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Manhattan Transference: Reader Itineraries in Modernist New York

The development of transportation technologies played a vital role in New York City's transformation into a modern metropolis. Between 1884 and 1893, travel by rapid transit in New York increased by 250 percent,¹ and "by 1920 there were 2,365,000,000 riders annually on all city transit lines . . . twice as many as all the steam railroads in the country carried" (Michael W. Brooks 90). The Elevated trains, which were completed by 1880,² and the subways, opened in 1904, fueled construction and crowding in the booming city,³ and they fundamentally altered the everyday experience of living in New York. These modern transit technologies were novel in and of themselves, but, moreover, they offered passengers previously inaccessible views of the urban landscape through which they moved: from above the streets on an Elevated track, from underground in a subway tunnel, and so on. City dwellers were not the only ones in motion—the city was dynamic, its spaces being rebuilt and expanded at a rapid pace—and so neither their frame of view (the mode of transit) nor their object of view (New York) were static. Literature offered one means of negotiating the dynamic modern city, of metaphorically contemplating its complex spaces. Although the literary representation of a city could be read as the city made static—and therefore made more comprehensible—I suggest that complicated urban texts replicate the experience of moving through the city for the reader. Rather than freezing the frame

¹ Michael W. Brooks, *Subway City: Riding the Trains, Reading New York* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 35.

² *Ibid.*, 33.

³ *Ibid.*, 109.

to portray the city, texts about turn-of-the-century New York thematically and formally take up transit through the urban landscape, conferring onto the reader the bewildering task of making sense of the city.

John Dos Passos's 1925 novel *Manhattan Transfer* is an exemplary text in which to explore literary urban transits. Despite the popularity of his social realist novels in the 1920s and '30s, Dos Passos has sustained relatively little critical attention—at least in part influenced by his turn from leftist revolutionary politics to radical conservatism in the 1940s.⁴ When he wrote *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos had read, and certainly been influenced by, Joyce's *Ulysses*,⁵ and *Transfer* should therefore be read in the broader, transatlantic context of modernist urban novels, all of which on some level deal with the difficulty of representing dynamic and changing cities. Critics often describe New York City as the main character—rather than the setting—of *Manhattan Transfer*, and with this in mind I consider how transportation within and through the novel facilitates the reader's understanding of the city. The number of transportation options depicted in the text highlights the vast scale and large population of the city, the spaces and crowds through which the characters move. The characters in *Manhattan Transfer* confront these new, technologically mediated visions of reality, which likewise affect the reader's apprehension of the textual city.

The title of the novel directly references the Manhattan Transfer train station, a real station in New Jersey that operated from 1910 to 1937, where New York-bound trains switched

⁴ Andrew Hook, "Introduction," *Dos Passos: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 1-12.

⁵ Barry Maine, ed., *Dos Passos: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1988), 7.

between steam power and the city's electric grid.⁶ New York visibly stood out from the rest of the country because of its modern technologies, including but not limited to transportation and commerce. The title therefore takes on thematic significance in regard to Manhattan—set apart from the rural past by its modernity as well as its surrounding rivers—but also in regard to the characters and the reader. Manhattan is a “national and metropolitan hub for the exchange, transfer, and transportation of goods and people” (Hurm 219), and the characters are, like trains, “atomised units in transit” (Brooker 53). Individuals travel through the city isolated while among a crowd; like transferring between trains, they form no more than transient connections with one another. The reader, like a city dweller, similarly struggles with her own exposure to dozens of flat characters. She is figuratively ferried into and out of the city along with the characters who ride literal ferries as the novel begins and ends (Hurm 219). And similar to the the Manhattan-bound trains transferring power sources, she must adjust her reading practices upon entering the bewildering text within the pages of this novel.

Critics often refer to the New York of *Manhattan Transfer* as an “urban vortex” (Lehan 241). I adopt this term here in my essay because it emphasizes the frantic movement of the city and relates that physical transit to the ways in which the modern city overwhelms and consumes its inhabitants. The urban vortex is connected to the novel's “perpetually revolving doors” motif, which likens the routine of life in New York to being ground out of or “fed in two endless tapes through” revolving doors (Dos Passos 101). This cyclical motion toward an evasive goal comes both from the mechanized transit and commerce of the city and from New York's unfulfilled promise of success. While both images reveal city dwellers to be objects of the harsh city, I use

⁶ See, for instance, Kate Marshall, “Sewer, Furnace, Air Shaft, Media: Modernity Behind the Walls in *Native Son* and *Manhattan Transfer*,” *Studies in American Fiction* 37.1 (2010), 71; Lisa Nanney, *John Dos Passos Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers: 1998), 165.

the term urban vortex because it also imagines the city as a space distinguished from the spaces around it, particularly because it draws people toward it and makes motion away, against the direction of its cycling, almost impossible. *Manhattan Transfer* envisions two responses to the overwhelming city for its characters: either they stay within its success-driven, mechanized vortex, becoming further atomized and determined by their urban transits, or they must submit to failure and flee the city in a final transit.

In addition to thematizing the atomized urban vortex, transportation also mediates responses to the city's spaces. The modern city resists representation because of its complexity—it cannot be seen or comprehended in one totalizing view. Rapid industrialization and modernization are constantly changing the city; “it constitutes a state of permanent transition” (Larsen 221). A static image of the city, as if seen from a skyscraper, may reveal a panorama that visually encompasses the city's area, but it obscures the details of city life, the transitory processes that make up the city's past, present, and future.⁷ The city is physically large, made up of innumerable structures and populated by millions of inhabitants, themselves of varying socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. From the outset I must acknowledge that a significant layer of the city's complexity—but one that is beyond the reach of this paper—is that of social diversity, from the modes of transportation that a city dweller has or lacks the resources to ride, to the socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic diversity that observation from those transit forms reveals or conceals. This paper is concerned primarily with the spatial and physical aspects of the city's complex geography—and their metaphorical and formal implications.

⁷ The impossibility of representing a city as a totality has been taken up by various critics, including Burton Pike in *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981) and Richard Lehan in *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

Critics of *Manhattan Transfer* often locate the novel's perspective within the city, offering competing readings of the novel. Michael Madsen comments that the narrator and reader stand atop a skyscraper, "survey[ing] the masses on the streets" (39). Michael Cowan, on the other hand, notes that most of the novel portrays a view from the street, looking up at skyscrapers (298). I see problems in both Madsen's and Cowan's arguments, however. Madsen overstates the ability of the novel to reveal a totalizing overview, and Cowan overstates the novel's street-level insight into characters as individuals. Instead, I focus on the fundamental act of transit itself, examining the role it plays in perception of the modern metropolis and its relation to the reader's experience. Later, I will return to a common view that the text reveals the city as if walking through it, but I argue that specifying the mode of transit facilitated by the novel's form is beside the point. The views-in-motion offered by all urban modes of transit confront the inadequacy of a panoramic, static perspective, at the same time pointing toward their own limits and the impossibility of fully comprehending the modern city.

Manhattan Transfer's modernist form underlies its use of transportation as a reaction to the incomprehensible modern New York. It is therefore important to begin by defining modernism in reference to the novel and for the uses of this essay. The two central features I focus on are (1) the connections between material experiences of the modern world and textual form, and (2) the role of modernist forms in apprehending and/or commenting on the modern reality from which modernism draws its techniques. My basic theoretical assumption is that modernist texts reacted to new technologies and changing experiences of the material world.

There is an integral link between modernism and movement.⁸ Andrew Thacker makes much the same argument: as social and geographical spaces came to dominate the political consciousness of the modern era, literary texts created “metaphorical spaces that [tried] to make sense of the material space of modernity” (3). Modernist formal strategies facilitate literary movement, replicating the heightened experience of transit in the material modern world.⁹

Manhattan Transfer draws on the material experiences of modern New York at the levels of both theme and form. Lisa Nanney defines Dos Passos’s American modernism based on his incorporation of technological and machine imagery into the text. The considerable number of characters—many of whom have similar names (See 351)—and the pseudo-stream-of-consciousness image catalogues—describing people, streets, store windows, and more—replicate the multitudes of people and objects encountered by city dwellers. Because dozens of characters appear only once or few times in the text, the reader stumbles upon and fails to form a lasting impression of them, as an individual among a crowd relates to the many people surrounding her. The fragmented narrative structure similarly mimics the effect of being in fast-paced, turn-of-the-century New York. The jumps between passages, some of which withhold the identities of their

⁸ See Andrew Thacker, *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); William Chapman Sharpe, *New York Nocturne: The City After Dark in Literature, Painting, and Photography, 1850–1950* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Svend Erik Larsen, “Bewteen Nowhere and Everywhere: Literature and the City,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée (CRCL)* 24.2 (1997): 219-34; Desmond Harding, *Writing the City: Urban Visions and Literary Modernism*, ed. William E. Cain (New York: Routledge, 2003); Peter Brooker, *New York Fictions: Modernity, Postmodernism, the New Modern* (New York: Longman, 1996).

⁹ Thacker focuses solely on British modernism, however, so Dos Passos’s formal choices must also be specified within their own context. Many critics have connected Dos Passos’s modernism to his search for a new American literature. For instance, in *Dos Passos’s Early Fiction, 1912–1938* (London: Associated University Presses, 1987), Michael Clark relates both the novel’s form and its revolving doors theme to “America’s predicament: the endless circularity without progress of American culture” (104); and in *John Dos Passos Revisited* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), Lisa Nanney writes, “[Dos Passos’s] use of American subjects and the aesthetics of the machine age in *Manhattan Transfer* constitutes the purest expression of his American modernist style” (155).

protagonists for their first few paragraphs, disorient the reader. Each storyline, character, passage, and setting in this complex novel competes for her attention.

I distinguish between narrative theme and narrative structure to highlight the interplay between the novel's depiction of life in the modern city and its artistic replication of and reaction to that experience. Spatial form theory offers a means of reading the spaces created by the text, and in examining *Manhattan Transfer's* spatial form, I reveal the similarities and differences between the characters' and reader's movements. Spatial form theory applies to novels that "subvert the chronological sequence inherent in narrative, . . . [which] includes not only objective features of narrative structure but also subjective processes of aesthetic perception" (Smitten and Daghistany 13). Unity in spatial-form narratives comes from thematic coherence (Mickelsen 70). *Manhattan Transfer's* use of repetition and fragmentation epitomizes spatial form, and it facilitates the reader's movement through the dynamic textual urban space. In replicating the experience of viewing modern New York City from within, it creates space in which the reader can find her own way through the city.¹⁰ According to spatial form theory, in such novels "no absolute conclusion is possible. Instead, the reader is confronted with an open-ended array of thematically interrelated factors he must weld into a picture" (Mickelsen 78). Considering the enigmatic and dynamic nature of the modern city, it would be impossible to map a static image of *Manhattan Transfer's* repeated and fragmented motifs. Instead, I argue, the novel points to the significance of the reader's movement between those "interrelated factors."

I use two methodological devices to convey the experiences of movement portrayed and facilitated by the text: *transit* and *transfer*. These phenomena are simultaneous and interwoven

¹⁰ In making this claim, I am indebted to Sam See's "Fast Books Read Slow: The Shapes of Speed in *Manhattan Transfer* and *The Sun Also Rises*," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 38.3 (2008): 342-377. I will discuss his thesis in further detail later in this essay.

facets of movement through the city; I distinguish between them as devices solely for the sake of clarity in my argument. I explore the literal, but also the literary, metaphorical, and psychological implications of each term. Transit and transfer apply to the experiences of characters in a text, but also to the experiences of the reader of that text.

Transit (its Latin roots meaning “go across”), for the purposes of this paper, refers to a continuous motion of passing through a space. For the characters in *Manhattan Transfer*, this is their movement into, out of, or through the spaces of New York City. Transit is related to the material experiences of urban life, of riding a ferry or train, of walking through the city streets. For the reader, transit is her movement through the spatial narrative, from the first to the last page, but also back and forth between the novel’s repeated themes.

Transfer (in Latin, to “carry across”), for the purposes of this paper, is a discontinuous movement, a changing from one space to another. Most literally, it is the act of changing trains. But it also has psychological implications for the characters, who are trapped in the urban vortex but unable to connect to one another. The frantic transit of modern New York forces city dwellers into constant transit, but inhibits the transfer of understanding among them. For the reader, transfer is the metaphorical passing over of insight on how to comprehend the city. I argue that the text may be able to transfer perspective on the modern city to the reader. In *Manhattan Transfer* this is not the obvious exchange of revelatory information. As I will show, transference may happen only because the novel’s form opens up spaces for alternative transits.

Heidi E. Bollinger and Michael Madsen, in very different arguments about *Manhattan Transfer*, both suggest that the novel sets a trap for its reader, ultimately implicating her participation in the problems of the modern city. According to Bollinger, the text forces the

reader to detach herself emotionally from the characters but then criticizes the state of disconnection among modern New Yorkers.¹¹ According to Madsen, the bewildering text compels its reader to search for its meaning but then condemns the desire for success.¹² These views place the reader in the position of the characters, who become trapped in the urban vortex and can only escape if they opt out of their life in the city—for the reader, if she gives up on her reading. But I argue that these readings are too simplistic. *Manhattan Transfer*'s complex narrative structure gestures toward alternatives to the characters' two possible fates, because the reader's transit through the text need not be equivalent to that of the characters.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau writes that static “surveys of routes miss what was: the act itself of passing by” (de Certeau 97). I hope to show that the disorienting and fragmented qualities of *Manhattan Transfer* allow readers to experience the novel as an itinerary, or de Certeauvian *tour*. We must be careful not to elide this literary text with everyday practices that are by nature not written or codified, that “elude legibility” (de Certeau 93); however, *Manhattan Transfer*'s modernist narrative forms and emphasis on transportation draw attention to the very act of passing by, denying the city an objective, panoramic representation, which would overly simplify readers' interpretations. Applying de Certeau's “spatial stories” to literature, Thacker writes, “The peculiar spatial stories told in the literary texts of modernism shape the ways in which we view and understand modernity itself” (31). So when Kate Marshall says that the title *Manhattan Transfer* “explicitly connects taking up the third rail and participating in fiction” (71), she points to the significance of the novel's spatial form. Although

¹¹ Heidi E. Bollinger, “Roving the Crowd: *Flânerie* in Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*,” *Literature of New York*, Ed. Sabrina Fuchs-Abrams (Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 73-90.

¹² Michael Madsen, “‘No More'n a Needle in a Haystack': The City as Style and Destructive Underworld in John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*,” *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 9 (2010): 36-46.

its characters are fated to remain “atomised units in transit” or relinquish the city altogether, *Manhattan Transfer* encourages its reader to participate in the city. In reading as an itinerary or spatial story, the reader may develop her own unique practices of living in and responding to both complex texts and urban spaces.

As I explore transit and transfer in *Manhattan Transfer*, I will turn to other examples of transportation in New York City literature. Walt Whitman’s poetry, in particular “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” “City of Orgies,” and “Song of the Open Road,”¹³ reveal the poet’s belief in community-affirming urban transit. Whitman’s literal transit facilitates a metaphorical transfer between poet and reader. I will show how Dos Passos repeats and alters Whitman’s poetic devices—which in the original offer a positive vision of the city—to criticize the modern urban vortex. I also look at William Dean Howells’s 1890 novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. As its protagonists transit through the picturesque city on El trains and walks, the novel confronts its own role in aestheticizing New York—its inability to represent the city in its entirety. I have two main reasons for reading these works alongside *Manhattan Transfer*: to show how transit and transfer can function as interpretive lenses in other works, and to contextualize *Manhattan Transfer*’s modernist turn. I do not mean to imply that these works were necessarily direct responses to one another. Rather, I suggest that reading the thematic and formal movements of Whitman’s and Howells’s texts can illuminate the problems of literary representation that Dos Passos addresses in his use of modernist form.

I first turn to the literary role of ferries as a mode of transit located beyond Manhattan’s borders, offering a perspective of the city skyline, and as a vehicle for transit into and out of the

¹³ I use the versions from the 1892 deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass*.

city—which in the conclusion I relate to de Certeau’s concepts of the frontier and bridge. After looking at ferries, I consider El trains and subways, two means of train travel through the city. While El trains present a view into apartments and onto the streets below, subways reveal only the bodies of other passengers. I then examine the act of walking as a human-scale movement through the city. Even though pedestrians are not reliant on technology for movement, they may still remain atomized from one another and trapped in the urban vortex. Finally, I return to a discussion of *Manhattan Transfer*’s modernist form to argue that it opens the space for reader itineraries and narrative transference.

Ferries

I begin my exploration of modes of transit in *Manhattan Transfer* with the ferry, which transports people into and out of the city. Because boats move beyond, away from, or toward Manhattan’s island borders, rather than within the city, they offer a panorama of the iconic New York skyline. As Dutch Robertson and Joe O’Keefe return from World War I on a ship, they travel up the East River: “Behind them beyond barges tugboats carferries the tall buildings, streaked white with wisps of steam and mist, tower gray into sagged clouds” (Dos Passos 240). The narrator here reveals a panorama of the skyline from behind the subjects of the passage, thus separating the reader’s perspective from the characters’ perspective. This disorients the text’s free indirect discourse, which often indirectly narrates the thoughts of the characters but then abruptly takes up a position outside of them. The novel’s unstable narration constantly transfers between different perspectives—not only between different characters, but also between those characters and the views to which only the narrator and reader have access. The most striking aspect of the

above view is its asyndeton and lack of punctuation, creating a stream-of-consciousness effect, which is typical of the entire novel's syntax. The objects themselves take precedence over the grammatical coherence and meaning of the sentence. I refer to this as a catalogue, or stream of images, and I argue that this form emphasizes movement, the listed nouns being objects seen and passed as a viewer transits across the city. Before moving on to a discussion of the ferry theme in particular, I offer the above-mentioned formal techniques as a microcosmic example of devices that structure the entire novel, contributing to the transit and transfer that permeate the text.

The varied recurrence of these images in a later passage demonstrates another important formal device: the text's obsessive repetition. As Mr. Densch flees the city and his bankrupt business in the final section of the novel, he looks back at Manhattan, and "red ferryboats, carferries, tugs, sandscows, lumberschooners, tramp steamers drifted between him and the steaming towering city" (Dos Passos 315). Here the view of the skyline comes from a ship traveling away from the city rather than toward it, and not all of the other boats seen are the same as those mentioned in Dutch and Joe's approach, but the sentences do reveal significant similarities. The catalogue of boats has the same effect of pointing out objects as they are noticed. The city is also surreally "steam"ing and "tower"ing in both passages. Spatial form theory offers a means of interpreting repetition that enhances my reading of transit as key to this text's form. Repetition of phrases, images, and motifs creates a "system of internal references and relationships" through which the reader moves (Smitten 20). A repeated reference compels the reader to remember, to think or look back on, the earlier iterations of that reference, and as she reads, this system becomes a space through which she moves—recursively, not linearly. These formal devices that I have laid out—transferring perspectives, streams of images, and

repetition of phrases—structure the entire novel, creating a textual space for reader itineraries, and I will refer back to them throughout the remainder of this paper.

The particularities of the above ferry views are not insignificant, however. They imply a space external to the city, although what that space is remains unclear, as the view is focused on the New York harbor and skyline. That New York is a major port city is particularly relevant to views of Manhattan from a ferry, which emphasize the bustle of the boats traveling into or out of the city. Interestingly, Walt Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" represents its view of the crossing between Manhattan and then-neighbor city Brooklyn through formal techniques related to—and likely precursors of—those used by Dos Passos. Whitman's poem follows the speaker's eye, for example in section 3, which catalogues various ships approaching through the harbor and progresses from nearby boats to the distant shore and the Manhattan skyline. Section 9 of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" reiterates the catalogue of images from section 3. As Dos Passos borrows Whitman's formal devices of the catalogue and repetition, he amplifies and extends them. His modernist take on Whitman's forms creates a disorienting effect that replicates for the reader the experience of moving through the modern city.

The thematic conceits of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" similarly reveal their disjuncture from the role of the ferry in *Manhattan Transfer*. For Whitman, ferry transit enacts a unification into "the simple, compact, well-join'd scheme" ("Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" section 2). Commuting among a crowd offers a communion, whereas the characters of *Manhattan Transfer* remain unable to connect as they momentarily meet in transit. From first finding the "crowds" crossing the East River on the ferry "curious" (section 1), Whitman then realizes "the ties

between me and them” (section 2). Crossing with others becomes a crossing among them.¹⁴ This poem therefore suggests the power of a text about literal crossing to facilitate a metaphorical crossing.¹⁵ Its movement as a textual transit across the river opens the space for transfer between poet and reader; Whitman attempts to commune with his future readers, whom he also sees as future Brooklyn Ferry commuters. This transference happens on a formal level, as Lytle Shaw articulates by using spatial metaphor when he writes more generally of Whitman’s democratic project that “we might zoom across space to bring these disparate people and activities into a neat paratactic list” (79).¹⁶ It is, moreover, the theme of the poem. Tom Cohen argues,

The work can seem the foremost work in any canon on the metatextual relation of (future) reading to the temporal *event* of inscription. . . . If the scene of the crossing is the ferry, that vehicle of transfers and transference suggests now the brute facticity of Whitman’s poem (in *ferry*, as implied, we may hear the carrying-across of *metaphor*). (33, italics original)

“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” uses text—from its catalogue form down to the etymological roots of the word “ferry”—to comment on and recreate the extra-literary act of crossing that is the poem’s subject.

Although ferries in *Manhattan Transfer* literally “shuttl[e] back and forth” (Dos Passos 52), their physical transit does not lead to a metaphorical transfer as in Whitman’s poetical ferry crossing. In addition to giving Whitman’s formal techniques an unsettling modernist reinterpretation, Dos Passos also borrows and twists images from “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.”

¹⁴ T.S. McMillin writes, “The palpable qualities of crossing the river thus allow the poet to affirm an impalpable connection between seemingly discrete individuals regardless of physical or temporal distinctions” (150).

¹⁵ “A textual crossing that permits the reader and writer to connect on another plane, a dimension unaffected by either space or time” (McMillin 151); “the claim . . . that the poem offers not simply a trans-historically accessible image of the embodied poet immersed in the daily life of New York City, but actual visual access” (Shaw 78).

¹⁶ Shaw’s argument that we read urbanism as the center of Whitman’s project allows me to apply this to a poem about the city in particular.

The novel's opening words, "*Three gulls wheel above the broken boxes, orangerinds, spoiled cabbage heads that heave between the splintered plank walls*" (Dos Passos 3, italics original), echo the "slow-wheeling circles" of the seagulls that Whitman describes (section 3). These gulls fly not above shimmering, sun-reflecting water, as in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," but above rotting detritus. From the ferry, New York no longer appears resplendent; instead it is dark, a harsh and degenerate city.

Whitman's spiritual communion is also no longer possible in Dos Passos's novel. The ferry crossing in *Manhattan Transfer*'s opening epigraph cannot transcend divisions: "*Feet step out across the crack, men and women press through the manuresmelling wooden tunnel of the ferry-house, crushed and jostling like apples fed down a chute into a press*" (Dos Passos 3, italics original). The novel's first representation of New Yorkers presents only their disembodied feet, exaggerating their disconnection, not only from one another, but even from themselves. (In contrast to Whitman, they have not "receiv'd identity by" their bodies ["Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" section 5].) And as many critics have noted, the characters in the novel are often portrayed as commodities rather than people, evident here in the apple press simile.¹⁷ The individuals in this crowd have no ties among themselves, even though they are pushed violently closer together, becoming a single implied product. According to the novel's congestion motif, physical transit exaggerates the closeness of these individual bodies, yet, unlike Whitman's ferry, connection on any spiritual level remains unavailable to them.¹⁸ This ferry crossing is no more than a material "*crush[ing] and jostling.*"

¹⁷ Bollinger, 77.

¹⁸ Kate Marshall argues that this "press" connects to the journalistic press, and "that to enter the movements of crowd and city is also to enter into the circulation of media forms" (75). Because the novel, through Jimmy Herf, dismisses the superficiality and inauthenticity of the modern media, we can see how the association of physical crowding and media communications is a denial of Whitman's positive spiritual embrace.

The first ferry entrance marks Bud Korpenning's arrival in the city, a moment that returns in a passage on the same page. The scene is repeated later in the novel when Stan Emery rides a ferry: "In the whitening light tinfoil gulls wheeled above broken boxes, spoiled cabbageheads, orangerinds heaving slowly between the splintered plank walls" (Dos Passos 213). Unlike Bud's ferry ride, this is not Stan's first appearance in the book, nor is it a remarkable entry into the city, because Stan has always been a New Yorker. It is significant, then, that ferries continue to travel toward Manhattan in passages appearing throughout the text—and that the ferry scenes are varied repetitions of one another. Ferry arrivals appear as a manifestation of the urban vortex theme. Characters, and the reader, are relentlessly drawn into the city like a vortex cycling toward its center. Escape seems improbable—for both Bud and Stan, it comes only in the form of death. These characters occupy similar roles in *Manhattan Transfer*, each appearing in only one section of the novel and dying (arguably by suicide) at the end of his respective section. The ferry's inability to facilitate a Whitmanian spiritual or metaphorical transfer is problematic to the point of being fatal.

When, in the novel's final section, characters do begin to travel away from Manhattan on ferries and ships, their panoramic view of the skyline still cannot be transcendent. As Mr. Densch leaves New York behind, he sees "the steaming towering city that gathered itself into a pyramid and began to sink mistily into the browngreen water of the bay" (Dos Passos 315). The imposing skyscrapers are ominously "steaming towering," but distance affords no perspective on what the city looks like. Instead, as it recedes, it becomes a sinking pyramid—on the one hand indicating its triviality in the scheme of the larger world, but on the other symbolizing the dangerous

corruption of the modern city. New York's future is decidedly dark, down to the muddy water surrounding it.

When Jimmy and Ellen approach the city on a ship at the beginning of section three, they also fail to see beyond the surface of the skyline—thus failing to find meaning in the city:

“Against a sootsmudged horizon, tangled with barges, steamers, chimneys of powerplants, covered wharves, bridges, lower New York was a pink and white tapering pyramid cut slenderly out of cardboard” (Dos Passos 235). From the harbor, New York appears impenetrable, yet, as “cardboard,” also fragile. Once the observer is removed from a location within the city streets, New York's scale becomes only ironically imposing: a “sinking” or “cardboard” pyramid. Despite the urban vortex, a world beyond and apart from the city does exist. As the reader mentally moves between these reiterated passages, she too transits from within the city (the passages surrounding these ferry scenes on the page) to a boat-perspective location outside of it.

The movement between narrative perspectives is a form of reader transit, but the potential of this ferrying to effect a text-reader transference is not nearly as straightforward as in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” In the case of a ferry of deported Communists, the narrator ultimately locates the reader's perspective on the wharf, leaving her in the city and revealing the ship “shrinking into haze” (Dos Passos 247). As the deportees disappear from view and their “singing [of ‘The Internationale’] died” (Dos Passos 247), they are erased from the city and provided no vision of a future. Because the text introduces the deportees briefly and, once they are gone, moves on to the next chapter, it urges the reader to dismiss and forget their plight as well. In this moment, the reader may succumb to the powerful urban vortex as many of the characters do. But I suggest that *Manhattan Transfer* creates a space in which the reader can establish her own agency over

her textual itinerary, and, in so doing, she may find the space to reconsider these deported immigrants—perhaps in the break between this chapter and the next, or in Jimmy’s later fantasy of his deported youth, which repeats the language of this passage.

Just as a ferry arrival opens *Manhattan Transfer*, literally ferrying the reader into the text’s New York, a ferry departure from Manhattan closes the novel, which abruptly ends with Jimmy’s transit out of the city. Although a ferry allows him to escape the city physically, Jimmy’s desire to travel “pretty far” indicates the ambiguity of whether he will ever be able to escape psychologically from the urban vortex (Dos Passos 342). Even at the end of the novel, the ferry cannot facilitate a spiritual or metaphorical transfer. However, in this paper I continue to investigate the possibility for transference in *Manhattan Transfer*, and I will ultimately argue that, even though the final ferry scene literally transits the reader to the end, or back cover, of the book, it also pushes the reader into a cyclical rereading of the novel, including a re-transiting among the internal references of its many repeated ferry scenes. The ferry, and the panoramic view of the city that it offers from beyond the island borders, cannot penetrate the surface of the skyline to reveal the crowds commuting—and the individual lives being lived—within the city and its streets. But a combination of itineraries, informed by perspectives from various modes of transit and provoked by the novel’s disorienting and fragmented modernist form, may offer more insight into the dynamic spaces of the urban vortex.

Trains

William Dean Howells’s 1890 novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes* enacts its own literary crossings and confronts the limits to observing the city in transit. In this narrative about recent

transplants to New York, “the discovery of the city . . . takes place through the movement of the characters *across* it” (Maffi 36, italics original). The protagonist Basil March explores his new home city in walks and by riding the El train; while Basil enjoys the aesthetic distance that his transportation affords him, the narrator points to the problems of such a view of the city. Critical readings of the novel tend to correlate the inadequacy of the El train perspective with the novel’s own struggles to depict labor conflict and the working class using its realist form. Whereas Whitman’s cataloging metaphorically mimics the connective crossings of the ferry, Howells’s realist novel mimics the aestheticizing view of the El—and confronts the inadequacy of this form of representation. *A Hazard of New Fortunes* raises questions about the relationship between the characters’ and reader’s transit—about the potential of structure to react to narrative—and gestures toward *Manhattan Transfer*’s use of modernist form to depict the city.

Raised above street level, the El train offers an illusion of a comprehensive view of the city. Its rapid motion through the large city seems to “[knit] together contiguous parts of the city’s social fabric without selecting or cutting it up into discrete visual fields” (Raczkowski 289). This combination of height and speed allows the city to appear “as a knowable and representable totality” (Raczkowski 288), because El passengers watch the variety of city neighborhoods, residents, apartments, and streets, through a single window and without interruption.

Yet the El rider’s privileged and insulated view in fact blurs detail and strips away agency from the people observed. The El presents both a literal and metaphorical obstacle to achieving a total moving view of the city: “the railway had drawn its erasing line across the Corinthian front of an old theater . . . in wanton disregard of the life . . . around, below, above” (Howells

163-164). Although the view from the El is contiguous, the El tracks have just the opposite effect on the city, fragmenting and obscuring its buildings—the “old theater” being an artifact of the city from before it became a modern metropolis. The prepositions call attention to the El’s linearity, to its neglect of the many dimensions of the lively urban scene. The moving El and its imposing tracks interrupt the lives of the people who live near it, as it upsets the theater; although the Marches appear to have a comprehensive view of the city, their perspective strips away the agency of the people whom they observe.

Replacing the outdated theater, the El showcases the city as a theatrical spectacle. On their night-time rides, “the darkness and the speed of the train preserve the Marches’ own privacy” (Sharpe 272), at the same time that the lit interiors of apartments display their inhabitants. The Marches delight in this “fleeting intimacy” (Howells 64), a phrase that suggests the possibility of forming brief connections with others while in transit. Yet despite the El passengers’ enhanced visual access to the city, the El aestheticizes their perspective. Isabel March’s one-sided view is not intimate; instead, the El “allows the observer to disavow participation in the scenes of urban poverty that he or she witnesses” (Raczkowski 290). The historical facts behind the novel confirm the exclusivity of an Elevated representation of the city: “The Manhattan elevated system, laid out on a north-south axis, bypassed the bulge of the Lower East Side. Like the picturesque perspective, the el thus concealed the city at the same time that it revealed it” (Michael W. Brooks 46).

These El train scenes appear in many critical readings of *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, in readings that equate the passive, picturesque El perspective and the realist novel’s aesthetic discovery of the city. Christophe Den Tandt and Christopher Raczkowski both acknowledge the

intrusion of the sublime amid a picturesque realism, associating the sublime with the “heteroglossia of American urban space” (Den Tandt 28), with the working class city dwellers of the bypassed tenements and the climactic streetcar strike. Both also agree that Howells the realist narrator distances himself from his realist-observer character, Basil. Howells calls Basil “self-enwrap” (164) and reveals the protagonist’s inability to confront the sublime chaos of the city. The critics disagree, however: Raczkowski believes that the novel thus successfully moves beyond the representational problems of the El (303), whereas Den Tandt cannot look past the text’s basis “in the aesthetic of the picturesque endorsed by March” (20).

Central to this debate is a distinction between the text’s (or narrator’s) response to its characters and the language of the text itself. To work through this contention thoroughly is beyond the reach of this paper. It is nevertheless useful to consider the details of these arguments. Most simply, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, as it evokes the El ride, presents another example of textual form as urban transit. Moreover, the El rides confront the “heteroglossia” of the modern city that makes New York so resistant to representation. In this confrontation, written as an encounter with the sublime, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* splits its reader’s perspective off from Basil’s, formally distinguishing the reader’s movement through the text from the characters’ discoveries-in-transit of the city—unlike Whitman, whose formal strategies unite the reader’s movements with all New Yorkers’, as well as his own. *Manhattan Transfer* then takes up this problem of representation, moving beyond Howells’s narratorial asides to structurally divorce the reader’s transit through the text from the characters’ moving perspectives. Dos Passos’s modernism reacts to the difficulties of realism by formally emphasizing the gaps that exist between reader and characters—and the gaps that exist between any one transiting New Yorker

and another. As the montage-like novel jumps between passages and characters, it highlights the incompleteness of any moving vantage point in the modern city, as well as the discrete, atomized itineraries of each character.

The role of the El train in *Manhattan Transfer* exemplifies the novel's distinct approach, which cuts the reader off from the picturesque El perspective that Basil and Isabel March enjoy. Instead, it offers a viewpoint more like that of the bypassed, "erased" pedestrians and apartment dwellers. There are no scenes in *Manhattan Transfer* set within an El train; the characters, and the reader, only encounter them from outside. When an El passes by, it is often with an "annihilating" or "diminishing clatter" (Dos Passos 9, 114). And when Ed Thatcher leans out his window and spots an El "rumbling past" from his apartment (Dos Passos 12), the verb is sonic and not visual, even though the action of the scene anticipates observation rather than hearing. The clamor of the rapidly passing train is as intrusive as its visual "erasing line" (Howells 163), and this is especially explicit in a scene in which Jimmy walks along the street with Ruth Prynne: "He could see Ruth's mouth forming words. . . . an L train drowned out the rest" (Dos Passos 114). As opposed to forming a false impression of "fleeting intimacy" (Howells 64), the El dominates the urban landscape, inhibiting social interaction. The clattering El denies Jimmy, and the reader, access to Ruth's words. Only through the violence of other urban architecture can the El's force be counteracted: "The restaurant door closing behind them choked off the roar of wheels on rails" (Dos Passos 114).

Dos Passos's El intrudes upon the city visually as well as sonically, and its visual qualities take on symbolic meaning beyond that of the "erasing line." The patterns on the pavement made by the sun shining through El tracks range from "striping the blue street with

warm seething stripes” to “barred sunlight” to “brightening redviolet through the latticework of elevated tracks” (Dos Passos 16, 114, 153). Bud Korpenning walks through the first of these, thinking, “No more’n a needle in a haystack” (Dos Passos 16), which accentuates the similarities of the striped light to both a literal haystack and to jail bars. (Although the first-time reader might not yet realize it, Bud has fled to New York City as a criminal.) The ever-present shadow of the tracks symbolically entraps the New Yorkers below it, just as it obscures those same people from its passengers’ view. The El is not wholly negative, however; the delicacy and beauty of the “latticework” is reminiscent of Basil’s view that the El roads are “the gayest things in the world. Perfectly atrocious, of course, but incomparably picturesque!” (Howells 53).

The combination of the beautiful and the ominous that emerges in both texts speaks to the awe and terror that are both manifest in the sublime. Desmond Harding argues that moments of beauty (and I introduce these El track images as an example of such) provide *Manhattan Transfer* with its energy, and that they support the message of “Whitman’s ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,’ which also argued that there were moments in the life of New York that contained perfection and furnished their part toward eternity” (129). An interpretation such as this—which goes against the prevailing evaluation that the novel presents a negative view of the city—prompts me, and perhaps other readers, to reevaluate our reactions to Dos Passos’s El images. Although aesthetically pleasing, these images also suggest the El’s domination over the city, especially when the beautiful patterns of light are “shattered” by passing trains (Dos Passos 114). Through repetition, the text reminds the reader that the El is forceful and “annihilating,” albeit beautiful, evoking the sublime with which Basil struggles to come to terms. Because the narration locates the reader outside of the train with bypassed pedestrians, it uses formal

techniques to reveal the problematic implications of privileging an EI perspective. The reader “sees” the train rushing past, which calls attention to her slower movement through the textual city. Yet the EI riders within those clattering trains are never mentioned; because the EIs remain only inanimate features of *Manhattan Transfer*’s dynamic city, the text fails to represent the view that they *do* offer.

Instead, as the narrative of *Manhattan Transfer* progresses through the turn of the twentieth century and into the 1920s, travel by subway proliferates. Michael W. Brooks argues that the subway is often rhetorically positioned in opposition to skyscrapers, and that “if the skyline symbolized the glorious aspirations of the Wonder City, the subway increasingly came to represent its oppressive day-to-day reality” (107). Dos Passos’s subway scenes reflect the oppressiveness of the subway, emphasizing the closeness of disembodied body parts and the passengers’ gazes upon one another. Because subway transit exaggerates fragmentation and temporarily packs together unconnected people, it exemplifies the more general experience of transit through this textual New York.

Unlike the EI, the subway affords little to no view of the physical city, as it travels primarily underground. A subway ride, then, cannot cinematically unify “contiguous parts of the city’s social fabric without selecting or cutting it up into discrete visual fields” (Raczkowski 289). Instead, passengers enter by descending into a station in one location; they shuttle beneath the city streets, with only advertisements and fellow passengers to observe;¹⁹ and they emerge outside in a new, distant location. The subway’s combination of speed and enclosure divorces its passengers from any sense of direction and from the physical landmarks above that comprise a

¹⁹ Andrew Thacker writes of the London Underground, “Stimulated by the social processes of transport to gaze, one is prevented by the organisation of space within the train from viewing anything but other people” (91).

contiguous route from start- to end-station, not unlike *Manhattan Transfer*'s formal means of disconnecting its textual movement from its narrative(s).

The subway scenes in *Manhattan Transfer* depict a crowd squeezed uncomfortably close together: "In the crammed subway car the messenger boy was pressed up against the back of a tall blond woman who smelled of Mary Garden. Elbows, packages, shoulders, buttocks, jiggled closer with every lurch of the screeching express" (Dos Passos 125). The city crowd of this novel does not allow for a Whitmanian spiritual connection, yet the subway brings out the urban reality of (extreme) physical closeness. In this case, riding the subway prompts the messenger boy—into whose thoughts the narrative then blends—to have a rape fantasy about the woman he is pressed against. This fantasy can only be momentary, however, as the train stops and "he was carried in a rush of people out the door" (Dos Passos 125). The boy's physical proximity to the woman, like his exit from the train, is a passive result of the subway's own movement and its crowdedness. Despite the messenger's disturbing contemplation of rape, the city's movement—and atomization—render his urges moot; even the fantasy works only if the train is to be "stalled, de lights go out, de train wrecked," nor does the boy have "de noive and de jack" (Dos Passos 125). In this New York, the characters' constant state of shuttling, of transit and transfer, inhibits any possibility of personal connection, be it positive and spiritual or violent and destructive.

The subway's shuttling movement in particular emphasizes a vocabulary of transit and transfer that applies to the novel's formal movement. I do not mean to suggest that *Manhattan Transfer* must be read as a subway ride; rather, the dominant features of subway transit offer paradigms for framing the challenges of urban perception replicated by the text.

The subway exaggerates the theatrical display²⁰ on view from the El by turning its passengers' gazes on one another, instead of on city dwellers beyond the confines of the train. The objects of subway riders' view are removed from the contexts of their own lives. Ruth Prynne, worried that she might have cancer, sees "a trainload of jiggling corpses" (Dos Passos 250). She projects her own preoccupations onto the people she commutes with, people so devoid of personalities that, to Ruth, they might just as well be lifeless. These bodies' mutation into corpses calls attention to the inability of subway passengers to relate to one another on a personal level, and the text puts the reader in Ruth's position, revealing no more about who the individuals in the subway car are. In another subway moment, however, James Merivale overhears two girls talking about him, saying, "'Look at the stripes that one has. . . . He's a D.S.C.'" (Dos Passos 233, ellipsis original). In this case the reader knows more about Merivale—his family background, for instance—than the girls, who see him only as a soldier. The reader experiences the scene from Merivale's point of view of overhearing, realizing that others are making judgments about him. However, the reader is also distanced from Merivale, and actually knows considerably little about his background. Critics often note that *Manhattan Transfer's* characters are flat types,²¹ meaning that they undergo little character development. The text offers minimal information about individual characters to the reader, who encounters them only in certain contexts, in passages fragmented from the unrevealed narratives of their personal lives. This formal device puts readers in the position of transiting through the textual city; the gap between

²⁰ William Chapman Sharpe, "From El to Hell: On Stage in the Urban Underworld" *EREA: Revue Electronique d'Etudes sur le Monde Anglophone* 7.2 (2010): <http://erea.revues.org/1085>.

²¹ E. D. Lowry, "The Lively Art of *Manhattan Transfer*" *PMLA* 84.6 (1969): 1629; Bollinger, 79.

reader and characters inhibits meaningful connections or identification, just as subway and El passengers project flat identities onto the city dwellers whom they view in passing.

The view of fellow New Yorkers from within the city also serves to commodify their bodies. As with the catalogues of images seen from the ferry (and throughout the novel), Dos Passos uses the subway to comment on the modern city's capitalistic mechanization and soullessness. Similar to the "elbows, packages, shoulders, buttocks" above (Dos Passos 125), another subway passage describes that "faces, hats, hands, newspapers jiggled in the fetid roaring subway car like corn in a popper" (Dos Passos 216). These lists evoke the crowdedness of the subway and the wandering gaze of its passengers. In addition, the popcorn analogy recalls the opening ferry's apple press in its description of people as food commodities under pressure. Again, these techniques are not unique to the subway; in fact, their pervasiveness throughout the text suggests that the city necessarily affects its inhabitants in these negative ways and also forces the reader to read in this frantic, superficial, and commodifying way.

Not just the view within the subway, but the physical motion of the subway, exemplifies the novel's formal qualities. Passages about the subway repeatedly employ the word "jiggled" (Dos Passos 125, 216, 250), calling attention to the involuntary movement of the passengers. It gestures toward the frantic pace of life in the city and toward New Yorkers' lack of agency within it—as they travel laterally in one direction, they cannot escape the uncomfortable jiggling effects of the subway. For the reader, this jiggling may be akin to the jumps in perspective and breaks between passages; the narrative is not a smooth or straightforward one.

Each subway passage also mentions New York's express-local system.²² Seen from a local train, "the downtown express passed clattering in yellow light, window telescoping window till they overlapped like scales" (Dos Passos 216). This is a visual manifestation of the novel's "atomised units in transit" (Brooker 53). The overlapping windows allow passengers from each train to exchange glances, yet they are physically prevented from ever interacting. And as this express passes "clattering in yellow light," it recalls the El trains passing pedestrians—even when riding a subway, in this city there will always be someone who is going to be speeding by even more quickly. The textual structure also mimics the express-local effect, as it switches between characters—some aging more quickly than others—and as it gives a fuller picture of some of their lives than others. Although the fragmented text prevents the reader from connecting to any of its flat characters, the reader gets a closer view of some of them than others, becoming atomized herself as she shuttles through the textual city.

Like Ruth, who "at Ninetysixth . . . had to change for the local" (Dos Passos 250), the reader transfers between passages, catapulted "clattering" and "roar[ing] shrilly" through scenes bursting with image catalogues and then abruptly switching perspective with the line break on the page (Dos Passos 216, 250). I have shown how *Manhattan Transfer* guides its reader into the role of a transiting, atomized New Yorker, gesturing toward the problems of representation that Howells confronts on the El, the problems of oversimplifying, aestheticizing, and projecting identities onto people who appear as flat types. I will later argue that the novel's form opens spaces of transference that allow for a view of the city beyond the isolating and commodifying one that it seems to confine the reader in, as on the train.

²² The four-track system that allows for running separate subways making both local and express stops "in 1904 became (and still remains) a unique feature of the New York subway" (Michael W. Brooks 13).

Walking

Walking, because of its independence from technology, presents an alternative to modern forms of urban transit.²³ With its human pace and scale, it allows a close-up view of other pedestrians, as well as of the physical urban setting. On the street, perhaps, is the potential for city dwellers to forge connections with others unlike on public transportation, where all are the disembodied, commodified objects of one another's gazes.

Whitman, in his walking poems "City of Orgies" and "Song of the Open Road," celebrates a union of people across time and space just as in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." For him, the common act of passing is important: "as I pass O Manhattan, your frequent and swift flash of eyes offering me love, / Offering response to my own—these repay me" ("City of Orgies" 7-8). The "frequent and swift flash[es]" of this Manhattan are comparable to the overwhelming speed and synesthesia of *Manhattan Transfer*. Yet in Whitman's view, city dwellers may communicate in an instant, in a fleeting look; through that look Whitman hopes to join himself orgiastically with the collective of the city. According to the poem, views of the city's physical structures cannot offer the same effect. However, in "Song of the Open Road," he writes of the pavements and houses and windows: "From all that has touch'd you I believe you have imparted to yourselves, and now would impart the same secretly to me, / From the living and the dead you have peopled your impassive surfaces, and the spirits thereof would be evident and amicable with me" (section 3). The spirit of those who have passed before lives on in the city's surfaces, making the city exponentially more dynamic. Just as Whitman communes with past and future

²³ Michael Cowan argues that "walking in the modern city provided . . . writers with a crucial way to experience that city — a mode often explored consciously as a counterpoint to such tempting perspectives as those made available by modern technology in the form of views from skyscrapers or from rapidly moving vehicles" (282).

ferry passengers via his crossing, he connects to these spirits as he walks the pavements with them. Again, physical transit facilitates a metaphorical transfer, and the inanimate does not necessarily prohibit human or spiritual relations.

This connective affirmation in Whitman's walking may not be universal, however. Basil March, in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, also enjoys strolling among the variety of the city crowds, but Howells gestures toward the ambivalence of doing so: "This immunity from acquaintance, this touch-and-go quality in their New York sojourn, this almost loss of individuality at times . . . was a relief, though Mrs. March . . . questioned whether it were not perhaps too relaxing to the moral fiber. March refused to explore his conscience" (Howells 268). As the Marches take evening walks, sit in the park, and watch young couples go by, they relax in the anonymity of the city. Unlike Whitman's intense identification with all who pass and whom he passes, Basil is able to remove himself from participation in the city because he sees those who walk by only as types. As on the El, the strolling Basil observes with an aestheticizing gaze: "He gave a whimsical shrug for the squalor" in a tenement district (Howells 271). Howells, again distancing his narrating voice from the protagonist, remarks that Basil chooses to ignore the morally problematic nature of his pedestrian observations.

These examples, comparable as they are with my previous readings of the same authors' works, reveal that the walking perspective may not be so different from a technologically mediated view after all. *Manhattan Transfer* demonstrates this variety of responses mediated by different modes of transportation. Just as with the catalogues of objects seen from the ferry and subway, walkers pass by streams of images: "In the heavy heat streets, stores, people in Sunday clothes, strawhats, sunshades, surfacecars, taxis" (Dos Passos 115). But as I noted in discussing

the subway perspective, Dos Passos does not employ different formal devices to contrast different types of transit. Instead, the novel's image catalogues have more striking similarities than differences. Rather than contrasting them, I read this repeated sentence structure, like repeated phrases, as an element of the novel's spatial form, which attempts to replicate the experience of moving through modern New York. The narrator and reader always see in streams of objects, whether walking, riding a vehicle, or even sitting in a restaurant and watching the city pass by.

Nevertheless, walking in particular as a mode of transit is central to *Manhattan Transfer*, and more specifically to its most prominent characters, Ellen and Jimmy. Heidi E. Bollinger calls for analysis of the walking that persists throughout the novel, and she proceeds to argue that the reader herself becomes a type of walker: a *flâneur*. *Flânerie*, in the tradition of Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, is a useful lens through which to examine walking in *Manhattan Transfer*. First, the *flâneur* is unique in his distanced relation to the members of the crowd, and his critique of modernity thus deals with the tension between urban atomization and proximity. Second, the *flâneur*'s ambivalent gaze reflects a related tension, as exemplified by the difference between the Whitman and Howells texts: that the presence of crowds may either facilitate or inhibit spiritual connections. *Flânerie*'s tenuous detachment from commodity capitalism is "potentially revolutionary²⁴ but equally capable of providing escapist entertainment for the masses" (Keller 302). Third, neither Ellen nor Jimmy fully embodies the role of the *flâneur*, and what makes their walking different reveals how the *flâneur*'s perspective is, like views of the city offered by its public transportation, a symptom of the impersonal modern city. I

²⁴ "To endow this crowd with a soul is the very special purpose of the *flâneur*" (Benjamin "Motifs" 195, cited in Keller 302). And for Keller, the revolutionary aspect that *flânerie* plays in *Manhattan Transfer* is class mingling and the forming of "cross-class alliances" (302).

will return to the implications of *flânerie* on the reader's textual transit and transfer, but before discussing form, I will show how the major walkers in the novel point toward an alternative urban mode of transportation. Although walking scenes lend themselves to cataloging—which is important on the level of form—they also turn the gaze on the walker him/herself.

Ellen, as a young adult, demonstrates the thrill and the danger of walking on the streets. After a walk through Central Park and then a bus ride, in which her fragmented eavesdropping becomes a type of aural *flânerie*, Ellen will not apologize for being late: “I haven't had such a good time in years. I've had the whole day all to myself and I walked all the way down from 105th Street to Fiftyninth through the Park. It was full of the most comical people” (Dos Passos 117). She defines her walk both as time to herself and by her amused observation of others, setting herself apart from the crowd, like a *flâneuse*. Her enjoyment of the walk also points to *flânerie*, with its entertained critical gaze verging on consumption.²⁵

Yet Ellen's statement is puzzling, because just two pages earlier, while on her walk, she thinks, “Why hadn't she taken the L?” (Dos Passos 115). The enclosure of the El would protect her from the openness of the street, allowing her to aestheticize the city as Basil March does. Instead, the crowd intrudes upon her detached enjoyment of the city, interrupting her *flânerie*. She “becomes an object of consumption as well as a consumer, a spectacle as well as an observer of spectacles” (Bollinger 82), because of “the harassment that critics claim disqualifies women from experiencing *flânerie*” (Keller 321). Violently exposed to others on her walk, the cataloging gaze turns on her with a single semicolon: “Two sailors were sprawling on a bench in the sun; one of them popped his lips as she passed, she could feel their seagreedy eyes cling stickily to

²⁵ Ellen's detached walking also aligns with *flânerie* when, on another walk, she watches “aloof, as if looking through thick glass into an aquarium” (Dos Passos 129).

her neck, her thighs, her ankles. She tried to keep her hips from swaying so much as she walked” (Dos Passos 115). Ellen is not detached from the crowd, but a member of it, equally subject to others’ gazes. The “tactile, physical” way that members of the crowd look at one another is not joyful, as in “City of Orgies,” but threatening (Keller 321). Looking back at the paragraph before the one in which Ellen notices the sailors, the violence of her vision stands out: the people and objects “broke and crinkled brightly about her grazing her with sharp cutting glints as if she were walking through piles of metalshavings” (Dos Passos 115). Bollinger reads the “glints” only in terms of a fragmented, shifting perspective (82), but considering Ellen’s harassment by the tactile gaze, her metaphorically physical encounter with the scene around her takes on a broader significance. She has never been detached from the crowd like a *flâneuse*; she struggles to move through it. This is why, Keller and Cowan argue, Ellen retreats from walking as the novel progresses. Both reference her final scene, when she refuses to acknowledge the burned Anna Cohen as a human, followed by her ride in a taxi.²⁶ Ellen herself becomes depicted in mechanical terms as she succumbs to a technological upper-class life in the city.

Jimmy, on the other hand, remains a walker throughout the novel, and the difference between his and Ellen’s relationships to walking exemplifies the two ways in which the characters can respond to the city: by succumbing to the urban vortex or by rejecting it altogether. Jimmy’s walking is decidedly not that of the *flâneur*. Jimmy does not walk to observe the city crowds, nor does he derive enjoyment from doing so. When Stan quotes Whitman, “City of orgies walks and joys” (Dos Passos 147), Jimmy dismisses him, voicing a wish to see the world because he has lived his whole life in New York. The boisterous, suicidal Stan identifies

²⁶ Keller likewise demonstrates the significance of Ellen’s taxi ride after her abortion.

himself with Whitman's joyful declaration, but Jimmy exposes the divide between the poem's vision of the city and his experience of New York. Jimmy has no meaningful personal connections to others; his wanderlust hints that the Whitmanian mode of walking is not possible in this modern Manhattan.

In contrast to Ellen and other walkers, Jimmy walks as an obsessive physical compulsion, a response to his psychological distress. In a recurring phrase, Jimmy "walk[s] on" (Dos Passos 95, 200, 310, 342), sometimes "desperately" (Dos Passos 200), sometimes "doggedly" (Dos Passos 310). "There's nowhere in particular he wants to go" (Dos Passos 310), revealing that this aimless walking is itself the obsession. He walks through the rain and cold, through nightmarish visions about skyscrapers and journalism and his failing marriage. For Cowan, this is "somehow a more 'adult' reaction than escaping by machine" (Dos Passos 301). Perhaps what Cowan struggles to articulate—minus his moral judgment lauding a heroic Jimmy—is that Jimmy's walking is nonconformist. Walking allows him to step outside of the social order. Whereas the *flâneur* distances himself from the crowd with his aestheticizing view and Ellen is threatened by the crowd's visual touches, Jimmy walks to address his own inner struggles, and, as he walks, he feels no relation to the people he passes. In Jimmy's walking scenes, his almost inscrutable, stream-of-consciousness thoughts are interspersed with images of the scenery he passes, but rarely with visions of people or body parts other than his own or those of his fantasies.

As the novel progresses, Jimmy's walking becomes more crazed, culminating in his perambulatory reveries of the final chapters. Before boarding the ferry to New Jersey, "Jimmy Herf is walking west along Twentythird Street, laughing to himself" (Dos Passos 341). But his walking changes drastically once he is out of Manhattan: "Then he walks on, taking pleasure in

breathing, in the beat of his blood, in the tread of his feet on the pavement” (Dos Passos 342). As before, Jimmy “walks on” without a destination, yet the language is different. The sentence is straightforward, not metaphorical, and Jimmy for once enjoys his walking, becomes attuned to his body. This is not to say that this moment is revelatory, that Jimmy has succeeded in escaping the city, or that the ending should be read as a happy one—this is principally an ambiguous and uncertain finale. But this vision does introduce the possibility of another, more pleasurable form of walking that was previously absent in the novel. This implies a mode of moving and seeing that would be a suitable alternative to the options available to frantic and atomized modern New Yorkers. Despite Cowan’s overly uncritical praise of walking as an alternative to modern technologies, he provides an insightful and nuanced summation:

In the view of Dos Passos, Walt Whitman’s open road had become unavoidably a metropolitan street, so that if the individual wished to find psychological and moral experiences equivalent to those proclaimed by Whitman as lying along the road, he must first begin his search for such experiences, as Whitman himself had done, in the street—in the hope, however tenuous, that the street did not prove merely a treadmill, threading through endlessly turning revolving doors. (303)

This search for a meaningful experience of the city is transferred onto the reader, who transits through a text that, as I have shown, mimics and replicates the movement of the material city. Just as the text provides the reader with boat- and train-related vantage points, it also puts her in the position of a city pedestrian.²⁷ Bollinger’s argument about reader *flânerie* is particularly useful to consider, because she demonstrates how *Manhattan Transfer* both guides and comments on the reader’s itineraries through the text. She writes that, to “successfully

²⁷ Many critics point to ways in which the novel’s formal structure transforms the reader into a *flâneur*. Keller writes that the fast-paced cataloging of images “replicat[es] the effect of a crowd member rubbernecking while taking in everything about the city” (319). E. D. Lowry states, “The effect is comparable to that produced by the procession of faces glimpsed on a crowded street. Some may be singled out for close scrutiny, others may be observed for only a fleeting moment” (1631).

navigate this potentially disorienting narrative experience, readers are compelled to adopt the role of a Baudelarian *flâneur*, or man of the crowd, and meander through Dos Passos' crowded city novel observing the field of activity with detached interest" (Bollinger 74). This happens because the novel's fragmentation "abruptly undercut[s]" emotion, preventing the reader from identifying with the characters just as the characters are atomized from one another (Bollinger 85). Bollinger's reading suggests that Dos Passos ultimately criticizes *flânerie* for its participation in the problems of the city. The text thus implicates its reader for taking up *flânerie*'s "capricious, noncommittal nature: momentary observation of the interior lives of other urban subjects without commitment or responsibility to them" (Bollinger 86).²⁸ Like Howells, then, this narrator exposes the failings of detached, aestheticizing walks through the city, while at the same time replicating the troublesome effects of such walking for the reader.

But does *Manhattan Transfer*, with its modernist form, not respond to the contradiction that *A Hazard of New Fortunes* runs up against? I argue that, although Dos Passos compels the reader to take up the detached gaze—so that she participates in moving through the city as the characters themselves experience it—his novel leaves blank, unexplained space in which the reader may discover her own itineraries. For example, the vision of Jimmy's straightforward exilic walking, together with the text's implicit criticism of *flânerie* and of the reader's participation in it, closes the novel by opening further questions about the possibilities of walking. Bollinger reads the ending as an escape from the city for the reader, just as it is for Jimmy, but I contend that Dos Passos does not offer an answer as simple as escape. According to

²⁸ Keller too suggests that Dos Passos's use of *flânerie* is to make a moral argument: "Dos Passos aimed to foster class and gender consciousness in his readers, even though the characters who practice *flânerie* are themselves only dimly aware of their condition, just as Benjamin used the *flâneur* in a 'materialist pedagogy' for educating his contemporaries without asserting that the *flâneur*'s own intentions were revolutionary" (317).

the common critical consensus, the novel may not offer an answer at all. Despite Jimmy's more wholesome walking style, he cannot imagine what his escape from the city might look like—he has to hitch a ride to travel an ambiguous distance “pretty far” from New York (Dos Passos 342). Therefore even if the ending criticizes *flânerie* and offers an alternative vision of walking, it leaves neither character nor reader with the satisfaction of having found a suitable means of transit through which to interact with the urban world. Nevertheless, its form demonstrates an awareness of itineraries beyond just those of the characters.

Conclusion

As I argue that *Manhattan Transfer* reacts to the modern city within its form, I will apply Sam See's use of spatial form theory to understand the novel, extending his view from a focus on the temporal to the spatial features of movement. See contends that *Manhattan Transfer*, by replicating modern speed culture in its fragmented, fast-paced form, “re-place[s] . . . space annihilated by speed” (365). I add to this assertion that, in remaking that space textually, the novel's form allows for innumerable modes of transit through it. This, as I term it, is the space of transfer between text and reader.

A common critical reading distinguishes between *Manhattan Transfer*'s difficulty with thematically representing the modern city versus its formal manipulation of New York: Dos Passos attempts to change the city only in his role as narrative structurer. Gerd Hurm writes that “the invisible relations underlying the urban jungle are made transparent in the cubist restructuring of space” (228), that “collectivity . . . is suggested only indirectly in the politics of

form and perception” (233).²⁹ When E. D. Lowry states that the novel ought to “be understood as a moral act or gesture,” he highlights “Dos Passos’ technique, emphasizing the artist’s dynamic restructuring of his world, . . . as a concrete embodiment of the idea of reality as the arena in which man *acts*” (1629, italics original). Many—myself included—do not read the novel as proof that literary world making can have a direct bearing on the extra-literary world, as Lowry seems to imply. However, as Lowry declares of the novel’s message, “man must transform his life into a moral and intellectual ‘picaresque’: an adventurous exploration of new modes of thought and experience” (1632). This notion of the “picaresque” underlines the centrality of movement to any attempt at understanding modernity’s complexity.

Bart Keunen does not go so far as Lowry as to suggest that *Manhattan Transfer* has social or political power; Keunen’s reading is more in line with Hurm’s, emphasizing the limits of literary form to incite social action. He identifies multiple chronotopes³⁰ at work in the novel, revealing another means by which narrative structure “reveals the complexity of the world” (Keunen 434). For Keunen, the significance of *Manhattan Transfer*’s montage is its very perplexity: “twentieth-century culture seems to be a complex whole of networks that refuses to be transposed into some kind of comforting artistic order,” and this novel’s form “allows the reader to doubt his own representations, to see them as mere constructions” (435). According to this critical interpretation, too, form replicates the modern urban experience and, in doing so,

²⁹ This is a key point argued throughout Hurm’s book—in regard to other novels in addition to *Manhattan Transfer*: “Aesthetic mode and fictional form often substitute and displace the explicit social impulse in the modern city novel” (Hurm 331).

³⁰ The chronotope is Bakhtin’s term for the means by which time is materialized in space in a literary text. Each of the chronotopes that Keunen identifies in *Manhattan Transfer*—the idyllic, the documentary, the self-referential, and the hyperrealist—carries with it its own meaning or perspective from the literary era in which it was predominant. He writes that, within their montage, the chronotopes “are used to qualify and reorient each other” (Keunen 422).

demonstrates the impossibility of any complete comprehension of reality. Rather, one must continually move back and forth between different representations.

Although reading *Manhattan Transfer* in this way challenges the relevance of the novel as an art form in the modern world, I assert that the text's form justifies its importance by unsettling the modern New York around which its narrative centers. Whereas the characters fail to read the city as ultimately unknowable, the textual form, in its very complexity, creates the spaces through which the reader can transit, become more familiar with the city, but then confront its evasion of her mastery. Learning to see through the lens of the collective, noticing the connections among characters and places, the reader may discover the networks of modernity—although this may not enable her to uncover those connections in the extra-literary social realm. This critique of modernity implicates the novel itself, which attempts to represent the city within its pages. Therefore, the space opened by the reader's confusion takes on importance in its very openness: the reader need not read the city as the text represents it. Instead, the novel's own insecurity about the power of literary representation allows the reader to explore multiple itineraries through the literary New York; the novel does not determine the reader's experiences of passing through the text, despite Bollinger's and Madsen's arguments that *Manhattan Transfer* leads its reader into a trap.

I argue that the novel's abrupt ending undermines the text's mastery over the reader, as well as the reader's mastery over the text. I read the ending as optimistic, although not for the same reason as does Bollinger, who sees it as a hopeful escape from the modern city. Sam See, on the other hand, reads the ending optimistically in light of spatial form theory. He argues that because of “‘the disparity’ between [the] narrative's preceding cycles and abrupt conclusion,”

“we must return to the novel just when we’ve thought we’ve finished it” (362). The sudden conclusion disregards the repetitive, vortical movement that defines the novel. Just as Jimmy’s final words, “pretty far” (Dos Passos 342), suspend him in ongoing transit, the reader continues to move in an “enforced hermeneutic” (See 362). On one level, this traps the reader in a textual urban vortex. However, the ending also provides insight into the sources of that vortex and suggests ways in which it could potentially be combated. According to See, the very abruptness of the ending slows the reader’s comprehension and thereby becomes a reaction against modern speed culture. I extend this understanding of the ending to the spatial dimensions of the reader’s movement through the text. *Manhattan Transfer* may compel its first-time reader to transit through the city as its characters do—detached and atomized—but it ultimately criticizes that mode of transit. So, if the reader does choose to re-enter this textual Manhattan, she now knows the novel’s critique and has discovered the existence of other modes of transit, as in Jimmy’s final walking scene. In addition, the proliferation of repeated references becomes more apparent in a re-reading, once the reader has some familiarity with the spaces of the text. A re-transiting through *Manhattan Transfer* not only slows the reader as she discovers further internal references; it alters her itineraries through the text altogether. Her developing understanding of those connections, combined with her search for less detached modes of transit, may change which plot lines, characters, and phrases she focuses on in her repeated cycling through the text. A re-reader may find alternate routes through the novel.

Reading the novel’s ending as a de Certeauvian frontier or bridge helps to illuminate its role in the narrative. According to de Certeau, the establishment of a frontier “is *also* a passing through or over,” and “in recrossing the bridge and coming back within the enclosure the traveler

henceforth finds there the exteriority that he had first sought by going outside and then fled by returning” (de Certeau 127-9, italics original). *Manhattan Transfer*’s ending avoids resolving the conflict; instead it changes how one may read or re-read what came before, now knowing that the city is perhaps inescapable but also that a more straightforward type of walking might be possible.

In re-reading, more connections, repetitions, and internal references—more complexities of the city networks—reveal themselves. Yet even as the characters and fragmented passages become more familiar to the reader, the text will continue to make her doubt her newfound understandings: the detached montage perspective leaves gaps in the narrative as well as on the page. In re-reading, the chronologies of the characters’ lives become less opaque or convoluted, but the text will never fully disclose them. These lives are not completely represented within the pages of the novel. The reader’s resulting endless cycling between participation and detachment, between comprehension and doubt, traps her in the urban vortex, but also offers her the space in which to go on various itineraries through the city. The novel’s form simultaneously exposes urban connections, countering atomization through its collective perspective, and demonstrates the limits of artistic ordering, instructing its reader to doubt representations.

I term this back-and-forth the space of transfer in reference to the concept of narrative transference as defined by Peter Brooks. This theory applies Freudian psychoanalysis to reading, locating the reader’s movement between the position of analyst (interpretation) and patient (transference) and “complicat[ing] any conception of interpretation as working from outside the text—as not implicated in its production” (Peter Brooks 58). Brooks writes, “The work of the reader is not only to grasp the story as much as possible, but to judge its relation to the narrative

discourse that conveys it” (61). As I have demonstrated, *Manhattan Transfer* facilitates that transference in the disconnect between its narrative theme and structure, between its characters’ itineraries through the city and those of the reader.

This constant shuttling emphasizes the importance of the act of passing by, which de Certeau locates in the everyday practice of walking. He equates walking in a city to reading a text, both acts being unique movements through the “immobility of an order” (de Certeau 111), within “a place constituted by a system of signs” (de Certeau 117). *Manhattan Transfer* remains an immobile text like any other, but its fragments and gaps call attention to the reading process as a spatial story. And even if the novel’s modernist outlook questions the possibility of literary representation—and of, in the extra-literary world, living well in the modern city—its form transfers to the reader a mobile mode of perception that may be able to resist the text itself.

Dos Passos’s 1936 essay “The Workman and His Tools” confirms the author’s desire to write texts that allow for this very dynamic. He writes, “[A writer] whittles at the words and phrases of today and makes forms for the minds of later generations. . . . A writer who writes straight is an architect of history” (“Workman” 8). The architect designs immobile structures through which future inhabitants will wander; he creates the spaces in which spatial stories happen. In *Manhattan Transfer*, Dos Passos constructs a literary city out of the materials of the modern experience. By opening spaces for dynamic itineraries through the text and for the eternal struggle over narrative control between text and reader, he subverts the technology of his age upon which the novel is built. Dos Passos’s *Manhattan* transits and transferences thus challenge the power of technology over the modern masses as much as they call into question literature’s political potential.

Reader transit, transfer, and itineraries need not only apply to modernist literature and the experience of the modern metropolis, however. Any text, although unchanging in the words set down on its pages, negotiates between the spaces constructed by its author, inhabited by its characters or narrators, and explored by its readers. These spaces are both textual, of the words and forms themselves, and imagined, of the themes and stories developed. Dos Passos's use of spatial form in *Manhattan Transfer*—read together with Whitman's and Howells's own textual transits through New York—emphasizes the ability and the limits of a text to guide its reader's itineraries and to achieve a metaphorical or spiritual transference. In certain regards, it is empowering to conceive of literary texts in this way: that they cannot fully control our unique movements through them. But neither can our interpretations control the spaces of texts themselves. The concept of reader itineraries importantly reminds us that, because we “pass through” both texts and extra-literary material spaces, we cannot represent or know completely the spatial stories of other people. Total views are immobilizing, and they never in fact present a whole picture. Instead, in turning our attention toward our ever-changing transits, we can examine how various modes of movement facilitate and/or inhibit transferences and connections between texts and readers, between authors and readers, and even among transiting people outside the realm of literature.

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