



"Speaking for Thousands": Mary Antin's The Promised Land and dominant narratives of identity in the early 20th century

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Publicado por: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra

URL persistente: <http://hdl.handle.net/10316.2/42325>

DOI: https://doi.org/10.14195/978-989-26-1308-6_15

Accessed : 11-Sep-2017 17:01:59

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**“SPEAKING FOR THOUSANDS”:
MARY’S ANTIN’S THE PROMISED LAND
AND DOMINANT NARRATIVES OF IDENTITY
IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY**

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Resumo: Este artigo explora a narrativa verbal e fotográfica da autobiografia de Mary Antin no contexto dos debates sobre a construção da nação e da identidade americana no início do século XX, uma época em que estas questões assumiram grande importância devido ao aumento exponencial da imigração. Embora a sua história tenha sido vista como um exemplo a emular pelas “massas” que batiam à porta da América, defende-se que este texto constitui um exemplo do que George Lipsitz designa por “contra-memória”, não só no sentido em que recupera um passado suprimido, uma história excluída da narrativa dominante da nação, mas também porque se assume como a voz de milhares de imigrantes, ilustrando milhares de vidas anónimas.

Palavras chave: Autobiografia imigrante; americanização; assimilação; restrição da imigração.

Abstract: This paper explores the verbal and the usually neglected photographic narratives of M. Antin's autobiography in the context of the debates about the construction of the nation and the definition of an American identity in the early 20th century, a time when the massive increase in immigration lent a particular urgency to these issues. Although her story was quickly co-opted as an example to be emulated by the "huddled masses" knocking at "the golden door" of America, I argue that her text can actually be seen as an example of what George Lipsitz calls "counter-memory", not only in the sense that it reclaims a suppressed past, a history excluded from the master narrative of the nation, but also in that it claims to "speak for thousands", illustrating "scores of unwritten lives".

Keywords: Immigrant autobiography; Americanization; assimilation; immigration restriction.

Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912) is perhaps the most famous of the many immigrant autobiographies that were published in the early decades of the 20th century in the U.S. Other popular autobiographies were *The Making of an American* (1901), by Jacob Riis, *From Alien to Citizen*, by Edward Steiner (1914), *The Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie* (1920), and *The Americanization of Edward Bok* (1920). The interest in immigrants' tales in this period is also attested by the 75 life stories, many of them by immigrants, published by the reformist newspaper *The Independent* between 1902 and 1906. Its editor, Hamilton Holt, selected 16 of these "lifelets," as he called them, and published them in a book entitled *Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans As Told by Themselves* (see Sollors 2002: 390-91).

Unlike Carnegie or Bok, Mary Antin was indeed an “undistinguished American” when she published her autobiography, as she candidly states in the introduction: “I have not accomplished anything, I have not discovered anything. . . My life has been unusual, but by no means unique” (Antin 1912/1997: 2).¹ Nevertheless, the story of her “makeover” became an instant success and was immediately revised for schoolchildren as *At School in the Promised Land or the Story of a Little Immigrant*, and special educational editions of her book continued to be published for use in civics classes until the late 1940s (see Sollors 1997: XXXII; Holte 1988: 28).

Although *The Promised Land* was read at the time, and for many decades after, as a story of successful assimilation, more recently several critics have shown how it disrupts the typical plot of conversion of the paradigmatic narrative of Americanization (Ashley 1998; Bergland 1994; Buelens 1994; Wasson 1994). A central element of this narrative was the erasure of the immigrant’s past and the wholehearted adoption of the new mode of life in America. By recovering a personal and collective past embedded in the long history of Jewish oppression, Antin’s autobiography refutes the linear simplicity of this dominant narrative of identity. The double vision and double voice that emerge from this remembrance of things past further complicate the reading of a text that has been variously called a “spiritual autobiography” (Salz 2000: xvi), a “biomythography” (Ashley 1998), or even “a treatise on sociology, of which education is the dominant feature” (*Literary Digest* 1912, qtd. in Sollors 1997: XXXII).

What I propose to do is to explore the verbal as well as the usually neglected photographic narratives of Antin’s autobiography²

¹ The abbreviation PL will be used in subsequent references to *The Promised Land*.

² As far as I know, Betty Bergland’s “Rereading Photographs and Narratives in Ethnic Autobiography” (1994) is the only extensive essay on this aspect of Antin’s

in the context of the debates about the construction of the nation and the definition of an American identity, at a time when the massive increase in immigration and the flare-up of nativism and xenophobia lent a particular urgency to these issues. Although her story was quickly coopted as an example to be emulated by the “huddled masses” knocking at “the golden door” of America, I will argue that her text can actually be seen as an example of what George Lipsitz (2001) calls “counter-memory.” As Lipsitz states, “counter-memory focuses on localized experiences with oppression, using them to reframe and refocus dominant narratives purporting to represent universal experience” (213). What Antin explicitly sets out to do is to “force revision” of existing representations of immigrants, and especially Jews, “by supplying new perspectives about [their] past” (*ibidem*) as well as their present. Thus, her narrative seeks, on the one hand, to reclaim a suppressed past, a history excluded from the master narrative of the nation, and on the other to give a sense of the daily striving of immigrants in America.

At the same time, Antin constructs her narrative in such a way as to conflate the “local” and the “universal.” Thus, the Antin family’s history of oppression in Russia serves as an illustration not only of the lives of Jews in Eastern Europe, but also of all the oppressed who flee tyranny and persecution. The story of the “little immigrant” who was “made over” is told by a narrator who claims to “speak for thousands,” “the humble [who] are apt to live inarticulate and die unheard” (PL 72; cf. 195). The autobiography of a thirty-year old undistinguished American is therefore fully justified:

It is because I understand my history, in its larger outlines, to be typical of many, that I consider it worth recording. My life is a concrete illustration of a multitude of statistical facts. Although

text.

I have written a genuine personal memoir, I believe that its chief interest lies in the fact that it is illustrative of scores of unwritten lives. (PL 2)

The official memory of this period of U.S. history is registered in population census statistics, records of the origins and numbers of migrants entering the country, congressional records of the debates on immigration, state surveys of immigration, besides countless studies of immigrant communities undertaken by sociologists, anthropologists and historians. The numbers are indeed staggering, and even more so when set in the context of the transatlantic migrations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries: from 1871 to World War I, 36,890 million people migrated to the Americas. The heaviest influx was in the period between 1891 and 1914: almost 26 million, of which over 16 million (16,618,000) migrated to the U.S. (Nugent 1995: 14). Another significant factor was the diversity of the migrants that settled in the U.S. Whereas South America received mostly migrants from Southern Europe, the U.S. attracted large contingents from all of Europe (Higham 1975: 15-16), although a noticeable trend was the increase in the number of migrants from southern and eastern Europe after the 1880s. Mary Antin and her family, who emigrated from the Jewish Pale of Settlement in Russia in the early 1890s, are representative of this shift in the sources of immigration to the U.S.

Foreign labor was absolutely essential to the expansion and transformation of the U.S. economy after the Civil War (Jacobson 2000: 4), but the sweeping social and cultural changes brought about by the massive influx of immigrants gave rise to a fierce debate that dominated the American scene especially from the early 1890s to the 1920s. At the center of this debate was the figure of the “foreigner” as racial Other, and thus, by implication, the definition of the “American.” Although the earliest attacks on the “new immigrants”

were essentially of a social and economic cast, towards the end of the 19th century arguments based on the “racial menace” they posed to the nation came to dominate the debate (Higham 1975: 44-45). Ideas of a superior American race, linked to the Anglo-Saxon branch of the Caucasian races, which had developed during the course of the 19th century (Horsman 1981: 4-5; 301-2), were now increasingly used by the proponents of immigration restriction. Associating the new immigrants with primitivism, disorder, irrationality, depravity, and disease, restrictionists argued that they were constitutionally incapable of assimilation (Higham 2000: 137-8, 140), and thus their presence threatened not only the political and cultural traditions of the nation, but also its “racial purity” (Higham 1975: 46; 2000: 138). After almost three decades of intense public and congressional debate, restrictionists won the day, and the passing of the National Origins Immigration Act in 1924 significantly reduced the influx from “undesirable” countries by establishing race-based criteria for legal admission into the U.S.

Mary Antin’s autobiography explicitly acknowledges the rising tide of opposition to immigration as well as discrimination against immigrants, and she seeks from the start to serve as “mediator” (Buelens 1994: 91-3) in this “bitter sea of racial differences and misunderstandings” (Antin 1997: 2). Indeed, she makes a conscious effort to establish connections in a deeply divided world. As Werner Sollors states in his introduction to this book, “*The Promised Land* is an autobiography of twoness, of divisions, and of ways to overcome them” (1997: xxix). In the first part of the book, Antin recalls her life as a member of an oppressed minority in Russia, while the second part describes and reflects upon her life in the U.S. Russia, representing both her personal past and the historical past of the Middle Ages, means oppression, poverty, and imprisonment; in contrast, America, representing both her present and modernity, means freedom, opportunity, and abundance. Thus, Antin’s narrator

is also represented as a “time traveler” (Sollors 1997: XXX), endowed with the knowledge and wisdom of the ages, and in the end she merges with America, “the youngest of the nations [that] inherits all that went before in history,” when she triumphantly declares that she is “the youngest of America’s children,” and hers is “the whole majestic past and. . . the shining future” (PL 286).

But this is only a superficial view of her narrative. If we take into account the interplay of voices and perspectives that “speak” in *The Promised Land*, including the photographic narrative, her counter-memory reveals a much more complex picture. The photos of the first part, documenting the poverty and oppression of Jews in the Russian Pale of Settlement, actually speak of an intensely communal life. Resistance to oppression within the Pale obviously worked in favor of group solidarity and communality, and the focus of this resistance was religion, which the older narrator describes as “a fortress erected by the prisoners of the Pale, in defiance of their jailers” (PL 26). In the New World, absence of explicit political oppression and religious persecution leads to atomization and individualism, not collective striving and endeavor.

The pictures included in the second part of *The Promised Land* emphasize this aspect, and also ironically point to the poverty, not the abundance and opportunity, of the social spaces inhabited by the immigrants. In contrast to the first part, many of pictures of the New World portray unpeopled spaces. The two pictures where groups are present capture individuals joined by accident of time and place (the school and the library); the picture of the sea at the end points to solitude and emptiness, not a “social” world of collective affinities and purposes (See Bergland 1994: 56; 73-4; 79-80); the picture of the railroad tracks, symbolizing the modern technological world of America, in contradistinction to the primitive, premodern world of Russia, signifies for Antin an evasion from “the confusion of [her] house” (PL 233) and her disintegrating family.

Her fascination with the tangle of tracks and the “fiery eye of the monster engine” indicates her growing detachment from family and community. She compares herself to the engine, “swift on my rightful business, picking out my proper track from the million that cross it, pausing for no obstacles, sure of my goal” (PL 234). The voice of the older, maturer, narrator, “whose life has borne witness, whose heart is heavy with revelations it has not made,” and who speaks “for thousands” (PL 195), reflects on “this sad process of disintegration of family life,” which “may be observed in almost any immigrant family,” and sees it as “part of the process of Americanization” (PL 213).

Thus, the photographic narrative and the shifting perspectives of the older narrator and the eager immigrant girl point to a much more somber picture of America in the early 20th century than has been acknowledged. Although Antin, in trying to capture the experiences and emotions of her younger self dazzled by the freedom and opportunities of the New World, stresses an idealized view of America, the verbal and the photographic narratives also give voice to another America, the America of the slums, which are seen “as a sort of house of detention for poor aliens, where they live on probation till they can show a certificate of good citizenship” (PL 145). The story of Antin’s father, who never managed to prosper in America, and who never ceased to be an alien, represents the dark side of the American Dream: “His history is the history of thousands who come to America, with pockets empty, hands untrained to the use of tools, minds cramped by centuries of repression” (PL 144).

In contrast to her father’s story of failure to assimilate, which would only confirm the worst fears of immigration restrictionists, she presents her own story of successful Americanization. The first words of her autobiography are “I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over” (PL 1). Most of the pages that follow are dedicated to this “making over,” this transformation of a Jewish immigrant into an American, who, nevertheless, does not “disown” her “father and

mother of the flesh” or her “entire line of ancestors” (PL 1). Although her parents and ancestors have a part in the “generation” of her “second self,” the most important part is played by the public school. Whereas her friend Horace Kallen, the earliest proponent of “cultural pluralism,” saw the American public school as a negative instrument of conformity to the norm of “the contemporary American of British ancestry” (1915/1996: 75), Antin sees it as a positive and absolutely essential means of making Americans out of “foreigners”:

The public school has done its best for us foreigners, and for the country, when it has made us into good Americans. I am glad it is mine to tell how the miracle was wrought in one case. You should be glad to hear of it, you born Americans; for it is the story of the growth of your country; . . . of the recruiting of your armies of workers, thinkers, and leaders. (PL 175)

Thus, Antin’s book, by telling the “miracle” of the making of one American who “is typical of many” (PL 2), seeks to provide a refutation of the dominant racial theories of the early 20th century.

But at the same time that she seeks to rebut the concept of identity as something innate, inherited in the blood, that can’t be changed or transcended, by proving through her own example of “conversion” that it is something that is acquired and that needs to be actively constructed within communities, her inability to forget the long past of Jewish oppression reveals her internalization of the dominant racial theories of her time. Indeed, as Priscilla Wald remarks, “Antin cannot suppress ambiguous traces of an incomplete conversion” (1995: 250). I would add that this incompleteness is also an effect of the ideological power of race in this period. In this sense, it is significant that in the introduction she invokes “the Wandering Jew” in her, who “seeks forgetfulness” (3). She confesses

that she is haunted by the past, which is metaphorically seen as “a heavy garment that clings to your limbs when you would run,” and she longs for “release from the folds of my clinging past.” Writing her autobiography is a form of exorcism, essential for her “personal salvation” (PL 3).

Thus, the double consciousness and double vision that was celebrated by W.E.B. Du Bois as emancipatory, is for Antin “painful” (PL 3). What she yearns for is the simplicity of a self unencumbered by memories of oppression and discrimination, a self that is guided (and blinded) by the shining torch of Lady Liberty, represented in the Statue that stands at the entrance of the New World, and that was chosen for the cover of her book, reinterpreted by Antin’s friend Emma Lazarus as a symbol of welcome to all those who “knock at the gates” of America.

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