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The Visual Architecture of an Evolving Diasporic Identity: Anya Ulinich’s protagonist Sasha Goldberg

The author and artist Anya Ulinich has been described as belonging to a “group of Russian-Jewish-American writers […] who draw simultaneously on immigrant street cred and erudite literary tradition” (Gershenson, 2023). Born in Moscow in 1973, she left the Soviet Union at the age of 17 with her family to settle in the United States. She published her first novel, *Petropolis*, in 2007 and her second, a graphic novel titled *Lena Finkle’s Magic Barrel*,in 2014. Having first received her bachelor’s degree from The Chicago Art Institute, one of the premier art schools in the United States, and then a Master’s in Fine Arts from the University of California, Davis, Ulinich was a committed and recognized visual artist when she began writing her first novel. Her formal training as a visual artist, combined with her writing in a second language, is what makes her first novel highly distinctive. More specifically, her visual use of language and typography and her inclusion of several original illustrations create a multilayered reading experience that increases the reader’s overall engagement with the text and expands the many possible interpretations of the narrative. At first blush, it is easy to disregard the rich allusions to questions of identity that the novel’s typographical layout and use of illustrations offer the reader; however, it is precisely the novel’s visual architecture that provides Ulinich’s reader with a window onto how her immigrant protagonist renegotiates an already complex identity, adapting to her new language and culture through both preservation and rejection of various cultural and linguistic memories.

*Petropolis’s* protagonist, Alexandra Goldberg (Sasha, for short), has a remarkably intricate and interstitial identity. She is a mixed-race Russian (her father is half African) with a Jewish surname inherited through adoption; she is at once a child and an (in her own words, “accidental”) mother. While she lives in a Siberian town called Asbestos 2 (formerly Stalinsk), originally part of the Gulag, she was raised by parents who were part of the Moscow and Leningrad intelligentsia. After the first third of the novel, Sasha leaves Russia on what will become an episodic quest to find her missing father, during which her identity becomes diasporic, as well.

The work of the scholar and artist Gali Weiss who builds on the work of scholars such as Marianne Hirsch and Stuart Hal. Weiss’s research is situated in the emerging field of diasporic visual culture, has strongly influenced my theoretical approach in this chapter. Weiss draws on Hirsch’s notion that postmemory relies on “relating to the past through imaginative investment and creation” and that inherited traumatic narratives often dominate people’s lives (Weiss 2016, 69). Referencing Hall, Weiss incorporates the concept that “the future existence of the diaspora identity is in its continual re-creativity, re-being, that is, in its becoming” and that the diasporic identity is a “performative mode of agency” (Weiss 2016, 61). To combat the idea of a fixed image or identity, Weiss creates hybrid portraits by layering imagery in her artistic practice: a drawing of a model, which she refers to as a “sitter,” created directly on a photograph of the sitter’s parent or child. Weiss’s work has inspired me to view the totality of the visual elements in *Petropolis* as composites or “transient states of imagery” (Weiss 2016, 74). Although these visual elements ultimately build toward and culminate in an identity that has significantly adapted, matured, and healed, each layer of the process is reflected in both the language(s) at the end of the novel and the concluding illustration.

This chapter will move chronologically through the five sections of the novel. As each section is prefaced by one of Ulinich’s illustrations, I will provide textual descriptions of the images.[[1]](#footnote-2) I will then analyze each illustration, focusing on how it reflects a “transient state” in Sasha’s development (Weiss 2016, 74). I will discuss how each subsequent illustration builds on the former and how the final illustration ultimately represents Sasha’s more stable existence as an immigrant. *Petropolis* engages in a very deliberate conversation with the notion that the body is an analog for the world. This is ultimately accomplished through Ulinich’s subtly layered visual references to Leonardo DaVinci’s world-famous image of the Vitruvian Man,[[2]](#footnote-3) whose meaning will prove key to understanding the protagonist’s “simultaneously rebuild[ing] and mourn[ing]” of her hyphenated existence, typical of the immigrant experience (Hirsch, 1996, 664).

Sasha’s process of rebuilding and mourning her identity can be further understood through Ulinich’s visual representation of language(s) on the page. After all, language “is a site of struggle where individuals negotiate identities,” and identity “is co-constructed through interactions” (Noels YEAR, 56). Although *Petropolis* was written in English, numerous Russian words (transliterated and italicized) appear throughout the novel. Additionally, Ulinich employs linguistic defamiliarization and irony by capitalizing terms denoting aspects of consumerist American culture. Therefore, along with the discussions of each illustration, I will analyze the visual portrayal of language in each of the novel’s five sections. Before delving into the analyses of the illustrations and language, some background is needed.

**[Insert ILLUSTRATION of Vitruvian Man-public domain]**

Although we most commonly associate the figure of the Vitruvian Man with Leonardo DaVinci’s drawing (c. 1487), it was the first-century BC Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollio who first wrote about the concept some 1500 years earlier (with Caesar Augustus’s figure in mind). Vitruvius believed, in journalist Toby Lester’s words, that the architect’s job “was to survey the cosmic order of things, grasp its circular animating principles, and then bring them down to earth. And the way to do that […] was with the help of the set square” (Lester 2012, 29). Connected to this was Vitruvius’s belief that the proportions of the human body “conformed to the hidden geometry of the universe” (Lester 2012, xii). Vitruvius was not the first to view man as a *minor mundus* or microcosm, but his innovating was outlining in detail the symmetry and proportions of the human figure for use in architecture. Leonardo’s innovation was to imagine two decentered, superimposed figures within the circle and square, creating “…a dynamic look at man […] [with] attention to the concrete, to the individual, moving, and living man” (Zwijnenberg 1999, 104). Beneath the figure is a linear scale, highlighting the unique proportions of the human figure.

essential, as identified in Ulinich’s illustrations,analyzedas metaphoric representations of evolving diasporic identityin the geography of the Of course, the circle and square can prosaically refer to an architect’s compass and square. representingthe

It is important to note here that throughout her young life, Sasha’s body and physical presence in the world are the object of negative attention, particularly from her overbearing mother. Thus, her “overweight and uncoordinated” female body was also pivotal to her identity (Ulinich 2007, 4). In their overview of feminist criticism concerning the “ideal [female] body type,” Catherine Riley and Lynn Pearce discuss how Naomi Wolf, in her 1990 book *The Beauty Myth,* suggests that the female’s ever thinning “ideal” weight at the end of the twentieth century (the temporal setting of Ulinich’s novel) was a response to women more commonly leaving the domestic sphere to enter the workforce and that “their bodies were made into the prisons their homes used to be” (Riley and Pearce 2018, 60). Riley and Pearce go on to explain that “consumer culture exerts unrelenting pressure on (especially) women to be thin” (Riley and Pearce 2018, 60). While it is her Soviet mother who harasses Sasha the most about her weight, the trauma follows Sasha to the United States and is reinforced, in particular, by the American fascination with “waifs” in the 1990s.

Of course, language is also a window into identity. Maria Rubins, for one, writes that “language itself transcends the role as a tool of communication and self-expression and becomes a crucial symbol of identity” (Rubins 2021, 3). The linguist Anna Wierbicka has studied how specific keywords serve to reflect aspects of a particular cultural identity. She explains: “Culture-specific words are conceptual tools that reflect a society’s past experience of doing and thinking about things in certain ways,” adding that “a person’s conceptual perspective on life is clearly influenced by his or her native language” (Wierbicka 1997, 5). *Petropolis*, an English-language novel, highlights certain transliterated Russian words as signifiers of cultural identity and memories of a previous life. While the role of language in identity construction is potentially crucial for any monolingual-translingual writer,[[3]](#footnote-4) Ulinich conspicuously employs specific words in both Russian and English as tools for constructing Sasha’s evolving identity. For example, she incorporates some of these words in such a way that they actively demand the reader’s attention, often disrupting the flow of the narrative. Ulinich has discussed her relationships with both English and Russian, saying: “Russian is my emotional language. Russian words have very deep flavors for me; they’re inseparable from the objects and actions they describe. […] English words are signifiers, which gives me a nice illusion of control when I write but sometimes I worry that I’m creating the literary equivalent of plastic fruit for people who are hungry for a real apple” (Johnson 2009, 15). She has also likened English words to Lego blocks, underscoring the idea of her writing as architecture (NPR 2008).

*Illustration 1: The image is a hand-drawn map with directions written in cursive Russian at the bottom of the page. At the top left of this map is a row of five numbered half circles (like the arch of a parabola) representing a row of half barrels, with an arrow pointing to barrel number 2. To their right is an irregularly shaped circle labeled “svalka” (junkyard). Below these, the center of the drawing features a row of three transmission towers—each composed of five points—connected by a thick line, representing a fence, and the top half of one of the towers falls inside the circular junkyard. Below this, in the center of the drawing, is a small* square *kiosk labeled “tabak” [tobacco]. At the very bottom of the map is a circular smiley face.*

Part I begins in Asbestos 2, a town built as part of the Gulag system where Sasha has grown up. The illustration of a map that opens this first section of the novel portrays a moment that will be highly integral to the novel’s arc: Katia, a new friend of Sasha’s from her afterschool art program, hands Sasha this map and directions to her home (a home that Sasha will find shocking once she gets there). Katia’s map shows a path that winds around a square kiosk, continues between two of three transmission towers, then alongside a circularly shaped junkyard, and, finally, toward a row of five half barrels. It includes a significant amount of Russian cursive text—instructions handwritten by Katia. What is important to note is that this map will lead Sasha to Katia’s brother, the young man who will father Sasha’s “accidental” child.

As indicated by the underlined terms in the illustration description, all of the main geometric elements that comprise Leonardo’s drawing are present here: the square, the circle, the line, and the pentagon (represented by the transmission towers). In the text, Ulinich provides a subtle hint that the towers symbolize animate beings when she refers to the towers’ vertical beams as legs: “The towers that had looked so elegant from a distance turned out to have elephant legs of riveted steel” (Ulinich 2007, 44). Further on in the text, Ulinich twice transposes a square inside a (half) circle when Sasha describes seeing and entering Katia’s home, which is one of the barrels. Sasha sees a door in one end of a barrel and, upon entering, wonders, “Did she expect the room to become square, to suddenly expand into another dimension? It must have been the furniture, the way it fits into the cylinder” (Ulinich 2007, 45). Throughout the novel, Ulinich continues to incorporate these same geometric elements both in the text and the illustrations.

Since Part I of *Petropolis* is set in 1992 post-Soviet Russia, this section of the novel is replete with transliterated and italicized Russian words, the most common one being *detka*(little one), which is what Sasha was called by her mother. Many of the other words similarly reflect the world of a child in her native childhood home, such as *lapochka*(sweetheart)*, Babushka* (Grandma)*, Babulya*(Granny), and *Tetya*(Aunt). Yet, other words reflect the difficulties and peculiarities of Soviet life, such as *pokoinik*(the deceased)*, idiotka*(idiot)*, nomenklatura*(nomenclature)*, subbotnik*(Saturday worker in communist parlance)*, samizdat* (clandestine form of self-publishing)*and voenkomat*(military commissariat). Wierbicka explains that keywords are “particularly important and revealing in a given culture” when they are “used in a particular semantic domain (emotions, moral judgments...)” and express “attitudes, values, and expectations.” (Wierbicka, 1997, 15–17) While Ulinich often provides some of the context behind these Russian words, she rarely translates them directly; as a result, for readers unfamiliar with Russian, which would be the majority of Ulinich’s readers, the reading experience likely feels “foreign.”

*Illustration 2: Unlike the previous image, this one is not supposed to be hand-drawn. Centered in the upper half of the page is a square with rounded corners, inside of which is a human figure bent over in a seat (creating a circle with their body), their hands protecting their neck. An arrow points to the placement of the hands, which are the only part of the figure that is dark. Just below this square image are the words “Part Two” in typed English. Along the entire bottom of the page is the top of a drawing of the roofs of two houses, the tops of five palm trees, and four street lights. On the roof of the house on the left is a small square chimney; on the roof of the house on the right is a circular turbine exhaust vent. The streetlights are long, thin pole arms reaching upward at what could be a ~30-degree angle off the main pole. There are also two parallel, barely visible lines of cable connecting the streetlamps.*

Unlike the first illustration, a hand-dawn note with handwritten cursive Russian text, the second illustration is distinguished by a style reminiscent of American pop art—first, an image from an airplane safety information card and, next, what appears to be the top of a very realistic, photograph-like drawing. While the two illustrations have entirely different styles, there is a recognizable continuation of the theme of the Vitruvian Man from the first to the second, where it appears in a slightly less deconstructed form. First, the square has merged with the circle with its rounded edges and it contains the outline of a human figure preparing for a crash in a rounded fetal form. Two additional examples of a circle and square can be seen in the bottom drawing’s small square chimney and circular turbine vent on the house rooftops. The shape of the Vitruvian Man, with his outstretched arms, is echoed in the streetlamps and the Vitruvian scale line can be identified in the cables connecting them.

This illustration depicts Sasha’s flight to Phoenix, which she embarks on as a mail-order bride—a commodity of sorts. With this stark contrast in design, Ulinich underscores the use of mass-produced media in America, compared with the lack thereof in Russia in the early 1990s. Notably, pop art “represented the modern consumer landscape” of mass-produced imagery, everyday objects, and recognizable elements (“Pop Art” 2022). The specific images we see here also speak to Sasha’s trepidation regarding what life in America has in store for her. The passenger in the image is preparing for a crash landing, and the houses we see are incomplete. Furthermore, the tops of the palm trees seem to be blown about by storm winds. Clearly, the illustration is engaging with Sasha’s apprehensions about the unknown.

In this section of the novel, Sasha has left Russia as a mail-order bride to marry an American named Neil in Phoenix, leaving her baby behind with her mother. Having manipulated the situation to her own benefit, Sasha’s mother appropriates the role of the baby’s mother and relegates Sasha’s relationship with the child to that of a distant aunt. In Part II, Ulinich continues to incorporate Russian words quite frequently. However, the terms that appear differ from those in Part I in that they are more conversational words and often slang or emotionally-laden terms, such as: *privet* (hey), *negritianka* (black woman), *nado zhe* (exclamation of surprise), *psychushka* (insane asylum)*, babskie shtuchki (*literally “grandmotherly stuff,” here meaning “coy art doodles”)*, Gospodi* (the exclamation Dear Lord!), *zatknis’* (shut up), *eto takoi surrealism* (it’s so surreal)*, narkotiki* (drugs)*, and nezashto* (no worries).[[4]](#footnote-5) These keywords and phrases are used primarily by Sasha and two young Russian emigres she meets, who introduce her to American culture—and recreational marijuana. It is clear that, at this point of the novel, Sasha resorts to her Russian lexicon—a guide to “ways of living, thinking, and feeling” (Wierzbicka 10) —to express emotions, as well as to experiment with a new kind of freedom. As Nancy Ries has proposed in her work on Perestroika-era Russian identities, this time period saw a “remodeling of ideological positions”: previously stable social identities adopted negative American “archetypal images” as emblems of freedom (Ries 1997, 175). Viewing Sasha through such a lens suggests that, in this early phase of adapting to American culture, she might be rejecting the deeply rooted Russian “female-owned discourses” of “decency, morality, and good behavior” (Ries 1997, 72).

The starkest difference in the visual language in Part II, however, is not these new categories of transliterated italicized Russian words but the fact that the text is littered with references to primarily cheap and vulgar aspects of consumerist American culture. Already on this section’s opening page, the brand names Aqua Velva, Listerine, and Tostitos appear, along with the titles of two TV shows*—The A-Team* and *Sesame Street.*On the following page, Sasha is surrounded by Rice Krispies, Walgreens, and McDonalds. Several pages later, Sasha notices various signs for businesses and a church: TACO BELL, PARTY CITY, CAMELBACK CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP, WENDY’S, RALLY’S, TEXACO, JACK IN THE BOX, 7-ELEVEN, ALBERTSON’S, LOS ARCOS, and SEARS. The use of the upper-case letters is very compelling, demanding that Anglophone readers—many of them probably Americans—engage in moments of defamiliarization with their own ubiquitous cultural products. Throughout the rest of Part II, Ulinich continues to satirize American culture. To a certain extent, Ulinich presents Neil’s version of American culture, but more broadly speaking, it might also represent a typical example of an American city in the early 1990s. Additional emblematic examples appearing throughout Part II include Red Lobster, Lazy-Boy, Slim Jims, Squirt, and the Nearly Free Shoe Warehouse, the latter Ulinich’s brilliant invention mockingly exposing the absurdity of mass production and consumerism to which Sasha is still acculturating.Wading through this onslaught of American consumerist capitalist culture, the reader experiences Sasha’s culture shock first-hand.

Moreover, as a subjugated individual on numerous levels, Sasha appropriates English in ways that challenge the stereotypical American identity and opens new possible identities for herself (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004, 13). In other words, “languages may not only be ‘markers of identity’ but also sites of resistance, empowerment, solidarity, or discrimination” (Pavlenko and Blackledge 2004, 4). Sasha’s reactions to her surroundings in Phoenix were likely strongly shaped by the views on materialism and commodity culture prevalent in the Soviet, Perestroika, and post-Soviet years, views marked by a sense of spiritual loss and problematic social distinctions (Ries 1997, 131).

*llustration 3: This illustration is entirely contained within one large circle centered on the page. A second circle forms an edge within the circle, recalling a dinner plate. Between these two circles, in stylized capital Russian letters, are the words “KTO NE RABOTAET, TOT NE EST” (“He who doesn’t work, doesn’t eat”).* *In the center of the plate are three objects, each reaching beyond the confines of the inner circle: a spray bottle, a square passport, and a toilet cleaning brush. The slightly tilted vertical spray bottle has the words PART 3 written in English on its label. The bottle also partially covers the tilted square passport that reads “USSR” in Russian and has a five-pointed star. On top of both those items is the toilet brush, which is positioned horizontally at a slight angle. The head of the brush is circular and has three drops of liquid coming off it. It also has four lines next to it that suggest motion.*

The opening illustration of PART III refers to a specific moment in the text when Sasha is looking at vintage Soviet porcelain dinnerware displayed in her new home in Chicago. She sees on one of the plates the words “KTO NE RABOTAET, TOT NE EST” (“He who doesn’t work, doesn’t eat”). The choice of media and design in this illustration is again both relevant to Sasha’s situation and distinct from the previous illustrations. This image is stylized to evoke Soviet propaganda posters and is imbued with dark irony. The last thing Sasha expected in America was to be a housekeeper and a prisoner in a luxurious home in the Chicago suburbs. Mrs. Tarakan, the wealthy Jewish mother with whom Sasha has ended up living, is so anxious to keep Sasha close that she hides Sasha’s passport. However, Mrs. Tarakan tends to forget about Sasha to such an extent that Sasha often goes without eating for long stretches of time. The protagonist has exchanged one form of commodification and imprisonment (a mail-order bride) for another (a human pet/toy/curio).

In this third illustration, we can again identify the main geometrical shapes of Leonardo’s Vitruvian Man. The circle and square are again merged, although the square (in the form of the passport) has shrunk in size and the circle has doubled. The shape of the man—represented by the pentagon—has also now clearly moved inside the circle and is recognizable in, of all things, the cleaning bottle and toilet brush, representing Sasha’s current “professional” identity. While things are not going smoothly for Sasha, they are at least progressing. She has survived the move to the United States, extracted herself from a difficult situation in Phoenix, and is now learning a skill (housekeeping) that will help her become independent in the future. Although, as Judith Butler pointed out, “the overarching paradigm of consumerism” contributes to how identities are shaped, Sasha adapts quickly and is learning to cleverly navigate her diverse American environments (quoted in Riley 2018, 46). The final notable aspect of this illustration is that it includes both Russian and English words.

The first two-thirds of this section contain minimal Russian language, as no one in the Chicago home speaks Russian, and because Sasha is gradually adapting to life in America. Interestingly, the few instances of transliterated, italicized Russian words appear during moments when Sasha is talking to herself: *zatknis’ (*shut up*), zdravstvuite (*hello*), avos’ka* (emergency bag).[[5]](#footnote-6)Another interesting example in this section is the code-switching phrase “*tozhe mne, lucky!”* meaning something like “lucky, yeah, right!” This is the first time her adopted language has crept into her native Russian.[[6]](#footnote-7)

In Part II, Ulinich incorporates the Russian language in another way by introducing a sudden switch in the narrator, dedicating an entire e chapter to Sasha’s father, who is brought in to tell his version of how and why he left the USSR. The flashback to his Russian past prompts the appearance of more Russian words related to Soviet oppression and bureaucracy, such as *otkaznik* (Refusenik), *blat* (corrupt dealings), and *OVIR* (the Office of Visa and Registration). He also calls his wife a *ved’ma* (witch), to which she retorts that he has no will of his own. When the reader is returned to Sasha in Chicago, there is one four-page chapter left containing only two Russian words: Sasha cursing with the word *chiort (*Devil!*)* and later saying *privet (*hey*)* on a payphoneto a Russian friend who will connect her with a Russian family in New York. The final chapter of Part III, aptly titled “An Element of the Landscape,” recounts a critical moment in Sasha’s development. Sasha now sees herself, not unlike (non-brand-name) gas stations and large to-go coffees, as just another “anonymous” element of the American landscape (Ulinich 2007, 230). She embraces anonymity as a form of freedom, having successfully escaped a third traumatic situation.

*Illustration 4: The illustration appears to be a pen and ink drawing of a tree, centered on the page and with the base of its trunk resting on a line of wavering width an inch from the bottom of the page. Under the line on the left side is written in cursive English, “part four.” The tree has no leaves, but many branches, and its crown is circular. One branch is longer than the rest: it juts out at what appears to be a ~30-degree angle, reaching toward the top left corner. At the top of this branch sits a seemingly indistinct, shapeless form. There is no square shape in this illustration.*

In Part IV, Sasha escapes again and finally finds her father in Brooklyn. This image, like the first and the third ones, refers to an identifiable moment in the text. Seeking to explain why he abandoned his wife and daughter in Russia, Sasha’s father sketches the image of a tree, observing: “Life is like climbing a tree… First, you have all the branches—all the choices. You climb. There are fewer branches and fewer choices. Then you’re crawling up a single twig. It breaks.” Responding to this cowardly justification, Sasha retorts: “You can always land on your feet, Papa. Or jump down” (Ulinich 2007, 249). At first glance, it might appear that with the fourth illustration, Ulinich has possibly abandoned the progression toward the symmetry and geometry of the Vitruvian Man. However, certain elements of it are still recognizable and there are reasons for the change in progression. First, the tree itself arguably simultaneously represents two central elements—it embodies the Vitruvian Man (with branches for outstretched arms) and the circle (the outline of the tree’s crown). For the first time, the scale line is positioned along the bottom of the page. Most notably, however, it is this image, with its wild, organic, and dynamic tree branches, that finally captures what one Leonardo scholar described as the “dynamic look” of the “moving” Vitruvian man (Zwijnenberg 1999, 104).

Next, square is conspicuously absent here, but it turns out that Sasha’s father, as the artist of this image, is intimately associated with squares and cubes, as seen in Sasha’s description of her father’s living quarters: “He has this weird two-room apartment. The rooms are perfect cubes, as tall as they are wide, and the windows are perfectly square. I think somebody built it as an experiment. Live in a cube! Equilibrium through space!” (Ulinich 2007, 308). Significantly, it is not her father who ultimately provides a home for her—quite the opposite, in fact. Her quest for him is now over and has ended in enormous disappointment but also in freedom. There is yet another way to interpret the lack of a square here—through the very act of her journeying, Sasha has, in effect, created a square, closed by her fourth location of Brooklyn (after Asbestos 2, Phoenix, and Chicago), the final stop in the path of her travels in this episodic novel, and where she will put down her roots.

In this section of the novel, Sasha comes to view her father, whom she had idealized for so long, as an “amoeba”—an organism surviving without any agency (Ulinich 2007, 307). Unlike him, Sasha has resilience, expressed, as it happens, through her own experience as a tree. When she was little, she was instructed to play the role of a tree in the school pageant while all the other girls in her class would be Snowflake Fairies. When she asked why she couldn’t be a fairy like the other girls, her father, realizing that she would “bear the weight of her difference” throughout her life, told her to look in the mirror (Ulinich 2007, 13–14). Ulinich’s illustration of the tree brilliantly encapsulates the novel’s denouement. Sasha has proven she is a survivor. She escapes three oppressive situations and finds her father against all odds, only to realize she does not need him.

Most interestingly, this depiction of a tree enhances our reading of the text in another fruitful direction. The illustration brings to the fore an intertextual reference to the 1943 American novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith, whichplaces Sasha’s story within the much larger context of the experience of so many other immigrants in America. The core metaphor of this celebrated literary classic is the Tree of Heaven—a tree that somehow survives and continues to grow without any care in its destitute urban environment. This driving metaphor, combined with notable parallels between the protagonists, suggests that Smith’s great American novel serves as a powerful subtext for *Petropolis*. The female protagonists in both works have dysfunctional origin stories: much like Sasha, Francie negotiates “a hard-working and emotionally remote mother” (Therrien 1999, 98) and a father who is “lazy, intemperate, of weak character, a bad provider, and apparently unwilling to reform, despite his knowledge that he is harming his family” (Therrien 1999, 99–100). By employing this borrowed metaphor from the American canon, Ulinich hints at the successful acculturation of her protagonist and herself, both inspired by the success of their American counterparts in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.

In this part of the novel, we find overt textual references to the Vitruvian Man, the central visual metaphor we have been exploring in Ulinich’s illustrations. In the chapter preceding the epilogue, we find Sasha perusing one of her stepmother’s books,  *Healing Techniques*. On its cover, she sees “the ubiquitous Da Vinci man stretched in his circle, but this time it was a woman” (Ulinich 2007, 298). In a meditation class Sasha’s stepmother teaches, she instructs the attendees: “Let’s mimic the landscape with our bodies” with “arms spread” (Ulinich 2007, 299). At this point in the narrative, Sasha is working with her stepmother, actively meditating, and becoming a part of the American landscape. Thinking about her boyfriend, Sasha wonders “whether love lift[s] the weight of your suffering, dissolve[s] the walls of your cube, release[s] you into the world…” (Ulinich 2007, 313). The novel’s episodic structure reinforces the idea that Sasha has been compartmentalized, living in separate cubes, and now she needs to break out of them.

While we might expect to see Ulinich’s use of Russian diminished in this section of the novel, reflecting Sasha’s progressing acclimation, the opposite is the case, as Sasha is staying in Coney Island with an elderly (and racist) Russian couple. The types of words reproduced in the text reflect typical aspects of Russian culture and attitudes that are, significantly, already becoming somewhat defamiliarized for Sasha: *schchi* (traditional cabbage soup), *soonduk* (storage chest), *tapochki* (slippers), *shubas* (fur coats), *intelligentsia* (Russian intellectuals), and *negritianka* (black woman, used twice here). Significantly, Sasha has reached a point in her Americanization where she can view these objects and concepts as Russian and Soviet stereotypes. The repeated use of the word *negritianka* (black woman) in reference to Sasha reinforces the reader’s perception of Sasha’s status as an “other,” even (or especially) among Russian emigrants. Then, unexpectedly, Sasha views a story about her hometown in Siberia on a Russian television channel and “remembered that this kind of stove was called a *burzhuika*” (Ulinich 2007, 237) and that “*burzhuika—*[was] a reliable indicator of hardship” (Ulinich 2007, 238). Notably, Sasha is described here as *remembering* the Russian word, underscoring the increased distance she now feels from her native language and country. Following this scene is another key moment in her transition. In a letter to her daughter, she writes: “I hardly remember you but I know what you need. You will have food and clothes. You will also have light-up sneakers and cherry-flavored vitamins, cartoon bedsheets, and a dollhouse with tiny furniture. I will hold you from a distance with soft teddy bear arms, I will talk to you with singing greeting cards. I will become your means of survival.” (Ulnich 2007, 239).

Following this realization, very little Russian is incorporated into the novel. When it does appear, it is most often in the context of Sasha remembering things and phrases from her past life. For example, she recalls her mother’s phrase *vozmi sebya v ruki* (get a hold of yourself), or a *khrushcheba* (а derogatory spoken term for a type of apartment building popularized during the Khrushchev era), or a cleaning woman with black teeth at the Birthing House saying to her, as Sasha lay on the bathroom floor, “*Vo dura, kuda zabralas*’” (You fool, how’d you end up here?) (Ulinich 2007, 264). At this point, Russian is receding into Sasha’s past and, concurrently, English is becoming second nature, so much so that she even notices an error in English—a sticker on a café door (in all capital letters) that reads “YOUR [sic] ONLY AN OBJECT.” She also recognizes the iconic American speech “I Have a Dream” on National Public Radio. Even as her familiarity with the deeper meanings of American life grows, we continue to see her American life through capitalized names of commodities, such as JACK-O-LANTERN, CHEETOS, STARBUCKS, ELMO, BARBIE, and HOT WHEELS.

And then, just when Sasha seems quite deeply embedded in American life, she makes a return trip to Russia to see her mother and daughter. While there, she reflects on the Russian word *ponayehali*and how “That single word means ‘they arrived over a period of time, in large enough masses as to become an annoyance’” (Ulinich 2007, 281). Immediately after this, she makes a mental remark, tinged with irony: “Oh, the great and mighty Russian language!” (Ulinich 2007, 281). It is also at this juncture of the novel, while reflecting on the more direct way of social interaction common in America, Sasha “finds herself missing Brooklyn” (Ulinich 2007, 281). In Russia, a woman she has known for years calls her “The American,” and Sasha feels proud of this designation (Ulinich 2007, 281). Never proceeding too long without humor, Ulinich then notes that Sasha is unable to remember the Russian term for bologna sausage. Four years later, on her next trip to Russia, English would spill over into the Russian culture she had left behind, transforming it and the language. Her family in Siberia will eat the SPAM and CRISCO she sends them, and her daughter will wear a tee shirt that says—in all capital English letters—“GIRLS RULE.” The few incorporated “Russian” words featured in the description of this visit serve to underscore how the Russia she once knew has changed. These include, for example, *dredy* (dreadlocks) and *heep hop (*hip hop*)*—obvious imports from the West.

*Illustration 5: The final illustration is an overt reworking of Leonardo’s Vitruvian Man. The human figure is framed in a circle and square, with a line at the bottom of the illustration. The word “Petropolis” is written in English italics to the left of the center along the top of the square. Two superimposed versions of a woman are seen from behind (pentagon). She has outstretched arms – one set perfectly horizontal, the other at ~30-degree angles. The two sets of feet are distinctly placed, as well. The figure has dark pigtails, is dressed in a tee shirt and jeans, and has a bag slung over her left shoulder. Outside the circle but inside the bottom left of the square is a small music box, itself comprised of squares and a circular mirror.*

The most complex illustration in the novel appears in the epilogue. Just as the artist Gali Weiss seeks to depict layered and transient diasporic identities in her portraits, Ulinich encapsulates the tortuous progression of Sasha’s diasporic identity in this final illustration. Moreover, the image depicts her current state—the acceptance of her highly interstitial identity and the postmemory of collective trauma into which she was born—and even looks to the future beyond the end of the novel. It is the only obvious illustration of Sasha in the book. Instead of Leonardo’s naked, front-facing, and ideally-proportioned Vitruvian man, on the page stands Sasha—clothed, back-facing, and not ideally proportioned in the classical sense. The two superimposed representations of Sasha could be interpreted as visualizations of her Russian and American selves. She need not give up one for the sake of the other, for she has learned to embody both harmoniously. She now stands inside the circle and the square, with the Vitruvian scale line below her. Sasha’s mother has died, she has accepted her father for who he is, she is in love (with an American), and, perhaps most importantly, she has become a mother in practice, having brought her daughter to America.

The music box in the bottom left corner of the square might be taken to represent Sasha’s daughter, Nadia, who will also carry with her inherited memories and an interstitial identity that she will need to center. Ulinich places the music box outside of Sasha’s circle but on the edge of her square, thereby showing their connection as mother and daughter while simultaneously preserving Nadia’s life path. Inside the music box is a ballerina creature, not yet in the center of its own circle and square (the music box lid and the circular mirror), with its arms reaching upward at a Vitruvian 30-degree angle—a possible nod to the hope Ulinich holds for Nadia’s life journey.

The epilogue’s narrative begins with a phone call from Sasha’s “Aunt” Vera in Siberia, informing Sasha that her mother has disappeared. Sasha knew her mother was dying from cancer and now understands that she will have to return to her former home, bring her Russian daughter back to the United States, and re-assume her role as the girl’s mother. When Vera calls, the English-language reader is immersed in a world foreign to them: “*Allo? Allo? … Allo?”*followed by*“...*Sasha*doma?”*(Is Sasha home?)*.* Of course, the fact that one of the last Russian words in the book establishes that America has become Sasha’s home is not lost on the reader. Ulinich will again evoke this word—“home” (in English)—in the novel’s closing sentence. The last Russian word Sasha says in the novel is spoken as a mother to her daughter, on the plane from Russia to the United States, after both of them have lost the woman who was the only mother they ever knew:

“Why don’t you talk to me?” Sasha asks.

“You aren’t Mama.”

“Neither are you,” Sasha says, “but I don’t make a *morda*at you, do I,?” making a sour face, her first stab at parenting (Ulinich 2007, 319).

It is also notable that alongside the gradual disappearance of italicized Russian words, we see very few of the capitalized words denoting American consumerism in the epilogue. This aspect of American culture is no longer new to Sasha, and her daughter is also already carting around a hot-pink Dora the Explorer suitcase. The promise she made to her daughter earlier in the novel has thus been fulfilled. Here, as elsewhere in the book, it is clearaspect of pursue this line of reading in Part III, when,upon ing a note from a friend, s to herself——y Ulinich takes us on a visual journey that influences our perception of the narrative journey.

Thus, linguistically, the narrative becomes more cohesive and balanced, with Sasha finally able to think “in an in-between language” (Ulinich 2007, 324). Ulinich, leaning on elements from her own émigré journey, guided her protagonist through the process of (re-)building a life from the scattered pieces of her memories of her Soviet homeland, her inherited traumas, and her new and evolving American identity. The novel’s epilogue shows that this

(re-)building was accomplished through binary means. Just as the final illustration shows the various Vitruvian elements at long last neatly assembled, so the disparate components of Sasha’s identity have finally merged into a harmonious and interconnected whole. This synthesis follows Leonardo’s lead in terms of how text interacts with illustration: “The writing is adjusted to the circumference of the circle and fitted to the width of the square,” David Rosand points out with regard to the Vitruvian Man (Rosand 2012, 36). Sashaas and intrinsic to

One theory as to the gender of the Vitruvian Man is that the male figure was chosen not out of “squeamishness at depicting the female body” but because “the posture of spreading out the legs and arms in the male figure symbolizes surrender of the microcosm to the macrocosm. A female body in such a posture would not serve since it could be construed as surrender to the male and not surrender to the macrocosm” (Wayman 1982, 185). Placing Sasha’s figure with her back to the viewer is a creative way of combating such an idea. Sasha is not performing for any audience; her internal life and identity are now centered. While Sasha grew up “dominated by [external] narratives that preceded [her] birth” (Hirsch 1996, 662), in response, she becomes the architect of her internal self, building a multilayered and balanced identity upon a former one “of ghosts and shadows” (Hirsch 1996, 683).

Emblematically, at the start of the novel, Sasha is chastised by her mother for walking awkwardly and taking excessively wide steps. By the end of it, walking to her Brooklyn home, Sasha “takes wider and wider steps, waiting to trip,” but “makes it home without falling” (Ulinich 2012, 324). She has achieved equilibrium and learned to navigate the American landscape in her own unique way, without sacrificing who she is.

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1. Unfortunately, Penguin was unable to offer the necessary copyright permissions for the illustrations to be reproduced here. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The discussion of the Vitruvian Man will be included in the second half of this chapter. See page X for the image. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. In his book on Soviet-born authors who do not write in their native tongue, Adrian Wanner describes authors such as Ulinich: “In spite of their personal bilingualism, as authors they are, as Elizabeth Beaujour would put it, ‘monolingual writers in an adoptive tongue,’ or—if we want to borrow the terminology proposed by Steven Kellman—they belong to the category of ‘monolingual translinguals’ rather than ‘ambilinguals’” (4). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. This last one is spelled as it sounds (as all one word), rather than correctly (three separate words). In Russian it can be used in response to “Thank you.” Ulinich is drawing attention to the auditory aspect of the phrase rather than its correct grammatical form.   [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. *Avos’ka* is another example of a Russian word that just cannot be translated without its cultural context. The word is built around the adverb *avos’*, which can be translated as “perhaps” or “hopefully” and is a kind of small bag that was carried around just in case there might be something worth standing in line to buy. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Also around this time in the novel, we see Sasha’s memories of her life in Russia are starting to fade: “the pain of being away from [her baby] Nadia was becoming duller, more like a memory of pain” (182). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)