



## Ending aging in the Shteyngart of Eden: Biogerontological discourse in a *Super Sad True Love Story*

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### ABSTRACT

This article broaches the topic of biogerontology as presented in Gary Shteyngart's dystopic novel *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) from the perspective of cultural and literary gerontology and examines how the novel manages to challenge predominant discourses in the field of scientific anti-aging studies, especially the notion that old age is a disease that can be cured. It compares the novel's presentation of biogerontological knowledge to current developments in the field, using Cambridge biogerontologist and immortality prophet Aubrey de Grey's book *Ending Aging* (2007) as an example. Based on the assumption that cultural criticism can and should impact scientific and medical research on aging, this paper asks whether (the analysis of) fictional texts can be seen as a cultural critical intervention into the ageism so often openly displayed in scientific discourses.

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### Introduction: Indefinite life extension — a dystopia?

"I work in the creative economy,' I said proudly. Indefinite life extension. We're going to help people live forever. I'm looking for European HNWIs – that's High Net Worth Individuals – and they're going to be our clients. We call them 'Life Lovers'" says Lenny Abramov, the protagonist of Gary Shteyngart's latest novel *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010: 12). Lenny works in the "Post Human Services division," which is the research branch of the massive multinational Staatling Wapachung corporation, that offers the promise of indefinite life extension to wealthy customers thanks to nanotechnology, super-antioxidants, and other innovative biomedical technologies, while also dealing in homeland security and more or less running what is

left of the United States. The novel is set in a near-future dystopic New York, the country is at war with Venezuela, the collapsing dollar is pegged to the Yuan, the national threat level is constantly on "red – imminent danger" (Shteyngart, 2010: 238), and the relationship with China has reached a point where an invasion is looming. iPhones (referred to as "äppäräti"), Twitter ("teen") and MySpace/Facebook ("GlobalTeens") determine people's lives, and credit poles are put up everywhere in the streets of Manhattan, flashing each individual's credit ranking while the äppäräti not only live-stream what their owners think but also broadcast their "personality and fuckability ranking" (Shteyngart, 2010: 29) as well as other data including consumer profile, blood pressure, ailments, or sexual preferences to the public. The novel is a satirical account extrapolating "every toxic development already at large in America to farcical extremes" (Kakutani, 2010, para. 4). The exaggerated fixation of its characters with longevity, youth, and beauty is only one of many levels of social criticism in the book that draws a rather dark picture of contemporary American society. Shteyngart presents, as Ruth Franklin (2010: 41) puts it in her review in *The New*

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*Republic*, a “worst-case scenario, a dystopian American culture sexed up, dumbed down, and digitized ad absurdum.”

In the context of aging studies, however, the most interesting aspect of the novel is its vivid illustration of the recent progress in biogerontology that has in the past few years led to a heated debate on the subject of human lifespan extension.<sup>1</sup> The central conflict Lenny Abramov finds himself in – asking, in essence, what being human, and thus aging, is all about – pinpoints ethical and moral aspects of such biogerontological research. The novel broaches the age-old question if immortality is desirable by satirically picking up on current biogerontological discourses that present aging and old age as a disease that can be cured. It subversively deconstructs normative age concepts and challenges the binary opposition of “young” and “old” by caricaturizing the characters’ obsession with youth and beauty and their stereotypical assumptions regarding aging and old age.

Against this backdrop, a *super sad love story* develops between the 39 year “old” protagonist Lenny (like the author himself the son of Jewish–Russian immigrants) and his girlfriend, the 24 year “young”, beautiful, and extremely hip Korean–American Eunice Park. Both Lenny and Eunice try to come to terms with their hybrid identities and migratory backgrounds, a fact that ties the couple together as much as it separates them. The tensions that arise between them, not least because of their age difference, become visible already through the book’s narrative technique. The story is mainly told via Lenny’s old-fashioned diary entries and Eunice’s chat and email messages from her “Global Teens” account. Their different approaches to communication and media, however, are only one of the many ways that express how Lenny and Eunice are not suited for each other. “For me to fall in love with Eunice Park just as the world fell apart would be a tragedy beyond the Greeks,” (Shteyngart, 2010: 108) Lenny writes in his diary. While Lenny seems to be an allegory of old-fashioned twentieth century intellectuality and belongs to a cohort that sociologists would classify as “Generation X,”<sup>2</sup> Eunice embodies the “Millennial Generation”<sup>3</sup> – “the first generation in human history who regards behaviors like tweeting and texting, along with websites like Facebook, YouTube, Google and Wikipedia, not as astonishing innovations of the digital era, but as everyday parts of their social lives and their search for

understanding” (Keeter & Taylor, 2009). As a matter of fact, Eunice is constantly online, discussing intimate details of her and Lenny’s love life with her sister and friends. However, Lenny is attracted and confused at the same time by the young woman who treats him badly:

When dealing with people my own age, I know precisely who I am. Not physically attractive, but at least well educated, decently paid, working at the frontiers of science and technology (even though I have the same finesse with my *äppärät* as my aged immigrant parents). On Planet Eunice Park, these attributes clearly did not matter. I was some kind of ancient dork. (Shteyngart, 2010: 22)

In fact, this is how Eunice perceives him. In her online conversations she calls him a “wheelchair geezer” and an “old gross guy” (Shteyngart, 2010: 28) – ageist descriptions that he internalizes from the first day of their relationship onwards. He portrays himself as a schlemiel, the owner of “a bald spot whose shape perfectly replicates the great state of Ohio, with its capital city, Columbus, marked by a deep brown mole” (Shteyngart, 2010: 5) and describes his aging body with self-deprecating humor:

A slight man with a gray, sunken battleship of a face, curious wet eyes, a giant gleaming forehead on which a dozen cavemen could have painted something nice... *Slight*. Slightness is my curse in every sense. A so-so body in a world where only an incredible one will do. A body at the chronological age of thirty-nine already racked with too much LDL cholesterol, too much ACTH hormone, too much of everything that dooms the heart, sunders the liver, explodes all hope. (Shteyngart, 2010: 4–5)

This passage not only illustrates Lenny’s lack of self-esteem but also points to the dilemma he finds himself in: Torn between the pleasures of “Earth 1.0 – *tortelli lucchese*, pistachio ice cream, the early works of the Velvet Underground,” (Shteyngart, 2010: 5) and the ‘brave new world’ he lives in where everybody is obsessed with immortality and online shopping with “AssLuxury,” he constantly feels alienated and hopes to soon have saved up enough money to participate in his company’s anti-aging program that would grant him eternal youth: “Do you think you can put me in for some dechronification treatment at a reduced rate,” he asks his boss. “Just basic soft-tissue maintenance, and maybe a few bio years shaved off?” (Shteyngart, 2010: 126).

This article broaches the topic of biogerontology as presented in the *Super Sad True Love Story* from the perspective of literary gerontology and examines how the novel manages to challenge predominant discourses in the field of scientific anti-aging studies, especially the notion that old age is a disease<sup>4</sup> that can be cured (de Grey, 2007: 10). It will compare the novel’s presentation of biogerontological knowledge to current developments in the field, using Cambridge biogerontologist and immortality prophet Aubrey de Grey’s book *Ending Aging* (2007) as an example.

<sup>4</sup> An overview of relevant publications that deal with the question whether aging can be seen as a disease has been provided by Thomas Schramme (2009).

<sup>1</sup> There are numerous approaches to biomedical enhancement of the human lifespan. For a more detailed analysis, see Peter Derkx (2009), who distinguishes between four different possible outcomes: extended morbidity, compressed morbidity, decelerated morbidity, and arrested senescence (178–181).

<sup>2</sup> “Despite the tendency of many commentators to attribute its origin to Douglas Coupland’s 1991 novel of the same name, the term ‘Generation X’ first appeared in print in the early 1950s as the name for his project that would capture, through photographs and interviews, the lives of twenty-year olds in the aftermath of World War II. Since then, ‘Generation X’ has always signified a group of young people, seemingly without identity, who face an uncertain, ill-defined (and perhaps hostile) future” (Ulrich, 2003: 3). Commonly, the term signifies a generation of people born between the early 1960s and the early 1980s.

<sup>3</sup> Among the first to use this term were William Strauss and Neil Howe in their 1991 book *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069*. They continued to analyze the US American Millennial generation in their 2000 volume, *Millennials Rising. The Next Great Generation* (Howe, Matson, & Strauss).

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