Transatlantic Border-crossing to and from Hull-House: Jane Addams, Henrietta Barnett, Hilda Polacheck, and Me

Sarah Ruffing Robbins

1TCU – United States

Abstract

In an era when immigration and diaspora claim as much attention from political rhetoric as from scholars, we stand to gain from re-visiting the writing of women associated with Hull-House, a pioneering Progressive-Era settlement established in Chicago’s urban center during another period of high anxieties around immigration. And, in the context of this SSAWW conference, Hull-House’s current cultural value can be re-illuminated by considering how its physical and social location—at a crossroads bringing people from many ethnic backgrounds together—helped produce generative women’s writing about border-crossing and its links to social justice agendas. This paper will revisit the actual transatlantic border-crossing experiences of three women closely associated with Hull-House’s early history: Jane Addams, its most visible leader; Henrietta Barnett, co-founder of London’s Toynbee Hall, whose example inspired and continued to influence Addams and her writings; and Hilda Satt Polacheck, a Jewish immigrant from Central Europe whose memoir represents the only book-length narrative about Hull-House from the perspective of one of those Addams and her co-“residents” at the settlement called their “neighbors.” I will first consider how the repeated transatlantic crossings of Addams and Barnett—both in person and through ongoing correspondence of over 40 years-shaped the vision and actions choices of both in gendered settlement leadership. I will then highlight aspects of Polacheck’s memoir of border-crossing—not just across the Atlantic but also from tenement and sweatshop into settlement life—as providing a crucial supplement to Addams’ and Barnett’s “mestiza” narratives. Finally, I will reflect briefly on my own experience of re-envisioning Hull-House and Addams through transatlantic projects with colleagues in the Symbiosis organization and at the University of Edinburgh.

*Speaker