

## Rewriting the American Dream for the Trump Era and Beyond in Gary Shteyngart's *Lake Success* (2018)

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This essay analyses Gary Shteyngart's *Lake Success* (2018) as an inquiry into the formative narratives of the American identity—the American Dream and self-making—through the story of a hedge-fund manager, Barry, who abandons his wife and child with autism to travel across the US just as the country is about to elect Donald Trump as president. Building on the intertextual connection with *The Great Gatsby* (1925), this essay contextualizes the ongoing corruption of these narratives within the culture of unbridled individual advancement, arguing that Trump's victory has further normalized opportunism and the dissociation between individual success and collective well-being. Although this hollowing out of the American Dream and self-making renders a rather bleak picture of contemporary US, the novel suggests the possibility of change, both for Barry and America, as it calls for the re-insertion of the other into the formative narratives of American identity, thus expanding their current limits.

Keywords: American Dream; self-made man; Donald Trump; *mean men*; autism; orientation

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## La reescritura del sueño americano para la era Trump y más allá en *Lake Success* (2018) de Gary Shteyngart

Este ensayo analiza la novela *Lake Success* (2018) de Gary Shteyngart como un ejercicio de cuestionamiento de las narrativas formativas de la identidad estadounidense—el sueño americano y el hombre hecho a sí mismo—a través de la historia de Barry, un *hedge fund manager* que abandona a su mujer e hijo con autismo para viajar por la América que está a

punto de elegir a Donald Trump como presidente. En base a la relación intertextual con *The Great Gatsby* (1925), este ensayo contextualiza la corrupción de estas narrativas formativas dentro de la cultura del individualismo desenfrenado, argumentando que la victoria de Trump ha normalizado aun más el oportunismo y la disociación entre el éxito individual y el bienestar colectivo. Esta vacuidad del sueño americano y el hombre hecho a sí mismo presenta una imagen bastante sombría de los EE.UU. contemporáneos. Sin embargo, sostengo que la novela sugiere la posibilidad de un cambio, tanto para el protagonista como para su país, llamando a la reintroducción del otro en las narrativas formativas de la identidad estadounidense para así ampliar sus límites actuales.

Palabras clave: Sueño americano; hombre hecho a sí mismo; Donald Trump; *hombres malos*; autismo; orientación

I. INTRODUCTION: *LAKE SUCCESS* AS SHTEYNGART'S AMERICAN NOVEL

At first sight, *Lake Success* (2018) is not a typical Shteyngart novel. It does not have the Russian flavour the reader has come to expect from Gary Shteyngart's writing, whether in the form of cultural references and jokes or humorous linguistic interjections. The author himself admitted that "[r]elying on the Russian-American background was always an easy way for me to differentiate my work, but I wanted to write an American novel without the Russian part" (Shteyngart 2018c, n.p.). True to the writer's intentions, *Lake Success* not only inquires into the formative narratives of the American identity—the American Dream and self-making—but also establishes an intertextual dialogue with a key text on the perversion of these narratives, F.S. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). The novel alludes also to other American classics, including Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), as well as Ernest Hemingway's oeuvre and persona.<sup>1</sup> The protagonist of *Lake Success* is Barry Cohen, a morally-flawed hedge-fund manager whose life of privilege and complacency is disturbed when his firstborn is diagnosed with autism. Driven by a Gatsbian impulse to erase the past and start over, Barry embarks on his own private *on-the-road* experience, replacing the comforts of his Manhattan lifestyle with the "authenticity" of a Greyhound bus. The result is a novel which marries two worlds—"the very elite world of hedge funds and the quite non-elite world of the Greyhound bus" (Shteyngart 2018c, n.p.)—to produce a timely and nuanced reflection on contemporary America and the narratives that sustain it.

While the novel departs from Shteyngart's earlier output, it does share a major running theme of his fiction: an individual's struggle for recognition and belonging against the forces of late-stage capitalism which mandates perpetual progress while intensifying the alienation and precariousness of those who for some reason do not fit in. With Donald Trump's election to the presidency, Shteyngart's critique of rampant corporate wrongdoing in the former Soviet republics (*Absurdistan*) and the dehumanized dictatorship of consumerism (*Super Sad True Love Story*) acquired a new dimension. Over the previous four years, Shteyngart has frequently levelled charges of xenophobia, racism and sexism at Donald Trump's administration, and even though the bulk of *Lake Success* takes place before Trump's election as president, there is a palpable sense of concern for the direction that the country has taken since 2016. That said, Shteyngart is not a moralist and *Lake Success* does not prescribe a remedy for ailing America. Instead, the novel scrutinizes the narratives which sustain the American identity—the American Dream and self-making—exposing the flaws that plague their contemporary iterations and stressing the need to rewrite them.

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<sup>1</sup> These intertextual relations feed into the representation of the protagonist: although Barry used to fantasize about becoming a writer like Fitzgerald and Hemingway, he ultimately chose to follow a get-rich-quick formula over creative work and its uncertain gains. As one critic ironically observes, if Barry were better read, "he'd recognize that he's just running away from his wife and son like Harry Angstrom in [John Updike's] *Rabbit, Run*" (Charles 2018, n.p.).

Accordingly, this essay seeks to analyze Shteyngart's take on the said narratives through Barry Cohen, one of Shteyngart's most nuanced characters to date, who embodies the dehumanization and alienation of the progress-at-all-cost culture while at the same time struggling with issues that this culture is incapable of resolving. Despite his spectacular financial success, Barry's low ethical standards undermine his achievement, while his difficulties empathizing with and relating to others, most notably his son Shiva, cast doubt on the notion of progress pursued in isolation from or at the expense of others. To examine these issues, I briefly discuss the connection between the American Dream and self-making, pointing out the meanings which they have accrued over time. Building on the intertextual connection with *The Great Gatsby*, I interpret Barry as a corollary of the ongoing corruption of these narratives, which has been further legitimized and normalized by the *mean men* culture (Lipton 2017) and Donald Trump's rise to power. The hollowness of Barry's ideology is then exposed through the focus on autism as a challenge to the narrative of unbridled progress, sparking a more general reflection on relationality and communication in a goal-getting culture, where heedless individualism inoculates the self against the other. Nonetheless, I argue that ultimately the novel entertains the possibility of change for Barry and for America, as it signals the need to make the formative narratives of the American identity more democratic and inclusive.

## 2. THE AMERICAN DREAM AND THE SELF-MADE MAN

As a social myth, the American Dream "is devoid of clear meanings, whether in journalistic accounts or in academic analyses" (Bloom 2009, xv). According to Jim Cullen, the Dream is frequently invoked yet rarely defined: "It's as if no one feels compelled to fix the meanings and uses of a term everyone presumably understands" (2003, 5). Consequently, the American Dream keeps being redefined, serving as a useful rhetorical figure in political propaganda and a potent literary trope, among others, often to contradictory effects. Barack Obama, for instance, affirmed the American Dream's vitality in his victory speech, whereas Donald Trump proclaimed it to be dead but promised to bring it back bigger and better. Given their respective political agendas, the American Dream they evoke is not of the same kind. Similarly, the myth's many incarnations across American literature point to a plethora of meanings which the Dream has assumed depending on the sociohistorical backdrop against which it has been explored, to the point that sometimes it seems more appropriate to speak of the American *nightmare* instead (Bloom 2009, xv). As Kimberley Hearne (2010, 89) asserts in her discussion of *The Great Gatsby*, the American Dream evades America's own history, for as a myth of "fraudulent innocence" (Callahan 1972, 3), it tends to escape blame for wrongdoings in the name of progress and whitewash the inequalities of the nation's founding principles.

Cullen is therefore correct in his recognition of the American Dream as "neither a reassuring verity, nor an empty bromide, but rather a complex idea with manifold

implications that can cut different ways” (2003, 6-7). Historically, the idea is usually traced back to the Declaration of Independence; however, the Puritans’ dream of self-determination, which propelled them to settle in America, must have paved the way for the consolidation of a belief in “a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable” (Adams 1931, 404).<sup>2</sup> Although the Declaration of Independence is regarded as the “charter of the American Dream,” even as it “calls attention to the gap between what is and what we believe should be” (Cullen 2002, 58), the document never mentions the “American Dream.” In fact, it was not until the late nineteenth century that this phrase was used to refer to the collective creed of American democracy (Churchwell 2018, 30-31).

However, in the popular imaginary, the American Dream has been predominantly associated with the upward mobility pursued by individuals regardless of their inherited social background and/or financial status. As such, it is inextricably linked to the idea of the self-made man.<sup>3</sup> The term “self-made man,” which was coined only in the first half of the nineteenth century (Paul 2014, 370), is commonly typified by such historical figures as Benjamin Franklin, Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, the latter’s spectacular and tragic trajectory turning him into “the ideal self-made hero” (Cawelti 1965, 96).<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding the historical complexities of their respective circumstances, Franklin’s, Douglass’s and Lincoln’s stories of advancement showcase the importance of individual effort as a means of cultivating the mind and the character. In his speech “Self-Made Men,” Douglass underscores “patient, enduring, honest, unremitting and indefatigable work” (1872, n.p.) as the basis for success and greatness—the very quality which underlies Franklin’s self-improvement in his *Autobiography* and Lincoln’s personal ethos. As such, these success stories offered an ideal to aspire to, even if this ideal overlooked their very discrepancies: “many contradictions that mark [Franklin’s] historical persona, his time, and his idealism” (Paul 2014, 373), Douglass’s hard-earned conviction that complete self-determination is a myth (1872, n.p.) or the fact that Lincoln’s trajectory was hardly typical but involved a unique combination of genius and circumstances (Cawelti 1965, 96).

As much as Franklin’s, Douglass’s and Lincoln’s biographies embody the ethos of self-making according to which “any success that follows can be accounted solely to their own efforts” (Nissley 2003, 3), their self-betterment was intertwined with

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<sup>2</sup> Adams’s *Epic of America* (1931) popularized the term “American Dream.” Although the work defines the American Dream as “that American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank” (7), the Dream it describes was created by and for white Americans (Churchwell 2018, 162; see also Lallas 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Although initially the concept was applied to white males only, in time the ideology of self-making transgressed race and gender boundaries to be embraced and shaped by diverse social and ethnic groups (see Paul 2014). Here, I limit myself to discussing only male embodiments of self-making whom I then juxtapose with Lipton’s *mean men* culture.

<sup>4</sup> Lincoln’s legend was reinforced by his reputation as “honest Abe” and immortalized through his untimely, tragic death. During his life, Lincoln actively shaped his image as a self-made man by emphasizing his modest origins (see Wilke 2000 and Hofstadter 2009).

social responsibility and thus contributed to the betterment of an America which they helped to modernize and democratize. As Douglass eloquently points out, progress is never achieved in isolation from others, for “no possible native force of character, and no depth of wealth and originality, can lift a man into absolute independence of his fellowmen” (1872, n.p.). Needless to say, Douglass’s understanding of self-made man does not center on profit. While financial independence is central to self-making, money-making is hardly an aim in itself. As Lincoln privately wrote, “Republicans are for both the man and the dollar, but in case of conflict the man before the dollar” (quoted in Hofstadter 2009, 11). If these words seem idealistic, it is because they hark back to an era when “modesty, community-orientation, and self-sufficiency” had not yet lost their hold on the public imaginary (Klepper 2016, 127), when self-reliance could still be divorced from materialism—as was the case in the writings of Emerson and Thoreau, and when Horatio Alger’s stories promoted middle-class respectability as “only partially defined by economic repute” (Cawelti 1965, 110).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, when the term “American Dream” was used in the context of economic prosperity at the end of the nineteenth century, “the expression usually suggested that the accumulation of wealth was ‘un-American,’ that the American [D]ream was opposed to economic inequality and laissez-faire capitalism” (Churchwell 2018, 31).

Sarah Churchwell situates the problematic entanglement of the American Dream with acquisitiveness and profit at the time when the Gilded Age was drawing to a close and giving way to the Progressive Era. Tellingly, *Lake Success*’s main intertext is F.S. Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, which marked “[t]he (preliminary) endpoint of the self-made man’s development from a rural to an industrial and finally to a market-oriented and corporate figure” (Paul 2014, 384). The novel exposes the American Dream of the 1920s as “resid[ing] increasingly in material abundance” (McAdams 1993, 657) and self-making as an alienating drive for prosperity, seen as the ultimate measure of human worth, rather than progress in terms of knowledge, abilities and character. Even though Fitzgerald did not use the phrase “American Dream,” the novel “evoked the trajectory [the American Dream] had begun to follow nationally: from a dream of justice, liberty and equality, to a justification for selfishness and greed” (Churchwell 2018, 136).

The connection between *Lake Success* and *The Great Gatsby* is both geographical and symbolic. Fitzgerald apparently modelled West Egg, where Jay Gatsby’s mansion is located, on the Great Neck area on Long Island, where teenage Barry, an inhabitant of Little Neck in working-class Queens, aspires to live. Although the boy is not aware of this geographical connection with *The Great Gatsby*, he instinctively yearns for a place that would bespeak individual success the way West Egg/Great Neck does. He singles

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<sup>5</sup> Those takes on the self-made man as *a common man* were reacting, each in its own way, to social and ideological transformations spurred by the Industrial Revolution and then the onset of the Gilded Age. Transcendentalists, for example, called for inward-focused self-improvement as a way to improve a society tormented by existing woes and new injustices. For the implications and reception of these ideas, see Cawelti (1965), Paul (2014) or Klepper (2016).

out a nearby town called Lake Success, which “had this shopping centre and [where] all the houses had these awesome backyards you could put a pool in” (Shteyngart 2018b, 224), as his symbolic azimuth. For little Barry, the son of a Jewish pool cleaner, Lake Success stands for a better life. However, in hindsight, the town comes to symbolize the protagonist’s problematic bootstrapping which, like Gatsby’s self-making, is based on “warped idealism and a wrong set of values” (Pearson 1970, 645). This is not to say, however, that Shteyngart’s novel disapproves of self-making as such. In fact, Barry’s biography contains elements of a classic rags-to-riches story where an individual coming from humble beginnings manages to achieve success against all odds. In Barry’s case, these humble beginnings include not only poor financial background, but also the early trauma of losing his mother in a car accident and a difficult relationship with his taciturn father. Being a smart yet socially-awkward child, Barry realizes that the best way to fit in is to show interest in the other, so he spends hours practicing his “friend moves” (Shteyngart 2018b, 18), conjuring imaginary interactions with others and thinking up the most appropriate responses to potential questions. In the years to come, he uses these hard-earned social skills in his lucrative managerial job which gives him enough financial leverage and prestige to woo Seema, a beautiful young lawyer, whom he subsequently marries and has a child with. While the novel seems to be appreciative of Barry’s early endeavours to improve, which recall Shteyngart’s own efforts to integrate as a Russian-Jewish migrant in the US,<sup>6</sup> it questions the form his self-making has taken over the years, the embodiment of which being his hedge-fund job and the unethical, predatory practices it involves. In a manner similar to Jay Gatsby, whose teenage diary reveals his Franklin-like project of self-improvement (Fitzgerald (1925) 1991, 142), Barry’s committed effort and original idealism are perverted as his American Dream becomes increasingly linked to profit.

### 3. THE HOLLOWING OUT OF THE AMERICAN DREAM AND THE SELF-MADE MAN IN THE *MEAN MEN* CULTURE

*The Great Gatsby* links the corruption of the formative narratives of the American identity to “the excessive injustices of the Industrial Revolution” which “gave rise to monopolies and oligarchies such as the Rockefellers, Vanderbilts, and Carnegies—shining emblems of the American Dream” (Hearne 2010, 192) and corporate self-made men of their times. Almost a century after the publication of *Gatsby*, *Lake Success* contextualizes this ever-increasing disjunction between ideals and reality within Mark

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<sup>6</sup> When a seven-year-old Shteyngart arrived in the US with his parents, he experienced discrimination against his origins and the family’s poor financial situation. Years later, his irreverent transnational satires, fuelled by his cross-cultural heritage and migrant experience, would earn him popularity and critical recognition (see Bryla 2018a and 2018b). Therefore, the author’s own success story “is in an important sense a retelling of the great American myth: a plucky ascent from nothing or very little to great professional and material achievement, a marvellous self-transformation undertaken in defiance of limiting origins and made possible by committed individual effort” (Hamilton 2017, 97).

Lipton's mean men culture: the national endorsement and even celebration of unethical and arrogant leadership where an individual's spectacular entrepreneurial success obliterates their estrangement from ethics. Although mean men have a long lineage in American history, including such icons of American progress as Henry Ford, Lipton associates the rise of mean men culture with "the shift away from a manufacturing to an information and services economy" (2017, loc. 1337) which transformed the way business success is achieved, creating "a free-agent nation" (2017, loc. 1332) where one can put together a business remarkably fast without the need to spend years climbing up the corporate ladder. Consequently, individual entrepreneurial skills become more valuable than teamwork, as it is no longer necessary to cooperate with others to achieve spectacular success. One pernicious effect of this model is the separating out of the individual's route from that of the community, with the dictum "do your own thing" replacing a more socially-oriented self-making. In its most extreme variant, self-interest obliterates social responsibility and ethics, thus rationalizing and legitimizing selfishness, greed and injustice, the qualities which, as Churchwell points out, used to be regarded as the antithesis of the American Dream.

In Shteyngart's novel, the mean men culture exonerates Barry's unethical business dealings and their broader social consequences. Shteyngart admitted that he made his protagonist into a hedge-fund manager because he had realized that his Manhattan neighbourhood was dominated by high-finance executives. As he befriended some of them, he was able to enter their world and get to know their lifestyle up-close. He then used this knowledge to create the character of Barry, who has been likened to such hedge-fund titans as Steven Cohen and Bill Ackman, but also cultural personifications of Wall Street: Sherman McCoy from Tom Wolfe's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) and Gordon Gekko from Oliver Stone's film *Wall Street* (1987) (Frank 2018, n.p.). To this list, one should also add Jordan Belfort, the protagonist of Martin Scorsese's film *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2007) based on Belfort's memoir. If there is anything that makes Barry resemble Belfort more than the other stockbroker protagonists, it is his investment in the culture of unbridled self-development which justifies the pursuit of prosperity at all cost, and which sells rampant individualism as self-growth.<sup>7</sup> In one of the most memorable scenes in Scorsese's film—which brings to mind Gordon Gekko's "greed is good" discourse—Leonardo DiCaprio delivers a sizzling inspirational speech to a large crowd of his male disciples, glorifying materialism and urging them "to deal with their problems by becoming rich." However, where DiCaprio's Belfort is belligerent, Shteyngart's Cohen relies on his "friend moves" to influence others. Regarded as the "[f]riendliest dude on the Street" (2018b, 18), Barry frames financial speculation in the smooth language of motivational speaking that manipulates reality to achieve a desired emotional effect:

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<sup>7</sup> Curiously enough, once he had served a prison sentence for securities fraud, real-life Jordan Belfort went on to become a motivational speaker.

You want to know the first rule of running a billion-dollar-plus hedge fund? Don't sweat the metrics. We're not really about the numbers. Do you know who we are? We are a *story*. Hedge funds are a *story* about how we're going to make money. They're about being smart, gaining access, associating with someone great. You. You are someone smart enough to make others feel smart. You are bringing your investors something far more elusive than a metric. You're bringing them the story of how great you'll be together (Shteyngart 2018b, 116).

By positioning himself as an authority yet using the inclusive pronoun “we,” Barry partakes in the long-standing American tradition of creating success stories for others to aspire to. However, the pseudo-poetic language and the appeal to shared greatness conceal a disturbing duality, or “fraudulent innocence,” for Barry’s explanation of what his job consists in glosses over its underside: unethical, aggressive practices which place individual goals over the well-being of those who are not “smart” enough to profit from the system. Barry’s investment in Valupro, which bears a striking resemblance to Valeant, a pharmaceutical company that spiked the prices of life-saving drugs in 2015, not only exposes the character’s duplicity but also casts some harsh light on the system which allows people like Barry to pursue their mean self-making regardless of its social repercussions. Although Barry is eventually punished for insider trading, he is let off lightly; with a hefty fine rather than a prison sentence. Except for his wife Seema, who turned Barry in to the FBI, no one within his social circle seems to regard his offense as particularly reprehensible: insider trading is “just part of being in the old boys’ club” (Shteyngart 2018b, 141).

Seema, however, sees her husband as a corollary of the system which has allowed Donald Trump to rise to power. The presidential elections are more than just a backdrop to the novel: there is a “direct line between Barry’s getting off with a slap on the wrist and Trump’s victory,” as both are made possible by the society “where the villains were favored to win” (Shteyngart 2018b, 306). Lipton does in fact list Donald Trump among contemporary iterations of mean men, arguing that the mogul’s rise to power attests to the normalization of meanness within American society. Since the mean men culture follows the logic of capitalism, those who deliver are celebrated, often irrespective of whether their success has been achieved ethically or not. In a travesty of Lincoln’s formula for the country, human values are ousted by market values and if there is conflict between the human and the dollar, it is the dollar that comes first. Moreover, the mean men culture rewards one-upmanship. Given that competitiveness and chutzpah are part of the entrepreneurial personality anyway, it becomes relatively easy to attribute the leader’s excesses to his *charisma* and reframe his transgressions as idiosyncrasies.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> According to Lipton, the relative scarcity of mean *female* leaders may be explained by social gender bias, since “female professionals who express anger don’t get the same boost in status enjoyed by angry men” (2017, loc. 1219). Whereas male anger tends to be rationalized as a response to objective external circumstances, female anger is seen as having an internal cause.

In building his economic stronghold, Trump made use of extensive tax abatements, unsavoury alliances and financial manoeuvres to shield himself from personal liability while his casino investments were plunging into debt. Trump's practices have not prevented him from fashioning himself into an entrepreneurial guru through his self-aggrandizing brand-building, including a TV show and financial self-help books. In addition to being a showman who never fails to capture media attention, Trump has built a reputation as a "tough guy" whose no-nonsense, anti-intellectual discourse and business know-how hold an attractive social promise: if there is anybody who can improve an already rotten system, it is me. The power of this promise excuses and normalizes Trump's transgressions, including his questionable financial practices, xenophobic rhetoric and sexist language. In other words, meanness becomes conveniently reframed as toughness and bravado within the preferred American story about spectacular individual success.

Shteyngart's novel accurately diagnoses the far-reaching impact of Trump's promise. Trump's voice, to paraphrase Fitzgerald, is "full of money" ((1925) 1991, 97) and his call to "make America great again" resonates with various segments of American society, regardless of the ethical implications this call carries. In evoking financial progress above all else, Trump's vision of America appeals to Barry and his Wall Street kin, but also to those whose circumstances preclude their participation in the America that Trump embodies: the land of plenty, property and possibility. As one of the people Barry meets on his journey puts it: "Socially, I'm a bit more liberal [...]. But Trump's going to rebuild the economy to where it should be. The condos around here aren't being built fast enough under Obama" (Shteyngart 2018b, 152). Trump's insistence on prosperity as the primary tenet of the American Dream thus acts as a unifying message for many in otherwise disparate human circumstances, while conveniently mitigating the message's own harsh realities: "the toxic vocabulary of hate, xenophobia, racism and misogyny" (Giroux 2017, 891), which herald the candidate's embrace of divisive social policies and unapologetic nativism in the name of "making America great again."

Shteyngart makes sure to expose the dark side of Trump's populism, even as his protagonist fails to comprehend its significance. One of the most meaningful scenes in the novel depicts Barry's ex-girlfriend, Layla, teaching a class on the Holocaust which quickly turns into a debate on supremacism with a very contemporary tinge. Among the manifestations of racism and xenophobia, there are also alt-right hate symbols with a loose connection to Trump's MAGA campaign. As it turns out, Layla has been the target of an ethnic slur for having been married to a Jew.

This connection between fascist symbolism and Donald Trump is hardly the fruit of Shteyngart's poetic licence. During his presidential campaign, Trump made use of controversial, historically-charged tropes, including the infamous slogan "America First," which since the late nineteenth century has been recruited in the service of some decidedly xenophobic and racist causes. The slogan was used as Ku Klux Klan's motto in 1920 and in 1940 featured in the name of the foremost isolationist pressure group

against the US's entry into WWII: The America First Committee, whose spokesperson, Charles Lindbergh, held overtly anti-Semitic views. An earlier proponent of American isolationism, the publishing mogul William Randolph Hearst, provided the prototype for Orson Welles's mean man *par excellence*: Citizen Kane. Curiously enough, Trump has named *Citizen Kane* as his favourite film and even likened himself to Welles's protagonist, which has led several journalists and scholars to draw comparisons between Kane's self-obsession and Trump's narcissism, as well as both men's ambivalent political positions. The scene in which Kane is depicted next to Adolph Hitler was inspired by Hearst's interactions with the Nazi leader: Hearst interviewed Hitler and published his and Hermann Göring's columns in his newspapers. For Benjamin Hufbauer, there is a parallel between Kane's/Hearst's questionable alliances and Trump's own dubious political sympathies, such as his praise of Vladimir Putin's leadership in the wake of allegations that the Kremlin was involved in the killings of high-profile opposition journalists (2016, n.p.). When already President of the United States, Trump displayed an accommodationist approach to racial violence, referred to Haitian and African immigrants to the US as "all these people from shithole countries" and installed white nationalists in his administration (Churchwell 2018, 276).

Shteyngart's novel points to yet another form of meanness associated with Donald Trump: his public mockery of a disabled reporter by "fluttering his arms around in imitation of [the man's] affliction" (Shteyngart 2018b, 66). The incident, which harks back to a real event during Trump's campaign, re-asserts Trump as "an exaggerated figure of brash masculinity" (DiPlacido 2018, n.p.) whose able-bodied and business-savvy self operates as the blueprint for the America he envisions. Trump is reportedly a believer in success genetics, or a "racehorse theory of human development," according to which some people have it in them to prosper whereas others do not (Churchwell 2018, 277). This type of social Darwinism is where the American Dream's duality comes to the fore most forcefully and thus most dangerously. As the presidential candidate promises to resuscitate the American Dream for everybody, he nevertheless suggests that not everybody possesses the necessary qualities to achieve it.

In *The Great Gatsby*, it is people like Wilson, human side effects of the perverse system of socio-economic disparity which has spurned Gatsby in the first place, who awaken us to the inequality of the American Dream.<sup>9</sup> A hundred years later, Shteyngart turns to autism to question the narrative of success in the Trump era. In *Lake Success*, autism provokes a reflection on the problematic duality of the narrative of success, which promises to be universal yet practices exclusion and determinism, as well as on the ethics of response to the other. Since he was not born with a set of qualities to prosper "naturally," Shiva becomes excluded from the America charted along Trump's lines, where individual self-worth is measured by outward success. Although Barry

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<sup>9</sup> As an inhabitant of a desolate wasteland between the West Egg and New York, Wilson is not just excluded from the promise of the American Dream; he is also disposable. Manipulated by Tom Buchanan, the epitome of the unearned social advantage, Wilson first kills Gatsby and then commits suicide.

is enraged by Trump's mockery of disability, he cannot accommodate Shiva in his success story either. As a human condition whose "cause is unknown, there is no known cure, and there are no approved medications or treatments" (Loftis 2015, 4), autism cannot be "improved upon" or "reframed," the way Barry reframes financial losses as mere "metrics" and selling shares as "telling stories." The resistant materiality of Shiva's condition, his neurodiversity and developmental delay, interferes with Barry's narcissistic storyline where having progeny capable of furthering the father's success is yet another sub-project in his self-making. Since Shiva fails to conform to Barry's story, he decides to rewrite it, or rather retell it, without him. In doing so, Barry follows Gatsby, who also disavows his past and his family as a means of starting over. What Barry fails to understand about Gatsby is that this disavowal contributes to Gatsby's tragic alienation from others, which no amount of outward success can remedy.

In the novel, the difference of autism is signified most powerfully by Shiva's non-verbality, which Barry, who has relied on motivational chatter to relate to others, is incapable of accepting. Although Barry's inability to relate to his son is problematized by an implicit suggestion that he himself may be "on the spectrum" (Shteyngart 2018b, 122),<sup>10</sup> his obsession with conventional communicability ultimately prevents him from finding other ways of relating to his son. In the context of autism, such privileging of communication occurring within the domain of the verbal fails to account for "all other variants of interpersonal and social contact" (Pinchevski 2005, 170), thus negating the other's alterity. As he urges Shiva to speak, Barry is seeking to *correct* or *improve* the boy, rather than to respond to him as he is.

Bennett Kravitz observes that in the popular imaginary autism has been used as a metaphor for "the lack of communication among states and individuals in the late capitalist reality of the postmodern world" (2010, 40). This metaphor is not only problematic, but also gratuitous: it stigmatizes the condition while failing to account for the reasons behind this failure to communicate and what it takes to respond to the other fully and ethically. *Lake Success* offers some insight into these questions. Unlike Shiva, Barry talks a lot, yet what may seem like a dialogue is in fact a monologue aimed at reasserting his position in the world. Such one-sided communication closes the self to the reality of the other resulting in, to use Sara Ahmed's term, an *orientation* that "makes others available as resources to be used" (2006, 118). It is hard not to relate it to Trump's populist style of communication, which has been built around the politician's Kane-like grandeur and cult of personality (Reyes 2020). In an important sense, Barry's monologic orientation mimics Trump's self-centeredness, preventing him from relating to others as they are: his son, his wife and his ex-girlfriend, Layla, whom he seeks out

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<sup>10</sup> Barry displays traits which are associated with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) in the popular imaginary, including difficulties with interpersonal relations and deficits in empathy, which under the influence of Simon Baron-Cohen's Theory of Mind have become problematically linked to autism (as well as Loftis 2015, see Bérubé 2016). However, these traits could also be read in light of his self-centeredness, which blinds him to other peoples' needs and feelings.

so that she can play Daisy to his Gatsby but to whom he never listens. As Layla puts it: “You wake up, you think, Oh here’s this man who says he loves me, but he doesn’t really. He’s just stitching together a version of me in his head. Coloring in the details. Adding nuance and plot” (Shteyngart 2018b, 253).

Barry adopts the same monologic orientation towards the people he meets on his Greyhound journey. As he approaches others, especially those of a lower social standing than his own, Barry invariably adopts the position of a tutor who, using his motivational talk, promises to improve them with the help of his financial assets and business know-how. Barry thus imposes his belief in self-improvement on others, irrespective of their personal circumstances and needs, acting on what is often held as a criticism against the psychology of self-actualization and development: a conviction that everyone can be a go-getter if only they so desire. As Edgar Cabanas and Eva Illouz point out, “the belief that, whether winners or losers, individuals are the only ones accountable for their own success or misery is deeply embedded in the cultural and national unconscious,” even though “North America is one of the nations with the highest inequality and social exclusion in the world” (2019, 13). One of the most blatant manifestations of this mind-set is Barry’s fantasy of a charitable foundation inspired by his personal obsession with collecting luxurious watches, where pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are taught order and rigour through taking care of their own expensive timepieces. Not only does this philanthropic fantasy demonstrate the extent to which Barry confuses his own interests with those of others, but it also “attempts to forestall and defuse any critique of structural injustice and inequality” directed at those who like Barry have done better than others at the seemingly all-embracing American Dream (Paul 2014, 394). Well-aware of his own fraudulent actions in his hedge fund and his failed family life, Barry fantasizes of “disrupting the system” (Shteyngart 2018b, 76), which he himself represents, while at the same time absolving himself from blame by means of charitable actions towards others. In this sense, Barry’s “gospel of wealth” is driven by self-interest more than by his desire to diminish socioeconomic difference.

*Lake Success* abounds in such examples of alienation from others which in turn expose the inadequacy of the blanket discourse of self-determination to address the ailments tormenting contemporary America, particularly if preached by somebody for whom other people are a means to further his own financial success and boost his self-image. Barry’s self-centeredness prevents him from recognizing that the divide between him and his fellow passengers cannot be bridged by motivational chatter. Although his journey is supposed to bring him closer to America at large, in his fantasy of the country there is no room for uncomfortable realities: the residue of the colour line, financial dispossession and gun violence, which he considers “a cost priced into living in America” (Shteyngart 2018b, 99). In a manner similar to Sal Paradise from Kerouac’s *On the Road*, Barry shapes America into a “psychosexual pastoral” (Richardson 2001, 25) which fetishizes race as a source of authenticity. This “[w]hite way of dreaming” (Richardson 2001, 25) is revealed when Barry first sees Brooklyn, a beautiful black girl travelling on the Greyhound. His

perception of the girl relies on cultural stereotypes of blackness: Brooklyn's eyes are the colour of "a copper sunset over a green country field" and her voice has "an ancient southern timbre overwritten by YouTube" (Shteyngart 2018b, 72). Barry is attracted to the fantasy of "authenticity" that Brooklyn represents to him, yet he fails to realize that it reduces black people to random cultural markers: churchgoing, soul food or rap music. This reductive representation fetishizes racial difference while problematically ignoring their social realities: the "racialization of bodily as well as social space," where the inheritance of racism is "an ongoing and unfinished history that orientates bodies in specific directions," marking the limits of what "bodies 'can do'" (Ahmed 2006, 111) and thus the possibilities of advancement that are available to them.

As Liliana Naydan points out, following Rahel Jaeggi's theory of alienation, Barry's alienation from himself and others is symptomatic of "the self-alienation of the largely white elite" whose ignorance contributes to the proliferation of racism and xenophobia, both of which have come "to the forefront of American consciousness through Trump's stereotyping and demonizing immigrants and national Others during the 2016 election" (2020, 5). However, just as Barry is a corollary of the system which has made Trump's candidacy possible, the presidential candidate symptomizes the normalization and legitimization of the culture of entitlement and selective social privilege. As the novel dramatizes the moments before Trump's election as president, it becomes clear that even those who identify themselves as his staunch opponents are entangled in the very culture they condemn: for example, Seema and her lover, an anti-capitalist writer Luis, issue their criticism of Trump amidst the opulent Manhattan interiors paid for by Barry's fraudulent trading and Luis's exploitation of the intellectual elites' penchant for the oppressed. Like *The Great Gatsby*, *Lake Success* poses an uncomfortable question about the limits of social co-responsibility for how wealth and privilege are distributed and perpetuated. The fact that Tom Buchanan inherited his money, rather than earned it through bootlegging like Gatsby, does not make him any less complicit in reinforcing social lines through his and Daisy's careless, entitled lifestyle. Similarly, Seema and Luis may not be involved in rigging the system the way Barry is, but they nevertheless profit from how it operates. In this light, Seema's decision to turn Barry in to the authorities seems more like an attempt to appease her own conscience than a real effort to challenge the mean men culture. In addition to criticizing social alienation of the elites, Shteyngart exposes their hypocrisy, which, in its complacency and passivity, conspires in favour of Trump's aggressive populism.

Taking a broad vista provided by Barry's Greyhound journey, Shteyngart depicts a country entrenched in the narrative of the self, where communication oriented towards reconciliation of difference has stalled to the point that the only audible message is the catchphrase delivered by a business mogul known for consistently placing corporate interests over ethics. The message will not do, for as Henry A. Giroux points out (2017, 902), the task of self-transformation and self-help cannot replace the systemic transformation necessary to stretch the boundaries of the American Dream beyond its

current limits.<sup>11</sup> In other words, America cannot be healed with pep talks as Barry, and Trump, would have it. It is therefore no coincidence that the election of Trump as president ushers in the ultimate undoing of Barry. His marriage to Seema collapses and for several years he becomes estranged from her and Shiva, tumbling into a meaningless life of half-hearted financial ventures and obsessive watch collecting. It is only in the novel's prologue that Shteyngart lightens up this rather dark vision by offering a corrective to Barry's failed Dream and returning him to the original premises of self-making: progress achieved through honest work and inclusivity rather than determinism.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS: MAKING AMERICA MORE DEMOCRATIC AGAIN

Ten years after his journey across the US, Barry reaches out to Seema, offering to finance Shiva's Bar mitzvah. Shiva has grown to be a happy boy surrounded by the love and acceptance of Seema's American Indian family—Shteyngart's nod to America's indelible diversity which he considers the country's strength and the source of its identity (Shteyngart 2004). Although he remains largely non-verbal, Shiva uses a speech programme to deliver his Bar-mitzvah address.<sup>12</sup> While the address is mostly dedicated to the family that has raised him, he does not fail to mention Barry, his "bird daddy," which is a nickname for an absentee father whom little Shiva "wanted to hug" but could not (Shteyngart 2018b, 327). In recognizing his difference and vulnerability, Shiva responds to Barry's failed fatherhood with radical acceptance. This in turn spurs Barry into the most unselfish and significant act of love and responsibility, and thus of personal growth, through which Barry responds to his son in return. As he sits down to repair the only watch that survived the Greyhound trip, having in mind giving it to Shiva, Barry recognizes that "[t]hings could be fixed. Barry could fix them. Barry could fix his son's watch" (Shteyngart 2018b, 329). Barry's action *for Shiva* is a subtle reminder of the collective dimension of the American Dream, where one person's progress can be another person's gain, as envisioned by its early champions. By painstakingly dismantling and reassembling the watch, Barry reconnects with his childhood self, a Little Neck boy who was determined to transform his dream into reality by means of persistent effort. The steady, physical work of "giv[ing] life with his fingers and his memory" (Shteyngart 2018b, 333) returns Barry to this original state

<sup>11</sup> In an interview for the financial magazine *Barron's*—a fact which Shteyngart does not fail to playfully acknowledge—the novelist speaks of the ways in which such transformation should come into being: "We have to dismantle finance and tech as they are.[...] What these systems are preparing us for is a world where pretty soon the helper fish are going to be replaced by algorithms. [...] Once they've done away with that, what's left? It's just basic income and the people who own the algorithms. Do we want that?" (Shteyngart 2018a, n.p.).

<sup>12</sup> While permeated with kindness and respect towards Shiva and other ASD individuals, the novel's ending may be treading a thin line between potentiality and stereotyping. Shiva's depiction as "a deeply intelligent" boy with a special interest in computers and music (Shteyngart 2018b, 326) recalls the tendency to render autists as endowed with some special ability which allows "for the difference of autism to be dissolved in the realm of the unknown in a manner that generates no fear or unease" (Murray 2008, 93; see also Loftis 2015).

of mind, filling him with a sense of purpose and implying the possibility of starting over, albeit with a different orientation than that which had driven his Greyhound trip.

The novel's ending remains open in its poetic brevity: Barry, the "bird daddy," ends his honest work, washes his hands of oil and dirt, and flies "home for good" (Shteyngart 2018b, 333). Although the meaning of *home* is inconclusive,<sup>13</sup> the novel entertains the possibility of change for Barry and, most of all, for America. Importantly, Donald Trump's name is not mentioned in the prologue, implying that America has survived the contentious president. In his victory speech, newly elected POTUS Joe Biden said that the time has come "to see each other again, to listen to each other again" as a means of healing a fractured America and propelling it "as far as [Americans'] dreams and God-given ability will take them" (Biden 2020, n.p.). A similar hope for a more relational and less deterministic reality seems to permeate *Lake Success*, yet it comes with the caveat that it is necessary to distinguish between populist chatter and a true call for unity. America might have survived Trump, but he managed to seduce millions of Americans into endorsing divisive politics in the guise of illusive prosperity. Although the entanglement of the American Dream with profit goes back more than a century, the election of Trump as president has dangerously reinforced the mean men culture. Trump has ultimately surpassed his favourite film character, Citizen Kane, for whereas Kane's licentiousness prevents him from getting the governor's post, Trump's own scandals—his disregard for ethics, misogyny and white nationalism—only strengthened his position as the right "tough guy" to do the job.

Just like *The Great Gatsby*, *Lake Success* is thus a cautionary tale about the trappings of a dream based on warped foundations, and thus an inquiry into American moral direction and values (McAdams 1993, 654). However, whereas the passage of time and pop culture might have dulled *Gatsby's* message, *Lake Success* brings it out with renewed urgency, as it exposes some serious social Darwinism in the narratives which are meant to be universal. Rather than criticize upward mobility and financial achievement as such, *Lake Success* alerts us to the legitimization of corporate interests to justify profit at the expense of others, and a systematic hollowing out of equality of opportunity which reverberates in social relations, creating a profound sense of alienation and disjunction between ideals and realities within contemporary America. In this light, Barry's difficulties empathizing with and relating to others—most notably his son—serve as a potent reminder of the ultimate short-sightedness of any self-making which detaches individual success from social responsibility and the well-being of others. This is perhaps the novel's most potent message for the Trump era and beyond: to re-insert the other into the formative narratives of the American identity to make America more democratic, rather than "first" or "great."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For a different reading of Barry's act of repairing the watch and the novel's ending, see Naydan (2020).

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