

Sara Blair, *How the Other Half Looks: The Lower East Side and the Afterlives of Images* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018)

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the age of mass-reproduced, broadly accessible images, how did societies observe and think of people, within the physical space of their nation, who seemed to be other than themselves? How did they seek to ‘control’ them, gather and transmit knowledge about them, and use them as a means of entertainment, ‘aesthetic pleasure’, and titillation? (6) How have practices changed in regarding such people and places that apparently are distinct, in essence, from their own—yet are still, however grudgingly, accepted as part of the national collective? Through what mechanisms and vehicles does a mainstream national culture differentiate what it terms ‘itself’ as more-or-less ‘normal’, compared to what is unusual? How might one define the character of this difference? From my perspective as a modern Jewish historian, these are among the central concerns animating the excellent, highly original study of Sara Blair, *How the Other Half Looks: The Lower East Side and the Afterlives of Images*.

In the emergence of significant swatches of popular opinion, polemics, and creative expressions, with a large emphasis on shared observations and resonant literary texts, Blair argues that Americans’ conception of themselves came to be endowed with anti-types and alternative visions, from within their own borders, that disproportionately emanated from New York’s Lower East Side. She also attempts to examine how the object of scrutiny—those who actually lived in in Lower East Side—‘looked back.’ This book is of particular interest to scholars of Jewish Studies, because New York’s Lower East Side, from the 1880s to 1930s, became the home of the largest concentration of immigrant Jews in the United States, the importance of which has had a continuing impact on American Jews, New York City, and the wider world. In Blair’s terms, the Lower East Side functioned as an exceptional ‘crucible of experimentation’ as compared to nearly any other circumscribed space in the

United States. In glancing at and focusing on the Lower East Side, it was set under what was believed to be a microscope, viewed distantly through a telescope, captured through supposedly dispassionate photography (including the “flash” method that immediately jarred and jumbled its subjects), and seen through both deliberate and inadvertent distorting lenses.

“Only by acknowledging the effects of this long-standing, evolving iconography”, Blair argues, “can we account fully for the Lower East Side as a site of social and imaginative encounter—and hence . . . for the expansive hybridity of Jewish American culture itself. Such an account”, the author continues, “may in turn help us better understand the agency of an image repertoire that moves across visual and textual fields, in an era in which explosive print and visual cultures claimed new participants, staked expanding social territories, and came increasingly to define collective experience. To trace that movement is also to rethink the life of the image as it enters into visual and textual genres, histories, and media.” (7) The changing Lower East Side, then, was mediated by the evolving popular press, a progression of different types of technological reproduction, photojournalism, photography that aspired to the fine arts, movies, literature, poetry, prose, novels, and self-consciously, politically-engaged writing. These categories were far from fixed, as all could easily dissolve into each other. Photos, for instance, have captions. For those seeking to learn how figures including Abraham Cahan, Stephen Crane, Walker Evans, Allen Ginsberg, D. W. Griffith, Jacob Riis, Henry Roth, Ben Shahn, Gary Shteyngart, and Paul Strand served as engaged interlocutors of the Lower Side, this book is a superb guide and should serve as a splendid complement to the expressly ‘historical’ work on the area. In addition to these better-known names, Blair also illuminates the related endeavors of Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Chesley Bonstell, James Hare, John Lear, and Martha Rosler. Although there is quite a range of people and topics covered, Patti Smith’s eloquent memoir of her experience with Robert Maplethorpe, *Just Kids*, would have served the author’s purpose more effectively than some of her selections.

What Blair writes about Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, for the early to mid-twentieth century, applies just as well to Smith's take on the late 60s to early 80s: it "is not just a portrait of the artist as a young [girl and] boy, but an experiment with the Lower East Side as a *camera*: a site and agency for an arresting look back, for critical reflection on what has been lost to a modernity in the making." (130)

Professor Blair is a versatile and brilliant scholar, author of *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century* and *Trauma and Documentary Photography of the FSA*. While *How the Other Half Looks* is historically informed, prospective readers should be aware this book is more in the realm of cultural and literary studies, as opposed to belonging to the discipline history per se—despite its obvious 'historical' subject matter. In large measure Blair uses selected case studies centering on the Lower East Side to interrogate the theoretical arsenal of present-day humanities scholars. Her utilization of 'theory' is impressive. Blair's analysis of the much-reproduced (and often modified) painting, *The Five Points*, reveals greater depth and subtlety than what might have been subjected, in the hands of others, to a more orthodox Foucauldian interpretation. The painting, she asserts, "suggests not the project of containing poverty, disorder, and licentiousness but rather the inevitable expansion of a dynamic and heterogeneous community, along with the city itself, toward an as-yet-unseen horizon." (9) I wish, though, that Princeton University Press had allowed the reproduction of the *Five Points* color image as a full-page (opposite p. 128), which also would have been welcome for the important reproduction of Jeff Orlowski's haunting *Chasing Ice* (opposite p. 129). Summing up the importance of Orlowski's picture of a climate-petrified southern Manhattan, as fitting coda for the book, Blair asserts that "the iconography of the city's other half and below lends itself all at once to cinematic shock and awe, the critical task of making change visible, and—just maybe—the possibility of remediating this defining, terrifying 'fact of our century.' From

the apprehension of the tenement to the fate of the planet: this too is a chapter in the evolving history of the Lower East Side and its image, continuing to shape the way we look backward and ahead.” (221).

Although Blair never purports to do so, this book should not be seen as a replacement to foundational historical works on the Lower East Side, including the recent studies of Hasia Diner, Eli Lederhendler, and the earlier, but still formidable *Transformation of the Jews* by Calvin Goldscheider and Alan Zuckerman, *Daughters of the Shtetl* by Susan Glenn, *World of Our Fathers* by Irving Howe, *Promised City* by Moses Rishin, and more specialized studies, such as Daniel Mendelsohn on the *shmate* (clothing) trade, Daniel Soyer on the Landsmannschaften (home-town associations), Mary McCune on women’s politics, and Ari Kelman on Yiddish radio. Perhaps the greatest gap in this iconography, especially in light of how the Lower East Side “looked back” and sought to visually preserve and display itself on its own terms, is that Jewry’s self-image was notably expressed through its materialization as ‘organized labor’, such as in the group photos of labor organizations writ large and individual unions. Anyone concerned, however, with the characters and topics enjoined by Blair, will no doubt find her presentation enriching.

This book also may be appreciated for its potential, in alerting scholars to how the immigrant and ‘Jewish’ quarters of cities may be approached as prime sites for cultural history. Outside of New York’s Lower East Side, this already has been accomplished, to no small extent, by Lisa Silverman’s splendid treatment of the Leopoldstadt in Vienna, and Karin Bugmann’s fine study of the ‘shtetl on the Sihl’, focused on East European Jews in Zurich, and Paris has been excavated through the labor history of Nancy Green and anthropological study of Jonathan Boyarin. The closest analogue to the Lower East Side, though, may well be the East End of London—formerly the setting of London’s Chinatown, along with being the epicentre of Dutch Huguenots, Jews, Irish, Italians, Bengalis, and others.

With writers such as George Elliot (Mariann Evans), Charles Dickens, Israel Zangwill, Wolf Mankowitz, and Sax Rohmer. Isaac Rosenberg was both poet and painter, and the East End was featured in the photography of David Bailey and film of Ken Hughes (*The Small World of Sammy Lee*, 1963) and David Cronenberg (*Eastern Promises*, 2007). Despite the pioneering efforts of Bill Fishman, the vibrant print culture of the Yiddish speaking East End has scarcely been mined by historians, but is being given a new life in the burgeoning scholarship of William Pimlott. One can only hope that the current group of historians will absorb and take heart from the stellar offerings of Sara Blair's *How the Other Half Looks*.