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New York City Street Theater: Gender, Performance, and the Urban from Plessy to Brown

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NEW YORK CITY STREET THEATER: GENDER, PERFORMANCE, AND THE URBAN FROM

PLESSY TO BROWN

By

ERIN NICHOLSON GALE

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2015
This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

NEW YORK CITY STREET THEATER: GENDER, PERFORMANCE, AND THE URBAN FROM PLESSY TO BROWN

By

Erin Nicholson Gale

Adviser: Robert Reid-Pharr

This dissertation investigates the ordinary, public performances of fictional female characters in novels set on the streets of Manhattan during the years of legal segregation in the United States. I examine a range of actions from bragging to racial passing, and I argue these ordinary performances are central to our ability to interpret race, gender, and class relations. I detect race, class, and gender-based impulses to segregate and exclude others that overlap with the motives guiding the national, legal edict to segregate people by race. These guiding inclinations, legible through the history of Manhattan’s grid, zoning laws, and the city officials’ treatment of the poor, for example, are also the tendencies directing fictional characters in the texts I explore. By considering fictional performances against the backdrop of actual history, I ask how and why both real and imagined people aim to squelch singularity or uniqueness in themselves or others. I argue that while some performances deaden the fictional actors, others suggest there are alternative modes of acting through which one might be empowered by abjection despite it.
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I am so fortunate to have friends on the level of family. I am ever grateful to Megan Paslawski, Lauren Baggett, and Katherine Broad for their friendship, support, laughter, mentorship, and babysitting. It is not always easy to live in New York City, but it is always easy to love you all. I would also like to thank my parents, David and Becky Nicholson, and my sister, Amy Williams, for their enthusiastic support of my academic career throughout my life.
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Introduction

Off the Rails: Confronting the Other in 1890s Manhattan

In Manhattan’s Astor Opera House on May 7, 1849, William Charles Macready was booed off the stage amidst the hurling of food and furniture. The mostly Irish, lower-class Bowery masses in the audience viewed Macready, a British actor, as both a snob and insufficiently masculine. He was engaged in a well-publicized feud with a beloved American star of melodrama, Edwin Forrest, who was “muscular” and “histrionic,” as opposed to Macready, who was “subdued,” “scholarly,” and “genteel” (Burrows and Wallace 761). Forrest’s stereotypically masculine style was reinforced by the melodramatic roles he played; Bowery audiences were delighted when he repeatedly came to the aid of innocent and incapable women. Meanwhile, Macready chastised Forrest, declaring he lacked “taste.” Adding to the Irish Bowery inhabitants’ disapproval of Macready was the “rage over the famine [in Ireland] and Britain’s suppression of Young Ireland’s rebellion” (762). Further, Irish-born New Yorkers were experiencing heightened discrimination in New York City as a new wave of poor, starving immigrants arrived in the 1840s and 1850s. While theater riots were common in this era, the intense displeasure with which Macready’s performance was greeted is remarkable because this particular riot engaged gender, class, and politics; filtered into the streets over a span of five days; and ended in the deaths of twenty-two people.¹

The Astor Opera House was uniquely situated at the point where the Bowery met Broadway and the rich met the poor. Broadway hosted elite shopping pageantry, and the Bowery

¹ It is worth noting that, in the portion of this introduction exploring 19th century New York City, I rely heavily on Edwin Burrows and Mike Wallace’s Gotham. The result of over twenty years of deep engagement with primary source material, this historical study is far superior or any other existing history of New York City. My preference for it over other histories is intentional.
housed poor tenement dwellers. The founders of the theater aimed to attract elites, as evidenced by their strict dress code. The location of the theater and the rivalry between a British and an American actor beloved by the poor inspired Captain Isaiah Rynders, a Tammany Hall man, to give out free tickets in Bowery haunts hoping to stir up a crowd of men who would heckle Macready. After the crowd did just that on May 7, Macready resolved to return to Britain. Forty-seven appalled elite citizens then begged him to stay and perform again, promising support. They experienced the initial riot as an unacceptable encroachment of the poor onto elite territory. Macready accepted the published invitation to perform again, and various troops were called in to ensure order. Rynders in turn rallied Boweryites with posters asking, “‘SHALL AMERICANS OR ENGLISH RULE IN THIS CITY?’” (763). The crowd outside the theater at the next performance reached ten thousand people, and the crowd members began hoisting stones, breaking windows, and rushing the doors. The police chief’s warning that force would be used was met with calls such as, “‘Burn the damned den of the aristocracy!’” and “‘Fire, fire you damned sons of bitches; you durs’n’t fire’” (763). The militia was called in, began firing, killed eighteen people (four more would die in the next few days), and injured over 150 people. An outraged group rallied again the next day but dispersed when the militia charged the crowd (764).

The Astor Opera House riots in 1849 demonstrate the ways in which New York City theater walls, the performances that take place within them, and the distinctions between actor and audience are often porous. Furthermore, this incident recognizes the ways in which even staged performances in 19th century New York City are matters upon which real lives turn. The Astor Place riots were ignited by an actual theatrical performance of Macbeth but inspired a range of off-stage performances including performances of masculinity (such as one crowd
member’s declaration that the police should “Fire!” and his cry that they dare not/are not man
eough to do so), loyalty, national pride, class pride, elite status, and authority that in turn led to
performances of violence. Rynders’s distribution of tickets in the Bowery and the resulting
heckling illustrate that it was taken for granted that the poor and the Irish dominated a particular
area of town and that they could be relied upon to perform loyalty to an object of their affection,
to their class, to stereotypically legible gender roles and the kinds of narratives that feature them,
and to their country. The individual acts off-stage in the theater underline the ease with which
real life sentiment and struggle are intertwined with the experience of viewing a performance.
Real life is literally and figuratively projected onto the stage in this incident, and this example
makes it clear that one person’s social antagonism or presumed snobbery can easily be
interpreted as a marker of an entire nation’s oppression. It was a part of common sense at the
time that a theater audience could and would act and could affect the course of events at the
theater. The movement of aggression from inside to the outdoors acknowledges both the theater
and the street as venues through which national and class drama might play out. Macready’s
public declaration that he would leave the country is another kind of individual act that shows the
ease with which an actor, off-stage, similarly takes one audience’s disrespect as a reason to flee a
nation. The strict dress code at the theater and the swift, firm, patriarchal public assurance of the
elite class that Macready should stay and would receive full support at his next performance are
both a kind of street theater performing high-class masculine authority while effacing the wishes
of the poor. Indeed, James Watson Webb, a wealthy citizen and newspaperman, argued that the
riots should serve as “‘an excellent advertisement to the Capitalists of the old world, that they
might send their property to New York and rely upon the certainty that it would be safe from the
clutches of red republicanism, or chartists, or communionistis [sic] of any description” (765).
Here, Webb distances himself from the poor, othering and marginalizing poor people as political deviants and potential thieves. Publicly (via the newspaper) urging Macready to stay was also a rehearsal for the performance of force to come that following Monday. The street theater performances of nationalism, gender stereotypes, loyalty, class, and violence that followed Macready’s initial performance were inspired because of all that Macready and his stage invoked for some audience members.

The Astor Place Theater Riots of 1849 are one historical example clearly illustrating that in New York City, performance, for both actors and audience, is inspired by presumed identity categories. Especially in the midst of sweeping immigration, individuals and groups try to position identity categories they associate with—such as those based in class, gender, or race—as superior to those describing presumed others. The fiction I explore in this dissertation is all set in Manhattan in the aftermath of the most massive wave of immigration to New York City, that of the 1890s, and all features ordinary, intimate performances on the part of the marginalized. In each chapter, I focus on performances by women, marginalized as a result of their gender. These female characters are marginalized because they are poor, black, or both. These female characters stage their relationship to their gender and enact performances on the streets of New York City in order to belong and survive the urban in a variety of ways. Their performances raise questions about whether or not it is possible for marginalized women to survive the urban without (re)marginalizing others. The era of my focus corresponds with that of legal racial segregation in the United States, which I define as the period between the U.S. Supreme Court rulings in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) and Brown v. Board of Education (1954).

I invoke these national decisions because the decisions themselves and the era of legal segregation between them reflect ways not only Manhattanites but also Americans at large
imagined and organized one another. While Plessy is uniquely infamous for its legal effects such as opening the door for laws prohibiting interracial marriage, it is also one example (the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 is another) of a larger trend in the late 19th century, particularly on the part of white men in power, to objectify, categorize, exclude, and position as inferior or superior people of all sorts. This impulse to categorize was heavily driven by an impulse to control (white) women and to have exclusive access to them.

The Boweryites are objectified and violated during the Astor Place Theater riots as a result of real and staged performances of a sort especially evident in the history of and literature about Manhattan in the 19th and 20th centuries. As I will show in this introduction, often in New York City history, action and decision-making is inspired by the objectification of a presumed other. Those deemed inferior are often treated as less-than-human, unworthy, and as expendable objects from which those people possessing some form of relative power wish to distance themselves. This introduction will examine how objectification of the marginalized and accompanying on and off-stage performances wrapped up in belonging came to be the norm for both the marginalized and those in positions of privilege. Here in my introduction, I will first define my use of the terms “performance” and “street theater.” I will then look at the kinds of imagination and identification that led to New York City’s most striking spatial performance, the grid, as the tale of the grid both contributes to and is inspired by city authorities’ fearful confronting of those they imagined as inferior others in Manhattan in the 19th century. Not only is the grid inspired by particular forms of imagination, but also it continues to reify them in fiction and real life well into the era of my focus. After exploring the story of New York City’s grid and specifying my particular approach to the study of urban space, I will turn my focus to 1890s Manhattan and examine the ways its wave of immigration and new technologies
exacerbate racism, sexism, the objectification of people deemed inferior, and performing as a means to fit in. I examine the *Plessy* decision as a national marker of a whole kind of failure of imagination of the other as one’s equal that was already deeply ingrained in the decision-making processes of New York City officials as well as at work in its citizen’s attempts to cope with their everyday gendered and raced urban lives. I read *Plessy* as both a marker and an official initiator that reflects and reifies the kinds of failure of imagination it recognizes. I view *Brown* as a sign of changing national imagination. Lastly, I preview my chapters.

**Performance: Defining Terms**

Through my study of the history and literature of New York City, I have been able to delineate two main kinds of performance. First, there are performances in the actual theater, and second, there is street theater. What I refer to as actual theater events are staged, pre-planned performances of scripted plays in a theater with seating and tickets for entry. What I refer to as street theater consists of a broader range including individual acts, static or inanimate spectacles, and live spectacles. The subcategories of street theater I recognize are often intertwined, but I see individual acts as greetings, small exchanges between a few people, sexual acts, small-scale incidents of discrimination, posing, having one’s picture taken, prostituting oneself, speeches, displaying one’s body or fashion, promenades, or placing a white ribbon on one’s door for mourning. Static or inanimate spectacles include architecture, street lighting, store window displays, or the location, size, decorations, or amenities of one’s home. Live spectacles include unique events and recurring events that are public but are not actual theater. This sort of unique event includes riots, revivals, fires, lynchings, protests, mass migration to avoid disease, tableau vivant parties, and street performances for which the audience members are random passers-by.
More regularly recurring and/or ever-present live spectacles include public transportation, sporting events, policing, and advertising.

My use of the phrase “street theater” is different than its popular connotation dating from the 1960s that describes the enactment on the street of typically staged shows, spontaneous shows, or crafted artistic performances. My use of the term does not exclude these kinds of street theater but is wider; in my definition I include events that draw a crowd, such as accidents or fires, as well as ordinary acting for oneself or one’s neighbors that ranges from bragging to racial passing. One may or may not engage in such acting consciously in order to position oneself in a particular way with a particular public.

I define group or individual performance as any attempt to mask or manipulate either the genuine or the way one may be perceived without such efforts. In this dissertation, I will investigate the work of these different kinds of performances together, as they appear together in the selected texts and are often intertwined. It is far more possible, in my assessment of urban performance, to decide when performances are happening than to determine when they are not occurring. In my approach to performance, I am interested in analyzing its aims and its work. I am not interested in keeping the exploration of scripted plays and street theater in separate studies. They communicate when, for example, characters attend a melodramatic play or act in an actual theater. These moments shape the lives of the fictional characters upon which I focus, and segregating theatrical encounters from the acting of the characters would limit the knowledge we might glean from either kind of occurrence. Similarly, in my conclusion, after four chapters that investigate different kinds of performances within novels, I examine the text of a play about the production of a play for the different kinds of acting it stages. This juxtaposition animates the always already intertwined performances within and amongst my selected texts.
Separating the plays and street theater within or amongst these texts would not only prove difficult, but also it would limit the potential significance(s) of these texts, whereas I am interested in letting the murkiness of performance speak.

My approach to performance is informed by scholarship looking at the body and the imagination, such as Paul Valery’s delineation of kinds of bodies and the work of trauma scholars like Cindy Patton (particularly her look at space in disease in “Performativity and Spatial Distinction: The End of AIDS Epidemiology”) and Cathy Caruth. I draw on work interrogating the social nature and performative aspects of individual identity, such as Judith Butler’s exploration of gender in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*. I also think about the work of theater scholars such as Richard Schechner’s *Performance Theory* and Stanton B. Garner’s *Bodied Spaces*. I am bringing together approaches to literary scholarship that have origins in fields that are oft-intertwined: psychoanalytic theory, queer studies, performativity scholarship and performance scholarship, as scholars like Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick did in the 1990s with their collection *Performativity and Performance* (1995). As Parker and Sedgwick recognize, the questions:

> When is saying something doing something? And how is saying something doing something? . . . have resonated through theoretical writings of the past three decades in a carnivalesque echolalia of what might be described as extraordinarily productive cross-purposes. One of the most fecund, as well as the most under-articulated, of such crossings has been the oblique intersection between performativity and the loose cluster of theatrical practices, relations, and traditions known as performance. (Parker and Sedgwick 1)
This comment is taken from the introduction to their collection aiming to explore the possibilities of the intersection of performativity and performance, and the works within it are thoughtful examinations. But their generative work, published almost twenty years ago, is still uniquely intersectional.

Many theater scholars, like Schechner, have an investment in distinguishing the study of other literature and the study of plays and performance generally. Schechner writes “These new approaches situate theater where it belongs: among performance genres, not literature” (Schechner 19). Schechner’s words note an anxiety to find a place for theater, suggest it needs to be aligned with something, and express his sense that, in order to allow theater and performance generally to speak, literature must be excised. His anxieties are a representative example of a lineage of academic turf wars that seem to explain why a collection like Parker and Sedgwick’s was and still is unique. Allowing drama and novels to speak together or looking together at on and off-stage performances within a novel is not only uncommon in academic literary circles, it is taboo. There are a variety of historical causes for this including a history of scholarly devaluation of dramatic texts, a history of effacing the performative aspects of dramatic texts, an effort to correct or overcorrect that mistake by steering away from dramatic texts and clinging to novels, short stories, or poems instead, and departmental politics/efforts to maintain or craft distinctions between departments of theater/drama and departments of English. Sometimes now, in the face of a history of neglecting it, when literary scholars/people in English departments examine plays they tend to isolate them, focus on performance only, and pointedly exclude other literature as Schechner does. Little scholarship juxtaposes on and off-stage acting in novels or

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2 See Sandra L. Richards’s “Writing the Absent Potential: Drama, Performance, and the Canon of African American Literature” for a thoughtful analysis of the exclusion of drama in the study of (African-American) literature.
looks at novels and plays together in order to look at the performative aspects of both presumed
genres in tandem. To separate these works is to pretend they do not or cannot speak to one
another (when they always already do for real life readers/viewers) or to pretend that what they
might have to say is not worth the risk of committing an academic faux pax. I find investments in
separation limiting to all potential categories of text and/or performance involved.

There are performative objects, like skyscrapers, performance spaces, like the street, and
there are performances. The interaction of these performative objects, performative spaces, and
performances often reveals the inspiration for and the goals and results of the urban
performances that I will explore. For example, when the hypocritical mother Mary in Stephen
Crane’s Maggie, A Girl of the Streets loudly bemoans her daughter’s supposed amorality in the
streets, she is inspired to do so because she knows her environment. She knows that on the
crowded Bowery streets in front of her tenement, she will have an audience. Her verbal
performance of her daughter’s amorality and her own sanctity suggest she is motivated to
distance herself from her marginalized daughter and position herself as superior to her daughter
in the eyes of the neighbors. The interaction of performative objects, performance space, and the
content and nature of the performances I explore, as in this fictional incident, allow me to
interrogate these questions of focus: What kinds of performances are required of what kind of
groups to enable what kinds of survival? What is the role of gender in the kinds of performances
enacted? Where do particular performances take place and why? What role do forces such as
ambivalence, audience, and anonymity play in urban performance? Is there room for singularity
in New York City life in the era between Plessy and Brown? If so, who is allowed to be unique,

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3 For me, insisting on the separation of drama and novels or not attending to different kinds of
acting within novels is akin to insisting on separating the study of works based on the race of
their authors, which I also push against in the texts I have selected.
who is not, and in what kinds of spaces? These questions interplay with my larger inquiry: What are the effects of city history and the development of the city space on the imaginations, performances, self-identifications, and levels of happiness for individual inhabitants in the decades following the 1890s? Through an analysis of performances in urban fiction used particularly by women as strategies for social and financial survival, we can see how performances tend to exhibit and entrench performers in the very impulses to objectify, other, and categorize people that have marginalized them. Further, I examine how such impulses might be overcome for characters and people in real life.

Being able to see and read depth in city life, which is often enmeshed with the superficial, requires attention to and an interrogation of the everyday performances ubiquitous in New York City life. Often the kinds of objectifying, categorizing, organization, clean up, and discrimination I will describe when looking at the history of New York City are superficial in nature. Performances enacted to rationalize, enforce, or subvert similar gendered, racial, and class discrimination are often presented in greater depth in the more intimate settings of the fiction I will examine. This does not mean that the performances I explore in the fiction are not superficially-driven, as they often are, but rather the thinking behind them and their intended results are more dynamically witnessable. Detecting the ordinary performances (as well as their causes and aims) operating in both history and literature set in the streets of New York’s Manhattan in this era is my main task in the chapters to come.

The kinds of performances I explore in this dissertation are legacies of the 19th century obsession with ordering and categorizing people and things as other that I will now turn to examine in this introduction. The characters I examine in my chapters most often perform as an attempt to subvert damaging labels or vulnerabilities associated with being a woman, poor,
black, or some combination thereof. These performances are also often deployed to try and validate, justify, or simply publicize the work of othering. This dissertation will explore the effects of 19th century impulses to segregate people whether they are at the national or local level and whether they are formal or informal. Through the unique lens of fiction set in this era on the streets of Manhattan, I examine the effects of these impulses on ensuing imagination(s) and subsequent actions, as they impact people’s sense of what is possible for whom and where.

The New York City Grid and Studies of Urban Space

In the physical structure of New York City, one can read a history of central authority ignoring the particularity or humanity of people or groups deemed “other,” especially under the guise of creating order and ownership. This began with the overtaking of the land of the Lenape people by early European settlers and continued. The rationale for and principles guiding the formation of the grid present an expedient example of the way that, in New York City’s history, fear leads to those in power asserting dominance over space and people in ways that efface existing materiality and/or humanity.

In many ways, fear of disease—especially yellow fever and cholera—gave birth to the grid of Manhattan. Disease inspired all who could afford to flee to go north to unsettled summer retreat areas in and above Greenwich Village in the 1790s and early 1800s. In a pattern typical of late 18th and 19th century responses to disease, “Within weeks every resident able to do so had fled... Left behind were the poor and dependent, many made destitute by the death or incapacity of the household wage-earner” (Burrows and Wallace 357). The poor who remained were likely to live in unsanitary conditions. Lack of knowledge of both disease and the poor led to authorities and wealthier citizens blaming the poor for their plights. In other words, powerful people making metaphor of disease.
Commentary made by public figures before, during, and after the 1832 cholera epidemic is characteristic of the ways many people of privilege objectified and categorized the poor as other not just to move away from them physically but as a way to position themselves as figuratively, morally superior to the poor. When doctors called for preventative action and clean up while anticipating the 1832 cholera epidemic,

The city administration responded with an apathy partly rooted in the convictions—widely shared. . . . that the plague, should it come, would pass over the virtuous parts of town and descend, like God’s wrath, on its sin-infested quarters. Ministers told the pious that the path of righteousness was the road to health. Temperance activists plastered Manhattan’s walls with notices like ‘QUIT DRAM DRINKING IF YOU WOULD NOT HAVE THE CHOLERA’. . . Physicians’ belief in ‘predisposing causes’ also suggested the likeliest victims would be those who, through indulgence in vice, intemperance, and filthy living habits, had weakened and predisposed themselves to the diseases (Burrows and Wallace 590).

Each of these messages suggests disease is controllable and therefore (doubly) marginalizes in advance those who fall ill. It is as if the trauma was being rehearsed for, publicly, and these messages suggest that objectifying the poor or alcoholics—ignoring their humanity and hoarding one’s own superiority—is a way to cope with the impending disease.

The objectification of the poor is bound up in the performances of the privileged. Despite this widespread belief that if one is good enough they will remain healthy, July 3, 1832, one day after the Medical Society reported cholera deaths,

a great exodus had begun. For all the certainty about their moral and physiological invulnerability, the city’s comfortable classes weren’t about to stake their lives on it. . .
by the end of the first week in July, almost all who could afford to flee had fled; by the
Post’s estimate of August 6, that figure eventually reached 100,000, roughly half the
population. Of the other half, 3,513 died, most of them horribly. (Burrows and Wallace
591).

The fact that so many of the wealthy half of the Manhattan population moralized about disease
but also fled it highlights the performative nature of their moralizing—they either were not
secure in their own goodness or what they were saying was an empty act. When John Pintard, a
wealthy merchant, was speaking of the epidemic, he said the disease was “‘almost exclusively
confined to the lower classes of intemperate dissolute & filthy people huddled together like
swine in their polluted habitations,’ he drew the terrible conclusion that the sooner this ‘scum of
the city’ was dispatched, the sooner the fever, deprived of fodder, would pass” (591). Pintard is
unsympathetic. He animalizes people (the ill are like pigs) and objectifies them (they are
“scum”). Pintard seems to be trying to comfort himself in the midst of potential death, of
otherwise unmanageable chaos. In a similarly unsympathetic vein, the private New York

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4 Antonin Artaud, in his essay “The Theater and the Plague” from The Theater and its Double
(1938, tr. 1958) engages the telling nature of historical responses to disease, focusing on their
potential to revive theater and in turn viewers. He writes, “If fundamental theatre is like the
plague, this is not because it is contagious, but because like the plague it is a revelation” (Artaud
19). He argues, “above all else, theatre is made to teach us” (60) that lack of freedom and ever-
present possibility for danger exist. Making meaning of disease in the way Artaud does,
suggesting “The plague takes dormant images, latent disorder and suddenly carries them to the
point of the most extreme gestures,” (17) which he aligns with the work of theater, attends to its
physical effects. For Artaud, “Just like the plague, [theater] reforges the links between what does
and does not exist, between the virtual nature of the possible and the material nature of
existence” (17). For my purposes here, Artaud’s notion that both theater and the plague heighten
and/or revive imagined connections, is the most useful one in that we might see the inherent
theatrical performances embedded in objectifying. Indeed, both in the 19th century heightening of
racism in the wake of increased immigration and the 19th century trend to ascribe figurative poor
morals to the physically ill when disease strikes seem to affirm Artaud’s claim that shocks to an
existing system heighten attempts to create sense or make links where they do not exist.
Hospital at the time did not accept cholera patients, and the Board of Health “reported that the ‘low Irish suffered the most, being exceedingly dirty in their habits, much addicted to intemperance and crowded together into the worst portions of the city’” (592-3). The alternate, radical metaphor was that “cholera was the result not of divine intervention but of human injustice” (594) in the unequal distribution of wealth. This alternative was not nearly as popular or widespread as those that positioned the wealthy as immune and superior, validating and exceptionalizing their activities and lifestyle.  

The chaotic atmosphere of fear and flight that disease brought to the city inspired other attempts to gain control of space and safety in city life. Such attempts included printing lists in local papers on a weekly basis tabulating those who died or became ill (Burrows and Wallace 572) so that readers would know what areas to avoid, could comfort themselves that they were out of the reach of disease, could gawk at the pain of others, or could offer them help. Most notably, citizens began expressing desire for widespread change beginning in the wake of the 1798 yellow fever epidemic because it was a particularly devastating one, killing almost five percent of the population of the city—2,086 people died (357). What was less typical about the events of 1798 was that “the Common Council established a committee to investigate its causes. Their report, made public in 1799, came down hard on unsanitary conditions, attributing the disease to ‘filthy sunken yards’ filled with offal, putrefying matter in pools of stagnant water, damp cellars, foul slips, decayed docks, open sewers, and overflowing privies”(358). While it was unknown how yellow fever spread, the committee seemingly did their best to experiment

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5 In the 1849 cholera epidemic, similarly, the upper class fled to the country, over five thousand mostly poor people died, and, “As in 1832, many declared the cholera God’s retribution for sin—notably that of being Catholic. (Had not over 40 percent of the casualties been born in Ireland?) Indeed the Herald was amazed to find victims ‘among the respectable, including even ladies’” (785 Burrows and Wallace).
with aspects of the lives of those most likely to fall victim to the disease. They knew what tended to surrounded disease, or where it tended to strike, and “in the next few years the municipal authorities would embark on a series of unprecedented interventions in hitherto private affairs” (358). Swamps were extremely polluted areas in the city, and they were one of the first things the Common Council decided to target. They began to drain swamps, including the filthy Fresh Water Pond beginning in 1803 (359).

Another resulting organizational change was more striking and wide reaching. The Plan of 1811 creating a grid of streets on Manhattan avowedly came out of a desire for order and control, especially in response to unwieldy disease. The New York City Assembly had commissioned a team in 1807 to plan “‘streets, roads and public squares’ in such a manner ‘as to unite regularity and order with the Public convenience and benefit, and in particular to promote the health of the city,’ by allowing for the ‘free and abundant circulation of air’” (Burrows and Wallace 419-420). It was widely assumed that fresh air and the free flow of air contributed to good health, and the chaos of disease was met with remarkable rigidity. Noted for “its ruthless utilitarianism” (420), the plan was unlike previous city grids in that it completely disregarded natural features of the land and existing structures. The grid imposed a strict geometry that created twelve one hundred foot wide avenues, crossed at right angles by fifty to sixty foot wide streets numbered up to 155th every two hundred feet (420-1). Efficiency and economy drove the plan, the commissioners argued (420). While the new organization of space on Manhattan was efficient in some ways—it was appealing to realtors (the new order would also make the sale of land easier, as plots were the same size), it was inefficient in others. The plan did not attend to the devastating effects that a lack of major diagonal roads or service alleys would have on traffic, and it disregarded “any previously laid-out streets that were not retroactively accepted by the
Common Council” (422). These streets were closed down and the potential effects on inhabitants of those streets were not valued. The commission, conversely, presumed the grid would serve a democratizing function. The grid would bring numbered streets instead of named streets. While “the network of parallels and perpendiculras provided a democratic alternative to the royalist avenues of Baroque European cities,” (422) and while the blocks were indeed equal in terms of size, the commission underestimated the ability of future generations to attach social meaning to numbers and to finagle exceptions to the grid. The thought of the numbered streets being devoid of social stigma or, alternately, of cache, would surely strike most modern New Yorkers as naïve. Further, the commission underestimated how rapidly the city would expand. It was beyond their imagination that areas north of Harlem Flat would be settled in the next few centuries (422).

After the Plan of 1811 was approved, John Randel, Jr., who had been hired to survey all of Manhattan during the development of the plan, and his workers began to stake out the ground, a process that took ten years and involved the placement of “1,549 yard-high white-marble markers at imagined intersections, each engraved with the number of its street-to-be, and wherever rocks barred the way, half-foot iron bolts, ninety-eight in all, were driven in to mark the spot” (Burrows and Wallace 422). Randel claimed to survey “‘with a view to ascertain the most eligible grounds for the indented streets and avenues, with reference to sites least obstructed by rocks, precipices, steep grades, and other obstacles,’” (420) but the actual plan and grid clearly did not consider any such effort. If we believe Randel, the effacement of his attempt to consider topography is a paradigmatic example of the ways difference—whether within land or between people—was often not valued or granted space by New York City authorities in the 19th century.
Rigid geometry appealed to the three white, wealthy, male committee members who created the 1811 plan in part because of its prospects for real estate—prepackaged, equal plots would seem more easily marketable. But wealthy white men were able to buy exceptions to the grid in the coming years, making land plots unequal. The Common Council, for example, backed off of its plan to extend the grid on the west side between Houston Street and 14th Street in 1818, allowing Greenwich Village to remain intact, after the wealthy Clement Clarke Moore, the owner of the land, became irate and wrote a pamphlet when the open fields of his land were encroached upon by 9th Avenue (447). Shortly thereafter, the still-rural Greenwich Village underwent development when yellow fever hit New York City again in 1822, and thousands of residents fled there. Many of those who fled in 1822 never left the Village, initiating a building boom there and causing people to fill in north of 14th Street. The wealthy, by staying in the northern areas of the city, created even more physical distance between themselves and the poor.

Aside from allowing Moore to keep some of his Chelsea fields intact, city authorities allowed other exceptions to the implementation of the 1811 grid plan for wealthy real estate investors, especially in the 1830s during a railroad and real estate boom. Contributing to the building boom was massive population increase: “Between 1821 and 1835 the population of every ward tripled or quadrupled, generating crowding, congestion, and soaring real estate prices . . . Developers built commercial structures and private dwellings at a fantastic pace. . . . The money for all this flowed in from private investors, many of them old landed families” (Burrows and Wallace 576). As real estate values dramatically elevated, the city decided to tax property much more heavily. Now, “With their fiscal fate now tied to the value of private holdings, aldermen adopted a policy of aggressively enhancing the value of private property, in the name of promoting the public good” (579). Making exceptions to the grid was now an opportunity to
enhance real estate (and in turn one’s power), as suddenly being next to a unique park or square would make a building much more valuable, especially when breaks in the grid were rare.

“Ignoring the grid designers’ egalitarian inclinations . . . [the Street Committee] began subsidizing the creation of elite neighborhoods. Partly this was simply a matter of sanctioning exceptions in street design.” Washington, Gramercy, Union and Tompkins Squares are all examples of such 1830s projects that disregarded the original grid plan. The landed wealthy were able to sculpt and buy respite from rigidity and in turn perpetuate their own wealth in the form of valuable real estate.

The largest break from the grid, Central Park, was intentionally crafted as such. Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmstead planned the park in 1857-8, and “they called for exiling the normal business of urban life to beyond the park’s perimeter” (Burrows and Wallace 794). One of their main considerations in planning was a desire to allow interclass mixing in the park, but the planners encouraged interclass mixing only if the lower classes were willing to follow the rules of the elites. Olmstead felt that the working class needed to be “‘trained to the proper use’” through signs and workers who patrolled the park (795). The lower class would also have to travel to the rich, to the park, considerably north (and therefore a costly journey) of where most lived, if they wanted to mix with the wealthy. Within the park the lower classes would travel by foot while middle and upper classes would not. This combination of factors leads Burrows and Wallace to argue that, “Once again a cultural enterprise designed to mitigate the divisiveness of metropolitan life had served only to exacerbate it” (795). Spatially, the streets of Central Park are intentionally curvy and wandering. Olmstead knowingly countered the geometrics of the grid: “banished was Manhattan’s grid, and with it the kind of streets that were ‘staked off,’ as Olmstead put it, ‘with a rule and pencil in a broker’s office.’ Here therapeutically romantic cures
were to be the rule” (794). The possibility for change, wonder, and surprise provided by the park was seen as a romantic and desirable one; but envisioning surprise as desirable marks the privileged mindset of the planners, as what is unknown might be terrifying for those struggling daily to cover their basic needs. In the minds of the planners, “Pedestrians and carriages would meander along paths affording ever-changing vistas . . . intended to invoke decorous contemplation of nature,” (794) but to be able to contemplate nature, and to have the time and mental energy to do so, might in and of itself be a privilege. Central Park’s creation, location, design, and the rules for its use highlight how even those unique individuals not appalled by class mixing failed, initially, to inspire it because they did not or would not attend to the material realities of the lives of the poor.

Spatial changes and divides were not exclusive to the binary of rich and poor. Space was often divided, within homes and without, by gender. Spatial arrangements were guided by patriarchal assumptions that women are both other and inferior to men. Writing about the 1840s and 50s, Burrows and Wallace write, “New York . . . was an intensely homosocial city,” (796) but this gendered sense of what space one could or should inhabit would persist well into the 20th century. In 19th century Manhattan:

The downtown worlds of politics and business remained physically off limits to ladies, and many of the civic parades that trooped through lower Manhattan streets were totally masculine events. When genteel women ventured out into heterosexual terrain, they found a network of safe spaces and corridors awaiting them. By the 1850s New York had a Ladies’ Oyster Shop, a Ladies’ Reading Room, a Ladies’ Bowling Alley; banks and post offices had special ladies’ windows. There was even a ladies’ eatery. . . Olmsted made sure that when his Central Park skating rink opened in 1858 it included a “ladies’
“pond” where the timid could tumble without blushing, and his park regulations strictly prohibited “boisterous or indecent conduct or language.” (798)

Breaking gendered norms for inhabiting space could severely damage one’s reputation and jeopardize their safety. For example, single women traveling alone were often the victims of group rapes.

Many still considered women in public a scant step from prostitution. They were quick to assume that women in dance halls were ‘rowdy girls,’ willing to trade sexual favors for the provision of beer and oysters . . . Predatory tavern rowdies and waterfront gangs dragged off lone women, especially those who appeared both vulnerable and independent, and subjected them to brutal group rapes . . . Such belligerence served as a stark reminder that women’s newfound access to public space remained subject to masculine veto. (816-817)

Rape was one way for men to objectify women and maintain control over space. In addition to literal violence such as rape being deployed to enforce a male sense of superiority, metaphoric violence against women was common. For example, “the conventional male assessment (particularly that of medical ‘experts’) held that mental acuity wasn’t really possible for women, driven as they were by their wombs, not their heads” (799). The same kinds of rationales—that a group’s mental capacity was inferior to that of (white) males, in the 19th century and beyond, would be deployed to try and legitimize discrimination, relocation, and other violence against people of various ethnicities, classes, and illnesses. For women, though, “The pursuit of fashion also validated expanded female claims on city space” as “Shopping was irreproachably legitimate” (812). Discrimination took the forms of lack of educational opportunities and a de-legitimizing of female control over female bodies. In the second half of the 19th century, men
saw to the prohibition of midwifery, increasing work opportunities for (all-male) obstetricians as well as male dominance over female bodies. This kind of pushback by men and a lack of educational opportunities for women helped cultivate an increasing sense that the presumed gender divide was an unjust one (798). The outlawing of midwifery was part of the professionalization trend of the late 1860s and the 1870s, and it seems to have been driven by a male desire to bolster the superiority of elite and educated men (the Bar Association, the American Institute of Architects, and many similar organizations were also created in this era) while delegitimizing assumed others like women or immigrants with different training backgrounds by categorizing them as inferior (968).

The way that New York City authorities tried to efface the unique qualities of particular areas of Manhattan’s landscape and of particular people inhabiting those spaces is mimicked by most popular approaches to the study of urban space in a variety of disciplines. Space generally and urban space in particular has received much attention in academic circles, especially beginning in the 1960s with Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), a scathing response to urban planners, architects, policy makers, and project heads such as Le Corbusier and his NYC disciple, Robert Moses. Jacobs argues in the book that most urban planners in her era do not consider the lives, habits or needs of people living in city nor do they consider what makes for successful, thriving neighborhoods. Jacobs herself led a committee successfully stopping Moses from building a highway through Greenwich village—one of three highway arteries he wanted to run straight through the city. Her success was a tremendous anomaly, as Moses generally cut thoroughfares through thriving areas (such as East Tremont in the Bronx when he planned and built the Cross Bronx Expressway) in order to create roads in (relatively) straight lines, completely disregarding topography or the materiality of people’s
lives. Moses’s rigid, unsympathetic approach—clear in his detached and impersonal television interview responses regarding the lives his projects were to upset (Burns, *New York: The City and the World*)—was indeed quite like that of the 1811 grid designers.

Jacobs takes on a circle of men who she rightly argues seem to see cities as a problem in need of solving. She convincingly asserts that her contemporaries do not value well-populated, mixed-use spaces or the people who populate them. But Jacobs does some effacing too. Jacobs lacks the ability to represent the interiority of her city subjects. For example, she writes:

To be sure, there are people with hobgoblins in their heads, and such people will never feel safe no matter what the objective circumstances are. But this is a different matter from the fear that besets normally prudent, tolerant and cheerful people who show nothing more than common sense in refusing to venture after dark—or in a few places, by day—into streets where they may way be assaulted, unseen or unrescued until too late.

The barbarism and the real, not imagined, insecurity that gives rise to such fears cannot be tagged a problem of the slums. (Jacobs 30-31)

Jacobs assumes most city dwellers are “normally prudent, tolerant, and cheerful” and “show nothing more than common sense.” These city dwellers look out for one another, enjoy watching others, flock to areas that are busy, and avoid areas that are not. Their psychology and their imagination are noticeably absent; the people she discusses are ever-pragmatic and predictable. Jacobs has a fine handle on the ways people tend to move in cities, but she oversimplifies city-dwellers and marginalizes the people who do not move as the masses do—the unique have “hobgoblins” in their heads. Jacobs moves from an imagined version of the majority of city dwellers to rationalize what they do on a daily basis without recognizing that her conclusions (such as “People’s love of watching activity and other people is constantly evident in cities
everywhere” (37)) are necessarily part imagination because of their generalized quality. In a more specific instance, when she writes: “Blue-collar families, for example, eat supper earlier than white-collar families because the working day of the husbands, if they are on a day shift, starts and ends earlier. Thus in the playground near where I live, mothers in blue-collar families leave before four; mothers in white-collar families come in later and leave before five,” (99) she is imagining others in ways that go so far as to designate a time schedule for classes of people.

Jacobs acknowledges the limitations of her study when she notes:

Deep and complicated social ills must lie behind delinquency and crime, in suburbs and towns as well as in great cities. This book will not go into speculation on the deeper reasons. It is sufficient, at this point, to say that if we are to maintain a city society that can diagnose and keep abreast of deeper social problems, the starting point must be, in any case, to strengthen whatever workable forces of maintaining safety and civilization do exist—in the cities we do have. (31)

But while Jacobs addresses her inability to diagnose the “complicated social ills” that “must lie behind delinquency and crime,” she fantasizes that city space and its inhabitants are ever-logical and that “workable forces of maintaining safety and civilization” can be isolated from the social ills undergirding crime. The organization of people in space in New York City is propelled by physical and social ills, though. My look at New York City’s urban environment through history and imaginative literature will illustrate this point. City planning is formulaic for Jacobs; she is far more attentive to people and their lives (because she is at all) than most of her colleagues were at the time of her writing, but her work also suggests that even the best social science writing about space is lacking imagination.
Kevin Lynch, a social scientist contemporaneous with Jacobs, famously studied the ways people internally visualize and map urban space by way of surveying small groups of people in Boston, Jersey City, and Los Angeles for his work *The Image of the City* (1960). Lynch wants cities to be legible and pleasurable, which are intertwined for him, whereas Jacobs is most interested in cities being diverse—filled by a variety of people doing a variety of things. Lynch, like Jacobs, points out some of the holes in his own work, noting the small size and limited diversity of his sample population. “The small size of the samples [30 people in Boston, 15 in Jersey City, 15 in Los Angeles] and their bias toward the professional and managerial classes prevent us from stating that a true ‘public image’ has been gained. But the material is rich in suggestion, and has sufficient internal consistency to indicate that substantial group images do exist and are, in part at least, discoverable by some such means” (15). He does not seem to recognize the extent to which a sample lacking class diversity leaves room for flawed conclusions. For example, although he argues the tone of his book will be “speculative and perhaps a little irresponsible: at once tentative and presumptuous,” (3) he also writes, “Obviously a clear image enables one to move about easily and quickly,” not recognizing the possibility, for instance, that if one has a clear mental image of danger it may actually inhibit movement. Lynch takes for granted that some of his findings are universal; for him:

A good environmental image gives its processor an important sense of emotional security. He can establish a harmonious relationship between himself and the outside world. This is the obverse of the fear that comes with disorientation; it means that the sweet sense of home is strongest when home is not only familiar but distinctive as well. Indeed, a distinctive and legible environment not only offers security but also heightens the potential depth and intensity of human experience. (4-5)
Again, if Lynch had interviewed subjects who, for example, lived in the middle of a gang turf war, or felt limited or stuck in low-income projects, he might have considered that one could know their surroundings well and not feel cozy. Also, Lynch does not seem to interrogate the seemingly racist and classist bias of his subjects when making comments (about Los Angeles, in this case) such as:

Although conceded to be the core, if anything is, yet Broadway was not a shopping area for most of these middle-class persons. Its walks are crowded with the ethnic minorities and lower-income groups whose living quarters ring the central section. The subjects interviewed regarded this linear core as an alien one, looking at it with varying degrees of avoidance, curiosity, or fear. (37-38)

If his subjects fear an area because of the people who live there, acquiring the perspective of those they fear seems necessary to understand or attempt to make fair claims about a space.

Much of the writing about space in the humanities is philosophical. Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* (1958, 1964) is one of the most well-known works of this kind. Bachelard’s text is indeed imaginative. Not only does he infrequently attend to concrete examples, though, but also he makes sweeping generalizations mired in privilege. For example, it is beyond Bachelard’s imagination that one’s home could be unpleasant, that one might not be able to daydream at home, that childhood would be difficult, or that intimacy can exist at all in cities. He defines the domain of intimacy as the “domain in which psychic weight is dominant” (12) and argues that “Intimate living flees” in city life (27). In Bachelard’s view, people in urban space cannot be lost in dream. Without a home, he argues, one does not have space in which to be consumed by thought, as “intimacy needs the heart of a nest,” (65) and “the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace” (6). He
takes for granted that home is nest-like, peaceful, and a center that is a “protective center” (39). Bachelard does not seem to consider the possibility that some people have abusive childhoods when he implies childhood is poetic: “It is on the plane of the daydream and not on that of facts that childhood remains alive and poetically useful within us” (16). Bachelard’s lack of concrete examples and failure to consider spaces other than large multi-story single family homes full of happy people with time on their hands is typical of the sweeping generalizations ensconced in privilege made in much writing in the humanities about space. My investigations into real and imagined urban Manhattan challenge Bachelard’s assertions.

Similarly, even academics in the humanities who set out to be practitioners of everyday, ordinary life often do not consider how their conclusions are bathed in privilege. Michel de Certeau, author of The Practice of Everyday Life (1984), does consider urban space and thoughtfully examines the grammar of walking in the city. When he ruminates on train travel, however, like Bachelard, he does not consider that riding a train could be unpleasant. De Certeau describes railway cars as “places of laziness and thoughtfulness, paradisiacal ships sailing between two social meeting points” (113) and claims, “There is something at once incarcerational and navigational about railroad travel . . . it combines dreams with technology” (113). Trains, like homes for Bachelard, are dream-spaces. It is not just that de Certeau does not consider the American Jim Crow South to find an alternative view of his paradise; he need have only looked closer to his European home, to the overcrowded death trains that carried Jewish and other people to concentration camps and gas chambers, to have realized the relatively absurd sense of privilege through which he was analyzing the space of train travel. And indeed, an ordinary train commute might be fairly unpleasant or distracting too, if not traumatizing.
Assumptions of the pleasantness of the known are not limited to philosophical writing about space; Yi-Fu Tuan, a geography scholar, argues in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977) that:

Compared to space, place is a calm center of established values. Human beings require both space and place. Human lives are a dialectical movement between shelter and venture, attachment and freedom. In open space one can become intensely aware of place; and in the solitude of a sheltered place the vastness of space beyond acquires a haunting presence. (54)

And he goes on to claim, “The street where one lives is part of one’s intimate experience. The larger unit, the neighborhood, is a concept” (170). Tuan’s description of the street and the neighborhood, coupled with his repeated definition of “space” as a more global and “place” as a more local, known area implies the street is a “place” and the neighborhood is a “space.” The texts in this dissertation trouble Tuan’s notion of the street as a “calm center of established values.” For these characters, if the street is “established,” it is stable only in the realm of fantasy. Further, for the seemingly marginalized or those from abusive homes or people inhabiting crime-ridden neighborhoods, being all-too-familiar with one’s place is not inherently “calm.”

My examination of urban space, while limited to New York City, recognizes the many spaces in which and through which one might dream, worry, hurry, or otherwise engage. I examine what imaginary works suggest about the real thought processes of the oft-neglected lower class and the otherwise marginalized person’s experience of this city. It is not only scholars who downplay reality in their philosophizing about space. A failure to recognize the thingness of the street or unique personhood of its inhabitants sometimes plagues the characters
upon whom this dissertation will focus. This failure is a matter upon which lives, like that of Lutie Johnson from *The Street*, turn. Literature—a zone of imagination itself—can provide a critical window into the interiority of its characters, and the selected works here provide such windows to varying degrees (if only, in some cases, to reveal the utter superficiality of characters like Ellen from *Manhattan Transfer*). Delving into literary works that deeply incorporate the urban space of Manhattan as it relates to characters’ imaginations, identities, and fates—especially in the aftermath of massive immigration, urban migration, and technological and transportation developments, reveals the way that the city lives of individuals and groups are critically impacted by and enmeshed in performance and imagination. I recognize that it seems antithetical to argue we must attend to the fantastic in order to reach the concrete, or that we must look toward something seemingly superficial, performance, to read depth. But whatever we might call “the concrete” or “the real” is always already bathed in, filtered through, and interpreted by the imaginations of the people interacting with it, who in turn treat space and one another as they imagine them to be. New York City is in so many ways a city populated by the imaginings and the dreams of immigrants and migrants. To ignore an aspect so critical to this city’s history and organization is to assume people are predictable, ever-logical beings. Our lives turn on both real conditions and imagination, and it is time to recognize this fact in critical writing about urban space, especially in writing that engages the fantastic streets of New York City.

**The 1890s, Public Urban Intimacy, and Grappling with the Other**

In light of New York City’s historical backdrop as a space marked by the desires of people in power to distance themselves from those they deem inferior, I turn to the 1890s, the decade initiating the era of my literary focus. Changes in New York City in the 1890s
simultaneously impede the kind of 19th century attempts to segregate self from others and heighten impulses to do so. Ellis Island opened on January 1, 1892, and during its first year, 445,987 immigrants passed through it (Burrows and Wallace 1111). The 1890s hosted a second major wave in European immigration to the U.S. As in the 1840s and 1850s, the largest groups of immigrants included those from Ireland and Germany. New waves of immigration included Jews from the Pale and Italians, two groups that were very attached to their homelands who only left home because of extreme unrest and poverty, as the Irish had when fleeing famine in mid-century. In the 1860s and 1870s, the Italian immigration tally was never more than thirty-five hundred people per year, but in the 1880s the average yearly total was over thirty thousand. Further, in the 1890s, the yearly average skyrocketed to sixty-five thousand (1122). The third newer group of immigrants, hampered by legislation directly targeting them, was the Chinese. One remarkable statistic puts into perspective the influx of new arrivals between 1890 and 1900: “By 1890 the Tenth Ward had 524 people per acre, the highest density in the city. Within ten years the figure would rise to seven hundred per acre, a rate that topped Bombay’s as highest in the world” (1117).

Within the United States, people were moving from rural areas to cities. By 1890, 29.12 percent of the people living in the U.S. lived in urban centers, up from only 3.35 percent one hundred years before (Clarke). African Americans moved to New York City from the U.S. South in increasing numbers in the 1890s (over 80,000 left the South between 1870 and 1890 while over 100,000 left in the 1890s). Though, in 1900, African Americans made up less than two percent of the city population, as the African American population was still recovering from the exodus following the Civil War draft riots. These draft riots had quickly turned into a race riot targeting black people, and, amongst other acts of violence, the riots included whites burning a
black orphanage and lynching black men on the streets of Manhattan. African Americans coming to the city in the 1890s primarily lived in Brooklyn and in Manhattan’s Tenderloin and San Juan Hill neighborhoods (1112). Incoming blacks, like immigrants from abroad, “came by and large, from small-town or rural hinterlands thrown into turmoil by an advancing capitalist global economy, and they were tossed abruptly into an urban American environment for which they had little preparation” (1112). By 1890, 42.2% of New York City residents were foreign born, and with immigrants and urban migrants combined, the majority of people living in New York City were not born here (U.S. Bureau of the Census).

These increasing crowds filled the city as the transportation options available there increased, new means of communication emerged, and distance between work and home expanded for many inhabitants. These changes altogether enabled what I call a new public urban intimacy. By this phrase I mean that activities one used to do alone or in private were suddenly much more likely to be watched or shared with others; one might begin to spend significant amounts of time in close contact with strangers. Even if immigrants and migrants were very poor, they most likely came from rural areas where they had more personal space and more familiarity with the people around them. Spending time traveling to and from work amidst a crowd was likely to be a novel endeavor for most new Manhattan residents. If onecommuted on foot, the streets were congested with people. Joining horse carts as a travel option, a mix of train styles emerged after 1867 (trains were elevated, on the surface of the street, and underground). Electric locomotives arrived in the 1880s. Vehicles and routes did not have extensive networks and were owned by different companies, so many commutes would involve a mixture of modes of travel, furthering opportunities for strangers to interact with one another as they switched from one method of travel to another. Further, new transportation suffered from kinks of all kinds,
often hurling strangers together unexpectedly in tragedy. For example, when the electric locomotive was invented in the 1880s (1068), “The result was carnage. By 1895 trolleys had killed 105 and maimed 407, most of them children, and become a symbol of random death” (1069). So strangers might unite through watching, injury or attempts to help one another. Additionally, the increasing accessibility to and from Manhattan resulting from the completion of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883 and the subway opening in 1904 only provided more opportunities for people to interact with an even greater array of strangers for even longer periods of time regularly.

Similarly, with the invention of the light bulb, first displayed by Thomas Edison in 1879 (1064), came the opportunity for increased hours of street accessibility. Edison created a mock city grid of an illuminated Manhattan in 1880, and that same year the first street lighting at night, in the shopping district near Madison Square Park, brightened the path for shoppers. Combined with the invention of the telephone in 1877, and the phonograph in 1878, New Yorkers had dramatically increased opportunities to access one another—there were newer, faster methods, and they now had more hours of light in which to promenade and socialize (presumably) more safely. By “1887 Mayor Hewitt declared that nocturnal effulgence had become essential for ‘the prevention of crime’ and the preservation of ‘the good order of the city.’ So quickly had New York grown accustomed to electric street lights that whenever they went off in substantial numbers, extra police were ordered out as a matter of course” (1066). Increasingly inexpensive means of publication continued to expand, and newspapers and flyers could easily reach a public and/or link an audience of strangers through their shared reading practices. So not only were new immigrants arriving in unprecedented numbers and living in unprecedented proximity, they were also potentially traveling side by side on a train and in a horse car, sharing knowledge via the
press, and being exposed to increasing opportunities for literal and figurative surveillance of one another and of themselves by authorities. For the first time, male or female strangers of many races and classes might interact in informal settings daily. This new public intimacy emerging in Manhattan in the 1890s most often reaped negative reactions from both new arrivals and native-born New Yorkers.

The strangers one was surrounded by were competition for jobs and space, and many immigrant and migrant men were perceived as a threat to the purity of (white) women. My study of both fiction and real history suggests that especially beginning in the 1890s, the city itself, for new and old inhabitants, began to be imagined as a kind of ordinary trauma. Everyday life in the city was reacted to as such. Trends in the history and fiction I investigate enable me to delineate two dominant strategies for urban survival in response to the ordinary trauma of city life. I see the two major forces I argued were behind the Astor Opera House Riots of 1849, objectifying and performing, as strategies repeatedly enacted in the real life history of and imagined stories involving New York City. What I label as the impulse to objectify others is often a combination of objectifying, categorizing, and hoarding people. These moves entail trying to control other people, trying to efface their humanity and/or their position as one’s equal, and classifying people in order to protect or cultivate one’s own perceived superior status.

Performing often operates in tandem with objectifying. For example, when wealthy citizens like Pintard decried the animalistic poor as responsible for their own suffering from cholera, he objectified the poor while simultaneously performing his own superiority. Delineating the causes, forms, and effects of these strategies, when used by performers in history and in fictional texts, allows me to show the ways that seemingly favorable strategies for surviving in the urban often tend to (re)marginalize and dehumanize both others and the self. The
new urban intimacy in 1890s New York City inspired a heightening of the objectifying and categorizing of things and people that had already been a 19th century trend. People became even more entrenched in their beliefs about perceived binaries such as man/woman and black/white in response to perceived threats. In other words, one main effect of Manhattan’s new urban atmosphere was that it unearthed existing and bred new fear of the other. In this history, fear of the other most often takes the form of ethnocentrism, racism, sexism, and classism.6

Most new immigrants tended to cluster with fellow immigrants from their home country, deepening nation-based allegiances. Germans who stayed in New York City fled to “Kleindeutschland,” an enclave originally “bounded by 14th, Grand, Broadway and the East River” that eventually shifted northward and to Brooklyn (Williamsburg, mainly). As Jews came in vast numbers in the 1880s and 1890s, Kleindeutschland expanded into the Lower East Side (1117) and “ethnic subdivision was the rule” in the expanded neighborhood which now reached

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6 Scholars of the body, such as Patrizia Magli, have noted increases in racism corresponding with urbanization. Magli, in her essay “The Face and the Soul,” traces the written history of philosophers and others who have tried to make legible and/or codify the soul and character of people based on their external features. There is a long tradition of gleaning meaning from individual body parts, their location on the body, their shape and size, their relationship to the features of animals, and their presumed proximity to the heavens. Assumptions made about humans were often based on imagined character traits attributed to particular animals. Magli sees this type of impulse heightening in the 19th century when “bureaucratic societies” were on the rise. She writes the tendency to animalize and codify others based on their appearance “is founded on the discovery of the ‘other,’ on the fear of the ever-increasing and uncontrollable size of the masses moving to the cities, on the fear of individuals losing their uniqueness. It confronts everyone’s individuality; it elaborates typologies” (124). Objectifying the other often helps the fearful validate the systematic marginalization of certain groups of people such as black people, women, children, or those deemed lunatics. Indeed, Magli’s assertion that masses of others are perceived as a threat is supported by New York City’s 19th century political current. Whether or not rising immigration made people fear losing their individuality is more complicated and depends on who is presumed to be doing the fearing and causing the fear. My examination of both fiction and history here will suggest living a hyperpublic life in a crowded Manhattan often causes people or characters in positions of privilege to perform their unique superiority and those in marginalized positions to mask it.
the Bowery. “By 1890, the old Tenth Ward, once predominantly German, was 70 percent Russian Jewish” (1117). Jews from the Pale primarily concentrated in the Lower East Side, though some moved to Brownsville and Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Germans moved northward. Irish immigrants “constituted some 40 percent of the city in the mid-1880s, 5 percent more than the second-ranked German Americans” (1112). The Irish were most heavily concentrated in Hell’s Kitchen on the west side between the mid-30s and upper 50s in Manhattan and in Navy Yard and Red Hook in Brooklyn (1112). Most Italian immigrants of the new 1880s/90s wave were single men, came from southern Italy in the midst of Italian unification from poor, diseased living conditions, and were illiterate (1121-2). The Italians took over many service jobs, leading to animosity especially between Italians and Irish over dock work when Italians began to be hired instead of the Irish. They accepted terrible living conditions in the Bowery, especially in the Mulberry Bend area (1123). When that area became extremely overcrowded, many settled in East Harlem and further segmented in clusters of blocks depending upon zones of origin from within Italy (1123-4).

These tendencies to cluster by country-of-origin groups contributed to a spike in racism in 1890s Manhattan. Those who segregated themselves into enclaves reinforced language, literacy, and spatial barriers that compounded existing racism. But isolation from one’s perceived group could also pose problems in late 19th century life. The Chinese were comparatively far less concentrated in one or two key neighborhoods than other ethnic groups were. Fewer than 20 percent of the Chinese lived in Chinatown (on the Lower East Side) while most “were scattered about the city, domiciled in quarters attached to the hand laundries where many spent 80 percent of their lives. Others lived in mansions of the uptown rich” as servants (1128). Isolation proved to be a problem for Chinese men who were “vulnerable to harassment by gangs, and there were
several race-based murders” (1129). Chinese men could not rely on fellow group members as a source of protection.

The most overt kinds of prejudices that (re)emerged in the 1880s and 1890s with these new trends in immigration and urban migration were those against Jews, Chinese men, blacks, women, and the poor. A search for the word “immigration” in The New York Times articles published between 1890 and 1900 yields 3,530 results, and many of the relevant articles feature the word “problem” alongside the word “immigration” in their titles. A few such examples include: “The Immigration Problem: Steamship Companies Fully Define their Position” (December 17, 1892); “Immigration Problems: . . . Dangers of the Current System Fully Set Forth” (November 26, 1892); “The Immigration Problem: Foreign Paupers and Criminals Enter This Country Via Canada, Inspector Watchorn Reports” (October 18, 1898); and “Problems of Immigration: Ex-Commissioner Stump States His View and Suggests Reforms” (January 11, 1899). The titles of these four articles, a bit of the pulse of the times, at least from the point of view of the Times, suggests immigration is indeed felt as a problem—of too many people coming too quickly—that needs to be “fully” attended to with “reforms.” The method for dealing with the chaos of ordinary life in a city growing at an unwieldy pace, for newcomers and old residents alike, very often included imagining others as inferior.

Many new Jewish immigrants escaped death threats and poverty in their home countries only to be met with new forms of discrimination and hardship in New York City. Jews living in Russian territory for centuries “by law and prejudice. . . had been restricted to the Pale of Settlement, which stretched from the Ukraine on the Black Sea up to Lithuania on the Baltic”

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7 There were no Chinese women in New York City at the time, as only men came to work on the Transcontinental Railroad and remained in the U.S.
Their market towns ("shtetls") were destroyed by industrialization and the increased availability of goods in the 1860s and beyond, leaving the Pale overcrowded and its people impoverished. When Czar Alexander was assassinated in March 1881, “The Jewish community of St. Petersburg laid a silver wreath on Alexander’s bier in thanks for his modest lightening of Russia’s oppression of their people. . . The peasantry [then] identified Jews with rapacious capitalism, despite the fact that most Jews were among its casualties . . . Pogroms broke out . . . Jews were beaten, killed” (1113). Policies such as the expulsion of Jews from Kiev, Moscow, and other cities began in 1891 (1113). Many Jews proceeded to flee to the U.S. generally and to New York City in particular, despite earlier judgments it was an unclean country whose Jews fell from Orthodox traditions. Combined with rising anti-Semitism, which the new arrivals only heightened, German Jews already living in New York began to distance themselves from those arriving for fear of losing ground in their already tenuous social position (1114). “The temptation was therefore strong to underscore the differences between German ‘Hebrews,’ still widely respected, and ‘low-class Jews,’ who were increasingly suspect” (1114). So, amongst other obstacles, new Jewish immigrants faced harsh prejudice from other Jews who were vying for social turf and desperately trying to maintain social status. Now, many German Jews

. . . sought to distinguish themselves from Eastern Europeans on all fronts. They derided Yiddish as a “piggish jargon” and ridiculed newcomers as “kikes,” as their names often ended in ki. Many detested the immigrants’ dress and habits, which they thought unhygienic, and found them clannish, backward, and alien. To cultural disdain they added the class contempt that investment bankers and genteel merchants had for peddlers and tailors. (1114)

German Jews were objectifying Jews from the Pale in an attempt to position themselves in a different and superior social category. In the late 1870s, when a few cases of anti-Semitism received publicity, “most
New York papers denounced it . . . and in 1881 the New York Civil rights code that prohibited discrimination in public places for reasons of race was amended to include reasons of creed. Nevertheless, anti-Semitic social ostracism grew steadily more acceptable during the 1880s, and by the early 1890s it had become a social given” (1088). Jews were excluded from social organizations and private schools where they had previously been welcome for generations (1088). It is no coincidence that this rise of anti-Semitism corresponds with increasing immigration, as these new immigrants were perceived as a threat to white male domination of jobs, power, space, and (female) purity.

Just as anti-Semitism was rising, so was Jim Crow. “Despite the generally dismal circumstances, the city’s shrunken black community began to regenerate itself. At [the Civil war’s end there were but 14,804 African-Americans in New York and Brooklyn combined, five thousand fewer than in 1840 . . . The populace grew 26.7 percent between 1865 and 1870 and jumped by another 53.6 percent over the next decade, partly through natural increase and partly via the flow of immigrant freedmen who began to trickle north, primarily from Virginia” (993). The reviving black community had few allies and faced many obstacles, though, in the form of legal and social discrimination. New York voted against black suffrage by 70.4 percent in the November 1869 elections, and the Democratic leader, in making a case against black suffrage was: “Playing a ‘scientific’ race card, Murphy trotted out a ‘craniological’ analysis that purported to prove the existence of superior and inferior breeds of man. Giving blacks the vote, Murphy argued, would lead to social equality, race mixing, and the collapse of civilization” (Burrows and Wallace 926). Civilization, indeed, seemed to be limited to any order dominated by rich white men in this use. Republicans, also against “amalgamation,” “countered that granting political rights would lessen the likelihood of amalgamation . . . by granting blacks dignity,’ arguing further that they would not want to associate with white women if they ‘respect [their] own blood’” (926). It was taken for granted that blacks had different blood and should not
socialize with white women. Broad declarations of black inferiority were akin to those used to rationalize limiting opportunities for women, noting the othering strategies used to marginalize black people as a part of systemic white male posturing to spotlight their own imagined superiority.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which persisted in different forms until the 1920s, was rationalized, like Jim Crow laws, by an impulse to protect power over (white) women in the name of their purity. The act prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers and limited the movement of Chinese men who had already immigrated. Further, Chinese men were unable to be granted citizenship during this time. One way that people categorized others and elevated themselves was through slumming, and slumming, for many, included a visit to Chinatown. In 1893, Moses King published a guidebook for slumming that focused on Chinatown. Burrows and Wallace write, “The Chinese community was unique among the new immigrant groups in having its entire community turned into a cultural commodity.” They note that although other groups such as the Jews and the Italians “attracted lovers of the ‘picturesque’ to their neighborhoods . . . they were never subject to anything quite like the indignities suffered by the Chinese” (1131). Chinatown in particular was appealing as a place where one could gawk at the “filth, immorality, and picturesque foreignness” (1131). Opium, in the previous twenty-some years, had come “to be considered an evil substance to which Chinese were peculiarly addicted and which they used to subvert the morals of decent white women.” To boot, all sorts of racist imaginings of white women lying around with “yellow” men appeared in newspapers during this time. “The combination of middle-class revulsion and working-class animosity won passage in 1882 of the Chinese Exclusion Act” (1130). This act is one expedient example of the impulse to
hoard (white) women and to categorize and exclude perceived others as a means of elevating the white patriarchy.

Aside from the street theater slumming provided, performances on the actual stage in 1890s New York City reinforced racism. Marginalized groups made entertainment out of supposed difference, performing stereotypes on stage and strengthening them through repetition in front of mass audiences. The new wave of immigration in the 1890s revived Bowery theaters, as new arrivals “imported new cultural traditions and the audiences to sustain them” (Burrows and Wallace 1138). Various kinds of melodrama thrived; pastiche and variety shows were most common. “The most popular bits were ethnically oriented, with performers mimicking New York’s diverse populations, doing Irish turns and Dutch (German) shtick.” And while black actors took over minstrelsy “on the strength of the argument that they could ‘act the nigger . . . with greater fidelity’” (1140) than whites, whites turned to the variety stage “where they did their old dialect putdowns of shiftless and irresponsible darkies or used blackface as a cover for raunchier humor than they could get away with if clad only in their own white skins” (1140). Indeed, seeing familiar, urban chaos organized on stage in comic form seemed to delight audiences, eager to see new arrivals on stage in this flattened form: “As new immigrant groups arrived they were quickly added to the cast of comic characters, with sharp-witted Jews, song-loving Italians, and opium-smoking Chinamen tossed in among the pugnacious Irishmen, lazy Africans, beer-drinking Germans, tight-fisted Scots, and ignorant farm rubes who peopled the virtual Lower East Side. These personas varied from good-humored to derogatory, benign to malignant, and the songs and spiels conveyed both the antagonisms and alliances between groups. Most variety skits never rose above one-dimensional stereotyping, but some did” (1140).

This kind of theater, its repetitive nature, and its increased popularity in this era of increased
immigration suggests the theater was a way for some New Yorkers to cope with the ordinary traumas of their lives by participating in racist ways to organize, imagine, and seek entertainment from others.

Those marginalized by their gender were not immune to marginalizing others. There was much racial posturing and othering amongst marginalized groups, especially in matters of employment.

Relations between working-class blacks and whites did not improve in the decade after the draft riots, and labor’s new solidarity did not extend across racial lines. When Susan B. Anthony asked why unions didn’t lower their barriers to women, a baffled printer replied: “you might as well ask why we don’t send for the colored men or the Chinese to learn the trade.” White contractors and work gangs collaborated in keeping black workers from the docks, pits, and quarries and in terrorizing those who did get hired. (Burrows and Wallace 992)

Solidarity seemed to form rarely and only out of convenience. The same lack of solidarity and infighting amongst marginalized groups was evident in the struggles for black and female suffrage. When Republicans fighting for black suffrage in the late 1860s would not include calls for female suffrage in their efforts, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony sought the help of Democrats instead and took a racist turn, “arguing that white men should accept women as allies against the supposed perils of black supremacy” and “campaigned for enfranchising Beauty, Virtue, and Intelligence to counter freedmen’s Muscle, Color, and Ignorance” (983). The Democrats were no help to the women either. The fight for space, work, and rights in the late 19th century was an ugly one in which resources and power were hoarded and the marginalized were not immune to objectifying and subjugating one another.
Heightened classism was often bound up in heightened racism and nativism. Performances like slumming were not limited to gawking at the Chinese; slumming was also a socially acceptable way for the more privileged to associate with the poor and to dabble in vice without having to be defined by it. It was common practice for reporters, writers, and ministers to disguise themselves, slum, and then craft sensational stories or sermons about what they witnessed. “In February 1894 Stephen Crane, impersonating a tramp, spent a night in a Bowery flophouse and reported, in ‘And Experiment in Misery,’ on the men who lay there ‘in death-like silence, or heaving and snoring with tremendous effort, like stabbed fish’” (1186). He similarly researched *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* in the early 1890s by frequenting Bowery venues and by interviewing prostitutes. In the spring of 1892, Reverend Charles Parkhurst embarked on a slumming adventure, hoping to find evidence of police corruption. He went about in disguise with a parishioner and a private detective (both creating and seeking his own theater) and he repeatedly asked to be shown the worst places that might be found (1168). The men began with saloons and opium dens and progressed to dance halls and a “colored dance house” where white women danced with black men. Parkhurst’s demand for “something worse” halted when he was taken to a club where he spotted a man dressed in drag and bolted, declaring New York City as “‘rotten with a rottenness that is unspeakable and indescribable’” (Burrows and Wallace 1169). The poor and those defying racial and gender-based norms were othered and objectified as a “rottenness” too terrible for words.

The renewed antagonism toward others in the 1890s literally threatened the lives of the poor. For instance, in 1896 Theodore Roosevelt stopped allowing the homeless to stay the night in police stations because the lodgings were “filthy” and because his “chief of police swore that 98 percent of the more than sixty thousand homeless people who had resorted to them during the
past year were the ‘lazy, dissipated, filthy, vermin-covered, disease-breeding and disease-scattering scum of the city’s population’” (1201). Direct aid to the poor (such as giving them food or shelter for free) was frowned upon even by the relatively few New Yorkers interested in helping them. For instance, “new legislation required parents entering poorhouses to surrender their children, who would then be transferred to orphanages” (1161). To seek help for one’s poverty was to be deemed unfit to parent. Indeed, assistance in the 1890s was not that different from that of the 1850s, when poor women could only get help with the birth of their child from the New York Asylum for Lying In Women if they were married, provided references, refused visitors, and refrained from profanity. After giving birth, most of those women in the 1850s were placed with “respectable women” as wet nurses after giving birth, but they had to agree to only nurse the child of their employer; they consequently had to send out their own children, almost ninety percent of whom died between 1854 to 1859 (811). It seems a persisting investment of those offering help was a need to create hierarchies of the poor and to only help those they deemed the unusually “good,” exceptional poor people. Through these efforts, the seemingly charitable could also display their own superiority as helpers to those they “helped.”

In the economic panic of 1893, the city did almost nothing for the poor, and sympathy for the poor was most definitely not in vogue. *The New York Times* called for a stop on immigration and the arrest of Emma Goldman after she advocated that the poor should simply steal food rather than starve to death. Few aid agencies existed, let alone started to see structural problems rather than personal moral failings as the cause of one’s poverty:

The Department of Charities and Correction gave aid to the blind and free coal to the poor but ceased doling out food and clothing as the result of pressure from groups like the Charity Organization Society. The COS and the Association for Improving the Condition
of the Poor were, however, shocked by the magnitude of the crisis, and admitted what they had denied in previous downturns: that the unemployed were not shiftless louts but simply unable to support themselves. (1187)

Demand for help “far exceeded the supply” and “less than 10 percent of the unemployed” received any aid in the 1893 financial crisis.

Those who publicized the plight of the poor were also not immune to (re)marginalizing them through racist and classist means. Jacob Riis, for example, known for his striking, frequently published pictures of the ordinary poor “was often contemptuous” and strikingly racist (by today’s standards) in his writing. He declares, “‘Slum dwellers were ‘shiftless, destructive, and stupid, in a word they are what the tenements made them’” (1182). While Riis did not blame the people for the hateful qualities he attributed to them, he did indeed interpret poor people as irredeemably amoral, other, and less-than. Riis “often deployed stereotypes or slurs. The Italians were ‘gay, light-hearted’; African Americans were sensual and superstitious; and as to Russian Jews—who were still ‘where the new day that dawned on Calvary left them standing, stubbornly refusing to see the light’—‘money is their God,’ and their attachment to ‘thrift’ was at once the community’s ‘cardinal virtue and its foul disgrace.’ The Chinese ‘in their very exclusiveness and reserve . . . are a constant and terrible menace to society’” (1182-3). He also expressed “horror at white girls’ submission to Chinamen’s lusts,” (1183) reifying Chinese men as a threat to white women, female purity, and white male dominance over white women. Riis, in bringing slumming to the masses, was also known to sneak up and surprise his subjects in the middle of the night, disregard what little space or privacy they might have had. Riis’s lack of sympathy for the poor despite his interest in their lives was not unique in the 1890s.
Not only did the poor and homeless face discrimination, they also faced decreases in wages with the influx of so many new unemployed immigrants desperate for work. This situation occurred despite increased opportunities for work, as in the 1880s and 1890s, sweatshops were born. “In the 1880s New York’s textile trades were undergoing yet another transition, which the Eastern Europeans spurred.” “[I]n the 1890s shirtwaist, skirt, and dress manufacturing followed suit,” embracing the shift toward ready-to-wear clothing that began as a trend for men in the preceding decades (1116). “The number of women’s clothing establishments ballooned from 230 in 1880 to 3,429 twenty years later,” and “By 1895 there were roughly six thousand sweatshops in New York City and nine hundred in Brooklyn, employing perhaps eighty thousand workers” (1116). So, with increased immigration and poverty, spaces for subjugation proliferated too.

In addition to targeting the poor and focusing on the purity of women, city authorities took swift action against related and other perceived ills and impurities in the 1890s. Germs and trash were two main targets, and the processes to eliminate them were in some ways intertwined. The impulse to reform both the city and its people took fire in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. For example, the Union League Club’s Committee on Municipal Reform was created in 1865 (Burrows and Wallace 917). Social science began to attract attention in the wake of the war with the notion that city life could in fact be managed through rationality. The rise of surveying was the result of this impulse to control an assumed chaos with the assumed purity of reason. A massive public health survey conducted in 1865 showed concerns about the conditions of the city were not abstract. Preventable diseases such as smallpox were rampant, and “thirteen thousand people were dying each year from diseases and conditions that were probably avoidable” (919). Another 1865 report noted that, “Out of New York’s seven-hundred-thousand plus residents, 495,592 individuals were tenanted in 15,309 multifamily dwellings” (921). A bill
requiring windows in tenements was passed in 1865 in the wake of this report, but many reforms affecting the profits of real estate owners were blocked or slowed to a stop for decades. In the 1860s and 1870s traffic outside of the financial district “approached the point of paralysis,” and:

to gridlock were added spectacular accumulations of garbage—filth that sometimes reached knee level. . . Much of the muck followed from the still-unavoidable reliance on horses—forty thousand of them, who each working day generated some four hundred tons of manure, twenty thousand gallons of urine, and almost two hundred carcasses—exacerbated by municipal incompetence and corruption in garbage removal. Some difficulties stemmed from cramming a nineteenth-century economy into a seventeenth-century matrix of narrow and crooked former cowpaths. Others were the fault of the grid’s blithe disregard of Manhattan’s topography, or actual exacerbation of its shortcomings, as in emphasizing north-south arteries over east-west river-to-river connections . . . The result was a downtown landscape that, for all its efficiencies and its lucrative centers of finance, communication, wholesaling, and retailing, coexisted with an inefficient public sphere and decaying, overcrowded communities. (948-950)

Ironically, the early nineteenth century desire to control disease and the space of Manhattan generally via the street grid sustained an out-of-control, filthy space that was a breeding ground for disease.

Many sweeping reforms related to trash and crowding were not made until the 1890s because of machine politics. “Much of the difficulty lay in the inability to bring concerted public power to bear on the issue . . . the resistance of property holders to any constraints on short-term profitability, and the tremendous number of interested and competing parties . . . raised insurmountable obstacles to reform” (949). At the end of the 19th century, problems related to the
grid, traffic, and the functionality of the streets (impeded by loose cobble stones, massive piles of trash, in addition to traffic) came into public focus again as the existing issues of overcrowding and filth became even worse as the city grew. Colonel George Edwin Waring Jr. was appointed in 1894 by the newly elected Mayor Strong to head the Department of Street Cleaning, and by targeting the efficiency of his department’s workers, he dramatically improved the cleanliness of Manhattan’s streets. Previously, the department was infamous for its incompetence. The city was plagued by “dirt, ashes, garbage, snow, and the 2.5 million pounds of manure and sixty thousand gallons of urine the city’s horses deposited each and every day along New York’s 250-plus miles of paved streets” (1194). Broken carts and other large items were abandoned in the street. The department was not well funded, and “It didn’t help that sweepers were primarily Tammany patronage appointees—hired and fired on the whims of politicians—and reportedly spent much of their workday in saloons” (1194). Waring required uniforms and created strict new rules banning profanity and drinking. He also cut the inflated wages of his workers. “The results were spectacular. Obstructions, particularly unharnessed vehicles, were briskly removed . . . streets were scoured. Violators of the sanitary code were promptly arrested” (1195). Harper’s published astounding before and after pictures (something the invention and rise of photography in the 19th century enabled) taken in 1895 and 1897 respectfully. The photos, requiring only a casual glance to notice major change, made Waring’s success highly legible even to those who could not read.

Purifying the streets would also come in the form of germ warfare in early 1890s New York City. Dr. Herman Biggs “In 1889, after reviewing the work of German bacteriologist Robert Koch . . . wrote a landmark report for the Health Department concluding that tuberculosis was communicable and thus preventable” (Burrows and Wallace 1196). His recommendations for disinfecting were largely ignored until 1892, when cholera again reached New York’s ports.
In response, “the Health Department established a Division of Pathology, Bacteriology, and Disinfection under the direction of Dr. Biggs.” Then:

Once a case was confirmed in the lab, Health Department crews were dispatched to the lodgings of the stricken, which were scrubbed and fumigated, and the patient’s clothes and bedding treated or burned. The department also marched a small army into the tenement districts to clean streets and vacant lots, scour thirty-nine thousand tenements, flush water pipes with disinfectant, and pass out circulars on prevention and treatment in English, German, French, Spanish, Italian, and Yiddish. Only nine people died. The epidemic—which had killed twenty-five hundred a day in Russia for weeks at a time—had been completely defeated. Never again would this particular scourge gain a foothold in New York City. But the mobilization was even more significant for what it kicked off: a series of pioneering municipal efforts at preventative medicine. (1197)

Such efforts included large campaigns fighting diphtheria and tuberculosis, cleaning up the milk supply, and starting to chlorinate the water supply (1197).

The desire to clean up the literal streets existed alongside a range of reforms targeting their perceived figurative impurity. For example, Anthony Comstock fought on behalf of the YMCA as a crusader against pornography, gambling, and prostitution in the last decades of the 19th century. He took on feminist spokesperson Victoria Woodhull, engaging her in a public fight that ended in Comstock having Woodhull arrested for sending “obscene” material through the mail. This victory, for Comstock, ushered in a “decades-long campaign to suppress public discussion of sexual matters” which was a rapid, fierce success; in 1873 he took his campaign to Washington and a federal law (the “Comstock Law”) banning “obscenity” in the mail was passed “virtually without debate” (1015). He “steadily broadened his definitions of obscenity” to
include “any depiction, no matter how indirect, of the act of intercourse” (1016). Comstock moved on to attack abortion, contraception of various forms, and printed matter referring to either. Like Comstock’s crusade, the politics of the 19th century were driven by a desire to literally and figuratively clean up; the deliberate exclusion or suppression of whole groups of people, places, or objects was the order of the day.

**Local Impulses, National Trends**

The U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* legalizing segregation by race suggests the trends to other, objectify, and (re)inscribe particular people as inferior, visible in the 1890s history of New York City, were also national trends in this time, especially in urban areas. *Plessy v. Ferguson* grew out of a June 7, 1892 challenge to the Louisiana Separate Car Act. Afro-Creole backers selected Homer A. Plessy for a test case because he could pass for white. His backers thought the murkiness of Plessy’s race would force the courts to realize the inherently problematic nature of racial segregation (if not its injustice). Plessy and his supporters hoped performing the humiliation of a man who looked quite like a white judge might cause the then all-white male judges to sympathize with their cause and, in turn, strike down the regulation. Plessy’s attorneys argued that the Separate Car Act violated portions of the 13th and 14th amendments, notably one’s right, under the 14th Amendment, to “equal protection of the laws.” On May 18, 1896, when the Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* to uphold the Louisiana Separate Car Act, Justice Henry Billings Brown wrote the decision. He “found that the law’s requirement that the accommodations be ‘equal, but separate’ met the constitutional standard” (1 Hoffer). While Brown used the phrase “equal, but separate,” John Marshall Harlan, the lone dissenter amongst the justices, used the phrase “separate but equal,” the one that took fire, as he argued that the Constitution was “color-blind.” Justice Cooley declared, “I never heard
the terms ‘public rights’ mentioned as a private one, and because I cannot understand the idea of a private individual exercising public rights” (28 Hoffer) he upheld the segregation law. Cooley’s confusion highlights the changing nature of personhood in public space. Here, he is unable to recognize the new public intimacy private individuals engaged in regularly, not just in New York City but in other urban areas nationwide in the 1890s and beyond.

William James [sic] Hoffer, in his book, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, notes Jim Crow laws did not instantaneously arrive with the end of the Civil War but rather swept the South with the rise of “the urbanization, industrialization, and transformation of the South from a cash-crop economy into a more diversified, commercial one,” (42) beginning as a trend in the 1880s. For example, with this transition to a more urban and industrial United States, the majority of people no longer lived where they worked, or within walking distance of it. As was the case in New York City, the accompanying new experiences—like sitting next to strangers on a train commute—inspired fear in some people. As Hoffer explains:

> It [public transportation] seems an odd place for racism to make its greatest impact, given the more intimate and provocative nature of schooling young children, but the rails were a greater source of tension for white supremacists because of the closeness of the quarters on public cars. Although schools were built in neighborhoods that were segregated by custom, the daily commute, the jaunt to amusement sites, and the regular business of navigating travel in this period necessitated a mixing of peoples . . . the concern of the white supremacists was that African American men would interact in any way with white women as equals. (Hoffer 45)

As Hoffer suggests, newly diversified U.S. cities brought changes in everyday life such as the development of the commute, unearthing new venues in which old social issues might be
dramatized. Namely, Hoffer’s comment that “the concern of the white supremacists was that African American men would interact in any way with white women as equals,” expediently points out *Plessy* was as sexist as it was racist in nature. The particulars of the ruling, wherein various exceptions allow black women, but never men, to ride in the whites-only cars, note how nonsensical and patriarchal the dominant thinking about white female purity was. White male racists pretended to or actually feared black men would sexually prey on and corrupt “their” women. If white male racists were merely performing such fears, they did so as a means of hoarding white women for themselves. A sort of hoarding impulse to protect imagined (inferior) possessions—such as white women—or superiority against imagined inferiority (black men) seemed to inspire segregation to calm white fears in practice and in law.

As Hoffer rightly notes, it was beyond the imagination of any of the parties involved to challenge racial categories and categorization generally, despite the opportunity for such an argument that Homer Plessy, as a man of mixed race, provided. Even Justice Harlan, the lone dissenter in the *Plessy* decision, ruled in 1899 (*Cumming v. Richmond Board of Education*) that providing separate but equal facilities did not require that blacks be allowed to attend high school at all just because there was a white high school in town. The decision of the town to provide no high school for blacks, he wrote, did not seem to show “‘any desire or purpose on the part of the Board to discriminate against any of the colored school children of the county on account of their race” (Hoffer 147). As Hoffer notes, “Although he may not have seen the racism in providing a high school education only for whites in the pleadings, the effect of this decision was to create an exception to equal education that white supremacists could drive an entire convoy through” (Hoffer 147). So even Harlan, who could imagine rights for black people in one case, was at best a weak advocate, and more realistically, not an ally at all.
The *Plessy* decision was mostly ignored at the time of its issue but became infamous in American history because it set the legal precedent enabling racial segregation. The ruling caused untold damage and unequal opportunities for nonwhites in areas as disparate as transportation and education. Further, as Hoffer notes, *Plessy*’s ramifications include decisions nullifying and banning interracial marriage, which delved deeply into the privacy and freedom of citizens of all sorts. Exemplifying the lack of attention paid to the case in the 1890s, there is only one mention of it in the *The New York Times* between 1890 and 1900. The case only appears in a catalogue the day after the ruling under the heading “Federal Courts: United States Supreme Court”: “No. 210--Homer Adolph Plessy vs. J. H. Ferguson, Judge &c.—In error to the Supreme Court of Louisiana. Judgment affirmed, with costs.” But neither *Plessy* in particular nor legal racial segregation between blacks and whites generally were deemed interesting by New York City newspapers in the immediate aftermath of the decision, for a host of potential reasons such as public disinterest in Supreme Court decisions, a different role of the court in public life at the time, a lack of foresight for the rulings’ ripple effects, and/or a failure to acknowledge the impact of segregation practices on the part of newspaper creators or buyers.

The rise of psychology in America, which occurred mostly in the wake of World War I and beyond, contributed to critical changes in individual and national capacities for imagination. Such changes in individual and group ability to imagine the psyche of others played a critical role in the Supreme Court’s revocation of legal segregation. In *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) Chief Justice Earl Warren declared “separate but equal” schools as “inherently unequal” in an opinion “that drew in part on evidence from the academic field of psychology” (Patterson xxii-xxiii). The reasoning behind the decision was based on research done by Kenneth and Mamie Clark, which argued that segregation caused black children to harvest feelings of
inferiority. Their research demonstrated that black children preferred white dolls to black ones for play; further, the black children they studied degraded the appearances of black dolls in response to interview questions. Of the shifts in American sensibilities related to the imagination, the mind, and justice, Patterson writes:

Du Bois had called segregation a “monstrous imposition on the psyches of black folk.”

Similar views had gathered strength in the early postwar years among leading social scientists, black as well as white, who relied ever more heavily on the growing prestige of psychology in American thought . . . President Truman’s Commission on Civil Rights had deplored segregation, perceiving it as the source among minority people of “damaged, thwarted personalities.” (43)

This notion that one could experience irrevocable mental damage in childhood was new and increasingly popular. Warren clearly embraces such thinking when he writes that segregation based only on race “generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely to ever be undone.” Not only was the psyche of children something recognized by the Court, but also it was something fragile to be protected. Additionally, Brown marks the Court’s ability and willingness to “henceforth interpret the Constitution in light of changing circumstances, not as a fixed document whose meaning had always to be found in the intent of the Founding Fathers or of politicians in the 1860s. These were not small innovations” (Patterson 69). Just as the other was being imagined anew, so too was the Constitution. Brown is in many ways a landmark victory for civil rights that acknowledges and inspires changes in both the Court and Americans’ imaginations generally.

But subtitles like that of James T. Patterson’s book Brown v. Board of Education—“A Civil Rights Milestone and its Troubled Legacy”—are possible despite the case’s landmark step
because *Brown* failed to enact an implementation process. A follow-up case, *Brown II*, that came one year later, was intended to address implementation but did not declare anything concrete. States were charged with integrating schools with “all deliberate speed,” a phrase that, while connoting speed, left the possibility of racist foot-dragging wide open to resistant school districts. Approximately twenty years of particularly heated public battles and litigation followed *Brown*. Debates and litigation regarding racial consideration and school admittance particularly at the university level continue to the present. Another shortcoming of the *Brown* decision is that it did not outlaw racial classification generally. Patterson writes that *Brown*, “understandably focused on the issue to be decided: state-sponsored segregation in the schools. *Brown* therefore did not maintain that all racial classifications (as, for instance, laws against interracial marriage) were unreasonable and therefore impermissible. It did not proclaim that the Constitution was color-blind” (Patterson xxii-xxiii). The lack of a sweeping statement about racial equality or a clear enforcement timetable contributed to the violence that accompanied desegregation.

In the aftermath of the *Brown* decision, six-year-old Ruby Bridges’s life was threatened when she began attending a previously all-white school in New Orleans in 1958. She studied alone for her first year of school because all the parents of the white children removed them from school. The integration of nine black students at Little Rock Central High School in 1957 in Arkansas was met with three weeks of them being shut out of school, stoning, and other violence; the students were finally admitted for a full day of school only with the assistance of President Eisenhower and federal troops. The troops remained for the entire school year. At the University of Alabama in 1956, after three years of legal battles, Atherine Lucy entered graduate school, only to be met with over one thousand protestors, eggs thrown at her, screams
of “Lynch the Nigger,” a cross burning, and a subsequent vote to exclude her from campus by the Board within a few days of her arrival.

Threats of lynching such as those greeting Lucy were not simply theoretical. The practice of lynching had its heyday roughly in the era between Plessy and Brown, which is no small coincidence. “The Tuskegee Institute . . . recorded the grim statistics: from 1882 to 1968, lynch mobs, with at least the tacit support of—and sometimes active participation of—the police, murdered 3,437 African Americans. The usual accusation was that an African American had raped a white woman” (Hoffer 152). Protesters of desegregation, particularly white males, frequently made references to a desire to protect white female sexuality, which they imagined as threatened by black males. For example, Bryant Bowles, a white supremacist who led rallies and school boycotts stated that, “‘The Negro . . . will never be satisfied until he moves into the front bedroom of the white man’s home, and when he tries that a lot of gunpowder will burn’” (Patterson 74). Aside from fueling the negative fantasies of men like Bowles, Plessy helped solidify the idea of race and racial categorization for people of all sorts of racial backgrounds. Plessy may not have garnered immediate attention because on the surface it seemed banal—it is a decision regarding transportation in one city. It is well-known today because of its impact on the imagination and organization of people nationwide. Plessy inspired and condoned all sorts of segregation, and supremacists only felt bolstered and emboldened by legal authority.

Dissertation Overview

Rigid thinking about race and other identity categories, such as that marked, inspired, and unquestioned by all parties involved in Plessy tends to result in many forms of violence. Such violence ranges from deprivation of opportunities to the murder or rape of people deemed other and less-than. In this dissertation, in both my analysis and textual selections, I push against the
violence-inducing ways people tend to attempt to make themselves, land, and others legible. I integrate works by black and white authors written in an era when the everyday integration of different kinds of people was on stage and on trial. To isolate works by the ethnicity of their authors (as, for example, Carol E. Henderson does in her *Scarring the Black Body: Race and Representation in African American Literature* or Wenying Xu does in *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature*) is one valuable context through which to study literature. I am not arguing for the end of that sort of study. But to solely study works in a kind of isolation that hinges them to the physicality of their authors is to limit the ways they might speak. The study of literature so often racially segregates texts in ways that are an unrealistic reflection of everyday life in New York City. I am taking a small step and integrating works by authors of only two presumed racial categories, black and white. While any study, mine included, has its limits, it is critical to allow these texts to speak together intimately here not least because they are indeed similarly investigating intimacy.

New York City’s streets are a stage upon which the presumably distinct real and imagined are intertwined. Delving into the imaginary work of these texts enables me to interrogate the ways what occurs within concrete space turns on fantasy. These texts in turn provide a pedagogy of urban performance, spatial fantasies, and space-based self-identification. I present this pedagogy in order to suggest alternative strategies for grappling with both gendered and raced urban space, the self, and/or other people in ways that are potentially less violent than the historical, marginalizing organizing principles still very much reified in the ways the selected subjugated characters think and act. These alternatives, which become visible in the performances within a work contemporaneous with *Brown*, Alice Childress’s play *Trouble in Mind*, might have useful ramifications for marginalized New Yorkers in particular and
Americans generally.

In Chapter One, I explore repetition and performance in Stephen Crane’s *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* (1893). Maggie is outcast as a result of her gender, and her fate is paradigmatic of the ways the street in the 1890s Bowery is socially surveyed and rigidly gendered zone. The street and the imagined binary logic governing it inspire performances from those attempting to navigate it. Such characters try and position themselves on the superior end of a binary subject position such as pure/whore or respectable/amoral. I attend to the performances of Mary, Maggie’s mother, and Jimmie, her brother, in order to show the ways performances are used to position the self as masculine and superior at the expense of others. I will show how Maggie’s relationship to performances of various kinds, combined with her fate, challenges the binary subject positions generally taken for granted in this poor, overcrowded neighborhood and in turn raises questions about what kind of female singularity, if any, can remain alive there. This chapter, by exploring an imagined, unjust street and the performances it inspires, will interrogate the role of gender in one’s ability to act and to survive in response to ordinary social trauma.

In Chapter Two I feature John Dos Passos’s modernist novel, *Manhattan Transfer* (1925). *Manhattan Transfer*, as its title implies, is a text about motion. Dos Passos meshes scenes describing streets, objects, and modes of transportation with seemingly ordinary moments in the lives of characters, which are, if one attends to performance, deeply revelatory. I explore the performances of the main character, Ellen, an actress on-stage and off, and her male counterpart, Jimmy. Their performances, when interrogated in light of their respective genders, suggest that one must be able to perform masculinity to remain alive in the city. I further suggest that the kind of invulnerable masculinity one may have to perform may require one to deaden their unique humanity, mimicking the mechanization of and architectural developments in the
city in the World War I era.

In Chapter Three, I read the first of two novels I study that are set in Harlem, Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929). I explore the ways the two main characters, who each frequently perform whiteness, reject masculinity and embrace upper-class femininity as a means of belonging in elite black society. I note the ways that these two women, marginalized for by their race and gender, often replicate the racist logic that suppresses them in ways that violate their own and one another’s bodies. I ultimately suggest that the women’s extreme investment in the superficial might be an inescapable by-product of living in a city and country that judge them so harshly on superficial gendered and racial terms.

In Chapter Four, I read Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946), outlining Lutie Johnson and Mrs. Hedges’s different approaches their bodies and city survival. I interrogate Lutie’s rigid fantasies of her street, her interpretations of its other inhabitants, her performative internal monologues, the real challenges she faces, and the self-segregation these combined factors inspire. While Lutie attempts to kill desire for her exceptionally beautiful body, Mrs. Hedges attempts to erase her unusually large and scarred body. Mrs. Hedges’s self-effacement and simultaneous financial success provide the possibility that the commodification of the female body might be avowed as ironically empowering.

In my conclusion I investigate Alice Childress’s *Trouble in Mind* (1955) in order to explore the ways the main character takes up and abandons self-effacing performance as a strategy for surviving a work environment that marginalizes her based on her race and gender. Ultimately, her empowerment provides ways for thinking about personal sacrifice as a necessary though ultimately positive move toward both individual and group empowerment that might be
replicated in real life. I see the new kind of self-reflection on personal performance evident in this text as of a piece with the changing modes of imagination that make the *Brown* decision possible. I move to produce a pedagogy of urban, gendered performance when viewing all of the featured texts in the dissertation in light of this final work. Lastly, I juxtapose the shortcomings and foot-dragging associated with the implementation of *Brown* with the comparatively sweeping changes in housing and lending policies that so often marginalized black people in the same era, the 1950s to 1970s. Both the *Plessy* and *Brown* decisions and their legacies are about urban space, imagination, and performance. They turn on who is imagined as a person, what the role of the Supreme Court is imagined to be, who is imagined as a threat in what spaces, and what kind of authorities are performed. It is therefore crucial to take imagination and performance into account when exploring urban space in order to understand both what kinds of changes have been enacted and what kind of changes might be enabled in order to minimize literal and figurative violence for people of all presumed sorts on the intimate, urban, and fantastic New York City streets.
Chapter 1

A Compulsion to Perform: Repetition, Gendered Theatrics, and Surveillance in Crane’s

Maggie, A Girl of the Streets (1893)\(^8\)

To act on a formal stage is to repeat-with-a-difference, performing the same role night
after night with variations. Stephen Crane’s fictionalized Bowery is a theater. The characters in
Maggie, A Girl of the Streets—whether at home or on the street—are always staging themselves,
acting, or watching a performance, and they are always in public. The work features the Johnson
family, poor Irish immigrants, and is set in Manhattan’s crowded Bowery neighborhood in the
1890s. The text focuses on the plight of Maggie, the daughter who is outcast from home by her
violent, alcoholic mother and subsequently condemned by her for spending a night out with a
man. Maggie’s mother Mary and brother Jimmie hypocritically perform in both the street and at
home. Mary bewails her daughter’s immorality, and Jimmie shuns Maggie for engaging in the
same activities in which he regularly participates. Under ambiguous circumstances, Maggie dies
a few months later; she is only welcome back in her family home as a corpse.

It is no wonder that Crane presents the Bowery as a theater wherein the walls are thin and
the neighbors can actually hear what is supposedly sheltered from outsiders. Crane himself went
to the Bowery as if going to a show; he believed slumming or otherwise going to a site was an
effective tool for learning about a place and its people in order to write about them. He did not
imagine his view as limited, and he believed his own writing was better when it was based on

\(^8\) Stephen Crane, Maggie, A Girl of the Streets, ed. Adrian Hunter (Toronto, Canada: Broadview
Editions, 2006, 1893). All references from this text will be noted by a parenthetical page number
only. This edition reprints Crane’s original self-published version of Maggie rather than the
events he witnessed or researched in person (Sorrentino 123-4). He lived on the east side, made trips to the tenement district, interviewed prostitutes, and attended Bowery theater shows while writing and revising *Maggie* (Sorrentino 78, 88, 105). Crane superficially surveys the urban both while researching for *Maggie* and in his life generally. Unlike the characters in Maggie, who are stuck in the Bowery, Crane rarely lived anywhere more than a year, and when his reputation was threatened, he fled New York City (Sorrentino 208-9). Despite Crane’s superficial surveillance of the Bowery, he crafts multifaceted characters. Indeed, it matters that he witnesses and imagines the poor at all. While writers of various sorts, including scholars and philosophers of urban space, in Crane’s era and well beyond, tend to either ignore concrete conditions or to imagine only concrete conditions of privilege in their writing, Crane is able to imagine the marginalized and to craft their complex imaginaries. The performative nature of everyday life in *Maggie* and the muddy borders between something like real life, real space, and pure theater within it uniquely qualify *Maggie* as a text through which we can recognize the muddy borders between fantasy and real life generally.

Characters in the text are similar to actors on a formal stage because they repeat particular roles and narratives, reanimating the verbal and gendered survival tactics of the people around them. Not only are characters repeating what they hear and see, but also the text at large repeats plots, subject positions, and (violent) character actions. The text’s repetitions are always in some way worse than the originals to which they refer, spotlighting a sense of multiplied

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9 As one of many examples of his thinking on this matter, he wrote in 1894 that writers “‘are the most successful in art when we approach the nearest to nature and truth’” (Sorrentino 124).
10 Many older writers of Crane’s era chided and even satirized writers “who strove to write only about what they had experienced” (Sorrentino 125). Urban space scholars such as Bachelard, Tuan, Lynch, and De Certeau tend to efface the marginalized in their writing. See my introduction for an analysis of this effacement.
deterioration. Acting in *Maggie*, because of its repetitive nature, is akin to the “compulsion to repeat” Freud observes in trauma victims (Freud 602). With this in mind, we can see performing as a traumatic coping mechanism for grappling with the hyper-public nature and gendered victimization characteristic of lives in Crane’s Bowery, whether these traumas take the form of the entire tenement knowing about the abuse in one’s family or of one being left to die because one is both poor and a woman. But repetition, in Crane’s environment, is itself part of what is traumatic. Just as the actual New York City grid performs a strict, repeated order and a democracy that is always already undermined by city realities, so too do the performances of Crane’s city residents superficially mask the limitations of binary logic and binary subject positions as well as the ways that one’s life possibilities in the Bowery are always already limited by classed and gendered inequalities.

*Maggie* suggests the acting that is a survival tactic for urban overexposure and marginalizing conditions such as poverty and womanhood tends to be hypocritical, to champion conformity, and in turn to reify marginalizing norms. In this chapter, I examine the self-staging, modes of watching, and performances Crane portrays through Jimmie, Maggie, and their mother Mary. Jimmie and Mary position themselves and perform in order to appear strong, to win affection or approval, to avoid punishment, and to survive (in myriad ways, including financially, socially, and literally as a living being). Maggie’s inability to detect or enact repetitive performances combined with her fate demonstrates that particularly for poor women, the inability to act, in the 1890s Bowery, is deadly. Ultimately, *Maggie* suggests singularity—one’s genuine uniqueness—cannot thrive in 19th century New York City. Alternatively, performing superior masculinity is the only way for men or women to survive.
As a part of my investigation into performances in *Maggie*, I will intervene in the long history of Crane scholarship in two key ways. First, very few scholars attend to the theater of and in *Maggie*.\(^\text{11}\) Secondly, I contend that much scholarship regarding *Maggie* is captivated by existing Crane scholarship, differences in the 1893 and 1896 texts, and/or patriarchal assumptions—remarkably in a text that repeatedly, ironically, recognizes being enchanted by superficial binary logic as problematic.\(^\text{12}\) I assert that many scholars have been beguiled in these ways at the expense of attending to the words on the page. I will argue, as seemingly no one has, that if we embrace the ambiguity Crane crafts—regardless of which version of the text we look at—(1) “The girl” in Chapter XVII may not be Maggie, and (2) one cannot know how Maggie

\(^{\text{11}}\) I have found two scholars who attend to melodrama in *Maggie*: Daniel Gerould and David Huntsperger. Gerould offers “a panorama of melodramatic performance” (Gerould 56) briefly touching on one of Maggie and Pete’s dates and problematically assumes Maggie commits suicide which he implies is inspired by the melodramas she has witnessed. Huntsperger analyzes the same single theater scene in the text, asserting, “The melodramatic theater scene in *Maggie* registers not a moment of false consciousness but a moment of class-conscious protest” (Huntsperger 309). While Huntsperger notes, in passing, that everyday life in *Maggie* is theatrical, he does not explore this notion. He writes, “Any adequate critical account of Crane’s representation of melodrama will have to move beyond simple dichotomies between melodrama and realism. After all, in *Maggie* the former is embedded in the later, and it is ultimately impossible to separate life and theater within Crane’s fictional text” (304). While his elaboration upon one of the many moments of staged theater is illuminating, it is quite limited, and he problematically presents false consciousness and class consciousness as mutually exclusive. It is my aim not to stray quite far from what the text supports or telescope the text, as I feel these two scholars, respectively, have done, but to look at the many kinds of performances within it both structurally and rhetorically so that we may see repetition-with-a-difference within the rich context provided by the text. The lives of the characters in *Maggie* turn on theatricality, and to leave this notion basically unexplored is to miss the complexity of the world Crane portrays.

\(^{\text{12}}\) For example, in Oehlschlaeger, Fritz. “Stephen Crane, Ripley Hitchcock, and ‘Maggie’: A Reconsideration.” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press. 97.1 (1998), Oehlschlaeger embraces all three of these tendencies (and assumes the girl in Chapter XVII is Maggie). For example, when he writes “Maggie encounters ten men in the 1893 chapter, nine in the 1896,” (46) he assumes “the girl” is Maggie, demonstrates his focus on textual differences between 1893 and 1896, and he begins an analysis that reads *Maggie* through the list of men she is presumed to encounter. While I have selected Oehlschlaeger as a somewhat recent example to reference, this is an extremely common trend in the scholarship.
dies.\textsuperscript{13} This twofold intervention matters as it shows the way Crane scholars get caught in repetitions and try to efface singularity, metaphorically (re)deadening Maggie. More importantly, if we read the text in such a way that permits this lack of clarity, the text instructs us to create room for feminine singularity, for varied female narratives, in a way that its characters like Mary do not.

\textbf{Act One: Establishing a Paradigm}

The opening scene of \textit{Maggie} and the gendered performances within it set up a paradigm that is repeated-with-a-difference throughout the text. This scene’s repetition is deployed in order to show the blurred boundaries between the street and its inhabitants, the street and home, the street and theater, the genuine and the feigned, and masculinity and femininity. \textit{Maggie} opens with a male child’s performance of loyalty to a liminal space. \textit{Maggie}’s opening privileges children as the center of attention, which is notable not least for the way the text’s attention contrasts with the persistent lack of parental surveillance of children in the real life of the text. \textit{Maggie} begins, “A very little boy stood upon a heap of gravel for the honor of Rum Alley” (27). Not only is the “very little boy” elevated amidst unwanted objects, atop a “heap,” but also he is “circl[ed] madly” by “howling urchins from Devil’s Row” (27). So, from the start of the text, the way one is positioned in space matters and can be used to effect violence. Further, the boy,

\textsuperscript{13} In the recent “A Cold Case File Reopened” (Dowling, Robert M. and Donald Pizer “A Cold Case File Reopened.” \textit{American Literary Realism}. Champaign: University of Illinois Press. 2009. Vol. 42. No. 1. pp. 36-53.) Dowling and Pizer debate whether Maggie commits suicide or is murdered, engaging debate regarding the 1893 and 1896 version of the text, assuming the girl is Maggie, and, incorrectly assuming, in my view, it is possible to know how Maggie dies from both or either version. I can only find one scholar who recognizes the cause of death as indeterminate; Adrian Hunter, in his introduction to the 2006 Broadview printing of the text aptly recognizes that Maggie’s cause of death is ambiguous, but he does not go far enough as to suggest that the girl in Chapter XVII may not be Maggie. He assumes it is her. He writes: “There is the matter of the ending, for example. Just how does Maggie meet her death? Is it by suicide, foul play, accident?” (8).
Jimmie, leverages his position as a way to defend his home. Characters see the space they inhabit as an extension of themselves, and so to defend the space is to defend the self. One’s street in particular clearly inspires fierce, animalistic loyalty. Loyalty in this scenario takes the form of physical violence and verbal performance, as this boy’s “small body was writhing in the delivery of great, crimson oaths” (27). This little boy is not alone in his devotion, as the “small, convulsed faces” of the boys opposing him blend together in unified animalistic action; they howl like wolves and circle like sharks. The blending of the boys underscores the blending of their lives with the monotonous, gridded streets surrounding them. While these boys are fiercely invested in the differences between Rum Alley and Devil’s Row—Jimmie, persists even with twenty bruises and torn clothes—to outsiders, both the boys and the streets blend. Perhaps it is the seemingly repetitive appearances of the streets that inspire the boys’ performances of loyalty as a means of trying to distinguish the indistinguishable.

Not only do the boys blend through their animalization, but also they are unified through the fragmentation of their bodies: it is the “Devil’s Row throats” that emit “Howls of renewed faith,” and it is the “faces” that shine (27). Even Jimmie’s father sees his son and another boy fighting as a “chaotic mass on the ground,” not only experiencing the boys as if they were indistinguishable but also dehumanizing them. Further, Jimmie’s father kicks at the mass, not caring which boy he harms, and not hesitating to blindly enact violence on small children. The smallness of the boys on both sides of the fight is deeply emphasized. In the first thirteen sentences, diminutive terms such as “infantile,” “little,” “small,” and “tiny” are used six times. It is as if the city surroundings are constant, large antagonist repeatedly infantilizing its inhabitants, provoking them to perform their own aggrandizement in attempts to not feel so small. The smallness and fragmentation of the boys gels with their surroundings—they defend two streets-
that-are-also-not-streets but rather can be thought of as small fragments of them (an alley and a row). The layers of fragmentation here highlight and foreshadow *Maggie* as a text that deeply values synecdoche—the literary device wherein a part stands for the whole. This scene is paradigmatic of the work of the text at large wherein the Johnson family experiences seem meant to typify Bowery life generally.

Manhood, like the boys’ performances of loyalty and violence, is performed superficially in the street. The boys’ fight is interrupted by the entrance of a “boastfully sauntering… lad of sixteen” “already” wearing a “chronic sneer of an ideal manhood . . . upon his lips” (28). The lad, Pete, performs “ideal manhood” through superficial parts (or fragments) of his body. His face and lips attempt to show an always-already-lacking manhood through a “sneer,” an expression of disillusionment and lost innocence that seem inevitable, as this “sneer” “sat,” planting itself whether welcome or not. Ideal manhood enters the scene as boastful, as a posture one assumes on the skin, and as something one might perform through dress, as “his hat was tipped with an air of challenge over his eye. Between his teeth, a cigar stump was tilted at the angle of defiance” (28). Even defiance, here, is marked as somewhat passive (in its inevitability) and fragmented through Crane’s use of the passive voice (the cigar “was tilted”) and the cigar’s truncated nature (it is a stump). When Crane marks this lad as one who “walked with a certain swing of the shoulders which appalled the timid” (28), he recognizes that even a walk can be an active performance (he “swings” a piece of his body) that can be employed to flaunt one’s gender and intimidate an audience. He “strode over the cursing circle, swinging his shoulders in a manner which denoted that he held victory in his fists,” (28) and it is assumed that the “size of” this “assailant” is what causes the group of Devil’s Row children to run away. Therefore, this text’s opening public performance of violence, loyalty, and superiority is interrupted by a
superficial performance of manhood and largess rather than by an actual adult. The actual adults are passive: adult women watch the violence from windows, and adult men observe it from the end of the block.

The retreating children are inspired to a third kind of performance, a (re)telling of events that manipulates them. The children self-aggrandize as a means of comfort: “they began to give, each to each, a distorted version of the fight. Cause of retreat in particular cases were magnified. Blows dealt in the fight were enlarged to catapultian power, and stones thrown were alleged to have hurtled with infinite accuracy. Valor grew strong again, and the little boys began to swear with great spirit” (28-29). Here, Crane suggests that to tell is to “magnify” and “enlarge,” to change, to enable one who is small to feel “valor” and greatness, and to renew or find spirit. Crane recognizes the way one might use superficial, performative means to enlarge oneself in a place where size matters, even when all who participate in the performance know its manipulative nature. The manipulation of truth is portrayed as a necessary coping skill for (re)gaining one’s spirit or sense of self. This self-staging is male dominated and happens outside in the street; the only females mentioned in the scene are passive witnesses positioned inside.

**Staging Abjection**

In Crane’s Bowery, self-positioning and acting do not stop when one leaves the theatrical venue of the street. The opening scene of violence I just described gets repeated-with-a-difference at home. Violence is performed inside with a gender and generation change in the inhabitant of both the lone-aggressor-who-challenges-a-group-yet-is-successful and portrayer-of-ideal-masculinity subject positions. In this repetition, Jimmie’s mother, Mary, rather than Jimmie or Pete, is violent, antagonistic, self-aggrandizing, and masculine. Structurally, the text suggests the indoors are an extension of the outdoors, and both spaces are equally theatrical zones. The
gender change in these subject positions also suggests that going indoors provides new possibilities for female action, violence, and coping with the urban. Much like the repetitive and seemingly indistinguishable (non)streets inspire violence and loyalty as a means for the young boys to distinguish themselves and their turf, the repetitive, inhospitable tenement buildings ignite Mary’s performances of violence. Mary aims to break monotony and position herself as superior to both fellow tenement-dwellers as well as the tenements housing them.

Well before Jimmie, his father, his sister, and his baby brother reach their destination, it is clear that their home is also not a home (much in the way that the alley is a sort of non-street). The home is fragmented and seems interchangeable with the surrounding buildings: “a dozen gruesome doorways gave up loads of babies to the street and the gutter” (30). Here, homes are always-already fragmented as doorways, each door is like the others, and none of these buildings nurtures children. Crane characterizes this “dark region” as a zone in which there are only bits of homes and only bits of families—babies are alone and tossed to the gutter. There is no mention of the adults charged with their care. When Crane writes that the tenement “building quivered and creaked from the weight of humanity stamping about in its bowels” (30), it is as if the building itself is a better or more humane human than the actual humans inhabiting it. Humans weigh the building down, make it quiver and bend to accommodate the pesky, heavy, “stamping” humanity invading exactly the kind of internal location one would like to efface or ignore, the bowels. It is as if humanity is the abject that even a tenement building would like to excrete.14

14 Here, I use “abject” as Julia Kristeva does in Powers of Horror. Crane describes people as a thing loathed by the tenements; the people burden the tenements and cause the tenements to recoil like “loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung,” (2 Kristeva) typically does for people. Kristeva considers this impulsive rejection, which she called “food loathing” to be “perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection” (2 Kristeva).
Through this surprising personification muddying the human and the inanimate, Crane memorably suggests an inhuman quality of life in the Bowery.

Even for children, the street seems to be a zone harboring strict gender binaries to govern behavior. While outdoors Jimmie is free to fight and defend his turf, Maggie is elsewhere on the street, performing ideal femininity. She, alone, cares for her baby brother. Once the family meets up in transit to home, Jimmie hits Maggie (“he suddenly swore and struck her”) when she cries out of fear that “‘we’ll all get a poundin.’” Jimmie “advanced dealing her cuffs,” or, repeated blows with the hands, even “as she slowly retreated” (31). Outside, then, the male child is a violent aggressor and the female child is a passive, pathetic victim and caretaker. Jimmie’s blows are met with his father’s complaint that “it’s like I can never beat any sense into your damned wooden head” (31). There is no sign of self-awareness or irony amongst the family members, though Crane makes the irony clear through this moment and the following one when, once home, Jimmie’s mother, Mary, beats Jimmie for beating others, also seemingly without awareness of the irony of her actions. It is clear, then, that violence within the Johnson family is repeated, cyclical, and hypocritical.

While the family’s home might be a reprieve in that it is a source of light in the wake of the dark stairs, instead, its light serves merely to spotlight the star of the show-in-progress, the singularly violent and un-motherly mom. The rest of the family, “the procession”—on an unreligious, inverted pilgrimage home, “plunged into one of the gruesome doorways. They crawled up dark stairways and along cold, gloomy halls. At last the father pushed open a door and they entered a lighted room in which a large woman was rampant” (31). The Johnson family apartment is, rather than something like a cohesive whole, a fragment. It is a room one passes
into through separate pieces like halls, stairs, and doorways. Mary is first described as “large”—just like the fight-stopping, strutting Pete. Not only is Mary large, but she is “rampant”:

“Eh, what? Been fightin’ agin, by Gawd!” She threw herself upon Jimmie. The urchin tried to dart behind the others and in the scuffle the babe, Tommie, is knocked down… The mother’s massive shoulders heaved with anger. Grasping the urchin by the neck and shoulder she shook him until he rattled. She dragged him to an unholy sink, and, soaking in a rag in water, began to scrub his lacerated face with it. (31)

So, Mary is the anti-Virgin Mary of the Christian Bible, as she washes her children in “unholy” water, ignores her own babe, and is a “massive” woman who tortures under the pretext of nurturing. When her husband asks her to “‘Let up’” because “Jimmie’s cries annoyed him,” her “operations on the urchin instantly increased in violence,” and she “at last tossed him to a corner where he limply lay cursing and weeping” (32). She then “strides” “chieftain-like,” pleased with her defiance of her husband as well as the violence she has enacted upon her weeping child. It is not enough to be big, visible, and violent; Mary is most delighted when she enhances her performance with masculine posturing. Mary’s stride recalls Pete’s affectations of “ideal manhood” a few paragraphs prior, encouraging the reader to associate Mary with performing masculinity by way of their shared subject position.

The Johnson family room is, in addition to its lack of peaceful space, also insufficient as a home in that its walls are thin, creating an automatic audience for the violence performed inside it. The neighbors are unable to refuse access to these performances, as to be home is to be a part of a public hailed and unified by location and sound. When Jimmie retreats to a neighbor’s apartment, the neighbor’s weary acceptance of Jimmie at her door recognizes the frequency of loud family fights at the Johnson house. Her question, “Eh, Gawd, child, what is it dis time? Is
yer fader beatin’ yer mudder, or yer mudder beatin’ yer fader?” (34), does a lot of work. The question not only proves the audibility of the goings-on of the Johnson home but also notes the expected, ordinary, repetitive nature of this family fight. Her question recognizes that the audience members for these fights do not intervene in them. The grammatically parallel structure of the question further suggests an interchangeability of aggressors—on some level it does not matter who is beating up whom, as Jimmie will be treated in the same manner regardless of the answer to the question. The parallel nature of the question also troubles stereotypes of gender roles. The question assumes it is equally likely that the mother or the father is beating the other, undermining the oft-assumed rigid gender divide (wherein males are aggressors and females are passive victims) performed outside in the street. It is as if, indoors, the muddiness of the supposed gender binary is allowed to be recognized. Further, the neighbor’s question highlights the fact that Crane chooses to portray the mother as the family drunk and bully when he could have just as easily done the opposite—dad, no saint himself, soon steals money from Jimmie (who is doing a favor for the rescuing neighbor), buys a beer with the stolen money, drinks it in one large gulp, laughs at Jimmie, and “hit his son in the head with the empty pail” (35). To first spotlight Mary as violent aggressor who strides around like a necessarily male chieftain is to trouble or invert expected gender roles, a move that Crane makes throughout the text in various forms and through various pairings. Additionally, Jimmie’s retreat to the neighbor’s house notes the ways violence fragments the Johnson family. Repeated use of animalistic verbs to describe this scene of domestic violence—mom “howls” and Maggie “ate like a small pursued tigress” (33) recalls descriptions of the boys’ fight outside and in turn notes life inside is just as fragmentated and animal as life outside. The repetitions—with-a-difference in the generation, gender, and location of the aggressor with Jimmie aggressing outside and Mary as the aggressor
inside is paradigmatic of the kinds of repetitions Crane enacts throughout the text to subvert and question literal and metaphoric boundaries between genders, people in a range of subject positions, and between presumably different places.

One might expect adult violence to be followed by a scene of its assumed legacy, but in Crane’s text the child violence precedes the adult violence, troubling the ability of readers to take the origins of violence for granted. Readers view childhood first in *Maggie*, as is expected in linear narratives, but childhood is truncated in this text. Not only is the section of the text engaging childhood brief in comparison to the rest of the narrative, but also the childhoods featured are also brief. Maggie is expected to mother her baby brother when she is still a child, and her baby brother, Tommie, dies in infancy (37). We might read a text that uses synecdoche with such a heavy hand that is crafted by an author who briefly slums in the Bowery as a means of witnessing the plight of the urban poor as suggesting that the structurally brief elaboration of childhood in the text is an accurate portrayal of childhood in the Bowery at large. Further, we might read in this brevity Crane’s attempt to link one’s childhood to their life at large, one family to many, or life inside one tenement building as a portrayal of life at large in this neighborhood and city. And, on one hand, Crane’s research method, the synecdoche employed in *Maggie*, and the repetitions in the landscape featured—the grid of New York and the like tenement buildings standing on it—all do suggest an utter monotony characterizing the Bowery and its inhabitants. But inverted, gendered performances, self-positioning, and particular modes of watching continually emerge to both unearth and question the deadening capability of the spaces featured in this text.
Masculine Surveillance and Self-Staging

Just as the opening chapters focus on childhood and repeat-with-a-difference performances of public violence, various other performative plots are repeated with inversions as a means of grotesquely aligning the seemingly opposed. These juxtapositions allow us to question the various kinds of hypocrisy, convention, and injustice embedded in seeming distinctions such as pure/whore, parent/child, and man/woman. Perhaps the most overt example of this phenomenon is exhibited through Pete and Jimmie’s shared subject position of man-who-“ruins”-an-innocent-girl. Both men perform superiority in different ways and with differing consequences. Through a comparison of the two men, the ways they perform superiority for themselves and others, and the ways they are aligned through their subject position as one-who-ruins, I will argue that poor men survive urban chaos through literal and figurative self-staging.

Jimmie functions by isolating and exceptionalizing himself. Jimmie is literally self-taught in the ways of the street, and his coping mechanisms for living in the Bowery are paradoxical in that Jimmie deems himself superior but only by viewing himself as a sort of ultimate urban victim. Before Jimmie feels compelled to obtain a job, “He studied human nature in the gutter, and found it no worse than he thought he had reason to believe it. He never conceived a respect for the world, because he had begun with no idols that had to be smashed” (37). Here, Crane places Jimmie in the gutter: a fabricated waterway through which only dirty water travels for processing. The gutter is a bowel of sorts, and it is also the place Crane writes “gruesome doorways” send tenement babies. The gutter is the lowest possible place on the street, and it is the place from which tenement children begin life. Jimmie responds actively to this passive placement. He isolates himself and embraces the surveillance of “human nature;” here in this observing—rhetorically at least—he is separated from what is supposedly natural for him as a
human, and he perceives a vertical power grid upon which he has nowhere to move but up.

Moving up to street corners, Jimmie does not like his surroundings: “Jimmie’s occupation for a long time was to stand on streetcorners. . . . He menaced mankind at the intersections of streets. On the corners he was in life and of life. The world was going on and he was there to perceive it” (38). Jimmie does not like being enmeshed with the others he surveys or with “mankind” generally. Jimmie feels superior: “He and his order were kings, to a certain extent, over the men of un tarnished clothes, because these latter dreaded, perhaps, to be either killed or laughed at” (38). Jimmie feels figurative superiority to “the men of un tarnished clothes,” or to higher class men, because they have something to lose. Jimmie gets a job that allows him to physically elevate—to be on a “perch” and “glare upon all things,” (39) as the driver of a horse carriage. Jimmie feels heightened superiority through his uber-downtroddenness, by rejecting morally based binaries: “above all things he despised obvious Christians and ciphers with the chrysanthemums of aristocracy in their button-holes. He considered himself above both of these classes. He was afraid of neither the devil nor the leader of society” (38). Jimmie feels he rises above through a sort of opting out. While “the leader of society” goes unnamed, Crane does invoke the name God when he describes Jimmie as a “god-driver,” (40) even though he “believed in nothing” (39). Through Jimmie, then, Crane is not merely questioning “obvious Christians” or a blind religiosity, but also he is asking what it is to be human and whether or not the urban poor in the 19th Century New York City Bowery can be a part of “mankind.” Can the poor here both survive and be humane? For Jimmie, “the rest of the world was composed, for the most part, of despicable creatures who were all trying to take advantage of him and with whom, in defense, he was obliged to quarrel on all possible occasions” (39). Jimmie, as described here, has a rationale for fighting with other people and envisions individuals only as a blended mass,
dehumanizing them all as a lot of lower “creatures” against which he must fight (like the boys from Devil’s Row who threw rocks at him in childhood). It is clear, then, that Jimmie does not encounter new people with openness but rather works them into his ready understanding of how the world works. All other people are not-him and would literally (like the police) or figuratively aim to bring him down. His glory is ironically in his lowness: “He himself occupied a downtrodden position that had a private but distinct element of grandeur in its isolation.” Jimmie feels exceptional, defensive, and only imagines an animalistic way to act—to fight physically. On a meta-level, in Jimmie’s detachment he seems to serve like a roving eye for the Bowery, as one who feels inhuman, above, and not a part. Crane shows through Jimmie what growing up here does, how it makes one inhuman, and what one might do to survive the monotony of streets and tenement rooms that all look the same and poverty that feels inescapably the same daily: detach from humanity and elevate oneself alone, much like Jimmie does as a little boy atop a heap of rubble, fighting an entire gang of other boys.

Jimmie is hypocritical, and the two brief moments in which he (almost) recognizes his own hypocrisy crucially underscore the gendered inequality of social norms governing Bowery life. Jimmie is outraged when Maggie is out all night with Pete. He finds Pete at work and beats him up. Yet, Jimmie has not only done the same thing, but also he has done it worse—he has “ruined” more than one innocent girl. Crane shows Jimmie, unlike Mary, as capable of recognizing his own hypocrisy, but Jimmie refuses to attend to it. First, “Jimmie walked to the window and began to look through the blurred glass. It occurred to him, vaguely, for an instant, if some of the women of his acquaintance had brothers” (58). Chapters later, Crane writes, “Again he wondered vaguely if some of the women of his acquaintance had brothers. Nevertheless, his mind did not for an instant confuse himself with those brothers nor his sister
with theirs” (69). In the first example, Crane notes that Jimmie must see in an atypical way—through “blurred glass”—in order to potentially recognize his flaws. The closest Jimmie can come to being vulnerable and genuine, even within his own thoughts, is in both a vague and fleeting manner. Further, even if Jimmie were to align Maggie’s social plight with that of women he has somehow wronged, he would do so by sympathizing with their brothers. So, even Maggie’s brother makes her ruination about him and how it angers, upsets, and “queers” him socially. Crane further underscores the gendering of the street with the use of “occurred to” above, noting that men can casually engage the consequences of their actions. Men have time and space in which things can occur to them, and they can choose to ignore their own hypocrisy. Crane once more recognizes Jimmie’s ability to be casual in the second example—he “again” is “vague” at best, only daring to approximate his flaws or selfishness. The second example is different because this time his solution is, notably, to cling to his own (and now Maggie’s) exceptionality. Jimmie would not dare enmesh himself with other people. Positioning himself mentally as different and as an exceptional other is his method for surviving an everyday life governed by unjust norms. He rationalizes or ignores inequalities based in poverty and gender, and he indulges in pleasures regardless of their consequences.

Pete, the other young man who “ruins” a woman in the text, performs superiority both for himself and others, and his behavior suggests performing superiority, purity, and respectability are other options readily available to men in the culture of Bowery life. I will elaborate on the impact of Pete’s performances in my forthcoming analysis of their effects on Maggie. Here I will simply introduce the nature of Pete’s performance strategies. Like Jimmie, Pete stages himself through his job. Pete performs superiority by way of flaunting an air of respectability. After encouraging Maggie to leave home and spend a night out with him, “Pete did not consider that
he had ruined Maggie. If he had thought that her soul could never smile again, he would have believed the mother and brother . . . to be responsible for it” (78). While Maggie indeed decides for herself to go out with Pete, the two share the same evening and engage together (or not—we only ever hear that the two return late at night together) in any activities considered promiscuous. Maggie is socially outcast for their shared experience, and, Pete, denying any relation to the matter, is not. Their differing fates mark both the unjust gender norms guiding social life in the Bowery and the willingness of Bowery inhabitants to at least pretend to believe certain types of individual performances. Pete distances himself from Maggie and performs purity: “The morning after Maggie had departed from home, Pete stood behind the bar. He was immaculate in white jacket and apron and his hair was plastered over his brow with infinite correctness” (79). Despite some momentary guilt after spotting Maggie (“He threw a swift, nervous glance about him, all at once feeling guilty” (79), “He gave a great start, fearing for the previously-mentioned eminent respectability of the place” (79), harshly asks “‘What d’ yeh wanna hand aroun’ here fer? Do yer wanna git me in the trouble?’” and “His countenance reddened with the anger of a man whose respectability is being threatened” (79). So, like Jimmie, Pete has a fleeting sense of his own imperfections or role in the perceived ruination of women he dates, and Pete, too, dismisses it. Alone behind the bar, he feigns outrage, correctness, and purity. He stages himself as superior to Maggie and ignores his role in her social trouble.

**Failure to Thrive: Feminine Self-Lowering, Stasis, and Superficiality**

If Jimmie examines the everyday horrors of life in the Bowery and copes with them by elevating himself, Maggie, his sister and female counterpart, does the opposite. When Pete comes to visit Jimmie at home, Maggie experiences herself and her ordinary surroundings anew:
As Jimmie and his friend exchanged tales descriptive of their prowess, Maggie leaned back in the shadow. Her eyes dwelt wonderingly and rather wistfully upon Pete’s face. The broken furniture, grimey walls, and general disorder and dirt of her home of a sudden appeared before her and began to take a potential aspect. Pete’s aristocratic person looked as if it might soil. She looked keenly at him, occasionally, wondering if he was feeling contempt. But Pete seemed to be enveloped in reminiscence. (43)

Much like Jimmie, Pete is “aristocratic,” at least in Maggie’s eyes, whereas his presence causes Maggie to lean, shorten, and darken into shadow. Maggie is most intrigued by Pete’s self-inflating tales, and she seems unable to distinguish performances from reality. When hearing Pete’s exaggerated tales, Maggie perceives that his “mannerisms stamped him as a man who had a correct sense of his personal superiority” (42). This impression causes Maggie to not only retreat into darkness but also to heighten her attention to metaphoric dark spots—the literal furniture and her embarrassing mother’s destructive behavior. Maggie’s concern that Pete’s “person . . . might soil” (43) can be read as her self-demoting and concern for Pete. But the phrasing also grammatically allows Pete to be seen as the active, soiling agent—a foreshadowing of the figurative soiling in which Maggie and Pete each play both active and passive roles. Additionally, while Pete is able to surround himself in figurative “reminiscence,” Maggie seems bound—again, at least in her view—by her literal, damaged surroundings. Maggie looks at her ordinary life anew when she experiences feelings of admiration for Pete, and she feels shame, particularly in regards to her personal appearance and the appearance of the family home, much the converse of the way Jimmie feels power through his ordinary, superficial, and literal position upon a cart.
While Jimmie and Maggie share a subject position as the two surviving children of the Johnson family, their gender difference critically impacts their life trajectories. When Maggie engages in the very strategy that elevates Jimmie and enables him to survive—self-isolation in the street—she is outcast and dies. The text first describes the adult Maggie as one who “blossomed in a mud puddle. . . . None of the dirt of Rum Alley seemed to be in her veins” provoking “the philosophers up-stairs, down-stairs and on the same flood, [to] puzzle[d] over it” (41). Maggie is singular for her literal and figurative cleanliness. The common sense of the text is that the grit of one’s surroundings can, and usually does, penetrate one’s internal operations, the very pumping of blood through one’s body. Further, the text imagines that whether or not one has internalized Rum Alley’s dirt is something observable that shows externally. Much like the personification of the tenement building as having bowels which interestingly hold people, this seemingly simple commentary regarding Maggie also uniquely complicates the external and the internal, nature and nurture, and the literal and figurative. The Bowery’s overpopulation and grit are able to penetrate one’s body and cycle back into visible appearance, action, or performance. Such complication suggests the Bowery is a place where ordinary operations in everyday life are troubled by the space in which they occur. “When a child, playing and fighting with gamins in the street, dirt disguised her,” and “she went unseen,” (41) but eventually she is noticed for her good looks. So by the logic of the narrator, one must be different to be seen, and to be seen, as a single young woman in this environment, is a problem. When Maggie begins to garner male attention, “her brother remarked to her: ‘Mag, I’ll tell yeh dis! See? Yeh’ve edder got teh go teh hell or go to work!’ Whereupon she went to work, having the feminine aversion of going to hell” (41). Jimmie recognizes the visibility of Maggie’s female body as a problem and verbalizes a supposed binary in which work and going to hell are seen as the two possible solutions to the
indeterminacy or open question her body’s visibility provides in this environment. Going to hell seems to represent dating, exhibiting affection and sexuality, opening oneself for ruination, and/or prostitution. Something like admirable courtship or marriage does not seem to be an option for Maggie, presumably because of the poverty in which Maggie and her potential mates are enveloped. Working and contributing to capitalism through alienated labor is seen as more feminine than commodifying the self, and these possibilities are presented as mutually exclusive opposites. Not only does Maggie choose to go to work rather than go to hell, but also she gets a job that reinforces traditional femininity and purity—she makes collars and cuffs, stiff ends that ornamentally cover the body and seal it from view. While Jimmie roves about town in presumably unpredictable patterns, Maggie is bound to repetition. “She received a stool and a machine in a room where sat twenty girls of various shades of yellow discontent” (41). While Jimmie’s profession as a driver allows him to feel separate and to literally sit up high, Maggie sits in one place all day at the same level as those around her. Isolated elevation, Crane notes, is the only way Jimmie feels power. But in her various shades of boundedness—to a fixed position and level, to the patterns of collars and cuffs, to the repetitive nature of her work and home environments, and to her gender—Maggie is disempowered.

The kind of action Maggie imagines she can take to improve her lot in life is superficial and domestic in nature (whereas Jimmie is turns outside, to the gutter, when coming of age). Pete’s first visit to the Johnson family home newly illuminates Maggie’s environment and self for her personal investigation. “Maggie contemplated the dark, dust-stained walls, and the scant and crude furniture of her home . . . the almost vanished flowers in the carpet pattern, she conceived to be newly hideous” (45). It is as if Pete’s gaze returns and renews her sense of the wretchedness of her environment. When “She anticipated he [Pete] would come again shortly,”
“She spent some of her week’s pay in the purchase of flowered cretonne for a lambrequin. She made it with infinite care and hung it to the slightly – careening mantel, over the stove, in the kitchen” (45-46). So Maggie’s impulse is to screen and cover with a curtain that which is broken and shames her. She seems only capable of changing the way things appear, not the way they are. She imagines that changes and improvements are something she can purchase and construct. She envisions flowers as something desirable to look upon. Much like the flower she places in her baby brother’s coffin is blemished because it is stolen, Maggie’s purchase suggests that something like a real, pure flower can only be approximated here, as this is a place inhospitable to something like beautiful, real, or pure life. Crane portrays Maggie’s deep investment in her constructed cover:

She studied [the curtain] with painful anxiety from different points in the room. She wanted it to look well on Sunday night when, perhaps, Jimmie’s friend would come. On Sunday night, however, Pete did not appear. Afterward the girl looked at it with a sense of humiliation. She was now convinced that Pete was superior to admiration for lambrequins. (45-46)

Maggie blends her self-worth with the worth of a curtain when she feels disappointed that Pete does not return a week later. She is not disappointed that he does not get to see her beautiful improvement; instead, she condemns herself for caring about it as all and for being someone inferior to Pete. Maggie experiences both hope and disappointment by reading them through her material domestic environment.

Jimmie and Maggie are male and female counterparts who differently strategize life in the Bowery. Aside from inhabiting the opposing ends of a supposed gender binary, Jimmie examines the world outside the home as a means of positioning himself in relation to others
while Maggie examines the domestic and reads her potential in relationship to her home. Crane, through Maggie and Jimmie, shows readers a disparity in what kinds of opportunities are available to them based on their gender (adult Maggie can go to work or go to hell, whereas Jimmie’s behavior seems to have no limits and his job does not bind him to any location). Crane further troubles the gender binary as unjust because Maggie and Jimmie engage in the same activities but are met with drastically different social consequences. After staying out all night on a date, Jimmie has an unpleasant meeting on the street with Hattie and a few fleeting vague thoughts about brothers that might track him down. Alternatively, Maggie is outcast and no longer welcome in the family home. However, Crane’s troubling of the gender binary is much less simple than a comparison between two children and their differing fates, a thought to which I will soon return in my analysis of their (gender-)troubling mother, Mary.

**Show Business: Watching and Imitation**

The conditions and skills that enable one to survive urban poverty are exacerbated by but not limited to one’s gender and associated expressive tendencies to self-elevate or self-deprecate as described in my analysis of Maggie, Jimmie, and Pete above. My examination of the nature of Pete and Maggie’s attraction to one another, their differing modes of watching, and their experiences of the actual theater on three theater dates allows me to further interrogate both the gendered and generalized conditions necessary to stay alive in this fictionalized, crowded urban environment. Maggie has difficulty distinguishing between real life (in the world of the text) and even the most obvious kinds of performances—those on the stage. Mixed in with this difficulty is her trouble reading depth and/or her general enchantment with the superficial. Pete is likewise deeply invested in the superficial, but Pete understands show; in fact, Pete’s livelihood and everyday life hinge upon his repeated surveillance of others and subsequent performances
highlighting his superiority to others. Maggie’s inability to decipher when Pete is performing prevents her from recognizing contradictions between his words and his intentions. Maggie’s inability to discern the theatrical from the genuine results in her social downfall and eventual death.

A large part of Maggie’s attraction to Pete is superficial and, more specifically, spatial. Because she takes Pete at his word, she views Pete as elevated and herself as low. His perceived self-lowering only expands his greatness in her view. Maggie “marveled at [Pete] and surrounded him with greatness” because of his appearance and his stories “descriptive of [his] prowess.” “That swing of the shoulders . . . combined with the sneer upon his mouth, told mankind that there was nothing in space which could appall him . . . She vaguely tried to calculate the altitude of the pinnacle from which he must have looked down upon her” (44). Pete’s greatness, for Maggie, is intertwined with the relatively low social position she imagines she inhabits. The nature of this description of Pete recalls his teenage performance of ideal manhood in the opening scene by way of his swinging shoulders, affected sneer, and ability to appall. This similarity suggests Pete, now actually an adult, continues to pretend to be a(n) “ideal” man, which he interprets as being hyper-masculine, domineering, and accompanied by a pretty woman. At any age, it is his performance of manhood that matters to him and his audience, as he is indeed performing for both. He appears to Maggie as if “nothing in space could appall him,” and his seeming strength in the face of objects and people is enough to woo her. In other words, she does not feel compelled to explore Pete’s mind. For Maggie, the prowess Pete takes on in her eyes means he fits into the narratives of her dreams: “Maggie perceived that here was the ideal man. . . . Under the trees of her dream-gardens there had always walked a lover” (44). Maggie’s wish is that there simply is “a lover,” existing, walking, and filling space,
and there are no other necessary requirements that she or her imagined lover need to meet. In her dreams she is passive—she is waiting in a garden for a man to saunter in, and her “dream-gardens” do not seem to contain anything she might cultivate. Her passivity even in her dreams marks the stereotypic, social, and gendered limitations governing life in the Bowery as limitations she also individually places on herself.

While Maggie’s mode of watching contributes to her self-deprecation, Pete’s mode of watching enables self-elevation. Pete’s close association with and frequent attendance at shows and spectacles does not trouble Maggie. Another woman might have been skeptical of this fact as indicative that Pete takes out lots of other women and may not have a particular investment in her. For Maggie, this familiarity with show reinforces his superiority in her mind: “it was obvious that Pete had visited this place many times before,” and he “leaned back, he regarded with eyes of superiority the scene before them. This attitude affected Maggie strongly. A man who could regard such a sight with indifference must be accustomed to very great things” (48). Here, Crane demonstrates that not only is the audience in a way the real show but also Pete’s particular mode of watching is a kind of performance—he has “eyes of superiority” but is not in fact superior. When Crane’s narrator notes Pete “displayed the consideration of a cultured gentleman,” he compares Pete to a gentleman only to mark his distance from true gentlemanly ways. Pete can display the qualities of a gentleman, but he does not actually have them. By noting what “Maggie perceived,”—“that Pete brought forth all of his elegance and all of his knowledge of high class customs for her benefit,” (48) the text again distances her perception from what is a clear, differing reality in the view of the narrator. Further, Maggie’s perceived position as lower and the way “Her heart warmed as she reflected upon his condescension” (48), suggests that Maggie’s vision of love is bound up in her self-image as one who is lower or
unworthy. Pete is attractive to Maggie because he will reach down to her level, in turn (re)evaluating him in her mind.

Pete’s attraction to Maggie is also superficial in nature, and it is primarily visual. Maggie’s thoughts or personality seem to mean little to Pete. Pete “took note of Maggie,” remarking “‘Say, Mag, I’m stuck on yer shape’” (44). Pete is captivated by Maggie’s looks, and he finds her attractive, but we can also read this line as an admission that Pete cannot see beyond her appearance. Further, Pete is most pleased with Maggie when the two are in public together. Pete is thrilled because Maggie enables him to feel superior around other men: “At times men at other tables regarded the girl furtively. Pete, aware of it, nodded at her and grinned. He felt proud. ‘Mag, yer a bloomin’ good-looker,’ he remarked, studying her face through the haze” (67). Pete sees Maggie through literal and metaphoric haze; although the glances come because they assume Maggie to be prostitute (67), which is a problem for Maggie’s ability to function socially as before in the Bowery, Pete is not only not troubled, he is delighted. He views being seen with Maggie as a way to further elevate himself in the eyes of others. The combination of Pete’s superficial attraction to Maggie and his delight in the idea of her enhancing the show of his greatness underscores the multiple layers of show and superficiality that guide Pete’s life. The text repeatedly highlights Pete’s superficiality and flaws and Maggie’s simultaneous investment in his supposed genuineness: “She would be disturbed by no particular apprehensions, so long as Pete adored her as he now said he did” (67). This moment is typical of the way Crane uses Maggie’s potential worry (for example, caused by the stares of other men) and the way it is cut off by her investment in Pete only to foreshadow Pete’s lack of genuine adoration for Maggie (with the comment “as he now said he did”).
It is not just Pete’s flaws that Maggie is blind to; Maggie does not register other forms of imitation as such. On their first theater date, while Maggie “saw the golden glitter of the place where Pete was to take her,” (46) the narrator establishes that “an orchestra of yellow silk women and bald-headed men” (47) appear onstage. Crane’s narrator, then, is immediately suggesting that the yellow reality of the theater is somewhat less magnificent than Maggie’s golden vision. Crane describes the players as “on an elevated stage near the centre of a great green-hued hall” (47). It is notable that in this theater the stars of the show are not front and center but rather near an elusive center. Like the “irregular aisles;” the “dull gilt of the chandeliers” and the off-center orchestra, all of the components of the theater are a bit irregular, dusty, or otherwise tainted. The people in the audience are tainted by their work, which haunts them after hours: “The vast crowd had an air throughout of having just quitted labour. . . . The great body of the crowd was composed of people who showed that all day they strove with their hands” (47). Not only are the audience members marked by labor, but also they are at a minimum as entertaining as the show on stage, with the text paying much greater attention to the audience than the presumed entertainment. Audience members listen “with the expressions of happy cows,” (47) and “very infrequent tipsy men, swollen with the value of their opinions, engaged their companions in earnest and confidential conversation,”(47). Crane seems to be satirizing in a few possible ways here—either the only earnest audience members are drunk, if we take the text at its word, or there are in fact many drunks, who may in fact be quite loud. Because these men who self-aggrandize seem an array of Petes, Crane suggests that while Maggie finds Pete exceptional, he is ordinary, and further, that acting superior and inflating oneself is a common activity for men in the Bowery. The audience, like the neighborhood, is also a spectacle of diversity, as “The nationalities of the Bowery beamed upon the stage from all
directions” (47). While the audience is pacified, animalized, and able to escape via the stage, the
text, in its focus and diction, conflates everyday humanity in the Bowery, patriotism, the acting
on the stage, and the irregularity of the environment—all are imitations of sorts.

What takes place on the actual stage is a litany of imitations of something like a genuine
performance, and yet Maggie has difficulty recognizing the most obvious of imitations. The
words to a song are “inaudible,” the singer “galloped upon the stage,” animalized as a horse
much like the bovine audience. The singer’s performance is overshadowed by the audience, who
“pound[ed] rhythmically upon the tables,” producing “long rollings of applause” (48). When the
singer “divulged the fact that she was attired in some half dozen skirts . . . Maggie wondered at
the splendor of the costume and lost herself in calculations of the cost of the silks and laces” (48-
49). Maggie is again captivated by the superficial (as she is with Pete’s stories and in her attempt
to improve her position/self by way of new curtains in her home), the superiority of others and
their dress (as she is with Pete’s attire), and her own perceived inferiority. Further, her
captivation is enmeshed with gender stereotype—she is fascinated by dresses. When a
ventriloquist appears onstage, Maggie asks, “Do dose little men talk?” to which Pete responds
“Naw. . . it’s some big jolly. See?” (49). Maggie is unable to properly distinguish between
performance and the genuine or between fantasy and reality, but Pete can. Maggie, on the other
hand, finds it possible dolls are talking. The appearance of imitation men is soon followed by a
minstrel, “a woman of debatable age” (and unclear race) who “sang a negro melody. The chorus
necessitated some grotesque waddling supposed to be an imitation of a plantation darky” (49).
Not only is Crane suggesting the audience is performing in all sorts of interesting ways, but also
he is parading a range of doubly imitative performances on the stage. Minstrel performances, if
played by whites, are in essence a fantastic performance of an imagined performance that does
not actually exist. If played by blacks, a minstrel performance is an imitation of an imitation of an imagined kind of show. It is no mistake that Maggie and Pete watch singers who few other people really watch or can hear, puppets who cannot speak, and a “supposed imitation” that is “grotesque.” The grotesqueness of the ageless, raceless woman is grotesque in the sense of bringing together a mismatch. All the performers are grotesque in some way, and they fall short of their ideal gender stereotypes—the first woman is inappropriately dressed, and the man is small. One woman cannot be heard, one woman is not an accurate portrayal of a black slave woman, small men cannot talk, and yet Maggie cannot seem to read the situation; she is as captivated by costumes as she is by Pete. Crane invokes layers upon layers of imitation and acting both on and off stage to suggest the grotesque manner in which acting is embedded in everyday life in the Bowery, to recognize Maggie’s inability to appropriately detect imitation, to dramatize the ways one’s gender expression is always already onstage in this environment, and ultimately to note Maggie as uniquely unable to navigate everyday life in the Bowery because she cannot perceive acting or act.

Crane also zooms out, as this first date at the theater climaxes with a national spectacle:

A carefully prepared crisis was reached in the last line of the last verse, when the singer threw out her arms and cried, “The star-spangled banner.” Instantly a great cheer swelled from the thoughts of this assemblage of the masses, most of them of foreign birth. There was a heavy rumble of booted feet thumping the floor. Eyes gleamed with sudden fire, and calloused hands waved frantically in the air. (49)

At a basic level, Crane implies an imitative quality of national pride—to be patriotic is to enact a kind of performance, and Crane’s repeated references to the diversity of backgrounds in the audience juxtaposed with the “heavy rumble of booted feet” suggests that those “of foreign
“birth” are performing more intensely—either out of deeper appreciation or out of a deeper sense that one must enact belonging in order to belong. To end a string of imitative performances with the national anthem begs readers to question the genuine nature of the song, the performers, and the enthusiastic audience.

**Repetition as Deterioration**

Pete and Maggie’s first date in a theater hall is noted as falling quite short of Maggie’s expectations despite her lack of according recognition. The evening showcases a slew of imitations and is repeated-with-a-difference twice. Each of the repetitions occurs in a deteriorated physical and figurative place. The deteriorating nature of Pete and Maggie’s theater dates suggests that mutual engagement in the same activities allows Pete to approximate ideal stereotypical masculinity while further distancing Maggie from idealized femininity or purity. It is as if Pete’s ability to be a perceived as a man hinges on Maggie’s inability to be perceived as a woman.

On their second theater date, when the reader rejoins Maggie and Pete after Maggie has “gone to hell,” several chapters have elapsed. The chapter opens, “In a hall of irregular shape sat Pete and Maggie drinking beer” (65). Their environment is set to match their relationship: something is not quite right with either. This opening line is also important because the sentence grammatically makes Pete and Maggie passive to their environment—they are a result, not active agents. Their passivity to an “irregular” place is underscored by the opening of the next sentence: “a submissive orchestra” follows its conductor; a singer performs in an “inevitable voice of brass.” There is something unpleasant and off in this hall, and yet that passive unpleasantness, like teenage Pete’s feigned sneer, has an air of inevitability. But this inevitability cannot be
solely attributed to the nature of the Bowery’s physicality. This inevitability also turns on the way Boweryites act and watch.

The differences in the first two theater dates imply Bowery residents view theatrical performances, like Maggie’s innocence, in extremes. The theater, now that Maggie is “ruined,” is seedier, and Maggie and Pete are more deeply entrenched in the roles they tend to assume both around one another and for everyday survival. On this date, a singer “returned attired in less gown . . . she reappeared in still less gown and danced” (65). While on their first date, a singer makes much of her six elegant and expensive skirts, creating a spectacle of her overly clothed self, now the shedding of clothing is the spectacle. The waiters, who on their first date were attentive to Pete, are now “indifferent or deaf.” Maggie, too, is notably different: “Maggie was pale. From her eyes had been plucked all look of self-reliance. She leaned with a dependent air toward her companion. She was timid, as if fearing his anger or displeasure” (66). Where Maggie has shrunk and sunken lower, now compared to a “spaniel” for her dependence upon Pete, Pete has soared: “Pete’s air of distinguished valour had grown upon him until it threatened to reach stupendous dimensions . . . He could appear to strut even while sitting still, and she showed that he was a lion of lordly characteristics by the air with which he spat” (66). Pete is apparently “infinitely gracious to the girl” (66)—to Maggie, and yet his graciousness is notably not tied to her name. He is, it seems, gracious to the girl of the moment. Even on this less pleasant night out, Maggie is able to dream amidst “the smoke-filled atmosphere,” just as she is able to cope with “her former Rum Alley environment” and her factory job so long as she can “regard Pete’s strong protecting fists” (66). In Pete’s “man-subduing eyes” “she imagined a future, rose-tinted, because of its distance from all that she had experienced before. As to the present she perceived only vague reasons to be miserable. Her life was Pete’s and she considered him worthy of the
charge. . . . She did not feel like a bad woman. To her knowledge she had never seen any better” (66-67). It is unclear why—perhaps because of the new, seedier location—or the speed with which gossip in the Bowery travels, but Maggie is now a show, subject to preying eyes, and she is aware of it. The roving eyes of other men inspire pride in Pete, while Maggie “considered she was not what they thought her” as “gray-headed men… stared at her through clouds” and “boys…tried to find the girl’s eyes in the smoke wreaths” (67). All views, then, are clouded, and there is a sense that no one can appropriately see, metaphorically or literally. The “glances . . . made [Maggie] tremble” (67), all the while with “negro melodies” playing in the background once again, and, undoubtedly, the music is played by whites. The women are “painted” and show skin; the other women around are assumed to be prostitutes. Imitation is the modus operandi of their environment, writ large or small.

Maggie’s lack of recognition of imitation when she sees it—her paradoxical illusion that illusions are real—combined with her gender amount to her inability to survive Bowery life. The moments wherein Pete and Maggie go to and observe various shows, combined with the ways their experiences as observers change over time, demonstrate that Pete feels a need to rejuvenate his sense of self-superiority regularly and one of his preferred methods for doing so is observing and publicizing other people’s flaws. Further, these scenes prove Maggie is captivated by show and performance. Maggie is unable to experience performance as such. She either thinks it is real when it is not, or she imagines it as a narrative possibility for her life. This is also how she reads Pete’s performances. She interprets him as an outlet of escape. While Maggie’s hopes are tethered to Pete specifically, Pete is tethered to the need to feel superior and not necessarily to Maggie.
The third repetition of this date with Pete and Maggie is an even worse version of it, enforcing the aura of deterioration and revealing that Maggie is as perplexing to others as she is perplexed. Now the hall is “hilarious,” with “dusty monstrosities painted upon the walls,” “noise” is made on stage, the waiters are “soiled,” and “The rumble of conversation was replaced by a roar” (70). The physical and emotional caliber of the space Maggie and Pete inhabit has rapidly deteriorated: “Three weeks had passed since the girl had left home. The air of spaniel-like dependence had been magnified and showed its direct effect in the peculiar off-handedness and ease of Pete’s ways toward her. . . . She followed Pete’s eyes with hers, anticipating with smiles gracious looks from him” (71). Whereas Maggie used to watch the stage, now she watches Pete. Her attachment to Pete is one of desperation, and it has intensified as rapidly as the environment has clouded. To be isolated for a man like Jimmie is empowering, but for Maggie, isolation further weakens and animalizes her. Moreover, while Maggie is described as a “pursed tigress” as a child, she is now dog-like. She is not just an animal, as before, but she is a smaller and more common one now. Maggie does not seem to recognize Nellie as a prostitute in this scene. “Maggie took instant note of the woman. She perceived that her black dress fitted her to perfection. Her linen collar and cuffs were spotless” (71). While Maggie makes cuffs and collars, this woman gets to wear them, and “spotless” ones at that, calling attention by way of comparison not only to Maggie’s metaphoric ruination but also her recognition of Nellie as superficially superior—she looks beautiful, in Maggie’s view, and wears “no apparent paint” (71)—she is pure. Crane, here, either notes that Maggie is unable to recognize the obvious, that Nellie is a prostitute, or provides Maggie as a voice through which one might see the humanity of prostitutes. When Pete and Nellie leave Maggie and the “mere boy,” Nellie’s date, alone at the table, “Maggie was dazed. She could dimly perceive that something stupendous had happened.
She wondered why Pete saw fit to remonstrate with the woman, pleading forgiveness with his eyes. She thought she noted an air of submission about her leonine Pete. She was astounded” (73). Maggie is not astounded that she is being abandoned, as she has always deemed Pete superior to herself, but rather, she is astounded that there is someone to whom Pete submits. She realizes that he is not superior to all other people, and she is further astounded by the ways Pete’s performance of himself does not match this reality. Further, Maggie is misread as she misreads. When Maggie says she is “‘going home’” rather than out with the “mere boy,” his reaction is: “‘Eh? What? Home,’ he cried, struck with amazement. ‘I beg pardon, did hear say home? . . . Great heavens! What hav’a struck?’ He is “stupefied” and “struck with amazement” (75) that Maggie has a home, is not a prostitute, and/or that a woman so obviously a prostitute, in his view, would turn down his money. Both Pete and Maggie, here, astound their audience when they undercut the way their observer perceives their gender expression. Maggie assumes Pete to be an ideal, hyper-masculine, indomitable man. She is stymied by Pete’s submission to Nellie. The “mere boy” has assumed Maggie to be a failed, impure woman, and when she challenges that stereotype, he is perplexed. The way that their upset mystifies characters suggests stereotypes based in gender are clearly used as a tool through which one navigates and reads others in this community.

**Crafted Ambiguity**

Maggie may or may not have one more encounter with theater in the space of the text, and Crane’s vagueness on the matter is critical. The woman in Chapter XVII is not named. This ambiguity suggests that any prostitute could be (a girl like) Maggie, in turn humanizing and making sympathetic prostitutes and/or women who take to the streets alone. The vagueness of the chapter invites the possibility that the “girl” is Hattie, a possibility for which there is
precedent in the text. Further, the fact that the unnamed girl is called Mary suggests she may in fact be a girl named Mary; may be Mary, Maggie’s mother; may be Maggie mistaken for her mother (as Jayne Anne Phillips asserts in her introduction to the 1988 Bantam printing of *Maggie*); or that Crane may be calling on the 19th century commonplace association of prostitutes and Mary Magdalene from the Bible.\(^{15}\) While Crane’s vagueness in other instances within this text, in my view, teaches his readers how to read Chapter XVII, no scholars (so far as I have found) have considered that “the girl” may not be Maggie. It is indeed taken as fact that she is Maggie, and therefore the vagueness of “the girl” in the chapter has yet to be fully examined.\(^{16}\) Crane’s vagueness opens the chapter and Maggie at large to multiple readings that do not mutually exclude one another, and yet scholars repeatedly violate the text by treating it as if its vaguenesses and its main female character are utterly definable. Moreover, scholars locate the girl and her death as definable by way of the list of men with whom she appears, performing a critical attachment to patriarchy and a social pigeon-holing of Maggie not unlike that which the text cautions against.

If Maggie is indeed the girl in this chapter, her lack of a name seems intended to highlight her potentially universal reach and her loss of sense of self after her denial by Pete. The last mention of her name while she is alive is “Maggie went away,” (80) upon Pete’s cruel dismissal of her, which, as a line of text could function on both a literal and metaphoric level. After this incident, in the remaining few paragraphs within Chapter XVI, Maggie is referred to intermittently as “she” and “the girl.” Such a reading suggests in being outcast by Pete and by the


\(^{16}\) See articles by Dowling and Pizer, Gerould, Huntsperger, Phillips, Hunter, and Oehlschlaeger as examples.
forces of social authority in the Bowery, Maggie has now lost herself in the theater of the streets. Indeed, if the girl in Chapter XVII is Maggie, the chapter contains yet another repetition with a difference of a night of theater, and this time the repetition is so much worse that Maggie is not even able to attend the show, but rather she waits outside to witness those who were able to attend in hopes of soliciting sex for money from the departing theater patrons. The music has also deteriorated, as it did in the other repetitions, to “faint sounds of swift, machine-like music, as if a group of phantom musicians were hastening,” (81) invoking industry, inhumanity, and death. If this girl is Maggie, she has learned to act, at least in one sense. This girl can modify her behavior depending upon her audience: “She threw changing glances at men who passed her, giving smiling invitations to men of rural or untaught pattern and usually seeming sedately unconscious of the men with a metropolitan seal upon their faces” (81). In this reading, Maggie has acquired a necessary survival skill—acting—only because she has lost herself and has become an object of theater. Indeed, regardless of how one reads Chapter XVII, Maggie does indeed become theater, and this is seen as thoroughly bad and irrevocable, at least by those who know her before she is objectified. Maggie is not just dismissed but ridiculed by her mother and the neighbors, who delight in her downfall.

“The girl” in Chapter XVII might well be Maggie but could also be Hattie or any other girl. Maggie and Pete’s third date, featured in Chapter XIV, concludes with a bewildered Maggie neglected by Pete and left alone with another man who assumes she is a prostitute. The very next chapter opens with “a forlorn woman” trying to navigate “an endless crowd” and is “apparently searching for someone” (75). Crane invites readers to assume this forlorn woman is Maggie, but, ironically, a few paragraphs later she turns out to be Hattie, and the man she is searching for is Jimmie. Here, Crane teaches readers not to make assumptions about ambiguity, especially
ambiguity regarding naming, by referring to Hattie as a “forlorn woman” right after Maggie has been abandoned, and then unearthing expectations when this woman is called Hattie. Hattie’s social situation mirrors Maggie’s, and Crane’s play on expectations with this woman’s identity invites the potential that the girl of Chapter XVII may also be Hattie.

The only name attributed to the girl in Chapter XVII is Mary: “A belated man in business clothes, in his haste to catch a car, bounced against her shoulder. ‘Hi there, Mary, I beg your pardon! Brace up, old girl.’ He grasped her arm to steady her, and then was away running down the middle of the street,” (82). This brief paragraph invites multiple possibilities. The man may call the girl Mary even though he does not know her, and it may or may not be her name. It seems unusual to call a stranger by a given name, though it does not seem impossible, especially given the frequent 19th century association of prostitutes with Mary Magdelene. Or, perhaps this is a girl named Mary who we as readers have not seen before, that the man knows but does not have time to speak with because he is in a hurry. Perhaps, as Jayne Anne Phillips suggests, a bedraggled Maggie is mistaken for her mother. Further, maybe the girl is Mary. While such a possibility presumably strikes my readers as ridiculous, to ignore the invocation of Mary’s name when Mary is a character in the text and there is a precedent in that text for surprisingly unearthing reader expectations, it important to acknowledge that this is a possibility. Evidence that might support this possibility: As Gerard M. Sweeny smartly points out, Mary has “blotches,” a likely indicator of syphilis, and this girl, too, has “crimson legions” (83).¹⁷ Maggie’s mother Mary is also a heavy drinker, and we do not know how she makes money. Further, she frequently goes to jail and frequently performs in hypocritical ways. Alternately,

evidence that would refute this possibility: if Mary were a prostitute, the neighbors would know and she would have been outcast, as was Maggie. What matters to me is that in its ambiguity, the text allows me to entertain these myriad possibilities. It is a mistake to try and define the girl or Crane by way of a particular reading of Chapter XVII (including how it ends), as that impulse fights the pedagogy of the text which notes effacing ambiguity and singularity as violent and unjust. To assume “the girl” is Maggie is to limit her significance when the fact that the text does not name her suggests she is meant to have a more universal reach.

Similarly, much scholarly debate surrounds Maggie’s death. Indeed, an entire recent article “A Cold Case Reopened” features a debate between two scholars, Robert M. Dowling and Donald Pizer, wherein Dowling argues she is murdered, and Pizer argues she commits suicide. The common sense behind the article and of both scholars includes that the girl in Chapter XVII is Maggie, and that her cause of death, through textual analysis comparing the 1893 and 1896 versions of the text, is identifiable. Dowling, in my view, is far more compelling and reasonable. Pizer calls on what “most critics have held since the late 1960s,” (Pizer 48) that Chapter XVII’s “wet evening” actually takes place over a long period of time, despite the lack of textual evidence to support such a claim, as Dowling rightly points out (Dowling 49). Pizer further calls on conventions of melodrama in the 1890s, seemingly not considering Crane’s frequent ironic treatment of melodrama, to rationalize his conclusion (Pizer 41). Despite Dowling’s argument being more reasonable, both scholars are misguided in taking for granted that the girl of Chapter XVII is Maggie and that her cause of death is legible.

Crane clearly leaves Maggie’s cause of death vague (in both the 1893 and 1896 versions of Chapter XVII, if one assumes “the girl” is Maggie; and, her death is even more obviously indeterminate if “the girl” of Chapter XVII is not Maggie). It is a violation of the text to ignore
or efface that vagueness for want of clear narrative. There is much scholarly attention to the
differences between these two versions of the text, in part because the 1893 original was
published by Crane himself and extremely rare until it was published in the 1950s. The most
significant change in the 1896 revision (aside from much eliminating of profanity, attempting to
make the text more suitable for publication) takes place in the end of Chapter XVII, and I list the
endings of each version side by side here, so that my reader may view them in tandem:

1893
She went into the blackness of the final block. The shutters of the tall buildings were
closed liked grim lips. The structures seem to have eyes that looked over her, beyond her, at other things. Afar off the lights of the avenues glittered as if from an impossible distance. Street-car bells jingled with a sound of merriment.

When almost to the river the girl saw a great figure. On going forward she perceived it to be a huge fat man in torn and greasy garments. His grey hair straggled down over his forehead. His small, bleared eyes, sparkling from amidst great rolls of red fat, swept eagerly over the girl’s upturned face.

He laughed, his brown, disordered teeth

1896
She went into the blackness of the final block. The shutters of the tall buildings were closed like grim lips. The structures seemed to have eyes that looked over them, beyond them, at other things. Afar off the lights of the avenues glittered as if from an impossible distance. Street-car bells jingled with a sound of merriment.
gleaming under a grey, grizzled moustache
from which beer-drops dripped. His whole
body gently quivered and shook like that of a
dead jelly fish. Chuckling and leering, he
followed the girl of the crimson legions.

At their feet the river appeared a deathly hue. At the feet of the tall buildings appeared the
taller buildings the deathly black hue of the river.
Some hidden factory sent up a yellow glare, Some hidden factory sent up a yellow glare,
that lit for a moment the waters lapping oilily that lit for a moment the waters lapping oilily
against timbers. The varied sounds of life,
against timbers. The varied sounds of life,
made joyous by distance and seeming
made joyous by distance and seeming
unapproachableness, came faintly and died
unapproachableness, came faintly and died
away to a silence.
away to a silence. (144)

The river, in both versions, is “deathly.” A “hidden” yet visible factory provides a “yellow glare”
in both, lighting grime. “Sounds of life” are “unapproachable” and die, but the girl—who may or
may not be Maggie—does not die here. We as readers simply do not witness the death. We
cannot take for granted that the presence of the “fat man” equates to the girl’s murder. We cannot
take for granted that being alone equates to the girl’s suicide. We cannot know why Crane
eliminated the passage featuring the “fat man,” but the girl’s death does not hinge upon his
absence or presence. No matter how the passages appear, Crane invokes a clash of life and death
imagery—death is suggested but not featured. We do not know how the girl and/or Maggie dies,
we just know that, at the start of the final chapter, Maggie is dead. It is this very ambiguity that
matters. The girl could be Maggie, or the girl could be any female, and what matters is that alone, on this particular street—with its scrutinizing eyes, eager ears, repeated biases and repetitive inhospitality for women, especially women who cannot (en)act (violence), she is outcast, seemingly without options other than prostitution available to her as a means of surviving financially. She dies, in any number of possible ways, because she is a woman.

**Inverted Encores**

Mary, Jimmie and Maggie’s mother, troubles stereotypical narratives of femininity and motherhood as one who outwardly displays anger, is physically violent, repeatedly breaks furniture, beats her children, and beats her husband. Perhaps most strikingly, Mary relishes in violent performance—even alone she is “rampant” or “raving,” as if rehearsing for the family to come home. Mary seems to delight in her downtroddenness just as Jimmie feels superior ironically by way of uber-victimhood. Mary is a spectacle, it seems, wherever she goes. Mary’s performances are the most ambiguous and complex in the text, and it is necessary to read them in context of the other kinds of performances in the text in order to decipher the ways Crane’s text troubles (norms related to) gender, performance, and morality. In one prototypical scene, Crane again repeats the opening scene with Jimmie, this time with a solitary Mary provoking and fighting a group of children and neighbors; the scene culminates in a scene of violence in the home which ends more starkly than the original scene does—it is, once again, a worse repetition.

In this scene, Mary’s arrival is anticipated by an audience of children: “urchins were intent upon the side door . . . twisting their fingers in excitement,” remarking “‘Here she comes.’” Mary appears with “grey hair . . . in knotted masses,” yelling, cursing, and leaving with “a kick of exasperation” to the door because the saloon will no longer serve her (54). Mary is a spectacle not only for her provocative, angry words but also for her ragged physical appearance and
physical acts of violence like kicks. The children’s anticipation of Mary’s arrival notes that part of the audience’s delight is in her consistency—she is a reliable aberration through which the children might feel superior in a world in which they are so often marginalized. Her social infractions delight in their predictable repetition, and part of what makes her a spectacle is her very unwomanliness—she is loud, angry, and violent. In line with stereotypical narratives of what her life should conventionally look like, she does get married and have children, but she certainly is not home tending to things or people. So through Mary and Maggie, Crane shows how one can follow convention and be morally abhorrent or break convention and be both sympathetic and potentially morally superior.

Returning to the scene outside when the boys follow Mary, she “howled, shaking red fists” while “the little boys whooped in glee” and “taunted her” (55). Not only is Mary in the spotlight, but also she is in the spotlight, here, in the same way that Jimmie is in the opening scene of the novella: she is out on the street, angry, challenging a group of small boys who are in turn taunting her. Just as Jimmie does in childhood, she then enters a “gruesome doorway”: “In the frame of a gruesome doorway she stood for a moment cursing them. Her hair straggled, giving her crimson features a look of insanity. Her great fists quivered as she shook them madly in the air . . . The woman floundered about in the lower hall of the tenement house and finally stumbled up the stairs” (55). The repetition of “gruesome doorway” here and elsewhere begs attention. Not only are the doorways revolting, but also going home or passing into one’s home is dreaded. Further, this repetition suggests the doorway is the same as it was years ago—there is a monotony to the horror of their environment, and the monotony is in turn part of the horror. The text acknowledges a boundary between the outside and inside while simultaneously, repeatedly questioning the differences between the zones. For example here, upon going inside,
Mary continues to be heard and surveyed. Mary’s features mark her as singular and insane. Her body is both fragmented and animal: Crane attends to her “features,” her “fists”—pieces of a body that may or may not be whole. She “flounders,” like a fish out of water, vulnerable yet active. In the tenement building, nothing has improved or changed. The home is—as it was when Jimmie, Maggie, Tommie, and their father entered in the scene years earlier—still fragmented: “On an upper hall a door was opened and a collection of heads peered curiously out, watching her. . . she began to kick the door with her great feet. She shrilly defied the universe to appear and do battle. . . she roared at the spectators. . . ‘Shet yer face, an’ come home, yeh damned old fool,’ roared Jimmie at her” (55). Interestingly, while the narrator grapples with the building in terms of doors and halls, and “heads” rather than people watch Mary, there is a way in which the word choices “spectators” and “universe” also mark unity. Mary unites others through their mutual watching of her spectacular, unconventional womanhood. Mary actively initiates and welcomes gawking. She is looking for a fight. She calls out names, begging for specific neighbors to come fight her. Mary is a stereotype of a downtrodden, drunken, family-less man who has a chip on his shoulder, but she is a woman with a family. Jimmie chastises and ridicules his mother verbally, the two fight “like gladiators” in a hallway, and then Jimmie beats his mother at home until she “lay screeching on the floor, the tears running down her furrowed face” (56). The scene is an inversion of the beating Jimmie receives from Mary as a child at the end of the opening scene. To repeat the scene while swapping parent and child and woman and man is to show a progression wherein the child has learned to enact violence and to infantilize the parent. The repetition-with-a-difference in subject positions also marks an interchangeability, once again, of victim and aggressor, man and woman. Jimmie and his mother engage in predictable patterns, repeating well-known performances for the neighbors, in a dilapidated
building that has seen no improvements in years. It is as if the repeated gruesomeness of their environment and social situation amongst the neighbors continually reproduces a certain kind of theatricality. They are regular actors in a show that the neighbors understand and appreciate not least for its predictability and repetitive theatricality.

Maggie is only involved in this scene of violence in its aftermath, as an observer left to assess damage. “Maggie, standing in the middle of the room, gazed about her. The usual upheaval of the tables and chairs had taken place. Crockery was strewn broadcast in fragments” (56-57). Here, Maggie is the surveyor of the inside/the domestic in the way that Jimmie is the surveyor and a kind of eye of the Bowery outside. Maggie seems to have no effect on and makes no attempts to intervene in the violence regardless of aggressor. It is as if the violence overtakes her and disallows the sculpting of her personality. In a rare moment of excited interpersonal exchange, for example, while on a date with Pete, the only stories Maggie shares are tales of particularly noteworthy family fights.18 Maggie’s arrival on the scene here functions to contrast her, as an ideal stereotypical woman who is nonviolent and interested in the domestic, with her mother, the antithesis of idealized femininity.

Mary’s strategies for survival in the Bowery include drinking, verbal performance, antagonism and trying to wield power through physical violence, much like those employed by Jimmie and/or Pete. I will now move to demonstrate the ways Mary tries to self-aggrandize through incantation, the repetition of crafted narratives in which she is a hero and sympathetic figure. Mary enacts this strategy in the social structures of her family, the tenement, and the court system. Mary seems to tell tall tales even when speaking solely with Jimmie at home, allowing

18 “At times Maggie told Pete long confidential tales of her former home life, dwelling upon the escapades of the other members of the family and the difficulties she had to combat in order to obtain a degree of comfort” (66).
readers to question if there is ever a private zone in which she might do something like truly recognize her role in the outcomes of events or if she would do such a thing if she could. Further, that people like Mary and Pete are seemingly never satisfied despite their repeated self-aggrandizing leaves the reader to question what, if anything, besides detachment from others (like Jimmie does), might satisfy them and/or break their entrenchment in performance and repetition to allow for something like their more genuine selves to emerge.

Mary’s role in Maggie’s departure from the home is complicated, and the degree to which she is hypocritical is extreme and curious. When Pete shows up after the big fight with Jimmie and Mary that ends up with Mary beaten on the floor:

The mother in the corner upreared her head and shooed her tangled locks. ‘The hell wid him and you,’ she said, glowering at her daughter in the gloom. Her eyes seemed to burn balefully. ‘yeh’ve gone teh deh devil, Mag Johnson, yehs knows yehs have gone teh deh devil. Yer a disgrace teh yer people, damn yeh. An’ now, git out an’ go ahn wid dat doe-faced jude of yours. Go teh hell wid him, damn yeh, an’ a good riddance. Go the hell an’ see how yeh likes it.’ Maggie gazed long at her mother . . . The woman on the floor cursed. Jimmie was intent upon his bruised fore-arms. The girl cast a glance about the room filled with a chaotic mass of debris, and at the red, writhing body of her mother.

‘Go teh hell an’ good riddance.’ She went. (57)

This passage, in which Mary first tells Maggie she has already gone to hell and then undercuts that notion/contradicts herself by instructing Maggie to go to hell, demonstrates Mary’s circular logic and frequent use of repetition within verbal performance. I call this selection a verbal performance on Mary’s part because she speaks with little to no interruption and for an audience. Mary, literally lying on the floor, tries to metaphorically pick herself up by targeting her
daughter’s character. It is as if Mary is avoiding chastising herself by projecting her negative thoughts onto Maggie by way of a speech condemning her daughter’s morality when Mary herself is the one embarrassing the family. “Go teh hell an’ see how yeh likes it” might be read as Mary’s admission that she knows what hell is like as she is already there. Mary seems to feel the only way to face herself is (unlike Jimmie who tries to exceptionalize himself) to try and liken others to herself. It is critical to recognize that Mary clearly tells Maggie to leave, and after one final survey of the domestic, Maggie does as her mother instructs. Crane presents Maggie’s departure as clearly a result of her mother’s behavior and destruction but also as a result of Maggie’s obedience to her mother. The clarity of Mary’s role in Maggie’s departure is met on Mary’s part not only without regret, acknowledgement, or the acceptance of responsibility, but also Mary uses Maggie’s social downfall to try and elevate herself and align herself with sympathetic narratives.

Mary also tries to enact sympathy through narrative in court, noting her understanding of how one might wield narratives to affect the ways one is judged. She tries to gain sympathy and lessen potential punishments by aligning herself with sympathetic subject positions such as a suffering mother:

When arrested for drunkenness she used the story of her daughter’s downfall with telling effect upon the police justices. Finally one of them said to her, peering down over his spectacles: ‘Mary, the records of this and other courts show that you are the mother of forty-two daughters who have been ruined. This case is unparalleled in the annals of this court, and this court thinks—‘ The mother went through life shedding large tears of sorrow. Her red face was a picture of agony. (70)
The text cuts off the voice of reason, the judge, presumably in the way that Mary either ignores or pretends to ignore any awareness she might have of her own flaws or culpability. The text implies that while it might be reasonable to sympathize with a person who experienced a presumed social tragedy once, pleas for sympathy lose their power through overuse. Further, the structure of the text disables Mary’s ability to legitimately inhabit any sympathetic narratives. For one, she is clearly a spectacle of public drunkenness, cut off in saloons and well-known as a problematic, violent, spectacular drunk well before Maggie is “ruined.” The text shows Mary’s “large tears” and face that is a “picture of agony” as superficial, hypocritical performances enacted in an attempt to gain leniency and/or social power via pity. Mary attempts to paint herself into narratives such as sympathetic suffering mother, but she has always already foreclosed herself from fitting into such narratives. Not only is the linearity of Mary’s claim problematic, but also such a claim—like the implied claim that the ruination of her daughter drove her to drink—shows no recognition of Mary’s role in Maggie’s departure from home or her disowning of Maggie by encouraging her to leave. It is clear that if Mary does sober up, she does not show regret but instead capitalizes on Maggie’s presumed downfall.

Mary performs suffering and morality as she avows motherhood in the Bowery streets. It is not enough to blame Maggie when questioned in court; Mary literally roams the street loudly lamenting her strife, her own virtue, and Maggie’s supposed amorality:

After the mother had, with great difficulty, suppressed the neighbors, she went among them and proclaimed her grief. “May Gawd forgive that girl,” was her continual cry. To attentive ears she recited the whole length and breadth of her woes. “I broughted ‘er up deh way a dauter ought be bringed up an’ dis is how she served me! She went the deh devel deh first chance she got! May Gawd forgive her.” (69-70)
Mary repeatedly narrates herself as a proper mother—it is as if she hopes to make her story true by incantation or she hopes to fool the neighbors. The narration and her actions also suggest that her audience is complicit in her hypocritical performance because they benefit from the show—either personally or by way of entertainment. Mary, in her self-aggrandizing narrative, tries to craft a reputation as an ideal woman by way of what are otherwise stereotypically masculine survival tactics in the text. Not only does Mary orate her motherly accomplishments, but she also tries to align herself with Christian morality by calling to “Gawd” for Maggie’s forgiveness. Mary’s cries for Maggie’s forgiveness attempt to divert blame from herself in a public performance. To call for Maggie’s forgiveness is to try and move the “universe” of neighborly eyes off of oneself. The text, by way of Mary’s hypocrisy and unclear degree of self-awareness raises the question of what—if any—sort of genuine, private self can exist for women in this kind of poor, urban life situation. But the text, here, also questions if genuine Christianity exists and recognizes the ways Christian narratives are invoked for deceptive purposes.

If one place might be free of acting, a reader might imagine that place to be in the home, but Mary also performs in her home for her son and herself. The question of when, if ever, is Mary genuine is perhaps most complicated by her conversation with Jimmie at home regarding Maggie’s ruination:

“An’ wid all deh bringin’ up she had, how could she?” moaningly she asked of her son. “Wid all deh talkin’ wid her I did an’ deh t’ings I tol’ her to remember? When a girl is bringed up deh way I brought up Maggie, how kin she go deh devil?” Jimmie was transfixed by these questions. He could not conceive how under the circumstances his mother’s daughter and his sister could have been so wicked. His mother took a drink from a squudgy bottle that sat on the table. She continued her lament. “She had a bad
heart, dat girl did, Jimmie. She was wicked the deh heart an’ we never knowed it.”

Jimmie nodded, admitting the fact. “We lived in deh same house wid her an’ I brought her up an’ we never knowed how bad she was.” Jimmie nodded again. “Wid a home like dis an’ a muddler like me, she went teh deh bad,” cried the mother, raising her eyes. (68)

This intimate conversation can be read in several ways. First, if Mary and Jimmie can be taken at their words, the passage suggests that, things being as they are, to be an unmarried woman and stay out with a man, regardless of the cause or driving forces, is seen as an exceptional sin. If we read in this way, Crane is plainly criticizing the supposedly moral and common conventions of the time—wherein it would be acceptable to sit around drinking and criticize your daughter’s lack of morality in cahoots with your son who has engaged in the same ruination repeatedly. In another reading, Mary is self-aware but refuses to acknowledge her flaws and role in Maggie’s supposed downfall even at home in an intimate conversation with her son. Continuing with the possibilities, Jimmie may or may not be acting, and he may or may not perceive Mary as acting. Perhaps, in another reading, both know they are putting on a show—for each other and for the eavesdropping neighbors, and they perform the hypocritical show because on some level it is all they (know how to) /(can) do. Jimmie complies with the damning social violence of his mother’s narrative performance because there is seemingly no other available option that would allow him to feel blameless. Regardless, the passage shows the lack of clear lines between something like real, genuine, self-aware emotion and self-posturing theater. The passage additionally makes it obvious that Mary wants to align herself with motherhood, real or performed. Mary views such an association as beneficial because it enables her to function in an urban existence with no private space and with rigid standards for women’s morality. Women in the Bowery are both held to these standards and yet simultaneously can never meet them.
Additionally, this passage highlights a trend—once Maggie is “ruined,” both her family and neighbors try to craft reverse narratives of her unique, hidden, past amorality. Mary attempts such a reverse narrative with her comment “she was wicked teh deh heart an’ we never knewed it.” It is not enough to narrate her own superiority in the present; Mary needs to entrench Maggie’s fall into a linear narrative explaining her ill fate.

Just as Jimmie complies with Mary’s performances of suffering, the neighbors are also, surprisingly, not skeptical of Mary’s claims to superior femininity and motherhood. Instead, the neighbors also narrate Maggie’s life in reverse for their own benefit:

“She allus was a bold thing,” he heard one of them cry in an eager voice. “Dere wasn’t a feller come the deh house but she’d try teh mash ‘im. . . .”

“Yessir, it was over two years ago dat I says teh my ol’ man, I says, ‘Dat Johnson girl ain’t straight,” I says. . . .

“Anybody what had eyes could see dat dere was somethin’ wrong wid dat girl. I didn’t like her actions.” (60)

All are willing to disown and condemn Maggie, for several reasons, it seems. One, Maggie never had Rum Alley “in her veins,” and her singularity as one who is pure troubled gossiping neighbors. If Maggie was able to grow up seemingly pure and innocent in the harshest of environs, such a thing would be viewed as possible, and others would be expected to be capable of similar purity. Condemnation also allows others to feel superior and makes Maggie legible; it makes Maggie into a repetition, a stereotype of a fallen woman, something they have seen before. Further, Maggie is gone, but the rest of the neighbors have to face one another. Even if these narratives are read straight at their word, the neighbors are at best trying to make sense of something they find a truly awful ruination and do not see themselves as flawed. But even in this
plain reading, impure gawkers disown someone pure and blameless. Even in this reading, implied binaries like pure/impure, heaven/hell, male/female, innocence/guilt are extremely problematic.

Jimmie and Mary’s performative invocation of the Christian Bible’s “prodigal son” parable further problematizes the ability of binary positions or descriptors to capture all of lived reality accurately and/or sufficiently. While Mary’s private thoughts are obscure in the text, it is clear, as examined above in Jimmie’s “vague” thoughts about the brothers of the women he has “ruined,” that self-awareness and guilt creep into Jimmie’s mind. Inspired by such a moment, Jimmie suggests to his mother, “shamefacedly” as he “began to wriggle about with a new and strange nervousness” that “‘maybe it ‘ud be better if I fetched’” Maggie and brought her home. The rationale he nervously presents to his mother is that “‘dis t’ing queers us! See? We’re queered’” (68). Jimmie is trying to persuade his mother to be lenient towards Maggie in the only way that might work—appealing to her selfishness. When his suggestion is met with rage, he retreats: “‘Well, I didn’ mean non of dis prod’gal bus’ness anyway,’ explained Jimmie. It wasn’t no prod’gal dauter, yeh damn fool,’ said the mother. ‘It was prod’gal son, anyhow.’ ‘I know dat,’ said Jimmie’” (69). Here, Crane satirizes the kind of Christianity that Mary adheres to both in theory and in practice. Mary’s is a version of religion that can forgive sons but not daughters. Crane also shows Mary’s lack of imagination. She reads Christianity like she reads the world, literally; she sees the world as a rigid place where inhabiting the desirable end of a binary (such as “good” mother) is critical to one’s ability to function and face others, even if it is not true. Jimmie again shows himself as recognizing a perceived injustice but as not willing to intervene with it. Breaking norms to intervene for the sake of an outcast is something few people in the Bowery are willing to do. The unnamed neighbor woman with a music box seems to be the only
exception, as she is willing to host both Jimmie and Maggie when they leave home amidst trouble. The woman with the music box justifies her offer of hospitality to a “ruined” Maggie by stating that she “ain’t got no moral standin’” (78) to worry about. The woman’s comment implies that others do not risk helping the downtrodden for fear of social condemnation by association. Jimmie’s refusal to do something like stand up for his sister or persist in his idea to bring Maggie home again raises the idea that even the immediate family is an audience for which one must act. It is as if Jimmie rehearses some lines with Mary, and when they are met with disapproval, he tries to take them back. Crane’s comment when Jimmie introduces the idea of fetching Maggie and, further, that “His mother laughed a laugh that seemed to ring through the city and be echoed and re-echoed by countless other laughs” (69) suggests Mary is a trial audience and her view is perceived as representative. Jimmie and Mary rationalize their own behavior in rejecting the prodigal daughter idea because the Bible story features a prodigal son. This rationalization shows their willingness to invest in gender inequality and established narratives over loyalty to family. Their conversation also recognizes that there simply is not precedent for forgiving women of liaisons, real or perceived. Jimmie’s nervous wiggles are his body’s way of displaying guilt, of displaying the very human excess that rigid narratives of the Bible, the street, or the Bowery exclude.

Mary is unwilling, unable, or some combination thereof to recognize her role in ostracizing Maggie. In any case, there is no doubt that Mary relishes in Maggie’s demise:

For a time they sat in silence. The mother’s eyes gloated on a scene her imagination could call before her. Her lips were set in a vindictive smile. “Aye, she’ll cry, won’ she, an’ carry on, an’ tell how Pete, or some odder feller, beats ‘er an’ she’ll say she’s sorry an’ all dat an’ she ain’t happy, she ain’t, an’ she wants to come home agin, she does.”
With grim humor, the mother imitated the possible wailing notes of the daughter’s voice. “Den I’ll take ‘er in, won’t I, deh beast. She kin cry ‘er two eyes out on deh stones of deh street before I’ll dirty deh place wid her. She abused an’ ill-treated her own mudder—her own mudder what loved her an’ she’ll never git anodder chance dis side of hell.” Jimmie though he had a great idea of women’s frailty, but he could not understand why any of his kin should be victims. “Damn her,” he fervidly said. (69)

Here, Mary imagines the ways a return from a sorrowful and downtrodden Maggie could benefit her. She rehearses and mimics Maggie to feel superior in advance of her arrival. She is hoping for Maggie’s social and actual position in life to worsen, and the more dramatic the conditions, even if they entail Maggie’s abuse, the better they make Mary feel, even in their hypothetical form. It is taken for granted that, “Of course Jimmie publicly damned his sister that he might appear on a higher social plane. But, arguing with himself, stumbling about in ways that he knew not, he, once, almost came to a conclusion that his sister would have been more firmly good had she better known why. However, he felt that he could not hold such a view. He threw it hastily aside.” For Jimmie, Crane draws distinctions—his disavowal of Maggie seems more like a necessary public evil, but, while fleeting, “within himself,” he “stumbl[es]” with his feelings that something about disowning Maggie just does not feel right. That Crane presents moments of doubt for Jimmie and not Mary regarding their disavowal of Maggie is important. First, the choice suggests that if Mary had doubts or regret, Crane would have presented them, marking their lack as more overtly heartless. Second, the rhetorical move suggests that if women are going to be treated more justly, men and/or a younger generation will have to be willing to recognize and act upon perceived injustice for change to occur. Mary, a woman of the older generation, is able to have a kind of power, but only in abusing and demoralizing other women.
It is a power she must constantly, publicly work on, and it is a power both real and imagined. Although she is willing to disown her daughter publicly for the sake of appearances with the neighbors, the same neighbors seem too wrapped up in their own appearances to genuinely value or believe Mary. In a place where everyone except Maggie acts for others (and wherein women in particular relish in this acting), it is unclear where, if anywhere, something like genuine female identity can exist or survive.

The final scene of the novella is revealing in its suggestion that the violent and disingenuous Mary is a prototypical woman of the Bowery. When word reaches Mary that Maggie has died, she says, “Deh hell she is” (87), finishes her dinner and coffee, and then she cries. The fact that Mary finishes dinner before crying implies her cries are not altogether genuine, that they mark a pause before a rising curtain. She is a piece standing in for the whole, as the neighbors are all too eager to come running, mimic Christian narratives, efface Mary’s motherly sins, wail, and likewise condemn Maggie:

The neighbors began to gather in the hall, staring in at the weeping woman as if watching the contortions of a dying dog. A dozen women entered and lamented with her. . .

Suddenly the door opened and a woman in a black gown rushed in with outstretched arms. “Ah, poor Mary,” she cried, and tenderly embraced the moaning one. “Ah, wat ter’ble affliction is dis,” continued she. Her vocabulary was derived from mission churches. “Me poor Mary, how I feel fer yehs! Ah, what a ter’ble affliction is a disobed’ent chil’.” Her good, motherly face was wet with tears. She trembled in eagerness to express her sympathy. The mourner sat with bowed head, rocking her body heavily to and fro, and crying out in a high, strained voice that sounded like a dirge on some forlorn pipe. . . “Ah, me poor Mary,” sobbed the woman in black. With low,
coddling cries, she sank on her knees by the mourner’s chair, and put her arms about her.
The other women began to groan in different keys. “Yer poor misguided chil’ is gone
now, Mary, an’ let us hope it’s fer deh bes. Yeh’ll forgive her now, Mary, won’t yehs,
dear, all her disobed’ence? All her t’ankless behavior to her mudder an’ all her badness?
She’s gone where her ter’ble sins will be judged.” (87-88)

It is as if none of the women are able to examine themselves. They can only look outward.
Crane is criticizes, again, as in the prodigal son scene, a kind of literal, bookish Christianity that
ignores people in need. Crane critiques this version of religion by way of women who only see
Maggie as forgivable once she is dead and who go so far as to directly say that her death is
probably for the best. In the point-of-view they perform, the worst sin of all is for a woman, a
daughter, to leave home. Crane satirizes a Christianity that is more surface than depth and that
attends more to books and rules than to real, human scenarios. The women, in their repeated
invocation of Mary’s goodness and Maggie’s disobedience echo and affirm Mary’s earlier
positioning strategies. The women seem to stand in place of and mark the absence of people that
actually care that Maggie is dead. Crane’s attention to their eagerness and repeated loud, musical
wailings suggest they are a multiplication and a mimicry of Mary’s behavior throughout the text.
The farcically hypocritical mournings seem to be the result of an inability to look inward and a
lack of space for genuine femininity. To really examine their environment would be to
overwhelm themselves with gendered unfairnesses so rampant it may be impossible to both
recognize them and function. Men can roam around in this environment, but women must stay
home. In the confines of home, they must perform.

The text questions the morality of these performances, particularly those attached to
Christianity. In an inversion of their prior prodigal son scene, Mary now permits Jimmie to “‘Go
git [his] sister,” “confronting him fiercely.” He, in turn, moves with a “reluctant step.” An Irish Catholic tenement family in this era would have a funeral in their living room. So Maggie is allowed to return home only upon her death. The female neighbors continue to “plead” through the repeated declaration “‘Yeh’ll forgive her, Mary!’” until ultimately “She shook her great shoulders frantically, in an agony of grief. Hot tears seemed to scald her quivering face. Finally her voice came and arose like a scream of pain. ‘Oh, yes, I’ll forgive her! I’ll forgive her!’”

Mary’s hypocritical attachment to moral authority also inverts the position of Christ on the cross. Whereas in the Bible the innocent, male Jesus begs for the forgiveness of those who murder him because they “know not what they do,” here, a culpable female who contributes to the death of an innocent person tweaks Jesus’s words to position herself as a blameless authority on morality. The acceptance Mary’s cries are met with, combined with her obvious hypocrisy, necessarily challenges a Christianity that celebrates Mary while condemning Maggie.

Through Mary’s performances, the approval she is often met with, and her very survival, (especially when her moves are viewed as encores of performances from Jimmie and Pete), Crane suggests that staging the self and enacting literal and social violence are necessary elements to survive the crowded public life of the 19th century urban poor in New York City. If one does not have the ability to live hypocrisy, to ignore injustice, or if one is too in touch with a kind of pure life one will struggle. If one obeys, as Maggie obeys her mother, one cannot stay. If one leaves, as Maggie does, there is nowhere to go, and nothing to do but die.

**Grotesques**

The scenes of dialogue in which Maggie in particular is outcast by others move, chronologically in the text, from more intimate to more social, public settings. The scenes of rejection by her mother, brother, Pete, and strangers move in rapid succession and present a
climax of repetitions in both their nature and in the content of their dialogue. Maggie’s rejections in this series are also repetitions of her earlier rejection by her mother and a scene immediately preceding the start of this series: Jimmie’s rejection of Hattie. These repetitions suggest that to be rejected, as a poor woman in 1890s New York City, is to be continually (re)rejected, to experience similar rejections no matter where one turns, whether by family, love interests, or even clergy, who presumably dedicate their life to aiding the downtrodden. Similarly, that Pete rejects Maggie after Jimmie rejects Hattie and in a very similar conversation suggests that Maggie’s rejection, though tragic for her, is unoriginal and common. Furthermore, the alignment notes that if Maggie had only been born a boy, even within the same family, she would have had a drastically different fate. This climax of repetitions furthermore importantly aligns Mary and Jimmie, illuminating the ways Crane is troubling both gender, generations, and the seeming distinction between love relationships initiated by choice and the familial relationships one inherits. These repetitions also imply a grotesque blending of individuals in the 1890s urban, as if uniqueness is nowhere to be found on these monotonous streets, and, if it does appear, as in Maggie’s case, it is squashed by a united front, a “chaotic mass” of indistinguishable individuals like the mass described in the opening scene of boys united to fight against the lone Jimmie.

These scenes imply a blending of not only Jimmie and Pete, and Hattie and Maggie, perhaps most obviously, but also of Jimmie and his mother, Mary. This blending, particularly of Jimmie and Mary is created by way of their shared subject positions in repeated scenes. In the culmination of this series of rejections, Jimmie rejects Hattie:

Jimmie came strolling up the avenue. The woman encountered him with an aggrieved air.

“Oh, Jimmie, I’ve been lookin’ all over fer yehs--,” she began. Jimmie made an impatient gesture and quickened his pace.
“Ah, don’t bodder me! Good Gawd!” he said, with the savageness of a man whose life is pestered . . .

“But, Jimmie . . . yehs told me ye’d—” . . .

“Say, fer Gawd’s sake, Hattie, don’ foller me from one end of deh city teh deh odder. Let up, will yehs! . . . Do yehs want people teh get onto me? Go chase yerself, fer Gawd’s sake.”

The woman stepped closer and laid her fingers on this arm.

“But, look-a-here—” Jimmie snarled.

“Oh, go teh hell.” (75-76)

When Jimmie asks Hattie if she “want[s] people teh get onto” him, he recognizes that he acts, that he says one thing and does another, and that she has the power to reveal something true about him that he tries to hide. Jimmie denies a role in Hattie’s difficulties, at least in his appearance and speech. Jimmie, like his abusive father, is annoyed and “impatient” in response to the suffering of others, and, just like his father, he flees to a saloon.

Within the same chapter, one paragraph later, Mary and Jimmie’s interactions with Maggie both echo this scene with Hattie. Mary and Jimmie together play the role of the inhospitable party, and Maggie plays the role of the ruined returnee. Mary “scoff[s],” “sneers,” and laughs, drawing the neighbors:

Maggie’s mother paced to and fro, addressing the doorful of eyes, expounding like a glib showman at a museum. Her voice rang through the building.

“Dere she stands,” she cried, wheeling suddenly and pointing with dramatic finger.

“Dere she stands! Lookut her! Ain’ she a dindy?...”

The jeering cries ended in another burst of shrill laughter.
The girl seemed to awaken. “Jimmie—”

He drew hastily back from her.

“Well, now, yer a hell of a t’ing, ain’ yeh?” he said, his lips curling in scorn. Radiant virtue sat upon his brow and his repelling hands expressed horror of contamination.

Maggie turned and went. (77)

Not only does this moment repeat the scene between Jimmie and Hattie, but also, of course, it repeats the scene of Maggie’s original departure from the home. While Jimmie is distracted and writhing in pain when Maggie first departs, he now, in place of his mother, is the person driving her out the door. It is as if she expected and could withstand the abuse of her mother, as long as Jimmie was there to “awaken” her, but his “scorn” and choice to align with his mother leaves her bereft. Jimmie and Mary therefore, by swapping roles in this repetition, blend interior and exterior settings and gender roles. This rapid series of repetitions and rejections continues in the very next chapter, when Maggie surprises Pete at work:

“Oh, Pete--,” she began brightly

The bartender made a violent gesture of impatience.


Astonishment swept over the girl’s features. “Why, Pete! Yehs tol’ me—” Pete glanced profoundly irritated. His countenance reddened with the anger of a man whose respectability is being threatened. “Say, yehs makes me tired…Yeh’ll git me in trouble wid deh ol’ man an’ dey’ll be hell teh pay!”... The girl seemed to have a struggle within herself. She was apparently bewildered and could not find speech. Finally she asked in a low voice: “But where kin I go?” The question exasperated Pete beyond the
powers of endurance. It was a direct attempt to give him some responsibility in a matter that did not concern him. In his indignation he volunteered information. “Oh, go teh hell,” cried he. He slammed the door furiously and returned, with an air of relief, to his respectability. Maggie went away. (79-80)

Pete and Maggie’s dialogue closely mirrors that of Jimmie and Hattie. Both men primarily desire to avoid certain realities of their behavior being exposed. For both men, and even more clearly for Pete, maintaining “respectability” is above all about keeping his job (staying out of “trouble wid deh ol’ man” in his workplace). Both men act differently than they have promised, as evidenced through the women’s surprised protestations. In a final ironic repetition that ends this rapid series, a priest or other male religious figure avoids Maggie on the street out of fear for his “respectability” (80). This rapid-fire repetition proposes a grotesque blending of people and their behavior in Bowery life. The Bowery is a place of sameness and repetition, governed by unjust, gender-based rules. It is a place from which difference is expelled. This series of repetitions also recognizes gender inequalities and troubles them through Mary. Mary’s upheaval of gender norms from her “cheiftan-like” stride and violent acts to her repeatedly shared subject positions with Jimmie intimates that if a woman wants to survive in this environment, she must perform masculinity and violence—both literal and figurative.

**Real Fiction**

In a moment of real life oddly conflating with fiction, Stephen Crane, like his character Maggie, was socially outcast by 1890s Manhattan society for being vulnerable, genuine, and associated with prostitution. In 1896, a woman named Dora Clark, who was a prostitute, was unjustly charged with solicitation while walking along with Crane and two chorus girls he was
interviewing for a piece on the Tenderloin. Clark was repeatedly, inappropriately arrested in September 1896 after an incident three weeks earlier when she was:

accosted on a poorly lit block of Broadway by a dark-skinned man she thought was black.

When she had chastised him for his behavior, he had become angry, revealed that he was a plainclothes policemen named Rosenberg, and arrested her. During the earlier hearing, concerning her arrest by Rosenberg, Clark’s account of mistaking his race had provoked laughter at his expense; and though she had been found innocent, he had whispered to her that he and other policemen in the 19th Precinct would seek revenge against her.

(Sorrentino 209)

Dora Clark’s arrests show that life on the real life streets of the 1890s Bowery, like those Crane portrays, turns on a mixture of gendered violence, othering, and performance. Clark is accosted because she is a woman alone outside at night, and she is blamed for and arrested as a result of her own victimization. She is continually targeted by corrupt and self-aggrandizing police who are all male. Further, Rosenberg’s brutal behavior is motivated by his personal horror and social ridicule in response to being mistaken for black, a race he clearly wishes to other and from which he aims to distance himself.

At first, Crane “struggled with the decision to defend Dora Clark in court and to criticize the police in a major New York City newspaper” because he rightly assumes defending a known prostitute will harm his reputation as a writer. He repeatedly referred to himself as a “reluctant witness” and debated with himself in his journal: “‘All that I value may be chanced in this affair. Shall I take this risk for the benefit of a girl of the streets?’” (Sorrentino 201-2). Crane did testify, solely, in Clark’s defense, and she was found innocent. Crane’s trouble came from his subsequent agreement to testify on Clark’s behalf when she filed charges against two policemen.
Like Maggie’s naïve trust of Pete, Crane trusted his friend Theodore Roosevelt, then President of Commissioners, to “enforce ethical behavior among members of the force,” as he had promised. But like Maggie’s trust in Pete, Crane’s trust in Roosevelt was misplaced. In the build-up to the trial,

It became clear that the police were attempting to frighten him away from testifying. While he’d been out of town, they had raided his apartment and had found an opium den layout tacked up on his wall, a souvenir from his research for ‘Opium’s Varied Dreams’—a graphic account of opium use in Chinatown and the Tenderloin widely syndicated the previous May. They threatened to arrest him for maintaining an opium den and spread rumors that he had consorted with prostitutes, taken money from them, and left the city to avoid being subpoenaed. (Sorrentino 205)

Corruption was rife in the courtroom. It was “packed with policemen” and a “barrage of witnesses” who “had been threatened or bribed to testify that Dora Clark had solicited two men and that Crane had not been with her.” Further, “one streetwalker who had entered the building as a witness for the prosecution had mysteriously become a witness for the defense by the time she entered the courtroom” (Sorrentino 206).

By agreeing to testify and by being honest on the witness stand, Crane made himself vulnerable in a public forum. During the trial,

Crane reiterated his September 16 deposition maintaining Clark’s innocence, but the defense ruthlessly attempted to discredit him. Though this particular court had been set up specifically to try cases against policemen accused of misconduct (not private citizens), Crane was repeatedly asked about his private life. The magistrate upheld objections to the line of questioning and ordered that part of it be stricken from the
record, but the focus of the trial quickly shifted from Clark and Becker to Crane. During cross-examination, Crane refused to answer questions about whether he had smoked opium and consorted with prostitutes, such as the well-known Sadie Traphagen. Overwhelmed, he covered his face with his hands . . . Eventually, however, he admitted that during the previous summer he had visited 121 West 27th Street, the home of Sadie’s sister, a prostitute who used the pseudonym ‘Amy Leslie.’ (Sorrentino 206-7)

A witness then verified that the address was a house of prostitution. Although this last-minute testimony later excluded, as Sorrentino notes, “the damage against Crane had already been done: now everyone knew that he had been living with Amy Leslie in a house of prostitution…Crane’s career as an investigative reporter had been ruined. The gallant knight who had defended an innocent Dora Clark had been exposed as a seedy habitué of the Tenderloin” (207). Like Maggie, Crane was condemned by others (especially Roosevelt) who pushed him down in order to elevate themselves. He isolates himself, and his self-isolation is exacerbated by the norms and conditions guiding life in 1890s Manhattan. When he refuses to join forces with the masculine police brotherhood—Roosevelt encouraged him not to testify, but Crane ignored Roosevelt’s advice—and instead favors what he feels is right and genuine, he marks himself as unique. In turn, he senses there is no longer room for him in his urban environment.

Crane knew that his career as an investigative journalist in New York was over and that he had to leave the city. Although he had been planning to go to England since at least September because the British had given such a favorable reception to *The Red Badge*, he was certain that the embarrassing details of the Dora Clark affair would precede him. When the Bacheller syndicate offered to send him to Cuba to report on the growing insurrection against Spain, he immediately accepted (Sorrentino 208-9).
In this strange enmeshment of real life and fiction wherein Crane finds himself in the position of the marginalized Maggie he created, one large difference between Maggie Johnson and Stephen Crane determines their fate. Because Crane is a man, he can leave the city alone. Despite his tarnished reputation, there is somewhere for him to go, and paid work, other than prostitution, to be found. Some of Crane’s last words beautifully capture both he and Maggie’s mutual plights while underscoring their difference: “Hours before his death, his final breath imminent, Crane had whispered peacefully to Cora: ‘I leave here gentle, seeking to do good, firm, resolute, impregnable’” (Sorrentino 369). In his last words, as in his life, he is both invulnerable and vulnerable. Like Maggie, Crane is gentle and seeks to do what he senses is the right thing; he testifies for Clark and tells the truth, refusing to act, just as Maggie cannot or will not. But Crane is also “impregnable,” marking their difference in both the literal and figurative senses of the term. Even though he cannot act, there are career options and means of safe travel available to Crane because he is a man. Furthermore, because Crane has financial prospects and upper-class connections, he can escape the monotony, repetition, and posturing of the rigid city streets and their social norms in a way that none of his characters in Maggie can.
Chapter 2
Performing Invulnerability and (Street) Theater in John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* (1925)

If Crane’s Maggie had followed her mother’s pedagogy of urban survival and learned to act, she may well have turned out like Ellen, one of the main characters in John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer*. From an early age, Ellen detests her gender, declaring she is “goin to be a boy,” because she recognizes that girls and women cannot experience city life as boys and men do. Adult Ellen is an actress both on and off stage, and in both zones, her goal is to appear as if she is invulnerable. As a result, Ellen is deadened by her own acting, which is ironically the coping mechanism she developed for living with the ordinary trauma of being (born) a woman in modern New York City. Ellen becomes, in the end, cruel, self-absorbed, and superficial. She becomes incapable of *not* acting. While Mary, Maggie’s mother, is similarly unable to be genuine, she differently inhabits a stereotypic masculinity as a means of surviving New York City life in the era of U.S. legal segregation, an era whose people are consumed with categorization, labels, and treating people in accordance with them. Mary stages herself as superior, does not take care of her body, and is violent—all more stereotypically masculine behaviors. But Mary is also eager to portray herself as a victim, a more stereotypically feminine subject position. Ellen, on the other hand, is prototypically feminine as she is beautiful and deeply invested in her physical appearance. But, like a stereotypic male, Ellen rejects victimhood. These women differently manipulate their gender expression as a means of grappling with public lives and gender inequality.

Yet gender is also a problem for Ellen’s male counterpart in *Manhattan Transfer*, Jimmy, who is perceived in childhood as not masculine enough. His trouble with masculinity haunts him
throughout his adult life. Jimmy has trouble acting, even in the most literal of senses. He is indecisive, has “trouble wrangling things,” and has trouble speaking about his emotions. But unlike Crane’s Maggie, Jimmy both perceives his own inability to act and can detect acting in others. Jimmy’s inability to belong anywhere as a child and in many situations as an adult stems from his often stereotypically feminine gender expression, allowing us to see that one’s gender expression, rather than their physical body, matters most, in this era in terms of one’s ability to belong. Through Jimmy we also learn, though, that regardless of one’s success in belonging, one’s sexual organs determine the options available to them when they face decisions, injustices, or interruptions to their coping strategies for everyday survival. Because of Jimmy’s gender, literal movement and figurative moving on are available to him in ways unavailable to his female counterpart Ellen or Crane’s Maggie. Investigating Ellen and Jimmy on the heels of my study of Crane’s *Maggie* allows me to argue that it is not just acting but acting masculine in various forms—a kind of acting always at risk of being undercut by one’s physical body—may be necessary for city survival.

Complicating Dos Passos’s treatment of gender and performance, Ellen and Jimmy are each raised solely by their opposite gender parent. This parenting situation occurs as a default, in Ellen’s case, while her mother is sick, and then becomes the norm when she (presumably) dies in Ellen’s early childhood. Jimmy’s mother exclusively raises him, as his father is always already absent and unknown in the text. Both Ellen’s and Jimmy’s childhoods can be characterized as awkward Freudian family romances. Each has a seemingly too-close attachment with the opposite gender parent that raises them which more closely resembles a marriage than a relationship between a parent and child. These attachments, their presumed effects on Ellen and Jimmy’s expression of their respective genders, and, further, their impact on Ellen and Jimmy’s
eventual marriage to one another contribute to the text’s queering of gender and typical parent/child roles.

For a few reasons, *Manhattan Transfer* is an appropriate vehicle through which to intervene in scholarship that insists on separately studying performance, performativity, and theater. Actual and street theater are enmeshed in the imagined real life of this novel. Many central characters are career actors who repeatedly act in or witness off-stage performances. Further, the setting of the text, Manhattan, houses Broadway, the presumed epicenter of the theater world. Additionally, the novel, in structure and content, refuses to draw clear boundaries in all sorts of ways (between characters and plots, around races, classes, and genders). The actual theater influences ordinary acting and extraordinary decisions for characters in this text, and to insist that performativity and what happens on official stages need to be treated separately, as generations of scholars have tried to do, would not only prove challenging but would create an atmosphere in which one would miss this text’s complex work regarding gender expression and belonging in 1920s Manhattan.

If ordinary acting is necessary, especially for poor women, to survive in Crane’s *Maggie*, it is ironically both necessary for survival and simultaneously deadening in *Manhattan Transfer*. Everyday acting is rife and dehumanizes the female characters who embrace it; more than one baby is aborted for the sake of an acting career. *Manhattan Transfer*, by way of its characters’ lives and fates, offers no space for vulnerability in the city. Characters capable of genuine emotion must leave the city, as Jimmy does, become dehumanized by it, as Ellen is, or commit suicide, as various secondary characters do. I will investigate Ellen and Jimmy’s relationships

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19 It may be useful, if anachronistic, to think of Dos Passos’s style as in line with Brechtian epic theater, defined in 1930, or Artaud’s “theater of cruelty,” defined in 1938. Both men want to disturb the familiar and investigate what it means to be human by way of disturbing their
to gender, performance, and vulnerability to argue that while Dos Passos’s text imagines urban, industrial New York City as an irredeemable living hell, his characters, even in their ugly, unlikeable behavior, always already mark the inability of a place to strip its inhabitants of humanity.

In this text, acting is most often irresistibly attractive and simultaneously destructive. The setting of the novel, Manhattan, is more of an active force than a passive backdrop. The city is not just filthy, it is flammable. Fire scenes are in both the background and foreground of the text and are sights of critical action and inaction for Jimmy and Ellen, who grapple with their own identities generally in ways that are intertwined with their (in)actions when confronted with fire. Fire, as something that literally consumes the vulnerable and metaphorically suggests passion, underscores Ellen’s deadness. She has indeed crafted herself to be quite like the tall, impenetrable, steel skyscrapers popping up all over the city. Fire scenes also highlight Jimmy and Ellen’s mutual inability to experience passion both while together and as individuals. Jimmy and Ellen’s relationships to fire scenes are bound up in the novel’s diatribe of New York City and modern urban technologies. The novel is set in an era in which actual fire was both common and street theater in New York City. Not only were fires themselves mesmerizing in their destruction, but the structure of firefighting companies in 19th century New York City, wherein volunteer companies fought for territory, created additional spectacles at firesides in ways that persisted well into the 20th century. The novel calls on the actual fire history of the city, especially invoking the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911 to emphasize Ellen’s

audiences. Dos Passos’s style certainly resembles the montage-style Brecht suggests, and Dos Passos fragments his plots in an Artaudian vein. Whether or not Dos Passos’s text shatters audiences in order to revive them, as Artaud champions, is an open question. While Brecht and Artaud see the humane potential of theater, it is not clear that Dos Passos or his characters do in this text.
inhumanity and the inability for someone utterly human, Jimmy, to inhabit such a place. Whether the pull is the actual theater or the fighting of a fire on one’s street, characters want to approximate these performances even if they must destroy themselves physically or emotionally to do so.

Playing Dead: Femininity, Artifice, and Mechanization

Ellen’s journey in the novel is from liveliness and enmeshment with other people to a sort of inhumanity. She becomes completely invested in the superficial. The causes of her demise, which occurs slowly over the course of the roughly twenty-seven years of her life featured in the text, are her childhood disappointment in her gender and socioeconomic status, her love of theater, and her desire to be an actual actress. I will examine Ellen’s declining sense of humanity as a means of suggesting what is gained and lost, in the view of the novel, by acting.

The differing reactions of her parents to her gender and her birth foreshadow the ways Ellen will experience and express herself her gender throughout her life. The novel sets up the scene of Ellen’s birth by opening it with an italicized epigraph describing city stench and the animalization of its inhabitants. The novel begins, “Three gulls wheel above the broken boxes, orangerinds, spoiled cabbage heads. . .” (3) and includes “men and women” who “press through the manuresmelling wooden tunnel of the ferry-house, crushed and jostling like apples fed down a chute into a press” (3). Here, not only do people become objects, they become objects that, because of their commute, are about to be smashed. This chapter opening is a typical one in its focus on garbage/stench and its objectification of people. The text of the main chapter then begins with a nurse, not a mother, holding a newborn baby in a “basket at arm’s length as if it were a bedpan” (3). Not only is the nurse not loving, but also she treats the baby, a yet-to-be-named-Ellen, as if it were excrement, the contents of a bedpan. The diction of the text
underscores the distance the nurse is trying to keep from the baby; she “set her basket,” not the baby, down, and she looks at it with “pursed-up lips.” This opening scene, in juxtaposing city filth with an anti-nurturing and clinical treatment of Ellen’s birth aligns city grime with the people living inside it.

Ellen’s mother rejects newborn Ellen in the hospital because of her appearance. When “A nurse was hovering near the end of the bed,” (6) Susie, Ellen’s mother, asks, “‘Couldn’t you let us see the baby, miss?’ The nurse nodded. She was a lanternjawed grayfaced woman with tight lips. ‘I hate her,’ whispered Susie. ‘She gives me the fidgets that woman does; she’s nothing but a mean old maid’” (6). Here, the syntax of Susie’s admission, “I hate her,” makes it originally seem as if she hates her baby girl, a reading both the text and Susie are slow to correct with the oddly passive sentence structure of “she gives me the fidgets that woman does.” This phrasing initially perpetuates a potential mishearing/misreading of the subject of Susie’s hatred, as if Susie herself is deciding who it is she hates. Susie’s interaction with both Ellen and the nurse becomes increasingly cold and inhumane:

“Oh isn’t she wonderful!” said Ed. “Look she’s breathing. . . .And they’ve oiled her.” . . .

“How can you tell them apart nurse?”

“Sometimes we cant,” said the nurse, stretching her mouth in a smile. Susie was looking querulously into the minute purple face. “You’re sure this is mine.”

“Of course.”

“But it hasnt any label on it.”

“I’ll label it right away.”

“But mine was dark.” Susie lay back on the pillow, gasping for breath. . . .

“It’s not mine. It’s not mine. Take it away. . . .That woman’s stolen my baby.”
“Dear, for Heaven’s sake! Dear, for Heaven’s sake!” he tried to tuck the cover about her.

“Too bad,” said the nurse, calmly picking up the basket. “I’ll have to give her a sedative.”

Susie sat up stiff in bed. “Take it away,” she yelled and fell back in hysterics. . . . (6)

In this scene, rather than being delighted with her new baby for simply being alive, as Ed, her father, is, Susie fails to recognize Ellen, rejects her, and objectifies her by referring to her as “mine” and “it.” Susie, rightly or wrongly—it is unclear—is convinced she does not have the right baby, and she has trouble with basic human functions as a result. She gasps and stiffens in response to the appearance of the baby. The solution, in the view of the nurse, to the overflow of emotion Susie feels, is to dismiss it and control Susie via a sedative, a drug that will dampen her emotional livelihood. The nurse’s other impulse is to disconnect people from one another; she ushers Ed out the door. Ellen is born into a cold, clinical environment in which woman are invested in superficiality and treated as hysterical. She is born to a mother who rejects her for her looks.

Ellen’s father Ed, alternatively, experiences newborn Ellen as a stepping-stone on his own path to greatness. Ellen’s birth inspires hope in her father. His hope manifests in an internal rehearsal for greatness and a sense of superior masculine belonging. On the night his daughter is born, he comes home and reads the headline on the newspaper he finds “where he had dropped it to run for the hack to take Susie to the hospital” (11). Ellen’s birth, then, is simultaneous with that of Greater New York City in 1898, as the headline reads, “MORTON SIGNS THE GREATER NEW YORK BILL: Completes the Act Making New York World’s Second Metropolis” (11). The combination of successful births arouses Ed to rehearse for his own personal success. He repeats the headline to himself “The world’s second metropolis. . . . And
dad wanted me to stay in his ole fool store in Onteora” (11). Here, Ed feels the city expansion makes him superior. His father’s store and his hometown, for that matter, are foolish. It is suddenly better for Ed to be in New York City than it was before the Greater New York Bill was signed. The city is not just greater as in bigger, for Ed, but it is greater as in greatness. Ed, by extension, feels he, too, is greater. Ed continues “might have [stayed in Onteora] if it hadn't been for Susie . . . . Gentlemen tonight that you do me the signal honor of offering me the junior partnership in your firm I want to present to you my little girl, my wife. I owe everything to her” (11). Ed’s rehearsal of an imagined, future speech (he is not a Certified Public Accountant, yet) is interesting in several respects. First, it shows that his joy and hope are inspired by the combined birth of his daughter and the city. Second, it demonstrates repetition, personal performance, and everyday city life as intertwined. It is as if repeated incantation of “the word’s second metropolis” solidifies and magnifies Ed and the city’s mutual greatness. Third, his speech notes that Ed’s greatest hope is to belong among business “gentleman,” his imagined audience and the crowd in whom he invests his self-worth. It is the approval of these acquaintances that matters to Ed, not his father’s approval or his own self-satisfaction. Ed’s speech here is paradigmatic of the ways city life, personal hope or lack thereof, and acting are bound up in one another for many characters throughout the text.

Ed’s rehearsal for greatness by way of an imagined future speech also introduces the text’s interest in performances that trouble traditional family and gender roles. After reading the headline about the city’s birth, he looks forward to showing off his “little girl” to fellow colleagues. But his last line, “my little girl, my wife. I owe everything to her,” can be read in

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20 Dos Passos frequently uses ellipses in the text and frequently eliminates apostrophes for contractions. All ellipses reproduced here are his unless otherwise indicated, and contractions or their lack appear here as they do in the text.
several ways. The one he owes everything to might refer to his wife or his daughter, or he may be mixing them in an odd way, thinking of his wife as a little girl or conflating the two females. Such a conflation would foreshadow both the way he and Ellen soon have a closer relationship than he and Susie do as well as Susie’s future absence/deadness. Susie never seems to recover from Ellen’s birth in a mix of (post-partum) depression and other unnamed afflictions that keep her in bed. While Susie is immobilized, Ed and Ellen go to the theater and fantasize about future boat trips abroad, which are more commonly activities and fantasies that married couples share rather than for a father and his young daughter to engage in alone, especially while the child’s mother is still alive and her parents are still married. As Ed continues his rehearsal for future greatness, he bows and breaks a fragile Dutch girl figurine belonging to Susie, which seems to be a nod at the city’s colonial history, as if to note the frequency with which the city has changed hands and forms. The shattered knickknack also marks Susie’s fragility and foreshadows her impending death. Furthermore this incident underscores the ways that deaths are bound up with births in the novel. Ed moves to lean out the window, and despite the “whiff of coal smoke [that] stung his nostrils,”

He hung out of the window a long while looking up and down the street. The world’s second metropolis. In the brick houses and the dingy lamplight and the voices of a group of boys kidding and quarreling on the steps of a house opposite, in the regular firm tread of a policeman, he felt a marching like soldiers, like a sidewheeler going up the Hudson under the Palisades, like an election parade, through long streets towards something tall white full of colonnades and stately. Metropolis. (12)
The repetition of “the world’s second metropolis,” eventually shortened to simply “Metropolis,” is a happy, pleasing repetition, like Bachelard’s understanding of “reverie.” It is an attempt to process just how delighted Ed is with his city, its history, and the personal history he sees as intertwined with the city. The line beginning “in the brick houses,” which follows one repetition of “The world’s second metropolis,” locates, via Ed’s stream of consciousness, the city and its history outside Ed’s window. The soldiers Ed feels marching seem to be those of George Washington, whose rise to glory stemmed from the Hudson and led him to the White House “full of colonnades and stately” and who is memorialized by the “tall white” Washington Monument. Ed sees a city outside his window where boys’ voices lead to great leadership, a city through

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21 Repetition is sometimes driven by psychic trauma in the novel, much in the way Freud details in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” as I will show; but repetition in the novel, as Bachelard’s The Psychoanalysis of Fire enabled me to realize, is inspired by other forces, too—like imagination, happiness, and fire. Bachelard’s text examines the ways people—primarily scientists, by way of their writings—have interpreted fire, gender, and one another, throughout history. Bachelard refers to “reverie” frequently in his analysis, and he means “reverie” in different, though connected, senses. In one sense, he means reverie is a state of fascinated daydream. In another, related meaning he invokes for reverie is that of “a fanciful or impractical idea or theory; a deluded or unrealistic notion,” (“Reverie”). For Bachelard, fire inspires both daydreams and wildly impractical scientific theories, and scientific experiments and knowledge hinge on dreams. He writes, “One can study only what one has first dreamed about. Science is formed rather on a reverie than on an experiment, and it takes good many experiments to dispel the mists of the dream,” (Bachelard 22) because “the dream is stronger than experience,” (Bachelard 20). Reverie, work of the imagination, is triggered by fire and is repetitive: “The reverie works in a star pattern. It returns to its center to shoot out new beams. And, as it happens, the reverie in front of the fire, the gentle reverie that is conscious of its well-being, is the most naturally centered reverie,” (Bachelard 14). The movement of the imagination that fire inspires repeats—with-a-difference in space, moving out, back to a presumed center, and then back out to a new distant point. Fire, Bachelard argues, is hypnotic and inspires being “lost in thought,” (“Reverie”), another definition of reverie. Fire is a “privileged phenomenon which can explain anything” (7) and is host to seemingly innumerable contradictions (For example, “It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell” (7)), much like Dos Passos’s Manhattan. Bachelard argues that fire’s contradictions are what attracts one’s unconscious; indeed, he argues contradiction is a need of the unconscious (Bachelard 80). While fire is host to a range of contradictory connotations, “reverie” generally has a positive connotation. Sometimes defined as a “state of wild joy or delight,” in this sense, reverie, as a cause of repetition, confronts the Freudian model.
which one, like Ed, can rise to fame and glory. Ed and Susie’s differing responses to the birth and gender of their child are each superficial in nature. Each parent reacts strongly to her appearance and sheer existence. The superficiality that her parents cling to and her father’s capacity to act foreshadow Ellen’s future values, life skills, and survival strategies.

Ellen is captivated by the idea of acting from the time of her first theater date with her father as a young child. As a child, she is consumed with a desire to be something other than what she is, whether that entails wanting to be a boy or wanting to be rich. After attending the theater for (presumably) the first time, she declares: “Oh mummy I want to be a little boy” (20), as if exposure to the world of actual theater made her realize she could be something else in her everyday life, that she could escape the seeming confines of her young life. In the space of half a page of text, young Ellen proclaims her message four times, ending with the third person chant “Ellie’s goin to be a boy, Ellie’s goin to be a boy” (20). Ellen is interested in gender norms and the associated unfairness she reads in them. In another early childhood scene featuring Ellen, when her father speaks to a stranger on the street, she asks:

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

“No deary you certainly will not.”

“If I’d been a boy could I?”

“I guess you could.” (53)

Even as a child, Ellen understands that the rules governing her life might be different and less restrictive if she appeared different, if she took a different form. Further, her father’s uncertain response indicates that he, as a man, has not given such a question much thought.

Not only is Ellen interested in subverting gender norms, but also she is invested in other ways through which she might craft her identity. She asks her father why they are not rich and
notes that she wishes they were. She tries to change her own name, and, even in childhood, she scolds her friend for calling her by the wrong name, declaring, “I told you not to call me Ellen anymore” (45). Readers experience many versions of Ellen’s name throughout the text. She seems to produce and shift her first names actively by moving from Ellen to Ellie, Elaine, and Helenah. She gains her last names more passively through birth or marriage, first acquiring Thatcher then Ogalthorpe, Herf, and Baldwin (at the close of the novel this marriage still seems to be forthcoming). Ellen’s various names are most interesting for their increasing proximity to Helen, as in Helen of Troy, the mythical beauty who inspires war and the burning of Troy. Dos Passos, in this ever-increasing approximation of Ellen to Helen of Troy, suggests Ellen is a superficially ideal woman who (will) reap(s) destruction.

Ellen seems fatalistically determined by her birth, as even in the childhood scenes described above, she is always already invested in money, appearances, and superficiality. After presenting a few scenes of Ellen with her parents and friends in childhood, the text jumps to a just-married Ellen at age eighteen. Adult Ellen acts two main ways. She acts on the Broadway stage, beginning as a chorus girl at sixteen, and she acts off-stage (as if she is in love, as if she is happy, as if she cares about particular people, and as if she is invulnerable) in the imagined real life the text crafts for her. Ellen’s on-stage acting is nowhere and everywhere in the text; it is never featured but drives her decision-making processes and dominates her social life. Ellen’s off-stage acting is often, though not always, in the service of her acting career. It is her off-stage acting that ultimately and metaphorically engulfs the genuine, human, and sympathetic part of her in flames.

Ellen initially thinks that acting as if something were true might make it so. Like Helen of Troy, Ellen is beautiful. She attracts many men, and she has various affairs and marriages. On
many occasions, Ellen performs as if she loves a particular man, beginning with a scene right after her first marriage (to John “Jojo” Ogalthorpe). The text portrays an adult Ellen on a ferry to Atlantic City on her honeymoon with Jojo. On the boat:

She wanted to feel very gay and listen to his purring whisper in her ears, but something had set her face in a tight frown; she could only look out at the brown marshes and the million black windows of factories and the puddly streets of towns and a rusty steamboat in a canal and barns and Bull Durham signs and roundfaced Spearmint gnomes all barred and crisscrossed with bright flaws of rain. (97)

In this moment, like so many others throughout the text that feature a variety of characters, Ellen’s unhappy emotional state and the environment surrounding her mirror one another. As in many other incidents in the novel, it is unclear if the “something” bothering Ellen originates in the drab marshes, factories, and ads that she cannot take her eyes off of or if they are simply the circumstantial material upon which she can project her internal, emotionally bothered state. She says to herself, between song lyrics referencing the biblical flood, “By the time we get to Atlantic City. . . Oh it rained forty days. . . I’ll be feeling gay. . . . And it rained forty nights . . . I’ve got to be feeling gay” (98). Ellen’s internal monologue reveals that despite her inability to look her happy husband in the eye, she not only hopes she will feel gay, but also she is commanding herself to do so. She succeeds in, at a minimum, acting as if she is happy by the deadline she sets for herself. Just as the two pull under a sign reading “Atlantic City,” Ellen, now going by Elaine, says “‘You’re my husband now John.’ And laughing they looked at each other in the coziness of the empty parlorcar” (98). Ellen acts as if she is in love with Jojo and acts as if she is not troubled when she is clearly upset.
Aside from the drab environment, there are a few potential sources for the “something” bothering Ellen on her honeymoon boat. The fact that she has forced herself to feel happy on her honeymoon and the moment later the same evening when she wakes up feeling “icy cold” both suggest she does not genuinely love Jojo. It becomes clear to the reader years later in the time-frame of the novel that Ellen was in the early stages of pregnancy at this moment, though she may or may not have known this at the time. After she wakes up “icy cold,” she goes out in the rain and says “Oh I want to die. I want to die. All the tight coldness of her body was clenching in her stomach. Oh I’m going to be sick. She went into the bathroom and closed the door. When she had vomited she felt better. Then she climbed into bed again careful not to touch John. If she touched him she would die” (98). Here, it’s unclear why “she would die” if she touched John. The possibilities include that she knows she is pregnant and the thought of having a baby and the threat it poses to her career make her want to die. She does, in later years, tell a fellow actress she “had a terrible time” after she and Jojo were married and that “of course” she had been pregnant and aborted babies. It is rumored that Ellen marries Jojo, who is much better connected in the theater world, for the benefit of her career. Or, she may simply be repulsed by him. Later scenes strongly suggest Jojo is a gay man masquerading, not very successfully, as a heterosexual one, so it is also possible that Ellen married him knowing he was gay and is troubled by his gayness, her action in spite of this knowledge, or some combination thereof. Dos Passos suggests, in the ambiguity of Ellen’s unhappiness and the multiple potential causes of it, that everything and nothing is the matter for this young woman who personifies the city. Regardless of its cause, this situation of unhappiness on a boat freezes the newlywed Ellen and makes her want to be dead, to be an object or a body rather than a person. Furthermore, the scene marks
Ellen’s inability to actually be other, as obviously she would not be pregnant and subsequently want to die if she were not a woman.

It is difficult to determine if Ellen genuinely enjoys or has a passion for stage acting or if she is more invested in the potential fame and money it might bring her. Ellen is, seemingly by way of marriage to Jojo, a Broadway success. Ellen overhears two men on the bus discussing an actress, prompting one of her few moments of happiness in the novel: “‘I’ll tell yer Jim it’s Irene Castle that makes the hit wid me. . . . To see her dance the onestep juss makes me hear angels hummin.’ ‘Naw she’s too skinny.’ ‘But she’s made the biggest hit ever been made on Broadway.’” After Ellen gets off the bus, she is surrounded by filth: “A fetor of mattresses and sleep seeped out from the blocks of narrow-windowed houses. Along the gutters garbage cans stank sourly. . . .” and yet, despite the putrid odors and decay:

Ellen smiled happily. Greatest hit on Broadway. The words were an elevator carrying her up dizzily, up to some stately height where electric signs crackled scarlet and gold and great, where were bright roofgardens that smelled of orchids, and the slow throb of a tango danced in a goldgreen dress with Stan when handclapping of millions beat in gusts like a hailstorm about them. Greatest hit on Broadway. She was walking up the scaling white stairs. Before the door marked Sunderland a feeling of sick disgust suddenly chocked her. (130-131)

There are a few possible ways to read Ellen’s happy smile and her repetition of “Greatest hit on Broadway.” In one reading, Irene Castle, a real life successful dancer and actress in the 1910s, is Ellen’s stage name, as her happiness suggests she feels the men have been talking about her. In this reading, her repetition is a processing of just how incredible her true success is for her. It would not be outrageous if Ellen, the character, were based on Irene Castle, as the real life
woman also married a man her father disapproved of and that marriage also contributed to her rise to fame. In another read, Ellen is happy because she is in the play with Irene Castle and is also therefore a part of this “greatest hit.” Or, if she is not a part of this production, then as an actress, rising in fame, she feels the day when she’ll be called the “Greatest hit on Broadway” is close upon her. In any case, Ellen is so delighted with the possibilities Broadway holds for her—it is a means to attach to greatness, just in the way her father, Ed, experiences the city as a whole upon her birth—that she is elevated above the “narrow-windowed houses” and city grit surrounding her. She is able to be happy despite ever-dismal surroundings, and she experiences a repetitive reverie akin to her father’s state of hope and joy after her birth. But once she reaches her destination on the elevator, the literal and figurative top floor, she is no longer able to fantasize about Stan, the one man she seems to legitimately love, who she has recently met and with whom she has begun an affair. She is unable to smell the orchids or to experience joy because she is reminded of her reality by way of the door to the rooming house in which she resides. Her reality and the choices she has made in her quest for success on Broadway include marrying a man she does not seem to love and who she may know is gay. “Sick disgust,” with herself, her environment, and her marriage all seem to be what “chocked her.”

The literal environment chocking Ellen is a rooming house where she and Jojo live with “all of the ham actors” (131), as a housemate, Ruth, calls them. Ham actors overact, act too much, or are not effective. This description is true of the inhabitants’ off-stage performances, the only ones presented in the novel, in different forms and fashions. Ellen is both entwined in and disapproving of ham acting. Being associated with ham acting negatively contributes to Ellen’s ability to sense happiness. The women who live in this rooming house, Ellen, Cassie, and Ruth, all abort babies for the sake of their career, which the text seems to see as an excessive
investment in acting. The men who live there, Tony and Jojo, both ineffectively try to pass as heterosexual. Jojo, for example, is repeatedly described as “peculiar,” as “strange fish” (114, 131), or as a thing (“What the hell is Mr. Oglethorpe? He beats anything I ever saw.”). He is always on a stage of some sort, either as a topic for gossip, an actor in the actual theater, or as one crafting scenes so as to engage in homosexual acts under the guise of heterosexuality, if rumor can be trusted. Ruth tells Jimmy:

“O you missed it. It was a shriek…Everybody was out in the hall. . . Jojo was brandishing a revolver, a little nickel one, may have been a waterpistol for all I know…the only person who looked in their right senses was Elaine Olgethorpe…you know the titainhaired vision that so impressed your infant mind. . . Well at last the Ogle got tired of his big scene and cried out in ringing tones, Disarm me or I shall kill this woman. And Tony Hunter grabbed the pistol and took it into his room. Then Elaine Oglethorpe made a little bow as if she were taking a curtain call, said Well goodnight everybody, and ducked into her room cool as a cucumber…Can you picture it? . . . But the worst is yet to come.” (132)

Ruth recounts a scene of marital discord, implying the fight was either staged with all involved, including Ellen, in on the staging so as to allow Jojo and Tony to sleep together without breaking heterosexual norms. After Ellen’s “curtain call,” she would not let Jojo into their room, so “the Ogle . . . went up to Tony and rolling his eyes like Forbes Robertson in Hamlet put his arm round him and said Tony can a broken man crave asylum in your room for the night” (132). If the scene was not staged to craft a façade of heterosexuality, it was, at a minimum, stage-like, with a weapon, theatrical dialogue, curtain calls, and different scenes. While recounting the theatrical scene she condemns, Ruth too is theatrical, building suspense with phrases like “the worst is yet
to come” and pausing to acknowledge that everyone in the restaurant is listening to her. Ruth presents Jojo and Tony (who, unlike Jojo, directly acknowledges his homosexual desire in the space of the text) as homosexuals. She nods vigorously in response to Jimmy’s question “Is Oglethorpe that way too?” (132). Ruth implies that acting is happening off-stage all the time and that living, which Jimmy is “too innocent” for, requires the ability to decode such acting. Ruth dramatizes the ways she detects masquerading, engaging in theatrical speech and the kind of off-stage acting she condemns. Ruth’s hypocritical performance for Jimmy and Ellen’s sense that she is chocking in her environment show how difficult and/or undesirable it is to be self-reflective about the ways one acts in everyday life.

Ellen is deeply invested in her body as the source of her (potential) success, and the degree of her self-investment, combined with her gender (and accompanying ability to get pregnant), mark her body as a site that can both create and destroy life. Ellen has one child, Martin, an unknown number of abortions, and she advises others to get abortions for the sake of their careers. Once Ellen leaves Jojo and moves into a hotel on her own, Cassie, a fellow actress, visits her and declares:

“Oh, you’re so lucky in everything Elaine and I’m so miserable.”

“Why I always thought it was my jinx that got the beautyprize, but what is the matter?”

Cassie put down her cup and pushed her two clenched hands into her neck. “It’s just this,” she said in a strangled voice. . . . “I think I’m going to have baby.” She put her head down on her knees and sobbed.

“Are you sure? Everybody’s always having scares.”

“I wanted our love to be always pure and beautiful, but he said he’d never see me again if I didn’t. . . . and I hate him.” She shook the words out one by one between tearing sobs.
“Why don’t you get married?”

“I can’t. I won’t. It would interfere. . . . I don’t want to have anything but my dancing.”

(158)

In this revelatory conversation, Cassie serves as a foil for Ellen. The reader learns through Ellen’s response, “Oh of course I have. When we were first married I had a terrible time. . . .” (159) that she has most likely had at least one abortion, as she has no children at the time and admits she has been pregnant. It is possible she miscarried, but it seems unlikely in the context of the conversation, as she refers to a potential pregnancy as a “scare,” and Cassie and Ellen both assume that a baby would interfere with Cassie’s career as a dancer. When Cassie proclaims, “I don’t want to have anything but my dancing,” Ellen certainly does not encourage her or declare any belief that continuing to dance while pregnant or after having a child is possible.

Interestingly, while Ellen’s first suggestion to Cassie’s pregnancy predicament is “Why don’t you get married?” she admits to having an abortion while married, undercutting her own advice that marriage would solve Cassie’s problem. She also makes this suggestion directly after Cassie declares “I hate him,” as if Cassie hating her boyfriend should not stop her from marrying him, something Ellen may well feel is true, given she never seemed to love Jojo. Ellen seems cold and dismissive when she goes on to suggest, “‘Look here Cassie there’s no use getting all wrought up over things, is there? I know a woman who’ll help you. . . . Do pull yourself together please,’” (158) but she is also pacing at the same time, which is a sign of emotional unrest. When Cassie goes to the bathroom and Ellen repeats, “I hate women. I hate women,” (159) to herself, it is unclear why she feels hatred for all women as opposed to just Cassie. She does not seem to be upset for purely superficial reasons, such as the fact that Cassie is throwing up in her bathroom or broke her saucer; she seems moved to hate all women, herself included, for being
vulnerable—for being able to get pregnant, for living in bodies that are able to be inhabited and affected both physically and mentally by unborn babies, and for caring about those unborn babies. She is angered by Cassie’s abjection—her heartbrokenness, her vomit, and her shaky body. She wants Cassie to pull herself together, to act like getting an abortion is “the only thing to do,” (160) because she herself wants to believe it. Ellen tries to appear invulnerable, as one without abjection. But, at the same time, her pacing and her declaration that Cassie is a “poor kid,” (159) mark her own vulnerability, humanity, and capacity for sympathy despite her best efforts to speak and act otherwise.

Ellen also acts as if she is not vulnerable to love. When Stan, the one person she genuinely seems to love, shows up at a party married to a new-found drinking buddy and aspiring actress:

Suddenly she remembered Stan’s face altogether, he was standing in front of her with a bow tie crooked in his soft shirt, his hair rumpled, drinking again.

“Oh Ellie I’m so glad to see you. . . I’ve been on the most exordinately spectacular trip, honestly you should have come . . . we never drew a sober breath. . . We got so tight in Niagara Falls that when we came to we found we were married. . . “

Ellen couldn’t see his face. The orchestra, the jangle of voices, the clatter of plates spouted spiraling louder and louder about her. . .

*And the ladies of the harem*

*Knew exactly how to wear ‘em*

*In O-riental Bagdad long ago. . .*

‘Good night Stan.’ Her voice was gritty in her mouth, she heard the words very clearly when she spoke them.” (208)
Here, Ellen deeply feels Stan’s marriage even though he does not. Ellen, so seemingly careless with her own marriages before knowing Stan (when leaving her marriage to Jojo, she casually asks her cab driver, “Matrimony isn’t much, is it?”) is so physically and emotionally affected by this news of Stan’s marriage that she feels him disappear—she “couldn’t see his face.”

Matrimony is weighty for Ellen when she feels real love, and her sensory disorientation and quick departure articulate the vulnerability that she does not verbalize. While Ellen’s carelessness causes pain for many men in the course of the novel, this is the one instance in which she experiences the pain of someone else’s carelessness. The orchestra’s song mouths the words Ellen cannot seem to form; she feels like a lady “of the harem,” like one of Stan’s many women, as if he never really loved her. Stan is oblivious to the emotional impact his marriage might have on Ellen, suggesting she could have or should have come on his elopement adventure. Stan implies that a marriage to Ellen might have sprung up haphazardly just as easily and without any different impact on Stan. Rather than show her emotional or physical vulnerability, Ellen simply bids Stan goodnight, never telling him about their unborn baby as she had planned to do, and she never sees him again.

Ellen’s difficulty deciding whether or not to keep Stan’s baby marks her humanity and her capacity for emotional experience despite the harsh performance she earlier enacts for a pregnant Cassie. If not before, Ellen grapples with whether or not to abort a pregnancy when she is pregnant with the baby of someone she loves, Stan. Whether or not she wants to have the baby is intertwined with the materiality of the city as well as her desire to in some way keep Stan, who has just burned himself to death, alive. In a taxi, she considers:

The sky above the cardboard buildings is a vault of beaten lead. It would be less raw if it would snow. . . . If I have my child, Stan’s child, it will grow up to jolt up Seventh
Avenue under a sky of beaten lead that never snows watching fruitstores, signs, buildings being built, trucks, girls, messengerboys, policemen. . . . She presses her knees together, sits up straight on the edge of the seat with her hands clasped over her slender belly. O God the rotten joke they’ve played on me, taking Stan away, burning him up, leaving me nothing but this growing in me that’s going to kill me. She’s whimpering into her numb hands. O God why won’t it snow? (222)

Just as baby Ellen was objectified by her mother, Ellen objectifies the fetus inside her womb as “this growing in me.” For Ellen, the built city environment stands in contrast to snow, which would cover the signs and people that trouble her and would make her surroundings “less raw,” more natural, and more hospitable. When Ellen thinks “If I have my child, Stan’s child, it will grow up to jolt up Seventh Avenue under a sky of beaten lead,” she presents jolting transportation and an unnatural-feeling city sky as reasons not to have a child. It is as if the unstable superficial environment, rather than her potential ability to care for the child in a home environment, is what matters to her. She wants to hold on to the last piece of Stan she has, but she also feels she must kill or be killed. She thinks the unborn baby is “going to kill” her. It is unclear why Ellen thinks the baby is going to kill her. The main possibilities seem to be that she feels the baby will kill her career, which she seems to equate with her entire being in such a reading, or that the baby would kill her reputation. It would be frowned upon for an unmarried woman to raise a child, and this would also negatively impact her ability to get jobs and support a baby financially. Ellen also objectifies Stan, treating him as a thing taken away by an unnamed, ambiguous “they.” If she knows his death was a suicide, she blames “them” for it, rather than Stan. At the end of that night, it seems that Ellen has made a decision, when she confides in Jimmy:
“Look Jimmy I might as well tell you. . . . I’m going to have a baby. . . . Stan’s baby. I’m going to give up all this silly life and raise it. I don’t care what happens.”

“O God that’s the bravest thing I ever heard of a woman doing. . . . Oh Ellie you’re so wonderful. God if I could only tell you what I. . . .”

“Oh no.” Her voice broke and her eyes filled with tears. “I’m a silly fool, that’s all.”

(225)

After this exchange, Ellen runs inside, and the next time we see Jimmy and Ellen, they are married, returning from volunteering abroad during World War I, and they have a baby, Martin. It is unclear exactly how long they have been gone (though they left during the war and return after Prohibition is in place, so they are gone at least two years). It is also unclear exactly how old Martin is, but he is referred to as a “baby” by a few characters. The text, therefore, initially presents the possibility that Martin is Stan’s baby and that Jimmy and Ellen have married perhaps in an effort to save Ellen’s reputation. It is not until the end of the text, in a flashback of Jimmy’s, that Ellen alludes to the “little Herf” inside her, instructing readers belatedly that Martin is Jimmy’s biological son.

The text’s structural performance of extended vagueness regarding Martin’s parentage and the fate of Stan’s unborn baby mimics Ellen’s ordinary performances to evade vulnerability. Further, the textual performance raises the possibility that Ellen aborted Stan’s baby right after telling Jimmy that she was going to raise him or her. Indeed, an abortion scene follows soon after that avowal of motherhood to Jimmy. The anonymity of the abortion scene in the novel opens the possibility that it features Ellen, but it also may feature any of the women in the text:

“What are you the lady? Come in.”

“Is this Dr. Abrahms?”
“Yes. . . . You are the lady my friend phoned me about. Sit down my dear lady.” The office smells of something like arnica. Her heart joggles desperately between her ribs.

“You understand. . . .” She hates the quaver in her voice; she’s going to faint. “You understand, Dr. Abrahms that it is absolutely necessary. I’m getting a divorce from my husband and have to make my own living.”

“Very young, unhappily married. . . I am sorry.” (226)

. . .

“It won’t take very long will it? If I can pull myself together I have an engagement for tea at five.”

“You are a brave young lady. In an hour it will be forgotten. . .” (226)

The next thing this anonymous woman says is “‘Taxi. . . Drive to the Ritz’” (227). If one reads her as Ellen, one would do so because we know Ellen is pregnant, has been considering whether or not to have the baby, and, like the woman featured, is getting a divorce at the time. Further, Ellen does not like being vulnerable, so the woman’s hatred of the “quaver in her voice” is Ellen-esq and recalls her “I hate women” soliloquy inspired by Cassie’s pregnant display of abjection.

If this woman is Ellen, her response to Jimmy’s flattery above (“oh no”) can be read as her expressing horror at the possibility of being praised and thought brave for raising a child alone, at the recognition that it would indeed be a difficult task, and/or at the possibility of being loved by Jimmy. We might then see this as the moment wherein she decides she actually wants to abort the baby after all. In this reading, Ellen’s admission to Jimmy is a rehearsal for what it would be like to tell people she is devoting herself to her baby, that she is giving up her “silly life” as an actress, and it is a rehearsal that terrifies her. Further, such a reading would indicate that she aborts the baby, despite really wanting, in some ways, to keep it because of how she might be
viewed by acquaintances (echoing Crane’s Mary’s deadly rejection of her own daughter for the sake of appearances with the neighbors). Ellen’s avowal of the baby and the abortion scene that follows it, in addition to their proximity, are further aligned because in both cases the male counterpart in the scene calls the woman “brave,” in one instance for keeping a baby, in another for aborting it, suggesting New York City in this era is a place in which women doing anything (alone) are considered brave. The reactions of both men note modern urban conditions for unmarried women as singularly difficult. Women are supposed to feel sorrow at an abortion, and the doctor presumes any woman going through an abortion is doing something she does not want to do. The text counters this assumption because the anonymity of this scene further suggests any one of the women involved in the text might well dash from an abortion to tea at the Ritz, as that is the kind of superficially-driven society they enjoy and perpetuate.

Ellen imagines war as a stage production she aspires to participate in. Before the war, Ellen romantically associates World War I and her potential role in it with the French Revolution, and her fantasy of war is intertwined with her desire to locate Stan and potentially have his child. After the night in which Stan avows loving Ellen, she cannot find him. Ellen repeatedly asks Jimmy if he has seen Stan, and she tells Jimmy, “If you see him tell him I want him to call me up at once. . . . Herf what were those women called who followed the armies in the French Revolution? . . . I’d like to do that” (195). Ellen fantasizes about following men when the man she desires will not follow her or allow himself to be followed. She searches her mind for gendered role models and settles upon women during the French Revolution to legitimate her own desires. Ellen, in her attempt to align herself with popular women from history (who were especially revered by New Yorkers, Burrows and Wallace 300-313, 797-821), recognizes that single women acting boldly might otherwise draw scrutiny and disapproval.
Ellen’s juxtaposition of her desire to locate Stan and her desire to align herself with idealized history highlights the simple, genuine love Ellen feels for Stan as well as her naivety about both Stan and war. Post-war Ellen is less alive, in a malaise of indeterminate, mixed causes like the sorts of depression she inspires. Because of the structure and style of the text as well as Ellen’s personality, it is unclear if it is having a child, marrying Jimmy, experiencing the war, Stan’s death, aborting Stan’s baby, returning to New York City, needing to take a day job, or some combination of these potential factors that causes Ellen’s cold, detached aura. When a married Ellen and Jimmy return to the city, Ellen is once again on a boat married to a man with whom she is not enamored. During their approach, Jimmy is interested in the city and the Statue of Liberty. He wants to be out on deck:

“God Ellie it’s the greatest sight in the world. . . . I never thought I’d ever come back, did you?”

“I had every intention of coming back.”

“Not like this.”

“No I dont suppose I did.” (235)

It’s unclear what “this” is, but it is not the stuff of dreams. Unlike the hopeful immigrants aboard, Jimmy and Ellen are already disillusioned. After some initial drinks with friends, we next see Ellen and Jimmy “walking to dinner through the snow”:

“Ellie I hate to have you take that job. . . . You ought to keep on with your acting.”

“But Jimps, we’ve got to live.”

“I know. . . .I know. You’d certainly didnt have your wits about you Ellie when you married me.”

“Oh let’s not talk about it any more.”
“Do let’s have a good time tonight. . . . It’s the first snow.”

“Is this the place?” They stood before an unlighted basement door covered by a closemeshed grating. “Let’s try.” (256)

Not only are Ellen and Jimmy trying to have a good time, but also they are trying to maintain their marriage. Ellen has given up acting to support her family. Her response to Jimmy’s encouragement that she continue to act, “we’ve got to live,” can be read in several ways. Obviously, she means they need to have money, which she is earning through her day job, to live. But her response might also mean she feels that she has to be real, too. She cannot just act in life; she has to live. Regardless of how she has come to this conclusion, it depresses her. Further, it can be read as an instruction for her and Jimmy that they have got to try and live together, to be alive. When Ellen responds “Oh let’s not talk about it any more” to Jimmy’s self-deprecating “You’d certainly didn’t have your wits about you Ellie when you married me,” she cuts off the subject rather than declaring love for Jimmy or correcting Jimmy’s assertion. Ellen seems to feel she did indeed make a mistake, in one or more ways, but she does not allow herself to be vulnerable or to discuss her feelings openly. Despite their efforts to cover their discord with a metaphoric cover of white snow, “When Congo limped away from their table silence came down between them like an asbestos curtain in the theater.” By producing a simile that brings the reader back into a theater, Dos Passos marks Ellen’s distance from the stage and from the kind of acting from which she gained satisfaction. Jimmy, as the evening drags on unhappily, confides, “Gosh I wish we could go to a show,” as if at least being able to watch a theater production would make them feel normal again. Ellen’s response, “It would be too late anyway” (257), is not merely literal. Their marriage, like her sense of aliveness and her aspirations, is dampened. Complicating matters, though, because the silence is compared to an asbestos curtain in
particular, it is as if their mutual silence and Ellen’s detachment are also the things keeping her, or both of them, from burning.

Ellen, in Jimmy’s view, is becoming more like an inanimate object and less like a person. He blames the city for her decreasing sense of aliveness, his present unhappiness, and his unemployment. During this evening out, he daydreams, remembering their train travels together in France:

“Ellie, Ellie there are nightingales singing along the track.”

“Oh I was asleep darling.” She gropes to him. . . . Gasp of nightingales along the track among the silverdripping poplars. . . . Gasp of nightingales.

Opposite him the Elliedoll was speaking. “He says the lobster-salad’s out. . . . Isn’t that discouraging?”

Suddenly he had his tongue. “Gosh if that were the only thing. . . . Why did we come back to this rotten town anyway?”

“You’ve been burbling about how wonderful it was ever since we came back.”

“I know. I guess it’s sour grapes. . . . I’m going to have another cocktail. . . . Ellie for heaven’s sake what’s the matter with us?”

“We’re going to be sick if we keep this up I tell you.”

“Well let’s be sick . . . . Let’s be good and sick.” (256-7)

Jimmy is more willing to have open discussion than Ellen is. When he experiences a changed Ellen, who he labels as a lifeless “Elliedoll,” he blames the city for her lack of life. He romanticizes wartime Europe, focusing repeatedly on nightingales, known for their beautiful singing. Nightingales live in Europe but not in North America. Whereas Jimmy wants to “be sick,” or to be vulnerable, Ellen either cannot or will not move beyond the superficial in
conversation. When Jimmy expresses distress about the city, Ellen tries to correct him and to convince him he actually does like it. When Jimmy, in the height of his vulnerability, asks, “What’s the matter with us?” Ellen only responds literally and in the context of the given evening. Jimmy, on the other hand, takes metaphoric meaning from her warning, “we’re going to be sick if we keep this up,” and seizes on the figurative sickness that Ellen is ignoring. Trying to remain in good spirits, or perhaps trying to cheer up the unemployed Jimmy, Ellen tells Jimmy “I think it’ll be rather fun to have an editorial job for a while,” (257) to which Jimmy retorts, “I’d find it fun to have any kind of job. . . . Well I can always stay home and mind the baby.” It is taken for granted that Jimmy caring for his child would emasculate him and make him unhappy; it is as if staying home with the baby would be such a damning fate that it is not taken seriously in conversation. Ellen responds, “Don’t be so bitter Jimmy, it’s just temporary.” “Life’s just temporary for that matter” (258), he retorts, as if dying would be preferable childrearing, stereotypically thought of as women’s work. Jimmy’s self-loathing and unhappiness seem to stem directly from the rigid gender norms he feels he cannot fit into at present unless he finds stereotypically masculine employment.

Ellen is as cold, disinterested, and dismissive of Martin, her baby, as she is of Jimmy. When Jimmy suggests, “Ellie we ought to have Martin out so he can see,” the city during their postwar return approach by boat, she responds, “‘And start yelling like a tugboat. . . . He’s better off where he is.’” (235). When Ellen meets up with her friend a few moments later, they share this exchange:

“Isnt he good?” clucked Frances as she and Hildebrand followed Ellen into the cab.

“Who?”

“The baby of course. . . .”
“Oh you ought to see him sometimes. . . . He seems to like traveling.” (237)

In this conversation, Frances supposes one’s baby’s behavior is an obvious focal point of discussion, but Ellen is elsewhere in thought and is not absorbed in child-rearing. Ellen’s lack of interest in her baby is further enforced by the fact that Ellen has a bulging belly not because she is pregnant again but because she is smuggling (because of Prohibition) a hotwater bottle full of alcohol under her clothes on her way into the city. She would rather harbor alcohol, the thing that destroyed her one true love, Stan, than attend to her living child. Her anti-maternal qualities and the ways in which she prefers ephemeral goods such as alcohol to her child echo the traits of Crane’s alcoholic Mary.

Despite her perhaps-genuine idea that a day job in editing might be fun, Ellen’s work further deadens her. She leaves her infant son Martin while she searches for revival in the form of a Martini (“Martin” with a difference) because she is “dead tonight, just dead.” She leaves Martin with a black nanny named “Nounou.” “Nou,” is a form of “now” that connotes “in view of what has happened” and can also invoke “the context of both the present and the past” (“Nou” OED). Nounou, in this solitary appearance in the text, through her “black face” that “grins” and by way of her immediacy, invokes the history of slavery. She, the black caretaker and not the child’s mother, is the only one immediately at hand for the needy, frightened white child.

Nounou is there “in view of what has happened”—in view of Ellen’s seeming lack of desire to mother, Nounou’s unspecified social and individual life conditions, and Ellen’s office-induced sense of deadness. After work for Ellen, “Not even the bath and halfhour’s nap had washed out the fagging memory of the office, the smell of it, the chirruping of typewriters, the endlessly repeated phrases, faces, typewritten sheets” (316). The repetition, the machines, and the material products of Ellen’s editing work linger, haunt, and overwhelm her senses; Ellen cannot seem to
clean off the taint of industry. Not only does Ellen need a drink, and not only is she unable or unwilling to mother after a night of work, but also, she is turning into a machine: “Ellen stayed a long time looking at the mirror, dabbing a little superfluous powder off her face, trying to make up her mind. She kept winding up a hypothetical dollself and setting it in various positions. Tiny gestures ensued, acted out on various model stages. Suddenly she turned away from the mirror with a shrug of her too white shoulders and hurried to the diningroom” (317). Ellen wants to act, but in the absence of an actual stage, the family’s need for her to work outside of her home, and in the presence of a repetitive job in the publishing industry, she acts like a doll, an inanimate, less-alive version of herself, as Jimmy earlier suggested when thinking of her as an “Elliedoll.”

The modern condition for women like Ellen is that of miserable pawn. Her stages are imitations—they are “model stages,” just like a doll is a model person, and even the real aspects of her life, like her shoulders, seem wrong; they are “too white.” They might be too white because she does not have time to spend in the sun, but they also might be too white in the sense of not seeming altogether human. Further, Dos Passos troubles the supposed binary of black and white presented by way of Nounou and Ellen in this scene by inserting Ellen’s excessive whiteness; it is as if there are many kinds of whiteness, and they are not all human.

Amidst the monotony of Ellen’s life, the only source of sanity she clings to is more monotony: the grid of New York City. It is as if she is compelled to cling to traumatic, abrasive, and superficial repetition. Ellen becomes delighted while riding in the cab to meet George, a long-time admirer, for a drink. She begins counting the remaining blocks and thinks, “It must have been to keep from going crazy that people invented numbers. The multiplication table better than Coué as a cure for jangled nerves. Probably that’s what old Peter Stuyvesant thought, or whoever laid the city out in numbers. She was smiling to herself” (317). When Ellen is
nervous, when she has “jangled nerves,” and when she feels overwhelmed in a very human way, the inhuman and unnatural repetition of the sculpted landscape is a source of comfort. It is as if the construction of modern, industrial New York City is both the cause of her misery and its cure. But the cure, or the way to survive and continue, is to become an inhuman puppet who “felt a gradual icy coldness stealing through her like novocaine. She had made up her mind. It seemed as if she had set the photograph of herself in her own place, forever frozen into a single gesture.” She feels herself numbing and turning into a frozen inanimate object, but at the same time has a very human reaction to George’s “wooden face of a marionette [that] waggled senselessly in front of her.” Seeing a flat, objectness in another human causes her to “shudder,” and she “hunched up her shoulders” (318). For, try as she might and much as she has resolved to live a life without feeling, she is, after all, human. Ellen is ambivalent about her own humanity; she has set out to be unfeeling as a mode of urban survival in the absence of actual stage acting, but her human body betrays her. The movement of her body, her shudder, results from having to view a marionette-like George. She sees herself in him and is humanly horrified. This horror provokes further acting: When George responds to her hunching and shuddering with, “‘What’s the matter, Elaine?’ . . . she lied” in response. “‘Nothing George. . . . Somebody walked over my grave I guess’” (318). Ellen’s ambivalence about her own sense of aliveness leads to lying, a(nother) kind of acting. But by way of her denial that something is wrong, in the sense that she is inhuman or dead(ened), she is also not lying. Her use of a cliché expression to try and randomize the seemingly excessive action of her body is no mistake. She is walking over her own grave.

Ellen’s comparatively more lifeless reaction to George, when juxtaposed with an earlier, similar scene between them, underscores her declining humanity. In the later scene, described above, after George’s marriage proposal that is also not one (“Well what about it?”), Ellen gives
a response that is also not one: “I guess I can stand it if you can George” (318). George is untroubled by her lackluster response. He smiles “like some celebrity in the rotogravure section of a Sunday paper” while Ellen “mechanically. . . squeezed the hand”—a fragment of a body—“that helped her into the cab.” While George feels he will finally get to be human by way of their marriage, Ellen feels the marriage seals her inhumanity:

“Elaine,” he said shakily, “life’s going to mean something to me now. . . . God if you knew how empty my life had been for so many years. I’ve been like a tin mechanical toy, all hollow inside.” “Let’s not talk about mechanical toys,” she said in a strangled voice…Beyond the shaking glass window of the taxi, like someone drowning, she saw out of a corner of an eye whirling faces, streetlights, zooming nickelglinting wheels.

(319)

It is as if George’s unhappiness is being transferred to Ellen. While it is perhaps as difficult for the reader to locate Ellen as it is for Jimmy to do so, this scene contrasts quite clearly with an earlier one, making the changes in Ellen over time abundantly clear. Years earlier, when George declares his love for Ellen, he pleads, “Can’t you see that I’ll go mad if I can’t have you. You are the only thing in the world I ever wanted,” and Ellen responds “George I don’t want to be had by anybody. . . . Can’t you understand that a woman wants some freedom? Do be a sport about it. I’ll have to go home if you talk like that” (190). In this exchange, Ellen is self-assured and refuses to objectify herself into a possession for George. Now, as she passively agrees to marry George, it is as if she is no longer a woman or a being that wants freedom, but rather she has become a marionette, an object only enlivened by the actions of another, living being.

Ellen’s experience with fire, in the last few pages of the novel, serves as her final appearance within the text and is the culminating scene of Ellen’s gradual demise. Ellen, whose
birth opens the novel and inspires her father’s hopeful dreams, comes to represent all that is detestable in modern, post-World War I New York City. In this scene of fire at the end of the novel, Ellen is in the back of a dress shop, picking up a gown, when a fire engulfs Anna, a young, hopeful garment-worker. Another worker comes to inform the shop-owner, Madame Soubrine, who was helping Ellen. Mme. Soubrine “hissed,” at the girl who suggests something is wrong, silences her, and disappears into the back room. While “Ellen stands looking at herself in the pierglass in the fitting room,” for a while, eventually “the smell of singed fabrics gets stronger,” so she goes into the workroom to find “Madame Soubrine, who is pointing a chemical extinguisher at charred piles of goods about a table. They are picking something moaning out of the charred goods. Out of the corner of her eyes she sees an arm in shreds, a seared black red face, a horrible naked head” (337). Despite what Ellen has witnessed, Madame Soubrine “shrieks breathlessly at her,” asking “Oh Mrs. Herf, please tell them in front it’s nothing, absolutely nothing. . . . I’ll be there at once” (337). Madame Soubrine presumably cares less about the burning girl in front of her and potential risk to others than she does about business out front. In response, “Ellen runs with closed eyes through the smokefilled corridor into the clean air of the fitting room,” and declares, “Madame Soubrine asked me to tell everybody it was nothing, absolutely nothing. Just a little blaze in a pile of rubbish. . . . She put it out herself with an extinguisher” (338). The first part of her announcement is carefully crafted so as not to be a lie. She is repeating what she was asked to say, not recognizing the gap between it and reality. But then, despite her initial machine-like repetition, she cannot help but add a line acknowledging that there was indeed a fire. By lying and saying that the disturbance was “just a little blaze in a pile of rubbish” Ellen shows that she can think, that she can craft her own sentence, and that she
is indeed human, alive, and not in shock.\textsuperscript{22} Ellen’s ability to think and edit makes her lie of omission morally worse, as she again undercuts her own humanity by choosing to dehumanize the burnt Anna into “a pile of rubbish,” when she knows the blaze charred and possibly killed a woman.

The girl who burns but of whom Ellen cannot speak is Ellen’s more hopeful, more alive double, Anna Cohen. Anna emerges as a character in the text just as Ellen returns, a bit deadened, to New York City after World War I. Anna believes in the possibility of a successful workers’ revolution and protests poor conditions along with other female garment workers. Anna’s mother so strongly disapproves of Anna’s involvement with social causes that she wishes aloud that her daughter was never born:

“If you had been blasted in the cradle it would have been better, if you had been born dead. . . . Oy what for have I raised four children that they should all of them be no good, agitators and streetwalkers and bums. . . and now you, may you wither in your chair, picketing for the garment workers, walking along the street shameless with a sign on your back.” . . .

“Aw mommer you dont understand.” . . .

“Understand, understand harlotry and sinfulness. . . .? Oy why dont you attend your work and keep your mouth shut, and draw your pay quietly? You used to make good money and could have got married decent before you took to running wild in dance halls with a goy. . . .” (302)

\textsuperscript{22} The research of trauma scholars Bessel A. Van Der Kolk and Onno Van Der Hart suggests that being able to edit a story in its (re)telling is a sign of healing or that one is not/is no longer consumed by traumatic events.
Mrs. Cohen, in the kitchen and speaking Yiddish, embraces traditional female and Jewish cultural norms. While she also disapproves of Anna going to dance halls with a non-Jewish man, her first and largest complaint is that Anna “walk[s] the street shameless with a sign in [her] back.” Mrs. Cohen, through her diction, conflates protesting with prostitution. Mrs. Cohen judges her daughter on superficial matters and devalues her based on a traditional, sexist rubric of her marriage-ability. Through this system of measurement, Mrs. Cohen feels no “decent” man will want to marry Anna, who she views as tainted by politics and prior relationships (especially one with a non-Jew).

Mrs. Cohen’s diatribe invokes actual New York City history that would have been a part of recent public memory at the time of Manhattan’s Transfer’s 1925 publication. The largest strike of women in U.S. history was that of female garment workers in New York City in November 1909. Approximately 20,000 women joined the strike, and the Tammany-backed police force jailed protestors along with prostitutes for “street walking.” In the novel, Mrs. Cohen, the matriarch, rather than a patriarchal force aiming to maintain power over workers for their own financial gain, hopes to squash her daughter’s interest in her own rights so as to reestablish Anna’s income for her own benefit. She, like the Tammany police force, tries to morally condemn her daughter in order to intimidate her into submissiveness. If this is her plan, it indeed backfires.

Anna, like Ellen, is highly invested in the superficial. She gets fired from a job at a lunch counter for primping in the mirror too often. She dreams of having a “Paris evening dress” and going to the “the theater and everything.” Being able to dress up and watch the theater Ellen once performed in is the height of Anna’s dreams. When Elmer, the non-Jewish boyfriend her mother disapproves of, responds to one of Anna’s wishes with, “Our children will have those things,’
Anna sat bolt upright on the seat. ‘I aint never goin to have any children,’ she said between her teeth, ‘never, never, never’” (304). Anna’s refusal to mother seems to be a refusal to repeat her mother’s sins, her “scoldin,” and it also seems to be a refusal to defer her dreams of material adornment and success to the next generation. Anna wants a fancy dress for herself, not for an imagined daughter. Her mother, at some point, perhaps in response to her lost job, throws her out of the family home. As a result, Anna turns to scabbing, to working in a garment shop despite the women’s strike, and to working in a dance hall (perhaps as a prostitute—the text is murky on the matter). Her mother’s rigid moral code drives Anna to the kind of behavior she disapproves of and straight into a literal fire, suggesting the prior generation’s rigid methods of categorizing people reaps destruction. Further, if we juxtapose Anna with Crane’s Maggie, the two women’s plights suggest maternal avowal of a sense of moral motherhood maligns and objectifies daughters. Marginalized poor mothers seem to target the only group in an inferior position to themselves, their daughters, and in turn reify the marginalization of women.

Despite her investment in the superficial—especially in money, Anna believes in love and wants to marry for love. Before Anna catches fire, she is humming show tunes, “stitching the future with swift tiny stitches,” and hopefully daydreaming. She thinks about owning her own dress shop, about love, and about the workers’ “Revolution” Elmer is so invested in. She is trying to decide whether or not to marry Elmer.

If Elmer wants to marry me we might as well; poor Elmer, he’s a nice boy but so dreamy.

Funny he’d fall for a girl like me. He’ll grow out of it, or maybe in the Revolution, he’ll

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23 She sleeps with a man she calls a “buyer,” but when he comments, “‘Hell Anna, things aint so bad, honest I’d take you West with me if it wasnt for my wife,’” Anna gets defensive. Her “voice goes on in an even whimper, ‘An now ‘cause I take a shine to you and want to give you a good time you call me a goddam whore.’” (330)
be a great man. . . . Have to cut out parties when I’m Elmer’s wife. But maybe we can save up money and open a little store on Avenue A in a good location, make better money there than uptown. La Parisienne, Modes. (336-7)

While on one hand, here, Anna is similar to Ellen in her passive declaration “If Elmer wants to marry me we might as well” (336). But Anna continues mentally debating, imagining the future, and eventually declares “Perhaps I do love him. Elmer take me,” (337) suggesting she ideally wants Elmer to “take” her because she loves him. Alternatively, though, her “Perhaps I do love him” is motivated by her daydream that Elmer might run for mayor, which she dreams would involve parties, dress up, and dancing. Unlike Ellen, at least in the space of the text, Anna thinks through whether or not to marry people based on whether or not she loves them. But Anna also wants superficial success. Just as she decides to embrace a “hot as flame, Elmer,” she ignites:

Through the dream she is stitching white fingers beckon. The white tulle shines too bright. Red hands clutch suddenly out of the tulle, she cant fight off the red tulle all round her biting into her, coiled about her head. The skylight’s blackened with swirling smoke. The room’s full of smoke and screaming. Anna is on her feet whirling round fighting with her hands the burning tulle all round her. (337)

As Anna catches fire, all that is white—her fingers, the fabric, her future—turns to a devilish red she cannot excise. The very content of her material dreams burns her, and the reader never sees an animate Anna again.

Ellen, who long before this fire moment was likely the least sympathetic character in the text, seems ironically more detestable when she reveals her capacity for sympathy and genuine emotion in the aftermath of the fire. When she shows her humanity, she makes it increasingly clear that she might have been more helpful at the scene of the fire but did not choose to be.
Despite becoming increasingly doll-like through the course of the novel, she lingers at the site of Anna’s burning like a firebug or the guilty fire-starter she is not. But her self-alignment with firebugs and her entrancement with this fire show the way in which she feels guilty of a kind of moral crime. She is dishonest and risks the lives of others—the fire may have continued on to engulf others—for the sake of the business woman’s financially-focused request. Ellen “wants to go away but she can’t” (338). She wants to ignore the fact that she saw a girl on fire and did nothing, but her body does not let her efface the sensations it feels or her desire to know what became of Anna. She “can hardly breathe. . . she tries to puzzle out why she is so moved; it is as if some part of her were going to be wrapped in bandages, carried away on a stretcher” (338). Ellen identifies with Anna’s charred body. When it seems like Ellen might be sympathetic and utterly human despite her best efforts to the contrary, she does not allow herself to be and criticizes herself for being moved by a young girl burning to death. “Why should I be so excited? She keeps asking herself” in a kind of repetitive effort to efface what has happened. She retreats to fussing over the details of her evening plans: “She’s got to meet some one somewhere, she can’t think where. There’s a horrible tired blankness inside her,” which she channels by hailing a cab, as if moving anywhere is better than staying still with the fire’s aftermath. Moving jogs her memory: “She remembers it all now, at eight o’clock she’s going to have dinner with Judge Shammeyer and his wife. Ought to have gone home to dress. George’ll be mad when he sees me come breezing in like this. Likes to show me off all dressed up like a Christmas tree, like an Effenbee walking talking doll, damn him” (338). Ellen tries to transfer blame to George for her superficially-driven existence in which only the look of things or people matters. But she is simultaneously attempting to cultivate her own inhumanity, clinging to vanity in response to any potential feelings of sympathy:
Suppose I’d been horribly burned, like that girl, disfigured for life. Probably she can get a lot of money out of old Soubrine, the beginning of a career. Suppose I’d gone with that young man with the ugly necktie who tried to pick me up. . . . There are lives to be lived if only you didn’t care. Care for what, for what; the opinion of mankind, money, success, hotel lobbies, health, umbrellas, Uneeda biscuits. . . .? It’s like a busted mechanical toy the way my mind goes brrr all the time. I hope they haven’t ordered dinner. I’ll make them go somewhere else if they haven’t. She opens her vanity case and begins to powder her nose. (339)

Here, Ellen’s thought process, even in the wake of the tragedy, is dominated by the superficial. When she ponders, “Suppose I’d been horribly burned,” she is really horrified by the idea of how she would live without her beauty. Moreover, Anna, too, cares about appearances—deeply, so Ellen’s inability to grapple with the possibility of living with a damaged body suggests Anna will not be able to either. After this potentially sympathetic thought that was always already about herself, Ellen’s thoughts move to money, to how Anna might profit from the fire that scalded her. Next, as if it is on par with a threat to her life, Ellen’s what-ifs move to “Suppose I’d gone with that young man with the ugly necktie.” Ellen’s stream-of-consciousness suggests dating someone who wears ugly clothes is as dramatically tragic as being burnt alive or living the kind of life one might live if they did not care about appearances. This is a kind of life which she can barely seem to process, lingering mentally on “care for what, for what;” it is a kind of life that Ellen, and probably Anna, cannot live.

The reader’s last view of the newborn baby whose birth opens the novel is a view of a grown woman consumed by vanity, selfishness, and acting. Ellen is worried she has forgotten something: “Gloves, purse, vanity case, handkerchief, I have them all. Didn’t have an umbrella.
What did I forget in the taxicab? But already she is advancing smiling towards two gray men in black with white shirts getting to their feet, smiling, holding out their hands.” (339). Ellen only cares about material things. She knows she has become doll-like and that her “mind is busted,” but she does not do anything to change. It is the fact that Ellen witnessed a person burning, had sympathetic inclinations, but did nothing and willfully declared Anna’s burning body to be “Nothing, absolutely nothing” that makes her so unlikeable. She knows that there is something beyond a superficial existence “if you don’t care,” but she cannot help but care more for “money, success,” and “hotel lobbies” than the people who possess or inhabit them.

Additionally, the text enforces a sense of fatalism through this scene, as Ellen’s inaction at the scene of a fire repeats her father’s sin when he similarly failed to act despite feeling a cold certainty he could identify a firebug at the scene of a deadly fire.24 This repetition suggests the

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24 The scene of Ed’s rehearsal for greatness immediately following Ellen’s birth is interrupted by a fire. As Ed fantasized, looking out the window, “The street was suddenly full of running. Somebody out of breath let out the word Fire.” Here, the word fire is capitalized, as if made a character, in its first appearance in the novel. In response to the word, Ed “was all tingling to be out. I ought to go to bed. Down the street he heard the splattering hoofbeats and the frenzied bell of a fire engine. Just take a look. He ran down the stairs with his hat in his hand” (12). For Ed, going to the scene of the fire is a temptation he cannot resist. A crowd of strangers gather, becoming an audience for the street theater unfolding in front of them. The audience is busy speculating to one another in whispers about the cause. A fellow spectator tells Ed, “’Everyone of ‘em on the two top floors was trapped. It’s an incendiary done it. Some goddam firebug’” (13). Ed notices “The flame in the center of the house flared brighter. Something black had dropped from a window and lay on the pavement shrieking” (13). The “something” capable of “shrieking” is a person, objectified by the fire. Ed reports a scene of (melo)drama as well—an Italian immigrant who speaks no English, failing to communicate with authorities, sits muttering as his pregnant wife burns upstairs in the engulfed tenement. Ed decides to leave, and . . . at the corner a man was looking into the fire alarm box. As Thatcher brushed past him he caught a smell of coaloil from the man’s clothes. The man looked up into his face with a smile. He had tallow sagging cheeks and bright popeyes. Thatcher’s hands and feet went suddenly cold. The firebug. The papers say they hang round like that to watch it. He walked home fast, ran up the stairs, and locked the room door behind him. The room was quiet and empty. He’d forgotten that Susie wouldn’t be there waiting for him. He began to undress. He couldn’t forget the smell of coaloil on the man’s clothes. (13)
inability of children to rise above the flaws of their parents in an increasingly mechanized Manhattan.

Further damning Ellen, the fire in Madame Soubrine’s shop invokes the terrible history of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911, which many 1925 readers would have remembered. The fire, which erupted at 4:45 pm on Saturday, March 25, 1911, drew an unusually large crowd of onlookers, as many people were in the area and on the streets either because it was their day off or they were leaving work at that time of day (Burns, “New York: The Power and the People”). By 5:05 pm, the fire engulfed two floors (the 8th and 9th) of the factory. Doors had been locked to keep workers in. The elevators failed. The water pressure in firehouses was insufficient, the tallest fire ladder only reached the 6th floor, and the fire nets were broken. The huge crowd of spectators witnessed many of the over-200 trapped workers, mostly young immigrant girls and women, jump out of windows to their death on the sidewalk or iron fence below. 146 people died as a result of the fire; 141 of them were young women, mostly teenagers, and at least eleven, per rings found in the rubble, were engaged (Burns, “New York: The Power and the People”). An East River pier became a makeshift morgue for the multi-day process of identifying bodies, seven of whom were so badly burned they could not be identified. One of the known victims, aged twenty-five, was named Anna Cohen (Hirsch). On April 5, 1911, approximately 400,000 people attended a mass funeral held for the unknown victims (Burns, “New York: The Power and the People”). The compendium of seemingly preventable factors in this tragedy and the way these failures were made public in the street in front of a horrified

The unnamed man from the crowd and Ed both jump to conclusions and impulsively place blame, much in the way actual New Yorkers have historically responded to fire. The man Ed sees might well be innocent. Ed, in response to the newspaper, is first hopeful about the future and suspicious of other people. It matters most, here, that Ed feels he knows in his body that he is looking at the firebug and he does nothing, despite watching another human burn.
crowd marks the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire as one of the most horrific episodes of street theater in New York City’s history. News reports in the aftermath pointed out that the same policemen who just two years before were beating and arresting garment workers protesting their terrible working conditions were the same policemen picking their dead bodies off the sidewalk, certainly implying there was blood on police hands. In calling on this recent tragedy by way of content, through the use of a real victim’s name in the fictional account (which may or may not have been intentional), and by portraying Ellen as one who might have helped out but did not, Dos Passos seems to craft Ellen as the least sympathetic woman possible. Anna, the disobedient daughter who burns, and Ellen are cautionary tales regarding the modern city—it is a place that destroys the humanity of young females, especially those who break traditional gender or religious norms; where “only looks matter,” as a new arrival is told in the opening pages of the novel; and where people with independent spirits, especially women, are doomed to death or deadening.

Ellen and Greater New York are simultaneously born. Both are attractive yet inhospitable. The city is personified as a cold, vain, and usually indifferent woman who will not help you even if you are burning alive. The text therefore questions if survival in post-WWI, industrial New York City, is possible, as to live and stay in New York City requires becoming less human. This notion is presented by Ellen’s deteriorating sense of aliveness, and it is reinforced through other female characters, like Anna, who serve as doubles and foils for Ellen. The life trajectory of Cecily, George Baldwin’s first wife predicts Ellen’s. She becomes a

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25 The real historical event Anna’s burning recalls, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, occurred on a Saturday, when devout Jews should not have been working. There was a sense, after the fire, among many of the Jewish families of victims that the fire was a sort of punishment from God for disobedience (“Sweatshop Workers”).
“marionette” by complying with George’s request they stay married for the sake of his political career, and she then wishes for rain, gazing out the window, as Ellen wishes for snow. Both women hope the natural will save them from both the city and themselves. The ways Ellen’s life story is predicted by Cecily’s intimate not being genuine, or acting in one’s everyday life, is both rife and detrimental, especially for women in this urban environment. The text’s presentation of the minor character Cecily mirroring the major character Ellen is a paradigmatic example of the way the text utilizes repeated subject positions—in this case, woman-descending-into-lifelessness-as-a-result-of-her-own-acting—to show the issues plaguing the major characters are multiplied. Performing, on stage and in the sense of not being genuine is also literally killing those who act in many cases. The actress Ruth, for example, invests in a hazardous x-ray treatment for her throat so that she might retain her voice for the stage, and George Baldwin, an opportunistic lawyer and dirty politician, takes strychnine pills, which are poisonous. Dos Passos crafts his characters as kinds of people suffering kinds of downfalls typical of New York City life in this era and not just as singularly terrible exceptions. To stay in the city and to share the presumption that only appearances matter is to live a slow death.

There are two main ways the text suggests for escaping the repetitive, dirty hell it deems modern New York City life to be: leaving the city and committing suicide. While women like Ellen, Cecily, and Ruth who want to act and/or have to act are dying a slow death, literally or figuratively, the potential to escape suffering quickly, in the text, is only available to men. Only men who refuse to or cannot act stereotypically masculine suffer. Stan and the minor character Bud both commit suicide, and Martin and Tony both contemplate it. Stan’s suicide is an active refusal of typical male narratives of belonging, and Bud, Martin, and Tony each either commit or contemplate suicide when they become vulnerable. Jimmy is Ellen’s male counterpart in the text.
An examination of his gender expression, lack of belonging, and his unique escape from the city suggest that while there is no space in 1920s New York City for men who cannot or will not perform stereotypic masculinity, simply having male sex organs enables men like Jimmy—but not women like Ellen—to potentially thrive elsewhere.

**Expelling the Vulnerable and Vulnerable Expulsions: Masculinity in *Manhattan Transfer***

Jimmy is the only character, aside from Ellen’s father Ed who moves to the suburbs, to escape the city alive. While self-critical, he blames New York City, more than himself, for his unhappiness. Though Jimmy blames the city at large for the problems in his life, other characters in the novel often see Jimmy as unfit to live in 1920s Manhattan because he is insufficiently masculine. As a child, he dotes on his mother and stays inside reading. In later years he is disinterested in the financial sector job available to him by way of his uncle. He would rather write than work on Wall Street. He thinks consumer culture and billboards are frivolous. He is indecisive and vulnerable. He spends most of his time in the city complaining about it and planning his departure(s) rather than taking action. He falls in love and gets hurt. But the novel, unlike the characters who criticize Jimmy, sees Jimmy as someone unlucky and stuck in a heartless, superficial environment. By way of Jimmy, the novel’s solution to the problem of the city—and the novel does see the city as a problem—is to leave it, to distance oneself as far as possible from the people and places one disapproves of, and to live life defining one’s identity in exclusion (by what one is repulsed by) rather than manifesting a positive sense of self. But the fact that Jimmy hates Manhattan even when it is the only city he remembers complicates the novel’s attempt to craft Jimmy as a heroic, uniquely genuine escapee of hell. The novel is both a diatribe of New York City and a vehicle through which we can see that it is actually the messiness of lived life, of abjection in any form, that frightens the vulnerable and encourages
those that can—men, in this case—to flee. The nature of Jimmy’s scapegoating of the city suggests the filth he flees is something he both can and cannot escape, as he both is and is not fleeing New York City in particular.

If Ellen is portrayed as the inevitable product of a mother who rejects her for her looks and who does not seem to love her enough, Jimmy is the product of a mother who keeps him moving. Jimmy, raised partly abroad, party in hotels, and partly at boarding school, seems never to belong, as a child and, in turn, as an adult who spends much of his time trying to decide where to go and what to do. Lily, Jimmy’s mother, unlike Ellen’s mother, loves Jimmy to seeming excess. Jimmy is both her son and her only company. More than any other character, Jimmy repeats himself. Whether he is repeating particular phrases, lines of thinking, or actions, his repetitions invoke Sigmund Freud’s assertions in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.” Freud describes observing a young boy who repeatedly plays a game of “fort”/”da,” (“gone”/“there”) with a stringed toy.

The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string wound round it. It never occurred to him, for example, to drag this after him on the floor and so play horse and cart with it, but he kept throwing it with considerable skill, held by the string, over the side of his little draped cot, so that the reel disappeared into it, then said his significant ‘o-o-o-oh’ and drew the reel by the string out of the cot again, greeting its reappearance with a joyful ‘Da’ (there). This was therefore the complete game, disappearance and return, the first act being the only one generally observed by the onlookers, and the one untiringly repeated by the child as a game for its own sake, although the greater pleasure unquestionably attached to the second act. (Freud 599)
Freud suggests the game is an act of defiance through which the boy copes with his mother’s disappearance—he throws the toy in order to experience loss proactively rather than reactively, all the while driven by the pleasure that will be gained from the toy’s return. Jimmy’s internal monologues, especially those surrounding his mother’s illness, are much like the fort/da game Freud describes in that he constantly invokes traumatic possibilities as a means of refuting them in an attempt to self-soothe.

Jimmy is traumatized by his mother’s illness when he is a young child, and as the only child of a single mother, he has few sources of human comfort. Like Ellen with her father, Jimmy is more of a surrogate spouse for his mother. Jimmy tends to his sick mother, doting on her with questions like “why aren’t you eating your soup?” and “What’s the matter muddy dear?” (66). When he goes out to buy candy and does not see his mother in the sitting room upon his return, “He was terrified. She’d gone out, she’d gone away. ‘Mother!’” (71). Jimmy’s extreme fear in her absence reminds the reader that despite acting like a peer to his mother, Jimmy is in fact a child. Aside from his mother, Jimmy seeks refuge in text. When he reads an encyclopedia, though, it is not soothing, as even the few entries he skims in the “A” section he opens give accounts referring to slavery, “savage vindictiveness,” “atrocious mutilation,” and “Abortion” (73). After the word “Abortion,” Dos Passos writes: “No; his hands were icy and he felt a little sick from stuffing down so many chocolates.” It is clear, too, though, that the too-adult content he is exposed to is not helping to distract him from his fears about his mother’s health, another sort of too-adult situation for young Jimmy. Jimmy is trying to escape his mother’s physical and emotional abjection by way of a static text, but even the seemingly ultra-stable genre of the encyclopedia is tainted with bodily abjection and violence in ways that physically rattle Jimmy. Later the same evening, when his mother is being tended to by his aunt in the aftermath of her
stroke, “Terror gripped him suddenly.” He begins to wonder “If mother was dead. . . ?” but he cannot complete the thought, and “a rush of sobs chocked him” (73). In the days that follow, Jimmy repeats the phrase, “Mother’s had a stroke and next week I’ll go back to school,” (81, 82, 86) multiple times, repeatedly naming a painful fact, “Mother’s had a stroke,” as a means of passing through it by way of the normalcy of “next week I’ll go back to school,” much in manner of the Freudian fort/da game. But in Jimmy’s internal monologue, the presumably joyful idea that he will return to school is only a relief in the sense that it is known. School is not a safe haven for Jimmy—it is a traumatic zone that is familiar as opposed to the unpredictable nature of his mother’s illness. Similar to his potential retreat into the encyclopedia, it is as if Jimmy must choose between facing his mother’s abjaction at home or his own at school.

Jimmy experiences the (ordinary) trauma of being teased at school for being different; Jimmy’s difference is that he is not sufficiently tough or stereotypically male in the view of the other children. He is traumatized by this gendered teasing, as evidenced not only through his repeated phrases but also through the flashbacks he experiences. After one of the repetitions of “Mother’s had a stroke and next week I’ll go back to school,” Jimmy has a flashback, recounting a scene from school that begins: “Say Herfy have you learned to fight yet?” (81). Despite Jimmy’s pathetic cries “But I dont want to” and “I dont want to, please,” he is beaten and called “Girlboy. . . .girlboy” and “Crybaby. . . .crybaby” (81). Jimmy is deemed not a boy by the other boys but instead is labeled as some in-between creature, a “girlboy,” or a boy who acts like a girl because he will not fight another boy on command. This scene haunts Jimmy and returns to him in a sort of post-traumatic stress experience. He mentally relives a troubling school experience much in the way the soldiers Freud studied had nightmare flashbacks in the aftermath of World War I, a fresh part of the cultural imaginary at the time of Dos Passos’s writing. Jimmy’s next
repetition is a repetition-with-a-difference, at his mother’s funeral, when he’s trying “to forget the smell of lilies,” a pun on his mother’s name, Lily. He thinks, “And muddy had had a stroke and now she was buried. He couldn’t think how she used to look; she was dead that was all” (95). The last phrase, “she was dead that was all” can be read as an attempt to minimize, cope, and overcome her death, or it can be read such that her death is the only fact that matters or will matter in the future. Dos Passos, through his presentation of Jimmy’s childhood as one plagued by repetitions, flashbacks, and death transports classic Freudian war-related trauma symptoms to the upbringing of a child who does not fit into strict gender norms as defined by his peers and who spends life moving, living in hotels, attending boarding school, and in a home with a single parent who is ill. By aligning the emotional experience of a child living an ordinary life with that of traumatized soldiers, Dos Passos validates the extraordinary psychological impact ordinary traumas such as frequent moves, bullying, and family illness can have on children. Dos Passos’s dramatization of the psychology of a child intimates the kinds of changing national imaginations that ultimately contribute to the overturning of Plessy v. Ferguson.

Jimmy’s personal traumas are exacerbated by city life. When he goes out alone while his mother is sick, he sees potential kidnappers and firebugs in every sign of otherness he reads:

He walked fast uptown past the Ansonia. In the doorway lounged a blackbrowed man with a cigar in his mouth, maybe a kidnapper. But nice people live in the Ansonia like where we live. Next a telegraph office, drygoods stores, a dyers and cleaners, a Chinese laundry sending out a scorched mysterious steamy smell. He walked faster, the chinks are terrible kidnappers. Footpads. A man with a can of coaloil brushes past him, a greasy sleeve brushes against his shoulder, smells of sweat and coaloil; suppose he’s a firebug. The thought of firebug gives him gooseflesh. Fire. Fire. (70)
Jimmy is captivated by the superficial—by doorways, storefronts, facial characteristics, and clothing—by what is flammable, and he envisions superficial appearances as indicative of character and morality. Here, the repetition of “Fire. Fire,” serves as a traumatic repetition in advance; negative, imagined possibilities pulsate in Jimmy’s mind in the same way that the real traumatic experiences he endures echo there. Further, by showing Jimmy frightened at every turn in childhood, in contrast to young Ellen, who ignores her friend’s warning that Central Park is full of kidnappers, Dos Passos molds two characters who seem to inevitably take on the stereotypic characteristics of the parent they spend more time with, their opposite gender parent. Their childhood personalities manifest into their adult personalities and contribute to both the ruination of their eventual marriage and their levels of fitness for urban survival.

Psychoanalytically, Ellen, in childhood and adulthood reads like one in possession of the Lacanian phallus, who does not know she lacks, whereas Jimmy is always already traumatized by lack. At the same time Dos Passos challenges and disrupts text and textual traditions formally in this novel, he is reifying other norms within it, like those associated with gender, portraying its troubling as fodder for disaster.

Jimmy does not seem to belong anywhere after his mother’s illness and death, predominantly in ways tied to his gender expression. While his childhood lack of belonging is mostly, initially recognized by others, Jimmy, the adult, seems to have internalized this sense that he does not belong. At his aunt’s house, in the aftermath of his mother’s stroke, his aunt chastises him for sleeping in the afternoon—“imagine a boy asleep at this time of the afternoon,” and tells him “you don’t see enough children of your own age Jimmy.” Here, Aunt Emily is bothered by Jimmy falling asleep reading not just because he is a child who is not out playing with other kids but specifically because is he a boy. She also treats him as an adult, though, and
contributes to what she has deemed a problem when she declares, “A boy’s school days are the happiest time in his life. You must be sure to write your mother once a week at least James . . . You are all she has now. . . .” (83). Here, Aunt Emily calls Jimmy “James,” which matters because she directly states she wishes Jimmy were more like her own son James who is the same age. She declares boarding school as a happy place for a boy, assuming she, as an adult woman, can appropriately judge what should and should not be a happy time for Jimmy. The assumption that a miserable time and place for Jimmy should be a delight would seemingly, if anything, worsen Jimmy’s experience of his school and himself. She encourages Jimmy to have fun but immediately brings him back to adult responsibilities, to his being “all” his mother has and his need to contribute to her care. Aunt Emily openly treats Jimmy as a less good version of her son James, noting “And James I want you to know my James better. He’s the same age you are, only perhaps a little more developed and all that, and you ought to be good friends. . . I wish Lily had sent you to Hotchkiss too,” (83) the school her son attends. Maisie teases Jimmy for not knowing how to play jacks; instead, he only knows Jack roses. He knows of the roses because his mother prefers them, underscoring Jimmy’s closer association with femininity and adulthood than with masculinity or childhood. When Jimmy “ran to the window” after hearing “the scream of a locomotivewhistle and the clank of couplings on shunted freight cars,” he tries to connect with Maisie by asking her if she likes engines. Delighted with their proximity to the train, Jimmy announces “Gee I wish we lived here. . . I’ve got two hundred and seventytwo pictures of locomotives, I’ll show em to you sometimes if you like. I collect em.” Maisie labels train pictures a “funny thing to collect,” and she thinks engines “are horrid,” adding “Daddy says we’re going to move on account of the noise and smoke” (84). Even when Jimmy shows signs of stereotypic boyhood—an obsession with trains—he is shunned because of his class. His higher
class, female cousin sees trains as a nuisance. Jimmy repeatedly dissatisfies his aunt and cousins because he does not inhabit childhood or boyhood in the ways they deem appropriate. Jimmy troubles what they see as natural, and their criticisms echo the taunts of “girlboy” he receives at school.

As Jimmy gets older, he is more self-conscious and focuses on what he presumes as his lack of belonging. He fatalistically tries to prevent not belonging in advance. When Jimmy is sixteen, his uncle takes him to lunch at his social club and expresses concern about what he regards as Jimmy’s lack of initiative. Uncle Jeff, after expressing dismay that Jimmy “insists” on going to Columbia over Harvard or Yale (which is, of course, a ridiculous criticism clearly emerging from Jeff’s superficial sense of a hierarchy of cache associated with elite colleges), remarks, “I have not noticed that you felt sufficient responsibility about moneymatters. . . . sufficient enthusiasm about earning your living, making good in a man’s world” (100). Not only is Uncle Jeff concerned about Jimmy lacking enthusiasm and the potential financial burden he might face if Jimmy cannot support himself, he is concerned that, “in a man’s world,” Jimmy is not man enough. He continues:

“I realize that your education has been a little peculiar, that poor Lily did not have quite the same ideas that we have on many subjects, but the really formative period of your life is beginning. Now’s the time to take a brace and lay the foundations of your future career. What I advise is that you follow James’s example and work your way up through the firm. . . .” (100)

Uncle Jeff labels his sister-in-law’s childrearing methods as “peculiar” because she had different ideas than he does and alludes to her methods as a cause of Jimmy’s lack of “sufficient” manliness. Like his wife Emily, Jeff wants Jimmy to be more like his own son, who goes by the
more manly version of their shared name. When Jeff leans in and expectantly asks, “‘Well what are you going to make of yourself?’” Jimmy “chokes on a piece of bread, blushes, at last stammers weakly, ‘Whatever you say Uncle Jeff’” (100). While Jimmy cannot so much as speak with authority in response to his uncle’s plans for him, as if mirroring his uncle’s negative expectations of him in terms of his passivity and feminine behavior, the lunch also inspires Jimmy break with Jeff and all he represents—devotion to a traditional patriarchy and capital. His break with Uncle Jeff is internal, though; he agrees to the summer job but immediately begins condemning it mentally. It is as if Jimmy is trying to prevent, by way of internal monologue, not belonging in Uncle Jeff’s office, or in his kind of life, by striking at the good old boys club of Wall Street in advance, before its members might shun him:

. . . he stands back against the wall with his hands in his pockets, watching people elbow their way through the perpetually revolving doors; softcheeked girls chewing gum, hatchetfaced girls with bangs, creamfaced boys his own age, young toughs with their hats on one side, sweatyfaced messengers, crisscross glances, suntering hips, red jowls . . . all elbowing, shoving, shuffling, fed in two endless tapes through the revolving doors out into Broadway, in off Broadway. Jimmy fed in a tape in and out the revolving doors, noon and night and morning, the revolving doors grinding out his years like sausage meat. All of a sudden his muscles stiffen. Uncle Jeff and his office can go plumb to hell. The words are so loud inside him he glances to one side and the other to see if anyone heard him say them. They can all go plumb to hell. (101)

Jimmy experiences the people he watches as fragmented bodies, by quick notices of their cheeks, hair, hips, or faces. The fragmented bodies are like the parts of a machine, like “two endless tapes” that move cyclically through revolving doors. Predicting the future in this daydream,
Jimmy assumes that to embrace revolving doors is to embrace cyclicality, to turn his own body into “sausage meat.” Jimmy does not know what he wants here; he only knows what he does not want: to be a part of an office in downtown Manhattan, living a life he assumes will be abhorrently repetitive. Jimmy viscerally rejects aging in New York City and the stasis of his imagined job. The thought of settling into a pattern of repetitions causes Jimmy’s body to stiffen; he is compelled to always move as a result of his childhood. He ironically clings to another form of repetition, chanting “Uncle Jeff and his office can go plumb to hell” (101) again after walking downtown on Broadway. His mental repetition when juxtaposed with his physical movement highlights a disparity between his ability to move physically and mentally. Jimmy’s frequent mental repetitions suggest he is traumatized in ways that affect his personal life. His repetitions also suggest he lacks a strong sense of self. He tries to convince himself of changes and decisions through repeated self-affirmations.

Jimmy is indecisive, and he projects his frustration regarding his own indecision onto the city. When Stan, his old boarding school friend, arrives unannounced after getting expelled from Harvard, Jimmy repeatedly complains about New York City to Stan, wishing that instead of graduating from Columbia that “it’d been real Colombia” (147) and asking “Do you realize that I’ve lived all my life in this goddamn town except four years when I was little and that I was born here and that I’m likely to die here?” (147). He goes on to declare, “I’ve a great mind to join the navy and see the world” (147). He argues, “I’m losing the best part of my life rotting in New York” (150). Like his reaction to his uncle’s workplace, Jimmy decides New York City is not for him despite, in this case, being in and of it. He cannot remember another place, but he avows a desire to leave the city. He condemns New York, yet he stays.
“The trouble with me is I cant decide what I want most, so my motion is circular, helpless and confoundedly discouraging.”

“Oh but God decided that for you. You know all the time, but you wont admit it to yourself.”

“I imagine what I want most is to get out of this town, preferably first setting of a bomb under the Times Building.”

“Well why don’t you do it? It’s just one foot after another.” (148-9)

Jimmy is aware of his indecision. It is unclear what Stan thinks Jimmy knows but will not admit. It is possible that Stan is suggesting Jimmy is gay but will not allow himself to be, which other vague moments later in the text might support. Stan might also simply be suggesting Jimmy knows what he wants career-wise but will not act on such knowledge—whether his desire involves staying in or moving from the city, becoming a novelist, or being a journalist. Instead of grappling with Stan’s pointed statement, Jimmy changes the subject by making an extreme suggestion. But in the end, rather than bombing the Times Building as he entertains here, Jimmy gets a job working for the Times. Jimmy’s self-criticism is accurate in that he does seem to live a circular existence. Approximately a few months later he tells a now-homeless old friend of his mother’s, “I want to go to the war. . . . The only trouble is I’m very poor at wrangling things” (210). Here, Jimmy’s indecision, lack of follow-through, and mixed emotions about going to war are stereotypically feminine. Ultimately, Jimmy does go to the war as a volunteer for the Red Cross (rather than joining the navy, the more stereotypically masculine version of going to war

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26 One such vague moment is Tony’s assumption that Jimmy is gay. The ending, which I will explore later, holds similar potential.
that he earlier contemplated), as does Ellen. The details of his move are left unexplained in the novel, though, and it is not clear if Jimmy’s decision to finally leave the city is passive (inspired by Ellen’s departure) or active (his own decisive move). Ellen implies that the two happen to reunite on the front.27

Jimmy, in a more stereotypically feminine gender expression, is passive in intimate relationships to the point of having trouble communicating his feelings verbally. When frustrated in relationships as a result, he condemns “everything.” His relationship with Ellen mimics his relationship with his mother in its exclusive intensity and his childish passivity toward her. Jimmy is drawn to Ellen, loves her, defers to her, and is deeply affected by her moods. When Ellen tells Jimmy she is pregnant with Stan’s baby and is planning to raise him or her, Jimmy praises her, beginning, “God if I could only tell you what I…” (225). Ellen’s response of “Oh no,” is ambiguous, as I have already detailed, and she runs up her stairs declaring, “I’m a silly fool, that’s all.” Ellen is running from Jimmy’s affection, the idea of praise, the idea of raising a baby alone, or some muddled combination of these notions. After Ellen runs off, Jimmy utters, “Oh Ellie I want to say something to you. . . .” and:

Jimmy Herf stood stockstill at the foot of the brownstone steps. His temples throbbed. He wanted to break the door down after her. He dropped on his knees and kissed the step where she had stood. The fog swirled and flickered with colors in confetti about him. Then the trumpet feeling ebbed and he was falling through a black manhole. He stood stockstill. A policeman’s ballbearning eyes searched his face as he passed, a stout blue column waving a nightsick. Then suddenly he clenched his fists and walked off. “O God

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27 Ellen, when asked if she and Jimmy met in Europe, responds “‘Oh no we were old friends. . . . But we were thrown together a lot. . . . We were in the same department of the Red Cross—the Publicity Department’” (242).
everything is hellish,” he said aloud. He wiped the grit off his lips with his coatsleeve.

(225)

“Everything” that “is hellish,” seems to include: Jimmy has botched his declaration of love, he is too passive to run after Ellen, Ellen is pregnant with Stan’s baby, he is in love with his dead friend’s lover, and he is coated in city grit. A trace of Ellen’s presence on a step made it kissable; her absence leaves distasteful filth. Jimmy feels a helplessness, when apart from Ellen, that is similar to the terror he feels when he is away from his mother as a child. When Ellen and Jimmy return to New York, married, the marriage is already dissolving; the reader only experiences happy times between Ellen and Jimmy through Jimmy’s flashbacks of Europe when they are always already over. He is as haunted by happy flashbacks in his adulthood as he was by terrible ones in his childhood. The structure of the text mimics Jimmy’s sense that happiness is always out of reach.

Jimmy loves Ellen, but even in the height of his passion, he cannot verbalize genuine emotion. He is docile when Ellen suggests they rent a second place for him to sleep, which she claims will help him get more sleep in light of their differing work schedules. While Jimmy’s thought process reveals his passion (“His lips knew her lips, his arms knew the twining of her arms, he knew the deep woods of her hair, he loved her” (281)), he responds “‘Just as you like’” (281), as if he is Ellen’s servant rather than her husband. Even in the height of Jimmy’s decisiveness, he is passive:

“Ellie I dont know why it’s always so difficult for me to speak out about anything. . . . I always have to get drunk to speak out. . . . Look here do you like me any more?”

“You know I’m awfully fond of you and always shall be.”

“I mean love, you know what I mean, whatever it is. . . .” he broke in harshly.
“I guess I don’t love anybody for long unless they’re dead. . . I’m a terrible sort of person. It’s no use talking about it.”

“I knew it. You knew I knew it. O God things are pretty rotten for me Ellie.”

She sat with her knees hunched up and her hands clasped round them looking at him with wide eyes. “Are you really so crazy about me Jimps?”

“Look here lets get a divorce and be done with it.” (294)

Jimmy confronts Ellen here, yet he still defers to her. He forces her to admit she does not love him. Therefore, he both does and does not decide that they should divorce. While he utters the words “lets get a divorce,” he only does so because of Ellen’s disavowal of love. Ellen’s recognition that she does not “love anybody for long unless they’re dead” directly alludes to Stan and she and Stan’s dead baby as the people she does (still) love. Ellen does not love Jimmy long because he is not Stan but also because he is not bold, as Stan was. When Jojo calls Ellen “the wife of a bolshevik pacifist and I.W.W. agitator,” her brief response of “‘Jimps isn’t exactly that. I kind of wish he were’” (290) reveals her desire for him to be bolder and, in turn, stereotypically manlier. Her admission is followed by “‘I’m a little fed up too with all that sort of thing,’” (290) making what she is fed up with—being a wife or taking on political and social causes—unclear and/or conflated as things that are no longer satisfying. Despite not wanting to take a stand, Ellen unfairly wishes Jimmy would.

Jimmy struggles with the messiness of lived life and conflict as opposed to the presumed neatness and finality of death or something he might write (a product he could author, control, and finalize). In a flashback, Jimmy fantasizes that Ellen dies in childbirth, wondering, “Suppose she had died; I thought she would. The past would have been complete all round, framed, worn round your neck like a cameo, set up in type, molded on plates for the Magazine Section, like the
first of James Herf’s articles on The Bootlegging Ring” (274). Ellen’s death would have allowed him to experience past happy memories as “complete all around, framed,” or in other words, as untainted by the present. Instead, he faces the messy unraveling of their marriage and in turn experiences some of his memories as less joyful than they used to be. If Ellen were dead, he would also be able to control her and their relationship, which he implies would only possible for him in writing and in the wake of her death. Jimmy’s desire to stabilize and simply Ellen, engraving her in print as his loving wife, when juxtaposed with his frequent movements and/or desires to move demonstrates that Jimmy unfairly hopes others will embrace a legibility and stability he refuses. Both Jimmy and Ellen, then, want from others what they are unwilling or unable to give or be. Further, Jimmy’s desire is also a desire for Ellen to be in the same condition as his mother—dead, suggesting he only knows how to love women who are dead, literally or figuratively, as in frozen, absent, controllable, or inanimate. Jimmy’s solution to the messiness of lived life is to other and to idealize the deadening of what he cannot control.

Jimmy primarily blames himself for his unhappiness after his marriage dissolves. He faults his lack of conviction, which is wrapped up the ways he measures his gender expression against masculine stereotypes. His self-criticisms both echo and up the ante of the criticisms he received in childhood. He also blames his unhappiness on “women,” generalizing and gendering the faults he sees in Ellen. So, for Jimmy, one’s faults tend to be gendered. He thinks to himself, “women are like rats, you know, they leave a sinking ship. . . . If I’d been a little more highly sexed I might have been an artist or gone in for religion. . . If I were sufficiently romantic I supposed I’d have killed myself long ago just to make people talk about me. I haven’t even got the conviction to make a successful drunkard,” (325). Echoing a conversation with Stan years earlier, Jimmy condemns his own indecisiveness. He is jealous of people, like Stan, “a successful
drunkard,” who can or do embrace extremes—like the ends of the imagined gender binary of man/woman. Jimmy also complexly both disavows homosexuality, here. He laments his inability to be bold even in what might be seen as a rejection of prototypical masculine and heterosexual life narratives. When Jimmy admires those more “highly sexed,” the moment recalls a conversation between Jimmy and Tony Hunter, in which Tony calls himself “horribly oversexed” (199) as a code for gay when he drunkenly comes out to Jimmy while sobbing and suicidal.28 The syntax of Jimmy’s comment “if I’d been a little more highly sexed” is interesting because to say he wishes he had been “a little more highly sexed” is to acknowledge that he is to some degree “highly sexed.” Homosexuality can be seen, in this sense, as an identity he might have embraced if he had more conviction. Yet his “if” also marks his distance from what he perceives as a sexual identity position that would allow him to act and express himself more boldly. Further, his phrasing in the entire monologue suggests he views people as having fixed identities (such as woman, romantic, or “highly sexed”) that predetermine their (in)ability to act. In focusing his lament on women and on his insufficient ability to inhabit even modes of expression perceived as insufficiently masculine (such as “romantic” or “artist”), Jimmy condemns himself as not only bad at being a man but bad at being a stereotypically insufficient man.

28 He confides:

“I’ve never told anybody in the world. . . By God if you tell anybody. . . When I was a child I was horribly oversexed, when I was about ten or eleven or thirteen.”

. . .

“I’m so ashamed. I’m so afraid people will find out about it. I’m always fighting to keep it hidden, to hide my feelings.”

“But it all may be an idea. You may be able to get over it. Go to a psychoanalyst.”

“I can’t talk to anybody. It’s just that tonight I’m drunk. I’ve tried to look it up in the encyclopedia. . . . It’s not even in the dictionary.” He stopped and leaned against a lamppost with his face in his hands. “It’s not even in the dictionary.” (199)
In addition to blaming himself and Ellen, Jimmy intertwines his unhappiness with New York City, which he calls the “City of Destruction;” the United States; and the American dream. Jimmy cannot imagine places and objects—the material world—devoid of the emotional value he has always already placed on them. While walking alone in the city, his observations of the material are intertwined with his feelings about his failed marriage and his lost “faith in words” such as those of the Bill of Rights: “Pursuit of happiness, unalienable pursuit . . . right to life liberty and . . . A black moonless night” . . . “Faces of Follies girls, glorified by Ziegfeld, smile and beckon to him from the windows. Ellie in a gold dress, Ellie made of thin gold foil absolutely life-like beckoning from every window” (310). Jimmy imagines Ellen is dressed in gold, “life-like” but not lively, advertising in a shop window, and possessing a face associated with folly. Even the ideal gold of her dress is actually “thin gold foil.” In his daydream he imagines her as impenetrable, unlike women, and like a phallic skyscraper he can never enter. Ellen is like the inaccessible “streets paved with gold” of immigrant lure and like the city at large, for Jimmy:

Please mister where’s the door to this building? Round the block? Just round the block…one of two unalienable alternatives: go away in a dirty soft shirt of stay in a clean Arrow collar. But what’s the use of spending your whole life fleeing the City of Destruction? What about your unalienable right, Thirteen Provinces? His mind unreeling phrases, he walks on doggedly. There’s nowhere in particular he wants to go. If only I still had faith in words. (310)

Here, Jimmy’s inability to fulfill his own and others’ views of how he might appropriately inhabit both his gender and the city are mimicked in the content of the monologue (he cannot get in the building, despite repeatedly traveling to its different sides) as well as in the shifts from
second to third to first person. The pronoun shifts suggest Jimmy is always trying to shift his way of being in the city only to fail repeatedly. Further, Jimmy’s internal monologue juxtaposes references to the history of the country with smiling “Faces of Follies girls,” beckoning him to windows in order to question the U.S. as a place built on false advertising, where dreams cannot become realities, and where “faith in words” like “love” leads to disappointment. The objects and people of Jimmy’s dreams are inaccessible, and he blames the city more than he blames himself for destruction, for its lack of middle ground, and for failing to nurture lives that do not neatly fit into binary subject positions like rich and poor. Being real or being vulnerable (being in a “dirty soft shirt”) necessarily requires one to “go away,” or stay in the city, living under a veil (surviving through the thin veil of “a clean Arrow collar”). It is a “city of scrambled alphabets,” “of gilt letter signs” (298)—a place where all is mixed up, fake, and hollow. He repeats advertising phrases like “spring rich in gluten” (298) to himself, as if repetition and the personalization of empty phrases might provide them with meaning. Initially, Jimmy does not move because “there’s nowhere in particular he wants to go” and nothing he can genuinely believe in. Jimmy’s disillusionment with America is intertwined with his disillusionment with his relationship with Ellen, which was always already embedded in his relationship to New York City. In this respect, Jimmy’s daydream here, near the end of the novel, serves as the converse of Ed’s dream at the beginning of the novel wherein his future imagined greatness depends on both the city and Ellen.

Jimmy is the inevitable product of the city he detests and all it seems to harbor. He either recognizes this hypocrisy and hates himself more for it or is oblivious to his hypocrisy. Right before he leaves the city, Jimmy quits his job, begins staying up all night, and “everything made him bubble with repressed giggles,” (298), especially the “painted phrases” of advertising signs
populating the street. Jimmy is captivated, soon before his departure, by the seeming absurdity of the texts that come to be published and public, like the poetry of a murderer and the signage around him. Jimmy assigns blame externally; he contemplates murdering Ellen as a route to being published, he is “beginning to have the nerve to admit to myself how much I dislike all of the things I don’t want” (305). But again, what Jimmy wants remains vague at best—it seems the best he hopes for, in his development as a person, is to reject and exclude more decidedly. “Print itches like a rash inside me,” but it is never clear—like the seemingly paradoxical “rash inside”—what kind of print itches at Jimmy—the print he yearns to write, all the public print that irritates his skin, or the seemingly unfair ratio in the presence of the two. If Jimmy aspires to write fiction, or poetry, like the murderer he is jealous of, he aspires to craft exactly the sort of unrealities he detests other people for living in, acting out, or contributing to. And furthermore, if this is Jimmy’s aspiration, he does not own it.

In the final scene of the novel, for once, Jimmy does exactly as he plans. On one hand, he is decisive here, as he does in fact leave the city. On the other hand, he has no specific destination in mind. He is a person who repeatedly sees rejection and othering as a solution to his problems, and he rejects and others the city, here. Similarly, in his view, he is not sufficiently masculine or feminine. But Jimmy does not yearn to be in any particular place, nor does he have positive goals or positive qualities he embraces. Who is he and what does he want? He does not know. He takes the ferry out of Manhattan, fleeing his personal “Vesuvius” (305) in the early morning, and he contemplates his sanity:

He sits smoking happily. He can’t seem to remember anything, there is no future but the foggy river and the ferry looming big with its lights in a row like a darky’s smile. He stands with his hat off at the rail and feels the riverwind in his hair. Perhaps he’s gone
crazy, perhaps this is amnesia, some disease with a long Greek name. . . . He laughs aloud so that the old man who came to open the gates gave him a sudden sidelong look. Cookoo, bats in the belfry, that’s what he’s saying to himself. Maybe he’s right. . . . The only passenger on the ferry, he roams round as if he owned it. . . . He keeps trying to explain his gayety to himself. It’s not that I’m drunk. I may be crazy, but I don’t think so.

If Jimmy is crazy, he is suffering from “some disease with a long Greek name.” This is a reference to Ellen, who went by Helenah while they were married and resembles the Greek Helen of Troy because she is both beautiful and destructive. Just as Troy burns, Jimmy feels Manhattan is about to burn. Rather than turning to ash, too, Jimmy is propelled toward an easy exit via water. He superficially protects himself by disengaging and moving. It is as if the second coming has arrived in the form of the modern industrial city, and Jimmy, the only passenger on the departing ferry, is the sole, delirious survivor.

Jimmy’s escape is and is not an escape. When he lands, presumably on Staten Island (he is surrounded by the smell of garbage, for which Staten Island used to be the go-to destination in the city), he exchanges one redhead for another:

“Herf hurries through cavernous gloom and out of a fogblurred street. Then he is walking up an incline. There are tracks below him and the slow clatter of a freight, the hiss of an engine. At the top of a hill he stops to look back. He can see nothing but fog spaced with a file of blurred arclights. Then he walks on, taking pleasure in breathing . . . Gradually the fog things, a morning pearliness is seeping in from somewhere. Sunrise finds him walking along a cement road between dumping grounds. . . Jimmy walks fast to get out of the smell. . . .
“Say will you give me a lift?” he asks the redhaired man at the wheel.

“How fur ye goin’?”

“I dunno. . . . Pretty far” (342).

Jimmy’s means of escape, the man who is going to drive him “pretty far” away, is a redhead, just like Ellen. The man’s red hair and its alignment with Ellen signify that Jimmy both can and cannot escape; though some things may change, all hardship cannot be escaped when leaving the city, as people are flawed no matter the location. Further, Jimmy may return; he has come and gone before. The red hair, given to a man now, may also symbolize Jimmy’s rejection of women at large or his replacement of women with men. In such a reading he would be avowing previously effaced homosexual desire. Jimmy does not escape trash or grit. But here in the end he is happy in spite of it. Perhaps he has come to accept a certain amount of insanity in an insane world, or perhaps he is only happy because he is in motion.

Jimmy’s responses to city life are similar to those of the real people driving skyscraper-production and city planning generally from 1916 well into the 1960s. As Amy Koritz points out in her article “Urban Form Versus Human Function in the 1920s: Lewis Mumford and John Dos Passos,” (2004) the combination of the 1916 Zoning Law and the development of steel frame construction resulted in the flourishing production of skyscrapers. Koritz thoughtfully juxtaposes the work of Mumford, an urban planner, and Dos Passos. She argues that both men, in their attention to the negative impacts of technological developments on the everyday lives of the lower class, are sort of heroes of the everyday. She feels they presciently predict the kind of destruction that urban planning inattentive to the materiality of people’s lives—such as that
inspired or driven by Hugh Ferriss, Le Corbusier, and Robert Moses—would reap on the city for decades to come.

The goals of the 1916 zoning ordinance were similar to those driving the 1811 grid. The regulations separating residential, retail, and manufacturing were meant to aid order, stabilize land values, and ensure airflow, just as the 1811 grid aimed to do. Additionally, the 1916 law further aimed to improve the quality of life of city residents by requiring tall buildings to be set back from the street in order to allow residents greater exposure to sunlight (Koritz 105). Both city planning moves paid little attention to other quality of life issues, though, seeing city space as disorderly and in need of management, separating areas by their use, “reinforce[ing] a technical and mechanistic approach to the city” (Koritz 105). At the time, mixed-use spaces, what Jane Jacobs argues for (much later) as a means of revitalizing urban spaces, were seen as a “misplaced” “hodgepodge” “one yearns to re-arrange” (Adams quoted in Koritz 105). But, of course, other forces, particularly racism and classism, were driving the desire to segregate activities. Seemingly harmless calls for organization entailed a desire, on the part of the rich, to be distanced from the poor. As if poverty were a contagious disease, “The high-end retail spaces of Fifth Avenue, for example, were being threatened by the influx of lower class garment workers who invaded the area daily to work in the manufacturing lofts situated above the stores” (Koritz 106). The wealthy shop owners and their clientele wanted to efface the means of production and the immigrants enabling their lifestyle. Consequently, there was a “disproportionate impact of one group’s aesthetic predispositions on the arrangements governing a city to be shared with the rest of humanity” (Koritz 106). Zoning made the rich richer and the poor more distant from them: “While land values steadily increased in the wake of zoning, so did social, racial, and economic segregation” (Koritz 106). Hugh Ferriss, “the artist whose visual
renderings of skyscrapers and skylines taught architects how to design with the constraints of the 1916 zoning ordinance,” (Koritz 109) did not recognize the impact buildings might have on those living in and around them, Koritz convincingly argues. Ferriss compared buildings to a theatrical stage, a setting he saw as detached from the human drama that would be displayed on it. Koritz insinuates that, on the other hand, “The powerfully articulate work of Mumford and Dos Passos challenged these dominant trends, motivated by a deeply humane concern for the quality of ordinary lives” (102). But Dos Passos’s project is less humane than Koritz asserts.

Koritz argues *Manhattan Transfer* is a “cautionary tale” rendering “what happens to people when cities get their priorities wrong” (104). She compares the minor character Phil Sandborne with Ferriss, noting the way Dos Passos satirizes Ferriss’s ilk for romantically believing city aesthetics like a pretty skyline might result in less divorce. She writes, regarding “images of skyscrapers” provided by the fictional characters Jimmy Herf and Phil Sandbourne in Dos Passos’s novel, that they:

> . . . articulate the two extremes in the argument between Mumford and Ferriss over how urban life and designs are related: the recognition of the inhumanity of the monumental skyscrapers, in the form of its inaccessibility to Jimmy Herf, and the simplistic determinism of Sandbourne’s assumption that prettier buildings will make for better lives. (Koritz 112)

Koritz takes for granted “the inhumanity“ of skyscrapers. Similarly, she uncritically includes phrases like the “unhealthy fragmentation of city life,” (Koritz 114) calling the city “socially toxic.” The point that Koritz, Dos Passos, and Jimmy seem to miss is that it is just as fantastical and “simplistic” to believe skyscrapers cause all sorts of destruction in one’s personal life than it is to believe they might ameliorate such ills. Skyscrapers might help or hurt one’s ordinary
existence, one’s commute, or one’s view, but the emotional impact of skyscrapers is not a given or a force that acts on agent-less objects. Human subjects—whether fictional or real—animate, imagine, create, react to, and enact physical changes to the city in ways that are both positive and negative. That is my point, and Dos Passos, Ferriss, Mumford, and Koritz seem unable to acknowledge it. When Koritz argues that Dos Passos fights space that “militates against the integration of a human life into a coherent unity,” (Koritz 113) she fantastically imagines that “coherent unity” is a possibility for human life without interrogating what such a life might look like. She assumes fragmentation and humanity are antithetical, as Dos Passos’s character Jimmy does.

But messiness is a part of life, and Manhattan Transfer is more human in its fragmentation. The desire to master space, which Koritz argues skyscrapers can do but the characters in Manhattan Transfer cannot, is like the always unrealizable Lacanian “Other.” Just as Mumford’s solution to a presumed lack of community in cities is a suburban-seeming “regionalism,” Jimmy’s solution to both the city and the problems in his life, which he experiences as intertwined, is to get as far away as possible from the city. Even in the inhumane, nightmarish city Dos Passos portrays, there is humanity. There are people outraged that babies are being flushed down toilet pipes. Ellen lingers to find out Anna’s fate. Even Jimmy, when happy, finds city signs beautiful and pauses to look at birds. The same signs are viewed with distress or laughter depending upon Jimmy’s very human, fluctuating, frame of mind. Dirt, in Dos Passos’s Manhattan Transfer, is never just dirt. In this way the novel is both full of and devoid of New York City’s built environment.

Manhattan Transfer’s treatment of New York City is further complicated by the resemblance of its ambivalent hero, Jimmy, to John Dos Passos himself. Dos Passos was raised
solely by his mother. Dos Passos’s wealthy, famous, lawyer father kept Dos Passos’s mother as a mistress, and Dos Passos spent most of his early childhood moving from hotel to hotel abroad, as his father thought it best that he only meet up with them outside the U.S. (Lynn BR3). Dos Passos both adored and hated his father, who did not recognize him as his son until he was sixteen and enrolling in college, two years after his father married his mother. Dos Passos’s mother died a year later, and his father died a year after that. These seemingly traumatic facts of Dos Passos’s real upbringing haunt and define both his real life and that of the “generic hero,” as Blanche Gelfant so aptly labels him, featured in much of Dos Passos’s fiction. For example, the real Dos Passos “mystified his friends by his unwillingness to stay put for more than three or four days at a time” (Lynn BR3). Likewise, “home for him was a series of hotels” (Lynn BR3). In real life he moved from an entrenchment in leftist politics to an engrossment in socialism and finally to an intense identification with conservatism, rejecting one way of extreme thinking only to embrace the next. Similarly, of Dos Passos’s fiction, Gelfant argues:

Out of inner necessity, perhaps the necessity for preservation, the generic hero finds new targets for the hatred he had for so long directed against himself: the Army, the ruling capitalistic class, the Communist Party, and finally, the New Deal. That these hatreds imply social and moral judgments which call for the reader’s consideration must be recognized. But it must also be recognized that these hatreds are always implicated in the characters’ neurotic pattern of inner need and self-defeating conflict. The hero’s inner compulsion to define himself through a social role in turn defines the novels. (149)

Dos Passos’s “generic hero” is based on himself, and the hero takes the form of Jimmy in Manhattan Transfer. The object of his hatred in Manhattan Transfer is New York City. But while Dos Passos’s text raises real problems of the city, such as filth, corruption, and hypocrisy,
he is also projecting onto the city his own “neurotic pattern of inner need and self-defeating
correct.” *Manhattan Transfer* is in some ways not about the city at all, which is easy for readers
like Koritz to miss because so much of the text literally details the city. Gelfant recognizes this as
a trend in the way Dos Passos is read when she writes:

His obsessive thematic concern with man’s inner dissonances has never been fully
recognized or explored, perhaps because his conspicuous skill in creating the outer or
objective aspects of his characters’ world—the externalities of local scenes, the social
mores and talk of the people, the political aura, and the long-range underlying historical
drift—capture and hold our critical attention as the brilliant achievement of his art. These
multitudinous details of the outer world may be viewed, however as the formal
paraphernalia within the novel for dealing with his characters’ personal and often
neurotic problems of identity. (133)

New York City, in *Manhattan Transfer*, is indeed the “formal paraphernalia” encasing Jimmy
and presumably Dos Passos’s “neurotic problems of identity” such as his inability to “wrangle”
things or act with determination. Jimmy travels the (central) street, literally and figuratively,
meets ordinary people and lives an ordinary existence in New York City. But if the novel
privileges the common people and the street level, as Koritz claims it does, this privileging is
only a means of more readily condemning the common people and places of the city. Indeed,
Jimmy leaves the city behind for a trip in a truck.

Another way of explaining what Dos Passos is doing via Jimmy is to think of Jacob Riis,
known for his groundbreaking expose, *How the Other Half Lives*, wherein he photographed poor
New Yorkers and explored their living conditions. But Riis also condemned the morality of his
subjects and assumed they were the inevitable products of their environments. He denied them
agency. Riis sympathized with but pathologized the poor. Jimmy, if not Dos Passos, similarly attends to ordinary, working class, and poor New Yorkers; he also sees them as fatalistically marred. While he attends to a wide variety of characters, I disagree that Dos Passos’s Manhattan is “a city thick with highly individuated persons constrained but not determined by the impersonal space they move through” (102 Koritz). Dos Passos’s characters may seem different or “highly individuated” at first glance, but upon careful examination they are often repetitions-with-a-difference of one another. Characters, like Cecily, Anna, Stan, and Emile, mimic the lives of more predominant characters like Ellen and Jimmy, as if providing multiple alternative endings to their stories. Further, they often seem quite determined by their environment, as Ellen seems destined from her birth to live a life as one invested in the superficial, and Jimmy, from his childhood, seems destined to wander.

It matters that the final moment of the novel finds Jimmy in truck, a private vehicle. Even Mumford, who argued for a city in which the machine played a secondary role to the needs of humans, supported “the automobile as a tool for alleviating the congestion of large urban centers” (Koritz 108). But cars, like the subway before them, “simply enabled cities to accommodate the increasing congestion that they themselves encouraged” (Koritz 108). Jimmy escapes by way of a modern technological development that has unexpected negative consequences. Vehicles pollute the air, cause congestion, and inspire the destruction of much land in order to build highways. Furthermore, owning a vehicle is part of the traditional version of success Jimmy does and does not want to embrace. Jimmy’s complaint, then, is his escape. Jimmy performs contradiction even as he seems to finally make a definitive move.

Contradiction envelops New York City, too, but the city also subsumes contradiction, which is presumably why New York City is a difficult place for Jimmy to leave. The final
chapter of the novel is titled “The Burthen of Nineveh.” Dos Passos invokes an archaic form of the word “burden,” here. Not only does “burthen” sound like both “burden” and “birth” but it means both “a load” and “that which is borne” (“Burthen”). At the close of the novel, it is spring. So it is as if the novel is declaring spring, rebirth, or cycles as a heavy load, a burden. Coleridge, in the “Biographia Literaria” defines imagination as a force that “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate. . . it is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead” (Coleridge XIII). Whether or not John Dos Passos can imagine a fragmented, filthy island as a place that can foster humanity, his characters, in their contradictions, vulnerability, and lingering, prove it is one. Life is a burden for Ellen and Jimmy, but each character also experiences moments of happiness intertwined with their reflections on the built environment they more often loathe. If Dos Passos presents a cautionary tale, he also shows—rarely but definitely—that renewed imagination might (re)animate the city and/or its inhabitants.
Chapter 3

Psychology of the Surface: Fantasy and Feminine Performance in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929)

Nella Larsen’s *Passing* narrates the 1920s reunion of two old friends, both of whom are light-skinned black women capable of passing for white. The women, Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield, have not seen one another for twelve years. In their time apart, they have differently inhabited bodies that similarly challenge the binary racial divisions black and white. Clare married a white man who does not know she is black, while Irene married a dark-skinned black doctor and lives in Harlem. Clare lives in the South with her husband, travels with him frequently, and idealizes Harlem as a haven she cannot access. Irene, similarly, views Clare’s lifestyle as intriguing yet inaccessible to her, as she simultaneously disapproves of Clare’s choice and is jealous that Clare seems to have an easy life untethered to her roots or to fellow black people. Clare and Irene’s reunion unearths Irene’s sense of stability in her body, inspiring her to try and regain the control over her life she feels she has lost. Irene therefore tries to entrench in blackness, her marriage, Harlem, and life in the United States generally as a means of clinging to what she has held dear for many years. For Clare, the friends’ reunion is freeing and delightful; she views Irene as a portal through which she may reencounter the black social sphere she has so missed. The novel’s portrayal of the consequences of this reunion and the (re)new(ed) senses of self it inspires are ambiguous.

What is clear, at the end of the novel, is that Clare dies and Irene feels guilty, but the text is blatantly ambiguous regarding Clare’s cause of death and any potential involvement with it on Irene’s part. Clare dies after falling, jumping, or being pushed out a window at a party in Harlem immediately after her white husband storms into the party, declaring his new knowledge that she
is black. If Clare is murdered, the prime suspects are: Irene, who comes to assume Clare is having an affair with her husband and who entertains killing Clare; and John Bellew, Clare’s husband. The white authorities who arrive on the scene of Clare’s death declare it a “death by misadventure.” The novel leaves the parameters of such misadventure unclear. Is Clare responsible for her own death because she challenges national, legal, subject positions? Is Clare at fault for transgressing against spatial segregation trends or the boundaries of Irene’s marriage? Is Clare to blame because she forays into whiteness and/or returns to blackness? Or is it through someone else’s misadventure that Clare dies? Further still, is Clare’s death only a “death by misadventure” in the eyes of white authorities? The novel *Passing* itself is performative in its insistent lack of clarity, mirroring the ambivalence and performativity of both of its main characters.

Irene, like Ellen from *Manhattan Transfer*, is deeply invested in appearances and the superficial. While readers of *Manhattan Transfer* catch glimpses of Ellen’s thought process, most often we see her dialogue and action rather than her interior monologue. The unique narrative style of *Passing*—most aptly described as third person limited—however, provides a window into the psychology of a woman wrapped up in surfaces. Through the wealthy, black Irene’s internal monologues, acting, and fantasies we learn that gender, class, race and one’s location within New York City together require subjects to adapt and perform different kinds of gendered, class-based, and racial performances in order to belong in a given group. It becomes clear, further, through my study of Irene here, that while she is humiliated by racism, she also often acts on the very racist logic that so harms her. Studying Irene’s thoughts and actions in the context of legal segregation makes it increasingly clear that what happens when Irene fiercely judges Clare, when Crane’s Mary outcasts her daughter, when Dos Passos’s Ellen aborts babies
and advises others to do so, and when Dos Passos’s Jimmy condemns New York City at large, is impelled by a whole kind of failure of imagination of individuals and groups across classes in this era. In all of these cases, marginalized parties replicate, to the detriment of self and other, the national, local, gendered, and class-based logics dominating them.

The characters in *Manhattan Transfer* demonstrate that the combination of one’s body and one’s gender expression together factor into one’s ability to belong. Men who are not deemed sufficiently masculine do not fit in, while women, perhaps only beautiful women, who act masculine, can be quite popular. *Passing* allows us to see that the combination of not only one’s body and one’s gender expression matter in terms of belonging, but also the combination of one’s body and one’s racial expression matter too. *Manhattan Transfer* mostly effaces complexities of racial expression by repeatedly relegating non-white characters to minor, service roles and disallowing their dynamism and/or self-expression to be represented on the page.²⁹

Rather than being hailed to perform masculinity to survive and belong in the city, like Mary in *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets* or Ellen in *Manhattan Transfer*, the wealthier, black women featured in *Passing* reject masculinity. In order to fit into the black bourgeois society of 1920s Harlem, both of the main characters, Clare and Irene, reject the desires of their husbands and act in a variety of ways, all of which comply with rigidly defined, appropriate upper-class feminine behavior as seen at the time. The women host teas, do not work, and are deeply invested in parties and what they will wear to them. Further, the women (re)negotiate their relationship to their bodies and their racial expression as a means of optimizing belonging in changing

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²⁹ Congo, the one quite visible non-white character, is of indeterminate race. For a thoughtful, extended analysis of Congo, see: Xavier, Silvia “Crosstown Jakes in 1920s Manhattan: Racial Formations in John Dos Passos’s *Manhattan Transfer* and Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem.*” *Modern Fiction Studies* 54.4 (2008): 715-743.
situations. The somewhat unique ability that Clare and Irene have to manipulate their racial appearance provides them with a false sense of control over matters generally seen as uncontrollable. I investigate the fantasies and performances of Clare and Irene as well as their relationship to the real life Nella Larsen in order to suggest that existing in a world that judges one so harshly on superficial terms often prevents subjects from grappling with exceptionality in others and causes them to hyper-invest in the superficial in destructive ways.

**Irene: Superficial Belonging and Stasis**

Irene Redfield is deeply invested in appearances and the superficial. In the opening paragraph of the novel, Irene “immediately” knows the sender of a letter she receives because its “thin Italian paper with its almost illegible scrawl seemed out of place and alien.” She labels even the banal envelope as “mysterious and slightly furtive.” She affirms her original judgment regarding its sender, adding “Furtive, but yet in some peculiar, determined way a little flaunting. Purple ink. Foreign paper of extraordinary size” (171). The appearance of even the outer shell of the letter and the color of ink used, for Irene, are indicators of its sender’s malicious motives. She is sure the letter is from Clare. The lack of a return address on the envelope combined with the presence of a New York postmark on it, for Irene, indicate Clare’s “attitude towards danger,” that she is “stepping always on the edge of danger.” Irene also labels Clare as selfish. In her view, Clare is “not drawing back or turning aside. Certainly not because of any alarms of feeling of outrage on the part of others.” Irene’s line of thinking makes it clear that she feels alarm and outrage at the possibility of seeing Clare in New York. Irene is less clear about why she is so alarmed by Clare’s presence, a thought to which I will return. Irene disapproves of Clare’s whereabouts. She sees it as dangerous that Clare, passing for white, would come to New York and want to see her, necessarily approximating blackness by way of approximating Irene, her
family, and Harlem. But more so, Irene disapproves of Clare herself, and the letter affirms her scorn before she has even read it.

Similarly, in their reunion meeting two years prior, before Irene recognizes Clare, she thoroughly assesses Clare by way of her dress. Irene first describes Clare as:

a sweetly scented woman in a fluttering dress of green chiffon whose mingled pattern of narcissuses, jonquils, and hyacinths was a reminder of pleasantly chill spring days. . . an attractive-looking woman, was Irene’s opinion, with those dark, almost black, eyes at that wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin. Nice clothes too, just right for the weather, thin and cool without being mussy, as summer things were so apt to be.

(176-177)

Irene scrutinizes Clare’s dress, attending to its fabric, patterns, thickness, and appropriateness, marking her extreme attentiveness to others’ appearances. She also cares deeply about her own looks, as when “her mind returned to her own affairs,” those affairs are “the problem of the proper one of two frocks for the bridge party that night” (177). Irene is worried about what to wear. Irene’s concerns about her own dress and that of others mark her adherence to a rigid, stereotypic upper-class feminine culture in which women are valued more as objects of beauty rather than as agents. Irene is immersed in this value system and does not seem to object to it. She also recognizes upper-class feminine appearances as fragile matters when, in the cab on the way to the Drayton for tea, she “made some small attempts to repair the damage that the heat and crowds had done to her appearance” (175). In a move that foreshadows her personal relationships throughout the novel, Irene recognizes that forces beyond her control might damage the way she looks, and she feels a need to be vigilant in response.
It is not just Clare’s appearance that matters to Irene; when Irene passes for white in order to take tea on the Drayton Hotel rooftop, she is above all concerned that she will be the subject of a scene. She thinks, “It wasn’t that she was ashamed of being a Negro, or even of having it declared. It was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably do it, that disturbed her” (179). Irene is accustomed to belonging in elite Harlem and amongst old friends there in Chicago; the fear that she might be “ejected from any place” reveals that belonging is what Irene holds most dear. Irene’s fear is not of being kicked out of the Drayton or of being recognized as black but of not belonging in any literal or figurative place she was once presumed to belong. It is, further, not just the idea of rejection that bothers Irene. It is the idea that her rejection would be public and witnessable on the ordinary, upper-class rooftop stage that makes her feel “anger, scorn, and fear.” This fear marks Irene as one consumed by surfaces and appearances, whether they are social, racial, gendered, or class-based. Similarly, when Irene impulsively invites Clare to join her mutual old friends for a weekend away:

. . . in the very moment of giving the invitation she regretted it. What a foolish, what an idiotic impulse to have given way to! She groaned inwardly as she thought of the endless explanations in which it would involve her, of the curiosity, and the talk, and the lifted eyebrows. It wasn’t, she assured herself, that she was a snob, that she cared greatly for the petty restrictions and distinctions with which what called itself Negro society chose to hedge itself about; but that she had a natural and deeply rooted aversion to the kind of front-page notoriety that Clare Kendry’s presence in Idlewild, as her guest, would expose her to. (186)
Irene notes “Negro society” as a culture of “petty restrictions and distinctions.” She marks herself as a “snob” through her very attempts to negate such a distinction, as she does not want to be met with “lifted eyebrows,” to have to explain why she has brought Clare, or to be compelled to tell others what Clare has been up to for the last twelve years. If she cares about “the kind of front-page notoriety” that Clare would bring to her, then she indeed cares about the strictures guiding black upper class culture. Clare’s presence would cause a scene, and Irene shudders at the thought of a negative spotlight. Clare would be looked down upon for passing in her everyday life and also, perhaps, for her lower class background as a now-dead alcoholic janitor’s daughter. The other fathers in their group of friends were successful professionals (183). Clare’s response to the invitation affirms that both Clare and Irene, by association, would be met with ire at the gathering. When Clare declines the invitation, she notes “And believe me, ‘Rene, I do thank you for asking me. Don’t think I’ve entirely forgotten just what it would mean for you if I went. That is, if you still care about such things” (186). “Such things” are superficial, and both women “still” care about them deeply. Clare is not going because “it wouldn’t do at all”—her passing charade might be threatened. Irene admits, “she was relieved. And for the very reason at which Clare had hinted” (186). Both women understand and act in their everyday lives by negotiating superficially-grounded, unwritten rules.

Irene’s desires to avoid a scene and maintain belonging at the Drayton and in her old group of friends are small indicators of her greatest aspiration in life generally—to maintain her current status quo. In her fight to maintain consistency, Irene is always already fighting a losing battle with both her husband and Harlem, as she mentally effaces the aliveness of both. Irene takes pleasure in control, and performs as a strategy for maintaining it. Irene is troubled by aberrations from what she can predict and manage. Brian, Irene feels, has changed.
She thought, “Whatever it is, if I only knew what it was, I could manage it.” Brian again. Unhappy, restless, withdrawn. And she, who had prided herself on knowing his moods, their causes and their remedies, had found it first unthinkable and then intolerable, that is so like and yet so unlike those other spasmodic restlessnesses of his, should be to her uncomprehensible and elusive. (246)

This is one of many instances in which Irene is noted as taking pride in her ability to manage her family and maintain the status quo in their everyday lives. She is not troubled, here, by Brian being upset but rather by her inability to know and in turn manage his feelings. She wishes Brian were less like a person, less spasmodic, and more like an object with no life of its own. This is also how she herself most likes to appear in order to mask her true feelings and harbor belonging. It is as if she cannot comprehend his personhood and the notion that he might change with time; Brian’s malleability is not only “unthinkable” but it is “intolerable” to her, even though she knows that her own appearance and demeanor often do not portray her reality. She experiences his humanity as an affront to hers, mimicking in her personal relationships the logic of national legal segregation, as she wants to erase the desires and humanity of a person she deems other than and less valuable than herself.

In terms of her desire to remain in the version of Harlem she inhabits, Irene is always already fighting a losing battle. Irene refuses to go to Brazil as her husband wishes to do. But what Irene does not or will not recognize is that Brazil, in essence, is always already coming to her. The influx of black immigrants of foreign birth to Harlem skyrockets in the 1920s. Black immigrants from the West Indies, for example, come in a steady flow to Harlem, as they were not subject to the kinds of strict restrictions immigrants from Europe or Asia faced in that decade (Osofsky 131). The Harlem Irene so dearly clings to and that Clare, too, idealizes, is and will be
the destination of many South American and Caribbean immigrants of color in the decades to come. Many upper and middle class Harlem blacks of the 1920s, like Irene and Brian, leave Harlem, spreading to the Bronx, Long Island and beyond when their ideal Harlem changes with migration, immigration, “intraracial antagonism” (Osofsky 134), and physical representations of racial tension such as the 1943 Harlem race riots (Griffin 127). Irene suffers from her own blind spots in her attempts to craft stability, representing and foreshadowing both her personal descent into a life of ambiguity and the national and individual suffering legal segregation both reaped and reaps.

Because Irene’s husband is successful and she in turn feels she belongs in elite Harlem society, Irene is deeply committed to remaining in Harlem. She experiences her husband’s behavior and desire to move to Brazil as a threat to the happy stasis she has cultivated. Irene cannot fathom Brian’s dissatisfaction with their shared life because she is satisfied. When Brian, a successful doctor, says, “‘I hate sick people, and their stupid, meddling families, and smelly, dirty rooms, and climbing filthy steps in dark hallways,’” (217) she is unable or unwilling to grasp that one could be good at something and loathe it or that someone would want something other than success out of a job. She asks herself:

Hadn’t his success proved that she’d been right in insisting that he stick to his profession right there in New York? . . . Was she never to be free of it, that fear which crouched, always, deep down within her, stealing away the sense of security, the feeling of permanence, from the life which she had so admirably arranged for them all, and desired so ardently to have remain as it was? That strange, and to her fantastic, notion of Brian’s of going off to Brazil, which, though unmentioned, yet lived within him; how it frightened her, and—yes, angered her! “Well?” he asked lightly. “I’ll just get my things.
One minute,” she promised and turned upstairs. Her voice had been even and her step was firm, but in her there was no slackening of the agitation, of the alarms, which Brian’s expression of discontent had raised (218).

Irene equates success with rightness. Further, for Irene, Harlem was and is the ideal destination—she wants nothing more than their life in Harlem, and she does not aim to move elsewhere. She attributes Brian’s dissatisfaction with his desire to live in Brazil rather than in New York, and she dismisses his presumed desire as strange and fantastic. She does not see it as her role to engage the fantasies of her partner, but rather her main goal is to have all “remain as it was.” She sees their lifestyle as a thing she, rather than Brian, the breadwinner, “admirably arranged for them all.” Therefore she asserts her own more stereotypically feminine, passive-aggressive role in fights resulting in their decision to stay in Harlem as a more valuable contribution to their lifestyle than the work Brian does. She sees “security” and “permanence” for her family as something that can be cultivated solely by her. Just as she does not want the location of her home disturbed, she does not want the appearance of calm within her home to be challenged. Rather than ask Brian what is wrong, Irene rages inward, ever careful that things appear fine. Rejecting a more stereotypically masculine directness, she feels alarm, agitation, fear, and anger, but she does not speak of these emotions. Instead, she embraces stereotypically feminine passivity and decorum regardless of her feelings; she acts as if undisturbed, only speaking of superficial matters like needing to get her things before heading downtown. Her ability to act for Brian in this scenario is enhanced by her stage. Their home, a zone of comfort, provides her with an easy exit. She can easily busy herself getting her things and collecting objects; she can go upstairs to regain the composure she has lost. The “security” and “permanence” of her family’s life are a source of pride for Irene, and her goal is to maintain
them through her own maneuvers. Irene is not moved by her husband’s unhappiness but instead selfishly fears his unhappiness is a threat to her stability. She wants to manage markers of his aliveness—such as his emotions—and hopes he will be more like an object she can arrange. She does not include his happiness in her definition of a stable, secure, or successful family life because she values surfaces rather than depths including what Brian or even she herself feels. Irene’s rejection of Brian’s desires typifies her general rejection of the masculine as a force that matters.

In Irene’s view, the masculine is something to be managed, manipulated, and controlled. Her primary means of rejecting the masculine are her performances wherein she pretends Brian’s opinions or desires matter to her. Irene believes she can manage her husband in the service of keeping their lives from changing. When a conversation with Brian does not go as it is rehearsed in her head, she is angry with herself for “opening” the conversation incorrectly. Irene means for a question about her son’s schooling and the too-adult ideas he might be acquiring from older students to lead to Brian agreeing with her. Then, she would have suggested Brian take their son abroad. Instead, when he chastises her for babying their children:

She was vexed with herself for having chosen, as it had turned out, so clumsy an opening for what she had intended to suggest: some European school for Junior next year, and Brian to take him over. If she had been able to present her plan, and he had accepted it, as she was sure that he would have done, with other more favorable opening methods, he would have had that to look forward to as a break in the easy monotony that seemed, for some reason she was wholly unable to grasp, so hateful to him. (221)

Irene’s reflection indicates that she tends to rehearse conversations with her husband as if rehearsing for a play performance, and here she is angry that with her ordinary stage partner, her
husband, she was unable to perform as planned. She strategizes family plans in isolation rather than with her husband. She both forms and reflects upon her plans in their bedroom, often while peering into the mirror. It is as if she is using her own, flat reflection as a stand-in for the all-too-real partner she would ideally consult about their shared life. She would rather efface his three-dimensional humanity, though. Irene’s repeated use of “opening” invokes both an opening scene, which sets the tone for the rest of a theatrical performance, and a game of chess, a tactical game in which a bad opening might mar an entire game. Irene finds pleasure in “easy monotony” and resents that Brian does not. Irene would much rather win than see her husband happy. Part of her failure in this “opening” might be attributed to Irene’s lack of control of the stage she was on. The conversation she is reflecting upon occurs in a taxi, which offers Irene no momentary escapes, stasis, or sense of domination—all of which she is afforded when acting for Brian at home. Instead, Irene’s only alternative to this argument is to leave the taxi abruptly, which she does. She views her exit from the cab as final and irreversible. Being direct with her husband or trying out her plan again at home both seem out of the realm of possibility in Irene’s view because she is always performing upper-class femininity. Irene’s interpretation of the role demands she act casual and appear unruffled, even when grappling with serious matters while alone with her husband.

Irene not only rejects both masculine directness and experiencing the personhood of her husband, but also she rejects traits in her children that she deems masculine/as coming from their father. She performs superior motherhood for herself and others in ways the text subtly questions. She takes it as a direct shot when Clare announces, “Children aren’t everything… There are other things in the world, though I admit some people don’t seem to suspect it.” Irene replies, “You know you don’t mean that, Clare. You’re only trying to tease me. I know very well
that I take being a mother rather seriously. I am wrapped up in my boys and the running of my house. I can’t help it” (241). Although she may well be wrapped up in her boys, and Clare may well be teasing her, it is also interesting to note that in the space of the text, Irene does not appear consumed by her children. Instead she is consumed with thoughts about Brian and Clare. This discrepancy suggests Irene’s defense of her extreme devotion to motherhood is a bit of an act. When Irene is distracted one day she thinks, “The boys! For once she’d forgotten them!” (252).

This moment, when read in light of her scant focus in the text on her children, makes it clear that either Irene does not engage her deepest thoughts and concerns mentally/in the mental lifeworld portrayed by the text, her priorities have shifted but she does not seem to recognize the shift, or she pretends for herself that she is always thinking of her boys when in reality she is more concerned about her appearance and her relationships with fellow adults. It is not as if, in the text represented, Irene cares nothing for her children. She references them as a reason to stay in her marriage when she suspects Brian of an affair. But when her avowals of dedicated motherhood in self-narrative and conversation with others are juxtaposed with how little of the text and in turn her thoughts engage her children, a mismatch is clear. In the taxi scene with Brian described above, she has no reservations about sending her son Junior away for a year if such a move would resolve a marital dispute. She rejects tendencies she witnesses in her son Ted as coming from Brian, even when the text makes it clear that Ted takes after her:

Junior, tall for his age, was almost incredibly like his father in feature in coloring; but his temperament was hers, practical and determined, rather than Brian’s. Ted, speculative and withdrawn, was apparently less positive in his ideas and desires. About him there was a deceiving air of candor that was, Irene knew, like his father’s show of reasonable acquiescence. If, for the time being, and with a charming appearance of artlessness, he
submitted to the force of superior strength, or some other immovable condition or
circumstance, it was because of his intense dislike of scenes and unpleasant argument.

Brian over again. (223)

The “intense dislike of scenes” Irene assesses as “Brian over again” is quite obviously, at a
minimum, a trait she shares too. She repeatedly acts and/or manipulates her race in order to avoid
scenes. Irene either does not or will not recognize this tendency of hers; instead she projects what
she does not like in one of her sons onto her husband, trying to masculinize and distance herself
from traits she deems negative. She simultaneously tries to align herself with superior upper-
class femininity and mothering.

Irene refuses to acknowledge John Bellew, Clare’s white husband, on the street when she
and her friend Felise accidentally bump into him. This impulsive move and her subsequent
rationale for her response note rejection of masculinity and the masculine gaze as an integral part
of the appropriate (street) behavior for upper-class women that Irene clings to in order to belong.
Despite her proclaimed distaste for acting, and her self-loathing after acting in front of John
Bellew in Chicago, Irene easily avows the Harlem street as her stage and recreates her first
meeting with Bellew with a difference. In this repetition, her commitment to acting is even
deeper. Motivated by impulsive racial solidarity and a desire to maintain Clare’s secret even
though she disapproves of it, Irene’s decision and commentary about her encounter suggest
performing on the street is a matter upon which lives turn:

“Pardon,” Irene begged laughingly, and looked up into the face of Clare Kendry’s
husband.

“Mrs. Redfield!”

His hat came off. He held out his hand, smiling genially.
But the smile faded at once. Surprise, incredulity, and—was it understanding?—passed over his features.

He had, Irene knew, become conscious of Felise, golden, with curly black Negro hair, whose arm was still linked in her own. She was sure, now, of the understanding in his face, as he looked at her again and then back at Felise. And displeasure.

He didn’t, however, withdraw his outstretched hand. . . .

But Irene didn’t take it. Instinctively, in the first glance of recognition, her face had become a mask. Now she turned on him a totally uncomprehending look, a bit questioning. Seeing that he still stood with hand outstretched, she gave him the cool appraising stare which she reserved for mashers . . . (259)

Irene and Felise take for granted that a white woman would not be seen arm and arm with a black woman. Felise easily interprets the situation. When Irene leads her away, “Felise drawled: ‘Aha! Been ‘passing,’ have you? Well, I’ve queered that’” (260). For Irene, to be seen clinging to Felise is to be black and to have her passing queered. Irene feels she cannot know and recognize both Felise and John without jeopardizing Clare’s marriage. Irene’s “face had become a mask;” she acts as if she does not know him and gives him a “cool appraising stare.” But Felise is not fooled by the mask, and Irene worries John is not either. Irene’s explanation for why she cares that her passing has been “queered” reveals the curious logic guiding Irene’s occasional passing: “I do, but not for the reason you think. I don’t believe I’ve ever gone native in my life except for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theater tickets, and things like that. Never socially I mean, except once. . . .” (260). Irene calls passing going “native,” as if the natives of her home were white and as if she were not a native in her homeland. She only passes “for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theater tickets, and things like that,” which she separates from
passing “socially” and using her name while she passes. Irene takes it for granted that what she
does is different than what Clare does. She believes there are different kinds of passing, with
some kinds being morally superior to others. Further, though, this scene of street theater also
reveals that it is not unusual for Irene to act on the street, as she has a kind of stare she typically
gives particular kinds of men. She is accustomed to warding off “mashers,” men who would
threaten her sense of belonging in upper-class feminine circles were she to associate with them.

Irene not only acts in her home with ease and upon instinct, but she avows acting as a typical,
comfortable strategy she embraces for surviving everyday life as a woman walking the streets of
Harlem. She is able to determine who the “mashers” are in Harlem. She knows the streets there
in a way that moving to Brazil would unearth.

When Brian tries to manipulate the superficial, acting pleasant on the surface when he is
inwardly upset, Irene rejects his attempt to co-opt her general life strategy. She belittles him.
Irene looks outside herself for sources of Brian’s unhappiness and faults him for wanting the
sense of control she so treasures. Irene suggests Brian’s desire to control his own life and/or
break a Harlem monotony he does not enjoy is a defect for which World War I might be to blame.

The old fear, with strength increased, the fear for the future, had again laid its hand on
her. And, try as she might, she could not shake it off. It was as if she had admitted to
herself that against that easy surface of her husband’s concordance with her wishes,
which had, since the war had given him back to her physically unimpaired, covered an
increasing inclination to tear himself and his possessions loose from their proper setting,
she was helpless. (223)
Irene’s specific declaration that the “war had given him back to her physically unimpaired,” suggests that the war may have returned Brian mentally impaired. She cannot imagine why he is unhappy and why she cannot control him as easily as she used to be able to do. She seems to be searching for causes that are not a part of their life together in Harlem. She implies that having left Harlem—to go to war and immerse himself in a masculine arena—rather than staying in Harlem, is the cause of Brian’s assumed problem. This long, muddled sentence requires careful reading in order to pair subject and verb, cause and effect, mimicking the seeming distance Irene wants to keep from her professed helplessness “against the easy surface of her husband’s concordance with her wishes.” She feels there is a “proper” setting for her husband and his things, and she is troubled by his desire for change. She does not want to move to a stage over which she does not feel mastery. This muddled sentence is also curious because what Irene envisions herself powerless against is her husband’s manners, not something like his aggressiveness, as one might imagine as more difficult to navigate. Brian has beaten her at her own game, for the moment, and in response, Irene tries to subvert and pathologize Brian’s unique desires and capacity for change—or in other words, his very humanity.

**Clare: Trafficking at the Surface**

From the opening scene of the novel when Irene encounters Clare’s letter postmarked in New York, it is clear that, like the flood of new immigrants, Clare is always already on her way to Harlem. It is also immediately clear that Irene experiences Clare as a threat; *why* she experiences Clare as a threat unfolds more subtly and is often less clear. In Chicago and in the two years after their meeting, Clare disturbs Irene because she causes Irene to rethink her racial expression and previously taken-for-granted allegiance to other members of her race. Clare troubles the borders of race and race loyalty for Irene in both her decision to regularly pass for
white and in her overzealous pursuit of blackness by way of Irene. Irene would rather forget Clare and excise Clare from her life because she troubles the racial logic upon which Irene otherwise wishes to operate. When Clare appears in Harlem, Irene perceives Clare as a threat to her own belonging amongst the black elite because Irene will have to continually explain the illegible Clare to fellow black elites (who both Clare and Irene agree care about the backgrounds of strangers who appear anew, unlike, in Clare’s view, their white counterparts who ask few questions of them). Irene’s perceived allegiance to Clare might make Irene’s friends question her loyalty to the race, and Clare would potentially make Irene’s own Chicagoness or outsider status vivid to her fellow Harlemites. Clare’s lower-class roots might translate into less-than-strict adherence to upper class black feminine mores in ways that might reflect poorly on Irene. Irene knows she cannot resist giving in to Clare’s persistent behavior, which, if Clare were to remain in Harlem at length, would cause problems for Irene’s desire to control all that surrounds her and maintain what she has carefully arranged. But in time, two perhaps simpler reasons emerge to explain why Irene experiences Clare as a threat. These reasons are only belatedly apparent through dialogue involving Irene. Irene sees Clare as a threat to her own means of belonging because Clare is exceptionally beautiful and because she has been disloyal to the race. She feels Clare has not earned belonging in a community to which she has not been loyal but that she will be accepted in it anyway because of her beauty. As one presumably less beautiful, Irene is irate and jealous that someone she deems selfish can belong without the careful arrangement of belonging she has endured. As in her dealings with Brian, Irene responds to the threats she sees Clare as embodying by performing upper class femininity. She adheres strictly to manners and casually drops suggestions representative of her own deepest desires even when she is enraged and feels her life as she has created it is threatened. She always operates on her own fantasies of
herself and others, assumes she accurately reads others, and performs accordingly. This mode of operating by way of hyper-vigilant attention to surfaces combined with her unwillingness to be direct or engage with emotion ironically leads to destructive change. Irene, in the end, condemns herself to live in the ambiguity she so detests through her very attempts to avoid it.

Even before Clare reintroduces herself to Irene, Clare destabilizes Irene’s typical thought processes because of her singularity and unpredictability on the upper class stage of a hotel rooftop tea lounge. Irene first describes Clare as “attractive-looking,” with “dark, almost black, eyes” (177), and she thinks Clare’s interaction with a waiter is peculiar: “Irene saw her smile up at him as she murmured something—thanks, maybe. It was an odd sort of smile. Irene couldn’t quite define it, but she was sure that she would have classed it . . . as being just a shade too provocative for a waiter” (177). Irene disapproves of Clare even before she knows who she is because she does not act in the way Irene expects a woman to in the given environment. Irene, in this open, roofless stage, seamlessly permits herself to act (she’s passing for white) yet abhors unpredictable fluidity in others. This moment in which Irene continues to stare at Clare and has a difficult time reading Clare and her behavior foreshadows Irene’s ambivalence about Clare throughout the novel. Irene does and does not want to know about Clare’s life, she loves and

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30 As scholar Brian Carr points out, critics often have replicated the seeming paranoia of Irene, who thinks her husband is having an affair with Clare, by exhibiting “paranoid readings” of her in Eve Sedgwick’s sense of the phrase. Such scholars might claim to know truths that Irene does not or cannot see or argue the text is really about homosexual desire rather than about race, limiting the potential work of the text through an either/or logic. I will sidestep these conversations. For my reading, it does not matter whether Irene’s anxieties are based in reality or not, and indeed, truth or reality in the world of the novel is often illegible. What matters, for my purposes here, is that whether or not Irene’s anxious imaginings are accurate, she does not test them. Irene assumes her fantasies are accurate and acts on those fantasies in ways that are destructive to both her and others.
hates her, she feels kinship and disgust for her simultaneously, and she repeatedly declares she
will not see Clare again only to welcome her lovingly upon sight.

Irene mimics the problematic logic of the black-white binary and racial segregation even
as her own body questions it. Clare often represents the superficial physical and social
malleability that Irene embraces but would rather not recognize. When both are passing in order
to have this rooftop tea and before Clare speaks with Irene, Irene runs through a host of possible
reasons why a woman is staring at her. Irene eventually asks herself:

Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the
roof of the Drayton sat a Negro? Absurd! Impossible! White people were so stupid about
such things for all they usually asserted that they were able to tell. . . They always took
her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a Gypsy. Never, when she was alone, had
they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro (178).

Here, Irene is performing the stupidity she attributes to white people. She chastises their assumed
inability to recognize blacks passing for white while simultaneously failing to entertain the
possibility that the woman she is looking at is black. She only wants to see, not be seen, trying to
efface the open, level theatrical stage she is on wherein those present might be audience, actor, or
both. Irene’s inability to recognize the possibility that Clare, the other woman, is passing, even as
she is directly contemplating the topic, suggests both the ambiguity of the race of other people as
well as the flawed system of logic many people operate on (such as Irene’s declarations about
“white people”) as a means of negotiating that ambiguity. Irene individually operates on logic
that has large potential holes. Even if her declaration about all white people was true, it would
not apply to the woman staring at her, a hole she does not see. This moment also exhibits how
Irene tends to assume that what she is doing, others are not, and what others are doing, she is not.
Irene further assumes the stability of the stages she is on and the other actors upon them. She is puzzled or troubled when the things and people she encounters in space are illegible, fluid, or mobile. This tendency is clear in her observations about and judgments of Clare throughout the novel.

After Clare’s identity is established, Clare’s choice to express whiteness further disturbs Irene. The fact that Clare regularly passes for white and is married to a white man who thinks she is white upsets Irene’s sense of self and stability as well as piques her curiosity. Like in her future interactions with Clare, at this initial rooftop reunion Irene is torn between what she thinks she should do and what she wants to do. The mutual boundedness and openness of the rooftop space mirrors Irene’s ambivalence:

Irene reminded herself that she ought immediately to go. But she didn’t move. The truth was she was curious. There were things that she wanted to ask Clare Kendry. She wished to find out about this hazardous business of “passing,” this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one’s chance in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly. (186-7)

Irene “ought” to go but “didn’t move.” She is drawn to Clare’s experience with this “hazardous business of ‘passing,’” which she distances herself from despite being in the middle of an act of passing. As her avowal of curiosity about passing further indicates, Irene has always already othered what Clare does. In Irene’s view, Clare’s passing is different than her own behavior, which goes unexamined and unacknowledged by her, because it requires Clare to leave “all that was familiar and friendly.” In this logic, Irene assumes her own life is composed of the familiar and friendly, not recognizing marital strife. Irene, conversely, does not think about the ways Clare’s life before passing was unpleasant. An orphaned girl, Clare was taken in by two cold,
hypocritical aunts: “For all their Bibles and praying and ranting about honesty, they didn’t want anyone to know that their darling brother had seduced—ruined, they called it—a Negro girl. They could excuse the ruin, but they couldn’t forgive the tar brush” (189). Clare’s narrative recalls the history of slavery in which many a Christian rationalized and/or ignored violence against slaves. Clare’s aunts only wanted honesty in theory. They forgave according to gender bias, racial bias, and familial ties. Clare’s family background and her subsequent decision to pass for white mark the possibility that avowing one’s marginal status—as a black person, in this case—can be a marker of privilege. In other words, Clare, after her father’s death, was not able to avow blackness because she was poor. Irene does not seem to have any sympathy for or understanding of Clare’s desire to distance herself from isolation and poverty through a marriage that required Clare to perform whiteness.

Clare’s racial expression unearths Irene’s own and her tendency to interpret race as something rooted and stable, even when she is personally enacting its potential for fluidity. It is as if she wants to and/or does believe she is the only one who can superficially manipulate appearances for gain. Irene wants to believe that passing, at least for others, is truly “hazardous.” She is disturbed by Clare’s nonchalance.

“You know, ‘Rene, I’ve often wondered why more colored girls. . . never ‘passed’ over. It’s such a frightfully easy thing to do. If one’s the type, all that’s needed is a little nerve.”

“What about background? Family, I mean. Surely you can’t just drop down on people from nowhere and expect them to receive you with open arms, can you?”

“Almost,” Clare asserted. “You’d be surprised, ‘Rene, how much easier that is with white people than with us. . . .”
Irene was inclined to be incredulous. “You mean that you didn’t have to explain where you came from? It seems impossible.”

Clare cast a glance of repressed amusement across the table at her. “As a matter of fact, I didn’t. . . . I’ve a good imagination, so I’m sure I could have done it quite creditably, and credibly. But it wasn’t necessary. . .” (187).

Clare’s account instructs Irene that the modern city enables a new kind of stage upon which one may appear and not be met with interrogation regarding the origins of one’s arrival. As Irene’s questions indicate, background and family history matter to her, and she is disturbed by the idea that people would embrace someone without knowing about their past. The notion that “a little nerve” and “imagination” could trump years of investment in cultivating a “successful” stable home bothers Irene because it suggests her whole way of living is unnecessary. Clare, of course, has never had a past she would want to speak of anyway, something that Irene does not (want to) acknowledge. Irene is “inclined to be incredulous” and would rather not believe that one can exchange racial and social groups with ease. Irene is doubly concerned by Clare’s “glance of repressed amusement” and lack of awareness as to why anyone who could pass for white would choose blackness. But more generally, Irene is troubled by the modern, urban world that makes easy migration and passing possible. Irene’s desire to stabilize and control are hypocritical, as she too has migrated across boundaries, just in a different way than Clare has; she’s transplanted herself to Harlem.

Irene is humiliated by the superficial racist hatred (and the logic guiding it) she experiences in an intimate setting at Clare’s hotel suite. Irene is haunted by how she acts—or, rather, fails to act—in response to verbal performances that victimize her. Her inaction causes her to question both her own racial expression and notions of race generally in ways she would
rather avoid. Irene is both so attached to rigid, upper-class feminine codes of appropriate behavior and so passive to Clare when encountering her in the flesh that she agrees to attend a tea at Clare’s hotel. Irene mimics Clare, passing for white socially for the sake of Clare’s marital façade. When others show an investment in superficial matters beyond their control, as Irene herself so often does, Irene judges them harshly, especially when she can identify with the victims of and/or recognize the humanity of those marginalized by harsh binary logic. When Clare and Gertrude, another light-skinned black woman passing for white, discuss their children, Clare remarks: “I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right” (197). Clare continues, “‘But, of course, nobody wants a dark child.’ Her voice was earnest and she took for granted that her audience was in entire agreement with her” (197). Irene, mother to a dark-skinned child and married to a dark-skinned man, does not contradict or confront Clare despite inner unrest. When Irene does confront Clare, her comment is simultaneously indirect and a direct attack on Clare.

When the women discuss a childhood friend, Claude Jones, converting to Judaism, Gertrude “shrieked with laughter.” Clare laughs too, then she considers:

“Still, it’s his own business. If he gets along better by turning—“ At that, Irene, who was still hugging her unhappy don’t-care feeling of rightness, broke in, saying bitingly: “It evidently doesn’t occur to either you or Gertrude that he might possibly be sincere in changing his religion. Surely everyone doesn’t do everything for gain.” Clare Kendry had no need to search for the full meaning of that utterance. She reddened slightly and retorted seriously: “Yes, I admit that might be possible—his being sincere, I mean. It just didn’t happen to occur to me, that’s all. I’m surprised.” (199)
While “surely everyone doesn’t do everything for gain” is linguistically vague, both Irene and Clare know the phrase is a shot at Clare. Rather than directly communicating her feelings about Clare’s passing, Irene morally scolds Clare by way of a seemingly unrelated story about an old friend’s religious conversion. Irene’s (non)attack of Clare is a break from her status quo at the tea, “hugging her unhappy don’t-care feeling of rightness.” Irene’s entrenchment in static unhappiness in the name of her fixed ideas of rightness and success here at the tea mirror her general condition in her personal life and marriage. Irene does not consider that, if Clare does everything for gain, maybe she does so out of necessity, as one who grew up in relative depravity. When Irene can identify and feel marginalized (on behalf of her children) by the binary logic guiding the light/dark child discussion, she eventually somewhat breaks ladies’ tea decorum. She does not consider the ways she might marginalize others through similarly rigid logic. For example, her constant negative judgment of Clare may stem from a lack of sympathy for Clare’s impoverished, lonely upbringing and subsequent decision to pass.

When faced with her own heightened sense of marginalization, Irene redoubles her commitment to both upper-class feminine decorum and acting. During a humiliating conversation, wherein Clare’s husband John Bellew declares both his ignorance of and his hatred for black people, Irene acts as if John’s explanation of why he calls Clare “Nig” is funny. Bellew says:

“But I declare she’s getting’ darker and darker. I tell her if she don’t look out she’ll wake up one of these days and find she’s turned into a nigger.” He roared with laughter. Clare’s ringing bell-like laugh joined his. Gertrude, after another uneasy shift in her seat, added her shrill one. Irene, who had been sitting with lips tightly compressed, cried out: ‘That’s good!’ and gave way to gales of laughter. She laughed and laughed and laughed. Tears
ran down her cheeks. Her sides ached. Her throat hurt. She laughed on and on and on, long after the others had subsided. Until, catching sight of Clare’s face, the need for a more quiet enjoyment of this priceless joke, and for caution, struck her. At once she stopped. (201)

Irene seems to lose control of her body in response to her discomfort—the tears and laughter are Irene’s abject, excessive emotion spilling out of her body once it finds an outlet. She is on an uncomfortable, unpredictable, and unknown stage. She is accustomed to a life of banal teas in fancy parlors, laughing at whatever is said and smiling at whoever is speaking. But when she is hailed as a jovial audience member and comic actress at what she experiences as a tragic performance, her inner emotions betray her in a way that she typically masks without problem. The awkward, nervous tension pervading the tea before and after Bellew’s arrival leaves Irene with emotions she does not understand and which unsettle her.

Appearing as an appropriately behaved woman matters more to Irene than her own happiness or sense of aliveness does. Rather than avowing or acknowledging her mixed emotions at the tea, Irene tries to tame and erase her unwieldy emotions in lieu of being able to control the others present or the unwieldy space of Clare’s parlor. Irene tries to gain control of something by acting. When a “sensation of fear” and a “slight shiver” overcome her, Irene says to herself: “‘It’s nothing,’ . . . ‘Just somebody walking over my grave, as the children say.’ She tried a tiny laugh and was annoyed to find that it was close to tears” (206). Irene is bothered when she does not have control over her body and thoughts and tries to escape her emotional abjection through a phrase that offers no real escape. To actually escape through the phrase “just somebody walking over my grave,” Irene would have to be dead and she would have to make herself an object, an emotionless dead body, but her live body—through her laughter and forming tears—
betrays her desire to appear undisturbed. Her body will not allow her to disavow the performance of self-damaging racism she has just participated in. While Irene tries to minimize her own illegible emotions, she negatively explodes the potential significance of Clare’s illegibility. When she cannot read Clare’s expression when they say goodbye after tea, she declares Clare’s look “partly mocking” and “partly menacing,” suggesting ugliness is encased in her “incredible beauty” (206). Irene projects onto Clare the ugly negativity and harsh logic she herself clings to despite her own superficially appropriate behavior. She chooses to ignore her own infractions against her avowal of blackness for want of demonizing Clare’s.

Two years later, Irene is most haunted by the questions about herself that Clare’s tea party presents her with. While Irene tries to channel all of her negative emotions onto Clare, she is unable to avoid self-questioning. She experiences even a letter from Clare as a harsh invasion of her personal space, diminishing her typical sense of dominance in that zone. Irene interprets Clare’s local behaviors broadly with ease, animating the inanimate letter despite her desire to objectify and stabilize Clare and her potential influence.

The letter which she had just put out of her hand was, to her taste, a bit too lavish in its wordiness, a shade too unreserved in the manner of its expression. It roused again that old suspicion that Clare was acting, not consciously, perhaps—that is, not too consciously—but none the less, acting. Nor was Irene inclined to excuse what she terms Clare’s downright selfishness. And mingled with her disbelief and resentment was another feeling, a question. Why hadn’t she spoken that day? Why, in the face of Bellew’s ignorant hate and aversion, had she concealed her own origin? Why had she allowed him to make his assertions and express his misconceptions undisputed? Why, simply because
of Clare Kendry, who had exposed her to such torment, had she failed to take up the defense of the race to which she belonged? (212)

The too-lavish letter troubles Clare because she deems it excessive. She easily associates it with both the acting she feels Clare engages in generally and Clare’s “downright selfishness.” The way Irene thinks about acting as something she suspects of Clare implies it is amoral—so amoral that she would not even accuse Clare, who she so loves to judge, of acting “consciously.” Irene tries to deflect any self-awareness of her own everyday acting onto Clare. The letter minimizes the real pain Irene feels as a result of Clare’s husband’s racism. But the object, the letter, disturbs Irene at a macro level as well. The letter will not allow Irene to forget her own acting, the social passing she engaged in and the racism she condoned on Clare’s behalf. Instead, Irene passively describes her own action as inaction when wondering why she did not act. Larsen’s narrator here, though, interestingly detaches the question, which is actually multiple questions, from Irene. The narrator notes, “And mingled with her disbelief and resentment was another feeling, a question,” but then proceeds with “Why hadn’t she spoken that day?” rather than “Why hadn’t I spoken that day?” The narrator’s use of “she” suggests that Irene is only willing to question herself in the most distant terms, as represented by her potential choice of a third person pronoun to describe herself. But that she questions herself at all while sitting in her own home matters; the letter, by proxy, brings a sense of instability to the stage environment of Irene’s home upon which she typically feels at ease to plot and act. Irene’s further questions note that in her mind belonging to a race necessarily requires one to defend it. Not having done so makes Irene question how much she belongs to the race she avows, what it means to belong in a race, and if one can belong to a race one is not indeed willing to defend. The letter causes Irene to rethink her
own racial expression, infracting upon the superficial realm of her appearance and acting, over which she generally assumes she dominates.

When Irene does not respond to Clare’s letter, Clare continues to contact her, and Irene feels her Harlem is invaded. While alone, Irene performs control over the space and people around her as well as over herself. Rehearsing future conversations with Clare, she practices maintaining her own wishes and denying Clare’s. But Irene is helpless in the face of Clare’s affection.

She meant to tell Clare Kendry at once, and definitely, that it was of no use, her coming, that she couldn’t be responsible, that she’d talked it over with Brian, who had agreed with her that it was wiser, for Clare’s own sake, to refrain—But that was as far as she got in her rehearsal. For Clare had come softly into the room without knocking and, before Irene could greet her, had dropped a kiss on her dark curls. (224)

Clare sneaks into Irene’s bedroom without knocking, denying Irene the boundary of her door, and kissing her, denying her personal space and control over her body. Irene equates her inability to do things as she envisioned them with her inability to do anything at all, though. It is as if when Irene faces the physical person of Brian or Clare she is forced to recognize the ways they are human and do not mesh with her static interpretations of them, which leaves her unable to process them flatly, as she wants to do. Irene cannot suppress her own humanity around them either, especially around Clare. She seems to give in to Clare’s wishes more easily than Brian’s, perhaps because she is attracted to her sexually. If true, Irene does not mentally entertain such a possibility, but it would, if recognized and acted upon, threaten Irene’s belonging in elite Harlem. Her marriage to Brian is what brought her into the fold, and extramarital lesbian affairs would not gel with the version of femininity through which Irene gained access to black society.
It may also be the case that Irene has such a hard time defying Clare’s wishes because Clare is simply more persistent and less-well-mannered in the pressure she places on Irene such that Irene is unable to craft effective, persistent evasions of Clare’s requests. In any case, Irene does not want Clare in Harlem because she recognizes her powerlessness around Clare and wants instead to feel power over her environment and the people in her life.

Irene fears that Clare’s presence in Harlem will upset the comfort and control she feels in her social circle, seemingly for various reasons. Under the guise of Clare’s interests, Irene selfishly tries to get Clare to leave Harlem by performing casualness and feminine solidarity. Irene was trying to collect her arguments, for some sixth sense warned her it was going to be harder than she thought to convince Clare Kendry of the folly of Harlem for her. Finally she proceeded: “I can’t help thinking that you ought not to come up here, ought not to run the risk of knowing Negroes.” “You mean you don’t want me, ‘Rene?” Irene hadn’t supposed that anyone could look so hurt. She said, quite gently, “No, Clare, it’s not that. But even you must see that it’s terribly foolish, and not just the right thing.” The tinkle of Clare’s laugh rang out, while she passed her hands over the bright sweep of her hair. “Oh, ‘Rene,” she cried, “You’re priceless! And you haven’t changed a bit. The right thing!”… “You don’t, you really can’t mean exactly that! Nobody could. It’s simply unbelievable.” (224)

While Irene, even in her own thoughts, thinks about how she can convince Clare “of the folly of Harlem for her,” she actually is trying desperately to fend off what will instead be a folly for herself and projecting onto Clare. What Clare thinks is so funny is unclear. Irene goes on to suggest it is “dangerous” and a “silly risk” for Clare to be in Harlem perhaps because it would be
dangerous for a white woman to dash about Harlem. If this is the case, Clare finds this absurd either because she is black or because she thinks her race in a scenario of potential danger would not matter anyway. In this reading, Irene is trying to racially categorize Clare as white because she cannot grapple with her ambiguous racial expression, nor does she care to make space for ambiguity. Irene feels she has earned her position in Harlem through loyalty to race and place, and she does not think Clare should get to be a part of elite black life there, as a new arrival and as one who has been disloyal in their racial self-expression. Another possibility is that Clare recognizes just how superficial Irene is being. It not being “the right thing” is the reason Clare declines going to Idlewild with Irene when she invites her during her visit to Chicago, but when Irene redeployed Clare’s rigid logic of social appropriateness in a way that dissatisfies Clare, Clare finds it funny as opposed to important. In this reading, when Clare announces that Irene has not “changed a bit,” she means that Irene cares as much as she did in her youth about superficial feminine modes of belonging and not causing spectacles, something both women avow in similar language as a former truth in their initial reunion in the rooftop tea. Irene persistently maintains her guise of concern for Clare. Irene quickly tries to squash her “strange and irrelevant” “suspicion . . . that in spite of her determined selfishness the woman before her was yet capable of heights and depths of feeling that she, Irene Redfield, had never known. Indeed, never cared to know. The thought, the suspicion, was gone as quickly as it had come” (225). The narrator’s window into Irene’s thought process marks her as one consumed with surfaces. She does not engage the depths of her own feelings because she cannot grapple with the hurt and ambiguity she would encounter if she did.

Like Irene, Clare seems desperate to belong in elite Harlem. For Clare, as for Irene, belonging requires the rejection of her husband’s desires, as he avows hating all black people and
would not want her to so much as visit, let alone belong in, Harlem. Clare persists in infiltrating more aspects of Irene’s life in Harlem, and her behavior in response to Irene’s actions repeatedly marks her as one who is either less gifted in social graces than Irene is or as one who chooses to ignore them. Clare is willing to infract upon rigid upper class feminine decorum in a way that Irene will not. If we take Clare at her word, she is willing to make social infractions because she is so lonely. Clare tells Irene that the tea they shared with John Bellew in Chicago

“made me want to see other people. It just swooped down and changed everything . . . that did something to me, and I’ve been so lonely since! You can’t know. Not close to a single soul. Never anyone to really talk to. . .” Her [Irene’s] own resentment was swept aside and her voice held an accent of pity as she exclaimed: “Why Clare! I didn’t know. Forgive me. . .” “How could you know? How could you? You’re free. You’re happy. And,” with faint derision, “safe.” Irene passed over that touch of derision, for the poignant rebellion of the other’s words had brought the tears to her own eyes, though she didn’t allow them to fall. The truth was she knew weeping did not become her. . . “I’m beginning to believe,” she murmured, “that no one is ever completely happy, or free, or safe.” (227)

What Irene sees as Clare’s “rebellion” is her honesty and her capacity for directness. Clare rebels against the upper class feminine, superficial style of interaction Irene expects of Clare. Irene is almost moved to tears at Clare’s twist on safety; Irene has just obsessively harped on how unsafe Harlem is for Clare, but Clare’s appropriation of the word to vocalize Irene’s relative position as one who is safe calls Irene to reflect on the precariousness of her own marriage and social position in Harlem. Irene is unable to express her genuine emotion because of her superficial priorities in one sense, as “she knew weeping did not become her.” However, Irene also seems to
speak genuinely and negatively in her own rebellion when she reveals her fears about the potential intangibility of happiness, freedom, and safety. Unless it is sheer charade enacted by Clare to gain favor with Irene, this conversation is the most genuine one the two women share; Irene nonetheless has trouble engaging Clare’s depth of feeling.

Generally, in Harlem, despite the sense of invasion Irene feels, she is casual in her attempts to fend off Clare, perhaps because she pity’s Clare, as the above conversation suggests, or perhaps because it would be considered uncouth to directly shun Clare. Clare is extremely persistent in her desire to attend a Negro League Dance that Irene has organized. About Hugh Wentworth, a white man (modeled after Carl Van Vechten, a close friend of Larsen’s), attending a “Negro dance,” Clare remarks:

“It seems rather curious, a man like that, going to a Negro dance.” This, Irene told her, was the year 1927 in the city of New York, and hundreds of white people of Hugh Wentworth’s type came to affairs in Harlem, more all the time. So many that Brian had said: “Pretty soon the colored people won’t be allowed in at all, or will have to sit in Jim Crowed sections.” “What do they come for?” “Same reason you’re here, to see Negroes.”

“But why?” “Various motives,” Irene explained. (229)

Irene assumes Clare’s desire to be in Harlem is purely superficial—that she is there to “see Negroes.” Clare’s passionate curiosity and desire to attend the mixed-race dance makes it clear that she idealizes Harlem as a stage upon which entertainment for her is performed. She does not seem to reflect on the ways she is acting or participating in the show, but Irene tries to call this to her attention with the phrase “Same reason you’re here” as a response to “What do they come for?” Irene encourages Clare to recognize herself as an agent. While Irene is not troubled by people she sees as clear others/white people attending a “Negro dance,” she is anxious about
someone she views as of ambiguous race, Clare, attending. Irene, when repeatedly pressed by Clare to allow her to come to the dance, calls on superficial arguments such as her suggestion that Clare, as a woman attending alone, might be mistaken for a woman of “easy virtue.” Eventually, while Irene declares she does not “care whether you go or what you do” she also notes “I shouldn’t like to be mixed up in any row of the kind.” She eventually reaches the kernel of truth of what seems to be bothering her most: “As far as I can see, you’ll just have to endure some things and give up others. As we’ve said before, everything must be paid for. Do, please, be reasonable”” (231). Irene’s “we” here is unclear, but if she means to suggest Clare has agreed with her that “everything must be paid for,” she is fantasizing. The truth of what is bothering Irene seems to be that Irene wants Clare to pay for passing; she does not want Clare to attend fun dances at which she has put years into belonging. For Irene, it is simply not fair that Clare could go, belong, or have a good time. Irene is also afraid of being “mixed up in any row” caused by Clare—she does not want Clare’s decision to pass or her Chicagoness to queer her own belonging in Harlem. Irene enacts rigid logics of belonging that mirror the binary logic governing race relations in the U.S. at the time.

Although Irene initially describes Clare as attractive, it is not until Clare is in Harlem that the reader learns, through conversations Irene has with two men, that Clare is “extraordinarily beautiful.” Clare’s beauty is another reason why Irene feels threatened by her, and based on the way the subject of Clare’s beauty belatedly emerges through dialogue, Irene is trying not to think about it. If Irene is worried Clare will be immediately accepted in the circle she has dutifully arranged belonging to, she seems to be right. Hugh confides in Irene:

“Everybody seems to be here and a few more. But what I’m trying to find out is the name, status, and race of the blond beauty out of the fairy tale. She’s dancing with Ralph
Hazelton at the moment. Nice study in contrasts, that.” It was. Clare fair and golden, like a sunlit day. Hazelton dark, with gleaming eyes, like a moonlit night. “She’s a girl I used to know a long time ago in Chicago. And she wanted especially to meet you.” (235)

Hugh makes it clear that Clare is conventionally and strikingly beautiful, such that he speaks with Irene about Clare’s beauty at the first chance he gets. She is “out of the fairy tale”—her beauty is almost unbelievable and legendary. Irene recognizes her relationship to Clare if only to distance herself from both Clare and Chicago; she “used to know” Clare “a long time ago in Chicago,” implying she does not know Clare anymore and that her connections to Chicago are outdated. Irene’s conversation with Brian about Clare’s beauty affirms its exceptionality. “Didn’t he, she once asked him, think Clare was extraordinarily beautiful? ‘No,’” he had answered. ‘That is, not particularly.’ ‘Brian, you’re fooling!’ “No, honestly. Maybe I’m fussy’” (239). Clare’s beauty is such that Brian’s refusal to acknowledge it provokes Irene to assume he is “fooling” and warrants the explanation “maybe I’m fussy,” suggesting most people do or would find her “extraordinarily beautiful.” Given these belated recognitions of Clare’s beauty it seems increasingly clear, combined with the way Clare disturbs Irene’s sense of self and sense of who gets to belong, why Irene perceives Clare as such a threat—she does not want her to be better liked by those in Irene’s circle than she is.

When Clare is preparing to leave Harlem, she is despondent. Irene tries to guilt Clare out of her dismay by referencing Clare’s daughter: “I imagine you’ll be happy enough, once you get away,” Irene told her one day when she was bewailing her approaching departure. “remember, there’s Margery. Think how glad you’ll be to see her after all this time” (240). When Clare replies “Children aren’t everything!” and Irene gets defensive, Clare vaguely promises, “Don’t think. . . whatever happens, that I’ll ever forget how good you’ve been to me.” (240-1). The
vague “whatever happens” here, combined with the jumpy, unclear monologue and tears that follow it, in my reading of the text, is the only potential indication that we have that Clare may actually commit suicide at the end of the novel. She continues, when Irene protests “Nonsense!” about her own goodness:

“Oh, but you have, you have. It’s just that I haven’t any proper morals or sense of duty, as you have, that makes me act as I do.”

“Now you are talking nonsense.”

“But it’s true, ‘Rene. Can’t you realize that I’m not like you a bit? Why, to get the things I want badly enough, I’d do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away. Really, ‘Rene, I’m not safe.” Her voice as well as the look on her face had a beseeching earnestness that made Irene vaguely uncomfortable.

She said: “I don’t believe it. In the first place what you’re saying is so utterly, so wickedly wrong. And as for your giving up things—“ She stopped, at a loss for an acceptable term to express her opinion of Clare’s “having” nature.

But Clare Kendry had begun to cry . . . for no reason that Irene could discover. (240-241)

As before, Irene is perplexed when Clare reveals the depth of her emotions in a seemingly genuine fashion. “Earnestness” makes “Irene vaguely uncomfortable” because she would rather imagine Clare as selfish and unreflective, and she cannot grapple with aberrations from the flat way in which she has made the singular Clare legible to herself. Irene cannot or does not try to figure out why Clare is crying, but there are many obvious potential causes. It is possible that Clare recognizes the unmannered way in which she has persistently invaded Irene’s life in Harlem, and she feels guilty about it. Perhaps Clare feels guilty about betraying her husband and potentially jeopardizing her own marriage by spending so much time in Harlem. It is possible
Clare and Brian are having an affair, and Clare feels guilty about that. In these readings, whoever or whatever Clare would or has hurt would be the cause of her tears. Or perhaps she is crying for herself, because soon she either has to leave Harlem and return to ordinary life with her white husband in the south or break up her marriage and family in order to stay in Harlem. Irene would rather treat the tears as a curious aberration from the norm, as if she cannot process genuine emotion because she is so unaccustomed to encountering it or showing it. Irene tries to perform a protest of Clare’s self-diatribe, but it so closely mirrors her own negative thinking about Clare that she is incapable of persisting. “She stopped, at a loss” for any defense of Clare’s general behavior, regardless of what specifics Clare is referring to. This scene is the one possible proof of an affair between Brian and Clare and/or that Clare’s death might be a suicide for any number of reasons or senses of guilt. It is also the scene that best illustrates Irene’s inability to grapple with the genuine, whether in Clare or in her own behavior.

Masking and Ambiguity

When Brian catches Irene attempting to exclude Clare from a social gathering at their house, she defensively produces a series of elaborate lies and an attack on Clare’s intelligence. Her response makes obvious both her jealousy of Clare and her unwillingness to admit even a minor social misstep to her husband:

“Oh, and Clare’s downstairs.”

“Clare! What a nuisance! I didn’t ask her. Purposely.”

“I see. Might a mere man ask why? Or is the reason so subtly feminine that it wouldn’t be understood by him?”

A little of his smile had come back. Irene, who was beginning to shake off some of her depression under his familiar banter, said, almost gaily: “Not at all. It just happens that
this party happens to be for Hugh, and that Hugh happens not to care a great deal for Clare; therefore I, who happen to be giving the party, didn’t happen to ask her. Nothing could be simpler. Could it?”

“Nothing. It’s so simple that I can easily see beyond your simple explanation and surmise that Clare. . . never happened to pay Hugh the admiring attention that he happens to consider no more than his just due.” (247-8)

Irene is so committed to upper-class feminine decorum that she performs it in intimate settings like her own bedroom even when alone with her husband. She will not simply admit she does not like Clare or does not want to see her on a given day, as not inviting her to tea would be a sign of bad manners. Irene is not willing to be genuine, and instead she concocts an elaborate scenario in which she is a social hero attentive to her guest of honor. Hugh, as she tells it, is the one who would not want Clare present because he “prefers intelligent women” (248). When Brian’s gaze falls on Irene and she feels like a transparent “pane of glass” (248), she hyper-invests in lies to deflect Brian from seeing whatever it is that might be inside her.

Plainly he was startled. “D’you mean that you think Clare is stupid?”

. . . “No, I don’t. She isn’t stupid. She’s intelligent enough in a purely feminine way. . .

Nobody admires Clare more than I do, for the kind of intelligence she has, as well as for her decorative qualities. But she’s not—She isn’t—She hasn’t—Oh, I can’t explain it. . .

Clare has got brains of a sort, the kind that are useful too. Acquisitive, you know. But she’d bore a man like Hugh to suicide. . . .” (248-9)

She cannot face it being vulnerable in Brian’s presence. Whatever genuineness Brian might see would be ugly; it made her “uncomfortable” and annoyed. She attacks Clare to avoid seeing herself and being seen. She not only calls Clare stupid, but also she associates Clare’s stupidity
with femininity: “She’s intelligent enough in a purely feminine way,” evident in her “decorative qualities.” Irene is willing to condemn femininity at large, as host to its own brand of inferior, superficial intelligence just to avoid being genuine about her real reasoning in not inviting Clare. But Irene soon gets tripped up in speech when she starts to get too close to expressing her own genuine emotions and her jealousy of Clare’s beauty. Whatever Clare lacks, Irene cannot name it, because she is fabricating it or it is too socially inappropriate for a proper lady to mention: “She isn’t—she hasn’t—oh, I can’t explain it.” Irene is so restrained, so accustomed to performing, and so indirect with her husband that she cannot even explain how she genuinely feels about another person. Simply calling out the beginnings of a direct, self-driven statement like, “But, Brian, I—” startles them both and causes her to retreat from any further gesture of directness. Irene “stopped, amazed at the fierce anger that had blazed up in her. Brian’s head came round with a jerk. His brows lifted in an odd surprise. Her voice, she realized, had gone queer” (249).

Irene is so deeply invested in appearances, her sense of ownership over her husband, and her sense of superiority to Clare that she is willing to sacrifice all personal happiness in the name of what she feels would maintain her status quo. When Irene suspects that Clare and Brian are having an affair, she decides her suspicion is true moments after the possibility enters her mind. She asserts they are actors performing loyalty to her. When she is getting ready for tea and she is running late, she thinks to herself, “And what matter if those two spent one hour, more or less, alone together, one or many, now that everything had happened between them? Ah! The first time that she had allowed herself to admit to herself that everything had happened, had not forced herself to believe, to hope, that nothing irrevocable had been consummated! Well, it had happened. She knew it, and knew that she knew it” (267). Larsen’s repetition of “knew”
reinforces Irene’s sense of certainty, which comes exclusively from her own thoughts. Irene is quick to accept disappointment so long as she feels she can manage it. She consoles herself, “It hurt. It hurt like hell. But it didn’t matter, if no one knew. If everything could go on as before” (255). If only Irene knows about the affair, it does not matter if she is right or not. She can live with, and it seems she would rather live with, her imagined worst-case scenario than confront Brian, Clare, or other sources, so long as her knowledge can be exclusively hers. She consoles herself that she can contain the affair by containing knowledge of it. Already certain, Irene interprets Brian’s open-ended comments such as “‘Don’t expect me to give up everything,’” in reference to a disagreement about child-rearing, as confirmation of his infidelity. She interprets the comment as Brian letting her know that he will not give up Clare. Perhaps Brian, like his wife, speaks in ways that are simultaneously direct and indirect. We cannot know based on the information in the text whether or not Brian and Clare are having an affair, nor can we know what Brian means by this comment. The narrator does not provide access to Brian’s private thoughts as he often does for Irene and sometimes does for Clare. What matters here is that Irene assumes destructively, for her own sense of happiness, that she correctly interprets others’ private emotions and thoughts.

In the wake of her suspicion and self-certainty, Irene has a heightened desire to excise Clare from both her personal life and Harlem, mirroring the racist logic of the legal segregation era that attempts to efface ambiguity. She feels her bedroom has been invaded literally, but it has also been invaded figuratively. Irene typically feels most secure and capable of acting in a controlled manner while in her bedroom. Her suspicions of an affair overcome her while she is in that space. In response, it seems her only solution and her only means to gain control over the
stage of her bedroom is to sacrifice one kind of happiness in the name of certainty and rootedness:

Now that she had relieved herself of what was almost like a guilty knowledge, admitted that which by some sixth sense she had long known, she could again reach out for plans. Could think again of ways to keep Brian by her side, and in New York. For she would not go to Brazil. She belonged to this land of rising towers. She was an American. She grew from this soil, and she would not be uprooted. Not even because of Clare Kendry, or a hundred Clare Kendrys. Brian, too, belonged here. His duty was to her and to his boys. (268)

Irene feels satisfaction in her presumed victimization because accepting her suspicion as fact allows her to move to planning and rehearsing ways to keep her and Brian’s family life static. Irene feels moral righteousness and feels Brian has one duty, that she knows what that duty is, and that she knows where both of them belong. She imagines Clare as an object and an obstacle to her ability to remain rooted. Raging against the notion of urban rootlessness, Irene refuses to move away from Harlem in the era where so many are flocking to it. Brian’s dissatisfaction with Harlem and his presumed desire to go to Brazil upset Irene’s satisfaction with “the land of rising towers.” Brian’s sentiments further question the whole notion of a utopic 1920s Harlem, the target of so many urban migrations in this very era. In dismissing Brian’s desires, she objectifies Brian just as she does Clare. In the very next line after her proclamation that she will keep Brian by her side no matter the obstacles, Irene admits: “Strange that she couldn’t now be sure that she had ever truly known love. Not even for Brian. He was her husband and the father of her sons. But was he anything more? Had she ever wanted or tried for more? In that hour she thought not. Nevertheless, she meant to keep him” (268). Irene selfishly hoards Brian for the sake of
consistent life. Consistency of location is the only thing she seems to find pleasure in within her marriage. She is willing to acknowledge she may not love Brian and that she may not now or have ever known love. Irene does not prioritize the pursuit of love. Maintaining possession of Brian and binding herself to Harlem are Irene’s main priorities.

Plotting ways to deepen her sense of stability, Irene brainstorms ways to rid herself of Clare. Irene mirrors the racist logic of the legal segregation era in her inability to recognize the humanity of others in her personal relationships. She catches herself fantasizing about Clare’s death: “If Clare should die! Then—Oh, it was vile! To think, yes, to wish that! She felt faint and sick. But the thought stayed with her. She could not get rid of it” (261). Irene seems to excitedly think of the consequences of the death with “Then—” before stopping herself. She admits she not only thought of Clare’s death but also wished for it. It is not the feeling of faintness that stays with Irene, but the thought of Clare’s death that stays with her. She “turned her face into her pillow to cry. But no tears came” (261). Irene, alone this time, cannot act upset because the possibility of Clare’s death feels at least partially positive to her. Irene takes it for granted that Clare’s death would stabilize and end any influence and infringement Clare causes in her life.

Irene’s attempts to persuade Clare to leave Harlem backfire because she assumes Clare is as invested in maintaining her own marriage and stability as she is. But when Irene asks Clare if she had “ever seriously thought of what she’d do if he found out,” Clare responds, “I’d do what I want to do more than anything else right now. I’d come up here to live. Harlem, I mean. Then I’d be able to do as I please, when I please. . . If Jack finds out, if our marriage is broken, that lets me out. Doesn’t it?” (266). Clare views Harlem as an ideal zone in which she might act freely and be endlessly entertained. Irene is both surprised and panicked at the notion that Clare would not be distressed at the demise of her marriage. Irene further imagines Clare’s declaration
of potential freedom as a warning to her, which only heightens her panic. Irene guards the fact that she saw John Bellew on the street and imagines it as a potentially life-altering secret.

Even if she [Clare] was only alarmed, only suspected that such a thing was about to occur, anything might happen. Anything. No! At all costs, Clare was not to know of that meeting with Bellew. Nor was Brian. It would only weaken her own power to keep him…And she would do anything, risk anything, to prevent him from finding out that truth. How fortunate that she had obeyed her instinct and omitted to recognize Bellew!

(268)

Here, Irene, feels her reflexive impulse to act on the street for Bellew preserves her life as she knows it. She imagines she is controlling Clare, Brian, and their presumed relationship by maintaining her secret. She thinks in extreme terms, noting “at all costs” she must keep the secret or “anything might happen.” That “anything might happen,” that the social goings-on around her might come completely out of her control, is her greatest fear.

The text is insistently ambiguous about Clare’s cause of death. The party during which Clare dies is set on a dramatic stage. Just as in their initial reunion, Clare and Irene are on a high floor, but this time, unlike the open-air café that bespoke varied possibilities for their renewed friendship, they are enclosed by a roof with only one framed window. This window serves as a portal to the openness of nature, underscoring the much more limited possibilities for the women’s futures. Further, this stage is entered actively. While Irene, Clare, and Brian climb the stairs to the party, Brian pointedly asks Clare if she has ever been on such a high floor, recognizing their mutual agency in their arrival upon this theatrical stage. When John Bellew dramatically tracks Clare down at the party, Irene’s sense of control is shattered.
Clare stood at the window, as composed as if everyone were not staring at her in curiosity and wonder, as if the whole structure of her life were not lying in fragments before her. She seemed unaware of any danger or uncaring. There was even a faint smile on her full red lips and in her shining eyes. It was that smile that maddened Irene. She ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare’s bare arm. She couldn’t have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn’t have her free. Before them stood John Bellew, speechless in his hurt and anger. Beyond them the little huddle of other people, and Brian stepping out from among them. What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly. (271)

Irene sees “the whole structure of” Clare’s life as “lying in fragments before her.” However, Clare “seemed unaware of any danger,” perhaps because she is planning to jump out the window or because she feels she can now live a free life in Harlem. It is indeed the structure of Irene’s life that has shattered, as she has envisioned the stability of her marriage as something she could control by way of maintaining Clare’s marriage. Irene is “maddened,” feels “terror tinged with ferocity,” and runs over to Clare, laying a hand on her. Larsen’s repetition of “she couldn’t” in the phrases “She couldn’t have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn’t have her free” emphasizes Irene’s singular focus. It is as if Clare is a part of Irene she cannot acknowledge. Irene envisions that if Clare is free of her marriage, Irene too might be free of hers, which for her would indeed feel dangerous and shattering. The text, by way of Irene’s rage, singular focus, and physical approach of Clare, strongly presents the possibility that Irene shoves Clare out the window to her death. But whether or not this occurs, the text and Irene will not say. Bellew and Brian are both also nearby, and “what happened next” is indelibly vague.
Irene acts guilty on the two remaining stages she inhabits in the text. First, alone in the room from where Clare just fell to her death, “Irene wasn’t sorry. She was amazed, incredulous almost” (272). She is amazed at her luck, her own cruelty, and/or at the ease with which a life can disappear. Irene alone lingers, like a criminal so pleased with their crime they cannot help but hover at the site of it. She does not run down to see Clare’s body like the rest of the party-goers do. In a way it does not matter if Irene pushed Clare to her death or not. What matters is that, whether or not Irene murdered Clare, she feels as if she did it. Irene acts guilty. She rushes to defend John Bellew on the more official, mixed race, and open-air stage of aftermath outside when the white police investigators suggest him as a suspect. Irene acts as if she does not want him to take the blame for her crime. Irene repeats to herself, “‘It was an accident, a terrible accident,’ she muttered fiercely. ‘It was’” (272), as if trying to convince herself. Irene might have done it, she knows she might have, and she does not allow herself to remember the evening correctly, even if it might allow her to experience relief: “Irene never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly” (271). In her refusal to remember clearly or reflect deeply or genuinely, she condemns herself to a purgatory of ambiguity. It is as if, whether or not Irene pushed Clare, her rehearsed imagining of the possibility of Clare dying is powerful enough to make Irene feel like a murderer regardless of what happened at the window. Ambiguity is the very thing Irene has spent her life to this point trying to avoid. Illegibility is what she detests in Clare. And yet now, as if plagued by Clare even in her death, Irene will be ambiguous even to herself. Irene, in her attempts to segregate herself from Clare, genuine displays of emotion, directness, racial ambiguity, motion, or rootlessness mirrors the impulses and logic of national, legal segregation in the United States. The doom with which Irene is met suggests destruction
will meet all parties whenever there is an attempt to efface difference, aliveness, and humanity in
decision-making processes.

**Crafting Belonging**

Nella Larsen incorporates elements from her own life into the stories of both of the
leading women in *Passing*. Clare’s childhood recalls Larsen’s lower class childhood and
marginalizing parentage, while upper class adult Irene more closely represents the Nella Larsen
of the 1920s. It is as if Clare is the part of the author she would rather forget but cannot, much
like the function Clare serves for Irene in the novel. Irene, unlike Larsen, has children and does
not work—she is a wealthier version of Larsen that more readily fits into the Harlem black
bourgeois than Larsen did. The ambiguity that Irene condemns herself to live in resembles the
ambiguous limbo that Nella Larsen was born into and in which she spent most of her life trapped
(superficially, literally, and metaphorically). Outside of her life in the 1920s, in which she was
connected to the New York Public Library system, the Harlem Renaissance, and exchanged
frequent letters with people that saved them (namely Carl Van Vechten and Dorothy Peterson),
little is known about Nella Larsen. Lack of information led Thadious Davis to make suggestions
about Larsen’s parentage and early life in her 1994 biography of Larsen that George Hutchinson
in turn negated in his 2006 biography of her. Hutchinson had unearthed more complete
documentation. 31 While Davis and Hutchinson disagree about much of Larsen’s early life, both

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31 Namely, Hutchinson attacks Davis’s suggestion (it is not an assertion, as Hutchinson
implies—it is always tempered in Davis’s text) that Peter Walker, Nella Larsen’s father, and her
stepfather, Peter Larsen, might be the same person passing for white. Hutchinson argues that it
would be impossible for the child of a white and black parent to be born darker than the black
parent. He further notes there is no reason to mistrust Larsen’s own account of her life. Davis
found a record that suggested to her that Larsen may have spent time in her childhood in an
orphanage; Hutchinson proves the girl in question was not Larsen. Davis suggests Larsen’s
mother reported only having one child on the 1910 census. Hutchinson argues it was her
stepfather that would have filled out the questionnaire sent to the head of the household and who
agree the circumstances of her birth, childhood, and abandonment were devastating to her and negatively impacted her throughout her life.

Nella Larsen was born in Chicago in 1891 to a white, Danish mother and a black father from the Danish West Indies. Her father died when she was an infant, and her mother married a white man with whom she soon after gave birth to another daughter (Hutchinson). This scenario left Larsen as the only nonwhite member of her family in an environment that was not only hostile to black people but also was hostile to white women with black babies. Mixed race families, in Illinois at the time, were illegal. And if Larsen’s mother were out with her alone, she would have been assumed a prostitute. Therefore, the circumstances of her birth and childhood, in which she never belonged even in her own home on the most basic, superficial level, were exacerbated by both her mother’s and her own femaleness. Larsen and her sister attended different schools, and at fifteen, Larsen was sent to attend Fisk, an all-black school in Nashville, Tennessee; she would never return to live with her family. Because she was raised in a white family and spent a few years abroad in Denmark as a child, Larsen did not naturally fit in with her schoolmates at Fisk. Before she could develop tight bonds at Fisk, she was kicked out. She proceeded to spend a few more years with family in Denmark, as the only black person in town. She returned to the U.S. to attend nursing school in New York. She met her husband and married would have attempted to erase Larsen. Hutchinson proves that Larsen did indeed go to Denmark with her mother and sister as a child and did indeed go to Denmark again after spending a year at Fisk and before attending nursing school. Davis had implied Larsen may have made these trips up in an effort to connect herself more closely to whiteness, as Larsen held no passport until 1930, but Hutchinson discovers that a passport was not needed to go back and forth between Denmark in the era of Larsen’s travel, and he further finds Larsen and her mother and sister on ship records from Denmark. Davis also implied Larsen’s family may have forced her to leave Fisk, but Hutchinson proved through new documentation he found that Larsen was actually expelled, along with about ten other female students, for what was deemed their antagonistic approach to the dress code there.
into the social circle of elite Harlem. She published short stories and her two major works, the semi-autobiographical *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). In the early 1930s, she was accused of plagiarizing a short story, discovered her husband was having an affair with a white woman, went abroad for a year and a half on a Guggenheim fellowship, lived with her husband in the South for a year, and then she and her husband divorced. Seemingly as a result of a combination of these negative events in the early 1930s, Larsen slowly and then completely withdrew from even the closest of her 1920s friendships. She lived alone and was not employed for several years, during which she may have struggled with addiction to alcohol and/or drugs. When her husband died (and she stopped receiving money from him), she returned to nursing, working quite successfully until she retired in 1963. She attempted to reconnect with her sister before she died and was denied by her sister. Upon receiving the news of her inheritance from Larsen in the wake of her death, her sister Anna claimed she did not know she had a sister, even though she lived with her until her teenage years, and even though the friend to whom she spoke this denial actually knew of Nella and knew Anna did, too (Hutchinson). It is often said or felt that Larsen disappeared after the mid-1930s. In actuality, she simply stopped producing fiction for publication and stopped exchanging contact and letters with the few key people through whom we best know her. She engaged in different work and with different friends.

Interpretations of Larsen generally read her through the letters she wrote in the 1920s, reading backwards to try and understand her childhood and forwards to try and predict her future actions. Davis portrays the effect of Larsen’s traumatic childhood and family situation as leaving Larsen a bit of a snob, as one masking her vulnerability. Davis references letters in which others call her a braggart or strange, and she notes a letter in which Larsen says she wants to move because too many “niggers” live near her. Hutchinson portrays the effect of Larsen’s childhood
as making Larsen pull away from others before they can pull away from her. Hutchinson notes repeated circumstances of triangular relationships in which Larsen gets shut out of the triangle. He views this as a repetition of her stepfather’s arrival in childhood and her subsequent lack of belonging in her family. Hutchinson sees this as repeated in Larsen’s husband’s affair with a white woman and in her withdrawal from friendships with Carl Van Vechten and Dorothy Peterson after the two got closer with one another than they each were with her. Even when her marriage and career allowed her to travel in elite circles in Harlem, she was highly conscious of what parties she was not being invited to and what apartments she could not afford to live in. Larsen, like Clare and Irene, was deeply invested in belonging and hyperaware of whether or not she belonged in a given atmosphere.

Not only was Larsen marginalized for her race in childhood, she was also judged harshly for associating with mixed-race crowds in the 1920s. Like Irene, Larsen associated with white people and had a close friend who was a white male. She repeatedly did not care what negative insinuations were made about her as a result of this friendship with Carl Van Vechten. The one thing Larsen’s main character Irene cannot tolerate is ambiguity, and this is the thing that at even the most superficial of levels, Larsen was born into and doomed to live in. Larsen was trapped in isolated ambiguity in her childhood as the only black person in her family or a town in Denmark; at Fisk, as the only student not raised in a black family; at the NYPL library school as the only black attendee; and later in social relationships when her writing was questioned and her marriage was in jeopardy (her husband wanted to maintain both his affair and their marriage). Though she spoke little of any form of isolation in her life, it seems that ambiguity in social relationships is what she was most unable to handle, as when she faced it, she fled, severing ties.
She mimicked in real life the binary logic both her character Irene and the actual U.S. Supreme Court operated on in regards to race.

It was as if, like Irene, Larsen was always trying to manage surfaces and did not care to delve into deep personal emotion. Larsen was expelled from Fisk, along with about ten other students at the time, for her aversion and subtle challenges to the dress code (Hutchinson). Her mother was a seamstress and taught Larsen; she had a love of clothing and fine objects much in evidence in accounts of her dress and home decoration style. Larsen’s attention to appearance seems impelled by her inability to manage the skin she was born into. Unlike Clare and Irene, Larsen was too dark-skinned to pass for white with any sort of regularity. It seems in fantasy she crafted more superficially fluid versions of herself. Larsen, like Irene, spoke little of herself or her background, and even her two so-called psychological novels are, literally, very thin because the kind of psychology displayed in them is limited. *Passing* portrays a psychology of surfaces, in which the main character often will not admit even to herself her greatest fears or strongest emotions, nor will she engage those of others.

**Harlem as Black Utopia**

It is not only the real life story of the author of *Passing* that mimics its suggestions about depth, surface, belonging and the idealization of Harlem. James Weldon Johnson in *Black Manhattan* idealizes Harlem in a nonfiction account, presenting 1920s Harlem as the ideal great height to which all prior history of black people in Manhattan has been aiming. Johnson, like Nella Larsen with *Passing*, writes on 1920s Harlem at the end of that decade and from within

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32 One of the rumors about the latter part of Larsen’s life is that she was passing for white. There is actually no evidence of this. There is, conversely, evidence that she was too dark to pass, even if she had wanted to (Hutchinson). Not to mention that certainly, as the only nonwhite member of an otherwise white family, she would have passed in childhood if she could have.
Harlem. Both writers were a part of the Harlem Renaissance, and the two were close friends. Larsen, her characters Clare and Irene, and Johnson all migrated to Harlem—the former three from Chicago and the later from Florida. Larsen’s two main characters, like Johnson, want to remain in Harlem in ways Larsen herself seemed more ambivalent about. Larsen left and returned to New York City three times, and she lived in various parts of the city throughout her life. She did not live in Harlem after the 1920s. While Larsen married into the black upper class in Harlem, Johnson established himself by way of his own legal career and leadership roles in the NAACP. Irene in *Passing*, as one organizing a “Negro dance,” for example, is more at home in the black bourgeois of 1920s Harlem than Larsen herself was. Johnson writes the kind of history of Harlem that either Irene or Clare, for all of their differences, might have written. He, while occasionally noting potentially negative aspects of life there for some inhabitants, generally idealizes Harlem as a uniquely positive zone for black life, health, prosperity, and race relations.

For Johnson, as for Irene and Clare, Harlem and New York are exceptional. He views Harlem as a part of the “heart of Manhattan,” unlike predominantly black sections of “nearly every city in the country”:

In nearly every city in the country the Negro section is a nest or several nests situated somewhere on the boarders; it is a section one must ‘go out to.’ In New York it is entirely different. Negro Harlem is situated in the heart of Manhattan and covers one of the most beautiful and healthful sites in the whole city. It is not a fringe, it is not a slum, nor it is a ‘quarter’ consisting of dilapidated tenements. (146)

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33 Larsen admired Johnson’s work, and when they were neighbors in Nashville in the early 1930s, they spend significant time with one another (Hutchinson).
For Johnson, Harlem is “beautiful,” “healthful,” and “not a slum.” He dates the “trek to Harlem” as beginning in the early 1900s when the then “West Fifty-third Street centre had reached its utmost development. . . The move to West Fifty-third Street had been the result of the opportunity to get into better houses; and the move to Harlem was due to the same urge. In fact, Harlem offered the coloured people the first chance in their entire history in New York to live in modern apartment houses” (147). Here, he notes migration to Harlem as a part of a legacy of increasingly positive opportunities for black people in New York City. He describes the migration to Harlem as “fathered and engineered by Philip A. Payton,” who Harlemites should thank for providing “Negroes with better, cleaner, more modern, more airy, more sunny houses than they ever lived in before” (148). In Johnson’s account, Harlem had been “overbuilt” and Payton convinced landlords who had trouble filling their buildings to allow black tenants to rent from them.

In Johnson’s view, the beginning of World War I expands Harlem as fertile ground for black prosperity. He writes that the war caused “an almost total cessation of immigration.” He notes the U.S. was “immediately called upon to furnish munitions and supplies,” and in turn there was “an unprecedented shortage of labour” for northern industry. For this shortage, Johnson argues, “there was only one source, and that was the reservoir of black labour in the South” (151). The result, in Johnson’s account, was black prosperity and black property ownership: “Down to fifteen years ago the amount that Negroes had acquired in Harlem was by comparison negligible. Today a very large part of the property in Harlem occupied by Negroes is owned by Negroes” (155), which he suggests is “at a conservative estimate, between fifty and sixty million dollars” of property (154). Johnson, in his preface, proclaims not to be writing “in any strict sense a history” and explains that:
I have attempted only to etch in the background of the Negro in latter-day New York, to give a cut-back in projecting a picture of Negro Harlem; I have avoided statistical data and included only as much of documentation as seemed to me necessary for my main purpose. . . . (xix)

The problem, of course, with the claims in Johnson’s preface, is that he does include statistics, such as in the instance above in which he suggests, “a very large party of the property in Harlem occupied by Negroes is owned by Negroes,” and estimates dollar amounts for the sum of the property blacks own. Further, these are assertions that other historical accounts of the era call into question. For example, Robertson et al in “Harlem in Black and White: Mapping Race and Place in the 1920s” (2013) argue that exactly the opposite was true, that most of the buildings occupied by black people were owned by whites. I am not suggesting Johnson had any intention of deception or even necessarily that he was wrong. I simply point out that he tries to write a history while claiming not to be doing so and while using information and pseudo-statistics that may have been more driven by optimism than reality. He judges Harlem superficially and from a position of privilege as a relatively wealthy Harlem resident.

When Johnson recognizes potential problems with life in Harlem, he portrays issues like racial tension as something affecting white people and not necessarily blacks or as something affecting blacks and whites in other places only. When he describes the sudden migration of blacks from other parts of New York City to Harlem, he writes:

Then, in the eyes of the whites who were antagonistic, the whole movement took on the aspect of an ‘invasion’—an invasion of both their economic and their social rights. They felt that the Negroes as neighbours not only lowered the values of their property, but also
lowered their social status. Seeing that they could not stop the movement, they began to flee. (150)

Here, it is as if black people only benefit from the move, and white people who have a problem with the arrival of blacks simply leave. In a later moment, when describing race riots sweeping the nation in 1919, Johnson writes: “not even during this period of massacre did New York, with more than a hundred thousand Negroes grouped together in Harlem, lose its equanimity” (156).

He goes further, attributing this relatively less violent summer of 1919 in Harlem to New York’s “natural psychology” as “a truly cosmopolitan city” that “more than any other American city, maintains a matter-of-fact, a taken-for-granted attitude towards her Negro citizens” (157).

Harlem, for Johnson, is an “experiment” that succeeded where other places failed. He writes, “more than two hundred thousand Negroes live in the heart of Manhattan. . . and do so without race friction” (281). I do not wish to claim that Johnson’s optimism is baseless; indeed, he lived and wrote in the era of which he writes. He and Nella Larsen had a unique, direct access to 1920s Harlem, and I will never experience it. His sentiments are not inaccurate because his Harlem crashed, and his view of the intangible spirit of Harlem is indeed as valid as that of any other 1920s inhabitant. But it does seem that Johnson either has an investment in effacing racial tension in his account and/or that he was so removed from ordinary street life in Harlem that he did not experience racial tension and in turn assumed it did not exist. His seeming desire to other racism in his narrative of Harlem mimics the logic of racism, as Irene so often does when she cannot grapple with singularity and ambiguities in the narrative she has crafted about Clare or about herself.

Similar to his approach to racial tensions, Johnson simultaneously acknowledges and erases the plight of poor blacks in Harlem:
But, of course, no one can seriously think that the two hundred thousand and more Negroes in Harlem spend their nights on any such pleasance. Of a necessity the vast majority of the more ordinary, hard-working people, who spend their time in just about the same way that other ordinary, hard-working people do. Most of them have never been inside a of a night club. The great bulk of them are confronted with the stern necessity of making a living. . . Notwithstanding all that, gaiety is peculiarly characteristic of Harlem. (160-161)

The masses of Harlem get a good deal of pleasure out of things far too simple for most other folks. In the evenings of summer and on Sundays they get lots of enjoyment out of strolling. Strolling is almost a lost art in New York; at least, in the manner in which it is so generally practiced in Harlem. . . one puts on one’s best clothes and fares forth the pass the time . . . One saunters along, he hails this one, exchanges a word or two with that one, stops for a short chat. . . This is not simply going out for a walk; it is more like going out for adventure. (162-3)

There is a large element of educated, well-to-do metropolitans among the Negroes of Harlem who view with indulgence, often with something less, the responses of the masses to these artless amusements. . . Yet as a whole community it possesses as sense of humour and a love of gaiety that are distinctly characteristic. (169)

It is as if even poverty, in this exceptional place, is not poverty. “The masses of Harlem” are essentialized as easy to please, and Johnson repeatedly notes “gaiety” as the overriding mood of Harlem despite the ordinary hard work at which most residents spend their time. It is difficult to assess these statements. Johnson perhaps feels he sees and understands the trials of those inhabiting a lower class than he does, but he also does not want to dwell on their struggle. Or
perhaps he feels an abstract, positive spirit in Harlem dominates and is not squelched by ordinary struggles. Johnson, as a member of the black bourgeoisie, also may have a superficial, rosy and inaccurate view of poor people in Harlem, ever at a distance from him. Further still, Johnson may be trying to will such a Harlem into existence by crafting it first in print.

The trajectory of Johnson’s text dwells for several chapters upon the artistic successes of black people in 1910s and 1920s Harlem and culminates in Johnson’s assessment that: “Through his artistic efforts the Negro is smashing this immemorial stereotype” (“that the Negro is nothing more than a beggar at the gates of the nation”) “faster than he has ever done through any method he has been able to use” (283). Johnson concludes hopefully that, “Possessing the basic rights, the Negro in New York ought to be able to work through the discriminations and disadvantages. His record beginning with the eleven three hundred years ago proves that he can; and he will” (284). The story of Harlem, for Johnson, is one of triumph, and the story of blacks in Manhattan is one in which life is always getting better, never worse. Johnson observes, “It is apparent that race friction, as it affects Harlem as a community, has grown less and less each year for the past ten years; and the signs are that there will not be a recrudescence” (156). It is easy to deride this optimism in hindsight. Upper class blacks actually begin to flee Harlem as the white inhabitants before them did, experiencing new black immigrants as invaders. The flourishing creative culture of the late 1910s and 1920s Harlem derails in the 1930s with the Great Depression and its accompanying lack of patronage for black artists. Just as the fictional, idealistic migrant to 1920s Harlem, Clare, dies, so too does the Harlem her counterpart Irene so cherishes. When the author Ann Petry, whose work I turn to next, writes, she writes in the aftermath of this collapse, of World War II, of the deflating discrimination black soldiers faced, and of the 1943 Harlem race riots. Petry, indeed, writes of a very different Harlem.
Chapter 4

Aftermath: Female Bodies and Ruinous Harlem in Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946)

Harlem is a place uniquely formed by fantasy. Fantasies of Harlem as a black utopia drove black urban migration there, especially in the 1910s, 1920s, 1940s and 1950s. Harlem was idealized as a safe harbor for black people facing lynch mobs and Jim Crow segregation laws in so much of the rest of the United States. In light of those fantasies, Ann Petry’s *The Street* is simultaneously a cautionary tale and an urban survival handbook. In this chapter I investigate the failed personal dreams of both Lutie, the text’s main character, and Mrs. Hedges, a minor character who migrated to Harlem from a small town in Georgia. For Lutie, these dreams include being self-sufficient such that she can earn enough money to leave Harlem and own a home. Mrs. Hedges’s dream is to find love. While looking at their personal failures and their corresponding reactions, I suggest their individual failures are emblematic of the messy aftermath of shared fantasies of Harlem and of the ways World War I and II might improve black life in the United States.

Matching actual historical trends and attitudes toward Harlem, Irene from *Passing*, set in the 1920s, is desperate to stay in Harlem, while Lutie, in the 1940s, is desperate to flee it. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, Harlem was largely ignored by the Works Progress Administration projects that eventually helped the rest of New York City to rejuvenate. The WPA, as an employer, discriminated against black people, who were already facing hiring discrimination before the stock market crash. Hospitals, drug stores, and insurance companies would not hire black people (Burns). Several of the stores on 125th Street, the main shopping
strip in Harlem, were white-owned and would not hire blacks.\textsuperscript{34} Of the 255 new playgrounds built in the city through WPA funds in the 1930s, only two were accessible to black children (Burns). World War II, while providing new jobs for (black) women, did not improve financial opportunities for black men or improve the status of black civil rights in the U.S. at large. Stories of the mistreatment of black American soldiers in World War II were well-known, bred resentment, and bred violence. For example, the 1943 Harlem race riots were inspired by the rumored death of a black soldier at the hands of a white police officer in Harlem. The riots resulted in looting and the deaths of six black people (Griffin 119-120).\textsuperscript{35} *The Street*, even by way of individual characters, engages the deflating aftermath of all sorts of national fantasies, including the white patriarchal fantasy that racial segregation might not have dire consequences. *The Street* uniquely attacks the national fantasy that separate could be equal through Lutie’s predominant personal fantasy—that she and her son could thrive if only they could get away from particular others.\textsuperscript{36}

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\textsuperscript{34} In light of this tension, on March 19, 1935, when rumors spread that a Puerto Rican boy was killed for stealing from a white-owned store (he was actually let out the back entrance), a race riot ensued in which three black people were killed and over one hundred were injured (Burns). \\
\textsuperscript{35} Private Robert Brandy was shot in the shoulder when he intervened with a white police man’s arrest of a black women wherein the white officer hit the black woman. Brandy survived the shot after treatment (Griffin 119). \\
\textsuperscript{36} If a black single mother like Lutie in the late 1940s was able to save enough money to contemplate buying a house, the practice of redlining, which emerged after World War II in the wake of the federal housing aid program’s Title 2 loan system, would likely have prevented her from leaving Harlem for anywhere other than Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, within the New York City metro area. The practice known as redlining began when the Housing Loan Corporation rated neighborhoods based on their ethnic makeup, particularly the degree to which black, Latino, Irish, Jewish, Italian, and Polish families lived there: The HLC “distributed the maps to banks and held banks to a certain standard when loaning money for homes and rental. The consequences of having your ratings go down is of course that your housing property [value] goes down. So for instance, white Brooklynnites living in the old sections of north Brooklyn all of the sudden find that their housing value is less valuable not because they’ve done anything and not because their neighborhood had changed but because banks won’t lend anyone money to move there unless those people are black. After the Housing Loan Corporation begins
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It is no coincidence that Petry’s *The Street* is a much longer book than Larsen’s *Passing*. While Larsen’s Irene avoids genuine engagement with emotion, especially her own negative emotions, Petry’s main character, Lutie Johnson, is immersed in the depths of her emotions. In Lutie’s internal monologues, she repeatedly performs her obsession with the awfulness of her street and her apartment, feeling doomed by their appearance because of the depth she always ascribes to material surfaces. While similar to Larsen in her reserve and unwillingness to talk about herself, Petry, unlike Larsen, poured herself into personal writing, leaving heaps of private, emotionally engaged journals in her wake. Petry’s preference for private self-expression is mirrored by Lutie’s extensive mental engagement with her private thoughts and her reserved interactions with other people in the novel. Petry’s Lutie, in her exploration of the aftermath of Harlem’s heyday and the breakdown of her own marriage, engages a depth of feeling Larsen’s Irene often avoids.

What is clear from Lutie’s emotionally driven internal monologues is that while Irene in *Passing* (1929) imagines change as unthinkably awful, Lutie, alternatively, feels doomed by the

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segregating on the federal level and working with local banks in Brooklyn, Manhattan and the Bronx, and Queens, the state gets involved in ‘red-lining.’ They also map out Brooklyn. They go block by block, and this time they look for only black and Latino persons, and a single black person living on a block is enough to red line a block. The effect will in fact be to do extraordinary damage to black communities throughout New York. All of a sudden, black communities that had been scattered throughout New York City which had long traditions in certain neighborhoods and the southern part of New York …were being physically segregated, rooted up. When the Housing Loan Corporation has finished its work in the 1940s, it has dramatically altered the makeup of Brooklyn” and “In the 1930s, Harlem goes from being an ethnic community with quite a bit of mobility and optimism to a racial slum with very little optimism, very little hope. The federal government had armed banks and insurance companies and real estate dealers with the public authority to keep black people inside that physical space and to force new black migrants to the city inside similar physical spaces so that as Harlem expands in the 1930s and 1940s as Bedford Stuyvesant expands in the 40s and 50s what remains true about them is black communities no longer control their own destiny by the 50s and 60s, they’re being forced and physically quarantined inside the city at a time when white Americans are peculiarly mobile.” (Wilder in Burns)
places she (feels she) knows. Lutie treats as fact her pervasive fear that the street where she lives, 116th Street between 7th and 8th avenues in Harlem, and its other inhabitants, will ruin her son. Her aversion to the street propels many of her actions, such as her frequent departures from her son in an effort to earn more money and in turn be able to move. Ironically, her obsession with helping her son avoid danger contributes to his entanglement with the law, her decision to commit murder, and her decision to abandon her son.

But Lutie’s incantatory negativity and bend toward fatalism are also not unfounded. It is not as if Lutie simply thinks her way into destruction; racism, sexism, high unemployment, and poverty all negatively contribute in real ways to her struggles as a single black mother in 1940s Harlem. Her landlord attempts to rape her, she is repeatedly sexually propositioned, she has no childcare for her son after school, she makes little pay, and she has limited job and housing options. A white man plotting to manipulate her into a sexual relationship with him heads the financial and social power structures of her street. This white man, Junto, threatens one of his black employees, Boots (who also has a sexual interest in Lutie) with the loss of his job if he pursues a relationship with Lutie. Junto also ensures Lutie’s poverty by refusing to pay her for her work so that she will be desperate for money and, he hopes, his affection. Lutie often fails to recognize these real threats to her and her son as a result of her hyper-vigilant attention to more abstract kinds of danger. Lutie focuses on a mixture of real and imagined knowledge of her Harlem street, treating her street as a stable abstraction she cannot change, at the expense of attending to concrete local or structural threats to her livelihood. I argue that the text suggests fantasy, action, and actual social forces together produce one’s fate in a given location. Lutie’s continual attempts to process and understand the happenings of the street and the novel’s easy access to her fluctuating and conflicting emotions display this complex interplay.
Irene and Clare from *Passing* perform upper class black femininity and aim to highlight their bodies through fancy dress. Differently, the poor, black female characters I examine from *The Street*, Lutie and Mrs. Hedges, each personally decide, for different reasons and through different methods, to try and erase (desire for) their bodies. Lutie tries to imagine her body is not a factor in her ability to successfully reach her goals. In response to repeatedly being treated as a sexual object, she tries to ignore and/or kill the desire for her body that causes her such attention and frustration. Mrs. Hedges, an exceptionally large woman who is horribly burned in a fire, would rather cover her body and deny chances for love relationships than make her body visible. Both women show how, for poor, single black women in the 1940s, having a(n exceptional) body is problematic. They do not take up masculinity, per se, in response to their disavowal of their feminine bodies, as Ellen in *Manhattan Transfer* does, but rather they aim for self-sufficiency, something often systematically denied of both black women and black men in Petry’s Harlem as well as the real Harlem of the 1940s. If we think of *Passing* and *The Street* as a historical lineage, it is as if Lutie could be Clare or Irene’s daughter who, in one generation’s time, has simultaneously become literally impoverished and emotionally enriched as compared to her figurative mothers. Lutie is more direct and connected to her emotions and in turn her mind than Clare or Irene is. Lutie alternatively avows and disavows her body, in her sometimes refusal to acknowledge her hyper-visibility as a beautiful poor black woman and in her sometimes refusal to ignore her body.

I examine Lutie and Mrs. Hedges’s alternative ways of surviving gendered, marginalizing urban space while inhabiting what are perceived as exceptional bodies in order to suggest the different failures of each of these women result from a combination of self-denial of agency, self-segregation, inattention to the concrete, and the real social forces marginalizing them.
Attending to the personal failures of these women and the physical spaces they inhabit provides ways for thinking about how others in similar subject positions might, alternatively, fight systematic racism rather than contribute to their own destruction. I assert that *The Street* demonstrates how attention to abstract danger can create a false sense of geographical knowledge and in turn may lead to inattention to concrete danger in ways that have violent consequences. In the end, Lutie kills Boots, the black man within her literal and figurative grasp, rather than Junto, the white man who dominates Boots and who is a kind of modern version of a slave master in the text. Mrs. Hedges differently violates other people’s bodies; once she decides her dream of love has failed, she becomes a madam prostituting poor black women. Through my analysis of Lutie and Mrs. Hedges’s fates, I assert their actions imply that, when frustrated, the marginalized are more likely to reinforce the subjugation of groups they belong to rather than attempt to tackle the processes by which their group is subjugated. Further, a study of the ways and reasons both Lutie and Mrs. Hedges harm black people provides ways for understanding how real people in similarly marginalized positions might act otherwise.

**Internal Monologue and Self-Defeat**

Lutie demonstrates from the start of the novel that the 1920s dream of Harlem is always already dead; in its place is, at best, ambivalence about Harlem and, at worst, loathing of it. Lutie generally experiences Harlem as an unfit reprieve from other, more terrible options. She flees to Harlem from her alcoholic father’s house because she sees it as the lesser of two evils. The novel opens with a cold, unrelenting November wind on 116th street between 7th and 8th avenues, and Lutie is in search of an apartment for her and her son, Bub, so that they might escape what she deems an amoral home. Lutie assumes that if she and her son segregate themselves their
prospects in life will improve, but she also feels doomed by the lack of possibilities for a positive escape in 1940s Harlem:

She turned and faced the wind in order to estimate the street. The buildings were old with small slit-like windows, which meant the rooms were small and dark. In a street running in this direction there wouldn’t be any sunlight in the apartments. Not ever... The hallways here would be dark and narrow. Then she shrugged her shoulders, for getting an apartment where she and Bub would be alone was more important than dark hallways. The thing that really mattered was getting away from Pop and his raddled women, and anything was better than that. Dark hallways, dirty stairs, even roaches on the walls.


Here, Lutie, from the facades, predicts the internal conditions of the buildings on 116th street while focusing on the negative—she assumes the building will be dark with poor air circulation, and she is right. She thinks that, in segregating themselves from her father and his girlfriend, she and her son can grapple with “almost anything” in terms of material life conditions. She assumes any move will improve their overall life situation. Interestingly, after they move in, though, she envisions the force of the material world as stronger than the force of people. She has always already given abstract power to her street and apartment, and the 1940s Harlem portrayed here is always already a problematic place mired by filthy and dark living conditions.

Indeed, Lutie’s personal dream is to escape Harlem unscathed through self-sufficiency. Like in the example above, Lutie’s internal monologues provide readers with access to her emotions and fantasies, whether hopeful or damning. Lutie performs self-sufficiency, with her declaration that “Anything. Anything. Anything,” would be better than her father’s home. Her repetition of “Anything” three times is an attempt to perform certainty for herself that she is
making the right decision despite her obvious reservations about the building. But the unanswered question “Anything?” that follows the three repetitions demonstrates the actual uncertainty she is trying to efface. While Lutie is right in assuming the literal darkness of the apartment she goes to inspect, her predictions quickly go farther when she views the inside: “Layers and layers of paint won’t fix that apartment. It would always smell . . . Scrubbing wouldn’t help any” (19). Lutie condemns efforts at improving both material and social conditions before they have been attempted. Lutie interprets this apartment as her only alternative to staying with her father. She does not inspect other apartment options: “there were these dark, narrow halls. . . Or she could go on living with Pop. And Lil” where Bub would, undoubtedly, in Lutie’s mind, “learn to like the taste of gin” and “a lot of things that Lil could teach him” (19). Lutie is quick to condemn Lil as morally questionable based on her appearance. She describes Lil as “raddled.” She is sure Lil is a poor caretaker and that Bub would take after Lil in negative ways no matter what she might do to prevent such results. She juxtaposes what she views as the literal and figurative filth of both her father’s home and this new apartment, and ultimately she decides to live in the more literally filthy place, the apartment. Lutie views the apartment’s assumed negativity as a potential improvement over what she sees as the guaranteed moral degradation facing her son in her father’s home. Lutie limits her own options through her condemnation of the apartment, her neighbors, her father, and Lil.

Lutie ascribes depth to the surfaces of material places. While her analysis of Harlem depends on her mood, she is generally negative about her surroundings. Lutie interprets Harlem through rigid, naturalistic logic. Even when Lutie is hopeful, Harlem is a “dark,” “shadowy” place filled with dark and shadowy people. When Lutie is encouraged to try out for Boots Smith’s band, she gushes with hope that she might earn enough money to flee her street. The
materiality of Harlem shop-windows impacts Lutie emotionally. When Lutie happily walks with Boots to his car, she notes:

        The windows of the butcher shops were piled high with pigs’ feet, hog maw, neck bones, chitterlings, ox tails, tripe—all the parts that didn’t cost much because they didn’t have much solid meat on them. . . the sight of them stiffened her determination to leave streets like this behind her—dark streets filled with shadowy figures that carried with them the horror of the places they lived in, places like her own apartment…She thought about the stores again. All of them—the butcher shops, the notion stores, the vegetable stands—all of them sold the leavings, the sweepings, the impossible unsalable merchandise, the dregs and dross that were reserved especially for Harlem. . . Bub was healthy, sturdy, strong, but he couldn’t remain that way living here. (153-4)

For Lutie, the withered vegetables and meat scraps are reflective of the people and vice versa. It is as if whatever she sees in the windows confirms her negative feelings about Harlem as a marginalized space intended for marginalized people. It is a space meant to perpetuate a negative cycle, as it is a space incapable of properly nourishing people who otherwise might rise above unjust conditions. Harlem is a place where one cannot remain “healthy, sturdy,” or “strong.” Lutie seems capable of delving into the injustices she associates with the low-grade food in Harlem only because she feels on the verge of a departure from Harlem. In a moment of doubt, later in the text, she conversely imagines her options for herself and Bub as limited to the subject positions of the street’s inhabitants:

        She wondered uneasily if she was fooling herself in believing that she could sing her way out of the street. Suppose it didn’t work and she had to stay there. What would the street do to her? She thought of Mrs. Hedges, the Super, Min, Mrs. Hedges’ little girls. Which
one would she be like, say five years from now? What would Bub be like? She shivered as she headed toward home. (183-4)

Lutie, when feeling deflated, cannot experience the thingness of the streets of Harlem or experience its inhabitants as unique individuals. Instead, the street is treated as an abstract, unchangeable force here, and individuals are types she and Bub are at-risk of becoming. She feels her only solution is to segregate herself and Bub from the poor nourishment provided by her street’s food and people.

While Lutie sometimes recognizes positive qualities in Harlem, she only does so by recognizing Harlem as a better alternative to hostile elsewhere. Lutie mimics the problematic logic of racism, noting one impact of legal, racial segregation is that it inspires the mental perpetuation of its logic in individual imaginations:

She got off the train, thinking that she never felt really human until she reached Harlem and thus got away from the hostility in the eyes of the white women who stared at her on the downtown streets and in the subway. Escaped from the openly appraising looks of the white men whose eyes seemed to go through her clothing to her long brown legs. On the trains their eyes came at her furtively from behind newspapers, or half-concealed under hatbrims or partly shielded by their hands. And there was a warm, moist look about their eyes that made her want to run. (57)

At the same time that Lutie is obsessed with leaving her street, she also refers to Harlem at large as the only place she feels human. This simultaneity marks her ambivalence about Harlem. It is a place of both safety and danger for her. In this example, it is as if Harlem at large is pleasant when compared to Lutie’s experiences in the rest of Manhattan but her street in particular is less pleasant than the neighborhood containing it. Her street is more reality than fantasy and is less
humanizing than the Harlem ideal is. For Lutie, while Harlem is perhaps, at least in theory, a more humanizing zone than most places she might go, it is also simultaneously quite unpleasant, especially when she considers the particularities of her street. This moment in the text also contrasts Lutie’s feeling of calm once she steps off the train, the literal battleground space invoking legal U.S. segregation, to her discomfort in transit in the face of “openly appraising looks of the white men.” The unstructured time of the daily commute makes Lutie uneasy; it is specifically “on the trains” that “their eyes came at her furtively from behind newspapers.” The train is a space allowing for theatrical disguise, in Lutie’s view—men may hide behind the mask of a newspaper while gawking at her body. This scenario also inverts the imagined, feared scenario partially driving the legalization of segregation (on train cars)—that white women needed protection from black men. Here, instead, a black woman is preyed upon by white men. Relieved when she steps off the train, Lutie assumes she can read the thoughts of the other Harlemites: “These other folks feel the same way, she thought—that once they are freed from the contempt in the eyes of the downtown world, they instantly become individuals. Up here they are no longer creatures labeled simply ‘colored’ and therefore all alike” (57). Moments after exceptionalizing herself in the face of specific other Harlemites, she now assumes a kinship with the strangers around her. The assumed kinship is such that she declares with certainty what “these other folks feel” and that it is “the same” as what she feels, regardless of their gender in the face of would-be appraising white eyes. At the same time she happily declares the individuality she feels is uniquely found in Harlem, she is also assuming black Harlemites are “all alike,” though. She performs the exact flaw she attributes to “the eyes of the downtown world,” reinforcing the kinds of logic that marginalize her. At large, this scene shows that while
segregation, for Lutie, provides some relief—it is pleasant for her to arrive in Harlem—it also reinforces and contributes to a cycle of inequality for racial groups.

A similar moment much later in the text echoes the above scene of Lutie’s arrival in Harlem via subway. But in this scene, when she is feeling more negative and starting to recognize patterns of marginalization affecting her because she is a single black woman, Lutie attends to the negative ramifications of structural racism. This later scene, rather than contradicting the prior scene, demonstrates the complex effects of real social forces such as gender norms and inequalities on one’s (sense of one’s) fate. Lutie goes to see an agent about potentially working as a singer, and he sexually propositions her. After the incident, she rides the train from the 50s to 125th Street. This time, in a furious rage when emerging onto 125th Street, she is unable to think generally or positively about Harlem. She declares:

Streets like the one she lived on were no accident. They were the North’s lynch mobs, she thought bitterly; the method the big cities used to keep Negroes in their place. And she began thinking of Pop unable to get a job; of Jim slowly disintegrating because he, too, couldn’t get a job, and of the subsequent wreck of their marriage; of Bub left to his own devices after school. From the time she was born, she had been hemmed into an ever-narrowing space, until now she was very nearly walled in and the wall had been built up brick by brick by eager white hands. (323-324)

When Lutie personifies “the streets like the one she lived on,” she envisions the streets not as one potentially resistible person or force but as mobs. Not only are the streets mobs but they are “the North’s lynch mobs,” condemning the North as no better than the South in terms of opportunities and safety for black people, a notion that would run against popular assumptions of the time. Not only are the streets plotting to kill black people, they are pursuing them as part of a whole city
plot against all black people that is “used to keep Negroes in their place.” Her recognition of lack of employment opportunities especially for black males during and after WWII contradicts the hopeful dreams of Harlem that were still impelling many blacks from rural areas to move there. Further, she directly connects lack of employment opportunities for black men with the disintegration of families. Lutie identifies with her crammed apartment, seeing her life as on a negative path moving into “ever-narrowing space.” The specific people harming Lutie go unnamed and seem indecipherable; a sea of “eager white hands” tries to contain her. Lutie experiences the violence of systematic segregation. Because she is black, Lutie faces limited housing options, unequal pay for equal work, and limited work opportunities. But Lutie perpetuates the violent logic of segregation on a personal level, and she does not note the ironic connection between the impulses driving systematic segregation and her own desire to disconnect from other black people in Harlem.

Lutie dreams of escaping from Harlem with Bub. Lutie thinks “the sun transformed everything it shone on” (195), and she idealizes “an apartment some place where there were trees and sunlight” as her greatest wish for herself and Bub. In the logic of her dreams, Lutie wants to see things in black and white. She performs an effacement of her own experiences when they counter her ability to generalize black and white experiences of the world. For example, when lamenting the disparity of wealth between black and white, she comments:

This world was one of great contrasts, she thought, and if the richest part of it was to be fenced off so that people like herself could only look at it with no expectation of ever being able to get inside it, then it would be better to have been born blind so you couldn’t see it, born deaf so you couldn’t hear it, born with no sense of touch so you couldn’t feel it. Better still, born with no brain so that you would be completely unaware of anything,
so that you would never know there were places that were filled with sunlight and good food and where children were safe. (155)

While Lutie describes a very real disparity of wealth, she assumes things like the safety of children accompany wealth even when her own experience marks such assumptions as untrue. Lutie worked as a maid and nanny for the wealthy Chandler family in Connecticut, and she often thinks about the little boy she cared for during that time as the white, advantaged counterpart to her disadvantaged son. While James might live in a literally sunnier place than Bub, he is not necessarily safer or more protected from harm than Bub is. Indeed, while Lutie was his nanny, Little James Chandler watched his uncle kill himself. When Lutie remembers the scene, she notes that James was ignored by the surrounding adults and sat silently with a ghastly white face in the wake of the traumatic experience. This is the kind of experience Lutie does not interrogate when she idealizes the life of James Chandler or living in a large sunny home. Lutie also does not recognize that her son only requires her presence to feel warmth and safety. So while she chases her vision of what is best for Bub, he is always already satisfied by her presence alone.37

**Storytelling and Exceptionality**

Lutie exceptionalizes herself in order to survive both her real, marginalizing circumstances and her stark fantasies related to them. Lutie rehearses her own ability to escape Harlem by hoarding and repeating stories of people she deems failed Harlemites. She recounts

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37 Indeed, Lutie’s son Bub offers an alternate view of space that, while basic, seems to elude his mother. For Bub, his mother’s presence alone makes the apartment “warm and friendly and familiar.” Without her, the apartment “was frightening and cold” (214) and “swallowed up in darkness” (216). For Bub, the space of the apartment is experienced as warm or cold, light or dark based on the absence or presence of the person he loves. Lutie cannot seem to get the same satisfaction out of Bub’s company that he does out of her company. Lutie, the adult, is ironically the one more focused on literal light and darkness as aligned with happiness or sadness in a way that her child is capable of metaphorizing.
their narratives for herself in order to mark her own difference from the subjects of these narratives. She in turn hopes she will face a more promising fate. Lutie’s self-talk, even at her most positive, performs a replication of the logic of legal segregation at an individual level—she feels superior to these others and wants to distance herself from them. When hopeful, she believes that despite the destructive fates she assumes befalls all who remain in Harlem, she is and can continue to be exceptionally untouched by Harlem’s destructive powers:

As for the street . . . she wasn’t afraid of its influence, for she would fight against it. Streets like 116th Street or being colored, or a combination of both with all it implied, had turned Pop into a sly old man who drank too much; had killed Mom off when she was in her prime. In that very apartment house in which she was now living, the same combination of circumstances had evidently made the Mrs. Hedges who sat in the street-floor window turn to running a fairly well-kept whore house; and the superintendent of the building—well, the street had pushed him into basements away from light and air until he was being eaten up by some horrible obsession . . . None of those things would happen to her, Lutie decided, because she would fight back and never stop fighting back.

(56-57)

Her logic is interesting. She sees her mother, father, Mrs. Hedges, her Super (Jones), and Min all as powerless over their circumstances. Yet Lutie simultaneously feels she can fight and win in the face of the same circumstances. She describes the street as active and these other people as passive—the street “turned,” “killed,” “made,” and “pushed,” them. But when Lutie thinks of herself, she thinks of the street as having “influence” rather than dominance over her. While others are “spineless” in the face of the street, Lutie allows herself to be exceptional in her own mind—“none of those things would happen to her . . . because she would fight back.” She
implies that her parents and neighbors did not fight the literal and figurative streets in their lives, “streets like 116th Street or being colored.” Here, she conflates race with her street, as if race is a direct route to somewhere. By “deciding” to fight the street—an agency she sees as available to herself alone—she also seems to be deciding to fight “being colored.” She shows no interest in trying to improve conditions on her street and shows no belief that such a thing is possible; her only solution is to move.

Lutie also sculpts her real encounters with strangers into abstract narratives that violate their agency in order to cultivate her sense of exceptionality and cope with the surroundings she condemns. In particular, Lutie repeats three narratives about strangers. These narratives rage against abstract assumed effects of living in Harlem, whereas her accounts of people she knows, detailed above, abhor the specific fates of the given individuals. Lutie repeatedly reflects on three people for whom tragic, private moments become public street theater in ways that haunt her. Lutie flashes back to the story of (1) a young black man fatally stabbed by a white store owner, (2) an old man in a hospital waiting room who stares into space, and (3) a young girl who is stabbed. In her retellings of these stories, it is clear she aims, above all, to avoid becoming resigned to Harlem, violence, and injustice. How to fight and what to fight prove difficult for Lutie to identify because she so often generalizes her particular circumstances to pin the street as an abstract, catch-all scapegoat for negative conditions and events.

When Lutie begins to recall stories of strangers meeting tragic fates, she notes: “The thought set her to murmuring aloud, ‘I mustn’t get used to it. Not ever. I’ve got to keep on fighting to get away from here’”(194). Lutie makes it clear that getting used to Harlem is one of her greatest fears. In her own retelling of stories, she reads death and violence as a predictable
linear narrative formed on and by the streets of Harlem. A close look at Lutie’s story about the stabbing of a young girl makes Lutie’s blindspots clear.

She felt she knew the steps by which that girl landed on the stretcher in the hospital. She could trace them easily. . . It happened again and again all through Harlem. And she saw in her mind’s eye the curious procession of people she had met coming out of 121st Street. They were walking toward Eighth Avenue. She had been to the day-old bakery on Eighth Avenue and she stopped on the corner for the stop light. Down the length of the block she saw this group of people. They formed at first glance what appeared to be a procession, for they were walking slowly, stiffly. There was a goodish space between each one of them as though they didn’t want to be too close to each other and yet were younger—sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, nineteen—and they were moving like sleepwalkers. (204-5)

For Lutie, the literal and figurative paths of the street are strict and unwinding. When Lutie imagines “the steps by which that girl landed on the stretcher,” it matters that she imagines a distinct and predictable narrative of demise. Lutie senses that if she can just know this narrative well enough, she and/or Bub can avoid it. There are not multiple paths to destruction in Lutie’s mind but rather one story repeats itself predictably. “It happened again and again” not everywhere but “all through Harlem.” She judges others for sleepwalking down a path she is so determined to avoid. It matters further that Lutie sees the “curious procession” in her “mind’s eye,” a phrase that implies Lutie is either remembering a real event by picturing it in her mind or that she is imagining the procession she describes. Lutie’s description of the procession leading the wounded girl to Harlem seems to be more of an explanation of what she assumes happened to the girl versus what she literally may have seen with her own eyes, though, because,
immediately before the girl arrives in the hospital, Lutie is in the waiting room with Bub and not trailing after the girl. Lutie continues:

Lutie got that same jolting sense of shock and then of rage, because these people, all of them—the girl, the crowd in back of her—showed no horror, no surprise, no dismay. They had expected this. They were used to it. And they had become resigned to it. Yes, she thought, she and Bub had to get out of 116th Street. It was a bad street. And then she thought about the other streets. It wasn’t just this street that she was afraid of or that was bad. It was any street where people were packed together like sardines in a can. And it wasn’t just this city. It was any city where they set up a line and say black folks stay on this side and white folks on this side, so that the black folks were crammed on top of each other . . . (205-6)

Lutie feels so strongly that she knows how the girl ended up covered in blood that she describes the girl’s arrival as something she witnessed. It is a procession, a path, so predictable and obvious, in Lutie’s view, that she need not have seen it to recount it. In this seemingly imagined part of the scene, it is the resignation of a whole “crowd” that disturbs Lutie. She judges that they show “no horror, no surprise, no dismay” when confronted with something that jolts, shocks and enrages her. She is in turn outraged by other people’s lack of outrage. She, alternatively, feels that maintaining her rage is a way to maintain her aliveness. She quickly and logically, in her mind, moves from witnessing another person’s tragic event to associating that event with the presumed resignation of all Harlemites excepting herself. From there she moves to associating horror and fear with her street, but she soon globalizes resignation toward violence as a plague facing the inhabitants of “any street where people were packed together like sardines in a can”
(206) and any place where people are segregated by race. This trajectory continues, invoking unemployment as an effect of segregation:

It was any place where the women had to work to support the families because the men couldn’t get jobs and the men got bored and pulled out and the kids were left without proper homes because there was nobody around to put a heart into it. Yes. It was any place where people were so damn poor they didn’t have time to do anything but work, and their bodies were the only source of relief from the pressure under which they lived; and where the crowding together made the young girls wise beyond their years. It all added up to the same thing, she decided—white people. She hated them. She would always hate them. She forced herself to stop that train of thought. It led nowhere. It was unpleasant. (206)

Here, “white people” are a “thing,” an object of Lutie’s hate. In her mind, white people are the inevitable end to a “train of thought” tracing a lineage of oppressive causes and effects. In other words, she cannot think globally about local horrors without ending up at her hatred of white people. Lutie, while in this extreme state of emotion, remains physically still. She physically appears just as the young male murder victim’s sister she judges so harshly for being still at the sight of her brother’s body. Her inaction in the face of rage calls into question her earlier assumptions about outward rage as a necessary sign of concern in the face of injustice. Or alternatively, her inaction suggests she is already resigned to the violence surrounding her. In Lutie’s account of the wounded girl in the emergency room, she imagines herself as different from other Harlemites. But she is always already at the back of the procession and/or linked to them as fellow blacks, the self-alignment she reaches at the end of her “train of thought.” “She and Bub had to get out of 116th Street” because they do not fit in emotionally with its other black
inhabitants, but she cannot get out. She and Bub have nowhere to go because they do not fit in with whites physically. The turn in Lutie’s thinking, wherein she most aims to exceptionalize herself from other Harlemites but is unable to completely sever herself from them even in fantasy, suggests her attempts to exceptionalize herself are always already undercut by the logic of racism as it applies to the regulation of her body.

Therefore, Lutie’s mental performances and strategies for coping with the violences she ascribes to Harlem become more complicated when she is unable to exceptionalize herself. As she proceeds through the narrative of the stabbed girl, Lutie demonstrates the (often oscillating) styles of reaction she has to setbacks in her ability to self-segregate from other Harlemites. In one kind of reaction, Lutie imagines herself as connected to other Harlemites, envisioning her actions as the only reasonable path for anyone in her situation to take. In the other strategy, Lutie isolates herself as solely to blame for hardship, seemingly effacing the roles of others in problematic situations as a way to feel control and as if she might avoid similar occurrences in the future if she can just avoid what she deems as her own mistakes. In the example above, Lutie first tries to emotionally exceptionalize herself as different from other Harlemites and wants her perceived emotional disconnection to be mirrored by physical distance from them: “They were used to it. And they had become resigned to it. Yes, she thought, she and Bub had to get out of 116th Street. It was a bad street.” But when Lutie “thought about the other streets,” she feels a default kinship with other people “crammed” in space and deprived of “light and air,” a necessarily dehumanizing physical condition in Lutie’s view. These other people in cramped quarters are necessarily “black folks” enduring official and unofficial segregation laws and practices. So Lutie’s attempt to position herself as superior to other Harlemites fails the more deeply she thinks about and sympathizes with the seeming causes of their resignation. As Lutie
continues and thinks about white people, she further connects herself to the nearby blacks she had meant to condemn and distance. The “train of thought” she forces herself to stop because “it led nowhere” actually leads to a source of blame—white people, not her neighbors. The white people populate the alternatives to the Harlem she wants to flee. So Lutie is not just stuck mentally and is not disabling a purely mental train of thought. Lutie also prohibits her own physical movement by disabling her mental capacity to rage outward at whites and at systematic racism.

Lutie tends to connect herself to other Harlemites when she notes the failures in her own self-exceptionalizing logic. Lutie frequently makes comments such as: “No one could live on a street like this and stay decent. It would get them sooner or later, for it sucked the humanity out of people—slowly, surely, inevitably” (229). Here, in her view, she is only a human, like other humans, and imagines her life trajectory as fated to the only possible outcome a human in her situation could produce. Lutie’s sense of connection to other Harlemites often but not always comes by way of her repulsion against and/or her objectification of whites. After Bub is taken to a children’s detention center:

The men stood around and the women work. The men left the women and the women went on working and the kids were left alone. . . . Alone. Always alone. . . . And they should have been playing in wide stretches of green park and instead they were in the street. And the street reached out and sucked them up. Yes. The women work and the kids go to reform school. Why do the women work? It’s such a simple, reasonable reason. . . . The women work because the white folks give them jobs—washing dishes and clothes and floors and windows. The women work because for years now the white
folks haven’t liked to give black men jobs that paid enough for them to support their families. . . . Even wars don’t change it. (388-9)

Here, Bub’s detention causes her to question her exceptionality as a Harlem mother. In her reaction to this failure to be superior, Lutie interprets what happens to her as what happens to all of “the women.” What happens to Bub is what happens to all “the kids”: “The women work and the kids go to reform school.” White people are the cause of this repeated narrative that plays in her thoughts like a troubling “chorus.” White people, in Lutie’s description, ensure the destruction of black families by way of their preferences to maintain the disempowerment of black men.

Lutie also blames “the street,” which she abstracts and personifies, when she is unable to be or feel exceptional. Her notion that the street “reached out and sucked up” children indicates it is simply too “unpleasant” for her to dwell on the role of human agency in her hardship. Lutie’s assertion that “even wars don’t change it” is particularly raw in the aftermath of World War II. In this historical moment, black men were considered equal to other men for the purposes of war abroad but not for the purposes of ordinary life at home. This injustice bred outrage, and this outrage was exacerbated by the issues at stake in the war—the marginalization of ethnic groups.38 When Lutie visits Bub at the detention center, she connects herself to other black people, especially black single mothers, and she does not blame herself for Bub’s fate:

So it was a circle, and she could keep on going around it forever and keep on ending up in the same place, because if you were black and you lived in New York and you could

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38 Ann Petry’s husband, who served in World War II “asserted that German POWs were treated better than black soldiers.” It was true that “Nazi prisoners of war who were held on US military bases were allowed to dine with white soldiers in racially segregated mess halls,” to the outrage of their fellow black officers (Griffin 112).
only pay so much rent, why, you had to live in a house like this one. And while you were out working to pay the rent on this stinking, rotten place, why, the street outside played nursemaid to your kid. The street did more than that. It became both mother and father and trained your kid for you, and it was an evil father and a vicious mother, and, of course, you helped the street along by talking to him about money. (407)

Lutie blames the street—not systematic racism—here. She and Bub’s life stories are presented as always already inscribed upon them. Because of Lutie’s impulse to quickly blame the street at large, she does not interrogate exactly what happened to Bub or investigate the potential involvement of other people in his alleged crime. While Lutie does not blame herself directly here, she thinks she “helped the street”—a godlike force, as she imagines it—“along.” She feels she sped up what was always already going to happen but that she might have avoided this fate if she could simply have fled Harlem sooner. Her invocation of a circle here is an invocation of inevitability, and the text’s repeated engagement with circles and circle imagery underscores this sense of inevitable doom resulting from systems and practices of segregation.

Aside from aligning herself with other Harlemites, Lutie’s other common reaction to setbacks is to rage inward, to blame herself alone for perceived failures. In these kinds of moments, Lutie mentally clings to a local negative (that she, personally, is exclusively to blame for what befalls her) in the hopes of avoiding another more global negative (all black people in Harlem are doomed, no matter what they do). In these moments, Lutie (like Irene in Passing) would rather imagine terrible outcomes as under her own control than grapple with other people, who are unpredictable in their humanness. For example, after Lutie finds out she will not be paid for singing with Boots’s band:
She tried not to think, to keep the deep anger that boiled up in her under control. There wasn’t any reason for her to be angry with Boots Smith and Junto. She was to blame. She could feel a hard, tight knot of anger and hate forming within her as she walked along. She decided to walk home, hoping that the anger would evaporate on the way. She moved in long, swift strides. There was a hard sound to her heels clicking against the sidewalk and she tried to make it louder. Hard, hard, hard. That was the only way to be—so hard that nothing, the street, the house, the people—nothing would ever be able to touch her (307).

When she is unable to stop thinking about the situation, she continues with an even greater sense of self-condemning certainty:

The trouble was with her. She had built up a fantasy structure made from the soft, nebulous, cloudy stuff of dreams. There hadn’t been a solid, practical brick in it, not even a foundation. She had built it up of air and vapor and moved right in. So of course it had collapsed. It had never existed anywhere but in her own mind. She might as well face the fact that she would have to go on living in that same street. (307-8)

Here, Lutie clearly blames herself for circumstances beyond her control. She has determined that “the only way to be” was “Hard, hard, hard.” It is as if through the actual experience of walking harshly down her street she is aiming to become emotionally hard—to dig her “heels clicking against the sidewalk” straight into it so that she might become an inanimate object. Lutie performs both physically, through hard steps, and mentally, through rigid thinking and a rehearsal of becoming resigned. She now aims to sculpt the trait—resignation—she so detests in other Harlemites. Through her internal monologue and her repetitive self-blame she tries to locate the cause of her disappointment as a means of stabilizing it to prevent its reoccurrence. In
this moment, Lutie would rather condemn herself and her life possibilities than be connected to others and therefore be vulnerable to them. But just as Lutie attempts to isolate herself, her method of reaching such a state of isolation is to be like the other Harlemites—to be hard. These blindspots in her logic (wherein she blames herself rather than the actual people who plot against her and aligns herself with others just as she is trying to distance herself from them) suggest that her attempts at self-segregation and self-blame are always doomed to fail because they are based on problematic assumptions. Her problematic logic mirrors the logic driving legal segregation at the time.

Lutie’s failed attempts at self-blame after Bub is taken away underscore her inability to exclusively blame herself for what befalls Bub. Her attempts fail because she is unable to ignore the real social forces that have contributed to Bub’s detention. She tries to imagine: “It was her fault he’d got into this trouble. No matter how she looked at it, it was still her fault. It was always the mother’s fault when a kid got into trouble, because it meant she’d failed the kid somewhere” (405). But even in this moment of self-blame, she simultaneously approximates and distances herself to blame. She targets herself with “it was her fault” but distances herself from blame by generalizing herself as “the mother,” one of many who have been in this situation. Lutie’s attempts at exclusive, stabilizing self-blame unravel: “And you helped push him because you talked to him about money. All the time money . . . Only you forgot. You forgot you were black and you underestimated the street outside here” (390). The street is Lutie’s catch-all marker for all forms of racial injustice. Just when she veers toward self-blame with the phrase “and you helped push him,” the realities of her body and unjust racial segregation undercut her attempt. Her body is the thing she forgot, or tried to forget, but never can. As Lutie continues, she notes “And it never occurred to you that Bub might find those small dark rooms just as depressing as
you did. And then, of course, there wasn’t any other place for you to live except in a house like this one” (390). Here, she recognizes what she determines as a blind spot in her own thinking, imagining she knows the cause of Bub’s illegal behavior. She imagines Bub acts out as a result of being depressed by “small dark rooms,” but the blind-spot she zeros in on is inaccurate; Bub is only depressed in her absence, and he only breaks the law because he is tricked into thinking he is helping the police fight an illegal operation. So while Lutie imagines she has missed something, she does not approach that possibility with openness. She is sure she knows what she has missed. She starts to blame herself only to shift blame onto the street. She eventually settles on the inevitability of racial injustice without naming it as such. She and Bub are separated because “there wasn’t any other place” for them to live, and their one option, Harlem, is a failure.

While Lutie is sure she needs to fight “the street,” she does not want to or cannot name systematic racism as what she needs to fight. Just like her view of the materiality of Harlem changes based on her mood, so too do her senses of fear and hope. Accordingly, she shifts her strategies for coping with all that she wraps up into Harlem. On her bed, reclining while she recounts stories of failed Harlemites, she “lay there trying to convince herself that she didn’t have to stay on this street or any other street like it if she fought hard enough. Bub didn’t have to end up stretched out on a sidewalk with a knife through his back” (206). Her street is often a catch-all scapegoat for all the literal and figurative injustices she experiences. But Lutie tends to avoid—for her own mental health and daily life—naming or focusing on specific injustices. Her general impulse is to exceptionalize her unique ability to fight Harlem, but her failure to be exceptional is continually questioned by both her own trains of thought and lived life experience. She wonders, “What reason did she have to believe that she and Bub wouldn’t become so
accustomed to the sight and sound of violence and of death that they wouldn’t protest against it—they would become resigned to it; or that Bub finally wouldn’t end up on a sidewalk with a knife in his back?” (204). She asserts that repeated exposure to violence results in a lessening of its impact upon observers, and she can think of no reason why she might be an exception to the rule she imagines. She assumes Bub being a murder victim is his default fate unless she can change it. Lutie imagines herself or Bub as potential victims of crimes and never as potential perpetrators of offenses. This failure of imagination is indeed the major, concrete blind spot in her mental performances, and avoiding the possibility that she or Bub are capable of illegal behavior or violence contributes to the breakdown of her family.

**Self-Sufficiency**

When Lutie is able to think concretely about what she can fight and how to fight it in order to evade a negative fate, Lutie believes she will defeat Harlem by being financially self-sufficient. In this belief, she is inspired by historical narratives:

She shifted the packages into a more comfortable position and feeling the hard roundness of the rolls through the paper bag, she thought immediately of Ben Franklin and his loaf of bread. And grinned thinking, You and Ben Franklin. You ought to take one out and start eating it as you walk along 116th Street. Only you ought to remember while you eat that you’re in Harlem and he was in Philadelphia a pretty long number of years ago. Yet she couldn’t get rid of the feeling of self-confidence and she went on thinking that if Ben Franklin could live on a little bit of money and could prosper, then so could she. (63-4)

Lutie does not exclude herself from the realm of people capable of achieving an American dream. She feels personal effort alone can bring her to her goals. She aims to keep a strict budget and rigid lifestyle like the one Benjamin Franklin documented in his autobiography. She does not
Lutie’s sense of her own exceptionality and her desire to be self-sufficient cause her to violently deny Bub’s attempt to assist her financially. Lutie’s reaction to Bub trying to make money shining shoes and her subsequent explanation of her reaction illustrate the ways Lutie processes real, existing threats in ways that reify the marginalization of black people rather than intervene with it. Bub makes a shoe-shine kit, imagining Lutie will be pleased that he is making some extra money. Instead, she responds by slapping him. For Lutie, shining shoes is the first step on a path that she assumes leads to a life of menial service: “I’m not going to let you begin at eight doing what white folks figure all eight-year-old colored boys ought to do. For if you’re shining shoes at eight, you’ll probably be doing the same thing when you’re eighty. And I’m not going to have it” (70). It is also clear in this line of dialogue that Lutie determines what her son can and cannot do against an assumed white narrative life plan for him. She does not imagine that he can provide a menial service and remain an agent, and she limits his agency on the premise of nurturing it. Here, Lutie slaps her eager son because she cannot slap the abstract, presumed desires of “white folks.” When Bub asks “why do white people want colored people shining shoes?” (71), Lutie turned toward him, completely at a loss as to what to say, for she had never been able to figure it out for herself. . . she had never been able to figure out why people with white skins hated people who had dark skins. It must be hate that made them wrap all Negroes up in a neat package labeled “colored”; a package that called for certain kinds of jobs and a special kind of treatment. But she really didn’t know what it was. “I don’t know, Bub,”
she said finally. “But it’s for the same reason we can’t live anywhere else but in places like this.” (71-72)

Lutie has been trying to figure out racial prejudice and segregation laws. She assumes quite rightly that legalized segregation was propelled by hate and a desire to neatly package and distance what legal authorities like the Supreme Court members backing the *Plessy* decision deemed other. Lutie is unable to avoid replicating the racist logic she attributes to segregation and prejudice—she speaks broadly about all white people and assumes all white people hate all people with “dark skins.” By discouraging Bub from aligning with what she regards as the white desire for his life trajectory, and by speaking broadly about white and black people, she (re)affirms for her son the very belief that she does not understand—that racial difference marks other differences as well. By slapping and scolding Bub, she disempowers him in his attempt to earn money and contribute to the household. She contributes to the subjugation of a fellow marginalized person by performing violence and by metaphorically violating Bub’s life possibilities by repeating a narrative she feels is both true and limiting.

Lutie becomes deflated when she is unable to meet the standards she establishes for herself; her human, bodily need for contact with other adults causes her to infringe upon her own ability to keep a strict budget and is one of the many ways Lutie’s body inhibits her ability to be self-sufficient. In addition to perpetuating violence against black people mentally, in narrative, and in action, as Lutie does in the shoe-shine incident, Lutie also reifies her own subjugation when she mentally abstracts the street. When Lutie is unable to meet her own rigid standards, such as maintaining a strict budget, she frequently denies herself agency and empowers the street instead as a means of excusing her behavior to herself or as a means of avoiding threats with which she cannot seem to grapple. In one of the first nights in their new apartment, after
chastising Bub for trying to shine shoes, Lutie gives Bub money to go to the movies. She does not seem to recognize the irony that she will not allow him to earn money but will allow him to break their budget; it is as if she is willing to be illogical and harm her dream so long as she can be in control of their money and seem like a self-sufficient breadwinner even as she undercuts her ability to fulfill that role. Alone after Bub leaves, “Listening to the music she thought she couldn’t possibly go on living here with nothing to look forward to” (82). She soon dresses, goes out, and further breaks her budget by ordering two beers at the Junto Bar and Grill. She explains her own individual behavior to herself in terms of what “people” need to do:

No matter what it cost them, people had to come to places like the Junto, she thought.

They had to replace the haunting silences of rented rooms and little apartments with the murmur of voices, the sound of laughter; they had to empty two or three small glasses of liquid gold so they could believe in themselves again. . . (147)

Lutie thinks this right after she orders her second beer. It is as if whatever she decides is, rather than a personal decision, what “people had to” do. Her comment about people needing to come drink “liquid gold so they could believe in themselves again” is ironic. She feels confidence earlier in the evening when she is being thrifty (she happily likens herself to Ben Franklin), but she notes she cannot seem to regain that confidence this evening (147). Sitting alone in the apartment deflates her, and by going to the Junto, “she rebelled at the thought of day after day of work and night after night caged in that apartment that no amount of scrubbing would ever get really clean” (147). Immediately after this thought, her beer glass “left a wet ring” on the bar, and “she moved it again in an effort to superimpose the rings on one another” (147). The incompatible circles seem to reflect Lutie’s incompatible feelings that she needs to save money in order to get off the street but that she also needs to spend money (on beer) to survive the
street. This minor incident and the way that Lutie de-individuates herself to align herself with the more abstract “people” typifies the ways she alternately aligns with and dismisses the other black inhabitants of Harlem. Further, this example highlights the way she abstracts the people and material around her to mentally position them as “the street”: a united, larger-than-life force she cannot change rather than a concrete ordinary place she interacts with.

**The Desired Body**

In addition to her own rigid logic, racial housing discrimination, and her physical need to escape isolation, the ways others interpret Lutie’s beautiful, female body also prevent her dream of escaping Harlem unscathed. In the cramped conditions of Lutie’s apartment, street, and Harlem generally, Lutie’s body is repeatedly recognized, and she is repeatedly targeted as an object and a commodity. The ways Lutie’s body is signified upon by others as an accessible zone of opportunity mark Lutie as inescapably visible and unable to control what happens to her body.

Lutie tries to ignore her building superintendent’s interest in her body. His fierce gaze, his awkward behavior, and her read on their first meeting allow her to determine, correctly, that he is attracted to her. She thinks: “And he radiated such desire for her that she could feel it. She told herself she was a fool, an idiot, drunk on fear, on fatigue and gnawing worry. Even while she thought it, the hot, choking awfulness of his desire for her pinioned her there so that she couldn’t move” (15). During this initial meeting, Lutie is able to imagine and enact ways to manipulate the Super’s gaze. “She stood there not moving, waiting for him to start down the hall toward the stairs, thinking Never, so help me, will he walk down those stairs in back of me” (18). The Super reads Lutie’s body as his opportunity to have a sexual encounter with a young, beautiful woman. He thinks about her “soft brown skin” and how he wants to “nibble at the curve of her leg,” (98) as if her body will literally nourish him. He rationalizes her lack of
interest in him through various means; he imagines if he can “get rid of” the woman who lives with him Lutie will return his desiring gaze (99). He manipulates his ability to access Lutie’s apartment and her son’s familiarity with him in order to approximate himself to Lutie. After inviting himself in to spend time with Lutie’s son while she is out, the Super sends Bub on an errand and snoops in Lutie’s closet, caressing her clothes: “he looked closely at the blouses…it smelt like the talcum and he crushed it violently between his hands” (108). When Lutie realizes the next day, mid-conversation with Bub, that the Super has fondled her blouse, she

turned away and went into the kitchen so that Bub wouldn’t see the expression on her face, because she was afraid and angry and at the same time she felt sickened. She could picture him, hungry-eyed, guant, standing there in her room crushing the blouse between his hands. She opened the set tubs, dumped soapflakes in—great handfuls of them—and ran hot water on the flakes until the suds foamed high. She almost let the water run over the top of the tub, because she stood in front of it, not moving, thinking, He’s crazy. He’s absolutely crazy. Finally she shut the faucet off and poked the blouse deep into the hot, soapy water. She couldn’t wear it again—not for a long time. Certainly she wouldn’t wear it tonight. (209- 210)

When Lutie’s privacy has been invaded, she focuses on the tainted physical object of the blouse rather than on a direct confrontation of the Super regarding the incident, imagining that cleaning the blouse might erase the Super’s desire for her body.

Lutie cannot ignore the Super’s gaze and yearning for her body when he physically attacks and attempts to rape her. Bodies and embodiment matter heavily in the scene of the attempted rape.
He was standing motionless in front of her. Somehow she had to pass him, get past him without looking at him. . . The street door was in back of her. If she moved fast enough, she could get out into the street. Instantly his harm when around her waist. He was pulling her back, turning her around so that she faced him. He was dragging her toward the cellar door. (235)

The Super physically overpowers Lutie, but Lutie’s relatively weaker body is countered by Mrs. Hedges’s alternatively stronger body, as “A pair of powerful hands gripped her by the shoulders, wrenched her violently out of the Super’s arms, flung her back against the wall” (236). Mrs. Hedges’s body enables her to rescue Lutie. While the Super has easy access to Lutie because they both live in apartment building together, the shared privateness of the apartment building also enables Mrs. Hedges to hear Lutie’s distress and come to her aid. When Mrs. Hedges rescues Lutie, the conversation between the two women suggests Lutie’s strict sense of naturalism is not unusual. Lutie and Mrs. Hedges share a kind of common sense that lack of exposure to nature has direct consequences on people. The troubled Super is assumed to be “something less than human” by both Lutie and Mrs. Hedges because he is deprived of sunlight and time outdoors. Lutie thinks, “the Super was something less than human. He had been chained to buildings until he was like an animal” (191). Similarly, when Mrs. Hedges rescues Lutie from Jones’s attempt to rape her, she yells to Jones: “‘You done lived in basements so long you ain’t human no more. You got mould growin’ on you’” (237). Mrs. Hedges and Lutie agree that lack of access to fresh air and sunlight can animalize a person. Mrs. Hedges goes so far as to deny that Jones is responsible for his crime because of the conditions in which he lives: “‘He ain’t really responsible,’ Mrs. Hedges continued. ‘He’s lived in cellars so long he’s kind of cellar crazy’” (240). When Lutie counters, somewhat surprisingly recognizing one’s potential agency
in the face of their surroundings, “‘Other people have lived in cellars and it didn’t set them crazy,’” Mrs. Hedges persists, declaring: “‘Folks differs, dearie. They differs a lot. Some can stand things that others can’t. There’s never no way of knowin’ how much they can stand’” (240). It seems when Lutie is met directly with violence she is less willing to deny the perpetrator agency in the face of their surroundings than when she is thinking of herself. In many ways, Mrs. Hedges’s excusal of Jones also foreshadows Lutie’s fate and can be read as a rationale for Lutie’s inability to cope with the ordinary violence of racial and gender-based injustice in 1940s New York City. “Some can stand things that other’s can’t,” and when Lutie reaches the limit of what she can stand, she explodes in a murderous rage.

Despite fending off the Super, Mrs. Hedges similarly sees Lutie’s body as a site of opportunity. Mrs. Hedges sees in Lutie an opening for financial gain. On more than one occasion, Mrs. Hedges propositions Lutie on behalf of her male clientele:

Mrs. Hedges studied her from head to foot with a calculating eye. “If you ever want to make a little extra money, why, you let me know. A nice white gentlemen I met lately—” Lutie walked up the street without answering. Mrs. Hedges’ voice followed her, “Jus let me know, dearie.” Sure, Lutie thought, as she walked on, if you live on this damn street you’re supposed to want to earn a little extra money sleeping around nights. With nice white gentlemen. (84)

Here, Mrs. Hedges assesses Lutie’s body as an interested male might. She is looking to capitalize on the features of Lutie’s body by way of prostituting Lutie. In hindsight, this excerpt also makes it clear that Junto, the only white man Mrs. Hedges associates with, had arranged for Mrs. Hedges to proposition Lutie on his behalf before Lutie ever met him. Mrs. Hedges speaks with the Super about Lutie as if Lutie is an object to be owned or claimed: “‘Ain’t no point in you
lickin’ your chops, dearie. . . She’s marked down for somebody else’” (90). This conversation, initiated by Mrs. Hedges’s intuition about the Super’s interest in Lutie, makes it clear that it is a part of the common sense of the people living in their building that Lutie is visible, beautiful, and desirable because of her body.

Lutie is the subject of negotiations that clearly indicate her ability to be self-sufficient as marred by forces beyond her control. The negotiation between Junto and Boots for rights to Lutie is inspired by her body, discounts her agency, and contributes to her decision to commit murder. The murder in turn causes the failure of her personal dreams. Junto declares, “‘That girl—Lutie Johnson--’ ‘Yeah?’ Boots leaned toward him across the table. ‘You’re to keep your hands off her. I’ve got other plans for her’” (262). Here, and in the lengthy conversation that follows, it is clear that both Junto and Boots see Lutie as an object of desire. The fact that Junto has “plans for her” clearly indicates that he does not care about Lutie’s wishes. Similarly, Junto thinks “But this one—this Lutie Johnson—was the first one he’s seen in a long time that he really wanted. He had even thought that if he couldn’t get her any other way, he’d marry her,” (263). Lutie is imagined here as “one,” as a kind of thing to be acquired rather than as a person with agency. Boots pushes back against his boss’s demand with “‘Suppose I want to lay her myself?’ Junto looked directly at him for the first time,” responding, “‘I made you. If I were you, I wouldn’t overlook the fact that whoever makes a man can also break him’” (264). It is clear here that Junto also dismisses Boots’s desires, lording the power he has over Boots as his wealthy, white employer. When Boots acquiesces to Junto’s desires for fear of limited and degrading employment opportunities, Junto insists that Lutie not be paid for singing with the band because “This will make it easier for you to arrange for me to see her” (274). Junto imagines Lutie as a pawn he can manipulate through a particular narrative path. When Boots suggests, “‘Some
women are. . . funny about having anything to do with white men,’” Junto notes “‘Money cures most things like that.’” Instead of being outraged at Junto’s manipulative plan, Boots is jealous of it: “he felt a momentary and fleeting regret at having lost the chance to conquer and subdue her” (275). This conversation reveals Lutie is the subject of calculated plans to manipulate her and that both men, regardless of their race or relative power, imagine themselves as more powerful than Lutie is.

Lutie’s experience with an acting agent makes it clear that the ways she is objectified and targeted as a sexual object are not limited to the borders of Harlem. When Lutie realizes and makes clear she cannot pay the fees the agent demands, he approaches her:

“You know a good-looking girl like you shouldn’t have to worry about money. . . if you and me can get together a coupla nights a week in Harlem, those lessons won’t cost you a cent. . . .” Yes, she thought, if you were born black and not too ugly, this is what you get, this is what you find. It was a pity he hadn’t lived back in the days of slavery, so he could have raided the slave quarters for a likely wench any house of the day or night. This is the superior race, she said to herself, take a good long look at him: black, oily hair; slack, gross body. . . . She remembered the inkwell on the desk in back of him. . . . She hurled it full force in his face. . . (321-22)

When Lutie is directly propositioned by a white man, she is able to connect the incident to race and the history of slavery as well as respond directly to the source of her objectification in a way she is unable to do when Boots and Junto later toy with and threaten her. Lutie reacts violently in a way that stains the supposedly superior appearance of the white man. She hurl$ ink at him, staining him, as if in an effort to make his appearance match his flawed character and to make him experience what it is like to be unable to control one’s superficial bodily markings and the
ways others read them. Lutie is enraged by the sexism and racism projected onto her body and
tries to smear and squash desire for her as well as gain a sense of control by being violent. As she
rides the train home she thinks, “the tumultuous anger in her could only be quelled by violence,”
(322) foreshadowing the end of the novel. She begins to connect individual incidents to systems
working against her:

She thought of Mr. Crosse with a sudden access of hate that made her bite her lips; and
then of Junto, who had prevented her from getting the job at the Casino. She remembered
the friends of the Chandlers who had thought of her as a nigger wench; only, of course,
they were too well-bred to use the word “nigger.” And the hate in her increased. (323)

Each of these references to people recalls a situation wherein she could have earned more money
or been more secure in a job if it were not for the ways others interpreted her black female body
or her own unwillingness to prostitute herself. Lutie begins to recognize a success story like that
of Ben Franklin as inaccessible to her because of her race and sex. Her body is hypervisible, and
she refuses to objectify herself or deny her own desires and sense of her body for financial gain
as others do and wish she would. Lutie fails to thrive in Harlem where Mrs. Hedges succeeds
because she will not negate her ownership of her body and because she cannot erase (desire for)
her body as far as others are concerned.

**Backfiring**

Lutie eventually escapes Harlem, but she does so alone, tainted as a murderer. She
condemns herself to the social isolation and fragmented family life that she has so feared both
through her decision to murder Boots and her subsequent decision to flee Harlem. Boots’s
murder marks the death of her already inhibited (by her body and the social forces infringing
upon it) personal dream and demonstrates the ways Lutie both does and does not direct anger to
its corresponding source. It matters very much that Lutie kills Boots, a black man, and not Junto, the white man intentionally plotting to enter a sexual relationship with her by ensuring her poverty and lording his own money over her. While Boots is not innocent in the moments leading up to his death—he indeed threatens to beat Lutie and potentially rape her—Lutie kills the black man within her grasp who participates in her strife instead of the white man driving her subjugation. Lutie’s murder of Boots suggests systematic racism such as that internal to legal segregation often inspires the marginalized to harm one another rather than members of the dominant group who are (or seem) physically or metaphorically out of reach.

When Lutie “began thinking about Junto—specifically about Junto,” whose name means “together” in Spanish, she connects him with her lack of pay for singing and Mrs. Hedges’s repeated attempts to connect her with an older white man:

Junto hadn’t wanted her paid for singing. Mrs. Hedges knew Junto. Books Smith worked for Junto. Junto’s squat bodied figure, as she had seen it reflected in the sparkling mirror in his Bar and Grill, established itself in her mind; and the anger in her grew and spread directing itself first against Junto and Mrs. Hedges and then against the street that had reached out and taken Bub and then against herself for having been partly responsible for Bub’s stealing. (417)

Petry’s simple diction above, with the first three sentences in this passage each being short and clear, indicates Junto as a man who has used his wealth and power to influence both Boots and Mrs. Hedges to aid him in converting Lutie into a sexual object he might own. Junto, as the sole white man with far more money than the many blacks who surround him, ties these characters together, wields power over them to get what he wants, and lusts after a much younger black woman. Junto therefore invokes stereotypic traits of a slave master while updating the
circumstances of slavery for a modern urban environment. Interestingly, despite Junto being a seemingly clear cause of her suffering, Lutie moves on to blame the street and then to blame herself for Bub’s absence. In Lutie’s logic throughout the novel, if she had earned money by signing, she would have quickly moved from 116th Street, and she would have been able to spend afternoons with Bub. So following this logic, if it weren’t for Junto, Bub would be home with her. But Lutie will not solely condemn Junto.

Even when “she thought, I would like to kill him” she wants to kill Junto because “It is as though he were a piece of that dirty street itself, tangible, close at hand, within reach” (422). Again Lutie’s scapegoat is the god-like street, the material object she repeatedly animates and empowers in her thought processes as a means of avoiding having to confront the selfishness or evil of individuals like Junto who might seek to subjugate her. In Lutie’s logic here, it is not that the evil of people, groups, or structures spills into whatever she considers to amount to the street. The reverse is true. She operates from a mental position that it is the street that is evil and corrupting.

Similarly, even when Boots poses a real threat to her, she murders him not only because of his literal threats but because she “felt she was gazing straight at the street with its rows of old houses, its piles of garbage, its swarms of children” (426). In addition to Boots signifying the street, Boots becomes a stand-in for Junto. When Boots will not immediately give Lutie the

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39 As Farah Jasmine Griffin points out in *Harlem Nocturne*, Junto’s name also invokes the “mutual improvement society founded by [Benjamin] Franklin in 1731.” For Griffin, because the “Junto’s membership was limited to white males” Petry “was asserting that Lutie’s difficulties were not caused by a lack of work ethic, personal responsibility, or ambition; instead, it was white supremacy that had prevented Lutie from achieving the American dream,” (108). I argue that a more complicated collection of causes result in the failure of Lutie’s American dream, but I certainly would include white supremacy amongst the forces Petry presents as harming Lutie, a criticism fruitfully underscored by this potential source of Junto’s name.
money he promised to give her to pay for a lawyer (because Junto wants Lutie to sleep with him first), she thinks: “This room was like the living room, it had too many lamps in it, and in addition there were too many mirrors so that she saw him reflected on each of the walls—his legs stretched out, his expression completely indifferent” (420). This moment recalls Lutie’s first view of Junto, when his “squat-bodied figure” is “reflected in the sparkling mirror in his Bar and Grill” (417). It is as if both men are projected and filtered such that Lutie cannot appropriately see either man. Boots, here, not only recalls but magnifies Junto’s image; now there are “too many mirrors” and there is too much light. Lutie’s response is one of mind/body disconnect: “She had to get out of here, now, and quickly... Yet she couldn’t take her eyes away from the ever-darkening scar that marred the side of his face” (426). Lutie’s ambivalence about being inside Boots’s apartment echoes her ambivalence about going at all: “Perhaps she ought to phone Boots and tell him that she wouldn’t come tonight. Perhaps by tomorrow she would be free of this mounting, steadily increasing anger and this hysterical fear that made her see things that didn’t exist, made her feel things that weren’t there. Yet less than half an hour later she was dressing...” (419). What Lutie’s body seems to know is that she is not imagining a plot against her—there really is one. She is being targeted for her body, the object Junto wants. Boots now tries to wield his own plot—to entice or force her to sleep with him first, then Junto. Boots wants to use Lutie as an object of revenge against Junto because she refuses to sell her body to Junto as Boots himself has.

Boots undoubtedly provokes Lutie’s rage; she reacts violently to his two very real slaps and his threat that maybe she will change her mind about sleeping with him after a few hits (428). Boots’s violence is a metaphoric tipping point, too, though. Before she murders Boots, all of her rage is mulled over internally and/or directed at herself. But now, she wants to “destroy
him completely, because he was there in front of her and she would get at him and in getting at him she would find violent outlet for the full sweep of her wrath” (428). Lutie is and is not raging specifically against Boots. He is the only person or thing within striking distance. “She was striking, not at Boots Smith, but at a handy, anonymous figure—a figure which her angry resentment transformed into everything she had hated, everything she had fought against, everything that had served to frustrate her” (429). Importantly, not only does Boots represent both a reality and the more abstract “everything she hated,” but he also represents whiteness. “She was striking at the white world which thrust black people into a walled enclosure from which there was no escape” (430). Boots, then, for Lutie represents not just a man who threatens her but blacks who lack solidarity for fellow blacks, Junto, the street, and “the whole white world,” wherein systematic racism is condoned. Boots wants to suppress Lutie because he has been suppressed, and he wants to use her to feel superior because he feels he is not in a position to lash out against Junto, the hand that feeds him. Similarly, Lutie’s outlet of rage is a fellow marginalized person rather than a person in power or a system of dominance. Junto’s arrangement, symbolic of white patriarchal power, leads those marginalized by him to violently lash out against one another rather than at him. By killing Boots rather than Junto, Lutie reinforces the system of segregation she so despises because of her refusal to acknowledge the very systematic nature of the racism she faces.

Lutie further reaffirms the marginalized position of black women like herself with the self-defeating logic that guides her decision to flee. Lutie’s tendency to cling to the negative and projected future narratives lacking hope allow her to feel a measure of control, but in exchange she must forego a life with her son. She condemns herself:
She was a murderer. And the smartest lawyer in the world couldn’t do anything for Bub, not now, now when his mother had killed a man. A kid whose mother was a murderer didn’t stand any chance at all. Everyone he came in contact with would believe that sooner or later he, too, would turn criminal. . . . The only thing she could do was to go away and never come back, because the best thing that could happen to Bub would be for him never to know that his mother was a murderer. (432-433)

Just as her murder of Boots is not unprovoked, her self-condemnation has a basis in reality. She is indeed a murderer. But Lutie goes much farther in her condemnation; she writes hope for Bub’s future out of existence because of her actions. When she continues her line of thinking with “the smartest lawyer in the world couldn’t do anything for Bub,” and “a kid whose mother was a murderer didn’t stand any chance at all,” she not only does not entertain that a lawyer might do anything for her, but also she assumes nothing can be done for Bub. She comes to this conclusion despite her lack of knowledge of what exactly Bub did and why. She has not discussed Bub’s supposed crime with him. She is so invested in negative, predictable, rigid narratives—like the one she imagines for the wounded girl in the emergency room—that she imagines no agency for Bub if he knows or is known as the son of a murderer. Lutie does not imagine the potential negative ramifications of Bub never knowing what happened to his mother or why she abandoned him. She does not imagine that he might find out she committed murder even if she leaves. She does not imagine any way in which she might explain what happened to Bub so that it would not completely ruin his life.

Lutie’s thought process in the final scene of the novel demonstrates how Lutie is both victim and active agent in the production of her own worst-case scenario. Her thoughts on the literal train, the space which bred the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision to legalize segregation, echo
her earlier “train of thought” that always amounts to “one thing” for Lutie—white people, the
train of thought she deems so “unpleasant” she must forcefully stop it.

As the train started to move, she began to trace a design on the window. It was a series of
circles that flowed into each other. She remembered that when she was in grammar
school the children were taught to get the proper slant to their writing, to get the feel of a pen in their hands, by making these same circles. Once again she could hear the flat, exasperated voice of the teacher as she looked at the circles Lutie had produced.

“Really,” she said. “I don’t know why they have us bother to teach your people to write.”

Her finger moved over the glass, around and around. The circles showed up plainly on the dusty surface. The woman’s statement was correct, she thought. What possible good has it done to teach people like me to write?”(435-6)

Not only is Lutie spatially invoking the *Plessy* decision by sitting on a train, she is further engaging legal segregation when she remembers a negative school experience, as schools were one of the most contentious spaces during segregation, and they were indeed the space that would lead to *Plessy*’s undoing. Lutie performs self-condemnation here through the act of tracing. She does what a white teacher taught her to do both physically and mentally; she is tracing a circle, following a formula to produce sameness, but also she is taking on the thinking of the white woman who questioned her value because of one action. While a poorly drawn circle is indeed less significant than a murder, Lutie is echoing the teacher’s logic by condemning herself and “people like” her because of one thing she did. Further, it matters that this experience of Lutie’s echoes Bub’s experience of school, detailed in an extended chapter earlier in the text. In that chapter, the only one written from the perspective of a white person, Bub’s teacher has always already performed all of Lutie’s current negative thinking about white
people. Bub’s teacher has no interest in her students, ignores them, thinks they smell, dreads every day of work, and does not tell her friends what neighborhood she actually teaches in because she is ashamed to be associated with Harlem or black children (328-33). So here, as Lutie draws circles and takes on the negative thinking about herself she is inculcated with in childhood, she is also locally suggesting an outcome of bad teaching and globally noting an outcome of segregated schooling. Her performative drawing insinuates inevitability. Through her thoughts and actions here, the text suggests Lutie’s tendency to think that no one in her material circumstances could overcome them is an accurate one.

Lutie’s thought process and her murder of Boots together show she fulfills negative expectations others hold of her as well as her own apprehensions about her environment. She does not recognize the role of her own negative thinking in her family’s unraveling, though.

And as the train roared into the darkness, Lutie tried to figure out by what twists and turns of fate she had landed on this train. Her mind balked at the task. All she could think was, it was that street. It was that god-damned street. The snow fell softly on the street. It muffled sound. It sent people scurrying homeward, so that the street was soon deserted, empty, quiet. And it could have been any street in the city, for the snow laid a delicate film over the sidewalk, over the brick of the tired, old buildings; gently obscuring the grime and the garbage and the ugliness. (436)

To think globally of negative cycles inspired by legal segregation and institutionalized racism is a “task” “her mind balked at.” To think globally, to think beyond her physical street, would be to acknowledge her own powerlessness. At least if “it was that god-damned street,” her troubles are caused by something she can and is leaving. The final image, a pleasant white image of snow that covers “grime and the garbage and the ugliness,” shows that Lutie internalizes and
reinforces, in this final moment, the racist logic that has so harmed her: what is white is pretty, and what lies underneath it is inferior. The opening scene of the novel, conversely, presents an image of garbage blowing about in the wind. Both the opening and closing images are devoid of people. Lutie is able to see positive aspects of her street only when it is superficially colored differently. By way of Lutie, the text indicates one solution to seeming messiness is to cover it.

The text deeply calls such a solution into question, though. Humans have produced this mess, the literal garbage in this case, and Lutie has taken actions and made choices. Lutie’s helplessness and her agency are deeply intertwined in her thinking, her actions, and her reflections, but her ability to be self-sufficient and craft the life she wants is also damaged by the ways others interpret her body. This interplay implies Lutie both is and is not to blame for murder and indicates that if the marginalized fulfill negative expectations of them, they are not wholly to blame nor are they wholly innocent.

**Profit and the Feared Body**

If Lutie’s story is a cautionary tale about 1940s Harlem, Mrs. Hedges offers an alternative approach and a guide to surviving New York City life as a poor, black, single woman in the 1940s. Mrs. Hedges also lives in Lutie’s building, and she has a differently exceptional body. Mrs. Hedges is large and scarred. While Lutie’s main goals are to make more money so that she may move and be able to spend afternoons with her son, Mrs. Hedges comes to New York City from rural Georgia primarily to find love. When Mrs. Hedges, like Lutie, fatalistically determines that her wishes will not come to fruition based on one life event (and its impact on her body). Unlike Lutie, Mrs. Hedges finds an alternate way to inhabit the street. Mrs. Hedges’s means of survival entail performing the effacement of her own body and actively commodifying other women. Mrs. Hedges’s means of recovery from physical and emotional harm raise the
question: is it possible in 1940s Harlem for a woman’s body to be both visible and uncommodified?

Mrs. Hedges is mostly developed by way of other characters’ impressions of her and through dialogue, yet she has a consistent presence in the text. The textual perspective, with readers positioned at a distance from her but also knowing her well, mimics her experience of other characters. Despite minimal direct interaction with others, she knows intimately and is able to accurately predict what other characters are going to do. As her name implies, Mrs. Hedges is always close to the center of something like the main plot of the novel but she only intervenes with the action as she deems critical. She is mostly a watcher, ever positioned physically on the edge of the street. If the street were a garden, or a beautifully manicured lawn, she would stand at its hedge. In lieu of such greenery, her name marks its absence on this urban street.

Mrs. Hedges, in both mind and body, represents the failings of the black urban migration dream. In some ways her life trajectory confirms the ideal vision of the urban that there are more opportunities for black people to make money in northern urban areas than there are in the rural south. Mrs. Hedges, through her friendship with Junto, in typical American dream/pull-yourself-up-from-your-bootstraps fashion, moves from poverty, dumpster-diving for food, and collecting cans for money to being a janitor and rent collector, to ultimately not needing to work at all to survive. Thanks to Junto’s admiration and appreciation of her loyalty, she is ultimately provided with a free place to live. But Mrs. Hedges’s success comes at a cost to her body. Junto’s admiration of her is heightened when her supposed shelter erupts in flames, scalding and scarring her body. While many are drawn to the urban north for its presumed and actual financial opportunities, Mrs. Hedges comes in the hopes of being “inconspicuous,” a dream that doubly fails when her body is burned:
And she frequently wished that she had never left the small town in Georgia where she was born. But she was so huge that the people there never really got used to the sight of her. She had thought that in a big city she would be inconspicuous and had hoped that she would find a man who would fall in love with her. (242)

Mrs. Hedges’s uniquely large body marks her as different, and her dream of blending into a city crowd does not unfold as she hoped it would. For while there may be more jobs for black women in 1940s Harlem than there are in her small Georgia town, her appearance marginalizes her more greatly than most black women and prohibits her in other ways from making money:

Her mind jerked away from the memory as though it were a sharp, sudden pain. She began thinking about the period in her life when she had haunted employment agencies seeking work. When she walked in them, there was an uncontrollable revulsion in the faces of the white people who looked at her. They stared amazed at her enormous size, at the blackness of her skin. They glanced at each other, tried in vain to control their faces or didn’t bother to try at all, simply let her see what a monstrosity they thought she was. Those were the years when she slept on a cot in the hall of the apartment belonging to some friends of hers from Georgia. . . . Her big body had been filled with a gnawing, insatiable hunger that sent her prowling the streets at night. . . (241-2)

Mrs. Hedges feels, rightly or wrongly, that others view her as a “monstrosity” unworthy of employment. She feels she is able to appropriately interpret the gaze of others, reading “uncontrollable revulsion in the faces of the white people who looked at her.” She views her appearance as the cause of her unemployment. As a result of her unemployment, she sleeps in a hallway and is unable to buy food. She is metaphorically burned by the city--her dreams of
blending in amongst a diverse mix of urban bodies dissolves even before she is literally burned in a fire, marking the double failure of her dream of being inconspicuous.

Mrs. Hedges’s experiences in the hospital, in her account, echo her experiences in New York City employment agencies:

When the nurses and doctors bent over her to change the dressings, she watched them with hard, baleful eyes, waiting for the moment when they would expose the ugliness of her burnt, bruised body. They couldn’t conceal the expressions on their faces. Sometimes it was only a flicker of dismay, and then again it was sheer horror, plain for anyone to see—undisguised, uncontrollable. . . . She stayed in the hospital for weeks during which the determination never to expose herself to the prying, curious eyes of the world grew and crystallized. When she finally left it, she moved into the house that Junto owned on 116th Street. (246-7)

Mrs. Hedges’s determines, in response to the ever-increasingly marginalized position her body relegates her to, never to allow her body to be vulnerable to the gaze of others again; her refusal to be seen is coupled with her arrival at 116th Street. Mrs. Hedges’s presence on 116th is a marker of both her survival and her attempts to efface her body. Her avoidance of exposure has two direct consequences. Her self-positioning alongside the street, as an audience member, is both the impetus for her career as a madam, in which she encourages the objectification of women, and what allows her to save Lutie from rape, helping Lutie to distance herself from objecthood.

Readers do experience Mrs. Hedges’s perspective when she reflects on the fire and its aftermath (though every character’s perspective, in the narration of The Street, is always already indirect, as the narration style throughout is one of free indirect discourse). In her account, Mrs. Hedges’s decision to become a madam is an organic one. Because Mrs. Hedges does not want to
be seen, “Before she left the hospital, she decided that she would have to have someone living with her to do her shopping, to run errands for her. So the first few days in the new apartment she sat at the window seeking a likely-looking girl. One girl passed by several times, a thin, dispirited young thing who never lifted her eyes from the sidewalk” (247). Looking down on the street from her window, Mrs. Hedges is able to inhabit the physical position of the doctors and nurses who looked down on her in the hospital. Mrs. Hedges sees this young girl and abandoned wife, Mary, who she genuinely wants to help. Mrs. Hedges allows her to live rent-free in exchange for running errands for her. “Mrs. Hedges began to take a kind of pride in the way Mary blossomed out,” as she “gradually lost her dejected look” (248). Mrs. Hedges is willing to assist the plights of other Harlemites as a means of helping herself literally (with her groceries) and figuratively (she feels indirect pride) in a way that Lutie is not willing to engage.

When Mrs. Hedges begins her career as a madam, she does so as a means for both she and Mary to profit from the societal subjugation of women. She sees herself as making money from activities already happening and as simply wielding an opportunity that happens upon her. She does not concern herself with any potential ramifications of treating women, men, and their sexual encounters as commodities. Her career begins when she spots a man approaching her apartment one night:

“Who you lookin’ for, dearie?” she asked.

“I come to see Mary Jackson,” he said. He glanced at Mrs. Hedges once and then looked away.

“She’s gone out to buy something at the store. She lives here with me. You want to come in an set awhile?”
She had looked him over carefully after he uneasily selected a seat in her living room. The big-brimmed, light gray, almost white, hat, the tight-legged breeches, the wide shoulders of his coat built up with padding, the pointed-toed bright yellow shoes, all added up to the kind that rarely got married, and when they did, they didn’t stay put. She stared at him until he shifted his feet and moved the light gray hat between his hands, balancing it and inspecting it as though he were judging its merits with an eye to purchasing it. (248)

In Mrs. Hedges’s observation here, she feels she can determine what kind of character this man has as a result of his dress. She determines his “almost white” hat and “bright yellow shoes”—both of which approximate but do not exhibit whiteness—“added up to the kind that rarely got married” or “didn’t stay put.” She reinforces the racial logic of the time, in which people are judged by superficial means such as their skin color and condemned for their lack of whiteness. But she also reinforces the (albeit intertwined) logic of the ways she feels people have judged her for her largeness and her scars. Furthermore, she projects her own “balancing” and “inspecting” and “judging its merits with an eye to purchasing it” onto the young man; when she describes his inspection of his own hat, she is indeed judging him with an eye toward purchasing him.

Additionally, her superficial inspection of the young man and her simultaneous ruminations on his potential profitability echo the experience of the slave auction block. In this scenario, Mrs. Hedges, then, shares a subject position with slave masters or slave dealers but unlike the historical reality of such roles in which most slave masters were white men, she is a black woman metaphorically subverting the gender roles of the historical scenario and literally capitalizing on fellow blacks.
Part of what inspires Mrs. Hedges to profit from Mary’s date is her inability or refusal to experience him as one man. He is, instead, a kind of man.

The street was full of men like him. She stopped her slow examination of him long enough to wonder if a creature like this was the result of electric light instead of hot, strong, sunlight; the result of breathing soot-filled air instead of air filled with the smell of warm earth and green growing plants and pulling elevators and sweeping floors instead of doing jobs that would develop big muscles in shoulders and thighs. (249)

In her inability to see his individuality, Mrs. Hedges performs the kind of judgments (she feels) have been enacted upon her body. Mrs. Hedges refers to him as a “creature,” echoing Lutie’s use of the same word to describe Mrs. Hedges. Her comments surrounding the kind of light and air that the young man spends time in reinforce Lutie’s own similarly fatalistic logic while simultaneously questioning urban migration and urban life generally as fruitful options. Most curiously, Mrs. Hedges’s ideal, that he would have a job “that would develop big muscles,” is unexpected because such a job might entail his total suppression. Slavery, for example, would develop such muscles, as would his jobs “cleaning up after white folks’ leavings,” which he tired of and quit.

Mrs. Hedges is gladdened when his only means of employment are to “help around” at an illegal gambling operation (249) because this fact affirms her negative assumptions about him:

Yes, she thought, and you saw Mary, and you think you’re going to get yourself some free loving. Only he wasn’t. He was going to have to pay for it. Mary would earn money, and she, Mrs. Hedges, would earn money from Mary’s earnings. The more she thought about it, the more pleased she was with the idea, for making money and saving it had become a habit with her. (249)
Mrs. Hedges takes pleasure in her ability to dominate the young man. Her mental dialogue with him demonstrates that she is “pleased” with the source of empowerment and profit she has discovered. It is clear here and elsewhere that Mrs. Hedges has saved a significant amount of money. Her “habit” started out of her belief that if she had enough money, she could woo any man she wanted. So here, it is clear that if Mrs. Hedges only wanted Mary to have some money, she could pay her. But she would rather make money off of Mary’s encounters with men, and she would rather take money from men than give it to another woman.

The street would provide plenty of customers. For there were so many men just like him who knew vaguely that they hadn’t got anything out of life and knew clearly that they would never get it, even though they didn’t know what it was they wanted; men who hated white folks sometimes without even knowing why; men who had to find escape from their hopes and fears, even if it was for just a little while. (250)

Like Lutie and Boots do in previously analyzed scenarios, here, Mrs. Hedges is seeking to benefit from and/or contribute to the marginalization of fellow blacks rather than doing something to intervene with white dominance and systematic racism. Mrs. Hedges seeks to profit from black male hatred of “white folks” and delegitimizes it by intimating such black male emotions are of vague and perhaps unfounded cause. She also delegitimizes the stance of this kind of black man she is theorizing with her comment that they “didn’t know what it was they wanted.” Even though there are very real, marginalizing forces in play limiting job opportunities for black men and which would provide significant rationale for their bitterness, Mrs. Hedges presents black men as selfish, wandering characters. Mrs. Hedges also seeks to profit from rigid gender norms that marginalize single black women: “Staring at him with her hard, unwinking gaze, she could see the whole detail of a prosperous, efficient enterprise. She would get several
more girls. They would be like Mary—girls that had been married and whose men had deserted them. The street was full of girls like that” (250). Mrs. Hedges plans to “get” more “girls,” describing fellow black women as diminutive objects she can acquire.

Not only does Mrs. Hedges capitalize on the marginalization of people with whom she shares an identity—black people and women—but also she specifically refuses to capitalize on white males, the party most responsible for their marginalization (to name one example, all the Supreme Court Justices on the Plessy case were white males). When explaining her plan to operate a brothel to Junto, so “the people at the precinct… wouldn’t bother her,” she declares: “‘this ain’t for white men . . . I ain’t prejudiced. . . I just ain’t got no use for white folks. I don’t want ‘em anywhere near me. I don’t even wanta have to look at ‘em. I put up with you because you don’t ever stop to think whether folks are white or black and you don’t really care. That sort of takes you out of the white folks class’” (251). Mrs. Hedges does not change her view of whites because she meets one, Junto, who cares about her and contributes greatly to her own financial stability. Instead, she de-racializes him, labeling him as non-white. While Junto may or may not be racist or “stop to think whether folks are white or black,” as Mrs. Hedges claims, he most definitely lords his money over poor blacks, most obviously through his threats to “unmake” Boots if he pursues a relationship with Lutie. Junto additionally seeks a sexual relationship with Lutie and sees his ability to ensure her poverty and maintain his own wealth as the means through which he might do so. If Mrs. Hedges considers the ways Junto benefits from her own marginalization and that of Boots and Lutie, it does not trouble her.

Further, Mrs. Hedges positively contributes to white male financial and social dominance by contributing to Junto’s wealth as a sort of free consultant. If the street is a theater, Mrs. Hedges is the most attentive audience member at the show. She watches the street to gain
knowledge and potential profit. Mrs. Hedges’s shares the knowledge she acquires from the street with Junto:

Sometimes she had surprised him and surprised herself at the things she had suggested to him. . . There were so many people passing by. . . and she learned a lot just from looking at them. She told Junto people had to dance and drink and make love in order to forget their troubles and that bars and dance halls and whorehouses were the best possible investments. Slowly and cautiously Mr. Junto had become the owner of all three . . .

Looking out the window was good for her business, too. There were always lonesome, sad-looking girls just up from the South, or little girls who were tired of going to high school, and who had seen too many movies and didn’t have the money to buy all the things they wanted. She could pick them out easily as they walked past. (251-2)

Mrs. Hedges is unwilling or unable to interrogate the ways that both she and Junto contribute to the reinforcement of the “troubles” people repeatedly need to forget. Junto and Mrs. Hedges profit from failed urban migration dreams, from the poverty and disappointment of “sad-looking girls just up from the South.” Not only does Mrs. Hedges benefit financially from deflated black women and needy black girls, but she also benefits from them as a source of entertainment. Their lives, in all the angst and desire and very humanness they display out on the street, “amused her.”

Mrs. Hedges feels she can appropriately read and profit from ordinary performances of sadness and lust on the street, which she interprets through facial expressions, clothing styles, and hairdos (252).

As much as Mrs. Hedges seems to structurally contribute to and profit from the maintenance of white financial and social power over black people, at individual levels she quite readily intervenes to stop the physical victimization of other black people. The very body Mrs.
Hedges so despises and which brings her such personal hardship is a saving grace for others. Mrs. Hedges rescues Bub from crowd of young boys trying to steal his money; the mere threat that she might come outside was enough to disperse the culprits (347). When the Super, Jones, attempts to rape Lutie, Mrs. Hedges physically rescues Lutie:

A pair of powerful hands gripped her by the shoulders, wrenched her violently out of the Super’s arms, flung her back against the wall. . . . The same powerful hands shot out and thrust the Super hard against the cellar door. . . She had never seen Mrs. Hedges outside of her apartment and looked at closely she was awe-inspiring . . . She was wearing a long-sleeved, high-necked flannelette nightgown. It was so snowy white that her skin showed up intensely black by contrast. . . Her hands, her feet, and what could be seen of her legs were a mass of scars . . . The flesh was drawn and shiny where it had apparently tightened in the process of healing. . . Lutie thought Mrs. Hedges had the appearance of a creature that had strayed from some other planet. (236-7)

Here, Lutie’s perspective makes it clear that Mrs. Hedges does try to efface her body. This is the first time Lutie sees Mrs. Hedges outside of her apartment or up close. Additionally, it is clear here that even when Mrs. Hedges expects to be home alone, undisturbed at night, she wears a “high-necked” nightgown. Lutie, in her determination that Mrs. Hedges looks like “a creature that had strayed from some other planet” also affirms Mrs. Hedges’s general anxieties about her appearance and suggests Mrs. Hedges’s interpretations of how others see her are correct. Lutie’s interesting observation that near Mrs. Hedges’s “terrible scars” “the flesh. . . had apparently tightened in the process of healing,” might also be interpreted figuratively; Mrs. Hedges had to make sacrifices in order to “heal.” She accepts life as a shut-in who covers her body and head at all times. She also, though, makes an exception to her general refusal to be vulnerable when she
feels needed and/or that she can otherwise display her own invulnerability. Being a “mountain of a woman” enables her to uniquely intervene with violence against women and children. While Lutie ignores her neighbor Mrs. Smith’s domestic strife, Mrs. Hedges intervenes with the violence she overhears. She knows she can overpower Jones, and so she risks, seemingly without hesitation, the scars on her legs and feet being exposed, presumably because her strength will trump the markings of vulnerability on her skin.

Calling Mrs. Hedges’s urban migration dream a failed one is complicated because she contributes to its failure. Her main dream is to find a man to love her, and she does find such a man in Junto. Accepting her scars, for Mrs. Hedges, generally entails a vigilant refusal to be vulnerable. Mrs. Hedges defines vulnerability physically. In other words, as long as her skin and bald head are not exposed, or as long as she can believe her body is not visible, Mrs. Hedges can feel invulnerable. When Junto makes “gestures toward transforming their relationship into something more personal” she “steadfastly ignored them” because “she never intended to reveal the extent of her disfigurement to anyone—least of all to Junto who knew her so well.” (252-3)

The problems with both Mrs. Hedges’s personal urban migration dream and accepting Junto’s affection, aside from her general refusal to be vulnerable, also include: her fatalistic logic, his appearance, and her determination that despite his words and actions, he will never love her “as a woman.”

Even as she struggled, she kept thinking that all she needed to do was to get badly burned, and never as long as she lived would any man look at her and want her. No matter how much money she acquired, they still wouldn’t want her. No sum of money would be big enough to make them pretend to want her. (244)
Like Lutie’s fatalistic logic after she murders Boots, Mrs. Hedges views getting burned, even as it is happening, as “all she needed to do” in order to ensure that “as long as she lived” no man would ever “look at her and want her.” For Mrs. Hedges, being burned is final, damaging, and something from which she can never recover. But also, Petry’s syntax suggests Mrs. Hedges views getting burned as something she is responsible for—it is something she might “do” as opposed to something she might unfortunately, passively encounter.

The ways Mrs. Hedges interprets Junto’s admiration for her trouble her. Further, she is not attracted to him because of his physical appearance, including, perhaps, his race. Mrs. Hedges struggles, on instinct, to survive the fire by shoving her large body through a small basement window, to the surprise of many. “The firemen who found her stared at her in awe . . . she was the only survivor left from that house full of people” (244). Her “indomitable urge to live, the absolutely incredible will to live, that had made her force her body through so small a space” causes Junto to “marvel” at her live, marked body and heap praises such as “You’re a brave woman” upon her (245). When Junto assures her, “You’ll be all right,” though, her response to Junto is, “The doctor told me . . . I ain’t going to have any hair left” in a “flat, uninterested” voice (245). When Junto wants to “tell her how amazing he thought she was . . . He touched one of her hands gently” and says “slowly,” “Mrs. Hedges. . . you and me are the same kind of folks. We got to stay together after this. Close together. We can go a long way” (245). When Junto admires Mrs. Hedges for her body and the way it is marked with her will and personality, she refuses to engage him or his admiration. Instead, right after his declaration:

She had thought about her scalp—how scarred and terrible looking it would be. The hair would never grow back. She looked steadily at Junto, her eyes unwinking. He would probably be the only man who would ever admire her. He was squat. His shoulders were
too big for his body. His neck was set on them like a turtle’s neck. His skin was as gray in color as his eyes. And he was white. . . even he would never want her as a woman. He had the kind of forthright admiration for her that he would have for another man—a man he regarded as his equal. Scarred like this, hair burned off her head like this, she would never have any man’s love. She never would have had it, anyway, she thought realistically. But she could have bought it. This way she couldn’t even buy it. (245-6)

Where Junto reads success into the markings on her body, Mrs. Hedges reads failure, first thinking of her scalp and its horror. Mrs. Hedges is unable to experience Junto in a way other than the way she imagines men experience her. In other words, she is revolted by what she perceives as his inappropriate size—he is too short but his shoulders are “too big.” Her comment “And he was white” implies his whiteness is another problem with him. Or the line also might be read such that his lack of distinct whiteness is a problem, as the line “And he was white” follows the sentence “His skin was as gray in color as his eyes.” In this reading, she is revolted because his skin should be white, but it is gray. Here, he is revolting not because of his particular race but because he does not look how a white male should look, in her view. She has to shift her eyes and refuses to see him, just as she refuses to be seen. She determines “even he would never want her as a woman.” She is unable to see beyond his appearance or her own, and she views Junto in the devastating ways she is/feels judged. The rigid logic through which she deflects Junto’s admiration when she decides he admires her as he would a man but not as a woman implies that he must love her body in order to love her as a woman. This notion is complicated by her assertion that she, if not burned, could have bought a man’s love. This logic does not make sense, as it seems that it would be impossible to create genuine bodily attraction through a financial arrangement but not through admiration. Furthermore, while readers do not have
particular evidence suggesting Junto is physically attracted to Mrs. Hedges, readers also do not have any evidence suggesting he is not attracted to her physically. Characters like Boots sense Junto is in love with Mrs. Hedges (276). But Mrs. Hedges will not or does not want to acknowledge this possibility because she refuses to be vulnerable and is not attracted to Junto. She realizes, on some level, that it is not enough to merely find a man who will love her in order to be happy.

Lutie and Mrs. Hedges both have exceptional bodies that repeatedly draw attention. Lutie is hyper-desired on 116th street for her body, while Mrs. Hedges’s uniquely large body tends to repulse or entrance others. It seems impossible for Lutie to be viewed as something other than an object, a commodity, or both. Meanwhile, Mrs. Hedges, especially in the youth she reflects on, is often seen as a liability or a source of financial depletion. There are exceptions, though—Bub loves his mother as an individual human, and Junto seems to love Mrs. Hedges similarly. Both women underestimate, ignore, or do not fully acknowledge this love. Both women cope with inhabiting an exceptional body in different ways. Lutie ignores or tries to literally and figuratively kill desire for her body. She determines her dreams have ended and in turn enacts their end; she flees Harlem, abandoning Bub, the street, and her hopes of upward mobility for her and her son together. When Mrs. Hedges feels her dreams are over, she remains on the street. She turns to watching, hoarding money, others, and herself. She capitalizes on the marginalization of both female bodies and black bodies. Both women suggest 1940s Harlem is a wasteland for the idealistic urban migration dreams it spawned, and both women suggest people only survive there at the cost of their dreams. If Lutie had been able to experience the people around in her Harlem as individuals worthy of her kinship, herself as an agent capable of writing new narratives through her own experiences, or her own encounters as isolated incidents, she
may well have been able to keep her family together and challenge systematic racism. If Mrs. Hedges had been able to imagine herself as a person worthy of love despite her physical scars, or if she had been unwilling to commodify black men or women, she may too have challenged systematic racism. But ultimately, Lutie’s train departure for Chicago suggests she has been defeated by legal segregation. She feels inferior, and she is going elsewhere as a result. She is isolated, fleeing black utopia on the literal vehicle that inspired the Supreme Court’s pro-segregation ruling. When she sets out for Chicago, she is reversing the journey, a generation earlier, of Clare from Passing’s idealism.

**Ruinous Harlem?**

Similarly to Petry’s novel, Osofsky’s *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* (1963) retrospectively portrays a very different Harlem than that James Weldon Johnson presents in *Black Manhattan* (1930). Unlike Petry, Osofsky focuses on the years 1890-1930, but for my purposes here, I will mostly engage his writing on the decade of the 1920s. Lutie Johnson, though a fictional character inhabiting 1940s Harlem, very much encounters the bleak Harlem Osofsky describes. Whereas James Weldon Johnson, also writing on the 1920s, sees “one of the most beautiful and healthful sites in the whole city” (146) and asserts “it is not a slum,” Osofsky argues just the opposite: “The most profound change that Harlem experienced in the 1920’s [sic] was its emergence as a slum. Largely within the space of a single decade Harlem was transformed from a potentially ideal community to a neighborhood with manifold social and economic problems” (135). Osofsky, a history scholar who is avowedly writing a history, goes on to detail the ways in which “High rents and poor salaries necessarily led to congested and unsanitary conditions” (136):
The most important factor which led to the rapid deterioration of Harlem housing was the high cost of living in the community. Rents, traditionally high in Harlem, reached astounding proportions in the 1920’s—they skyrocketed in response to the unprecedented demand created by heavy Negro migration and settlement within a restricted geographical area. . . . In 1919 the average Harlemite paid somewhat above $21 or $22 a month for rent; by 1927 rentals had doubled” and the average rent rose to $41.77. . . . The typical white working-class family in New York City in the late twenties paid $6.67 per room, per month, which Harlem Negroes were charged $9.50. (136)

The Harlem that Osofsky portrays here is the Harlem Lutie Johnson experiences. Blacks suffered dramatically inflating rents to live in cramped quarters while whites paid less to live more comfortably. Of the mid-1920s, Osofsky writes, “People were packed together to the point of ‘indecency’” (140), echoing Lutie’s assertion that people were “packed together like sardines in a can” in Harlem. In contrast to Johnson’s gushing commentary on the healthy, sunny life Harlem provided blacks, Osofsky’s convincing statistics suggest otherwise: “Twice as many mothers died in childbirth as did mothers in other districts, and almost twice as many Harlem children ‘passed’ as did infants in the rest of New York. Infant mortality in Harlem, 1923-1927, was 111 per thousand live births; for the city, 64.5” (141). According to other studies Osofsky invokes, tuberculosis and other diseases such as venereal disease had equally disproportionate rates in Harlem, and “Harlem was the most disease-ridden community in Manhattan” (141-3). Osofsky calls Harlemites “New York’s most depressed and traditionally worst-housed people” (105). Osofsky’s statistics reflect Lutie’s concerns about the health of her son, such as her focus on the lack of proper nourishment and sunlight available to her son in Harlem and how such conditions would prohibit him from growing strong. Osofsky takes it for granted that 1920s
Harlem was a slum. “The Harlem slum of the twenties was the product of a few major urban developments . . . If one is looking for a dramatic turning point in the history of the urbanization of the Negro—‘a race changing from farm life to city life’—it was certainly the decade of the twenties . . . ‘Harlem became the symbol of liberty and the Promised Land to Negroes everywhere,’ the Reverend Dr. Powell wrote,” (128) but its realities disappointed. The very decade that Johnson reads as the crescendo of black opportunity, Osofsky views as a turning point for the worst.

Here, less than two Harlems described in two different eras is the same Harlem viewed and attended to differently by two historians, two authors of fiction, and the fictional characters within each. The histories and the novels differ most strikingly in their degree of attention to the poor and poverty generally. Harlem is a zone both formed by and that inspired wildly different narratives. We can conclude from the differences in these accounts that Harlem during the era of legal segregation was a space of ambivalence and financial diversity. Johnson and Larsen focus on and belonged in the black elite. Petry, of a more privileged, rural background than Larsen, spent her years in Harlem amongst the working class and the poor. Osofsky, an academic with an elite education (he earned his M.A. at NYU and his Ph.D. at Columbia), studied those marginalized by race and poverty. When Petry’s biographer notes, “While society marginalizes many of the people that she brings to life, in her pages they take center stage and demand our serious consideration,” (Holladay 130), we might easily argue the same point about Osofsky.

Petry worked as a journalist and managed an after-school program at P.S. 10 in Harlem (Holladay 8). Of this time Petry wrote, “‘Although I had been aware of Harlem, this was [my] first realization of the impact of that kind of hard life on kids. I lived my whole life without paying attention. It wasn’t my life. But once I became aware, I couldn’t see anything but’” (Fein
B2 as quoted by Holladay 8). Petry was not a stranger to literal or metaphoric racial violence. She was stoned and called racial slurs by white boys on her way home from her first day of school as a small child. She wrote in diaries about the awkward, marginalizing experience of studying the Civil War and slavery in school as the only black student. Petry was attentive to her body in self-reflection, once noting: “Having been born black and female, I regard myself as a survivor and a gambler” (Holladay 2). But nonetheless Petry had never witnessed distinctly black urban poverty before working in Harlem. Her biographer Hilary Holladay asserts “Although she sees herself as a gambler and a survivor, she began life with advantages commonly associated with guaranteed prosperity, to say nothing of survival” (Holladay 4-5).

Petry grew up in Old Saybrook, Connecticut where her father owned a pharmacy, and she became a pharmacist as well. When she moved to Harlem in 1938 with her husband, she reported being shocked by what she learned from the young people in her after-school program. She repeatedly witnessed unprecedented (for her) crime and violence as a part of her job as a journalist (Holladay 8-10). Petry lived in Harlem from 1938 to 1947. She mostly lived in Harlem alone, as her husband was drafted into World War II. “At various times during the 1940s, she was a teacher, copywriter, newspaper journalist, consumer advocate, actress, and student at Columbia University. In retrospect, this immersion in Harlem culture seems to have been just the education Petry needed to write The Street, her first novel” (Holladay 22). Similar to Larsen, Petry grew up elsewhere and of a different social background to those she associated with in Harlem. Holladay writes Petry “looked at Harlem with the dual vision of an outsider, who had not grown up with the problems endemic to ghetto life, and an insider, who identified with the people of her own race and wanted to put their struggle into words” (Holladay 10). We might say something similar about Larsen (who also seemed to both be an insider and on the outside)
regarding the elite social group she married into. Both women write of a class they come to know but are not born into, as if drawing the other near in a way their characters do not.

Harlem is both a haven and a space of doom for Irene, Clare, Lutie, and Mrs. Hedges. The fictional characters here, in their imagined humanity, allow space for ambivalence about Harlem and segregated space generally. These characters shift perspectives based on mood, fantasy, and events in ways that the nonfiction accounts of Johnson and Osofsky work to squash. For Johnson, Harlem is heaven, it is potential; for Osofsky, it is hell—it is “a ghetto” like many others, always already on the path to ghetto-hood. Petry, differently, calls Harlem “‘as varied and as full of ambivalences as Manhattan itself’” (Holladay 22). She describes pleasing sights and sounds like “ice-cold watermelon, honeysweet” and dances, but she also condemns Harlem as a ghetto: “looked at head on, its thousand faces merge into one—the face of a ghetto. In point of time it belongs back in the Middle Ages. Harlem is an anachronism—shameful and unjustifiable, set down in the heart of the biggest, richest city of the world” (Petry, “Harlem”). Petry’s Lutie may easily have uttered a similar statement, but fiction allows characters like Lutie to contradict themselves over time in ways that historians might not feel at liberty to do. Just as Irene, Clare, Lutie, and Mrs. Hedges so often assessed and reassessed their role in Harlem, so too is the history of the space continually being rewritten. Even Johnson admits:

Harlem is still in the process of making. It is still new and mixed; so mixed that one may get many different views—which is all right so long as one view is not taken to be the whole picture. This many-sided aspect, however, makes it one of the most interesting communities in America. But Harlem is more than a community; it is a large-scale laboratory experiment in the race problem. (281)
If Harlem is an experiment created at least in large part as a result of racism and racial segregation, it is an experiment that in many ways reinforced inequalities and encouraged a continual cycle of the (re)marginalization of its inhabitants. The fictional characters, in the active agency they possess, contribute to their own demises, too, though; so just as their fictional lives may have turned out otherwise despite systematic oppression, Harlem need not be seen as a clear success or failure, as a place with a history that is already written.
Conclusion

Acting Up in the 1950s

To live as a woman in Manhattan in the era of U.S. legal segregation, in the novels I have explored, is to live in a time and a space of kill or be killed. Crane’s Mary metaphorically kills her daughter Maggie, contributing to her ambiguous death. Dos Passos’ Ellen aborts babies and deadens herself. Larsen’s Clare dies; Irene either kills Clare or condemns herself to live with a murderer’s guilt unnecessarily. Petry’s Lutie tries to kill the street, which she has always already animated. Instead, she kills the black man threatening her as well as her own dreams. Lutie’s counterpart, Mrs. Hedges, metaphorically kills her own body, cloaking it from view. These women are all inspired to perform because they are females in environments that marginalize them accordingly. They are encouraged to squash the unique singularity of their appearances and/or personalities in order to survive; if they do not or cannot, they suffer consequences. Those who survive, such as Crane’s Mary and Petry’s Mrs. Hedges, sacrifice people and/or pleasure in order to do so.

To live in Manhattan as a man in these novels is to live with different options and increased possibilities for movement within or outside of New York City. Crane’s Jimmie and Pete can position themselves as superior to the women that suffer for their mutual activities. These men can craft their own narratives and can live unaffected by the social smears that are fatal for women like Maggie. When male characters like Dos Passos’s Jimmy Herf cannot squash their unique singularity, they can simply leave town, alone and without plans. Larsen’s Brian and John Bellew each have jobs that allow them to travel. Brian might move to another country whenever he likes; it is his attachment to his wife and children, rather than societal norms or prejudices in New York City, that prevents his departure. Petry’s Junto lords his wealth
and power over poor black Harlemites in order to heighten both. The only man who is killed and/or faces limited choices because of societal prejudice in these works is Boots, a poor black man. But even Boots has often successfully manipulated circumstances in his favor. He evades the draft through his own connections, and he contributes to Lutie’s subjugation for personal gain. Boots is in a position to use Lutie because, as a poor black woman, she is in an even greater position of marginality than he is. Crane’s Mary, Dos Passos’s Ellen, Larsen’s Clare and Irene, and Petry’s Lutie teach us that even the same kinds of performative survival strategies in the same kinds of situations offer narrower possibilities for women versus men. Women are less free to move and fewer goals are attainable for them in this time and place. What remains to be seen are the means of empowerment women might embrace in order to intervene with forces that marginalize them.

Interventions

Alice Childress’s meta-play Trouble in Mind (1955) emerged on the heels of the Brown v. Board of Education (1954) decision. Trouble in Mind is a play about a mixed race cast meeting and rehearsing a play, “Chaos in Belleville.” This imagined play-within-a-play is about the lynching of a black man, Job, who is targeted by whites because he votes. Trouble in Mind therefore addresses historical and nationally publicized traumas faced by blacks as well as more everyday racial traumas black people encounter. These traumas include mistreatment and murder during Reconstruction and thereafter, school segregation and the violence that nine students in Little Rock experience while trying to attend a previously all-white school, and housing and
workplace discrimination the characters in the work directly encounter. The play engages multiple layers of performance to present such traumas.

Not only is *Trouble in Mind* a play about actors practicing a play, but also it is a play about actors who perform in their everyday lives. Wiletta, a black actress in her fifties and a focal character, avows acting for the white authorities in the theater business as a necessary strategy to obtain and keep the kind of work she loves. White men dominate the structure of New York City theater production, and Wiletta is a deferential yes-woman in her doubly performative career as an actress. When Wiletta’s performance-based coping mechanisms for everyday racism fail her, in the course of the play, she revises them. She embraces hypervisibility despite attempts to erase her. By examining her performative coping methods, their disruption, her reaction to such disruption, and the consequences she faces as a result of her choices, I argue that *Trouble in Mind* illustrates how individual, everyday trauma can be processed toward group empowerment. In turn, I delineate a pedagogy of what individual, group, and/or staged performances are capable of achieving for marginalized groups when people turn outward and confront their subjugation publicly.

At the beginning of the play, Wiletta outlines her coping strategies for grappling with the kinds of everyday racism she experiences in the theater industry. Wiletta avows acting for white...
managers and directors as a strategy for obtaining roles and keeping jobs. She describes her methods to John, a young black man acting in his first Broadway play. Wiletta first asks John, “Why you want to act? Why don’t you make somethin’ outta yourself?” (486) and advises “You don’t have to take what I’ve been through . . . don’t have to take it off ‘em” (486). Wiletta’s first comments about acting are curious, given she has a true passion for acting. Wiletta pauses to take a breath when she enters the theater, noting that she enjoys soaking it in, and she later tells Henry, the seventy-eight-year-old Irish doorman, “I want to be an actress, I’ve always wanted to be an actress and they ain’t gonna do me the way they did the home rule!” (510), equating the Irish struggle for home rule to her struggle to act. Therefore she further reveals her passion for acting by equating it to a group’s violent fight for independence. In questioning why John wants to act and by implying that it is not a way to make something out of oneself, Wiletta is trying to prevent future hardship for him. By deprecating a profession she loves, Wiletta is acting even as she advises John about acting, making it clear that Wiletta uses performance as a strategy not only to protect herself but also as a way to protect others.

Wiletta’s style is antithetical to the then-popular Stanislavski method. Manners, the director, and John and Judy, two of the actors, are all well-schooled in this style that champions relating personally and truthfully to one’s character. The style, popularized in the U.S. by Lee Strasberg who referred to it as “the method” or “method acting,” reached its heyday in the U.S. in the 1950s. John and Judy are both straight out of school. John’s responses to Wiletta, such as, “I wouldn’t, couldn’t play anything I didn’t believe in…I couldn’t,” (488) mark his desire to genuinely relate to his work and his belief that such a thing is possible. The nature of Wiletta’s continued suggestions to John shows that her strategies are formed in reaction to racism she has experienced or witnessed. Wiletta, therefore, is introduced to the audience as a seasoned actress
who is in control of her experiences in the theater, even if this control only comes in the form of manipulating the ways in which she is discriminated against. When John notes, “I think the theater is the grandest place in the world, and I plan to go right to the top,” Wiletta responds, “and where do you think I was plannin’ to go?” (487). Wiletta’s use of the past tense with “was planning” indicates that she feels going “to the top” is no longer a possibility for her. When John wonders, “aren’t you proud to be a part of it all?” (487) by which he means the “theater,” Wiletta evades his question and responds, “Show business, it’s just a business. Colored folks ain’t in no theater” (487). Wiletta emphasizes the word “business,” saying it twice in one line, suggesting that blacks are less able to relish in the artistry of the theater than whites are due to the scarcity of financial backing for shows involving black actors and the resulting scarcity of opportunities for black actors. Wiletta has no illusion that the theater industry is anything other than a racist one, and she operates in it accordingly, wielding and employing stereotypes of herself and others as she sees fit. Wiletta pushes against the Stanislavski method not only on stage but in the manner in which she acts at rehearsals. She advises John not to let the director know he has taken acting classes because “They don’t like us to go to school . . . They want us to be naturals . . . you know, just born with the gift” (487). Her warnings indicate the sense of “us” and “them” through which Wiletta’s experience of the theater is framed; this binary can be read as a divide between black actors and white managers, black people and white people in general, or between actors and directors in general. If Wiletta intends to call upon a racial divide, which seems likely in context, then she is calling upon the stereotype that black people are naturally talented at dancing and singing. Willetta asserts it is a stereotype white people prefer to reality.

Childress underscores the social predicament the Stanislavski style presents for black actors. Wiletta argues that when black people express the realities of their lives or their genuine
emotions they cause white theater authorities—and white people generally—displeasure. The
1950s theater is a space where some kinds of inner truths are welcome and some are not, but
neither Manners, John, or Judy have thought deeply about ugly or undesirable truths that might
everything they say, makes ‘em feel superior,” (487) and “white folks can’t stand unhappy
Negros” (488). Wiletta feels called to perform the superiority of others. Unlike Crane’s Mary,
who performs her own superiority, or Dos Passos’s Ellen who performs her own invulnerability,
Wiletta focuses on how her performances might position others rather than on how she will
appear to others. She does not distinguish her advice along gendered lines; she feels all black
people need to learn the lesson(s) she has uncovered. She concludes, “Nobody told me, had to
learn it for myself,” (488) indicating that she has learned to mask her genuine self through her
own negative experiences with white people generally and in the theater industry specifically. It
is clear as the play progresses that Wiletta follows the advice she gives John, allowing the
audience to know she is honestly attempting to help John and that she indeed calculates her
behavior as a performance for the white management. For Stanislavski, mechanical acting based
in stereotype produces “shackles and your only means of getting out of them is to study your art
and yourself in relation to it” (Stanislavski 278-9). But for Wiletta, because the only roles
available to her are stereotypes, she cannot genuinely emotionally connect to them. Further,
when she does speak truths, her feelings are in utter discord with the actions of her character,
highlighting a fundamental problem for black actors facing limited roles: the Stanislavski method
breaks down when plays are unrealistic. The method is therefore unusable for black actors unless
scripts change. Here, before Wiletta is willing to be vulnerable, and in her career before the rise
of method acting, being mechanistic has enabled her success rather than shackled it.
Wiletta’s coping mechanisms for grappling with her everyday experiences of racism, which entail masking her true self and genuine emotions, are called into question when Al Manners, the white director, attempts to emulate Stanislavski. It seems that Manners has studied the latest in directorial techniques to ensure his Broadway debut is a success. Stanslavski’s then-popular book, *An Actor Prepares*, is a fiction that stages his method by way of an imagined dialogue between a director and his students through a year-long course. The director and the model student narrating *An Actor Prepares* are both versions of Stanislavski himself. The book is a conversation Stanislavski is having with himself in which he always already knows every question and its right answer. Within the book, the director is all-knowing. There is a right way to act, and the director is the only person with the ability to properly assess acting. When the director makes comments such as, “‘You are not drawing the right conclusion from today’s lesson. Something much more important took place than you think’” (275 Stanislavski) the students are deferential. The narrator occasionally questions the director temporarily only to soon declare that the director was indeed right all along (273 Stanislavski).

Manners enters the scene clearly hoping to recreate scenes straight out of *An Actor Prepares*. He declares, “I definitely know what I want and however unorthodox my methods, I promise never to bore you. . . . please forget your old methods of work and go along with me. I’ll probably confuse the hell out of you for the first few days but after that . . . well, I hope we’ll be swingin’” (496). Manners hopes to anoint his cast with his unconventional genius, though his supposedly unorthodox methods ironically mimic Stanislavski exercises. The director in *An Actor Prepares* teaches his students that one achieves a “proper ‘creative state’” by “‘introducing some unexpected, spontaneous incident, a touch of reality. . . . The unexpectedness of the incident will excite you and your nature will rush forward’” (278 Stanislavski). So Manners is
confused when his cast is not creatively excited in response to a “spontaneous incident.”

Manners throws a wad of paper in a performative rage. When others attempt to pick up the trash, Manners insists that Wiletta be the one to pick it up. Manners’s performance surprises Wiletta, who takes his performance to be genuine. She reacts in a “quick flare of temper” (497). She screams “Well, hell! I ain’t the damn janitor!” and then tries to “check her temper” (497) but is flustered, looking for words. Manners is “quite shaken and embarrassed” (497), and as the stage direction notes, “even though he was trying to catch them off guard, he did not expect this” (497). Although her outburst is brief, it surprises both her and Manners. Wiletta is accustomed to masking her true feelings, and Manners expected unearthing them would result in “fine acting” as it does according to Stanislavski. He stutters through a Stanislavski-esq response: “What you have just seen is...is...is fine acting. Actors struggle for weeks to do what you have done perfectly...the first time” (497), though he is genuinely perplexed. Manners did not imagine that he might unearth truths he does not like, nor did he predict challenges to his authority might ensue. Manners’s new directorial approach changes race and gender relations in the theater for him and Wiletta. He shocks Wiletta out of her normal self-effacing and stereotype-fulfilling coping mechanisms as well as her ironic sense of control over her own dominance. Manners is in turn dismayed by the unwelcome burst of truth his methodology evokes.

While her main character Wiletta may not have been schooled in Stanislavski’s methods, Childress is clearly underscoring its limits and complications resulting out of the social and financial structure of the Broadway stage. Childress and her main character understand the social dangers that can come out of perpetuating stereotype on stage, as does Stanislavski. He warns against portraying Othello as a silly savage out of ignorance. The director criticizes the narrator’s stereotypic performance, asking, “Can you really believe that the Moors, who in their day were
renowned for culture, were like wild animals, pacing up and down a cage? . . . Where did you get any such approach to the role?” (Stanislavski 26). Manners does not consider the problems he might encounter in trying to implement Stanislavski’s method in the social context of 1950s America when producing a play whose text is steeped in stereotype.

Two main social issues are on the minds of Wiletta and her black peers: education and housing. Before rehearsal, Wiletta reads the newspaper headlines aloud: “Look at ‘em! Throwin’ stones at little children, got to call out the militia to go to school.” John responds, “That’s terrible,” and then Millie, “(Quite proud of her contribution to Little Rock)” notes, “A woman pushed me on the subway this mornin’ and I was ready for her! Called her everything but a child of God. She turned purple! Oh, I fixed her” (489). Childress updated the setting of her play to the fall of 1957 presumably to include these then-current references to Little Rock in the initial conversations between actors. Here, we see John, Wiletta, and Millie all in agreement that the violence facing nine black students is unjust. These nine students were recruited by Daisy Bates of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to integrate Little Rock Central High School (“Integration of Central High School”). On September 4, 1957, the nine students were prevented from entering the building by the Arkansas National Guard, under the direction of Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus. The group members were also met by protestors, who hurled insults and spit on some of the students (Patterson 110-112). Photographs show protestors waving a Confederate flag, kicking one of the male students, yelling at Elizabeth Eckford, and touting signs reading “Race Mixing is Communism” (Binkovitz). Eckford was spat on and threatened with lynching as she tried to enter school (Patterson 111). Thurgood Marshall earned an injunction, and the nine entered school on September 23, 1957, only to be ushered out with the threat of mob violence as crowd members threw bricks soon after on that same day.
President Dwight D. Eisenhower then sent Army troops to escort the students to school at the request of Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior (“Integration of Central High School”). These events were widely publicized, and in much of the country bred outrage like that Wiletta, John, and Millie feel. But while Millie will unleash her outrage on a stranger on the subway, she does not feel similarly empowered in this workplace. Instead, she mumbles protests like “people are not all the same” under her breath in response to young white Judy’s naïveté.

Discrimination directly experienced by the cast members is also discussed in the build-up to Manners’s arrival on set. Sheldon, an older black male cast member, faces housing discrimination but pointedly does not want to be a desegregation trailblazer. Because of racism, Sheldon is “planning to be busy all winter lookin’ for an apartment, I sure hate roomin’” (503). He is unhappy in his current situation, but finding acceptable housing at a price he can afford might take months. When white Eddie describes his own bargain apartment, Sheldon asks “They got any colored livin’ in that buildin’?” Eddie responds “I…I…I don’t know. I haven’t seen any.” Sheldon knows that obviously “there’s none there then.” Eddie, in his position of privilege, either does not think before he speaks or does not realize how difficult it is for black people to find housing. Eddie offers, “I’ll gladly ask,” putting Sheldon “In great alarm,” as he hastily declares, “Oh, no, no, no! I don’t want to be the first” (503). The difficulty that Sheldon faces finding housing because of his race is not something he wishes to challenge. He does not want to have to live in a place where he would be known and potentially targeted as the first black resident in a building. Discussion of housing discrimination and school integration are both part of casual

41 Name-calling, spitting, and stone throwing persisted throughout the year. Gloria Ray was pushed down a flight of stairs. In the course of the year, Melba Pattillo, was beaten, had acid thrown in her face, and was locked in a bathroom stall while girls attempted to burn her hair. White students burned a black effigy across the street from the school (“Integration of Central High School”).
discussion setting the scene before Manners has even entered the theater; Childress establishes racial injustice as part of ordinary life for the black members of this cast and black people in the country generally.

When Wiletta loses her temper, then, it is clear she is inspired by these ever-present, looming injustices. When she shouts at Manners, she unsettles the certainty she feels earlier while giving John advice. The episode marks Wiletta’s coping mechanisms as fragile. She questions them when confronted with their failure to allow her to remain calm and satisfy her boss’s sense of superiority (which is grounded in his sense that he understands women, black people, and how to direct plays in the best possible way). Moments later, when a young white actress, Judy, is uncomfortable using the word “darkies,” Manners asks the black cast members if they object to the use of the term (499). Wiletta responds “Lord, have mercy, don’t ask me ‘cause I don’t know,” and, as the stage direction notes, she “stops short as she realizes she is repeating words from the script. She’s disturbed that she’s repeating the exact line the author indicated” (500). Wiletta is troubled by her mimicry of the script for several reasons. First, she realizes she has been so upset by the recent confrontation with Manners that she is not formulating independent thought. She therefore feels she has lost control of herself. In addition, the play they are rehearsing is likely set at least fifty years earlier and focuses on the interactions between sharecroppers and a plantation owner and his family. By repeating not only words set in an earlier era that is at least hypothetically a more racist one, but also by repeating words that refer to one’s own ignorance, it is as if the current confrontation in the workplace has provoked Wiletta to revert to a self-effacing and self-deprecating interaction with white male authority reminiscent of black-white and male-female relations in the post-Civil War south. Further, the fact that Wiletta is able to mirror this interaction from the past without others noticing or being
disturbed by it in the present allows the play as a whole to call attention to the fact that little has changed in workplace interactions between black workers and white authorities or between female workers and male bosses. Wiletta’s mirroring of the script underscores that the disruption of her coping strategies simultaneously disrupts her ability to control her own reactions. Mimicking prepared lines ironically results in Wiletta feeling that the theater is once again a space governed by unfamiliar rules.

When faced with the failure of her performance-based coping mechanism for workplace survival, Wiletta is hyper-vigilant about trying to anticipate and prevent being further traumatized. She focuses on the source of her trauma. As the rehearsal moves on, Wiletta “watches Manners with a sharp eye, always cautious and on the look-out” (498). These stage directions highlight Wiletta’s hyper-vigilance in the wake of the trauma of being caught unaware and reacting in unexpected and undesirable ways. Wiletta is further unearthed, though, by Manners’s attempts to encourage her to verbalize her feelings about a song her character sings in the play they are rehearsing. Wiletta responds to Manners’s first request to “speak your mind and then sing,” by noting “I know exactly what you want” (505). Although Manners’s first response to her singing is “Beautiful,” he then immediately asks, “What were you thinking?” (506), and he repeats his question when Wiletta avoids answering it. He insists, “Tell me. You’re not a vacuum, you thought something” (506). A Stanislavski-style free-association leads to Wiletta revealing true emotions and frustrations about housing discrimination, “killin,’” “the man’s theater, the man’s money,” and being instructed to “pick up that paper!” (507). She invokes Sheldon’s struggle, echoing his question “They got any colored in that buildin’?” (507). Simply by naming these frustrations and injustices aloud on stage, she is able to sing the song as “a song of strength and anger” (507). Wiletta’s repetition of “the man’s” underscores her anger
as gendered; it is not just that whites own and operate theater productions, but it matters that those owners are also always men. Wiletta’s empowerment is more than Manners can bear. The stage direction notes, “the song is overpowering, we see a woman who could fight the world,” (507) and Manners is troubled by this. He reacts:

Wiletta, if you dare! You will undo us! Are you out of your senses? When you didn’t know what you were doing . . . perfection on the nose. I’ll grant you the first interpretation was right, without motivating. All right, I’ll settle for that. (507)

Manners’s speech reveals his preference that Wiletta not be empowered as a woman or as a black person. It also acknowledges just how uncomfortable he is that the process he is committed to is exposing truths that are unwelcome. He prefers a detached, “vacuum” version of a black woman, as she knew he would. Manners’s idea that Wiletta “will undo us” recognizes that black female empowerment undoes something—it upsets his feelings of superiority and control as both a director and as a white male generally. Her unhappiness disrupts his false sense that the black cast members are delighted all of the time simply because he has given them work. Both Manners and Wiletta preferred the façade but for different reasons. For Wiletta it was familiar and she understood it. For Manners it was a way to experience power as pleasurable even for those dominated by it. While Manners is able to move on to a discussion of costumes with other characters, Wiletta is “feeling very lost” (507). For Wiletta, Manners’s style of directing is new. He is presumably more committed to Stanislavski’s Moscow Art Theater style than her previous directors were. His style upsets her entire understanding of theater operations and her strategies for functioning within them. However, the way Wiletta reacts to Manners’s prodding by singing with strength reveals the potential for empowerment to be found when black women emote with, address, and publicly perform a connection to the suffering associated with their identity
categories. By way of Wiletta, Childress champions truth-telling on stage, the Stanislavski way, while underscoring the ways it might have unintended consequences or go awry when those who encourage it, like Manners, are actually invested in maintaining stereotypes both on and off the stage.

Wiletta begins to attend to the script of the play more closely and to react to it emotionally. Before rehearsals begin, she tells John she thinks the play “stinks, ain’t nothin’ atall,” (488) while several other characters, including John, admit to finding it moving and powerful. Wiletta now expresses her concerns about the script. The result of Manners’s prodding, therefore, is that Wiletta is no longer able to avoid connecting her experiences in the theater to her genuine self, emotion, and sense of morality. Manners’s methods work as they are designed to, but they backfire on his authority and his sense of himself as an enlightened white liberal. For Wiletta, this change is irrevocable and at the same time confounding, as she is accustomed to disconnecting from her genuine self while at work. Wiletta feels the script is morally problematic because it calls for a mother to encourage her son to turn himself in to the police and risk death even when he has not committed a crime; he is wanted by white people who are upset with him for voting. Wiletta’s concerns are tied to her gender, as she feels she knows what a mother would and would not do. Her unease is ignored, and she is met with demeaning comments such as “Darling, don’t think. You’re great until you start thinking” (514) and sexist attempts to distract her by attending to her charms. Such attempts include “Isn’t she wonderful?” and “Dear heart, I adore you” (514). These reactions and attempts to divert her attention reveal that Wiletta’s moral objections, suggestions, questions, and emotions—whether because of racism, sexism, classism, workplace hierarchy, or some combination thereof—are completely dismissed in her work environment. The reactions also suggest it is common in this
era for male authorities to placate women with superficial flattery rather than engaging them at the level of depth they are already operating on in the workplace. The kind of obvious dismissal Wiletta is met with stresses that her previously voiced concerns about the theater industry are valid, and the coping mechanisms (such as laughing at whatever the director might say) that she previously enacted in response to past marginalization did offer protection from demeaning moments such as this dismissal.

When Manners directs Wiletta to connect with her character and he is met with unpleasant surprises, it becomes clear that positive racial relations in the workplace are grounded in mutual performances. Wiletta, persisting in attempts to modify the script and/or receive support from other cast members on this front, receives no attention or aide. In turn, she protests Manners’s directing methods and accuses him of being disingenuous: “Talkin’ ‘bout the truth is anything I can believe . . . well, I don’t believe this. . . The writer wants the damn white man to be the hero—and I’m the villain” (533). The disputes regarding the script and its potential modification echo the real life experiences Langston Hughes with the Broadway production of Mulatto and predict those of Childress herself.42 Childress, after rewriting the play several times, eventually refused to produce Trouble in Mind on Broadway with a desired happier ending.43

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42 Hughes’s Mulatto ran for a year on Broadway in 1935. Mulatto is an anti-lynching play featuring a young man of mixed race antagonized for wanting to use the front door of his father’s house and similar actions. His refusal to bow to a deferential racial position in a strict binary system results in a fight in which he kills his father. He then kills himself rather than allowing the angry lynch mob to torture him (Hughes, Five Plays). Hughes’s play was rewritten and in rehearsals before he was even aware it was being produced; a sister who leaves town in Hughes’s original version hangs around the plantation and is raped in the rewritten text. Hughes eventually sanctioned the rewrite (Hughes, I Wonder As I Wander, 310-314).

43 It is unclear, though, if she rewrote the play under similar pressure for its off-Broadway production at the Greenwich Mews Theater in 1955, though. In light of Doris Abramson’s account of Trouble in Mind in her Negro Playwrights 1925-1959, like Judith Barlow, I too presume the ending presented at the Greenwich Mews ends more optimistically than the published version does. Abramson’s texts describes an ending in which other cast members come
In the height of Wiletta’s frustration and in the midst of her dismissal from others, she declares, “You don’t want to hear. You are a prejudiced man” (536). Manners responds with a rant of his own, complaining of his own hardships and eventually fulfilling Wiletta’s declaration with his racist comment that his own son should not be compared to John, “with three strikes against him. . . they’ve got nothing in common” (537). Wiletta’s inability to uphold her former performances on the job disables Manners’s ability to do the same, revealing an underlying racism in his thinking. One can now see his previous statements about only being concerned with the human race as a whole as dishonest performances of a belief in equality. If Manners’s son is comparable to a young black man, his sense of identity and superiority necessarily dissipate too. It is difficult for Manners to let go of rigid categorization because he has so benefited from its advantages to white men. After this incident, Manners storms off, and the future of the production is unclear. This series of interactions between Manners and Wiletta reveals cooperation between black and whites in this era to be performance-based and fragile. Members of both races must mutually uphold these workplace performances for cooperation to function and continue. It is a given that white men are idealized by both the play the cast is performing and Manners’s defense of it; even as Wiletta questions white male heroics, Manners responds by performing them.

Wiletta’s empowerment is irrevocable. Although her current job is in jeopardy, she does not regret voicing her opinions. She declares that even if she is not called to return to work the next day, she will “show up any damn way . . . we have to go further and do better” (541). She is clearly prepared to fight not just for herself but for a presumably raced and gendered “we.” She to support Wiletta, Manners coaxes them back, Wiletta forgives him, and Manners agrees to speak with the writer in an attempt to make the play a more just representation of black people.
has “always wanted to do somethin’ real grand. . . in the theater. . . to stand forth at my best” (541). It is clear, to the audience, if not Wiletta, here, that she just has done so, by confronting Manners. The play as a whole valorizes what Wiletta performs. Delving into the negative and addressing it—putting racism and sexism on stage—can be a source of empowerment and strength. It is critical that while Wiletta initially performs in everyday life for the sake of her individual career, she experiences her failure and subsequent empowerment as group-oriented, as indicated by her use of “we” in “we have to go further and do better.” *Trouble in Mind*, then, marks a relationship between personal emotional experiences and subsequent public action for groups as possible, even if the means of reaching group-oriented empowerment are potentially detrimental for the inspired individual.

This play, through Wiletta’s and Manners’s performances and through its role as a meta-play, creates a space through which the audience can examine the nature of performance. Audiences may learn the potential benefits and pitfalls of performance as a traumatic coping mechanism. The play also enables audiences to understand the devastating effects of racism, classism, sexism and discrimination. Viewers are encouraged toward empowerment, not without warning that empowerment will be met with resistance. Following the meta-impulse of *Trouble in Mind*, I will now read back through Crane, Dos Passos, Larsen, and Petry’s novels as well as Childress’s play so that we might see the benefits and pitfalls of performance as a traumatic coping mechanism. Their subjects are coping with urban life in New York City in the era of legal segregation. This is an era which entailed gender, class, and racially-based marginalization for many of the characters I have featured in my analysis. These texts, when read together, provide a pedagogy of performance.
Performance as Pedagogy

Performances in these texts are inspired by national, city, workplace, small-group, or individual failures of imagination. Those in power, be they national lawmakers or judgmental neighbors, often refuse to see people as equal to one another. This failure to accept humans as equally valuable regardless of their class, race, gender, or self-expression is often grounded in the ways a group’s or one’s own identity has been formed and/or by whom one feels one’s identity excludes. If one sees oneself as superior to women or certain kinds of men, one might feel unhinged when experiences or individuals suggest otherwise. This is because so much social power and advantage depends on a sense of superiority. The performers I have examined—Mary, Jimmie, Pete, Ellen, Irene, Clare, Lutie, Mrs. Hedges, and Wiletta are inspired to perform by their marginal status, desire for control, and need for affirmation. Their positions of abjection stem from poverty, racism, sexism, cultural/societal norms, the industrialization of the city, the repetitive New York City streets, and the overall lack of room for genuineness and singularity in the ordered built environment of the city. These characters are vulnerable, and they try to do something about it.

Many of the performances in these texts are driven by poor women’s desires to survive financially in New York City, though these actors’ performative methods vary. Mary in Maggie, A Girl of the Streets strives to position herself as superior and/or masculine, to expel difference, to divert the spotlight of a hyperpublic life, and to gain affection. Ellen from Manhattan Transfer and Wiletta from Trouble in Mind present themselves as invulnerable to maintain their careers. Mary and Ellen are successful, while Wiletta’s prior success unravels on stage. Irene and Clare from Passing want to appear feminine, white, and as if they belong; each woman tries to enact solidarity. Lutie from The Street tries to convince herself of her self-sufficiency and
exceptionality. Lutie further tries to shed the significations of others from her body, while Mrs. Hedges from *The Street* tries to shed her body generally. Lutie from *The Street* and Irene and Clare from *Passing* both initially perform as a means to avoid violence and enact positive change. Their failures devastate them.

The potential benefits of performance as a coping mechanism for the injustices of ordinary life as a woman in New York City in this era are that one might earn greater opportunities for work, financial survival (Ellen, Clare, Lutie, Wiletta), and social acceptance (Mary, Clare, Irene, Wiletta). If a woman acts, she might not be outcast by judgmental neighbors (as Maggie is and Mary is not), and she might avoid greater vulnerability and physical or emotional harm (as Ellen and Mrs. Hedges do). Performances for the self, especially, can provide hope and a way to channel negative experiences into something potentially positive (as Irene and Lutie so often try to do). The potential pitfalls of using performance as a coping mechanism include that one can be further traumatized if (one feels) one’s methods are no longer successful (as Lutie and Wiletta experience); one might become so entrenched in one’s desire to cope by way of particular methods that one may end up denying oneself of one’s greatest wishes and pleasures (as Irene, Lutie, and Mrs. Hedges seem to do). One might often be compelled by conflicting impulses; one might feel morally compelled to act in a way that may, at least initially, cause them further hardship such as the loss of a job or one’s sense of self (like Wiletta when she refuses to act against instinct in a play she morally disagrees with and like Irene when she passes for white out of racial solidarity for Clare). Wiletta’s case also, on the other hand, illustrates that such losses can be empowering and can be seen as trivial compared to what one has to gain in self-worth or the ability to stand up for oneself, one’s gender, or one’s race.
These texts teach us. We learn that an inability to act or detect acting may be fatal for poor women inhabiting hyper-public, crowded streets (*Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*). Acting masculine—a kind of acting always at risk of being undercut by one’s physical body—may be necessary for city survival, at least for men and women trying to maintain employment (*Maggie, A Girl of the Streets, Manhattan Transfer*). One’s body, one’s gender expression, and one’s racial expression matter in terms of belonging (*Manhattan Transfer, Passing*). One may need to (re)negotiate one’s relationship to one’s body and racial expression as a means of optimizing belonging in changing situations (*Passing*). Ironically acting might be both necessary for survival and simultaneously deadening (*Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, Manhattan Transfer, Passing, The Street*). Acting might dehumanize those who embrace it as a strategy, but even the most unsympathetic actors are never completely dehumanized (*Manhattan Transfer*). It is impossible to will oneself into self-sufficiency or exceptionalism by performing such traits for oneself, as both social forces and personal decisions work together to determine one’s fate (*The Street*). It is impossible to segregate oneself as one can never completely escape the significations others will place on their body, even if one flees alone (*The Street*).

Performances require the consent of those around or at a minimum the willingness of an audience to at least perform a belief in them. Childress’s Wiletta successfully performs until Manners questions her level of engagement with her character. Crane’s Mary performs for her neighbors because they are willing to hear and accept her lies. Dos Passos’s Ellen performs as if she were in love with Jojo and George because she knows they are willing to believe her and/or participate in a charade. Ellen similarly performs in theatrical productions she denigrates as unrealistic because there are audiences willing to view them with openness. Larsen’s Clare and Irene perform whiteness for people that will not question their racial expression. Petry’s Lutie
performs for herself in internal monologues because she wants to believe she can be self-
sufficient and leave Harlem unscathed.

Individuals have a choice whether or not to follow the trajectory that their coping
mechanisms encourage. Wiletta refuses to follow the trajectory of her laughing self-denial, but
the female characters who perform in the selected novels tend to cling to their strategies for
urban survival regardless of the cost engaging in such strategies requires. Mary continues her
hypocritical performance of her own superiority even at her daughter’s funeral when her survival
strategies contribute to her daughter’s death. Ellen mechanistically attends to her dress even
when she has just witnessed a girl in the dress shop that produced it burn almost to death. Irene
will not speak plainly or directly with her husband, even when major decisions are up for
discussion. Irene will not leave Harlem regardless of her husband’s wishes because she clings to
stasis, and she similarly will not separate from Brian even though she is not sure she loves him.
Lutie abstracts and objectifies people. She simultaneously vivifies the street to the point of
murdering a person she feels represents the street even when such action kills her personal
dreams. Mrs. Hedges refuses vulnerability even when such refusal costs her a chance at love.
Through their pedagogy these texts view performance in general not as detrimental but as a
practice one should engage in with caution, considering what might be at risk. These texts note
that certain kinds of individual performances that are intended as coping mechanisms may
backfire and cause further traumatization, which victims may nonetheless find necessary to
endure. All of the featured texts suggest that trying to perform the rigid categorization of others
into groups, treating people as objects, or treating places as static will always already fail and
doom the performer to violent consequences, whether the performer is a national body or an
individual. For the characters examined here, existing in a world that judges one so harshly on
superficial terms often prevents subjects from grappling with exceptionality in others, encourages their desire to expel the unique humanity of others, and causes them to hyper-invest in the superficial in destructive ways. The ways in which all of the featured characters are transfixed and/or marginalized by the superficial demonstrates that the era of legal segregation caused and/or represents a whole kind of failure of imagination regarding empowerment. Individuals and groups in the literature of this era that might intervene with the national, local, gendered, racial and class-based logics dominating them instead seem to reify such marginalizing forces.

_Trouble in Mind_ allows us to see the more positive potential of performances, whether on the scale of individual strategy for urban survival or on the scale of a theater production through which audiences might interrogate issues. Childress’s Willetta is a woman who acts up in subjugating circumstances. Initially, Wiletta’s ambitions are limited to herself. She wants to maintain her job, but she does not want to have to sacrifice her morals to do so. But Wiletta’s empowerment expands her ambition. Once she is willing to speak up at all, she is eager to speak not just for herself but for other people, too. She comes to associate her individual choices with what a “we” must do, and she refuses to disappear. Wiletta notes it may be necessary to make personal sacrifice to effect group change. She risks her job. But her story also suggests it is possible that those most greatly marginalized might have the greatest capacity for the most intense empowerment. If women must act to belong and survive, they must assess and change their modes of performance, risking their life(style) in order to contribute to genuine changes in their environment that would benefit themselves and others. Wiletta encourages women to renegotiate the ways they act so as to embrace social empowerment.
To display abjection is to display humiliation, something people usually try to keep private. Staging abjection is something quite different than being abject without an audience. John Limon, of stand-up comedy, writes “what is stood up in stand-up comedy is abjection,” (4) and “to ‘stand-up’ abjection is simultaneously to erect it and miss one’s date with it: comedy is a way of avowing and disavowing abjection” (4). *Trouble in Mind*, as a staged play that interrogates racism, sexism, workplace and housing discrimination, allows us to clearly see performances of abjection in general as a way of both avowing and disavowing abjection to interrogate it. By putting abjection on display on literal or figurative stages (like that of the novel at large), all of these texts are exposing unjust wrongs and noting their existence. But these novels are also reclaiming something. They are taking control of the abjection of the characters within them by shaping and manipulating it in to consumable narratives. These novels lessen the power of abjection by performing in the face of it, by crafting a space for it that can be vacated when the story ends, by welcoming reflection, and by discouraging avoidance. To perform abjection, Wiletta shows, is to provide one with a chance to be empowered by it despite it. Wiletta’s performative and public avowal of abjection distinguishes her work from that of the other characters investigated here.

At a broader scale, Childress similarly avows abjection by writing *Trouble in Mind*, as she stages a story similar to her own. Like Wiletta, Childress educated herself. She had to leave high school for financial reasons but read voraciously at the public library (Barlow 469). She began working as an actress with the American Negro Theater, of which she was a founding member, but she tired of the racism she encountered and the limited roles available to her. Childress wrote her first play in response to an argument with other actors who claimed that a mixed race play necessitated a “life and death thing” to be interesting (Abramson 190). She
aimed “‘to write about those who come in second, or not at all. . . My writing attempts to interpret the ‘ordinary’ because they are not ordinary’” (Childress as quoted in Barlow 470). Childress hoped to have “more artistic freedom if she herself were creating the plays” (Barlow 470). In her words, “racism, a double black-listing system, and a feeling of being somewhat alone in my ideas caused me to know I could more freely express myself as a writer” (Childress as quoted in Dugan 147). Childress yearned to express herself freely. Ironically, Childress met challenges to the text of Trouble in Mind, a text dramatizing such challenges. As she notes, “It is ironical that those who oppose us are in a position to dictate the quality and quantity of our contributions. To insult a man is one thing, but to tell him how to react to the insult adds a great and crippling injury” (Childress as quoted in Abramson 190). When faced with challenges, Childress refused the production of Trouble in Mind on Broadway, and she sanctioned the publication of the version of the text she preferred. Like Wiletta, when Childress’s first attempt at self-expression—acting—no longer satisfied her, she changed tactics. She, too, sacrificed and risked her career. If nothing else, she then controlled her own voice and what she would allow to come out of it.

Trouble in Mind shows us that putting trauma on stage changes it. Trauma scholar Cathy Caruth claims “the history of a trauma . . . can only take place through the listening of another. The meaning of the trauma’s address beyond itself concerns, indeed, not only individual isolation but a wider historical isolation” (11). Caruth suggests that making a story public and allowing others to listen to it is a way to move beyond the isolating effects of trauma and to make a trauma history—to move beyond it, to pass through it, to survive in spite of it. By staging a story so close to her own, Childress hails others to listen to the effects of both ordinary and
extraordinary racial and gendered traumas as one way to encourage empowerment, reduce isolation, and attempt to historicize, or end, trauma.

All of the performers I have analyzed—Mary, Jimmie, Pete, Ellen, Irene, Clare, Lutie, Mrs. Hedges, and Wiletta—aim, through their performances, to efface or at least lessen their own unique individuality in order to belong in a social/political group and/or survive financially. In each of these texts, these marginalized performers also marginalize and objectify others in ways that have negative consequences for themselves and those they subjugate. Mary marginalizes her daughter Maggie and uses her as a prop through which she might position herself as a superior mother. Ellen objectifies Anna, a burning woman, pretending her burning body is a pile of rubbish. Irene tries to objectify Clare. Lutie objectifies and marginalizes other Harlemites, perpetuates harmful narratives for her son, and kills Boots, imagining him as the street rather than as a person. Mrs. Hedges marginalizes and objectifies young women by prostituting them. In each case something is lost or deadened as a result—whether it is Lutie’s dream that she and her son will escape from Harlem or Irene’s dream that Harlem will stay the same and that she and her family can thrive there. National and local city politics and history as well as the spatial makeup of New York City mirror and contribute to the process in this fiction wherein those who are poor, female, and/or nonwhite, are marginalized and objectified and marginalize and objectify others.

Trouble in Mind stages both a way in and a way out of this cycle. Wiletta originally obscures her own voice and encourages John to do the same, effectively attempting to marginalize him. However, when she is isolated by a combination of Manners’s direction, the script of “Chaos in Belleville,” and the material realities facing black women in a white-male-dominated industry, she is empowered to verbally identify and publicly avow injustice. She
complexly further isolates herself in ways that align her with groups. Though the local members of those groups—other black and/or female cast members—do not support her, her verbal determination opens the “we” she identifies with. Wiletta’s “we” might include a diversity of subjugated peoples such as the old white male Irish Henry who fought for “home rule,” is now marginalized by his age and class, and who serves as Wiletta’s sole companion at the end of the play.

Isolation and segregation of the poor, women, and minority ethnic groups has reaped destruction throughout the history of New York City and the nation. The fiction and drama I explore here provide stages for both imagining the other and their empowerment. The trajectories of the characters within the selected works and the combined narrative of this assortment of fiction suggests that denying the unique value of both particular spaces and the individual lives inhabiting them reaps destruction that can only be countered when the ways presumed others are imagined changes, just as changes in the field of psychology contributed to Brown v. Board of Education’s desegregation ruling. Similarly, Alice Childress, through Wiletta from Trouble in Mind, teaches us that one can stage and avow the ways one might be imagined as a form of empowerment in order to intervene with limiting visions.
Bibliography:


