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UNDERGROUND SUBJECTS: PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION AND PERCEPTION
IN NEW YORK MODERNIST LITERATURE

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Underground Subjects: Public Transportation and Perception in New York Modernist
Literature

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This dissertation investigates the relationship between public transportation and New York modernist literature. It argues that the experience of riding the subway and elevated train shapes the forms and themes of modernist writing, while textual representations of these spaces of transit in turn shape the modern understanding of urban subjectivity. Exploring the tension between the embodied, habitual ride and the abstract transportation system, New York modernist writers represent the sense of being in thrall to forces of modernity, interrogate the connection between space and psychology, and envision new pathways between the past and the present.

I begin with an analysis of the intertwined discourses necessary to a consideration of modernism and public transportation, including visibility and spatial theory, the history of technology, and urban studies. Through readings of American Expressionist plays by Elmer Rice and Osip Dymov, I locate a modernist theatricality in the subway car, one centered on ideas of claustrophobia and fantasy. I then turn to Harlem Renaissance

writers Rudolph Fisher and Walter White, whose migration narratives embrace the transitional potential of the mechanized journey North even as they warn against the illusory vision of Harlem seen from the subway steps. Next, I suggest that the affective poetic fusion of Hart Crane's long poem The Bridge finds its equal in the complex network of subway tunnels between Manhattan and Brooklyn, in which Crane locates a new genealogy of American poetry. I conclude by moving aboveground, considering surrealist artist Joseph Cornell's experimental film Gnir Rednow as it participates in and offers alternatives to postwar New York artists' nostalgia for the soon-to-be-raided Third Avenue El. In each of these versions of modernism, public transportation lies at the intersection of material culture and metaphor. Cutting across genres and movements, I hope to remap the boundaries of early twentieth-century American literature as well as underscore the role of technology in the construction of the urban imaginary.

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Introduction: Going Underground

On or about October 1904, New York's character changed. It changed because of the myriad assumptions, fears, and fantasies about the city were driven underground with the opening of the subway. New York City's first subway line opened to the public on October twenty-seventh, with Mayor George B. McClellan manning the controls for the ceremonial ride from City Hall to 145th Street (Hood 92-3).¹ Over 100,000 New Yorkers rode the subway on opening day; since most had six-day work weeks, more than a million people tried to ride it that Sunday.² In those early days, the subway ride was an end in itself, a source of entertainment. People spent most of their time staring out the windows, watching the other stations and trains fly by, and admiring the intricate tilework on the walls of each stop. On playwright Elmer Rice's first subway ride, which he described in The New Yorker in 1928, people "gazed out of the windows brazenly and did not attempt to stifle their exclamations of wonder" ("New-York Childhood" 21). Yet the reception of the New York subway evolved rapidly: "by the end of six months," Rice said, "I had even stopped looking at the tiling" (23). My study focuses on the 1920s, a period when the subway's novelty had hardened into routine. In this era, writers and cultural commentators began to look beyond the tiling, so to speak, and consider the deeper resonance of this modern underground space. For the authors in my dissertation, underground movement by subway is both a reflection of the city's modernity and a testing ground for new forms of literary experimentation.

Though these New York modernists work in a number of genres, they continually recognize and thematize the subway's detached relationship to the city surface. The novelty of this new form of movement was noted very early in the subway's life. Only a

week after it opened, the Utica Saturday Globe said that the subway had turned New Yorkers into “human prairie dogs” who descend into one hole in the ground and re-emerge from another (qtd. in Hood 98). The subway was spatially distinct from the world New Yorkers knew, and it connected highly disparate city spaces to one another. For American Expressionist playwrights, this descent in one space and ascent in another communicated working-class New Yorkers’ disconnection from urban sites of power; for Harlem Renaissance fiction writers, it was a more ambivalent figure for the spatial rebirth of the migrant into Harlem. Hart Crane saw poetic possibilities in the submission to the subway commute; postwar artist Joseph Cornell rejected blind movement by subway in favor of the elevated train’s more connected view of the city. Throughout my dissertation, I catalog and explore the aesthetic and cultural possibilities suggested by this newly habituated form of modern movement. The detached relationship to the cityscape made possible by the subway enabled modernist writers to imagine a number of new literary possibilities as well. In the following section, I give historical context for how this new urban habit came to be.

New York City’s Transportation History

For the majority of the nineteenth century, movement through New York City took place at ground level. Public transportation schemes in this period arose as a solution to New York’s population explosion coupled with its geographical limitations. As Manhattan is a long, thin island with business and government focused at its southern tip, urban development moved northward (Michael Brooks 8). The commute from an affordable and spacious home to a downtown office was no longer within walking

distance. Omnibuses, streetcars, and private carriages all jockeyed for space on the congested north-south avenues, funneling people downtown for work and back uptown to their homes. Elevated trains opened on these avenues as a way of leaving street traffic for business and freight transportation. But Els were noisy vehicles that dirtied the streets, and they simply served as a stopgap measure (Michael Brooks 33).³ New York government and business officials continued to search for a new solution.

By the 1890s, other cities had begun the electrification of trolleys. Frank J. Sprague built an electric streetcar line in Richmond Virginia in the late 1880s, and Chicago electrified streetcars that brought people to the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893 (Hood 81). William Barclay Parsons, chief engineer of the Rapid Transit Commission, traveled to Europe in 1894 to investigate possibilities for New York's subway system. He was most impressed with the City and South London Underground Railways (Hood 81-2). London was the nineteenth century's capital of underground transportation. The first underground steam railway opened in 1860 and was electrified in 1890 (Thacker 86). Parsons recommended imitating their methods in constructing an electrified subway system for New York. Financed by millionaire Augustus Belmont, the Interborough Rapid Transit company's first subway line ran from City Hall up the east side of Manhattan to Grand Central Terminal, connected to Times Square, and then ran up the west side of Central Park. At 103rd Street, the subway branched off into two lines that extended into the Bronx (Interborough Rapid Transit 24-25).

The expansion of the subway both followed and fueled the expansion of the city. After the IRT began to collaborate with the Brooklyn Rapid Transit company in the 1910s, subway lines expanded and multiplied throughout the boroughs, connecting

destinations as far-flung as Coney Island in Brooklyn and Van Cortland Park in the Bronx. Lewis Mumford describes the centrifugal force of the subway on New York City in this way:

The result of all these assiduous attempts mechanically to mobilize and disperse, night and morning, the inhabitants of the metropolis is nevertheless plain; one and all, they have intensified the pattern of congestion [...] Though such transportation systems open up new areas on the outskirts of the city, they but thicken the crowding at the center. (238-9).

As with earlier movement by bus and trolley, subway movement facilitated the development of centralized districts where places of work and entertainment could be found en masse, such as Times Square. From these transit hubs, passengers dispersed to neighborhoods far more distant than even in the era of the elevated trains.

This dialectical relation between the centripetal and centrifugal force of urban expansion is reflected in the work of New York modernists. The move toward the boroughs in particular marks an important difference from earlier literary understandings of New York. Gilded Age accounts of picturesque ethnic neighborhoods, Stephen Crane's naturalist portrayals of Bowery bums, the political and aesthetic transgressions of Greenwich Village bohemians, even the musings of the Algonquin Round Table come out of a New York synonymous with Manhattan. A focus on the subway expands and remaps our understanding of where modernist New York begins and ends. Working-class Jews moving to the Bronx, southern African Americans migrating to Harlem, Brooklynites habitually crossing the East River – all inform modernist authors' new writing practices. The following section describes how the groundwork has been laid for

a critical practice that envisions the relationship between geographical spaces of a historical period and the textual spaces generated in response to them.

The Subway as Space, Vision, and Technology

Much of the work on spatiality in general, and on the importance of space to modernist literature in particular, has distinguished between *space* and *place*. Heidegger is usually credited as the first critic to distinguish place (what he calls “dwelling”) as bounded, inhabited, and culturally continuous (Thacker 14). Gaston Bachelard’s The Poetics of Space refines the understanding of place in his consideration of how different places in the home offer different experiences of dwelling; he suggests that domestic space be read as a text, a project which I extend to urban space (14). Michel De Certeau carries on this distinction between space and place in The Practice of Everyday Life, contributing a related distinction between the “tour” and the “map” as forms of spatial story-telling (115-121). Contemporary critics tend to follow Yi-Fu Tuan’s distinction, “place is security, space is freedom” (3).⁴ Place is a site of home, roots, and often, restrictions. Modernism in general, and subway writing in particular, presents a symbolic understanding of the city as a *space*, a location of transition, potential, and flux.⁵

As a scholar of visuality as well as literature and culture, I focus on the physical perceptions made possible by technological innovation and consider them as a metonym for larger changes in urban modernity.⁶ Visuality, what Hal Foster calls “how we see, how we are able, allowed or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein,” is central to understanding technology’s importance in American culture (ix). Transportation technologies situate viewers in literal and symbolic relation to the passing

landscape: here we can think of the car's importance as an individualistic technology, for example, arising from its literal separation of the driver both from the surroundings and from the crowd (Mark Foster 91). Of course, there are many other senses involved in transportation, some of which I will discuss in further detail. Yet vision has been the most important – and most studied – of senses that mediate our experience of technologies of motion.

Wolfgang Schivelbusch's The Railway Journey initiated many terms in the critical discussion surrounding transportation technology's impact on human perception. Like Walter Benjamin before him and theorists of the elevated train after, Schivelbusch finds panoramic vision to be a central feature of nineteenth-century culture. He locates this distanced, aestheticizing way of seeing in the sweeping views of an abstracted countryside glimpsed from a touring-car window (52-69).⁷ Schivelbusch also argues that the train altered the modern understanding of space and time by compressing the distance between a journey's beginning and end, replacing a sense of miles traveled with one of hours spent (33-44). I will regularly consider the subway's temporality throughout my dissertation. Subway movement does not only compress space: the sense of "dead time" underground replaces the sense of the distance traveled. Additionally, New York modernists often use the subway's underground tunnels to imagine a connection between tradition and modernity that could not be portrayed as one of straightforward narrative progress. When the rupture between past and present is so dramatic, it stands to reason that only hidden complex pathways could connect them.

Throughout my dissertation, modernist writers revise earlier American literary genres and conventions associated with the railroad, both to assert their modernity and to

locate new forms of movement, perception, and literary form distinctly within the (ever-expanding) city limits. Where the railroad is often evoked as an embodied articulation of the late nineteenth-century subject's way of seeing the world, the subway is an important location for understanding the perceptual apparatus of the modern New Yorker. The subway's function as a space of underground transit makes palpable the liminal quality both of style and subjectivity that is perhaps the distinguishing feature of modernist writing.⁸ It is important to note that I will not focus solely on the subway as a vehicle for seeing the city – in fact, one does not see much of the city space at all when traveling by subway. This led modernist writers to focus on new or under-examined forms of perception, including an increased focus on the sound of overheard language and the interior gaze of daydreaming. In the texts that I discuss, the cognitive map of city space shaped by the subway was as dependent on the invisible as the visible.

Drawing on the work of geographer Kevin Lynch in The Image of the City, I argue that the subway instantiated a “nodal” or underground mental map of city space (74). Unlike travelers by train, bus, or streetcar, subway passengers could descend in one part of the city and emerge in another without seeing any of the intervening sights that connected their journeys. Built into the city, the subway is a part of the urban infrastructure in a way that buses and elevated trains are not. Elevated trains offer a unifying perspective of the city, while buses (even when crowded) give passengers an individual, street-level perspective. Where windows on a bus or streetcar allow passengers to see where they are going, subway passengers do not have any means of situating themselves in relation to their journey except for the names of the passing stations and the (often inaudible) conductor's announcements

Long before Frederic Jameson's reading of the Bonaventure Hotel, the New York subway of the 1910s and 20s (and its concomitant tracks, tunnels, and transfer points) created a spatial environment which "transcend[ed] the capacities of the human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world" (Jameson 44). I argue that this spatial disconnection led to a new model of subjectivity that was discontinuous rather than developmental. The subway ride is an instance where, in order to get from one locatable point to another, the human body moves through cognitively unmappable space. Their underground location allowed the newly extended subway lines to follow pathways other than those of existing streets. The subway's underground movement is unrestricted by traffic flow and street orientation. In his description of the subway's place in "mental maps" of Boston, Kevin Lynch says "[s]ubway stations, strung along their individual path systems, are strategic junction nodes[...]Most of them are hard to relate structurally to the ground above them" (Image of the City 74). While New Yorkers may move by subway below spaces that are familiar to them as pedestrians, the subjects of the texts I discuss are either new arrivals or borough dwellers; as such, they are not familiar enough with the city above the subway tunnels to be navigate the relationship between the two. For them, imaginary and perceptual relation exists between above- and belowground space and movement that does not directly correlate and cannot be mapped.

My project suggests that, for modernist writers, the subway functions as the spatial unconscious of the city. Modernist texts and modern subjects move from one place to another and one identity to another without a rational connection between them. The built environment of New York City thus feeds into the implicit disconnection and

overall logic of contemporary discourses like psychoanalysis and Taylorism. The subway illustrates how seemingly fragmented and irrational systems are often highly efficient in ways that are invisible to those who move through them.

Modernism and the City

Critics have long described modernism as an urban cultural phenomenon (Kenner 14; Huyssen 6). Diverse modernist literary movements located their texts in the subway because it condenses so many issues relevant to the modern city. Like the railroad, the subway compresses time: “city life was becoming episodic. A city shaped by rapid transit, and later by a telephone network, delivers its experience in discrete packets” (Kenner 11). Through its engagement with the subway, New York modernism formally appropriates and responds to new forms of technology, movement, and built space. The subway helps us understand how modernist writing is not simply “fragmented.” Instead, it takes a particularly urban form where beginning and end are connected not by a visible narrative progress but by a period of unconsciousness, daydreaming, and physical restriction.

Of course, technology has long held a symbolic status in literature and art as a herald of the modern – for better or for worse. As American culture became increasingly industrial and railroads connected the nation, mid- and late nineteenth-century American authors grappled with this concern. Leo Marx’s classic text, The Machine in the Garden, details the traditional utopian vision of America as a new Eden and how this vision was altered by technology’s appearance in that otherwise virgin landscape (3). Critics of technology and literature have seized on Marx’s concept of the “technological sublime”

as a means of exploring the wonder, awe, and power that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors and artists located in the machine.⁹

Many early twentieth-century schools of art and literature embraced technology's creative and destructive force as it signaled their own avant-garde status. The Futurists were perhaps the fiercest champions, celebrating even the technologies that made possible the impending First World War. F.T. Marinetti embraces the automobile in particular as a sign of the modern values of individuality, speed, and power. His 1909 manifesto begins with a car overturned in a ditch and proclaims that a "racing car whose hood is adorned by great pipes, like serpents of explosive breath, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace" (Marinetti 49). American avant-garde artists also embraced the machine as an ideal for modern art.¹⁰ While European surrealists generally saw technologies as defamiliarized mythic symbols, American artists tended to share with the subjects of my dissertation an insistence on the dialectic of utility and transcendence in representations of the machine. The New York subway is neither wholly sublime nor wholly destructive. It is precisely its everydayness that serves as such a powerful symbol for the new experience of the modern machine. Hart Crane's essay "Modern Poetry" argues that "contrary to general prejudice, the wonderment experienced in watching nose dives is of less immediate creative promise to poetry than the familiar gesture of a motorist in the act of shifting gears" (262). And it is the familiar gestures associated with subway riding that earn the most attention in modernist subway writing. Dropping a nickel in the turnstile is a habit, but it is also a ritual gesture of entrance into modern American life.

Throughout my dissertation, the subway literally and figuratively makes modern New Yorkers out of characters whose loyalties lie elsewhere. My dissertation deals with modern subjects shaped by multiple identifications: working-class New Yorkers seduced by American consumerism, African American migrants from the South who must start making sense of a Northern city. But the “interborough fissures” in Hart Crane’s poem “The Tunnel” do not just divide the self who boards the subway in Manhattan from the one who debarks at home in Brooklyn. The subway is also space where old and new ideas about literary form compete. In Crane’s poem and Joseph Cornell’s film Gnir Rednow, the liminality of public transportation articulates the underlying tension between romantic nostalgia and the piecemeal perceptions of the modern artist.¹¹ While it is not necessary to directly apply Michel Foucault’s term “heterotopia” to subway space, it certainly fulfills his criteria of a spatially separate environment that embodies the contradictions of the larger society. The texts I discuss all find in their spatial and perceptual experience of the subway an introduction to (and indeed an indoctrination into) urban values, fantasies, and fears.

The crowd, particularly the rush-hour crowd, plays a central role in 1920s representations of the subway. The subway’s modernity did not reside in the machine itself; rather, it was the entire ensemble of train, tunnel, station, and crowd that made the subway modern. The spatial experience of being in such a crowd often brings out the urban subject’s conflicted feelings engendered by the modern city. Claustrophobia is one of the most common “psychic and spatial diseases of modernity” (Donald 136); throughout my dissertation, subway riders experience claustrophobia regardless of race, gender, or familiarity with the subway system. Not only is this pressing sense of space a

response to the modern crowd; I also theorize that it is a response to the enormity of the urban infrastructure. Like the crowd, the claustrophobic is often gendered female (Vidler 45). But claustrophobia was not just the purview of the hysterical woman. It is just as often the response of the self-contained male subject whose dignity cannot be squeezed into such a small space. Perhaps most surprisingly, claustrophobia is not always negative. In my second chapter, I discuss how the subway's claustrophobia was taken up by Harlem Renaissance authors as a way of connecting this new technology to the slave narrative's tradition of restricted movement that precedes physical and psychic freedom. For Hart Crane, the press of the subway crowds is both erotic and transcendent.

Often the sense of the subway's pressing physical space is coupled with a reading of its movement as efficient. One of the most influential theorizers of mechanized modernity was Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856-1915). Inspired by the stop-motion photography of Etienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge, Taylor's theories of the scientific management of movement revolutionized manufacturing (Tichi 77). Taylor's watchword, "efficiency," reverberated throughout early twentieth-century American culture, from tobacco advertisements to poetics (Tichi 85, 91). It is especially important to note that standardization extends far beyond the assembly line (Lears 303). Rationalized movement became a daily routine for white-collar workers as well as their peers in the factories. Indeed, in this period efficiency and mechanization became more allied with upward mobility and middle-class values.

Efficiency inspires both positive and negative representations of the modernist subway. In The Culture of Cities, Lewis Mumford calls the subway "The Kingdom of Pluto" (261). Although the subway as underworld a common trope of modernist writing

(and indeed one that Hart Crane appropriates in “The Tunnel”), Mumford uses this image as the starting point to make the New York subway a scientifically-managed hell on earth:

The acceptance of this environment, as a necessity of daily life, is perhaps no more singular than the acceptance of a day that includes no glimpse of the sun, no taste of the wind, no smell of earth or growing things, no free play of the muscles, no spontaneous pleasure not planned for a week in advance and recorded on a memorandum pad: in short, that day without an hour given to sauntering, which so amazed and horrified Henry Thoreau. Hence the need for synthetic stimuli.

(261)

Here, subway movement exists in a feedback loop with the planned, ordered, efficient world of the office worker. Both the subway and the office contrast dramatically with the pastoral individualism epitomized by Thoreau. Most of the authors in my dissertation connect efficient subway movement to submission – with both the normative and the sexual senses of that word in play. To be a part of the modern city is always to be aware of the larger forces that make your movements possible. Assimilation, migration, urban development, and the poetic tradition are all imagined as underground forces that efficiently move modernist subjects.

Many of the characteristic forms of New York modernist writing – the expressionist drama, the migration narrative, and the poetic descent to the underworld – follow the same narrative arc as a subway rider’s commute. In each, the central character is detached from everyday life and moved through a fantastic underground space in order to imagine a transition between subjective states. Public transportation often evoked

transportive reverie in the efficiently moving passengers. Whether fantasizing about a new pair of shoes or a new form of poetry, the minds of the passengers who move through my chapters are nearly always elsewhere. The disjunctive experience of urban movement can be oppressive or revelatory, and in fact it is usually both. The “underground subjects” of my dissertation, therefore, are both the new urban dwellers riding the subway as well as the repressed desires and dangers of city life that they encounter in this mechanized space of the urban unconscious.

Chapter Summary

My dissertation considers the various forms of circulation through the modernist city that were enabled by the subway. In each chapter of my dissertation, a different genre of modernist writing isolates one aspect of the subway commute as it embodies an unconscious understanding of the city’s infrastructure and the new arrangements of urban space in modernist New York. My first chapter locates these concerns on the modernist stage: while the railroad may have threatened physical danger in sensation melodramas, the pressures of the American Expressionist subway car are psychological ones. I argue that Elmer Rice’s The Subway (1923) and Yiddish playwright Osip Dymov’s Bronx Express (1919) cast the subway as an urban dream space where working-class Jews and women engage in imaginative assimilation to American ideals. Like their German predecessors, American Expressionists were interested in using objective space to convey a subjective reality. The subway was an ideal setting for such a conflation of interior and exterior, one that Dymov and Rice distorted in order to better convey the daydreams and repressed desires of their protagonists. These plays show how the subway’s underground

movement takes on both a subjective and a political valence. The subway's spatial detachment from the city allows passengers to engage in fantasy relationships to mass culture, but it also suggests their lack of agency in the urban landscape through which they move. American Expressionist subway plays allow for a more nuanced reading of the relationship between technology and modern drama, one where technology is not just a sign of dehumanization but also a means of fusing geographical and psychological understandings of the city.

The subway is just as formative a space for African American migrants as it is for immigrants and working-class girls evolving into American consumers. My second chapter discusses subway movement as it condenses the spatial, temporal, and cultural leaps made by the protagonists in migration narratives of the Harlem Renaissance. Building on the work of Robert Stepto, I argue that Rudolph Fisher's "City of Refuge" (1925) and Walter White's Flight (1926) both revise spatial tropes associated with earlier African American ascent narratives in their representation of the subway ride to Harlem as a rebirth. The subway also allows these authors to problematize the discourse surrounding Harlem during the Renaissance, suggesting that the linear movement toward a collective culture was merely an illusion and reminding African Americans of the period that city living still demanded submission to routines. This submission, however, is not wholly negative. Like the claustrophobia and partial vision of the subway ride, it enables Harlem Renaissance writers to connect the fragmented experiences of modern migration to those of the Southern past. Fisher and White's repeated attention to the physicality of the migrant emerging from the subway into Harlem suggests the need for a re-examination of the utopian promise of the Harlem Renaissance.

Hart Crane uses these new forms of subjectivity as the starting point for theorizing a modernist poetics based in discontinuity and repetition. Critics often describe Crane's book-length epic poem The Bridge (1930) as the epitome of Leo Marx's concept of the "technological sublime." However, "The Tunnel," its penultimate poem, argues for a habitual rather than a transcendent relation to technology. Through submission to the subway commute and the loss of individuality it entails, Crane suggests that urban dwellers gain embodied knowledge about their relationship to city space and fellow passengers alike. Unlike other poets of the city who are detached from the sights they record, Crane's narrator is *in media res*: he overhears conversations on the crowded subway car instead of seeing faces in a station of the metro. I use Charles Bernstein's concept of "dysraphism" (359)—a formal strategy wherein the sutures between poetic materials are still visible in the final product—to connect the subway's fragmented perceptions to the collage and citation regularly associated with modernist poetry. Indeed, Crane explicitly connects the literary past to the fragmented physicality of the subway commuter: the poem's narrator encounters Edgar Allen Poe as a disembodied head swinging from a subway strap. This ghostly image revises and extends the association of the subway ride with a descent to the underworld, a strategy common in both poetry and prose of the period. The subway's flexible and varied paths through the city allow Crane to imagine multiple trajectories through the poetic unconscious.

Although many postwar New York authors (most notably, Ralph Ellison) continued to represent subway space as the site of the unconscious and irrational, some artists and filmmakers felt that underground movement merely led to detachment. My fourth chapter considers postwar nostalgia for a much earlier form of urban public

transportation, the elevated train, as a response to the subway's organization of the modern city and the modernist mind. I focus on the work of American surrealist artist Joseph Cornell (1903-1972), who explored the El's visuality in his diaries, collaged boxes, and films. The elevated train had ceased to be an important form of public transportation in New York City by the mid-twentieth century, carrying a mere 70,000 fares per day compared to the subway's 4.5 million ("Antiquated El" 20). However, the Third Avenue El's imminent destruction gave it a new hold on the city's cultural imagination. With postwar artists' embrace of the El, disconnected movement through the city is rejected in favor of visual flow and a sense of the relationship between city spaces. The El's openness and proximity to apartment buildings granted passengers a sense of embodied connection to the city that could not be experienced in a subway. Filmmakers and photographers marshaled its old-fashioned design and slow pace in order to refute popular notions of progress and efficiency. This intense longing for an anachronistic form of public transportation reveals how influential the subway had been in shaping perceptions of urban space and movement. The subjective, internal, and fantasy-based visuality of the subway passenger, once a thoroughly novel perspective on city space, had become the norm; filmmakers and artists of the 1950s had to go back more than half a century to find an alternative.

My dissertation argues that the subway is an integral site for cultural work on modernism. The habit-driven body, the relationship to the literary past, and the organization of urban space are all central concerns of early twentieth-century literature illuminated by its underground light. Yet in order to recognize technology's cultural importance to modernism, it is vital to articulate the interplay between historically

specific physical experiences and their textual representations. My dissertation finds surprising formal and thematic commonalities among representations of public transportation in early twentieth-century New York literature, shared concerns that cut across boundaries of genre and movement. The first three chapters examine the psychic pleasures and perils of underground movement by subway, while the fourth moves aboveground to consider the elevated train as an alternative vehicle for urban subjectivity. The tracks laid by these texts mediate between the body and the city, between disparate spaces, and between past and present. For New York modernists, public transportation lies at the intersection of material culture and metaphor.

¹ Hood's 722 Miles is widely regarded as the definitive account of the New York subway's construction and expansion. Brooks's Subway City: Riding the Trains, Reading New York considers the New York subway through a wider cultural lens: along with a historical perspective on the construction and use of the elevated trains and subways, Brooks gives an overview of the literary and cultural responses to New York's subway through the 1980s. My study differs both in its specific attention to the literary importance of the subway and the circumscribed time period that I address.

² Hood notes that the subway at this time could only handle 350,000 passengers per day, so many New Yorkers would have to wait weeks before their first subway ride (96).

³ As we will see in my fourth chapter, it was not until the subway had taken hold as the most common form of mass transportation that postwar New Yorkers began to see the elevated train's appeal.

⁴ Recently, some American Studies scholars have tried to revive a less reactionary understanding of place. See Halttunen, Buell, and Deloria.

⁵ For space and place in modernism in particular, see Harvey and Thacker, as well as all of the articles in Geographies of Modernism.

⁶ For influential works on visibility and nineteenth-century culture, see Crary and Friedberg.

⁷ For a description of American panoramic train travel, see Ward 131, where he says, "Americans were becoming a blur as they sped past one another." For discussions of panoramic visibility as it affected modern subjectivity, see Friedberg 20–29; Doane 42–44, and Kirby 7.

⁸ "Movement between these various spaces, then, is a key feature of modernism, and one significant way of interpreting this is via the emergence of modern means and systems of transport, such as the motorcar, the electric tram or bus, or the underground railway" (Thacker, Moving through Modernity 7).

⁹ David Kasson offers a useful expansion and clarification of Marx's concept in his Civilizing the Machine 164-180. See also Tashjian, Tichi, and Nye.

¹⁰ See Tashjian.

¹¹ For an account of the relationship between movement within the city and the forward movement of the text, see Winspur.

Chapter 1. Underground Dreams: Technological Fantasies and Fears in American Expressionist Drama

A light falls upon the person whose dream is to be revealed. The subway train divides in the middle, in darkness, and the place of this person's dream is revealed. The dream unfolds while the sound of the moving subway continues.

The play begins with the subway and ends with the subway. Begins and ends with the real world. The beginning and end of each dream is the subway: except for the subway and these dreamers aboard, these dreams could not be. (Saroyan 5)

For twentieth-century American playwrights and filmmakers, the subway was a space of drama, its crowd a microcosm of the urban populace.¹ With passengers disconnected from the city surrounding them and lost in their own thoughts, the modern subway was particularly a space of internal drama. William Saroyan's Subway Circus (1940) for example, consists of ten scenes that represent the fantasies of ten different passengers on a single subway car. Generally, these dreams enact explicit wish fulfillment: a cripple dreams that he is a circus acrobat, a clerk confesses his love to a co-worker. Sometimes they perform a kind of condensed racial allegory: one section is called "Africa-Harlem Express;" others show Italian and Yiddish immigrants whose dreams take place in their native language. But Saroyan's note for production quoted above insists that all these dreams be staged in the same fashion: he communicates the opening up of dream space through a literal opening up of the subway train. The subway car thus frames and echoes the individual passenger's unconscious mind, with non-naturalistic movement of theatrical space signaling the movement into subjective mental space. Yet this is not pure interiority: the "sound of the moving subway continues" throughout each dream, insisting on the connection between human fantasy and mechanical reality.

I would like to insist on this connection as well. Critics of subway dramas tend to ignore the embeddedness of the setting in city life. They leap too quickly to a metaphoric reading instead of first considering the subway as a culturally, historically, and spatially located environment.² Saroyan himself insists on the materiality of the theatrical space: “[e]xcept for the subway and these dreamers aboard,” he argues, “these dreams could not be.” In this chapter, I examine two American Expressionist plays whose protagonists’ dreams are equally dependent on the subway’s reality, Osip Dymov’s Bronx Express (1919) and Elmer Rice’s The Subway (1923). Dymov was a Russian playwright who immigrated to America and wrote for the thriving Yiddish theater in New York in the 1910s and 1920s.³ Bronx Express’s original run took place at the New Jewish Theatre in 1920; it was translated into English and opened on Broadway in 1922.⁴ Elmer Rice was one of America’s best-known playwrights in the first half of the twentieth century, particularly for The Adding Machine (1922) and Street Scene (1929). While the former is a Yiddish comedy and the latter a lesser-known tragedy, both plays are Expressionist phantasmagorias of the fears and fantasies associated with habitual use of the subway in early twentieth-century New York.

Expressionist drama is best known for its attempt to stage subjective experience: Eugene O’Neill’s Emperor Jones doesn’t just feel “little formless fears” – we see them onstage with him (28). Similarly, Rice and Dymov’s subway plays use the objective spatial experiences of the subway to communicate the experience of modern subject formation. Because Dymov and Rice’s plays unite the critique of modern technology with a sense of its seductive thrills, they have not generally been as well received as other American Expressionist plays. Eugene O’Neill’s The Hairy Ape (1922) and Sophie

Treadwell's Machinal (1928), which I will discuss later in this chapter, were included in John Gassner's 1949 volume, Twenty-Five Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre; Bronx Express and The Subway were not. American Expressionist drama is generally understood to be a revolt against the norms of modern life, particularly as they are articulated through technology, work, and efficiency.⁵ The subway's restricted movement – both the limited number of subway lines and the literal restriction of physical movement in a crowded car – becomes a resonant symbol for these constraints placed upon modern subjectivity. However, the subway plays I'm discussing suggest a slightly more nuanced view of this restriction. Instead of condemning the mechanical, the commercial, and the efficient, The Subway and Bronx Express explore how these forces grant city dwellers a mental respite from their daily lives, and indeed why they hold the appeal that they do. In the same way that Antonio Gramsci suggests that the repetitions of assembly-line labor might bring about a freeing dissociation of the mind from the body, these plays stage the repetitions of the subway ride as they free the mind to fantasies of escape (Koritz 560).⁶

For most early twentieth-century avant-gardes, the urban is associated with the unconscious and the irrational. Futurists celebrated the city's rapid tempo in short plays stripped of narrative coherence; surrealists incorporated defamiliarized images from shop-windows and gas stations into urban dreamscapes like Louis Aragon's Paysan de Paris (1926) and Andre Breton's Nadja (1928). German Expressionism considered the fragmentary sense of the modern city to be a reflection of fractured modern subjectivity in general, and modern masculinity in particular (Spreizer 255-6, 260). Particularly influenced by August Strindberg's dream plays, German Expressionist dramas staged

their protagonists' inner conflicts through fantastic scenarios and a radically subjective use of theatrical space.⁷

Bronx Express and The Subway were deeply tied to German Expressionist traditions. Max Reinhardt, a central figure in the reimagining of German drama, produced several of Dymov's plays (Sandrow Vagabond Stars 193). The director even sent a telegram to Dymov commemorating his "jubilee" (Reinhardt). Elmer Rice's relationship to German Expressionism is far more conflicted. He repeatedly disavowed the influence of plays like Georg Kaiser's From Morn To Midnight (1916, though staged in America in 1922) upon his writing of The Adding Machine, claiming he "had heard of expressionism" but had never read "any of the German plays" (Minority Report 198). By the time The Adding Machine was staged, however, Rice joked in a letter that the courtroom scene was "swiped from Caligari," Fritz Lang's influential Expressionistic film ("Letter to Marc"). In spite of this undeniable anxiety of influence, I argue that Rice and Dymov's subway expressionism is uniquely American. Their plays portray technology not just as a space of dehumanization or complicity but as a dream space with its own benefits for modern subjects.

Part of what I'll argue throughout this dissertation is that the subway is an important space for staging urban subject's imaginary relations to the city because it was used unconsciously. The changing reception of subway space in the 1920s is not simply proof that the technology's novelty was wearing off, although this is itself interesting evidence of modernity as a state of rapid acclimation to new habits. The attention paid to this new form of movement suggests a growing consciousness of issues central to Expressionist theater, including the detachment of identity from place, the awareness of

oneself as part of a crowd, and the desire to escape functionality through a fantasy that is both liberating and isolating.

Unlike Subway Circus, where the dreams of Jews and Italians that take place strictly in their native tongue, Bronx Express is literally an American dream, one that stages a Jewish immigrant's fantastic encounter with the mixed cultures and conflicted desires of the Melting Pot.⁸ Chatzkel Hungerproud is a Jewish button maker who runs into an Americanized friend, Jake (formerly Yankl) Flames on the subway ride home. When Flames disembarks to dine "on Broadway" (279), Hungerproud falls asleep; the rest of the play shows his exaggerated dreams of assimilation. In Rice's play, the subway rider's dream is less literally staged but more nightmarish. Sophie Smith, the heroine of The Subway, works in the grimly efficient office of the Subway Construction Company; men in animal masks grope her on her commute home. The rest of the play shows Sophie moving between these two poles that define the subway as a dream space: the restrictions of efficient movement and the frightening freedom of unfettered sexuality.

Disconnected movement underground enables the dramatic understanding of the subway car as a dream space. In Freud on Broadway, W. David Sievers says the subway in Rice's play "is perhaps the symbol for the seething underground of the unconscious" (149). The vogue for psychoanalysis ensured that modernist New York was abuzz with discussion of unconscious drives, dream symbols, and the like. In 1913, A.A. Brill, one of the chief popularizers of Freud's work in America, translated The Interpretation of Dreams (1900) into English (Douglas 125). Though not widespread until the 1930s, Freudian psychology was common parlance for New York intellectuals and sophisticates by the late 1910s.⁹ Sievers' declares that "the drama of O'Neill's contemporaries serves

to establish beyond a doubt that the period of the twenties in American drama must be called The Psychoanalytic Era” (65). The staging of internal conflicts through dream symbols was particularly appealing to American dramatists interested in moving away from realistic theatrical representations.

Like the writers that I discuss in the later chapters of my dissertation, Dymov and Rice use their protagonists’ unconscious movement as an embodied, habitual way of representing new relationships between the individual and the city.¹⁰ So how was this Psychoanalytic Era of American drama shaped by the space of the subway car, the press of the crowds, the disconnection from the sidewalks of New York? Steve Pile says that spatial relationships are constitutive of meaning both in dreams and in cities (47). Dymov employs the Uptown Bronx train to shape his protagonist’s dream in a very literal way, populating it with the advertising figures and crying babies that surround Hungerproud as he sleeps. The subway does not disappear when American Expressionist passengers retreat into fantasy; rather, it persists in a symbolic way within the space of their dreams, articulating unconscious wishes and giving the passenger-protagonists a sense of the overall system that moves and manipulates them.

American Expressionist drama mapped onto subway space the unconscious adherence to modern norms of productivity, consumption, and identity. Frederic Jameson ends his discussion of the Bonaventure Hotel by suggesting that the relation between the body and the hotel space “can itself stand as the symbol and analagon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects” (44). In Bronx Express and The Subway, the

disjunction of the subway commuter from city space is just such a “symbol and analagon”; however, the plays do not find a total incapacity to map the networks they describe. Instead, the subway subject senses her relationship to these impersonal systems during momentary flashes of insight and in dream images.

The recurrence of the subway throughout Rice’s play suggests its overdetermination as a symbol for the larger cultural forces of modernist New York. Along with its presence as the title of the play, the subway is mentioned in eight of its nine scenes. Its omnipresence in the characters’ working lives is particularly striking: Sophie works for the Subway Construction Company; her father works as a subway guard; her artist boyfriend wants to write an epic poem about people crushed in a subway tunnel. Blue-collar, white-collar, and bohemian – like branching subway lines, they all feed into the same interconnected system.

Both plays envision the subway as an underground channel for wealth, power, and sex. In the 1922 Broadway production of Bronx Express, Hungerproud’s dream involves a millionaire’s ball where he meets with advertising characters like Aunt Jemima and the Smith Brothers of cough drop fame.¹¹ A review tells us, “the idea of the subway train is still dominant in his mind, for the dancers are, when the curtain rises on this scene, clinging to straps suspended from the ceiling. Then at the foot of the stairway leading to the ballroom there is a turn stile” (Reamer 8).¹² This staging would have suggested a wealth of associations for audiences of the period. It connects stumbling on the subway with dancing, as did a popular ragtime song (“The Subway Glide”). The scene also evokes what was popularly known as the “millionaire express,” the #6 from Grand Central Station to Wall Street (“Millionaire Subwayites” 2). Yet the subway ballroom is

more important for what it tells us about Hungerproud's unconscious relationship to the city. This setting is what Freud calls a "composite structure," a dream image that combines elements of two images to argue for their similarity (Interpretation of Dreams 359). It condenses Hungerproud's actual location, his desire for Americanization, and his sense of being manipulated, literally moved, by the millionaires.

Here we come to an important point made in both plays: the loss of identity, self-control, and intentionality in the subway is eagerly traded for the possible pleasures of the city. Hungerproud abandons his Jewish faith as he is swept up in Flames's fast talk about business success, for example, and Sophie's identity as a "good girl" is cast aside for the thrill of forbidden love. In the next section, I suggest that sets of subway plays' settings stage the same kind of dialectic in the audience. The viewer who submits to the intensely oppressive and claustrophobic theatrical space is rewarded with the pleasure of seeing scenes from everyday life staged as illicit fantasies. Like the characters whose subway dreams unfold before them, the audience experiences the spatial tension and fantastic release that is central to modern urban subjectivity.

Staging Subway Space

Dymov and Rice's use of the subway as a dream space comes into sharp relief compared with only bona fide hit subway play of the 1920s, Eva Kay Flint and Martha Madison's Subway Express (1929).¹³ This murder mystery received accolades both for its ingenious plotting (the subway tunnel's electrified third rail is used as a murder weapon) and for its ultra-realistic set. New York Times theater critic J. Brooks Atkinson describes the "childish pleasure" audiences feel "in seeing the stage reproduce the effects of the

machines familiar to every-day life. When this subway car draws up to a station, opens the door with a hiss of air valves, and then starts with a jerk that upsets New York's centre [sic] of gravity, you feel that the scene mechanics have given you your money's worth" (34). But Bronx Express and The Subway suggest that the subway upset "New York's centre of gravity" on a perceptual level as well. Their sets call upon the thrill of mimetic novelty, but unite it with a more systemic sense of conflict and danger than is seen in the murder on the Subway Express. Rice and Dymov combination of high and low drama, masculine and feminine culture, does not neatly fit the ideals of American Expressionism.

Compared to other Yiddish theater, Bronx Express was hailed for its serious content, in spite of its "vaudeville" form (Sandrow, God, Man, and Devil, 266). This was not the case with the Broadway version adapted for the Coburns (a star theatrical couple, like Alfred Lunt and Joan Fontanne). Compared to other Expressionist plays, Bronx Express was highly unserious. Reviews of the period often discussed Bronx Express in relation to Eugene O'Neill's The Hairy Ape, which opened the same season.¹⁴ To modernist scholars today, this seems an unlikely juxtaposition: The Hairy Ape is a serious examination of debased Modern Man; Dymov's play, forgotten to all but Yiddish scholars, is a punning, slapstick fantasia on immigrant life. Yet both plays are indisputably Expressionist in their techniques, and both are interested in the twinned effects of technology and commercialism on working-class men. A review titled "The New Play" makes this comparison: "The technique of this belongs to what Mr. [Kenneth] Macgowan tells us is the school of "expressionism" so effectively used in "The Hairy Ape." It has not been treated thus in this production – in fact the entire procession of ads

[...] look more like a hastily organized masquerade ball than the jeering symbols of commercialism” (Smith).

Rather than critiquing The Subway as unsuccessful social protest, critics condemn Rice’s play with a term often used for Yiddish theater – melodramatic.¹⁵ Two critics compare The Subway to a particularly histrionic melodrama called Bertha the Sewing-Machine Girl (1906), perhaps more recognizable to readers at that time because it was adapted as a film in 1926. One biting backhanded compliment came from Robert Garland: “Although Mr. Rice’s Sophie is merely ‘Bertha, the Sewing-Machine Girl’ viewed subjectively rather than objectively – or is it objectively rather than subjectively? – ‘The Subway’ is not an uninteresting play” (14). Plays like Bertha the Sewing-Machine Girl were dismissed as feminine, low-class, and derivative, diametrically opposed to the innovations of American Expressionism. And yet, Garland suggests that Expressionism may be just a case of old wine in new bottles. He uses and reverses the most common formula for describing Expressionism’s avant-garde credentials in order to deflate the movement’s (and the play’s) pretensions. Rather than using this connection as a means of dismissing these plays, I’m going to take Garland at his word. The melodrama and the Expressionist dream play both use technology means of training audiences to deal with the shocks of modern life.¹⁶ I would like to pause for a moment and consider how Rice and Dymov revise this theatrical form.

“Sensation dramas” were late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century melodramas focusing on the (usually female) protagonist’s repeated evasion of sexual menace and spectacular disaster. Scenes of danger and escape via transportation technology proliferated in the sensation drama. Bertha, the Sewing Machine Girl, for instance,

“included a four-way race between two automobiles, a locomotive, and a bicycle, as well as a motorboat race, fire engines speeding toward a burning building, and various torture scenes” (Singer 152). In fact, Ben Singer’s list of “typical sensation scenes” in Melodrama and Modernity bursts with transportation-centered drama, including attempts at crossing raised bridges, jumps from apartment windows to passing elevated trains, exploding automobiles, and the like (153-7). Serial melodramas moved these narrow escapes to the film screen in the 1910s. On the turn-of-the-century stage and in the early film, modern transportation was inherently frightening and thrilling.¹⁷

The term “sensation drama” is credited to Dion Boucicault, as is the scenario familiar to us from silent movies, where the heroine is tied to the railroad tracks by the mustachioed villain while the hero races against the train to save her just in the nick of time. After Dark, London by Night (1868) Boucicault’s first play where this convention takes place, has the hero rescue his male army buddy from the path of an oncoming *subway* train, the newly built London Underground (Daly 24-5). Both The Subway and Bronx Express have only one moment each when their characters are in physical danger: revealed as a bigamist, Hungerproud is nearly lynched and only escapes by waking up; Sophie commits suicide by jumping in front of an oncoming subway train. The possibility of physical danger prolongs the dramatic tension in sensation dramas, but physical danger is the culmination to an otherwise internalized dramatic conflict in Expressionist subway plays.

The “railway rescue” is convincingly interpreted by Nicholas Daly as a sign of modern technology “made visible – it is embodied on the stage in the express train – and thus made beatable” (25). The modernist understanding of the New York subway,

however, is much more conflicted and resigned. Protagonists of subway plays (and the narratives, poems, and films I discuss in later chapters) may feel restricted by the subway or freed by it, but it is a habit, a fact of life. The prospect of *beating* it is no longer even conceivable, except for through the momentary escape of fantasy. Even this escape is illusory, since the unconscious sense of the subway system persists in the characters' dreams. The subway as a dream setting is more dangerous, seductive, and modern than the subway as a physical conveyance. Where sensation dramas show the physical risks of modernity, subway plays show its psychological risks.

Dymov and Rice channeled the thrills that come from the objective representation of the subway car itself into the subjective representation of spatial disconnection and daydreaming that audiences knew from their daily commute. Twentieth-century American drama moves from detail-heavy realistic surroundings to a streamlined environment that set a mood, another important inheritance from the German Expressionist stage and from the "New Stagecraft" of Gordon Craig and Adolphe Appia.¹⁸ In his 1918 pamphlet "How's Your Second Act" Arthur Hopkins, who directed Elmer Rice's first play, suggests that a successful director should "place five thousand people in a room and strike some note or appeal that is associated with an unconscious idea common to all of them" (24-5). The subway could easily evoke a common idea in the audience because they saw it as a habitual environment, which I describe in the previous section. This unconscious and immediate evocation of an idea contrasts dramatically with the wasted energy that Hopkins sees in overly realistic theater sets:

If a Child's Restaurant [one of a chain of New York lunchrooms] in all its detail is offered it remains for the audience to recall its memory photograph of a Child's

Restaurant and check it up with what is shown on the stage. If the butter-cake stove is in place, and the 'Not Responsible for Hats' sign is there, and if the tiling is much the same, then the producer has done well. He has been faithful to Child's, and whatever credit there is in being faithful to Child's should be unstintingly awarded to him.

Unfortunately while the audience has been doing its conscious checking up, the play has been going, and going for nothing, since any form of conscious occupation must necessarily dismiss the play. (45-6)¹⁹

Here Hopkins acknowledges and subsequently lambastes the theater director's desire merely to reproduce a space from real life in exacting detail. The emphasis on the peripheral details of a set is eminently distracting, and even Hopkins himself gets caught up in the hilarious specificities of a sign's wording. When the audience pays too much attention to verisimilitude of the set, the play has been "going for nothing;" realism impedes dramatic movement, gets hung up on the details. *Modern* drama, by contrast, allows for efficient dramatic progress because the audience moves through it unconsciously. In subway plays there are realistic details from the audience's everyday subway ride: the conductor inevitably says "step lively," for example. Since both of the plays I am discussing are dream plays, they focus on how these everyday details are transformed and what these transformations tell us about the dreamer.²⁰

The audience's familiarity with the subway creates a level of unconscious empathy with characters. One shared experience was a sense of physical restriction, popularly known as the "subway crush" (Mumford 261). New York modernists write frequently about claustrophobia on the subway, often in response to a sense of

entrapment in the city's infrastructure. Stuart Chase, a cultural commentator on technology and work in the period, describes his dislike of the subway in emotional and violent terms:

To go up or downtown I use one of the three horizontal levels of transportation which the city affords [i.e., the subway, the street, or the elevated train]. As a profound melancholia always accompanies a trip on the lowest, I endeavour to use the upper two exclusively. Many of my fellow citizens do the same, particularly since a score of them were killed at Times Square the other day. Killed in rush hour, like beeves [sic] in the Chicago stockyards; except that the packers put no more animals into a pen than can go in. (4)

Chase echoes other modernist critics such as Lewis Mumford by reading the spatial estrangement and claustrophobia on the subway as signs of its inhumanity. Most notable in this passage is Chase's avoidance of the word subway: he only calls it "the lowest." In spite of his rejection of it, Chase shares American Expressionist playwrights' understanding of the subway as a space of unconscious movement. The passengers move like animals and are killed in the same way, in unthinking herds. He also shows the same awareness of the subway as a stand-in for larger systems that manipulate urban subjects. The indignity of the subway ride is evidence of the dehumanizing doctrines of efficiency. In a rush to move as many people as efficiently as possible, Chase suggests, subway guards treat people worse than animals and try to transcend the powers of the machine itself.

The kind of claustrophobia evoked in subway plays does not give audiences the sense that they are cattle en route to the slaughterhouse. Rather than aiming for spatial

oppressiveness pure and simple, the plays attempt to evoke the unconscious understanding that arises from the proximity to other passengers on the subway car. Kenneth Macgowan suggested that the new theatre should be “A Drama of Intimacy and of Crowds,” and the subway was both intimate and crowded. This is true even on the level of seat arrangement. The first subway cars had “eight transverse seats facing each other at the center” (Sansone 27), which gave passengers unobstructed views of the windows and mimicked the small groupings in trains. This initial arrangement suggests sociability and an externally directed gaze, both of which were eliminated by later innovations. We can see the dramatic shift from train to subway space in the post-1909 Interborough Rapid Transit cars (Figure 1).²¹ After 1909, the transverse seats were removed and center doors were installed in order to increase the efficiency of passenger movement. Rather than offering an intimate travel space that allowed for seated contemplation of the outside world or dialogue (real or imagined) with a small group of people on the same level, this new space presented people who were too far or too close.



Figure 1. Interborough Rapid Transit subway car interior (approx. 1916)

The rush hour train is the most commonly represented space in all writing about the modernist subway, perhaps because this is when the novelty of the crowd was at its peak. A rolling representation of the spatial qualities valued by the “new theatre,” the rush hour train emphasizes abstraction, intimacy, and the dissolution of the line between actors and audience (Macgowan 190-4). At the beginning of *Bronx Express*, the stage is so full that the audience doesn’t know where to look; the stage directions tell us that the main characters have entered, but “we hardly notice them among the crowd” (Dymov 269) In the rush-hour car’s radically anti-narrative setting, many different forms of contact were possible. Seated passengers stared at the abstracted forms of standees’ torsos, as well as the faces of their fellow seated passengers on the opposite side of the car; standees stared down at seated passengers and were in constant physical contact with other straphangers. In fact, when Hungerproud and Flames first meet, they are not even

facing each other. For passengers in the subway crush, the car becomes something like a very full stage of a theater in the round where no one's view is privileged and everyone's view is partial.

This innovative perspective on city space was transferred, with varied levels of success, to the American Expressionist stage. The Subway's second scene calls on the intimate and even oppressive space of the subway car while giving the audience an external perspective. The usual means of representing the subway in a theater set is a cutaway view of the interior of the car where one of the car's walls serves as the "fourth wall," which opens up all the action to the audience. Rice's set gives a more limited and distanced view (Figure 2). This set shows the action in the car from the outside: "Facing the audience is the outer door of the car, solid steel breast-high and, above that, glass through which the head and shoulders of the crowd upon the platform are visible" (27). Through the passing subway cars, the audience watches the scene on the platform.²² The location of the audience, then, is literally "tunnel vision": our limited perspective both mimics that of a subway passenger on a crowded train and simultaneously allows us to step outside of it into the very infrastructure that makes such an experience possible. Sophie attempts to read as she waits. She boards the train and is crushed in a corner, surrounded by leering men. When her train emerges out of the darkness, the men who surround her are transformed into animals, setting her apart as a human and a woman but trapping her in an animal world. This set romanticizes modernity but at the same time implicates the audience in the spectacle, since we are close enough to see Sophie's frightening dreams come to life but too far away to help her. The scene recreates the physical proximity and psychic isolation central to modernist experience of urban space:

the “unbridgeable psychic gulf between man and man” is a subway track (“Letter to Frank Harris”).²³

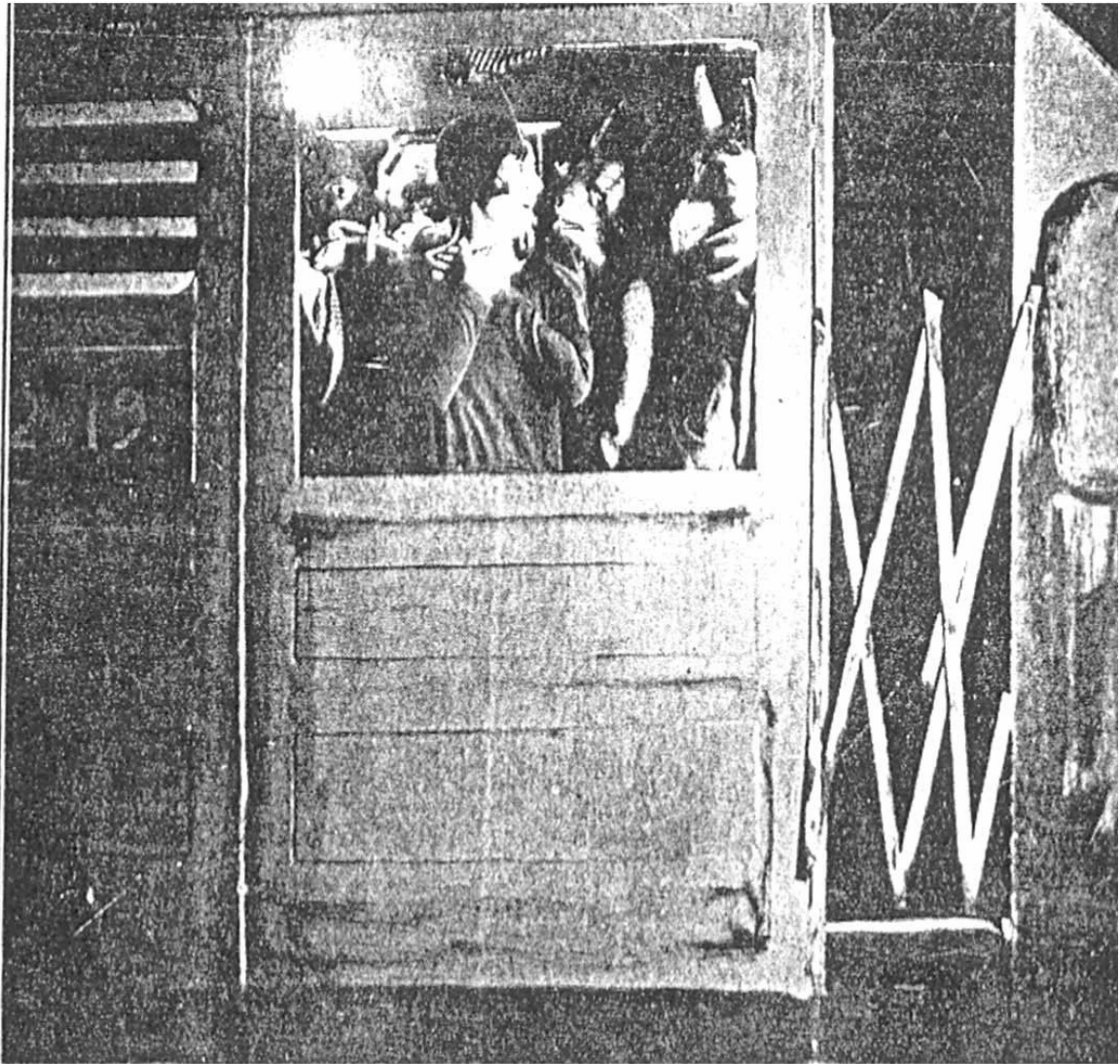


Figure 2. Elmer Rice, The Subway (1922)

Rice’s only scene set on a subway car unites the mechanically derived thrills of sensation melodrama with a German Expressionist sense of the stage as psyche.²⁴ While the distance from Sophie evokes a feeling of helplessness and claustrophobia, Rice was concerned that the staging should give audiences a sense of intimate connection to her as well. He responded to proposed sketches of the sets with a comment that the scene in the

subway car is “much too far upstage.” He continued, “The scene contains almost no dialogue and depends entirely upon pantomime and facial expression. It is absolutely essential that the faces of the actors – especially Sophie – be distinctly seen” (“Notes on Proposed Sets for The Subway”). The trade-off for the uncomfortable proximity and cramped sense of space in the performance is an increased access to the nonverbal and unconscious emotions of the performers. The audience’s attention is focused on indirect and nonverbal clues that reveal the characters’ mental states.²⁵ Indeed, this is another aspect of performance that connects Expressionism with melodrama: the dependence on tableaux that stage the relationship of characters to their environment. Sophie’s physical response to her sexualized nightmare scene – wide eyes and mouth, hands clutching her throat – shows us how expressionism moves the melodramatic impulse into the realm of the unconscious.

Both for the audience and for the plays’ protagonists, claustrophobia is overcome through a submission to the system that opens up a space of subjective freedom in the midst of the subway crush. The physical space of the subway set may feel oppressive to theatergoers, but proximity has its privileges. Frederick Karl suggests that enclosure is a “spatial image that represents the modern experience of the division between interior and exterior worlds” (30). Within the enclosure of the subway car (or the subway set) by contrast, the interior world is just as clearly visible as the exterior. In Bronx Express, we’ll see how subway ads in particular were sites where this contrast between exterior restriction and interior freedom is dramatized. Both Hungerproud and Sophie sense the spatial and psychic constraints upon their identity and attempt to overcome them (often in a dangerous way) through the opportunity for fantasy offered on the subway car.

Subway Advertising and Assimilationist Fantasy

The urban subway subject's alienation was not solely the result of the crowded subway car; for the working-class protagonists of Bronx Express and The Subway, it also arose in response to the length of the ride. The expansion of the New York subway in the late 1910s and early 1920s was a centrifugal force, dispersing poor New Yorkers to the outer boroughs where they could live in cheap, new apartments instead of the cramped tenements of Manhattan ghettos. The New York subway system of 1920 had more than doubled its initial track length and the number of trains it could provide in an hour (Hood 159). Because of this increase in service, the population of the Bronx grew by 150% in this period. 75% of the population who lived in this borough in 1920 was made up of first- or second-generation immigrants, and many of those were German and Russian Jews (Hood 111). New Yorkers with the longest subway rides tended to be the poorest and the least assimilated. Bronx Express addressed the psychic effect of this new commute on the Jewish population that had moved there from the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

Tropes of adaptation and assimilation are central to Yiddish drama (Sandrow, Vagabond Stars, 129-131). In earlier plays this might involve moving into a more respectable neighborhood or casting aside old-fashioned traditions. Bronx Express's attention to the spatial estrangement from city life instantiates new understandings of assimilation as unconscious or fantasy-based. Hungerproud overcomes his alienation from American consumerist power through the unconscious wish fulfillment of assimilation via subway advertisements.²⁶ The subway separates immigrants from the

city, but subway ads reconnect them to the city's possible pleasures. Nahma Sandrow sees Expressionist theatricality as an important way of dealing with the loss of old traditions and the construction of new identities in Yiddish theater (Vagabond Stars 221). In Bronx Express, as in most Yiddish drama, new pleasures and old traditions were dealt with in equally exaggerated styles.²⁷ Yet there is benevolence to the parodic characterization of unassimilated characters – the old teacher who constantly asks “Is it good for the Jews?” (Dymov 274) or the traditional wife obsessed with her cooking abilities – that does not extend to assimilated characters. For Dymov, the subway becomes a dream space for immigrants who desire to lose themselves in consumerism. They become part of “a great mass of workers that works and buys, works and buys, and eats, and chews, and swallows.” (Dymov 295) Being a consumer is grotesquely literalized through actual consumption here, in the same way that all of the elements of American capitalism are cartoonishly exaggerated through the millionaire advertising characters.

Throughout this section, I return to The Hairy Ape in order to emphasize what difference the subway makes to the understanding of American Expressionist space, fantasy, and technology. O'Neill's takes a fatalistic view of his protagonist Yank's prospects for finding a place in the culture at large. Dymov, on the other hand, ironically suggests that the subway is a space where all passengers are cooked together in the Melting Pot. Both plays emphasize the spatial separation of their protagonists, but in Dymov's case this separation can be overcome through fantasy.

Yank and Hungerproud begin their respective plays underground and in motion: Yank in the stokerroom of a cruise ship, Hungerproud on a northbound Bronx Express

train. In both plays, their distance from the world of privilege is enacted spatially through the appearance of an outside visitor who comes down to “their level.” In The Hairy Ape, the steel magnate’s daughter Mildred is “like a white apparition” among the dirty stokers (O’Neill 191). She calls Yank a “filthy beast,” driving him to seek revenge but also causing him to question his place in the world (O’Neill 192). Hungerproud’s assimilationist fantasies are brought on by a less dramatic but just as troubling apparition, a friend from the old country who has Americanized in all the ways Hungerproud has not. Jack Flames is a snappy dresser, dines on Broadway, neither keeps kosher nor knows when Yom Kippur is (269-270). Noticing that Hungerproud has a Yiddish newspaper, Flames harangues his friend:

Why don’t you read about stocks and bonds? Railroads? Mexican Oil? And United States Steel. From Fourteenth to One Hundred and Tenth Street lies Broadway! New York! America! In your sleep in the subway, you have passed America by all your life!...In the Bronx, where you are, is life? Up there with the Americans – on Broadway, Fifth Avenue, Wall Street! There you will find real life! People run, dance, laugh, they buy, sell! They live! And who cares! Your business is my business! Money! Gold! Success! Success! A friend is no friend! A word is no word! My wife is your wife! Your wife is my wife! It is life. (Bronx Express MS P-7)

Flames’s monologue conflates the business and pleasure of capitalism in the language of a shyster: the loyalty and tradition of the observant Jew is replaced with the buying, selling, lying, wife-swapping frenzy of the assimilated American. Hungerproud does not belong on Wall Street any more than Yank belongs above deck on the cruise ship, but the

appearance of these uninvited guests emphasizes the class inflections of spatial separation. “Up there” is where real life takes place. Both these men have missed out on the benefits of being an American because of their underground movement through the culture, which embodies ignorance and marginality. Without being able to see where they are going, the life of wealth and privilege – even of *humanity* in Yank’s case – has eluded them.

In *Flames*’s exaggerated language, there is an astute understanding of the new spatial relationship to the city made possible by the subway’s expansion. For the kind of spatial separation that Dymov depicts is not the same as ghettoization, or rather it is a technologically mediated ghettoization that is far more difficult to overcome. Previously living on the Lower East Side, Jewish immigrants had been separated from the “America” of “Fourteenth Street to One Hundred and Tenth Street” through culture and language, but not absolutely through geography. For example, a Yiddish theater on Irving Place, just above Fourteenth Street, confirms the lack of definitive neighborhood boundaries (Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars* 267). With the subway’s expansion and the subsequent movement of Jewish New Yorkers from this neighborhood to the Bronx, this separation becomes an absolute one. The subway thus short-circuits social access: the distance underground is equated with Hungerproud’s distance from real Americans.²⁸

Yet if the subway cuts off immigrant neighborhoods from site of power and prestige, it also connects those who can afford it. After Hungerproud returns home to his Sabbath dinner, he slaps his shy prospective son-in-law and leaves his house to go find “a Broadway millionaire” to marry his daughter instead (283). He boards the train again, asks the conductor where the “big shots” get off, and pays a nickel when he leaves (after

also, presumably, paying a nickel when he got on). “Pay and pay is all they know,” says Hungerproud bitterly (283). The subway toll takes its toll: Hungerproud expresses a psychic resistance to assimilation, a deep resentment of his situation and its cyclical, never-ending nature. Even in his dreams, he senses that his only way to reconnect with the world of “The Americans” in Manhattan is through money.

Advertising is an imaginative means of access to Wall Street and Fifth Avenue. The rest of the play shows us Hungerproud’s dreams brought on by Flames’s monologue. He takes the subway to the office of Mr. Pluto, the red devil figure used to advertise Pluto Mineral Water (Figure 3). Pluto is holding a meeting for millionaires, all of whom are mascots and spokespeople for products advertised in the subway. Hungerproud poses as a millionaire and joins them; there, he falls in love with Miss Murad, a Turkish girl from a cigarette pack. Dymov literalizes the experience of the immigrant passenger lulled into product-centered escapist fantasies. He argues here, as Steve Pile does in his discussion of Freud and Benjamin, “that dreams and cities are the guardians of the moderns’ sleep: an elaborate play of remembering and forgetting; showing and disguising” (57). Encounters with the figures from subway ads reveal and conceal Hungerproud’s unconscious wish brought on by his encounter with Flames in the prologue, the desire to abandon himself to modern American life. Dymov’s play uses public transportation as a metaphor for the transportive raptures of American consumerism.



Figure 3. Pluto Mineral Water advertisement (approx. 1920s)

As a site of commuting fantasy, the subway advertisement, or “car card”, exploits both the immigrants’ dream of assimilation and his extended subway ride. Hungerproud’s enculturation via advertisements was common in the early twentieth century. One of the quickest ways of popularizing a brand was by placing it in a public space where people literally had nothing else to look at. And the quality of attention people paid to subway ads was not the brief or distracted: James Lackey Jr.’s survey of transportation advertising’s history and characteristics describes the “Length of Individual Exposure” as follows:

Contrary to many superficial opinions, a car card does not convey a flash message; actually it is read under almost leisurely conditions. The average length of a transit ride is almost 25 minutes, which finds ample time for careful reading and lasting impression. Moreover, there is little urgency involved in reading; there is a minimum of competition for the rider’s attention and little incentive to move to some other immediately pressing activity. (48)

Because of its disconnection from the city, the space of the subway car, then, is perhaps one of the few where modern life’s “distractions” are set aside. These ads were seemingly inescapable: the BMT Advertiser makes the somewhat ominous point that “they cannot be discarded, ‘tuned-out,’ or turned like pages[...]because they are constantly in view” (“No Advertising” 10). Instead, the leisurely reception, the close reading, and the “lasting impression” (both from the single, extended observation and the repeated exposures) guarantee that they ad will make an impression. Of course, ads did not merely address immigrants in this way. In her 1916 poem on the subway, Ruth Comfort Mitchell describes ads as

Signs which draw the tired eyes up like magnets
 Strident signs which are noises visualized
 You cannot evade or dodge them – loud, insistent
 Insolent signs determined to be read (54).

The oppressively persistent environment created by ads is one factor that led to the subway car's gradual reimagination as a fantasy space, both onstage and off.

Modern transit ads first appeared in nineteenth-century streetcars. It was not until the turn of the century that advertisers took advantage of this environment to its fullest extent through the use of mascots that gave their products a “face.” In the subway in particular, the faces of advertising figures function as an alternate crowd, friendly and familiar, that hovers above the impersonal, abstracted, and too-close bodies of fellow city-dwellers. According to Susan Buck-Morss, this personal quality is “a new dissimulating aura [that was] injected into the commodity, easing its passage into the dream world of the private consumer...Advertising images attempt to ‘humanize’ products in order to deny their commodity character” (184). In Bronx Express, Flames literalizes this process, animating the brand mascots with the motivations of the capitalist structures that make them possible. He tells Hungerproud there are “millionaires right over your head” and lists the net worth of the advertising characters:

FLAMES: Do you have any idea what's going on with the Americans? Nestlé? That baby? Two hundred million. And chewing gum, Wrigleys, three hundred million. And Smith Brothers Cough Drops, three hundred fifty million.

HUNGERPROUD: Both brothers together?

FLAMES: Each brother separately. Both together, five hundred (Dymov 273).

The faces in advertisements interpellate Jewish immigrants into the American culture where personal value and monetary value are synonymous. Hungerproud, Flames

suggests, does *not* “have any idea what’s going on with the Americans” even though they are trying to tell him. But the rest of the play tells us that the reverse is true: Hungerproud knows the names and faces of all the American advertising figures, since they have been a part of his work life for twenty-five years (Dymov 293). The permeability of the boundary between interior self and exterior world means that the fantasy life of subway passengers is rapidly colonized by the omnipresence of advertising.

Americanization takes place even during as passive a process as daydreaming on the subway commute. In one sense, the fantasy enacted in Bronx Express is *not* the fantasy of wealth and fame presented by the car cars but the fantasy of being able to talk back to those dream-images. At the millionaires’ meeting Hungerproud is offered a cigarette, which he refuses because Jews are forbidden to smoke on the Sabbath. This causes the millionaires to rant about how Jews “spoil the business,” refusing to consume at the rate that good Americans do (294). Hungerproud retorts, “I hid from you under the ground. I needed peace from your yelling and from the hard work that I do for you. For you, not for myself. But you found me and dragged me out, you tear at me and yell: ‘Buy! Buy! More! Money! Don’t spoil the business.’ Some fine bunch you are” (293). Here Hungerproud suggests the connection between class and space as well as the inevitability of assimilation through technology. He has tried to hide from consumer culture “under the ground,” but ads invaded even the space of the subway, dragging him out from his hiding place and forcing him into the world of the Americans.²⁹

Hungerproud’s jeremiad participates in a larger theatrical tradition: American Expressionist heroes often show us their anger at the system that defines them. The Young Woman’s fragmented monologues in Machinal, for example, or Mr. Zero’s

speech on the witness stand in The Adding Machine, are the fierce condemnations of modern life for which the theater movement is known. In The Hairy Ape, Yank attempts to speak truth to power in a less articulate, more physical way than Hungerproud. Finding his targets coming out of a church on Fifth Avenue, a telling conflation of spiritual and commercial values, he insults them and tries to start a fight. In one of the more explicitly dreamlike stage directions, Yank “*turns in rage on the men, bumping viciously into them but not jarring them the least bit. Rather it is he who recoils after each collision*” (O’Neill 209). Figures of power and control can absorb the rebellion and anger of the working classes without flinching; instead, it is Yank whose movement is impeded.

Yank repeatedly mourns his inability to find a place where he belongs or a way to strike back against the social system that places him on the outside. Hungerproud’s rebellion, however, is absorbed in a way that proves that he belongs with the millionaires. Once the button maker submits his identity to the vicissitudes of the marketplace, acceptance and success soon follow. Mr. Pluto takes a million dollars from his safe and places it before Hungerproud, dazzling him with it (294). Hypnotized into the state of suggestibility that car card advertisers long for, Hungerproud reveals the ultimate gambit to force assimilation, making the Jews work on Yom Kippur. This idea is received with great acclaim: Miss Murad “dances the dance of love” before Hungerproud, and Mr. Pluto “pours money over him” (295). No longer subject to a faceless, impersonal system, he is part of a humanized version of that system. The subway again gains the status of a machine for those on the outside to move back to the center – albeit briefly.

Bronx Express dramatizes the mixing of identities and spaces that is the result of this urban movement. The play’s final act shows everyone “cooked in the same pot,” a

self-consciously ominous conflation of the Melting Pot assimilationist ideal and the cannibalistic drives of the marketplace (295). The most obvious tradition that is broken down is that of the ethnic family unit: Hungerproud has married Miss Murad, who is presumably Muslim, and they have taken the adopted Nestlé baby with them on a honeymoon to Atlantic City.³⁰ In the Schildkraut production of Bronx Express in 1925, the Atlantic City set retained a row of subway ads across the top (Figure 5), reinforcing the spatial confusion along with the confusion of identity. His family members keep appearing throughout the vacation as menial workers: a respected teacher from the old country is a messenger boy; his very Americanized son shines shoes and whistles jazz tunes, and his wife is a cook in a restaurant. Whether through desire or necessity, everyone in Hungerproud's extended family – and, Dymov suggests, everyone in the city – finally submits to the system represented by the subway ads.



Figure 4. Bronx Express production still (1925)

Miss Murad's discovery that Hungerproud is already married leads the play in an odd direction, one that showcases the latent violence underlying calls for Americanization: when the advertising figures discover he is a bigamist, they threaten to lynch him and actually tie a rope around his neck (303-4). More commonly a violent death for African Americans in the post-Reconstruction South, death by lynching calls into question both Hungerproud's personal identity and his geographical location. This shocking end to the play proper also locates it historically. The best-known Jew to be lynched was Leo Frank, the manager of a pencil factory in Atlanta. Frank was lynched in 1915 after being convicted of the murder of Mary Phagan, a white girl who worked in his

factory (White 25-6). The trial fueled public anti-Semitism and renewed interest in the Ku Klux Klan; it also led to the founding of the Anti-Defamation League. Hungerproud, the play suggests, is subconsciously aware of the dangers of assimilation as well as its pleasures. In the imagined connection between Hungerproud and Frank there is also a shift in loyalty from labor to management. Fortunately, Hungerproud wakes up, from his subway dream as well as his dream of life as a flashy American.

In the epilogue, Hungerproud regains consciousness (and class-consciousness) at the end of the Bronx Express subway line. Again, the spatial connection of the subway to the passenger's mind is reinforced: the final section of the train line is elevated, and once he emerges aboveground he can again see his connection to the city. In a last irony, Hungerproud insults the baby that's been crying on the train (and invaded his dreams as the crying Nestlé baby), leading the baby's mother calls him an anti-Semite. Hungerproud agrees, "Sure I'm an anti-Semite, a bigamist, and also a millionaire in the bargain" (304). Hungerproud lost himself while in his dream, abandoning his family and his identity, as well as sleeping past his stop. But his immersion into the undifferentiated mass of consumers is a cautionary example. Dymov uses the subway ads as Freudian dream images, "to facilitate, in the patients, a kind of transformative recognition of their own circumstances" (Pile 57). Now conscious of the workings of American culture, Hungerproud realizes who he is and who he is not.

As at the end of a melodrama, Hungerproud is reunited with his children on the subway car. They have come from Bronx Park, where they had been picking flowers to celebrate their father's 25 years in the button-making shop. Still, Bronx Express raises some cultural anxieties associated with the subway that its happy ending cannot

overcome. The family is not fully restored: his wife is absent, presumably cooking at home. More ominously, the picture of Murad still hangs among the car cards (305). Hungerproud spits at it and sets back toward his appropriate station, but the possibility of submitting to the seductions of consumer culture still lurks in the subway with him. The reunion with the children suggests that perhaps assimilation is not so dangerous, or that the next generation will figure out how to combine traditional collective values with American personal fulfillment. In any case, the ending is a deeply ambivalent one.

Hungerproud survives the devil's bargain presented by car cards, but Sophie Smith is not so lucky. In Rice's Subway, freedom of movement and sexual abandon are too appealing to resist. Hungerproud felt an implicit pressure to conform evoked by subway advertisements. Sophie, by contrast, feels the literal pressure of bodies surrounding her on the subway. But Rice does not merely stage the subway as a dystopia. Instead, he balances the fears and fantasies of a working girl trapped in the subway crush.

Sexualized Subway Submission

The subway car had become a remarkably sexualized space by the 1920s. This occurred in part because of the fantasies of monetary and romantic success evoked by subway ads. Rising subway congestion emphasized physical proximity which was not only claustrophobic but (for some) erotic. In this section, I discuss the relationship between physical restriction and mental release as experienced by Sophie Smith in The Subway. Like the sexually menaced heroines of sensation and serial melodramas, her virtue is threatened by the modern city; unlike most of those heroines, she somewhat willingly submits. Rather than literally dreaming onstage, Sophie shows us how

unconscious sexual fantasies are shaped by modern technology. Both come together in the eroticization of modern transportation, literal and figurative.

The young, attractively dressed, and upwardly mobile female office worker is a quintessentially modernist figure. Her presence in a crowded subway car emphasizes her ability to circulate in the modern world and provide for herself. In the early twentieth century, more American women worked outside of the home, particularly in urban centers: “[f]emale mobility,” says Ben Singer, “was necessary for the sake of modern capitalism.” (262).³¹ And riding the subway alone was as clear a sign of being a modern woman as smoking or wearing a bobbed hairdo. Of course, a large cross-section of New York women rode the subway – for shopping, entertainment, and the like – but films and newspaper cartoons emphasized the everyday commute of the typist to her office, escaping from the domestic and private world into one that is public, efficient, and full of strange men (Michael Brooks 173-180). The central figure in any romantic subway fantasy, then, was the working girl.

As I have previously discussed, critics of The Subway tend to think that its melodramatic sexual issues are added for prurient interest alone and distract from Expressionism’s usual focus on modern life. Said one particularly harsh critic,

Of course, Rice could perhaps be using the constant threat of seduction and the act itself as a symbol. The soulless city, represented by the pseudo-artistic or affluent men, corrupts and destroys the purity of the human soul. However, the result reminds one less of *The Adding Machine* than of *Bertha, the Sewing-Machine Girl*” (Durham 71).

Even the machines are gendered in Durham's dismissal; although an adding machine is ostensibly a universal symbol of modern Taylorist technology, it is far more masculine than a sewing machine.³² In The Subway, Rice is admittedly trying to have his cake and eat it too: Sophie's seduction by the modern city is symbolic, but it's still seductive. The connection between technology and female sexuality persists throughout American and German Expressionism, with the female robot in Metropolis being something like its apotheosis. The Subway explores how becoming more mechanical makes it easier for women to move through the modernist city.

The Subway connects the unconscious fantasies of subway passengers with the efficient movement of female office workers. Popular culture of the 1910s and 1920s portrays young working women who imagine the office and the subway as vehicles of upward mobility, merely means to the desired end of marriage (Michael Brooks 174-5). The same is true of Sophie Smith when the play begins. We first see her at work in the basement office of the Subway Construction Company. The office is thoroughly and coldly Taylorized: it is windowless, made of concrete and steel, and covered in filing cabinets from floor to ceiling.³³ Like Yank, Sophie is characterized as part of the machine she works for, "fil[ing] with mechanical rapidity" (4). But daydreaming gives her a sense of escape even while she continues to work. A fellow worker, George Clark, enters with more letters for Sophie to file. Like the opening up of dream space in Saroyan's subway car, this office is transformed: "*the rear wall between the doors becomes transparent and a landscape is seen: a cheap, suburban bungalow covered with clambering roses*" (4). Efficient, machinelike movement and the possibility of romance coexist in this office space. Although the house is "cheap" and maudlin, its suburban location offers the same

promise of escape from city life that led Jewish immigrants to move out of Lower East Side ghettos and into Brooklyn and the Bronx.

Like the office, the subway is a space of possible romance – and possible risk. Representations of the working girl's fears and fantasies were focused on men's power in the subway crowd. The tradeoff for female mobility and freedom to fantasize in public space is of course being the object of public fantasy. On the subway, women were often subject to groping and pinching by men whose identity could remain hidden.³⁴ There were new calls for a separate car for women in the 1920s, a solution that had not been suggested since 1907.³⁵ A letter to the editor from the New York Times connects contact on the subway and theatrical indecency, a concern that arose after Mae West's play, Sex, was prosecuted in early 1927: "To my mind, the indecency of plays is mild in comparison to what takes place every morning and evening in the New York and Brooklyn subways. Young girls are subjected to treatment that would make a Cossack blush" (S.L. Hoffman, New York Times, 2/23/1927). The assault on the coherence of the physical self that all passengers experienced in the "subway crush" of rush hours was not only an assault on a woman's bodily integrity but an assault on her morality.

Sophie experiences such treatment at the Subway Construction Company as well as in the subway itself. Two men visit her office to write a story about its efficient design. The first, Eugene Landry, sketches her at her desk and later becomes her lover. The second, Maxwell Hurst, ogles her as a distraction from her boss's droning speech. The stage directions tell us that "*As he stares at her, her dress becomes diaphanous, revealing the outlines of her figure. She feels uneasy and confused, writhing under Hurst's unrelenting gaze*" (20). Much has been written about women in public space and the

assumption of moral laxity ascribed to them.³⁶ Rice stages the modern urban woman encountering this assumption subjectively, with her psychological discomfort made visible and later transformed into a mass culture-mediated fantasy when she and Eugene go to the movies. Where the Jewish subway play protagonist realizes that his dream-relationship to the city is delusional, the working girl uses mass culture to make hers seem more real.

Sophie Treadwell's Machinal (1928) is another, better known American Expressionist play that begins in an eroticized, mechanized office. It tells "the story of a woman who murders her husband – an ordinary young woman, any woman" (Treadwell 496). The Subway and Machinal were connected in even more complicated ways than their similar settings suggest. Elmer Rice wrote The Subway in 1923, just after The Adding Machine was produced, but Machinal appeared on Broadway to great acclaim before The Subway's semi-amateur production. Elmer Rice was so upset by the play that he considered suing Treadwell or her publishers for plagiarism. A letter to the director of Machinal, who directed Rice's On Trial as well, suggested Treadwell had read the play and been "influenced by it – consciously or unconsciously." ("Letter to Arthur Hopkins"). Regardless of whether or not this is true, the appearance of such similar heroines in plays nearly spanning the 1920s suggests the continued prevalence of the figure of the working girl tempted by the big city. But these are very different manifestations of the same type: Sophie enters her office at the Subway Construction Company just before the clock strikes nine, for example, while Treadwell's Young Woman is late to her job and her typewriter is "out of order" (500). The Young Woman struggles to maintain her dignity in the face of dehumanizing mechanization, but Sophie

ends up fitting in almost too well. Unlike *The Young Woman*, *Yank*, or *Mr. Zero*, *Sophie* and *Hungerproud* are American Expressionist subjects who submit to externally imposed norms. Unique to subway plays is this attention to the fantasies of transcendence that are the result of submitting and becoming part of the system rather than escaping from its moral constraints.

Rice and Treadwell use space to connect the repressiveness of work and gender roles, characterizing them in the same claustrophobic terms used to describe the subway. *The Young Woman*'s daily commute makes her feel "all tight inside" and "stifling." She says, "I can't go on like this much longer – going to work – coming home – going to work – coming home – I can't – Sometimes in the subway I think I'm going to die" (504). Her fragmented and repeated language suggests the subway commute as an endless cycle; the routines have shaped her physically and linguistically. In my third chapter, I discuss how modernist poetry considers the repetitions of this commute as liberating the passenger from a sense of self. However, for the *Young Woman* the subway is most assuredly an oppressive space.

All of the sets in *Machinal* are interiors, underscoring the *Young Woman*'s claustrophobia even in the ostensibly liberating spaces of the speakeasy and her lover's apartment.³⁷ In scene three of *The Subway*, Rice uses language of imprisonment similar to Treadwell's. After fainting on the subway in scene two, *Sophie* is brought home in a taxi by Eugene Landry. She tries to tell her family about him, but they are unresponsive: her mother and sister continue their piecework and platitudes; her father and brother read newspaper headlines mechanically as they have for the whole scene. The cuckoo clock

strikes. Sophie senses that nothing in her life has changed, in spite of the new connection she has made with Eugene. The stage directions tell us that she

looks all about, as though searching for some means of escape. Then she comes down, towards the audience. A curtain, consisting of broad, vertical stripes, corresponding to the wall-paper pattern, is lowered, between Sophie and the audience. She looks out, between the strips, as though she were in a cage. Then she turns slowly away, takes an apron from behind the door, puts it on and begins mechanically picking up the newspapers which Tom and Mr. Smith have discarded.

TOM [reading a headline]: Six Day Grind Begins Monday.

MR. SMITH: Subway, in Record Day, Carries Two Million Three Hundred and Ninety-seven Thousand, Four Hundred and Twelve.

Sophie mechanically picks up and folds the newspapers.

The Curtain Falls(45)

The cage is an important space in American Expressionist theater with The Hairy Ape, Kaufman and Connelly's Beggar on Horseback, Machinal, and Rice's own Adding Machine including scenes where the main character is caged and put on display or imprisoned for a crime. Here, Sophie is in a private cage. The curtain of vertical stripes enclosing her is merely an extension of the wallpaper pattern, suggesting the inherent claustrophobia of the domestic sphere (and perhaps echoing Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"). Her bedroom environment is just as prison-like. She looks out, attempting to connect with the audience briefly before turning back to her chores. It is striking that the women in this scene continue to engage in mechanical, repetitive work at

home while the men relax and read newspapers. However, leisure does not make them less mechanical – the headlines that they read merely put the mechanization of home life into a broader context. Tom’s headline mocks whatever leisure the Smiths might assume that they have: the “six-day grind” is inescapably cyclical. And with the headline read by Sophie’s father, the psychological restrictions of modern life are again physicalized in subway space. The celebration of the subway’s record number of passengers quantifies just how many people could experience the same sense of spatial oppression as Sophie every single day. Both of these plays show the negative side to the modern working girl’s newly-won freedom from the domestic sphere. Mobility in urban space is not inherently liberating; in fact, Treadwell and Rice both suggest that work routines are just as deadening as those of the home are.

One of the major differences between Machinal and The Subway lies in their interpretation of how fantasy helps women escape these routines. The Young Woman in Machinal takes a path similar to the heroes of German Expressionist plays. Confessing to the murder of her husband, she claims she did it “to be free” (526). The world is fragmented, routinized, deadened, but outside the law it is still possible momentarily to find freedom and a sense of self. This is literalized geographically in the case of the Young Woman’s lover, who has been living as an outlaw in Mexico. Treadwell’s world is dystopic, but there is some possibility for action and a place to escape. Sophie, however, is devoid of agency throughout the play. In her office, she is just another piece of equipment (Jerz 55): in the original draft, her boss and the visitors from a trade magazine move on from her to a stamping machine (Rice The Subway MS 1-18). The manipulation of Sophie’s body by others is a theme throughout the rest of the play. She is

menaced and groped on the subway, seduced in the movie theater, and impregnated. But Rice begins to suggest the larger effects of subway subjectivity by not presenting these manipulations as wholly bad. Sophie's experiences of the sublime, including swimming at Coney Island and going to the opera, are connected to the illicit romances that brought her there.

Sexual submission and submission to the vicissitudes of mass culture are united in the image of the working woman in the subway crowd. Sophie is so easily manipulated because her active, fantasizing mind distracts her passive body. She shares this quality with many of her fellow office workers consuming pulp novels on the train. A 1929 New York Times article called "Those Who Read in the Subway" describes the typical working girl's mode of attention while being transported:

the girl whose reading in the previous session was interrupted at the point where the desert lover was about to declare his identity as an English nobleman to the fair lady he has rescued from the Arabs. Her book is opened before the train starts, her eyes would be glued to the page except for the shifting of the train; still, she keeps them fixed on the startling words. By some clairvoyance, she places herself above a seated passenger who gets off at the first station, she seats herself without losing a sentence, and remains buried in the book, while others worry about the scarcity of straps. Although she cannot see out of the window to tell when her station has been reached, some instinct seems to guide her here also; for she rises at the right time, and glides off the train in a happy daze. (SM9)

The reading woman does not ask anything of the space surrounding her, does not jostle other passengers, and indeed seems barely physically present at all. Because of her

absorption in mass culture, she can be assimilated more easily into the subway crowd. This is not to say that this working woman escapes the crush of the bodies surrounding her. Rather, I suggest that she displaces being moved and sexualized against her will into the fiction she reads.

The reading woman experiences her own submission as a mass cultural fantasy. The book this typical working girl reads was a bestseller in 1921 and 1922, one that defined women's fantasies of being a powerful modern woman who is overpowered by a more powerful man. The plot point "where the desert lover was about to declare his identity as an English nobleman to the fair lady he has rescued from the Arabs," while typical of the desert romances of the 20s, has its source in E.M. Hull's novel The Sheik. Best known for supplying Rudolph Valentino with his most memorable film role, The Sheik deals with the capture and "taming" of a modern woman who is vacationing on her own in the Sahara desert. Critics have read the book as reactionary in its rape fantasy and empowering in its displays of female desire.³⁸ Whether forward-thinking or retrograde, the book's focus on unwanted and eventually enjoyed sexual force echoes The Subway's portrayal of female sexuality.

Sophie's masochistic enjoyment of her own seduction as spectacle is central to the play's structure and theme. It takes place in the fifth scene of nine, while she and Eugene are at the movies. After watching a newsreel and a portion of the film, Eugene takes Sophie's hand with what we are told is "mechanical deliberation;" in response, she "submits passively, without any attempt at resistance" (76). This scene is striking because it is not only the mass-culture-trained heroine who experiences real life in terms of its mediated simulation. Instead, even the artist who never goes to the movies is

mechanically following his onscreen role. Sophie reads the silent film's intertitles aloud; Eugene verbalizes his doubts and seduction strategies. These unconscious expressions come together once the clichéd seduction scene onscreen starts to parallel the one in the audience. The crescendo of this scene shows Sophie savoring the pain of Eugene's clasping hand just as the film's audience is savoring the heroine's on-screen seduction. Sophie reads the intertitle, "'You're a beast, Lord Orville – a vile beast'" and then says, "I can feel his nails. They're digging into me. Go on! Hurt me some more" (78). The animalistic quality of this juxtaposition is striking, particularly since calling Lord Orville a "vile beast" no longer seems so banal when actual nails dig into her skin. It also suggests a rereading of the scene of Sophie surrounded by leering animal-men in the subway car not as a scene of terror but as a repressed desire. Like the girl reading The Sheik on the subway, Sophie is easily manipulated because she's the heroine of her own mass cultural fantasy, watching her forbidden desires acted out onscreen. Billie Melman says of the Rudolph Valentino film The Sheik that it "invite[s] the overwhelmingly female film audience to share, vicariously, a collective experience of rape" (93). The audience of The Subway, then, is doubly alienated in its voyeurism.

The movie theater scene is the only one in the play where the subway is not mentioned. However, the seductive sense of emotional transportation is quickly channeled back into physical transportation. Eugene invites Sophie to his apartment after the film. She is nervous and generally unresponsive to his advances until he begins to tell her about the "epic of industrialism" she has inspired. Also called "The Subway," Eugene's visionary story relates the subway to the modernist city's infrastructure in the same way as the nonfiction accounts of cultural critics like Chase and Mumford.³⁹ In it,

the city's "steel towers" topple and humanity flees underground to hide in the subway tunnels. Eugene envisions "The city razed flat...a mountain of rubble and twisted steel...and humanity penned...penned in the subway...every orifice choked with rubble...great pipes bursting...gas-mains...sewers...and mankind perishing...drowned... suffocated...buried alive in the grave of concrete and steel it has built for itself..." (96). Eugene connects the subway with other underground developments of city life like gas mains, water pipes, and sewers. This passage gives us a sense of how ominous, even dangerous this interconnection is: when the tunnels collapse, mankind is not only buried in rubble, but also drowned with the water and sewage of burst pipes and suffocated by gas from ruptured mains. Eugene's artistic vision enacts a violent return of what has been repressed by the organization of city space: all the things that have been moved out of sight come back to haunt the urban dwellers when they are forced underground. Claustrophobia is such a common element in descriptions of subway in the 1920s because the subway offers a physically immediate sense of a subject's own confrontation with the enormity of the city, the minuteness of the self in relation to the built environment.

What's unique about Eugene's epic of industrialism is that this confrontation is no longer frightening – it's sexy. His description of his artwork is an epic means of seduction (Jerz 56), and Sophie responds to his descriptions of humanity trapped in subway tunnels as she does to his caresses in the movie theater. Her physical responses to his story straddle the line between fear and sexual arousal: she is "half-afraid," then is shown "lowering her eyes" (95), "moaning," (96), and "sobbing" (98). After he's finished his story, she throws her arms around his neck and cries "Love me, Eugene...love

me...!” (99). This is quite different from Machinal, where romantic love is an escape from the daily grind of city life. The scene between the Young Woman and her lover is full of exotic and distant spaces: below the Rio Grande, San Francisco, Spain (Treadwell 514-6). Sophie’s seduction is fairly unique in American Expressionist theater because the mechanized pressure of city space is a constant presence throughout. Like the audience, Sophie is seduced by the vision of the city as sordid and menacing. Melman locates in “desert romances” a response to the cultural anxiety “that the modern, sexually emancipated woman can pursue pleasure without being punished” (93). Urban spaces such as the subway offer myriad opportunities for such a pursuit of pleasure. Yet in Rice’s fantasia, the pleasure is conflated with the punishment. His reconciles traditional and modern ideals of feminine morality through masochism.

Eugene’s subway dystopia also offers one hopeful vision of feminine escape from physical restriction, a vision of self-sufficiency that echoes that of the girl reading on the subway. He imagines scientists “from the new civilization on the Congo” digging through the rubble of a destroyed New York and finding “the body of a young girl...preserved miraculously...inexplicably...a young girl asleep...warm...radiant...in that chamber of death” (98). The sleeping girl escapes the oppressive claustrophobia of the subway. Through her unconsciousness, she transcends the forces of city life and gains a singular self-possession. Eugene thus imagines a dream version of Sophie who cannot be menaced by the anonymous men in the subway: they have, after all, been pulverized. In the same way that the girl’s unconscious beauty allows her to escape being crushed by the collapsed subway tunnels, Eugene suggests that his love for Sophie is a “compensating beauty” that allows them “an escape from the ugliness that was crowding

us...crowding us..." (98). Like consumerist assimilation in Bronx Express, romantic fantasy is another force in American modernist culture that allows for mental escape from physical restriction.

Sophie's submission to Eugene is not directly followed by her submission to the larger forces of modern industrial life; it is only after she becomes pregnant and stands accused by a chorus of disembodied voices that she flees her bedroom for a subway station. The subway is one of the few public spaces she can conceivably go to at that hour of the morning, and one whose sexually oppressive space mirrors her perceptions. Maxwell Hurst, the man who leered in her office as the play began, accosts her in the subway station as it ends:

HURST: You can't spend the night here. If a policeman finds you, he'll take you to the stationhouse.

SOPHIE: I haven't done anything wrong.

HURST: You're not properly dressed. It's against the law. You'd better come with me. (150-1)

With her sexual indiscretions and her coat on over her nightgown, Sophie has become an embodiment of all the fears about male contact's effect on female decency. She has returned to the space where she first was asked to submit to man's spatial and sexual dominance, but this time she has no more hope about the possibilities for where it leads. Sophie's interaction with Hurst parodies both her relationship to Eugene and to her job: Hurst tells Sophie that the subway is unsafe for her, tries to cajole her to come back to his apartment, and then starts to lead her to the turnstiles. However unwillingly, Sophie seems momentarily to return to her usual unconscious and passive attitude. But the stage

directions show a sudden change of heart: “[*Hurst*] starts to conduct her gently, through one of the turnstiles. She submits passively, then suddenly resists.” (150). No longer willing to relinquish control of her own movements, Sophie wrests free of Hurst. Having regained her agency, she soliloquizes on all of the overwhelming forces to which she has enjoyed submitting: the waves on the beach, music, Eugene’s touch. Then she throws herself on the tracks. Now it is the train that crushes her, and not merely the male passengers surrounding her.

Sophie’s final soliloquy connects the awe-inspiring and destructive force of man and machine into one moment: “It’s singing – everything is singing. My heart. More, more! Tighter! Tighter! Eugene!” (153). The subway’s screech and rumble become a siren song, the apotheosis of mechanized forces that transport the working girls of the modernist city. Ending with this celebratory sexualization of the force that kills her is an odd and complex move; many American Expressionist plays end with their central character dying, but most do *not* end with their central character rejoicing in her own death. Hungerproud can wake up from his seduction by the American consumerist machine, reaffirming his connection to other traditions; The Young Woman refuses to submit; Sophie submits utterly.⁴⁰ While their heroines move through the city in different ways, Treadwell and Rice finally share the same feeling about the office girl that senses the restrictions of her station. For American Expressionist playwrights, the modern woman’s desire for mobility in the mechanized city is a losing proposition. Rice adds something to the dialogue by suggesting that there is some pleasure to be had as a by-product of this oppressive system.

In The Subway, the body of a girl “preserved miraculously” as she moves through the city is still only a dream. It becomes a reality in the films of Busby Berkeley: in the process the subway play loses much of its critical force and becomes, in Joel Dinerstein’s words, a “pleasure machine” (183). The next section looks back at Dymov and Rice’s interventions through the lens of Berkeley’s post-American Expressionist subway musical number, “I Only Have Eyes for You.” For it is only after seeing what the subway dream looks like from the perspective of a white male passenger that we can truly see what difference it makes to have marginal characters at the center of subway plays.

Spatial Freedom and the Spectacular Subway

The height of mechanized modernist sexuality can be found in the work of choreographer and film director Busby Berkeley. Berkeley was not an Expressionist in the strictest sense, but he was certainly influenced by the mechanization of everyday life.⁴¹ In his 1934 film Dames, Berkeley takes up the experiences of the subway raised in Dymov and Rice, including spatial separation, advertisement as fantasy, even the sense of being moved by larger forces. However, there is an important difference between Berkeley’s subway dreams and those in American Expressionist theater. Dymov and Rice both construct a dialectic between tension and release, between the limits imposed on the subway subjects by external circumstances and the freedom from them experienced in the dream world. Berkeley’s musical numbers are so unique because they explode limits: space, scale, and psychology are all disregarded in order to create the most intriguing

picture for the viewer. Where Eugene and Sophie search for a “compensating beauty,” Berkeley presents all beauty, all the time.

“I Only Have Eyes for You,” in addition to being perhaps the best-known song written for Berkeley’s films, serves as the center of Dames’ penultimate musical number, a subway play in miniature.⁴² The song is meant to take place onstage, but just as the music begins a car literally runs over the spectator’s point of view, severing us from the constraints of theatrical space. In the sequence, Ruby Keeler walks through a crowded street, meeting Dick Powell as he finishes up his shift as a ticket seller for a theater. He sells his last pair of tickets, closes the box office, and greets his girl. They stroll down the sidewalks of New York; Powell sings, with help from immigrant passers-by. Occasionally the song’s figurative description of a lover’s focused attention becomes strikingly literal: Powell sings “they all disappear from view,” and the crowded street instantly empties as the camera cranes up to an impossible height. Now it is the spectator, and not the urban infrastructure, that defines the visual possibilities.

This is true in part because the passenger in charge is now a white man, less subject to the whims of the system. Indeed, his song and fantastic vision bend the world to his desires. Powell and Keeler board the subway; Powell again works his lyrical magic and the subway crowd disappears from view as well. Keeler falls asleep on her beau’s shoulder and Powell daydreams, as Hungerproud did, by looking at the car cards with pretty female faces. He seems surprised but happy when each ad’s spokesmodel transforms to Keeler in turn. Unlike Hungerproud, Powell is not swayed by the Miss Murads of the 1930s: he has become a coherent, self-contained viewer of the subway’s fantasy space so that, even while daydreaming, he maintains his focus on his beloved.

Here we can again see Berkeley transforming the dystopic aspects of 1920s subway plays into a utopic affirmation of the urban subject's ability to navigate city space smoothly and gracefully. Sophie and Hungerproud can't shut out their surroundings entirely -- the ads and leers and pinches make their way into their dreams -- but Powell can and does. We get the sense, from Powell's smile in response to the ads' transformation, that Keeler populates his dreams because he *wants* her to do so.

The final ad that transforms into Keeler also takes the viewer into what Martin Rubin calls Berkeley's "endlessly dissolving, unbounded space" (117). Audience members no longer experience the imagined limits of the stage or even the subway car -- the camera can move in any direction and usually does. In this section, white-clad Keeler clones hold up masks of her face. They walk up and down white steps on black rotating stages and generally disorient the viewers' perspective, with the abstract patterns of their bodies constantly shifting in scale. The women are all dressed alike and share Keeler's hairstyle; whenever a woman walks in front of the camera, it is Keeler herself (Figure 5). Critics tend to argue that "I Only Have Eyes for You" emphasizes the uniqueness of the beloved in comparison to the faceless crowd, but the constant reappearance of Keeler's face suggests a manipulability and easy replication that are counter to uniqueness. In fact, I would argue that Berkeley embraces the conventions of the subway play precisely to counteract the desire for individuality. At least on the subway, our loss of self can be transformed into a space of infinite erotic possibilities. Keeler's image becomes, in Joel Dinerstein's formulation, "a standardized girl [who] appears to enjoy her work as a cog in an eroticized, fetishized pleasure machine" (212). The sexualized set pieces of earlier subway plays, such as Sophie's seduction in the movie theater, are stripped of their

danger and erotic menace. Unlike the sense of anxiety and isolation audiences feel when they sense Sophie and Hungerproud are cogs in the system, only the anxiety of excess is evoked by the infinitely multiplying Ruby Keeler of “I Only Have Eyes for You.”

Berkeley is far less ambivalent than his predecessors about the pleasure experienced by those who submit to underground movement.



Figure 5. Multiple Ruby Keelers in Dames (1934)

The beauty of the mechanized body (and the mechanized female body in particular) is characteristic of thirties culture.⁴³ The regimented movement of women through this space points to the external forces that arrange and move those bodies. However, the most important force is the gaze of the lover-artist who situates the mechanized female body well within the realm of contained fantasy. Overhead shots offer impossible views that restore a sense of control unavailable to subway passengers.

Instead of Hungerproud and Sophie's glimpses of the system they're moving through in dream images, the Berkeley viewer gets a picture of the whole system all the time (Telotte 22). Joel Dinerstein describes this ever-shifting view of the whole as an aesthetic that makes the patterns rather than the dancers dance (203). This attention to the patterned whole as it appeals to the disembodied male spectator eliminates the embodied pleasure and the physical danger in Hungerproud's and Sophie's eminently corporeal dreams. Rather than its troubling proximity in both the actual subway and its Expressionist counterpart, the body on the Berkeleyan subway is an abstracted part of the city as spectacle. The only thing all these subway plays share is a sense that the subway can overwhelm passengers with their own desires.

Powell and Keeler's physical relationship to urban space comes briefly into play when they wake up at the end of their subway dream. The train has stopped, and they are alone at "The End of the Line," according to the sign visible out the train window (Figure 6). Powell helps Keeler down from the subway car and chivalrously carries her across an abandoned train yard. They have experienced the geographical disorientation central to the subway play without any aspect of their personality or romantic relationship getting lost in the process. But in American Expressionist subway plays, physical and psychic disorientation go hand in hand. The sense of "not belonging" is perhaps what unites all Expressionist protagonists, both German and American (Sokel 55-65). Sophie's and Hungerproud's stories follow a common plot arc in Expressionist theater, one where an everyman character begins in an established routine and an extraordinary event throws him off that pre-determined path.⁴⁴ Hungerproud sleeps past his stop as he breaks all the rules of observant Judaism. When Sophie has "lost her way" morally (by becoming

pregnant) she flees to a subway station; questioned about her destination, she says, “I don’t know where I’m going. Nowheres” (142). Subway plays combine Berkleyan pleasure with danger, uniting in the subway the frightening and appealing forces of urban modernity that disorient subjects from their moral compasses.



Figure 6. “End of the Line” in *Dames* (1934)

The subway evokes dreams and nightmares for groups that have much to gain and much to lose through the social mobility of New York’s modernist subway. My next chapter discusses Southern African American migrants to Harlem, another population disconnected from their traditions by the forces of Northern modernity. Like the “helpless and unfriended” protagonists of melodramas, working-class women and ethnic minorities were the most distanced from New York’s centers of economic power and the most subject to its whims. However, they were also groups for whom technologically mediated

culture had the most appeal. Dinerstein says “even in the 1920s, working-class Euro-Americans, African Americans, and immigrants – those without the luxury of nostalgia – were drawn to cultural forms that integrated machine aesthetics into their everyday lives” (184). Except for the subway, none of their dreams could be.

¹ For other subway plays from the same period, see Flint and Madison, Dodson. Later plays where the subway is a space of interracial contact include Amiri Baraka’s Dutchman (which I discuss at the end of chapter two) and Adrienne Kennedy’s The Owl Answers.

² This assessment from a recent article on Subway Circus is typical (albeit influenced by Saroyan’s own interpretation of his work): “Undoubtedly, the subway symbolizes the rottenness of American civilization” (Linde 19).

³ Osip Dymov (1878-1959) (sometimes written Dimov or Dymov) wrote over thirty plays for the Yiddish stage. Max Reinhardt presented several of his plays, including Nju and Every Day. Dymov was known as an author of Yiddish plays of higher artistic quality, in contrast to the crowd-pleasing *shund* that preceded him in the 1900s and 1910s: his plays were produced at the New Jewish Theatre and ARTEF theatre. For a more thorough biography and description of his plays, see Sandrow, Vagabond Stars 193. For contemporary analysis of Yiddish theatre around the world, see Berkowitz. For a detailed history of Yiddish theater in America, see Vagabond Stars, and Lifson.

⁴ For a detailed production history, see Sandrow, God, Man, Devil.

⁵ Probably the most influential analysis of American expressionism is Valgemäe’s Accelerated Grimace. Ronald Wainscott characterizes Expressionism as a theatrical movement that tends to satirize “the American capitalist system and its exploitative methods” (148). The most recent book-length discussion of American expressionism, Julia Walker’s Modernism and Expressionism in American Theater argues that all American Expressionist plays articulate a struggle between an art and commerce via technology (120). Perhaps the critics whose view of technology’s role in American Expressionism most closely resembles my own is Dennis G. Jerz, whose Technology in American Theater 1920-1950 pairs The Subway with Eugene O’Neill’s Dynamo in order to discuss the seductiveness of technology as well as its oppressiveness.

⁶ Amy Koritz describes Gramsci’s position as one where “freedom depended on separating the work of the body from the self of the worker, making work not expressive of, but irrelevant to the self” (560).

⁷ For a thorough intellectual background of German Expressionism, see Sokel, The Writer in Extremis. For recent takes on the importance of German Expressionism, including its poetry and narrative, see A Companion to the Literature of German Expressionism, ed. Neil H. Donahue.

⁸ Even when the play was originally staged in Yiddish, Nahma Sandrow tells us, the characters spoke a mixture of Yiddish and English. The words spoken in English are particularly telling: they include “millionaire” and “bluff.” (God, Man, and Devil 262)

⁹ Frederick Lewis Allan describes Freudianism's cultural importance in the 1920s in a tongue-in-cheek manner:

Sex, it appeared, was the central and pervasive force which moved mankind. Almost every human motive was attributable to it: if you were patriotic or liked the violin, you were in the grip of sex -- in a sublimated form. The first requirement of mental health was to have an uninhibited sex life. If you would be well and happy, you must obey your libido. Such was the Freudian gospel as it imbedded itself into the American mind after being filtered through the successive minds of interpreters and popularizers and guileless readers and people who had heard guileless readers talk about it. New words and phrases began to be bandied about the cocktail-tray and the Mah Jong table -- inferiority complex, sadism, masochism, Oedipus complex" (98-99).

For a scientific discussion of the dissemination of Freud's theories in America, see Nathan G. Hale Jr., Freud and the Americans and The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in America. Ann Douglas's Terrible Honesty discusses the influence of Freud on New York modernism throughout, but particularly in chapter three.

¹⁰ While trains are often called "The Broadway Line" or "The Seventh Avenue Line," they do not always follow this direct path underground -- besides, Manhattan-based geographic names are meaningless for those travelling to and from other boroughs.

¹¹ In the published version of the play, he meets them at an office.

¹² This ball took place in the Broadway production of the play, but not the published version, which is why I quote from the review rather than the play.

¹³ Subway Express had a successful Broadway run, toured outer borough theaters and other cities including Chicago and Detroit. It was also made into a film. See Michael Brooks 234.

¹⁴ The Hairy Ape opened March 9, 1922 and Bronx Express opened April 26, 1922. See Collection of Newspaper Clippings.

¹⁵ Rice himself understood that his attitude toward the protagonist The Subway was far different from his coldly satiric view of The Adding Machine. See "Letter to Bertram Bloch." Important critics to deal with melodrama as symptomatic of modernity are all listed in Singer 314. For my purposes, the most relevant is Vicinus.

¹⁶ This has been one of the more popular theses in recent critical work on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century film and technology. Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin are the initiators of this critical tradition. For examinations of nineteenth-century technologies and their effect on visibility, see Friedberg and Crary. For recent work on film and technological shock, see Gunning and Kirby.

¹⁷ Flint and Madison's Subway Express, while more of a straight "whodunit," is certainly a part of this tradition.

¹⁸ Macgowan's The Theatre of Tomorrow, referred to dismissively in Smith's review of Bronx Express, gives a good summary of "the new stagecraft" and its immediate effect upon modern drama.

¹⁹ Here, Hopkins refers obliquely to theatrical producer David Belasco, whose 1912 play The Governor's Lady did indeed include a precise replica of a Child's Restaurant where food was made onstage (Hamilton 283).

²⁰ Subway Express, needless to say, does not display such concern.

²¹ Other train lines retain transverse seats that are two seats wide. However, these plays are all on the IRT line and as such have the parallel sets of seats.

²² Unfortunately, the set came crashing down on opening night. Rice sent a letter to all of the critics who saw The Subway's opening night including a copy of the second scene, which had to be abandoned due to technical failures. See "Correspondence Re: The Subway."

²³ In this letter, Rice tells Harris what he thought of The Hairy Ape. In the full letter he says: "I agree with you in the main about The Hairy Ape. O'Neill's ideas are good, but he lacks the imaginative power to carry them through. Only one scene stirred me emotionally – the mannikin scene. That was a flash of real insight – a vivid illumination of the unbridgeable psychic gulf between man and man. After that the play ran down-hill (for me). The I.W.W. scene was tedious and the monkey-house scene puerile. But O'Neill has power. He has contact with life and his work shows it."

²⁴ The physical stage, the protagonist's environment, ceases to be a fixed frame of a scene or act and becomes a projection of his inner self" (Sokel 38).

²⁵ This proximity to, even visualization of, Sophie's unconscious mind is repeated throughout. Two scenes take place in her bedroom. They were among the most popular in the production, chiefly because the actress handled them so well ("Correspondence Re: The Subway").

²⁶ Except for the few places where the differences are important, I will be citing from the published text in Sandrow's God, Man, and Devil. The English translation used in the 1922 production at the Astor Theater is part of the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Performing Arts Library.

²⁷ "To make expression more emphatic, the Expressionist, exactly like the dreaming mind, distorts features of reality by exaggeration" (Sokel 39).

²⁸ Thanks to Alison for the formulation in the first part of this sentence. The play between height as upper-class and depth as lower-class continues throughout Bronx Express, particularly since it repeats a Yiddish phrase, "high windows," which "means the domain of rich and powerful people" (Sandrow, God, Man, and Devil, 265).

²⁹ New Yorkers thought that the subways would be free of advertisements, but placards were put up the second day. See Michael Brooks 69-70.

³⁰ This is another thematic similarity between the American Expressionist subway play and the melodrama – the sense of the family's breakdown due to capitalism. See Vicinus.

³¹ For a useful history of such women, though one specific to Chicago, see Joanne J. Meyerowitz.

³² The Adding Clerk is male in Machinal as well.

³³ The description of the office in The Subway is very similar to that of the first law office where Rice worked as a boy. See Minority Report, 67-8

³⁴ This continues to be a problem in contemporary New York City. See Hartocollis.

³⁵ In 1907, Julia L.D. Longfellow "proposed that the last car of each IRT train should be reserved for women who were traveling alone and unprotected. Women would be able to ride in any car if they wished, but the last car would always be a refuge from 'inconveniences' and 'insults'" (Michael Brooks 173). This issue is raised again in a letter to the editor, "Special Subway Cars for Women" (West 24). There continue to be segregated subway cars in Cairo and Mexico City subways for precisely this reason.

³⁶ See Michael Brooks 172-3 for a summary of these arguments as they relate to literature of the subway.

³⁷ See Walker 219 for a description of the implications of these sets for a feminist reading of *Machinal*

³⁸ See Melman for an analysis of this book and the many cultural imitators and parodies it spawned.

³⁹ It is unclear whether this artistic masterpiece will be written or drawn. Eugene says this work will “out-Doré Doré” (96), suggesting it will imitate that artist’s dramatic and violent symbolist etchings, but then his friend mocks his “synopsis or scenario or whatever it is” and says Eugene “thinks he’s a Dante or a Milton,” which both suggest that it is written (111).

⁴⁰ See Sievers 149-50 and Jerz 56 for discussions of the masochistic quality of Sophie’s gesture.

⁴¹ Busby Berkeley is one of the Depression’s foremost creators of a flexible and fantastic space equivalent to that of the subway car. One of the most celebrated musical numbers in the *Earl Carroll Vanities of 1928*, a Broadway show he planned sets for and choreographed, was called “The Machinery Ballet”:

Inspired, the programme [sic] asserted, by a visit to a Ford automobile plant, the number began at the gates of a factory, then moved to an expressionistic assembly line. There, amid lurid flashes of fire and smoke, the chorus, in metallic robot-style costumes emblazoned with dials and switches, shuttled and whirled mechanically in an endless circle. Their route took them across a series of platforms surmounted by a female dancer turning continuous slow cartwheels, which transformed her into a living cogwheel. (Rubin 53)

⁴² “Lullaby of Broadway” may be close

⁴³ See Kracauer, Dinerstein 182-220. For a pre-history to this period, see Glenn.

⁴⁴ See Kaiser *From Morn To Midnight* for the prototypical version of this narrative: a cashier sees a beautiful woman in a bank who seems to be trying to get money under a false identity. He steals money from the bank for her (although she doesn’t want it) and abandons his family life for a life of sensation in the city.

Chapter 2. Underground Flights: Psychological and Cultural Relocation in Harlem Renaissance Migration Narratives

“Harlem, like a Picasso painting in his cubistic period. Harlem – Southern Harlem – the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida – looking for the Promised Land – dressed in rhythmic words, painted in bright pictures, dancing to jazz – and ending up in the subway in morning rush time – *headed downtown*” (Hughes, “My Early Days” 78-9)

In my previous chapter, I discuss the dispersal of white ethnic working-class New Yorkers to the boroughs as a result of the subway’s expansion in the 1910s and 1920s. Rice and Dymov staged the subway car as a disconnected fantasy space, one where Bronx residents attempted to reconcile the traditional expectations of their home life with the commercial and sexual desires of modern Manhattan. A similarly perplexed group grapples with the intricacies of urban space and culture in the migration narratives of the Harlem Renaissance.¹ Indeed, the trials of Southern African Americans acclimating to subway space suggest a much closer connection to American Expressionism than critics have previously acknowledged. As with the boroughs’ population explosion discussed in my first chapter, Harlem’s development was intimately tied to the expansion of the subway. Apartment buildings were built in anticipation of the Lenox Avenue Line, but delays in the subway’s opening left apartments vacant and the 1904-1905 depression exacerbated the problem (Michael Brooks 185). Landlords began quietly to rent to African Americans, and black realtors saw an opportunity to help their race while making a profit (Lewis 25).² The subway brackets Harlem circulation, and Harlem narratives, in a way that spans pre-established boundaries of region and class. Not used to emphasize the division between interior and exterior, as it is in American Expressionist drama, it is instead the middle term and the liminal space in many narratives of African American circulation. Migrants arrive from southern cities to start a new life; comedians and chorus

girls visit cabarets and bring the jokes, songs, and dances back to white cultural centers; Harlemites visit their more established friends in the row houses of Brooklyn or go on day-trips to Coney Island; light-skinned African-Americans pass for white, but still feel the lure of their culture. The subway mediates all of these stories – the migrant and the chorus girl, the passer and the Harlemite pleasure-seeker could share the same subway car. As we will see in this chapter, the modern attention to transportation vividly presents the psychological contours of black subjectivity in transition.

As Langston Hughes describes above, Southern African Americans of this era moved to the New York neighborhood in search of a black utopia. Though the period addressed in this chapter takes place some twenty years before Billy Strayhorn's musical admonition to "Take the A Train," the migration to Harlem in the 1920s was as driven and optimistic as that iconic composition (Groce 84). Hughes depicts migration in eminently modern terms, portraying the initial encounter with Harlem as rhythmic, jazzy, even cubist. The migrants' one-way movement into the future, however, is coupled with a sense of repetitive movement that verges on entrapment: migrants actively "look" for the "Promised Land" but as they acclimate to the city they passively "end up" moving away from this destination on their regular subway rides to downtown jobs. A conduit for "Southern Harlem" to be channeled to the "Promised Land," the subway also serves as a synecdoche for the routines of city life in which unprepared migrants are quickly caught up. Hughes's joy about the idea of Harlem, the push and pull between one-way migration and repeated circulation, and his brief glimpse of racial community in a scene of urban routine serve as a template for the narratives discussed in my chapter. Rudolph Fisher's short story "The City of Refuge" (1925) and Walter White's novel Flight (1926)

interrogate concerns central to the Harlem Renaissance, including the relationship between tradition and modernity and the possibility of constructing a complex community out of a neighborhood as disparate in its parts as a Picasso painting. They use the subway passenger's mechanized movement and partial vision to challenge assumptions about the agency of the modern black subject.

Theories of movement are central to contemporary considerations of black literature and culture. “The fundamental theme of New World African modernity,” says Cornel West, “is neither integration nor separation but rather migration and emigration” (qtd. in Griffin 2). Many scholars have attended to the international circulation of cultures of the Black Atlantic and the African diaspora.³ African American circulation encompasses interregional movements like the sale of slaves “downriver,” the movement toward freedom on the Underground Railroad, and the Great Migration in the early twentieth century — the particular movement on which this chapter focuses.⁴ World War One led the United States government to curb the foreign immigration that brought Dymov’s characters and their ilk to New York. This xenophobic restriction also led to a labor shortage. Consequently, African Americans from the South moved to Northern industrial and cultural centers in order to fill this void.

The trials of Southern migrants in Northern cities constitute a major subject of twentieth-century African American literature.⁵ Black writers of the 1920s considered migration in a variety of directions: Wallace Thurman portrays a move west from Idaho to Los Angeles in The Blacker the Berry; Nella Larsen sends the Chicago-born mixed-race heroine of Quicksand to Denmark to visit her mother’s relatives. Fisher’s “The City of Refuge” is a prototypical African American migration narrative, one where a hapless

Southern folk protagonist (ironically named King Solomon Gillis) is dazzled by the big city that teaches him a harsh lesson.⁶ Extremely well received in its day, the story was originally published in The Atlantic Monthly and reprinted in The New Negro (1925). Its title became a synonym for Harlem in writing of the period (De Jongh 17), and was used as a chapter title in David Levering Lewis's groundbreaking cultural history, When Harlem Was in Vogue (25). White's novel Flight was less successful and less typical than Fisher's was. Flight serves as a striking counterpoint to Fisher's story, however, since its protagonist, Mimi Daquin, is a migrant whose intellectual development and aesthetic distance from "her people" more closely mirrors the attitude of Harlem Renaissance intellectuals themselves than that the migrating folk. Indeed, there is a curious connection between Harlem Renaissance intellectuals and the migrants they tend to portray: both look at the daily life of Harlem with the defamiliarized perspective of an outsider. Both Fisher and White were well acquainted with Harlem by the mid-1920s; their use of the migration narrative, however, enables them to juxtapose the image of Harlem in the mind of the newcomer with the reality of everyday life there. Though they differ radically in tone and style, these narratives give us a broad sense of how transportation technology shaped black urban subjectivity.

Mimi and Gillis share almost nothing in common – except for their experience of migration and the forced confrontation with their pasts that it brings about. Fisher and White were interested in analyzing the larger cultural and political realities of African American migration, but critics do not tend to discuss these writers together.⁷ Much criticism of the Harlem Renaissance observes an implicit divide between what Robert Bone calls "The Harlem School" and "The Rear Guard" (64). The former group includes

writers who told tales of working-class figures with “authentic,” folk-inflected ways of life, such as Fisher, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Zora Neale Hurston. As we can see in Du Bois’s review of Walls of Jericho, the more conservative “rear guard” often found this younger group’s work to be primitivist pandering to white modernist taste for the exotic (Bone, Negro Novel 95). The rear guard included Du Bois, Jessie Redmon Fauset, and to a lesser degree Nella Larsen and Walter White.⁸ Their writing focused on middle-class strivers who spoke standard English, kept tidy houses, and asked, as Countee Cullen did in his poem “Heritage,” “What is Africa to me?” (250). In spite of their differences, all of these authors were deeply invested in the period’s debate about the role of African American art and the social responsibilities of the New Negro.⁹ They also share an acute interest in technologies of modernity.¹⁰ And that is why I consider Fisher and White’s narratives in tandem: both consider the lack of agency inherent in subway movement in order to better understand Harlem Renaissance writers’ relationship to their collective past and to the concerns of the larger modernist city.

Like the subway dreamers of American Expressionist drama, African American migrants were transported north – and particularly to Harlem – by a host of larger forces. The difficulty of sharecropping, the constant threat of Southern violence, and the increase in labor demand during World War One all played a role in this dramatic uprooting. Perhaps the most important factor in this mass exodus was the utopian characterization of Northern cities in the black press; the Chicago Defender’s importance as a cultural organ for popularizing Northern migration, for example, cannot be overestimated (Rodgers 13). Harlem Renaissance writers also cast Northern urban space in utopian terms. The Great Migration and Harlem were initially not synonymous. Emmett Scott’s The Negro

Migration During the War (1920) does not include a single chapter that focuses on New York.¹¹ Though black New Yorkers began moving to Harlem in the early 1900s, the overall Northern migration was more driven by economic desires and more focused on industrial centers with good-paying factory jobs.¹² But by the mid-1920s, regard for the metropolis was on the rise. Eugene Kinckle Jones, Executive Secretary of the National Urban League, declared that New York City's "reputation has been broadcasted to every nook and corner of the Southland" (Jones 8). Renaissance writers played an important role in broadcasting Harlem's reputation and tying it to the migration north. The one person most responsible for this new connection of Northern space and cultural opportunity was Alain Locke. Throughout this chapter, I will return to Locke's writings on migration, perhaps the most influential of the period, in order to distinguish his ideas from the mechanized and routine migration by subway.



Figure 7. Cover of the Harlem issue of Survey Graphic magazine (1925)

A philosophy professor at Howard, Locke is popularly known as the "dean" of the Harlem Renaissance.¹³ In 1924, the editor of Survey magazine, a white progressive

periodical, commissioned a special issue on Harlem (Figure 7). He asked Locke to edit it and write the introduction (Rampersad xi).¹⁴ The “Harlem Number” of the Survey Graphic was edited and expanded into The New Negro (1925), a book-length anthology that widened its lens from Harlem to the whole of modern black culture.¹⁵ Rather than the assimilation to white middle-class norms illustrated by Booker T. Washington’s New Negro for a New Century (1900), The New Negro amassed anthropological, sociological, and literary explorations of the unique qualities of the black experience. This interest encompassed city life and patterns of migration, the culture and folk traditions of Southern African Americans and slaves before them, as well as art from the African continent. Locke’s framing essays that began the “Harlem Number” and The New Negro characterize movement North as a conscious embrace of cultural modernity. Fisher and White use images of the subway, and particularly its restricted physicality and limited vision, to counter the optimistic emphasis on personal choice in the construction of a collective black culture during the Harlem Renaissance. The migrants in the narratives of only gain a larger sense of racial collectivity and African American history during brief, embodied moments of submission to larger forces. “The City of Refuge” and Flight counter Locke’s optimism in their portrayal of migration as movement that requires an abandonment of agency.

Yet I do not wish to suggest that Locke put forward the “wrong” view of migration and Fisher and White gave more correct ones. These authors were all members of the Harlem intelligentsia, and they all played a part in the conceptualization of the New Negro and of black culture. “The City of Refuge” and Flight contribute to that discourse in interesting ways, I suggest, because Fisher and White find in the restrictive

movement of the subway and the relationship between the subway and the city a means of articulating the complex and troubled relationship between African American tradition and modernity, a central concern of the Harlem Renaissance. Their narratives' protagonists, grappling with the relationship between old life and new, also suggest the difficulty in reconciling past and present. Fisher, for instance, shows us the ways in which the Southern migrant's move to the city carries on Southern realities even as it disavows them; White's novel suggests that the only way African Americans can deal with their personal and cultural history is through an acceptance of the past as something that rises up into the present at unexpected moments and can never be entirely hidden or rewritten.¹⁶ Considering the Harlem Renaissance through the lens of subway movement offers a more historically and geographically specific understanding of migration, as well as one that connects African American migration to the circulation of other groups through 1920s New York.¹⁷ "The City of Refuge" and Flight both follow and revise the structure of what Robert Stepto typifies as "ascent narratives" (167). Each story charts its protagonist's movement from Southern restriction and ignorance to Northern freedom and literacy. The physical restriction, spatial confusion, and lack of agency inherent in subway movement connect it to earlier ascent narratives, particularly slave narratives. But Fisher and White also call into question their pilgrims' progress, minimizing the uniqueness of their journeys and suggesting the possible negative consequences of northern movement.

A practicing doctor and X-ray technician, Rudolph Fisher brings a similarly analytic perspective to his short stories and novels, which anatomize the distinctions in skin tone, birthplace, class perspective, and geographical location that make up 1920s

Harlem life.¹⁸ Fisher lived in Harlem for two years as a small child before growing up in Providence, Rhode Island (Bone, “Down Home,” 151). He received bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Brown University and his MD at Howard University; scientific research at Columbia University brought him to Harlem during the Renaissance. His first novel, The Walls of Jericho (1928) was a commercial and critical success, though W.E.B. Du Bois disliked its focus on lower-class black life and its neglect of politics in favor of slang and local color (374). But most contemporary critics praised the novel because of its inclusion of the wide spectrum of African American types, from the “dictiest dicty” (the most elite, light-skinned Harlemit) to the most low-class “rat” (Fisher, Walls of Jericho 70).

Critics often discuss Rudolph Fisher’s stories as attempts to construct an urban African American culture that partakes equally of the folk and the modern.¹⁹ Characters who embody folk values tend to be the heroes, tempering the effect of the city through appeals to shared history or culture. For example, the grandmother in “The Promised Land,” tries to keep her grandsons from fighting by throwing the Bible at them (Fisher 85); in “Common Meter,” bandleader Fess Baxter transports a dancehall crowd with an old-style Southern blues (Fisher 147). But in “The City of Refuge,” King Solomon Gillis is not the font of ancient wisdom his name suggests. Rather than a cultural repository, Gillis is a comic type – the country fool who thinks his luck will change once he comes to the big city. According to David Levering Lewis, the Great Migration brought “thousands of Gillises stumbling out of the 135th Street subway or swaying up Lenox Avenue atop overloaded carts and trucks” (34). Instead of being a comforting reminder of home in a

cold, heartless city, Gillis and his ilk function as an embarrassing evocation of what more acclimated Harlemites must have looked like when they first arrived.

“The City of Refuge” walks the tightrope between the traditional and the modern by portraying the wide-eyed wonder of its folk protagonist with a distanced and amused narrative voice. Gillis has killed a white man by accident in the South and fled to Harlem to begin his life anew. Emerging from the subway station, he encounters an old friend from home named Mouse Uggam. Uggam has lived in New York for some time and has become, as described in the original manuscript for the story, “Harlemized almost past recognition” (“City of Refuge” MS 5). Indeed, Uggam is a stand-in for the far more numerous Harlem residents, those who have acclimated to city routines and see how the cycles of migration work. As a knowledgeable Harlemite, Uggam takes advantage of Gillis’s naïveté: the migrant serves as an unwitting front for Uggam’s drug dealing and is eventually arrested at a Harlem nightclub. Fisher concludes his tale with Gillis in the same posture of wonder as when he initially emerged from the subway, forcing readers to ask whether escaping from old patterns is possible for Southern migrants in the modern city. Walter White’s second novel Flight ends in a similarly repetitive fashion, showing his migrant heroine on the cusp of returning to Harlem.

Unlike Fisher, White is far better known for his professional achievements than for his literary contributions.²⁰ A longtime employee of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, he succeeded James Weldon Johnson as the organization’s executive secretary (Lois Brown 562). Fair-haired and blue-eyed, White used his appearance to his advantage in order to investigate reports of lynching for the NAACP. His first novel The Fire in the Flint (1924) follows an educated African

American physician who is educated in the North, returns to his home in Georgia, becomes politically active, and is eventually lynched.²¹ While White's research provided the factual core of his first novel, his appearance serves as the emotional core of his second novel. Late in the story, its heroine "passes" as a white woman of French extraction, and previous critical work on Flight, though scarce, has argued for reading Mimi as a figure with whom White identified (Neil Brooks 376). Taken together, White's novels suggest the difficult and ambivalent connection of race, geography, and identity in early twentieth-century African American culture.

Flight tells the story of Mimi Daquin, a beautiful and free-spirited woman who continually starts over, recreates herself, and flees her past. As a young girl, Mimi moves from New Orleans to Atlanta when her father remarries. There, she becomes involved with (and pregnant by) Carl Hunter, a fellow outsider and dreamer. When she tells him about their child, he first suggests that she should have an abortion, and then reluctantly offers to marry her. Aghast at the heartless conventionality of her lover, Mimi moves to Philadelphia to raise her son alone. The difficulty of making ends meet is too pressing, so Mimi moves to Harlem to live with her aunt, while her son Jean is left in an orphanage. She succeeds in Harlem, but a visitor from Atlanta reveals her past. Humiliated, Mimi moves once again, this time to a white neighborhood in New York. She works for a stylish dressmaker, rises in the ranks, and eventually marries a man she meets in Paris. He is a caricature of rich, white male intolerance, and Mimi again becomes restless in her comfortable life. In his autobiography, White suggests that this novel was less successful than The Fire in the Flint "because the story it told was less melodramatic" (Man Called White 80). From this brief plot description, however, we can see that Mimi's life is full of

upheaval and melodramatic incident. Most critics agree that the polemical tone of White's writing served as a distraction: in Melvin Tolson's words, "the propagandist in Walter White overshadows the novelist" (80). Although White can be didactic as a writer, the sheer intensity in his depictions of Mimi's compulsion to move merits attention. Her story suggests the incompatibility of an unsettled racial identity with a settled place of residence.

Mimi's ceaseless migration dissatisfied Frank Horne, a minor poet of the Harlem Renaissance who reviewed Flight in the July 1926 issue of Opportunity.²² His criticism set off a debate on the letters page: Walter White and Nella Larsen (going by her married name of Imes) both wrote in to defend the book. Horne responded to their responses, suggesting that Flight was both didactic and obscure and "might just as well have been written in some manner as this:--- 'Mimi – colored – disillusioned – white – disillusioned – No. 2 – colored No. 2 ...please use imagination.'" (326) This mockingly telegraphic style in fact reduces Mimi's story to its essence: she is colored, becomes disillusioned by being colored, moves on to being white, becomes similarly disillusioned with whiteness, then has a second go at being colored as the novel ends. Flight argues that African Americans "have successfully resisted mechanization," but Mimi's compulsive forward movement may contradict that assertion.

"The City of Refuge" and Flight both espouse a common modernist attitude toward technology: we need to control machines, or they will control us. Each narrative suggests in part that urban African Americans model a more healthy relationship to technology than their white compatriots. The black traffic cop spotted at the beginning of "The City of Refuge" induces awe because cars (and their white drivers) "leaped or

crouched at his bidding” (Fisher 29). In Flight, a visitor from China observes to Mimi, “only your Negroes have successfully resisted mechanization” (White 291). Yet attending to the migrants’ subway rides reveals ambivalence about technology and the ability to control it. Fisher and White use machines to underscore how migrants are themselves mechanical. Many reviewers alluded to the robotic quality of Mimi’s migrations described in Flight; similarly, Fisher’s protagonist is a comic type whose story is pre-determined well before he arrives in the “City of Refuge.” Connecting new technologies and newly arrived migrants, the narratives betray a suspicion not only that technology will not improve our lives but also that the participation of the migrating masses in the construction of the “New Negro” movement is highly doubtful.

Fisher and White's focus on mechanization and the resultant lack of control mitigates the power of one-way movement, both the presumed movement of migrants to the “Promised Land” and the presumed progress central to the discourse of the “New Negro.” Their modernist migration narratives undercut the linearity of any forward movement by emphasizing it as part of a cycle as well. In the following section, I discuss how “The City of Refuge” and Flight use the experience of the Great Migration to articulate how Harlem has been and continues to be defined by myriad small migrations: the move to Harlem is monumental on the small scale and commonplace in the grand scheme of urban circulation. The very typicality of the idea of transformative movement calls into question the uniqueness of the movements they describe. After discussing the ordinary quality of migration, I turn to the lack of agency that defines modern movement – both one-way and round-trip. The modern city is one of endless movement, and one of mindless movement as well. Migrants’ submission to the underground space of the

subway, rather than setting them apart from more-seasoned city dwellers, can be thought of as their first experience of urban subjectivity. Fisher and White use underground movement to imagine a partial and provisional relationship between tradition and modernity. The brief epiphanies at moments of surrender stand in sharp contrast to the moments of emergence from the subway, where Fisher and White depict the apparent coherence of the scene and progress of the protagonist as deeply ironic and illusory. The moments when we think we've arrived, these subway migration narratives suggest, are precisely the moments where we have the least control over our futures; only when helpless, blinded, misrecognizing the scene before them do the protagonists in "The City of Refuge" and Flight understand what it means to be New Negroes.

Everyday Migrations

A sense of flux, of identity being up for grabs, permeates Harlem Renaissance narratives.²³ A D.H. Lawrence review of Flight sees in White's story the inevitability of change and relocation. He places it in illustrious company, reading its themes and style in relation to Carl Van Vechten's Nigger Heaven, John Dos Passos's Manhattan Transfer, and Ernest Hemingway's In Our Time. Lawrence says with a combination of scorn and wonder, "All these books might as well be called *Flight*. They give one the impression of swarms of grasshoppers hopping big hops, and buzzing occasionally on the wing, all from nowhere to nowhere, all over the place. What's the point of all this flight, when they start from nowhere and alight on nowhere?" (363). More cynical than Fisher and White, Lawrence sees such modern movement as vigorous but pointless. "The City of Refuge" and Flight, however, do not ask, "what's the point of all this flight?" They acknowledge

its omnipresence and instead refocus the question, asking, “what’s the result of all this flight?”²⁴ The attitude toward migration taken by Fisher and White distinguishes them from many of their peers in the Harlem Renaissance. Authors like Langston Hughes and Claude McKay tend to depict Harlem as a site of *place*, a neighborhood to put down roots. Occasionally protagonists take the subway to other parts of the city, but they always return, in the words of McKay’s best-selling novel, home to Harlem. On the contrary, “The City of Refuge” and Flight imagine Harlem as a *space*, a location “of movement, of history, of becoming” (Thacker 13).²⁵ These narratives suggest that movement, rather than the means to some idealized end, has become an end in itself, a fact of everyday life. The very commonplace quality of migration can be seen in both the narratives’ titles. To call a novel Flight when it depicts multiple flights is to suggest that each migration is symptomatic of a larger condition. “The City of Refuge” also suggests a perpetual search for sanctuary underpinning modern life.

Both narratives are particularly attentive to the historical and cultural embeddedness of Harlem’s constant change.²⁶ In the mid-1920s, the contemplation of Harlem as spectacle was at the height of fashion (Bone, Negro Novel 58-61). But rather than depicting the neighborhood in the timeless terms of primitivism, White introduces his protagonist to Harlem and simultaneously gives his readers a condensed version of the quarter’s development: “Down Lenox Avenue they walked. Harlem, which first had been Dutch 'Haarlem,' then Irish, afterwards Jewish and German, was in the flood-tide of transition to a Negro city within a city. From the doorway of a former private dwelling in a side street near bustling Lenox Avenue came a resonant flooding swell of music” (187). Urban histories of Harlem written in the 1920s and 1930s tend to emphasize the

provisionality of their information and the inevitability that Harlem will change in the future.²⁷ But Flight extends this discourse: not only has migration become a cliché of Harlem life in the 1920s, it has always been one. Even Harlem's architecture communicates its own history of urban redevelopment, with the "doorway of a former private dwelling" opening onto a church service. That's why so many books of the period insist on Harlem's history: when the subjective shifts of modern life are so dramatic, they depend upon the past in order to construct some kind of continuity.

Of course, the constant change of Harlem includes a constant stream of new arrivals. This Northern exodus had become such a familiar process that more seasoned Harlemites joke about it throughout Fisher's fiction. In "The South Lingers On," another Fisher story included in The New Negro, a clerk at an employment agency discovers that a job seeker has recently arrived from a farm in Virginia. He says dismissively, "Oh—migrant," and Fisher tells us, "In the clerk's tone were patronization, some contempt, a little cynical amusement, and complete comprehension. 'Migrant' meant nothing to Jake; to the clerk it explained everything" (75-6). In another section of this episodic narrative, a dishonest preacher hangs around Pennsylvania Station, encouraging migrants who debark from the railroad there to attend (and tithe at) his church (Fisher 74). Once migration has become an accepted fact of Harlem life, migrants become easier to spot and easier to exploit. In "The City of Refuge," migration has become so typical that the posture of a migrant on the subway steps can be read on sight. Mouse Uggam tells his bootlegger boss that he spotted Gillis "where you find all the jay birds when they first hit Harlem – at the subway entrance. This one come up the stairs, batted his eyes once or twice, an' froze to the spot – with his mouth open" (Fisher 30). Because the subway entrance enables one-

way migration and repeated circulation, it functions as a space of contact between different populations of Harlem. In an era when migration is a fact of life, migrants become just as much of a spectacle to Harlemites as Harlem does to migrants.

While Fisher describes the sociological effects of migration becoming the normal state of African American life, White describes the psychic effects. White's protagonist understands her own life story as segmented, made up of abrupt beginnings and endings linked together only by ceaseless forward motion. Like King Solomon Gillis, Mimi Daquin assumes each time she moves that she will be in that new place "'til [she] dies", that the increased freedom and opportunity awaiting her will finally allow her to settle down. Yet her restlessness continues in Atlanta, in Philadelphia, even in Harlem. Rather than remaining stuck in the past as Gillis is, Mimi jettisons everything from the past each time that she moves on. White suggests the mechanical quality of migration by showing how with each move Mimi imagines herself as "free! Free! Free!" (*Flight* 158, 300).²⁸ When Mimi returns to Harlem after an absence of ten years, she worries that she might run into an acquaintance from her former life, but then just as quickly dismisses this concern. White tells us that her Aunt Sophie, with whom she lived a decade ago, has moved back to New Orleans; Mimi "had long since been forgotten in the ever-changing life of Harlem" (291). And it is into this ever-changing neighborhood that she returns: Mimi can only gain a sense of stability in a place where no one stays put. This is true not only of Harlem but also of New York City as a whole. When Mimi moves to an apartment building in a white neighborhood, White tells us ironically of the "oldest inhabitant of the house, who had been living there now for a year and a half" (211).

Mimi's highly developed aesthetic sense and ceaseless desire for new beginnings connect her to Helga Crane, one of Nella Larsen's recklessly mobile heroines.²⁹ Helga and Mimi epitomize an individualistic restlessness that constantly tests the boundaries of racial restriction. Less optimistic than *Flight*, *Quicksand* (1928) ends with Helga married to a preacher in the rural South, thinking over her unstable life: "For she had to admit it wasn't new, this feeling of dissatisfaction, of asphyxiation. Something like it she had experienced before. In Naxos [the school in the South where she taught]. In New York. In Copenhagen. This differed only in degree" (134). Movement and improvement are inextricably linked, urging these modern women onward. But Larsen and White are both dubious about the prospects of forward motion. The flipside to the New Negro woman's boundless potential is her boundless potential for disappointment.

These characters display a propensity for self-reinvention that denies and negates their past. They participate in the culture of "self-willed beginning," the belief that Henry Louis Gates says enables the repeated reconstruction of the image of the African American as a "New Negro" (132). White portrays Mimi's journey as one with an ostensibly happy ending: she leaves her white husband to put down roots in the black community and live a more honest life with her son and her people.³⁰ Yet the novel ends with Mimi in transit, having left Washington Square but not arrived in Harlem. It is difficult not to suspect that she is about to enter into the same cycle of settlement and flight. As such, Mimi functions as a cautionary tale for African Americans trying to navigate the relationship between tradition and modernity in a period when the "New Negro" is being reconstructed once again. In the following section, I address migrants' illusory sense that their identities can be re-invented once they arrive in a new city. Fisher

and White use the submission demanded by subway movement in order to physicalize migrants' lack of control over their own fates in the city.

Setting Out for Harlem

During World War One, Southern African Americans boarded the railroad in droves, moving to cities like Pittsburgh, Detroit, and most of all Chicago.³¹ “Exodus trains,” so named to evoke the biblical exodus of slaves following Moses out of Egypt, offered one-way tickets North at dramatically reduced prices (Zabel 26). Labor recruiters and eager migrants played up the religious symbolism of this journey by chalking evocative slogans on the side of the train, such as “Bound for the Promised Land” (Bontemps 163). The railroad thus became a vehicle of transportation to a Northern utopia. This strategy astutely ties the spiritually transportive possibilities of the gospel train with the economic realities of Northern industry. It also underscores the lack of agency African Americans felt in their transformation; larger forces moved them North, whether industrial, economic, or spiritual.

Throughout my dissertation, I discuss how New York modernist writers use the subway to communicate the sense of being transported by abstract forces. Alain Locke differs from these other authors because he is so invested in the dynamic construction of black culture by modern African Americans. His introduction to The New Negro, for instance is better read as a manifesto than as an objective analysis of cultural trends. He insists that Southern migrants' participation in the Northern exodus is active rather than reactive:

Neither labor demand, the bollweevil nor the Ku Klux Klan is a basic factor, however contributory any or all of them may have been. The wash and rush of this human tide on the beach line of the Northern city centers is to be explained primarily in terms of a new vision of opportunity, of social and economic freedom, of a spirit to seize, even in the face of an extortionate and heavy toll, a chance for the improvement of conditions. (7)

Here we see two competing desires in the portrayal of the Great Migration. Locke argues for the visionary intentions of this population, but actual migrants are oddly absent from this passage; instead, their movement is naturalized as the rolling in of a “human tide.” He even absents himself from the role of prophet or analyzer, passively constructing a movement that “is to be explained” rather than taking credit for his own explanation. Locke’s desire for Harlem to be a cultural Mecca conflicts with his suspicion that migrants are mere waves crashing mindlessly on New York’s shores. Critics often accuse Alain Locke of cultural hierarchizing, and he was certainly only interested in folk culture as he could make use of it in Northern space (Carby “Politics” 30). David Levering Lewis finds Locke’s populism disingenuous, saying that he was “Eurocentric to the tip of his cane” (117) and assumed that most educated members of the race would serve as its advance guard. I am less interested in Locke’s intentions toward the migrants and more interested in his recognition of the dangerous submission to the forces of the city embodied in migration. Fisher and White locate interesting problems and possibilities in this mindlessness, seeing it both as a hindrance to the kind of cultural recreation Locke imagines and as a site for possible (if fleeting) reconciliation between Southern tradition and Northern modernity.

Alterations in the built environment of the subway made the entrance to New York City at the dawn of the Great Migration qualitatively different than it had been in the past – both more efficient and more passive. At the turn of the century, the African American migrant would have entered New York City by ferry, in the same fashion as any other new arrival. Manhattan was still an island, and the only span that crossed one of its rivers was the Brooklyn Bridge (Ballon 19). Trains moving up the eastern seaboard from Philadelphia, Baltimore, and points south stopped at Jersey City. There, the entire railway crowd would debark and board ferries to Manhattan, which caused a bottleneck of tremendous proportions. Railroad movement was streamlined in 1910 with the opening of Pennsylvania Station; trains could now tunnel beneath the Hudson River and emerge in Manhattan.³² This tunneling into New York had narrative consequences as well as geographic ones: Harlem begins to seem less like a conscious destination and more like the inevitable end to an underground journey.

The first two paragraphs of “The City of Refuge” put this distinction in sharp relief by illustrating how little Gillis has to do with his own journey North. As he stands poised on the subway steps at 135th Street and Lenox Avenue (the crossroads of Harlem), King Solomon Gillis thinks back over how he has arrived there. He remembers “the railroad station, the long, white-walled corridor, the impassible slot machine, the terrifying subway train” (Fisher 28). The “long, white-walled corridor” in Fisher’s description is a tunnel that connects the area of Pennsylvania Station where railroad passengers exited their trains with the entrance to the subway. Although the 135th Street station in Harlem opened as part of the initial IRT line in 1904, the subway connection to Harlem inside Penn Station opened in 1917, making it almost exactly coincident with the

Great Migration (“IRT West Side”). Gillis’s journey through the railroad station to the subway, and his subway ride to Harlem, are described concretely and thoroughly; his railroad journey from Washington D.C. to New York, on the contrary, is not described at all. And the “slot machine,” a defamiliarized vision of the subway turnstile, underscores Gillis’s sense that luck alone moves him North: he drops a nickel in, and the machine decides if it will allow him to keep moving.

Considering the one-way movement of migration divorced from progressive or developmental impulses, it can seem like entrapment. Although Gillis envisions Harlem as a land of opportunity, it is also one toward which he is magically moved. Mouse Uggam’s parents, a “traveling preacher,” black-owned newspapers, and “a Southwest bootlegger” all encourage King Solomon Gillis to move to Harlem (Fisher 28). While he may have the agency to migrate North on his own, his eventual destination seems inevitable; once he has arrived, his bad end seems equally unavoidable. Innovations in the built environment during the 1910s and 1920s ensured that migrants had no time to orient themselves to New York City once they left the railroad: King Solomon Gillis moves directly from the railroad, through the crowded station, to the subway. He just as easily moves from entering the Harlem neighborhood to imitating the easy racism of Mouse Uggam to being an unwitting drug dealer. In a city and a time period that valued efficient movement, Fisher suggests that migrants can start on one path and find it as inescapable as an express train.

Gillis’s understanding of subway space condenses his subjection to other peoples’ desires and to larger forces of urban life. He makes sense of his first subway ride by imagining himself surrendering to a fantastic machine. He feels “as if he had been caught

up in the jaws of a steam-shovel, jammed together with other helpless lumps of dirt, swept blindly along for a time, and at last abruptly dumped” (Fisher 28). A steam shovel transporting soil to an industrialized northern space, the subway seems to be a machine of the Great Migration in miniature. This racialized imagery is turned back on itself, however, since *all* the passengers, black and white, are “helpless lumps of dirt.” Thus, the subway is less a machine of the Great Migration specifically and more a space that epitomizes New York City’s constant development. The repeated movement of the subway, like the repeated movement of migrants into Harlem, is a mindless cycle; both are abstract forces of city life that don’t care who or what they’re consuming.

In Flight, Mimi also understands subway movement as submission to the abstract, unknowable forces of urban life. On her first subway ride, Mimi has to be led by her aunt through the bewildering crowds of Penn Station and imagines the subway as a “roaring monster that leapt upon them” (185). Yet this passivity does not appear to decrease with familiarity: she sees black musicians “swallowed up” by the subway en route to a downtown gig; in the neighborhood where she moves in order to pass for white, fellow residents are “belch[ed]” from their apartment buildings, “swallowed up by the yawning and insatiable pits,” and “whirled to down-town jobs by the rushing, roaring subways” (210). Here, as in Bronx Express, the subway becomes a monstrous personification of the needs of the capitalist city, devouring people for the duration of the work day and then spitting them back to the fringes. This suggests a more geographically specific reading of Farah Jasmine Griffin’s assertion that the move North shifts the focus of social control from the migrant’s body to his psyche and from processes of active violence (like lynching) to those of control and regulation (102). Migrants who worked as

sharecroppers or toiled in Southern factories had already experienced control and regulation, but the subway transforms that submission into a lateral, if not upward, mobility.

The subway's role as a machine of modernity in "The City of Refuge" and Flight allows us to take a broader view of migrants' lack of control over their own movements. It is unnecessary to redeem migration by saying that it was intentional. Migrants do not separate themselves from modern urban subjects by submitting to the subway. For Fisher and White, the lack of agency migrants feel when faced with the daunting cityscape operates in dialectical relation to the lack of agency experienced in everyday circulation within the city. Yet as with other authors in my dissertation, the transportation through underground space has its pleasures and revelations: the physical restriction and partial vision accompanying subway movement are both specific manifestations of the overall lack of agency within the modern city and a means of understanding the relationship between past and present that can be navigated through migration. These forms of limited perception connect the experience of moving north on the railroad and the subway; I take up this subject in the following section.

Underground Sounds and Visions

As I argue throughout my project, one of the primary differences between the New York subway and earlier forms of public transportation lies in the experience of underground movement. Beginning is dissociated from end, and modern passengers are disconnected from the city through which they move. This experience of city space lies at the heart of Harlem Renaissance migration narratives as well. Both "The City of Refuge"

and Flight employ the restricted and disorienting subway space as a warning and as a site of creative promise: neither migrants nor the constructors of black culture should assume that they know where they are headed, or the relationship between the beginning and end of the story.

As with other writers in my dissertation, Fisher and White reconsider and extend the metaphors of modernity that earlier writers had associated with the railroad. Indeed, the railroad car is an inescapable presence in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century African American writing.³³ So what does it mean for Harlem Renaissance writers to represent the subway along with, or even instead of, the train? In part, Fisher and White wish to scale down the promise of that mythological machine: certainly the underground subway journey is more efficient and less remarkable than that of the Underground Railroad. Yet the subway ride is not merely a fallen imitation of the railroad journey north. The subway mitigates the apparent linearity of railroad migration. The railroad gives the illusion of a unidirectional trip, one that migrants carry with them when they first emerge in Harlem. Yet this element of the urban infrastructure also transports longtime Harlemites “in morning rush time – headed downtown” as part of the routine commute between work and home. The subway suggests a more pragmatic and less utopian migration, one that acknowledges that it is following pre-established and well-trod paths. Yet in the disorientation of underground movement, Harlem Renaissance writers locate the new possibilities of modern migration.

In one of its most experimental passages of “The City of Refuge,” Gillis maneuvers his way through Pennsylvania Station, boards the subway, and rides it to Harlem. But rather than describing Gillis’s actions, the narrative describes the shifting

noises of the city that surround him. Fisher illustrates the bewilderment of his migrant protagonist by presenting a decontextualized catalog of “strange and terrible sounds”:

“New York! Penn Terminal – all change!” “Pohter, hyer, pohter, suh?” Shuffle of a thousand soles, clatter of a thousand heels, innumerable echoes. Cracking rifle-shots – no, snapping turnstiles. “Put a nickel in!” “Harlem? Sure. This side – next train.” Distant thunder, nearing. The screeching onslaught of the fiery hosts of hell, headlong, breath-taking. Car doors rattling, sliding, banging open. “Say, wha’ d’ye think this is, a baggage car?” Heat, oppression, suffocation – eternity – “Hundred’n turdy-fif’ next!” More turnstiles. Jonah emerging from the whale.
(28)³⁴

Like Charles Ives’s Central Park in the Dark and Georges Antheil’s Ballet Mechanique, this part of Fisher’s story creates an urban symphony of disorientation.³⁵ Few of the sounds are described in full sentences: they are telegraphic, dependent on gerunds that suggest motion in progress. In a story marked elsewhere by an ironic distance from its protagonist, this passage collapses Gillis’s and the narrator’s perspective to remarkable effect. The cacophony of city life, when heard anew through a migrant’s ears, can still shock even the most jaded New Yorker.

In his extended attention to Gillis’s initial subway ride, Fisher focuses on an experience of urban modernity that white modernist writers tend to shun. Says Emily Thompson in The Soundscape of Modernity, “African Americans who migrated from rural southern cities to large industrial cities would have experienced an aural transformation far more dramatic than virtually any other group of Americans at this time” (132). Throughout this passage, we see Gillis trying to make sense of his

surroundings using Southern folk knowledge. The religious imagery – Jonah, the “fiery hosts of hell” – helps Gillis reckon with the sublimity of this underground space. Perhaps most revealingly, Gillis senses echoes of Southern violence in the subway space. He mishears his surroundings, then corrects his perception: “Cracking rifle-shots – no, snapping turnstiles.” Gillis’s anxiety about fleeing his Southern crimes leads him momentarily to locate himself in a remembered landscape, one where men with rifles pursue him. Gillis repeatedly attempts to understand Northern space in Southern terms: his tiny apartment to a chicken coop, and imagines the values of Harlem dwellers as similar to those in his Southern black community. As we will see again when I discuss the conclusion to “The City of Refuge,” Fisher suggests that misrecognition can sometimes offer a truer sense of the subject’s relationship to his or her surroundings than correct perception might. Like Hungerproud dreaming of being lynched, Gillis’s sense of the danger on the subway is wrong on the surface; also like Hungerproud’s dream, Gillis’s mishearing reveals an understanding of the parallels between spaces and situations that he could not consciously articulate. Gillis’s disoriented sense perception links past and present, marking this space of transit as a true space of transition. Considering black subjectivity in terms of underground movement shows the migrant’s constant redefinition of himself in relation to the spaces through which he moves.

The disorientation of subway space forces migrants to construct more provisional mental maps of their location; this loss of control also enables them to construct more complex models of continuity between past and present. Flight marks each of Mimi’s transitions with an image that spatially estranges old self from new. When she moves from Atlanta to Philadelphia to give birth to her child, she feels “that she had definitely

closed the pages of the first book of her life” and wonders “what was written on the pages of that second book whose cover she was now lifting” (White 154); on the train to Harlem, her son left behind in a Baltimore orphanage, she “sense[s] intuitively that the second book was being shut” (White 184). Her move from Harlem to a white New York neighborhood is characterized in a less dramatic but more urban simile:

Just like a novel by Rolland, she thought. Or, better, her life to her was like one of those Harlem apartments of seemingly interminable length, with no hall and with each room opening into the next one. Railroad flats, she had heard them called. She felt that she was always opening the door of another room, passing through it, then opening and closing before her, never to be reopened, the door of the next cubicle. (White 209)

Where black subjectivity has been associated with the freedom of the railroad, this vision has narrowed to the limited movement and change of the railroad flat.³⁶ Yet this is not a wholly pessimistic figure. Closing a door to the past and opening a door onto the future are gestures that link the stages of Mimi’s life in a narrative of forward progress; the space may be more limited, but she can tell that she’s moving ahead instead of just moving on. The restricted, partial vision of underground movement here is channeled into a vision of an unknowable future. In the same way that a subway rider unconsciously grasps the pattern of the abstract system through which she moves, Mimi has hit upon a model of her own life that accepts instability and potential disaster without retreating into nihilism. Accepting that movement is inevitable, she still finds continuity in the fact that the rooms are linked together into a whole apartment. Some larger logic connects the

beginning and end of a subway journey, even if the rider cannot see it; some architecture also connects Mimi's otherwise disconnected lives.

Like the partial vision engendered by subway movement, claustrophobia plays an important and not wholly negative role in Harlem Renaissance migration narratives. White describes Mimi's struggles late in the novel: "Out of the chaotic writhing of her growing restlessness she sought and vaguely began to see the dim path which would lead, she thought, to a broader view of the scene of which she was a part" (268). The parallels to the subway ride here are striking: she imagines herself moving through a restrictive darkness and toward a more open and illuminated state of mind, patterned on the subway's dialectic of confinement and release. Mimi has internalized the spatial experience of migration as rebirth. White modernists often deploy the claustrophobic subway as a spatial metaphor for the modern subject's newfound insignificance in relation to the urban infrastructure. Rather than offering such a dramatic contrast, subway migration narratives participate in the African American cultural tradition that portrays confinement as a necessary precondition for freedom. Thus, the lack of agency inherent in subway movement offers a means for migrants to imagine their journey as it relates to a larger African American tradition.

Because it is rooted in spatial restriction, African American movement by train cannot wholly be understood using the same model of perception inherited from Wolfgang Schivelbusch, whose important work The Railway Journey is discussed in my introduction. Schivelbusch theorizes the perception of railway passengers as "panoramic," with the passing scenes experienced as a distanced blur or spectacle (52-69). In most cases, African American movement by train does not allow for the leisure

and detachment inherent in this way of seeing. Instead, black railroad passengers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tended to experience a limited perspective, whether riding in a crowded Jim Crow car, a cramped railway kitchen, or the hiding place of a stowaway or hobo. The most extreme version of this limited perspective can be seen in the spatial disorientation of slaves escaping north by the Underground Railroad, since safe movement between “stations” had to follow an evasive, indirect path and usually took place in darkness or while hidden (Siebert 54-5, 62). In perhaps the most dramatic example, detailed in The Narrative of Henry Box Brown (1849), a slave ships himself to freedom by hiding in a two-by-three foot wooden box and traveling in a mail coach (Rodgers 127). This trope of claustrophobia continued even after slavery ended, with the narrator in The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man stowing away in a Pullman porter’s linen closet (Johnson 30). Both of these men suffer for their journeys, the social restrictions of race and class imprinting themselves on their bodies. The Ex-Colored Man is “bumped and bruised against the narrow walls” of his compartment (Johnson 30), physicalizing how the narrator repeatedly chafes against the restrictiveness of possible roles for educated African Americans. Box Brown “narrowly avoided permanent injuries” (Rodgers 127) from his journey, which suggests more fatal possibilities for fugitive slaves. For African Americans, movement is not intrinsically equated with freedom; the railroad, then, is a sign of delayed gratification.

The claustrophobia of Gillis’s subway ride is clearly associated with the railroad, as we can hear in the fellow passenger’s joke, “wha’ d’ye think this is, a baggage car?” (Fisher 28). This jest about Gillis being laden with bags references also evokes Jim Crow railroad cars, which often doubled as baggage cars.³⁷ Gillis has traded restricted

movement shared with members of his race alone for restricted movement shared equally with all city dwellers. The claustrophobia of the subway thus served an important political function noted in Leon Litwack's Trouble in Mind: "in street cars they touch as free citizens, each paying for the right to ride, the white not in place of command, the Negro without obligation of servitude. Street car relationships are, therefore, symbolic of new conditions" (231). Throughout "The City of Refuge" Fisher uses moments like this to suggest that while New York is spatially restrictive, it also offers a freedom unavailable in the South. On the subway, Gillis briefly and fragmentedly feels "Heat, oppression, suffocation – eternity." But it's not an eternity: his thoughts are interrupted by the conductor's interjection, "Hundred'n turdy-fif' next!" (Fisher 28). Gillis cannot see where he is going, so he does not know how long he has to suffer. Thankfully, neither the subway's restriction nor its disorientation is as bad as he had expected. In the following section, I discuss the subway steps as a liminal space where "The City of Refuge" and Flight pause to grapple with this issue of relating the cultural and personal past to the present. The symbolic resonance of the railroad, the spatial relationship of the subway to New York City, and the self-conscious construction of the Harlem Renaissance as a site of spatial and temporal rupture all shaped the 135th Street station on the IRT line into a space of emergence (Figure 8).



Figure 8. Tile mosaic for subway station at 135th Street and Lexington Avenue, Harlem

Emergence

For migrants in this period, the Harlem subway entrance serves as a threshold between the abandoned Southern self and the Northern one yet to be formed. Migrants pausing on the subway steps may function as a cliché in this period, but they also allow Harlem Renaissance writers to break from narrative constraints and experience a fleeting moment of revelatory accommodation to the new environment, a relocation both geographic and psychic. Langston Hughes's autobiography The Big Sea (1940) represents his initial move from Mexico to Harlem in such terms:

I can never put on paper the thrill of the underground ride to Harlem. I had never been in a subway before and it fascinated me – the noise, the speed, the green lights ahead. At every station I kept watching for the sign: 135th STREET. When I saw it, I held my breath. I came out onto the platform and looked around. It was still early morning and people were going to work. Hundreds of colored people! I wanted to shake hands with them, speak to them. I hadn't seen any colored people for so long – that is any Negro colored people.

I went up the steps and out into the bright September sunlight. Harlem! I stood there, dropped my bags, took a deep breath and felt happy again. (81)

Compared to the other accounts of the subway throughout my dissertation, Hughes's is particularly utopian. The noise and speed excite rather than assault Hughes's consciousness; the "green lights" provide go-ahead signals for the motorman and simultaneously confirm the rightness of Hughes's path. The emptiness of the train going north stands in stark contrast to that of American Expressionist drama. Arriving in the

early morning, Hughes travels in the opposite direction from rush hour, going uptown while everyone else goes downtown. Indeed, the subway becomes a figure of rebirth for Hughes, since he holds his breath when he sees the sign for Harlem and does not breathe again until he has emerged in his new home.

Hughes enters into the community of Harlem, even as everyone else is leaving this community for the daily routine of their job. Here we can see the contrasting modes of subway movement that recur throughout Harlem Renaissance migration narratives: the seemingly linear, unidirectional movement of the migrant and the repeated movement of the city-dweller. He seems comically naïve, eager to interrupt the subway rides of Harlemites to “shake hands with them” and “speak to them.” Yet Hughes recognizes (perhaps belatedly) the importance of Harlem as a space of urban routine. This “Mecca of the New Negro” is not only a cultural fantasy, it is a place where African Americans live everyday lives – and this includes a bleary-eyed commute to work every morning. As I discuss in later sections of this chapter, subway migration is never singular. Though earlier “ascent narratives” may bring their protagonists to a “symbolic north” (Stepito 167) and let them stay there, Fisher and White’s narratives use the repetitive movement of the subway to underscore the city’s perpetual oscillation between restriction and freedom.

Both “The City of Refuge” and Flight present extended scenes on the subway steps, portraying the initial encounter with the “symbolic north” as both seductive and illusory. Migrants emerging from the subway first experience Harlem as an image, one that brings their movement to a screeching halt and demands rapt attention. As Laura Mulvey says of the close-up on the female form in narrative cinema, this image of the

neighborhood “tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation” (398). Emerging into Harlem, Gillis freezes with his mouth agape; Mimi too is dazzled by the sights and sounds around her. In a period when Harlem had become a figment of the cultural imagination – in the popular press and popular song, as well as in the minds of Harlem intellectuals – focusing on the introduction of migrants into the neighborhood allows Fisher and White to juxtapose the fantasy of Harlem with the reality that they later confront. The organization of city space made possible by the subway prevents the kind of distanced vision of an ideal city that earlier migrants saw from the deck of a ferry. With subway movement, and particularly the embodied emergence into and implication in a crowd epitomized by the subway steps, any unified and utopian vision of black culture proves deceptive. One cannot observe the city without being observed as part of it.

Gillis emerges from the subway into a "Clean air, blue sky, bright sunlight" (Fisher 28). This pause relocates the narrative in a new but recognizable landscape, one whose potential seems infinite. Compared to the underground, mechanized space of the subway, Harlem seems nearly pastoral – the first indication that this vision of the city is too good to be true. Gillis is not interested in the natural environment, however: he gets his bearings by looking at the surrounding crowds, seeing "Negroes at every turn" and thinking "there was assuredly no doubt of his whereabouts. This was Negro Harlem" (29). Unlike the defamiliarizing environment of the subway, the image of Harlem is resolutely familiar, even uncannily so. "The City of Refuge" takes a naive protagonist as its subject in part so it can construct a sort of travelogue, displaying Harlem for white readers who have never been there in person. This is particularly true of the story when it

was initially published in The Atlantic Monthly. The subway mediates between black and white visions of the neighborhood.

More importantly, by presenting Harlem as something that even Gillis recognizes on sight, Fisher insists upon the pre-established quality of stories of migration and the image of Harlem in the black press. While his protagonist contemplates how he has arrived in the "Promised Land," Fisher meditates upon the means by which black culture has arrived at the point of the so-called Renaissance. After that dramatic sentence, "This was Negro Harlem," Fisher moves us into Gillis's mind, where we see the reasons for his journey: a preacher, a Southern bootlegger, and a friends' parents all convince him, but it is the "colored" newspapers that serve as the most evocative motivator. These newspapers "mentioned Negroes without comment, but always spoke of a white person as 'So-and-so, white.' That was the point. In Harlem, black was white." (29). An evocative indeterminacy animates the last sentence: the promise of being an uninflected subject is collapsed with the possibility of a carnivalesque misrule. Locke envisions a total reversal similar to Gillis's when he locates the power of the Harlem Renaissance in the Southern migrant, saying "it is the 'man farthest down' who is most active in getting up" ("New Negro" 7). Yet, as the rest of the story plays out, we see that Gillis's initial reading of the neighborhood could not be further from the truth. Visible as a migrant, he is neither normal nor in control of his own destiny. And rather than a topsy-turvy world where "black is white" and the powerless are powerful, Fisher gives us an environment as ruthlessly naturalistic as Dreiser's or Zola's. The first vision of Harlem, he suggests, is inevitably a false one – it is only through repeated encounters with the city that one gains

a sense of how the image does (and mostly does not) mesh with everyday routines of city life.

Fisher and White use the underground connections between railroad and subway to revise the journey to New York City seen in such central migration narratives as Paul Laurence Dunbar's The Sport of the Gods (1902) and James Weldon Johnson's Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912).³⁸ Earlier migrants experience a distanced view of the city on that first ferry ride; they approach it from afar and, consequently, have sufficient time to absorb its meaning. For Johnson's *Ex-Colored Man*, the initial vision of New York City is a "fatally fascinating" allegory for the temptations of modern urban life. A parody of the Statue of Liberty, "She sits like a great witch at the gate of the country, showing her alluring white face, and hiding her crooked hands and feet under the folds of her wide garments" (41). Paul Laurence Dunbar feels that "the provincial coming to New York for the first time" must feel "a thrill as he crosses the ferry over the river filled with plying craft and catches the first sight of the spires and buildings of New York" (356). In both cases, New York is a sort of Whitmanian ideal, a single picturesque image. The subway journey to Harlem allows no such separation from New York. Once Mimi and Gillis leave their trains, they are in the midst of a rushing crowd. The modernist migrant's first vision of the city is no longer an image to be contemplated, it's a bewildering space of transit to be navigated. There is no vision of the city that the modern black subject can take in from a safe distance. Even when they emerge from the subway and take in the scene of Harlem, migrants are already implicated in it; as we saw from Gillis's emergence to be visible is to be vulnerable.

Walter White is much more optimistic in his heroine's initial vision of Harlem, though he later suggests a similar kind of dangerous visibility in city space. Flight strikingly contrasts Mimi's initial emergence into Pennsylvania Station with her eventual emergence into Harlem. Indeed, the two locations serve as a kind objective correlative for the differences White sees between white and black use of city space. When Mimi first emerges from her train, the “faces which scanned the incoming passengers through iron fences” appear to her as “prisoners or animals eager to escape” (White 185), an eminently American Expressionist figure for the commuting crowd trapped by its desires. This image is extended when these crowds are shown as slaves to efficiency, “rushing throngs all seemingly with some definite destination the reaching of which in the shortest possible time was of vast importance” (White 185). Movement in Harlem takes place at a more leisurely pace, one not shaped by concerns of work alone. The neighborhood evokes the South through other senses as well: Mimi overhears jokes and hymns, smells fried chicken and pig’s feet (White 186-7). Harlem is set apart from the monetary cares that define white modernist New York, a space of sensual and embodied movement. White described Mimi’s aesthetic response as she takes in the spectacle: “For here was a new life, teeming, exotic, individual [...] Mimi sensed again the essential rhythm, the oneness of these variegated colours and moods. It was all vivid, colourful, of a pattern distinctive and apart, and she warmed to the friendliness of it all...” (185-6). From a distance, Mimi can see the relationship between part and whole, the way that the crowd’s accents, facial expressions, styles of dress, and skin tones assert their individuality and yet give her a unified sense of “Harlem.” Where Locke optimistically projects a “great race-welding,” Mimi sees it.

At a dance later in the novel, she has a similar vision of a complex aesthetic and cultural whole, "a kaleidoscopic scene, brilliant, colourful, fascinating" where the participants all share "a rhythmic unity that gave Mimi the impression that the dancers had been rehearsed with great pains by an expert *maître de danse*." (201). Yet White, like Fisher, reminds us that it is impossible to observe Harlem from an aesthetic distance. While watching the dancers, Mimi is spotted by a former neighbor from Atlanta who tells her companion that Mimi had a baby out of wedlock and did not marry the man (202). Soon this rumor is spread around town, and Mimi decides to leave Harlem and pass for white instead of dealing with this reminder of her past (205-8). This is a common trope in migration fiction: Paul Laurence Dunbar's The Sport of the Gods shows the Hamilton family forced to leave a respectable boarding house because an acquaintance from the South tells their landlady that the absent husband is in jail for robbery (381). However, Mimi's revelation is all the more modern, since it is spread through Harlem as a blind item in a gossip column in a scandal sheet called "The Blabber" (204). Paradoxically, migrants who flee the South in search of urban anonymity find themselves in a city where they are constantly under surveillance.³⁹

As we will see in the following section, the Southern past can never be fully abandoned upon arrival in the Northern city: it returns at unexpected moments and confronts the narratives' protagonists with unexpected reminders of their history. Because underground movement by subway is not bound by the direct connective logic of aboveground movement, it allows Harlem Renaissance writers to imagine a complex continuity between temporalities. The abrupt movement of the subway can be thought of

as a figure for the disjunctive, repetitive, and irrational relation to tradition portrayed in these narratives. The subway entrance, in a sense, spans folk and modern time.

The South in the City

Much of the critical discussion of migration narratives has focused on the need for spaces or figures that reinforce communal, Southern values in the Northern city.⁴⁰ In her influential essay “City Limits, Village Values,” Toni Morrison suggests that African American characters in the city succeed or fail depending on their connection to the ancestral past they have left behind (43). Fisher and White show that subway migration requires an almost constant navigation between past and present. Their narratives offer models of movement through history that echoes the subway’s model of movement through the city: instead of a progressive or developmental linear movement, their narratives suggest that African Americans constantly (and unconsciously) circulate through different temporalities and aspects of their personal and cultural history.

A sense of the difficulty in bridging Southern tradition and Northern modernity recurs throughout Harlem Renaissance fiction. Nella Larsen’s Passing (1929) includes a brief joke that belies a deeper sadness at the inability of modern African Americans to acknowledge and learn from their cultural history.⁴¹ That novel famously ends with a raucous party where Clare Kendry, who has been passing for white, falls to her death just after her racist husband discovers her secret. At a more restrained party earlier in the novel, the protagonist Irene Redfield shatters a teacup. She jokingly tells her white friend Hugh Wentworth that she plans on blaming him for the accident. Then she details the teacup’s history: “It was the ugliest thing that your ancestors, the charming Confederates

ever owned. I've forgotten how many thousands of years ago it was that Brian's great-great-grand-uncle owned it. But it has, or had, a good old hoary history. It was brought North by way of the subway. Oh, all right! Be English if you want to and call it the underground" (Larsen 222). The cup is the talisman of the Southern slave past (perhaps stolen from the master or given to a loyal house slave); the joke, however, transforms it into a meaningless commodity. Rather than reckoning with the material history of this object, Irene seems grateful that she no longer has to deal with an ugly thing in her house. The ease of movement on the subway also eviscerates the material experience of Northern migration. To collapse the Underground Railroad with a quick commute uptown is to ignore the important distance traveled by her husband's ancestor. Reducing a migratory journey to the status of a teacup moved by the subway, Larsen mocks the middle-class woman's avoidance of difficult racial truths. Similarly, inflating Gillis's subway ride to the status of movement on the Underground Railroad, Fisher mocks the migrant's exaggerated sense of his own importance. The mechanization of modern life has made the journey North easier but less heroic; Gillis is a comic figure, in part, because he still thinks of himself in the monumental terms of the past. Both "The City of Refuge" and Flight use the moment of emergence from the subway as a narrative site of confrontation between the past and the present.

Alain Locke imagined the journey North in as disjunctive a manner as Irene Redfield. For Locke, migration is a conscious journey into the future, one that leaves the past behind. History is no longer linear: he argues that Northern migrants "hurdle several generations of experience at a leap" ("New Negro" 4) and that the Great Migration is "a deliberate flight not only from countryside to city, but from medieval America to

modern” (“New Negro” 6). Yet both “The City of Refuge” and Flight show the problems with reading migration as a radical break with the past: their central characters encounter figures they have known in the South, and suffer the consequences. Mouse Uggam is just as surprised by Gillis’s appearance at the subway entrance as Gillis is by Uggam – both men assume that Harlem is a place to start over. Similarly, because Mimi imagines such a radical break between past and present, the reappearance of someone from her previous life come as a shock. As with other aspects of subway migration, the relationship between past and present is shaped by a lack of agency. Migration does not allow for an escape from the past, we learn, because movement north *isn’t* one-way or restricted to migrants who want to begin their life anew. The past returns at unexpected moments, and must be dealt with when it arises.

In Flight’s penultimate chapter, Mimi experiences a return of her repressed past far more dramatic than that of the nosy neighbor who outs her at a Harlem dance. She and her husband have gone to Carnegie Hall to hear a black opera singer perform. The singer, though not named, is usually assumed to be Roland Hayes (Horne 227). As the tenor sings “Nobody Knows de Trouble I See,” Mimi has a synesthetic, visionary experience of black culture’s triumphant faith, persistence, and beauty in the face of hardship. Her response to the song brings to mind another famous African American singer, Paul Robeson, who performed the title role in the 1924 revival of Eugene O’Neill’s The Emperor Jones. In that play, a former Pullman porter (O’Neill 12) and self-appointed emperor of a “West Indian island as yet not self-determined by white Marines” (O’Neill 3) flees the island, pursued by visions of his race’s trials: he sees the man he killed, finds himself on a chain gang, in a slave auction, on a slave ship, and finally in a jungle where

he is menaced by a witch doctor. Like many Harlem intellectuals of the period, White saw Robeson perform this role at the Provincetown Theatre: he even begins his article in The New Negro, called "The Paradox of Color," by discussing the "thrill" he felt at the performance (361). In Flight, however, White reverses the trajectory of this racialized vision so that instead of a reversion or degeneration, Mimi sees her race's evolution. She first envisions African dancers, then a slave ship, a plantation, and finally present day laborers. Similar to her vision of life as a "railroad flat," each of these scenes reveals itself behind a door. Unlike these prior visions, where she walked from one room to the next, White emphasizes Mimi's passivity in the process: "Another door was opened for Mimi," says the narration at one point; "Under the spell of the music other doors opened one by one," we are told on the following page (298-9). Now, instead of the forward progress of her life, these doors reveal to her the repeated humiliations and victories of her race. Though they follow a rough forward progress, the repeated language and sounds associated with her visions suggest that Mimi has finally put aside one-way flight in favor of a repetitive and accretive vision of racial progress.

For a heroine who struggles so mightily to control her destiny – and flees regularly from place to place in order to do so – this unexpected encounter with the past serves an important purpose. I suggest it is because of her lack of agency, her loss of the ability to escape, that the music has such a dramatic effect. Like the commuters mentioned previously, concertgoers too are "swallowed up in the vast building" (296). Indeed, the whole paragraph that begins this chapter is filled with words suggesting a subway ride: voices "rumble," musicians board a crowded "platform," Mimi even notes that "every seat seemed to be taken as she followed Jimmie down the aisle" (296). The

pervasiveness of this language suggests that White is describing an aesthetic surrender parallel to that of the subway rider, one where the abandonment of agency to larger forces results in a visionary experience. My understanding of Mimi's imaginary encounter at the Carnegie Hall concert differs from that of Russ Castronovo. He argues that "instead of finding a use *for* art, [Mimi] simply uses it, becoming strung out on opera taken in from the cheap seats at Carnegie Hall [...] Flight pushes a 'just say no' attitude toward aesthetics, fearful that all beauty leads to illusions of escape and false transcendence" (Castronovo 1456). Aestheticizing urban life while she is in the midst of it does give Mimi the illusion of escape and separation from the scene she views; here, however, Mimi feels herself deeply implicated in and connected to the vision of her culture, which motivates her to abandon her husband and return to Harlem. White's narrative thus reverses the movement of Brutus Jones, who despotically rules over and then flees his black community, and in a sense recuperates the primitivism of O'Neill's drama. Yet as I discuss in the following section, White leaves Mimi suspended prior to the point of arrival and suggests that she may continue her mindless movement in spite of this epiphany.

As we have seen throughout this chapter, White is more optimistic and more straightforward in his polemics about race and culture. Not surprisingly, "The City of Refuge" links folk and modern temporality in a more comical and cynical way. The debate surrounding the accommodation of migrants into the collective black culture of the 1920s rides on the assumed temporal disjunction between the folk and the modern.⁴² Gillis functions as a comic type because he doesn't change: a modernist writer's version of a migrant, he's neither modern nor mobile. Before he encounters Mouse Uggam, Gillis

gapes at a black policeman directing traffic and a beautiful girl in green stockings. Both of these figures embody the promise of the modern city: the policeman implies that all career avenues are open, while the “sheba,” an African American version of the flapper, suggests sexual availability. Gillis's countrified appearance clashes dramatically with that of modern African Americans. His “tan-cardboard extension-case” is a comic prop; his “black, shining brow” and slow spreading grin call to mind the visage of a blackface minstrel (Fisher 28).⁴³ Fisher suggests that at this transitional moment in the life of the “New Negro,” old and new forms of blackness will uncomfortably coexist in the same space and time.

One of the most important issues addressed in Alain Locke's introduction to The New Negro is the diversity of Harlem's population. He imagines the neighborhood as “the laboratory of a great race-welding,” one where peasants and poets, West Indians and South Carolinians all work together to construct a collective culture (7). Yet Fisher's stories insist upon the difficulty of bringing these disparate parts of the population into a whole. The inability to assimilate is true on the level of language as well as appearance. John McCluskey astutely notes “the clash of dialects” in “The City of Refuge” as a sign of differing understandings of “the codes of the streets” (xxii). A question like “Wha' dis hyeh at, please, suh?” (29), which Gillis asks Uggam before they recognize one another, no longer functions purely as a signifier of racial difference as it might have in Uncle Tom's Cabin or the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar.⁴⁴ Nor does dialect function as a measure of authenticity, as it often does for Hughes and Hurston.⁴⁵ Instead, Gillis's dropped r's and overly polite questions mark him both as non-native and as old-fashioned. Black urban speech, we find, is no monolithic norm. Uggam, his drug-dealing

boss, and a West Indian shop clerk all speak distinct strains of non-standard English (to say nothing of the white detectives and the Italian shopkeeper). Fisher's use of multiple forms of dialect articulates a central problem of the Harlem Renaissance: how can the different populations of Harlem imagine themselves as part of the same culture when they do not speak the same language or share the same history?

We can mark Gillis's acclimation to Harlem in terms of how his language changes over the course of the story: he begins to use urban slang and call West Indians "monkey chasers" as Uggam does (Fisher 34). This use of language is in some respects mindless imitation of his citified friend, but Fisher hints that mindless repetition may indeed be the only means of accessing the deeper realities of urban life. Routines of urban movement and the repeated engagement with the habits of Harlem offer an alternative model of cultural coherence. In the following section, I discuss how both narratives end with the reappearance of characters, movements, and attitudes that we see earlier in the novel; these conclusions reaffirm Fisher and White's interest in the transition from one-way migration to repeated routine. Their return to postures of emergence from the subway in particular re-locates the problems of the Harlem Renaissance, giving their protagonists (and their readers) a chance to reconsider their initial introductions to Harlem. As I show with the conclusion to Flight in particular, rather than being instructive, repetition is sometimes merely compulsive.

Re-emergence

Both novels conclude with scenes that echo the spatial and perceptual experience of a migrant's initial introduction to Harlem, now divorced from the idea of progressive

linear motion. Instead of moving forward, Gillis and Mimi repeat encounters from their pasts. Melvin Tolson's dissertation contains the amusing assertion, which came from an interview with Fisher, that when writing short stories "he usually followed the methods that Edgar Allan Poe used – that is, Fisher writes his last paragraph first" (89); the story's end, like Gillis's, is predetermined. Yet in repeating the figures and postures from the initial subway ride to Harlem, Fisher suggests the possibility of repetition with a difference, of a moment of revision of this fixed narrative.

The figures who appeared at the beginning of "The City of Refuge" all reappear in an underground nightclub in the final section as well, suggesting a reconsideration of Gillis's first encounter with Harlem in a submerged landscape of restricted vision like that of the subway car. As the story ends, Gillis has been betrayed by Mouse Uggam and is about to be taken away by two white detectives. He spots the girl with the green stockings, now being kissed against her will by her white escort. Gillis rises from the table to help her, but the white policemen take this move as an attempt to flee. As Gillis fights the policemen, we hear his fragmented thoughts about the violence inflicted on black farmers in Waxhaw: "Five of Mose Joplin's horses. Poisoning a well. A year's crops. Green stockings – white – white—" (Fisher 40). As with Gillis's mishearing of rifle shots in the subway station, he recognizes the parallels between Southern and Northern structures of power. Aside from the fantasy of sexual freedom evoked by the green stockings, this catalog suggests that there is no difference between north and south, that the power and authority of southern mob rule that killed horses and poisoned wells now resides in the white detectives. The lynching he escaped, Gillis thinks, may be

unavoidable. The black traffic cop arrives as backup, however, and reminds Gillis that Northern space and authority are different, more modern and full of possibility.

Gillis's encounter with the traffic cop suggests that visions of a possible racial collectivity can be intimated only in moments of submission to the larger forces of modernity. Throughout "The City of Refuge," Gillis has affirmed the promise of Harlem by repeating to himself the refrain, "even got cullud policemen" (29, 31, 40). The officer "awaits his rush," but Gillis stops in wonder, repeating that same refrain. He reacts bodily to the black policeman's presence as well: "Very slowly, King Solomon's arms relaxed; very slowly he stood erect; and the grin that came over his features had something exultant about it" (40). The repetition of "very slowly" assumes an incantatory quality similar to his marveling refrain; the slowed-down movements briefly take control of a situation characterized by speed and violence. Gillis assumes the physical posture he displayed on the subway steps, but he is now "erect," betraying a pride and power that he has not shown before, with an "exultant" minstrel grin more consciously and proudly deployed (Fisher 40).⁴⁶ Though based in misrecognition, this encounter is truly a revision of Gillis's introduction to Harlem, one that he accesses through a physicalized refusal to rush toward his pre-determined fate. Instead of engaging in another version of the criminal flight that brought Gillis to Harlem in the first place, he slowly relaxes, accepting his place in the underground space of the cabaret and, indeed, in Harlem. Though fleeting and deeply ironic, Gillis shows a spark of the acclimation to urban routine that Hart Crane finds to be such a generative source for understanding modern subjectivity and modernist poetics.

Mimi's re-introduction to Harlem is both more solid and more problematic than Gillis's: it is difficult to tell if her repetition includes any differences. The sights and sounds of her visit (the first in more than a decade) repeat those of Mimi's initial introduction to the neighborhood long ago: she emerges from the subway, scans the faces of the crowd, and overhears two men joking with each other. Even the language in this section of the novel echoes her earlier encounter. In the first passage White tells us, "gone was the morbid, morose, worried air she had encountered at the other end of the subway" (186); later he says "gone were the morose, the unhappy, the untr tranquil faces she had been seeing downtown for years" (294). Yet the differences are instructive. Now that she has been among the gloomy, hurried people in the white world for an extended period, Mimi can properly appreciate the distance spanned by the subway. White hints that urban renewal may be an external manifestation of psychic renewal: "It was a new Harlem she now saw, or rather, though she did not realize it, it was a new Mimi through whose eyes she saw it" (294). Rather than merely changing locations, she has now changed attitudes. The constant flux of the city and the urban subject, even if mindless, comes to look like progress.

A more ambivalent understanding of Mimi's transformation can be seen in the novel's concluding paragraphs. After returning to Harlem, after the moment of racial revelation at Carnegie Hall, she sets out from her comfortable house on Washington Square to return to Harlem – presumably for good. In their retorts to Frank Horne's review on the "Correspondence" pages of *Opportunity* magazine, Walter White and Nella Larsen insist that this conclusion depicts a positive return to a collective culture that

escapes mechanization. However, it is an eminently inconclusive return, and one that seems mechanical in its repetitions of early flights. White sets the scene:

A brilliant but cold sun was creeping over the housetops out of the East as she softly closed the door behind her and stood upon the topmost step. Another book in her life was being closed with the shutting of the door. Mimi raised her eyes to the cross on the church across the Square. Her head went up and her shoulders straightened. She joyously drew into her lungs deep draughts of the cold air.

"Free! Free! Free!" she whispered exultantly as with firm tread she went down the steps. "*Petit Jean* – my own people – and happiness!" was the song in her heart as she happily strode through the dawn, the rays of the morning sun dancing lightly upon the more brilliant gold of her hair..." (300)

A hyperbolic insistence upon the rightness of Mimi's journey uptown permeates these paragraphs, from the sun rising in the east to the cross she spots across Washington Square. Her pause at the top of the stairs and descent into the street literalizes her rejection of white society – moving from the "topmost step" and returning to the ground-level to engage with her "own people." Yet it also echoes and reverses the emergence from the subway steps into Harlem. Other aspects of the description show that White is of two minds about Mimi's return. The bright and cold weather suggests a positive but bracing action, and perhaps hints at the cold reception she will receive as a single mother in 1920s Harlem. The language repeated from past moments of escape is particularly damning: the book of her life is closing as it has so many times before; the last time Mimi insisted to herself that she was "Free! Free! Free!" was after she bought a fake wedding ring from a menacing "bearded Jew" in a Philadelphia pawn shop (158). Except for the

implicit reunion with her son, everything about this conclusion suggests it is merely repeating the pattern of her previous flights.⁴⁷

Striding down the sidewalk, head erect and shoulders straightened, Mimi physically communicates her determination to be a part of Harlem life. And this is precisely the problem. Whenever Mimi tries to pin down a place where she belongs, she fails. Even her physical beauty resists categorization. As Neil Brooks astutely observes, the gold in her hair reminds readers of her mixed race at precisely the moment where she tries to consciously embrace her African American heritage (384). As we saw with Gillis's relaxed posture at a moment of crisis, and as White articulates in the Carnegie Hall scene, it is only in the moments where the protagonists accept their lack of agency that they can truly — if briefly — progress. In her discussion of passing and modernist technology, Pamela Caughie describes a Barbara Johnson lecture where she “argued that passing is acting as if one could determine one's subject position, as if one were an autonomous subject without heritage, family, or history” (389). The same could be said of anthologies like The New Negro, which tried to reshape the perception of a race through the selection and highlighting of particular aspects of diasporic art, culture, and history. I read the conclusion of Flight as suggesting that the desire to control messy categories like race, culture, and identity inevitably backfires. Both of these narratives intimate the possibility of a culture instantiated by the location of Harlem but their central characters can only access this knowledge through the routine postures and restricted visions of subway riders.

By the 1960s, the black subway functions as a space for imagining alternate histories: the subway car is “heaped in modern myth” (3) in Amiri Baraka's play

Dutchman and a space for those “outside of historical time” in Invisible Man (Ellison 440). I suggest that Fisher and White’s narrative of subway migration are important predecessors for these authors’ examinations of racial and spatial progress (or its absence). In the following chapter, I examine the subway car as a similarly liminal space for poet Hart Crane to envision new models of urban subjectivity and new modes of reconciling with the poetic past. Where Fisher and White locate epiphanies in fleeting (and sometimes deceptive) moments of racial unity, Crane finds the routines of the subway allow him to interrogate poetic tradition. The restrictions of subway space connect the poem’s speaker to the American poetic tradition; he embraces the fragmentation that his literary ancestors struggled against. Spanning movements and genres, the underground movement of the subway allows New York modernists to forge a new path between past and present.

¹ The Harlem Renaissance is generally thought to end with the stock market crash of 1929 and ensuing Depression, though Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) is considered the last great work of the movement. Ground-breaking early studies of the period include Nathan Huggins, Harlem Renaissance and David Levering Lewis, When Harlem Was In Vogue.

² See James Weldon Johnson Black Manhattan, particularly 148-156 for the development of Harlem due to these factors and others. Gilbert Osofsky gives a longer, and more grim, history of Harlem’s development in Harlem, the Making of a Ghetto.

³ See Gilroy and Edwards.

⁴ For a history of the Great Migration from the period, see Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy, Anyplace but Here. Joe William Trotter Jr. gives an overview of different historical perspectives on the Great Migration. Two book-length studies of Great Migration narratives are Farah Jasmine Griffin, “‘Who Set You Flowin’?” and Lawrence Rodgers, Canaan Bound.

⁵ See Ellison and Morrison.

⁶ Written at the Library of Congress while Fisher was attending medical school at Howard (McCluskey xv), this story is more about Harlem as a utopia than a realistic neighborhood.

⁷ Lois Brown notes that Fisher and White also lived in the same apartment building, at 409 Edgecombe Avenue, one of the most desirable locations in Harlem (164-5, 562).

⁸ Larsen and White split the difference between the two groups, writing novels with middle-class heroines in very modernist styles.

⁹ For a thorough examination of the debate between W.E.B. DuBois and Alain Locke regarding the purpose of African American art, see Castronovo.

¹⁰ See Nardi.

¹¹ His chapter 12, "The Situation at Points in the East," deals with Philadelphia and Newark, New Jersey (134-42).

¹² In an early draft of "The City of Refuge," King Solomon Gillis thinks
To be sure, other Utopias beckoned. Mose Joplin had found his fortune in
Pittsburg [sic], with a six-dollar-a-day job in a steel mill; Abe Tryte had taken his
family to Detroit and was making an unbelievable seven in an automobile factory;
Cheevers and Crinshaw and Prickett all wrote back from vague Pennsylvania
towns that they were earning more in a week now than they had in a month when
south. But for King Solomon Gillis no other place held the appeal, the lure, the
glamour of Harlem.

(Fisher, "The City of Refuge" MS 2)

¹³ The other most important figure that shaped the Harlem Renaissance was Jessie Fauset, editor of The Crisis (Rampersad xxii).

¹⁴ The Civic Club dinner is often discussed as a central moment in the construction of the Harlem Renaissance. See Rampersad x-xi and Lewis 89, 93-4.

¹⁵ Walter White also had an article in The New Negro, an analysis of racial "passing" and discrimination according to skin tone called "The Paradox of Color."

¹⁶ In this sense, personal and cultural history operates in Flight in a similar way to race in other passing novels; it will inevitably reveal itself.

¹⁷ Mimi's story is particularly connected to that of white female migrants to the city in the tradition of Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie. See Meyerowitz 117-139.

¹⁸ For background on Fisher's biography and writing, see McCluskey and Perry. For an introduction to the themes in Fisher's short stories and a bibliography of their original places of publication, see Tignor.

¹⁹ See Balshaw 32-36; Bone, "Down Home" 156; Lenz 326-7.

²⁰ For a fascinating behind-the-scenes account of the Harlem Renaissance, see Charles W. Scruggs, "Alain Locke and Walter White: Their Struggle for Control of the Harlem Renaissance." There has not been much critical work done on Walter White's fiction, but the most thorough account may be found in Edward E. Waldron's Walter White and the Harlem Renaissance.

²¹ The action is detailed through the distancing device of a newspaper account at the end of an otherwise fairly conventional novel.

²² Of the ending in particular, where she sets off for Harlem but is not shown arriving there, Horne said, "Truly, has Mimi been left in the lurch!" (227).

²³ Though beyond the scope of this chapter, the prevalence of migration narratives and passing narratives in this period suggests a fascination with mobility and transformation.

²⁴ In this way, they are important precursors to Ralph Ellison's interrogation of migration in Invisible Man. Emerging from the subway, the narrator in that novel remarks, "I'd been so fascinated by the motion that I'd forgotten to measure what it was bringing forth" (444).

²⁵ See Johnson, Black Manhattan 281.

²⁶ Though it does not appear in “The City of Refuge,” many of Fisher’s stories and novels begin with a thumbnail sketch of Harlem’s geography and how it has evolved over time.

²⁷ “The metropolis pays little heed to the shifting crystallizations of its own heterogeneous millions. Never having experienced permanence, it has watched, without emotion or even curiosity, Irish, Jew, Italian, Negro, a score of other races drift in and out of the same colorless tenements” (Locke, “Harlem” 629)

²⁸ See Neil Brooks.

²⁹ The connection between Nella Larsen’s Quicksand and ideas about public transportation was first suggested to me by Jennifer Beckham’s American Studies Association 2005 paper, “Mobility, Public Space, and the Traveling Woman in Nella Larsen’s Quicksand and The House of Mirth”

³⁰ Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic is the first study to use the formulation of black “roots” and “routes,” an important one for critics who wish to balance considerations of tradition and transformation in African American culture.

³¹ For a thorough history of Chicago as a site of black migration, see St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, Black Metropolis.

³² The destruction of McKim, Mead, and White’s initial railroad station in the early 1960s is one of New York’s great architectural traumas. See Lorraine Diehl, The Late, Great Pennsylvania Station. For a history of Pennsylvania Station’s initial construction, as well as its reconstruction beneath Madison Square Garden in the early 1960s, see Hilary Ballon, New York’s Pennsylvania Stations.

³³ Its importance persists to this day in novels like Colson Whitehead’s John Henry Days (2001). For a historical survey of the train’s importance in African American culture in the nineteenth centuries, see Zabel. For discussion of the train in blues songs, see Hazel Carby, “‘It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometimes’” 334-6. For attention to the story of John Henry and the importance of the train to African American music and dance, see Dinerstein 120-124.

³⁴ Interestingly, Harlem is not mentioned in the manuscript version of this sonic catalog (Fisher, “City of Refuge” MS 1).

³⁵ See Thompson 133-144 for a discussion of these modern composers who appropriated and replicated city noise. The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams contains a related anecdote: “as we came from Antheil’s ‘Ballet Mechanique,’ Williams says, “a woman of our party, herself a musician, made this remark: ‘The subway seems sweet after that’” (qtd. in Thompson 143).

³⁶ See William Dean Howells, A Hazard of New Fortunes, discussed in my last chapter, for another discussion of the railroad flat as a model of urban subjectivity.

³⁷ After the Civil War, African Americans were technically free to ride in any railroad car for which they had paid the appropriate fare – though many passengers had to sue to do so. See Ayers 92-100. This hard-won freedom was cut short with the transportation segregation of late nineteenth-century “Jim Crow” laws, which divided passengers by race in addition to the class of ticket they bought. Homer Plessy tested this law in 1892: a light-skinned African American who could pass as a white man, he boarded a whites-only car on a Louisiana train and eventually told the conductor that he was a Negro. For a thorough and lucid account of the Plessy vs. Ferguson Supreme Court case, see Eric

Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 233-249. This strategic challenge led to the codification of “separate but equal accommodations” as a principle of racial segregation in American life, even through the years where the train was a symbol of freedom.

³⁸ *Sport of the Gods* is often described as the first migration novel (Rodgers 3). The most influential discussion of African American writers’ practices of revision is certainly Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey*. Also important in terms of the argument in this chapter is Houston A. Baker Jr.’s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, particularly his assertion that late nineteenth- and early-twentieth century African American writers’ revision practices can be categorized as “the mastery of form” or “the deformation of mastery” (xvi)

³⁹ This is literally true of Gillis, who is watched both by Uggam when he emerges from the subway and by his boss Tony, who appears to leave him alone in the store and then observes him through an “unobtrusive glass-windowed door” to see if he steals money from the cash register (Fisher 36).

⁴⁰ See Rodgers 29-30, 168-9; Griffin 5, 110-123.

⁴¹ Larsen’s novel deals with many of the modes of urban circulation I discuss in this chapter: migration, racial passing, the passers compulsive return to Harlem. But since they are conspicuous consumers of the upper-middle class, Irene Redfield and her husband own a car and do not take the subway.

⁴² See Carby, “The Politics of Fiction” and Duck.

⁴³ Bone notes that the characterizations of “Harlem School” writers often “run dangerously close to stereotype” (*Negro Novel* 66).

⁴⁴ See Wald and Wideman.

⁴⁵ See Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, where she mocks her early attempts at anthropological research: “I went about asking, in carefully accented Barnardese, ‘Pardon me, but do you know any folk-tales or folk-songs?’” (128).

⁴⁶ Robert Bone calls this scene “a powerful epiphany of the New Negro”: “he perceives that Harlem, while it may betray the Southern migrant, also offers him the possibility of manhood” (“Down Home” 157).

⁴⁷ D.H. Lawrence’s review is particularly dubious, saying: “It is just what Nordic wives do, just how they feel about their husbands. And if they don’t go to Harlem, they go somewhere else. And then they come back. As Mimi will do. Three months of Nigger Heaven will have her fed up, and back in the Washington Square region, and being ‘of French extraction’. Nothing is more monotonous than these removals” (363).

Chapter 3. Underground Lines: Repetition and Tradition in Modernist Subway Poetry

Machinery will tend to lose its sensational glamour and appear in its true subsidiary order in human life as use and continual poetic allusion subdue its novelty. For, contrary to general prejudice, the wonderment experienced in watching nose dives is of less immediate creative promise to poetry than the familiar gesture of a motorist in the act of shifting gears. I mean to say that mere romantic speculation on the power and beauty of machinery keeps it at a continual remove; it can not act creatively in our lives until, like the unconscious nervous responses of our bodies, its connotations emanate from within – forming as spontaneous a terminology of poetic reference as the bucolic world of pasture, plow, and barn. (Crane “Modern Poetry” 262)

In my previous chapter, we saw Fisher and White foreground the circularity of urban movement as a corrective to the optimism of linear migration narratives. Once the novelty of mechanized city space wears off, Southern African Americans begin to see the Northern City in a more realistic light. The subway initially seems like a magical vehicle conveying them to the Promised Land; after acclimating to the city, it becomes merely a vehicle that takes them downtown to work and home to Harlem. As we see in his essay quoted above, Hart Crane wished to move away from a literary portrayal of machines that emphasized their “sensational glamour.” Crane’s poem “The Tunnel” also considers how the subway’s meaning shifts when New Yorkers’ attitudes toward it change from distanced wonder to routine boredom. In this poem, the embodied and repeated habits of subway riders serve as a source for new poetic structures.

Born in Cleveland, Harold Hart Crane was nevertheless a poet of New York City (Mariani 12). He first moved to Manhattan at the age of seventeen; though occasionally moving back to Ohio, to upstate New York, or abroad, his most productive years were spent primarily in Brooklyn Heights. Crane published lyric poems in little magazines of the 1920s, including Poetry and The Dial.¹ His first book of verse, White Buildings (1926) with an introduction by fellow poet Allen Tate, received respectable reviews in a

broad variety of publications (Mariani 268-9).² Still, Crane is best known for his American epic poem The Bridge (1930). Work on the poem was funded by a grant from banker and arts patron Otto Kahn (O My Land 212-14). Each section of the larger work moves back and forth through time and across the American landscape and features history-book figures such as Christopher Columbus and Pocahontas. Crane first wrote the poem's visionary conclusion, then its introductory proem "To Brooklyn Bridge"; the rest of the larger work's eight sections were written in the late 1920s.³ Most critics reviewing The Bridge at the time of publication found it lacking in structural coherence and "distinguished between 'successful' and 'less successful' sections" (Unterecker 619). This tendency continues to this day: few people argue that The Bridge is a unified work.

A more optimistic response to T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," Crane's poem envisions the Brooklyn Bridge as a symbolic technology that fuses past, present, and future. The penultimate poem, "The Tunnel," is particularly indebted to Eliot: he admits in a letter to Yvor Winters that its style "savors a little of Eliot and his 'wistfulness'"; additionally, it was published as a separate lyric in The Criterion under Eliot's editorship (O My Land 333, 348). The poem follows a subway ride from Times Square to Brooklyn Heights, and its form plays on the iterability of public transportation, reflecting its repetitive stop and go in the reiteration of words and the rhythm of lines, and the citation (or recitation) of "overheard" subway conversations and poetic predecessors. The routines of the subway commute allow the urban subject to make sense of the glimpsed images and overheard conversations without denying their inherently fragmented quality. The habits associated with subway space offer a counterbalance to and a means of processing the terror evoked by the modern machine as well as the literary past.

Throughout my dissertation, I discuss how New York modernist writers found potential for literary innovation in the everyday habits and spatial complexities of the modern city. By focusing on the subway, these authors revise and set themselves in opposition to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers who used literature to convey new aspects of urban subjectivity. Of these literary predecessors, Edgar Allan Poe looms largest in “The Tunnel.” His “Man of the Crowd” dissects the urban spectacle and takes its protagonist on an apparently fruitless journey, as does Crane’s poem. Poe’s tales – particularly “The Fall of the House of Usher,” which I discuss later in the chapter – imagine a deep connection between literal and psychological spaces. Even the repetitions of “The Raven” echo through “The Tunnel.” But I will begin by addressing Poe’s physical presence in Crane’s poem.

By the time the narrator of “The Tunnel” encounters the figure of Poe, he has descended from the bustle of Times Square, entered a quasi-mythic subway station, and boarded a train to Brooklyn. The ride is interrupted when the narrator spots a striking sight: a disembodied head, later revealed to be Edgar Allan Poe’s, hovering ominously nearby in his subway car. The narrator asks

Whose head is swinging from the swollen strap?
 Whose body smokes along the bitten rails,
 Bursts from a smoldering bundle far behind
 In back forks of the chasms of the brain,--
 Puffs from a riven stump far out behind
 In interborough fissures of the mind...?

And why do I often meet your visage here,
 Your eyes like agate lanterns – on and on
 Below the toothpaste and the dandruff ads? (Crane 66-74)

This initially terrifying image is located simultaneously inside and outside, undercutting the division between interiority and exteriority seen in Expressionist subway plays and

Harlem Renaissance narratives. Poe's head hangs in the car while his body lies smoking on the tracks; both are located in a subway system that is resolutely concrete as well as imaginary. The strap where Poe's head swings, a woven handhold for standing subway passengers, ominously conflates commuting and lynching (Figure 9).



Figure 7. Woven subway strap (approx 1900s)

Perhaps the most striking thing that the narrator tells us about this horrific “visage,” however, is he “often” meets it while riding the train. As we will see throughout the poem, Crane embraces the repetitions of the regular subway ride as a means of

reimagining poetic possibilities. “The Tunnel” even repeats Poe’s poetry in a more commonplace context: “eyes like agate lanterns” suggest the “agate lamp” in Poe’s “To Helen,” but we see them “below the toothpaste and the dandruff ads.” In Poe’s poem, Helen is physically separated from the narrator who exclaims:

Lo! In yon brilliant window-niche
How statue-like I see thee stand,
The agate lamp within thy hand! (10-13)

There is a vital difference between Poe’s and Crane’s attitude toward the transporative sights that they describe. The visionary rapture of “To Helen” engages the spectator but also ossifies him, since in the poem’s confused syntax it is unclear whether the narrator or Helen is “statue-like.” “The Tunnel,” on the contrary, shows us a spectator constantly in motion. Unlike the figure presented in “To Helen,” Poe’s head cannot be kept at a poetic distance: he appears in a darkened space near the speaker rather than a framing window-niche; instead of a statue-like, aestheticized body holding a lamp, he is bodiless. Crane brings the vision he describes much closer to the spectator, and reveals it as fragmentary rather than synecdochic. Their destinations differ as well: earlier lines in “To Helen” evoke a classical literary tradition that Poe embraces as his “home” (8); for all its flights of fancy, “The Tunnel” describes a journey toward a literal home. Crane reconsiders Poe’s body and his body of work as they are refigured by subway space. The transcendent wholeness of Helen has become common and partial. Poetic elevation and daily habits press close together in the crowded subway. The singular vision has become a regular encounter, and the sublime has become routine.

When Crane began writing “The Tunnel” in 1926, the subway was already a typical subject for twentieth-century American poets of the city. Ezra Pound’s “In a

Station of the Metro” was 13 years old; William Carlos Williams’ Spring and All (1923) featured a poem later called “Rapid Transit” (Imaginations 146-7); and several lesser-known poems on the New York City subway were included in The Soul of the City: An Urban Anthology (1923), edited by Garland Greever and Joseph M. Bachelor. A grab-bag of picturesque lyrics, radical experimentation, and mawkish sentiment, this anthology includes poems on urban themes by Walt Whitman (“Broadway” among others) and T.S. Eliot (“Rhapsody on a Windy Night”), as well as those of now-forgotten poets of the city. The sheer number of poems that take as their subject buses, streetcars, and the New York and Chicago elevated trains shows just how universally public transportation was understood as a poetic project in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Rather than merely repeating a modernist trope, however, Crane takes the very familiarity of the subway as a starting point for reimagining modernist poetry. In the 1920s, technologies of the city are no longer innately remarkable and thus can no longer signal the modernism of the writer deploying them. Therefore, writers began reckoning with the regularity (even the invisibility) of mechanized encounters and the fragmentation that came along with them. This shift in the reception of the subway and the kind of poetry it made possible marks a movement from early to high modernism, from the “mere romantic speculation” that keeps machines at a distance to the engagement with them as part of everyday life.

Crane follows many modernist trains of thought through “The Tunnel:” he depicts modern life shaped by unconscious habits; records the fascinating peculiarities of everyday speech; and interrogates the poetic tradition while asserting his place in it. All of these concerns are refracted through a subway ride, uniting the navigation of a

complex poetic text with the navigation of newly complex urban space. Critics tend to agree that “The Tunnel” conveys how subway space has dramatically shaped urban subjectivity. Richard P. Sugg describes the subway as “imagistically linked with the human brain” in Crane’s poem (100).⁴ Helge Normann Nilsen extends the scope of this argument, arguing that “the mind is conceived of as completely dominated by and organized on the pattern of the city and the subway system” (150). But this chapter does not merely argue that “The Tunnel” is recording changes in the urban sensorium. Instead, I suggest that the subway’s organization of New York’s built environment manifests an important modernist tendency, one where fragmented, embodied experience can only be held together and made sense of through abstract systems.

My previous chapters discuss work, fantasy, and migration as abstract forces to which urban subjects willingly submit. In “The Tunnel,” Crane attends to routine movement, and the sense of fragmentation that arises from it, as a model for imagining the relationship between part and whole in modernist poetry. Like many other modernist long poems, The Bridge constantly searches for a symbol that will bring together the work’s disparate images without undercutting their individuality and partiality.⁵ Crane associates the difficulty in constructing a whole poem out of lines and verses with the difficulty in constructing the totality of the subway system out of the partial individual observations of a subway ride. A 1926 letter to critic and friend Waldo Frank describes Crane’s work on “The Tunnel” as “rather ghastly, almost surgery – and, oddly, almost all from the notes and stitches I have written while swinging on the strap at late midnights going home” (O My Land 272). Crane tries to combine his “notes and stitches” into a

whole poem, but the process is complicated, even “ghastly.” The poem sounds less like a coherent, organic work of art and more like the body of Frankenstein’s monster.

It is telling that Crane calls the process of composition “*almost* surgery” in this letter, which suggests that the pieces of the poem he is grafting are almost but not quite physical. In his essay “Blood On the Cutting Room Floor,” poet-critic Charles Bernstein uses a similarly qualified metaphor, calling writing “a kind of psychic surgery” (351). He later calls this new possible relationship between parts of a poem “dysraphism,” a medical term for the “congenital misseaming of embryonic parts” (359). This violently physicalized term helps Bernstein imagine a mode of composition where the differences between disparate source materials are not resolved out of existence – where the scars are still visible even when the poetic body is whole (359). “The Tunnel” finds in the subway an ideal location for dysraphic poetry. Crane presents impressions, sensations, and fragments of conversation that are physicalized and unresolved, lines that never quite come together into a complete work just as Poe’s head and body never quite come together into a person.⁶

As I have discussed in previous chapters, subway travel precludes a feeling of mastery: underground, the viewer cannot see the neighborhoods through which he or she moves. In “The Tunnel,” this sense of the difficulty in fusing together isolated views of modern life is transferred from the subway rider to the poet. Habituated to the subway ride, Crane can jot down bits of poetry or overheard conversation while “swinging on the strap”; he struggles only at the point of reconstruction, when trying to make sense of these pieces in a larger system. Here we can recall geographer Kevin Lynch’s description

of the subway as a form of transportation that makes imagining the city as a spatial whole nearly impossible:

The buried paths of the Boston subway could not be related to the rest of the environment except when they come up for air, as in crossing the river. The surface entrances of the stations may be strategic nodes in the city, but they are related along invisible conceptual linkages. The subway is a disconnected nether world, and it is intriguing to speculate what means might be used to mesh it into the structure of the whole. (Image of the City 57)

Although Lynch's remarks are concerned with Boston's subway, they reflect remarkably well the view of the subway articulated in "The Tunnel." The poem begins in Times Square and ends beneath the Brooklyn Bridge, both readily recognizable New York locations. The bulk of the poem takes place in a "disconnected netherworld," one that relates to its starting and stopping points psychologically but does not mimic a possible aboveground path. The end of the poem even "come[s] up for air," offering a clearer and more coherent view of the self's relation to the city while looking over the East River. Yet there the similarities end, for Lynch considers the subway's relation to the geographical "whole" of the city, while Crane attempts to mesh its disconnected perceptual world into the larger narrative structure of his poetry. Throughout this chapter, I discuss how the subway figures in modern subjects' and modernist poets' quest for a complex wholeness, one that does not ignore the partiality of the constitutive perceptions.

Thinking about the relationship between an individual subway ride and an abstracted subway system keeps the physicality of the subway rider at the forefront. The embodied experience of the passenger allows Crane to understand and analyze the

fragmented city without abstracting or idealizing it. In the following section, I discuss how the subway moves from a sublime technology to an everyday one. Physical knowledge of the subway is a necessary precondition for its usefulness as a poetic vehicle: if you don't know how to use the subway you can't swing from a strap while writing. As we will see, this attitude toward urban space distinguishes Crane from other poets of the subway who focus on the uniqueness of their rides. The habituation to the subway in "The Tunnel" signals a move from poetry that records the crowd to poetry where the poet is part of the crowd. After discussing subway poetry of the period, I turn my attention to Crane's examination of the passengers in "The Tunnel." Like the subway system described by Lynch, "The Tunnel" portrays subway riders made up of piecemeal gestures and words held together by "invisible conceptual linkages" of routine. The narrator's pleasurable submission to crowded, mechanized space allows Crane to reimagine a relationship to the American poetic tradition as embodied by Edgar Allan Poe. Rather than finding them deadening, I suggest that Crane finds routines to be hypnotic, empathy inducing, even transportive. He feels pleasure in the surrender to mechanized movement through the city. This is a very different attitude toward the machine than is usually ascribed to Crane, which I address in the following section.

Technological Sublime, Technological Routine

The critical discussion of technology in The Bridge has long been informed by Leo Marx's idea of the "technological sublime" (195).⁷ In all its manifestations, the sublime evokes a complex mixture of wonder and terror in the viewer. But the technological sublime differs in an important way from the sublime in the Burkean

tradition. A sublime encounter with the natural world – gazing on a majestic waterfall for example – ends with the feeling of being humbled before God’s creation; the technological sublime, on the contrary, elicits such a reaction directed at the creation of mere human beings (Nye 60). This experience often results in a mystification of the machine or a rationalist embrace of its creator. In The American Technological Sublime, David Nye describes two disparate responses to the railroad: “innocents” who do not understand how the machine works feel “terror and astonishment,” while knowledgeable planners and educated spectators appreciate the machine as a symbol of reason’s triumph (55). The modernist exploration of the subway does not lionize the engineer or present the subway as a symbol of human reason. Instead, it identifies with the “innocents” trying to navigate the engineer’s creation.⁸ Many of the technological spectacles in The Bridge can be productively understood within the frame of the technological sublime – particularly the pilot soaring and crashing his plane in “Cape Hatteras.” Yet the subway in “The Tunnel” is not merely triumphant or terrifying. Crane’s shifts in tone, diction, and perspective throughout “The Tunnel” attempt to register both the subway’s sublime and its routine.

Indeed, “The Tunnel” pays close attention to all the details of the subway ride, from how it parallels an epic descent to the underworld to what it sounds like when the doors close. In his essay “Modern Poetry,” Crane suggests that we must become accustomed to the machine’s prosaic qualities before we can appreciate its poetic qualities. He tells us that

unless poetry can absorb the machine, i.e. *acclimatize* it as naturally and casually as trees, cattle, galleons, castles and all other human associations of the past, then

poetry has failed its full contemporary function. [...] It demands, however, along with the traditional qualifications of the poet, an extraordinary capacity for surrender, at least temporarily, to the sensations of urban life. (261-2)

The poet makes sense of mechanized urban life through a series of passive processes: absorption, acclimatization, and, most importantly, surrender. Submitting to the machine habituates modernist city dwellers to perceptions that they cannot control. Repetition, and the familiarity it breeds, subdues the terrifying power of the modern machine.⁹ Once the poet moves beyond the terror and astonishment of the sublime, he is not deadened by routine. Instead, he finds these everyday processes and modes of perception opened up to analysis and creative free association. Because subway riding is part of modern culture, it becomes as open to interpretation as trees, cattle, and galleons. Accepting an environment as common, as neither innately sublime nor innately poetic, allows the poet to investigate it more fully. Poe's head is frightening when first encountered, but then you notice how the ads behind him are also disembodied heads.

Moreover, "The Tunnel" plays a unique role in The Bridge because it pays IMPT extended attention to everyday technology and its repeated use. Crane's narrator walks across the Brooklyn Bridge but it remains an otherworldly symbol; the ships in "Cutty Sark" and the airplane in "Cape Hatteras" are described in rapturous detail, but they both make journeys of a more dramatic scale. But this is not Crane's ideal relation to the machine. In "Modern Poetry," Crane strongly differentiates himself from other modernist groups who take the mechanical as a subject purely because of its modernity. Precisionist painter and straight photographer Charles Sheeler, who moved in the same avant-garde circles as Crane, celebrated both the functionalism and the religious connotations of the

machine (Tashjian 219-222). Precisionist aesthetics certainly tend to embrace “wonderment” before the machine, as can be seen in Sheeler’s paintings and photographs, which often look like futuristic movie sets such as Fritz Lang’s Metropolis (1927) (Figure 10).

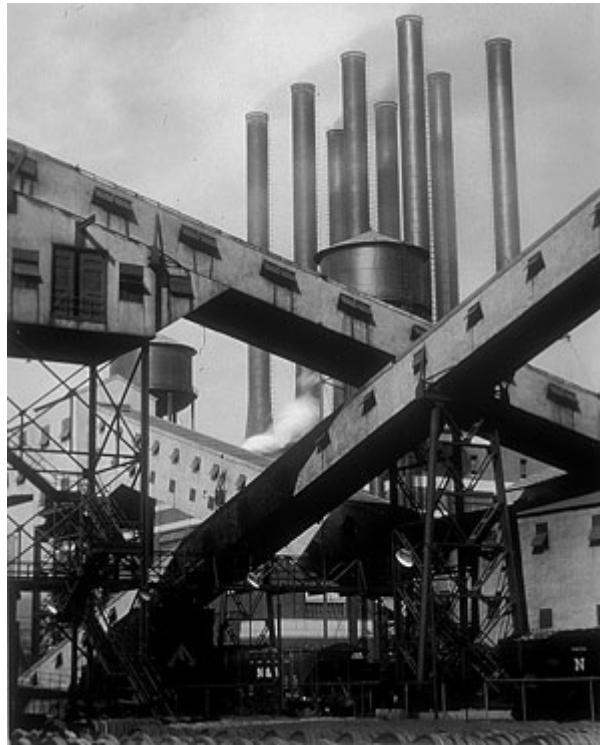


Figure 8. Charles Sheeler, “Ford Plant, River Rouge, Criss-Crossed Conveyors” (1927)

Still, Crane is just as optimistic as Sheeler regarding the artist’s ability to engage with and shape the meaning of technology; “use” and “continual poetic allusion” are put on the same level in their ability to subdue the machine’s novelty (262). Repeatedly riding the subway makes it more a part of everyday city life – after all, it is impossible to have a sublime response toward a machine you ride every day. And ride they did: in 1905, the average New Yorker rode the subway 98 times a year, but by 1925 this average had nearly tripled to 276 times (Michael Brooks 111). Similarly, repeatedly *writing* the subway makes it less interesting as a subject and more interesting as a vehicle. This move

from wonder about a unique event to curiosity about a regular occurrence again illustrates how Crane theorizes the meaning of technology when it ceases to be sublime. The poet's job is not to "make it new," but to make it familiar.

Throughout this chapter, I consider how Crane uses the increasing habituation to subway space to imagine unconscious movement as a conscious aesthetic choice. Like the authors in the other chapters of my dissertation, Crane focuses on the subway because it illustrates a newly passive relationship to urban technology; unlike the other authors, he consciously embraces the possibilities contained in this new experience of unconscious and underground urban movement. For Expressionist dramatists, the body's mechanization is deadening, and for Harlem Renaissance writers it is a necessary evil. The subway is an important poetic vehicle for Crane, however, because it demands the surrender of will on the part of its passengers, allowing them to absorb (and become absorbed by) the system that move them. And it is this absorption in the system, the surrender to the routine, which distinguishes "The Tunnel" from other subway poetry.

In a Station of the Metro

The physical and psychological qualities of the subway crowd are precisely the qualities of unconscious movement that Crane brings to subway poetry: being bored, being too close for comfort, repeating the same routine are all ways of "surrender[ing] to the sensations of urban life." The corporeal quality of Crane's poem comes into focus when comparing the beginning of "The Tunnel" to its most important predecessor, "In a Station of the Metro." Ezra Pound famously claims that Imagist poems present "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" ("Imagism" 143), and his poem

presents a similarly instantaneous perception. “The Tunnel,” on the contrary, presents intellectual and emotional complexes from multiple instants: the only thing that holds them together is their occurrence on the same subway line.

Of course, the haiku is a characteristically disjunctive form: it asks readers to make a leap between the first and second lines, mentally recreating the implied relationship between them. In Pound’s poem, however, the subway station is established as the setting in the title, and this location guides the reader’s sense of the relationship between literal and symbolic:

In a Station of the Metro
The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough. (Poems and Translations 287)¹⁰

A hundred years later, this is still striking poem – striking for its coherence, in spite of the seemingly disparate images. From the title on, each line constructs a relationship between the specific and the general: a station in the larger subway system, faces in a larger crowd, petals on a tree. Although Pound disavows “cinematographical” poetry (“Vorticism,” 150), “In a Station of the Metro” suggests an Eisensteinian montage.¹¹ The first line is realistic, albeit from a subjective perspective; the semi-colon provides a grammatical “cut”; and the second image puts an impressionistic cast on the gritty, urban setting.

Pound uses the subway setting of “In a Station of the Metro” to establish a relationship between part and whole, literal and symbolic. The urban milieu keeps the reader moored in reality, so that even when the poetic focus shifts to the natural world, we remember what the petals and tree branch are meant to parallel. “The Tunnel,” on the

other hand, uses its city setting to disorient. The beginning of “The Tunnel” introduces us to a spectator struggling to make sense of urban images:

Performances, assortments, résumés –
Up Times Square to Columbus Circle lights
Channel the congresses, nightly sessions,
Refractions of the thousand theatres, faces –
Mysterious kitchens... You shall search them all. (1-5)

The first five lines of the poem are almost entirely constituted of nouns in apposition, as are the two lines of Pound’s poem. Crane’s lines are far more abstract than Pound’s, and no relationship is suggested between them – they are paratactic rather than syntactic. The endpoints of Times Square and Columbus Circle tell us that we are most likely on Broadway, but the “Performances, assortments, [and] résumés” may be taking place in Broadway theaters or on the street. The confusion is heightened by poem’s spatial order: while Pound asserts connection between the two clauses by a semi-colon, Crane’s dash suggests interruption as well as connection.¹² Something’s cooking in these “mysterious kitchens,” but we can’t even read the menu.

This confused catalog of images is quite different from the visual experience of the city recorded in most urban poetry contemporary to Crane’s. “In the Tube” and “Roses in the Subway,” both poems included in The Soul of the City, focus on the narrator describing a striking, and usually poor, person glimpsed in the commuting crowd.¹³ Perhaps inspired by Pound’s influential experiment in condensation, these poems present a singular image or scene that can be characterized as picturesque.¹⁴ These poems isolate their figures from the backdrop of the station, setting them apart like Pound’s petals. They are then invested with a symbolist resonance in order to communicating personal or eternal truths. For John Presland, a poor mother and sick

child are transformed into the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus (234); in Dana Burnet's "Roses in the Subway," "a wan-cheeked girl with faded eyes" calls to mind the speaker's mother (48-9).¹⁵ Picturesque images glimpsed in the subway are unique and transformative, but they always depend on the poet's ability to project meaning on to an otherwise invisibly common sight. Admittedly, none of these poems is of the same quality as Crane's, to say nothing of Pound's. The compilers of The Soul of the City anthology acknowledge that some of the poems they include are "of less certain quality that yet helps reveal the soul of the city" (xii). Still, the sheer number of poets engaging with the subway in this period is remarkable. When so many people were writing about this urban space, it was bound to lose its picturesque luster.

Repetition gives a particularly urban and modern cast to the poetic images in "The Tunnel": they cease to be remarkable and begin to be part of the urban landscape. Pound's "faces in the crowd" are naturalized by the poetic gaze which distinguishes striking images from the undifferentiated mass. The first stanza of the "The Tunnel," mocks exactly this kind of aestheticizing vision:

Someday by heart you'll learn each famous sight
 And watch the curtain lift in hell's despite;
 You'll find the garden in the third act dead,
 Finger your knees – and wish yourself in bed
 With tabloid crime-sheets perched in easy sight. (6-10)

Crane presents a deadened sense of shock as the eventual end to picturesque spectatorship. The protagonist is a bored theatergoer, distanced from the drama he observes. Even the regularity of these poetic lines and the exactness of the couplet's rhymes suggest the formulaic quality of his vision of the city. If he's going to passively consume mass culture, Crane suggests with Eliotic irony (as well as a similar rhyme and

syntax), he might as well do so in the comfort of his own home. The repetition of the word “sight” also suggests its association with the kind of perception Crane does *not* want to explore: the mere “retinal registration” of the city presented by “impressionists” like E.E. Cummings (“General Aims and Theories,” 219-21). Being a city dweller, and particularly being a city poet, is only exciting when you take advantage of *embodied* urban perception – not just seeing the crowd, but being part of the crowd.

This is exactly the physical relationship that Ezra Pound writes out of “In a Station of the Metro.” In Pound’s poem, the narrator is present only as an observer, not subject to the subway space in the same way as the picturesque people he observes. Andrew Thacker’s “Imagist Travels in Modernist Space” describes one account Pound gives of the epiphany that led to the poem’s composition. In it, he “refers to being jostled by the departing passengers” (237). Thacker then assesses that “[t]ouch is thus replaced in the poem by the detachment of the gaze” (237). Pound’s condensation, like Cummings’s “retinal registration,” removes the physicality and everydayness of the subway commute, turning it into an aesthetic event which the narrator can observe from outside.

The distracted glances of the subway rider offer a poetic perspective that is both less focused and more physicalized than Pound’s. Michael Taussig locates the magical quality of modern perception in “a certain tactility growing out of distracted vision” (143). It is precisely this tactility that Crane discovers in “The Tunnel,” as if the blind movement of the subway necessitated that passengers feel their way through the city. Before the passing sensations are registered as symbolic, the poet and the reader experience them as tactile fragments in a landscape. The habits, daydreams, spatial

perceptions, and overheard conversations that make up the subway journey from Manhattan to Brooklyn are physically encountered and then consciously processed. In the next section, I turn to the distractions of the subway commute as a way of making sense of the subway rider's fragmented physicality.

Just My Body Dragging Me Home

Crane foregrounds the subway's role as a divider and connector, both of geographical spaces and of psychological states. The line, "In interborough fissures of the mind...?" ("The Tunnel" 71) ends with a trail of ellipses before the question mark, rendering on the page a space that is actually between boroughs rather than just describing the movement from one to the other. "Interborough" is a key word in the subway lexicon, since the Interborough Rapid Transit Company ran the first subway line. The word also articulates the subway's newly efficient connection of boroughs that were otherwise difficult to traverse. The Bridge's eponymous central image is the Brooklyn Bridge, whose interborough span metaphorically connects the past to the present, the real to the ideal. However, "fissures" suggest just the opposite, a division between parts rather than a connection.¹⁶ In a 1916 poem, Ruth Comfort Mitchell, called the subway "the torrid hyphen that bridges work and home" (54). "The Tunnel" extends this metaphor, depicting the modernist desire for suspension and potential over fixity, at least until the poem's conclusion where we return to the realm of the ideal. In this section, I discuss how the subway's "interborough fissures" make visible the unexamined habits of the commuter that tenuously bind together work and home selves.¹⁷ "The Tunnel" takes place in the middle space of urban transit, the free fall between selves like the one that we

see in the proem where “elevators drop us from our day” (“To Brooklyn Bridge” 8). It is striking how many people in The Bridge are depicted on this threshold: Columbus returns to Spain in “Ave Maria”, Rip Van Winkle hurries to his job, the son in “Indiana” leaves home to strike it rich in Mexico. Crane depicts the voices and bodies of commuters coming home from work in “The Tunnel” in a way that acknowledges this liminality on a psychological level as well as a poetic one.

From overheard conversation to shoes ascending an escalator, the habitus of the commuter establishes the perspective from which the city (and the poem) is perceived. Crane portrays the initial entrance into the subway, for example, as an involuntary accommodation of the self to the system. A reflexive and passive verb phrase describes the body unconsciously taking on the appropriate positions: “you find yourself/Preparing penguin flexions of the arms” (“The Tunnel” 20-21). Throughout my dissertation, we see subway passengers compared both to animals and to automata, illustrating the pervasive sense that subway movement broke down the boundaries between human and inhuman. The image of the penguin and the sputtering alliterative “p” sounds give the commuter’s arm movements a jerky, robotic feel.¹⁸ “Flexions” are movements specific to muscles, which indicates that Crane is breaking down actions to their smallest component parts. The rush of images slows down as the commuter enters the subway, defamiliarizing each element of the common gesture. The syntax proceeds as if Crane were presenting a Muybridge time-and-motion study of a horse galloping or a man running. And this of course is the converse of Poe’s strange head becoming familiar: the longer we look at subway routines, the stranger they become.

Crane participates in a larger modernist discourse on commuting, one characterized by an estrangement between the body performing city habits and the mind observing and recording them. Accounts written by working women in this period pay particular attention to labor's fragmentation of the female body.¹⁹ One poem from the Bryn Mawr summer school for working women ends with the line "Just my body dragging me home" (qtd. in Hollis 108). Cornelia Stratton Parker describes her first trip home from the factory in a similar way: "I am no aggressive feminist, and I am no old-fashioned clinging vine, but I surely do hate, hate, hate every man in that Subway who sits back in comfort (and most of them look as if they had been sitting all day) while *I and my feet* stand up" (16, emphasis added).²⁰ "The Tunnel" also presents a working woman's body in pieces on the trip home. In it, Crane's narrator addresses an Italian washerwoman:

And does the Daemon take you home, also,
Wop washerwoman, with the bandaged hair?
And after the corridors are swept, the cuspidors –
The gaunt sky-barracks cleanly now, and bare,
O Genoese, do you bring mother eyes and hands
Back home to children and to golden hair?
(100-105)

Presumably wearing a headscarf, this figure displays a body visibly broken by her work cleaning "corridors" and "cuspidors." The reflexive construction in Crane's description – bringing her own eyes and hands home – recalls Stratton Parker as well as the subway rider at the beginning of this section, the "you" who finds himself making the preparatory gestures to enter to kiosk. The enforced passivity of the subway commute gives laborers the time to pay attention to (and sometimes even articulate) their alienated physicality.

Unlike most modernist subway poems, Crane emphasizes speech just as strongly as the image.²² In this stanza, dashes segment lines in odd places, literalizing the gaps between one phrase and another. Crane's use of overheard voices has been compared to William Carlos Williams, and the first line of this stanza is reminiscent of Williams' "Shoot it, Jimmy" in Spring and All (Paul 266). Surprisingly, Crane records voices as local as those in Williams: this stanza seems to invoke pastoral activities of a distant past, but the places described so nostalgically are in Brooklyn and Queens.

There is a tension in this subway reverie, a tension between evocative part and fragmented whole, the evocative past and the fragmented present. This tension suggests the relationship between New York's individual boroughs and the larger city of which they were a part. One of the most important ways that the subway geographically reorganized New York City was by uniting overcrowded Manhattan with the still-rural boroughs of Brooklyn, Queens, and The Bronx. Originally owned by the Long Island Railroad, the "Culver line" connected central Brooklyn to Coney Island in the late nineteenth century and was annexed by Brooklyn Rapid Transit company during the expansion of the subways in the 1910s (Feinman and Darlington).²³ The subway links city and country, though only provisionally. Pastoral reminds us that city and country interpenetrate, and that our divisions between those spaces are merely fantasy (Marx 31-2), a "pigeon's muddy dream." The pastoral and the urban are not set in opposition to one another in this passage, and their intersection is not ironic or tragic, as it is in "Quaker Hill." The city has simply incorporated everything, albeit without uniting the pieces into some greater whole.

Critics most often address the overheard conversations of “The Tunnel” in relation to T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” (1922).²⁴ As with most American modernists, Crane was writing in opposition to Eliot as much as he was writing in thrall to him. In particular, Crane responds to Eliot’s ethnographic anxieties, presenting the most culturally authentic utterances – such as those of the Brooklynites above – in a more visually, aurally, and spatially fragmented manner than those of the modern, alienated subway passengers. Brian Reed argues that all of Crane’s poems can be read as “a maimed piece of an absent, ungraspable whole” (Reed 119). Heard in their chopped-up state, the voices of these subway passengers are no longer signs of presence. Instead, they allow the narrator (and the reader) to imagine the absent, ungraspable whole self of which conversations and habits play only a part.

The subway makes possible the kind of familiar anonymity that Michael Trask finds throughout Crane’s oeuvre, “a form of contact that is simultaneously intimate and public” (Trask 124). Encounters in the transitory space of the subway are specific but impersonal, unique but not attached to a particular character. And it’s not only the girls “shaping up” that suggest the subway’s erotic potential. The poem addresses a more explicit form of transitory urban encounter with an oblique reference that has generated much critical discussion.²⁵ Crane delves into the unconscious, repetitive experience of subway space:

The phonographs of Hades in the brain
Are tunnels that re-wind themselves, and love
A burnt match skating in a urinal— (“The Tunnel” 58-60).

The match in the urinal is commonly read as a metonym for a homosexual encounter in a subway restroom, one that has been tossed away after lighting a post-coital cigarette.

Underground movement enables this erotic frisson of anonymous sexual contact: willing partners lock eyes in the rush-hour crowds, the subway bathrooms provide a space both public and private, and the trains allow for an easy departure. Following Crane's opaque poetic syntax, however, we can theorize that the tunnels and the match are not just tenors in parallel metaphors (phonographs are tunnels, love is a burnt match). They are also connected images of the urban body compelled to repeatedly engage in anonymous encounters with and within city space. Since the "phonographs of Hades" are in "*the* brain," rather than "your brain" (or mine, or ours) Crane seems to imagine habitual processes hard-wired into the urban mind through repetition rather than taken on consciously by heroic effort. The lines reinforce knowledge of the subway system on a bodily level, with the circling match in the toilet echoing the circling of the tunnel. An illicit encounter by a urinal is just one manifestation of the ephemeral contact with fellow city dwellers that the subway makes possible.

There is a libidinal aspect to the repeated subway rides Crane depicts in "The Tunnel," even when they do not include cruising. Repetition brings into focus the machine's erotic qualities. The fragmented sights and sounds of the subway carry the narrator through the underground space in the same way that the movement of the line carries the reader through the poem. Once the narrator has boarded the subway train, we can see and hear this rhythm being established:

...In the car
the overtone of motion
underground, the monotone
of motion is the sound
of other faces, also underground—
("The Tunnel" 34-38)

Enjambment lends a dynamic quality to Crane's description, since it both cuts off the regularity of the rhythm and reinforces the eventual rhymes between "overtone" and "monotone," "underground" and "sound." This poetic movement echoes the movement of the train, suggesting an "overtone of motion." This stanza exists in a spatially impossible landscape, or at least one that combines sight and hearing so that an "overtone" can be heard "underground." Here the spatial disorientation present throughout the poem results in a generative synesthesia. The boredom of the subway ride is productive as well: although the train's movement is monotonous, it allows the narrator to hear the "sound/of other faces." The enforced routine gives the narrator time in close proximity to these other faces, time to listen to strangers' conversations and contemplate their inner lives. And with Poe's head in close proximity to the narrator, the poem contemplates the author's life as well as the author's poetic lines.

The Man Who Was Used Up

Throughout The Bridge, Crane connects literary innovators with technological innovation. In part this is a strategic break from the past: embracing technology helped American modernists envision a tradition not beholden to Europe (Tashjian 128). "Cape Hatteras" pairs the airplane and Walt Whitman, "Cutty Sark" features a sailor thought to be Herman Melville, and, as we have already seen, Edgar Allan Poe plays a prominent role in "The Tunnel." In this underground space, both Poe's corpus and his corpse appear in pieces. Through their repetition and recombination, Crane suggests that technology gives the modern subject a newfound flexibility in bringing the past into dialogue with the present.

American modernists of the 1920s counted Poe as a forefather to their poetic experimentation because he offered a local point of origin, an alternative to the Eurocentric citation of greatest hits and lesser works in “The Waste Land.”²⁶ William Carlos Williams’s influential catalog of alternative literary ancestors, In the American Grain (1925), locates Poe’s importance in his rejection of writing that simply filled European forms with American content.²⁷ Instead, Williams imagines (and becomes critically invested in) a particularly modernist understanding of Poe as an author who asserts his own originality through the act of repurposing mass cultural materials and the work of earlier writers (Elmer 32-37). Crane, too, engages in a conflicted bricolage of high and low, with toothpaste ads shoulder to shoulder with agate lanterns. He uses the subway passenger’s physical confrontation with Poe to concretize one of the most important issues in modernist poetics – dealing with poetic predecessors.²⁸

Staging Poe’s reappearance in “The Tunnel,” Crane takes on a similar role to that of the child in the famous “fort-da” game Freud describes in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. The child deals with his sense of parental abandonment by pretending to throw away a wooden toy and then pulling it back, taking pleasure both in its disappearance and its return. Freud gives two possible interpretations of this game: that the repetition of an experience of passivity and discomfort gives the person repeating it a sense of control, or that this repeated game satisfies a suppressed wish (14-17). Both of these interpretations can be applied to Crane and his relationship to his poetic forefathers. Crane revenges himself on Poe by forcing him to appear, denuded and fragmented, in this modern space; yet he also repeats and revises Poe’s words and his mistakes, deploying the language of brokenness and submission as aesthetic choices.

“The Tunnel” literalizes issues of descent and the relation of part to whole that are central to Crane’s poetic practice. I suggest that the poem also complicates the presumed authority and coherence of American literary ancestry through its extended attention to Poe’s physical fragmentation and his violent death.²⁹ An early biographer of Poe describes “the fixed belief of Baltimoreans” regarding his demise: that local party hacks kept him locked up, plied with alcohol and opium, and then forced him to vote the Whig ticket at polling stations (Ingram 427). Of this horrific, though most likely fictional, occurrence, Crane’s narrator asks

And when they dragged your retching flesh,
Your trembling hands that night through Baltimore—
That last night on the ballot rounds, did you
Shaking, did you deny the ticket, Poe? (79-82)

Poe’s body is not only fragmented here, it is actively abject – “retching,” “trembling,” and “shaking.” The act of voting described in this stanza is a parody of democracy, with Poe’s lack of self-will over his body’s movements echoed in his lack of political control. But this form of surrender is not placed in the past: Poe’s movement is connected to that of the subway commuter, particularly through the word that unites politics and transportation, “ticket.” To pursue this comparison, self-determined democracy is replaced by enforced engagement with the political machine, and self-determined movement through open space is replaced by enforced transportation through pre-established underground pathways. In this sense, Poe’s experience parallels the submission of the subway rider much more closely than the active optimistic engagement with machines described by other modernists.

Poe’s acuity in predicting central concerns of the modern condition was another factor that led early twentieth-century poets to embrace him. Waldo Frank says “Only

Poe [of all early American authors] guessed the transfiguring effect of the Machine upon the form of human life, upon the very concept of the person.” (130). Crane sees in Poe’s enforced movement an early expression of the modern sense of being moved against one’s will by larger forces. It is only by imagining a more positive means of submission that Crane finally escapes Poe’s terrible fate. When submission is inevitable, Crane suggests that we should embrace it.

Instead of anxiety about his own belatedness, Crane gives himself over to the subway crush of poetic influence. “The Tunnel” is not a poem about Poe in the same way “Cape Hatteras” is a poem about Whitman. Whitman’s appearances neatly bookend that poem, and his language is present throughout. In “The Tunnel,” by contrast, Poe appears halfway through a text that begins with a Blake epigraph and borrows many techniques from T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams. In the couplet “--And did their riding eyes right through your side, /And did their eyes like unwashed platters ride?” (75-6), Poe’s severed head and the “unwashed platters” suggest Eliot’s sheepish John the Baptist in “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” The rhythm and syntax of these lines echo the rhetorical question that begins William Blake’s poem, “And did those feet in ancient time,” also known as “Jerusalem” (Blake 161). Even Poe’s insistent and influential presence is refracted through Crane’s other influences, all of whom question the possibilities of urban life. The eyes of the silent observers parallel the lurking silent influences in the poem. In this way, the underground space of the subway is momentarily transformed into a literal underworld; the subway car becomes a “crypt of the ancestral dead” (Smith 3). As we can see in this stanza, “be[ing] minimum” (Crane 24) is not only a question of de-emphasizing one’s physical presence on the subway. Crane minimizes

his own interpretive voice here, presenting an underground space of poetic influence where there is no single guide, no Virgil or Rousseau – only an echo chamber of fragmented influences. The American poetic tradition is as crowded as a rush-hour subway car, and the path it follows is far more complex and modern than that of a family tree.

Of course, Poe's legacy was not that of a great poet, but of a great tale-teller. Crane's idea of descent and influence is engaged with Poe's tales as much as his poems. The idea of the fissure in particular connects and separates Crane's complex subterranean space from the uncanny locations of many of Edgar Allan Poe's tales. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," the first foreshadowing of the house's imminent destruction comes when the narrator notices a "barely perceptible fissure" running down the length of its façade, and the word is repeated twice when the narrator describes the house's collapse (141). For Poe, the fissure is what eventually leads to the house's destruction; due to the cracks in the foundation, the house collapses into the tarn and the water closes over it. However, Crane's interborough fissures span *and* separate. Because the subway ride is a routine rather than a unique, grotesque event, the water regularly closes over Crane's commuter but also parts just as often.

In "The Tunnel," Crane envisions a new model of descent and influence, one where Poe exists on one of myriad possible paths through American literary history. The spatial complexity of the subway is an improvement on the model of transmission in Poe's tale: Usher's line of descent is single stem with no branches, where direct transmission from father to son is the only model of inheritance (Poe 140). The "back forks of the chasms of the brain" and "interborough fissures of the mind" allow Crane to

imagine a more complex form of descent and influence. He transfers the subway tunnels' pathways into the commuter's brain, with the subway's spatial orientation echoing and extending the speaker's mental map. The construction of the first spatial metaphor branches off into one prepositional phrase and then another, suggesting both the subway system and the nervous system. Subway space, with its back forks and fissures, offers multiple paths for the poetic commuter to follow; it also eliminates the suggestions of stunted growth and inbreeding that come with straight lines of descent like those of Roderick Usher.

Although both authors share an interest in the relationship between space and psychology, the claustrophobic qualities of "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Tunnel" stem from very different conceptions of what is being restricted in these close quarters. Richard Wilbur discusses claustrophobia in Poe's tales as "the exclusion from consciousness of the so-called real world, the world of time and reason and physical fact; it means the isolation of the poetic soul in a visionary reverie or trance" (104). For Poe, spatial restriction echoes and reinforces the isolation of the individual consciousness and its private perceptions. The subway, on the other hand, lends a very public character to claustrophobia. In Poe's "Man of the Crowd," the old man whom the speaker follows can escape from his identity because he lacks the spatial restriction that Crane's narrator experiences. This distinction is another example of Crane's move away from a visionary or flaneural urban poetics and into one where the loss of self leads to an empathy with others in the crowd.³⁰

"The Tunnel" continues to make use of the poetic past, but these fragments are not synecdoches of larger problems of urban life (as in "The Waste Land") or even

representative material arising from the landscape (as in Paterson.) Instead, they seem to be visual equivalents to Poe's fractured body, appearing when he is present in the tunnel and then passing on as the speaker moves to another station. Poe's physical and poetic fragments are glimpsed in passing by the "riding eyes" of the passengers and the reader, held together by Crane's insistent apposition and by the ride of which they are a part. Repetition forges connections that value the literary past only as it coheres with the distracted modern present. And the complex space of the subway is an appropriate technological structure for understanding the lines of descent in American poetry: there is not a single, direct line over centuries, but one that is fractured, fragmented, and glimpsed in passing.

Disintegrated, Yet Part of the Scheme

"The Tunnel," however, does not conclude in this complex underground space; neither does it ascend symmetrically up a set of Brooklyn subway steps. Instead, the poem turns abstract and Romantic as the subway leaves Manhattan and tunnels under the East River into Brooklyn. If the underground sections are too close to the action, the concluding stanzas are perhaps too distant: a hand reaching for a nickel becomes a "Hand of Fire" (137); the overheard words of passengers become "some Word that will not die" (122). Visionary fragmentation seems only to function underground. Consequently, Crane ascends into Brooklyn and returns to the discourse of the technological sublime.

In the conclusion, Crane tries to account for the abstract and the embodied aspects of underground movement, the infrastructure of the subway system as well as the individual subway ride. He does so, in part, by describing the subway in wildly

contradictory ways. “And does the Daemon take you home, also[?]” (100), Crane’s narrator asks of the Italian cleaning lady with whom he shares a newly-empty subway car traveling beneath the East River to Brooklyn. A daemonic subway system could be a guardian spirit of new forms of urban perception or a devil trapping city-dwellers in inescapable routines (and most likely both). Similar to the Brooklyn Bridge and the Mississippi River in other sections of The Bridge, the subway’s power sweeps up individuals caught in its wake. While Nye characterizes the technological sublime as “a celebration of the power of human reason” (60), the subway’s sublimity is certainly irrational – as is Crane’s attempt to make sense of it.

Poe’s head shows us the sublime becoming routine; these final stanzas show us the routine becoming sublime. In the next stanza, the daemonic repetition of the daily subway ride is conveyed through its contradictory status as a conveyance of death and birth.³¹ Even the “yawn” that describes the subway throughout this poem becomes a “demurring and eventful yawn” (106), both the yawn of boredom or fatigue and the yawn of eternity. The subway system “cruelly inoculate[s]” the dawn by ferrying passengers into Manhattan “toward worlds that glow and sink,” suggesting figures rising and falling in the stock market (109-110). It “spoon[s] us out” to Brooklyn once again as the stars are dimly perceived at dusk (111-2). Like the “interborough fissures” earlier in the poem, the subway has an “umbilical” quality (114) that emphasizes the division of Brooklyn passengers from their workday identities in Manhattan even as it connects them to the island that provides the lifeblood of the city.

The subway car moves from beneath the East River to its first stop in Brooklyn Heights, giving the narrator a Lazarus-like sense of rebirth. The narrator has emerged

from the subway in the same place where he ended the first poem in The Bridge, gazing at the East River from the piers beneath the Brooklyn Bridge. Ascent and elevation are commonly described as positions that turn the urban spectator into a visionary, both removing him from the scene and allowing him to see more of it. Michel De Certeau described the view from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center as one that “makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text” (92). The “opaque mobility” of the subway system is in fact rendered invisible in the poem’s final stanzas. The ascent of the subway tunnel is echoed and extended in the final stanza, which sutures “The Tunnel” into the whole of The Bridge.

Looking at the subway from this elevated perspective, “The Tunnel” seems to move away from Poe’s fissured poetics and back to the mystical fusion of Walt Whitman. In some ways, Whitman is a far more obvious poetic predecessor than Poe. “The Tunnel” follows the same geographical path as “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” and both poems share a sense of the city’s temporality as cyclical and natural. Crane, however, is not as optimistic about the possibilities of community built into the commute – the last three long verse paragraphs of “The Tunnel” end with the word “die.” Whitman’s engagement with the city in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is full of “face to face” contact (1); Crane’s knowledge of New York is constructed through furtive glimpses, at least until he ascends from the subway at the end of the poem.

“The Tunnel” concludes with the kind of visionary language much more common in the celebratory nineteenth-century accounts of manmade technologies. But we can understand this version of the technological sublime as peculiarly modernist, in part because the earlier fragmentation makes possible the concluding transcendent

abstractions. On the subway, everyone is disintegrated – it's only with hindsight that they're "disintegrated but part of the scheme" (Whitman 7). If we repeat fragmented experiences long enough, the poem offers, they will begin to make sense as part of a transcendent whole. Reed suggests that Crane "finds 'euphoria' in contemplating the loss of self as mechanical processes supplant, or rend, the integrity of the individual" (109). But mechanical routines do not merely fracture the possibility of integrity; instead, the hypnotic and erotic rhythm of mechanized routine allows Crane's narrator to empathize with the other passengers sharing the subway car. Regular movement transports the narrator beyond normal perceptual capabilities and into a mechanically induced fusion of the senses.³² Crane's narrator does not minimize the discreteness of the individual lines, phrases, and fragments that he records along his journey. Instead, he emphasizes the various ways in which the urban sensorium operates: when logical ways of making sense fall through, the brain and body keep moving, finding echoes and connections on other levels.

The repetition of decontextualized fragments was not only a poetic strategy for Crane – it was a mode of composition as well. Brian Reed describes the poet's "infuriating way of writing a poem": he got drunk, played the same record over and over on a hand-cranked Victrola, and alternately typed and read his verse aloud (99). He would often listen to one movement of a symphony over and over instead of the whole thing from beginning to end. This process stripped the music of its narrative quality. The repetitive sonic environment allowed Crane an escape from his own subjectivity as a poet in the same way that the repeated physical and mental habits of the subway ride allow (and often *force*) the erasure of the commuter's identity. Reed calls "Crane's faith that

repetitious sound could lead one into mystic and physical transport [...] positively shamanic” (120). I read the end of the poem as an articulation of such a shamanic understanding. Throughout the 1920s and 30s, New York authors portray the subway as an otherworldly space: it is apocalyptic for Elmer Rice, the belly of the whale for Rudolph Fisher. For Crane, it is the repeated submission to the subway that reveals its mystical qualities and allows him, at the poem’s end, to see the fragmented lives of city dwellers “gather[ed]” into a divine whole (136). The narrator is carried along by the fragmented sights and sounds of the subway in the same way that the reader is carried along by the movement of the line – literal public transportation veers into verbal transportation.

Modern life is always perceived in pieces, moved along by force of habit. Crane does not suggest that recognizing these routines is a way of freeing ourselves from the subjection of them (one of the more naïve interpretations of Expressionism). Instead, he embraces these habits as the subject for poetry. The fragmented movements and identities of individual subway riders counterpoint the monotonous, mechanistic rhythms of the repeated commute. The tired commuters that populate “The Tunnel” suggest a new relationship between part and whole, subway ride and subway system. Unconscious processes and mechanized routines are the only things that bind individuals together as whole selves; they also bind lines and verses into whole poems. The subway has given modernist writers a new mental map of urban space and poetic possibility, one where repetition allows city dwellers unconsciously to understand their new environment.

Although “The Tunnel” becomes more abstract as it retreats from the subway space, it still presents the “unconscious nervous responses of our bodies” as they work

through the lessons learned in that space. Crane's re-emergence above ground at the end of the poem can be seen as a desire for reconnection to the lived-in space of the city. Later modernist texts amplify this impulse, connecting it to a rediscovery of lost urban history. My final chapter explores why experimental films of the 1950s fixate on an ancestor of the subway, the elevated train. I argue that the El's shifting scenes of surrounding neighborhoods offer an alternative to the disconnected internal focus of underground movement. American surrealist Joseph Cornell mourns the soon-to-be-raided Third Avenue El, I suggest, because its inefficient visual connection to city space enables fantasies of urban community that are absent from the modernist subway. Like Crane, Cornell wants to mesh the individual's understanding of the city into the structure of the whole.

¹ See Crane's exchange with Harriet Monroe, where she takes issue with the opacity of some of the metaphors in "At Melville's Tomb" and he testily explains them, in O My Land 277-283.

² Though they were friends, Tate's introduction was something of an afterthought: White Buildings was supposed to include a foreword written by Eugene O'Neill (Mariani 231).

³ See Dickie for a history of the composition of each section of the poem.

⁴ See also Robert K. Martin, "Crane's The Bridge," where he says, "It is important to see that the hellish sounds which the poet hears are 'in the brain' – that is, they form part of his interior vision, his realization of the darkness of self. The tunnels and the phonograph records lead us back finally to the surface of the brain" (Section 16).

⁵ This puts the subway in the company of Eliot's "fragments I have shored against my ruins" (430) or the image of "divorce" in Paterson (Williams 17).

⁶ This is true of The Bridge as a whole in addition to being true of "The Tunnel." In fact, Susan Schulz says this is the defining quality of The Bridge ("The Success of Failure" 55). See Margaret Dickie, On the Modernist Long Poem 47-76 as well.

⁷ See Dembo 77-81, Tapper 225, and Zeigler 291.

⁸ This makes my argument very different from that Cecelia Tichi's Shifting Gears, which focuses on early twentieth-century writing that celebrates the engineer and ideas of efficiency and streamlining. In this way, I am locating New York modernists closer to other modernist writers who display "a positive fascination with the people who had been left behind by the engine of progress" (Lears 359). The subjects of my chapters have not been left behind, but they certainly must work to keep up with modern movement.

⁹ But it also introduces a terror of its own, the terror of fragmentation and loss of self embodied in Poe's head, for example.

¹⁰ This version was published in *Lustra*, 1916. For an analysis of different version of this poem, see Thacker, *Moving Through Modernity*, 100-102.

¹¹ Bernstein also discusses Eisensteinian montage as a "limiting case" in understanding the process of juxtaposition, one that "precludes thematically and ideationally nonidentical material." (359).

¹² The same is true of the "interborough fissures" that I discuss later.

¹³ Not all the poems in this collection focus on singular visual images. Ruth Shephard Phelps's "The Subway" and Chester Firkins' "On a Subway Express" both describe an idealized commute, rife with religious implications: Firkins calls the subway his "meeting-place with God" (*Soul of the City* 54) and Phelps compares herself with "Dante, pilgrimaging where/Lucifer was hurled" (*Soul of the City* 98). Certainly "The Tunnel" has its share of striking images and spiritual implications; however, they are all couched in the language of the repeated and the physical.

¹⁴ This aesthetic of the picturesque is an important element of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American literature, one that I discuss in more detail in the following chapter.

¹⁵ One of the exceptions to the picturesque rule comes near the beginning of "Summer Evening: New York Subway-Station," a poem by Crane's friend Maxwell Bodenheim. In perhaps the most modernist section, Bodenheim says, "The scene consists of mosaics/Jerkily pieced together and blown apart" (177). Bodenheim finishes the poem by describing a working girl and an old man in similar language to that of the other poets of the picturesque subway: they are both sad and sweaty, wearing black hats, "Pieced together by an old complaint" (177).

¹⁶ The structure of *The Bridge*, Margaret Dickie argues, begins with an "image of completion or wholeness, and then proceed[s] to break it down" (50); the phrase "interborough fissures" activates the same tensions on a micro-level.

¹⁷ In this way, Crane's poetry examines heretofore-invisible detail with the same penetrating attention that Walter Benjamin locates in the cinema's slow-motion and close-up shots (232-234).

¹⁸ Later in the poem, the narrator addresses a fellow commuter in a similarly alliterative voice, calling her a "Wop washerwoman" who cleans "corridors" and "cuspidors" (101-102). Alliteration is a poetic techniques Crane employs more often than repetition to underscore the dehumanizing qualities of the city.

¹⁹ See Karyn Hollis, "Material of Desire" 98-119.

²⁰ Stratton Parker was an upper-class woman posing as working-class to write her account; some of the most striking details of her first weeks working at a chocolate factory have to do with the conscious and unconscious ways she had to physically alter herself to become accustomed to that routine.

²¹ Michael Trask calls this new form of temporality "episodic time" and connects it with the anonymity and replaceability of the laborer in Crane's poetry (136).

²² This is also true of William Carlos Williams's "Rapid Transit," though that poem is more focused on the language of advertisements than that of passengers. (Williams *Imaginations* 146-7).

²³ For information on this subway line, see {<http://www.nycsubway.org/lines/culver.html>}

In a letter to Gorham Munson, Crane said “I can hardly resist mentioning that all the place-names in ‘The Tunnel’ actually do exist, and I honestly regard it as something of a miracle that they happened to fall into the same kind of symbolical functioning as the boat-names took in ‘Cutty Sark.’”

I have never been to Floral Park nor Gravesend Manor, but you do actually take the 7th Avenue Interborough to get there, and you change for same at Chambers Street. A boozy truckdriver I used to talk with a good deal in a lowdown dive lived out there, used to talk about the girls ‘shaping up,’ and finally died at Floral Park, Flatbush. There are some new timbres and tonalities, I think, in ‘The Tunnel’ – at least if I know what nearly maddened me for three years until I got a few of the acid tremors down on paper – if I have!” (*Oh My Land* 334).

²⁴ Many people have made this argument, but the most thorough is George S. Lensing.

²⁵ Queer theory readings of Crane have been the most attuned to the physicality of his poetry. The first extended discussion of Crane’s queer poetics, Thomas E. Yingling’s *Hart Crane and the Homosexual Text*, does not mention “The Tunnel” a single time (which is curious, because he mentions even the “heterosexual motif[s]” of poems he does not discuss in depth (204). However, he does discuss “how for Crane all theory had to take account of the body and its life of sensation” and the ways in which *The Bridge* accounts for the movements of desire in the relationship between body and machine (225-6). For a more recent reading of Crane’s queer poetics, see Tim Dean.

²⁶ In *From Poe to Valery* by contrast, T.S. Eliot disavows Poe for his immaturity and inconsistency:

If we examine his work in detail, we seem to find in it nothing but slipshod writing, puerile thinking unsupported by wide reading or profound scholarship, haphazard experiments in various types of writing, chiefly under the pressure of financial need, without perfection in any detail. This would not be just. But if, instead of regarding his work analytically, we take a distant view of it as a whole, we see a mass of unique shape and impressive size to which the eye constantly returns.” (5)

²⁷ See Gregory 83.

²⁸ See Gregory 25.

²⁹ See Tim Armstrong, 90-5 for a discussion of physical fragmentation in Poe and its wider literary import. Poe’s tale, “The Man that Was Used Up” similarly celebrates a “wonderfully inventive age” by showing how its inventions emphasize the fragmentation of the modern subject. The man of the title is a general who the narrator finds a dashing figure. The narrator then finds out that the general’s well-formed physique and booming voice are all man-made: he has prosthetics made for an arm, a leg, his tongue and palate, and so on, which he lost when fighting the “Bugaboo and Kickapoo” Indians (Poe 127-137).

³⁰ Tim Dean suggests that all of Crane’s poetry enacts a kind of positive claustrophobia: “I would suggest that the *reader*, rather than the poet, is somehow ‘locked-in’ or ‘insulated’ by Crane’s poetry. That is, Crane’s lyrics reproduce – rather than represent – an experiential intensity that affects the reader with a sense of his or her own privacy” (89).

³¹ Both Paul Giles (191) and Sherman Paul (271) make sense of this notoriously difficult stanza by pointing to its paradoxes and contradictions.

³² Here is another connection between Crane's and Poe's poetic strategies: "Poe had, to an exceptional degree, the feeling for the incantatory element in poetry[...] It has the effect of an incantation which, because of its very crudity, stirs the feelings at a deep and almost primitive level." (Eliot From Poe to Valery 13).

Chapter 4. Farewell to the El: Nostalgic Urban Visuality on the Third Avenue Elevated Train

“Toll a bell for the El/For the last clientele/With a stubborn and sporting *esprit*/Not a cinder around, yet my vision is blurred/Sentimental? Yes, that I may be. /Nothing ever again can be quite what the Third Avenue El was to me.”—This metropolitan dirge, composed by Michael Brown, is the current hit of Julius Monk’s suave revue in the new nightclub cellar, The Downstairs. Mr. Brown’s wail poignantly expresses the general lamentation for the passing of Third Avenue as we knew it.

Shedding a tear for Third Avenue, or any city antique, is a popular sport. Nobody in town is kept as busy as the nostalgia-minded. Their eyes are never dry from weeping for another lost cause. New York, chameleon-like, changes with extravagant regularity; the city’s old familiar song is the ra-ta-ta of the riveter. But Third Avenue is a special field day for the nostalgic. (Lewis 12)

May 12, 1955, was truly a “special field day for the nostalgic”; it was the last day to ride on the Third Avenue Elevated train. Although there were still elevated trains throughout the city’s boroughs, the trains that ran down Ninth, Sixth, and Second Avenues in Manhattan had been torn down by 1942. (New York Public Library).¹ The Third Avenue El was the last of its kind, and riders were eager to memorialize this dying technology. An account of the last ride on the Third Avenue El describes the train being overrun by “souvenir collectors” who stripped the car of “everything that wasn’t nailed down”: “The black metal destination markers proved the most popular items and were quickly removed from their window slots. Several persons carried six or eight signs tucked under their arms and for a while there was a brisk trading of ‘duplicates.’” (Barstow 1). This hunger continued for less concrete souvenirs that could communicate the experience of the train ride. The New-York Historical Society opened “Exhibit of the City’s Elevates” the day the Third Avenue El closed, replacing the literal ride with a figurative one. (“Exhibit” 14). A decade later, a retrospective tracked “The Rise and Fall of the Elevated Railroad”; along with the usual photographs, sketches, and contracts, this

retrospective included a “1 1/2 hour program of old el movies (and some new ones too)” (New York Public Library).² Mourning the Third Avenue El was truly a “popular sport.”

Personal and collective views on American life often arise from machine-mediated views of American space, even once the technologies that made those views possible are deemed outdated or razed altogether. We tend to think about technological innovations as they suggest new social arrangements and philosophical understandings. Even the subway, while not new in the 1920s, was a newly habitual part of urban movement. Yet the Third Avenue El offers an important counter-example. The end of the El was the beginning of its afterlife as an object of aesthetic contemplation.³ I suggest that the El became so popular in this era because it served as an alternative to the disconnected, efficient modernist subway. Where writers in my previous chapters examine the pitfalls and pleasures of underground movement, artists and writers of the 1950s sought alternatives to it.

Elevated trains (and their tracks, stations, and passengers) were common in cultural representation of the New York cityscape throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴ But the Third Avenue El’s imminent destruction made it a particularly resonant subject for postwar artists and writers. Popular and avant-garde filmmakers shot on its cars and beneath its tracks in the shadowy world of the Bowery.⁵ Photographers preserved the flowery ironwork on the girders and the potbellied stoves and stained glass in the stations.⁶ In the 1950s, the El traveled nearly empty while subways were packed and cars jammed the streets, but this anachronistic transportation technology gained a new hold on the city’s cultural imagination.

New Yorkers mourned the El because it was a link to the city's past that was about to disappear, one of many in a period of rapid urban development. New York has always understood itself as a city that changes "with extravagant regularity," as Emory Lewis suggests above.⁷ The 1950s were no exception, a decade "highlighted by a construction boom that once again transformed the cityscape. High-rise apartments and slum clearance projects were going up virtually overnight" (Lankevitch 191). However, I suggest that the El was not just a metonymic stand-in for "the wonderful old world that's passing" (Beckley 7). Instead, it structured New Yorkers' knowledge of urban space in a way that had never been possible on the subway. As an underground form of transportation, the subway keeps urban development out of sight. In the 1950s, the El was an obsolete technology in a modernizing city, and it emphasized movement through the city as mediated movement through the urban past.

The connection to city space made possible by the El stood in sharp relief to the frictionless movement through the city embraced by urban planners, architects, and the like. Robert Bennett sees the development of this period as resulting in a "postindustrial dematerialization of urban space" (61). New York may have reached its insubstantial apex in the glass and steel towers of the Lever Building (Figure 11). However, I suggest that the ground was laid for such an "unreal city" in the tunnels of the modernist subway. Modernist writers charted a landscape where New Yorkers began to relate to the city's infrastructure in more theoretical and fantastic ways. Underground movement habituated urban subjects to the submission to abstract systems and the disconnection of beginning from end. We can understand the "nostalgia-mindedness" of artists of the 1950s as an attempt to rematerialize urban space and to recreate a concrete, embodied relationship to

the city – one that existed prior to the subway. Like nostalgic cyborgs, artists of the 1950s inhabited anachronistic machines in order to see what modes of perception they offered and how they could be maintained in a world without the material technology itself.⁸

In the last days of the El, it was no longer a novelty or a mover of the masses. Instead, it had a more symbolic purpose as an alternative to the decontextualizing force of the subway or the isolation of the car.⁹ The El showed postwar artists a city dissociated from progress, haunted by machines of the past and visions of modernity from seventy-five years ago. Recent critical attention to the elevated train has emphasized its panoramic quality and the distanced relationship to the city sights (particularly the lives of the poor) that resulted.¹⁰ For these critics, technology is a shield and a frame: it protects New Yorkers who can afford the fare and aestheticizes encounters that would otherwise be experienced more authentically at street level. However, my argument considers how the El's visuality changes over time and in relation to other, later transportation technologies.¹¹ Seen in relation to the modernist subway's underground movement, the El's orientation separates viewers from the crowd but simultaneously reconnects them to city space.



Figure 9. Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, Lever Building (1952)

The progress associated with newer transportation technologies could not erase the satisfactions of riding the El: it offered the urban subject embodied connection and a sense of lived history. Nostalgic representations of the Third Avenue El in the 1950s argued that these pleasures should continue to be a part of New York's visual landscape. Janelle Wilson describes nostalgia as “the opportunity to observe and juxtapose past and present identity”; the nostalgia for the city as seen from the El posited continuity and discontinuity between past and present forms of urban space and experience (35).¹²

The El's anachronistic visuality collapsed binaries between distance and intimacy, public and private space, past and present. The defining aspect of the El, particularly in

comparison with later forms of public transportation, was its openness to city space. The “shadbelly” design included a low-slung center so the cars didn’t tip over, and gave extra height to ceilings (they were 9’6”); its double row of windows in the center provided extra light and extended the view (Reed 49). Windows could be opened, and on summer days the back door of the last car was opened to take in the breeze. This connection to the urban environment was impossible on the subway, a space of physical and psychological dissociation.¹³ El passengers experienced a clear relationship to the city, while subway passengers could not see where they were going. A 1938 editorial from the New York Herald Tribune doubted that the El would ever be torn down precisely because of the aesthetic pleasure and spatial mastery riders felt in their navigation of the city: “Powerful nationalistic smells of cooking, as well as odors from the leather, spice, chemical, coffee and other industries reach the traveler who is seeing New York for a nickel, and if he is a regular, he can tell with his eyes shut about where he is on his journey” (“It Won’t Be Very Soon” 10). Here, regular riding of the El is not associated with the daily grind of commuting but with the sensual experience of smelling fresh ground coffee. The city may be a site of shifting neighborhoods and alliances, but it makes sense (and it even makes *scents*) to those habituated to movement through it.

The embodied connection to city space should not suggest that El riders experienced a more real version of the city than subway riders did—it was a wholly different one. Subway car views alternated between dark tunnels and stations distinguishable only by name; lone riders retreated into internal fantasy through reading, daydreaming, or dozing.¹⁴ El passengers, on the other hand, experienced fantasies that were directed outward into external city space. Technologies of transportation reinforce

urban subjectivity by literalizing views of the city: moving underground, New York became a space of invisibility and isolation; moving aboveground and in close proximity to city life opened up otherwise invisible spaces to fantasies of communion. While the cross-country train offered the possibility of connecting different parts of America, the elevated train suggested this imaginary connection could take place on an individual level as well.¹⁵

Artists of the 1950s latched on to this externally directed gaze as a way of preserving not only the sights of the El but also the way of seeing from it. American surrealist Joseph Cornell used assemblage, film, and writing to examine the technology's possibilities for projecting a reverie of connectedness onto urban space. Cornell's prominence in the art world rests on the reputation of his boxes, which were filled with found and purchased objects arranged as they would be in a cabinet of curiosities.¹⁶ His diaries from the 1920s through the 1950s describe the people and scenes he saw while riding the El, as well as the magical sense of identification that they evoked. One diary entry describes a "woman adjusting [her] window" seen from a Queens elevated train. The "'flash' view of [the] moving car leav[es] this image imbued with the magic that used to come so strongly on occasions in commuting days and following" (Cornell "Diaries"). Cornell often attempted to visually evoke the viewer's past in his artwork just as he experienced his own past while watching the woman described in his diary. One series of shadowboxes, known as the Window Façade boxes, is made up of vertically oriented grids of windows: the box suggests the façade of an apartment building seen from a passing elevated train, and viewers expect that similar isolated scenes will be glimpsed inside (Figure 12).

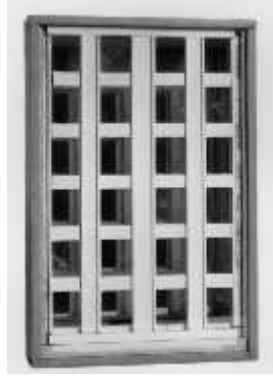


Figure 10. Joseph Cornell, Untitled (Window Facade) (1950)

Joseph Cornell's depiction of the El illustrates an understanding of public transportation not only as a historically specific technology to be mourned and fetishized but as a way of seeing that can be examined and problematized.¹⁷ Throughout Cornell's corpus, old-fashioned technologies make the persistence of the past a concrete and embodied—but not easily perceived—presence.¹⁸ This is especially true of his film Gnir Rednow, produced in collaboration with avant-garde film pioneer Stan Brakhage. Brakhage shot the initial footage on the Third Avenue El and edited it for his own film, The Wonder Ring (1955); however, Brakhage's final product did not evoke the sense of encounter between different spaces and times that Cornell had envisioned. Brakhage "shot a film that remained almost entirely inside the cars of the train [. . .] Cornell, dissatisfied with the interiorization of what he saw as a highly voyeuristic experience, found another use for the footage" (Keller 250). Reversing Brakhage's intentions as well as his title, Cornell edited The Wonder Ring into Gnir Rednow (precise date unknown), a film that re-created the El's visuality as Cornell understood it (Sitney 80).¹⁹ While this seems to be an example of what Susan Hegeman calls "salvage ethnography," I argue that Cornell is not merely a nostalgic preservationist (Hegeman 34).²⁰ For Cornell, the

Third Avenue El is not just a structure; it is a structure of feeling. To know New York through this anachronistic technology is to realize the historical locatedness of urban visuality, and yet to want it to persist outside of its specific history.

Passing Acquaintances

The El oriented passengers like Cornell to the cityscape in two ways: it presented broad vistas that connected neighborhoods as well as intimate close-ups that segmented vision into brief glimpses. The first section of William Dean Howells's novel A Hazard of New Fortunes (1890) shows readers how the close-up views affected nineteenth-century passengers' visual relationship to the city. Basil March and his wife Isabel ride the elevated trains back and forth across Manhattan looking for an apartment. They glimpse theatrical scenes of the urban poor through windows of the apartment buildings near the tracks:

It was better than the theatre, of which it reminded him, to see those people through their windows: a family party of work-folk at a late tea, some of the men in their shirt-sleeves; a woman sewing by a lamp; a mother laying her child in its cradle; a man with his head fallen on his hands upon a table; a girl and her lover leaning over the window-sill together. What suggestion! What drama! What infinite interest! (Howells 76)

Here the El both connects and separates. The respectable bourgeois protagonists share the train with other classes and ethnicities, but the immigrants and poor people glimpsed in passing are intriguingly distant. The scenes are fascinating because of the technological frame provided by the El: the images flow seamlessly one into another, and the

passengers experience a panoptic sense that the apartment dwellers are unaware of being observed. By contrast, when the Marches are confronted with a scene of poverty at street level, the experience is far less aesthetically pleasing (Howells 65-67). The El presents a theatrical display of interiority to an invisible audience that can instantaneously perceive and possess the meaning in the sight.²¹ Unlike the scenes described in Carrie Tirado Bramen's "The Urban Picturesque," the El does not merely display the particularity and variety of working-class life (446). Each of the tableaux is separated from the others by semicolons, creating a sense of self-enclosure and evoking an entire story. The El window displays the passing city as a spectacle, connecting it to earlier forms of visibility instantiated by the passenger train.

The El could not maintain its status as a technology that defended passengers from encounters with city space. Over time, the habitual exposure to detailed interiors moved even the nineteenth-century bourgeois spectator beyond distanced appreciation into what Michael Taussig calls a "tactile appropriation" of city life, a lived connection that transcends typicality (144). When a sight is repeatedly encountered, its picturesque quality becomes intimate, embodied, and even confrontational. To return to Howells, "What suggestion!" and "What drama!" both seem praises well within the realm of the picturesque aesthetic, but "What infinite interest!" suggests meaning that cannot be contained by the surveillant gaze of the El rider. When seen once, a scene glimpsed from the El seems to stand in for all immigrants, all working women, or all urban poor; when seen regularly, the glimpse's ability to stand in for a larger whole breaks down. This repeated and immediate view made the El a particularly urban form of transportation, one that offered the fascination of intimacy along with the comfort of anonymity.²² More

contemporary transportation technologies cannot offer both at once: the subway is intimate, but you are just as visible to the other passengers as they are to you; the car allows for personal anonymity, but the gaze from a car cannot penetrate interior spaces.

As public transportation moved past the windows of private homes, a peculiar kind of sociability was created between these border-crossing spaces—a form of “passing acquaintance” that was intimate without creating social obligations. On the same page as the theatrical scenes in A Hazard of New Fortunes, Isabel describes “the fleeting intimacy you formed with people in second and third floor interiors, while all the usual street life went on underneath[, which] had a domestic intensity mixed with the perfect repose that was the last effect of good society with all its security and exclusiveness” (Howells 76). Here, separated from the street below, both the El car and the apartment seem to interact. The very depth of the interior space refuses the flattening of a sketch. Unable to reduce the person inside the apartment to a picture, the passenger on the El is invested with a sense of the city as intimately social. Of course, this intimacy passes quickly, feels unidirectional, and takes place in neighborhoods and with people who are not actually part of “good society.” But it has an important purpose, particularly for Isabel as an upper-class wife isolated from the Boston milieu to which she is accustomed. The furtively glimpsed wholeness of another city dweller restores the individual passenger’s lost sense of social wholeness, a wholeness nearly never felt in the isolation of the subway crowd. In addition, the “security” and “exclusiveness” bring the viewer into contact with lower-class life as a comforting social ritual without the social obligations of a more upper-class “good society.” Instead of a separation through technology, the spatial proximity of the El to the apartment building performs an asymptotic easing together of

American classes, perhaps suggesting a gradualist model of assimilation. The visual structure of the EI welcomes the spectator into an intimate crowd, one defined not by nicety but merely by visual proximity. This proximity was especially striking on avenues where the distance from the tracks to the adjacent buildings was less than thirty feet. See Figure 13, from Third Ave EI (1955), for a sense of just how close the trains were to apartment windows. The EI's technological possibilities, rather than creating containment, begin to include letting otherness in. The imaginative connection between physical and psychic interiors creates a kind of dream space of urban intersubjectivity.



Figure 11. Carson Davidson, Third Avenue EI (1955)

Cornell had already explored the voyeuristic relationship between a spectator and a glass-covered interior space. His Portrait boxes of the late 1940's and early 1950's offered spaces of encounter with a diverse array of subjects from the past and present. In one of the most famous Portrait boxes, Medici Slot Machine, strips of smaller serial

images flank a Renaissance prince's portrait (Figure 14). Several games or prizes sit in a compartment beneath, including a jack, a die, and a ball. But the portrait is central to the box, and according to Harold Rosenberg, "The tall, narrow portraits in the "Medici" series of boxes are kin to the reflections in the mirrors of penny-candy dispensers" (112). He then notes parenthetically, "when Cornell discovered a particularly brilliant chewing-gum machine in the Thirty-fourth street station of the B.-M.T. [the Brooklyn-Manhattan subway line], he rushed around urging his friends to go see it" (Rosenberg 112). The substitution of the mirror with a portrait makes explicit the dialogue between self and other at work in this box; that it is a Renaissance child's portrait underscores the multiple temporal dislocations at work. And this interaction takes place with a candy machine found on the subway platform, suggesting that the visual structures in spaces of public transportation offer brief encounters with another person and, suggestively, another time.



Figure 12. Joseph Cornell, Untitled (Medici Slot Machine) (1942)

In the 1950s, the Third Avenue El's intimate proximity to city life was the theme most often examined in literature, art, and film.²³ A later verse of "Third Avenue El" describes how the structure "looked in the windows of avenue wives/Until it became a part of their lives" and insists that, in spite of its destruction, "a family of six hundred thousand survives" (Michael Brown). The visual relationship between the El train and the apartment window begins voyeuristically, but it becomes a familiar, even a familial sharing of city space.²⁴ This intersubjective connection reinforces urban community in a period when the car had become a more popular form of transportation, one that reinforced the separation of passengers and drivers from city space and from each other.²⁵ Although critics tend to discuss technology's effects in terms of connection to or alienation from the community, the El was a technology that bridged the two: it created a deep sense of imaginary connection without making people feel responsible for each other.²⁶



Figure 13. Joseph Cornell, *Gnir Rednow* (undated)

Cornell's film, *Gnir Rednow*, uses surrealist techniques of appropriation and reversal to defamiliarize these intimate encounters with people seen from the El—he uses most of Stan Brakhage's original footage, but shows it upside-down and backward. This reversal makes clear two possible ways of relating to the city implicit in the technology. *The Wonder Ring* narrows the panorama of the city to a subjective view of a person seeing. The film's concluding sequence epitomizes Brakhage's interest in singular sight: a rack focus shot, it begins on the sight seen through a train window and becomes more and more blurry until the focus is on the dusty and scratched glass of the window itself. Brakhage shoots the field of vision rather than any particular object in it: his film begins with squares of light falling through the El platform to the pavement below and an ascent to the platform up stairs that repeat the same abstract rectangular patterns. Within most shots the camera pans from left to right, mimicking the movement of the train as well as

the scanning gaze of the flaneur in search of the best sight. Gnir Rednow, by contrast, forces viewers to interact with city sights by including new shots of people gazing directly into the camera, framed by windows or the train doors. Perhaps most striking is Cornell's addition of an extended shot of a man in a fedora seen through the door of one train car and into the next (Figure 15). The man stares straight into the camera and moves toward it; seen upside-down and backward, his movements are both engrossing and disorienting. Brakhage's film, by contrast, does not show any other faces directly. Any portraits are partial, oblique reflections in the window, again emphasizing the safely impenetrable eye of the camera: we can see them, but they can't see us. Cornell presents faces that are more centered, though since they are upside-down they have to be consciously humanized through a mental flipping of the image. The reversed faces, like the dramas Howells describes or the faces Ezra Pound sees in a station of the metro, move the commuter to pause, to make a lateral glance, to be momentarily transfixed by something that interrupts the eye's commuting journey. Despite its avant-garde technique, Gnir Rednow joins other representations of the El in affirming technology's power to connect the viewer with the urban community.

This connection enmeshes passengers in city space by reflecting back a mixture of their desires and the unknowable difference of other lives. The glass of the train and apartment windows separates the El passenger from the scenes glimpsed. Yet glass does not separate absolutely, as Bernard Herman points out; it both reflects and refracts, showing the desires of the collector and gently distorting the objects it encloses (45). Technologically mediated urban visibility leads to a kind of opacity: the urban subject

seen from the El is always visible and socially knowable, but never totally legible, totally interpretable.

Reinserting intersubjective encounter into Brakhage's El ride, Cornell also emphasizes another aspect of the El's visuality that was seen in many nostalgic representations. From Howells on, artists and writers pointed to the interaction between public and private space as the most notable experience of riding the El. The description of an El ride from the 1930s shows passengers and picturesque denizens of city space reaching out even further toward one another than Howells would have dreamt:

From the car windows one can almost touch the buildings—buildings lined with fire escapes and strung with the family washing. Frowzy women lean from the window sills exchanging gossip and bawling at their offspring playing in the gutter three floors below. During the heat of summer, thousands of the residents pull mattresses out onto the fire escapes and sleep the nights through, oblivious of the traffic flowing past just a few feet from their heads. (McCloy 285)

The scenes of lower-class life glimpsed from the El train are often picturesque to the point of cliché. This scene is a case in point: the same “frowzy women” lean out of their windows in Ashcan school paintings and popular dramas such as Elmer Rice's Street Scene (1929). But when passengers “can almost touch the buildings” and the train passes “just a few feet” from sleeping residents' heads, there is an undeniable immediacy to the experience for both groups. The ensemble of El train and apartment building shaped American vision through the power of proximity.

In the late nineteenth century, the heyday of the El, apartments had only recently become acceptable alternatives for the members of New York's middle class who could not afford the financial burdens of a private home. Middle-class residents observed a clear distinction between public and private domestic spaces, but apartment buildings still had semipublic areas that were used by the less genteel tenants as extensions of their homes (Cromley 156). The woman leaning out of her window and yelling at her child "playing in the gutter" is not observing the niceties of apartment life, since she is engaging in a (quite literal) dialogue between inside and outside. The structure and proximity of the elevated train enacted a similar kind of dialogue, a dialogue that undid the separation between the public, semiprivate domestic, and private spheres.²⁷

The adjacency of train tracks and apartment buildings broke down the defined uses of city space. By the 1950s, the development projects of urban czar Robert Moses had moved New York City toward a model of spatial separation and unimpeded movement. His parks, bridges, and highways added to the frictionless, dematerialized city. Interaction between residential spaces and spaces of transportation was strictly taboo: Jones Beach, a recreational park on Long Island that Moses helped establish, is separate from the city, and buses had to obtain special permits to enter its grounds (Caro 318-9). Jane Jacobs described planning of the postwar era as it separated cities into zones with different purposes, creating "business districts," "culture districts," and the like (165-70).²⁸ When nostalgic artists brought public and private spaces into dialogue, they were going against the grain of urban planning and popular notions of progress.

Looking and Moving Backward

The temporal and spatial order of postwar New York idealized an efficient flow similar to that of subway movement. Yet the very efficiency of this separation of spaces prevented New Yorkers in motion from the kind of chance encounters central to city life. A later verse of the “metropolitan dirge” described above compares the danger and excitement of driving on an icy street under the El tracks with the boring experience of after the tracks have been taken down. The song warns that now “it’s dull and it’s drab to go by in a cab/with a feeling approaching ennui” (Michael Brown). The anachronistic thrill is gone, as is the dangerous and interesting proximity to the city’s past. The artists who embraced the El found pleasure and potential in its inefficient and anti-progressive movement.²⁹

Among its many juxtapositions, the Third Avenue El created dialogue between past and present. The El’s circular movement and old-fashioned appearance made a journey on it seem inefficient and counterproductive. It was also literally an older space: entering through an old-fashioned station with a pot-bellied stove and stained-glass windows, riding around the city in “antiquated wooden coaches,” riders spatially inhabited the past (WPA 404). In spite of the guidebooks’ insistence that “the speed of the El is substantially the same as that of the subway,” the El provided a slowed-down relation to city space for artists of the 1950s (WPA 404). The perceived slowness connected passengers to the city’s past and gave them time to examine their surroundings. The El’s temporal and spatial relationship to the city contrasts dramatically with that of streamlined trains.³⁰ Streamlined transportation’s appearance underscored its ease of movement; its visual beauty, modernity, and emphasis on

forward motion “stimulated public faith in a future fueled by technological innovation” (Meikle 162). In comparison, the El’s old-fashioned and inefficient space emphasized the lateral pull of memory and urban history on the forward motion of progress.³¹

The proponents of razing the Third Avenue El spoke about the city in terms of unceasing forward movement. The circulation of the El through the city, rather than a parallel forward movement, became an impediment. According to a New York Times editorial,

elimination of the Manhattan El [. . .] would mean restoration to full use of one of this island’s main north-south thoroughfares, which for seventy-six years has been encumbered and blighted by its forest of pillars and its roof of ties and tracks and stations and trains. City Construction Coordinator Robert Moses has urged in the interests of traffic flow that the El be torn down. (“End of the ‘El’?” 22)

The El is an odd, liminal element in the urban landscape: its pillars are naturalized as trees, but the “roof” suggests domestic space. The diction in this editorial even enacts a thwarted forward motion, with “ties and tracks and stations and trains” that throw up one barrier after another. The “interests of traffic flow” are humanized and given authority by the name of Robert Moses—a man who embodied efficiency. Even when people were nostalgic about the El, they often couched their arguments in terms of efficiency. The week after the Third Avenue El’s last run, the New Yorker described the need for destruction of the structure in more poetic terms:

But cupolas and stained glass adorning green villas have nothing to do with the nineteen-fifties; they are so old and out of place that to us they must be either hideous or quaint. Until the villas have been torn down and half forgotten and

then slowly rebuilt in memory, we can't be sure how much they may have meant to us[. . .] Twenty more years and a brand-new "L," the "L" of recollection, will go darting among the rooftops, at a speed the old "L" never reached, through a city fairer than any of us has ever seen. ("Notes and Comment" 27)

The imagined effects of this ghostly technology are curiously similar to the progress-based discourse of unimpeded forward movement that led to the El's destruction. Romanticizing the El as it will be remembered in the future, this description removes any trace of the anachronism that artists of the 1950s embraced. Its old-fashioned cars become "brand-new"; its inefficiency is transformed to speed; even its contact with the city is imagined as contact with a utopian city of the future. While the iron grip of Robert Moses would not begin to relax until the late 1950s, nostalgic artists used the El to articulate negative or mixed feelings about what had until then been New York's steamroller style of modernization.³² Compared to these visions, nostalgia for the El as it actually existed was literally and figuratively movement in the wrong direction.

Perhaps it is no coincidence then that Cornell's film about the Third Avenue El is projected upside down and backward.³³ Cornell's reuse of Brakhage's footage in Gnir Rednow foregrounds one of the most old-fashioned and inefficient aspects of movement on the Third Avenue El—its standardization. Unlike foot and car traffic, movement on elevated and passenger trains is predetermined and can follow only a limited set of paths. Although the subway's paths are also fixed, the number and increasing ease of transfers between subway lines prevented it from a similar obsolescence. From the 1920s on, both Els and railroads suffered in relation to more flexible and decentralized forms of movement.³⁴

Cornell did not feel that movement on old-fashioned transportation technologies was inherently limiting.³⁵ He often made boxes that included Baedeker guidebook pages, and an entire box of his library is filled with guidebooks for movement by train, car, bike, bus, and cruise ship (Cornell, “Personal Library” Box 77). By using shots that came from someone else’s journey, Cornell emphasized restriction and repetition, key aspects of elevated train commuting that other artists of the period ignored. His interest in preestablished paths and sights also suggests a self-consciously modernist take on urban visibility as something borrowed, cited, but not owned. Instead of a director’s credit, Gnir Rednow ends with the much-discussed title card, “The end is the beginning.” Most critics read this card, obviously and rightly, as a nod to T. S. Eliot.³⁶ It also underscores the counterproductive or backward-looking movement associated with the El in the 1950s.³⁷ His citation echoes the model of urban nostalgia espoused by the New Yorker, but with an important difference: instead of destroying something in order to idealize it, Cornell argues that one has to reuse it.

Several critics have noted Cornell’s increased interest in urban preservation during the postwar period without pointing to the wider context of artistic nostalgia in which it occurred. Deborah Solomon says “buildings, vistas, and entire blocks that Cornell had explored since the 1920s were disappearing under a wave of glass-and-steel construction. Streetscapes seemed to be changing beyond recognition every time he looked” (223). Lynda Roscoe Hartigan sees a “nostalgic drive to preserve” in Cornell’s films, such as Gnir Rednow and Centuries of June (1955) (“A Biography” 109). But it is the desire to make the past present that distinguishes Gnir Rednow from the other short films made about the Third Avenue elevated train between 1953 and 1958. Hal

Freeman's film Echo of an Era (1957) explicitly places this transportation technology in the past when the film's narrator calls it "indifferent to the rhythm of a changing city." This contrast was particularly evident through the choice of music: nearly all of these films were silent, perhaps suggesting the relative peacefulness of an El ride compared to one on the subway or in a car. Sometimes an old-fashioned score emphasized the El's pastness, as with Carson Davidson's film Third Avenue El (1955), which shows modern images of the El set to harpsichord music. D. A. Pennebaker's film Daybreak Express (1953) was set to the Duke Ellington song of the same name, suggesting the El's connection to the passenger train in more explicit terms than most. David Amram, the composer for Echo of an Era said, "During some of the film that showed elegant old horses and carriages, I wrote some of the wildest jazz, and somehow it worked in relationship to the picture" (243). It "worked," I argue, because these filmmakers meant to emphasize the El's connection to other old-fashioned forms of transportation and its disconnect from contemporary life. These filmmakers portrayed the El as purely anachronistic; it is a holdover from the past before "modern" art and architecture had taken over the city.³⁸

Under Cornell's defamiliarizing gaze, by contrast, even the present becomes an image to be read rather than something that can be taken for granted. In Gnir Rednow, the process of looking becomes one of searching out clues that locate the image in a particular place and time. Because they are inverted (and because the El had been torn down by the time Cornell was recutting the film), the advertisements that scroll past the windows can no longer be read as part of the commuter's daily life. When a poster spotted on the El platform is lingered on long enough to be read as The Blackboard

Jungle, the viewer experiences a certain amount of relief in seeing a sign that establishes the film historically. Cornell's anti-lyrical film shows the difficulty of visually possessing an ever-changing city: without that poster, the viewer's connection to the outside world would be lost. He renders urban sight more difficult in order to foreground it as a historical process.

Reversing the film takes even the encounters with people out of the realm of personal vision. When seen upside-down, the face is abstracted, flattened, and emptied. The reversal makes the spectator work at recognizing what can be seen, acknowledging the limitation of possibilities for poetic sight in the stripped landscape of Robert Moses's New York and encouraging the kinds of views of the city that were being shut down by urban development. The film explicitly articulates the anxiety of mid-century artists' nostalgia in a dematerialized and dehistoricized space of constant urban renewal: if we keep destroying these structures from the past, how will we even be able to see the present? Working in a time and place that championed the ostensibly unmediated subjective views of abstract expressionism, Cornell uses the technology of the El as a way of reconnecting the viewer to the external world and suggesting the difficulty of seeing and recovering history in the American cityscape. Art, he suggests, is one way of retaining traces of the technological past relieved from the burden of efficiency.

Echo of an Era

New Yorkers still navigate the material environments of outdated transportation technologies, as well as the arguments about urban spaces that surround them. Since the mid-1980s, property owners, residents, and rail enthusiasts have debated the fate of the

High Line, an elevated freight railway that ran between factories on Manhattan's far west side.³⁹ The history of the High Line is a history of urban American transportation technology in miniature. Freight was initially delivered on a street-level railroad on Tenth Avenue. This made crossing so dangerous that the street was popularly known as "Death Avenue" and men on horses, called the "West Side Cowboys," rode in front of the trains on horseback waving flags and warning passers-by ("High Line History"). The High Line replaced this train line in the 1930s through funding from the state and city of New York. Interstate shipping by truck rose in popularity in the 1950s, and the High Line became a victim of the standardized and centralized movement of rail technology, sharing the fate of passenger and elevated trains.

The High Line's shifting meanings, like those of the elevated train, suggest that technologies of transportation are ideal conveyances for the changing material and emotional needs of the city. These parallels are all the more striking since designers consciously tried to avoid them. The "Friends of the High Line" Web site explains that the "structure was designed to go through the center of blocks, rather than over the avenue, to avoid creating the negative conditions associated with elevated subways" ("High Line History"). Nevertheless, as it fell into disrepair and weeds overran the tracks, the High Line's role as a space for imagining the city echoed that of the Third Avenue El in the 1950s. It mediated opposing visual states through a combination of proximity to and distance from its urban surroundings (Figure 16). A wilderness penetrating a heavily industrial area, the High Line transmuted a space of urban transportation into a space for transportive meditation for the few who chose to brave the abandoned structure, rather than for the masses who rode the El.



Figure 14. Joel Sternfeld, "The High Line" (2000)

In the 1980s and 1990s, the fate of the High Line seemed destined to be the same as that of the Third Avenue El: this time, it impeded economic rather than physical progress. However, a group called “Friends of the High Line” persuaded the city to preserve the structure and set aside funding for development of a mixed-use open space on the former freight tracks (De Monchaux). A design team led by Field Operations and Diller, Scofidio + Renfro was chosen from more than 720 applicants to design the new park space. A new debate has arisen in the wake of these designs, between those who embrace the public space that will be developed and those who fear the new development will eliminate the way of experiencing the city that is possible on the structure in its current state. In some respects, this is a debate about class: the value of businesses and apartments near the High Line will increase exponentially after the development is completed. One critic suggests that “many of the plants and artifacts now flourishing there won’t likely find a home on a polished walkway, made for yipping terriers and baby

strollers” (Braunschweiger 38). Many of the outsiders who have roamed the High Line in its wild state feel they will also lose a home.

“In the end, this treetop world, as we know it, will disappear,” says the same critic wary of dogs and strollers, using the language of the “metropolitan dirges” sung fifty years before (Braunschweiger 38). City dwellers continue to feel nostalgia for modes of perception that will be lost to urban development. The fear of longtime New York residents—that the city has utterly transformed from a bastion of grimy authenticity to a slick simulacrum—has led them to embrace another anachronistic perch for orienting artistic vision to urban space. The Third Avenue El and the High Line both suggest that anachronistic technologies offer visual alternatives to the top-down organization of American urban space since World War Two. Here, the concern is not the imaginary connection between city dwellers, which, after all, would be enhanced by an additional promenade. Instead, it is the desire for a connection to wilderness, to nature in a state not planned by the likes of Frederick Law Olmsted.

The utopian desire surrounding the High Line is an opposition to planning itself, a desire that may be observed even in the development’s planned preservation of “wild spaces” of weeds and tall grasses. The High Line is one of New York City’s few popularly embraced wastelands, places that Kevin Lynch and Stephen Carr call “freer than parks . . . places on the margins” (416). This structure’s spontaneous evolution into a nature walk and graffiti- and garbage-strewn outdoor sculpture garden suggests that other things can still spontaneously develop in the city: subcultures, neighborhoods, ideas. Its very marginality—like that of the El—makes it a site of possible perceptual freedom. A 2005 exhibit by the Creative Time arts organization used the redevelopment of the High

Line as a starting point for art that considered “how we imagine, and long for, inaccessible spaces [and] the way in which we re-mystify the world we already know” (“Plain of Heaven”). Nostalgic urban visuality articulates this longing for inaccessible urban space and unknowable urban life—both as a mystification and as a form of protest and inquiry.

I do not want to suggest that old technologies produce inherently resistant, liberal, or positive ways of seeing the American city. Instead, they point out an important, and often forgotten, aspect of theorizing visuality—the need to consider discontinuities in technology’s use and meaning. Critics have understood visuality as it arises through public habituation to technological innovation, but Paula McDowell’s argument about oral and print culture reminds us that “binary models of media shift have never done justice to the complexity of actual lived experience” (104). The same is true for binary models of technology: once the subway opened, New Yorkers did not all stop riding the El. New technologies and new visions of city space always compete with old; we can consider more local and less deterministic versions of urban visuality when we think about how technologies hang around urban space, insisting on the persistence of past relationships to the city. The product of multiple technological obsolescences, the High Line forces us to consider America’s relationship to technology as one that moves beyond innovation and obsolescence. The aesthetic needs fulfilled by technology proceed at a different pace than its planners, producers, or even consumers intend. Like the High Line, the temporality of the Third Avenue El as a symbol, imaginative view, and way of knowing city space persisted long after the last passenger disembarked. Urban development can never bring about a total erasure of the past, even in a city that changes

with the “extravagant regularity” of New York. Considering technology’s aesthetic residue gives us a more complex map for navigating urban space, tracing the trains of thought that shaped the American city as they cross, trail off, and eventually stop.

¹ There were still elevated trains in the boroughs of Brooklyn and the Bronx and, most important, an elevated train from Queens that Joseph Cornell took into Manhattan almost every day.

² Unfortunately, the library no longer has records of what movies were shown in this program. However, both the small number of films about the elevated trains and the familiarity of the current staff with the Brakhage and Cornell films suggest that one or more of the films I discuss in this article were included on the program.

³ I thank my one of the anonymous readers of my article on this topic for the formulation that my essay’s subject was “the aesthetic afterlife of the El.”

⁴ See Zurier for an assessment of the Ashcan School.

⁵ Popular films featuring the El were usually fairly bleak visions of the city. See Kirby 164–7. Avant-garde films, which I discuss later in this article, are more optimistic.

⁶ Berenice Abbot and Arnold Eagle were the best known photographers of the El. See Brooks *Subway City* 51. Abbot’s book, *Changing New York*, shows the wider results of New York’s rapid urban development in a slightly earlier time period.

⁷ See Page 1–15.

⁸ This is not merely a fanciful comparison: many of the films shot from the El in the 1950s had extended sequences from the “point of view” of the train, shot from the front car’s window with the tracks stretching out through the cityscape.

⁹ The car did not have as pronounced an effect on perception in New York City in this period as it did in the suburbs. See Foster, *Nation on Wheels*.

¹⁰ See Michael Brooks 36–38; Ticchi 247–48; Haenni 493–527.

¹¹ Claude Fischer explains how “the role of the telephone unfolded over time” from novelty to business communication medium to popular technology (24).

¹² Extending Fred Davis’s theory of nostalgia as a pursuit of continuity in concepts of self and community, Stuart Tannock suggests that nostalgia argues for continuities while also positing discontinuities “between a prelapsarian past and a postlapsarian present” (457).

¹³ “As we spend more of our lives in interior environments, we are deprived of many natural clues to the passage of day and season. Office and factory buildings, long corridors, and subways are timeless environments, like caves or the deep sea. Light, climate, and visible form are invariant” (Lynch, *What Time is this Place?* 69).

¹⁴ Like the passenger train before it, the subway’s regular view and social proscriptions against interpersonal contact led passengers to read for the duration of the journey. For a description of reading on the train as it developed in nineteenth-century Europe, see Schivelbusch 64–69; for an amusing account of American reading practices in the subway (albeit thirty years before the period dealt with in this chapter), see “Those Who Read in the Subway.”

¹⁵ The initial discourse in favor of American railroad construction emphasized its ability to unite the nation. Ward 17.

¹⁶ Cornell is even periodized in the past: although he worked from the 1930s to the late 1960s, he has been called Romantic, Symbolist, and Victorian. See Ashton 10; Caws 29; Hartigan “Dance with Duality” 15. While he worked and exhibited with surrealists who regularly borrowed images and forms from the past (Picasso’s primitivism, say, or Max Ernst’s Victorian etchings in *Femme 100 Têtes*) Cornell’s appropriations have until quite recently been seen as pure, innocent, magical. Michael Moon’s discussion of Cornell does a good job of refuting what he calls the “enchanting innocence line of criticism” (153), arguing that it is a mode of suppressing the complicated ways in which the boxes work out different forms of (often queer) contemporary desire surrounding fandom in particular. In a similar vein, more recent discussions of Cornell’s work have examined his relationship to contemporary art and popular culture. See Jodi Hauptmann in particular.

¹⁷ This is another way that Cornell’s work connects him to the other modernists in my dissertation. Cultural commentators of the 1920s often make critical pronouncements about the subway rather than considering how it functions and what its psychic benefits might be. Cornell distinguishes himself from most artists of the 1950s who mourned the El because he also interrogated its visuality and considered what New Yorkers gained and lost in seeing the city from this perspective.

¹⁸ See in particular Lears’s discussion of “the aesthetic of the outmoded” (401) and its operation in Cornell’s boxes (403-414).

¹⁹ Notably, Sitney is one of the few critics to explicitly refute perceptions of Cornell as nostalgic: “Cornell was not a nostalgist, a recluse, or a naïf, even though he knew how to play those roles expertly. He was a dialectician of experience” (69).

²⁰ Hegeman describes salvage ethnography as “recording ways of life that are seen to be dying out in the face of encroaching assimilation and modernization” (34).

²¹ As we saw in the last chapter, this type of vision persisted into the twentieth century and can be seen in some of the poems in the *Soul of the City* anthology.

²² See Simmel 324-339 for a description of this interpersonal relationship as a particularly urban one.

²³ This attention to the horizontal gaze may be particularly pronounced in the later period because the Third Avenue El chiefly ran through residential areas and was quite close to the apartment windows in those areas.

²⁴ There is an important caveat to this feeling of connection—in all of the films, songs, and novels that I’ve encountered, it is felt only by people riding the trains. In the few instances when the El is represented from the perspective of a Bowery apartment, it is generally an oppressive urban force (see Kirby 165). The relationship of apartment dwellers to the technology of the El is a subject for another study—one that pays as much attention to economic realities as it does to aesthetic-political construction of fantasy spaces. However, this dramatic difference reminds us that technologies do not have a singular meaning, even within a fairly circumscribed population like Manhattan residents.

²⁵ Glenn Holt points out that “commuting, which had been among the most public of daily experiences in the nineteenth century, became one of the most private in the age of the automobile” (338).

²⁶ This suggests a very different relationship to fellow city dwellers than the isolation and interior focus of subway passengers.

²⁷ Carolyn Marvin discusses the telephone as having a similar effect in breaking down the boundaries between public and private space (68).

²⁸ Jacobs, an architect and advocate who often directly opposed Moses's plans, valorized the sidewalk as a site of urban social contact and interaction between diverse spaces and people. See 32-41.

²⁹ Svetlana Boym considers nostalgia to be inherently opposed to progress: "At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythm of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress" (xv).

³⁰ On streamlining as a design strategy, see Plummer and Bush. On streamlined trains and their psychological effect on the American public, see Meikle 162, 179 and Dinerstein 137-181.

³¹ The Third Avenue El was an important "residual" technology, to use Raymond Williams's term (171). In this way, it serves a quite different function than did the subway to migrants in the Harlem Renaissance narratives that I discuss in chapter two.

³² See Caro, particularly chapters 41 and 42, for details of Robert Moses losing ground after struggles in the 1950s over public housing and the Tavern on the Green.

³³ It also suggests a close reading of the title's temporality: Gnir could be read as "near" and Rednow reveals "now."

³⁴ For a discussion of railroad and truck-based freight, see Albro Martin 358–9. Mark Foster says that urban planners in the postwar era consciously rejected the subway and the El as solutions to problems of urban congestion because of their lack of flexibility compared to the car (64).

³⁵ Cornell's Hotel boxes are the first works in which he explores the imaginary escape from self at the heart of the nineteenth century's regulated forms of travel. Called "Hotel" boxes because each includes a scrap of paper with a hotel name collaged on one of the walls, these boxes connect Cornell's interest in travel with his exploration of interiority.

³⁶ The Wonder Ring, in comparison, begins with its title and Brakhage's name scratched into the leader. This gesture can be read both as a mark of possession as well as an introduction to the tactile and perceptually personal quality of the film.

³⁷ Joseph Cornell loved T. S. Eliot. His library at the Smithsonian Institute's Archives of American art includes a handmade book with all of the Four Quartets written in painstaking calligraphy (Cornell, "Personal Library" Box 45).

³⁸ Pennebaker's film fits somewhere between these two categories: while his use of swing music suggests an interest in the El as anachronism, he also uses the train as a visual analogue for cinema itself, focusing on the flickering images seen through a moving El train and the kaleidoscopic views of the city made possible by its elevation.

³⁹ For a history of the High Line, see Lobbia.

Epilogue: The End of the Line

Carolyn de la Peña suggests that scholars of technology should “analyze the relationship between individual subjectivities and complex systems” (917). I have found subway modernism to be obsessed with this relationship, particularly as it is articulated in terms of bodies submitting to transportation systems. The texts addressed in my dissertation explore and imaginatively respond to this particular reality of city life. Efficiency, assimilation, consumerism, urban development, and the erotics of the crowd – each force becomes more visible when examined in transit. Though these technologies serve different purposes depending on the rider and the writer, the underlying experience of being moved by a larger force remains the same. Sometimes this submission is dangerous: King Solomon Gillis’s passivity lands him in jail in “The City of Refuge”; Sophie gives her life to the sexual pressures of The Subway. A rider’s temporary disorientation often signals an unconscious understanding of his or her place in the system. Yet in all cases, this loss of agency is eagerly traded for the possible pleasures of the city. Even at their most polemical, New York modernists portray the benefits of mechanized transportation as well the problems.

Modern life, as I have shown throughout this project, is life in motion. Ethnic groups migrate between countries, regions, and neighborhoods; commuters shuttle between work and home. This constant circulation has mixed consequences. While linear motion implies progress, it also weakens the power of tradition; the routines of subway movement can suggest entrapment. Repetition may be alienating or dehumanizing, but it is never simply that. The recurring attention to habitual gestures in particular unites my

chapters, suggesting that the meaning of the subway becomes visible in the “unconscious nervous responses” of passengers accommodating to its mechanical routines.

Critics have long understood modernist literature as focused on interiority and the subjective perspective. The literature and culture of early twentieth-century New York considers a number of geographically and historically specific spatial experiences and their repercussions on modern consciousness. The modern subject often responds to physical claustrophobia, for example, by retreating into fantasy; the proximity of apartment buildings to elevated trains reinforces a sense of urban community that had been absent from the underground space of the subway. Throughout this project, we see writers hypothesize a relationship between the complex branching paths of public transportation and the similar paths taken by trains of thought. In a period where psychoanalysis was becoming part of the popular culture, the subway served as a resonant figure for the unconscious mind: its submerged structure completely determined by external forces, it nevertheless allows a multiplicity of creative pathways and surprising connections.

Along with the psychology of technological space, New York modernists explore its poetics. Tropes of descent and re-emergence recur throughout my first three chapters, reinforcing the everyday routine of the subway ride as it evokes – sometimes comically, sometimes seriously – the journey to the mythological underworld. Each chapter of my dissertation addresses a different genre, and each genre focuses on a particular aspect of the technological ensemble of public transportation in order to explore its peculiarly literary qualities. American Expressionists located modernist theatricality in the subway car, one centered on ideas of claustrophobia and fantasy. Unlike the static subway car, the

subway entrance is a site of active, individual movement between worlds. Harlem Renaissance migration narratives embrace the transitional potential of this space even as they warn against the illusory vision of Harlem seen from the subway steps. The affective poetic fusion of Hart Crane's long poem The Bridge finds its equal in the complex network of subway tunnels between Manhattan and Brooklyn, in which Crane locates a new genealogy of American poetry. The proximity to apartment buildings and the partiality of visions that could be glimpsed from the Third Avenue El brought the viewing strategies animating Joseph Cornell's boxes into the real world. In each of these examples, we can see how topography shades into metaphor. My project underscores the importance of space as a locus for formal innovation in the early twentieth century.¹

Underground movement decreases the usefulness of vision as a means of orientation in the modern city.² Functioning as the shadow-side to the Brooklyn Bridge's panoramic promise, the subway in "The Tunnel" connects the boroughs invisibly. Harlem Renaissance subway migration narratives undercut the progressive discourse of New Negrohood by portraying migrants who do not know where they are going. The limited sights of the subway trouble the centrality of the visual image in our understanding of modernist representational strategies.³ Consequently, subway modernism takes on an increasingly sonic and tactile texture. Eschewing the picturesque distancing of earlier and more popular writing about the city, New York modernists immerse themselves in the crowd and consider vision as it operates within a wider perceptual field. Even the films that I discuss are more interested in portraying sight as subjective, partial, and faulty. In Dames, vision functions as a dangerously excessive expression of personal fantasy; Gnir

Rednow shows the difficulty of re-inscribing yourself within the real world through visual perception.

New York modernists attend to the spatial complexity of public transportation as a means of theorizing new formal relationships between the part and the whole. Texts oscillate between embodiment and abstraction; perspective shifts dramatically from one moment to the next. These formal characteristics reveal an interest not only in fragmentation, but more importantly in figuring out what kinds of structures can hold fragments together without imposing a false coherence. An underlying logic gives shape to subway movement, though it is impossible to perceive it while in the midst of the ride; the elevated train becomes such an appealing alternative to the subway, I suggest, because it provides an embodied, shifting sense of coherence. This provisional connection between the ride and the system seems to function as a model for the elliptical style of compression and condensation that is characteristic of modernist writing.

New York modernism's engagement with public transportation illustrates "the ability to *think through machines*" (de la Peña 927). The revisionary use of earlier forms of transportation in the texts that I discuss shows that these authors use machines to think through their relationship to literary and cultural predecessors. The subway play's connection to the runaway railroad of the melodrama suggests a more populist theatrical lineage for American Expressionism; the difference between migration narratives in the era of the ferry and that of the subway shows just how mechanized Northern movement had become. Transportation technologies allow modernist writers to think through their multiple identities and personal allegiances as well. Depictions of the subway and elevated train as spaces of habit signal a deep investment in the problems of city life. Yet

these texts also engage with modern conceptions of American identity and inhabitation of space. In this period, home and work life grew increasingly more separate; similar to the telephone and the car, the elevated train and subway mediate between these spaces even as they divide them from one another.

My project shows us that the study of public transportation and of technology more broadly should attend to the interplay between use and cultural representation. Technology tends to be understood quite differently by its producers than its consumers, and these meanings evolve over time. As the subway became more commonplace, early alarmist depictions of its underground space fell away, as did those focused on its sublimity; similarly, the popular conception of the subway as a space of interpersonal encounter, common in the 1900s and 1910s, evolved as writers begin to be more interested in interiority. The relationship between public transportation and New York modernism is neither one where technology deterministically shapes literature nor one where writers reshape urban reality to their own purposes. Instead, there is a two-way pull between technology and literature: the physical experience of public transportation shaped the forms and themes of modernist writing; textual representations of these spaces of transit in turn shaped New Yorkers' sense of themselves as urban subjects in thrall to the technologies of modernity.

Replacing the train's rapid blur of the passing landscape with the blur of the passing stations, signals, tunnels, and other trains, subway modernism in particular meditates on the nature of urban infrastructure. In her introduction to the PMLA special issue Cities, Patricia Yager discusses infrastructure as a way of thinking about the relationship between urban spaces and texts. She notes, "Given infrastructure's

importance, its play of surface and depth (subways, water mains), or hypervisibility (bridges) and invisibility (the electrical grid), it is tempting to imagine that the deep structures of city texts might mirror the deep structures of cities. Instead, infrastructure's role in literature is unpredictable and varied" (Yaeger 16). My project yields to the very temptation against which she warns: I do believe that New York modernist writing finds a concrete expression of the modern city's underground logic within the tunnels of the subway. Yet in my attention to the materiality of subterranean movement, I wish to transcend the mere positing of equivalence between cities and texts. Instead, I suggest that new ways of moving through the city and new ways of moving through a text are mutually constitutive (Grosz 248). The interdisciplinarity of American studies and the cultural and technological turns to recent work in modernism give us a richer and more detailed understanding of the ways in which texts grow out of, respond to, are shaped by, and create alternate versions of city space.

From Rem Koolhaas's "delirious" manifestos (Hal Foster 147) to the comic-book visions of Gotham and Metropolis, New York City holds a central space in the urban imaginary. Over the decades, the subway rides to Times Square, Coney Island, and Central Park have become as emblematic of New York City as those destinations. Recent literary and cultural criticism has almost compulsively addressed the issue of how to theorize New York City's literal and literary spaces in the wake of the World Trade Center's destruction on September 11th, 2001.⁴ My project grapples with the contemporary resonance of public transportation through this lens as well. The bombings of Madrid commuter trains and the London Underground, as well as the omnipresence of surveillance in the contemporary New York subway, underscore public transportation's

continued symbolic resonance as a space of urban modernity. More attention is needed to the cultural representations of these underground subjects: as public transportation becomes a less common reality of American life it may become, as the Third Avenue El did, a more important site for collective fantasy. I began this project, I used to jokingly say, because I didn't have a driver's license; I conclude it convinced that riding the subway is, in some small way, performing an allegiance to the cosmopolitan modern city.

¹ This idea persists well into the late twentieth century: the cult film The Warriors (1979) and the explosion of graffiti culture posit an intimate relationship between subterranean spaces and subcultures. See Pike 11-14.

² Though beyond the scope of this dissertation, the proscription against eye contact between subway passengers (and the various ways that this taboo is violated) seems important to explore in this context as well.

³ This is true of written representation. Paintings and sketches depicting subway riders were quite common in this period, though I would locate them in a similar picturesque tradition as the Soul of the City poems that I describe in chapter three (or the picturesque paintings of the Ashcan School, the more direct ancestor). See Fitzpatrick, "Tunnel Vision." The foremost practitioner of this popular art form was Reginald Marsh, whose "Subway Sunbeams" column was featured in the New York Daily News (Michael Brooks 162-3). It is striking, however, that the best-known series of subway portraits, Walker Evans's photographs in Many Are Called (1966) were "shot blind," taken from a camera hidden in his jacket.

⁴ See Foster 146; Lindener; Tallack 174-181.

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I. Education

- 2007 Ph.D., English, Rutgers University
 2004 M.A., English, Rutgers University
 1997 B.A., *magna cum laude* with honors, English and French, Loyola University Chicago

II. Positions Held

- 2005 Blum Teaching Fellow, English Department, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey
 2002-2007 Teaching Assistant, English Department and University Writing Program, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey
 2001-2002 Teaching Assistant, Film Studies Program, English Department, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey
 2000-2001 Graduate Fellow, English Department, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey

III. Publications

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