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The Nigger Huck: Race, Identity, and the Teaching of Huckleberry Finn

Author(s): John Alberti

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THE NIGGER HUCK: RACE, IDENTITY,  
AND THE TEACHING OF  
*HUCKLEBERRY FINN*

John Alberti

*What Africanism became for, and how it functioned in, the literary imagination is of paramount interest because it may be possible to discover through a close look at literary "blackness," the nature—even the cause—of literary "whiteness." What is it for? What parts do the invention and development of whiteness play in the construction of what is loosely described as "American"?*

Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*

*Well, if ever I struck anything like it, I'm a nigger. It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race.*

Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

**S**helley Fisher Fishkin's recent book, *Was Huck Black?*, explores the influence of African-American culture and language on the creation of Huckleberry Finn as both novel and character. In explaining her approach, she points out that until recently, "by limiting their field of inquiry to the periphery," white scholars "have missed the ways in which African-American voices shaped Twain's creative imagination at its core" (4). She links her study of Twain to the more general "need to revise our understanding of the nature of the mainstream American literary tradition" and credits Twain with helping to "open American literature to the multicultural polyphony that is its birthright and special strength" (4, 5). This effort to overcome the cultural separation and segregation in the study of American literature has many of its roots, as Fishkin points out, in the work of African-American scholars and critics, and constitutes one of the central aims of multiculturalism. Fishkin's work is testament to the freshness of insight such an approach brings to the study and teaching of even the most heavily interpreted of texts.

If, however, as Fishkin argues (following Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison), *Huckleberry Finn* can be used to demonstrate the interrelatedness of white and black American culture, the book is also profoundly about separation and the construc-

**John Alberti** is an assistant professor of American literature at Northern Kentucky University. He is the editor of *The Canon in the Classroom: Pedagogical Implications of Canon Revision in American Literature* (1994) and the Instructor's Guide to the second edition of the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*. He is currently working on the application of rhetorical and cultural studies approaches to multicultural pedagogy.

tion of racial difference, issues evoked by the brutal epithet that haunts the pages of this supposedly All-American epic: “nigger.” Indeed, the emergence of the latest movements toward multiculturalism in general and the modern study of African-American culture in particular—the historical developments that make a book like Fishkin’s possible—parallels historically the controversy begun in the 1950s over Twain’s use of the term “nigger” in *Huckleberry Finn*. Rather than try to explain the term away or simply condemn the book, I want to look at the use of “nigger” in *Huckleberry Finn* as central to the operation of this text in American culture and the American classroom and to regard *Huckleberry Finn* as a kind of meditation on the word “nigger,” as an attempt by Twain to explore the construction and maintenance of racial identity. My goal, however, is not to come to a determination of some essential quality of the book or author (was Twain or is *Huckleberry Finn* “racist”?) but instead to see what this approach tells us about our own historical and pedagogical moment as part of the reception history of the book—its enshrinement as an American “classic” and its subsequent appearance as a standard required text in the classroom. In asking, for example, why Huck is unable to relinquish the word “nigger” in referring to Jim, in spite of the supposed growth of their friendship, I also want to ask how particular readers respond or have responded to that word. Most specifically, what do the excuses and explanations offered in justification of Twain’s use of the word “nigger,” the attempts to control the discussion of how race operates in the novel and in the classroom, tell us about the investment Huck and his white critics, teachers, and readers have in the book and in the word, and what implications does such an analysis have for discussions of race in the classroom?

Although dismissed by some as an example of a newly faddish “political correctness,” the controversy over the use of “nigger” in *Huckleberry Finn* goes back almost forty years and is in many ways a product of the efforts at school desegregation brought about by the civil rights movement and the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. The changing demographic and political realities created by these historical developments brought a new group of readers and critics into formerly all-white educational institutions. For many black schoolchildren, particularly in integrated or semi-integrated classrooms, the insistent repetition of the term “nigger” in *Huckleberry Finn* caused pain, anger, and humiliation, and led organizations like the NAACP and other sympathetic parties to question the purpose of requiring children to read the work.

Responses from the academic establishment to such challenges ranged from the puzzled to the dismissive. A classic move in defense of the book, then and now, has been to lump all nonacademic critics of the book together as extremists and “censors” (Robert Sattelmeyer, for example, refers ominously to “organized groups” [3] who have attacked the novel), thus equating the complaints about the book’s “coarseness” from the genteel bourgeois trustees of the Concord Public Li-

brary in the 1880s with more recent objections based on race and civil rights. Clearly, though, such blanket dismissals obscure real and important differences in historical context and political reality. The book has been defended against charges of racism, for example, by the likes of George Will and Ronald Reagan, readers whose general advocacy of school texts that promote “patriotism” and “decency” might seem to have more in common with the moralistic concerns of the nineteenth-century Concord library committee than with modern civil libertarians (it is also hard to imagine any other situation in which conservative commentators would defend the inclusion in school curricula of a work that contained over two hundred instances of any other brutal obscenity, regardless of the overall artistic purpose of the work).

One result of the entrance of African-American voices into the critical discussion of the book has been to point out the arrogance, ignorance, and naïveté of many otherwise subtle readers of *Huckleberry Finn*. Peaches Henry, for example, shows how the defenses of the book offered by Nat Hentoff, Justin Kaplan, and Leslie Fiedler in reaction to the controversy over the term “nigger” “illustrate the incapacity of non-blacks to comprehend the enormous emotional freight attached to the hate word ‘nigger’ for each black person” (30). Robert Nadeau’s condescending remark in his “The *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a Moral Story” is typical: “But it might help to explain to those students [who object to the term] that in slave states the word was merely the ordinary colloquial term for a slave, and not necessarily abusive” (141). The larger implication of Nadeau’s remarks, that slavery itself was “not necessarily abusive,” raises new questions instead of defusing the controversy. It is also a pedagogical comment that seems strangely distant from the demographic realities of the contemporary American classroom.

Many other recent critics, both white and black, have also pointed to the level of white fantasy involved in discussions of the character of Jim and more specifically the relationship between Huck and Jim. Harold Beaver and Forrest Robinson, in particular, each point to the sentimental naïveté of white readers who simply take Jim’s declaration of affection for Huck at face value, thus ignoring the fact that throughout the book Jim is involved in his own plans for escape and that Huck always remains a threat to those plans. Beaver’s and Robinson’s more skeptical perspectives, for example, make us regard Jim’s statement in chapter 16 that he was secretly “a-listenin’ to all de talk” while Huck lied their way out of the unwanted attentions of two men in a skiff as a sign of Jim’s caution and suspicion as much as his attentiveness and gratitude toward Huck (128).

The increased albeit piecemeal integration of American education since the 1950s, however, has given many older Twain scholars pause. The prominent Twain scholar James Cox admits that he would now have second thoughts about teaching *Huckleberry Finn*: “I know in my heart that, if I were teaching an American literature course in Bedford Stuyvesant or Watts or North Philadelphia, I might well

find myself choosing *Tom Sawyer* or *A Connecticut Yankee* rather than *Huckleberry Finn* to represent Mark Twain” (388). The assumption, though, is that this story would somehow be easier to teach in a racially homogeneous (that is, all white) class, or that it was easier to teach when such homogeneity could be counted on in the classroom. The controversy over the use of “nigger” in *Huckleberry Finn*, however, should make us question this assumption as well and ask why the word wasn’t a “problem” before. After all, racism may be a problem *for* African-Americans and other people of color, but it is a problem *of* white Americans, and classroom practice shows that the term “nigger,” along with Twain’s characterization of Jim, is just as problematic in a predominantly or all white classroom as it is in an integrated or predominantly black classroom, if not more so.

The question of Jim’s dialect provides an example of what I mean. There is a long critical history in response to Twain’s explanatory note at the front of the book concerning his attempts at recreating regional—and racial—dialects in *Huckleberry Finn*. The strongest such efforts (Fishkin; Smith; Woodard and MacCann) not only explore the various sources available to Twain but also directly confront the question of how Twain’s love of minstrel shows—what Twain called “the real nigger show—the genuine nigger show, the extravagant nigger show”—influenced his creation of the character of Jim (qtd. Bell 127). Critics have argued whether and to what extent Twain’s portrayal of Jim manages to transcend or ironically transform the minstrel aspects of Jim’s character, but pedagogical practice brings up a performative aspect of the question that complicates any discussion of Twain’s irony. Put simply, in teaching the novel every instructor must decide how to read aloud Jim’s character. Jim’s is the most heavily marked, most obviously “nonstandard” dialect in the book, and first-time readers will often express their difficulty in understanding him. In reading aloud, the instructor must decide how to perform this racially coded dialect. In effect, a white instructor reading out loud a white writer’s comic attempts at depicting what Twain calls “the Missouri Negro dialect” runs the risk of becoming a kind of minstrel performer him or herself, whatever the racial demographics of the classroom (although such demographics will surely affect how an individual instructor approaches this problem).

There are no easy or obvious answers to this pedagogical dilemma. One strategy, of course, is to make this problem a part of class discussion, and the more helpful defenses of *Huckleberry Finn* advocate seeing the novel as a teaching opportunity, as a chance for opening in the classroom a dialogue about racism. However, the multicultural classroom raises questions about what exactly we can learn about racism from *Huckleberry Finn*. Thomas Inge’s response is instructive both for its dismissive tone and for the assumptions embodied in it about who the novel is being taught to:

To the sensitive reader, such charges [of racism] are amazing, because the novel remains in American culture one of the works most challenging to racial bigotry, so-

cial and political hypocrisy, and moral compromise. There is an integrity at the heart of the novel that cannot help but touch the reader, and if any work of art has the power to exert a positive influence, then surely this one does. (ix-x)

Aside from the loaded term “sensitive reader,” this response makes us wonder just what this positive influence might be—and most important, who is supposed to be influenced. This only makes sense if we presuppose a white readership that needs lessons in the immorality (or even existence) of racial bigotry, or that needs to learn to see African-Americans as fully human. At the same time, Inge’s response might seem to suggest that readers who do raise questions about the impact of “nigger” in the classroom are guilty of being both insensitive and too sensitive.

Nat Hentoff’s defense of the novel provides another example of the often contradictory messages given in recommending the novel as morally instructive. In a *Nightline* debate over whether the book should be required classroom reading, Hentoff invokes the teaching defense: the novel explores questions of racial discrimination that should be at the heart of American education (“*Huckleberry Finn*: Literature or Racist Trash?”). When faced with the question of whether in fact most or many teachers are adequately prepared to lead such a discussion, Hentoff concedes the point, offering an anecdote about a teacher in Texas who tried to initiate such a discussion by asking the class “What is a nigger?” The class response was for all of the white students to turn their heads and silently look at the few black students. Hentoff admits that such an approach is disastrous and suggests that the teacher should have been summarily fired. This is a curious response indeed from a First Amendment advocate, and one not likely to persuade other teachers to follow his suggestion that they make race a focus of class discussion.

By framing his defense of *Huckleberry Finn* in didactic pedagogical terms, Inge also opens the question of whether *Huckleberry Finn* is in fact “one of the works most challenging to racial bigotry” in American literature. If such a challenge is what we want, any number of works might also fit the bill: *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, *Invisible Man*, *Beloved*. Moreover, *Huckleberry Finn* is especially problematic in fulfilling this morally exemplary function because the title character and first-person narrator himself pointedly fails to transcend racism by the novel’s end.

The epigraph from Toni Morrison suggests a different approach to the text, one that views it not as an exemplary challenge to bigotry, however much it can be made to fit that purpose, but as a key text in the exploration of the attractions of bigotry and racism, an exploration tied to the reasons “nigger” remains so attractive to Huck in the text and has troubled so few white critics of the book. The hapless teacher in Hentoff’s anecdote was getting at an important question—or rather, if she made a mistake, it was in limiting the question, for the question “What is a ‘nigger?’” is inextricably bound up in the question “What is a white person?” and these questions perhaps make more sense as a translation of Huck’s conflict into the

contemporary American classroom than more abstract considerations of how the novel exposes a kind of ahistorical “social and political hypocrisy.”

Addressing these questions in the text means discussing the subject positions of readers—in particular, those of teachers and students in the classroom. One way to begin is by asking just what we mean when we identify ourselves or others according to racial codes, whether “white,” “black,” “yellow,” “brown,” or “red,” in the first place. One of the remarkable aspects of the construction of whiteness in the United States is the way it allows people to find some kind of kinship across barriers of time, language, religion, and social class solely on the basis of perceived racial unity. I teach at a predominantly white, working-class school, and I am always struck by the immediate identification many “white” students have with the “white” characters in texts which are otherwise difficult and historically distant, works such as Cabeza de Vaca’s *Relations* or the captivity narrative of Mary Rowlandson. This identification occurs even when the use of the social marker “white” may be anachronistic, even when students are separated from these characters by barriers of gender, ethnicity, and language, and even when they may be critical of the actions of these “white” characters.

This same identification holds true when my students read *Huckleberry Finn*. When considering the relation between Huck and Jim, most students will immediately align themselves on one side or the other of the color line, even when denouncing prejudice or bigotry. In fact, such an alignment is often a necessary precondition of making any such judgments. All this of course should not be surprising, but it is significant how little this aspect of the reception of the novel was discussed before various “resisting readers” (to borrow Judith Fetterley’s term) such as Ralph Ellison brought attention to it. If *Huckleberry Finn* is going to serve as a means of discussing race in the classroom, then we must start with the constructions of race we bring to the class: How do we define ourselves racially? If you define yourself as “white,” how do you know that’s what you are, and what do you mean by such a definition? What investment might Huck or his readers have in maintaining a color line in the novel, even while supposedly coming to recognize Jim’s “humanity”? For in spite of lessons Huck seems to learn in the novel and the actions he takes (“humbling” himself before Jim; swearing to help Jim at the cost of his own salvation), Huck never overcomes the use of the term “nigger.” Asking questions about why this is so, what benefits Huck derives from maintaining this racial distinction, ties in with a discussion of what that term would mean both to Twain’s 1880s audience and to readers today.

Neil Schmitz has pointed out that in spite of their partnership, Huck and Jim “have different ideas of where they want to go and what their flight means, points of view that come increasingly into conflict in the first part of the novel” (100), since in “a very real sense, Jim’s freedom means the termination of [Huck’s] own, the abandonment of the raft and the river for concrete realities in Illinois” (105).

While Huck's goal may seem simply escapist, Jim's escape is inherently political and social: he wishes to change the legal and cultural definition of his personhood and those of his wife and children. To do this in the narrow sense involves crossing into a "free" state, but as the imposition of Jim Crow during Reconstruction made clear, a larger sense of freedom would involve the reconstruction of social categories of race, status, and power, and such a definition of freedom would create a larger, more complex dilemma for Huck and, by extension, for any "white" readers identifying with Huck: the loss of their "white" identity. Simple friendship is one thing, but social and political solidarity with Jim would threaten Huck's status as "white," a position particularly vulnerable because of Huck's own marginal class status. In helping Jim, Huck at the same time is trying to avoid becoming a "nigger" himself.

Anxiety over racial identity has always been a defining feature of the historical construction of racism in the British American colonies and later the United States. Such anxiety is in fact the strongest evidence that race is indeed a social construct, subject to historic variations and thus always inherently unstable. It is crucial to understand and take into account the material basis of both the initial construction of the racial ideology of the U.S. and its historical development and transformation, not only for interpreting *Huckleberry Finn* in the narrow sense but also for examining how various readers, both professional and amateur, have found and find themselves implicated in the novel's concern with racial identity. Most crucially, we need to look at how the construction of race theory and the development of racism in the West was linked to efforts to justify slavery not only by creating a permanent servant class but also by creating an ideological barrier between work seen as "slave" labor and the work of indentured servants and other menial workers. Indeed, the first explicitly race-based slave laws in seventeenth-century Virginia were drafted in part to counteract confederacies, both political and sexual, among African and European indentured servants (Zinn 31; Morgan).

Thus, from the beginning, the construction of race has served to counteract tensions arising from class inequalities and to prevent class solidarity. "[R]acial privilege could and did serve as a compensation for class disadvantage" for workers classified as "white," and the legal abolition of slavery could only intensify the need to mollify workers now finding themselves in potential competition with African-Americans (Fredrickson, *White Supremacy* 87). Fredrickson goes on to describe how the creation of "a powerful set of anti-Negro attitudes" in order to justify race slavery could, after the Civil War, still serve "the psychological needs of white groups in a competitive free-labor society" (*The Black Image* 41). Indeed, these needs have been among the most important factors contributing to the persistence of racism to this day, but they are more than psychological; they also carry with them a material dependence on the benefits of racial privilege, however marginal these benefits may be at times.



Thus, the identification along racial lines that students and teachers make with fictional characters and historical actions necessarily involves this question of racial privilege, even when such identification is used as a means of criticism. A student writing in response to *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* that she feels “ashamed for what we did to the slaves” condemns the actions of a group of people she nevertheless claims solidarity with, solely on racial grounds. The opposite reaction often encountered in class, the appeal to historical distance (“I don’t have any slaves, I’m not responsible for what happened back then, therefore racism isn’t my problem”) reveals in its defensiveness a desire, however unconscious, to maintain “white” status and its concomitant privilege while seeming to deny any such identification.

Keeping this inexorable cultural dynamic linking the construction of race and economic privilege in mind, let us consider the pedagogical implications of discussing the status of marginal “white” figures in *Huckleberry Finn* by looking at Pap Finn’s rant about what he sees as the erosion of racial privilege. Many critics have cited these passages as unequivocal denunciations of racism in *Huckleberry Finn*, since the overstated illogic of Pap’s argument clearly marks him as an object of Twain’s satire. It is significant, though, that Pap is not only condemning “that nigger” but also the white government that allows a black man to cross the boundary between free and slave:

“Here’s a govment that calls itself a govment, and lets on to be a govment, and thinks it is a govment, and yet’s got to set stock-still for six whole months before it can take ahold of a prowling, thieving, infernal, white-shirted free nigger . . .” (34)

Pap’s racist harangue in fact develops out of his complaints against another “white-shirt,” Judge Thatcher, who is denying Pap his “property” in the person of Huck and thus his chance to be “one of the wealthiest men in this town, if I could git my rights” (33). Instead, the “law backs that old Judge Thatcher up and helps him to keep me out o’ my property” (33). Pap’s anger, then, has two targets, one based in class, the other in race.

Equally important to note in Pap’s speech is that the “nigger” in question is in fact described by Pap as “a mulatter, most as white as a white man” (33). Susan Gilman’s reading of *Pudd’nhead Wilson* focuses on how the figure of the mulatto in that work exposes anxieties over race and social control not only in Twain’s contemporary audience but also in Twain himself, and her analysis has clear implications for the reading and teaching of *Huckleberry Finn*:

[Twain’s use of doubleness] raise[s] a fundamental question: whether one can tell people apart, differentiate among them. Without such differentiation, social order, predicated as it is on division—of class, race, gender—is threatened. Thus Mark Twain, champion of the subversive, also championed the law as one agent of control that resolves confusions about identity, restoring and enforcing the fundamental distinctions of society. (5)

The object of Pap's scorn, then, creates anxiety in Pap through a variety of mixed signals: legally "black," the man is an "old gray-headed nabob" with a "gold watch and chain, and a silver headed cane," who is a "p'fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages" (33–34). The professor, then, brings Pap's class anger and the race hatred he uses as compensation for that anger into what is for Pap an intolerable conflict, a conflict he mitigates through alcoholism and child abuse.

The point of such an explication of Pap's speeches is to demonstrate how this passage can be used to draw important connections between Pap's marginal class status and his racism, as well as the contradictions inherent in his racial self-identification: his simultaneous condemnation and envy of class privilege in the person of Judge Thatcher and his subsequent identification on the basis of race with those he perceives as denying any such identification with him in return. Clearly, the complexity of the analysis necessary to elicit an understanding of Pap beyond simple repugnance should make us wary of the easy assumption that the simple assignment of *Huckleberry Finn* will automatically and inevitably challenge the attitudes of students—particularly white-identifying students—toward race.

In fact, even such a close reading presupposes a kind of distance from Pap, not only in historical terms but also in terms of personal implication in the logic of race, as if Pap's concerns with status, both economic and social, are not also shared by the students in our classes, and by ourselves as teachers. As I implied above, many student readers of Pap react to him with disgust and show little desire to consider his case more deeply. We might want to read this condemnation of Pap as an indicator of how alien a figure he is to many students, but a closer analysis of that disgust allows us to see how in many ways the racial issues raised by Pap hit closer to home than they do in the supposedly more sympathetic figure of Huck. The reactions of some white-identifying students to Pap, for example, indicate a desire to see Pap as atypical, not a true representative of "white people," while some students, particularly but not exclusively students identified as "nonwhite," will recoil from Pap as precisely all too typical of "white" attitudes. Thus, our students' dismissal of Pap as a racist, a point on which we may easily find unanimity, can in practice prevent a more consequential discussion of the construction of race, namely one that focuses on the connections between wishing to retain "white" status while dismissing Pap from the white race and Pap's own confusion about whether to see Judge Thatcher as a class enemy or a racial compatriot.

Such an approach also helps us to understand why Huck has been and remains such a controversial role model. Before arguing about whether Huck's behavior is exemplary or not, we need to understand how concerns over status and race not only propel the narrative of the text but also provide the context for student reader responses. If Huck is torn between conflicting loyalties in *Huckleberry Finn*, the conflict is not only between self and society, or, in Twain's terms (as echoed in the title of Henry Nash Smith's famous essay), between a "sound heart and a deformed

conscience.” Huck’s two options—aiding Jim in his escape or turning Jim in—represent two different sources of personal empowerment. Helping Jim escape is not just an act of friendship; as Huck realizes, it is a profoundly political and revolutionary act, branding Huck as a “low down Ablitionist” (one of the few overtly political references in the work), and involving him not just in the eradication of race slavery, but in efforts at the social reconstruction of race (52). Turning Jim in will win him not only the approbation of the white community, but it will also secure his white status and clarify his own position as a non-slave.

Throughout the novel, Huck is nothing if not class-conscious. Mark Egan points out that “Huck’s terminology . . . is worth noting as evidence of social attitudes. ‘People’ are reasonably affluent whites—Tom Sawyer’s family, for example. ‘Folks,’ on the other hand, are destitute, like Pap Finn. Niggers, of course, are neither folks nor people” (112). I would modify the classification of “people” and “folks” with two even more class-laden terms that Huck uses repeatedly: “quality” and “trash.” Pap is an example of “trash” ludicrously hoping to become “quality,” and I would suggest that the condemnation of Pap among white readers stems as much from his “trash” status as his overt racism. In contrast, many (though not all) of my white-identifying students have to be coaxed to recognize the racism of the Phelpses, the more prosperous family farmers who nonetheless imprison Jim. Although Sarah Phelps’s conversation with Huck about a fictitious steamboat accident is often correctly cited as part of the book’s critique of racism (after being told by Huck that the boat “blowed out a cylinder-head” Mrs. Phelps asks “ ‘Good gracious! Anybody hurt?’ ‘No’m. Killed a nigger.’ ‘Well, it’s lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt’ ” [279]), in classroom practice such an admission of callousness does not prevent many white-identifying students from still seeing Sarah Phelps as basically kind and decent. In other words, these students are more likely to make excuses for the petty-bourgeois Phelpses (“they didn’t know any better”) than they are for the obviously “white trash” Pap. Similarly, many students overlook the repeated beatings Huck suffers at the hands of Sarah Phelps as simply “discipline,” supposedly unrelated to Pap’s obvious abuse of him.

Jim is also aware of the power of these white class differences, as is most famously seen in one of the text’s overtly pedagogical moments, where Jim chastises Huck for playing a trick on him when they had become separated on the river and lost in the fog: “En all you wuz thinkin ’bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is *trash*; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren’s en makes ‘em ashamed” (95). The upshot of this lesson is that Huck decides to apologize, but only after thinking about it for fifteen minutes, and he describes the apology as “humbl[ing] myself to a nigger” (105).

The question, then, for Huck as well as the student readers of the novel is one of identification, and this question—not only which characters we as readers find

ourselves identifying with in the novel but how indeed we identify ourselves and are identified socially—proves a more salient pedagogical question than whether we think the book is “racist” or not. As teachers, we might ask ourselves the related question of whether our pedagogical practices serve to reify or to unsettle hierarchical questions of race (or gender or class). One argument raised in relation to the satirical elements of *Huckleberry Finn* in the classroom is that students, particularly elementary and secondary school students but college students as well, are incapable of the ironic interpretation necessary to become the “sensitive reader” Inge refers to above. One response, of course, is to say that such training in responding to irony is the responsibility of the teacher, and that is certainly true as far as it goes. But the example of the very different reactions of white-identifying students to the racism of Mary Phelps and to that of Pap represents not so much an inability to recognize irony as an unwillingness to recognize irony, or to consider the implications of that irony: the question not just of why Huck doesn’t follow through on his apprehension of the fictitiousness of race, but of why he might not want to. To consider a reading of *Huckleberry Finn* that asks the reader to question his or her own investment in the construction of racial identity—and thus racial privilege—goes beyond the recognition of formal techniques of irony. It requires first of all the foregrounding of racial identity as a question, not in the clumsy sense of simply asking “What is a nigger?” but in the more fundamental sense of investigating how we come to have racial identities in the first place, and how those identities function as markers of class status.

The issue of Huck’s class mobility ties in directly as well with a similar issue in the lives of many student readers, particularly college students from “nontraditional” backgrounds, whether defined in terms of race, ethnicity, class, or gender, who view their own educations primarily in economic terms, as both a means to and promise of middle class (“quality”) life, a goal certainly ambivalent enough in itself but also increasingly problematic in practical terms, given the economic realities of the 1990s. Debates about affirmative action, for example, can be read as indicating among some white-identifying students distinctly Huck-like ambivalences about completely renouncing racial privilege in the name of equal opportunity or even class solidarity. Social class also provides us a more concrete way of understanding Huck’s comments about his inability to reform and conform to the expectations of Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas. Rather than referring to any internal moral capacity (or lack thereof), Huck’s “wickedness” can be seen as a code term for his class status, and Huck is torn, in classic American fashion, between an embedded but repressed understanding that such class divisions are an ineluctable consequence of birth in a hierarchical society and the ideology of unfettered class mobility that works as a solidifying force in the construction and maintenance of racial categories:

Well, I tried the best I could to kinder soften it up somehow for myself, by saying I was brung up wicked, and so I warn't so much to blame; but something inside of me kept saying, "There was the Sunday school, you coulda gone to it; and if you'd a done it they'd a learnt you, there, that people that acts as I'd been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire." (269)

Yet we have to wonder if Huck really can become "quality" anymore than Pap can, if his attempts to do so would amount to much more than the masquerade conducted by the equally low-born Duke and Dauphin, who in the end are unable to fool those "proper" members of the middle class, the doctor and the lawyer, during the Phelps deception.

Huck's repeated internal meditations, then, on the usefulness of trying to imitate the "quality" can be read, as they often have been, as examples of either Huck's pragmatism or his adherence to the pleasure principle, but we can also read them as class analyses prompted by his consideration of confederacy with Jim: "Well then, says I, what's the use you learning to do right, when it's troublesome to do right and ain't no trouble to do wrong, *and the wages is just the same?*" (128; emphasis mine). When he first arrives on Jackson's Island, Huck describes himself as becoming "boss," a position formerly claimed by Pap. His confrontation with the runaway slave Jim thus forces Huck to choose between two ambitions: striving to become a "boss" in the "white" world, or allying with Jim and risking classification as a "nigger."

Huck's "insights" about Jim's humanity (again, insights only to a white audience) thus provide as much racial anxiety as revelation. When Huck concludes, for example, on the basis of Jim's crying over his children that "I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their'n," we can certainly recognize the irony here (particularly given how badly most white people treat their children in this novel) (201). More than simple irony or the exposure of hypocrisy, however, Huck's comment can suggest a fundamental deconstruction of all categories of racial division. In Susan Gilman's words, "Instead of a 'true self' and clear standards of verification, what Twain discovered in his own fiction was the constructed and artificial character of essential social measures of identity—measures that, as the history of race relations demonstrates, we nevertheless totally depend upon" (95).

Clearly, the argument over whether *Huckleberry Finn* is racist or not will not be solved through ever more subtle close reading. Toni Morrison suggests a different way of reading the text, one that moves the question of racism from something a person or book might "have" to a cultural practice that forms the context of every interpretive experience of *Huckleberry Finn*:

It is not what Jim seems that warrants inquiry, but what Mark Twain, Huck, and especially Tom need from him that should solicit our attention. In that sense the book may indeed be "great" because in its structure, in the hell it puts its readers through

at the end, the frontal debate it forces, it stimulates and describes the parasitical nature of white freedom. (57)

The term “nigger” is the verbal expression of that parasitical freedom, as much today as in the 1880s (or 1840s), and therefore we can expand Morrison’s question about what Twain, Huck, and Tom need from Jim to include the reader in particular and the “white” critical tradition in general.

Rather than trying to determine exactly what the book “is” (racist or non-racist, historically determined or historically transcendent), we would be better served by asking what different groups of people have wanted the book to be and why others want the book in the classroom. If traditionally—at least in terms of pedagogical practice—*Huckleberry Finn* has been seen as a book about “freedom,” the controversy over how both the portrayal of Jim and the repetition of the term “nigger” are received by different readers suggests that “freedom” is also a racially coded term, and that in crucial ways the conditions of Huck’s freedom are antithetical to those of Jim’s, particularly insofar as Huck’s desire for freedom includes a desire to retain white privilege: “Huck’s almost Hamlet-like interior monologues on the rights and wrongs of helping Jim escape are not proof of liberalism or compassion, but evidence of an inability to relinquish whiteness as a badge of superiority” (Lester 201).

That Huck’s monologues *have* often been interpreted as proofs of compassion or well-meaning also suggests that the white freedom desired by many of Huck’s white-identifying readers has been freedom from responsibility for or participation in the construction and maintenance of race and racial oppression in the United States: “one of the ways in which whites avoided confrontation with the humanity of black folk was to see themselves as kind to Afro-Americans, focusing on their own feeling of being good, decent people rather than on the feelings of the enslaved blacks” (Jones 179). Furthering this belief in white “kindness” in terms of the reception history of *Huckleberry Finn* has involved readings of the book that condemn slavery and racism while at the same time carefully maintaining the color line. It’s interesting to note that the phrase “nigger Jim,” an identifier that became commonplace in criticism of *Huckleberry Finn* (as in the famous Hemingway quote from *Green Hills of Africa*: “If you read it you must stop where the Nigger Jim is stolen from the boys” [22]), is itself an invention of the critical tradition; it appears nowhere in *Huckleberry Finn* (the closest is Huck’s reference to “Miss Watson’s nigger, Jim” [20]), indicating that for many white readers, as for Huck, it was important that Jim maintain a “nigger” status, thus establishing with certainty the “whiteness” of the reader, before “compassion” could safely be felt for Jim:

Although Huck may be “trash,” as Jim often calls him, Huck’s privilege is certainly there, thanks to the social structure. Huck himself fully understands the great degree of social distance that separates him from Jim and, accordingly, finds it quite easy to accept their distant intimacy. (Mason 37)

The fact, then, that *Huckleberry Finn* has been turned into a signifier of white liberal compassion has made any questioning of how race is handled in the text especially troubling for many white-identifying readers and teachers. Yet, as Toni Morrison suggests, the power of the text for a modern audience lies in the very impurity of its representation of racial oppression. The argument over the use of the term “nigger” in the novel may be the whole point: the emergence of criticism of that term over the last two generations should force readers of the book to think consciously about their own relationships to that term. This discussion is much advanced in the African-American community; for too long, however, white-identifying readers have failed to question their own investment in the term, a line of inquiry which leads to questions about the social uses and misuses of the construction of racial identities in general.

Pedagogical and critical strategies, therefore, that address race in *Huckleberry Finn* in particular and in American literature in general without addressing the construction of race serve to reify racial identity and thus reinforce the black/white split that functions as the crucial binary logic in the discourse of American racism, whatever specific condemnations of racism may be made along the way. This reinscription of the color line poses a particular dilemma for readers identifying themselves or finding themselves socially identified as neither white nor black, readers often referred to by the suggestive term “people of color.” Gilman’s discussion of Twain’s anxious fascination with how the figure of the mulatto potentially deconstructs the functional and binary logic of racism has important implications here, particularly when we remember that *Huckleberry Finn* appeared during the imposition of not only Jim Crow but also the Chinese Exclusion Act. A pedagogical reading strategy that implicitly insists that a Chicano or Chinese-American student, for example, choose sides in terms of black or white in responding to *Huckleberry Finn* reinforces without problematizing the perverse logic of American racial assimilation, whereby members of ethnic minorities can be shunted back and forth across the color line (think of Proposition 187 or the myth of the “model minority”) in order to accommodate various dominant group political desires.

Newcomers to the United States quickly discover that whatever the ethnic and class complexity of U.S. society, the bipolar racial logic of dark and light functions as a key component of identity formation, both between identified groups and within them. My classes in California, for example, contained many students who had lived in the United States for just a few years. Introducing *Huckleberry Finn* to these students turns the traditional humanist defenses of the text on their head: because any discussion of racism in the text, no matter how “critical,” must necessarily revolve around the freighted term at the heart of the controversy over the novel, the very assignment of *Huckleberry Finn* works as recognition and at some level institutional authorization of the language of American racism itself. Thus a pedagogical act meant to condemn racism can only do so by invoking the entire

discursive system of racism, a system that also carries the injunction to line up on one side or the other of the color line. This injunction carries this debate over *Huckleberry Finn* beyond a confrontation between “black” and “white” students considered as reified racial identities into an analysis of the bipolar color line as the crucial fault line running through the complex discursive network of racial construction in the U.S. Such a recognition of the embeddedness of the novel in the cultural logic of race and racism does not mean that *Huckleberry Finn* cannot or should not ever be taught in any U.S. class at any time, but that any teaching of it inevitably extends beyond the mythical level of the “text itself” to the level of discourse and ideology.

How then best to use *Huckleberry Finn* as a teaching opportunity to open a discussion about racial identity and racial oppression that doesn’t merely reinforce racial identity? A number of recent articles have offered detailed lesson plans and strategies for approaching *Huckleberry Finn* in the classroom (Lew; Carey-Webb; Hengstebek). All stress the need to place the novel into a social context by providing students with readings in both history and sociology, and all would clearly make for interesting, socially responsible learning experiences (the recent critical edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Gerald Graff and James Phelan that includes essays and documents related to the controversy over race is pedagogically promising in this regard). Yet the enormous amount of what we might, from a New Critical perspective, call source and background material needed to introduce the text successfully into the classroom begs the question of just why it is so important to get *this* text into the classroom. Instead, by implication these articles demonstrate the ideological and pedagogical problems raised by a “masterpieces” approach to literature instruction—that is, designating certain texts as classics and therefore required reading, and then dealing with the question of how to make the texts work in the class. But the controversy over the representation of race in *Huckleberry Finn* goes to the heart of the reception history which created its classic status, at least in pedagogical terms, on the basis of the book’s positive “moral” influence.

This reception history, then, provides the vital context we need to bring into the classroom, but again not as separate from or supplementary to the analysis of how the novel implicates its readers in terms of the construction of racial identity, or perhaps only supplementary in the Derridean sense of the term, in that, as we have seen, the establishment of *Huckleberry Finn* as a cultural/pedagogical icon has itself been a part of the process of maintaining the color line in the twentieth century.

These pedagogical questions have relevance beyond the particular example of *Huckleberry Finn* to the case of any overdetermined canonical text, especially those with their own notorious histories, histories that point to a similar implication in the construction and reification of oppressive structures of differentiation. Feminist criticism has challenged the patriarchal structuring of the dominant canon as a



whole in this regard, but the critical/pedagogical point applies as well to supposedly isolated individual cases, such as the anti-Semitism informing *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Sun Also Rises*, or *The Waste Land*. Teachers introducing these texts into their classes face the same basic question of pedagogical orientation raised by the example of *Huckleberry Finn*: do I regard these texts as isolated and discrete textual entities somehow infected by a strain of bigotry that can be eradicated through liberal faith and ever more ingenious (and ahistorical) close reading? Or do I consider my teaching of these texts (whether as personal choice or as part of a set curriculum) as a cultural activity implicated in and a further extension of the construction and maintenance of a larger hegemonic discourse of power and identity, processes that include not only the discrete production of a text containing the particular views of a specific author but also the canonization and institutionalization of that text along with a set of interpretive practices to insure the maintenance of that canonical status? As we have seen in the case of *Huckleberry Finn*, these practices work both to reinscribe the canonical literary status of the text in question and to confirm the dominant social status of the subject-positions inhabited by those who regulate that interpretive practice, even when the results of such practice claim to offer a critique of the oppressive ideologies represented in the text in question.

This second alternative suggests that in the classroom we approach the controversial status of Twain's text by asking ourselves two questions: how do we define racial identity, and why is this text considered required reading? One of the points of this essay is to argue that these in fact become one question, and that any institutionally sanctioned discussion of the text, whether on a television show, at an academic conference, or in the classroom, is an intrinsic part of that process.

In the end, the controversy over *Huckleberry Finn* or any other "problematic" text is not finally an interpretive argument, but a debate over what the ends of education should be. It is ironic to say the least that after praising *Huckleberry Finn* as masterpiece on the basis of its treatment of race, many advocates of the book want to dismiss out of hand any attempt to pursue further the questions about racial identity raised by the reading of the book in a diverse classroom. The efforts to defend the book as providing a pedagogical opportunity to talk about race and racism in the final analysis seem more interested in monitoring and limiting that discussion to a distinctly middle-class point of view, a view that both secures the racial identity of the reader and affirms that reader's innate innocence and goodness rather than exploring how the constitution of that racial identity implicates any reader in the dynamics of race and class privilege. As Terry Eagleton argues, however,

What it means to be a 'better person,' then, must be concrete and practical—that is to say, concerned with people's political situations as a whole—rather than narrowly abstract, concerned only with the immediate interpersonal relations which can be extracted from the concrete whole. (208)

Yet pedagogical practice makes such “concrete and practical” considerations unavoidable; like it or not, it is impossible to read *Huckleberry Finn* in a contemporary American classroom without talking about the term “nigger”; to explain the term away in the name of preserving the text as an indictment of racism is not a defense of the text but an avoidance of it.

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# The Spatial Politics of Urban Modernity: Henry James's *Washington Square*

KATJA SARKOWSKY

## ABSTRACT

*The American Scene* and other later texts have been at the center of attention in the critical discussion of Henry James's explorations of urban modernity. Against the background of these readings and the theoretical assumptions of the so-called spatial turn and urban studies, this contribution looks at *Washington Square* (1881) as an early example for James's ambivalent investigations of American urbanity and modernity. Understanding space not as a background for the plot but as constitutive for the agenda of the novel, I will focus on presentations of New York's gendered and racialized spatiality in *Washington Square*. While less complex and developed than the later texts usually discussed in this context, *Washington Square* presents New York as an increasingly diverse and dynamic environment, intertwined with both the nation and transnational processes, and thus a place of conflict over early urban modernity from the 1820s to the time of its publication in 1881.

Urbanization had reshaped American society on a large scale particularly since the end of the Civil War. But as early as the antebellum period, the urban environment was present in American writing at a greater degree than is usually acknowledged (Steele 179); Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861) and other texts reflect on the effects of industrialization and urbanization, and writers and journalists like Lydia Maria Child and George Lippard explored the various spaces of antebellum New York (Steele 188). These earlier developments notwithstanding, the key period for research on modern urbanity and urban literature in the United States (as in Europe) is that of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as social, cultural, and economic developments became increasingly dynamic and diversified. In this context, urban research has regarded New York's development—from the late nineteenth century onwards in particular—as paradigmatic for the emergence of world cities in the twentieth century (Berking 34-35).

Not surprisingly, New York's growth and diversification feature strongly in American writing. Journalists such as Lincoln Steffens and social reformers like Jacob Riis, as well as realist and naturalist authors such as William Dean Howells and Stephen Crane, have created intense depictions not only of individual moral dilemmas, but also of social injustices and conflicts that emerged as a result of these rapid economic transformations. In this regard, according to Bremer, the period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was one of social transition that is reflected also in *how* the city was taken up in literature. Howells, for instance, "stops presenting cities as cultural expressions of human capacities, as

‘homes’ to be known and shaped from within, and confronts The City as an external force shaping human character, to be studied at arm’s length by ‘homeless’ newcomers” (Bremer 300).

When Henry James disembarked at New York’s harbor in 1904, he was not a newcomer to the metropolis but a scrutinizing returnee shocked by the onslaught of impressions and drastic changes since his last lived in the city of his birth and youth. As related three years later in his travelogue, *The American Scene* (1907):

The aspect the power wears then is indescribable; it is the power of the most extravagant of cities, rejoicing, as with the voice of the morning, in its might, its fortune, its unsurpassable conditions, and imparting to every object and element, to the motion and expression of every floating, hurrying, panting thing, to the throb of ferries and tugs, to the splash of waves and the play of winds and the glint of lights and the shrill of whistles and the quality and authority of breeze-born cries—all, practically, a diffused, wasted clamour of *detonations*—something of its sharp free accent and, above all, of its sovereign sense of being ‘backed’ and able to back. (54)

Having resided in Europe since 1875, James narrates this encounter upon his return with fascination and bewilderment, with a sense of being overwhelmed by New York’s energy as well as appalled by some of the drastic developments he observes. The city certainly had changed since his last visit to the United States in 1882/83: domestic and foreign migration, the rapid growth of the economy, the expansion of the transportation infrastructure and of urban settlement, and the effects of Consolidation in 1898 (merging not only five counties, but with New York and Brooklyn also combining the largest and third-largest cities in the U.S. at the time) to name but a few of these changes, had turned New York City into a metropolis. As such, it represented an exemplary manifestation of urban modernity not only as a culmination of processes of rapid urbanization and ethnic diversification, but also by bringing forth a shift in attitude and ‘mental life,’ as Georg Simmel puts it, because in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries modernity also meant “the urbanization of the mind” (Schlör, qtd. in Crang and Thrift 13).

Despite his fascination with the city’s energy, James views these changes rather critically; writing about the Lower East Side, he reproduces much of the anti-Semitic and anti-immigrant jargon when he sees Jewish immigrants ‘flooding’ the city:

The children swarmed above all—here was multiplication with a vengeance; and the number of very old persons, of either sex, was almost equally remarkable; the very old persons being in equal vague occupation of the doorstep, pavement, curbstone, gutter, roadway, and everyone alike using the street for overflow. As overflow, in the whole quarter, is the main fact of life. (*American Scene* 94)

By using words and phrases such as ‘swarmed,’ ‘multiplication with a vengeance,’ and ‘overflow,’ James draws on what Sidney Bremer has called a “standard code for cities’ immigrant and poor populations” (297). His view upon immigrant cultures—Eastern and Southern Europeans having largely replaced the earlier Germans and Irish—expresses his skepticism towards a kind of cultural diversity that had become inextricably linked to urban modernity and that was reflected along similar lines in Crane or Riis.

At the same time, as Ross Posnock has argued, James was not a ‘typical’ high modernist dismissive of the developments of his time but confronted them self-consciously and with careful discrimination (*Trial* 13). David McWhirter writes that James

was always awkwardly embedded in, responsive and exposed to, a modernity marked by historical currents—the rise of consumerism and mass culture; the introduction of new technologies of transportation and communication; a transformed geopolitical sphere; new constellations of publicity and a changing literary marketplace—that anticipate much in our own historical situation. (181)

For critics, then, *The American Scene* serves as a key text in the analysis of James’s ambivalent explorations of urban modernity and the challenges of its increasing diversity; in his description of his tour of New York’s Lower East Side, James “bears direct witness to the transition from a Victorian culture of hierarchy and homogeneity to a more unsettling urban modernity” (Posnock, *Trial* 12). The America James encounters in 1904 is overpowering in its architectural appearance and its energy, but at the same time it is fascinating in ways that would echo in his fictional texts on New York (Tintner 10). Posnock calls *The American Scene* James’s “most direct confrontation with the fractured totality of modern civilization; his foregrounding of the difficulty in fashioning a ‘decent form’ for his impressions becomes one way of representing the bewildering impact of modern America” (*Trial* 91-92). But James’s is also a highly ambivalent reflection on the effect of urban modernity upon the individual.

The intensity of sensual impressions—the ‘shock’ that James presents—is thus a nod toward the experience of the metropolis as captured by modern theorists of urbanity such as Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel. As the latter states in his 1903 essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life”:

The psychological foundation, upon which the metropolitan individuality is erected, is the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli. [...] To the extent that the metropolis creates these psychological conditions—with every crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life—it creates the sensory foundations of mental life. (325)

Both James’s travelogue and some of his fictional texts explore rapid urban development and its effect upon the individual and his or her structure of perception. In the short story “A Jolly Corner” (1908), for instance, having spent thirty years away from his home in New York, protagonist Spencer Brydon sees the settlement patterns of the city as “dreadful multiplied numberings which seemed to him to reduce the whole place to some vast ledger-page, overgrown, fantastic, of ruled and criss-crossed lines and figures” (439), indicating the impact of New York’s drastic changes upon a returned expatriate (like James himself). In James’s earlier short story, “The Impressions of a Cousin” (1883), Catherine Condit, a painter and also a returnee from Europe, relates similar impressions about New York when she writes in her journal:

What people? The people in the Fifth Avenue? They are even less pictorial than their houses. I don’t perceive that those in the Sixth are any better, or those in the Fourth and Third, or in the Seventh and Eighth. Good heavens! What a nomenclature! The city of



New York is like a tall sum in addition, and the streets are like columns of figures. What a place for me to live, who hate arithmetic! (387)

Both passages highlight not only the protagonists' perception of change, but also the kind of modern, all-encompassing rationality that structures these changes. This manifestation of urban modernity is clearly regarded as negative: Brydon and Condit perceive these developments not as a form of rational order, but instead simultaneously as chaos and mechanical reduction.

As the example of "The Impressions of a Cousin" indicates, despite James's preference for 'international' settings, the city of New York nevertheless provided a recurring theme before his return to New York in 1904/05. But in these earlier stories, such as "A Most Extraordinary Case" (1868) or "An International Episode" (1878/79), James's characters leave New York as quickly as they can, the city being "too lonely or unhealthy, or just too hot" (Tóibín xii). Even before James's bewildered re-encounter with his natal city in the early twentieth century, its dynamics and intense demand on the individual—so characteristic for America's urban modernity—are reflected in the ways in which the city features in his writing.

*Washington Square* presents both an exception to this pattern of flight from the city and an early example for James's engagement with urban modernity. Serialized in 1880 and published in 1881 (and thus sandwiched between "An International Episode" and "The Impressions of a Cousin"), this novella focuses on the New York of the 1840s and 1850s and, on the surface, depicts a very different image of the city than that of either *The American Scene* or "A Jolly Corner." But not only does the portrayal of New York in *Washington Square* contrast with that in other texts set in the city, it also presents an exception to James's other depictions of the period before the Civil War. James's later texts "look back on the antebellum society of New York with disdain" (Taylor 9); *Washington Square*, however, observes this society with a direct nod towards the author-narrator's childhood memories:

It was here, as you might have been informed on good authority, that you have come into a world which appeared to offer a variety of sources of interest; it was here that your grandmother lived, in venerable solitude, and dispensed a hospitality which commended itself alike to the infant imagination and to the infant palate; it was here that you took your first walks abroad, following the nursery-maid with unequal step, and sniffing up the strange odour of the ailanthus-trees which at that time formed the principal umbrage of the Square [...]; it was here, at any rate, that my heroine spent many years of her life. (16)

While this early authorial intervention remains singular in both its intimacy and extent, the tone characterizes the way in which the narrator reflects upon New York throughout the text. *Washington Square* "offers a glimpse of the 'old' New York that [James] found missing in the chaos of the turn-of-the-century city" (Wilson 123). Thus, while most of James's writings on New York, and *The American Scene* in particular, provide an often biting cultural critique that is crucial for James's reflection of urban modernity (see for instance Graham; Pippin; Posnock *Trial*; Rowe "United States") and cultural pluralism (Posnock "Alien"; Rowe *Other*), this "topographical parenthesis" (*Washington* 16) suggests a reading of *Washington Square* as a part self-consciously nostalgic, part ironic reminiscence

of New York in the 1840s/1850s, i. e., the New York of James' youth. Here, the narrator—unlike James's 'restless analyst,' as he calls the observer-narrator of *The American Scene*— seems less analytically critical than nostalgically descriptive, and this passage is reminiscent of what James would later write about his childhood in *A Small Boy and Others* as “the world of quieter harmonies, the world of Washington Square and thereabouts” (83).

At a first glance, *Washington Square* does not appear to substantially reflect upon the rapidly modernizing urban environment of its setting; Colm Tóibín has argued that James's lack of familiarity with New York at the time of writing *Washington Square*, his not knowing “enough about the city and the society in which he had set the novel,” led to a focus on psychological portraits and interiority (xvii). While domestic spaces indeed seem to dominate *Washington Square*, critics have occasionally remarked on the novel's documentation of uptown expansion (see, e. g., Williams; Savoy); the *Historical Atlas of New York City* frequently uses *Washington Square* to illustrate the rapid growth of the city and the speed with which the upper middle class moved north (e. g., Homberger 90, 100). Nevertheless, most critics see New York only dimly presented; for Eric Savoy, “despite the novel's awareness of the patterns of uptown migration among the upper middle class,” the city that had undergone drastic changes during the antebellum period with regard to its demographic and economic structure, and its patterns of settlement are “barely registered in *Washington Square*” (359).

I will argue, however, that the tracing of Manhattan's northward expansion is an important and previously underestimated means by which the novel addresses the changes in mid-nineteenth century New York, but it is certainly not the only means. Rather, character developments and the plotline are both inextricably embedded in the way in which the novel constructs a variety of spaces shaped by the conflicts of modernity. As one effect of the spatial turn and its conceptualization of space as dynamic (see Löw), the understanding of how spaces (domestic spaces, urban spaces, landscapes, etc.) function in literature has shifted from regarding them as mere backdrops or settings for the plot to an analysis of them as structural elements. While recent literary theories of space have tended to privilege the spatial discontinuity of modernist and postmodern texts, the importance of space as a structuring element is equally important for other periods, particularly for realism; a focus on the urban spatiality of realist texts allows a necessary “return to materiality” in literary analysis after a period of postmodern focus on linguistic construction (Bachmann-Medick 284). As Savoy notes:

In the great age of realism—roughly 1840 to 1880—the city is neither an object of mere description nor a backdrop for the drama of good and evil. Rather, it permeates every aspect of character [...]. The city's designs for living—interior and exterior, public and private—determined in advance the kinds of character interaction that novelists could dramatize. (354)

The realist novel thus “became less a representation of urban architecture than a *kind* of architecture, one that shaped reading practices in ways similar to our traversing of urban spaces themselves” (Savoy 354). *Washington Square* clearly falls into this category; the social and spatial dynamics addressed in the novel

render New York not merely a background to the plot, but place it in complex frameworks of national economy, demographic developments, unprecedented urban growth, and transnational or, more specifically, transatlantic relations that significantly complicated the understanding of ‘American.’

Against this background I will argue that, despite the seeming scarcity of references to New York as an urban environment, the novel is an early example of James’s explorations of urban modernity, a theme that he elaborated in more detail and complexity in this later work. Unlike his expression of bewilderment in *The American Scene* that finds its equivalent in James’s modernist writing style, these explorations in *Washington Square* match James’s realist approach at the time.

### “A tale too American”: *Washington Square*

James left out *Washington Square* when he selected the works to be included in the *New York Edition* of his oeuvre; he dismissed the novel as a “poorish thing” and a “tale too American” (qtd. in Howland 88). Certainly, *Washington Square* stands out in the early 1880s since—in contrast to the other novels of this period such as *The American* (1877) or *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881)—it does not favor the “international theme” (Walton 30) but is set almost exclusively in the United States. Nevertheless, when looking at the genealogy of the text, this statement is not without irony since the anecdote on which the novel rests and which it fictionalizes is not American but British (Edel 11-12), and the fictional text, which is relocated in part to an American setting, is actually French: Balzac’s *Eugénie Grandet* (Bell 16; Savoy 358). James’s condemnation of *Washington Square* as being “too American,” then, may have more to do with its investigation of a context—New York’s urbanity as metonymy for American modernity—that is exceptional with regard to both the setting and to its literary treatment among the works of that time that largely explore ‘Americanness’ through expatriate characters.

Despite James’s own dismissal, the novel has been read as an early exemplification of later themes and constellations. James Gargano regards *Washington Square*’s Catherine Sloper as “an early portrait—without the later nuances and depth-psychology—of the Jamesian protagonist transformed, to her own surprise, to a discovery of selfhood and an inner life” (355); and Bette Howland sees this text as “essential James,” disowned by its creator like its heroine by her tyrannical father, but nonetheless as a blueprint for constellations to be found in later novels (88), if in much more subtle form and with more ambiguity than this straightforward text. Both Gargano and Howland therefore read *Washington Square*’s constellations as an early ‘kernel’ to later elaborations, constructing a continuity that moves from the simple to the complex while retaining its ‘essence.’ Along this line, I will argue that—despite the contrasting sentiment with which New York is presented—James’s later reflections of urban modernity are already present in *Washington Square*, obviously to a less elaborate degree than in the later texts, but like his later texts, they are characterized by ambivalence, nostalgia, and uneasiness. At the center of *Washington Square* lies a conflict: at the surface, it is a dispute be-

tween father and daughter over an intended marriage. However, as Robert Pippin has argued, these interpersonal relationships are bound up with shifting values and shaped by a “link between the understanding and uncertainty themes and the problems of reciprocity or moral acknowledgement” (17). The novel’s interpersonal conflict, understood as an intergenerational crisis, is thus embedded in conflicts over shifting values in the context of a specifically urban American modernity the diversity and dynamics of which challenge established value systems.

Given the span of time covered by the novel, the processes of these modern developments are not restricted to the mid-nineteenth century: the earliest explicit social and spatial reference is to the 1820s, the plot takes place between the 1840s and the 1860s, and the narrative perspective, frequently and explicitly *looking back* onto the earlier era, is located in the 1870s. Thus, *Washington Square* covers half a century during which New York developed from a city of just over 200,000 inhabitants, 90 % of whom were native born (Lankevich 70), into a metropolis at the threshold of even more drastic demographic and economic shifts that would begin in the 1880s. And while the novel does not explicitly focus on the conflicts that went hand in hand with these developments, it hints at struggles over both urban spaces and their social and symbolic meaning.

“Cities have always been arenas of social and symbolic conflict” (Berking et al. 9), and the period between 1840 and the end of the Civil War was one of intensified and often violent changes in New York: the effects of the first phase of industrialization, the immigration of large groups of Germans and Irish (many of the Germans and most of the Irish were Catholic) with the inevitable conflicts over culture and religion, and the northern expansion of the city presented challenges in accommodating not only a vast array of cultural and social differences, but also to the dominant notions of Americanness. “Rapid economic growth, significant population shifts, and intense political struggle created a series of conflicts over religion, education, labor, and home rule” (Reitano 55), and while these conflicts were clearly social, they were also symbolic for struggles over representation and American identity in face of the increasing diversification characteristic of urban modernity.

While these changes are not addressed directly in the novel, the spatial shifts that accompanied this development find manifestation in *Washington Square*. In much more detail than usually receives attention, this early and disavowed ‘New York novel’ takes into account the accelerated move of urban settlement towards the north of Manhattan and the city’s fast-changing social structures that were associated with this move; it thus also gestures toward the processes of industrialization and capitalist developments that motivated it.

These developments manifest a larger set of changes, which should be seen in the context of what is “usually summarized as the problem of Western modernization” (Pippin 5); but as Pippin’s argument above indicates, ‘modernity,’ including urban modernity, is not simply a matter of technological and economic development or urban growth, but a shift toward radical uncertainty of social, including familial, relationships and their moral frameworks:

While these individuals always represent and evince aspects of their social position, the interrelation and meaning of such social positions, functions, roles, the depth of meaning in convention and tradition, and so on, do not any longer provide these characters, in this

increasingly anomic and disunified social world, with much of a basis for interpretation and assessment. Types and kinds and classes and social position and “blood” and family and races and institutions and social forms and even appeals to “human nature” will no longer function in making possible such mutual understanding, and neither will too hasty a reduction of possible motives to some set of the low, the base, the selfish, or “the natural.” (Pippin 5)

These challenges to social structures and value systems presented by modernity are intensified in urban settings; not only does the diversity characteristic of urbanity require modes of accommodating this diversity, it also suggests a potential multiplicity of specific modernities (cf. Eisenstad in a different context), a simultaneity of different trajectories within American society that goes beyond the scope of this study. Thus, what is at stake, even in an early text such as *Washington Square*, is the loss of reliability of social structures and values that characterizes modernity more generally and that comes to the fore most strongly in an urban setting.

Despite these general notions, however, there is a historical specificity to the way in which American urban modernity developed. Modernity’s “disembedding” (Giddens, *Consequences*) of time, space, and societal norms and the emergence of an urban modernity in the nineteenth century must, in the American context, be understood against the background of earlier Republican ideals of “simplicity” (James, *Washington* 14) that were initially coded as agricultural and seen as juxtaposed to urbanity, as well as the fundamental shifts brought about by the Jacksonian era; in New York specifically, this meant important advances in democratization (Lankevich 66). Thus, the urbanization of the nineteenth century is not only connected to economic modernization but is crucial to the questions of nation building, national identity, and democracy. In the face of diversification and challenges to established value systems, the spatial changes and shifts in values that find their embodiment in New York’s urban spatiality in the mid-nineteenth century are by no means confined to the city; rather, the city is an integral part of a broader and more complex modern constellation. “In James’s mythic landscape,” writes Pippin, “the name for such a collapse of the reliability of traditional form, such uncertainty and new vacancy as well as radical possibility, is simply ‘America’” (5). ‘America’ is modernity; America finds its metonymy to a large extent in the city of New York; New York, thus, embodies modernity with all its ambivalent implications.

*Washington Square* negotiates this national and urban modernity by how space is narrated, that is, by way of the novel’s spatial politics. Huan Hsu has highlighted the close connection that James usually creates between the characters and the spatial constellations in which he places them: “James effectively fuses geographical and aesthetic concerns by showing how emergent geographical scales (like Victorian apartments, metropolitan centers, and global circuits of capitalist exchange) affect the subjective psyches of individual characters and readers” (233). Hsu hereby also points to the interwoven circuit of the urban, the national, and the international embodied by the metropolis, an aspect crucial to *Washington Square*’s spatial politics. In the novel, the role of specific places and neighborhoods within the city is central; Second Avenue where Morris Townsend’s sister lives

is such an example. These locations and their social connotations are not static, but depicted as rapidly changing with New York's economic growth and the concurrent spatial rearrangements, a fact highlighted mainly by the self-referential narrative perspective and the historical perspective on the development it offers. Thus, these locations and the ways in which they change illustrate the dynamics of space—vis-à-vis an understanding of space as a static container—emphasized so strongly in the context of the spatial turn (see Löw; Soja; Bachmann-Medick).

But what is more, these (public) spaces are complemented by investigations of the private spaces of domesticity; far from presenting the counterpoint to urban modernity, they provide the stage for conflict between the sexes and between generations and are thus an integral part of urban modernity understood as being shaped by a variety of conflicts. “In the 1840s New York of *Washington Square*, the family is already a battleground over manners” (Wilson 123), reflecting the struggles not only over what constitutes manners but how to legitimize specific interpretations of social hierarchies. Modernity is not a state but a constant process of negotiation and conflict. Accordingly, ‘Europe’ as a transatlantic location and other places in the United States mentioned in the text present reference points that additionally mark New York's antebellum urban spaces and locate them in a complex national and transnational web of people and economic and cultural relations. These connections contextualize not only the processes of drastic urban change, but also the seemingly static domestic spaces of conflict.

### **The Dynamics of Urban Expansion: ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Values**

‘New York’ in the text is anything but abstract, even if references to the city vary in kind and detail; regarding the general importance of “specifics of James’s omnipresent urban settings,” McWhirter notes:

James’s characters, after all, have addresses; take their leisure in one park rather than another; negotiate the city by tube and bus as well as in carriages. In James, such details are always informed by those ideas from which he was supposedly so blissfully free. (179)

According to McWhirter and Rowe, among others, and in contrast to earlier interpretations of James as the pure aesthete, these spatial details should be read as documenting a keen sense for socio-historical processes and their material implications.

In line with McWhirter’s observation, *Washington Square*’s plot and characters are placed precisely, both in geographical and social terms, with close attention to the historical development of these locations and the social status they indicate. Mrs. Almond, Dr. Sloper’s sister, lives “much further up town, in an embryonic street, with a high number—a region where the extension of the city began to assume a theoretic air” (*Washington* 16), hinting at the beginning land-speculation and the trend among the well-off towards the north; Morris Townsend’s sister, Mrs. Montgomery, lives “in a neat little house of red brick” in an unspecified location on Second Avenue (65)—presumably in one of the neighborhoods that in mid-century gave way to larger Greek Revival Style structures and not in the

more extensive part of Second Avenue which in the second half of the century was to become the location for growing tenement house complexes; in its historical time frame, this location signals her (comparatively) modest means, for “Mrs. Montgomery, in her little red house in the Second Avenue, was a person for whom Doctor Sloper was one of the great men—one of the fine gentlemen of New York” (66). Both locations in the narrator’s time no longer exist, but have given way to the rapid developments of the city: the picturesqueness of Mrs. Almond’s neighborhood at the time in which the novel is set has now (in the 1870s) “wholly departed from New York street scenery” (17); and Mrs. Montgomery’s “little house” has “now disappeared, with its companions, to make room for a row of structures more majestic” (65). This detailed positioning of the characters and its function for their social placement thus is more than a realist strategy; it simultaneously—by way of the narrator’s intervention from a different point in time—documents the development of the city nostalgically and thus uses this exact positioning as a social commentary: for what is gone are not only the houses and the street scenery but with them ‘Old New York.’

This ‘Old New York,’ with its spatial constellations, represents a different value system, and this shift in values is sketched by way of the spatial reorganization of the city, or rather, by how the characters handle these changes. The values of ‘Old New York’ are ‘republican’ values: “In those days, in New York, there were still a few altar-fires flickering in the temple of Republican simplicity” (*Washington* 14); given the shifts towards more democratic participation of the ‘commoner’ (provided that this commoner was white and male) that had taken place during the 1820s, this comment implies both irony and nostalgia. Conveying Dr. Sloper’s attitude toward the inappropriateness of displaying or even flaunting wealth, he is introduced as being of a generation that during the 1840s found itself between the ideals of the early Republic, Jacksonian democracy, and the shift toward commerce and money as the markers of ‘virtue’ during the 1840s and 1850s.

This understanding of virtue was closely linked to two dominant types of gender. As Martha Banta has suggested, “growing up in the 1840s and 1850s, James learned early that being demonstrably ‘masculine’ in America was mainly associated with making money”: “men who are in business, [and] women who tend to whatever forms the nation’s ‘society’ takes” (23); the possibilities for women were largely restricted to “that limited area of social and cultural affairs” (23). More so than novels such as *The Portrait of a Lady* or *The Bostonians*, *Washington Square* reflects these restrictions and—given the personality of the heroine—by and large abstains from testing them beyond Catherine’s persistence.

However, while these gendered associations apply to a number of the spaces staged in *Washington Square* (domestic vs. public, Europe vs. the United States, culture vs. business), they are never without ambivalence; like the manifestations of modernity, both gender relations and the genderedness of spaces are contentious. The association of ‘masculinity’ with money-making is clear, for instance, when Morris’s idleness and his personal history of spending more money than he has makes him not only an unsuitable husband in Dr. Sloper’s eyes, but also an immoral person. At the same time, the emphasis on money making per se and the

display of wealth associated with it appear as developments of a specific historical moment and are not taken for granted. Rather, as the novel's depiction of the northward movement of the middle-class and the social status associated with it indicate, these spatial developments are connected to societal negotiations and conflicts over changing values of an urban capitalist modernity.

The intergenerational conflict inherent in these developments is best illustrated in the juxtaposition of a 'newer' and an 'older' movement of residence, the newer being associated with the prerogative of money-making and the older one with 'republican propriety.' As Arthur Townsend, the fiancé of Catherine's cousin Marian, tells Catherine: "At the end of three or four years we'll move. That's the way to live in New York—to move every three or four years. Then you always get the last thing. It's because the city's growing so quick—you've got to keep up with it. It's going straight up town—that's where New York's going" (*Washington* 25). His prospect of moving north is an indication for a taken-for-granted growing monetary prowess and for the speed that New York's dynamics had developed by the 1840s; 'moving north' is an abstract direction, not directed at a specific location.

If compared to Austin Sloper's own move north years earlier, the generational shift as well as spatially manifested changing values become clear: Sloper's move begins with the social and geographical emplacement of his late wife; in addition to her charms and "solid dowry," she is characterized in social (and in the context of the novel this mean spatial) terms: "[I]n 1820 she had been one of the pretty girls of the small but promising capital which clustered about the Battery and overlooked the Bay, and of which the uppermost boundary was indicated by the grassy waysides of Canal Street" (*Washington* 6). Dr. Sloper's own career goes hand in hand with a northward movement that is both social and geographical:

Some three or four years before this, Doctor Sloper had moved his household gods up town, as they say in New York. He had been living ever since his marriage in an edifice of red brick, with granite copings and an enormous fan-light over the door, standing in a street within five minutes' walk of the City Hall, which saw its best days (from the social point of view) about 1820. After this, the tide of fashion began to set steadily northward, as, indeed, in New York, thanks to the narrow channel in which it flows, is obliged to do, and the great hum of traffic rolled farther to the left and right of Broadway. By the time the Doctor changed his residence, the murmur of trade had become a mighty uproar, which was music in the ears of all good citizens interested in the commercial development, as they delighted to call it, of their fortunate isle. (15)

With his earlier neighbors' residences having been "converted into offices, warehouses, and shipping agencies," the beginning of the plot finds father, daughter, and Sloper's widowed sister living in Washington Square, presenting the "ideal of quiet and genteel retirement" (15). Since increasing financial means, social position, and residence tend to go hand in hand, the movement north per se is not remarkable. However, in light of Savoy's earlier cited insistence on space as a structuring element rather than a mere backdrop, what is of interest is the fact that this movement is so precisely and repeatedly sketched and reflected upon. This reflection places the novel's setting not merely in a specific location at a particular time, but instead in a dynamic of chronology and spatial arrangements that seems to counter the 'inactivity' of the novel's plot itself.



But Sloper's own move is also important because it contrasts with the move projected by the young Townsend. The latter not only takes 'speed' for granted; his assumption of moving "every three or four years" is representative of a new generation and for values that seem to parody the frontier spirit:

If I wasn't afraid Marian would be lonely, I'd go up there—right to the top—and wait for it. Only have to wait ten years—they'll all come up after you but Marian says she wants some neighbours—she doesn't want to be a pioneer. She says that if she's got to be the first settler she had better go out to Minnesota. I guess we'll move up little by little; when we get tired of one street we'll go higher. So you see, we'll always have a new house; it's a great advantage to have a new house; you get all the latest improvements. They invent everything all over again about every five years. (*Washington* 25)

By rhetorically linking the economic and residential expansion toward the north of Manhattan to the westward (and southward) expansion of the United States at the time, urban modernity appears here as an 'urban frontier' (used here slightly different than by Lehan, 182-193). This 'urban frontier'—tamed by feminine reluctance—adores the constantly new: new houses, new streets, the latest improvements, the speed and constant reinventions of a mechanical and technologized development. In contrast, Dr. Sloper's social values reflect conservatism in a literal sense, including financial matters, and this conservatism is mirrored in his residence and the comparative slowness with which he changes residence: not every couple of years, as might have become fashionable for the younger generation in the 1840s and 1850s, but after fifteen years.

The depiction of Catherine's development pushes this juxtaposition even further; countering the speed of urban development and the sense of adventure and risk (parodied by both Morris and Arthur Townsend) with a social conservatism and personal routine, Catherine's development not only reflects a choice among limited possibilities for a middle-class woman (in her case, remaining unmarried), but also reflects the very constructedness of 'old' and 'new' values. By the time Dr. Sloper has passed away, leaving Catherine and his sister to occupy the house, Washington Square is no longer fashionable, and the house "had begun by this time to be called an 'old house.'" By having Catherine stay in the house after her father's death instead of moving to "a more convenient abode in one of the smaller dwellings, with brown stone fronts, which had at this time begun to adorn the traverse thoroughfares in the upper part of the town" (*Washington* 165), the novel uses her insistence on staying in the house to underline her overall development; this development has been seen by critics as one of increasing interiority mirrored by the interiority of the 'old house' (see Gargano; Williams).

Catherine consequently appears as a protagonist almost out of her time; as the narrator remarks toward the end of the novel, "her opinions, on all moral and social matters, were extremely conservative; and before she was forty she was regarded as an old-fashioned person, and an authority on customs that had passed away" (160). Given her own refusal to subject herself to unquestioned patriarchal rules, this shift toward conservatism, in fact her seeming embodiment of conservatism, appears highly ironic. As Sarah Wilson has emphasized:

The social inheritance that Catherine thus claims is a constructed thing: her authority on the past is only recently gained and does not itself extend into the past. For the youth

who view her so sympathetically, she represents an Old New York ostensibly certain and solid, but in fact founded in uncertainty and conflict. (124)

Catherine thus embodies not so much Old New York as a retrospective and clearly nostalgic *idea* of Old New York with socially conservative values and clear moral reference points, an embodiment that finds its spatial equivalent in the ‘old house.’ Catherine and the house have become a reminder not of a time passed, but a time that never was, for the plot tells a story of contested values; her position thus reflects a nostalgia for a ‘tradition’ that is not the counterpoint to ‘modernity’ but its product (see Giddens “Living”), echoing self-ironically the nostalgia suggested by the authorial interventions.

These discussions of the novel’s strategies to negotiate urban modernity in the mid-nineteenth century highlight the specificity of place as a marker for social status, the rapid northward expansion in conjunction with commercial developments, and the way in which buildings and characters become embodiments of the ‘old’ New York. These processes are embedded in yet another modern urban dynamic, that of the growing entanglement of culture and economy in transnational or even global contexts. As Winfried Fluck has highlighted with regard to Randolph Bourne, “a strong transnational dimension is part of the specific conditions under which American society and culture have developed” (74); this applies probably even more strongly to the city of New York.

### Global New York?

In 1851 James Fennimore Cooper wrote: “New York is essentially national in interest, position, pursuits. No one thinks of the place as belonging to a particular state, but to the United States” (qtd. in Reitano 5); in the same year the *Broadway Journal* predicted: “New York is fast becoming, if she is not already, America” (qtd. in Lankevich 77). The increasingly metonymic function of New York for ‘America,’ including in James’s work, has already been noted. However, this statement may be extended to highlight not only New York’s national role in economy and culture, as well as its role as a symbol for ‘America,’ but also its inter- and transnational entanglements, the ways in which these are taken up in *Washington Square* and the challenge they potentially pose to the conceptualization of ‘Americanness.’

From the 1840s to the 1860s, the period covered by the novel’s plot, New York grew dramatically in size, population, and diversity, and both in-migration and commercial growth intensified New York’s economic links nationally and internationally. Lankevich states that by the 1840s,

Manhattan was growing at such a phenomenal rate that it would soon contain more people than did Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Boston combined. Immigrants from Europe poured in by the tens of thousands, making New York even more cosmopolitan and heterogeneous. [...] From 1820 to 1870, 70 percent of the more than 7 million immigrants to the United States entered through New York. By 1860, this influx so fundamentally altered the demography of Manhattan that foreign-born residents comprised more than 50 percent of the metropolis. (69, 71)

While the shifts of even more diversified migration movements, immigration, and domestic migration reached an unprecedented high between 1880 and 1920, in the mid-nineteenth century, New York was already a ‘global city.’ Although *Washington Square*—this “tale too American,” to put it like James—seems to disregard entirely some of the dramatic developments of the time period it covers, there are indications that this seemingly most domestic of novels reflects James’s keen awareness of the changes happening in the city, changes that affected both urban New York and, by extension, the United States. These changes are intimately bound to New York as an intersection for transnational economic and cultural processes; their reflection thus points to recent developments in James studies, and in American Studies more generally, as important reference points.

More recently, critics have looked at the transnationalism of James’s work not only with regard to his favored ‘international theme’ but also with attention to the interconnectedness of spaces and processes across national borders (Hsu; Rowe “Globalization”; Rowe “United States”). This includes the various ways in which he addresses modernity, and in this respect, James has been read as an early explorer of issues prevalent in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. As Rowe has argued, “James’s responses to the modernization process anticipate many of our concerns with the one-way globalization.” Rowe continues:

[...] James was a witness to and participant in the early stages of today’s globalization wherein second-stage modernization, characterized by Taylorism and Fordism, developed together with the consolidation of the British Empire in its growing competition with lesser European imperial powers and the emergence of the United States and Japan as colonial forces, if not outright imperial powers. (“Globalization” 205).

In *Washington Square*, this anticipation diagnosed by Rowe can be found in concerns with New York’s diversification, an awareness of New York’s participation in international economic networks, and the changing role of Europe for the American middle class; these instances present an exploration—however hesitant and fleeting—of American urban modernity and its development throughout the nineteenth century as bound to both national and international dynamics.

The bourgeois and largely domestic life world of the Slopers touches upon ‘the world’ in several ways. An obvious example is Austin and Catherine Sloper’s journey to Europe which, despite its restriction to one chapter, plays a central role in the narrative; other examples include Morris Townsend’s (real or feigned) connections to New Orleans, which point to New York’s role in the sea trade of cotton at the time and thus at the ambivalent stance of the city vis-à-vis slavery in antebellum New York (Weil 75; Lankevich 88-89) or the already cited analogy between the northward growth of the city and westward expansion of the nation. Thus, *Washington Square*’s domesticity is clearly framed in the context of a constantly changing, transnationally connected modern urban environment: its financial basis, its status markers, and the symbolic language in which it is framed attest to this.

While the careful spatial positioning of even minor characters and the frequent allusion to the middle-class movement toward the north serve to connect space, characters, and social status, there are few other passages in which New

York's urban environment is explicitly mentioned. In these instances, New York's urbanity takes on an almost illicit air, signaling a counterpoint or even a potential intrusion of a threatening outside into middle-class domesticity. When Morris asks Catherine to meet him on the Square, she insists that he come to the house instead, a move that Aunt Lavinia, in her own fondness for romantic melodrama, is unable to comprehend: "Morris Townsend had told her that her niece preferred, unromantically, an interview in the chintz-covered parlour to a sentimental tryst beside a fountain sheeted with dead leaves, and she was lost in wonderment at the oddity—almost perversity—of the choice" (*Washington* 49). Representing clichéd romanticism to Lavinia Penniman and safety from potential paternal interruption to Morris Townsend, the Square is part of an urban outside to Catherine, juxtaposed to the contested domestic space of Sloper's house.

New York's public space thus signals a form of wilderness, and this sense of a 'wild outside' is reflected in the 'foreignness' of the city and its (immigrant, Black) inhabitants. Depending on the perspective, New York is thus presented in the related images of 'frontier' and 'wilderness'; these perspectives, obviously, are gendered—space to be conquered, potentially threatening space—and thus reflect the different ways in which women and men in the novel move in public spaces. From Lavinia Penniman's perspective of mid-nineteenth-century middle-class femininity, life worlds beyond New York's bourgeois urban pockets make an appearance under dingy and objectionable circumstances. As Rowe puts it:

In general, James follows the logic of Freudian sublimation by incorporating minority and marginal social identities into an aesthetic cosmopolitanism, which epitomizes his own authorial position and disguises any more personal identification with gay men, lesbians, straight women, Jews, immigrants, peoples of color, prostitutes, and children. ("Globalization" 213)

So when Aunt Lavinia—who in contrast to her niece Catherine is indeed shown outside of the domestic sphere of Washington Square or societal events—considers potential meeting places for her conspiratorial get-together with Morris Townsend, she

had an inclination for Greenwood Cemetery, but she gave it up as too distant; she could not absent herself for so long, as she said, without exciting suspicion. Then she thought of the Battery, but it was rather cold and windy, besides one's being exposed to the intrusion from the Irish immigrants who at this point alight, with large appetites, in the New World; and at last she fixed upon an oyster saloon in the Seventh Avenue, kept by a Negro—an establishment of which she knew nothing save that she had noticed it in passing. (*Washington* 77)

This is one of the few passages that indicate the growing diversity of New York by referring to Irish immigration and struggling Black entrepreneurship in face of increasing marginalization of the African American population at the time (Reitano 62; Lankevich 169). Mrs. Penniman's considerations of spaces serve to once again to indicate the changes New York undergoes; at the same time, growing ethnic diversity and its spatiality locate Mrs. Penniman's plans as literally 'out of bounds' of the socially acceptable, even though she reproduces romantic clichés. "New York comes to figure as the locus of romantic transformation" (Wil-

liams 26), and the spaces of ethnic ‘otherness’ are used by Lavinia as a stage for her romantic plot and simultaneously are contained in their potential challenge to the social order by this plot. The, from James’s perspective, bewildering diversity highlighted twenty-five years later in *The American Scene* that began to intensify at the time of the novel’s production is relegated here to the margins, providing space for a failed scheme, but nevertheless in its foreignness is associated with potential danger. Mrs. Penniman’s and Morris’s way back to Washington Square is described as a return from the wilderness into civilization:

[T]hey went out together into the dimly lighted wilderness of the Seventh Avenue. The dusk had closed in completely, and the street lamps were separated by wide intervals on a pavement in which cavities and fissures played a disproportionate part. [...] So he walked with her through the devious ways of the west side of the town, and through the bustle of gathering nightfall in populous streets, to the quiet precinct of Washington Square. (*Washington* 82-83)

While “barely registered” (Savoy 354), these ‘other’ spaces seem to loom just in sight, simultaneously demanding attention and kept at bay at the margins of the narrative. The conflict between Catherine and her father, as well as Lavinia Penniman’s scheming, provide the foreground for negotiations of urban modernity that are hesitant and tentative, but are obvious nevertheless. Sarah Wilson has argued that in the New York novel of manners

intergenerational conflicts serve to introduce the idea of cultural change (primarily racial and ethnic, but also political) as a force marking intimate arenas of self-definition—something quite distinct from the forces that traditionally concern manners literature (gender and class identity). In the process, these texts inscribe the special conflicts and questions of a cosmopolitan city into the tradition of manners. (123)

The cultural changes traced in the novel are more drastic than the novel at first glance seems to let on; these are changes that are symptomatic for an early urban modernity inextricably bound to a national context. So James’s reference to *Washington Square* as a “tale too American” may in many ways be accurate. At the same time, however, ‘American’ urbanity and modernity emerge as already being transnational in the mid-nineteenth century.

Unlike later texts, most notably in *The American Scene*, these national and transnational complexities of context and positioning are not reflected in a stylistic emphasis on discontinuity and fragmentation; *Washington Square* adheres to the realist approach that shaped James’s work at the time. This does not mean that the novel projects New York as a coherent space; on the contrary, as Jeffrey Steele has pointed out, city writing in the antebellum period went beyond the construction of continuities and visuality, and instead sought to capture the experience, particularly of New York City in its “slices” (192), and this applies even more strongly to literary reflections of the intensified urbanization after the Civil War. Realist novels such as those by Howell or Crane illustrate the short-sightedness of regarding urban space as exclusively descriptive, as a mere background for the plot, and/or as a mode of social critique; but a novel such as *Washington Square*, read mostly without regard to the urban space in which it is embedded, illustrates the subtlety by which realist texts can investigate urban

modernity and its spatiality. “Realistic novels,” writes Amy Kaplan, “do more than juggle competing visions of social reality; they encompass conflicting forms and narratives which shape that reality” (13). By the precision of the characters’ placement and by utilizing the limitations of their perspectives, James’s early novel works through hints, focalization, direct speech, in order to convey not only an impression of the city, but also to evoke a specifically urban experience. This experience of New York is one of bits and pieces, of connections that have to be drawn out and related by the reader; thus, *Washington Square* provides an early example not only of certain characters and constellations elaborated in more detail in James’s later work, but also of his struggle with modes of representation with regard to New York’s urban spaces. Obviously, the realism of *Washington Square* shares little with the impressionistic modernist strategy deployed in *The American Scene*. However, the domesticity and interiority of the novel only seem to keep the rapidly changing city at bay while failing to gloss over the “very worst of the danger-signals” of mid-nineteenth century urban modernity (James, *Small Boy* 83), as James saw them in hindsight. The novel’s spatial politics thus highlight the complexities and ambivalences not only of urbanization itself, but also of the struggle to find appropriate forms of representation for a process that fundamentally and irrevocably changed the United States in the nineteenth century.

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