Seeing and Consuming “the Other Half:” Ethnic Poverty as a Commodity in Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*

I-YUN CHEN
Taipei Chengshih University of Science and Technology, Applied Foreign Languages Department

Abstract

As shown in the title of the book, Riis frames his content as the “other half” and thus makes the American middle-class as “this half.” The distinction between the “other half” and “this half” is crucial since it involves the way how the ethnic poor is represented to “this half” and the way how the white, affluent audience receives the “other half.” With the representation of the “other half,” a great number of reviewers and editorialists dwelt on “the ‘evil,’ the ‘danger,’ the ‘horror,’ and the ‘anarchy’ festering among what the New York *Evening Sun* tellingly called the ‘dangerous classes of New York.’” I rather see a different picture of the “other half” depicted by Riis. It is a picture crisscrossed by diversions that deviate from the representation of poverty, a flickering light of a “hilarious” kind looming in the dark space of slum tenements. I want to pose the questions: what do Riis’s diversions mean to his representation of the ethnic poor, how do they cater to middle-class interests in a way, and how do they affect the audience in reading and seeing the book of poverty?

**Keywords:** New York, immigration, ethnic poverty, commodity
觀看與消費「另一半」:雅各·里斯《另一半人如何過活》貧窮移民人口的商品化

陳藝雲

臺北城市科技大學應用外語系

摘 要

十九世紀末期的紐約，充斥著大量外來移民人口。雅各·里斯的文字攝影集《另一半人如何過活》以移民聚落的窮困破蔽為標的，為美國富裕的中產階級居民，揭露「另一半」的人口如何過日子。如此攝影報導，用意在於推動都市更新計畫、改善都市市容。然而異於同年代其他攝影記者，里斯的文字攝影集並不以呈現異國族裔邪惡、危險、恐怖的圖像為訴求。作者擬以里斯所設定的「另一半」讀者(美國中產階級)做為研究起點，從羅蘭巴特等攝影理論出發，配合同時期的社會文化背景，探究里斯書中呈現「觀看」與「消費」外來族群生活的報導現象。

關鍵詞：紐約、移民、族裔貧窮、商品
Seeing and Consuming “the Other Half:”

Ethnic Poverty as a Commodity in Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*

Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York*, originally published in 1890, is a late 19th century urban classic. Assigned to police headquarters by the New York *Tribune* as a reporter, Jacob Riis was claimed as “America’s first documentary photographer” in 1887 and the deterioration of living conditions in the fast-growing cities of modern America commanded his undivided attention.\(^1\) The book *How the Other Lives* takes the huge immigration population of New York as its object of scrutiny to call for a slum clearance and better public housing for the ethnic poor.\(^2\) As shown in the title of the book, Riis frames his content as the “other half” and thus makes the American middle-class as “this half.” The distinction between the “other half” and “this half” is crucial since it involves the way how the ethnic poor is represented to “this half” and the way how the white, affluent audience receives the “other half.” With the representation of the “other half,” a great number of reviewers and editorialists dwelt on “the ‘evil,’ the ‘danger,’ the ‘horror,’ and the ‘anarchy’ festering among what the New York *Evening Sun* tellingly called the ‘dangerous classes of New York’” (O’Donnell 17-18). I rather see a different picture of the “other half” depicted by Riis. It is a picture crisscrossed by diversions that deviate from the representation of poverty, a flickering light of a “hilarious”

---

1 Riis began in 1887 to write about slum districts in cities and their poverty-stricken dwellers with the aid of his camera. The novel combination of words and photos in his reports immediately won him the national fame. For an account of this, see Edward T. O’Donnell, “Pictures vs. Words? Public History, Tolerance, and the Challenge of Jacob Riis,” *The Public Historian*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Summer 2004), p. 14, n16. The stories of *How the Other Half* are based on his first 12 years’ experience of being a police report, a job that acquainted him with the streets of New York and its ethnic population.

2 Donald N. Bigelonw says that effective efforts to deal with city slums came up with the publication of Riis’s book. With the help of Theodore Roosevelt who became one of the book’s most eloquent champions, concrete reforms included housing, parks, and schools. See Editor’s Introduction to Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, American Century Series, 1957, vii and ix.
kind looming in the dark space of slum tenements. I then want to pose the questions: what do Riis’s diversions mean to his representation of the ethnic poor, how do they cater to middle-class interests in a way, and how do they affect the audience in reading and seeing the book of poverty? Drawing on Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, I first dwell on the deviated verbal and photographic spectacle that pricks me. With the argument of ethnic poverty as a commodity and Barthes’s notion of photo images as objects, I then try to examine Riis’s book in the context of the 1890s and see its meaning relevant to the emerging culture of consumption. Finally turning to Susan Sontag’s *On Photography*, I would like to remove Riis’s words from his pictures, submitting his photo images to an analysis of how melancholy objects are consumed in the contemporary world.

**Seeing and Reading the Partial Object**

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes explains that there are two elements involved when viewing a photograph: “studium” and “punctum.” “Studium” is a “kind of education (knowledge, civility, ‘politeness’)” and it provokes feelings of “liking, not of loving; it mobilizes a half desire” (27-28). The studium is what the photograph is about: to recognize it is to “encounter the photographer’s intentions” (27). “Punctum” is more on the viewer’s side of things, instead. It is more elusive and it is whatever strikes us first, perhaps an insignificant “detail” or “a partial object” that has crept into the photograph by accident (43). Barthes says the punctum “pricks” and “bruises” since it evokes “poignant” feelings and mobilizes a full desire on the side of the viewer (27). In the light of the above discussion, we might take the stadium of *How the Other Half Lives* as anything that makes clear Riis’s intention to render a miserable account of urban poverty. Indeed, people find Riis’s images caught in helpless exploitation and profound distress powerful and his stories that expose the evils of slum life equally impressive. It goes without saying that Riis follows the tradition of
poverty writing before him, showing just how the other half sins and suffers. But Riis’s words and images are also replete with some irrelevant details which exceed that tradition and even violate its logic. There exist some stubborn, heterogeneous elements in the homogenizing poverty landscape. This utter irrelevance attracts me with its singularity and contingency and to find expression in Barthes, “I feel that its mere presence changes my reading” (42).

Riis’s markets and street scenes keep intruding into the domain of poverty as an addition, for which “Mulberry Street” (Figure 8) serves as a supreme example. The photo establishes its off-center irrelevance among other images that are taken in the same area (Figure 9, Figure 9A, Figure 10, and Figure 10A). The birds-eye view of “Mulberry Street” is different from the close-ups of “Bandit’s Boost” and “Bottle Alley,” where ash-barrels, piles of rag, malodorous bones, musty paper and shabby tenements contribute to a nightmare of slum life (44; 48). “Mulberry Street” does not shock its viewers with its unclean disorder but it rather shocks me with its bustling view of the sidewalks, a suggestion of romantic exoticism. In a similar fashion, Riis’s verbal depiction of the Mulberry bend, the “foul core of New York’s slums” betrays moments of digression (41). His words form a foil for the photo “Mulberry Street” when he describes a market-place where Italians cluster on a sunny day:

When the sun shines the entire population seeks the street, carrying on its household work, its bargaining, its love-making on street or sidewalk, or idling there when it has nothing to do, with the reverse of the impulse that makes the Polish Jew coops himself up in his den with the thermometer at stewing heat. Along the curb women sit in rows, young and old alike with odd head coverings, pad or turban, that is their badge of

3 For a detailed account of Riis’s conformity to the tradition of poverty writing, see Keith Gandal’s The Virtues of the Vicious: Jacob Riis, Stephen Crane, and the Spectacle of the Slum, Oxford UP, 1997, pp. 28-31. Gandal’s book is highly inspiring to me in the way that he not only points out how Riis follows the poverty writing tradition but also indicates some other places where Riis goes counter to it. His analysis of the photo “The Bend” as an example is of great help to my argument in this paper. Yet, my approach to the photos differs from his in a sense that I tend to see photographic meaning established not “within” its own image but “between” images in a system of relations.

4 In my paper, I tend to apply Barthes’s reading of the photograph to that of the verbal text. The reasons why I do so are twofold. First, to discuss the pictures free of their verbal context sounds weird to me since Riis’s book is a composite work made of words and pictures. Second, if I take Barthes’s “punctum” simply as some deviated, seemingly insignificant details, I don’t find it inappropriate for me to apply the principle to the verbal.
servitude—her’s to bear the burden as long as she lives—haggling over baskets of frowsy weeds, some sort of salad probably, stale tomatoes, and oranges not above suspicion.  Ash-barrels serve them as counters . . .” (43).

There is not so much in rendering a picture of urban poverty here because of the disappearance of beggars, drunks, rag-pickers, starving vagabonds, shivering children from the streets, and there is no description of their miserable, filthy dens.  Instead, there is more about exotic behaviors, fashions, staples, as well as collective customs.  Riis concludes his sketch of the market in the statement: “a perpetual market doing a very lively trade in its own queer staples, found nowhere on American ground save in ‘the Bend’” (44).  Examples of the exotic nature are dispersed in Riis’s book such as the street scenes in Chinatown and in Jewtown.  Riis’s colored account of the Pig-market in Jewtown especially add unusual exotic flavor to a book of poverty.  On the bustling activities of the Pig-market, Riss writes, “Pushing, struggling, babbling, and shouting in foreign tongues, a veritable Babel of confusion” and on its great inventory of staples, Riis writes, “Bandannas and tin cups at two cents, peaches at a cent a quart, ‘damaged’ eggs for a song, hats for a quarter, and . . . frowsy-looking chickens and half-plucked geese, hung by the neck” (87; 85).

Riis’s verbal and photographic diversions on exoticism often linger on certain ethnical objects or traits.  Photos that capture people from different ethnic groups such as Figure 16, Figure 17, Figure 17A, Figure 17B, Figure 18 and Figure 19 strike me with a special tinge of ethnicity.  When Riis’s camera eye probes into the interiors of slum dwellings, I mostly agree with Stephanie Foote, whose analysis of the photo “Sweatshop in Ludlow Street Tenement” (Figure 17) demonstrates the absence of the typical American middle-class family: domestic harmony has been irrupted by poverty, turning the home into a factory of the sweatshop (141-43).  Poverty constitutes the studium of Riis’s photos of the interior type.  However, I’m irresistibly arrested by some other strange things that carry with them traces of ethnicity as Keith Gandal has pointed put in his interpretation of the photo “Bohemian Cigarmakers at Work in Their Tenements” (Figure 18): the long beard and the
suspenders (66-67). Barthes holds a similar discussion of William Klein’s photos which, he
thinks, supply him with “a collection of partial objects” to yield up some details for
ethnological knowledge (29). Riis’s “unmistakable physiognomy” of the Russian Jew in
his book goes like this: “Men with queer skull-caps, venerable beard, and the outlandish
long-skirted kaftan” (77). In addition to his fascination with the Italian red bandanna, the
Bohemian beard, the Sabbath silk hat, and the suspenders of Jewtown, Riis’s “‘Official’
Organ of Chinatown” (Figure 16) eventually pricks me with the frozen gait of the Chinese
man: “the cat-like tread of his felt shoes” (69, my italics). To provide a verbal portrayal of
the Chinese, Riis proceeds to describe them “whether in blue blouse, in gray, or in brown,
with shining and braided pig-tail dangling below the keens, or with hair cropped short above
a coat collar of ‘Melican’ cut” (70).

Two photos emerge out of the other photos of Riis’s to demonstrate the “wonder” of the
art of everyday invention created by ethnic groups: “Rear Tenement, Roosevelt Street”
(Figure 6) and “Happy Jack’s Seven-Cent Lodging House” (Figure 14). In so saying, I’m
downplaying Riis’s emphasis on the conditions of destitution in urban poverty. The truth is
I’m equally drawn by his lavish descriptions of the “stain” of the city as a spectacle. In a
maze of narrow, often unsuspected passageways, we are led by Riis to wonder at “the
patched linen [which] is hung upon the pulley-line from the window” and the “perennial
lines of rags hung out to dry” in the rear tenements in New York (35). Wonder works its
way through the ugly towering tenements in the Hebrew quarters, the queer fenced-off
partitions in Chinatown, and the unlicensed dump settlements of Italian immigrants, just to
name a few. The materiality of the poverty landscape is furthermore depicted as a stunning
wonder by Riis when he describes the “bed” represented by “loose planks” in the police

---

5 Keith Gandal offers an interesting interpretation of the photo by focusing on the blank paper posted on the
“official organ,” the telegraph pole. For Gandal, the missing words on the paper explain well Riis’s depiction
of the menace of the mysterious Chinese men: there is some “conspiracy” working on but unknown to others.
Besides, the solitary image of the Chinese man also conforms to Riis’s petition for the Chinese: “Rather than
banish the Chinaman, I would have the door opened wider—for his wife” (76). See The Virtues of the Vicious,
pp. 68-70.
station lodging-house (64). It offers an even cheaper “bed” than the one in the seven-cent house as Riis shows in his photo (Figure 14), which is definitely a spectacle of novelty for the American middle-class. On the spectacle of slums, Riis, with a tone of excitement, introduces his readers a most breath-taking device constructed for the poor, a device practiced in other countries but not in America: it is a kind of bed “represented by clothes-lines stretched across the room upon which the sleepers hung by the arm-pits for a penny a night” (64). Thus, besides scenes of exoticism and profiles of ethnicity, Riis again seems to divert our attention from the real issues of poverty and makes his representation of the poor a highly problematic one.

The Averted Gaze that Consumes

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes proposes to see the photo subject undergo a process of becoming the subject-turned-object. Barthes is obsessed with this kind of sinister, inverse logic in photography when he claims, “Photography transform[s] subject into object, and even, one might say, into a museum object” (13). The assertion of the subject-turned-object is most obvious when one “poses” oneself in front of the camera and transforms oneself into an objectified image, invented by the mechanical eye of the camera. In other words, the photo image creates my body but it never coincides with my notion of what I am as conjured up in my mental eye (10-12). A split is inevitably caused by the distinction of the two images: the photo image is “heavy, motionless, stubborn” while that of “myself” is rather “light, divided, dispersed” since its essence is simply elusive (12). In this light, a photo means the advent of the subject’s becoming an object, of which the subject can claim any ownership no longer. The photo subject thus subjects itself to the manipulations of viewers for ruthless consumption: “they turn me, ferociously, into an object, they put me at their mercy, at their disposal, classified in a file, ready for the subtlest deceptions” (14). Going back to Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives*, I tend to see the author’s words and pictures work together in a way to construct ethnic poverty as a commodity. My saying so is not to
misinterpret Riis’s intent as a social reformer or to discredit his achievements but to reevaluate his deviated representation of the ethnic poor as a whole for some historical reasons. The grounds for such a reevaluation are found in the emergence of a new consumption culture which is complicated by the advent of photography and the surge of interest in ethnic otherness in the 1890s.

One might attribute the national interest in the “other half” to factors like urbanization and the Progressive movement. The late nineteenth century witnessed an increase in industrialization in America and hence a corresponding diminution in rural areas and the rise of urban centers. As John Allen states in his Homelessness in American Literature, urbanization brings about issues of crime and poverty that make the city a new genre popular with novelists like George Lippard, George Foster, Ned Buntline, Stephen Crane, and Jacob Riis (66). Urban society between 1875 and 1900 has been portrayed by David Ward, specialist of American cities, in Poverty, Ethnicity, and the American City, 1840-1925 as “a contrast of extremes of wealth and poverty, or of ‘sunshine and shadow’” (qtd. in Allen 67). This polarization between the rich and the poor in metropolis was more obvious with the arrival of a huge population of immigrants.\(^6\) The ethnic/social Other constituted a great part of urban life in modern America and an intense interest in the foreign inhabitants of the slums was stirred up by the Progressive movement. The Progressive movement in the late nineteenth century was the time of “great national excitement” when people were seized by an impulse to expose all ills of society, and Riis’s sad indictment of New York tenements was simply part of this national concern.\(^7\) Yet, for the rich half especially, this curiosity in Otherness soon converted the slum into “a site of entertainment or spectacle” (Allen 72).

According to Keith Gandal and other critics, to consume the other half, walking tours of tenement districts and “slumming parties” were invented during the period for urban leisure (39; 87). Gandal confirms us that “the poor are not just victim or menace but also curio” and in his observation, “Riis and Crane were providing middle-class readers with a new way

\(^6\) “New York City in 1890 had a total population of 1,515,301, of which 43 percent was foreign-born and 1,219,218 were of foreign parentage,” as claimed by Gandal, p. 8.

\(^7\) See Editor’s Introduction to Jacob A. Riis, How the Other Half Lives, American Century Series, 1957, viii.
of approaching the slums: as a spectacle for its own sake” (62).

The trend to take ethnic poverty as a spectacle or a commodity was accompanied by the invention of photography that had been associated with not only science but also spectacular entertainments. Many nineteenth century Americans believed in “the myth of the unerring objective camera” and thus took photography as a means of evidence (Trachtenberg 20). Likewise, Riis relied much on the photographic credibility for social reform, putting forth great efforts to render his news stories on slums “realistic” to his readers. He experimented with magnesium flash powder which helped him to take the slum and its dwellers in low light and at night (Stange 24). But while some critics pick up the idea of “photography as surveillance” and identified the controlling gaze as a middle-class right and tool, I tend to see on Riis’s side a more benign purpose (O’Donnell 15). My argument is close to that of Gandal in nature in a sense: we all agree on the point that Riis’s alliance with the middle class is more for “flattering” his audience than anything “colonizing,” that is, his visual truth is a way for spectacular entertainments. This is true in many ways. First, in my mind, Riis as a Denmark immigrant in New York could never be a harsh outsider to the “other half.” Second, as Gandal demonstrates in his book, Riis’s book was propagated as a promise for “picturesque art”—one advertisement said, “It [How the Other Half Lives] is from beginning to end as picturesque in treatment as it is in material” (qtd. in Gandal 61). Third, the claim for spectacular entertainments was just “the style of the age” and it was a byproduct of the late nineteenth reliance in science supported by photography. Maren Stange explains, “In the sphere of reform, editors of newspapers, magazines, and reports learned quickly to exploit photography as a medium newly flexible” (28). To flatter the consuming gaze of the middle-class audience, writers and reformers alike, developed new spectacular forms of reporting to attract a large share of the reading market. Looked in this way, the deviated representation of the ethnic poor becomes Riis’s strategy: Riis announced a clear call to action and he did so by appealing to the novelty, at that time, of seeing

---

8 Gandal considers Riis’s book not simply “charitable.” It is “an urban travel literature” for him, p.34.
photographs and making his text exotically picturesque.

In his conformity to the middle-class tastes, Riis turns the ethnic poor into objects of spectacle, inviting his readers not only to see secrets but also to observe types. A sketch of stereotypical representations of the ethnic poor has been thus drawn: in “the cosmopolitan character of lower New York,” one can find a diversity of ethnicity, such as “an Italian, a German, a French, African, Spanish, Bohemian, Russian, Scandinavian, Jewish, and Chinese colony. Even the Arab” and they take on the identities of being the toughs, the tramps, the waifs, the drunkards, the paupers, the beggars, and the gamins (15). Then, out of his positive intent, Riis collects, categorized, and objectifies his photo subjects for spectacular consumption.\(^\text{10}\) The ethnic poor were assembled in each of the photos, exposing their faces and bodies to their viewers who had been properly distanced and bridged by the photos—they were “safe” without having a real confrontation with the horrors of slum realities. Though staring straight at the viewers, the photo subjects, with the blankness in their eyes, are merely objects of entertainment for the consuming gaze, the gaze that turns them into objects and reads them in its own desire. The photo “Tramp in Mulberry Street Yard” (Figure 13) is the one Riis paid to make his collection of the ethnic poor entertaining enough: he came across this “particularly ragged” tramp in the Bend and asked him to pose for a picture with the pipe, and although the tramp charged for the pipe, Riis considered “it was worth a quarter to have it go in the picture” (57-58). Some other photos like “Two Ragamuffins” (Figure 24) and “Two Typical Toughs” (Figure 30) also seem to complete Riis’s stereotypical collection for entertainment: situated in a blank background, they are very much like photographs from police and charity files.\(^\text{11}\) In the nineteenth century, photos of these kinds at the Rogue’s Gallery at Police Headquarters, as Riis wrote, were of an entertaining nature: the Gallery was like a tourist attraction which was “more frequently

\(^{10}\) Susan M. Ryan dwells on ways how Riis’s photo subjects are objectified in her “‘Rough Ways and Rough Work’: Jacob Riis, Social Reform, and the Rhetoric of Benevolent Violence,” ATQ, Sep 1997, 11.3, pp. 191-213. She considers the slum dwellers less “human” to Riis’s audience when they were photographed without their permission, when they were often lying down or sleeping, or when they were partially shown by limbs and hands.

\(^{11}\) Stange says that as a police reporter, it is explicit that Riis might employ photos from police and charity files for his own use, p. 19.
Feeling Melancholy Objects

In On Photography, Susan Sontag writes, “The photographer—and the consumer of photographs—follows in the footsteps of the ragpicker” in search of “Everything that the big city threw away, everything it lost, everything it despised, everything it crushed underfoot” (78). Earlier in her book, Sontag elaborates this fondness of the photographer for taking the city as his object of study: “Starting as artists of the urban sensibility, photographers quickly became aware that nature is as exotic as the city, rustics as picturesque as city slum dwellers” (56). The city has been the source of a hidden, exotic reality and the poor in it might just be the trash, eyesores, or rejects that entrance any “rag-picker.” In addition to the oppressed, the exploited, and the dispossessed that account for all social miseries, slum dwellers in the city are simply another form of “melancholy objects” for Sontag—objects that documentarists prefer and photograph consumers desire.12 And as social documentation, photography is but an instrument to arouse humanism from the heart of its consumer, who assumes “that essentially middle-class attitude, both zealous and merely tolerant, both curious and indifferent” (56). When Riis photographed the alien melancholy objects of the “other half” in New York to inspire the comfortably-off of “this half,” he showed his appreciation of the medium and believed in its consumers. But do photographs actually keep their emotional charge to inspire, to move, and to arouse humanism? How were the melancholy objects in How the Other Half Lives felt by Riis’s contemporaries and how are they felt now?

To attain his aim for social reform, Riis created a book, new in subject matter and in visual appeal, to flatter his audiences, but if he succeeded in doing so, he addressed to more the fear and concern of the middle-class and less their pity and compassion. That is, if to consume ethnic poverty means to put pleasure in the hand of the middle-class, paradoxically Riis also “shocked” them and place power in their hands for urgent reform. As Stange

12 Sontag mentions the name of Riis’s work How the Other Half Lives as an example. See On Photography, p. 56.
argues, Riis specified “a new class duty” when he came up with the solution to tenement problems that the propertied middle class owed first and foremost (4-5). “Neither legislation nor charity can cover the ground,” Riis wrote, “[t]he greed of capital that wrought the evil must itself undo it” and “the coming appeal for justice must proceed from the public conscience” (4). At the end of the book, Riis warned “this half” and attested to the pressing need to preserve national safety, “The sea of a mighty population, held in galling fetters, heaves uneasily in the tenements” and he knew of but “one bridge that will carry us over safe, a bridge founded upon justice and built of human hearts” (226). Indeed, How the Other Half Lives sold well: It went through eleven editions in the span of five years and great sensation was caused for its shocking prose and its accompanying photos (Ryan 191; O’Donnell 12). Reforms were carried out as Donald N. Bigelow, editor of the book, said, “But not until 1890 was there effective effort to deal with city slums” (vii). Thus humanism aroused by Riis’s book, if there was any, is mostly due to Riis’s deft and intentional manipulations of the affects of his audiences. He both shocked and flattered them, making the melancholy objects of the “other half” a fear and a commodity of ethnic/social exoticism.

Yet, the melancholy objects disappeared from public memory with the death of Riis in 1914, the very year when he was claimed as one of the great humanitarian reformers at his time. None mentioned about him after he died and “none made more than a passing mention of his pioneering photographs that made him famous in the first place,” observes Edward T. O’Donnell (13). Riis reentered into the public consciousness only after 1947 (O’Donnell 13). This can be easily understood, I think, with the exhaustion of photography’s novelty and with the inadequacy of the medium to stimulate moral feelings or to awaken conscience. Of the latter, Sontag writes, “But moral feelings are embedded in history, whose personae are concrete” and a photograph that brings the news of “misery cannot make a dent in public opinion unless there is an appropriate context of feeling and attitude” (17). Without any link with the melancholy objects in a specific historical situation, people chose to forget them in a way. But Riis’s reentry into the American public memory after 1947 was greeted with unprecedented praise for his pioneering photographs.
The Museum of the City of New York, that is in charge of the complete Riis collection, claims that “reproductions of Riis photographs are by far their number one request from their vast collection” (O’Donnell 21). Over a century now, Riis’s melancholy objects have been felt in quite a different way, in my opinion.

First of all, Riis’s melancholy objects are felt by today’s photograph consumers as a commodity for nostalgia, a feeling that has much to do with pathos for a lost past than for the suffering subjects of the “other half” in New York. A photograph can make one experience and remember moments of lost time and customs of long oblivion. It is more memorable, as Sontag says in On Photography, than the “moving images” such as the nonstop stream of things from television, movies, videos because it provides viewers with still, frozen frames: a photograph is an object that one can keep and keep looking at (10; 17). Sontag refers to the medium as an irrefutable form of memorizing again in her Regarding the Pain of Others: in the era of overflowing information, “when it comes to remembering, the photograph has the deeper bite” (22). Photography as a compact form of memory is proved by the popularity of Riis photographs after 1947, a profound interest in remembering “our immigrant past,” promoted by museum exhibitions, books, ethnic fairs and walks, and “Riis plays a starring role” in the memory of ethnic heritage (O’Donnell 21). In their context-free form, the melancholy objects of How the Other Half Lives become icons of “struggle and heroism” for America in celebration of multiculturalism (O’Donnell 24). Sontag’s comments on Riis’s images are merely their being highly “instructive to those unaware that urban poverty in late-nineteenth-century America was really that Dickensian” (On Photography 23). Photographs help to fill in blanks of our limited experiences but their humanistic regards might just drift away into a tender vague pastness: the past is consumed as an object, “scrambling moral distinctions and disarming historical judgments by the generalized pathos of looking at time past” (On Photography 71). Melancholy objects are thus perceived in the melancholy aura of recalling and glorifying ethnic heritage. They stand for not icons of suffering but a featherweight portable museum of the things gone and reminiscent.

But being memorable icons of ethnic heritage, Riis’s melancholy objects are actually consumed by the white prejudice in its selective remembering and forgetting as well as by
the public that has been made a little less able to feel, to have its conscience pricked in the era of proliferation of suffering images.\textsuperscript{13} Scholars of Riis find the fact that Riis’s photographs have been much more popular than his troubling prose that has particularly been attacked by its racism. To cite a few examples, Riis in his book describes that “Like the Chinese, the Italian is a born gambler,” “Money is their [the Jewish’s] God,” “He [the Negro] loves fine clothes and good living,” and “He [the Chinese] lacks the handle of a strong faith in something” (40; 79; 115; 68). Hence when Riis emerges as an important figure shaping the collective memory of an immigration history in America, the use of photographs devoid of their verbal context designates a selective remembering that advocates America’s generous past of multiculturalism through a forgetting of its possible racism. As O’Donnell indicates, the blunt caption “In the Home of an Italian Ragpicker, Jersey Street” (Figure 7) has been transformed by public historians into a benign one “An Italian Mother and Her Baby in Jersey Street.” Public historians also tend to remove Riis’s words or even use their own words to illustrate exhibitions on themes of immigration or urban poverty and sometimes, they choose gentler and less sensational ones of Riis’s photos or just prefer other photographers at Riis’s time such as Lewis Hine (O’Donnel 22-24). In this fashion, Riis’s melancholy objects are felt less sympathetic and humanistic but more utilitarian and indifferent. Their message of suffering is made irrelevant; compassion is but a construction that numbs its viewers. This is very true with the era when people are surrounded with too many images overloaded with misery: “To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering, which does not necessarily strength conscience and the ability to be compassionate. It can also corrupt them” (20).

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

My paper thus has made an attempt to show how Riis’s deviated representation of the poor reflects a historical urge to appropriate an alien reality in urban slums. Riis photographed and sketched the “other half” in the 1880s in an almost exotic spirit to cater to

\textsuperscript{13} On the first point, I’m again indebted to O’Donnell’s account of the recent reception of Riis’s book in America.
the demands of his audiences. That is, the melancholy objects for spectacular entertainment and consumption were just rendered in a manner that was most local, class-bound, and ethnic. Drawing upon Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, I have also proposed to see how sophisticated it can be for a photograph to prick us to attention or prick us to compassion. It is a sophisticated phenomenon as I have illustrated in the example of Riis’s book, a book which is punctuated by irrelevant details that turn ethnic poverty into a commodity for the purpose of social reform. In my limited treatment of the consumption of Riis’s melancholy objects, I have finally suggested how problematic it can be for a photograph to assert its power of morality sometimes. But it is false to claim that photography has just lost its emotive qualities to move or today’s photograph consumers are totally incapable of feeling. Rather, after my analysis of How the Other Half Lives, I would like to call for a new attention to the fact that the power of the medium can be sophisticatedly manipulated, including the affects it produces. In regard to the dilemma of modern people in a world hyper-saturated with images of suffering, I feel like quoting Sontag at the end of her Regarding the Pain of Others. With a photograph taken by Jeff Wall in 1992 titled “Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986),” Sontag poses the questions: “These dead are supremely uninterested in the living: in those who took their lives; in witnesses—and in us. Why should they seek our gaze? What would they have to say to us?” (125) For Sontag, the photograph is exemplary “in its thoughtfulness and power:” it makes us think and feel (125).
Appendix:

With the concern about the photo copy right of *How the Other Half Lives*, photos mentioned in the paper are sequentially arranged according to the following entries.

*Figure:*

1. Gotham Court
2. Hell’s Kitchen and Sebastopol (The Rock)
3. Ash Barrel of Old, ca. 1888-1889
4. Old House in Cherry Street, “The Cradle of the Tenement”
5. Upstairs in Blindman’s Alley
5A Blindman’s Alley, Cherry Street
5B Mullin’s Alley, ca. 1888-1889
6. Rear Tenement, Roosevelt Street
7. Italian Mother and Baby, Jersey Street ca. 1889
8. Mulberry Bend ca. 1888-1889
9. “Bandit’s Roost,” 39 1/2 Mulberry Street
9A Bandit’s Roost at the Feast of St. Rocco
10. Bottle Alley, Baxter Street
10A Bottle Alley
10B Bone Alley As It Was
11. “Five Cents a Spot,” ca. 1889
11A A Midnight in Ludlow Street, 1888-1890
12. Bandit’s Roost, the Stale-Beer Dive in Celler (flashlight at 3.AM)
13. Tramp in Mulberry Street Yard
14. Happy Jack’s Seven-Cent Lodging House
14A Police Station Lodging, Oak Street
14B Police Station Lodging, Eldridge Street
14C Police Station Lodgers Waiting to Be Let Out
15. Smoking Opium in a Joint
16. “Official” Organ of Chinatown (with Chinese Man Standing near it)
17. Sweatshop in Ludlow Street Tenement, ca. 1889
17A Necktie Workshop in a Division Street Tenement, ca. 1889
17B In a Sweatshop, ca. 1889: Twelve-Year-Old Boy at Work Pulling Threads
18. Bohemian Cigarmakers at Work in Tenement
19. Black-and-Tan Dive in Broome Street, ca. 1889
20. Baby-Mourning Badge at Mouth of Mulberry Street (flashlight 3 A.M.)
21. Tenement Interior in Poverty Gap, ca. 1889
22. The Potters Field: General View
23. Prayer Time in Five Points Nursery, ca. 1889
24. Two Ragamuffins
25. Street Arabs in the Area of Mulberry Street, ca. 1889
26. Street Arabs, Barelegged, in Mulberry Street
27. Washing Up in the Newsboys’ Lodging House
28. Black-and-Tan Dive in Thompson Street
29. The Montgomery Guards
30. Two Typical Toughs, Rogues’ Gallery: A Burglar and A Thief
31. Dock Rats Hunted by the Police
31A. The Short Tail Gang under Pier at Foot of Jackson Street, later Corlears Hook Park
32. Two Sewing Women in Elizabeth Street Doorway

Bibliography


Jacob Riis' book *How the Other Half Lives* is a detailed description on the poor and the destitute in the inner realms of New York City. Riis tries to portray the living conditions through the 'eyes' of his camera. He sneaks up on the people flashes a picture and then tells the rest of the city how the 'other half' is living. Riis says, "Long ago it was said that one half of the world does not know how the other half lives. That was true then. Riis gave Americans an opportunity to see what life was really like for an immigrant in living in America. In *How the Other Half Lives*, Riis showed how immigrants were not entirely different from Americans and he talked about which groups of immigrants were more suited to succeed by assimilating to the American lifestyle. Cari Blog Ini. *How the Other Half Lives*. April 26, 2013. Lord Manners was a rich and famous banker. When he died, he was given a magnificent funeral which was attended by hundreds of famous people. The funeral was going to be held in Westminster Abbey. Many ordinary people lined the streets to watch the procession. The wonderful black and gold carriage was drawn by six black horses. The mourners followed in silence. Lord Manners was given a royal farewell. Two tramps were among the crowd. They watched the procession with amazement. As solemn music could be heard in the distance, one of them tu