

First Buffalo Humanities Festival Offers Food for Thought on Migration

For immediate release – September 2, 2014

Buffalo, N.Y. – The University at Buffalo (UB) Humanities Institute (HI) presents the first annual Buffalo Humanities Festival, Friday September 26 and Saturday September 27, at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Burchfield Penney Art Center, and SUNY Buffalo State.

The Festival’s theme is “**Migration Nation: Moving Stories.**” With a day and a half of talks, music, conversations, dance, and food, the Festival seeks to answer the deceptively simple question, “How did we get here?” At a time when most commentary about migration and immigration is marred by ideologically rigid formulations, the Festival instead seeks to raise the level of civic discourse in Western New York by exploring the topic through history, literature, and the arts. And it aims to do so in an atmosphere that is fresh, lively, and fun.

Erik Seeman, Professor of History at UB and Director of HI, says “the Festival’s mission is to foster dialogue, the sharing of ideas, and the enjoyment of the humanities among the public, scholars, and artists.” According to Libby Otto, Associate Professor of Art at UB and Executive Director of HI, “We believe that understanding history, culture, literature, arts media, and the diverse traditions of the humanities are an essential part of life and that this greater understanding fosters civic engagement.” Each year, the Festival will draw on Buffalo’s rich academic tradition to engage the most pressing questions of our time.

Gary Shteyngart, the *New York Times*–bestselling author of *Little Failure*, kicks off the Festival on Friday September 26 at 8:00pm in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Tickets are \$20 for adults, \$15 for students. Shteyngart will read from *Little Failure*, his acclaimed memoir about growing up Jewish, first in the Soviet Union, then in New York City after his family emigrated when he was seven years old. The *Los Angeles Times* says that *Little Failure* is “as vivid, original, and funny as [anything] contemporary U.S. literature has to offer.”

After the reading, Shteyngart will be interviewed on stage by David Schmid, Associate Professor of English at UB. Shteyngart will take questions from the audience and will be available afterward to sign books, with copies offered for sale by Talking Leaves. A limited number of VIP tickets are available for a pre-event wine-and-cheese reception with the author, beginning at 7:00pm. VIP tickets, which include admission to Saturday’s events, are \$60 each, \$100 for two.

Gary Shteyngart is the author of three novels that explore the immigrant experience using dark humor and powerful storytelling: *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook* (2002), *Absurdistan* (2006), and *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010). For more on the author, go to <http://www.garyshteyngart.com/>.

The Festival continues on Saturday September 27 with sixteen interactive talks by Western New York’s most gifted humanities teachers and scholars, at the Burchfield Penney Art Center and Ketchum Hall at SUNY Buffalo State. During each of the hour-long sessions, speakers will engage audience members on topics such as “Photography and Burmese Immigrants in WNY,” “Songs of the Dust Bowl Migration,” “Tuscaroras,

Still Stirring About,” and “Many Middle Passages from Africa to America.” Talks will be held from 10:30am to 4:30pm.

Daypasses for Saturday’s events, only \$12 for adults and \$10 for students, also offer admission to a screening of short films about migration. And if daypasses are purchased by Wednesday September 24, they include a **free lunch** from the immigrant vendors of the West Side Bazaar. Choices include Ethiopian vegetarian combo, Burmese chicken curry, Vegetarian Pad Thai, and many more.

Saturday also features a number of **events that are free and open to the public** in the outdoor space on Rockwell Quad (behind Rockwell Hall, between the Burchfield Penney and Ketchum Hall). A Puppet Parade at noon will delight viewers of all ages. The Performance Space includes music and dance by artists such as Mohamed Diaby (Guinean drum and dance), Gaitrie Devi (Bollywood dancing), and Le Ballet Touba (African dance). The Conversation Station allows for in-depth discussions with recent migrants. And vendors from the West Side Bazaar will offer handcrafted goods and food.

The Festival is a collaboration among five Western New York institutions of higher education: in addition to UB, partners include Canisius College, Niagara University, SUNY Buffalo State, and SUNY Fredonia. Furthermore, the Festival is made possible with the generous support of the Oishei Foundation, UB’s Office of the Vice President for Research, the UB College of Arts and Sciences, the New York Council for the Humanities, and the Foundation for Jewish Philanthropies. The John R. Oishei Foundation strives to be a catalyst for change to enhance economic vitality and quality of

life for the Buffalo Niagara region through grantmaking, leadership, and network building.

For more information, including a full schedule of events, go to buffalohumanities.org

For questions, contact Erik Seeman, Professor of History at UB and Director of HI, at seeman@buffalo.edu