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Memories of the Lower East Side, US Historical Narration, and the Gentrification of Chinatown

This paper examines liberal discourses of anti-gentrification and historical preservation that surround discussions of the future of the Lower East Side (NYC), an area celebrated for its bohemian lifestyle, working class and immigrant cultures, and creativity. In reproducing a nostalgia for the Lower East Side's historical past, these narratives ironically contribute to the urban aesthetics of gentrification, a form of global cosmopolitanism that homogenizes the urban landscape, for instance undoing the boundaries between urban figures such as the hipster and yuppie. Manhattan's Chinatown, which sits squarely within the Lower East Side, has been largely elided from the historical memory of the area, which is dominated not only by the story of European immigration but also by the larger genealogy of the American revolution and the founding of the US. In this paper, I explore the stakes of a transatlantic narrative in the future development of the Lower East Side and New York as global urban landscape. I then query how a transpacific-inflected imaginary alters this landscape and contends with received narratives of American immigration, culture, and urban life as exemplified by the Lower East Side. Using the case studies of the Lower East Side and Chinatown, I compare how the development of cultural studies in a transpacific versus transatlantic context contributes to different forms of national and urban critique.