

“[I]t was a cost priced into living in America:” Exploring normalization of selective social privilege and economic inequality in Gary Shteyngart’s *Lake Success* (2018)

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Arguably, the critically acclaimed Russian-American author Gary Shteyngart has been exploring the idea of (ab)normalcy in his fiction since the beginning of his literary career in 2004. As a child migrant from the Soviet Union, Shteyngart struggled to fit in as his fellow pupils at the Hebrew School that his parents enrolled him in pinpointed him as a *stinky bear* and a *Ruski* as a result of his background, his initial inability to speak English, and his outdated clothing. No wonder then that Shteyngart, who channels his experience of being an outsider in his memoir *Little Failure* (2014), has been attuned to the difference between what is and what is not the norm in the American society, as well as the consequences and possibilities that each condition entails. In fact, many of Shteyngart’s protagonists are marked by difference; whether ethnic, linguistic, ideological, economic, or neurological. The last two differences are particularly meaningful in the context of Shteyngart’s penultimate novel, *Lake Success* (2018), which depicts the US right before electing Donald Trump to the presidency. At first sight, this novel, which is narrated from the perspective of Barry Cohen, an extremely prosperous and privileged hedge-fund manager, seems to run counter to the key notions of this panel: “inequality” and “precarity.” However, as I hope to demonstrate in this paper, Shteyngart uses Cohen’s privileged position as a departure point for exploring the ongoing corruption of the formative narrative of the US identity: the American Dream, in contemporary America, arguing that the dissociation between individual success and collective well-being has been further normalized by Trump’s rise to power. In addition to discussing the normalization of selective social privilege, economic inequality, and entrepreneurial meanness (Lipton 2017), this paper will also pay special attention to neurodiversity, here embodied by Barry’s son—a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder, which in the novel serves to further problematize an already extremely problematic narrative of success epitomised by the forty-fifth American president.

References

Lipton, Mark. *Mean Men: The Perversion of America's Self-made Man*. Voussoir Press., 2017.

Shteyngart, Gary. *Lake Success*. Random House, 2018.

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