

Tracking the transnational trickster: Gary Shteyngart and his protagonists

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze Gary Shteyngart's protagonists in the light of his works, particularly his debut work, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (2002) and his memoir, *Little Failure* (2014). Drawing on the trickster trope and the concept of cultural hybridity, I argue that Shteyngart's doubly hyphenated characters act as digital-age trickster figures that move between the West and the East with dexterity and ease, exposing persistent mental patterns of othering within multicultural America, but also providing valuable insights into the process of constructing a sense of self on the threshold of several cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: Gary Shteyngart; American literature; trickster; hybridity; East; West

Igor Shteyngart was born in 1972 in Saint Petersburg, then Leningrad, to a Russian-Jewish couple. In 1979, taking advantage of the 1974 political accord between the Soviet Union and the US, the Shteyngart family were allowed to emigrate. They settled in Queens and little Igor, whose name was soon changed to an American-sounding "Gary," was sent to a Hebrew school. Similar biographical information is usually provided whenever American author Gary Shteyngart is discussed. Shteyngart's Russian-Jewish origins are invariably emphasized not only by those writing about him, but most of all by the author himself, whose fiction, journalistic works, and public presence all capitalize on his hybrid cultural identity. Most recently, the story of the Shteyngarts' immigration to the US was dramatized in the author's 2014 memoir *Little Failure*. At once humorous and sad, the book is a three-culture bildungsroman illustrating the author's early life in the US and then the road which has led him to becoming one of the most popular ethnic American authors. The work highlights the importance of humor, irony, and satire as the means for young Gary to navigate his way through the difficulties of growing up in a different culture, as well as the hardships embedded in the process of adapting to the host society, aggravated by the national stereotypes which accrued to Russianness at the turbulent times of the

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Cold War. At the same time, *Little Failure* as well as Shteyngart's other works, including his non-fiction writings, demonstrate to what extent the experience of being a (doubly) hyphenated American author has shaped his writing both in terms of form and content.

In this essay, I will focus on Shteyngart's immigrant protagonists, who, at least partially, overlap with the author himself, in his literary debut, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (2002) and his memoir, *Little Failure*. I will also refer to *Absurdistan* (2006) and *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) in passing. I propose to read Shteyngart's hyphenated characters as digital-age trickster figures that cross transnational borders with ease, disturbing the status quo and mocking "those facile and sponsored choruses which celebrate the vitality of cultural diversity while detaching it from all socio-economic references" (Papastergiadis 2000: 13). Although the tricksters' antics make us laugh, as Shteyngart's writing always brims with irony and sarcasm, behind the satire there is nonetheless a social commentary which merits closer attention. In addition, Shteyngart's tricksters unveil difficulties inherent in the process of constructing one's identity on the threshold of several cultural backgrounds. To probe into this significant aspect of his work, I will explore the trickster trope in relation to the notion of hybridity. Accordingly, Shteyngart's hybrid tricksters will be discussed in the context of national stereotypes and self-orientalization. Then, I will focus on *Little Failure* to approach Shteyngart himself as a transnational trickster whose travails and tribulations reveal the formation of hybrid identity, and his (ultimately very successful) inscription into the American cultural landscape.

In *The Trickster Figure in American Literature* (2013), Winifred Morgan reads tricksters as deeply embedded in American literature which she envisions as a representation of and testimony to racial and cultural diversity that constitutes the very tissue of America. The significance of trickster tradition for American literature lies in its function as a lens providing "insights about people who might otherwise always remain 'other'" (Morgan 2013: 4). Tricksters' ability to translate alterity for the rest of us and, in doing so, familiarize us with it and normalize it for us stems, among other things, from the fact that tricksters partake in the very otherness they address. As occupants of the crossroads and spaces in-between, tricksters operate on the threshold of cultural systems, moving between them with dexterity and ease. Their

ambiguous, interstitial character may be associated with marginality, which is not necessarily a negative condition. In Barbara Babcock-Abrahams's words, "[i]n contrast to the scapegoat or tragic victim, tricksters belong to the comic modality or marginality where violation is generally the precondition for laughter and *communitas*, and there tends to be an incorporation of the outsider, a levelling of hierarchy, a reversal of statures" (Babcock-Abrahams 1975: 153). The kind of marginality that Babcock-Abrahams is referring to harks back to Victor Turner's concept of liminality as applied to such common myth and folklore presences as "holy beggars," "simpletons," "third sons," or, more in tune with the subject of this essay, Jewish schlemiels. Despite their lowly status, these figures steal the limelight from other characters as they "strip off the pretensions of holders of high rank and office and reduce them to the level of common humanity and mortality" (Turner 1976: 110). Along similar lines, Morgan depicts tricksters as marginal, anti-structural individuals who, however, "are not put upon," unsettling what seems to be stable and "explod[ing] preconceptions" (Morgan 2013: 5). Outwardly weak and unimposing, these characters often defy expectations: "They are 'little guys' who overcome overwhelming odds to triumph despite their apparent lack of stature, heft, or promise" (Morgan 2013: 4).

In her study of American tricksters, Morgan identifies several trickster traditions corresponding to some of the ethnic minorities inhabiting the US, each reflecting problems and issues pertinent to the given community. One of them is the so-called Euro-American trickster tradition. Although Morgan traces it back to European oral tradition, particularly Anglo-American folklore, tricksters may manifest themselves in a variety of social and cultural contexts. Thus, the scholar points to trickster-like characters in Jewish-American fiction, the most famous of which being Saul Bellow's *Augie March* (already acknowledged by Babcock-Abrahams).¹ Accordingly, I propose to place Gary Shteyngart's picaros within the tradition of Euro-American tricksters who are rooted in Jewish culture and particularly its Jewish-

¹ For discussion of tricksters in Jewish culture, see for instance Ed Cray's collection of Jewish jokes framed by an academic analysis, entitled "The Rabbi Trickster" (1964). The presence of trickster in the Pentateuch has been analyzed by Dean Andrew Nicholas (2009).

American variant, but who also draw from and reflect their Russian legacy, moving back and forth several cultural spaces: Soviet, post-Soviet, Russian-Jewish, and Russian-American.²

Many a scholar writing about tricksters across various cultures cite humor and laughter as their unifying traits. Yet the humor in trickster tradition is hardly an inconsequential jest. To the contrary, “[t]rickster laughter—both the laughter *of* the trickster and *our* laughter at him may well tap cultural levels we otherwise ignore to our peril” (Hynes and Doty 2009: 31). In other words, trickster levity is closely linked to this character’s transgressive potential and his capacity to lay bare what we would rather not see. It is in this sense that the trickster “unites in himself the traits of the culture hero and the buffoon” (Lipovetsky 2010: 26). In order to expose certain uncomfortable or perturbing social dynamics within a given cultural circle, trickster jocularities often falls back on the humor specific to the corresponding ethnic or national group. Thus, Jewish-American trickster literature reaches to the tradition of Jewish humor, which is said to take its origins in the nineteenth-century Eastern and Central Europe. In his discussion of the fin-de-siècle literary identity of the region, Ewald Osers referred to a peculiar sense of humor—the determination to see the funny side even in a desperate situation—which might not be understood outside the region, and which he sees as very much akin to Jewish jokes (Osers 2000: 48). Indeed, “the difficult conditions that east European Jewry endured gave their humor a particular poignancy. Humor that thrived in the midst of struggle suggested that the humor functioned not as idle entertainment but as a vital mode of expression” (Oring 2013: 241). A number of scholars have noted that Jewish humor “was conceived as an instrument for turning pain into laughter” (Wisse 1971: 120). Emanuel S. Goldsmith pointed out that modern Jewish humor “has been described as the spiritual laughter of a people who laughed in order not to always have to cry” (Goldsmith 1993: 14), whereas Sarah Blacher Cohen observed that “[b]y laughing at their dire circumstances, Jews have been able to liberate themselves from them. The humor has been a balance to counter adversity and internal sadness” (Blacher Cohen 1990: 4).

² Given their cultural allegiances, the question arises whether Shteyngart’s tricksters could be analyzed along post-Soviet tricksters discussed by Mark Lipovetsky in his 2010 study.

Contemporary Jewish-American literature is indebted to this kind of bitter-sweet comedy. Suffice to mention Philip Roth's *The Prague Orgy* (1985), where Nathan Zuckerman envisions the Czech capital in the midst of communist normalization as an imaginary Jewish homeland which, despite outward deterioration and inner misery, thrives on stories and jokes, "because beneath the ordeal of perpetual melancholia and the tremendous strain of just getting through, a joke is always lurking somewhere" (Roth 1995: 63). Humor is so integral to Jewish-American identity that in the American imaginary Jewishness is interlocked with satire (Moshin 2006). From the Borscht Belt to *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), Jewish comedy altered American laughter, offering "humor that underscored failure rather than success, marginality rather than influence and puniness rather than power" (Whitfield 2005: 41).

Importantly, Shteyngart, the son of Russian Jews, thinks of himself as an heir to this type of wit. Asked about the importance of Jewishness for his writing, he declared that "Jewish humor interests me the most, and Soviet Jewish humor is Jewish humor taken to the max. It's Jewish humor from the edge of the grave" (Wiland 2006: par. 6). Indeed, Shteyngart's oeuvre displays many of the characteristics traditionally attributed to Jewish humor, including self-disparagement, tragi-comic laughter, as well as sympathy for the incurably hapless *schlemiel*, who also forms part of the writer's public persona: "a not-quite-assimilated Russian Jewish immigrant, amusingly disheveled and blundering; part Slavic clown, part schlemiel" (Hamilton 2017: 1). Shteyngart's brand of laughter—self-deprecating Soviet-Jewish humor informed by American popular culture—is the principal means of expression in his works and a (trickster-like) way of exposing the sores behind the comedy. Furthermore, as revealed in Shteyngart's memoir, it has been his survival strategy for coping with a number of adversities which he was faced with as a child immigrant. In Shteyngart's fiction, jokes not so much underlie stories as constitute their primary matter, concealing an array of emotions which often prove too difficult to deal with, to the point that the narrator of *Little Failure* will strive to "decouple the rage from the humor" and "[l]augh at things that are not sourced from pain" in order to keep himself sane (Shteyngart 2014: 32). True to Jewish tradition, humor in Shteyngart's works is thus inherently ambiguous, providing a relief from hardship but also acting as an anxious reminder of the hardship it tries to ward off. To quote Saul Bellow's famous dictum, "laughter and

trembling are so curiously intermingled that it is not easy to determine the relations of the two” (qtd. in Pinsker 1991: 2).

Unlike tricksters from other traditions, Euro-American tricksters seem to be relatively well-off. White-skinned, they blend into America and, seemingly, are not bothered by racial discrimination. Soon after coming to the US, the protagonist and narrator of *Little Failure* realizes that there are people whose skin color puts them at a disadvantage and that his own whiteness is in fact an asset: “We are refugees and even Jews, [...] but we are also something that we never really had the chance to appreciate back home. We are white” (Shteyngart 2014: 109). Nonetheless, whiteness does not guarantee either prosperity or social respect. Neither does it shield Shteyngart’s characters from being the object of ridicule and national prejudice aroused by their otherness. At the same time, however, they manage to use their transnational credentials to their advantage and outwit those who discredit them in the process. Thus, their trickstery is interlaced with their transnationality which breeds conflict (with the self and with the rest of the world), but also opens up space for performative reinvention.

Several critics have used the term “cultural hybridity” to theorize the inter-national and inter-cultural position from which Shteyngart writes. In his discussion of three contemporary authors of Russian origin, one of them being Shteyngart, Adrian Wanner speaks of “Russian hybrids” to denote the complex concoction of identities, cultural allegiances and linguistic choices which constitute their writing (Wanner 2008: 662). Similarly, Yelena Furman maintains that Russian-American writing and writers “inhabit [...] a hybrid ‘third space,’” while their identity is predicated on “the continuous interplay of the terms surrounding the hyphen” (Furman 2011: 22, 25). While Wanner and Furman employ the term to encapsulate the transnational and translingual character of Shteyngart’s writing,³ Jesper Reddig argues that the novelist “critically adopts the idea of hybridity and reconceives it in a distorted, parodied

³ In his novels, Shteyngart blends different registers of American English with Russian and Russian-sounding words. This linguistic strategy adds color and pizzazz to his fiction and highlights the intercultural background of his protagonists.

way” (Reddig 2013: 213-4).⁴ Since it is evident that there is a difference in the way these scholars apply the concept to Shteyngart’s fiction, I consider it necessary to address the meaning of hybridity in the context of his writing.

In Peter Burke’s view, hybridity is “a slippery, ambiguous term, at once literal and metaphorical, descriptive and explanatory” (Burke 2014: 54). Hybridity, which originally comes from botany, “evokes the outside observer studying culture as if it were nature, and the products of individuals and groups as if they were botanical specimens” (Burke 2014: 55). This in turn deprives hybridity of agency, as it focuses on the outcomes rather than on the process and the actors that engage in what the historian prefers to call “cultural translation” instead. Burke’s reservations form part of a larger debate on this contentious term. On the one hand, it operates as a trendy buzz word—a somewhat less hackneyed synonym of “multiculturalism.” On the other, hybridity as a postcolonial concept provides counterweight to the discourse of cultural colonialism, essentialism, and hegemony. Speaking about the cultural identity in the Caribbean, Stuart Hall famously turned to hybridity to capture “[t]he dialogue of power and resistance, of refusal and recognition” which people of the Caribbean conduct with and against the cultural, social, and political presences that have shaped them (Hall 1990: 231). In Hall’s terms, there is heterogeneity and diversity to this dialogue, as there is to the cultural identity which it breeds, and “which lives with and through, not despite difference; by *hybridity*” (Hall 1990: 235). In this sense, hybridity is not just an outcome or a result, but it emerges as a process of negotiating and producing new meanings. It is, as Homi Bhabha would put it, where culture originates.

Importantly for the subject matter of this essay, Bhabha resorts to literature to illustrate the workings of the concept. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), he juxtaposes traditional national literature with works

⁴ A similar argument is developed by Brian Trapp who posits that in *Super Sad True Love Story* Shteyngart deconstructs “the American myth of the melting pot for a transnational America” (2016: 2), as the interracial romance between the protagonists, a Russian-Jewish American and a Korean American, ultimately fails to overcome the deep-down intercultural differences which become exacerbated by the dystopian realities of the declining, violence-ridden America of the future.

whose themes and concerns cannot be contained within the borders of one nation-state: “Where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees—these border and frontier conditions—may be the terrains of world literature” (Bhabha 2005: 12). Therefore, the figure of a liminal/marginal person and the transnational story he or she has to tell promises to become “an international theme,” as cultural hybridity is placed on par with nationhood. If this is true, then Shteyngart’s (life) story, as presented to the reader in *Little Failure*, and in his other works too, falls within Bhabha’s conceptualization of world literature, since it reveals the making of a writer whose identity has been formed in the process of coming to terms with difference and otherness, and finding sense (and writing material) *in-between*. Furman seems to confirm this claim as she draws on Bhabha’s idea of “third space” to establish a connection between hybridity and immigrant identity which involves moving back and forth the old and the new geographies and cultural and linguistic spaces (Furman 2011: 30). Importantly, in Shteyngart’s fiction, hybridity is interlocked with trickstery as his fierce, frequently politically-incorrect and unforgiving sense of humor is informed by the fact that he straddles several cultures. Yet, his Russian-Jewish-American trickster laughter is often directed at hybridity itself, understood, in too simplistic a way, as a melting-pot-like amalgamation of cultures. As I will show in the following sections of this essay, through the exploitation of crude national stereotypes Shteyngart playfully draws our attention to the existing mental maps of difference, and, in a broader perspective, our incessant need to pigeonhole and classify selfhood and otherness according to an ingrained set of mental images. In this sense, I suggest that while writing from the position of hybridity in Bhabha’s sense, Shteyngart problematizes an idealized discourse of normative *multiculti* which stresses a happy and smooth coexistence of nations and ethnicities amidst an atmosphere of acceptance and tolerance. Moreover, even though Shteyngart’s characters (and arguably the author himself) tend to profit from their hybridity, it is nonetheless a constant source of existential pains for them. Therefore, I coincide with Reddig’s claim that “[w]hile his [Shteyngart’s] writing is located within hybrid domains, this location is [...] not without its carefully inwrought ambivalences” (Reddig 2013: 216). In Shteyngart’s literary world, this often

burdensome and bumpy hybridity is embodied by transnational tricksters who, acting from the position of liminality—*betwixt and between* identity and alterity—are at once cultural disruptors and mediators who “discombobulate power relations among races, classes, and genders,” but also “offer a kind of palliative to the pain and discomfort inherent in difficult social interactions” (Morgan 2013: 11-12).

One of the crucial characteristics of tricksters is that they are irreverent. In his fiction, Shteyngart does not spare anyone, and his mockery and disparagement are oriented towards both his country of origin and his country of residence. Even more so, they are aimed at the writer himself or his various, thinly-disguised alter-egos, such as Vladimir Girshkin from *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* or Jerry Shteynfarb from his uproarious second novel, *Absurdistan*. Although Shteyngart's reliance on satire and auto-derision as ways of navigating life's adversities places him firmly within Jewish literary tradition—“survival will mean [...] the love of what is funny, humor being the last resort of the besieged Jew” (Shteyngart 2014: 111)—his jokes are also very much indebted to his Russian background, and particularly to the cultural symbolism of the Cold War and the Soviet-American struggle for supremacy. As Adrian Wanner points out, while Shteyngart's scathing, unforgiving jokes have earned him much popularity with American literary critics, Russian reception of his works has been much cooler. In his homeland, Shteyngart's fiction has been criticized for exploiting and indulging in clichés and stereotypes which only “serve to reinforce American prejudices against Russians” (Wanner 2011: 121). Even Shteyngart's jokes have been disparaged for being “always completely American” rather than Russian in character (Wanner 2011: 121). In other words, Shteyngart's predilection for politically-incorrect satire, often directed against his own kin, has not gone down well with Russian critics, who deem him shallow and inauthentic.⁵ Indeed, there is

⁵ According to Wanner, quite the opposite is true for Jewish-American critics who have praised and rewarded Shteyngart's works, positioning his writing within the rich tradition of Jewish-American immigrant literature (Wanner 2011: 122-123). At least until *Little Failure*. In “The Hollowing of Gary Shteyngart,” which David Brauner (2017) sees as reminiscent of Irving Howe's infamous critique of Philip Roth, Marat Grinberg not only criticizes Shteyngart for essentializing the Russian-Jewish immigrant, but also for “hollowing out” their

no denying that Shteyngart's writing relies, to a large extent, on the exploitation of stereotypes and labels regarding three main national or ethnic groups: Russians, Americans, and Jews. In this, it appeals to an overriding "tendency to fixate one's estimate of foreigners or of foreign nations in terms of a limited number of foregrounded attributes, while reciprocally reserving for oneself or for one's own group the contrary (usually superior) characteristics" (Beller 2007: 429). However, Shteyngart's own liminal position on the threshold of cultures and nations problematizes easy polarizations into self vs. other, better vs. worse, and the West vs. the East.

This is already visible in his debut novel, which employs irony, hyperbole, and parody to spotlight Russian and American flaws alike. Interestingly, Shteyngart's departure point for exploring the Iron Curtain of preconceptions is Prava, a newly de-communized city somewhere in the European East. Although all signs indicate that Prava is a thinly-disguised Prague, the city is situated in a generic Eastern European country torn between the receding communist structures and the looming capitalist future. In Shteyngart's novel, this liminal, half-real, half-imaginary setting turns into a battleground for influence between the competing forces of the East and the West. The latter is represented by a group of well-off, college-educated American youths,⁶ who have gone East in search for a temporary respite from their commonplace lives. Perched on bar stools all over Prava, they picture the city as the "Paris of the 1990s" (Shteyngart 2004: 66), hoping that its "shabby chic" will rub off on them, catalyzing their metamorphosis into post-Cold-War Hemingways and Steins. Shteyngart is quite merciless in his depiction of those Western globetrotters and their grandiose expectations. Young Americans populating the pubs of Prava are portrayed as doltish,

Jewishness: "And so the infamous Soviet project of hollowing out Jewishness which should have died with the death of the communist regime, has now entered American literature—through the work of Gary Shteyngart" (Grinberg 2014).

⁶ Shteyngart knows this crowd well. As a student at Oberlin College, he visited the Czech capital which was at the time "mobbed, mostly with young people ambling with their knapsacks and guitars [...]. This summer of 1990 Czechomania, or Czech chic has overtaken the youth international" (Hoffman 2010: 108).

shallow, and self-centered. In theory, the Westerners yearn for the cultural other, but in practice they spend most of their time enclosed in their all-American self-congratulatory enclaves. Importantly, their presence in Prava is symptomatic of sociopolitical changes that the European East is going through following the lifting of the Iron Curtain, as “American expats are essentialized as privileged Western consumers in collusion with multinationals which are obscenely encroaching on the city, transforming it into a neocolonial paradise” (Kovačević 2008: 147).

In turn, the capitalist West gradually colonizing the post-communist East is juxtaposed with “the side effects of capitalist transitions” (Kovačević 2008: 148): a brutal and corrupted post-Soviet mafia which is wielding control over Prava. In his depiction of the Mafiosi, Shteyngart essentializes Russianness as much he does Americanness, reaching for some of the most blatant stereotypes regarding his homeland and its inhabitants. Thus, the Mafia boss and his comrades spend time binge drinking and indulging in senseless violence, while outwardly they display a lack of good taste and a predilection for ostentation and kitsch. Yet, despite their rough disposition, they can also be warm-hearted and affectionate in their own ways, evoking the popular *imageme* of an expansive and contradictory Russian soul battered by history.⁷ In Shteyngart's novel, these seemingly disparate worlds of the East and the West blend in the figure of Vladimir Girshkin, a Russian-American of Jewish extraction who comes to Prava to profit from both parties. He strikes a deal with the Russians to, under the guise of an insider to both worlds, trick the doltish Americans into embarking on a fraudulent investment scheme involving some of the trademark tools of neoliberal culture: a “lit mag,” a nightclub, and a fake computer company. Meanwhile, he responds to the post-Soviet desire for improvement, that is, measuring up to the West, by teaching the Mafiosi how to *appear*

⁷ This contradictory image of Russia goes back to the late nineteenth century, when American politicians and intellectuals were emulating Western European views on tsarist Russia as oppressive and backward. Concomitantly, works by great Russian novelists, Lev Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, fueled a different kind of stereotype—a romantic vision of timeless Russia populated by “fabulously wealthy aristocrats, wild Cossacks, noble nihilists, beautiful prima ballerinas, bomb-throwing revolutionaries, and picturesquely downtrodden folk” (Chatterjee and Holmgren 2013: 3).

American, rather than by helping them to correct their degenerate ways. Thus, Vladimir, the first of Shteyngart's tricksters infiltrates both communities, exposing their pettiness and parodying their vice. In doing so, however, Shteyngart also exposes the protagonist himself, drawing the reader's attention, in his ever-humorous manner, to the dilemmas inherent in living an immigrant's hybrid life and the process of constructing one's identity at the crossroads of two worlds—the literary project which he will accomplish in *Little Failure*.

Modeled after his creator, Vladimir Girshkin arrived in the US as a child and has felt inadequate ever since. Although his inside knowledge of both Russians and Americans proves to be crucial for his (ultimately flawed) conquest of Prava, he is in fact tormented by his hyphenated status, as he is striving to become if not an American, then at least “an alpha immigrant” (Shteyngart 2004: 128). In the novel, being born in the US is associated with an innate self-confidence and social advantage, whereas the existence of an immigrant is depicted as an uphill struggle. In between these two clichéd representations, there is another intermediate category: the aforementioned “alpha immigrant.” Traditional immigrant narrative would suggest that this rubric designates an incomer who manages to achieve a native-like-status or even surpass “real” Americans through hard work and constancy. However, Shteyngart's novel complicates the story of upward mobility as being an alpha immigrant translates into fulfilling natives' expectations of a perfect other that is at once exotic and familiar. Therefore, Vladimir Girshkin capitalizes on his Russian credentials in order to exoticize himself, first for the sake of his American girlfriend Francesca and her circle, and then for the Westerners in Prava. Vladimir's self-orientalizing mission exposes Western penchant for otherness, understood as an appealing social marker as long as it is delivered in the right dose. Thus, the Americans in Prava accept Vladimir, because he encapsulates the right balance between familiar American qualities and Eastern European exoticism: “[h]istorically, a little dangerous, but, for the most part, nicely tamed by Coca-Cola, blue light specials, and the prospect of a quick pee during commercial breaks” (Shteyngart 2004: 389).

Arguably, ironic self-orientalization, involving trickster-like shape-shifting, has been one of the major tropes in Shteyngart's writing and part of his public performance since the very beginning of his literary career in 2002. The inner back cover of his debut novel features a

photograph of the author wearing an unflattering cap perched on top of his head and an old-fashioned coat with a fur collar, his hand enveloped with a leash attached to a grizzly bear cub. This hyper-clichéd image of a shabby Eastern European immigrant is further exploited in the video trailer for *Super Sad True Love Story* (which, curiously enough, is the least concerned with Russianness of all Shteyngart's works), in which the novelist speaks with a thick Russian accent and is unable to read English, despite being a published author and a lecturer at Columbia. The trailer pokes fun at academia's and the publishing industry's fascination with exoticism and "immigrant chic." Columbia students and writers featured in the video, in this role actor James Franco and writer Jeffrey Eugenides among others, make pseudo-intellectual comments about Shteyngart, while the author himself teaches his students how to master a pretentious small-talk apt for snobbish literary circles. At the same time, the video capitalizes on the cultural imagery associated with Russia to mock the highly stereotypical notion of Russianness as a national trait which can be boiled down to a few random elements jumbled together: vodka and marinated pickles are mentioned alongside bears and Chekhov's short stories. In his discussion of the novel behind the trailer, a dystopia concerned with an interracial romance of a Russian–Jewish American and a Korean American, Brian Trapp argues that national stereotypes "appear here in such an exaggerated and reductive form that one can conclude Shteyngart is staging a comedy of multicultural descent, using stereotypes to reveal the absurdity of such essentialism" (Trapp 2016: 4). The same is true of the visual story promoting the novel, which mocks clichéd thinking through the accumulation and exploitation of schematic national representations.

Importantly, in Shteyngart's fiction self-orientalization and stereotyping turn out to be means of performing trickster which contributes to "casting a 'grain of sand' into the machinery of the established structures and social and economic tradition" (Morgan 2013: 99). Therefore, somewhere between the hyperbolic consumerist West and the wild East portrayed in *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, there is post-communist European East striving to find the "third way" capable of accommodating communist legacies and capitalist realities. This quest is humorously represented through a conflict between a group of communist babushkas who keep protecting the last remnant of the regime—an enormous foot which used to belong to a giant Stalin

figure—and two young rebels who stock up on explosives to blow up the foot and, in doing so, clear the path to a bright westernized future. While for Shteyngart the former system has never been an option, he is far from endorsing the new one unconditionally. Through the character of Girshkin, he holds up a mirror to the European East, so to say, exposing its long-standing desire to emulate the West. However, instead of casting Western capitalism as the only viable solution to Eastern European socio-economic malaise, he adverts to the system's own afflictions.⁸ Shteyngart's novel does not offer a conclusive answer to the post-communist question, but it seems to be implying a possibility of reconciling the past and the future into a meaningful present, as long as the memory of communism is not sidestepped when forging the post-communist identity of Eastern-Europeans and their nations.

Similar embedded social commentary, though I doubt that Shteyngart would approve of using this term in relation to his fiction, can be found in his second work, *Absurdistan*. As was the case with his debut novel, *Absurdistan* does not spare anyone: using his Russian-Jewish protagonist Misha Vainberg as his mouthpiece, Shteyngart “thinks in peoples, not just individuals. He jokes in peoples, too, and not only about Jews and Russians, as his heritage entitles him to, but about Muslims, Germans, Brooklynites and every other in-group he can outrage” (Kirn 2006: par. 11). In Shteyngart's perfectly democratic satire, social malaise knows no borders and may in fact unite seemingly disparate social groups. As Misha's outspoken, streetwise American girlfriend puts it, “‘all of you Russians are just a bunch of nigazz.’ [...] ...your men don't got no jobs, everyone's always doing drive-bys whenever they got beefs, the childrens got asthma, and y'all live in public housing” (Shteyngart 2008: 12). By drawing this blunt parallel between Russian and African-American experience, Rouenna exposes dismal social conditions of post-Soviet Russia, this great Cold-War loser, where there is an insurmountable gap between the oligarchs and the poor, and violence has been normalized to such an extent that it no longer shocks anyone. As Sasha Senderovich has rightly observed, Shteyngart “[...] explores the Soviet experience as a way of understanding life after the collapse of the

⁸ Shteyngart's critique of savage capitalism will resurface in *Super Sad True Love Story*, where he pictures a dystopian version of the United States of America where consumerism has become a new religion.

Soviet Union, including in America” (Senderovich 2015: 98). Although Misha and Rouenna may initially seem like a very unlikely couple, they both come from places plagued by very similar social problems, except for the fact that she has been raised in poverty while he has avoided it thanks to his Mafioso father. In addition, despite having different nationalities, they share a common culture.

Like Shteyngart's debut novel, *Absurdistan* is a book about cross-cultural identity, however, unlike Vladimir, Misha knows where he belongs. Misha is convinced that he is an American trapped in a foreigner's body and one way of channeling his American self is through rap music. When a Russian businessman takes offence at Misha's rapping, suggesting that he should declaim some Pushkin instead, Shteyngart once again conflates Russian and African-American experience, this time within the realm of culture: “Hey, if Pushkin were alive today, he'd be a rapper,” he replies (Shteyngart 2008: 6). Though tongue-in-cheek, Misha's remark points to the kind of cultural hybridity which Shteyngart performs in his books, blending the East with the West, English with Russian, and the highbrow with the popular.⁹ As Adrian Wanner points out, “Shteyngart's fervent embrace of cultural hybridity leads him to reject any claims of ethnic purity. [...] Ultimately any ritual of national or ethnic pride turns in Shteyngart's fiction into a self-ironic spectacle” (Wanner 2011: 131). In other words, whenever Shteyngart mocks otherness, he laughs at himself because it forms part of who he is. This is particularly evident in such characters as the aforementioned academic Jerry Shteynfarb, “a perfectly Americanized Russian émigré” who has used his “dubious Russian credentials to rise through the ranks of the Accidental creative writing department,” and whose literary debut is called “*The Russian Arriviste's Hand Job*” (Shteyngart 2008: 55). Yet Shteyngart's self-irony and auto-exoticism may also be read as a conscious strategy. By emphasizing his own

⁹ In one of the interviews Shteyngart declared that “At Oberlin, rap saved my life. It was the most liberating thing I'd ever encountered (...). These antisemitic, anti-Asian, anti-white, anti-everything raps” (Oppenheimer 2006). Not only does this statement attest to the author's fascination with rap music, which he has shared with Misha Vainberg, but also sheds some light on his trademark irreverence to political correctness, which, it seems, has been at least partly inspired by rap.

“Russian credentials” in a garish and hyperbolic manner, as is the case with the aforementioned trailer, Shteyngart may be seen as profiting from America’s life-long fascination with Russia whose Janus-faced image has existed in the American imaginary since the late nineteenth century and is still very much alive. Moreover, if seen from the post-colonial/communist perspective,¹⁰ Shteyngart’s appropriation of Western patterns of othering bears resemblance to subversive mimicry, which, ultimately, allows him to assert his hybrid voice, or, perhaps more appropriately, to have the last laugh. To put it bluntly, as we laugh at the cultural other, it is in fact he who calls the tune.

There is a strong element of cultural trickstery in all this. Shteyngart and his various alter egos unsettle the established order, mocking the notions of tolerance, political correctness, and happy multiculturalism to the enjoyment of readers and critics, at least the Western ones, alike. According to Walter Kirn, there is something quite liberating to Shteyngart’s impudent characters to the point that “[o]ne envies his sense of entitlement to biases, and his frank understanding of the fact that such crude distinctions make the world go round. Especially these days, when they’re not supposed to. When, ostensibly, we’re all United Nations blue” (Kirn 2006: par. 11). Yet there is more to Shteyngart’s tricksters than irreverence. Through exposing persistent national representations, they raise questions about our relationship to otherness, which is always constructed with respect to the way we perceive ourselves and embedded in a larger socio-historical context. In this sense, the “stereotype game” which Shteyngart engages in as a writer and a cultural performer is universal to all of us. As Kirn suggests, Shteyngart appeals to the human need to classify and pigeonhole, to analogize and juxtapose, revealing the mechanics involved in the process of constructing one’s self-image in relation to otherness and vice versa. Shteyngart’s paradigmatic hero—an immigrant man—becomes thus a perfect vehicle for exploring (and subverting) the persistent use of mental maps in a world which celebrates diversity while “fetishizing and commodifying [...] identity,” and

¹⁰ It is not my intention to conflate the post-colonial and post-communist experience here; nonetheless, for several years now scholars in post-communist studies have successfully applied post-colonial concepts to the study of the complex relations between the Soviet Union/Russia, East-Central Europe and the US.

separating “ethnic groups into agreeable winners and forgettable losers” (Hamilton 2017: 51). At the same time, his hybridity allows him to penetrate cross-cultural boundaries to point finger at specific social and cultural malaise tormenting both the East and the West, as is the case with his debut work and *Absurdistan*. With the help of his Russian-Jewish-American tricksters, like Vladimir and Misha, Shteyngart draws seemingly unlikely but often surprisingly accurate parallels between the post-Soviet and American experience (Wanner, Senderovich). In doing so, he recycles the leitmotif of a funhouse mirror,¹¹ as the East keeps functioning as a distorted image of the West. At the same time, however, his hybrid tricksters problematize this common trope. Thinking in Saidian terms, Western self-image reflected in the post-communist mirror is hardly consolidated and strengthened in comparison with its Eastern European imitation—though it is still undeniably appealing and worthy of emulation, it also comes off as visibly flawed.

Throughout all of Shteyngart's novels there appear auto-biographical elements and anecdotes. Although the writer has never concealed the fact that his life has been a source of inspiration for his works, it is only in *Little Failure* that an attentive reader may find out which episodes and characters have been inspired by real events.¹² In what follows, I would like to focus on Shteyngart's memoir as I believe it reveals the story behind the motif of three-culture tricksters which runs through his works, and which has been the focus of this essay so far. In this sense, *Little Failure* functions as a kind of coda to Shteyngart's previous novels and,

¹¹ It was at the beginning of the revolutionary twentieth century that Russia's image as America's mirror came into being (Merrill Decker 136). During the Cold-War period this trope would give way to a metaphor of an inverted or distorted mirror image, encompassing not just Soviet Russia but the satellite countries of Eastern Europe.

¹² If, of course, the memoir is approached as a true-to-life account. The strong trickster element and Shteyngart's record of mock-biographical writings, with a plethora of barely-disguised alter egos, may make one wary of classifying the work as strictly autobiographical. In Wanner's assessment, “with all its seeming honesty and revelation of an unvarnished self, *Little Failure* remains nevertheless a calculated, attention-seeking verbal performance” (Wanner 2015: 144).

arguably, constitutes his most mature literary achievement to date,¹³ irrespective of the fact whether he will continue to source his cultural legacies in his future writings or not.

In a number of ways, Shteyngart's memoir reflects the experience of many Russian-Jewish immigrants to the US. Shteyngart's parents decided to leave Russia in 1979 as part of the third wave of Jewish emigration from the USSR. "Declaring one's wish to leave was a brave and risky step to take in the 1970s, as it was defined by the authorities, and perceived by the broad public as an act of treason and meant severing one's links with other 'good citizens,' becoming an outcast" (Remennick 2012: 38). It also, in many cases, meant leaving family behind: Gary Shteyngart's mother only saw her own mother Galya in 1987, right before her death. In addition, emigration was almost always equivalent with professional devaluing and the feeling of losing one's culture. Many cultured and educated Russians felt that their skills and general culture were not worth much in America, as they often had to work in jobs for which they were overskilled (Remmenick 2012: 203-04). Back in Leningrad, Shteyngart's mother worked as a piano teacher, while the author's father was a mechanical engineer. On coming to the States, they were forced to start afresh and reinvent themselves professionally, in addition to mastering a new language and adapting to a completely different lifestyle. All these changes took a toll on the couple, which, as Shteyngart candidly admits in *Little Failure*, has been "too dissimilar to marry successfully" in the first place (Shteyngart 2014: 21).

In order to understand Shteyngart's American bildungsroman, it is necessary to know where he and his family come from. The Soviet Union of little Gary's childhood is a colossus with feet of clay. In the memoir, it is symbolized by the towering figure of his childhood idol, Vladimir Lenin, whose grandeur contrasts sharply with a dysfunctional country where food queues lead to barren shops and bureaucracy reigns supreme. Nevertheless, for little Gary Leningrad is the center of the world, and the proud figure of Lenin is an equivalent of an American superhero. Frequently bed-ridden due to excruciating bouts of asthma, the boy exercises his imagination by conjuring stories featuring the Soviet leader: "I decide to become a writer. Who wouldn't, under the

¹³ This essay has been completed before the publication of Shteyngart's most recent work, *Lake Success: A Novel* (2018).

circumstances?” is Shteyngart's bitter-sweet appraisal of his sickly Soviet years (Shteyngart 2014: 51). Although his asthma practically disappears once the Shteyngarts leave for the West, the fear and stress which fueled the disease in the Soviet Union will accompany him in the US. While moving from the USSR to America “is equivalent to stumbling off a monochromatic cliff and landing in a pool of pure Technicolor,” the amazement spawned by the change is offset by the feeling of inadequacy and unfitnes: Gary's first thought in the new world is “How will I ever measure up?” (Shteyngart 2014: 96).

Little Failure's most poignant scenes take place right after the Shteyngarts land in the US. If hybridity is understood as an easy multiculturalism, a melting pot, or even a heterogeneous salad bowl in which different nationalities coexist happily and peacefully *e pluribus unum*, then this is hardly the subject of Shteyngart's memoir. Assimilation is a tough business, especially for an immigrant from the Soviet Union, which is mapped as the US's archenemy in the popular imaginary at the time. With the Cold War in full swing, Gary's classmates at the Hebrew School, immediately pigeonhole him as a cross-breed, although their understanding of hybridity has more to do with the nineteenth-century discourse of cultural determinism than the inclusive narrative of multiculturalism. Poorly dressed and with a limited command of English (and none of Hebrew), Gary becomes the class scapegoat, a *Russki* and a *stinking bear* in one, only slightly less despicable than the most hated boy in class. The sense of being an outsider is further exacerbated by the situation at the Shteyngarts' household, which is the enclave of exactly the type of Russianness that Gary wishes to escape from. There, traditional Russian food is forced upon the boy together with educational methods which involve a combination of overprotection and tough love. His parents' conception of Jewishness brings its own problems. The ordeal of the first years at the Hebrew School and a botched circumcision at the tender age of eight will contribute to the sense of displacement and inadequacy.¹⁴ Although adult

¹⁴ In hindsight, they will also fuel fiction. Although this essay focuses more on the Russian side in the identity equation, coming to terms with one's Jewishness in addition to Russianness and (acquired) Americanness are major interlocking themes in Shteyngart's work. The trickster-like nature of these negotiations is revealed, among others, in the way Shteyngart exploits Jewish symbols and

Gary has much understanding for his parents' blunders ("they mostly did all right given the circumstances" (Shteyngart 2014: 119)), behind the mature outlook there is a poignant sense of the child's resentment and anger mixed up with an unconditional love and an ever-present desire to satisfy. It is this paradoxical emotional baggage that makes the book into a poignant and at times brutally candid portrait of an emigrant family, in addition to being a story of becoming an author.¹⁵

As in Shteyngart's other works, hybridity and trickster-like behavior are crucial to forging the protagonist's sense of self. Despite his lowly status among peers and the troubled relations with his parents, the protagonist finds a way to upset the school hierarchy and in doing so "bridge the gap between being a Russian and being loved" (Shteyngart 2014: 146): he becomes a writer. Although in his first sci-fi book, aptly called *The Challenge* [sic], he strives to avoid all things Russian, it comes off as a cultural *mélange* of Soviet, Jewish, and American elements. Significantly, the book is written in English. Encouraged by one of the teachers, Gary reads out the story to his classmates at the Hebrew school and the magic happens: "The children are silent. They are listening to my every word [...]. And they will listen to the story for the next five weeks

imagery. Thus in *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* the name of Vladimir's first girlfriend, Challah, alludes to the bread served at Shabbat (Vladimir's mother keeps calling her "little Challah-bread") but also to the woman's robust shape. Another salient example is the ritual of (botched) circumcision which haunts both *Absurdistan's* Misha Vainberg and the narrator of *Little Failure*. If contemporary diasporic Jewish humor satirizes obsessive preoccupation with the Holocaust (Rosenberg 2015), then Misha's plan for a gory Holocaust museum aimed at scaring young diaspora Jews into reproductive sex with each other offers a perverse commentary on the subject.

¹⁵ The intertwining of family and writing is a recurrent theme in Jewish-American literature. As David Brauner argues in his insightful article, Shteyngart shares it with Philip Roth whose works often explore the perils involved in writing about one's family (Brauner 2017). The same could be said of (mis)representing Jewish family. In all of his works and particularly in *Little Failure*, Shteyngart has created portraits of Russian-Jewish parents and sons, thus contributing to a long-established tradition of depicting filial relationships in Jewish-American writing. In fact, Shteyngart termed his memoir "an unhappy love letter to my parents, a demanding love letter" (Chicago 2014).

[...] and they will shout out throughout the English period, 'When will Gary read already?'" (Shteyngart 2014: 150-51).

Storytelling thus becomes the means of redefining Gary's status in the eyes of his peers: he is no longer just a hated Russian and despicable "commie," but has a voice which they intently listen to. Curiously, the next step in the process of asserting oneself, and performing trickster at the same time, involves *shapeshifting*. In a trickster-like fashion, Gary moves further away from the reductive Russianness he has been pigeonholed into to become "Gary Gnu the Third." Although this alter ego is inspired by an unimpressive puppet from a children's show, for Gary it opens up a space for performative reinvention: as Gary Gnu the Third he is no longer a real-life image of a stereotypical Soviet immigrant, but somebody much more difficult to categorize and thus freer and more creative. As his new self, Gary unleashes his imagination and creates *Gnorah*, a mock Torah script "directed at the entirety of the SSSQ religious experience" with its hypocritical and obsolete methods of teaching and treating students (Shteyngart 2014: 159). This subversive trickster text, peppered with references to contemporary American pop culture, not only earns Gary some delicious notoriety with his schoolmates, but also constitutes a metaphorical rite of passage: his "true assimilation into American English" (Shteyngart 2014: 161).

The second part of the memoir traces Gary's youth through the corridors of a high-performance school, where the future author learns, to the dismay of his hard-working immigrant parents, that he is not destined to be a lawyer at a prestigious Ivy-League school, and then through a liberal arts college in Ohio, where he takes up writing in a serious and systematic fashion. The first institution, composed of a *mélange* of international students, is crucial insofar as Gary's integration into American society is concerned. There, surrounded by black and Asian students, he learns that (personal) happiness means indifference to alterity; not being pointed at, but also not pointing at somebody for being different. The natural consequence of this realization is the gradual demise of Gary's intolerance towards others, for "[w]hat's there to say when the smartest boy in school is of Palestinian descent by way of South Africa?" (Shteyngart 2014: 228). Yet what works for the self, does not necessarily work for fiction. As much as he is moving away from Russianness, understood as a constricting national rubric, and towards America in his private life, Gary's fiction will rely on his knowledge of

the two worlds and the creative space he will carve out in their interstices. To encounter his particular Russian-Jewish-American brand of cultural hybridity and mold it into the content and form of his fiction, Gary has to cross the border between the US and Russia, first through the process of a conscious remembering, which materializes in his writing, but then also by more conventional means.

This border crossing becomes a way of performing trickster or “the playful penetration of social and cultural boundaries, which can then open and maintain liminal states. And it is in liminal states, in the nebulous borderlands of cultural processes, that cultures gain the potential of growth” (Salinas 2013: 144). The potential fertility of cultural in-between spaces harks back to Bhabha’s location of culture—the intervening space or the “interstitial passage” located between “fixed identifications,” which displaces traditional binary logic and “entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Bhabha 2005: 4). With the benefit of hindsight, we know that Shteyngart will realize Bhabha’s paradigm by writing *betwixt and between* languages and cultures. At the same time, he will challenge it by appealing to crude cultural categorizations—the very “fixed identifications” that Bhabha rejects—to expose our reliance on them as explanatory models of behavior, no matter how politically-correct or “United Nations blue” we consider ourselves to be.

The trans-national and trans-cultural movement that proves crucial for forging the writerly voice has also a personal dimension. It is essential for conjoining the past and the present into a meaningful whole: the identity of somebody who has become integrated into the host country, but who is nonetheless influenced and affected by the history, politics, and culture of his homeland. In the protagonist’s case, his most significant link to Russia are his parents. Therefore, the last chapter of the memoir recounts the family’s first visit to Saint Petersburg, the place where it all began, since their departure in 1979. As pieces of the family jigsaw come into place and Gary gains a better understanding of his parents, whose personal struggles he has internalized as if they have been his own to the detriment of his psychological well-being, a kind of a filial reconciliation takes place, making this final border crossing especially meaningful. “The journey never ends” reads the dedication on the first page of *Little Failure*. Although this concluding visit to Saint Petersburg seems like an apt epilogue to the story of becoming Gary Shteyngart the

writer, the dedication seems to be suggesting that the trickster's job is not over. Even if he will not "play the Russian card" (Wanner 2011: 165) in his future works, it is hard to imagine him ceasing to cross borders and boundaries to challenge the structures and divisions, political and mental alike, that underlie them.

At the beginning of this essay, I have referred to Shteyngart as a digital-age trickster. Accordingly, it seems fit to conclude by bringing up the author's virtual activity, which forms a significant part of the public image that he has built over the years. Shteyngart's social media accounts reflect his trademark *mélange* of the satirical and the serious. On his Instagram account, humorous "selfies" and snapshots of gourmet food are displayed along photographs of international landmarks (though often lying off the beaten track, like the Chernobyl power plant) and politically-minded messages clad in irony. As the presidential race between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump entered its final phase, Shteyngart's Twitter account became dominated by an almost exclusively political content, often aimed against the racist and chauvinistic elements of the latter candidate's discourse and their possible repercussions for future American politics. In *The New Yorker* article published two weeks after the Republican candidate had been elected president, Shteyngart juxtaposed Soviet and American racism, his ironic, though at the same time apprehensive question being "I grew up in a dystopia—will I have to die in one too?" (Shteyngart 2016: par. 7). The question is symptomatic of the broader concerns which permeate Shteyngart's fiction. As this essay has attempted to demonstrate, behind the comedy there is often an uncomfortable question, a shrewd comment, or a penetrating critique of the status quo. In this, Shteyngart's writing forms part of the trickster tradition within American literature, as his protagonists are individuals whose irreverent language and unruly behavior, cloaked in an equally impertinent, politically-incorrect humor, problematize interhuman relations, exposing persistent mental maps and patterns of othering within contemporary America. Their hybridity, which is mapped in dynamic terms as a process of mediating between cultural differences and allegiances, disrupts the "fixed identifications," but also acts as a lens through which specific social problems become refracted: Shteyngart's tricksters bear a mirror in which America sees itself reflected in the other within and without: the ghettos of American metropolis (*Absurdistan*) and the dystopian space of post-human New

York (*Super Sad True Love Story*), but also post-Soviet Russia and post-communist Eastern Europe.

Shteyngart's protagonists are heroes of our times. Burdened by "the craving for money and respect, the mixture of self entitlement and self-loathing, the hunger to be attractive, noticed and admired," they are always on the lookout for something that will redeem them: a woman's love, a father-figure, or a sense of self in a world that is already fractured (Shteyngart 2008: 163). Their lives and relationships defy the idea of hybridity understood as an easy multiculturalism, or a smooth melting pot. To the contrary, the process of carving out the space for the self is often fraught with doubts and difficulties as family values and allegiances need to be renegotiated to fit in with those applying in the host society. In this sense, national identity in Shteyngart's works is a process of coming to terms with all the complexities of being a migrant—Shteyngart's character par excellence, and, according to Bhabha, the paradigmatic literary hero of our times. Ultimately, Shteyngart's cross-cultural fiction is profoundly American as long as

what it means to be American is essentially to arrive as a newcomer—to start over and make a new life. From the Pilgrims to the Slaves to the Ellis Island generation, this is the one experience that all Americans share: this and what follows—finding a way to fit in, or hang together, eventually by balancing your particularity against the common culture that accrued over time. (Jacoby 2004: 313)

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