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Book Review

***Bohemia in America, 1858–1920.* By Joanna Levin. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. x, 469 pp. \$65.00, ISBN 978-0-8047-6083-6.)**

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Bohemia in America is revisionist history in the best sense. Not only does it overturn received wisdom but it also reveals, on a vast canvas long assumed to be more or less blank, a vivid collage of scenes and portraits, rich in both concrete details and meaningful abstractions. In this case, the received wisdom is the claim that in the United States bohemianism was a relatively inconsequential affair, a pale and nearly irrelevant version of the famed Parisian *vie bohème*. Joanna Levin convincingly proves otherwise. Most impressive, however, is Levin's

exploration of numerous versions of “bohemia,” each with a family resemblance to the others, yet each one unique in its interpretation, articulation, and realization of “*la vie de bohème*.”

Levin argues that in the United States,

the persistent differences between (and within) the categories of the Bohemian and the Bourgeois—including those based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, and regional identity—ever complicate the familiar opposition. Foregrounding these many differences, the cultural geography of Bohemia has subjected the traditional binary to many temporal, ideological, and aesthetic remappings. (pp. 2–3)

In pursuit of these remappings, Levin investigates a wide range of bohemian subcultures, extending from a German rathskeller in antebellum Manhattan to San Francisco in the latter half of the nineteenth century to “regional Bohemias” in *fin-de-siècle* Fort Worth and Cincinnati to Manhattan’s Lower East Side and Greenwich Village in the early twentieth century. Seeking to “restore ... complexity to the counterculture known and experienced as Bohemia,” Levin examines multiple ways

the dialectics of Bohemianism destabilize any reduction of the real to the ideal, the Bohemian to the Bourgeois, the ethnic to the national, the regional to the provincial, the gendered to the biological, or the aesthetic to the commercial. (p. 9)

Along the way, the reader encounters a host of writers, editors, poets, and playwrights, both familiar and little known.

Levin is to be commended for the exhaustive research that has enabled her to populate these discrete and shape-shifting bohemias with such noteworthy literary figures (including both transient observers and resident bohemians) as Walt Whitman, Bret Harte, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, William Dean Howells, Henry James, Ellen Glasgow, Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, Willa Cather, Abraham Cahan, James Weldon Johnson, and Paul Laurence Dunbar. In addition to analyzing the writings of these figures, Levin draws extensively on bohemian periodicals, mainstream newspapers, memoirs, plays, and even Broadway musicals. Whether critiquing bohemia from an ideological distance or singing its praises, the dozens of contemporary voices that Levin captures make for a highly textured, engaging account.

There are a lot of moving parts here, and Levin coordinates them admirably. Occasionally, however, the drive to compartmentalize milieus (such as “ethnic” bohemias) in service to the book’s structural requirements seems to constrict the analysis and leads to some diffusion of material. Coverage of the visual arts is also regrettably meager. These criticisms pale, however, in comparison to the overall excellence of this multifaceted cultural history. *Bohemia in America* is an important and authoritative book with remarkable reach.