

“HE WAS IN NO PLACE AND NO PLACE WAS IN HIM”: EDWARD DAHLBERG’S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTIONS AS AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF SITES¹

MARTÍN URDIALES-SHAW
Universidad de Vigo
urdiales@uvigo.es

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ABSTRACT

Edward Dahlberg’s childhood, adolescence and youth, narratively fictionalized in two early autobiographical novels, *Bottom Dogs* (1930) and *Flushing to Calvary* (1932) is markedly and recurrently informed by the influence of urban sites and institutional spaces. As the article discusses, a number of these spaces are pivotal to the development of Dahlberg’s autobiographical character Lorry, and can be productively read in terms of the Foucauldian heterotopia, while other sites, explicitly identified as metropolitan, are marginal to Lorry’s autobiographical narrative, and yet serve to foreground the protagonist’s absence from them in relevant ways. Finally, other spaces may epitomize a predominantly artificial nature, functioning as simulacra of experiences that Lorry undergoes but needs to cast out. Drawing on theoretical tenets related to space, site and place, as set out by Foucault, Baudrillard, Lefebvre, and others, in this article

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I will contend that a situated epistemological approach is essential in fruitfully reading Dahlberg's early fictions, and, ultimately, in understanding his quest for space in both biographical and artistic terms.

RESUMEN

La infancia, adolescencia y juventud de Edward Dahlberg, ficcionalizada a través de sus dos tempranas novelas autobiográficas, *Bottom Dogs* (1930) y *Flushing to Calvary* (1932), está muy determinada por la influencia de entornos urbanos y espacios institucionales. Algunos de estos espacios son esenciales para el desarrollo de Lorry, el protagonista autobiográfico de Dahlberg, y pueden ser interpretados en clave de heterotopia Foucauldiana. Otros lugares, expresamente identificados como espacios metropolitanos, marginales a la narrativa autobiográfica centrada en Lorry, resultan, sin embargo, extremadamente significativos para subrayar la ausencia del protagonista de los mismos. Además, otros entornos sirven para encarnar condiciones artificiales, proporcionando simulacros de vivencias que Lorry experimenta pero necesita luego desechar. Partiendo de nociones teóricas relativas a los conceptos de sitio y de espacialidad, desarrolladas por Foucault, Baudrillard y Lefebvre, entre otros, el presente artículo propone un análisis basado en una epistemología de "situacionalidad" que permita una interpretación crítica fructífera de la obra iniciática de Dahlberg, y, en concreto, ilumine su obsesiva búsqueda de espacio(s), tanto en términos biográficos como literarios.

If one were to choose the most itinerant, rootless, and yet strangely place-aware writer in the early twentieth century American scene, Edward Dahlberg would rank among the very first. In his "Introduction" to an omnibus edition containing early novels, stories and autobiographical fictions, critic Harold Billings highlights the shifting America of Dahlberg's childhood and youth: he was born in a Boston charity hospital (1900), and raised singly by a Polish immigrant mother who rambled the South and the Midwest, until settling in Kansas City in 1905. At twelve, Edward was dispatched to the Cleveland Jewish Orphan Asylum. At seventeen he left the orphanage to work at odd jobs in the region. At 19, almost broke, he settled in the Los Angeles YMCA, where he depended on odd jobs and checks from his mother, while pursuing a literary education with an elder mentor at the Christian Association. He attended the University of California at Berkeley from 1921 to 1923, then transferred to Columbia University, from which he graduated in 1925 (Billings xiv).

In the late twenties, Dahlberg became a literary expatriate in France, Belgium and England, where he met the American and Anglo-Irish modernists, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and the playwright Seán O'Casey. Looking back across the Atlantic, Dahlberg composed much of his two early novels, *Bottom Dogs* (1930) and *From Flushing to Calvary* (1932) from the European continent, rendering the fluctuating scenes of his boyhood and youth, partly under the influence of a modernist aesthetics, but also partly within the paradigm of social fiction. After a brief period living in New York's Greenwich Village, Dahlberg visited Germany in 1933, working as a correspondent for the *London Times*. His explicit condemnations of the emerging Nazi regime entangled him in a fight with a German storm trooper in a Berlin café, an event that scaled into a diplomatic incident, and made the international news headlines, when Dahlberg lodged a complaint with the American Consulate, which the German authorities pressured him to withdraw (*Jewish Daily Bulletin*, 2). Back in the US, Dahlberg taught at Boston University from 1944 to 1948 and, briefly, at the Black Mountain College in North Carolina. In the fifties, as he turned to autobiography and essay writing, he relocated to the Danish island of Bornholm,² and in the early sixties he moved to Soller, in Mallorca. For longer or shorter periods, other domiciles of Dahlberg's adult life included Dublin, Wicklow, London, Madrid, Malaga, Mexico City and the Seychelles.

Dahlberg's early autobiographical fictions always employ place and geographical space as a key structural and narrative device. His autobiography *Because I Was Flesh*³ (1959) is structured in twelve chapters, each of them signaling a new relocation across the American territory, from Boston to New York, via the South, the Midwest, and California. His first two novels *Bottom Dogs* and *From Flushing to Calvary*⁴ which can be read in sequence as an uninterrupted *Bildungsroman* with differing narrative tempos, trace Dahlberg's childhood and youth (Lorry in the novels), through

² Uncannily symbolic of the sense of placelessness that haunts Dahlberg and his autobiographical self, Bornholm is very far from Denmark, lying in the Baltic between Sweden and the north German coast.

³ Henceforth cited as *Flesh*.

⁴ In discussion, henceforth cited as *Flushing*. All parenthetical citations to either novel, or the unfinished novel *Mimes*, will refer to the omnibus edition of Dahlberg's early writing, cited simply as *Works*.

chapters that seem to structure these memories in terms of place. *Bottom Dogs* covers the first twenty years of Lorry's/Dahlberg's life, devoting the first two chapters to early childhood in Kansas City, three to the Cleveland Orphanage years, another three to his reunion with his mother in Kansas City, two to his wanderings across California and San Francisco, and the closing chapters to scenes of his YMCA years in Los Angeles. More attuned to the modernist concerns with the intensification of time, consciousness, memory and subjectivity, *Flushing* focuses on the brief New York period in the mid-1920s, but the actual material (and often marginal) sites of this metropolis intricately commingle with the childhood spaces of memory of its prequel: Kansas City, the Cleveland Orphanage and, again, the YMCA in Los Angeles.

Dahlberg's itinerant childhood, adolescence and youth, a formative period that the writer narratively fictionalized in explicitly topographical terms in these two early novels, which closely mirror⁵ the spatial structural division of the autobiography *Flesh*, is significantly and recurrently configured by the influence of certain spaces, akin or identical to sites designated by French philosopher Michel Foucault as heterotopias, "something like counter-sites ... [in which] all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted" (24). These "counter-sites" are sometimes pivotal to the development of Dahlberg's autobiographical character Lorry, but they can also be notably marginal, that is, there to foreground Lorry's absence from them in relevant ways, or they may also embody a predominantly artificial nature, functioning as a simulacra of experiences that need to be cast out by Lorry. In the following pages, drawing on theoretical tenets related to spaces, sites and environments as set out by Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Julia Kristeva, and Henri Lefebvre I will contend that a "situated" epistemological approach is essential in productively reading Dahlberg's early autobiographical fictions, which are markedly informed by a keen awareness of how a sense of place modeled both his identity as an individual and as a writer. I will be using both the notions of place and site to refer to the diverse spaces of the building-institution, the urban neighborhood, or the amusement park. Thus, my principal concern is not so much with

⁵ Alfred Kazin aptly summarized "[Dahlberg] published his own story several times in the form of fiction" (111).

taxonomizing difference between these theoretical concepts, as to highlight the relevance of space/s for Lorry as autobiographical character and for Dahlberg as writer.

CRISIS HETEROTOPIAS: THE CLEVELAND ORPHAN ASYLUM & THE LOS ANGELES YMCA.

Two significant institutions presided over, and would largely determine, Dahlberg's unusual childhood and youth: the Jewish Orphan Asylum in Cleveland and the Young Men's Christian Association in Los Angeles. These, I will argue, conform a more authentic sense of home than that ever provided by his unstable and erratic mother (Lizzie Lewis in the novels) in the periods in-between, whether in Kansas City or in New York. In *Bottom Dogs*, Lorry's Orphanage life spans three chapters (3 to 5, pp. 175-217) but meaningful recollections of this site's residents intrude later in time, in the midst of the Los Angeles YMCA section (chapters 12 to 15), and, with even more vivid intensity, in Part Five of *Flushing*, the novel's sequel, as Lorry revisits the then derelict site. The orphanage experience in *Bottom Dogs* is initially traumatic, not least because behind the decision to dispatch Lorry was his mother's new partner, a manipulative and self-serving individual.⁶ Further trauma arises when, on arrival, Lorry is predictably designated a "newcumber" and his Southern Missouri drawl becomes a target for ridicule when he finally has to talk to other boys, after an obstinate initial reserve. Gradually, however, and in spite of the strictly regimented life, bad food, and a penalty-based pedagogy, Lorry grows into the orphanage system and earns respect when he unexpectedly prevails in a fight he had meant to avoid, an early rite of passage within this community of peers. The orphanage boys are collectively referred to as "inmates," and, individually, by nicknames. Dahlberg, in fact, titles two of the Orphanage chapters after two of its iconic rogues, Herman Mush Tate and Bonehead-Star-Wolfe, who meet tragic ends after being expelled or leaving the "home," as they all refer to the asylum. Foucault described the boarding school as an instance of a typically nineteenth century "crisis heterotopia" a site "reserved for

⁶ In *Flesh*, Dahlberg writes "He had intimated that if she could get the boy out of the way [...] they might make plans together. At 38, she was positive that if Henry Smith did not marry her, she was as good as dead" (63-64).

individuals, who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis” (24). Subsequently, he argues that these sites have, in the twentieth century, been largely replaced by “heterotopias of deviation,” such as psychiatric hospitals, rest homes, or prisons, which shelter individuals “deviant in relation to the required norm” (25). In Dahlberg’s experience, fictionally narrativized through the autobiographical Lorry, the Jewish Orphan Asylum shares traits from both these heterotopic sites, appearing simultaneously as a potentially educational and spiritually-forming environment, but also a repressive and deprived institution, as illustrated by the attempts of its inmates to escape temporarily into Cleveland to get better food or enjoy some freedom.⁷ The asylum is a collective *Home* for outcasts and a “counter-site” that “re-present[s], contest[s] and invert[s]” (24) the real homes of children with one or both functional parents. Dahlberg’s sense of belonging to the Jewish Orphan Asylum as an ingrained surrogate home is so strong, that the writer has this institution resurface in Part Five (“*J.O.A. Ja Wohl, Das Ist Das Weisenhaus*”)⁸ of the New York-set *Flushing*, when Lorry returns a decade later:

Then something sank within him ... He stood there gaping. He had come to the place. But the orphanage, like Wolkes, was in no place. There was no more orphan asylum. [...] There was nowhere for him to go – and he felt as if there would never be any reason for him to go anywhere, to any place, because no place would ever be in him. (*Works* 454)

Pursuing an experimental technique that he had adopted in this second novel, the narrative form of Part Five juxtaposes Lorry’s wanderings through the all-too familiar buildings of the now derelict site with stream-of-consciousness sections, printed in smaller type and uncapitalized, in which memories of the last superintendent Simon Wolkes, are vividly cast, specially concerning Lorry’s conflicted projection of love, admiration and desire for approval

⁷ Yet, once Lorry leaves the Orphanage, Cleveland becomes an irrelevant site, as the brief, transitional chapter “Cedar Avenue Nights” reveals. On how several American cities remain alien for Lorry, refer to the conclusions.

⁸ This literally translates “Jewish Orphan Asylum Indeed, This is the Orphan Home.” The marked influence of German tuition, including the lyrics of religious hymns, is patent in Dahlberg’s orphanage memories.

for/from a surrogate father figure who is essentially oblivious of him: "he loved wolkes more than he loved his mother, he sang his prayers way out loud and with high-pitched devotion so that wolkes could see: he followed him all over" (450). Wolkes is significantly absent, perhaps purposefully repressed, from the orphanage chapters in *Bottom Dogs*, but emerges powerfully in this fragmented chapter of *Flushing* that also blends in snatches of nursery rhymes (*humpty dumpty*), the Jewish Passover song *Chad Gadyo*, and lines from the Orphanage confirmation hymn (*father, see thy suppliant children*). The overbearing nostalgia for a site vivid in Lorry's mind, but materially in ruins, permeates this section, which is at times evocative of the polyphonic nature of T.S. Eliot's *Wasteland*, in its fusion of texts, languages and registers.

The childhood at Cleveland Orphanage projects itself fully into the second crisis site of Lorry's life, the Los Angeles YMCA, which, besides Foucault's actual usage of the term, embodies the concept in its Greek etymological sense, as a "turning point" towards the inception of the artist as a young man, in the Joycean coinage. The brief Los Angeles YMCA era is a period of Dahlberg's life strongly coloured by his relationship with Max Lewis, a senior pal from Orphanage times, and already a YMCA boarder when the destitute Lorry arrived in Hope Street in downtown LA, at age 19. The influence of Max Lewis on Dahlberg as a young aspiring writer was so strong that Dahlberg adopted the surname for his own fictional autobiographical persona (Lorry Lewis) and dedicated *Flushing* to him, in acknowledgment of his literary indebtedness.⁹ Tellingly, just as *Bottom Dogs* seems to introduce Lorry's life at the Los Angeles YMCA, the narrative instantly shifts back into a retrospective excursus of the tragically Faulknerian family account of the Maxwells/Lewis¹⁰ leading to Max and his siblings being interned in the orphanage (*Works* 280-294), before resuming the present time frame two chapters later. In both the autobiography and the novels, Dahlberg recounts, with varying detail, Max's alternative lifestyle, his

⁹ In a vividly recalled and moving scene of *Flesh*, where the two young men finally part ways, the writer also reveres Lewis for having persuaded him to enrol at "the university at Berkeley" (141).

¹⁰ The Lewises become the Maxwells in the novels, Max Lewis being Max Maxwell. Yet Max is referred to as Lao Tsu Ben in *Flesh*, his real alias during the Los Angeles period.

Masonic membership, his risky entrepreneurial ventures, and his many sexual exploits. But Max is, above all, essential in initiating Lorry/Dahlberg in literary classics and philosophical inquiry, as the writer recalls in *Flesh*:

This man [...] liked to call himself Lao Tsu Ben, and he was to be my mentor. From him I learned of Gissing's *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, *The Upanishads*, Daudet's *Sappho*, Gautier's *The Golden Fleece*, *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, and Wilde's *De Profundis*—books which I bought in the secondhand shops by selling my overcoat. (127)

While the autobiography focuses very exclusively on Lewis/Lao Tsu Ben, Lorry's own prospects at the time are more clearly featured in some pages of the "Bensonhurst" section of *Flushing* (*Works* 359-364), which, as it did with the orphanage period, again functions retrospectively to encapsulate the Los Angeles-YMCA era. Here, Lorry reminisces on how he "decided to be a writer" (*Works* 359), reciting literary lines from Emerson and from Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," while struggling to get a movie script accepted at a Hollywood studio. It is in this context that Lewis resurfaces as an intellectual mentor: "Maxwell first started to guide Lorry in his readings" (*Works* 361).

Beyond the extraordinary influence of Lewis/Maxwell, the YMCA itself is also reminiscent of the Cleveland Orphanage, as both a surrogate home and a crisis heterotopia in Foucauldian terms. In *Bottom Dogs*, Lorry's first contact with the institution involves hanging around the lobby with a number of "bums," looking for shelter or a free meal, who are regularly expelled (*Works* 275-6; 295). Having no money for the membership fee, Lorry himself is taken for a vagrant, until Maxwell appears and vouches for him before the desk clerk (276). Although only one chapter of *Bottom Dogs* details later life at the "Y" (playing poker, drinking, and being rowdy), the sense of a disciplined life with rules of decorum and a religious education involving prayers and hymns, which also relates to an all-male community, mirrors, in various ways, the Jewish Orphanage background.

MARGINAL SITES, LIFELESS PLACES: BENSONHURST, BROOKLYN AND CALVARY, QUEENS.

Whereas the Orphanage and the YMCA become key central sites in Lorry's formation, often recurring and intruding through memory into later periods of the individual's life, in sharp contrast, two urban areas of his youth emerge as marginal, un-lived or lifeless. These New York districts, Bensonhurst and Calvary, appear in *Flushing*, a work where Dahlberg employed a distinct New York cartography to entitle three of its six constituent parts (1. Bensonhurst; 2. Flushing to Calvary; 4. Coney Island Angelus Bells), which are not always consistently relevant to Lorry's life-story. Revealingly, unlike the earlier formative sites discussed above, both Bensonhurst and Calvary correspond to one of the periods of Lorry's life shared with his mother Lizzie, who often becomes the focalizer of the narrative in this novel.

The first four chapters of the *Bensonhurst* section, prefaced by the quoted epigram "Cheap Peoples Live Here!" (*Works* 325), function to foreground several modes of exclusion from the American success ethic, the neighborhood becoming metonymic for paralysis, economic failure, and unrealized dreams. Dahlberg does this by focusing on the inset stories of several characters (Lizzie Lewis, Willy Huppert, and Jerry Calefonia) while sidetracking Lorry's central autobiographical narrative. Conversely, when Lorry's narrative is resumed in chapter 6 of *Bensonhurst*, it is through a retrospective section, encapsulating parts of *Bottom Dogs* dealing with his earlier Los Angeles life, unrelated to the materiality of this neighborhood. Dahlberg's concern in this part of the novel—oddly discordant with the aestheticized sections featuring Lorry as center of consciousness—is to show alienated characters struggling to find a sense for their lives in Bensonhurst. Two of these are recent immigrants to the US, the German-Dutch Willy Huppert, who becomes a boarder with the Lewises, and the Argentinian Jerry Calefonia, who meets Lizzie Lewis and has hopes of seducing her. Both Huppert and Calefonia feel linguistically and culturally marginal, lacking fluency in English and the capacity to engage with American social norms or entrepreneurship. Initially spellbound by the New York sights of the Battery, the Statue of Liberty and the island ferries, Willy Huppert desperately seeks a manager to pursue his boxing dream, but his life is determined by a 12-hour job in a store and a persistent solitude: "on late afternoons, he liked to sprawl on a parkbench and talk to Americans" (*Works* 339). More symbolically relevant to this section, however, is the Argentinian Jerry Calefonia, the character used by Dahlberg to focalize the

physical presentation of Bensonhurst itself, a sparsely urbanized area of south Brooklyn:¹¹

In winter the ashen stucco houses shaped like Camel cigarette-boxes squat before the Bensonhurst bay-mist. Bensonhurst, low, flat, rheumatic marshland, is a realtor's reclamation project. Many of the streets which may be compared to the booming oil cities of the Oklahoma country seem to have sprung up over night. The houses are a makeshift stage-setting for a slapstick comedy. (*Works* 327)

Critic William Solomon notes an analogy between this passage and silent screen comedies, placing "the literary text in the field of mechanized entertainment" (54), one that prefigures the relation between narrative form and subject matter in the Coney Island section, to be discussed later. Cinematically, the narrative zooms into the interior of the Bensonhurst movie house where "a very sexy picture" (*Works* 327) is screened and Jerry tries to grope a young woman. The description of the cinema itself as a unplaceable site of marginality mirrors, and is mirrored by, Jerry's behavior inside:

The Bensonhurst moviehouse recalls the dated red-light district—the old Cleveland, Kansas City, Chicago, or San Francisco red-light town. The general interior has much of the lewd dopefiend Japanese café and dancehall about it. Over and above the narrow submarine aisles pour the mercurial rays. (*Works* 327)

Like Huppert, Jerry is monologically linked to loneliness and to an unrestrainable sexual urge he cannot satisfy in America. After taking an interest in Lizzie Lewis, who has to send him off, he is finally convicted for sexually harassing an adolescent girl in a doorway. Chapter four, the last before the retrospective non-Bensonhurst set chapters, closes with an image of the miserable Argentinian recalling his goldfish in the solitude of his jailhouse cell, the last marginal site of his US experience and an instance of the Foucauldian heteropia of deviation (25).

¹¹ With the 4th Avenue subway line extension to southern Brooklyn in 1915, many immigrants left the congested Lower East Side to build homes in the cheaper Bensonhurst. In 1927, when Dahlberg and his mother moved here (*Flesh* 208), this was still a developing area of detached houses and empty lots.

Part Two of *Flushing* opens with the relocation of Lorry, his mother, and their boarder from Bensonhurst to Calvary, as their savings run low and they move out furtively, leaving rent unpaid. Calvary was then a western section of Queens developing around this vast peripheral cemetery,¹² near which "rent is cheaper" (371). Vividly recalling this event in the autobiography, Dahlberg explains the move in more arbitrary terms:

Queens is an immense warehouse for New York cadavers, and I had taken the greatest care to find rooms that were remote from the graveyards. But after I had signed the lease and was standing at the window overlooking high, shaggy iodine-colored bushes, I found they concealed the cut-rate Virgin Marys and Christs of Calvary Cemetery. (*Flesh* 208)

As a material site, this neighborhood is hardly relevant to the narrative of Part Two, essentially focused on Lizzie's domestic schemes to earn money and find a partner through matrimonial ads. However, Dahlberg extends the symbolic implications of Calvary Cemetery into Part Three, "Daily Graphic Slabs" (*Works* 415-423), a brief section which thematizes death in relation to Lorry's mother in several interconnected ways: Lizzie's deteriorating health and obsession with reading obituaries; the death of Mamie Roonan, an Irish neighbor she was "treating;" and an ominous death-dream Lorry experiences about his mother.

Foucault notes the "strange heteropia of the cemetery," as yet another crisis site which becomes marginalized and suburbanized since the nineteenth century as the fear of death, conceived of as an "illness," became widespread (25). In this section of *Flushing*, Lizzie's thanatophobia after seeing Mamie Roonan's corpse illustrates this type of belief: "Walls were nothing against a dead body, especially those thin slapped-together modern tenement-house walls" (*Works* 418). As Dahlberg tends to merge the social and the symbolic, besides the extended implications of death in this part of the novel, the Calvary neighborhood is itself representative of paralysis and

¹² Calvary was the first major New York cemetery to be established beyond the island of Manhattan, by the Trustees of St. Patrick's Cathedral, in 1848. (www.calvarycemeteryqueens.com/default.asp)

marginality vis-à-vis the metropolis, thus becoming “lifeless” in more ways than one.

In this period of the Lewises’ life covered by Parts Two and Three of the novel, as in the earlier Bensonhurst section, the central autobiographical narrative involving Lorry is again removed, now only spatially, from the material and symbolic thanatological theme embodied by the narrative events and the physical proximity of the cemetery itself. The sole chapter here in which the narrative adopts Lorry’s perspective deals with the boy’s new job at a subway kiosk in downtown Manhattan (*Works* 384-7). This chapter serves to highlight Lorry’s awareness of the incessant, life-affirming New York human bustle, underground trains, and street traffic, conjuring up an urban space which is represented as a radical counter-site to Calvary, Queens.

Ultimately, both Bensonhurst and Calvary are depicted as suburban sites whose marginal and lifeless nature becomes symptomatic of the prospects and fates of certain characters who textually perform the social critique of Dahlberg’s early fiction. These pages are powerfully at odds with those sections featuring Lorry as center of consciousness, where the autobiographical narrative is governed by the style of the modernist *Bildungsroman*.

ERSATZ CITY, SIMULATED SITE: CONEY ISLAND.

In a radical narrative break with the Calvary-set chapters, *Flushing* resumes Lorry’s central autobiographical narrative in one of the most provocative and dynamic sections of the novel, “Coney Island Angelus Bells” (Part 4), a section that Dahlberg composed employing a highly experimental narrative technique that, as Solomon has argued, seeks

to reproduce verbally the onslaught of sensations a visitor to the park typically receives, to capture the somatic experience of being at Coney Island. The frequent interpolations into the narrative of song lyrics and the calls of park barkers mimic the auditory impressions the place engenders [...] The recorded sensations bombard the reader as the narrator’s “eye,” frenetically mobile, swinging in dizzying arcs as if in imitation of a ride in a merry-go-round or carrousel, makes one feel like part of the “jamming and oceanbillowing crowd” (217), rushing excitedly from float to ride to exhibit. (58)

In one of the few existing in-depth enquiries into Dahlberg's early fiction, Solomon reads this section—and other parts of *Flushing*—as foregrounding Dahlberg's early fascination and simultaneous revulsion with American forms of mechanized amusement vis-à-vis "the disenfranchised, marginalized, and impoverished" (404). Taking up on Julia Kristeva's conceptualization of the abject, Solomon discusses how, in this novel, the feminine and the machine/mechanism are usually deployed in conjunction in relation to alienated, sex-starved, male characters, such as Jerry Calefonia, Willy Huppert or Lorry Lewis himself. Although I will not elaborate here on the part of Solomon's argument dealing with "psychosexual anxieties" and the mechanics of the body (extensively discussed in Solomon 47, 53-63), it is worth noting that this critic has traced Dahlberg's concern with "traumatized autobiographical protagonists, who repetitiously encounter the machine as the cause of severe panic" (36) to Dahlberg's very first, unfinished, autobiographical fiction *Mimes*, written in 1925, but only published in 1976. As Solomon observes, passages of *Mimes* were reworked for *Flushing*. Among these, Lorry's experience at the subway kiosk mentioned above is a rewriting of a longer scene in *Mimes* where the protagonist perceives the subway train as part monster, part mechanized ride (39). In the wake of *Mimes*, Part Four of *Flushing* represents Coney Island as a site combining a classic entertainment-driven New York (a dance floor with live music, a hotel in an alley), with what Baudrillard conceptualizes as the fourth stage in the representation of images, "a pure simulacrum [which] bears no relation to reality whatsoever" (170), embodied by the "Noah's Ark" exhibit with automated mechanical figures and the "Slums of Paris," an underground boat ride through dimly lit stage sets displaying fiendish and freakish wax figures. Unlike Disneyland,¹³ these Coney Island rides were ostensibly un-American in cultural terms, but crucially, the "artificial resurrection of the figurative" (Baudrillard 171) as a consumer-oriented visual and mechanized spectacle, does become a quintessential American phenomenon, one whose function was soon superseded by the overriding influence of Hollywood

¹³ Baudrillard defines Disneyland as simultaneously hyperreal and imaginary, a representation of an intrinsically American fantasy childhood world which functions to (falsely) make perceive, by contrast, the "reality" of the surrounding metropolitan Los Angeles, which also belongs in "the order of the hyperreal and of simulation" (172).

cinema and mass culture at large,¹⁴ as more modern modes of “production of the real” (171). Dahlberg’s own wording is expressive of this when he labels “Noah’s Ark, a columbia-burlesk edition of the bible” (*Works* 433).

Both so-called “attractions” are introduced in quick succession, and are linked to Lorry’s encounter with a young woman who takes interest in him. Lorry dances with her and tensely leads her away to a “side-street upstairs hotel” (*Works* 441), only to discover that his newly found date is actually a prostitute, and thus fully commodified as yet another “ride” in the resort’s functional terms. Lorry’s ensuing sexual initiation with her thus also becomes a simulacrum of the real experience within the parameters of the ersatz, consumerist, mechanized realm of Coney, where all pleasures are purchasable. Dahlberg ends the episode with the couple’s return to the resort’s “Slums of Paris,” where

physically ill, Lorry [...] falls into a vertiginous mental spin. Able neither to comprehend the oddities he has seen nor to distinguish between the natural and the unnatural, the character becomes panic-stricken in his confrontation with what [Henry] Miller would [later] term [...] the “sovereign pasteboard power” of the amusement park. (Solomon 60)

In the concluding paragraphs, Dahlberg accelerates the tempo of the young man’s inassimilable perceptions and growing sickness, as Lorry perceives the “artifice” of the “faked-up grotto made of wood” in the “Slums” as actually resembling the Calvary cemetery wall prospect from his tenement window: “all the desolation and dizziness of artifice, of contrived unreality swirling in his brain and in the pit of his stomach like the round-and-round carousel” (*Works* 444). Juxtaposing music lyrics and visual stimuli in another sensorial overload, where visions of his mother’s death coalesce with memories of the orphanage, “Coney Island Angelus Bells” draws to a

¹⁴ John Kasson has noted that in this period the experience of the Coney Island resort, signalling the advent of mass culture, began to blur with the experience of the metropolis itself (112). On the crowding of early century Coney Island as a visual spectacle in itself, see Nasaw 94-95.

close with Lorry running back to the BMT¹⁵ and finally vomiting outside the subway station access. This act of symbolic and material (r)ejection of his simulated experiences at Coney readily lends itself to a Kristevian reading in terms of the abject,¹⁶ as Lorry undergoes a psychosexual crisis of identity and a breakdown of the experiential and emotional baggage, which has, so far, constructed his sense of self—fatherlessness, orphanage, mother, death and sex.

CONCLUSIONS

In spite of its insistent structural toponymy (Bensonhurst, Flushing, Calvary, Coney Island) *Flushing* stubbornly refuses to remain just the novel of Lorry's New York years, because it is intensely overshadowed by the persistence of the memory of the central crisis heterotopias of *Bottom Dogs*, the Jewish Orphan Asylum and, to a lesser degree, the YMCA. In several ways, the closure of *Flushing* actually becomes the closure to both formative novels as a whole. Following the Coney Island section, Lorry's narrative recedes into memories of Cleveland Orphanage in Part Five of *Flushing*, "J.O.A. Ja Wohl, Das Ist Das Weisenhaus," when the youth revisits the now derelict site. This has been discussed earlier at length, but it is worth recalling here that pivotal to the *Weisenhaus* (orphanage) section is the memory of school director Simon Wolkes, on whom the teenage Lorry, fatherless and barred by his mother's partner, had projected fantasies of a surrogate father figure. Lorry now knows Wolkes to be dead, and the nostalgic and conflicted recalling of Wolkes's two-fold absence, in both space and time, leads the way to a further loss: Lorry returns to New York in Part Six, to find that his mother has been taken to a charity hospital, where she soon dies in the course of an urgent surgery, thus fulfilling his ominous death-dream in "Daily Graphic Slabs." Dahlberg's structuring of sections Five and Six, and of *Flushing* in general, reveals how absent sites and figures coalesce and become

¹⁵ Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit was one private operator of subway lines between these boroughs in this era, before the subway and train systems were municipalized by New York City.

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion of Kristeva and the abject informing this section of *Flushing*, see Solomon 53-63.

simultaneously memorialized and materialized, through an ongoing juxtaposition of past and present narrative time frames.

Flushing draws to a close in Part Six, as Lorry finally abandons their tenement after selling the furniture. Now factually orphaned and homeless, he gets “caught up in a Communist Riot at Union Square” (Williams “Lazarus” 31) violently dispersed by police. Through a defamiliarized perspective, the starving Lorry is shown picking a peanut from the sidewalk in Union Square, and suddenly finding himself amidst “a parade” he thinks is chanting “a marchtime hymnal procession” (*Works* 472-3), as ingrained memories of orphanage times take over yet again. Hurt by the mounted police who are breaking up the rally and unaware of its political significance, Lorry continues walking toward Washington Square, chewing on the peanut and singing an orphanage hymn. Resuming an experimental narrative mode, Dahlberg even has the hymn’s music sheet printed on the page. The novel ends with Lorry chanting this hymn, musing

Treading along, his thin soles, callousburns against his feet, he thought he would go somewhere, but he didn’t know where [...] Vaguely, he believed, going, going somewhere, would be more possible for him than doing. But what could he push himself into, where could he drive himself? Cleveland, Chi, Frisco, L.A., they made him mutter with cold. They were the nastywet sears-roebuck catalogue sheets of a leaky outhouse up against him. (*Works* 474-5)

This last mental image, obscurely outdated today, juxtaposes the tragic allure of consumer culture to the grim certainties of Lorry’s homelessness and poverty. Counterpart to today’s online *Amazon*, the Sears-Roebuck, an early century mail order catalogue which famously advertised, among other goods, homes and cabins to be set up on one’s property, was typically recycled for toilet paper sheets in the “outhouse,” itself also advertised within these pages (“The Sears Catalog”). As Lorry wanders central New York aimlessly, these American cities are imaged as “nastywet sears-roebuck catalogue sheets,” discarded sites of his childhood and adolescence, merging in his memory as almost indistinguishable places. This final sequence, with its bringing together of American metropolises, the nationwide bible of consumer capitalism, and the homelessness of the urban wanderer, becomes markedly informed by a discourse of spatiality which significantly performs the Lefebvrian paradigm of the

"production of space," as "[both] a precondition and a result of social superstructures [of] the State" (qtd. in Tally 117). Indeed, Dahlberg highlighted "the inevitability of failure of the dollarless American trapped in a capitalistic society" (qtd. in Williams "Lazarus" 30) as a significant theme of *Flushing*.

Read together, the two early autobiographical fictions *Bottom Dogs* and *Flushing* chart the complex interrelatedness of place in Lorry's formative years, shaping a very distinct approach to the narrative of Dahlberg's life, one that enacts Foucault's premise on the 'spatial turn' of the twentieth century. The ways in which the orphanage and the LA YMCA intrude nostalgically into later New York life, the fact that Lorry's autobiographical story-line recedes from the Calvary and Bensonhurst sections, the particular re/presentation of Coney Island as supplier of simulacra, and the open-endedness of *Flushing*, showing a homeless Lorry mechanically drifting in the city, reveal an ongoing concern with the pursuit of situatedness that always intrigued Dahlberg, as much as it eluded him. In the absence of a stable home, the familiar spaces of Lorry's/Dahlberg's youth remain heterotopic sites, in themselves surrogate homes, while the cities beyond—Cleveland, Los Angeles, New York—pass in quick succession and become for him "alienated cities," in the terms set out by Kevin Lynch, and later espoused by Fredric Jameson (Jameson 51; Lynch qtd. in Tally 71): spaces which are unmappable, ungraspable in their urban totality.

Another way in which the question of situatedness becomes central to these early novels has been mentioned early on in this essay, and deserves further comment. This involves Dahlberg's "position" and "wayfinding" as a young writer, composing these American novels about American spaces from European places (France, Belgium, England) and under the influence of Anglo-Irish modernism. Although both novels trace Lorry's youth chronologically and are appropriately read in sequence (the latter, as has been discussed, often evoking the spaces of the former), they nevertheless chart a significant shift in terms of genre. The rather consistent narrative linearity of *Bottom Dogs*, broken only by two chapters towards the novel's end, gives way to the aesthetic experimentation of *Flushing*, with its polyphonic Part 4, its stream of consciousness memory sections, the juxtaposition of time-frames, and the collaging-in of musical notation. Critics have often labelled these works, particularly *Bottom Dogs*, as "classic(s) of proletarian literature," tending to focus on the underlying themes of penury and economic

struggle which underlie the narrative. But it is hard to reconcile Dahlberg's style, even in *Bottom Dogs*, with the realism and naturalism that characterized the social novels of the period,¹⁷ while *Flushing* very clearly switches into a modernist aesthetics that clearly outweighs a sense of social critique. Ultimately, Dahlberg's literary space in the late twenties and early thirties becomes shifting ground, a complex crossroads that blends working-class consciousness with modernist form, under the competing influences of the ideological¹⁸ and the artistic.

In the 1940s and 1950s, as the writer turned away from autobiographical fiction to essay writing, philosophical and anthropological enquiry, and the revision of literary myths, the notions of absent sites, homelessness or inner exile remained a leitmotiv of his writings, as various commentators observed. Commenting on one of these later, better known books, *The Carnal Myth*, Anthony Burgess interprets Dahlberg's vision of American identity in the New World: "The American has been dwarfed by a continent so large it cannot ever be a home" (*Williams Tribute* 62). On her part, critic Kay Boyle refers to Dahlberg as a "man in the wilderness," who knew "he was destined, both as man and writer, to be an exile in the land of his birth" (*Williams Tribute* 68). But, perhaps, one of the most insightful assessments of Dahlberg's individual and artistic struggle with a sense of place is recorded by Arno Karlen, himself a rare intellectual who straddled the fields of literary creation, as a poet and short story writer, with his medical specialization in sexuality and psychoanalysis:

¹⁷ In this era, an interesting counterpoint to Dahlberg's early work is Daniel Fuchs' *Summer in Williamsburg* (1934) a naturalistic fiction which prominently textualizes, in socioeconomic, psychological and ethnic terms, the influence of New York districts (Williamsburg, Manhattan, and others) on the characters' destinies.

¹⁸ Dahlberg joined the Communist Party in 1934 and published his third novel, *Those Who Perish*, that same year. At the time, a commentator of the Marxist journal *New Masses*, attempting to situate Dahlberg politically through a review of the new novel, wrote: "[after *Bottom Dogs* and *Flushing*] there has been uncertainty as to Dahlberg's position as a writer" (Burnshaw 26). This reviewer goes on to celebrate Dahlberg's progress from "the pictures of decay" (i.e., *Flushing*) but is hard put to label *Those Who Perish* as "revolutionary fiction," as it concerns "complex middle-class individuals" (Burnshaw 27). Today, this work is chiefly remembered as the first American anti-Nazi novel, written in the wake of Dahlberg's fateful visit to Germany in 1933.

[Dahlberg] bounces as he walks the earth, without the ballast of inherited myth, longing for even the memory of a homeland and ancestral house. But even the memory is forgotten ... so it cries for recreation every day in his work. The recreation is part guess, part invention, part the memory of remembering. So it is never right. The best success fails and makes him try again. So he remains an artist. And in his art he proves that an American, an artist, a Jew, a fatherless son lives out the myth of mythlessness, itself a Sargasso homeland. (Williams *Tribute* 73)

Looking back from early old age at his beginnings as a writer in the late twenties, Dahlberg still reflected on both the place and the dislocation of his early fiction. In 1961, living in the mediterranean island town of Soller, in Majorca, Dahlberg composed a brief preface to *Bottom Dogs* at the renewal of the work's copyright. Thirty years after the novel's first and largely unsuccessful publication, in this preface the writer reminisces on what he now perceives as the novel's central flaw, the "rough, bleak idiom" (Works 145) that materialized from his early attempts to produce "a vernacular American Ulysses" (Billings, Works xvi) which would bring together modernist aesthetics, social fiction and the American scene. So Dahlberg lingers, finally, both in "no place" and in too many places, one of the most fascinatingly interstitial writers in the American twentieth century.

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