New York City
An Outsider’s Inside View

Mario Maffi

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tricky business, that of understanding New York. The city is always on the move, forever shifting. You leave it one day and you come back the next to find that it has changed mood and countenance.

Observing it from afar, as the immigrants must have done more than a century ago, it comes across as a solid, immovable construction in granite—a splendid, impregnable fortress. And yet, maybe even more than Hemingway’s Paris, it is a moveable feast, spinning, throbbing, and changing, swirling and elusive. That is its charm, that is its curse. And yet, like all metropolises, New York, too, has its own deep-seated nucleus: a solid, fixed kingpin that alone allows it to spin, throb, and change.
Contents

Foreword
   George J. Lankevich ix

Preface: Time and the City xiii

1 Names 1
2 Maps 12
3 Underworlds 24
4 Villages 36
5 Museums 60
6 Words 73
7 Images 87
8 Sounds 102
9 Prism 114
10 Bridges 137

Appendix: The Sites 151
Bibliography 155
Index 165
Foreword

By George J. Lankevich

In New York City: An Outsider’s Inside View Mario Maffi reveals that two of his favorite Manhattan structures are the Chrysler Building and Grand Central Terminal, a combination not altogether surprising since one illustrates the verve of a metropolis that reaches for the sky and the other is forever a place where “something is about to happen.” The sites reflect the allure and tumult of a city whose only constancy is change, a venue which radically reshapes places and people. If real New Yorkers are produced only when they share memories of former city realities then Maffi, an Italian professor whose research has illuminated the history of the Lower East Side, qualifies as a true resident of his adopted city.

It is difficult to fit Mario Maffi into the architecture of scholarship. The son of a translator, his graduate work analyzed the dynamic youth culture of the 1960s, a fluid and kaleidoscopic movement that introduced him to the complexities and contradictions of Manhattan’s lifestyle. His award-winning La Cultura Underground appeared in 1972, beginning an enormously varied academic output. As Professor of American Literature at the State University of Milan, Maffi has produced—in both English and Italian—monographs, articles, translations, lectures, maps and even audiovisual aids. His oeuvre encompasses leftist parliamentary politics, the Lower East Side of Manhattan island, American authors as varied as James Fenimore Cooper and Upton Sinclair, contemporary Nuyorican and Chinese poets, the librettos of George Gershwin and Stephen Sondheim, personal ruminations, and even a foray into the neighborhoods of London. Though his writings range across a wide spectrum, this book makes clear that his heart belongs to New York, the capital of the world.

Maffi first came to New York in 1975—he remembers the day was bright and sunny—and discovered the subject that has beguiled him ever since. After immersing himself in the “shocking and fascinating” culture of the Lower East Side, he has spent the last quarter century attempting to “get a grasp” on the metropolis whose essence is change. In academic terms, Maffi
examines the forces of ethnicity, multiculturalism, Americanization, class and gender relations, “high” and “low” cultures— influences that immigrants encountered as they went through the acculturation process. But in human terms Maffi also passed through the polyglot, “self-centered” world of America’s most famous ghetto and fell in love with the greater metropolis surrounding it.

If “Americanization is an alchemic process,” the Lower East Side was a laboratory where fundamental changes occurred. Maffi, who appears to have read every book and memoir from its “golden age” of development (1880–1930), was first attracted by its proletarian culture and published Gateway to the Promised Land in 1995. Gateway, the English version of Nel mosaico della città, analyzed the interaction between immigrants and American society, a transforming dialectic he calls the “very heart of cultural production.” Successive waves of Jews, Italians, Chinese and Puerto Ricans experienced such give-and-take in the streets of “Alphabet City.” The dynamism of the process was brilliantly summed up by Waldo Frank decades ago: “We go forth all to seek America. And in the seeking we create her.” The laboratory results continue to amaze Maffi and he is clearly reluctant to see his “alternate city” fade.

Paradoxically, the joy of a community that succeeds in joining mainstream society is always tempered by sadness for cultural loss. Maffi is deeply aware of the tensions created as immigrant waves interact with modernism, but he now understands that in Manhattan nothing remains unaltered for very long. Even raucous Times Square could be “anesthetized by Disney” and Maffi knows intellectually that the still underdeveloped Lower East Side surely faces gentrification. His mind tells him change is inevitable but his passion refuses to admit it. Manhattan’s process of continual becoming eminently suits the talents of a gifted storyteller and Maffi’s New York: L’isola delle colline (New York: Island of Hills) and Sotto le torri di Manhattan (Under the Towers of Manhattan, of which the present book is a translation) adopted a more personal tone; they ignore the dry statistics of cliometricians and examine the rich life of real people. Maffi’s latest volume also revels in the moods of Manhattan recording “obstinate wanderings” in search of Americanization.

An Outsider’s Inside View is a wonderful tour through Manhattan taken with a knowledgeable friend. Maffi knows many pathways into the heart of the city: names that recall its past; maps that chart its complexities; villages that house its varied folk; images implanted in the mind’s eye by the media. Our walkers together examine the “deep seated and privileged” relationship between New York and the wider world, wonder at metropolitan tolerance, enjoy a glimpse of the theater that fuels its energy and infuses its spirit. And with every step Maffi displays an advocate’s love for a city
that belongs to the world as much as to the United States. Like a true Manhattanite, he finds it almost unnecessary to discuss the four "outer boroughs" where the vast bulk of New Yorkers live; he even throws a few darts at those neighborhoods. New York may boast three other Chinatowns and Dominicans may dominate its Latin community, but Maffi’s heart remains in “Loisaida” and on Avenue C where he became a New Yorker. He, like the acculturated second generation that returns only for weekends, now sees a different East Side but one which retains its pulsating life force. Maffi’s Manhattan has a “jealous, exclusive will to capture and possess those who set foot” within its precincts, and those who travel with him benefit from a tour that is both nostalgic and forward looking. An Outsider’s View is not scholarly, but true New Yorkers like Maffi know they will never fully understand the city he calls a “sphinx.” Although this fine volume presents Maffi as only an observer, it really proves he is no longer an “outsider.”
Preface: Time and the City

When I reread this book for its U.S. edition, I felt that a chapter was missing, and acutely so: indeed, no book on a metropolis (and on New York City in particular) can do without a chapter on “Time.” Because time is different in a metropolis: its pace is different, as are its rhythms, its moments and the way they speed up and slow down; so too is the temporal span between sunrise and sunset, between sunset and sunrise, and all the segments contained therein—the way they follow after each other and together constitute such a different timetable. Above all, time is change, and change is what makes a metropolis (any metropolis, but—again—New York City in particular) a living organism, subject to an ongoing cycle of birth, growth, decay, and rebirth—not the frozen exhibit of lines and volumes, shapes and profiles, lifeless artifacts and empty proclamations, which all too often passes itself off as a “metropolis” on the pages of glossy magazines. How, then, to reckon with time and change in New York City?

This book was written in 1997, published in Italy in 1998, and translated into English in 2003, and so many things have since changed: how to take them into account? How to recover them and place them within the context of a book whose purpose, from the beginning—from its very inception—was to avoid as far as possible a flat and stiff image of the city?

A chapter on “Time” (I told myself) would have to embrace micro—as well as macro—phenomena. For instance: murals and gardens have been disappearing, or continue to disappear, all over the city, especially on the Lower East Side, where merciless property developers relentlessly throw their weight around; Charas/El Bohio, the huge community center on East 9th Street that served the needs of one of the most depressed (and simultaneously creative) areas of the city for decades, was scandalously served an eviction order to make room for what will probably become a big luxury condo; the tiny Vejigante Café, replaced by a hairdresser, is no longer there to brighten up El Barrio’s sunny afternoons; people have moved from one job to another, or left the city, disappeared; friends and acquaintances have sadly passed away; love’s labors were lost; other books were written, movies shot, paintings painted, theatricals acted; Petrella Point itself remained a riddle up until a couple of years ago, when the curiosity of an Italian
reader of this book helped me solve it . . . Time ran in the streets of New York.

And then, of course, the most dramatic change of all occurred—9/11/2001. I was in Memphis, Tennessee, driving north to gather material for a new book on the Mississippi River, when everything happened—when the New York skyline exploded before my eyes on the TV screen. Someone in the motel lobby had told me that a hijacking was taking place over New York, and I had gone back to my room and turned on the TV set, just in time to see one of the Twin Towers in flames, and the almost surreal scene of a second airplane crashing into the other tower, and both of them finally collapsing in a silent apocalypse of thick, swollen, rolling white-grey clouds. I remember spending most of the morning in my motel room, between the TV set and the telephone, trying to reach New York and Milan, anxious to learn and understand more of what was happening.

Whether one liked them or not (and frankly I did not), the Twin Towers were a New York icon. The tragedy consumed within and without them, the lives of thousands entrapped in their crumbling walls, not only changed the city's skyline (that would be a purely aesthetical—and rather cynical—consideration) but also our perception of the city, and the city's perception of itself—as a world-city, yes, but in a peculiar way also detached from the world: an impregnable fortress, around which the world revolved, yes, but almost without touching it . . . Now, every time I think (or read) of the Twin Towers, or glance at one of those by now tragically familiar photos, an image comes to my mind, conjured up with a strange force of suggestion by so many evocations and connections: the last sequence of Franklyn J. Schaffner's Planet of the Apes (1968, a movie that is also, so to speak, about New York, and disturbingly so)—the sequence that comes as a shocking revelation to Charlton Heston and his handful of fugitives. And, invariably, in my mind, that sequence is accompanied by the resonating words from one of Henry James's most prescient books, The American Scene (1907), where he compares New York's skyline to "some colossal hair-comb turned upward and so deprived of half its teeth that the others, at their uneven intervals, count doubly as sharp spikes." But of course the issue is a large and complex one, and one that would inevitably take us far from New York, and it cannot be dealt with at length here.

Anyway, how to account for all these changes—the large and the small, the collective and the personal, the soft, inevitable change, and that which is sudden and dramatic? An extremely interesting book edited by Michael Sorkin and Sharon Zukin, After the World Trade Center: Rethinking New York City (2002), manages to analyze the 9/11 events and their aftermath also by exploring (or by unearthing, so to speak) what was there before the WTC—that is, by exploring time and change in New York City, by giving back to
the city its status of a living organism, with an all too often forgotten (even hidden) past. But what to do with a book written before such momentous (or, as the case may be, seemingly insignificant) changes? How to introduce the continuous flow of time in the fixed format of a printed book? I resolved to modify the text slightly here and there, in order to acknowledge and incorporate the most significant transformations. I rewrote some passages in order to introduce a kind of perspective, a sort of time distancing. I used parentheses and past tenses. I mentioned tragedies great and small. But even so, the fact remains that a chapter on “Time” is missing from this book. And maybe—just think for a moment—it is quite appropriate that it be missing. Perhaps it would have been impossible to write it—an endeavor comparable to that of Achilles racing with the turtle. Maybe I would have ended up in a Tristram Shandy situation—trying to tell the life of a city and always being left behind by that very life. Maybe it would have been a useless attempt to freeze “Time,” thus denying it. Maybe the book as it is, written then, read now, is itself a testimony to time and change in New York City.

So, perhaps the best way to “write” it is to leave the reader with the task of writing his or her own chapter: his or her own perception of the rhythms of the city, of its ever-changing face, pace, and nature. Perhaps the real, most appropriate chapter on “Time” starts unfolding when a reader opens the book and starts turning its pages. And this, on the part of its author, is surely a wish.

Mario Maffi
Milan, Italy
23 February 2004
1

Names

At the northern tip of Manhattan, where the waters of the Hudson divide to form the Harlem River and, running eastward, separate the island from the Bronx before joining up with the East River and flowing into New York Bay—it is here, well off the traditional tourist circuit, that Inwood Hill Park lies. A little-known spot, it has a certain bearing on the city’s topography, and it is symbolic of the intertwining of past and present at the heart of New York’s history.

Lapping the soft stern of Manhattan, this particular section of the Harlem River is actually artificial. Originally it flowed more to the north, around Marble Hill, and formed a winding bend, further bedeviling efforts at navigation among the maze of straits, bays, islands, promontories, and secondary branches that unravel their way east and southeast of Manhattan. In 1895 a decision was made to open a new waterway in that section of the river: the original bed was filled and a softer bend was created a few miles to the south. So, on paper at least, Marble Hill passed over to the Bronx, but such was the outcry among its inhabitants that the jurisdiction of this tiny stretch of hilly terrain was soon returned to Manhattan. Yet another strange and fascinating chapter in the local history of the metropolis.

But the reason I’ve ventured all the way up here to these river banks is another. Set somewhere in a rock along one of the paths weaving their way through the park, there should be a plaque reminding visitors that one of the island’s biggest native villages once stood nearby: Shorakkopoch, inhabited by the Weckweesgeek Indians (or, according to some, by the Reckgawanes), a subtribe of the Wappingers. The plaque should also remind onlookers that it was precisely here, in 1626, that the colonial governor of Nieuw Amsterdam, Peter Minuit, was supposed to have purchased the entire island of Manhattan from this tribe for the equivalent of sixty guilders (twenty-four dollars) in beads and trinkets.

I say “supposed” because some measure of doubt persists. Indeed, another version of the event assuredly recounts that the meeting took place between the Dutch and the native Manate Indians, a subtribe of the Matouacs, this time at
the opposite end of Manhattan, near Battery Park and the present-day site of
the U.S. Custom House—in other words, just a few blocks away from Wall
Street. And I must admit that this second version carries greater conviction: first,
because it is more plausible (in 1626 the northern area of Manhattan was prac-
tically terra incognita), and second, because it is more suggestive (where else
could such a bargain have been more appropriately struck if not in the area that,
two and a half centuries later, would become the “business district”?). How-
ever, I still prefer to imagine the episode having taken place here, among
the last remaining woods of Manhattan’s primeval forests—somewhere in the
watery, leafy silence of these paths and hills (Minuit forging along the path at
the head of his men in baggy puffed trousers and broad-brimmed hats; the
Weckweesgeeks lined up in front of the village with their canoes ditched along
the shore just a few yards off)—and not amidst the frenetic cacophony of nar-
row canyons downtown.

Whatever the truth of the matter, it is from here, from this past, that we must
first set off to discover Manhattan: by piecing together its history through an
understanding of names.

So, the Weckweesgeeks or the Reckgawancs (or the Manates, if the other
version is to be believed . . .)—the opening phase of Manhattan’s histo-
ry is far from simple. The tribes and subtribes are numerous, the relation-
ships complex, the trails beset with traps, the settlements clouded in mist,
and any single interpretation is necessarily subject to revision. (There is
even an all-American version that claims that Manhattan was “sold” by
Chief Tammany, whose name is thought by some to loom behind
“Tammany Hall,” the palm-greasing political machine of the Democratic
Party in New York; but the truth is that the chief’s real name was
Tammanend, and he “sold” Philadelphia to the English in 1682.)

What is certain is that this island, with its mild climate, its abundantly
fertile soil, and its nourishing profusion of natural fruits, was inhabited by
certain tribes and subtribes belonging to the great Algonquin family.
Members of these tribes called themselves Lenapes (“native men”), but the
Europeans called them “Delawares” after the bay to the north of
Jamestown, which took its name from the first governor of Virginia, Sir
Thomas West, the third Duke de la Warr. The island was also inhabited by
Wappinger, Matouac, and Mohican tribes and subtribes (again, belonging
to the Algonquin family), as well as by certain tribes and subtribes (like
the Mohawks) of the great rival family, the Iroquois of the Five Nations.
Thus it was that the first European explorers of Manhattan island
(Giovanni da Verrazzano, Henry Hudson, and the fur merchants of the
Dutch East India Company) came face to face with the Weckweesgeeks and the Manates, as well as the Canarsies, the Matineccos, the Rockaways, the Nechtancs, the Tenkenas, the Paperimemins, and plenty of others besides—about twenty villages in all, linked together by trails. The most important of these was the so-called Weckweesgeek Trail that cut its way through Manhattan from top to bottom, a kind of latter-day Broadway running east (and not west) of what is today Central Park. (Evan T. Pritchard's Native New Yorkers [2002] is a fascinating account of this complex history.)

The Lenape and other Algonquin Indians were hunters and fishermen. They lived in longhouses capable of hosting several families, and they built highly maneuverable canoes out of tree trunks; they cultivated corn, beans, pumpkins, and tobacco, cooked hominy and succotash in terracotta pots, and ate out of wooden plates decorated with animal designs. They were also great oyster lovers: discarded shells littered their settlements and adorned the banks of the two rivers. Their matriarchal form of social organization related to a “primitive communism” that gave short shrift to any ideas of private ownership of the earth (the Great Mother) or animals, both of which were possessed on a collective basis and were there to be enjoyed by present and future generations. Hence the wide-eyed indifference with which the natives greeted unfavorable “transfers of property” and, afterward, their obstinate refusal to recognize and uphold such transactions. The very idea of buying land and animals was something completely outside their conceptual mindset—an instance of sheer folly. The treaties were perceived by the natives as agreements of mutual enjoyment: hence, the instances of “trespassing” and “larceny” that so outraged Europeans and sparked a viciously spiraling routine of reprisal, revenge, punishment, and plunder.

Relations between Europeans and natives on the island were not, then, exactly idyllic, especially when William Kieft, the hawkish governor of the Nieuw Amsterdam settlement (and author of a horrific massacre in 1643), was in power. But today this is of less concern to us than the question of what actually remains of the native communities in New York. Very little, to tell the truth: a few arrow- and spearheads in stone (called “Clovis heads”) that turned up mainly on Staten Island and around Canarsie and Queens; shell deposits along the riverbanks; the very fine National Museum of the American Indian at One Bowling Green; and, more than anything else, certain names. For example, Rockaway (“Sandy Land”) and Jamaica (“Home of the Beavers”), which are now neighborhoods in Queens; or Canarsie (“At the Fenced-in Place”) and Nayack (“headland”), present-day neighborhoods of Brooklyn. Or, less directly perhaps, the name given by the Dutch to a road that, on the southernmost tip of the island, wound its way...
alongside the East River: smothered in mother-of-pearl oyster shells, Pearle Straet now goes under the name of Pearl Street.

And then, obviously, there is Mana-hatta, Manhattan, whose meaning and origins are still subject to debate: “a place for general inebriation”? “the place for gathering bow wood”? “the hilly island”? “small island”? “rocky island” (or “rocky founded island,” as Walt Whitman translated it)? from the name of the Manates (= “island inhabitants”)? In Washington Irving’s 1809 work *Diedrich Knickerbocker’s History of New York*, a comic-opera blend of history and fantasy, America’s first professional author treated his readers to an amusing explanation of the name. It derived, he wrote, from the native women’s custom of putting on men’s headgear: “Man Hat On”! Meanings and origins are, then, plagued by uncertainty. Nonetheless, the sheer musicality of the name possesses a mythical force and conjures up images of a controversial past shrouded in mystery. And a feeling of guilt that has yet to be fully dealt with.

Very little otherwise remains of the Native American presence in New York: the odd archaeological find coming to light during excavation work for a new skyscraper; long stretches of roads like the Bowery or Broadway actually retracing ancient trails atop the summit of hills (later leveled out in the wake of property speculation), over water meadows and marshlands. Or—perhaps—a sudden revelation while investigating the city’s social history: take, for example, two photographs by Danish immigrant Jacob Riis. Working as a journalist for the central police station in the immigrant neighborhood of the Lower East Side at the end of the nineteenth century, Riis was the inspiration behind the very first socially oriented investigations and laid down the roots of American social photography with his extraordinary documentation of urban poverty. The first of the two photographs is titled *Old Mrs Benoir, an Indian woman, in her attic on Hudson Street*. We get a glimpse of a tiny room, a skylight, a pallet, the odd piece of furniture, two trunks, a mirror, and a wood-burning stove; and, sitting astride a chair, a plump old woman, hair tied up with a handkerchief, intent on her crochet work: drawing on her white pipe, she concentrates hard on her task, a lorgnette slipping down to the tip of her nose. The title of the second photograph is *Aquila Montana and her Iroquois Indian family*. It features an elderly man and two women with splendidly sculpted faces, seated around a table to the side of a sash window with a half-drawn blind; the table is strewn with piecework and, beside a trunk, a young man sits devotedly playing a violin, his chair tilted slightly backward. Strange, uncustomary views of urbanized Native Americans.

Native New Yorkers. It is almost impossible not to think of *Apologies to the Iroquois* (1962) by Edmund Wilson (an attentive observer of culture and society, and one of the founding fathers of American literary criti-
cism)—a book that describes the contribution made by this other native family to the building of New York, of its bridges, office complexes, and skyscrapers: the George Washington Bridge, the Triborough Bridge, the Henry Hudson Bridge, the Waldorf-Astoria, the Knickerbocker Village, the Rockefeller Center, the Empire State Building (who can forget Lewis Hine’s celebrated photograph of workers eating astride an iron girder suspended in midair during work on the new skyscraper? I wonder how many of them were Iroquois . . . ). Neither is it possible not to think of the powwows that were still taking place during the 1950s right here in Inwood Hill Park, or of the tiny Iroquois community in Gowanus, Brooklyn, which used to meet up near Nevins Bar & Grill (nicknamed “Indianopolis”) between the 1920s and 1960s. (Joseph Mitchell writes of this in his fine tale-cum-reportage, The Mohawks in High Steel, now collected in Up in the Old Hotel.) And I personally can never forget what poet-activist Bimbo Rivas, a dear departed friend of mine, once told me. On arriving from Puerto Rico, his family settled on the Lower East Side, a neighborhood of German, Irish, Chinese, Italian, and Jewish immigrants. Still living there, among the sweatshops and tenements, were some native families: “one of my friends was an American Indian. It was called the Eagle Family: Dancing Eagle, Swift Eagle. And they used to do the Indian ceremonies in the back yard, I mean they would have their powwows in there. We were right there, next to their culture all the time, you know . . . .”

Then it was the turn of the Dutch fur merchants, the East India Company, and, later, the West India Company. The island became Nieuw Nederland, and Nieuw Amsterdam came into being. Judging from the maps and prints of the era, it must have been a small farm-trading village that strove to resemble its namesake city as best it could: the narrow, winding streets, the characteristic houses with sloping roofs, garret windows, and high entrance steps, the numerous taverns where beer, rum, and genèvre were imbibed, the star-shaped fort, the windmills, and even two canals (Heere Gracht and Begun Gracht) that wound their way from the East River to what is today Broad Street. The Heerewegh (“the long, main street”) announced the arrival of Broadway, and beyond Het Cingle (“the wall”) stood broad expanses of farms and fields, orchards and meadows, hills, rivulets, and small lakes.

The Dutch lasted about fifty years (from 1610 to 1664), and their survival was always in the balance. The growing sense of disintegration was countered (sometimes autocratically) by governors like Kieft and Peter Stuyvesant who vainly sought to impose some semblance of order. Everything considered, much still remains of this Dutch past in New York. Not just the poems of Nieuw Amsterdam’s first poet, Jacob Steendam, who
lived on the very tip of the island (“See! Two streams my garden bind, / From the East and North they wind, / Rivers pouring in the sea, / Rich in fish, beyond degree. // Milk and butter; fruits to eat / No one can enumerate; / Ev’ry vegetable known; / Grain the best that e’er was grown”). Not just the stories and legends re-created with extravagant irony by Washington Irving in his *History* (or, in the case of the upper reaches of the Hudson, in the tales *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, where the slow, dreamy pace of pipe-smoking Dutch farmers and tavern raconteurs is contrasted with the greedy acquisitiveness and frenzy of the Yankees). And not just the densely contorted maze of streets in the southern part of Manhattan—so different from the regular geometries that characterize the rest of the city (again, with his usual perspicacity, Irving hazards an interesting explanation in his *History*: “The sage council . . ., not being able to determine upon any plan for the building of their city—the cows, in a laudable fit of patriotism, took it under their peculiar charge, and as they went to and from pasture, established paths through the bushes, on each side of which the good folks built their houses; which is one cause of the rambling and picturesque turns and labyrinths, which distinguish certain streets of New-York at this very day”).

The chief surviving relics of the Dutch past are the often unimagined names and words of a genuine social, cultural, architectonic, and linguistic map that unfolds before one’s eyes during the journey of discovery in New York. First and foremost, and in no uncertain manner, comes Harlem, where, in 1637, the De Forest brothers settled and brought into being the first nucleus of what would become, over the course of the next twenty years, the village of Nieuw Haarlem (so called after its Dutch namesake). Then Brooklyn and the Bronx, the first taking its name from the village of Breuckelen, situated just to the south of Amsterdam, the second from a certain Mr. Bronck, a Swedish or Danish captain on the payroll of the Dutch who later became an important landowner. Not to forget Corlaer, van Cortland, Schuyler, and Brevoort, all names of farmers and landowners linked in some way to the West India Company, all having some bearing on the city’s geography. But the most familiar name of all remains that of Peter Stuyvesant. Immortalized in many a painting and book, the choleric wooden-legged governor owned at least half of the southern part of Manhattan and a generous slice of the present-day Lower East Side: buried in the tiny cemetery of the St. Mark’s-in-the-Bouwerie church, his name lives on today in a square and a block of buildings.

Neither must we forget Gansevoort, the name of an important family whose descendants include the mother of Herman Melville—and a name that is still on the map of Manhattan to define that maze of streets, alleys, storehouses, and sheds next to the Hudson called the “meat market.” And
what of Duyckingh? In its slightly modified form, it was also the name of New York’s first great literary critic, Evert Duyckink, renowned for his *Cyclopedia of American Literature*, his magnificent personal library, his pioneering role in discovering and encouraging new authors, and his “soirées” at 20 Clinton Place, his home in Greenwich Village. (Living outside the city, Melville would write in 1851: “I suppose the Knights of the Round Table still assemble over their cigars and punch. . . . I should like to hear again the old tinkle of glasses in your basement, and may do so, before many months”). And lastly, there is that Knickerbocker fellow who, thanks to Irving, would become synonymous with the archetypal New Yorker and, metaphorically speaking, with the metropolis as a whole in its continuum of past and present.

Yet there is more to all this than just the names of the most important Dutch families. If you stroll down Cherry Street, remember that it was once the site of David Provoost’s enormous cherry orchard. Or if you take a trip to Coney Island and have a look around what is left of one of the biggest amusement parks built between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, bear in mind that this peculiarly long, thin slice of island-peninsula was so densely populated with rabbits in the seventeenth century that the Dutch called it *Conyné Eylant* (the “island of rabbits”). If you pop into one of New York’s most celebrated department stores, Bloomingdale’s, don’t forget that the origin of the name goes back to a lovely spot on the Upper West Side called “blooming dale” (*Bloemendael* in Dutch). Again, if you gaze across the Harlem River at the northernmost point of Manhattan (where our etymological journey began), the place staring back at you from the other side of the river, immediately west of Marble Hill, is called Spuyten Duyvil. This name is probably a corruption of the Dutch *spuit den duyvil* (“cheat the devil”), which speaks volumes about the difficulties of navigation in that part of the river. And if, when observing a detailed map of Manhattan and surrounding areas, you are taken aback by the number of names indicated with the term *kill*, quake not: it has nothing to do with bloodcurdling mysteries and everything to do with the Dutch name (*kil*) for “strait” or “inlet.” If you venture as far as Red Hook (maybe in search of the disquieting events recounted by H. P. Lovecraft in his *The Horror at Red Hook*), or if you happen to be at Corlear’s Hook or Sandy Hook, remember that *hook* derives from the Dutch word used to indicate a curving strip of land that runs into the sea: *hoeck*. When strolling along the Bowery, remember that it is named after the road that linked up the main farms (*bouwerie* in Dutch) located outside the urban settlement of Nieuw Amsterdam. And lastly, when wandering around in the rarefied peace of Gramercy Park, the most exclusive park in Manhattan (only those living in the wealthy abodes
directly overlooking the park possess a key giving them access), remember that there once used to be a Krom Moerasje here (tricks of the city’s history!), a “small crooked morass”—from which the English got Gramercy.

Then there are other types of linguistic leftovers. For example, boss, which sounds quintessentially American, comes from the Dutch word baas, meaning “master” and, earlier still, “uncle.” Likewise, stoop, the word used to describe the high entrance steps that almost give the old New York houses the appearance of small castles. In the ghetto neighborhoods especially, stoops served many different functions: projected outward into the great theater of the street, these elevated platforms were ideal for observation, courting, a chat, or gossip. And here we must pause and think for a moment. Stoop actually comes from the Dutch stoep, and linguistic considerations aside, this fact also has important implications in terms of architecture and town planning. Indeed, the first builders in the city (including the celebrated Crijn Fredericsz, who landed in Nieuw Amsterdam in 1625) brought with them their customs of erecting buildings that were elevated (as protection against the havoc wreaked by North Sea floods) and flush to the street (to make up for the lack of space in a canal-dominated city like Amsterdam). The early village of New York thus assumed an identity that, three centuries later, it still retains—and charmingly so along certain streets and in certain neighborhoods.

But let’s get back to history. With very few blows being exchanged, the English took over from the Dutch in 1664. Disorganized, forsaken by all, and unsure of its capacity to resist and survive in the New World, Nieuw Amsterdam quietly agreed to become New York. Other immigrants had been filling its streets in the meantime: Huguenots and Sephardic Jews escaping from the clutches of Europe, slaves from Africa and the East Indies “imported” to build the new town. All of them left their mark. Peter Minuit was a Huguenot, as indeed was the merchant and landowner Stephen de Lancey, whose name is inextricably linked to Delancey Street. (Perhaps the strongest linguistic reminder of the passing French presence belongs, however, to the world of gastronomy: the chaudron, or cauldron, bastardized definitively as chowder, as all those familiar with the characteristic Manhattan clam chowder will no doubt recall.) The first Jewish congregation on American soil (“Shearith Israel”) dates back to 1654, and in 1730 New York’s first synagogue was built a stone’s throw from Wall Street. In 1712 and 1741, the first black slave revolts took place; the second of these, with the aid of some whites, culminated in a public execution just outside the perimeter wall, in the vicinity of present-day Wall Street and City Hall, and just a few yards away from the “African Cemetery” that came to light during excavations undertaken for the con-
struction of a new building in the area between Broadway and Duane Street. Even the celebrated Fraunces Tavern (now a historical landmark), on the corner of Pearl and Broad Streets, where George Washington established his headquarters during the American Revolution, is linked to the black history of New York: the host and owner of the tavern, Samuel Fraunces, once Washington’s aide, happened to be from the West Indies.

Other names—perhaps more obvious and less evocative than their native and Dutch counterparts—remain to signal the English presence in New York: Chelsea (site of a Dutch farm purchased in 1750 by a retired English captain, and baptized anew in memory of the district in London) and Queens (the first Dutch settlement, occupied by the English at the end of the seventeenth century, and so called after Catherine of Braganza, the wife of King Charles II). And then, of course, like Mana-hatta for the natives, New York, from the Duke of York, owner of the city at the time of English domination and the future King James II: more than anything else, the name reminds me of the Shambles, the medieval maze of alleyways and shops in the English city of York, which was perhaps the closest thing resembling the southern tip of Manhattan at the time.

Lastly, two names (among the many) that no longer refer to certain places in New York but which have become symbols of the city as a whole. In 1807 Washington Irving was the first to refer to the city as “Gotham” in the magazine Salmagundi: its origins derive from the English town of the same name near Nottingham, whose inhabitants had become legendary folk heroes for having foiled King James’s plans to tax them by pretending to be mad or stupid. (The implications of all this are complex and ambiguous, and indeed, “Gotham” has always maintained a certain aura of mystery about it, as anyone familiar with the lengthy saga of Batman and Robin will tell you.) Then, in the 1930s and 1940s, a new term with which we are all too familiar today became common coinage among those jazz musicians who saw New York as a kind of glittering Mecca or a land of promise: “the Big Apple” (whose slang origins came from afar and which, metaphorically speaking, ultimately came to stand for the metropolis itself) was used to indicate the big deals that could be struck in the city.

In the midst of all this—the wealth of things that have disappeared and the little (or much) that has survived (names, memories, signs)—one presence has survived down the centuries and millennia to the present day. A silent, stern witness to events, it can be touched with the hand. Erupting from the deep, dark heart of the earth, the black, shale rocks that sprout from the green knolls of Central Park, and the clear dolomitic rocks that rub shoulders in the primeval forests at the northernmost extremity of the island, have always been here: they preceded
and accompanied the recent history of natives, the Dutch, the Huguenots, the Africans, the Jews, the English, and the Americans. Manhattan shale and Inwood dolomite: a living testament to the past in the present.

I took a good look around Inwood Hill Park. I got off the subway at the end of the A line, at Broadway and 207th Street, strolled up Isham Street and crossed Seaman Avenue. Then I set off into the park. It is a thick and hilly wood, a forest of century-old trees, an intricate network of roads and trails, rising and falling then meeting before departing again, squirrels poking about the bushes and scattering up the trees. Yet it is in a sorrowful mess: the brush is littered with wizened branches, leaves, and fallen trees, bottles and wastepaper are scattered here and there, and not one of the street lamps has been left intact—some of them have even been torn out of the ground, and now lie there like cast-iron trunks uprooted during a storm. There are no signs to tell you where you are, and it’s easy to get lost and you just have to trust your luck in finding the odd passerby who can put you back on the right track.

But then, just there, right beneath the pale blue span of the Hudson River Bridge, you come to a point where the waters of the Hudson divide to form the side arm that later becomes the Harlem River, and the view is fascinating. Opposite, perched atop the artificially cut overhanging rock, stand the buildings of Marble Hill; to the left, the immense, grey, and solemn expanse of the Hudson; to the right, a broad cove dotted with seagulls. Behind me, clambering up the hillside, stand what to all appearances are the “Indian caves,” the hotly disputed site of Native American settlement prior to the establishment of the villages: oblique, jutting rocks offering shelter. And below, at the bottom of the descending path, a spacious green clearing.

And right there, in the middle of the path (one of the friends accompanying me on this expedition points it out), is the rock I was looking for, and the plaque that reads:

SHORAKKOPOCH
According to legend, on this site of the principal Manhattan Indian village, Peter Minuit in 1626, purchased Manhattan Island for trinkets and beads then worth about 60 guilders. This boulder also marks the spot where a tulip tree (Liriodendron Tulipifera) grew to a height of 165 feet and a girth of 20 feet. It was, until its death in 1938 at the age of 280 years, the
last living link with the Reckgawanc Indians
who lived here

Reading the plaque after two mazelike hours meandering about the hills of Inwood Park, with its blocks of shale and dolomite, its oaks and nut trees, makes an odd impression. No matter how doubtful the legend might be, you feel as if you are in the native place of Manhattan. And the state of abandon into which the park has been allowed to sink is a laconic comment on that transaction (if it ever really came to pass, and on this spot) 350 years ago.
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Bibliography


Index

Abbott, Bernice, 64, 95, 96
Abingdon Square, 50
Abrams, Ruth, 67
Abyssinian Baptist Church, 58
African Americans. See blacks
African Free School, 45
African Grove Theater, 45
Afro-American Realty Company, 53
After Hours, 99
After the Ball, 107
After the World Trade Center: Rethinking New York City (Sorkin and Zukin), xiv, 73
Agee, James, 99
The Age of Innocence (Wharton), 81, 87
“Alamo,” 19
Aldridge, Ira, 45
Alexander Hamilton Bridge, 139
Alexander’s Museum, 125
Algarín, Miguel, 84, 136
Algonquin Hotel, 78
Algonquin Indians, 2–3
Alleman, Richard, 99
Allen, Irving Lewis, 108–9
Allen, Woody, 75, 79, 147
Alley Pond Park, 143
All People’s Garden, 21
All That Is Solid Melts into Air (Berman), 132
Amato, Anthony, 125–26
Amato Opera, 125–26
Amato, Sally, 125, 126
American culture, x, 40–41, 75–78
The American Language (Mencken), 108
American Museum of Natural History, 62, 63
The American Scene (James), xiv, 81, 111
“The American Scholar” (Emerson), 90
Ammann, Othmar, 143, 148, 149
Anderson, John, 73
Anderson, Laurie, 106, 111–12
Angelo Orensanz Foundation cultural center, 67
Annie Hall, 147
Apollo Theater, 54, 57
Apologies to the Iroquois (Wilson), 4–5
Arbus, Diane, 96
archaeology, 9–10, 26
architecture, 19, 51–52, 56–57, 117–18. See also brownstones; skyscrapers
armories, 26–27
Armory Show, 27, 92
Armstrong, Louis, 105, 143
art, 27, 41, 48–49, 90–100. See also Frick Collection; Guggenheim Museum; Harlem Renaissance;
Metropolitan Museum of Art; Museum of Modern Art; Museum of the City of New York
Arthur Avenue, 142
The Art of the City (Conrad), 96
Asbury, Herbert, 28
Ash Can school, 41, 92
Asian Americans, 141, 144. See also Chinese
Astor Court, 62
Astoria, 143, 144
Astor, John Jacob, 74
Astor Place, 19
Astor Place Opera House, 129–30
Atlantic Garden, 27
Audubon Ballroom, 55
Austen, Alice, 87, 149
Auster, Paul, 22, 85, 106, 145
the B52s, 125
“bachelor society,” 69, 70
Back Where I Came From (Liebling), 108
Bailey, James A., 57
Baldwin, James, 55, 82
Bankhead, Tallulah, 143
Baraka, Amiri, 31
Barnum, James A., 57
El Barrio, 18, 36–37, 59, 65–66, 111, 128
Bartholdi, Frédéric-Auguste, 64
“Bartleby the Scrivener” (Melville), 81
Baxter Street Dudes, 28
Bayonne Bridge, 149
Beat Generation, 107
Bedford-Stuyvesant, 145, 146
“Before Central Park: The Life and Death of Seneca Village,” 24–25
Behan, Brendan, 120
The Belle of New York, 107
Bellows, George, 91, 92
Belmont, 142
Bender, Thomas, 76
Benjamin, Walter, 13, 62
Bensonhurst, 145, 146
Benton, Thomas Hart, 133
Berger, Meyer, 86
Berlin, Irving, 41, 106
Berman, Marshall, 132
Bernstein, Leonard, 106
Bials & Koster Music Hall, 98
The Bicycle Rider in Beverly Hills (Saroyan), 85
“Big Apple,” 9
“The Big House,” 143
The Birth of a Nation, 98
Bishop, Isabel, 93
The Black Crook, 107
The Black Hand, 98
black history, 9
Blackmar, Elizabeth, 127
blacks, 39, 44–45, 52–58, 106, 127, 130, 140, 141, 146, 149
Blake, Eubie, 54
Bleecker Street, 49
Bloomingdale’s, 7
Blue in the Face, 85, 106, 145
Bobst Library, 85
Bogart, Humphrey, 99
Bonaparte, Napoleon, 123
Botkin, B. A., 86, 110
Bowen, Eliza, 123
Bowery, 7, 28, 42, 82, 123–25
The Bowery, 107
“The Bowery,” 124
Bowery Boys, 130
Bowery (Coney Island), 148
Bowery Lane Theater, 125
Bowling Green, 18
Bradhurst, Samuel, 57
Index

Brandon, Jorge, 136
Bread Givers (Yezierska), 83
Brennan, Joseph, 34
The Bridge (Crane), 79, 137
bridges, 131–32, 137–50
Bridge Twisters, 28
Bright Lights, Big City
(McInerney), 84
Brighton Beach, 146, 148
Brighton Beach Hotel, 147
Brises del Caribe, 21
Broad Channel, 145
Broadway, 109
Broadway Bridge, 139
Brodie, Steve, 125
Bronck, Jonas, 140
Bronx, 6, 19, 20, 139–42
“Bronx” (Drake), 141
Bronx Zoo, 141
Brooklyn, 3, 6, 19, 20, 139, 143,
145–48
Brooklyn Bridge, 88, 137–39,
146
The Brooklyn Bridge: Variation on
an Old Theme (Stella), 93
Brooklyn Dodgers, 142, 145
Brooklyn Heights, 145–46
Brooklyn-Queens Expressway,
131
Brooks, Michael W., 31
Brotherhood of Sleeping Car
Porters, 54
Browne, John, 144
brownstones, 27, 46
Bryant, William Cullen, 74
Bu Gao Ban, 70
Burckhardt, Rudy, 96, 99
Burnham, Daniel H., 116
Burr, Aaron, 123
“Bushville,” 34
Byrne, David, 106, 125
Café Orlin, 71
Caffè Fanelli, 49
Cagney, James, 99
Cahan, Abraham, 40, 43, 83,
111
Call it Sleep (Roth), 43, 83, 107
Canarsie Indians, 3, 145–46
Cannon, Steve, 136
Cantor, Eddie, 41
Cantwell, Anne-Marie, 26
Caribbeans, 65–66, 141. See also
Puerto Ricans
Carnegie, Andrew, 61
The Carpenters, 28
Casa Adela, 43
Cassavetes, John, 99
Castle Garden, 39
The Catcher in the Rye (Salinger),
83, 104
CBGB (& OMFUG) (Country,
Bluegrass, Blues and Other
Music for Uplifting
Gourmandizers), 125
Cecil Hotel, 58
Central Park, 17, 20, 24–26, 89,
100–101, 126–29, 132
Changing New York (Abbott), 95
Chaplin, Charlie, 98
Charas community center, 30
Charas/El Bohio, xiii, 133
Charnow, Sally, 31
Charyn, Jerome, 85
Chelsea, 9
Cherry Street, 7
Chiang, Fay, 135
The Child of the Ghetto. Rivington
Street: The Strugglers, 98
Chinatown, 16, 38, 41, 42, 69,
84, 102–3
Chinatown (Chiang), 135
Chinatown History Museum,
69–71
Chinese, 40, 41, 110, 144. See also Asian Americans
Chinese Exclusion Act, 69, 70
Christopher Street, 49
Chrysler Building, 17, 89, 117
Chu, Louis, 84
Chumley's, 115
cinema, 41, 97–100
Het Cingle ("the wall"), 5
Cirino, Linda D., 82
Citibank Building, 88
Citicorp Center, 17
CityArts, 133
City College of New York, 57
The City from Greenwich Village (Sloan), 92
The City in Slang (Allen), 108–9
City Island Bridge, 142
“City of Ambition: Artists and New York, 1900–1960,” 97
City of Glass (Auster), 22
Cliff Dwellers (Bellows), 92
Cockcroft, Eva, 133
Cockcroft, James, 133
Cohen, Marilyn, 97
Coleman, Glenn, 93
Collect Pond, 39
Colon, Jesus, 84
The Color of a Great City (Dreiser), 123
Columbia University, 17, 131
Coney Island, 7, 27, 146–48
Congregation and Chebra
Ukadisha B’nai Israel Mikalwarie, 56
Congregation Anshei Slonim, 67
Congregation Chasam Sopher, 67
Conrad, Peter, 96, 134
Conservatory Garden, 129
Cooper-Hewitt Museum, 60
Cooper Union, 44
Coppola, Francis Ford, 29
Corbett, Jim, 124
Corlear's Hook, 7
Cornwell, Patricia, 33
Corona, 143
Corso, Gregory, 107
Cotton Club, 54
Cowley, Malcolm, 48
Crane, Hart, 31, 48, 79, 137, 145
Crane, Stephen, 48, 82, 108
Cross Bronx Expressway, 131
“Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” (Whitman), 79, 88
Croton Aqueduct, 140
Cullen, Countee, 54
cummings, e. e., 50
Cyclopedia of American Literature (Duyckink), 7
Dakota Houses, 63
Da Ponte, Lorenzo, 45
da Verrazzano, Giovanni, 2, 145
Davies, Arthur, 91
Davis, Stuart, 93
Daybreak Boys, 28
Dead Rabbits, 28, 130
De Forest brothers, 6
de Kooning, Willem, 96
de Lancey, Stephen, 8
Delancey Street, 8, 150
Delawares, 2
DeLillo, Don, 86
Demme, Jonathan, 99
De Niro, Robert, 99
Desperately Seeking Susan, 99
De Ville, Mink, 125
De Ville, Willie, 106
Diamond Lil, 124
Dias y Flores, 21
Diedrich Knickerbocker's History of New York (Irving), 4, 78
DiMaggio, Joe, 142
Diner, Hasia, 58
Di Prima, Diane, 107
Division Street, 16
Dixon Place, 125
diZerega Wall, Diana, 26
Dock Rats, 28
Doctorow, E. L., 85
Dominguez, Maria, 65, 133
Dos Passos, John, 48, 82, 88, 107
Down These Mean Streets
(Thomas), 84
downtown, 15–16, 26, 39
Draft Riots, 130
Drake, Joseph Rodman, 141
Dreamland, 147
Dreiser, Theodore, 48, 82, 123
Drooker, Eric, 31, 97
DuBois, W. E. B., 54, 83
Dunne, Finley Peter, 108
Dutch, 5–9, 140, 144, 145, 148–49
Dutchman (Jones), 31
Duyckingh, 7
Duyckink, Evert, 7
Dylan, Bob, 107, 134–35

Eagle, Arnold, 68
Eakins, Thomas, 90
East Broadway, 43
East India Company, 5
East River, 19
East Village, 43–44
Eat a Bowl of Tea (Chu), 84
Ebenezer Gospel Tabernacle, 56
Edmiston, Susan, 82
The Eight, 91–93
Eisner, Will, 33
Elizabeth Street, 42
Ellery Queen's Game, 82
Ellington, Duke, 54, 65, 105
Ellis Island, 19, 39, 68

Ellison, Ralph, 24, 34, 55, 82, 83
Elysonian Fields, 74
Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 90
Emperor's Birds, 102–3
Empire State Building, 17, 95, 117
Encyclopedia of New York City
(Jackson), 138
Enemies: A Love Story (Singer), 84
Engel, Morris, 147
English, 8–9, 144
“English Sparrow (Washington Square)” (Millay), 112
Enrico Fermi Cultural Center, 142
Epstein, Jacob, 92
Essex Street, 43
Esteves, Sandra María, 84, 111, 136
Evans, Walker, 95, 96
Exile's Return (Cowley), 48
An Experiment in Misery (Crane), 108
expressways, 131–32

The Fat of the Land (Yezierska), 41–42
Ferriss, Hugh, 93
Fifth Avenue, 17, 89
Fitzgerald, F. Scott, 77, 80, 89, 105, 143, 150
Five Points, 42
Flatiron Building, 89, 95, 116–17
Flushing Meadow, 143
Flushing Remonstrance, 144
Fordham University, 141
Foreman, Milos, 99
Forest Hills, 143
Forrest, Edwin, 129
Forsyth Street Garden Conservancy, 102
Frank, Waldo, x
Fraunces, Samuel, 9
Fraunces Tavern, 9
Fredericks, Crijn, 8
_The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan_, 134–35
Frick Collection, 60–61, 71–72
Frick, Henry Clay, 61
Frisch, Michael, 71
_From Potter’s Field (Cornwell)_), 33
Fuller Building. See Flatiron Building
Fulton Fish Market, 18
Fulton, Robert, 146
Gallo, Joey, 29
gangs, 28–29, 130
_The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld_ (Asbury), 28
Gansevoort family, 6
Gansevoort Street, 18
Garcia, Chino, 30
gardens, 21, 102–3, 140, 144
Garibaldi, Giuseppe, 45, 49
Garibaldi-Meucci Memorial Museum, 87, 149
Garment District, 16–17
_Garrets and Pretenders_ (Parry), 48
_Gateway to the Promised Land_ (Maffi), x
gay movement, 49
Gellert, Hugo, 133
General Electric Building, 17
George Washington Bridge, 132, 139, 149
Germans, 39, 51, 110, 127, 130, 140, 144
German Winter Garden, 27
Gershwin, George, 105
Giamo, Benedict, 124
Ginsberg, Allen, 81, 107
Give My Regards to Broadway, 107
Glackens, William, 91
Glickman, Toby and Gene, 20
_The Godfather_, 142
Goetz, Bernard, 31
Goldberger, Paul, 19
Goldman, Emma, 48
Gold, Michael, 82, 93
_The Gophers_, 28
“The Gotham,” 9
Governor’s Island, 19
Gowanus, Brooklyn, 5
Gramercy Park, 7–8, 17
Grand Boulevard and Concourse, 141
Grand Central Terminal, 17, 33, 117–18
Grand Duke’s theater, 28
“The Grange,” 57
Granick, Harry, 26
Great Bowery Theater, 124
_The Great Gatsby_ (Fitzgerald), 77, 80, 143, 150
Great Neck, 143
Greeks, 144
green areas, 20–22, 121
the Greenbelt, 149
Green Lawn, 128
Greenwich Village, 16, 44–50, 89, 134–35
_Greenwich Village 1920–1930_ (Ware), 46
Griffith, David W., 41, 98
Griffith, Lois, 136
Grooms, Red, 96
Gropius, Walter, 118
Guggenheim Museum, 17, 60, 62
_A Guide to the Architecture of Manhattan_ (Goldberger), 19
Haas, Richard, 96
Home to Harlem (McKay), 56
Hope Garden, 21
Hopper, Edward, 93
Hotel Theresa, 55
Houghwout Building, 16
Howard Beach, 145, 146
Howells, William Dean, 76,
81–82, 89–90, 97, 110–11
How the Other Half Lives (Riis),
94
How to Speak New Yorkeese
(Levine and Jackson), 110
Hoyt, Charles, 124
Hudson, Henry, 2, 145
Hudson River Bridge, 139
Hudson River Railroad, 32
Hudson River School, 90
Hughes, Langston, 54–55, 82
Huguenots, 8
Hungry Hearts (Yezierska), 83
Hunter, Alberta, 53
Hunts Point, 141
Hutchinson, Anne, 140
Ilpetonga, 145
immigrants: on the Bowery, 124;
in the Bronx, 141; in
Brooklyn, 146; culinary habits
of, 58; films about, 98; in
Harlem, 51–52; and language,
110; literature of, 83, 84; on
Lower East Side, 39–40; muse-
ums about, 67–70; photos of,
94–95; in Queens, 144; on
Staten Island, 148–49. See also
specific groups
“Immigrants at Ellis Island”
(Hine), 95
The Incident (Peerce), 31
The Incorporation of America
(Trachtenberg), 100
Industrial Workers of the World,
Index

48, 50
Infamous Manhattan (Roth), 29
In Pursuit of Gotham (Taylor), 109
International Center for Photography, 60
International Workingmen’s Association, 130
In the Street (Agee, Levitt and Loeb), 99
Invisible Man (Ellison), 24, 34, 83
Inwood dolomite, 9–10
Inwood Hill Park, 1, 5, 10–11, 26
Irish, 39, 45, 51, 120, 127, 130, 140, 144
Iroquois, 2, 4–5
Irving, Washington, 4, 6, 7, 9, 74, 78
The Isaac Quartet (Charyn), 85
islands, 139
Italians, 40, 41, 45–46, 110, 141, 143, 145. See also Little Italy
I’ve Been Working on the Subway: The Folklore and Oral History of Transit (Charnow and Zeitlin), 31

Jackson Heights, 143, 144
Jackson, Kenneth T., 138
Jackson, Nancy, 110
Jamaica, 3
Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, 145
James, Henry, xiv, 27, 44, 75, 78, 81, 86, 111
James II, King of England, 9
Jardin de la Esperenza, 21
Jardin de los Amigos, 21
jazz, 105
Jazz Age, 54, 93
Jefferson Market Library, 134
Jewish Daily Forward, 43
Jewish ghetto, 41–43
Jewish Museum, 60
Jews, 8, 40, 41, 55, 56, 83, 106, 110–11, 141, 143, 145
Jews Without Money (Gold), 82, 93
Joel, Billy, 106
Johnson, Jack, 57
Johnson, James Weldon, 54, 79–80
Johnson, William, 96
Jones, LeRoi, 31, 107
Jumel, Stephen, 123
Kazin, Alfred, 145
Keaton, Buster, 98
Kelly, Gene, 99
Kerouac, Jack, 107
Kieft, William, 3, 5, 144
King, David H., Jr., 56–57
King’s Bridge, 139, 140
Kingsbridge, 140
Kleindeutschland Riots, 130
Klein, William, 95
“Knee-Pants’ at Forty-five Cents a Dozen—a Ludlow Street Sweater’s Shop” (Riis), 94
Knitting Factory, 106
Kosloff, Joyce, 22
Kozak, Roman, 125
Kracauer, Siegfried, 98
Kuo Wei Tchen, John, 69
Kupferberg, Tuli, 107
Lai, Charlie, 69
languages, 108–11
Last Exit to Brooklyn (Selby), 83
“The Last Leaf” (Henry), 49
Latin Kings, 30
Lawrence, Jacob, 96
Lawson, Ernest, 91
Index

Lee, Spike, 145
Lenapes, 2, 3
Lennon, John, 63
Lenox Avenue, 53, 56
Leone, Sergio, 29, 120
Levine, Joseph, 96
Levitt, Halen, 99
The Liberator, 48
Liberty Island, 19
Liebling, A. J., 108
The Life of a Bootblack, 98
“Life on the East Side” (Myers), 41
Lincoln Tunnel, 19, 149
Literary New York (Edmiston and Cirino), 82
literature, 73–86, 106–11
Little Fugitive, 147
Little Italy, 29, 41, 42, 69, 89, 142. See also Italians
The Little Match Girl, 98
Little Neck, 143
“Little Odessa,” 148
Locke, Alain, 54
Loeb, Janice, 99
Loisaida, 41, 43, 111
Long Island, 139, 143, 145
Lost New York (Silver), 27
Lower East Side, ix–xi, 21, 38–44, 67–68, 97, 106, 120, 130
Lozowick, Louis, 93
La Lucha Continua, 133
Luhan, Mabel Dodge, 48
Luks, George, 91
Luna Park, 147
MacDougal Street, 49
Macombs Dam Bridge, 123, 139
Madison Avenue, 17
Madison Avenue Bridge, 139
“Madonna of Ellis Island” (Hine), 95
Magenta, Anna, 102–3
Maggie, Girl of the Streets (Crane), 82
Magical Children’s Garden, 21
Mailer, Norman, 145
Malcolm X, 55
Malcolm X Boulevard. See Lenox Avenue
Manates, 1–3
Manhattan, 1–2, 4, 10, 15–16, 20–21, 139–40
Manhattan (Allen), 75, 99
Manhattan Beach, 146
Manhattan Beach Hotel, 27, 147
Manhattan Bridge, 139
Manhattan shale, 9–10, 26
Manhattan (Sheeler and Strand), 99
Manhattan Transfer (Dos Passos), 82, 88, 107
“The Man of the Crowd” (Poe), 81
Manor, Douglas, 143
maps, 14, 21, 22, 29
The Marathon Man, 128
Marble Hill, 1
“Marble Palace,” 57
Marcus Garvey Park, 55
Marcus Garvey Square, 18
La Marqueta, 36
Married to the Mob, 99
Marsh, Reginald, 64, 93, 96, 97, 133, 147
Martin, John, 93
Marx Brothers, 106, 143
Masereel, Frans, 96
The Masses, 48, 50, 92
Matinecocs, 3, 144
McInerney, Jay, 84
McKay, Claude, 54, 56, 130–31
Index

McReady, William, 129
McSorley's Old Ale House, 119–21
Melendez, Jesús Papoleto, 15, 36–37, 58–59, 65
Melville, Herman, 6, 7, 27, 47, 81
Men At Work (Hines), 95
Mencken, H. L., 78, 108
Mercy of a Rude Stream (Roth), 55
Mermaid Parade, 148
MetLife Building, 17, 118
Metropolitan Museum of Art, 17, 60, 62
Meucci, Antonio, 45
Midtown, 15–17
Millay, Edna St. Vincent, 48, 50, 112
Miller, Arthur, 145
Miller, Stuart, 142
Mills, Florence, 53
Minnewit, 142
Minton’s Playhouse, 58
Minuit, Peter, 1, 8, 10
Miracle Garden, 21
Mitchell, Joseph, 5, 81, 120
The Mohawks in High Steel (Mitchell), 5
The Mole People: Life in the Tunnels Beneath New York (Toth), 33–34
Momber, Marlis, 97
Monk, Thelonious, 58
Monroe, Marilyn, 116
Montague Street area, 146
Moore, Clement Clarke, 121
Morgan Bank, 88
Morgan Library, 62
Morrisania, 140, 141
Morris-Jumel Mansion, 123
Morris, Roger, 123
Morton, Margaret, 32, 34, 65, 97
Moses, Robert, 131, 148
Mott Haven, 140, 141
Mount Morris Park, 55–56
The Movie Lover’s Guide to New York (Alleman), 99
Movie-Made America (Sklar), 98
Mr. Dooley Remembers: The Informal Memoirs of F. P. Dunne, 108
The Mulligan Guard Ball, 107
murals, 132–34
Museo del Barrio, 65–66
Museum Mile Association, 66
Museum of the American Indian, 62
Museum of Chinese in the Americas, 69–71
Museum of the City of New York, 29, 64–65, 96–97
Museum of Immigration on Ellis Island, 68
Museum of Modern Art, 61, 89
Museum of the Moving Image, 144
museums, 17, 60–72
music, 104–8, 125–26
The Musketeers of Pig Alley, 98
“My City” (Johnson), 79–80
Myers, Jerome, 41, 92
“My Lost City” (Fitzgerald), 80–81, 105
My Own Ground (Nissenson), 83
“The Mystery of Marie Roget” (Poe), 74–75
The Naked City (Dassin), 99–100
Nathan’s, 148
National Academy of Design, 57, 60
National Westminster Bank USA, 88
Index

Native Americans, 1–5, 10–11, 44
Nayack, 3
New Amsterdam, 5–8, 64
New Amsterdam News, 54
New York album, 106
New York and Harlem Railroad, 140
New York (Berger), 86
New York Botanical Garden, 140, 141
New York Chinatown History Project, 69–71
New York City Folklore (Botkin), 86, 110
New Yorker, 79, 81
New-York Historical Society, 24–25, 63–64
New York Hospital, 129
New York Intellect (Bender), 76
New York: Island of Hills (Maffi), x
New York (Klein), 96
New York Labor History Association, 20
New York Marathon, 148
The New York Red Pages (Glickman and Glickman), 20
New York School, 41
New York's Nooks and Crannies (Yeadon), 143
New York: The City Observed. A Guide to the Architecture of Manhattan (Goldberger), 19
The New York Trilogy (Auster), 85
New York University library, 85
New York Yankees, 142
Niblo's Garden, 27
Nieuw Amsterdam, 5–8, 64
Nieuw Haarlem, 6, 50
Nissenson, Hugh, 83
Norfolk Street, 42
Notes of a Native Son (Baldwin), 82
novels, 107
novels without words, 96, 97
Nuyorican Poets’ Café, 43, 136
Nuyoricans. See Puerto Ricans
O'Connell, Shaun, 82
Odets, Clifford, 82
Of Time and the River (Wolfe), 82
O'Hara, Frank, 81
O'Keeffe, Georgia, 93
Old Bowery Days (Harlow), 124
Olmsted, Frederick Law, 127, 143, 146
Once Upon a Time in America (Leone), 29, 120
145th Street Bridge, 139
125th Street, 53
O'Neill, Eugene, 48, 120
On Leong Tong, 29
On the Bowery (documentary), 99, 124
On the Bowery (Giamo), 124
Orchard Street, 42
Organization of Afro-American Unity, 55
Oriental Hotel, 27, 147
Orpheum, 106
Osofsky, Gilbert, 54
The Other Islands of New York City (Seitz and Miller), 142–43
Our Lady of Lourdes, 57
The Oyster Bar and Restaurant, 118–19

painting, 90–93, 96–97. See also art
Palace Hotel, 125
Paley, Grace, 84
the Palisades, 149
Panna Maria (Charyn), 85
Papp, Joseph, 132
The Park and the People
(Rosenzweig and Blackmar), 127
Park Avenue, 17
Parker, Charlie “Bird,” 58, 105
Parker, Dorothy, 78
Parque de la Tranquilidad, 21
Parry, Albert, 48
Patchin Place, 50
Paterson Strike Pageant, 48
Patri, Giacomo, 96
Patti, Adelina, 45
Payton, Philip A., Jr., 53
Pearl Street, 4
Peerce, Larry, 31
Pelham Bay, 140
Pennsylvania Station, 27
people, 37–38. See also immigrants
Pepper Pot, 48
Petrella Point, 12–13, 22–23
Petry, Ann, 82
Philipse, Frederick, 140
photography, 94–96. See also art
Pierre; or, the Ambiguities
(Melville), 81
Pietri, Pedro, 36, 65, 84, 107–8, 136, 145
Pig Foot Mary, 53, 58
“Pinehurst,” 57
Piñero, Miguel, 84, 136
Planet of the Apes (Schaffner), xiv
Plaza Hotel, 17
Plug Uglies, 28
Poe, Edgar Allan, 34, 47, 50, 74–75, 81, 86, 141–42
poetry, 107
Pollock, Jackson, 96
Pop, Iggy, 125
Porter, Cole, 106
Portrait of a Lady (James), 78
Portrait of Katrina van Cortland
(van Mierevelt), 64
Prendergast, Maurice, 91
Prohibition, 29, 48, 115
Prologue for Ode to Road Runner
(Pietri), 107–8
Prospect Park, 146
Provoost, David, 7
Public Library, 17, 89
Puerto Rican Assassins, 29–30
A Puerto Rican in New York
(Colon), 84
Puerto Ricans, 36, 41, 43, 65–66, 84, 141
Quakers, 144
Queen, Ellery, 83–84
Queens, 3, 19, 20, 135, 139, 143–45
Queensboro Bridge, 139, 144, 150
Radiator Building—Night, New York (O’Keeffe), 93
The Rag-Picker’s Christmas, 98
Ragtime (Doctorow), 85
the Ramones, 125
Randall’s Island, 19
Raritan Indians, 148
Rat Island, 139
Rauschenberg, Robert, 96
The Raven (Poe), 50
Reckgawancs, 1–2, 11
Red Hook, 7
Red Peppers, 28
Reed, John, 48, 49, 50, 120
Reed, Lou, 106
Remarkable, Unspeakable New York (O’Connell), 82
Renaissance Theater, 54
Restell, Madame, 74, 86
Rhapsody in Blue, 105
Rice, Elmer, 82
Riis, Jacob, 4, 27–28, 40, 65, 94
Rikers Island Bridge, 139
riots, 129–31
The Rise of David Levinsky (Cahan), 83
Rivas, Bimbo, 5
Rivera, Diego, 133, 134
Riverside Park, 20–21, 32
Rivington Street, 42
Robinson, Edward G., 99, 143
Rockaway, 3
Rockefeller Center, 134
Roebling, John Augustus, 137–38
Roebling, Washington, 138
Roger Morris Park, 123
Rogers, Ginger, 143
Rogers, Mary Cecilia, 73–75, 86
Rogosin, Lionel, 99, 124
Roosevelt Island, 19
Rosenthal, Bernard, 19
Rosenzweig, Roy, 127
Roth, Andrew, 29
Roth, Henry, 43, 55, 83, 107
Rotolo, Susan, 134–35
Rowboat Lake, 128
Rukeyser, Muriel, 31
Runyon, Damon, 30, 78, 109
Russians, 148
Salinger, J. D., 83, 104
Sanders, Ed, 107
Sandy Hook, 7
San Juan Hill, 52–53
Saroyan, William, 85
Savini, Federico, 102–3
Scenes from the Life of a City (Homberger), 86
Schaffner, Franklyn J., xiv
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 57
Scorsese, Martin, 28, 29, 37, 99
Sea View Hospital, 149
Seidelman, Susan, 99
Seitz, Sharon, 142
Selby, Hubert, Jr., 83
Seneca Village, 24, 51, 127
September 11, 2001, xiv
Serenity Garden, 21
Seventh Avenue, 53
The Seven Year Itch, 116
Seward Park Houses, 133–34
Shadow and Act (Ellison), 82
Shahn, Ben, 41, 64, 93
“Shared Perspectives,” 97
Sheeler, Charles, 93, 99
Shinn, Everett, 91
Short Tail Gang, 28
The Sidewalks of New York, 107
Siempre Verde, 21
Silver, Nathan, 27
Silver Palace Hotel, 20
Singer, Isaac Bashevis, 84
Sister Carrie (Dreiser), 82
Siwanoy tribes, 142
Sklar, Robert, 98
skyscrapers, 17, 95, 117
slaves, 8, 50, 146, 149
Sloan, John, 41, 48, 49, 50, 91, 92, 96, 120
slums, 42
Small’s Paradise, 54
Smith, Patti, 106, 125
Smoke, 85, 106, 145
Snug Harbor Cultural Center, 149
Snyder, Robert, 103
Society of Friends, 144
SoHo art market, 16, 49
El Sol Brillante, 21
Song of the Silent Snow (Selby), 83
Sorkin, Michael, xiv, 73
Soto, Pedro Juan, 84
sounds, 103–13
South Street Seaport, 88
Soyer, Isaac, 93
Soyer, Raphael, 93
Spanglish, 111
Spanish Harlem. See El Barrio
Specimen Days (Whitman), 79, 88
Spiks (Soto), 84
The Spirit of the Ghetto (Hapgood), 92
Spuyten Duyvil, 7
Standard Oil building, 88
A Star Shines Over Mt. Morris Park (Roth), 55
Staten Island, 19, 87–88, 148–49
Staten Island Expressway, 131
Staten Island Historical Society, 149
Statue of Liberty, 64, 88
Steendam, Jacob, 5–6
Steeplechase Park, 147
Steichen, Edward, 95
Steinbeck, John, 75
Steinway, William, 144
Stella, Joseph, 93, 96–97
“A Step Away from Them” (O’Hara), 81
Stettheimer Doll House, 64–65
Stewart, A. T., 57
Stieglitz, Alfred, 95
St. Mark’s Place, 43–44
Stomp, 106
stoops, 8, 55–56

The Story of Rosa in Little Italy, 98
Stout, Rex, 84
St. Patrick’s Cathedral, 57
Strand, Paul, 99
Strawberry Fields, 63
“Street Corner University,” 53
The Street (Petry), 82
Street Scene (Rice), 82
strikes, 129–30
Strivers’ Row, 56–57
Studio Museum, 57–58
Stuyvesant, Peter, 5, 6, 50, 144
Stuyvesant Town, 131
subway, 30–34
Subway City: Riding the Trains,
Reading New York (Brooks), 31
The Subway (Tucker), 31
Sugar Hill, 56, 57
Sullivan Street, 49
Sutton Place, 17, 26
Swamp Angels, 28
sweatshops, 45
Switchback Railway, 147
Sylvan Terrace, 122

“Taíno: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean,” 65–66
Taínos, 65–66
Take the A Train, 105
Talking Heads, 106, 125
Tammany Hall, 110
Ta-Ra-Ra Boom-De Ay!, 107
Tate, Allen, 31
Taylor, William R., 109
Telephone Booth poems (Pietri), 107, 145
Television, 125
Ten Days That Shook the World (Reed), 50
Tenderloin, 52–53, 130
Index

Tenement Museum, 67–68
Tenement Times, 68
Thalia Theater, 27, 124
theater, Yiddish, 41
Theory of Film (Kracauer), 98
Third Avenue Bridge, 139
Third Avenue Elevated, 124, 140–41
This Ain’t No Disco (Kozak), 125
Thomas, Dylan, 50
Thomas, Piri, 84
Thompson Street, 49
Throgs Neck Bridge, 143
Thunderbolt, 147
Thurber, James, 78
Thurston, Zora Neale, 54
Tiffany lamps, 143
time, xiii–xv
Times Square, 17, 30, 89, 109
Tin Pan Alley, 106
Toiber, Arthur, 71, 135
Tobocman, Seth, 97
Tompkins Square, 20, 43, 130
Tompkins Square Park, 34, 131
Toomer, Jean, 54
Toth, Jennifer, 33–34
Toward a People’s Art (Cockcroft, Weber and Cockcroft), 133
Trachtenberg, Alan, 100
Triborough Bridge, 131, 139
A Trip to Chinatown, 107
Trump Tower, 17
Tucker, George, 31
Tudor City, 17
The Tunnel: The Underground Homeless of New York (Morton), 32
Twain, Mark, 44, 47
Twelve Historical New York City Street and Transit Maps from 1860 to 1967, 22
“Twenty-Three Skidoo!,” 116

Twin Towers, xiv
Types from City Streets (Hapgood), 124
Umberto’s restaurant, 29
UN Building, 17
Underground Railroad, 45
Underneath New York (Granick), 26
Under the Towers of Manhattan (Maffi), x
Underworld (DeLillo), 86
Unearthing Gotham: The Archaeology of New York City (Cantwell and diZerega Wall), 26
Union Square, 16, 20
Union Square (Halper), 82
University Heights Bridge, 139, 140
uptown, 15, 17–18
Valentino, Rudolph, 143
Van Alen, William, 117
Van Buren, Martin, 74
Vanderbilt, Cornelius, 87
Van Der Zee, James, 53
Van Vechten, Carl, 54, 64
Vaux, Calvert, 127, 134, 146
Vejigante Café, 36–37, 58–59
Velvet Underground, 106
Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, 131–32, 148
Vidor, King, 99
A Visit from St. Nicholas (Moore), 121
The Voice of the City (Snyder), 103
the Voidoids, 125
Wah Mei Bird Garden, 102–3
Waiting for Lefty (Odets), 82
Walker, A’Lelia, 54
Walk on the Wild Side, 106
Walkowitz, Abraham, 93
Wall Street, 15–16, 54
Wang, Wayne, 106, 145
War Cries Over Avenue C (Charyn), 85
Ward, Lynd, 96
Ware, Caroline, 46
Warhol, Andy, 99
Warriors' Gate, 129
The Warriors (Hill), 31
Washington Bridge, 139
Washington, George, 123
Washington Square, 18, 49
Washington Square (James), 44, 81, 86
Washington Square Park, 44
Weber, John, 133
Weber, Max, 93
Weckweesgeeks, 1–3, 140
Weegee, 30, 96
West Farms, 140
West India Company, 5, 6, 144, 145
West, Mae, 124
West, Sir Thomas, 2
Wharton, Edith, 81, 87
What Did Mozart See on Mulberry Street (Burckhardt), 99
White Horse Tavern, 50
White, Stanford, 49, 57, 143
Whitman, Walt, 47, 79–81, 88, 145, 147
Whitney Museum, 17, 60, 96–97
Wilder, Billy, 99
Williamsburg, 130, 146
Williamsburg Bridge, 139, 150
Willis Avenue Bridge, 139
Wills, Harry, 57
Wilson, Edmund, 4–5, 48, 78
Withers, Frederick Clarke, 134
Wolfe, Gerald D., 19
Wolfe, Thomas, 82, 145
Woolrich, Cornell, 84
Woolworth Building, 88
working-class, 19–20, 22, 48–49, 94–95, 128, 146
World’s Fair (Doctorow), 85
World Trade Center, xiv
Wright, Richard, 55
Wyler, William, 99
Yeadon, David, 143
Yekl (Cahan), 83, 111
Yezierska, Anzia, 40–42, 83
York, Duke of, 9
Young, Art, 93
Zeitlin, Steven, 31
Zukin, Sharon, xiv, 73
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