

# Americanization of a "Queer Fellow": Performing Jewishness and Sexuality in Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*

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The narrative of David Levinsky's acculturation in Abraham Cahan's 1917 novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, is framed by its first-person protagonist-narrator's reflections about the somewhat ambivalent effects of his Americanization. The book opens with Levinsky's contemplation of his truly American "metamorphosis" from a poor East European Jewish peddler into a millionaire, which "strike[s] him as nothing short of a miracle." It closes, over five hundred pages later, with an acknowledgment that he sometimes feels "overwhelmed by a sense of [his] success and ease." (525) Levinsky tells his story after his struggles are over, when he is middle-aged, has everything money can buy, and finally has leisure to analyze and ponder his condition in depth. Cahan's narrative thus gives the reader access to two versions of his protagonist in the historical and social context of the late 1890s and early 1900s: Levinsky the character – the relatively innocent greenhorn striving to become an American, and Levinsky the narrator – the more insightful and mature persona who has made it and now reconstructs his life in the

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Cahan, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 3. All subsequent references to the novel come from this edition and will be given in parenthesis.

past in an effort to make sense of his identity in the present. This preoccupation with two distinct incarnations of the main character – Levinsky before and after acculturation – and the employment of the rags-to-riches narrative of male economic success indeed make Cahan's text, in Jules Chametzky's words, "a classic of American literature."

Despite its being so, or perhaps because it is a truly American classic, Cahan's novel also probes and reveals the mixed blessings and paradoxes of Americanization. As Chametzky, Sam B. Girgus, and, more recently, Donald Weber, point out, Levinsky is an ambivalent character, a "grotesque perversion of the American Dream," and a "Diaspora Man," engaged in a "sad narrative of unfulfillment."<sup>2</sup> Although he often boasts about the fantastic coup that made him "worth more than two million dollars" as "one of the two or three leading men in the cloak-and-suit trade," he often gives in to feelings of loss and confusion about his identity. As if to undermine the miracle of his transformation into the "new Man, the American," he states on the very first page of the novel that "my inner identity . . . impresses me as being precisely the same as it was thirty or forty years ago." (3) "There are cases when success is a tragedy," (529): he also says in the last chapter, where he complains about his inability to break away from his past, to forget his Old World, Polish Russian Jewish self and immerse himself fully in America

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 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 (530)

Instead of transforming him into a happy American – or a "melted ethnic" – Levinsky's superficially successful acculturation results in a deep identity split, which complicates and subverts the clichéd readings of Cahan's novel as a classic immigrant narrative. Levinsky's post-Americanization subjectivity, what he calls his "inner identity," seems suspended and constructed between the binary of selves he refers to in

2 Jules Chametzky, *From the Ghetto: The Fiction of Abraham Cahan* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1977) 137. Sam B. Girgus, *The New Covenant: Jewish Writers and the American Idea* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984) 74. Donald Weber, "Outsiders and Greenhorns: Christopher Newman in the Old World, David Levinsky in the New," *American Literature*: Dec. 95: 738, 740.

the third person – the "poor lad swinging over a Talmud volume at the Preacher's Synagogue" in the Old World and "the well-known cloak-manufacturer" in the New. The images of these two "David Levinskys" bracketing Cahan's narrative are mutually exclusive and viewed as deeply problematic by the narrator. When the memories of the Old World and his oppressive "old self" overwhelm him, Levinsky feels that "[his] present station, power, the amount of worldly happiness at [his] command . . . seem to be devoid of significance". (3) Thus, he perceives himself as devoid of stable subjectivity, as undefinable and unanchored; he is fragmented into his mysterious "insignificant" "inner identity" that resists Americanization, his past incarnation as an Old World Talmud scholar from Antomir, and his recently acquired facade as a successful American businessman.

In this paper, I explore the reasons for and the significance of this identity fragmentation in Cahan's protagonist and argue that it results from Levinsky's failure to be successfully Americanized as a Jew and a male who is rejected by the dominant culture. Levinsky's inability to achieve coherent subjectivity after his acculturation illustrates a profound crossbreeding of narrative models available to Cahan in the early twentieth century America with what Diana Fuss calls the "the social and discursive formations" of identity.<sup>3</sup> My close reading of Cahan's novel reveals that both Levinsky the character and Levinsky the narrator are products and victims of late nineteenth and early twentieth century immigrant identity politics in the United States, which dictate appropriate narrative models for immigrant stories like Levinsky's, stigmatize him as an ethnic for his Jewishness, and reject him for his ambivalent sexuality in order to write the master narrative of American consensus. Basing my approach on Sander Gilman's theories of Jewishness and the body, and on Judith Butler's and Diana Fuss's theories of gender as performance and identity as marginalizing difference, I will argue that Cahan's narrative reflects and explores American culture's desire to marginalize males by "feminizing" them, transforming their alien bodies and sexual conduct into a threat against the white middle class, heterosexual hegemony. I hope to reveal that *The Rise of David Levinsky*, long before

<sup>3</sup> Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 109.

literary criticism had theorized these issues, actually reveals and explores complex ways in which ethnicity is shaped by specific performance of gender and sexuality.

Despite the foreshadowing in its title, Cahan's novel, like William Dean Howell's *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, which was its inspiration, explores the ironies and self-destructiveness of its protagonist's "rise" to the pinnacle of capitalist prosperity. However, Cahan's text concentrates more openly on constructing its main character's identity split through the rites of gender and sexuality that Levinsky has to perform between the Old and the New Worlds. As a lower-class Jewish immigrant who can succeed only on the dominant culture's terms, he has to abandon the familiar milieu of Talmud scholars and the intellectual and moral values they represent and exchange the comfortable practices of Orthodox Judaism for a dramatically new way of living and thinking, for the quasi-religion of American capitalism which demands a whole new cultural identity. Therefore, he not only crosses from one patriarchal culture into another, but also has to negotiate two diametrically different versions of spirituality, masculinity, and homosociality. These negotiations interestingly prompt Levinsky to chart his transition into America in economic and sexual terms, as his rags-to-riches narrative unfolds simultaneously with his sexual history.

### **Narrating Acculturation as Heterosexualization**

Although a virgin, only tempted to "think" of sex by Satan in the Old World, Levinsky is a perceptive greenhorn in the New World, where he identifies successful Americanization with heterosexual machismo. While beginning his business ventures as a struggling peddler of "dry goods," he is also getting his sexual education from other vendors on the Lower East Side, the more experienced Jewish men who "were addicted to obscene storytelling . . . never tired of composing smutty puns . . . [or] hinting, with merry bravado, at . . . illicit successes with Gentile women." (115) Levinsky is "scandalized beyond words" by these men, especially that they often abuse verbally and harass women customers whom they

rely on for their livelihood, thus linking money, merchandise, and sex in a transaction that produces and defines (Jewish) manhood as a misogynist and lewd performance in the public sphere. (123) Unable to reject or resist this model of ethnic masculinity, young Levinsky pretends to be a quiet accomplice of his elder fellow vendors and learns quickly the rules of performance that a marginal bystander needs to embrace to appear one of the group. His teachers enjoy his complicity and derive self-esteem from it: "Look at Levinsky standing there quiet as a kitten . . . One would think that he is so innocent he doesn't know how to count two. Shy young fellows are the worst devils in the world." (124) By never revealing that he is an outsider to this discourse and not a "man enough," Levinsky pretends to be sexually experienced and soon translates the gender and sexual roles that his peers "invent" for him into action. When he announces the loss of his chastity in curiously "feminine" terms – "the last thread snapped – he connects it with severing the last ties to his Old World innocence and thus also with becoming an American. Yet, his sexual initiation spells loss of control over and absence of any anchored identity, as Levinsky becomes more ambivalent, confused, and fragmented as an acolyte of Americanism who has discovered the secret of knowledge in the Garden of Eden:

Intoxicated by the novelty of yielding to Satan, I gave him a free hand and the result was months of debauchery and self-disgust. The underworld women I met, the humdrum filth of their life, and their matter-of-fact, business-like attitude toward it never ceased to shock and repel me. I never left a creature of this kind without abominating her and myself, yet I would soon, sometimes during the very same evening, call on her again or on some other woman of her class. (125)

Interestingly, although himself a performer of the roles picked up among his ethnic peers, he sees the prostitutes as bad actors performing in the capitalist theater of market economy and projects his self-hatred onto them. "[T]hey failed to deceive me," Levinsky critiques their masquerades of "love" for sale, and then proceeds to identify their failure with his own as a businessman: "I knew they lied and shammed to me just as I did to my customers, and their insincerities were only another source of repugnance to me. But I frequented them in spite of it all, and *in spite of myself*." (125) By thus trying to distance the illicit sexual exploits that define and establish his Jewish manhood in the New World from "his

inner identity," Levinsky appears to illustrate Diana Fuss's concept of "identity as difference": "To the extent that identity always contains the specter of non-identity within it, the subject is always divided and identity is always purchased at the price of the exclusion of the Other, the repression or repudiation of non-identity."<sup>4</sup>

But New World homosocial relations are determined by and designed to uphold compulsory heterosexuality that is encoded as white and Protestant. Although Levinsky acquiesces in the dominant scenario of masculinity, he realizes that, as a Jew, he is an exact opposite of such a cultural identity and thus prohibited from entering the mainstream, especially in the social and historical context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States, which was dominated by racist theories of eugenicists and anti-immigrant legislation that restricted Jewish and other minorities' civil rights.<sup>5</sup> As Judith Butler argues in response to Michel Foucault's theory of identity, "prohibitions produce identity . . . along the culturally intelligible grids of an idealized and compulsory sexuality."<sup>6</sup> Being those who embody prohibitions, Jews serve as the perfect other for the heterosexual ethos of masculine Americanization.

Leonard Dinnerstein explains that anti-semitism in early twentieth-century United States "was part and parcel of . . . expressions of hostility toward the foreigner and the outcast" and that Jews were seen as "allegedly favor[ing] alcoholism, spread[ing] pornography, [and] subvert[ing] Christian principles."<sup>7</sup> Constructing them as a threat to the social order and morality – they "would . . . take over American government and society if allowed to do so" – goes hand in hand with designating their bodies and sexuality as abnormal and perverse. In *The Jew's Body*, Sander Gilman illustrates the reasons for the Jew to be perceived as "the surrogate for all marginalized males . . . who can be the source of [sexual] corruption."<sup>8</sup> Although the gender designation of the

4 Fuss, 103.

5 Leonard Dinnerstein, "Anti-Semitism in Crisis Times in the U.S.: The 1920s and 1930s," *Anti-Semitism in Times of Crisis*, eds., Sander L. Gilman and Steven T. Katz (New York: New York University Press, 1991) 213–18.

6 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 135.

7 Dinnerstein, 213, 216.

8 Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 123.

Jewish body is masculine, Gilman argues, its cultural representations focus on its "feminine" nature in, for example, linking Jews and prostitutes as "outsiders whose sexual images represent all of the dangers felt to be inherent in human sexuality" and who "have but one interest, the conversion of sex into money or money into sex."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, in being viewed as sexual polluters and diseased bodies, Jewish males are also linked with homosexuality because, in the medical and psychoanalytic discourse, the body of the Jew, and especially of the Eastern European Jew, is often seen as "interchangeable with the body of the gay man – physically different, exotic, feminine."<sup>10</sup>

Read in the context of such constructions of Jewishness, Levinsky appears marginalized in ways similar to Jewish females' marginalization at that time, despite his "macho" economic feat. Being dependent on WASP men's power and support in business, he learns that he has to abandon his "race" and excel in the native performance of "white" economic prowess in order to be like "true Americans," although he can never become them. As a feminized male, he has to turn his Jewishness and sexuality into Fuss's "non-identity," to participate, as it were, in his own self-annihilation in the anti-Semitic New World. His participation in what Butler calls "the public regulation of fantasy through the surface politics of the body" is, then, a multi-layered gendered performance of acculturation which is doomed to fail."

The realization that he is a sexually suspect and unacceptable ethnic informs Levinsky's ironic comments about the sexualization of his economic success: "I pictured civilization as a harlot with cheeks, lips, and eyelashes of artificial beauty. I imagined mountains of powder and paint, a deafening chorus of affected laughter, a huge heart, as large as a city, full of falsehood and mischief." (380) He identifies Americanism with images of goddess Fortuna, who seems to have stepped down from one of the cosmetics advertisements of that time: "Success! It was the almighty goddess of the hour. Thousands of new fortunes were advertising her gaudy splendors. Newspapers, magazines, and public

<sup>9</sup> Gilman, 4-5, 120-22.

<sup>10</sup> Gilman discusses instances of textual intersections of Jewishness and homosexuality in Freud, Proust, and Otto Weininger on pp. 83 and 196, 126-7, and 133, respectively.

<sup>11</sup> Butler, 136.

speeches were full of her glory, and he who found favor in her eyes found favor in the eyes of *man*." (445) As Levinsky has learned from his performances with prostitutes and from "prostituting" his capitalist machismo in the land of plenty, a newcomer's rites of entrance into America, his acceptance or rejection there, are warranted by "winning the Savor" of the "bitch goddess," that is, by gaining the approval of the American "*man*" for a successful performance of metaphorical rites of heterosexual romance. Levinsky's ironic construction of success as making it out with Fortuna-America elicits his necessity to excel in the idealized, nuclear-family compulsory heterosexuality. His failure to do so means that he can never be American, that, as a Jew, he will remain marginalized and feminized as the necessary other for the culture. Levinsky the narrator realizes that his inability to enter the dominant culture through the marriage narrative, despite having become the most desirable catch in Jewish New York, proves again that there is something "wrong," not simply with his gender, but with his sexuality. (526)

### Queer Moments

Levinsky's over-performance of heterosexualized acculturation repudiates and represses, turns into "non-identity," the Old World Talmud scholar innocence, chastity, and boyishness that his Jewish elders ridicule early on in the novel. He has to erase the homoerotic bonds he has had with his Preacher's Synagogue peers and teachers in Antomir – Reb Sender, whom he "loved passionately" (32) and Naphtali, whose "scrupulous tidiness," "girl-like squeamishness," and "ardent singsong" he "thought fascinating" and whom he missed "as [he] would a sweetheart." (35-6) He learns to hide his "inner identity" and desires of "a queer fellow" and engages instead in producing himself as the only acceptable male in the New World homosociality – the heterosexual. Levinsky is clearly self-conscious and ashamed of his transformation under the eyes of men who dictate and perpetuate this narrative – he feels "like one stripped in public" when his fellow vendors compliment him on his good looks. (116) Yet, his mature narrative persona – the fragmented and fluid



non-subject the novel ends with – has clearly survived the heterosxist rituals of Americanization and recognizes the paradoxes of gender and sexuality inherent in this process.

This ability to read through his performance enables Levinsky the narrator to salvage *some* of the "yueerncss" that relates to his "other-worldly" eroticism, sexualities, and desires. His discovery that a person is not a stable concept but a fluid process leads him to "everlastingly revising [his] views of people, including [his] own sell." (350) He also revises the effects of his acculturation performance which, although designed to erase all "queerness" while producing Americans, did not entirely exclude the possibility of "qucer" survival, opportunities, and relationships amid the exclusionary politics of dominant identity productions. As Levinsky admits, among the "astonishing discrepancies" in the "topsy-turvy" America, "the average man or woman was full of all sorts of false notions." (128)

The ways in which Levinsky the narrator presents his "notions" concerning his relationships with men and his ambivalent conquests of women suggest and even compel "queer" readings of Cahan's novel. He talks about his male friends in the eroticized language of love and romance. When crossing to the New World, he becfriends a tailor, Gitelson, who "cling[s] to him like a lover" (87-8) and with whom he celebrates their "ship brotherhood" twenty five years later as if it were a "lovc-tryst." (514) When he becomes infatuated with Jake Mindcls, he "adores him" for his "too soft and too blue" eyes, his blushes, and his virginity of "a regular bride-to-be," which he discovers when they both become the "lovelorn slaves" of a diva in a Jewish theater. (158-161) He compares another friend, his elder benefactor Meyer Nodelman, to "a girl of sixteen" and cherishes their moments of sexual confession, yet he is unable to use similar language in his descriptions of women and bc spontaneous in his relationships with them. While attempting to find a wife, Levinsky either chooses an object impossible to conquer and thus sabotages any marriage narrative – like he does with Anna Tevlin – or withdraws at the last moment repulsed and turned off – as he does with Fanny Kaplan. Moreover, he acknowledges and despises his heterosexual performances as fake and troubling. When proposing to Anna he watches himself like an actor "(That's it . . . I am speaking like a man of a firm purpose.)" (496); he is "somewhat bored" while listening to a confession

of love from Dora, a married woman whose "moral downfall" he succeeds in after an elaborate courtship which reveals to him that conventional "love" is "a blend of animal selfishness and spiritual sublimity." (280, 279)

Although necessarily embroiled with the homophobic discourses he was constructed by and could not help internalizing (much like Cahan himself, perhaps; not to mention his supposed anti-semitism or self-hatred), Levinsky the older man is able to author and revise himself beyond the exclusionary Americanization by preserving the "queer moments" of his tale. Reading into those "moments," we can glimpse other sexualities in Cahan's text, sexualities through which the protagonist fails to fully constitute himself, but whose possibility still helps him vocalize his "queerness."

By emphasizing this "queer," almost tragic, dimension of Cahan's otherwise often unsympathetic character (he is a class enemy to the author and often a disgusting sexist capitalist chauvinist), we can read *The Rise of David Levinsky* as illustrating the ways in which sexuality and gender are used to marginalize immigrants in America. Even though on the surface these immigrants may have been allowed to partake of all the happiness and glitter of economic success implicit in the American Dream, like Levinsky, they will always remain "victim[s] of [sexual] circumstances." Although he makes it big with goddess Fortuna, Levinsky ends up as a rather sterile character sexually, who has exhausted all his manly prowess while breeding money and thus cannot become one of the "Fathers." (523)

Cahan's novel exploits the rags-to-riches narrative of male economic success by constructing the story of a peddler transformed into a millionaire, while it simultaneously debunks such a vision of success by having this story told by a "queer" character who loses his sense of self as a result of this transformation, one who is "devoid of significance" because constructed as a failed ethnic and an unfulfilled American. While it is clear that immigrant acculturation is gendered, I hope that I've also demonstrated that it is sexualized. In the dynamic in which Levinsky finds himself, he becomes and remains a "queer" to the extent that he cannot/does not – because of his Jewishness – become a true American, a WASP, a hetero, a married man.