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Interpreting the Progressive Era Pictures vs. Words? Public History, Tolerance, and the Challenge of Jacob Riis

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Through his pioneering use of photography and muckraking prose (most especially in *How the Other Half Lives*, 1890), Jacob Riis earned fame as a humanitarian in the classic Progressive Era mold. Yet in recent years some revisionist scholars have denounced Riis as an unreconstructed racist who merely posed as a benevolent reformer. Does this rethinking of Riis and the character of his work mean that public historians who have come to revere his photographs should shun them when producing public history related to themes of ethnicity, immigration, multiculturalism, and tolerance? The author argues against this conclusion for two reasons. First, a careful analysis of Riis's entire career and body of written work reveals a man who, despite his lapses into the language of racist stereotypes, was fundamentally tolerant to a degree that far surpassed his contemporaries. Second, the bold use of Riis's words and photos provides the public historian with an extraordinary opportunity to delve into the complex questions of assimilation and Americanization, labor exploitation, cultural diversity, social control, and middle-class fear that lie at the heart of the American immigration narrative.

For years no matter how many times I reproduced Riis' photographs for books, documentaries, and museum exhibits, I never ceased to be moved by the heroic images of the inspiring masses of poor immigrants. Eventually I picked up a

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copy of *How the Other Half Lives* and when I read what Riis had to say about these people I almost fell out of my chair.

—Marguerite Lavin, Curator of Photographs,
Museum of the City of New York¹

WHEN PUBLIC HISTORIANS endeavor to tell the story of the American immigrant experience, they have at their disposal many rich and varied resources. One such collection, however, arguably stands above all others for its capacity to shock viewers, grab their attention, and elicit emotions of sympathy and compassion: the photographs of Jacob Riis. Public historians find irresistible both the powerful images of poverty and exploitation and the story of Riis's pioneering use of photography to expose the evils of tenement life and bring about reforms in housing, parks, and schools.

Yet as the words of Marguerite Lavin above indicate, those who bother to read *How the Other Half Lives* are more often than not shocked by what Riis wrote about the people he proposed to save. Riis always managed to find certain virtues in every group, but not before dwelling in considerable detail on racial and ethnic stereotypes of the German whose "Teutonic wit is too heavy"; of Jews for whom "money is their God"; of "John Chinaman" about whom "there is nothing strong, except his passions when aroused"; of the Negro who accepts "poverty, abuse, and injustice alike . . . with imperturbable cheerfulness"; and of the "swarthy" Italian who is "gay, lighthearted and if his fur is not stroked the wrong way, inoffensive as a child."²

So what does this more critical reading of Riis mean for public historians? Should they shun Riis's photographs when producing public history related to themes of ethnicity, immigration, multiculturalism, and tolerance? The answer, I argue in this paper, is no. My answer is based on a careful analysis of Riis's entire career and body of written work (not just *How the Other Half Lives*) which reveals a man who, despite his lapses into racist stereotypes, was fundamentally tolerant to a degree that far surpassed his contemporaries.

However, this paper also argues that when public historians do use Riis's photographs, they must resist the temptation to suppress the words he wrote to accompany them—even those that make us wince. For Riis's words and photos—when placed in their proper context—provide the public historian with an extraordinary opportunity to delve into the complex questions of assimilation, labor exploitation, cultural diversity, social control, and middle-class fear that lie at the heart of the American immigration experience.

1. Marguerite Lavin, curator of photographs, Museum of the City of New York, telephone interview with Edward T. O'Donnell, 10 May 1998.

2. Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives, Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: 1890). For more on Riis and his impressions of Jews, see Jeff Gurock, "Jacob A. Riis: Christian Friend or Missionary Foe? Two Jewish Views," *American Jewish History* (September 1981): 29–49.

Troubling Excerpts from *How the Other Half Lives* by Jacob A. Riis

Like the Chinese, the Italian is a born gambler. His soul is in the game from the moment the cards are on the table, and very frequently his knife is in it too before the game is ended. No Sunday has passed in New York since "the Bend" became a suburb of Naples without one or more of these murderous affrays coming to the notice of the police . . .

Thrift is the watchword of Jewtown, as of its people the world over. It is at once its strength and its fatal weakness, its cardinal virtue and its foul disgrace. . . . [I]t has enslaved them in bondage worse than that from which they fled. Money is their God. Life itself is of little value compared with even the leanest bank account. In no other spot does life wear so intensely bald and materialistic an aspect as in Ludlow Street . . .

Poverty, abuse, and injustice alike the negro accepts with imperturbable cheerfulness. His philosophy is of the kind that has no room for repining. Whether he lives in an Eighth Ward barrack or in a tenement with a brown-stone front and pretensions to the title of "flat," he looks at the sunny side of life and enjoys it. He loves fine clothes and good living a good deal more than he does a bank account . . .

At the risk of distressing some well-meaning, but, I fear, too trustful people, I state it in advance as my opinion, based on the steady observation of years, that all attempts to make an effective Christian of John Chinaman will remain abortive in this generation; of the next I have, if anything, less hope. Ages of senseless idolatry, a mere grub-worship, have left him without the essential qualities for appreciating the gentle teachings of a faith whose motive and unselfish spirit are alike beyond his grasp. He lacks the handle of a strong faith in something, anything, however wrong, to catch him by . . .

Public History, "Wretched Refuse," and the Problem of *Uncomfortable Memories*

Some of the most exciting and important public history in the last three decades has focused on the themes of immigration, ethnicity, and race. Yet as anyone involved in such projects will attest, these themes are fraught with potential for conflict and controversy. Every group in America, it seems, is keen to have its story told—but not necessarily the "warts and all" version.³

3. For more on controversies concerning museum exhibitions about race and ethnicity, see Steven Dubin, *Displays of Power: Memory and Amnesia in the American Museum* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), especially chapter 3 on the *Gaelic Gotham* exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York in 1996; Donald Carfield, "Too Real for Comfort (Depicting Slave Life in Colonial Williamsburg)," *Museum News* 74 (1995): 8–10; William Yeings and Lonnie C. Bunch, "Curating the Recent Past: The Woolworth Lunch Counter, Greensboro, North Carolina," and William W. Fitzhugh, "Ambassadors in Sealskins: Exhibiting Eskimos at the Smithsonian," in *Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian*. Amy Henderson and Adrienne L. Kaeppeler, eds. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian, 1997), 143–55, 206–45; Frederick Turner, "No Surrender" [regarding the controversy over renaming and redesigning the



Sewing and Starving in an Elizabeth Street Attic (ca. 1890, Jacob A. Riis Collection, courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York)

The problem, as a generation of scholarship makes clear, is that ethnic and racial identities do not exist as objective realities. Rather they are invented and molded by a variety of group experiences, goals, and fears. Central to the formation of these identities is the construction of group memory as a means of both simplifying a complicated and multi-faceted experience and forgetting certain events and legacies that undermine a group's sense of identity or call into question its cherished myths.⁴ Nowhere is this more apparent today than in the booming "search for ethnicity" among individual ethnic, racial, and cultural groups, and the formation at a higher level of what might be termed a macro-level white ethnic immigration narrative among Americans of European descent. It is a narrative where what is forgotten about their collective experience is as important as what is remembered.⁵

Custer Battlefield Memorial], *Outside Magazine*, August 1997, accessed online at <http://outside.ateay.com/magazine/0897/0708custer.html> January 28, 2002.

4. Hasia Diner's *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000) provides an excellent overview of how ethnic group identity is created and shaped.

5. On ethnicity and identity, see: Beth S. Wenger, "Memory as Identity: The Invention of the Lower East Side," *American Jewish History* 85, no. 1 (March 1997): 3-27; Werner Sollors, *The Invention of Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford, 1988); and *Beyond Ethnicity, Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford, 1986); Amritjit Singh, et al., eds., *Memory and Cultural Politics: New Approaches to American Ethnic Literature* (Boston: Northeastern University

Public historians who—quite correctly—feel compelled to produce more than "feel good" exhibitions, documentaries, and educational programming inevitably encounter this tension between narrow and highly selective group memory and a full and probing historical interpretation of an ethnic group experience. As a tour guide (and later exhibition curator) in New York City during my graduate school years, I experienced first hand a great deal of this conflict between the forgotten and the remembered inherent in this narrative, especially on ethnic tours of the Lower East Side and Ellis Island. One incident stands out in particular. While leading a group of tourists to the ferry for a trip to Ellis Island, an elderly couple among them explained that they were both immigrants from Russia and were thrilled to be visiting Ellis Island a second time after so many years. In particular they hoped we could stop to see the plaque bearing Emma Lazarus' famed poem "The New Colossus." It had long held a special place in their hearts, they explained. One of them even "remembered" hearing the poem read as they steamed into New York harbor.⁶ Thrilled to hear that we would visit the plaque, they could hardly contain their enthusiasm, launching into gushing praise for Lazarus' talent and humanitarianism.

Alas, the visit to the plaque left them dismayed. As they read the poem aloud they stopped and became fixated on a phrase that seemed out of place. "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses" rang true, but the next line—"The wretched refuse of your teeming shore"—gave them pause.

"Was that in the original?" they asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"I never read *that* part before," commented the women as she vainly struggled to find a more positive meaning.

Her husband was less forgiving and more blunt: "wretched refuse' my ass."⁷

Public historians discover a similar disconnect between the popular view of Jacob Riis's photos and the often troubling realities of his prose. For as will

Press, 1996); Amritjit Singh, Joseph Skerrett, Jr., and Robert E. Hogan, eds., *Memory, Narrative, and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literatures* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994). On collective memory see Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans., Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); John Gills, ed., *Commentations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990); David Middleton and Derek Edwards, eds., *Collective Remembering* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1990); David Thelen, ed., *Memory and American History* (Bloomington, Ind.: University of Indiana Press, 1990); David Thelen, "Memory and American History," special issue of the *Journal of American History*, 75, no. 4 (March 1989): 1117-29; "The Uses of Memory: Round Table," special issue of the *Journal of American History* 85, no. 2 (September 1998): 409-65.

6. This point speaks volumes about the complexities of personal memory: she later said she arrived unable to read or write English.

7. John Higham, *Send These to Me: Immigrants in Urban America* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 78-79. For a similar take on Lazarus' poem, see A. M. Rosenthal, "Log Cabin New York," *New York Times*, 3 December 1996: "Oh, how I would have loved to hear my mother, Sarah, who had the guts of a pirate queen, if she had known Emma Lazarus wrote of her as wretched refuse. She would have made a puddle out of the woman."

be discussed in the latter portion of this paper, Riis and his extraordinary photographs occupy a celebrated position within the larger public memory of American immigration. Tellingly, the 304 pages of prose that accompanied those photos do not. Popular culture reveres Riis for his pioneering use of photography to expose the evils of tenement life and bring about reforms in housing, parks, and schools. The reason for the selective memory is simple: Riis's words seem not to correspond with his photos, or at least the contemporary meaning attached to them in the white ethnic narrative of immigration.

Of "Humanistic Photography" and "Benevolent Violence": Jacob Riis Examined

For the public historian to grasp the significance of Riis and his photographs fully, it is essential to examine his life story, the history of his photographs after his death, and the subsequent historiography concerning his career.⁸ For most, at least the very broad outlines of Jacob Riis's life are well known. He arrived in New York in 1870 as an immigrant from Denmark and after several years of hard times gained a foothold in journalism. By the mid-1880s, he had earned a reputation as a reporter covering the crime beat. In 1887 he hit upon the idea of adding photographs to his prose, first by hiring photographers and later by taking the pictures himself.⁹ In 1888–1889 he began giving lantern slide lectures before Protestant reform societies and church groups. Spurred by the positive reaction to these talks, he wrote *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* which was published in 1890.¹⁰

From the outset the book caused a sensation, not merely for its shocking rhetoric and lurid exposé quality, but also for its accompanying photographs and drawings—even though the quality of their reproduction was quite poor due to primitive halftone technology. While others before Riis had written of New York's slums, notes Peter Hales, "it was the photographs that provided

the real revolutionary impact."¹¹ Within months Riis achieved an international reputation as a reformer, a status he assiduously cultivated for the rest of his life. Nine more books would follow, including his autobiography, *The Making of An American* (1901). At his death in 1914 Riis was lionized as one of the era's great humanitarian reformers.¹²

And yet, very quickly after his death, Riis nearly disappeared from public memory. So too did his writings and photographs. Although some historians mentioned him in the context of tenement reform, none made more than a passing mention of his pioneering photographs that made him famous in the first place. Indeed, a lengthy biography of Riis in 1938 barely mentions his work as a photographer ("photography" is not even in the index) and two histories of American photography published that same year omit Riis entirely.¹³

Tellingly, Riis was rediscovered by both scholars and the public through public history. In 1947 Alexander Alland, Sr., having recently discovered Riis's long missing collection of photographs and negatives, mounted an exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York. Riis's reentry into the public consciousness and memory after 1947 was greeted with a scholarly assessment nearly unanimous in its praise. Although a few historians took Riis to task for his superficial approach to poverty or his emphasis on private sector prescriptions for relief, the overall interpretation was positive and centered on three points.¹⁴

First, Riis received accolades for his pioneering use of documentary photography. Implicit in these assessments was the conception of documentary photography as rational, objective, and factual as opposed to a medium subject to the biases of its creator. They praised Riis for his "realism" and avoidance of sentimentality when dealing with so compelling a subject. Even more than the statistical tables he included in *How the Other Half Lives*, Riis's photographs added to the impact of his findings by providing visual truth.¹⁵ No less a figure than Ansel Adams lauded Riis's photographs as "magnificent achievements in the field of humanistic photography" while his biographer

11. Peter B. Hales, *Silver Cities: The Photography of American Urbanization, 1839–1915* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 179.

12. *New York Times*, 13 June 1914; Theodore Roosevelt, "Jacob Riis," *Outlook* 107 (6 June 1914): 284; Jane E. Robbins, "Maker of Americans," *Survey* 32 (6 June 1914), 285–86.

13. Louise Ware, *Jacob A. Riis, Police Reporter, Reformer, Useful Citizen* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1938); Robert Taft, *Photography and the American Scene: A Social History, 1839–1889* (New York: Dover, 1938) and Beaumont Newhall, *Photography: A Short Critical History* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1938). See also Sally Stein, "Making Connections with the Camera: Photography and Social Mobility in the Career of Jacob Riis," *Afterimage* 10 (May 1983): 9.

14. Yochelson, "The Masked Image," 17; Daniel Levine, *Jane Addams and the Liberal Tradition* (Madison, Wis.: State Historical Society, 1972), 132–33; and Roy Lubove, *The Progressives and the Slum: Tenement House Reform in New York City, 1890–1917* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962), 49.

15. For more on the idea of photography as fact, see Roland Barthes, *Images—Music—Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), W. J. Mitchell, *Iconography: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), and Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image: Social Representation and the Cinema and Other Media* (Bloomington, Ind.: 1981).

8. For one of the best overviews of the history of Riis's photographs, especially in the decades following his death, see Bonnie Yochelson, "The Masked Image: Recapturing the Work of Jacob Riis," *Humanities*, 19, no. 3 (May/June 1998): 15–21.

9. There has been considerable examination of the Riis collection in recent years to determine who actually took the pictures that bear his name. Maren Stange, for example, has concluded that some of Riis's best-known photographs like Bandit's Roost were actually taken by Richard Hoe Lawrence. See Stange, "Jacob Riis and Urban Visual Culture: the Lantern Slide Exhibition as Entertainment and Ideology," *Journal of Urban History* 15, no. 3 (May 1989): 274–303. Bonnie Yochelson, however, challenges this assertion. See Yochelson, "The Masked Image," 19–20.

10. Biographies of Riis include Alexander Alland, Sr., *Jacob A. Riis: Photographer and Citizen* (Millerton, N.Y.: Aperture, 1974); James B. Lane, *Jacob A. Riis and the American City* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1974); Edith Patterson Meyer, "Not Charity, but Justice": *The Story of Jacob A. Riis* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1974); Louise Ware, *Jacob A. Riis, Police Reporter, Reformer, Useful Citizen* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1938). See also Jacob A. Riis, *The Making of An American* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1901).

James Lane emphasized Riis's unprecedented ability "to subject affluent Americans vicariously to the reality of poverty."¹⁶

Second and perhaps most enduring is the observation that Riis broke new ground in his evaluation of poverty and the impoverished. *How the Other Half Lives* shared the shock value of earlier works of slum exposé such as Charles Dickens' *American Notes* (1842), George C. Foster's *New York in Slices* (1849), and Charles Loring Brace's *The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years Work Among Them* (1872). But it differed from them in its conclusion that the harsh environment of the slum, not immorality or poor genetic stock of the slum dweller, was the chief cause of poverty and related distress.¹⁷

In thus addressing Riis's words, however, these scholars were forced to confront the untidy reality of Riis's negative characterizations of the various racial and ethnic groups inhabiting the Lower East Side. Still, none did more than chide Riis for failing to rise above the intolerant terminology of his day. Most simply dismissed it out of hand, arguing that the totality of his book "achieve[d] a balanced account" which negated his use of terms carrying "the implication of intolerance and discrimination."¹⁸

The third element to the consensus interpretation of Riis centered on his success in bringing about concrete reforms in housing, education, and recreation. Indeed, his success was an additional piece of evidence summoned by historians who sought to quell any lingering fears that Riis might have been a racist. The earlier works by Dickens, Foster, and Brace had merely shocked middle-class Americans. Conversely, *How the Other Half Lives* stood apart for its "raucous cry for reform . . . and prescription for change."¹⁹ Riis, wrote another, gave "the public confidence in the city's ability to cope with the tide of the immigrant poor."²⁰ Within a decade of the book's publication, tenements were razed to make room for public parks, a Tenement House Com-

mission was formed, and a new Tenement Law was passed providing for dramatic improvements in immigrant housing. In a word, Riis delivered. He was not merely a man of words and pictures, but also one of deeds—deeds so significant they defanged his racially charged rhetoric.²¹

Even as this rather filioipietistic view of Riis reached its high point in the early 1970s, a more critical treatment informed by the Marxism and anti-elitism of social history emerged. Among the first was Daniel Levine, who in his biography of Jane Addams characterized Riis as a faux progressive. As much as Riis promoted an environmental analysis of poverty, argued Levine, he still made the harsh and traditional distinction between deserving and undeserving poor—"for the pauper," he argued, "Riis had no sympathy." More important, the source of this less-than-progressive view stemmed from the fact that Riis was "a visitor to rather than a resident amongst poverty."²²

More biting critiques awaited Riis in the years to come. By the mid-1980s postmodernists took Levine's point about social distance and made it the cornerstone of an unrelenting drubbing of Riis. For in addition to declaring Riis a full-blown racist, acquisitive individualist, plagiarist, and anti-labor zealot, they argue that the primary function of *How the Other Half Lives* was to identify and strengthen a wall of difference separating the native-born middle class from the immigrant working class. Drawing upon Foucault and others, they charge Riis not merely with providing his audience with voyeuristic "tours" of Lower East Side sin and vice, but also with providing them reassurance, via his technique of "photography as surveillance,"²³ that although dangerous, the immigrant working class could be socially controlled. Essential to this was Riis's labeling, categorizing, and objectifying of his quarry, which allowed the middle class to assert power and superiority (real and psychological) over them without ever entering the slum. "Riis made experiences of Otherness safe," writes Reginald Twigg, "by enforcing the distance between his viewers and his subjects, allowing viewers to penetrate the darkest spaces without leaving their contexts."²⁴ Not to be outdone, Susan Ryan has most recently com-

16. Charles A. Madison, Editor's Introduction to Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York: Dover, 1970), v, vii-viii. [Riis] seared the conscience of prominent New Yorkers and forced reforms upon greedy landlords"; James B. Lane, "Unmasking Poverty: Jacob A. Riis and *How the Other Half Lives*," *Maryland Historian* 2, no. 1 (1971): 27-39; Meyer, "Not Charity, But Justice," 40-41. "So, in 1887, Jacob Riis became America's first documentary photographer."

17. Sam Bass Warner, Editor's Introduction to Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), xv-xx; David Leviatin, Editor's Introduction to Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Bedford Books, 1996), 42; Paul S. Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 180-81. For more contemporary assessments of Riis's environmentalism see: Lewis Fried, *Makers of the City* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), 31-32 and Keith Candall, *The Virtues of the Vicious: Jacob Riis, Stephen Crane, and The Spectacle of the Slum* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 93-94.

18. Quote from Bigelow, Editor's Introduction to Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), xiii; Madison, Editor's Introduction, vii, my emphasis; Moses Rischin, in fact, mentions Riis many times in his work *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962) without once raising the issue of Riis's negative characterizations of Jewish immigrants.

19. Cardasco, Editor's Introduction, vii.

20. Warner, Editor's Introduction, vii.

21. For example, Cardasco writes in this introduction to CP, (viii): "In large measure, the law of 1901 was due to the efforts of Jacob Riis." See also Nevins in Ware, *Jacob A. Riis*, vi.; Lawrence Veiller, *Tenement House Reform in New York, 1834-1900* (New York: New York Post Job Printing House, 1900), 32-36; Robert Weeks DeForest and Lawrence Veiller, eds., *The Tenement House Problem . . . by Various Writers* (New York: MacMillan, 1903), 165-201; Sam Bass Warner, Editor's Introduction to Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1977), vii; Charles N. Glabb and A. Theodore Brown, *A History of Urban America* (New York: Macmillan, 1967); Fried, *Makers of the City*, 11-12; Leviatin, Editor's Introduction, 42.

22. Levine, *Jane Addams*, 132-33; Bigelow, Editor's Introduction, xii; "the book ignores economic considerations"; Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 124-28; Riis "represented the slum as the antithesis of the home, a breeding ground of menacing ignorance and discontent . . . an offense to all notions of the clean, the sanitary and the civilized"; Thomas Leonard, *The Power of the Press: The Birth of American Political Reporting* (New York: Oxford, 1986), 154; Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Dell, 1977), 55; Boyer, *Urban Masses*, 97-98, 127.

23. Stange "Jacob Riis," 296.

24. Reginald Twigg, "The Performative Dimension of Surveillance: Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 12 (1992): 324.

pared Riis's work with the Trail of Tears, the Filipino Insurrection, the War on Drugs, the first Persian Gulf War, and the AIDS epidemic to emphasize its place within "the language of benevolent violence." Through his skillful manipulation of words and images, writes Ryan, Riis "waged a war on the poor" while claiming to wage one on poverty.²⁵

In response to this escalating castigation of Riis, a recent essay by Bill Hug brings the historiography full circle. What seems to be a dichotomy between sympathetic photos and intolerant prose, he writes, is actually a "conscious rhetorical contrivance" by Riis in which he uses the former to undermine the latter. Riis, he asserts, had to use racist terminology to gain the attention and confidence of his middle-class audience. Once gained, he then demolished those ideas with emotive, humanitarian photographs.²⁶ Hug may be on to something here, but his argument reminds one of the defenders of the TV sitcom "All in the Family" back in the early 1970s. While they argued that the brilliance of the show was its ability to expose and ridicule racism through its pathetic star Archie Bunker, critics countered that millions tuned in simply to hear him rant against Jews, blacks, feminists, and homosexuals.

"A Contact So Foul and Loathsome": The Problematic Impact of Riis in His Own Time

This scholarly debate over Riis should make it clear to public historians that there is far more to Riis than his photographs, words, and legacy of reform. Yet Riis becomes an even more complicated and fascinating figure when *How the Other Half Lives* is analyzed in the context of the 1890s. In other words, it is essential to focus not so much on what Riis was trying to do than on what he ultimately did in his own time. Scholars of Riis, even his harshest critics, agree that his book and subsequent career as a reformer led to substantive, if not substantial, changes in housing laws and improved living conditions among the immigrant poor. Curiously, however, no scholar has devoted more than a half sentence or footnote to another impact of *How the Other Half Lives*: its appeal to the emerging immigration restriction movement.²⁷ Nor have any histories of immigration, nativism, or restriction given much attention to this issue.²⁸ This lack of attention is particularly surprising given

25. Susan Ryan, "Rough Ways and Rough Work: Jacob Riis, Social Reform, and the Rhetoric of Benevolent Violence," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 11 (September 1997): 191-212 (quote from p. 183).

26. Bill Hug, "Walking the Ethnic Tightwire: Ethnicity and Dialectic in Jacob Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*," *Journal of American Culture* 20 (Winter 1997): 41-53. For another work which attacks the postmodernist critique of Riis, see Joel Schwartz, "The Moral Environment of the Poor," *The Public Interest* (Spring 1991): 21-37.

27. Higham, *Send These to Me*, 78-79; Caudal, *The Virtues of the Vicious*, p. 147n26.

28. Thomas Archdeacon, *Becoming American: An Ethnic History* (New York: The Free Press, 1983); Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1990); Frederick M. Binder and David M. Reimers, *All the*

lengths to which postmodernists have sought to divine a controlling (even violent) purpose behind Riis's work.

Surveying the ample commentary *How the Other Half Lives* elicited in the 1890s reveals abundant evidence that whatever his intentions were regarding the poor immigrant, Riis's prose and pictures were interpreted by a significant number of Americans as an authoritative, even scientific, argument for ending large-scale immigration to the United States. Even before publishing *How the Other Half Lives*, Riis attracted the attention and enthusiastic support of two leading immigration restrictionists, Rev. Josiah Strong and Rev. Charles Parkhurst. Strong was the author of the alarmist tract *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (1885) which decried the waves of "inferior" immigrants and called for restriction. Parkhurst was then a rising anti-vice crusader in the Society for the Prevention of Crime who also called for immigration restriction as a means of diminishing the criminal population and denying Tammany Hall its never-ending army of voters.²⁹ After attending one of Riis's lantern slide lectures in 1888, they helped him secure more lecture opportunities before church and reform groups, an experience that convinced Riis to compile his lectures and slides into the book that became *How the Other Half Lives*. Later Riis befriended another prominent New Yorker who expressed, albeit less vociferously, support for immigration restriction—Theodore Roosevelt. It is significant to note that both Parkhurst and Roosevelt achieved national fame in the 1890s by adopting the tactics of Riis and prowling the Lower East Side slums in search of vice and crime.³⁰

Publication of the book drew an immense response from book reviewers and editorialists across the country. Many wrote of the power of Riis's exposé and his call to reform the slum. The *Boston Times*, for example, wrote that the book was "a commanding invitation to the thick of the battle against social injustice." Yet an equal number dwelt primarily, some even exclusively, on the "evil," the "danger," the "horror," the "sin," and the "anarchy" fester-

Nations under Heaven: An Ethnic and Racial History of New York City (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); David H. Bennett, *The Party of Fear: From Nativist Movements to the New Right in American History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Dale T. Noble, *America for the Americans: The Nativist Movement in the United States* (New York: Twayne, 1996); Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1993).

29. Josiah Strong, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis* (New York: Baker and Taylor, 1885); Charles H. Parkhurst, *My Forty Years in New York* (New York: Macmillan, 1923); see also Charles H. Parkhurst, "Immigration and Its Danger to the Nation," *New York Evening Journal*, April 1911, reprinted in *Correspondence between Rev. Dr. Charles H. Parkhurst and the President of the National Liberal Immigration League on the Effects of Present-day Immigration* (New York: National Liberal Immigration League, 1911).

30. See H. W. Brands, T. R.: *The Last Romantic* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 274-75; and Theodore Roosevelt, *The Autobiography of Theodore Roosevelt*, Wayne Andrews, ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 100-103. For an analysis of Roosevelt and the question of immigration, see Thomas G. Dyer, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Idea of Race* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 15, 128-37. In 1897, for example, Roosevelt complained to H. C. Lodge that the New York Sun had listed him "as opposed to immigration restriction. Al corrected it in the Sun this morning."

ing among what the New York *Evening Sun* tellingly called the “dangerous classes of New York.” More to the point, *How the Other Half Lives*, wrote the editor of the *Christian Union*, demonstrated the urgent need “to drain the morasses of poverty and crime which are to be found in almost all our great cities” so as to preserve national “safety.”³¹

Leading figures in the immigration restriction movement read the book in this light as well. For in addition to Strong and Parkhurst, the future founder of the Immigration Restriction League, Henry Cabot Lodge, cited the book in an 1891 article he wrote for the *North American Review* entitled “The Restriction of Immigration.” For those interested in knowing the “degrading effect of this constant importation [of immigrants],” he recommended “the very interesting book just published by Mr. Riis, entitled *How the Other Half Lives*.” Its detailed account of the slum-dwelling masses, he warned, “is enough to alarm every thinking man.” Its conclusion by his reading was that “this condition of things is intensified every day by the steady influx of immigration.”³² Another leading restrictionist, Francis Walker, found in *How the Other Half Lives* a similar message. In an article titled “Restriction of Immigration” published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, he warned of the damage being done to the United States by the inflow into its slums of “beaten men from beaten races.” Anyone who doubted the magnitude of the problem need only “read the description [of slum life] given by Mr. Riis. . . . What effects must be produced upon our social standards, and upon the ambitions and aspirations of our people, by a contact so foul and loathsome?”³³

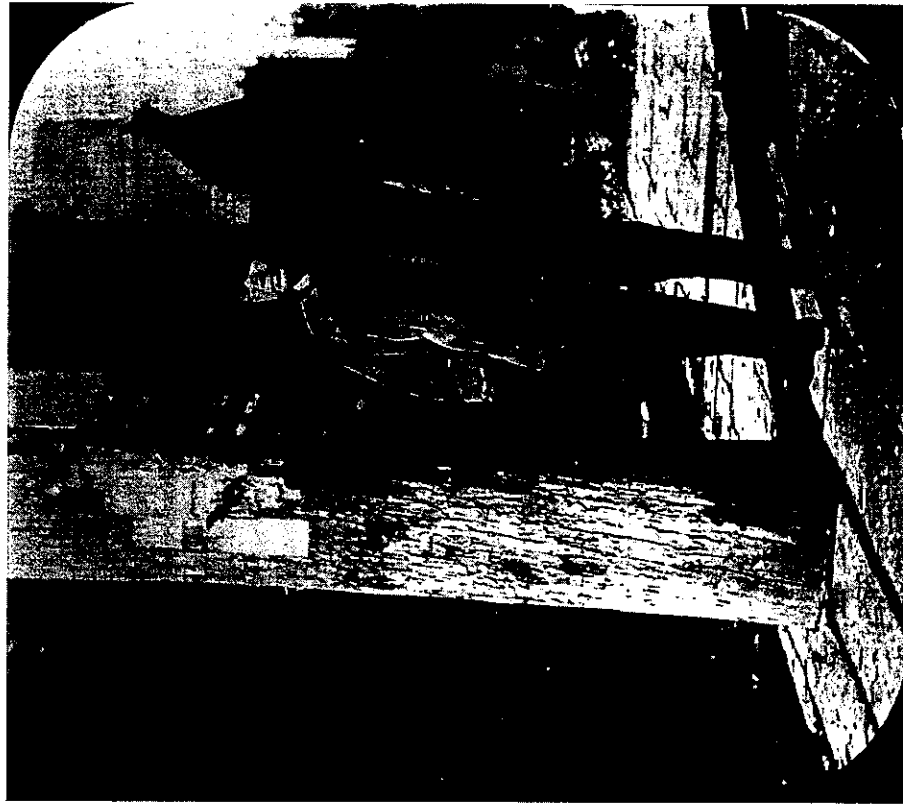
Such commentary might lead one to conclude that even though it has not addressed the appeal of *How the Other Half Lives* to immigration restrictionists, the postmodernist critique of Riis as controlling racist is nonetheless strengthened by such evidence. Certainly this appeal attests to the *capacity* of Riis’s words and photographs to be given diametrically opposed interpretations, and no doubt this stems from Riis’s alternate use of racially laden alarmist language and compassionate calls for reform. But does it actually allow us to conclude that this appeal to restrictionists reveals a covert nativist text?

The answer ultimately lies in Riis’s approach to the question of immigration. Riis made a career of speaking and wrote ten books—just where did he stand on the great issue of the day? Judging from the recent historiography, one would assume that he favored restriction, or at least staked out some “respectable” position, i.e., a sharp curtailment of numbers or the exclusion of certain undesirable groups, such as the Chinese. After all, what greater form of social control vis-à-vis immigrants could there be than to prevent their en-

31. “How the Other Half Lives,” *Boston Times*, 30 November 1890, “Darkest New York,” *Christian Union*, November 1890. “How the Other Half Lives,” *New York Evening Sun*, 15 November 1890, Riis Scrapbook, 4, 5, 15. See also Lewis Fried and John Fierst, *Jacob A. Riis: A Reference Guide* (Boston: C.K. Hall, 1977).

32. Henry Cabot Lodge, “The Restriction of Immigration,” *North American Review* 152 (January 1892): 27–36.

33. Francis Walker, “Restriction of Immigration,” *Atlantic Monthly* 77 (June 1896): 822–29.



The Official Organ of Chinatown (ca. 1890, Jacob A. Riis Collection, courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York)

try into the United States and therefore the slums of the Lower East Side? Moreover, if what he truly aspired to was middle-class credibility, what better way for Riis the immigrant to demonstrate his “American” credentials than to support immigration restriction? For, as one recent critic has put it, Riis had no reason to fear any backlash, since he was of the preferred “Nordic” stock.³⁴

A careful reading of Riis’s voluminous writings, however, turns up surprisingly few statements on immigration policy. When he did express an opinion, Riis took a moderate, even enlightened, position on the subject.³⁵ As one

34. Stein, “Making Connections,” 10.

35. One possible exception was a statement allegedly made by Riis in Boston in 1891 following a talk about his book. A reporter quoted him as saying that immigration should be re-

who ultimately stressed environment over ethnic or racial characteristics, Riis consistently upheld the principle of continued immigration to the United States. Even when considering the Chinese, the one group that received his harshest rhetoric and the one group against whom restriction was widely considered a respectable position, Riis resisted. "Rather than banish the Chinaman," wrote Riis, "I would have the door opened wider—for his wife."³⁶ Although perhaps a bit too bourgeois for some, Riis's point is clear: the especially horrific conditions of Chinatown are fundamentally due to an unnatural environment (i.e., the "bachelor society") produced by Chinese exclusion. Overall, Riis developed a conception of immigration as possessing a vital regenerative quality essential for the improvement of the slum. Immigration fills the slums, wrote Riis, "but it also keeps them from stagnation."³⁷

The working of the strong instinct to better themselves, that brought the crowds here, forces layer after layer of this population up to make room for the new crowds coming in at the bottom, and thus a circulation is kept up that does more than any sanitary law to render the slums harmless.³⁷

It would be false to claim, however, that Riis advocated mass immigration with only minimal qualifications. Few Americans in his era did. Like most of his contemporaries, Riis supported the policy of excluding immigrants who were destitute, possessed a criminal background, exhibited poor health, or professed radicalism, and like others of his time, he believed that this policy did not go far enough. Yet while turn-of-the-century restrictionists called for a radical curtailment (if not total stoppage) of immigration and the imposition of "racial" preferences, Riis offered a very different solution, one free of the racist obsessions of the day. In a 1911 article in *Survey*, Riis argued that rather than make blanket judgements on the fitness of various ethnic groups to become Americans, officials should examine each immigrant individually to see if they possessed sufficiently high "ideals [and] traditions" of cultural pride and patriotism. "If he is a Hungarian, do his eyes shine at the name of Kosciuszko? If a Pole, at the mention of Kosciuszko?" If so, argued Riis, they would make good Americans. However quaint or abstract Riis's concern for patriotic ideals might appear to the modern reader, it demonstrates how little national origin mattered to Riis. Evaluating immigrants as individuals would allow for a more positive assessment, for example, of the "dreaded immigrant from the Balkans" whose brave heritage of resistance to Turkish aggression equipped him to become an ideal American. "To be sure, he is not apt to know much English," wrote Riis in a swipe at restrictionists who called for literacy tests, "but would one fear damage to the republic from the injection of such a strain as his?" Clearly Riis did not.³⁸

stricted to 50,000 per year. No other such statement appears in any of Riis's vast writing and speaking career and no other newspaper reported the statement. Riis Scrapbook, 30.

36. Riis, *Other Half* (Bedford edition), 127.

37. Riis, *Children of the Poor*, 2.

38. Jacob A. Riis, "The Man Who Is an Immigrant," *The Survey* (18 February 1911): 838–39.

Public historians are left then to conclude that Riis eludes our attempts at easy categorization. His harsh discourse, rhetoric of fear, and unbridled assimilationist views run up against his appeals for sympathy and action, his evocative pictures, his concrete accomplishments, and his consistent support for a continued immigration regulated by a nonracial set of criteria, even as his audience of middle-class Americans gravitated toward the position of restriction. The totality of Riis's work, then, ultimately reflects a figure dedicated—however imperfectly—to providing a new approach to resolving the problem of immigrant poverty. Far from negating this central thrust of his career, his use of racist language and stereotypes merely complicated and to some extent obscured his underlying meaning. As a result, Riis unwittingly facilitated, both in the 1890s and in recent times, the misinterpretation of his intent.

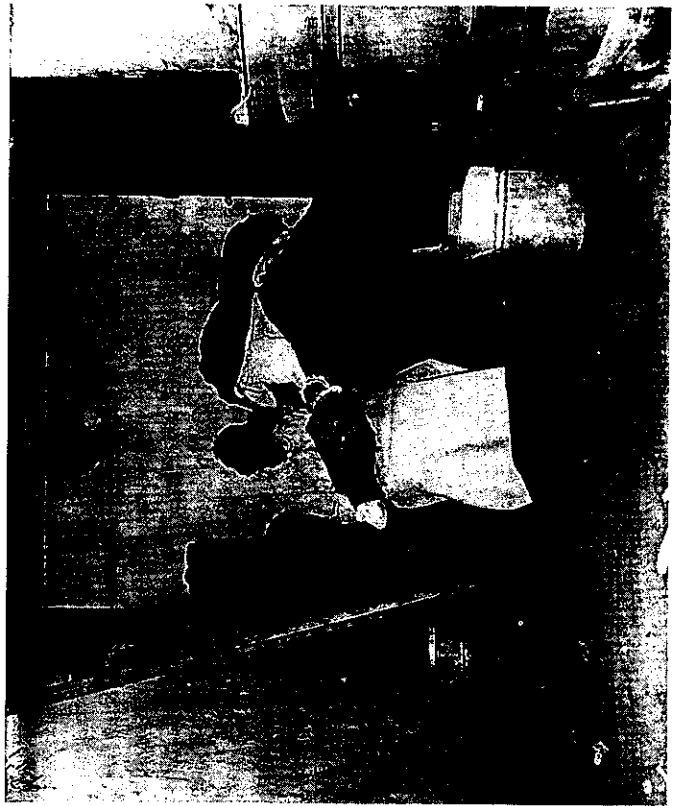
Chronicler of the "Inspiring Masses"

Finally, we return to the issue raised at the beginning of this paper: consideration of the place of Riis and his work in contemporary American culture and what implications this holds for public history. For although scholars continue to dissect the meaning and legacy of Riis, increasingly interpreting him as intolerant and elitist, writers, journalists, film makers, and, yes, public historians have elevated his photographic work to mythical heights. This phenomenon has nothing to do with scholarly debate and everything to do with the steady growth since the 1960s of a romanticized and increasingly modified conception of the white ethnic experience.

This trend is exemplified by the surge of interest in museums with ethnic themes, most especially Ellis Island, ethnic fairs, genealogy courses, coffee table books on "our immigrant past," and as Catherine Cocks, Jennifer Gates, and others have so ably demonstrated, ethnic heritage tourism.³⁹ In this evolving construction of varying modes of ethnic sentimentality experiences, Jacob Riis plays a starring role, both as a zealous reformer and more importantly as a heroic provider of the emotional imagery of struggle. "We instantly recognize the photographs," writes Hasia Diner in her work on American Jewish memory. The Museum of the City of New York, the institution which holds the entire Riis collection, reports that reproductions of Riis photographs are by far their number one request from their vast collection. They have become central icons in the high church of ethnic heritage.⁴⁰

39. Catherine Cocks, *Doing the Town: The Rise of Urban Tourism in the United States, 1850–1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) and Jennifer A. Gates, "Strangers in New York: Ethnic Tourism as a Commodity, Spectacle, and Urban Leisure in Three Manhattan Neighborhoods" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1997).

40. Hasia Diner, *Lower East Side Memories*, 3, 81–85, 158–59. For more on public history and memory, see Michael Fritsch, "The Memory of History," in *Presenting the Past: Essays on Public History and the Public*, ed. Susan P. Benson, et al. (Philadelphia: Temple, 1986), 5–17; David Glassberg, "Public History and the Study of Memory," *The Public Historian* 18, no. 2



In the Home of an Italian Rag-Picker, Jersey Street (1888), Jacob A. Riis Collection, courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York

Public historians have long facilitated this reification of Riis photographs in three specific ways. First, the dilemma posed by Riis's harsh words is solved by simply ignoring them. In the exhibition, *A Century Apart: Images of Struggle and Spirit*, Jacob Riis and *Five Contemporary Photographers* (1995) at the Museum of the City of New York, for example, of thirty-seven Riis quotes that accompanied seventy of his photographs, none included his observations about the various ethnic and racial groups found in the slums.

A variation on this theme is to accompany Riis's photographs with carefully selected quotes from *How the Other Half Lives* or even to go beyond that source to other Riis works to find a more suitable quote. Ric Burns's treatment of the Riis story in his 14-hour epic, *New York: A Documentary Film* (1999–2000), stands as the supreme example in recent years. This practice creates a moving yet profoundly simplistic story of the fearless (and spotless) reformer who, despite the odds, achieves stunning success. It is a sanitized, context-free version of history akin to mounting an exhibition on the life of Andrew Carnegie that makes no reference to the 1892 Homestead Strike or of Thomas Jefferson absent a discussion of slavery. Such efforts re-

(Spring 1996): 7–23; Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken, 1989); Yochelson, "The Masked Image," 17.

sult in public history that is arguably more harmful than "the Disney version" because it is presented as a serious and complete telling.⁴¹

Second, public historians frequently change the sometimes uncharitable captions Riis gave to the photos. As a result, the coarse, "In the Home of an Italian Ragpicker, Jersey Street" is transformed into a kinder and gentler "An Italian Mother and Her Baby in Jersey Street."⁴²

A third and by far the most effective device in the use of Riis's pictures for this purpose involves not merely the removal of his words, but the addition of works by other photographers, especially Alice Austin, Lewis Hine, and Bernice Abbott. Public historians often do this when illustrating exhibitions on immigration or urban poverty. The more romantic human portraits in these latter photos serve to lend emotional qualities not initially apparent in Riis's works and thus help create a more satisfying, emotive ethno-panorama. Perhaps the first instance of this practice occurred in 1966 when Allon Schoener mounted *The Lower East Side, Portal to American Life* at the Jewish Museum. More recent examples are found in the permanent exhibition at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum (1990) and The Museum of the City of New York's exhibition, *A Century Apart: Images of Struggle and Spirit*, *Jacob Riis and Five Contemporary Photographers* (1995).⁴³ This practice is so widespread, especially in history books, that many Americans see old black-and-white photographs of immigrant and urban America and think of them as "Riis photos," much in the same way that they loosely use the brand names Kleenex and Xerox.⁴⁴

41. Ric Burns, *New York: A Documentary Film* (Steeplechase Films, 1999–2000), episode 3. This practice is also found in The Museum of the City of New York's exhibition, *A Century Apart: Images of Struggle and Spirit*, *Jacob Riis and Five Contemporary Photographers* (1995). In contrast to Burns's treatment of Riis, Steven Fischler and Joel Sueder's documentary, *The Other Half . . . Revisited* (Pacific Street Films, 1998), deals directly with the issue of Riis and racism.

42. Museum of the City of New York, exhibition script for *A Century Apart: Images of Struggle and Spirit*, *Jacob Riis and Five Contemporary Photographers*, January 18–September 3, 1995, 8. See also Leslie Nolan, "The Impoverished: A Century Apart in Pictures," *USA Today Magazine*, July 1995, p. 78.

43. Schoener's use of Riis and other photographers for this exhibition is found in the companion book he edited, *Portal to America: The Lower East Side, 1870–1925* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1967). At the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, one room in the "Peak Immigration Years" exhibition is filled with black and white photographs of turn-of-the-century immigrant neighborhoods. Of the twenty-one photographs, eight are by Jacob Riis, eight by Lewis Hine, and five by "unknown." Elsewhere in the same exhibition in a section titled "Sweatshops," Riis photos are mixed among those taken by Lewis Hine, Bernice Abbott, Jessie Tarbox Beals, Frances Benjamin Johnson, and many others by "unknown" or simply not identified. For more on the significance of photography in the evolving image of the Lower East Side, see Deborah Dash Moore and David Lobenstein, "Photographing the Lower East Side: A Century's Work," in *Remembering the Lower East Side: American Jewish Reflections*, ed. Hasia Diner, Jeffrey Shandler, and Beth S. Wenger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 28–69.

44. Examples of this use of Riis's photographs in history books are too numerous to catalogue here. Two examples stand out. Bernard A. Weisberger's *The American Heritage History of the American People* (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., 1970) represents one of its earliest implementations; Allon Schoener's *New York: An Illustrated History of the People* (New York: Norton, 1998) one of the latest.

What are public historians to make of this trend? On the one hand, given Riis's largely positive views on immigration, it seems perfectly appropriate that his photographs achieve a special place in a movement that champions the nation's multicultural heritage. Indeed, that message is invariably at the heart of all recent public history exhibitions and programs on American immigration. On the other hand, it raises two particular problems. First, the sanitizing and simplifying of Riis's work—i.e., by excising his troubling words—reflects a broader trend within the ongoing process of commodifying white ethnicity: a desire to celebrate ethnicity and immigration devoid of the very problematic context that suffuses Riis and *How the Other Half Lives*. That is, it deletes from the immigration narrative questions of assimilation and Americanization, labor exploitation, class conflict, cultural diversity, social control, and middle-class fear, leaving behind only images of struggle and heroism.⁴⁵ Public history that succumbs to this “feel good” temptation misses an enormous opportunity to enhance the public's knowledge and understanding of America's remarkable—and complicated—multicultural heritage.

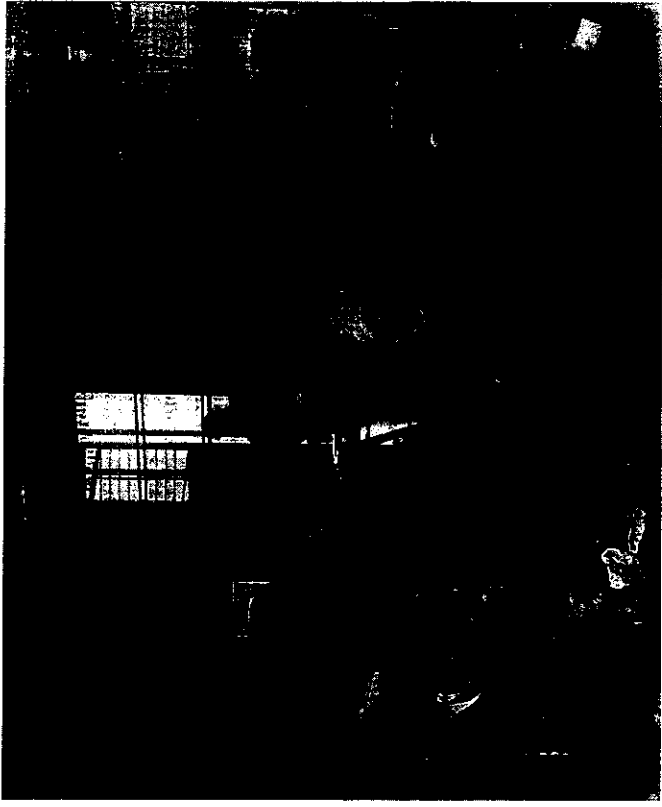
This point takes on greater urgency for public historians when one considers an additional impact of removing of Riis's words from his pictures: it makes room for other words that form a pernicious subtext to the contemporary ethnic heritage movement. For even as Joseph Rhea has demonstrated, in his words, how “American collective memory has, in the last thirty years, come to better reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of its citizenry,” it is a process of remembering that is far from complete.⁴⁶ Public history has played a central role in this broadening of public memory and spreading an ethos of tolerance, but the selective and context-free use of Riis's photographs make it abundantly clear that there are pitfalls the public historian must guard against. Here the problem involves not merely the removal of Riis's own words, but also the content of text written by public historians to accompany the photographs—or the lack of such text.

Let me illustrate this point, once again, with an experience drawn from my many years in the field of public history. To put myself through graduate school in the 1990s, I served as a guide at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. One would be hard pressed to find a public history venue more explicitly dedicated to the noble goal of promoting, in the words of its mission statement, “tolerance and historical perspective through the presentation and interpretation of the variety of immigrant and migrant experiences.”⁴⁷

45. See Michael DiLeonardo, *Varieties of Ethnic Experience* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), among others, for discussion of ethnicity as a commodity.

46. Joseph Tilden Rhea, *Race Pride and the American Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 2.

47. For a history of the museum see Katherine E. Snider, Andrew S. Dolkart, and Pamela Keech, *The Lower East Side Tenement Museum* (New York: State University of New York at Buffalo, 2001). For a critique of its evolving identity and focus, see Jack Kugelmann, “Turking the Slum: New York City's Tenement Museum and the Politics of Heritage,” in *Remembering the Lower East Side*, ed. Diner et al., 179–211.



“Knee-Pants” at Forty-Five Cents a Dozen—a Ludlow Street Sweater’s Shop (ca. 1890, Jacob A. Riis Collection, courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York)

Despite the best of intentions on the part of the museum's staff and curators, however, I saw the effort backfire on many occasions and always in the same place: in front of a large reproduction of a Jacob Riis photograph bearing no caption or text panel. “‘Knee-Pants’ at Forty-Five Cents a Dozen—A Ludlow Street Sweater’s Shop” stood propped in a corner of one of the Tenement Museum's unrestored tenement apartments. Depicting a group of garment workers hunched over their work in a crowded tenement, it never ceased to tug at the heart strings of tour goers and elicit sympathetic comments on how hard people worked back then.

Yet on countless occasions someone in a group would chime in something to the effect that this was because “they didn't have welfare back then.” The statement, of course, operated on two levels, simultaneously elevating the heroism of *those* immigrants (i.e., their ancestors) while calling into question the worthiness of the ones recently arrived.⁴⁸ How was such an interpreta-

48. Seth Kamil, who like me also paid for graduate school at Columbia University by giving tours at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum and its surrounding environs, recounts a strikingly similar conversation with a tourgoer. “In 1997, a woman, who was part of a group from a Jewish community center in suburban New York and who had never lived on the East Side, became distressed half-way through a two-hour walking tour. She finally exclaimed: ‘When we lived here the streets were wonderful, you never had to lock your door; you knew all of your

tion possible, given the museum's fundamental premise? Again, it speaks to the extraordinary power of Riis's photographs. Their ancient, black-and-white quality, depicting quaint subjects set against a long-vanished urban landscape have the potential to support the compartmentalization of the memory of race, ethnicity, and immigration. That is, they can support visually the memory of a past immigration many are convinced is fundamentally different in character, content, and impact from current immigration. Surveys of American attitudes toward immigration consistently demonstrate a strong tendency to draw distinctions between contemporary immigration and that of yesterday. Although such attitudes have marked every stage of American immigration history as far back as the colonial period, the contemporary ethnic heritage movement, with its often highly stylized and multi-faceted presentations of evidence like Riis's photographs, lends to those sentiments an added emotional, visual, and in the case of interactive museums, even tactile quality not present in earlier eras.⁴⁹

This reality underscores what Michael Frisch wrote when considering the potential and pitfalls of public history: "What matters is not so much the history that is placed before us, but rather what we are able to remember, and what role that knowledge plays in our lives."⁵⁰ Clearly, the photographs of Jacob Riis possess the potential—just as they did over a century ago—either to validate the idea of American multiculturalism, or to denigrate it by providing images of an inspiring immigrant past for those who feel threatened by the multicultural present and future. To which of these ends this rich and unique resource is put depends to a large degree on whether or not public historians have the courage to utilize Riis's photographs *and* the words and context that are inseparable from them.

neighbors—it was like family. Everyone spoke Yiddish. It was wonderful. Why can't these immigrants learn English already? I can't believe how they ruined our East Side!" See Kamil's essay "Tripping Down Memory Lane: Walking Tours on the Jewish Lower East Side," in *Remembering the Lower East Side*, ed. Diner et al., 236.

49. See for example, "Muddled Masses: The Growing Backlash Against Immigration Includes Many Myths; Folklore Says Great-Grandpa Didn't Take Handouts; Actually, He Took Plenty," *Wall Street Journal*, 26 April 1995. Roger Daniels and Otis L. Graham, *Debating American Immigration, 1682–Present* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

50. Frisch, "The Memory of History," 6.