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New York: A City Set in “a Mosquito-Infested Swamp”

New York is one of the oldest cities in North America. The Dutch founded New Amsterdam in 1626, so it is older than St. Petersburg, which was founded in 1703. Like St. Petersburg, New York is both an icon of modernity and a locus of urban phantasmagoria. New York for Sanderson (2009: 33) is “the quintessential modern city” and “the first megacity, a city of at least ten million inhabitants.” It achieved this milestone before 1950. New York is also a quintessentially modern city like St. Petersburg as it was founded, like a number of other modern cities, in a wetland, specifically what Doctorow (1994: 156) calls “a mosquito-infested swamp” on the island of Manhattan.

This island (and swamp) became what Burrows and Wallace (1999: xv) in their monumental history of the city call “the most valuable piece of real estate in the world.” Beneath and before this “piece of real estate” were what Burrows and Wallace also call “vast meadows of grass ... forests with towering stands” of a variety of tree species, an abundance of wild fruits and wild animals, and last, but by no means least, “tidal marshlands” (3, 4). In *The Forests and Wetlands of New York City* Barlow (1971) tells the story of New York in relation to its wetlands. By presenting archival and recent maps of the city, Barlow also documents the presence of its wetlands in the past and the absence of its lost wetlands in the present (xxvi–xxix, 20–21, and endpapers).

Barlow (1971: 5) also relates how “the early Dutch settlers gravitated to the flat marsh-fringed lowlands reminiscent of the geography of Holland.” Moreover, “the Indians were marsh men too” (6). This similarity between

invader and indigene as marsh men did not lead to much solidarity or commonality or fellow-feeling between them, nor did wetland reminiscences lead to a desire by the colonizer starting with the Dutch to protect them with the result that “by 1900 the once extensive Manhattan marshes, with the exception of some fragments at the northern end totaling less than one square mile, had been filled in and built over” (36). New York for Barlow is “in its way as much of a water city as Venice” (144), perhaps as both are cities built in wetlands; but whereas one city canalized wetlands into means of watery ingress and egress, the other filled them in and built over them; whereas the water in one city is plain for all to see, the water in the other has gone.

Recently, along similar lines to Barlow, Eric Sanderson (2009) in *Mannahatta: A Natural History of New York City* shows the lost wetlands both by presenting archival maps and by digitally peeling away the city from Manhattan Island to create a three-dimensional model in an oblique view of Mannahatta in 1609. Sanderson describes how seeing the British Headquarters Map of circa 1782–83 (21, endpapers, and 50–51) changed his life. Archival maps provide a vertiginous view into the past in which the present slips away and one finds oneself floating above a fascinatingly familiar and yet strangely unfamiliar landscape for one can make out features that survive to this day, such as hills, and note ones that haven’t, such as wetlands, the feature most vulnerable to destruction by urbanization. The British Headquarters Map shows wetlands and indicates that New York is a swamp city, a marsh metropolis, a city built on wetlands (as Sanderson notes [53], and his later map of ecological communities confirms this with seven different wetland communities shown [139]). Not only is New York, as it is for Kotkin (2005: 93), “the ultimate vertical city” of skyscrapers and “the Manhattan skyline . . . the perpetually acceptable face of capitalism,” as it is for Pile (1992: 223), but it is also the anterior horizontal city of lost marshes and swamps and the unacceptable grotesque lower earthly and bodily stratum of the earthly foundation on which capitalism and the capitalist city is built and which the city suppressed.

New York, like London, is not only another marsh metropolis, but also “another maritime metropolis” as de Landa (2000: 93) puts it. Probably the writer to have most powerfully evoked New York as a maritime metropolis is Herman Melville. He is usually regarded, though, as what Sloterdijk (2013: 43; 2014: 811) calls “the greatest writer of the maritime world.” Sloterdijk

is following in the footsteps of D. H. Lawrence ([1923] 1977: 168) who, ninety years before Sloterdijk, called *Moby Dick*, Melville's masterpiece of the maritime world, "the greatest book of the sea ever written." Joel Kovel (1970: 234 and 238) even goes so far as to claim that *Moby Dick* is "perhaps the greatest American novel." Many critics and scholars concur, even going further than Kovel to claim that it is perhaps the greatest novel in English. Yet it is a masterpiece not only of (American) literature and the maritime world, but also of the maritime metropolis of New York, the epicenter of the maritime world and the leading maritime metropolis of the day when Melville was writing.

Melville ([1851] 1992: 1) begins *Moby Dick* in the following famous fashion, both invoking the maritime world and evoking the leading maritime metropolis of his day:

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball. With a philosophical flourish Cato throws himself upon his sword; I quietly take to the ship. There is nothing surprising in this. If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, some time or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me. There now is your insular city of the Manhattoes, belted round by wharves as Indian isles by coral reefs—commerce surrounds it with her surf. Right and left, the streets take you waterward. Its extreme downtown is the battery, where that noble mole is washed by waves, and cooled by breezes, which a few hours previous were out of sight of land. Look at the crowds of water-gazers there. Circumambulate the city of a dreamy Sabbath afternoon. Go from Corlears Hook to Coenties Slip, and from thence, by Whitehall, northward. What do you see?—Posted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries. Some leaning against the piles; some seated upon the pier-heads; some looking

over the bulwarks of ships from China; some high aloft in the rigging, as if striving to get a still better seaward peep. But these are all landmen; of week days pent up in lath and plaster—tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks. How then is this? Are the green fields gone? What do they here? But look! here come more crowds, pacing straight for the water, and seemingly bound for a dive. Strange! Nothing will content them but the extremest limit of the land; loitering under the shady lee of yonder warehouses will not suffice. No. They must get just as nigh the water as they possibly can without falling in. And there they stand—miles of them—leagues. Inlanders all, they come from lanes and alleys, streets and avenues—north, east, south, and west. Yet here they all unite. Tell me, does the magnetic virtue of the needles of the compasses of all those ships attract them thither?

The maritime metropolis is a liminal place between land and sea in which the siren call of the sea prevails over the pull of the heartstrings toward hearth and home. This call is probably exacerbated for New Yorkers by Manhattan being an island, and so already being halfway out to sea.

What a pity that Melville ([1857] 1990) did not also turn his pen to evoking the marsh metropolis of Manhattan Island and what effect it had on, and for, his fellow New Yorkers. What if he had given the same sardonic attention to New York as a marsh metropolis at the confluence of the East and Hudson Rivers as he had given to the swamp city and riverine metropolis of Cairo at the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers in *The Confidence Man*, which he evokes in the following ironic miasmatic terms: “at Cairo, the old established firm of Fever and Ague is still settling up its unfinished business; that Creole grave-digger, Yellow Jack—his hand at the mattock and spade has not lost its cunning; while Don Saturnus Typhus, taking his constitutional with Death, Calvin Edison and three undertakers, in the morass, snuffs up the mephitic breeze with zest” (156).

The view of Melville’s New Yorkers looking out to sea into the vastness of horizontal space in the nineteenth century contrasts with, and segues into, Michel de Certeau’s vertical view from the 110th floor of the then World Trade Center in the 1980s. When de Certeau (1984: 91) viewed “the urban island” of Manhattan, he described the view as “a wave of verticals.” What he did not see and what Melville and Sanderson (2009) enable us to see is that a wave of verticals fronts the waves of the horizontal ocean and is built upon a swamp

of horizontals. Manhattan was Mannahatta, the swamp island. When the terrorist attacks of 9/11 reduced the World Trade Center to a heap of rubble, they produced something between a swamp and a wave, between the vertical and the horizontal. For de Certeau (1984: 91) “the gigantic mass” of Manhattan was “immobilized before our eyes” in the view from the World Trade Center.

In the aftermath of 9/11 the gigantic and now grotesque mess of the ruins of the World Trade Center was “immobilized before our eyes” in the photographs of Joel Meyerowitz (2006; see Giblett, 2009: 165–173 for a discussion of the photography of 9/11). The grotesque marshes and statuesque forests of Mannahatta before Manhattan are also “immobilized before our eyes” in Sanderson virtual bird’s eye view 3D digital modeling of the precontact island. What de Certeau (1984: 91) calls “a city composed of paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs” viewed from the World Trade Center was once upon a time a native quaking zone of pleasant places of hilly reliefs of maternal and supine swamps and marshes. In the aftermath of 9/11 the World Trade Center became a feral quaking zone and paroxysmal place of heaped ruins as depicted by Meyerowitz and others. The World Trade Center was for de Certeau “only the most monumental figure of Western urban development” (93). It was not only erected on the monstrous body of the swamp but also later demolished into the most terrifying figure of the destruction of Western urban development.

The city undertakes rituals of exclusion and repression involving what de Certeau (1984: 125) calls “an excommunication of territorial divinities, the deconsecration of places haunted by the story spirit.” In the case of Manhattan Island, this involved the erasure of the Amerindigenous Lenape’s stories and place names. For de Certeau, “every power is toponymical and initiates its order of places by naming them” (130), or perhaps more precisely by renaming them in the colonizer’s terms as the places of Manhattan Island had Lenape names.

Unlike Venice, which made its wetlands into canals, New York made one of its wetland areas into Central Park, probably America’s most famous park, certainly one of New York’s premier attractions for visiting tourists and prime recreational facilities for local residents. Its location was “swampy,” as Smith (2012: 286) puts it, as there were “bogs in Central Park” according to Sanderson (2009: 53). “The city,” according to Rybczynski (2003: 166) “had

been able to acquire the rocky and swampy land for the park because it was unsuitable for normal real estate development. Vaux and Olmsted turned this liability to an advantage by exploiting the craggy outcrops and turning the lowlands into lakes." Certainly swamps are not suitable for normal real estate development, but it was also part of normal park development to turn swamps into lakes. It would have been abnormal not to have done so and to have left the swamps as swamps. Rybczynski goes on to relate how "a system of underground pipes would drain the swampy flats; the lowest areas would be excavated and turned into lakes" (174).

Similarly, Barlow (1972: 20) relates how, "by judiciously clearing away here and planting there, by moving earth to rearrange the land into more pleasing contours, by laying drains and converting swamps into ponds, there would emerge a landscape that was at once naturalistic and picturesque." Olmsted's role in this account was sculptural as it involved rearranging the "pleasing contours" of the feminized body of the pleasing prospects of the hidden park so that they could emerge smoothly from the inchoate lump of swamp and earth that he was given to work with. The wetland was subjected to the conventions and dictates of the European landscape aesthetic, especially of the picturesque, one of the three dominant modes with the sublime and the beautiful, and the one best suited to landscape architecture.

Mumford (1955: 88) gives Olmsted a more active role in the development of Central Park in which he transformed 800 acres, "chiefly rocks, swamps, [and] barren pasture," into "lakes and meadows." Mumford concludes by claiming that "by making nature urbane" Olmsted "naturalized the city." More precisely, he culturalized the city. By making nature move to an arranged design, as Raymond Williams (1973: 124) puts it in relation to the gentleman "improvers" in England, Olmsted not only culturalized the city but also mechanized the park. In a letter to his father Olmsted boasted that "I have got the park into a capital discipline, a perfect system, working like a machine" (cited by Rybczynski, 2003: 160). Olmsted belonged to the school (and caste) of gentleman farmers (or "improvers") of the park estate (see 31, 66, 79, and 81). Their catch-cry was "discipline and drain," discipline by drainage to produce the pastoro-technical idyll of the machine in the garden, the living, organic machine. Olmsted applied to the park the same

civil engineering and landscape aesthetic that he applied to the farm. Both were gentleman park estates. Parks, Schenker (2009: 5) argues, were “stylized representations of rural countryside” in both of which “marshes were drained.” Olmsted was a serial swamp killer. Besides the swamps in Central Park in New York, he rearranged the Fens in Boston (as we will see in the following chapter) and drained the swamps in Buffalo and the marshland in Chicago (as we will see in Chapter 14; see also Sutton, “Introduction,” Olmsted, 1997: 11).

Olmsted’s naturalistic and picturesque landscape was a particular version of nature based largely on the conventions of the aesthetics of the English picturesque and landscape gardening of the pleasing prospect. There is a clear line of descent to Olmsted as the first American landscape architect (Barlow, 1972: 5), though he was unhappy with this title (Rybczynski, 2003: 261n.), from Humphry Repton as the first landscape gardener, if not landscape architect (and from William Gilpin’s and Uvedale Price’s aesthetics of the picturesque).¹ The aim in Central Park was to produce what Schenker (2009: 134) calls “a monumental, picturesque rendering of Nature” in a park, and not allow a monstrous, grotesque tendering of nature in a swamp to persist. Olmsted operated in the patriarchal paradigm of mechanized nature, and against the matrifocal paradigm of embodied knowledge (see Giblett, 2011: figure 1).

Olmsted could claim a biblical precedent in transforming the chaotic swamp into the Edenic garden. Dutch poet Jacob Steendham (cited by Burrows and Wallace, 1999: 3) exulted of Manhattan Island, “O this is Eden!” New York contended with Boston as the Eden of North America as we will see in the following chapter. English essayist Daniel Denton followed suit by calling this Eden “a terrestrial *Canaan*,” a promised land, “where the Land floweth with milk and honey” (cited by Burrows and Wallace, 1999: 3). Along similar lines for F. Scott Fitzgerald’s narrator Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* “the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailor’s eyes [was] a fresh green breast of the new world” (cited by Barlow, 1971: 2; Berman, 1988: 298; Sanderson, 2009: 9). Perhaps needless to say this line did not make it into the recent Baz Luhrmann film production of *The Great Gatsby*. Perhaps Fitzgerald was alluding to the indigenous meaning of Mannahatta as “hilly island” (Homerberger, 1994: 10 and 16).

By contrast, E. L. Doctorow's (1994: 156) narrator in *The Waterworks*, in a seeming rejoinder or rebuff to Denton and Fitzgerald, "envisages the first Dutch sailors giving up on the place as a mosquito-infested swamp." The island, in other words, is a good breast and the swamp is a bad breast. But both are the same place; the flowering island *is also* the mosquito-infested swamp. The mosquito-infested swamp *is* a fresh green breast. The good and bad breast of the Great Mother or Goddess of the flowering island of the matrifocal swamp was destroyed in becoming the city of New York. It was replaced by the good breast of the patriarchal Mother Earth of Olmsted's Central Park and its parkways (and by Robert Moses's Long Island parkways) and by the bad breast of Moses's Manhattan expressways. The good breast and the bad breast of the patriarchal city are both organic parts of patriarchal Mother Earth. Moses was "America's greatest builder," specifically "New York's master-builder" (Hall, 2014: 277 and 329).

Olmsted's Central Park and its parkways² were a pastoro-technical idyll of the machine in the garden³ of the nineteenth century, whereas Robert Moses's parkways were a techno-pastoral ideal⁴ of the garden in the machine⁵ of the twentieth century. Both were "reimagineerings" (reimaginings and engineering) of the good breast in different centuries, in different registers of the relationship between technology and the pastoral, with different politics, ideologies, and locations but all involving the enclosure of the commons and the draining or filling of swamps. Olmsted's parks and parkways took place inside the city of New York, as did Moses's expressways, whereas Moses's parkways took place outside the city on Long Island. Berman (1988: 298 and 299) describes how Moses's "first Long Island roadscapes represent a modern attempt to recreate" the good breast in "a techno-pastoral garden." Moses's parkways were a techno-pastoral reimagineering of the nurturing wetland and good breast of Manhattan transplanted to Long Island, whereas his expressways blasted through the old neighborhoods of the city were the bad breast of a technicist hell giving new meaning to the idea of "expressway," and the fresh, green breast of mother Manhattan Island fed its indigenous inhabitants life-giving nourishment directly without any need to express it. "Of all the world's cities, New York" for Sennett (1994: 360) "has the most destroyed itself in order to grow." On this view, New York is a kind of self-parasitic

monster feeding on itself. It also fed on, and was nurtured by, the fresh green breast of mosquito-infested swamps.

As with other cities, the lost, forgotten, if not repressed, past of the city in the swamps returns in the figuring of its underside. In 1892 Count Harry Kessler arrived in New York by ship and related:

What a wild phantasmagoria is such an entrance into a harbor at night! Our world, all that we otherwise see and feel, disappears, dissolves in the darkness, and its place is a world of dark shadowy forms, of sudden noises that abruptly cease, of fiery lights that consume themselves. Commands ring out through the darkness, hurried steps echo on the foredeck, the engines groan and crack, dark monsters race by with fiery red and green glowing eyes. From the shore shine blinking signals, long rows of glowing windows, the red flames of the forges leap into the night. In such moments we understand the medieval scholastics, the fear of the outside world, the shudder at the glimpse of nature, the horror of the hidden, demonic forces which, behind every appearance, lurk to destroy and swallow men. (Easton, 2011: 50)

Except that, unlike for the medieval scholastics, for the modern scholastics like Kessler “the hidden, demonic forces” are artificial forces of the modern, industrial city; the dark monsters racing by are mechanical demons produced by men and machines; they are metaphorical beings pressed into service to figure the dark and satanic underworld of the modern industrial city; they are not creatures of the marsh or swamp but creations of the “marshy” and “swampy” underside of the modern industrial city with its light and phantasmagorical overside (as we saw with St. Petersburg in the previous chapter and as Benjamin showed with Paris).

A couple of weeks later Kessler goes on to relate that in New York

ramshackle wooden arcades cover the stoops and protect the wares in front to the doors for display [. . . including] unhealthy hunks of red flesh . . . piles of slimy clams in cozy proximity with oranges, apples, and half-rotten bananas. The smell that this creates is benumbing, a sort of compromise between fish, tar, and rotting fruit. The pavement consists of a row of deep holes in which half-melted, dirty snow, rusty pieces of iron [and] rotten banana peels close out [their] existence. Through this filth a swarm of men from all the countries of the world . . . wades and pushes. (Easton, 2011: 53)

The malodor of the city assaulting the sense of smell is a commonplace of city writing in the nineteenth century, as is the dirty and muddy city pavement, neither solid, nor liquid, nor clean. Swarming creatures are an abomination, according to Leviticus, as they are neither fish nor flesh nor fowl, as they inhabit neither land nor air nor water. They are slimy creatures of the swamp.

The slime goes hand in hand with the sublime in the modern city. At mid-day on the following day Kessler “spent a long time on the Brooklyn Bridge,” that icon of modernity, and described how “the feeling of unlimited wealth, of bold, youthful energy, of the grandiose creations of millions of people, the sensation of immeasurable strength, creates the feeling of an almost painful *aesthetic* beauty, as is the case will all great natural spectacles, among the towering peaks of the Alps, on the storm-tossed sea” (Easton, 2011: 54; emphasis in the original). Except that the sublimity of the modern city is not a great natural spectacle but a great cultural one. Kessler is singing word-for-word from the hymn sheet of the Germanic romantic sublime. The modern city is also for Kessler the site of the technological sublime as “in the dusty, dark air, the thick network of telegraph wires span the space between the earth and the sky like gloomy prison bars threatening disaster” (55). Telegraphy is a sublime communication technology that sublimates the solid matter of the earth into air (see Giblett, 2008b: chapter 3).

Along similar lines to Kessler, and nearly thirty years later, Ernst Bloch (1998: 304 and 307–308) in his 1929 essay, “The Anxiety of the Engineer” argues that

in the Americanized big city ... technology has achieved an apparent victory over the limits of nature. For the coefficient of known and, more significantly, unknown danger has increased proportionately ... The existence of the technologically advanced city is extremely dangerous and completely lacking in beneficent harmonies. There, natural correlations have been torn apart—as in New York or similar places where the world has become a scene of commercial activity and intercourse. The city of ever-increasing artificiality, in its detachment and distance from the natural landscape, is simultaneously so complex and so vulnerable that it is increasingly threatened by accidents to the same extent that it has rooted itself in midair—that is, the city is built upon roots that have grown more and more synthetic. This grandly suspended, inorganic metropolis

must defend itself daily, hourly, against the elements as though against an enemy invasion. But most important, these elements are not of the old kind, made up of conventional modes of chance and accident. Instead, they dwell amid the complexities of mechanized existence itself; with respect to “nature,” they inhabit nothingness: a nature consisting of nothing but calculations, a nature that arrived with the machine and that increasingly has taken up residence under less perceptible conditions, in ever more “mathematized” dimensions ... the nothingness that stands behind the mechanized world, a world unmediated by humanity, is a mortuary in which people have been buried alive.

The city of New York mathematized space not only vertically in the skyscraper but also horizontally in the grid plan, plots, and streets north of Washington Square (Homburger, 2002: 26). New York for Sennett (1994: 359) is “a grid city par excellence” with “no fixed edge or center.” Invoking William Blake’s concept of “fearful symmetry,” for Burrows and Wallace (1999: 420–421),

there is nothing new about grids. City planners had relied on them for thousands of years, and they were deployed throughout the American [as well as Canadian and Australian] colonies ... What was new about the Manhattan grid was its ruthless utilitarianism ... Manhattan’s ancient hills, dales, swamps, springs, streams, ponds, forests, and meadows—none were permitted to interrupt its fearful symmetry ... The grid enshrined republican as well as realtor values.

The ruthless utilitarianism of the Manhattan grid is plain to see in the Commissioners’ Plan of 1811 (264 and 421) and in the Viele Waterway Map of 1872 (Barlow, 1971, unp.) in which the fearful symmetry of the grid is superimposed over the fluid curvaceousness of the hills, dales, swamps, springs, streams, ponds, forests, and meadows of the British Headquarters Map of circa 1782–83. “New York’s dominant commercial classes,” as Burrows and Wallace (1999: 422) call them, not only “thus engraved their vision on the city,” but also inscribed their vision for their city first on a blank sheet of paper and then on the tabula rasa of the drained and filled (wet)land.

The “city” for de Certeau (1984: 94; his scare quotation marks) “must repress all the physical, mental and political pollutions that would compromise it,” including, in the case of Manhattan, the wetlands of Mannahatta. But

the repressed always returns, and the city is no exception as the marshy or swampy geographical and historical repressed of the city is never totally suppressed or destroyed. The mosquito-infested swamp *before* the city becomes the unsanitary conditions of the foul and stagnant waters of the city. New York by 1830 for Burrows and Wallace (1999: 588), “it was widely agreed, was the filthiest urban center in the United States . . . Great heaps of mud, garbage, and animal excrement piled up in the streets, forming a stinking mash labeled ‘Corporation Pudding’ by a disgusted citizenry,” also described by Burrows and Wallace as “the vile stew” and “the awful offal.” In accordance with prevailing miasmatic theory of disease of the time, “poisonous vapors rising from the streets [were seen] as major contributors to the plague” of cholera that swept New York in 1832 (594).

Perhaps it is hardly surprising then that the foul and stagnant waters of the sewers of New York are the habitat in urban legend for alligators. Yet for Bruce Hallenbeck (2013: 61) “the tales of alligators in the New York City sewers have much more than a grain of truth to them,” and he goes on to present these loaves of truth. These tales date from newspaper accounts of the 1930s, were legitimized in the late 1950s with Robert Daley’s (1959: 187–189) *The World Beneath the City* with a chapter on “Alligators in the Sewers,” were fictionalized in the early 1960s with Thomas Pynchon’s (1963) great postmodern novel *V*, and were filmed in 1980 with the horror film *Alligator*, albeit set in Chicago, but clearly based on these accounts. These stories first emerged in the 1930s when Teddy May was the superintendent of sewers, or the “King of the Sewers” as Daley (1959: 174) calls him in a chapter devoted to him, as “he reigned below ground like a king” (175). May deposed the alligators, the king of tropical swamps and marshes, as king of the sewers in an act of regicide. May was also “mayor under the streets of New York” and the Bruneseau of New York, like his nineteenth-century Parisian counterpart, as “he knew every turn and joint of New York’s 560 miles of sewers” (174–175), just as Bruneseau did with the sewers of Paris. Both men mapped the sewers of their respective cities. Daley goes on to relate how May “also had the only topographical map of the original island, showing where the marsh ground had been” (175). This sounds suspiciously like the British Headquarters Map of circa 1782–83 that was so important for Sanderson (2009: endpapers and

50–51). As Bruneseau was Napoleon's inspector of sewers in Paris, it is fittingly ironic that May had a "Napoleonesque manner" (Daley, 1959: 175).

May was initially skeptical about alligators in the sewers until he saw them for himself when, like Bruneseau, he went on a journey of discovery as another "Columbus of the cloaca" of the new world beneath the city. A few alligators were hunted down and shot by May's inspectors armed with .22 rifles and pistols in what Daley (1959: 189) calls "possibly the most unusual hunting on earth, a veritable sewer safari." This urban myth or tall story is the basis for the episodes of Thomas Pynchon's (1963: 113) *V* in which Benny Profane is employed as an underground hunter on sewer safari armed with "a 12-gauge repeating shotgun." Pynchon satirizes May as Zeitsuss who "was aware that most hunters regard use of this weapon like anglers feel about dynamiting fish [*sic*]; but he was not looking for write-ups in *Field and Stream*" (113). The irony here is that this story did later get a write-up in *Field and Stream*, which took exception to Pynchon's understanding of firepower (see Reiger, 1978).

May's and his men's happy hunting ground was the battlefield against the alligators and streams of sewerage underground that they made their home. The story goes that alligators had got into the sewers when

kids all over Nueva York bought these little alligators for pets. Macy's was selling them for fifty cents, every child, it seemed, had to have one. But soon the children got bored with them. Some set them loose in the streets, but most flushed them down the toilets. And these had grown and reproduced, had fed off rats and sewage, so that now they moved big, blind, albino, all over the sewer system. Down there, God knew how many there were. Some had turned cannibal because in their neighborhood the rats had all been eaten, or had fled in terror. (Pynchon, 1963: 43; compare with Daley, 1959: 188)

In Melville's *Moby Dick* the obsessive Captain Ahab hunts the white whale across the greatest ocean of the world; in Pynchon's (1963: 111) postmodern parodic reprise Benny Profane hunts a pinto alligator ("pale white, seaweed black") beneath the greatest city in the world in an inverted, if not subverted, carnivalesque play on the great American novel. Just as Melville captured the maritime metropolis of New York and evokes its affects for New Yorkers of his day, so Pynchon captures the subterranean metropolis of New York and

evokes its affects for New Yorkers of his day. Just as Melville's Ishmael made a myth out of whale hunting, so Pynchon's (1963: 142) Profane and Angel "added detail, color" to the story of the alligators in the sewers and together they "hammered together a myth." Like the myth of the white whale, the myth of the alligators in the sewers taps into unconscious fears and desires. *Moby Dick* is the great novel of "Man versus nature" across the oceans of the earth; *V* is the great novel of "Man versus cultural nature" inside the sewers of the city.

Profane pursues the pinto alligator and confronts it in "a wide space like the nave of a church" beneath the city that mirrors the churches above. "A phosphorescent light coming off the walls whose exact arrangement was indistinct" illuminates this underground nave. Profane is at a loss to explain the light. He speculates that "sea water shines in the dark sometimes; in the wake of ship you see the same uncomfortable radiance. But not here. The alligator had turned to him." Profane eventually kills the pinto alligator in a nave-like space, which is also "a bonecellar, a sepulcher." The killing of the alligator is a kind of secular mass or communion performed in a sepulchral nave in which "blood began to seep out amoebalike to form shifting patterns with the weak glow of the water" (Pynchon, 1963: 122–123) in a kind of milky, seminal discharge reminiscent of the sperm whales slaughtered for their blubber and oil in *Moby Dick*.

This episode haunts Profane who remembers it later and contemplates the inequitable exchange and the asymmetrical and nonreciprocal relationship between the hunter and the hunted (Pynchon, 1963: 146). The alligators give life because they give employment, but the hunting inspectors give death in exchange "tit for tat" (146). However, the hunted alligator can become the hunter and the hunting inspector can become the hunted as occurred "when a gator turned and attacked" and Profane has to shoot it. Rather than the amoebalike-sacrament of the pinto alligator's demise that gives light and life in the underground nave lit by an uncomfortable, bio-luminescent radiance, the death of this alligator in the dark results in Profane "standing by the headless corpse watching a steady stream of sewage wash its life blood out to one of the rivers" (147) in a secular and profane black mass in the sewers of the city. Profane is profane by name and nature and certainly not sacred in the secular city.

The New York sewer in *V*, as Brian Jarvis (1998: 58) puts it, is “portrayed allegorically as an underworld, vernacular geography of secret spaces and ‘sewer stories’ which go beyond truth, falsity and the rationalism of the alienating cityscape above.”

Pynchon’s countergeography of the world beneath the city in the sewers subverts the world of the city above and taps into the unconscious of the city. Unlike Bruneseau and May who were “a Columbus of the cloaca” of Paris and New York, respectively, Pynchon is the Columbus of the unconscious of the city who accepted Thoreau’s (1982: 560) invitation in *Walden* to “be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought.” Pynchon is the Columbus of the world beneath the city, the grotesque lower urban stratum.

Pynchon taps into and operates in the register of what Freud called the uncanny. For both writers, alligators (and crocodiles for Freud as well) are vehicles and vectors for the uncanny. The uncanny is not only a return to the past but also in quasi-Freudian terms “a return to the repressed,” including the colonial and urban repressed. For Freud the uncanny is literally *unheimlich*, unhomely, but also homely, contradictory feelings that he found associated in the minds of adult males with the first home of the womb.

The uncanny for Freud was also applicable not only to the native quaking zone of the swamp but also to the artificial quaking zone of the dark underside of the city, which for him was an object, or more precisely abject, of horror and fascination (as we saw in Chapter 2). In Freud’s “The Uncanny” the alligator and crocodile emerge as a figure for the colonial repressed to which he returns via the vehicle and vector of the artifacts of colonialism located in the imperial capital city, which bear the traces of other, alien, or exotic places and peoples (as alligators in the sewers do too). Perhaps no animal has been more deified/demonized than the alligator and crocodile, the “monarch of the marsh,” and the “king of beasts” of the tropical swamp. The alligatorian and the crocodilian have been repressed for a long time, at least since Freud’s time and it still persists. For Vollmar (1972: ix) “crocodiles, alligators and caimans both horrify and fascinate.” In Freud’s ([1919] 2003: 123) terms, they are uncanny as he defines the uncanny as that which “belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread,” and I define the uncanny as both horrifying and fascinating (Giblett, 1996). Vollmar (1972: ix) suggests that

“lurid travellers’ tales of evil reptiles lying loglike in tropical mud, ready to snatch and devour the unwary human, linger in the memory.” Freud ([1919] 2003: 151) developed the uncanny from reading one such tale, L. G. Moberly’s “Inexplicable” published in *The Strand Magazine* in 1917 (see also Moberly, [1917] 1991).

In *The Uncanny* Freud ([1919] 2003: 151) relates how

I read a story about a young couple who move into a furnished flat in which there is a curiously shaped table with crocodiles carved in the wood. Towards evening the flat is regularly pervaded by an unbearable and highly characteristic smell, and in the dark the tenants stumble over things and fancy they see something undefinable gliding over the stairs. In short, one is led to surmise that, owing to the presence of this table, the house is haunted by ghostly crocodiles, or that the wooden monsters come to life in the dark, or something of the sort. It was quite a naïve story, but its effect was extraordinarily uncanny.

In his reading of Moberly’s story Freud downplays the role of real alligators and ignores the swamp as the place par excellence of the uncanny (see Giblett, 1996). The home, or perhaps more precisely the “unhome,” of the slimy, and the uncanny, is the wetland and the sewery vestiges of the marshes and swamps beneath and before the city. They are also the home, or unhome, for alligators and crocodiles, the “king” of the tropical wetland and of the sewer, the obverse of the temperate dry land of the city above, and the archetypal swamp monster par excellence.⁶

The city and the alligator come together in Pynchon’s *V* (as we have seen); the city and the crocodile come together in Bruno Schulz’s ([1934] 2008) short prose piece (hardly a story), “The Street of Crocodiles,” in which prostitutes are figured as crocodiles. Implicitly the red-light district of the city is figured as swamp. The Street of Crocodiles, however, appears on “an old and beautiful map of our city” hanging on the narrator’s father’s wall as “the empty whiteness that usually marks polar regions or unexplored countries of which almost nothing is known” (63–64). This blank space is reminiscent of Thoreau’s insistent and self-directed question in *Walden* that “is not our own interior white on the chart? black though it may prove, like the coast, when discovered” (Thoreau, 1982: 560). The blank space on the map is also reminiscent of Melville’s meditation on whiteness in *Moby Dick*, which is

simultaneously inviting and terrifying. It is also reminiscent of the heart of darkness of Conrad's eponymous novella marked in red on maps as part of the British Empire, an intriguing and inviting space awaiting exploration and colonization. These chromatic qualities only exacerbate "the equivocal and doubtful character of that peculiar area, so unlike the rest of the city. It was an industrial and commercial district" and "a parasitical quarter" attached to the host of the old city that "shot up here in a rich but empty and colorless vegetation of pretentious vulgarity. One could see there cheap jerry-built houses with grotesque facades, covered with a monstrous stucco of cracked plaster." The Street of Crocodiles is monstrous like its namesake, the grotesque lower urban stratum where "the scum, the lowest orders had settled" (Schulz, [1934] 2008: 64).

Like Freud venturing uncannily into the red-light district of a small Italian town, so some city-dwellers would "venture half by chance into that dubious district" of the Street of Crocodiles and there find "immersion in that shallow mud of companionship, of easy intimacy, of dirty intermingling" in the nether world of the uncanny city of dreadful night. Rather than the white space on the map, the red-light district was not red at all but a place where "everything was grey ... as in black-and-white photographs" (Schulz, [1934] 2008: 65). These are not auratic photographs as Walter Benjamin put it in relation to early photographs (as we saw in Chapter 3). Rather, they are "like a photograph in an illustrated magazine, so grey, so one-dimensional" (67). These photographs are of a flat time and space of death as in Benjamin's reading of Atget's photographs of Paris in which the deserted streets are like the scene of a crime (as we also saw in Chapter 3). Interestingly, Benjamin and Schulz were both sons of Jewish parents and almost exact contemporaries as they were both born in the same year (1892) and died within two years of each other as victims of Nazism.

As in Freud's small Italian town, the denizens of the Street of Crocodiles are prostitutes "showily dress in long lace-trimmed gowns" who "advance with a quick rapacious step, each with some small flaw in her evil corrupted face; their eyes have a black, crooked squint, or they have harelips, or the tips of their noses are missing. The inhabitants of the city are quite proud of the odor of corruption emanating from the Street of Crocodiles" (Schulz, [1934] 2008: 70). The monstrous street is inhabited by monstrous creatures who are

a source of both fascination and horror among the good citizens. Like Freud's peripatetic and compulsive return to the red-light district provoking the mirth of the prostitutes at his discomfiture, the monstrous crocodiles of the Street of Crocodiles are bearers and embodiments of the monstrous uncanny in which the fascinating and horrific are projected onto, and embodied in, a monster.

On the Street of Crocodiles there is "a fermentation of desires, prematurely aroused and therefore impotent and empty" (Schulz, [1934] 2008: 71). The Street of Crocodiles is a Bachelor Machine for a Bachelor Birth (as discussed in Chapter 3 in relation to Paris). The city itself is a Bachelor Machine for a Bachelor Birth. The city sublime sublimates the slimy swamps into streets and skyscrapers, and desublimates streets and skyscrapers into sewers. As a Bachelor Machine for a Bachelor Birth, the Street of Crocodiles for Jerzy Ficowski (2003: 95) "in Schulz's stories became the symbol of the bewitching and pathological beauty of imitation which conceals seeds of a magical metamorphosis." A Bachelor Machine for a Bachelor Birth is a simulacrum whose seeds never reach fertile ground, such as a swamp, and propagate, and so conception and magical metamorphosis never occurs. It is a phantom, or phantasmatic, pregnancy in which "a passing excitement swells into an empty parasitic growth" of the monstrous (Schulz, [1934] 2008: 71). This parasitic growth is hosted on and by the body politic, the body urban, urban nature that is not urbane. Like the bad air and smells, the urban miasma feared by nineteenth-century writers about the city, "over the whole area [of the Street of Crocodiles] ... floats the lazy licentious smell of sin" (71). This immoral miasma is a threat more to propriety than to health. It certainly stifles creativity and originality for "in that city of cheap human material no instincts can flourish, no dark and unusual passions can be aroused" (71). Like the slums of other modern cities, "the Street of Crocodiles was a concession of our city to modernity and metropolitan corruption" (72). Does not every modern city make and have such a concession in two senses of the word, one in the sense of giving away reluctantly and the other in the business and legal sense of giving access to land and customers, denying and repressing the wetlands on which it was built, which nevertheless return in the very tropes for the grotesque lower stratum of the city and its denizens, the alligators and crocodiles, real or imagined? New York is a case in point.