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# A FABLE FOR OUR ENTANGLED WORLD: READING GARY SHTEYNGART'S *OUR COUNTRY FRIENDS* (2021) IN ASSEMBLAGE TERMS[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on Gary Shteyngart's 2021 novel, *Our country friends*, which follows a multicultural group of American friends spending the COVID-19 lockdown at the country estate of Sasha Senderovsky, a Russian-American writer and "landowner." Inspired by assemblage thinking and Thomas Newlin's ecological reading of Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* (1897), this study reads *Our country friends* as a novel that foregrounds interhuman relations in an entangled world. By invoking Anton Chekhov's fin-de-siècle play, the novel opens up space for a trans-temporal reflection on a universally human affliction—a sense of wasted time and regret for opportunities not taken. Simultaneously, Shteyngart's work taps into the anxieties of the present moment: the COVID-19 pandemic, mapped as a complex biological and political assemblage, and Donald Trump's dysfunctional politics exacerbating the resulting chaos. Like Chekhov in *Uncle Vanya*, Shteyngart favors a *deep-time*, globally conscious perspective over a nation-centric one. Shteyngart's protagonists are not immune from the world beyond the country estate but are instead embedded in several interconnected ecosystems: their immediate environment and the broader sociopolitical ecosystem of America, which in turn forms part of the global totality. Accordingly, in being at once deeply universal and painfully contemporary, Shteyngart's novel is, to paraphrase Salman Rushdie's words, a fable for our entangled world, which promises to remain relevant even as the COVID-19 pandemic recedes from view.

Keywords: Gary Shteyngart; Anton Chekhov; *Uncle Vanya*; Assemblage; Ecosystem; COVID-19; Donald Trump.

As a globally transformative occurrence, the COVID-19 pandemic has generated numerous responses from scholars trying to understand the effects it has exerted upon different aspects of human life, including work, family

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dynamics, and mental health. As it transformed our daily routine, the lockdown affected what scholars of time call "psychological time" or "subjective time," that is, individual perception of temporal events. Deprived of our usual time-regulated activities, such as commuting to work or teaching face-to-face classes, we started to pay more attention to time. For some, this turned into a source of frustration as having too much time on their hands generated boredom which had to be assuaged: time had to be killed. For others, this sudden shift in how it was distributed, managed, and spent opened up possibilities for transferring their attention to the activities and projects which they had not been able to take up before.

The Russian-American writer Sasha Senderovsky, who is the protagonist of Gary Shteyngart's critically acclaimed novel *Our country friends* (2021) belongs to the latter group. Faced with the prospect of being locked down at his country house in upstate New York, Senderovsky decides to revive his childhood dream of a colony of friends living in close proximity to one another and to nature. He invites several friends, most of them hyphenated Americans like himself, to spend the lockdown at his estate together with himself, his wife, and their adopted daughter Nat. This idyllic vision already implies something interesting about Senderovsky's perception of time. In devising his plan of a friendly cohabitation in the midst of the global pandemic, Senderovsky is hoping to revisit the time he spent as a child at a Russian bungalow colony in New York—a summertime project meant for immigrant children like himself. In order to immortalize the spirit of carefreeness associated with this memory, Senderovsky had several small bungalows built around the main house. When his friends arrive, they are each allocated to a different bungalow while the host and his family remain in the main house. Initially, there is a pleasant sense of comfort and flexibility to this arrangement. The guests meet for meals but are free to retire to their individual premises if they so desire. The setting seems pastoral, the food is sumptuous, drink aplenty, soft drugs available. As time goes by and the lockdown is prolonged indefinitely, the characters forgo their former lives, easing into the situation and getting used to having their lives regulated by mealtimes and happy hours. In fact, the very event that has facilitated this Decameron-like arrangement, which Shteyngart playfully alludes to by naming one of his protagonists *Dee Cameron*, seems as removed in time as the characters' pre-pandemic lives. As the peculiar situation of lockdown puts the lives of the characters on standby, they invest their energies in the relationships with those around them. Consequently, conflicts erupt, friendships collapse, and new romantic configurations emerge in the microcosm of Senderovsky's rural setting. In the meantime, the contagion keeps wreaking havoc in the US troubled by its own malaise: Donald Trump's divisive politics, and racial tensions spurred by George Floyd's murder at the hands of a white police officer.

Shteyngart uses several strategies to foreground the change in pace which the pandemic has brought about, the most interesting of which being perhaps the novel's trans-temporal nod to Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* (1897), a fin-de-siècle Russian play which is also set in a country house and which depicts its inner dynamics and the interrelationships among its inhabitants. By gesturing towards *Uncle Vanya*, Shteyngart's novel transcends the present moment to provoke a reflection on the themes which are central to Anton Chekhov's work: love, friendship, loneliness, and existential longings which stem from the inevitability of the passing of time. Inasmuch as *Our country friends* is a response to the global pandemic happening against the backdrop of America's internal ailments, the novel's immersion in a broader global context and literary tradition makes it at once painfully contemporary and universally resonant.

Accordingly, my reading of the novel foregrounds its embeddedness in several interconnected contexts by focusing on how the characters relate to themselves and to one another but also to their immediate environment and the world beyond the country house. The article's organization alludes to these concentric circles by dealing with the inner dynamics of Senderovsky's estate first and then moving outwards to reflect on the estate's immediate environment and America at large. In writing this article, I have been inspired by those theories and critical studies which favor polyphony over monologue, entanglement over linearity, and contradiction over clarity—the qualities which are central to Shteyngart's work. Thus, I draw on assemblage thinking and Thomas Newlin's reading of *Uncle Vanya* (2015) in terms of ecosystems to suggest that Shteyngart's novel not only captures the pandemic zeitgeist, with its underlying anxieties, but, through the dialogue with *Uncle Vanya*, it also opens up space for a reflection on human nature and interhuman relations in an entangled world. Moreover, the novel's formal characteristics, which include the blurring of literary genres and disrupting linear narration with dream-like interludes, contribute to expressing the fragmented, confusing period that the characters of the novel are going through whilst simultaneously foregrounding the fragmentariness and fragility of human life and the characters' various efforts to assuage them.

To think in assemblage terms about literature and about the world is to be attuned to heterogeneity, multiplicity, and relationality. Paradoxically, the very word "assemblage," which is the English translation of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's original French term *agencement*, may give a false impression that the concept emphasizes the processes of joining, indeed *assembling*, heterogeneous elements into a unified, organic whole. As Thomas Nail points out, *agencement* connotes instead "'a construction, an arrangement, or a layout'" (2017: 22). Rather meaningfully, *unity*, understood as a state of being in agreement, is missing from the latter definition as assemblage foregrounds

relations and processes occurring among self-subsisting elements which have the potential for recombination and rearrangement. The proponents of assemblage thinking,[3] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, employ the image of a rhizome: a multiplicity of dissimilar roots, to connote assemblage as a system which does not "plot a point" or "fix an order" but embodies "the principles of connection and heterogeneity" (2005: 7).

Since assemblage logic rejects the idea of essence, it follows that the questions which it will posit about any object of inquiry will be concerned with the processes, changes, and events involved in the assemblage formation rather than its "nature" or "core" (Nail 2017: 24). The question that arises is whether such a focus on relations, circumstances, and processes at work over unity or whole does not necessarily restrain the concept's applicability to literary analysis, which tends to treat a work of literature as a finished product whose *essence* it attempts to pinpoint through the exploration of its characters, themes, and symbols, among others. Scholars inspired by assemblage logic challenge this question by approaching books as systems embedded within a network of other, interconnected systems; materials, affects, and epitexts. The thinker Bill Brown, for instance, sees the novel as "not only a polyphonic (heteroglossic) assemblage of voices and not only a composite of genres but also an assemblage of materials. The novel has an assemblage mode of existence" (2020: 271). Inasmuch as Brown's approach foregrounds the novel's "material manifestation" (2020: 271) it also gestures towards the novel's inherently intertextual mode and thus Mikhail Bakhtin's work on literary dialogism, which in turn underlies Julia Kristeva's definition of intertextuality as "a mosaic of quotations; [where] any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (1986: 37). Works of literature thus emerge as neither autonomous objects nor mere by-products of the context in which they were created, but are instead seen as entangled in trans-temporal networks of forces and actors.

Significantly, Deleuze and Guattari themselves single out the example of a book to explain assemblage mode of thinking about literature: "We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what

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[3] In this article, the term "assemblage thinking" or "mode of thinking" is preferred over "assemblage theory." This choice is motivated by the lack of agreement among scholars as to whether it is possible to speak of a fully-fledged assemblage theory in Deleuze and Guattari's works. Indeed, "assemblage theory" is an umbrella term used with respect to bodies of work that take root in the philosophers' ideas but that "go about things in their own way, often in ways that are at odds with the inspirational source" (Buchanan 2021: 4). In situating my own reading of Shteyngart's novel within assemblage mode of thinking about literature, I am aware of the transformations which the original concept has undergone in how it is being applied, and how such transformations may compromise the original logic, while also inspiring productive ways of thinking about works of literature.

other things it does or does not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed, and with what other bodies without organs it makes its own converge" (2005: 4). The book is seen here not as a reflection of reality but rather as a "little machine" in connection with other machines (Deleuze & Guattari 2005: 4)—the term "machine" implying here "fabrication and creation powers" (Michon 2021). This rhizomatic, relation-focused mode of thinking about literature is realized in the thinkers' book on Franz Kafka, *Kafka: Toward a minor literature* (1986). Rather than pigeonholing the Czech author and his work into fixed modes of literary interpretation, such as psychoanalytically- or historically-inflected ones, they recognize how his writing "allows us to account for the different 'machines' that condition our actual relation to the world, to the body, to desire, and to the economy of life and death" (Bensmaïa 2003: xvi). As the work's translator, Dana Polan, points out, Deleuze and Guattari's work on Kafka challenges many of the preconceptions as to what literary criticism, especially a criticism of an author's literary trajectory, should aim at, including the need to impose a sense of unity and linearity upon the subject (2003: xxiii). In fact, Polan claims that in translating Deleuze and Guattari's text on Kafka she does not translate for the specialist in Kafkalogy, but rather for a "deterritorializing critic who . . . engages in a 'pickup' of ideas. a gathering here and there of desires, of wills, of energies" (2003: xxv). In addition to offering a rhizomatic reading of Kafka's life and work as multi-element assemblages in relation with other assemblages, *Kafka: Toward a minor literature* invites us to reflect on the question "which other machine the literary machine can be plugged into, must be plugged into in order to work"? (Deleuze & Guattari 2005: 4) and thus to rethink critical analysis itself and our work as readers.

What seems to be at stake for us as readers is to untether ourselves from the fixities of context or autobiography in favor of cultivating an attunement to spatial and temporal interconnection and entanglement. This task becomes particularly important when reading works which, like Shteyngart's novel, are deeply rooted in the present moment and a specific setting but evoke and engage with other times and places in ways that may not initially make sense, risking dismissal as mere intertextual flavor. As Rita Felski observes, inspired by Bruno Latour's Actor-Network Theory, which shares many concerns with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of assemblage:[4] "[t]he literary text is not a museum piece immured behind glass but a spirited and energetic participant in an exchange" (2015: 182). We as readers partake in this exchange through our commitment to recognizing and reflecting on the networks in which literary

[4] For a useful comparison between the Actor-Network Theory and the concept of assemblage, see Müller (2015).

works are embedded. Thus, I would like to start my reading of Shteyngart's *Our country friends* with a series of questions in the spirit of assemblage thinking: In what does Shteyngart's writing of this novel begin,[5] what other machines or networks is his one embedded into, and what effects does this assemblage produce?

While the label "plague novel" imposes a rather reductive reading on Shteyngart's work, it was indeed the Covid-19 epidemic that prompted the writing of *Our country friends*. In the interview with Darin Strauss, Shteyngart admitted that, when the contagion erupted, he was writing an entirely different work, but as he felt that the pandemic would not end anytime soon, he decided to turn his attention to the events unfolding in front of his eyes. In addition to the pandemic, he mentions also another, interconnected, source of inspiration: the condition of America under Donald Trump's leadership and the political chaos ensuing as a result of the incompetent handling of the pandemic's development by Trump's administration. Shteyngart thus maps the pandemic as a disruptive yet transformative series of events which are not limited to the spreading of the virus but involve multiple machines, including the state machine. As Saul Newman and Tihomir Topuzewski point out, "[t]he pandemic introduces a strange interregnum between worlds, full of dangers and uncertainties, as well as radical emancipatory possibilities. This gives much greater complexity and dynamism to a life which includes the creation of new arrangements or assemblages" (2022: 3). In other words, not only is the pandemic an assemblage but it also produces new assemblages, forcing us to rethink our self-perception and our forms of being in and relating to the world.[6] To come back to my initial question, it is thus through the encounter with the pandemic assemblage that the mpulse for writing arises and the author's previous interests are overridden for the time being. Indeed, Shteyngart foregrounds the pandemic as time-sensitive: there is a sense of urgency behind the desire to write and the subsequent writing process which becomes oriented towards registering the intensities of the moment.

Simultaneously, Shteyngart mentions yet another major context for the writing of *Our country friends*: Anton Chekhov's short stories set in the Russian countryside, including "The man in a case" (1898) and "Gooseberries" (1898). Shteyngart reached for those stories during the lockdown which he himself spent in the American countryside in upstate New York.While it is the countryside that emerges as a kind of meta-setting for the literary machine to get ignited by

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5 The wording of the first question has been borrowed from Ola Ståhl's (2016: 1) reflection on the act of writing, inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's work on Kafka.

6 It is no coincidence that Gilles Deleuze has once theorized assemblage in terms of "contagions, epidemics, the wind" in reference to its non-linear, relational character (Deleuze & Parnet 2007:140).

bringing together the disparate contexts of the pandemic-stricken US and the fin-de-siècle tsarist Russia, Shteyngart points also to the content of Chekhov's short stories as a source of inspiration for his own writing. Specifically, says Shteyngart, these stories zoom in on conversations among friends who are in their forties and who therefore feel compelled to take stock of their lives. In *Our country friends*, a group of middle-aged friends is similarly invested in taking stock of their lives, with the exception that their coming together is prompted by the advent of the epidemic. The result is, in the words of Shteyngart's publicist, "Chekhov meets *Big Chill*," with the global health crisis playing the role of a disruptive narrative "device" (Oblong Online 2021) which resembles Alex Marshall's suicide in the movie. The pandemic assemblage is thus not only the trigger for the writing process, but also the catalyst for the novel's framing device—the meeting of friends in a country house—the idea which Shteyngart traces back to his reading of Chekhov's short stories.

Although the above comparison is likely aimed at marketing Shteyngart's novel as an approachable blend of high literature and popular culture with a tragi-comic tinge, it does usefully underscore the novel's assemblage character. Arguably, Shteyngart's creative method had been following assemblage logic long before the publication of *Our country friends*, with Russian literature being central to it. Many of Shteyngart's works, especially the early ones, make intertextual references to and engage in satirical reconfigurations of nineteenth-century Russian texts. For instance, in his second novel, *Absurdistan* (2006), the protagonist Misha Vainberg proclaims affinity with Fyodor Dostoyevsky's Prince Myshkin and Ivan Goncharov's Oblomov, whose character traits, such as innocence/naiveté and idleness, respectively, have been interpreted as symptomatic of the declining condition of the tsarist Russia. Given the fact that Misha is a privileged New Russian who is squeezed into a giant body, suffers from fragile mental health and has a penchant for all things American, this comparison may initially seem rather far-fetched. However, on a closer inspection, Misha's behavior and his depiction of St. Petersburg take on a new significance when juxtaposed with the cultural content which each of these characters carry, spurring an interesting reflection on the condition of the post-Soviet Russia in the post-Cold War period. In other words, through the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated elements, a series of parallels emerge, mapping a kind of cultural continuum which, notably, is not linear but disrupts spatial and temporal dimensions to produce a new insight into the object of inquiry.

Shteyngart's investment in Russian literature comes as no surprise given the author's background. Although the Shteyngarts left the Soviet Union when the writer was only seven years old, they maintained the connection to the homeland by speaking the mother tongue at home and reading Russian classics, including Chekhov, among others. But to say that Shteyngart's Russian literary

heritage is the root from which his own writing sprang up would be to deny the rhizomatic character of Shteyngart's trajectory as a writer and a public personality. The family's migration to the US ignited a long-term process of re-thinking and working through his Russianness which, from the very start, turned out to be much more than nationality as it came freighted with historical weight and cultural preconceptions. Accordingly, Shteyngart's early writing and public performance reflect the author's ambivalence towards Russia, which manifests in the satirical mode and proliferation of stereotypes. Shteyngart's promotional strategy at the time deftly taps into the Western fascination with Russia. In the trailers promoting his novels, Shteyngart's self-Orientalizing performance caters to the American expectations of what constitutes stereotyped Russianness in order to publicize the hyphenated nature of his writing. Similarly, the intertextual references to Russian literature underscore Shteyngart's Russianness, one the one hand, while at the same time deterritorializing it to fit Shteyngart's hybrid mode of writing, where the nineteenth-century character traits, such as Oblomovism, are mediated through the Americanized character of Misha Vainberg to showcase post-Soviet political dysfunctionality.

This hybrid mode of writing—where a new quality emerges in the interstitial space among different aesthetics, languages, registers, interests, and affects—marks Shteyngart's writing at least until *Lake Success* (2018). In writing *Lake Success*, which depicts America on the verge of electing Donald Trump as the next US president, Shteyngart consciously distances himself from his Russianness: "Relying on the Russian-American background was always an easy way for me to differentiate my work, but I wanted to write an American novel without the Russian part" (Knowledge at Wharton 2018). Although outwardly *Lake Success* lacks the kind of transcultural and translingual exchange that one has come to expect from Shteyngart's work, some critics have nevertheless recognized Shteyngart's transcultural sensibility in the novel. Thus, Liliana M. Naydan (2020) reads the novel's ambiguous ending as Chekhovian in nature, whereas I am convinced that a case could well be made for the novel's protagonist, a morally-ambiguous hedge-fund manager Barry Cohen, as a contemporary American iteration of the *superfluous man*: a well-known literary motif in the Russian literature of the nineteenth century. In other words, *Lake Success* seems to usher a different kind of engagement with Russianness/Russian literature in Shteyngart's writing, one which is subtler and operates under the narrative's surface, so to say, generating questions with existential underpinnings.

In *Our country friends* Shteyngart does not aspire to creating "an American novel without the Russian part," as the work gives a number of nods to Russianness and Russian literature. As mentioned earlier, Shteyngart identifies

Chekhov's short stories as the source of inspiration for his novel, but the novel gestures also to Chekhov's play *Uncle Vanya*, and, implicitly, *The cherry orchard* (1904), in addition to other works of world literature. In line with Shteyngart's intertextual strategy used in his early novels, *Uncle Vanya* is explicitly referenced in *Our country friends*: one of the characters reads the play during the lockdown and, in a metafictional move, the play is staged by the members of Senderovsky's colony. However, it is the "under-the-surface" connections to Chekhov, which lie beneath the name-dropping, that open up new ways of thinking about the various themes that the novel is concerned with and which have been identified as central also to Chekhov's body of work, such as love, friendship, productive life, and time (Gilman 2002: xx). At the same time, just like the Russian texts referenced in Shteyngart's novel cannot be disengaged from their fin-de-siècle anxieties, even if these texts are set in seemingly sheltered environments, so does *Our country friends* reach out to the world beyond Senderovsky's country house, even if the action of the novel is restricted to the estate and its immediate surroundings.

At first glance, there is little to encourage the task of "reading across" (Felski 2015: 3) the two works except for their shared setting: a country house inhabited by several interconnected characters. Otherwise, the works seem as distant as it may get, varying in literary genres, historical eras, and cultural sensibilities, to name but a few differences. However, the moment they open the book, an attentive reader discovers that the novel's very structure gestures towards Chekhov's work by blurring literary conventions. Rather than let the reader identify individual characters in the course of the reading process, Shteyngart introduces his characters as *Dramatis Personae*. This well-known dramatic convention is meant to help the reader/spectator of a play to recognize individual characters, especially if a large number of them appears in the play. Typically, the name of each character is followed by a brief description of their profession and/or connection to the other characters in the play. In borrowing this convention from the realm of the theatre, Shteyngart not only seems to nod to Chekhov's play with its own set of Dramatis Personae, which *his* Dramatis Personae will in turn impersonate when *Uncle Vanya* is staged, but also to suggest a degree of artificiality and incongruity to the novel's setup. Thus, the characters' professions seem to clash with one another and even among themselves; a case in point being Vinod Mehta, who is described as both "[a] former adjunct professor and short-order cook." Another character, Ed Kim, is labelled merely as "Gentleman," the term which originates in an entirely different historical era, whereas the initiator of the encounter, Alexander (Sasha) Senderovsky, is listed as "a writer and landowner," with the word "landowner" colliding with the novel's contemporary setting and suggesting an affinity with the declining tsarist empire portrayed by Chekhov. The setup's theatrical

artificiality is reinforced by the inclusion of the character referred to as "The Actor," who in hindsight plays the role of the antagonist, disrupting the apparent harmony among the rest of the cast and, ultimately, introducing the deadly virus in their midst. Importantly, this blurring of genres extends to the structure of the novel itself which is divided into acts instead of chapters. Not coincidentally, the novel consists of the same number of acts—four—as *Uncle Vanya*. The question thus arises about the relation between this theatrical artificiality and "genre migration" (Naydan 2023) and the inner dynamics of Senderovsky's estate, but also about the ways in which Shteyngart's text reaches out to and interacts with the world beyond the perimeter of the country house.

Interestingly, Chekhov himself was criticized for assembling an incongruous cast of characters in *Uncle Vanya*. On seeing one local production of the play, the poet Osip Mandelstam derided *Uncle Vanya*'s internal incoherence, criticizing the lack of rationale for bringing the play's characters together. The only adhesive keeping them together was, according to Mandelstam, the ecological principle of "cohabitation:" "With his specimen net Chekhov scoops up a sample of the 'marsh mud' of humankind, the likes of which were never seen before. People live together and simply can't manage to go their separate ways. That's all" (qtd. in Newlin 2015: 215). Mandelstam's striking application of a biological term of *cohabitation* to Chekhov's play becomes the departure point for Thomas Newlin's insightful reading of *Uncle Vanya* in ecological terms. The play, argues Newlin, explores the interrelationships among the characters of the play and between them and their environment, both human and non-human. These interrelationships form five concentric ecosystems: the ecosystem of the play itself with its fragmentary structure that Mandelstam so disliked; the house with its inhabitants and the relations among them; the surrounding district, *zemstvo*; the global ecosystem; and, finally, the ecosystem of the author's failing, tuberculosis-affected body, which lies at the core of the play. As it maps the interrelationships among these ecosystems, *Uncle Vanya* "gestures insistently toward the breakdown of the various structures, 'systems,' or ecosystems—social, environmental, artistic, corporeal—that underpin its fragile, spiraling universe" (Newlin 2015: 216). Thus, "*Uncle Vanya*'s preoccupation with fragmentation and degeneration," which manifests in the play's disjointedness, the dynamics of the household, but also the relations among the inhabitants of the house and with the world beyond it, makes Chekhov's play into "a peculiarly provocative leap of the dramatic and the ecological imagination" (Newlin 2015: 216).

*Our country friends* is similarly invested in mapping the interrelationships among the characters and between them and their environment, whereas the arrangement designed by Senderovsky, bringing together his various friends for the duration of the lockdown, turns out to be possible precisely because

several traditional systems or ecosystems have failed. Shteyngart's friends are single, alienated from their families and themselves at the time when the existing social structures, relations, and dynamics have been disrupted as a result of the contagion. Simultaneously, the pandemic makes it possible for the characters to form an ecosystem of their own: Senderovsky's country house with its adjacent bungalows becomes the site for remapping the traditional structures and configuring an assemblage where relations among individuals are more relevant than the roles which they have been biologically and socially assigned. Thus, the only family unit of the novel, Senderovsky, Masha, and their adopted daughter Nat, expands, not without some friction, to encompass also Senderovsky's friend Karen. Karen, who is alienated from her family and does not have children of her own, develops a strong bond with Nat, a Chinese girl adopted by her Russian parents, who is struggling with identity and belonging issues. Initially, the bond grows from Nat's fascination with a K-pop boy band BTS and all things Korean. Karen, who was born in Seoul, provides Nat with a tangible link to the culture and the language the girl is fascinated with. In time, Karen and Nat grow very close, each fulfilling an important emotional role in the other's life. By the end of the novel, Karen has become a de facto member of the family, effectively co-parenting Nat alongside Masha and Senderovsky.

In foregrounding the fragmentation, transformation and expansion of family relations in the novel, Shteyngart seems to challenge traditional family roles, suggesting that for a family to thrive in the present moment it is necessary to recruit all the love, care, and protection it can get, regardless of the source these come from. Significantly, the family assemblage of the narrative is a dynamic and relational ecosystem, rather than a self-contained and stable nuclear family with clearly-defined roles. Similarly, the whole work is invested in remapping human interrelationships in dynamic terms, and it does so with understanding and humor. In the course of the story, the affective balance of the household undergoes a number of transformations, as the existing bonds are redefined, new affinities emerge, and sexual liaisons are formed. Thus, Vinod and Senderovsky's friendship momentarily collapses under the burden of Senderovsky's betrayal of his friend's trust, Masha strikes a sexually-charged liaison with the Actor, Ed falls in love with Dee, who has a love affair with the Actor, whereas Vinod's unrequited love for his and Senderovsky's best friend Karen is finally reciprocated, to name but a few examples of the many affective fluctuations within the estate. Meaningfully, the chapter/act in which these interrelationships unfold is called "Entanglements" in allusion to their rhizomatic character.

The (trans)formation of these emotional entanglements is facilitated as much by the space of the country house, which necessarily shortens the physical

and emotional distance among the characters, thus stirring and intensifying their feelings towards one another, as by the peculiar time of the pandemic. As suggested at the beginning of this article, the pandemic collapses the characters' customary relationship with time. More precisely, the imposition of the lockdown disrupts the rhythm of the characters' lives, putting their pre-pandemic existence on hold, untethering them from the economics of the clock and returning them to a quasi-pre-modern existence regulated by the seasonal and the celebratory. Simultaneously, the threat of the virus raging outside the ecosystem of the house intensifies the life in the house itself. In this redefined temporal context, at once languid and compressed, the characters not only turn to one another with unprecedented fervor but also look inwards, questioning themselves and their life choices.

A case in point is the Gujarati-American character, Vinod Mehta, one of the most interesting and tragic members of Senderovsky's multicultural colony. Unlike the other temporary inhabitants of the estate, Vinod is not well-off. Although he used to work as a university professor, he failed to secure his tenure and had to become a short-order cook in his uncle's restaurant to make ends meet. Through most of his adult life, Vinod has been hopelessly in love with Karen, who has consistently overlooked his feelings for her. In addition to Vinod's emotional vulnerability, he is also a lung-cancer survivor with a compromised immunological system, which makes him particularly susceptible to the SARS-CoV-2 viral threat. Significantly, like many of Shteyngart's characters, Vinod is a migrant.[7] Arguably, being a migrant in Shteyngart's works is not limited to mobility but is mapped instead as an emblematic human condition of the interconnected world: a complex assemblage of meanings and affects which are forever being negotiated into a semblance of unity. Being a migrant is thus a state of becoming in which the desire to belong collides productively, if painfully, with one's self-perception and others' expectations of what one should be. For Vinod, these expectations come not only from his Indian family but also his American friends, Senderovsky and Karen, who, being migrants themselves, have usurped the right to question his lack of "wolfish ambition" (Shteyngart 2021: 172), which they see as responsible for his disadvantaged social position. If *Lake Success*'s Barry Cohen channels the corrupted version of the American Dream and self-making, understood in terms of unbridled advancement dissociated from the well-being of others (Bryla 2022),

[7] In opting for the term "migrant" here, I consider migration, and by extension migration literature, a capacious category that does not command an orientation towards either the home or the host country. This category accommodates different motivations for contemporary mobility, extending beyond political exile and forced migration, thus connoting a more fluid and variable condition (Nasiłowska 2018: 6). It also draws attention to the psychological and affective impact that hyphenated ethnicity has on identity.

the character of Vinod quietly challenges the notion of upward mobility by choosing to live outside the hamster wheel of modern life. Similar selflessness characterizes Vinod's love for Karen, which remains steady and constant despite being unrequited.

Although Shteyngart's sympathy for the character of Vinod is tangible, it is in him that he ultimately deposits the Chekhovian anxieties of superfluity, the fear of the passing time, and the sense of meaninglessness, which he updates in accordance with the American commandment for upward mobility. The emotionally heightened time of the pandemic and Vinod's own vulnerability overlap to produce a personal crisis which does not manifest in bouts of emotions but is nevertheless detectable in Vinod's demeanor. Thus, Vinod suddenly takes interest in the manuscript he had written as a young man and which he, ill-advised by Senderovsky, decided to shelve. Ostensibly, Vinod's renewed interest in his novel, which Senderovsky had stored away for him, stems from his desire to "remember [his] state of mind when [he] wrote it" (Shteyngart 2021: 34), but the palpable sense of discomfort which accompanies his request to see the book seems to suggest that there might be more at stake than Vinod cares to show.

Significantly, one of Vinod's readings of choice during the lockdown is *Uncle Vanya.* Although Shteyngart leaves it to the reader to decide whether it is the reading of the play that triggers Vinod's crisis, there are interesting parallels between Shteyngart's and Chekhov's protagonists. Following the novel's governing principle of juxtaposition, these two characters could not be further apart from each other. Vinod is hardly reminiscent of Ivan Petrovich Voynitsky, the title Vanya, a nineteenth-century Russian who has spent most of his adulthood managing the estate of his mentor Professor Serebryakov. Although both Vinod and Vanya nurture an unrequited love for an unavailable woman and both have prioritized the well-being of others over their own, they are worlds apart from each other in temperament and life goals, with Uncle Vanya's mid-life crisis taking the form of a full-blown cataclysm complete with a spectacular gun-shot which only narrowly misses Professor Serebryakov. However, if juxtaposed, Vinod and Vanya provoke a trans-temporal reflection about a rather universal disease: the dissatisfaction with oneself, a sense of a wasted life, and nostalgia for the time lost and impossible to regain. For his part, Vanya laments his inability to pursue his love interest, Yelena Andreyvna, when she was still available, and his blind dedication to Serebraykov, which has prevented him from living his life on his own terms. Vinod, albeit much less spectacularly, realizes that he has been living "like a character in a Chekhov play, forever taunted by desires but trapped in a life much too small to accommodate the entirety of a human being" (Shteyngart 2021: 120). When it is revealed that Senderovsky had dissuaded Vinod from sending his, exceptionally good, first novel to a publisher

out of envy and then pretended to have lost the manuscript, Vinod transcends the frame of selflessness and gentleness that the reader has come to associate with him and strikes Senderovsky with an open palm. Importantly, Vinod's outburst is preceded by an affective shift in his relationship with Karen. In a striking passage, which undoes the narrative's temporal linearity by making the past and present blend into one another, Vinod breaks out of the Chekhovian play that his life has become to reach out for Karen's body in "real time:"

> 'You were in Elmhurst and I was in Jackson Heights,' he said, bathed in memory, unable to stop talking, even as he brought his hands up to her chest, passing through some mental tollbooth, into a world where he was finally allowed to touch her like that. He pictured her coming out of Senderovsky's pool as he watched the fullness of her body. When they would go to bed together, he would still be able to smell the chlorine on her neck, like an olfactory afterimage. (Shteyngart 2021: 179)

Vinod is not the only character entrapped in a script which he himself has helped to write. In his review of *Our country friends* for *The Guardian*, Sam Leith (2022) refers to the whole cast of Shteyngart's novel as *superfluous men* "pottering and squabbling in rural exile, wondering what the world is coming to and regretting the past." Leith evokes an emblematic motif in the nineteenth-century Russian literature: an educated, well-off character who lacks neither capability nor intelligence for action but who remains on the margin of life, allowing it to unfold without his intervention. Shteyngart has previously sourced the character traits associated with the superfluous man in *Absurdistan* through the comparison between Oblomov's fin-de-siècle idleness and Misha's Vainberg New-Russian inertia.[8] In the twenty-first-century globalized reality of Shteyngart's novel, the metaphor for inertia is a Japanese reality show that the colony members binge watch during the lockdown. The pace of the show is described as "nineteenth century, at best" to the point that "sometimes Vinod or the Actor would put down the Russian play or novel they were reading and wonder if they were still watching the show instead" (Shteyngart 2021: 148). To the group's dismay, the show is ultimately revealed to be staged, with the actors following external directions. Like Vanya and Vinod, but also several other members of Senderovsky's colony, the reality show actors are not living their lives but rather performing a role in accordance with a ready-made script.

While the characters' tendency to take on a role and stage the self for the sake of others is mapped as a deeply human condition, Liliana M. Naydan's perceptive reading of the novel links its emphasis on performativity also to the migrant's incessant need to perform in order to fit in the American frame

[8] An attentive reader of *Our country friends* will recognize one of the literary blueprints for the superfluous man in the book which Vinod reaches for even before *Uncle Vanya*: Mikhail Lermontov's *A hero of our time* (1840).

(2023: 312). Whereas the understanding of migration as a constant see-saw of expectations and disappointments is at the heart of all of Shteyngart's works, the migrant's necessity to fit in becomes even more pressing in the sociopolitical climate of the Trump era that Shteyngart's novel is set in. To return to Thomas Newlin's ecological reading of *Uncle Vanya*, even though the sheer affective turmoil of Senderovsky's estate may create an illusion of a self-contained universe, this emotionally volatile ecosystem is at all times imbricated in other interconnected systems which Shteyngart's text reaches out to: the ecosystem of the house's natural surroundings embedded in Donald Trump's America.[9]

Arguably, *Our country friends* capitalizes on Shteyngart's ecological and bioethical sensibility which is detectable already in his 2008 novel *Super sad true love story* that imagines a dystopian reality in which human life and body are "conceived of as an assemblage of data and information flows, genetic and otherwise" (Dolezal 2016: 219). To illustrate the technology's fusion with the self, Shteyngart equips his characters with äppäräti—digital appendages which stream their thoughts and feelings, continuously cranking out data about their potential social attractiveness. In *Our country friends*, the intrusive encroachment of technology manifests in Tröö Emotions, a "love potion" app capable of making people fall in love by taking their photograph and enhancing it digitally. When Karen, the app's creator, snaps the picture of Dee and the Actor together, a chain reaction is set off which destabilizes the affective balance of Senderovsky's estate. Although different in aesthetics and scope, both novels share an undercurrent of concern about technologies' potential to "trump the complexities of human interaction and identity" (Dolezal 2016: 223). In *Our country friends*, Shteyngart responds to the underlying anxieties of *Super sad true love story* by removing his characters from the usual setting of his novels—the metropolis—and locating them in the midst of nature. From the very beginning of the novel, Senderovsky's country house is rendered as an almost organic part of the surrounding landscape, with the owner taking pride in the estate's "'entropic'" character (Shteyngart 2021: 3). The human-technological assemblage from *Super sad true love story* thus gives way to a mode of living that makes room for the coexistence of the human and the non-human:

> [T]he hundred or so acres of Senderovsky's property served as a finishing school for the area's younger animals. Coyotes perfected their maniacal howls here, vultures learned to research prey from great capitalist heights, groundhogs taught

[9] Thomas Newlin recognizes ecological awareness in Astrov's, the country doctor's, cartographic activity, which renders the aggressive human encroachment on natural habitats on his home-made map of the *zemstvo*. However, similar concerns are detectable also in *The cherry orchard* and *The seagull* (1896).

> their children to eat the roots of the expensive Christmas trees which removed the sheep farm from Senderovsky's sight lines as he drank dry fino sherry on his rocking chair. (Shteyngart 2021: 38)

For the first time in Shteyngart's work, an animal, a groundhog named Steve, is almost a character in itself, with Shteyngart making a sympathetic attempt at inhabiting Steve's consciousness to view Senderovsky's estate from his perspective. This has led one of the novel's reviewers to draw a comparison between Shteyngart and Leo Tolstoy (Spiotta 2021). Indeed, in Tolstoy's work "even minor references to animals include acknowledgment that what is involved is a living, feeling creature" (Donovan 2009: 46). Whereas Shteyngart's ecological sensibility is very likely inspired by the author's own move from the city to the countryside, it seems to play into the author's broader vision of the world as intrinsically entangled and networked and thus impossible to contain within the East-West dichotomy, the binary of race, or the illusory fixedness of nationality, even as these categories keep stratifying the world's population on a daily basis. In *Our country friends,* Shteyngart seems to be adding an ecological dimension to this vision, as the novel acknowledges the non-human entities as actors within the networked system in which Senderovsky's estate is but one element.

This ecological awareness becomes even more significant in the context of the coronavirus which has been said to emerge from "an accidental contagion between man and animal," thus "brin[ing] into sharp relief the dangerous and unpredictable consequences of our commercial exploitation of nature and non-human species" (Newman & Topuzovski 2022: 2). But as Newman and Topuzovski are quick to remind us, the SARS-CoV-2 is not just a biological virus but also a political one, attacking not only the body's immune system but also disrupting the political systems (2022: 2). This view correlates with my initial suggestion that in Shteyngart's novel the pandemic figures as an assemblage; a set of relations rather than a mere descriptor for a biological phenomenon. Thus, to read Shteyngart's novel merely as a meditation on friendship in the midst of the global health crisis is to overlook a number of interconnected forces and flows impinging upon and thus destabilizing the volatile ecosystem of Senderovsky's estate. Despite the illusion of impermeability, Senderovsky's estate is hardly immune to the workings of the pandemic assemblage. The most immediate manifestation of this is of course Vinod's death from the virus-induced pneumonia.

Vinod contracts Covid from the Actor who inadvertently introduces the virus in the colony after having spent a period of time outside the estate. Inasmuch as Vinod's disease destabilizes the life of the colony, tragically nipping Vinod and Karen's blooming romance in the bud, it also implodes the flow of the narrative

itself, which meanders into a dream-like, hallucinatory terrain that collapses spatial and temporal boundaries. As Vinod enters a liminal realm separating reality from dream, he imagines himself climbing an endless flight of stairs. As he climbs, pockets of time keep opening up, offering new variants of his past and his relationship with Karen and Senderovsky—his family of choice. In one version of the dream, Vinod tries to take a lift to avoid the arduous climbing, but he is smothered by an enormous fat man pressing into his body, forcing it into submission. In another, he finally reaches the top of the stairs only to realise that Karen and Senderovsky are lovers. This realization does not result in a sense of betrayal but reinforces Vinod's conviction that "[p]eople hurt one another, and no one hurt more than family" (Shteyngart 2021: 309). Metaphorically, Vinod's Sisyphean climbing can be read as his inability to comply with the American narrative of upward mobility, which mandates incessant personal progress in the name of the illusive promise of the American Dream. Narratively, his half-dreams of striving and not being able to catch up with his friends prefigure Vinod's loss of control over his body and thus his self, as well as Karen and Senderovsky's decision to ignore Vinod's wishes. Despite having specified his preferences regarding Medical Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment (MOLST), Vinod's autonomy is ultimately violated by his friends who take him to hospital and have him intubated against his wishes. As Vinod's friends return to the city after his death, the reader is left with the ethical question about the limits of personal autonomy under extreme circumstances, which in the novel is demonstrated to be ultimately contingent on the factors external to the individual. The pandemic figures here as a complex assemblage of powers, including the state powers restricting free movement and social and professional life, as well as people's powers over other people's bodies, all exercised in the name of public and individual health.

The fact that Vinod contracts the virus which comes from outside of the estate is not only a reminder of "the permeability of our bodies to viral contagion" (Newman & Topuzovski 2022: 1) but also of the entangled nature of human life. Although the Actor seems unaware of carrying the virus in his system, his decision to return to the colony after having spent a prolonged period of time outside it demonstrates his narcissistic disregard for the wellbeing of its inhabitants. Indeed, the Actor's self-conceit and egocentrism, which he exhibits from the moment he sets foot in the colony, seem so extreme as to be almost programmatic—one has a feeling that the Actor has been inserted into Shteyngart's tragicomedy to expose the shortsightedness of self-interest pursued without regard for others. Interestingly, one of the critics of an earlier version of *Uncle Vanya*, *The wood demon*, reads it as concerned with the "pandemic disease" of human decadence: egotism and incapacity for altruism, infecting the contemporary society like a virus (Newlin 2015: 218). This is a telling

comment in light of the fact that *Uncle Vanya* alludes to an actual epidemic. At the beginning of the play, Astrov, the country doctor, recalls his efforts to help poor villagers suffering from typhus: "They were crammed side by side in the huts … Filth, stench, smoke, calves on the ground by the sick…" (Chekhov 2005: 146). Although seemingly disparate, these two diseases are interlocked for, as Newlin's reading reminds us, the characters of the play cannot be divorced from the ecosystems in which they are embedded. Even though Chekhov's settings, such as those of *Uncle Vanya*, *The cherry orchard* or *Three sisters* (1901), have been interpreted as reflecting the characters' emotional states and thus as conducive to "existential, even ahistorical or apolitical" readings of his plays, this perceived symbolism does not preclude engagement with the world beyond the perimeter of the estate (Young 2007: 68).

Chekhov's mention of the typhus-stricken villagers may seem almost imperceptible, but it nevertheless alerts the reader to the suffering in the world beyond the country house, with Astrov's involvement pointing to the interconnectedness of the two ecosystems. Similarly, the privileged position of the colony members, who are able to put their lives on hold thanks to their own substantial means and their host's generosity throws into sharp relief the class, gender, and race inequalities which the pandemic has exacerbated. Moreover, in *Our country friends*, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic overlap with and are aggravated by an arbitrary and directionless bravado with which the US has been governed under Donald Trump's presidency and which causes the country to plunge even deeper into the virus-induced chaos. In this sense, the novel revisits the concerns signaled in *Lake Success*, which reads Trump's rise to power as symptomatic of the normalization of selective social privilege and unbridled advancement. Just like *Lake Success*, the novel does not attribute the afflictions tormenting the US at the time of the pandemic solely to Trump's presidency, instead it maps them as integral to the American nation-scape.

From the very beginning, Senderovsky's multicultural arrangement is punctuated by subtle reminders of an entirely different social order intent on making its presence felt though little acts of violence: a black pickup truck keeps passing by the house's front lawn with its bright high beams aimed at Senderovsky's property and unidentified gun shots are heard in the vicinity of the estate. These little acts of violence are dispersed enough to preclude their classification as supremacist, yet they are aggressive enough to fracture the sense of immunity from the outside world which Senderovsky has believed himself able to secure. Significantly, one of them happens in the aftermath of the riots following the death of George Floyd at the hands of a white police officer: when Karen, a Korean-American, and Nat, a Chinese-American, go on one of their daily walks around the property, a pick-up truck whizzes by, only narrowly missing the girl. Although the novel does not attempt to impose a correlation

between the two events, the car incident brings the digitally mediated violence of George Floyd's death closer to home. Shteyngart puts the following reflection on George Floyd's death in the mouth of Senderovsky, but it may as well be the novelist himself breaking through the fourth wall of his omniscient narration to deliver it:

> As an immigrant his mission had been simple. He was brought to America by his parents to make money off what an important Jewish author had once termed "the American berserk." You came, they laughed at your accent on an urban playground, and then you were given your degrees and guided into battle. By which point, you were just a scab sent in to reinforce the established order. In the video, as the white policeman was draining the air from his Black victim's lungs with his knee, another cop, a Hmong immigrant, stood in front of him in a wide-open stance, daring anyone to come to the dying man's aid. He could have been a Russian, a Korean, a Gujarti. All of us, Senderovsky thought, are in service to an order that has long predated us. All of us have come to feast on this land of bondage. And all of us are useful and expendable in turn. (Shteyngart 2021: 187)

It is a rare passage coming from Shteyngart, whose social consciousness tends to come clothed in satire. The passage's seriousness underscores the speaker's dawning sense of complicity in systemic inequality, which is seen as so deeply entrenched in the social structures and relations of the country that no one is immune from it. At the level of the language, the word "bondage" punctures the spatial and temporal frame of the novel to evoke the institution of slavery and its legacy's lingering effects on the social stratification in the modern-day US. Simultaneously, the phrase "American berserk" gestures to Philip Roth's *American pastoral* (1997), the novel which violently demythologizes the protagonist's American Dream by exposing its underside: "the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral" (Roth 1997: 86). This underside has been there all along but it is only now that Senderovsky admits to having "distanced his gaze from the country he inhabited," choosing instead to cultivate the illusion of immunity by fleeing "from all the land that was not in his possession" to make "a protectorate" of himself (Shteyngart 2021: 186).[10]

George Floyd's death brings the American berserk home for the colony members. Soon after the riots start, Dee Cameron's whiteness is brought under public scrutiny by the Actor's faithful fans who unearth an essay that Dee, the self-acclaimed white-trash intellectualist, once wrote about *Gone with the wind*

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[10] The seriousness of the passage prompts a question which, although beyond the scope of this article, compels further attention: Does the lack of the usual satirical mode signal also Shteyngart's growing sense of complicity in the American berserk and thus the shedding (or at least suspension) of his Russian-Jewish mask with its double role as a narrative strategy and a protective *shield*?

movie, which has been banned by yet another streaming platform in the wake of the protests. In the essay, Dee reviled the film's portrayal of Black people, yet refused to shun the audience of the film, herself included, and their "longing for a fabled romantic past these Scots-Irish folk had been forced to live off after everything else (the jobs, the hope) had been taken away" (Shteyngart 2021: 196). Dee accompanied her essay with a list of "her people," including "racist cops just itching for the right motorist to pull off the tarmac" (Shteyngart 2021: 197). The Actor's fans are quick to take this phrase out of its original context and subject Dee to a full-scale online ostracism, or the cancel culture gone berserk, which culminates in the Actor's calculated decision to dissociate himself from Dee. Dee's predicament lays the question of complicity on the table for the colony members to relate to. Her defensive question "Where are the Black people at this table? Where are the gay people? The noncisgendered people?" is meant to push some of her white heterosexual guilt onto others, but it ultimately underscores, in Vinod's words, America's ongoing "negotiation with white supremacy" and the many unresolved contradictions that come with this process (Shteyngart 2021: 220).

In conclusion, Gary Shteyngart's latest work transcends "the novel about friendship" label which Shteyngart applied to it in one of the interviews. Put into motion by the global pandemic machine, the novel maps the relationships among the characters and between them and their environment in dynamic terms, underscoring the entangled, changeable character of the ecosystems in which they coexist. In doing so, the novel moves beyond American exceptionalism to take a *deep-time* view of the nation, which foregrounds America's embeddedness in a global assemblage of powers and flows. By gesturing towards Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, the novel opens up space for a trans-temporal meditation on the sense of individual superfluity and the time that has been irretrievably lost and is now impossible to regain. At the same time, *Our country friends* is a painfully contemporary work which captures the pandemic zeitgeist with its many anxieties, revealing the contagion to be as much a biological as a political crisis, imploding the collective sense of immunity and putting the dysfunctional politics of Donald Trump's administration into sharp relief. As the virus enters the ecosystem of the house, doubts arise about the limits of individual autonomy—although Karen and Senderovsky decide to cross them in an effort to save Vinod's life, the reader is left with an ethical question that evades easy answers. Similarly, George Floyd's death provokes a pressing inquiry into the American collective complicity in the system raised on inequality. Not unlike Philip Roth, whose writing is brought into the tissue of Shteyngart's text, Shteyngart acknowledges the system's victims yet refuses to compartmentalize blame, implying that the individuals conspire with the system in perpetuating social divides. To use Deleuze and Guattari's

language, *Our country friends* does not "plot a point" or "fix an order," instead it maps a multiplicity of points that together constellate contradictions which the novel does not attempt to circumvent but which it lays bare for the reader to reflect on. With its sympathetic view on the perennial imperfectability of humans and its investment in the actuality, Shteyngart's novel is, to paraphrase Salman Rushdie's words, a fable for our entangled world"[11] which promises to remain relevant even as we forget the pandemic which, when lived in "real time," seemed impossible to forget.

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[11] Rushdie originally called Shteyngart's work "a fable for our broken time." Rushdie's endorsement of *Our country friends* appears on the novel's back cover.

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