

Reading Home Cultures Through Books

Edited by Kirsti Salmi-Niklander and
Marija Dalbello

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Chapter 1

Immigrants being at home in libraries

How the immigrants brought their home to
the New York Public Library

Marija Dalbello

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1 Immigrants being at home in libraries

How the immigrants brought their home to the New York Public Library

Marija Dalbello

The New York metropolitan area has been a place upon which generations of immigrants and exiles have been “prospecting for a future home – forever looking at alien land as land that could conceivably become [theirs]” (Aciman 1999: 13). This chapter situates a genealogy of belonging and home for immigrants in New York City by focusing on the activities of the New York Public Library (NYPL) in the first two decades of the twentieth century. The shaping of citizenship through literacy activities and the services for immigrants was an imperative at the core of the melting-pot ideology shaping the American assimilation effort. The sanctioned versions of American citizenship involved domesticated, literate immigrants and the library as a place of belonging. These models of belonging were shaped by immigrant/library interactions around material culture of reading spaces and books—as liminal places of the immigrants’ engagement with the Library.

The spatial syntax of the city that involves a broad topography of parks, streets, and neighborhoods includes libraries as contact zones for the manifestation of “home,” the places of belonging, familiarity, and comfort among many urban public spaces that one may inhabit. Those spaces carry an “essence of the notion of home” and being at home where “an entire past comes to dwell in a new house” by means of imagination and thought (Bachelard [1958] 1994: 5). They allow for the creation of the “spatial stories” and “itineraries” that organize the everyday life of individuals and the city as an inhabited world (de Certeau 1984: 115).

Library services for immigrants during the Progressive era in American history

Being at home in libraries is tied to a long history of library services for immigrants, which were established during the peak migration from Europe to America at the turn of the twentieth century when the libraries welcomed the second-wave settler immigrants (Dalbello 2017: 29). The emergent services for immigrant communities were discussed at the time in *The Library Journal*, *Public Libraries*, and the *Bulletin of the American Library Association* including the testimonials from librarians nationwide about their work with immigrants. Some advocated for inclusion of materials in the

languages of the users within an Americanization program. The “modern library principle” of serving communities with translations of English and American authors in their native tongue prompted questions in the media space such as, “Why Should American Citizens be Taxed to Print and Buy Books in a Foreign Language for the Entertainment of Persons Supposed to be Citizens in the Rough?” (Gaillard 1903: 67).¹ The nature of desired relationship between immigrants’ literacy and the public library was exemplified by a discussion of the so-called “East Side reading” (referring to the Lower East Side of Manhattan) that was characterized by a distinction between the “older school” and “the modern school” readers. For the former, the librarians would be tasked “to get them away from their serious ideas” (and their home-language reading) and to “provide books which give American ideas and ideals” in their language (Gaillard 1904: 84–5). The immigrant readers were often a puzzling presence for the librarians. The “natural timidity of foreigners” in the library, “apt to be awed” by the features of library spaces and their “modesty in making demands” librarians partly attributed to their former habituation in “despotic” regimes (Hrbek 1910: 102). Between 1903 and 1910, the discussion of “how to provide services to immigrant communities” was “advancing beyond the provision of books either in English or in other languages,” to the expansion of services for circulating materials to foreign-born populations (Novotny 2003: 345). In the address at the 1916 Asbury Park library conference, one library leader emphasized the importance of libraries in opening a door to American life for the immigrants aspiring to citizenship. These aspirations offered the justification for creating the services for the immigrant populations and making them into citizens. He built his speech from testimonials of librarians who worked with the immigrants that allowed him to identify the immigrants’ subject positions, as in this excerpt of an interaction between an immigrant and a librarian: “‘Before we had these books, our evenings were like nights in a jail,’ said an Italian in a hill town of Massachusetts. ‘You mean that I can take these books home? You trust me?’ asked a poor fellow of a Chicago librarian. ‘If I tell that in Russia, they no belief me’” (Carr 1916: 152). By describing a mixture of the immigrants’ desire for books alongside their “awe” of the library, John Foster Carr justified the ethos of librarians’ Americanization activism. That attitude was a mixture of “sympathy” (helping turn immigrants into democratic citizens) and “fear” (of failing to domesticate them) (Novotny 2003: 343).

At the start of the twentieth century, the discourse and material practices of immigrant/library interactions were guided by an ideology aimed at migrant labor that shaped the position of the library leaders and the mission of libraries. The period between the “protest of the railroad workers in 1877, to the final repression of the Industrial Workers of the World in 1917” placed not only politicians and businessmen but also library leaders in a defensive position—at that time, “most chief librarians insisted [that it] was the librarians’ job to provide the quality literature that would counteract the dangerous ignorance of the workers” (Garrison 1979: 43, 45).

Instead of expressing direct fears of the rebellious labor or poverty, they created the reading places open for the immigrants to be safety valves for expression and a social machine for their domestication.

The library as a replacement home and “citizenship machine”

In the NYPL context, the library services established for immigrants in the early twentieth century included the provision of books in the languages of the foreign-born populations and citizenship services, the outreach to immigrant communities through a system of branch libraries and distribution of books within a network of places across the boroughs. For example, a large traveling library system operating from the central branch was known as the Travelling Libraries from 1901, and later, the Extension Division grew to 800 individual points within a decade (*Bulletin* 1913: 162). The Travelling Libraries served factories, hospitals, prisons, workhouses, churches, and educational settings including Sunday schools, elementary and high schools as well as army posts, merchant marine vessels, individual homes. Services to immigrants were integrated into the network of Travelling Libraries and the NYPL branches.

These NYPL services to immigrants had an enduring impact for over a century and adapted to serve the newly arriving immigrant groups and established ethnic communities. The NYPL still offers “Immigrant Services” for “most recent immigrants” through (1) free programs in the local library branches “related to work and life skills development as well as cultural and recreational presentations through local partnerships, volunteers, or contracted performers for people of all ages”; (2) resources and services for non-English speakers including language classes to learn and improve English, legal assistance for citizenship; and (3) World Languages collections that “serve and reflect the local immigrant community.” The website presents the NYPL as a site welcoming and celebrating the City’s multicultural diversity with this statement:

There are an estimated 8.5 million people living in New York City, and approximately 37% of that population—over three million people—are born outside of the United States. Approximately 6-in-10 New Yorkers are immigrants or the children of immigrants. The Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island—the three boroughs served by The New York Public Library—are home to one-third of the city’s immigrant population.²

The cosmopolitan identities of immigrants are reflected in NYPL artifacts such as the World Languages Collection (WLC).³ The citizenship services include the English language as a second language (ESOL), resources for immigrants seeking legal help, and virtual citizenship classes and programs. Information for immigrant families and non-citizen parents concerned with deportation is not limited to the NYPL; they are now standard services in public libraries across the United States.⁴

The history of library services for immigrants offered in the Metropolitan area was started in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.⁵ A number of independent free public libraries established throughout New York City in the last quarter of the nineteenth century through philanthropic efforts were meant to exert a “civilizing and uplifting influence upon the masses,” be “a neutralizer of radical ideas,” and provide means for the lower classes to educate themselves (Dain 1972: 29). For example, the Aguilar Free Library, founded in 1886, served mostly immigrant, Jewish and working-class “book-starved public” with four branches on the Lower East Side of Manhattan when it was consolidated in the NYPL system in 1903.⁶ This consolidation of a system of free circulating libraries and the incorporation of the NYPL as a non-circulating reference and research library in 1895 was continued in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Expansion was propelled in 1901 by Andrew Carnegie’s gift for construction of 65 library branches across greater New York.⁷

According to the conventional library history of that period, “the masses of immigrants, many non-English speaking, were generally too poor, too timid, too sectarian, or too ignorant of urban life to initiate large public institutions, though they did form their own organizations, sometimes with small libraries” (Dain 1972: 29). Librarians also thought that southern and eastern European immigrants, “especially those espousing radical ‘foreign’ ideologies—communism, socialism, anarchism—[would] be uninterested in public libraries, a miscalculation, as experience proved” (Dain 1972: 28, 29). They entered immigrant neighborhoods:

Librarians in New York and elsewhere, viewing themselves as active agents in the assimilation of the immigrants, considered the situation an opportunity. They deliberately planned new branches in the centers of foreign population and eventually launched special programs for the inhabitants ... the children and young people from immigrant families crowded into the libraries. ... These neighborhood libraries, with their pictures and plants, quiet and gentility, offered a haven to students and workers eager for knowledge and advancement, living in dark, congested tenements where mother and children often labored all day at cigar making or sewing and where there was no money for books or any other luxuries. This was particularly true on the Lower East Side, where the Slavic Jewish immigrants lived when they arrived.

(Dain 1972: 289)

Furthermore, the library leaders shared with the general public the perception and concern about the immigrants’ literacy, which were directed particularly at immigrants from rural backgrounds and Southern Europe. However, according to the official data, nearly 70 percent of all the immigrants arriving in the early twentieth century were literate (Dalbello 2017: 29). The libraries were intended to be places to assimilate immigrants, as machines for citizenship and engines for literacy. These perceptions set the stage for understanding how the middle-class librarians imagined the places

for the new immigrants settling in the City at the start of the twentieth century. The official publications originating from the NYPL convey an active circulation of books in the branches serving immigrant neighborhoods and those being brought to factories and places of work through the Travelling Libraries program. The Library home that was created by the reformers for the edification and betterment of immigrants overlapped with the provisional tenement homes where immigrants lived their realities as laborers.

“Immigrants being at home in libraries”—their presence and silences in the record

An analysis of the official publications, the *Handbook of the New York Public Library* (further: *Handbook*) (1901–1921) and the *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* (further: *Bulletin*) (1897–1920), revealed an institutional machine with meticulous record keeping. In interpreting thousands of pages that documented the activities of the NYPL in this period, I combined the interpretation of individual reports with the contextual searches of the digitized volumes, focusing on terms related to home and migration.⁸ The “index test” logged the presence of particular words to reveal their “rhetorical character” in the institutional records (Schwartz-Shea 2014: 131). This technique aided a strategic reading that revealed structures of documentation where the absences in the record demonstrated the “silences that enter in the production of history” (Trouillot [1995] 2015: xii). The terms that revealed the immigrant/library interactions within a broader library discourse were represented by these concepts: “foreign,” “home,” and “(im)migrant(s)” and its cognate “alien(s).” (Immigrants were then also referred to as “aliens” in less hospitable connotations of population control and eugenics.) The NYPL’s discourse of home and migration is discussed in the next three sections organized around these concepts.

Situating foreign-language collections and readers—Searches for “foreign” in NYPL reports

Searches in the *Bulletin* and the *Handbook* retrieved the instances of the word “foreign” (2,942 and 14, respectively) in reports about the library programs, collections, and circulation statistics (in references to non-English materials that encompassed services to immigrants). Based on the searches, the four thematic groupings discussed next include: collecting books in “foreign” languages; teaching “foreign” populations; reaching “foreign” language readers and communities; and, making the library branches contact grounds in “foreign” neighborhoods.

Collecting books in “foreign” languages

The use or collecting of works in “foreign” languages in the Library branches and within the Travelling Libraries program comprised a bulk of references

to “foreign”-ness in the official records. Typically, the *Bulletin* for 1910 (151) claims that foreign titles were at five percent of all “home” circulations across the 33 branches of the NYPL, with the Travelling Libraries program comprising less than two percent of the overall number in over a million titles they circulated that year.⁹ The books in foreign languages circulated in the inter-branch loan system were predominantly in German. Other languages included French, Italian, Spanish, Hungarian, and Russian, Danish, Latin, Swedish, Finnish, Polish, Greek, Yiddish, Hebrew, Slovak, Bohemian, Modern Greek, Arabic, and Dutch (1910: 111). The annual report further notes a growth of the German American collection through donated volumes and pamphlets (1910: 101).¹⁰ The reading “priority” in these languages situated the collections and their “homeliness” in the city neighborhoods (Malpas 2006a: 36, 76).

By contrast to neighborhood branches, the foreign language materials obtained through purchases, gifts, and exchanges worldwide were highlighted in the NYPL acquisition reports in the non-circulating reference collection, in the Hebrew, Slavonic, and Oriental Divisions. These collections were geared to researchers and specialists rather than the “home” languages of New Yorkers. In reference to the uses of the Slavonic Division collection, the *Bulletin* (1919) offers this framing of the priority reading:

In addition to the usual type of student and writer on Slavonic matters, the collection was used by workers who are educating the immigrant Russian masses in this city and its vicinity. To the journalist the Division could offer but little, for the reason that the current literary output of Slavonic Europe still remained practically beyond the reach of the Library.

(1919: 133–34)

An immigrant (non-English speaker) as user of resources in their native Slavonic language would be accidental and untypical—by contrast to a “student and writer on Slavonic matters,” or a “journalist,” and all “workers who are educating the immigrant Russian masses in this city and its vicinity” (*Bulletin* 1919: 133). The literacy of the “Russian masses” in their “home” language in this construction shows that immigrants were primarily imagined within a frame defined by their quest for citizenship, their need to be educated to become English language readers. The frame for foreign-language collections being used by non-English language readers constructed collections as bridges for these readers becoming English readers.

Teaching “foreign” populations

The “foreign” titles that reached immigrant communities and working-class readers were viewed through readers’ problematic literacy that required intervention by the middle-class professionals—the teachers and the librarians. In working with immigrants, the teachers engaged the services of the librarians; the primary role of the librarians supporting teachers was in supplying

books in English. The City children's use of the NYPL was primarily through English language materials. However, teachers were also learning about the operation of other educational systems from which the immigrants arrived. For example, in the *Bulletin* for 1910, the "foreign" School Reference Works included lists of "Recent Books of Interest to Teachers" that were distributed to support teaching in the city with "the best educational works published in France, Germany, and Italy, and exceptional books from Hungary, Bohemia, Poland, Argentina, Chile, and Spain,"¹¹ noting that "these foreign books are used to a slight extent, but they are purchased for the exceptional student of larger educational movements" (1910: 115–16).

Reaching "foreign" language readers and communities

The clusters of non-English readers can be mapped to the City's immigrant neighborhoods with significant foreign-born populations and their established ethnic communities by identifying the library branches with the highest numbers of foreign-title circulations. In the circulation records of the branches, the books were marked as "books for home use" or "withdrawn for vacation reading"; in the column specifying "foreign" circulation they were classified within sciences, arts, philosophy, and religion (*Bulletin* for 1910: Tables IV–VI, 151–53). For example, the German-title books intended for home use in the Ottendorfer branch in East Village were overwhelmingly in the category of fiction (popular titles), history, biography, travel, literature (referring to literary works), periodicals, sciences, arts, philosophy, and religion categories (*Bulletin* 1910: 152). In 1909, the highest overall circulation of the foreign-language titles was reported in the Ottendorfer, Rivington Street, Yorkville, Webster, Seward (East Broadway), and Tompkins Square branches.¹² These branches were in the East Village or Lower East Side with high concentrations of immigrant readers. While the figures refer to books, by implication they also refer to the readers within these neighborhoods. In 2021, the Ottendorfer branch has a rarefied presence in the architecture of East Village as an enduring material trace of once bustling German-speaking neighborhood, signaled by its name, inscribed on a scroll above the Ottendorfer branch entrance reading, "Freie Bibliothek u. Lesehalle."

In addition to reporting "foreign" circulations in the branches in the neighborhoods, the Circulation Department distributed Lists of Books for Adults that were available in the branches. The "Bohemian book list," "Polish book list," "Italian book list," "Books for Foreigners Learning English," and the "Fairy Tales for Grown-up readers" were available in the branches alongside the reading list titled, "Wanderers and Vagabonds," which carries an ironic resonance with the adult immigrant readers (*Bulletin* 1917: 911).

Making the library branches contact grounds in "foreign" neighborhoods

The librarian Anne Carroll Moore reports on her work with children and in children's rooms. She emphasized the training of children's librarians,

the “study of each branch in relation to its neighborhood and for a very practical study of its book collections,” and mastering “variations in reference and reading-room work, story telling and club work, the decoration of children’s rooms [as] subjects for observation and study” (*Bulletin* 1910: 121). Exemplifying work with immigrant groups, the provision of children’s books in foreign languages involved native librarians and the representatives of the communities. Discussions of children’s books in foreign languages could be prompted, for instance, by a talk in the Webster branch in March 1909 “by a Bohemian lady,” accompanied by an exhibit of (children’s) books in Bohemian. The *Bulletin* refers to “similar accounts in the Hungarian, Russian and Polish, and German books for children” accompanied by the lists of recommendations for purchase “in districts where these languages predominate” (1910: 120–21). The involvement of children and the creation of bridges to the communities within the neighborhoods was not only prompted by expanding the scope of their reading in their “home” languages but by hosting talks and events as a site for immigrant/library interactions. Examples include well-attended events such as the theatrical performance of “Hamlet” given under the auspices of the Richmond Hill House with a cast of Italian boys” in the Hudson Park branch, or a concert and a recital given by “the people of the neighborhood” (*Bulletin* 1910: 138–39). Further, the *Bulletin* notes the fortnightly meetings of the Bohemian club Slavia or the Hungarian American Social Circle (*Bulletin* 1910: 133–34).¹³ These activities revealed the immigrant communities being hosted in the branch libraries. Those were the same branches recording the highest circulation of foreign-language books in the NYPL annual reports. A liminal ground for incidental contacts between the Library branches and the displays of community identity in the immigrant neighborhoods also provided bridges for individuals’ exit from the “foreign”-ness and their permanent entry into the mainstream society by making home in the English language. Thus, the NYPL *Handbook* for 1916 notes that “many classes of foreigners learning English meet regularly” in the Central Building and the branch libraries in other parts of the Boroughs of Manhattan (1916: 33, 59–61, 62). Combining the conventional reading with the searches to track the rhetorical incidence of “foreign” revealed four main points of attention in the NYPL institutional vision—oriented to its collections, teaching “foreign” populations, readers, and communities, and building contact zones in the neighborhoods as bridges to immigrants’ domestication.

Situating libraries as institutional home—Searches for “home” in the NYPL reports

A global search for “home” in the *Bulletin* and the *Handbook* (with 2,616 and 15 instances of the word, respectively) revealed a literal meaning that situated the word “home” in the names of public homes for those who are destitute and homeless, needing refuge, signaling replacement homes in conditions of social displacement, often directly associated with specific

immigrant groups and their poverty, homelessness, temporary home, or prison “home”—exemplified in the name of the Women’s Prison Society and Home (*Bulletin* 1901: 420–21) as a double reference to being secure for the society to be secure.¹⁴

Rhetorically, a more hospitable meaning of “home” occurs in the phrases such as “one million books lent for home use” through the Circulation Department (listed in the NYPL *Handbook* for 1916, 74) that echoes the monthly and annual reports in the *Bulletin*. The “home use” through the Travelling Libraries program and the heading “Home libraries are booming!” (*Bulletin* 1904: 505–6) references the vibrant outreach program that delivered books to private homes for reading and study groups. The addresses and names of individuals whose homes served as reading rooms are noted in the *Bulletin*, alongside books sent to “several camps and vacation homes” presumably for summer reading (1905: 420). The “home reading” and books for “home use” meant procurement and proximity “within some reasonable distance of their residences” (*Bulletin* 1897: 23, 24).

These NYPL publications include references to home use of de-accessioned books and the annual reports on net losses from open shelves in the branches. Book theft was diplomatically referred to as “loss from open shelves,” alongside instructions for the staff “to exercise special vigilance in the detection of theft and [that] several thieves have been caught and punished” (*Bulletin* 1904: 489). This formulation points to the limit of the Library’s institutional position with regard to the transgressive interactions of the users taking books home.

Situating immigrants as users of libraries—Searches for “-migrant-,” “alien-” in the NYPL reports

Despite the NYPL’s totemic status as a welcoming place in New York City during the period of peak migration, the searches for the word “alien(s)” revealed no association to the library services (among the 38 instances retrieved).¹⁵ Even more surprisingly, the root “-migrant-” occurs only 89 times, mostly captured in the wording of the names of immigrant societies, schools, and charities served by the Library’s outreach programs. Despite the evidence that the NYPL directed activities to immigrants, this discursive silence in the official records and the rhetorical absence of immigrant users is in contrast to the circulation reports in which the “foreign” languages and their “home” users are hyper-visible.

The generic and specific references to immigrants appear only a few times. For example, the *Bulletin* for 1916 includes two references to immigrant users in its report by the Reference Department. One refers to “an immigrant who is trying to lay the foundations of his education” and the other to “educating the immigrant Russian masses” (1916: 213), in which the same unspecifiable Immigrant User reading in their home language appears in the context self-fashioning through library use and the library supporting education programs in NYC.

The reports of the Travelling Libraries programs refer to pockets of immigrant groups such as in an example of distributing “English history prints for the immigrants at Ellis Island” (*Bulletin* 1913: 162). Or, when the *Bulletin* for 1910 notes the circulation of the worn-out books through the NYPL’s Travelling Libraries program to “Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society, 229 East Broadway” (1913: 164) and the elusive and short-lived program at Ellis Island immigration station between 1909 and 1921 and the delivery of the NYPL books to this station in a special book crate (Dalbello 2017). The bibliographies listing documents from public charities and hospitals are another category of incidence in these reports, in which the immigrants were associated with pauperism, incarceration, correctional institutions, missions, and the immigrant and emigrant societies.¹⁶ Descriptions of cooperative work with literary and education societies and clubs in the library branches included the programs for “the protection and education of immigrants” (*Bulletin* 1913: 183), emphasizing the fragility of the “home state” for immigrants.

In sum, reading of the corpus of the *Bulletin* and the *Handbook* in the period from 1897 through 1921 revealed the rhetorical presences and silences in the institutional discourse. Captured in these specific official publications, a general framework for immigrant/library interactions shows the Library as a social mechanism by which librarians created contact zones for Americanization through outreach and branch use. The aspirational social environment within the NYPL was integral to the process by which the libraries were being fashioned “into friendly, social places—places where one went for advice and a smiling face as much as for the companionship of a good book” (Novotny 2003: 346). How these places and settings were “subject to processes of appropriation as home-like” (Boccagni 2017: 9) depended on the material culture within the NYPL.

The physicality of libraries as homes and placemaking in libraries

This section focuses on the ideological staging of library as a replacement home through the physicality of library spaces and the representations of readers’ presence in those spaces recorded in the library reports, the imagery drawing from archival scrapbooks, social photography, and in descriptive accounts that revealed the multiplicity of “home” in space, time, and representations.

Home is located in space, but it is not necessarily a fixed space ... it need not be a large space, but space there must be, for home starts by bringing some space under control ... A home is not only a space, it also has some structure in time; and because it is for people who are living in that time and space, it has aesthetic and moral dimensions.

(Mary Douglas 1991: 289; quoted in Boccagni 2017: 5)

In this section, “home, as a discursive resource [that is] potentially instrumental to all sorts of political agendas” (Boccagni 2017: xxvii), will be

interpreted from the images and other representation that manifest the ideological staging of the NYPL in the public debate on immigration. The process of “homing” among the immigrant populations situates the library as “a source of attachments, desires, needs, and dilemmas,” a “migration-home nexus,” and a form of meaning-making by which immigrants in the “here-and-now” were managing a “distance between real and aspired homes” (Bocagni 2017: xix–xxi). Within the immigrant neighborhoods, the NYPL provided numerous opportunities for a “homing” experience in institutional settings by creating aspirational spaces, images, and attachments essential in the process of becoming American, and disguises of Americanization through cultural objects aimed at a moral uplift of individuals and immigrants in general.

The ideological staging of the library as home—NYPL institutional position

The design of the NYPL reading spaces in the official photography of branches and in the official reports conveys an extraordinary level of detail about their physicality, reflecting the reformist era librarians’ concrete and factualist presentation. For example, the *Bulletin* for 1909 details that the Hudson Park building was painted throughout, that the Jackson Square branch installed a new heating plant, and that the Aguilar branch installed extensive new shelving, remodeling the children’s rooms (1909: 141). The *Bulletin* reports focused in part on buildings, with detailed floor plans and elevations, blueprints marking furniture arrangements in reading rooms, with functionalist explanations of their design and detailed description of artwork, and decorations alongside statistical circulation reports.

The sensorial spaces that emerge from the extensive documentation were the reading rooms on rooftops, first introduced in summer 1905 in the Rivington Street branch. Described in the *Bulletin* for 1910, a roof reading room was “forty feet square [and] it proved so popular, 7483 readers using it during the summer of 1905, that similar accommodations were called for in four other buildings located in crowded districts” (1910: 102–3).¹⁷ One of them was in the Seward Park branch on East Broadway, the successor of the Aguilar Free Library, that was newly opened in late 1909 through a Carnegie gift (1910: 103) and was situated in a radical immigrant working-class neighborhood. A series of images depicting the Seward Park branch convey the sensory dimensions of these spaces. The *Handbook* for 1916 includes images of the branch exterior, floor plans including one for the rooftop open-air reading room with 16 desks and awning drawn in as well as a photograph, a reading space where we can observe the readers (1916: 68–70). The photograph titled, “Seward Park Roof reading room” shows a group of absorbed readers seated at one table—a young woman or a girl, a man, and two boys and another group at the adjacent table (Figure 1.1). The awning frames this scene and captures the New York *sfumato* skyline.



Figure 1.1 “Seward Park Roof reading room” (ca. 1910b).

Source: From The New York Public Library.

This image has a luxuriously urban feel, conveying spaciousness and comfort through tables, chairs, reading material, a boxwood fence, and a balustrade and awning framing the view. The readers’ relaxed postures, likely posed, convey representability.

Other images are technical and documentary. For example, “Seward Park Children in Library” (1910a) (Figure 1.2) captures the children’s circulation desk and the work process in the branch.

From the vantage point the viewer shares with the photographer, the women librarians seated on *Thonet* chairs are turned away from the camera and facing a crowd of children, the circulation desk between them. The slightly claustrophobic feeling is conveyed by the structured, piled up card catalogs placed under the circulation desk, contrasted to an amorphous crowd of children facing the librarians and a group of men seated in the faraway back of the room whose role as parents or guards is unclear. The aesthetics and materiality of this space recalls the material culture of a well-functioning household in the “organization of the work process” (the functional parts of the library like the circulation desk and the filing cabinets) together with the “creation of the intimate surroundings” through ornamental pieces and the middle-class atmosphere and dwelling in which the idea of comfort is also conveyed through the conventional library tables, “glassed-in bookcases” (Giedion [1949] 2013: 519–20, 297–98, 323–24). In this atmosphere,



Figure 1.2 “Seward Park Children in library” (ca. 1910a).

Source: From The New York Public Library.

the information management processes indicated by the efficiency of library furniture correspond to the period iconography of home management (*ibid.*: 522–23). In the portrayal of women and children in this and other images, libraries are presented as women’s domains while depicting the work process.

The *Bulletin* for 1910 gives information about the procurement of objects: “through the kindness of Mr. Dodge and other friends we have been able to add to the attractiveness of the branches by the purchase of pictures, plaster casts, plants, etc.” (1910: 103). The decoration of the children’s rooms is detailed in another account, listing murals with motives from Howard Pyle’s *Robin Hood*, the *Arabian Nights*, Brothers Grimm and Hans Andersen’s fairy tales illustrated by Helen Stratton in Seward Park and Tompkins branches and that “several German lithographs and pictures of a similar kind were purchased for circulation among the branches as temporary exhibits”; that “[p]lants and other decorations have been received by a considerable number of libraries ... that attracted much attention and favorable comment from children and grown people” (1910: 120). The spatial iconography reflects the intimacy of the parlor room in a bourgeois home.¹⁸ These pacifying spaces and settings reveal an institutional style and the implementation of the hygienic practices dictated by modern science that included cleanliness and sanitation to fight illness and disease.



Figure 1.3 “Seward Park Students pictured at depleted American History shelf” (ca. 1910). Source: From The New York Public Library.

Figure 1.3 documents an interaction in the library branch that is slightly discomfiting, making the visual “obtuse” and hard to comprehend (Oxman 2010: 71). It is captioned, “Seward Park students pictured at depleted American History shelf” (1910). Why photograph an empty shelf? The narrative construction explaining this “depleted American History shelf” could point to an eager readership or draw attention to the shortcomings of the library collection. The visual immediacy of the image captures a moment of institutional consternation—with a helpless librarian standing in front of the empty shelves facing inquiring children. This photograph conveys tensions between aspiration and reality—the excited immigrant readers against the “depleted” and lackluster performance of institutional virtue.

Domesticated immigrant readers domesticating the library: Friction between the library home and the tenement home

The materiality of books passing into the immigrants’ homes and books as “nomadic” objects passing thresholds in the interactions of immigrants and library surface in the larger discourse of librarianship directed at immigrants. The librarians’ testimonials about the immigrant reading are enmeshed with the rhetoric of dearth and dirt,

[O]ur books are read to pieces ... we are altruists playing Cinderella on short rations. But the joy I get doing something with nothing! Some weeks I get nothing out of it but mud. It depends on the weather. Once in

a while I have the pleasure of scrubbing up some dear Italian boy, before I allow him to take a book in his hand. That is where the personal touch comes in! And so it goes! The uncouth new-comers, soon disciplined! The zeal in reading, the growing appreciation of our country among her members—Poles, Italians, Armenians! The sudden success that perforce led for a while to taking all English books out of the Polish library, until a fair supply could be secured, and the clamor stopped.

(Carr 1916: 152)

These librarians saw themselves as “altruists playing Cinderella on short rations.” The cost of their success in drawing readers to the library were the “books read to pieces,” turned into “mud” by the soiled readers’ hands. In her report on “library work among foreigners,” Josepha Kudlicka describes a cleansing ritual when children,

“some of [whom] *never saw* [emphasis in the original] picture books, many are ragged and dirty, but we take them to a basin in the corner of the room, where they wash their hands and faces and then with eager eyes look at the books or come to the desk to sign their names for library cards” or a librarian giving “a cake of soap” to a child to take home.

(1910: 375, 376)

The miasmic presence of immigrants’ reading in the library is extended to the librarians’ sensorium when visiting the “foreign” quarters in the New York City East Side, the bakeries, soda shops, and newspaper offices selling books and newspapers, as reflected in this quote by a librarian from Passaic (New Jersey) public library: “In buying foreign books, if you do not get the small-pox or the pink-eye, you will accumulate enough experiences to fill a three volume novel” (Campbell 1904: 67).

The contiguity between the library home and the tenement home is tied to an interplay of purity and dirt. Thus, the NYPL as a place of belonging and Americanization crystallizes tensions within reformist discourses and surfaces the surprising domestication of the Library as the immigrants’ lived home. The “legitimate” uses of the book and the forms of reading (Chartier 1992: 51) depended on disciplining the hands of pragmatic readers who introduced the grime and dirt of their tenement home through their reading. The reading space was exposed as an illusion through the “real space” of their lived lives (Foucault 1986: 27). The tactility of reading and reading at home was an un-reflected activity that made visible the reality of laborers’ homes that could not be kept out of the library. The books became reflective surfaces through the act of touch and reading, the turning of the pages recalling the repetitive action of some industrial process. Leafing through books produced a friction with paper and transferred to it an “honorable,” working-class dirt. The tenement homes, books, and libraries became contiguous spaces by “how they are touched by each other and envelop each

other” and their “likeness” became “an effect of the proximity of shared residence” (Ahmed 2007: 155). Relocating the conditions of the laborers’ home/workspace to the library envelops the familiar and familial places.

An inside-out perspective of the library in the city: An exposé of the reality of aspirations

How working-class readers made the Library a home in the City was visible through the consequences of immigrants’ real and symbolic “hunger for books” and the transgressive forms of reading books “to pieces” and the transmission of dirt. This reality clashed with the utopian projections of a well-stocked library with clean books articulated in the conformist and idealized visions of services to immigrants. An undercover journalist Selma Robinson, posing as a library assistant in the Seward Park branch in 1922, published an *exposé* with a headline, “Book Shortage at Libraries Hinders Youth, People Unable to Obtain Prescribed Volumes for Home Reading, Reporter for Tribune Discovers, Even Classics are Missing, Reduced Grants Result in a Decrease in Titles: Aliens Get Little Help” (Robinson 1922). Her ethnographic-style descriptions question the public-facing images of the Library and remind us that “space is a practiced place” and grounds where meaning is lived (de Certeau 1984: 117). Her investigative report included an image showing children returning library books titled, “Typical scene of congestion in branch library: evidence of need for relief from crowded conditions” (Robinson 1922). “And that is how I found Seward Park library” depicts a grim physicality of reading, the discomfiting, decaying, decrepit, unhygienic and disfigured books, anxious users and staff, and understaffed libraries. The Library’s cooperation with the City’s schools, celebrated in the annual reports and the NYPL circulation statistics, is shown not to be able to supply books nor influence “the children through their teachers on the proper care of books”:

But there are no books to take their place, and all the shelves are full of grayed, tattered volumes. The pages are frayed along the edges, fat-stained and fish-incrusted, for the East Side child eats while he reads. They have been handled so many times by sweating little fingers that sometimes the print is obliterated. The dirt on the bindings is thick enough to scratch away with a pin. I couldn’t rub my hands clean of the grimy feeling that persisted even after soap and water. ... The little breeze stirred up by turning the leaves seemed polluted, and I held my breath while I examined the books.

(Robinson 1922)

The physicality of books in the children’s department reflected the living conditions of their readers, especially the East Side immigrant readers; their inability to read but in “Russian and Yiddish such writers as Gorky, Tolstoy and Checkhov”; or, the scarcity of relevant literature for their Americanization. There was nothing beyond elementary civics and a few books of

the frontier days” and those “who must qualify for naturalization papers, read the simple sentences of Goldberg’s English for coming citizens” and no books to “introduce them to real American life” (ibid.). Scarcity and dirt are captured in the heading, “Foreign Born Hunger for Romance,” that includes this exchange between herself and an immigrant reader:

The foreign books pass in and out of the library in rapid circulation. Their readers are hungry for tales that supply the romance which cutting cloth and sewing seams rob from life. One long-bearded Jew who just spent the evening on a settee near the window with a thin book on his lap asked me: “Why is always the same books?” He nodded sympathetically while I explained that the library had no funds for new titles, and I nodded sympathetically while he explained that he had read every one of the books in the meager collection. He pointed to the book he had been reading. Each of the pages was swollen to twice its original size by filth and much handling. “Dirty, no?” he said.

(ibid.)

She portrays the Seward Park branch dwindling book stocks: where “more than half the books should have been cast into the rubbish heap”; favored books “never on the shelves for more than ten minutes at a time” although “even a soiled book is better than none at all” (ibid.). This vignette points to the ironies of the reformist discourse when an actual library assistant confided her idea of Utopia to Robinson: “‘It is the place,’ she said, ‘where there are enough copies of Mark Twain, Dickens, O. Henry and Stevenson for those who want them; nice clean books’” (ibid.). The NYPL community house programs lauded in the institutional reports are naturalistically described in the “Lecture Room in Basement,”

One of the functions of the library is to serve as a community house, where clubs may meet and lectures be given. I expected to see a good sized clubroom, for I had heard of the several mothers and children’s clubs of Seward Park. I found what was once a cellar store room for old books, a dingy room, with tiny windows placed next to the ceiling, and water pipes writhing around the walls. One hundred and seventy-five persons are crowded into this room to hear Friday night lecture. There isn’t enough money for a new coat of paint.

(ibid.)

And further,

That is how I found Seward Park Library. That is how I would find every library in the city, I was assured, although the librarians hastened to say that they were not complaining. The library system is like an orphan who has been starved by his guardians. He is afraid to ask for more for fear of getting less.

(ibid.)

The Library serving as a “community house” in New York City’s Lower East Side at the start of the second decade of the twentieth century was an extension of the immigrants’ dwellings/workplaces—where work and life overlapped and came into friction with each other—clashing aspiration and institutional realities. The physicality of poverty is relocated to the Library, an “orphan” starved by its “guardian” (i.e., the City). Just like the slum-like tenements, a social condition, and lived life, the dirt and discomfort of the readers were transmitted to the books and the physicality of spaces that extended *their* home into the library spaces. (Such conditions of immigrants’ work and life in the tenements were authentically conveyed by the social photographers Lewis Wickes Hine (Freedman and Hine 1998) and Jacob Riis ([1890] 2016).¹⁹

Reading the official NYPL publications and photography “along” and “against” the grain pointed to the material practices in the immigrants’ interactions with the library. The NYPL as an institution “where regulated social routines and performances take place” defined the cultural function and “distinction” through which the *cognoscenti* differentiated themselves from the masses” and created a “contradictory dynamics” (Bennett 1995: 11). They succeeded in circulating books but not domesticating the immigrants. Ironically, the immigrants domesticated the library.

Immigrants making a shadow home in the library

Contrary topological notions of home in libraries and the relative placelessness and homeless-ness of immigrants in society, with the NYPL as a contact zone, emerge in immigrant autobiographies. Anzia Yeziarska, a reader in the Seward Park branch,

portrayed the effect of a branch library on a working-class Russian girl who falls in love with a young American sociologist [a reference to John Dewey] intent on Americanizing her: ‘What a stillness full from thinking! So beautiful, it comes on me like music.’ The contrast between herself and the ‘book-ladies ... so quiet like the things,’ their hands so well kept and clothes so simple, reveals the insurmountable distance separating her from the sociologist.

(Dain 1972: 290)

Yeziarska’s stories *Hungry Hearts* (1920) depict the “liminal spaces of New York’s Lower East Side tenements – with their dark interiors and crowded exteriors, with their stores, chaotic and noisy streets” amid which the library appears as “a transition point for the protagonists on their paths into American life” with strategic imagery of books, reading, and literacy as an actant in the crucial scenes and contrasts in the process of Americanization and the replacement identities they were creating (Dalbello 2018: 79). The protagonist of Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) frequents the library of the East Side branch of the Young Men’s Hebrew Association, an idealized image of the library as a place for integration across the social classes:

It was a sort of university settlement in which educated men and women from up-town acted as 'workers.' The advice these would give me as to my reading, their kindly manner, their native English, and last but not least, the flattering way in which they would speak of my intellectual aspirations, led me to spend many an hour in the place. The great thing was to hear these American-born people speak their native tongue and to have them hear me speak it.

(Dain 1972: 290)

The old Aguilar Library branch in Italian Harlem, with only a few books in a rented storefront,

was a 'fascinating and wonderful place' for the boys and girls who had never owned books. Leonard Covello, later the principal of the nearby Benjamin Franklin High School, recollected his daily visits to the library, his 'life in the wonder-world of books.' The adolescent Louis Adamic, only three years in this country, found in the Yorkville Branch 'real' books like Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906); its impression on the future writer was not quite what the Americanizers had in mind.

(Dain 1972: 290)

Thus, the "services to the foreign born" (ibid.: 288) combining literacy and citizenship were connected to the powerful founding myth and stories of individual immigrants being the conscious subjects engaged in self-fashioning aimed at Americanization that is integral to social re-fashioning and moving up and out of the tenements home to dwell in society.

Conclusion

The historians of the Progressive era in America pointed to the conflicting goals of the reformist ideology that confounded the economic interests of the nation with the requirement of a certain type of integrative support for immigrant laborers. In this case, the domestication and the Americanization of immigrants was facilitated by the Library institution and the soft power of genteel, middle-class librarians. The policy-related public debates of ideological nature were then and remain at the core of effort of sanitizing the library history of this era and disguising their political agenda of conformism and a site for pacifying the working class (Garrison 1979). The euphoric, self-validating, and self-congratulatory idealism of the reformers was successful in that the immigrants used the services rendered and desired them, yet there are silences around reciprocity by which the Library would maintain the services and advocate for them. Though repudiated by the "revisionist" historians (Harris 1973; Garrison 1979; Wiegand 1989) and unmasked in the silences of the idealistic framing of the institution in the official record (Trouillot [1995] 2015), the celebrated librarians' activities presented a model of an appropriative history in which librarians appear

in a heroic role. In the actual story of building services for immigrants, the NYPL offered an “existential ground” for building a relational identity in which identity is materialized (Malpas 2006b: 205; Deleuze 1995) by “building” a place for the immigrants, “a letting dwell” (Malpas 2006a: 381) and conveying “a sense of ... identity as shaped in relation to those places—to a sense of ‘belonging to’ those places” (Malpas 2006b: 198–99). The affects and senses enter the discussion of the librarians who defined their idea of the library through “warm, helpful kindness that is reaching out and also helping the foreigners” (Kudlicka 1910: 375) while echoing the surfaces of dirt and pollution that recorded, in the space of soiled books and reading, a friction between immigrant readers and the public libraries. The library spaces were an extension of the social conditions in the tenements, characterized by their neglect and the lack of funds in the political economy of the immigrant/library interactions.

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Notes

- 1 Published in *The New York Times Saturday Review*, January 31, 1902.
- 2 “Immigrant Services,” <https://www.nypl.org/help/community-outreach/immigrant-services>.
- 3 World Languages Collections (WLC) in public libraries are often limited to language instruction manuals. The languages are listed on the website. For example, Newark Public Library claims Spanish and Portuguese, the Boston Public Library lists 17, and The Westchester Library system claims 71 languages. The NYPL features a World Languages blog about services in Spanish, French, Chinese and Russian, portals prepared by outreach librarians, the World Languages Electronic Resources and “‘Say What?’ Look at What the Library Has in Your Language” translation service for search results from English to other languages, access to online resources for use in the classroom.
- 4 “Resources for Immigrants in NYC,” <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2019/07/15/resources-immigrants-nyc>.
- 5 The New York Free Circulating Library was “formed in 1878 for a church sponsored sewing class [and expanded to] eleven branches by 1899” (The New York Public Library, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York, NY, *Free Circulating Libraries Records, 1880–1905*, MssArc RG4 4858).
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 The New York Public Library, Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York, NY, *Arthur Elmore Bostwick Records, 1901–1909*, MssArc 5559.
- 8 The searches were performed using Hathi Trust and Internet Archive document tools and searching across the PDF collections of the *Bulletin* (1897–1920) and the *Handbook* for 1900, 1916, 1921.
- 9 The “foreign” title circulation was at 345,260 (of overall 7,013,649 circulated in the 33 branches). Travelling Libraries program reported the circulation of 1,853 foreign titles (of overall 1,028,550).
- 10 The report states that 96 donors presented 706 books, 60 newspapers, and 13 periodicals for the collection that year.
- 11 This list included 4,500 broadsides.

- 12 Circulation included books in all categories (fiction and science) and ranged between 20,000 and 35,000 titles in languages other than English, in addition to a high reading activity of English language material. The Ottendorfer branch reported a circulation of 194,629 books that included 35,730 foreign titles (18 percent) of which 33,974 were German titles, with the highest foreign-language circulation in 1910 in the system (*Bulletin* 1910: 151).
- 13 The chief of the circulation department in the NYPL Arthur E. Bostwick reported on the Webster branch gatherings of the Bohemian Literary Club in the City and the “performances of Bohemian music, and Bohemian refreshments served by local girls in national costume” (Hrbek 1910: 102).
- 14 The names of public charities and associations listed in the bibliographies in the NYPL reports.
- 15 Titles in the acquisition lists do not refer to services to immigrants in the *Bulletin*. There were no instances of “alien(s)” or explicit mention of immigrant(s) in the *Handbook*.
- 16 These refer to Irish, Jewish, and German immigrant public charities.
- 17 The *Bulletin* (1910) notes that three of the five branches were equipped with the roof reading rooms.
- 18 Editorial note: Johanna McElwee’s chapter in this volume focuses on bourgeois style domesticity and parlor aesthetics.
- 19 Lewis Hine photographs appeared in *Charities and the Commons: A Weekly Journal of Philanthropy and Social Advance* (later: *Survey*), published 1906–1908, in New York (Publication Committee of the New York Charity Organization Society).

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