AMERICANIZATION AND THE IMMIGRANT NOVEL, REDUX: ABRAHAM CAHAN'S *THE RISE OF DAVID LEVINSKY*

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Abstract

In this essay I turn to Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), one of the most popular immigrant novels ever written. I argue that, like other immigrant writers of his generation, Cahan challenged the optimistic version of Americanization of the Progressive Era. First, I examine the context surrounding the publication of the novel, and argue that it stages Cahan's response to nativism and anti-Semitism, pervasive in print culture at the turn of the century. Then I explore David Levinsky's fashioning of his Americanized persona; Levinsky's determination to Americanize leads to a series of unfulfilled, deferred dreams. By performing his desired new identity (to become a "true American"), and by repressing other forms of identification, Cahan's character opens up a line of critique of Progressive Era constructions of race and ethnicity. I end with a discussion of the immigrant novel as a legitimate genre in 1917 and beyond.

Keywords: *The Rise of David Levinsky, Abraham Cahan, the immigrant novel, Americanization, Jewish American literature, American realism*

"An aspiring writer from an immigrant background feels damned on the one side for becoming too American and damned on the other side for not being able to become American enough." (Thom Ferraro, *Ethnic Passages*)

The Rise of David Levinsky (1917) was the first immigrant novel to receive national attention in the United States, and recognition on the first page of the *New*

York Times Book Review (Marovitz 162). Despite its early favorable reception and recognition after its publication, the novel has received less attention than it deserves. In a twenty-first century context of renewed nativism and xenophobia, what can Cahan's novel teach a new generation of readers? Understanding Cahan's novel in the context of the Americanization movement and heightened nationalism after the novel's publication in 1917—exacerbated by U.S. entry into World War I and the new wave of "100% Americanism," which gave rise to new nationalism and xenophobia—is relevant not only for rethinking immigrant subjectivity, when resurgent nativism continues to criminalize immigrants and restrict the access of immigrant writers to the literary market, but also for rethinking the cultural work of the immigrant novel in negotiating simultaneous pressures on the immigrant writer: Americanization, group affiliation, access to an English readership and the American literary market, and representing the diverse experience of immigration against pressures of homogeneity.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, immigrant writers wrestled with the idea of becoming American in poetry, short fiction, life stories, and a genre that has not received enough critical attention: the immigrant novel. As multilingual writers and readers, immigrant writers during the Progressive Era confronted both the demands of the American literary market and those of assimilation and Americanization. Like their American peers, new immigrant writers and thinkers explored Americanization as both trope and ideology in the context of the heightened nativism during World War I and the imminent immigration restriction legislation. They ranged from the Yiddish poets in New York, who chose to write for a narrow audience, to better-known autobiographers like Mary Antin—whose *Promised Land* (1912) rendered the optimistic transformation into an American—to Abraham Cahan. For fellow Jewish writer from Romania, Marcus E. Ravage, author of the autobiography *An American in the Making* (1917), becoming American coincided with becoming a scholar, defying the cultural path for immigrant social mobility. For Cahan's fictional character in *The Rise of David Levinsky*, also published in 1917, becoming American was coterminous with becoming an entrepreneur, who used capital to exploit fellow immigrant laborers, and who, at the end of his life, yearned for an imagined pre-lapsarian life before immigration. Whereas fellow immigrant writers used the literature they produced as platforms to call attention to the limitations of legal citizenship in the intellectual immigrant's search for cultural citizenship, in *The Rise of David Levinsky* Abraham Cahan meditated on the costs of the immigrant capitalist's Americanization in arguably one of the most popular immigrant novels ever written.

In this essay I turn to the novel's contribution to the genre of the immigrant novel—a popular genre today, with an insufficiently examined history—and its potential recovery as a counter-narrative to the Americanization

ethos and policy during the decades leading to immigration restriction legislation in 1924. Whether becoming an intellectual or a capitalist were the “goals of immigrant ambition,” as critic Randolph Bourne noted in his compelling review of Cahan’s novel in *The New Republic* in 1918, or not, they are useful categories to conceptualize immigrant representation in the rare instance when the *representors* were themselves immigrants, who wrote and published in English (Bourne 30). Like other immigrant writers of his generation, Abraham Cahan, a Jewish immigrant to the United States, challenged in his novel the popular, optimistic version of Americanization—the transformation of the *greenhorn* into a citizen.¹ Instead, the “father of Jewish American literature” offered in his novel what Randolph Bourne called “the story of the undesirable American on the make,” the successful businessman whose turn from exploited into exploiter of fellow immigrant workers offered Cahan a productive opportunity for social critique.

First, I examine the context preceding and surrounding the publication of the novel in 1917, and argue that *The Rise of David Levinsky* stages Cahan’s response to nativism and anti-Semitism, pervasive in print culture at the turn of the century (such as *McClure’s*, the magazine where the germ for the story first took shape in four installments in 1913). Then, I explore how David Levinsky fashions his public self (or his Americanized persona) to survive and adapt in the new, urban environment—thriving off the culture of consumption—which becomes the stage and audience for his performance. Ultimately, I argue, Levinsky’s determination to Americanize leads to a series of unfulfilled, deferred dreams, such as his desire for a college education and marriage. Levinsky’s Americanization coincides with his entrance into modernity, a social and cultural scene that leaves a lasting mark on his immigrant persona, just as he also transforms modernity as an immigrant. By performing his desired new identity (to become a “true American”) and by repressing other forms of identification, Cahan’s character opens up a line of critique of Progressive Era constructions of race and ethnicity. I end with a discussion of the immigrant novel as a legitimate genre in 1917 and beyond, and examine *The Rise of David Levinsky* as a compelling immigrant novel that paves the way for a rich tradition of (both) immigrant novels in the US in the twentieth century and beyond.

Immigrant David Levinsky’s story of success and failure has fascinated generations of literary critics who have read his rise and fall as a critique of

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¹ This transformation is central to many taxonomies of the immigrant novel. See my article on Romanian immigrant Marcus E. Ravage, Levinsky’s contemporary memoirist, whose autobiography, *An American in the Making* (1917), received similar critical attention at the time not only its treatment of immigration but also for writing critically about Americanization.

capitalism and loss of spirituality in the United States, a rags-to-riches story, a *bildungsroman*, Abraham Cahan's own autobiographical account, "a classic of American literature," or "the first American Jewish novel of consequence."² Critics have also read *The Rise of David Levinsky* as a genre piece, an example of realism, ghetto realism, or naturalism.³ A nod to William Dean Howells's novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) earned the praise of the dean of American letters, who hailed Cahan as "the new star of American realism." Howells was enthusiastic about Cahan's fiction: "I cannot help thinking that we have in him a writer of foreign birth who will do honor to American letters... He is already thoroughly naturalized to our point of view; *he sees things with American eyes*, and he brings in aid of his vision the far and rich perception of his Hebraic race" (qtd. in Chametzky 68-69, my emphasis). Yet, Howells's enthusiasm was less directed at Cahan, the immigrant novelist, and more at Cahan as an already Americanized immigrant author, who "sees things with American eyes." To be accepted in the rarified world of American letters, could the "new star of American realism" (69) be less than Americanized? Could he be recognized for his literary virtues if he were "to see things" differently?

Cahan's novel, along with his other fictional and journalistic work both in English and Yiddish, also contributed to the consolidation of the genre of the immigrant novel, particularly the immigrant Jewish novel at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴ The Jewish immigrant novel, of course, has a much longer history in the United States, from Nathan Mayer's novels of mid-nineteenth century to Isaac Mayer Wise's didactic and historical novels from the late nineteenth century. As Derek Parker Royal has shown, it wasn't until the large immigration wave of the 1880s—the opening of the immigration door to Southern and Eastern European immigrants in 1883, following the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882—that the Jewish American novel came to prominence and recognition in the United States (244). Whereas, for fellow immigrant writers like Marcus E. Ravage, a Jewish immigrant from Romania, Americanization meant a

² For readings of the novel as autobiographical, see Sanders 420 and Harap 518, 524. Chametzky calls the novel "a classic" (viii).

³ The current bibliography on the reception of Cahan's novel is too lengthy to comprise in a note. The emphasis is either on David's "inner experience" or the multiple losses he experiences (Weinstein 47). On Levinsky's loneliness as allegorizing the "emptiness at the heart of the American Dream," see Engel, 38. On David's multiple self-divisions—whereby Levinsky's productions of the structure of self-difference "assist both his economic and cultural rise," see Barish, 643. For a lengthier discussion of the novel's autobiographical readings, see Marovitz, 153-56. My reading of the novel resonates more with Chametzky's historicized analysis.

⁴ On the genealogy of the Jewish American Novel, see Derek Parker Royal, "Plotting a Way Home: The Jewish American Novel," especially pp. 241-258.

continuous transformation—"The American that was made in this slow and half-unconscious process as an individual, not an imitation" (*An American in the Making* 31)—Cahan offered in *The Rise of David Levinsky* a critique of "the American on the make," the capitalist who plays the game of Americanization for profit. Randolph Bourne concluded his critique of the novel: "Mr. Cahan makes a subtle back-fire of criticism more deadly than the most melodramatic socialist fiction" (30). Cahan's David Levinsky is not the eager immigrant ready to Americanize; he is a successful businessman whose turn from exploited into exploiter of fellow immigrant workers provides Cahan with an opportunity for social critique.

THE IMMIGRANT NOVEL AS LIFE STORY: "THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN AMERICAN JEW"

Before he published *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Abraham Cahan was a cultural critic and cultural mediator, a journalist for the *Commercial Advertiser*, and an aspiring writer who contributed stories and sketches to the *Post* and the *New York Sun*, early exercises in realist fiction. His other early fictional work in English, which contained the germs of his future stories, also included the novels *Yekl, A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896) and *The White Terror and the Red: A Novel of Revolutionary Russia* (1905). Cahan had plans to write another novel, which he never completed.⁵ At the height of his career, Cahan described himself as "an important American novelist," "the best foreign language editor in the United States," and "a former feature writer for various English language newspapers" (Rishkin xvii). Jules Chametzky sums up Cahan's array of personas: "Cahan was conscious of his position as a bridge between disparate worlds of experience. Among the Yankees, a Jew; among the Jews, an expert on the American scene; in capitalist America, a radical socialist; among radicals, a moderate; an intellectual and a popularizer; a Russian soul and education jostling alongside a Jewish and American one" (115). Although Cahan presented himself as an "American novelist" rather than an immigrant novelist, his claim to Americanness is as intricate as David Levinsky's; in asserting his legacy and national belonging as "an important American novelist," Cahan legitimated the category of immigrant novelist as an American novelist.

In his fictional and journalistic work, Abraham Cahan helped many Americans find the humanity of immigrants that the earlier journalistic work of

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⁵ The title of Cahan's new novel would have been *The Chasm*. Jules Chametzky speculates that Cahan never completed *The Chasm* because he found it difficult to reconcile his old and new experiences in literary form: "[T]he chasm was wider than Cahan had sometimes thought and to bridge it more difficult than he expected" (75).

Jacob A. Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) had reduced to mere types, waiting for a White Savior to rescue them from socio-economic and racial marginalization. As the founding editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward/Forverts* from its inception in 1897, the most influential Yiddish newspaper, with the highest circulation of all immigrant papers in the United States, Cahan arguably contributed to the assimilation and acculturation of Jewish immigrants in the United States. He also printed Yiddish translations of the U.S. Constitution and the Declaration of Independence in the *Jewish Daily Forward/Forverts*. Cahan's contributions extended to the American metropolitan daily press, as well as three Yiddish newspapers. Most importantly, he helped fellow Jewish immigrants *find America* long before he conjured the memorable David Levinsky; he wrote a history of the United States in Yiddish, making the history of his adopted country available to a large Jewish readership in the United States and abroad. Steven Diner has argued that Cahan's editorials in the *Forward* "criticized America's failure to live up to the country's ideals of liberty and democracy in its treatment of workers and black Americans." He also documented that almost 250, 000 students used Cahan's *English Teacher* (1891) to learn English. Like other fellow immigrant writers, Cahan taught English in a night school, and became was certified by the New York City Board of Education (99). Although he continued to write both in Yiddish and English, presenting himself as an American novelist, Cahan the editor promoted and cultivated a taste for Yiddish literature in the *Forverts*—at a time when the Jewish intelligentsia disdained the Yiddish "jargon" as plebeian—by publishing the work of writers like Sholem Aleichem, Sholem Ash, I. J. Singer, and Isaac Bashevis Singer.

Born in a small Lithuanian village in 1860, Abraham Cahan left Lithuania shortly after the assassination of Czar Alexander II and the ensuing massive pogroms, and arrived in the United States in June 1882.⁶ Poverty and state-supported anti-Semitism in Lithuania and other Eastern European countries led many Jews to emigrate. For the rest of his life in America, Cahan became an advocate for social justice through his work as a journalist and a socialist. When he raised the "Jewish Question" at the International Socialist Congress in Brussels in 1891, he spoke forcefully about a subject he cared deeply about rectifying: anti-Semitism. In his speech, he remarked: "The Jews are persecuted. Pogroms are made upon them. They are insulted, they are oppressed. Exceptional laws are made for them. They have been made into a separate class of people with no rights." He urged his audience to "Push back anti-Semitism! Declare before the world that you condemn every form of Jewish persecution!" (qtd. in Jacobson 50). Long before David Levinsky and the American Jewish Question took shape in the

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⁶ For a recent reading of Cahan in the context of Jewish American literature, see Dana Mihailescu, especially pp. 43-72.

United States, Cahan had made a strong plea against anti-Semitism that he would continue to advocate in his literary and political work throughout his long career. Cahan published the story that generated the novel *The Rise of David Levinsky* under the title “The Autobiography of an American Jew: The Rise of David Levinsky” in the sensationalist magazine *McClure’s* in four installments, April-July 1913.⁷ The March issue of *McClure’s*—a month before the serialization of Cahan’s story began—published a lengthy article, titled “The Jewish Invasion of America.” Authored by Burton J. Hendrick, it offered an alarmist prediction of a Eugenics professor that, “in another hundred years the United States will be peopled chiefly by Slavs, negroes, and Jews.” Announcing Cahan’s forthcoming piece on the subject, Hendrick enthusiastically endorsed the story about why “the Jews so easily surpass or crowd out, at least in business and finance, the other great immigrating races—Irish, Germans, Scandinavians, and Italians—and why, in the next hundred years, the Semitic influence is likely to be almost preponderating in the United States” (165). Hendrick concluded by calling the Jews in America superior to other “invading races,” setting the tone for reading Cahan’s story in the magazine’s following issue (125). Fears of alienism had already fueled the American nativism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism of the potential readers of Cahan’s story.

Although it is not clear whether Cahan knew about *McClure’s* set up for the story that became the germ of the novel *The Rise of David Levinsky*, he was well aware of the pressures of ethnic representation that the literary market was making on the author of *Yekl; A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896) and “The Imported Bridegroom” (1898) (Marovitz, 136). The blurb introducing the serialized story, with arguably racist illustrations by Jay Hambidge, read Levinsky as “an actual type” taken from “real life,” thus fulfilling realism’s new promise—of extending literary representation to social groups “formerly neglected or idealized in literature” (Kaplan, 21-22). Moreover, *McClure’s* editor added that Levinsky’s story “reproduces actual characters, occurrences and situations taken from *real life*. And his intense and complicated struggle shows, as no *invention* could do, the traits of mind and character by which the Jew has made his

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⁷ *McClure’s* initially announced this forthcoming story as “The Confessions of an American Jew,” a title Abraham Cahan changed later to “The Autobiography of an American Jew.” The announcement read: “A notable *McClure’s* article by Burton J. Hendrick, describing the marvelous recent growth and extension of Jewish power in America, will be followed by “Confessions of an American Jew—an autobiography by one of the successful Hebrews of the country which to many will explain why there is a Jewish Invasion—an illuminating and strikingly unusual personal document” (Cahan, “The Autobiography” 92-93).

sensationally rapid progress in the business world of America.”⁸ [my emphasis] The editor’s distinction between a “real life” account and a distorted “invention” called into question the fictionality of Cahan’s realist story and reduced its aesthetic value to a mere sociological or ethnographic exercise, more consistent with investigative journalism than literary realism, thus further calling into question the possibility that a Jewish immigrant writer could have imagination. But the readers of *McClure* were in for a treat as Cahan’s fictional character negotiated between his “real life” identification and his desire to be(come) somebody else throughout the novel; David Levinsky emerged as a complex character, with a high degree of unreadability. At the same time, Cahan’s decision to make an immigrant character central—rather than peripheral—to a preeminently American story of mobility and transformation, and to tell his story from a first-person narrative perspective, reveals his investment in the genre of the immigrant novel that his work helped solidify.

Although we can credit the immigrant autobiography with the heavy work of representing Americanization—immigrant life stories, or stories of “undistinguished Americans” (promoted by Henry Holt’s eponymous collection in 1906) established the credibility and often the “authenticity” of immigrant difference at the same time that they advocated for assimilation—the immigrant novel took the immigrant life story into the rarefied realm of American letters.⁹ As I have argued elsewhere, “just as Americanization, as either policy or ideology, walks the fine line between liberty and coercion, consent and dissent, so does the genre of immigrant autobiography, which negotiates narrower, group identity representations with larger claims to universality” (Stanciu 7). In their work on autobiography, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have argued that recent scholarship has started to look more closely at “stories of Americanization among populations dominated and spoken for by the myth of the American melting pot.” Smith and Watson show how some autobiographers “link their autobiographical writing to social critique” (123-24). If American writers such as Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and Edith Wharton could write with some aloofness about the putative immigrant invasion, immigrant novelists like Cahan, Anzia Yezierska, Henry Roth and others saw the task of the immigrant novel—in English—as complementing that of the immigrant autobiography. It is perhaps not accidental that immigrant novels by first generation immigrant writers like Cahan were often autobiographical. Although Werner Sollors has made a compelling argument about ethnic literature as an exercise in “group documentation and self-analysis”

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⁸ Cahan, “The Autobiography of an American Jew,” 92-93.

⁹ Henry Holt popularized the genre of life stories, first by publishing them as either individual or “as-told-to” stories in the newspaper he edited, *The Independent*; later he collected these stories under the title *The Life Stories*

in *Beyond Ethnicity*, my reading of the immigrant novel shares more with Thomas Ferrarro's claim that immigrant literature is "compelling beyond the individual ethnic sphere" (5-6). I read the immigrant novel by first generation immigrant writers at the turn into the twentieth century as (re)centered both on the inevitable assimilation and on distinctiveness, difference, humanity, and craft.¹⁰

THE IMMIGRANT NOVEL AND THE PERFORMANCE OF AMERICANIZATION

Like their American-born peers, immigrant novelists and autobiographers were deeply invested in (re)defining ethnic identity for a predominantly WASP readership at the beginning of the twentieth century; in their endeavors, they resorted to imaginative scenarios of Americanization and struggles between the push toward cultural conformity and the pull of (ethnic) community. Cahan's David Levinsky, the unreliable narrator of his pseudo-autobiographical novel, contemplates his transformation in America as a "convincing personation," a performance of his many identities, including his Americanized persona: "[w]e are all actors, more or less. The question is only what our aim is, and whether we are capable of a 'convincing personation'" (194). In this section, I propose that reading Americanization in Cahan's novel as performance, the immigrant character's deliberate effort to embody, to mimic, and thus to reframe or repress his other identities (ethnic, national, sexual) opens new possibilities for rethinking immigrant literature—and the immigrant novel in particular—as a reconceptualization of the pervasive myth of the American melting pot.

At first glance, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, written for an English-speaking middle class audience, is a Horatio Alger story: a Jewish immigrant becomes a successful clothes manufacturer after following a more or less predictable rags-to-riches trajectory. Born in Antomir, in Russian-occupied Lithuania, David lives with his mother and attends the traditional Jewish school in his town. After his mother dies in an altercation with a Gentile, trying to avenge her son (beaten in the street for his side-locks), orphan David decides to leave for America. After his arrival in New York City, Levinsky abandons his Orthodox clothes and religious practices, attends an evening school to learn English, and dreams of becoming a scholar. One of his dreams, deferred after his cloak manufacturing business takes off, is that of attending City College: "Once I am to be an educated man I want to be the genuine article" (164). But he never becomes

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¹⁰ Reputable studies of the immigrant novel (such as William Boelhower's) continue to invoke authors like Willa Cather or Gertrude Stein who wrote *about* immigrant families, albeit from the vantage point of comfortable middle class American (or second-generation immigrant) distance from first-generation immigrant experience.

a “genuine article”; instead, David Levinsky becomes complicit with the work of American capitalism in manufacturing countless replicas of the genuine article he aspires to emulate. The remaining chapters of the novel, five-hundred pages long, revolve around his “rise” and economic success, as well as his personal failures, such as his loneliness and his failed attempts to start a family.

Throughout *The Rise of David Levinsky*, the immigrant character-narrator is concerned with “appearance”; he examines and imitates what he sees as “real” American gestures, demeanor, and inflections of voice. After his arrival in the United States, David acquires new clothes and a new haircut: “[w]hen I took a look at the mirror I was bewildered. I scarcely recognized myself. . . . It was as though the hair-cut and the American clothes had changed my identity.” Mr. Even, his benefactor and the sponsor of this transformation, is an indirect agent of Levinsky’s initial transformation from greenhorn into American. He instructs the barber: “Cut off his side-locks while you are at it. One may go without them and yet be a good Jew.” Pleased with David’s external transformation, his benefactor exclaims: “Now you won’t look green. [...]” “That will make you look American. [...] Not that you are a bad-looking fellow as it is, but then one must be presentable in America” (101). The fashioning and self-fashioning of Levinsky’s “American” identity and its performative possibilities are revealed from the beginning of the novel; when Loeb, an American-born Jew starts ridiculing Russian Jews in the company of gentiles for their excessive gesticulations, Levinsky reveals the exterior markers of his own identification as a foreigner in tension with his desire to be American. Although David does not participate in this conversation, the episode instructs him that both foreign and American are embodied identities, emerging from iterative performances following a more or less established social code. In a queer reading of the novel, Warren Hoffman has argued that at the heart of the novel is Levinsky’s inability to “negotiate his homoerotic feelings for other men” because such a negotiation collided with his other project of assimilation; in Hoffman’s reading, Levinsky represses his homosexuality so that he could perform his Americanization (394-97, quote on 394). Levinsky’s version of Americanization, therefore, is a heterosexual one, despite the novel’s investment in queer desire, which David ultimately represses. Hoffman’s queer reading of the novel helps expand our understanding of Levinsky’s performance of both his sexuality and nationality; David’s desire to become American supersedes his desire to be recognized as a queer immigrant during the Progressive Era.¹¹

Despite the external changes to his clothes and demeanor, Levinsky is a constantly anxious character, who tries to mask his Orthodox past and to control his gesticulations, which he perceives to be “so distressingly un-American” as he

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¹¹ My use of the term “queer” here refers to both difference from heteronormativity and strange, foreign.

navigates public scrutiny (318). Later in the novel David internalizes the parameters of his performance through self-surveillance and control: "Don't be excited. . . . Speak in a calm, low voice, as these Americans do. And for goodness' sake don't gesticulate!" (329). Yet, Levinsky does not suppress or repress his Jewishness (in the sense that both gestures and iterations of his birth culture are explicit throughout the novel); he simply acquires a new repertoire of gestures and words that assist in his performance of Americanization. In his essay "Democracy vs. Melting Pot" (1915), Horace Kallen argued optimistically that Americanization does not repress but liberates nationality (Kallen 220). In this framework, Levinsky's professed Jewish secularism becomes an even more distinctive mark of his immigrant persona rather than a failed attempt to *out-green* himself (318). Cahan's rewriting of the narrative of successful immigrants that permeated the era's literary market is also relevant in the context of the novel's publication date, 1917, the year the United States entered the World War I, a year marked by an exacerbated nationalism, growing nativism, and the "100 per cent Americanism." The next few years would witness a new wave of hostility towards immigrants. Had Cahan published the novel a year later, would Levinsky's "rise" have been as daring?

In *The Rise of David Levinsky*, David dramatizes his performance of "becoming American"; his studied performance invites questions about what and why he is performing. In a study of Cahan's novel alongside James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Catherine Rottenberg reads race and ethnicity as "performative reiteration[s]." Building on the work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, Rottenberg defines performativity as "the power of discourse to bring about what it names through the citing or repetition of a particular symbolic order's regulatory ideals" (312). In this framework, specific "modalities of performativity" emerge in a subject's behavior, gestures, speech acts etc. when the subject attempts to cite dominant, hegemonic categories of identification (which recognize him as subject). In Rottenberg's words, "subjects are interpellated into the symbolic order as gendered, classed, and raced beings, and once interpellated, they must, in turn, incessantly cite and mime the very norms that created their intelligibility (and thus their condition of possibility) in the first place." This symbolic order, in other words, demarcates the boundaries of the subject's identification from his "desire to be" (312-13).

David Levinsky's "desire to be" American *mimics* dominant categories of identification throughout the novel. This type of imitation calls to mind contemporary postcolonial critiques of mimicry. Specifically, in Homi Bhabha's framework, when the colonized mimes the colonizer's institutions, behavior, language, music, appearance etc., he creates ambivalence in the colonizer, calling into question the colonial project through repetition and difference (the colonized

sees his power and hegemony disrupted) (Bhabha 86-89). But Levinsky's position vis-à-vis the settler colonial nation is tenuous; as a Jewish immigrant, although discriminated against and inhabiting an "in-between" space in the US black-and-white racial matrix, he enjoys the advantages of his performed whiteness. He becomes a successful capitalist entrepreneur who exploits other immigrants and, in the process, becomes complicit in the settler nation's capitalist project. In an episode of the novel, Levinsky's boss introduces him to urban etiquette, as well as nativism and racism: "Where were you brought up? Among Indians?" (182), he asks, commenting on David's awkward, uncouth manners. Jeff Manheimer, Levinsky's boss, associates Levinsky's lack of manners—or his difference of manners—with racial difference, thus conflating cultural difference with a biological understanding of racial difference. Manheimer's question translates both urban and national anxieties over Native American and immigrant "savagery" and their difference from the Anglo-Saxon model of "civilization," the norm of turn-of-the-twentieth century Americanization movement. This norm marks nativism's widely-disseminated fear of racial and ethnic difference and the threats it poses to "real Americans" (WASPs). Levinsky also internalizes settler tropes such as "the land of Columbus" and references to American exceptionalism throughout the novel as he is constantly policed and surveilled both by America's anxiety toward foreign "invaders." The novel is invested in immigrant tropes and concerns, but it may also be read as a glorification of the settler colonial script and its simultaneous critique, revealing the extent of Cahan's own internalized colonial discourse in Levinsky's endorsement of Anglo-Saxonism as his desired American identity.

As a Jewish immigrant, Levinsky understands his racial advantage toward a more rapid Americanization (than African Americans or Native Americans); yet, he is also aware of the codes for whiteness of the Progressive Era, where "gentile" signifies whiteness and Jewish does not; to him, becoming a "true American" is synonymous with becoming white, responding to the racial imperatives of Anglo-Saxonism and its codes for the *American* identity he constantly seeks to perform. Discrimination against immigrant and minority groups during the Progressive Era was also a lived reality. As an immigrant and a Jew, Levinsky devotes his attention to performing both whiteness and an Americanized version of his Jewishness: "I was forever watching and striving to imitate the dress and the ways of well-bred American[s]" (260). Read in the context of Progressive Era racial classifications and categories of identification, Jewish immigrants—while not enjoying the advantages of being read as "white on arrival," as Thomas Guglielmo has argued about Italian immigrants—inhabited an in-between racial status. It is from this vantage point of in-betweenness that Jewish immigrants like Cahan's David Levinsky engaged the hegemonic racial regime of his time, which privileged Anglo-Saxonism as the ideal American norm of identification. Identifying himself

as a Jew, Levinsky's desire to be American also signifies his desire to become white. His in-between racial status, therefore, leads to what Rottenberg calls a disaggregation of Jewishness from *race* and its morphing into *identity* (317-18). This morphing of race into ethnicity, Rottenberg argues, "has not been possible for African Americans at all since the intelligibility of ethnicity depends on the prior construction of black-white binary opposition" (318). According to Rottenberg, "as whites-to-be, these subjects were ultimately able and encouraged to identify fully with Americanness" (319). In morphing his whiteness into Jewishness, Levinsky does not renounce his Jewishness but adjusts its performance to the social codes of Americanization.

One of the modes of surveillance (and sometimes self-surveillance) that David Levinsky encounters as he unsuccessfully tries to Americanize is the policing (and self-policing) of his linguistic persona. As an immigrant character and self-professed greenhorn, Levinsky is linguistically incompetent and anxious about his social performance, which results in his constant policing of his clothing, gestures, and inflections of language. Reading *The Rise of David Levinsky* alongside Henry James's *The American*, Donald Weber has argued that Cahan's novel charts "the growth of shame, repression, self-hatred, and denial in the immigrant psyche." Weber shows that, while Christopher Newman, James' protagonist, is "at ease with his American manners," Levinsky "remains forever anxious about his social position" (734). Competing forces shape Levinsky's linguistic identity, staging an ongoing struggle between the pull of Yiddish (the language of home and family) and the desire for English (the language of his adoptive country). Unaccustomed to English pronunciation, David Levinsky first scoffs at the idea of linguistic difference: "English impressed me as the language of a people afflicted with defective organs of speech" (126). Levinsky later hires a *native* speaker as a language tutor and realizes that imitation is key to his acquisition of both linguistic and cultural capital: "I would hang on his lips, striving to memorize every English word I could catch and watching intently, not only his enunciation, but also his gestures, manner, and mannerisms, and accepting it all as part and parcel of the American way of speaking" (135). As much as he tries, David Levinsky's linguistic sense of inferiority precludes what he perceives to be the ideal of Americanization. To Levinsky, "[p]eople who were born to speak English were superior beings. Even among fallen women I would seek those who were real Americans" (171). "Real Americanism," Cahan signals in the nativist and gendered undertones he implicitly critiques, will always distinguish Levinsky from his American-born peers; Levinsky's Americanization, therefore, is impossible.

The chasm between Levinsky's greenhorn aspirations and the reality of his Americanized life only widens with age. At fifty-two, casting a retrospective

glance on his life after thirty years in the U.S., David faces a classic immigrant identity crisis, recurrent in other immigrant narratives: “My past and my present do not comport well.” David, the charity scholar of Talmud back in Antomir, Lithuania, and David, the wealthy cloak manufacturer in the United States, remain at odds throughout the novel: “I can never forget the days of my misery. *I cannot escape from my old self. My past and my present do not comport well*” (518). [my emphasis] David’s sense of displacement circularly opens and closes the novel, leaving the narrator to ponder the gains of accumulated capital and the loss of the greenhorn’s presumed innocence. David’s transformation comes at a price: the greenhorn and the successful entrepreneur are in perpetual conflict, causing painful meditations toward the end of the character’s life. Levinsky’s success and failure ultimately emerge from his negotiation with and ambivalence toward integrating and reconciling an ethnic past with an American present, which remain at odds throughout the novel.

David Levinsky’s performance of Americanization has limitations, however; in showing Levinsky’s inability to fulfill all his aspirations (education, family etc.), Cahan also signals the limitations of the immigrant’s ability to understand and perform the hegemonic script of Americanization. He is, in Randolph Bourne’s words, “an American on the make”—Cahan’s cautionary tale about Americanization gone wrong when capitalism gets in the way. In Bourne’s astute reading, “Mr. Cahan makes a subtle back-fire of criticism more deadly than the most melodramatic socialist fiction,” offering “a corroding criticism of the whole field of ambitions and ideals of this pushing, primitive society, more telling than any caricature or railing” (30). When Levinsky imitates hegemonic categories of identification that would make him legible as *American*, he simultaneously calls into question the parameters of the Americanization project, its prescriptive norms, and ideology. The militant Americanism of the 1910s was premised on hostility to non-Americans and foreigners—one either was an American or else one was not desired into the nation.¹² Although by the end of the novel he becomes a successful clothes manufacturer, David Levinsky still imitates what he believes an (imagined) American would do and say, but ultimately sees his difference as a lack: “That I was not born in America was something like a physical defect that asserted itself in many disagreeable ways—a physical defect which, alas! No surgeon in the world was capable of removing” (284). An inability to decipher the American space and American cues marks the greenhorn’s journey, as well as the frustration of his performance. Internalizing his “un-American” behavior as a lack, Levinsky points to the impossibility of ever becoming an American.

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¹² See Desmond King, *Making Americans*, especially 14-24.

THE IMMIGRANT NOVEL AND THE IMMIGRANT TROPE

Recent attention to immigrant subjectivity, immigrant memoir, poetry, and fiction, has generated an interest in the immigrant novel, a genre popular in the twenty-first century, but less so at its inception in the early 1900s, when sociological interest in immigrants shifted the readers' attention to life stories, autobiographical accounts of immigrant journeys and obstacles overcome.¹³ Thomas Ferraro asks: "How, in fact, do immigrants become writers? [...] In what ways have recent arrivals deployed the established literary forms of the established culture? What have immigrant writers achieved for themselves and their groups by *variously* participating in national literary and rhetorical traditions?" (Ferraro 7). Ferraro's questions gesture at the larger immigrant literary tradition that Cahan's work has inspired, as immigrant writers continued to position themselves within the American literary and rhetorical traditions. Furthermore, as Matthew Jacobson has argued, for immigrant writers, literature was not only "a useful venue for the contest of political ideas," but it was also "a forum for protesting present conditions ... and for challenging the oppressors' legitimating narratives of persecution and conquest" (*Special Sorrows* 96-97). More pressingly for this essay, the immigrant literary tradition went beyond the tropes of "the immigrant experience" by examining not only how American literature made room for immigrant tropes, but also how immigrant practitioners have influenced and transformed American literature.

The "immigrant experience" as a literary trope has been the subject of many genres of American literature. Established American writers like Willa Cather (*O, Pioneers!* [1913], *My Antonia*, [1918]) and Upton Sinclair (*The Jungle*, 1906) incorporated themes of the immigrant experience in their work, from alienation and poverty, to second-language acquisition and the costs of Americanization. Others went so far as to pass as immigrant writers: Sidney Luska, a.k.a. Henry Harland, posed as a German Jewish American writer (*The Yoke of the Torah*, 1896), while Broughton Brandenburg posed as an Italian immigrant (*Imported Americans*, 1904).¹⁴ The trope of immigration attracted considerable attention from gentile American writers, who wrote about successful

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¹³ A case in point is Henry Holt's volume published originally in *The Independent*, a collection of *Life Stories by Undistinguished Americans* (1906).

¹⁴ Sidney Luska, a.k.a. Henry Harland, posed as a German Jewish American writer, while Broughton Brandenburg posed as an Italian immigrant. To learn more about "imported Americans," Broughton Brandenburg and his wife went slumming in the New York tenements and, later, traveled to Italy. The resulting slumming narrative was *Imported Americans* (1904).

or stalled Americanization experiences, often in less than flattering terms. Although literary critics are still divided on this issue, Henry James and Edith Wharton were “at least arguably anti-Semitic.”¹⁵ Henry James’s return to the “American scene” in 1904 proved an uneasy encounter with “the New Jerusalem” (James’s preferred term for the East Side Jews), whose crowdedness and “multiplication with a vengeance” threatened or at least disturbed the realist celebrity’s bourgeois dispositions: “There is no swarming like that of Israel when once Israel has got a start. [...] It was as if we had been thus, in the crowded, hustled roadway, where multiplication, multiplication of everything, was the dominant note.... The children swarmed above all—here was multiplication with a vengeance” (James 131). Henry James’s unveiled distaste for Jews and other immigrants on the Lower East Side in *The American Scene* establishes a complicated relation between high realism and the more democratized realist enterprise proposed by William Dean Howells in what he called “the aesthetic of the common” (or, between highbrow and lowbrow realism). In Cahan’s novel, David Levinsky is similarly policed and surveilled both by America’s anxiety toward foreign “invaders”—and toward its own position as an invader—and by realism itself as a mode of surveillance. Although they are not “immigrant novels” *per se*, these representations shared a thematic interest in immigration and a willingness to represent the so-called “immigrant experience” and to normalize and humanize it for American audiences. Yet, they were not immigrant novels—i.e. novels written by immigrants themselves, or from an immigrant character’s point of view—and their narrators and characters were American by birth or impersonating immigrant characters. One of the theorists of the (early) immigrant novel, Richard Tuerk urged readers to distinguish between novels *about* immigrants and novels *by* immigrants. This is a distinction worth expanding on as we connect the cultural work of the early immigrant novel with more recent immigrant literature.

Although most early reviewers of Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* found ways to read it autobiographically, later studies devoted to the novel and Cahan have focused on its literary appeal, its craft, and the difference between Cahan and his protagonist (Lipsky xii-xiii). Yet, the craft of Cahan’s novel is worth further attention as both an immigrant novel and as an American novel.

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¹⁵ Marovitz reads James’s “grotesque representation of ‘a Jewry that had burst all bounds’” as “ambivalent” (108). I read James’ anti-Semitism as emblematic not necessarily of James’s own anti-Semitism but of the “American scene” he sees and describes through both nativist and expatriate eyes.

Thomas Ferraro captures the crux of the immigrant writer in America: “An aspiring writer from an immigrant background feels damned on the one side for becoming too American and damned on the other side for not being able to become American enough” (10). Does becoming American, therefore, challenge representational (genre) choices or group allegiances (or both)? By self-distancing from the group, the immigrant writer can achieve the critical and individual distance to write about it; yet, the pull of the Jewish ghetto is often too strong and, as with Cahan, more tempting and urgent than a literary future in English. Along with Anzia Yezierska and Mary Antin, also first-generation Jewish immigrant writers, Abraham Cahan popularized the immigrant novel in English at a time when both the genre (novel) and its practitioners (immigrants) were under the scrutiny of modernity and one of its major social crises: immigration restriction. As a mediator between cultures and languages, as a cultural agent, emerging realist writer Abraham Cahan positioned himself in dialogue with emerging American modernity, writing about and for a group that became one of modernity’s main challenges: the urban (new) immigrants.

The Rise of David Levinsky was also Abraham Cahan’s last work of fiction in English or Yiddish. For Cahan, writing in English was not a matter of choice as much as one of necessity. Unlike many of his fellow middle-class Jewish contemporaries, who believed in the impossibility of Yiddish to render the nuance of literature, Cahan realized that his Yiddish audience in America, though small, would become even smaller if the language were not preserved through some means, including literature and journalism (Chametzky, 54). Ethnic enclaves, such as the Yiddish community in New York City, tried to preserve a sense of belonging, or “the national feeling,” in a familiar language and with a familiar imagined readership. Although many immigrants shared similar political commitments, sociologist Robert Park argued, it was ultimately language and tradition that brought immigrants together (Park 55, 5). Was writing in English an act of assimilation, an affirmation of his commitment to the adoptive country, or an escape from the rigors of the conservative ghetto for Cahan? Was writing in English “in itself was an act of emigration,” as Marcus Klein has argued (20)?

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Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* reveals immigrant writing as not only complicit with but also critical of Americanization, conceived broadly as legal, political, cultural, and popular discourse. Americanization challenged both the novelist’s representational (genre) choices and group allegiances. Calling attention to the politics of immigrant representation and self-representation is a necessary intervention in order to bring immigrant writing to the center of American studies. Cahan’s immigrant novel paved the way for (new) immigrant fiction in the United States that would flourish throughout the twentieth century

and beyond. Besides the rigidity of these categories, which rely on limiting binaries like “old” and “new,” the immigrant novel continues to perpetuate a common mis-directed framework: the exceptional New World vs. the parochial Old World. Such representations continue to consolidate the work of the American empire by understanding immigrant writing at the beginning of the twentieth century in pro-assimilationist, pro-Americanization terms, where conformity to Anglo-American norms determined the immigrant’s potential for inclusion. If the immigrant novel has the potential to offer the “pluricultural view” that William Boelhower has proposed, it must be situated within a decolonial framework which further erases the putative “New World’s” multiplicity of cultures by casting it as an Anglo-Saxon world ready to mold the “savage” immigrant. Cahan rendered both the immigrant character’s desire to Americanize and his simultaneous reluctance to Americanization through an emphasis on David’s trans-cultural identity. Ultimately, *The Rise of David Levinsky* helps rethink immigrant writing as not only complicit with but also as a counter-narrative to Americanization through David Levinsky’s skillful manipulation of his performance of Americanization. In the immigrant novel, we see the legitimization of the immigrant genre and the recognition of its aesthetics beyond the superficial immigrant “theme” and its initial sociological appeal. Writing about immigrant subjectivity, both old and new, requires closer attention to histories pre-dating such forced or voluntary relocations, complicit or not in the American empire-building project, that immigrant literatures both document and help imagine.

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BIONOTE

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