"WELCOME TO AMERICA 2.0": READING WASTE IN GARY SHTEYNGART'S *SUPER SAD TRUE LOVE STORY**

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Abstract

This article proposes a reading of Gary Shteyngart's celebrated novel *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), a text that straddles the dystopian and the satiric in its depiction of a quasi-contemporary America, from the perspective of Waste Studies. Through the problematic relationship between its two main characters, Shteyngart's novel articulates the wide-ranging effects of globalization on a generationally-ruptured American society, that in many ways stands also for the First World at large. Drawing from sociologists, cultural critics, and philosophers like Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, Byung-Chul Han, John Scanlan and Susan Sontag, who have theorized how individuals today are molded, challenged and threatened by powerful extrinsic forces in the era of globalization, this article aims to explore how *Super Sad True Love Story* showcases a range of mutually interrelated "modes of waste," resulting from the writer's pushing to a satiric/dystopic extreme contemporary American practices in politics and finance, citizenship and social ethics, culture and language, and even biological research.

Keywords: waste, globalization, citizenship, social ethics, cultural practices, dystopia, satire.

«BIENVENID@ A AMERICA 2.0»: UNA LECTURA DE LO RESIDUAL EN *SUPER SAD TRUE LOVE STORY* DE GARY SHTEYNGART

Resumen

Este artículo propone una lectura de la aclamada novela de Gary Shteyngart, *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), un texto que bascula entre la distopía y la sátira en su retrato de una América cuasi-contemporánea, desde la perspectiva de los *Waste Studies*. A través de la complicada relación entre sus personajes principales, esta novela de Shteyngart articula las diversas consecuencias de la globalización sobre una sociedad norteamericana caracterizada por una ruptura generacional, que es representativa del primer mundo en general. Partiendo de sociólogos, críticos culturales, y filósofos como Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, Byung-Chul Han, John Scanlan y Susan Sontag, que han teorizado sobre cómo el individuo contemporáneo se ve moldeado, intimidado y amenazado por poderosas fuerzas extrínsecas en la era de la globalización, este artículo examina los diversos ámbitos en los que *Super Sad True Love Story* manifiesta lo "residual", a partir de una visión en la que se llevan a un límite satírico y distópico las prácticas políticas y económicas, de ciudadanía y ética social, culturales y lingüísticas, e incluso biológicas, que definen a la América contemporánea.

Palabras clave: *waste*, globalización, ciudadanía, ética social, prácticas culturales, distopía, sátira.

American literature and American popular culture witnessed a suggestive shift around the 1980s and 1990s, as new critical practices toward US hegemony and cultural values began to find expression in novel ways. While, within the broad template of realism, towering male literary figures of the postwar era interrogated the state of the nation, and American women writers started to voice their American experience from the 1960s onwards, in the late twentieth century and into the new millennium, partly sustained by the postmodernist turn, an increasing number of narratives began to express diverse anxieties about "what may have happened" or "what can happen," gradually pushing center-stage the genres that we familiarly label today speculative fiction, alternate history, and dystopian narrative. In Hollywood cinema, the surge of global or American disaster movies ("blockbusters") in the nineties is patent, while in narrative this tendency underwent more diverse manifestations, including alternate histories (Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*), dystopian futures (Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*) or encyclopedic novels (David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*).

Francis Fukuyama's 1989 often-discussed prediction of the "end of history" whereby Western liberal democracies would become the "final form of human government" (Hochuli 2021, 21) has proven largely inaccurate, although a significant premise of his argument, the replacement of "political idealism" by an international "common marketization" was absolutely sound and is now obvious, third world excepted. What Fukuyama, or anyone, was unable to predict, is that in year one of the twenty-first century, the attacks on New York's World Trade Center would radically alter the "tranquil" evolution of Western liberal democracies, sparking anew fervent radical nationalisms and populist outlooks. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 finally materialized and embodied a dystopian event, which as Slavoj Žižek, Susan Sontag, and other philosophers and cultural critics promptly noted, had only been envisioned within the "safe" framing distance of Hollywood apocalyptic cinema.[1] The World Trade Center towers, materially erected in New York but "dealing" in world trade (*first* world trade, that is) did in fact symbolize an inextricable alignment between a specific nation and a global economic system, just like the Pentagon, another target, symbolized American 'intelligence interests' throughout the world, serving a US foreign policy that has often been dictated by both political and by corporate strategies.

The epiphanic moment of 9/11, which Sontag labelled "the monstrous dose of reality" (2001, n.p.), literally brought home and realized the consequences of what was obvious for decades: the US is a highly interventionist country whose political agenda, corporate lobbies, military power and intelligence agencies have often worked in conjunction. This 'operative framework' has shaped or conditioned the fate of

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[1] See Žižek, Slavoj. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (Verso, 2013) and Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Penguin Books, 2004).

many countries and peoples, including Vietnam and Cuba, governments and puppet regimes in Central and Latin America, and the Middle East region, where American involvement (military, strategic, or economic) has played a part in Kuwait, Syria, Israel/Palestine, Iran and Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Yemen and Turkey.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 affected American society and American literature and culture significantly, not just across the many memoirs, fictions, poetry and graphic novels thematizing the events themselves, but also by familiarizing readerships with the reality of the unimaginable: a dystopian turn in the collective American experience had taken place, however much the Bush administration tried to infantilize the public, sanitize the TV footage, and engage in the partisan, simplistic discourse of 'democracy against terror.'

In the twenty years elapsed since 2001, the sense of living in an ongoing dystopian era has escalated for both the United States and the world at large, not least as the perversely interconnected pattern on which neoliberalism is based– the exploitation of third world countries, the rapid depletion of (their) natural resources, the unsustainable exchanges of merchandise across great distances, and the supremacy of corporate capital–has been severely affected by the awareness of a climate crisis without precedent, followed by the global sanitary crisis. As with Covid-19, more recent events, such as the war in Ukraine, have only corroborated how, within our economic superstructure and "connectedness," any regional, localized crisis has global repercussions, effectively generating a "world risk" society, where "we are all trapped in a shared global space of threats – without exit" (Beck 2009, 56).

Within the generation of contemporary American writers of Jewish descent and Russian origins who successfully emerged into US the literary canon in the first decade of the new millennium,[2] proudly self-proclaimed New Yorker[3] Gary Shteyngart is, I believe, one of the novelists today most attuned to the dangers and excesses of the contending forces that shape contemporary America as a prominent, but already gradually declining, world player in global economy. Like the early Philip Roth, Shteyngart's narrative approach has been mostly satiric, often combining Swiftian technique with a trenchant political incorrectness. In his first two novels, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (2002) and *Absurdistan* (2006), Shteyngart mobilizes Jewish religion and heritage, Russian and Soviet history, American culture(s) and globalism as integral elements of his satire. These works parody the prestige, home and abroad, of American consumerism and cultural values, and the economic influence of the US in an Eastern Europe which, in the wake of post-Soviet disintegration, has been overrun by shameless materialism, governmental corruption and self-serving oligarchs. In Shteyngart's finest novel so far, *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010), the writer turns to America, focusing centrally on the challenging relationship between Lenny Abramov, age 39, son of a Russian Jewish immigrant, who "owns a wall of

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[2] See Adrian Wanner's excellent overview.
[3] See Grinberg.

books," and the twenty-four-year-old Korean Eunice Park, a graduate in "Images," against the backdrop of "an all-too-plausible digitized dystopia" (Goldbach 2010, n.p.). One of the novel's greater strengths is Shteyngart's ability to draw comedy from a love story conditioned by the bleak disintegration of America, as it affects– and is affected by–its two central characters.

Writing about the 9/11 terrorist attacks twenty years ago, in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Slavoj Žižek reflected, in line with Sontag's analysis above, on how the broadcasting of TV footage of the planes crashing into the World Trade Center should not so much be read as "the intrusion of the real which shattered our illusory sphere [...] quite the reverse [...] the question [...] is: *Where have we already seen the same thing over and over again*?" (Žižek 2013, 16-17, italics in original). *Super Sad True Love Story* lies very much in this juncture between the dystopian/speculative and what is already uncannily real and familiar in contemporary American society, especially in relation to its youth. In a broad-ranging chapter dedicated to this work within Shteyngart's fiction, Geoff Hamilton has perceptively listed the wide range of critical responses to this text across fields as diverse as Economics, Media Studies, Biology and Aging Studies, Dystopian studies, and even Psychiatry, a diversity he reads as attesting "to [the novel's] broad cultural relevance" (2017, 61). Indeed, a Google Scholar search reveals close to forty published essays or book chapters which tackle the novel from frameworks as varied as Posthumanism, Print and Cyber-cultures, Medical Humanities, Transnationalism and Ethnic studies, or Surveillance Studies, among others. This is a substantial amount of criticism for a novel published a little over a decade ago.

The ways in which Shteyngart's dystopian novel foregrounds a number of interrelated and reciprocally causal *dis*integrations–of the nation and welfare state; of language and a relevant cultural heritage; of meaningful emotional relationships and ethics; even of the very biology of the human body–has led me to reflect on a further, and, to my knowledge, unexplored approach to this text. Whether at literal or metaphorical levels, disintegration involves the breakdown of a structure, body, machine or construct into its constituent parts, which, being no longer "integral" (whole) or "integrated" (working together) engenders waste. The symbolic notion of waste as a concept relevant to literature and culture is intriguingly complex and long-standing, dating back a hundred years, in the Anglophone literary tradition, to T.S. Eliot's narrative poem invoking cultural, historical, and personal breakdowns after World War I. But since Eliot's influential *The Waste Land*, the concept of waste has broadened in the wake of late twentieth century globalization and capitalism, and its mounting production of multiple forms of "refuse," "excess," "by-products," "toxic residue," and the like, that have come to conform the current age of the Anthropocene, the first era in the history of humanity where this species' impact on the planet has far-reaching, maybe irreversible, consequences. While the material production of 'world waste' has planetary effects, affecting humanity's fate globally, the economic system itself has also perversely contributed to broaden the social and economic divide between the Third World, exploited for resources, and the First World (and developing nations), whose industrial and technological capacities allow for the transformation and production of finished products from those resources.

The cycle is completed by the ultimate dumping of the waste products generated by these transformations back into the third world, as documented, for example, in the chilling World Health Organization report on *Children and Digital Dumpsites: E-Waste Exposure and Child Health* (WHO 2021). Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, among others, has perceptively traced how this economic cycle creates its own parallel in the value scale of humanity's distribution worldwide, contributing to continually broaden the socioeconomic divide between first world, "functional" citizens (i.e., the smartphone users), and the "wasted lives" that inhabit the third world (i.e., the children salvaging smartphone components at toxic dumpsites): "in the 'wasting' of whole classes of human beings, they become nonentities, equivalencies for trash, garbage and filth [...]. As Serres points out, 'the rich readily discharge waste [...] where the poorest live'" (Morrison 2013, 467).

In *On Garbage*, John Scanlan provides an insightful discussion of "garbage metaphorics" and the ways in which waste has, in the Western cultural tradition, always been inextricably bound to "an economy of human values" (2005, 23) within which it is constructed as an "Other," or as a product of an "imbalance" across both material and abstract domains: nature and civilization, information and knowledge, art and aesthetics, social order and ethics, biology, etc. (22-55). Scanlan notes how in Calvinist doctrine and John Locke's related political philosophy, "waste" denoted the "ungoverned" condition of nature in the absence of mankind's (God-willed) intervention. Yet, as far back as the thirteenth century, centuries before global capitalism, "waste" as verb functions also with opposite connotations, where its human agency is semantically linked to destructive action or excessive consumption: "c. 1200, 'devastate, ravage, ruin,' from Anglo-French and Old North French *waster* 'to waste, squander, spoil, ruin' (*Online Etymology Dictionary*).

Drawing from the lexical field of the term 'waste' as a verb–to consume, to use up, to damage, to become barren, to ruin, to weaken–and as noun, along with its derived terms, wasteland and devastation, in the following pages I will be approaching *Super Sad True Love Story* by shedding light on a variety of mutually related *modes of waste*, representing the "imbalance" and "othering" noted by Scanlan in his overview of the ramifications of the term, which I argue this novel showcases in relation to contemporary American neoliberal standards of politics and nationhood, citizenship and social ethics, cultural and linguistic practices, and even biological relevance. Although Scanlan's study is useful as a primary epistemological framework, the discussion will draw from sociologists, philosophers and cultural critics–Susan Sontag, Emmanuel Levinas, Zygmunt Bauman, Byung-Chul Han, and Ulrich Beck–whose ideas are particularly compelling in discussing more specific approaches to several expressions of waste in this novel.

POLITICAL WASTELANDS: THE END OF THE NATION

Overtly invoking the excesses of free market economy, the dominance of transglobal corporations, and the subservience of digital network technologies to both, resulting in the irrelevance of the nation-state (let alone the welfare state), Lenny

and Eunice live in a United States governed by the ARA or 'American Restoration Authority.' The ARA ranks citizens and controls immigrants on the basis of their "Credit," with a capital C. The country is beyond financial collapse, and uses a form of investment currency, the "Yuan-pegged dollar," after China has become its main creditor and large corporations have become capitalized by the powerful Chinese economy, fostering companies with hyphenated names, like Staatling-Wapachung. As it awaits the intervention of the Chinese Central Banker,[4] who will eventually purchase the country as a commodity-state at the novel's conclusion, the United States has gone beyond Zygmunt Bauman's notion of the "weak, quasi-state [...] reduced to the (useful) role of local police precinct[s], securing a modicum of order required for [conducting] business but not to be feared as effective brake[s]on the global companies' freedom" (1998, 68).

Conveniently for the control of citizens' wealth, a plausible technology has developed the 'äppärät,' a ubiquitous gadget that far exceeds the functions of an iPhone, as it streams figures continuously onto "Credit Poles" on the sidewalks and connects to other äpärätti users, publicly reporting each individual's "worth" or credit ranking. Lenny works as a high-profile salesman for a division of Staatling-Wapachung, providing Indefinite Life Extension through bio-engineering, a service accessible only to HNWI or 'High Net Worth Individuals,' as they are labeled in this American dystopia. As Simon Willmetts has observed, Shteyngart's novel originates in the tradition of twentieth century dystopian fiction (George Orwell's *1984* or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*) but also departs from it in a significant way, since "rather than solidify[ing] class distinction and identity, surveillance [here] is fundamentally destabilizing, subjecting the individual to continuous transformation [where s/he] is in a permanent state of becoming" (2018, 272). Throughout the novel, Lenny is recurrently concerned with his credit rating and rankings, and the incessant economic "alerts" from *CrisisNet* that beep on his äppärät, thus illustrating the uncertainty, instability and fluidity of American citizenship under the American Restoration Authority, and the ever-present fear of falling towards the ranks of LNWI, or Low Net Worth Individuals. His concerns, shared by other characters, essentially embody Zygmunt Bauman's notion of fear in contemporary "liquid modern life," where "power and politics drift ever further in opposite directions [...] [and] Society is no longer protected by the state, [...] [but] exposed to the rapacity of forces it does not control" (2007, 25).

In political terms, Shteyngart's ironies extend into the actual language used to portray his conception of the ARA interim government. "Restoration Authority" is a frequent label used in the US to identify institutions or administrations committed to funding or aiding damaged ecosystems, housing, or urban districts. In the novel, the American Restoration Authority is an obscure organization, in some ways reminiscent of Orwell's vigilant Big Brother in *1984*, awakening Lenny's

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4 While still unfamiliar to the US, the threat of foreign economic intervention, also as an effect of global capitalism, has become a real experience for several EU countries since the 2008 crisis.

suspicions about a workmate's covert involvement and responsible for issuing warning messages which twist and distort language in order to elude its accountability as a real governing body. One of its public street signs notifies "By reading this message you are denying its existence and implying consent" (Shteyngart 2010, 239).

In the American context, further satires emerge from the ARA's being provisionally managed by a Jew: "Defence Secretary Rubinstein [also known as] 'shifty Rubinstein'" (11), while articulating a public discourse that foregrounds a racialized perversion of nationalism, correlated with economic wealth: "America Celebrates its Spenders! [...] The Boat is Full / Avoid Deportation / Latinos Save / Chinese Spend / ALWAYS Keep Your Credit Ranking Within Limits" (54). In a number of interrelated ways, the conceptualization of the ARA in the novel–a puppet administration that restores nothing and is terminated by China's eventual takeover of the US–brings to an undisguised completion Bauman's notions of "the new expropriation, this time, of the state" (1998, 65-69), ultimately officialized by the visit of the Chinese delegation, greeted by banners that read "Welcome to America 2.0: A GLOBAL Partnership. THIS is New York: Lifestyle Hub, Trophy City" (Shteyngart 2010, 322).

WASTED INDIVIDUALS: *BE*-ING HUMAN BEINGS?

In "Only Disconnect," a brief essay published in *The New York Times* in July 2010, Shteyngart acknowledged, in a self-critical tone, his enduring addiction to his (sic) "iTelephone," propelling him into a state of "techno-fugue" in which the streets and people of New York receded from sight, as he became increasingly engrossed in posting on Facebook, following online maps to stores and eateries, then rating the eateries, reading emergent news headlines from the screen, and so on. In August, *The Atlantic* quoted *Village Voice* reviewer Rob Harvilla as branding *Super Sad True Love Story* "the finest piece of anti-iPhone propaganda ever written, a cautionary tale full of distracted drones unwilling to tear themselves away from their little glowing screens long enough to make eye contact" (Madrigal 2010, n.p.). Indeed, the novel is inextricable from Shteyngart's visceral addiction with and later, reaction to digital technologies, which for many US citizens under forty is tantamount to an iPhone, in one of its successive versions. In several interviews, Shteyngart reflects on how younger generations of Americans, specifically those who fall under the (arguable) label "digital natives,"[5] can actually be controlled and manipulated within the very framework of neoliberal, democratic, "free" societies, because these digital natives use modern technologies to freely(?) divulge their personal data, opinions and preferences via the continuous upload and streaming of content, subsequently processed by algorithms.

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5 For an engaging discussion on this label's validity, see Helsper and Eynon.

In his postscript to the "Society of Control," argued as a response to Foucault's notion of "environments of enclosure" (panopticons, prisons, factories) Gilles Deleuze noted that "[w]e no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become *dividuals*, and masses, samples, data, markets, or *banks*" (1992, 5). Contemporary Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han has added to the discussion by perceptively reconceptualizing the notion of the physical "panopticon" as it shifts into a new virtual realm:

> Digital control society makes intensive use of freedom. This can only occur thanks to voluntary self-illumination and self-exposure (*Selbsausleuchtung und Selbstentblößung*). Digital Big Brother *outsources* operations to inmates, as it were. Accordingly, data is not surrendered under duress so much as offered out of an inner need. That is why the digital panopticon proves so efficient. (2017, 9)

Han's reflections here closely reflect Shteyngart's informally worded insights into the contemporary loss of individual freedom within neoliberal, western and apparently free democratic societies. Indeed, these concerns inform much of the background to *Super Sad True Love Story,* written between 2008 and the publication of "Only Disconnect" in 2010. A number of critical approaches over the past decade have identified the work's relevance to the digital era, whether in relation to the dystopian or to posthumanism.[6] The novel abounds in numerous instances of the subservience of human volition to the dictates of technology, illustrating the Deleuzian transformation of a free-thinking individual into a *dividual* or, in Han's terms, technology's capacity to "ensure that individuals act on themselves so that power relations are interiorized, and then interpreted as freedom" (2017, 28) but I will be limiting my discussion here to three episodes that illustrate, in various ways, how relationships among individuals, conditioned, as they are, by the mediating effects of digital technology, ultimately derive in a dissolution of individual transcendence and the breakdown of a sense of self.

In a chapter with the ominous title "The Fallacy of Merely Existing" (Shteyngart 2010, 50-71), Lenny's anxiety over not locating a woman, contracted by the State Department, who has tried to help him with a malfunction in the automated immigration procedure, resonates with the younger generations' contemporary anxieties over privacy, anonymity, publicity, and exposure in social networks. Shteyngart takes this to a limit where not even a residual sense of individual agency remains:

> I sent a GlobalTeens message to Nettie Fine, but got a chilling "RECIPIENT DELETED" in response. What could that mean? No one *ever* gets deleted

⁶ Among the most extensive studies are Simon Willmetts's "Digital Dystopia: Surveillance, Autonomy, and Social Justice in Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*" and Raymond Malewitz's "Some New Dimension Devoid of Hip and Bone": Remediated Bodies and Digital Posthumanism in Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*."

from GlobalTeens. I tried to GlobalTrace her but got an even more frightening "RECIPIENT UNTRACEABLE / INACTIVE." What kind of person couldn't be found on this earth? (55)

The app's very language and Lenny's reaction to it ("chilling;" "no one ever;" "RECIPIENT DELETED") reveal how nonexistence in the digital world is tantamount, if not to physical death, at least, to some severe form of repression or confinement. His suspicions will be confirmed at the novel's ending. A more radical example of the power of disciplinary technologies and their actual control over individuals is provided by the episode that takes place early in the story, when Lenny, waiting to board his flight to the US at a first-class lounge in an Italian airport, is astonished to come across a "fat man" who

> registered nothing. I mean he wasn't there. He didn't have an äppärät, or it wasn't set to social mode [or had been hacked to block transmission] And he looked like a nothing [...]. No one would look at him except me (and only for a minute), because he was on the margins of society, because he was without rank, because he was ITP or Impossible to Preserve, because he had no business [mixing] with real HNWIs in a first class lounge. (35)

Warranting Lenny's fears, the "fat man" episode predictably closes with the plane's landing at New York, surrounded by tanks and mercenary-like forces who board the plane fiercely and scan all passengers' äppärätti signals until they identify and arrest the proscribed nonuser. The scene grimly reverberates the homeland security polices during the Bush mandate, but to a more radical degree, in which nonpossession of the streaming gadget is equivalent to nonexistence or an irrelevant existence. In an illuminating discussion of digital posthumanism in the novel, Raymond Malewitz has discussed this episode drawing from Kristeva's notion of the abject:

> In a manner akin to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, if citizenship in a social world is governed by the ability to represent oneself and to be represented by others, Lenny's inability to describe the man suggests that digital technologies not only clarify the nature of citizenship in a posthuman world but also constitute the grounds on which the fantastical universalist category of 'human' is established [...]. Kristeva argues that the abject is less a thing than a process that results from a breakdown in the human structuration of the self. (2015, 114)

Lenny's reflection–"he wasn't there" (Shteyngart 2010, 35)–explicitly emphasizes how the fat man's existence cannot be grounded only in the perceived reality of his physical *be-ing*. In the particular "structuration of the self" imposed by digital surveillance societies, he remains abject because his refusal to share his identity through an äppärät removes him beyond the margins of citizenship in the terms that this citizenship has been constructed and conceived.

The ways in which the American Restoration Authority and its digital controls assess citizenship is at the core of Shteyngart's dystopia, sometimes in

episodes which combine outright comedy with ominous forces at play. In the first world, we are all familiar with the frustration of using automated voice recognition systems that supposedly guide us through options and services, yet finally require human assistance. In the opening scene of the novel, a hilarious exchange takes place between the protagonist and the GIF-like, automated "Jeffrey Otter" who addresses him as "Leonard or Lenny" (8, 9, 10) and interrogates him on occupation, reasons for travel, Credit ranking, and foreign acquaintances. This is the ARA's automated immigration procedure, an app that suddenly freezes seconds after the voice recognition system confuses Lenny's reply "some Italians" with "Somalians" (9):

> "De Salva, Fabrizia," I whispered.
> "You said 'De Salva–'" But just then the otter froze in mid-name, and my äppärät began to produce its "heavy thinking" noises, a wheel desperately spinning inside its hard plastic shell, its ancient circuitry completely overtaxed by the otter and his antics. The words ERROR CODE IT / FC-GS / FLAG appeared on the screen. (10)

Hereafter, a red asterisk flashes next to Lenny's Credit scores, who later discovers through a supervisor at Life Extension, Howard Shu, that his record has been "flagged" by the ARA as "malicious provision of incomplete data" (69). Shu promptly attributes the error to Lenny's obsolete gadget, but his diagnosis may be staged to assuage Lenny's fears. As Gregory Rutledge notes in his discussion of the implied intertextual allusions of the term 'äppärät,' "Shteyngart's novel can be re-read as a deadly-serious spy novel and commentary on the dangers of combining surveillance culture (fascism) with a false sense of individual empowerment" (2020, 387). The äppärät leaves "a clear trail of destruction" (388) as High Net Worth Individuals may mask under assumed digital identities and possibly control, from the beginning, the outcome of Lenny's relationship with Eunice. In spite all its surface comedy, *Super Sad True Love Story* disturbingly reveals the ways in which individual lives are conditioned by the projection of such lives into a digital unknown, controlled and exploited by neoliberal elites, whose "technology of power takes on subtle, supple and smart forms, [escaping] all visibility. Now, the subjugated subject is not even aware of his subjugation [,] the whole context of domination [...] remain[ing] entirely hidden" (Han 2017, 14).

WASTED WOR(L)DS: THE RUINS OF CULTURE

The automated immigration software, under the ludicrous designation "Welcome back, pad'ner!" voiced by the digital otter "speaking" clichéd American slang provides a fitting opening into the ways in which *Super Sad True Love Story* foregrounds the disintegration of language and culture in the US. As several commentators have observed, here the writer draws from several strands, some disturbingly real in today's First World: the demise of books and print culture, including professional journalism, replaced by a solipsistic streaming of one's own "media"; the proliferation of social media jargon centered exclusively on *datafication*,

brand-quoting and sexualization (online women's fashion adopts sexist and fetishist labels like Onionskin, TotalSurrender, AssLuxury); the shrinking of language into a Newspeak which coins terms and acronyms guided to represent such a reality.[7] Shteyngart conveys these breakdowns of language and culture by composing chapters using diverse textual registers: Lenny's written diaries and Eunice Park's GlobalTeens account–set in a different typeface–which include her messages to Lenny and friends, but also long, pathetic, admonitions by her Korean mother in a broken and comical English. The following is a representative sample:

> *GLOBALTEENS SUPER HINT: Switch to Images today! Less words= more fun!!!*
> EUNI-TARD ABROAD TO GRILLBITCH:
> Hi, Precious Pony!
> What's up, twat? Missing your 'tard? Wanna dump a little sugar on me? JBF. I am so sick of making out with girls. BTW, I saw the pictures on the Elderbird alum board with your tongue in Bryana's, um, ear. I hope you're not trying to get Gopher jealous? He's had way too many three-somes. Respect yourself, hoo-kah! (Shteyngart 2010, 27)

> CHUNG.WON.PARK TO EUNI-TARD ABROAD:
> Eunhee,
> Today I wake up sad. But no problem! It will be OK! Only your father is very mad at you. He say you bohemia. What is this? He say you go to rome and you do not protect the mystery. He call you bad word in korean. [...] He say only bohemia people go to Europe and bohemia people is bad people. (72)

> *RATE ME PLUS: FROM THE DIARIES OF LENNY ABRAMOV*
> Dear Diary,
> God, I miss her. No messages from my Euny yet, no reply to my entreaty to move here and let me take care of her with garlicky carcasses of eggplant, with my grown man's practiced affections, with what's left of my bank account... (76)

These discourses, and the respective worldviews they evoke, are illustrative markers of three generations of Americans whose relation to culture can be read as 'wasteful' or 'wasted' in several ways. Chung Won Park struggles to communicate with her daughter Eunice, but her broken syntax and limited vocabulary, regardless of her attempts at American idiom, are unsuited to her conservative religious Korean values, and her reprimands (here referring to premarital sex) consistently appear both pathetic and hilarious. Eunice's message to a friend is characteristic of current trends in the teen language of social media, in its bluntness, immediacy, use of slang and acronyms, while revealing a graphic and superficial attitude to sexual intimacy. Eunice is a graduate in "Images" in a society where the younger generations connect

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[7] The shrinking of language partly evokes George Orwell's classic dystopia *1984*, while acronymic usage also resonates with the discursive practices of Nazism: see also footnote 10.

through a social network that publicizes "*Less words=more fun!!!*" (27).[8] In a later social message to Grillbitch, she reports with awe how Lenny is capable of reading "for like HALF AN HOUR [...] that Russian guy Tolstoy [which] was a thousand pages long BOOK, not a stream" (144). The language of Lenny's diary, very authorial, modeled on Shteyngart himself, stands in opposition to both discourses, as a register that is literary, intense and sophisticated. But Lenny's cultural outlook is itself also essentially "wasted" in this contemporary dystopian US. When younger workmates, men of Eunice's generation, initiate Lenny into the 'FAC-ing' app ('Form a Community' although Lenny mishears "fuck"; 88) which will "rate" his "male hotness" in relation to the surrounding women at a bar, he ranks last. Part of the data computed in the algorithmic computations involve his recent purchases, identified as "bound, printed, nonstreaming Media artifact[s]" to the younger men's amusement: "You've got to stop buying books. [...] Where the fuck do you even find those things? [...] Lenny Abramov, last reader on earth!" (90).[9] To a lesser degree than the ITP-Impossible to Preserve fat man arrested earlier, at 39, the well-read Jewish Lenny, who owns "a wall of books" which he actively cherishes (Hamilton 2017, 69), embodies what has become a vestigial, wasted, form of culture. Drawing from Marshall McLuhan, Raymond Malewitz perceptively reads the educational rift between Lenny and Eunice's generation:

> Lenny is a bumbling outsider whose quaint liberal humanism is still structured by what Marshall McLuhan calls "the Gutenberg galaxy"–a print culture that generates and sustains the solitary, introspective "individual ego" (52). [...] In contrast, Eunice constitutes the tribal citizen of McLuhan's electronic "global village," who lives pluralistically in many worlds and cultures simultaneously [...] embody[ing] the "new electronic interdependence" of a world returning to a "non-literate" status (31, 30). (2015, 110)

The bar scene pushes electronic interdependence to the very limits of ethics and civility. Everyone is looking into the data streams of their äppäräti, but nobody exchanges looks in the Levinasian sense.[10] When detailed data from a FAC stream labeled 'Child Abuse Multimedia' inputs Lenny's gadget from one Annie, he tries to catch Annie's eye in a gesture of sympathy, "but the words 'Look away quickly, dork,'" appear on his äppärät (Shteyngart 2010, 92). This scene fully epitomizes Han's conceptualization of dysfunctional "digital tribes" and the advent of a "communication without community" where there are no listeners, and the "other is

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[8] Instagram was released only months after the publication of *Super Sad True Love Story* in 2010, although other image-sharing apps had been developed earlier.
[9] This comment evokes Walter Tevis' science fiction dystopia *Mockingbird* (1980), which envisions a robot-managed distant future where books and reading skills have long been forgotten by a lethargic human population.
[10] In "Ethics and the Face," Emmanuel Levinas foregrounds the significance of the exchange of the human gaze for the simultaneous recognition of our individual uniqueness and shared humanity (1991, 213).

in the process of disappearing" (Han 2022, 51-55; my translation), as communication becomes fully conditioned by a solipsistic datafication of the self.

A further issue worth examining, in connection to the novel's darkly ironic approach to the reduction of "words" and their "wastefulness," is the cultural shift towards an acronymic communication, which identifies Eunice's and her peers' social media, and to some degree, Lenny's discourse as well. Acronyms in the novel essentially encapsulate terms belonging to three semantic fields: the state's commodified language of financial taxonomies (the above quoted ARA, ITP, HNWI, LNWI); biological terms related to human chemistry; and sexual acts and the expression of human emotions. The first field clearly functions as a representation of the political dystopia envisioned by Shteyngart, and can be read in analogy to historical totalitarian regimes, such as Nazism, which distorted and encoded the German language with nouns and acronyms that "rationalized" its perverse world-view.[11] As noted in section one, the ARA actually establishes a "financial racialization" of citizens–Chinese vs. Latinos–and uses repressive methods against those residents it considers 'ITP: Impossible to Preserve,' a euphemistic language which carries echoes of Nazi-Deutsch *Endlosüng*, "Final Solution" (namely, the extermination of Jews). In the third lexical field, however, Shteyngart is tapping the most disturbing, fully contemporary, form of epistemological waste. One of the very first dialogues between Lenny and Eunice provides this exchange:

> "LPT," she said. "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.
> "Who's that?" I pictured a tall Protestant man.
> "It means I'm 'just butt-fucking' with you. Just kidding, you know."
> "Duh," I said. I knew that. Seriously. [So] what makes me a nerd in your estimation?"
> "'In your estimation,' she mimicked. "Who says things like that? And who wears those shoes? You look like a bookkeeper."
> "I'm sensing a bit of anger here," I said. (Shteyngart 2010, 22)

The ironies implicit in Eunice's condescending to Lenny's superior linguistic and cultural competence, when he "struggles to accommodate himself to the truncated, vulgarized expression of social networking" (Hamilton 2017, 69) are revealing. They bear out that such "web-speak" conventions actually blunt the younger generation's skills at social and emotional interaction: "while digital acronyms radically attenuate the verbal expression of possible emotional and cognitive states, the novel's equivalent of emoticons–pantomime images–converts Shteyngart's

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[11] A number of survivors and commentators of the Holocaust, from Victor Klemperer's early *The Language of the Third Reich* to Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved* and George Steiner's essays on "Language and Silence" have foregrounded the relevance of acronyms to the transformation of German into Nazi-Deutsch in the 1930s.

characters into empty emoticon like signs of desire and anger" (Malewitz 2015, 119), although, under his influence, Eunice later begins to defer to Lenny's broader humanistic worldview. This simultaneous dwelling and communicating both in the physical and the digital worlds brings about "the [...] exaggeration of bodily behaviors [which] is remediated back into the material world, simultaneously amplifying and coarsening interpersonal relationships by treating real-world encounters as disembodied data transfers" (Malewitz 2015, 119).

Ultimately, from Lenny's–and Shteyngart's–perspective the novel passes judgement on the contemporary ruins of a culture which has enabled digital and social media to lay waste to the potential of language beyond the narrow limits of a truncated, acronymic, emoticon-based, articulation of human emotions and physical desires. Only the nonusers of social media, children and the elderly, are still capable of such a potential, as Lenny nostalgically reflects twice in the novel: "I relished hearing language actually being spoken by children. Overblown verbs, explosive nouns, beautifully bungled prepositions. [...] How long would it be before these kids retreated into the dense clickety-clack äppärät world?" (Shteyngart 2010, 53); "A co-op woman, old, tired,' [...] looked up at the pending wind and said [...] 'Blustery.' Just one word, [...] but it caught me unaware, it reminded me of how language was once used, its precision and simplicity, its capacity for recall" (304).

DEVASTATION, DEPARTURE, DEATH

The last third of the novel deals with events following the "Rupture" as China abandons its financial support of the US, and the "restoring" nation begins to collapse instead, a process broadcast in real time by increasingly alarming messages on CrisisNet. Displaced and evicted 'Low Net Worth Individuals' take to the streets of Manhattan and burn Credit Poles while the National Guard is mobilized to subdue the demonstrators,[12] although, ironically, there is no nation left. But in such a densely interweaved fiction, "rupture" goes beyond the sociopolitical, into the existential and the personal. The GlobalTeens network starts reporting "connectivity issues" in error messages with ludicrous language and spelling errors–"We are SO TOTTALY sorry for the inconvenience"; Shteyngart 2010, 262-263–and soon all äppärätti stop connecting, leading to the first suicides of young people, as they are unable, without the gadget, to "reach out to life [consisting of] only walls and thoughts and faces" (270). As in the earlier bar scene, this inability to *face* other "faces" again deserves reading with Levinas' reflections on intersubjective relations.[13] As chaos unfolds, Lenny's boss Joshie Goldman at Post-Human Services takes advantage of his "insider information" and uses the firm's restricted network to seduce Eunice away

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[12] In a violent version, this episode foretells the *Occupy Wall Street* peaceful protests that developed in September 2011, a year after the novel's first publication.
[13] See "The Other and the Others" in *Totality and Infinity*, 212-15.

from Lenny, hastening the "rupture" to their (super sad) love story. The passionate, intense, ever-youthful Joshie Goldman, the embodiment of Shteyngart's biting critique of the American success ethos, ultimately reveals himself to be the ultimate agent, and eventually victim, of waste and devastation in the novel. Enacting Ulrich Beck's claims regarding the "power differential" in the "distinction and distribution of knowledge and non-knowledge" between "individuals, groups, authorities, monopolies and resources [versus] those who challenge them" (Beck 2009, 125), Goldman advocates before Lenny the transition into a "*better* America," one held by foreign investors who will "clear out our trophy cities of all the riffraff with no Credit and make them real lifestyle hubs...[to the profit] of Staatling-Wapachung" (Shteyngart 2010, 257). Soon after, Lenny finds his own block about to be forcibly evicted, and then demolished, by 'Staatling Property Relocation Services.' In anguish, he confronts a site worker, unfamiliar with the word 'books,' who shrugs off his plea not to relocate elderly neighbors:

> "They're being moved into abandoned housing in New Rochelle."
> "New Rochelle? Abandoned housing? Why not just take them straight to the abattoir? You know these old people can't make it outside New York." (310)

While Staatling is executing such "relocations" of these "wasted lives" (now in New York, a first world city), an episode that once again recalls the ghettoization practiced by Nazism in the early 1930s, Goldman actually commodifies the "Rupture," of which he is an active agent, in his own personal interests, as a way to access and seduce Eunice, offering accommodation for her family in New York, and "fixing" all the resident permits.

But not even Goldman's knowledge, power, influence, and wealth can make him omnipotent. In the novel's epilogue, further projected into the future, Lenny has self-exiled in the Tuscan Free State, in the now administratively fractured Italian peninsula, suggesting a symbolic reversal of the twentieth-century immigrant Atlantic crossing. He sees his ex-boss one last time, as "whatever was left of Joshie" (328) is flown over by the medical school to lecture on Post-Human Services. Twitching from "the recently discovered Kapasian tremors associated to the reversal of dechronification," Goldman admits, "we were wrong. The antioxidants were a dead end [...]. Our genocidal war on free radicals proved more damaging than helpful, hurting cellular metabolism, robbing the body of control" (328-329). In a language in which human biology reverberates with historical, social and political implications ("*our genocidal war on free radicals*," 329, my italics) a wasted, dying, Joshie admits defeat before the course of nature. In his analysis of the ending of a modern Hungarian novel,[14] John Scanlan discusses "the brilliant [...] analogy of the human body as the site of order that by extension reveals how the civic body, too, functions" (2005, 53). After having explored the political wasting of

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[14] László Krasznahorkai's *The Melancholy of Resistance* (1989).

American democracy, the wasting away of individual freedom and ethics, and the ruins of humanism, language and culture, *Super Sad True Love Story* also reaches its dystopian biological climax in the cruel deaths, from multiple organ failure, of the youthful, super-rich Indefinite Life Extension clients, ultimately materializing Scanlan's notion of the "garbaged self" (2005, 53). There is some poetic justice in this rewriting of the Faustian bargain, in the final defeat of advanced bioscience allied to unjustified privilege in this age of the Anthropocene. "NATURE HAS A LOT TO LEARN FROM US," boasts a framed marketing print at Indefinite Life Extension headquarters early in the novel (60). Yet it is Lenny's final survival in Tuscany, close to the origins of human civilization in Mesopotamia, that best expresses the cautionary tale that we need to learn if we hope to avert Shteyngart's bleak vision.

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