# Introduction: Postsocialist Literatures in the United States

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This special issue calls attention to an emergent body of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century cultural productions by first- and 1.5-generation US immigrants from nations in the former Eastern Bloc, a Cold War geography dominated by the former Soviet Union. Authors like Yelena Akhtiorskaya, Vera Brosgol, Dagmara Dominczyk, Boris Fishman, Elena Gorokhova, Olga Grushin, Aleksandar Hemon, Nadia Kalman, Sana Krasikov, Ellen Litman, Oksana Marafioti, Téa Obreht, Miroslav Penkov, Ismet Prcic, Domnica Rădulescu, Natasha Radojčić, Gary Shteyngart, Saviana Stănescu, Anya Ulinich, and Lara Vapnyar were born in various Eastern Bloc nations and came to the United States as part of a large-scale movement in the context of dramatic late twentieth-century transformations in these countries. While much of their creative work has been nominated for, or obtained, literary awards and become the object of worldwide translation, it has received far less critical attention from US-based literary scholars.

Predominantly written in English, the new cultural productions highlight key events in the former Eastern Bloc, which have shaped the formation of Cold War imaginaries in the United States in the twentieth century and beyond. This new work examines the legacies of state socialism and the Cold War, and it represents diasporic practices by immigrants from former Eastern Bloc nations, leading up to and following the disintegration of socialism and the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Rather than analyzing the new cultural texts as contributions to an emerging discrete ethnic subtype of US immigrant fiction, this special issue places the creative work in dialogue with the evolving scholarly focus on the transnationality of US cultural productions and their critical lenses on US nationalism, empire, and global forms of neoliberalism. The


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authors' emphasis on the emergence of US diasporas from the former Eastern Bloc enriches theories of US multiethnic immigrant writing, which have highlighted this work's critique of US empire as well as its attention to transnational connections between the Global South and the United States. The new works' portrayal of state socialism and its aftermath also illuminates the continued relevance of Cold War paradigms, which still influence US policies toward postsocialist nations as well as toward other geographies affected by the "war on terror."

The cultural productions examined in this special issue emerged after the fall of European state socialism, "a twin, if failed project of capitalist modernity" (Atanasoski and Vora 2018: 150), which enabled the arrival of capitalist and neoliberal policies that had already been unevenly implemented in other parts of Europe and the United States. By the late 1980s, Eastern Bloc countries had enjoyed relatively high levels of social welfare and human development (Kaneff and Pine 2011: 8). But the liberalization of price and currency controls, the withdrawal of state benefits, and the large-scale privatization of public assets in the late 1980s led to years of severe economic stagnation, high unemployment, and the rise of a small but powerful class of oligarchs who reaped most of the benefits of the transitions (Klein 2007). The dramatic economic, political, and social consequences of these rapid changes included an unprecedented rise in inequality, falling life expectancies and birth rates, declining living standards, and widespread impoverishment (Kaneff and Pine 2011: 2). Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and the USSR disintegrated into several nations, with Yugoslavia experiencing the most violent of breakups in a series of wars between 1991 and 2001. Some newly independent post-Soviet nations, particularly Georgia and Ukraine, also became the target of armed conflicts with the Soviet Union's largest successor state, post-Soviet Russia, which also engaged in hostilities with its own republic of Chechnya.

The dramatic upheavals in these nations and the wars in Yugoslavia set in motion large out-migration from countries that had sent virtually no emigrants abroad during the Cold War. Socialist nations had restricted their residents' movement to other countries, particularly to the capitalist West. Because of its special, nonaligned status, Yugoslavia was able to send hundreds of thousands of guest workers to Germany and Austria in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But the majority of socialist countries only began to allow the emigration of small numbers of dissidents or

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members of religious minorities in the 1970s and 1980s. Starting in the 1970s, the Polish government also permitted its citizens to visit family in the United States, which some used as an opportunity to overstay their visas, work in a variety of jobs, and either stay or return to Poland with savings equivalent of a lifetime's earnings (Kaneff and Pine 2011: 17).

After the fall of state socialism, much larger numbers of people left their homes, mainly as religious refugees, or as labor or family migrants. The majority went to Western Europe, and Soviet Jews immigrated to Israel, Germany, the United States, and Canada. While much scholarship has addressed migration to Western Europe and its cultural representations (Kaneff and Pine 2011; Parvulescu 2014), the movement of formerly Second World residents to the United States since the late 1980s, including the massive influx of war refugees from the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, remains underexamined (except Croegaert 2011; Liebert 2009). According to the 2010 US Census, over two million people are estimated to have emigrated from nations in the former Eastern Bloc, half of them having come from the largest of those countries, the former Soviet Union.

Writer Anya Ulinich has perceptively commented on the link between growing migration from, in this case, the former USSR and the emergence of a body of US cultural productions by authors from this country. "The reason all of us appeared at more or less the same time," she argues, "has more to do with Russian politics than with literary trends":

> During the Soviet times, before Gorbachev came to power in Russia in 1986,[1] it was fairly difficult to emigrate, and fewer people came to the US. Starting in the late 1980s, it became easier to leave, and people began to arrive in droves. I suppose, statistically, more people mean more potential writers. All of the writers . . . , with the exception of Gary [Shteyngart, who arrived as a child in the late 1970s], came to the US in the early 1990s. It took us a while to grow up and learn English, and so here we are now. (2007)

We struggled to find an appropriate term to denote the background of the authors who have produced this body of work. So far we have used the term "Eastern Bloc" or "Second World" as a form of strategic essentialism to refer to countries that were controlled by the former Soviet Union following the post–World War II division of Europe,



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including Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Yugoslavia. These nations implemented similar features of state socialism, such as one-party rule and socialist property regimes, and officially proclaimed their intentions to work toward the utopian ideal of a communist world without property holders, economic classes, or nation-states. However, there were significant differences in each nation's economic development and the extent to which it adopted totalitarian features over time. Most prominently, Yugoslavia and Albania left the Warsaw Pact in 1948 and 1960, respectively, with Yugoslavia being especially vocal in proclaiming its nonalignment with Eastern Bloc politics and in adopting some capitalist economic policies that opened the country's markets to Western loans and allowed the emigration of some of its populace as guest workers.

In contrast to the term *Eastern Bloc*, which originated in the Cold War, the concept of "Eastern Europe" has remained highly contested, especially when used as a synonym for—or in opposition to—the notion of "Central Europe," whose nations have long desired Westernization and independence from the Soviet Union. Two international writers' conferences in the late 1980s highlighted significant disagreements among authors like Joseph Brodsky, Péter Esterházy, Václav Havel, Danilo Kiš, György Konrád, Milan Kundera, and Czesław Miłosz in their approaches to defining the notion of Eastern/Central European literature (Labov 2002). While subsequent endeavors to engage with the issue provided clearer definitions, these efforts were shaped by individual writers' agendas or their political contexts (Corniș-Pope and Neubauer 2004; Todorova 1997: 140–60), and sometimes also addressed Western audiences. More recently, scholars have argued for an "unmapping" of "Eastern Europe" that pays attention to the region's historical and contemporary transnational connections (Komska 2017: 7–8). These debates have been centrally shaped by views of the Soviet Union as "the other" against which "Eastern Europe" had to be defined or as the oppressor that had to be resisted. As a way to acknowledge the Soviet Union's colonizing role in the region, the USSR and its successor nations, including post-Soviet countries in Asia, tend to be excluded from the "Eastern Europe" label, which obscures the shared socialist and postsocialist features of all Eastern Bloc nations.

We call the post-1989 work of US immigrant authors from the former Eastern Bloc examined in this special issue "postsocialist." Even though some authors immigrated to the United States before the fall of



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socialism, their migration was either shaped by Cold War realities or by the impending decline of socialism and, partially, the increasing loosening of emigration restrictions. We draw on postsocialism as a concept that, in its most descriptive understanding denotes the histories of state socialism and its post-1989 aftermath in the unevenly aligned (or nonaligned) countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the USSR (or the former Soviet Union [FSU]) (Suchland 2011: 837). This term does not recognize the heterogeneity of socialism as implemented in various Eastern Bloc countries and also excludes its expressions in Caribbean, African, and Asian nations, geographies we do not consider in this special issue.[2] Even in the face of these methodological hazards, however, *postsocialist* seems more appropriate than *postcommunist* as a descriptor for the work of US immigrant writers from the former Eastern Bloc. This is because, in its most common, pejorative use, the term *communism* appropriates a concept designating the never-realized ideal of a utopian egalitarian society in order to portray the Eastern Bloc as a monolithic other—the ideological opponent of the capitalist "West" (Western Europe and the United States)—within a tripartite model of a globe divided into First, Second, and Third Worlds.

Nevertheless, individual contributors, and some of the creative work examined here, sometimes do employ *communism* to refer to the experiences of lived state socialism, and *postcommunism* to describe its afterlife. Postcommunism has wide circulation as a label for analyzing the transitions of individual countries toward capitalist property regimes as guided by neoliberal practices (Holmes 1997; Kennedy 2002; Mandelbaum 1996; Sakwa 1999). These inquiries have focused on the importance of global financial networks as means of economic and political domination, as well as on humanitarian interventions in formerly socialist countries as neocolonial types of conquest (Kovačević 2014: 335). *Postcommunism* has also come to refer to the collective traumatic experiences of lived socialism and neoliberal transitions and to the diversification of views on state socialism since the late 1980s. These perspectives acknowledge the repressive features of state socialism, such as the lack of democratic institutions and the persecution of dissidents, as well as the system's economic shortcomings, as manifested in the material deprivation suffered by many, if not most, residents of former Eastern Bloc nations. But as approaches to the socialist past have become more diversified, the terms *postcommunism* and *postsocialism* are now also used interchangeably to denote the ongoing revalorization—and



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commodification—of the everyday realities of lived socialism. This increasingly more popular emphasis partly underscores the tangible and immaterial social benefits provided by former socialist states (Kaneff and Pine 2011: 7), such as guaranteed employment and housing, as well as free health care and education (Boym 2001; Sadowski-Smith 1998; Şandru 2016; Todorova and Gille 2010), vis-à-vis an ailing global capitalist system.

Essays in this special issue explore cultural productions by US immigrant writers from the former Eastern Bloc that stress this geography's importance for the constitution of US (post)–Cold War imaginaries, the emergence of postsocialist US diasporas, and the evolution of global capitalism and US empire. These authors lived through state socialism or witnessed their home countries' traumatic transitions to capitalism, and those experiences influenced their critical approaches to the United States after their immigration. The writers have produced a wide variety of cultural representations, including fiction, poetry, and theater. The fiction often presents what are thinly disguised fictionalized autobiographical or intergenerational experiences of socialist and postsocialist trauma in the authors' home countries, which led to the protagonists' migration and later shaped their experiences of arrival, adaptation, and engagement in transnational practices in the United States and, in the case of David Bezmozgis or, more recently, Josip Novakovich, Canada. While much of the work questions stereotypical images of "Russia" or "Eastern Europe," some of the cultural productions also participate in or self-consciously problematize processes of self-exoticization that reaffirm these ideas for US audiences (Wanner 2011a). Post-Soviet Jewish writers in particular tend to reflect on Soviet Jews' relationship to North American Jewish communities in ways that appeal to US readers, but they often do so by complicating idealized portrayals of the new arrivals (Senderovich 2015b). While the articles collected here open a dialogue between postsocialist writing and critical approaches to contemporary US multiethnic immigrant literature, Aleksandar Hemon, Miroslav Penkov, Saviana Stănescu, and Gary Shteyngart also develop explicitly cross-ethnic and transnational perspectives on US immigrant cultures. Their cultural productions fictionalize connections between immigrants from various nations, not all of them from the former Eastern Bloc, and Blažević-Krietzman's and Hemon's work in particular links traumatic experiences of Cold War border crossings and military conflicts in Yugoslavia, in which the United States participated, to the ongoing "war on terror" and geographies in West Asia.



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By exploring how postsocialist literary productions connect the United States to countries of the former Eastern Bloc, contributors establish analytical and comparative transnational lenses that bridge several academic fields, including American, Slavic, immigration, and diaspora studies. They analyze connections between the United States and former Eastern Bloc countries in order to contribute to "transnational," "global," or "planetary" approaches (Fishkin 2005; Giles 2011; Dimock 2007) in American studies, whose emergence coincided with the entry of Eastern Bloc nations into capitalist relations in the 1980s and 1990s. The study of linkages between the United States and former Eastern Bloc nations also enriches the transnational scholarship that has focused on notions of racial alterity through the perspectives of postcolonial theory, US race theory, or critiques of US imperialism in the Global South (Jay 2010; Sharpe 1995; Singh and Schmidt 2000). In addition, an attention to connections between (post)socialist nations and the United States responds to concerns of comparative literature scholars about limitations posed by borders, languages, and disciplinary boundaries (Damrosch 2003; Saussy 2006; Spivak 2003).

So far, these trans- and internationalized academic frameworks have largely ignored linkages between the former Eastern Bloc and the United States as well as the emergence of postsocialist US diasporas and their cultural productions. Calls for the inclusion of literature by US immigrant authors from the former Eastern Bloc first appeared in the mid-1990s, mostly in response to the work by Cold War exiles like Eva Hoffman, who emigrated from Poland in the late 1950s and began publishing in the late 1980s.[3] But despite the phenomenal growth in the number of similar cultural productions since that time, Wai Chee Dimock's (2007: 10) point that Eastern Europe's "deep entanglement with American literature is just beginning to be recognized" has remained true today.

The lack of interest in the former Second World and its connections to the United States, which extends to virtual silence about the existence of US postsocialist diasporas, is centrally rooted in the persistence of Cold War notions of a tripartite globe. This framework othered the former Second World and its residents through ideological forms of alterity, characterizing communism as a monocultural, homogenizing, and totalitarian ideology that suppressed expressions of individual and group differences. Because communism became conflated with "Russianness" and the Soviet Union's global rule during the Cold War,

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the entire Eastern Bloc became coded as ethnically homogeneous, "white" European (Atanasoski 2013: 4–7, 22). As Atanasoski and Vora have argued, this Cold War belief continues to shape the view of communism as an obsolete ideology, and informs the idea that discussions of postsocialism are outdated and ought to be replaced by an attention to processes of racialization (2018: 142).

Residents and immigrants from (former) Eastern Bloc nations continue to be associated with a pan-European whiteness that evolved after World War II, following the virtual end of European migration, to encompass all those of European immigrant background in the United States, including those of Jewish descent who had come from different areas of Europe and assimilated to a Jewish American identity (Sadowski-Smith 2018). Marked as privileged in the US ethnic and racial hierarchy, this identity is simply extended to residents and immigrants from the former Eastern Bloc in ways that overlook the internal ethnic and national diversity of many of its countries, including the fact that several Soviet successor nations straddle Europe and Asia. Areas marked by the rise of new authoritarian regimes or the revalorization of Islam, as well as regions with large populations considered nonwhite, are either simply ignored in these approaches or are theorized under separate geographical labels, such as Central Asia, the Balkans, or the Caucasus (Suchland 2011: 844). During the 1990s, the geography of the Balkans in particular became constituted as a prime site of ethnoreligious conflict, so that then dominant US state ideologies of multiculturalism could be extended to frame US military intervention as a means of protecting the region's internal ethnic and religious diversity (Atanasoski 2013: 4).

In addition to persisting Cold War notions of alterity that attribute a privileged whiteness to the former Second World while simultaneously marking the ethnic and religious identities of some of its populations as nonwhite, postsocialist US cultural productions have also not received much attention because of Cold War disciplinary divisions that continue to shape academic approaches to this day. While Third World nations were predominantly analyzed through the lenses of anthropology and development theory, the Second World was studied chiefly by political scientists (Chari and Verdery 2009), and has only more recently become a subject of anthropological scholarship.

The study of (former) Eastern Bloc nations also appears to contribute little to multiethnic approaches or critiques of neoliberalism and US



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empire that have been the focus of much US humanities work (Atanasoski 2013; Lazarus 2012; Suchland 2015: 11). Postsocialist nations seem to have uncritically embraced neoliberalism by promoting the disappearance of their social welfare states as a necessary step toward Westernization/ Europeanization and membership in the European Union (Kovačević 2014: 335). In addition, especially those postsocialist countries with strong conservative nationalist ideologies and authoritarian regimes appear to have failed to develop the kind of politics of representation that has influenced much US ethnic and American studies scholarship.[4] However, the view of socialism as an obsolete, othered ideological formation, and of postsocialism as a complicit form of neoliberalism without a US-style identity politics, overlooks the ongoing revalorization of the egalitarian and social justice features that were partially implemented in socialist nations, while also overemphasizing the oppositional ability of US-style identity politics. As Nancy Fraser (2017) writes, until the 2016 US election elevated reactionary forms of neoliberalism to dominance, identity politics centrally informed what she calls US "progressive neoliberalist" policy making, which aimed to merely diversify, rather than to abolish social hierarchies, in ways fully compatible with neoliberalization.

The existing body of scholarship that links the former Eastern Bloc to the United States has focused on issues other than how the study of socialist and postsocialist experiences, including migration to the United States, can contribute to the ongoing internationalization of the US humanities and their critique of US nationalism, empire, and global neoliberalism. This work has instead explored the Americanization of individual Eastern Bloc nations (Antoszek and Delaney 2006; Kovacs 2007; Siefert 2006), the growing importance of US popular culture in Central and Eastern Europe (Nitzsche and Grünzweig 2013; Ramet and Crnković 2003), US media representations of postsocialist nations and their residents (Borcilă 2014), as well as the reception of American studies methodologies in individual postsocialist countries (Antoszek 2009; Bollobás 2002; Luca 2013; Mihăilă 2003).

Another prominent perspective, which was popularized in an article by David Chioni Moore (2001), tries to understand developments in the former Second World through postcolonial theory as an epistemic alternative to the uncritical language of neoliberal transformation and transition. While this transnational framework seeks to examine the place of the (former) Second World in the global order outside of old



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Cold War binaries, its privileging of postcolonial alterity to understand developments in the Eastern Bloc runs the risk of overlooking the particularities of state socialism and postsocialism (Atanasoski and Vora 2018). Approaches have included appropriating postcolonial methodologies to examine the aftermath of state socialism and its cultural productions (Kelertas 2006; Kołodziejczyk and Şandru 2012; Kovačević 2008; Owczarzak 2009; Pucherová and Gáfrik 2015), discussing the value of comparative studies of the postcolonial and postsocialist worlds (Chari and Verdery 2009; Parvulescu 2012 and 2015; Popescu 2003), and studying postsocialist immigrants in Western Europe (Samaluk 2016). Calls for the adoption of a "multiple border position" (Tlostanova 2012: 133) in postsocialist nations, acknowledgments of the global and transnational dimensions of postsocialism (Gille 2010; Suchland 2011), demands for the infusion of insights derived from postsocialist studies into postcolonial paradigms (Imre 2014), and critiques of postcolonial approaches to the former Eastern Bloc (Hrytsak 2015) could be enriched by comparative approaches to US multiethnic and immigrant cultural productions that are informed by American studies critiques of US nationalism, empire, and global neoliberalism.

The existing scholarship on US postsocialist writing emphasizes the uniqueness of the presented experiences. Slavic studies' approaches to writing from the former Yugoslavia emphasize its use of the Orientalist trope (Kovačević 2008) and its representation of the wars in Yugoslavia and their aftermath (Crnković 2012; Gorup 2013), while scholarship on post-Soviet cultural representations, particularly by artists of Jewish descent, has focused on their intertextual references to Russian literature or their relationship to Jewish American notions of identity and culture (Furman 2011; Katsnelson 2016; Senderovich 2015a, 2015b; Wanner 2011a, 2011b). Adrian Wanner, who contributes to this special issue, has pioneered a comparative diasporic approach to the study of Soviet-born writers in France, Germany, Israel, and North America, which focuses on the work's translingualism, its intertextuality with Russian literature, and its attempt to construct a collective "Russian" identity (2011a; 2011b; 2012).

On the rare occasion that they have paid attention to the new cultural productions, US-based American literary scholars or artists have subsumed the socialist/postsocialist particularities of the fictionalized events and their significance for analyses of US migration and empire under developing transnational or global frameworks. Bharati Mukherjee's

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(2011: 683) catalogue of writers who participate in a new form of US immigrant writing that she calls the "Literature of New Arrival" includes five immigrant authors from the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, namely David Bezmozgis, Olga Grushin, Aleksandar Hemon, Téa Obreht, and Gary Shteyngart. But Mukherjee completely ignores these writers' backgrounds in Europe when she asserts that the "Literature of New Arrival" encompasses a new "generation of *non-European* immigrant American authors" (our emphasis) and then proceeds to discuss in detail only the work by contemporary writers of Caribbean, Asian, and Latin American descent. Her attempt to define a new body of literature recognizable by its *non-Europeanness*, that is, the *nonwhiteness* of its writers, overlooks the complex ideological and racialized othering of residents and immigrants from the former Second World described earlier. Mukherjee emphasizes the nonwhiteness of "The Literature of Arrival" to contrast it with the work by descendants of early twentieth-century European immigrants, particularly Jewish American authors. She argues that Jewish immigrants who were viewed as religious refugees from pogroms "embraced America as they understood it, totally, without reservation or evasion" since for them "there was no going back to the homeland that had failed them . . . and assimilation was the goal they desired for their US-born offspring" (681). She posits that, in contrast to American Jewish literature, which according to her is partially modeled after traditional Anglo-American writing, the "Literature of New Arrival" employs new transnational aesthetics by fusing languages and by presenting proliferating plots and neglected histories of the authors' homelands.

Similarly to Mukherjee, who only gestures toward recognizing some of the most well-known US postsocialist literature as a form of US immigrant writing, other US critics have discussed individual postsocialist texts to bolster theories about the transnationality of contemporary US literary productions without acknowledging how the new works' focus on (post)socialism complements and challenges these paradigms of study. Caren Irr's (2013: 2) observations about the late twentieth-century rise of a transnational form of fiction, which she calls the "geopolitical novel," for instance, are informed by her reading of some US postsocialist writers, including Hemon and Shteyngart. She suggests that the geopolitical novel is characterized not so much by the biographies or nationalities of its producers, or the places where they reside, but by the writers' focus on transnational connections between the United States and

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other geographies. But in developing this global focus, Irr pays little attention to the particularities of the postsocialist cultural productions she examines and the political and economic context of their emergence. Still other scholars have shown how some postsocialist texts criticize facets of US ideology, while overlooking their status as US immigrant narratives and their attention to connections between the United States and the former Eastern Bloc (Lurie 2013). Another trend has been to discuss post-Soviet cultural productions by authors of Jewish descent as an extension of twentieth-century American Jewish literature. While the work by post-USSR Jewish authors indeed reintroduces Jewish writing into the territory of US immigrant literature (Furman 2011), critics tend to overgeneralize the new texts' similarities with twentieth-century American Jewish literature, particularly when they posit that post-Soviet fiction focuses on the new arrivals' desire to adapt to US culture (Sadowski-Smith 2018). As the articles in this special issue show, this perspective overlooks the new work's more complex transnational subject matter and aesthetics, as well as its contributions to critiques of US nationalism and empire, which render it similar to other contemporary US immigrant writing.

Contributors to this special issue move beyond existing scholarly approaches to explore how the work by (post-)Soviet and Central/Eastern European immigrants represents and constitutes new transnational imaginaries that enrich and challenge theories of US cultural productions created by immigrants. Neda Atanasoski (2013: 27) has argued that the use of ethnography to understand developments in postsocialist countries needs to be supplemented by the study of media, political rhetoric, and academic and activist discourses, as well as literary and visual texts. The cultural productions examined in this special issue constitute such objects of study and theory as they highlight the extension of global neoliberalism and US military, political, economic, and cultural involvement in the Eastern Bloc, which contributed to large-scale outmigration from this territory.

## Postsocialist US Immigrant Writing

Joseph Benatov opens the special issue with a polemical essay that emphasizes the underexamined centrality of the former Eastern Bloc for the evolution of American studies. In his article "Transnational American



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Studies: A Postsocialist Phoenix," Benatov discusses the work of F. O. Matthiessen, one of the leading figures for the institutionalization of US literary studies. In his accounts of his 1940s travels through several socialist countries in Europe, Matthiessen places critiques of US anticommunism alongside criticism of US empire toward the postcolonial world. But genealogies of American studies have ignored this highly political aspect of Matthiessen's work and instead tend to characterize his scholarship as a key contribution to the evolution of formalist, nonpolitical perspectives. Benatov's essay concludes by positing that the fall of European state socialism freed politically engaged Americanist scholarship critical of US empire from its alleged connections with communism and thus elevated these perspectives to a position of centrality just as the field was moving toward more global frameworks. Benatov argues that by not acknowledging the role the former Eastern Bloc has played in this evolution of American studies, scholars run the risk of overlooking the current reemergence and expansion of Cold War paradigms in the US cultural and political imaginary, and of continuing to marginalize more labor-oriented leftist critiques in the field.

While Benatov's essay focuses on the understudied centrality of the former Eastern Bloc as a geography and ideological figure in the evolution of American studies, Ioana Luca's article develops a comparative framework for analyses of US postsocialist writing. In "Postsocialist Fiction and Frameworks: Miroslav Penkov, Lara Vapnyar, and Aleksandar Hemon," Luca comparatively examines the work of US-based writers from Bulgaria, the former USSR, and the former Yugoslavia—Penkov's *East of West* (2011), Vapnyar's "Puffed Rice and Meatballs" (2004) and *The Scent of Pine* (2015), and Hemon's *Love and Obstacles* (2009). This work creates new transnational reading publics by connecting the histories of several postsocialist nations to the United States. Luca argues that this writing does not exoticize the socialist and postsocialist world, or merely critique the United States, but that it reconfigures representations of the Second World by demanding the development of new interpretative frameworks for the study of past and present exchanges between the United States and nations of the (former) Eastern Bloc.

The next four contributions focus on authors from specific postsocialist nations. In "Geopolitical Imaginaries: Croatian American Diasporic Writers in North America," Jelena Šesnić discusses Josip Novakovich's *Apricots from Chernobyl* (1995), *Salvation and Other Disasters* (1998), *Plum Brandy*

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(2003), *Infidelities* (2005), and *Shopping for a Better Country* (2012), as well as Neda Miranda Blažević-Krietzman's *Američka predigra* (1989) and *Marilyn Monroe* (2010). Šesnić argues that this work invents a new postsocialist aesthetics of translation, one that presents US and diasporic audiences with portrayals of life in the former Yugoslavia and in post-Yugoslav Croatia. Novakovich and Blažević-Krietzman focus on the war in Croatia, which has become a main trope in Croatian fiction but is less well-known to US audiences, by exploring the war's effects on emigration and on US Croatian transnationalism since the 1990s. In its most recent phase, the work of the two authors points to their role as transnational cultural agents who are deeply embedded in US-based global networks.

In "Between Homeland and Hostland: Women Migrants' Agency in US Post-Yugoslav Novels," Tatjana Bijelić examines representations of North American women migrants in the work of two understudied post-Yugoslav writers. She analyzes how Nadja Tesich's novel *Native Land* (1998) and Natasha Radojčić's *You Don't Have to Live Here* (2005) fictionalize women's prewar lives in the former Yugoslavia and their migration to the United States, including their transnational relationships to their former home's histories. The two novels portray characters who recuperate matrilineal values as they move between the former Yugoslavia and the West. In *Native Land* the protagonist returns from the United States to socialist Yugoslavia, which she continues to regard as her home. Experiencing the onset of military conflicts in Yugoslavia, Tesich's protagonist finds strength in the antiwar traditions propagated by her female relatives, but because of her continued identification with her motherland, she also becomes trapped in neotraditional gender roles. In *You Don't Have to Live Here* the main character uses her relationship with her mother to reevaluate the radical shifts in her racial and class identity after she moves from Croatia to Cuba to Greece, and eventually to the United States, so as to more fully participate in the complex multiethnic world she encounters.

Adrian Wanner's "'There Is No Such City:' The Myth of Odessa in Post-Soviet Immigrant Literature" examines how the work of two post-Soviet Jewish writers—the poet Ilya Kaminsky and the novelist Yelena Akhtiorskaya—engages the long-standing trope of their native city Odessa in order to examine the ongoing construction of a "Russian Jewish" identity and its reception by US readers and critics. Akhtiorskaya portrays the fictitious poet Pavel Nasmertov in her novel *Panic in a Suitcase* (2014)

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to deconstruct the well-established literary myth of the "Odessa poet" and replace it with a collage of new and multiple intertextual references, while Kaminsky's highly acclaimed poetry volume *Dancing in Odessa* (2004) reconsolidates the trope in ways that reaffirm self-orientalizing notions of "Russianness" and mobilizes the concept of "Eastern Europe" as a locus of tragic suffering. As they conform to preexisting ideas and expectations of the US reading public, these notions have contributed to the popularity of post-Soviet immigrant literature in the United States.

In "Transnationalism in Contemporary Post-Soviet North American Literature," Anna Katsnelson places fiction by writers from the former USSR in the context of approaches to US immigrant literature. The essay shows how the work of several (post-)Soviet immigrant authors engages and revises the trope of transnationalism, which has characterized much recent writing by immigrants from the Global South or their descendants. Katsnelson discusses how David Bezmozgis's *Natasha* (2004) and Ellen Litman's *The Last Chicken in America* (2007) address the impact that flows of people and culture from the former USSR have on the United States and Canada, while the novel *Absurdistan* (2006) by Gary Shteyngart, the only author discussed here who arrived before the fall of socialism in the USSR, explores transnational imagery that highlights Russia's Americanization, as well as political, cultural, economic, and social forms of repatriation and return to Russia.

The last contribution analyzes postsocialist cultural productions that develop explicitly comparative and multiethnic perspectives on US migration. In "Staging the Postsocialist Woman: Saviana Stănescu's Alternative Transnations," Oana Popescu-Sandu examines how the work of Romanian immigrant playwright Stănescu moves beyond a focus on the autobiographical self and the significance of shared ethnic identities for the creation of communities, a focus that has dominated US multiethnic immigrant literature and its critical reception. Stănescu's two plays *Lenin's Shoe* (2010) and *Aliens with Extraordinary Skills* (2010) connect postsocialist immigrants to discourses of undocumented migration and debates about post-9/11 terrorism. The portrayal of a diverse range of immigrant protagonists emphasizes their shared unstable legal and low socioeconomic status, their difficulties in adjusting to US social and gender norms, their attachment to their countries of origin, and their engagement with their nations' traumatic histories. These commonalities lead the protagonists to question official narratives of the

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United States as a nation of happily adapted immigrants and enable the emergence of hybrid identities, communities, families, and alliances not based on biological, ethnic, or linguistic ties.

Collectively, the contributions to this special issue forge a new object of inquiry and theory, which we call US postsocialist diasporic writing. The essays model approaches that recognize the value of the new works' focus on (post)socialist particularities for complementing and revising existing approaches to US immigrant literature and its representation of transnationalism as well as its critique of US nationalism and empire. These frameworks have emerged from efforts to globalize American studies through the paradigms of postcolonialism, US race theory, or through critiques of US involvement in nations of the Global South, involvement that has also spurred US migration. Through its focus on the importance of developments in a territory associated with an othered and seemingly defunct ideology, postsocialist writing draws attention to critiques of US nationalism, empire, and global capitalism by artists from the former Eastern Bloc as well as emphasizes a series of other factors that produce or deepen connections between nations and shape immigration to the United States. These include US support for the extension of capitalism to the former Eastern Bloc (Klein 2007) and US participation in NATO's military intervention in the former Yugoslavia as an important and somewhat underexplored facet of US interventionism (Atanasoski 2013). As it points to intersections with other US multiethnic immigrant writing, postsocialist literature thus also calls for a rethinking and broadening of notions of US immigrant literature.

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## Notes

1. Gorbachev actually came to power in 1985.

2. Ethnographic and anthropological scholarship on the diverse experiences of Asian, African, and Caribbean state socialism and its aftermath points to the potential for analyses of the global and transnational dimensions of postsocialism (Rogers 2010; Suchland 2011; Silova, Piattoeva, and Millei 2018; Tulbure 2007).

3. For discussions of Hoffman's work in connection to immigration from the former Eastern Bloc, see Fjellestad 1995; Zaborowska 1995.

4. Countries such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland or post-Soviet nations like Ukraine, whose governments officially proclaimed their desire to Westernize, are often seen as emblematic of the entire former Eastern Bloc in ways that overlook how attempts at Westernization have been rooted in a self-colonizing social imaginary, which acknowledges the cultural power and supremacy of Europe/the West as marked by the values and ideas of colonial Europe (Kovačević 2014: 333). In their efforts to be fully recognized by Europe, many postsocialist countries continue to strive toward similar idealized Western patterns, while also upholding "native" practices that have historically been viewed as non-European and substandard (Goldsworthy 1998; Iordanova 2001; Kiossev 2005; Todorova 1997; Wolff 1994).

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