Anna Fishzon, Duke University

“Queer Temporality, Russian-American Fiction, and the Specter of Soviet Childhood”

My paper is the inaugural foray into the second half of a two-part book project on Brezhnev-era temporality. Briefly, the first part of the project and backdrop for this paper elaborates the thesis that a queer temporality emerged during Brezhnev’s time, the so-called era of stagnation, when the Stalinist past was unspeakable and the future postponed or foreclosed. In response to the limited horizon of “developed socialism”—the loss of narrative coherence and futurity, the never-to-arrive communist promise—a libidinally saturated present rich in possibility and feeling was depicted and brought into being in popular animated films, providing a revitalizing time and space where one could desire again.

The second part of the project and heart of this paper argues that the presentist, queer time conveyed by late-socialist animation also structured social formations like the queue, as well as the narrative fiction and autobiographical statements of contemporary Russian-American writers, specifically the novels of Olga Grushin, David Bezmozgis, and Gary Shteyngart. Echoes of Brezhnev-era temporality raise the ghost of the late-socialist child, a child who did not grow up. Perhaps the Soviet youngster’s failure to become what s/he latently was brings to light the “queer temporality haunting all children.” As Kathryn Stockton reminds us, “the child is precisely who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back.” But if the figure of the child is always a memorial to the death of a former (fictional) self, the Soviet child, having fallen out of history, arrested in development, is not readily available to its adult self for retrospective integration of feelings, desires, and fantasies. Drawing on the work of psychoanalyst Maria Torok, I propose that the death of the Soviet Union, particularly as a vehicle of temporality, has left “introduction” (and thus the work of mourning) incomplete, producing a fixation in post-Soviet adults. Torok understood introjection as a process whereby the ego extends its autoerotic interests -- is broadened and enhanced -- by taking into itself the traits of an external love object. When an object is not properly introjected because of sudden loss or rejection, an imaginal fixation ensues and mourning continues indefinitely. The love object in question here is not the Soviet Union but late-Soviet temporality and the recreations of the Brezhnev-era notion of time constitute the “fixation” of Russian-American novels like Grushin’s The Line (2010), Bezmozgis’s The Free World (2011), and Shteyngart’s Super Sad True Love Story (2010).

Nataša Milas

“Maturing Into Non-Fiction: Gary Shteyngart’s Little Failure and Aleksandar Hemon’s The Book of My Lives”

Immigrant literature has been in the forefront of American literary production in recent years, exemplified by Gary Shteyngart and Aleksandar Hemon, immigrant writers who are also among the most popular writers in American letters today. The portrayal of their immigrant selves in America, paired with their use of humor, has found great appeal with American audience. Now in their mid-careers, both writers have turned to exploring non-fiction genres, Hemon in his book of essays, The Book of my Lives, and Shteyngart in his memoir Little Failure.
My paper will consider the pivotal turn these two writers made from creating fictional selves to exploring autobiographical truths. Humor, an essential element in both writers’ styles, remains an important literary device in their non-fiction. Shteyngart finds humor in *Little Failure* to be “a launching missal” of his narrative, essentially delivering “sadness” or “melancholy,” while Hemon views humor as “a positive conversion of personal, historical, and cultural rage.” As I aim to show in my paper, both writers’ maturation into non-fiction, with its concomitant elevations of openness and intimacy, marks an important new dimension in the project of *writing the self* within a rich tradition of American immigrant literature.

**Margarita Levantovskaya**

“*Gary Shteyngart: Jewish Failure, Russian-American Success*”

My paper examines Gary Shteyngart's representations of the failure to become Jewish by Russian-speaking immigrants in the US. More specifically, I compare Shteyngart's recent memoir *Little Failure* and 2006 novel *Absurdistan*, paying attention to their generic differences but also highlighting their common goal to depict Russian-American Jews' struggles with cultural authenticity after emigration. For example in each text, a young emigrant from the former Soviet Union involuntarily submits to a circumcision at the behest of a Soviet-educated father who wishes to overcompensate for his own alienation from Jewish culture. As Shteyngart's writings show, this internalized sense of inauthenticity results, in part, from the encounter of Russian-Jews with American Jews, who predominantly view the immigrants as "non-Jewish Jews" or "more Russian than Jewish." My talk will illustrate that Shteyngart's fiction criticizes such binary and essentialist constructions of identity through images of corporeal suffering produced by Russian-Jews' unsuccessful attempts to become "real Jews." I will also argue that Shteyngart's fiction instead promotes a hybrid, Russian-Jewish-American diasporic identity as an alternative to static definitions of Jewishness.

**Sasha Senderovich**

“*Russian American Jewish Writers and the Critique of Self-orientalization*”

David Bezmozgis, Anya Ulinich, Boris Fishman, and Gary Shteyngart—part of a cohort of émigré Jewish writers from the Soviet Union who have started to publish in English in the last decade—offer stories that make us question pat assumptions about Soviet Jews. Their writings offer distinctive perspectives on the way that Soviet Jews construct narratives that will be attractive to their American Jewish counterparts and the ways that, in turn, Soviet Jews are themselves constructed by those narratives. Who are the Soviet Jews, these works invite us to ask, and how are they different from the concept of “the Soviet Jews” that has crystallized in the North American Jewish imagination? How can we differentiate between real experiences that may be shared among Jewish émigrés from the Soviet Union and, on the other hand, the constructed nature of narratives written about these experiences? How do those in the new cohort of Jewish writers from the former USSR make their English-language readers question Cold War dichotomies and why do they repeatedly point to ways in which Soviet patterns of thinking weren’t always so different from those in the West?

Their work, I will argue in this paper, is characterized by reflection on and critique—often, satirical—of an intriguing process of self-orientalization by émigré Jews from the Soviet Union. Self-orientalization is a concept stemming from Edward Said’s writing about how Western Orientalists constructed the image of the Orient in such a way
that turned “Orientals” themselves into native informants who parrot the West’s assumptions about them; it has been more recently applied more broadly to the study of other displaced populations. In the works of Soviet-born émigré Jewish Anglophone writers, the critique of self-orientalization, I argue, stems from these writers’ engagement with images of the Soviet Jew constructed in North America during the Cold War. These authors write in English, a language in which the “Soviet Jew” had become a powerful cultural and political trope, particularly as a result of the American Jewish engagement in the Soviet Jewry movement. In doing so, I argue, Soviet-born Jewish writers are forced to reconcile this cultural image with the more diverse and idiosyncratic identities of their Soviet and post-Soviet Jewish protagonists, some of whom mold their behavior in line with the Western image of them, and some of whom satirize and subvert it.

Nyusya Milman-Miller

“To Hell and Back”: The Theme of Purgatory in David Bezmozgis’ The Free World

The mass movement of Russian Jews to North America could be seen as the latest historical development in a 4,000-year-old saga. Looking for a better life in a free country became a recurrent theme for the descendants of Abraham over the millennia. The Captivity in Egypt, in Babylon, in Imperial Rome and the desire to escape from slavery was rightfully seen as a journey to Freedom. Centuries later, pogroms gave rise to a new journey from Tsarist Russia and led the first generation of Russian Jews to an American “paradise.” The “emigrant experience” became one of the most popular themes in American Jewish literature. The dislocation and nostalgia of Jewish emigrants in the 20th century inspired American Jewish writers from Henry Roth to Samuel Bellow.

The experiences of the second wave of Jewish emigrants, who escaped Europe on the eve of the Catastrophe, and the survivors of the Nazi concentration camps of WWII, gave birth to another phenomenon of Jewish American literature—literature of the Holocaust.

The new, third wave of Jewish emigration, was originally triggered by the Dymshits-Kuznetsof hijacking affair in 1970. Ленинградское дело drew international attention to human rights violations in the USSR, which eventually resulted in the loosening of emigration restrictions to the West. Soviet Jews, who had experienced a “paradise” of a different kind—the “workers paradise”, fled to America searching for Freedom: freedom of religion, freedom of speech and, of course, freedom of artistic expression. After years of writing for the desk drawer, Jewish Russian writers and intellectuals were finally able to write without the restriction of censorship. From Dovlatov and Limonov to Aksyonov and Brodsky, their works offered views on the interaction of Russian and American cultures and provided a window into the lives and thoughts of Russian Jews discovering America. Unfortunately, limited to a Russian speaking audience, this literature was doomed to be perceived as marginal. It took over two decades and a new generation of Jewish-Russian Americans to bring these themes into contemporary American literature.

David Bezmozgis’ tenderly written novel The Free World centers on the journey of the Krasnyanskiys, a large three-generation family. Instead of telling the familiar émigré story about difficulties of the transition in the new country, the author concentrates on the bi-polar generational perceptions of the emigration itself. Set in Rome in the summer and fall of 1978, Bezmozgis’ novel addresses the hostility and confusion experienced by former Soviet citizens in their first encounter with the free
world. Arriving to Rome en route, anxious, adrift and fragile, the Krasnaynskiys remain there for months while awaiting visas to enter Canada. Neither a place of arrival nor departure, Rome becomes their place in-between - their way station and purgatory. The proposed paper is devoted to an analysis of the theme of purgatory in Bezmozgis’s novel and his use of artistic allusion in relation to the new emigrant experience in this unique moment of Jewish history.

Jeffrey Taylor
“The Post-Soviet Poetics of Regina Spektor”
Regina Spektor’s rigorous training in piano, starting in the Soviet Union, and continued throughout her youth in the United States, helps to explain her skills in composing complex and unexpected pop music. Less obvious, though, would be an understanding of the literary skills inherent in the lyrics to her songs. This presentation examines the poetics in Spektor’s work in order to understand her commonalities with other literary figures who have emerged from the same wave of Soviet Jewish emigration. From the title of her first major label release, Soviet Kitsch, we find references to the writings of other East Bloc émigrés, in this case Milan Kundera, and the problem of Kitsch, or idealized images of holy entities divorced of their ugly realities. The same problem of kitsch or idealization affects immigrant idealizations of their homeland. Finding a new voice in a new language has become a solution for numerous exiled Russian writers, and their ethos of cosmopolitanism through art has remained a survival mechanism for generations of transplants who find meaning in constructing a new aesthetic language out of an adopted one.

Anna Katsnelson
“Identity and Pictorial Representation in the First Russian-Jewish Graphic Novel”
The graphic narrative is a powerful force in contemporary literature. The only fiction writer to win a MacArthur Fellowship in 2014 was graphic novelist Alison Bechdel, author of Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic. This year also marked the debut of the first Russian Jewish American graphic narrative, Anya Ulinich’s Lena Finkle’s Magic Barrel. Along with other works by contemporary cartoonists—Bechdel, Art Spiegelman, Joe Sacco, and Marjane Satrapi—Anya Ulinich’s Lena Finkle is a self-referential, autobiographical graphic narrative. While fiction and autobiographical works by Russian Jewish writers have always engaged with educating the American reader in questions of Russian-Jewish ethnicity, never before has the American reader been able to visualize the traumatic Russian Jewish experience of alienation from the majority culture in Russia, immigration to the US, and assimilation. Lena Finkle belongs to a genre that crosses multiple mediums, and brings a painful identity into visual focus. This presentation will show that in an age of multiple-media artistic production and the ascendance of the visual over the traditional narrative form, Lena Finkle sets the stage for a powerful visual dialogue about identity, ethnicity, and transnationalism. These often discussed topics are amplified though her adult narrator and then through the illustrations that evoke Ulinich’s own memories of being a young adult who lived through immigration, acculturation, and assimilation. The use of illustrations allows for an additional level of complexity to the perception of the Russian Jewish immigrant experience. By infusing simple, clean images with as much humor as she imparts to her words she ensures that her readers/viewers will
associate with her character. This presentation gives an overview of her life and work, then shows her transformation from a writer specializing in the novelistic genre into one who combines more than two genres in her oeuvre, and third explores how her specialty as a graphic artist influences her themes in this novel, and vice versa. The presentation pays particular attention to the issues of multiple identities that Ulinich addressed in her first novel Petropolis, but explores further with illustrations in Lena Finkle.

Elizaveta Mankovskaya

“How Michael Idov Became a Russian: Ground Up in Russia”

The paper examines the critical reception of Michael Idov’s Ground Up (2009) that was translated into Russian by the author and became quite popular in Russian literary community. The paper analyzes critical reviews of the novel and the interviews given by Idov to Russian journalists (2009-2010) and investigates how Idov constructs his identity as a writer and how expectations of the journalists as well as the success of the novel in Russia gradually shift the image that he creates.

In the early interviews Idov insists that he is not a Russian but an American and writes in English better than in Russian, his novel although based on his real experience is not at all his memoirs, and the main character, Mark Scharf, is of Russian-Jewish origin only by accident or because of literary motifs. He also maintains that he has nothing to do with the Russian emigre community and that Ground Up is not an emigre novel. Finally and most importantly, he stresses that he should not be viewed as a Russian writer, his novel in Russian is merely a translation and even the conflict of the book is completely foreign to Russian readers.

However, the questions and suggestions of the critics, who try to include his novel in the emigre literary context and that of the Russian literature and language while confirming Idov’s claim that his novel should be viewed as a product of Western literature, step by step, interview by interview, change the identity that Idov communicates. From the image of self that denies his Russian roots he comes to the one that recognizes Russian classic and emigre literature influences with the result that Idov not only starts speculating about the Russian literary process but also accepts the Russian identity on a personal level sharing memories of his Russian-speaking Latvian past.

Metaphorically speaking, it could be said that following the debut of his book in Russia Idov acts out the identity crisis of the Ground Up main character, Mark Scharf with a similar outcome. Embracing his Russian heritage and adding it to the mix of American, Jewish and in general Western as opposed to Soviet identity he finds a place not only in the Russian literary process but also in Russian business. His further career in Russia - the editor-in-chief of Russian GQ (2012-2014), the creative director and a playwright for the company Art Pictures could be owed to the initial success of his book in Russia and to the openness of his position: not too Russian, not too American but easily navigating the territories of different identities.

Jesper Reddig (Münster)

“Re-Negotiating the Americanization of Tevye: Intertextuality and Meta-Fiction in Nadia Kalman’s The Cosmopolitans”

In the context of post-Soviet Jewish American migrant fiction, Nadia Kalman’s 2010 The Cosmopolitans can count as a second-generation text. Earlier works, such as
the debut novels by Gary Shteyngart, Lara Vapnyar, and Anya Ulinich, crossed imagined boundaries by introducing a formerly uncharted discursive space to a U.S. readership. Structurally, however, these novels’ staging of the “American-in-the-making” (Bercovitch), the gradually strong individual whose journey from the Old World in time resolves smoothly in the New, did not yet break free from a normative American master plot. *The Cosmopolitans*, in contrast, enacts a multiplicity of voices, a sometimes non-linear storyline, and a complex web of intertextual and meta-fictional references, by means of which Kalman enters into a critical dialogue with both her Soviet-born predecessors and a larger tradition of Jewish writing.

I will draw on two of *The Cosmopolitans*’ intertexts—Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* and especially the *Fiddler on the Roof* folktale—in order to show how Kalman challenges the grand narrative of Americanization. Just as the eponymous three sisters of Chekhov’s 1901 play, Milla, Yana, and Katya Molochnik of *The Cosmopolitans* spend a meager life in the rural province, longing to leave behind the small-town immigrant household and move to the metropolis (from Perm to Moscow in Chekhov, from Stamford to Boston in Kalman). And just as the daughters of Tevye the dairyman from the *Fiddler* saga, Milla, Yana, and Katya epitomize the advent of New World modernization, as their choices of unconventional spouses—a homosexual woman, a Bangladeshi Muslim, and a small-time crook, respectively—clash with the parent generation’s Old World traditionalism.

At first glance, Kalman seems to contradict the existential stasis known from Chekhov’s pessimistic drama by forging a happy ending, with the Molochnik family making a fortune in Boston at *The Cosmopolitans*’ conclusion. The novel appears to solidify the normative trope of the American dream. However, a careful reconstruction of the narrative voice that navigates us through Kalman’s text reveals that, on a deeper level of reading, the whole family saga is a self-subversive, meta-fictional invention. It is told, and always already interpreted, from the perspective of the three sisters’ uncle, an unreliable story-teller. Once his shadowy existence in the plotline has been distinguished, it is possible to identify him as a depressive, broken man, all day sitting in the attic—“on the roof”—of a low-income housing project. His only joy is in letting loose his imagination and determining, indeed inventing, the fates of his family members.

This second level of Kalman’s text, then, bit by bit projects the biography of a disillusioned refusenik: even after having migrated to the proverbial land of promise, all around him he observes a world gone mad, scarcely redeemable through the work of fiction. Seth Wolitz has argued in his seminal article on “The Americanization of Tevye” that in the long tradition of adaptations and transformations of *Fiddler on the Roof*, it was the Broadway and Hollywood versions of the 1960s and ’70s that most powerfully reaffirmed “the American ideals of individual[ism], progress, and freedom.” As I will hold, *The Cosmopolitans* spells discontinuity to this narrative and re-appropriates Sholem Aleichem’s original version of the tale (1894-1914), which displayed profound skepticism vis-à-vis the supposed promise of America.

Julia Kolchinsky Dasbach

“The Dancing ‘Storyteller’: Situating Ilya Kaminsky’s Collection

Dancing in Odessa as Poetry of Inherited Witness

This paper will examine Ilya Kaminsky’s first poetry collection *Dancing in Odessa*. After being granted political refugee status in 1993, Kaminsky and his family
emigrated from Odessa, Ukraine. My paper analyzes Kaminsky’s work in terms of the literary tradition and memory of Soviet and Jewish collective violence. Kaminsky's writings engage in a trans-generational, historic, and linguistic dialogue with key Soviet poets of direct witness (as defined by Milosz in Witness of Poetry)—a dialogue that may be interpreted (or perhaps problematized) as a kind of literary inheritance. My analysis asks whether Cathy Caruth’s framework for the study of trauma in cultural texts, and particularly that of traumatic departure as taken from and applied to Freud, is applicable to Kaminsky’s lyric arch and to the his decision to compose in English while situating himself within the identity of a Russian speaking, Jewish refugee, Ukrainian émigré in the United States. While Kaminsky alludes to a multitude of literary figures—not necessarily limited to Soviet writers, as Kaminsky also has a dedication to Paul Celan, who is part of Kaminsky’s literary ancestry in connection to both lyric poise and Jewish ethnicity—this paper focuses on the way Kaminsky addresses traumas endured and written about by Anna Akhmatova as well as Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam, likening them to his own biographical experience of exile from the former USSR.

I analyze the aesthetic and literary devices of allusion, epigraph, and dedication, as well as Kaminsky’s formal choice of genre as related to the poetics of his predecessors. Bringing in Peter Sacks and Jahan Ramazani’s theories on the genre of elegy, this paper shows how Kaminsky’s collection reaches towards and strives to reconstruct a traumatic past. While the crux of this paper’s argument suggests an active or even chosen inheritance with respect to the traumatic past, Jewishness—passed down through blood in traditional history and through collective memory in literary and cultural discourse—is more of a hereditary inheritance that emerges, perhaps even involuntarily or unconsciously, in Kaminsky’s work and potentially that of his predecessors. Echoing Freud’s seminal concept of belatedness, I argue that Kaminsky’s poetry constructs a dynamic space that is neither traumatic nor post-traumatic, but rather a temporally fluid yet historically engaged lyric space I term inherited witness.