

# “Act Two for America”: Narcissism, Money, and the Death of American Literature in Gary Shteyngart’s *Super Sad True Love Story*

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**Abstract:** Gary Shteyngart’s *Super Sad True Love Story* is set in a dystopian New York City of the not-so-distant, and uncannily familiar, future. Shteyngart’s America is hopelessly indebted to China, has ceded government control of the military to private corporations, and is populated by a citizenry narcissistically enthralled with hand-held media devices called “äppäräti.” In this article, I examine how Shteyngart depicts the collapse of the United States as a global power as a corollary to the devaluation of US currency and the end of American literature as a mode of cultural production. Money, literature, and American national identity are all yoked to the concept of narcissism in Shteyngart’s novel. American narcissism has often been supported by narratives of US exceptionalism, which represent the United States as the centre of global geopolitics, New York City as the global centre of culture and commerce, the US dollar as the de facto currency of a global economy, and American literature as valuable cultural capital. However, when the US loses its place as a global superpower in *Super Sad True Love Story*, it is significant that many of the novel’s characters—especially Shteyngart’s narrator, Lenny Abramov—note this loss primarily in terms of their changed relationships with both money and literature. I read Shteyngart’s novel as a (sometimes failed) critique of the role of narcissism in establishing bonds of national, economic, and literary belonging, and of the ways in which globalization and economic crises can destabilize these affective connections.

**Keywords:** Gary Shteyngart, money, narcissism, literature, reading, nationalism

**Résumé :** Le roman de Gary Shteyngart intitulé *Super Sad True Love Story* (*Super triste histoire d'amour*) se déroule dans le New York dystopique d'un avenir proche et curieusement familier. Les États-Unis y sont désespérément endettés envers la Chine, ont cédé le contrôle de l'armée à l'entreprise privée et sont peuplés de citoyens narcissiquement envoutés par des dispositifs portables d'information appelés « äppäräti ». Dans cet article, je m'intéresse au lien que pose Shteyngart entre l'effondrement des États-Unis en tant que superpuissance et la dévaluation de la devise nationale, et à sa description de la fin de la littérature américaine comme mode de production culturelle. Dans le roman, l'auteur rattache l'argent, la littérature et l'identité nationale étatsunienne au concept de narcissisme. Le narcissisme nourrit souvent les récits de l'exceptionnalisme étatsunien, qui décrivent le pays comme le centre géopolitique mondial, New York comme le cœur planétaire de la culture et du commerce, le dollar US comme la devise de facto de l'économie mondialisée et la littérature étatsunienne comme un capital culturel de grande valeur. Mais dans *Super triste histoire d'amour*, quand les États-Unis sont déçus de leur rang de puissance mondiale, un grand nombre de personnages—et spécialement le narrateur, Lenny Abramov—perçoivent cette déchéance avant tout comme un changement dans leur relation à l'argent et à la littérature, et cela me semble significatif. Le roman de Shteyngart serait en effet une critique (parfois ratée) du rôle du narcissisme dans la formation des liens d'appartenance nationale, économique et littéraire, et une critique également de la façon dont la mondialisation et les crises économiques peuvent déstabiliser ces liens affectifs.

**Mots clés :** Gary Shteyngart, argent, narcissisme, littérature, lecture, nationalisme

Gary Shteyngart's 2010 novel *Super Sad True Love Story* is set in a dystopian America of the not-so-distant, and uncannily familiar, future. Shteyngart's America is hopelessly indebted to China, has ceded government control of the military to private corporations, and is populated by a citizenry narcissistically enthralled with handheld media devices called "äppäräti." When Shteyngart set out to write his third novel in 2006, he discovered that real-life social and economic crises kept eclipsing his darkest predictions for the near future of the United States. In an interview with Jon Wiener of *The Nation*, Shteyngart describes his writing process:

I started writing this book in 2006 before the financial crisis. In my original draft, horrible things happen: Lehman Brothers fails, GM and Chrysler fail. Two years into writing this, all these things were actually happening. So I had to make things worse and worse. That's one of the difficulties of writing a novel these days—there doesn't seem to be a present left to write about. Everything is the future. That makes writing a novel difficult—it's much easier to write a blog about something.

The 2016 election of Donald J. Trump as the forty-fifth president of the United States seems to have confirmed Shteyngart's uncomfortable realization that reality is outpacing his outlandish satire. In response to one of many tweets from readers pointing out that Trump's election seemed like an episode from *Super Sad*, Shteyngart tweeted, "If I had to title it now I'd take out the 'Love' and just call it Super Sad True Story." Although Trump's ethnic nationalism and xenophobia certainly aligns him with the world of *Super Sad*, so too does his disdain for reading. Since the 2016 election, numerous media outlets have reported that Trump—in stark contrast with his predecessor, Barack Obama—does not read books.<sup>1</sup> The US president's proud anti-intellectualism echoes a prominent motif in *Super Sad*—namely, that reading books is a thing of the past. In Shteyngart's novel, books are described as "bound, printed, non-streaming Media artifact[s]" (90), and young people constantly complain that books "smell" (52). Shteyngart, who was born in 1972, complains that he "come[s] from the last generation when books were loved and cherished," a sentiment that is shared by the Shteyngart-like protagonist of *Super Sad*, thirty-nine-year-old Lenny Abramov. Even though some recent studies suggest that reading print books remains a popular pastime among Millennials,<sup>2</sup> Shteyngart—in interviews, *Super Sad*, and his 2014 memoir *Little Failure*—frequently laments the decline of reading as a social practice, and, in his dystopian novel, depicts the end of American literature and literary culture as a corollary to the end of the United States as a world power and sovereign nation. Although narcissistic young people are a frequent target of Shteyngart's satire, his critique of narcissism extends to the United States as a whole, and especially to New York City as a locus of early twenty-first-century American culture. I am interested in how Shteyngart's treatment of narcissism also necessarily invokes the concept of mourning, as the decline of US culture and political hegemony in *Super Sad* corresponds with the loss of something like a stable sense of American identity. While Shteyngart is willing to imagine the death of some aspects of contemporary urban US culture, his novel is ultimately more interested in redeeming and reanimating those aspects of American life that Shteyngart and Lenny claim are the most imperilled.

Perhaps Shteyngart's most prescient prediction in *Super Sad* is an anti-capitalist, anti-austerity uprising of "Low Net Worth Individuals" (or LNWI in the novel's parlance) based out of a park in Manhattan. Shteyngart sets his insurrection in the East Village rather than Zuccotti Park, but otherwise, his description of the LNWI-led "Aziz's

Army” is a surprising forecast of the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement that would begin just over a year after his novel was published. A few months before the occupation of Zuccotti Park, one of OWS’s future organizers, the anthropologist David Graeber, published *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. In his book’s opening chapter, Graeber notes with disappointment that there was no significant social or economic backlash to the subprime mortgage crisis of 2008. Although Graeber’s book did not predict the coming of Occupy Wall Street—a movement that, whatever its flaws, did represent a backlash against bank bailouts and the business-as-usual attitude of the US financial sector—there is a passage in his text wherein he imagines a hypothetical America very much like Shteyngart’s dystopia:

What is the difference between a gangster pulling out a gun and demanding you give him a thousand dollars of “protection money,” and that same gangster pulling out a gun and demanding you provide him with a thousand-dollar “loan”? In most ways, obviously, nothing. But in certain ways there *is* a difference. As in the case of U.S. debt to Korea or Japan, were the balance of power at any point to shift, were America to lose its military supremacy, were the gangster to lose his henchmen, that “loan” might start being treated very differently. It might become a genuine liability. But the crucial element would still seem to be the gun. (7; original emphasis)

For Graeber, foreign investment in US Treasury bonds is a symptom of American imperialism: nations that purchase US debt, like China, are ultimately “ beholden to U.S. interests, rather than the other way around” (6). At the end of the day, it is US military hegemony (“the gun”) that assures that these loans are secured and, as a consequence, that the US economy and the US dollar retain their place at the centre of global capitalism. However, if the Chinese economy and military were to eclipse those of the US; if the Chinese yuan were to surpass the US dollar as the *de facto* global currency; if China rather than the United States suddenly held the gun, then the United States’ foreign debt would indeed begin to look like “a genuine liability.” What would happen when such debts were recalled? In many ways, Shteyngart’s America in *Super Sad* serves as a provisional, if satirical, response to Graeber’s hypothetical scenario.

I am interested in exploring the connections between two major themes in Shteyngart’s novel: first, his views on the death and mourning of literary culture and the rise of techno-narcissism in

the United States, and second, his representation of the collapse of the United States as an economic power and the devaluation of the US dollar. In this article, I examine how Shteyngart depicts the demise of the US as a global power as a corollary to the devaluation of US currency and the end of US literature as a mode of cultural production. Money, literature, and American national identity are all yoked to the concept of narcissism in Shteyngart's novel. American narcissism has often been supported by narratives of American exceptionalism, which represent the United States as the centre of global geopolitics, New York City as the global centre of culture and commerce, the US dollar as the de facto currency of a global economy, and American literature as valuable cultural capital. Drawing on essays by Marshall McLuhan and Jonathan Franzen on techno-narcissism, I argue that Shteyngart's novel functions as a (sometimes failed) critique of the role of narcissism in establishing bonds of national, economic, and literary belonging, and of the ways in which globalization and economic crises can destabilize these affective connections. Shteyngart vacillates in his criticism of American culture precisely when he finds himself unwilling to fully mourn the aspects of that culture that are most sacred to him, namely the importance of literature and reading as social and cultural capital. Following Annie McClanahan's argument that Shteyngart draws on the logic of credit scoring to create character "types," I argue that Shteyngart examines and critiques the connection between different kinds of money and social stereotypes, particularly through his creation of a new social figure, the "five-jiao men" that work on the streets of Manhattan after the collapse of the United States. Although *Super Sad* does imagine a radical alternative to US economic and military hegemony, ultimately, Shteyngart is not willing to abandon a conventional conception of literary culture, as his hero, Lenny, effectively reinvents American literature and thus valorizes the social type of "the reader," which both Lenny and Shteyngart claim is under assault in contemporary American society.

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In his famous essay "The Gadget Lover: Narcissus as Narcosis" from his book *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan considers the electronic "gadget" as one of the "extensions of man" named in his book's subtitle: "To behold, use or perceive any extension of ourselves in technological form is necessarily to embrace it," McLuhan writes:

It is this continuous embrace of our own technology in daily use that puts us in the Narcissus role of subliminal awareness and numbness in relation to these images of ourselves. By continuously embracing technologies, we relate ourselves to them as servomechanisms. That is why we must, to use them at all, serve these objects, these extensions of ourselves, as gods or minor religions. (46)

For McLuhan, technology is an extension of the body—the wheel is an extension of the foot, for example, while electronic technology is an extension of the entire central nervous system. The consequence of this extension—or “amputation” (42), as he puts it—is an accompanying sense of numbness or “narcosis,” a term that is etymologically related to the name “Narcissus” (41). For McLuhan, we are fascinated by these uncanny technological extensions of ourselves, these minor gods, numbing distractions that captivate our attention while concealing from us the fact of our amputated isolation: “Self-amputation forbids self-recognition,” McLuhan writes (43). Although he is hopeful about the possibilities of technological extension, implicit in McLuhan’s essay is the idea that narcissism and the love of gadgets also necessitate the mourning of the body—that is, the mourning of an older, less technologically driven social order. As I will show elsewhere in this article, such nostalgia for the body is a significant motif in *Super Sad*, especially in Lenny’s descriptions of his girlfriends (Fabrizia DeSalva versus Eunice Park) and his boss, Joshie Goldmann.

As is often the case with his writing, McLuhan’s essay seems equally as pertinent for life in the early twenty-first century as it did for the mid-twentieth. Indeed, McLuhan’s thoughts on electronic gadgets and narcissistic numbness have been implicitly taken up by several contemporary writers, including novelists like Jonathan Franzen and Zadie Smith (in her essay “Generation Why?”) and cultural critics like Jaron Lanier (*You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto*) and Sherry Turkle (*Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*). In his essay titled “Pain Won’t Kill You,” originally delivered as a commencement address at Kenyon College in 2011, Franzen uses McLuhan-esque terminology to lament his own relationship with his BlackBerry Bold and, more generally, with the substitution of “liking” (in the Facebook sense of the term) for “loving” in contemporary society. “There is no such thing as a person whose real self you like every particle of,” Franzen writes. “This is why a world of liking is ultimately a lie. But there is such a thing as a person whose real self you love every particle

of. And this is why love is such an existential threat to the techno-consumerist order: it exposes the lie" (9). Love, he writes elsewhere, "[is] the dirt that ... inevitably splatters on the mirror of our self-regard" (8). For Franzen, the human equivalent of a social media platform or electronic device that has been "designed to be immensely likable" is a "narcissist—a person who can't tolerate the tarnishing of his or her self-image that not being liked represents, and who therefore either withdraws from human contact or goes to extreme, integrity-sacrificing lengths to be likable" (7). Although he draws on a similar vocabulary for his discussion of electronic gadgets, Franzen is considerably less sanguine than McLuhan about the possible advantages of technological and media innovation. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that Franzen's attitude toward much contemporary electronic and social media is decidedly curmudgeonly.<sup>3</sup> While, for Franzen, narcissistic liking can be correlated to "consumer products" like smartphones, the more complex category of "loving" is aligned in his essay with the kind of product that is "simply itself and whose makers aren't fixated on your liking it" (7). Examples of this include "jet engines, laboratory equipment," and, unsurprisingly, the kind of "serious art and literature" that Franzen himself creates and celebrates (7).

Shteyngart may not be as serious as Franzen—he is certainly funnier—but he does seem to share Franzen's concern that the reader is a social type threatened with extinction in the early twenty-first century. In *Super Sad*, Lenny addresses his "Wall of Books" as though he were the last reader on earth: "'You're my sacred ones,' I told the books. 'No one but me still cares about you. But I'm going to keep you with me forever. And one day I'll make you important again'" (52). Although *Super Sad* is set in the dystopian near future, Lenny's speech to his books resonates with Shteyngart's comment in his interview with Wiener that he "come[s] from the last generation when books were loved and cherished." In his memoir *Little Failure*, Shteyngart claims that after rereading his three novels (including *Super Sad*), he was "shocked by the overlaps between fiction and reality on those pages, by how blithely I've used the facts of my own life" (318). Although it would be misleading to suggest that Shteyngart and Lenny are completely identical, it is telling to note some of the overlaps between the author of *Super Sad* and his fictional counterpart. For example, on the first page of *Little Failure*, Shteyngart recounts browsing for books at the Strand Book Annex in a way that recalls Lenny's speech to his Wall of Books: "In 1996, people still read books and the city could support

an extra branch of the legendary Strand in the Financial District," Shteyngart writes, "which is to say that stockbrokers, secretaries, government functionaries—*everybody* back then was expected to have some kind of inner life" (3; original emphasis). New York City of the 1990s is a kind of cultural hub that Shteyngart already keenly mourns in 2014. The "inner life" of the reader that both Shteyngart and Lenny (and Franzen) are keen to defend is, however, defined by a certain kind of literary taste that is, with few exceptions, overwhelmingly white, male, and European. Describing his life in New York City in the mid-1990s in *Little Failure*, Shteyngart writes that "the woman [he] was in love with at the time" had "criticized [his] bookshelves for containing material either too lightweight or too masculine" (6). Shteyngart's response to this scrutiny is to "arrange his Oberlin texts such as Tabitha Konogo's [sic] *Squatters & the Roots of Mau Mau* next to newly found woman-ethnic gems such as Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Wild Meat and Bully Burgers*" (6). Shteyngart's strategy of peppering his "masculine" bookshelves with token "woman-ethnic" books that he has not read<sup>4</sup> in order to impress women is a trait he shares with Lenny in *Super Sad*. In addition to "brittle Soviet books" and "Fitzgeraldian and Hemingwayesque stuff," Lenny's Wall of Books contains "Lacanian and feminist volumes that were supposed to make [him] look good when potential girlfriends came over" (*Super* 311).

While token "woman-ethnic" and "Lacanian and feminist volumes" are supposed to be useful for impressing Shteyngart's and Lenny's "potential girlfriends," there is little doubt that what Franzen calls "serious art and literature"—that is, the kind of literature associated with Shteyngart's "inner life"—looks quite different. Elsewhere in *Little Failure*, Shteyngart recounts that when he was a boy in the 1980s, because his immigrant parents could not "afford a television," he "turn[ed] to the collected works of Anton Chekhov" (138). This pastime, he reports, did not go over well with his TV-loving classmates: "'NEEEEEERD!' the children scream[ed] whenever I tr[ie]d to welcome them into my inner life" (138). In *Super Sad*, Lenny also draws on the works of Chekhov when contemplating his inner life, comparing himself to Laptev from the novella *Three Years*—"the unattractive but decent ... son of a wealthy Moscow merchant, who is in love with the beautiful and much younger Julia" (36). The Julia to Lenny's Laptev in *Super Sad* is twenty-four-year-old Eunice Park, who embodies most of the techno-narcissist clichés of Shteyngart's fictional world, and who, like the schoolchildren who mock Shteyngart in *Little Failure*, frequently makes fun of

Lenny for his love of books and reading (she calls Lenny a “nerd” or “nerd-face” at least a dozen times over the course of the novel). Despite Eunice’s love of “immensely likable” (to borrow Franzen’s phrase) consumer products from stores with names like AssLuxury and JuicyPussy, and despite the “super sad” ending to Lenny and Eunice’s love story, Lenny’s love of (a certain kind of) literature does manage to make an impact on her. In addition to Chekhov, Lenny is a fan of a plethora of white male authors, including Tolstoy, Freud, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Milan Kundera, whose 1984 novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* has a profound, if muddled, effect on Eunice.

Toward the end of *Super Sad*, Eunice asks an incredulous Lenny to read to her. As Lenny reads her Kundera’s novel, he hopes to show her the difference between superficial liking and loving: “I wanted us to feel something in common,” Lenny records in his diary; “I wanted this complex language, this surge of intellect, to be processed into love” (275). When Lenny reaches the point in the novel where “Tomas’s girlfriend Tereza and his mistress Sabina are taking photographs of each other naked, dressed in [the] recurring black bowler hat,” Eunice “stir[s]” and initiates a sexual encounter:

She took off her TotalSurrenders with a snap of her finger and moved up to straddle my face between her legs. With the book still partly open in one hand, I cupped her behind with the other while using my tongue in the familiar motions against her opening. She pulled back for a while and let me look into her face. I mistook her expression for a smile. It was something else, a slight opening of the mouth, with the lower lip leaning rightward. It was astonishment: the astonishment of being fully loved. (276)

In this bizarre tableau, Lenny holds a classic work of European literature in one hand, and in the other, the naked body of the beautiful young woman whom he has used this literature to seduce. Lenny’s love of reading has led him to a gratifying sexual experience with a young woman whom he (and everyone else in the novel) considers his social better, and has allowed the otherwise superficial Eunice a glance at the “astonishment of being fully loved.” It is a scene that is supposed to be hugely flattering to Kundera, to Lenny, and to Shteyngart himself if we are to believe the parallels between his own life and Lenny’s. In *Little Failure*, he gives us occasion to do so. Toward the end of his memoir, Shteyngart describes how his friend and mentor, novelist Chang-rae Lee, helped him to land his

first book contract, and what this event meant for both his “literary” and “romantic future” (original emphasis):

In the year 2000 it is still possible to woo a girl with a book deal. And woo I do. But what’s amazing is how quickly I am wooed back. How soon a number of warm and attractive women are keen to walk down the street with me, hand in hand, to see *Cabaret Balkan* or whatever foreign nonsense is playing at the Film Forum, without a second wood-carving boyfriend waiting for them on their Brooklyn couches . . . I’m not stupid when it comes to these matters. I know how little attraction I pose for most women à la carte. And what I realize is that with Chang-rae’s single gesture, I will never have to go home to an empty bed again. From this point forward, I will know love whenever I need to know it. (316–17)

What does it mean to “know love”? For Shteyngart and Lenny, knowing love is intimately connected with knowing literature, and being able to translate that cultural capital into sexual and romantic relationships with women. And yet, for Lenny at least, such love is short-lived. Immediately following his sexual encounter with Eunice, the two have a major argument, and a few days later, she consents to an affair with Joshie Goldmann, Lenny’s “employer and ersatz papa” (*Super* 50). Lenny is surprised by this betrayal, though it is clear to the reader of *Super Sad* that Lenny’s love for both Joshie and Eunice exceeds the affection he receives from either of them in return. Although Lenny spends a great deal of time thinking and talking about love, he often comes across as naïve when it comes to romantic and sexual psychodynamics.

One is tempted to note that if Lenny had bothered to read any of the “Lacanian and feminist volumes” housed on his Wall of Books, he would have encountered Lacan’s well-known dictum that “love is giving something one doesn’t have to someone who doesn’t want it” (Žižek).<sup>5</sup> In her book *The Female Complaint* (another candidate for the “potential girlfriends” section of Lenny’s Wall of Books), Lauren Berlant glosses Lacan’s theory of love: “[Lacan’s] logic goes like this,” Berlant writes: “you, the lover, assert that you love while demanding that your love object (the woman, in Lacan’s symbolization) provide for you the surreal combination of ego recognition and idealization that you require to give love in the first place” (14). Nothing could be further from Franzen’s humanist assertion that “there is such a thing as a person whose real self you love every particle of” (9) than Berlant’s description of love as “a formal promise

and an aspiration to try and try again to intend to be faithful to an enduring project of projection, mirroring, and repetition" (14). Although "under the right circumstances" love can be defined as an act of reciprocity, for Berlant, "the circumstances are never just right" (14). The particles of the other person, to adopt Franzen's imagery, are constantly changing and shifting. Franzen's account of loving a person assumes that "person" is a stable category, or a "steady state of object desire," as Berlant puts it (14). This kind of bad faith describes Lenny's attachment to Eunice and Joshie, as he is constantly trying—unsuccessfully—to figure out how to give them his love in a way that will force them to reciprocate. They never do; Eunice eventually leaves Lenny for Joshie, effectively ending Lenny's relationship with the two people, besides his parents, he loves the most.

While Lenny and Eunice's Kundera-inspired sexual encounter does not "astonish" Eunice into staying in love with Lenny, it does seem to change her attitude toward books, thereby suggesting the redemptive power of literature in a culture that, for Franzen and Shteyngart, has all but abandoned the love of reading. When Lenny and Eunice are forced to abandon his apartment, Lenny is shocked when he comes home to discover Eunice packing up his Wall of Books in order to save his collection of printed, bound media artefacts from being destroyed. Although Lenny describes his "thirty years' worth of reading material" as "the entirety of my life as a thinking person," he is also disillusioned with the value of literature, noting the "weakness" and "immateriality" of these books and "how they had failed to change the world" (*Super* 311). Lenny tries to move on from his book collection by packing some of Eunice's "intimates" and items from her shoe closet instead, but Eunice tells him not to bother: "Just the books," she said. "That's all we have room for" (312). Although Eunice is in the process of leaving Lenny for Joshie, this final gesture, saving his books and eschewing her consumer goods, represents her final act of love for him. Eunice does not learn to love literature, but literature—or Lenny's love of literature—seems to teach her how to move from techno-narcissism and "liking" toward authentic "loving." What Shteyngart is suggesting, despite Lenny's disavowal of his book collection, is that literature *does* still have the ability to "change the world," even a world as hostile to literature as that of *Super Sad*, and even for a character as stereotypically shallow as Eunice. The America Shteyngart imagines in *Super Sad* may be a bleak dystopia, but it still isn't the kind of world where literature truly doesn't matter.

As much as Shteyngart (and Franzen) likes to lament the death of reading, this is a false Jeremiad: even in *Super Sad's* America, literature, as a form of cultural capital, will always be redeemed.

Before the closing chapters of *Super Sad*, Lenny's love of literature *does* prove to be a social liability, but he has nevertheless attained a measure of economic and social success working for the Post-Human Services division of the massive Staatling-Wapachung Corporation. Lenny's credit score is "an impressive 1520" (55), and his salary falls within the "top 19 percent of U.S. income distribution" (90). Lenny's job as a "Life Lovers Outreach Coordinator" (5) is to offer technology that promises biological immortality to "High Net Worth Individuals" (HNWIs). At the start of *Super Sad*, Lenny is returning to the United States after spending a year in Italy unsuccessfully seeking out new clients for his company's Indefinite Life Extension treatments. Although Lenny wants to undergo these treatments himself—the novel opens with him confessing to his diary that he has decided he is "*never going to die*" (3; original emphasis)—he also knows that the "top 19 percent" is not the same as "the one percent"—he lacks the net worth to be a HNWI.<sup>6</sup> Lenny's only chance at immortality is to impress his "employer and ersatz papa," Joshie, who he hopes will provide him with "dechronification treatments" (66). Although Lenny surmises that Joshie is "in his late sixties," he has the physical appearance of a much younger man due to his own Life Extension sessions. When Lenny and Eunice visit Joshie in his apartment, Lenny at first mistakes Joshie for a younger cousin. When he gets a closer look at his boss and mentor, though, he can see "dechronification" at work: "Joshie straightened up and I could see the muscle tone," Lenny writes in his diary, "the deep-veined reality of what he was becoming, the little machines burrowing inside him, clearing up what had gone wrong, rewiring, rededicating, resetting the odometer on every cell, making him shine with a child's precious glow" (218). Although Joshie never wears an *äppärät*, the smartphone-like devices that everyone else in *Super Sad* is beholden to, he nevertheless provides readers with the novel's most over-the-top example of techno-narcissism. His desire to retain a kind of infinite youth means that he embraces technology not as an extension of the body, as McLuhan would have it, but rather as a replacement for it. He is, in short, Franzen's worst nightmare: a living, breathing gadget.<sup>7</sup>

At first, Eunice seems to perfectly embody the techno-narcissistic generation that both Franzen and Shteyngart set out to critique: she is glued to her *äppärät*, obsessed with shopping and consumerism,

and interested in only the most superficial sexual and romantic relationships. Indeed, Lenny thinks of Eunice as being almost identical to her *äppärät*, calling her a “sleek digital creature” (Shteyngart, *Super* 153) and a “nano-sized woman . . . who existed as easily on an *äppärät* screen as on the street before me” (21). The “digital,” “nano-sized” Eunice recalls Lenny’s description of Joshie with “little machines burrowing inside him,” which is to say that, like Joshie, Eunice is described as being essentially disembodied. When Lenny first sees her, he notes that “she could not have weighed more than eighty pounds” (16) and “had likely never known the tickle of her own pubic hair” (21).<sup>8</sup> At the outset of the novel, Lenny contrasts Eunice’s digital frame with that of Fabrizia DeSalva, his forty-year-old Roman girlfriend. In addition to noticing her “thick Mediterranean pubic hair,” Lenny reports that Fabrizia was “the softest woman I had ever touched. But maybe I no longer *needed* softness. Fabrizia. Her body conquered by small armies of hair, her curves fixed by carbohydrates, nothing but the Old World and its dying nonelectronic corporeality” (21; original emphasis). For Lenny, Eunice represents the new of the New World, a digital, disembodied figure who is more at home “on an *äppärät* screen” than in Fabrizia’s apartment on the Piazza Vittorio. Fabrizia, on the other hand, is older, sensual, embodied, and serves as a stand-in for the Old World of Italian culture. “[W]hat I admire about youngish Italians,” Lenny writes, is “the slow diminution of ambition, the recognition that the best is far behind them . . . We Americans can learn a lot from their slow decline” (14). While Italians like Fabrizia have accepted their country’s “decline,” Americans like Lenny and Eunice still think of the United States as a global superpower; their identity as Americans is still associated with all things modern, new, and progressive.<sup>9</sup> Over the course of *Super Sad*, however, the United States loses its status as a sovereign nation, its military collapses, the US dollar loses its place as the de facto global currency, and every vestige of American identity—which is to say, narcissistic narratives of American exceptionalism—is obliterated. New York City, home to both Shteyngart and Lenny, is reduced from its status as the world’s economic and cultural centre to a token “lifestyle hub” (257) that will be sold off to America’s Chinese and Norwegian creditors, thus reducing the city from the ultimate narcissistic affirmation of America’s ego to a potent symptom of the death of American culture. In what follows, I want to argue that this transformation of American identity is felt most forcefully through Americans’ changed relationship to money, as Shteyngart imagines the Chinese yuan to surpass the US dollar as the new

gold standard for global capitalism. This change in money creates new social types, representing a wholesale reinvention of the American social fabric.<sup>10</sup> Despite this drastic change, the one social type that seems to survive the destruction of the United States is the reader, represented by Lenny, who improbably revitalizes the once-extinct field of American literature.

\* \* \*

Lenny and Eunice's relationship falls apart at the same time that America collapses as a sovereign nation-state, an event known as "the Rupture" in the novel. A few days before the Rupture, Joshie announces to his employees, "We are finally no longer critically relevant to the world economy. The rest of the globe is strong enough to decouple from us. We, our country, our city, our infrastructure, are in a state of freefall" (Shteyngart, *Super* 181). Although he follows this speech with a sanguine assessment of the future of the "creative economy," Lenny soon discovers that Joshie's optimism is due to his knowledge of the Staatling-Wapachung Corporation's role in providing paramilitary support for the liquidation of America. "I bet this is going to be good in the long run," Joshie tells Lenny:

This is a controlled demise for the country, a planned bankruptcy. Liquidate labor, liquidate stocks, liquidate everything but real estate . . . the International Monetary Fund will skedaddle from D.C., possibly to Singapore or Beijing, and then they're going to make an IMF recovery plan for America, divide the country into concessions, and hand them over to sovereign wealth funds. Norway, China, Saudi Arabia, all that jazz. (256–7)

For Lenny this "controlled demise" represents not just a "planned bankruptcy" but, as he puts it, "no more America" (Shteyngart, *Super* 257). Lenny is not the only character in the novel to associate the collapse of the American economy with the end of America itself. For example, after the Rupture, Eunice writes that "America might be gone completely soon" (297). David Lorrington, one of the leaders of the LNWI protest in Tompkins Square Park, writes to Eunice, claiming that in the aftermath of the Occupy-like movement, "[i]t'll be like 1776 all over again. Act Two for America" (177)—a sentiment that Eunice dismisses after the Rupture. She writes to her friend Jenny Kang, saying that "[m]aybe there isn't going to be an Act Two for America" after all (265). Echoing F. Scott Fitzgerald's dictum that "there are no second acts in American

lives" (Wilson 163), David's vision of Act Two for America is ironically realized on a banner Lenny spots in Manhattan that reads as follows:

Welcome to America 2.0: A GLOBAL Partnership

*THIS* Is New York: Lifestyle Hub, Trophy City. (Shteyngart, *Super* 322)

Adopting the language of online and technological innovation, America 2.0 represents a second act for America—or for New York City, at least—as a “trophy city” owned by foreign creditors. The halcyon 1990s New York City of Shteyngart's *Little Failure* that could support two branches of the Strand bookstore is ancient history, and even the culturally enervated New York of Lenny and Eunice seems to be irrevocably lost. The bankrupt nation is tied here to a now-bankrupt national identity that is, Shteyngart suggests, as superficial and narcissistic as the *appārāti* that enthrall the US population.

Throughout *Super Sad*, Shteyngart imagines ways in which the decline of the United States as a superpower is accompanied by the decline of the US dollar as the *de facto* currency of global capitalism. Even before the Rupture, inflation is rampant, and US dollars are far less valuable than Chinese yuan or “northern euros” (34). Most Americans have limited faith in the dollar as a fiat currency and prefer to hold yuan-pegged dollars, which are backed, as Lenny tells us, by the “Zhongmin Renmin Yinhang/People's Bank of China” instead of the US Federal Reserve (84). The US dollar has been displaced by the yuan as the currency by which all others are measured. Previously, the value of a dollar was, tautologically, simply a dollar, but now it has to recognize its value as it is reflected in another currency—a kind of money that is more trusted and more respected, and that has displaced the dollar as the centre-piece of the narcissistic economy of currency exchange. Like the literary culture that Lenny and Shteyngart both cherish, the US dollar has become an object of mourning. As both the United States and its dollar begin to lose prestige, so too do American citizens begin to internalize the ascendancy of the yuan as a signifier of the new global economic order. Joshie, for example, tells Lenny to “[f]orget the dollar. It's just a symptom” (66), and after the Rupture, Lenny encounters his boss “wearing a gold yuan symbol around his neck” (256). Likewise, Eunice uses the phrase “you can bet your bottom yuan” in one of her messages (280), and Lenny's cab

driver tells him that he wants to “make some money. Real money. Chinese money” (254; original emphasis). As he wanders the streets of post-Rupture New York City, Lenny sees a series of signs in shop windows that reflect this radical change in the US economy: “WE ACCEPT ONLY YUAN SORRY BUT WE ALSO HALF TO EAT” (252); “WATER FROM CLEAN PLACE, 1 GALLON = 4 YUAN, BRING YOUR OWN CAN” (291). The decline of the United States from global superpower to a Chinese asset has been accompanied by the wholesale devaluation of the US dollar in relation to Chinese renminbi.

Perhaps the most striking economic change in *Super Sad* is the emergence of a new social type—five-jiao men: formally affluent Americans who now work as day labourers for five jiao (half of one yuan) per hour. “Rows of men cracking open asphalt, digging ditches, filling in ditches with cement,” Lenny writes, “[t]hese five-jiao men roam the city, hands in pockets, useless vestigial äppäräti plugs in their ears, like a pride of voiceless lions” (Shteyngart, *Super* 271). When Lenny encounters an old media friend, Hartford Brown, “working a five-jiao line on Prince Street,” he appears to be entirely broken: “If they can make a fabulous gay man work like that,” Lenny wonders, “what can they do to the rest of us” (272)? Lenny gives Hartford a hundred-yuan note, but this financial windfall does nothing to restore his spirits; he turns his back on Lenny and returns to his work, “swinging [his pick] mechanically” and “avoiding [Lenny’s] presence” like a post-apocalyptic Bartleby (272). Perhaps no character in *Super Sad* experiences as severe a fall in fortune as Hartford, who we first encounter as a media star, streaming a “political commentary show intermixed with his own hardcore gay sex” from a “yacht near the Dutch Antilles,” but only a few months later is a member of an incipient class of five-jiao lumpenproletariat (155). For Rayyan Al-Shawaf, in his review of *Super Sad*, Hartford’s fall from media star to five-jiao man could be seen as nothing more than the transition from one easy stereotype to another. Although Al-Shawaf does not discuss Hartford specifically, he does argue that, aside from Lenny and Eunice, all of Shteyngart’s characters seem to “embody societal phenomena rather than the complexities of real people.” Hartford’s pre-Rupture life could certainly be seen as a facile caricature of a narcissistic and decadent society.

But is Shteyngart’s use of broad generalizations necessarily a bad thing? Does it reveal a weakness in his writing, or, instead, a more

nuanced understanding of the ways in which social and economic forces can be reified in social types? In her essay "Bad Credit: The Character of Credit Scoring," Annie McClanahan reads Shteyngart's use of caricature and stereotyping not as a sign of the "failure of the novel" (42), as Al-Shawaf would have it, but as an index of a society whose obsession with credit scoring and accumulating data tends to reduce individuals to either hyper-specific accumulations of data points (caricature) or broad social types defined by spending habits (stereotype). In other words, *Super Sad*'s world of over-the-top caricatures and stereotypes reflects the social reality of an American society defined by questions of social ranking and credit-worthiness. As McClanahan writes, "Shteyngart's caricatures and stereotypes show personhood—once defined by its consistency, predictability, and social legibility—transformed in an age of credit crisis, an age in which one cannot necessarily keep one's promise to pay" (50). Hartford's transformation from one stereotype ("a fabulous gay man") to another (a five-jiao man) reflects the change to his credit after a crisis—the Rupture—renders his social and cultural capital as a media star virtually valueless. Although McClanahan discusses credit at length in her essay, she does not pay much attention to the kinds of money—dollars, yuan, northern euros—that are used to measure debts and credit in *Super Sad*. I would like to suggest that the displacement of the dollar by the yuan is a significant factor in the creation of new post-Rupture social types. Similar to the store signs Lenny spots, as well as the changes to Eunice's idioms ("you can bet your bottom yuan") and Joshie's clothing (his gold ¥ chain), when Aziz Jamie Tompkins, the eventual inspiration for the LNWI-led "Aziz's Army," is killed during the paramilitary takeover of New York City, Lenny notes "the strange confluence of having seen him alive, if even for a moment, combined with a dot the size of a five-jiao coin that had punctured the upper half of his elongated brown forehead" (156). Here the five-jiao coin, by being likened to a fatal bullet wound, is quite literally associated with the death of both the US economy and what most of the characters in the novel would recognize as American national sovereignty and identity. By being murdered during the initial death throes of the United States, when the country's wholesale liquidation to appease its Chinese creditors is just getting underway, Aziz becomes the first of the five-jiao men.

I have claimed that Shteyngart's radical reimagining of US economic and military hegemony is qualified by his valorization of the figure of the reader, particularly toward the end of his novel. Throughout

most of *Super Sad*, Lenny is aware that reading is a hopelessly outdated pastime, and that the decline of both the production and consumption of US literature corresponds with the decline of America's national prestige leading up to the Rupture. In fact, to describe the reader as a social "type" in *Super Sad* is somewhat misleading, since Lenny might be the only remaining example of this kind of person. Lenny tells us that his friend Noah Weinberg had, some years before, "published a novel, one of the last that you could actually go out and buy in a Media store" (85). Now, however, Noah hosts his own media show broadcast from his *äppärät*, which consists of little more than crude jokes and nods to his corporate sponsors. Noah and Lenny are represented as some of the last members of a literate society, and yet both characters are, to some extent, willing to forgo their attachment to books in order to conform to a culture that privileges techno-consumerism over the written word. However, after the Rupture (which is to say, after America), literature seems to make something of a comeback. The final chapter of the novel reveals that the preceding sections, which are presented in the form of Lenny's diary entries and Eunice's GlobalTeens messages, have been published decades later and become something of a cultural phenomenon. Written by an older Lenny—now calling himself "Larry Abraham" and living in the "Tuscan Free State"—the final chapter of *Super Sad* is ostensibly an introductory note to the "New 'People's Literature Publishing House' Edition of the Lenny Abramov Diaries" (324). Lenny expresses surprise that his diary entries and Eunice's messages have reached such a wide audience, and he is dismissive of the suggestion that he wrote his "passages with the hope of eventual publication," claiming, "[w]hen I wrote these diary entries so many decades ago, it never occurred to me that *any* text would *ever* find a new generation of readers" (327; original emphasis). Lenny goes on to explain that in many ways his diaries "presage[d] the diaristic flood of contemporary Sino-American writers" who have been inspired by a mandate from the "People's Capitalist Party" that "[t]o write text is glorious!" (327). It seems that although the end of America as a sovereign nation-state was accompanied by the end of American literature, this national Rupture also created the conditions of possibility for a new kind of transnational cultural production: Sino-American literature.

Even if Sino-American literature in *Super Sad* reflects the cultural values of China and the "People's Capitalist Party" rather than those of the (now expired) United States, it is significant that it is

Lenny who—however unwittingly—initiates this rebirth of literature as a form of cultural capital. Franzen in “Pain Won’t Kill You,” Shteyngart in *Little Failure*, and Lenny in *Super Sad* all complain that serious reading is doomed. Indeed, Lenny’s love of literature is not enough to help him save the day, save America, save the lives of his friends, or save his love affair with Eunice. At the end of *Super Sad*, however, Lenny’s devotion to literature and writing does pay off: he is the inaugurator of a new literary tradition, a twenty-first-century Chekhov whose work will be remembered for generations to come. Although Lenny did not think that “any text would ever find a new generation of readers,” a new generation of readers has emerged, thereby saving and revitalizing the figure of the reader well after the collapse of every other vestige of the United States and its culture. It appears that Lenny has outlasted his narcissistic era. Eunice disappears from the novel, married now to “a person of perfectly decent temperament and controlled ambition,” while Joshie survives only as a shell of his former nano-powered self, due to the “recently discovered Kapsian Tremors associated with the reversal of dechRONification” (329). Lenny, on the other hand, lives in comfort in the Italian *campagna*: “I wanted to be in a place with less data, less youth, and where older people like myself were not despised simply for being old,” Lenny writes, “where an older man, for example, could be considered beautiful” (328). By returning to Italy, Lenny returns to the Old World, the world of Fabrizio, the world of the body that he abandoned for äppäräti-crazed America many years ago. And yet, by returning to Italy, Lenny does not shed all of his New World hang-ups. Both Shteyngart in *Little Failure* and Lenny in *Super Sad* seem anxious about how their love of literature, the stories they associate with inner lives, will be perceived by young women. It is perhaps unsurprising that the final scene of *Super Sad*, which finds Lenny visiting his friends Giovanna and Paolo at their country home, is centred around the sudden appearance of “two young Cinecittà actresses just arriving from Rome” (330). “They had no idea who I was,” Lenny writes, “but we soon learned that one of these glamorous young personages had just been charged with playing Eunice Park in a new Cinecittà video spray of my diaries. The hacks at Heng-dian World Studios in Zhejiang had already clocked in one artistic disaster with their *Lenny ♥ Euny Super Sad True Love* series, and now the Italians were having a go at it” (330). Lenny is polite while the young actress practices her Eunice impression, but when she uses “her performance for a long-winded critique of America, reaching as far back as the Reagan era” (331), Lenny loses his cool.

He interrupts the actress and tells her that the main characters from their forthcoming film are dead, “la[y]ing out a scenario for the final days of Lenny Abramov and Eunice Park more gruesome than any of the grisly infernos splashed on the walls of the neighboring cathedral” (331). In response to his story, “no one said anything,” and Lenny is “blessed with what [he] needed the most. Their silence, black and complete” (331). It is as if the revitalization of Lenny is only possible through the silencing of these young women, who recall the superficial young people who populated the pre-Rupture United States. Techno-narcissism—this time represented by two Cinecittà actresses involved in the creation of a “video spray”—is once again set against Lenny’s love of literature and his inner life. In this case, though, techno-narcissism is silenced by Lenny’s storytelling. He claims that telling this story, demanding this silence, is a way for him to mourn. But we might reasonably wonder what else he experiences by putting a “sudden end to their levity” (331).

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### Notes

- 1 For example, in her recent profile of Trump’s first weeks in the White House, Maggie Haberman reported that “[the President’s] meetings now begin at 9 a.m., earlier than they used to, which significantly curtails his television time. Still, Mr. Trump, who does not read books, is able to end his evenings with plenty of television.”
- 2 In a February 2015 article on the *Washington Post* website, Michael S. Rosenwald claimed that 87 per cent of college textbooks for the fall 2014 semester were print books; he cited a Pew Research Center study that showed that “the highest print readership rates are among those ages 18 to 29, and the same age group is still using public libraries in large numbers.”
- 3 In “Pain Won’t Kill You,” Franzen acknowledges that his Kenyon College audience is “[v]ery probably . . . sick to death of hearing social media disrespected by cranky fifty-one-year-olds” (8). If they weren’t sick of hearing this from Franzen in 2011, there’s a good chance they are now. In 2012, Alison Flood reported in the *Guardian* that during a recent talk at Tulane University, Franzen complained that “Twitter is unspeakably irritating. Twitter stands for everything I oppose.” Although each new gripe catches the attention of the literary world via social media, such complaints are part of Franzen’s long-standing defence of “high culture” against what he sees as the dumbing-down effects of mass media. The most notable incident in Franzen’s self-declared war against philistinism occurred in 2001 when he criticized

Oprah Winfrey after she selected his novel *The Corrections* for her TV book club. In the 29 October 2001 edition of the *New York Times*, David D. Kirkpatrick reported on the Franzen fallout:

[A]fter Mr. Franzen publicly disparaged Oprah Winfrey's literary taste—suggesting at one point that appearing on her show was out of keeping with his place in “the high-art literary tradition” and might turn off some readers—he found that he may have inadvertently damaged his own reputation in the literary world. Ms. Winfrey did not revoke her selection but politely withdrew the invitation to appear on her show. And instead of rallying to Mr. Franzen, most of the literary world took her side, deriding him as arrogant and ungrateful.

- 4 Shteyngart misspells Tabitha Kanogo's last name as “Konogo” and admits that although he “always imagined” Yamanaka's *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* “to be the quintessential Hawaiian coming-of-age story,” he still hasn't bothered to read it (*Little* 6).
- 5 Lacan presents this formulation in his seminar on transference (*Seminar VIII*), but I am familiar with Lacan's views on love through Slavoj Žižek's essay, “Passion: Regular or Decaf,” published in the magazine *In These Times*.
- 6 Lenny has “something like 1,865,000 yuan to [his] name,” a considerable amount of money in the world of *Super Sad*, but the sum is woefully inadequate for the “preliminary beta dechronification treatments” he desires, which would “run three million yuan per year” (Shteyngart, *Super* 77).
- 7 Joshie has proved to be a popular focal point for *Super Sad* critics. Ulla Kriebner, for example, points out the parallels between the novel's description of Indefinite Life Extension and “current biogerontological discourses,” implicitly likening Joshie to British “biogerontologist and immortality prophet” Aubrey de Grey (62). Meanwhile, Geoff Hamilton, in his cogent essay on *Super Sad*, writes that Joshie becomes “something like a grotesque, Gothicised version of what the literary critic R.W.B. Lewis famously dubbed the ‘American Adam’” (23). To my mind, this “grotesque, Gothicised American Adam” sounds quite a bit like Frankenstein's monster, although in *Super Sad*, Joshie takes on the roles of both Victor Frankenstein and his creation.
- 8 Hamilton astutely observes that “Eunice is reminiscent of Nabokov's Lolita in her adolescent physique, thralldom to consumer culture, and symbolic suggestiveness” (18).
- 9 Natalie Friedman notes a similar tension in Shteyngart's first novel, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, which is set in New York and a Prague-like European city in the mid-1990s. While the Old World of Eastern Europe is associated with “remembering, reminiscing, or even vicariously reliving moments” (78), America, for Shteyngart, “is characterized as a land of anti-nostalgia or anti-memory” (77).

- 10 In *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fisher cites the well-known dictum, variously attributed to Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” (2). *Super Sad* offers an interesting variation on this thesis, in that Shteyngart does not imagine the end of capitalism but does imagine the end of money, or at least the end of the US dollar’s hegemony as the de facto currency of global capitalism. To borrow Fisher’s description of the world of Alfonso Cuarón’s 2006 film *Children of Men*, the world of *Super Sad* “seems more like an extrapolation or exacerbation of ours than an alternative to it” (2). Shteyngart may not imagine a world that eclipses the horizon of capitalism, but by speculating about the decline of the American dollar, he does present a world in which the coordinates of global capitalism have been seriously scrambled.

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