

## **Hyphens and Accents: The Hidden Violence of Assimilation**

In the early 1900s, there was an influx of immigrants to the United States with numbers estimated to surpass the twenty million. Suddenly, there were pockets of immigrants of Eastern European and Mediterranean descent emerging across the United States. This led to immigration being conceptualized as a challenge to the state's nation-building efforts. In his essay "The American Melting Pot: a National Myth in Public and Popular Discourse," political scientist David Michael Smith argues that the challenge of the state in responding to large influxes of immigration is to make sure that "diversity does not become the basis for social, economic and political division" (387). Invoking popular political science theories, Smith continues to say that "the work of nationalists must simultaneously emphasize homogeneity within the nation and a high level of difference in relation to those outside of it" (388). Therefore, he argues, the United States created the idea of the melting pot to "legitimize" immigration as a part of the national fabric (Smith 380). While the challenges that Smith describes can be seen in many nations with sizable immigrant populations, the United States is unique in that it largely comprises of an immigrant citizenry. Hence, if, as Smith mentions, the work of a nationalist is to build a national identity at home that is distinct from the outside, how does he cope with the potential of many pockets within the country that could identify with the outsider? In other words, how can it secure its survival and avoid the threat of a nation within a nation? And more importantly, why does the United States allow its immigrants to maintain a hyphenated identity precisely to eliminate the threat a disintegrated nation?

The scope of this paper discusses Mary Antin's memoir, *The Promised Land*, published in 1912 to investigate why the state allows for a hyphenated identity as a strategy of securing its survival. Antin, a Russian Jew immigrant, goes through the process of Americanization and

successfully becomes an American—a Jewish-American. Although she does not have to give up her Jewishness to become an American, the terms of what constitutes “Jewishness” get redefined by the state, treating the hyphen as a transitional space in which the work of cultural ideology is done. So, to become an American, Antin feels that first she has to change her name, get rid of her accent, leave Judaism. Thus, I argue the hyphen becomes a metonym for the project of Americanization, acknowledging the existence of difference while aggressively undermining and eradicating the saliency of that difference.

I situate my analysis in the public schools because Antin speaks extensively about her admiration for the public schools and as a state funded institution, it is the perfect proxy for the state. This allows us not only to conceptualize the school territory as a space where cultural ideology is done but also to observe how the fantasy of a hyphenated identity masks the violence that accompanies the process of Americanization. I analyze three aspects of early public school education that Antin encounters that illustrate the psychic work that the hyphen does: the learning of the English language, the induction into a state sanctioned shared history, and elimination of the immigrant’s tradition in the public schools.

First, we observe how the fantasy of the hyphen is instrumental in the process of language learning. For the immigrant, learning the language is more than a convenience- it is a necessity for gaining membership into the society. Because English, until very recently, was the primary schooling language in the United States, to not adopt and master English meant to not be fully American. Even Horace M. Kallen who was an avid critic of the assimilative elements of the melting pot and argued for more multicultural approach at the time advocated for one language nation (1915). In “Democracy versus the Melting Pot,” Kallen, writes “the unison to be achieved cannot be a unison of ethnic types. It must be, if it is to be at all, a unison of social and historic

interests, established by the complete cutting-off of the ancestral memories of our population, the enforced, exclusive use of English language and English and American history in the schools and in daily life” (1915). It is noteworthy that in his argument for a more perfect union, Kallen makes a direct link between “the exclusive of English language” and achieving a unison.

However, the success of the language project depends on the immigrant maintaining the fantasy of the hyphenation. It is necessary that she doesn't realize the contradiction of embodying a hyphenated identity without a hyphenated language. For instance, Antin comes to admire the English language, claims that “in any other language happiness is not so sweet, logic is not as clear” (164). However, the irony lies that the same language she claims welcomes and embraces all cannot accommodate her own name. In fact, Antin and her family, similar to many immigrants, struggle to keep their native names. Antin writes, “with our despised immigrant clothes we shed also our impossible Hebrew names” (149). Nonetheless, she doesn't consider having her name “ruthlessly discarded” as an attack on the promise that the hyphen holds. On the contrary because her new American name is similar to her Hebrew name, Antin feels “cheated” as she “longed to possess a strange-sounding American name” (150). This perfectly illustrates the effectiveness of the immigrant fantasy in masking the violent erosion of difference. Instead of demanding full inclusion, the immigrant feels that her name is objectively “impossible” to pronounce and changes it.

Furthermore, the process of Americanization does not merely request the mastering of the English language, but the mastering of a specific kind of English. Mary Antin has an accented English which she views as an obstacle to her learning. Her accent represents her origin because she speaks English with the intonation of Yiddish. Here too, the state steps in to erase the traces of that origin, through the public-school teacher who helps Antin get rid of her accent. Therefore,

the accent becomes a synecdoche for the hyphen as both are proxy markers of difference. While the accent is a sonic reminder of difference, the hyphen is a visual marker of difference. They both signify the lingering of the foreign origin. Hence, requiring the ‘right’ kind of English exposes the inherent artificiality of the hyphenated identity as a mere fantasy intended to make the process of assimilation tolerable for the immigrant.

Second the fantasy of maintaining a hyphenated identity constructs a citizen whose allegiance to the state is strong. The construction of the loyal immigrant starts in the public schools. For instance, Antin asserts that “the public school has done its best for us foreigners, and for the country, when it has made us into good Americans” (175). Her somewhat hyperbolic assertion is significant because the immigrant’s first initiation into the ideology of citizenship happens in the public schools, which have the state built into it. Antin demonstrates this ideology at work in her discussion of George Washington (177). After she learns about George Washington, she declares that she came to see him as a relative and “strove to conduct [herself] as befitted a Fellow Citizen” (177). This shows that teaching about the Revolutionary War and figures like George Washington is more than mere historical facts— it is about teaching patriotism. The school establishes a kinship between her and George Washington; he becomes her relative, her fellow citizen. The state is invested in establishing the fantasy of kinship because it strengthens the immigrant’s allegiance to the state.

Finally, the project of Americanization succeeds when the immigrant views the oppressive process of assimilation as emancipatory and *voluntarily* drops the hyphen. Antin gives up a salient part of her Jewishness- Judaism. She originates the moment she realized that God didn’t exist was when she saw her father go to work on the Sabbath (Antin, 190). She takes this moment as a definitive affirmation that there is no God. However, it is noteworthy that her dad was deeply

indebted from bringing his family to America and maybe had to work on the Sabbath— a possibility she does not consider. On the contrary, she cites a letter her father wrote to her mother before they moved to United States where “he wrote boldly that Progressive Jews in America did not spend their days praying; and he urged her to leave her wig in Polotzk, as a first step of progress” (Antin, 192). Although Antin admits that the letter was a part of her dad’s effort to make them American, she does not question why being an American could not accommodate her family’s religious tradition. Thus, she once again fails to see the disconnect between the sacrifices that the immigrant must make to gain membership and the promise that a hyphenated identity holds.

Furthermore, we can observe the state’s intervention to circumscribe and limit the spaces in which religion can exist in the way religion is discussed on the school ground. When Antin gets in altercation with her classmate about religion, her teacher tells her that “it was proper American conduct to avoid religious arguments on school territory” (192). Antin claims that she “felt honored by this private initiation into the doctrine of the separation of Church and State” (192). However, her teacher violates this separation when she offers Antin ham, which Antin reluctantly eats as a symbol of her liberation (197). This interaction exposes how the state circumscribes the spaces in which religion can exist to undermine the religious upbringings of the immigrant. The teacher doesn’t encourage Antin to abandon Judaism; but merely offers her ham. And the success lies in Antin coming to see the ham as a symbol of “free thought.” Hence, making Antin the ideal immigrant because she does not only accept the refusal of the state to incorporate her traditions, but views the rejection as emancipatory.

In sum, Antin’s “typical” immigrant journey towards Americanization exposes that because multiculturalism and cultural pluralism operate under the rubric of the state, there is always the desire to forge sameness. The state must ensure its survival and secure the loyalty of

the new comers while simultaneously, appearing not to antagonize their origin. Thus, the hyphen sends the message that an immigrant does not have to give up her origin to be a part of the new nation. However, and this is the important part, it never expects it to be permanent, but a transitional bridge that carries the immigrant into the new culture. This expectation is captured in a speech President Teddy Roosevelt gave in 1915 entitled “Americanism” (Davis and Schwartz, 645-660). In that speech, Roosevelt speaks about the hyphen, asserting that “the men who do not become Americans and nothing else are hyphenated Americans; and there ought to be no room for them in this country” (Roosevelt 649). Roosevelt does not only denounce the hyphen, but he argues that holding on to a hyphenated identity is a sign of the immigrant’s inability to assimilate to the American society.

Highlighting the violent assimilative nature of the project of Americanization is not an argument against cultural pluralism. On the contrary, cultural pluralism as a framework to think about immigration can be beneficial. However, we cannot advocate for cultural pluralism without acknowledging its limits. Multiculturalism and cultural pluralism will always operate under the rubric of the state and ideals of nationalism. Hence, we are confronted with the reality that the trans-national multi-cultural America that people like Randolph Bourne and Horace Kallen advocated for can become effective political tools for the state to aggressively eliminate difference (Bourne 1916). It is not cultural pluralism if immigrants like Mary Antin are required to erase any trace of foreignness to be fully inducted into the American public. Multiculturalism cannot survive the state because the project of Americanization ends when the first half of the hyphen becomes purely decorative and eventually drops out.

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