Searching, Re-Writing, and Jumping Away:
Émigré Identity in "1.5-Generation" Russian-American Literature

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Abstract

This dissertation investigates self-perception and self-definition in the works of three major Russian-born writers living in the United States: Gary Shteyngart, Anya Ulinich, and Margarita Meklina. The very act of crossing a physical border does more than unsettle characters' identities. It forces consideration of metaphorical borders between writer, reader, and character, which in turn bring new experiments both in understanding the nature of identity in the global age and in crafting narrative. Here, I ask how changingspatial, temporal, and linguistic contexts shape perceptions of identity.

To answer this question, I examine Shteyngart's three novels (*The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, 2002; *Absurdistan*, 2006; *Super Sad True Love Story*, 2010), Ulinich's first novel (*Petropolis*, 2007), and six of Meklina's works: five short stories ("Dom"/"The House", 1995; "doktor Morselli, medsestra Ellen Dayton"/"Dr. Morselli and Nurse Ellen Dayton", 1998, "Srazhenie pri Peterburge"/"The Battle of Petersburg", 1998; "A ia posredi"/"And I am in the Middle", 2011; "The Jump", 2014) and an epistolary novel (*POP3*, 1998-1999). I chose these writers for their prominence, sustained interest on the topic, and generic innovation.

The dissertation is divided into five parts – an introduction, a chapter on each author, and a conclusion. The introduction presents a brief history of twentieth-century Russian-American emigration, followed by a description of the sociological context in which Shteyngart, Ulinich, and Meklina write. It also provides a summary of scholarly writing on émigré identity while introducing fundamental conceptual frames such as hybrid identity, the diaspora, transnationalism, and globalization. Chapter 1, "Gary Shteyngart Searches for Self in Time, Language, and Space",examines Shteyngart's works in which his protagonists' unexpected discovery of hybrid identity occurs in a liminal locus of space, time, and language, which I call a "node". Chapter 2, "(Re)Writing the Self – Large and Small – in Anya Ulinich's *Petropolis*", considers Ulinich's use of

memory and intertextuality to represent her protagonist's identity as a form of consciousness, which I call a "palimpsest", that fashions itself in particular spatial, temporal, and linguistic situations. Chapter 3, "Leaps of Identity in Margarita Meklina's Russian and English Fiction", explores the role of radical plot and character disruption in selected works by Meklina, where protagonists confront identity in spatial, temporal, and linguistic crises I call "communicative displacement". I conclude that these three writers gradually move away from inward-turned examination of transnational émigré identity and instead embrace an outward-looking "global" concept of self.

Acknowledgments

They say it takes a village to raise a child, and I feel that this saying applies just as well to the conception, creation, revision, and completion of a dissertation.

My village, to whom I am inexpressibly and eternally grateful, includes my advisor, Edith Clowes, my committee (Rafael Alvarado, Julian Connolly, and Karen Ryan), the many professors and fellow graduate students in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, the Department's current and former administrators (Beth Eastwood-Beatty, Jessica Downie, Gina Hutton, and Anne Zook), some dear friends whose support and willingness to lend an ear is unmatched (most especially Jill Martiniuk, Madelyn Stuart, and Vicky Vutova), and the proprietors of the various, wonderful Charlottesville breweries and purveyors of food and libations.

To my family, and most of all Alex: it took nearly a decade, but I'm done with school. Thank you. I love you.

Note About Transliteration and Translation

In my own transliterations of Russian titles and names, I have used the Library of Congress transliteration system. All transliteration in the body of the text, footnotes, and bibliographies is mine, and any errors therein are mine alone.

When quoting primary sources, I have given transliterated Russian and Hebrew words exactly as they appear in the texts. Any errors therein are the authors' alone.

All translations – Russian, French, or otherwise – are my own.

Introduction

What do a crooked-walking asthmatic, a mail-order bride, and a seemingly suicidal writer have in common? All of them are border-crossing characters who question their identity, only to suddenly confront it in unexpected places. This dissertation examines traumas of identity through the eyes of three major "fourth wave" Russian-born writers currently living in the United States: Gary Shteyngart, Anya Ulinich, and Margarita Meklina. While current surveys of this generation of writers count approximately 30 published authors in the United States alone, these three offer the most compelling qualitative study of various psychologies informing perceptions of identity.[1]I narrow my focus on them partially based on their critical acclaim and appeal to readers, and partially based onthe innovative ways in which they interpret self-perception. Shteyngart, the most well-known of the three, has had his work translated into over 20 languages, and has earned several major awards for his novels.*The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (2002) won the Stephen Crane Award for best first novel, among others, and *Absurdistan*(2006) was named "Book of the Year" by several publications including the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Ulinich's2007 debut novel, *Petropolis*, has been translated into ten languages and earned her the Goldberg Prizeawarded to up-and-coming Jewish fiction writers, as well as a "5 Under 35" award. Meklina's2003 anthology *Srazheniepod Peterburgom*[*The Battle at Petersburg*] won the Russian Andrei Bely Prize, given to non-conformist writers, and her 2009 anthology *Moiaprestupnaiasviaz' s isskustvom*[*My Criminal Connection to Art*] won the Russian Prize. Border-crossing experiences – spatial, temporal, and linguistic – come naturally to émigré writers, and these three writers vicariously traverse

[1]For a comprehensive list of émigré Russian-American writers, see Elena Dimov., et. al., "Post-Soviet Russian Émigré Literature", *Contemporary Russian Literature at UVA,*SHANTI at University of Virginia, 2011, https://pages.shanti.virginia.edu/russian/post-soviet-russian-emigre-literature/; accessed 29 April 2015. See also Vladimir Voshnyak and MaksimGureev, "Ves' mir", *NovaiaLiteraturnaia Karta Rossii*, n.p., 2015, http://www.litkarta.ru/world/; accessed 29 April 2015.

those borders in various ways as their charactersconfront common expatriate problems of self-perception and belonging. Writer, character, and reader all experience displacement of some sort as they discover that those problems havecomplicated solutions. This dissertation is an attempt to answer the following question: How does changing spatial, temporal, and linguistic context shape perceptions of identity when writers have left the land of their birth, in which the first roots of identity usually grow?

A brief summary of the long history of Russianemigration will provide useful background for the context in which these three authors write. Scholars generally refer to three "waves" of emigration that occurred between 1917 and 1991, the first of which occurred immediately following the 1917 communist revolution and subsequent civil war. Émigrés from this wave were "loyal to the old regime" and left "with the hope of coming back to Russia when the revolution and the chaos created thereby were over"; to them, according to ethnographer Ludmila Isurin, "their exile was a temporary measure and that belief was passed on to their descendants".[2]The "second wave", on the other hand, "is not as easily identifiable" because "some scholars include resettled first wavers and their descendants, while others limit it to those Soviet citizens who were caught up in the crossfire of WWII, went through POW camps or camps for displaced people and chose not to go back to the USSR when the war was over"– because of this scattered movement, reliable numbers for the second wave are not available, as statistics are "quite scattered and contradictory".[3]The "third wave" was composed of those who left the Soviet Union beginning in the early 1970s after Leonid Brezhnev eased emigration restrictions; émigrés in

[2]LudmilaIsurin, *Russian Diaspora: Culture, Identity, and Language Change* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2011), 5.

[3]Ibid., 6. Isurin notes that reliable statistics on Russian émigrés are difficult to find due to the general unavailability of precise census information from the former Soviet Union. Her numbers originate from reliable and widely available immigration statistics in the West.

this wave, unlike the first two waves, were "predominantly Jewish with a certain injection of non-Jewish family members".[4] Their reasons for leaving ranged from "uncertainty about the economic and political future of the country" to "open and hidden anti-Semitism" that often made obtaining work or higher education difficult.[5] Upon arrival in the U.S., many of them settled in New York City – specifically, Brooklyn – while others spread out to major hubs like Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington, San Francisco, and Houston.[6] Although a logical term for the next wave of émigrés would be "fourth wave", ethnographer Larissa Remennick calls this wave the "1.5 Generation": that is, those "who moved to [the U.S.] as older children or adolescents, after having spent part of their formative years in the FSU [Former Soviet Union]" – a term she uses to convey the feeling these émigrés have of being "caught in the middle" between Russia and the United States thanks to their parents' choice to emigrate.[7] I will elaborate on this "1.5 Generation" shortly, as Shteyngart, Ulinich, and even Meklina belong to this group of émigrés. For now, suffice it to say that the liminality and border-crossing capability implied in the moniker provides a useful introduction to the key concepts guiding my discussion.

More specific insight on Russian writers who belonged to these various waves will help us further contextualize contemporary Russian-American émigré writers. The majority of writers who left with the "first wave" from 1918 to 1922 went to Paris, Berlin, Helsinki, Prague, and Warsaw, among other European capitals. Abroad, they experimented with a diverse array of genres, from short stories to novels, memoirs, lyric poetry, and travel notes, "often of a philosophic bent and concerned with the basic tenets of freedom and Christian

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[4] Ibid.,7.
[5] Ibid., 8.
[6] Ibid., 16.
[7] Larissa Remennick, *Russian Jews on Three Continents: Identity, Integration, and Conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2007), 215. "FSU" is an abbreviation for "former Soviet Union".

optimism".[8] Literature produced by this "wave" is notable for its "orientation toward the past" and eagerness to embrace Western literary traditions.[9] Writers traditionally included in this wave are Konstantin Bal'mont, Ivan Bunin, ZinaidaGippius, DmitriiMerezhkovskii, Vladimir Nabokov, ZinaidaShakhovskaia, NadezhdaTeffi, Elsa Triolet, and Marina Tsvetaeva.The "second wave" left the Soviet Union during and after the second World War, and was composed mostly of poets who went to the United States, though a few also went to Germany. This wave is the least productive of the four, in terms of well-known poets and writers, possibly because they "seemed unable to equal the degree of culture, education, and 'Westernization' of the first-wave", and were more isolated from Western European cultural influences.[10]Even so, second-wave writing is notable for its conservative style, strong tint of nostalgia, and a palpable longing to return to Russia, and is mostly comprised of both poetry and memoirs. Writers included in this wave are Ivan Elagin, DmitriiShakhovskoi, and ZinaidaTrotskaia.

The "third wave" of émigré writers consists of "dissident" writers in the 1970s and 1980s whose "delinquent" actions (such as sending works abroad for publication or writing letters of protest) usually ended in, if not harassment, then exile from the Soviet Union. Some of them, like the non-literary émigré population that left during this period, had ties to Jewish family members abroad or were Jewish themselves, rather than (or in addition to) being known as dissidents. Writing of this time is known for its diversity in themes and voices, as writers such as VasilyAksenov,Joseph Brodsky,Sergei Dovlatov, Nina Kosman (who translated a vast amount of Marina Tsvetaeva's poetry), Andrei Sinyavsky, Sasha Sokolov, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and Vladimir Voinovich display what Maxim Shrayer calls

[8]"Émigré literature." *Handbook of Russian Literature*, ed. Victor Terras (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 119.
[9]Ibid., 122.
[10]Ibid., 123.

"a great diversity of pasts (ethnic, linguistic, religious, ideological) and a broad representation of formal trends (from staunch avant-gardists to sworn traditionalists)".[11]What most literary scholars agree can be called the "fourth wave" – Shrayer in fact uses the term in his encyclopedic entry to refer to what Remennick calls the "1.5 Generation" in the general population – consists of writers whose parents took them out of the Soviet Union, or who later moved themselves, during and after *perestroika* from 1987-1991 before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Aside from the three writers I discuss, this wave includes an impressive array of women writers, such as Olga Grushin, Sana Krasikov, Ellen Litman, Olga Livshin, Irina Mashkinskaia, Irina Reyn, and Lara Vapnyar. Also prominent in this group are David Bezmozgis (who is actually Canadian), Mark Budman, Michael Idov, Mikhail Iossel, IlyaKaminsky, and IlyaKutik, among others. Shrayer characterizes this generation of writers as one that "cultivat[es] in their work the theme of immigrant culture and the sense of duality it precipitates", but such a description is inadequate because it does not address these writers' efforts to move beyond the so-called "immigrant novel" and experiment with other themes and genres.[12] In this "immigrant novel", which is usually their first work, these writers explore the idea of "hybrid identity" and what it means to be Russian, Jewish, American, or some combination thereof. Subsequent works usually steer away from an identity-based plot, yet still contain a distinctly Russian character or setting.

Finally, a brief overview of the sociological differences between Shteyngart, Ulinich, and Meklina's generation, and their parents, will help us understand these writers'experiences as émigrés. Shteyngart's parents belong to what is commonly referred to as the "third wave", since they emigrated in 1979, though Shteyngart himself – who is 43 – belongs to

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[11]Maxim Shrayer, "Russian American Literature", in *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature, Volume IV (N-S)*, ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 1946.
[12]Ibid., 1950.

Remennick's "1.5 Generation". Isurin's lengthy study of this "third wave", in which she interviewed 154 Russian immigrants in the United States, Israel, and Germany, reports various levels of adjustment and acclimation to life in the United States; of the 154 respondents, 50 live in the U.S. Her study offers three main conclusions that paint a somewhat mixed picture of "third wave" immigrant life; while they seem well-adjusted in general, they sometimes still feel most comfortable in a setting that is primarily Russian, both culturally and linguistically.

Her first conclusion is thatthe Russian immigrants she interviewed feel mostly at home in the United States; 64% responded that the U.S. was their home, while only 2% responded that Russia was still their home.[13]Her second conclusion finds that while these immigrants claim the U.S. as their home, they still feel most comfortable in pockets of Russian culture that exist in their diasporic communities, especially if their English-language skills are poor. Of her 50 American respondents, 52% reported "good" proficiency in English; of these, 23% reported feeling more comfortable in American culture, while 31% reported feeling more comfortable in Russian culture. 46% reported equal comfort in both cultures. Of the 48% who reported "poor" English proficiency, only 17% felt comfortable in American culture, with 54% preferring Russian culture and 29% feeling equally comfortable in both.[14]Isurin's third conclusion suggests that self-perceived command of Russian or English may factor into those feelings of comfort. When she asked the 50 American respondents to assess their command of English before immigration and at the present time of the study, 70% thought their English was "bad" (or had no English-language skills at all) before, compared to only 10% at the present. 30% thought their English was "good" or

[13]14% responded that they considered both the U.S. and Russia their homes equally, and the remaining 20% responded that they no longer had "any strong attachment to any particular location where [they have] lived or live currently". Isurin, 176.
[14]Ibid., 94.

"O.K." before, compared to 90% at the present. When asked to assess their Russian-language skills at the present time of the study, 74% of respondents answered "very good" or "good", 22% answered "O.K.", and only 4% responded "bad".[15] It is reasonable to conclude that these respondents feel that they have retained their Russian language skills well enough to communicate more or less fluently, even as they gain capability in English.

Children of émigrés, however, often unexpectedly have a difficult time adjusting. In a study similar to Isurin's,Remennick followed Soviet Jewish "third wave" émigrés for nearly two decades after their arrival, including their children who moved with them; this study is useful background information since Shteyngart's and Ulinich's parents were Jewish, and Shteyngart was raised culturally Jewish. Remennickfound that these émigré parents went through an "identity crisis" due to the culture shock they experienced when they discovered "the irrelevance of their old cultural capital in the new life".[16] The women in this group, she notes, "often turned out to be more fit, adaptable, and faster learners than their male partners", because they better prepared themselves psychologically for the move.[17] Their children, the "1.5 Generation", turned out to have the hardest time adjusting to life in the U.S., as one respondent named Mila suggests:

> Children of émigrés are always split and fall in between parental expectations and the urges of their new life. I think they are having a more difficult time adjusting and finding their way in America than adults because we at least made a decision to move here ourselves and now face the consequences; they were drawn into this mess by us, nobody asked what they had wanted.[18]

Despite this difficulty, Remennickpoints out, in her experience most of the "1.5 Generation" who came to the U.S. younger than age 10 "saw themselves as Americans with an additional

[15]Ibid., 209-211.
[16]Remennick, 203.
[17]Ibid., 212.
[18]Ibid., 214.

Russian streak (multiculturalism is cool these days!)".[19]By their late teens, they spoke accented, limited Russian with grandparents, a mix of Russian and English with parents, and only English with friends – a description that illustrates perfectly the appropriateness of Remennick's moniker designating them as bridges between the Russian- and English-speaking world. For most of this generation, their first encounter with "ethno-cultural diversity and often-hostile relations between different groups" came in the New York public school system; some had difficulty with this adjustment, but others "emphasized that they actually enjoyed the multiracial and multicultural makeup of the city, finding this [cultural ambience] an exciting change from the homogenous white human landscape of their Soviet cities".[20] Thus, émigrés of Shteyngart'sage at arrival (7 years old) were mostly well-equipped to navigate the new social and cultural paths they found before them. Émigrés of Ulinich's and Meklina's ages at arrival (seventeen and twenty-two, respectively) found the transition to American life more difficult, regardless of whether they arrived with their parents (Ulinich) or on their own (Meklina); their self-professed trouble at adjusting to life in the U.S. warrants their inclusion here, even though Meklina herself is not Jewish. Shteyngart's works describe both his and his parents' struggles the most acutely, whereas Ulinich's works focus more on her own struggle to adjust to a new life. Meklina's works do not explicitly address her adjustment process, but they do hint strongly at the difficulty she has experienced trying to feel "at home" in the U.S.

Scholarly writing on émigré literature has evolved a great deal since the work of three major literary theorists: French-Americancritic George Steiner (*Extraterritorial*, 1971) Bulgarian-French philosopher and critic JuliaKristeva (*Strangers to Ourselves*,1991) and Indian post-colonial criticHomiBhabha (*The Location of Culture*,1994). These works were among the

[19]Ibid., 217.
[20]Ibid., 219-220.

first to explore the concept of "hybrid identity". Steiner remarks that émigré writers tend to feel a particular "unhousedness" that results from "extraterritoriality", which he defines as the "linguistic pluralism" that has emerged "in certain great writers [who] stand in a relation of dialectical hesitance not only toward one native tongue… but toward several languages".[21]These writers do not feel "at home" in a certain language, even though they write in it. Being "extraterritorial"– possessing linguistic plurality and feeling "unhoused" – means that writers who wish to place themselves under the label have to undergo "genuine shifts of sensibility and personal status", which can meanexpressing "binary values" such as being both Russian and Jewish, or both Russian and American.[22]Kristevaalso frames her discussion of identity in binary terms, in that hybridity exists only when we look in the mirror to recognize that the foreigner, or "other", resides in our own "self". Émigrés always have at least two "selves", which Kristeva refers to as "native" and "foreigner", and which correspond with my writers' protagonists' concepts of "self" and "other".[23]For Bhabha, culture, and by turns identity, is found in a liminal "Third Space" wherein a colonized émigré's culture meets that of his colonizer after the émigré has been displaced and relocated. In that "third space", a hybrid identity is formed that is neither fully the émigré's own, nor fully the colonizer's.[24]

Literary theorists Josef Raab and Martin Butler approach Bhabha'spostcolonial theory with what they call a "postmodern, relativizing" eye; in their work on hybrid identity in the Americas, they question whether the term "hybridity" applies to "New World cultures and literatures, or whether it has to be modified (both in theory and by application) in order

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[21]George Steiner, *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution* (New York*:* Atheneum,1971), viii.
[22] Ibid., 4.
[23] Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, transl. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 182.
[24]HomiBhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 36.

to aptly describe and explain those cultural phenomena that are commonly referred to as being of 'hybrid' nature".[25] Given that "there is no single, or correct, concept of hybridity: it changes as it repeats, but it also repeats as it changes",[26]Raab and Butler conclude that"the concept of *hybridity* itself is a hybrid construct".[27]Cultural theorist Stuart Hall foregrounds this idea of changing and repeating, and takes Bhabha's idea one step further, with his claim that "hybrid identity" requires émigrés to be "constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference".[28]These theories describe aptly the encounters that the writers of the "1.5 Generation" have with the cultures of their new countries; as they adjust to life in their new homes, they must constantly refashion their identities in the slow process of adaptation. Shteyngart'sMisha in *Absurdistan*, for example, claims various nationalities and ethnic backgrounds as he tries to obtain the elusive American passport; Ulinich's Sasha Goldberg in *Petropolis*, as I will argue, re-writes herself as what I will call a palimpsest during her struggle to find her place in the world.

In his discussion of hybrid identity as a vehicle for self-transformation, Hall alludes to the "diaspora", a concept with a long and contentious history as a scholarly term. Refugee studies scholar Khalid Koser notes that the term "has classical connotations and has normally been used to refer to the exodus of the Jews following the destruction of the Second Temple in 586 BC", but has also recently been used to refer to African slaves and refugees of the Armenian genocide in Turkey.[29]"Modern" diasporasoccur, he claims, when

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[25]JosefRaab and Martin Butler, eds.,*Hybrid Americas: Contacts, Contrasts, and Confluences in New World Literatures and Cultures* (Tempe, AZ: LIT Verlag and Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingue, 2008), 8.
[26] Robert C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), 27. Quoted in Raab and Butler, 2.
[27]Raab and Butler, 2.
[28] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference,* ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 235.
[29]Khalid Koser, *International Migration: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 25.

"any migrant group that makes material contributions to the development of their country of origin".[30]According to Hall, the diaspora exists wherever hybrid identities renew and reproduce themselves. The community formed by a diaspora thus exhibits and expresses "heterogeneity and diversity" of races, languages, and religions, rather than an expected homogeneous purity, by adapting to the new culture in which they live while simultaneously preserving and expressing their native culture.[31]Cultural theorist Susan Stanford Friedman includes this adaptation in her discussion of the diaspora, which she says includes migration by definition, but more specifically the kind of migration that results in longing for one's homeland: "Diaspora is migration plus loss, desire, and widelyscattered communities held together by memory and a sense of history over a long period of time".[32] Memory and a sense of history allow members of diaspora communities to preserve their native culture, but the journey from homeland to new settlement – and the process of settling itself – is crucial for understanding how émigrés understand identity "as it is in a continual process of (re)formation in relation to changing spaces and times".[33]

This process of "changing spaces and times" naturally requires émigrés to cross borders. Itself a complex concept, a "border" can be understood as "spatial practices comprised and maintained by a continual negotiation between the boundedness of territories and cross-border flows of people, goods, capital, and information", not only in a geographic sense but also in a social, political, economic, or cultural sense.[34]Diener and Hagen, who are geographers, offer a "constructivist" answer to the question of why humans mark territory

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[30]Ibid., 26.
[31]Hall, 235.
[32]Susan Stanford Friedman, "Migrations, Diasporas, and Borders", in *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures(3rd edition)*, ed. David G. Nicholls (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2007), 268.
[33]Ibid., 263.
[34]Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen, *Borders: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9.

by creating borders; we do this, they say, because "determinations of 'us' and 'them', 'insiders' and 'outsiders', and 'in place' and 'out of place'are not related to what we commonly identify as innate categories such as race and ethnicity, or even cultural characteristics such as language or religion, but are formed through unequal power relations within and between social systems".[35]Concerning the border-crossing required to claim a hybrid identity, they suggest that current émigré practices of self-identifying ethnic heritage through a state affiliation (i.e. Russian-American) "serve only to bolster a sense of individuality"; most diaspora communities, they say, express little desire to return to their homeland and "choose instead a hybridized identity that constitutes a status of national belonging to 'both/and' rather than 'either/or'".[36]

This idea of "both/and" belonging suggests an identity that is not so much hybrid or hybridized as what is commonly called "transnational" identity, a term which suggests that borders are porous and can be crossed in both directions. Diener and Hagen claim that transnational identity is a direct result of the existence of borders: borders "put the 'trans' (i.e. to cross, breach, or span) in processes of transnationalism and transmigration".[37]Some scholars recognize a conceptual difference between diasporic and transnational communities, so it is important to remember that not every transnational community is a diaspora. Sociologist Peggy Levitt summarizes the distinction thus:

> Diasporas form out of transnational communities that span spending and receiving countries and out of the real or imagined connections between migrants from a particular homeland who are scattered throughout the world. If a fiction of congregation takes hold, then a Diaspora emerges.[38]

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[35]Ibid., 6.
[36]Ibid., 86-87.
[37]Ibid., 17.
[38] Peggy Levitt, "Transnational Migration: Taking Stock and Future Directions", in *Global Networks* 1 (2001), 203. A "fiction of congregation" occurs when émigrés profess ethnic or national affinity among one another.

Current scholarly practice favors the term "transnational" over "hybrid" or "hybridized", though the term is not new and has been in use regularly since the early 1990s. Political sociologist Barbara SchmitterHeisler notes that scholars in her fieldinitially used the term as "a catchall phrase for a variety of sustained border crossing ties", but more recently have "begun to consider how immigrant transnationalism might illuminate, complement, or oppose more traditional forms of immigrant incorporation".[39]Heisler then defines "immigrant transnationalism" as "the process by which immigrants 'maintain, build and reinforce multiple linkages with their countries of origin' ".[40]Cultural anthropologist Caroline Brettell uses some of the same language in her definition of transnationalism, which is "a social process whereby migrants operate in social fields that transgress geographic, political, and cultural borders" that "emerged from the realization that immigrants abroad maintain their ties to their countries of origin".[41] A crucial distinction between transnational émigrés and diasporic émigrés, Brettell notes, is that "from a transnational perspective, migrants are no longer 'uprooted', but rather move freely back and forth across international borders and between different cultures and social systems".[42]Émigrés engage in that free movement in search of improved economic or social circumstances; sociologist Alejandro Portes refers to this search in his designation of transnational communities as

> [d]ense networks across political borders created by immigrants in their quest for economic advancement and social recognition. Through these networks, an increasing number of people are able

[39] Barbara SchmitterHeisler, "The Sociology of Immigration: From Assimilation to Segmented Assimilation, From the American Experience to the Global Arena", in *Migration Theory: Talking Across Disciplines*, ed. Caroline B. Brettell and James F. Hollifield (New York: Routledge, 2000), 95.
[40] Ibid.Heisleris quoting Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects and the Deterritorialized Nation-State*. New York: Gordon and Breach, 1994, 6.
[41] Caroline Brettell, "Theorizing Migration in Anthropology: The Social Construction of Networks, Identities, Communities, and Globalscapes", in *Migration Theory: Talking Across Disciplines*, ed. Caroline B. Brettell and James F. Hollifield (New York: Routledge, 2000), 120.
[42] Ibid.

> tolive dual lives. Participants are often bilingual, move easily between cultures, frequently maintain homes in two countries, and pursue economic, political, and cultural interests that require their presence in both.[43]

Sociologist Stephen Castles takes this designation one step further by defining transnationalism through its implications,claiming that"it will inevitably lead to a rapid rise in multiple citizenship" that "may in the long run lead to a rethinking of the very contents of citizenship".[44]

The relative freedom that émigrés now enjoy to live these dual lives may be one reason that émigré writers also feel comfortable inhabiting what is called a "translingual" mindset, as they publish what is increasingly referred to as translingual literature. Comparative literature scholar Steven Kellmanoffers a widely accepted definition of "literary translingualism" as "the phenomenon of authors who write in more than one language or at least in a language other than their primary one".[45]Shteyngart, Ulinich, and Meklina fall under this designation because their primary language was or is Russian; while Shteyngart and Ulinich write in English, Meklina writes in both Russian and English, though mainly in Russian. Russianist Adrian Wanner, who has written extensively on Shteyngart and Ulinich as part of what he calls a "translingual diaspora" that also includes writers such as David Bezmozgis (a Canadian), Ellen Litman, Irina Reyn, and Lara Vapnyar, asks whether these writers can be considered "Russian" writers even if they do not write in Russian.[46]

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[43] Alejandro Portes, "Immigration Theory for a New Century: Some Problems and Opportunities", in *International Migration Theory* 31:4 (Winter 1997), 812.
[44] Stephen Castles, "Migrant Settlement, Transnational Communities and State Strategies in the Asia Pacific Region", in *Migration in the Asia Pacific: Population, Settlement and Citizenship Issues*, ed. Robyn Iredale, Charles Hawksley, Stephen Castles (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2003), 19.
[45] Steven Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), ix.
[46] Adrian Wanner, *Out of Russia: Fictions of a New Translingual Diaspora* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011), 5.

Russianist Yelena Furman indirectly answers Wanner'squestion in her treatment of Shteyngart and Ulinich as hybrid writers writing hybrid texts, noting that their engagement in translingual writing is a "choice to write in language X" that "does not automatically make someone an X writer, or rather, it does not make them *only* an X writer. Rather, writing in English by Russian-American authors should be seen in the context of a hybridized linguistic and cultural identity".[47] Both scholars point out the Jewish component of Shteyngart's and Ulinich's hybrid identities, shortening the cumbersome epithet "Russian-Jewish-American" to "Russian-American" while also noting that neither seem particularly fond of the "Jewish" element. Shteyngart, for example, "presents himself as a cultural hybrid and expresses a certain degree of identification with all three of his identities – Russian, Jewish, and American", claiming pride in his Jewish heritage, but his "fictional caricatures of Jews come dangerously close to anti-Semitic stereotypes and Jewish self-hatred. The nationality of choice in Shteyngart's self-constructed literary identity clearly is Russian", according to Wanner.[48]Ulinich, on the other hand, rejects the Russian aspect of her heritage through Sasha Goldberg, who asWanner argues displays a "composite identity".[49] Furman disagrees somewhat with Wanner's assessment, claiming that both Shtetyngart's and Ulinich'scharacters inhabit a primarily Russian identity, and their works contribute to a "Russian-American fiction [that] can be viewed as a kind of minor literature that enacts a particular type of Russian identity outside of Russia's borders".[50]This identity, Furman claims, is found in Bhabha's "third space" of cultural and linguistic hybridity.

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[47] Yelena Furman, "Hybrid Selves, Hybrid Texts: Embracing the Hyphen in Russian-American Fiction", in *Slavic and East European Journal* 55:1 (Spring 2011), 27-28.
[48] Both quotations are from Wanner, 128.
[49]Ibid., 166.
[50]Furman, 34.

*Searching, Rewriting, and Jumping Away: Émigré Identity in '1.5-Generation' Russian-American Literature*builds on these concepts and seeks a more nuanced vocabulary to address complex, transborder identity. One notable departure from prior scholarship is my focus on women writers whose numbers are remarkable. Previous research focuses on the most popular male writers so far in this generation, such as Shteyngart or Russian-French writer AndreïMakine. For example, Wannerdivides his monograph *Out of Russia* into five chapters, with one chapter each devoted to Makine, Russian-German writer WladimirKaminer, Russian-Israeli writer Boris Zaidman, Shteyngart, and what Wanner calls "the Russian debutantes"who followed in Shteyngart's literary wake – that is, all of the women writers of the Russian-American cohort, lumped somewhat unceremoniously with Russian-Canadian writer David Bezmozgis. Furman's article devotes equal consideration to Shteyngart and Ulinich, as does RussianistYashaKlots in an article about Russian émigré narratives in New York City in which he discusses works by Shteyngart, Ulinich, Vapnyar, Reyn, and Michael Idov.[51]Two of the three main chapters here are devoted to Ulinich and Margarita Meklina, who hasso far received (undeservedly, in my opinion) no scholarly attention in literary studies. I single them out because of the groundbreaking ways in which their works advance conversation on identity as a whole, and not just émigré identity.

In terms of specific writers, I augment previous research on Shteyngart when I claim that his protagonists discover and display a particular type of hybrid identity, which I call a "nodal identity", that is found in precise intersections of space, time, and language. While it is a transnational identity, and somewhat composite, I argue that this hybridity only occurs at specific locations that I call "nodes". While the idea of specific locations may evoke

[51] See YashaKlots, "The Ultimate City: New York in Russian Immigrant Narratives", in *Slavic and East European Journal* 55:1 (Spring 2011), 38-57.

Bhabha's "third space", I contend that these nodes occupy what might be called a "fourth space" where space, time, and language converge. I build upon this idea of a temporary, shifting identity in my discussion of Ulinich'sprotagonist Sasha Goldberg, for whom identity is a concept that is re-writeable, surmountable, and inherently tied to memory. I argue that she represents a "palimpsest" in her ability to erase and re-create herself, which introduces the previously unexplored concept of intertextuality to Ulinich's work. I am establishing a scholarly body of work on Meklina by suggesting that she engages with previous Russian-American émigré writing and takes it beyond the confines of hybrid or transnational identity, instead considering identity through "disruption" in a communicative context. This shift away from an overt exploration of national or ethnic identity, I argue, represents a new way of thinking about identity in émigré literature that reflects an increasingly globalized context for both writers and readers.

I use the terms "globalized" and "globalization" to emphasize the context in which writers of the "1.5 Generation" live and write, and the vast differences between that environment and the one in which prior waves of émigré writers lived and wrote. Constantly changing demographics, porous and sometimes even fluid borders, and the Internet and technology all contribute to what is being called (somewhat redundantly) a "global" world. Cultural theorist Nikos Papastergiadis traces the origin of the term "globalization" to the 1980s, noting that "it has been used, in various ways, to represent the perception of the world as an interconnected whole and the consciousness that a growing number of issues can no longer be addressed purely at a local level".[52] However, the term is complicated because "there is little consensus on the precise form that [globalization] takes";

[52] Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization, and Hybridity* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2000), 76.

Papastergiadis notes three major theorists who stress different aspects.[53] First is Roland Robertson, who Papastergiadis notes probably coined the term. According to Papastergiadis, Robertson "is concerned with the human experience of globalization. His work has focused on the way our consciousness of the world, and our sense of place in the world, have changed".[54] Second is Immanuel Wallerstein, who looks at the concept from an economic and political structuralist point of view, and third is Ulf Hannerz, who "focuses on the transformation of cultural relations".[55]My use of the term draws on Robertson's; that is, I define globalization as a frame for understanding how humans view themselves and their place in the world as borders fluctuate and become more permeable.

Papastergiadis also observes that current discussion on globalization affects how we understand the relationship between migration and social change. As he views the situation, "the paths of human movement across the globe are so intricate and multi-directional that it is no longer possible to talk about international migration in terms of Eurocentric axial routes"; this picture suggests that scholars who discuss (e)migration need to consider movement of communities *within* countries and states just as much as *between* them because "current demographic movements are not just the extension or even the inversion of previous patterns".[56]Immigration scholar Tamar Jacoby underscores the need for this consideration when she remarks that "American demographic realities only highlight the significance of the questions [immigrants] face. One in nine Americans is now foreign-born, and together blacks, Hispanics, and Asians account for 30 percent of the population. The

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[53]Ibid., 77.
[54] Ibid. Robertson first used the term in 1985, but only defined it in 1992, as "a concept that refers to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole", in his monograph *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage Publishers, 1992), 8.
[55] Ibid.Wallerstein is best known for his four-volume series *The Modern World-System* (New York: Academic Press, 1974-2011), and Hannerz for his monograph *Transnational Connections: People, Culture, Places* (London: Routledge, 1996).
[56]Ibid., 91.

new immigrant groups are by far the fastest growing segments of the nation".[57] Jacoby's statement is based on data from the 2000 U.S. Census; more recent data from the 2010 census reflects rising numbers in both of those groups: one in every 7.5 Americans (13%) is foreign-born, and 34% of the total population identifies as black, Hispanic, or Asian.[58]According to the 2012 Census Bureau data, of the 13% that is foreign-born, over one-third – 35% – arrived in the United States after 2000, with the majority of those coming from Latin America and Asia.

A good deal of this movement can be attributed to borders that are more fluid and fluctuating than ever before, which, as Diener and Hagen suggest, is a result of "new spaces of sovereignty and authority [that] are emerging and shattering the fictive, nested hierarchy of territorial jurisdictions, starting with private homes and ending at the nation-state".[59] "Sovereignty" refers to the control exerted over a territory and its people and resources, and "jurisdiction" refers to a specific, bounded area within a sovereignty, inside which authority is recognized. They continue:

> While external state borders are central to a variety of issues, new economic, social, and political realities are producing new forms of bordering and alternative spatial realities manifest at thesubstate level. Voting districts, census tracts, municipal boundaries, and any number of other bureaucratic divisions of space, along with unofficial boundaries of socioeconomic and cultural differences, increasingly constitute tangible landscapes of authority and power. These civil hierarchies and the varied spatialities they foster play central roles in shaping individual

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[57] Tamar Jacoby, *Reinventing the Melting Pot: The New Immigrants and What It Means To Be American* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 5.

[58] Foreign-born data is taken from the U.S. Census Bureau, *The Foreign-Born Population of the United States 2010*, May 2012, https://www.census.gov/prod/2012pubs/acs-19.pdf; accessed 27 April2015. Race and ethnicity data is taken from theU.S. Census Bureau, *2009-2013 5-Year American Community Survey*, 2013, http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_13_5YR_DP05&src=pt; accessed 27 April2015.

[59]Diener and Hagen, 11.

and group identity.[60]

Not only have physical borders changed, but so have *conceptual* borders. Friedman observes that such a distinction "between diaspora and other forms of migration such as travel, exile, expatriatism, immigration and emigration, nomadism, and refugeeismhas become ever more porous".[61]When physical and psychological borders erode, however, greater connectivity emerges, as it has in leaps and bounds since the advent of the Internet and in accordance with various techonological tools that facilitate border-crossing communication.

Looking more closely at this new connectivity, Papastergiadis states that "migration and telecommunication have brought differences closer together" and that one of the benefits of globalization is that it "has heightened the potential for interaction".[62]However, the movement and displacement that brings about this increased interaction also brings about a potentially negative effect of drastically altering the ways in which communities are "grounded", he says. Communities usually thought of as stable and bounded groups that draw strength from close-knit, center-proximate members begin to fall apart physically and psychologically once members begin to move away from the center and towards the peripheries. The traditionally "concentric and territorial construction of the community has been dramatically altered by the technological advances in communication and the multidirectional migrations of globalization".[63] These factors imply that the concepts of "displacement, rupture, and fragmentation", which have "become thedominant motifs for articulating the prevalent forms of experience in the modern world", are vital for our understanding of "how such experiences can be communicated".[64]Displacement and

[60]Ibid., 12.
[61]Friedman, 272.
[62]Papastergiadis, 94-95.
[63]Ibid., 207.
[64]Ibid., 95.

disruption provide an apt conceptual framework for my discussion of the ways in which these three émigré writers shape their characters' and readers' understanding of identity.

My treatment of émigré Russian-American writing begins with Gary Shteyngart's first three novels (*The Russian Debutante's Handbook* [2002], *Absurdistan*[2006], and *Super Sad True Love Story* [2010]), which I analyze as explorations of complex identity (especially hybrid identity) and imaginated community and imaginative geography. Then, I consider Anya Ulinich's first novel, *Petropolis* [2007], within the framework of personal and national identity and memory, and as a form of palimpsest. Finally, I investigate six works by Margarita Meklina, five short stories [2003-2014] and an epistolary novel co-written with Russian writer Arkadii Dragomoshchenko [2010] in light ofcommunication, discourse, and the concept of the utterance. I further examine Meklina's works through concepts taken from reception theory, particularly the ideas of the horizon of expectations and the implied reader. I concurrently examine how each writer crosses borders in seeking an international readership composed of multiple identities.

Each writer addresses different facets of complex identity for both character and reader in the émigré world. In this study I have developed a number of terms as a kind of shorthand that captures the crucial experience of identity confusion. In the case of Shteyngart consciousness of identity emerges in a structure that I call a "node" – a temporary turning point in the networks of time, space, and language, which a character encounters at an unexpected moment. Ulinich's work presents a consciousness of émigré identity that resembles what I call a "palimpsest" – a text composed of re-writable layers that occasionally seep through and reveal underlying layers of identity. Meklina'sstories focus on a consciousness of identity that is more linguistic than transnational, presenting characters through whom the reader experiences discursive breakdowns of identity in a process that I

call "communicative displacement". This dissertation moves from the most familiar kind of writing – Shteyngart's parody and picaresque novels – to Ulinich's more aggressively confrontational *Bildungsroman*, ending with the least accessible, most challenging writing in Meklina's stories.

Gary Shteyngart was born in Leningrad in 1972, and emigrated to the United States with his parents in 1979 when Leonid Brezhnev allowed Soviet Jews to leave the Soviet Union. Like many Eastern European immigrants, they arrived in New York City, where they settled into an apartment in Queens. He attended Stuyvesant High School and Oberlin College, eventually earning a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) from Hunter College while working on his debut novel. He currently teaches writing at Columbia University, and his parents live in Westchester County, New York. He has published three novels, a memoir (2014's *Little Failure*), and several essays and short stories. His debut novel, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (2002), received the Stephen Crane Award for First Fiction and the National Jewish Book Award for fiction, and was named a *New York Times* Notable Book. His second novel, *Absurdistan*(2006), landed on the *New York Times Book Review*'s list of top ten books of the year, and was named "Book of the Year" by several publications, including the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Washington Post*. His 2010 novel, *Super Sad True Love Story*, came on the heels of his designation by *The New Yorker* as one of the "20 Under 40" writers to watch.

Anya Ulinich was born in Moscow in 1973, and remained in the Soviet Union until she was seventeen, when her parents took her to Phoenix on a tourist visa in search of a better economic future. She studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and eventually earned her MFA in visual arts from the University of California-Davis. She lives in Brooklyn and occasionally teaches at The New School. In 2007 she was awarded the Goldberg Prize for Emerging Writers of Jewish Fiction, and the National Book Foundation's "5 Under 35"

prize, for her debut novel, *Petropolis*. Her second novel, the graphic *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel*, was published in July 2014 to instant critical acclaim.

Margarita Meklina was born in Leningrad in 1972, and after completing her degree in philology at St. Petersburg's Herzen Pedagogical Institute in 1994, she moved to San Francisco, where she currently lives and works as a novelist, essayist, and interviewer. She also studied at the University of San Francisco and the Hebrew University in Moscow. Until recently, most of her prose was written in Russian and sent to publishers in Russia; in 1996, she attracted the attention of the prestigious literary journals *Mitin* and *Vavilon*, and her work began to appear regularly there. In 2003, her prose collection *The Battle at Petersburg* won the Andrei Bely Prize (usually given to so-called "non-conformist" writing), and her 2009 prose collection *My Criminal Connection to Art* won the Russian Prize.

I chose these three writers for my discussion not only for their prominence, but also for their unique views on émigré identity in the context of various sorts of border-crossing. I considered including many other writers of the contemporary Russian-American émigré-writer cohort, such as David Bezmozgis, Olga Grushin, Ellen Litman, Irina Reyn, and Lara Vapnyar, but ultimately decided to exclude them for various reasons. Nearly every writer's debut novel explores themes of border-crossing and displacement, but not all of them address émigré identity profoundly, or creatively, enough to warrant inclusion in this discussion. Grushin's*The Dream Life of Sukhanov* (2005), for example, describes a character's struggle at the border between reality and fantasy, but it takes place entirely in Moscow and only superficially refers to émigré identity. Bezmozgis's*Natasha* (2004) does address the relationship between border-crossing and émigré identity, but its narrow focus on Jewish identity and Canadian locales places it outside the scope of my work, which focuses on U.S.-Russian writers.

Litman (*The Last Chicken in America*, 2007), Reyn (*What Happened to Anna K.*, 2008), and Vapnyar (*Memoirs of a Muse*, 2006)are often included in scholarly discussions of Russian-American émigré writers thanks to their debut works, but after those efforts they seem to have moved from literary investigation of émigré identity to other questions. Litman's 2014 follow-up, *Mannequin Girl*, reads more as a *Bildungsroman* than an examination of émigré identity: its protagonist is an adolescent Jewish girl in Soviet Moscow whose scoliosis makes her a social pariah. Vapnyar's latest work, the 2013 novella *The Scent of Pines*, describes experiences at a Soviet summer camp, but neither this work nor the short-story collections she wrote in intervening years explicitly addresses émigré identity to the degree of *Memoirs of a Muse*. Reyn has maintained fictional radio silence since *Anna K.* was published; she edited a volume of short stories exploring what it means to be a "New Jersey writer", but this was published in 2007 (*Living on the Edge of the World: New Jersey Writers Take on the Garden State*, Touchstone Publishing).

Shteyngart and Ulinich continue to address border-crossing, and émigré identity, in works that follow their debut novels. Meklina, who confronts borders in a distinctive way, prefers to address émigré identity not in terms of hybridity but what I will call"globality". Her work is a complete departure fromShteyngart's and Ulinich's groundbreaking texts, and is seminal in its own right. She explores several of the same themes as they do, but with a twist: she writes in the language into which all three were born, rather than the one spoken in their current country of residence. These three writers are all talented émigrés who have their own ways of treating complex identity. While the English/Russian language division might seem problematic, all three of them play with language; Shteyngart and Ulinichhappen to fall on the English side of the division, whereas Meklina falls on the Russian side. This is yet another border for them to cross, which they do, multiple times. In general, the border-

crossing that they all engage in the most is reaching out to readers who are not in "their" traditional (birth) culture and who are part of the culture in which they now live – even the Russian-speaking readers in the United States, who, even if they form their own communities and diasporas in the U.S., still live there and are now part of its culture.

Thinking about diasporas and adopted cultures motivated the original trajectory of my research on this topic, which focused on Svetlana Boym's treatment of nostalgia in *The Future of Nostalgia* – especially as it is felt by Soviet Jewish émigrés and their children. I expected the writers of the "1.5 Generation" to feel some of the same nostalgia that their "third wave" parents professed, but as it turns out, such nostalgia does not register with them. In fact, they *reject* their parents' proclivity for nostalgia, eyeing it instead with deep suspicion**.** [65]Boym notes that the "third wave" of Soviet Jew émigrés who left the Soviet Union between 1972 and 1987 did so under the family reunification clause from the Helsinki Agreement, even if they had no family abroad, for reasons ranging from "political convictions and experiences of anti-Semitism to a sense of claustrophobia and existential allergy to Soviet life during the Brezhnev stagnation, from the search for economic and social opportunities to some vaguely utopian dream of freedom, a desire for an unpredictable future".[66] To them, a hyphenated Russian-American identity was "hardly an acceptable identity" for two reasons. First, other Russian émigrés from earlier waves saw them not as Russians, but as "unpatriotic rootless cosmopolitans"; second, they "did not manage to fit in" to American culture and lacked basic knowledge of American customs, laws, and behavioral norms.[67]Even so, they"remain nostalgic for the American dream they

[65]SvetlanaBoym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 337.
[66] Ibid., 329.
[67]Ibid., 332.

dreamed up in Russia and sometimes can't quite forgive America for not living up to it".[68] Their children, on the other hand, readily accept and even embrace a hyphenated Russian-American identity, because they see themselves as Remennick's "cool kids" who identify as American with a multicultural dash of Russian.

However, possessing facility in two languages can be problematic for these "cool kids" when they mature and begin to write about their experiences. Steiner's work on identity and "unhousedness" provides some insight about this communicative difficulty, as it became a clearer reference point for my research after nostalgia proved an untenable concept. Because they possess what Steiner calls "linguistic pluralism" – the ability to write in more than one language – these writers hesitate to express themselves in either, or multiple, languages; both Ulinich and Meklina have expressed this sentiment repeatedly.[69]The concept of being "unhoused" evokes losing a home (i.e. *being displaced*),which is what all three of the writers in this discussion experienced when they left the Soviet Union (or Russia, as it was called when Meklina left) for the United States. In turn, these writers transfer their sense of displacement to their characters, or, in Meklina's case, directly to the reader, possibly to convey the complexity of talking about identity in an émigré world, in which migration – and movement across borders in general – affects self-perception in various ways.

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[68] Ibid.

[69] In an early interview,Ulinich compares writing in English for college compositions to a power tool: "It all made me feel that the English language wassomeone else's tool, like a chainsaw that I was clumsily borrowing. I certainly didn't dare to take it and use it for my own creative purposes" ("Interview", *Anya Ulinich*, http://www.anyaulinich.com/interview.html; accessed 30 January 2014). In a 2009 interview with Dmitry Bavilsky, Meklina says that language is a means of resistance, but that in order to resist, one must know intimately the rules of a language. She knows Russian well, but with English, "яегоменьшезнаюибольшеоднегоподстраиваюсь; невсегдачувствую, когдаплывупотечениюикогдапротив" ["I know it less and I have to adjust to it more; I don't always feel when I go with the flow, and when I go against it"] (in *Частныйкорреспондент*[*ChastnyiKorrespondent*], 15 December 2009, http://www.chaskor.ru/article/margarita_meklina_yazyk_-_sredstvo_soprotivleniya_13464; accessed 11 September 2014).

I turn my attention first to Gary Shteyngart, who was the first to arrive in the United States as a child and (many would say) jump-started the recent wave of Russian-American émigré fiction writing. Then, I proceed to a discussion of Anya Ulinich, who arrived in the United States as a teenager, and who continues to push the boundaries of novelistic genre by granting discursive authority to both her art and her words. Finally, I conclude with Margarita Meklina, who settled in San Francisco in 1995 and in many ways seems to embody the future of émigré writing by embracingand practicing a global philosophy of interaction between writer, reader, and character.

Chapter 1: Gary Shteyngart Searches for Self in Time, Language, and Space

Introduction

Each of Gary Shteyngart's novels contains a moment wherein the protagonist suddenly realizes a truth about his identity that has eluded him to that point in the narrative: try as he might to resist, he is a *mix of cultures*. In *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, Vladimir Girshkin struggles to assert himself as, in turns, and American, Russian, and Jew. At the end of the novel, he finds himself inside an airport, fleeing a group of Russians intent on killing him; as they are detained by the border police at the departure gate, he turns around to watch them being attacked. " 'Oh, my poor people', said Vladimir suddenly as the violence commenced. Why had he said this? He shook his head. Stupid heritage. Stupid multicultural Jew".[70] In *Absurdistan*, Misha Vainberg makes a sad sport of situationally claiming Russian, American, Jewish, or Belgian heritage, all the while haunted by his murdered Russian father's lingering specter. At the end of the novel, he finds himself in a village of Jews – who have erected a plaque in his father's honor – who hide him until he can move safely across the eponymous republic's border on foot the next day. One of the elders tells Misha how much Misha meant to his father: " 'He was always love you, Misha. He only talk about you. He was your first lover. And nobody will love you like that never again.' I sighed… *Look, Papa. Look how much weight I've shed in the last few weeks! Look how much we resemble each other now in profile.*

[70] Gary Shteyngart, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2002), 446. Hereafter, this novel appears in parenthetical citations as (Shteyngart 2002, page number).

There's nothing of my mommy left in me anymore. I'm all you now, Papa".[71] In *Super Sad True Love Story*, Lenny Abramov experiences an existential crisis, spurred by his fear of death, when he tries to fashion a virtual self to replace his decaying physical self. Again near the end of the novel, he spends a night with his aging, ailing parents – after a cataclysmic event called 'the Rupture' – and looking after them before returning to what's left of his home. When he wakes up the next morning, his parents greet him with sad smiles, which cause him to think: "Who was I? A secular progressive? Perhaps. A liberal, whatever that even means anymore, maybe. But basically – at the end of the busted rainbow, at the end of the day, at the end of the empire – little more than my parents' son".[72]This chapter will show that being "little more" than the product of two people signifies a reversion to a kind of "default status". This status only changes when Lenny, and Shteyngart's other protagonists, confront changing temporal situations, spaces, and languages in particular moments and respond by expressing a temporary "nodal" identity.

In these fleeting moments, each protagonist finally views himself as a kind of "hybrid" – someone who, like Shteyngart, finds his identity at an intersection of cultural traditions. Vladimir Girshkin realizes his inherited "multicultural" Russian and Jewish heritage; Misha Vainberg understands that no matter which passport he brandishes – Russian, American, or Belgian – he is inevitably his father's son. Lenny Abramov, after multiple failed attempts to establish a successful 'online' self, learns that his true self is the 'offline', physical one, the product of two Russian parents raising their son in the U.S. and not the product of an information stream (similar to a contemporary "newsfeed" or scrolling headline) manufactured by a ubiquitous futuristic smartphone, called here an *äppärät*. The

[71] Ibid.,*Absurdistan* (New York: Random House, 2006), 328. Hereafter, this novel appears in parenthetical citations as (Shteyngart 2006, page number).
[72] Ibid.,*Super Sad True Love Story* (New York: Random House, 2010), 294. Hereafter, this novel appears in parenthetical citations as (Shteyngart 2010, page number).

protagonists embrace these identities in specific border settings – a detail that, as it turns out, is crucial to unlocking the protagonists' true selves. Girshkin's moment occurs at the departure gate of an airport that provides a way out of a deadly confrontation; Vainberg's moment occurs in an enclave near the border of a hostile republic; Abramov's moment occurs in the locus of his nostalgia: his parents' house, which sits on "the most important corner of [his] life" (Shteyngart 2010, 131). These borders act as *nodes*, or critical points in the text where Shteyngart's protagonists confront spatial, temporal, and/or linguistic borders and, as a result, form their self-perceptions as a kind of hybrid. In this context, "hybrid" and "hybrid identity" refer to an awareness of being simultaneously Russian, Jewish, and American without being fully any of the three, or fully all three. This awareness manifests itself in the writer's self-consciousness – that is, an inability *not* to refer to it – about language (is the protagonist using the correct language? Is he using that language properly?), religion (is the protagonist behaving in a manner that betrays his Jewishness? Is this behavior somehow intrusive, invasive, or causing others to feel uncomfortable?), and cultural acumen (is the protagonist behaving according to cultural norms of the majority?).

However, it also requires anxiety about physical appearance and location, and conflict between the past, present, and future. Being a "hybrid" or having "hybrid identity" implies being located on the border of liminal eras, cultures, and places.[73]It also implies shaping one's identity in a place, outside of one's land of birth, where geographical, temporal, linguistic, and cultural contexts constantly change. Shteyngart's protagonists shape

[73] The idea of *liminality* was first broadly theorized by British anthropologist Victor Turner, who in 1965 used the term "liminal" to apply to people who "are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony" (*The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* [Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1969], 95). Another useful concept of borderline experience comes from Mikhail Bakhtin, who writes of self-consciousness as "that which takes place on the *boundary* between one's own and someone else's consciousness, on the *threshold*" ("Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book" [1961], in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* transl. Caryl Emerson [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984], 287).

their hybrid identities at "nodes" that are particular intersections of time, language, and space. These "nodes" act as specific, temporary, situationally-dependent moments in which protagonists somehow alter themselves to present a particular self. After the moment ends, however, they inevitably revert to a sort of "default" status – that of "my parents' son" – and thus never quite outrun their national or ethnic identity.In this chapter, I will show how changing temporal situations, spaces, and languages form a temporary "nodal" émigré identity.

Shteyngart guides his readers through these momentsby weaving common threads of time, language, and space elements through his novels. This chapter begins with definitions of *identity,time*, *word/language*, and *space*, which are the image types crucial to understanding Shteyngart's identity search. After clarifying those terms, it will be useful to examine the methodology that was used to uncover these four image types in Shteyngart's novels; then, attention will turn to summarizing the plots of these novels. Next, the novels' similarities in plot, protagonist, and character type will be briefly addressed before a deeper examination of their similarities in time, language, and space. The discussion will then focus on the places in the novels where these key image types intersect (which I call *nodes*), after which it will be argued that these nodes are the key to unlocking what I call Shteyngart's protagonists' "nodal identity". Finally, other scholars' treatment of his novels will be considered, while pointing out the fresh perspective that this argument offers. In this chapter, the reader will discover new findings related to two concepts: one, how Shteyngart varies his focus on time, language, and space to reveal identity; two, how this discovery results in a more complex portrait of American identity. Concerning the first concept, I will show the reader that Shteyngart's own search for identity mirrors that of his protagonists', as they chronologically mimic his own aging process. I will also demonstrate that this temporal progression is more

important than language use in the discovery of identity, but that it is not as important as spatial movement, which I will emphasize by showing that Shteyngart's protagonists truly discover their identity in enclaves, at borders, and throughout liminal spaces. Finally, I will bridge the gap between the two concepts by arguing that these spaces create a complex, contemporary*nodal identity*.

Key Concepts

I define the first key concept, *identity*, as a character's calculated expression of self as they perceive most true. Russian philosopher and philologist Mikhail Bakhtin and Kristeva offer good points of departure for a basic understanding of identity as it applies to this discussion.

Bakhtin offers his theory of identity in the modern novel in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981). In the essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics" he posits that characters identify themselves through points containing both space and time, which he terms *chronotopes* and defines as "literally, 'time-space'… [that] expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space)".[74] Novels trace changes in protagonists by placing them in different chronotopes, each of which contain their own symbolic meaning marking them as more than mere descriptors or settings. Shteyngart's novels, especially, rely heavily on chronotopes to express identity.

Bakhtin also offers a meditation on his philosophy of language in *The Dialogic Imagination* in the essay "Discourse in the Novel", stating that novels are composed of competing and interwoven voices or viewpoints. This *discourse* – which I call *language* – finds a place in the chronotope as well, since characters engage in different types of discourse within certain spaces and times. Just as those spaces and times carry their own symbolic meanings,

[74] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist and transl. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84.

these types of discourse also carry symbolic meanings because they express what their speaker *values* – that is, his own worldview – as he attempts to exert *authority* over his interlocutor, whom he wishes to persuade of his view. Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope would seem to fit well into my discussion of Shteyngart's and other authors' expression of identity, but it is missing one crucial element: *liminality*, which I have defined on page 3, and which Bakhtin associates more with the carnivalesque than the chronotope.[75]

Kristeva takes a binary approach in addressing identity; she begins *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991)with the statement that "the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity".[76] This paradox opens her discussion of the uncanny, strangely-familiar self we encounter when we meet a foreigner, which immigrants experience twofold since they are composed of (at least) two selves. The characters of writers such as Shteyngart are usually perceived as Russian first and American second, because their "otherness", which Kristeva says we both love and hate, forces us to confront "the foreign component of our psyche".[77] Kristeva clearly frames her discussion of identity in binary terms, which applies to my discussion of identity because she frequently uses the terms 'native' and 'foreigner', which here correspond to a protagonist's identity of 'self' and 'other'. Shteyngart's characters experience the confrontation of 'self' and 'other' simply by looking in the mirror; it might be said that Bhabha's "third space" occurs *inside them*, then, since they are the physical incarnation of the place where 'self' and 'other' meet (see my discussion of Furman below). I take Kristeva's argument one step further by adding at least one other identity element to

[75] In the carnival square, "people who in life are separated by the impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into free familiar contact", suggesting that Bakhtin sees the carnival as a *threshold* (cf. footnote 73). "Characteristics of Genreand Plot Composition in Dostoevsky's Works", *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 123.
[76]Kristeva, 2.
[77] Ibid., 182.

these characters' expression of self, thereby creating the hybrid that I claim resides in a temporary "fourth space" that I will discuss shortly.

In *Imagined Communities* (1993), international studies specialist Benedict Anderson looks at the ways in which individuals align their selves with 'others' that they cannot see but still consider part of their community. To him, the nation – an "imagined political community" contained within set geographical border lines – is composed of a group of people who "never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion".[78] This may explain why Shteyngart's protagonists find difficulty adjusting to American, Absurdistani, or *äppärät* life: born into one nation at first, they learn to identify with that community from their parents and peers. Moving to another nation forces them to interact with a second community, and also forces them to confront their imagined allegiance and ask themselves to which nation they pledge the closest kinship. Shteyngart's protagonists tend not to choose one over another, but instead attempt to let at least two communities reside within their minds and, in turn, their self-perceptions, which are now shaded with a nuance of hybridity.

While Anderson discusses how people derive self-identity from a large governance structure, a state, or a "nation", geographer Robert Sack narrows his discussion of personal identity to a smaller window. In *Homo Geographicus* (1997), he differentiates between the locations of *space* and *place* by using *space* as the neutral term to refer to "a property of the natural world [that] can be experienced", whereas *place* "differs from space in terms of familiarity and time. A place requires human agency, is something that may take time to

[78] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London:Verso Editions/NLB, 1983), 6.

know, and a home especially so".[79] Thus, he writes, "place implies space, and each home is a place in space".[80] Sack makes a distinction between the two words even as he acknowledges their relation to one another, but as I will discuss below, I use the term *space* to refer to any location that has meaning assigned to it – essentially the opposite of what Sack claims.

Literary theorist Edward Said identifies a more abstract relationship between space and identity in his theory of imaginative geography, as described in his 1978 work *Orientalism*. Briefly, the human propensity to organize what surrounds us means that all things made by humans (including history) are also classified and given meaning by humans. Anything that a human makes – an object, a place, or time – can be assigned a role and given meaning "that acquire[s] objective validity only *after* the assignments are made".[81] Some objects may be made not by the hands but by the mind, that is, *imaginative*. A group of people living on a parcel of land will automatically erect boundaries – physical (as in a fence) or not (as in an imaginary line in absence of a fence) – between their land and its surrounding areas and the land beyond, which they term " 'the land of the barbarians' ":

> In other words, this universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is 'ours' and an unfamiliar space beyond 'ours' which is 'theirs' is a way of making geographical distinctions that *can* be entirely arbitrary. I use the word 'arbitrary' because imaginative geography of the 'our land-barbarian land' variety does not require that the barbarians acknowledge the distinction. It is enough for 'us' to set up these boundaries in our own minds.[82]

Also not necessary for establishing such boundaries is anything beyond a superficial knowledge of what may be " 'out there' ", where "all kinds of suppositions, associations, and

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[79] Robert Sack, *Homo Geographicus: A Framework for Action, Awareness, and Moral Concern* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 16.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 54.
[82] Ibid.

fictions appear to crowd the unfamiliar space outside one's own".[83] Such "imaginative geography" applies to more than just literary or artistic contexts; Said uses it in the context of fashion, biological taxonomy, architecture, and literature, to begin. For the purpose of this discussion, the term will help us understand how characters who confront and explore their hybrid identities think about space and place. Being born in "our" space but growing up and living in "their" space, and occasionally returning to "our" space, allows these characters to look at the relationship between space and self-perception in unexpected ways.

The crucial form of identity developed in recent criticism is that of *hybrid identity*, which I define as an awareness of being simultaneously Russian, Jewish, and American without being fully any *one* of the three. This awareness manifests itself in a writer's self-consciousness – that is, an inability *not*to refer to it – about whether or not his or her protagonist conforms to the model of the successful immigrant's proper language use, appropriate religious behavior, and demonstration of cultural acumen. Such an awareness also carries with it anxiety about physical appearance and location, and conflict between the past, present, and future. Most importantly, then, hybrid identity implies spatial, temporal, and cultural liminality; the hybrid characters whom I discuss occupy what I call the "fourth space" – a place where Russian, Jewish, and American identity elements meet briefly and in some cases violently.

This place is not unlike Bhabha's concept of "Third Space" in *The Location of Culture* (which occurs where a colonized migrant's culture meets that of his colonizer),[84] but I distinguish this space from Bhabha's in two ways. First, the "fourth space" is a temporary chronotope, and its effects on the character who enters it are non-permanent, while Bhabha's terminology suggests a chronotope that exerts lasting influence on its inhabitants.

[83] Ibid.
[84] Bhabha 1994, 36.

Second, the "fourth space" is occupied by free, skilled, and educated migrants who left their homelands by choice in search of a better life, whereas Bhabha places in his "Third Space" enslaved, unskilled, and uneducated migrants who were forced to leave their homeland by a colonizing authority. Bhabha refers to these colonized migrants as "those who have suffered the sentence of history – subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement", and he refers to their movement as "cultural displacement, whether they are the 'middle passage' of slavery and indenture, the 'voyage out' of the civilizing mission, the fraught accommodation of Third World migration to the West after the Second World War, or the traffic of economic and political refugees within and outside the Third World".[85] Their "cultural displacement" ends with them being *re*placed into this "Third Space" as they assume a new hybrid identity.[86] Because the free migrants whom I discuss are already hybrids (that is, Russian-Jewish) when they leave their homelands, their arrival in the United States further complicates the cultural picture because it adds yet another aspect of identity to transform them from binary-identity migrants to migrants with multi-faceted identites who thereby occupy the "fourth space" that I name.

More recently, in his book *Out of Russia* (2011), Wanner hints at the idea of multi-faceted migrants that Bhabha creates; in his work on translingual writers, he updates the concept of hybrid identity by referring to their characters' "multiple" or "composite" identities, which implies stratification that does not occur in what I will henceforth call a "nodal" identity.[87] Under my model, characters can change expressions of identity at will in certain situations, moving quickly from one identity to another, and usually reflecting on this

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[85] Ibid., 172.

[86] See Bhabha in "The Third Space": "Hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives" (in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference, e*d. Jonathan Rutherford [London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990], 211).

[87] Wanner first uses the terms "multiple" and "composite" on page 17.

change as it happens. Wanner, on the other hand, holds that these characters can only display one identity at a time, and that any change from one to another is abrupt and jarring, without any reflection on it by the character.[88] Furman, who also engages with Shteyngart's works, resurrects Bhabha's "Third Space" model – which she defines as a space that "comes into being when two (or more) different cultural elements encounter each other and becomes something more than either of these elements" – and claims it a sufficient context for Russian-American writers' hybrid identity.[89] She claims that this identity is "by definition hybrid since immigrants are simultaneously from both places at once (or from no place at all)", but is also complicated and "further hybridized through being Jewish", which is also intrinsically hybrid.[90] To Furman, these three "facets" of identity (her term)[91] are not isolated from one another and do indeed interact,as each protagonist is a product of his parents' character and culture. However, this thesis, like Wanner's, still does not reflect the temporal urgence of my idea of "nodal" identity.

The first image type I define, *time*, isa moment in which something changes; for these novels, the times that most matter for developing and forming identity are the past and the future (and their iterations), and the *liminal time* wherein two time iterations meet. This definition is based on Bhabha's concept of the "temporal caesura" or "time-lag" where time slows down to allow a transformative moment to occur that helps one discover identity; this moment can be between past/present, present/future, or past/future, but it *must* be an in-

[88] Ibid., 131. Wanner here quotes Shteyngart from an interview with Jeffrey Eugenides in 2008: "About his days at Oberlin College he remarks: 'I had quite a hand to play… I would say: "Well, as a Jew…" and then "as an American…" or "as a Russian…" and: "Well, as an immigrant…" and that always got them.' "Wanner goes on to argue that Shteyngart's identity-switching translates to his characters, who then engage in the same mindless practice.
[89] Furman, 23.
[90] Ibid., 25.
[91] Ibid., 26.

between moment.[92] This liminal time, then, occurs at the border where two or more time-related events (such as a memory and a present dilemma) clash in a transformative moment to jostle the protagonist into self-realization. For example, during the narrative's present tense, a protagonist recalls an episode from the past when a change of some sort occurs. The awareness of this moment where past meets present kicks off the cognitive process by which hybrid identity is realized – that is, when one understands that one is at this border, one fully understands one's mixed-culture self. In *The Russian Debutante's Handbook,* Vladimir experiences this understanding when threatening an investor, whom he takes by the collar and at whom he growls a phrase that instantly brings to mind a Soviet slogan from his youth. Startled, Vladimir thinks of himself as both an American and a Soviet-era *apparatchik* for the first time. Another example occurs during the intrusion of the past upon the present, but looks to the future instead of dwelling in the past, as Lenny does in *Super Sad True Love Story* when he recalls being fourteen, realizing his parents would someday die, and understanding that this fact makes him unable to imagine happiness for himself or others in the future. Lenny does not fully understand until the present narrative, that that moment was crucial to his identity as his parents' son.

I define *word/language* as the words and phrases used to express identity, particularly the idioms, translated phrases, and incorrect uses of language that show familiarity (or lack thereof) with multiple languages (and thus in a sense *mark* a character for identity [as 'part of speaking-group / not part of speaking-group']; for these novels, the most important language is *liminal language*. This language occurs when a speaker chooses an unexpected speech form in order to undermine, highlight, or even *confront* an expected speech form. Based on Steiner's belief (1971) that a person's identity is "thoroughly grounded in the fact

[92]Bhabha 1994, 242.

of language",[93] this intersection of speech forms serves as the location of a speaker's or protagonist's full expression of hybrid identity. For example, Vladimir in *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* admires himself in a mirror and wishes himself a good afternoon with the Russian/English phrase "*dobry* fucking *den'*" (Shteyngart 2002, 254). Another example occurs when *Super Sad True Love Story*'s Lenny drops Russian into the English he speaks with his parents, describing a coworker as a *svoloch kitaichonok* ('little Chinese swine') (Shteyngart 2010, 134), or when *Absurdistan*'s Misha spoofs Detroit rap with his own Hebrew-flavored lyrics: "*Heah come dat bitch / From round de way / Box my* putz / *Like Cassius Clay*" (Shteyngart 2006, 6).

Perhaps most important for hybrid identity is my definition of *space*, which in this work refers to an area, called 'place' by geographers,[94] that has had some sort of meaning assigned to it by its inhabitants; for these novels, the spaces that most matter for developing and finding identity are the enclave, border space, and – most importantly, as I will show – *liminal space.* An enclave is a meaningful space that is closed and confined and somehow restricts yet also comforts (or at least *used to*) the protagonist; it is surrounded on all sides by borders of some sort. Enclaves can be located within other enclaves; for example, Vladimir's father in *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* has turned the basement of their house – in which Vladimir spent his childhood – into a re-creation of an *izba* (a wooden house often found in Russian villages and countryside), creating an enclave where he can hide from Vladimir's mother inside of the home they share together (Shteyngart 2002, 127). Border space separates two meaningful places from one another, and can occur in the form of a national or international border, a social or economic border, or an age or cultural border; for example, Misha's ultimate goal in *Absurdistan* is to cross an international border into the U.S.,

[93] Steiner, 63.
[94] See reference to Robert Sack, page 34.

but he first has to escape the national border of the republic of Absurdistan. Liminal space, finally, occurs at the threshold where two or more meaningful places meet. This kind of border space offers an 'in-between' location where the protagonist is most fully aware of his or her hybrid identity. For example, in *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, Eudora Welty's – the expat bar that Vladimir uses as a base for his pyramid-scheme operation – acts as the setting for his declaration that he can successfully exploit both his Russian and American identities. Another example is a passport-control zone or embassy, where protagonists must present both their government-issued identity documents and their self-declared (that is, spoken aloud as an answer to the question "What is your nationality?") identity, simultaneously inhabiting both, as Misha does in *Absurdistan* when he lands in the eponymous republic's capital-city airport and tells the immigration officers that he is Russian and Jewish.

In Shteyngart's work, space and time often overlap; less often, space and word, or time and word, overlap, and in special instances, all three aspects of identity cross paths. When this occurs, *nodes* form; I define these*nodes* so crucial to identity formation as the crossroads where liminal time, word, and space all intersect in a chronotope of self-recognition. Nodes imply part of a network; the networks forming these identity nodes are the various competing cultures, languages, and selves that each protagonist confronts at certain moments. During these confrontations, a temporary "fourth space" results, and protagonists choose to present a certain self in favor of another, as a kind of *identity chameleon*. However, like an actual chameleon, Shteyngart's protagonists always revert to an original, or "default", state defined by their lineage after these moments pass. My main argument in this chapter is that these nodes are the key to understanding hybrid identity in Shteyngart's characters, which I call "nodal identity".

Methodology and Similarities Across Novels in Plot and Character Type

To explore Gary Shteyngart's realization of hybrid identity, I created a typology of character and plot of the three novels, drawing on Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (2nd edition, 1968, 19-65).[95] My ruling principle was a close reading that led me to discern repeated marked and/or dominant words, images, and figures, from which I concluded that patterns of references to time, language, and space did indeed exist. This process led me to discover the similarities in these three image types across the novels, which in turn led me to discover that they intersect in particular ways, thereby forming *nodes*, which are my own creation but evoke traditional Bakhtinian foci of time, language (that conveys the speaker's world view), and space.

In addition to the nodes I discuss shortly, I also discovered several plot elements and character types common to all three novels. In terms of plot, each novel has as its protagonist a man who commits some sort of transgression and has to undergo a transatlantic journey to correct this transgression; regardless of what the protagonist searches for, the journey helps him resolve the question of his hybrid identity. This protagonist is a Russian-Jewish male who lives (or has lived) in the U.S., specifically New York City, and whose family is of Soviet-Jewish descent. To reflect his own movement through various life stages, Shteyngart ages his protagonists as he writes, beginning with Vladimir Girshkin at 25 in his 2002 novel, moving on to Misha Vainberg at 30 in his 2006 novel, and ending with Lenny Abramov at 39 in his 2010 novel. Each protagonist searches for something, be it identity, love, or immortality; he also seeks parental approval and feels immigrant-child guilt for failing to live up to parental expectations. In addition, he longs anxiously for parental touch (either as a physical embrace or a metaphorical blessing), and tends to be tethered to

[95] While Propp's morphology deals with texts that are structurally identical, I thought it would be interesting to use his theory as a model for the explication of the heterogeneous novels here.

or strongly associated with one dominant parent. He usually wants to act as a savior of some sort for his lovers; he usually lives near or even *with* the elderly (i.e. he is proximate to death), and, finally, he is willing to exploit his immigrant status for some kind of gain.

This protagonist is surrounded by several types of stock characters whom Shteyngart employs to help the protagonist discover his hybrid identity. Some of these characters are the villain (who threatens the protagonist's quest by endangering either his life or his chances for success), the foil (who can also be a mentor or a villain, or both, who lures the protagonist with a false opportunity to a place that changes the protagonist, or that the protagonist changes by inhabiting); the heroine (either positive or negative, whose behavior the protagonist either wants to imitate or reject); and the mentor (an authority figure who creates a burden of expectation that helps the protagonist find a path to identity).

Plot Summaries

Before I begin my discussion of identity, I will first briefly summarize the plots of Shteyngart's novels since readers may be unfamiliar with his work.

The Russian Debutante's Handbook is a picaresque adventure, the hero of which is 25-year-old Vladimir Girshkin, who works in New York City for an immigrant-services corporation that helps recent arrivals assimilate to American life. When a Mr. Rybakov walks in to Vladimir's office for help obtaining his American citizenship – something Rybakov considers essential to his own identity – he sets off a wild goose chase that leads Vladimir to the European city of Prava (a thinly disguised version of Prague). There, Vladimir sets up a pyramid scheme intended to bilk American tourists so that he can pay off debts incurred in an erstwhile attempt to give Rybakov fake citizenship during an elaborately staged naturalization ceremony. While in Prava, Vladimir also embarks on a journey of self-discovery, realizing his Russian, American, and Jewish identities. He also meets and falls in

love with Morgan Jensen, an American college student who flees Prava with him when Rybakov's son (who is also Vladimir's boss) tries to kill him. Back in her hometown of Cleveland, they – to Vladimir's urban-centric surprise – settle into suburban family life, with their first child on the way at the novel's conclusion, in which Vladimir finally sees himself as an American by way of his son.

Absurdistan, a Mafia thriller, opens as 30-year-old Misha Vainberg, the son of a wealthy St. Petersburg oligarch, wallows in limbo in his birth city, which he derisively calls "St. Leninsburg" (Shteyngart 2006, 3). Educated in the American Midwest but rooted in New York City, he wants above all to return to the Big Apple to his lover, Rouenna Sales, so that they may begin a life together – she, the Puerto Rican/German/Mexican/Irish wife to his Russian/Jewish/would-be American self. His father's murder of an Oklahoma businessman prompts the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to refuse Misha re-entry to the United States, and when his father himself ends up murdered, Misha sets out for the Bronx one last time. He is offered Belgian citizenship to facilitate his passage, but he must travel to the republic of Absurdistan to obtain it. There, he is caught up in a fake civil war, embroiled in a love affair with the daughter of the government official responsible for starting the war, and more desperate than ever to escape and return to the U.S. – all the while cycling through his three identities, and at one point ticking off the names of countries in which he had or has passport-sponsored citizenship – to see which one will give him the result he desires: egress to New York City. He flees for the republic's border at the novel's end, though the reader never learns whether or not he successfully reaches Rouenna (who is pregnant, though not with Misha's child) in New York. His final identity also remains somewhat obscured, enshrouded under the term "multiculturalist" with no clear primary self.

Super Sad True Love Story, Shteyngart's third novel and a futuristic dystopian love story, focuses on 39-year-old Lenny Abramov, a low-grade salesman for a so-called Life Extension company selling "dechronification treatments" designed to reverse the effects of aging to wealthy clients in 21st-century New York City. Lenny returns from a year abroad in Rome in trouble with his boss, Joshie: he has not obtained a single client, and he lags woefully behind the technological curve embraced by his younger peers, who interact fluidly with their futuristic-smartphone *äppäräti*. He also leaves behind Eunice Park, a Korean-American whom he has just met but already thinks will help him stave off the physical death he so greatly fears (unlike Joshie, he is not allowed to partake in the treatments he sells). While Lenny lived abroad, Joshie began his own treatment regime, so that at the age of 70 he looks younger and more attractive than Lenny. Eunice eventually joins Lenny in New York, however, and he adapts – albeit clumsily – to *äppärät* life as he rebuilds his reputation at work. Just when Lenny thinks all is well, the Rupture – an invasion of New York City by either Chinese or Venezuelan insurgents – cuts off all communication and separates Lenny from his Russian parents (who live on Long Island), as well as his friends and, even, Eunice (though they live in the same apartment); his attempt to define himself through her and her youth, instead of remaining true to the old-fashioned self with whom she fell in love, drives her away from him and into Joshie's arms. Lenny finds himself alone, having moved from New York to Canada to, finally, Tuscany, where he can mourn fully those he has lost over the years – not only his friends and family, but also his country, and his identity as both his parents' son and an American.

Similarities Across Novels in Time, Language, and Space

Before I discuss spatial similarities – which I consider the most important of the three key images – in Shteyngart's novels, I will first discuss temporal and linguistic similarities.

Time assumes roughly nine forms in Shteyngart's novels. The past appears in two forms: the flashback, which gives inside context and depth to a character (for example, *Absurdistan*'s Misha relates an evening from his college days in a fellow Russian student's dorm room, "striving for the attention of a solitary American Jew. Why couldn't we do better by each other? Why couldn't we form a team to assuage our loneliness? One day I had offered Girshkin and Shteynfarb some homemade beet salad and a loaf of authentic rye bread from the local Lithuanian-owned bakery, but they had only laughed at my nostalgia" [Shteyngart 2006, 175]), or the story recall, which usually originates from a non-protagonist character and gives an outsider's-view context of who the protagonist was (for example, when he arrives in Absurdistan itself, the American helping him through passport control is another college acquaintance, who recognizes Misha with a memory of a humiliating ritual: "Remember how the freshmen used to rub your belly for good luck before midterms? Mind if I give it a rub now, Snack?" [Shteyngart 2006, 129]).[96]

The present appears in three forms: the cinematic, which either advances the plot or slows down the narrative for deeper scrutiny and/or detail (for example, Vladimir's frenzied escape from Prava near the end of *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* occurs over five pages, even though the events therein only tally up to a few minutes); the textual, which is strictly the plot as it occurs; or the reverie, which acts as the subjunctive: what *could* the protagonist do, say, or become in a given moment (for example, Vladimir is in London when he thinks of a time when his best friend and his then-girlfriend "could still count as the sum total of

[96] "Snack Daddy" was Misha's nickname at Accidental College.

his affections; when through their failings he could draw comparative strength; when that childish feeling of superiority had been enough to sustain him" [Shteyngart 2002, 393]).

The future appears in three forms: the imagined, which is a daydream into the long-term future about what or who the protagonist sees himself as, a long time from the textual present (for example, Lenny in *Super Sad True Love Story* sees a dead man being wheeled out of his co-op building as "one possible end to my life: alone, in a bag, in my own apartment building, hunched over in a wheelchair, praying to a god I never believed in" [Shteyngart 2010, 80]); the real, which consists of the novel's epilogue (each novel has a short one); or the dreamed, which takes place while a character dreams and gives unconscious or subconscious context for who the character truly wishes to be, regardless of what he or she might say to the contrary (for example, in a dream Misha sees Rouenna in a sun-lit field, where she sells him an apple and says "Be a man. Make me proud" [Shteyngart 2006, 122]).

The ninth and final form of time in Shteyngart's novels is the most important: liminal time, which occurs when at least two time-related events collide in a moment that changes the protagonist in some way. Most often, the past interrupts the present to nudge the protagonist towards a deeper understanding of his identity, but occasionally the future invades the present to achieve the same end. In *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, we see the former when Vladimir visits his parents and his mother watches him walk around her bedroom, telling him he walks like a Jew. The manner in which she speaks triggers a memory for Vladimir:

> "So it is true," she said in a voice of complete exhaustion, a voice Vladimir remembered from their early American days, when she would run home from her English and typing lessons to make him his favorite Salad Olivier – potatoes, canned peas, pickles, and diced ham tossed with a half-jar of mayonnaise. Sometimes she'd fall asleep at the table of their tiny Queens flat, a long knife in one hand, an English-Russian dictionary in the other, a row of pickles lined up on the chopping block, their fate uncertain. (Shteyngart 2002, 44)

Here, the past intrudes on the present to confirm what both Vladimir and his mother have feared all along: he is, in fact, Jewish, try as he might to hide it. He immediately tries to defend himself, telling her that he is sure *many* people walk like him, which causes her to retort "In the Vilnius ghetto, maybe" (Shteyngart 2002, 45). She seems more upset by this fact than Vladimir, since his first instinct is to comfort her, but he feels some nascent guilt at causing her such consternation, which Shteyngart conveys by equating the tone of her voice in this present-tense anecdote to the tone of her voice in a past situation wherein she constantly rushed from one place to another to make ends meet so that Vladimir could have a good childhood (she reminds him of this by telling him he is going to hurt her, because that is his way of repaying "his lifelong debt to her, by tearing her to shreds like a wolf" [Shteyngart 2002, 44]). Whether or not this behavior towards their mothers is typical of Jewish sons is not clear, but the deep exhaustion in his mother's voice confirms for Vladimir the ingrained quality of his Jewishness; it might be said that he can neither run nor even *walk* away from it.

The past intrudes on the present again later in the novel when Vladimir watches Rybakov – whose ultimate goal is American citizenship – on his boat and reflects on the arc of his American dreams:

> Vladimir was reminded of his own adolescent daydreams: young Vladimir, the simple-minded son of a local factory owner, running triumphantly down the field of his Hebrew school's opulent Recreation Centrum... as he scored the 'home goal' or 'home run' or whatever it was he had to score. All in all, Vladimir's American dreams formed a curious arc. During adolescence he dreamed of acceptance. In his brief days at college he dreamed of love. After college, he dreamed of a rather improbable dialectic of both love *and* acceptance. And now, with love and acceptance finally in the bag, he dreamed of money.What fresh tortures would await him next? (Shteyngart 2002, 111-112)

Here, his Jewish identity in the past – which seems to be where he would prefer to keep it (see above, when his mother tells him he walks like a Jew) – informs and even coexists with his American identity in the present. Shteyngart implies that Vladimir's early years in Hebrew school were sufficiently alienating to cause Vladimir to crave that acceptance, and that as he matured from childhood through high school and just beyond, this transferred to a craving for love as he developed his American identity. However, the present also informs Vladimir's future, as he tries to exploit his Russian identity for profit; he looks ahead to his next venture, which will probably not be positive for him (given the use of the word "tortures" instead of, perhaps, "adventures"). He does not yet know it at this point in the novel, but all three facets of his identity will meet in his near future in a not-positive way indeed.

The same triplicate structure can be applied to the flashbacks Vladimir has while shaving his face to commit the college-interview fraud for his best friend Baobab's boss's son. As he looks in the mirror, he thinks: "What a disaster. The sickly Vladimir of Leningrad looked back at him, then the scared Vladimir of Hebrew school, and finally the confused Vladimir of the math-and-science high school: a triptych of his entire lusterless career as a youngster" (Shteyngart 2002, 137). Here, he places his Russian heritage first, as if trying to shelve it for the time being since it is "sickly" – that is, the opposite of how he wants to look now. He then softens the degree of negativity by declaring himself merely "scared" in his Jewish heritage, since he was not accepted; in his finally-American identity in high school, he is simply "confused", like many teenagers. Vladimir sees his upcoming adventure as his passage into adulthood, and hopes for a clean break from his mediocre past, but he does not yet realize that he has to exhibit all three identities in order to find this break and, indeed, break through it to understand his true self.

Most tellingly, the past intrudes into Vladimir's present when he reflects on his actions in the moment when he extorts the Canadian, Harold Green: at one point, Vladimir tells him, " '*We do not bow to your facts'*. Vladimir suspended his diatribe for a minute and took a deep breath. *We do not bow to facts?* Hadn't he seen that slogan once, in his youth, on a communist propaganda poster in Leningrad? Just what the hell was he becoming? Vladimir the Heartless Apparatchik?" (Shteyngart 2002, 256) As much as he purports to be an American – especially when attempting to exhort his fellow citizens (or their northern neighbors) – Vladimir cannot, in the heat of the moment, escape his ingrained Russian heritage. Also, this moment neatly parallels that of the mirror-gaze referred to above; both moments offer Vladimir a breath of reflection, and in *this* moment, he realizes that he has finally begun his passage into adulthood – and instead of being "sickly", "scared", or "confused", he is now "heartless", which he translates for himself as (ironically) "brave" or even "confident".

The past also invades the present in *Absurdistan*, mostly because Misha Vainberg desperately tries to escape his present location (Absurdistan in the textual present, St. Petersburg in the flashback-past) to return to the place of his past happiness (New York City, specifically, the Bronx; more specifically, his girlfriend's apartment on the corner of 173rd Street and Vyse Avenue). But Misha also mourns his dead father, so most of the invasive memories he has involve either Beloved Papa or Rouenna. Early in the novel, Misha watches a videotape of his father's death (it was recorded by a German tourist who happened to be filming the bridge on which it took place) and thinks: "Once, in the eighties, during that nice Gorbachev perestroika time, Papa and I went fishing off the Palace Bridge. We caught a perch that looked just like Papa. In five years, when my eyes completely glaze over with Russian life, I will resemble it, too" (Shteyngart 2006, 24). Here, the future also

nudges its way into the present, as Misha predicts both his lifeless state as a permanent resident of St. Petersburg and his physical resemblance to his father (which he refers to repeatedly throughout the story).

Later, the past intrudes on the present again as he eats at the cleverly-named "Lady With a Lapdog" restaurant in Absurdistan with his paramour, Nana:

> More fish came. I ate it all. I could feel my father's hands upon me. The two of us. Together again. Papa drunk. Myself timid yet curious. We would stay up all night. We would ignore Mommy's threats. Who could think of a school day in the morning when you could drop your trousers and pee all over the neighbor's anti-Semitic dog? I could feel my father's vodka breath in my mouth, in my nose, in my ears, my pasty body pressed to his prickly one, both of us sweating from the ghetto heat of a Leningrad apartment in deep winter. (Shteyngart 2006, 196)[97]

The memory is a pleasant one, especially since Misha is eating – an activity he very much enjoys – but it throws Misha into a funk, sinking him into a deep longing for not only his Leningrad past but also his New York City past. The conversation turns to New York, and Nana (who studies at NYU) mentions a seafood restaurant on 10th Street, which Misha knows well. The two have a rapid-fire exchange, filling in one another's blanks and ending one another's sentences, when Nana suddenly says: "I went on a date –", prompting Misha to respond: "There?" "Everyone does." "Even you?" "Me?" "I wish." "I wish right now." "I wish I was – " "Me, too" (Shteyngart 2006, 197-198). Nana may or may not know it, but Misha is thinking of his Bronx lover, Rouenna, in this moment, wishing he could be there with *her* rather than trapped in Absurdistan with what is at best a substitute for her. Misha spends a good deal of time thinking about Rouenna and their life together; most of his reveries involving her can be summed with this memory he has while writing a letter to her: "We used to sit on a creaking bench in a weed-choked yard behind Rouenna's housing

[97] The name of the restaurant refers to a short story by Russian writer Anton Chekhov, published in 1899.

complex, doing a bit of what she called 'roughhousin' ', as beautiful brown children ran around us, engulfed by summertime happiness, yelling to each other… What I wouldn't pay for one more July night on the corner of 173rd Street and Vyse" (Shteyngart 2006, 82). It can be argued that Misha spins tales of these constant flashbacks to life in the Bronx – which are usually floridly detailed with the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of the neighborhood – to make his case with the INS to be let back into the U.S., because he thinks that they show enough nostalgic familiarity with the area to be seen as a natural-born American. Because he is a self-declared "multiculturalist", Misha thinks that his detailed recollections of past pleasures in New York involving places and people from all walks of life – combined with his Russian heritage but clear affinity for most things American – will bolster his chances of return. He is so sure of it that he tells Rouenna at the end of the novel that they will finish their lives together on that street corner in the Bronx, which is a rare instance of the future intruding into the present.

While *Super Sad True Love Story* takes place in the near future of the mid-21st century, and Lenny Abramov frets excessively to the point of obsession over his eventual death (his first words in the novel, addressed to his diary, are: "Today, I've made a major decision: *I am never going to die*" [Shteyngart 2010, 3]), much of the liminal time encountered in this novel continues the pattern of past intruding upon present. This is not entirely surprising, as Lenny feels out of place in the textual present and wishes he could live in a different time: "Honestly, how little I cared about all these difficult economic details! How desperately I wanted to forsake these facts, to open a smelly old book…Why couldn't I have been born to a better world?" (Shteyngart 2010, 81) Yet his constant thoughts about death often bring the past to the forefront, as perhaps a coping mechanism for Lenny's perceived lack of future; towards the end of the novel, Lenny refutes his statement from its beginning about his

immortality: "Today I've made a major decision: *I am going to die*" (Shteyngart 2010, 304). The last four words of the novel point to this eventual end of life, as Lenny describes a ceased conversation that offers him respite in "silence, black and complete" (Shteyngart 2010, 331).When he tells his boss, Joshie, that Joshie will see him die one day, he immediately feels bad for having done so, and thinks of his parents and how has been worrying about their (and his) death since childhood:

> We would all be dead together. Nothing would remain of our tired, broken race. My mother had bought three adjoining plots at a Long Island Jewish cemetery. "Now we can be together forever", she had told me, and I had nearly broken down in tears at her misplaced optimism, at the notion that she would want to spend her idea of eternity – and what could her eternity *possibly* comprise? – with her failure of a son. (Shteyngart 2010, 126)

Lenny projects a lack of future onto his mother as well, though it could be misread as egotism on his part (that is, he may overinflate his importance in her eyes by implying that he is all she has to live for).

For all of his shortcomings in temporal satisfaction, Lenny at least *seems* to be aware that he fixates on the past and his impending death, even in moments when he feels he should be celebrating – specifically, celebrating the idea of a happy future for his friends – in which he lets the past intrude on the present yet again. When said friends Vishnu and Grace host a party at their house to celebrate Grace's pregnancy, Lenny smokes marijuana with their mutual friends Noah and Amy, and settles into a memory of being fourteen, passing by an NYU building, and seeing some girls who smile at him, which makes him happy. But then:

> …After I had walked half a block away, I realized they were going to die and I was going to die and that the final result… would never appease me, never allow me to enjoy fully the happiness of the friends I suspected I would one day acquire, friends like these people in front of me, celebrating an upcoming birth… passing into a new generation with their connectivity and

> decency intact, even as each year brought closer the unthinkable… How far I had come from my parents… and yet how little I had traveled away from them, the inability to grasp the present moment, to grab Grace by the shoulders and say, "Your happiness is mine". (Shteyngart 2010, 237)

Evidence seems to have accumulated to point to Lenny as little more than his parents' son - a man obsessed with death (while they are not obsessed with it, they do acknowledge that they will soon pass on: "We're old people. Soon we will die and be forgotten" [Shteyngart 2010, 290]) and trying to return to a past that has long since passed him.

The past, then, seems to be the dominant form of time in Shteyngart's novels since it plays such an intrusive role in the present, though the present is still very much at the forefront of a protagonist's search for identity (since, logically, he conducts the search in the present tense even if he began this search in the past). The past is also the most problematic form of time in shaping self-awareness, precisely *because* it is so invasive; while it does help a protagonist assert his identity, it forces him to regress to a prior version of himself, often against his wishes. When the past and the present meet, a protagonist can see both parts of himself, the 'then' and the 'now', and use their interaction in a liminal moment to get closer to a true understanding of himself. The future also serves this purpose, but to a lesser degree, since Shteyngart largely orients his plots in the past.

While time as it relates to identity is intrusive in Shteyngart's works, language tends to take on a more passive role, bubbling under the speech surface and creeping in (often) unexpectedly to paint a more complete picture of a character. Language assumes five forms in Shteyngart's novels, mostly based on three key languages (Russian, English, and Hebrew): transliterated and translated words and phrases (for example, Vladimir's Pravan boss, the Groundhog, saying to his girlfriend "*lastochka ti moya*, which meant roughly 'you're my little swallow' " [Shteyngart 2002, 374]; idioms (for example, a Texan businessman visiting

Absurdistan says "Don' worry 'bout the mule, son, just load the wagon" [Shteyngart 2006, 240]; slang and non-standard words and phrases (for example, Lenny's friend Noah in *Super Sad True Love Story* uses several Spanish slang terms such as "*putas*" ('bitches') and "*huevóns*" ('men so lazy they let their testicles drag on the ground') [Shteyngart 2010, 85], and Eunice in the same novel writes text messages in a non-standard form of English that allows her to explain her logorrhea as simply her being "one chatty ass-hookah these days" [Shteyngart 2010, 115]; grammatically incorrect uses, such as Misha's sidekick's girlfriend's broken English: "That orange towel so ugly. For girl is nice lavender, for boy like my husband, Boris, light blue, for servant black because her hand already dirty" (Shteyngart 2006, 11); injections of other languages into English speech (such as Spanish, French, German, Italian, Korean, or other Slavic languages, examples of which are too numerous to recount here); and, most importantly, liminal language, which occurs when an unexpected speech form confronts an expected speech form. Shteyngart most often employs three forms of this liminal language: broken or grammatically incorrect English, randomly inserted Russian and Hebrew, and slang and non-standard English to point his characters towards their hybrid identity.

In his first novel, Shteyngart uses all three forms of liminal language to emphasize, in turn, Vladimir's Russian, Jewish, and American identities. He does this not only through Vladimir's own speech, but through the speech of those around him; for example, his mother uses broken English in conversation with him when she wants to talk about work, asking him to help her correct her speech. Over the phone, he asks her how she is;

" 'Terrible', said Mother, switching to English, which meant job-talk. She blew her nose. "I have to fire someone in office... Is big complication. He is American African. I am nervous I will say something wrong. My English not so good. You must teach me to be sensitive to

Africans this weekend. It is important skill, no?" (Shteyngart 2002, 15)Vladimir's Russian-American identity peeks through in this scene; his mother knows that she can speak both Russian and her broken English to her son and be understood, and that he is fluent enough in American English to be able to help her improve her own. Shteyngart does not always make it clear when Vladimir's mother speaks English and when she speaks Russian, but he does note when she drops a few choice words of both – and, in one important instance, a combination of both – into her speech. Her nickname for Vladimir is the Russian-English mashup "*failurchka*" (Shteyngart 2002, 16), or 'little failure', though in more tender moments she refers to him as her Russian "*sinotchek*", or 'little son' (Shteyngart 2002, 46; 450).

Vladimir finds some of his Russian-American identity in those two words; the latter is used for the first time after she tells him he walks like a Jew, conferring awareness of this third part of his identity (she says it to comfort him when he reacts poorly to her statement: " 'Straighten up, *sinotchek*', she said… He had been out of her good graces for too long: that one word made him wheeze with pleasure" (Shteyngart 2002, 46). She also occasionally calls him by his Russian diminutive, Volodechka, to show her affection, and possibly to remind him of his Russian heritage, especially at the end of the novel when he lives with his wife, Morgan, in Cleveland and has finally 'cut the cord' with his mother. He returns her Russian in turns, bidding her good-bye with both that English word and the Russian "*do svedanya*" (which follows a half-hearted *bye-bye* in English before the incident in which she tells him he walks like a Jew [Shteyngart 2002, 43]), but by and large addresses her in English to reinforce his American identity and possibly distance himself from his Russian identity.

However, his English is not always perfect; traces of his Russian accent still remain, as if he cannot completely shed his Russianness. This accent causes Vladimir a great deal of pain when he walks with his American girlfriend, Francesca, and pronounces the word

"quotidian" with a Russian *kv-* at the beginning (*kvotidian*). The reader learns this later, when Francesca scolds Vladimir for constantly following her around like a puppy because he is happy to have her as his girlfriend; she uses his pronunciation of the word to wound him: "She said the last word Vladimir-style with its birdlike *kvo*. *Kvo-kvo*, said the Vladimir bird. *Kvotidian*" (Shteyngart 2002, 89).Vladimir's reaction is one of horror: "He had been unmasked! She knew! She knew everything! How much he needed her, wanted her, could never have her... All of it. The foreigner. The exchange student.The 1979 Soviet 'Grain Jew' poster boy" (Shteyngart 2002, 90).[98] Here, Vladimir is not just a 'foreigner' to the English language, but also to Fran and her world of privilege and upper-middle-class success and good looks.

Much to his chagrin, his father – who, Vladimir notes, usually has good control of English – reverts to broken English interspersed with Russian and even German when he and Vladimir's mother have dinner with Fran and her parents: at one point, he exclaims, "*Literatura is kaput!*", and then continues: "But how is possible? Professorship offer no remuneration. Who will put food on table? Who will contribute to IRA?" (Shteyngart 2002, 86) Prior to this, Dr. Girshkin has confided in Vladimir about his grandmother's poor health in near-native English ("She's nearing the sunset, slowly but surely… Sometimes she thinks there's two of me. The good Boris and the evil Boris. If I let her guard the oak trees until she falls asleep, and that can be as late as eight or nine o'clock, then I'm the good Boris. The one that's not married to your mother. If I take her in early, she'll curse at me like a sailor" [Shteyngart 2002, 36]); later, he uses the same speech to impart a life lesson to his son: "The most important thing: you do what *you* want to do. And also, don't get married unless you

[98] The "Grain Jew" reference nods to the narrator's early account of President Carter's trade of "tons of Midwestern grain for tons of Soviet Jews" in the late 1970s (Shteyngart 2002, 38). This has no basis in historical reality, though it seems to correlate grain embargoes with the Jackson-Vanik Amendment of 1974, which denies "most favored nation" status to countries that refuse to permit emigration.

are ready to lose your happy youth. These are the two lessons we've learned today" (Shteyngart 2002, 125).

Dr. Girshkin's choice of proper and improper English depending on the audience may reflect an effort to help Vladimir appear more hybrid-like in front of Fran's parents so that they will be impressed with him, the immigrant son; or, for all the reader knows, Dr. Girshkin may be speaking in Russian and Shteyngart has simply chosen not to divulge this fact. In any event, it is not difficult to see how the son has not fallen far from his parents' linguistic tree: like them, he switches from one language to another depending on his audience to maximize empathy and attention. For example, when his father lends him money so he can pay his ex-girlfriend's rent, he counts the bills in Russian – "*Vosem'desyat dollarov... Sto dollarov... Sto dvadtsat' dollarov...*" ('eighty dollars… One hundred dollars… One hundred twenty dollars…') (Shteyngart 2002, 120) – as if he is indirectly appeasing his father by using Russian, and also abstractly thanking him for the loan. Towards the end of the novel, while he is running for his life in Prava, he happens upon a gathering of Russian *babushki*, whom he decides to rally in his favor with an address that he delivers solely in Russian, after asking the crowd's permission: " 'But of course! Speak, Russian eagle!' the audience said as one. My kind of audience, Vladimir thought" (Shteyngart 2002, 439). In this and other instances, Shteyngart weaves English and Russian through Vladimir's speech to, as Francesca says, 'unmask' him as his true self: a person inherently American and Russian, composed of his past and his present, translated into his two main languages.

Absurdistan's Misha is similarly composed of a past and present expressed in the language he uses. Like Vladimir, he can switch smoothly (even when he makes mistakes) from one language into another, depending on whom he needs to please. Early in the novel, he states: "This book, then, is my love letter to the generals in charge of the Immigration and

Naturalization Service. A love letter as well as a plea: *Gentlemen, let me back in!*" (Shteyngart 2006, 14); based on this statement, it can be argued that his repeated use of American English slang, for example, shows his facility with the language and indicates that someone of his near-native speaking ability should be considered an American citizen and re-admitted to the United States. Early in the novel, as he recalls his happy college days with his friend Alyosha-Bob, Misha reproduces some of the rap lyrics they sang, one of which he calls a "Detroit ditty": "*Aw, shit / Heah I come / Shut yo mouf / And bite yo tongue. / Aw, girl, / You think you bad? / Let me see you / Bounce dat ass.*" (Shteyngart 2006, 5); further, and more multiculturally, "*My name is Vainberg / I like ho's / Sniff 'em out / Wid my Hebrew nose / Pump that shit / From 'round the back / Big-booty ho / Ack ack ack*" (Shteyngart 2006, 6). He hopes that conveying his language acumen will convince the INS officers that he belongs in the United States because he can speak just as its residents do, although the words he uses here belong to an admittedly small group of Americans.

Perhaps sensing that the INS would welcome someone with more inclusive language ability, Misha then emphasizes his Jewish and Russian roots in this ongoing love letter. He claims to be "an American impounded in a Russian's body" (Shteyngart 2006, 15), but then likens himself to characters from classic Russian novels, such as Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin (of *The Idiot*) – "like the prince, I am something of a holy fool", he says (Shteyngart 2006, 15) – which he attributes to his first experience of the U.S., which was his circumcision at the age of 18. He sprinkles his recollection of the circumcision with Hebrew words, some real, such as *mitzvah*, *tsimmus tov*, *mazel tov*, and *Yisroel*, and some nonsensical, such as *humus tov*. "Several terms I recognized: *mazel tov* is a form of congratulation, *tsimmus* is a dish of sugary crushed carrots, and Yisroel is a small, heavily Jewish country on the Mediterranean coast" (Shteyngart 2006, 20-21). Here he could be attempting to gain a foothold of some

sort with any INS officials who happen to have a Jewish background, but it is more likely that he simply wants to demonstrate that even though he is no longer a practicing Jew, he still belongs 'in the fold' precisely because he knows these words and phrases (even if he does happen to get one of them wrong). He tries this tactic in Absurdistan when he drafts a proposal to the American Israeli embassy to convince them to donate money for the construction of a museum of Sevo-Jewish friendship;[99] he peppers the document with several complimentary Hebrew words, such as *tzadikim* (269, 'righteous people') and *maideleh* (Shteyngart 2006, 270, 'beautiful Jewish girls'), but also makes sure to refer to the American Christian government as *goyishe* (Shteyngart 2006, 272, 'something not Jewish'). Misha's proposal ultimately falls flat, but he demonstrates here that he thinks he belongs to the Jewish community, again, simply because he knows how to use some Hebrew language – which is in his mind enough to include "Jewish" in his "multicultural" list of identities.

He also tries – and fails – to include himself in another group to which he has no birth or blood ties: the youth of Rouenna's age (she is in her early twenties), who communicate with a heavily informal style in their emails. He tries to reach out to her in one such message to her after she returns to New York after visiting him in St. Petersburg: "*wondering why u haven't written back 2 me 4 so long… you'd like 2 of these girlz, they real ghetto… maybe you can come to p-burg 4 xmas break. maybe u+I can chill?!*" (Shteyngart 2006, 77), but he is alarmed when she does not return the favor, replying in a more formal tone instead: "*First off, I'm really sorry it took me so long to answer your sweet, sweet letters to me*" (Shteyngart 2006, 78). His alarm is warranted, as she reveals in that letter that she is seeing one of her professors (who happens to be Misha's former college nemesis).

[99] "Sevo" is one of the ethnic factions of the republic; Svanï is the other, and the two are at war. This proposal is a scam, incidentally; there are no plans to build such a museum. Misha intends to use the money to assist the Sevo, who are losing the war.

Rouenna's denial cements Misha's status as a non-member of her lexical and age group, which may be why he digs in even harder to define himself as multicultural from this point on in the novel. If he cannot talk to Rouenna, he fears he will lose her; she is his reason for returning to New York, so what is he to do? He decides to try a different nationality, and its language, on for size when he meets a woman in Absurdistan to whom he lies and says that he is Belgian. She asks him if he is a balloon, and because he only has *imagined* knowledge of Belgian culture, he fails to understand that she is really asking him if he is a Walloon, or a French Belgian. He replies with the most basic French that anyone could evoke: "*Ah, oui*, I said. *Un Wallon. C'est moi.*" She replies: "*Parce que nous parlons français.*"" 'Mm, no,' I stammered, for I had never bothered to learn that complicated tongue" (Shteyngart 2006, 187). For someone who studied multiculturalism in college, and claims to be a multiculturalist in front of this very woman's father later in the novel, he has only a superficial knowledge of what the term means, try as he might to 'talk the talk'. Here, his attempt to use liminal language fails, and he brands himself as a non-French speaking non-Belgian – again, perhaps to show the INS that he truly is an American who belongs in the United States.

Super Sad True Love Story's Lenny Abramov repeats Misha's pattern of longing to belong through words, trying – and failing – to fit in with a younger crowd that includes many of his coworkers and his lover, Eunice. She is fluent in what I call "Teenspeak", which is the highly informal, almost dialectical language of the ubiquitous online messaging system most of her peers (ages 13-30) use to communicate. It is characterized by abbreviations, acronyms, and non-standard grammar, all of which are found in Eunice's message to her best friend: "Missing your 'tard? Wanna dump a little sugar on me? JBF" (Shteyngart 2010, 27). When Lenny tries to talk to Eunice using this language, the results confuse her:

> "LPT… TIMATOV. ROFLAARP. PRGV. Totally PRGV." The youth and their abbreviations. I pretended like I knew what she was talking about. "Right," I said. "IMF. PLO. ESL." She looked at me like I was insane. "JBF," she said… 'Just kidding, you know." "Duh," I said. "I knew that. Seriously". (Shteyngart 2010, 22)

Lenny later tries again to joke about his inability to communicate with Eunice in her language, and stops trying altogether after the joke falls flat.

This inability is one of several behaviors Lenny exhibits that highlights the age difference between him and Eunice – fifteen years – and it disturbs Lenny because even his boss, Joshie – who is nearly seventy – can freely communicate with Eunice and her cohort in Teenspeak. Joshie even rebukes Lenny when he uses the term "home-slice", and Lenny mocks him, saying that no one uses that outdated phrase any more. Joshie shrugs and says simply, "Youth is youth. Talk young, live young" (Shteyngart 2010, 223). This statement drives at Lenny's deepest fear – that of aging and dying, especially alone – and reminds him yet again that because he cannot "talk young", he is never going to be able to "live young", at least not as (he thinks) Joshie will be able to. Lenny gets something of a comeuppance near the end of the novel, however, when Joshie reveals that the treatments never worked, and did more harm than good; he ends up fired from the company and is left alone to decompose and die. Eunice repeatedly teases Lenny, causing him to fear more and more that his chief identity is that of an "old man" – she pointedly tells him one day, "You're old, Len" (Shteyngart 2010, 25), and refers to him as a "very old white, um, 'friend' " (Shteyngart 2010, 113) – and that of a relic, perhaps, of a bygone era, in which he could hear "language actually being *spoken* by children. Overblown verbs, explosive nouns, beautifully bungled prepositions. Language, not data" (Shteyngart 2010, 53).

Lenny's inability to fit in with a younger group does not mean that he is a complete linguistic orphan. He is still able to move in and out of Russian-language (and, to a lesser

degree, Hebrew-language) situations with ease, staking his claim to what remains of his identity as the son of Russian (and Jewish) immigrant parents, albeit one who was born in the U.S. and not the Soviet Union as Shteyngart's other two novel protagonists were. While never fluent in Russian, he is still able to speak it piecemeal, mostly to appease his parents when he visits them: "I spoke English with tantalizing hints of Russian I had studied haphazardly at NYU, the foreign words like raisins shining out of a loaf" (Shteyngart 2010, 134), such as when he refers to a co-worker as a "*svoloch kitaichonok*" ('little Chinese swine') (Shteyngart 2010, 134). He also calls Eunice "*malishka*" (affectionate, 'little one') in front of them (Shteyngart 2010, 166). Even if he does not respond in Russian, he is still able to understand when his parents address him in their own Russian, such as his father's exhortation "*Nu, rasskazhi*" ('so, tell me') to update him on his life (Shteyngart 2010, 134) and his mother's "*Lyonya, gotovo*!" ('Lenny, dinner is ready!') and "*Kstati, u tvoei Eunice ochen' krasivye zuby. Mozhet byt' ty zhenishsya?*"('By the way, your Eunice has very pretty teeth. Maybe you will marry her?') (Shteyngart 2010, 139). Later, after the Rupture when he looks after his parents by buying them groceries to fill their empty kitchen, he demurs when they call him by his Russian diminutive "*Lyonitchka*" (Shteyngart 2010, 291), use the affectionate term for 'son' "*sinotchek*", and tell him "*Zabotishsia ty o nas*"('You are taking care of us') (Shteyngart 2010, 292). When he lays in their basement that same night, falling asleep thinking of them, he realizes that they are his parents "*na vsegda, na vsegda, na vsegda*, forever and ever and ever" (Shteyngart 2010, 294), leading him to conclude that regardless of who else he is, he is – at his most basic – "little more than my parents' son" (Shteyngart 2010, 294), with all of the Russian heritage that entails.

That Russian heritage also entails some Jewish heritage, albeit much more sporadic than Russian; Lenny's parents, like Vladimir's and Misha's, left the Soviet Union in the 1970s

when Jews were allowed to leave, and they settled into poverty in New York City. Early in the novel, Lenny alludes to this component of his identity by referring to his family not as the Abramov family, but as the "the Abramov *mishpocheh*" ('family') (Shteyngart 2010, 12). Later, he says a prayer for a dead resident of his housing complex in "a few words of my grandmother's Yiddish"; as if to underscore Lenny's physical proximity to death – in addition to his mental proximity to death – Shteyngart places his residence in a building that houses a "Naturally Occurring Retirement Community" (Shteyngart 2010, 79). When more of those residents fall ill after the Rupture when food, water, and heat run scarce, Eunice looks after them but asks Lenny to translate some of their speech referring to the current American secretary of state: "that *farkakteh* [literally, 'pooped-up'] Rubinstein", "that *schlemiel* [an exceptionally lucky and inept man] Rubinstein", "that little *pisher* [an insignificant or contemptible person] Rubinstein" (Shteyngart 2010, 273).

While the focus on the protagonist's Jewish heritage is not nearly as strong here as in Shteyngart's first two novels, it is nonetheless an important component of Lenny's identity and one that indeed makes him his parents' son. Even when he leaves the U.S. after Eunice leaves him for Joshie in the aftermath of the Rupture, and changes his name, he chooses an Americanized version of his parents' last name that reflects this Jewish heritage: Larry Abraham, which he says seems to him "very North American" (Shteyngart 2010, 328), but still conveys Jewish identity. His new last name means "father of many" in Hebrew, which may accidentally bring Lenny closer to the world he tried to escape: the ubiquitous smartphone device in the novel, the *äppärät*, has a name eerily similar to the Korean word for father – *appa* – which Lenny realizes when Eunice wails it in sorrow while drunk (Shteyngart 2010, 260). The name could also be Lenny's own attempt at making himself a father, when he realizes he will likely never have children (and indeed does not, as he remarks on page

326). Lenny is the least hybrid of Shteyngart's three protagonists, but he is nonetheless comfortable acting as a linguist if need be, so long as the languages involved are ones that have always been part of his consciousness.

This idea of a multiple-language consciousness, then, plays a key role in Shteyngart's use of language in his novels; while he varies his prose with words from tongues as diverse as Spanish, Polish, and Korean, he focuses his characters' use of words on three dominant languages: Russian, Hebrew/Yiddish, and English. The unexpected use of one where another is anticipated creates liminal language moments where the protagonist realizes that he has those languages immediately accessible; this realization sparks awareness of his hybrid identity, which also now involves awareness of cultural hybridity, if we are to believe that language and culture are inseparable from one another. It also draws on linguistic hybridity, described by Bakhtin as a "mixture of two… languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter… between two different linguistic consciousnesses",[100] where a protagonist's choice of language is informed by another. Whether or not this choice is intentional, the protagonist expresses certain values when he uses one language over another. He also asserts authority by using one language over another; he can assert command of his Russian or Jewish identity by slipping Russian or Hebrew phrases into his English sentences (as Girshkin does with Russian when addressing a hall full of *babushki*), or he can attempt to affirm his American identity by using English unexpectedly (as Misha does when he raps in *Absurdistan*). Thus the protagonist ultimately asserts in turns his linguistic, cultural, *and* identity hybridity.

As important as time and language are for my discussion of liminal identity, space is by far the most crucial of the three image types. Both the *border* and the *enclave* (see examples,

[100] Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel", *The Dialogic Imagination*, 358.

p. 39-40) are essential in the formation of a liminal space, but the presence of either does not necessarily result in a liminal space; that is, there must be a location formed by the meeting of two significant spaces in order for a liminal space to exist. While an enclave may not be inherently liminal, a border space is; thus, the meeting place of the two can be – and often is – liminal. This meeting place doubles as the place where Shteyngart's protagonists begin to more deeply understand their hybrid identity.

In *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, Vladimir travels to the fictional European city of Prava in the republic of Stolovaya. The name "Prava" blends the Czech name for Prague (Praha) with the Russian word for "truth" (Pravda) and "rights" (prava). "Stolovaya" is a transliteration of the Russian столовая, or "dining room / canteen". In and of itself, Prava is a liminal space because it straddles Western and Eastern Europe, belonging to both or neither, depending on whom one asks. Because Czechs see themselves as Central Europeans, the Cold War division of Europe into Eastern and Western parts remains contentious, as may be expected when a geographical border is drawn that is not marked by a line on a map. Such straddling is not only mental but also physical and cultural, as indicated by the sizeable American expatriate community in both Prava and the 'real' Prague, as well as the amount of space dedicated to recreating American experiences in a place many Americans in the novel only know as "the Paris of the 90s" (Shteyngart 2002; 20, 40, 132).

Shteyngart foregrounds this liminality when he shows it to Vladimir in a dream the night that he meets Francesca. In the dream, Vladimir travels to the city on an airplane "drifting through eastern European clouds rolled together, pierogi-style from the layered exhaust of coal, benzene, and acetate" (Shteyngart 2002, 61), which eventually passes over "a blue grid of urban light" which "is replacing the void of the countryside. The nascent city is bisected by a dark loop of river, illuminated solely by the lights of neon barges making their

way downstream. The word PRAVA, glowing in neon, is spelled in giant Cyrillic characters on the city's left bank" (Shteyngart 2002, 62). The Eastern influence of the Cyrillic name intersects with the Parisian attributes of a 'bisected' city with a 'left bank'; that Vladimir first sees this in a dream – in a space which is itself liminal, occurring between sleep and wakefulness – hints that this may be where he finally finds his true identity.

In Prava itself, Vladimir finds even more liminal spaces. In addition to Eudora Welty's – the bar at which most American expatriates spend their time and money, where Vladimir decides he will scam them in order to make his own money – there is a restaurant called "Road 66", an obvious nod to the historic Route 66.[101] Vladimir only visits the restaurant because his boss in Prava, Tolya (a.k.a. "the Groundhog"), invites him on a double date so they can meet each other's respective girlfriends. When Vladimir and Morgan arrive, "an awesome vista of cheap mahogany and American-themed tackiness greet[s] them, as the restaurant, just like the song, wound its way 'from Chicago to L.A…. more than two thousand miles all the way', with tables marked St. Louis, Oklahoma City, Flagstaff, 'don't forget Winona… Kingman, Barstow, San Bernardino…' " (Shteyngart 2002, 370).The misnamed restaurant represents imaginative geography because Route 66 is somehow a *desired* space, but in keeping with the theme of Eudora Welty's as a potential parody of American culture, it is not fully Pravan either because it is dedicated to a foreign country.

On this double date, Morgan learns that Vladimir is not only a Russian Jew who grew up in the U.S., but also a criminal, when the Groundhog tells her he heard of Vladimir after he became a "criminal laureate" by helping his father obtain U.S. citizenship. Then, his girlfriend, Lena, says to her: "Groundhog one day tell me funny story… about how Vladimir

[101] Given that there is no obvious connection between this Mississippi short-story writer and Prague, this name could be a play on the American (and now, Russian) tendency to give stereotypical names to establishments appealing to certain ethnic groups. For example, naming an Irish pub in America "Molly Malone's", or naming a Mexican restaurant in Russia "Saloon Sanchez".

take money from rich Canadian and then he sells horse drug to Americans in club. You have very clever boyfriend, Morgan" (Shteyngart 2002, 375). Morgan reacts with shock, but Vladimir shrugs and acts casually, as if being a criminal was something he was born to do – that is, something inherent in him all along. In this liminal space, another aspect of Vladimir's identity reveals itself: his criminally-minded Russian side, which he had been trying to conceal from Morgan. Shteyngart purposefully places this revelation inside this space – the Groundhog was the one who set up the date, clearly with an agenda in mind to "expose" Vladimir as a criminal, and Vladimir agrees to go along – so that Morgan can understand who Vladimir is, though Vladimir himself does not truly arrive at this knowledge until later in the novel.

Indeed, Vladimir's status as a "criminal laureate" is confirmed when the Groundhog anoints Vladimir as his second-in-command in his small Mafia of Russians in Prava; this ceremony takes place in a *banya* (a bath house similar to a sauna; in Russian culture, it is considered liminal because both the living and the dead can inhabit its space)[102] that is, curiously, neither Russian nor Pravan: "The *banya* wasn't a true Russian bathhouse with its peeling walls and charcoal-stained stoves, but rather a tiny prefab Swedish sauna (as dull and wooden as Vladimir's furniture), which had been attached to the *panelak* in a makeshift manner, like a space module to the Mir" (Shteyngart 2002, 236).[103] Vladimir assumes his position of authority by whipping the Groundhog, which is a common bath-house behavior (the birch twigs used in the process are thought to force toxins to rush to the skin's surface, where they can be excreted through sweating pores) but also intrinsically Russian; the action

[102] The *banya* in Russian folk belief "was thought to be a gathering place for various types of evil spirits, witches, and unclean dead", and it was also thought unclean because it housed the malevolent spirits of the *bannik* and his wife, the *bannaya*. Linda Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1989), 59.

[103] *Panelak* is a Czech word for pre-fabricated housing; Shteyngart may be making a play on words here.

not only cements Vladimir's status as a part of the Groundhog's inner circle, but it also confirms his Russianness and gives him the kick-start he needs to exploit his American identity for pyramid-scheme profit.

In addition to the liminal spaces in Prava, some places outside the Stolovayan republic can also be considered liminal. Vladimir's parents' house is a whole enclave unto itself, but its backyard is liminal because it is both an outdoors space but also his grandmother's unofficial domain (the reader gets the sense that if she could receive mail there, she would): when the reader first meets her, she is "dozing in her wheelchair underneath the giant oaks that delineated the Girshkin's property from that of their supposedly megalomaniac Indian neighbor" (Shteyngart 2002, 35), whom his grandmother is ready to kill to defend the yard's border. His father lets on that she spends more time out there than in the house, and it is in this outside space that he tells (or possibly reminds) Vladimir of his Russian roots and his grandmother's role in his upbringing. One of the stories Dr. Girshkin tells his son involves another liminal space: a cemetery; or, more specifically, a mass grave at Piskaryovko, where his grandfather is buried. She would

> take him each Sunday to the Piskaryovko mass grave for the defenders of Leningrad – that most instructive of Russia's field trips – where they would leave fresh daisies for his grandfather Moysei, a slight, thoughtful man shyly holding on to Grandma's elbow in wedding photos, who perished in a tank battle on the city's outskirts. And after this simple reckoning in front of a statue of the Motherland, weeping over an eternal flame, Grandma would ceremoniously tie a red handkerchief around Vladimir's neck. Asthma or not, she promised him, he would join the Red Pioneers someday and then the Komsomol Youth League and then, if he behaved himself well, the Communist Party. "To fight for the cause of Lenin and the Soviet people, are you ready!" she would drill him. "Always ready!" he would shout back. (Shteyngart 2002, 37)[104]

[104]A memorial site to victims of the Siege of Leningrad during World War II, located in the northeast suburbs of St. Petersburg.

In this liminal space where the living and the dead meet, Vladimir understands at an early age his Soviet identity as a future member of the Communist Party. While this identity fades as he ages in the U.S., it returns to haunt him in Prava as he berates a Canadian and utters a phrase he once knew from his Communist youth (this scene is explicated in more detail below, in my discussion of *nodes*). Try as he might, he cannot entirely escape his Russianness, even if he thinks – mistakenly – that running away to another part of the world (which is actually *closer* to his birthplace than the U.S.) will help him do so.

Girshkin is not entirely unaware of his American identity, though. On a boat with Rybakov that is full of Georgian nationals, Vladimir tells the man that he is afraid of the group: " 'You must see my concerns. I am from Russia originally, this is true, but I am also from Scarsdale... From Westchester...' This seemed to eloquently sum up his concerns. "And?" "And I'm worried about... Well, Georgians, Kalashnikovs, violence. Stalin was a Georgian, you know" (Shteyngart 2002, 113). When his attempt to portray himself as an American man from posh New York suburbs fails, he reverts to his Russian identity as a reason for fearing these Georgians. He is careful to refer to Stalin, whom he knows Rybakov would identify as a fearsome person. He later plays the 'American card' when he arrives in Prava and pitches his pyramid scheme to the Groundhog and his men; not only can he act as a Russian like them, he can also fit in with the American crowd: "Despite my fluent Russian and my tolerance of drink, I can easily double as a first-rate American. My credentials are impeccable" (Shteyngart 2002, 191). But, as Vladimir later acknowledges, it is chiefly his Russian identity that compels him to act criminally; this dual-edged identity only begins to emerge in liminal spaces, however, and fully emerges with his Jewish identity also intact in the *nodes* wherein he encounters his full hybridity.

Absurdistan's settings also provide its protagonist with liminal spaces in which he can explore and even realize his identity. Before he travels to the eponymous republic, he lives in St. Petersburg, which he calls "St. Leninsburg" possibly as a nod to its ever-changing status as both a Russian and European (that is, Eastern and Western) city. According to him, the city is liminal because it tries too hard to be both Western and Russian without succeeding at either:

> By the year 2001, our St. Leninsburg has taken on the appearance of a phantasmagoric third-world city, our neoclassical buildings sinking into the crap-choked canals, bizarre peasant huts fashioned out of corrugated metal and plywood colonizing the broad avenues with their capitalist iconography (cigarette ads featuring an American football player catching a hamburger with a baseball mitt), and what is worst of all, our intelligent, depressive citizenry has been replaced by a new race of mutants dressed in studied imitation of the West. (Shteyngart 2006, 3)

The city serves as a source of pain for him, not only because he is not allowed to leave; his father was murdered on one of its bridges (itself an in-between space), and he often imagines that his dead mother's soul "hovered about in a happy, cultured limbo above the topiary of one of the czar's summer palaces" (Shteyngart 2006, 91). It is here that Misha declares that he is an American trapped in a Russian's body; here that he begins to scheme identity-swapping to achieve his ultimate goal of egress to the U.S. to reunite with his girlfriend, Rouenna.

The target of his scheme, Absurdistan, is a liminal space similar to St. Petersburg in its American-Russian polarity. While it has its own ethnicity (Absurdi, further divided into Sevo and Svanï factions), traces of its culture and architecture are unmistakably Soviet, and it is appropriately littered with Western conventions: a main road from the capital Svanï City airport has on it stores such as Disney, a Starbucks knockoff named Caspian Joe's, the Gap, Banana Republic, an Irish pub named Molly Malloy's, skyscrapers bearing the names

ExxonMobil, BP, ChevronTexaco, Kellogg, Daewoo Heavy Industries, and Radisson and Hyatt hotels (Shteyngart 2006, 119). However, few spaces in Absurdistan are more liminal than the passport control zone at the airport, where Misha neatly sums up his identity in a swift exchange with the officers, who ask him who he is. "I sadly held up my Russian passport. 'No, no,' the fatty laughed. 'I mean by *nationality*.' I saw what he was after. 'Jew,' I said, patting my nose" (Shteyngart 2006, 114).This is the first time in the novel Misha admits to being both Russian and Jewish in the same breath; no mention is made of his American identity, but only because he has no *need* to mention it here; the passport control officer, unlike an INS worker in New York, cannot help him obtain American citizenship, and therefore has no need of this knowledge.

Further, the capital – where Misha lives and spends most of his time – is itself binary in nature: "Journeying from the International Terrace [the Sevo Terrace] to the Svanï one, we had left a fledgling Portland, Oregon, and arrived in Kabul" (Shteyngart 2006, 140). It is here that Misha imagines a conversation with his father at an "Imaginary Breakfast Table", and it is here that Misha thinks most about his life in New York City, imagining himself flying to it or over its streets as he returns to Rouenna. Concerning the first imagined instance, Misha takes a bath in his hotel room and recalls a memory from childhood when he and his father would race poorly-made boats down a creek near his family's summer hut in the forest outside Leningrad; as he returns from the memory to reality, he sees and hears his father in the bathroom with him, and they talk, the conversation ending when his father asks him if he thinks one person can change the world. After he replies "yes", Misha loses his vision of his father, suggesting that he has now taken his place as the person who could change the world – he has become his father, which he does not realize fully until the end of the novel when he is in a Jewish enclave near the Absurdi border. Without the liminal space

of the Western hotel in the Eastern city, which is itself divided, Misha would not have realized that regardless of his passport's stated nationality, be it American, Russian, or Belgian, he is not only a "multiculturalist" but also his father incarnate.

Also liminal for Misha are the imaginary paths he takes to New York, usually by airplane but also by helicopter or train. At the novel's beginning, he divulges his foremost wish: to rise above the village space in which he is currently hiding and fly home to Manhattan, floating "over the village's leafy vegetables and preroasted lambs, over the green-dappled overhang of two colliding mountain ranges that keep the prehistoric Mountain Jews safe… over flattened Chechnya and pockmarked Sarajevo… over Europe, with that gorgeous polis on the hill… over the frozen deadly calm of the Atlantic… toward the tip of the slender island" (Shteyngart 2006, ix). He has the same desire when he first arrives in Absurdistan, trying to imagine surveying Svanï City from a helicopter; try as he might to make himself see the place in which he is currently located, the imagined helicopter keeps taking him elsewhere.

> The chopper… spread its helicopter shadow over the asphalt conglomerations of downtown and midtown, then streaked past the gables and dormers of the Dakota Apartments on New York's Central Park… And then I was on an IRT train headed north to East Tremont Avenue in the Bronx. It was wintertime… By the Third Avenue-149th Street stop, I could already glimpse the light-handed winter sun slipping its rays down the station's stairways. A second later, we were free of the subway tunnel and the Bronx was around us. (Shteyngart 2006, 135-137)

Perhaps belaboring the point, Shteyngart repeats these episodes to make the case for Misha – whose appeals to the INS have thus far gone unheeded, or rejected – to gain re-entry into the U.S. as an American citizen, albeit one composed of the same amalgamated background as its actual residents.

Like Vladimir and Misha, *Super Sad True Love Story*'s Lenny finds himself in liminal spaces in a large city and a passport-control zone. The latter he experiences in Rome, on his way back to New York after a year there for his job. Before he leaves, he visits the American embassy there to apply for re-entry to his native country; when he enters, the building contains only "a few of the saddest, most destitute Albanians [who] still wanted to emigrate to the States" (Shteyngart 2010, 7) applying for visas. Instantly he sets himself apart as an "Other", because he is not like the Albanians; he is trying to *return*, not *leave in the first place*, which a poster on the wall stating that the border is closed implies is all but impossible for those potential émigrés. The former he experiences in New York City itself, his hometown, which contains several liminal spaces but only becomes liminal itself after the Rupture occurs. One of those spaces is his workplace, where he has an office "housed in a former Moorish-style synagogue near Fifth Avenue, a tired-looking building dripping with arabesques, kooky buttresses, and other crap that brings to mind a lesser Gaudi". His boss's office is on the top floor, "the words 'You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me' still stenciled into the window in English and Hebrew" (Shteyngart 2010, 64). Life meets death in this liminal building; its purpose is to provide space for people to create technology that allows certain individuals to extend their lives, but it is also the place in which Lenny has several encounters with both Joshie and his co-workers that help him realize he will always be their backwards-looking, death-fearing (and death-obsessed), 'uncool' colleague. In both instances, places in cities mark Lenny as an outsider, an "other", someone who is *not*an émigré or *not* young – so, then, who is Lenny, if his spatial support keeps dwindling?

Post-Rupture New York does not offer Lenny much solace in his seemingly stymied identity search. While he walks Eunice to work one morning, he notices changes to Central Park and its environs. "The trees held fast, but the cityscape was in constant flux"

(Shteyngart 2010, 313), while around the park, old commerce buildings stand empty, waiting to be turned into residential units. His own building is soon to be torn down and re-built for high-net-worth individuals, and when it finally happens, he watches on the news and cries at the image. With his house gone, the city no longer resembles what he called home. In a sense, Lenny himself becomes a liminal being here, thrust into a space in which he finds no comfort and no identity. Prior to this point, he has experienced a taste of this when all communications shut off right after the Rupture, when New York becomes bifurcated by borders both physical (with checkpoints cordoning off most neighborhoods or interstates or ferry routes) and mental (people stop moving or trying to cross physical borders when they realize their *äppäräti* can't connect them with anyone). It is at this point that Lenny realizes that he is someone truly alone, who has enough money to live somewhat comfortably for the time being but cannot reach out to anyone. "My *äppärät* isn't connecting. I can't connect. No one's *äppäräti* are working anymore… I'm so scared. I have no one" (Shteyngart 2010, 251).This disconnection finally compels him to return to his parents' house, where he ultimately understands his identity:

> The Abramovs. Tired and old, romantically mismatched, filled to the brim with hatreds imported and native, patriots of a disappeared country, lovers of cleanliness and thrift, tepid breeders of a single child, owners of difficult and disloyal bodies (hands professionally scalded with industrial cleansers and gnarled up with carpal tunnel), monarchs of anxiety, princes of an unspeakably cruel realm, Mama and Papa, Papa and Mama, *na vsegda, na vsegda, na vsegda*, forever and ever and ever…. Who was I? A secular progressive? Perhaps. A liberal, whatever that means anymore, maybe. But basically – at the end of the busted rainbow, at the end of the day, at the end of the empire – little more than my parents' son. (Shteyngart 2010, 294)

It is in the liminal space of the city as crossroads that he finds his true identity: a mixture of his parents' DNA, Russian and American, old and unhip, longing to stave off death and live forever.

While time, language, and space all contribute pieces of Shteyngart's protagonists' self-understanding – in a sense, building blocks atop one another to move toward a cohesive whole – it is the *node* that completes their realization of who they are. Nodes are temporary places where time, word, and space all intersect; often in Shteyngart's works, we see space and time, or time and word, or space and word, intersect, but in the most special circumstances all three image types cross paths. These nodes are the key locations for the creation of nodal identity; only inside these nodal moments and spaces can protagonists fully and completely realize their hybridity.Because nodes convey such temporal significance, more often than not they provide moments of climax or plot resolution. As previously noted, Shteyngart's novels reflect his own movement through time as he ages; because his first novel features his youngest protagonist, it is most similar to a *Bildungsroman* in which the hero comes of age and begins to understand his identity. It is no surprise, then, that *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* contains the most nodes of any of Shteyngart's novels; it has three, discussed here in order of increasing importance.

The first node of the novel is Vladimir's anticipation of a barbecue that takes place at his parents' house. This anticipation occurs when he visits Rybakov, who has an odd penchant for fans and thus makes sure he is always sitting or standing near one. Vladimir discusses procuring American citizenship with Rybakov when he gazes into a nearby spinning fan, thinking of the barbecue coming up that very weekend. A memory of a song from his childhood intrudes on his real-time conversation:

> "Pa-ra-ra-ra-ra Moscow nights." They sang it in Brighton Beach and they sang it in Rego Park, and they sang it on WEVD, New York – 'We Speak Your Language' – that the Girshkins had always left the radio tuned to, even when his first American friends from Hebrew school came over to play computer games and they heard the 'Pa-ra-ra-ra...' and the two-dollar synthesizer orchestra in the background, and saw his parents at the kitchen table singing along while

> munching on the verboten pork cutlets, slurping down the mushroom-and-barley soup. (Shteyngart 2002, 24)

This memory captures time, language, and space to pinpoint Vladimir as Russian, Jewish, *and* American. The geographical spaces mentioned – Brighton Beach and Rego Park – identify Vladimir as Russian because they are both historically Russian Jewish enclaves where immigrant communities arose and flourished (in a sense, closing themselves off to other immigrants), but they also identify him as American because they are located in New York City. The Girshkins' kitchen in their apartment is also an enclave that identifies Vladimir as Russian, because it is a closed space where the family can engage with their Russian heritage by eating traditional Russian food. The "verboten pork cutlets" point to Vladimir's non-kosher Jewish upbringing, as does the radio station, WEVD (which was broadcast in Yiddish), and his status as a student in Hebrew school. The intrusion of Vladimir's past into his present occurs as part of a pattern throughout the novel (and, indeed, across all three novels) wherein the meeting of these temporal categories nudges the protagonist towards a deeper understanding of his identity, but becomes much more powerful because of the space and language that surround it. Finally, the language involved in the memory reinforces Vladimir's Russian and Jewish identities, with its mention of the Russian lyrics of the song "Moscow Nights" that he and his parents would sing, and the all-Yiddish radio station to which they would listen day and night. This memory neatly encapsulates the three identities that weave together to form Vladimir's hybrid self, through time, language, and space.

The actual barbecue that takes place a few days later in real time serves as Girshkin's second identity node. His parents live in Westchester County – specifically, in Scarsdale – which is adjacent to the Bronx and houses an affluent population. Immediately Shteyngart establishes the place Vladimir's parents moved to after making enough money to leave the cramped Queens apartment in which they initially settled; it is, like some American houses,

large and well-appointed, with "the largest oak door in Scarsdale, New York, its lucent door knob carved from Bohemian crystal" (Shteyngart 2002, 43). This is the enclave in which Vladimir partially grew up; on the outside, it looks as American as any other house on its street, but behind that oak door and in its backyard, it is Russian thanks to its inhabitants (which include not only Vladimir's parents but also his grandmother).

Most of the barbecue scene is devoted not to grilling meat and vegetables – though there is the errant mention of a tomato or piece of chicken – but to stories from the past, which intrude heavily on the present throughout the event. Vladimir's father begins by recalling difficulties the family encountered during World War II:

> "There were times during the war when one carrot would feed a family for days. For instance, during the siege of Leningrad, your grandma and I, well... if truth be told, we were nowhere near Leningrad. We fled to the Ural Mountains at the start of the war. But there was nothing to eat there either. All we had was Tolik the Hog. A big fellow - we ate him for five years. We even bartered jars of lard for yarn and kerosene. The whole household ran off that hog." He looked sadly at his son as if he wished he had saved a tailbone or some other memento. (Shteyngart 2002, 35)

This passage marks Vladimir as the descendant of Russians, especially Russians who suffered greatly before he was born. Dr. Girshkin does not linger in his reverie, however; Grandmother soon interrupts to ask a question, and asks why they had a hog in the first place: "We're Jewish, aren't we?" (Shteyngart 2002, 35), which reminds all parties involved that they are, in fact, Jewish. When Dr. Girshkin tells Vladimir that his grandmother is not long for this world, Vladimir loses himself in an extended flashback (again, the past intruding on the present) about his grandmother's role in raising him and her importance to him in real time:

> She had raised Vladimir, teaching him to write Cyrillic letters when he was four, awarding two grams of cheese for every Slavonic squiggle mastered. […] In the late 1970s… the gentle, toothy American Jimmy Carter swapped tons of Midwestern grain for tons of Soviet Jews, and Suddenly Vladimir and Grandmother found themselves walking out of the

> International Arrivals building at JFK. They took one look at the endless America humming her Gershwin tune before them and cried in each other's arms. And this was Grandma today – wheelchair-bound, imprisoned in one of the world's most expensive backyards, the rustle of stealth wagons sliding into adjacent driveways, meat burning everywhere, her grandson a grown man with dark circles under his eyes who came to visit his family seasonally, as if they lived in the wilds of Connecticut and not some twenty kilometers beyond the Triborough Bridge. Yes, Grandma deserved at least one more kiss from Vladimir. (Shteyngart 2002, 37-38)

Thus he is his grandmother's grandson as much as he is his parents' son, underscoring how deep and inescapable his Russian roots are, try as he might to outrun them. These roots extend to the language used during the barbecue; both English and Russian flow freely, and two particular words identify Vladimir as a person with a defined place in the Girshkin family hierarchy. First, Vladimir addresses his grandmother with the Russian noun. As he answers her question about the pig of the past, he says "softly", "Of course there's no hog, *babushka*" (Shteyngart 2002, 37). Second, when he is in his mother's room trying to bid her good-bye, and she makes him walk around the room for the express purpose of telling him he walks like a Jew (which further cements his status as a person with Jewish heritage), she can see that she has upset him and tries to soothe him by saying "Straighten up, *sinotchek*". "My little son… He had been out of her good graces too long: that one word made him wheeze with pleasure" (Shteyngart 2002, 46). When he leaves the barbecue, it is as an established hybrid through time, language, and space: he is a three-pronged Russian-Jewish-American man, though he does not permanently retain this status.

Vladimir most fully inhabits this triplicate identity in the third node, outside the door of a bar in Prava much later in the novel, where Vladimir finds himself at the mercy of the Groundhog's hired thugs, who want to kill him because the Groundhog has found out that his father (Rybakov) does not actually possess American citizenship. The bar itself is a liminal space; it is a former Soviet Palace of Culture that has been repurposed and decorated

in 1970s and 1980s Soviet kitsch, suggesting that it exists both in the present and the past at the same time without existing fully in either. Not only that, but it is a place populated by seedy characters who seem to exist in what Bakhtin calls "slum naturalism" – a setting for exactly the type of people who make up the mob that has suddenly formed an enclave (what the narrator calls, ironically, a "*cordon sanitaire*" [Shteyngart 2002, 420]) around Vladimir.[105] As the thugs begin to beat him, he mentally moves between the geographical spaces of Prava and home, drifting in and out of consciousness, spatial awareness, temporal awareness, and language use as he sees and feels:

> flashing in bright childhood yellows then receding to darkness and the aftershocks of pure pain, and then someone had jumped on his clenched fist and – *bozhe moi, bozhe moi* – there was that cracking again, the cracking you could feel in the back of your mouth, the cheering again (hurrah?), Morgan… wake up in Prava, *shto takoie?* which language? *pochemu nado tak?* my God, not like this, *svolochi!* you have to breathe, *nado dyshat'*, breathe, Vladimir, and your mama will bring you… *zhirafa prinesyot*… a stuffed giraffe… *ya hochu zhit'!* I want to live! to continue to exist, to open your eyes, to run, to say to them, "No!" (Shteyngart 2002, 421)

Spatially, he wavers between waking up in Prava with Morgan and suffering an asthma attack back home with his mother, which is a moment that also crosses temporal borders because it shifts him quickly from the present to the past. It also signifies that he is moving out of his past at long last (coming of age, if you will), because he thinks of his girlfriend (and future wife) first, and only *then* his mother, from whom he has spent a great deal of the novel trying to 'cut the cord'. Here, when the past intrudes upon the present, he snaps himself back into the present somehow and even projects himself into the future, expressing his desire to live and continue his very existence. Language is also liminal here, as Vladimir engages in his

[105]Bakhtin, "Characteristics of Genre and Plot Composition in Dostoevsky's Works", *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* 155. The setting is particularly appropriate for creation of a nodal identity, as Bakhtin explains earlier in the same article that "[t]he adventures of truth… take place on the high road, in brothels, in the dens of thieves, in taverns… The man of the idea – the wise man – collides with worldly evil, depravity, baseness, and vulgarity in their most extreme expression" (ibid.,115).

most profound switching between Russian and English. It is in this vulnerable, nodal moment that Vladimir's hybrid identity is realized, the one he fulfills by the end of the novel: an American of Russian descent, neither fully one nor the other, finally independent of his mother and looking forward to a life of his own with a wife of his own.

Misha Vainberg's nodes in *Absurdistan* are slightly more complicatedthan Vladimir's. Perhaps not surprisingly, his hybrid identity emerges in a mental space rather than a physical space, even though this space involves a concrete geographical location, defined time period, and particular language. I refer to his various self-transfers to New York City when he would rather be there than wherever he is in the moment; these mental journeys are also flashbacks, transporting him to not only a place but also a time in which he was truly himself, where he was surrounded by the multiculturalism that he absorbs like a sponge to become a hybrid. I have alluded to some of these moments previously, but they warrant further attention here.

The first flashback Misha experiences occurs in the novel's prologue, when he writes to Rouenna from a place near Absurdistan's border to tell her that he is "trying to piece [my] life together" (Shteyngart 2006, ix), which leads him to mentally assemble and lay out for her all of the meaningful places in New York City for him where he used to work or live. His path begins at a Pakistani restaurant on Church Street, winds east of Madison Park over the replica of St. Mark's Campanile (which is in Venice), then traverses Twenty-Fourth Street, Central Park, and the Harlem River to the South Bronx, where, finally:

> my girlfriend's world reaches out and envelops me. I am privy to the relentless truths of Tremont Avenue – where, according to the graceful loop of graffito, BEBO always LOVES LARA, where the neon storefront of Brave Fried Chicken begs me to sample its greasy-sweet aromas, where the Adonai Beauty Salon threatens to take my limp curly hairdo and turn it upward, set it aflame like Liberty's torch. I pass like a fat beam of light through dollar stores… through the brown hulks of housing projects… over the three-year-old Dominican girls in tank tops and fake earrings… On the corner of 173rd Street and Vyse Avenue, on a

> brick housing-project stoop riddled with stray cheese puffs and red licorice sticks, my girl has draped her naked lap with Hunter College textbooks. I plow straight into the bounty of her caramelized summer-time breasts. (Shteyngart 2006, ix-x)

This vivid recollection contains liminal space (the corner of 173rd Street and Vyse, a front stoop), liminal time (past intruding upon present, as it is clear from his detailed account that he has made this journey repeatedly), and a hint of liminal language (behind the doors of Brave Fried Chicken, possibly slang English; out of the mouths of the Dominican girls, Spanish and possibly French). Here he finds "relentless truths" about who he is: a New Yorker who simply wants to be with his lover.

Misha experiences a similar yearning when in the Absurdi capital, Svanï City, after he receives a message from Rouenna telling him she thinks she may be pregnant and that the father is Misha's college nemesis (who is now her professor at Hunter College). He looks out the window of his office and finds himself transported, once again, to New York City:

> I was on that stretch of East Tremont Avenue in the Bronx, *our stretch* [referring to himself and Rouenna], which starts from the El Batey Restaurant near Marmion Avenue and then swelters down to the Blimpie franchise on Hughes… East Tremont Avenue, solid purveyor of attainable dreams, where stores will sell you *todo para* 99¢ *y menos,* 79¢ gets you a whole chicken at Fine Fare, and $79 will land you a flowery upright mattress with a 'five-year warrenty'; where a 325-pound Russian man with a hot *mamita* on his arm is respected and accepted by all; where dudes wheeling by on bicycles and young mothers languidly window-shopping at She-She Juniors and Ladies will subject me to the same breathless local query: "Yo, Misha, *qué ongo, a-ai?*" (Shteyngart 2006, 274-275)

Again, his space is liminal (a road), his time is liminal (past intruding on the present), and his language is liminal (in addition to the Spanish quoted here, Misha also recalls El Batey's famous *comidas criollas* (Peruvian food), a metal pot filled with *asopao de camarones* ('soupy shrimps') soaked in *ajillo* ('garlic'), which reverberate through his *estómago* ('stomach') (Shteyngart 2006, 275). He not only belongs to this stretch of road; he melts into it, since

someone of his size can be "respected and accepted by all" here. Misha finally respects and accepts *himself* here, too, which is a crucial step toward his understanding of his hybrid identity.

Reflecting his creator's journey from identity-searching young adult to meaningful-connection-searching middle-aged man, Lenny Abramov in *Super Sad True Love Story* also finds his nodes in two places: one, his own home, and two, in his parents' home, which I will address first. He visits his parents twice during the novel: once when he introduces Eunice to them, and again after the Rupture when his boss, Joshie, sends him there so that he can make his advances on Eunice. The sum of the two experiences leads Lenny to conclude that he is little more than his parents' son, but what exactly does that mean?

In terms of space, his parents' house – located on a corner, which is itself a liminal space because it is located at the intersection of two roads - is both an interior enclave and an external liminal space.[106] From the outside, as Lenny sees it, it is located on "the corner of Washington Avenue and Myron, the most important corner of my life"; it resembles any number of houses on such a street on Long Island, and is flanked by "the gigantic flags of the United States of America and SecurityState Israel billowing in the hazy breeze from two flagpoles" (Shteyngart 2010, 131-132). Even though the reader has already been told that Lenny's parents are Soviet Jews, the flags outside the house emphasize their dual allegiances to both the U.S. and Israel, marking Lenny as the product of Jews who emigrated to the United States. (Indeed, they raised him entirely there, so this is the house in which he spent a

[106] Bakhtin in "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" says this about the road: "On the road… the spatial and temporal paths of the *most varied people*… *intersect*… People who are normally kept separate by spatial and social distance can accidentally meet; any contrast may crop up, *the most various fates may collide* and interweave with one another… The road is… a place for events to *find their denouement*" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 243, italics mine). Additonally, in Russian folk belief, an intersection of two roads – the crossroads – is considered a dangerous space because it was a "favorite haunt" of the devil (Ivanits 40).

good deal of his childhood, even though he was born in Queens.) However, Lenny's Russian heritage is not obvious until one 'sees' the inside of the house (that is, after crossing the threshold, which hosts the traditional Jewish *mezuzah*) which evokes the Soviet world they left behind.[107] The dining room contains

> shiny Romanian furniture [they] had imported from their Moscow apartment… the table was laid out in the hospitable Russian manner, with everything from four different kinds of piquant salami to a plate of chewy tongue to every little fish that ever inhabited the Baltic Sea, not to mention the sacred dash of black caviar. (Shteyngart 2010, 139)

Elsewhere,

> the hallways were hung with framed sepia-toned postcards of Red Square and the Kremlin; the snow-dusted equestrian statue of… [the] founder of Moscow (I had learned just a bit of Russian history at my father's knee); and the gothic Stalin-era skyscraper of prestigious Moscow State University, which neither of my parents attended, because, to hear them tell it, Jews were not allowed in back then. (Shteyngart 2010, 136)

The Soviet past very much lives on in this house, which may explain why Lenny himself seems stuck in the past, often wishing to live in an older world, which he views as optimal – as he asks himself, "why couldn't I have been born to a better world?" (Shteyngart 2010, 81) The past thus constantly intrudes on the present, especially when Lenny sees his father for the first time after the Rupture: "His tired brown eyes were marked with a sadness I had seen only once before – at my grandmother's funeral, when he had emitted a howl of such unknown, animalistic provenance, we thought it had come from the forest abutting the Jewish cemetery" (Shteyngart 2010, 288). Like Lenny, his father seems to be a relic from the past living in a burdensome present, which Lenny realizes when he takes them to buy food from a local grocery store and they pass

[107] The *mezuzah* is a small piece of parchment inscribed with specific Bible passages that is then rolled up inside a container and affixed to the doorjamb. Per ancient custom, every Jewish residence must display a *mezuzah*; its original purpose was protection from evil spirits, but presently it serves as a reminder of God's presence both entering and leaving the home. I.M. Casanowicz, *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 8 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1903), 531-532.

> what used to be the Friendly's restaurant but was now apparently the headquarters of some local militia. Was this what Russia looked like after the Soviet Union collapsed? I tried, unsuccessfully, to see the country around me not just through my father's eyes but through his *history*. I wanted to be a part of a meaningful cycle with him, a cycle other than birth and death. (Shteyngart 2010, 290)

As much as Lenny lives in the past, he does not and cannot live in his *father's* past; I will return to this shortly when I discuss his own apartment as a node.

Language in the Abramovs' house is more liminal than anywhere else in the novel. English and Russian trade turns seemingly at will, as indicated earlier when I described Lenny's English flavored with Russian like a loaf studded with raisins, as well as Lenny's ability to understand his parents' Russian commands. But, Lenny's occasional slips into the mother tongue do not identify him so much as a Russian as his parents' words towards him; they address him affectionately: "*sinotchek*, *nash lyubimeits*" ('little son', 'our favorite') (Shteyngart 2010, 132), "*malen'kii*" ('little one') (Shteyngart 2010, 133); and with two diminutives of his Russian name, Leonid: "*Lyonitchka*" (Shteyngart 2010, 291) and "*Lyon'ka*" (Shteyngart 2010, 293).Theyalternate their English with other Russian words and phrases, possibly to show more affection ("*Zabotishsia ty o nas*",'You are taking care of us') (Shteyngart 2010, 292) or to conceal ideas from Eunice on the first visit (asking him if they will marry, "*Kstati, u tvoei Eunice ochen' krasivye zuby. Mozhet byt' ty zhenishsya?*"['By the way, your Eunice has very pretty teeth. Maybe you will marry her?'] [Shteyngart 2010, 139)]; letting him know that they know he has lost status at his job, "Also he says *tebya ponizili* ['you have been demoted'] at the company" [Shteyngart 2010, 141]). Even though he does not always return his parents' Russian in kind, he at least understands it and reacts to it, and finally comes to realize – while trying to fall asleep in the basement on his second visit – that it is part of his

essential makeup, and in turn his hybrid identity as the offspring of his parents, Jewish, Russian, and American.

Lenny's 740 square feet of apartment space in Manhattan, like his parents' house, helps him become conscious of his hybrid identity. This space also serves as a node; it is an enclave, interrupted by the past, and wrapped in the words of the literary English of the books that line the walls. As an enclave, it was historically a place for Jewish workers to settle, and its current residents evoke the past: "I live in the last middle-class stronghold in the city, high atop a red-brick ziggurat that a Jewish garment workers' union had erected on the banks of the East River back in the days when Jews sewed clothes for a living. Say what you will, these ugly co-ops are full of authentic old people who have real stories to tell" (Shteyngart 2010, 51). Behind the walls, he has a "Wall of Books", a "twenty-foot-long modernist bookshelf" (in an ersatz attempt to surround himself with *something* contemporary), which holds volumes that he tells, "You're my sacred ones. No one but me still cares about you. But I'm going to keep you with me forever. And one day I'll make you important again" (Shteyngart 2010, 52). He has furnished the place with "modular-design furniture and sleek electronica and the mid-1950s Corbusier-inspired dresser" (Shteyngart 2010, 52), again in an attempt to appear contemporary, but his environs betray him; his enclave reflects his self, which is old, smelly, odd-looking, and very twentieth-century.

As if to underscore the point, Lenny tells the reader he lives in what is essentially a retirement community (Shteyngart 2010, 53); not only is he surrounded by an aging building with aged furniture and antiquated books, he is also surrounded by dying people – an atmosphere of decay that foretells the death of the building itself near the novel's end. These people, and the building in which they live, reflect the past and barely exist in the present; they have no future, which can also be said of the building when it is torn down after the

Rupture. Eunice feels uncomfortable in this space at first, because it is so entrenched in the past (and she is very much a person living in the present tense and the future, partially due to her youth, but also due to her language use), though she does feel comfortable enough at one point to pick up one of his books and begin leafing through it when she thinks he does not see her; when Lenny discovers her testing the literary waters of the past, she "slid[es] the book back on its shelf and retreat[s]to the couch, smelling her fingers for book odor, her cheeks in full blush" (Shteyngart 2010, 205).This is the closest Eunice comes to engaging with the literary language Lenny speaks; he reads Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* to her, but she has trouble following along: "I've never really learned how to read texts… Just to scan them for info" (Shteyngart 2010, 277). Just as he finds it difficult – if not impossible – to communicate with her in Teenspeak (recall his misuse of acronyms such as ESL and PLO in an attempt to reach out to her), she also finds it difficult to parse his English, be it spoken, read aloud, or written.

This scene, in which Lenny reads Kundera to Eunice, may be the most powerful node of Shteyngart's novels,as the decaying space in which he lives (and calls home) bears proud witness to a dying language (literary English, albeit translated from another language) captured in relics from the past (the physical book). Like his parents, who built a sort of shrine to Soviet Russia in the kitchen of their suburban home, Lenny has arranged his living room to resemble a museum to twentieth-century culture and values. Lenny conflates his parents with their home furnishings, viewing them as aging artifacts, and Eunice looks at him in much the same way: as someone embodied by his surroundings.As much as Lenny is his parents' son, he can also be seen as an amalgam of the books and ideas that surround him (he wonders if the Kundera text is the "book that had launched my search for immortality" [Shteyngart 2010, 275]), as outdated and standard as they are. Thus Lenny can

be seen as the ultimate hybrid, one who is a mix of not only cultures and ethnicities but also of eras and thoughts.

Discussion

In a 2007 review of *Absurdistan*, Konstantin Mil'chin wrote: "ГариШтейнгартработаетна стыкесразу трехкультурныхтрадиций" ["Gary Shteyngart works at the intersection of three cultural traditions"].[108] Eventually the reader discovers that Milchin refers to the cultural triumvirate of Woody Allen, Nabokov, and Borat, but it is also accurate to say that Shteyngart also works exactly at the juncture of Russian, American, and Jewish cultures. The 'crossroads' image in this sentence aptly describes the *nodes* where space and time imagery and/or foreign-language items intersect, ever so briefly, in his fiction. These nodes, as I have shown, are the temporary points in his texts most crucial to understanding a character's identity – specifically, his *hybrid* identity. Outside of these nodes, Shteyngart also varies his emphasis on time, word, or space within a given work, leading his characters across, around, over, and sometimes merely *up to* certain types of borders so that they may confront their identity at these thresholds. To spark this confrontation, Shteyngart temporally interrupts the present most often with the past (but sometimes with the future); linguistically interrupts standard English with Russian and Hebrew, as well as slang and grammatically correct English; spatially interrupts enclaves with border spaces. These conflicts form the nodes that then shape a character's nodal identity; almost like shape-shifters of science fiction, Shteyngart's protagonists can change aspects of identity as needed in order to blend into a particular group or situation, even if this transformation means that they then become an outsider to another group or situation. Thus, they live perpetually *on the*

[108] Konstantin Mil'chin, review of *Absurdistan*, TimeOut *Moscow*, 9 November 2007, http://www.timeout.ru/books/event/94270/; accessed 18 November 2013.

threshold of identity, never completely belonging to one or all groups with which they may identify.

My designation of these characters as hybrids distinguishes this discussion from prior treatment of not only Shteyngart's work but also post-colonial hybrid theory in general. Primarily, my focus is on the difference between Wanner's "multiple identity" and my own "nodal identity", but I also distinguish between *hybrid* identity and *hyphenated* identity, which Furman claims applies to Shteyngart's protagonists. I disagree with this claim because it bifurcates and polarizes not only Shteyngart but also the other members of his émigré cohort whom she addresses (such as Lara Vapnyar, Ellen Litman, and Anya Ulinich). She concedes that it is possible to refer to these writers as Russian-Jewish-American, but that the term "has not gained any traction in discussions of this literature".[109] I propose the more temporally-specific term "nodal" instead, which subsumes the multi-pronged identity to which Furman refers but also allows for free and easy movement from one to another as needed.

Along those lines of free movement, another way in which my research distinguishes itself is in its treatment of protagonists as free migrants who arrive in the U.S. entirely of their own choosing, as opposed to Bhabha's colonial migrants who are forced to move to a space at the behest of a colonizing force. However, I also contend that these migrants occupy more than two cultural spaces; Bhabha's idea of the third space no longer applies to these characters (as Furman insists), since this third space now becomes a liminal fourth space where the Russian-Jewish-American elements meet. Additionally, I am discussing writers who become *creative forces* in their new country of citizenship; they act as *disseminators* of both old and new cultures, and the power relationships to which they are subject are entirely different from Bhabha's colonial power relationships of subjugated and subjugator.

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[109]Furman, 22.

Related to this idea of the "self" and the "other" (what Bhabha calls the "colonized" and the "colonizer") is Kristeva's statement that identity results only when a "self" interacts with an "other"; I argue otherwise, having shown (especially in the case of Misha Vainberg) that hybrid identity can indeed be found when a "self" engages with its own self in another time, place, or utterance.

Conclusion

What can Shteyngart's characters – who have left their homelands behind to put down roots elsewhere, and form their identities in fluctuating spatial, temporal, and linguistic contexts – show his reader about not just hybrid identity, but also contemporary American identity? I have shown that his characters possess a variegated constitution that gives them freedom to change facets of identity. One might argue that this freedom makes them *more* American than the characters around them who were born in the United States, because they can adapt to any cultural situation and be, as Misha puts it, "respected and accepted by all". A potential weak point of this claim is that such acceptance only occurs within the *nodes* I have pointed out; those moments are few and far between, so it may be said that Shteyngart's protagonists behave only as their true selves when time, language, and space intersect in exactly the right way. I maintain that the rarity of this intersection – the elusiveness of this fourth space – is in fact precisely what distinguishes it from other potential moments of identity realization, and, in a larger sense, other work on this writer.

Shteyngart lets his reader catch a glimpse of this fourth-space crossroads where he finds his *own* sense of self through the ever-changing, hybrid identity of his protagonists. However, Shteyngart's choice to publish a memoir suggeststhat he might find it difficult to define himself as something other than "my parents' son", much like his protagonists who cannot quite escape their ethnic backgrounds and revert to a kind of "default" status as a

product of two people. The idea of the elusive, fleeting moment of identity realization appears not just in Shteyngart's work, though: Anya Ulinich, who emigrated to the U.S. when she was seventeen, offers glimpses of a different kind into her protagonist's identity in the novel *Petropolis*. In the next chapter, I explore the possibility that a character can surmount her ethnic background in particular moments of identity realization influenced by *memory*. When these nodal points occur, a character canact as a palimpsest by re-writing her identity, creating a new sense of self while flashes of her old self still peek through. Where Shtenygart explores national identity expressed in particular spatio-temporal-lingualnodes, Ulinich explores the space between national and personal identity with an increased focus on surpassing and integrating one's ethnic identity.

Chapter 2: (Re)Writing the Self – Large and Small – in Anya Ulinich's *Petropolis*

Introduction

Phoenix, Arizona is almost certainly one of the last places an émigré Russian-American writer in the twenty-first century would think to place a Russian protagonist emigrating to the United States, especially given the tendency of such writers to place their heroes in New York City.[110] Anya Ulinich landed in Phoenix when she arrived in the U.S. as a seventeen-year-old; much like her, Sasha Goldberg, the hapless ¾ Russian, ¼ African protagonist of her novel *Petropolis*, finds herself heading from her small-town Siberian home toward what Ulinich calls in an interview "the ultimate culture shock destination".[111]Elaborating, Ulinich says that moving to Arizona is "a little bit like moving to Mars – the landscape, the weather, and the outlandish ways people ignore the reality of it all: green lawns and golf courses in the desert, huge air-conditioned houses, Christmas lights wrapped around cacti", scenes that Sasha herself soon confronts when she lands. In a moment filled with changing spatial, temporal, and linguistic contexts that areeasy to overlook yet central to Sasha's experience of identity formation in Phoenix (and later in Chicago and New York), she gawks at the buildings she passes on her way out of the airport,

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[110]In 1991-1992, 57,677 U.S. immigrants reported that their last country of residence was the Soviet Union (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigrationand Naturalization Service, 1996,*U.S. Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C., 1997, 28). By the time of the 2000 U.S. Census (that is, spanning the decade from 1990-2000), about 386,000 U.S. immigrants reported the same; approximately 81,000 of them lived in New York City (New York City Department of City Planning, Population Division, *The Newest New Yorkers, 2000*, Department of City Planning: New York, October 2004, 13). In contrast, only approximately 10,000 of them lived in Phoenix (U.S. Census Bureau, *Census 2000 Summary* File 3, Matrices P18, P19, P21, P22, P24, P36, P37, P39, P42, PCT8, PCT16, PCT17, andPCT19, May 2012, http://phoenix.gov/webcms/groups/internet/@inter/@dept/@dsd/documents/web_content/pdd_pz_pdf_00198.pdf; accessed May 8, 2014).

[111]"Interview".*Anya Ulinich*. http://www.anyaulinich.com/interview.html;accessed January 30, 2014.

imagining that "aliens had abducted the people here… leaving the occasional squat cactus, a crooked palm tree, an evergreen hedge".[112] When the car carrying her to her new home ascends a freeway ramp, Sasha – who left art school to move to the U.S. – quickly comes to a startling realization: "she'd inadvertently chosen the perfect place to erase herself" (Ulinich117).

This potential act of self-erasure calls to mind Sasha's much earlier introduction to the District 7 Evening Art Studio for Children in her Siberian hometown, Asbestos 2, where the first teacher she meets brings her into the classroom with the other students and immediately sets out, eraser in hand, "making the rounds, erasing parts of their drawings. Halfway through the room, his eraser gummed up and Sasha watched him make greasy graphite smudges over drawings that seemed perfect to her" (U:8). This teacher's penchant for erasing mistakes that apparently only he can see makes an impression on Sasha, who spends most of her childhood and early adolescence painfully aware of the external flaws that preclude her from fitting in, such as the only jacket she wears, which is a faux-fur coat with a "not-quite-right, counterfeit Mickey Mouse" stitched on its back (U:7).These flaws are the first things others see in her – for example, a woman she meets at a party not long after she arrives in the U.S. looks at Sasha and exudes the "posture" and "distracted eyes" that indicate that she "was thinking, *trash*" (U:156). Eventually, Sasha recognizes these flawsas an advantage, and decides to wear her "misfit" status as a badge of honor – in one particular example, she plays along at practicing Judaism by reciting a prayer to appease her boss, which gets her invited to eat dinner with the boss's family instead of dining alone in her meager bedroom.

[112]Anya Ulinich, *Petropolis* (New York: Viking, 2007), 117. Hereafter, the novel appears in parenthetical citations as (U:pn), for example, U:8.

To Sasha, the chance to "erase herself" means a chance to rub out the parts of her past, perceived character, and looks that make both her and others uncomfortable, and in their place to fill in an improved, more appealing (to both herself and others) iteration. It also means a chance for her to erase the stigma attached to the parts of her given to her by her parents – her genetic makeup, looks, physical quirks (such as a seemingly uncontrollable sneer), and world view – and, especially, declare her independence from her mother by fashioning her own identity. As I will argue here, Sasha lands in Phoenix with a desire to *rewrite* her identity, to act as a palimpsest of sorts as she erases components of herself that she can then reshape and put forth as her "true" – that is, more authentic – self.When Sasha confronts a change of space, time, or language, she chooses to exhibit a certain aspect of her identity that she then integrates with her upbringing to surpass it. She achieves this, and avoids reverting to a "default" status, by consciously accessing her memory.

This chapter asks two questions: Generally, what does it mean to think about identity as a palimpsest? More specifically, what does Ulinich's novel contribute to our understanding of post-Soviet émigré identity? I argue that the metaphor of the palimpsest offers a viable lens through which to view a character's journey toward identity articulation, framing my discussion first with existing definitions of received identity and constructed identity and then turning to Ulinich's text to examine the ways she challenges those two concepts as they relate to Russian identity – and, in turn, previewing how Ulinich advances conversation on national identity and its meaning and importance for personal identity.A brief review of the particular scholarly conversation on national identity and memory will preface my discussion of the metaphor of the palimpsest and its relationship to the concept of intertextuality. My main argument in this chapter is that Sasha Goldberg relies on *remembering*past experiences – and not only *forgetting*them, which is a crucial part of the process of shaping memory,

identity, and even the future – to fashion her sense of self. Where Gary Shteyngart's protagonists confront their hybrid identity in particular nodes where culturally contrasting concepts of space, time, and language intersect, Ulinich's Sasha finds her identity in particular spaces, times, and utterances of *memory* – what I call memory-space, memory-time, and memory-language. Drawing partially on German literary theorist Renate Lachmann's theory of the art of memory, I will show in this chapter that by accessing, acting on, and even rejecting her memory, Sasha Goldberg shapes her consciousness to represent a palimpsest, and that it is in the very act of re-writing her memory that she begins to forge her combined personal and national identity.

Previous literature on Ulinichaddresses her similarities and differences between Shteyngart and other members of their cohort. Three in particular address aspects of Ulinich's writing on its own that gave me some initial points of departure. The first, Klots, ultimately concludes that New York City becomes a space of identity realization for Sasha. He analyzes her journey from a geographical standpoint, whereas I focus on the role of memory in the city space. Klots traces her "convoluted itinerary" from Siberia to New York by way of Phoenix and Chicago, concluding that what began as a search for her father becomes a quest to find her true home; the novel, he says, "is essentially a story of ascent, in which New York's topography, and geography on the whole, sets up the stages for the heroine's self-realization".[113] I agree with this conclusion, but I focus on memory-space instead of geography alone. I argue that it is the memory evoked by a place that gives that place legitimacy as a space for self-realization. New York by itself does not inherently contain the key that will help Sasha unlock her identity; instead, the key is found in the memories that she experiences in New York's particular spaces.

[113]Klots, 53.

Furman offers a point of view that opposes mine. She considers Sasha – and other protagonists of the authorial group – in the context of Bhabha's theory of "third space" as a location for hybrid identity, singling Sasha out as a geographical hybrid more than a cultural hybrid because of her constant movement around and between countries.[114] Furman posits that Sasha is a "cultural misfit" because she does not fit into any of the places she inhabits; just as the group at large feels alienated from Russia and finds difficulty feeling themselves Russia, Furman claims, so Sasha feels alienated from the U.S. and from American culture - mainly because she has such a poor grasp of English.[115] Thus, "Russian" becomes Sasha's default identity because she has no other culture towards which she can turn. I disagree for two main reasons. First, I argue that in this novel identity, while tied to language, is not solely determined by language; other factors such as environment, genes, and social circle contribute to a character's identity. In addition, while Sasha does find English hard to grasp, she has occasional moments where it becomes her default language, such as in a moment in a village outside Moscowwhen she hears the Russian word "*ponayehali*" and instantly misses the English word "*motherfucker*". In general, I claim that Sasha is more complex than a character who reverts to a default identity; instead, she writes and re-writes her identity gradually – calling upon various identity layers – until she finally strikes upon the elusive American identity that she seeks.

Wanner offers a perspective on Sasha that became the starting point for my interpretation of the novel. He describes Sasha's identity as "composite", which is a term I have used sparingly in this chapter, though he bases his word choice on Sasha's "multicultural but also… multiracial character with an entirely imaginary Jewish identity that

[114]See my discussion of Bhabha in Chapter 1, page 36.
[115]Furman, 32.

has no basis in either genetics or religion".[116] He addresses Sasha's "multiracial" identity at length, citing it as her "most original feature", and using it as a point of comparison between Shteyngart's and Ulinich's treatments of African culture.[117] I would argue that Sasha's palimpsest consciousness is her most original feature, though a more complete version of this work might more deeply examine the ways in which Sasha accesses this "multiracial" identity as a component of her national identity. Wanner does not ignore Sasha's Russian heritage, noting at the beginning of his discussion that Sasha's "process of 'Americanization' can become reversible through a temporary or permanent 'repatriation' to Russia", and that she rejects her Russian heritage in fits and starts by fighting with her mother, and her mother's ideas of the ways in which Russians of their social status should behave.[118] I agree with his second claim, but I hold that Sasha's 'repatriations' to Russia serve to *reinforce* her nascent American identity, especially towards the end of the novel when a Russian family in a village calls her "the American", pointing out that she is so different from anything in that place.

The idea of Sasha Goldberg's consciousness as a palimpsest is the most important new idea in this chapter. Pursuant to that, relating Sasha's search for identity to memory and intertextuality is also a new approach to the novel; most scholars analyze her search by examining her language, behavior, relation to space, and experiences in time, as I do, but they have not yet connected these concepts with that of memory. While they have addressed at length Sasha's ethnic identity, they have not acknowledged the possibility for a national identity (into which I incorporate ethnic identity in this work) to be superseded by a personal

[116]Wanner, 166.
[117]Ibid., 169.
[118]Ibid., 166; 170.

identity, nor for a received and a constructivist identity to coexist in a person rather than acting as separate, even opposite, personality elements.

Key Concepts

In my discussion of Shteyngart's novels, I defined *identity* as the calculated self a character puts forward as her most trueas it relates to Anderson's idea of the nation as *imagined community*. Such a community is a group of people composed of members who will – due to the sheer size of a nation and the general difficulty in traversing its entire demarcated landscape – never meet, know, or even be aware of other community members, yet still imagine themselves as part of "a community that is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship".[119] Anderson's idea might explain why Gary Shteyngart's protagonists find it difficult to adjust to life within the communities into which they migrated. As they confront imagined and pronounced allegiances to decide which nation's kinship is more desirable, they find it more fruitful to not choose one nation and its community over another, but instead align themselves – and, in turn, their self-identities –with various communities. I concluded my discussion of the term by noting that one of the most important developments in recent criticism is the emergence of discussions of *hybrid identity*, which I defined as cognizance of simultaneously Russian, Jewish, and American facets of identity without fully inhabiting any *one* of them.

Gary Shteyngart focuses his protagonists' search for self on precisely *that* type of hybrid identity, at which Anya Ulinich hints; she, in contrast, chooses to focus her protagonist's search for self on a different kind of hybrid identity: one composed of

[119]Anderson, 7.

intertwined *personal*(individual) and *national*identities.As much as a person forms his individual identity, someone born into a group (no matter how large, as in the case of an entire nation, or how small, as in the case of his neighborhood)receives his identity unconsciously from the communal culture of that group, as he absorbs the group's behaviors and views. In order for the group to survive, it must pass on its distinguishing characteristics to its members – thus the absorption of group identity into individual identity.[120] Although Shteyngart leads his characters on journeys that help them discover their simultaneous and conflicting national identities that then become the defining components of their personal identities, Ulinich deconstructs national identity as a defining component of personal identity, demonstrating that a character can *surpass* national identity in her search for personal identity. As I argue here, Ulinich claims that national identity is not the most important defining trait of a human being – *personal*identity is, even as the two are meshed.

Although personal identity can be understood as the system of values a person forms for herself while she is coming of age, national identityis more difficult to define. Understanding national identity includes becoming critically aware of and articulating what one views in oneself as 'natural' or 'received' (essentialist identity), and what one has chosen to adopt from either the community into which they were born or an outside community (constructed identity). Thus, I will first discuss those two terms, and their treatment in Ulinich's text, after which I will turn to national identity and its components, briefly summarizing scholarly arguments about it before I address the role of memory in identity formation.

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[120]See Harold Isaacs, *Idols of the Tribe* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 32-33.

I use the term *received* instead of the more controversial *natural* or even *essential* in reference to identity because even the most seemingly 'natural' components of identity received from one's ancestors – even genes, which have for centuries been manipulated or isolated by breeders of both animals and humans – are no longer 'natural', and to say so is to claim a false sense of inheritance. According to contemporary theory, there is no such thing as 'natural' identity, and identities claimed as 'natural' are in fact constructed.The concept of *received* identity is based on Aristotle's idea in *Metaphysics* that the form imposed on matter is that which defines it as a composite, and therefore, a being; for humans, this is the body into which they are born, which is composed of DNA that they receive from their parents.[121] *Constructed* identity, on the other hand, is the identity shaped by the social group around a human. This notion is based on political scientist Harold Isaacs' reading in *Idols of the Tribe* of psychologist Erik Erikson, whose understanding of identity is rooted in Hegel and Nietzsche's competing philosophies that identity can only be known when one encounters another being (Hegel), and that an identity is formed by a confluence of disparate forces (Nietzsche). Erikson applied these notions to social-group interactions, claiming that the group first defines and then passes on its shared characteristicsto individuals, such as physical characteristics, religion, language, and names. That is, the group actively selects which components of identity define its individuals, which the individual is then later free to adopt or discard. These shared characteristics create what Erikson calls a "deep commonality known only to those who shared in it, and only expressible in words more mythical than conceptual", which results in identity becoming "a process 'located' *in the core of the individual* and yet also *in the core of his communal culture*".[122] This communal culture can be a circle as

[121] Hippocrates G. Apostle, transl. *Aristotle's Metaphysics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), 110.
[122] Erik Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968), 22. Quoted in Isaacs, 32-33.

immediate as family members, or as wide as the entire state in which a person lives (since the land itself is a geo-political construct), with groups of varying sizes (school classmates, coworkers, fellow language speakers, to name a few) in between.

Among scholars of nationalism – who range from historians to philosophers to social anthropologists – there is considerable disagreement about the nature of national identity. Ethnographer Anthony D. Smith, for example, claims that national identity is primarily received, relying onthe genes of the ethnic group into which one is born, whereas British-Czech philosopher and social anthropologist Ernest Gellner claims that national identity is constructed, due to the ethnic group's role in shaping collective memory (i.e. that which is passed on to new group members). Ulinich, for her part, confronts these two approaches to identity in what I will refer to as *national/ethnic identity* – that is, an identity based on both perceived genes and that which is passed on from a social group –- which she then links to *personal* identity, which is what I have defined as the value system a person forms while coming of age. Sasha Goldberg's received and constructed characteristics fall under the umbrella of *national* identity that Sasha then re-writes as she establishes her *personal* identity, which fluctuates (as befits a misfit) between artist, mother, mail-order bride, Russian émigrée, housekeeper, teacher, Americanized-Russian-in-Russia, and Russian-tinted American-in-America.

More specifically, Ulinich endows Sasha, and her parents Lubov and Victor, with particular *received*and *constructed* identities that, in several senses, contribute to Sasha's self-formation and eventual re-writing. Sasha's basicidentity is that of a girl with "yellow freckled skin, frizzy auburn hair, and eyes like chocolate eggs" (U:12), who grows into a large frame (she is called "Fatberg" and "Hippo" at school [U:64-65]), and has Russian and African genes (Lubov is Russian, while Victor has a Russian mother and an African father). Her

constructed identity is more complicated; she is born in Siberia and grows up speaking Russian, and she inherits the following: a fake Jewish heritage from her father's last name, the dead-end values of her culturally and economically poor hometown of Asbestos 2 (which clash with the values of the cultural elite, the intelligentsia to which Lubov insists the family belongs), and, presumably from Lubov, an affinity for literary classics, Alexandre Dumas, Jane Austen, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and, later, Vladimir Nabokov. As she grows out of adolescence and into adulthood, she constructs an American, English-speaking identity when she moves to Phoenix.

Lubov's*received* identity is that of a woman with the genetic appearance of "an archetypal Russian beauty" (U:12) (itself a cultural construct) given to her by her Russian parents, but even that description is contentious because so many ethnic groups fall under the term "Russian" (Finno-Ugric, Turkic, Slavic, etc.) that it is difficult to single any one of them out as "archetypal".Her *constructed* identity begins with her birth on the Ukrainian war front, after which she was raised by her grandmother (in her alcoholic mother's absence) in Siberia; not long after her mother's death,Lubov and her grandmother move to Asbestos 2. There, she cultivates her constructed identity as a descendant of "the original Russian intelligentsia" (as her grandmother – who was born in Leningrad, the center of intelligentsia activity until the Revolution – tells her; U:56), spending her wages on polished clothes such as boots with "camel spike heels" and manicures (U:7) to construct a persona that Sasha is convinced "was born wearing a starched shirt and a string of pearls" (U:11). She resists absorbing the cultural and economic poverty surrounding her – and in which she raises Sasha – by going to college and steeping herself in "ancient philosophy and Latin classes, late-night parties with red wine… Bulgakov's plays, and… copying the forbidden poems of Osip Mandelstam into a small notebook on her lap" (U:59). Upon her return from school to

Asbestos 2, she jumps at any chance to move away from Asbestos 2, even if it means marrying a man with a Jewish last name – i.e., Victor Goldberg. She knows that she "want[s] nothing to do with Asbestos 2 men" (U:59), but she also believes from reading Mandelstam that "Asbestos 2 would be a postapocalyptic place" because "it grew out of the demise of civilization he mourned in his poems" (U:62). That civilization – the intelligentsia from which her grandmother claims ancestry – centered itself in Leningrad, which Lubov "knew… hadn't entirely died", since "its bones were still there" (U:63). Even so, Lubov can "imagine members of the intelligentsia surviving behind the unwashed windowpanes of Leningrad's historic facades. But they were there, and she… [was] in Asbestos 2. Could anyone blame her for wanting to stay, as much as possible, in… Petropolis? She'd hoped, just a little, that Victor might get her there" (U:63).

Victor's *received* identity is that of a man with a Russian mother and an African father (though it is not known exactly where in Africa he is from: "Liberia? Ghana? Ethiopia?" [U:19]); his *constructed* identity begins the day after his birth, when his mother leaves him at "Moscow Birthing House Number 8", where he is adopted by a wealthy Soviet couple "because you were the lightest", as his "second mother" Raya explains, referring to the color of his skin (U:19). Victor inherits his adoptive parents' name, Goldberg, which implies Jewish heritage, though Raya and her husband Semyon have none. They are engineers and members of the Soviet *nomenklatura* (the Soviet ruling class composed of bureaucrats and intellectuals) who live comfortably but rarely pay attention to him, so he is left alone to sleep in, watch television, and enjoy snacks of caviar and jam with his French tutor (U:22). He is raised mostly by his nanny, who inadvertently sparks his affinity for Mandelstam when she leaves a volume of his poetry out where he can pick it up and read it. When Victor is fourteen, the Goldberg parents are killed in a car accident, and he must return to a

"Children's House" where most residents are "sick or deformed" (U:23); he spends the next four years of his life there, still in Moscow, surrounded by what is essentially the polar opposite of his life as an adopted child: he no longer has "his privacy, his room, the creaky bookshelf, volumes of Tolstoy, Hugo, and Thackeray that smelled of old glue, the view of the Moscow River out the window" (U:23). Having moved from surroundings of wealth and luxury to those of poor health and living conditions, Victor fares no better when he is drafted into the army, where life "at a remote base in Siberia resembled his life in the orphanage: shaved heads, a room shared with thirty men in horrible, viscous idleness" (U:23). He soon attempts suicide but fails; the stunt lands him in a hospital in Asbestos 2, which is where he meets Lubov.

I mention these characters' received and constructed identities because they are crucial for understanding the way in which Ulinich challenges and deconstructs what can be construed as a *received*Russianness. For a definition of this concept, I borrow Edith Clowes's definition of Russianness in *Russia on the Edge*:

> There are at least two approaches to conceptualizing Russianness – the essentialist and the constructivist. In one view, Russians are ethnically Indo-European, speak 'pure' Russian, adhere to the Eastern Orthodox confession, and swear loyalty to a Russia defined by the myth of the north… The other view broadly embraces as Russian anyone who is a citizen and welcomes the 'hybrid' person who combines ethnic background with a broadly defined sense of citizenship.[123]

The first view espoused there is the essentialist – what I call *received* –approach, whereas the second is the constructivist approach. Ulinich seems to agree with the essentialist view. In *Petropolis*, being Russian means having "blond braids and flushed pink faces" (U:12) and being "white all over… white hair, blue eyes… from the north" (U:14). It means claiming

[123]Edith Clowes, *Russia on the Edge: Imagined Geographies and Post-Soviet Identity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 166.

Moscow as one's geopolitical and cultural center, and it means ignoring religion as a part of daily life – though Ulinich does explore the ramifications of being perceived as ethnically Jewish (for one, Victor is bullied in the army on account of his last name; U:23). It means adhering to certain cultural rituals (for example, Sasha's "snowflake fairy" dance at her elementary school recital [U:13]), and for Lubov and Sasha it especially means adhering to cultural rituals of the intelligentsia, such as taking lessons in piano, ballet, and skating (U:3-4) and reading Russian literature such as Tolstoy (U:64-65), and avoiding behaviors such as biting one's fingernails (U:7) and associating with "lowlifes" (U:47). Finally, it means speaking Russian, even when abroad. Concerning the constructivist approach, Ulinich's novel hinges on clarifying preconceived notions of a constructed Russian identity, especially that identity quoted here as a simple matter of possessing citizenship and a hybrid background. My exploration of this clarification will, as the term suggests, lead to a more precise understanding of what that constructed identity can be.

As the protagonist, and especially as one who re-writes and reconstructs her identity, Sasha presents the biggest challenge to the idea of a received Russianness. Her skin, hair, and eye color immediately go against what her father tells her is an acceptable 'look' for a Russian (it is he who tells her that she cannot be a "snowflake fairy" because she is not white and lacks blond hair and blue eyes), and her large weight – which would seem to evoke the more full-figured "archetypal Russian beauty" – causes Lubov enough embarrassment that she puts Sasha on a diet.[124] Sasha rebels especially hard against Lubov's idea of her daughter as a descendant of the intelligentsia; she has no ear for music (and thus cannot play either the piano or the violin), is too clumsy for ballet or skating, has several unseemly habits such as "star[ing] at the wall with her mouth open, twirl[ing] her hair… [never] keep[ing] her knees

[124]Ironically, Sasha's daughter, Nadia, *could* almost be a snowflake fairy: her "gray eyes peer from under her thick straw-yellow bangs" (U:269).

closed, keep[ing] her tongue in her mouth, smil[ing]" (U:7), and she associates with "lowlifes" who live on the outskirts of town by drinking vodka, smoking, and having sex with one of them.[125] She also does not go to college after high school, as Lubov has prescribed ("Mrs. Goldberg insisted that Sasha would have a *future*" [U:51]), and her first job in the U.S. is housekeeping, where she violates Lubov's dictum that "children of the intelligentsia don't clean toilets. Until they fuck up, their life consists of mathematics, literature, and art" (U:123).

When she initially reaches Moscow, Sasha rejects it as a center (and, in a way, the center of constructed Russian identity), abandoning it for the periphery by taking herself out of art school and finding a marginally acceptable way of leaving Russia with a mail-order bride service that takes her to another periphery in the southwestern United States. It is here that she begins to learn English, thereby rejecting any notion that a Russian speaks only Russian when abroad. Through these ESL classes, she meets fellow Russian immigrants, andbonds with one in particular: Marina, who helps her find places to live in both Chicago and New York. With Marina, Sashaoccasionally uses Russian language, and begins to exhibit and reassert other Russian behaviors during interactions with others inthe U.S., both Russian and American.

For example, Sasha uses Russian language to overcome her dark-colored skin when she arrives in New York City to stay with an elderly Russian immigrant couple in Coney Island (who are friends of Marina's grandparents). When she knocks on the door of their apartment, they look through the peephole and misidentify her twice: first as a "*negritianka*" ['black girl'], and then as Marina herself, despite Sasha's corrections to the contrary (U:233).

[125]Sasha may have unconsciously picked up her habit of sprawling her legs from her mother, who props her feet up on a table in a meeting with Sasha's future art teacher (U:11); see page 106 of this chapter for the specific reference.

She accepts their mistake, deciding that "it was best not to complicate things" since she only plans a two-night stay with them (U:233). Here, she learns that her African heritage can be overlooked if her Russian heritage is palpable (she wryly notes that "[the Lipmans'] problem with her race [had] apparently [been] solved by her language"; she speaks to them in Russian as she shouts her Russian-Jewish name through their door; U:233). By going to New York City in the first place, Sasha has unwittingly emulated her father's search for another center after having fled the periphery, though Sasha's motives are less purely center-seeking than Victor's – she simply wants to find her father. Later, as she settles in to American life in New York, she reaches back to her artistic roots as she teaches an outdoors landscape-painting class, which directly follows a meditation class: she "felt compelled to put on a show... 'Use your *eyes*! Is this what you *see*?' she moaned with a disgusted look on her face. She did it in honor of [her first art teacher] Evgeny Mikhailovich, of [his boss, nicknamed] Bedbug, of their useless, forgotten socialist realism. She enjoyed… being the [ladies'] *strict foreign teacher*" (U:299). That these predilections do surface suggests that she is, indeed, a palimpsest, because her previous Russian identity is never completely erasable and, at times, peeks through to the surface.

Surprisingly, Lubovundermines not so much received Russianness as constructed Russianness – specifically, that of the well-mannered intelligentsia – in several ways. The first glimpse of her deviant behavior comes when she puts her feet on a table when she meets with Sasha's future art teacher to discuss Sasha's potential as a student: "Sasha never suspected that her mother was capable of being sprawled out… Sasha suspected that the world would have to turn ninety degrees to force Lubov Goldberg to put her feet up on a coffee table" (U:11). Because Sasha has seen Lubov as the arbiter of Russianness her entire life, she balks at seeing her mother – who, she quickly realizes, has had a couple of drinks –

compromise her morals in order to uphold her self-image as a woman who is both artsy and intelligent. Later, we learn that Lubov (a librarian by profession) steals books from the Asbestos 2 library so that she can sell them in exchange for imported goods such as shoes, coffee, jewelry, and makeup; this would again seem to violate the moral code of her intelligentsia breeding, but she justifies it as a necessary evil: "She felt that she had no choice. She had her place in the economy" (U:56). Some of these stolen books end up in Victor's possession when he recuperates from his suicide attempt at the Asbestos 2 hospital, which is how Lubov meets him (he sees her carrying them and asks her if she knew his parents, who had similar books in their apartment, and they begin talking); not long after, Lubov performs her most defiant act against her constructed identity by marrying Victor, which her grandmother deems a mistake because he comes from a troubled background and has no clear upward trajectory in life:

> "He'll latch on to anyone who feeds him and doesn't abuse him… He's eighteen! Just a child, an orphanage child. I know orphanage children. Damaged, Luba, is the word. Broken… He'll write his own*Tristia* [the poem over whose lines Victor and Lubov initially bond] for you to get you out of whatever hell you've just rescued him from. And then he'll turn around and find a better place to go and forget all about you". (U:61)

This is, in fact, exactly what Victor does when he receives an invitation to work in the United States: he leaves Lubov (and Sasha) behind.

Victor's exodus can be seen as a challenge to his constructed Russian identity, but he first and foremost challenges received Russianness simply by virtue of the fact that he was born with half African blood (that is, he does not fit the prescribed Indo-European mold). Under the constructivist definition, he is an acceptable Russian because he is a citizen, even though of hybrid background. This Russian citizenship seems to be the last thing he wants, as he jumps at the chance to leave the country: Lubov recalls that he "received a surprise

letter from an American researcher… and a few months later he was gone" (U:61). In a letter he leaves for Sasha upon his departure, he cites a partial truth that he can no longer stand the "oppressive regime" (U:36) that is either his marriage, or the Soviet state, or both. In any event, he never fulfills his promise to return for his wife and daughter. He goes to Moscow before he emigrates, but not even the capital that is his birthplace can satisfy him as a center; when he waits for his visa, he holes himself up in a hotel: he "never once thought to visit parts of the city familiar to him from childhood. He was content to emerge on the other side of the clouds without memories, a new man" (U:224) – thereby indicating his strong desire to leave not only Russia but also his Russian identity (steeped in his memories) behind. Thus he leaves Moscow for another cultural center, New York City, but when he arrives, he realizes to his chagrin that "the problem was that New York City was full of Russians, their singsong voices like stabs in the back" (U:224). Seeing Russian immigrants at every turn, he rejects them by strongly suggesting to his second wife (an American, who in turn refuses to leave the city) that they move into the suburbs (i.e. from the center to the periphery) so that he can be "free of both Russians and blacks" (U:225); here Victor demonstrates that he has retained *one* aspect of his constructed Russian identity: distrust of, if not a blatantly prejudiced attitude toward, black people, ironically enough considering his own half-African ethnic heritage.

The concept of *national identity* may be defined as a self-perception that is both receivedfrom one's forebears and constructed from one's social circle, in the framework of a larger imagined community. Scholars find it difficult to agree on a definition of even one component of that term. Instead of opposing one another, the two components combine to form what I will call *national/ethnic identity*.

The concept of *national identity* first developed in scholarly discourse in the nineteenth century when the British historian Lord Acton wrote in his 1862 book*Nationality* about nationalism and its meaning. He wrote that nations were "(ahistorically and a-culturally) 'natural', thus requiring an imposition of an ethical Legitimist [i.e. monarchical] state above them", espousing a universalist view that all nations can be governed by one type of authority.[126]In his 1924essay *The Nation*, the Austrian social thinker Otto Bauer refuted Acton's view, positing that nations derived their value not from a universal authority but from "national character and culture" – more or less engaging Acton in a debate between his own"culturalism" and Acton's "universalism".[127] Culturalism largely prevailed as Bauer's work brought back to the forefront the work of German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. A Romantic cultural nationalist, Herder wrote in the 1780s in *IdeenzurPhilosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*(*Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Humankind*) that he favored "cultural unity for humanity's sake" and freedom of expression of national character, which is "the product of family features, the climate, the way of life, and education of a people".[128]Some scholars later disagreed, such as Gellner, who claimed in his 1964 book*Thought and Change* that nationalism had no use for the " 'sentimentalities' associated with 'national cultures' ", since, in his view, the idea of "national culture" was a purely functional response to industrialization.[129]

In his 1793 work*BriefezurBeförderung der Humanität (Letters on the Advancement of Humanity)*, Herder also championed a view that language is an indispensable component of national identity because "no greater harm can befall a nation than to be robbed of its

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[126]Gopal Balakrishnan, ed.,*Mapping the Nation* (London: Verso, 2012), 4. This citation is in Balakrishan's introduction to the volume.
[127] Ibid., 4.
[128]Royal J. Schmidt,"Cultural Nationalism in Herder", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 17:3 (June 1956), 407-408.
[129]Balakrishnan, 10.

character by being deprived of its language, for without its language it loses its own mode of thinking (*Denkart*)".[130]Bauer responded to this idea in 1924, writing that language is significant to a nation because it is a *unifying* tool: "It is with the people I stand in closest communication with that I create a common language; and it is with the people with whom I share a common language that I stand in closest communication".[131]In 1990, although British historian Eric Hobsbawm in *Nations and Nationalism* agreed with Bauer that language was crucial for national identity, he wrote of it as a *dividing* tool: to him, its purpose was to separate speakers of one dialect from another by making a "standard idiom out of a multiplicity of actually spoken idioms"– that is, creating a single public-sphere language distinct from several private-sphere languages in an effort to delineate "us" (speakers of the public dialect) from "them" (speakers of the private dialects).[132]

Hobsbawm also argues here that national identity can also depend on ethnicity, but, like language, mainly in a divisive way; his view is that groups use it to exclude rather than include: " 'visible' ethnicity tends to be negative, inasmuch as it is much more usually applied to define 'the other' than 'one's own group'. Hence the proverbial role of racial stereotypes (the 'Jewish nose')".[133]Smith disagrees with Hobsbawm, claiming in *National Identity* (1991) that ethnic identity is actually a unifying component of *national identity*.In an earlier work, Smith held that a person is born into an ethnic community (i.e., a group with an *ethnic identity* formed from "collective cultural units and sentiments of previous eras"), and eventually acquires the language, political awareness, territorial awareness (i.e., cognizance of a border), rituals, common practices, and ideology necessary to *feel* that he belongs to that

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[130]Qtd. in F.M. Barnard, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 12.*Denkart* refers to the "mode of thinking".
[131]Otto Bauer, "The Nation" (1924), republished in part in Balakrishnan, 52.
[132]Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and NationalismSince 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 54.
[133]Ibid., 66.

community.[134]Smith provides a rare combined view of national identity as not only received (one is born into a group) but also constructed (one then picks up the traits of that group), departing from other scholars discussed here who – as I have –largely treat national identity as a constructed concept.

Finally, following Smith's assertion of the nation as a cluster of collective units, anthropologist Katherine Verdery in her 1993 essay "Whither 'Nation' and 'Nationalism'?" responds to Hobsbawm by declaring the nation a symbol "conceived as collective individuals".[135]These individuals have their own *national identity*, which,Verdery claims, exists first on the small level of "the individual's sense of self as national", but also on the larger level of "the identity of the collective whole in relation to others as like kind".[136]This idea of identifying with a nation both on the individual, personal level and on the collective, national level drives Ulinich's novel – and Sasha's exploration of her personal and national identities – from its beginning, and serves as a good departure point for my own definition of *national/ethnic identity*.

A final concept crucial to identity formation that these scholars hint at, but do not address directly, is that of *memory*. Smith draws the most attention to memory when he includes ethnic identity as a component of national identity.*Ethnic identity* hinges on a shared cultural experience preserved from the past for current and future generations to access, augment, transfer, and eventually preservethemselves. Yet ethnic identity is useless without understanding the function of *memory*. In this context, the term *memory* does not apply only to the act of remembering or recalling, as opposed to forgetting; it is useful to incorporate Lachmann's definition of the *art of memory* (that is, the system by which humans organize

[134]Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (New York: B. Blackwell, 1986), 13.
[135]Katherine Verdery, "Whither 'Nation' and 'Nationalism'?", in Balakrishnan, 228.
[136]Ibid., 229.

mnemonic processes) as "a pragmatic aid that helps to improve and sharpen recollection… a distinct part of the cultural domain… [established] so that generation after generation can draw upon its contents".[137]*Memory* helps a nation preserve its ethnic identity, albeit by means of an apparent paradox: its key concepts are "forgetting and remembering (as mechanisms that establish a culture), the storing of knowledge (as a tradition's strategy for survival), the need for cultural experience to be preserved by a bearer (of memory) as witness, or as text".[138]As Lachmannpoints out, *forgetting* is a process crucial to the shaping of memory that upholds citizens' image of their nation because (as the constructivist argument goes) national identity is assembled, however implicitly or explicitly, by cultural and psychological processes. One important cultural process that leads to such memory-shaping is the creation of literature (which Steiner defines as "a form and function of language", with that language being the most fundamental component of human identity).[139]Lachmann mentions Umberto Eco's concept of *arsoblivionalis*("the art of forgetting") in her discussion of fantastic literature, which she says "invents as much as it retrieves… [*arsoblivionalis*] culminates in the "obliteration of accumulated, transmitted knowledge and the creation of counter-memory".[140]Lachmann's study of "wishful forgetting" begins with sixteenth-century literature, when Descartes postulated that thinking can only begin when ideas previously acquired have been erased.[141]This forgetting occurs in the cultural sphere as well, when histories of a culture are written and "a cherished memory is kept alive in spite of its being proven false by conscientious historiographic reconstructions of the past", through:

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[137]Renate Lachmann, "Cultural Memory and the Role of Literature", *European Review* 12:2 (2004), 166.
[138]Ibid., 166.
[139]Steiner, 95. He writes in the same work that human identity is a "speech-function" (61), and that "man becomes man as he enters a linguistic stage" (66) – in sum, speech is what identifies humans as separate from animals, which may or may not be true anymore.
[140]Lachmann 2004, 174.
[141]Ibid., 175. Certainly, the process of "wishful forgetting" is as old as humanity itself.

> new disclosures and reinterpretations of documents, the discovery of war atrocities, uncovering their traces in mass graves, [which] may alter the entire edifice built up in cultural memory. A past that was venerated as heroic may thus be lost or radically reinterpreted. The alternative is to deny the truth of certain findings because, if they were accepted, everything that was taken for granted about the past would break down. […] A striking example from the recent past is the rewriting of the last century of the history of Russia.[142]

Lachmann's examples support Gellner's statement in his 1993 essay "The Coming of Nationalism and Its Interpretation: The Myths of Nation and Class" that forgetting – "amnesia" – is just as crucial for an understanding of national identity as is memory. To him, "in the East they remember what never occurred, [while] in the West they forget that which did occur".[143]That is, identity in the East – for Gellner, the European parts of the former Ottoman Empire, and countries to the east in which Communism arose – in his grossly sweeping view, is formed from false memories created to replace the memory of events or eras in a nation's past that it would rather forget. In a sense, nations in the East augment and suppress memories, whereas nations in the West – for Gellner, the Americas and the non-Marxist parts of central and western Europe –simply discard them. Western nations, in just as overgeneralized fashion, form identity by simply ignoring the events or eras they would rather forget; it can be said, then, that national identity in the West arises from a vacuum, since Western nations do not create new, false memories to supplant the discarded memories.

Gellner partially draws these generalizations from French philosopher Ernest Renan's idea (put forth in the 1882 essay "Qu'est-cequ'un nation?") that nations have not only common memories and shared pasts essential to their formation, but also a shared, collective forgetfulness of the questionable (from a moral or ethical standpoint) events that

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[142]Ibid., 171.
[143]Ernest Gellner, "The Coming of Nationalism and Its Interpretation", in Balakrishnan, 138.

led to their formation (he gives the example that no Frenchman can say if he is a Visigoth, Burgundian, etc. – only that he is a Frenchman – but that every Frenchman has likely forgotten the massacre of St. Bartholomew).From Renan's theory, Gellner sketches a loose image of national identity as a vehicle for what may be called "createdmemory" in the East, and of amnesia – "induced oblivion" – in the West.[144]

While the concepts of "created memory" and "induced oblivion" are gross generalizations, they are stilluseful for my treatment of Lubov (Sasha's mother). Memory helps keep Lubov alive by allowing her to construct a past in which she had a future; for Sasha herself, memory helps free her from the past which was constructed *for her* (Lubov tells Sasha from the moment she gives birth to Nadia that Nadia is her sister, and not her daughter) even as she draws on it to create her own future. Yet Lubov's constructed past is simultaneously a way of forgetting for her; she engages in revisionism to prevent herself from experiencing the breakdown to which Lachmann refers – an endeavor at which Lubov ultimately fails. Sasha uses "wishful forgetting" in a different way, as she tries to forget the pain of being separated from her daughter in order to create a better future for both of them.

Returning to Lachmann's point about the preservation of cultural experience through text, insofar as a nation has readers who value and synthesize a text's meaning, a nation's literary heritage acts as its textual bearer – and builder– of memory, even though the texts that comprise this heritage shape a nation's memory not just in terms of historiography – i.e. what historians record, which she considers different from literary texts – but also in terms of what that nation identifies itself by – i.e. its "most exemplary" literary

[144]Ibid., 139.

products.[145]This heritage, or *canon*, is a shared set of texts that "provide the place where memory is shaped within a given culture".[146] This set often consists of *classical* works – i.e. the "most exemplary" literary texts – because, as Lachmann says, "the classical is the place where, from the interplay between remembering and forgetting, everything that seems to confirm the identity of a group interested in building models is retained, nurtured, and carefully preserved".[147]It may be said that *all* literary texts of a certain nation help shape that nation's cultural memory, but *not all* of those texts can be included in that nation's canon; Lachmann hints at this dichotomy when she says (in "Cultural Memory and the Role of Literature") that "literature is a mnemonic medium that not only creates new texts to be remembered but also recovers suppressed knowledge, revives obsolete knowledge and reincorporates formerly rejected unofficial or arcane traditions of knowledge".[148]This creation of new texts concurrent with the revival of suppressed or arcane knowledge illustrates the "interplay between remembering and forgetting" that is crucial to the formation of a nation's cultural memory.

Whether or not a text should then be included in the canon is a matter of debate that continues even to this day, Lachmann says, partially because of arguments for and against avant-garde texts, and partially because of particularly Russian issues of censorship – especially of what she calls "taboo authors, such as… [Acmeist] Osip Mandelstam, and of taboo works (for example… Vladimir Nabokov's works, which were considered to be sensational occurrences) that are granted reentry into the fold".[149]It is not by chance that the two major Russian literary worksvital to *Petropolis*(and for whom, in turn, *Petropolis* is vital for

[145]Lachmann, *Memory and Literature: Intertextuality in Russian Modernism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 178.
[146]Ibid., 176.
[147]Ibid., 176.
[148]Lachmann 2004, 173.
[149]Lachmann 1997, 182.

continued inclusion in the canon) are a poem cycle by Mandelstam, *Tristia* – which contains the poem that supplies the novel's title – and Nabokov's memoir *Speak, Memory*.

In terms of Lachmann's first point about the preservation of cultural experience through a witness, I contend that it is the human being behind the text – i.e. its author, and not the text itself – that is the more valid bearer of memory. The human being has the ability and agency to write and over-write the text's contents, whereas texts lack this ability or agency.

In *Memory and Literature: Intertextuality in Russian Modernism*, Lachmann contends that the creation of text – literature – is not the act of creating something completely new, but instead of what she calls "making literature *from* literature, that is, writing as continuation, writing as a rejoinder, or rewriting".[150]When a writer engages in this rewriting, he accesses his memory (i.e. what he has read) to form in a new textual space (i.e. the physical text he produces) a text that is both new and old, because he cannot help rewriting texts that are already in his consciousness. This *intertextuality*– "contact between one text and others"– is achieved by "the insertion of foreign texts into a new one through the use of quotation or allusion, the creation of a contaminated work from a large number of heterogeneous texts, or literary refutations and rejoinders in relation to an already known text – perhaps even its rewriting".[151]

The crucial point of Lachmann's discussion of intertextuality is that texts require a human agent to establish contact with other texts; a palimpsest text cannot erase and rewrite itself. Humans, in contrast,*can* rewrite not only literary texts but also their contents and their own selves. In this sense, Sasha Goldberg acts as a palimpsest, even exhibiting some intertextual traits: following Lachmann, it can be said that she has been created from a

[150]Ibid., 37.
[151]Ibid., 30; 38.

number of heterogeneous forebears, and that she adopts and accesses her own literary heritage (where Lubov and Victor's most influential text is Mandelstam's *Tristia*poem cycle – which unites them – Sasha's is Nabokov's memoir *Speak, Memory*, which inspires her to escape from the Tarakans). She also refutes and rejoins the already-known people whence she originated. Returning briefly to the *canon*, scholars hold it in high, almost sacrosanct, regard because it bears the cultural memory writ large of the educated community, though re-writing and re-imagining the canon – even as "parody or travesty"[152] – results not in its violation but in its veneration. Lachmann writes elsewhere that "an aesthetic and semantic surplus" emerges when canonical texts are re-fashioned, and it is this surplus that keeps literary (and other artistic) works alive and relevant as the culture itself adapts to necessary changes.[153] Re-writing one's identity as a witness to cultural memory will still affect the group at large – one person's reading of the canon *can* challenge established meanings of that canon – but Sasha Goldberg's focus is on her *personal* identity, and how she can rewrite the identity given to her by her parents upon her creation (in a sense, her own contact with and rewriting of her hereditary canon). Her personal identityis intertwined with her national and ethnic identity, which is precisely why I suggest that a person can, indeed, act as a *palimpsest*, formed of his or her current and former selves that manifest in layers of all three identity types.

To define the term "palimpsest" more precisely, I refer to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) definition, which is "a parchment or other writing surface on which the original text has been effaced or partially erased, and then overwritten by another [presumably a person]; a manuscript in which later writing has been superimposed on earlier

[152]Ibid., 38.
[153]Lachmann, "Mnemonic and Intertextual Aspects of Literature", *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008),309.

(effaced) writing".[154]While the OED's definition implies that the term applies only to an object with a surface upon which text can be somehow inscribed, I suggest that it can apply in the abstract to a human being, where the surface can be the physical body or the conscious self in the present tense, with the conscious self in the past tense underneath. I partially base this idea on the work of literary scholars George Bornstein and Ralph Williams, whose study *Palimpsest* traces the evolution of the term first as an editorial construct and more recently as a cultural construct. They suggest that "both German and Anglo-American theorists accept the validity of multiple versions of [an] artwork, each possessing its own integrity", and that such a theory of versions, then, emphasizes "the multiplicity of versions themselves rather than on privileging a final one to which the others seem mere stepping-stones"; that is, process, not product, makes a work an object of art.[155]From this point of view, then, "the palimpsest becomes less a bearer of a fixed final inscription than a site of the process of inscription, in which acts of composition and transmission occur before our eyes".[156]In *Petropolis*, the re-written and inscribed surface is usually Sasha's conscious self, but she does occasionally alter her body and physical appearance as well (for example, she uses part of her very first paycheck to get her thick, frizzy hair put into braids, which her father perceives as "*too black*" [U:260, italics in original]). I will show that Sasha embodies the palimpsest by connecting the concepts of *identity* and *memory,* which are the key components of the metaphor of the palimpsest; *identity* makes up the layers of the palimpsest that the person writes and over-writes, while *memory* allows a person to access what has been overwritten. I will also show that these connections of identity and memory occur at three

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[154]"Palimpsest, n." Def. 2a. *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, March 2005). http://dictionary.oed.com/; accessed 24 February 2014.
[155]George Bornstein and Ralph G. Williams, eds.,*Palimpsest: Editorial Theory in the Humanities*(Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 3.
[156]Ibid., 3-4.

focal points: memory-space, memory-time, and memory-language, which I will explain in more detail in the "Typology" section of this discussion.

In *Petropolis*, Sasha Goldberg's ethnic heritage as a Jew is foregrounded in her last name, but her dark-skinned and frizzy-haired looks suggest an entirely different, African, heritage. While Sasha grapples with the Russian, Jewish, African, and American layers of her national identity, the novel's core centers around her attempt to establish her *personal* identity as an independent entity suitably apart from her mother's as Sasha becomes a mother herself at the age of fifteen. I argue that these struggles are precisely what make Sasha a *palimpsest*: her 'original writing' – her childhood and the genetic identity she was given by her mother and father – does not completely disappear, as her childhood self occasionally bubbles to the surface (for example, in the U.S. she retains the Russian language that she grew up speaking), yet she remains in constant conversation with the identity of both her parents and the wider circle that forms her cultural and ethnic community. *Memory* is what makes this conversation possible, as Sasha *continues* her parents' identity simply by existing – but, with memory, she can reply to this identity (by rebelling or acquiescing) or re-write it (by reinventing herself and forging her own path). Sasha replies and re-writes by getting pregnant (rebelling, albeit accidentally), going to art school at her mother's behest (acquiescing), fashioning a mail-order bride persona (reinventing herself), and moving to the U.S. (forging her own path). Along the way, she emulates her District 7 art teacher by partially erasing components of her identity, though she also uses her memory to *access these partially erased layers* and synthesize her most complete identity from said layers, as they interact with her present, non-erased self.

Plot Summary

Sasha, a budding artist, is born to a mixed-heritage couple in the Siberian town of Asbestos 2. Her father, Victor, who is half African, half Russian, and was raised Jewish (but

no longer practices the religion in any sense), leaves Sasha and her mother, Lubov, for the U.S. when she is ten. Sasha gets pregnant when she is fifteen, and Lubov (who then raises Sasha's daughter, Nadia) sends her to art school in Moscow, where she signs up for a mail-order bride service as her ticket to the U.S. to find her father and eventually to make a better life for Nadia and for herself. Soon after landing in Phoenix, she escapes her husband and moves to Chicago, which she in turn escapes for New York City, cleaning the homes of the wealthy (beginning with a stint as the live-in maid for the Tarakan family in Chicago) along the way to support herself. Her employer's son, JakeTarakan, helps her escape from Chicago to Brooklyn, where she finds her father, obtains her green card, and finally begins to make her way in the U.S. When her mother dies, Sasha retrieves Nadia from Asbestos 2, and she and Jake re-connect and plan to raise the girl together.

Typology

As with Shteyngart's work, I have here examined *Petropolis* for repeated figures, images, or words, some of which echo the patterns I found in Shteyngart's novels. Similar character types, spatial orientations, temporal situations, and language usages emerge in Ulinich's work, but, most importantly, similar *nodes* emerge in her work as well. In the Shteyngart chapter, a *node* is a place where space, time, and word intersected; in this chapter, a *node* is a place where memory intersects with space, time, or word to create what I will refer to as *memory-space*, *memory-time*, and *memory-word*. In these three nodes, the metaphor of the palimpsest is made most clear, as Sasha Goldberg's identity emerges at these intersections.

Ulinich's novel employs a few types of stock character who, as in Shteyngart's work, help the protagonist discover her identity. That protagonist, Sasha Goldberg, is an émigré picara – a rogue, a border-crossing adventurer – who also happens to be a racial misfit like her father, Victor, who is also an émigré but not at all a picaro. Surrounding Sasha are foils

(Alexey, who lures her into a loveless relationship that ends with her pregnancy, and who tries to get her to stay in Russia when she returns for her daughter), mentors (her art teachers in Asbestos 2, who guide her burgeoning art career in childhood but also influence her teaching style as an adult), helpers (Marina, her first Russian friend who helps her escape her marriage in Arizona; Jake, the son of the villain Tarakan family who helps her escape from employment in what she calls "a true jail" [U:182]), and villains (the Tarakan family, especially Mrs. Tarakan; Sasha's mother, Lubov, and Victor's second wife, Heidi – at least from Sasha's point of view).[157]

In terms of spatial orientations, Ulinich departs from Shteyngart's choices of the enclave and border space as the most important types of space (which refers to an area that has some kind of meaning assigned to it). Instead, she emphasizes body space, ideal space, imagined space, home space, city space, cultural space, and artistic space (in the form of illustrations in the text). She does agree with Shteyngart that liminal space is an important space type for identity realization, but the similarity ends there. Ideal space indicates a destination at which a character prefers to be located because she thinks it will allow her to improve on, or escape from, a negative situation. For Sasha, two ideal spaces early in the novel are her desired destinations of the District 7 Art Studio in Asbestos 2 (where she hopes to – and does – find a social group that accepts her, feeling upon entry that she "stepped into her own dream" [U:8]), and the RepinLyceum in Moscow (where she hopes to hone her art skills to a degree that will allow her to leave Asbestos 2 and lead a more fruitful life; U:79). Imagined space is a place mentally transferred and re-constituted elsewhere, either in homage to a place left behind, such as a homeland, like the Soviet-themed Chicago

[157]I say "from Sasha's point of view" because the reader sees parts of Lubov's and Heidi's points of view, which offer a deeper understanding of their reasonsfor standing in Sasha's way. The reader may conclude that those reasons are not as intentionally malicious as Sasha makes them seem.

apartment belonging to Russian immigrants where Sasha spends a couple of nights before beginning work at the Tarakans' (U:135); or, in substitution during a daydream, as when the Tarakans' lawn becomes Vladimir Nabokov's childhood backyard in Sasha's reverie about revolutionary activity (U:179).

Home space in this context refers only to the town or city that a character calls home – i.e. that she would list on a passport or other official form. Sasha begins the novel in her childhood hometown of Asbestos 2, and ends it in her adult hometown of Brooklyn in New York City. City space refers to the general cityscapes frequented by a character or characters; Ulinich focuses on five in her novel: Asbestos 2, Moscow, Phoenix, Chicago, and New York. Cultural space signifies a place that helps preserve some sort of national identity or memory, or even personal identity. Ulinich mentions that Sasha's elementary school class visited an ethnographic museum the day that her father leaves her and Lubov (U:34); moreover, Lubov works at a library (U:55), and eventually dies there (U:321). The Tarakans' house, Sasha notes immediately upon her arrival there, is more of a museum for collecting and keeping refugees than a livable home space (U:153). Body space is the area occupied by the physical human corpus; Sasha's awkward, clumsy body is the dominant physical form, but her mother's beautiful – even when dead – Russian body (U:321, and, in a photograph, U:324) and her daughter's skinny body (U:295) also occupy important places in the novel. Liminal space signifies the threshold where two or more meaningful places meet; Asbestos 2 contains two types of liminal space: one, the crossroads that are formed by its streets (U:3, 41), and two, the so-called "barrel houses" – named because they look more like nuclear waste barrels than actual residences – located at the edge of the town's border, where Sasha becomes pregnant (U:49, 72).

Artistic space in this context refers to the five illustrations Ulinich includes in the text; the first is a reproduction of the map Katia draws for Sasha containing directions to the so-called "barrel houses". The second illustration is a silhouetted view of palm tree-tops and power lines in Phoenix, above which floats an image of a passenger cradling his head in the brace position, presumably based on graphics from an airplane emergency procedure card. The third illustration is a re-imagined Soviet slogan often seen on porcelain plates; around the border of the plate is the phrase "Ктонеработает,тотнеест" [he who does not work, does not eat], and in the middle a toilet brush crosses over a bottle of cleaning solution superimposed over a Soviet passport marked by the Cyrillic abbreviation СССР [USSR]. The fourth drawing is a silhouetted bird perched atop a bare-branched tree; the bird bends backwards, looking skyward, with its beak perpendicular to the ground. The final illustration riffs on Leonardo DaVinci's *Vitruvian Man*, replacing his perfectly proportioned man with an imperfectly proportioned adult Sasha, her back to the page, her hair tied in twin ponytails, wearing jeans and a T-shirt with a bag slung around her shoulder and an opened music box to her left and behind her. Above her is written the name "Petropolis". The final three images remind the reader of key plot events (Sasha breaking her mother's dictum "Children of the intelligentsia don't clean toilets" [U:123]; Sasha's reunion with her father wherein they rehash his constant comparison of life to climbing a tree [U:249]; Sasha maturing from a child of "Petropolis" into "*Homo Post-Sovieticus*" [U:311]). The second illustration makes graphic the very landscape that spurs Sasha's realization that she can erase herself, and the first illustration – the map to the "barrel houses" where Sasha's life is forever changed – exemplifiesthe most important type of space: *memory-spaces*, or areas where place and memory meet in a character's consciousness that then trigger some kind of realization or discovery about that character's identity.

Ulinich also draws on temporal situations similar to those of Shteyngart; the iterations of time (which I define as a moment in which something changes, i.e. an event) in her novel are the narrative present and past, the imagined present and past, and the imagined future. The narrative present refers to the real-time plot of the novel as it occurs, whereas the narrative past refers to the past events of the protagonist's life as portrayed in the novel through flashbacks or a simple narrative switch from one chapter to another. *Petropolis*'s plot switches from the narrative present – wherein Sasha is a young adult living in New York with her daughter – to the narrative past, moving from her more immediate past as a recent immigrant to her more distant past as a child and young teenager in Siberia. Both the past and the present can be imagined (that is, conceived in the mind as a form of escapism); in the imagined past, for example, Sasha imagines her great-grandmother's Soviet experience as she studies a piece of 1920s porcelain propaganda (U:163-164), while in the imagined present, Sasha fantasizes about the home lives of her fellow housekeepers at the Tarakans' (U:174). The future is imagined as well, as Sasha sees herself as a subject in her own future paintings with an idealized future husband (U:86-87).

As in Shteyngart's novels, each time type can interrupt or otherwise clash with another. For example, the past interrupts the present when Sasha lies in bed with her husband and is suddenly reminded of a childhood memory of her father (U:118), and the future interrupts the past when Victor, in a flashback, recalls his feeling of dread at the thought of Sasha's schoolchild future when her classmates realize that she has a Jewish last name (U:16). Yet the most crucial temporal situation in Ulinich's novel is that of *memory-time* – a moment when a particular type of time meets memory to reveal something about a character's identity – which I address at the end of this discussion, since it is the most important nodal point for identity realization.

Finally, concerning language (i.e. the words and phrases that characters use to communicate and express identity), Ulinich – like Shteyngart – uses idioms, translated phrases, and incorrect words and phrases that show familiarity (or lack thereof) with multiple tongues. Like Shteyngart, she inserts both Russian and Hebrew into her English-language prose, but in contrast to him, she uses Hebrew much more sparingly, and only in the context of spoken prayers for rituals, as when lighting candles or washing hands with the Tarakans.

The Russian language that Ulinich inserts is mostly translated, with some words or phrases left untranslated but contextually comprehensible (for example, her use of the word "*negritianka*" (U:93), and some idioms carefully explained (for example, Sasha and Lubov using Lubov's favorite expression with one another, "*vozmisebya v ruki*. Get a grip, take yourself into your own hands" (U:244). The English language in the novel falls under three types: broken (Sasha's initial attempts at English with her American husband [U:114], and Nadia's own fledgling English when she arrives in New York with Sasha [U:323]), fluent (specifically, its elusivity – Sasha thinks she will never speak her husband's fluent English [U:119-120], though she does eventually recall an English phrase in place of a Russian phrase [U:186]), and accented (Sasha's friend Marina speaks English with a heavy Russian twinge [U:93], and Marina's relatives sing "Happy Birthday" as "*Hepybursday*" [U:144]). There are only two instances of Russian and English code-switching, however; Sasha and Marina engage in word-for-word switching when Marina says "Fuck!", and Sasha responds with "*Da*, fuck!" [U:122), having also just mixed Russian and English idioms (following "water under the bridge", English, with "last year's snow", Russian;U:122). One of Marina's relatives engages in one last moment of word-for-word substitution when she tells Sasha "If you must know, I have a *vozlublenny*['lover']" (U:143). Most importantly, though, it is *memory-*

word – language that occurs as a result of a memory, expressing something that a character understands about her identity – that is the most important language type in *Petropolis*.

Memory is the vehicle by which people on both an individual and collective level not only recall and remember but also forget and reshape the events crucial to their ethnic, cultural, and psychological identity. More specifically, on an individual level, the word "memory" implies the early parts of a palimpsest – the hidden layers formed in one's childhood – that surface in adolescence and adulthood and lead to a reassembly, even a synthesis, of self. When memory meets space, time, and word, particular nodal points of identity realization occur, both on the personal and national level, though I argue that the personal *supersedes* the national. I begin my discussion of Sasha Goldberg's identity exploration through memory-nodes with instances where space and word meet memory, and conclude my discussion with the most important nodal points of identity realization: those where time evokes memory.

I define *memory-space* as a location in which a character experiences an acute intrusion of recollection – as when the settingtriggerspositive or negative memories– or, in some cases, memory loss, as when is the setting helps a character realize that she has forgotten something. Sasha's path to employment as a housekeeper at the Tarakans' mansion in suburban Chicago is a convoluted one that has led her from Moscow (where she drops out of art school and signs up with a mail-order bride service) to Phoenix (where her ex-husband, Neal, lives) to Chicago, where she rooms with the Vasilievs (relatives of the uncle of Marina, her ESL classmate in Phoenix) before she is essentially dumped on the Tarakans' front porch. The otherworldly house – which Marina's uncle, VitalyVasiliev, refers to as the "Waterfall House" – so occupies Sasha's physical and mental energy that she spends an entire month there with no more than a passing thought of her baby daughter, Nadia. Thus

the house becomes a place where Sasha can *forget* the pain of her past. Sitting in her sparsely decorated room one day, Sasha suddenly realizes that

> this place was worse than the Vasilievs', worse than Neal's house. Sasha thought wistfully about the Repin Lyceum, about lively Moscow streets… When she pictured holding Nadia in her arms, a warm, heavy bundle, her eyes remained dry. Here, at the Tarakans', she was accomplishing what she'd failed to achieve in Arizona: the pain of being away from Nadia was becoming duller, more like a memory of pain. The Waterfall House, with its inflexible regime of work and ritual, felt like a true jail. Sasha noticed that her yearning for Nadia had been replaced by constant, nagging anger. (U:182)

Here, forgetting about Nadia allows Sasha to suppress her maternal identity and focus on her national identity: she is able to let her Russian identity shine through and drive her to leave her present, stifling situation and move towards obtaining an American identity (even if at this point "American identity" refers strictly to the papers that will allow her to stay in the country to continue her search for her father). While this moment is an example of national identity prevailing over personal identity, Sasha soon supplants her national identity with her personal identity, as the reader sees when she finally escapes the Tarakans and begins her journey to New York. The anger that Sasha feels as an immigrant who is treated as a "toy", as Jake puts it (U:165), partially compels her to approach Mr. Tarakan – after a month of wondering why he always seems to avoid speaking to her – about her immigration status, though in the moment the reader is not entirely certain why Sasha is angry. She may simply want Nadia back, or she may want her independence and legal status as an American immigrant so that she can begin to *get* Nadia back. She may also want to find her father, Victor, and at least see him again, if not ask him questions about his sudden departure from Asbestos 2; she may also want him – a legalized citizen – to help her with her own legal status. A maternal part of her may also feel angry that she no longer feels hurt by the distance (physical and emotional) between Nadia and her, but it may also feel angry

that she is trapped at the Tarakans' and cannot immediately act to improve Nadia's situation, much less her own.

Sasha may not realize that her anger could stem from a more deeply-rooted, received national identity that precedes her, and her parents, by several generations: her Russian literary heritage. About five weeks prior to the moment above wherein Sasha begins to understand that she is forgetting Nadia, she is cleaning a room in the Tarakan house when she looks out of the window and has an entirely different realization: that she, like certain fictional characters before her, possesses the Russian rebellious spirit that she can use to free herself from being a "captive of the Talmud", as Jake says (U:185). She sees

> the carefully premeditated slope of the Tarakans' lawn, at the peeing cupid… At the Vasilievs', Sasha had armed herself with a dictionary and slogged through Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*… now she realized that, in her mind, Nabokov's bucolic lost world – an idyll of bicycle bells, butterfly nets, and sun-flecked forest paths – had always resembled the Tarakans' backyard. In the latter part of the book, a bloody revolution caused the author's 'removal from the unforgettable scenery'. The revolution appeared to come out of nowhere, like a tornado or an unfortunate loose brick to the head. Before she came to the Tarakans', Sasha hadn't given much thought to the future rebels themselves… Now she felt as if [they] were collectively sending her a message. Sasha Goldberg received it into her hands, irresistible like a reflex. Dropping her broom with a thud, she allowed her fingers to curve around the handle of an invisible pitchfork. (U:179)

Here, Sasha almost acts as a vessel forthe Russian literary heritage (albeit translated into English); she is a receptive audience for the cries of Nabokov's peasants, even as she the reader is the polar opposite of the exiled author. Unlike her mother, who recalls Mandelstam's poetry about death – her favorite – as "a soundtrack to her misery, her thwarted desires" (U:59), Sasha immediately takes action: her fingers curl around an unseen weapon, and within a matter of days she has approached Mr. Tarakan twice about helping

her become a legal immigrant.[158] While he stalls her for nearly a month, he relents eventually, and Jake helps Sasha escape from their house so that she can move on, find her father, and – as she muses to herself in the Chicago airport waiting for her flight to New York – finally have "the moment she'd been waiting for, her third escape, an instant of perfect anonymity. She was nobody's pet Soviet Jew, just an element of the landscape, a girl in the airport" (U:230). In the airport, then, Sasha's personal identity overwrites her national identity, as she becomes an autonomous, unnamed, undesignated person completely free of the confined, labeled, pigeonholed "pet Soviet Jew" she leaves behind.

In fact, Sasha gets a prime chance to re-write her national identity as she leaves Chicago behind and arrives in New York. Ironically, when she reaches the Lipmans' (Russian immigrants who live in Coney Island and are friends of Marina's grandparents), they misidentify her twice: first as a "*negritianka*", and then as Marina herself, despite Sasha's corrections to the contrary that she shouts through the door in Russian (U:233). When they open the door after hearing the Russian, Sasha learns that her African heritage can be dismissed if her Russian heritage is emphasized. Later, her African heritage will become a point of pride when she uses her looks to scare a passing pedestrian, but in this instance, she lets her Russian self bubble to the front, and decides it most beneficial to let it remain there.[159] Within a matter of hours, her personal identity takes over, as she lies on the Lipmans' couch in an attempt to sleep, thinking about her real reason for leaving Russia: "If she were to do it again, she'd tolerate Neal all the way to INS and then all the way to the bank… she'd trade her selfish loves for Nadia's future… *Children of the intelligentsia don't trade*

[158]It might even be said that by reading, interpreting, and responding to Nabokov's work in this way, Sasha metaphorically creates its palimpsest. By re-writing his work, she kick-starts the process of re-writing herself yet again. (I thank Edith Clowes for suggesting this idea to me.)

[159]On her way to a subway stop, she meets the stare of an elderly man doing tai chi nearby, who quickly walks away from her. Grinning widely, she is "for the first time completely happy to be a big black girl in an ugly coat. Wow, she was capable of frightening the elderly. She liked Coney Island." (U:240)

love for money. Children of Asbestos 2 don't return home empty-handed" (U:239). Here, her personal identity as a mother and a member of an elite Soviet class intertwines with her national identity as a native of her Russian hometown; neither dominates over the other, as her ability to provide for her daughter depends directly on her status as a person who calls Asbestos 2 home – or, as Sasha realizes, on her status as a person who now has the means to acquire, through her émigré father, "legal residency, work, and money" (U:239). Sasha complicates matters by injecting her constructed American identity into the mix, telling Nadia in an imaginary letter that her new homeland – the United States–

> *has done its job. I don't dream of holding you any more… I hardly remember you, but I know what you need. You will have food and clothes. You will also have light-up sneakers and cherry-flavored vitamins, cartoon bedsheets, and a dollhouse with tiny furniture. I will hold you from a distance with soft teddy bear arms, I will talk to you with singing greeting cards. I will become your means of survival.* (U:239; italics in original)

This declaration implies that Sasha can only acquire such items while in the U.S., among Americans with access to them. In a sense, then, Sasha's American identity – as someone who can provide for her child – emerges to subdue her Russian identity, which would have her still in Asbestos 2, "another unemployed eater of anemic ditch-grown vegetables" (U:239). These national identities are ultimately trumped by her personal identity one last time, though, as her final statement to Nadia demonstrates: in a neat reversal of Sasha's prior choice to emphasize her national identity (as a Russian) over her personal identity (as a mother),she will give Nadia life because she is, above all, a mother - *her* mother.

When Sasha does return to Asbestos 2 as a legalized American after a two-year absence with money, clothes, toys, and gifts for both Nadia and Lubov, she does not immediately bring Nadia back to the U.S. with her, but instead promises to return in ten months and send money and food in the interim. She departs her hometown in a bus headed for the local airport, and as the bus moves away, Sasha looks out of the back window at

Lubov and Nadia, who wave until they cannot see her any longer and then turn around to walk home.

> Despite the rusting scaffolding of the never-finished District Soviet annex behind them, they look like an old lithograph of peasants in their matching kerchiefs. Sasha reminds herself that she will soon come back, but can't stop feeling that she is looking into a distant past, as if the graffitied, filthy bus is the future.(U:279)

This scene does not match previous memory-spaceswhere Sashahas recalled an event from her past; instead, it resembles a snapshot of a past that Sasha never experienced but with which she is still familiar. The "peasants in their matching kerchiefs" may have been more at home in the Tolstoy she read as a schoolgirl, or even the Nabokov she reads at the Vasilievs', but they are still a part of her Russian cultural heritage. As a memory-space, such a scene does not merely look back at the past, as Sasha is literally doing out of the window of the bus; it also looks forward into the future, as embodied in Nadia and as expressed by Sasha's reminder to herself that "she will soon come back". Not long after this episode, the reader learns that Sasha spends two weeks in Asbestos 2 every year after this initial visit (U:291), and she brings more food and clothing with her each time – thereby settling more and more into the part of her identity that is an American who can provide for her child.

The future American Sasha – the one with dreadlocks, for whom English still occasionally causes fits, but who buys her daughter a "GIRLS RULE" t-shirt (U:291) – emerges, perhaps startlingly, within a few hours of her departure from Asbestos 2. On her way to the Moscow airport, she takes a detour to see Alexey, Nadia's father, who lives with his mother and wife in a village southeast of the city. When his mother opens the door to greet Sasha, she exclaims "Oh, who do I *see*? Sasha! The American!" (U:281). Her national identity is presented first, and it is telling that Alexey's mother – who knows Sasha from her days at the District 7 Art Studio, and primarily knew Sasha as a Russian – announces her

guest as a foreigner. The small brick building in which Alexey and his mother and wife live becomes not just a space in which Sasha is identified as an American, but also a memory-space for Sasha as soon as she sees Alexey, whose body space triggers Sasha's memories of intimacy – and thus her personal identity as a woman, about to become a mother – with him. She realizes that he has not changed much since their trysts, save for growing taller; he still makes the same faces and she is still "captivated by his hands and face… [has she] come here to test her body's memory?" (U:283) Years ago, Sasha would have yielded to the sight of Alexey's hands and face, and indeed she does let him kiss her in his car as he drives her to the airport (albeit in a roundabout way, as he takes her on a detour to look at an art installation with which he was involved that Sasha finds distasteful), but she *rejects* her body's memory during the kiss, turning away: "Alexey's kiss feels too hard, suffocating, wrong" (U:285). He pleads with her to stay with him, but she rebuffs him: "What do you want me to do, stick around and be your second wife? Drive me to the airport. […] I used to love you, and now I don't. Please drive, or I'm taking the metro" (U:285-286). By rejecting him, she not only erases any traces of, but also begins to close the chapter about, Alexey and their history in Russia, giving herself the chance to write a new history – and a new future – with Jake in the U.S., as an American, "so different from anything" in Alexey's Russia (U:286).

In the same vein, as soon as Alexey deposits Sasha at the airport curb and drives away, she tells him in an interior monologue that, when she discovered her pregnancy, she returned to the so-called "barrel houses" to obtain his address in the Army so that she could write to him about their future child. Instead of finding the "houses", though, Sasha arrives to find them being destroyed and removed by bulldozers:

> *There was a flatbed truck and a crane parked in front of the barrels. I couldn't tell what was going on until I saw two men tying steel cable to rebar rings on the roof of number four. I sat down nearby and watched the half-pipes sail one by one through the air. They were still painted*

> *and wallpapered on the inside… I wanted a souvenir, so I went back the next week… People left nothing. I suppose they were too poor to leave things behind. I found a broken bottle, a dented aluminum mug, a length of rusted chain. I couldn't recognize any of it as belonging to… anybody at all. Floating in the mud, the objects looked recently unearthed, like archaeological finds… "Home?" you said. I watched your home sail through the air like a giant eggshell.* (U:287-288; italics in original)

Sasha witnesses the eradication of a space that was crucial to her identity formation as a young teenager and mother, and which was directly responsible for her immigration to the U.S., and subsequent identity reformation, in the first place. Since Sasha has just shut out of her memory any reminders of the time she spent there with Alexey, and there are no complete physical artifacts left at the site for her to collect and retain, the only reminders she has of her identity as a resident of Asbestos 2 are her mother and daughter – one of whom will soon die, and the other of whom will grow up not as a Russian but as an American. This destruction of a memory-space may have planted the seeds of revision in Sasha's mind, even at an age where she could not imagine "having to create her own future" (U:51); watching the demolition, she may realize that it is indeed possible that she can leave her former self behind and create a new self somewhere else. The end of the memory-space, then, potentially becomes the moment when Sasha understands that she possesses the agency to write herself anew. She may not yet be able to glimpse her future as an American, but she can – however tenuously – grasp her future as a mother. Her personal identity comes to the forefront as a part of her national identity disappears.

This statement could also apply to the *memory-words*, or language used as part of a memory to express something that a character understands about her identity, that Sasha uses and experiences. As befits a member of a community with a vast literary heritage, Sasha possesses a facility for language –albeit one that does not translate to learning English, which proves difficult at first for her. This facility allows her to present herself as a speaker of

Hebrew when, in fact, she has no Jewish heritage at all. The Tarakanswelcome Sasha partially because they assume she has Jewish heritage from her last name; after they have their third child, Jake, Mrs. Tarakan turns to "religion and philanthropy" (U:191), and they begin to take in Soviet Jewish refugees as nannies, raising money to bring in replacement girls under an organization called "Operation Exodus". The Tarakans, who actually*are* Jewish, nudge Sasha to participate in rituals they assume she practiced as a child, from candle-lighting and hand-washing prayers to attending Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services at their synagogue. Sasha quickly understands that her time with the Tarakans will be easier if she plays along, so she agrees to participate, even when it means speaking a language she never knew. A week into Sasha's stay, Mrs. Tarakan asks her to help light the Sabbath candles.

> "You light one and I'll light the other. Did you do this in the Soviet Union?" "Sometimes", Sasha lied. "Do you know the prayer?" Sasha shook her head. "No." "Of course not. Just repeat after me. *BarukhatahAdonai*…" "*BarukhatahAdonai'*", repeated Sasha. She had a good memory for words, especially poetry, and her recitation was effortless. Mrs. Tarakan nodded approvingly. (U:171)

Sasha acts as a sort of *fake* palimpsest here, as she pretends to access a long-forgotten part of her past to create and shape a non-existent Jewish facet of her former Russian identity. Mrs. Tarakan does not know that Sasha is simply regurgitating sounds and has no real idea what the Hebrew words mean because they evoke a completely fabricated memory. In her eyes, Sasha is re-acquainting herself with a forgotten part of her past; once repressed, Sasha the Soviet Jew can now feel free to let her Jewish heritage shine through. Sasha, however, recognizes that she is re-writing herself with a phony layer of identity, allowing her desire for a certain personal identity (legal American immigrant) to over-write any desire she might have to be known by her national identity (Soviet, not Jewish). In this instance, Sasha may be performing this role to get in Mrs. Tarakan's good graces and 'earn' her freedom,

thinking that if she proves herself a good student of Judaism, the Tarakans will want to help her obtain legal immigrant status – as VitalyVasilievindicated they might, since Mr. Tarakan is a lawyer (U:146).

Sasha maintains the façade of the lapsed Jewish girlas Mrs. Tarakan then invites Sasha to eat at the table with them because "Jewish people don't work on the Sabbath" (U:172). As each family member recites the Hebrew hand-washing prayer, Sasha hears the words "*BarukhatahAdonai*" and thinks "about adenoids and long winter colds, the smell of Tiger Balm in stuffy rooms. Mrs. Goldberg used to say that if Sasha didn't stop sleeping with her mouth open, her adenoids would have to be removed. Sasha had tied a scarf around her head at night, to keep her jaw shut" (U:173). In another example of a fake palimpsest, instead of remembering a religious ritual or time spent praying with her family, Sasha remembers illness and an admonition from her mother; she transposes *Adonai* onto *adenoid*, neatly stuffing away a layer of her identity that never truly existed (for her, at least). When it is her turn to recite the prayer, Sasha needs no help from Mrs. Tarakan: "I remember it. *BarukhatahAdonai, Elohaynu, melekh ha-olam*… She finished the prayer herself, making no mistakes. Remembering a string of sounds she couldn't understand was simple, easier than memorizing meaningful text." (U:173)

Sasha accesses a memory that is only barely from the past, as the original recitation happened merely minutes ago, but thememory-words that she uses allow her tocompartmentalize her identity layers, presenting a stratum for Mrs. Tarakan's eyes while being able to hide it safely from herself – a trick she learned when she was fourteen, leaving her childhood behind in Asbestos 2, "transforming [things] into neat, convenient abstractions, as if her mind were a well-packed suitcase" (U:86). She is able to "hunch over her plate" and "hid[e] her face in the fragrant steam" (U:173-174) of dinner, feeling "halfway

between a star student and halfway like a lucky… idiot" (U:173) for successfully fooling the Tarakans. Once again, her desire for a particular personal identity overrules her desire to be known by her national identity, here expressed not only by her behavior but also by her language.

When Sasha does finally acquire that desired personal identity – legal immigrant – her first action is to return to Asbestos 2 to re-establish her maternal personal identity. Along the way, she uses language to augment her personal identity with her burgeoning national identity – that of legal *American* immigrant. After seeing her daughter and promising her mother that she will return in ten months, Sasha spontaneously detours to see Alexey in the Tula Region (south of Moscow), in the village Ulianka. When a resident gives Sasha directions to the "*poseyolok*" ["low brick buildings at the end of the road"] In Ulianka(U:281), she gets a good look at Sasha and exclaims "*Bozhemoi! Negritianka!*"['My God!A black girl!'](U:281). Sasha retorts with an expression of gratitude, to which the woman sighs and responds, "*Ponayehali*" (U:281), which Sasha deconstructs thus:

> The single word *ponayehali*means "they arrived over a period of time, in large enough masses as to become an annoyance". *O, the great and mighty Russian language!*thinks Sasha. Here abuse is compact and efficient; two prefixes do the job of a sentence. Suddenly Sasha finds herself missing Brooklyn, where people simply call each other motherfucker. (U:281)

During this encounter, Sasha hears a Russian word but accesses a memory of an English word, and it is telling that that particular word comes to her because it establishes her as an American, at least partially. This memory-word points Sasha toward the culmination of her identity reconstruction and self-revision; she now hears Russian and misses English, whereas earlier in the novel she would hear her ESL classmate Marina's spoken Russian and miss speaking Russian (when she introduces herself to Marina as a "*negritianka*", she is "giddy to use the dormant muscles of her tongue" [U:93]). Though the English language still

occasionally causes Sasha grief, it is nonetheless her language of choice at this point in the narrative. Her reflexive, almost instinctual thought of an English word over a (perhaps different) Russian word points to her re-written future identity as an American – a successful immigrant who has reconstructed her Russian identity, even as it emerges with less frequency. It may appear that her national identity has, in fact, superseded her personal identity, but I would argue that this is not the case: here, memory-word indicates that Sasha's identity as an immigrant – a constructed American – has moved to the forefront of her consciousness to replace the Russian identity with which she was born.

Because memory revives the past, it is to be expected that *memory-time* - a moment when a particular type of time meets memory to reveal something about a character's identity – serves as the critical nodal point for Sasha's understanding of her identity. Yet memory can also involve the future when a character looks forward to a time when an event becomes a memory, or is even in the process of becoming a memory. Sasha experiences an acute case of both forward- and backward- looking memory-time when she goes to bid Alexey farewell as he ships out with the Army. She misses the chance to speak to him, only able to watch as he climbs into the recruiters' van, and after lingering for an hour watching othersbid farewell, she finally decides to walk home. As she walks, she feels

> a pleasant nostalgia for all things past and things she hoped to leave behind. She was about to turn fifteen. If she was lucky, by next summer, she would be living in Moscow, attending the Repin Lyceum.She allowed herself to pretend that her life up until now was a memory, combed through and preserved to be used as a subject matter for future paintings. (U:86)

This metaphorical representation of her life as a memory implies a timeline that allows her to look backward as she imagines her future. The past material of her memories in Asbestos 2,

she thinks, will provide great fodder for her new life in Moscow, as she envisions a chance to portray herself – write herself – anew.[160]

However, Sasha does not yet know that she is pregnant – and neither does the reader, though this fact is made known two pages later – so she does not know to what extent she is truly leaving her childhood behind. It can be argued that this childhood also represents her partially formed personal identity, and that as she turns the page from adolescence ("about to turn fifteen") to adulthood (at least in biological terms), she begins to finalize that personal identity. Incidentally, the implication of her future as a blank canvas may foreshadow her realization upon landing in Phoenix that she has found a place where she can "erase herself" (U:117); in this moment, she (albeit unwittingly) begins to erase her childhood self and replace it with her adult self, though the replacement is not whole. Sasha still lets bits of her childhood self show through the adult layers of her identity, as the reader learns late in the novel when Jake tells her "maybe you shouldn't try to split your childhood memories from the rest of your life" (U:310). Additionally, Sasha's referral to her life to that point as a memory that can be "combed through" implies that it, too, has strata, further supporting the idea that she is a layered being composed of layered memories.

Sasha experiences a similar forward-looking memory-time moment when she expresses the fear that she will soon receive a phone call from Asbestos 2 telling her that her mother – who has cancer from years of asbestos exposure – will soon die. She wants to *preserve* the memory of her daughter as a child – that is, she wants to stop time – and *prevent* a memory of learning of her mother's death: "she stroked the rubbery power button of her cell phone and fantasized about turning it off once and for all. That way, Tetya Vera wouldn't be able to reach her, her mother would never die, and Nadia would forever remain

[160]In Russian, the verb писать (*pisat'*) – 'to write' – can also mean 'to paint', when used with a noun referring to an artistic tool.

a skinny seven-year-old" (U:295). Sasha, perhaps unconsciously, emulates her mother in her desire to preserve memory and freeze time so that the inevitable does not occur, and in so doing echoes Lubov's belief that the past is "the only thing she can control" (U:60). In this moment, the reader sees two layers of Sasha's identity, inherited from Lubov, that Sasha herself is ashamed to show others – hence her desire to "never admit to anyone" what she feels, as part of her constructed identity. This desire may well stem from a realization that she is acting like her mother, and thus cannot entirely escape her received identity. This instance reinforces the idea of Sasha as a palimpsest because it sheds light on a part of her identity that, while buried below the surface, still makes up part of Sasha's received identity, as much as she would like to erase it completely. She cannot entirely control which layers peek through at all times, which may be why she feels ashamed of what she shows here.

Ironically, by wishing to deny Nadia a chance to age, she also denies her daughter the chance to write her *own* identity and her own palimpsest, which Lubov – for all her perceived faults in Sasha's eyes – did not deny Sasha, as Sasha learns when she reads a note from Lubov given to her before she leaves Asbestos 2 that says, simply, "*Sashenka, I was just trying to keep you moving in the right direction. Love, Mama*" (U:279). As much as Lubov herself is mired in the past, she recognizes that Sasha must have a future, so that the girl can have a life "apart and above the realm of mud and vodka" (U:63). When Sasha reads this note, and then reads the letters from Alexey that Lubov hid from her, she realizes what Lubov has done, which prompts her to detour to Ulianka to sever ties with Alexey so that she can keep herself moving forward, toward a more complete acceptance of her successful immigrant, American identity.

As much as Sasha looks forward to the future in someepisodes of memory-time while shesettles into her immigrant, American identity, she does occasionally glance

backward and let through her Russian identity during these episodes. One such instance occurs when she agrees to teach an outdoors meditation/landscape painting class with her father's second ex-wife, Heidi. The class is held in Brooklyn's Prospect Park on Saturday mornings, with Heidi teaching meditation and then turning the (mostly female, mostly older) students over to Sasha for painting instruction. One day, a year after she and Heidi started the class, Heidi urges the women to "*feel the park*... mimic the landscape with [y]our bodies!" (U:298), which spurs Sasha to perform her own mimicry. Watching Heidi, Sasha "felt compelled to put on a show... 'Use your *eyes*! Is this what you *see*?' she moaned with a disgusted look on her face. She did it in honor of Evgeny Mikhailovich, of Bedbug, of their useless, forgotten socialist realism. She enjoyed… being the [ladies'] *strict foreign teacher*" (U:299; italics in original). Even though Sasha admits that she admires the way art is taught in the U.S., where students are allowed to follow their interests and expand their skills as they progress, she cannot resist peeling back the layers of her identity to access her childhood self and let her adult self have a little fun.

Unlike instances wherein Sasha may not fully control which layers of her identity show, here she *chooses* which layer to let through, unapologetically allowing her Soviet Russian impulses to rise above her more sensible American desires (that is, the desire to teach art to Americans in a manner they might expect). Not surprisingly, Sasha stops teaching the class not long after this incident, but not only because the students have been leaving in droves thanks to her rough demeanor. After this particular class, Sasha and Heidi sit in Heidi's apartment to plan future lessons that will never materialize, because Heidi tells Sasha that she received a phone call from someone who turns out to be Jake. This moment sets off a chain of events that leads Sasha and Jake to reunite, which in turn points toward the moments at the end of the novel when the reader learns they are raising Nadia together

in New York – as close to being part of an American family as Sasha has yet been: "What an odd couple they make, a confused choo-choo train, Jake's black hair to Nadia's yellow, his paper-white skin to her brown" (U:324).

Indeed, when Sasha goes to see Jake, they talk for a long time about the events of their lives in the four years that have passed since Jake helped her escape from the Tarakans' house. They confess being in love with one another, and Jake tells Sasha he will help her raise Nadia after Lubov dies and Sasha brings Nadia to the United States. Sasha then tells Jake that she can't reconcile the changes in Asbestos 2 with her new life in the U.S., where she keeps forgetting concrete details of what Asbestos 2 looked, smelled, and felt like: "I feel as if I'm forgetting who I am, as if I'm going crazy" she says, to which Jake replies: "Maybe you shouldn't try to split your childhood memories from the rest of your life" (U:310). Jake recognizes that Sasha is a palimpsest and that she should not try to bury the layers of her childhood self in favor of her present adult self. Sasha wants to leave her dissolving past in the past and look forward – thus not repeating Lubov's mistake of wallowing in the past – even though she confesses that she has no idea how to leave the abstract*idea* of Asbestos 2 behind, or how to be a mother to Nadia: "She was just an immigrant. Nadia was just a kid. She was just afraid" (U:311).

"Just an immigrant" is a crucial phrase here, as Sasha is anything but: she is a composite human being, formed from layers of her past and present, from her identity in Russia that is soon to fade under the surface as her American identity rises to the top. Jake thinks that Sasha's past can be instructive for her, and that she can still unearth buried layers of her identity and mine them for meaning. In a sense, he urges Sasha to continue re-writing herself, gently nudging her to be mindful of the parts of her past that have led her to the present – and, he implies, can accompany her to the future. "You're too caught up in

stories", he admonishes. "If you're too much into building temples, your daughter might hate you for it. Or she might put your temple to her own use" (U:311). Jake implies that Sasha doesn't need to abandon her past entirely, but she cannot idolize it for herself or for Nadia; she must keep writing and keep moving, as Lubov wrote, "in the right direction" (U:279) – toward her most complete, and completely constructed, American self.

Sasha literally takes the final steps toward that self at the end of *Petropolis* when she walks home from a store on a snowy December evening, in what turns out to be the novel's ultimate memory-time instance. At the beginning of the novel, Lubov chides Sasha for her clumsy gait as they walk home from yet another failed figure-skating audition – a result of Lubov's search for an activity to occupy Sasha after school, as "children of the intelligentsia don't just come home in the afternoon and engage in idiocy" (U:3). Walking a few steps behind Lubov, Sasha

> contemplated the street lamps. She tried to determine the direction of the wind by the trajectories of snowflakes… but the snow seemed to be flying every which way. Sasha was staring straight up when her foot hit the curb and she landed flat on her face in a snowbank. This was more than Mrs. Goldberg could take. "I told you to stop taking such wide steps… this is why you fall all the time! You trip over your own feet!" (U:4)

At the end of the novel, in Brooklyn, Sasha "stares up at the street lamps. The snowflakes dash and scatter in the circles of light. The street is empty. Sasha takes wider and wider steps, waiting to trip, but the sidewalk is strangely uniform, un-Brooklyn-like, and she makes it home without falling" (U:324). The memory of that first incident still weighs on Sasha's mind – she is "waiting to trip" – but she still takes wide steps in a final act of re-writing her identity. No longer is she a "child of the intelligentsia" expected to behave according to certain norms and conventions; no longer is she powerless to escape the identity into which she was born and with which she was raised. She is a woman with agency who has

progressed from clumsy Soviet child to confident American immigrant. Gone is the wide-eyed, mute Sasha Goldberg who landed in Phoenix and realized that she could "erase herself" there, who wondered if she could ever get used to life in such a country. In her place is the Sasha Goldberg who has created a stable environment for her daughter through steady employment, who can navigate the complexities of American life with increasing ease, who misses English when she hears Russian.She still incorporates her childhood self into her identity, but at the same time, she builds upon it to fashion a multi-layered adult manifest in her palimpsest self.

Discussion

Petropolis had both the good fortune and bad timing to be published in 2008, two years after Gary Shteyngart published his second novel but also squarely in the middle of the swirling maelstrom of novels published by self-identifying Russian-American authors writing in Englishsuch as Irina Reyn, Lara Vapnyar, Ellen Litman, Olga Grushin, and Sana Krasikov. That timing, combined with the fact that Ulinich's novel still has not been translated into Russian, as well as the fact that Shteyngart's novels *were* translated and quickly excoriated, may explain why Russian literary critics have not responded to her work in large numbers. Despite this lack of critical response, *Petropolis* still won praise froma handful of Russian reviewers. Two critics who have read the English version – or, in some cases, English-language reviews – of the novel praise it for its well-crafted form and technique; for its characters, who can greet misfortune with a smile; for its wit, and its destruction of American and Russian stereotypes. YakhovBorokhovich addresses the first three features in his review of Russian-American literature at large, "Russkie v 'Barnes & Noble' " ["Russians

in 'Barnes & Noble' "].[161]Borokhovich's discussion of Ulinich focuses mostly on an extensive quotation from the Russian translation of Antoine Wilson's favorable review of *Petropolis* inthe *Los Angeles Times*(2007), which he says sums up his own feelings on the novel:

> "Улинич — мастертрагикомедии. 'Петрополис' завлекает, смешит и искренне трогает в самом хорошем смысле. Искристый дебют автора оказался уникальным комическим романом о Хомо Постсоветикус. Пытаясь согласовать два далеких друг от друга жанра — роман воспитания и сатиру, — Улинич рисковала, но риск оказался оправданным, она добилась успеха. Произошло это благодаря таланту Улинич-рассказчика и умению ее смеяться сквозь слезы сосвоимигероями". ["Ulinich is a master of tragicomedy. 'Petropolis'captivates us, makes us laugh and sincerely touches us in the best sense. The author's sparkling debut has turned out to be a unique, comical novel about *Homo Post-Sovieticus*. Trying to reconcile two distant genres – Bildungsroman and satire–Ulinichhas taken a risk, but the risk has turned out to be justified; she has succeeded. This has happened thanks to Ulinich's talent as a narrator, and her ability to laugh through her tears with her heroes."]

Borokhovich, ending the *Times* quotation, adds:

> Воригиналевместо "смехасквозьслезы" былонаписано thebittersweet (горькаясладость), ноядумаю, чтоименно "смехсквозьслезы" большесоответствуетглавномуприему АниУлинич. Могу добавить от себя, что именно этим меня привлек роман Ани Улинич — умением героев в самых тяжелых жизненных ситуациях с горькой улыбкой взглянуть напроисходящее."
> [In the original, instead of 'laughter through tears' was written 'the bittersweet', but I think that it is 'laughter through tears' that more closely corresponds to Anya Ulinich'smethod. If I may add, that is exactly what attracted me to Ulinich's novel – her heroes' ability, in the most difficult life situations, to look with a bitter smile at what is happening.]

Julius Bernstein addresses the last two features of Ulinich's novel in his review of *Petropolis*, which focuses almost solely on the novel and only gives passing mention to other

[161]YakovBorokhovich, "Russkie v 'Barnes & Noble' " ["Russians in 'Barnes & Noble' "], in *Znamia* [*The* Banner], June 2009.http://magazines.russ.ru/znamia/2009/6/bo17.html; accessed 30 January 2014.

contemporary Russian-American fiction.[162] His review reads somewhat tepidly, as he is not as effusive with his praise as Borokhovich; nonetheless, he finds certain aspects of the novel pleasing to a Russian audience. The reviewbeginson a positive note:

"ИроничныйроманУлиничпривлекаетчитателейиостроумнойнаблюдательностью, ичеловечностью, ипсихологизмом"

[Ulinich'sironicnovelattractsreaderswithitswittyobservation, humanity, andpsychology], andgoesontopoint out thatanyRussianreadersfearingatypically-Americanhappyendingneednotworry:

"Улиничсоединяетжизньсвоейгероининесинтеллектуалом-реформатором, асинвалидом, неспособнымбезпостороннейпомощиподнятьголову. Такписательницаобходитсясожиданиемромантическогохэппи-энда" [Ulinich connects the life of her heroine not with that of an intellectual reformer, but instead with that of a disabled person who is unable to raise his head without help.Thus the writer trumps any expectation of a romantic happy ending].[163]

BernsteinalsoenjoysUlinich'sdestructionofotherstereotypes, suchas "Русскоепредставлениеовысокойкультуре, еврейскаявиктимнаяидентичность, героическаяборьбаамериканскихевреевзаэмиграциюсвоихсобратьевизСоветскогоСоюза" [The Russian idea of high culture, the Jewish victimhood identity, and the heroic fight of American Jews for the emigration of their counterparts from the Soviet Union], which Bernstein notes can leave the reader feeling somewhat adrift without

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[162]Julius Bernstein, "Review of *Petropolis*." *Booknik*, February 11, 2010. http://booknik.ru/library/all/v-tehnike-ready-made/For Wilson's original review, see "Amerika 101" [Review of *Petropolis*], *Los Angeles Times* 18 February 2007, http://articles.latimes.com/2007/feb/18/books/bk-wilson18; accessed 29 December 2014.

[163]It is disputed whether or not Sasha and Jake are in fact romantically involved by the novel's end; they do share a kiss when he returns to Brooklyn, but Klots believes that their relationship "develops into true friendship", implying that they reach a *platonic* happy ending and not a romantic one (53).

"знакомыхлитературныхрешений" [familiar literary decisions] that force him to rely on his own feelings and experiences. Yet, Bernstein concludes, Ulinich does not leave either her heroine, or her reader, adrift: he appreciates the conclusion of her narrative arc that "соединяетсибирскоепрошлоеинью-йоркскоенастоящеегероини. Начавшийся в Асбесте-2 путьприводитеедомой" [connects Sasha's Siberian past and her New York present. With its beginning in Asbestos 2, the pathway leads her home]. While these are only two reviews of Ulinich's work, and thus by no means representative of the Russian readership's general view towards her work, they point to a favorable impression – at least more so than of Shteyngart.

The timing of the novel's publication in the U.S. made it difficult for not only critics but also – and even more so – scholars to react to and evaluate *Petropolis* without comparing it to Shteyngart's works, as well as those of the other *female* authors in the group. Wanner, for example, pairs Ulinich's novel with Olga Grushin's novel *The Dream Life of Sukhanov*(2006) because they both "feature characters who are equally at home (or equally not at home) on both sides of the Atlantic".[164]He also points out a difference in the way Shteyngart and Ulinich treat African culture; Shteyngart, he says, portrays African-American culture as analogous with Russian culture, whereas Ulinichportrays them as opposites.[165]There are some other differences more germane to the discussion in this chapter, however, that I will now address.

Creating the typology for Shteyngart's works helped me see the threads that connect his three novels in terms of plot or character type; from that process, the similarities in space, time, and language types also became apparent. I applied the same approach with*Petropolis*, anticipating that the typology would not quite line up with that of Shteyngart's works, not least because the source material consisted of only one novel, instead of three.

[164]Wanner, 166.
[165]See Wanner, 170.

My hunch was correct; while it is clear that Ulinich has read Shteyngart's work and admires him (she once said "I'm completely awed by Gary Shteyngart's*Absurdistan*. I think it's perfect in every way"),*Petropolis* is no imitative homage to him or his work, even though it does share some characteristics with his novels.[166] For example, it is fair to say that *Petropolis* is a picaresque *Bildungsroman*, like Shteyngart's*The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, in which a border-crossing protagonist comes to an understanding about his or her identity (for Sasha, her identity is the fortune she seeks as a picara). New York City figures prominently in both authors' works, though the city is the feature location for the Russian-American cohort to which they belong. Both authors rely on contrasting images of their protagonists' Soviet pasts and American present; and so forth – the similarities continue, though they fall outside the scope of this work and as such will not receive further attention here.

Some minor differences between Ulinich's and Shteyngart's texts are in the details of gender and ethnic Jewishness: her female protagonist, his male protagonists; Sasha's lack of Jewish heritage, Vladimir's, Misha's, and Lenny's pronounced Jewish heritage; her emphasis on motherhood, his emphasis on fatherhood, to name a few. I discern two majordifferences between their works, which more clearly mark Ulinich's work as a departure from Shteyngart's. The first difference – between *The Russian Debutante'sHandbook*and *Petropolis*– is that the latter is distinguished by Ulinich's clear attempt to craft her identity as a writer and find her authorial voice, much as Sasha attempts to craft her identity and find her independent voice. Shteyngart's authorial voice was already somewhat established when his debut novel was published; his graduate degree was in a creative writing program, and he had spent years turning one of his early MFA manuscripts into that novel.[167]Ulinich, on the other

[166]http://www.anyaulinich.com/interview.html; such praise is a two-way street, as Shteyngart wrote a blurb in turn for *Petropolis*: "Sasha Goldberg is like Borat, but with a big heart!"
[167]Shteyngart details this process in his 2014 memoir *Little Failure* (New York: Random House).

hand, made her living as an artist, and only thought to turn to writing after the birth of her first child, after she ran out of space for her art materials and needed a creative outlet.[168]The second difference, which applies to all four of the authors' novels, is in the way they address identity. To summarize, Shteyngart treats identity as a hybrid, nodal concept that exists at the temporary intersection of particular image types, whereas Ulinich treats it as a layered, re-writable mesh of national culture and private identity. If Shteyngart's protagonists present themselves as identity chameleons, it can be said that Ulinich's Sasha Goldberg presents herself as an identity palimpsest.

One of the major achievements of *Petropolis* is its rich set of ideas that Ulinich adds to ubiquitous scholarly conversations on national identity. First, she hints that it is possible to rewrite and thus refashion one's national identity, thereby challenging essentialist assumptions about national identity and supporting constructivist views. She accomplishes this feat by showing that the question "who am I?" can be answered by in turnasking "what have I read?", "where have I been?", and "who else lives in the place where I was born?", in addition to or even instead of the usual "what do I look like?", "who are my parents?", "what is my name?", "where am I from?",and "what language do I speak?". By doing so, Ulinich also confronts the concepts of received and constructed identities and combines them into one – what I call national/ethnic identity – which she then merges with personal identity. She simultaneously pointsout shortcomings in constructivist views – e.g. that we cannot know, control, and consciously reconstruct everything about ourselves. This is why, even as Sasha rebels against Asbestos 2 and its influence on her, she still identifies with it to the very end of its existence (which for her is when Lubov finally dies).

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[168]Kevin Kinsella,"Kevin Kinsella Interviews Anya Ulinich." *Maud Newton*, September 18, 2007. http://maudnewton.com/blog/kevin-kinsella-interviews-anya-ulinich/; accessed 30 January 2014.

Second, Ulinich suggests through Lubov and Victor that one can be born into a national identity without feeling oneself part of Anderson's imagined community. She also suggests that national identity – even the idealistically-fashioned Russian intellectual national identity seen in her novel – sometimes fails as a way for people to survive and lift themselves out of oblivion, per Smith's claim that national identity's "primary function… is to provide a strong 'community of history and destiny' to save people from personal oblivion and restore collective faith".[169]Sasha is driven by her search for Anderson's imagined community, and does in fact begin to feel that she belongs to one by the novel's end.Lubov and Victor, however, find and thenlose theirsmall imagined community of the "lost intelligentsia" twice: once literally, when Victor leaves Lubov and Sasha for the U.S., and again metaphorically when Petropolis – the city in Mandelstam's *Tristia*– dies.[170]

Finally, Ulinichfocuses on and demotes, respectively,two elements of national identity. First, she emphasizes literary heritage as fundamental to Russian national identity; literature is part of a shared culture, but she makes it explicit and specific by integrating authors less well-known to American readers such as Nabokov and Mandelstam directly into the text, instead of merely hinting at itin a broader sense (such as constructing her narrative in a vein evocative of a more well-known author such as Fyodor Dostoevsky). Second, she de-emphasizes religion or religious heritage – a construct –as an essential component of national identity. In *Nations and Nationalism*Hobsbawm highlights the complex relationship between religious identity and national identity, noting that the two are often conflated as a person is born into a community of a particular faith.[171] By portraying religion as a construct (for example, the Tarakans include Sasha in their Jewish rituals to create the impression that

[169]Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991), 161.
[170]The refrain of the poem "about Petrograd during the Revolution, the death of a great city", reads: "*Your brother, Petropolis, is dying*" (U:62).
[171]See Hobsbawm, 70.

they are compassionate, yet strictly observant, practitioners of the faith), Ulinich undermines its importance as an element of national identity – it is not something with which one is born, but something into which one can be forced.

To summarize briefly, Ulinich's novel contributes to our understanding of post-Soviet hybrid identity by highlighting three new elements of that identity.One, it prioritizes literary heritage over religious heritage in the formation of national identity. Two, it proposes that the imagined community is not the most important influence on national or even personal identity, as – three – personal identity can integrate with and surpass national identity. Post-Soviet hybrid identity, then, depends not on a person's place of origin, genes, or upbringing, but on the influences and experiences that comment upon those components.

Conclusion

We have just answered the first question that this chapter asks; let us now consider the second question: what does it mean to think about identity as a palimpsest? It means considering already-familiar image types – space, language, and time – in light of memory, which in turn requires understanding the process of not only remembering but also forgetting. Remembering occurs on both a national and personal level when a culture (or a character) wishes to preserve something it (or she) deems crucial to identity (and therefore existence) for access and use by future generations. Forgetting occurs on those same levels when a culture, or a person, creates a counter-memory, purposefully obliterates an unfavorable memory, or invents a new memory to replace an undesirable one. Gellner portrays this process on a global scale as "created memory" where none existed, in the East, and "induced oblivion" of that which did exist, in the West; Ulinich portrays it on a local scale in *Petropolis* as Lubov's constructed past in which she has a future in Russia, and as

Sasha's realization of self-erasure as she lands in Phoenix.[172]Memory and oblivion engage with one another in the creation of a palimpsest, as the very layers of the text – or, here, consciousness – appear and disappear, and then reappear as the author – or, here, protagonist – records and re-writes its contents. Memory also allows Sasha to keep her newly (re)formed identity as she confronts changing spatial, temporal, and linguistic contexts, which in turn allows her to surmount her upbringing.

Thinking of identity as a palimpsest also means considering the ways in which personal identity engages with and informs national identity, even as it transcends that national identity. Sasha identifies herself as, in turns, an artist, a mother, a mail-order bride, a Russian in the U.S., a housekeeper, a teacher, an Americanized Russian in Russia, and – ultimately – an "American in America".[173]The first three identities manifest themselves when Sasha is still in Russia, and the last four while she is in the U.S., with the "Russian in America" identity bridging the gap between the two groups. (I would also argue that Sasha continues to wrestle with the "mother" label well into her time in the U.S. and even to the very end of the novel.) Being an artist is part of her constructed Russian identity, but as she becomes a mother, she abandons that part of her to become a mail-order bride, which she hopes will take her to a place where she can find a better life for her and her child – thereby allowing personal identity (mother) to trump national identity (artist, and, in a sense, stereotypical Russian mail-order bride, as she looks nothing like the expected blonde beauty of the agency's catalog).

Sasha's first identity in the U.S. is as a Russian in a foreign country, and she soon settles into a constructed personal and, eventually, American identity as a housekeeper and a teacher, even though both have roots in her occasionally-transparent Russian identity (she

[172]Quoted in Balakrishnan, 139.
[173]Shteyngart 2002, 452.

recalls Lubovrefusing to so much as let her near housework, and she emulates her art-school teachers when giving a class on landscape painting in New York). After two years, Sasha has re-written herself enough to be lauded as "the American!" when she returns to Siberia – and suburban Moscow – to visit her daughter and her former lover, signaling that her American constructed identity is now at the forefront of her consciousness, where it remains as she begins to build a life with Nadia and Jake in Brooklyn. Yet it is Sasha's personal identity as a being capable of re-writing herself that emerges most clearly above all by the end of the novel, in the final scene where she re-traces steps over which she stumbled in Siberia, only to glide over them effortlessly in the United States.

Like Ulinich, Margarita Meklina was a late arrival in the U.S. compared to other Russian émigré writers: she arrived at age 22, and, like Ulinich, landed in a place outside of New York. The similarities end there, however, as Meklina settled in San Francisco and immediately began writing in Russian, seemingly for an audience back in St. Petersburg. Her short stories, essays, and even a novel in letters reflect the displacement she herself has felt as an unhoused Russian in the U.S. – a displacement that is transferred to both Meklina's characters and readers as she deconstructs their very notions of self through various disruptions of the communicative process. Meklina engages her reader on a thoroughly different level than Ulinich or Shteyngart; her texts move from one character, one space, and one language to another such that the reader can never be sure where they are and whom they are with. Meklina makes her reader construct her texts as a co-author, rendering her work much more participatory than her contemporaries. One of her most recent English-language works is a short story called "The Jump" – a fitting description of the leaps that both her characters and her reader must take to follow her convoluted discursive path towards a sense of self.

Chapter 3: Leaps of Identity in Margarita Meklina's Russian and English Fiction

Introduction

"When you die, Elsa, in which language will your last words be?"[174] A Russian writer who has emigrated to France reads this question in a letter from the well-known Russian Formalist critic Viktor Shklovskii, who receives no reply – a discourtesy also extended to the frustrated reader who encounters this potentially problematic communicative stream. In Margarita Meklina's 2014 short story "The Jump", three Russian women who leave their country of birth die metaphorically as they slowly abandon their grasp of Russian language: "Like Zinaida and Elsa, uprooted from any feelings of comfort, agonizing and analyzing, unnerved and unsettled, [Margarita] jumped to her death in an alien tongue" ("The Jump" 217). Having lost the ability to communicate in their native language – or, as Meklina makes painfully clear, *any* language – these women have also misplaced their identities and interpretations of self and surroundings.

The same could be said of Meklina herself as the author of "The Jump", which is her first English-language work to address explicitly a theme she has avoided in the nearly twenty years since her arrival in the United States: émigré identity. She may feel that she has

[174] Margarita Meklina, "The Jump", in *Wreckage of Reason II: Back to the Drawing Board*, ed. Nava Renek and Natalie Nuzzo (Berkeley: Spuyten Duyvil, 2014), 213.

leaped to her own metaphorical death by writing for readers who can only engage with this text, or she may have finally decided to acknowledge her own feelings of displacement. Such an uprooted, unsettled feeling extends beyond Meklina and her characters to reach her reader, who also experiences such disruptive sensations while navigating her intentionally challenging texts, in which a character can be not only uprooted or unsettled, but also absorbed or "transplaced". This extreme form of disruption that affects both character and reader occurs in communicative breakdowns in which some element of the communicative model goes missing, leaving both the character and the reader unsure of their identity – an event that I call "communicative displacement", experienced by characters I call "identity jumpers".

This chapter asks two main questions: first, what is the relationship between various kinds of communicative disruption and émigré identity displacement? Second, how does this communicative displacement affect interpretation by both characters and readers?[175] To answer the first question, I use Russian literary theorist Roman Jakobson's structuralist communicative model and Bakhtin's theory of "utterance" and "dialogue" to examine the ways in which Meklina confuses her characters' communicative functions. I answer the second question by defining and discussing Meklina's "implied reader" who confronts her challenging texts, drawing on German literary theorist Wolf Schmid's and American literary theorist Gerald Prince's definitions. This discussion will address Meklina's efforts toconfuse whatGerman literary theorist Hans-Robert Jauss calls the reader's "horizon of expectation" and "aesthetic distance". To treat the related question of spatial disorientation, I draw on

[175]"Interpretation" in this context is complex because it refers to both the reader's interpretation of the work and the characters' interpretations of their surroundings and their lives. Communicative displacement affects not only the characters' experiences, but also their perception of their place in the text and their very selves. This displacement also affects the reader, as disruption of the characters' lives also interrupts the reader's interpretive process of consuming and actively participating in the construction of the text.

two concepts: first,modernist Russian writer Yevgeny Zamiatin's definition of "displacement" as it relates to plot lines and time-space planes; second, the idea of "transitional space" as commonly applied to French folklorist Arnold Van Gennep's liminality theory.

Using examples from six of Meklina's works – four short stories, an essay, and an epistolary novel – I argue that Meklina upends previous thinking on post-émigré identity by ignoring more popular concepts such as (trans)nationalism and hybridity, and instead concentrating on treatment of identities that are more *linguistic* than ethnic or traditionally national. While Shteyngart and Ulinich designate certain habits, thoughts, and actions as "being Russian", "being American" or "being a little bit of both", thereby giving their characters a sense of self as habitual or active beings, Meklina gives her characters a sense of self only insofar as they are communicative beings – that is, they are themselves only when they can send and receive messages from other humans.[176]While changing spatial and temporal contexts do influence their self-perception, these contexts are less critical for identity-shaping than shifting communicative contexts. Meklina's emphasis on these particular contexts – that require her characters to reach out to others rather than access an internal memory or genetic heritage – shows that her work offers the most useful way to think about contemporary émigré identity as a *global* concept, rather than an ethnically driven one.

Key Concepts

To understand how a character can experience communicative displacement, it will be helpful to consider Jakobson's model of communication, consisting of language's six functions. According to this model, a communicative event requires a speaker (an

[176] As Steiner writes: "We *are* so far as we can declare ourselves to be, and have full assurance of our asserted existence only when other identities register and reciprocate our life-signals." (59)

"addresser"), an interlocutor (an "addressee") and a "message" that passes between the two in a shared "context" (a shared background of some sort, whether spatial, temporal, or cultural) transmitted in a commonly understood "code" (an organized system of communication). Also necessary is a physical and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee – which Jakobson calls "contact" – that enables them to enter and remain in communication.[177] The model is illustrated thus:

Context

Addresser Message Addressee

Contact
Code

In Meklina's works, the addresser-addressee relationship functions and malfunctions on two levels: on the level of author and reader, and on the level of protagonist and would-be interlocutor. This emphasis on the participants, and the importance of a reciprocal relationship between the two, implies that the most meaningful instances of communicative breakdown occur when either an addresser or an addressee fails to participate. This failure occurs when the code is incomprehensible to one of the parties, or when the message becomes garbled in transmission due to shifting contexts or contact. Meklina focuses more on interrupting the message through changing codes and contexts rather than contacts, though there is an underlying current of altered contact when, say, an addresser uses an alternate code with an addressee. For example, switching code from Russian to English may be a way of confusing or intimidating an addressee in an attempt to establish some sort of psychological dominance on the addresser's part.

[177] Roman Jakobson, *On Language*, ed. Linda R. Waugh and Monique Monville-Burston (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 72-73.

Bakhtin defines the role of communication in his 1935 essay "Discourse in the Novel" in terms of collectively held words for which all participants become addressers and addressees, thereby interactively building understanding and meaning:

> language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes one's "own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention.[178]

To put Bakhtin's idea in Jakobson's terms, words (elements of the "code") belong not only to those who speak them (the "addressers"), but also to those who hear them (the "addressees"), and a speaker can only articulate language as discourse (the "message") as his or her own when he or she imbues it with his inflection, intent, and meaning. However, a speaker (or "addresser") must also have an interlocutor (an "addressee") with whom a reciprocal relationship exists (that is, the "addresser" becomes the "addressee" for the interlocutor when the interlocutor replies to the speaker) in order to communicate meaningful speech, per Bakhtin's 1953 essay "The Problem With Speech Genres". According to Bakhtin, an utterance (a "message") always contains two characteristics: addressivity (it is always directed at a specific someone, i.e. it is inflected) and answerability (it always anticipates a response, i.e. is conveyed with intent and meaning). Thus, "any understanding [of live speech] is imbued with response and necessarily elicits it in one form or another: the listener becomes the speaker".[179] In Jakobson's terms, the addresser becomes the addressee, and vice versa, when the addresser sends a message in code, with context, and through contact to the addressee, who is able and willing to receive the message and respond in turn as an addresser. When any one part of this model fails, disruptions of communicative

[178] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 294.
[179] Ibid.,*Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), 68.

function occur. In Meklina's texts, these disruptions appear when addressees fail to respond to addressers, when addressers or addressees change codes to distort messages, or when the context shifts to interrupt message reception.

Focusing on the interpretive concepts of the "implied reader" and the "horizon of expectations" helps us examine the complicated relationship between narrator and reader in Meklina's works. Schmid (1973) defines the "implied reader" as "the contents of the image of the recipient that the author had while writing, or – more accurately – the author's image of the recipient that is fixed and objectified in the text by specific indexical signs".[180] Prince (2003) clarifies Schmid's definition as "the audience presupposed by a text; a real reader's second self (shaped in accordance with the implied author's values and cultural norms)".[181] Put another way, the implied reader is the reader that the author has in mind when writing a certain text; who brings a certain set of knowledge and expectations to reading the text, and is supposed to either receive the text passively or participate in the creation of the text as he reads it. Meklina's implied reader is an educated reader/speaker of Russian who is intimately familiar with Russian language (literary and colloquial), literature (classic and contemporary), and culture, both high and low. This reader may or may not be a native Russian, based on the numerous references she makes to non-Russian people, places, and concepts that might confuse native Russians, especially those living in Russia. Most importantly, her reader agrees to act as the detective in what may be called Meklina's "writerly text".

The concept of the *writerly text* originates from French philosopher Roland Barthes's essay *S/Z* (1970), here translated and quoted by American literary critic Barbara Johnson:

> On the one hand, there is what it is possible to write, and on the other, what it is no longer possible to write (re-write)... What evaluation finds is precisely this value: what can be written today: the 'writerly' (scriptible).

[180] Wolf Schmid, *Narratology: An Introduction* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2010), 54.
[181] "Implied Reader", *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 43.

> Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text…Opposite the writerly text is its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read, but not written: the 'readerly' (lisible) (4).[182]

I call Meklina's text "writerly" because the writing forces the reader to trace the clues and construct meaning more or less constantly, when the author shifts languages, characters, planes of actions, and contexts, among other elements of the text. Her deliberate confusion of the reader's horizon of expectation leaves readers to assemble those pieces on their own, requiring them to do more than simply read and receive.

Directly tied to the concept of the *implied reader* is the reader's *horizon of expectation*. Jauss (1967) combines it with the idea of *aesthetic distance* to form what he calls "reception theory". To Jauss, the reception of a text is not "an arbitrary sequence of merely subjective impressions, but rather the carrying out of specific instructions in a process of directed perception".[183] In this process of directed perception, although a writer reaches out to a text's reader with specific, embedded (albeit implicit) instructions on its consumption, ultimately it is the reader who is responsible for determining the text's meaning. In a sense, the reader enters into an unspoken contract with the writer, promising to interact with the text according to the writer's directions, even if those directions lead to puzzle-like plots and very complex characters. However, the reader participates in another unspoken contract with the writer by bringing to the text an "objectifiable system of expectations that arises for each work in the historical moment of its appearance, from a pre-understanding of the genre, from the form and themes of already familiar works" (22).

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[182] "The Critical Difference: Balzac's *Sarrasine* and Barthes's *S/Z* (1978)", *The Theory of Criticism: From Plato to the Present*, ed. Raman Selden (London: Longman, 1988), 397.

[183] "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory", *Toward an Aesthetic ofReception*, transl. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 23.

This definition mentions the history and sociology attached to expectations about a work, but in this chapter I apply the term to each of Meklina's works independent of their genre, structure, sociological underpinnings, or place in literary history. That is, there is an inherent set of expectations for each of her stories as stand-alone entities: for example, a reader confronted with the title "Dom" ("The House", 1995) would expect that a house of some sort plays a central role in the story. Where is this house? Who lives in it? What does it look like? What goes on in it? For whom is it a "home", which the Russian word strongly implies? When Meklina refuses to address these questions, or even to indicate to her reader that the "house" in the title exists at all, she confuses her reader's horizon of expectation. Indeed, Meklina constantly muddles her readers' horizons of expectations, thereby forcing the reader to act as a detective who must follow a trail without a known or concrete end.

Reception theory contributes another element to our discussion: the "aesthetic distance" (25) between the reader and the text. If the reader's horizon of expectation is met, then this distance is easily covered and the reader does not have to work as hard to follow the writer's implicit guidance for consumption of the text. But if the reader's horizon of expectation is somehow altered or disturbed – especially on multiple occasions during the process of reading – then this distance becomes more difficult to cover, since the reader must work harder to find the writer's instructions. In summary, texts that meet the reader's horizon of expectation and minimize aesthetic distance are easier to receive than texts that confuse the horizon and maximize aesthetic distance. Meklina, for her part, prefers to challenge her reader by adjusting the horizon and maximizing aesthetic distance.

Finally, the concept of *displacement* will help us understand the ways in which characters and readers can be confused by an interruption in communication. I avoid using the term in a Newtonian context of the physical movement of a body or mass as another

body or mass acts upon it, though I do find the OED's definition useful as a starting point: "removal of a thing from its place; putting out of place; shifting, dislocation".[184] More relevant is Zamiatin's more abstract definition of the term in his 1923 essay "Novaia russkaia proza" ["New Russian Prose"] as it relates to the reader's perception of shifting "plot planes" in a novel. In this essay, Zamiatin comments on the displacement technique of another major Russian modernist and his contemporary, Boris Pil'niak:

> В композиционной технике Пильняка есть очень свое и новое – это постоянное пользование приемом "смещения плоскостей". Одна сюжетная плоскость – внезапно,разорванно –сменяется у него другой иногда по нескольку раз на одной странице. Прием этот применялся и раньше –
> в видепостоянногочередования двухилинесколькихсюжетных линий (Анна + Вронский, Кити + Левинит. д.), ноniукого –
> стакойчастотойколебаний, какуПильняка:с "постоянного" тока –
> Пильняк перешелна "переменный", сдвух-трехфазного – намногофазный.
> [Pil'niak'stechnical composition has something very new and original – the continuous use of the device of "the displacement of planes". One plot plane – suddenly, explosively – is replaced by another, sometimes several times on one page. This method was acceptable in the past – in the form of a constant shift between two or more plot lines (Anna + Vronsky, Kitty + Levin, etc.)[185], but no writer did it with such frequent fluctuation as Pil'niak did: he switched from a "permanent" current to a "variable" current, from a biphasic current – to a multiphase current.][186]

Zamiatin writes that Pil'niak's best example of this method is his 1922 short story "Иван-да-Марья" ("Ivan and Maria"), which begins with the phrase "Вот её письмо" ["Here is her letter"].[187] Following this statement is not an explanation of who "she" is or what her "letter" contains, but a meditation on the relationship between sincerity and hypocrisy, which Pil'niak's narrator suddenly brings to a halt because it is all "слишком грубо и неточно" ["too rough and imprecise"] (5). Another meditation on indifference follows, but the

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[184] "displacement, n." Def. 2a. *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, December 2014), http://dictionary.oed.com/; accessed 7 March 2015.
[185] These names refer to characters in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*.
[186]"Novaia russkaia proza" ["New Russian Prose"], *Litsa* (New York: Iz datel'stvo imeni Chekhova, 1955), 200-201.
[187]Boris Pil'niak, *Ivan-da-Mar'ia* (Berlin: Grzhebin, 1922), 5.

narrator again ends quickly, almost dismissively: "но это не для вас" ["but this is not for you"] (5). Two more plot planes prove untenable: first, a love story featuring a male protagonist, which turns out to simply be "тоже эксперимент. И тоже не для вас" ["also an experiment. And also not for you"] (6); second, a love story featuring a female protagonist, which the narrator cannot finish out of exhaustion. What follows is Pil'niak's actual text: a short story set during the 1917 Russian Revolution. Over the course of two pages, one plot plane replaces another, seemingly without end, until the narrator finally settles into a story unrelated to the preceding fragments.

This idea of shifting plot planes was central to Zamiatin's conceptual theory of Synthetism (outlined in his 1922 essay "O sintetizme" ["On Synthetism"]), which he defines as something that

> пользуется интегральнымсмещениемпланов. Здесь вставленные в одну пространственно-временную раму куски мира – никогда не случайны; они скованы синтезом, и ближе или дальше – получиот этих кусков непременно сходятся в одной точке, из кусков – всегда целое.(239)
> [uses an integral displacement of planes. Here, fragments of the world are inserted into one space-time frame – and never by chance/never randomly; they are bound by synthesis, nearby or far away – but the rays of these fragments without fail converge in a single point. The fragments always form a single whole.][188]

Although Synthetism failed to take hold as a viable literary theory, its idea of the displacement of planes is useful for this discussion of Meklina's work because her characters move between "realities" that could be seen as "fragments of the world" (and, in a sense, the characters themselves could be seen as such "fragments", too). The "single whole" in which these fragments converge, then, is Meklina's text in its entirety, where fragmented realities and fragmented characters meet. Critic Dmitry Golynko-Volfson attributes Meklina's textual "surrealistic phantasmagoria" to her experimental stories that "formulate a female psyche"

[188]"O sintetizme" ["On Synthetism"], *Litsa*, 239.

that is "unfixed and constantly changing", thanks to her characters, who "are in essence symbols of phantomlike and fragile realities" who move from one reality to another.[189]

Something like shifting plot planes that Zamiatin found in Pil'niak's texts appear in Meklina's texts as moments in which her characters experience what I call "communicative crises". Here, a particular element (most likely the addresser or addressee) of Jakobson's communicative model fails, and in that moment of failure characters find themselves in a *transitional space* that disturbs or confuses their self-perception**.** Such constant shifting and displacing affects the reader as much as the characters. A main argument in this chapter is that both the implied reader and the character are displaced by the character's jumps between "contexts", which in turn challenges the implied reader's horizon of expectations. Due to these jumps, the plot planes never quite converge in a single point, causing the reader almost always to finish reading one of Meklina's works with a *question* in mind instead of an overarching sense of resolution. In Shteyngart's and Ulinich's works, the reader has some sense of a journey completed that ends with the reader, if not also the protagonist, recognizing the protagonist's identity and its composition. In Meklina's works, the reader does not receive any sense of a journey, any idea of a "central voice" (i.e. a single or solid protagonist), any idea of a single language or continuous lexicon – not to mention a consistent sense of space or time in the first place.

Communicative Crises

How, then, is communicative function disrupted in Meklina's works? It will first be helpful to relate our various interpretive tools to the structure of Jakobson's communicative model. Meklina's narrator is the addresser who directs discourse to her addressee, the

[189]"Letter From Russia: Contemporary Women's Prose", *Context* No. 15 (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, University of Illinois), NP. http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/letter-from-russia-contemporary-womens-prose/; accessed 11 September 2014.

implied reader. This discourse istransmitted in the code of either Russian or English language, and in the context of a work of fiction containing certain shared assumptions about space, time, and action (what Zamiatin calls "plot planes"). The horizon of expectation that the reader brings to Meklina's text acts as the contact between addresser and addressee, given that this system implies a psychological connection between writer and reader. Thus Jakobson's model (see p. 157) can be re-labeled:

Traditional assumptions about unified space, time, action (plot planes)

Narrator Discourse Implied Reader

Horizon of Expectation
Utterance (Russian or English)

Meklina engages in communicative disruption in three main ways ("communicative crises"): she changes the code of the utterance by switching from Russian to English (or another language); she cuts off discourse by interrupting or abruptly ending trains of thought or speech events; and she denies her addresser a reciprocal addressee, creating characters who do not return the addresser's messages. In doing so, Meklina interferes with contact by playing with her implied reader's horizon of expectation, thereby denying that her reader a chance to act as addressee and thus engage fully in discourse with her as "author" – an act that also leaves Meklina herself unsure of her own function as a communicative being, since her Bakhtinian "word" is only half-formed without a listener. Moreover, since the reader is unable to decode her message, disruption occurs, leaving the reader as unsure of his or her identity as Meklina (and her characters) seem(s) to be. In that sense, then, disruption of the communicative model results in disturbance of self-perception – to the point of near-total loss of identity – for Meklina, her characters, and her readers. In this discussion, I move from the most basic element of Jakobson's communicative model – code (i.e. word) – to message (i.e. string of words), then to addresser/addressee (i.e. people exchanging messages),

to show how the model breaks down at the most basic, and then more intermediate, and then most advanced levels. This last and most "advanced" breakdown is what leads to the greatest disturbance in self-perception. The fictive Margarita Meklina's final "jump" is the culmination of each smaller communicative breakdown that characters and readers experience along the way.

Meklina has published several collections of short stories and essays, totaling around fifty works; I address six works here. Her collections contain stories written since her arrival in San Francisco in 1995, but many were not published in print until later. This chapter's material mainly originates from two such sources: her 2003 collection, *СражениеподПетербургом*[*Srazhenie pod Peterburgom*, The Battle at Petersburg] and her 2010 epistolary novel co-written with writer Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, *POP3*.[190] From *Srazhenie*, I take the stories "Dom" ["The House"], "Srazhenie pri Peterburge" ["The Battle of Petersburg"][191], and "doktor Morselli, medsestra Ellen Dayton" ["Doctor Morselli and Nurse Ellen Dayton"].[192]Excerpts from *POP3* are indicated by the number under which they appear in the printed text, except where noted. "A ia posredi" ["And I Am in the Middle"] is taken from Meklina's 2011 short-story collection of the same name, and "The Jump" first appeared in the 2014 English-language anthology *Wreckage of Reason II: Back to the Drawing Board*.[193] Rather than present separate summaries of these works here, I incorporate summaries into my discussion of the three "communicative crises". Within these

[190] A Russian writer, poet, and translator, who, like Meklina, was awarded the Bely Prize for independent literature in Russia. He died in September 2012. The letters in the novel were written from 1998-1999, though the novel was not published until 2010.

[191]This story's title is deceptively similar to that of the collection in which it appears: *СражениеподПетербургом*[*Srazhenie pod Peterburgom*].

[192]Concerning in-text citations, I use abbreviated story names where necessary. "Dom" is cited in-text as ("Dom" pn); "Srazhenie pri Peterburge" as ("Srazhenie" pn), and "doktor Morselli, medsestra Ellen Dayton" as ("Morselli" pn).

[193]"A ia posredi" is cited as ("Posredi" pn).

discussions, I present the works in chronological order by date of writing, not publication. All are in Russian except "The Jump", which is in English.

The first "crisis" of communication focuses on the most basic building block of Jakobson's model: the word itself, expressed as "code". In Meklina's works, a change in "code" means a sudden switch from Russian to English or French, or an unexpected instance of transliterated, non-translated Russian appearing in English. Her first such work, *POP3* (1998-1999), is an epistolary novel composed of letters that she exchanged over the course of a year with Russian writer Arkadii Dragomoshchenko. They discuss a wide variety of topics, from the state of literature and publishing in post-Soviet Russia to life in the United States and in Russia. While its form and style depart from the usual presentation of a more traditional "novel", the work's plot derives its action, conflict, and climax from the contents and transmission of the letters between Meklina and Dragomoshchenko. In his afterword to the novel, contemporary Russian writer Vadim Temirov describes the work as "переписка двух очень литературных персонажей, которые снимают свои профессиональные маски. И не могут их снять" ["an exchange between two very literary characters who repeatedly take off their professional masks, but cannot take them off once and for all"] (*POP3* 203). This inability to maintain a consistent relationship translates into an increasingly fragile narrative, which is a direct result of the communicative breakdown that occurs between Meklina and Dragomoshchenko – who take turns acting as addresser and addressee – when one or both of them unexpectedly changes the code. This change also weakens the relationship between Meklina and her reader, who might expect two Russian writers toconsistently use Russian language as they address one another.

Meklina playfully refuses to provide such codal consistency, however: seemingly out of nowhere, her fictive self throws an English word into an otherwise Russian sentence, even

when a perfectly good Russian word would suffice. For example, she and Dragomoshchenko discuss co-authoring a playwhen she asks if his son lives in the U.S. She tells him that Orson Welles' stage adaptation of "Macbeth"used an exclusively African-American cast, and asks him: "Стоит нам тоже нацеливаться на труппу какой-то определенной ethnicity?" ["Is it worth it for us to also aim for a troupe of a certain kind of ethnicity?"] (*POP3* 24).[194] In his reply, Dragomoshchenko retorts "Что же касается ethnicity труппы... мне бы хотелось, чтобы нашу пьесу исполняла труппа балийского балета" ["As far as the ethnicity of the troupe is concerned… I would prefer that our play used the troupe of a Balinese ballet"] (*POP3* 26). He pokes fun at her not only by repeating her English word, but also by making light use of alliteration in Russian in the phrase "Balinese ballet". Dragomoshchenko echoes Meklina's code change in what appears to be an act of linguistic solidarity, but his lighthearted intent does not align with Meklina's serious approach to the idea. His slightly sarcastic use of the English word may mean that he thinks poorly of her suggestion, or that he disapproves of insertion of English into their Russian conversation. He may also be trying to exert power over her by showing that he, too, can use English, and even outfox her by then making a clever linguistic play in Russian. She does not respond to his jab, suggesting that the tiny cracks of a communicative rift may have just begun to form.

Meklina "fights back" by changing the code twice in a subsequent letter to Dragomoshchenko, perhaps as a way of putting some distance between them as addresser and addressee. She offhandedly begins a letter describing nearby wine country: "Здесь, в Napa Valley, можно ездить с одного vine'ardана другой и на дармовщинку пить вино..." ["Here, in Napa Valley, you can drive around from one vineyard to another and drink wine

[194] This refers to the 1936 stage production in Harlem commonly called "Voodoo Macbeth", since it takes place on an unnamed Caribbean island and blends Haitian voodoo with Scottish witchcraft. Bernice W. Kliman, *Macbeth* (2nd ed.) (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 112.

for free..."] (*POP3* 29).The word "vine'ard" is an odd combination of an English-language term and Russian-language transliteration and grammar: the "a" on the end of the word inflects it for the genitive case that follows the Russian preposition "с", or "from". Transliterated "vine'arda" is rendered in Russian as "винеьард" -- close to, but not quite the same as, "виньярд", which is the Russian rendering of place names such as Martha's Vineyard, though not the actual Russian word for "vineyard". That word is "виноградник", or "vinogradnik", though "виньярд" seems to be a perfectly acceptable cognate. Such linguistic play may be Meklina's way of distancing herself from Dragomoshchenko while softening the blow of geographic separation. By using the English name "Napa Valley" instead of, say, its Russian rendering of "Напа Вали", she reinforces the fact that she lives in the U.S. and has more freedom to use English whenever she likes -- indeed, in other letters containing American place names, Meklina tends to use transliterated Russian, such as "Хаф Мун Бей" for northern California's Half Moon Bay (*POP3* 26). Yet she may alsoconcede somewhat by using an incompletely-English transliteration of a Russian cognate, and by giving it a proper Russian grammatical ending – this "Russglish" may be a way to bridge the gap, metaphorically and linguistically, between San Francisco and Dragmoshchenko's native St. Petersburg. In any event, Dragomoshchenko does not respond to Meklina's comeback, implying that she has succeeded in putting at least *some* distance between them, and beginning the process of communicative disruption that intensifies as the novel progresses.

Meklina's narrator builds up communicative tension by sprinkling such one-word or two-word instances of English once every few letters for most of the novel. In one particularly disruptive exchange a little more than halfway through – in letter no. 127, of 236 – Dragomoshchenko appends a postscript in which he mentions an instance of misplaced stress on a Russian word that he heard on television. Meklina responds in letter no. 128 with

a thorough explanation of how such a misstep would change the meaning of a word in English:

> В английском же легкой перестановкой ударения мы меняем смысл. Path**e**ticandpathet**i**c.В первом случае это слово может относиться к персидскому принцу, утерявшему свою галерею в 13 тысяч squarefeet; во втором случае – к, скажем, симфонии Чайковского…Когда я сказала, "PathEticSymphony,"всем стало весело, ибо в переводе это значит "Плачевная Симфония". [In English with we change the meaning of a word by means of something as simple as the rearrangement of its stress. Path**e**tic and pathet**i**c. In the first case, the word can apply to the Prince of Persia, who got lost in his gallery of 13,000 square feet; in the second case – to, say, Tchaikovsky's symphonies. When I said, "PathEtic Symphony," it became fun, because in the translation it means "lamentable symphony".] (*POP3* 135)[195]

The same phenomenon occurs in Russian, too, which Meklina knows as a native speaker. Here, however, she shows off her English-language prowess – and her self-conceived linguistic superiority – by demonstrating her knowledge of English nuance. Dragomoshchenko may not know that she errs slightly in spelling the end-stressed variant ("pathet**i**c") with an *–ic* instead of the French *–ique* ending, but she likely takes that into account as she tells him, in a subtle jab, that – having spent about four years living among English speakers by this point – she now knows enough English to understand variance in meaning that results from variance in stress. Dragomoshchenko again does not respond to this message, which further increases the distance between him and Meklina – while not in total communicative crisis just yet, their relationship as dialogic beings is in danger as the émigré Meklina asserts her increasingly-Americanized self.

After this little jab, Meklina seems unwilling to acknowledge the presence of *any* division between her and Dragomoshchenko that is not physical, which she demonstrates by ignoring a plea from himto organize his letters (presumably for publication) and refusing to

[195] "Pathetic Symphony" refers to Tchaikovsky's 6th symphony, "Pathétique".

tell him what she has been doing with them. In her letter no. 180, which is a cut-and-pasted e-mail that she received from someone she calls a "незнакомый интернетовский junkie" ["unfamiliar Internet junkie"]:

> really russia? im o so jealous. i used to baby sit an old lady from stpetersburg. Josephine pasternak – afraid of the dark, leonid's daughter (the russian renoir – only better) boris's sister (no mean draughtsman himself) couldn't sleep in the house all alone. she told me stories of st petersburg and tolstoy and chaliapin and any crazy shit to keep me coming back. then my old friend nick went to live there and still I didn't go. pathetic really. (*POP3* 172)

The word "pathetic" serves as a cheeky reminder to Dragomoshchenko that she, a connoisseur of English, can receive and understand e-mails written in that language, even if they are riddled with grammatical and factual errors. Neither the reader, nor Dragomoshchenko or even Meklina herself, know who this "Internet junkie" is, but Meklina's intent is clear: by sending Dragomoshchenko this e-mail, Meklina warns him that she has other addressers for whom she can act as addressee, and vice versa. At any moment, she can cut off Dragomoshchenko's discourse entirely, at which point he would cease to exist in her dialogic world. Dragomoshchenko seems eager to cut *her* off first, however; his response to her in letter no. 181 consists solely of the sentence "да и не возитесь вы с письмами, кому это собственно нужно" ["and don't bother with the letters; to whom are they actually necessary?"] [*POP3* 172). He refers to his earlier plea that she organize his letters, but here seems to change his mind entirely about the need for their communication to be preserved at all. After all, he says, who needs them?

Meklina responds in turn to this threat with silence, suggesting that the communicative crisis may have reached a point of no return. Before letter no. 185, a note in the text indicates a long break between letters because Meklina flew to St. Petersburg to meet Dragomoshchenko. While this event might indicate that the crisis has passed, the

reader does not know how the two writers spent time together in Russia, or how they got along. After Meklina returns to San Francisco, however, Dragomoshchenko – who seems to have a revived interest in continuing their dialogic relationship – writes to her in increasingly familiar and suggestive ways. Late in the novel, in letter no. 205, he suddenly switches the code of address from formal to informal: "Как ты там, Рита, как работа, чего по вечерам -- фотография с пиш.маш. очень cousy 8-)) – это новая квартира?"["How are you doing there, Rita, how is work, what are you doing during the evenings – the photograph with the typewriter is very cozy 8-)) – is that a new apartment?"] (*POP3* 184).[196] Addressing Meklina with the informal "ты", Dragomoshchenko assumes a level of intimacy between them that ignores their previous communicative failures. Unfortunately, Meklina does not meet him at this level, and continues to address him with the formal "вы", switching the code back to use terms she finds acceptable.Or, she may be responding in a culturally programmed manner: she could be using this pronoun out of respect for him, or as an acknowledgement of hierarchy, putting Dragomoshchenko in a more elevated position: men in Russian literature as far back as the 19th century often addressed women with the informal pronoun "ты", whereas women addressed men with the formal "вы".

Their discourse fractures further as they address one another with different levels of respect, which only Meklina seems to notice – Dragomoshchenko never changes his code to the formal address that he had been using. Instead, he bumbles along linguistically, calling her "душа моя" [lit. "my soul"] in an attempt to narrow the distance and keep the conversation going in letter no. 209 (*POP3* 185), to which she does not respond; finally, in letter 217, the single sentence he writes to her is the suggestion "Фамилии будем заменять на очень похожие 8-)" ["Let's change our last names to ones that are more similar to one

[196]"пиш.маш." is an abbreviation for "пишущая машинка", the Russian term for a typewriter.

another"] (*POP3* 190). This last line could be read as a marriage proposal, albeit a hesitant one, given the smiley-face icon at its end (and given Dragomoshchenko's penchant for overusing that same emoticon in the last half of the novel). His final disruption of their communicative code of formal, professional dialogic address is met with silence – Meklina does not respond to his suggestion, and the last five letters of the novel are all Dragomoshchenko's unanswered missives describing a recent bout with the flu and plans for their future epistolary novel. His final line to her reads "Обнимаю – жаркийприветхолоднойидалекойкотлете!!!" ["Hugs – and warmest greetings to my cold and distant meat patty!"] (*POP3* 199)[197] The communicative crisis has reached its climax here, as Dragomoshchenko addresses Meklina as if she is in the third person, outside of their conversation. He disrupts communication not only between himself and Meklina, but also between Meklina and her reader, whose expectation of a consistent linguistic code, not to mention consistent form of address between interlocutors, has been long dashed. Finally, the reader's expectation of consistent personhood has been upset; not only does the novel end with this unprecedented third-person address, but it also ends without any sense of resolution between Meklina and Dragomoshchenko.

All the reader knows is that the end date of the novel is September 1999, a little over a year from when the first letter of August 1998 was dated. Thus, Jakobson's communicative model is broken between addresser and addressee within the text, and narrator and implied reader outside the text, and each party experiences confusion of self-perception. Dragomoshchenko, having lost his addressee after expressing a willingness to lose his own

[197]The Russian adjective "жаркий" literally means "hot", and is usually used to describe weather, or how a person feels when outside in such weather. Dragomoshchenko's word choice here is likely an attempt at ironic humor, to contrast with what he perceives is Meklina's "cold" attitude towards him. The Russian noun "котлет" ("meat patty") usually refers to an actual comestible, but it can be used in slang as a term of endearment for a partner, spouse, or close relative, as French uses the phrase "mon chou" ("my cabbage").

surname, might think that he has ceased to exist in Meklina's view; Meklina, not having her discursive needs met when her addressee changes the code, has no one with whom she can exchange utterances as an equal – and, therefore, cannot exist as a linguistic being. The reader, confused by the failures of contact, many sudden changes in code, andthe code'smovement between addresser and addressee, now confronts the difficult task of completing an inconclusive text from which no clear sense of self emerges, for either reader or character.

Meklina presents an even more muddled picture of identity in her short story "The Jump" (2014), in which her narrator presents an new core code to the reader: English language. Yet as that code changes suddenly to French or Russian, both the reader and Meklina's characters experience not only communicative but also disruptionsthat leave them unsure of their identity. Meklina's text, a fictionalized narrative treatment of three historical personages, begins with Elsa Triolet, a Russian writer born in 1896 as Ella Kagan into a Jewish family in Moscow. Her sister was Lilya Brik, wife of Russian Futurist impresario Osip Brik. Elsa spoke German and French, and was one of the first writers to translate Vladimir Mayakovskii's Russian Futurist poetry into French. In 1918 she married French cavalry officer André Triolet and accompanied him to France and then Tahiti, but her unhappiness spurred her to divorce him afterwards. In Tahiti, she exchanged letters with Russian Formalist critic Viktor Shklovskii. He showed the letters to Russian Socialist Realist figurehead Maksim Gorkii, who took it upon himself to nurture her career as a writer. In 1928 Elsa married Communist French writer Louis Aragon; they fought together in the French Resistance of World War II, and in 1944 Triolet became the first woman to win

France's prestigious Prix Goncourt for the best prose work of the year. She died in France in 1970 of a heart attack.[198]

The story begins with a description of Elsa's life before she became an established writer. Meklina's narrator instantly places both Elsa and the reader in a Francophone setting in two ways: first, by overtly inserting French words into the narrative; second, by following these code-switches with French cognates and alliteration of French sounds. At home, Elsa feeds her French husband "*croque-monsieurs* and *foie-gras*" ("The Jump" 203) – two food terms probably familiar to Meklina's English-speaking reader, which may explain why she leaves them untranslated. A few paragraphs later, the narrator presents more subtle French code, describing how Elsa spent her youth:

> [she] frequented cabarets and cafés… and her flirting with local photographers was interspersed with flashes of passion… Exalted exhaustion was shared by all of her friends who used to arrive home at 5 a.m. after discussing Catullus, the carriage dragged by a disheveled horse and disapproving *muzhik*. ("The Jump" 203-204)

The phrase "cabarets and cafés", and the name "Catullus", continue the hard-C sound in the French "croque-monsieur", keeping the French code prominent in the reader's mind. At the end of that paragraph, however, Meklina's narrator suddenly switches the code to Russian, leaving the reader unfamiliar with Russian to use context clues for re-orientation. A few paragraphs prior, the narrator contrasts Elsa's diet with her husband's: where he eats ham-and-cheese sandwiches and goose liver, she subsists on "the power... to create a safety net with her words. Still, in recurring nightmares she would fall into the bottomless pit of her Russian" ("The Jump" 203). The reader's first encounter with Russian code is a challenge, as Meklina leaves the transliterated word untranslated. While it refers here to the carriage

[198] "Elsa Triolet", *Dictionary of Russian Women Writers,* ed. Marina Ledovsky, Charlotte Rosenthal, and Mary F. Zirin (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 657-9.

driver, *muzhik* can mean anything from "peasant" to "lower-class worker" to "a man's man".[199] This single, complex word serves two purposes: first, it reminds the reader that Elsa's roots are Russian. Second, it reinforces the narrator's description of Russian as a "bottomless pit" in "recurring nightmares" by suggesting that these roots are tangled indeed.Another function of this word, coupled with the "bottomless pit" of "recurring nightmares", could be to remind the reader of an important literary forebear: Anna Karenina, the heroine of Leo Tolstoy's novel, who suffers recurring nightmares about a *muzhik* and later jumps to her death in front of a train. Finally, it may also imply that Meklina's narrator intends to make the reader's experience of navigating the text just as complicated as Elsa's experience of navigating her own relationship with her native language.

As if on cue to complicate the reader's experience, Meklina's narrator quickly changes the codeback to alliterative English sprinkled with French, noting that "when [Elsa] fled the Bolsheviks, she changed her name from Ella to Elsa, where the sneaked-in "s" stood for "escape" (or for "escargot")" ("The Jump" 204). Here the"s" sound lends the narrative a fluid quality, relaxing both the reader who may stumble over the term "Bolshevik" and Elsa herself, whom the reader learns is in Tahiti with her first husband, André Triolet. Meklina's narrator uses these mellifluous sounds to set up the harsh contrast with the Russian words that make Elsa feel ill, which in turn causes the reader to also feel communicative confusion: "Every resuscitated Russian word – *sobaka* ["dog"], *ruzh'e* ["gun"], or *kolodetz* ["well"] – made her heart race, which led to nausea... Russian for her became: hot flashes, shivers" ("The Jump" 204). The untranslated Russian causes the reader to stumble; without meaningful

[199]Translator Michele A. Berdy notes that *muzhik* is one of the most difficult words to translate into English, based on its meaning in a variety of contexts. See "A Muzhik for All Seasons", *The Moscow Times*, December 10, 2010. http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/tmt/426008.html; accessed 3 February 2015.

context, readers can only guess what these words mean, which creates distance between them and the narrator.

In the second part of Elsa's narrative, communicative distance and distress extend to other characters as she leaves André, moves to Paris, and marries another writer after finally establishing her own literary career.Her second husband, Louis Aragon, sells Elsa's jewelry creations at local markets; when Elsa and her sisters wear this jewelry in public, men who see them "bec[o]me speechless, [their] Russian, German, or French giving way" ("The Jump" 212). They lose their ability to communicate in any code, leaving them without the words necessary for discourse. Without speech, they become mute and invisible, and fall by the wayside for both Elsa and her sisters. Perhaps in a show of solidarity, Meklina's narrator makesElsa herself feel invisible when she asks Louis to assess her writing. Every time she pleads with him to give her an opinion, he refuses to answer:

> for him, she was neither Russian-Jewish nor French; there was no such term as a Jewish or German vagina, andwhen loving her, he was taking her in one hundred percent, her tongue and organs together, not separating "*sobaka*" from "*un chien*", "*kolodetz*" from "*un puits*", "*ruzh'e*" from "*un fusil*" ("The Jump" 212).[200]

Louis's lack of desire – or ability, or both – to separate Elsa's Russian language from his own French creates a muddled code that has a pronounced effect on Elsa's self-perception. Seeing that her husband does not make a distinction between the Russian and French facets of her identity, Elsa becomes confused: is she Russian, as she was born, or French, as she has lived and written? To this point in the narrative, Elsa has worked hard to keep her Russian identity – which is characterized by rough, nausea-inducing, frightening linguistic expression – separate from her French identity, which is characterized by smooth, mellow linguistic expression. When Louis so carelessly conflates her two selves, Elsa becomes

[200] These terms are, respectively, the Russian and French words for the nouns "dog", "well", and "gun".

agitated: he has broken the communicative model by refusing to recognize the distinct code that she uses to address him. Thus, the narrator notes, Elsa is driven "to the brink", ostensibly to make some kind of leap implied by the story's title ("The Jump" 213). Having gone mad, Elsa loses her sense of self, leading to an identity crisis brought on by lack of communication. The reader, too, experiences a sort of crisis when the narrator ends Elsa's story there without giving the reader any idea of her fate.

The second historical personage in the story, "Zinaida Shakhovskoi", grew up in an aristocratic Russian family during the 1917 Revolution and later became a well-known writer and editor.[201] The historical Zinaida Shakhovskaia began contributing to émigré literary journals in Russia, France, and Belgium as early as the mid-1920s, and much later edited the Parisian newspaper *Russkaia mysl'* (*Russian Thought*). In her childhood, her family spent winters in St. Petersburg and summers at Matovo, the family's estate in the Tula province just south of Moscow. Zinaida was raised speaking, and later wrote in, both Russian and French; the bulk of her work from the 1920s to the 1960s was in French, and thereafter she concentrated on writing in Russian. She died in 2001 and was buried in Paris, having worked and lived there since the late 1920s.[202]

The first words out of Zinaida's mouth designate the codes in which she can communicate: "My name is Zinaida, and I speak Russian, German, and French" ("The Jump" 205). The reader does not know which code Zinaida uses, but may assume that since she is four years old at the time (according to the narrator), she speaks Russian. She speaks to a toddler, who is unable to reproduce the code; instead, hewaddles away without answering her, setting up the pattern of a broken communicative model that will continue

[201] Meklina avoids the usual feminine ending of this last name (Shakhovskaia). I will refer to the fictive Zinaida as "Shakhovskoi" to distinguish her from the historical Shakhovskaia.
[202] "Zinaida Shakhovskaia", *Dictionary of Russian Women Writers,* ed. Marina Ledovsky, Charlotte Rosenthal, and Mary F. Zirin (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 573-5.

throughout Zinaida's childhood. Indeed, later that very summer, Zinaida tries to engage in discourse with some boys fishing from a bridge near her home by teaching them "a handful of simple French words" and promising "to show them *Tour Eiffel*" ("The Jump" 205). Here, it is not the narrator but the character who once again changes the code, from Russian to French, but the new code evokes an even more confusing reaction. Rather than remain silent, the boys throw fish at Zinaida, and curse at her (presumably in Russian), until she runs away. In both of these situations, both the addresser and the addressee experience communicative confusion because they cannot agree upon a single, mutual code. Meklina's narrator plants a seed of doubt in Zinaida's mind; if she cannot communicate in either her native Russian or her near-native French, then what code *should* she use?

Meklina's narrator delays answering the reader, instead underscoring the distress Zinaida feels when she has to speak Russian in front of others and, in turn, imparting some of it to the reader. Possibly due to her failed attempts at communicating in her native language, Zinaida develops a stutter: "When she was six, her stutter became prominent, but only in Russian" ("The Jump" 205). Her efforts to engage in discourse, once stymied, now become nearly impossible as even her own parents refuse to communicate with her in their shared native language. Whenever Zinaida enters a room they are in, they switch from Russian to Pig Latin, saying "Stepan went *unting-hay* and he *illed-kay* a big *kuropatka*" ["partridge"], and Zinaida would stare at them, not understanding what bearded *dyadya* Stepan did to the bird", but they only succeed in cowing her into silence: "She didn't dare to ask" what had happened ("The Jump" 205). Meklina's narrator mixes Pig Latin and transliterated, untranslated Russian with English to express the awkwardness and alienation Zinaida feels during this communicative crisis. Her parents switch to a completely foreign

code – a kind of pidginEnglish – to exclude her from their discourse, which may cause her to wonder where she belongs in the family.

This discriminatory code-switching practice continues for at least another seven years, when Zinaida is nearly twelve and the family is driven off their estate during the revolution. Prior to her parents' disappearance, Zinaida is in a room and overhears through an open window how the family's dogs have mysteriously turned up dead: "nobody switched syllables in the word 'killed'; it was uttered in thick, stocky Russian, '*Ubil*'" ("The Jump" 206). Shocked by the unscrambled code, Zinaida cannot speak; the communicative confusion renders her mute, unable to make a sound when soldiers enter the family estate's palace and take her mother away. While her mother later returns, her father's and uncle's whereabouts remain unknown for the rest of the story, and her nanny and other family caretakers and workers have long since fled.

The day after her mother is taken, one soldier returns, telling Zinaida that her mother is alive and promising to bring news of her every day. This soldier notices Zinaida's stutter, but does not change the code he uses to communicate with her. That is, he speaks to her in Russian still, and his lack of reaction to her stutter results in an increasingly harmonious communicative atmosphere for Zinaida. Left alone at the palace, she only speaks with the sailor, who agrees to use her code – a fact reflected in the narrator's choice to relate the rest of Zinaida's story with only one more instance of transliterated, untranslated Russian. The sailor relates terrifying eyewitness accounts of rebel White Army soldiers being captured and thrown overboard from his ship after spitting in the Bolsheviks' eyes and repeating the phrase "*Slava Otechestvu*" ["glory to the Fatherland"] ("The Jump" 209). This story, which ends with that defiant cry, compels Zinaida to stare at the sailor with wide eyes, but she continues to communicate with him nonetheless. Their harmonious discourse is broken only

when the sailor brings Zinaida's mother back to the family's palace; he tells Zinaida, in front of her mother, that one of his officers was thrown overboard and that he "lowered" himself to find the man. Confused by an exchange that she does not understand, Zinaida's mother asks for an explanation, and the sailor "burst[s] into tears and [runs] away" ("The Jump" 211). Now that their discourse has ceased, and the communicative model disrupted, Zinaida has no one left with whom she can communicate, returning her to her previously mute state, shuffled into the background once more. Moreover, Meklina's narrator leaves the reader without a resolution by ending Zinaida's part of the story there.

The relative absence of communicative displacement itself in the intial appearance ofthe third historical figure, writer Margarita Meklina, may seem out of place. The reader may expect a sudden change in code from English to Russian, based on the narrator's designation of Margarita as a Russian author. No such switch occurs, however, and the reader is left with mere *mention* of Russian words – words that upset Margarita, just as they did Elsa Triolet: after she reads news of a hate crime, she tries to describe her feelings in a journal, but "her Russian was too raw, too close to the skin, and she started feeling much worse" ("The Jump" 208). Meklina's narrator attributes this trouble to the fact that Margarita "still had a hard time adjusting to the U.S. after arriving here from Russia fifteen years earlier" ("The Jump" 213), which is the opening line for the second part of Margarita's narrative. In the first part, the narrator describes her troubled sexual relationship with her husband, and her curious online relationship with a man in Boston named Ethan, who is sixteen years her senior and who works for a Jewish historical organization.

When Margarita communicates with Ethan, they both use English until the second part of the narrative, when Ethan sends her a talk he gave at his office about Ukrainian police bullets. He interjects Ukrainian words into his e-mails to her, not only changing the

linguistic code but also the syntactical code: "she read line after line… his wet, long sentences, almost snail trails, interspersed with dry, awkward quotations in the Ukrainian language… 'Our dutiful policemen are impatiently waiting for pistols to start performing the job', 'I'm impatiently waiting for the next installment of your confessions'" ("The Jump" 213). Perhaps caught off guard by these code changes and unsure how to respond, Margarita does not reply or react to them (insofar as the narrator tells the reader), thus interrupting her otherwise continuous communication with Ethan. The communicative confusion deepens when, having not received a response in some time, Ethan starts addressing Margarita in German (in a true non-sequitur, as he has demonstrated no prior knowledge of any German words), and interspersing his letters to her with Russian words. The first such missive (and the three that follow) begins "Liebe M.", and ends with this entreaty: "please call me today and utter some simple words in your Slavic accent, *sobaka* ["dog"] or *seksapilnost'* ["sex appeal"]" ("The Jump" 215).[203] The narrator makes no record of any reply from Margarita, so Ethan tries again: "please call and leave several words on my recorder: *ia hochu* ["I want"], *ia zhelaiu* ["I wish"], *i goriu zhazhdoi* ["and I burn with thirst"]" ("The Jump" 216). Possibly turned off by Ethan's effort to reach her by using a sexualized contact consisting of a code that makes her "feel worse", and is still painful to read or hear even after fifteen years of life in the United States, Margarita fails to respond.

After this particular bout of silence, Ethan stops using Russian words in his e-mails, but still she does not respond. She refuses to communicate in the code that they had been using freely to this point – English – and instead loses herself in descriptions of clothing in catalogs, which "was all of the English, being a Russian writer, she wanted to know" ("The Jump" 216-217). She seems to embrace her identity as a Russian writer, absconding with the

[203] German "Liebe" means "Dear", as in "Dear John…".

English language that has hounded her for over a decade. The next line – which is also the final line of the story – betrays her declaration, however: "Like Zinaida and Elsa, uprooted from any feelings of comfort, agonizing and analyzing, unnerved and unsettled, she jumped to her death in an alien tongue" ("The Jump" 217). She experiences the ultimate communicative breakdown through the code that has slowly caused the death of her Russian identity; having lost her native language, she ceases to exist as a Russian.

Meklina's narrator connects Margarita with Elsa and Zinaida, who lived in Francophone countries and won the most acclaim for their work in French, as women who were forced to change codes and thus give up an essential component of their identities – thereby ceasing what Steiner calls "mechanisms of identity [that] are thoroughly grounded in the fact of language".[204] Since they cannot express themselves in Russian, these three characters experience a (metaphorically) fatal disruption of their self-understanding. The gradual loss of code that these women – and *POP3*'s fictive Meklina – experience culminates in moments of communicative crisis in which they cannot articulate a cohesive identity. The reader, having also endured ever-shifting code and being left without the psychological comfort of a resolution (was the "leap" literal, or metaphorical? Did Meklina ever reply to Dragomoshchenko's last letter?), suffers as well – and thus, the first cracks in the communicative model between writer and reader are formed. The violation of the most basic building block of this model – language, or words collectively held that interactively build understanding and meaning between those who share them – lays the foundation for the second "crisis" of communication, in which disturbance happens on a larger scale.

This second "crisis" focuses on Jakobson's "message", which in Meklina's works may be understoodin terms of Bakhtinian "discourse" (the reciprocal exchange of those

[204]Steiner, 63.

collectively held words by speakers and interlocutors who share a psychological and contextual connection) as the strings of words that form sentences, paragraphs, speech events, and plot planes. Meklina disrupts the communicative model by cutting off this discourse through interruption, or abrupt ends, of trains of thought or speech events. The first work in which this disruption occurs is the story "Dom" ("The House", 1995), which begins with Lem, a Russian writer who lives in Boston and experiences writer's block while working on a story about a house. He has never seen this house, yet somehow knowsitintimately, from the name of its homeless inhabitant to the shape of the snowdrifts that envelop it in winter. His wife, Bonnie, is an American circus worker with Russian ancestors whose Russian is fractured and whose health is constantly failing – yet she serves as his muse, even as she scares him with her circus-strongwoman act. The story begins with Lem writing in a coffee shop, thinking about the house in his story; through flashbacks, the reader learns of his early years with Bonnie and her jealous rages in which she would literally tear apart his manuscripts, looking for signs of an affair. Lem is consumed by dreams of the unknown house, and falls into a depression when he receives word that it is going up for auction. To help Lem cheer up, Bonnie helps him edit his English prose, and they write a story together about a Boston policeman. Soon after that in a dream Lem sees his unknown house go up in flames, and the story ends when he reads news of a conflagration at the house in an unknown magazine – but in an issue that has not yet been published.

The story begins with a description of Lem as he sits in a café on a cold winter day and tries to write: "Вывез с собой кусок изразца со стынущей печи в Грязно, холодное утро, вид из окна, замерший, литой, как лед на Сиверге, набросок рассказа про дом. Переливал, сидя в кафе, чай из термоса в кружку" ("Dom" 16) ["He brought with him: a piece of tile from the frozen stove in Griazno; a cold morning; a view from the window that

was frozen and molten like ice on the Sivergues; the outline of a story about a house. Sitting in a café, he emptied tea from a thermos into a cup"].[205] The narrator then sets a slushy scene of writer's block; the floor is covered with "следы, будто оставленные кем-то вошедшим внутрь со стужи" ["tracks ostensibly left behind by someone coming in out of the extreme cold"], and Lem is trying to revive his "мертвеющий текст" ["paralyzed text"], trying to "вживить память в слова" ["implant his memory into his words"].

Then, the narrator suddenly switches to a view of a bridge, facing an unspecified house that becomes the subject of the next two paragraphs: "Стоял на мосту - снег, метель, дом укрыт на горе" ["He stood on a bridge – snow, a blizzard, the house nestled on a mountain"] ("Dom" 16). The reader then learns that "Дом был заколочен, закрыт - прежде прятал беглых стрельцов, согревал ямщиков, был харчевней" ["The house was boarded up and closed – previously, it hid runaway musketeers, warmed coachmen, and was a tavern"], but just as quickly encounters an apparent paradox: the writer "знал, что он, Лем, в этом доме не жил никогда"["he knew that he, Lem, had never lived in this house"] ("Dom" 16). Even so, Lem then remembers people and experiences from his childhood: "нянюшку, бонну, говенье, из ледника жбан простокваши" ["his nanny, his mother's helper, fasting, a jug of sour milk from the icebox"] ("Dom" 16), but the narrator does not let him wallow in his reminiscence for too long before returning to the café in Boston where he writes. These starts, stops, and constant changes in space and time not onlydescribe Lem's trouble with his "paralyzed text", but they also reflect how the reader may feel paralyzed by the narrator's

[205] Both places mentioned in this sentence are real: Griazno is a village approximately 45 miles (70km) southwest of St. Petersburg, where a devastating fire occurred in 1857 that obliterated almost all of its farmhouses and outbuildings. Andrei Burlakov, "Грязно" ["Griazno"], *Гачина сквозь столетия* [*Gachina Through the Centuries*], http://history-gatchina.ru/article/grazno.htm; accessed 23 March 2015.Sivergues is a commune of approximately 40 inhabitants in Provence, in southeastern France. 14 kilometers (8.6 miles) away from Sivergues is a town named Bonnieux (evoking Lem's wife, who is named Bonnie). "Sivergues", *Provence Web*, http://www.provenceweb.fr/e/vaucluse/sivergues/sivergues.htm; accessed 23 January 2015.

ever-shifting focus. The reader cannot follow the narrator's twisting, turning message, and as such does not know where to look next, or what to expect.

True to form and without warning, Meklina's narrator designates Lem's return to the café as the second part of the story, using flashbacks to tell the reader how Lem met his wife, Bonnie, while noting some of her linguistic and personality quirks (she "любила артистов, иностранный акцент, абсент, борщ… она говорила ему: еллоу-блу бас" ["loved artists, a foreign accent, absinthe, borshch… she said to him, yellow-blue bus"] ("Dom" 18).To Russian speakers, "еллоу-блу бас" is an amusing and odd mispronunciation of the phrase "Я люблю вас" ("I love you"), which Bonnie bungles by switching the initial vowel sound "я" ["ia"] to "е" ["eh"] and then transposing the letter sound "b" on the letter sound "v" in saying "бас" over "вас". Just as quickly, the narrator then jumps to a description of Lem's current writing projects, noting that he has no trouble writing nonfiction prose, and tossing the reader another scrap about the mysterious house: "Лем его почему-то боялся писать, боялся погибнуть, нечаянно заглянув в самую глубину какой-нибудь фразы, боялся выйти из комнаты и зайти обратно в свой мир не с той стороны" ["Lem for some reason was afraid to write the story; he was afraid of dying, having accidentally fallen into the deepest abyss of some phrase, and he was afraid of leaving the room and returning to his world from the wrong side" ("Dom" 18).

After this chilling statement, however, the narrator deflects the reader's attention to Bonnie's various afflictions and their effect on Lem: jealousy, rage, sudden allergic reactions to fettucine alfredo and cats, and asthma attacks – all of which exhaust not only Lem but also the reader, who must also suffer through these mood swings and outbursts. Meklina's narrator prolongs the agony for both parties by drawing out one of Bonnie's fits into two breathless sentences composed of more than fifteen clauses:

> Однажды, когда он засиделся в “Пироге Романтичном” за полночь, она разбила в отчаянье толстого португальского кролика в яблоках, которого он ей подарил, расколошматила молотком его несгораемый сейф, разбросала по полу рукописи, ища любовные письма. Волнуясь, она выгрызала до крови костяшки пальцев, руки ее были покрыты экземой, а когда Лем обхаживал издателей в Нью-Йорке, она, тоскуя, гладила по голове, ласкала лысую куклу из глины, которую слепила с него, нашептывала заклинанья, зажигала свечи, молилась.
> [One day, when Lem stayed too long at “Pie Romantic” until midnight, Bonnie in despair destroyed a fat statue of a Portuguese dappled rabbit that he had given her, clobbered into pieces with a hammer his fireproof safe, tore up and threw his manuscripts all over the floor, looking for love letters. Worrying, she gnawed her knuckles to the bone until they were bloody, her hands covered in eczema, and when Lem cajoled and pleaded with publishers in New York, she, pining and longing, stroked him on the head, caressing the bald clay doll that she had sculpted with him, whispering spells, lighting candles, and praying.] (“Dom” 19)

After making a pun in both English and Russian – in a footnote, the reader learns that the name of the café in Boston where Lem writes is a play on the English term “pyromantic”, derived from “pyromancy” (divination by fire, which may foreshadow the house’s fiery demise) – the narrator confronts the reader with a wall of text that is more monologue than discourse, thereby causing the reader to once more feel “paralyzed”in the face of such one-way communication.

Severaldisorienting plot twists and turns later, Meklina’s narrator returns to the unknown house by interrupting Lem and Bonnie’s Lake Tahoe vacation with a newspaper story. One morning, Lem reads: “Дом признан исторической ценностью, и в нем производят изыскания” [“A house had been recognized as having historic value, and research was being carried out inside it”] (“Dom” 20) – but Lem soon finds out that the objects being excavated there are the very same ones he has written into his work of fiction. He begins to worry, wondering if the events at the house somehow forecast some kind of apocalyptic, “эффектный конец, туш и литавры, извержение вулкана” [“the effective end, a

flourish of trumpets and drums, a volcanic eruption"] ("Dom" 21). Meklina's narrator thenjerks both Lem and the reader along on a frantic narrative journey: he smokes more than ever before, writes about Dorothy Parker, dreams of his fictional characters and their spouses, writes about Bonnie, goes to see all of her circus shows, has a mental breakthrough about their relationship and begins to see her as a muse more than an enemy (i.e. her frenzied jealousy now inspires him, rather than causes him to despair), and they begin to write a story together about a Boston policeman, which brings them closer together than ever before – suggesting to the reader that perhaps a resolution will occur after the rollercoaster of the previous pages.

Yet the narrator suddenly returns to Lem's story about the house at the end the narrative. Bolstered by his work with Bonnie, Lem"пересмотрел в сотый раз все газеты, пытаясь найти сообщенье. Он задумывался, всё ли в порядке" ["looked for the hundredth time in all of the newspapers, trying to find an announcement. He started to wonder if everything was all right"] ("Dom" 24). Here, Meklina's narrator smudges the line between reality and fantasy. Lem begins to see thick, blood-red carpets in his dreams ("С недавних пор ему стали сниться ковры, толстые, цвета крови" ["Dom" 24]), and his next action is to walk towards a door, open it, and cross himself, but the narrator does not clarify whether this action occurs in his dream, or in reality. The language is ambiguous enough that the reader could make a case for either scenario, even as the scene becomes more feverish (thus implying a dream scenario):

> Он знал: он движется к дому, и уже что-то сместилось, натянувшись, дрожит, ищет правильный фокус - теплее, теплее, и вот уже совсем горячо, как в любимой детской игре, и все стены покрыты коврами, разбиты лампочки в кухне, метель, искры сыплются из зева натопленной печки.
> [He knew: he was moving towards the house, and alreadysomething had already shifted, having tensed up, trembling,he was looking for the correct focus – he was getting warmer,warmer, and then completely hot, like in the

> beloved children'sgame, and all of the walls were covered with rugs, there werebroken light bulbs in the kitchen, outside was a blizzard, sparks showered from the throat of the overheated furnace.]("Dom" 24)

Just as feverishly, the narrator interrupts the reader's experience by suddenly abandoning this description to switch the setting to an ambiguous location. Lem wants to place firewood under a stove or a furnace (possibly the one just described as being "overheated"), and he digs around for papers to add as fuel when, suddenly, "попался под руку какой-то журнал, оказалось, последний, этого месяца выпуск, - увидел: дом уже невозможно спасти, сгорел от чьей-то неудачной спички" ["into his hand fell a magazine of some sort that turned out to be this month's issue, the most recent one – he saw: it was no longer possible to save the house; it had been burned by someone's unfortunate matches"] ("Dom" 24). At this news, Lem grows terrified: everything he has been dreaming or writing has come true, assuming that this revelation is not occurring within a dream itself. He sits for a while, afraid to look at the magazine once more to see the awful news, and when he finally steels himself to look again,

> последний тот номер не смог отыскать – все предыдущие были, а этот, январский, куда-то пропал, и Лем никак не мог взять в толк, откуда он знает, что дом сгорел, и, может быть, дом еще цел, потому что журнал с сообщеньем, вероятно, еще не сверстали.
> [he couldn't pick out that most recent issue from the others – all of the previous issues were there, and that one, the January issue, had disappeared, and Lem couldn't grasp how he knew that the house had burned, and, just maybe, the house was still in one piece, because the magazine with the announcement had not yet been published.] ("Dom" 24-25)

The story ends with Lem's worst fear coming true: in writing about the house, he has left the room (when he "opens the door and crosses himself") and returned (when he "moves toward the house"), only to find himself on the wrong side of his mental world (an object suddenly vanishes, when it had seemingly existed only moments prior, as if Lem's decision

to wait pushed him into another dimension). This final act of communicative disruption – the narrator never clarifies whether the scene takes place in the "real" world, or in Lem's dream world – causes Lem to question his own existence: if his other fears have come true, then this may indeed be the "effective end" of his life that he had feared earlier in the narrative.

For a writer, being unable to write (and thus make a living) might spell an "effective end" due to a lack of ability to convey one's thoughts. Lem may finally understand why Bonnie envies the communicative outlet he finds in his writing, given her failed attempts at speaking broken Russian with him. He can express himself on the page in a way that he cannot with her, because she cannot reciprocate his messages fluidly – they cannot establish and carry out consistent "discourse" due to frequent misunderstandings that arise from a lack of "collectively held words" and an interrupted psychological connection. However, the writer's block that he experiences when working on the story about the house – in which he cannot make the words in his head appear on the page – indicates that he, too, has trouble transmitting a message easily received by an addressee. Thus, that form of communication – writing the story – becomes a dead end for him, as the lack of consistent discourse in his personal life seeps into his professional life. That the story is about a house resembling the *dacha* in which he spend childhood summers implies that something about "home" is causing him to lose his ability to communicate, and thus exist, is ironic, considering that one usually considers "home" to be a native place in which the self is formed (that is, one's home imparts a basic set of values and assumptions about one's self and one's life). Writing about a place of identity causes Lem to become confused about his *own* identity, andby the end of the story he is no longer sure what is real – the house, or himself, or either. Both he and the

reader, who is left without a resolution, arrive at the end of the story with more questions than answers thanks to the narrator's frequent use of discursive disruption.

The next story featuring this interruption is "Srazhenie pri Peterburge" ("The Battle of Petersburg", 1998), which immediately presents the reader with a conundrum: to which Petersburg does the title refer? The Russian-speaking reader probably assumes that "Petersburg" is the city St. Petersburg, which is written in Cyrillic as Санкт-Петербург (Sankt-Peterburg) and often referred to as simply Петербург, or "Petersburg". A Russian-speaking reader familiar with American geography, however, might assume that the battle takes place at St. Petersburg, Florida, or at the Civil War site of Petersburg, Virginia. Either way, a reader might reasonably expect a story with a place name in its title to refer to that place early on in the narrative, if not in the first few paragraphs. Meklina's narrator does not meet that expectation, however, and waits until the story is nearly halfway through to give even a cursory mention of "Petersburg". Near the end of the sixth page (of thirteen pages total), the narrator has placed the protagonist – Ilya – on an airplane: "СамолетИльирейсом 'Сан-Франциско – Санкт-Петербург' ужевыруливалнавзлетнуюполосу" ["Ilya's plane, the flight from San Francisco to St. Petersburg [Russia], was already taxiing along the runway"] ("Srazhenie" 201). Like Meklina herself, Ilya is a Russian transplanted into California, but unlike her, Ilya is returning to his native country – not just to Russia, but to St. Petersburg, the place to which the story's title ostensibly refers.

After this long-awaited mention of "Petersburg", the narrator turns away from the core narrative and focuses full attention on a framed story, a device Meklina's narrators use frequently in some of the works discussed in this chapter as another way to disorient the reader – much as Pil'niak did with shifting plot planes in "Ivan-da-Mar'ia".[206] Ilya decides to

[206] "A ia posredi", for example.

read one of the magazines in the back of the seat pocket in front of him, and he happens to pick up one containing a story called "Srazhenie pri Peterburge" ("The Battle of Petersburg"), as in the title of the story. The reader probably expects this story to relate to the Russian St. Petersburg to which Ilya is flying, and the narrator initially fulfills this expectation with a slyly ambiguous opening:

> Английский путешественник, побывавший в Петербурге
> в восемнадцатом веке, в путевыхзаметках своих записал:
> "Нигде не видел я такого грязного города, как Петербург.
> Девять месяцев в году Петербург представляет из себя
> отходную яму..."(...) Петербург,основанный как крепость,
> был наименован в честь некоего Петра, который посредством
> ловкой женитьбы пополнил мошну и укрепил Петербург.
> [A British traveler who visited Petersburg in theeighteenth century
> wrote in his travel diary: "Nowhere have I seen a city as filthy as
> Petersburg. Nine months out of the yearPetersburg is a waste pit…
> Petersburg, founded as a fortress,was named after a certain "Peter"
> who filled up his coffers througha clever marriage and thus
> strengthened the city. ("Srazhenie" 201-202)

The use of the name "Petersburg", together with the context of flying to St. Petersburg, strongly implies that the city in question is indeed the one located in Russia, which the narrator reinforces by playing on a stereotypical tourist opinion: Petersburg is so filthy that it is a pit for most of the year. A reader familiar with the history of the Russian city would interpret "city as fortress" as describing St. Petersburg, and would feel confident in his or her designation upon reading that the city named here was named after a "certain Peter". The story continues to detail the harsh climate of Petersburg that causes widespread, fatal illness, during which many residents fell on hard times, nearly starving to death and quarreling over scarce "белый хлеб с маслом" ["white bread with butter"] and other amenities ("Srazhenie" 203). Eventually, these quarrels lead to a war: "Началась осадка Петербурга" ["The siege of Petersburg had begun"] ("Srazhenie" 203).

The reader might be misled by mention of a siege, assuming that it refers to the siege of the city in Russia, but St. Petersburg was still named Leningrad when its siege began during World War II. The telltale detail marking the framed story as a reference to the American city in Virginia, and not the Russian city, occurs nearly a page after the frame story's beginning. The narrator nonchalantly drops a sentence about a conflagration that wiped out many of this Petersburg's non-brick structures in 1815: "После пожаров город остроился заново" ("Srazhenie" 202). Nearly a page later, the narrator confirms the reader's suspicions of a switch from one Petersburg to another with the sentence "К марту к Петербургу подтянулись войска" ["By March, the troops had reached the city"] ("Srazhenie" 203) – the siege of Leningrad began in the summer of 1941, whereas the Siege of Petersburg in the American Civil War began in March 1865.

Hereafter, Meklina's narrator challenges the reader to keep up with the various artistic liberties taken in retelling the story of the Siege of Petersburg. The descriptions of the events of the siege align with those commonly found in textbooks, but the narrator inserts characters both historically real and imaginary to lend the story an element of (albeit confusing) fantasy. Union lieutenant Henry Pleasants, Union major general Ambrose Burnside, and Union officer Henry Seymour Hall appear in the story, fictionally commanding men and fighting in battle as they did in real life. Julius Caesar makes a curious appearance as a slave with such great strength that he can survive several consecutive days of flogging with hardly a scratch, which means that his master "решилвыраститьособыйсортработящихрабов" ["decided to cultivate a special kind of hard-working slaves"] ("Srazhenie" 205). Meklina's narrator bluntly confronts the reader with this idea of a Roman emperor as a slave, and then intensifies the reader's confusion by portraying

Caesar as the father of over fifty children, when the historical Caesar had only four – none of whom were slaves.

The confusion intensifies with an introduction to Caesar's brother, a man named "Потомак Вашингтон" ["Potomac Washington", "Srazhenie" 204], who is himself an odd character. Potomac and his wife, Jezebel (Cyrillic "Джезебел"), escaped slavery in Petersburg together and fled for the North via underground railroad, hiding themselves in a box on an Adams Express train.[207] Jezebel remained in the North while Potomac went to fight in the war against his former owners, and the two exchanged letters while he was helping to build the crater that would later figure in the Battle of the Crater, on which this framed story focuses.In brief, Union general Burnside led an ill-fated attack on Confederate defenses around Petersburg, which was met with swift and strong counter-defense from the Confederate side. After an embarrassing defeat, Burnside was relieved of duty and both sides continued the unpleasant task of trench warfare for another eight months.While this new emphasis on an actual "Battle at Petersburg" finally fulfills the reader's expectation of a story about a fight, the story within the story ultimately does little more than retell the history of the siege, adding some racy details as embellishment, before bringing the entire text to an abrupt halt after the Battle of the Crater ends. The narrator lists the number of soldiers killed on each side, and relates the fate of each general or lieutenant mentioned in the story, before ending it with the sentence "Прошло еще несколько месяцев, прежде чем Петербург был захвачен" ["A few months passed before Petersburg was captured"] ("Srazhenie" 208). The text ends there, with the conclusion of the framed story – and, more

[207]This detail suggests that Meklina may have based Washington on Henry "Box" Brown, who escaped slavery by mailing himself in a wooden crate (via the "Adams Express" shipping company's trains) to abolitionists in Philadelphia. Brown, however, left his wife – and their children – behind in Virginia. Hollis Robbins, "Fugitive Mail: The Deliverance of Henry 'Box' Brown and Antebellum Postal Politics." *American Studies* 50:1/2 (Spring/Summer 2009), 5-30.

importantly, with a *resolution*, in which both Ilya and the reader learn the fate of each character and of Petersburg itself. The core narrative in which the framed story appears, however, provides the reader with no such resolution; it is important to remember that the author of the framed story (whose identity the reader does not know) is a separate narrative voice from that of Meklina's narrator. This fact may explain why readers experience less of a perceptive and communicative challenge in the framed story than they do in the core narrative, which frustrates readers by offering *no* resolution and exhibiting *no* influence whatsoever from the framed story.

The core narrative begins with a confusing description of a mostly benign schoolboy reminiscence about a favorite patch on a knapsack: "На его ранце, сине-красном и плоском …была переводная картинка: пять олимпийских колец" ["On his backpack, bluish-red and striped… was a decal: the five Olympic rings"] ("Srazhenie" 195), and a detailed description of the process by which the unnamed "he" applied the decal to his bag. None of this has anything to do with the meaning of "Petersburg", a trend that the narrator continues for six pages (of thirteen pages total) that are full of such seeming non-sequiturs and shifts in plot levels.

Two paragraphs later, Meklina's narrator piques the reader's interest in a possible "battle" that may lead to "Petersburg" with a teasing sentence about potential conflict: "То, что он с любовью помнил свой ранец, не значило, что он хорошо помнил школьные годы" ["The fact that he remembered his knapsack lovingly did not mean that he also remembered his schoolboy years well"] ("Srazhenie" 195). Just as quickly, however, the narrator jumps elsewhere and intensifies the challenge to the reader, moving into several paragraphs of seemingly unrelated and oddly specific details about this boy's school, none of which have anything to do with the elusive "Petersburg", or the battle thereof. His classroom contains a

terracotta lizard housed in a tiny domicile ("терракотовый ящер... пристально смотрел на него из своего домика"), a refrigerator containing only a half-eaten, half-rotten plum ("на нижней полке в холодильнике лежала надкушенная и подгнившая слива"; perhaps a reference to William Carlos Williams' poem "This Is Just To Say", in which delicious plums in an icebox prove irresistible to the poem's speaker), a cabinet with a bronze clock, and a scattering of pearls ("бронзовые часы в кабинете, россыпь жемчужин", "Srazhenie" 195). A pearl falls from an alluvial deposit in the room into the lizard's house, which somehow causes Ilya – over a page into the text, the reader finally learns the protagonist's name – to be left in charge of a spare key, which Ilya then keeps as his own to unlock a cabinet behind a mirror.

In that cabinet is a gold chain that Ilya steals, upon which the rest of the core narrative – in which it is never clear when Ilya ages from schoolboy to adult – improbably hinges; Ilya's next move is to take the chain to a pawn shop, where he meets an African-American clerk: "Негр-скупщик дал ему за цепочку пятерку и попросил сигарету" ["thepawn-shop clerk, who was black, gave him five dollars for the chain and asked him for a cigarette"] ("Srazhenie" 196). Ilya gives the clerk a few cigarettes, and as soon as the clerk walks away from him, he begins to count how many he actually gave to the clerk. It is an odd moment – grabbing a handful of cigarettes without counting them, and only after the fact realizing that "нужно знать, сколько сигарет он отдал") ["it is important to know how many cigarettes he gave away", "Srazhenie" 196] – but it sets the stage for the remainder of the narrative, in which Ilya (by way of the narrator) confuses himself to the point of obsession about the number of times an object has been given away, a phrase or sentence has been uttered, or an action has been performed – all moments of communicative confusion in which he questions his perception both of the outside world and of himself.

Ilya's first such memory lapse occurs with the cigarettes; trying to remember how many were in the pack, he "трогал пачку, считая на ощупь, потом закурил" ["touched the pack, counting by feel, and then lit a cigarette"] ("Srazhenie" 196). Instead of giving him or the reader a number however, Meklina's narrator immediately throws both Ilya and the reader into another situation altogether – yet another moment that has no relation to "Petersburg": "Кровь залила негру лицо, в пачке стало меньше на одну сигарету, врач сказал ему: то, что ты видишь – это то, чего нет" ["Blood rushed to the clerk's face; the pack had one less cigarette in it. The doctor told him: what you see is what doesn't exist"] ("Srazhenie" 196). This non-sequitur doctor – who appears out of nowhere, and who does not have anyone other than Ilya in his office – deeply confuses both Ilya and the reader: how can Ilya see something if it is not real? To prevent either Ilya or the reader from dwelling too long on this point, Meklina's narrator quickly jostles the reader by mentioning that Ilya has borrowed a typewriter from the pawn-shop clerk so that he can write letters. Ilya's slightly neurotic tendency to doubt himself resurfaces when he drops one such letter into the mailbox, and, "вернувшись домой, удостоверился, что конверт с письмом из дома исчез... Он представил себя подходящим к почтовому ящику: в правой руке было письмо, на конверте нет марки – дойдет. Уже, вероятно, дошло" ["returning home, he was sure that the envelope with the letter had disappeared from his house... He imagined himself walking to the postbox: the letter was in his right hand, and there was no stamp on the envelope – but the letter would arrive. Almost certainly, it had already arrived" ("Srazhenie" 197). Once more he second-guesses himself immediately after acting, further disorienting the reader and casting doubt on the connection of his thoughts to potentially performed actions. Ilya's self-perception becomes even more muddled, and Meklina's narrator undermines him – and thus

further confuses the reader – by using the reply to that letter to shift the narrative into its next chronological phase: Ilya's life as a criminal.

First, the narrator mentions that Ilya did, in fact, receive a reply to his letter: the magazine sent a letter requesting "очерк об авторской жизни" ["a feature article about the life of an author"] ("Srazhenie" 197). He complies and includes a self-addressed envelope, but he forgets the crucial element of the transaction: a stamp. "Почтальон, увидев, что не наклеена марка, отошлет обратно письмо" ["The postman, having seen that there is no stamp pasted on the envelope, will send the letter back"] ("Srazhenie" 198) – though the reader is led to believe that the letter will be returned not because of insufficient postage, but because the essay about "the life of an author" omits a crucial detail about Ilya himself. This letter, the narrator says, in no way mentions either "Petersburg" or

> как они напали на молодого негра на обочине дальнобойной дороги, у того сломалась машина, и он привстал посреди ночи, открывая капот. Забрали деньги и кредитные карты, и Илья выстрелил черному в голову. Отошел на два шага, затем выстрелил во второй раз.
> [how they attacked a young black man on the side of a highway when his car broke down in the middle of the night and he got out of the car to open the hood. They took his money and his credit cards, and Ilya shot him in the head. He took two steps back, and shot a second time.] ("Srazhenie" 198)

The narrator offers no markers clarifying who "they" were (and, to this point, has made no mention of Ilya belonging to any kind of group), but contextual clues suggest that Ilya was not only part of a group that robbed the driver of the car, but also that he was the one who actually *shot* him. It should be noted that the driver of the car may or may not be the pawn-shop clerk, but the narrator never makes this point explicit, even though the murder does take place after Ilya visits the pawn shop. After mentioning Ilya's role in the crime, the narrator quickly shifts back to Ilya's inability to remember numbers, and the communicative confusion reaches a fevered crescendo, even at this early stage of the story

(this occurs on page three of thirteen). Over the course of the next page, Meklina's narrator uses not only insistent repetition of words, phrases, and entire sentences, but also intentionally disruptive spacing, to convey Ilya's extreme agitation at being unable to recall how many times he shot the driver:

> Ему казалось, что во второй раз он не стрелял.
> Он вспоминал второй выстрел и считал, на сколько шагов
> отступил, когда кровь брызнула ему на одежду, сколько раз
> нажимал на курок –
> (раз или два нажимал на курок)
> …совмещал первый выстрел *тогда* с этим выстрелом *ныне*...
> (один или два, он считал и стрелял), –
> для того, чтобы знать, сколько раз, совмещал первый
> выстрел *тогда* с этим выстрелом *ныне*... нажимал на курок,
> второй раз – а
> пуля летела вперёд.
> На пути в ресторан на обочинах видел трупы людей,
> возвращался, заезжал на фривэй, чтобы проверить: то, что он видит –
> то, чего нет. Везде видел трупы людей... выстрел, второй: шаг, два,
> три –
> (раз, два, три, он считал и стрелял, раз два три, нажимал
> на курок) –
> негр был мёртв.
> [It seemed to him that the second time he hadn't shot. He
> recalled the second shot and counted, how many steps he had
> taken back, when the blood splashed on his clothes, how many
> times he had pulled the trigger – (once or twice he'd pulled the
> trigger) … he had combined the first shot *then* with this shot *now*…
> (one or two, he counted and fired) – in order to know how many
> times, he had combined the first shot *then* with this shot *now*… he
> pulled the trigger, a second time, and – the bullet flew forward.
> On the way to the restaurant on the roadsides he saw corpses of
> people; he returned, stopped by that spot on the freeway, to
> confirm: what he was seeing was what didn't exist. Everywhere
> he saw corpses of people… the second shot: one step, two steps,
> three steps – (one, two, three, he counted and fired, one two three,
> he pulled the trigger) – the black man was dead.]
> ("Srazhenie" 198-199; italics and staggered line breaks in original)

The narrator uses repetition and intentional spacing with chilling effect: the reader's breath almost involuntarily speeds up as the eyes jump from one line to another, giving them the same sinking feeling that Ilya experiences of never being sure how many times he actually shot the driver. The repeated "one two three" sequence underscores this uncertainty,

as does repetition of a key phrase first uttered by the doctor: "то, что он видит – то, чего нет" ["what he sees is what doesn't exist"]. The narrator pauses Ilya's frantic mental exercises to clue the reader into his location at the restaurant ("Его замутило. Вилкой ворошил пишу и ощупывал в кармане банкноты, сквозь бурлящую тошноту") ["He was sickened. He stirred his food with a fork and fingered the money in his pocket through his raging nausea" ("Srazhenie" 199)], and then, without warning, uses a single word – the Russian predicative "пора" – to bring both Ilya and the reader back to the beginning of the story, four pages prior:

> будто поднимающуюся с отстойного дна, инастойчивые толчки крови в ушах вдруг услышал: "пора". Что-то было в этих событиях с чужим рассказом и ранцем, что заставило вспомнить школьные годы. Как они складывали из бумаги машинки и дули на них –чья быстрей. Как у него тетради были чише всех в классе, как он был самым лучшим чтецом. [As if rising from the settled depths and the persistentpounding of blood in his ears, he suddenly heard the word:"it is time". There was something in these events witha strange story and a knapsack, something that prompted him to recall his schoolboy years. How they had madelittle cars out of paper and blew on them to see whosewas faster. How his notebooks were the cleanest in theentire class, how he was the best reader.] ("Srazhenie" 199)

The narrator does not elaborate on what the "something" is that brings up Ilya's memories of his knapsack, nor does the narrator give any indication that this return to the object that began the story has any relation whatsoever to "Petersburg". Instead, the reader learns that Ilya walks out of the restaurant after he pays for his meal and across the street to a building, where he ascends a staircase and enters a room through a door he had chosen long ago ("подойдя к давно выбранной двери", "Srazhenie" 199). This last action could be read as either literal, or as a metaphor for the choice he makes to shoot the young man. The ambiguous text following Ilya's entry through the door and sudden memory of the number four describes how he handled the gun and steadied himself to shoot:

> Первый, как маятник, как на качелях, прошел, второй дожидался, пока покачивалась с пятки на носок и обратно рука... На весу угадывая, как

> по обманным кочкам на болоте идя, второй, третий штырек...
> Превращаясь в легковесность и баланс своих пальцев...
> [The first [shot], like a pendulum on a swing, missed;the second [shot] hesitated, while his hand rocked backand forth from heel to toe…
> Guessing the weight [ofthe gun], as if walking over deceptive bumps in a swamp, went the second and third pins [as if the shots were grenades he had to pull]... Then, growing into [i.e. settling into] the lightness and balance of his fingers… ("Srazhenie"200)

Then, Ilyahastocountinhisheadagain: "Считал: один, два, три – не дойдя до четвертого, начинал все сначала. Запомнить чувство *свободы*, что появилось после второго, совместить чувство *ныне* с тем чувством *тогда*" ["Hecounted: one, two, three – notgettingtofour, hestartedalloveragain. To remember the feeling of *freedom* that arose after the second shot, to combine the feeling *then* with this feeling *now*] ("Srazhenie" 200, italics in original). Meklina's narrator repeats the "one, two, three" count that haunts Ilya, and also repeats the "then/now" frame, to reinforce the idea that Ilya truly cannot remember how many times he shot.

This time, however, the narrator adds a twist: instead of combining shots fired from a gun in the "then/now" frame, Ilya now incorporates his feelings into that frame. Acknowledging those feelings may lead Ilya to the "freedom" he suddenly feels that he likens to a musty space being uncorked in his soul ("ивдругсхарактернымотпускающимзвукомоткупорилось… затхлоепространствовдуше", "Srazhenie" 200) – a freedom that allows him finally to make a decision. Somewhere in the space that he has just entered is a bookshelf containing everything he needs: "денегхватитслихвойнабилет" ["there was more than enough money for a ticket"] – presumably, money that he stole from the young man after he shot him – which Ilya realizes will change his life: "жизнь его теперь извернется не так, как повернулась бы раньше: теперь он вернется, а если вернется, про выстрел можно забыть"["his life was shifting in a way that it wouldn't have earlier: now he would return, and if he returned, he could forget

about the shot"] ("Srazhenie" 200). Echoing earlier instances of "returning" either physically or mentally to the scene of a crime, Ilya now uses that "shifting" of his life to *escape*his crime. At the same time, Meklina's narrator takes advantage of this shift to move the narrative in a completely different direction, offering the reader a glimpse of a resolution only to quickly snatch it away.

Instead of a resolution, the narrator turns to a scene set in an airport, which follows logically from the mention of a ticket but immediately threatens to drag Ilya and the reader back into the previous, disjointed narrative. Ilya sits on a bench and immediately feels for his cigarette pack through the fabric of his pocket, as if to count again how many cigarettes he has left. But something stops him: "смял пачку–сколько осталось? – нет, кончились, считать не пришлось" ["He crumpled the pack – how many were left? – no, they'd run out, he didn't have tocount" ("Srazhenie" 201). The narrator denies him the chance to obsess over numbers in his new, "shifting life", but does not entirely let him go from his past life, as he happens to be sitting next to a man reading a journal. The narrative then diverts briefly into this stranger's mind, noting that he sits there remembering a note he intercepted from prison: ("Человек вспоминал перехваченную из тюрьмы на волю записку"): "Вдругкто-товыстрелил, инегр, которогомынамеревалисьвсеголишьограбить, упал. Снамибылрусский, мыегозвали 'Раша'…" ["Suddenly someone fired, and the black man, whom we had merely intended to rob, fell over. A Russian man was with us; we called him 'Rasha'…"] ("Srazhenie" 201).[208] The narrator again teases the reader with a narrative element (here, a flashback), only to jerk it away quickly. As such, the reader misses a potential conflict in figuring out who the man is and how he knows about Ilya's role in the

[208]"Rasha" here is spelled phonetically in Cyrillic to represent how a Russian speaker might pronounce the English word "Russia". The implication is that this "Rasha" is the man who pulled the trigger and shot the African-American.

crime. Instead, the narrator finally offers the reader a piece of information useful to constructing the text's world: the name of the city from which Ilya escapes, and, more importantly, the name of his destination. The phrase "СамолетИльирейсом 'Сан-Франциско – Санкт-Петербург'" ["Ilya's plane, the flight from San Francisco to St. Petersburg [Russia]"] signifies the end of the core narrative, and the beginning of the framed story, but offers no resolution for Ilya or for the reader left wondering about his fate, the purpose of the knapsack, his role in the crime, or the status of his unstamped letter.

Indeed, the reader may wonder what the point of the framed story is in the first place, especially if its details have no direct influence on the core narrative or its outcome. I suggest that the framed story's purpose is threefold: one, to challenge the reader to keep up with the shifting plot; two, to humanize African-Americans for Ilya, give them distinct *identities*, and act as a corrective for his hostility towards them; three, to stand as a metaphor for loss of context that interrupts the message and, in turn, disrupts communication between writer and reader. Concerning the second purpose, the narrator's relative humanization of African-Americans underscores how Ilya clearly sees them as an "other" whom he treats antagonistically. Considering the framed story in this light, the reader might begin to understand why Ilya just happened to pick up a magazine with the specific story of the "Battle at Petersburg" in it: The narrator plants it for him to read in order to expose him to a depiction of African-Americans – both slaves and soldiers – as human beings with distinct personalities and identities, and not merely faceless and nameless targets of crime. However, the reader only learns that Ilya has committed a crime as a passing detail that concludes the part of the narrative discussing an unstamped letter. The narrator's very next move after noting that letter's lack of stamp is to suddenly shift the focus of the story to Ilya's inability to recall how many times he shot the young man. By doing so, the narrator implies that the

breakdown in communication between Ilya and the publishing company leads directly to Ilya's loss of self-perception and self-knowledge – essentially, a loss of identity. He personifies Steiner's declaration that humans "have full assurance of our asserted existence only when other identities register and reciprocate our life-signals".[209] Without any reply, and thus any sense of his own identity, Ilya may feel threatened by an "other", who is partially represented in the narrative as the target of the crime that Ilya commits.

Even so, without further explanation or context, the framed story's most important purpose is the embodiment of a metaphor for a failed attempt at communication that is easily overlooked in the relative bewilderment contained in the first third of the narrative. The narrator mentions that Ilya forgets to put a stamp on a letter to a magazine that he has already dropped in the mailbox, though he is convinced it will reach its intended destination regardless. It does, and he receives a reply asking for an original essay. When he sends this essay out, he forgets to put a stamp on the self-addressed envelope, causing the postman to send the letter back. Ilya's literal effort to communicate with his addressee goes awry, because his message lacks contact – that is, the missing stamp is a mutually understood physical connection between addresser and addressee. Both the post office and Ilya understand that a stamp is required to convey a message (in the form of a letter) from the addresser to the addressee; without it, the message cannot reach its addressee. Ilya's addressee – the magazine editors – can neither receive his message nor respond to him and complete the communication. In this story, the narrative element of a resolution (a psychological connection) becomes the "stamp" (a physical connection) – both Meklina's narrator and the reader understand that a resolution completes the communication between her narrator (the addresser) and the reader (the addressee). Without it, the communicative

[209]Steiner, 59.

model becomes and remains broken, because the narrator never offers the reader "contact" with which to understand the interrupted message.

The final story to mix the message in Jakobson's modelis "A ia posredi" ("And I am in the Middle", 2011), which immediately foreshadows a good deal of cognitive confusion that results from not knowing whether Meklina uses the pronoun autobiographically, or as a narrative construct. As such, the reader begins the story without a clear idea whether the text is an essay (implying autobiography) or a story (implying a fictional narrative). The narrator begins with the declaration "Переехав из России в Америку, я перестала смотреть телевизор" ["Having moved from Russia to America, I stopped watching television"] ("Posredi"49). The Russian "перестала" ["I stopped"] is inflected to indicate a female speaker, but even that detail does not offer the reader clarification of the narrator's status as an autobiographical or fictive persona. The narrator continues to note that even though the television stands in the corner of her living room, permanently switched off, it still haunts her with voices from beyond the grave. To explain this situation, the narrator foregrounds the rest of the story with the sentence "Нижеследующая история схематично может быть представлена так: экраны телевизоров висят на стене, а между ними на волоске висит моя жизнь" ["The story that follows below can be conceptually presented like this: television screens hang on the wall, and between them, hanging by a thread, is my life"] ("Posredi"49), and then continues: "Первый телевизор находится в музее современного искусстваимени Руфино Тамайов Мехико-сити … второй – в арт-музее города Беркли" ["The first television is located in the museum of the contemporary artist Rufino Tamayo in Mexico City… the second – in an art museum in Berkeley"] ("Posredi"49). Contrary to the opening paragraphs of "Dom" and "Srazhenie pri Peterburge", in which the narrators offered the reader no clear glimpse of narrative cohesiveness or a resolution, Meklina's narrator here has shown the

reader exactly where the two screens are located. Presumably, the reader can expect to learn next in what way she is "in the middle" of them.

Instead, however, Meklina's narrator uses the Russian interjection "итак" ["And so"] ("Posredi" 39) to introduce what turns out to be a long flashback detailing her first visit to the Tamayo museum in Mexico, where she encounters an exhibit related to Dutch conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader (1942-1975).[210] On the walls of the exhibit hall are television screens showing looped videos of Ader performing three tasks: riding a wobbly bicycle along the banks of the Amsterdam canal, only to turn his wheel and fall into the water; hanging from a tree for an excruciatingly long period of time before finally flopping onto the grass below; and leaping from the roof of a house onto the ground below. Meklina's narrator looks at the exhibition booklet for an explanation of these screens, and here she interrupts her narrative by challenging the reader with another framed story. The booklet explains that Ader disappeared in 1975 while working on a project called "In Search of a Miracle", in which he set off alone in a fragile vessel ["на утлом суденышке", "Posredi" 50] to circumnavigate the globe, just as a man named Donald Crowhurst did in 1969. Meklina's narrator further displaces the reader by turning her attention to Crowhurst, cleverly placing the reader "in the middle" of a mixed message, immersing them in this richly-detailed account of Crowhurst's demise. A novice sailor, Crowhurst nonetheless entered a round-the-world yacht race, went wildly off course, and some nine months later (according to his diary, which was found with the wreckage of his boat) threw himself overboard.[211] As soon as the reader settles into the framed story, however, the narrator abruptly ends it, noting that Ader

[210] The Museo Tamayo hosted a solo exhibit of Ader's work from February 12-May 23, 2004. "Bas Jan Ader", *Photography Now*, 1998.http://www.photography-now.com/artist/bas-jan-ader; accessed 23 February 2015.

[211]"Он… взял в руки хронометр… и прыгнул за борт. Его тело до сих пор не нашли" ["He… picked up his timepiece… and jumped overboard. His body has not been found to this day"] ("Posredi" 51).

kept a book about Crowhurst in his desk, and that neither man's body has ever been found. Just as suddenly, she then moves the text elsewhere with the Russian adverb "теперь" ["now"], using it to set up a swift transition to the framed story in California: "А теперь – город Беркли" ["And now – the city of Berkeley"] ("Posredi" 51).

In Berkeley, Meklina's narrator encounters an outdoor exhibit dedicated to a group of architects that calls itself "Ant Farm".[212] She visits this exhibit the day after her return from Mexico City, and she notes that one of the group's most remarkable projects is the so-called "Cadillac Ranch" installation (1974). This (also outdoor) exhibit is composed of old Cadillac cars buried nose-first, with their tailfins visible, in the sand along the famous Route 66 in Texas. Her description of the exhibit digresses into discussion of two related projects put on by Ant Farm, both of which involve television screens. The first, "Media Burn" (1975), was composed of members of Ant Farm crashing a decorated Cadillac at full speed into a pyramid-shaped wall of televisions that they had just set on fire. The second, "The Eternal Frame" (1975), simply replayed the Zapruder film of John F. Kennedy's assassination (in Dallas, Texas) on an endless loop. Meklina's narrator may mention these two exhibits centered on television screens to create a bookend for the screens she mentions at the very beginning of the story (three pages prior), but since the story does not end here – placing the reader even deeper "in the middle" of stories about screens – it is more likely that she uses "The Eternal Frame" to engender further communicative confusion. She cuts off the narrative about Ant Farm's work and quickly shifts the focus to Dallas: "Итак, Даллас" ["And so, Dallas"] ("Posredi" 52).

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[212] "Ant Farm" was an artists' collective formed by Chip Lord and Doug Michels in San Francisco in 1968. A retrospective exhibit of Ant Farm's decade-long existence, "Ant Farm: 1968-1978", was held at the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive from January 21-April 25, 2004. All of the exhibits or performances described in Meklina's text actually existed. "Ant Farm", *Electronic Arts Intermix*, 1997-2015. http://www.eai.org/artistBio.htm?id=394; accessed 23 February 2015.

Given the narrator's propensity for first-person accounts of art exhibits in different cities, the reader may expect another discussion of an art exhibit in Dallas at this point. Instead, Meklina's narrator jolts them into a flashback to a frightening incident that occurs when she is returning from Mexico City to Berkeley. After departing Mexico City, she changes planes in Dallas; ten minutes after takeoff the plane shudders, one of the engines begins to squeal and clank, and the plane banks as the cabin fills with smoke. Just as in "Srazhenie pri Peterburge", Meklina's narrator repeats certain words and phrases to re-create for the reader the same sensation of panic and dread that she felt during this ordeal. The phrase "Втовремя" ["At the time"] is repeated three times in rapid succession, and the first two times appears as part of the phrase "Втовремяещенебылоизвестно" ["At the time, it was not yet known"] ("Posredi" 53) to underscore the anxiety the narrator feels at not knowing two things. First, whether or not she and the other passengers would all emerge alive and intact; second, that without her visit to the Ant Farm exhibit in Berkeley, this tripartite text (referring to this very story itself) would have been incomplete – thus, Meklina's narrator writes, the plane landed safely, so that she could not only continue to exist, but also (and more importantly) finish her story – that is, so that she could continue to exist as a communicative being relaying a message to the reader.

However, the phrase "в то время" introduces a chain of events so coincidental that it strikes the reader as absurd, and completely undermines any intent the narrator has of establishing a functional communicative model. Not long after her harrowing flight experience, Meklina's narrator contacts Bas Jan Ader's widow, who lives nearby, and who tells her about Dmitry Prigov, a Russian poet and conceptual artist who used Ader's works as inspiration for his poetry. This conversation by itself is unremarkable, but Meklina's narrator notes that right before her trip, someone mailed her a book about Prigov. The

reader might then expect a more precise explanation of the connection between Ader and Prigov, or more than the footnote that is given indicating exactly who sent the book (it was fellow émigré writer Matvei Yankelevich, a co-founder of the publishing company Ugly Duckling Presse), but the narrator resists this impulse and instead pushes on with the story, pointing out what *is* known or clear to her in that moment of terror aboard the roiling airplane.

The turbulence she feels is reflected in the uneven nature of the story's final few paragraphs, which causes the reader discomfort as it interferes with the message.The narrator finds amusing the idea of perishing over the state of Texas, which is associated not only with the Cadillac Ranch exhibit (it is located near Amarillo), but also with the livelihood of the "самого вегетативного американского президента" ["most vegetative American president"][213], and specifically over the city of Dallas, in which "был убит самый известный и самый почитаемый президент"["the most famous and most revered president was killed"][214] ("Posredi" 53). Dallas then becomes the focal point for the conclusion of the story, as Meklina's narrator gives it her full attention even as she hovers over it, naming it as not just a *single* point on a map, "а две или три, соединение несоединимого, - пунктиры судьбы" ["but two or three, connected incompatibly – broken fates"] ("Posredi" 53). Like Zamiatin's "plot planes", these two or three "fates" "crash" and intersect improbably and unexpectedly (to the reader's chagrin), but Meklina's narrator attempts to clarify what she means with the sentence "Я изображу происшедшее так: 1975 – 2004 – 1975" ["Thus I depict the following: 1975 – 2004 – 1975"] ("Posredi" 53), placing herself in 2004 (the year

[213]It seems likely that Meklina uses the term "vegetative" to refer to a medically brain-dead person, which I read as her opinion of former President George W. Bush.
[214]John F. Kennedy, presumably.

in which the story's events take place) in between the markers of events occurring in 1975. She devotes the rest of the story to her explanation of how she arrived at this designation:

> Прыжок за борт Дональда Кроухерста, падение со скалы Дуга Мичелса, падение Адера вместе с велосипедом в амстердамский канал. Несостявшееся кругосветное путешествие Адера (1975), несостяшеевся падение моего"МакДональда-Дугласа" (2004), сожженные телевизоры, загоревшийся самолет, велосипед и вода, работы *AntFarm*(1975). На экране в Мехико-сити тонкая, легкая фигурка [Адера]… На экране в Беркли – тонкая, легкая фигурка [Мичелса]… И моя фигурка, висящая в воздухе между не отражающих мою жизнь, параллельных друг другу экранов. На одном – Бас Ян Адер, на другом Ант Фарм, а я посреди.
> [Donald Crowhurst's leap overboard, Doug Michels's fallfrom the cliff,[215] Ader's fall together with his bicycle into theAmsterdam canal. Ader's failed circumnavigation trip (1975),my McDonnell-Douglas's failed fall (2004), the burning televisions, the plane that caught fire, the bicycle and the water, the works of "Ant Farm" (1975).On the screen in Mexico City is the thin, slight figure of Ader… On the screen in Berkeley is the thin, slight figure of Michels… And my figure, hanging in the air between two screens that are parallel to one another and do not reflect my life. On one screen – Bas Jan Ader; on the other Ant Farm, and I am in the middle.]
> ("Posredi" 53-54)

In this passage, the narrator summarizes her visit to the various art exhibits, pointing out the "falls" or "leaps" each artist experiences. She puts herself in the middle of these artists, declaring herself a liminal being and claiming that this "middle" position both literally and metaphorically signifies her identity. Yet this designation does not help the reader ascertain *what* that identity is; existing in between two artists, two art exhibits, two cities, or two screens, the narrator's "I" is neither one nor the other (especially since the screens "do not reflect [her] life"). The reader finishes the story just as they began it, without a clear idea whether the narrator's "I" is her own self, or a narrative construct, precisely because she aligns herself with the "broken fates" that, improbably, intersect and manifest over Dallas,

[215]Doug Michels died in 2003 in Australia. At the time, he was working on a film about whales, and he scaled a cliff to get a better view of the whales below. He slipped and fell to his death. Ken Johnson, "Doug Michels, Radical Artist and Architect, Dies at 59." *The New York Times,* 21 June 2003. http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/21/obituaries/21MICH.html; accessed 23 February 2015.

personified by her.[216] The reader finds her final declaration difficult to believe, however, because the narrator has so frequently cut off or interrupted discourse that the reader may no longer perceive her as a reliable discursive partner. Her transmitted message rings hollow, but it may also portend something more sinister lurking beneath the words: the death of the addresser, anticipating the loss of an addressee.

Meklina's narrator may well be expressing anxiety felt by her historical counterpart at the potential loss of her Russian identity. Constant references to death suggest that Meklina, in 2011, confronts a major life change that requires her to "give up" part of herself, and couching herself as an ambiguous narrator allows her to explore her attitude towards that change.The narrator's frequent use of the phrase "hanging by a thread" to describe her life implies a fragile existence that is reflected in the art exhibits she visits, and threatened when she thinks her plane is about to crash. Ader – inspired by Crowhurst – and the Ant Farm collective, as artists, emphasize risk, falling, and death in their work. Ader's exhibit shows looped images of him falling into various places, based on Crowhurst's leap overboard from his boat. Ant Farm builds a memorial "graveyard" of Cadillacs, "kills" media by driving a car into a funeral pyre of televisions, and replays *ad nauseam* the moment of John F. Kennedy's death – it hardly seems coincidental, then, that Doug Michels died as a result of a fall.

Such a heavy emphasis on death may indicate that the historical Meklina in 2011 begins to consider what parts of her – and her Russian self – remain alive, or have died, as

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[216] In a June 2012 interviewwith*Radio Svoboda*'s Dmitry Volchek, a caller asks Meklina if she is interested in genealogy. She answers that she is not, andcontinues: "Скорее, меняинтересуеттемаразличныхсвязей, какможнопотянутьгде-тозаниточкуиочутитьсянадругомконцевселенной…когдатыначинаешькопатьсяиразыскиватьэтисвязи, товдругзнакомишьсяслюдьми, скоторыминикогдабынепознакомился." ["Rather, I'm interested in the topic of various links, like the ones you can pull somewhere on a string and find yourself at the other end of the universe… when you start to dig and search for these links, then suddenly you get acquainted with people that you otherwise would never have met."]http://www.svoboda.org/content/transcript/24613895.html; accessed 11 Sep 2014.

she starts writing in other languages (mainly English) more frequently in her short stories. Her 1995 story "Dom" contains 6 instances of English-language words or phrases, and her 1997-1998 story "doktor Morselli, medsestra Ellen Dayton" contains 7 instances of Italian and English usage. "A ia posredi", from 2011, contains ten uses of English phrases – signaling that perhaps Meklina, having used English piecemeal for over a decade, is prepared to finally make the leap into writing primarily in English, even if this "leap" is caused by a feeling that Meklina (as an American citizen) wants to widen her audience to the more populated English-speaking reading public. By increasingly changing the code in which her narrators communicate, and then building on that to interrupt, re-direct, or otherwise garble the message her narrators impart to the reader, Meklina constructs a foundation for confusion of self-perception for both her characters and her reader – a process that culminates in her strongest challenge to Jakobson's communicative model: elimination of the addressee.

Meklina embodies this final and authoritative communicative breakdown in non-responsive characters who either acknowledge messages with silence, or who act as parrots for other characters' messages and simply transmit them without reacting.The first work in which such characters appear, 1998's "doktor Morselli, medsestra Ellen Dayton" ["Dr. Morselli and Nurse Ellen Dayton"], compares the peculiar, parallel life experiences of two women who die in their thirties: Elena, a patient at a clinic in Milan in the 1920s, and Ellen Dayton, a nurse at an AIDS clinic in 1990s San Francisco.[217] Elena arrives at Dr. Morselli's

[217] Elena/Helen is a strictly fictive personage, while Ellen Dayton is a historical personage: in 1996, she was working in a University of California drug clinic when she accidentally stuck herself with a used needle and contracted hepatitis C and HIV. In 1998 she successfully sued the company that made the needles for wrongful injury, but was forced to retire from nursing due to her illness. Unlike the fictive Ellen Dayton, she is still alive. "Nurse's Life Changed in a Moment", *San Francisco Gate*, 13 April 1998. http://www.sfgate.com/health/article/Nurse-s-Life-Changed-in-a-Moment-3008969.php; accessed 23 March 2015.

clinic with an undiagnosed illness, though it soon becomes obvious to Morselli that he is dealing with two patients: Elena presents herself in turns as an Italian woman who speaks perfect French (Elena), and a French woman who speaks Italian with a French accent (Helen). Morselli calms her anxiety by giving her a piano and sheet music to play; this placates her, but she still ends up dying from a kidney infection. Ellen Dayton, on the other hand, moves from a small farm to Berkeley, California, to work at an AIDS clinic, after she meets a man, has a daughter, and leaves him. She falls in love with Karen, an X-ray technician at the clinic, who takes care of her when she accidentally sticks herself with a used needle and contracts HIV. Ellen experiences many of the same symptoms that Elena did, and even becomes Elena, to a degree, even though her eventual death is a result of AIDS and not a kidney infection. The story ends with Karen visiting Ellen's grave with Ellen's daughter, reading her a book next to the tombstone.

Meklina's narrator begins the story with Elena, a patient at Dr. Morselli's clinic in Milan, who has just turned twenty-five. In the second paragraph, the reader learns that "С момента принятия в клинику итальянская и французская "личины" Елены попеременно сменялись" ["From the moment of her arrival at the clinic, Elena regularly switched her Italian and French 'masks'"] ("Morselli" 111). These two personalities demonstrate varying levels of self-awareness: "Итальянская 'личина' Еленыничего не знала о своей французской 'партнерше', в то время как 'француженка' была полностью осведомлена и о себе, и о своей итальянской 'сестре'" ["Elena's Italian 'mask' knew nothing about her French 'partner', while the 'Frenchwoman' was completely knowledgeable about herself *and* her Italian 'sister'"("Morselli" 112, italics mine). This Frenchwoman refers to the Italian 'sister' as Helen (Cyrillic "Элен"); this Helen manifests only when Elena misbehaves, which Morselli later discovers is a defense mechanism against repressed memories. As he

understands Elena more deeply, he differentiates between her Italian and French halves based on their behavior. Elena's French side is "неуемная, темпераментная"["irrepressible, temperamental"], while her Italian side is "впечатлительной, тонкой" ["impressionable, delicate"] ("Morselli" 112-113); Morselli decides that her Italian half is her "настоящей сутью и судьбою" ["true substance and fate"] ("Morselli" 113), and directs her to "высвободиться из французских тенет, из двойного безумья, путем чтения вслух, ежедневно, сорока стихотворений Кавальканти и Данте" ["free herself from her French snare, from this double madness, by reading aloud, every day, forty poems by Cavalcanti and Dante"] ("Morselli" 113). His prescription of reading without an audience – Elena is isolated in the clinic – forces Elena to become an addresser without an addressee, and at first the result is painful:

> Елена обрела в померкшем сознанье забытые сцены.
> Она вспомнила, что была безвинной жертвой нападений
> отца. Самым ужасным для нее было его стремленье засунуть
> в ее рот свой язык. Ее побег во французскую "личность"
> символизировал попытку подавить воспоминания о языке
> своего отца и о его противуправных на нее притязаньях.
> [Elena found, in a faded consciousness, forgotten scenes.
> She remembered that she was the innocent victim of assaults
> by her father. The scariest thing for her was his striving to
> push his tongue into her mouth. Her escape to her French
> "mask" symbolized an attempt to suppress her memories
> of her father's tongue and his illicit claims on her.] ("Morselli" 113-114)

Soon, however, the treatment begins to work, and Morselli prescribes Elena more complicated texts to read out loud. Her success under this treatment – "нежелательные психосоматические симптомы Елены исчезли" ["Elena's unwanted psychosomatic symptoms disappeared"] – leads Morselli to discharge her from the clinic, thinking that she has been cured ("Morselli" 114). The reader may be surprised to learn several clauses later that this is not, in fact, the case: not long after her dismissal, Elena "умерла от острого

гломерулонефрита" ["died from acute glomerulonephritis (inflammation of the tiny filters in the kidneys)"] ("Morselli" 114).

Elena's death represents the ultimate loss of identity; when she enters the clinic, she has no clear idea which "mask" displays her true self. Morselli removes her agency by deciding *for her* that her Italian half represents her real identity, and that her French half needs to be driven away through engagement in a non-discursive exercise (i.e. reading out loud to no one). In a sense, Morselli's action parallels that of Elena's father: both men try to keep her quiet,one in a literal (father) and the other in a metaphorical (Morselli) sense. Her inability to respond with her own words – that is, act as an addresser with a complicit addressee – proves fatal for Elena. Meklina's narrator suggests that this loss of identity through lack of addressee is the true cause of Elena's death by ending the story with a supernatural detail. The final sentence of this part of the story states that Morselli "в настоящее время… занят излечением пациентки, пишущей анонимные письма, а затем скрупулезно выслеживающей, кто же является автором сих подметных улик" ["presently… is occupied with the treatment of a female patient who writes anonymous letters and then scrupulously tracks down just who is the author of these anonymous clues"] ("Morselli" 114). Such behavior echoes Elena's lack of awareness of her French half, Helen, and implies that Morselli may be haunted by a woman who hides her identity, only to then set off in search of it. Not only does she hide her identity as an addresser, but she also has no intended addressee (the narrator never mentions the letters' destination). Morselli has no idea who she is, but it seems that she, herself, does not either.

Meklina's narrator disorients the reader by opening the second part of the story with the same clause ("she has just turned twenty-five") as in the first part, changing only the name of the female protagonist. The narrator chooses a very specific name: "Эллен", which

instantly reminds the reader of Elena's "Элен" side in the story's first part. This Ellen, it turns out, so closely resembles Elena that the narrator repeats words, phrases, and entire sentences to direct the reader to believe that they are in fact the same person. Aside from the repetition of the first sentence, Ellen repeats verbatim what Elena says in the first part when she tells Morselli that her father is dying; she suffers the same symptoms as Elena that cause her neck veins to swell and her breathing to become labored; she embroiders to keep her mind occupied; she behaves in a certain way "с момента принятия" ("from the moment of her arrival"). To further confuse the reader, the narrator switches Ellen's name to "Elena"two paragraphs from the end of the story, describing how Ellen's lover, Karen, takes her abroad at the height of her illness (which is never specifically referred to as HIV:

> Кэрен возила ее на Ривьеру, в Венецию, рассматривать итальянские фрески, в старинные замки – во все места, куда Елена, будучи бедным подростком без копейки в кармане, когда-то мечтала поехать.
> [Karen took her to theRiviera, to Venice, to look at Italian frescoes in old castles – all of the places where Elena, as a youth with not even a single kopeck in her pocket, dreamed of going someday.] ("Morselli" 116-117)

The next seven references to the character Ellen Dayton use the name "Elena": "Елена уже не ходила" ("Elena couldn't walk any more"); "Елена стала мала" ("Elena had shrunk"); "Елена уже ни с кем не говорила, а только мычала" ("Elena no longer spoke to anyone, but instead only mumbled") ("Morselli" 117). When Ellen dies, Karen helps her friends carry out a specific ritual:

> Лия, плотник, взяла любимую Еленину дверь и две доски из гаража, и сделала гроб. Все женщины встали в круг вокруг Елены и спели ее любимые песни.Заварили любимый Еленин чай, зажгли любимые Еленины свечи. Затем положили ее в кузов грузовика и повезли в последний раз посмотреть город. После этого Елена была отвезена на кладбище.
> [Lia, a carpenter, took Elena's favorite door and two boards from the garage and built a tomb. All of the women stood in a circle around Elena and sang her favorite songs. They made Elena's favorite tea and lit her favorite

> candles. Then they laid her into the bed of a truck and drove her around to look at the city one last time. After that Elena was taken to the cemetery.] ("Morselli" 117)

This unexpected name change accompanies Ellen's deteriorating physical condition. As soon as the narrator calls her "Elena" instead of Ellen, her health begins to decline rapidly, beginning with her confinement to a wheelchair and moving through her loss of communicative ability to eventually result in death. For Ellen, losing her name and her ability to speak precedes death, implying that a correlation exists between loss of identity and loss of life. Meklina's narrator never gives Ellen her "own" story, in which she displays unique characteristics and confronts unique situations. Rather, the narrator uses her almost as a parrot for Helen / Elena, repeating details, words, and entire phrases from Helen / Elena's part of the story in Ellen's part of the story. By denying Ellen the chance to act and speak with her own gestures and words, the narrator also denies her a singular identity. She never has the chance to communicate with her own words (i.e.*message*), which may hasten her demise. The narrator also removes any sense of particular identity that Helen / Elena exhibits by reproducing verbatim her words and traits in a similar character. Meklina's narrator directs the reader to believe that Helen / Elena and Ellen are the same character, leaving both the characters and the reader without a clear grasp of the characters' identitiesthat stems directly from their inability to act as eithera unique addresser or addressee.

Meklina most strongly challenges Jakobson's communicative model in "The Jump" with a different tactic: her narrator's careful use of silence. Each of the story's three female protagonists – and two of its male counterparts – suffer dialogic breakdowns that push them into making a "leap" into oblivion suggested by the title. When one character refuses to respond to another's messages in various forms (letters, spoken pleas, or e-mails) by ignoring

statements or leaving questions unanswered, communicative disruption leads directly to a loss of identity so extreme that it could be interpreted as the character's literal death. By offering such an ambiguous conclusion, Meklina's narrator offers readers one final challenge: to decide the characters' fate for themselves.

The first female protagonist, Elsa Triolet, experiences difficulties communicating with two addressees: her husbands, André Triolet and Louis Aragon. Andre, an officer, spends his mornings away from Elsa, who is then "left alone with words" – that is, without an addressee who can receive and reciprocate her messages, languishing in "tropical monotony" ("The Jump" 204).When she and André make love, he meets her exclamations not with clear sounds and syllables but with mutterings in "an unintelligible language" which she parses as a lack of interest in her ("The Jump" 204). Her husband's guttural sounds form an inscrutable code that she can, nonetheless, read "as easily as a page, which openly stated, "You are not one of my main interests" ("The Jump" 204). This statement describes communicative disruption not only between Elsa and her husband, but also between the narrator and the reader, who may have expected one spouse to comfort another in such a time of confusion. Instead, the narrator creates distance between the reader while also creating even more distance between Elsa and André: having received her husband's message indicating his lack of interest, Elsa seeks a new addressee: "She addressed her letters about Tahiti to someone else" ("The Jump" 204). Curiously, that "someone else" is a fictionalized "Victor Shklovsky",[218] who may or may not reply to her letters – the narrator leaves this point unclear – but at the very least poaches them for literary material: he "relegated his desire for her to his analytical fiction, later claiming that the love flowered only for the sake of the novel… He quoted her letters to him from Tahiti in a novel, "Zoo", and

[218] To distinguish the real Viktor Shklovskii from the fictive Victor Shklovsky, I will use the "Shklovsky" spelling when discussing Meklina's work.

one notable… figure read it and stated… "She'd make a great writer" ("The Jump" 211). The narrator implies strongly that Shklovsky does not actually answer her letters by then noting that Elsa not only becomes a writer but also marries one, suggesting that she still seeks an addressee who will respond to her messages.

This writer and second husband, Louis Aragon, sells necklaces that Elsa makes at local markets. Described by the narrator as "needy", she asks Aragon if they are nice, but the text makes it clear that she refers to a work titled *Necklaces* – a distinction only captured in text, and not rendered in speech.[219] Misunderstanding her, Aragon tells Elsa that her work is, like her, "sparkling" ("The Jump" 212), but she corrects him, saying that she was really talking about her writing. Aragon "would not answer: for him, she was neither Russian-Jewish nor French" ("The Jump" 212). His lack of desire – or ability, or both – to separate Elsa's Russian language from his own French language strikes Elsa as "seeming indifference" to her anguished existence as a writer, and this attitude infuriates her ("The Jump" 212). Even worse, Shklovsky remains silent on the other end of her letters: "every day she expected news from Victor in Russia, but the days were as empty and rusty as her metal mailbox" ("The Jump" 212). Having been denied one addressee, she turns desperately to another, begging her husband once more to respond to her: "Nights with Aragon were argumentative… she rejected his kisses; when he would touch her… she would counter with a question: "Don't you think that my *Necklaces* are no worse than some of your writing?" ("The Jump" 213) Clearly, Elsa needs recognition "not only in bed, but in book", in the narrator's words, and Aragon's and Shklovsky's silence – and thus lack of recognition – takes her "to the brink" ("The Jump" 213). This extreme form of displacement (marginalization that leaves her feeling "on the edge") leaves the reader with unanswered questions about her

[219] The title refers to Triolet's French-language "fact novel", *Necklaces*, about the Paris fashion industry. "Elsa Triolet", *Dictionary of Russian Women Writers*, 658.

fate. Where Russian language caused Elsa the most discomfort in the first part of her narrative, it is silence – disruption so extreme that it results in a linguistic void – that leaves her, and Meklina's reader, reeling. Zinaida Shakhovskoi suffers the same fate, albeit more cruelly, because she finds an addressee willing to reciprocate her fractured messages only to then lose him when her mother intrudes on their communicative space.

Meklina's narrator introduces Zinaida experiencing her very first moment of inadequate interlocutors at the age of four, when she tries to talk to a toddler whose response is to ignore her and waddle away. Here, the narrator establishes a pattern of addressees responding to Zinaida's messages with silence (or, at the very least, bewildered looks). When Zinaida turns six, she develops a stutter in Russian that leads her to isolate herself and read aloud to an empty library; her parents exacerbate her dialogic isolation by switching from Russian into Pig Latin whenever she walks in on them having a conversation. Intimidated, she walks away without asking what they talk about. The narrator not only removes her addressees from the situation, but also nullifies Zinaida herself as an addresser, since she is a speaker without an interlocutor.

This negation of Zinaida's dialogic self culminates in a harrowing scene when White Army sailors storm the family's estate to take away her mother. Her stutter, which has driven away her potential addressees, has "made the accumulation of thoughts in her head almost painful [and] also *made her invisible*" when the sailors arrive; as they lead her mother away, Zinaida stands "in the corner, unnoticed" ("The Jump" 206, italics mine). Zinaida is eleven years old when this incident occurs, so she has spent the last five years encountering silent responses to her communiqués. Such a continuous lack of addressee has altered Zinaida to the point of invisibility; speaking without being answered has rendered her effectively nonexistent. Moreover, she is left alone not only communicatively but also literally: her

father and uncle have mysteriously vanished from the story, her nanny has fled, and the family gardener is incapacitated, leaving her isolated at the family estate. She remains alone for an unspecified amount of time until a "young, scrawny sailor" appears and brings news: "Can you keep a secret? Your mother's alive" ("The Jump" 206). He asks her to remain silent by keeping this secret, perhaps not realizing that she has no one to speak to regardless, yet she agrees, writing a note to her mother that she gives to the sailor to take to her. He "took the note and disappeared without a nod", but then returns the next day; it turns out he is "lonely and eager to talk", and he begins to visit her every evening ("The Jump" 206).

Not only does Zinaida now have an addressee, but she also has an addresser for whom *she* can act as an addressee: the sailor "noticed that the girl was a stutterer, but it didn't stop him from retelling her every minute of his daily existence" ("The Jump" 209). The sailor acts as an interlocutor for Zinaida, and also a bridge between her and her mother; he brings her mother's messages to her every day, trading them for continued dialogue in the form of "science lessons" ("The Jump" 209). She struggles to speak clearly with him due to her stutter, so she draws maps and diagrams instead. Her messages to him are expressed in a non-verbal medium, but the dialogic relationship flourishes nonetheless: she teaches him about the solar system and meteorology, and he continues to bring her notes from her mother. Zinaida and the sailor continue this mutual (albeit grotesque) exchange until he brings her mother back to the estate after she is freed from White Army capture.

The sailor has told Zinaida in great detail of his fascination with the human body's decomposition under water, so it is not out of place for him to tell Zinaida about one of his officers being thrown off their ship because he trusts her to respond appropriately as his addressee within their thriving communicative model. Before she can respond, however, her mother asks for an explanation, which the sailor interprets as an intrusion into his dialogic

relationship with Zinaida. Thus, he runs away, leaving Zinaida once more without an addressee – based on previous narrative clues, the reader might assume that her mother still does not wish to engage in any kind of communicative relationship with her. Meklina's narrator ends Zinaida's story there, drawing readers into this sudden linguistic distress only to leave them with more questions than answers – for example, what the sailor's response was; what happens next for Zinaida and her mother – meaning that the reader can only imagine what miserable discursive fate awaits Zinaida. She may not be "on the brink" of some sort of ledge, but she *has* just seen her only reliable addressee desert her, thus rendering her an inert dialogic being who is once more invisible.

The fictive Margarita Meklina, on the other hand, deviates from Elsa Trioletand Zinaida Shakhovskoi when she intentionally pushes her addressee away and denies him a meaningful dialogue with her. Margarita has a hard time understanding why Ethan, her "virtual" lover in the sense that they exchange e-mails but have never met, is interested in "her, a Russian author muted by life in the U.S." ("The Jump" 207). She subverts the paradigm of the unheard addresser by retreating into silence in uncomfortable situations; the narrator implies that if she does not take any communicative risks, she cannot be hurt: "[Ethan] retrieved her from the silence of the Web via Skype and invited her to his summer home in Boston… [but] she politely declined" ("The Jump" 207). By refusing to engage in Ethan's offer of in-person communication, she denies him dialogic agency and protects herself from the same rejection she receives from her "non-virile" husband, who "instead of kisses" covered her with his "ardent apologies" that leave her feeling "deflated" ("The Jump" 208). That is, she seeks physical intimacy rather than verbal intimacy, preferring actions to words because words – at least English-language ones – cause her anguish. The narrator notes that Margarita "still had a hard time adjusting to the U.S. after arriving here

from Russia fifteen years earlier" ("The Jump" 213). She is a writer who sends her stories to Moscow where they win prizes (i.e. she is received and understood by addressees – her readers – there), but her experience with English turns out to be much less satisfying as her English-language messages to Ethan are met with "line after line" of pleas that she act as his reciprocal addressee ("The Jump" 213):

> I'm impatiently waiting for the next installment of your confessions, and the more I read about your daily life… the more I need to know about you: what time you set your alarm, how many meters from the front entrance you light up your cigarette, how many people you're seeing, how multiple your orgasms might be. ("The Jump" 213-214)

The narrator never specifies how many letters Ethan sends to Margarita without receiving a response, but the reader knows that it occurs at least twice:

> When she would fail to respond, he would force a newsuggestion on her: "Why should it be that you are on thesunny West Coast and I'm on the sexless East Coast; couldn't we meet in between?" Knowing that she caredabout the research he did at his office, he would attach a report to his letter" ("The Jump" 215).

She remains silent towards both offerings, not even thanking Ethan for the reports he sends her. The next four paragraphs of the text contain four of his unanswered e-mails to her, all of which address her in German and beg her to interact with him in her native Russian (i.e. the language in which she feels most "herself") because he "would not want to die… without you returning my affection" ("The Jump" 215). Margarita ignores his first message, but that only seems to encourage him to repeat it. His second letter ends with a request that she at least leave him a voicemail, if she is "afraid of live conversation": "please call and leave several words on my recorder… I wouldn't pick up, but later I will play the message numerous times" ("The Jump" 216). Again, Margarita answers his plea for an addressee with silence, which then throws Ethan "into despair", as he puts it, crying out "I know that I'm nothing for you" in a desperate declaration of impending dialogic doom. In his last e-mail to

her, he ceases using Russian words in his notes and simply begs her to call him and "let me know that I'm still alive" ("The Jump" 216). Her response to this is to "retreat" from Ethan's verbal onslaught, "growing more mute than she usually was" ("The Jump" 216).

By withdrawing all forms of communication with Ethan, she denies him an addressee and also refuses to play the role of addresser, thereby disrupting the communicative model and threatening both of their identities as functional dialogic beings. In a sense, she finds herself on the outside of the conversational situation – driven to the edge, perhaps, if the reader takes the final line of her narrative as truth. Ceasing to speak to anyone at all, and preferring to spend her days examining clothing colors in mail-order catalogues, she descends intoa final isolation: "Like Zinaida and Elsa, uprooted from any feelings of comfort, agonizing and analyzing, unnerved and unsettled, she jumped to her death in an alien tongue" ("The Jump" 217). Even if it is only metaphorical, Meklina's narrator offers a resolution: linguistic death, as the ultimate displacement, finally gives the reader a sense of closure – yet simultaneously denies them the chance to construct their own ending for the narrative, thus frustrating their expectations of full participation in Meklina's "writerly" text. Readers may lose a little confidence in theirself-perception as they navigate Meklina's fascinating and strange literary world, but they may also enjoy the challenge of questioning who they are. Meklina's characters are not so lucky; they experience (and sometimes cause) the gradual disappearance of their addressees, ending with the ultimate loss of identity: having no one around to talk to at all.

Discussion

Writing in two languages may be Meklina's way of ensuring that she does not suffer the same fate as these three characters: that is, ensuring that she always has someone to "talk" to. It could also be her way of reaching a larger audience and in turn attracting a wider

array of scholarly and critical reactions, although scholarly reaction to her work in either language is virtually non-existent. The same can be said of critical reaction to her work in the U.S., but not in Russia. There, she enjoys an abundant and mostly positive reaction from critics, who praise the complexity of her work and tend to portray it as a healthy challenge to the reader, rather than an alienating tactic. Golynko-Volfson, for example, praised her anthology *Srazhenie pod Peterburgom* for its "stylistic experimentalism and linguistic novelty"[220], and Dmitry Bavilsky echoes and amplifies those sentiments in his review of the same text, marveling at her prose's unpredictable nature:

> Непредсказуемость — вот что мне в прозе Маргариты Меклиной важнее всего прочего. Обычный сюжет предполагает законченность, завершённость, автор оказывается вежливым, если все линии истории сходятся в законченности пасьянса, если ни одна деталь, обнаруженная по ходу развития пьесы, не оказывается случайной, и все ружья стреляют.[221]... В условиях дефицита сюжетов... и их тотальной предсказуемости... самым интересным и ценным оказывается именно непредсказуемость.
> [Unpredictability – for me, that is what is more important than anything else in Margarita Meklina's prose. The 'usual' story implies completeness, conclusiveness, the author turns out to be polite, if all the story lines converge [as] in the completion of solitaire, if not a single detail discovered in the course of the play turns out be be random, and all of the guns end up firing... Given the shortage of plots... and their total predictability... the most interesting and valuable thing about her prose is precisely its unpredictability.][222]

Even though her prose can be unpredictable and difficult to read, one reason for her positive press in Russia – and lack thereof in the U.S. – may be that she is an outspoken critic of American literature and American writers. She seems to have made an effort to distance herself from other members of the Russian-American émigré literary cohort, first by

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[220]"Letter From Russia: Contemporary Women's Prose", NP.

[221] Bavilsky probably refers to Russian Realist writer Anton Chekhov, who, according to Russianist Jules Levin, "saw [Henrik Ibsen's] *Hedda Gabler*performed in St. Petersburg, and said that if you show a gun in the second act, it will be fired in the last act. Then he wrote *Cherry Orchard*, which does show guns in the second act that are not fired in the last act." "Re: Chekhov - end with a wedding or a suicide?",*SEELANGS* Listserv 16.0, SEELANGS/University of Alabama, 29 March 2015; accessed 3 April 2015.

[222] Dmitry Bavilsky, Review of *Srazhenie pod Peterburgom*, *Топос* [*Topos*], 5 November 2003. http://www.topos.ru/article/1735; accessed 11 September 2014.

generally avoiding the writers who publish in English, and second by aligning mainly with the émigré writers who publish primarily in Russian (for example, Olga Livshin, Maria Rybakova, and Natalia Rubanova; while Livshin does write in both Russian and English, Rybakova and Rubanova write exclusively in Russian).[223] Given the backlash that émigré writers such as Gary Shteyngart experienced when their novels were translated into Russian, these choices – combined with her sardonic view of American writers – may endear her more to Russian-speaking readers than those who only speak English. In her *Radio Svoboda* interview with Dmitry Volchek, she plainly expresses her opinion that American literature is an intellectual wasteland:

> …когда я говорю, что в американской литературе ничего нет, я имею в виду, что ничего нет для читателя, который следит за литературной жизнью, то есть среднего читателя в Америке… Я читаю "Нью-Йоркер", "Атлантик", известные литературные журналы, которые издают университеты, и вот они там просто отказываются печатать что-то авангардное. То есть, возможно, что-то есть, но это не попадет среднему читателю: в тех журналах, которые попадают мне в руки, нет ничего интересного.
> ["…when I say that there is nothing in American literature, I mean that there is nothing for the reader who keeps up with literature, that is, the average reader in America… I read the "New Yorker", the "Atlantic", the famous literary magazines, the ones published by universities, and in these they simply refuse to print anything avant-garde. That is, it's possible that something is there, but it doesn't reach the average reader: in those magazines that fall into my hands, there is nothing interesting."][224]

More pointedly, she has stronger words for contemporary American writers in another interview:

> У меня язык не поворачивается назвать этих чудовищ «коллегами». Если ты, конечно, имеешь в виду выпускников так называемых creative writingprograms. Это тут целая фабрика, практически 90% так называемых литературных журналов печатает эту серую массу. Они пишут гладко и без словесных изысков, с краткими, якобы остроумными репликами и множеством действий: такие тексты печатаются для того, чтобы любой домохозяин или мальчик с безумными глазами и крашеным ежиком

[223]Margarita Meklina, Interview with Olga Livshin, Natalia Rubanova, and Maria Rybakova.*Spurious Bastard* 21 August 2014. http://spuriousbastard.blogspot.com/2014/08/three-questions-to-three-women-writers.html; accessed 11 September 2014.
[224]http://www.svoboda.org/content/transcript/24613895.html; accessed 11 Sep 2014.

> прочли их и подумали – надо же, ведь и я так могу! И прочтение этого текста подвигнет этого мальчика записаться в creativewritingprogram, заплатив кучу денег, и затем его напечатают, и другой такой же мальчик подумает: и я так могу! Это просто в Америке нашли такой способ выколачивать деньги. А нормальных писателей тут почти нет, как и в России.
> [I do not dare to call these monsters "colleagues." If, of course, you mean the so-called graduates of creative writing programs.It's now a whole factory, almost 90% of the so-called literary magazines print this gray mass. They write plainly and without verbal refinement, with brief, ostensibly witty remarks, and a variety of events: such texts are printed so that any housewife or a wild-eyed boy with a mohawk can read them and think – what the hell, even I could do that! And reading this text encourages the boy to enroll in a creative writing program, paying a lot of money, and then he'll get published, and another boy just like him will think: I can do that too! It's just that inAmerica they have found a way to extort money. And there are almost no normal writers there, not like in Russia.][225]

Her strong reaction to American literature may be a reflection of a fear of "losing herself" –by emigrating to the U.S. and not being able to write for an exclusively Russian audience. She alludes to this fear in an answer to a question from a caller in her interview with Volchek, in which the caller asks her how she is received as a writer in the U.S. She responds:

> У меня есть вещи, которые опубликованы на английском, я пишу также на английском языке. Проза на русском никому не приходится по вкусу, потому что в США привозят только определенных писателей – Пелевин, Прилепин, Сорокин. Это буквально три фамилии, их модно привозить и их привозят. Одних и тех же привозят, поэтому все остальные остаются за бортом. И русская проза в США никого не интересует вообще…Поэтому я пишу на русском и на английском. На английском мои темы совершенно не связаны с моими русскими темами. Просто чтобы выйти на международный рынок, нужно забыть, чтотырусскийписатель.
> [I have things that have been published in English, and I also write in English. Prose in Russian doesn't hit the spot for anyone [in the U.S.], because in the United States they only import certain writers – [Viktor] Pelevin, [Zakhar] Prilepin, [Vladimir] Sorokin. It's literally just three names, they're fashionable to import and so they are imported. They import the same ones over and over, so all the others remain behind. And Russian prose in the United States interests no one at all… That's why I write in Russian and in English. In English my themes are not related to my Russian themes.

[225] Dmitry Deich, Interview with Margarita Meklina for Booknik.ru, 24 February 2009. Hosted on *НоваяЛитературнаяКартаРоссии*[*NovaialiteraturnaiakartaRossii*], 22 February 2011. http://www.litkarta.ru/dossier/fisiologiya-vremeni/; accessed 11 September 2014.

> It's just that to enter the international market, you must forget that you are a Russian writer.][226]

This kind of "forgetting" may not lead directly to identity loss, but the two are related insofar as the concepts of "memory" and "forgetting" are inextricably linked to the process of shaping identity. If Meklina indeed "forgets" her identity as a Russian writer, to some degree, her recent forays into English-language writing may be an attempt to embrace some sort of identity as an American writer. However, she still sends Russian-language work to Russia, suggesting that she wants to preserve her identity as a Russian writerfor as long as she can. Even so, changing the language of her code from Russian to English can be seen as a communicative disruption for Meklina that influences both her self-perception and her critical reception. While opinions such as the one she expresses in interviews with Deich, Golynko-Volfson, and Volchek are only accessible to Russian-speaking readers and critics (or particularly ambitious English-speaking readers who can find translators), it is easy to understand why Meklina has gained more notoriety in Russia than in the U.S. Her recent and gradual move towards publishing in English, however, may alienate her Russian-speaking readership at the same time that it welcomes her English-speaking readership.Just as her characters undergo identity shifts during communicative crises, Meklina *herself* also experiences them while moving between two "realities": native, and foreigner.

Golynko-Volfson attributes this movement to the "female psyche" formed by Meklina's stories: this "woman's identity—which is unfixed and constantly changing—resembles the identity of an émigré: she is a stranger to both her native and adopted lands, regardless of its hospitality and comforts".[227] Golynko-Volfson may place too much emphasis on a particularly female "other" who feels herself a stranger, since other women

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[226] http://www.svoboda.org/content/transcript/24613895.html; accessed 11 Sep 2014.
[227] "Letter From Russia: Contemporary Women's Prose", NP.

writers have successfully become "fixed" and established stable, if hybrid, identities. Yet this "female psyche" may be exactly what allows Meklina to write what she calls "что-тотакое, чегоВладимирНабоковненаписал, допустим, то, чтоможетнаписатьженщина" ["something about which Vladimir Nabokov {to whom Meklina is often compared} would never write, let's say, that which a woman could write"].[228] I would argue that Meklina's works reflect more accurately agender-neutral, liminal state of mind: even some twenty years after her arrival in the U.S., she still feels somehow neither "here" nor "there".

To understand how a writer – or a character – can experience a shift in identity while he or she is in between two (or more) realities, we must have a grasp of the concept of *transitional space*. I define a *transitional space* as a liminal space in which a character undergoes a transformation as he or she passes from one reality to another. I base this definition on Turner and van Gennep's theories of liminality and ritual passage, respectively. In the early 1900s, van Gennep coined the term *liminal* in the context of coming of age to describe the middle, transitional rite in a tripartite rite of passage: "I propose to call the rites… executed during the transitional stage *liminal (or threshold) rites*",[229]which Turner later applied to people who "are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony".[230] Examples of liminal rites include graduations (as students move from student status to independent-adult status), marriages (as men and women move from single status to married status), and having a child (as men and women move from "married" to mother and father status). In Meklina's works, the "transitional stage" manifests in the *transitional space* in which a character moves from one

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[228] http://www.svoboda.org/content/transcript/24613895.html; accessed 11 Sep 2014.
[229] Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, transl. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (London: Routledge, 1960), 21.
[230] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1969), 95.

communicative "reality" to another: changing the code from Russian to English, for example, or responding to a message to move from acting as an addressee to an addresser, or somehow garbling a message's contextduring its transmission. As I have shown, when these realities are disturbed, characters question their identities even as they lose their grasp on them.

Characters' dialogic displacement also influences Meklina's readers' interpretive process, as it leads them to question their own role as consumers and producers of her text. When she confuses her readers' horizons of expectations through directed perception, authorial instructions, and penchant for concluding a narrative without a resolution, Meklina challenges them to re-evaluatetheir potential self-perception as passive vesselsfor her text. Instead, they must complete her narrative with their own interpretations of characters' identities and fates, resulting in a unique dialogic experience between Meklina and every individual reader.

Conclusion

This singular dialogic experience may be precisely what most differentiates Meklina from her émigré counterparts. Meklina's attempt to include readers who speak English (i.e. those who speak what can now be considered her second language) distinguishes her from other writers in her cohort, especially Gary Shteyngart and Anya Ulinich. Shteyngart – who did not translate his novels into Russian – seems uninterested in making his work available, or even palatable, to readers who speak Russian (i.e. those who can speak what can now be considered his second language). Neither he nor Ulinich publish fiction written in Russian, nor have they indicated any desire to do so. Ulinich once expressed a desire for her first novel, *Petropolis*, to be translated into Russian, but simultaneously seemed unwilling to

spearhead the effort even though she still speaks the language.[231] Also, while Shteyngart and Ulinich dabble in literary genres aside from the novel – Shteyngart's latest work is a memoir, Ulinich's second novel is a graphic novel, and both have published short essays – Meklina demonstrates a more flexible attitude towards genre.

First and foremost, she shies away from novel-length prose, preferring to write short stories and "flash fiction" usually less than a thousand words. She has also co-authored an epistolary novel (*POP3*), and has even written a short young-adult novel (*The Little Gaucho Who Loved Don Quixote*) in English, which is only available online. This last work represents a crucial difference between Meklina and her contemporaries in this chapter: she is willing, and in some cases seems to prefer, to publish her texts online and free of charge. Such an attempt to reach the maximum number of readers in multiple languages suggests that she focuses on an identity that is more linguistic than (trans)national, more communicative than simply native, and that she places more importance on a global identity than her Russian-American émigré contemporaries.

Rather than ask what it means to be "Russian", "American", or both, Meklina advances the literary conversation on identity by considering it in a communicative context. When both she and her characters confront changing spatial, temporal, and linguistic situations, they form their identities through intentionally inclusive, reciprocal contact. Meklina does not invite her reader to consider what it means to be X or Y nationality, but instead nudges them to think about what it means to be a dialogic human being in an increasingly globalized world in which borders seem less and less absolute. Her decision to

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[231] In a 2008 interview for NPR's *Bryant Park Book Club*, host Mike Pesca asks Ulinich if *Petropolis* has been published in Russian. Ulinich answers "no", to which Pesca responds: "And are there plans for it?" Ulinich answers, "I wish", and continues: "I don't know what the deal is. I want to tell, if any Russian publishers are listening, please buy my book. I would love to come visit. I haven't been there for six years." "Listen to the Story", *The Bryant Park Book Club* (National Public Radio), 14 July 2008. http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=92510189; accessed 6 April 2015.

publish in two languages may be purely economic, but it may also indicate that she recognizes the need for a writer to reach out to readers in both her "native" and "adopted" lands (and beyond, as widely as English is understood), even as she says that she must "forget" her Russian identity in order to achieve international success as a writer. By opening a dialogue with both English- and Russian-speaking readers, she reaffirms her identity as a communicative, and therefore human, being: her readers respond to her by consuming her text, which means that she is alive. Her characters' journeys (in these and other stories) to and from Russia, the United States, Mexico, Argentina, Italy, France, and Japan suggest that she attempts to establish not so much a *hybrid* identity as a *global* one, in which the most vital sense of self is as a dialogic being. Her willingness to publish her work online free of charge puts this idea into action; by addressing a larger group of addressees through a wider variety of contexts, through more easily accessible messages, Meklina establishes herself as a groundbreaking writer who wants her voice – her utterance – to be heard. Thus the "Jump" of her 2014 short story can be seen as a metaphorical leap not only into linguistic death, but also into a literary (and existential) rebirth.

Conclusion

Asking what an asthmatic, mail-order bride, and depressed writer have in common seems like a setup for a bad joke involving three literary characters, but in fact it turns out to be a potentially rich question that leads to a deeper examination of new ways of thinking about identity. I have approached my research question – how selected works of Gary Shteyngart, Anya Ulinich, and Margarita Meklina shape self-perception through crossing spatial, temporal, and linguistic borders – with several critical concepts in mind.

The first concept, hybrid identity, provides an understanding of how émigré writers (and their characters) might perceive themselves as belonging to two or more communities. One of those communities is the "native" community, in the land of their birth. The other, the diaspora, offers émigrés a simultaneously real and imagined "home away from home". In this community, shared memory holds the group together even as it reinvents itself in the

process of crossing borders during emigration. This third concept, the border, is a crucial component of my study, as the writers I discuss cross borders of many kinds: not just spatial, temporal, and linguistic, but also psychological, stylistic (in terms of genre), and technological.

Thanks to this constant movement, émigrés in diaspora communities often feelthat they belong to *both* theirformer, native community *and* their new, foreign one, recognizing for themselves a kind of hybrid identity that is commonly referred to as a transnational identity. While not every diaspora is a transnational community, many émigrés who consider themselves "transnational" lead two lives in the sense that they profess allegiance to two countries, have economic and/or social ties to two communities, and possess at least some capability in two languages. Such linguistic fluidity suggests another kind of identity: the translingual identity, which is most commonly ascribed to émigré writers who write in at least two languages. Recent studies on writers of the "1.5 Generation", including Shteyngart and Ulinich (but not Meklina, in an oversight), claim that they inhabit hybridized identities that collectively form a "translingual diaspora", but in my study I have broadened these writers' sphere of influence. I have shown that their identities are complex, consciously and thoughtfully malleable, and based on a principle of outreach rather than looking inward, as they embody the transborder experience.

Examining Gary Shteyngart's three novels through a typology of their characters, locations, time periods, and languages led me to conclude that his protagonists exhibit a "nodal" identity that goes beyond the idea of a "hybrid" or "hybridized", "multiple", or even "composite" identity. This identity exists briefly in singular, liminal places where networks of space, time, and language converge in what I have called a "node". This node exists in a

"fourth space", which is a temporary time and location wherein Shteyngart's protagonists unexpectedly confront and become fully aware oftheir hybrid identities.

The idea of a temporary, changing self that cannot quite break free from its national and ethnic roots previews the representation of identity that I found in Anya Ulinich's first novel, *Petropolis*. Ulinich's protagonist embodies the literary concept of the "palimpsest" by re-writing her consciousness to forge a combined personal and national identity that subsumes her ethnic background. When confronted with moments of identity crisis, Sasha Goldberg uses memory to access and express underlying layers of her experience. Her ability to surmount her ethnic background to establish an intertextual sense of self (i.e. heeding her past while building her future) hints at the major departure from prior treatment of émigré identityfound in Margarita Meklina's work: that ethnic or even national identity may no longer be a viable tool for understanding self-perception in a "globalized" world marked by permeable and shiftingborders.

For Meklina's protagonists, the simpleidea of reciprocal communication is crucial to identity, as they confront their true selvesin moments of spatial, temporal, and linguistic crisis. These crises, which fall under the umbrella of "communicative displacement", disrupt the protagonists' dialogic selves and compel them to start a conversation with an exterior interlocutor, rather than reflect inwardly with an interior, self-directed monologue. This tendency to reach *out* rather than *in* drives Meklina's characters towards a deeper understanding of not so much a "hybrid" or "transnational" identity than as of what I call "globality" – a transborder orientation towards others that identifies gaps between cultures, languages, spaces, and time zones and brings them into an odd and defamiliarized association with one another, accomplished with a "jump".

My study argues that we need more salient terms to capture the global scope of these writers' works. To that end, I have created my own vocabulary for talking about increasingly complex interpretations of identity. In my analysis of Shteyngart's novels, I conceived the "node" as a locus of space, time, and language wherein characters act as a kind of "identity chameleon" – they show their true colors only in certain circumstances where cultures, languages, and image types clash, and they inhabit what I call a "nodal identity". Outside of those moments, they return to a basic identity that, while similar to their parents' identities, is solidly grounded in non-nostalgic feelings. I have added to previous scholarship on Shteyngart by placing these nodes in a liminal, temporary "fourth space" that expands the scope of Bhabha's more fixed "third space" beyond postcolonial theory to be more broadly applicable in studies of émigré literature.

Through my examination of Ulinich's first novel, I repurposed the existing term"palimpsest" to describe her protagonist, whom I call an "identity palimpsest" to contrast with Shteyngart's "chameleons". I applied the original term not to a text, upon which an outside agent acts to erase and re-write it, but to a human being with the agency to erase and re-write her consciousness, while also overcoming a problematic national and ethnic identity. My focus on intertextuality – and on the emphasis which Ulinich places on literary and cultural heritage as markers of identity, rather than more traditional traits such as citizenship or ethnicity –foregrounds a new way of thinking aboutémigré and transnational identity highlighted in Margarita Meklina's work.

Interrelated texts and characters that are in constant conversation with one another results in an interconnected, far-reaching network in which reciprocal communication is vital: after all, dialogue cannot occur when only one party participates. When the disruption of "communicative displacement" occurs in space, time, or language, characters undergo

shifts in identity to become "identity jumpers"; that is, they make the leap (or are pushed) out of one self-perception into another. My work in this area draws attention to – and is intended to begin the scholarly conversation on – an émigré writer whose innovative work remains unjustly ignored. For future studies of émigré literature, this dissertation offers a solid basis for a more comprehensive typology of writers who belong to the "1.5 Generation". It also serves as a good point of departure for a deeper focuson émigré women's voices, especially those on the border between languages, suchas Meklina.

Accordingly, this dissertation's focus on the voices and points of view of two women writers suggests that the growing number of works produced by that group at large also deserves more careful attention. While Shteyngart may have initially led his generation of Russian-born authors now living and writing in the United States, I contend that women writers(especially Meklina) now stand at the front of the movement by forging new directions in émigré literature and re-shaping and expanding the way we think and talk about transnational identity.Meklina specifically accomplishes thisinnovation by presenting self-perceptionnot as a mix of national or ethnic statuses but as a dialogic state in which existence depends on meaningful interaction across all kinds of borders. This interaction takes place not only between characters, but between these writers and their readers; without the other, neither would exist.

This reciprocity also reflects the gradually more complex relationship between reader and writer expressed in these writers' works. Shteyngart and Ulinich present their readers with a less daunting challenge by mostly creating a consistent horizon of expectation; they provide continuous plots with mostly clear narrative arcs and conflict resolutions. Some of their characters provoke strong reactions from readers who might find them distasteful, or the situations in which they end up incredible, but they more or less agree to enter into a

mutual, productive dialogic relationship with their readers.Meklina, on the other hand, challenges her readers by manipulating the horizon of expectation through plot twists and turns, and shifting languages, and even by asking them to participate in its completion. The discomfort that readers feel when confronted with this task can be perceived as a challenge to question their *own*identities and assumptions about themselves not only as readers but more so as dialogic, interactive beings.

In fact, Meklina may have a grander purpose in causing her readers such existential crises by challenging them to complete her texts. When she invites them to approach certain truths about themselves, she also invites them to reach out to one another. At the same time, she herself reaches out to a global readership. By publishing online and encouraging free worldwide consumption, and discussion of, her texts, she suggests that the most meaningful treatment of contemporary émigré identity is one that is all-inclusive and communicative. Émigrés may no longer be wondering "who am I?", but instead want to know "who are *you*, and what can we talk meaningfully about?" Shteyngart's asthmatic Vladimir Girshkin, Ulinich's mail-order bride Sasha Goldberg, and Margarita Meklina's eponymous suicide become not objects of a punchline, but instead a trio of characters in a dialogue with one another, their creators, and their readers in a worldwide context.

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