Journal of American Studies, **44** (2010), 4, 777–793 © Cambridge University Press 2010
doi:10.1017/S0021875809991423 First published online 20 January 2010

Affective Narratives: Harlem and the Lower East Side

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This paper begins by juxtaposing contemporary discourses on Harlem and the Lower East Side, arguing that the processes of iconization of these two neighborhoods have been very different. Whereas the iconicity of Harlem has always been shot through with ambivalence, the Lower East Side has come to signify a relatively unambivalent sacred space for US Jewry. The second part of the essay then traces the representations of Harlem and the Lower East Side back to early twentieth-century African American and Jewish American novels, claiming that critically analyzing the theme of ambivalence in these texts – and, more specifically, how ambivalence manifests itself differently within each literary tradition – is key to understanding not only why Harlem and the Lower East Side have undergone parallel but divergent processes of iconization, but also the way Jews and blacks have been positioned and have attempted to position themselves in relation to dominant white US society.

INTRODUCTION

Jewish Americans' intense identification with the Lower East Side is similar only to the African American relationship with Harlem. Indeed, it is impossible to tell the history of US Jewry or discuss the emergence of Jewish American literature without forefronting and dwelling on the Lower East Side. The same is true of Harlem with respect to black history, especially if one is interested in the African American literary and artistic traditions. Moreover, it is extremely difficult to think of another minority group in the US that has so closely identified, or been identified, with a "particular chunk of space."[1] There are many Chinatowns and Little Italy's, but there is only one Harlem and only one Lower East Side.

Following the recent "spatial turn" in the academy, scholars have become increasingly interested in examining these two urban neighborhoods as spaces

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I wish to thank the Frankel Institute at the University of Michigan for making this research possible, and the anonymous reader at *JAS* for his/her helpful comments.

[1] Hasia Diner, *Lower East Side Memories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 50.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875809991423 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that have helped shape contemporary black and Jewish self-conception and self-representation. *Remembering the Lower East Side* and *Lower East Side Memories*, for instance, are two in-depth interdisciplinary studies that investigate how and why this "Jewish" neighborhood has come to figure so prominently in the psyche of Jewish Americans.[2] Along similar lines, Henry Louis Gates's influential "Harlem on Our Minds" and Sara Blair's *Harlem Crossroads* consider this neighborhood's "iconic" status and what this urban space has come to represent for African Americans.[3]

Despite these interesting parallel developments within Jewish American and African American studies, no comparative work on the Lower East Side and Harlem has yet been carried out. One of the questions that still needs to be addressed is why these urban spaces have come to stand for *the* twentieth-century Jewish American and African American experiences. Another question, no less important, relates to what the representations of these two iconic city spaces can tell us about the way that Jewish Americans and African Americans have been positioned – as well as the way they have attempted to position themselves – with respect to dominant US society.

In what follows I begin by outlining how contemporary historians and literary critics have interpreted the role these city spaces have played in the popular imagination of African Americans and Jewish Americans. What emerges from the scholarship is a convincing claim that the Jewish American and the African American communities have developed a powerful affective relationship towards the Lower East Side and Harlem respectively. But while there are striking similarities in how these two sites have been "appropriated," there are also profound differences in the way that they have been conceived. More specifically, even though both urban enclaves have undergone processes of iconization, the Lower East Side has come to symbolize a relatively unconflicted Jewish American sacred place while Harlem has come to represent two irreconcilable affective modalities: hope and despair.

As a way of gaining further insight into these parallel but divergent processes of iconization, the second part of the article looks at depictions of the Lower East Side and Harlem in now canonical early twentieth-century Jewish American and African American novels. This comparative diachronic move is important because it discloses, once again, certain similarities in the representation of the two neighborhoods, the most salient of which is the theme of ambivalence. In both the African American and Jewish American

[2] Hasia Diner, Jeffrey Shandler, and Beth Wenger, eds., *Remembering the Lower East Side* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

[3] Henry Louis Gates, "Harlem on Our Minds," *Critical Inquiry*, 24 (1997), 1–12, and Sara Blair, *Harlem Crossroads* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875809991423 Published online by Cambridge University Press

narratives, the protagonists' relationship with Harlem and the Lower East Side is informed by a complex dynamic of attraction and repulsion (and thus identification and dis-identification). These texts, in other words, dramatize the "simultaneous existence of contradictory attitudes, or feelings in the relationship to a single object," which in our case is a particular swath of city space.[4]

However, the represented source of the ambivalence and the way the ambivalence manifests itself are different in each literary tradition. In the African American novels, the ambivalence towards Harlem emerges in racialized terms, whereby the fictional depictions of this city space are consistently laced with references to "blackness," which elicits both identification and disgust. In the Jewish American narratives, the ambivalence towards the Lower East Side, especially in its negative manifestation, is much more class-inflected; the repulsion the various protagonists feel towards this space is most often ascribed to its poverty and not to its perceived "Jewishness."[5]

These similarities and differences in representation – both in the fiction and in contemporary discourse – can, I argue, tell us something about the way blacks and Jews have been inscribed and the way that they have attempted to inscribe themselves as subjects in the dominant national US landscape in the twentieth century. As "real-and-imagined spaces" that combine spatial metaphor and spatial materiality, Harlem and the Lower East Side have served as sites through which the negotiation of African American and Jewish American identity has been played out.[6] Analyzing how the Lower East Side is depicted in the early twentieth-century Jewish American novels, for example, can tell us something about how "Jewishness" was beginning to be disarticulated from a "racial" discourse and how this process was being mediated through the representation and narrative production of space. This, in turn, helps us understand why Harlem and the

[4] Jean Laplanche and Jean-Betrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karnac Books, 1973), 26.

[5] Today it is axiomatic to say that race, class, and gender interact with and are articulated through one another. While I certainly agree that these categories overlap and interact in complex ways, I am arguing that there is a decided *emphasis* on one category over another in these African and Jewish American texts and that this in and of itself is interesting and in need of explanation.

[6] My notion of "real and imagined" space is indebted to Edward Soja's *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Read-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996). In contrast to Soja's conception of Thirdspace, I understand these real and imagined spaces as sites in which and through which the territorially subjugated necessarily negotiate with dominant culture.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875809991423 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Lower East Side, which today serve as such powerful symbols for these two minority groups, have come to signify quite differently.

THE LOWER EAST SIDE AND HARLEM TODAY

Historian Beth Wenger claims that as increasing numbers of Jews left the Lower East Side in the 1920s and 1930s they developed a new and often sentimental relationship with this place. Contemporary American Jews, she argues, have claimed the Lower East Side as their site of memory, "embracing it as the Plymouth Rock of American Jewish history."[7] Many social and cultural historians concur about the Lower East Side's significance for contemporary US Jewry. Not only has the Lower East, these scholars persuasively show, become suffused with desire and nostalgia, but in the post-World War II era there has also been a certain sacralization of this urban neighborhood.[8] By evoking its name, by identifying with it, Jewish Americans stake a claim both in a common Jewish American history and in a dominant Jewish American narrative, one which tells the story of poor immigrants who rose out of the ghetto and entered middle-class US society. Just as importantly, in the minds of American Jews, the Lower East Side lays claim to a more authentic "Judaism."[9] Jewish Americans, then, attempt to tap into, if not to reclaim, this authenticity by appropriating the neighborhood as their own.

Turning to Harlem, one immediately notices a difference. Scholars cannot talk about cultural memory in the same way for the simple reason that Harlem as a site of crowded black urban life did not disappear over the course of the twentieth century. Therefore the iconization of this neighborhood cannot be limned in the same terms, since, for Jewish Americans, the process of iconization of the Lower East Side has meant the making sacred by having left as well as included a certain memorialization and reconstruction of a "Jewish" neighborhood that no longer exists in present reality. In other words, the memory of the Lower East Side assumed its power not only from the Jewish sojourn there but more importantly from the drama of exodus from it.

Like its Jewish counterpart, though, Harlem has over the course of the twentieth century become a place associated with cultural exemplarity and a site of deep emotional investment. Beginning with the Harlem Renaissance

[7] "Introduction," in Diner, Shandler, and Wenger, 2, 6.
[8] See the many excellent articles by different scholars in Diner, Shandler, and Wenger.
[9] See Diner, 8, 27.

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and continuing all the way to the present, Harlem has continuously been invoked and has served as a catchphrase for African American life, both in scholarship and in literature. The prominent African American historian Nathan Irvin Huggins claimed, "Throughout the world, and throughout this century, Harlem has *been* Afro-American life and culture."[10] Several decades before Huggins's declaration, Harlem had already been famously described as "the Mecca of the New Negro" and as a "prophetic space,"[11] thus indicating that the neighborhood has also been suffused – at least during particular periods – with a certain sacrosanctity.

In "Harlem on Our Minds," Gates underscores the exemplarity of Harlem, yet he simultaneously stresses its conflicted legacy.[12] On the one hand, Gates echoes his predecessors by arguing that Harlem emerged not so much as a physical place but rather as the cultural metaphor for black America itself. On the other hand, he suggests that Harlem as icon and metaphor is Janus-faced, since alongside its promise, it has simultaneously been inscribed as a space of intense anguish. Over the past century, in other words, Harlem has also come to stand in for the nightmare of black inner-city life.[13]

In a sense, then, and like the Lower East Side for Jews, Harlem has been the place that African Americans embraced as the Plymouth Rock of their history – at least in terms of escape from the persecution of Jim Crow and the place where blacks could practice hitherto unknown cultural freedoms. But Harlem as a site of memory and communal attachment has a much darker side as well, one that cannot be romanticized away. Thus one notices a deep ambivalence in the very iconicity of Harlem, an ambivalence that hardly exists in the contemporary representations of the Lower East Side. Unlike the Lower East Side, whose iconization has produced a narrative of linearity – from ghetto to middle class, with perhaps some nostalgia about the loss of Jewish "authenticity" on the way – Harlem's iconization has not been the result of a "progressive" story, since the hope associated with this space

[10] Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Revelations: American History, American Myths* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 21, emphasis added.

[11] See, for example, Alain Locke's "The New Negro," in Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (reprint, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992; first published 1925), 7; and James Weldon Johnson's *Black Manhattan* (reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1991; first published 1930), esp. 160–284.

[12] See Gates. In his article, Gates is very clearly echoing Nathan Irvin Huggins's earlier essay, "Harlem on My Mind," which was written in conjunction with the controversial Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition (and served as the introduction to the 1979 commemorative text edition) and which resonates with the famous song lyrics. See Huggins, 21.

[13] Gates, 11.

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has always dovetailed with despair. The narrative Harlem points to is zig-zagged and jagged-edged.

While part of the reason for the divergent processes of iconization has to do with the lived history of the two peoples in each neighborhood, another part surely has to do with the perspective from which each community tells its story. One could argue that contemporary Jews' nearly universal middle-class status allows them to look back to the Lower East Side lovingly from the ease of postwar acceptance.[14] By contrast, as Gates notes, in the early 1990s only one in seven African American families were middle-class. Today, alongside the historic election of the first African American President and an expanding black middle class, there are simultaneously more under-class African Americans than ever before in US history.[15] Harlem as a metaphor seems to incorporate and express these two jarring and discordant realities.

In comparing these two city spaces, it thus becomes evident that both have become sites of intense emotional investment and identification. There is something strikingly similar and yet profoundly different about the way these two places have come to signify as "exemplars" in the psyche of African Americans and Jewish Americans. However, to better understand the divergent representational trajectories of Harlem and the Lower East Side, I suggest that it is crucial to revisit the novels written by authors who lived in and depicted these places during the most formative period in the history of these neighborhoods. Examining these early twentieth-century texts, which have become "foundational" for Jewish American literary studies and the African American literary tradition, can give us some important clues as to why the narratives about these two urban ethnic enclaves developed in the way that they did over the course of the twentieth century.

CONFLICTED REPRESENTATIONS

The area in lower Manhattan that would later be called the Lower East Side had had a Jewish presence long before the turn of the twentieth century. However, it was only following the tidal wave of Jewish eastern European immigration, which commenced in the early 1880s, that a certain swath of lower Manhattan – south of Fourteenth Street and north of Fulton, nestled between Broadway and the East River – began to be perceived as a specifically "Jewish" place.[16] Similarly, the black settlement of Harlem was part

[14] Diner, 170.
[15] Gates, 6, 12.
[16] For a short history of the Lower East Side prior to the 1880s see Diner, 46–47.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875809991423 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the Great Migration of African Americans to northern cities between 1910 and 1920. Already by the mid-1920s what had once been an affluent "white" suburb had become an overcrowded, poverty-ridden, and "black" urban space.[17] Indeed, the early twentieth century witnessed demographic shifts that radically transformed the makeup of these two communities and helped facilitate the coalescing of Harlem and the Lower East Side into racial and "ethnic" enclaves.

A comparative investigation of how these dense urban neighborhoods were depicted and (re)produced in early twentieth-century African American and Jewish American novels reveals a deep and striking ambivalence towards these two spaces in both literary traditions. This is already interesting, since in contemporary discourse, as I have discussed above, the negativity with respect to the Lower East Side has all but disappeared; what is left is a sentimentalized nostalgia. In the literature, however, the theme of conflicted affectivity is very prominent in both traditions.

The ambivalence I am referring to is most clearly articulated by the protagonists in the novels by Jessie Fauset (1884–1961), Nella Larsen (1893–1964), Abraham Cahan (1860–1951) and Anzia Yezierska (1885–1970). These authors and their novels are today recognized as cornerstones of the African American and Jewish American literary canons. Both Larsen and Fauset lived, worked, and wrote in Harlem during the 1920s. Fauset was one of the most prolific Harlem Renaissance novelists and served for a period as the literary editor of the *Crisis*, an extremely influential African American publication. By contrast, Larsen wrote only two slim novels; her literary career was cut short following an accusation of plagiarism for one of her short stories. The Jewish authors Cahan and Yezierska also had firsthand experience of life on the Lower East Side. Cahan immigrated to the neighborhood from eastern Europe in his early twenties, became a leading socialist activist, and served as the editor of the important Yiddish newspaper the *Jewish Daily Forward* for almost fifty years; interestingly, he wrote only one full-length novel in his lifetime. Yezierska immigrated to the Lower East Side from eastern Europe in her early teens and rose to national fame in 1919 when one of her short stories was named the best short story of the year. She then went on to write four novels, three of which focus on the Lower East Side.

In addition to their current canonical status, all four writers emphasize a similar narrative trajectory. Their protagonists are depicted as endeavoring

[17] Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto: Negro New York, 1890–1930* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 122–23.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875809991423 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to move from a marginal existence to a more mainstream one while actively attempting to live out some aspect of the American Dream. It is not surprising, then, that these authors' novels highlight an intense negotiation between a protagonist's feeling of identification with the Lower East Side or Harlem and his or her desire to escape from the "constraining" neighborhood. These modern and now classic "ethnic" novels, in other words, (re-)produce the conflict between minority and dominant culture with particular force, and it is this conflict that brings out both the positive and the negative poles of ambivalence.

HARLEM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

The protagonist of Nella Larsen's 1928 *Quicksand*, Helga Crane, leaves Harlem and the United States in order to feel that she belongs to herself alone and not merely to the black race. She quickly realizes, however, that even in Denmark she cannot escape the constraints of race, and while in Europe Helga begins to yearn desperately for negroes and Harlem. Harlem, in Helga's nostalgic longing, represents everything: "Everything was there, vice and goodness, sadness and gayety, ignorance and wisdom, ugliness and beauty, poverty and richness."[18] Harlem is *the* place to be if only because it contains everything, and everything, in Helga Crane's eyes, is extremely desirable.

The picture Larsen has Helga paint of Harlem can be termed ambivalent in the sense that it is inclusive of both that which attracts and that which repels; the neighborhood concomitantly contains the very desirable and the very undesirable. And, after her return to the US and to "the medley that is Harlem," Helga is described as being swept with a wild surge of gladness when she realizes that "[t]hese terrible, these fascinating; these lovable, dark hordes" once again surround her (95). Larsen's protagonist is simultaneously repulsed by and attracted to the black masses inhabiting these few square miles of city space, and the language articulates the twin poles of her ambivalence.

When Helga arrives in black Manhattan for the very first time, she is absolutely enthralled by what she sees: "The continuously gorgeous panorama of Harlem fascinated her, thrilled her," but she is also acutely aware that

[18] Nella Larsen, *Quicksand and Passing* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 46. All subsequent references to the novel come from this edition and will be given in parentheses. This is my reading of Helga's yearning for Harlem. In the novel, Helga expresses a deep homesickness for "Negroes" (92). Her homesickness, I would argue, emerges out of the desirability described during Helga's initial sojourn in Harlem.

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the neighborhood is an enclave: "The sober mad rush of *white* New York failed entirely to stir her. Of that white world, so distant, so near, she asked only indifference …" (43, 45; emphasis added). The text's emphasis even at this point is clearly on the separation and racialization of space, the seemingly strict borders between black Harlem and white New York.[19] Just a few lines later Larsen fleshes out her description of Harlem by bringing in the bodies of the "alluring brown or yellow men" who dance attendance on the beautiful Helga Crane (ibid.).

This move, from a more positive portrayal to an emphasis on the racialized spatialization of Harlem, becomes a pattern in *Quicksand*. Indeed, whenever Harlem is described specifically as space – as streets, buildings, and people moving in space – the reader senses the hordes, the movement, the congestion. But what the reader most forcefully senses is the "color" of this space. It is not the "teemingness" or the hordes that is stressed, but rather the "dark-eyed brown folk" inhabiting this neighborhood (43, 51). Thus, even in the pulsating, exciting descriptions of the urban enclave, race seems to emerge as paramount, eliding other characteristics and details.

Moreover, once the space has been racialized in this way, a feeling of circumscription seems to follow. Returning to the section where Larsen first dwells on the line of demarcation between black Harlem and "white New York," the reader is also told that Helga Crane's "existence, now, was *bounded* by Central Park, Fifth Avenue, St. Nicholas Park, and One Hundred and Forty-fifth street … Not a narrow life, *as Negroes live it*" (46, emphasis added). As negroes live it is surely a qualification, and bounded carries with it all sorts of undesirable connotations, such a restriction, confinement, and perhaps even slavery. And just a little while later in the narrative, when Helga Crane herself begins to feel restless and "bounded," one gets an even clearer sense of her conflicted relationship towards Harlem:

> As the days became hotter and the streets more swarming, a kind of repulsion came upon her. She recoiled in aversion from the sight of the grinning faces and from the sound of the easy laughter of all of these people who strolled, aimlessly now, it seemed, up and down the avenues … (48)

Grinning faces, easy laughter – these are very slightly veiled racialized stereotypes that bring to mind the likes of blackface, Sambo, and minstrelsy. The once muted pole of repulsion has clearly taken over, overwhelming all else.

[19] This is an ambiguous section. I argue, however, that Larsen is emphasizing the separateness of white and black Harlem and ultimately on a certain kind of segregation between these two worlds. See *Quicksand*, 45.

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Both the attraction and the repulsion of Harlem has to do with its being perceived as "black" space. On the one hand, even when Harlem is described as including "everything" and as being a thrilling city unto itself, the racialized spatialization is underscored. On the other hand, Helga Crane's disgust is constantly related to her feeling of "being shut up, boxed up, with hundreds of her race … these despised black folk" (54–5).

In Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun*, published in the same year as *Quicksand*, the protagonist – also a young aspiring middle-class African American woman who moves to New York but who "passes" for white in order to live out the life of freedom she has always dreamed about – describes Harlem in a similarly conflicted way. Like her literary counterpart, the first time Angela Murray lays eyes on this city space she is "amazed and impressed at this bustling, frolicking, busy, laughing great city within a greater one." Fauset goes on to tell us that Angela "had never seen *colored* life so thick, so varied, so complete."[20] Again, through this description, we get a sense of the pulsating life of teeming, *black* Harlem. Furthermore, this description is qualified in a way we have seen before. The wonder Angela experiences is later ascribed to the "fact" that these few square miles of city streets included "people of a very high intellectual type, exponents of the realest and most essential refinement living cheek by jowl with coarse or ill-bred or even criminal members of their *race*" (326, added emphasis).[21] Everything exists in this neighborhood: the high and the low, the hope of the race and what this very genteel protagonist perceives as the shame of the race. A few minutes after Angela's initial thrill at seeing Harlem for the first time, she contemplates more seriously the meaning of this city within a city: "Unquestionably there was something very fascinating, even *terrible*, about this stream of life" (97, added emphasis). Again, we see the slippage from a depiction that could be called ambivalent in the sense that it paints a picture inclusive of desirable and undesirable elements into a language of ambivalence.

What is so striking about the descriptions of Harlem in these two novels is that the language used to portray the people populating these city blocks – fascinating, terrible – is uncannily similar. Also interesting, and I suggest important, is that poverty, while certainly mentioned, is not the

[20] Jessie Fauset, *Plum Bun* (reprint, Boston: Beacon Press, 1990; first published 1928), 96, emphasis added. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be given in parentheses.

[21] This is my interpretation, since the quote I have inserted is from a later section of the novel. But the sentiments that Angela expresses when she first sees Harlem are similar (see 96). The quote taken from a later section seems to articulate the "everything" of Harlem more succinctly.

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pivot around which the ambivalent descriptions of space revolve. Considering that both protagonists are described as struggling to carve out a respectable middle-class lifestyle, their aversion might have been directed at the dirt and meanness of the streets of Harlem. These works, after all, were written and published at a time when Harlem had already become severely poverty-ridden.[22] But race rather than poverty is at center stage, as if poverty were merely a symptom and race the cause of the ills of this urban space.

The particular modes of ambivalence found in the novels need to be understood in relation to the process of signification Harlem was undergoing at the time, a process these novels (re)inscribe. Harlem is presented in these texts as a segregated enclave with definite borders. African Americans, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, high yellow, blue black, and even those who can "pass" are all depicted as lumped together. As a desirable place, Harlem signifies race pride and solidarity as well as possibility. Nella Larsen has her protagonist express this pride when Helga returns to Harlem after her sojourn in Europe. Speaking about the "hundreds, thousands of dark-eyed brown folk" she is filled with a (albeit fleeting) sense of thankfulness: "*These* were her people" (95, italics in original). After all, the 1920s – the period in which these texts were written and published – was the time of the Harlem Renaissance. As a site of repulsion, the space of Harlem serves as both a recognition and a reminder that the "color line" in all of its various manifestations was that which circumscribed and limited life for blacks in the US. The crucial point for my purposes here, though, is that both the attraction and the repulsion are directed much more towards the perceived racialized spatialization of the neighborhood and much less towards its poverty. While class and gender factor into the ambivalence, these are not, by any means, the represented source of aversion.

THE LOWER EAST SIDE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Abraham Cahan's classic novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, initially describes the Lower East Side with a decided stress on its Jewishness. After debarking at Castle Garden, the protagonist, David Levinsky, walks not to the East Side but to the "*Jewish* East Side." The streets are depicted as swarming with Yiddish-speaking immigrants.[23] Like the African American novels described above, Cahan has his protagonist describe this space in quite positive terms

[22] Gates, 11.

[23] Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1993; first published 1917), 93. All subsequent references to the novel come from this edition and will be given in parentheses.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875809991423 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in the beginning. Emphasized are the "ethnic" specificity and the fact that on these streets Jews are less bounded than on the streets in Russia. However, Cahan's stress on the Jewishness of the East Side gives way, relatively quickly, to something else. Almost immediately following his first impression, David Levinsky sums up his introduction to "the ghetto" in the following terms: "Instead of stumbling upon nuggets of gold, I found signs of poverty. In one place I came across a poor family who – as I learned upon inquiry – had been dispossessed for non-payment of rent" (95). Throughout the rest of the novel, the descriptions of the Lower East Side underscore the neighborhood's penury.

Cahan's text gestures towards a move that can be seen most profoundly in the Jewish American novels of the 1920s, and most saliently in Anzia Yezierska's *Arrogant Beggar* and *Salome of the Tenements*. In these texts, there is a striking stress on the economic conditions of the Lower East Side, and it is through the emphasis on the deplorable physical conditions that the negative pole of ambivalence towards the neighborhood is most clearly articulated. "Dirty," "squalid" "swarming" "verminous" – it is difficult to find a description of the Lower East Side in which such adjectives are not used.

Sonya Vrunsky, the protagonist of Yezierska's 1923 *Salome of the Tenements*, has little good to say about her neighborhood. In the opening pages of the novel, Sonya – who is a reporter for a Jewish newspaper – interviews a millionaire philanthropist who has opened a settlement house in the ghetto; the two are fascinated by one another. Yezierska portrays their meeting using the Lower East Side as background:

> Oblivious of the squalid humans that swarmed about them, indifferent for the moment to the myriad needs that drove the crowds here and there from pushcarts to shops, from tenements to factories, restaurants and coffee stands, unaware of the raucous orchestra of voices, the metallic bedlam of elevated trains, the pounding of horses and humans scuttling through the middle of the street – this man and this woman stood wholly absorbed in one another.[24]

The emphasis is on the noise, on the bustle, on the "squalid humans," and not on the Jewishness of the people inhabiting this space. Sonya desperately wants to "get rid of her poverty" and displays sheer disgust at the "the teeming ghetto, the haggling pushcart peddlers, and the dirt and din of screaming hucksters" (3). Her one desire is to find a space which will take her away "from the crowded windows that hung dirty mattresses and

[24] Anzia Yezierska, *Salome of the Tenements* (reprint, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995; first published 1923), 2. All subsequent references to the novel come from this edition and will be given in parentheses.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875809991423 Published online by Cambridge University Press

bedding – flaunting banners of poverty" (5). And while the "haggling pushcart peddlers" may be a recognizable code word for Jew, neither do the descriptions foreground Jewishness nor does the Jewishness of the space become the cause for repulsion. The reader, I would argue, most strongly senses the "teemingness" of the ghetto from these negative descriptions and not the specifically "ethnic" marking of this space.

Similarly, in Yezierska's 1927 novel, *Arrogant Beggar*, we find portrayals that emphasize the poverty-stricken streets and houses, the noises and the hordes. Like Sonya Vrunsky, the protagonist Adele Lindner is desperate to better her conditions. Initially, she wants nothing more than to live at the Hellman Home for Working Girls, a settlement house, and she first experiences the institution as the antidote to her impoverished existence. Returning to Essex Street after seeing the cleanliness and order of the home, she is described as being even more conscious of the Lower East Side's poverty:

> I saw once again the houses huddled together in neglect, like a poor over-crowded family. On either side of the stoop, rubbish, bags bursting and overflowing, two alley cats pulling the dirt out on the sidewalk. The cracked doors on broken hinges. The cellar windows stuffed with rags. Over this ugliness, my new life beckoned.[25]

"The ugliness" "the terrible dirt," and "the gloom" of the Lower East Side are what get reiterated time and again in Yezierska's texts. The negative pole of ambivalence emerges in relation to poverty and not to the protagonists' feeling of "being yoked" to the "despised folk" who inhabit this neighborhood.

Despite the negative way in which the Lower East Side is portrayed, the Jewish protagonists' relationship to this space is, as I have argued, ambivalent. This means that alongside the repulsion the novels also present a certain attraction to or identification with the neighborhood. There are two main modes through which the positive pull of the Lower East Side manifests itself. One finds a certain nostalgia and yearning for the Lower East Side once the protagonists "make it" in the larger "white" world and move uptown. This is most clearly articulated in Cahan's text.

Yezierska's texts, however, introduce the positive pull of the Lower East Side in a different way. Her female protagonists actually end up returning to the Lower East Side and this return is depicted as a matter of "choice." If the problem with this space is primarily poverty and not its perceived "Jewishness," then there is hope of improving it. Adele Lindner, for

[25] Anzia Yezierska, *Arrogant Beggar* (reprint, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997; first published 1927), 12–13. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be given in parenthesis.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875809991423 Published online by Cambridge University Press

example, leaves the Home for Working Girls and goes back to her former neighborhood and familiar streets. It is here that she manages to open up a successful café and restaurant. Her goal, the reader is told, is to provide her people with "the most for the least money," and this becomes a way for Adele to work out "the hungers" she had suffered (129). It is interesting to note that while her return is understood to be a return to "her" people and "her" neighborhood – that is, the "Jewish" East Side – the service she is rendering and the conditions she hopes to improve are articulated in economic terms.

Even though the ambivalence in the Jewish American literature is articulated in and through class and economic terms, this is not to argue that the divide between Jewishness and mainstream US society disappears in any of these novels. In fact, the yearning for the "Jewish" East Side in David Levinsky's case and the return of Yezierska's protagonists can be understood as the discomfort these protagonists feel outside the confines of the Lower East Side, perhaps due to anti-Semitism.[26] I am not arguing that the Jewish texts do not include descriptions of Jews or Jewishness; they do. But I am interested in how these texts depict the urban space of the Lower East Side – the kind of language used and the details stressed. I have found not only that the descriptions are suffused with ambivalence, but also that the source of the ambivalence in relation to the "Jewish" neighborhood is less marked in terms of "ethnicity" or race and is much more class-inflected.

FROM PAST TO PRESENT

In addition to the different ways that the ambivalence manifests itself within the two literary traditions, the Jewish novels – unlike the African American texts – also gesture towards the possibility of leaving the "Jewish" enclave behind, moving up the class ladder, and becoming (more or less) part of mainstream middle-class America. This possibility is intimately related to the fact that the ambivalence towards the Lower East Side is depicted in class and not racial or "ethnic" terms.

Two points need to be underscored here. First, these early Jewish Americans texts were meditating on the chances and the possibility of Jews

[26] Anti-Semitism, though, does not figure prominently in the novels. Interestingly, the discomfort in white space is more pronounced for the Jewish women protagonists. For two articles that begin to articulate this gendered difference see Lori Harrison Kahan, "Drunk with the Fiery Rhythms of Jazz," *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, 51, 2 (2005), 416–436; and Catherine Rottenberg, "Race and the New Woman," in *idem*, *Performing Americanness* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2008), chapter 5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875809991423 Published online by Cambridge University Press

moving into the dominant white and Gentile society. The narratives suggest that for Jews the barriers were being constructed and conceived of more in class terms, a view that is both reflected in the novels but also (re)produced by them. Second, unlike gender and race, which have historically been conceived of as biological facts that cannot be altered, in the United States class has not been perceived as an essence.[27] Therefore, if the problem is poverty, then one's position and the space that helps determine that position can, at least ostensibly, be changed. Harlem, by contrast, is represented in racialized terms and as a much more bounded space, both metaphorically and physically. One could, it seems, carve out a middle-class existence, but only within the confines of the black community.

Put somewhat differently, the Jewish novels' relationship with space underscores that the most pressing problem for the Jewish protagonists is perceived to be poverty and not being defined or defining oneself as Jewish. Consequently, the way space is portrayed in the texts can be said to reveal a certain jockeying for a position in US society, a position that would be defined and thus determined much more by one's class status and much less by one's "race." "Jewishness" is not depicted as a particularly constraining factor in the novels. Thus, even though Jewishness was framed within a racial discourse at this time and, as many contemporary scholars have argued, dominant US society was still questioning whether Jews were full-blooded whites, the portrayal of the Lower East Side in the novels seems to gesture towards a changing relation to Jewishness.[28] By emphasizing the obstacles of class rather than of "Jewishness," these texts can be seen as inscribing a less racialized Jewishness, and perhaps even as facilitating the process of "morphing" Jewishness from a racial category into an ethnic one – a process that would only be complete post-World War II.[29] In the African American novels, by contrast, space is consistently racialized. This suggests that the most pressing problem for the protagonists – as refracted through their ambivalence to Harlem – is not perceived to be poverty but race, underscoring just how intransigent the black–white divide has been in US history and society.

The narrative emphasis on class in the early Jewish American novels therefore points to the very different positionality of Jews in relation to

[27] See Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), esp. 25–48.

[28] See, for example, Matthew Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[29] See, for example, Karen Brodkin's *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875809991423 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mainstream US society – even during the 1920s when anti-Semitism was on the rise, Jews were a marginalized minority, and Jewishness was still being articulated within a discourse of race. As Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* narrativizes and perhaps even presages, Jews who managed to climb the class hierarchy could and did cross spatial and social boundaries; namely, for Jews, there was not only vertical but also horizontal movement. For African Americans, on the other hand, climbing the class ladder was not enough to allow for a blurring of spatial and social borders. Thus, while there was some vertical movement, very little horizontal movement was "allowed." The only way blacks could "cross the line" and integrate into mainstream US society was through passing and by denying their "blackness."

Given the prohibitions on boundary crossing, the "genteel" African American literature therefore helps us understand how and why Harlem emerged as a conflicted metaphor. In the fiction from the 1920s, Harlem's dual affective modality – the promise and the despair – is almost always related to its spatialzed racialization. And while race and racialized space continued to play a crucial role in the lives and life options of African Americans throughout the twentieth century, the Jewish move into the middle class meant that class would figure less and less as an the obstacle to "making it" in dominant US society. Thus, unlike the process of iconization vis-à-vis the Lower East Side, the negative pole of ambivalence has not been elided with respect to Harlem because the conditions allowing for such an erasure never materialized.

Yet, when we begin comparing the early representations with current discourses on and about these neighborhoods, we see a fascinating shift in emphasis. The emphasis on class in the Jewish novels has been almost completely overshadowed by the current narrative's accentuation of the Jewishness of the Lower East Side, whereas the foregrounding of race in the African American novels has been slightly eclipsed by a class discourse vis-à-vis Harlem. The poverty of the Lower East Side and the importance of moving up the class ladder – and making it in the larger white and Gentile world – is noticeably missing in the current narratives of this city space, while its Jewishness is now emphasized. It seems that the comfort (and discomfort) of middle-class existence allows contemporary Jewish Americans to invoke this site as a means of renegotiating their ethnic identity at a time when mainstream acceptance has led to a fear of loss of ethnic and religious particularity. For Jews today, poverty is no longer perceived to be a problem; losing a sense of uniqueness is.

The narrative of Harlem has also been changing. Henry Louis Gates urges us to revisit Harlem as metaphor and to uncover the part class has played in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875809991423 Published online by Cambridge University Press

creating such a sharp division between the African American middle class and the underclass. For African Americans, while race and racialization have never stopped being a defining feature of life, the widening class discrepancy among blacks has increasingly become a disturbing and divisive marker of difference. The current discourse on whether or not Harlem is being truly (re-)"gentrified," especially by upwardly mobile and entrepreneurial African Americans, is just one aspect of this shifting emphasis.

These shifts and changing emphases indicate not only that Harlem and the Lower East Side continue to be crucial for refracting the self-representation of African Americans and Jewish Americans, but also that these city spaces continue to be key sites for making sense of the two minority groups' position in, as well as their relation to, mainstream white US society.

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