

The Anxieties of Modern Life:

Fears of Jewish Immigration in the Popular Press and in George Luks's *Allen Street*

In 1907, *The Craftsman* columnist John Spargo hailed Ashcan artist George Luks as: “an American painter of great originality and force, whose art relates to all the experiences and interests in life.”¹ Spargo’s statement is high praise for the artist, as Luks had only left the newspaper industry to take up painting two years prior.² Between 1905 and 1907, Luks portrayed an eclectic array of subjects, but predominantly painted scenes from the daily lives of immigrant communities living in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. In one of these images, *Allen Street* (c. 1905), Luks depicts a group of (primarily) female consumers shopping in an open-air market in one of New York City’s Jewish quarters (Fig. 1). This small and intimate picture is a striking example of Luks’s energetic handling of paint and spirited representations of mercantile matters; yet, there is something unsettling about his portrayal of the nighttime locale. From his tight cropping of the composition and depiction of a street-level viewpoint, to his thick, unblended application of paint and energetic brushstrokes; to his dynamic juxtaposition of the stark artificial lighting and the dark recesses of the street, Luks renders a scene that is claustrophobic and unstable, and elicits anxiety from the viewer.³ By situating this painting in its socio-historical moment, I argue that Luks’s image engages with the various class, racial, and ethnic tensions emanating from the influx of European immigrants during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Further, I examine how Luks fosters a feeling of unease in *Allen Street* through a close

¹ John Spargo, “George Luks, An American Painter of Great Originality and Force, Whose Art Relates to All the Experiences and Interests of Life,” *The Craftsman* 7, no. 6 (September 1907): 599.

² Judith Hansen O’Toole, “George Luks: Rogue, Raconteur, and Realist,” in *The Eight and American Modernisms*, ed. Elizabeth Kennedy (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 92.

³ NB: Throughout the remainder of the paper, when discussing the fictive observer, I am referring to a twentieth-century viewer who is a white, middle-class, and native-born American citizen. While women could have seen Luks’s (and other Ashcan artists’) images in public exhibitions (such as the one held at the Macbeth Gallery in 1908) or in the popular press, I gendered my observer as male. Yet, it is entirely possible that female viewers experienced similar feelings of unease when regarding Luks’s painting. However, what is most important to note is that the viewer is of a higher class (i.e. not working class), a different race (i.e. white, and not a person of color, as African Americans continued to face marginalization in this period), and most likely of a different ethnicity (i.e. not Jewish).

visual analysis of the formal and technical elements of the painting. In doing so, I contend that Luks's cramped setting, representation of the figures, and bravura brushstrokes reveal contemporary fears of the rapidly-changing city, the growing concerns over the increasingly diverse inhabitants, and the anxieties of modern life.

Coming to America: Immigrants in the City

In *Allen Street*, George Luks represents a lively nighttime scene of commercial display and consumption. On the street level, Luks renders an eclectic collection of commodities for purchase. On the left of the canvas, he paints a bricolage of wares, including: a burnished copper pot, a painted portrait, indigo fabrics and cobalt cushions, and ornate upholstered chairs. Adjacent to the assorted items, a woman in a brown dress bends over to inspect a vibrant, patterned orange rug, while another female figure examines a bright green carpet. On the opposite side of the scene, a seated woman sells pretzels and other baked goods to two potential customers, while other patrons peruse the additional offerings available along the street. Above the abundant display of products on the sidewalk, Luks portrays a second story of marketable items. Unlike the busy scene below, the upper level contains a single visible store that is brightly illuminated by an artificial light source. A row of white mannequins line the multi-windowed storefront and advertise the types of garments sold inside. In the center of the composition, a silhouetted woman transcends a wooden staircase, which visually connects the orderly sartorial display in the second story to the diverse assortment of commodities at the street-level.

At first glance, Luks's *Allen Street* appears to be a representation that encapsulates many aspects of modern, urban society, such as consumption, display, and spectacle. However, upon closer inspection, *Allen Street* reveals deeper-seated anxieties, such as the considerable expansion of immigrant populations in the city. Between 1870 and 1915, New York City's

population drastically increased from 1.5 to 5 million, primarily due to the influx of Italian, Irish, Eastern European, and Chinese immigrants.⁴ Among the Eastern Europeans arriving through Ellis Island were Jewish immigrants, who fled from religious and ethnic persecution in Europe. The newly-arrived Jews constituted a significant portion of New York's immigrants, comprising one-tenth of the immigrants in the United States.⁵ By 1910, 1.25 million Jews were living in New York City.⁶ Like other immigrant groups inhabiting the metropolis, Jewish émigrés settled in primarily segregated neighborhoods. By living in largely homogenous communities, immigrants could live and work amongst other members of their language, ethnic, or religious group. As a result, diverse neighborhoods developed in the city—each with their own lively and local personalities.

In *Allen Street*, Luks renders one of these distinct locales through his vibrant nocturnal scene of street vendors selling their wares. His choice of available products, the artificially lit, second-story storefront window, clothing of the figures, and title of the painting firmly situate this fictive scene in the Jewish quarter of New York City. In the images, Luks represents the two most prominent commercial pursuits of Jewish immigrants: peddling and garment production.⁷ As architectural historian Daniel Bluestone notes in “‘The Pushcart Evil,’” from the early 1890s onwards, newly-arrived immigrants—particularly Jewish immigrants—took up street peddling as a way to earn an income.⁸ On the right of *Allen Street*, Luks refers to this mercantile venture through the depiction of the pretzel seller. In the image, Luks depicts the female merchant sitting behind a table laden with assorted baked goods. While it is unclear if the pretzel vendor sells her

⁴ H. Barbara, Weinberg, Doreen Bolger, and David Park Curry, *American Impressionism and Realism: The Painting of Modern Life, 1885-1915* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 191.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Daniel Bluestone, “‘The Pushcart Evil,’” in *The Landscape of Modernity: Essays on New York City, 1900-1940* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1992), 292.

⁸ Ibid.

foodstuffs from a cart, Luks suggests that she, like the other peddlers lining the street, is a pushcart merchant through the inclusion of the wooden wagon to her right. A significant portion of Jewish immigrants undertook peddling as they did not have to rent a space to sell their wares and they could set up shop in their neighborhood streets where they could speak with sellers in their shared, native language.⁹ As art historians and curators H. Barbara Weinberg, Doreen Bolger, and David Park Curry state in their discussion of urban realism, merchants and peddlers served the various needs of their community within their smaller immigrant neighborhood.¹⁰ In the Jewish quarter, Hester Street served as the main commercial thoroughfare, with the intersecting streets—such as Orchard, Ludlow, and Allen—providing additional markets in which to shop. Vendors working on these streets not only sold their wares from outdoor counters, wagons, pushcarts, like the fictive pretzel seller in *Allen Street*, but also in open-air or enclosed shops, as seen in a contemporary photographic view of Hester Street (Fig. 3).

Within some of these makeshift stalls and glass-windowed shops, Jewish immigrants produced and sold their other lucrative commodity: clothing.¹¹ As art historian Robert L. Gambone states, in the early twentieth century, Jewish immigrants were known for being skilled tailors.¹² In fact, the Jewish-run clothing and textile industry rose in prominence during the first decades of the new century, alongside the department store.¹³ In *Allen Street*, Luks selects the Jewish garment industry as the backdrop of his image. On the street-level, he renders pattern carpets, earth-toned scarves and bolts of fabric, and blue and purple upholstery draped over rods

⁹ Ibid, and Weinberg, Bolger, and Curry, *American Impressionism and Realism*, 191-92.

¹⁰ Weinberg, Bolger, and Curry, *American Impressionism and Realism*, 191.

¹¹ In the early 1900s, tailoring was the most prominent occupation for Jewish immigrants, with peddling coming in as a close second. See: Bluestone, “‘The Pushcart Evil’,” 292.

¹² Robert L. Gambone, *Life on the Press: The Popular Art and Illustrations of George Benjamin Luks* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 68-69.

¹³ Ibid. For more on immigrants’ roles in the garment industry in the early twentieth century, see: Nancy L. Green, “Sweatshop Migrations: The Garment Industry Between Home and Shop,” in *The Landscape of Modernity: Essays on New York City, 1900-1940* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1992), 213-232.

and arranged in piles outside the vendors' shops. Above, Luks paints a row of dressed mannequins sporting various readymade dresses available for purchase. In these two levels of the scene, Luks emphasizes the eclectic offerings of Allen Street through the bright pops of pigment on the canvas. These bold bursts of color not only capture the fictive buyers' attentions, but also catches the viewer's eye. In doing so, Luks encourages the viewer to imagine the cacophony of sights, sounds, and smells that would have possibly overwhelmed the early twentieth-century observer on the street, and encouraged the spectator to become a consumer.

Illustrating Immigration: American Anxieties in the Popular Press

The influx of immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provided artists and illustrators ample material for representation; yet, the treatment of newly-arrived and second-generation immigrants varied in different media. In painting, Ashcan artists represented immigrant communities as lively—and oftentimes overcrowded—microcosms of the city. In these images, such as George Luks's *Hester Street* (Fig. 2), the painters primarily provide the viewer with a street-level vantage point, affording the (presumably) white, middle-class viewer the opportunity to vicariously experience the vivacious energy of the immigrant neighborhoods from a comfortable distance.¹⁴ Similarly, in the popular press, artists focused their attention on the human elements of immigration, frequently interweaving their cartoons with a level of social critique. In these mass-produced images, illustrators capitalized on their audiences preexisting knowledge of stereotypes and caricature to differentiate immigrants from native-born, white American citizens.¹⁵ During a time when whiteness was in flux, exaggerated features, clothing,

¹⁴ Rebecca Zurier discusses the role of the *flâneur* and the use of a street-level vantage point throughout her book. For a focused discussion of “armchair travelers,” see: Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 99-103.

¹⁵ Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 181-245.

and accompanying text became the primary way to denote racial and ethnic difference in cartoons.¹⁶ However, these stereotypes were not solely employed for visual distinction, but used as a way to exert social control in constantly-changing and rapidly-diversifying urban spaces.

As cultural historian Robert W. Snyder claims in “The City in Transition,” Ashcan artists depicted immigrants in order to understand their presence in the city and interpret their role in the modern metropolis.¹⁷ Further, Snyder notes that the Ashcan group utilized stereotypes in their images of immigrants for their viewer to easily identify the figures as “other.”¹⁸ While Snyder’s statements specifically refer to the Ashcan artists, his ideas can also be used to describe the ways in which illustrators utilized stereotypes in their cartoons. In fact, it seems that this act of classifying immigrants as part of a specific ethnic and/or racial group through stereotype was a tactic that many Ashcan artists, like Luks, learned from their early careers as newspaper illustrators.¹⁹ As Rebecca Zurier notes in “The Making of Six New York Artists,” the publishing industry became a productive space for artists to obtain work and circulate their images at the turn of the century, as newspapers and magazines expanded their readership across the country.²⁰ In these mass-produced images artists rendered images of current events, such as new fashion trends and theater performances, as well as represented various social problems plaguing the country—like immigration.²¹ While Luks’s *Allen Street* is a painting, and not a widely-circulated illustration, his representation of Jewish immigrants is concurrent with the images of

¹⁶ Many of these stereotypes stemmed from the racial/racist tropes exploited in vaudeville performances. See: Roger Fischer, *Them Damned Pictures: Explorations in American Political Cartoon Art* (New Haven: Archon Books, 1996), 70.

¹⁷ Robert W. Snyder, “City in Transition,” in *Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan and Their New York* (Washington, DC: National Museum of American Art, 1995), 36-37.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Rebecca Zurier, “The Making of Six New York Artists,” in *Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan and Their New York* (Washington, DC: National Museum of American Art, 1995), 59.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

²¹ *Ibid.*

European and Chinese immigrants disseminated in the popular press. Therefore, it is necessary to examine contemporary cartoons of immigrants to investigate how these ubiquitous images did or did not influence Luks's artistic choices in *Allen Street*. Further, as a medium that is intended to speak to a wider audience, illustrations offer a unique insight into the "collective" mindset of the American public and can possibly reveal the contemporary anxieties about the incursion of immigrants at the turn of the century.

In his 1903 illustration for *Judge*, "The Unrestricted Dumping Ground," Louis Dalrymple depicts the arrival of European immigrants as an invasion of vermin (Fig. 4). In the foreground, Uncle Sam stands resolutely, clutching the staff of an American flag and smoking a cigar.²² He scowls intensely at a red and green chute that dumps hordes of rats with human faces into the pristine blue harbor. Above the shaft, an arched, olive-green slab reads: "Direct from the slums of Europe daily." In the center foreground of the composition, three rats scurry out of the water and onto the ground by Uncle Sam's feet. Each bears a distinct moniker across their hats or bandanas, which reads (from left to right): "Socialist," "Anarchist," and "Mafia," and indicates that the figures are meant to be read as Italian immigrants. In the jaws of the "Socialist," Dalrymple depicts the wooden barrel of a pistol with the words "Murder" etched into the grip of the weapon. Next to him, the "Anarchist" clenches the blade of a sword between his teeth, with the word "Assassination" scrawled on the metal. While the Mafioso does not brandish a weapon, he wears a black eye mask, which suggests nefarious intent. In the distance, a steamer ship chugs toward the right of the image, presumably carrying more Italian immigrants to the United States.

²² A billowing plume of smoke extends from the end of Uncle Sam's cigar and cleverly transforms into a thought bubble containing the visage of President William McKinley. As I do not wish to expand on the political ramifications of immigration policies in the early 1900s, I did not mention the president in my formal reading of the cartoon. However, Dalrymple importantly includes McKinley to offer a degree of political commentary. In doing so, the artist encourages the reader/viewer to contemplate the effect of "unrestricted" immigration policies and the man who is responsible for allowing the United States to become a "dumping ground" for Europe's undesirable citizens.

A throng of rats swim from the side of the boat toward the center of the composition, where a colony climbs onto a rectangular platform and leaps into a dark void.

Within this small scene, Dalrymple alludes to the nascent fears of white, middle-class American citizens concerning the rapid influx of immigrants in the country. Through his strategic blend of text and image, Dalrymple suggests that many readers of *Judge* worried about three main issues: the spread of physical and social diseases, the threats to “American” ideals, and the large numbers of immigrants coming into the country. First, Dalrymple references the fear of disease through his representation of Italian immigrants as a contagious hoard of rodents bringing illnesses with them from “the slums of Europe.” As one writer lamented in looking at the Lower East Side inhabitants in 1893: “Filthy persons and clothing reeking with *vermin* are seen on every side. Many of these people are afflicted with *diseases...*” (emphasis added).²³ In this passage, the anonymous author verbally articulates the apprehensions about infection that Dalrymple suggests in his cartoon. In his image, however, Dalrymple elides the division between immigrants and their pest-ridden clothes, and represents immigrants as vermin who threaten to contaminate the city with their contagions.

In “The Unrestricted Dumping Ground,” Dalrymple also suggests that the maladies that the immigrants potentially possess are not solely physical ills, but social ones. He implies that the United States’ “unrestricted” immigration policies have allowed ruffians, like socialists, anarchists, and Mafia members, to infiltrate the country and spread their undesirable political ideologies (anarchy and socialism) through the threat of violence (“murder” and “assassination”). Dalrymple states this fear more explicitly two months later in “The High Tide of Immigration—A National Menace” (Fig. 5). In the image, an alarmed Uncle Sam clings to a rocky cliff as the

²³ “East Side Street Vendors: Their Push Carts Obstruct Many Streets,” *New York Times*, July 30, 1893, 17.

waves of “Riff Raff Immigration” crash against the stony bluff and present “[A] Danger to American Ideas and Institutions.” Beneath the image, the writer states: “Immigration statistics for the past year show that the influx of foreigners was the greatest in our history, and also that the hard-working peasants are now being supplanted by the criminals and outlaws of all Europe.” In both the images and descriptions, Darlymple cautions the viewer about the perils of “unrestricted” immigration—American values, such as honest labor and hard work, and working-class jobs (of native-born citizens) are in danger.

Lastly, Darlymple’s 1903 cartoons suggest that one of viewers’ primary apprehensions concerned the sheer number of immigrants arriving in the United States. In both images, he implies that immigrants will continue to enter the country in a seemingly-endless wave on a daily basis. While Darlymple’s declaration that immigration rates doubled in 1903 refers to a specific year, this fear of being overwhelmed by foreign invaders has consistently appeared in newspaper illustrations since the 1870s. In his 1878 cartoon for *The San Francisco Wasp*, George F. Keller depicts the impending arrival of Chinese refugees as a plague of almost biblical proportions (Fig. 6). In the image, Keller represents the immigrants as a swarm of locusts fleeing from the ghostly figure of Famine to fields of San Francisco. An overwhelmed Uncle Sam swats at the immigrant-insects, attempting to beat the horde away from his crops. Beneath the image, Keller warns that Uncle Sam’s farm is in danger of being overrun by over seventy-million Chinese people who are preparing to flee China due to famine and starvation. While Keller’s image precedes Dalrymple’s illustrations by twenty-five years, the same warning of “Look Out... Uncle Sam!” echoes throughout the pictures. Further, both artists employ human-pest hybrids to enhance the threat and emphasize the dangers large numbers of immigrants present to the United States.

Similarly, in 1892, illustrator Grant E. Hamilton expresses the burgeoning concerns over disease, erosion of American values, and uncontrollable immigration in his representation of Jewish immigrants in “Their New Jerusalem” (Fig. 7). On the right of the image, a long, sinuous line of Jewish immigrants flee from the personification of Russia, who prepares to crack the whip of persecution across their backs. The waves of the Atlantic Ocean part like the Red Sea to allow the oppressed immigrants safe passage to the United States. They arrive on the shores of “New Jerusalem” downtrodden and hunched under their weight of their personal possessions. On the left of the image, a mass exodus of emigrants depart for the West with their belongings in tow, mirroring the movement of the Jewish immigrants. In the center of the composition, a well-dressed man stands with his hands in his pocket and a scroll stating “Perseverance and Industry” tucked under his arm. His large hooked nose and noticeable girth straining against the buttons of his waistcoat indicate that the man, like the immigrants on the right of the image, is Jewish.²⁴ In the background, signposts and placards bearing the names “Cohen,” “Steinberg,” “Solomon,” and “Moses” signify the owners of the shops are also Jewish.

In the image, Hamilton alludes to the social ills believed to be endemic to the Jewish community: greed. Through the plethora of signs bearing Jewish surnames, Hamilton suggests that recently-arrived and second-generation Jewish immigrants have taken over all of the available shops on Broadway, forcing the “first families”—i.e. white, middle class Americans—on the left of the picture to seek employment opportunities out West. Hamilton reinforces the association between Jews and avarice below the image in a statement about the rapidly rising

²⁴ A hooked nose and beard were the most common stereotypes used to delineate Jewish individuals in cartoons. As Jewish individuals were also perceived as crafty and greedy, illustrators would oftentimes add additional heft to a Jewish figure’s midsection to denote avarice. See: Gambone, *Life on the Press*, 67-68; and Robert W. Snyder and Rebecca Zurier “Picturing the City,” in *Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan and Their New York* (Washington, DC: National Museum of American Art, 1995), 116-117.

Jewish population in New York, their monopoly of the storefronts on Broadway, and the capital they accrue and circulate within their nuclear community. Further, by representing an ostensibly endless stream of Jewish immigrants fleeing from Russia, Hamilton suggests that the multitudes of refugees will continue to migrate to New City—or, “New Jerusalem”—and force “the first families” (i.e. the “original” settlers who migrated to the United States centuries prior) to seek refuge in other parts of the country.

In Dalrymple’s, Keller’s, and Hamilton’s illustrations, the artists represent immigration as an uncontrollable pestilence that threatens to permanently contaminate American values and institutions. Further, these artists suggest that immigration is a particular danger to native-born, white American citizens whose jobs, livelihoods, and homes are endangered by the influx of immigrants. Through the depiction of immigrants as hordes of vermin and huddled masses, the multitude of immigrants in the images, and the ominous cutlines, these three illustrators show that immigration was a burgeoning fear for many of their subscribers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁵

It is within this social and cultural milieu that Luks paints in *Allen Street*. As a former newspaper illustrator, Luks would have been familiar with the visual tropes Dalrymple, Keller, and Hamilton employed in their illustrations.²⁶ Yet, Luks seems to deliberately avoid the threat of disease, overcrowding due to mass immigration, and the overturning of American values in *Allen Street*. However, this is not to say that Luks did not portray these themes and figures in paint. In a contemporary painting, *Hester Street* (Fig. 2), Luks’s earthy palette, claustrophobic

²⁵ NB: The fictive subscriber, unlike my fictive viewer can potentially include female readers, people of color, and members of various classes, as mass media is able to transcend these rigorous categories more than painting. However, for the sake of consistency, I will presume the fictive subscriber is male, middle to upper class, and white.

²⁶ In fact, Luks employed many of these tropes: a large crowd of immigrants, stereotypes, etc. in his popular cartoon series, *Hogan’s Alley*. To show how these visual tactics operated in popular depictions outside of the Ashcan school, and Luks’s work in particular, I elected to discuss Dalrymple’s, Keller’s, and Hamilton’s illustrations instead.

clustering of bodies, and recognizably Jewish figures (who are identified through their clothing, full beards, and the noses of some of the male figures), seem to follow the formula employed by the illustrators, and suggest modern apprehensions about immigrants.²⁷ In *Allen Street*, on the other hand, Luks appears to offer a remedy to the physical and social ailments in *Hester Street*. As historian Robert A. Slayton claims in *Beauty in the City: The Ashcan School*, the pristine pink pavement of the sidewalk, carefully arranged wares, and structured second-story shopfronts suggest an orderly and sanitized market street.²⁸ Moreover, the individual shoppers idling along the street are easily counted and not a homogenous crowd that blend into a blur of bodies that move through the congested Hester Street. In depicting a clean and judiciously-arranged scene of people and goods, Luks provides a degree of social control, stabilizing a seemingly disorderly, corrupted, and changing city through paint. While Luks does not employ stereotypes, an abundance of figures, and a veil of dirt and disease in *Allen Street* to address the contemporary fears of immigration, his cropping of the scene, handling of paint, and nighttime setting suggests that there is an air of anxiety in the image, lurking just beneath the surface.

Anxiety on *Allen Street*

In “Once Again the Street,” German theorist Siegfried Kracauer describes modern life in the metropolis as a series of evanescent moments that create an ever-changing mosaic of memories of and experiences in the city. He states:

The street in the extended sense of the word is not only the arena of fleeting impressions and chance encounters but a place where the flow of life is bound to assert itself. Again one will have to think mainly of the city street with its ever-moving anonymous crowds. The kaleidoscopic sights mingle with unidentified

²⁷ For a discussion of the Jewish features of the figures, see: Rebecca Zurier and Robert W. Snyder, “Introduction,” in *Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan and Their New York* (Washington, DC: National Museum of American Art, 1995), 26.

²⁸ Robert A. Slayton, *Beauty in the City: The Ashcan School* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017), 108.

shapes and fragmentary visual complexes and cancel each other out, thereby preventing the onlooker from following up any of the innumerable suggestions they offer. What appears to him are not so much sharp-contoured individuals engaged in this or that definable pursuit as loose throngs of sketchy, completely indeterminate figures. Each has a story, yet the story is not given. Instead, an incessant flow of possibilities and near-intangible meanings appears. This flow casts its spell over the *flâneur* or even creates him. The *flâneur* is intoxicated with life in the street—life eternally dissolving the patterns which it is about to form.²⁹

Kracauer's description of an onlooker's physical experience of the street is a useful passage to help unpack the ways in which Luks attempts to relate the fleeting effects of the city in *Allen Street*. In the painting, the viewer adopts the position of a *flâneur*, who stands on the street with the depicted individuals coming and going.³⁰ Like Kracauer's onlooker, Luks's viewer receives suggestions of the street, people, and sights without capturing a clear view of any distinct aspect of the scene. Luks's quick application of paint and unmodulated strokes echo the rapidity of the swiftly-changing city. The faces of the fictive individuals become smears of brown and beige pigment, erasing any semblance of identity (only the central woman and pretzel seller have beak-like daubs of tan paint to indicate noses). In the background, thick swipes of mahogany, aubergine, and gray paint, dotted with flecks and dashes of vermilion and amber constitute the second story of the buildings. Yet, while Luks's broad bands of paint give the impression of a constructed edifice, as the viewer traces the fictive façade toward the right of the composition, the strokes of the building fade into the obsidian void of the night sky. As a result, the brushstrokes simultaneously give shape to the objects and figures in the scene and threaten to dissolve solely into surface.

²⁹ Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemptions of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 72.

³⁰ The *flâneur* is a complex figure who is difficult to define. For the purposes of this paper, I argue that Luks conflates the *flâneur* with his viewer, whom I have been describing as white, male, and middle to upper class. Yet, in *Allen Street*, the *flâneur*'s identity is perhaps not as clear as I initially suggest. I attempt to complicate the identity of the figure later in this section.

In *Allen Street*, anxiety punctuates the fictive scene through the work's formal elements, specifically through the collapsing and controlling of space within the image, the perspective, the unstable assemblage of bric-a-brac, and the "in between" identity of the figures. In the image, Luks erodes the spatial distance between foreground and background through his thick application of paint. While Luks uses size and clarity of the figures, as well as light and shadow within the image to create the illusion of spatial recession, his same expressive treatment of the building, sidewalk, and textiles betrays the perspectival deception, bringing the background into the foreground and collapsing the fictional space in the composition. This flattening of the scene is further compressed through the tight cropping of the scene. In the painting, Luks uses an open market stall and a vendor's cart to frame the sides of the image and give the illusion that the open-aired counters and pushcarts continue outward on either side of the canvas. However, Luks's heavy application of paint in the sidewalk and building seems to compress the composition vertically and contain the fictive viewer in a tightly enclosed and shallow space. This claustrophobic presentation of space simultaneously elicits anxiety from the viewer and perhaps alludes to modern unease over the rapidly-increasing population and decreasing size of available space in the city.

Luks's confining sense of space in *Allen Street* is not as restrictive as the fictive space in *Hester Street*, in which he seems to emphasize the narrowing of the city streets as bodies uncontrollably proliferate and navigate the constantly-changing metropolis. In the latter painting, Luks renders an animated scene of vendors selling their wares along the titular street. A cluster of children gathers around a merchant selling toys, while groups of men and women move about the fictive avenue. Luks's represents the figures in the foreground with discernable facial features, but as the crowd recedes into the distance the figures are abstracted into daubs and

dashes of ivory, powder blue, and umber paint. On the left and right of the image, Luks depicts two compressed, brick constructions that extend from the fictional street beyond the picture plane. In the background, a distant row of buildings stops just below the top of the canvas, allowing a patch of sky blue paint to punctuate the claustrophobic scene and alleviate the cramped feeling of the image.

In their reading of Ashcan paintings, like *Hester Street*, Ashcan scholars Rebecca Zurier and Robert W. Snyder claim that the artists adopt a street-level vantage point and “retain a sense of cautious distance from their subjects.”³¹ While this statement may be true of many Ashcan images, I do not agree that Luks maintains a “cautious distance” from the figures in *Hester Street*. In the image, the bodies of the crowd are uncomfortably pressed against the picture plane—even the male figure in the gray hat alarmingly appears as if he is going to move off of the canvas and into the viewer’s space, as the sole of his shoe rests uncomfortably along the edge of the canvas, blurring the boundaries between real and fictive space. One of the few instances of relief Luks does offer the viewer in *Hester Street* is the slightly elevated viewpoint, which temporarily pulls the viewer out of their role as the *flâneur*.

In *Allen Street*, Luks utilizes a similar street-level vantage point to afford his viewer the opportunity to become the *flâneur*, who, in this image, observes the crowd from a comfortable distance. As Zurier argues Ashcan drawings and illustrations, such as William Glackens’s *Far from the Fresh Air Farm* (Fig. 8), and photographs of immigrants, like Jacob Riis’s *Bandit’s Roost* (Fig.9), allowed viewers to become a *flâneur*, or an “armchair traveler,” in the privacy of their own home.³² She further contends that through these mass-produced and widely-circulated images, middle- and upper-class viewers were able to see parts of the city they had not

³¹ Zurier and Snyder, “Introduction,” 27.

³² Zurier, *Picturing the City*, 99-101.

previously seen.³³ Additionally, I would add that Zurier's claim extends beyond the images reproduced in newspapers and magazines to the canvases Ashcan artists exhibited in their studios and gallery settings. In depicting the street-level position, Luks capitalizes on the visual training his viewers already received through photographs and illustrations, and offers his viewer a vicarious experience in the Lower East Side.

By adopting the position of the *flâneur*, Luks's viewer attempts to become an unseen observer of the nighttime market scene on Allen Street. However, the viewer's unnoticed presence is complicated when one considers who the *flâneur* can be in this image. Traditionally, the *flâneur* is a male individual of a certain social station who traverses the city and studies its inhabitants.³⁴ One of his defining characteristics is that he observes, yet he is not observed; instead, he blends seamlessly into the crowd and examines people engaging in their everyday lives. This important facet of the *flâneur*'s identity is called into question when reflecting on the identity of Luks's viewer. Throughout this paper, I have described Luks's viewer as a white, middle to upper class, male spectator—the type of individual who would clearly be noticed in an immigrant neighborhood featuring primarily female shoppers. Therefore, it seems to me that the only fictive *flâneur* who can easily navigate Allen Street without detection is an immigrant or working-class woman. With this in mind, the viewer once again feels a sense of unease emanating from the painting, as his identity designates him—and not the Jewish immigrants—as the outsider.

As Robert W. Snyder states in “City in Transition,” immigrant neighborhoods, like Allen Street, possibly appeared foreign, fascinating, and frightening to an outside observer.³⁵ In his

³³ Ibid, 101.

³⁴ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (New York: Phaidon, 1964), 1-15.

³⁵ Snyder, “City in Transition,” 38.

painting, Luks alludes to all three of these descriptors through the assortment of wares, costumes of the figures, and nighttime setting. From the striking sting of the patterned, tangerine rug and the vivid jade shade of the carpet, to the white veils of the women and their austere gray and brown dresses, Luks portrays a scene that is both captivating and markedly “other.” In “The Urban Picturesque and the Spectacle of Americanization,” Carrie Tirado Bramen describes these appealing aspects of foreign flavor as the “urban picturesque.”³⁶ She claims that in the early twentieth-century, artists utilized the urban picturesque to “transform immigrants from social threats to cultural resources.”³⁷ She states that through representations of cultural differences (i.e. that which is foreign or “other”), artists converted the ethnic, racial, and class divisions of immigrant subjects (i.e. that which is “different” and potentially frightening) into “an aesthetic spectacle” (or, something visually pleasing for the viewer).³⁸ In *Allen Street*, Luks attempts to portray the Jewish neighborhood as a charming and non-threatening entity. By reducing the figures to a discernable number, punctuating the canvas with pops of enticing colors, and confining the wares and shoppers to distinct portions of the image, Luks transforms the exotic street scene into an easily readable image. Moreover, even the potentially foreboding nocturne setting is assuaged through his use of fictive, artificial lighting.³⁹

In depictions of Jewish immigrants, Bramen claims that the urban picturesque is located in the liminal space between Old World culture and New World ideas.⁴⁰ In the painting, Luks seems to portray this juxtaposition through his shoppers’ clothing and levels of sartorial display. On the sidewalk, Luks renders an assortment of patterned pillows, copper wares, decorative rugs,

³⁶ Carrie Tirado Bramen, “The Urban Picturesque and the Spectacle of Americanization,” *American Quarterly* 52, no.3 (September 2000): 444-477.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 446.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 447.

³⁹ Therefore, the elements that would have been in the dark or hidden are rendered apparent in the image.

⁴⁰ Bramen, “The Urban Picturesque,” 462.

and ornate chairs into a neatly-arranged, yet unstable pile. While visually captivating, these items exude a sense of old-world charm that situates these objects as part of the immigrants' native country. Luks enhances the antiquated feel of these goods, by setting them against the modern, mass-produced quality of the dresses in the second-story shop window. In doing so, Luks bisects his canvas into distinct registers: the old world (the street-level) and the new one (the upper-level storefront). Yet, Luks allows for some fluidity between strata, using the central female figure on the stairs to bridge the two realms. Importantly, he renders her in silhouette—denying the viewer a clear reading of her identity through her clothing—on a staircase—a structure that marks a transition between two spaces. Consequently, the woman's identity is in flux, allowing her to navigate the liminal space between an old-world culture and new-world ideas.

As I have discussed throughout this section, *Allen Street* is a painting that is in between states of being. The buildings are in between solidity and dissolution, simultaneously coming into being and coming undone on the surface of the canvas; the perspective and painted shadows concurrently tricks the viewer's eye into perceiving spatial depth, while flattening the image; and, the fictive figures are at the same time recognizable types of people and blurred faces without individual identities. While these Jewish figures are fictitious characters in Luks's imagined scene, they possibly represent the unstable status of immigrants living in New York City in the early twentieth century. As historian David Roediger argues, immigrants existed in a state of "inbetweenness," as they challenged existing ideas of class, ethnic, and racial categorization.⁴¹ Although Roediger utilizes "inbetweenness" as a way to interpret how new

⁴¹ David Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White, The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 13.

immigrants navigated their uncertain racial status in the United States, his methodological lens can potentially unpack why Luks renders his figures in a painterly and indeterminate manner.⁴²

As I have previously argued, Luks's bravura handling of paint and sketchy articulations of his figures possibly attests to his desire to represent the rapidly-changing nature of New York City and the seemingly endless flow of immigrants into the metropolis. However, when considering Roediger's notion of inbetweenness and Bramen's idea of the urban picturesque, Luks's painterly expression of the Jewish immigrants perhaps also suggests how the artist attempts to translate shifting identities through medium. Thus, Luks's brushy figures with their blurred appearances and obscured features, suggest characters who are in the process of coming into being—both on the surface of the canvas and in the city itself.

Conclusion: The Anxieties of Modern Life

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the United States experienced periods of instability and tumultuous change. The gradually increasing numbers of immigrants arriving in major urban centers and the rapidly-modernizing cityscapes elicited a sense of anxiety from the modern inhabitant. In New York City, artists and illustrators attempted to translate the unease prompted by the constantly-changing and increasingly-diversifying character of the city in various media. In newspaper and magazines, illustrators capitalized on viewers' fears of immigration as a pestilence that brought disease and crime to America. They warned that if left unheeded, immigrants would endanger American values and put native-born American citizens out of jobs. Likewise, Ashcan artists alluded to the anxieties induced by immigration and sought to alleviate their viewers' worries through representation. In *Allen Street*, George Luks suggests

⁴² NB: While not explored further in this paper, Roediger's "inbetweenness" provides an effective lens through which whiteness—as both a racial category and a color—can be read the image.

contemporary apprehensions over the shifting nature of the city and its inhabitants through his gestural strokes and expressive use of color. From the blurred visages of the figures to the unsteady mound of consumer goods, the artist portrays the Jewish neighborhood and the individuals' identities as in flux. However, beneath this layer of instability, Luks attempts to stabilize the scene by reducing the number of figures, sanitizing the image, and bifurcating the canvas into the realms of "old culture" and "new [American] ideas."⁴³ In doing so, Luks endeavors to assuage his viewers' fears and show his audience that immigrants are not a threat, but are, instead, a picturesque addition to the changing urban fabric of New York City.

⁴³ Bramen, "The Urban Picturesque," 462.

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Appendix



Fig. 1. George Luks, *Allen Street*, c. 1905.
Oil on canvas, 32 x 45 in. Hunter Museum of American Art.



Fig. 2. George Luks, *Hester Street*, 1905.
Oil on canvas, 25 13/16 x 35 7/8 in. Brooklyn Museum.



Fig. 3. *Street Vendors, Hester Street, 1898*. Photograph.
The Byron Collection, Museum of the City of New York.

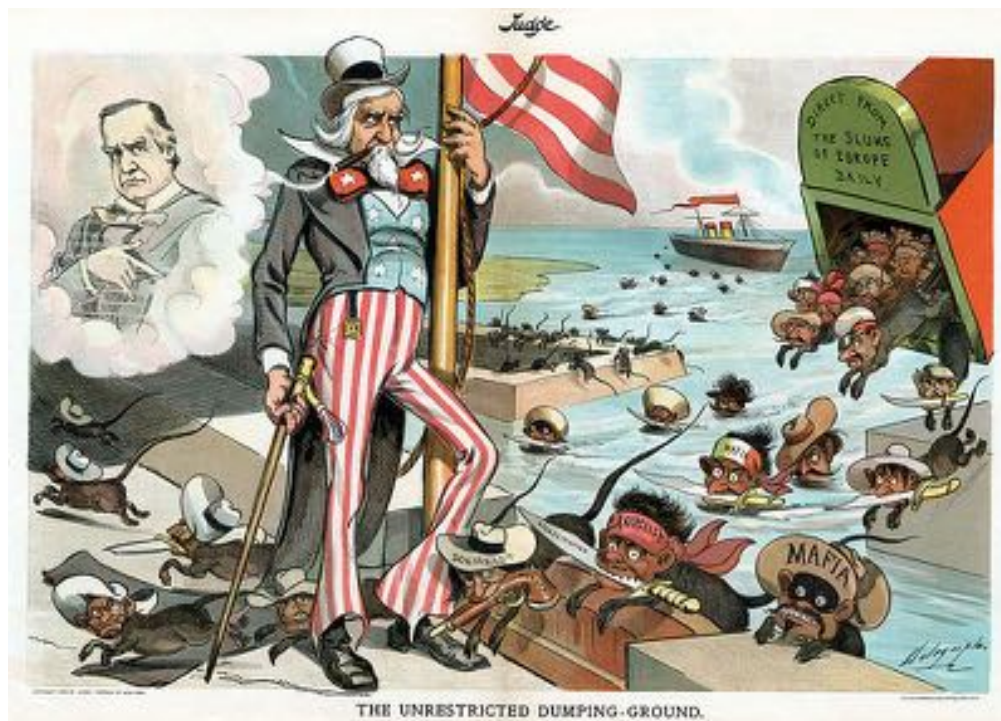


Fig. 4. Louis Dalrymple, "The Unrestricted Dumping Ground."
Judge Magazine, June 6, 1903.



Fig. 5. Louis Dalrymple, “The High Tide of Immigration—A National Menace.”
Judge Magazine, August 22, 1903.



Fig. 6. George F. Keller, “Uncle Sam’s Farm in Danger.”
The San Francisco Wasp, March 9, 1878.



Fig. 7. Grant E. Hamilton, "Their New Jerusalem."
Judge Magazine, January 23, 1892.

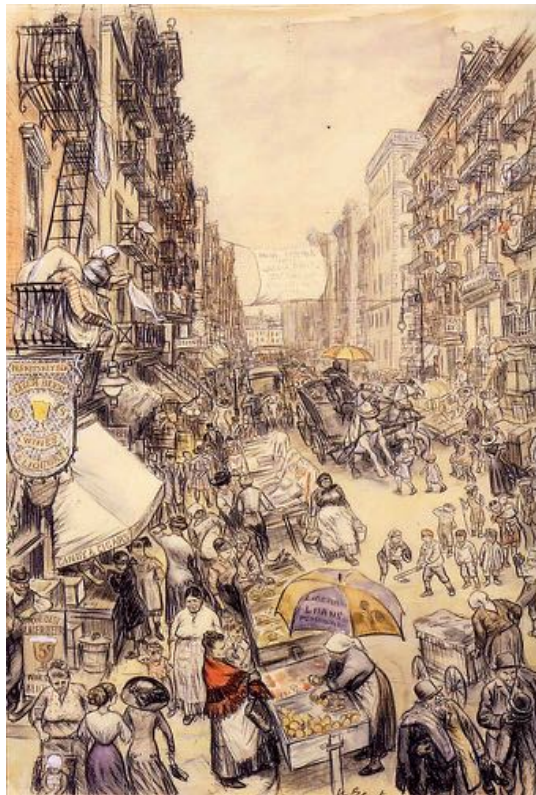


Fig. 8. William Glackens, *Far from the Fresh Air Farm*, 1911.
Carbon pencil and watercolor on paper, 25 ½ x 17 in. NSU Art Museum, Fort Lauderdale.



Fig. 9. Jacob A. Riis, *Bandit's Roost, 59 1/2 Mulberry Street*, 1888.
Gelatin silver print, 19 3/16 x 15 1/2 in. Museum of Modern Art.

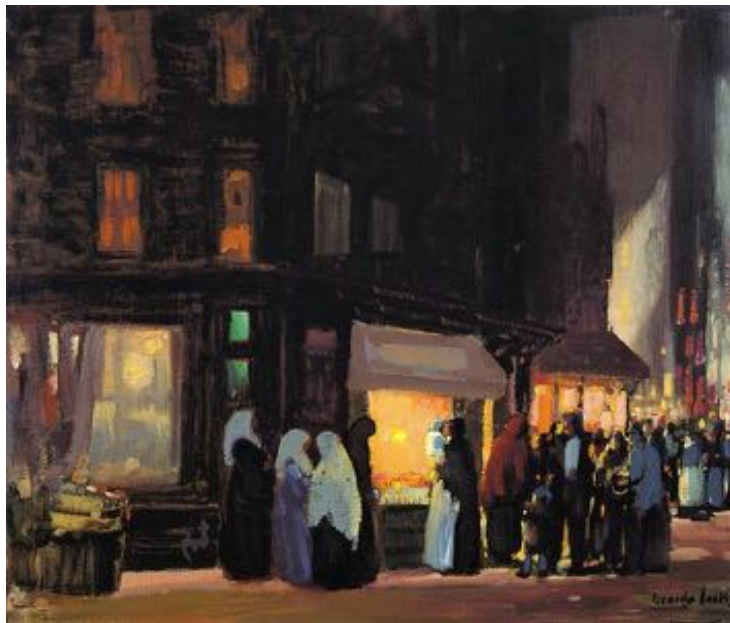


Fig. 8. George Luks, *Bleecker and Carmine Streets, New York*, c. 1905.
Oil on canvas, 25 x 30 in. Milwaukee Art Museum.