

Comments on “The Bold Soldier Boy”

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In his essay, Stephen Rohs argues against an American studies scholarship that has tended to homogenize Irish immigrant experiences in nineteenth-century New York. Focusing in particular on the 1855 St. Patrick’s Day, he examines the multiple meanings that arose in efforts to construct diasporic Irish identity in a particular U.S. region. Drawing on songs, speeches, and the spectacle of urban parades, Rohs examines how public performances of Irish American identity were not seamless or coherent events, but rather diverse activities that simultaneously elicited the fascination and contempt of nativists and bourgeois Irish elites alike. By carefully reading the social texts and complex processes through which a divergent Irishness was constructed and contested, Rohs argues for a recognition of the ways internal divisions based on gender, class, and religion complicate understandings of racial or ethnic collectivities as well as the writing of history.

As Rohs indicates, the displays of Irish unity and pride that were aspects of the St. Patrick’s Day celebrations took place with an awareness of a rising hostility against the Irish diaspora and a growing anti-Catholic sentiment in New York City. The grand masculine spectacle was thus envisioned as enabling Irish brotherhood in America and convincing others that the Irish possessed proper Republican virtues. As such, the St. Patrick’s Day events were largely figured as acts of cultural resistance. Although both men and women participated in the parades, the events were primarily organized and understood as manly efforts that helped reinforce national allegiances, as ways of expressing loyalties to the motherland of Ireland, and as a means of re-enacting masculine rites of nationhood in the face of violence, the loss of a homeland, and diminished status in the new country.

Events prior to the 1855 St. Patrick’s Day, however, made the atmosphere particularly tense that year. Public accounts of violence erupting between rival groups of Irish and Americans—the subject of Martin Scorsese’s hybrid western-gangster film, *Gangs of New York*—as well as fallout from the millions of Irish immigrants arriving in New York made the St. Patrick’s Day events of 1855 something to be feared.¹ The bourgeois Irish elites shared the concerns of other elites that the newly arriving immigrants would fall prey and contribute to the corruptions of the city. As such, they subscribed to a larger moral panic regarding an imagined mob of uncivilized or wild Irish invading New York, doing so in

part out of anxieties that their own standing in the social hierarchy would be threatened. Rohs traces the ways the Irish elite sought to squelch communal divisions by creating a totalizing and unified definition of New York Irish identity. Through a careful reading of songs and public speeches delivered by Irish elites that tried to contend with nativist intolerance by emphasizing the positive qualities of the New York Irish, however, Rohs restores to memory the class divisions as well as the conflicted masculinities that fractured any attempt to create a unified ethnic identity on the part of these “probationary whites.”²

Rohs’s work contributes to the development of a critical regional studies that recognizes complex interactions between differently defined geographies and that addresses how international concerns often impinge on the making of regions. His work focuses on an Atlantic Irish diaspora, showing how the Irish presence in one space was understood and shaped through a popular memory that evolved within a larger transnational context. As he explains, many Irish in New York interpreted the intolerance they faced in the United States as an aspect and extension of the political history of British imperialism in Ireland. Many of them in turn exploited this sentiment and developed a regional narrative of heroic exile that aimed to unite the millions of Irish who arrived in America between 1845 and 1854, and which implied that all Irish immigrants were political exiles. Such explanations ultimately commanded great psychological loyalty in the group toward their home country and even aided fundraising efforts for causes on the other side of the Atlantic. Rather than acknowledging the different motivations for immigration, the narrative blamed Britain for the famine that forced the Irish exodus, and through selective memory, homogenized the plight of Irish exiles in America.

The collective memories born in one country were thus carried to another setting where they were utilized in new political and regional contexts. In that much contested historical document, *Gangs of New York*, one character laments that he thought they had left their problems behind them, but instead found the same trouble waiting for them here.³ The long-standing British stereotypes of the Irish, for instance, influenced how many Irish were treated in the new country. Notions of Irish intemperance, passion, and hostility shaped how nativists treated newcomers. Although a sizable Irish population had been in New York before the mid-1840s, the famine immigrants were often regarded as rapidly overwhelming the city. As a result, the St. Patrick’s day events in 1855 evoked anxiety in some Americans by raising fears of a crazed Irish mob fueled by ancient hatreds and fears. In reframing this history, Rohs contributes to the making of critical regional and race studies by addressing the international dimensions that were brought to bear on the development of ethnic/racial identities in nineteenth-century New York. Ideological and political battles on other shores exerted their power in new terrain as battles over what New York might become and as regional struggles over the racialized meaning of America were deeply rooted in an international context. He thus indicates the ways the region is drawn

into and implicated in events that are often initiated elsewhere. Likewise, he presents struggles over Irish-American identity with a critical eye that avoids commodifying ethnic culture as one more element of difference that adds value to the city and its histories, and that may be consumed as yet another aspect of local color.⁴

Rohs also critically engages gender studies, indicating the ways masculinity is not a unitary category, but involves divided and contested performances that must be continually enacted in order to maintain their power. In turn, Rohs reminds us of how nations are frequently articulated through gender and how gender in turn often articulates class. As his study indicates, multiple masculinities clashed during the 1855 St. Patrick's Day celebrations as the Irish community in New York understood the meaning of America and the performance of national loyalty in different ways. The use of Irish boldness as a form of resistance against anti-Irish sentiment often pointed out the fractures in Irish masculine identity between the elites and the working classes. The elite Irish largely tried to manage the threat posed by class differences, adopting Victorian forms of masculine identity that dictated qualities such as industriousness and sober self-control, which were regarded as forms of good citizenship, while the working-class Irish often expressed identity through gambling, drinking, fighting, and other forms of urban working-class culture. A militaristic masculine ethos or what Rohs calls "raucous companionship" shaped working-class culture, with fights staged against perceived enemies of Ireland facilitating a ritualistic performance of national loyalty. While they were displaced from Ireland and recently centered around neighborhood and larger political alliances, the fights were staged in order to present visible loyalty to a national community. By showing the fractures that emerged along lines of class and gender, he writes against much of the historiography that presents Irish immigrant experiences as homogenous and the scholarship that ironically and unwittingly re-enacts a century later the earlier efforts of Irish elites who sought to contain the meaning of Irish immigrant experience in nineteenth-century New York.

As a wise American studies professor used to say in her graduate theory seminars, "All history is literary history." For that reason perhaps we might ponder why the truth value of Ken Burns's New York documentaries is not examined alongside that of Martin Scorsese's recent portrayal of the city. What models of realism keep critics from examining a diverse range of materials in writing their histories? In reading against the grain, in examining carefully and symptomatically the discourses that shaped racial/ethnic identity in nineteenth-century New York, Rohs attends to the ways understandings of nationalism often mask internal divisions and conflicts. We can see this masking in some of the reactions against parades and protests in the disputes about anti-war demonstrations today. Once again, the discourse of late tends to define proper citizenship very narrowly and against displays of difference, creating in turn a narrative that treats protest and public displays of dissent as somehow anti-

American and unpatriotic. We need only look at the events taking place over the past year to recognize how public spectacles of difference—the physical presence of bold, dissenting bodies on display—can be unsettling and infuriating to those who continue to hold narrowly defined understandings of appropriate citizenship.

Notes

1. In an interview, director Martin Scorsese describes *Gangs of New York* as a hybrid text that stages the meeting of two genres, as a “Western meets a gangster film,” or a tale about what happens when “the frontier meets the city.” For further discussion, see Ian Christie, “Manhattan Asylum,” *Sight and Sound* 13: 1 (January 2003): 22. Scorsese also outlines the ways he was influenced by Irish American director John Ford during the making of the film, particularly through his 1946 classic Western, *My Darling Clementine*. Responding to criticisms about his free-wielding history of mid-nineteenth century New York, Scorsese points to Ford’s 1946 film as a post-Realist model for what he sought to achieve on screen, “where the gunfight at the OK corral lasts about 14 minutes whereas in reality it was over in under a minute. History is suggested and there’s the impression of a world” (22).

2. See Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 81.

3. *Gangs of New York*. Directed by Martin Scorsese. Miramax Films, 2002.

4. For further discussion of how racial and ethnic differences become transformed into commodities in an era of multiculturalism, see Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Bryan Wagner, “Helen Hunt Jackson’s Errant Local Color,” *Arizona Quarterly* 58: 4 (Winter 2002): 1-23; and Monica Chiu, “Postnational Globalization and (En)Gendered Meat Production in Ruth L. Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats*,” *LIT: Literature, Interpretation, Theory* 12: 1 (April 2001): 9-128.