ancestral roots symbolically by making pilgrimage to the black quarter of the city, perhaps hoping to match her external surroundings with her newly discovered racial identity. Howells illustrates how Rhoda begins to internalize racial difference by having her focus on the phenotypical characteristics of the people of North Beacon Hill, fetishizing their physiognomies, and visualizing a congregation of racial grotesques. Howells's black comedy ends with a fatal irony: At the conclusion of her walk, Rhoda returns to her quarters to find her aunt had overdosed on her sleep medicine. Mrs. Meredith's death perpetuates Howells's sinister and devious route toward Olney and Rhoda's seemingly improbable marriage.

What starts as an errand to post a letter breaking her engagement to her betrothed, named Bloomingdale, quickly becomes a harrowing descent into a neighborhood where a collective of the city's black population resides. Through Rhoda's walking route, Howells gives a physiognomy of the cityscape in which social geographies can be visibly carved out and the economic transformation of the city explained, reminiscent of the housing shifts the walking narrator had remarked in *Suburban Sketches*. Rhoda passes through streets in which "houses that had once been middle-class houses had fallen in the

social scale.”<sup>228</sup> The stores were “adapted strictly to the needs of a neighborhood of poor and humble people.”<sup>229</sup> She moves through waves of “intense-faced suburbans” waiting for streetcars to ship them away to their exurban purlieus, until she “met the proper life of the street.”<sup>230</sup> Here, also as he had in *Suburban Sketches*, Howells registers the growth of the “streetcar suburbs” of Boston, in which the construction of streetcar lines and the resulting development of suburban communities prompted a middle class exodus from the city center, further segregating metropolitan demographics.<sup>231</sup> As she hurries deeper into the working-class pocket “she began to encounter in greater and greater number the colored people who descended to this popular promenade from the up-hill streets opening upon it,” doubtless returning from a hard day's work on the hill.<sup>232</sup> Finding herself on Charles Street, she repeats the same route rehearsed by Olney on his Sunday afternoon stroll, only the falling darkness of evening matches her darkening state of mind.

In Howells's novels of the city, these journeys seldom move in a straight line. Even if the reader can get past the tragic paradox of Mrs. Meredith's death as an integral step toward the “happy ending” of the marriage plot, an optimistic reading of the ending can easily be dissembled when considered with the racial stereotypes that persist

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<sup>228</sup> William Dean Howells, *An Imperative Duty*, 83.

<sup>229</sup> *ibid.*, 83.

<sup>230</sup> *ibid.*, 84.

<sup>231</sup> Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston (1870-1900)* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 14. Warner's history sees the city's growth in terms of the prevailing modes of transportation stratifying Boston's neighborhoods. With streetcar lines assisting in sorting out the populations into separate neighborhoods, “The physical deterioration of old neighborhoods, the crowding of factory, shop, and tenement in the old central city, the unceasing flow of foreigners with ever new languages and habits—these negative pressures tended to drive the middle-class out of the city.”

<sup>232</sup> William Dean Howells, *An Imperative Duty*, 84.

throughout the novel. Such imagery reaches its crescendo with Rhoda's erratic musings as she descends further into the city wilds. Her seemingly benign and liberal racism subsides and simultaneously becomes radically transparent. When she actually walks among black people, in their neighborhood, and imaginatively assumes their identity, she callowly muses, "how hideous they were, with their flat wide-nostriled noses, their rolled out thick lips, their mobile bulging eyes set near together, their retreating chins and foreheads, and their smooth, shining skin; they seemed burlesques of humanity, worse than apes, because they were more like."<sup>233</sup> Howells's horrific sketches build sympathy for the innocent, unsuspecting black folk, who unwittingly become objectified and dehumanized by Rhoda's irrational invective. Perversely, Rhoda's hatred for the race grows as she begins to identify herself as one of them: she is forced to view her slaveholder ancestors in the light of their questionable humanity. Now feeling doubly-alienated by her white and black ancestry, Rhoda is as close an attempt as Howells ever makes in trying to describe the peculiar psychological complexity of being a mixed-race American at the turn of the twentieth century.

Critics old and recent have argued over the legitimacy of Howells staking a position, and particularly such an ambiguous one, in the American race problem. In her 1892 memoir, *A Voice from the South*, Anna Julia Cooper did not respond favorably to Howells's representation of black people in the novel, denouncing the "gratuitous sizing up of the Negro and conclusively writing down his equation."<sup>234</sup> Particularly, Cooper

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<sup>233</sup> William Dean Howells, *An Imperative Duty*, 85.

<sup>234</sup> Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 203.

took offense to Howells's grotesquely caricatured congregation in the climactic church scene being described by the author as, “the best of colored society.”<sup>235</sup> More broadly, she criticizes any such “sweeping generalizations of a race on such meager and superficial information,” concluding that Howells “has studied his subject merely from the outside.”<sup>236</sup> On the other hand, in a 1913 review of the novel, W.E.B. Du Bois called Howells a “friend of the colored man,” applauding the author's depiction of an interracial romantic comedy as both savvy and timely.<sup>237</sup> Whether or not Howells was racially qualified to undertake such subject matter, the use of caricature in the church scene accompanies Rhoda's crisis of racial identity, and arguably, it is her racism that is satirized, not the congregation itself.

The chimeras of racial amalgamation that Rhoda imagines when attending a lecture on racial uplift at the Charles Street Meeting House are of such a fantastic, stylized, and elaborate design; the imagery is reminiscent of a bestiary embroidered upon a medieval tapestry. A faithful portrait of Boston's black faithful is clearly not the point here. Howells's racial caricatures describe the transformation, or revelation, of Rhoda's unrealized racism. Howells conjures images of the people in this scene with Boschian grotesquery: the goblin-like preacher, here a rolling-eye, there “repulsive visages of frog-like ugliness,” and a woman sitting in Rhoda's pew letting loose a “Glory to God” from her catfish mouth. In her harrowed state, Rhoda envisions a hell of her own creation.

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<sup>235</sup> Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, 202.

<sup>236</sup> *ibid.*, 203, 209.

<sup>237</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, “As a Friend of the Colored Man,” William Dean Howells at 75: Tributes from Eminent Americans to Our Foremost Man of Letters. in eds. Edwin H. Cady and Norma W. Cady *Critical Essays on W. D. Howells, 1866-1920* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983).

Magnifying Rhoda's horrific impressions, Howells demonstrates how easily people can become vulnerable to internalizing stereotypes made against them. Beyond mere voyeurism, caricature is used to visibly demonstrate how racism distorts perceptions of our common humanity. In the end, the meeting on racial uplift at the Charles Street Meeting House can be interpreted as a parody of racial caricature.

With the grotesques of the church scene and Mrs. Meredith's drug overdose, it is hard to imagine *An Imperative Duty* ending happily. Exactly why the novel can be considered a comedy needs additional explanation. The mismatched human alchemy Olney constantly encounters in Boston—from the gruff and coarse Irish, to the childish and smiling blacks, to the stiff-lipped and taciturn Anglo-Saxons—is part of the social satire in comedies of manners. In a sense, Rhoda and Olney themselves become part of the mismatched human alchemy that both had observed on their walks throughout Boston—an alchemy that long precedes their union and, like heredity, is always in a state of solution. And while the blend of the Old World and the New attracts Olney to Rhoda: “It was the elder world; the beauty of antiquity, which appealed to him in the lustre and sparkle of this girl; and the remote taint of her servile and savage origin gave her a kind of fascination which refuses to let itself be put into words,” looking at the matter in the light of day, their love “performed the effect of common-sense to them, and in its purple light they saw the every-day duties of life plain before them.”<sup>238</sup> In spite of the democratic and peculiarly American shadings of his “common-sense” rhetoric, ironically, it is the place that interferes with the legitimacy of their coupling. Perhaps Howells

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<sup>238</sup> William Dean Howells, *An Imperative Duty*, 134, 146.

suggests that Olney and Rhoda's love story viewed by any outsider can be as pedestrian, as commonplace, and as usual as any other—except that the audience is privy to the psychological turmoil suffered by Rhoda and unleashed by the anxieties of America's racial amalgam. Ultimately Howells lets the paradox stand even at the end of the novel. Howells leaves the reader to sort out the tragic from the comic elements in *An Imperative Duty*; however, looking at the light side seems the favorable solution to cope with everyday life in a practical and light-hearted way. Howells exposes the limits of literary realism in *An Imperative Duty* with the unorthodox union of burlesqued tragicomedy and the unexpected combination of a tabooed, with a pedestrian, romance plot. To not overcome racial difference but to deal with it in a neighborly way proves as yet impossible in America. To mitigate the social obstacles faced by Rhoda and Olney's marriage the couple's reverse-migration back to Italy is the only practical solution for a marriage that Howells destines to have a happy ending, leaving behind an interracial neighborhood love story with a homeopathic dose of black-comedy and social criticism.

Howells's descriptive language is not always free of moral judgment in its unaffected glimpses of everyday life in late nineteenth-century American cities. This ethos shapes Howells's characters, who navigate their narratives in various states of becoming: their stories take place during precarious stages in their personal lives. Often the urban spaces they occupy are also sites of transition, indicating that social change in America is an ongoing state of solution—whether it be South-End and burgeoning entrepreneur of paint, Silas Lapham; or expat and would-be psychiatrist of racial hypochondria, Edward Olney. Similarly, Basil March undergoes a drastic change in his

personal and professional life when moving with his family from Boston to New York. The move of Howells's protagonist in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* exemplified the author's own move to the city in 1889, to undertake his new editorship at *Harper's*. Leaving behind the city that March describes as “death-in-life” in the beginning pages of the novel, the transition away from Boston symbolized New York's succession as the new literary, artistic, and cultural capital of the nation, and increasingly the world.

## Chapter 4

### NARRATING NEW YORK

Many a mile I might lead you along these rivers, east and west, through the island of Manhattan, and find little else than we have seen. The great crowd is yet below Fourteenth Street, but the northward march knows no slackening pace. As the tide sets uptown, it reproduces faithfully the scenes of the older wards, though with less of their human interest than here where the old houses, in all their ugliness, have yet some imprint of the individuality of their tenants.

—Jacob Riis, *Ten Years' War*

During the Progressive Era muckraking in the press and civic-reform movements made the blight of the urban lower classes prevalent in the public consciousness, to the point of redundancy by the end of the nineteenth century. Ethnographic studies of the nation's cities, particularly their slum districts, became a topic of academic interest in the fledgling discipline of sociology, as the nation's most populous cities continued to swell with new arrivals. However, the story of the cycle of urban decline and revitalization was not a late nineteenth-century novelty. As we have seen in George Lippard's *The Quaker City*, city-mysteries sensationalized urban life, engaging the surreal and horrific in baroque detail. Later in the century, objectivity became the chief concern for writers. The city supplied the laboratory and materials. As immigrant and migrant communities emerged, they became a popular subject of fiction and their inclusion made the representation of city neighborhoods more journalistic.

With the city as the subject of literature, writers could raise awareness and promote social change within slum districts. At the same time, popularizing such subject matter debased the people who made up these communities. New urban types increasingly became the staple of fiction, including Crane's Bowery residents, Johnson's rounders, Dunbar's showgirls, and Howells's anarchists. The rise or fall of the naive pilgrim, the recent arrival, to the hazards of the city provided the arc of many a story skyline (such as in Abraham Cahan's famous tenement novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky*). The reification of these urban types and their stories had perhaps unintended rhyparographic effects, vulgarizing the subject for the sake of its peculiar fascination and popular appeal.

Yet, the neighborhoods against which these stories transpire form a separate and elusive social entity that contemporary scholars have difficulty making into a formalized approach to metropolitan literature. Too often criticism about urban novels starts with the assumption that they are cautionary tales decrying the dangers of city life. However, perambulatory narrators observed the day to day life of human communities adapting to ever-evolving sets of norms. Critics have traditionally seen the urban novel negatively because it furthers a social agenda grounded in a specific moral or ethical framework relevant only to its particular time; whereas, the neighborhood narrative, as I'm defining it, offers a concept of neighborhoods as an open and evolving social entity critical to the adjustment of newcomers and subjected to the ever-shifting patterns of life.

No writer better exemplifies this fraught combination of concerns than William Dean Howells. This chapter attempts to delineate neighborhood narratives set in New York, and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) stands out as the ur-text of Realism's focus on the city as a subject of fiction. My critical interest in starting this chapter with Howells's novel is two-fold: to explain the perceived vagaries of the novel's structure by situating it within a genre-shift, and to examine the phenomenon of transitional neighborhoods as a microcosm of the city, and by extension the nation, within America's greatest metropolitan era.

### **The Purlieus of Greenwich Village and the Hazards of How the Middle Half Lives**

When Basil March sets out from his South End residence in Boston's genteel Nankeen Square, the prospect of his move to New York is unsettling. Faced with uprooting his family and a career change that itself is a transplantation, Basil, a former businessman, accepts an offer to assume the editorship of a start-up literary magazine called *Every Other Week*, though not without trepidation. Even though two days of traipsing through a handful of Manhattan neighborhoods in a meandering apartment-hunting mission leaves the Marches no closer to feeling at home in their new surroundings, if their surname is any indication of the ground they cover, Isabel and Basil have seen enough of New York by foot, rail, and coupe to know where they want to live, at least Mrs. March is certain: their future dwelling “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, hall-boys, and a pleasant janitor.”<sup>239</sup> Her list of requirements for perfect domesticity encompasses the neighborhood of Greenwich Village and derives from a topographical portrait of the city—its buildings, businesses, streets, homes, and people—that William Dean Howells begins to develop in the opening scenes of the novel. On West Eleventh Street, the *Every Other Week* office is conveniently located within Isabel's boundary lines, and the Marches eventually settle in the environs of a gentrifying neighborhood that was coming to be popularly known as Greenwich Village.<sup>240</sup>

Howells builds on a narrative tradition of cultural encounters set in the context of city walking. Peripatetic narratives facilitate a moving *tableau vivant*, generating and committing to print sketches of ever-changing urban landscapes as they gentrify. A walking narrator always encounters the potential for change, and yet locks his subjects in a frieze-like panorama. Given the unprecedented scale of urban development in North American cities during the late nineteenth century, a walking narrator like Basil March conveys the ephemeral qualities of the neighborhood out of full and present immersion in his surroundings. Basil's routine meanderings form a prominent but long neglected subplot of the novel, which are the heart of the novel and anything but the loose, baggy monster most critics have seen and fled.

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<sup>239</sup> William Dean Howells, *A Hazard Of New Fortunes*, introduction by Tony Tanner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 64.

<sup>240</sup> Gerald W. McFarland, *Inside Greenwich Village: A New York City Neighborhood, 1898-1918* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press), 78. The neighborhood Howells outlines as Isabel's preference was genteel, but also a frontier. A history of Greenwich Village supports the region as residential. Villagers “remained devoted to the neighborhood...and had the practical effect of slowing the expansion of tenements, factories, and commercial buildings north of Washington Square” (78).

While familiar themes of art, romance, politics, and business play out among a quadrille of characters in parlors, dens, and dining rooms, Howells unfurls the background of Progressive-era New York with an excursus of literary sketches that Basil March observes on his sporadic walks through the city. Using what Carrie Tirado Bramen has termed the “intra-urban walking tour” as his narrative mode, Basil accumulates a notebook full of ideas originally destined for the pages of *The Every Other Week*.<sup>241</sup> Although Basil's perambulations made *Hazard* famous for its realistic depictions of New York City in the 1880s, by the end of the novel these sketches remain unpublished, an uncompleted project.

The urban sketch subplot had not figured prominently in critical studies of *Hazard* until Bramen supplied a stop-gap with her theory of the “urban picturesque.” In eighteenth-century landscape painting, something that was considered picturesque framed scenes taken from everyday life in the country. Bramen updates the term in the context of the modern city, equating the urban picturesque with scenes of immigrants and other urban dwellers living in or passing through tenement districts. In the interminable delay to publish Basil's sketches, Howells invokes the ethical dilemma of realistic representation. On one hand, the sketches publicize a version of an international, composite America; on the other hand, the urban picturesque is an exclusionary framing device, which, Bramen believes “insured that particularity would be maintained by

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<sup>241</sup> Carrie Tirado Bramen develops her theory on the “urban picturesque” using the city sketch sub-plot in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* to describe the evolution of literary forms in terms of the proliferation of city-sketches in the American periodical market and Howells's commentary on them by their inclusion in *Hazard*. See Carrie Tirado Bramen, “William Dean Howells and the Failure of the Urban Picturesque,” *The New England Quarterly* 73.1 (2000), 82-99; “The Urban Picturesque and the Spectacle of Americanization,” *American Quarterly* 52.3 (2000), 444-477.

mapping cultural difference onto distinct neighborhoods.”<sup>242</sup> This description is both true and not true for Howells's novel since its seemingly separate ethnic and class spheres intersect.

A detour to the heart of Greenwich Village in Henry James's 1881 novel, *Washington Square*, provides some historical context for Basil's role in the social development of the neighborhood. The novel starts when the region is still on the cusp of the city wilds in the first half of the nineteenth century. Through the story of the Sloper family, James traces the initial phases of middle-class settlement in Washington Square, which marks the southern edge of Greenwich Village. In the exposition, we learn that as newlyweds, the Slopers first lived about two miles south of the region “in a street within five minutes' walk of the City Hall, which saw its best days (from the social point of view) about 1820.”<sup>243</sup> Within fifteen years the effects of commerce changed the neighborhood significantly. Buildings “had been converted into offices, warehouses, and shipping agencies, and otherwise applied to the base uses of commerce.”<sup>244</sup> “After this,” writes James, “the tide of fashion began to set steadily northward.”<sup>245</sup> Though never mentioned in the novel, newly arrived Irish immigrant workers replaced the fleeing middle classes and immigrants settled the race-riot prone Five Points neighborhood located virtually around the corner from the Slopers' old residence. In the 1830s, affluent New Yorkers escaped the congested commercial sector of lower Manhattan and moved

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<sup>242</sup> Carrie Tirado Bramen, “The Urban Picturesque,” 447.

<sup>243</sup> Henry James, *Novels 1881-1886* (New York: Library of America, 1985), 14.

<sup>244</sup> *ibid.*, 15.

<sup>245</sup> *ibid.*, 15.

north to build distinguished single family row homes along the northern border of Washington Square.

The Slopers are part of this first flight from the city center to put up stakes in more genteel surroundings. The novel closes with Dr. Sloper's daughter, well into her spinster years, knitting with her elderly aunt in the front parlor of their home—exponents of Washington Square, which came to be known as “Widow's Row” by the late nineteenth century. The neighborhood has since remained a gallery of residential gentility, but as the geographical gap separating the very wealthy from the very poor closed in on the borders of Washington Square in the eighties and nineties, New York's *nouveau riche* sought refuge further uptown. As luxury high rises began their gridlock march up Fifth Avenue in the 1880s, a space opened in Greenwich Village for the young professional and creative classes, like the Marches, to occupy.

Howells admitted indulgence when writing the much-debated house-hunting scene that whiles away the first hundred or so pages in what Amy Kaplan describes “a narrative of urban settlement.”<sup>246</sup> In an autobiographical preface, Howells mentions “the formlessness of the passages following the opening, or rather, their disproportionate length.”<sup>247</sup> Reminiscing about his and his wife's own wanderings throughout New York City, he confesses to getting the most amusement out of writing the novel's apartment-hunting scene. During one such digression, the Marches stroll through Washington

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<sup>246</sup> Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 96.

<sup>247</sup> William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* introduction by Everett Carter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 510.

Square Park when they begin “to excel in the sad knowledge of the line at which respectability distinguishes itself from shabbiness”<sup>248</sup> Basil identifies the park as the North-South boundary line that suggests precisely the same encroachment of commerce and the working classes that had sent the Sloper family packing to Washington Square in the first place. Fifty years later, Howells shows the boundary line had moved north. Rather than escaping, however, Howells has the March family moving into a region that encompasses “old-fashioned American respectability which keeps the north side of the square in vast mansions of red brick, and the international shabbiness which has invaded the southern border, and broken it up into lodging-houses, shops, beer-gardens, and studios.”<sup>249</sup> The Marches, and by extension, Howells, document the evolution of lower Manhattan's neighborhoods by the architecture as well as by the shuffle of people moving in and out of dwellings that seem to be in a constant state of dilapidation and renovation.

When searching for a place to live, the Marches venture too far south into “old Greenwich Village,” and take a turn into a tenement district. The scene is described as the newspaper stories of the day:

They drove accidentally through one street that seemed gayer in perspective than an L road. The fire-escapes, with their light iron balconies and ladders of iron, decorated the lofty house fronts; the road-way and sidewalks and doorsteps swarmed with children; women's heads seemed to show at every window. In the basements, over which flights of high stone steps led to the tenements, were greengrocers' shops abounding in cabbages, and provision stores running chiefly to bacon and sausages, and cobblers' and tanners' shops, and the like, in proportion to the small needs of a poor neighborhood.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (Oxford), 47.

<sup>249</sup> *ibid.*, 55-56.

The picturesque scene inspires March to marvel at the seeming conditions of permanence that poverty must accommodate. In contrast to his ethical qualms, Isabel's pat remark to her husband initiates the novel's meta-discourse on the market for city sketches: "You ought to get Mr. Fulkerson [the managing editor] to let you work some of these New York sights up for *Every Other Week*...you could do them very nicely."<sup>251</sup> As literary editor of *The Every Other Week*, a national periodical, Basil March has the responsibility of selecting subject matter of interest to his readers that would sell more copies of his magazine. Howells knew something about the coming and passing of trends in taste. From his experience with the editorial side of writing, he writes in *Literature and Life* (1902) that "there are some sorts of light literature once greatly in demand, but now apparently no longer desired by magazine editors, who ought to know what their readers desire."<sup>252</sup> Among these he counts the travel narrative. With so many Americans traveling abroad, "the foreign scene no longer has the charm of strangeness."<sup>253</sup> The domestic city scene does. Howells, as editor of *Harper's* and "as a very interested spectator of New York," had, "reason to be content with the veracity with which some phases of it have been rendered."<sup>254</sup> In Howells's estimation, art forms that "held the mirror up towards politics on their social or political side, and gave us East-Side types—Irish, German, negro, and Italian—were instantly recognizable and deliciously

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<sup>250</sup> William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (Oxford), 53.

<sup>251</sup> William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (Oxford), 53. Just before starting *Hazard*, Howells was approached by his editor at Harper's to write a collection of short pieces about New York life, but it never materialized, instead he wrote *Hazard*.

<sup>252</sup> William Dean Howells, *Literature and Life: Studies* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1902), 26.

<sup>253</sup> *ibid.*, 26.

<sup>254</sup> *ibid.*, 177.

satisfying.”<sup>255</sup> Howells noted the formal similarities between the two popular forms and also foresaw that inner city slum sketches, like travel narratives before them, would eventually fall out of favor because of being reproduced to the point of cliché in popular periodicals.

The geographic effects of the house-hunting scene have been interpreted as drawing lines of respectability within which the Marches can live in protected middle-class domesticity, and armed with a reporter’s beat Basil can subdue the unknowable city, essentially cordoning off the Marches from the dangerous, foreign elements of New York life.<sup>256</sup> Yet few scenes in *Hazard* actually take place in the March’s flat, and Basil’s walks are much too frequent and revelatory to suggest any desire to withdraw from the life he observes on the streets. Rather, in not publishing the sketches, Basil dodges promoting a sort of literary ghettoizing. The street sketches we observe over Basil’s shoulder—they never make it to the printers, but remain in the novel—portray an awareness of neighborhoods in transition that could not be contained within the frozen frame of the urban picturesque.

Examining Basil's sketches through the frame of the picturesque hampers the momentum of urbanization that Howells imbues in them. Rather, Howells highlights the transitional character of Greenwich Village. Most of the apartments they look at are

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<sup>255</sup> *ibid.*, 178.

<sup>256</sup> Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, 49. In her seminal analysis of the house-hunting scene, Kaplan positions the Marches as tourists, a role which allows them “to distance themselves from the surrounding poverty [of New York's working-class neighborhoods] by framing it within the secure confines of the 'picturesque'.” According to Kaplan, the March's attempts to secure middle-class domesticity among the city's incoherent and fragmented neighborhoods prove impossible. My reading suggests that the act of exploring the city's diverse neighborhoods actually assists in their settlement in and assimilation to city life.

within the neighborhood, but the types of dwellings and the people who live in them range vastly from block to block. Either they visit old-fashioned, subdivided mansions, with no modern conveniences, no elevator, no steam-heat, not enough rooms: the typical New York railroad flat. Or when they stop at renovated mansions, appointed with all the newest refinements, they are turned away at the door. They see “huge apartment-houses chiefly distinguishable from tenement houses by the absence of fire-escapes on their facades.”<sup>257</sup> They walk a few avenues west and see single family homes, for sale, but not available for rent. New affordable apartment buildings with modern conveniences are still in their construction phase, “heaped with a mixture of mortar, bricks, laths, and shavings from the interior . . . the clatter of hammers and the hiss of saws came out to them from every opening.”<sup>258</sup> In various states of neighborhood rehabilitation, the Marches observe “that some streets were quiet and clean, and . . . that they wore an air of encouraging reform.”<sup>259</sup> They notice, “[w]hole blocks of these down-town cross streets seemed to have been redeemed from decay” with a simple coat of paint on the brick work.<sup>260</sup> Howells walks the Marches through a process of urbanization that Basil recognizes to be fluid and ongoing. Selecting sketches that prioritize “international shabbiness,” or “scenes of misfortune,” or “the urban picturesque,” imposes limitations on the perambulatory narrator's range of trajectories, indeed the range of his subject matter. With a focus on the Marches' observations and adjustments to the various phases

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<sup>257</sup> William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (Oxford), 47.

<sup>258</sup> *ibid.*, 57.

<sup>259</sup> *ibid.*, 59.

<sup>260</sup> *ibid.*, 59.

of New York life, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* approaches but refuses to fetishize slum sketches simply for their popular appeal.

Basil's ambulatory narratives through a transforming Greenwich Village evoke phases of development, including the process of migration and settlement in urban centers and an optimism about a period of rediscovery of what constitutes urbanism in America. On Sunday mornings, Basil strolls through Greenwich Village to the waterfront, a mixed-residential district. Some streets are lined with small brick houses, some buildings have the most destitute rear-tenement lodgings, and still others boast new apartment-houses "breaking the old skyline with their towering stories" and March, "found a lingering quality of pure Americanism in the region."<sup>261</sup> Keen to observe the constant shuffle of populations through these working class districts, Basil observes that "foreign faces and foreign tongues prevailed in Greenwich Village, but no longer German or even Irish tongues or faces. The eyes and ear-rings of Italians twinkled in and out of the alleyways and basements....[he] liked the swarthy, strange visages; he found nothing menacing for the future in them."<sup>262</sup> Throughout his travels on the elevated tracks 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue, Basil revels in always "encountering some interesting shape of shabby adversity, which was almost always adversity of foreign birth."<sup>263</sup> He goes on with a physiognomic list of southern and eastern European traits, "the small eyes, the high cheeks, the broad noses, the puff lips, the bare, cue-filleted skulls."<sup>264</sup> Their numbers surpass previous Irish

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<sup>261</sup> William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (Oxford), 268.

<sup>262</sup> *ibid.*, 299.

<sup>263</sup> *ibid.*, 163.

<sup>264</sup> *ibid.*, 163.

and German immigration waves; they become the newest arrivals to settle into the already crowded Lower East Side to begin the process of neighborhood settlement anew.<sup>265</sup>

If the aporia of realism lies in the tendency of the urban picturesque to perpetuate late nineteenth-century racial hierarchies, the urban sketch subplot in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* reflects this concern rather than forwarding xenophobic anxieties which some critics have attributed to it.<sup>266</sup> Howells is often at his best when burlesquing forms so when Basil's urban sketches never make print, Howells directs his critique to the burgeoning market exploiting the form that makes "miserable art" (in Howells's terms) out of someone else's misfortunes. Examining Howells's meta commentary on literary form through the urban-sketch subplot explains the vagaries of structure in his greatest of city novels.

### **Tenement Sketches and the Worries of Writers**

Sketches of city slum conditions were becoming more ubiquitous during the American 1890s. What reads today as a rattling catalog of recognizable urban types was

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<sup>265</sup> Henry Wonham, "William Dean Howells," 49. In discussing Howells's engagement with ethnic caricature to repudiate types and reinforce realism's commitment to "character" rather than stereotype, Wonham reads these descriptions as the imaginings of a social order that is static and unchanging, allowing realist fiction and its writers to engage stereotype while seemingly undermining it by a "conceptual slight-of-hand": "Howellsian realism institutes permanent and inflexible ethnic and cultural categories as a strategy for imagining a homogeneous social order." However, if we conceive of Basil's neighborhood vignettes as descriptions of a social environment in a state of ongoing change, and the imaginings of a sketch writer, these exercises in capturing different physiognomies seems more benign.

<sup>266</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 47. Trachtenberg sees Howells's engagement with his urban subjects as marked by "terror." Amy Kaplan, *Social Construction*, 53, noted that Howells's realist aesthetics depended on "banishing 'the other half,' the common people into a tamed cityscape."

then newsworthy raw material in periodical literature, which Howells made the subject of fiction. *Hazard* was published the same year as police reporter Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*. The photographic exposé recounted the wanderings of Riis throughout New York's tenement, most notably the Lower East Side. In Riis's journalistic and creative writings, a walking narrator was middle-class readers' tour guide, navigating them through notoriously degenerate precincts while lending authenticity through his eyewitness account. The effect of such narratives was not only consciousness raising, but also contributed to the development of a visual vernacular of city types, which *Hazard's* urban sketch subplot critiques. As being in the scene, but not of it, the walking narrations of Jacob Riis keep an outsider's distance, constructing and reproducing geographic fictions about the real inhabitants of inner-city neighborhoods.

For any writer of the 1890s, the city offered valuable data and laboratory experience. Immigrants hailing from the southern and eastern hinterlands of Europe, Russia, and Asia, added new faces to the slums of New York and made the city the newest most densely populated in the world. Overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, and poverty came to represent the people who lived in these communities by reform-minded writers like Riis, who ushered in a period of muckraking in journalism pushing for government reform.

As a reporter for the *New York Tribune*, Riis worked from police headquarters at Mulberry Street in the Lower East Side, the heart of today's Little Italy and then recognized as the center of poverty, illness, and crime. He developed a close friendship

with Theodore Roosevelt who became police commissioner of the city in 1895. In each other's company, the two men hit the streets and strolled among the tenements at night. In his autobiography Roosevelt recalls “the midnight trips that Riis and I took enabled me to see what the Police Department was doing, and also gave me personal insight into some of the problems of city life. It is one thing to listen in perfunctory fashion to tales of overcrowded tenements, and it is quite another actually to see what that overcrowding means.”<sup>267</sup> While Riis’s work resulted in the systemic restructuring of communities, many of his colleagues used the same means—an ambulatory narrative method and like subject matter—to entirely different ends: to cultivate a picturesque aesthetic of life in the big city.

With decades of police reporting already behind him, no one was better prepared than Jacob Riis to document the blight of the urban poor. In Riis's case, writing neighborhoods resulted in civic reform. The social activist knew that a narrative depicting the deadly side of tenement life needed to be deployed before any urban rehabilitation project could successfully intervene on one of the cornerstones of American democracy: the right to own private property. In 1888, Riis made the case to the state health department that delinquent and absentee landlords bore the red taint of high mortality rates, and who else but city government ought to be held accountable for inadequate enforcement of fire laws: “Why should a man have a better right to kill his neighbor with a house than with an axe in the street,” he asks years later in his memoir.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>267</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), 199.

<sup>268</sup> Jacob A. Riis, *The Making of an American* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1902), 349.

The social responsibility of local government, as well as landlords, to tenants was evinced in *A Ten Years' War* (1900), a post-hoc accounting of reform measures coming in the wake of *The Other Half*. The title came from Riis's notion that it took roughly ten years for policy changes to take affect and Riis was sure to catalog the spoils of his labor: the Tenement House Commission was re-appointed and the notorious Mulberry Bend of New York's Lower East side was cleared and transformed into a park; light wells and air shafts were constructed in existing tenements; city councils voted to demolish dark, musty, unsanitary rear-facing tenements. Compulsory education laws, regular street-cleaning, and the closing of soup kitchens and police lodging houses to discourage pauperism and vagrancy were just some measures accomplished under Riis's protests.<sup>269</sup> Writers depicting the living conditions in these areas influenced New York City's fledgling building bureaucracy.

Riis conducts the reader of *A Ten Year's War* on a virtual tour through New York's tenement districts: "We were in Stanton Street. Let us start there, then, going east. Towering barracks on either side, five, six stories high. Teeming crowds."<sup>270</sup> As we go along, Riis gives locations of murders, fires, and suicides, instead of street signs, as sign posts of the neighborhood. Wending anecdotally through the slums, Riis stops here to toss off a sentimental tableaux—an Italian mother poised sewing sweat-work pants while her child slumbers atop a great pile of clothes. The image is humility sanctified: Riis includes a "picture of the 'Mother of God,'" flanked by two green glass bottles to preside

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<sup>269</sup> Jacob A. Riis, *A Ten Years' War: An Account of the Battle with the Slum in New York* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1969).

<sup>270</sup> Jacob A. Riis, *A Ten Years' War*, 30.

over the patient mother's labor, investing in all a “festive show.”<sup>271</sup> We move on to another block. And once again Riis stops in front of a building where there had recently been a deadly fire. In a mixture of didacticism and sentimentality, he welds a melodramatic, but true, story of a family who perished when a stairwell that was supposed to be made of fireproof material collapsed under them. For Riis, the city shares blame with the landlord.

Mostly, though, *A Ten Year's War* gives a post-hoc account of changes affected in the wake of *The Other Half* without much interest on the writer's part for aesthetic effect. A measure of that was to be found in the skeins of human-interest stories from his newspaper and magazine work of the eighties and nineties. His imperative was to reform poverty-stricken neighborhoods by spreading their stories through mass media. Two decades working out of Police Headquarters at Mulberry Street provided the meal which Riis generously doled out in his own newspaper columns (first in *The Evening Sun* and then *The New York Tribune*) and in nationally circulated magazines such as *Scribner's*, *The Century*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*.

In *Out of Mulberry Street* (1898), Riis reassembles a selection of such tales sprung from his reporter's notebook into a series of discrete but thematically interconnected vignettes “from the daily grist of the police hopper”(Preface). Circulating through the police station and sheathed in familiar themes—of fires, suicides, and abandoned orphans—the stories of Mulberry Bend stand as nothing short of a dead end neighborhood for the characters strung up to live there. For example in “The Slipper-

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<sup>271</sup> Jacob A. Riis, *A Ten Years' War*, 110.

Maker's Fast," a happy ending means escaping a fire with your life and (if you're lucky) with the stock of sweat-work slippers that, even selling after weeks of toil, would barely cover rent and meals. Riis prefaces *Out of Mulberry Street* with an oath of truth but admits to editorial discretion in the sequence of the stories versus their actual chronology. He arranges mini melodramas and tragicomedies among the families, friends, enemies, and neighbors of Mulberry Bend to produce ironic contrasts and heartbreaking juxtapositions, like the meaninglessness of death by fire or the limits of community bonds. A match-stick proves a fatal substitution in "Abe's Game of Jacks," leaving one child from a pair of twin boys charred to death: an elderly man in the following story manages to escape the flames of his boarding house on a wing and a prayer. In "A Dream of the Woods," a displaced Indian woman and child stranded in Grand Central station eventually find refuge among their own people in Thompson Street, while the rescue of an abandoned Chinese foundling from an ash barrel on the corner of Elizabeth and Mott Streets falls to an Italian woman—perhaps a stranger to the infant's culture, but not to the needs of nurturing newborn life. Rather than for the sake of whistleblowing, like so many of Riis's other writings, the human-interest stories from *Out of Mulberry Street* recreate dramatic incidents of ghetto life that collapse, or conflate, journalism's ties to literature. Basil March's concerns in writing and publishing urban sketches in the context of a market quickly becoming saturated by them critique specifically the kind of generic blending that Riis undertakes in producing human interest stories to elicit the patronage of his readers.

Reform-minded writers like Jacob Riis used the reporter's desk to clean out the ghetto and Tammany Hall. But at the same time a new breed of journalists began to emerge who saw their newspaper work as the first step in a budding literary career. Even Howells had to admit about journalism's ties to literature that, "the entente cordial between the two professions seems as great as ever," himself jumpstarting the careers of such reporters-cum-novelists as Stephen Crane and Abraham Cahan.<sup>272</sup> In the early 1890s a young Lincoln Steffens worked alongside Riis at police headquarters, reporting and muckraking the activities of an ongoing investigation into police corruption and graft for *The Evening Post*. Under the direction of his editor, Steffens "was to pay no attention to crime," but what he discovered on his many rambles with Riis became a wellspring of creative inspiration for the young writer and incited a firestorm of sensational articles in the *Post*.<sup>273</sup> By his own admission, "The Post printed a murder, as news, and there was no news in it; only life. 'We' published crime after that, all sorts of sensational stuff. Why not? Nobody noticed it, as crime. I soon found out that by going with the reporters to a fire or the scene of an accident was a way to see the town and the life of the town."<sup>274</sup> Much of the narrative of ghetto life was thus spun and what looked like a spike in crime, by the author's own concession, "was a wave of publicity only."<sup>275</sup> In the interest of his literary endeavors and pressured by Roosevelt, Steffens agreed to reign in his sensational stories: he would collect such material only as "local color for fiction or data for the

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<sup>272</sup> William Dean Howells, *Literature and Life*, 22.

<sup>273</sup> Lincoln Steffens, *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (New York: The Literary Guild, 1931), 197.

<sup>274</sup> *ibid.*, 243.

<sup>275</sup> *ibid.*, 290.

scientific purposes of my studies in sociology and ethics.”<sup>276</sup> Howells also participated in this methodology when he recounted his experiences as a young reporter working the night court shift. The fad for local color and the various routes writers took to achieve it marked overshadowed the emphasis on characters over types that Howells became increasingly weary of when penning his great New York novel.

Though theoretically the paths of journalism and fiction tended to veer close to one another, in practice, Steffens had to work twice as hard to delineate the two forms of writing. Inevitably one would give way to the other. Apart from his newspaper work, Steffens wrote “several local color and human-interest sketches of New York shopgirls, of Jews at religious observances and Italians at their street festivals, soft-news stories.”<sup>277</sup> Some of these writings found publication in the smaller magazines, like *The Chap-Book* and in the *Post's* Saturday supplement. There were plans to collect and publish these vignettes in a book called *The Human Various*, with publisher Henry Holt. But, writes Steffens's biographer, “by the time he submitted his book collection in 1902, Holt had decided that the market was glutted with 'newspaper short stories' and 'slum stories' written in frank imitation of one of the fads of the middle 1890s.”<sup>278</sup> Howells had anticipated the waning of this literary trend in *Hazard*, but he could not deny the change in reading practices that attended periodical publication. Neither could he deny the dividends of printing in serial installments, as *Hazard* had been.

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<sup>276</sup> *ibid.*, 291.

<sup>277</sup> Justin Kaplan, *Lincoln Steffens: A Biography* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1974), 88.

<sup>278</sup> Justin Kaplan, *Lincoln Steffens*, 88.

Despite his literary ambitions, Lincoln Steffens's career in writing never really evolved past the editor's room, a position he occupied for *The Evening Post*, *The Commercial Advertiser*, *McClure's*, and *American Magazine*. Steffens achieved his greatest notoriety from his investigative journalism. He wrote a cycle of articles for *McClure's* about the workings of political machines in city government. When it was published as a book in 1904, *The Shame of the Cities* collected all of Steffens's articles on St. Louis, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York. If not with his slum sketches, Steffens shaped the literary landscape by accepting a position of city editor for the “grandmother” of New York's general interest periodicals.

Though the *Commercial Advertiser* had a considerably smaller circulation than the *Post*, it also had the pedigree of long-time approval by the literary establishment.<sup>279</sup> Steffens's biographer notes that, “William Dean Howells, the novelist, once said that no writer or artist could afford not to read the *Commercial Advertiser*.”<sup>280</sup> By that he meant a new wave of writers entrenched the ties between journalism and fiction, with the stuff of real life forming the basis of their literary output. The transition for Steffens was a lateral one at best, but working for the *Advertiser* gave Steffens the editorial freedom to remake the newspaper to his liking. This meant embracing, rather than dismissing, the overlaps of such words as “literature,” “art,” and, “journalism.”<sup>281</sup> The whole staff was replaced, mostly with young and recent ivy league graduates who, “wanted to be writers,” and “did

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<sup>279</sup> Lincoln Steffens, *Autobiography*, 311.

<sup>280</sup> Justin Kaplan, *Lincoln Steffens*, 321.

<sup>281</sup> Lincoln Steffens, *Autobiography*, 316.

not intend to be journalists.”<sup>282</sup> Drama critic Norman Hapgood came on, as well as his brother, Hutchins, and Neith Boyce, and perhaps Steffens's most notable hire was Abraham Caham, whose first novel *Yekl* had recently earned him the praise of Howells as the premier author of immigrant life.

Though he continued to write neighborhood sketches and vignettes about the city while working on the *Advertiser* through the late 1890s, Steffens's fiction never stirred the literary marketplace some of his colleagues' did. As Howells had predicted of the form in general, Steffens's work drowned in the tide of newspaper sketches; however, some of his associates at the *Advertiser* would go on to earn recognition for their interpretations of ghetto life.

In *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (1902) and *Types from City Streets* (1910), Hutchins Hapgood incorporates the sayings, practices, and daily life of the Lower East Side. Hapgood's human interest stories, rendered as character portraits, genre sketches, and vignettes, formed part of a larger industry of literary production that was the offspring of the realist literary aesthetic—grounded in social activism and advanced through newspapers and magazines. The very titles of Hapgood's books suggest how immigrant literature materialized. *The Spirit of the Ghetto* documents the dialect, dress, feast days, newspapers, and writers of the Lower East Side, even as the author acknowledges the immigrant condition and the location of the ghetto is ephemeral, a similar conclusion to Howells's. Telling the immigrant story is to speak of transitioning out of the ghetto and of adapting to mainstream American culture, the culture of the middle class. Hapgood

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<sup>282</sup> *ibid.*, 314.

gives an example: the son of a pushcart peddler can open “a small basement store on Hester Street, then a more extensive establishment on Canal Street—ending perhaps as a rich merchant on Broadway.”<sup>283</sup> As a literary critic and journalist, Hapgood was cognizant that, like the immigrant's residency in the ghetto, his depictions in newspaper sketches are transitory: “Rather than for the art they reveal, they are interesting for the way they present a life intimately known. In fact the literary talent of the ghetto consists almost exclusively in the short sketch.”<sup>284</sup> With more elaborate plot and character development than the short sketch, but with the same fidelity to detail, Abraham Cahan fixed in time the urchins, pushcart peddlars, and shopgirls of Hester Street like figures on an urn. Hapgood reserves an entire chapter to extolling his *Advertiser* colleague: “Cahan's work is more developed and more mature as art than that of the other men, who remain essentially sketch writers.”<sup>285</sup> With this, Hapgood emphasized what Howells knew to be true: that the distinction between subject and form mattered only insofar as the writer's abilities to create a timeless expression out of something as common as the newsprint that human interest stories were printed on. This explains why Basil refused to commit his sketches to the *Every Other Week* and supports Hazard's engagement with the dynamic process of urbanization as inseparable from his critique of the form.

Hapgood wrote with an awareness that the “New York ghetto is constantly changing. It shifts from one part of town to another, and the time is not so very far

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<sup>283</sup> Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto: Studies of the Jewish Quarter in New York* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1902), 29.

<sup>284</sup> *ibid.*, 231.

<sup>285</sup> *ibid.*, 230.

distant when it will cease to exist altogether.”<sup>286</sup> With Howells championing realism from the editor's desk at Harpers, fiction writers could employ the strategy of the investigative reporter walking the city streets in search of a story, in an attempt to create lasting impressions of an environment in constant change. The same year that *The Spirit of the Ghetto* appeared, Howells put that strategy into a narrative about writing in an essay published in his memoir, *Literature and Life*, which he described as, “a group of desultory sketches and essays.” “Worries of a Winter Walk,” tells the story of a poor Venetian tenement belle fueled by her love for the Swedish driver of a coke-cart, whom she follows hunched over to gather the pieces of coal tossed out of the back, lumping them into her shameful rags. By the end of the essay, Howells lightly chastises himself for using the occasion to make “miserable art” out of their misfortune especially when “fiction [is] already overloaded with low life.”<sup>287</sup> Howells's, Hapgood's, and to some extent, Jacob Riis's and Lincoln Steffens's sauntering throughout New York's neighborhoods produced variations on the formal possibilities of capturing urbanization; the neighborhood narratives they depicted registered the need to accommodate different people and circumstances. As we proceed with the sweep of urban settlement to the Tenderloin neighborhood, located a few avenues west and a couple of streets north of where the Marches found their home, the general pattern of accommodation reproduces itself in the neighborhood novels of Paul Laurence Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson.

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<sup>286</sup> *ibid.*, 268.

<sup>287</sup> William Dean Howells, *Literature and Life*, 44.

## Sporting in the Tenderloin

Commercialized popular entertainment found its niche on the west side in the upper twenties and thirties during the latter half of the nineteenth century. When the former station of the old New York and Harlem Railroad was rendered obsolete by the construction of the Grand Central Depot nearly twenty blocks uptown, the Vanderbilts, who owned the site, began leasing the old station house to theatrical and entertainment entrepreneurs in the 1870s. Boxing matches, marathon races, not to mention P.T. Barnum's circus (1873) and the first Westminster Kennel Club Show (1877) drew a crowd of pleasure-seekers to the region. Realizing its consumer value, in 1879, the Vanderbilt family took control of the facility once again, naming it Madison Square Garden and continuing its use as a "multipurpose, multiclass venue."<sup>288</sup> When the vice crusade of the 1880s closed down boxing events, which were still considered illegal, curtailed profits led the Vanderbilts to sell out to the capitalist aggregate of J.P Morgan, Stillman, Astor, and Carnegie in 1885. Eleven months later, on Twenty-sixth street and Madison Avenue, the same site where the old station once stood, Stanford White designed and built "one of the largest public entertainment halls" the country had ever seen.<sup>289</sup> Extravagant and daring, with a nude statue of the Roman goddess Diana crowning the 289-foot pinnacle and an observation deck commanding never before seen city views, the second version of Madison Square Garden became home to a variety of large-scale popular entertainments. The cost of maintaining such a grand stadium did cut into the

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<sup>288</sup> Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1138.

<sup>289</sup> Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham*, 1147.

profit margin and investors took a cue from their predecessor and began leasing to outside entertainment agencies, such as Barnum's and Ringling's circuses. Alternately hosting exclusive New York society balls and popular amusements such as dog shows, sporting events, and circuses, "Madison Square Garden thus became an institution that oscillated, from night to night, between patrician and plebeian entertainments."<sup>290</sup>

There were more amusements to be had for the sporting crowd that came to this precinct than Madison Square Garden could respectably provide. Theaters, music halls, brothels, and gambling dens attracted a mixed crowd to the region, which was known as Satan's Circus, and coming to be known as the Tenderloin. Robert M. Dowling, whose survey of the neighborhood outlines the demographics that these institutions catered to, includes "African American musicians, gamblers, stage performers, and prostitutes, as well as white 'slummers,' and frequenters of the 'black and tans'" as part of the marginal, rather than mainstream, culture of New York that caroused around the Tenderloin.<sup>291</sup> In this region of the city, the pattern described with regard to Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side is sustained, as Dowling notes, "the ensuing army of pleasure-seekers chased [the neighborhood's] residents uptown."<sup>292</sup> The pattern of gentrification which we have observed with the Marches (and before them, the Slopers) is duplicated: vacated space quickly finds new occupants in a thriving city.

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<sup>290</sup> *ibid.*, 1148.

<sup>291</sup> Robert M. Dowling, *Slumming in New York: From the Waterfront to Mythic Harlem* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 79.

<sup>292</sup> Robert M. Dowling, *Slumming in New York*, 79.

Still an outpost of police headquarters at Mulberry Bend and not within the ken of Riis's study of the other half, the Tenderloin gained notoriety when police captain Alexander "Clubber" Williams was transferred to the precinct in 1876. An article printed in *Harper's* March 1887 edition spotlighted the infamous police captain, whose favorite instrument in fighting the ruffians and law-breakers under his jurisdiction earned him his nickname. The captain is also credited with giving the neighborhood he served its moniker. The author of the *Harper's* article states, "His precinct is known as the 'Tenderloin,' because of its social characteristics."<sup>293</sup> The social characteristics, less obliquely, but no less euphemistically, reveal themselves in the captain's ironic remark to another reporter about the graft that had been facilitating the neighborhood's seedy trafficking. Upon learning of his transfer to the Tenderloin, Williams can easily be imagined smacking his lips and rubbing his hands, "I've been having chuck steak ever since I've been on the force...and now I'm going to have a bit of tenderloin."<sup>294</sup> He described the preponderance of bribes seeking to line his wallet, as well as his waistline, and in doing so gave a name to the neighborhood that stuck.

The Tenderloin's geographical boundaries seem to be as tenuous as they are anecdotal.<sup>295</sup> The location I give outlines "Clubber" Williams' precinct at the time when

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<sup>293</sup> Richard Wheatley, "The New York Police Department," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 74.442 (1887): 500.

<sup>294</sup> Quoted in Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham*, 959.

<sup>295</sup> James Trager has traced the neighborhood from 23<sup>rd</sup> to Forty-Eighth Street between Fifth and Seventh Aves, based on Williams' precinct. James Weldon Johnson in *Black Manhattan* doesn't even provide an explicit location. Mary White Ovington in her settlement study *Half a Man* locates the Tenderloin between 14<sup>th</sup> and 59<sup>th</sup> from Sixth Ave to the Hudson. Dowling approximates the region between 25<sup>th</sup> Street and 55<sup>th</sup> Street, from 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue to 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue. In Burrows' and Wallace's *Gotham* the neighborhood is located between 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue, from 23<sup>rd</sup> Street to 57<sup>th</sup> Street.

he was appointed captain; therefore, the Tenderloin covers Twenty-third Street, all the way up to Fifty-third Street, between Fifth and Seventh Avenues. Since neighborhood development was still advancing headlong uptown in the “post-bellum, pre-Harlem” era of New York City, the northern edge of these borders functions like an osmotic pressure point. Furthermore, the region was bisected when between 1903 and 1910 developers scooped out a large swath of land from Thirty-first to Thirty-third Streets, between Seventh and Eighth Avenues, to make room for Pennsylvania Station. Because of its tenuous boundaries, the Tenderloin remains more a matter of literary than geographical record. Nevertheless, the region is a historical fact not to be overlooked in a narrative of neighborhood formation.

In 1911, Mary White Ovington published a social study on the historical status of New York’s black population entitled *Half A Man*, in which she identified five Manhattan neighborhoods with the highest concentrations of their settlement: “Greenwich Village, the middle West Side, San Juan Hill, the upper East, and the upper West sides.”<sup>296</sup> The Tenderloin lies in the second region, abutting the predominantly Irish Hell’s Kitchen to the west and confirming what was beginning to be recognized as characteristic of the city’s demographic features, that “it is only a step in New York from Africa into Italy or Ireland.”<sup>297</sup> In his cultural history of New York’s black population, James Weldon Johnson affirms Ovington’s cultural geography, naming the Tenderloin New York’s “black Bohemia,” to which the Harlem of the 1920s and 30s became heir. In *Black*

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<sup>296</sup> Mary White Ovington, *Half a Man: The Status of the Negro in New York* (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1911), 33.

<sup>297</sup> Mary White Ovington, *Half a Man*, 72.

*Manhattan* (1930) he writes about the northward trend, “By 1890 the centre of the coloured population had shifted to the upper Twenties and lower Thirties west of Sixth Avenue. Ten years later another considerable shift northward had been made to West Fifty-third Street and to San Juan Hill (West Sixty-first, Sixty-second, and Sixty-third streets).”<sup>298</sup> For writers with varying motives, an interest in the spoils of these cultural collectivities accompanied an interest in their migration and settlement patterns.

Interpreting trends in the housing choices of working people, particularly of black Americans, Ovington noted that the push and pull of migration trends influenced social self-segregation of neighborhoods: “New-comers to New York usually segregate,” she writes, “and the Negro is no exception.”<sup>299</sup> According to Ovington, and as we can infer from James's literary antecedent, the east side south of Washington Square used to be a fashionable residential district for black people who were employed in the service of more prosperous whites living north of the square. The infilling of European immigrants in lower Manhattan's slum districts squeezed the city's small but growing black population uptown, making it “difficult to find an African face among the hundreds of thousands of Europeans south of Fourteenth Street.”<sup>300</sup> She attributes the shift and growth of the city's black population to the migrations from the West Indies and from the American South during the first decade of the twentieth century. The recent black arrivals to Manhattan, “are glad to make their home among familiar faces, and they settle in the already crowded places on the West Side. Freedom to live on the East Side next

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<sup>298</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), 59.

<sup>299</sup> Mary White Ovington, *Half a Man*, 49.

<sup>300</sup> *ibid.*, 42, 43.

door to a Bohemian family may be very well, but sociability is better.”<sup>301</sup> The Tenderloin offered a combination of sociability for the self-colonization of new arrivals while boasting attractions to a mixed sporting and clubbing crowd. Like the purlieu of Greenwich Village for the Marches, the Tenderloin became home to a hopeful middle class.

From the perspective of middle-class reformers like Jacob Riis and Mary White Ovington, the opportunities for cross-class and cross-race mixing presented one of the greatest hazards of city life. In *How the Other Half Lives*, Jacob Riis had already vilified establishments in the Lower East Side that promoted cross-racial assignations. He writes, “The border-land where the black and white races meet in common debauch, the aptly named black-and-tan saloon, has never been debatable ground from a moral stand-point. It has always been the worst of the desperately bad. Than this commingling of the utterly depraved of both sexes, white and black, on such ground, there can be no greater abomination.”<sup>302</sup> With the spread of these locales uptown, together with the abundance of dance halls, bar rooms, gambling houses, and cabarets available in the Tenderloin, Ovington also concluded that “a vicious world dwells in these streets and makes notorious this section of New York.”<sup>303</sup> Interpretations of the Tenderloin, a mostly anecdotal affair, from the stodgy musings of Captain Williams to the philanthropic liberalism of Ms. Ovington, overlook the regions' attributes by marking the region with a

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<sup>301</sup> *ibid.*, 48, 49.

<sup>302</sup> Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), 156.

<sup>303</sup> Mary White Ovington, *Half a Man*, 36.

moral cartography. However as a subject of imaginative literature, and particularly the novel, the Tenderloin shows the neighborhood to be a testing ground for the non-normative, where new ways of thinking and living meet a taste for subversive play.

Social workers of the Progressive era denounced lapses in moral behavior occurring in Tenderloin clubs, and in doing so also overlooked the basic need for working class leisure that these accessible, affordable venues catered to. But even Riis did not fail to mark “[t]he amount of ‘style’ displayed on fine Sundays on Sixth and Seventh Avenues by colored holiday-makers.”<sup>304</sup> To be seen parading along the shop-lined avenues dressed in one’s finest underscores the casual and superficial rites of the free, open, and democratic activity of city-strolling that working folk availed themselves of on weekends. James Weldon Johnson refers to the activity as an art; Hutchins Hapgood provides a definition of “the rounder” as one of the city streets’ types: “He is the embodied spirit of Broadway. There his tastes are formed. He hates with the special hatred of a highly differentiated type whatever is foreign to the basic instincts of the Tenderloin.”<sup>305</sup> City strolling accelerates the assimilation process for the urban migrant because the activity puts him in contact with highly differentiated “types” and makes cultural literacy not only possible but a quality widely sought.

In exchange for free and casual acquaintance, newcomers to the city risk and often intentionally abandon formerly sacred social networks of family, religion, and school. Tradition is forsaken. As Georg Simmel argued, the effect of the metropolis on

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<sup>304</sup> Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 154.

<sup>305</sup> Hutchins Hapgood, *Types from City Streets* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1910), 76.

mental life offers the freedom of anonymity, the ability to make a blank slate of the past through the suspension of individuality in favor of the legibility of types.<sup>306</sup> The dialectical themes surrounding the urban migrant—cosmopolitanism and nativism, tradition and progress, segregation and sociability, and individuality and anonymity—has been broached in studies of Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *Sport of the Gods* (1902) and James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* (1912), novels in which a new set of values inform the development of characters and the Tenderloin neighborhood.

Criticism surrounding these novels, which get paired together because they situate a black (or liminally-raced) migrant in the modern cityscape, attributes the increasingly social concepts of race and place as determining the characters’ behavior and thus their fate. As we have already seen Howells describe, archetypal features of the travel narrative have crossed over to the urban migration narrative of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the naïve pilgrim is conducted into a new environment and exposed to new experiences, which alienate the pilgrim from the past, and after being faced with a series of challenges, the pilgrim either rises or falls. Whereas, for example, religious dogma engineers the journey of Dante’s pilgrim through a medieval hell, the migrant of the modern city is conducted on currents of race and class. In both scenarios the outcomes appear to be predetermined. Ostensibly, at the end of Dunbar’s novel, the Hamiltons must abandon their place in the Tenderloin and the ex-colored man must renounce his race to reserve his place in New York.<sup>307</sup> With deterministic interpretations

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<sup>306</sup> Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. trans. Kurt Wolff. (New York: Free Press, 1950), 409-424.

<sup>307</sup> Lawrence R. Rodgers, *Canaan Bound: The African American Migration Novel* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997). In his study of both novels in the context of the “Great Migration” of African

of race in the modern novel of urban migration, the positive side of the urban migrant's dialectic—cosmopolitanism, progress, sociability, and anonymity—seems to go unnoticed. Traditional interpretations of the migration novel do not allow migration to and mobility within the modern city to give play to forces as free, open, and planless as the neighborhood within which these narratives transpire.

This discussion of *Sport of the Gods* and *Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man* features walkable urbanism as a way for the migrant to become familiar with the city and also as a way to free the city from associations with environmental determinism that had caused it to become a subject of vilification in ethnographies of the low life. By featuring the navigation of and adaptation to the Tenderloin neighborhood, American literature and the arts took its first steps in forging a modernist aesthetic, characterized by the complexity and moral ambiguity of newly sprouted denizens coming to terms with living closely next to one another in a nation of big cities. Modern taste for folk forms in art, literature, and theater began to arise. An aesthetic interest in localized, uniquely American folkways began to take on cultural currency in literary and artistic production at home and abroad—themes that the Tenderloin novels of Johnson and Dunbar embrace.

First Dunbar and then Johnson were part of this rendezvous with the artistic and cultural life of New York City. They both came to the city, like the characters in their novels, seeking new opportunities. The publishing houses of New York were a draw, and

Americans to Northern cities in the early twentieth century, Rodgers writes that “geography and race are not the sole determinants of fate” in the characters' Tenderloin lives (53). However, he concludes that the Tenderloin “inhibited the formation of an African-American-based aesthetic”(69). While emphasizing the characters' autonomy of will when living in the city and establishing Dunbar's characters as more complex than plantation era depictions of black people, the study marks the Tenderloin as an incomplete realization of the creative cultural work going on in the region.

so were the local circles of artists, musicians, writers, and entertainers. At different times, they participated in the emerging “black bohemia” that preceded the Harlem Renaissance. Just as the settlement patterns of a youthful and fledgling creative class continued the northward trend up Manhattan island, the Tenderloin neighborhood became a brief stopover at the beginning of the twentieth century, before the center of black cultural life hop-scotched to San Juan Hill (located around 53rd Street) and then to Harlem (another fifty blocks uptown). Within this context, the neighborhood novels of these two writers reaffirm dynamism, mobility, and cultural progress.

In critical comparisons of Dunbar's *Sport of the Gods* and Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, the latter is touted as the more experimental and modern, and not only because Dunbar's novel appeared in print more than a decade before Johnson's. While it's true that *Sport* proceeds from the plantation tradition that the post-Reconstruction South was heir to, the novel not only subverts that paradigm, but more overtly, becomes its undertaker. What's more, Dunbar's deathbed novel can be seen as a forerunner of the Southern Gothic tradition, representative in the works of such authors as William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, and Flannery O'Connor decades later. As an analysis of the novel's ending will show, Dunbar leaves the narrative tradition of the Old South in a ghostly, distant past, while ushering in a new urban setting for black youth culture and the arts.

The transition to modernism apparent in Johnson's novel, on the other hand, is an experiment in genre, rather than a relinquishment of a bygone literary milieu. As Thomas

Morgan argues, “In *Sport of the Gods*, Dunbar can only argue against what are already ingrained as representational differences between whites and blacks, whereas Johnson's use of autobiography allows him to question contemporary conditions by providing observations and experiences that run counter to this institutionalized logic.”<sup>308</sup> In Johnson's, “fiction of 'authenticity',” he writes, “The anonymity of the text was designed to trouble readers' previously held conceptions concerning black urban life.”<sup>309</sup> By cross-dressing as autobiographical testimony, the fictional text exploits racial phobias that are made more palpable and therefore more realistic in the context of city living. In my reading of two central scenes in which the neighborhood locale figures prominently, I want to argue that the condition of anonymity made possible by living among crowds of strangers troubles the easy legibility of types in an urban setting. As demonstrated by the ex-colored man's own accounts and experiences, the complexion of one's skin is not a fail safe way of determining racial identity. In the guise of a confessional, the author's experimentation with genre must have been deliciously satisfying for Johnson and immensely troubling for his audience.

The trickery is disclosed from the first paragraph of the narrative: In divulging the “great secret” of his life, the ex-colored man conjures up, “a sort of savage and diabolical desire to gather up all the little tragedies of my life, and turn them into a practical joke on society.”<sup>310</sup> Moral ambiguity, alienation, and satirical humor, all

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<sup>308</sup> Thomas L. Morgan, “The City as Refuge: Constructing Urban Blackness in Paul Laurence Dunbar's 'Sport of the Gods' and James Weldon Johnson's 'The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man',” *African American Review* 38.2 (2004), 225. Accessed January 8, 2012, J-Stor.

<sup>309</sup> Thomas L. Morgan, “The City as Refuge,” 224.

<sup>310</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (Boston: Sherman, French & Company, 1912), 1.

characteristic of the modern and post-modern condition, frame the novel. While it's true that Johnson innovates in terms of form using a fictional autobiography, the story itself follows conventional tropes of a migration novel. The protagonist moves away from the familiarity and security of his Connecticut home once he finds out the truth of his racial identity. He migrates South, to receive an education among his own people, but his naivety leaves him robbed and unable to pay for tuition and living expenses. Orphaned and stranded among strangers in a strange land, he strikes out further south to Florida, where he must make a living on his own. His experience securing employment in a cigar factory provides him with a skilled trade that allows him to work up a bit of capital to establish himself. Following a cohort of upstarts like himself, he decides to try his fortune in New York City, where the jobs promise to be bountiful. And like the transplants that have preceded him, he waxes lyrical recounting the first splendid views of America's empire city:

We steamed up into New York harbor late one afternoon in spring. The last efforts of the sun were being put forth in turning the waters of the bay to glistening gold; the green islands on either side, in spite of their warlike mountings, looked calm and peaceful; the buildings of the town shone out in a reflected light which gave the city an air of enchantment; and, truly, it is an enchanted spot. New York City is the most fatally fascinating thing in America. She sits like a great witch at the gate of the country, showing her alluring white face, and hiding her crooked hands and feet under her garments,—constantly enticing thousands from far within, and tempting those who come across the seas to go no further. And all these become the victims of her caprice.<sup>311</sup>

Intoxicating, enchanting, beguilingly adaptive—these perceptions of New York echo throughout a similar scene in Dunbar's novel, and generically, a familiar scene in

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<sup>311</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography*, 86.

urban novels. Likewise, in both novels, the new transplants easily find accommodations in a boarding house in Twenty-seventh Street, the Tenderloin. For both transplants, becoming assimilated, and soon after inured, is a speedy process; however, it involves assuming airs of pretense. No sooner than after his first visit to the club, the ex-colored man “learned to fake a knowledge for the benefit of those greener than he.”<sup>312</sup> However contrived the route to recognition and acceptance; insider status appears to be gained with minimal obstacles as Johnson's narrator easily becomes, “acquainted with the majority of the famous personages who came to the 'Club'.”<sup>313</sup> In Dunbar's and Johnson's novels, the “neighborhood rounders” embark upon the sporting life of the locale and become visible exponents of the changed effects urban life has on youth culture.

James Weldon Johnson's legacy proves that he was more than a casual observer of the influence black Americans had exerted on modern life, or the ways in which the color of one's skin or, indeed, the lack of color, affect both identity and social mobility. Johnson's legacy mostly comes from his long career working for the NAACP. However his efforts in promoting black arts were realized earlier in his life, on the stage, in music, and in literature. He became one of the first anthologists of black writers, collecting and editing verse in *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922); he followed Dunbar's adoption of dialect in a collection of folk sermons called *God's Trombones* (1927); he recounted his own peripatetic experiences in a true autobiography titled *Along This Way* (1933). Out of all his efforts to chronicle African American culture, *Black Manhattan*

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<sup>312</sup> *ibid.*, 103.

<sup>313</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography*, 103.

(1930) stands out as the most relevant to its time. With a backward glance that sweeps back to the first migrations from Africa, up to the present Harlem Renaissance, the historical survey of America's black people made the metropolis crucial to the cultural progress of the race in American culture. The path to prominence, Johnson notes, is marked by the successes and talents of the great athletes, writers, actors, and musicians of color who gained their opportunities in the nation's cultural capital, at the right time: "In New York the Negro now began to function and express himself on a different plane, in a different sphere; and in a different way he impressed himself upon the city and the country."<sup>314</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, black Americans began to impress themselves upon the nation's artistic and cultural sphere in new and exciting ways, and, "New York, the New York of the upper Twenties and lower Thirties west of Sixth Avenue, became the nucleus of these changed activities."<sup>315</sup> During this time, "New York's black Bohemia constituted a part of the famous old Tenderloin; and, naturally, it nourished a number of the ever present vices; chief among them, gambling and prostitution. But it nourished other things; and one of these things was artistic effort."<sup>316</sup> The artistic effort that I want to emphasize in this discussion of *Autobiography* is not the "practical joke" of the title and genre. Rather, the centerpiece of the tale, and what makes it uniquely modern, is the role the Tenderloin plays as a tilling field within an evolving and uniquely American artistic tradition.

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<sup>314</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 59.

<sup>315</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 60.

<sup>316</sup> *ibid.*, 74.

Among the clubbing crowd, commonly grouped together as a mix of degenerates and mislead, there exists an emergent creative class, along with their benefactors and hangers-on. As we see in *Black Manhattan*, Johnson characterizes New York as an exponent and exporter of American popular culture and the arts. Novels like Johnson's (and Dunbar's) locate the specific neighborhood pulsing their activities. The activities going on in the "Club," the heart of Tenderloin amusement in *Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, tell a new, insider's story of American popular culture in its nascence. Here, African American talent takes center stage and so do all the attendant exploits and scandals. Such an insider's view would have been a titillating read and a lure to the Tenderloin for the more adventurous. The widespread popularity of the novel made the seamier side of urban life more mainstream and therefore more acceptable, while helping to create and perpetuate the ephemeral realm of the hip, cool, young, and modern.

The club at which the ex-colored man so quickly becomes a regular was "at the time the most famous place of its kind in New York, and was well known to both white and colored people of certain classes."<sup>317</sup> Johnson's descriptions of the venue—including its interior, its clientèle, and its activities—encompass democratic, even plebeian, openness, mixed with rarified exclusivity: "Here the great prize fighters were wont to come, the famous jockeys, the noted minstrels, whose names and faces were familiar on every billboard in the country."<sup>318</sup> The décor is a gallery of African American cultural figureheads, as well as rising stars: "There were pictures of Frederick Douglass and of

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<sup>317</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography*, 100.

<sup>318</sup> *ibid.*, 102.

Peter Jackson, of all the lesser lights of the prize-fighting ring, of all the famous jockeys and the stage celebrities, down to the newest song and dance team.”<sup>319</sup> The entente cordiale shared here by the “notables” and their “admirers, both white and colored” is limited, however, and fraught with tension. Forces generated by the music, spirits, dancing, and gambling influence the transactions taking place in this den of frenetic activity and infuse the entire atmosphere with restless volatility. With capricious fortune touching the humble and the powerful alike, one wrong footfall can be deadly, or deliverance can be found just around the corner.

Johnson sets up the ex-colored man as one example of the risks and rewards of associating with the patrons of the Tenderloin club. While his protagonist concedes there existed locales in New York where “respectable” African American middle class families concentrate, they exist outside his tale. In contrast to James's *Washington Square*, Johnson placed the transitory club life, rather than rooted domesticity, at the center of his neighborhood novel. Fascination with the new and unexamined, rather than studied appraisal of the past enhances the rate of the telling, and the narration evokes and advances the heady excitement and popular appeal of the clubbing life. Upon his first visit to the club, the protagonist feels “dazzled,” and “dazed,” and “absolutely giddy.” His attentions oscillate without fixed focus, skipping and dashing from one distraction to the next. Distinctions in usage of insider slang surprise and unnerve him: “I noticed that among this class of colored men the word 'nigger' was freely used in about the same sense as the word 'fellow,' and sometimes as a term of almost endearment; but I soon

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<sup>319</sup> *ibid.*, 101.

learned that its use was absolutely prohibited to white men.”<sup>320</sup> Observing for the first time “the ancient and terribly fascinating game of dice, popularly known as 'craps',” he notices the players, “were using terms that were strange.”<sup>321</sup> They were carelessly testing chance with exclamations of “Fate me! Fate me! Fate me!”<sup>322</sup> The strange new world seems always strangely on the verge of dissolution.

He abandoned the cigar-rolling trade in Florida and upon relocating to the Tenderloin dedicated himself to full-time gambling. A year passes in the span of a paragraph: nights at the club until three or four in the morning; awake in time for aimless afternoon walks; twilight stupors in the gambling house. In spite of all the novelties that he so recently found having engaged him, his life threatens to push forward in staccato, without variation—restless and inert. One novel form he encounters during his stint with the nightlife, however, disrupts his routine and sends his life in another direction. The new, uniquely American form of ragtime music, with its themes and variations, with its blending of southern folk roots and European classical music, enters the novel and becomes a metaphor for the seemingly haphazard incidents that pattern the journey of the meandering Tenderloin soul.

The distractions available in the club conveniently facilitate the assimilation process for the ex-colored man. In unexpected ways, city life unfolds for him: reversals of fortune lurk around every corner. This mode of living gains traction as walking

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<sup>320</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography*, 89.

<sup>321</sup> *ibid.*, 90.

<sup>322</sup> *ibid.*, 90.

narrative motifs in neighborhood novels. A walking narrator's perspective demystifies city life for urban transplants, as well as for readers. Led to the Tenderloin, then navigating the society found there, the ex-colored man achieves status and credibility by way of his affiliation with the life of the street. The premise of walkability is an end and a means—an activity unto itself associated with and common to all urban dwellers. As a narrative trope, it builds on a tradition of travel, but presses forward to illustrate the processes of settlement within an increasingly mobile society, where change and unpredictability is the rule, not the exception. A certain abandon and faith must be given to the fickle currents of fortune. Upon arrival, the ex-colored man and his small coterie of fellow travelers immediately find accommodations in a Tenderloin lodging-house, “in 27<sup>th</sup> Street, just west of Sixth Avenue.”<sup>323</sup> They find a local gambling den an easy stroll from their residence, on the first night out: “We turned into one of the cross streets and mounted the stoop of a house in about the middle of a block between Sixth and Seventh Avenues.”<sup>324</sup> They finish their first full night in Manhattan in the club, directed there by a nameless guide: “We went to Sixth Avenue, walked two blocks, and turned west into another street. We stopped in front of a house with three stories and a basement.”<sup>325</sup> With every footfall, incidental encounters pattern the Tenderloin life of the ex-colored man, not the least of which is the journey his playing of ragtime music takes him on.

Johnson captures the tempo of a modernizing American youth culture, the important influence of black American cultural forms, and the evolution of America's

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<sup>323</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography*, 87.

<sup>324</sup> *ibid.*, 88.

<sup>325</sup> *ibid.*, 94.

cities from metropolises to cultural capitals in the form of ragtime music. Structurally, the musical motif, a forerunner to jazz, also goes far in scoring the reversals of fortune observable in the Tenderloin scenes of Johnson's novel. Johnson traces the roots of ragtime, which follow the similar migratory patterns of post-bellum black Americans, to “the questionable resorts about Memphis and St. Louis by Negro piano players...It made its way to Chicago, where it was popular some time before it reached New York,” where the protagonist (also of motley origins) discovers that it “was just growing to be a rage which has not yet subsided.”<sup>326</sup> As it touches the life of the ex-colored man, ragtime exemplifies the interdependence between artist and benefactor, between art forms and audience, between tradition and modernity, through its uniquely American interregional valences. Johnson alerts readers to a new form originating within the African American community, and also puts it within an established framework through which all cultural forms evolve. In its newness and seeming defiance of convention, ragtime is already interpolated within an artistic tradition that extends beyond the borders of its homeland. In essence, the form of the novel mimics the principles of ragtime, and of new artistic forms and their practitioners.

The ex-colored man's quick mastery of ragtime comes to the attention of one of the club's fêted patrons. Johnson, in defiance of the academic tradition to dismiss popular forms, elevates the significance of ragtime because of its relevance in an international context, investing it with cultural capital: “it is music which possesses at least one strong element of greatness; it appeals universally; not only the American, but the English, the

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<sup>326</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography*, 96.

French, and even the German people, find delight in it. In fact, there is not one corner of the civilized world in which it is not known, and this proves its originality.”<sup>327</sup> The “world-conquering influence of ragtime,” gains United States art forms a license on cultural pedigree among the world's cosmopolitan centers. So much so that, “In Paris they call it American music.”<sup>328</sup> As noted ragtime musician among the Tenderloin crowd, the protagonist is soon swept up in the form's international stream. Ragtime and happenstance becomes the ex-colored man's international passport for the sections following the Tenderloin scenes.

Through his regular gig at the club, the protagonist meets a wealthy gentleman, who fast becomes his patron and hires him for private parties attended by the city's elite. Soon, an explosive night at the club initiates a disorienting walk, followed by a coincidental encounter. The scene forms the lynchpin of the novel. Significantly, the epicenter of the book prepared a launch for the ex-colored man into a post-race society because for the duration of his European tour he follows the path dictated by the ragtime music he plays, not the color of his skin. The mixed origin of ragtime itself becomes a metaphor for changes in the perception of American culture. One of the few forms perceived the world over as being wholly American, popular rags are part of a larger process of artistic regeneration, the continuity of which depends on, at least for Johnson's historical moment, the ability to assimilate diverse groups and tastes.

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<sup>327</sup> *ibid.*, 97.

<sup>328</sup> *ibid.*, 85.

Johnson assembles a seeming haphazard chain of events that moves the protagonist from the local purlieus of the Tenderloin to points international. Playing at one of the parties of his benefactor, he meets a wealthy society woman who takes a liking to him. He soon discovers that this woman, whom he calls the white widow, is also a benefactor, of sorts. She can be found holding court at the club in the company of a surly young black man, who is bedecked in jewels and tailored finery, to match the elegance of his companion. The widow spares no expense to outfit her chaperon, and now she intends to extend her patronage to the club's noteworthy ragtime musician. One night, anxiously seated with her at a table, the ex-colored man's worst fears are made manifest: In strides her vexed lover, a monolith of fixed determination. Raising a gun to her throat, the jealous lover executes the white widow.

Time compresses. Action and incident fast-forward the reader through the remaining Tenderloin scenes. The high drama of the widow's murder closes shut like the door of the club behind the now wandering musician. Johnson sends the reeling soul on a walking spree. Reacting like a moving target, the narrator recounts the semiconscious journey, "Just which streets I followed when I got outside I do not know, but I think I must have gone towards Eighth Avenue, then down towards Twenty-third Street and across towards Fifth Avenue. I traveled not by sight, but instinctively. I felt like one fleeing in a horrible nightmare."<sup>329</sup> Abandoning himself to the streets, suspending will and purpose, he confesses, "How long and far I walked I cannot tell"<sup>330</sup> Johnson places

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<sup>329</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography*, 121.

<sup>330</sup> *ibid.*, 121.

this walk at a crucial point in the development of the novel's central themes. Once he wanders beyond the terrain of his familiar neighborhood, a disembodied voice calls to him from a nearby cab. He is summoned back to consciousness once he recognizes, “the voice of his millionaire friend.”<sup>331</sup> Somewhere on Fifth Avenue, somewhere near Central Park, we can infer the ex-colored man blindly journeyed east and north, at least twenty blocks, to the uptown regions of well-heeled New Yorkers. “What on earth are you doing strolling in this part of town?”<sup>332</sup> The walking narrative Johnson's protagonist ventures upon when Tenderloin forces collide extends the significance of the neighborhood from a local to an international context, and his position changes from hired entertainer to synecure and companion. The ambulatory narrative, like the walking narratives we have followed in the novels of Lippard, Webb, and Howells are alternately punctuated by reverie, an almost dream-like state, and frenzy, an urgent need to flee surrounding conditions. The porosity of neighborhood borders, their fluid, yet shaping influence, enables the diffusion of American cultural forms to regions that extend beyond the city and the nation.

The rambling narrative vignettes of neighborhoods in Johnson's novel, in contrast to the tenement sketches of the Lower East side, demonstrate the liberating possibilities of city life. Unexpected incidents and encounters pattern the protagonist's neighborhood journeys. With his forthcoming European sojourn, the ex-colored man's Tenderloin life has taught him to feel at home in multiple contexts and has equipped him with an expandable identity, which Johnson foresees to be the next great obstacle faced by

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<sup>331</sup> *ibid.*, 121.

<sup>332</sup> *ibid.*, 121.

America's raced society. At this juncture of the novel, an expandable identity is shown to have prevailed over stubborn regional affiliations. Volatile as the club might be, ephemeral as popular culture tends to be, immaterial as the social fabric of a neighborhood entity is—examining Johnson's liminal protagonist against a background of social activity unveils his walks as discrete acts of extrication from what has been perceived as a repressive environment to a freer world stage.

### **Southern Hostility and Southern Hospitality**

Paul Laurence Dunbar rose from elevator operator to popular author when William Dean Howells issued words of praise and encouragement in the introduction to Dunbar's second collection of poetry *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1898). Calling Dunbar “the first poet of his race in our language,” a descendant of slaves with “an innate distinction in literature” to “feel the negro life aesthetically and express it lyrically,” Howells permitted himself, “the imaginative prophecy that the hostilities and prejudices which had so long constrained his race were destined to vanish in the arts.”<sup>333</sup> Howells lauded Dunbar's writing “as an evidence of the essential unity of the human race, which does not think or feel black in one and white in another, but humanly in all.”<sup>334</sup> For some, the race's increasing visibility in the arts and culture may have lent additional proof of our common humanity, of democracy in literature, but not necessarily equality of black Americans before the law or improvement in their economic condition. Two years before Dunbar's second collection of poems appeared, the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* had been

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<sup>333</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, introduction by William Dean Howells (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1920), xiv-xvii.

<sup>334</sup> William Dean Howells, introduction to Paul Laurence Dunbar, *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, xvii.

decided: federal law raised a wall between the races, sanctioning state laws that mandated separate accommodations for blacks and whites in public places. And with many Southern states determined to undo the suffrage rights gained by black male citizens with the passage of the 15th Amendment in 1870, the dawn of the twentieth century broke with a fixed color line on the horizon.

Economic hardship fostered growing racial hostilities in the post-Reconstruction South. Here was a case in which black citizens had to decide whether, to paint it broadly, they were living in a state of hospitality or hostility. On one hand, they were called upon to help sustain the agricultural economy of the South, with the promise of work, technical training, and basic education as offered by the Tuskegee Institute, while enduring racial segregation and temporarily abandoning the fight for equality and social justice. This was the appeal sounded by Booker T. Washington in his famous 1895 Atlanta Compromise address, in which he insisted black southerners cast down their buckets and stay at home, receive technical education, and raise themselves economically through agricultural and skilled or semi-skilled labor. On the other hand, the opportunity to escape the South for the chance to be upwardly mobile in the industrial north, and to continue the fight for equal rights and access to higher education was a lure that turned many gazes north.

As a new century opened, a host of factors sent southern blacks migrating to northern cities, demonstrating the mounting numbers that had sided against hostility: race riots, lynching, disfranchisement, and lack of job opportunities plagued the large

black population who had called the southland their home for generations. *The Sport of the Gods* anticipates this exodus, which had barely begun by the time it was published in 1902. In his final novel, Dunbar explores the duality of the black experience in a domestic community in the South and the North, between patronizing hospitality and racial hostility, darkly revealing through an ambiguous, if not retrogressive ending that the country's race problem is not local, but general, not concentrated by locale, but dispersed.

From the writer's own personal letters and non-fiction writings, not to mention the history of scholarship to account for his legacy, Dunbar's version of racial progress at the turn of the century seems as conflicted as the ending we are left with in *Sport of the Gods*. The favor he had gained among the critics and the public for *Majors and Minors* (1896) and *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896) concentrated heavily on the dialect pieces, particularly for the accuracy with which they “truthfully” reproduced the language and sensibilities of black southern folk culture. These pieces were a hearkening back, through the blurring and softening lens of nostalgia, to antebellum days, rendering plantation sentiment through lyrical images of soulful agrarians tilling the fields of harsh (or kind) white overseers while sending their spirit-strengthening melodies up from the furrowed land. However, Dunbar, as any writer or artist attempting to make a living from creative labors, was limited in his ability to represent the race problem as it was. Hemmed in by efforts to gain a mass audience (which meant mostly white), he keenly felt the bind, or burden, of being a black writer of some acclaim, as he expressed in a letter written to a

friend in 1897, “I see now very clearly that Mr. Howells had done me irrevocable harm in the dictum he laid down regarding my dialect verse.”<sup>335</sup>

Dunbar's deeply conflicted concern for the state of racial progress in the post-Reconstruction era was more apparent in his non-fiction essays, published around the time he was writing *Sport of the Gods*, in periodicals such as *The Toledo Journal*, *The Columbus Dispatch*, and the *Denver Post*. His tone in these pieces is alternately defiant (almost threatening) and acquiescent (but not quite conciliatory). Sometimes flimsy arguments are laced with a lyricism that plays with commonplaces and atrocities: the tempo of Dunbar's rhetoric shows up with a problem, appears to lie down and play dead, jolts up, and then self-consciously withdraws. In response to the race riots of Wilmington, North Carolina, “The Race Question Discussed” repeats the old paradox of civilization advancing through acts of barbarism. Narrowing the historical problem to his critique of American progress since abolition, he earnestly asserts, “the question is not of the Negro's fitness to rule or vote but of the whites to murder him for the sake of instruction.”<sup>336</sup> As Rome and France had pillaged for progress before, Dunbar satirically comments, “America strides through the ashes of burning homes, over the bodies of murdered men, women, and children, holding aloft the banner of progress.”<sup>337</sup> Following abruptly with, “Progress! Necessity! Expedience!” Dunbar's rhetorical sleight-of-hand reminds us of the slaughter that came at the expense of the democratic call to arms,

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<sup>335</sup> Thomas L. Morgan, “The City as Refuge,” 217.

<sup>336</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings*, eds. Shelley Fisher Fishkin and David Bradley (New York: The Modern Library, 2005), 261.

<sup>337</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings*, 262.

“Liberte! Egalite! Fraternite!” Instead of the rolling heads of guillotined aristocrats, hangings and burnings followed the democratic and revolutionary cause of American emancipation: “Try as you will, though it has grown away, you cannot put the plant back into the seed. Of course you can root it up entirely; but beware of its juices.”<sup>338</sup> Progress comes with mixed consequences. With the reign of terror that followed the emancipation of slaves came also the gradual acquisition of voting rights, land ownership, and education. Ultimately, Dunbar argues that black Americans would not cede their rights of citizenship to mere “obstacles” (as he calls them) like the North Carolina riots. His cautionary tone is auspicious of the racial unrest that would stamp this country’s modern history for decades to come.

“Negroes of the Tenderloin” agrees with the previous essay’s opening premise: “The race spirit in the United States is not local but general.”<sup>339</sup> In some ways these two articles acquiesce to the common thinking, that blacks being not even a half generation out of slavery, predominately poor, uneducated, and living in the south, were still transitioning from their serfdom and thus socially, regionally, and politically disadvantaged. Dunbar dresses members of the black community in the recognizable tropes: that, being less socially evolved, they are infantilized within American civilization; either meaninglessly abiding by the dicta of their fathers to stay south and work the land, or else making the more grievous error of migrating to northern cities, new home to their moral degradation. In this essay, he challenges the assumption that the

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<sup>338</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings*, 263. Dunbar’s sentiments echo Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835), in which he questions the very basis of American notions of equality. The tyranny of the minority will unrelentingly create social upheaval.

<sup>339</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings*, 260.

Negro problem is centered in the South, but also seemingly accedes to Darwinist theories and sees the black migration north as regressive in the social evolution of the race. Instead of destroying “the defects, mental, moral, and physical, placed upon them by slavery,” he contends that black people living in the Tenderloin, “are perpetuating and increasing all of his deformities, both mind and body.”<sup>340</sup> A sunken, but more significant point that gets overlooked in critical readings of this piece, is that Dunbar highlights the pervasiveness prejudice, particularly when engendered by the spread of negatively stereotyping blacks: “The voice of the brute who is lynched for an unspeakable crime sounds farther than the voice of the man of God who stands in his pulpit Sunday after Sunday inveighing against wrong.”<sup>341</sup> Dunbar argues that, in the public imagination, the acts of one black criminal can signify a whole race, regardless of where that criminal lives.

Perhaps what is most compelling about this essay as it concerns *The Sport of the Gods* is Dunbar's seeming willingness to use racial stereotypes to caution racial progress in the short term. And this point, overlooked in scholarship, is what makes Dunbar's take on the race problem more subtle. The structure of the article mimics the arc of Fannie and Berry Hamilton's story as well. The essay ends like the novel ends: with a portrait of American gothic almost half a century before Grant Wood painted it. The ironic ending of the novel, however, possesses the bitter juices Dunbar mentions in the essay; whereas, the ending of “The Negroes of the Tenderloin” uses conventional imagery in an earnest

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<sup>340</sup> *ibid.*, 266.

<sup>341</sup> *ibid.*, 266.

tone, upholding the stereotyped pastoral ideal of southern blacks “felling the forest, and tilling the field, and singing in their cabin doors at night” to maintain the “purity, simplicity, and the joy of life.”<sup>342</sup> Significantly, he opens the Tenderloin novel with a similarly naïve portrait of southern domesticity, however, wrought with irony. In contrast, Dunbar concludes his Tenderloin article warning against the migration north, “Until they show greater capabilities for contact with a hard and intricate civilization, I would have them stay upon a farm and learn to live in God's great kindergarten for his simple children!”<sup>343</sup>

Infantilizing black Americans was as common a trope as caricaturing them in the post-Reconstruction era. That Dunbar utilized this device without subverting it in any obvious way made his stance on the “Negro Problem” all the more precarious, or contrived (and therefore too easily controverted). However, woven throughout the cautionary essay, Dunbar stitches a new and burgeoning urban character type worth exhuming—one that he makes a central character in *The Sport of the Gods*. Stereotypes and satire have always been deployed as shorthand to protest social problems. Hardness, cynicism, and vice describe the Tenderloin dwellers. Dunbar condescends, calling the newly transplanted youth, “great, naughty, irresponsible children”<sup>344</sup> Driven by a hedonistic, “search for pleasure,” “they think they have found it when they indulge in vice.”<sup>345</sup> Contrasting typical imagery associating southern blacks with the effects of

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<sup>342</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings*, 267.

<sup>343</sup> *ibid.*, 267.

<sup>344</sup> *ibid.*, 265.

<sup>345</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings*, 265.

northern cities on their behavior, the diatribe continues: “They are losing the simple, joyous natures with which God had endowed them, and are becoming hard and mean and brutal.”<sup>346</sup> Listing the differences in their environment, Dunbar wonders if this migration north signals progress: instead of fields, gutters; instead of sweet-smelling soil, alleyways. Their faces have changed: instead of light-hearted smiles, hardened sneers. Simple melodies on the banjo have been replaced by rags on the piano. Up North they “creep like vermin.” A stock character of the cityscape emerges when the “hapless southern negro” has been decontextualized. The subtext is that dissipated dandies swaggering up and down the Tenderloin streets burlesque race as much as the grinning minstrels of coon shows, only they are dressed in new attire. These negative stereotypes, Dunbar contends, will persist no matter where the black man decides to settle, for racism, according to Dunbar, is a national, not a local problem. And America has only begun its creep toward finding a resolution.

Presenting a new raced character type and then concluding the Tenderloin article with a sentimental portrait of plantation era stereotypes, Dunbar uses tragicomic references that get muddled, perhaps because it was not the appropriate time and they were not the appropriate theme for humor. At a time when there were no fancy European words to legitimate the fledgling lexicon of American folk forms, which addressed slavery and its fallout, such imagery did not possess the gravitas, the history, or the tradition, of more acceptable forms of social commentary rendered in broad strokes such

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<sup>346</sup> *ibid.*, 265.

as commedia dell'arte. In *The Sport of the Gods*, Dunbar held up both masks to a social issue that was no laughing matter, closing a discomfiting parody with a wicked grin.

### **The Geography of Nowhere**

“Fiction has said so much in regret of the old days when there were plantations and overseers and masters and slaves, that it was good to come upon such a household as Berry Hamilton's, if for no other reason than that it afforded a relief from the monotony of tiresome iteration”<sup>347</sup>

The inhabitants of a small cottage, furnished and tidy, settle down to another evening in Georgia. Berry Hamilton can be found inside, legs stretched, shaking off another day in his favorite chair. After having prepared a few overwrought meals already for the main house, Fanny tenderly coaxes her family's chicken and biscuits with an old wooden spoon. The warm buttery smell coming from the hearth and her melodic humming fills the Hamilton home. Raising their eyes from the outspread game of jacks, the children ready their stomachs for another hearty meal spent together in cheerful banter. When this prelude of sweet domesticity is soon disrupted, Dunbar relieves the reader “from the monotony of tiresome iteration.”

Nested within a frame that reproduces the paradigm of southern hospitality and hostility described above, *The Sport of the Gods* recounts the travails of the Hamilton family. After being falsely accused and imprisoned for stealing a large sum of money from his landlord and employer, Berry Hamilton is uprooted from his home and loving

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<sup>347</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings*, 321.

family, who perhaps most suffer the consequences of this miscarriage of justice. Exiled by the Oakley's, whom husband and wife had faithfully served for years, and shunned by their friends and neighbors, who take fiendish glee in the well-to-do family's reversal of fortune, Fanny and her two children put their backs to the garden of their innocent years and depart to begin a new life in the northern wilds of New York City.

The migration of the ruptured Hamilton family to New York's Tenderloin neighborhood has been traditionally conceived of as a cautionary tale complete with Dunbar's anti-urban moral—and for good reason. Readers observe the city's corrupting influences most overtly on siblings Joe and Kitty, whose coming-of-age story matures within the shadowy interiors of the Banner Club, a black-and-tan nightclub that hosts a fast-and-loose clientèle. Within just a few weeks of settling into their lodging house, the youths keep company with the regular drunks, gamblers, and showgirls. Dunbar exchanges their southern kindergarten for a sandbox of dissipation and vice, with fatal consequences. Joe begins a passionate love affair with Hattie Sterling, a ripened showgirl who mentors young Kitty's apprenticeship on stage. By the end of the story, Kitty gets swept up in the sensational but rootless cabaret lifestyle, traveling around the country with her troupe, at home nowhere and everywhere. Joe winds up in the penitentiary—a convicted murderer. Faithful and devoted Fanny, all but abandoned by her children, ends up marrying an abusive gambler and drunk—a formulaic foil to her dear imprisoned Berry.

By a stroke of fortune, and Dunbar's authorial hand, the truth of the Oakley theft eventually surfaces. Maurice Oakley's brother finally confesses to the robbery and the framing of Berry. However, Dunbar leaves the reader with one last indictment against the court and penal system of the South: Berry's sentence is commuted and he is set free, but not officially pardoned. When he comes to New York to retrieve his family and finds they have been torn apart. By another fortunate intervention, Fanny's new husband dies and she is free to return south with Berry—the only remnants of the Hamilton family to make an exile's return.

Upending the traditional narrative of the exile's return, the framing device that Dunbar utilizes in *The Sport of the Gods* presents more than a tale warning of the dangers of the black migration north. An examination of the frame narrative, and particularly, the ending, confirms the accepted interpretation of the novel, that there is no viable geographical alternative for the blacks in the post-bellum South. In the critical comparison that Dunbar's novel prepared critics for, in the discourses of plantation literature and urban naturalism, “the ideal space of hope that New York initially offers an alternative location for black representation is just as unavailable as the space of the pastoral South.”<sup>348</sup> Lawrence Rodgers, in his study of great migration novels, concedes that *Sport* “had the all-important effect of enlarging the terrain that African-American fiction explored.”<sup>349</sup> However, he contends each character suffers a tragic fall and thus concludes that ascent for black transplants is not possible in the urban north. This

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<sup>348</sup> Thomas L. Morgan, “The City as Refuge,” 220.

<sup>349</sup> Lawrence R. Rodgers, *Canaan Bound*, 52.

assessment needs more attention, for the reversals of fortune experienced by the Hamilton family possess a foresight into urban living conditions that was just beginning to be explored when Dunbar began writing his final novel.

In spite of Dunbar's tendency to use overdetermined plotting and broadly painted character types, the novel successfully illustrates the processes of neighborhood assimilation in an urban environment that Robert Park studied. After helping Booker T. Washington compile *The Man Farthest Down* (1912), the urban sociologist began publishing about “human ecology”—a term he invented—in the urban ecosystem. He was particularly interested in the processes set in motion by human migration, honing in on race relations in immigrant and black communities as the subjects of his research. Park also acknowledged the importance of novels of realism in documenting urban life, exemplified in his seminal works *The City* (1920) and *Race and Culture* (1950).<sup>350</sup> One passage from his body of work significantly illustrates Dunbar's keen grasp of these relations as they were happening, at the dawn of the Great Migration era:

in a mobile society, such as exists in America, particularly on the frontier and in the cities, where changes in fortune are likely to be sudden and dramatic, where every individual is more or less on his own, the influence of tradition is inevitably minimized. Personal relations are easily established but quickly dissolved. Social forms are flexible and in no sense fixed. Fashion and public opinion take the place of custom as a means and method of social control.<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> Barbara Ballis Lal, *The Romance of Culture in an Urban Civilization: Robert E. Park on Race and Ethnic Relations in Cities* (London: Routledge, 1990). Lal writes, “Park played a major role in bringing about a transition from biological to cultural explanations of supposed racial differences”(153-154). He also worked with Booker T. Washington to bring the liberal arts to industrial education, preparing a bibliography of readings for students of the Tuskegee Institute that included Shakespeare, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Charles Chesnutt, and Frederick Douglass, to name a few (131).

<sup>351</sup> Robert Park, *Race and Culture* (New York: Glencoe Free Press, 1950), 12.

The arc of the Hamilton family's degenerating storyline, from exile to restoration in their Georgia cottage on the Oakley estate, dramatizes Park's thesis. What has been described as their fall can perhaps be better situated as the family's allegorical transition to modernity: as Dunbar's move from plantation tradition and sentiment to urban naturalism and moral ambiguity encompasses a generational shift to modernism in American literature. In particular, sudden and dramatic reversals of fortune and personal relations being easily established and quickly dissolved, punctuate Joe's and Kitty's break with southern tradition typified by their parents' generation.

On one hand naïve and innocent, on the other, ignorant and antiquated, the Hamiltons enter into their life in New York with the mindset typically ascribed to the migrant experience. Through the eyes of the newcomers, Dunbar paints an exaggerated first impression of the city—a sky-high hyperbole describing the narcotic effect living in New York has on the transplanted migrant:

The subtle, insidious wine of New York will begin to intoxicate him. Then, if he be wise, he will go away, any place—yes, he will even go over to Jersey. But if he be a fool, he will stay and stay on until the town becomes all in all to him; until the very streets are his chums and certain buildings and corners his best friends. Then he is hopeless, and to live elsewhere would be death. The Bowery will be his roman, Broadway his lyric, and the Park his pastoral, the river and the glory of it all, his epic, and he will look down pityingly on all the rest of humanity.<sup>352</sup>

The irony of this passage is palpable. To read this passage as evidence of *The Sport of the Gods*'s anti-urban message does not factor in Dunbar's tone. Moving out of New York will not lead to certain death, just as every New Yorker is no Olympian god (but would

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<sup>352</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings*, 357.

probably rather not live in Jersey). The structural elements in the passage: the elevation of the landscape to literary forms; the intense personal identification between people and their everyday environment; suggest that the city fosters an entirely separate and unique mode of life which is highly, if not beguilingly, adaptive. Nevertheless newcomers face it in a blanket of intrigue, anxiety, expectation, and anticipation.

As soon as the family of three land on Manhattan island homeless, clueless, and broke, a friendly ferry porter recommends them to a comfortable lodging house, where he stays when he is ported in New York. On their arrival, a landlady graciously welcomes them and makes immediate accommodations in a room of her four-storied brick dwelling on Twenty-Seventh Street, center of the Tenderloin. Even as strangers to the city, they have little trouble finding housing: the very opposite of what they experienced in their own southland after Berry's imprisonment. When their old friends and neighbors refused to hire Joe for any work or to rent housing to the family, he had to tell his aching mother, "not one of 'em wanted to rent to me. Some of them made excuses 'bout one thing er t'other, but the rest come right straight out an' said dat we'd give a neighbourhood a bad name ef we moved into it."<sup>353</sup> Not so in the Tenderloin. Mrs. Jones asks no prying questions about their history—even though Fanny was prepared to elide such inquiries anyway, mistakenly thinking she might have been denied lodging on the same grounds as their southern neighbors had. Cautious about this new strange city, Mrs. Hamilton not only wants to keep her past a secret, but also fronts the great masses with reserve and trepidation. As with most new migrants, her misperceptions of New York precede her

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<sup>353</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings*, 353.

actual experience there. Dunbar's omniscient narrator shows her thoughts, "she knew that there could not be so many people together without a great deal of wickedness. She did not argue the complement of this."<sup>354</sup> Even with this thought, the allure and illusions of the great city begin to cleave the two Hamilton generations from the very start of their sojourn.

Whereas Fanny tries to hold on to the southern values of her upbringing, her children, first Joe and eventually Kitty, more readily embrace the allure of New York and become part of it. As Dunbar describes the typical migrant, he could be describing a young and impressionable Joe, "glad to strike elbows with the bustling mob and be happy at their indifference to him, so that he may look at them and study them." Joe's eagerness to get "in" with the crowd is as apparent as Fanny's intentions to avoid it. He is "wild with enthusiasm" and "with a desire to be a part of everything that the metropolis meant."<sup>355</sup> Barely settled into his new home and he already envisions himself strolling down the street passing among southern Greenhorns like a real local, "red-cravated, patent-leathered, intent on some goal."<sup>356</sup> Kit, on the other hand, at first maintains her mother's critical self-possession: "She had a certain self-respect which made her value herself and her own traditions higher than her brother did his."<sup>357</sup> In spite of or as a result of her initial indifference, it is actually Kitty who secures Joe's inroad into the Banner

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<sup>354</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings*, 358.

<sup>355</sup> *ibid.*, 358.

<sup>356</sup> *ibid.*, 359.

<sup>357</sup> *ibid.*, 359.

Club circle through the advances of her admirer, ferry porter and “back-area type Don Juan,” Mr. William Thomas.

In the porter figure, and more significantly a ferry porter, Dunbar updates a mythic trope found in travel narratives and tales of pilgrimages. Thomas conveys the Hamiltons first to their new abode, and then ferries Joe and Kit to an even deeper circle of New York social life, like being ferried to hell in myth. First he offers the family tours of the traditional sites: the Statue of Liberty, Coney Island, the theater, with his focus, of course on accompanying Kitty, and winning over her mother and brother. Once he lands the siblings in The Banner Club, it is not long before Joe becomes a regular, a rounder, a “genteel loafer.” Joe and Kit establish easy relations among the denizens of the club almost instantly, for the venue “stood to the stranger and the man and woman without connections for the whole social life. It was a substitute—poor, it must be confessed—to many youths for the home life which is so lacking among certain classes in New York”—where no one is a stranger for long, where personal history does not matter.<sup>358</sup>

Among their new friends-cum-family, each relationship proves auspicious and yet completely arbitrary, as if put in place to serve a single purpose in the story. In spite of repeated references to Mr. Thomas' hard and desirous gazes at the innocent Kit, the ferryman proves innocuous, merely a conduit to land the Hamilton youth in the Banner Club. As a chorus girl in her twilight years, Hattie Starling makes the perfect love-interest for a charismatic and ambitious upstart like Joe while mentoring his sister's stage career. Mr. Skaggs, a muckraking reporter for a yellow paper known as *The Universe*, is

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<sup>358</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings*, 371.

perfectly positioned to advance his reputation in journalism as “friend of the colored man,” since he too is a Banner Club insider and can always get the scoop on the goings-on around town. These characters reveal Dunbar's conspicuous authorial hand, which allows him to visibly render usually unseen social forces. That these character types and the legibility of their roles can be found in the city adds verisimilitude to the novel—where unforeseen and unexpected possibilities and encounters are around every corner and a fact of life.

In a novel titled *The Sport of the Gods*, Dunbar asks his audience to put predetermined outcomes based on conditions of social environment (i.e. class and race) beside serendipity, happenstance, and fortune. Regardless of the author's heavy handed plotting and broad-stroked characterization, the novel ends ambiguously. The outcomes of the major characters mark them as victims of fortune rather than either predestination by an interventionist god, or accident of birth. Take, for instance, Dunbar's leitmotif of heredity in the novel. Antiquated notions about the inheritance of criminality make the Hamiltons keep Berry's imprisonment a secret from their New York circle. When an old acquaintance from their Georgia past happens to cross paths with Joe at the Banner Club he thinks that if the family secret gets out, they will be ostracized once again. Once the spiteful interloper unleashes the Hamilton's past, much to Joe's surprise, the Banner circle actually tightens around the Hamiltons. Just because father ostensibly perpetrates a crime, does not inherently mark his offspring as criminals.

Another cascade of fortunate events leads to Berry's release from prison. First is the crisis of conscience experienced by Francis Oakley. Once he learns that his brother Maurice had Berry imprisoned, from his new bohemian life in Paris, Francis writes a letter to his brother confessing to the crime. This information drives Maurice to the very bottoms of peril and madness. Vowing to guard the secret to protect his brother, Maurice imprisons himself in his own home, where he becomes a misanthrope, chronically agitated, and sick with nerves.

As if suffering a madman's fate isn't enough, Maurice's worst fears come in the form of another stereotypical character from Joe's New York circle. After hearing about the southern hostility that brought down the Hamiltons, Mr. Skaggs decides it's worth traveling south to investigate the story. Asking around among the town's leading men, he learns of the change that came over Maurice Oakley four years ago, about a year after the Hamiltons settled in New York. "From a social, companionable man, he became a recluse, shunning visitors and dreading society. From an open-hearted, unsuspecting neighbor, he became secretive and distrustful of his own friends."<sup>359</sup> The apparition that Skaggs beholds when finally gaining entrance into the Oakley manor confirms the townspeople's gossip; the master of the house is only a shadow of the man he once was, "The strong frame had gone away to the bone, and nothing of his old power sat on either brow or chin."<sup>360</sup> In this scene, Skaggs wrests the letter of confession away from the

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<sup>359</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings*, 420.

<sup>360</sup> Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods and Other Essential Writings*, 421-422.

enfeebled Oakley. Through the hijinks of a muckraking reporter, the *Universe* has its sensational story, and a semblance of justice is reached.

### **Justice and Heredity: Joe Hamilton's Fate**

In the 1890s the Tenderloin had the nickname Satan's Circus. Fast times and vice and crime colored the neighborhood red. Nightclubs, with showgirls and gambling at every table, drew a mixed crowd. As Robert Park wrote years later, here was a location where fashion and public opinion overruled traditional values. Here within the smoky shadows, the onus is placed on the individual to survive, more so than in a small town—where family, church, and neighbors can keep a firmer grasp on community conduct. Values and systems of social control from the past have less of an influence and therefore consequences and accountability are more likely to fall to one's personal decisions. Joe and Kit's assimilation within the neighborhood supports this premise, and also supports my argument that if there is a moral in *Sport*, the message is not altogether an indictment against the black migration to the city. A closer look at the ending scene will demonstrate that Dunbar renders a grimmer outlook for the returned exile migrating back south and a still indeterminable outcome for Joe and Kitty.

Both Kitty and Joe experience a quick rise in the neighborhood. They obtain housing, employment, and friends, although by all accounts modest, with very little hardship. However precarious, they both attain a certain level of success in achieving what they set out to accomplish in the big city. Joe reaches a vaunted pinnacle among his social circle, the dream he envisioned when first arriving: he's become an insider, a

certified neighborhood rounder. Kitty, with her youth, beauty, and talent, surmounts Joe's sweetie, Hattie, and earns top billing and local celebrity status as a chorus girl. The young Hamiltons have traveled far since barber and church choir girl.

However, with his odd jobs supplemented by gambling and a habit for the night life, it is easy to see how Joe has succumbed to the vices of the city. His passionate relationship with Hattie turns tumultuous and eventually his excessive drinking gets the best of him. One night on a bender after another break-up, Joe turns up at Hattie's door. Dunbar titles the operatic chapter Frankenstein, since a crazed Joe turns on his “maker” and smothers her to death with a pillow. For all the mixed fortune in his life, a conviction of murder and a sentence in the penitentiary are the unfortunate rounder's fate. Dunbar's lesson here is obvious. More interesting is how Dunbar concludes the themes of justice and heredity through a comparison of Berry's and his son's final outcomes. Even though proved innocent of the crime through the investigations of a northern muckraking journalist—even though his prison sentence is commuted—according to the southern court system that convicted him, Berry is still a convicted thief. Up North, his son, and primary heir, on the other hand, is given a fair trial and prison sentence to fit the crime. No mob justice or lynching, no dogs or chains or burnings, no race riots like those in Wilmington, North Carolina. In the social experiment Dunbar envisions, Joe's own bad decisions lead to the deadly crime of passion. As a guide into his Tenderloin life, Hattie might be his surrogate creator. The old-fashioned notion that criminality can be inherited turns out to be a false positive when it comes to the contrasting scenarios of father's and son's crimes and penalties. Joe chose his own destiny: the monster turns on his maker,

who is not his father. Swift and blind justice is carried out in the North, unlike Berry's experience in the South. Hattie's typed role as showgirl and tragic muse is complete. Dunbar's wheel of fortune takes another turn.

While the family that has stayed in the North have mixed fortunes and an uncertain road ahead of them, they nevertheless move forward. Joe will fairly serve his sentence, according to the law. Kitty's stage life is a success, however precarious. Just starting out, she is probably innocent of the short shelf life of the career ahead of her, as well as the lifestyle's dubious side-effects. In the end, she all but renounces her family roots, joins the cabaret circuit, and makes her home any paying stage in the country. Kit's fate is perhaps the most indeterminate by the novel's end, but with the resolute focus and talent she had shown during her Tenderloin interlude, probably not joyless and certainly not as grim as her parents', and to a lesser extent, her brother's.

The book ends where it begins. Summoning a Georgia evening, Dunbar sets an infinite and merciless horizon for the remaining days of the elder Hamilton's twilight years together. They have returned to their cabin on the Oakley estate, welcomed there by the grief and guilt of Maurice Oakley's wife. The picture is a grim one. They sit, an expressionless still life portrait, night after night, hands clasped, enduring the shrieks and howls of the madman coming from the manor house. Home has been translated into an asylum. The South is inertia. Resignation and despair mark the returned exiles' fate. They have retrogressed by returning to an anemic south and they have sacrificed their will.

## A New Home to the World

During New York's era of metropolitanization, urban sketches streamed from the literary marketplace, and their proliferation matched the ever-swelling populous they depicted. When parsed among novels featuring neighborhoods such as Greenwich Village, the Lower East Side, and the Tenderloin, it is easier to see how seemingly ephemeral trends in periodical literature gained relevance and credibility, while still maintaining the momentum of constant change. As established systems of social conduct such as church, school and work, family and home, began to loosen their control over an increasingly mobile and motley population, life of the city streets teemed with individuals prepared to adjust to a whole new set of norms and conditions. Steeped in haphazard incident, the wiles of fortune, and freewheeling anonymity, walking narratives within neighborhood novels have patterns in common. Tenement sketches of the Lower East Side lock sentimentality and pathos in discomfiting stasis, resembling advertisements soliciting donations for philanthropic causes. In spite of the timeless causes for which they succor, the walking narratives of Steffens and Riis worked from within the dominant mores to instruct and to eliminate localized problems of poverty, illness, and crime. Vignettes of neighborhood life in the fiction of Dunbar, Johnson, and Howells reposition American cultural values in a broader context of literary production. Whether by experimenting with modern forms, as Johnson's fictional autobiography; critiquing hackneyed literary trends, as Basil's unpublished slum-sketches remain in *Hazard*; or parodying defunct literary movements by divesting racial stereotypes of their humor, as Dunbar's tragicomic portrayal of the plantation tradition; the unexpected encounters of

the city contoured by the ceaseless adjustment to neighborhood life become the message and the moral of American literature.

## Chapter 5

### CONCLUSION

The height of human social development and organization, the city is ancient as it is modern. Michel de Certeau believed the city “presents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future.”<sup>361</sup> De Certeau and writers like him who viewed the city as a whole invariably make generalizations about the city and what it represents. A lumbering textual tradition on the topic precedes them, from Edward Gibbons' *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776) to Lewis Mumford's *The City in History* (1961). Even such massive scholarly studies have continually relied on famous novelists and other sources of fiction to capture what urban life was like. What they're really talking about is a fragmentary collection of impressions, and in this study they are defined through a collation of its various neighborhoods. Neighborhoods organize a city in a way that goes beyond the rivers, streets, ports, and other elements of a paper map to the aspirations and values of the people who live in them. In a sense writers like George Lippard, Frank Webb, William Dean Howells, Paul Dunbar, and James Johnson have remapped the city by focusing on neighborhoods. Shaped through an ambulatory or walking narrative perspective, the city is made at once more specific to the local life and at the same time conveys the sense of

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Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 91.

something fleeting, something already in the process of becoming something else. Like Dr. Olney, Howells's protagonist in *An Imperative Duty*, said of heredity: America exists in an ongoing state of solution, and city neighborhoods have been central to its cultural fusions.

A neighborhood can be defined by its architecture, by its population density, by its ethnography, by the goods and services provided there. However, these elements are also impermanent; they vary across different neighborhoods and through space and time. Pierre Mayol has offered a useful interpretive framework that has guided this layer of city inquiry: the neighborhood “for a dweller who moves from place to place *on foot, starting from his or her home*” forges “a continuity between what is most intimate...and what is most unknown.”<sup>362</sup> With the home as the most intimate of dwelling places and the city at large as the most unknown, the neighborhood occupies a middle space, “less an urban surface,” “than the possibility offered everyone to inscribe in the city a multitude of trajectories.”<sup>363</sup> Like the arcades that inspired the reveries of the flaneur figure, every city stroller's walk holds the potential for poeticizing the neighborhood vis-a-vis his varying trajectories.

Fragmentary within themselves, neighborhood narratives have required of writers an emendation of literary forms which owes a debt to other forms such as newspapers, sociological treatises, travel writing, and anthropological accounts. Howells brought

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<sup>362</sup> Pierre Mayol, “The Neighborhood,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life Volume 2: Living & Cooking* Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Piere Mayol trans. Timothy J. Tomasik (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 11.

<sup>363</sup> Pierre Mayol, “The Neighborhood,” 11.

travel writing home as he sauntered through “Charlesbridge,” “embroidering” his impressions as he walked. George Lippard brought to bear the inflammatory rhetoric of his political screeds and contemporary newspaper scandals on *The Quaker City*. To the settlement studies that made ethnic and working class neighborhoods central to their investigations, writers like Hapgood, Riis, and Steffens responded with sketches of the Lower East Side that brought tenement life to readers of popular periodicals like the *Commercial Advertiser*, *McClure's*, and *The Atlantic*. Cultural commentaries written by Webb and Dunbar struggled with race issues in feature articles of the country's African American interest journals, while James Weldon Johnson committed himself to escalating blacks through their artistic and cultural contributions, advocating the rising cultural stars, anthologizing the literary history, and helping bring about a renaissance in Harlem. Such a constellation of city writing compels questions about the motivations of writers: to what extent did they select their subjects for their human interest, for belletristic endeavors, or due to market demands? With the text-rich canvas of the neighborhood as their backdrop, more than that, as a vital element of city life, the narratives featured in this study have been activated by a melding of literary forms that have shaped these questions. Implications of my analysis of neighborhood development and transformation in great city novels may direct future studies of burgeoning and nascent neighborhoods today, with their route to literary representations iteratively foretelling the rise or decline of great cultural capitals in the making.

The neighborhood paths traced in the body of this study have incorporated the activity of strolling. Walter Benjamin evaluated Baudelaire as lyric poetry's expiring

breath in nineteenth-century Paris, because the forms of the moment, “leaflets, brochures, articles, placards”—the literary fragments of the city—constituted the new material of the modern writer's literature.<sup>364</sup> With the feuilleton as his portable genre—“[b]uilding's walls are the desks against which he presses his notebooks; newsstands are his libraries”—the flaneur figure made the street his dwelling place.<sup>365</sup> Benjamin opens *One Way Street*, a montage of vivid city sketches, saying “[s]ignificant literary work can only come into being in a strict alternation between action and writing.”<sup>366</sup> He positioned the flaneur figure as an archetypal nineteenth-century city narrator who elevated the activity of walking to an art form. In one way or another, all the novels I have discussed incorporate the narrative strategy to recreate an environment constantly evolving; neighborhood narratives typify these changes. In the novels of George Lippard and Frank Webb, of William Dean Howells, of Paul Dunbar and James Johnson, the neighborhood shares in the lives of characters as a place of passage. A space in which the private merges with the public, neighborhoods rely on codes of propriety to conduct the paths of dwellers. The neighborhood expresses the sum of these codes of language and behaviors. Either formed *sua sponte*, Latin for of its own accord, as a result of migration and gentrification, like the Tenderloin; or officially planned and developed, like the Back Bay, neighborhoods took shape in the imaginations of novelists, as Benjamin would agree, between action and writing. The trajectories of their characters have proven that walking the neighborhood

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<sup>364</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street and Other Writings* introduction by Susan Sontag, trans. Edmond Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1985), 45.

<sup>365</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Flaneur,” in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* ed. Michael W. Jennings trans. Howard Eiland et. al. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 68.

<sup>366</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street*, 45.

can be a leisurely activity, or walking in the neighborhood can be subversive. The consequences of traversing the city occur as a success or failure of reading its codes of conduct, either by assimilating them or breaking with them. These texts extend a social contract to the reader; they offer an invitation to observe codes of behavior chronicled by the flaneur, the feuilletonist, the city novelist or poet, the newspaperman, and the travel writer, all of whom have recorded city neighborhood life in one way or another. However, the totality of the city mediated through their various narrative forms only appears in partial, fragmented ways, similar to the city dweller's walk through his neighborhood.

Whether turning the reader into a tourist, soliciting curiosity, sympathy, alarm, or delight, or pondered at length in scientific investigation, the textual layers of the city that have informed this project range as widely as the walks we have read about.

Topographical histories, tracts on urban planning, chronologies, settlement and sociological studies, travel memoirs, and newspaper accounts have partially informed the story of neighborhood development these novels have chronicled in their time. The significance of this insight extends to not only how literary work has been accomplished in the big city or simply what forms it would take, but also to how it was consumed. Feuilleton-like, literacy and the literary found a home in street life and public culture. Pamphlet novels, serialized stories, and magazines, picked up from newsstands and booksellers by people to be read on a crowded train or in a busy coffee house accompanied a change in reading practices and reflected a text-rich culture. The short forms lent themselves to being composed (or at least assimilated) and consumed on the go. Ambulatory neighborhood narratives capture this momentum and writers

incorporating this strategy have modified the novel to accommodate the textual layers of city writing. With serial novels and installment publications, spin-offs of the feuilleton form, writing in parts as Lippard and Howells did, testifies to the wonderful versatility of the novel in engaging and commenting on the cultural happenings of city life.

City neighborhoods during America's great metropolitan era were a wellspring of creative and commercial activity. Accessible and walkable, they sped up the process of assimilating to the city, a place that the media often portrayed as decrepit and immoral, at worst, and indifferent to human life, at best. However precarious the social environments of neighborhoods might be, they take on the characteristics of the people they house. In big city novels, neighborhoods exist as a delicate tissue. City neighborhoods change from one street corner to the next, indeed, from one generation to the next. In "The Painter of Modern Life," Charles Baudelaire famously wrote about the influence of nineteenth-century Parisian street life on artists and writers. He characterized modernity as, "the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, which make up one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable. This transitory fugitive element, which is constantly changing, must not be despised or neglected."<sup>367</sup> The liminal space of the neighborhood, and the opportunities it presents for creativity, has been neglected in the discourse surrounding city literature, which has been steeped in eternal conversations about mass consumption, race, class, and gender disparities. As the fugitive element of city life, however, neighborhoods restore a sense of the humanistic side of urbanization. The ancient Greek maxim inscribed upon the threshold to the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, according to the

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<sup>367</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* by Charles Baudelaire trans. and ed. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), 13.

travel writer Pausanias, read “Know thyself.” When modern city dwellers know, if not love, their neighbors and neighborhoods as extensions of themselves, they enact a timeless code of human conduct and civility that underlies even the greatest of empires.

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