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“Reading the Progressive Era: Literature, Race, and the Settlement House”

The Educational Alliance, a large settlement house in the Jewish immigrant community of New York City’s Lower East Side, was an unlikely but prominent locus for literary and cultural work at the turn of the twentieth century. In this paper, I argue that intersecting dynamics of Americanization and racialization, cultural estrangement and creative opportunity within the settlement house generated a complex culture of reading that has served as a crucial and unacknowledged site of minority literary production.

The Educational Alliance’s stated goal in all of its cultural pursuits was to work toward “humanizing, Americanizing and elevating the people,” and literature played a critical role in that process. Literary clubs and classes proliferated between 1895-1905, and archival materials show that these hybrid entities were envisioned as primary agents for the Alliance’s mission of Americanization. Access to reading and writing was conjoined with explicit instruction in gender norms and the attempt to manipulate racialized affect and behavior. For example, the Little Women Club spent the summer of 1901 reading *Little Women* and sewing dolls’ clothes for sick children, interweaving the novel’s lessons in charity with its pronouncements on female creativity, and belletristic reading material was selected to calm the Jewish readers’ ‘natural’ predilection for “feverish [and] peculiar intensity.” The emphasis on “taste,” “refinement,” and “character” within the Alliance’s institutional literature demonstrates that reading and assimilation were presumed to be parallel operations, making this philanthropic institution a fascinating site of progressive-era racial formation. But although literature was selected for its ability to transmit genteel values and mold the immigrant into an upwardly mobile white citizen, the settlement house ultimately generated an alternative literary sphere that silently underwrites twentieth-century Jewish American writing and sets in motion many of its key concerns.