



Amy DeFalco Lippert. *Consuming Identities: Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 416 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-026897-8.

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## Black on Lippert, *Consuming Identities*

In *Consuming Identities*, Amy DeFalco Lippert offers a superb chronicle of mass culture in San Francisco in the mid-late nineteenth century. Lippert, a professor of American history at the University of Chicago, brings together a diverse set of sources to construct her narrative, including photographs, lithographs, newspapers, private letters and diaries, published primary sources, and institutional records. Using these, Lippert builds upon the work of prominent scholars of visual culture—including W. J. T. Mitchell, Vanessa Schwartz, James Cook, Joshua Brown, and Michael Leja, among others.[1] Pushing against the predominance of New York and Paris in this literature, Lippert offers San Francisco as a pivotal location for reperiodizing developments in mass culture, including celebrity, surveillance, modern race relations, and identity formation.

In seven richly researched chapters, Lippert examines the centrality of images to the modern experience, arguing that mid-nineteenth-century San Franciscans participated in many of the trends traditionally associated with the modern mass culture of the early twentieth century. Each of these chapters presents a series of vignettes, intertwined with relevant context, to show how images influenced the lives and perceptions of individuals living in San Francisco after 1849. Though the bulk of the text focuses on photography, Lippert skillfully brings other relevant visual sources into her story, including lithographs, *cartes-des-visites*, image-laden stationery called “letter

sheets,” and illustrated newspapers. The book begins with an examination of the ways in which the Gold Rush attracted a range of domestic migrants and international immigrants to the region, each seeking to gain fame and fortune—figures who have been captured and enshrined for posterity through photographic portraiture. Lippert details how visual culture (especially lithographs and photographs) helped initiate an archetypal miner in public consciousness, which subsequently fed into identity formation for the men who traveled to California to strike it rich. Photography also contributed to the creation of immigrant stereotypes—particularly of Chinese men and women—which fueled ethnic and social divisions in the city. Yet photographs also worked to bring people together, particularly homesick Argonauts and their loved ones back East, in ways that paralleled the intimacy brought by letter-writing.[2]

In later chapters, Lippert examines how San Franciscans participated in familiar narratives of nineteenth-century popular culture, and likewise, how visual culture influenced familiar narratives in the history of the West. Examining post-mortem photography and other instances of commemoration, Lippert notes how visual media punctuated the life cycles of miners and their families, sustaining family relationships and reinforcing “virtual interconnections” across vast distances (p. 199). Photography also contributed to the growth and maintenance of prostitution in the West—a key industry through

these decades—by augmenting physical erotica through visual platforms (i.e., pornography) that could be widely shared, enabling vicarious participation in sexual pleasure. Interestingly, portrayals of interracial mixing (both erotic and benign) fed into the excitement that other visual media could produce in this “marketplace of arousal” (p. 256). Lippert also examines the ways in which public surveillance (through photography and other means) led to the emergence of Rogues’ Galleries and vigilante justice in the middle decades of the century, which ultimately fed into ethnic tensions between whites and nonwhites. Here, Lippert builds upon the pioneering work of Anna Pegler-Gordon and Shawn Michelle Smith, who have each examined the intersection of photography with social constructions of the Other.<sup>[3]</sup> Moreover, photography—especially *cartes-des-visites*—helped to boost the celebrity of theatrical performers traveling through San Francisco, as well as the notoriety of California as a land of plenty and Gold Rush miners as history-makers. Lippert notes how photographs helped to disburse an individual’s fame beyond the local in ways that were not possible earlier in the century. Finally, Lippert traces several provocative precursors to familiar topics in twentieth-century history, including a budding appeal to women as consumers (p. 204) and the gender fluidity (and perhaps nascent queerness) of actress Adah Isaacs Menken (p. 342).

Throughout the text, Lippert insists on the importance of the visual realm for understanding not just how nineteenth-century individuals perceived daily life, their own identities, and the identities of others in public space, but also how San Franciscans *acted upon* such perceptions. In short, Lippert argues that images not only represented life in the past, but also shaped how individuals interacted. This claim is one worth repeating, even if it echoes those made by Schwartz (in *Spectacular Realities*) and Brown (in *Beyond the Lines*) about two decades ago. Indeed, this reader appreciated seeing the influence of these (and the aforementioned) visual culture scholars in this, the newest scholarship in the history of California and the West. Lippert’s indebtedness to these visual culture forerunners demonstrates how the study of visual culture is permeating our understandings of broader cultural developments such as immigration, economic development, and criminality. This is one of Lippert’s strongest contributions to the cultural history of the United States. While other scholars have sought to reperiodize the emergence of mass culture (from the late nineteenth to the mid-nineteenth century), Lippert also decentralizes the importance of New York and Paris in

these narratives. Shifting our focus to San Francisco, Lippert shows that budding urban centers exhibited many of the familiar features of mass culture and that studying them can provide new perspectives on the intersection of mass culture with economic growth and immigration. Of particular interest is her detailed discussion, in chapters 2 and 3, of the economic aspects of image circulation in early San Francisco, which includes a history of local photography studios and image production, distribution channels that carried pictures to other parts of the country, and consumption patterns of these, in an attempt to show how San Francisco became a hub of visual production and consumption.

Lippert’s broadly researched book is well suited for introductory and upper-level graduate seminars, especially in visual culture, modernity, urban history, and the history of the West. This reviewer can also envision applications, in small doses, in upper-level undergraduate seminars focusing on similar themes. The writing throughout the text is clear and accessible, and a short glossary of terms appended to the book, as well as an online companion website ([www.consumingidentities.com](http://www.consumingidentities.com)), augments the pedagogical possibilities for this text. Some readers might find the organization of the book challenging, however. Each chapter presents clearly defined sections, but at some points these read as a series of vignettes rather than elements of a coherent narrative within each chapter itself. Moreover, the argument feels somewhat shallow throughout some of the middle chapters in the book, as the diverse evidence presented resists being culled together in the current organization.

These criticisms notwithstanding, the book presents an engaging, and often compelling, narrative about the importance of visual culture for understanding Gold Rush-era San Francisco. Lippert argues that the city shows us “how images functioned in an increasingly mobile, urban, and capitalist society,” where spectatorship became “a central means of navigating the anonymity of urban space and the perennial desires stoked by the marketplace” (p. 374). It is provocative, informative, and encyclopedic in its coverage of San Francisco’s visual culture in the decades bridging the Gold Rush. In short, *Consuming Identities* is sure to become a staple in the bookcases of historians studying visual culture, urban history, and the West.

#### Notes

[1]. W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Vanessa R. Schwartz,

*Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Joshua Brown, *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); and Michael Leja, *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

[2]. For example, see Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven,

CT: Yale University Press, 1996); Konstantin Dierks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); and Lindsay O'Neill, *The Opened Letter: Networking in the Early Modern British World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

[3]. Anna Pegler-Gordon, *In Sight of America: Photography and the Development of U.S. Immigration Policy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); and Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

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