

CROSSING CULTURAL BORDERS: THE CONSTRUCTION OF A JEWISH AMERICAN
IDENTITY IN *THE PROMISED LAND*, *YEKL*, AND *THE RISE OF DAVID LEVINSKY*

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Table of Contents

Introduction	p. 3
Chapter 1: The Myth of a Homogeneous American Society	p. 6
Chapter 2: Mary Antin's <i>The Promised Land</i> : The Impossibility of Becoming American	p. 13
Chapter 3: Broken Homes, Broken Languages, Broken Dreams: Unsuccessful Assimilation in Abraham Cahan's <i>Yekl</i> and <i>The Rise of David Levinsky</i>	p. 30
Conclusion	p. 57
Works Cited and Consulted	p. 60

Introduction

At a time in which the dominant culture's pressure on immigrants to Americanize increased, Mary Antin (1881-1949) and Abraham Cahan (1860-1951) wrote literary works that bore witness to the complexity and personal costs of assimilation. The Eastern European Jewish immigrants in Antin's (fictionalized) autobiography *The Promised Land* (1912) and Cahan's novella *Yekl; A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896) and his novel *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) offer insights into the impact of America's assimilationist ideology on identity construction, showing how both ethnic and national identities are imagined, constructed, and performed.

Antin and Cahan wrote their works in a society that defined one's place on the social ladder based on ethnicity. Especially those immigrants originating from Southern and Eastern Europe were labeled by both the government and "old stock" Americans as "primitive" and culturally inferior to native-born Americans, and were blamed for "all the ills of the cities" (Karafilis 132; Glazer 21). The call for immigration restriction policies grew louder around the turn of the nineteenth century, and the success of the melting pot ideology – the notion that in America all ethnic minorities were amalgamated into one American race – was seriously doubted by mainstream Americans. The American public's pressure on immigrants to conform reached a high point between 1880 and 1920 when the United States gained 18 million new citizens who often fled conflicts or persecution in their own countries, and who were attracted by America's economic opportunities and its value of personal freedom (Perlmann 3; Howe 50). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, an economic depression, oversupply of cheap labor, and the ever increasing number of "culturally inferior" immigrants stirred up xenophobia amongst American native-born citizens who feared the challenges of labor competition, the worsening of living conditions in the ever-growing slums, and the increase of poverty-stricken inhabitants (Howe 31). Moreover, native-

born Americans feared that “an inassimilable ... immigrant population” would threaten “the purity and culture of the Anglo-Saxon founders” (Karafilis 132).

Partly as a response to this social anxiety, both Antin and Cahan offered American readers an insight into the lives of Jewish immigrants, depicting their experiences of settling in an unfamiliar host society and the consequences of migration for immigrant families, communities, and their cultural traditions. Moreover, they provided examples of Jewish immigrants who participated successfully in American society. However, instead of depicting fully Americanized protagonists, they explored the ethnic categorization by American society. Besides analyzing their supposed ethnic otherness in relation to the American dominant culture, they also aimed to have American readers reflect on the “otherness within [them]selves,” within American society (Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* 31). With their work, Cahan and Antin aimed to make American readers understand the psychological consequences of immigration for the immigrant, while simultaneously informing their Jewish readers about norms and values of the dominant society they were supposed to assimilate into. The authors attempted to bridge the differences between the two groups by showing the similarities between the protagonists and the society they desired to belong to.

Jake Podkovnik, David Levinsky, and Mary Antin – the protagonists featured in Cahan’s and Antin’s texts, respectively – explore the social injustices Jewish immigrants suffered in the United States. Their narratives explore the complex nature of Americanization by sometimes bluntly criticizing the pressure to conform, but elsewhere demonstrating that they have assimilated to a certain degree. All three works are concerned with the most visible and audible aspects of attaining an American identity: losing one’s “greenhorn” appearance and manners in order to pass as an American, and above all, mastering English. However, the protagonists find themselves in a bind: on the one hand they need to give in to the pressure to assimilate in order to attain the American dream, while on the other hand they often feel tied to their Jewish cultural heritage. Eventually, none of the

characters submit to the dominant culture's pressure to establish a normative American identity.

Yekl's Bernstein and Gitl are the only characters who succeed in negotiating the differences between Jewish and American culture by constructing hybrid Jewish American identities despite the assimilationist ideology; the others are – to varying degrees - unable to reconcile their Jewish and American cultural identities.

Chapter 1

The Myth of a Homogeneous American Society

“What then, is the American, this new man?” is the most famous quote from J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s *Letters From an American Farmer*, published in 1782 (34). De Crèvecoeur was the first to publicly discuss what American identity actually was, and stood at the basis of the ongoing debate about the necessity of Americanization for immigrants in order to melt “into [this] new race of men” (De Crèvecoeur 34). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) considered themselves the normative Americans and demanded that immigrants adopt their language, belief system, morals and values, and dress codes (Glazer 8). Immigrants could not escape the “powerful assimilatory influences of American society,” and were pressured to shed their own cultural customs and traditions (Glazer 12). The pressure to conform was strong. Nevertheless, the definition of the American identity newcomers should take on increasingly became a point of discussion.

Especially at the turn of the nineteenth century, the government increasingly imposed restrictions on immigrants and the threat of the First World War gave rise to the public debate about especially German immigrants’ loyalties and the degree to which they successfully assimilated into mainstream American society. As Maria Karafilis explains, writers and scholars, among others, responded to this debate and criticized the mainstream American public stance in their works (Karafilis 134). Authors like Cahan and Antin, writing from the margins of the dominant society, contributed to the debate and critically reflected on the ambiguous status of the American identity they – as immigrants – were supposed to assimilate into. Instead of conforming to the still prevalent ideal of a homogeneous cultural American identity, they

explored the possibility of constructing a hybrid cultural identity, a new American identity enriched by the immigrant's cultural heritage.

The turn-of-the-century American society into which immigrants were supposed to assimilate became increasingly categorized by ethnic origins. The public discourse amongst the native-born Americans turned towards a division between racially superior and inferior citizens, influenced by various interpretations of Social Darwinism and scientific theories about racial hierarchy (Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* 25; Wilson 247). A distinction was made between old and new migration, by which this latter generation of immigrants was categorized as inferior to preceding generations of immigrants who originated from more 'civilized' regions; namely Western and Northern Europe. A racial bias clearly informed the basis for this classification, fueled by racial theories such as eugenics and anti-Semitism, which had been on the rise since the 1870s (Kramer, "Assimilation" 131; Glazer 139). According to Sarah Wilson, "Darwinism was not responsible for the explosion of anti-immigrant sentiment," but its various interpretations "certainly proved useful to racists, nativists, restrictionists, and even coercive Americanizers" (247).

Partly because of Israel Zangwill's popular play *The Melting Pot* (1908), the public debate about whether immigrants amalgamated successfully into one American "race" was sparked (Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* 10). As many feared, De Crèvecoeur's ideal of the melting pot ideology had failed, and many immigrants remained within their segregated urban districts where they kept their own cultural traditions alive instead of conforming to mainstream American culture. As sociologists Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan concluded decades later, in the 1960s, "the point about the melting pot is that it did not happen" (290). Instead, ethnic minorities lived alongside each other, assimilating to a certain extent to pass as American in order to enhance their upward mobility, while retaining the customs and traditions that culturally defined them, or, as Abraham Cahan described the situation of New York City's Lower East Side's immigrants: the

ghetto was filled with “people with all sorts of antecedents, tastes, habits, inclinations, and speaking all sorts of subdialects of the same jargon, thrown pell-mell into one social caldron – a human hodgepodge with its component parts changed but not yet fused into one homogeneous whole” (*Yekl* 14).

The public debate on assimilation focused on the question of the definition of American identity as well as the necessity of assimilation. First of all, the debate turned to the question of *who* should assimilate: ethnic minorities alone or also native-born Americans? The WASPs argued that they represented American national identity and that ethnic minorities should conform to them. However, as Werner Sollors points out, others argued that the dominant society needed to assimilate as well in order for all ethnicities – minorities *and* the dominant culture – to successfully comprise one homogeneous identity. According to the “universalist” approach, thus, “[e]verybody must be reborn, ergo everybody must be Americanized” (Sollors, “Rebirth” 97; Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* 24-25). Secondly, the definition of American national identity became subject of debate. Two important figures in this discussion, philosopher Horace M. Kallen and the progressive intellectual Randolph Bourne, openly expressed their doubts about the existence of such a fixed national identity, and, more importantly, if amalgamation into one national identity was desirable. According to Kallen, the concept of “American identity” was based on groundless assumptions. The immigrant was supposed to strive towards the same values and social standing as Americans of Anglo-Saxon descent, while pride in particularly those origins was actually the reverse of what the Founding Fathers – the prime WASPs – thought about their British oppressors, and therefore could not be referred to as the true American heritage (Kallen, “Democracy,” part I, 191). Similarly, Bourne wryly pointed out that America was founded by European colonists who “did not come to be assimilated in an American melting pot. They did not come to adopt the culture of the American Indian” (Bourne 270). This lack of a “native”

American culture to base the criteria of assimilation on made it impossible, according to Bourne, to judge if immigrants assimilated successfully (282-283).

Bourne and Kallen both published critical essays on assimilation and American identity at the beginning of the First World War, a time in which American citizens' loyalties to the United States or their original country became increasingly important. The reasoning of the pro-assimilationists that every new citizen should discard his or her ethnic identity and take on the American one became untenable, and Bourne and Kallen emphasized the merits of so-called cultural "dual citizenship," championing a combination of both *ethnic* and *American* identities that culminated in cultural pluralism (Bourne 293-294; Butler 63-64; Sollors, "Rebirth" 80). Kallen and Bourne argued that the American identity, if it existed at all, was only a superficial concept specifically concerned with immigrants' external conformation to the normative identity ("Democracy," part I, 190-192; Bourne 287). Bourne criticized "unthinking" Americans for believing that immigrants would sufficiently Americanize as long as they swap their own cultural traditions for "the American culture of the cheap newspaper, the 'movies', the popular song, [and] the ubiquitous automobile" (Bourne 279). According to him, this would only create "half-breeds," constituting "a tasteless, colorless fluid of uniformity" (278). Instead he called for leniency on the part of Americans, urging them to allow immigrants to retain their own cultural traditions and values in order for them in their turn to enrich American society (280). Kallen similarly opposed the concept of erasing citizens' cultural heritage through the process of Americanization, and instead argued that American society would be enriched "when each individual functioned both as a member of his ethnic-cultural group and as a member of the larger American society" (Ratner 50). In *The Promised Land*, published three years before Kallen's essay, Mary Antin also emphasizes the value of immigrants for American society: "You should be glad to hear of it, you born Americans; for it is the story of the growth of your country; of the

flocking of your brothers and sisters from the far ends of the earth to the flag you love; of the recruiting of your armies of workers, thinkers, and leaders” (175).

To participate successfully in this society, however, immigrants often felt the need to conceal their ethnic markers in order not to be stigmatized by native-born Americans or become victims of racism. In the three texts under discussion, Cahan and Antin describe their characters’ strategies to construct their social identities as Americans and the role both the dominant and immigrant societies have in this construction. The characters apply what Erving Goffman in his seminal work *The Performance of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) calls “sign-equipment” that constitutes one’s “personal front,” that is, dress, language, racial characteristics, and gesticulations (34). In order to give a consistent performance – to convince the other during a social encounter that someone is who he or she says to be – the performer likely conceals sign-equipment that contradicts this ideal identity or social status, for example by shaving earlocks and discarding one’s wig, which clearly betray Jewish identity, or by concealing the “Talmud gesticulations” that troubled Cahan’s character David Levinsky “like a physical defect” (Goffman, *Performance* 56; *The Rise of David Levinsky* 226). Goffman explains how this act of performance is necessary for people to manipulate the perception others have of them (*Performance* 15-16). One of the main reasons for this is the idolization of the “higher strata” of society – mainstream American culture in the case of the Jewish immigrants discussed in this thesis – and the “aspiration on the part of those in low places to move to higher ones” (*Performance* 45). Goffman argues that this “upward mobility involves the presentation of proper performances” during encounters with others, performances that are “opposit[e] to stigmatized identities” usually ascribed to Jewish people (*Performance* 45; Clarke 512). In Cahan’s and Antin’s works, most of the characters perform an idealized social identity: one that is contrary to

their original stigmatized status of a Jewish immigrant and that conforms to the stereotypical social role of the mainstream American that they aspired to.

Writing from the margins of the dominant society, Cahan and Antin reflected on the assimilation debate, its consequences for the social construction of immigrants' cultural identities, and the minority position Jewish immigrants were placed in by the dominant society. They offered readers an insight into the daily lives of immigrants and, like muckraking journalists and realist and naturalist novelists, exposed social injustice in American society. Both authors deliberately wrote in English, not only to reach a mainstream American public, but also to be able to criticize America from within, challenging public rhetoric that denounced immigrants, and to critically discuss the work of social reformers and missionaries who believed to have the answer to immigrants' problems (MacKenzie 2). The choice to write in English enabled both authors, in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's words, to "deterritorialize" the language of the dominant society and to include themselves within the English-speaking society by "taking ownership of the[ir] language" (*Kafka* 1598; Yazdiha 34). Especially Cahan inflected English with Yiddish idioms and syntax and used the dialect of the Lower East Side ghetto, changing the English language from within. Their usage of English additionally exemplifies the authors' own assimilation into America: they were very able to acquire the English language themselves, express their thoughts, ideals, and criticism through the language, and earned a place for themselves within the American literary tradition (Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 51; Butler 58).

As Michael Kramer points out, the works of both authors represent the profound change Jewish American literature went through with the arrival of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Before the 1880s, Jewish American authors originated mainly from Germany and they agreed with mainstream Americans' point of view that Eastern European immigrants were inferior. They reflected upon this lower class within their work while looking "forward to

American vistas,” while the new immigrants from Eastern Europe – like Antin and Cahan – regarded America through different eyes. Many of these authors “could see American myth *as* myth” and regarded America “skeptically ... from their ghetto tenements” (Kramer, “Beginnings” 15; 28). Antin and Cahan were both critical of this American myth of equal opportunities and reflected on the complex nature of assimilation, notions of American national identity and exceptionalism, the theme of alienation, and immigrants’ attitudes “toward their minority status in their new country” (MacKenzie 1; Kramer and Wirth-Nesher, “Introduction” 5-7).

Chapter 2

Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*: The Impossibility of Becoming American

Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* was an instant bestseller in the United States after its first publication in 1912 (Sollors, "Introduction" xxix). Contemporary American reviewers hailed the work as an exemplary story of successful immigration and assimilation. Antin's patriotic embrace of America and its Founding Fathers colored readers' judgment of her work, for it was generally read as presenting a positive view of Americanization (Parrish 27; Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 53-54). While her American readers praised what they saw as her pro-assimilationist stance, her Jewish audience resented Antin's apparent disregard for her Jewish heritage (Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 54). Although Antin did benefit in her personal life from participating eagerly in the process of Americanization and did emphasize the positive influence immigrants and native-born Americans could have on each other in *The Promised Land*, the work is not as unambiguously pro-assimilationist as her contemporary readers and later critics have claimed it to be. As *The Promised Land* makes clear, Antin herself was unable to fully assimilate into American society. Furthermore, she used her work to criticize Americans' reception of immigrants, emphasizing the impossibility for them to belong to a host society that determined one's "otherness" on the basis of ethnicity and thereby established a dichotomy between the dominant and minority cultures.

Critics have only recently begun to focus on Antin's ambiguous stance towards assimilation, partly due to the more recent approach to her work as a fictionalized autobiography (Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 54; Lejeune 28). Traditionally, *The Promised Land* was read as a truthful account of Antin's life with which she aimed to "let her ... American audience know, ... [,] that the American story worked" by using her own process of Americanization as an example (Sollors, "Introduction" xii; Eakin, *Fictions* 3; Parrish 28). As a "unruly genre," however, the

definition of autobiography and the function of literary conventions as represented in such life writing have been unsettled by critics in the second half of the twentieth century (DiBattista 2; Eakin, *Fictions* 3). This ambiguity is also present in *The Promised Land*, in which Antin applies several literary techniques to manipulate the genre in order “to fictionalize her life” (Sillin 25). For example, Antin uses both first-person and third-person narration to tell her own life story that, as she claims, represents that of two different people, “for I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell” (1). She destabilizes the reader by “speak[ing] about [her]self *as if* ... speaking of another” (Lejeune 29; emphasis original). Furthermore, she repeatedly casts doubt on the truthfulness of her account, as in the instance when she discusses her faulty memory of the flowers in her garden in Polotzk: “As a conscientious historian I am bound to record every rumor, but I retain the right to cling to my own impression. Indeed, I must insist on my dahlias, ... I have so long believed in them, that if I try to see *poppies* in those red masses ..., the whole garden crumbles away[.] ... my illusion is more real to me than reality” (66; emphasis original). Congruent with the approach of recent critics, this thesis discusses *The Promised Land* as a fictionalized autobiography, or, as Sollors explains it, as a “self-consciously literary attempt ... in which the narrator insists on dahlias even though they may have been poppies” (“Introduction” xii).

The Promised Land tells the story of Antin, who immigrates to the United States as a young Russian Jewish girl and fairly successfully integrates into U.S. society. She grows up in a liberal family and her parents want their children to receive a proper education, including the girls, in order to prepare them for a successful life (Sollors, “Introduction” x-xi; Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 61). Due to economic hardship, persecution in their native town Polotzk in former Russia as well as the economic and educational opportunities offered by the United States, Antin’s father immigrated to America in 1891 (Butler 65). Three years later, Mary – at the age of

thirteen - and the rest of her family joined him. The critical undertone of *The Promised Land* emerges in the passages in which Antin describes the family's continuing struggle in America to better their future. Her father never becomes truly successful in business, trying to get a foothold in the New World without having the skills required for unfamiliar jobs. Furthermore, the fact that he never becomes proficient in English makes it impossible for him to participate successfully in American society. He becomes disillusioned with the American myth of opportunity and eventually reaches the conclusion that "nothing in the American scheme of society or government was worth tinkering" (171). Mary's siblings and mother were forced to work in order to keep their "head above water" (156). Nevertheless, the move to America opened up a world of possibilities for Antin herself. Her fictionalized autobiography testifies to this by explaining how her family enabled her – as the only one of her siblings – to pursue higher education, allowing her to eventually become a well-known author. Regardless of her claim that her life represents the collective story of Jewish immigrants – "I speak for thousands; oh for thousands!" (195) – Mary's personal story is exceptional.

The purpose of *The Promised Land* was twofold: Mary wanted to critically reflect on the difficulties of assimilating into a society in which xenophobia was on the rise, while on the other hand she wanted to show American readers that immigrants indeed could have a positive influence on the country and could contribute purposefully to the nation (Karafilis 130; Kramer, "Assimilation" 123-124). As Werner Sollors explains, Antin wanted "to offset a growing sense of American nativist hostility to immigration by presenting the inwardness of a consciousness that underwent the transformation from foreign immigrant to American citizen successfully" ("Introduction" xiii). To achieve this second aspect of her goal, Antin applied several strategies to reassure her American audience, ranging from her patriotic reverence for the Founding Fathers,

her emphasis on the endless opportunities America offered immigrants, to her use of intertextual references to American authors and thinkers as well as to Puritanism.

Antin divided *The Promised Land* into two parts: the first concerns her life in Polotzk within the Pale in Russia, the second part describes her life in America. From the start, she emphasizes the differences between her old and new environments. Upon arrival in Boston, her impressions of the city and the country are mainly positive: “we were all impressed with our new home and its furniture ... [I]t was chiefly because these wooden chairs and tin pans were American chairs and pans that they shone glorious in our eyes” (146). Everyone seemed to welcome her and her family with open arms, and she especially credited the educational system for granting her the opportunity to become a celebrated author. Education indeed is one of the main themes in *The Promised Land*, for it offered Antin a means to comply with the ideals of Americanization by mastering the English language and by learning about America’s social values. She applauded the free education that public schools offered both boys and girls – “the essence of American opportunity, the treasure that no thief could touch, not even misfortune or poverty” (148) – and which formed the “primary Americanizing influence” on immigrant children (Butler 60). It was in school, this instrument of Americanization, that Mary became fascinated with Founding Father George Washington. Her extensive account of her school’s celebration of Washington’s Birthday and the poem she wrote as a tribute to him express her appreciative feelings for the country. Her American audience read this “patriotic embrace of America” as an example of the reverence immigrants had for their great country (Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 74). Furthermore, Antin defined her own identity as an American through her worship of Washington, for he represented the values of American society: “democracy and liberty” (Sillin 29). Sillin argues that by including Washington so prominently in *The Promised*

Land, Antin proved her appreciation of the educational system as well as of the opportunities the United States offered her as a woman, free to determine her own future (29).

Antin's reverence for America's great "historical figures" was one of her tactics to express her idolization of her new homeland and to "heighten her claim to Americanness" (Karafilis 146; 147). Aside from proclaiming her high regard for Washington, Antin also included covert references to America's great thinkers with whom she would have been familiar through her education. Her choice to write an ethnic autobiography – the story of "a hyphenated self's attempt to make it in America" (Boelhower, "Making of Ethnic Autobiography" 133) – for example, is often related to the familiar American story of upward mobility as represented by Benjamin Franklin's influential autobiography (1791) and to a certain extent to Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901) (Karafilis 147; Kramer, "Assimilation" 132). Furthermore, she incorporates "Emersonian self-reliance and self-fashioning" as characteristics learned in America to prove to her readers that she understood what it took to become American (Karafilis 143; Kramer, "Assimilation" 135-136). She also refers to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Louisa May Alcott in *The Promised Land*; Antin credits their writings for teaching her writing skills and narrative techniques. Not only would these authors' names strike a chord with the educated members in her audience, they also positioned Antin as a well-educated young woman, worthy of America's acceptance (Sillin 28; 25). According to Sean Butler, by purposefully using intertextuality to forge a common ground of understanding between her American readers and herself, Antin tried to establish an "American literary identity" by linking her writing with these celebrated authors and thinkers (71). Her self-confidence about her future as a successful author is exemplified by a passage in which she consults an encyclopedia to determine where her name as a celebrated author would be published after her death: "I could not resist the temptation to study out the exact place in the encyclopædia where my name would belong. I saw that it would

come not far from ‘Alcott, Louisa M.’; and I covered my face with my hands, to hide the silly, baseless joy in it” (202-203). As Sarah Sillin argues, this fantasy “allows her to imagine a recent immigrant possessing the same renown and cultural influence” as the celebrated author Alcott, thereby imagining a well-established place for herself as an American (26).

As Butler explains, Antin tried to engage her readers by establishing a common ground and tried to convince them of her story’s significance for them: “Should you be sitting there, attending to my chatter, while the world’s work waits, if you did not know that I spoke also for you?” (Butler 71; Antin 72). She wanted to increase her American-born readers’ awareness of similarities between themselves and immigrants, but also criticized her readers for their prejudiced classification of newcomers. She emphasized the cultural boundary that was drawn by American public discourse between the native-born and Jewish immigrants, which labeled the latter as inferior to native-born. Antin herself navigated between American culture and the other side of this “cultural frontier,” taking a position that enabled her to educate and criticize the American public (Butler 53; 60-73; 80). She raised her readers’ awareness of the difficulties of assimilation, but she also wanted them to realize “the effect that her assimilation should have on *their* perception of her” (Butler 54; emphasis original). Sean Butler argues that Antin chose language acquisition as the means to navigate back and forth across the border that separated “‘mainstream’ Americans from ethnic and linguistic minorities” (53-54). As she was a “linguistic ‘othe[r]’” in the eyes of her host society, they would immediately categorize her as an ethnic “other” (Butler 55). As Butler points out, Antin considered herself to have taken on a new identity, “grow[n] out of the division of two ... groups” (57). She credited her language acquisition for placing her in an elevated position above “her unassimilated ethnic peers *and* ... ‘normal’ Americans” (Butler 57; emphasis original). By learning their language, Antin was able to show the dominant society that she could identify with them as well as with immigrants on the

Jewish side of the cultural boundary. She meticulously described her progress in mastering English to encourage her American-born readers to reflect on the difficulty for immigrants to overcome a language barrier in order to belong to the dominant society, as language acquisition was seen as the “ticket to Americanization” (Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 70; 7). She included a glossary and pronunciation guide in *The Promised Land* with the purpose of familiarizing her readers with a foreign language, just as the immigrant had to do.

In accordance with the dominant view of her contemporary society, newcomers should not only master the language, but also pronounce English flawlessly in order to be recognized as American (Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 59). This had implications for Antin’s claim that she had fully assimilated, since perfect diction determined how successful her assimilation could be. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, handbooks about diction became very popular, trying to remedy the “‘phonetic decay’ that was widespread” as a result of the linguistic influences immigrants had on English (Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 57). The general notion among WASPs was that one had to pronounce English correctly; if not, this meant one spent too much time amongst immigrants, adopting their vulgar pronunciation. According to Hana Wirth-Nesher, Antin was never entirely able to assimilate since she was unable to speak English without an accent. Antin’s speech “defect” was an ethnic marker that she could not remedy; as Wirth-Nesher explains, internal vocal organs are developed in order to enable someone to pronounce correctly the language(s) he or she learns from infancy (*Call it English* 59). In Antin’s case, this would mean Hebrew, Yiddish, and Russian. Even though Antin claimed to be able to think, “dream [her] dreams in English phrases” (156), and write flawless standard English, her spoken English proficiency worried her. She comments on this problem when she discusses the difficulty she has with pronouncing the “dreadful English *th*” (164; emphasis original). This flaw in her spoken

English and her slight accent, Antin feared, would “prevent her from passing in society” (Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 56-57).

According to Wirth-Nesher, passing for an American requires a rite of passage; in this case Antin’s “linguistic passing” required assimilation (*Call it English* 57). The notion of the rite of passage resonates with the Jewish ritual of Bar Mitzvah, in which “mispronunciation [of the Torah] is tantamount to failure” (Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 56). By writing her story down, Antin evaded the possibility of making mistakes in pronunciation, and hoped to be able to pass as an American in her readers’ eyes with her flawless English prose. This rite of passage into the language is reflected in the structure of *The Promised Land* as well. Whereas Antin used Hebrew and Yiddish words in the first part about Polotzk, these languages are absent in the part about America. The “erasure of Hebrew and Yiddish” in the part situated in the U.S. demonstrated her “submission to the nativist pressures and linguistic policies and practices” of American society (Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 60; 57).

Wirth-Nesher relates Antin’s linguistic transformation to the Jewish religious tradition of the Bar Mitzvah, and religion indeed forms an important theme throughout Antin’s fictionalized autobiography. The title *The Promised Land* as well as chapter titles like “The Exodus,” “The Tree of Knowledge,” and “Manna” point to the common Judea-Christian heritage and, more specifically, call attention to the similarities between her own story and that of the Puritans who traveled to *their* promised land in the early seventeenth century. According to Wirth-Nesher, Antin used religion as a strategy to make her life story more recognizable to American readers, just as she established a common ground by referring to America’s Founding Fathers and well-known authors. Antin tried to close the gap between the religious culture of Jewish immigrants and Americans by playing into the dominant religious discourse of the “Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture” (*Call it English* 66). Her story is a conversion narrative, as she acknowledges in *The*

Promised Land's opening paragraph: "I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over. ... I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell" (1). By "describing her life story as that ... of a transformation of spirit within the same body," Antin self-consciously alluded to the Puritan conversion narrative that was familiar to her contemporary American readers (Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 52). Recognizing Puritanism as the basis of American culture, Antin included religious narrative structures to argue that Jews could easily become equal to Americans since their religion is based on the same moral and religious principles (Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* 41; Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 67). However, as Michael Kramer suggests, her choice of the conversion narrative as a model for her fictionalized autobiography also seems to suggest that "that a Jew *must* change in order to become an American," thereby acknowledging the necessity for rebirth (138; emphasis original). This led many of her contemporary readers to believe that she propagated assimilation.

Another strategy Antin uses to emphasize her claim that she is reborn is her use of third-person narration to talk about her former self (Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity* 33). As Antin explains in the first paragraph of her work, third-person narration enables her to talk about "Maryashe" from a distance. "I can analyze my subject, I can reveal everything; for *she*, and not *I*, is my real heroine. My life I have still to live; her life ended when mine began" (1; emphasis original). With this passage, the adult American Mary clearly cut herself loose from Maryashe (the immigrant child and protagonist of her narrative), distancing herself from her past. According to William Boelhower, this trope of rebirth is typical for ethnic autobiographies in which the author aims to "reconstruct th[e] self by simulation," creating a new identity that conforms to the American normative ideal and by emphasizing the complete break with one's ethnic past ("Making of Ethnic Autobiography" 127). He argues that her usage of both first- and third-person narration

enables her to take on “various identities” that place her “in a position constantly to make and unmake her American self” (“Making of Ethnic Autobiography” 136).

In spite of her many references to religion and her use of the conversion story to structure her fictionalized autobiography, Antin actually was a self-proclaimed atheist. Apostasy was not necessarily an effect of Americanization, for Antin already began to doubt her faith in Polotzk. As she explains about life within the Pale, one was either a Jew or a gentile; in either case one was supposed to be religious. Mary described men from her village who claimed to be freethinkers or atheists as “monsters,” after which she immediately continued to describe how she as a child and her own father apostatized as well (98). After she witnesses her father disobey the rules of the Sabbath, she performs her own childlike experiments to prove that God did not exist. “She put it [her handkerchief] back into her pocket. She did not have to rehearse mentally the sacred admonition not to carry anything beyond the house-limits on the Sabbath day. ... And with her handkerchief in her pocket the audacious child stepped into the street! ... Nothing happened! Where was the wrath of God? *Where was God?*” (99-101; emphasis original). Another example is when Mary steals her sister’s notebook and starts copying her words. When her parents find her, Antin knows how to spell God (95-96). A Jewish custom forbids this blasphemous act of writing down the name of God, a telling action of Antin’s lack of belief (Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 62). Since she lost her faith already in Russia, critics are wrong in claiming that Antin shed Judaism – the most important pillar of Jewish culture – because of her assimilation into U.S. society and her aim to successfully pass as an American.

According to Wirth-Nesher, the term *passing* denotes the ability to adopt a dominant society’s language and customs successfully, but also connotes *performance*. Antin herself wrote that she “passed as an American among Americans” in behavior and clothing, and could pass nearly as well in speech, apart from her accent (156). Therefore, as Erving Goffman would argue,

her co-citizens presumed she was American, for she presented the correct personal front that complied with stereotypical American characteristics and tried to conceal all markers that would betray her ethnicity: “her Americanness becomes a performance covering her immigrant history” (Sillin 29). Wirth-Nesher, however, argues that this performance of passing also signals deception, since Antin tried to perform as a perfect American while acknowledging that there would always be something that would betray her ethnicity (53). Antin started performing in Polotzk, when she and her playmates took on the role of a gentile in their children’s games. This playful adopting of an identity was done in secret, and Antin continued to conceal aspects of her identity in her work. When *The Promised Land* was published, for example, Antin was married and in daily life went by the name of Mrs. Grabau. Yet, despite her marital and social status, there is no mention of her own immediate family in her fictionalized autobiography because her identity as a Jewish immigrant would contradict her acquired social status as the American intellectual woman her acquaintances knew her for (Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 70-72; Salz xviii).

“How long would you say, wise reader, it takes to make an American?” wonders Antin in the chapter “My Country” (175). While the readers follow Antin in her journey into American citizenship, she also asks them to critically reflect on the meaning and process of Americanization. According to Butler, Antin tried to destabilize the public sentiment that unsuccessfully assimilated immigrants “disrupt the flow of business as usual” (81). Antin asks her reader to take a more open-minded stance to the reality of assimilation and to acknowledge that language acquisition and full assimilation cannot take place in the blink of an eye or that it is even completely possible or desirable at all (Butler 81). She was well aware of the government’s plans to restrict immigration drastically as well as of the racially based, dismissive public discourse on immigration: “[d]ozens of these men [poor immigrants like her own father] pass

under your eyes every day, my American friend, too absorbed ... to notice the looks of suspicion which you cast at them, the repugnance with which you shrink from their touch. ... ‘The Jew peddler!’, you say, and dismiss him from your premises” (144). With *The Promised Land*, Antin tried to counter biased ideas about immigration by subtly satirizing this public stance (Butler 75). The Antins’ landlady Mrs. Hutch represents the Americans who regard immigrants as a threat, as competitors for their jobs, and as beggars, not fit to call themselves Americans. She remembers an episode in which Mrs. Hutch comes to collect rent and, when she does not receive it, has an outburst that reflects her contemporaries’ preconceptions: “[W]e were too lazy to work; we never intended to pay; we lived on others; we deserved to be put out without warning. She reproached my mother for having too many children; she blamed us all for coming to America” (245). In the few instances Antin devoted to her in the text, Mrs. Hutch represents the general “ignorance of the oppressive conditions which compelled most immigrants to come to America and of the social and economic forces which kept them in poverty after arriving” (Butler 75-76). Readers empathizing with Antin before Mrs. Hutch furiously utters her critique would have been struck by the latter’s ignorance. According to Butler, Antin did not seem to “suspect her reader[s] of rabid nativism,” but she did use her influence to make them take distance from the popular nativist sentiment (75).

According to Sillin, Antin’s critique of social injustice in *The Promised Land* can be regarded in the light of social realism. Like other realists and muckraking journalists, Antin “employs realistic depictions of the slums to assert the need for reform” (32). Her main criticism is directed at the living conditions of Jewish immigrants in Boston’s slums. As she describes the tenement building her family calls their first American home: “Anybody who is acquainted with the slums of any American metropolis knows that that is the quarter where poor immigrants foregather, to live, for the most part, as unkempt, half-washed, toiling, unaspiring foreigners”

(145). The descriptions of her family's living conditions become more poignant as Antin grows older. Whereas she initially delighted in the brick building of her first home in the United States, in the brightly illuminated street where "[l]ight was free; the streets were as bright as a synagogue on a holy day" and where children on the street invited her to play (148), she increasingly became aware of the deteriorating living conditions in which her family found themselves when they moved from slum to worse slum. She meant to provide a wake-up call to her audience, suggesting that this state of poverty was not entirely the immigrant's fault and that American society was also responsible for keeping them in the slums "where they live on probation till they can show a certificate of good citizenship" (Sillin 32; Antin 145). Her comments on her father's failure to support his family because of his failed businesses and more explicitly on her parents' futile attempts to build a morally supportive home exemplify how American values like individualism lead to the "disintegration of home life" that Antin sees as "part of the process of Americanization" (213). "My parents knew only that they desired us to be like American children; and seeing how their neighbors gave their children boundless liberty, they turned us also loose, never doubting but that the American way was the best way" (213). These and other examples form the basis of Antin's effort to prove to readers that immigrants did indeed try to conform to American standards and way of life, but were often unable to do so due to the language barrier, anti-Semitism, and lack of "good American form" (213). As Sillin argues, Antin "asserts that Russian Jewish immigrants can become valuable [U.S.] citizens," but "she also represents immigration and naturalization as profoundly unsettling processes" (Sillin 25).

Her criticism also addressed those middle and upper-class citizens who, in the role of social reformers, tried to aid immigrants like Antin herself. She especially reproached them for not fully understanding the poor quality of life that they tried to alter by applying a little "soap and water" (209). "The delicate damsel would hasten home to wash and purify and perfume

herself till the foul contact of Wheeler Street was utterly eradicated. ... [S]ome people there may be smothering in the filth which they abhor as much as she, but from which they cannot, like her, run away” (207-209). By describing this scene in which a young and refined woman comes to Wheeler Street to help poor citizens but flees back home as soon as possible, Antin conveyed to her reader that this attempt at reform by the “slum tourist” was futile and short-lived (Sillin 32). In another passage, she explains that as a child, she abhorred the missionary of Morgan Chapel in Wheeler Street and how she “always got out of the chapel before Brother Tompkins could do [her] any harm” by having her attend prayer (211). However, her descriptions of the National History Club of which she became a member at Hale House (a settlement house) are much more positive in terms of the influence it had on immigrants and their assimilation. Moreover, she eventually learned to appreciate to a certain extent the efforts of social reformers and missionaries in her neighborhood to improve the situation of children and adults alike through community houses or church activities. She describes how later in life she, as many of these middle and upper-class women had done before her, also went to her former tenement block on Wheeler Street in order to apply “soap and water” (209).

Antin shifted continuously between support and criticism of Americanization. Whereas she was full of praise for the manifold opportunities the U.S. offered her through education, she was also critical of the exclusion of many immigrants from decent education and economic opportunities. Because of low wages, discrimination in the workplace, and the large size of many immigrant families, each member of an average family had to earn money in order to survive. Mary was regarded as unfit to work by her parents because of her weak constitution, and therefore she was the only one able to continue her education while her siblings needed to help out by working. Mary did try to contribute with a futile attempt at selling newspapers, but eventually decided that she could support her family better by becoming a famous author. This

difference of situation – her enjoying education while her siblings toiled in factories – is exemplified in the difference in roles between Mary and her older sister Frieda. “The lot of the firstborn is not necessarily to be envied. ... The firstborn of an indigent father inherits a double measure of the disadvantages of poverty[;] a joyless childhood” (80-82). Frieda is bound by the same shackles that she faced in the Pale in Russia: as in the old country, she needs to work in order to help support her family until she finds a husband and has a family of her own. Frieda represents the immigrant who finds herself in a position of stagnation as she would have found herself in Europe, not being able to enjoy the opportunities and freedom American life could offer her, while Mary turns into a modern, educated woman without a day of hard toil in her life. As Sillin points out, Mary “appears troubled by the unfairness of her greater access to schooling” than her sister has (28). However, throughout the *The Promised Land* she professes her wish to have a literary career and to become a modern New Woman. In order to keep up the appearance that this status as an independent, literary woman was the true culmination of Americanization for herself, Antin deliberately left out her own turn towards the domestic sphere in her fictionalized autobiography. This way, she was able to emphasize the contrast between her sister’s shackled existence and her own free life as a successful American (Sillin 27-35).

Antin’s *The Promised Land* has been included in the canon of Jewish American literature as a representative immigrant autobiography. This inclusion is still debated, however, due partly to Antin’s ambivalent stance on Americanization. Whereas Antin’s contemporary non-Jewish reviewers focused mainly on the passages that supported assimilation, especially Jewish critics were highly critical of the work because they felt Antin had betrayed her Jewish past (Kramer, “Assimilation” 122). According to Michael Kramer, *The Promised Land* deserves neither the current interest nor inclusion in the Jewish American literary canon. He believes scholars find it “difficult to accept the fact that Antin’s attitude toward Jewishness ... was so dismissive” and

that they should leave *The Promised Land* for what it has long been regarded: an uncritical story of successful assimilation (Kramer, "Assimilation" 122; 123; 136). Moreover, Antin's discarding of her Jewish heritage still offends critics today; for example, Sarah Blacher Cohen feels Antin should be excluded from the canon because she was so eager to abandon Judaism (Cohen qtd. in Butler 73). To many critics, however, these putative faults actually exemplify Antin's tactics to win her readers' empathy for the immigrant's situation. Her narrative strategies aim to first win the readers' empathy and subsequently educate them about the social injustices of life in the slums and discrimination against immigrants. Moreover, the extent to which Antin actually sheds her Jewish cultural heritage is ambiguous. Although she tried to belong to American society and therefore became less strict about Jewish customs, Antin herself acknowledged that Jewish immigrants would probably never be truly able to discard their religious heritage: "Even I ... think it doubtful if the conversion of the Jew to any alien belief or disbelief is ever thoroughly accomplished" (195; Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 69). The fact that Antin devoted the larger part of *The Promised Land* to her Jewish life in Russia also signifies a deeply rooted reverence for Jewish customs and values, if not religious traditions (Butler 73).

The Promised Land was much more critical about American society and the effects of assimilation on the Jewish immigrant than Antin's contemporary readers took it for. Although Antin is positive about the freedom the United States offered her in all aspects of her life, she did try to call her readers' attention to the detrimental effects of uprooting people and placing them within a society that would always stigmatize them as ethnic "others," remaining unequal to those who were born as American citizens. However, her personal life story is an interesting example of how a young girl, by "self-improvement through education" and a commitment to America's values of self-reliance and self-fashioning, was able to shape her own successful future in the United States (Karafilis 147-148). But the story of her own family, on the other hand, is a harsh

wake-up call to the other reality of immigrants who were unable to better their lives, who were unsuccessful in their assimilation and could not enjoy America's manifold opportunities.

Through her narrative techniques of third-person narration and establishing a common ground between her native-born reader and herself as a Jewish immigrant, Antin claimed to be able "to make and unmake her American self," to stand on both sides of the cultural boundary that divided mainstream America from (Jewish) immigrants (Boelhower, "Making of Ethnic Autobiography" 136). She did indeed negotiate both sides of the divide: providing insights into the lives of Jewish immigrants to her American audience and offering a hopeful example of American success to her fellow Jewish immigrants. Yet, she never actually succeeds in establishing a hybrid cultural identity in which she reconciles the cultural differences of her past and present. Eventually, Antin remains conflicted about her Jewish past and claims that she will always remain a "Wandering Jew," emphasizing how "painful" it is to her "to be consciously of two worlds" (3).

Chapter 3

Broken Homes, Broken Languages, Broken Dreams: Unsuccessful Assimilation in

Abraham Cahan's Yekl and The Rise of David Levinsky

As a writer, Abraham Cahan aimed to reach not only the American reader interested in immigrants' lives, but also his fellow Jewish immigrants living in the New York ghetto. Through his popular column "The Bintel Brief" in the *Jewish Daily Forward* (1897-today), Cahan advised recent Jewish immigrants on how to live according to American social standards: from language acquisition to keeping house, and from etiquette to raising children in America. His main goal was to help Jewish immigrants become Americans ("The Forward at 110," n.pag., n.d.). From the last decade of the nineteenth century, Cahan also began to write short stories and novels about the everyday lives of Jewish Americans living in the Lower East Side. These literary works were written especially to raise American readers' awareness about "social issues plaguing [the] community," but above all to address the complexity of assimilation into the host society (Kensky 69). The works discussed in this chapter, *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896) and *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), explore the progress of their protagonists in the process of Americanization and its effect on identity construction. Eventually, the protagonists are unable to completely substitute their Jewish identity for an American one, nor are they able to successfully negotiate the various parts of their fragmented identity. *Yekl's* character Bernstein is the only protagonist in the discussed works who is able to successfully construct a hybrid cultural identity.

Abraham Cahan was influenced by realist authors such as William Dean Howells, and wrote and lectured about literature's responsibility "to illuminate the social problems of the author's community" (Kensky 67-68). In his own literary work and in the *Jewish Daily Forward*,

the successful Yiddish newspaper that he founded in 1897 with fellow socialist Louis Miller, Cahan focused on the troubles of ghetto life as well as on the requirements of assimilation. Soon after its foundation, Cahan left the paper for about five years because of differences of opinion about the political direction of the *Forward*, but returned in 1902 to become its dominant figure. The *Forward*, at the turn of the century known as the *Forverts* and initially only published in Yiddish, focused on and defended “trade unionism and moderate, democratic socialism,” as explained on the website of the journal (“About Us”). When Cahan took over, the paper became the “voice of the Jewish immigrant and the conscience of the ghetto,” focusing less on socialism and labor issues but instead turning towards popular journalism. Furthermore, the *Forward* carried stories about common experiences of Jewish immigrants and the problems they encountered in the United States (“About Us”; Michels n. pag., n.d.). According to David Engel, Cahan established the *Forward* as a very important medium to serve “uniquely as counselor, mentor, and consoler to the Jewish population of ... the Lower East Side” (36).

In addition to his career as a journalist, Cahan began publishing short stories about life in the ghetto in magazines and newspapers until William Dean Howells’ wife Elinor Mead picked up one of his stories and called her husband’s attention to it. After meeting with Cahan several times, the author and literary critic Howells himself encouraged Cahan to write a longer story about common experiences of Jewish immigrants, since he appreciated the “lifelike quality of these new tales of the ghetto” and wanted to “lure readers with a glimpse of the exotic world of urban slums” (Richards vi; Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 40). As a result, Cahan wrote *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* in English as well as Yiddish, a novella that placed Cahan in the realm of local color writing (Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 36). As Eitan Kensky points out, the English version especially exemplifies Cahan’s strategy to let characters and situations speak for themselves without explanation by the author (79). Kensky explains that Cahan aimed for the

reader to “internalize” scenes in order to understand social problems that were part of the everyday life of Jewish immigrants, creating a sense of immediacy that not only entertained readers but also informed them of the deplorable conditions of the ghetto (Kensky 79). An example of this social critique is given by *Yekl*'s narrator who evokes a strong image of the shabbiness of the tenement blocks: “He [Jake] had to pick and nudge his way through dense swarms of bedraggled half-naked humanity; past garbage barrels rearing their overflowing contents in sickening piles ... The pent-in sultry atmosphere was laden with nausea ... and the teeming populations of the cyclopic tenement houses were out in full force ‘for fresh air’” (13). According to Wirth-Nesher, Cahan believed that representing reality in fiction in scenes like this “would necessarily combat inequality and injustice” (*Call it English* 39), perhaps eventually leading to social reform.

Cahan's first novella *Yekl* tells the story of Jake Podkovnik, a Russian Jewish immigrant who works and lives in the Lower East Side ghetto in New York City. He exemplifies the immigrant who is eager to assimilate but is unable to do so. Jake wants to live the American life: discussing sports and attending the dance school are what, according to him, make him “an *American feller*, a *Yankee* – that's what I am” (*Yekl* 70; emphasis original). He is more attracted to his “ladas” (23) – the women who dress American, earn their own wages, and whom he knows through “his own sinful experience ... to be of a rather loose character” (32) – than to his own old-fashioned Russian Jewish wife. His flawed English, however, gives away his immigrant background and excludes him from American society since he simply cannot pass as an American, according to the language standards discussed in the previous chapter on *The Promised Land*. Although Jake tries his utmost best to act American, he does not succeed in constructing an American identity.

Cahan approached Jake's attempt to assimilate through the two main themes of language acquisition and American identity construction. To assume this American identity, Yekl changes his name to Jake and adopts manners that he believes will testify to his Americanness. He fantasizes about remaining a bachelor and abandoning his family; he keeps deferring from sending them the promised ticket for a passage to America, "a piece of burlesque as old as the Ghetto," as the omniscient narrator comments (25). Eventually, Jake decides "against his past" and tries to separate himself from his former, traditional life so he can marry the Americanized Mamie (Engel 39). This attempt to shed his Jewish identity takes several forms: he loses interest in his religion, tries to speak English, learns to dance according to the American style, shaves his beard and earlocks, and dresses like an American. To borrow Randolph Bourne's term, Jake exemplifies the "half breed" that discards his traditional heritage while being unsuccessful in assimilating into American society (278).

Conforming to the fashion styles of the United States was considered highly important by Jewish immigrants in order to "identify themselves as American Jews" (Schreier 27). Jake's emphasis on fashion is commented upon frequently by the narrator, and also defines the main distinctions between the culture he left behind and his newly adopted culture. The pivotal moment when the difference between Jake as an American and his former self as Yekl is presented is when his wife Gitl and son Yosselé arrive at Ellis Island. Jake is appalled by his wife's old-fashioned looks: "here he was, Jake the Yankee, with this bonnetless, wigged, dowdyish little greenhorn by his side!" (36). While he is spruced up with a "blue diagonal cutaway, glossy stand-up collar, the white four-in-hand necktie, coquettishly tucked away in the bosom of his starched shirt, and ... his patent leather shoes," Gitl meets him "slovenly dressed in a brown jacket and skirt of grotesque cut ... [,] her hair concealed under a voluminous wig of a pitch-black hue" (36; 34). In this passage, the narrator emphasizes the difference between modern

American society and the downtrodden, simple, peasant culture of Eastern Europe. As Barbara Schreier puts it, Gitl's appearance "is a painful reminder of the past he [Jake] is trying to forget" (25). Jake's encouragement of his wife to dress more like an American resembles the general attempt by immigrants to prove "that the cultural chasm confronting the newcomers could be bridged" (Schreier 27).

Throughout *Yekl*, however, Gitl remains reluctant to dress like an American woman – the corset and hat her neighbor Mrs. Kavarsky bought for her lie untouched on a shelf – and she defies her husband's wishes to discard her head covering. She always has a kerchief or bandana covering her hair (*Yekl* 39), obeying the orthodox laws with which she was brought up in Russia and refusing to embrace the "new body type" that resembled the "American ideal" (Schreier 29). The only time that Gitl walks around in her own hair, curled up fashionably by Mrs. Kavarsky in order to woo Jake, is the spark that fuels the fight that ends in their divorce. The last moment Gitl features in the story is when she is at the house of the rabbi several months after the said fight in order to be divorced from Jake. Ironically, Gitl appears to be Americanized when Jake sees her again at the rabbi's: "The rustic, 'greenhornlike' expression was completely gone from her face and manner ... Her general Americanized make-up, and, above all, that broad-brimmed, rather fussy, hat of hers, nettled him [Jake]" (83-84). Although the extent to which Gitl assimilates remains unclear, she does grow more accustomed to American fashion, and thereby shows she has made progress in the process of assimilation. By replacing the wig with the American hat, Gitl sheds what was seen as an "integral part of a woman's Jewishness" (Schreier 28).

The characters of *Yekl* all recognize English language acquisition as the necessary means to construct an American identity. In this novella, knowledge of the language takes on complex dimensions that involve the reader just as much as the characters themselves. The third-person narrator mediates between the Yiddish characters and the American readers by translating the

dialogues into English. He consciously notifies the reader of this mediating role by pointing out translations in the text or at the bottom of the page, or by commenting on the flaws of the characters' speech as "copiously spiced with mutilated English" (Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 44-45; *Yekl* 2). Moreover, throughout the novella, the narrator emphasizes the code-switching of the characters by clarifying each time which language is used: "She [Mamie] spoke with an overdone American accent in the dialect of the Polish Jews, affectedly Germanized and profusely interspersed with English" (49). The New York ghetto dialect of the characters is introduced at the very beginning of *Yekl*, when the narrator starts in *medias res* in a scene set in a typical ghetto sweatshop where the reader falls into the middle of a discussion between Jake and his fellow cloak makers. The text is written in English, but the characters are speaking in Yiddish (translated into English by the narrator). Once in a while they do incorporate actual English words in their Yiddish, which are italicized in the text. When the characters do utter English phrases, the narrator points it out to the reader, but the speech is represented phonetically which makes it difficult for English readers to understand exactly what is being said (Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 44-45). In the following quote, for example, the first part is described phonetically, representing the English dialect of Jake's speech, with the italicized "you" representing the correctly pronounced English word, and the latter part representing the Yiddish as translated by the narrator into standard English: "Cholly! Vot's de madder mitch *you*? You do hop like a Cossack, as true as I am a Jew,' he [Jake] added, indulging in a momentary lapse into Yiddish" (*Yekl* 17). This quote exemplifies the extent to which the narrator is capable of producing standard English, while Jake butchers the language in his ghetto dialect, once in a while correctly pronouncing one or more words.

Since not many of *Yekl*'s readers would have been able to understand everything that was said in the phonetically transcribed English speech, Cahan provided the most difficult words with

a gloss (Wirth-Nesher, “Shpeaking Plain” 42). However, he wanted to challenge his readers to pronounce the words out loud, preferably with a Yiddish accent, in order for them to understand the text. Hana Wirth-Nesher argues that his tactic “situates the reader in the place of the immigrant as he reenacts the slowed pace of encounters with strange sounds and signs” (*Call it English* 33). It was meant to destabilize American readers. The words would have been difficult to understand, or even meant nothing at all to either English or Yiddish readers. Passages like the following would have created difficulty for anyone, in spite of Cahan’s explanations: “Dzake, do me a faver; hask Mamie to gib dot feller a couple a dantzes ... I hasked ‘er myself, but se don’ vonted. He’s a beesness man, you ‘destan’, an’ he kan a lot o’ fellers an’ I vonted make him satetzfiet” (18). Cahan creates a confusing amalgamation of languages that the reader needs to unravel in order to comprehend the extent to which the spoken English of the characters is influenced by their native language and the ghetto dialect. One thing must have been clear to the contemporary American reader: due to their flawed speech most of the characters could never pass as fully assimilated Americans.

According to Wirth-Nesher, this phonetic description of dialects places Cahan in the “project of realism” (*Call it English* 34). She argues that Cahan, following the example of his mentor Howells, gave a voice to the people of the Lower East Side by presenting their vernacular with all the difficulties that accompany the acquisition of an unfamiliar language (“Shpeaking Plain” 43). Cahan reflected on the process of learning a language, depicting “a progressive movement toward becoming American in a dynamic linguistic environment” (Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 37). Jake thinks he speaks English well, even better than educated immigrants like Bernstein. However, his accent and continuous code-switching between Yiddish and English immediately give him away as an immigrant. The narrator even compares his accent to “Irish brogue,” placing Jake on the lowest rung of the social ladder (*Yekl* 2; Wirth-Nesher, *Call it*

English 44-45). Ironically, the new American name he has adopted to mark his Americanness also poses a problem for Jake in order to pass as an American, for he and the other characters are unable to pronounce it correctly. According to Wirth-Nesher, their pronunciation of his name as “Dzake” signals Jake’s foreignness since the “alienating phonetic sign” is unfamiliar to American readers (*Call it English* 33). For the characters themselves, their speech impediments sabotage their aim to Americanize (Wirth-Nesher, *Call it English* 46).

Due to his flawed English, Jake would not be accepted as American by mainstream society. Moreover, his fellow immigrants do not acknowledge his American identity either. His knowledge of American sports, slang, and dancing skills, all demonstrate his eagerness to appear Americanized. Jake himself believes he belongs to American society more than his fellow immigrants do and he criticizes them for their lack of knowledge of typical American subjects like sports and English: “‘Once I live in America,’ he pursued, ... ‘I want to know that I live in America. *Dot’sh a’ kin’ a man I am!* One must not be a *greenhorn*’” (5; emphasis original). His shop mates, however, see through his thin disguise and taunt him for it: “‘Look at the Yankee!’ the presser shot back. ... ‘He thinks that *shaving* one’s mustache makes a Yankee!’” (6). Even though Jake is trying very hard to pass as an American, ethnic markers like his flawed English prevent him from being accepted as one by neither the dominant society nor other Jewish immigrants.

Jake’s wife Gitl is not able to fully assimilate into American society either, although she tries to for different reasons than Jake. While Jake is enamored with his American life – attending the dancing school, arguing with his shop mates about American sports – and wants everyone to acknowledge his American identity, Gitl is driven by her loyalty for her husband. She tries to assimilate to some extent in an attempt to regain Jake’s respect and love but not because she wants to belong to American society. Gitl and her son return to Jake’s life after his father’s death

when he, due to a sudden sense of guilt about not fulfilling his promises to his immediate family, sends for them after spending three years in the United States by himself. Upon arrival, Gitl is shocked by Jake's un-orthodox appearance and has difficulty in combining the memory of her husband with the man that picks her up from Ellis Island. "'You look like a *poritz* [Yiddish for nobleman], she said shyly' when she takes in his glamorous attire (35). The narrator tells about the importance of the first day of arrival for an immigrant: in America, the very first thing that Gitl needs to do in order to fit in is to get rid of her wig. Jake is embarrassed by her "greenhorn" appearance and does not want to become the laughing stock of the street. He tries to have her take off the wig, but after asking bewildered if American Jewish women "go about with their own hair?" she replaces the wig with her kerchief in order to still obey the rules of Judaism (*Yekl* 37). Gitl's profound reverence for orthodox rules concerning clothing and her relationship with her husband keeps her from accepting Jake's Americanizing lessons and will eventually lead to their divorce.

Gitl's first lessons in the American lifestyle – for example, handling money on Sabbath, cooking on an American stove, and learning English – are bewildering to her. The only way for her to learn the language is through Jake, and he scolds her for not learning quickly enough in contrast with their son, who picks up words more easily. When Gitl is at home by herself, she tests her own knowledge of the unfamiliar language: "'What is it they call this?' she presently asked herself, gazing at the bare boards of the floor. 'Floor!' she recalled, much to her self-satisfaction. ... 'And what was it Yekl called that?' – transferring her eyes to the window. 'Veen-neev-veenda,' she at last uttered exultantly" (41). Even though the extent of Gitl's Americanness remains ambiguous at the end of the story, her pronunciation betrays her limited knowledge of English and therefore her inability to pass as an American. She parrots Mrs. Kavarsky's words when accepting the divorce at the end of *Yekl*, messing up because they are incomprehensible to

her: ““Say that you are *saresfied*,” whispered Mrs. Kavarsky. ‘*Ull ride*, I am *salesfiet*,’ murmured Gitl” (85).

Jake’s assimilation is unsuccessful: he breaks with his Jewish past but is unable to construct an American identity that consists of more than his love for American sports and the dance school. Furthermore, he fails to establish a hybrid cultural identity to negotiate between the two cultures. Another character in *Yekl* seems quite capable of establishing such an identity: Bernstein. He is one of Jake’s sweatshop co-workers and his boarder. He is the very first character the reader encounters, described as a “rabbinical-looking man” who is reading an English newspaper and has a dictionary in his lap to look up unfamiliar words (1). Bernstein is a scholar who spends his evenings reading the Talmud, lives in the ghetto, looks for a wife through a traditional Jewish matchmaker, and has not conformed to the dressing and shaving customs of America. Nonetheless, he does become proficient in English and understands the necessity of mastering the language in order to move up on the social ladder in an “educated country” like America (*Yekl* 4). According to Wirth-Nesher, his Talmudic studies in Russia have prepared him for learning another language, and therefore provided for “his successful Americanization, whereas Jake, ceaselessly talking and rooted in Yiddish alone, will always be a greenhorn” (*Call it English* 48-49). Bernstein constructs a hybrid identity that enables him to climb up the social ladder by turning into a successful grocer. This cultural hybridity does not comply with the ideal of assimilation – a complete shedding of one’s former culture – but he proves to be successful and content in his American, hybrid life. His marriage to Gitl at the end of the novella, and the fact that together they will set up a successful grocery store in the ghetto, indicates she as well presumably establishes a hybrid cultural identity. In contrast to Jake, both Bernstein and Gitl represent Cahan’s preferred model of social integration in which they retain their Jewish values while being able to culturally adjust to American society.

Whereas Bernstein represents the well adjusted culturally hybrid immigrant, Cahan used other characters in *Yekl* to explore the negative side of Americanization. Jake's new wife Mamie, for example, shows the deplorable effects of embracing the ideal of Americanization on immigrants. Like Jake, Mamie wants to pass as an American. She dresses according to American fashion, earns an independent living, and her spoken English is "a much nearer approach to a justification of its name than the gibberish spoken by the men" (*Yekl* 19). However, Cahan portrays Mamie, the other dance girls, and Jake as vulgar, improper, uneducated citizens with loose morals. Mamie's accomplishments in achieving an American lifestyle do not necessarily signify that she has become a respectable citizen. Through her especially, Cahan criticized American assimilationist policy, arguing that immigrants do not become better citizens if they indulge in American pastimes like the dancing school.

In *Yekl*, Cahan portrayed two types of Jewish immigrants: those who were eager to assimilate and who wanted to break with their former culture and religion, and those who held on particularly to their religious customs while trying to adapt to the host society. Overall, Cahan was critical of the first category, represented in this novella by Jake and Mamie, for their contribution to American society is negligible. The reader is left with the impression that Jake's future with his Americanized wife will not be a happy one: "instead of a conqueror, he had emerged from the rabbi's house the victim of an ignominious defeat" (*Yekl* 89). The second category, consisting of Bernstein and his new wife Gitl, represents the more successful immigrant, although not according to the assimilationist policy of the time. Successfully constructing a hybrid Jewish American identity, Bernstein and Gitl become almost like the dual citizens Randolph Bourne called for two decades later, enriching their newly constructed cultural identity with their Jewish heritage.

Another character in Abraham Cahan's work who appears to lead a successful life in the United States is David Levinsky. The difference between *Yekl*'s character Bernstein and David Levinsky, however, is that David is unable to reconcile Jewish and American cultures, causing an "ever-increasing rift in [his] identity" (Rosenberg 25-26). *The Rise of David Levinsky*, serialized by the muckraking *McClure's Magazine* in 1913 and published as a novel in 1917, tells the story of a poor Russian Talmud student who emigrates to the United States in his early twenties. An orphan, David has nothing left in his birthplace Antomir in Russia to keep him and he becomes intoxicated by the myth of the United States "as a land of milk and honey ... of mystery, of fantastic experiences, of marvelous transformations" (42). As the title already explains, David takes advantage of this milk and honey. He avails himself of the opportunities America offers him and sets up a successful business in the cloak-making industry: the novel tells the quintessential rags-to-riches-story of a penniless immigrant who becomes a multimillionaire. In his appearance and in the way he runs his business, David seems to conform to American social standards. Nevertheless, his Jewish origins gain a profound hold on him when he lives in America and lead him to romanticize his past. He unwillingly finds himself in a liminal position between his old and new identities, vacillating between his memories of the Jewish cultural traditions of his old life in "good, old Antomir" and the secular reality of his life in America, "the most cruel place on earth" (273; 67). As David Engel puts it, he is a "man who is no longer loyal to the old 'noble' life of obedience and servitude (David's life in Antomir) but who has not found it possible to become the man suitable for the new 'base' life of bold opposition and autonomy" (Engel 56). Eventually, even though David is successfully integrated into American society through his position as a shrewd and prominent businessman, he is unable to "make some inner, unifying sense" between his lost past and American future (Engel 37). He is unable to comply with the American ideal of assimilation but does not establish a hybrid cultural identity either.

Criticizing capitalism and the materialism of American society and its corruptive power over the traditional values of immigrants, *The Rise of David Levinsky* is “an indictment of assimilation” (Rosenberg 171). Like Judith Rosenberg, David Green argues that the novel “contains crucial warnings against assimilation and ethical deterioration, while making an argument for Jews maintaining a sincere and practiced Judaism to guard against the loss of their Jewish values to America’s cultural construct” (24). Green argues that Cahan wanted to warn readers about America’s “deleterious” traits of “greediness and a hunger for status symbols” (Green 24). However, even while still in Russia, David was ambitious and displayed the character traits Green associates with the dominant American culture. Even though America provides David with the means to avail himself of opportunities in order to better his future and give in to his greed, it is ultimately not America that corrupts David. As Engel points out, he is corrupted by his own envy and greed, character traits that were already formed in Antomir and are only intensified when he adjusts to American culture (Engel 48). David’s ambition to become successful in business and thereby to prove his superiority to his former acquaintances instigates his Americanization instead of an intrinsic desire to belong to American society.

Critics like Rosenberg regard *The Rise of David Levinsky* as a quasi-autobiographical novel, pointing out that David’s story resembles that of the author himself. However, the similarities end after both men arrive in the New World. Cahan and David both grew up in religious Jewish environments in families who wished to see them become Talmud scholars. Both men were more interested in the world outside of the synagogue, however, and secularized already in Russia. They emigrated from Russia in the early 1880s and started their careers as shop workers in the clothing industry in New York. After this, their paths grew apart: David in fact became the alter ego of Cahan. According to Kensky, Cahan uses David to vent his critique on American capitalism by describing how multimillions cannot make one happy if he or she feels

lost in the New World (110). Furthermore, Cahan offers the reader a counter-narrative to the ideal of assimilation. He provides insights into both the sacrifices and rewards the process of assimilation offered Jewish immigrants. He explores the extent to which they willingly participated in this process, but also highlights the personal tragedies of “alienation, loss, and fragmentation of the self” that resulted from conformation to the dominant culture (Rosenberg 31). Although he seems to represent the incarnation of the American dream, Levinsky’s loneliness and feeling of emptiness shed light on the negative consequences of Americanization. As he explains himself in the concluding paragraph of the novel, “My past and my present do not comport well” (372). David remains divided between his old and new world, between orthodox Jewish traditions and modern American culture. According to Engel, the fact that David cannot reconcile the image of his former, religious self with his new American identity “makes his rise a fall” (37).

Nevertheless, David does his utmost best to appear American and his “progress ... becomes a measure of his self-worth” (Barry 85). In *The Rise of David Levinsky*, David applies several strategies in order to enhance his American appearance. One of these strategies – dressing according to the American fashion – is this novel’s unifying theme (Kensky 99). This is represented not only through Levinsky’s career as a successful cloak manufacturer, but also through the importance David attaches to dress and its ability to create and perform an identity. Like Gitl in *Yekl*, David dresses like an American on the very first day of his arrival in the United States. He receives a suit and a fashionable four-in-hand-tie from a beneficent stranger, and his earlocks and beard are shaved off. According to Eitan Kensky, this “passage equates clothing with becoming American” (102). As discussed in relation to *Yekl*, clothing represents one of the decisive factors of passing for an American. The narrator of *The Rise of David Levinsky* continuously comments on the people David encounters and the impression they make on him by

what they wear. During his first days in New York, however, David misreads people's clothing and is therefore deceived about their actual situation in life. Walking around the ghetto on his very first day, he is impressed by the way immigrants around him are dressed: "The well-dressed, trim-looking crowds of lower Broadway impressed me as a multitude of counts, barons, [and] princes" (62). He figures they are all well-to-do Americans and does not realize yet that clothing alters one's appearance to support their identity performance. According to Erving Goffman, clothing was one of the ways immigrants used to show off their social status and to manipulate the perception others had of them. In order to belong to American society, as immigrants aspired to, they would attain status symbols like clothing in order to perform their social identity as Americans (*Performance* 15-16; 46). Kinsky argues that David is unaware of this when he arrives in New York and consequently "has to learn how to properly read clothing in order to understand America" (99; 82). Judith Rosenberg adds that this ability "to 'read' the society to which [one] aspires" is an important part of the process of assimilation. She argues that immigrants like David need to "decod[e] the external world," including the significance of clothing, in order to comprehend society and to understand the extent to which identities can be performed (46).

In spite of the importance given by characters in the novel to dressing like an American, David already discovers the function of someone's appearance in Russia. Long before David conceives of the idea of emigrating to America, he comes to understand the necessity of looking a certain way. The violence that leads to his mother's death is caused by his very appearance: the "new long-skirted coat and side-locks" make him stand out as typically Jewish, evoking the scorn of gentile youths who aggressively attack him for his ethnicity (34). His mother, trying to obtain justice for her beaten son, falls victim to violence herself and dies. In another passage, Mathilda Minsker, the daughter of David's Jewish benefactress, helps David to understand that he needs to

change his looks in order to become modern. “When you are in America you’ll dress like a gentile and even shave. Then you won’t look so ridiculous. Good clothes would make another man of you” (51). The need to change his looks becomes urgent after his arrival in New York when he discovers the judgmental attitude of other Jewish immigrants. When he walks around the Lower East Side on the day of his arrival, he overhears others talking about him as being a greenhorn, a naive, unknowing immigrant who has ‘Old World’ written all over him. In Goffman’s terms, David realizes that, even though those who judge him are immigrants as well, they do not “‘accept’ him and are not ready to make contact with him on ‘equal grounds’” (*Stigma* 7). When David describes his desolation walking on the street on the first day and being stung so “cruelly” by the words of fellow-immigrants (64), he is “intimately alive to what others see as his failing,” that is, his appearance as “a newly arrived, inexperienced immigrant” (Goffman, *Stigma* 7; Cahan, *Rise of David Levinsky* 64).

Even though he takes offense when he is accused of being inexperienced and un-American, he quickly adopts this same judgmental attitude and judges others on the basis of their clothing. In his descriptions of the residents of the Rigi Kulm House in the Catskill mountains where he stays one summer, he criticizes the Jewish immigrants who vacation there during the slack season of the clothing industry for using the occasion as a matchmaking opportunity as well as a chance for the women to show off their husbands’ wealth. David is disgusted by this display of riches accompanied with unsophisticated manners and loose morals: “I knew that most of them had a feeling as though wearing a hundred-and-fifty-dollar dress was in itself culture and education” (294). However, he simultaneously plays along, showing off his own wealth by his manner of dressing and judging the crowd on the basis of their outward appearance. The scene of the Catskill resort demonstrates that Jewish immigrants in the novel did not let the chance go by to participate in this new leisure activity during the summer, and grabbed the opportunity to

demonstrate their successful assimilation. As will be discussed later, Cahan uses this moment in David's life to criticize assimilation policy for its detrimental effects on immigrants' morals. Even though he participates in this American performance himself, this new found "[p]rosperity was rapidly breaking the chains of American Puritanism" (300). The narrator claims American morals are "Frenchifying" (300), in other words worsening, depicting the attendees of the Catskill resort as the vulgar result of Americanization.

It is especially in this passage at the Catskill resort that David's ambivalence about the effects of assimilation on Jewish immigrants becomes clear. At the resort, the reader is introduced to two types of women who represent David's inner struggle between his desire to Americanize on the one hand and his feelings of guilt about giving up his Jewish identity on the other (Rosenberg 172). The first type is represented by the girls whose Yiddish accents make them distinctively Jewish, speaking "a hubbub of broken English, the gibberish being mostly spoken with self-confidence" (297), and whose loose sexual morals exemplify their attempt to act like Americans. This type is represented by the prostitutes that David visits and especially by the girls that stay at the Catskill resort. David continuously comments upon the girls' dresses, how low cut they are with "luscious flesh" protruding from the bust and sleeves (298). Their "painted" faces remind him of the prostitutes he visits, placing them amongst the most inferior class of citizens (281). Some of the dancing women are described as half naked, clasping to unknown men, while all this is being allowed by their parents because that is what American youngsters do: "What would you have? Would you want American-born young people to be a lot of greenhorns? This is not Russia" (299). Nevertheless, David is attracted to them. This type is, to a lesser extent, also represented by Dora, David's friend Max Margolis' wife. David has an affair with her, adores her for her desire to become educated and therefore American, but he despises her Jewish accent and adherence to Jewish customs. As Rosenberg suggests, "[David] desires what is American" about

the women, especially their incorporation of American values like individualism and self-fashioning, “but is repelled by their Jewishness” (Rosenberg 210). The second type of woman featured in the novel is the *donna angelica*, represented by Anna Tevkin. Together with Matilda Minsker, she represents the successfully assimilated, refined, upper-class, but unattainable woman whom David adores. Rosenberg argues that they represent David’s own desire to assimilate. He is never able to have these women; they reject him for his inferior status due to his incomplete assimilation (Rosenberg 187-188).

Their rejection of him because of his Jewishness – Matilda rejects him because he looks like a Talmud scholar from Antomir and Anna Tevkin refuses him for his inclination towards Judaism near the end of the novel – make David extremely self-conscious about his Jewish identity. He is keenly aware of the necessity to assume an American identity in order to gain the things he wants, but is only partly successful. In regard to his economic status, for example, David does indeed succeed in assimilating himself, and the necessity of passing as an American in business is made clear to the reader continuously. When he finally meets Mr. Huntington, the sales representative of St. Louis’ largest department store, for example, Levinsky is only accepted after he affirms his American identity: “‘Are you a Russian?’ he [Mr. Huntington] asked. ‘I used to be,’ I answered, with a smile. ‘I am an American now’” (234). Catherine Rottenberg explains how David needs to be initiated into the business world by the American-born Jewish businessman Loeb, who successfully “position[s] himself ... closer to the side of the gentiles, ... showing him [David] what needs to be done in order to gain not only *admittance* but also *acceptance* into the hegemonic culture” (310-311; emphasis original).

This initiation occurs on a train when David travels to distant cities to sell his wares. A familiar literary trope, his train travels resemble the progress he makes in his assimilation process. It is on one of those travels, however, that he is confronted with a marker of his Jewish

identity that would surely cause him to be rejected by the white dominant class. Through Loeb, David meets a couple of well-to-do American businessmen with whom he strikes up a conversation about politics. David shows off his newly acquired Spencerian view on life and eats an American meal – although too expensive to fit his budget – to prove to his colleagues his ability to act according to American standards. However, this performance is strenuous: “‘Don’t be excited,’ I was saying to myself. ‘Speak in a calm, low voice, as these Americans do. And for goodness’ sake don’t gesticulate!’” (228). In this instance, David emphasizes the concealment of his Talmudic gesticulations that form the ethnic marker betraying his Jewishness. By concealing this particular sign-equipment, he would be able to uphold the personal front that was congruent with his idealized American social identity. David plays the part in order to move up the ladder of, in this case, the American business world. He needs to *act* in order to appear American, but is self-conscious about all the aspects that could betray his identity as a Russian Jew (Engel 46). According to David Engel, Levinsky’s “exaggerated conformity,” his strenuous attempts to pass as an American, are precisely what mark “him as ineradicably an outsider” (43).

The Rise of David Levinsky differs from *The Promised Land* and *Yekl* in its use of and approach to language. In the latter two texts, language is one of the most obvious aspects of identity performance. Both texts deal extensively with the difficulties of acquiring a new language and with the remnants of a Jewish accent that prevented the protagonists from fully crossing over into American society. In *The Rise of David Levinsky*, however, Cahan no longer used the narrative strategy of representing the Yiddish dialect of English as extensively (Kensky 69). Whereas *Yekl* focused heavily on the dialect of the Lower East Side, *The Rise of David Levinsky* hardly contains foreign words at all. Nevertheless, the acquisition of English as the key to Americanization forms an important theme in this novel as well. As a first-person narrator, David comments on his progress in learning the language on several occasions, but he also

describes the effect language acquisition has on other characters and the status this lends them in David's eyes. Especially Dora is an example of a Jewish immigrant who desperately wants to Americanize, but who has trouble mastering the language. According to Rosenberg, David defines Dora as an immigrant – with all its negative connotations – through her speech: “When she speaks Yiddish, the text represents her language in standard English. ... But when she speaks English, the text represents her language as the broken pidgin of a greenhorn” (205). David continuously emphasizes her linguistic inferiority by showing off his own proficiency in English. Nevertheless, David himself is “not ‘born’ to speak English,” and therefore “cannot be one of the superior race” (Rosenberg 209). According to Rosenberg, David's showcasing his English proficiency is all deception. He needs to simulate the language in order to pass as an American, and therefore to belong to the dominant society (209).

This deception eventually surfaces as one of the problematical aspects of David's assimilated person. “Through imitation and artifice,” David is able “to appear and sound American” (Rosenberg 173). The performative aspect of David's assimilation leads to his unreliability as a narrator, many critics have pointed out (e.g. Barry 86; Hoffman 393). According to Barry, Cahan used this technique of unreliability to “impl[y] there is some distance to be found between the author's intended effect and the narrator's awareness” (86). He explains that David's exploitation of his Jewish workers stands in stark contrast to Cahan's own views on socialism and his work for the unions, and that therefore David's rationalization of exploiting his workers seems thin (86). Cahan plays the devil's advocate quite often in the novel by denouncing socialism and the unions. He satirizes his own position as a Lower East Side writer and his union-funding newspaper as well: “I regarded everything that was written for the East Side with contempt, and ‘East Side writer’ was synonymous with ‘greenhorn’ and ‘tramp’. Worse than that, it was identified in my mind with socialism, anarchism, and trade-unionism. It was something

sinister, absurd, and uncouth” (286). Kensky agrees with Barry’s explanation of David’s unreliability, arguing that the narrator is unreliable only in a “technical sense of not speaking or acting in accordance with the implied author’s norms” (80). Moreover, he asserts that David’s fabricated lies create “narrative dissonance,” creating a “strong sense that develops in the reader’s mind that the events could not ‘actually’ have transpired the way the narrator describes” (81). David, even though a capitalist, refers extensively to the workings of unions and the system of socialism, and thereby vents Cahan’s own socialist vision on issues like labor, capitalism, and unions.

Another point of criticism Cahan reveals through David is the American educational system and U.S. society’s regard for learning. Throughout his life, David shows a keen interest in education, both to enable his own Americanization and to fulfill his promises to others to become an educated man. However, David eventually chooses to go into business rather than pursuing a college education: “I had a notion that to ‘become an American’ was the only tangible form of becoming a man of culture ...[;] the impression was deep in me that American education was a cheap machine-made product” (116). Whereas Mary Antin elaborated at length on the positive influence of education on immigrants to turn them into successful and patriotic Americans, Cahan criticized the educational system for using “intellectually deadening practices” (Shiffman 85). As Dan Shiffman argues, David recognizes that in the materialistic American culture, education is seen merely as a way to wealth, enabling citizens to compete successfully with each other and, in David’s case, to “manipulate” others” (90). It did not, however, revere education as Jewish culture did, and intellectual rewards were not regarded important in themselves. David’s initial belief in the importance of education and his mother’s and his first love Matilda’s desire that he become an educated man, conflict with the trivial role education plays in American business: “America was a land of dollars, not of education” (50). David breaches his promise to attend

college, for he finds it impossible to combine education with his business pursuits. Nevertheless, his wish to attend college appears now and again in the novel, and David meticulously describes his self-taught knowledge of English, mathematics, and Herbert Spencer's social-economic theory. Through his extensive knowledge, he feels himself superior to other businessmen, especially since "[t]he business world contains plenty of successful men who have no brains" (371).

In Jewish culture, an educated man was highly respected and Talmud scholars were revered (Howe 8). For this reason, David's mother did everything to have him attend *cheders* and eventually stimulated him to become a Talmud scholar. When he moves to the United States, David is eager to go to evening school and prepare for college. The necessity to survive, however, forces him to interrupt his education and he becomes entangled in the cloak-making business. First he works as a sweatshop worker, but due to an incident in the factory in which he works, he opens up his own shop. He loses his aspirations to become a scholar, even though it fills him with a deep sense of regret. In the aptly titled chapter "The Destruction of My Temple," for example, when he passes City College – his intended Alma Mater and self-declared "temple" – he "felt like a convert Jew passing a synagogue" (142-143). Through David, Cahan explained one of the important differences between Jewish and American culture regarding education: American society focused on economic success and self-fashioning. Immigrants soon found out that education was not necessarily the "most direct route to economic success," and therefore often abandoned their hopes of being educated (Shiffman 84). In spite of his failure to enroll in college, David does retain an interest in intellectual pursuits. He studies vigorously for the tests he needs to take in order to enroll in City College (but neglects to actually take them), and continues his self-education by reading "Spencer, Emerson, or Schopenhauer (in an English translation)" (225). David takes on an educated air "in order to validate his rightful place as a powerful and

influential man” (Shiffman 91). He is driven by the need to show his superiority through education to others, be they businessmen, friends, or loved ones. On the other hand, he deeply respects characters like the Russian poet Tevkin who show a keen regard for education themselves. In this sense, the reverence for education is one of the factors from David’s Jewish heritage that sticks with him, despite his desire to fit into American society through his business success.

Besides education, Jewish traditions form a recurrent factor in David’s memories of his past life as well as his future. Antin already explained that the Jewish faith is not only a matter of religion, but also an important part of Jewish culture. In *Yekl*, Cahan mainly mentions religion in relation to Bernstein and the evenings he spent reading the Talmud and in relation to Gitl’s reference to orthodox laws concerning husband and wife. In *The Rise of David Levinsky*, however, Cahan elaborates on the theme of Judaism as a major pillar of Jewish culture, with or without the connotation of religion. David explores the function of Judaism in social life, in his upward mobility, and in what it means for the formation of a family. Unconsciously, Judaism has a strong hold over David’s private life even though he proclaims himself to be an atheist. For one thing, he feels that his former religion is not compatible with the rational tendencies of American society, the racial theories of the day, and, above all, the Social Darwinist theory that he is so impressed with. But David also recognizes the importance of religion for his business and private life: the synagogue functions as an important place to meet business relations and it forms a respectable charity. He increasingly turns towards Jewish immigrants who live according to Jewish traditions rather than mingling within mainstream American society. Finally decided on marrying, David searches for a wife in the most orthodox family that attends his synagogue. After he breaks up with his fiancée, he befriends the poet Tevkin in order to come closer to the latter’s daughter Anna, whom David met at the Catskill resorts when he was supposed to visit his fiancée

Fanny. One of the things David – now in his forties – respects most about Tevkin is his reaffirmation of Jewish religious traditions (Rosenberg 179-180). His Jewish religious heritage never loses its hold on David, even if he believes it does not comport well with American rationalism. In the very last paragraph, he acknowledges that “David, the poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher’s Synagogue, seems to have more in common with my inner identity than David Levinsky, the well-known cloak-manufacturer” (372).

This very acknowledgment has caused quite a debate amongst critics who try to interpret David’s longing for his cultural heritage. Critics like Green and Engel argue that Levinsky truly wanted to break with his past and shed his Jewish heritage in order to fully assimilate, thereby “den[ying] the Old World ... and so den[ying] a part of himself” (Engel 47). Many have focused on the strong words he uses in his final reminiscences, for example in the claim he makes that he is unable to “escape” from his past (372). However, others like Rottenberg and Rosenberg believe the narrator when he states that “[t]he gloomiest past is dearer than the brightest present” (368). Indeed, various passages throughout the novel actually demonstrate that David dwells on his past and his losses, and explain how he is lost between his Jewish heritage and his romanticized past and the modern world of America in which he is unable to gain a position for himself as an accepted American citizen, regardless of his success as a manufacturer. Moreover, near the end of the novel he “becomes increasingly disillusioned with his capitalist life,” and is drawn to characters like the poet Tevkin who rediscover and embrace their Jewish heritage (Rosenberg 179-180). These examples show that David is unable to fully assimilate, and in addition longs for his past self.

A fact that critics do agree on is Cahan’s criticism of the effect of “America’s capitalistic values ... on ... Jewish soul[s]” (Green 23). *The Rise of David Levinsky* was first serialized in 1913 in the muckraking journal *McClure’s Magazine*, as part of a series of articles that were

promoted as exploring “Jewish power” in the American economy at the turn of the nineteenth-century (Engel 36; Kensky 70). At that time, this “Invasion of America” by Jewish immigrants was a central subject in public discourse, a topic that stirred up many emotions amongst especially Nativists (Kensky 70). *McClure’s Magazine* promoted Cahan’s stories about the successful Jewish immigrant as autobiographical, providing evidence of the dangerous rise of the Jewish immigrant within the American economy. This wrongful portrayal of the text passes by Cahan’s educational efforts in both his journalistic and literary works. His main aim with *The Rise of David Levinsky*, albeit through a satirical portrayal of the wealthy capitalist as a product of his environment, was to explain to American readers the emptiness and loneliness assimilation would bring Jewish immigrants. Cahan uses first-person narration to “initiate readers into his community” (Kensky 71). Through David’s confessions about his inner secrets, the narrator makes the audience part of his emotions and life story. Moreover, the quasi-autobiographical form would suggest the “illusion of reality” (Kensky 77). According to Kensky, Cahan’s main aim with presenting David’s perspective on the world through first-person narration was to make readers “understand that Levinsky’s choices and spiritual misfortunes . . . are the result of capitalism” (79-80).

The Rise of David Levinsky contains several narratives revolving around the impact of assimilation on Jewish immigrants. On the one hand, the novel explains that it is not always the influence of American society or the desire to fit in that alters an immigrant. David’s character itself is the cause of his success in the new world, but his character traits were already formed in Russia (Engel 48). Moreover, his wish to give up his aspirations to become a Talmudic scholar was stirred when he first arrived at the Minskens’ house, the Russified Jewish family in Antomir. It is Matilda Minsker who stimulates him to look more American, or modern, by shaving his side-locks and by changing his clothes. Therefore it is not American society that imprinted

modernizing changes on David, but in this case modern Russian society. In New York, the changes David undergoes are all brought about by other immigrants: he is dressed like an American by a Jewish man; he is branded a greenhorn by fellow Jewish immigrants; and he is introduced to the cloak business and how to make his factory a success by other Jewish businessmen. Hence, David Americanizes through the Jewish immigrant community instead of American society. It is not a complete transformation, however. In memory, David keeps returning to his former life and is sentimentally more attached to his Russian past than to his American future. Overall, his intrinsic motivation to succeed in American society is based on his will to survive and his ambition to become a successful businessman. Influenced heavily by Spencer's theory on the survival of the fittest, he makes this his main aim in life: by showing himself to be the "fittest" of all his acquaintances, he proves his superiority over them. However, eventually this success does not bring him an American identity or even the wish to become a fully assimilated American. He longs for his past, his lost education, and the women he failed to seduce. His is a failed American dream.

Cahan's two novels portray the unsuccessful assimilation of two Russian Jewish immigrants: Jake and David. The first fails because of his lack of education and sophistication, the second because of the incompatibility of his Jewish and American identities. Cahan does present various characters who do seem to conform to American society, like Mamie and Anna Tevkin, although not all of them represent virtuous, model citizens. Mamie and the Catskill residents, for example, represent the Americanized youngsters whom Cahan criticizes as vulgar and superficial. Cahan's critique of American society becomes quite clear: it is impossible and undesirable for Jewish immigrants to fully Americanize. First of all, the dominant society was too forbidding in its acceptance of newcomers. Language barriers were too rigid and racial epithets were part of everyday public discourse. Secondly, the requirement to shed one's cultural identity

and affiliation was impossible. No matter how much Cahan's characters want to become American, their Jewish heritage has a strong hold over them and prevents them from constructing an American identity. Bernstein and Gitl are the only characters (although in varying degrees) who are successful in negotiating between their Jewish past and American future. They construct hybrid cultural identities in which their Jewish identities are altered but retained, and in which their Jewish heritage enriches their newly acquired identity. In contrast, however, characters like Jake and David remain conflicted and are unable to construct a new identity in which both their past and present are reconciled.

Conclusion

With *The Promised Land*, *Yekl*, and *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Mary Antin and Abraham Cahan bore witness to the complexity and personal costs of assimilation at the turn of the nineteenth century. Their works depict experiences of Jewish immigrants who try to create a better future for themselves in the U.S., and reflect on the positive and negative aspects of forced conformation to a host society and the reasons behind acceptance or rejection of Americanization. The first two decades of the twentieth century witnessed a growing division within immigration debates about the question to what extent it was desirable for immigrants to assimilate: should they completely shed their heritage or was it more desirable to stimulate newcomers to become “dual citizens,” as Randolph Bourne termed them, enriching American culture with the cultures of ethnic minorities? Cahan and Antin offered counter-narratives to the requirement of the dominant society that immigrants should shed their cultural identity completely in order to blend in with mainstream American society, and both - although Antin did so reluctantly - took a stance on the side of critics of this theory like Kallen and Bourne, exploring the need or possibility of constructing a hybrid cultural identity.

Besides countering the ideological view of national identity as homogenous, Cahan's and Antin's works also suggest that the extent to which an immigrant assimilates is in part a personal decision, one that is not completely formed by pressure exerted by a dominant society. David Levinsky is an example of an immigrant who already turns away from his Jewish religion because of modernizing influences – in his case instigated by a modernized Russian girl – but who also lacks the intrinsic motivation to become American. He assimilates in order to fulfill his own American dream of becoming successful in business and thereby becoming superior to his acquaintances, but eventually is unable to reconcile his Jewish and American identities and

therefore feels alienated from both his past and his future. He never wishes to become an American, and therefore never completely assimilates.

Mary Antin similarly suggests that individual character determined if an immigrant was able to take advantage of the opportunities offered by America, although in contrast to Cahan, her underlying reasoning caters to America's image of itself as a country in which anyone can acquire his or her American dream through a commitment to hard work, self-reliance and self-fashioning. In contrast to David Levinsky, Mary did profess that she wished to become American and devoted her youth to her American education. Her fictionalized autobiography explains that her situation as an educated immigrant girl was unusual, and she portrays the sacrifices her family had to make in order to enable her to have a promising future, thereby exploding the American myth of equal opportunities. Antin does present herself as completely different from her former, Jewish self, but she also reluctantly acknowledges that it is impossible for a Jewish immigrant to discard his or her Jewish ethnicity completely. She is unable to construct a hybrid cultural identity, for that was something she did not want; she wanted to be accepted by the dominant society as a normative American.

In *Yekl*, Cahan introduced characters that would represent the later "half-breeds" and "dual citizens" of Randolph Bourne more explicitly: Jake, the immigrant aspiring to be American, is prevented from fully assimilating due to his lack of proficiency in English and his unsophisticated manners. On the other hand, his ex-wife Gitl (to a certain extent) and her new husband Bernstein exemplify the immigrants who successfully reconcile their Jewish heritage with American customs and who are able to participate successfully in American society while holding on to their Jewish religion and traditions, establishing the hybrid cultural identity Bourne championed almost two decades later.

Cahan's and Antin's protagonists simultaneously represent the complex nature of hybrid identities and the underlying motivations of desiring or rejecting Americanization. Whereas Jake (*Yekl*) and Mary (*The Promised Land*) truly desire to become Americans and try to shed their Jewish heritage, they eventually end up disappointed for not being able to completely pass as Americans nor are they willing to reconcile their Jewish heritage and their American future in a hybrid identity. Furthermore, Jake and his new Americanized wife Mamie reflect Cahan's critique of the detrimental effects assimilation could have on Jewish immigrants, as he urges his fellow immigrants to hold on to their cultural heritage. Bernstein and Gitl (*Yekl*) represent this caution: they carve out a hybrid identity for themselves, which allows them to participate successfully in American society without sacrificing Jewish values and customs. David Levinsky represents a cautionary tale: that of the Jewish immigrant who, although materially successful in one aspect of his American life, finds himself alienated from both his roots and future.

Cahan and Antin both deliberately chose to write their works in English in order to criticize America from a minority position within the dominant society. Their works aimed to have American readers critically reflect on their own stance towards immigration and participation of immigrants in society. By explaining the difficulties of migration and conformation to the unfamiliar customs and values, and above all learning the language of a host society, the authors tried to enhance native-born readers' awareness about the impossibility for immigrants to completely Americanize because of the dominant society itself: its rigid language barriers, xenophobia, and emphasis on ethnic categories in public discourse created a society in which ethnic minorities would never be fully accepted. Therefore, none of the characters eventually establish normative American identities, and Cahan's and Antin's works suggest that only their most adaptable characters are capable of living a successful, hybrid Jewish American life.

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