CYRUS R. K. PATELL

Introduction

Now Dick had listened to all this conversation. Being an enterprising young man, he thought he saw a chance for a speculation, and determined to avail himself of it.

Accordingly he stepped up to the two just as Frank's uncle was about leaving, and said, "I know all about the city, sir; I'll show him around, if you want me to."

The gentleman looked a little curiously at the ragged figure before him.

"So you are a city boy, are you?"

"Yes, sir," said Dick, "I've lived here ever since I was a baby."

"And you know all about the public buildings, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

"And the Central Park?"

"Yes, sir. I know my way all round."

The gentleman looked thoughtful.

"I don't know what to say, Frank," he remarked after a while. "It is rather a novel proposal. He isn't exactly the sort of guide I would have picked out for you. Still he looks honest. He has an open face, and I think can be depended upon."

"I wish he wasn't so ragged and dirty," said Frank, who felt a little shy about being seen with such a companion.

Horatio Alger, Jr., *Ragged Dick*.[1]

What is it that the Kander and Ebb song says about New York City? "If I can make it there, / I'd make it anywhere." From its origins as a Dutch mercantile center to its modern incarnation as the financial center of the United States and a target for the terrorists of 9/11, New York, as the song suggests, has held a special place in the country's national mythology.

In "New York, New York" (1977), the singer wears "vagabond shoes" and "long[s] to stray," to "wake up in the city / That doesn't sleep" so that his "little town blues" will "melt" away.[2] Fred Ebb's lyrics draw on the rags-to-riches mythology made famous in Horatio Alger, Jr.'s bestselling novel *Ragged Dick, or, Street Life in New York with the Boot-Blacks* (1868),

which traces young Richard Hunter's rise from a vagabond boot-black to a respectable, upwardly mobile clerk with a penchant for learning. What does young Dick have going for him as the novel opens? Pluck, conscience, a streak of altruism, and the ability to recognize an opportunity: Dick thinks of his encounter with Mr. Whitney and his nephew Frank as "a chance for a speculation." What sets Dick's story of upward mobility in motion, however, is his ability to use the local knowledge that he possesses – his street smarts – to guide Frank around the city. Dick knows "all about the city," "all about the public buildings" and "the Central Park." Frank regards him skeptically at first: "'I wish he wasn't so ragged and dirty,' said Frank, who felt a little shy about being seen with such a companion." But Dick turns out to be a very good companion indeed and, as Frank puts it afterward, "a capital guide." Dressed in some "half worn" clothes that Frank no longer needs, Dick shows Frank around the island of Manhattan: the two boys wander from Chatham Square up Broadway to Madison Square and then Fifth Avenue, all the way up to the still-unfinished Central Park. By the end of the tour, which lasts a "few hours," Dick has formed a "strong attachment" to Frank and promises to stay in touch. When Frank sends him a letter from boarding school, Dick writes back, promising to "go round" with Frank next time he's in the city: "There's lots of things you didn't see when you was here before."[3]

This *Cambridge Companion to the Literature of New York* presents you with a series of "capital guides," opinionated companions who will show you around some of the different eras, enclaves, genres, and ideas that mark the city's literary and cultural history. (But by no means all of them: the city's literary history is too rich and complex to be surveyed completely in a book such as this, so don't *kvetch* too much if you find that some familiar figure has been omitted or given short shrift. Or, rather, *kvetch* all you want: complaining, after all, is one of New York's great cultural traditions.)

Taking you on a temporal as well as a geographical tour of the city, our guides treat their subjects as if each were a neighborhood, pointing out its distinctive landmarks and offering glimpses into its particular wealth of local knowledge. This tactic is fitting, because New York is still the city of neighborhoods that E. B. White described in his extended essay *Here is New York*, first published in *Holiday* magazine in 1948 and then in book form the following year. Although it is less and less true that "many a New Yorker spends a lifetime within the confines of an area smaller than a country village," the sense of neighborhood that White identified remains strong. Local knowledge offers comfort when you're in your neighborhood, but can make you feel subtly ill at ease when you're away from it: "Let [a New Yorker] walk two blocks from his corner and he is in a strange land and will feel

uneasy till he gets back."[4] Even diehard New Yorkers, it seems, can use a tour guide when they're off in some unfamiliar part of the city, though most would be loath to admit it.

It is, however, precisely that sense of uneasiness that drives the literature and culture of New York City. Its greatest writers and artists have tended to be explorers, moving beyond their comfortable neighborhoods, embracing rather than shrinking from the experience of difference. Some have attributed this to the city's Dutch past. Kenneth T. Jackson and David S. Dunbar, the editors of the anthology *Empire City*, put it this way: "Unlike Boston, which was founded as a kind of religious experiment, New Amsterdam was founded for the purpose of making money." Commenting on an account of New Amsterdam included in Nicolaes van Wassenaer's *Historisch Verhael* [Historical Account], they note that "the countinghouse, not the church, was the most important building in town."[5] This emphasis on making money sets in place a logic of exchange, which begins with the exchange of money and goods, but expands to include the exchange of cultures and practices as the city itself grows and expands.

In his introduction to the anthology *Writing New York*, Philip Lopate postulates that "there is such a thing as 'New York writing,' and that it goes beyond the coincidence of many superb authors having resided and worked in the city." According to Lopate, "New York writing flows from the rhythm and mode of being that this singular place imposes on everyone who lives in it or even visits it at length … [New York] began as a cosmopolitan, international port, a walking city with a vital street life and a housing shortage, and stayed that way. The more the metropolis grew, the more it attracted writers."[6] Arising from the rich variety of experiences to be found on the streets and in the neighborhoods of the city, New York writing dramatizes the ways in which difference – whether it is based on culture, ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, or class – is not a problem to be solved, but rather an opportunity for individual and cultural growth.

The intellectual historian Thomas Bender has suggested that New York sometimes seems un-American because of its emphasis on difference. "It is puzzling but true," writes Bender, "that the outlook associated with New York's cosmopolitan experience has been unable to establish itself as an American standard." Often, Bender argues, "American history – and the meaning of America – has been framed as a political and cultural dialectic" between Puritan New England and Jeffersonian Virginia: "In spite of the narrowness and purity of the Puritan dream of a 'city upon a hill' and of agrarian Jeffersonianism, these myths have come to be associated with the essential America, evoking the virtues of the small town and the agricultural frontier." As Bender notes, Puritanism and Jeffersonianism are very

different ideologies: "one is religious, the other secular; one hierarchical, the other egalitarian; one town-oriented, the other rural; one reminiscent of the medieval worldview, the other drawing upon the Enlightenment." But in Bender's analysis, despite their differences in outlook, what Puritanism and Jeffersonianism share is this: "both reject the idea of difference. Neither can give positive cultural or political value to heterogeneity or conflict. Each in its own way is xenophobic, and that distances both of them from the conditions of modern life, especially as represented by the historic cosmopolitanism of New York and, increasingly, other cities in the United States."[7] As the epitome of US urban culture, New York can sometimes seem like the most un-American place in the country, a residue perhaps from the time when, as Eric Homberger points out in his chapter on New York's immigrant cultures at the turn into the twentieth century, New York was "the most 'foreign' of American cities": in 1910, over 40 percent of the city's population was born abroad.

New York's cosmopolitanism arises from the points of contact among its different neighborhoods and among the cultures and subcultures they represent. It arises from acts of literal crossing from one neighborhood into another, whether for work or for play, and in zones where neighborhoods abut one another or even overlap. It arises from conversations across cultural (and sometimes even linguistic) boundaries. New York's history is marked by what the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah calls "cosmopolitan contamination." Cultures, in Appiah's account, never tend toward purity: they tend toward change, toward mixing and miscegenation, toward an "endless process of imitation and revision."[8] Cultures are all about "conversation across boundaries." Such conversations, Appiah writes, "can be delightful, or just vexing: what they mainly are, though, is inevitable."[9] New York's history demonstrates, however, that if cultures tend toward mixing, the process of cosmopolitan change is never easy, and sometimes it is violent. The close proximity in which New York's different peoples have been forced to live with one another has often had the effect of producing a kind of cultural retrenchment and an insistence on cultural purity. What we see in many of the writings that the *Cambridge Companion* investigates is a dramatization of the vicissitudes of cosmopolitan contamination and, more often than not, a sense of why it is important to embrace, rather than resist, difference.

In comparison to Puritan Boston, the New Amsterdam described by Russell Shorto and others seems almost modern with its ethnic diversity, multiculturalism, and (at least theoretical) emphasis on religious tolerance.[10] By the 1640s, although there were fewer than one thousand residents in New Amsterdam, there were eighteen different languages being spoken there. The dominant language, of course, was not English, but Dutch. Indeed, the fact

that the earliest narratives about New Amsterdam are all written in Dutch helps to explain why so many American literary histories have centered their accounts on New England.

Typical approaches to the history of American writing still tend to unfold by emphasizing the importance of Boston and Philadelphia to the emerging national culture, with occasional detours south to Jefferson's Virginia. Most college survey courses in US literature undervalue New York's contribution to American literary history: they commonly begin with some Native American creation stories and Columbus's letters, before launching into Puritanism and a procession of New England writers, leavened by one Philadelphia writer (Charles Brockden Brown) and two New Yorkers (Washington Irving and Walt Whitman) – three, if you include Herman Melville. New York receives little attention as a literary center even, curiously, in courses that include the turn into the twentieth century, when New York was clearly the site at which the national cultural mythology was being produced by new mass media and by the publishing industry. One of the goals of this *Cambridge Companion* is to suggest what a reconfigured US literary history might look like if its center of gravity were shifted southward from Boston to New York.

One impediment to the full realization of this goal lies in the paucity of literary materials from New Amsterdam accessible to modern readers. Current anthologies of both US literature and New York writing tend to pay little attention to Dutch New York, because most of the available materials are written in Dutch and have not been translated. Since 1974, the New Netherland Project, directed by Charles Gehring and based in Albany, has been translating and publishing documents held by the New York State Library and the New York State Archives, with approximately twenty-four volumes anticipated when the project is complete.[11] Literary texts, however, are another story. The intrepid reader who wishes to investigate New Amsterdam's literary writing must venture to the library to find *Narratives of New Netherland, 1609–1664*, published in 1909, and *Anthology of New Netherland, or Translations from the Early Dutch Poets of New York, with Memoirs of their Lives*, originally published in 1865 and reprinted in 1969. Literary New Amsterdam was a coterie culture, in which poets like Henricus Selyns and Jacob Steendam wrote in Dutch for one another and for occasions like weddings and funerals. Some of their work was published in Dutch in Amsterdam. The case of Selyns's work is instructive: his poems have been carefully preserved in a bound manuscript in the New-York Historical Society, still undigitized and untranslated as this volume goes to press. The Society's catalog offers this description of the manuscript: "Undated manuscript volume of poems by Henricus Selyns, comprising approximately 200

epitaphs, and nuptial, birthday, and other congratulatory odes of a personal character and chiefly dedicated to the author's contemporaries in Holland, New York, and the West Indies. Most are in Dutch, but also included are several in Latin, and one in Greek." The situation (as Elizabeth L. Bradley notes in her contribution to this volume) that first inspired Washington Irving to write his *History of New York* (1809) – a lack of knowledge about New York's Dutch past – remains a problem for literary historians today.

Our *Companion*, therefore, examines the Dutch past as it is reconstructed through Irving's eyes: Bradley's chapter traces the rise of the idea of the Knickerbocker, from its first appearance in Irving's burlesque history to its later manifestations in New York's popular culture and novels of manners. Chronologically, however, we begin in British New York, with Robert Lawson-Peebles's account of gastronomical motifs in early writing about New York. "The epic that is New York was founded in conquest," Lawson-Peebles tells us, and is "then transformed into the capacious corporeality that would be celebrated by Whitman." The chapters that follow guide us through a variety of different New Yorks. Bryan Waterman treats nineteenth-century New York as a metatheatrical space, in which "New York audiences of various stripes flocked to see representations of themselves on stage" and sometimes became the primary spectacle presented in the theater. Thomas Augst traces New York's impact on Herman Melville's writing and highlights the Young America movement's attempts "to move the nation's literary capital from Boston to New York, while at the same time proclaiming the revolutionary power of literature to promote an 'original' national consciousness," with New York serving as its "stronghold." Lytle Shaw articulates the principles of Whitman's "urbanism" and traces his legacy in the work of Allen Ginsberg and other twentieth-century poets, while Martha Nadell situates Whitman as the originator of a tradition of Brooklyn writing that "complements and complicates" the literary history of New York City as whole.

Likewise, Caleb Crain's account of writing about New York's "high-life" and Sarah Wilson's analysis of New York's novels of manners both complement and complicate the story of upper-class New York established by Bradley's treatment of the Knickerbocker mythology. Crain treats little-known novels about New York's "overclass," a world exemplified by the writings of Charles Astor Bristed, in which "wealthy New Yorkers were dyeing their moustaches and elaborating rules about cocktails while Henry James was still in short pants." Wilson complicates the story of the novel of manners from James to Edith Wharton by situating works of Lower East Side realism in its midst. Eric Homberger deepens our understanding of immigrant New York at the turn into the twentieth century by viewing it

through the lens of the successful stage play *Abie's Irish Rose*. New York's ethnic literatures reappear in Cyrus R. K. Patell's examination of the dynamics of emergent literatures that offer a challenge to the kind of reading promoted by late twentieth-century multiculturalism and exemplified by the controversy over the choice of Chang-rae Lee's novel *Native Speaker* (1995) for New York's abortive "One Book, One City" program in 2002. Patell also shows how the evolution of the idea of the "Nuyorican" serves as a late twentieth-century case study of the kind of cultural mixing embodied by New York's literatures.

Our other chapters devoted to the twentieth century focus on some of the city's famous literary enclaves. Melissa Bradshaw takes us on a tour of Greenwich Village bohemianism, orienting her story around Edna St. Vincent Millay and Djuna Barnes as much as around Eugene O'Neill or the Provincetown Players. Thulani Davis demonstrates the impact on African American writing of Harlem's transformation from Black Mecca to urban ghetto. Daniel Kane offers a reinvigorating take on New York's Lower East Side poetry scene by highlighting its links to punk rock. Robin Bernstein looks at lesbian and gay New York through the prism of the theater scene. And Trysh Travis's account of New York's print cultures traverses these different enclaves, moving from the commercial to the bohemian, from the middlebrow to the avant-garde. What emerges from all these chapters is a set of distinctive, sometimes idiosyncratic, accounts of overlapping scenes, some connected geographically, some connected through time. Each chapter will introduce you to a particular archive of local knowledge, but we hope that from the specific details we examine something like an abiding portrait of New York and its literary cultures will begin to emerge.

E. B. White's *Here is New York* is often taken to present that kind of abiding portrait. That's what Hillary Clinton believed when she cited it during a debate with her challenger Rick Lazio during her campaign in the fall of 2000 to become one of New York's US senators. But when you read White's essay you are surprised by the specificity of his references – the book is full of once-recognizable names that now beg for footnotes – as well as by the way so many of his general statements about the city and its culture still ring true. That's one of White's points: in his foreword to the book version of his essay, he suggests that "the reader will find certain observations to be no longer true of the city, owing to the passage of time and the swing of the pendulum." So much, White tells us, has changed in just a year: "The heat has broken, the boom has broken, and New York is not quite so feverish now as when the piece was written." And yet, he argues, "the essential fever of New York has not changed in any particular, and I have not tried to make revisions in the hope of bringing the thing down to date." Living before the

advent of the internet, White playfully suggests that "to bring New York down to date, a man would have to be published with the speed of light – and not even Harper is that quick" (17). Of course, the internet now allows us to publish with something akin to the speed of light, but White's point about the constantly shifting cityscape is no less true.

There are darker ways in which White's essay is marked by the historical moment in which it was written:

> The subtlest change in New York is something people don't speak much about but that is in everyone's mind. The city, for the first time in its long history, is destructible. A single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers, crumble the bridges, turn the underground passages into lethal chambers, cremate the millions. The intimation of mortality is part of New York now: in the sound of jets overhead, in the black headlines of the latest edition.

White's prose suggests that the dropping of the bomb changed everything, that New York would never be the same now that it "must live with the stubborn fact of annihilation." White's contemplation of "the destroying planes" seems uncanny in the wake of 9/11, which White did not live to see. Those of us who did live through it are often tempted to point to that day as the day that changed everything. Adam Gopnik, the *New Yorker* writer who might be considered White's heir as a chronicler of New York, wrote, only days after 9/11: "We have heard the jets now, and we will probably never be able to regard the city with quite the same exasperated, ironic affection we had for it before."

Perhaps. But just a little more than five years later, Gopnik admits in a *New Yorker* article entitled "Gothamitis" that 9/11 "turned out to change almost nothing in the city's interplay of money and manners." He goes on to *kvetch* about gentrification, arguing that "for the first time in Manhattan's history, it has no bohemian frontier."[12]

Maybe he's right. Or maybe we just haven't found the tour guide who can show us the way to the latest incarnation of bohemia in New York. If the tour guides we've assembled in this *Companion* tell us anything, it's that New York's writers have always found new sites within the city's neighborhoods and cultures to stake their various claims.

NOTES

1. Horatio Alger, Jr., *Ragged Dick, or Street Life in New York with the Boot-Blacks* (1868; Philadelphia: John C. Weston Co., 1910), pp. 33–34.
2. John Kander wrote the music and Fred Ebb the lyrics for the song "New York, New York," which was featured in Martin Scorsese's 1977 film of the same name. The song was performed by one of the film's stars, Liza Minnelli, but

it later became one of Frank Sinatra's signature songs. Sinatra changed the lyrics slightly, putting the phrase "A-number-one" into the list of things the singer wants to be. Ebb didn't care for the change, but he did like the fact that Sinatra made the song a hit. See www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/newyorknewyork/.

3. Alger, *Ragged Dick*, pp. 110, 115, 245.
4. E. B. White, *Here is New York* (1949; New York: Little Book Room, 2000), pp. 34–36. Further references appear in the text.
5. Kenneth T. Jackson and David S. Dunbar, eds., *Empire City: New York through the Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 26.
6. Philip Lopate, Introduction to *Writing New York* (New York: Library of America, 1998), p. xviii.
7. Thomas Bender, "New York as a Center of Difference," in his *The Unfinished City: New York and the Metropolitan Idea* (New York: New Press, 2002), pp. 185–86.
8. Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Case for Contamination," *New York Times Magazine* (January 1, 2006): 52.
9. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2006), p. xxi.
10. See Russell Shorto, *The Island at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan and the Forgotten Colony that Shaped America* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).
11. See The New Netherland Project online (www.nnp.org).
12. Adam Gopnik, "Gothamitis," *The New Yorker* (January 8, 2007).

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ROBERT LAWSON-PEEBLES

From British outpost to American metropolis

In 1828, James Kirke Paulding summarized the changes that New York had undergone since September 1664, when the Dutch had surrendered to the forces of James Stuart, Duke of York. Paulding's account is still disquietingly relevant today:

> New York, though a very honest and well-intentioned city as times go, (with the exception of Wall Street, which labours under a sort of a shadow of suspicion,) has changed its name almost as often as some graceless rogues, though doubtless not for the same reasons. The Indian name was Manhadoes; the Dutch called it New Orange and New Amsterdam; the English New York, which name all the world knows it still retains. In 1673, it was a small village, and the richest man in it was Frederick Philipse, or *Flypse*, who was rated at 80,000 guilders. Now it is the greatest city in the new world; the third, if not the second, in commerce of all the world, old and new; and there are men in it, who were yesterday worth millions of guilders – in paper money: what they may be worth to-morrow, we cant [*sic*] say, as that will depend on a speculation. In 1660, the salaries of ministers and public officers were paid in beaver skins: now they are paid in bank notes. The beaver skins were always worth the money, which is more than can be said of the bank notes. New York contains one university and two medical colleges … twenty-two banks – good, bad and indifferent; forty-three insurance companies – solvent and insolvent; and one public library: from whence it may be reasonably inferred, that money is plenty as dirt – insurance bonds still more so – and that both are held in greater estimation than learning. There are also one hundred churches, and almost as many lottery offices, which accounts for the people of New York being so much better than their neighbours … there is an academy of arts, an athenæum, and several other institutions for the discouragement of literature, the arts and sciences … New York supports six theatres, of various kinds: from whence it may be inferred, the people are almost as fond of theatres as churches. There *was* an Italian opera last year. But … the birds are flown to other climes, and left the sweet singers of the nations, as it were, howling in the wilderness.