

## THE IMMIGRANT IS DEAD, LONG LIVE THE IMMIGRANT: THE EAST EUROPEAN TRANSMIGRANT IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Vladimir Girshkin's mother doesn't like his way of walking. "You know, I've been keeping an eye on you for years, but it just hit me today, your little Jew-walk. Come here, I'll teach you to walk like a normal person." In her idiolect "a normal person" is synonymous with "a real American". This traumatizing scene is one of many which emerge out of the need to create clear ethnic boundaries set in the Jewish Russian American household of the Girshkins. The predicament is set in Gary Shteyngart's debut novel *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, a novel crossing two generations of Russian 'immigrants', two generations of American 'natives' and two continents, which supposedly epitomize two world orders. Everything seems neatly separated in binary oppositions until the main hero starts crossing the lines.

The chaotic situations the main character's actions will produce are not surprising. Alone the difficulty of finding an antonym to the term "immigrant" in American English is an expression of the constant exchange between any two sides built up on ethnic or national grounds in the USA. However, by setting up a list of things to do 'the Jewish way' and things to do 'the American way' Ms Girshkin shows no confusion positioning herself between two imaginary worlds. Her perspective is determined by her ability to describe, define and control these 'worlds', as if she was an outsider looking at them. Her son's dissatisfaction with the outsider perspective and his promotion of hybridity will lead to confusion. Like the majority of American academics and critics did with immigrant writers during the Cold War period, the mother positions herself *between* the world of "counting money" (American) and the world of "losing yourself" (Russian): a classic dichotomy of the American Dream associated with wealth and the Russian Soul associated with melancholia. A collapse of this order is predetermined, since the only agreed upon fact in this concept is the maintenance of the division between 'us' and 'them.' Anything else remains wrapped in silence. This is the point where the main hero starts feeling uncomfortable and decides to challenge preset conceptions.

Even today, at the peak of trans-identity theory, American literary studies still like to position writers between "worlds." In particular writers with an East or Central European background appear to be stuck in this in-between category. And yet, this is precisely what they are writing against. Ms Girshkin's son, Vladimir Girshkin, "the immigrant's immigrant, the expatriate's expatriate, enduring victim of every practical

joke the late 20<sup>th</sup> century had to offer and an unlikely hero for our times. . . ." epitomizes a whole set of American migrant literary characters painfully trying to live 'in-between', only to realize that they have been 'within' all along. Vladimir Girshkin, opposing his parents' and everybody else's expectations, counts his money in Russian and curses in American English. With his productive use of two homelands he is qualifying to be a new type of a literary character – the transmigrant.

The term transmigrant has been introduced and developed mainly by a group of sociologists around Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Blanc-Szanton in order to describe a new type of migrant who productively combines the social fields of multiple homelands.<sup>1</sup> "Transmigrants develop and maintain multiple relations – familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political that span borders. Transmigrants take action, make decisions, and feel concerns, and develop identities within social networks that connect them to two or more societies simultaneously." (Glick-Schiller et al., 2002: 1–2) To stress the activity on the part of the migrant is programmatic, since taking actions and decision making are main characteristics separating the transmigrant from the immigrant.

One of the reasons for the sudden appearance of so many transmigrants in literature is the availability of fast and inexpensive transportation, as well as recent technological developments, which have created certain "freedoms" that were out of reach for former generations. However, in order to describe the transmigrant Schiller et al. use recent theories of transnationalism, which are traceable, in the context of American literature, at least back to 1916 and the publication of Randolph Bourne's essay "Trans-National America" (Bourne, 1977). Obviously, the transmigrant has been around for a long period of time. Transnationalism is an ideology that has been existent in North American literature throughout the twentieth century. The end of the block system, the intensive development of new communications, media and information technologies in the second half of the twentieth century, and most of all global financialization have allowed an existing concept to come into view, rather than creating a new model. The excessive promotion of the concept of the Melting Pot at the turn of the last century, which was later largely replaced with the Salad Bowl or the Mosaic, never allowed its propagators a widespread forum. Today, it is a concept that exists along with other migration concepts in literature. Similar to the time of the Great Migration, the time and the sense in which Randolph Bourne wrote his essay, not every migrant has to be a transmigrant, and not every migrant can be a transmigrant, since certain political and social requirements regarding traveling and knowledge are not always met. However, a reading of contemporary East European American literature shows that many literary migrants are indeed transmigrants.

Defining a literary transmigrant who has an East European heritage and a fresh American private address is a difficult task, because of the two strong and opposing

<sup>1</sup> A considerable body of work on this subject has been done by the German sociologists Ludger Pries and Ulrich Beck.

tensions at work here. In much the same way that the end of the Cold War paved the way for nationalism and internationalism simultaneously, it has also opened a field for national *and* transnational writers. East European American writers seem to position themselves mainly in the second group, even though some writers choose to stress their newly discovered national inclinations; Eduard Limonov being the best example. Identities that have been denied find both means of communication and articulation thanks to world financialization. This leads to a paradoxical situation in which there is a simultaneous necessity to celebrate and demystify ethnic identity. Subsequently, ethnonationalism and supranationalism go hand in hand. Aleksandar Hemon, Iva Pekarkova, Eva Hoffman, David Albahari are a new generation of writers who successfully position their main characters in multiple "worlds", propagating ethnicity as an expression of national bondage without pushing it on top of any other form of identity. The stylistic form they use is often sarcasm, ridiculing power structures that try to propagate ethnicity over any other form of identity. In contrast to former East European American writers with transnational tendencies, calling for a recognition of their ethnic heritage, we now encounter characters who do not ask for an acknowledgement of being Russian, Czech or Bosnian, but rather characters who wish to be so without being constantly reminded of it by their social surrounding.

Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj point out, in their pioneering and unique study *Going Global*, what happens when writers are stuck in ethnic categories. Giving a personal account of being an academic with an 'exotic' background working on 'ethnic literature' in the American academia they describe the disadvantages of extreme ethnic affirmation in literary studies. One more time they call upon the literary community to take a step beyond ethnicity, to demystify ethnicity.<sup>2</sup> What connects transmigrants in current East and Central European American literature is exactly this kind of positioning against ethnic stereotyping; demystifying the concept of migration based on firm ethnic identity borders; and propagating the positive aspects of multiple homelands. Unfortunately, Amireh and Majaj restricted their study to postcolonial literature and so-called "third world writers". Writers who find themselves in a post-socialist setting seem to be excluded from this discussion, even though they address same problems. In much the same way that East Europeans were excluded from the American multicultural discourse that reached its peak in the early 80s, they are now being excluded from the current debate on transnationalism and globalization.

In a programmatic way, Vladimir Grishkin is trying to fit in by proving his ability to take decadent action and enjoy prosperity with no regrets:

"Despite my fluent Russian and my tolerance of drink, I can easily double as a first-rate American," he tells the gangsters. "My credentials are impeccable. I have . . . a profound appreciation for the dress, manners and outlook of the disaffected young American set. I have lived many years in New York, the

<sup>2</sup> One of the most influential studies in this field is Sollors, 1986.

capital of the disaffected movement, have had many angry, disenfranchised friends of the artistic persuasion."

Throughout the novel the main character will try to either ward off or construct a victim identity in order to fit in. He will also try to go with the flow and perform the expected noble but tragic immigrant role. Obviously, a certain idea of melancholia and deprivation sticks to the East European body. The "tired, the poor, the huddled masses" are still supposed to reach "American shores" in order to someday reach the American Dream: prosperity.<sup>3</sup> Prosperity is supposed to raise a person to a higher sphere, namely that of being an "American." But the adverb American remains undefined. And the wretched are going through transformations as well. What happens when characters do not step on American ground tired and piled up in huddled masses? What happens when prosperity does not transform the body into an "American body", or the mind into an "American mind"? The mythological formulation of the movement of East Europeans to the USA implies that there had been no *terra firma* in their lives before they set foot on American ground. The existing equation, the novel implies, goes as follows: East European equals poor and melancholic, American equals rich and happy. Shteyngart challenges this expectation by asking the question: What happens when a rich and happy East European American enters the picture? It will remain a question of authenticity and performativity until the very end of the novel, when the main hero will return to the USA to live the classic American Dream including a job, a marriage and a house. He will defer the question of solving the immigrant to the next generation.

Contemporary writers often challenge patterns of the classic immigrant novel by offering personal experiences that differ from the expected immigrant story. Gary Shteyngart drew from his experience as an immigration officer in New York and as the son of an immigrant mother. Iva Pekarkova, a writer who lived in Prague until her twentieth birthday, migrated to New York subsequently where she worked as a cab driver, and used this experience for her novel *Gimme the Money*. In an almost reader irritating manner she does not initially provide background information on her main character. At the same time, little pieces of evidence are being slipped into the story line. Only through other characters – and relatively late in the novel – can the reader find out that the main character Gin, a cab driver in New York, must have a strong accent, since her roommate is trying to mimic it in order to appear more interesting; that she must be from Czechoslovakia, since her cab driver colleagues are mocking her about "Czechonoslakia"; and that she achieved a legal residency in the USA through her husband. However, instead of focusing on Gin's ethnicity, Pekarkova concentrates on the silence and rigidity of the female subject in society. The instrument of her expression is

<sup>3</sup> Inscription on the Statue of Liberty in New York by Emma Lazarus: „Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore, send these, the homeless, tempesttost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!“



the interdependency between the city and the subject, rather than ethnic relationships. The typical ethnic community, established as a trope in American immigrant literature by writers throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has been replaced by skyscrapers and pavement. Adding to this, the immigrant is not a male dissident with a perspective on "back then" and "what will the future bring" but a woman with fluid goals. Even her profession breaks with long established orders – she is the only white female cabdriver, as well as the only one who takes her customers to Harlem at night. Thus, the writer successfully challenges habitual restrictions of ethnic writing and ethnicity as a concept. She has taken her main character out of the ethnic community only to show that there is no escape from the constrictions of ethnicity.

Even though Pekarkova decided not to write about Gin's migration, migration remains one of the main subjects. Gin's perspective is after all restricted by the fact that her social environment consist mainly of immigrants. In addition to three female characters (all of them immigrants), there are twenty male characters. Their behavior toward Gin constantly borders on sexual abuse. The only non-immigrants are two white Anglo-Saxon Americans named Stanley. Both of them bring Gin into life-threatening positions. She ends up killing the first in self-defense. The second is an architect who wanted to change Manhattan's skyline: "I had wanted to build a REAL skyscraper, you see. At least fifty, eighty floors. I wanted to ... leave a mark, you see." He seems sexually more threatening than any of the immigrant men. All of whom seem to expect her to be at their disposal sexually during any chance encounter, which she, in her chosen passivity, actually is. During her encounter with the second Stanley, Gin almost loses her life in a traffic accident while driving under the influence of alcohol. In the case of both Stanleys Gin is unusually confused; she does not know how "to read them". Again, two imaginary worlds that divide the 'immigrant' from the 'native' are being depicted. The Stanleys imagine that their fate has global implication, the immigrant men on the other hand, see themselves on a local scale. In this novel the American dream of the WASP American man obviously differs from the American dream of the American immigrant man. Pekarkova has constructed the novel in such a way that the proclamation: "I wanted to leave a mark!" in an immigrant and African American context would sound absurd. By doing so she opened the door for another deeply American subject to be looked at from an East European female's point of view – racism.

Theories of racism do not shed light on the position of an East European woman embedded in the concept of *whiteness* defined against *blackness*. Gin is perceived as an American by her husband's African American friends in spite of her previous illegal status. The narrative voice names her Talibe's "American wife". Limamou, her husband's friend, judges her for her American mentality: „You Americans can't never understand that, what it is, to work all the time and not have enough money for – ...“ Her husband, Talibe, who has been a resident for many decades is never perceived as being American. Does this imply that her white skin makes her more American than American citizenship does? The construction of *Gimme the Money* supports this assumption. In a scene at the hospital Gin is crying at her husband's bed. Limamou tries

to stop her in an aggressive manner telling her that according to African belief, crying at the bedside of an ill man may kill him. Suddenly, two security guards, attracted by the noise, run into the room and throw Limamou cursing:

What d'you think your're doing? What do you have IN MIND? Are you trying to rob her? To rape her? Or what? That's why I'm here, to prevent you from doing that! You're never gonna stick that nigger face of yours into this hospital again! I guarantee that!

Despite Gin's trying to protect Limamou, the guards stick to their prefabricated opinion. This is one of many scenes where over-determined contexts of reception are being depicted and in this way deconstructed. In writing this scene Pekarkova questions the construction of whiteness in contemporary North America. „It is no accident and not a mistake that immigrant populations (and much immigrant literature) understood their „Americanness“ in opposition to the resident black population. Race, in fact, now functions as a metaphor so necessary to the construction of Americanness that it rivals the old pseudo-scientific and class-informed racisms whose dynamics we are more used to deciphering,“ writes Toni Morrison only a decade ago. (Morrison, 1993: 47) Gin becomes white only in her black surroundings, her whiteness remains unconscious throughout the novel. Matthew H. Jacobsen analyzes, in his ground breaking publication *Whiteness of a Different Color*, not only the economic privileges that certain white ethnic groups in the USA received in opposition to other non-white ethnic groups, but also their whiteness as existent only in opposition to blackness. He is mainly writing about Celts, Hebrews and Slavs. Similarly to Jacobsen's work, Pekarkova is exploring a new field on the question of race and ethnicity in an East European American context in *Gimme the Money*.

By stressing gender questions and refusing a dissident setting Iva Pekarkova introduces a new forum for East European women writing in the USA. Her double exclusion as an immigrant writer and a woman writer might be one of the reasons for this particular choice. However, the East European American literary landscape has been transformed over the last couple of years. More and more male writers have decided to write outside the scope of a dissident context. Aleksandar Hemon, a Bosnian writer who stayed in Chicago after receiving a grant to work as a journalist in the spring of 1992, a time when his hometown of Sarajevo was occupied by Serbian army forces, illustrated the silencing of the migrant by projecting a "classic immigrant" onto him in his last novel *Nowhere Man*. The so-called immigrant identity of the novel's main character Jozef Pronek is being defined exclusively by his American surroundings. The novel is written from six different perspectives without losing its almost traditional story line. Telling the immigrant's story of Jozef Pronek using a postmodern narrative pattern, Hemon challenges the genre of immigrant fiction as well as preset identity borders that were sedimented into American society long before Jozef Pronek arrived

into it. The socio-historical background is one of the reasons why the writer decided to intertwine fiction and fact in this novel. Chapters written in first person narrative mainly reconstruct the past. In one scene the American president George Bush visits Ukraine after the coup d'état in Moscow. Pronek is standing in front of the stage when the president starts talking to him:

„What is your name, young fellow?“

„Jozef Pronek,“ Jozef answered, while the fat man was mouthing a translation of the question, spit burping in the corner of his lips.

„This place is holy ground. May God bless your country, son.“

„It is not my country,“ Jozef said.

„Yes, it is,“ Bush said, and patted Jozef on his shoulder. „You bet your life it is. It is as yours as you make it.“

„But I am from Bosnia ...“

„It's all one big family, your country is. If there is misunderstanding, you oughtta work it out.“ Bush nodded, heartily agreeing with himself.

Jozef Pronek stands for “conflict zone”, “powder keg”, “no man’s land” or simply “the East”. Since the character in the novel is the president of the USA a whole country is being projected into a category: the other. The same projection will happen on a personal scale in the case of Pronek’s American roommate, who will say: “I loved Jozef Pronek because I thought that he was the simple me, the person I would have been had I known how to live a life, how to be accommodated in this world.” The romanticization – in this case eroticization, since the roommate will eventually develop a libidinal connection to Pronek – of the “simple” other disguises xenophobic notions. In both cases the ‘approval’ of the existence of the ‘other’ merely emphasizes “Western” superiority.

While in North America and Western Europe cultural globalization has been viewed as a set of observed cultural streams and social processes moving outward from the center to the margins, in Eastern European countries globalization has been studied as a political, or “ideological”, project, led by the West. Hemon takes both perspectives and shows the dangers of binary categories on a personal as well as a political scale. The relationship between the character of the Bosnian Jozef Pronek and the character of the American Victor Plavchuk disguises the “big brother’s” motivation and demystifies his picture by doing so. The already defined relationship is in this case only being depicted, without further interpretation, by the main character. The effect of Hemon’s writing, similar to Pekarkova’s case, is to obtain the missing historicization of the construction of an East European identity in North American society.

Demystification remains one of the key concepts in transmigrant literature. Hemon uses music to demystify the “poor and isolated Eastern Europe”. Before the war, Pronek was a member of a Beatles cover band called “bube”, the Serbo-Croatian word for beetle. The band performs the function of a cultural mediator. The role of the mediator

traditionally should have been Pronek's. However, by desubjectivizing the mediator, Hemon refers to the complex intertwining of the West and the East, of power structures working on and around the subject. Pronek cannot be solely a mediator, his activity is wondering and dwelling, the mediation is being done on him and by him. He might be seen as the mediator and the mediated simultaneously. In the same way that Stuart Hall describes the role of music in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" showing how Reggae and Rastafarianism mediates between Jamaican and African identity, Hemon brings the East and the West together through rock music (Hall, 1990). Like Hall, he analyzes both sides as *both* the same and different. In order to do this, the "ethnic gaze" is turned upside down. The characters being marked as ethnic in the beginning of the novel are now, even retrospectively, looking at themselves through devices associated with "the West". In this context the West stands for Western Europe and North America since mainly British and American artists are being named. In another scene Jozef Pronek will compare John Lee Hooker and Zaim Imamovic, a singer who became popular singing traditional Bosnian music. By mingling the so-called East with the so-called West Hemon simultaneously questions the puritan motives of ethnic heritage while celebrating the ethnic other. Arjun Appadurai would certainly applaud and approve of Pronek as a true "cosmopolitan patriot" (Appiah, 1997: 617): loyal to his country of consent as well as to his country of descent. Which brings us to the question of two homelands.

Aleksandar Hemon lives in Chicago. He regularly visits Sarajevo, Bosnia, where, according to him, people do not even notice when he is gone.<sup>4</sup> Iva Pekarkova moved back to Prague, Czech Republic a couple of years ago. In between she lived in Thailand, doing research for her recent novel, and she spent more time in the USA. She lives in Prague and Nigeria now. Gary Shteyngart was born in Russia. He moved to the USA at the age of ten, and lived in Prague for a couple of years while writing his novel; after its publication he moved back to New York. A couple of months ago he decided that a set residence does not support his writing technique and he moved to Rome, where he is living now. The concept of two homelands is deeply imbedded in the novels of these writers; however, instead of the clash and discontent traditionally associated with multiple homelands they celebrate their broader perspective and try to broaden it even more by introducing new locations into their writing and their lives.

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## POVZETEK

### PRISELJENEC JE MRTEV, NAJ ŽIVI PRISELJENEC: VZHODNOEVROPSKI TRANSMIGRANT V SODOBNI AMERIŠKI KNJIŽEVNOSTI

Sladja Blazan

Svetovne razmere po koncu hladne vojne so omogočile nastanek novega tipa literarnega lika, in sicer takšnega, ki združuje »svetovljanskega popotnika« z »lokalnim domačinom« (James Clifford). Potencialna možnost za konflikt, ki je prej v t. i. emigrantskem leposlovju predstavljala zaščitni znak te dvojnosti, ne vodi več neizogibno v »priseljensko krizo«. Članek obravnava tri romane avtorjev, ki so se priselili v ZDA iz nekdanjih evropskih socialističnih dežel in se odločili, da bodo osvetlili proces izseljenstva z uvedbo novega literarnega lika – transmigranta. V svojih romanih razvijajo novo, pozitivno razumevanje migracij in koncepta večdomovinskega. Romani *Nowhere Man* Aleksandra Hemon, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* Garyja Shteyngarta in *Gimme the Money* Ive Pekarkove odražajo novi položaj subjekta v svetu, s čimer na novo definirajo koncept svetovljanstva, ki je sicer že tradicionalno povezan z zdomskim leposlovjem.

Izraz *transmigrant* ima svoj izvor v sociološki znanosti. Sociologi, kot so Nina Glick-Schiller, Linda Basch, Christina Blanc-Szanton, Ludger Pries in Ulrich Beck, priznavajo v okviru izseljenskih študij – vzporedno s tradicionalnimi kategorijami priseljenca, izseljenca in migranta – obstoj novega tipa migranta, in sicer *transmigranta*. Ta se od prejšnjih tipov razlikuje po tem, da na produktiven način združuje in pridobiva iz več domovin, namreč iz dežele (ali dežel) sprejetja (*consent*) in dežele porekla (*descent*) (Werner Sollors). S tem ko migranti aktivno sodelujejo v socialnem, kulturnem in političnem življenju obeh dežel, postavljajo vprašanje izseljenstva v pozitivno luč. Enake spremembe zasledimo v sodobni književnosti. Članek obravnava lik *transmigranta*, ki biva v nekdANJI socialistični deželi v Evropi in hkrati v ZDA. Glavne spremembe v oblikovanju protagonista v okviru sodobne postsocialistične izseljenske književnosti glede na prejšnjo priseljensko in emigrantsko literaturo (zlasti tisto, ki je nastala v času množičnega priseljavanja in hladne vojne), ki so pripeljale do uvedbe lika *transmigranta*, so naslednje:

1. združitev »prejšnje identitete« z »novo identiteto«;
2. individualiziranje priseljenskega subjekta;
3. uvedba koncepta kontinuiranega prihoda namesto tradicionalnega koncepta začetnega in vseobsegajočega prihoda;
4. dopuščanje fragmentarne in nelogične govorice kot rezultat dvojezičnosti;
5. priznavanje protislovja v različnih sferah priseljenskega življenja.

Ti pisatelji ustvarjajo mehanizem, ki bo uporaben za prihodnje avtorje, saj bo naš »vek migracij« (Stephen Castles / Mark Miller) zagotovo prinesel še več medkulturnih gibanj in medetničnih umestitev. Uvedba termina *transmigrant* v literarne študije omogoča kritikom in znanstvenikom, da se odzivajo na spreminjajoči se izseljenski zemljevid in v svojih študijah ustrezno artikulirajo zavest o novih razmerjih.

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