BETWEEN LANGUAGES AND CULTURES: GARY SHTEYNGART AS A GLOBAL AUTHOR

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In one of her essays, Eva Hoffman, Polish-American writer who emigrated to the West as a child, says that "to lose an internal language is to subside into an inarticulate darkness in which we become alien to ourselves; to lose the ability to describe the world is to render the world a bit less vivid, a bit less lucid" (1998: 49). Hoffman speaks from experience. When she first arrived in Canada from Poland in 1959, not only was her personal world split into two: the before and the after the emigration, but she was also left without the language to articulate and communicate the experience of displacement. At the same time, however, Hoffman recognizes that

> Being deframed, so to speak, from everything familiar, makes for a certain fertile detachment and gives one new ways of observing and seeing. (…). This perhaps is the great advantage, *for a writer*, of exile, the compensation for the loss and the formal bonus—that it gives you a perspective, a vantage point (1998: 50, my emphasis).

In many ways, Gary Shteyngart's literary career serves as an illustration to Hoffman's words. Like Hoffman, Shteyngart left the East for the West as a child. Igor Semyonovich Shteyngart was born in St. Petersburg, then Leningrad, to a Russian-Jewish couple: a mechanical engineer and a piano teacher. Desperate to secure a better future for their only child, the Shteyngarts decided to take advantage of the 1974

political accord between the US and the Soviet Union. In 1979, together with thousands of other Russian Jews, they left their homeland with a one-way ticket to the West.

The story of the Shteyngarts' immigration to the US and the process of their adjustment to America constitutes the subject matter of Gary Shteyngart's critically acclaimed work, *Little Failure*: *A Memoir* (2014), which tells the story of Gary's coming-of-age as a Russian-Jewish immigrant in New York. It also testifies to the struggles, but also satisfaction and a sense of personal liberation, that come with forging a voice in a foreign language. Although Shteyngart's American English is impeccable, it is nevertheless marked by what I would term a deliberate cultural and linguistic accent which has been Shteyngart's trademark since the beginning of his literary career.

In this essay, I will approach Shteyngart as a writer who has forged a voice of his own and built a successful literary career between cultures and languages. To do so, I will use the concept of *limen* as a fertile space where diverse cultural and linguistic references collide and collude, through the processes of creative juxtaposition, negotiation, and translation, to produce a new literary quality marked by transcultural and translingual imagination and thus attuned to the interconnectedness of today's globalized world. Rather than think of Shteyngart as an ethnic author, I propose to interpret his writing and the public persona he constructed in the course of his literary career in global terms which, in a broader perspective, speak to the exciting yet precarious realities of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000).

The most discernible of Shteyngart's sources of cultural and linguistic inspiration is his homeland. Russian is Shteyngart's mother tongue and the language which his parents insisted on using at home on arriving in the US, in an effort to maintain a sense of continuity with the *before* of their emigration. Yet, Shteyngart's writing is created entirely in English, the language of the host society but also Russia's

ultimate global rival at the time of the family's arrival in the US. Therefore, the Cold-War balance of power; the USSR-US rivalry and the ensuing cultural representations that each nation held of the other are crucial for comprehending little Gary's assimilation into American English and his first attempts as an English-language writer equipped with a strong cross-cultural and translingual sensitivity.

As a child immigrant who had been transplanted from one cultural and linguistic reality to another, dramatically different one, Shteyngart had at his disposable only one language to communicate and describe his experience of the world. However, judging by the author's account of his early childhood in Leningrad, little Gary's relationship to and the use of his mother tongue went far beyond that of an average child his age. More than just a means of everyday communication, Russian was for Gary the medium for his first forays into writing. Encouraged by his grandmother, who would reward his efforts with chunks of yellow Soviet cheese, Gary wrote a sprawling story about his childhood hero—the athletic and invincible Vladimir Lenin; the epitome of strength and stamina which the asthmatic child that Gary was at the time must have been both awed and intimidated by.

Gary's imaginary had been inevitably shaped by the landscape of his childhood: the family's Leningrad flat, the Moscow Square with the monument of expansive "Latin Lenin," where the boy would play hide-and-seek with his father, and the pink-and-white cake of the Chesme Church. With a benefit of a hindsight, Shteyngart sees the Soviet Union of his childhood for what it was: "an idealized landscape of the mind" (Hoffman, 2010: ix) but also a dysfunctional colossus of a country blinded by dogma. However, for a child immigrant, the realization that his homeland may be somebody else's other comes only when this otherness is pointed out. This happens first at the Hebrew school in Queens where Gary's parents decide to send their only child. However, this decision,

which in all likelihood is motivated by a desire to hold on to the familiar in a foreign reality, serves only to exacerbate the alienation of a child who speaks neither English nor Hebrew and is thus unable to function fully among others. To counteract the sense of displacement, Gary escapes into the coziness of his mother tongue which, at the same time, is also a signifier of his otherness as a "Stinky Russian Bear" (Shteyngart, 2014: 104) in the eyes of his American or at least Americanized peers. Acquiring English becomes thus not just a question of communicating with others, but most of all of blending in and thus surviving away from home. Yet, as Hoffman points out, between the loss of one language and the acquisition of another a third space emerges, a fresh vantage point and a hitherto unrealized perspective. Unconsciously, little Gary strives to fill up this space for he realizes that if he succeeds, he will achieve what he is most lacking at the time: social acceptance. Later on, this instinctive understanding will develop into a conscious creative choice, as Shteyngart will deliberately explore the artistic possibilities that emerge in-between languages and cultures to produce his own brand of *global* literature, where America and Russia collide and collude productively, and where a Jewish-American cultural accent is palpable.

Hoffman's conception of the migrant writer's voice as emerging in the interstices between languages and cultures emphasizes the generative potential of the *limen*: a threshold or a space betwixt and between two realms where, as Homi Bhabha repeats after Martin Heidegger, "something begins its presencing" (2005: 7). In Bhabha's postcolonial reading of the third space, forces of centre and periphery become displaced as traditional binary logic no longer applies and difference is enacted "without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (2005: 4). While it is not my intention to conflate the cultural expression of the postcolonial experience with the process of assimilating into the host culture and forging the writer's voice in a new language, which is the subject of

Shteyngart's *Little Failure*, the notion of the limen as the third space where hybrid culture originates seems to be highly pertinent to the discussion of Shteyngart's cross-cultural writing. Importantly, as fertile as this space may be, it is also the site of struggle in which descent and consent (Sollors, 1986); the hereditary and the acquired, grapple and clash productively yet often painfully.

Many a scholar have analysed the nature of the limen and its various incarnations. Liminal zones exist both as physical and symbolic spaces: suffice it to mention Gloria Anzaldúa's conceptualization of the US-Mexican borderland as a multi-layered site where "the third world grates against the first and bleeds" to form "a third country, a border culture" (1987: 25), Richard Schechner's theory of the theatrical space, or Mary Louise Pratt's discussion of the *autoethnographic text* as a contact zone. In the case of Gary Shteyngart, it is indeed the literary text that embodies tensions between Russia and America, but also serves as an entryway into the host culture, for it is through storytelling that the migrant boy's *passage* into American English, and America in general takes place. "But how do I bridge that gap between being a Russian and being loved?" is the question which Gary Shteyngart asks and answers with no hesitation: "I start to write" (2014: 146).

By the time, Gary knows "to avoid *anything* even remotely Russian" (2014: 148) but even though the protagonist of his heavily misspelt novella, aptly named *The Chalenge* [sic], is an all-American boy, the creation comes off as a medley of cultural influences ranging from Isaac Asimov to the sci-fi tales which Gary's father would tell him back in Russia. Subconsciously, the boy models the fictional conflict between imaginary space forces on the Cold-War rivalry between his home and his host, with the balance of power finally shifting towards the latter, mimicking Gary's assimilation into America. Forever auto-ironic, Shteyngart mocks the flawed English in which *The*

Chalenge is written and the broad accent with which it is read out to his classmates on a weekly basis. However, he is also profoundly aware of the symbolic meaning of this first American story, since it marks a linguistic and social breakthrough for a boy who has been an outcast but has forged for himself a voice and created a story that others listen to. Yet, as pointed out before, hybridity is not born easily and Gary's first story already intimates the ambivalence and divided loyalties that writing from the place beyond one's language and culture generates.

In Shteyngart's writing, it is often the figure of the migrant that embodies the above. The protagonist of Shteyngart's first novel is, as the title has it, a Russian-Jewish "debutante" coming out in the post-1989 world where the Iron Curtain still casts a long shadow. Set at the threshold between the East and the West, the novel dramatizes Vladimir Girshkin's transcontinental quest for self-definition which takes him from New York to Prava, a hyperbolic version of post-communist Prague of the early 1990s. In addition to exploring the dilemmas but also the advantages of being part of both worlds, the novel gives an ample taste of Shteyngart's trademark style of writing where distinct cultural and linguistic references are shaped into a hybrid narrative with a strong satiric slant, indebted to Jewish-American humour.

The main source of laughter in the novel resides in Shteyngart's exploitation of national clichés regarding the two nations which Vladimir Girshkin is part of: Russia and America to a comic effect. Prava, the locus of Shteyngart's transcontinental story, is torn between the clashing influences of the East, embodied by the post-Soviet Mafiosi who are determined to Westernize themselves to keep up with the times, and the West, which materializes in multinationals transforming the city's landscape into the topography of the global, as well as young American expats romanticizing Prava into their own "Paris of the 1990s" (Shteyngart, 2004: 66). The imaginary Prava becomes

thus a liminal zone where the West's fantasies of the East and vice versa are enacted against the backdrop of an uneasy transition into a new but hardly flawless system. Given his Russian and American credentials, Vladimir plays the role of a double agent who infiltrates both communities by being "a Russian to Americans and an American to Russians. The only constant is that he always plays the role of the Other" (Wanner, 2011: 102). Accordingly, Girshkin's role as a cultural insider consists in his catering to and exploiting the hetero-images which each community holds of the other. In doing so, not only does he reap profit for himself but, most of all, enacts his own fantasy of centrality and social importance which he lacks as an immigrant. As the novel makes clear, the condition of an expat is preferred to that of an immigrant, since it comes with a sense of "luxury, choice, decadence, frou-frou colonialism" (Shteyngart, 2004: 170). The novel is thus as much a comic exploration of national stereotypes from both sides of the Iron Curtain as a comic-mordant study of the immigrant's liminal condition and his struggle for self-definition in an ethnocentric world.

For the reader, the byproduct of Girshkin's (and Shteyngart's) investment in both cultures and languages is a fast-paced narrative style with a cultural and linguistic accent which endows the novel with a foreign flavour. Interestingly, Shteyngart's cross-cultural and translingual strategy has inspired dramatically diverse critical reactions. As Adrian Wanner points out (2011: 121), American press has fashioned Shteyngart into an expert on all things Russian, comparing him to such translingual writers as Vladimir Nabokov, whereas several Russian critics have decried the comparison, criticizing the author for hollowing out Russianness to propagate schematic stereotypes of Russia and further prejudicing Americans against their country. As I have argued elsewhere (Bryla, 2018), while Shteyngart's reliance on stereotyped national traits in the construction of his characters may indeed provoke charges of reductionism, it is significant that his

satire is democratic in scope and, more often than not, aimed at Shteyngart himself as a Russian-Jewish immigrant in America. If one were to read *Little Failure* at face value, it reveals how much of Shteyngart's own experience on the threshold of languages and cultures has fuelled his characters, and how determining his Russian heritage, both literary and aesthetic, has been for his work.

Stylistically, it manifests itself in the frequent use of Russian interjections, like the omnipresent "Bozhe moi!" (Oh my God!), babushka (grandmother) or some florid invectives which to many a speaker of Slavic languages will seem comic and familiar at once. Perhaps the most representative example of Shteyngart's inclusive and malleable approach to his second language is the Russian-English coinage, *Failurchka*, attributed to Gary Shteyngart's mother, which combines English semantic content with Russian noun form and from which the novel's English title is derived. Content-wise, Shteyngart, who has come of age when the memory of the Cold War was still vivid, draws from the cultural imagery of the not-so-bygone era, particularly in *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* and his subsequent novel *Absurdistan* (2006), where his hybrid characters are portrayed in post-communist locales that are grappling not only with tangible consequences of political and economic transitions but also various non-material legacies of the former system, including the memory of communism and their place in a multipolar world.

Like Shteyngart's debut work, *Absurdistan* is a cross-cultural novel in which the East and the West come together in the figure of Misha Vainberg, a Russian by birth, a Jew by religion, and an American by choice. Here too the protagonist's three-partite self spurs Shteyngart's irreverent comedy where the characters are national and ethnic caricatures that think and act in accordance with some of the crudest stereotypes, which might have been extremely offensive if they were not so absurd in their accumulation.

For instance, Misha's hybridity is expressed through contradiction: he is a Russian oligarch, endowed with a highly stereotyped bodily form of an overweight American, whose penchant for gangsta rap, multiculturalism and democracy, in their most commodified variant, does not prevent him from being anti-Semitic and professing a decisively nineteenth-century mindset which manifests itself in keeping a manservant and playing the role of patron of artists and prostitutes. That said, Shteyngart's stereotyped satire conceals some sharp observations regarding the post-communist state of affairs. The Russian Federation, epitomized by St. Petersburg, is depicted at the moment of internal *post-dependence*:[1] as the legacy of the former system is still holding strong, Western capitalism, in its flashiest and vulgar dimension, is on the rise, rapidly transforming the city into a terrain of clashing influences and wooing the inhabitants of the city with Potemkin prosperity: "[t]he apartment houses (…) surrounded by corrugated shacks featuring, in no particular order, a bootleg CD emporium, the ad hoc Mississippi Casino (…), a kiosk selling industrial-sized containers of crab salad, and the usual Syrian shawarma hut smelling invariably of spilled vodka, spoiled cabbage, and some kind of vague, free-floating inhumanity" (Shteyngart, 2008: 50). Those that are not lucky enough to rank among the privileged: the oligarchs and the nouveau riches, remain trapped in the condition of painful liminality, condemned to the lack of perspectives, like the Petersburg children who, as Misha gloomily realizes cannot be saved even by his "*dollar-denominated humanism*" (Shteyngart, 2008: 37).

[1] Although this adjective has been originally used in reference to Poland and other countries of post-communist East-Central Europe vis-à-vis *precisely* (Soviet) Russia and the West, it makes sense to expand it onto Shteyngart's portrayal of contemporary Russia in the state of *internal* post-communist dependence, in which the legacy of the former system is clashing with Western-style capitalism, leaving regular citizens in a cultural limbo. For more information about post-dependence studies and a list of publications in Polish, see the website of the Post-dependence Studies Centre: http://www.cbdp.polon.uw.edu.pl/index.html. For scholarship in English, see for instance the special issue of *Teksty Drugie*, entitled *Postcolonial or Postdependence Studies?*, which can be accessed at http://tekstydrugie.pl/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/t2en_2014_1webCOMB.pdf.

Importantly, Shteyngart's hyperbolically deterministic depiction of Russia in the early 2000s is as contemporary as it is timeless, for the novelist frequently draws from the nineteenth-century Russian literature for characters and parts of plot. Shteyngart has never concealed the impact that Russian literature has had on his writing. In *Little Failure*, the presence of Russian literary heritage is tangible: volumes of Pushkin, Chekhov and Tolstoy sit on Gary's bookshelves and since the family has no television set yet, the boy turns to "Gooseberries" and "Lady with Lapdog" for distraction. In the future, adult Shteyngart will frequently speak of his appreciation mostly for the great Russian classics, but also contemporary Russian-American and Russian writers, most notably Vladimir Nabokov, but also Vladimir Sorokin. It thus comes as no surprise that intertextual references to Russian literature permeate Shteyngart's works at different planes and degrees of explicitness. Misha Vainberg, for instance, refers to himself as a modern-day Oblomov, the protagonist of Ivan Gonczarov's famous nineteenth-century novel of the same title, but also as Prince Myshkin from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. At the same time, part of the novel's plot, which has been adapted from Shteyngart's earlier short story, "Shylock on the Neva," is a reworking of Nikolai Gogol's "The Portrait." As Adrian Wanner points out, Gogol's influence on Shteyngart is not limited to his absurd humour, but extends to his literary representation of post-Soviet St. Petersburg "through a Gogolian lens" as "a world where the Devil reigns supreme in the guise of universal vulgarity and banality, and where (…) artistic creation has been reduced to a postmodern recycling of pre-existing plots" (2011: 120).

By incorporating the great Russian writers into his works in this way, Shteyngart establishes a bond with his cultural heritage, showing his indebtedness to Russian literary culture. At the same time, he engages in the act of cultural translation understood here as a process by which elements of the nineteenth-century Russian

literature and the image of Russia are weaved into the fabric of the twenty-first century fiction written in English. The resultant text inscribes itself into Shteyngart's customary practice of assembling seemingly opposing cultural elements, registers, even historical eras into an idiosyncratic whole, where it is nevertheless possible to appreciate the building blocks and where neither the source nor the target are given prominence. When a fellow Russian criticizes Misha for his blatantly Western tastes, he elevates rap music to the status of classic nineteenth-century Russian poetry: "Hey, if Pushkin were alive today, he'd be a rapper" (Shteyngart, 2008: 6). Importantly, as humorous as Misha's declaration might seem, Shteyngart's appreciation of hip-hop should not be dismissed. As revealed in one of the interviews, Shteyngart finds rap's trademark irreverence liberating and thus perhaps also inspiring for him as a writer, who is more than keen on breaking cultural taboos and practising political incorrectness, even if the genre is commonly perceived as less "cultured" (Shteyngart, 2008: 6) than poetry.

The juxtaposition and integration of the East and the West, the (seemingly) lowbrow and the highbrow encourage the reader to rethink and question these very categories, or at least the positions they occupy in implicit cultural canons of the Western world, for in Shteyngart's fiction rap is as culturally significant as poetry and cultural fusion is a given. Importantly, the author's penchant for combining unlikely cultural influences and elements is not just a narrative strategy geared towards comic irreverence, but also an occasion for a weightier commentary on the globalized world. Rather than speak from a distinct national stance, Shteyngart responds to global interconnectedness of politics, capital, and the digital and its repercussions for the individual and the collective from the position of someone who is familiar with polar political systems and has been shaped by opposing sociocultural values that he negotiates in life and in writing. This in turn allows Shteyngart to draw some

meaningful comparisons between social groups or cultural contexts which are seemingly incommensurate, like the impoverished of the post-Soviet Russia and the disadvantaged minorities of American metropolitan suburbs (*Absurdistan*), but may nevertheless suffer from similar social marginalization. In most of his works, "the destabilizing effects of late capitalism, and the cruelties associated with extreme polarities in wealth and distribution" (Hamilton, 2017: 58-59), augmented by the dictatorship of the digital which connects as much as alienates people (*Super Sad True Love Story* (2010)), shape his characters' lives and their sense of self. In many ways, Shteyngart's fiction is always concerned with the question of identity and belonging, which, following Zygmunt Bauman (2013), are never cast in stone but undergo reconfigurations through external circumstances and personal choices, particularly for the characters who inhabit or move in and out of the cultural in-between: hyphenated Americans, migrants, or travellers (*Lake Success*). As pointed out by Hoffman, this in-betweenness, which in Shteyngart's works is often but not always related to ethnicity, may be a source of creative empowerment, as the hybrid character sees and feels things from a distinctly idiosyncratic perspective, but also bring about a sense of alienation from the mainstream and thus a sense of exclusion.

In fact, each of Shteyngart's characters seems to be something of a *schlemiel*—"a stock figure of Jewish anecdote," whose social ineptitude and resultant failure were traditionally the object of laughter and ridicule, but who, as "the acknowledged 'fool'" was nevertheless "free to criticize in a way that those with vested interests in social realities could not" (Pinsker, 1991: 10, 17). In this sense, schlemiel, a Jewish nebbish and underdog, ranks among liminal characters whose very marginality is a marker of humanity and *communitas* (Turner, 1976) against "the greater political and social powers of the surrounding majority" (Wisse, 2013: 379). Shteyngart's characters tend to

be such underdogs and outsiders, even if they operate multimillion-dollar hedge funds like Barry Cohen from *Lake Success* (2018), whose social blunders provoke laughter, but may nevertheless have a more serious ethic dimension: to expose the hypocrisy and corruption of those around the underdog, but also the underdog himself. However, it is important to recognize that if there is a sense of communitas in Shteyngart's fiction, expressed through his *schlemielish* characters, it is not oriented towards fellow Jews as such, or any other specific ethno-cultural community, but rather towards fellow migrants, hyphenated individuals or all those in search of an anchor in a liquid world who pit (versions of) themselves against others' definitions of who they are and should be. Nevertheless, there is no denying that Jewish and Jewish-American humour, whose very essence lies in a perilous balance between laughter and lament, infuses Shteyngart's bitter-sweet comedy with its contemporary, decidedly lay variation on schlemiel. Importantly, Shteyngart's schlemielish protagonists have less to do with the innocents of Yiddish jokes than with the stand-up shows of Catskills and Philip Roth's acerbic and irreverent comedy which had cost him charges of self-hatred and anti-Semitism (Shteyngart singles Roth as one of his most significant influences). As such, they display a complicated attitude towards their Jewishness, which, especially in its religious and ritualistic variant, emerges as constrictive and oppressive to the point that, as Adrian Wanner remarked, some of his "fictional caricatures of Jews come dangerously close to anti-Semitic stereotypes and Jewish self-hatred" (2011: 128). In light of Shteyngart's persistent ridicule of glib multiculturalism and political correctness, the exploitation of stereotypes of Jews (as well as Russians, Latino Americans, African-Americans, etc.) may be interpreted, however, as "Shteyngart's critique of the typically hidden or disavowed intolerance lurking within pluralist

sensibilities themselves" (Hamilton, 2017: 54), manifested by those who, like Misha are not only *other* themselves but claim to be cosmopolitan and tolerant.

If this is indeed so, then Shteyngart's schlemielish protagonists, and the author himself, should be seen, as I have argued elsewhere (2018), as part of a vivid tradition of Euro-American *tricksters* who, as the inhabitants of the in-between, move back and forth cultural spaces to mock border-less human folly and expose ignorance which is the cornerstone of stereotypes. After all, since the beginning of his literary career Shteyngart has been the butt of his own jokes. "[P]art Slavic clown, part schlemiel" (Hamilton 2017: 1), Shteyngart appears on the inner cover of his debut novel dressed in a fur coat and holding a bear cub on a leash. The same sardonic aesthetics re-appears also in the trailer for *Super Sad True Love Story*, where the persona of a Russian immigrant is inflated to epic proportions to a comical effect. Shteyngart capitalizes here on the meat of his novels: national stereotypes which stretch from New York to St. Petersburg. Stepping into the role of an illiterate Russian writer, the very embodiment of a crude stereotype of Russia, think pickled gherkins, bears, and Chekhov's short stories, Shteyngart woes pretentious pseudo-intellectual academics with his exotic "Slavic spirit." Paradoxically, by accumulating clichés, he manages to ridicule universal reliance on them, exposing shallow multiculturalism which serves only as a façade for ignorance about others.

However, the book trailer is important also for another reason. The very idea of creating a visual companion for a medium whose essence resides in the act of conjuring *in one's mind's eye* the people and the places conveyed on a page, may strike us as something counterintuitive, unnatural even. However, book trailers are now a well-established, if still relatively young, form of launching and promoting new books, and, in some cases, also an art form in itself (Voigt, 2013). Thus, given the pervasiveness of

the visual in contemporary culture, Shteyngart's fondness for trailers (there have been three so far) attests to his deep understanding of the increasingly competitive book market and the contemporary audience's needs.

I have used the term "audience" for a reason. Through the decision to accompany his books with trailers, Shteyngart steps beyond the traditional realm of words—writers' principal arena—moving instead towards a *contact zone* between the written and the visual, where the word "readership" fails to account for the new ways in which Gary Shteyngart's oeuvre may be approached and apprehended. It is noteworthy that Shteyngart's book trailers are not mere synopsis of the plot but rather short films starring both professional actors (James Franco, Ben Stiller) and celebrated writers (Jeffrey Eugenides, Jonathan Franzen), and as such deserve to be treated as part of Shteyngart's multi-media performance where the written and the visual complement one another, in addition to successfully teasing the viewer to "consume" more of Shteyngart, not just through his fiction, but also his vivid social media feed. Therefore, it may be said that they not only respond to the above-mentioned pervasiveness of and the need for the visual in contemporary culture, but also constitute yet another instance of cultural and language mobility and mediation, where a traditional literary text becomes enhanced with a visual component typical of a different art form to produce a new liminal quality, which, as argued in this essay, has been Shteyngart's creative strategy since the beginning of his literary career and the space from which he has chosen to communicate as a writer.

To conclude, Shteyngart's characters, including the author himself as portrayed in *Little Failure*, are "children of this age" (Szymborska, 1986) who have grown in tune with the fluid realities of their globalized times and thus respond to them as they know best. Although they are permanently "on the move," it does not mean that they conform

to the precariousness and changeability that are the sign of the liquid times. As they cross boundaries between cultures and languages in search for safety and significance, or at least move from one city to another, as the protagonist of *Lake Success* does on his journey into himself and into America, they are variously burdened and empowered by their own and others' definitions of what they should be. Even though they share "the common experience of cultural difference" (Longinović and Buden, 2008), portrayed in garish and hyperbolic terms, what peers through is their common humanity, as trite as it may sound in the context of Shteyngart's eminently ironic fiction: Misha's desire to just *be* with his girlfriend Rouenna against all odds, or Barry Cohen's road to accepting himself before he can accept his autistic son. More than anything else, Shteyngart's characters strive to belong, and when *home* cannot be found in *home*land and *identity* seems like nothing but a catch-all term, they carve out the space for themselves—*in-between*. Their context is thus global, with the perks and perils that this entails, as is Gary Shteyngart's, whose fiction is attuned to the sound of contemporary world and eager to contest it with the aid of an irreverent laughter which, like the laughter *at* the schlemiel and *of* the trickster always has a no-joke ring to it.

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