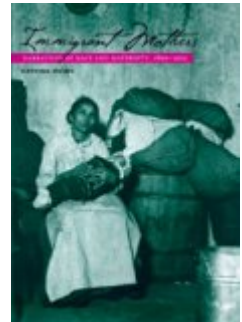


Katrina Irving. *Immigrant Mothers: Narratives of Race and Maternity, 1890-1925.*

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At the end of her discussion of Americanization, Katrina Irving writes: "The hysteria that accompanied Americanizers' activities during the war years resulted from the reformers' assumptions about the obdurate traditionalism of the immigrant woman" (p. 90). How did she come to such an extraordinary conclusion? Not by examining actual instances of wartime hysteria. Had she, for example, considered the efforts of the federal Committee on Public Information (the Creel Committee) to control the foreign-language press or to organize "I Am An American" Day parades for July 4, 1918, she would have encountered the specter of the "hyphen." Were German-Americans or Irish-Americans or Swedish-Americans, many of whom had vigorously opposed American entry into the war, loyal? Did the hyphen indicate a divided allegiance? Was the United States threatened by a kind of Balkanization? These and other fears had much to do with the political activities of immigrant men and little or nothing to do with the domestic traditionalism of immigrant women.

Irving does mention, in another chapter, that the Immigration Act of 1917 empowered the gov-

ernment to deport immigrant aliens and notes the deportation of Alexander Berkman (misidentified as "the would-be assassin" of Andrew Carnegie) and Emma Goldman for radical political activities (p. 98). It is telling that the crusade for "100% Americanism" does not figure in her discussion of Americanization and receives only this brief comment in the chapter on cultural pluralism.

It is often unfair to complain that an author did not consider a particular topic or event or piece of evidence. One of the privileges of authorship is to construct one's own argument. But this is a privilege, not a license. One cannot affirm that the "hysteria" that accompanied wartime Americanization resulted from assumptions about immigrant women stubbornly clinging to tradition and ignore a large body of evidence, readily available and widely discussed, that supports alternative explanations.

How does Irving reach this remarkable conclusion? She cites Frances Kellor's essay on "Neighborhood Americanization," but not her voluminous writings on immigrant male workers. She links Jacob Riis's *How The Other Half Lives* to

the "sentimental" fiction of "such mid-century writers as Maria Cummins, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Susan Warner." Is this because she has reason to think that Riis read any of these authors? No. She instead cites the view of Laura Wexler that Americanization programs "coupled the imperial agenda of sentimental fiction with 'the social control of marginal domestic populations'" (p. 72). Even though, according to Irving, such fiction had declined in influence by the Progressive Era, it nonetheless informed the work of Riis. Why? Presumably because, once "discourse" has joined together agenda items, no mortal power can sever them.

What was this "imperial agenda"? Judging by Irving's treatment of several Riis photographs and of an anecdote in Lillian Wald's *The House on Henry Street*, it entailed remedying the immigrant mother's deficiencies by teaching her "modern" (aka American) forms of child care and home-making. In Wald's autobiography, she recounted how she came upon an Italian woman with two starving children. She made sure the family received enough food and then arranged to have the father released from jail where he had been wrongfully confined. For Irving, "Wald's relation to the immigrant is shown to be an aestheticized one before her textualization of the event: 'Her face brought instantly to my mind the famous picture of the sorrowing mother'" (p. 79). It is "the immigrant woman's failure to approximate the maternal ideal" which "calls for Wald's intervention." The episode "is a striking example of how the rhetoric of sentimental motherhood can be mobilized both to legitimate native intervention into immigrants' lives and mount an argument for their potential recuperability for the American way of life" (p. 79). One can doubt Wald felt her "intervention" required legitimating. Of course she could have allowed the mother and her children to starve. She could have allowed the husband to rot in prison. Fortunately for these immigrants,

Wald was a sentimental imperialist of the deepest dye.

Any line of argument which leads to such absurdities should be quickly and quietly abandoned as should be the book which contains them. *Immigrant Mothers* does have an additional claim upon our attention, however. It strikingly exemplifies a current reductionist tendency in Culture Studies, namely, to explain everything in terms of race, gender, and (diminishingly) class.

In her discussion of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Irving seconds the call of Elizabeth Ammons to "consider the 'actual, important presence of race as a category in Wharton's work'" (p. 39). In the novel that presence takes the form of the "'invading Jew'" Simon Rosedale. This is as close as Irving comes to discussing anti-Semitism in the construction of nativist discourse. She does not advert to it again, not even when analyzing Horace Kallen's theory of cultural pluralism. Nor does she mention Zionism or the widespread concern among American Jews over how to maintain their own identities as Jews as they modified or abandoned traditional religious and cultural practices. Instead she treats Kallen as another voice in the chorus of native-born Americans concerned about immigration.

Anti-Catholicism receives no more attention. In her extended analysis of *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, Irving does point out that in the novel, Harold Frederic reversed a number of stereotypical views of Irish Catholics. This does not distract her, however, from seeking to show how the novel illustrates the "engendering of the new immigrant." Irving writes: ". . . trembling on the cusp of nativism, the representation of the immigrant woman [in Frederic's novel] portends although does not fully mirror that construction of the alien female as the compaction of her race's essence and therefore as especially noxious" (p. 34).

The immigrant woman in question is the "wealthy, cultivated" and "beautiful" Celia Mad-

den. She is not a "new" immigrant as that term was used, to refer to newcomers from southern and eastern Europe. This detail does not slow Irving down. Nor does the problem that those nativists who did see the immigrant woman as "the compaction of her race's essence" never included wealth, beauty, or cultivated sensibilities in their descriptions of that essence. Nor does the problem that Frederic did not present Celia as quintessentially Irish. After all, Irving is dealing with what the novel "portends" rather than with what it "fully mirrors."

Similarly, Irving seizes upon Frank Norris' use of the word "swarthy" to describe Trina's hair in *McTeague* to link the novel to nativist fears of "'swarthy white' races" (p. 65). Trina is a Swiss-German immigrant. Nativists like Clinton Stoddard Burr, whom Irving cites at this juncture, did not classify Swiss Germans as "swarthy whites." Irving offers a description of their categories in her first chapter. They divided European peoples into Nordic or Aryan, Alpine, and Mediterranean. As one proceeded from north to south and from west to east, the differentiation between old and new immigrants, one encountered "swarthy whites." Trina's beautiful black hair may "intimate her latent depravity" (p. 65), but it is not a racial signifier in the sense Irving intends.

Is there, finally, nothing worth salvaging from this account of "the racialization of the immigrant woman at the turn of the nineteenth [sic] century"? (p. 110) Yes. The question which lies at its heart, how did ideas of gender and ideas of race enter into debates over national identity, very much deserves asking. We need to rethink, however, how we frame the question. Americans, as Charlotte Perkins Gilman observed, categorized virtually every human trait as masculine or feminine. They could not think about any issue, as a consequence, without employing gendered terms and notions. Racial ideas were equally pervasive. So it contributes little or nothing to our understanding to point to the "engendering" or the

"racializing" of the "discourse" about any topic. This suggests that race and/or gender lay at the heart of whatever we happen to be discussing when all we have actually shown is that people were using language.

An example may help. As southern states moved toward secession, northern cartoonists frequently portrayed them as headstrong young women asserting their independence from that old patriarch Brother Jonathan or his newer incarnation Uncle Sam. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. composed an ode from Brother Jonathan to his sister Caroline. (I include several examples of these cartoons and the poem in *This High and Holy Moment*). Does this mean that Northerners "engendered" secession? Yes. Does using this term contribute to our understanding of the way they understood the South's actions? I would answer that it does not. What can contribute is a study of how the ongoing public debate over woman's rights during the 1850s, combined with the coincidence that many southern state names were female, provided a frame which Northerners could use to describe events which were irreducibly political. What can also help is a study of how popular images of Reconstruction showing a contrite southern bride renewing her marriage vows, especially obedience, provided a frame for criticizing woman's rights as a threat to fundamental social values.

Discovering that Americans thought in terms of race and gender is like discovering that fish swim in water. It is necessary to know but it is not sufficient.

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