REVIEW ESSAY

THE ETHNIC CRUCIBLE
New York City's Lower East Side and How It Got That Way

HASIA R. DINER, *Lower East Side of Memories: A Jewish Place in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000, pp. xiii, 219, illustrations, notes, index, $35 cloth.

HASIA R. DINER, JEFFREY SHANDLER, AND BETH S. WENGER, EDS., *Remembering the Lower East Side: American Jewish Reflections*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000, pp. viii, 291, illustrations, notes, index, $24.95 cloth.

CHRISTOPHER MELE, *Selling the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate, and Resistance in New York*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, pp. xiii, 408, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, $19.95 paper.

No city in the world is more intimately associated with immigration than New York, and no region of that city embodies that association more than the Lower East Side. For nearly two centuries, the area bounded by the East River, Fourteenth Street, Broadway, and the Brooklyn Bridge was the place of arrival and settlement for successive waves of millions of newcomers. Each new group endeavored, to paraphrase historian John Bodnar, to create an insular ethnic enclave in which Old World traditions and customs were transplanted. Yet none stayed very long, because the push of poor housing and high crime and the pull of a better life elsewhere eventually caused the dissolution of each ethnic enclave.[1]

Before the Civil War, districts known as Little Ireland, *Kleindeutschland* (Little Germany), and Little Africa characterized the subboundaries of the Lower East Side. By the 1880s, these earlier settlements began to give way to Chinatown, Little Italy, Little Athens, and a massive Eastern European Jewish district known to outsiders simply as Jewtown. By 1900, the Lower East Side was not only an urban region of astonishing ethnic diversity but also the most densely populated place in the world. Today, nearly forty years after the reform of American immigration laws, the Lower East Side has been transformed yet again to include the Latino area of *Loisaida* ("Spanglish" for Lower East Side), a booming new multi-Asian section still referred to by the now-antiquated name of Chinatown, a small but distinct Orthodox Jewish enclave, and

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a series of smaller groupings of immigrants from Ukraine, Haiti, and Bangladesh. No single locale in the United States reflects better the scale, diversity, and incessant quality of immigration to the United States during the past 180 years.

Coupled with this extraordinary record of successive ethnic settlement is the larger cultural influence of the Lower East Side on the national conception of the place of immigration in American society. Ever since the first accounts of immigrants on the Lower East Side appeared in the 1820s, the area has provided Americans with the basis for their most powerful stereotypes and enduring myths about immigration, race, and multiculturalism in American life. From the mid-nineteenth century drawings in *Harper's Weekly*, to the muckraking photos of Jacob Riis in the 1890s, to vaudeville and Tin Pan Alley songs, and to contemporary documentary films, the Lower East Side has provided American society with a steady stream of images of immigration. These images and their meanings have alternated unevenly between two poles: one construing immigration as the supreme threat to American society, politics, and culture, and another depicting immigration as the wellspring of national strength, vibrancy, and exceptionalism. Never was this duality more apparent than in 1916, when Randolph Bourne looked to the Lower East Side and exulted over the "the incalculable potentialities of so novel a union of men" in creating a new "cosmopolitan enterprise." [2] That same year, Madison Grant gazed in the same direction and published his eugenicist rant, *The Passing of the Great Race*. "The whole tone of American life, social, moral, and political," he wrote, when considering the inhabitants of the Lower East Side and other American immigrant ghettos, "has been lowered and vulgarized by them."[3]

Given the centrality of immigration in the American experience and the profound role played by New York's Lower East Side, it is striking to discover the absence of a scholarly, comprehensive history of the Lower East Side. The historical literature on the Lower East Side, although rich and valuable, is characterized by extreme compartmentalization. Only Mario Maffi's *Gateway to the Promised Land* attempts to provide a history of the area from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1990s. Its effectiveness is limited, however, by a nearly exclusive reliance on secondary sources and by scant attention devoted to the period before 1880. Other books on the Lower East Side such as Ronald Sanders's *The Lower East Side* and Allon Schoener's *Portal to America* are of the coffee table variety, offering beautiful pictures but limited text.[4]

By far, the most common study of the Lower East Side is one that focuses on a single ethnic group. Moses Rischin's *The Promised City* stands as the classic in this genre. It has been followed by numerous works on the Jewish experience of even greater specificity of focus, including Jenna W. Joselit's *Our Gang*, Arthur Goren's *New York Jews and the Quest for Community*, and Irving Howe's *The World of Our Fathers*.[5]

Although the experience of Jewish immigrants has received the greatest amount of scholarly attention, a growing body of work studies other Lower East Side groups, especially the Chinese, including Peter Kwong's *Chinatown, New York* and *The New Chinatown*; John Kuo Wei Tchen's *New York before Chinatown*; and Min Zhou's *Chinatown*. Historians like Donna Gabaccia, Stanley Nadel, Ronald Bayor, and Timothy Meagher have studied Italians, Germans, and the Irish.[6] Although these works contribute significantly to the historical knowledge of individual groups of the Lower East Side, they hardly comprise a comprehensive and integrated study of the Lower East Side as an ever-evolving multiethnic, multiracial area. None gives more than passing references to the issues of ethnic and racial conflict and cooperation. The closest we come to such a study is Tyler Anbinder's engaging study of Five Points, one of the Lower East Side's more famous quarters.[7]

Other realms of scholarship, particularly labor and women's history, have also contributed to the literature of the Lower East Side. Elizabeth Ewen's *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars*, Christine Stansell's *City of Women*, and Annelise Orleck's *Common Sense and a Little Fire* have greatly added to what is known about the lives of immigrant women and their role in the labor movement.[8]

Although we wait for a synthetic and comprehensive analysis of the Lower East Side in its totality as a two-hundred-year-old multiethnic urban settlement, books of the compartmentalized variety continue to be written. As before, they deepen our knowledge of certain aspects of the Lower East Side. Hasia Diner's fascinating and illuminating *Lower East Side Memories* makes a vital contribution to our understanding of how an urban place plays a fundamental role in the formation of an ethnic group's identity.[9] Diner begins with a compelling assertion: "The Lower East Side has become the American Jewish Plymouth Rock. It has come to stand for Jewish authenticity in America, for a moment in time when undiluted eastern European Jewish culture throbbed in America" (p. 8). Everywhere she looked—film, novels, memoirs, TV sitcoms, and museum exhibitions—the Lower East Side loomed large as the "sacred icon" of the Jewish experience. Given just how profoundly diverse Jewish America was in its Old World origins, years of arrival, places of settlement, politics, and religiosity, Diner set out to discover how and why American Jews "made the Lower East Side their common heritage."

Diner discovers several key factors that led to the construction of the Lower East Side, above all other Jewish neighborhoods in the United States, as a special place in the collective memory of American Jews. First, size mattered: although Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and other cities boasted large Jewish quarters at the turn of the twentieth century, none compared in population and density to the Lower East Side. By 1920, more than 540,000 Jews lived there, making it the largest Jewish "city" in the world. This reality shaped not only Jewish notions of the Lower East Side as the center of Jewish America, but those of the wider, non–Jewish American public as well, a fact attested to by

the countless features on the Jewish Lower East Side in popular magazines circa 1900.

These overwhelming numbers gave rise to a second crucial factor in the "sacrilization" of the Lower East Side. Population density, Diner contends, forced Jews to live their lives—even the most intimate aspects—in public, a fact that transformed the very streets of the Lower East Side into a vibrant arena of cultural expression, fusion, and creativity. "The memory of the Lower East Side derived much of its power," she writes, "from the physical concentration of Jews on those streets" (p. 134). Population density likewise supported a vast network of Jewish institutions—synagogues, newspapers, theaters, unions, and restaurants—unmatched anywhere in the United States.

Third, American Jews in the 1960s and 1970s were influenced by the wider national phenomenon of revived white ethnic identity. Like their Irish American counterparts, Jewish Americans sought to spice up their homogenized suburban lives by "rediscovering" their ethnic heritage. But here, notes Diner, American Jews faced a peculiar dilemma: unlike the Irish, they had no Old World to anchor their identity as Jews—the Nazis had seen to that. They filled that void with the Lower East Side, the nearest approximation to an Old World as they could find, one that was both distant (in time and space) and authentic.

Thus began the social construction of the Lower East Side as an iconic remembered place in the minds and hearts of American Jews born after 1940. They took seriously Irving Berlin's famous quip, "Everybody ought to have a lower East Side in their life." From films like *Crossing Delancey* (1988), to novels like Meredith Tax's *Rivington Street*[10] (1988), to museum exhibitions like the Jewish Museum's *Portal to America* (1966), and to histories like Irving Howe's *The World of Our Fathers* (1976), the Lower East Side provided a familiar, sentimental, and authentic setting. Only the African American reification of Harlem competes as *a place* of ethnic identity and historical memory.

Diner points out, however, that the remembered Lower East Side—like the iconic Emerald Isle for the Irish—is a place stripped of its more complicated historical realities. As the many works mentioned above make clear, no single Jewish experience existed in the Lower East Side, let alone the United States. Riches and poverty, secularism and orthodoxy, capitalism and radicalism, and assimilation and tradition coexisted on practically every block. In the memory of the Lower East Side, almost everyone is poor, pious, family centered, and committed to traditions. "In the process of making the profane sacred," observes Diner, "the history of the neighborhood in all its complexity has somehow gotten lost" (p. 14).

Diner's engaging book does have its limitations. One wishes that more attention was given to the editing process—especially to organization and the elimination of repetition—to fully transform Diner's lectures into a more coherent monograph. It might also have caught the mistaken reversal of captions identifying and explaining two important Lower East Side maps. Diner also leaves readers wondering about regional variations of her argument. Did

Jews in Orange County, California, for example, subscribe to the Lower East Side narrative to the same degree as those living in Nassau County, New York? Nonetheless, *Lower East Side Memories* offers a convincing thesis.

If Diner's book attempts to establish a broad explanation about the role of the Lower East Side in the postwar Jewish American experience, *Remembering the Lower East Side* represents an effort by more than a dozen scholars to add depth and detail to that thesis. Not surprisingly, Diner, along with Jeffrey Shandler and Beth S. Wenger, coedited the volume of essays that were originally presented as papers at a conference on the Lower East Side in 1998. Divided into two groups, part I, "The Dynamics of Remembrance," offers works examining the Lower East Side from 1900 to 1940. Together, they show that both the residents and outside observers of the Lower East Side were busy constructing representations—the building blocks of future "memories"—long before the 1960s. Moses Rischin, for example, provides an informative look at how the Lower East Side got its name (capital letters and all). More precisely, he notes how names like "Jewtown" and the "Great New York Ghetto" were dropped, paving the way for the Lower East Side's subsequent "investiture" as "the vortex of Jewish immigrant New York" (p. 16). Deborah Dash Moore and David Lobenstein similarly focus on how the Lower East Side obtained its look. "We cannot imagine," they write in their essay, "the Lower East Side apart from a century of photography that has frozen its images in our minds." But, as the authors ably demonstrate (aided, thankfully, it must be said in this era of tightwad publishing practices, by many finely reproduced photographs), those images have changed throughout time, from the "distant" pictures of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine (circa 1900) to the more intimate human portraits of Roy Perry (1930s) and to the conflicted scenes captured by Bill Aron (1970s).

Other essays in this section analyze the place of crucial institutions in Lower East Side memory such as restaurants (Suzanne Wasserman), public schools (Stephan F. Brumberg), and synagogues (David Kaufman). Kaufman, for example, observes that despite the existence of some five hundred synagogues in the Lower East Side, they hardly exist in the early twentieth-century images and descriptions of the Jewish enclave. Move the clock forward to the 1970s (Diner's iconic moment), and the synagogues are suddenly everywhere, becoming, in Kaufman's words, "the new repositories of Lower East Side memory" (p. 133).

The second grouping of essays analyzes many of the details of Diner's thesis. One of the most thought-provoking is Jack Kugelmass's examination of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum as a heritage site. Founded in 1988 as a museum dedicated to promoting ethnic, religious, and racial tolerance, it has struggled to downplay its Jewishness (a majority of the building's 10,000 tenants were Jews) in favor of a multicultural offering of restored apartments reflecting not only Jewish but also Irish, Italian, and German experiences. The result, writes Kugelmass, is a certain level of disappointment on the part of

American Jews who visit the museum in search of those emotive sights and reference points so ably described by Diner.

Similarly, Seth Kamil relates his experiences leading Jewish heritage tours of the Lower East Side (including his now-famous Christmas Day tour that draws hundreds). He points out, in an observation that challenges to a certain degree the implied unity of Diner's Jewish memory narrative, that not all Jewish tourgoers are looking for the same thing. Some want to know about the Jewish boxers, gangsters, and prostitutes their parents deleted from the group memory, whereas others—openly horrified by such underworld association—want only to see synagogues, pickle shops, and birthplaces of people like Al Jolson.

These and other essays in *Remembering the Lower East Side* constitute a welcome companion to Diner's *Lower East Side Memories*. They amplify, clarify, and, as noted, occasionally challenge her thesis. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that they ought to be read consecutively. Not every contribution, however, succeeds. Paula E. Herman's article describes with little analysis the way in which the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire became an American story as opposed to a Jewish one. Mario Maffi's otherwise entertaining and insightful essay is diminished by a lack of focus and what can only be described as turgid prose. Overall, one looks in vain for a work addressing how the presence of other ethnic and racial groups shaped the Lower East Side memory, from the rosy visions of the Shabbas goy to the grim images of anti-Semitic thuggery.

In contrast to these works, Christopher Mele's *Selling the Lower East Side* examines the Lower East Side in terms of class, culture, and politics rather than ethnicity (although the latter does play a role). Ultimately, Mele analyzes the sources, impact, and meaning of Lower East Side gentrification that began in the 1980s. He sees no irony or serendipity in the fact that the neighborhood long considered the city's most depraved became one of its most fashionable and expensive, albeit in a manner quite different from that of the Upper East Side. Gentrification is the result of many factors, argues Mele, not the least of which were public policy decisions by the city, state, and federal government agencies; a pop cultural shift that embraced certain elements of radical/bohemian culture; and the keen eye of real estate developers who capitalized on both.

The strongest aspect of Mele's book is the detailed chronological survey of Lower East Side history from 1880 to 2000. This is not a full history but one that focuses on three themes: the changing image of the Lower East Side in the minds of middle- and upper-class society; the persistent efforts of public officials to tame, reform, and redevelop the district; and the emergence of a culture of resistance among the area's working-class residents (i.e., rent strikes). All three are inextricably intertwined, with one leading necessarily to the next, for, as Mele writes, "images, symbols of rhetoric about the Lower East Side have considerable influence on how the real estate industry and state actors con-

struct their plans to reinvent (or, at times, ignore) the Lower East Side and how locals develop collective and unorganized forms of resistance" (p. ix).

At the turn of the twentieth century, writes Mele, the image of the Lower East Side in novels, magazine articles, photographs, and government reports consistently portrayed the neighborhood as a place of despair and depravity. This image revealed growing middle- and upper-class fears about the poor but also their desire to assert their "cultural superiority over the working masses" (p. 34). In this era, the Lower East Side drew the attention of reformers, most notably Jacob Riis whose exposé *How the Other Half Lives* spurred efforts to improve tenement housing.[11]

The image of and public policy toward the Lower East Side shifted in the 1930s as a result of declining immigration and the economic impact of the Great Depression. To revitalize a stagnant housing market, desperate real estate and commercial interests created "self-serving representations" of the Lower East Side that invented "sharp distinctions between the past (the immigrant quarter) and present (the deviant ghetto)" (p. 88). In a word, the good immigrants did the right thing and departed to more prosperous lives elsewhere; those left behind were the hopeless ones who made the district a slum. Thus began the first efforts at saving the Lower East Side, first with model middle-class projects like Knickerbocker Village (1933) and eventually the "slum clearance" and public housing initiatives of Robert Moses in the 1940s and 1950s. Rarely, notes Mele, were the residents of the district consulted.

None of these efforts succeeded, and by the 1960s the Lower East Side had entered a period of precipitous decline spurred on by government indifference (apart from building public housing and maintaining rent controls) and landlord divestment and abandonment. Declension made the neighborhood especially attractive to the growing countercultural movement led by the beats. It also spawned a resurgence in community resistance to landlord exploitation and government policy, most notably in the squatter and homestead movements led by groups like the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) to return abandoned buildings to occupancy.

But beginning in the 1980s and reaching full flower in the 1990s, the city's real estate interests, in league with a development-obsessed city government, increasingly viewed the Lower East Side not as a place of perpetual poverty, drugs, and crime (i.e., a place not worthy of investment) but rather as a new "frontier" for development. Fueling this vision, asserts Mele, was a pop culture that increasingly glorified and commodified anything that smacked of bohemia, counterculture, or hip hop. Amazingly, the very reputation that for so long frustrated the efforts of politicians and developers to upgrade the Lower East Side now served as the cachet ("the allure of bohemian decadence," according to a 1992 *New York Times* article) that attracted young urban professionals yearning to live on the edge.

Well, not exactly. As Mele argues persuasively, the district's new residents had their cake and ate it too. Just a few steps past a homeless shelter or graffiti-

covered wall, one found a Starbucks, Gap, and Barnes & Noble. And if they decided to relocate, they sold their condominiums at fabulous profits. This indulgence in sanitized urban grit would not necessarily demand our attention, writes Mele, if it did not come at the expense of the rights of the poor residents of the Lower East Side and allow public policy makers to avoid tackling the structural economic sources of poverty.

Mele’s book adds significantly to the growing body of literature on urban gentrification. It does, however, have several problems that diminish not so much his overall thesis but the effectiveness of its presentation. To begin with, Mele falls into the familiar trap of creating an ill-defined Lower East Side. Much of the book’s earlier chapters examine the Lower East Side in the largest geographical sense of the term (from the Brooklyn Bridge to Fourteenth Street, and from the East River to Broadway), whereas the ultimate focus of his study is the much smaller subset known by the 1960s as the East Village. Furthermore, in those earlier chapters, two of the Lower East Side’s most prominent ethnic groups, the Irish and Chinese, are hardly mentioned at all. On a larger level, Mele sometimes is guilty of what can only be described as “romancing the slum.” He is less interested in the very real problems of Lower East Side crime and violence (pregentrification) than in their “representations.” Nor does he allow that there might be something redeeming, in spite of the significant problems associated with gentrification, about a social trend that sees a generation of Americans eager to live in an environment that is crowded, multiuse, and culturally diverse.

These three books leave us more informed about certain aspects of Lower East Side history, especially in the areas of ethnic identity and gentrification. Still, the uneven historiography to which they belong leaves one with the feeling of an archaeologist who has found the shattered remains of a pottery bowl. Some pieces are beautifully preserved and reveal much information about the society and artisan who produced it. Others are faded and less informative, and many are yet to be found. Together, they form a compelling yet incomplete whole. Urban history still awaits a bold, imaginative, and multiethnic study of the nation’s foremost immigrant neighborhood from its origins in the 1820s to the present.

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NOTES

1. The two best works on the history of immigration to New York are David Reimers and Frederick Binder, *All Nations under Heaven: An Ethnic and Racial History of New York City* (New York, 1995); and Nancy Foner, *From Ellis Island to JFK: New York’s Two Great Waves of Immigration* (New Haven, 2001).
2. Randolph Bourne, “Trans-National America,” *Atlantic Monthly* 118 (July 1916): 86-97.
3. Madison Grant, *The Passing of the Great Race* (New York, 1916).

4. Mario Maffi, *Gateway to the Promised Land: The Ethnic Cultures in New York's Lower East Side* (New York, 1995); Ronald Sanders, *The Lower East Side: A Guide to Its Jewish Past with 99 New Photographs* (New York, 1979); and Allon Schoener, *Portal to America: The Lower East Side, 1870-1925* (New York, 1967).

5. Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge, 1962); Jenna W. Joselit, *Our Gang: Jewish Crime and the New York Jewish Community, 1900-1940* (Bloomington, 1983); Arthur Goren, *New York Jews and the Quest for Community: The Kehillah Experiment, 1908-1922* (New York, 1970); and Irving Howe, *The World of Our Fathers* (New York, 1976).

6. Peter Kwong, *Chinatown, N.Y.: Labor and Politics, 1930-1950* (New York, 1979); Peter Kwong, *The New Chinatown* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987); John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882* (Baltimore, 2001); Min Zhou, *Chinatown: The Socioeconomic Potential of an Urban Enclave* (Philadelphia, 1995); Donna Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street: Housing and Social Change among Italian Immigrants, 1880-1930* (Albany, 1984); Stanley Nadel, *Little Germany: Ethnicity, Religion, and Class in New York City, 1845-1880* (Urbana, 1991); and Ronald Bayor and Timothy Meagher, *The New York Irish* (Baltimore, 1995).

7. Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points: The 19th-Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum* (New York, 2001).

8. Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York, 1985); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York City, 1789-1860* (New York, 1986); and Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-Class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965* (Chapel Hill, 1995).

9. Diner's book is an outgrowth of a series of lectures delivered in 1997.

10. Meredith Tax, *Rivington Street: A Novel* (New York, 1982).

11. Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York, 1890).

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