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Joke-Making Jews, Jokes Making Jews: Humor and Identity in Abraham Cahan's Yekl

Jason Paul Steed

- 1 Within any “minority” ethnic community there are two identity issues which, due to the incongruities inherent in them, can become sources of humor. The first is the issue of how the group member relates to others outside his or her group and of his or her attempts to assimilate into the majority. The second is the issue of how the group member relates to others within his or her own group and of his or her attempts to remain comfortably situated within the group after having successfully (or excessively) assimilated into the majority. In both cases, humor functions as a possible means of either assimilating or alienating the incongruity. In other words, the individual’s assimilation into the majority, or his or her alienation from the minority, is itself an incongruity which is either assimilated or alienated by those who encounter it—and humor is a means by which this assimilation or alienation can be accomplished.
- 2 Take the following joke as an example:

American banker Otto Kahn, Jewish by birth but a convert to Christianity, was walking with a hunchbacked friend when they passed a synagogue. “You know,” said Otto, “I used to be a Jew.” “Yes,” his companion replied. “And I used to be a hunchback.”¹
- 3 Here, an individual has attempted to assimilate into a majority group and has even gone so far as to assert that his identity as a member of the minority group is over. For an identity such as Jewishness, this assertion presents an incongruity, because Jewishness is not merely a matter of religion, it is also a matter of genealogy. This joke, then, uses humor as a means of assimilating or alienating that incongruity. One might make a case for the idea that the joke is assimilating, in that it is not violent and allows for individuals such as Otto to make a claim of assimilation, though the claim is the object of ridicule. But

ultimately, I would argue that the joke disallows such claims because it undermines them. In other words, the incongruity of a Jew claiming he is no longer a Jew after his conversion to Christianity is effectively alienated by this joke, because the joke reasserts Otto's Jewish identity. Otto is no less Jewish than the hunchback is less hunchbacked. So we see that humor can function, through the assimilation and/or alienation of incongruities, as an effective means of constructing a sense of identity.

- 4 Humor, of course, does not necessarily function in this manner at all times; but because it *can* function this way, it is possible to examine the use of humor with regard to issues of identity. As Paul Lewis points out in his *Comic Effects* (1989), the conspicuous *absence* of humor in the face of such an incongruity can likewise be worthy of examination. Perhaps one of the most fruitful fields for such examination is American Jewish literature, which often takes up issues such as alienation, assimilation, and "Jewishness" as some of its major themes.
- 5 The first prominent example of such a work is Abraham Cahan's novella, *Yekl*. Published in 1898, no other major work of American Jewish literature precedes *Yekl*, and it deals with precisely those themes mentioned above. Cahan—himself a Russian Jewish immigrant—had to deal with alienation and assimilation in his own life, and in *Yekl* he explores these through Jake Podkovnik's struggle for "Americanization" and his increasing inability to identify with his Jewishness. Considering the prevalence and prominence of these incongruities in the novella, it is not surprising that Cahan also creates and makes frequent use of humor.
- 6 That Cahan's humor was widely acknowledged and admired in his time is well-documented. Bernard G. Richards, in his introduction to Dover's 1970 edition of *Yekl and The Imported Bridegroom*, speaks of Cahan's "enlivening humor" (v) and his "rollicking humor" (vi) and quotes William Dean Howells's review of *The Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of the New York Ghetto* (1898)—which appeared in the December 31, 1898, issue of *Literature*—in which Howells describes Cahan as "a humorist" whose "humor does not spare the sordid and uncouth aspects of the character whose pathos he so tenderly reveals." According to Howells, Cahan successfully "holds the reader between a laugh and a heartache" (qtd. in Richards, vii).
- 7 In *Yekl*, humor abounds. There is joking among the characters themselves, there are humorous situations shared by the narrator with the reader (Sanford Marovitz notes "the sharp contrast" between the narrator's language and that of the characters as "the source of comic irony" [79]), and equally, if not most importantly, *there are clear opportunities for humor from which humor is conspicuously absented*. These "failures" of humor are important because, as Paul Lewis explains,

the failure or collapse of humor often heralds an affective and intellectual intensification, an anti-comedic shift into terror, alienation or confusion... Like the use of humor, the unwillingness or inability to be amused confronts us with what is most essential about a given writer, character or work. (157-58)
- 8 The best example of this in *Yekl* is the chapter in which Jake meets Gitl at the train station. Before examining this scene, however, it is necessary to first examine Cahan's use of humor up to this point.
- 9 *Yekl* opens in the cloak shop where Jake Podkovnik works, and we learn quickly that Jake (whose Russian name was Yekl) wants very much to consider himself an American. We learn this not only through the Americanization of his name and the narrator's description of him as "clean-shaven" and insistent on speaking a Yiddish "more copiously

spiced with mutilated English” than the others, which he speaks “with what he considered a Yankee jerk of his head” (2), but we learn it also through the humor that is present. The opening scene is one of joking: Jake, proud of his knowledge of American sports, speaks of boxers, and the result is a mini-sparring match between Jake and the other Jews who work at the shop. It begins with one of the men, responding to Jake’s demonstrations of boxing techniques, saying, “Nice fun that! ... Fighting—like drunken moujiks in Russia!”:

“Tarrarra-boom-de-ay!” was Jake’s merry retort; and for an exclamation mark he puffed up his cheeks into a balloon, and exploded it by a “pawncch” of his formidable fist.

“Look, I beg you, look at his dog’s tricks!” the other said in disgust.

“Horse’s head that you are!” Jake rejoined good-humoredly. “Do you mean to tell me that a moujik understands how to fight?” (3)

- 10 This good-natured banter between the workers is the first appearance of humor in *Yekl*, and it accomplishes two things. First, it posits Jake as very much a part of the group that is present. As Lewis notes, in his preface to *Comic Effects*, “In context—that is, as a shared experience—humor assumes and reveals social and psychological relations, cognitive processes, cultural norms, and value judgements” (ix). In other words, when we laugh *with* others, we assume and reveal shared values, identifying ourselves with one another as a social group. Because the group that is present here is identified as Jewish—they are speaking Yiddish, reading Yiddish newspapers, etc.—Jake, then, is identified initially—despite his desire to consider himself an American—as being comfortably situated within the Jewish community. Indeed, the fact that he wants so badly to see himself as an American only underlines the reader’s initial identification of him as not-American, as a part of this identified group of Jewish immigrants.
- 11 But immediately following this shared humor is the display of a more hostile humor, as Bernstein—a “rabbinical-looking man,” and thus, presumably, identifiable as extra-Jewish—becomes irritated with Jake, who has interrupted his reading. Jake scoffs at the mention of Russian moujiks who fight clumsily, claiming that “‘here [in America] one must observe *rulesh*.’”² Bernstein, in response, and “with an air of assumed gravity,” says, “America is an educated country, so they won’t even break bones without grammar. They tear each other’s sides according to ‘right and left.’” In a footnote, Cahan makes it clear that this is “a thrust at Jake’s right-handers and left-handers,” and the fact that it is a joke is clear in that the others respond with an “outburst of laughter” (4). Cahan’s footnote also provides a brief explanation of the joke: Bernstein’s reference to “right and left” is a punning of Jake’s boxing moves, his “right-handers and left-handers,” with the Hebrew equivalent of the letter *s*, “whose pronunciation depends upon the right or left position of a mark over it” (4). The joke clearly functions as a “force in the exercise of power in social groups” (Lewis 36); Bernstein, a more educated man than Jake, makes a joke at Jake’s expense, in which Bernstein’s knowledge and Jewish literacy (he knows the sacred language, Hebrew, and we find out later that Jake can’t even read Yiddish) is placed in a position of superiority over Jake’s knowledge, which is of American sports. As Bernstein and the others laugh *at* Jake (as opposed to *with* him) his identification with the group is undermined—he is alienated, to some extent. As a result, we begin to see Jake as at once Jewish (part of the group) and not-Jewish (apart from the group); or, perhaps more appropriately, we begin to see him as both no-longer-Jewish (“his religious scruples had followed in the wake of his former first name” [11-12]) and not-yet-American (“He

thinks that *shaving* one's mustache makes a Yankee!" [6]). From the first chapter, then, the theme of alienation and assimilation is firmly established.

- 12 We also learn in the first chapter that Jake has a wife and child in the Old World, but that this is not something he has shared with anyone, as the second chapter makes clear. Jake spends his free time at a dance hall, and it seems he has been somewhat intimate with at least two other women, by the names of Fanny and Mamie; clearly, "his resolution to send for his wife," notes Chametzky, is "in the indefinite future" (59). But in chapter three Jake learns of his father's death and is forced to bring his wife, Gitl, and son, Yossele, to the New World. Until the news of his father's death, Jake had continued his pursuit of Americanization. Not telling others of Gitl and Yossele was a part of this, as he "carefully avoided all reference to his antecedents" (24), thereby cutting himself off from a Jewish history. Yet Jake cannot completely let go of his past:

During the three years since he had set foot on the soil... he had lived so much more than three years... that his Russian past appeared to him a dream and his wife and child, together with his former self, fellow characters in a charming tale, which he was neither willing to banish from his memory nor able to reconcile with the actualities of his American present. (25-26)

- 13 After learning of his father's death, which clearly signifies a substantial loss of his past and his former identity, Jake's "native home came back to him with a vividness which it had not had in his mind for some time" (29). Jake resolves to send for his family and to "begin a new life" (31). But it is too late; his Americanization has progressed too far, as is evidenced by his reaction to Gitl's arrival in chapter four.
- 14 This is the above-mentioned scene in which the *failure* of humor "heralds... an anti-comedic shift into terror, alienation or confusion" (Lewis 157-58). The narrator's telling of the scene demonstrates clearly that the scene is an opportunity for humor, but the humor fails miserably:

All the way to the island [Jake] had been in a flurry of joyous anticipation. The prospect of meeting his dear wife and child, and, incidentally, of showing off his swell attire to her, had thrown him into a fever of impatience. But on entering the big shed he had caught a distant glimpse of Gitl and Yossele through the railing... and his heart had sunk at the sight of his wife's uncouth and un-American appearance. She was slovenly dressed... and her hair was concealed under a voluminous wig. (33-34)

- 15 The narrator, here, lets us in on the potential for humor by explaining that Gitl actually had been "sprucing herself up for the great event," and this incongruity between her intent and the outcome is clearly a potential source of humor. This potential is reiterated by the narrator's remarks that Gitl was

aware neither of this [the ugliness of the wig] nor of the fact that in New York even a Jewess of her station and orthodox breeding is accustomed to blink at the wickedness of displaying her natural hair, and that none but an elderly matron may wear a wig without being the occasional target for snowballs or stones. (34)

- 16 To say that the humor of the scene fails may be a bit misleading, for clearly there is humor here that is succeeding. Gitl is, after all, incongruity personified. Readers today will perhaps laugh naturally and unthreateningly at the scene, while the narrator seems to target Gitl in much the same way that Bernstein, earlier, targeted Jake—as an outsider, the object of a derisive, hostile humor which functions as an alienating force. Either way, the humor is not merely potential but fully present. Moreover, we note that through derisive humor the narrator constructs a set of values that are assumed to be shared by

the reader, and it is interesting to note this as an instance in which Cahan (as narrator) might be accused of anti-Semitism. Chametzky, too, notes this tendency in the narrator when, after praising him for “dispelling . . . an implicit prejudice and ignorance in his audience,” he admits that “he is capable also of an arch and condescending attitude towards his Jewish characters” (63). But in effect, though derisive, the humor is not violent nor is it ultimately alienating. That is, Gitl is not completely shunned by the group that includes the narrator and the reader (though Jake is another matter). While hostile humor directed at its object of ridicule can have an alienating effect, the fact that this hostility is expressed *through humor* is evidence that the alienation is not complete, nor need it be. Freud argued that humor was a safe means of venting hostility, and according to Lewis, “a character’s use of humor [is] related to his or her capacity for cognitive, emotional and moral development” (75). In other words, the ability to recognize incongruity and to laugh at it demonstrates the ability to accept or assimilate that incongruity. Bernstein and the other Jews laugh at Jake in the cloak shop, but he is still acceptable to them—they do not ostracize him altogether. Likewise, as the narrator and the reader share a laugh at Gitl’s expense, the value system that is shared which allows for that humor allows also for the presence of the incongruity which Gitl represents. Whether there is anti-Semitism present, then, in the end, depends on whether or not a space is made for Gitl’s Jewishness (the nature of her incongruity), whether or not it is allowed to *continue*.

- 17 It is precisely this potential for *not* allowing the presence of incongruity to exist or continue that, when realized, constitutes either true ridicule or the failure of humor altogether. It is this failure of humor altogether—to which I referred previously—that is realized in Jake’s reaction to Gitl’s appearance at the station. Instead of joining in with the narrator and the reader and having a laugh at Gitl’s expense, thereby accepting her incongruity and making space for it, Jake’s new system of (presumably) Americanized values cannot produce humor; instead, he recoils into anticomedic terror and confusion:

[H]is heart had sunk at the sight of his wife’s uncouth and un-American appearance... [He] had no sooner caught sight of her than he had averted his face, as if loth [*sic*] to rest his eyes on her, in the presence of the surging crowd around him, before it was inevitable... and he vaguely wished that her release were delayed indefinitely. (34)

- 18 For Jake, who has been doing his best to assert his Americanness, primarily through the suppression of his Jewishness, that Jewishness—to which he is still married, and with which he now comes face to face, as personified in Gitl—is unbearable, even unbelievable. “Here he was, Jake the Yankee, with this bonnetless, wigged, dowdyish little greenhorn by his side! That she was his wife, nay, that he was a married man at all, seemed incredible to him” (37). Jake is filled with “disgust and shame” (37), and quickly begins to see his wife and child “as one great obstacle dropped from heaven, as it were, in his way” (36). And it is with this last estimation that Jake’s failed humor is revealed as anti-Semitic, a manifestation of self-hatred, for Jake sees Gitl’s Jewishness, and thus his own Jewishness, as “one great obstacle” in his way to Americanization—an obstacle that must be removed or overcome. It must not be allowed to continue.
- 19 “When humor fails,” writes Lewis, “when a listener recoils in anger or discomfort, it is often because the listener and the teller have different values, a difference that manifests itself in an unwillingness or an inability to treat a particular subject lightly” (34). In this scene, Gitl is the joke—a joke told by the narrator and shared with the reader. Gitl is a

text being read. Jake, as another reader of the text, however, does not share in the humor because he no longer shares the values that will allow him to treat the subject—Gitl's apparent, even flagrant Jewishness—lightly. For Jake, the joke is not funny, it is offensive. And he spends the rest of the novella alienating this incongruity from his presence.

20 This alienation is accomplished as Jake pursues his divorce from Gitl and his relationship with Mamie. Mamie is one of the dance hall girls with whom Jake has had some past intimacy, and she is furious over the revelation of Jake's marital status. As Mamie's character is developed, we learn that she speaks an English that is "a much nearer approach to a justification of its name than the gibberish spoken by the men" (Cahan 19), and that she does so "with an overdone American accent" (49). Yiddish, of course, is representative of Jewish identity, and Marovitz notes that "the linguistic distinctions detailed in *Yekl*... add not simply to the local-color interest... but also to the definition of character and the assimilationist theme" (80). Thus, in an almost allegorical construction, Mamie—with her Americanized speech—comes to represent the Americanization that Jake is so desperately seeking, while Bernstein (with his Hebrew literacy) and Gitl, whose "backwardness in picking up American Yiddish" (41) is repeatedly emphasized, come to represent the Jewishness from which Jake wishes to escape.

21 In pursuing Mamie/Americanization, then, Jake must remove his "obstacle," Gitl/Jewishness. This move from Gitl to Mamie culminates in chapter eight, in the scene between Jake and Mamie on the rooftop, when the plans for Jake and Gitl's divorce and Jake and Mamie's subsequent union are finalized. The significance of the imagery in the scene is made explicit:

When they reached the top of the house they found it overhung with rows of half-dried linen... A lurid, exceedingly uncanny sort of idyl it was; and in the midst of it there was something extremely weird and gruesome in those stretches of wavering, fitfully silvered white, to Jake's overtaxed mind vaguely suggesting the burial clothes of the inmates of a Jewish graveyard. (75)

22 This association of the flapping laundry with a Jewish graveyard underscores the death of Jake's Jewishness. This metaphor is emphasized again as Mamie, playing hard to get, tells Jake to go back to his family; Jake begins to sense "the wrong he [is] doing," and we learn that "moreover, while [Mamie] was speaking [Jake's] attention had been attracted to a loosened pillowcase ominously fluttering and flapping a yard or two off. The figure of his dead father, attired in burial linen, uprose in his mind" (77). Clearly Jake feels haunted by his past, by his Jewishness. At that climactic moment when Jake and Mamie kiss, "the pillowcase flap[s] aloud, ever more sternly, warningly, portentously," and Jake has "an impulse to withdraw his arms from the girl; but, instead, he [clings] to her all the faster, as if for shelter from the ghostlike thing" (78). Jake's identity as a Jew is at stake, and it is the surrendering of his Jewishness that agitates the ghost. Clinging fast to his Americanization provides at least the semblance of shelter from the hauntings of his past, so this is what he does. That this shift in identity is complete is evidenced by what follows: Mamie declares, "Now it is all *settled*," Jake refers to her as "my gold" (78)—recalling the notion of America as "the golden land" (52)—and the two continue their conversation *in English*, during which Mamie repeatedly demands that Jake pledge his "oath of allegiance" (79), as though she were America herself.

23 Through all of this—from Jake's reunion with Gitl on Ellis Island, to his pursuit of Mamie, and on to his eventual divorce and his projected future *with Mamie*—Jake continues on, conspicuously humorless. Highlighting this humorlessness, by contrast, are scenes with

Mrs. Kavarsky, Gitl's mentor and advisor and easily the most humorous character in the novella. Gitl, too, is able to make jokes and to laugh at herself as a "greenhorn." At one point, for example, Jake upbraids her for her poor English, saying, "Don't say varimess, ... here it is called *dinner*." To this, Gitl responds with "an irresistible pun": "*Dinner?* And what if one becomes fatter?" *Dinner*, Cahan explains, is Yiddish for *thinner* (38). Jake's reaction to the joke is, characteristically, nonexistent. The pun relies on a knowledge of Yiddish, on Jewish identity. To acknowledge and share in Gitl's humor would be to share in her Jewishness—precisely what Jake wishes to avoid.

- 24 Because of his humorlessness, which contrasts with the humor of those around him, Jake might be described much in the same way that Lewis describes the protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux"—as "the one serious person in a city of mirth" (91). Jake is surrounded by Jews and Jewishness, by immigrants trying to make a home in America; yet while those around him can acknowledge the incongruities inherent in their situations and can often laugh at them, Jake cannot. He is either unwilling or unable to treat his predicament lightly, and thus responds to it with that "anti-comedic shift into terror." This notion of "anti-comedic," of course, refers not only to humor but also to genre. As Jake fails to find humor in incongruity—a humor that will allow for the existence of this incongruity, and thus the existence of his Jewishness—his story shifts from potential comedy into personal tragedy, the tragedy being the end of his marriage and the death of his Jewishness, as, with the completion of the divorce, "the bond between [Gitl] and Jake [is] now at last broken forever and beyond repair" (87).
- 25 Gitl, on the other hand, as we see her at the end of the novella, has reaffirmed her Jewishness through her engagement to Bernstein (a man "fit to be a rabbi" [88]). Though we are told that she, too, has become somewhat Americanized, with new makeup and a new hat (84), we note that these are superficial changes—Americanizations in appearance only. Marovitz uses these, and the fact that "the rustic, 'greenhornlike' expression was completely gone from [Gitl's] face and manner, and... there was noticeable about her a suggestion of that peculiar air of self-confidence with which a few months' life in America is sure to stamp the looks and bearing of every immigrant" (Cahan 83), as evidence of Gitl's own, more thorough Americanization. He romanticizes the novella, claiming that "both [Jake and Gitl] are the subjects and products of Americanization," Gitl's being the realization of "the intrinsic promise that Americanization can fulfill" (Marovitz 80-81).
- 26 But it is important to point out that Gitl's "air of self-confidence" is only an air; more precisely, it is merely the "suggestion" of an air. Really, we are told, she looks "bewildered and as if terror-stricken" (83). When she participates in "the culminating act of the drama"—the divorce—"her cheeks [turn] ghastly pale" (85) and her arms shake "so that they [have] to be supported by Mrs. Kavarsky" (86). In truth, what little real confidence Gitl might have is provided by Mrs. Kavarsky, who curses Jake ("May no good Jew know him") and whose words have "an instantaneous effect," so that Gitl can compose herself (87). As Mrs. Kavarsky consoles her, and even scolds her for lamenting the loss of her husband, we learn that "at the bottom of her heart [Gitl] felt herself far from desolate, being conscious of the existence of a man who was to take care of her and her child, and even relishing the prospect of the new life in store for her" (88). The second source of Gitl's hope and confidence is Bernstein. Thus it is not America, or Gitl's version of Americanization, which has affected Gitl for the good, as Marovitz suggests, but rather her continued and reaffirmed sense of Jewishness. We are told that Gitl and Bernstein will be married by the rabbi (87), unlike Jake and Mamie, who are rushing off in

a cable car “bound for the mayor’s office” (89). It is also important to note that Gitl’s hope and confidence are buried under “an exhibition of grief” and a “paroxysm of anguish” (89), and that her future—though she relishes her prospects—is by no means guaranteed. The fact that Gitl and Bernstein’s future “seem[s] bright with joy” leads Marovitz to declare them “two new Americans in the Golden Land” (81). But this overlooks the fact that their future only seems this way to *Jake* (Cahan 89), whose grass-is-always-greener mentality now causes him, in his moment of supposed triumph as he races away with Mamie, to wonder whether he might still be able to “dash into Gitl’s apartments and, declaring his authority as husband, father, and lord of the house, fiercely eject the strangers” (89).

- 27 By deromanticizing our reading of the novella in this way—by recognizing the dampened hope in Gitl’s and Bernstein’s future and by denying Gitl the same Americanization attributed to Jake—we lend to it a greater power and authority as the “cautionary tale” that Chametzky suggests it to be. The novella illustrates the negative effects of not just one mode of Americanization (Jake’s), but of Americanization and the immigrant’s predicament in general. Again, Jake’s failure at humor underscores this, for, as Lewis notes, “fictions, especially those that focus on problems of adaptation, use humor or the conspicuous lack of humor to raise questions about whether assimilating the incongruous is always the best or most noble response” (110). In other words, Jake’s inability to find humor in his own and others’ incongruity disallows that incongruity’s existence and forces an assimilation whose value is questionable. The only happy ending in the novella is in the story of Gitl and Bernstein, but whatever romance this might have had is undermined, because it is essentially a story of alienation; the two find happiness only by maintaining their identity as Jews, still separated to some extent from the dominant culture. Meanwhile, the story of assimilation—of Jake’s desire to become a “Yankee,” through and through—is the novella’s tragedy.
- 28 This may be what Cahan refers to when he demands that writers show “*real life*, with its comedy and its tragedy mingled—giving us what in my Russian day we called the *thrill of truth*” (qtd. in Marovitz 65). The realism of this truth, at least in Cahan’s novella, is the notion that even happy endings are touched with sadness, loss, alienation. Such is the case with Gitl and Bernstein. And the last words from the narrator of *Yekl* describe Jake’s thoughts as he is swept away toward City Hall with Mamie. Jake’s ending is supposed to be triumphant—he is getting what he wants, a divorce from Gitl, marriage to Mamie, his Americanization—yet he cannot shake the feeling “which was now gaining upon him, that, instead of a conqueror, he had emerged from the rabbi’s house the victim of an ignominious defeat.” We are told that
- If he could now have seen Gitl in her paroxysm of anguish, his heart would perhaps have swelled with a sense of triumph, and Mamie would have appeared to him the embodiment of his future happiness. Instead of this he beheld her, Bernstein, Yosele, and Mrs. Kavarsky celebrating their victory and bandying jokes at his expense. (89)
- 29 This final reference to humor functions as a last mark of emphasis on the theme of alienation and assimilation. For Jake—whose values are such that incongruity cannot be tolerated and for whom there is no humor—to feel triumphant, he must flaunt “a hilarious mood” (89), making Gitl the butt of his hilarity; he must see his ex-wife, the symbol of his Jewishness, in the “anguish” of utter alienation. But instead, Jake feels, “in his inmost heart” (89), himself alienated. In his thrust for Americanization he has lost his sense of identity, his future seems “impenetrable,” as he knows he is not yet an American

and no longer a Jew. The loss of his Jewishness is manifested in the perception in his mind's eye of the others "bandying jokes at his expense." Here, the presence of humor (though imagined) is used one last time, much in the same way that Bernstein uses it in the cloak shop, as a means of alienating Jake from the group. But unlike Bernstein's humor, which was real and which evidenced an ability to allow for Jake's incongruity, this humor is imagined by Jake himself in such a way as to alienate Jake completely. Thus it becomes a means of self-expulsion, expelling Jake from his Jewishness just as he has expelled Gitl from his Americanization. Jake feels this loss as he rides away, "the victim of an ignominious defeat," his new identity finally and effectively constructed by the humor that surrounds him, whether real or imagined.

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NOTES

1. This is my wording of the joke. It also appears in Telushkin, 125.
2. Cahan explains that the characters are speaking in Yiddish, and that italicized words are in English, and he often has to clarify the butchered English words; here, in brackets, we learn that "*rulesh*" is "rules."

ABSTRACTS

Le processus de construction identitaire de tout membre d'une minorité culturelle connaît deux phases caractéristiques : effort d'intégration qui définit les rapports du sujet avec les membres extérieurs de son groupe, et effort de non aliénation qui définit ses rapports avec ses pairs. Dans les deux contextes le sujet ouvre volontiers des portes aux ressorts du comique car il a souvent recours à l'humour pour gérer des « incidents » dus à des incongruités qui lui échappent. L'assimilation d'un tel individu dans la culture dominante ou son aliénation de sa minorité culturelle est elle-même une incongruité que le sujet intègre ou rejette, selon les cas, comme trait de sa personnalité, par le truchement de l'humour. Autrement-dit, l'humour participe à la construction identitaire du sujet.

Le présent article illustre ce cas de figure en s'appuyant sur la longue nouvelle de Abraham Cahan, *Yekl* (1898) qui se déroule au sein de la communauté juive-Américaine.

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