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The Visual Architecture of an Evolving Diasporic Identity: Anya Ulinich's 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 2014). 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 vetted 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 arguably what makes *Petropolis* highly distinctive. More specifically, her inclusion of several original illustrations, as well as her visual use of language and typography, 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, it is easy to disregard the rich allusions to questions of identity that the novel's use of illustrations and typographical layout offer the reader, however, it is precisely *Petropolis*'s visual architecture that provides Ulinich's reader with a window into how her immigrant protagonist renegotiates an already complex identity, adapting to her new home through both preservation and rejection of various cultural and linguistic memories.

Petropolis'*s* protagonist, Alexandra Goldberg (called Sasha), has a remarkably intricate and interstitial identity. She is a mixed-race Russian (her father is half African) with a Jewish surname inherited through her father's adoption; she is at once a child and a (in her own words, "accidental") mother. Although she grows up 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 scholar who has most significantly influenced the theoretical approach of this chapter is the artist Gali Weiss, whose research is situated in the emerging field known as diasporic visual culture. Weiss's approach builds upon the work of

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111389165-010

such scholars as Marianne Hirsch and Stuart Hall. 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). With a nod to 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, in her artistic practice Weiss creates hybrid portraits by layering imagery: 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 of *Petropolis* ultimately build toward and culminate in an identity that has significantly adapted, matured and healed, each layer of the process is reflected both in the language(s) at the end of the novel and the concluding illustration. *Petropolis* engages in a very deliberate conversation with the notion that the body is an analog for the world. This notion is of particular interest when it comes to Russian women authors in the diaspora since they, as Karen Ryan has discussed at length, so strongly have been identified with the "domain of the domestic", including the nation, the home and community (Ryan 2011, 65–66). This is, as might be expected, depicted by female hybrid authors as "confining and restrictive" (75). Ultimately, Ryan shows that such authors "enact failure by way of claiming independence in the new world of the diaspora" and, through this process, they find their voice (75). I argue that this is ultimately accomplished through a two-pronged approach. First, throughout the novel, Ulinich subtly layers visual references to Leonardo da Vinci's world-famous image of the Vitruvian Man,[1] whose meaning will prove key to understanding the protagonist's "simultaneously rebuild[ing] and mourn[ing]" her hyphenated existence, typical of the immigrant experience (Hirsch 1996, 664). Second, 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 2020, 56). Although *Petropolis* was written in English, numerous Russian words (transliterated and italicised) appear throughout the novel. Additionally, Ulinich employs linguistic defamiliarisation and irony by rendering terms denoting aspects of consumerist American culture

1 The discussion of the Vitruvian Man will be considered more in depth below. See below for the image.

that she sees on signs in all capital letters. Ulinich's emphasis on the visual reveals that, as the protagonist becomes increasingly acculturated, the categories and frequencies of the Russian words and consumerist references change and wane, while the deconstructed Vitruvian elements come together in a harmonious whole. Ultimately, this leads to Sasha finding equilibrium for herself as both an individual and as a mother.

The following research questions will guide this chapter: How does Ulinich's emphasis on the visual (typographical and illustrated) serve to depict the complexities of Sasha's female diasporic identity? How does Gali Weiss's concept of "transient states of images" inform the visual and narrative construction of identity in the novel? How does Ulinich both rely on and subvert the concept of the Vituvian wo/man to reflect the protagonist's process of identity formation? How does the prominent use of culture-specific keywords in this novel reveal information about the protagonist's immigrant experience? How do the novel's themes of memory and trauma inform Sasha's identity construction as a female immigrant?

This chapter will be structured chronologically, as I move through the five sections of the novel. Since each section is prefaced by one of Ulinich's illustrations, I will provide a textual description of each of them.[2] I will then analyse each illustration, focusing on how it reflects a "transient state" in Sasha's development (Weiss 2016, 74), how each builds on the former and how the final illustration ultimately represents Sasha's more stable existence as an immigrant. Next, since language is a crucial element of identity, an analysis of the visual play with language in each part of the novel will follow each analysis of the illustration. Before delving into the analyses, some background on the Vitruvian Man is necessary.

Although we most commonly associate the figure of the Vitruvian Man with Leonardo da Vinci'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 he was the first to outline in detail the symmetry and proportions of the human figure for use in

2 Unfortunately, we were unable to obtain the necessary copyright permissions to reproduce the illustrations in Ulinich's novel.

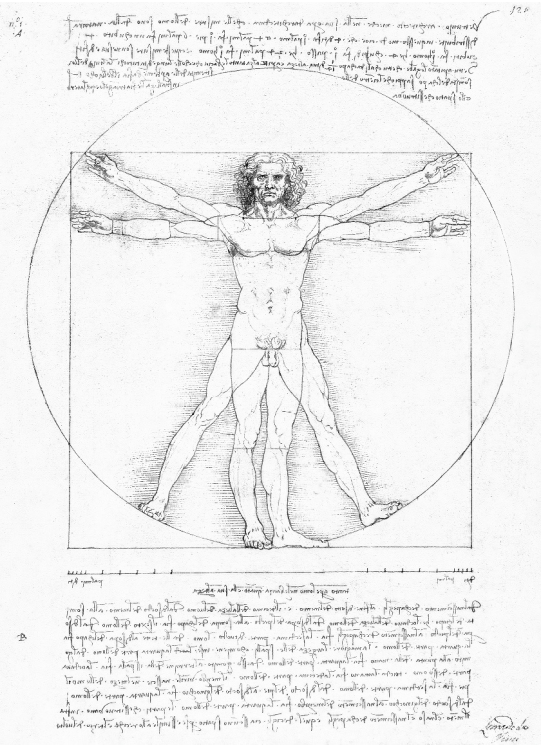

Fig. 1: "Vitruvian Man" (Leonardo da Vinci, c. 1487 AD).

architecture. Leonardo's innovation, then, was to imagine two decentred, 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).

In the ensuing sections of this chapter, the Vitruvian Man's essential geometric elements (circle, square, line and pentagram), as identified in Ulinich's illustrations, will be analysed as metaphoric representations of Sasha's evolving diasporic identity. It is important to note that the circle is a key shape in the geography of the universe: "The ideality of the circle, with its single center and circumference with neither beginning nor end, [has] a privileged position in the symbolic geometry of the religious imagination as the perfect representation of the divine" (Rosand 2012, 38).[3] Conversely, the square and the scale line that is

3 Of course, the circle and square can also, more prosaically, refer to the architect's tools of compass and square.

situated beneath the figure both represent the earthly realm. On the other hand, the pentagram and the number five (representing the head and the four extremities) have long symbolised man in many world cultures (Wayman 1982, 185, 187).

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 would likely be 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 Wierzbicka 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" (Wierzbicka 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,[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

4 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).

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 number two. 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 in the form of directions to her home. 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 – Katia's handwritten instructions. What is important to note is that this map will lead Sasha to her friend's brother, the young man who will father Sasha's "accidental" child.

As indicated by the underlined terms in the illustration description above, all 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 symbolise animate beings when she draws attention to their thick 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 Part I, Ulinich twice transposes a square inside a (half) circle when Sasha describes seeing and entering Katia's home which is, in fact, 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 entirety of 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 italicised 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* (a clandestine form of self-publishing) *and voenkomat* (military commissariat). Wierzbicka 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" (Wierzbicka 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, first, a style reminiscent of American pop art – an image from an airplane safety information card – and, next, what appears to be the top of a hyperrealist drawing. While the two parts of the illustration have entirely different styles, there is a recognisable continuation of the theme of the Vitruvian Man from the first to the second, where it appears in a slightly less deconstructed form than in the illustration from Part I. 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.

At this point in the novel, Sasha has left Russia as a mail-order bride (a commodity, of sorts) 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 usurps the role of the baby's mother and relegates Sasha's relationship with the child to that of a distant aunt. This illustration depicts Sasha's flight to Phoenix. 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. Clearly, the illustration is engaging with Sasha's apprehensions about the unknown.

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 referring to art doodles), *Gospodi* (the exclamation "Dear Lord!"), *zatknis'* (shut up), *eto takoi surrealism* (it's so surreal), *narkotiki* (drugs) *and nezashto* (no worries).[5] These keywords and phrases are used primarily by Sasha and two young Russian emigres she meets who introduce her to American culture – as well as to 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 1997, 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

5 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, yet another form of defamiliarisation.

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 defamiliarisation with their own ubiquitous cultural products. Throughout the rest of Part II, Ulinich continues to satirise 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 lattermost Ulinich's witty 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 is brought to experience 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).

> Illustration 3: This illustration is entirely contained within one large circle centered on the page. A second circle forms an edge within the first 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 stylised 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 the girl close that she hides her passport. However, Mrs. Tarakan tends to forget about the girl 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/servant).

In this third illustration, we can again identify the main geometrical shapes of Leonardo's Vitruvian Man. The circle and square are merged once more, although the square (in the form of the passport) has shrunk in size while the circle has doubled itself. The shape of the human figure – represented by the pentagon – has also now clearly moved inside the circle and is recognisable in, of all things, the cleaning bottle and toilet brush, hinting to what will become Sasha's "pink-collar" profession. 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, has 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 (Butler 1990, 11). The final notable aspect of this illustration is that it includes both Russian and English words, which speaks to the progression of her formation of a hybrid identity.

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, italicised Russian words appear during moments when Sasha is talking to herself, such as *zatknis'* (shut up), *zdravstvuite* (hello) and *avos'ka* (a just-in-case bag).

In Part III, Ulinich incorporates the Russian language in another way by introducing a sudden switch in the narrator, dedicating an entire 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 returns to Sasha in Chicago, there is one four-page chapter left in Part III and it contains only two Russian words: Sasha cursing with the word *chiort*

(Devil!) and later saying *privet* (hey) on a payphone to a Russian friend who will connect her with a Russian family in New York. This final chapter of Part III, aptly titled "An Element of the Landscape", recounts a critical moment in Sasha's development. Sasha now sees herself 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 neither square nor pentagon in this illustration.

In Part IV, Sasha escapes again and eventually tracks down her father in Brooklyn. This image, like the first and the third, refers to an identifiable moment in the text. Seeking to explain why he abandoned his wife and daughter in Russia, Sasha's father sketches an 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 recognisable and I maintain 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 where it should be, 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, the 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: she will rent a place of her own. Her quest for him is now over and has ended in enormous disappointment but also in freedom.

In this section of the novel, Sasha comes to view her father, whom she had idealised for so long, as an "amoeba" – an organism surviving without any agency (Ulinich 2007, 307). Unlike him, Sasha has resilience, gained in part, as it happens, through her own past 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, realising 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 realise 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 feminist novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith, which places 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 of female resilience from the American canon, Ulinich hints at the successful acculturation of her protagonist, inspired by the success of her American counterpart in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.

In this part of Ulinich's novel, we find for the first time 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 the 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 more rooted in the American landscape. We also witness here her thoughts of integration when she, in thinking

about her boyfriend, 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). By this point in the novel, the reader might also notice that the novel's episodic structure reinforces the idea that Sasha has been compartmentalised, 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, because 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 defamiliarised 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 Americanisation 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). It is striking that 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 yet 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). It is at this moment that Sasha at last recognises that the American market economy with its many commodities offers her an opportunity to provide a higher quality of life for her daughter. Although she might not be able to mother her daughter, she has – for now – found a way toward becoming her provider.

Following this realisation, 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* (a derogatory spoken term for a type of apartment building popularised during the Khrushchev

era),[6] or a cleaning woman with black teeth at the Birthing House saying to Sasha, as she 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 grammar – a sticker on a café door (in all capital letters) that reads "YOUR [sic] ONLY AN OBJECT." She also recognises 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 capitalised 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, that Sasha "finds herself missing Brooklyn" (Ulinich 2007, 281). Serendipitously, during this visit to 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 something as prosaic and ubiquitous as bologna sausage. Four years later, on her next trip to Russia, English will 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 much the Russia she once knew has changed over these few years. 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

6 Ulinich uses the slang and ironic term for "khrushchevka" in the novel.

> 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, although she has her back to the reader. Instead of Leonardo's front-facing, naked and ideally-proportioned Vitruvian man, on the page stands Sasha – back-facing, clothed and not ideally proportioned in the classical sense. The two superimposed representations of Sasha could be interpreted as visualisations 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. She has accepted her father for who he is, she is in love (with an American), her mother has died and, perhaps most importantly, she has herself become a mother in practice, having brought her daughter to America.

The music box in the bottom left corner of the square surely represents Sasha's daughter, Nadia, who will also carry with her inherited memories and an interstitial identity that she will need to center and ground. 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 individual 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 had known 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 reassume 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).

Alongside the gradual disappearance of italicised Russian words in the epilogue, we see very few of the words denoting American consumerism. 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 novel, it is clear that Ulinich uses the visual aspect of words on the page to help illustrate the evolving identity of her protagonist. In fact, Ulinich all but instructed her readers to pursue this line of reading in Part III when Sasha, upon examining a note from a friend, thinks to herself: "Maybe it was in the spaces between the lines, in the width of the margins, the curves of the font" (Ulinich 2007, 228). Through her carefully curated visual use of words as bricks – or "Legos" – and her evolving dynamic illustrations that rely on the "the hidden geometry of the universe" (Lester 2012, xii), Ulinich takes us on a visual journey that significantly 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.[7] 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

7 The etymology of the term "diaspora" derives from the word "scattering" in Greek. For an in-depth discussion of the term in relation to the Russian diaspora and how its traditional definition came to be associated with the Jewish diaspora, see Slobin (2013, 20–22).

the Vitruvian Man (Rosand 2012, 36). Cast now as a Vitruvian Woman, Sasha has learned to live in a harmonious way (within an earthly square, a cosmic circle and a scale line) and to understand her interstitial identity as unique and intrinsic to her.

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 centred. While Sasha, like most immigrants, 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).

The close of the novel ensures the reader understands this. 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 2007, 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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