

CHAPTER I

Introduction
The History of New York Literature

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The history of New York's literature encompasses centuries where war, commerce, revolution, democracy, industry and immigration have shaped the city into a global metropolis. Therefore, it is a literature that not only addresses the experiences of those living within the city but the city's relationship with the rest of the world. In a sense, New York's literature is global literature as it speaks to and attends the ways in which the modern world emerged. The city's literature possesses a universal quality as it serves to remind readers of the forces that shaped our lives and our identities. Written within the city's novels, memoirs, poetry, periodicals and magazines are the myriad experiences and perspectives that chart the traumatic and triumphant processes that have formed our contemporary society.¹ While studies of New York's literature have often carved the complex array of materials into themes or subject matters, this study draws the connections between the work of authors and writers in the city and the wider world through examining *movement*. The prose, poetry and fiction that has emerged from the city is infused with this character that defined the modern age. It is movement that has been assessed as forming the era of modernity as global networks of trade and commerce emerged from the sixteenth century.² The advent of this nascent capitalism brought death, enslavement and destruction in its wake as people, goods and ideas were forcibly moved across the Atlantic Ocean. New York was formed in the nexus of this movement, established as a colony to exploit the profits that could be

¹ Cyrus R. K. Patell and Bryan Waterman (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of New York* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Catalina Neculai, *Urban Space and Late Twentieth-Century New York Literature: Reformed Geographies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014); Phillip Lopate (ed.), *Writing New York: A Literary Anthology* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1998); Sabrina Fuchs-Abrams, *Literature of New York* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009).

² I. Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System, Vol. I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic, 1974).

made in this transition.³ The sense of movement increased in the eighteenth century, as ideas shared across the globe brought riot and protest to New York as freedom and liberty were demanded by colonial and enslaved New Yorkers alike. The nineteenth century saw the contraction of the world as time and space were rethought with the advances made in industry and technology. New York was accelerated forward through these changes as it was established by its merchants, bankers and investors as an entrepôt of great renown. Movement characterised the twentieth century as New Yorkers were enmeshed into a bustling metropolis where profit, problems and potential were all too frequently one in the same.⁴ This is a city built on movement; as such, it is a metropolis that evokes the changes that have made the modern world. The literature of New York is defined by this movement, which ensures that the narratives of this city move beyond the confines of Brooklyn, Bronx, Manhattan, Queens and Staten Island and tell a global story.

New York's literature is an account of movement, a transition from one state to another. This is distinct from stating that the history of writing within the metropolis is concerned with progress. The two are separate and must remain so as the association with progress would obscure the pain and suffering present within the city's history while affirming a grand teleological vision for New York. Certainly, there is a narrative trope connected to the city that regards the distinguished status of the metropolis as inevitable, as if the settlement had been preordained for greatness. This vision of a luminous city arising from banks of the Hudson River is one that preoccupied the historians of the latter half of the nineteenth century as they sought to rationalise New York's substantial growth.⁵ However, it is not progress that was present here but movement. A movement in economics, politics and culture that was discerned by the authors of the period who observed how some of its citizens were changing their perspectives on their own action and their fellow New Yorkers. A literature that is defined by movement is not focused on progress, destiny or improvement. It is a range of work that has been delineated by the forces of change. This

³ Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); François Weil, *A History of New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

⁴ George Foster, *New York in Slices: By an Experienced Carver* (New York: W. F. Burgess, 1849); John McCabe, *New York by Sunlight and Gaslight* (Philadelphia: Douglass Brothers, 1882).

⁵ Junius H. Browne, *The Great Metropolis: A Mirror of New York* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1869); William Stone, *History of New York City: From the Discovery to the Present Day* (New York: E. Cleave, 1868); Mary L. Booth, *History of the City of New York: From Its Earliest Settlement to the Present Day* (New York: W. R. C. Clarke & Meeker, 1859).

movement is present throughout the literature of the city. Whether that is the movement of people into the metropolis as they locate a new home in the city; the movement from rags to riches or riches to rags; the movement of identities as communities define and redefine themselves; or the movement of the individual, as they reflect upon life in the city by the Hudson. This is not a ‘city on the move’ but a city that has always been ‘in movement’. It is this flux that has been the source of inspiration for authors as they chronicle the movement that occurs within the city. This movement can be unpredictable and perilous, it can lead to fortune and fame as much as isolation and ignominy. Too often, the sense of movement is emphasised within the immigrant literature of the nineteenth and twentieth century but forgotten elsewhere. Movement from the old world to the new is certainly a clear example of this process but only one among a multitude of other contexts. Movement is a character, a plot device, a symbol or a narrative frame that connects the disparate accounts of authors and artists across the centuries. Defining the history of New York’s literature as an account of movement rather than ideals regarding progress or historiographical phases enables an alternative perspective on how the city’s novels, poetry and periodicals have shaped the metropolis. This is a literature that accounts for movement and that moves people. Movement made the modern world and movement made New York’s literature.

Movement and the Modern City

The literature that emerges from this land is defined by movement. Rivers, hills, woods and ponds are first named for the activities, events and religious practices that take place there. The oral cultures of the Lenape provided the first stories that defined this area. The Munsees, Canarsees, Raritans and Rockaways all moved across what is now New York, naming the places they used and forming stories and narratives in the process. The river that flowed both ways as the tides altered was termed the *Shatemuc* or *Muhheakantuck*. Along this route people made their way to the island of *Man-ä-b-tonh* or *Mannahchtanink*. This place name has been variously interpreted as an ‘island of hills’ or the location where ‘bows are gathered’ but it was the European interpretation of *Manahata* that was first recorded on the documents that were made from the early seventeenth century.⁶ On

⁶ Ives Goddard, ‘The Origin and Meaning of the Name “Manhattan”’, *New York History* 91(4): 277–93.

this island, the *Minetta* river could be followed for fish, which could lead to the village of *Sapohannikan*, where tobacco grew. Further along from this site, at the rocky tip of the island known as *Kapsee*, canoes could travel to the small island of *Pagganck*, where nut groves could be harvested. In these locations, stories are taken, shared or altered and made into other narratives. *Pagganck* is renamed *Noten Eylant* by later Dutch settlers after the plentiful crop and is then altered again into *Governors Island* by the British in the eighteenth century.⁷ It is the place names that provide the initial literature of the city, as each appellation writes into the landscape a sense of purpose and use that enables all subsequent readers to share in this knowledge. It is the titles that have been given to this area that allow a reading of this place. Within oral cultures where knowledge is transmitted through experience, places and names, this is a literature that is read through movement. It is this literature that has survived the colonisation of European settlers, disease and conflict and that remains embedded in the city. To understand and share this information, you must go from place to place. From the outset, New York must be understood in motion.

As a city that has been defined by movement, it is fitting that New York's first appearance on a manuscript is within a document that facilitates transfer and passage of people and goods. The maps, itineraries, accounts and charts that bring Europeans to this place record how to navigate the waterways and islands that are part of this 'new world'. The accounts of the Florentine explorer Giovanni da Verrazzano (1485–1528), who travelled the eastern seaboard of the modern United States in 1524 from North Carolina to Newfoundland, provided a new type of literature for the city. In this writing, the locations were described to Europeans who might never set foot in this place but who wanted news of the resources present within this land.⁸ The notes represent the beginnings of New York's literature in motion; as audiences far away learn of the location, wildlife and the activity on this collection of islands.⁹ This account details the trading items and potential of the area as the site is regarded as what could be move from this location.¹⁰ The maps and lists of goods that are produced from the

⁷ Evan T. Pritchard, *Native New Yorkers: The Legacy of the Algonquin People of New York* (San Francisco: Council Oak Books, 2002); Robert S. Grumet, *First Manhattans: A Brief History of the Munsee Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press 2002).

⁸ Richard Hakluyt, *Divers Voyages Touching the Discovery of America and the Islands Adjacent (1582)* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1850).

⁹ Susan Tarrow (trans.), 'Translation of the Cellere Codex', in Lawrence C. Wroth (ed.), *The Voyages of Giovanni da Verrazzano, 1524–1528* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

¹⁰ Giovanni da Verrazzano, *Scheeps-togt van Johan de Verrazano: Florentyner, na Florida* (Leiden: Pieter Vander, 1706).

exploration of Manhattan Bay during the sixteenth century created a new type of literature for the city, but this still maintain the significance of movement. This can be observed with the accounts of the English merchant adventurer, Henry Hudson (c. 1565–1611), who was financed by the Dutch East India Company to chart a route through to India and arrived in Manhattan in September 1609.¹¹ The narrative of this journey charts the travel of the Halve Maen across Manhattan Bay and up the *Sbatemuc* river that would in time be named Mauritius, the North River and then the Hudson River in turn. This literature could be described as functional – assessing the quality and quantity of the profits that could be made. As more Europeans charted the areas, drew up maps to understand the coastline and recorded the growing trade in furs with the tribes of the Lenape in ledgers and accounts, the literature of the city increased. However, this is always a literature of movement in the same way as its subject matter. A constantly shifting assessment of arrivals and departures, presences and absences. Figures and characters appear and disappear in these early writings as movement brings opportunities and endings.¹² With the foundation of a permanent settlement by merchants from the Netherlands in the 1620s, the basis of an established literature of place might emerge but what take hold in the city are further accounts of transition.¹³ Travelogues, guides and business propositions are the first genres of written literature in the city as it becomes *Nieuw Amsterdam*. These are far from just commercial pieces as they illustrate a place for others across the world that is in movement. It is not just profit that can be made here but a sense of place and identity. Within a seemingly utilitarian body of work is the character that defines the work of writers and authors across the centuries; this is a place of change.

Within that same body of literature is another transformation and account of movement that alters the city. These are the lists of individuals who are enslaved, brought to New York and forced to work in building and maintaining the homes, enterprises and infrastructure of the colonial port. From 1626, when the first Africans who had been captured and sold into slavery arrived in New Amsterdam, literature is used to restrict movement and to suppress while it also serves as the medium through which individuals and groups resist oppression, maintain traditions and make new communities. Within the legal documents of the city during the colonial period of

¹¹ Samuel Purchas, *Purchas His Pilgrimes, in Five Books* (London: Henrie Fetherstone, 1625).

¹² Elizabeth Blackmar, *Manhattan for Rent, 1785–1850* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 16.

¹³ Adriaen Van der Donck, *Beschryvinge van Nieuw-Nederlant* (Amsterdam: Evert Nieuwenhof, 1656).

Dutch and then British rule, enslaved individuals were classified but also found within the writs and court proceedings a means to challenge and create.¹⁴ Brutality and violence is inscribed onto New York through the posters and periodicals that were published after an uprising against enslavement in the city took place in 1712.¹⁵ It was restrictions on movement and congress that were noted in orders issued after this act of resistance. Similar literature was issued in 1741 in response to the fear that a group of enslaved men and women were planning to overthrow New York's slaveowners and burn the city.¹⁶ Transition and transgression were enabled and curtailed by literature in the city. However, the marriage records and baptisms relay how those who were enslaved continued to move and make their own paths through New York, despite the ways in which their lives were overseen.¹⁷ Indeed, the literature that concerns the experience of enslaved African New Yorkers in the eighteenth century continually expresses or communicates their desire for movement and freedom.

The drive of movement within the city's literature is also present within the materials published to foster support for liberty from British rule. The city had been taken from the Dutch in 1664 and renamed New York, and with this transition trading documents, religious texts and political treatises had altered accordingly. Whereas the Dutch trading links had once drawn the name of New Amsterdam with Sint Maarten and Curaçao in the Caribbean, or, Recife in Brazil, New York now became entwined with Boston, Philadelphia and Charleston but also Liverpool and Bristol in Britain. Names of places and people from Europe, Africa and South America across the shipping documents and records brought the world closer to New York. The introduction of printing presses into the city in the 1690s ensured a profusion of religious and political texts that brought new movement to New York's streets.¹⁸ Notions of identity and value, liberty and tyranny, were in flux as literature fermented political dialogue across the city.¹⁹ Periodicals, newspapers and handbills published in the

¹⁴ Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 14–15.

¹⁵ Kenneth Scott, 'The Slave Insurrection in New York in 1712', *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 45 (1961): 43–74

¹⁶ *A Journal of the Proceedings in the Detection of the Conspiracy Formed by Some White People, in Conjunction with Negro and Other Slaves, for Burning the City of New-York* (New York: s.d., 1747).

¹⁷ Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery*, p. 21.

¹⁸ *Catalogue of Books Printed by William Bradford, and Other Printers in the Middle Colonies. Exhibited at the Grolier Club in Commemoration of the Bicentennial of the Introduction of Printing into New York; April 14 to 21, 1893* (New York: Grolier Club, 1893).

¹⁹ Jupiter Hammon, *An Address to the Negroes in the State of New-York* (New York: Carroll and Patterson, 1787).

city reflected the desire for alteration and change. The *New York Journal* and the *New-York Gazette and Weekly Post-Boy* became the agents for republicanism in the city as they provided readers with details of British rapaciousness or affirmed the values of the new nation in the aftermath of the war.²⁰ Accounts of abuses of power, alienation from government and persecution of those who argued for liberty fuelled the dissatisfaction in New York.²¹ Literature makes the revolution in the city; it creates a groundswell of support for the movement, which although controlled and suppressed with the British occupation of New York in 1776, emerged in the aftermath of the war to ensure a prominent place in the new republic.

The writing that defines New York after the War of Independence is not one that reifies the nature of national identity. Rather, it is a literature that clarifies movement. From the account books and ledgers to the novels, poems, dramas and letters of the era, these are works that characterise attempts to define identity and place.²² Whether it is political position or social custom, the work that emerged from the city emphasised the capacity to shape and reform the world and an individual's status within it. New York became a centre of intellectual life in this new age. However, this status was due to its capacity for learning or debate, it was a distinction that was derived from the city's singular character for movement. As the economic centre of the republic, the entry point for goods and literature from Europe and increasingly the site of settlement for immigrants, New York survive and thrived on the act of transition. As noted by authors and commentators, this could be process that would elevate the individual but also a journey into hopeless despair. The function of the city's literature during this period was to ensure this movement could be navigated, controlled and brought into order. From the stage to the law court, whether concerning the metropolis or wider American society, the early republican writings within New York mapped the lives of others to track, check and to comprehend the pattern of life.²³

²⁰ Mark Kamrath and Sharon M. Harris, *Periodical Literature in Eighteenth Century America* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), p. 157.

²¹ James Alexander and William Smith, *The Complaint of James Alexander and William Smith to the Committee of the General Assembly of the Colony of New-York, &c.* (New York: John Peter Zenger, 1735).

²² Bryan Waterman, *Republic of Intellect: The Friendly Club of New York City and the Making of American Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

²³ James Kent, *Commentaries on American Law*, 1st ed. (New York: O. Halsted, 1826); William Dunlap, *The Father; or, American Shandy-ism* (New York: Hodge, Allen & Campbell, 1789); William Dunlap, *Darby's Return* (New York: Hodge, Allen & Campbell, 1789).

The desire to explain these changes and to harness the movement that appeared to form and reform the city in quick succession is most noticeable in the way in which New York was cast as the subject of historical enquiry from the late eighteenth century onwards. Authors sought to explain how such a place could have arisen and how its people had carved a place for themselves on the banks of the Hudson River.²⁴ From accounts of the earliest settlement to the establishment of institutions and ideals in the new republic, historical narratives became a means of placing order on the disorderly processes that had shaped New York. This is not an attempt to arrest movement, to preserve the city in aspic, but a means of trying to utilise the events that made the city for a political, social or cultural purpose. As the nineteenth century progressed and the city saw the arrival of millions of people into its docks, these histories became a means of control. Within these accounts, only a certain type of movement within the city was represented as legitimate. As many of these new immigrants would find themselves in the tenements and slums of Brooklyn, Bronx and Manhattan, their transition from immigrant to citizen was not regarded as a journey that denoted belonging. Indeed, their movement was frequently regarded as a descent; the enclaves in which people resided were looked upon as examples of humanity's reversion to its base nature. Historical texts could affirm status and denote belonging as movement into the city was policed. Where this established order could be challenged was through the biographies and accounts of individuals who had moved to the city as part of an escape from confinement or enslavement. This was a process of change and alteration resisting the racism and prejudice within the city that adjudged the lives of African Americans to hold less significance than the lives of others.²⁵ The great abolitionist, reformer and orator Frederick Douglass recounted his arrival into the city after fleeing enslavement in Maryland:

My free life began on the third of September, 1838. On the morning of the 4th of that month, after an anxious and most perilous but safe journey, I found myself in the big city of New York, a free man; one more added to the mighty throng which, like the confused waves of the troubled sea, surged to and fro between the lofty walls of Broadway. Though dazzled with the wonders which met me on every hand, my thoughts could not be much

²⁴ Ezekiel Porter Belden, *New-York: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Prall, Lewis & Co., 1851).

²⁵ James Pennington, *The Fugitive Blacksmith; or, Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington, Pastor of a Presbyterian Church* (New York: H. Jacobs, 1861); Harriet Ann Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Thayer & Eldridge).

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withdrawn from my strange situation. For the moment the dreams of my youth and the hopes of my manhood were completely fulfilled.²⁶

The movement of individuals and communities into and around the city was certainly facilitated by literature. The first African American owned newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, which was published in the city in 1827, offered adverts and advice to those seeking employment. It also provided indictments of the iniquity of enslavement and mobilised opinion against the discrimination that many experienced within New York. The use of newspapers as a means to establish and enable communities in the city became a central theme of the nineteenth century – from the dominance of the *New York Times*, *New York Herald* and the *New-York Tribune*, where events were filtered through the lens of party politics and privilege, to the creation of ethnic and foreign-language newspapers, where accounts of individual traverses across the city that would be ignored elsewhere could be heard. The *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung* (1834), the *American Hebrew and Jewish Messenger* (1857) and the *Irish American* (1849) were to be joined by the end of the century by titles such as *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* (1880), *Forverts* (1897) and *New-Yorské listy* (1874) as new immigrant groups moved into the city and established businesses, schools and networks. Newspapers could promote socialism, religion or commerce within the tenements and ethnic enclaves, but significantly they provided a vehicle for expression within a dominant culture. This literature kept the city in movement.²⁷ These publications enabled the transmission of ideas and the passage of life within the city. The newspapers of New York facilitated movement and provided points of reference for individuals to orientate their politics, their identities and their associations.

A similar conductor to the appropriate procession through the city was present within the etiquette and courtesy books of the nineteenth century. These guidebooks to behaviour informed their readers of how to act, converse and dress as an increasingly diverse city created a desire among the higher echelons of society for distinction and definition.²⁸ The navigation of New York through literature was not conducted solely by the

²⁶ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Boston: De Wolfe & Fiske Co., 1892), p. 250.

²⁷ Frederick Binder and David Reimers, *All the Nations under Heaven: An Ethnic and Racial History of New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

²⁸ Robert de Valcourt, *The Illustrated Manners Book: A Manual of Good Behavior and Polite Accomplishments* (New York: Leland, Clay, 1855); W. R. Houghton, *American Etiquette and Rules of Politeness* (New York: Standard Publishing House, 1883); Samuel R. Wells, *How to Behave: A Pocket Manual of Republican Etiquette, and Guide to Correct Personal Habits* (New York: Samuel R. Fowler, 1856).

manuals, newspapers and historical literature; the nineteenth century novel gave moral, religious and cultural markers to move through and within the city's social circles. The accounts of romance, intrigue, danger and salvation that depicted New York's professional and upper classes explained how the mercantile and industrial context that now drove the city's economy altered the lives of its inhabitants.²⁹ Where fortunes and reputations could be so easily won and lost among the richer section of society, the perilous nature of the existence of the working classes was less frequently depicted. However, from the middle of the nineteenth century, accounts of the suffering of the city's poor was provided by middle class reformers seeing to rescue their fellow man from destruction. The condition of the lives of others became the concern of wider society as literature created a framework to move emotions and evoke a sense of empathy and responsibility. As socio-scientific studies detailed the condition of individuals in the tenements, a literature of charity and improvement emerged from the city as professionals and authors delineated where society had erred and the apparently 'correct' path of movement for those unfortunate souls of the city.³⁰

A concern for the motives of New York's citizens and the future of the city itself is reflected in an array of literature that emerges at the outset of the twentieth century. From social commentaries or editorials, novels and poetry, a sense of fear and uncertainty as to where the metropolis was directed is apparent. After the latter-half of the nineteenth century that saw riots, political corruption and tremendous poverty alongside unprecedented wealth, the emergence of dystopian fiction that imagined New York's destruction or descent into chaos was perhaps inevitable. This literature acted as a guardian to warn of the potential perils that could plunge the city into irreversible decline. The anxiety regarding place and identity in the city was also reflected in the literature that explored the relationship between the individual and the collective. The novels of the first two decades of the twentieth century questioned the established processes and patterns in society and set forward alternative modes of movement within the city. Characters, plots and settings altered perspectives on the city both from citizens themselves but also the wider world as New York's literature was consumed across the globe. The events of the city streets as depicted in fiction ensured that the city became imbued with

²⁹ Henry James, *Washington Square* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1880); Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (New York: Scribners & Sons, 1905).

³⁰ Jakob Riis, *How the Other Half Live* (New York: Scribners & Sons, 1890).