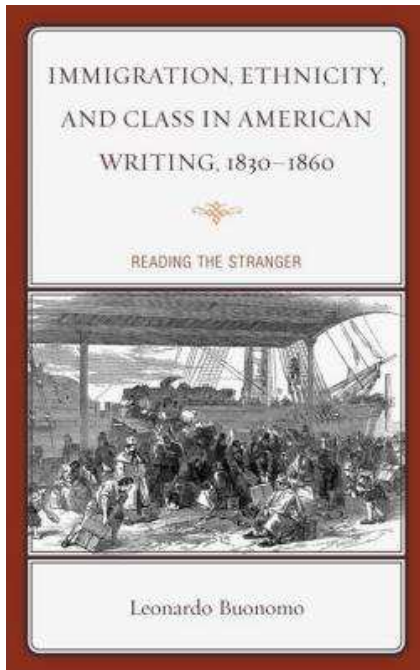




Immigration, Ethnicity, and Class in American Writing, 1830-1860: Reading the Stranger

Leonardo Buonomo

Lanham, Fairleigh Dickinson Press, 2014, pp 201.



Reviewed by Vincenzo Bavaro¹

“There is still another evil which begins to be felt in our rural population (...) namely the influx of Irish laborers, a low and semi-barbarous legion, who can subsist almost on an offal, and be clothed almost by rags (...) so that the only alternative left for the proud Caucasian race is to flee before the Irishman.” As Leonardo Buonomo points out, Ralph Waldo Emerson was voicing, in his lecture “The Trade of New England” (1843), some of the tensions and anxieties that characterized the mid-19th century in the United States, particularly with regards to an unprecedented influx of immigrants from Europe. What may be surprising for many readers of this book is that the speaker, a revered father of American letters rather known for his commitment to a democratic egalitarianism and a luminous vision of the potentiality of America, is uttering these unusually hideous comments. Here Emerson echoes some of the most powerful racial discourses of his time—which produced Irish immigrants as non-whites—while articulating an identitarian as well as economic concern for the survival of the ‘Caucasian’ (i.e. Anglo-Saxon) race.

Immigration, Ethnicity and Class in American Writing 1830-1860 focuses geographically on the Northeast, and chronologically on three decades in ante-bellum United States that witnessed on the one hand a massive migration of “foreigners,” and on the other a pivotal moment in the definition of the national identity. Most of the writers the critic takes under consideration are among the protagonists of the “American Renaissance,” namely Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Hawthorne, and Cooper. In his investigation into these writers and intellectuals’ responses to the times they were living in, Buonomo sheds new light on canonical

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and lesser-known writers by analyzing both established works and minor writings, editorials, newspaper articles, private letters, and travel journals. Buonomo's rigorously documented archival work is enlightening and inspiring, and the strength of his argument, coupled with his refusal to simplify or to dismiss the myriad ambiguities and complexities of the topic at hand, make the book a precious contribution to the scholarship on 19th-century American literature and culture, and on both Ethnic Studies and Whiteness Studies.

As the subtitle clarifies, the stranger is the protagonist of this critical volume: the first two chapters articulate some of Buonomo's crucial claims about the function of the immigrant. The third and fourth chapter investigate the figure of the stranger respectively in relation with the American natural landscape and the urban environment. The first chapter of the volume focuses on the analysis of the figure of the "stranger" in Emerson, Melville, and Hawthorne. It highlights the era's fascination for physiognomy and phrenology, the widely popular belief and practice of associating features of one's face, body, or skull with moral qualities, character, and intelligence; it was, as Buonomo reminds us, a response to the need to "find a scientific justification both for inequality within American society and for territorial expansion" (3).

Much of the American population of the era understood racial difference to be inherently hierarchically organized. Whereas, on the one hand, Scandinavians and Germans seemed to be naturally inclined to fulfill the American promise, on the other hand, the "black eyes of Europe" in Emerson's words, Italians and French, or the Irish, were widely seen as unassimilable, as a threat to the national identity. Here, Buonomo inaugurates one of the critical moves that are crucial to a full appreciation of the significance of his work. Instead of focusing exclusively "outward" on the stranger, he reverses his critical eye and directs it to a necessary investigation "inwards" into American subjectivity and national identity. The seemingly overwhelming presence of the foreign other inspired and prompted an extremely transformative quest for identity and difference.

A favorite embodiment of this foreign menace in the mid-Eighteenth century is the Irish, "hundreds of thousands of human priest-controlled machines" in Samuel Morse's words (6). The Irish, and particularly Irish women, are at the center of the second chapter, which I personally find the most compelling, on the understudied issue of domestic servants. The "Bridgets," a common Irish name that came to identify the entire profession, constitute an extremely powerful locus to investigate the role that the "foreign other" played in the national identity formation. The "Anglo-American" household becomes a synecdoche for the nation as a whole, and the servant, a role too often perceived as contiguous to slavery or just simply at odds with the democratic spirit of the "native-stock," becomes a test for the future of the nation and its fundamental beliefs. By exploring the unexpectedly pervasive "servant problem," we learn of Nathaniel Hawthorne family's repulsion at the idea of an Irish servant, Margaret Fuller's "responsible" paternalism towards servants, and Walt Whitman's fascination for their commodification and display. Eventually, through a reading of James Fenimore Cooper, we face a typical contradiction that characterizes this and similar processes of racialization and stereotyping: the Irish becomes the embodiment of both a "natural ingrained propensity to servility" and an "incurable inclination for insolence" (64).

In this volume, Leonardo Buonomo has not only convincingly put the foreigner at center stage, as he planned in his introduction, but he has claimed a fundamental position for it at the heart of the national identity formation. In doing so, his work acquires an important currency in today's cultural and political landscape, as it mirrors and evokes contemporary debates on migration, on the relationship between multiculturalism and national identities, on racism and class struggle, and on seemingly unbridgeable cultural gaps between contiguous communities.