

BOOK REVIEW

Heidi Kaufman. *Strangers in the Archive: Literary Evidence and London's East End*

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Prolonged research in an archival institution, whether the well-funded and technologically advanced libraries of Ivy League universities or the dusty repositories tucked away in the backstreets of provincial towns, is usually the precursor to an academic publication. In Heidi Kaufman's *Strangers in the Archive: Literary Evidence and London's East End*, archives themselves, material and digital, actual and potential, become the focus of the investigation. Along the way, Kaufman addresses a number of fallacies, half-truths, and questionable assumptions, about how scholars use and themselves change the primary materials they interact with, and also about the East End of London in the nineteenth century as a physical and imagined terrain, which is the chosen canvas of this study.

Kaufman's project begins, as the questions underpinning an ambitious and extended piece of academic work often do, with the encountering of a piece of extraneous information while carrying out research on a different matter. In this case this was an allusion to Maria Polack, who lived in East London in the first half of the nineteenth century and is credited with being the first Jewish author to publish a novel in Britain, *Fiction Without Romance*, in 1830. Kaufman determined to piece together, as much as possible, the details of Polack's life and times, and the question of how archival material could be employed to accomplish this forms the basis of the monograph.

Kaufman divides *Strangers in the Archive* into four chapters. The first chapter provides a welcome reconsideration of many of the assumptions, based around class, ethnicity, and gender, made about the nature of East End society and creative life. As Kaufman makes clear right at the beginning of the book, relaying an overheard conversation at a dinner party disparaging the 2012 Olympic games' setting in East London, this marginalization of an area associated with different forms of the Other has not faded with time. The continued dominance of certain archetypes, such as Charles Dickens's Fagin, and the prevalent "Ripper tourist" industry in that part of the city are discussed. Kaufman also challenges the conception that nineteenth-century literature was created solely *about* rather than *by* Eastenders, that the working class would not have the necessary resources to capture their own experiences. The next three chapters detail Kaufman's experiences in different archival institutions, and the creation by the author themselves of digital databases collating information in an attempt to address these gaps in the knowledge surrounding Polack's life, her work, and her social circle.

The result is a book that is ambitious, challenging, and multidisciplinary in scope, as well as being very enjoyable to read. Kaufman's study is transnational, leaving the confines of the East End and following the conduits of diaspora and imperialism, and at certain points shifting the focus to rural Jamaica. A range of different forms of historical testament are

examined, from census records and private diaries to the correspondence of orphanages and the inscriptions on moss-covered gravestones. Throughout, the joys and frustrations of archival research are captured, and the problematic presentation (and self-perception) of scholars as so-called detectives, saviors for those marginalized groups located in the past whose experiences are revealed (or not) through investigation into primary materials is dissected. Essentially there are three overlapping narratives presented in *Strangers in the Archive*—the narratives discovered in the archives (the lives of Polack and her family), the narrative of the archives and sources used by Kaufman (the nature of this material, how it was collated, how it answers or does not answer the researcher's questions), and Kaufman's own narrative of seeking and examining this material. Above all this is a consideration of narrative silence, and an acknowledgment that sometimes these silences will remain, despite the efforts of researchers. There is also a final, dramatic, and unexpected revelation about Maria Polack's own life, which demonstrates the ability of the information contained in archives to unseat the assumptions underpinning our research and makes clear that we are never really in control of the material we are examining.

Kaufman also makes the point, already stressed by a number of theorists on language and information transfer that, selected, combined, and presented by human beings as they are, archives can never be neutral spaces. As Kaufman writes: "Archives are crafted, created platforms that mediate relationships between the past and future. They enable and intervene in cultural continuity. And they serve as a platform for both exchange and erasure" (114).

This is a book full of ideas and questions which are sometimes only partially answered, these answers demanding the posing of new questions in their turn. Kaufman acknowledges their own position as an outsider, both to the nineteenth-century East End where the subjects of this monograph made their homes, and in contemporary Jamaica, where the research leads. It presents the current state of the debate on archives and their use (or misuse) and suggests future points of discussion. *Strangers in the Archive* will be required reading for students of Anglo-Jewish or East End social history, those interested in obscurer British nineteenth-century literature, and researchers who wish to consider in more depth their own relationship with the archives they work in. Overall Kaufman's monograph constitutes a bold contribution to the theoretical body of work on archival studies.