

## “Electric Currents of Life:” Lola Ridge’s Immigrant Flaneuserie

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To Lola Ridge (1873-1941), the island of Manhattan was contradictory: it was beautiful yet repugnant, scintillating yet scary, welcoming yet alienating. Indeed she viewed the American city during the period of high modernism in much the same way that a century later sociologist Zygmunt Bauman would characterize the twenty-first century metropolis: “City living is a notoriously ambivalent experience. It attracts and repels” (89). When Ridge, an Irish-born, Australasian-raised poet, arrived in New York in 1908, she found a world of collisions. A confluence of immigrant enclaves and machine-age technology was transforming the city.

A few lines from Ridge’s long poem, “The Ghetto,” typify these contradictions. They reveal the tensions at play in the poet’s attempt to understand New York as urban phenomenon.

LIFE!  
*Startling, vigorous life,  
That squirms under my touch,  
And baffles me when I try to examine it,  
Or hurls me back without apology.  
Leaving my ego ruffled and preening itself.*

In these italicized lines, Ridge the poet, in the guise of a flaneur, confides to readers the challenges tied to exploring and pinning down the new social formations, which invite yet resist descriptive glimpses. Finding words to categorize the new life surrounding her will no doubt frustrate Ridge. The communities that she celebrates in verse will “baffle” and repel her as she attempts a closer examination. Yet while her artist’s ego is “ruffled” and in need of mending, she begins to discover that her own alien self is a part of the character and luster of lower Manhattan’s immigrant experience in the sway of its looming technology.

Lola Ridge is an immigrant flaneuse, a new world poet ambling the streets of her “vigorous,” yet “startling” new home. Ridge’s biography is eclectic, radical. She left a provincial marriage to a New Zealand gold mine manager to come to America, where she sought the visual stimulation and diverse community that a place like New York City has historically provided new immigrants. Born Rose Emily Ridge in Dublin, Ridge moved as a very young child with her mother first to New Zealand and then to Sydney, Australia. In Sydney she studied art under Julian Ashton at the Academie Julienne. After her arrival in New York City, Ridge found lodging on Manhattan’s Lower East Side. She supported herself by working in a factory, as an artist’s model and as an illustrator. She also became involved in the anarchist movement, assuming the role of organizer for the Francisco Ferrer Association’s “Modern School,” where she met and later married the Glasgow-born engineer David Lawson. It was also where she first encountered the cultural and political radicalism that infused so much of her poetry. The Modern School brought together a distinct group of artists and radicals including Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, John Sloan and Man Ray, Hutchins Hapgood, and Will and Arielle Durant. Ridge’s work appeared frequently in the “little magazines,” which were actively shaping modernism in America.<sup>1</sup> In 1923, she won *Poetry* magazine’s Guarantor’s Prize, whose other recipients include W.B. Yeats, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), and William Carlos Williams.

In 1929 Ridge was diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis and recurring bouts of illness left her semi-reclusive, decreasing her artistic output. During her career, Ridge published five books of poetry, including *Firehead*, an allegory of Sacco and Vanzetti’s execution. In the 1930s, a Guggenheim Fellowship enabled Ridge to travel to Paris, Beirut, Baghdad, Taos, and Mexico. She received the Shelley Memorial Award in 1934 and 1935. Although Ridge’s writing is not well known or studied in depth, when she died in 1941, her *New York Times* obituary eulogized her as one of America’s leading contemporary poets. Cary Nelson maintains that the critical practices of American literary culture during the Cold War helped create a severe cultural amnesia about the preceding generation of radical poets, of which Ridge was a prominent member.<sup>2</sup> Thus she became one of many casualties. While Ridge has long been an interesting footnote in the memoirs of writers as diverse as William Carlos Williams, Gorham Munson, Matthew Josephson, Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger, Harold Loeb, Kay Boyle, and Robert McAlmon, she has not received the scholarly attention she deserves. If we consider our current interests in the transnational character of



**Figure 1:** A photograph of poet Lola Ridge, taken by Esta Varez, published in ‘Playboy: a portfolio of art & satire’ (no. 1, 1919). Courtesy of the Bryn Mawr College Library Special Collections.

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both American and modernist studies, the work of Lola Ridge certainly demands more serious scrutiny.<sup>3</sup>

What interests me here is the urban character of Ridge’s poetics, which are exemplified in her first book *The Ghetto and Other Poems*. Published by the avant-garde house B.W. Huebsch, which had set up offices in lower Manhattan in 1906, *The Ghetto and Other Poems* joined company with Huebsch’s other important titles such as the first American edition of James Joyce’s *A Portrait*

of *the Artist as a Young Man* and D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*. "The Ghetto," the collection's title poem, first impressed readers when it was excerpted in the April 13, 1918 issue of *The New Republic* magazine.<sup>4</sup> A review of *The Ghetto and Other Poems*, written by one of Ridge's contemporaries—the poet and anthologist Louis Untermeyer—noted the centrality of urban space and the significance of Ridge's own immigrant status to her poetics:

*The Ghetto* is essentially a book of the city, of its sodden brutalities, its sudden beauties. It seems strange, when one considers the regiments of students of squalor and loveliness, that it has remained for one reared far from our chaotic centres to appraise most poignantly the life that runs through our crowded streets. Miss Ridge brings a fresh background to set off her sensitive evaluations; her early life in Australia has doubtless enabled her to draw the American city with such an unusual sense of perspective. . . . The city dominates this book: but the whole industrial world surges beneath it. . . . (1)

This "industrial world" surging beneath the city is a driving force behind Ridge's urban muse. *The Ghetto and Other Poems* is divided into groupings of verse beginning with "The Ghetto" and followed by sections entitled, "Manhattan Lights," "Labor," and "Accidentals." The long poem, "The Ghetto" offers a life-affirming narrative of communal activity and struggle. Other sections are darker glimpses into the colliding worlds of commerce, labor, and modernist identity. Ridge moves between the urban and industrial and the spiritual and symbolic. As a flaneuse (to use the "feminine" form), she wanders throughout the text in the shadow of modernity's terrible beauty—the urban spectacle, crowds, diversity, and everyday details of human struggle.<sup>5</sup> While *The Ghetto and Other Poems* is not exclusively a work of urban or immigrant literature, the mark of the immigrant flaneuse is nonetheless stamped sharply into its composition.

The flaneur is an urban creation and Lola Ridge's poems of windswept immigrant streets and the "[n]ebulous gold" of the city's "ephemeral glory" belong to a tradition of urban poetry whose long list of practitioners include Charles Baudelaire, T.S. Eliot, and Carl Sandburg. The London of T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" and Carl Sandburg's *Chicago Poems* are well known examples in modern American poetry of how male poets have written the city. Eliot's London is one of permanent decay, trivialized by the invasion of the alien and the new: "Madame Sosostriis, famous clairvoyante;" "unshaven" "Mr. Eugenidis, the Smyrna merchant;" the "Bradford millionaire" and his "silk hat;" "Mrs. Potter" and "her daughter" who "wash their feet in soda water." Sandburg's celebratory rendering of Chicago's laboring classes as they build the city with the aid of their "big shoulders" is strikingly different from Eliot's depictions of urban dwellers. Sandburg affirms his city's developing reputation as "Hog / Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with / Railroads and Freight Handler to

the Nation.” Like Sandburg’s Chicago, Ridge’s New York is filled with praise for the worker and delight for the new, but her city life is also tempered with a cautionary critique of Manhattan’s “unreal” elements.

Most noticeably, however, what distinguishes Ridge’s urban poetics from her male counterparts is the placement of herself at the heart of this new urbanity. A voice that dominates much of *The Ghetto and Other Poems* is that of the immigrant and female flaneur. If the flaneur is an invention of modern urbanism, Ridge’s flaneuse is a figure of early twentieth-century American modernism. She is a female artist who engages and critiques the modern city from her position as a new American. Ridge “plumbs the depths” of herself to express her artistic vision of urban life.<sup>6</sup> She strolls the streets of Manhattan, imagining a female presence within decidedly masculine spaces. For Ridge, the Jewish ghetto becomes “a cramped ova;” the Brooklyn Bridge—a distinctly masculine symbol—is transformed into an orgasmic “pythonesse.” She immerses herself in the artistic, social, and political pulse of lower Manhattan and thus becomes a flaneur for the new century, a transnational, urban, immigrant, *female* “botanizer of the asphalt”—to borrow Walter Benjamin’s description of the nineteenth-century European flaneur.

As Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson observes, “the flaneur [who] now walks abroad in many guises and in many texts . . . took *his* first steps in the streets of Paris early in the nineteenth century. It is scarcely accidental that the flaneur turns up in Paris directly [as] the city emerges from the Revolution into the Empire; a new regime; a new century; a new city” (22) [*italics added*]. Ridge’s first book records her reflections on a new life of art and freedom, as well as an understanding of the social dislocation created by the abrupt changes of “a new century” and “a new city.” Much of *The Ghetto and Other Poems* is devoted to the struggles of urban communities and the shock created by crowds, a changing infrastructure, and the newly built symbols of modernity, “drawing the charmed multitudes” and transforming urban life.<sup>7</sup> While Ridge may not be a flaneur in the nineteenth-century European sense, I contend that she is a new kind of flaneuse, an immigrant and female who envisions a contradictory metropolis full of hope and despair. While in certain respects she shares the distanced and alienated position of the European flaneur, the verse she creates embraces and celebrates urban diversity as it also admonishes and questions its many alienating forms and practices.

Since Walter Benjamin first drew attention to the flaneur in his work on the French poet Baudelaire, the flaneur has become a highly adaptable figure, and the act of flaneurie a highly adaptable category.<sup>8</sup> For example, Benjamin reminds us that Baudelaire’s consummate flaneur figure is the journalist-sketcher Constantine Guys, whose newspapers sketches of Parisian streets and cafes, anointed him the “painter of everyday life.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Lola Ridge’s Imagist snapshots of lower Manhattan’s immigrant enclaves make her the poet/flaneuse of modernist New York.<sup>10</sup> The highly visual prose feel of her verse is the equivalent of the urban sketch.

But is a female flaneur possible? Although Ridge's flaneuserie is a product of the shifting cultural and demographic landscape of early twentieth-century New York, any discussion of flaneurie must consider the mid-nineteenth century European milieu in which it originated. The flaneur figure was a *man* of leisure and of means, secure in his ability to walk the streets of Paris in solitary, unmolested pursuit. In a period of fixed gendered norms, Janet Wolff maintains that the female flaneur was "rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century" (45).

Importantly, the flaneur figure was associated with the man of letters, such as Baudelaire found in Guys.<sup>11</sup> Benjamin maintained that the arcade, as a place for leisurely browsing, helped produce flaneurie. It was the male figure, however, who browsed leisurely through the arcade stalls. Priscilla Ferguson points out that while nineteenth-century European women engaged in shopping—an activity associated with the public realm—their movements were still restricted and scrutinized. Unlike the ambling flaneur, who browsed rather than purchased, their shopping was also purposeful.<sup>12</sup> Countering such views, Elizabeth Wilson refuses to discount the presence of working-class women and middle-class female shoppers in nineteenth-century Paris and London; she argues that the impossibility of a female flaneur has been "overstated" (56).<sup>13</sup> Wilson contends that the rise of the department store, which employed women as workers, and arranged its space to accommodate the middle-class female shopper, signaled women's greater presence in the public spaces in which the flaneur cavorted.

Lola Ridge's flaneuse is formed in the twentieth century, a new age in which a new urban woman and urban writer exists. Thus Deborah Parsons' critique of the female flaneur with regard to twentieth-century women modernists is important. While cautious of the term's overuse, Parsons draws attention to the flaneur as an "increasingly expansive figure who represents a variety of 'wanderings', in terms of ambulation, nationality, gender, race, class and sexuality" (4). Rather than argue that previous feminist critics such as Wolff and Griselda Pollock are wrong about the impossibility of a flaneuse, she shapes her discussion around how female authors understood and represented the early twentieth-century city in a variety of different ways. Because women were becoming highly aware of themselves as "walkers and observers of the modernist city" (6), they begin to challenge "aesthetic, urban perception" as a strictly masculine purview.<sup>14</sup>

Lola Ridge's flaneuserie through the streets of lower Manhattan certainly created a new "urban perception" about the modernist city. Her immigrant experience shaped her vision and her aesthetic. In 1908 Ridge settled in New York's Greenwich Village, which from her arrival to the start of the First World War was the center of radical culture and social and intellectual life in the United States.<sup>15</sup> One of the numerous aesthetic projects that arose in this period was the little magazine *Others*. An influential journal founded by Alfred Kreymborg, it is one of three journals that Lola Ridge had a hand in editing during her early years in Greenwich Village.<sup>16</sup> The publication served as a literary launching pad not only for Ridge, but also for one of America's classic modernist poets, William Carlos

Williams. In her book *The Little Magazine Others and the Renovation of Modern American Poetry*, Suzanne Churchill describes the magazine’s eclecticism, noting that its interests extended beyond the publishing of “unbridled free verse” and the insistence on “technical innovation,” to endorsing “social rebellion and sexual transgression” (6). With feminism as a guiding principle, Churchill contends that modernism, however it was defined, “was vividly embodied in *Others*” (7). The magazine brought together “anarchist, communist, and socialist writers” like Ridge, Adolf Wolff and Sandburg. It also included “avant-garde artists such as Mina Loy, Man Ray, and Marsden Hartley . . . Nearly half the poets it published were women, and special issues showcased women and Spanish-American poets” (7). In fact, as Churchill notes, what made *Others* so forceful was its “spirited disregard of hierarchies, conventions, and canons,” thus allowing William Carlos Williams to describe the journal playfully as a “free running sewer” (8).

That Ridge would find a home with the *Others*’ poets makes sense. Unlike the other significant Greenwich Village journal, Margaret Anderson’s *Little Review*, which identified its aesthetics through transience and exile, *Others* contributors found inspiration in the local. The journal was inclusive in respect to modernist identity, which it found embodied in New York’s immigrants—particularly its Jews.<sup>17</sup> Not only was Ridge herself an immigrant; her empathy with the Jewish people had developed early. In a journal she kept during her final illness, Ridge recalled an admonition her mother had made to her long ago: “Jews are good people. You must be very nice to them” (quoted in Drake, 193). Thus, Ridge shared with the *Others*’ crowd an admiration for Jews and the communal practices they observed in their urban diasporas. As sociologist Christopher Mele explains in his study of Manhattan’s Lower East Side, Jewish communities were “[f]ormed from unique historic circumstances within their home countries, [and] Jewish immigrants’ efforts at community building were more intensive than those established by older ethnic groups. East European Jews sought to reproduce a semblance of the densely networked shtetl, or small village, life permanently left behind” (54). The larger Greenwich Village bohemia as well as the smaller *Others*’ crowd found in this Jewish neighborhood an example of a new world creation that included culture and politics, something with which Ridge, who must also have felt alien in her surroundings, found welcoming.

In her long poem, “The Ghetto,” Ridge identifies with an inspiring and “cramped” chaos found in Lower East Side Jewish life with its “wars, arts, discoveries, rebellions, travails, immolations, cataclysms, hates . . . (22).”<sup>18</sup> As participant, as poet observer, and as radical critic, Ridge takes her readers through the Jewish ghetto and through the crawling “undulant” streets of lower Manhattan in the shadow of its shape-shifting serpentine skyscrapers. Here she brings her new brand of flaneuserie into action as she composes her verses of urban life. Indeed, according to Christopher Mele, the Lower East Side had a long history of attracting radicals and bohemians. He observes: “Unlike the bourgeois dandies’ episodes on slumming, the bohemians sought to identify with and often mimic

the ‘spirit of the ghetto.’ As participants rather than spectators, bohemians found in the Lower East Side a place for authentic anti-bourgeois values” (75).<sup>19</sup>

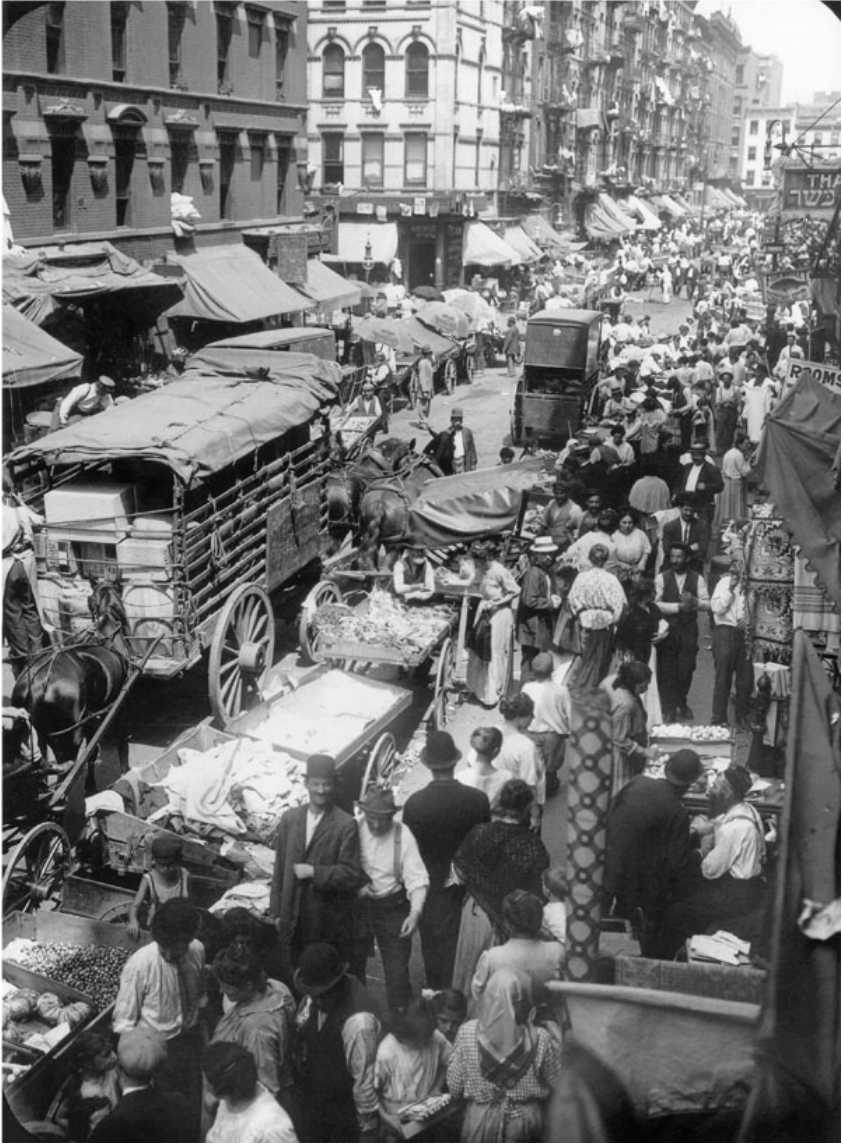
The radical bohemia in which Ridge immersed herself produced eclectic poetry magazines such as *Others*, but her work also appeared in more mainstream journals such as *The Dial* and *Poetry*. Yet at the same time her poetry was finding a home in these aesthetically focused reviews, she was contributing poems to left-leaning opinion magazines such as *The New Masses*, *The New Republic*, and later in her career *The Nation*. *The New Republic* printed a lengthy excerpt of “The Ghetto,” the first English-language modernist long poem on the subject of ghetto life to be published in the United States. The poem’s nine sections depict exterior as well as interior scenes of this new Jewish space. Ridge opens with a description of Hester Street with its heat, crowds, and stench. She asks her readers to gaze upon this central thoroughfare, which according to the 1910 census was the most densely populated street in America. From there the poet locates the poem’s speaker—Ridge as flaneuse—by shifting the voice to the first person. The “I,” who “rooms at Sodos,” goes out and meets “the sturdy Ghetto children” who “stammer in Yiddish” to her incomprehension. Ridge’s flaneuse traverses the outdoor markets—the immigrant Jewish ghetto’s twentieth-century equivalent of the nineteenth-century European arcade. Returning to her room, she absorbs the “sounds” of the ghetto. She completes her flaneuserie with a stroll past and glimpse into “dingy cafes” and meeting halls, and follows these by welcoming the erotic gestures of dusk as night descends upon “The Ghetto.”

From the poem’s opening stanza, the flaneuse conducts her long gaze upon the ghetto, beginning with the “cool inaccessible air” and “ponderous bulk” of Hester Street. As she ambles along the crowded streets she notices the bodies that “dangle from the fire escapes,” faces that “glimmer pallidly,” and “infants” that “suck at the air.” Ridge’s flaneuse engages in that most contemporary of urban pleasures, people watching. Yet she watches attuned to both a vibrant community in social formation—the “electric currents of life”—and an awareness of the grim realities of social dislocation and poverty—“The heat . . . / Nosing in the bodies overflow.”

Within the ghetto’s lively yet crowded atmosphere, Ridge emphasizes the activities of women. As an immigrant woman and artist Ridge empathizes with the struggle of other immigrant women desiring to remake themselves. She is fascinated by the Jewish *new* women “who wear their own hair” as much as she admires the “mothers waddling in and out” of the commercial spaces, where commerce and ritual collide. What is more, Ridge represents the women themselves partaking in and redefining flaneuserie as they traverse the densely populated ghetto streets “crowded like a float” and “bulging like a crazy quilt”:

Young women pass in groups  
 Converging to the forums and meeting halls,  
 Surging indomitable, slow  
 Through the gross underbrush of heat,





**Figure 2:** A view of Hester Street, 1910. Courtesy of the American Memory Project of the Library of Congress.

Their heads are uncovered to the stars,  
And they call to the young men and to one another  
With a free camaraderie  
Only their eyes are ancient and alone . . .

The nineteenth-century flaneur enjoyed the anonymity of the crowd. Ridge's representation of these crowds of immigrant women, with their heads "uncovered to the stars," shows her own fascination with a new urban freedom for women as well as the cultural breaches that this immigrant flaneuserie suggests. They surge "indomitable, slow," and engage in a "free camaraderie." The strolling of poet and Jewish new women mingle to suggest that clichéd but nonetheless important "melting pot" at the center of so much American writing of the period. Although different from the poet in heritage and in purpose, these young women signify an exhilarating new aspect of American life, squirming beneath the poet/flaneuse's touch as she surveys the congested streets of lower Manhattan, and Hester Street where "Bodies dangle from the fire escapes / Or sprawl over the stoops. . . ." <sup>20</sup>

Ridge's homage to these immigrant new women is not an isolated experience shared only by the foreign-born. Although unintentionally, Chicago-based reformer Jane Addams describes flaneuserie in her observation of what were largely native-born females, whom the nation's cities welcomed in record numbers as they escaped the destitution and boredom of rural towns, or the frightful prospect of unwanted marriage. As Addams notes in her discovery of this migratory phenomenon:

Never before in civilization have such numbers of young girls been suddenly released from the protection of the home and permitted to walk unattended upon city streets and to work under alien roofs. . . . As these overworked girls stream along the street the rest of us see only the self-conscious walk, the giggling speech, the preposterous clothing. And yet through the huge hat, with its wilderness of bedraggled feathers, the girl announces to the world that she is here . . . she states that she is ready to live, to take her place in the world (quoted in Wilson, 74). <sup>21</sup>

Ridge further records the immigrant new woman taking "her place in the world" by creating poetical sketches of young Jewish females, factory workers such as Sadie Sodos, "who stabs the piece-work with her bitter eye," is intellectually curious and "reads / Those books that have most unset thought." With Sadie, Ridge represents the modern girl who attends "a protest meeting on the Square" and takes a "Gentile lover." She also introduces her readers to other Jewish new women, Sarah and Anna, who "live on the floor above." Though "ill-clad," Sarah's mind is "hard and brilliant . . . like an acetylene torch." Anna is stylish; though "cheap," her clothes "are always in rhythm." She is also generous; "when the strike was on she gave half her pay." A daring modern girl like Sadie, Sarah "would share all things. . . . Even her lover." Ridge's attention to these Jewish new women in "the Ghetto" further establishes what Deborah Parsons contends are the "alternative metaphors" that modernist women writers created because of their increased presence as walkers and observers. As the "heavy surges of flesh"

of these young immigrant women “[b]reak over the pavements,” the poets finds traceable in their steps, the space she needs for herself—the immigrant artist.

It is not, however, just the presence of the women traveling in groups or those women mentioned by name. Under Ridge’s watchful eye, the entire ghetto becomes feminized space, which is articulated through one of the poem’s central metaphors. Ridge represents the Jewish ghetto as a “cramped ova.” It is teeming with life and this life is abundantly apparent on its streets, its passage-ways and in glimpses through its windows: “Life in the cramped ova / Tearing asunder its living cells . . . Wars, arts, discoveries, rebellions, travails, immolations, / Cataclysms, hates.” Despite the metaphor’s association with childbirth and mothering, Ridge’s flaneuserie draws attention to those urban spaces upon which women encroach: the street, the market, the sweatshop. They make “discoveries,” “arts” and “rebellions.” Yet even the mundane domestic spaces have their own visual power to attract the poet’s alien stroller. For example, Ridge describes the Jewish female’s practice of lighting Sabbath candles, which in this dense immigrant enclave creates an illuminated map of community. Taking pleasure in the cultural and domestic rituals of the other, Ridge notes the visual beauty of the lit shabbos candles as they frame communal practice. The “tenements,” which are linked in “endless prayer” through the “fine rays” of Sabbath candles, are comforting “coupling” lights in contrast to those that create a dislocating coldness along the edges of Manhattan.<sup>22</sup>

Later in the poem’s eighth section, when the “lights go out” in the ghetto’s commercial sector and the “stark trunks of factories / Melt into the drawn darkness,” the visual contrast between the domestic and commercial spaces blur. With “mothers waddling in and out,” picking up the debris left from a full day of selling “gewgaws” and “beauty pins,” “amethyst and jade,” the domestic spaces characteristically designed to represent ghetto women as bearers of tradition exist side by side with those spaces reserved for commerce. Just as Benjamin suggests that the flaneur is commodified by his commercial surroundings, Ridge’s flaneuse draws attention to Jewish women’s commercial roles.

Mothers waddling in and out,  
Making all things right—  
Picking up the slipped threads  
In Grand street at night—

Historians Elizabeth Ewen and Susan Glenn have documented the various ways in which immigrant Jewish women on the Lower East Side contributed to the family economy by taking in boarders or doing laundry. As Ewen notes, often one would find on the ghetto streets a conventional male peddler being assisted by a wife or daughter. Moreover, young women, who sought relief or had been fired from the sweatshop, employed peddling as an alternative means of income.<sup>23</sup> Thus Ridge characterizes the Lower East Side Jewish ghetto as a place of productivity in which women play a central part. She observes their es-

sential place in everyday activities. They oversee; they make “all things right.” The “slipped threads,” which remain at the end of a workday on Grand Street, are key ingredients to maintaining the community fabric—a “motley weave” threaded together by women.

This communal “fabric” that Ridge so keenly observes and admires in the Jewish “ghetto” is in fact best identified in the “great bazaar” of Grand Street, where one can find much more than “slipped threads.” Here Ridge’s immigrant flaneuse most resembles the arcade-strolling flaneur of nineteenth-century Europe as she creates poetic flourishes that draw attention to Grand Street’s active markets and the colorful array of goods continually on display there.<sup>24</sup> Between “the herded stalls / In dissolute array . . .” and the “strangely juxtaposed” papers, cans, and rags, which are “Flung / Like an ancient tapestry of motley weave,” Grand Street evolves into this urban immigrant enclave’s twentieth-century arcade. Activity is everywhere all the time—a vision of modern urban space, which first excited the nineteenth-century flaneur. Ridge’s flaneuse delights in the colors and objects that leap around as she points her visual lens to the “Olive hands and russet head, / Pickles red and coppery.” Each abstract image suggests commercial activity filtered and flickered through the flaneur’s delighted gaze: “Coral beads, blue beads / Beads of pearl and amber.” Cheap baubles, “bijoutry for chits” also soar off and assault the solitary stroller with “darting rays of violet.” With its commercial bustle, Grand Street invokes the city in “miniature,” which Benjamin attributed to the arcade (37). Ridge’s flaneuse finds in Grand Street’s arcade of “jumbled finery” the inspiration to make modernist collage. What is more, in the presence of women on the ghetto streets, she finds an opportunity to shape her own identity as immigrant artist and new woman in America. She becomes part of an alien yet invigorating “motley weave.”

Importantly, this “motley weave” makes the ghetto and its larger metropolitan surroundings a cultural haven for the poet/flaneuse to dissect. Ridge observes without bias and delights in the sensual and sonorous while also acknowledging what is rank and unruly. The “Ghetto” is cramped, but in its crampedness is life:

Life—  
 Pent, overflowing  
 Stoops and facades,  
 Jostling, pushing, contriving,  
 Seething as in a great vat . . .

The contradictions of ghetto life are meted out on the streets of this most crowded part of Manhattan. Ridge’s urban immigrant flaneuse finds herself at home there. Streets of “ponderous bulk,” with their “hot tide of flesh” prove captivating. The “herded stalls” with their “dissolute array,” the “dingy café” with walls of “mottled plaster” that “blen[d] in one tone with the old flesh” of the men who slump at the tables, all invite this urban stroller to spend her time unnoticed, yet thoughtfully engaged.

In "The Ghetto," Ridge attempts to recast flaneurie for the twentieth-century world in which women become urban walkers. "Mothers waddle in and out" and daughters express a "free camaraderie" on the ghetto streets. With "Manhattan Lights," the sequence of poems that follows "The Ghetto," Ridge questions what happens to the female walker once she leaves the crowded ghetto. The sequence begins with poems that describe the pleasures of looking, and Ridge's flaneuse adopts the classic flaneur's stance. Yet as the sequence continues, the poems shift from the beauty of the urban spectacle to the drabness of urban drudgery, revealing Ridge's penchant for exposing class dynamics.<sup>25</sup> Thus she negotiates between two views of the modernist city—enchantment and disappointment. She represents enchantment through brightness and newness: the skyscrapers with their "far-flung" neon signs attached like wayward limbs to their "graven and cold" towers. Through repetition of words and images that depict visual sensations, Ridge captures the constant stimulation evoked by a stroll through the thoroughfares of the modern metropolis. On the other hand, she represents disappointment through an expression of unwavering concern for her fellow immigrants and for others dislocated by enormous social and technological change.

Ridge makes these contradictions of life in the modernist city visible through the differing emotional responses revealed in "The Ghetto" and in the "Manhattan Lights" sequence. Like "the Ghetto," the "Manhattan Lights" poems have a fragmented snapshot quality. They evoke what George Simmel famously observed about the modern metropolis; it is experienced through "the rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of on-rushing impressions" (quoted in Charney, 279). The fragments of community recorded in "The Ghetto" mutate from the "electric currents of life" into "innumerable ions of light." The island of Manhattan—more specifically its grand thoroughfare Broadway—is characterized by "trillions of porcelain / Vases shattering." Ridge records her awe of the "Diaphanous gold / Veiling the Woolworth" building in the poem "Manhattan." In "Broadway," the world-renowned boulevard is likened to a serpentine seductress whose "hydra heads" are "poised" triumphantly "above the avenues." To sharpen the contrasts of modernist New York, in "Flotsam," she frames immigrant poverty and dislocation with imagery of "glittering" cafes and the "blinking yellow phosphorescent eyes" of the neon signs. In "Promenade," she describes the flaneuserie of wealthy, native-born women. Unlike those Jewish new women in whose "slow" movements Ridge finds new life, energy and "free camaraderie," here she presents an indifferent leisure class. "Imperious" women pass in "warm velvety surges;" their jewels "half weary of their glittering."<sup>26</sup>

In the "Manhattan Lights" sequence, Ridge discovers electrifying and awe-inspiring space, which is also alienating, dislocating and dangerous. Once she has left the communal world with which she identifies as both female and immigrant, she uses her flaneuserie to create poems of social critique. She enters the flaneur's classic masculine space to experience its delights, and to critique its excesses. The poems "Manhattan," "Broadway," "Flotsam," "Promenade,"



**Figure 3:** The Woolworth building at night, 1913. Courtesy of the American Memory Project of the Library of Congress.

“Spring” and “Bowery Afternoon” present an ambivalent critique of urban life. They are snapshots of modernity’s contradictory fragments, at once colorful and dull, eye-piercingly bright and obscurely menacing.

In “Manhattan” and “Broadway,” Ridge expresses the shock and awe of the city’s new vertical wonders. These poems attest to the significance of New York City’s vertical design as a defining moment in modern American culture. They also clue us in to the ways an immigrant female artist might feel as she

walks beneath a skyscraper for the first time. Ridge's arrival in New York City coincided with Manhattan Island's first great "modern" building boom. There were 166 skyscrapers erected in Manhattan between 1902 and 1908. Indeed by 1908 there were 366 such "towers" located in lower Manhattan alone.<sup>27</sup> Thus it is worth noting that the poetry and gender conventions being shattered in Ridge's Greenwich Village bohemia had been matched by the "architectural innovations" transforming how men and women experienced urban space in New York City.<sup>28</sup>

Ridge's efforts to document her experience of urban space were part of a developing aesthetic turn in modern American poetry. Early twentieth-century poets, male and female, were exploring "the skyscraper city as contradiction, instability, and challenge" (103). These writers, as John Timberman Newcomb maintains, perceived the "metropolitan grid as an arresting abstract pattern of lights and lines that rival[ed] the creations of nature," and pondered how to "balance this detached aesthetic perspective with emphatic connections with others" (103-104).<sup>29</sup> In "Manhattan" Ridge's vertical gaze is cast upon the "slender and stark" Woolworth building, as well as the Singer building with its "indolent idol's eye." Yet as alluring as these structures are, she also finds in them something sinister, and "insolent."

To "balance" her own perspective, Ridge exposes the pleasures and dangers of Manhattan street life. In "Broadway," Ridge evokes the nineteenth-century flaneur's gaze through imagery in which the avenue is compared to a seductress. "Out of her towers rampant," Broadway is an "unsubtle courtesan." The glittering avenue through "ambuscades of light" seduces the "charmed multitudes," which include the poet, "with the slow suction of her breath." In staging this seduction, Ridge addresses the new woman's desire to roam the streets in admiration of these modern wonders, while also sensing a lurking danger, the "eternal watchfulness" that is exceedingly a part of the modern city's gaze. One might, however, also characterize the "huge serpent" as she trails "her coruscating length / Over the night prostrate" as a symbol of the poet's own flaneuserie. The guiding yet "captive lights" lead her through the modern metropolis, which endures as a space of both possibility and distress. She desires to "know" more beyond the "shimmering nebulae," but what she learns offers little consolation. Broadway's spectacle attracts through its blinding "light."

If "Manhattan" and "Broadway" are explorations (and flaneuserie) of spatial and technological innovation, "Flotsam" addresses Ridge's concern for those immigrants and others who are displaced by the transforming technologies of modern urbanism. The poem is thus a stroll through two worlds. As Ridge becomes "a detective of street life," she critiques two poles of the modernist city.<sup>30</sup> The "crass rays" of café society are contrasted with "the dim-lit square" where homeless men and women, "the flotsam of the five oceans" sleep, dream, and feel the "quick, staccato" blows of a police "baton." In the fragmentary snapshot style through which Ridge described working-class Jewish New York, the poet introduces the "glittering . . . jeweled teeth" of New York night life only to abruptly shift focus to "slovenly figures" that are "huddled one to the other."

The shrill sounds and bright lights of Manhattan are distractions against the real urban din at that center of her critique of the bourgeois city.

So many and all so still . . .  
The fountain slobbering its stone basin  
Is louder than They

The stillness of the dispossessed is an important contrast to the scintillating urban spectacle with which Ridge opens the “Manhattan Lights” sequence. One cannot so easily forget these competing themes of isolation and abuse alongside Manhattan’s burgeoning skyline. Apparently while skyscrapers were increasing in size and number, so were the numbers of the homeless. A *New York Times* article published in 1911 noted that from 1907—the year Ridge arrived in America—to the article’s date, the city had seen a 50 percent increase in “vagrancy.”<sup>31</sup> Ridge’s visual lens documents the fragmentary mix of neon signs spurting their colors “rhythmically” in the “indigo darkness” with the “flotsam . . . on the raft of the world.” As in “The Ghetto,” Ridge identifies with the “other.” Her critique pushes through the surface glitter of metropolitan life to reveal its core. Yet as “The Ghetto” describes a place of constant work and enterprise despite its being “crowded like a float,” “Flotsam” explores lack amidst splendor and opulence. Indeed, Ridge fixes the struggles of the dispossessed into the minds of those who amble the neon thoroughfares seeking out “some adventurous night.” Whereas “Manhattan” and “Broadway” attest to the city’s power to attract the “multitudes,” “Flotsam” repels. As Ridge’s flaneuse probes the city’s surface she finds the “drab,” blurry, worn-through existence of its dispossessed.

That poems about Manhattan’s infamous Bowery should follow “Flotsam” in the sequence is not surprising given the trajectory of Ridge’s flaneuserie. The pleasures of looking with which the “Manhattan Lights” sequence begins later evoke a weariness of being in poems like “Spring” and “Bowery Afternoon.”<sup>32</sup> In “Spring,” this season of renewal is merely an extension of winter. The poet’s stroll along the “mean” streets requires her to dodge “puddles,” observe a child “who never plays,” and witness the “endless washing days” of women who have “eyes like vacant lots.” “Bowery Afternoon” mocks flaneuserie. It describes a neighborhood bathed in “deadly uniformity.” Like the desolate strangers that are flotsam “in the dim lit square,” a walk through the Bowery reveals “holes wherein life scratches.” There is no delight here and no sense of energy derived from the presence of passing strangers. Here what one sees is decaying and “drab”—“faces, facades, pawn-shops, / Second-hand clothing.” Life is “rancid” and deadness is met in the “eyes” of passers-by and glimpsed through the faintly lit “windows.” Indeed, the Bowery of Ridge’s era has been characteristically described as the city’s “premiere avenue of sinful transgression lined with saloons, drug dens, and flophouses frequented by sailors, criminals, thrill seekers, the hopeless” and other wayward souls (Mele, 45). Ridge’s snapshots record the neighborhood’s “special notoriety” as a red light district (Jackson, 72).<sup>33</sup> Women appear,



“flaunting” their “bosoms and posturing thighs” from “gaudy vestibules.” Ridge no doubt senses the irony in moving from the Jewish ghetto where the women provide communal sustenance, to the neighboring Bowery, where the female presence itself is a commodity.

This trapeze through the Bowery might be an apt metaphor for Lola Ridge’s reception in the annals of literary modernism. If one reads Ridge through the lens of the New Criticism whose formalist approach values primarily technique, her poems are imperfect—something of the streetwalker’s inelegant step too near to the promenades of high society. Yet it is precisely this unpolished aspect of her work that makes Ridge an interesting poet. The grittiness of her subjects, the visual flavor that she adds to her rough-hewn language are indeed compliments to the city she desired to write and to produce. Few other early twentieth-century female poets wrote the city with as much passion and commitment as Ridge. It is only a narrowly constructed post-war canon that has made a fetish out of detachment and estrangement and turned social engagement into a liability.

While the discovery of and the writing on forgotten female moderns may “no longer be in vogue as it once was” (Garrity 803), Ridge’s poetry and her flaneuserie are certainly in sync with the “new” modernist studies.<sup>34</sup> Her emigration from Australasia, interest in and critique of technology, and attention to visual culture, reveal Ridge’s complex poetic and personal identity. More to the point, it is Ridge’s presentation of her self as a flaneuse that should spark further interest in her life and work. While feminist critics such as Deborah Parsons and Elizabeth Wilson present cogent arguments about the British and continental flaneuse, in Ridge’s poems we find the American flaneuse, an immigrant artist who draws her inspiration from the streets and structures that put American modernism on the map. Ten years before Virginia Woolf hit the London pavement in search of a pencil, Lola Ridge set out on the streets of lower Manhattan to discover the “astounding, indestructible / Life of the Ghetto.”<sup>35</sup> Moreover, Ridge’s contradictory attitude about technology as evidenced in the “Manhattan Lights” sequence can certainly be found in the attitudes of contemporary flaneurs.<sup>36</sup> Lola Ridge produces a city of contradictions, one that “attracts and repels.” In between this attraction and repulsion are the “electric currents of life” with which, in her guise as immigrant flaneuse, she hopes to “entice” her reader.<sup>37</sup>

## Notes

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1. For a discussion of the little magazine’s role in shaping modernism see Jane Marek, *Women Editing Modernism: “Little” Magazines and Literary History* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1995); Mark Morrisson, *The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception, 1905-1920*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001); Adam McKible, *The Space and Place of Modernism: the Russian Revolution, Little Magazines, and New York* (New York:

Routledge, 2002), and Suzanne Churchill, *The Little Magazine Others and the Renovation of Modern American Poetry*.

2. See Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

3. Ridge has already begun to receive attention in a number of scholarly venues. For example, the New Zealand poet Michele Leggott documents Ridge's years spent in Australia and New Zealand—years which the poet herself described in her second collection, *Sun-Up and Other Poems* (1920). See "The First Life: A Chronology of Lola Ridge's Australasian Years:" a talk presented at BLUFF '06, Southland, New Zealand, 22 April 2006. ([www.nzpec.auckland.ac.nz](http://www.nzpec.auckland.ac.nz)). Cristanne Miller's "Tongues 'loosened in the melting pot': The Poets of *Others* and the Lower East Side" addresses Ridge's importance, along with the canonical female modernists Marianne Moore and Mina Loy, in the shaping of a new, immigrant-friendly aesthetic among New York City poets. My book *Women Poets on the Left: Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, and Margaret Walker* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001) discusses the important hand that both national and international leftist causes had in inspiring and creating American women's poetry during the modern period. Lola Ridge's artistry and activism are deeply felt in her early contributions as a new American poet. For a brief excerpt of "The Ghetto," see Berke, "Radical Moderns: American Women Poets on the Left," in *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections*, Bonnie K. Scott, Ed. (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

4. See Berke, *Women Poets on the Left*: 176, note 37.

5. The term "flaneuse," as I use it in this article, is simply the feminine form of flaneur, a word of French origin. The context for its use, however, revolves around the pioneering work of Griselda Pollock and Janet Wolff. Exploring the gender divide of the nineteenth century European art world, these authors questioned the possibility of a female flaneur. In the twenty plus years since this question first entered feminist critical practice, it has become de rigueur to use the term "flaneuse."

6. See the poem "Submerged" in *The Ghetto and Other Poems*.

7. "Broadway," *The Ghetto and Other Poems*.

8. See Keith Tester's introduction to *The Flaneur*.

9. See Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*.

10. Inspired by French Symbolist poetry, the Imagist movement under the guidance of Ezra Pound extolled the writing of succinct, concentrated verse in which an exact visual image made a total poetic statement. Imagism sought to make poetry analogous with sculpture. Ridge was hardly a characteristic Imagist. Rather she developed her own Imagist style, which she would abandon in her later work.

11. Griselda Pollock insists that even a well-regarded, nineteenth-century female artist such as Berthe Morisotte painted the separate spheres: the interior and domestic scenes rather than the sketches of nightlife and cityscapes created by her male counterparts. See *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

12. "The Flaneur on and off the Streets of Paris." In Keith Tester, Ed. *The Flaneur*.

13. See *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women*.

14. Janice Mouton points to Virginia Woolf's classic 1927 essay "Street Haunting," about her traipse through the streets of London in search of a pencil, as a shift in the imagining of the female flaneur. Although Woolf hits the London streets with a purpose, she manages to return home to record a series of "flashes" on urban life and its eccentricities, which clearly contain elements of flaneurie. See Mouton, "From Feminine Masquerade to Flaneuse: Agnes Varda's *Cleo and the City*" (*Cinema Journal* 40, Winter 2001).

15. So much has been written about this short-lived, fertile era in American culture, that historian Dee Garrison proclaims, "[w]ords seem too limited to express the mood of that brief explosion of challenge and exuberance before the war. Yet so impelling is the task, that, with sneers or cheers, many commentators have tried" (62). The radical journalists Max Eastman, John Reed, and Mary Heaton Vorse; poets Edna Millay, the Baroness Else von Lovringhaven, and e.e. cummings; the saloniere Mabel Dodge; novelists Floyd Dell and Theodore Dreiser; cartoonists Art Young and Robert Minor, and the painters John Sloan and Robert Henri are but a random selection of names which appear in the "sneers and cheers" penned by the numerous chroniclers of Greenwich Village bohemia. Yet, this Greenwich Village enclave was not just about personalities, or art, or politics but an amalgam of all things that suggested the possibility of a new life. Shedding the vestiges of a stultifying Victorian past and embracing modernity were its immediate goals.

16. As an organizer for the Francisco Ferrer Association, Ridge founded the journal *Modern School* and edited its first issue. She also edited the last several issues of *Others*, and for a time was the American editor of the international arts magazine *Broom*. She also served on the editorial board of the *New Masses*, which began to publish in the mid-twenties.

17. This discussion is further articulated in Cristanne Miller's article "Tongues 'loosened in the melting pot': The Poets of *Others* and the Lower East Side."

18. The word "ghetto" as used by Ridge in this early twentieth-century poem needs to be problematized. A word of uncertain origin, "ghetto" was first used in the sixteenth century to refer to the separate neighborhood in which the Jews of Venice lived. As historian Roberto Bonfil suggests,

Jewish ghetto life in Renaissance Italy was experienced as a "middle ground between unconditional acceptance and expulsion" (70-71). Thus the term's early usage may not have had the negative stigma that it began to develop in the twentieth century. Although ghettos were officially abolished in Western Europe in 1870, descriptions of ghettos are frequently mentioned in both Anglo and continental texts up through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. Ridge probably adopted the term as it was used by other writers whose works on ghetto life she was familiar, such as Anglo-Jewish author Israel Zangwill's autobiographical *Children of the Ghetto* (1892), and Hutchins Hapgood's journalistic expose, *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (1902).

19. Here Mele alludes to one of the first works of American journalism to discuss Jewish life on the Lower East Side. Hutchins Hapgood, whom Ridge knew through their mutual connection to the Ferrer Association, wrote a laudatory if somewhat sanitized expose of ghetto life in *Spirit of the Ghetto*.

20. An interesting contrast exists between Ridge—and by extension the *Others*' crowd—and earlier native-born American authors. Alfred Kazin's introduction to a 1996 reissue of Mike Gold's Lower East Side novel *Jews without Money* notes these remarks about America's new arrivals: "Henry James, born just off Washington Square, was astonished and repelled by the proliferation of Jews on streets he had known as a boy. He compared the Jews occupying their fire escapes in summer to monkeys in cages. . . . Henry Adams hated Jewish immigrants so much that he portrayed them on the pier as interlopers violating his 'Puritan and Revolutionary heritage.' They seemed less than human, 'snarling a weird Yiddish'" (1-2).

21. See Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth in the City Streets* (New York: Macmillan, 1909).

22. As I discuss with the poems in the "Manhattan Lights" section of *The Ghetto and Other Poems*, once outside the ghetto, Ridge locates a different urban aesthetic, which frames the city as spectacle lacking the warmth of community.

23. See Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985), and Susan A. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

24. As Benjamin writes, "The bazaar is the last hangout of the *flâneur*. If in the beginning the street had become an *intérieur* for him, now this *intérieur* turned into a street, and he roamed through the labyrinth of merchandise as he had once roamed through the labyrinth of the city. . . . The *flâneur* is someone abandoned in the crowd. In this he shares the situation of the commodity" (54, 55).

25. Two poems from the collection, "Frank Little at Calvary," about the lynching of an IWW organizer, and "Lullaby," about "an incident of the East St. Louis Race Riots, when some white women flung a living colored baby into the heart of a blazing fire" (81), are but two examples of Ridge's attempt to use themes of labor unrest and social justice to problematize modernist poetics. See Berke, *Women Poets on the Left: Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, Margaret Walker*.

26. Since one of this article's subjects is the *flâneur*, it is worth noting the *American Heritage Dictionary* definition of promenade: (n.) "a leisurely walk, especially one taken in a public place as a social activity. . ." (1046).

27. See Mona Domash, *Invented Cities: the Creation of Landscape in Nineteenth-Century New York and Boston* (New Haven: Yale University Press) 1996: 78-80.

28. See Churchill, 17

29. See Newcomb, "The Footprint of the Twentieth Century: American Skyscrapers and Modernist Poems."

30. As Rob Shields comments, "Walter Benjamin casts the *flâneur*, or stroller, as a detective of street life. He . . . is more than a neutral onlooker or a credulous gawker" (61).

31. "More Vagrancy Here than Ever Before." *New York Times* 1857—Current File :// May 15, 1911. ProQuest Historical Newspapers. *The New York Times* (1851-2009). The article details the rise in the numbers of homeless "men" and the rise in applications for relief and for city run "lodging house shelters." Historian Kenneth Kusmer notes that specific numbers pertaining to homelessness in turn of the twentieth-century America are difficult to calculate. Yet at the state and local level, "[s]tatistics on arrests and incarcerations for vagrancy, lodgings in police stations . . . and relief of vagrants in almshouses all provide insights into the nature of homelessness" in that particular historical moment (99). (See *Down and Out on the Road: The Homeless in American History*).

32. Ridge's vision of spring is different from her fellow *Others* contributor William Carlos Williams'. His "Spring and All" is a salute to the coming life of the spring season with "the reddish / purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy / stuff" (24). For Williams, while the arrival of spring is painfully slow, the anticipation of its arrival is celebrated.

33. For a brief history of the Bowery neighborhood see Kenneth Jackson, "The Bowery: from Residential Street to Skid Row," in Beard. As Janet Wolff and others have argued, a commercial sex zone such as the Bowery would obviate its possibility as a place of *flâneuse*. No "respectable" woman would dare walk there. Nonetheless, it can be argued that Ridge's vivid, visually charged impression of the district suggests the *flâneuse*'s symbolic presence.

34. See for example, Mao and Walkowitz, "The New Modernist Studies." *PMLA*, 123.3, 2008: 737-748.

35. See note 14.

36. See for example, Michael Sorkin's recent homage to Jane Jacobs, *Twenty Minutes in Manhattan*. Reaktion Books, London 2009.

37. In the book's dedication, which is printed below, Ridge speaks "to the American people" on behalf of her fellow immigrants. She asks for acceptance by suggesting that what defines her may not be so easy to translate:

TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE  
Will you feast with me, American People?  
But what have I that shall seem good to you!

On my board are bitter apples  
And honey served on thorns,  
And in my flagons fluid iron,  
Hot from the crucibles.

How should such fare entice you!

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