EMBODIMENT AND GENDERED SUBJETIVITY IN UKRAINIAN WOMEN’S FILM, POETRY, AND PROSE DURING PERESTROIKA (1985-1991)

Sandra J. Russell
University of Massachusetts Amherst
EMBODIMENT AND GENDERED SUBJECTIVITY IN UKRAINIAN WOMEN’S FILM, POETRY, AND PROSE DURING PERESTROIKA (1985-1991)

A Dissertation Presented
by
SANDRA JOY RUSSELL

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2022

Comparative Literature Program Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures
EMBODIMENT AND GENDERED SUBJECTIVITY IN UKRAINIAN WOMEN’S
FILM, POETRY, AND PROSE DURING PERESTROIKA (1985-1991)

A Dissertation Presented

by

SANDRA JOY RUSSELL

Approved as to style and content by:

______________________________
Catherine Portuges, Chair

______________________________
Jessica Barr, Member

______________________________
Julie Hemment, Member

______________________________
Angela Willey, Member

______________________________
María S. Barbón, Chair
Languages, Literatures, and Cultures
DEDICATION

To the people of Ukraine
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am boundlessly amazed by the power of community in shaping and sustaining creative life. The love and support from mentors, colleagues, friends, and family has been a cornerstone over these past seven years of graduate school, during which I have moved through a range of experiences and emotions: self-discovery, joy, grief, precarity, and uncertainty—all of which have profoundly textured and enriched this dissertation.

First and foremost, I want to thank my advisor and Chair, Catherine Portuges, who graciously took me on as a doctoral student just before retiring from UMass. Your feedback and mentorship throughout the dissertation and job market has not only taught me how to approach my scholarship with boldness, rigor, and creativity, but also what it means to mentor students with kindness and generosity. Merci.

I am deeply grateful to my dissertation committee members—Jessica Barr, Julie Hemment, Angela Willey, and Jessica Zychowicz. Your guidance, encouragement, and deep engagement with my work have been transformative in my development as a feminist and interdisciplinary scholar and teacher. I am honored to be your mentee and colleague. I would also like to thank UMass faculty members both in Comparative Literature and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies for their tremendous support over the years: Jim Hicks, Corine Tachtiris, Kathryn Lachman, Moira Inghilleri, Marisol Barbón, Banu Subramaniam, Svati Shah, Laura Ciolkowski, Miliann Kang, and Kiran Asher. Thank you to my incredible feminist colleagues and community at the Five College Women’s Studies Research Center, where I was a remote Associate at the height of the pandemic from 2020-2022. I also want to extend my gratitude to the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies for funding this dissertation through the Summer Dissertation Writing Grant, as well as to the UMass Graduate School for awarding me a pre-dissertation grant, allowing me to do research in Ukraine in 2017.

I want to give my utmost appreciation to my fellow graduate students at UMass, who have served as mentors, allies, and friends. To Krzyś Rowiński, my very first OGSCL “mentor”—your care and camaraderie carried me through the ups and downs of the dissertation and the job market. Siobhan Meï, your love, solidarity, and collaboration have enriched my personal and creative worlds—thank you for teaching me big-heartedness and deep friendship. To Hyongrae Kim, for being my kindred brother and confidant. My love and thanks to Subh Gooptu for modeling true friendship and sustaining me over tacos and margaritas. To Alex Ponomareff, your kindness and wisdom carried me through both the PhD and in my first year as faculty at Hollins; Manuela Borzone, for teaching me the value of academic community; and Daniel Armenti, whose words of encouragement always stay with me. To Eric Vázquez, my personal film guide and unwavering cheerleader; and Kevin Henderson, who lets me admire his brilliance and continues to deepen my knowledge of feminist theory. Thank you to Noor Habib, whose conversations and homemade chai were vital in our first PhD years. Additionally, I want to thank Maryam Zehtabi, Amanda Giorgio, Juan Carlos Cabrera Pons, Saumya Lal, Maryam Fatima, Mehtap Ozdemir, Elena Igartuburu—all of you have made graduate school survivable and life-giving.
To my Pioneer Valley community (and beyond): Kristi Mientka, with whom I share a lasting Peace Corps Ukraine bond—an abundance of thanks for always being there. Jocelyn Langer, you have taught me volumes about friendship and imagining new ways of belonging. Merci à Tom Meï—your steadfast presence, kindness, and dad jokes have been an anchor to me. To Ania Micinska, for your thoughtful encouragement and backyard beers; Hyewon Shin, for sharing many coffees near and far; and to Tera Blanco-Saracho, for the poetry and more. To the kiddos in my life and the sweetness you bring to it—Pascal Meï, Julek Rowiński, Bruno Rowiński, and Sebbi Langer—thank you.

To my dearest and oldest friends: Noelle Kaslly, Natalie Bainter, Laura Noveck, Caroline Clunk, Frank Wisswell, Clare Benson, Emily Hagen, James “Elrod” Anderson, “Team Burgundy”—thank you for loving me, celebrating me, listening to me, and rooting for me all these years. I also want to give a big thanks to my Hollins students and colleagues who held me in community this last dissertation year, especially LeeRay Costa, Emma Snowden, Suellen Coelho, Kristen Streahle, Julia Riegel, and Wendy-Marie Martin.

Thank you to my family of origin, who loved me into being and forged pathways that allowed me to pursue my dreams. Thank you especially to my grandmother Sandra Haney (mama) and my late grandfather Kurt Haney (papa) for giving me the profound miracle of unconditional love. I am grateful to the extraordinary women who have molded, loved, and grounded me: my mom, Karen Russell and my aunts Rhonda Myers and Barbara Haney—you make everything special (and an extra thank you for the novelty wine glasses). To my siblings, Veronica Russell, Weston Russell, and Kurt Russell—who still make me laugh harder than anyone else. My world is so much brighter and saner because of you. To Seuss, the sweet, round cat with whom I have shared living space for twelve years—thank you, as always, for sitting with me.

Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to my Ukrainian friends and colleagues who have welcomed me as their own. To my host family in Chernihiv—the first to patiently speak Ukrainian with me: Mama Luda, Tato Ruslan, Olya, and Tanya Voloshchuk. Thank you for feeding me and calling me family. To my former colleagues in the Faculty of English at Lesya Ukrainka Volyn National University in Lutsk, especially Olena Halapchuk-Tarnavska, my lifelong feminist sister and friend. To Peace Corps Ukraine staff, and Oksana Shagas in particular—I will always be ready to carry you and your heels through icy Ukrainian winter streets. I am also indebted and inspired by the intellectual support of my many colleagues in Ukrainian studies, including Vitaly Chernetsky, Oleh Kostyuba, Kateryna Ruban, Tamara Hundorova, Tamara Martsenyuk, Kate Tsurkan, Anna Dovgopol, Oksana Lutsyshyna, Steven Seegel, and Emily Channell-Justice. Thank you especially to Serhiy Bilenky and George Grabowicz—your courses at the Harvard Ukrainian Summer Institute in 2018 shaped this dissertation in rich and meaningful ways. Дякую дуже.

It is impossible to thank everyone who has contributed to the life of this project, but my great hope lies in the fortifying and worldmaking practices of care and belonging. I continue in this spirit.
ABSTRACT

EMBODIMENT AND GENDERED SUBJECTIVITY IN UKRAINIAN WOMEN’S FILM, POETRY, AND PROSE DURING PERESTROIKA (1985-1991)

SEPTEMBER 2022

SANDRA JOY RUSSELL, B.A., CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
M.A., CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
Ph.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Catherine Portuges

In this dissertation, I look to Ukrainian women’s literary and filmic contributions in the final Soviet years of perestroika to recontextualize and reconsider feminist and gendered epistemologies in Eastern Europe. I view the last Soviet Ukrainian filmmakers, writers, and artists as groundbreaking in their conceptualization of a new, more “liberal” vision of nation, especially through their increasingly open and subversive critiques of the Soviet state. I locate perestroika as a powerful moment in Ukraine’s histories of resistance to the weaponization of colonialist and imperialist mythologies, past and present. For women in particular, the stakes of this shifting articulation of nation became part of a bolder and more visible feminist consciousness, although not necessarily named as such.

I contribute critical insight to the ways in which gender operated in dialogue with the idea of Ukrainian nationhood during perestroika and glasnost, while at the same time, considering how the works under examination have contributed to contemporary discourses of gender, violence, and nation within and beyond Ukraine. By giving new attention to Ukrainian feminist engagement with queer and transnational feminisms, I challenge narrow and incomplete, and thus colonialist, narratives about gender and sexuality in Ukraine and Eastern Europe more broadly, bringing visibility to feminism’s development not as a corollary of or in relation to Western discourses, but as a product of its own cultural, political, and ideological conditions. In so doing, I situate Ukrainian feminist critiques within broader transnational feminist discourses, especially regarding women’s ties to the idea of the nation, both materially, through their bodies, and psychically, as an imagined intimacy, constituted through a sense of belonging.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF IMAGES</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF STILLS</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMBODYING NEW WORLDS: PERESTROIKA AND (RE)MAKING THE UKRAINIAN IMAGINATION</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. THE COLLAPSING SOVIET MAN: EMBODYING Perestroika IN KIRA MURATOVA’S The ASTHENIC SYNDROME (1989)</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: Soviet “Women’s Cinema”</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muratova the Ukrainian Filmmaker</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Diagnosis in The Asthenic Syndrome</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reframing Soviet Apocalypse</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consuming Sovietism</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Re)rendering Soviet Masculinity</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: Embodying Futurity</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. TOWARD A UKRAINIAN FEMINIST POETICS: THE LAST SOVIET POETRY OF IRYNA ZHYLENKO, NATALKA BILOTSEKIVETS, AND OKSANA ZABUZHKO</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: Gendering Poetic Epistemologies</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender and “Second World” Difference</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transgressive Bodies: Ukrainian Women Poets of Perestroika</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender and the Poetics of Disaster: Writing Chornobyl</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: Writing Between the Boundaries</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. ANATOMIZING THE SOVIET UKRAINIAN PERIPHERY: THE PERESTROIKA PROSE OF NINA BICHUYA AND HALYNA PAHUTIAK</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: Organizing Soviet Urban Space</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Galvanizing the Soviet Family: Perestroika’s Biopolitics</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukrainian Women’s Perestroika Prose</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: “The other side of the wall”</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. UKRAINE’S GLOBAL CONTINUITY: ETHNICITY AND VIOLENT HISTORIES IN THE POETRY, PROSE, AND VISUAL ART OF THE DIASPORA</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: The End of Homo sovieticus</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF IMAGES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IMAGE 3: YOUNG AND FREE? POLICE BRUTALITY ISSUE, 2020</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMAGE 5 JURIJ SOLOVIJ’S WOMAN IN THE MIRROR, FROM CARNIVAL (1986)</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF STILLS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Still</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STILL 1: FROM MURATOVA, <em>THE ASTHENIC SYNDROME</em> (0:44)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STILL 2: FROM MURATOVA, <em>THE ASTHENIC SYNDROME</em> (0:050)</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STILL 3: FROM MURATOVA, <em>THE ASTHENIC SYNDROME</em> (0:45:55)</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STILL 4: FROM MURATOVA, <em>THE ASTHENIC SYNDROME</em> (01:02:21)</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STILL 5: FROM MURATOVA, <em>THE ASTHENIC SYNDROME</em> (01:06:01)</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STILL 6: FROM MURATOVA, <em>THE ASTHENIC SYNDROME</em> (01:47:38)</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STILL 7: FROM MURATOVA, <em>THE ASTHENIC SYNDROME</em> (01:51:38)</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STILL 8: FROM MURATOVA, <em>THE ASTHENIC SYNDROME</em> (01:52:29)</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STILL 9: FROM MURATOVA, <em>THE ASTHENIC SYNDROME</em> (01:52:42)</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STILL 10: FROM MURATOVA, <em>THE ASTHENIC SYNDROME</em> (01:52:49)</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

EMBODYING NEW WORLDS: PERESTROIKA AND (RE)MAKING THE UKRAINIAN IMAGINATION

“The Soviet civilization... I’m rushing to make impressions of its traces, its familiar faces. I don’t ask people about socialism, I want to know about love, jealousy, childhood, old age. Music, dances, hairdos. The myriad sundry details of a vanished way of life. It’s the only way to chase the catastrophe into the contours of the ordinary and try to tell a story. Make some small discovery. It never ceases to amaze me how interesting everyday life is.”

—Svetlana Alexievich, Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets

“I’m drawing on the window-pane
A Kingdom of Fallen Statues –
And the outlines, delicate and fine, are wavering.”

—Oksana Zabuzhko, “A Kingdom of Fallen Statues”

In a six-photograph series from 1988 entitled “Games of the Naked,” photographer Roman Pyatkovka depicts four nude figures—two men and two women—in a Khrushcheyovka-style Soviet apartment in Kharkiv, Ukraine. Arranged in various positions and configurations, his subjects stand in front of an empty wall. Using superimposition, Pyatkovka overlays projected images from public, political life on Kharkiv’s Dzerzhinsky Square (now known as Freedom Square) onto their naked bodies.

In one photo, we see a military parade, wherein a line of uniformed military men marching with Soviet flags are projected over a man’s genitals. Next to him, the portraits of four politicians are projected onto the remaining two women and man’s figures. In another image, we see the single figure of a woman flexing her arm in a Schwarzenegger-like pose; to her right is a propaganda poster, to her left are soldiers carrying flags, and overlaying her naked breasts is the image of Vladimir Lenin’s statue, his outstretched
hand positioned as if he is grasping her nipple. In the final photograph of the series, a man and woman stand side by side—covering the man’s genitals is a male soldier standing at attention in the middle of Dzerzhinsky Square, and across the woman’s breasts we see an emblem of the hammer and sickle. Over the subjects’ necks and faces are images of Soviet politicians presiding above the square and observing a military procession. All the while, Pyatkovka’s foregrounded nude subjects grin—the man expressing a comical frown while the woman appears to be holding back laughter.

A member of the Kharkiv School of Photography (KSOP)—which emerged in the 1970s as an inventive, dissident, and specifically Ukrainian visual response to Soviet realia—Pyatkovka displays through his nude subjects the inklings of a swiftly approaching national collapse, legible through the comedic, subversive, and salacious manipulation of state symbology. Such artistic representations would have, prior to 1985, risked imprisonment, labor camps, or even death. Yet Pyatkovka’s work in “Games of the Naked”—as well as his other series during this period, including “Witches Sabbath” (1985) and “Wrong Picture” (1986)—engages the intellectual and social spirit of perestroika¹ (meaning “reconstruction”)—the Soviet Union’s final years, spanning from 1985 to 1991, alongside the policy changes of glasnost² (or “openness”). The loosening

¹ “perebudova” in Ukrainian
² “hlasnist” in Ukrainian
of censorship, relaxed restrictions on Western cultural and economic imports, as well as the attempt to include and expand more democratic policies in the USSR, engendered more visibly subversive forms of expression. These changes allowed for not only a political and social expansion outward beyond the Iron Curtain, but an inward turn as well, making the relationship between citizens and the state a more open object of interrogation. Even in the minutia of Pyatkova’s photography, this ideological critique becomes clear, as he uses the material contours and intimacies of a communal apartment to probe the social manifestations and human costs of Sovietism (perhaps even gesturing toward impending administrative failure). He highlights the extent to which late Soviet absurdity textured social and intimate life, evidenced through the quite literal comingling of bodies and the state. Bodies—their movements, habitus, vulnerabilities, limitations, and possibilities—participate in the formations, continuities, and dissolutions of national imaginaries and mythologies. These were not merely derived, passive contributions via blind mechanisms of a communist state; rather, they were deliberate and meaningful investments in their national and political lives and futures—if only imagined.

Despite perestroika’s attempts to integrate democratic policies and ideas, these cultural transitions and manifestations were not simply Western biproducts. On the contrary, Soviets had long challenged the regime’s practices, and this often occurred through underground, dissident communities of writers and artists. In Ukraine, these movements opposed primarily the supremacy of Russian culture and resisted the forced assimilation of Ukrainian literature and culture into the Russian language. Among some of the earliest Ukrainian dissidents were the Executed Renaissance, emerging in the 1920s-1930s, all of whom were imprisoned or executed during the Great Terror spanning
from August 1937 to November 1938. Following Stalin’s death in 1953, samvydav (“self-publishing,” “samizdat” in Russian) began to form, including the Shistdesiatnyky generation of writers (the “Sixtiers”) in the 1950s-1960s, followed by the Visimdesiantnyky (the “Eightiers”) alongside the Bu-Ba-Bu Poets, emerging in 1985 with the advent of perestroika. These late Soviet movements coincided with President Mikhail Gorbachev’s optimism that Soviet socialism could be salvaged through better relationships abroad, making him something of a hero in the West, yet not necessarily among his own peoples. In Svetlana Alexievich’s ethnographic examination of the final Soviet years in Secondhand Time, one interviewee comments:

More jokes were told in the Kremlin than anywhere else. Political jokes… anti-Soviet… [A pause] “Perestroika” … I don’t remember exactly when, but I think that the first time I heard the word was from foreign journalists while I was abroad. Here, we were more likely to say “acceleration” and “the Leninist path.” Abroad, the Gorbachev boom was in full swing. The whole world had caught Gorbymania. (128)

The shifting political landscape of the USSR in many ways contributed to the global embrace of Gorbachev’s political persona during perestroika, as it followed President Nikita Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin and the onset of the Thaw period as well as the subsequent Stagnation period under Lenoid Brezhnev. Alexievich’s interviewee continues, however, by questioning what the Soviet Union had been doing prior to this moment: “Soon enough, everyone got sick of [Gorbachev’s] sermons: ‘back to Lenin,’ ‘a leap into developed socialism’… It made you wonder: What have we been building, then,

---

3 This refers to wider dissident groups and movements throughout the Eastern Bloc, all of which included grassroots organizations and publications, often handmade, to evade censorship.
‘underdeveloped socialism’?” (Alexievich 129). Such a query reflects a significant paradox of this transition, and a phenomenon Alexi Yurchak poignantly observes regarding the Soviet Union’s last days: “Many discovered that, unbeknownst to themselves, they had always been ready for it, that they had always known that life in socialism was shaped through a curious paradox, that the system was always felt to be both stagnating and immutable, fragile and vigorous, bleak and full of promise” (4). For Ukrainians especially, the processes of national “building” and “unbuilding” have relied on violent paradigms, both physical and psychic, and have occurred through increased militarization as well as the rise of enriched and unaccountable political classes. Even more presently, this is visible through Russia’s war against Ukrainian peoples—the historical continuity of which is traceable through violent mythologies of “belonging” such as a reunified “Slavic brotherhood,” Orthodoxy, geographical proximity, and the “phantom pain of old Russian imperialism” (to borrow from Vitaly Chernetsky). I locate perestroika as a powerful revolutionary moment in Ukraine’s historical articulations of resistance to the weaponization of such colonialist and imperialist mythologies, past and present. I view the last Soviet Ukrainian women writers and filmmakers as groundbreaking in their conceptualization and identification of gendered formations of power and domination, especially through their more open and subversive critiques of the state.

My preliminary impetus for this dissertation was to examine the contributions of Ukrainian women-identified writers, filmmakers, and artists during this transitional period of perestroika to recontextualize and reconsider feminist thought in the wider context of Eastern Europe. By focusing on women-identified subjects, I amplify the
under-translated and overlooked work of Ukrainian women in the last Soviet years, but I also map Ukrainian feminist intellectual genealogies and epistemologies, identifying their shifting and emerging expressions in a moment of political upheaval. Nation-building queries and projects are profoundly gendered, as they include questions and anxieties that are fundamentally embodied and produced through bodies, including sex, pregnancy, childbirth, maternity, childrearing, and even food access and preparation. Despite the USSR’s nominal attempts at gender equality, such expectations nevertheless fell under the category of unwaged labor that was implicitly expected to be taken up by women, lauded and mythologized as critical to the processes of building communism—and equally, Ukraine’s “unbuilding” of Sovietism beginning in the 1990s. Regarding my use of gendered categories, my references to “men” and “women” are not an insistence on gender’s binarization, but rather an acknowledgement of the social configurations of gendered difference under Sovietism. I borrow from Susan Gal and Gail Kligman’s definition in The Politics of Gender after Socialism, in which they consider gender as a socially and culturally produced “organizing principle” under state socialism, with the intention of making “socially atomized persons dependent on a paternalist state” (5). Rather than women’s expected reliance on individual men through familial or marital bonds as in capitalist contexts, state socialism triangulated the relationships among men, women, and the state. For women, as the political landscape of the USSR began to rapidly change, the stakes of this shifting articulation of nation became part of a bolder and more visible feminist consciousness (although not necessarily named as such), as for many Soviets, “feminism” remained part of a Western, and thus bourgeois, imagination.
Due to the USSR’s attempt to cultivate gender equality through its leveling—and thus its erasure of a historical and social analytic—there was a notable absence of feminist research throughout the region throughout the Soviet period. As Ukrainian feminist scholars including Oksana Kis, Tamara Hundorova, and Marian J. Rubchak have argued, such politicized attempts at gender equality established in all four Soviet Ukrainian constitutions were merely nominal. Women ultimately carried a double burden through the expectation of both domestic and waged labor. As such, I argue that women’s literary and filmic responses to the precarious relationships between gender and nation in the moment just prior to transition evoked new language for articulating and considering gendered and sexual subjectivity. I consider the creative and artistic resistances to these manifestations of patriarchal power under Soviet socialism to be part of a longer, and often overlooked, Ukrainian feminist genealogy, becoming more visible alongside the increased openness of perestroika. However, Ukrainian feminist liberatory thought did not begin during perestroika, as feminist scholars including Kis, as well as Maria Bohachevsky-Chomiak and Solomea Pavlychko, have documented long histories of critical research, activism, and practices around gender.Rather, I identify this period as a significant moment in producing a more visible feminist rhetoric in Ukraine. This, however, had less to do with the efforts themselves, which were in many ways politically ill-conceived, and more to do with the ways in which Soviet citizens responded to an increasingly open society: one that allowed them to imagine, create, and perform new ways of being “Soviet,” which ultimately became part of a “post-Soviet” imaginary. As

4 This is evident throughout the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, for example, in the ethnographic work of Olena Pchilka (1849-1930), the writing and translations of Olha Kosach (1877-1945), the writing and poetry of Lesya Ukraїnka (1871-1913), and the writing of Olha Kobylianska (1863-1942).
some forms of Western feminism(s) and scholarship have (often unintentionally) produced narrow and incomplete, and thus colonialis, narratives and assumptions about women and gender in Eastern Europe, I position such gendered and subversive engagements as part of broader transnational feminist and postcolonial discourses. Scholars including Vitaly Chernetsky, Emily Channell-Justice, David Chioni Moore, Dobrota Pucherova, Sharad Chari, and Katherine Verdery (among many others) have drawn from postcolonial theory to consider the extent to which East/Central Europe, post-communist, and post-Soviet spaces have been contoured by forms of colonialism. In considering these theoretical and geopolitical intersections, I identify and demonstrate how the embodied performance of gender is always in conversation with state practices and national concerns. These forces of power and domination are not unique to Ukraine and Eastern Europe, but are, rather, symptomatic of the ways in which political and administrative power relies on gendered subjectivity to maintain its authority, often to oppressive, and even violent, ends.

My analysis resists a framing that implicitly relies on narratives of progress regarding the former USSR’s increasing democratization and liberalization during perestroika, and to this end, I bring visibility to its development not as a corollary of or in relation to Western feminist discourses, but as a product of its own cultural, political, and ideological conditions. In my exploration of women’s cultural productions during perestroika, I consider both national and diasporic sources to emphasize the global reach and implications of this transition. Chapter One entitled “The Collapsing Soviet Man: Embodying Perestroika in Kira Muratova’s The Asthenic Syndrome (1989),” investigates Kira Muratova last Soviet film, The Asthenic Syndrome (Astenicheskiy sindrom, 1989),
which was, incidentally, the last Soviet film to be produced and shelved. Romanian by
birth and Russian speaking, Muratova is often discussed within the context of Russian
cinema, despite the fact that her near fifty-year film career took place primarily in Odesa.
I explore in this chapter Muratova’s engagement with the “undoing” of Soviet society
through her chaotic and often disorienting representations of her characters’ bodies,
including illness, psychosis, cruelty, and food consumption, as well as her subversion and
“eroticization” of Soviet masculinity. Although her films do not address questions of
“Ukrainianness” or a national identity in the context of perestroika, as has often been the
objective in scholarly work on Soviet Ukrainian film, I draw attention to her
instrumentalization of Soviet Ukrainian cultural space to interrogate and produce a
critique of Sovietness. For this reason, it is not possible to exclude her work from a
Ukrainian cinematic context or canon, as it is equally essential to questions of nation and
identity—albeit represented indirectly. Muratova not only represents sociocultural trauma
in The Asthenic Syndrome, but also produces a powerful cinematic language, anchored in
embodied performances, for addressing embodied subjectivities in a late Soviet context.

Chapter Two entitled “Toward a Ukrainian Feminist Poetics: The Last Soviet
Poetry of Iryna Zhylenko, Natalka Bilotserkivets, and Oksana Zabuzhko,” focuses on the
intergenerational poetics of this period, including the works Zhylenko (1941-2013),
Bilotserkivets (1954-), and the early writing of Zabuzhko (1960-). I examine the extent to
which women’s poetry during perestroika, as simultaneously a political practice and a
form of cultural representation, developed new language for representing the ways in
which gender (and its embodied performances) is tied to the state. This language,
moreover, has been vital for feminism’s development in the twenty-first century both in
Ukraine and throughout the region. As the 1980s brought forth new political and ecological realities, especially the Chornobyl explosion in 1986, the stakes of this shifting articulation of nationhood became especially high for women, as the concerns were tied directly to women’s sexual and reproductive bodies and futures. I draw from the eco-feminist work of Anne Phillips, as well as the work of postcolonial feminisms, including Chandra Mohanty’s “Under Western Eyes.” Ukrainian feminisms, and East European feminisms more generally, have often been evaluated in relation to those of the so-called West, wherein Western feminisms are (often implicitly) viewed as progressive, and those of Eastern Europe are seen as underdeveloped and/or emerging only after independence. This chapter resists such neocolonial framings by arguing that the poetic contributions of Ukrainian women writers during perestroika holds significance for understanding a longer Ukrainian feminist genealogy. I position the work of Zhylenko, Bilotserkivets, and Zabuzhko during perestroika as integral to the emergence of a more visibly subversive feminist rhetoric in Ukraine. While not always “feminist” in name, women’s perestroika poetics yielded sharper and more vulnerable articulations of their gendered subjectivities, including the performances of sexual, maternal, and national identities.

In Chapter Three, entitled “Anatomizing the Soviet Ukrainian Periphery: The Perestroika Prose of Nina Bichuya and Halyna Pahutiak,” I examine the Soviet Ukrainian city through Nina Bichuya’s (1937-) 1990 short story, “The Stone Master” (“Kaminnyi hospodar”) and Halyna Pahutiak’s (1958-) 1989 short story, “To Find Yourself in a Garden” (“Potrapyty v sad”). I argue that the late Soviet Ukrainian context (especially perestroika) is a powerful case study for considering how modes of living and belonging are formed and reformed by built, material conditions. I employ in this chapter a
transnational and interdisciplinary approach, engaging not only feminist scholarship in the context of East/Central Europe, but also queer feminist work on the political and economic intersections of natural and social worlds to examine the shifting discourses around gender, reproduction, and family during perestroika. Donna Haraway’s early discussions of “naturecultures” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, Gayle Rubin’s examination of sexual political economies in “The Traffic in Women,” and Avery Gordon’s concept of haunting in *Ghostly Matters* frame my consideration of the expectations and essentialization of bodies in the reform and “strengthening” of the Soviet state. By examining the prosaic representations of embodiment and gendered subjectivity in Ukraine during perestroika, I engage the ways in which the materiality of everyday life is deployed through bodies via their subjects’ movements through public and private domains, physiological vulnerabilities to the environment (for example, the legacies of Chornobyl and Holodomor), familial bonds and institutions, food and food scarcity, sex and reproduction, labor (waged and unwaged), and the relationships between bodies and built environments (as with *khrushchyovka* housing).

Finally, Chapter Four, entitled “Ukraine’s Global Continuity: Confronting Ethnicity and Violent Histories in the Poetry, Prose, and Visual Art of the Diaspora,” turns to women writers and artists of the diaspora. Perestroika’s earliest and most optimistic stages, in many ways, signified the Soviet Union’s attempt to imagine and create a viable and sustainable future. Yet even despite this openness, the USSR’s imminent end became increasingly clear, bringing with it new uncertainty and instability. This transition also thrust Soviet cultures more legibly into the global arena, bridging worlds that were previously believed to be ideologically incompatible. In the Ukrainian
case this phenomenon was especially visible, as much of its Soviet literary and cultural productions had been preserved by the diaspora. For this reason, I argue that the creative contributions of women artists and writers in the Ukrainian diaspora carve out and assert Ukraine’s global intelligibility and continuity through their representations of gender, race, and ethnicity. I include the surrealist poetics and visual art of Emma Andijewska (Germany, 1931-) and short stories of Vira Vovk (Brazil, 1926-), both of whom experienced exile during World War II and whose work reflects the trauma of displacement through its existentialism and surrealism, as well as the more visibly feminist work of Janice Kulyk Keefer (Canada, 1952-), a second-generation Ukrainian Canadian. Using the concept of “fallible fiction,” Keefer draws from Ukrainian history to not only reimagine violent Soviet and émigré histories in the “corrective,” but also to critique diasporic complicity with the violence of settler colonialism and white supremacy in her native Canada. In so doing, by focusing on the contributions of women-identified writers, filmmakers, and visual artists who have actively engaged questions of embodiment, violence, patriarchy, and “deviant” sexuality, I situate Ukraine as a vital part of a transnational feminist discourse, representing and responding to histories of violence, colonialism, white supremacy, and misogyny.

In the early stages of this project, I intended to focus my attention on the poetics, prose, and filmmaking that came out of Ukraine’s Euromaidan/Revolution of Dignity in 2013-2014. It quickly became clear that the outcomes of this more recent historical moment—including the illegal annexation of Crimea, the subsequent eight-year invasion and occupation of Ukraine’s eastern regions, and currently Russia’s full-scale invasion and genocidal war—remain uncertain and continually in flux. For this reason, I turned
my attention to Ukraine’s last Soviet years as a way of unveiling and discerning a critical moment in Ukraine’s genealogies of liberation that are fundamentally gendered and embodied. My focus on this six-year period has, incidentally, brought me to the present moment in surprising ways, especially as I have evaluated perestroika’s significance as transition that was simultaneously (and paradoxically) apocalyptic and hopeful. This has not only allowed me to better historicize and contextualize Ukraine’s position as a colonial and imperial object—conditions that have been mobilized and exacerbated in the ongoing war—but also as a way of bringing greater epistemological nuance to the categories of gender and sexuality, decentering and disentangling them from Western and Eurocentric imaginaries. By complicating the political orientation of bodies as strategic administrative apparatuses organized by state and ideological structures, I highlight the ways in which Ukrainian women’s literary and filmic representations of bodies implicitly resist such operationalization. To this end, gender—in its physicality, performances, and imaginaries—becomes not merely a marker of power differentials within a society, but also a locus of possibility for building new (and better) worlds.
CHAPTER 1
THE COLLAPSING SOVIET MAN: EMBODYING PERESTROIKA IN KIRA MURATOVA’S THE ASTHENIC SYNDROME (1989)

In your films, women are smarter than men. Why? Well, perhaps because they’re more selfish, they have to be more cunning. It’s like in an illness: in an illness, a person becomes more intelligent, he understands more.

—Kira Muratova, interview with Uldis Tīrons, 2017

Introduction: Soviet “Women’s Cinema”

One of the few women filmmakers working during perestroika, and the only woman director in Ukraine during this period, Kira Muratova pushed the boundaries not only of Soviet film, but of cinema more broadly. Romanian by birth and Russian speaking, she is often discussed within the context of Russian cinema, despite the fact that her near fifty-year film career took place primarily in Odesa. The intersections of her ethnonational identities within the cultural and geographic context of Ukraine once textured and oriented Muratova’s filmmaking. Her oeuvre has, in many ways, been defined by its use of misrepresentation; that is, her emphasis on the absurdity of Soviet reality—a reality that insists on conventional, and even moralized, expectations for social behavior both in public and private domains. In both their aesthetic and framing, her films during perestroika disorient the audience from conventional spectatorial expectation. Chaos becomes itself a protagonist in her rendering of Sovietism, or what is, to her, the mania of late Soviet society. For Muratova, mania is not merely a psychological phenomenon or metaphor; it is, rather, manifested and pathologized through the body and performed through illness. This is especially true for The Asthenic Syndrome (Astenicheskiy sindrom, 1989), wherein the film’s protagonists suffer from
various forms of asthenia, debilitating and isolating them physically and psychologically. It is through her instrumentalization of the body that she diagnoses her apocalyptic vision of the Soviet Union’s final years. In 1991, Andrei Plakhov posited that *The Asthenic Syndrome* “closes the cine-epoch of the 1980s. And perhaps not only of the 1980s.” What Plakhov sensed but was not yet free to articulate, as Jane Taubman emphasizes, “is that the film heralded both the end of Soviet cinema and of Soviet society” (46). Muratova’s depiction of corporeality exposes the political anxieties situated at the boundary between the Soviet and the “post,” as her filmic representations of nakedness, especially her inclusion of the male form, incorporates both vulnerability and disgust—what Taubman refers to as an “anti-erotic” gaze. By exposing the “private” space of the exposed human body, she also challenges public formations of gender and sexuality within the context of late Soviet society just prior to transition—a gesture that would come to take on new significance in the post-Soviet context. Scholars including Taubman and Ellen E. Berry have previously, and productively, highlighted the significant cinematic and symbolic dimensions of her filmmaking. I build on their critique by emphasizing the extent to which the inclusion of bodies that are ill, eating, and eroticized produces a way of considering the physical manifestations of perestroika—as part of a longer history of Soviet state violence. In so doing, Muratova not only represents sociocultural trauma, but also produces a powerful cinematic language, anchored in embodied performances, for addressing gendered and sexual subjectivities in a late Soviet context.

In discussing “women’s cinema” or “women’s film,” particularly in the context of the Soviet Union, we encounter a number of problems, not only in terms of a definition, but also with regard to its boundaries. What does it really mean to consider “women’s
cinema” as a category, and how can we emphasize women’s cinematic contributions without reducing them to a kind of spectacle? Even more complicated is the category of “feminist cinema,” which already imposes a particular (and implicitly singular) rendering of feminism. Feminist film scholars including Laura Mulvey, Martine Beugnet, Kaja Silverman, Teresa DeLaurentis, and Barbara Creed (among others) have written extensively on the question of “women’s” or “feminist cinema,” especially as it relates to a “male gaze” and the “female voice.” In a 2015 conversation, Beugnet and Mulvey address the concept of a “feminist” cinema in the context of a “cinema of transgression.” Both view it through the cinematic representation of embodiment, or what they refer to as “corporeal cinema” or “cinema of the senses.” As itself a site of knowledge, the “body” has been explored extensively in feminist scholarship, and particularly with regard to violence and the inscription of trauma, as evidenced in the works of Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray.5 In feminist film studies, such metaphorization of bodies has often been explored in relation to psychoanalysis, echoed in the works of Mulvey and Silverman. Mulvey, importantly, approaches the concept of a “feminist” cinema with caution, noting how in the cinema of transgression, “these women directors don’t necessarily take to being categorized as ‘feminist’ or even as ‘women.’” But “to what extent has this genre attracted women… and to what extent has it enabled them to touch on questions of the body, violence, and the fantastic, and so on in a way that is unprecedented in the history of women’s cinema?” (191-92). I agree with Mulvey’s critique and would add that approaching cinema via the particular categories of “women”

---

5 These critiques of the “body” are visible especially in Butler’s Gender Trouble (1999) and Bodies that Matter (1993), Kristeva’s Pouvoirs de l’horreur, Essai sur l’abjection (Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, 1980), and Irigaray’s Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un (This Sex Which is Not One, 1977).
or “feminist” not only risks oversimplifying the categories themselves, but can superimpose a restrictive and arbitrary binary: “women’s cinema” implies a subgenre of “Cinema” proper, implying that it belongs to “men.” Similarly, “feminist cinema” risks becoming a novelty category, suggesting that films not categorized as “feminist” disregard questions of gendered and sexual subjectivities.

When confronted with the notion of a “feminist cinema” or a “female director,” Muratova responds:

I was puzzled to begin with. I thought: what nonsense, what does it mean “‘female’ director”? A person either has talent or doesn’t. That’s the skeptical attitude I took with me to Créteil in France, where I was surprised to see that female cinema actually exists. It’s terribly cynical and violent. Films by embittered slaves made good who spit in the face of everything stored up and seething inside them. I was amazed. And I have since come to recognize the existence of tigers, jellyfish, spiders—and women’s cinema. (Donina)

While her observation recognizes the existence of a “women’s cinema,” and its emergence as a response to violence, Muratova nevertheless distances herself from it, implying that her cinematic intention does not arise from gendered cynicism or violence, but something more universal. Muratova’s interpretations of categories such as gender and feminism are tied to the Soviet political and social contexts in which she lived and worked. Feminism was broadly viewed as a “Western” idea, implemented to address bourgeois problems. Moreover, the notion of “gender,” as both an analytic and social category, carried a different meaning in the USSR than its common conception in the “West.” The man/woman division and their expected roles were often viewed less in
terms of hierarchy and more in terms of, as Sarah Ashwin observes, its service to state power. In the context of Soviet Russia, the relationships between gender and the state were triangulated; as she describes, “the primary relationship of individual men and women was to the state rather than to each other” (2). This does not mean the Soviet Union achieved gender equality or the genderless (and classless) utopic ideal touted in its various constitutions. On the contrary, women maintained their auxiliary roles as wives and worker-mothers, and the distinctions between genders (as “male” and “female”) were produced and reproduced in relation to each other, particularly because women’s bodies were essential for producing more Soviet subjects.

In this sense, the world in which Muratova emerged, and within which her cinema was shaped, bore particularly Soviet gendered realities and lived experiences. Thus, a productive analysis of her films requires a complex critique of what feminism means or could mean in the context of late Soviet Ukraine, and to which I turn my attention to the “cinema of transgression” as a way of considering Muratova’s use of embodiment to represent her vision of Soviet decay. Rather than looking for “feminist” cinema in the context of late Soviet Ukraine, I provide a more complex rendering of what it means to represent the gendered and sexual subject, and as such by looking to cinematic spaces of transgression and subversion. Despite the absence of an explicit feminist presence in name, Soviet women filmmakers were still producing what can be considered “feminist” cinema through its use of representation and subversion. With this in mind, rather than approaching Muratova’s work as implicitly “feminist,” I instead look to the intersecting questions and representations of embodiment, violence, and the erotic as entry points for
considering gendered subjectivity in the late Soviet period, and as it relates to a Ukrainian context in particular.

Due to its loosened restrictions on film censorship (along with other creative mediums), perestroika ushered in new ways of representing and critiquing social and cultural phenomena. Berry describes this era as a “cultural identity crisis,” not only opening up cultural possibilities in the Soviet Union, but as also exposing the “emptiness of years of simulated existence” (448). As Mikhail Epstein observes, it was the end of “utopia,” asking its citizens: “How to live after one’s own future, or, if you like, after one’s own death” (71). Muratova responds to perestroika’s identity crisis in *The Asthenic Syndrome* by turning to the language of “diagnosis,” interpreted and performed somatically. However, Muratova’s film was not well received by Soviet censors. *The Asthenic Syndrome* was the last Soviet film to be censored in 1990, due not to the nudity, but to its “vulgar” final scene, wherein a woman in a subway car directs a torrent of obscenities at the viewer (referred to in Russian as *mat*, or “filthy language”). Taubman identifies these “unprintable words” as “Muratova’s reaction to the devastation” present in late Soviet society, and she was pressured to omit this scene, encouraged to instead drown out the sound with subway noises. Ultimately, she refused, as she later describes regarding the attempted censorship:

First, this is simply the truth of life, straightforward realism. Vulgar language accompanies my life from the moment I step outside my house. As I walk along the streets, it accompanies me like a birdsong or the rustle of leaves…. If I had reflected the real scale of the phenomenon, it would have sounded uninterrupted during the length of the entire film. (qtd. in Taubman 46-47)
Her unwillingness to comply delayed its release nearly six months—until 1990—making it the last Soviet film to be shelved. That year, it was entered into the 40th Berlin International Film Festival, where it won a Silver Bear—Special Jury Prize. By considering Muratova’s engagement with the “undoing” of Soviet society through her representations of embodiment in *The Asthenic Syndrome*, I bring new attention to the ways in which her filmmaking during perestroika reflected not only Soviet realities, but more acutely, the precarity of Soviet life as constituted within the context of Ukraine. I do this by exploring not only Muratova’s position in Ukrainian cinema, but also by highlighting the extent to which her filmic rendering of bodies—through their illness, pathologization, consumption, and eroticization—serves as both scrutiny of late Soviet society as well as a re-articulation of mythologized forms of state subjectivity.

**Muratova the Ukrainian Filmmaker**

Regarding my positioning of Muratova as a Ukrainian filmmaker, it is necessary to historicize some of the distinctions among Soviet filmmakers working in Ukraine during this period to clarify this view. While I discuss Muratova within the context of Ukrainian cinematic history, she is also claimed as part of Russian cinematic history. By contextualizing her in the Ukrainian context, I do not wish to negate her significance in the Russian context: I believe that her multiple ethnonational and linguistic identities as a Soviet filmmaker facilitate her duality. In terms of the Ukrainian SSR, there were significant differences in filmmakers’ relationships with the idea of “Ukrainianness” and Ukrainian cultural politics, depending on the studio in which they were housed. Kyiv Film Studio⁶ in Kyiv, for example, was established in 1929 with the intention that it

---

⁶ Kyiv Film Studios later became Dovzhenko Film Studio, or *Dovzhenkovtsy*, in the 1950s, named posthumously after filmmaker and writer, Aleksander Dovzhenko (1894-1956).
would be the center of the Ukrainian film industry. In some ways, this can be attributed to Ukrainization,⁷ which was part of the Bolshevik efforts initiated in the mid-1920s as a way to develop modern nationhood. They believed that encouraging national cinemas in Ukraine, Georgia, Uzbekistan, and other republics would help promote and achieve this ideal. This strategic political project aimed toward Soviet nation-building: by establishing a national cinema alongside national literatures, theatre, dance, music, etc. that would develop the Soviet Union into a multinational federation. The motives behind this framework of the Soviet nationalities policy were ultimately concerned with eradicating, according to Yuri Slezkine, “the virus of nationalism from their proletarian disciples and their own minds” (qtd. in First 3). Ukrainian films were, likewise, seen as a vehicle for transforming Ukrainians into communists. However, as Joshua First notes, by the late 1950s, few people in Ukraine and throughout the USSR were interested in viewing explicitly Ukrainian films, and there were even reports of movie theater managers blacking out the studio name to encourage audiences to attend. As audiences during this unpredictable period of de-Stalinization (both in the USSR and beyond) expressed a growing interest in Soviet cinema, “the Kyiv studio seemed to be operating according to old principles and was dually ignored” (First 4).

Many of the Dovzhenkovtsy filmmakers—including Aleksandr Dovzhenko himself, as well as Yuri Ilyenko, Leonid Bykov, and Sergei Bondarchuk (among others)—identified as specifically Ukrainian filmmakers. This means that most of them were not only born in the geographic boundaries of Ukraine but, to a large extent, were engaged with Ukrainian political and cultural concerns, and this was demonstrated in

⁷ Sometimes called “korenizatsiya,” or indigenization—literally “putting down roots.”
their filmmaking. The murkiness of using Ukraine and “Ukrainianness” as an ethnonational qualifier in the Soviet context is due to the ways in which this identity has been challenged and oppressed, as well as preserved and protected, throughout the Soviet period. As First clarifies:

Every Ukrainian knew they were “Ukrainian” in the USSR, largely because of the legal certainty of line four on the Soviet international passport. Some others identified with a common Ukrainian past or a contemporary ethno-linguistic community that transcended Soviet Ukraine. (18)

Film, as a creative and cultural medium, allowed filmmakers a space in which questions about national identity can be interrogated and performed (albeit often involving heavy restriction by censors). However, for Soviet filmmakers at Odessa Film Studio (Odessity), which was founded ten years earlier in 1919, and where Muratova spent most of her career, Ukrainian political questions were less present—and often even nonexistent—than at Dovzhenkovtsy. Many were from other SSRs and neither considered themselves to be “Ukrainian” filmmakers, nor were their films considered representative of a Ukrainian “national cinema.” As Ukrainian political and cultural questions are often thought to be central to the concept of “Ukrainian cinema,” many scholars, likewise, do not consider Odessity within the scope of Ukrainian cinema, as this marker has often been hinged on the filmmaker or work’s engagement with specific cultural, linguistic, and political questions. First, for instance, excludes Odessity from his examination of cinematic representation in Soviet Ukraine, noting, “I feel it necessary to exclude this studio from analysis…believing that film production in Odessa would be best examined in relation to central studios like Mosfilm and Gorky” (18). He thereby categorizes
Odessity as part of larger Soviet film initiatives, aligning it with Russian studios Mosfilm and Gorky, both located in Moscow.

In many ways, this distinction between the Odesa and Kyiv Film Studios speaks to Odesa’s position as an international, rather than Ukrainian or even Soviet, city, and this is due to histories of migration and diaspora that have contributed to its populations and development. Tanya Richardson observes this phenomenon regarding Odesans themselves: they insist they are “a distinct nationality. Moreover, they see their city as international, multiethnic, Jewish; while Ukrainians might reside there, many do not consider it a Ukrainian city” (5). Patricia Herlihy describes Odesa’s expansiveness following Catherine the Great’s official founding of the city in 1794, as in addition to Ukrainians, Russian officials, Polish landlords, and many non-Slavic peoples settled in Odesa, including “Greek and Italian merchants, Bulgarians, Albanians, Tartars, Swiss, Germans, the French, and even a few English people. Many Jews, notably from Galicia and Poland, took legal residence there” (2). In addition, the city’s location as a port further facilitates its multinational, multiethnic composition—one that is not necessarily “Ukrainian” in the same way as Kyiv is viewed as Ukrainian. Herlihy describes the peculiarities of this multicultural and multiethnic landscape as part of the “Odesa myth,” wherein “municipal ideologues proclaim, ‘We are not Russians, nor Ukrainians, nor Jews, nor Americans, not Bushmen, nor Chinese, we are Odessites!’” (13). For this reason, while Odesa is geographically “Ukrainian” and I include Muratova’s work as part of Ukrainian cinematic history, not all of its inhabitants have historically borne or embraced this ethnonational identity.
Muratova’s positionality within the Ukrainian context, along with the impact of her filmmaking, serve as a productive case study for considering gender and the complexity of ethnonationalities the Soviet Union. Due to the Odesa’s international and multiethnic mythos, many of its Soviet filmmakers did not seek out Ukrainian questions or narratives in their films. Throughout the Soviet period, Muratova similarly was not explicitly interested in Ukraine’s “national question” (although, arguably, not entirely disinterested), nor did her films address questions of Ukraine’s national identity. There is a relevant distinction to be made, as First does, with respect to how filmmakers were oriented politically (and even ethnically\(^8\) in some cases) based on film studio affiliation, and I agree that filmmakers have been justifiably identified as “Soviet,” “Russian” or “Ukrainian” based on their affiliation with Kyiv or Odesa. However, in exploring women’s contributions within the demarcated space of Ukraine, and moreover, positioning these contributions within a longitudinal articulation of feminist thought both in the Soviet period and beyond, I identify Odessity as a Ukrainian site of analysis. Moreover, I equally consider Muratova’s oeuvre as part of a broader Ukrainian cinematic canon because she was living and working within this demarcated Ukrainian space, and I do not wish to erase or overlook Odesa’s seventy-year history as part of the Ukrainian SSR as well as its continued significance in an independent Ukraine. However, at the same time, I do not dismiss the complexity of the city’s multiethnic and multilingual populations, especially in terms of its Russian-identifying population.

\(^8\) I use the term “ethnically” to refer to those whose consider their political, cultural, linguistic, national, and/or familial identities to be Ukrainian. I do not wish to essentialize or homogenize these categories, as the question of ethnicity within this context is a complex and often contested one, particularly in the diaspora.
In terms of her career as a filmmaker, after the dissolution of the USSR, Muratova’s shift from Soviet to Ukrainian citizenship financially compromised her filmmaking, thus restricting the funding and circulation of her films. However, despite this economic hardship, she managed to complete twelve feature films between the years of 1991 and her death in 2018, and both Russians and Ukrainians alike continue to embrace her as part of both cinematic landscapes. While she continued to make films in the Russian language, she did not object to the Ukrainization of Ukrainian Cinema, although she did note that Ukrainians accept “the fact that things must be done cheaply….It’s all a question of improvisation and imagination. This is necessary for Ukraine” (Dolin). She, moreover, supported the 2013-2014 Euromaidan (Revolution of Dignity) protests that challenged the Russian military’s invasion, occupation, and later the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. In a 2014 interview with Russian film critic Anton Dolin, Muratova reflects on some of the limits and challenges this political and social transition presents:

I was wildly in favor of Maidan until the moment when the shooting and killings began….No territory—be it called a motherland—is worth killing each other for…. I continue out of a kind of inertia to empathize with Ukrainians, I continue through inertia to condemn Putin but the fact that people are killing each other shatters me….It’s abhorrent to me when people are killing each other. Whether Ukraine will become part of Europe or not is of no interest to me. At that price nothing is interesting anymore.

(Dolin)
In other words, Muratova’s support for the “Eurofication” of Ukraine, in addition to her opposition to Russian President Vladimir Putin’s military and political actions, does not exceed her concern for the lives and safety of citizens. The boundaries of her allegiances and identities reveal the complexity underlying her relationship to Ukrainian national space. Although her films do not address questions of “Ukrainianness” or a Ukrainian national identity in the context of perestroika, as has often been the objective in scholarly work on Soviet Ukrainian film, I draw attention to her instrumentalization of Soviet Ukrainian cultural space to interrogate and produce a critique of Sovietness. For this reason, it is not possible to exclude her work from a Ukrainian cinematic context or canon, as it is equally essential to questions of nation and identity—albeit indirectly.

**Cultural Diagnosis in The Asthenic Syndrome**

In her recent monograph, and the first book in French on Muratova, *Kira Mouratova. Un Cinéma de la Dissonance* [Kira Muratova: A Cinema of Dissonance], Eugénie Zvonkine identifies what she calls “cinematic dissonance” to describe Muratova’s oeuvre. The concept, definitionally, emerges from music, wherein a classical understanding would imply, as Irina Schulzki notes, “at least two sounds that never fused, and, building tension, provoked a desire for resolution which according to the rules of harmony could be obtained only by returning to consonance” (Schulzki np). This definition was revised in the twentieth century by Arnold Schönberg (1911) and Theodor Adorno (1970), framing dissonance as less of a disturbance and more “first, an evolutionary phenomenon (i.e. dependent on perceptual habits) and, second, a decisive part of, if not more important than harmony itself” (Schulzki np). For Zvonkine, Muratova’s inclusion of dissonance throughout her films—that is, the inclusion of
narrative gaps, instabilities, and ambiguities between images, sounds, and sequences—arouses in the audience “a perceptive disturbance” (304). Muratova produces cinematic contradictions and disruptions, and, unsurprisingly, her work was met with dissatisfaction and even ire from both audiences and censors.

I extend Zvonkine’s discussion to consider how *The Asthenic Syndrome*, specifically, uses cinematic dissonance in its somatic representation(s), as Muratova’s characters embody numerous “moral” contradictions, at once seemingly victims and perpetrators, subjects and objects, passive and active. Dissonance, here, is not merely the “decisive” inharmonious part of the film, it is, rather, the spaces wherein these discordant qualities push against each other, as if antimagnetic, that Muratova locates, and even medicalizes, her diagnosis. Likewise, it is the film’s (often relentless) inclusion of discordance and ambiguity that yields not only her own cultural “diagnosis” of late Soviet society, but also provokes the audience to participate in its diagnosis. I make a distinction between Muratova’s “diagnosis” of culture through her use of dissonance and what might be considered cultural pathologization. The former offers nuance in its critique, whereas the latter risks assuming a more dismissive or essentializing reading. This is not to say that Muratova herself did not pathologize Soviet society in her films—she clearly did so, and for her, the violent legacies of the USSR were viscerally and forcefully present. As Irina Sandomirskaia argues, *The Asthenic Syndrome* “performs this state of dissolution as it narrates it,” noting that Muratova is less interested in representation than tactility (63). However, I resist uncomplicated, essentializing assumptions about Soviet peoples and society. Such assumptions not only perpetuate monolithic historical narratives that contribute to epistemological slippages, but they also
reinforce latent Cold War attitudes regarding Soviet life, particularly in western discourses. I, rather, consider how *The Asthenic Syndrome* brings visibility to what she sees as the specific workings and legacies of violence in the Soviet context, while at the same time, it disrupts singular narratives of the late USSR, particularly its representation of gendered and sexual subjectivities.

The discernible social critique in *The Asthenic Syndrome* is, arguably, not exclusive to the precarities of Sovietism or state socialism. I resist an “East” versus “West” approach to the political dimensions of Muratova’s filmmaking, as reproducing this ideological and geographic binary contributes to a neocolonial imaginary of Eastern Europe. As Bohdan Y. Nebesio addresses in his discussion of early post-Soviet Ukrainian cinema, the legacies of communism, in addition to Russian cultural domination, “makes the adaptation of Western theoretical models difficult, if not impossible, for a conceptualization of the cultural phenomena one encounters there.” He, however, is cautious about viewing “the chaos of values in the societies of the former Soviet Union as postmodern or postcolonial curiosities,” and Nebesio, instead, approaches Ukrainian cinema from the bottom up—exploring the ways in which “described phenomena suggest conclusions,” rather than interpreting through a particular theoretical lens (198). I echo Nebesio’s concerns regarding the misapplication of ill-suited theoretical approaches, and for this reason, further rigorous interdisciplinary research on the former Soviet Union remains vital: we are still reckoning with the legacies of communism alongside ongoing (and often tenuous) liberalization processes throughout the region. At the same time, in theorizing these epistemological gaps and slippages, it is useful to further consider existing theoretical models, including postmodern and postcolonial critiques, as scholars
including Vitaly Chernetsky, David Chioni Moore, Sharad Chari, and Katherine Verdery have done. Yet this must also emerge from an interdisciplinary methodology to develop more cautious and precise language for considering the social, economic, political, environmental, and cultural complexities of the region.

For most Soviet filmmakers, particularly during the heightened, restrictive, and violent censorship of the Stalinist period of 1927-1953, explicit or shocking representation of embodiment was rarely permissible, including images of corpses or depictions of death. There were, however, instances where filmmakers challenged these conventions; for instance, Yuri Illenkyo’s 1965 A Spring for the Thirsty (Krynytsya dlya sprahlykh) includes a scene where the film’s elderly protagonist lies down in a coffin he built for himself, and later shows him carrying an apple tree, with the frame suddenly shifting to falling apples—implying the man’s death. Such inconsistencies in censorship speak to the arbitrariness of Soviet censorship. Murtatova’s work was subjected to intense scrutiny and restriction throughout her career, due in particular to her instrumentalization of alleged “vulgarity” and “obscenity.” Martine Beugnet describes the filmic performance of embodiment as part of what she calls “the cinema of transgression,” and more specifically, “corporeal cinema,” referring to the continuity between “the materiality of the human body and that of the medium” (Beugnet and Mulvey, Feminisms 191-193). As a way of considering the materiality of embodiment in Muratova’s films, and likewise, her representations of Soviet subjectivity, her pivotal voice captures the physicality of Soviet society’s delirium, as it is through her strategies of distorting and misrepresenting the cinematic subject that she disorients the viewer. It is through the dialogue between Muratova’s representation of corporeality and film as a
visual, performative medium that I locate the possibilities for *The Asthenic Syndrome* to subvert and challenge Soviet society, and even more presciently, to consider how “corporeal cinema” can mediate sociocultural trauma.

Film scholars have often framed *The Asthenic Syndrome* as Muratova’s “diagnosis” of perestroika: her response to the social “illnesses” of Soviet society, perpetuated by the dawning realization of a failed utopia. Such use of medicalized language in the film’s analysis reflects the metaphor suggested in its title, as Muratova describes the syndrome itself, “In the olden days it was called hypochondria, or black melancholia. Each time Nikolai (Sergi Popov) cannot cope with circumstances, he falls asleep. In the end, he falls asleep for good” (qtd. in Taubman 45). In other words, the film’s diagnosis of asthenia or an “asthenic syndrome” is not merely a physiological affliction but a societal one, visibly present through the bodies of citizens, which themselves perform as metaphors for Sovietism. As they move through and engage (or disengage) with their world, they mirror the “disease,” becoming a human canvas for “infection.” Embodiment in the film provides the canvas for traumatic inscription via her subjects’ loss of bodily control. This is particularly evident through the experiences of illness, the consumption of food, and grief—and through which Muratova’s apocalyptic vision of the Soviet Union’s final years is realized.

**Reframing Soviet Apocalypse**

One of the prevailing interpretations relies on an assumption that Muratova’s arbitration of perestroika and Soviet society in *The Asthenic Syndrome* is implicitly a cynical one, represented through images of chaos, cruelty, and unease. To that end, she employs an “apocalyptic” cadence as part of this diagnosis—one that is, equally, often
critiqued as disparagement or even contempt. Here it is worth clarifying the notion of apocalypse as one that does not merely signify an ending or even annihilation, but as a way of revealing or unveiling. To borrow from Andrea Oppo, who, drawing from the theological underpinnings of apocalypse in *Shapes of Apocalypse*, notes a distinction between an *event* marking an “end of history” and one that creates conditions for a new world. He defines apocalypse as a form of “artistic imagery” that “passes through the annihilation, or transfiguration, and a *kind of perspective on ‘earthly things’*” (Oppo 9).

In exploring the concept of apocalypse in the context of representing perestroika—the boundary between the Soviet and the “post-Soviet”—it is vital to recognize the work such representation does in unveiling the groundwork for what lies beyond.

While *The Asthenic Syndrome* seeks to expose what Muratova saw as the moral failures of Soviet life, both in public and private domains, to position the film as merely cynical in its representation of Sovietism risks oversimplifying its legacy. This is where Zvonkine’s discussion of dissonance becomes useful, as it speaks to the “in betweenness” of dissonance, and the possibilities for productive cultural exploration and reflection within spaces of contradiction and opposition. This is not to say the film carries an especially rosy, or even hopeful, tenor, as the viewer is quickly made aware of the film’s unforgiving attitude toward conventional narrativity or resolve, and it has been criticized for its obscurity and even unwatchability. Rather, its legibility emerges in the details: the long, often tedious, shots of objects, human bodies, and social interactions offer its audience not merely a consumption of images, but the consumption of time, almost as a way of bringing the reader into the frame kinesthetically. This is, as Temunga Trifonova describes, the “structuring of attention,” working against the “natural predisposition of
consciousness to drift.” Film, in other words, promises “to keep at bay the vertigo of drift by arresting time into moments that give us the illusion of presence” (107). Similarly, Matilda Mroz describes the phenomenon of temporality in *Mirror*, in which fellow Soviet filmmaker, Andrei Tarkovsky, produces a kind of experiential cinema. As Mroz observes, “it is time that sculpts, and that objects and people are subject to the vicissitudes of time, rather than time being something that can be mastered and controlled, as the notion of spatialised or clock time suggests.” Long-takes, in other words, “thematise and enact a sense of time passing indifferently to our presence” (Mroz 95). Not only are Muratova’s characters subjects of time, but her audience is as well. She includes long shots not merely to sculpt the narrative itself, but more acutely, to carve or hollow out spaces for her audience, both habitable and uninhabitable. In so doing, they accompany Muratova to these arenas of discomfort, and thus disentangling a late Soviet reality from a Soviet imaginary.

Muratova sees these disparities and violence(s) as human problems generated by human failures. She does not necessarily single out the USSR as the chief offender in her representation of political and moral failings, as she acknowledges what she sees as a ubiquitous human propensity toward inequality and violence. When asked about the film in an interview, she responded, “I don’t see any fundamental difference between us and the West. Mankind is everywhere, in general, the same. I see in the world a level of suffering and cruelty that surpasses understanding.” Yet, for Muratova, this suffering takes on new dimensionality and physicality in the Soviet context, as she adds, “in a poor man, a hungry man, an insecure man, this cruelty is more evident, his anger is on the surface, this structure, this skeleton is laid bare” (qtd. in Gersova 160). It is the
centralization of the physicality and the anatomization of this cruelty, as evident in Muratova’s language, that underlies her use of embodied representations as not merely a physiological subjectivity, but as also containing, performing, and reifying cultural, social, political, and environmental imaginaries. In so doing, she achieves a cinematic vivisection of the Soviet subject, one that emerges from her own critique of both the Soviet state’s failure and her diagnosis that its failure is merely symptomatic of a ubiquitous human “syndrome.”

Regarding the film’s use of pathology and medicalization, the notion of “asthenia” is one that, in 1970s Soviet psychiatry, served as a “euphemism for milder and fixable, manageable form of madness.” This “diagnosis” did not require institutionalization, but rather, the expectation that the subject was to cure the asthenic syndrome “in himself and by himself” through “rudimentary analysis, hypnosis or mild antidepressants” (Sandomirskaia 66). This assessment also contained violent political and ideological components: whereas schizophrenia was often the diagnosis for “dissident” or anti-Soviet behavior, thus requiring heavy medication and hospitalization, asthenia was frequently used to describe “an emotional or behavioral disturbance” associated with the “colluding and collaborating intelligentsia,” or as Sandomirskaia refers to it, “a perestroika of the soul” (66). Rather than being medicalized as a serious disease, “asthenia” signaled a fracture in the relationship between subject and society. To this extent, then, it has never been considered a nosocomial entity, but, rather, was used in such a way as to conveniently pathologize deviant subjectivity.

9 The key architect of this psychology was Andrei Snezhnevsky (1904-1987), who was an academician at the USSR Academy of Medical Sciences, and who developed the term “sluggish schizophrenia”
The narrative in *The Asthenic Syndrome* is divided into two parts that are, allegedly, unrelated, although a number of the characters’ lives overlap, with part one filmed in sepia and part two filmed in color. The film’s opening scene informs its audience of this two-part structure by flashing “*dve serii*” (“two parts”) on the screen, followed by four distinct images. The first is of a doll covered by flowers, with bubbles floating over it. The background music in this opening scene is Schubert’s somewhat light “String Quartet No. 8: *Allegro Ma Non Troppo*” (which incidentally translates as “Cheerful but Not Too Much”), but the music quickly stops as the scene moves to the second image: three elderly women standing together, smiling and holding hands in front of a wall, not far from the discarded items. Following the babushkas is the image of a young boy blowing bubbles out a window (the same bubbles seen earlier next to the garbage). The image shifts to a wider frame, revealing that the doll and flowers are merely items discarded in a public garbage can, along with more discarded objects, including a broken clock, empty open cans, an overturned cart, glass jars, a cane, and a single crutch that perhaps signal Muratova’s forthcoming exploration of affliction and illness. Regarding her inclusion of garbage, she refers to this as “the aesthetic of garbage, trash, eclectic combinations of rubbish,” but notes that it is “the construction site [that] expresses laconically what I have in mind” (qtd. in Taubman, “The Cinema of Kira Muratova” 374). Such spaces emerge throughout the film, almost tediously, delineating, particularly in its representation of public domains, an atmosphere not so much of progress, as is often implied with “building,” but the static quality of a Soviet reality. One might conclude that Muratova sees the construction site as a perpetual, uninhabitable state, rather than a suggestion of development.
The music shifts to something more somber as Muratova brings her audience to a construction site, wherein several men in a ditch are terrorizing a cat by tying a tin can to its tail—an act that can, allegedly, frighten a cat to death. As this is happening, a conversation unfolds between two of the men: one tells the other about his “terrible obsession” with eating bread and sausage after he would make deliveries on his postal route, while the second man laughs hysterically—a hint at the film’s preoccupation with food and eating (00:2:46). Muratova uses these early moments in the film to establish her critique. For instance, despite being in uniform at the construction site, the men here are not working—signalizing the futility of not only Soviet labor practices and expectations, but also of “building” the state itself. Additionally, the worker in charge stands holding the blueprint and a cigarette, laughing at the men chasing the cat, initiating the narrative’s
relationship with cruelty—a theme that punctuates the film. This quartet of images—the babushkas, the child, the rubbish, and the men—set the tone for her film, one that includes this sense of dissonance, as she places in opposition the perceived innocence of the child and a more violent and cruel reality of the grown men tormenting an animal. Berry comments on how the laughter in this moment of abuse “suggests a death of the heart, or of human responsiveness and compassion” (449). What is clear is that Muratova exposes the film’s thematization of social “disease,” not only by juxtaposing innocence with cruelty, but also by introducing the ways in which violence is often built into the landscape itself, occurring alongside the banality of everyday life, becoming a mundane fixture.

The chorus of the three babushkas begins The Asthenic Syndrome with a reference to Leo Tolstoy—an author who, for the most part, Soviet citizens would have read in school, or at the very least, recognize. In so doing, Muratova orients the film within a particular cultural and moral framework; this is to say, historically, Tolstoy and his works have been perceived as morally foundational (albeit not unproblematically) within a cultural canon, particularly his challenging of the upper-class during the late Russian Empire, in which he discouraged private property ownership, state institutions, and violence, and encouraged anarchistic and socialist approaches. The first woman holds copy of his 1878 novel, Anna Karenina, and the three chant, but not entirely in unison, “In my childhood, in my early youth, I thought it was enough for everyone to read carefully through the work of Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoy and everyone would understand absolutely everything. And everyone would become kind and intelligent” (Asthenic Syndrome, 0:050). Regarding her inclusion of this reference, Muratova reflects:
I could dedicate this film to Tolstoy. This is the key to my film. He says things about the naivety of the intelligentsia who believe that culture and art can transform the world… I believe that we can only draw attention, provoke, make people think, try to refine the soul and raise the mental level, but the essence of what is inside cannot be changed. This film is a tragedy consecrated to that fact. (qtd in Taubman 48)

Muratova’s artistic vision rests somewhere between the optimism of her Tolstoyan premise of raising individual consciousness, and her belief in the stability of an internal human “essence,” one that could possibly produce a better society and a different world. *The Asthenic Syndrome*, in this sense, acknowledges the nihilism of late Sovietism and
the anxiety of its uncertain future, while also reflecting Muratova’s belief in the possibility of art to cultivate some good and perhaps even enlightenment. However, as Taubman laments, there were many who “could not, or would not see” her prophetic moral vision, and who described it using the epithet “chernukha,” effectively meaning, “an excessively bleak depiction of reality” in art, literature, or film (“The Cinema of Kira Muratova” 369).

In a 2017 interview (less than a year before her death), Latvian filmmaker Uldis Tīrons asked Muratova about this scene, acknowledging an underlying irony: what is revealed through the grandmothers’ conversation is that “nothing came of Lev Tolstoy’s project.” She responds to this query by connecting it to her own experience, echoing the words of the old woman at the beginning of the film: “When I was a child or a young person, I thought that if people read Lev Nikolayevich very carefully, everyone would become good, kind and wise, kind and wise, kind and wise.” Tīrons asks her, “and why doesn’t that work?” to which Muratova replies, “Because literature can’t teach you how to live… Nothing can. Nothing” (Tīrons). Socialist Realism’s idea that art serves a moral purpose, that the writer is the engineer of human souls, became, for many Soviet citizens, Muratova included, a parody of their lived experience. Her disillusionment, as expressed here, is palpable in her last Soviet films. However, this is not to argue that her invocation of moralism and its literary manifestations situates The Asthenic Syndrome as inherently moralistic. Rather, in this brief homage to Tolstoy, she exposes perestroika’s unintentional fracturing of the expectation for a kind of moral idealism that, in many ways, failed alongside the utopic promises of the Soviet state.
In many ways, using illness and disease to represent political corruption appears to be somewhat obvious: a physical and psychological attack on the “body,” weakening, destabilizing, or even killing it. Such analyses of metaphors have been present in some of the critiques and scholarship of Muratova’s *Asthenic Syndrome*, emphasizing the centrality of illness, or “syndrome,” in the film. Yet there are problems with this metaphor, as disease in itself is not political, nor does it function in the same way as governing power. Disease, rather, thrives amid structural weaknesses, be they institutional, ideological, legal, or epistemological. For Muratova, illness is locatable in these contexts, and the subject’s body is merely a vehicle. For her, the question of who is to blame for this “illness”—if someone is to be blamed—is a complicated one. In many ways, as some scholars agree, she places the onus of responsibility on her viewer—hence the seemingly relentless onslaught of uncomfortable images, evoking even, at times, a level of disgust or repulsion. Helen Furguson, for instance, observes how “the desire to confound and frustrate the viewer’s expectation is coupled with an urge to confront them with the unsettling and the disturbing” (39). This is seen throughout the film through the characters’ repeated cruelty toward animals as well as vulnerable people, for instance, the aforementioned moment at the beginning where the workers tie a can to the cat’s tail. In another scene, two local women mock and humiliate a mentally disabled person, only to be reprimanded by a man who happens to be passing by. Yet his reproval quickly escalates to further violence, as he then becomes physically aggressive with the women, pulling their hair and attempting to throw them to the ground (01:14:22-01:15:37). Muratova’s disorienting, and even disturbing, inclusion of such scenes is not simply an effort to bring moral accountability to a Soviet condition, but to reveal its taken-for-
granted, “built-in” quality, visible through the audience’s visual consumption of everyday life. Thus, rather than being merely a moral project, the film poses a more complex question: how does one survive apocalypse—if it is to be survived?

Part one of the film focuses on Natasha, a new widow who, after burying her husband, goes through a series of breakdowns, behaving erratically and even aggressively, often toward men. However, nearly forty minutes into the film, the screen changes to reveal a projector as “конец” (“The End”) flashes across the screen. As the lights go up, shifting from sepia to color, the audience discovers that “Natasha,” revealed to be the actress, Olga Sergeyvena Antonova. She is merely performing in the film—revealed to be Muratova’s film-within-the-film. As she stands on stage with a male speaker, the disgruntled audience begins to leave, and all the while the frustrated speaker pleads with the disappearing audience:

Please don’t go away. We have the chance to talk about our impressions and to ask questions. It doesn’t often happen that we see a movie engaged…by directors like [Aleksei] German, [Alexander] Sokurov, and Muratova. We can talk, ask some questions. Comrades, please! Go back to your seats, please. We have a chance to meet a maestro of cinema. A person who participated… (00:38:48-00:39:43)

Not only does Muratova position herself among other prominent Soviet directors, she, and ironically, refers to herself as a “maestro of cinema,” as while he is speaking, a fist fight breaks out among the disinterested audience as the people are leaving. The speaker’s voice is drowned out by audience members shouting at one another: “What are you doing? Are you crazy? You have to take off your hat!” The camera follows a
seemingly “ideal” Soviet family out of the auditorium—they are well-dressed, the wife clinging to the husband’s arm and the child asking if they can get ice cream. The husband scoffs, reflecting on the film, “What’s the use of movies like this? I’m already tired, out of exercise. I’d like to have fun, listen to some music instead of watching such movies. I didn’t want to see these people carrying the coffin, burying….What kind of topic!” to which his wife, laughing and gazing at him adoringly, responds, “Alyosha, you’re tired. I love you so much! Your smell! I could die right now. Your face—You look like an angel!” (00:40:15). Here, the audience are, in some sense, reflections of the censors themselves, rejecting images of illness, grief, or death. Muratova’s comedic undertone of the film surfaces clearly in this exchange: the irony is that in showing her film within a film, and to a disinterested Soviet audience, she reveals that she in fact has no audience.

In this scene, which is also the moment the film shifts from part one to part two, we are also introduced to Nikolai, Muratova’s narcoleptic protagonist in part two, who is left sleeping in the audience, and to whom some of his fellow audience members ask, confusedly, “Is he drunk? No, he’s just sleeping”—a line that is used consistently throughout in reference to Nikolai. Muratova’s medicalization and pathologization of Sovietism, then, participates in the question of survival through the observable control and lack of control of bodies throughout the film, evident especially in the character of Nikolai, whose narcolepsy causes him to fall asleep in public places. In order to “survive,” he sleeps. His body, like a corpse, is immobile and “interrupting” a space of movement, not unlike the doll lying among the trash pictured at the beginning of the film. His narcolepsy serves as a barrier between his body and his ability to move through or engage with his environment. For Muratova, illness, in this sense, is a spatial limitation,
controlling and delimiting Nikolai’s body within certain spaces, and particularly in public contexts. As he goes about his day, moving through the city, Muratova punctuates her narrative with the image of his body splayed out in the open, sometimes even looking crucified, situated as a public obstacle that must be stepped over or avoided altogether.

This contrast between the moving crowd and Nikolai’s motionless, sleeping body occurs most notably when Nikolai falls asleep on the floor of the metro station, foregrounded as the camera moves rapidly back and forth between his immobile body and the swarm of people moving through the metro. The frame rests on various faces in the crowd as they ride the escalator down, many of whom also appear to be exhausted, some resting their heads on the shoulder of a friend or partner, yawning and even nodding off. The camera brusquely shifts back and forth between the stillness of Nikolai’s body and the actions of crowd—going down the escalator, passing by on a train, and entering and exiting the
train—until finally, the two crescendo and are in into the same frame (0:45:55).

Most unsettling about Nikolai’s stillness is his invisibility to the moving crowd as they push against one another to get where they are going. The audience is made uncomfortably aware of the apparent dissonance within the frame—it is unclear whether he is just drunk, injured, or even dead. Muratova’s inclusion of this cinematic dissonance, again, elicits audience engagement with the visible absence of a sense of responsibility for others, yet despite the severity of Nikolai’s narcolepsy, what underlies the starkness of Muratova’s visual representation of this difference is the reality that everyone is suffering from asthenia, as demonstrated through the yawning and tired expressions. Nikolai continues to be ignored until finally two women and a man help move his body to
a nearby wall until he is able to wake up. They are followed by a police officer and a nurse who investigate Nikolai’s body: the nurse opens an eyelid, seemingly to check if he is ill or dead, as the officer (as did the people in the auditorium in the previous scene) asks, “is he drunk?” to which she responds, “no, he’s just sleeping” (0:46:22-0:46:58) As she stands back up, the nurse grabs her back and groans as if in pain, followed by a yawn, then thanks the officer and walks away. All the while, he stands over Nikolai, unsure what to do with him, and, as another crowd of people move past, he himself begins to yawn. The syndrome from which Nikolai suffers is already present (or perhaps latent) within the public, many of whom remain oblivious to its effects or severity. For Muratova, it seemingly moves through a social web, from body to body, reminding the viewer that whether or not the symptoms are debilitating, as with Nikolai, the “illness” circulates among the public.

Consuming Sovietism

Throughout *The Asthenic Syndrome*, Muratova draws a connection between the subjects’ bodies and cultural space through the presence and fixation on food. It works as a kind of “moral” barometer for the film, signifying particular levels of social dysfunction through its overconsumption as well as its inaccessibility. For Muratova, the presence and consumption of food involves a metaphorical and physiological “vivisection” of culture, and often becomes visible through her characters’ physical interactions with food and eating throughout the film. Martina Caspari discusses the literary representation of food in the GDR, wherein there was “constant competition with the much more affluent West…and having to deal with an economy of scarcity at the same time.” Moreover, this competition, “mixed with the attempt to create a utopian new society determined the
relation people had toward food throughout the existence of the GDR and beyond. Food became the central symbol of well-being, affluence, luxury, while its creation became an ever more artificial endeavor,” as food ultimately “became a metaphor for the state of affairs in the GDR and mirrored different historical attitudes” (89). While circumstantially different from the GDR, the Soviet Union exhibited a similar phenomenon with food culture, performing and professing a utopic ideal through the portrayed public relationship with food production and distribution, yet in reality, these resources were often unobtainable throughout much of the Soviet period. In their work on *Food in Russian History and Culture*, Musya Glants and Joyce Toomre assert how, “precisely because of the constant shortages, the government evolved a ‘carrot and stick’ policy whereby granting or withholding food rations became a potent tool for imposing will and manipulating its population…the giving or withholding of good is perhaps the ultimate weapon of control” (xx). This was especially prescient in the Ukrainian SSR, where manufactured food shortages under Stalin, notably the Holodomor famine (1932-1933) caused four million people to starve to death. This historical memory, for Ukraine, remained (and remains) close, tied intimately to the consumption of food and food itself. Muratova’s characters’ fixations on food in *The Asthenic Syndrome* gesture at this memory of famine in Ukraine alongside broader Soviet relationships with food, including its strategic deficiencies, shortages, and bread lines. As sustenance (and its absence) was deployed as an especially embodied means of political control and domination in the USSR, Muratova’s characters’ obsessions and compulsions regarding its consumption signal their implicit knowledge of this heritable trauma.
Muratova’s cinematic inclusion of food and its consumption throughout *The Asthenic Syndrome* highlights the extent to which the material needs of people, within the context of Sovietism, have often been disregarded, only to be replaced with forms of idealism—the failed promise of utopia. We see, for instance, Nikolai gazing in the mirror, eating from a can of caviar, which later appears next to him while he is a patient in the psych ward. Another significant example is the line at a fish stall in a nearly four-minute scene wherein two men are engaged in a philosophical conversation. The first, a Soviet, says, “You’ve got to educate the soul!” to which the second, an African immigrant, replies, “And sometimes cut the hands.” They continue this exchange:

- The soul will be educated.
- Sometimes the hands will be cut.
- We need to educate the soul.
- And cut some hands.

All the while, they are blocking the line for the fishmonger, and around them the crowd pushes against one another. In the background, someone shouts, “Stop pushing!” “It’s enough for everyone! Hands off!” and “Give me the fish. Give it to me!” (01:01:15-01:01:45). Muratova's late Soviet apocalypse is dramatized through the irony of this dual reality: the Soviet man’s insistence and projected idealism about the possibility of "educating souls," all while hungry citizens are frantically pushing one another in line for food.

The physical space of the fish market is also significant for Muratova’s inclusion of food, as well as the social processes of obtaining food. In a nearly two-and-a-half-minute shot, the camera then focuses on the frenzied scene of the fish stall, including a
fishmonger in a *ushanka* (fur-cap), indifferently smoking a cigarette while a swarm of people cluster around her, pushing against one another, demanding fish. The fish are stacked haphazardly in wooden crates in front of the fishmonger, adjacent to a large mallet. As the camera moves in closer, the audience is brought more directly into the line, positioned near the front, facing the fishmonger, as if peering over the shoulder of a fellow customer—at one point the camera is even blocked completely by a blue coat. Muratova’s audience observes the scales and the fishmonger’s gloves as she aggressively shoves the wet fish into plastic bags and takes the peoples’ money, as the soundtrack picks up some of the ongoing dialogue between the fishmonger and the crowd: “Give me some clean [gloves]!” “Lady this fish is dirty!” “You’ll wash them at home!” “I don’t have running water at home!” (01:32:30). While on the surface the scene feels haphazard, and even anxiety-inducing, Muratova describes its appeal for her:

> This scene could be filmed in a million ways—you could shoot it much more powerfully and crudely, but this is the way it is for me: horrible and at the same time cheerful, almost dancing along, as if they were engaged in something pleasant…. I find the queue terribly likable because there’s life in it….Well, you know, like Charlie Chaplin—a little man, everything seems to be going badly for him, but at the same time he feels good. (qtd. in Taubman, *Kira Muratova* 53)

While this scene depicts an ordinary Soviet experience, there is, for Muratova, relief in her ability to represent the duality of this existence: it is at once a space of deficiency and severity, yet in dramatizing it, there emerges freedom and vitality. Berry observes how her inclusion of seemingly inconsequential events is strategic, and it “effectively underscores Muratova’s message that the key to diagnosing cultural malaise lies in an
examination of the banal and trivial, of the everyday, rather than of seeming consequential public events” (451). However, there is a thorniness in framing Muratova’s artistic goal as strategically moral or even meaningful. Her avant-garde approach signals something more observational and less didactic. In this way, *The Asthenic Syndrome* offers not merely a cynical vision of late Soviet society nor even a call to change or reform, but rather by hyperfocusing, as if surgically, on the minutiae of Soviet reality—in all of its proclivities, monstrosities, and intimacies—Muratova brings greater complexity, and even tenderness, to its rendering.

STILL 4. FROM MURATOVA, *THE ASTHENIC SYNDROME* (01:02:21)

Muratova’s cinematic rendering of the minutia of a Soviet reality also acutely engages the mechanism of disgust, and both the spectators’ and the characters’
experiences and performance of repulsion participates critically in the narrative’s development. Sara Ahmed conceptualizes what she refers to as “the story of disgust,” or the sensation of being disgusted, as it relates to “the project of survival”—which she observes as how “we take something other into our bodies,” particularly with food, or even perhaps medicine. This notion of survival, moreover, challenges the extent to which disgust, as an embodied, visceral response, can give insight into the “truth” of an object. As a sensation, it reveals the ways in which the objects are perceived as “good” or “bad,” and “how the boundaries that allow the distinction between subjects and objects are undone in the moment of their making” (83). Ahmed’s exploration of disgust highlights not merely its affective role in a filmic or artistic medium, but also the ways in which it, as a bodily mechanism, carves out and complicates particular ways of knowing. In The Asthenic Syndrome, Muratova works to complicate this boundary between “good” and “bad” through the mechanism of disgust, which, for her, is often implemented through her subjects’ bodies’ occupation of space—through the experiences of illness, grief, sex, and violence. This can be seen especially through her use of long takes, focusing in on a character’s consumption of food by depicting their mouths chewing and swallowing. It is an indicator of boundaries—social, private, and political. By way of disgust, Muratova disrupts and subverts who gets to observe these boundaries and when, thus performing her cultural vivisection of the late Soviet period.

Muratova’s use of disgust is demonstrated in The Asthenic Syndrome predominantly, again, through her use of long takes, wherein she requires the audience to observe seemingly mundane social (and non-social) interactions and behaviors. Not long after the scene in the fish market, the scene shifts to Nikolai’s classroom, wherein he is
giving a lesson in English to a classroom of students who are not listening to him. Instead, they are sleeping, eating, talking to one another, and reading newspapers. The camera moves to focus on an image of a dead fish lying on a piece of paper. It is unclear whether it is intended for eating or dissection. In the background, the popular American song “Chiquita” begins to play. We see first one, then two, three, and four hands begin to tear at the fish, pulling it apart bit by bit as the camera moves in closer and closer, until it is so mutilated it is practically unrecognizable. Later, the camera focuses in on a young girl’s mouth, slowly eating pieces of the mutilated fish. The scene has a salacious undertone, as Muratova blurs the boundaries between disgust and sensuality, and in so doing, she returns thematically to the subject of cruelty, and the extent to which cruelty so often occurs through the slow piecing apart of the subject—a kind of social denaturing represented through the object that appeared so coveted in the previous scene. In this sense, the fish is not so much symbolizing human subjectivity, but rather it is part of the broader tapestry of “undoing” that Muratova critiques, and one that becomes even clearer in her representations and eroticization of human (particularly male) bodies.
(Re)rendering Soviet Masculinity

In the final scene of Aleksander Dovzhenko’s 1929 silent film Arsenal (Арсенал)—a dramatization of the Kyiv Arsenal January Uprising in 1918—the protagonist, a Ukrainian peasant and Bolshevik hero, Tymosh, proves himself invincible against the bullets of the counterrevolutionaries. As the men try to shoot at him, they shout, “Fall, damn you, fall! Are you wearing armor or something?” The hero responds by screaming, ripping open his shirt, and baring his naked chest as the music crescendos and the film ends (01:13:24). While Arsenal received a great deal of criticism from Ukraine’s Communist Party, Dovzhenko was ultimately redeemed by the fact that Stalin watched the film and enjoyed it. The notion of the New Soviet Man (novyi sovetskii
chelovek, and his counterpart, the New Soviet Woman) emerged as a way of identifying, constructing, and ultimately embodying Soviet formations of gendered subjectivity, curated and demonstrated through much of the USSR’s state-sanctioned cinema. As Lilya Kaganovsky argues, this image of Soviet masculinity was secured through the rise of Joseph Stalin, who came to power in 1924. She describes this image as “the rhetorically constructed figure rising above the Soviet masses to lead them to victory and the bright future of communism. The square jaws, the broad shoulders, the ‘halo’ that emanates in and around his presence—all of these elements contribute to the grandeur of the new being, the hero of socialist labor” (Kaganovsky 3). This image of masculinity, and the prioritization of a male gaze, was aggressively present throughout much of Soviet cinema, even despite some of the legal and political moves to “equalize” gender. As Graham Roberts observes, this was a way in which “the heroic, narcissistic bodies” of Soviet heroes hint “not just at the absence of internal psychological conflict but also, and more importantly, at the integrity and inviolability of the USSR itself” (114). Such production of Soviet masculinity and male subjectivity in the context of cinema was mobilized to uphold the imaginary of the state and its alleged ideological infallibility. This cinematic mythologization was achieved through state-sanctioned, benevolent representations of Stalin throughout the Soviet bloc, visible especially in the Stalin-era films of Dovzhenko and Eisenstein. By pushing against this image, Muratova’s perestroika-era films, particularly The Asthetic Syndrome, powerfully undermine and intervene in this fantasy of Soviet masculinity—one that has long anesthetized Soviet citizens.
Muratova’s inclusion of bodies (both human and animal) in The Asthenic Syndrome is her foremost gesture for critiquing late Soviet society, and especially what she sees as the cruelty or viciousness of late Soviet society. As an apparatus for the performance of subjectivity, the body offers a means by which these conditions can play out, particularly through the filmic medium, which allows for the visual depiction of bodies to occur without relying heavily on spoken language. Dina Iordanova observes how in The Asthenic Syndrome specifically, Muratova’s characters are emotionally destitute and thus have weakened defenses. It is, she argues, “her persistent reminders of people’s hurt feelings and their impaired emotional lives that was unpalatable for the communist censors” (Iordanova 284-285). Her rendering of this emotional poverty seizes the subjects’ bodies, and this embodied occupation in many ways functions as Muratova’s chosen language in the film. This language captures the ways in which the mechanisms of state violence and oppression are carried out and persist somatically. Yet she plays with this idea by turning her attention to the ways in which bodies occupy, and are occupied by, the peculiarities of a late Soviet political landscape.

Regarding the cultural climate of the late Soviet period, Ukrainian literary scholars, including Tamara Hundorova, Vitaly Chernetsky, and Marko Pavlyshyn (among others) have commented on the thematic emergence of a postmodern “carnivalesque” in perestroika (specifically post-Chornobyl) and early post-Soviet Ukrainian literature. In her preface to The Post-Chornobyl Library, Hundorova thoughtfully describes the phenomenon of what she calls a “postapocalyptic postmodern narrative.” She notes how, It begins simultaneously with the Chornobyl explosion in April 1986… it is exactly the Chornobyl discourse that provokes the deployment of Ukrainian
postmodernism because Chornobyl is not only associated with socio-techno-ecological catastrophe that occurred in a certain time and place but also signifies a symbolic event that projects the postapocalyptic text about the postponement of the end of civilization, culture, and human into the post-atomic era. (Hundorova xiv)

The severity and precarities of Chornobyl’s aftermath, in combination with the uncertainty of the Soviet Union’s future, were not lost on Muratova. She, similarly, employs a perceptible “carnivalesque” tenor in The Asthenic Syndrome, heralding a distinct departure from the Soviet realism of her earlier films, including Brief Encounters (Korotkiye vstrechi, 1967) and The Long Farewell (Dolgiye povody, 1971). While Ukrainian literature during this period frequently dealt with questions of national identity and culture, Muratova was not overtly concerned with “Ukrainianess,” and this had to do with her reticence to align with overtly “political” themes (at least not overtly during this period). As she moves toward a more fragmented and disorienting reality in The Asthenic Syndrome, and to a lesser extent Change of Fate (Peremena uchasti, 1987), she incorporates elements of the carnivalesque to dramatize her own political anxieties.

Likewise, I draw this comparison to the Ukrainian carnivalesque to consider Muratova’s use of the erotic images in The Asthenic Syndrome.

The Ukrainian carnivalesque was employed especially by writers and performers of the Bu-Ba-Bu—a literary group formed in 1985 by poets Yuri Andrukhovych, Oleksandr Irvanets’, and Viktor Neborak. Due to the state of Soviet Ukrainian literature—which had ostensibly been at the mercy of Soviet expectations and often

---

10 The Bu-Ba-Bu is short for “buffoonery, farce, burlesque” (bufonda, balahan, burlesk).
violent forms of censorship—buffoonery, as Neborak explains, was a “radical way to overcome depression, an antidepressant” (qtd. in Hundorova 103). Similarly, Andrukhovych describes the movement as “nothing less than a way for us to survive the second half of the eighties. At the beginning of the nineties, we seriously considered erecting a monument to ourselves” (qtd. in Hundorova 104). One of the Bu-Ba-Bu’s objectives, as Pavlyshyn observes in “Ukrainian Literature and the Erotics of Postcolonialism,” was to “consistently outrage a public postulated as traditionalist and still shockable, in large part by breaking the taboo on the explicit treatment of sex in public discourse” (118). Regarding the role of the carnivalesque, Andrukhovych describes it in the following way in Literaturna Ukraïna: “Carnival unites the ununitable, it juggles hierarchical values, it turns the world on its head, it provokes the most sacred ideas in order to rescue them from ossification and death” (qtd. in Pavlyshyn 119). It is another way of configuring dissonance. It is not, however, used to merely produce or represent chaos or absurdity; rather, for Muratova, the carnivalesque unmoors her viewers from an expectation for synchronicity or linearity, allowing for more disorienting and subversive representations.

Muratova’s portrayal of male nudity has often been critiqued in terms of its relationship to “eroticism,” as some critics (including Taubman) have insisted that it does not fall into the category of “erotic,” referring to her inclusion of nudity as “anti-erotic.” However, the notion of an anti-erotic image or representation is itself an ambiguous concept, reliant on an interpretation of eroticism as tied exclusively to sex and sexual acts.\textsuperscript{11} Muratova’s use of the “erotic” in The Asthenic Syndrome, as well as the ways in

\textsuperscript{11} To borrow from Audre Lorde’s essay, “The Uses of the Erotic, The Erotic as Power” in which she critiques the misnaming of the “erotic,” I resist an implicit linkage between Muratova’s
which her exploration and portrayal of the male body in the late Soviet period, has less to do with its conventional, overtly-sexual interpretation, but instead, responds to underlying anxieties regarding gender, masculinity, and the longstanding mythologization of the “New” Soviet Man. As Kaganovsky observes, “the Stalinist fantasy of masculinity” through its reliance on images of wounded, mutilated male bodies (often through cinematic representation) “turned the New Soviet Man into a heroic invalid” (3). Muratova reverses the gaze, revealing not so much the vulnerabilities of nude male bodies themselves, but rather of the spaces in which they exist. In effect, she challenges not only the idea of “Sovietness,” as it has been represented through such virile, yet distressed, images and expectations of masculinity, but also the imagined infallibility of the Soviet state itself. To effectively critique Muratova’s treatment of Soviet masculinity through the inclusion of male nudity—we need to consider how she positions her critique against the imaginary of its gendered legacies. Her inclusion of the carnivalesque is most visible in the scene where Nikolai encounters two gatherings—the first includes a gathering of mostly young women, dancing and listening to loud music in an apartment; the second involves a gathering of young people, some nude and some clothed, who are engaged in what Muratova describes as “a kind of theatricalized erotics or an erotic game” (qtd. in Taubman, Kira Muratova 56). Nikolai walks through the first one, only to stumble in (and seemingly disrupt) the second one. While at first bewildered, he is soon intrigued, and joins them, as they inform him, “you have to make a sculpture of love. A celebration of the human body” (01:49:38).

inclusion of nudity and the pornographic, as I view this inclusion and representation as a scrutinization of oppressive forms of subjectivity.
Nikolai eventually lies down, fully clothed, as the other members begin to leave the room. Masha, one of the party members/artists, removes her Red Star earrings and places them on his chest, and, again, he falls asleep, as a machine behind him continues to billow out smoke. Following this, as if the viewer enters his dreams, we see a series of naked bodies, five men and one woman. The men are fully nude and appear to be not so much powerful, muscular, or aggressive, but they are situated among neglected detritus of the everyday—household clutter, a mirror, empty boxes, garbage, a television. The woman, however, is not posed among objects, but instead a white and red background, and is only partially nude, as she is covering her genitals. Muratova, in this scene, redirects the male gaze, as Nikolai is the viewer, “seeing” the naked bodies along with
the audience. He “sees” in other words, the vulnerability and fallibility of the male body, and in so doing, as Roberts suggests, she “demythologizes” it (2). Added to this notion of demythologization, the power of Muratova’s redirection of the gaze lies in the knowledge that bodies are always tied directly to the state through its ability (or inability) to direct or control them. Questions of agency and control, moreover, are situated through this thematization of asthenia, visible through perestroika’s fracturing of the bond between Soviet subject and the state. This is not merely a critique of communism—such a reading of subversive late Soviet representations is one that Western scholarship has often relied on—but rather the director’s overarching condemnation of politicized cruelty. While representing communism’s dysfunction and metaphorizing the loss of power is integral to Muratova’s overarching cultural critique, specifically within the context of perestroika, this limits the film’s significance. Rather, legible here is a call to action and doing so through the reorientating or reimagining of power. *The Asthenic Syndrome* challenges her audience’s assumptions about not only the gendering (and thus privileging) of power, but about what it means for its embodied performance to be in conversation with a broader cultural and political imaginary.
STILL 7. FROM MURATOVA, *THE ASTHENIC SYNDROME* (01:51:38)
STILL 8. FROM MURATOVA, *THE ASTHENIC SYNDROME* (01:52:29)

Conclusion: Embodying Futurity

In 2017, Ukrainian photographer Sergey Melnitchenko (1991-) began an ongoing project entitled, “Young and Free,” in which he depicts naked bodies of young men, posed in various positions, in what the artist imagines as “beyond time and civilization” (Lecia Gallery Warsaw). His work in this project and previous projects\textsuperscript{12} explores masculinity in the context of twenty-first century Ukraine, utilizing the nude male form. He has continued the project as a way of responding to some of the ongoing crises in the region and the world, including, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic and police brutality, echoed both in recent Ukrainian and US contexts. In considering recent

subversive representations and explorations of masculinity and embodiment in the context of Eastern Europe, such as Melintchenko’s, we can see the extent to which the function of audience discomfort empowers its cultural and social significance. The continuity of Muratova’s project is legible in such artistic representations that consider the vulnerability of bodies as markers of both political violence and social transformation.

As Muratova expresses in *The Asthenic Syndrome* just before the scene shifts to the psych ward where Nikolai is a patient, and where he finds out that the world outside is just as “insane” as the one within:
PEOPLE DON’T LIKE TO LOOK AT IT.

PEOPLE DON’T LIKE TO THINK ABOUT IT.

THIS SHOULDN’T BE REFERRED

TO DISCOURSE ABOUT GOOD AND EVIL. (02:07:09)

We can look to a filmmaker like Muratova, and especially her work in *The Asthenic Syndrome*, as a forerunner for exposing less “dignified” aspects of embodiment—mental and physical illness, eating, and nudity. In so doing, she conjures spectatorial anxiety and disgust, instrumentalizing these equally embodied responses not so much to demand accountability or even to carve out a clear moral takeaway, but, and perhaps more effectively, to remind her audience where they live—that is, of their Soviet and political subjectivities.

*The Asthenic Syndrome*’s final scene follows Nikolai into a subway train, where he meets a woman with whom he flirts and kisses, asking “where are we going?” to which she responds, “to my house… I live with my mother. If she looks annoyed, don’t mind her, she’s actually quite nice” (02:20:24). As she says this, Nikolai, again, begins to fall asleep. The woman gasps and embraces him, saying, “I will do anything for you. It will be a joy to cook and wash for you, while you’ll be writing a novel, a short story, a poem” (02:20:49). As the train stops and the other passengers get out, the woman becomes frantic, hitting him and screaming at him, like other women have throughout film, “Nikolai Alekseyevich! Wake up! Come on, wake up! Please, wake up! Nikolai Alekseyevich!” The police officer wanders into the car, and asks, “Is he dead?” to which the woman responds, suddenly calm, “No, he’s only sleeping” (02:21:59). Muratova punctuates her film with these questions regarding Nikolai’s state—“is he sick?,” “is he
drunk?,” is he dead?”—consistently meriting the same response, “no he’s only sleeping.” The “only” here indicates a paralysis, one that reminds its audience that he remains in this liminal state, doing nothing more or less. This response, significantly, acts as a kind of refrain for her film: it emphasizes the extent to which observable social “evils” lie not so much in what is presumed to be social problems (sickness, drunkenness, death), but rather in “sleep,” or more aptly, a seemingly relentless absent consciousness.
CHAPTER 2:
TOWARD A UKRAINIAN FEMINIST POETICS: THE LAST SOVIET POETRY OF IRYNA ZHYLENKO, NATALKA BILOTSERKVETS, AND OKSANA ZABUZHKO

“Let’s keep records. At least those of our own feelings. Let’s hope they will create a different time”

—Oksana Zabuzhko

Introduction: Gendering Poetic Epistemologies

Reflecting on her generation of writers’ new position in Ukraine’s literary history, poet and scholar Oksana Zabuzhko remarks in a 1995 essay that “The ‘New Wave,’ the generation where I belong, is actually the first one after the last six decades that is freed from the obligation ‘to save the nation’” (“Reinventing the Poet” 275). Her observation refers to the ways in which Ukrainian-language poetry and literature throughout much of Soviet history was often a dissident act, the production of which risked exile, labour camps, or death. Moreover, Zabuzhko’s sentiment gestures at the belief, explicitly or implicitly, that intellectual freedom emerges with the presence of a sovereign nation, wherein writers no longer bear the burden of its defence. Yet the murkiness of Ukrainian poetry’s relationship with the national idea—as she would come to find out—has remained, however transformed. The last Soviet Ukrainian poets, Zabuzhko among them, were, in many ways, the first to undertake this new vision of nation. As the 1980s brought new political and ecological realities, especially the Chornobył explosion in 1986, the stakes of this shifting articulation of nationhood became especially high for

---

13 As I am speaking specifically about the Ukrainian context, I use the Ukrainian transliteration “Chornobyl” rather than the Russian “Chernobyl.”
women, as the concerns were tied directly to women’s sexual and reproductive bodies and futures.

To highlight this changing discourse, I foreground the work of three Ukrainian poets writing during the late Soviet period of perestroika (1985-1991): Iryna Zhylenko (1941-2013), who began her career with the “sixtiers” (“shistdesyatnyky”) group of poets, Natalka Bilotserkivets (1954-) who began publishing her poetry in the late 1970s, and Oksana Zabuzhko (1960-), who emerged with the “eightiers” (“visimdesiatnyky”), or what Tamara Hundorova refers to as “the post-Chornobyl generation.” While Zhylenko was an integral part of the Ukrainian literary underground of the 1960s and 1970s, Zabuzhko was one of the foremost writers responsible for bringing the underground to the aboveground during perestroika in the late 1980s. Moreover, by including an intergenerational framing, I emphasise the extent to which the poetry of the late 1980s built on the contributions of previous generations of writers. By centring the works of Zhylenko, Bilotserkivets, and Zabuzhko during this period, I position this period as a vital contribution within a longer genealogy of Ukrainian women’s poetry, marking a shift toward a more visibly subversive feminist rhetoric—one that has become even more perceptible in the post-Soviet period. This visibility has to do with what Hundorova refers to as, “the idea of a national renaissance” that emerges in the 1990s following independence wherein questions of nation, modernity, and identity came to the forefront (“The Canon Reversed” 249). Scholars including Hundorova, Michael M. Naydan, and

---

14 The terms perestroika and glasnost (perebudova and hlasnist in Ukrainian) are effectively constructed Russian words to signify the “restructuring” and “openness” (respectively) of a reimagined Soviet society, culture, and economy.

15 This is not to say that there are no prior Ukrainian feminist thinkers or activists. On the contrary, there were many, including Lesya Ukrainka, Olha Kobylianska, and Milena Rudnytska (among many others), as historian Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak has extensively documented.
Larissa M. L. Z. Onyshkevych have productively addressed the significance of Ukraine’s literary cultures throughout the late twentieth century, particularly the movement toward a more postmodern aesthetic in the 1990s. However, there has not been substantial exploration of their gendered component in the Ukrainian context, and particularly regarding the 1980s, during which political and cultural shifts initiated by *perestroika* and *glasnost* evoked new questions of nation and identity.

Secondly, I argue that women’s creative expressions produced during this transitional period of *perestroika* hold significance for understanding Western constructions of a “second world woman.” Such formulations have often, and perhaps unintentionally, allowed for singular and uncomplicated representations of Eastern European women’s experiences, thus contributing to neocolonialist frameworks for considering gender and feminist thought in a post-socialist, and especially post-Soviet, context.\(^{16}\) Throughout Ukraine’s efforts toward democratization and liberalization the discourses around gender have shifted. Yet, considering this, I resist latent Cold War narratives that have, often implicitly, identified Western feminist discourse as paradigmatic of progress, as such assumptions risk propagating neocolonial framings of non-Western feminism(s). In so doing, I draw from Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s discussion of “third world difference” in “Under Western Eyes,” wherein she challenges monolithic constructions of a “third world woman.”\(^{17}\) Likewise, through my exploration

\(^{16}\) It is important to foreground that critical feminist work on state socialism, especially in the social sciences, emerged in the early post-Soviet period and beyond. Scholars including Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, Francisca De Haan, Krassimira Daskalova, Kristen Ghodsee, Julie Hemment, and Magdalena Grabowska, among many others.

\(^{17}\) Recent work by scholars including David Chioni Moore, Vitaly Chernetsky, Dobrota A. Pucherová, and Róbert Gáfrik (among others) have drawn from postcolonial theory to examine the conditions of post-socialist and post-Soviet spaces, yet they have been clear that this application is not a superimposition of history. Postcolonial theory in this context, rather, seeks to
of Ukrainian women’s poetry, I assess the extent to which the inclusion of subversive, and even erotic, language can challenge assumptions about a similarly monolithic “second world woman,”18 one who has emerged as a personification of Cold War rhetoric, often reliant on the theoretical tools of a hegemonic “first world” feminism(s).19 My objective is not to equate the experiences of (so-called) “third” and “second world” women and feminisms, rather I want to emphasise how limiting constructions of “second world women” represent assumptions about not only Soviet socialist gender politics, but even more presently, what it means for women in post-Soviet contexts to negotiate the legacies of state socialism.

Finally, this period marked a turn in how women poets expressed their relationship to, at once, their gender and their position as Ukrainians, and moreover, the extent to which the relationship between gender and nation has shaped contemporary feminist discourse in Ukraine. Literary scholars have often viewed the cultural surfacing during perestroika as a new wave of liberation for Soviet writers, particularly in Ukraine. Michael M. Naydan optimistically notes how it “marked the opening of Pandora’s Box in the process of the restoration and return of a truly free Ukrainian literary culture” (455). Hundorova, similarly, observes how perestroika literature seemed to be an integral part consider dichotomies of power in order to produce a more robust and complex language for the legacies of empire in Eastern Europe—Russian, socialist, and Soviet.

18 The term “second world woman” is not necessarily claimed or embraced by women in post-socialist contexts, as has sometimes been the case for “third world women.” I am, rather, using this term to indicate how Eastern European women’s experiences have been framed and categorized in the West.

19 Binary usage of the terms “East” and “West,” as well as the reliance on “First,” “Second,” and “Third World” divisions, is historically problematic and requires further nuancing. In this context, I use this terminology as a way to conceptualize and critique the construction of gender in relation to the political and ideological constructions of “worlds.” I am not advocating for reductive geopolitical divisions, but rather I am trying to undermine how these divisions have limited robust articulations of transnational feminist thought, particularly in Western academic contexts.
of the nation- and state-building process. Assuming their historic national mission, Ukrainian writers produced works that would satisfy not only aesthetic but also political, sociological, and cognitive needs ("The Canon Reversed" 251). The tendency to see this decade as a promising cultural renaissance is indicative of the cultural landscape from which Soviet writers emerged: one that, prior to the 1980s, remained under the grip of restrictive, and even deadly, censorship. The marked openness of this decade was accompanied by new ways of representing gendered and feminist concerns, and as such, I emphasise the ways in which women’s poetic re-representation of Soviet life heralds a transition in Ukrainian feminist thought. I propose that this intellectual shift emerged from Soviet women’s poetic expression of their vested interest(s) in national, ecological, and ethical concerns as tied to women’s sexual and reproductive bodies. While the poetry examined here is not always overtly subversive in its treatment of women and gender, my interest lies in the extent to which perestroika yielded, for women, sharper and more vulnerable poetic articulations of their gendered subjectivities, including the performances of maternal, domestic, and national identities. As such, the peculiarities of gender cannot be excluded when examining Soviet literature of this period, and particularly for Ukrainian women, as these embodied concerns were also tied to a national interest, separate from Russia and other Soviet states. In so doing, more complex expressions of intimacy and belonging emerged—language that would become essential to Ukrainian feminism in the post-Soviet period of the 1990s (or the "ninetiers").

**Gender and “Second World” Difference**

---

20 This was even the case throughout the 1980s, as evident in Ukrainian poet Vasyl Stus’ 1980 sentencing to a Soviet labor camp for ‘anti-Soviet activity,’ where he died in 1985.
Regarding the concepts of gender and women, and similarly, the representations of what it means to be “masculine” or “feminine,” “male” or “female,” and “man” or “woman,” it should be emphasised that these definitions vary considerably across cultures, histories, languages, and disciplines. For the purposes of my discussion, I draw from Susan Gal and Gail Kligman’s definition of gender in their comparative-historical work in *The Politics of Gender after Socialism*, “[Gender is] the socially and culturally produced ideas about male-female difference, power, and inequality that structure the reproduction of these differences in the institutionalised practice of society” (Gal and Kligman, 4). Broadly speaking, I define contemporary feminism(s) to extend beyond women-identified subjectivities: it must acknowledge that the embodied and interconnected categories of gender, sexuality, and race are themselves knowledge systems produced through complex social and cultural structures. Feminist studies as a discipline, moreover, must develop theoretical tools and praxis that can mitigate domination and oppression. In the Eastern European context, I echo the work of Gal and Kligman as well as Maria Bucur, Kristen Ghodsee, Julie Hemment, Michele Rivkin-Fish, and Francisca de Haan (among others), all of whom have stratified their treatments of these categories within a post-socialist context, acknowledging the ways in which patriarchal structures and institutions have differed from those in the West.  21 This is not to say that Soviet society achieved the genderless utopia purported in many of its constitutional ideals. Gender remained a key organising principle throughout the Soviet Union, beginning immediately following the Revolution in 1917; as Sarah Ashwin describes, the Soviet system produced its own form of patriarchy through the state’s role

---

21 As stated elsewhere in this dissertation, this was due in part to the triangulated relationships between men, women, and the state, rather than women’s established reliance on individual men.
as “universal patriarch to which men and women were subject” (1). The Communist Party worked to “transform traditional patterns of gender relations in order to consolidate its rule” as a way to undermine the “social foundations of the old order” (Ashwin 1). While legally women and men were considered equals, Soviet gender roles were nevertheless prescriptive, as, together, women and men were to build communism via their distinctive responsibilities. Women were idealised as “worker-mothers,” expected to participate in the waged labour force, which gave them financial independence, but they were also to produce and raise the next generation of workers, and in return, the state provided support for their capacities as mothers. Men, on the other hand, Ashwin notes, had fewer responsibilities but more status, as they were able to work as soldiers, leaders, and managers, thus managing the communist system more directly (Ashwin 1). To better reframe these divergent feminist and gender histories is to consider how this public/private division has often been interrogated in Western scholarship, particularly in terms of gendered divisions of labour, limiting women’s participation in political and social arenas.

To understand a Soviet model of gender, one must consider that these expectations were structured primarily around social and political (as opposed to public and private) domains. In “The Gender of Resistance in Communist Poland,” Padraic Kenney clarifies this difference by describing how, in communist societies, “there is at best minimal space for public interaction or public opinion outside the state” (401). In twentieth century capitalist societies, he continues, the division exists symbolically “between productive (breadwinning) and non-productive spheres” (Kenney 401-402). Kenney, importantly, points to the embedded Western assumptions about feminist
concerns in Eastern Europe, emerging from a mistranslation (or perhaps a superimposition) of the structures within which gender is performed. Building on Kenney, Bucur emphasises the significance of the “fundamental genderedness of political and social life”—phenomena that must be considered when examining the histories of dissent and solidarity in communist societies (Bucur 1388). For Soviet Ukrainian women, this political and social division was also significant. In some ways, women were able to move between these boundaries much more easily than men, accessing not only this “social” space of domesticity, but also participating in the waged labour force. However, regardless of their access to productive spheres, women were still, in most cases, expected to maintain their auxiliary roles.

The relationship between feminism and nationalism has often been precarious, and some Western feminist scholarship has critiqued nationalism as a gendered, masculinist, often violent project and thus incompatible with feminist ideals. In her discussion of the South African context, Ann McClintock posits that, “all nationalisms are gendered, all are invented and all are dangerous” in the sense that they “represent relations to political power and to the technologies of violence” (“No Longer in a Future Heaven” 104-105). However, within the context of state socialism, the promotion of nationalism has often emerged from a different reality, particularly as it relates to women and women’s interests, and it is here that I want to make a comparative distinction between some feminism(s) in the West and those in Ukraine.\(^{22}\) In terms of pre-perestroika feminist thought, the development of women’s movements in Ukraine throughout the

\(^{22}\) Scholars including Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, Katherine Verdery, and Lilya Kaganovsky (among others) have explored and interrogated the masculinist formulations of nationalism in the Soviet Union and the region. Their interventions are vital for recognizing the gendered origins of nationalism in the Ukrainian context.
The twentieth century worked to address Soviet women’s lives, but at the same time, they were closely tied to the idea of “Ukrainianness” and Ukrainian interests. Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak describes how the organization of the World Union of Ukrainian Women, developed in 1934, sought to defend the rights of Ukrainian women and work toward the expansion of those rights. The political situation, however, required stress upon the adjective Ukrainian rather than the noun women (Bohachevsky-Chomiak 280). Oksana Kis, for example, refers to this as “national feminism,” which she describes as “a unique movement beyond existing feminist paradigms” and one that “explores women’s contributions to a Ukrainian national cause” (“(Re)Constructing Ukrainian Women’s History” 154). The legacy of this vested interest in Ukrainianess has been significant in terms of how feminist thought in Ukraine has emerged alongside, and even enmeshed in, the development of populist and nationalist rhetoric.

Not unlike many of the discourses around “third world” feminisms, academic research on “second world” feminism(s) is often hampered by its reliance on the ideological and theoretical tools of hegemonic “first world” or “Western” feminism(s). Mohanty’s description of the construction of the “third world woman” identifies her as a “singular monolithic subject” who appears throughout Western feminist texts (Mohanty 51). The problem of singularity, for her, is an analytic one: it constructs women of the “third world” as a monolith, and it is within this production of “third world difference” that oppression, and thereby colonization, occur (Mohanty 53-54). Likewise, a similar (yet, and importantly, not equal) monolithic construction is evident in the production of the “second world woman.” The development of “second world” feminism(s)—perhaps more aptly referred to as post-socialist or post-Soviet feminism(s)—becomes legible to a
Western audience through a reliance on “difference.” In other words, the trajectories of feminist thought and praxis in a Soviet/post-Soviet context (and socialist/post-socialist contexts more broadly) are often, and problematically, evaluated in relation to the “first.” The emphasis placed on the relationship between “worlds,” however, provides a limited, narrow vision of not only the development of feminist thought in the region, but also the ways in which “second world women” have been viewed in opposition to those of both the “first” and the “third.” Kristen Ghodsee describes some of the stereotypes perpetuated by Western feminists who saw state socialist women as “blind dupes of Marxist patriarchy” and thus “insufficiently concerned with women’s true issues” (14). She cites, specifically, Barbara Wolfe Jancar and Nanette Funk, both of whom reject the possibility of feminist thought in the Eastern Bloc; as Funk writes, “[communist women’s organisations] were not agents of their actions, proactive, but instruments of a patriarchal state,” calling recent research on state socialist women’s organizations “feminist revisionist” (qtd. in Ghodsee 14). In her Introduction to the Aspasia forum, “Ten Years After: Communism and Feminism Revisited,” Francesca de Haan points out that one of the problems with this view is the assumption that there is a correct interpretation of the history of state socialist women’s organisations (“Ten Years After”). Krassimira Daskalova highlights the assumptions about epistemological hegemony, asking “who is entitled to provide ‘THE definition’ of feminism/s,” and similarly, Magdalena

---

23 It is important to emphasize, as Mohanty does in her later work, the extent to which these demarcations are unable to represent the complexity of peoples and ideas within and between “worlds,” as non-monolithic cultural and political spaces. I want to consider how such artificial distinctions themselves produce flattened assumptions about the subjectivities that inhabit them.  
24 I want to be cautious here so as to not imply that the so-called “second world” is itself a monolithic unity. It is vital to note that the practices and realities of state socialism were varied throughout the Eastern Bloc. The very idea of “worlding” itself already undermines the spectrum of lived experience in all three contexts.
Grabowska challenges the “universalizing representation of liberal Western feminism…as the sole point of reference for the marginal East European women’s movement” (qtd. in De Haan 104). While I do not extensively examine Soviet or other communist women’s organizations, I include this discussion in order to emphasise the ways in which some Western feminist discourses have, intentionally or not, relied on Cold War assumptions in their framing of communist women’s experiences, rendering them incompatible with feminist thought.

In my consideration of Ukrainian women’s poetry, I want to give attention to the ways in which the “East” and “West” both produce and have been produced by particular ways of knowing, yet these embedded epistemologies neither exist in vacuums nor do they produce a singular experience. Moreover, the production and performance of gender, as its own body of knowledge and way of knowing, participates in this negotiation with modernity through both resistance and accommodation. In the case of late Soviet Ukraine, and especially during perestroika, women continually confronted new ways of not only being “modern,” but also reinterpreting their subjectivity to the state, in both bodily and psychological terms. However, and importantly, I am not arguing that the “first world” is responsible for this shift, nor do I centralise Western feminism(s) as more progressive than those of the “second” or “third.” What this indicates, rather, is the significance of where societal fractures have occurred, and moreover, how they have been mediated through discourses of democratisation and liberalisation. The monolith of a “second world woman,” then, emerges in the Western imaginary as an embodiment of this fracturing, formed through a reliance on the theoretical tools of hegemonic, “first world” feminism. By giving close attention to some of the poetic contributions of
Ukrainian women writers in the final Soviet years, what emerges is a nuanced and multidimensional vision of gender in a “second world” context: one that challenges the flattening of feminism as something that only emerged as a result of democratization post-1991. Moreover, it exposes the ways in which life under communism during this period both shaped and was shaped by women’s representations of their gendered subjectivity. To do so, I focus specifically on how women poets of perestroika initiated new ways of speaking and representing gendered divisions of Soviet subjectivity on the cusp of transition. In this sense, the works of Zhylenko, Bilotserkivets, and Zabuzhko are key: it is through their shared, yet differing, expressions of an embodied experience of gender in the period just prior to transition that a complicated representation of gender in the so-called “second world” emerges.

Transgressive Bodies: Ukrainian Women Poets of Perestroika

In the final decade of the Soviet Union, many writers took up more radical rejections of a prescriptive Soviet ideology, or what Hundorova describes as “providing an alternative to the Soviet literary paradigm” (“The Canon Reversed” 259). Larissa M. L. Z. Onyshkevych comments on how Ukrainian poetry shifted from the 1960s to the 1980s, as she observes: Poets of the 1960s were often concerned with intellectual, artistic, and ethical issues; in the 1980s, ethical concerns and ecology (both biological and cultural) predominated (Shifting Borders 365). This turn was due primarily to the Chornobyl disaster, but also “the fate of future generations, and the Ukrainian culture (often symbolised by Ukrainian language itself)” moved to the forefront (Shifting Borders 365). In a large sense, these changes were also in concert with loosening

---

25 To be clear: of the three women poets examined, only Zabuzhko referred to herself as “feminist,” at least during this period.
censorship, but I would add to Onyshkevych’s assessment by drawing attention to the gendered component of these shifts, including how women’s sexual and reproductive bodies were especially vulnerable to increasing national and ecological anxieties during this period. To do this, I will, in the following, provide close analyses of selected poems from Zhylenko, Bilotserkivets, and Zabuzhko during perestroika. While these examples demonstrate poetic subversion in a specifically late Soviet Ukrainian context, I want to emphasise that they also speak to broader concerns regarding gendered subjectivity in state socialist contexts, particularly in terms of how women have used the language of embodiment to interrogate the boundaries between “womanness” and nation, particularly as they relate to the politics of intimacy and belonging.

Beginning her work during the Soviet Thaw era of the early 1960s, Iryna Zhylenko was part of Ukraine’s “sixtiers” (“shistdesyatnyky”) generation of poets. This early period secured the creativity and community essential to establishing a critical cultural movement, and one that, in many ways, forged new ways of thinking about what it means to be not only Soviet, but also Ukrainian. Such new epistemological outlets, in many ways, paved the way for Ukrainian writers in the final decades of the Soviet Union, and particularly the writing that emerged with the eightiers during perestroika, including Bilotserkivets and Zabuzhko. In “Sertse” (“Heart”), from her 1985 collection Ostannij vulychnyj sharmanshchyk (The Last Street Organ-Grinder), self-reflective, embodied language becomes visible, as she expresses, “I am whole - a whole heart. The body is the world” (line 1). Not only does she connect her embodied experience as being part of the world, Zhyenko also ascribes symbolic violence to that experience:

26 Translation my own.
But the heart must fight, woman.

I fight until the elbows are warm in blood

and bruises boil over the knees. (lines 2-4)

For Zhylenko, violence against the body is at once a barometer for her own gendered experience as well as that of the world. The female speaker, the heart, is indelible from the “body” of the world—one in which she must fight to be in. This language of embodied struggle marks a contrast from her earlier work, which, while it often challenged state-imposed literary expectations (mainly Soviet realism), did not offer such an explicit representation of the struggle she associates with “womanness.” As such, I associate Zhylenko’s overt feminist tone with the more lenient censorship that accompanied perestroika and glasnost: changes that ultimately did not correct the Soviet state’s failures yet made room for more transgressive articulations of gendered subjectivity. As Zabuzhko emerged during perestroika, her early work clearly engages a transgressive literary paradigm—and does so even more explicitly than Zhylenko’s writing of the same period. Vitaly Chernetsky describes the arc of her work in contemporary Ukraine as producing a testimony of survival and resistance as a writing woman in a postcolonial cultural dynamic and a critique of the intellectual and cultural legacies of conceptualising the oppressed nation (Chernetsky 255).

In a 2019 interview, she self-identifies as “the living result of underground education—classrooms of home-taught children the Ukrainian intellectuals organised in Kyiv in the 1960s” (“Oksana Zabuzhko: Ukraine is at The Forefront [interview]” 2019). Her attentiveness to embodiment hints toward what would, in her post-Soviet writing, become a clearer engagement with the intersections of gender and the project of nation-
building. This connection is evident in her 1989 poem, “Vyznachennya poeziyi” (“A Definition of Poetry”), wherein she begins:

I know I will die a difficult death –

Like anyone who loves the precise music of her own body,

Who knows how to force it through the gaps in fear

As through the needle’s eye, (lines 1-4)

By associating the awareness of her love for her body with not merely her mortality, but the prospect of “a difficult death,” Zabuzhko attunes the reader to the correlation between violence and inhabiting “womanness.” This quality is, in other words, inherently uninhabitable, particularly for those who are attuned to the pleasures and desires of their own embodiment, as she continues by hinting at the erotic:

Who dances a lifetime with the body – every move

Of shoulders, back, and thighs

Shimmering with mystery, like a Sanskrit word,

Muscles playing under the skin

Like fish in a nocturnal pool. (lines 5-9)

Zabuzhko’s description of shimmering and mysterious “shoulders, back, and thighs” highlights the materiality of her body. By intimating the erotic through her somatic imagery, she moves towards a more subversive poetic construction, one that has not, prior to the 1980s, been especially visible in literature, and which becomes more pronounced in her post-Soviet writing. Halyna Koscharsky asserts that both Zabuzhko

---

28 Beginning with Zabuzhko’s *Pol’ovi doslidzhennya z ukrayins’koho seksu* (*Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*) in 1996, as well as her 1999 short story “Divchatka” (“Girls”), which includes a sapphic relationship between two women.
and Bilotserkivets reflect “the development of a feminist worldview, at least from the viewpoint of urban Ukrainian women.” She characterizes the 1980s as the period when eroticism becomes characteristic of Zabuzhko’s poetry and particularly in her treatment of Ukrainian history (Kosccharsky 312-313). Moreover, Zabuzhko’s use of the erotic in writing about Ukrainian national history marks a significant turn in Soviet women’s writing, evidenced by its resonance among Ukrainian women—associating their own national history with representations of women’s sexualised, often violated, bodies. The poetic, for Zabuzhko, is not merely a representation but an embodied project, reliant on and proliferated by her ability to bring precise awareness to her experience of “womanness”—a boundary “between two worlds,” as she reflects later in the poem:

And draw the soul up, trembling like a sheet of paper –

My young soul –

The color of wet grass –

To freedom – then

“How!” it screams, escaping,

On the dazzling borderline

Between two worlds – (lines 28-34)

Visible here is Zabuzhko’s movement toward a poetics that engages not only embodiment, but also identifies the liminality between “worlds”—interpretable as both a poetic and ideological boundary—and with it, the possibility of transversing this liminality.

A poet, translator, and editor, Bilotserkivets began publishing her poetry in the late 1970s, just before Zabuzhko, and was influenced by Russian acmeism and French
symbolism. Her work, likewise, offers a clarity and imagination that translate smoothly into English. Life and death thematically emerge throughout Bilotserkivets’ poetry, and perhaps most notably in “We’ll Not Die in Paris,” 29 from her 1989 collection Lystopad (November). The title responds to the line “I will die in Paris on Thursday evening,” from Peruvian poet, Cesar Vallejo’s poem “Black Stone on a White Stone” (“Piedra negra sobre una piedra blanca”)—a line she includes as an epigraph. Bilotserkivets’ poem itself reads like a eulogy, both as a meditation on death and grief, and also as a way of thinking about the idea of Europe through the prism of her “Ukrainianness,” which she frames as provincial, separate from the presumed decadence of Western Europe. Her speaker begins by describing her subject’s death:

You forget the lines smells colors and sounds
sight weakens hearing fades simple pleasures pass
you lift your face and hands toward your soul
but to high and unreachable summits it soars
what remains is only the depot the last stop
the gray foam of goodbyes lathers and swells
already it washes over my naked palms
its awful sweet warmth seeps into my mouth
love alone remains though better off gone (lines 1-9)

29 Translated by Dzvinia Orlowsky in From Three Worlds (1996). The original Ukrainian poem does not include a title, but rather begins with Vallejo’s line, ‘Ya pomru v Paryzhi v chetver uvecheri.’
Bilotserkivets’ speaker emphasises not so much the subject’s memory, but instead, what has been forgotten, as she engages with the certainty of death. In so doing, she represents this process as a loss or separation from what is familiar: lines, colours, sounds, and sights. Such objects are, importantly, received and experienced through the body—a location that is, for her, vulnerable and provisional, yet sexual and eroticised, as she differentiates between the temporariness of her body and something more timeless. What remains with the subject’s body is the love of others (“the gray foam of goodbye”), manifested through the experience of grief.

For Bilotserkivets, the connections among loss, grief, and the geopolitical divide between “West” and “East” are intimately tied to her awareness of what it means for her to be Ukrainian, particularly during this period. The seismic ideological and political changes are reflected through her engagement with the question of belonging, which she represents through her creation of this distinctive space wherein the loss occurs:

in a provincial bed I cried till exhausted
through the window a scraggly rose-colored lilac spied
the train moved on spent lovers stared
at the dirty shelf heaving beneath your flesh
outside a depot’s spring passed quiet grew (lines 10-14)

Outside of this space is movement and change: a train rushes by, and spring, a period often representing rebirth and renewal, passes, leaving death inside. Bilotserkivets again uses the language of eroticism (“spent lovers,” “heaving beneath your flesh”) to articulate a sense of belonging. The idea of “national belonging,” in other words, is explored through the erotic. Like Zabuzhko, she uses the erotic to consider her own positionality in
the so-called “second world”—highlighting her awareness of her perceived provincialism—not only how she sees herself, but how she believes she is seen by others. Moreover, the speaker’s world remains separate, lodged somewhere between this movement and stasis, life and death. In the poem’s titular stanza, she asserts:

we’ll not die in Paris  I know now for sure
but in a sweat and tear-stained provincial bed
no one will serve us our cognac  I know
we won’t be saved by kisses
under the Pont Mirabeau murky circles won’t fade (lines 15-19)

Here, Maria G. Rewakowicz reads her tone, along with much of the poetry of this period, as pessimistic, suggesting that Bilotserkivets expresses her generation’s despair over the long-kept divide with regard to the Western cultural heritage and over the provincialism imposed by the Soviet authorities, as well as a deep, implicit longing to be culturally part of Europe (Rewakowicz 289). Similarly, Halyna Koscharsky assesses the poem’s cynicism, asserting how the lines “we’ll not die in Paris I know now for sure/but in a sweat and tear-stained provincial bed” became a kind of “calling card of the generation” of underground poets (Koscharsky 312). Her speaker’s observation and assertion reflect some of the uncertainty that accompanied Ukrainian poets (and East European poets more broadly) at this time, as they wrote between the boundaries of knowing and unknowing.

Bilotserkivets, in a sense, responds to some of the concerns about prioritising “Ukrainianness” addressed by early Soviet Ukrainian women’s movements; however, rather than praising this quality, she undermines it. She, in other words, responds to the
question of “Europe”—who can and cannot belong—and concluding that she cannot, and, unlike her foremothers, grieves that absence. However, the idea of “Europeanness,” which she represents through the imaginary of Paris, becomes a kind of caricature, presumably filled with romance, cognac, and beautiful architecture, all of which is juxtaposed to her “provincial bed.” Her observation relies on this European imaginary, bolstered by assumptions about what Europe is and is not, what it can and cannot provide, and the extent to which the fantasy of Western Europe is a marker of prosperity. Even currently, such thinking has played into the imaginary of Ukraine’s future, serving as a barometer not only for its national progress, but also in measuring the success of its liberalization. This is not to say there were (and are) not real disparities that poets like Bilotserkivets were responding to; however, it is the way in which the image of Europeanness exists as a perceived end. It relies on an oversimplified (and often problematic) East/West binary, one that associates progress with the “West” and backwardness with the “East.” The self-consciousness of the “East/West” imaginary also played a role in Zhylenko’s, Bilotserkivets’, and Zabuzhko’s responses to Chornobyl—all of which, in some way, confront an uncertain future through their representations of embodiment. The body (through both its absence and presence) intervenes in the poets’ recognition of how, and to what extent, their national territory was affected, ushering in complex expressions of embodiment and environment.

**Gender and the Poetics of Disaster: Writing Chornobyl**

The enormity of the Chornobyl catastrophe in April of 1986 was, arguably, one of the major catalysts for the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. The subsequent denial and dangerous mishandling on the part of Soviet authorities contributed to a rapid decline in
citizens’ faith in the promise of a communist utopia. As the disaster occurred in the midst of *glasnost* reforms, put into effect several months before, the event was something of a litmus test for the system’s credibility. Due to the severity of this event, and amid the *perestroika* and *glasnost* reforms, as the consequences slowly came to light for the public, so too did the literary responses reflect a shared anxiety regarding its ecological and political repercussions. As Zhylenko, Bilotserkivets, and Zabuzhko were actively writing and publishing during this time, it is no surprise that all three poets responded to disaster in the late 1980s. Their Chornobyl poetry even became part of a poetic theatre performance entitled “Explosions,” written and directed by translators Virlana Tkacz and Wanda Phipps, and performed in New York City in November of 1991 (Tkacz). Most significantly, their poems reflect the disaster’s impact on everyday life, both inside and outside of the exclusion zone, considering especially its effect on women and children.

The literary response to Chornobyl reflects how gender is represented and instrumentalised through catastrophe, yet scholarship on Chornobyl poetry has frequently overlooked this gendered component (at least in English-language scholarship). Moreover, the precarity and danger of the event and its aftermath, particularly through its environmental and somatic impact, is itself a feminist issue. In “Re-Writing Corporate Environmentalism: Ecofeminism, Corporality, and the Language of Feeling,” Mary Phillips explores what she calls “creative subversion and re-imagining of corporate environmentalism through a poetic writing of nature and bodily embeddedness in the natural world” (Phillips 443). Drawing from Hélène Cixous, she considers “ways to re-imagine looming ecological crises as being intertwined with our corporeal existence” and thus we “feel moved to respond” (Phillips 449). Writing from (and about) the body,
Cixous argues, can “disrupt binary thinking” and “explode phallocentrism,” and women’s writing (she calls this “the feminine text”) offers the possibility of disruption because it “writes of and from the body” and “is thus subversive and volcanic” (qtd. in Phillips 451). While I reject an essentialization of “women’s writing,” Cixous’ premise is useful for considering how the representation of the body has responded to, and even mitigated, ecological crises. Women’s reckoning with the physical, environmental, and even reproductive costs of its consequences contributed to a broader reimagining of positionality within and value to the state. In this sense, the disaster itself, along with the literary responses to it, presented a turning point in how Soviet Ukrainian women imagined themselves, and their bodies, in both national and ecological contexts.

Visible in Zhylenko, Bilotserkivets, and Zabuzhko’s Chornobyl poetry is the ways in which they each construct an image of domestic space (inhabited, imagined, or vacant), using it to locate and articulate where the human cost of the disaster lies. In Zhylenko’s poem “V xati” (“In the Country House,”), she depicts an interaction between a mother and son in the wake of the explosion. She begins by identifying the ways in which, even amidst ecological devastation, her performance of “womanness” remains intact:

Now back to the chores. Rake out the ashes.
Start the fire. Sweep away the cobwebs...
And cook some potatoes for dinner.
Dead or alive – I’m still the housekeeper.
Dead or alive – I’m still the mother.

30 Translated by Virlana Tkacz and Wanda Phipps for the Brama website.
I come out of a deep dark depression,

to feed my little son

to tell him a fairy tale about happiness.

... Joy fills my lungs --

as my son offers me a chrysanthemum through the window. (lines 1-10)

By her tone, it is unclear as to whether or not she critiques the speaker’s insistence on her domestic roles as mother and homemaker. Yet her awareness of a persisting expectation for this gendered performance of caretaking is readable. This embodied act of “womanness” (or what is designated as “womanness”) is manifested through her role as “housekeeper” and “mother,” and in so doing, she preserves a status-quo, one that is, seemingly, crucial for survival. Zhylenko’s speaker then addresses the “doses of radiation” that she continues to be psychically aware of and burdened by. She describes this anxiety though her interaction with the son:

But a raven’s voice is already counting out the dose of radiation.

“Wash your hands, wash your hands, my son...”

“Mom, a kitten. How sweet.

You’re such a poor little dirty stray...”

The clock starts to beat out the doses of radiation:

Wash your hands! Wash your hands! Wash your hands!

“Mom, please let me go play in the sand.

The kids are burying the reactor.

Don’t worry – it’s just a hunk of metal.

Granddad caught some crayfish
And treated me to some. They were great.

Why is everything we eat canned, canned, canned? (lines 11-22)

The speaker’s fears are located in the natural world—in the mundane objects of everyday life that have suddenly become dangerous: the cat her son touches, the sand he wants to play in, the fish and mushrooms fed to him. As a response, she concludes the poem by embodying, and thus taking on, the radiation itself:

My heart beats out the doses of radiation

On every grain of sand,

On every little weed.... (lines 33-35)

Zhylenko draws an intimate connection between the speaker’s body, particularly the internal and external labour of her body, and nuclear disaster—both spaces of production, reliant on particular forms of care and sustenance. Her physical reflection of this trauma speaks to Phillips’ discussion of maternal bodies in ecofeminism, noting how the “boundaries of [cis women’s] embodiment” (menstruation, birth, lactation) tend to be “fluid and insecure” and thus regarded as inferior. Likewise, she calls for further exploration of the possibilities of women’s embodied experiences of nature” to consider the representation of “emotion, love and care” (Phillips 446-447). For Zhylenko, even while acknowledging ecological catastrophe, she uses embodied, maternal images to interrogate the connection between woman and nation, and particularly a nation in crisis: she seemingly cannot help but take on its trauma physically.

In “Pryp’yat – Natyurmort” (“Prypiat—Still Life”), 31 Zabuzhko does not distinctly represent any gendered aspect of Chornobyl. Her poem, rather, constructs and

observes a space in which human absence itself becomes a subject. Through language, she excavates the affected space of Prypiat as a way of imagining the unimaginable (both to Soviet citizens as well as the international community). She begins:

It could be dawn.

The light crumpled like sheets.

The ashtray full.

A shadow multiplies on four walls.

The room is empty. (lines 1-5)

It is through Zabuzhko’s use of the contingent “could” (“зdayetsya”), which can also be translated as “seems to be,” that she reflects the phenomenon of unknowing in the years following the disaster. In so doing, her speaker constructs her own knowledge of the event, identifying and observing Chornobyl’s human and ecological cost. Zabuzhko’s speaker, rather than speaking of embodiment directly, eulogises the absent body. an image that is in many ways more powerful:

No witnesses.

But someone was here.

A moment ago twin tears shimmered

On a polished wood.

(Did a couple live here?)

In the armchair a suit, recently filled by a body,

Has collapsed into a bolt of fabric. (lines 6-12)

Significantly, for Zabuzhko, the speaker’s focus is on the space of a home: the lived-in, domestic, private world of the social, closely tied to images of maternity and
“womanness.” She is not directly addressing, in other words, the failures of the state, nor does she give a face to real villains or victims, as there are “no witnesses” (“zhodnoho svidka”). Here, the tragedy lies in citizens’ dislocation from spaces of belonging—moving from the known and familiar, to the unknown and unfamiliar. Moreover, she acknowledges the state’s violation of this intimacy, which she conveys through the absence of her subjects’ bodies. In a sense, the speaker herself is also disembodied, as by illuminating this absence she is an observer, rather than a victim, of the tragedy. Yet the absence, for Zabuzhko, signals something more insidious—the freshness of the disaster itself, the immediacy of loss, and the inadequacy of the state’s response, as the speaker invites the reader:

Come in, look around, no one’s here
Just the breathing air, crushed
As though by a tank.
A half-finished sweater remembers someone’s fingers.
A book lies open, marked by a fingernail.
(How amazing, this silence beyond the boundary!) (lines 13-18)

Again, Zabuzhko returns to the boundary—a metaphor for not only the unpredictability of a post-Chornobyl Ukraine, but also her awareness of a Soviet liminality—a country that would abruptly end and, like the victims of Prypiat, would find themselves reckoning with its absence. Poetry disrupts this absence by acknowledging such ‘in-betweenness,’ and in this way, the recreation of a place that has been lost reflects her feminist consciousness. It is through her parsing of in-betweenness, especially with the boundary of the body, that Zabuzhko builds a language for her feminism.
The longest of the three Chornobyl poems, Bilotserkivets’ “Traven” (“May”) is divided into five parts, incorporating dense imagery and description, along with second person voice, to orient the reader in the experience of a child following the disaster. Like Zhylenko, Bilotserkivets thematically turns to images of children and childhood, a device that Hundorova argues, in Ukrainian literature of the 90s, “reflects the condition of a new cultural consciousness that has arisen from the wreckage of post-Soviet Ukraine” (“The Canon Reversed” 268). However, this device can also be seen slightly earlier, as poets of Ukraine’s last Soviet generation are, in many ways, preparing for a ‘new world’ through their representation of uncertainty through the vulnerability of children. Her speaker opens by invoking a vague memory of childhood:

A soft sob at midnight. Still asleep you can’t remember where, in what corner

of the suddenly empty room.

Was it there, where your bed stood when you were a child?

Where the shadows of tiny breasts first

appeared over the ribs—during childhood,

cooing dark skeins of trembling

syllables, fears and cries?

You were born

far away from an airport or even a railroad! (lines 1-10)

Like Zabuzhko, the speaker in Bilotserkivets’ poem brings her reader into an imagined space—one of which the subject’s memory is uncertain and which has suddenly become

empty. It is, moreover, clear from these first few lines that the poem’s subject is a woman, as the speaker mentions “the shadows of tiny breasts” appearing during her childhood—a statement that indicates her formative relationship to the space described. Her speaker continues, returning the reader to this place of simultaneous memory and uncertainty:

You wake again, and again you’re in the building where you lived with your parents when you were small, but today strangers live there, and they’ve let both of you spend the night in your old room, and even served you tea—a different kind, in a different cup, not the white one with blue dots—and your lips find traces of someone else’s tentative sips who drank from my cup? (lines 11-19)

For Bilotserkivets, there is a clear “before” and “after” Chornobyl, treated as two separate lives: the primitive, as marked by a childhood, and the modern, marked by the machinery of the “new century”:

warm memories, of milk, of tears of mother’s kindness, of laughter, and of the sound of bare feet in the garden you were born before nuclear power plants or dead rivers, or trains crammed with children—what straws
will they grasp in the new century?... (lines 24-30)

Bilotserkivets continues later in the poem by meditating on the human cost of Chornobyl:

others

put out the flames

in the reactor’s burning heart;

we, dressed in white lab coats and dosimeters in our hands;

in military epaulets, in soldiers’ uniforms;

young pregnant women and girls

with children that will never be born

victims and rescuers in the burning heart of Europe. (lines 47-54)

The emphasis on compromised reproduction and motherhood, visible especially in Zhylenko and Bilotserkivets’ poems, again, demonstrate the ways in which women’s writing reflects not only the somatic burdens of the disaster, but the extent to which this endangers a national future. All three poets center the uncertainty of a post-Chornobyl future as itself a subject in their poems, and likewise, all three utilise the image of women’s bodies, either their presence, compromised by the radiation, or their absence, removed from a space of belonging as the result of the disaster. In this regard, a perceptible shift emerges in Soviet Ukrainian women’s writing during this period—one that is more willing to articulate indignation for what they have lost or been denied, ushering in a clearer, more subversive feminist language that would continue in the coming decade.

**Conclusion: Writing Between the Boundaries**
To return to Zabuzhko’s 1995 essay, she concludes by reflecting on a newly independent Ukraine, “Thank God the nation does exist, its development is guaranteed by newly born statehood, so we are not forced any longer to bear the exclusive responsibility for its historical fate, to be national heroes, and redeemers, or we don’t pretend to be” (“Reinventing the Poet in Modern Ukrainian Culture” 275). Zabuzhko was not alone in associating poets with messianic (and even martyrological) figures for Soviet Ukraine, and her sense of relief that accompanied independence is indicative of how she saw her role as a Soviet poet—inevitably tied to the nation, intentionally or not. For Soviet Ukrainian women poets especially, so too were their representations of “womanness” and embodiment tied to a sense of national responsibility. As the USSR quickly moved towards collapse in the late 1980s, so too did Soviet writing reflect the anxieties of belonging, identity, and futurity. While there remained some hope in the Soviet system through the potential of perestroika and glasnost reforms, this was offset by visibility of the Soviet authorities’ dishonesty in its final years, particularly with Chornobyl. As Ukraine moved rapidly toward independence, women writers especially sought to represent the gendering of national and ideological spaces, and likewise to reckon with the impact of what Catherine Baker calls “the micropolitics of intimacy and sexuality” of what would become a “new” Ukraine (Baker 2). By examining the development of a Ukrainian feminist discourse through the poetic, what surfaces most clearly are Zhylenko, Bilotserkivets, and Zabuzhko’s articulations of in-betweenness, doing so

33 Importantly, that the idea of Ukrainian independence was not necessarily at the forefront of citizens’ minds during perestroika, as many still clung to the idea of Sovietness. As Ethnographer Alexi Yurchak emphasizes, the “system’s collapse had been profoundly unexpected and unimaginable to many Soviet people until it happened” (Yurchak 4). I do not see the examined poets as explicitly writing about independence, but rather responding to a rapidly changing political environment.
through a shared awareness of their own bodies, and likewise, the political and social expectations for their performance of gender.

Although they emerged with different generations, Zhylenko, Zabuzhko, and Bilotserkivets’ poetry during perestroika coincides through their respective representations of how the anxieties of performing “womanness” participated in the revision of “Ukrainianness.” More visible and disruptive feminist literature has emerged in more recent years and has been discussed more extensively in scholarship; my focus on perestroika intervenes by exploring how Ukrainian women poet’s representations of embodiment often reflected of their relationships to a shifting national idea. In so doing, they fostered more subversive articulations of their gendered subjectivity. This subversion became especially sharp in their responses to Chornobyl, as all three poets recognised the impact it had, and would continue to have, on the nation’s future and security. In other words, their poetic consideration (and even critiques) of the nation in a moment prior to transition is not exclusive from or incompatible with Ukrainian feminism; it is, rather, a vital moment in its genealogy. Likewise, as I have demonstrated, this is often performed by giving attention to their vulnerabilities within these gendered spheres of belonging, including their domestic, maternal, sexual, Soviet, and Ukrainian identities.
CHAPTER 3

ANATOMIZING THE SOVIET UKRAINIAN PERIPHERY: THE PERESTROIKA PROSE OF NINA BICHUYA AND HALYNA PAHUTIAK

“We are doing a lot of building. But we must give thought to another aspect of the matter: sometimes as a result of haste, new buildings are put into exploitation with many defects. The working people, naturally, are highly annoyed at this, and rightly so! Those responsible for such defects should be rapped over the knuckles”
—Nikita Khruschev, *The Road to Communism*, 1961

stifles, thick stream
of scorched chestnuts,
lindens, poplars float toward Kyiv.
Poor trees with stunted trunks
wrap themselves around balconies.
—Natalka Bilotserkivets, from “August City Night”

Introduction: Organizing Soviet Urban Space

At the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1961, Soviet President Nikita Khrushchev put forth the slogan “communism in twenty years,” promising Soviet citizens that “we are strictly guided by scientific calculations. And calculations show that in twenty years we will build mainly a communist society.” Khrushchev, moreover, ensured that by 1980, communism will be built “in the main,” and “the current generation of Soviet people will live under communism.” In 1958, he launched the “seven-year plan,” as part of his model for state reform in the early 1960s, which involved building cheap, temporary housing that he envisioned would alleviate the USSR’s housing shortage until a more mature communist system emerged. These buildings came to be known colloquially as “Khrushchyovka” (or “Krushchovyk”) named after the president himself, and they were intended to last around twenty-five years. They were neither luxurious nor stylish, made with inexpensive materials such as concrete,
plastic, and asbestos, and—as Khrushchev insisted—Soviet citizens, “brought up to appreciate ‘truth and expediency,’ would be sure to appreciate the ‘simple, logical and elegant form of the new apartment blocks’” (Attwood 155). Yet by the 1980s, the Soviet project was well in decline, and these dilapidated structures came to metaphorize the failures and broken promises of Sovietism.

Khrushchev’s efforts to implement change in the Thaw period following Joseph Stalin’s death in 1953, was in many ways an attempt to reform the state by relaxing some of the violence and rigidity of his predecessor—which were made even more lenient with Gorbachev during perestroika in the mid-1980s. Yet, despite Gorbachev’s seemingly earnest efforts toward materializing state reform, as evidenced in his promise of a thriving communist future, many of these acts remained in the domain of the performative through state-sanctioned slogans, posters, art, architecture. The challenge, however, was the chasm between the promises of state socialism and the lived realities. In What Was Socialism and What Comes Next, Katherine Verdery locates this disparity in economic and political dimensions of state socialism, highlighting the roles of desire and consumption, as she observes: “as people became increasingly alienated from socialism and critical of its achievements, then, the politicization of consumption also made them challenge official definitions of their needs” (28). The organization of time, according to Verdery, participated in these economic dimensions, noting in the Soviet context particularly, “the base logic of socialism, by contrast, placed no premium on increasing turnover time and capital circulation…for the most part Soviet leaders acted as if time was on their side. (When Khrushchev said, “We will bury you,” he was not too specific about the date.” The initiation of perestroika, then, “reversed Soviet ideas as to whose
time-definition and rhythms were dominant and where dynamism lay: no longer within the socialist system but outside it, in the West” (Verdery 35-36).

In my consideration of the shifting cultural landscape of Soviet Ukraine alongside the economic and political contours of perestroika, I invoke Michel de Certeau’s notion of the “everyday” and “everyday practices”34 as a way of considering Soviet society’s discursive “formal” and material structures. This includes education, economic exchanges, and the structuring of urban time and space, and transportation (among other things)—all of which were entangled in the shifting imaginaries around socialism, consumption, and desire (to echo Verdery). This notion of everydayness has been discussed with regard to the gendering of late Soviet literature in the Russian context, as Benjamin M. Sutcliffe describes Russian women prose writers’ appropriation of the concept of “быт” (“byt,” — “побут,” “pobut” in Ukrainian), meaning “everyday life.” Yurchak also refers to this concept as “normal life” (or “normal’naia zhizn’”), which he emphasizes “was not necessarily equivalent to ‘the state’ or ‘ideology’.” Socialism, rather, was for many Soviets, “a system of human values…something quite different from the official interpretations provided by state rhetoric” (Yurchak 8). For some western feminists in the 1970s and 80s, including Barbara Wolfe Jancar and Nanette Funk, this critique was mobilized as a neo-colonial framework for narrativizing women’s lives on the Eastern Bloc as endemically “backwards,” as Funk criticized communist women’s organizations as not being “agents of their actions, proactive,” but rather as “instruments of a [Marxist] patriarchal state” (qtd. in Ghodsee 14). In this sense, in

34 Michel de Certeau’s The Practice of Everyday Life (1984), wherein he identifies these “formal structures” of a society, including the institutions and structures of power within a given cultural context.
building a feminist and gendered critique of this period, the turn to the “everyday” in the context of women’s prose writing opens up ways of thinking beyond hierarchical forms of state-imposed violence, but instead to the ways in which many Soviet Ukrainian women were able to ground their experiences in imaginaries outside of prescriptive and imposed forms of “Russianness.”

For this reason, the turn to Ukraine is significant because of its unique position as not only Soviet, but also rooted in a linguistic and cultural forms of “Ukrainianness,” which would be foundational to independent nation-building in the post-Soviet context.

The concept of “everyday life” or “normal life” emerged early in the Soviet period and was, to a large extent, rooted in the question of gender. As Lynn Attwood describes, after World War I and the Russian Civil War, the need for a transformation of public housing “which would be conducive to creating a new socialist way of life” also transformed gender relations. Communal housing, in other words, “would deal to some extent with both practical and ideological concerns,” ultimately forming the “foundation of the new socialist person [that would] not only foster collectivism but would also liberate women from doing the domestic chores for their own families” (Attwood 28).

This notion of byt was an integral part of how living spaces were not only allocated, but also built into a Soviet imaginary of relationality and belonging. Sutcliffe describes how from the early 1960s to around 1984, “female authors had appropriated byt as a cultural space for selectively documenting gendered problems within mainstream literature”

---

35 This is not to say “Russianness” was insignificant or unimportant to Soviet Ukrainians. Depending on region, ethnicity, and decade, Russian linguistic and cultural forms of “Sovietness” were also important (and remain important) to many Ukrainian citizens. I am, rather, emphasizing the extent to which “Ukrainianness,” as a distinct ethnolinguistic category, was carefully preserved often through covert means, wherein dissidents often risked violent or deadly repercussions if identified.
I consider how the notion of “everyday life” (“pobut”) as a punctuating factor of living space also participated in late Soviet Ukrainian women’s renderings of their social worlds, and more specifically in the context of perestroika, to an awareness of the economic, social, and ecological tensions underlying the USSR’s looming failure.

As research on late Soviet Ukrainian women prose writers has been notably absent, my chapter addresses not only this critical gap in literary studies, but also the significance and performance(s) of gender within the Soviet urban periphery. In so doing, I bring greater attention to the boundaries the “built” environment of the Soviet Ukrainian city and women’s bodies as vehicles of both (re)production and labor as well as embodiments of “natural” and “unnatural” identities. Such focus is particularly urgent within a Ukrainian context, as many of the urban sites of the so-called “Soviet periphery” (such as Kyiv, L’viv, Kharkiv, and Donetsk) remain essential to the ways in which an independent Ukraine has been constructed and sustained in the post-Soviet era. Likewise, women have long participated in nation-building processes, as their bodies and the expectations for their bodies are tied to national interests, not only through reproduction and domestic concerns, but also as a result of an established reliance on the state. The urban (or the notion of contrived public space), moreover, is susceptible to

---

36 Most recently, Oleksandra Wallo has examined Bichuya’s work and the absence voices of Soviet Ukrainian women’s writing in her article, “‘The Stone Master’: On the Invisibility of Women’s Writing from the Soviet Ukrainian Periphery.”

37 The concept of “built” environment emerged through architectural studies and urban planning to describe “human-made” environments and the extent to which they meet public needs, particularly regarding public health, aesthetics, and accessibility. Scholars have also used this framework to critique structural inequalities, including the categories of race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, and language. See George Galster and Patrick Sharkey’s "Spatial Foundations of Inequality: A Conceptual Model and Empirical Overview" (2017) and Ann de Graft-Johnson’s Gender, Race and Culture in the Urban Built Environment (1999).

38 By “natural” I do not necessarily mean it to be an antonym to “built,” nor do I use it to refer to something “pure” or “original.”
being situated as built memory, and one that looks forwards and backwards in the formulation of gendered, political, and cultural identities. Women’s literary representation of gendered subjectivities during this period emerges as, at once, an observation of the oppressive, often violent, paradigms of Soviet history as well as a critique of the failures of the Soviet system itself—one that, whether citizens overtly recognized it or not, was imminently collapsing.

To consider the role of literary representation, and prosaic representation in particular, in revealing these structural forms of everyday life, this chapter focuses on the short stories of two Ukrainian women prose writers during perestroika: Nina Bichuya (1937-) and Halyna Pahutiak (1958-). Bichuya, who was born in Kyiv but spent her career in Lviv, has been described as a pioneer of Ukraine’s urban literature of the 1980s. I discuss Bichuya’s last short story—her 1990 “The Stone Master” (“Kaminnyi hospodar”)—and Pahutiak’s “To Find Yourself in a Garden” (“Potrapyty v sad”) from her eponymous 1989 collection, both of which narrativize the cultural and material and immaterial spaces of the Soviet city, emerging through the authors’ movements between seemingly competing “worlds” or states: wake and sleep, life and death, built and “natural.” However, both Bichuya and Pahutiak blur the boundaries between these categories, and they are readable as interventions into the relationships between subjectivity and “space.” With respect to women-identified subjectivities, particularly in Western feminist discourses, there has long been an association with “private” spaces of the home; whereas built, public (and by extension—national and “political”) spaces have most often been associated with men, particularly through labor. This social structuring of gendered subjectivity (that feminist scholarship has critiqued extensively in capitalist
patriarchal systems), however, was not the case in the context of state socialism, as women were expected to participate across these domains, including not only the domestic sphere, but also the waged labor force. Because of this, legally, gender in the Soviet Union was considered to be leveled (along with other social categories, including race and ethnicity). Likewise, the emergence of contemporary gendered critiques of “space” and subjectivity in the late Soviet context requires a more nuanced, discursive methodology. For this reason, I employ a transnational and interdisciplinary approach, including not only feminist scholarship in the context of East/Central Europe, but also borrowing from feminist work on the political and economic intersections of natural and social worlds to examine the shifting discourses around gender, reproduction, and family during perestroika. Donna Haraway developed the concept of “natureculture” to refer to the inseparability of nature and culture. I draw from her discussion of such entanglements in “A Political Physiology of Dominance” from her 1991 collection *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, as well as Gayle Rubin’s examination of sexual political economies in “The Traffic in Women,” and Avery Gordon’s concept of haunting in *Ghostly Matters*, to consider the ways in which the expectations and essentialization of bodies were used as a way to reform and strengthen the Soviet state. In this sense, I connect the naturalization of gender in a late Soviet Ukrainian context (especially perestroika) as a powerful case study for considering how modes of living and belonging are formed and reformed by built, material conditions.

To effectively situate the Soviet Ukrainian city within the broader historical milieu of Empire, and moreover, to consider the idea of an urban periphery itself (specifically with regards to Kyiv), the divergent ethno-cultural imaginings and
representations present prior to the Soviet period require acknowledgement. In *Imperial Urbanism in the Borderlands, Kyiv 1800-1905*, Serhiy Bilenky emphasizes Kyiv’s diverse topography during the period of the Russian Empire, mapping the opposing “identities” (while also challenging the idea that a city can hold an identity)—Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian. Borrowing from Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of a city being at once an act of “vision” and “division,” Bilenky observes how Kyiv was “appropriated through the work of vision.” In other words, he shows how Jewish, Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian travelers, authors, and journalists laid claim to radically different representations of the same city. In poetry and prose, Kyiv was often depicted as a holy city, borrowed from its origins as the center of Orthodoxy via the Kyivan Rus’ in the ninth through the thirteenth century. Yet in the nineteenth century, this notion of “holiness” was weaponized by pious Russians against Kyiv’s Polish and Jewish populations, referring to the idea, as one author asserted in the 1860s, that “[Kiev’s] name and memory are alien to those who do not carry the name Russian” (qtd. in Bilenky 25).

This proto-nationalist narrative around Russian ethnic identity has, moreover, been longstanding, and was invoked most recently in 2014 as a way to justify the Russian military’s occupation of eastern Ukraine and the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. As Helge Blakkisrud observes in “Blurring the Boundary between Civic and Ethnic,” “to maximise its room for manoeuvre, the Kremlin has been deliberately blurring the borders of the Russian ethnic ‘self,’ making it possible to reinterpret the ‘self’ as something more narrow but also broader than the body of citizens of the Russian Federation” (250).

---

39 Natan Meir confirms that “alien” in this context refers to both Polish and Jewish Kyivites (qtd. in Bilenky 25).
I mention Kyiv’s complex, multiethnic imperial origins and legacies to highlight the extent to which its social histories inform its emergence (or perhaps transition) as a Soviet Ukrainian city. In other words, I resist an insistence on its narrative situatedness as singularly Ukrainian, as has, more recently, been posed as a counterpoint to Russian occupation and aggression in Ukraine’s eastern regions. Rather I emphasize how, by acknowledging intersecting and discursive interpretations of Ukraine’s urban space (both historically and currently), we can cull nationalist rhetoric in favor of more nuanced, and thus more precise, articulations of how built space (both in its vision and division) shape other, more complex, categories of belonging. To be clear, recognizing multiple geneses of Ukraine’s urban spaces is not a means to justify the ethnopolitical narrative disseminated by Kremlin-based pro-Russian propaganda, but rather, and for the purposes of this chapter, I challenge singular expressions of not just the Soviet Ukrainian city itself, but rather the question of to whom built public spaces (and divisions) belong. As a theoretical approach, this opposition to monolithic categories and identities is, moreover, critical to my examination of gender in the late Soviet period as part of the ways in which the notion of the everyday becomes both recognizable and transformative.

To return to the image and promise of Khrushchyovka, I begin with this example to emphasize the extent to which the “builtness” (or the structuring) of public space participates in the rendering and performance of its inhabitants’ subjectivities, and this is especially true regarding the configuration of living space. I emphasize the extent to which living spaces themselves, and the limitations and organization of living space, are part of the structuring of belonging. Inhabitants’ movements within and between their built environments participate in the organization and texturing of this space and of the
“everyday,” the “pobut.” In the context of the late Soviet period, this structuring involved not only the production of fast and inexpensive *Khrushchyovka*. In this sense, the boundaries and expectations between “public” and “private” in the late Soviet context were different than those of the West, as well as the ways in which these expectations were performed in various social spheres under Soviet socialism. My turn to the literary, and specifically the perestroika prose of Bichuya and Pahutiak, moreover, highlights how critiques of gendered expectations within Soviet society emerged through women writers’ narrativization of their embodied relationships to their inhabited spaces, both in national and local terms. Likewise, my focus on the Ukrainian context is to emphasize its position as a colonized subject, concerned not only with the Soviet Union’s movement toward democratization, but also its own question of independence. Unlike its Soviet Russian counterpart, Ukraine, at least with regard to much of its ethnonational population, has long been preoccupied with the question of Ukrainian sovereignty as a means to preserve its language and culture.

**Galvanizing the Soviet Family: Perestroika’s Biopolitics**

Women’s perestroika prose both in Ukraine and throughout the broader Soviet context employed the loosening restrictions around censorship to more visibly address the “woman” question. In state socialist economies, wherein gender was legally

---

40 This is not to exclude Ukraine’s Jewish and Crimean Tartar populations in the national context, but rather to emphasize ethnic Ukrainian’s concern with its language and culture within the geographical boundaries of Ukraine. There is need for further work on both its Jewish and Tartar populations.
“equal,” the “woman” question was approached somewhat differently than in capitalist patriarchal context. The state was viewed as the primary “emancipator of women” so as to eliminate the need for women’s activist groups or academic research on women and gender. As Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak details, in the early Soviet Ukrainian context, the Communist Party of Ukraine (CPU), “fighting off both Ukrainian communists and anti-communists, paid little attention to the women’s question, however, it used women to popularize the regime” (288). Regarding women, the early Soviet Bolshevik policy in the 1920s was two-pronged: in an effort to “free women from the strictures of the past” they made them “a potent force in the implementation of Bolshevik power in society.” Women were intended to be a “galvanizing force” in developing Soviet society (Bohachevsky-Chomiak 289). This was a formal legal effort to abolish a gendered hierarchy within the domestic sphere, wherein husbands and fathers no longer had power over women. Institutions like marriage and divorce became entirely secularized and simplified. These legal shifts for gender also meant that women were to be included more substantially in the waged labor force. This inclusion became all the more important with the rise of industrialization, as, following the death of Lenin and the rise of Stalin in

---

41 While there was legal gender equality (or “leveling”), particularly in the context of Soviet socialism, as scholars including Oksana Kis and Sarah Ashwood have argued, this did not necessarily mean gender equality existed in any meaningful liberatory sense. Although they participated in the waged labor force, women were still expected to fulfill their auxiliary domestic roles.

42 There were, however, still women’s groups in Soviet and state socialist contexts, as scholars including Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak, Kristen Ghodsee, and Francesca de Haan (among many others) have documented. There has been some debate over whether these can be considered “feminist” or activist, and there was surely some differentiation among them throughout Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In the Soviet context, such women’s groups were often engineered by the Bolshevik party, rather than grassroots movements that emerged as a response to specifically gendered social issues.

43 However, as Bohachevsky-Chomiak notes, unlike Soviet Russia, Soviet Ukraine retained a distinction between legal marriage and common-law, non-registered marriage (289)
1924, Ukraine and Ukrainians became a source for exploitation, visible especially through Stalin’s manufactured famine (known as Holodomor) from 1932-1933.

This Soviet history of legal (and nominal) equality was important in shaping Soviet categories of gender: while on the surface such policies appear to be more equal than that of its Western counterpart, but in this leveling, gender was also erased. Women’s issues were often regarded as non-existent, at least in popular discourse, yet the notion of feminism remained equally unappealing, as it was viewed as a bourgeois preoccupation. With respect to gender and perestroika, and moreover, perestroika’s initiative toward greater societal transparency and openness, Gorbachev included in his 1987 book, Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World [Perestroyka i novoye myshleniye dlya nashey strany i dlya vsego mira] a brief section on “Women and the Family,” in which he reaffirms and praises the Soviet aim of gender equality:

The extent of women’s emancipation is often viewed as a yardstick to be used in judging the social and political level of a society. The Soviet state put an end to the discrimination against women so typical of tsarist Russia with determination and without compromise. Women gained a legally-guaranteed social status equal with men… Without the contribution and selfless work of women, we would not have built a new society nor won the war against fascism. (758)

Yet Gorbachev also acknowledges the extent to which, even despite legal equality, many of women’s issues and needs were disregarded, thus producing greater inequality. Rather than concluding that this was due to unmanageable expectations for Soviet women within and beyond the domestic spheres, he proposes that such expectations kept women from effectively performing and fulfilling their domestic obligations. This, Gorbachev argues,
kept women from cultivating “a good family atmosphere,” resulting in an erosion of “morals, culture, and production” through “weakened family ties and a slack attitude to family responsibilities.” He continues,

This is a paradoxical result of our sincere and politically justified desire to make women equal with men in everything. Now, in the course of perestroika, we have begun to overcome this shortening. That is why we are now holding heated debates…about the question of what we should do to make it possible for women to return to their purely womanly mission. (758)

This logic, in the context of the goals of perestroika and Soviet reform, speaks to some of the ways in which—in an effort to “correct” the USSR’s moral failures—an essentialized vision of gender and gendered expectations (i.e., the return to a pure, “womanly mission”) became more pronounced. As opposed to the USSR’s historic vision of a Soviet “woman” or “man,” wherein Soviet peoples were expected (at least nominally) to work together to produce a strong communist state, women became the object and resource for nation-building via their presumed biological roles as (re)producers and caretakers.

In terms of a Soviet emphasis on “The Family” during perestroika, Gorbachev’s observation is not merely regressive, as this would suggest that previous Soviet categories of gender were implicitly progressive. The rhetoric of a familial center and mythologization of romantic love as part of the structuring of Soviet life was present long before perestroika, though represented differently than its western counterpart. As Katerina Clark describes in *Moscow, the Fourth Rome*, in 1931, the German newspaper *A-I-Z* published a photo essay, entitled, “24 Hours in the Life of a Moscow Worker
Family,” which served as a form of international socialist propaganda, depicting a “poster family for the good life the Soviet Union offered its workers…the family were all workers, except one school-age son and his mother, who had left work for home duties, and they were all simultaneously furthering themselves through study” (Clark 68). This example demonstrates the extent to which, while in various legal contexts, the USSR established forms of gender equality intended to elevate women’s status as paid laborers, yet at the same time, even as early as the 1930s, it is evident that legal measures reflected neither the broader Soviet social narratives nor lived reality of Soviet women.

Soviet women were, even prior to perestroika, implicitly expected to uphold the burden of domestic labor, even despite legal measures. In this sense, Haraway’s discussion of labor and the body politic in “A Political Physiology of Dominance” is a useful analytic for recognizing the ways in which political modes of domination are often naturalized through biologically deterministic demands. The very idea of population as an evolutionary concept as “the fundamental natural group,” Haraway writes, owes itself to the notion of the body politic, “which in turn are inextricably interwoven within the social relationships of production and reproduction” (7). Similarly, Rubin, drawing from the work of Lévi-Strauss, refers to the need for a “political economy of sexual systems.” Moreover, the construction of “The Family” as a socially instituted form of kinship, she observes how “the social organization of sex rests upon gender, obligatory heterosexuality, and the constraint of female sexuality” (179). I include Rubin and Haraway’s queer feminist frameworks to emphasize the extent to which the social structures of belonging in the late Soviet context were, like their capitalist counterparts, formed through embodied performances of gender, “naturalized” and moralized through
the language and mythology of belonging. Moreover, these gendered performances were built into everyday life through the expectations of familial and reproductive systems, instituted through political rhetoric as a way of upholding a particular narrative of communism. The imagined future of the Soviet family was hinged on women’s compliance with a biologized narrative regarding their sexual and familial lives, endorsed by the state. As part of my literary critique, I demonstrate how the selected women’s perestroika prose in the Soviet periphery more visibly resists such modes of domination and oppression, established and sustained through political narratives—that emerged more forcefully after Stalinism—regarding women’s naturalized social roles.

The significance of Gorbachev’s political articulation of women’s “return” to domesticity is related to the ways in which the Soviet social spaces continued to shift during perestroika. The rhetoric of this “return” to the family punctuated Soviet history as a way of structuring power, even despite the state’s lip service to gender equality. In “The Zhensovety Revisited,” Genia Browning addresses how women’s councils were used throughout the USSR to “consolidate the family” to prevent divorce, and likewise, to “strengthen the institution of the family” (107). Such biopolitical efforts were intended to use the model and expectations of a heterosexual family structure to produce a functioning and efficient communist state. Like Rubin and Haraway, Foucault’s discussion of biopower serves as a critique of capitalism’s overinvestment in the social organization of marriage, reproduction, sex, and sexuality; however, I consider how this

44 The “zhenskie sovety” or “zhensovety” refers to women’s councils in the Soviet Union. These were women-only groups existed throughout the USSR but were energized by Khrushchev and “earmarked by Gorbachev to ‘help resolve a wide-range of social problems…confronting women and their families’” (Browning 97). Many of these councils existed in Soviet Ukraine (“zhinocha rada” in Ukrainian) as well, considering not only “women’s issues” but Ukrainian issues as well.
framework, in the context of state socialism, and particularly in a moment of political transition, also aims to situate the family as a central stabilizing political force. This is a shift from the historically Soviet vision, which, in the effort to strengthen communism, aimed to triangulate the relationship between women, men, and the state rather than women’s economic ties to individual men. In my consideration of Bichuya and Pahutiak in the following section, I explore women prose writers’ representation of the relationship between the gendered subject and state as a way of critiquing not only violent Soviet histories, but also the extent to which the gendering of Soviet citizenship was part of the “builtness” of a Soviet Ukrainian landscape. With the increased cultural openness of perestroika, women’s literary representations welcomed new, more visible expressions of structural inequalities within (and throughout) Soviet histories of gender. In so doing, I demonstrate the extent to which gendered subjects specifically within the Soviet Ukrainian context were produced through the structural and material organizations of labor, family life, and belonging, with the aim of producing particular forms of Soviet subjectivity.

**Ukrainian Women’s Perestroika Prose**

There were, as Wallo notes, few women writers, especially prose writers, in Ukraine from the 1930s through the 1970s—departing from Beth Holmgren’s assertion of a “distinctive group” of women writers in the post-war Soviet context or the notion that the Stalinist system “proved to be an institutional and iconic enabler of women’s writing” (qtd. in Wallo 25). While there are numerous reasons why Ukrainian women’s

---

45 This is not to say that Holmgren gives credit to the Stalinism for the elevation of women’s writing in the post-war period, but rather, in the Soviet Russian context, this boon was the result of women’s equal opportunity in education as well as “upward mobility through party membership” (Holmgren 226-227).
poetry thrived while prose did not, this in part had to do with the tremendous social expectations placed on Soviet women. Even despite legal gender equality, they still bore the majority of domestic labor as well as participating in the waged labor force. As prose writing is often more time-consuming, women writers turned to poetry. This deficiency of women’s prose throughout most of the Soviet period was also, somewhat paradoxically, tied to the shift toward legal gender equality. As Wallo observes, “the implementation of women’s rights in Stalinist Ukraine often resulted in women intellectuals (in numbers equal to men intellectuals) being persecuted for ideological, and often nationalist ‘deviations’.” Women writers adopted several strategies to escape this persecution, which she refers to as “strategies of invisibility” wherein “some of them abandoned literature altogether, some chose translation or writing for children only, and some switched to Russian as a ‘safer’ language” (Wallo 160). Holmgren’s assessment, moreover, does not consider the extent to which the Soviet state controlled, and thus limited, the literary production in the Ukrainian context, and for this reason, we do not see a wide emergence of women’s prose until perestroika and beyond. Ukrainian Women dissident writers included Zinaida Tulub (1890-1964) and Nadia Surovtsova (1896-1985), who were detained and imprisoned in labor camps and lived in exile following their release. Due to the disparity between Russian and Ukrainian Soviet women prose writers’ experiences, it is essential to examine the emergence of women prose writers in Ukraine to understand their marked absence until perestroika. Importantly, this is not to assert that women writers in the Russian context did not also experience brutal forms of repression—indeed they did. However, the Stalinist regime notably censored (often through force) Ukrainian linguistic and cultural expressions as a way of suppressing what
they saw as Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism, even in spite of the USSR’s claim to a multinational, multiethnic “friendship of peoples” model. As Serhy Yekelchyk describes in *Stalin’s Empire of Memory*, this was part of a Stalinist “ideological campaign” against bourgeois nationalism in Ukrainian literature and historiography, one that died out in 1947, but was still practiced throughout the remaining Soviet years. Even in spite of his movement away from Stalinism (and being Ukrainian himself), Khrushchev continued his predecessors’ anti-nationalist rhetoric in an effort to control the image of Ukraine as well as other Soviet and Soviet satellite states (Yekelchyk 89). It was not until Gorbachev’s establishment of perestroika and glasnost that the possibility of more open expressions emerged. In the case of Bichuya and Pahutiak, their work reflects the development of more candid representations of what it means to be a gendered subject.

Nina Bichuya was one of the few Soviet Ukrainian women prose writers to achieve notoriety before the 1980s, beginning her career as a journalist and children’s author. Born in Kyiv in 1937, she graduated from the faculty of Journalism at Lviv University, beginning as a journalist, later working as a literary director of the Lviv Youth Theatre and an editor at the newspaper, *Prosvita*. She emerged in the late 1960s, as many Soviet women writers did, through the publication of children’s stories including “Vacations in Svitlohors’k” (“*Kanikuly u svitlohorsk’u*,” 1967) and “Slavko Berkuta’s Rapier” (“*Shpaha slavka berkutu*,” 1968). In the 1970s, however, she began to publish short stories and novellas including “The Drohobych Astrologer” (“*Drohobyts’kyi*

46 In this context, “anti-nationalist” simply refers to any writing that was deemed “bourgeois” or anti-communist by Soviet censors, for instance, any emphasis on Ukrainian language or culture or anything indicated a working toward a sovereign state. Although there are some shared histories in terms of resisting Russian domination, this is not to be equated with Ukrainian nationalism evident in the post-Soviet context, which have been aligned with violent far-right, neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups, including the Azov Battalion and Right Sector.
“zvizdar,” 1970) and Tales (Povisti, 1978); and in the 1980s she published April in a Boat (Kviten u chovni, 1981) and Genealogy (Rodovid, 1984)—among others. For the purposes of this chapter, I will be focusing on Bichuya’s 1990 short story “The Stone Master,” which, in many ways, speaks most candidly to the conditions of perestroika. As Wallo observes in her chapter “On the Invisibility of Ukrainian Women’s Writing in the Soviet Empire,” it “may be read as [Bichuya’s] ‘last word’ of sorts on the Soviet environment for writing literature, especially in the rebellious Soviet periphery of Western Ukraine” (33). Moreover, her open criticism of Stalin speaks to the new, more open literary forms emerging throughout the USSR during this period, making way for more political, and even activist, cultural expressions. Like Bichuya, Pahutiak’s perestroika prose, in many ways, bridged the late Soviet and the post-Soviet periods, as she too espoused a more open tenor, particularly in her depictions of conditions particular to Soviet women, including domestic violence, alcoholic husbands, and dysfunctional family life. Born in Zalokot—a village in Lviv Oblast—in 1958, Pahutiak studied Ukrainian philology at the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv. Emerging with the 1980s (often referred to as the “eightiers” generation of writers), Her first novel was, like Bichuya’s and other women writers, for children, entitled Children [Dity, 1982] followed by Master [Hospodar, 1986], which was her first Science Fiction work, and her first collections of short stories To Find Yourself in a Garden [Potrapyty v Sad, 1989] and Mustard Seed [Hirchychny Zerno, 1990]. Her post-Soviet writing has turned to the genres of fantasy, magical realism, and horror (often referred to as “mythopoetics”) with novels
including *The Minion from Dobromyl* [Sluha z Dobromylya, 2006] and *Urizka Gothic* [Urizka Hottyka, 2009].

As there has been little scholarly work on late Soviet Ukrainian women prose writers, especially in English, I acknowledge Wallo’s pioneering work on Bichuya, and in particular her analysis of “The Stone Master,” in which she examines its significance in critiquing the Soviet, and particularly the Stalinist, regime within the context of the Ukrainian periphery, and moreover, the invisibility of women writers within these contexts. I build on her analysis by turning my focus to the representations of built and “natural” environments by placing Bichuya’s “The Stone Master” into conversation with Pahutiak’s “To Find Yourself in a Garden.” In so doing, I explore the literary representation of how gendered subjectivity emerges through not only material architecture, but also within the structures of belonging. As Alexy Golubev observes regarding his ethnographic research in *The Things of Life: Materiality in Late Soviet Russia*, “my respondents narrated their everyday life experiences under late socialism some thirty years later…through their material conditions and not just in terms of consumption.” Materiality, for Golubev refers to the forms of Soviet space that were “constructed and lived, hierarchical and flexible—but most of all, heterogenous and multilayered.” These objects and spaces in the late Soviet context, moreover, are what “navigated people through the socialist city, structured their daily activities, defined their relations with their family, friends and neighbors, and forged communities” (Golubev 2).

---

47 The turn to these genres, for Pahutiak, speaks to what Svitlana Krys refers to as “mythmaking strategies,” which, she suggests, facilitate a symbolic return of the vampire narrative “from the West back to Eastern Europe.” This, Krys argues, is also politicized in that Pahutiak uses the gothic to push the vampire narrative “further east” toward Russia and away from the Carpathians (where Bram Stoker had, in the nineteenth century, situated this vampiric image).
To return to de Certeau’s notion of “everyday practices” and the structuring of everyday life, I emphasize the extent to which everyday materiality participated in structuring the particularities of gender, and within this, the structural workings and deployments of power, in the late Soviet Ukrainian context. These gendered structures would, moreover, bleed into and transform a post-Soviet landscape.

For Bichuya, Kyiv, and its western counterpart, L’viv,48 are in dialogue as peripheral locations of both Soviet and Ukrainian identities—what Wallo refers to as “the center of the Soviet periphery” and “the Western Ukrainian periphery” respectively (157). Similarly, for Pahutiak, the Ukrainian Soviet city itself contains an anatomy: a location that is both “built” and “natural,” retaining the power to preserve or exploit, as she begins “To Find Yourself in a Garden,”

As a rule, gardens don’t grow in train stations. But one grew here. From behind a high brick wall, branches with red apples peeked out. Only sparrows flew through the fence. If the builders had understood that poets had wings, they’d have thought up a more complicated system of defense than this wall and impenetrable steel doors. But the poets who had wings died a long time ago. (From Three Worlds 268)

Pahutiak thereby places the reader directly into this liminal space, situated between the seemingly “fixed,” or visible, materiality of urban space and a more fluid, protean imaginary. The reader is introduced into this boundary between built, “natural,” and

48 Kyiv and L’viv are sometimes mythologized as “oppositional” by virtue of their differing emergent histories: Kyiv’s historical position as the “cradle” of Slavic civilization via the Kyivan (or Kievan) Rus’ from the late ninth to early thirteenth century, whereas L’viv has been occupied by numerous states and Empires, including the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Austrian and Austro-Hungarian Empires, and finally the Soviet Union.
imaginary worlds, as Bichuya, similarly, begins “The Stone Master” by bringing her reader into this liminality, describing a recurring nightmare:

A trampled green field extends between me and the podium, which was made of rough rust-colored planks hastily hammered together, and the man behind the podium, holding the microphone in his hands, explains something, shouting at the top of his voice, but I don’t hear a word, and this is all because someone has spread out such a boundless green expanse between us and also because of the fact that the microphone he’s holding is not plugged into anything; the cord drops, stretches out, and recoils like a long black snake, and maybe the man is even hissing like a snake, and although I understand that the man cannot hiss, I keep thinking that his voice is that absurd hissing, and there is not another soul in the vast green space—only I and that man who stands behind the podium holding the microphone, although it makes no sense to hold it because nothing can be heard anyway. (404)

In this lengthy, somewhat disorienting, sentence, Bichuya draws her audience into her speaker’s nightmare, blurring the boundaries between the real and the surreal. There is a male voice projecting, but the speaker is physically distanced from it. As Wallo observes, the man in this nightmare is “both an agent and symbol of the Soviet regime’s discursive monopoly” (“Ukrainian Women Writers” 35). The title is an intertextual borrowing from Ukrainian fin-de-siècle poet and protofeminist thinker, Lesya Ukrainka’s (1871-1913) eponymous 1912 drama, as an adaptation of the Don Juan narrative, making Donna Anna (rather than Don Juan himself) the central figure, who ultimately seduces him rather than
being seduced. Although, as Oksana Zabuzhko posits in her 2009 lecture entitled “The Death of Don Juan,” both characters lose because the “confrontation is not evenly matched” as Donna Anna is alone, “Don Juan makes part of an unshakable stone system of patriarchy.” Moreover, “The Stone Master,” Zabuzhko continues, is “not an individual but an elaborate system of the patriarchy which might consist of insignificant men, yet it is designed to endow those insignificant men with invincible power” (9).

Scholars including Wallo, as well as Zabuzhko and Myroslav Shkandrij have noted that Ukrainka’s drama challenges not only imperial and colonial power but also critiques a dominant “masculine” order. Bichuya’s “The Stone Master” continues its predecessor’s critique by subverting a Soviet model of authoritarianism, and in particular, the situatedness of gender within the context of Soviet authoritarianism, especially in the context of a post-Stalinist USSR.

Bichuya’s “The Stone Master,” like its predecessor’s eponymous drama, gives attention to how gendered modes of power operate, yet within a late Soviet Ukrainian context. As Wallo explains, through her personal interviews with Bichuya, the “female I-narrator expresses many of Bichuya’s own ideas, fears, and regrets related to living and writing in post-Stalinist Western Ukraine. The historical, cultural, and social proximity of the subject matter to the author makes ‘The Stone Master’ Bichuya’s most overtly ideological text” (“On Invisibility in Women’s Writing” 168). The story begins twenty-five years after Stalin’s death, with the female protagonist remembering its impact on her childhood, returning to the recurring nightmare of the man behind the podium. The

---

49 Literary scholars, including Zabuzhko, have observed this drama as one of Ukrainka’s foremost feminist texts: “not a version of [the Don Juan narrative], but a subversion,” as Zabuzhko observes. Ukrainka challenges, she continues, most importantly its “archetypical contents, by giving a floor, for the first time, to full-fledged women characters” (Zabuzhko 6).
speaker, recalling the day he died, describes how her father repeatedly and excitedly shouted, “He croaked! He croaked!” (“Zdokh! Zdokh!”), after which they are herded to the local cemetery “with torches to lament the death of the leader—the old and cruel one whom we could never see, unreachable like God, and terrible, depraved, like Satan” (Bichuya 37). Bichuya’s open denigration of Stalin, which acknowledges the USSR’s violent legacies, signaled perestroika’s cultural turn toward more open and subversive literary forms. Moreover, and not uncommonly for this period, there is a clear departure from a socialist-realist genre, employing magical realism (and even horror) elements in narrativizing this political shift, not only of Stalin’s death, but also in the movement toward a collapsing Soviet Union.

Bichuya utilizes this back and forth between childhood and adulthood to characterize the vitality of Stalinism and its persistence across generations, embedded not only in citizens’ memories, but in their bodies. As Bichuya’s speaker, now an adult, sits at a table drinking wine with her fellow writer friends, they remember “how each of us took the news of his death and what we did on that day. None of us managed to shed a single tear that day… and now we howled with laughter and rejoiced that it did not occur to any of us to choke up on the occasion of that cosmic tragedy” (37). For Bichuya, as Wallo also observes, Stalin’s death did not mark the end of Stalinism, nor the continued violence that resulted from his rule. For her, both the ideas and events themselves as well as their psychological toll persist into the present, as “Stalin remains powerful even after death because the system he put into place remains” (“On the Invisibility of Ukrainian Women’s Writing” 172). Bichuya recognizes them as “built-in” to the environment itself,
permeating the structures of everyday life, including social structures of relating and belonging.

The story’s title reflects this archetypical imaginary of permanence. Even amid her recognition of his monstrousness, Bichuya’s speaker describes the newly deceased dictator as: “The stone master. Indestructible. Eternal” (49). Not only is his presence physically “unbreakable” but he remains, stonelike, persistent in his subjects’ memories. This description is, moreover, in response to the speaker’s friend’s memory of Stalin’s seemingly unbreakable statue:

When the Germans came, they ordered the Jews to pull off the monument to Stalin from its pedestal. Later on it couldn’t be moved even with the help of explosives, even with tanks, and here they were, ordering people to do it….They tied thick ropes around it, yoked people to it, and the people pulled so hard that their mouths foamed with blood…. But it was all in vain—they couldn’t move him, so they were flogged with whips. (Bichuya 48)

By including this memory of the Nazis’ demand (and failure) to “break” this image of Stalin, Bichuya positions these two violent formations of fascism—Nazi Germany and Stalinist USSR—alongside each other, demonstrating not only the ostensible “indestructability,” or perhaps the enduringness, of Stalinism, but also the extent to which it is physically built into the environment. Moreover, when the Nazis fail to destroy the statue with machinery, they then turn to human strength, demanding that their Jewish prisoners execute this task, and brutally punishing them when they are unable to do so. Bichuya, in this sense, positions these seemingly opposing forces—machinery and human
strength—as equally insufficient remedies for destroying this “Stone Master.” As the friend continues describing this horrific scene, the speaker thinks to herself:

[they were] flogged with whips to the point that their skin was cut and bleeding, but they kept pulling and pulling—and whom did they curse? The Germans or that immovable one, terrifying and immovable? …Even at that moment he could have fallen and covered them all with the weight of the stone slab. And they pressed their feet against the cobblestones, slippery from their blood, and pulled and pulled him, nor knowing for what to beg God—to let them live or let them perish…. (Bichuya 48-49)

Importantly for Bichuya’s narrative, and in representing these violent histories, both Nazi and Soviet, she marks Ukraine as a historical intersection for these brutal forms of power, deployed through human aggression, and organized and justified through the structures that represent and uphold ideological structures of power.

In my consideration of Bichuya, and of Soviet structuring of power more broadly, I return to Haraway, and particularly her discussion of naturecultures, which she uses to describe the entanglement of what is seen as the “natural” world and what has been developed in our social worlds, and moreover, how such entanglements have been instrumentalized in the development of structures of power as a way to “naturalize,” and thereby sustain particular systems of power. In the Soviet case, this lies in the deep-rooted belief that Soviet socialism was not only the most ethical political system, but also, in many ways, evolutionarily inevitable for humankind. This was a value that many citizens held until it collapsed (and even beyond). As Yurchak quotes songwriter and musician Andrei Makarevich, “It had never even occurred to me that in the Soviet Union
anything could ever change. Let alone it could disappear. No one expected it. Neither children, nor adults. There was a complete impression that everything was forever” (1).

This view that the USSR was an “eternal state” was naturalized throughout its near seventy years of power, and because of this, for many citizens, it was difficult to disentangle this institutionalized moral framework from their lived realities. In this scene of reflection among friends on the moment of Stalin’s “indestructability,” Bichuya recognizes the embeddedness of the systems themselves, how they factor into their ongoing lives, as the speaker wonders, “for by remembering him, we extend his life. Perhaps we are incapable of living without him—hence the memories…” (Bichuya 48).

The memories themselves, likewise, are manifested as nightmarish and spectral forces throughout the narrative, reminding the reader again and again of the hauntedness of a late Soviet condition. This haunting, as Bichuya demonstrates, speaks to the gendering of these violent inheritances, and likewise, to the structuring of late Soviet (and ultimately post-Soviet) life.

By including more candid portrayals of violence and trauma, Bichuya visibly departs from socialist realism, incorporating a more experimental approach in “The Stone Master” through her inclusion of magical realist elements, and in particular, the looming presence of Stalin’s ghost. While the inclusion of the spectral represents the embeddedness of Stalinism even beyond his death, and likewise, the psychological toll this has taken on Soviet citizens, in many ways, the inclusion of his ghost is also humorous. While this group of friends reminisces about his death, the late dictator hovers behind them, as the speaker continues, “for there he was, holding the glass [of] wine in his hideous hand; he approached us quietly, as fear itself approaches, and for some reason
he stood only where I could see him, behind the backs of my friends—he stood there and drank, and wiped his fake mustache, and then he unglued it” (Bichuya 49). Through the speaker’s observation, Bichuya effectively “unmasks” this villain whose presence continues to instill fear and anger, even posthumously. In so doing, through the image of a “glued on,” fake moustache, she undermines the image of Soviet masculinity developed under Stalin, that was frequently weaponized against women. Lilya Kaganovsky describes the fantasy of male subjectivity under Stalin, and moreover, the Soviet fascination with “male” virility as part of Stalinist iconography—a representation of “health and vigor of the collective, a new nation marching together toward the bright future” (6). Yet Kaganovsky also contrasts this image with that of the mutilated male body, and together with the virile body, she argues that “these two forms of masculinity exist together, and together they create the ideal Stalinist man: hyperbolically strong, yet without arms or legs; committed to the cause, yet chained to his bed; visionary, yet blind.” This paradox of seemingly opposing images, she continues, speaks to the problem of “limitation, of certain disciplinary and structural parameters that the Stalinist subject (of either gender) is not allowed to cross” (Kaganovsky 5).

To return to Bichuya’s narrative inclusion of Stalin’s ghost, he embodies both—comically virile, yet also falling apart. Her speaker, who is the only one among her friends who seems to see him, describes him looming over their gathering: “He takes a wine glass, pours himself some red wine, it flows and flows, although I know for sure the bottle has been empty for a while, but he pours himself a full glass, the wine overflowing in a red rivulet, he drinks and drinks, and his glass does not go empty” (Bichuya 46). On the one hand, this haunting, and the ghost’s behavior with the red wine spilling on the
white tablecloth, is a painful symbolic reminder of the horrific bloodshed that occurred under Stalin’s regime. Yet here, Bichuya also undermines the image of Stalinist masculinity by emphasizing his artificiality: “he places the wine glass back on the table, and around it there forms a blood-red stain on the white tablecloth. and he takes off his fake black moustache, puts it in his pocket together with this fake pipe—and jumping up like a fairy-tale devil...Like a creature from hell...” (46-47). He is both vicious and laughable, indicating the paradoxical ways in which his presence lingers throughout the lives of Soviet citizens, and especially for Ukrainians whose generational memory of Holodomor remains fresh. Bichuya’s speaker recalls these stories of the famine, as told to her by her father, who in Kyiv, “saw, right under the gate, a woman in a beautiful embroidered shirt, with beads around her neck—dead from hunger; I knew about human corpses at railway stations—heavy logs that landed with a bang, thrown by others who were still alive into the freight cars” (44). These memories, passed down from the speaker’s parents, are “built-in” to this urban landscape of both Kyiv and Lviv, as she now associates these places with corpses, haunting her own mythologized vision of these national spaces, making her “afraid to look to the side” when exiting her apartment.

The concept of “haunting” is one that feminist scholars, including Avery Gordon and Grace M. Cho, have drawn from to develop a language for addressing the ways in which abusive systems and regimes of power infiltrate everyday life. In Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination, Gordon describes how this phenomenon of haunting is distinct from “being exploited, traumatized, or oppressed, although it usually involves these experiences of is produced by them.” Haunting, rather, is “an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known,
sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely” (Gordon xvi). Her emphasis on social violence is useful for my discussion of not only Bichuya and Pahutiak, but also for my consideration of late Soviet Ukraine and the various manifestations of generational violence occurring within its borders, as evidenced in both “The Stone Master” and “To Find Yourself in a Garden.” Bichuya, by including Stalin’s ghost, employs this phenomenon directly—a spectral reminder of not only the workings of oppressive, violent regimes of power in everyday life (in this case, during a relaxing gathering with friends), but also the extent to which the subject finds it difficult (or even impossible) to resolve this “animated state.”

For Bichuya’s speaker, she is, moreover, physically unable to speak, signaling, as Wallo argues, “a female writer’s painful and overdetermined silence, and it ends with a nightmarish image of her complete annihilation” (“On the Invisibility of Women’s Writing” 168). This silencing occurs directly after Stalin’s death, when, as a fourteen-year-old child, the speaker’s teacher locks her in the principal’s office demanding that she write a poem in his honor, and she is unable to do so. She remembers:

I spent five or six harrowing hours in that ‘solitary confinement’ and couldn’t write a single line; I was ready to cover the sheets of paper in front of me with that viciously happy and ravenous ‘he croaked,’ but I knew all too well that I couldn’t give into that temptation, I couldn’t trace out even the first letter of the word because the letter could be deciphered, just like all of my feelings, thoughts, and moods. (Bichuya 37).

All the while she is struggling to write, her teachers and many fellow students are weeping over the fallen leader. As they wait for her to complete the poem, she wonders,
“maybe they wanted to purchase their freedom with that poem” (Bichuya 38). Looking back, she reflects on how “no one in the entire world could have helped me in that moment,” wishing that instead she could have fallen ill, died, or perhaps not have been born at all. Yet, at the same time, she recognizes that she had “to decide for myself what to do, and the education in hypocrisy, which had affected and demoralized my not-yet-guilty generation, turned out to be the only thing that helped me then and suggested a way of escape,” as she, instead of writing the poem, pretends to cry to the teacher: “‘I can’t, I can’t,’ I muttered deceptively… I simply can’t write a single line because my anguish is so great that it cannot be measured in words, my sorrow is so infinite that I can’t express it” (Bichuya 39). The speaker in this moment reflects the paralysis associated with the Soviet literary landscape, particularly for women, who—through oppressive apparatuses of power—were unable to express themselves through language. Her memory, in many ways, performs this “haunting of memory” that Gordon refers to in her discussion of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, describing how, “the story is about haunting and about the crucial way in which it mediates between institution and person, creating a possibility of making a life, becoming something else, in the present and for the future” (142). In the case of *Beloved*, Morrison is retelling the slave narrative, tracing the inheritance of racial slavery, the unfinished project of Reconstruction, and the compulsions and forces that all of us inevitably experience in the face of slavery’s having even once existed in our nation. Slavery has ended, but something of it continues to live on, in the social geography of where peoples reside, in the authority of collective wisdom and shared benightedness, in the veins of the
contradictory formation we call New World modernity, propelling, as it always has, a something to be done. (Gordon 139)

While the social, racial, and political contexts of late Soviet Ukraine and Reconstruction-era US are quite different, there are comparable questions of inheritance, and moreover, of how generational trauma textures the everyday, continuing and reverberating through this experience of haunting.

In Bichuya’s “The Stone Master,” the adult speaker (like her memory of her child self) is also unable to speak. While she is with her friends, whom she doubts believe her stories about her father yelling “he croaked!” or being unable to write a poem, she observes, “I make no attempt to convince them of anything, I can’t even open my mouth” (Bichuya 41). Bichuya’s emphasis on her speaker’s paralysis with regards to both speaking and writing reflects a longer feminist genealogy, especially that of first and second wave “Western” feminists, for instance Betty Friedan’s 1963, *The Feminist Mystique*, in which she describes “the problem that has no name” — wherein, despite women’s unhappiness in their domestic roles, they remain unable to give voice to their experiences. In a transnational and postcolonial feminist context, the image of silencing can also be connected to Gayatri Spivak’s 1988 “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in which she argues that, in the postcolonial context, there is no possibility for those who are most marginalized (the subaltern) to speak. While the Soviet context Bichuya represents, and the forms of subjectivity therein, are not necessarily comparable to Spivak’s discussion of the postcolonial subaltern subjectivity, this parallel demonstrate the extent to which “The Stone Master” is in conversation with broader historical and global feminist discourses. In this sense, I further Wallo’s gendering of this phenomenon of the speaker’s muteness
by considering how it not only demonstrates the silencing of women’s writing in the Soviet Ukrainian periphery, but also the extent to which gender, as a category reliant on embodied performance, particularly through women’s reproductive labor, itself is instrumentalized to sustain oppressive systems of power.

To return to Rubin’s discussion of the political economy of sex, in her critique of Lévi-Strauss’ assertion that women are like words, “misused when they are not ‘communicated’ and exchanged,” to which she responds, “why is he not, at this point, denouncing what kinship systems do to women, instead of presenting one of the greatest rip-offs of all time as the root of romance?” Instead, she offers, “I personally feel that the feminist movement must dream of even more than the elimination of the oppression of women. It must dream of the elimination of obligatory sexualities and sex roles” (Rubin 203-204). In the social and political contexts of the USSR, such leveling of gender was, at multiple points, institutionalized, and, indeed, the USSR attempted (at least superficially) to eliminate the emphasis on obligatory male/female roles. However, as feminist scholars, including Oksana Kis and Marian Rubchak, have argued, these attempts at equality ultimately failed. As Rubchak observes in both the Russian and Ukrainian Soviet contexts, “misogyny carried over into Soviet culture and so thoroughly socialized were the women that they were unable to transcend entrenched male values” (156). In other words, the fantasy of a genderless socialist utopia could never overcome the structural workings of misogyny, and moreover, the extent to which masculinist domination relies on the exploitation of women and women’s bodies.

Pahutiak’s “To Find Yourself in a Garden,” like “The Stone Master,” addresses the “built-in” quality of a late Soviet condition, again, juxtaposing the built and “natural”
worlds—reflecting in a fictional context Haraway’s concept of a natureculture, as the main character, a houseless man, moves between built and natural imaginaries, yet continually returns to their intersections. The story begins by describing these seemingly oppositional spaces: “As a rule gardens don’t grow in train stations. But one grew here.” It then shifts to the male protagonist, Hrytsko, who is imagining his movement between them: “Hrytsko imagined that one warm night he’d crawl from the last train, and when he reached the station, he’d see the doors open. He’d enter the garden, lie down in the tangled fragrant grass, bend his cheek to Mother Earth, then weep and ask: ‘Who have I become—an unhappy tramp?’” (Pahutiak 268). The story’s narrator describes Hrytsko, in many ways, becoming part of the landscape, built-in and observable, “The police from the southwestern rail line knew Hrytsko and didn’t bother him. What can be taken from someone who doesn’t have a wife, only a harmonica and the black illness from the war? The hospital was his only refuge” (Pahutiak 268). He is suffering from several conditions, including, as mentioned, homelessness, “the black sickness” or the “black illness” from, presumably, the Soviet-Afghan war, frequent seizures, and alcoholism. The narrator describes how after the war, his father taught him to play the harmonica, and they began to panhandle at bazaars, where “his father played the harmonica, and Hrytsko collected money in an army cap.” Because of this, “his mother couldn’t bear the shame of this and died, and the old man froze to death one night as he returned, drunk, from town” (Pahutiak 269). While she does not necessarily gender this narrative context in the way

---

50 This “black illness” is likely similar to the “asthenic syndrome” named in Kira Muratova’s eponymous film. She also refers to this as “black melancholia,” which would now be considered severe depression or PTSD. In Hrytsko it manifests as seizures. Muratova’s The Asthenic Syndrome, as I address in Chapter 1, also situates this condition as a societal one, reflecting late Soviet society.
Bichuya does, Pahutiak acknowledges the gravity of the social problems of late Soviet society that are implicitly gendered, including domestic violence, alcoholic husbands, depression, and PTSD from the war.

Pahutiak’s story, while quite brief, may appear on the surface to be a mundane narrativization of a disabled veteran’s day, but a closer reading reveals how she brings careful attention to everyday life, and in this case, the life of an individual suffering from the inadequate forms of care within a failing Soviet state. This is evidenced through her descriptions not only of Hrytsko’s struggles, but also built into the city and living spaces, as the narrator describes:

the street was to be demolished, and in its place tall brick blocks of flats would be built. The homeowners said ‘screw it’ and had stopped painting their window frames and patching their picket fences. ‘Misery,’ Hryts yawned, and his heart tightened as he felt the black illness approaching. The last time, it had knocked him to the pavement so hard he needed stitches on his head. (Pahutiak 270).

Again, Pahutiak builds Hrytsko’s afflictions into the environment, as he observes the changing urban landscape with buildings being demolished and rebuilt, to his ever-present “black illness” which has in the past, also caused him, like the buildings themselves, to fall to the earth. To return to Gordon’s notion of haunting— the spectral in this context emerges through the built environment, as, even despite its neglect, it continues to change and move, remind its subjects of the fragility of their social state.

“To Find Yourself in a Garden” ends with Hrytsko’s visit to the home of a dying friend, Mykoltso, whom he hears about from another friend while he is panhandling on a train. When he arrives, he observes how “Mykoltso’s limbs were bloated, almost blue,”
as when he “pulled back the blanket that partly covered him” he observes “his shining swollen legs” (Pahutiak 270-271). yet even on his deathbed he reminds Hyrtsko to “take care of your shoes…if you don’t fix’em, watch out, you’ll need to throw them away.” He continues, “I know that you’re not looking at the ground, and it’s carrying you…” again reminding the reader of Hyrtsko’s fixation on the built environment rather than on his body and mobility. In this scene, the narrative shifts to show him caring for the needs of this dying friend, who asks him to play him a song on the harmonica, after which Mykoltso “sobbed like a child,” telling Hyrtsko to “live at my place. I’ll die, then I’ll give you the house and Bosko51…whether you’re stupid or blessed, ain’t nothin’ like your own home. It’s your sister, and wife, and mother. And I’m gonna die soon” (Pahutiak 271). The house, in this sense, is “feminized” to stand as a source of caretaking, and comes to represent and fulfill Hyrtsko’s unmet needs—he is the subject and survivor of a crumbling state. As he lies awake listening to the dog and his friend breathe, he observes how “the wind rose with rain…the walls shuddered.” He thinks to himself, “It’ll knock us over yet,” but, as the narrator reminds the reader, “he didn’t know that old houses stand strong.” We return with Hyrtsko to the garden at the train station from the story’s first line, where he thinks of how the wind must be tearing “off all the apples,” yet, he hopes to himself, “may it not break the branches… on the other side of the wall, it doesn’t blow so hard.” (Pahutiak 272). Despite the story’s emphasis on the structural and institutional neglect of late Soviet Ukraine, Pahutiak concluded on a hopeful note, speaking to what is, for late Soviet Ukrainian citizens, an uncertain future.

**Conclusion: “The other side of the wall”**

51 Mykoltso’s dog.
To return to Khrushchev’s failed promise of “communism in twenty years”—there is a viable and even palatable moment of optimism, intended to unite a post-Stalinist USSR by attempting to meet their physical needs for adequate housing through the construction of Khrushchyovka. The irony of this promise lies in what, time and again, stands out as the Soviet Union’s death knell—the reliance on cheap and expedient solutions that ultimately disguise an infrastructure that has long been fractured, the burden of which is borne by Soviet citizens, many of whom have lived through decades of violence, neglect, and trauma. Yet, for many Soviets, these built living spaces, fragile though they were, offered new forms of freedom that came to represent the Thaw period and, ultimately, perestroika. As Svetlana Alexievich describes in *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*,

The pitiful Khrushchyovka kitchenette, nine to twelve square meters (if you’re lucky!), and on the other side of a flimsy wall, the toilet. Your typical Soviet floorplan. For us, the kitchen is not just where we cook, it’s a dining room, a guest room, an office, a soapbox. A space for group therapy sessions…. That’s where perestroika really took place. 1960s dissident life is the kitchen life. Thanks, Khrushchev! He’s the one who led us out of the communal apartments; under his rule we got our own private kitchens where we could criticize the government and, most importantly, not be afraid, because in the kitchen you were already among friends. (Alexievich 18).

In many ways, as Alexievich observes, the establishment of the Khrushchyovka marked the beginning of a new world for many Soviet citizens, one that opened possibilities for new ways of living, being, and belonging—although not without problems.
In my consideration of this emerging world, through which the birth pangs of perestroika are made clear, I have focused on the short stories of Bichuya and Pahutiak—two of the few women prose writers in Ukraine during this period—to bring this transitional moment to life. While neither necessarily centers gender in these narratives, nor speaks directly to gendered violence, I demonstrate the extent to which they reveal how systems of power structured everyday life. In drawing from a queer feminist framework by including the works of Haraway, Rubin, and Gordon, I show how Bichuya and Pahutiak’s stories, through their emphasis on the political workings of the everyday, and moreover, the extent to which these structures of power relied on the labor, subjugation, and domination of women. The gendered expectations of Soviet Ukrainian citizen, as subjects of domineering apparatuses of power, were instrumentalized to preserve the Soviet state (or at least to attempt to do so). In using a queer feminist framework, I lay bare not only the ways in which Soviet systems and institutions harmed Ukrainian women in particular (while professing to help them), but also, more broadly, the extent to which these oppressive structures are built in to the everyday, remaining long beyond the perpetrator’s death (in this case, Stalin). It is through the entanglements of built, “natural,” and imagined worlds, performed through subject’s bodies and lives, that we can begin to see more clearly how oppressive power is operationalized, and, with any luck, as Pahutiak metaphorizes as “the other side of the wall,” we can begin to imagine and build better, more equitable worlds.
CHAPTER 4

UKRAINE’S GLOBAL CONTINUITY: ETHNICITY AND VIOLENT HISTORIES IN THE POETRY, PROSE, AND VISUAL ART OF THE DIASPORA

“I have never been a diaspora—I was a Ukrainian outside Ukraine. And I can do anything.”
—Emma Andijewska

Introduction: The End of Homo sovieticus

In a January 1998 Pizza Hut commercial airing in North America and Europe (but not Russia), a family dining in a Moscow Pizza Hut argues over the legacy of former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. The father, after spotting Gorbachev dining with his granddaughter at a nearby table, says to his family, “it’s Gorbachev,” to which the son turns around and, with awe, confirms, “it is Gorbachev.” The two then proceed to debate the state of the nation:

“Because of him, we have economic confusion!”
“Because of him, we have opportunity!”
“Because of him, we have political instability!”
“Because of him, we have freedom!”
“Complete chaos!”
“Hope!”
“Political instability!”

Finally, the grandmother interrupts to end the debate by adding, “because of him, we have many things…like Pizza Hut.” The family enthusiastically smiles and nods in agreement. One by one, followed by the rest of the Pizza Hut patrons, they stand and,
raising their pizza in a toast, shout, “To Gorbachev!” The camera cuts to Gorbachev, humbly accepting the praise. The voiceover concludes in English, "Sometimes, nothing brings people together better than a nice hot pizza from Pizza Hut."

In a 2019 Foreign Policy article, Paul Musgrave notes that the commercial was an attempt by Gorbachev—less than well-liked among Russians at the time—to raise money and “make a comeback in Russian politics.” Although the amount Gorbachev received is classified, Musgrave estimates that it would likely be a seven-digit figure by today’s standards. The ad’s (exclusively) Western viewers were not only reminded that the newly “post-Soviet world” (so to speak), despite intergenerational disagreement on the state of its political and economic landscape, was beginning to imagine its own future—a marker of democracy’s birth and the concomitant processes of liberalization. Viewers would, moreover, be able to agree that this once feared, volatile, and bleak landscape had been eased through its relationship with the West, with fast-food pizza punctuating this liberation. I begin with this example as emblematic of the ways in which the Soviet Union’s collapse was at once celebrated and misunderstood in the West—its remaining citizens becoming legible through its acceptance and (quite literal) consumption of neoliberal values.

In its earliest and most optimistic stages, perestroika signified the Soviet Union’s attempt to imagine—and ultimately create—a viable and sustainable future for the country while retaining state socialism. It represented, in many ways, a genuine belief on the part of Soviet leadership that that the state could, through sufficient and intentional infrastructural measures, revitalize its citizens’ faith not only in the hope and promise of Sovietism, but also in sustaining its moral continuity: that communism could and would
be forever. Such belief for citizens, as Alexi Yurchak emphasizes, was part of the extent to which Sovietism, and state socialism more generally, requires acknowledging the relationship between the ideological and the everyday. This includes, "the very real humane values, ethics, friendships, and creative possibilities that the reality of socialism afforded—often in spite of the state’s proclaimed goals” (8). For Soviet citizens, the realities of their lived experiences were not equal in measure to the ideological frameworks of the Soviet state. The legacies of the USSR’s near-seventy-year investment in producing and sustaining particular forms of subjectivity among its citizens remained inscribed in the contours of the everyday, as Svetlana Alexievich details in Secondhand Time:

Seventy-plus years in the Marxist-Leninist laboratory gave rise to a new man: 

_Homo sovieticus_. Some see him as a tragic figure, others call him a _sovok_.\(^52\) I feel like I know this person; we’re very familiar, we’ve lived side by side for a long time. I am this person. And so are my acquaintances, my closest friends, my parents. For a number of years, I traveled throughout the former Soviet Union—_Homo sovieticus_ isn’t just Russian, he’s Belarusian, Turkmen, Ukrainian, Kazakh. Although we now live in separate countries and speak different languages, you couldn’t mistake us for anyone else. (3)

Inextricable from this thrust into the global arena are the movements and mingling of bodies—their resistances, creations, expansions, and assimilations. The “building” of

\(^{52}\) According to Alexievich—_sovok_ is a pejorative term derived from the word for “dustpan” and refers to those who adhere to Soviet values, attitudes, and behaviors. Also used to describe the Soviet Union itself. (3)
*Homo sovieticus*, or the New Soviet Person, was indeed an intentional, structural component of the Soviet ethos—envisioned to create a new communist society, naturalized and mythologized through powerful narratives of integration and belonging to a greater whole. As Alexievich emphasizes, this imaginary transcended (or attempted to transcend) a singular vision of what this “new person” might look like, limited not merely to a Russian identity and language (in theory), but aspiring to unite peoples from all nations, languages, and cultures through its objective of at once championing, leveling, and erasing differences among embodied identities. It was through these narratives and processes that uniquely Soviet configurations of power emerged. Equally emerging were particular forms and expressions of Soviet subjectivity—expressions that were intended to be not only extensions of communism’s promised inevitability, but also the physiological apparatus of the state itself. Gender and gendered Soviet subjectivity is a powerful component for recognizing the extent to which bodies were operationalized to establish and secure power for the state through their engagements with material and immaterial structures of belonging—coded and moralized as distinctive Soviet institutions. Likewise, it is within the embodied representations of such deployments, including the performances and subversions of power and subjectivity, that I locate a shift in soon-to-be ex-Soviets’ recognition of political and economic transformation. My focus on Ukraine emphasizes a national and post-Soviet context that readily (and continually) sought to unmoor itself from its Russian oppressor. In this regard, I examine the extent to which imperialism and coloniality have shaped Ukrainians’ responses to these histories and mythologies within and beyond its national context.

53 Most often codified as “man”—women were included and considered “equal” legally and theoretically, although not in actuality.
My consideration of social formations and structuring of intimacy and belonging is indebted to the work of queer and Black feminists, including Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Jennifer C. Nash (among many others) who have—through multi- and interdisciplinary means—examined and critiqued the fraught relationship between embodied subjectivity and forms of state and political violence. My intervention positions Ukrainian (and East European) feminisms as not merely part of a transnational feminist discourse and praxis, but also deepens engagement with gendered, racial, and ethnic difference as critical analytics in determining engagement with state apparatuses of power. In *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*, Jennifer C. Nash responds to the siloing of intersectional and transnational feminisms, noting how

These varied interventions mark important engagements with the racial politics of transnationalism’s institutionalization and reveal one of the key strategies through which transnationalism and intersectionality have been kept separate:

transnationalism is tethered to nation, intersectionality is tethered to race, as if nation and race are wholly separate sites of analysis. (96)

This connection between the intersectional and the transnational is especially recognizable when considering questions of legibility and visibility: what kinds of bodies and subjectivities allow one to be politically legible? I consider East European, and particularly Ukrainian, contexts to be urgent for recognizing the extent to which state practices—as mechanisms not only for shaping social belonging but also for controlling and managing the production of the nation itself—are tied to colonialist paradigms through national myth-making.
There is a distinction between the legacies of white supremacy, capitalism, and settler colonialism in the U.S. and their manifestations in a post-socialist context. For instance, in the context of LGBTQ+ rights, some scholars of Eastern Europe have critiqued the application of Jasbir Puar’s concept of homonationalism. Roman Leksikov and Dafna Rafchok argue that post-socialist contexts have little in common with the settler-colonial contexts (like the U.S. and Israel) through which the term emerged. They, instead, offer the term “homo-neoliberalism” as a way of nuancing some of the political and ideological conditions of the post-socialist world (29). Emily Channell-Justice, on the other hand, while acknowledging the problems Leksikov and Rafchok articulate, includes Puar in the Ukrainian case by responding to her assertion that homonationalism materializes when “some homosexual bodies [are seen] as worthy of protection by nation-states, a constitutive and fundamental reorientation of the relationship between the state, capitalism, and sexuality.” In Ukraine, as Channell-Justice considers, “we do not see that some LGBT+ bodies are worth protecting; rather, we see that all LGBT+ bodies are only sometimes worth protecting—only when Ukraine is making a claim on a European identity” (88). Considering these definitional problems and limitations, I resist a superimposition of Western liberatory frameworks in former Soviet world and I agree that the presence of both nationalism and colonialism in Ukraine requires more precise and localized tools for its reckoning. I oppose a framing of Ukrainian nationalism that reproduces a colonialist “othering” through oppositional “good” versus “bad” forms of nationalism and nation building—with Western nationalism implicitly viewed as “progressive,” “LGBTQ friendly,” and non-Western nationalisms as symptomatic of an

endemic backwardness, or “homophobic,” “traditional,” “authoritarian.” Leksikov and Rachok describe this in their discussion of the recent derivative term, *vyshyvatnik*, or “bad Ukrainian nationalist.” This, they argue, is another way of constructing a dichotomous “progressive west” and “backwards east.” I would add, this is another way of disqualifying so-called “second world” epistemologies, thus privileging Eurocentric, and thus colonialist, framings. In the context of gender and sexuality, such framings produce narrow, incomplete imaginaries around these embodied categories, which are themselves epistemological sites.

The intersecting conditions of gender, sexuality, legibility, and administrative violence frame my consideration of the significance of embodiment and gendered subjectivity in the late Soviet context for wider queer feminist analyses of subjectivity and state violence. I consider ways in which bodies are expected to perform “successfully” for the state through social and political narratives of being and belonging. Such performances are not unique to Soviet and state socialist contexts, but part of the broader ways in which structural power can be identified and addressed. Soviet heteropatriarchal power was deployed through the organization and regulation of bodies via Soviet identity formation and mythologies of belonging—and subsequently their subversion through literary, filmic, and artistic endeavors during perestroika and glasnost.

In this regard, I position late Soviet Ukraine as an important intervention in transnational feminist scholarship, not only as part of the former Eastern Bloc, but more specifically

---

55 *Vyshyvatnik*, according to Leksikov and Rachok, is a neologism that emerged in the Ukrainian LGBTI community—*vyshy* referring to an ethnic and cultural Ukrainian identity, and *vatnik* referring to a nostalgia for the Soviet Union or equally, a pro-Stalin, authoritarian politics (40). They reject this term, considering its potential to participate in “social racism.” I agree that this exhibits ethnocentric prejudices, but the racism in this context requires further complication, so as to articulate the processes of racialization unique to CEE contexts.
(and contemporaneously), Ukraine’s historical position as an object of political control and domination. I expand the circulation of these narratives to include the formations of Ukraine’s diaspora, which emerged out of the immigration of exiled and displaced persons (DPs) throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I argue that the literary contributions of émigré and diasporic writers reveals Ukraine’s global situatedness, and equally, the extent to which Ukrainian writers outside of Ukraine were (and continue to be) active participants in its political, historical, and cultural salience.

The discourses around power, particularly in Western academic research on the USSR, have long relied on uneven narratives regarding intention and planning on the part of Soviet leadership. In *The Things of Life: Materiality in Late Soviet Russia*, Alexey Golubev describes the official Soviet writing on “the new Soviet man,” which became the “foundations of Soviet pedagogy, cultural politics, or quotidian party work” (20). This official writing insisted that the socialist state “not only provided working masses with unlimited access to spiritual wealth, but also made them immediate creators of culture” (qtd. in Golubev 20). Golubev, however, refers to Michael Heller’s *Cogs in the Wheel: The Formation of Soviet Man*, which was published in 1985—in tandem with the beginnings of perestroika and glasnost. Heller, an émigré Russian historian, argues that the efforts to construct a “Soviet Man” indicated premeditated, organized power shaping “human raw material” into “passive cogs.” Regarding *Homo sovieticus* and Heller’s metaphor of the “cog,” Golubev critiques the use of the term “cog” as a descriptor of an “ideal communist personality” and resists the assumption that “Soviet leaders were engaged in an intentional and planned campaign of dehumanizing the Soviet population”
Instead, he uses Heller’s analysis as an entry point to consider “Soviet cultural fantasies of control over the material world” rather than limiting his analysis to what Golubev refers to as the “productiveness language of Soviet culture” (20). The emergence of dangerous assumptions concerning Soviet citizens’ passive subjectivity regarding their own participation in political and social domains is visible through the materiality of the everyday. Ukrainian women’s depictions of these embodied acts and orientations amidst the political, intellectual, and cultural shifts of perestroika reveals how gendered bodies (especially in the context of coloniality) were not merely passively instrumentalized by the state, but organized through structures, institutions, and narratives of belonging. I consider not only the material conditions and cultures of the late Soviet period (specifically perestroika), but also how gendered bodies participate in this materiality through sexual, productive, and reproductive expectations and performances. The Ukrainian case, moreover, provides a unique entry point due to, as Oleksandra Wallo characterizes, its peripheral position in contrast to the Soviet Russian metropole. This peripherality constituted both Ukraine and other Soviet Republics as well, not only as a geographic and ethnopolitical distinction but also included forms of violence specifically targeting ethnicity, language, and culture.

In Chapters One, Two, and Three, I examined gendered subjectivity’s representation through Ukrainian women’s poetic, cinematic, and prosaic contributions during the late Soviet period of perestroika. I explored how such representations reveal new, more subversive imaginings of systemic and state deployments of power, reflecting,

56 I am not implying that Soviet leadership did not intentionally instigate and enforce violent, oppressive systems—they clearly did, especially under Stalin. However, I oppose singular narratives concerning how power was operationalized through Soviet citizens, and moreover, the assumption that they were merely passive subjects.
in many ways, the rapidly changing political, environmental, and cultural conditions initiated by perestroika and glasnost. How, I ask, are the unique concerns that emerged in Ukrainian women’s representations of embodiment during this period—including their ecological, sexual, reproductive, and labored vulnerabilities—entangled in contemporary discourses of biopower and the material structures of belonging? In this sense, the shifting feminist consciousness that emerged in the late Soviet socialist milieu shares its investments in the structures and movements that constitute everyday life. In this final chapter, I turn to the concurrent writing from the Ukrainian diaspora as a way of not only demonstrating the global reach of this watershed moment of perestroika, but also as a way of considering how the conditions and experiences of dislocation and exile, as well as those of second-generation children of Ukrainian immigrants, are also in conversation with questions of gendered and ethnic subjectivities, the collapsing Soviet state, and mythologies undergirding Ukrainian national identity and histories.

**Beyond the Periphery: The Women of the New York Group**

My turn to Ukraine’s diaspora broadens the geographic and linguistic frameworks under discussion, considering not only the relationship between gendered subjectivity and the Soviet state, but also Ukrainian and East European feminisms’ situatedness and possibilities for intervening in global and transnational feminist discourses regarding power, subjectivity, and the state. I do this in two parts: first considering the dimensions of exilic representations, and secondly through the more markedly feminist work of first-generation Ukrainian Canadian women writers. Specifically, I concentrate on the visual art and poetry of Emma Andijewska (1931-) in her collection *Vigils* (*Vigiliii*, 1987) and Vira Vovk’s (1926-) multi-generic text, *Carnival* (*Karnaval*, 1986). Included as well is
the early work of Ukrainian Canadian author Janice Kulyk Keefer (1952-), who, in her short story “Unseen, the Cuckoo Sings at Dawn” (1986), narrativizes the entrance of a newly displaced person (a “DP”) into Toronto’s Ukrainian community. While Andijewska and Vovk were both born in the Ukrainian SSR, immigrating to Germany and Brazil, respectively, Kulyk Keefer is a first-generation daughter of Ukrainian immigrants. Through textual and visual mediums, these three authors demonstrate, and to varying and intergenerational degrees, an embodied émigré experience. Kulyk Keefer, for instance, at the beginning of her short story, likens her émigré protagonist, Pani Zozoolya, \(^{57}\) to a bird:

> Who could ever have discovered even the simple truths about Pani Zozoolya: why she’d come here to Toronto; how she’d learned her tipsy English; and where she disappeared to after her last performance? An actress, and what’s more, a specialist in dramatic monologue, she treated every question as rhetorical. *Zozulia* means “cuckoo bird” in Ukrainian and indeed, there was a true resemblance between the actress and that poetical bird—brash, and at the same time, melancholy; flagrantly irresponsible, yet charming; egotistic to within a shade of the ridiculous. (96)

Through movement and language, the émigré body, for Kulyk Keefer, becomes narrativized as part of new landscape, at once integrated and untethered. The metaphorization this such experience, moreover, speaks to the liminality of belonging—a process of both being and becoming.

---

\(^{57}\) “Pani” is the Ukrainian word for “Mrs.” or “Ms.” and “Zozoolya” is a play on the Ukrainian word for “cuckoo bird”—“zozulia.” This is presumably not her actual name, but rather a nickname used among the émigré community.
I argue that literature (and the practices of storytelling), through its formations and contestations of history and memory, individual and collective, can resist the insistence on biologized categories of belonging. Such an approach is especially significant in Ukraine’s contemporary context, as Russia’s war on Ukraine has brought more clearly to the fore a need for further critiques of ethnonationalism and racism in the region. In *Haunting and the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War*, Grace M. Cho, drawing on the work of Avery Gordon,\(^\text{58}\) considers the extent to which “hauntings” (in the Korean context this manifests in the form of a ghost knows as “yanggongju”—an “embodiment of trauma” in the figure of a woman) move across diasporic generations as a “constellation of affective bodies transmitting and receiving trauma” (Cho 41). Trauma is, according to Cho, an “experience that is folded into the body but never quite reaches cognition” and it is through the performance of the body that the experience is allowed to emerge (46). Cho’s figure of the ghost—or diasporic “hauntings”—is a useful prism for recognizing how lineages of trauma, especially war and genocide, become folded into the everyday lives of those who have escaped these atrocities. They are, in other words, reproduced in new ways—as Cho would say, as if a kind of haunting. These ghosts transcend both generation and location, and in my consideration of Andijewska, Vovk, and Kulyk Keefer—three intergenerational authors and artists living in distinct parts of the world—I am less interested in their shared (and often biologized and essentialized) ethnic identities as Ukrainian, but rather in their respective representations of the ways in which embodied legacies of displacement—particularly as connected through their “escape” from Sovietism—forge and contour their

experiences outside of this national and political space as an independent Ukraine began to take shape. In her 1995 article, “‘Coming across Bones': Historiographic Ethnofiction,” Kulyk Keefer (whose writing explores ethnicity extensively) refers to a “literary ethnicity,” that is, “the imaginative exploration and inscription of ethnic experience” (“Coming across Bones”). As I explain in more depth later in the chapter, I build on this concept of a “literary ethnicity” to consider the extent to which literary engagements with and inscriptions of shared (and disparate) ethnonational identities denaturalize the presumed category of ethnicity, both as a biologized paradigm and as a geopolitical marker.

Little critical work has been done in English on the contributions of Andijewska and Vovk, both of whom were part of the New York Group of Poets—a group of Ukrainian émigré writers—many of whom were living in exile resulting from war and displacement—working outside of Ukraine (not necessarily in New York). As Maria G. Rewakowicz observes in “Periphery versus Center: The Poetics of Exile,” the project of the New York Group emerged through the distinctive experience of exile: “This relatively early emigration may explain why the group embraced it exilic condition as something stimulating rather than stifling—and turned to Western literary sources for inspiration” (42). To return to Wallo’s assessment regarding women writers in the late Soviet and early post-Soviet periods, the Ukrainian context, unlike its Russian counterpart, is distinguished by its peripheral status. Ukrainian literary production during this period of transition, likewise, reflected writers’ awareness of their own peripherality, especially those who were living in exile. Despite this turn, however, the group’s unifying factor was its use of the Ukrainian language, as Rewakowicz continues:
By choosing the Ukrainian language as their main—if not exclusive—medium for artistic expression, they cultivated a link with the literary past of their own country and, by doing so, necessarily placed themselves outside the mainstream cultural space of their adopted homelands. Forced to negotiate linguistic, transnational, and transcultural issues in their creative endeavors, the poets unavoidably thrust themselves into liminal positions. (42-43)

For Rewakowicz, it is the linguistic unity of this group that allows them to speak within this liminality of diaspora, and moreover, it was through this shared displacement that they were able to “transcend the periphery” (43). In exploring the contributions of these three writers, I begin with Andijewska and Vovk by examining their roles as two of the seven founding members (the other five were men) of the New York Group, focusing particularly on their writing and visual art during the last Soviet period. While their work during this period does not overtly address political or national questions related to Ukraine or the Soviet Union (and neither necessarily believed this to be their obligation as émigré writers), both have been recognized by Ukraine as part of their national literary canon through the reception of its highest national literary award, the Shevchenko National Prize—Vovk in 2008 and Andijewska in 2018. Moreover, in using the Ukrainian language to engage existential and surrealist aesthetics in their work prior to 1992, I argue that this work is readable as subversive, political contributions.

Both Andijewska and Vovk’s departures from Ukraine and the Soviet Union occurred during World War II: both were the result of Soviet attacks on their homes and families. Andijewska was born in Ukraine’s eastern region of Donetsk—an oblast that has historically been viewed as an industrial and scientific center of Ukraine (and the
Soviet Union more broadly), and both her parents were scientists by trade. Because she suffered from different ailments throughout her childhood, Andijewska did not consistently attend school, and was, for the most part, educated at home. Due to her morbidities, the family moved frequently—to Vyshhorod (in Kyiv Oblast) in 1937, and to Kyiv in 1939. As chemist and inventor, her father was fatally shot by Soviet authorities to prevent him from sharing his discoveries with the Germans, and because of this, Andijewska’s mother and her siblings fled to Germany in 1943, where they lived in an English occupied zone in Berlin before eventually settling in Munich in 1949. Her oeuvre—which includes poetry, prose, and visual art—is often described as surrealist, and incorporates elements of mysticism, spirituality, and even Buddhist principles.

Like Andijewska, Vovk also incorporates mixed genres, languages, and materials into her work, including music, poetry, prose, and visual art. Born Vira Selianska in Boryslav, Galicia (western Ukraine) in 1926, as a teenager she fled the Soviet occupation of Lviv with her family, and completed her secondary education in Dresden, where she witnessed her father’s death the February 1945 Bombing of Dresden by Allied troops. She eventually became a student at University of Tübingen, where she studied Music History and Comparative Literature, and after emigrating with her mother to Portugal in 1949 and ultimately to Brazil, she completed a PhD in German Studies at the University of Rio de Janeiro. She has since lived and worked in Brazil as a professor, writer, and translator.

Andijewska and Vovk’s creative contributions are not only representative of the goals and project of the New York Group, but they also engage multi-genre, groundbreaking stylistic and aesthetic approaches. While Andijewska never makes direct
reference to their exilic condition, and Vovk does so only indirectly, Rewakowicz nonetheless positions their poetic consciousnesses, specifically Vovk’s, as emerging from and reliant on the “harmonious coexistence of these two countries.” In this regard, she argues, “this tendency is deeply rooted in the exilic sensibility. This contrapuntal awareness of simultaneous dimensions (to use Said’s words) undoubtedly enriches [Vovk’s] vision and widens perspectives, but it also injects a sense of discomfort and indeterminacy” (55). Both Andijewska and Vovk’s exilic perestroika writing outside the Soviet Ukrainian context conceptualizes this moment of transition as a global phenomenon; one that engages the embodied experiences, anxieties, and memories of the displaced. This was, in many ways, a continuation of a Ukrainian poetic tradition. As George G. Grabowicz describes, the New York Group “created the first poetry and poetics of Ukrainian modernism,” due in many ways to their ability to write about “Ukrainianness” outside of Soviet censorship. They did this “through such features as formal and semantic openness and experimentations, thematic breadth (but with a special predilection for the erotic and the urban), a genuine…catholicity, and…a firm conviction about the poet’s autonomy in the face of society.” Such innovation, Grabowicz adds, demonstrates “a palpable sense of belonging to a continuum of Ukrainian poetry, of treating paths and roads that, however tortuous, led back to the homeland” (159). The confluence of Ukraine and “elsewhere” is reflected through the works of these Women émigré writers (including second-generation writers like Kulyk Keefer) writing between the boundaries of histories, national imaginaries, and their own embodied, lived experiences.
Despite the dearth of scholarly research on Andijewska’s writing in English or Ukrainian, the sweep of her work is prolific, including poetry, prose, and visual art. Most of her critics have narrowed in on the “existential” and surrealist quality of her work, and, moreover, as Rewakowicz observes, “Andijewska seems to be oblivious to the issues of reception. Hers is a world of self-contained poetic constructs, a world in which the word reigns supreme, even though dislocation, surprise, ambiguity, which are so conspicuous in her oeuvre, frequently undercut the logical foundations of that word.” It is due to her perceived fidelity to language that Rewakowicz positions Andijewska firmly as a modernist—“the playfulness of her poetry is the byproduct of the game she seems to play with language itself” (111). It was also late in the period of perestroika that she began to paint as well, and likewise, Andijewska’s paintings participate in this “linguistic game” through her visual exploration of surrealism. This is evident, for instance, in one of her early paintings from this period, “Two in a Gondola” (“Dvoie V Gondoli,” 1991), where we see two figures, as the title suggests, rowing in a gondola. The proportions of the figures’ forms are exaggerated, with their large heads and hands making up most of their bodies. They are, in some ways, indiscernible from the gondola itself, playfully and artfully distorting her viewer’s sense of the relationship between bodies and the material world.
Despite her often-perceived ambiguity, Andijewska’s work reflects an exploration of a movement between the spaces of memory, trauma, and grief. This is evident in the juxtaposition of death and the natural world—and in a way that is often disembodied. It is, in some sense, the inability to anchor her poetic interventions within embodied experiences that give it its disorienting quality. She is, moreover, one of the few Ukrainian poets to write about homosexuality during the Soviet period (albeit outside of the Soviet Union)—as evidenced in her 1961 collection *Fish and Dimension (Ryba i rozmir)* in which she includes a cycle of homoerotic poems, “Dionysia” (“Dionisii”) presented as translations of two fictional poets, Aristidimos Likhnos and Barubu
Bdrumbhu. In a letter to Andijewska, fellow New York Group poet Bohdan Boychuk describes how several of her peers in the émigré poet community were scandalized by the collection:

[They] were almost jumping out of anger, excommunicating you from literature, and Kostiuk, the archpriest, said: “Well, how is it possible that a man apparently tosses his rotten phallus from hand to hand, etc.” Well, I sat there with satisfaction and only from time to time poured oil on troubled waters highly praising the collection. But Halyna and Humenna were jumping even higher… Afterwards, when Lasovsky’s son read your collection and lost his innocence, Lasovsky with great outrage wrote an apostolic epistle to “Svoboda,” questioning your morality… In other words, your book became a legend (qtd. in Rewakowicz 144).

Rewakowicz sees the inclusion of the erotic in Andijewska (and other NYG members’) poetry as part of the existential and surrealist sweep of her work—“assenting to life even in death.” By placing eroticism at the center, she is able to use it “subversively as a toll in [her] rebellion against the aesthetic entrenched within the émigré community in which they were active” (Rewakowicz 139). There is clear continuity between Andijewska’s early and later work in the 1980s and beyond. Her exploration and integration of visual art—in its linguistic inventiveness and subversion—to her poetry and prose during the transitional years of perestroika engages with existential questions of through its dissonance. While I see such dissonance as a form of reconciliation between Andijewska and her own lived experiences of displacement and loss, she nevertheless brings a playful exuberance to her work, never limiting it to a singular interpretation.
In a March 2021 interview with Andijewska in *Ukraïner*, the interviewer Olga Voitovich observes how “life has always taken something from her: her father, her health, her native language, her homeland. These significant events that filled Emma Andijewska’s life not only broke her, but they also shaped her.” In this regard, Andijewska’s work negotiates these spaces of grief, building meaning into her world most acutely through her engagement with the natural world. The reader is invited to peer into images that are void of “humanness,” yet remain animated as themselves forms of life, defying the constraints of time and space. For instance, she begins “Vigil XXXIX” with:

Ніч не рухнеться й, наче в прірву, їде.

Без коліщат – у виміри обтічні.

Вже безпредметним стало й нелетюче,

Зник фюзеляж, висить шасі із вати,

Night does not fall and, as if into an abyss, moves.

Without wheels— in streamlined measurements.

Already without a subject, constant and flightless

the fuselage gone, a hanging chassis of cotton (1-4)

Similarly, in “Vigil XL,” she explores the relationship between “light” and “darkness” in a way that is disconnected or absent from human life:

Ні світла, ані кроків на майдані.

Ніч – наглухо – у володіння власні.

59 My translation.
Лише душа, як верховіття в лісі, –
Все глибше й – далі – від тандит щоденних.

Не місяць – еліпс. Крапле белладонна.
Ще мить, – і шкірка зовнішнього лусне.
Позаду – проминальне і облесне.
Єдиний дзвін, що бамка щогодини.

No light, no footsteps on the Square.
Night - hermetically - in possession of oneself.
The only soul, like the top of trees-
Everything deeper—and further— from everyday life.

No moon - an ellipse. Drops of belladonna.
Another instant and the outer skin cracks.
Behind – prominent and shining.
Only a bell that rings every hour. (1-8)

In both examples, through their exploration of the interplay between not only light and dark but also the irony of human absence in the “built” world (“no footsteps on the Square”), Andijewska’s Vigils play with their reader’s existential imaginings. The lack of humanness or human presence becomes the subject of the poem, moving away from the notion of “everyday life”—a poetic quality that was highly regarded in Soviet realism—to a world that could (and perhaps will) exist despite its emergence through a human world. Although subtle, such exclusions of the human, for Andijewska, reveal her
resistance to a poetics that insists on its own morality. Here, rather, she is asking her reader to imagine a world that is unwelcoming to supposed moral boundaries themselves.

Like Andijewska, Vovk’s work also explores the intersections of visual art and literature, pushing the boundaries of genre, technique, and audience, although she departs from Andijewska though her engagement with moral and religious questions. Vovk’s 1986 work, Carnival [Karnival], is, in many ways, an experiment with the possibilities of translation, wherein she not only includes Ukrainian and Portuguese languages, but draws from her position as a Ukrainian living and writing in the Brazilian context to consider the liminality of émigré life. She does this by incorporating and responding to some of the abstract impressionist paintings of Jurij Solovij (1921-2007), who was affiliated with the New York Group, and whose work also engages existential themes, including gender, reproduction, and death. He explores through his art some of the traumatic dimensions of immigrant and exilic experiences and knowledges. Vovk’s inclusion of Solovij’s work emphasizes such representations of embodiment that often play with the idea of iconography or the sacred, as visible in both his Woman in the Mirror [Zhinka v dzerkali] and Tryptic of Life [Tryptykh zhyttya]. The images are accompanied by short prose texts or vignettes, both in Ukrainian and in Portuguese, and in so doing, she animates the ways
in which émigré life is shaped and textured through the work of translation.

In the vignette "Woman in the Mirror," Vovk describes a woman named Sylvia, presumably a Brazilian ballerina, who, gazing into a mirror, sifting through her memory, does not recognize herself. She describes:

Я, Сільвія, відома балерина, підходжу до вузького, довгого дзеркала мага Коневої шафи, де висить моїх двісті сукенок. Бачу молоду ще жінку в золотому костюмі: спідниця з тяжкого атласу багато нашивана топазами, корсет двома листками щільно прилягає до стану, звідки підноситься довга, смуглява шия з гордою головою. Я відчуваю себе вкоріненою в той пейзаж за вікнами, що ви паровує спеку, той великоміський гамір, де знаходжу
душу своїх предків, які певно вмирали на асфальті, танцюючи й співаючи самба. Однак, я пам'ятаю тільки свою матір, яка померла сімнадцять років тому. З обличчя в дзеркалі дивляться на мене голодною кішкою двое допитливих карих очей, неначе хотіли б виссати з мене якісь таїни. Слуга в темносиній уніформі відхиляє порт'єру й відчиняє мені двері до вінди.

I, Sylvia, a famous ballerina, approach the narrow, long mirror of my wardrobe. I see a young woman in a golden suit: the heavy satin skirt is richly sewn with topaz, the corset with two panels conforms snugly to the waist, from which a long, dark neck with a proud head rises. I feel rooted in the landscape outside the windows, which steams in the heat, the noise of the big city, where I find the soul of my ancestors, who probably died on the asphalt, dancing and singing the samba. However, I only remember my mother, who died seventeen years ago.

From the face in the mirror, two inquisitive brown eyes look at me like a hungry cat, as if they want to suck some secrets out if me.  

(Vovk 17).

In this cycle, the emphasis on Sylvia’s body, and more significantly, on Sylvia’s simultaneous recognition of and disassociation from her own body, participates in Vovk’s narrative exploration of women’s inner-lives. As Yulia Hryhorchuk writes (borrowing from Marko-Robert Stech)—the vignettes themselves are “meditations on women’s identity: moral, religious, and even mystical dilemmas related to loneliness, alienation, yet at the same time reconciliation and understanding of the ‘whimsy’ of individual destiny” (35).

---

60 My translation
61 My translation
Vovk’s speaker, despite not recognizing herself, connects with her world through death—recalling that of her mother’s and imagining the deaths of her ancestors. Sylvia continues by musing about her inability to separate her body from her mind, considering her own “fixedness” in her body and its presumed mortality:

Як це так, що я навіть у сні не спроможна бути іншою особою. Якими таємними нитями моє тіло зв'язане з моєю свідомістю? - На такі питання нема відповіді…- То мое призначення бути Сільвією. Але де я була, коли ще не була со бою? А коли я помру, куди подінеться Сільвія? Чи я затримаю свою свідо мість?

How is it that, even in a dream, I can’t be another person. What are the secret threads through which my body is connected to my consciousness? - There is no answer to such questions…. "That's my destiny to be Sylvia." But where was I when I was not yet in battle? And when I die, where will Sylvia go? Will I delay my consciousness? (18)

For an author like Vovk, who was loyal to her religious beliefs in comparison to her New York Group contemporaries, this vignette expresses an examination of the existential: focused less on God and more on the vulnerability and temporality of the body. Like Andijewska, Vovk’s work in Carnival does not express explicitly feminist ideas, as are seen in Kulyk Keefer’s writing, yet by including it, I highlight the extent to which women writers, writing from a space of loss and exile, through representation of embodiment—in all its limits and contradictions—produces émigré subjectivity. In some ways, this is a production of the self in opposition to one’s history, personal and national. Moreover, in
making *Carnival* bilingual in Ukrainian and Portuguese, Vovk insists on the global significance of her creative and translational contributions. I turn next to the Canadian context, and particularly the work of Kulyk Keefer in the 1980s, to explore in more depth more acutely feminist engagements with the questions around displacement, ethnicity, coloniality, and violence.

**Producing Subjectivities: Ukrainian-Canadian Émigré Writing**

As a second-generation Canadian child of Ukrainian immigrants, much of Kulyk Keefer’s writing throughout the 1980s and 1990s in many ways centralizes, but also complicates, the question of ethnicity. Her work negotiates the boundaries among ethnicity, nationality, and history, as she describes in her article, “‘Coming across Bones': Historiographic Ethnofiction,” regarding her 1996 novel, *The Green Library* “I am currently engaged in writing ethnicity, literally.” Set in 1992, the novel’s Canadian protagonist discovers her Ukrainian ethnic identity and travels to Kyiv to learn about her family history, learning that her maternal grandmother, a poet, was executed at the Babyn Yar massacre in 1941. Similarly, in her 1987 short story, “Unseen, The Cuckoo Sings at Dawn,” an actress from Kyiv, “Pani Zozoolya,” arrives in Toronto, carrying through her immigrant body the weight of history. The narrator observes,

> The how and when and why of her any history book could answer: she’d survived the Nazi occupation in Kiev, German forced labor camps, and ultimate translation from Old World to New on one of those postwar freighters in which dislocated Europeans were crammed thicker than poppy seeds into a strudel. (“Unseen” 96).

Kulyk Keefer anchors ethnicity in the historical, building history into the embodied performances and subjectivities of her characters. In her description of *The Green*
Library’s plot, she emphasizes how the novel’s heroine’s examination of ethnicity “has nothing to do with religious rituals, social customs, cultural traditions, national costume, and cuisine -- those standard markers of ethnicity. Rather, it has to do with history in a twofold sense: personal and public, private and collective” (“Coming Across Bones”). Ethnicity in this regard considers not only the ways in which space and location are instrumentalized and occupied, but also the extent to which narratives are, as Kulyk Keefer suggests, part of a practice of historicization that is twofold: both in the “corrective” by filling in or “embroidering over” what she calls “fallible fiction,” or incomplete narratives; and secondly, “that which feeds and resists narrativization,” or Ukraine’s recent history (in this case, the collapse of the Soviet state). It is also significant that it was the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada that was responsible for preserving Ukrainian documents, literature, and other cultural artifacts through the building of archives, museums, and libraries. This was especially true regarding the documentation of the Holodomor famine from 1932-1933, and the North American diaspora’s insistence to Western leaders not only of its existence, but also of its need to be categorized as genocide. After gaining independence in 1991, it was this cultural bridge between Ukraine and its Canadian diaspora that supplemented Ukraine’s restoration of its own culture.

Kulyk Keefer’s writing of history and ethnicity materializes through the lens of the “corrective”—a profoundly feminist practice, one whose origins can be attributed to the work of Audre Lorde, who uses the term “biomythography” to describe her 1982 work, Zami, which narrativizes her experiences not only as a first-generation daughter of Caribbean immigrants, but also as a Black lesbian coming of age in the 1950s. For Lorde,
“biomythography” captures the entanglements of history, biography, and myth as a way of rewriting the self through the corrective. For her, this is a feminist, embodied project, as she writes in Zami’s “Epilogue:”

The casing of this place had been my home for seven years, the amount of time it takes for the human body to completely renew itself, cell by living cell. And in those years my life had become increasingly a bridge and field of women….

_Zami. A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers._ We carry our traditions with us. Buying boxes of Red Cross Salt and a fresh corn straw broom for my new apartment in Westchester: new job, new house, new living the old in a new way. Recreating in words the women who helped give me substance. (255)

For Lorde, “rewriting” the self in the corrective is not merely telling or claiming one’s own story, it is also a way of creating and recreating the body itself—as it is through bodies (and for Lorde, it is primarily “women’s” bodies) that traditions (and I would add, histories) are carried, transmitted, and spoken. I bridge Lorde’s biomythographic approach to Kulyk Keefer’s discussion of storytelling as a practice of historicization, to consider the ways in which her engagement with the question of ethnicity gives rise to and makes legible to a conceptualization of the “ethnic” beyond its biologized characterizations. This is not to say that familial bonds do not meaningfully shape ethnicity; however, its emphasis reifies an investment in the naturalization of émigré subjectivity as exclusively tied to heredity. The émigré project of rewriting such “fallible fictions” not only locates a more nuanced definition of ethnicity and shared histories, but
it also produces particular ethnic and racialized subjectivities that bring political legibility to “multiculturalism.”

With regard to the Ukrainian-Canadian literary context, scholar and writer Lisa Grekul observes how critical examinations of Ukrainian Canadian literature are not merely explorations of “Ukrainianness” but rather a way to engage with wider debates regarding colonialism, race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity (379). Likewise, in this chapter, I argue that such reexamination of the question of ethnicity in the context of the Ukrainian diaspora is significant because it considers not only the ways in which investments in belonging are often marked by embodied (and thus biologized) assumptions, but also the extent to which the turn to a narrative or literary practice of telling and texturing Ukrainian histories both produces and critiques the emergence of émigré subjectivities. This manufacturing of legibility is, moreover, relevant beyond the Ukrainian diasporic context because it demonstrates the extent to which “ethnicity” itself within the context of settler colonialism becomes a project of political and administrative legibility. Kulyk Keefer’s work engages with the question not only of Ukraine’s transition from Sovietism to independence, but also the ethnonational complexities tied to this transitional moment. As her writing is temporally situated between the end of the Soviet Union and the emergence of more visible critiques of “multiculturalism” in Canadian settler colonial contexts, it provides a rich comparative intersection for considering nation building narratives and practices.

The mythology surrounding “Ukrainianness” in the Canadian context was produced and deployed as a way of legitimizing Ukrainian ethnic identity to the government. In terms of North American practices around immigration and ethnicity—
particularly with white immigrant populations—there were distinct language and practices around assimilation. According to Mary K. Kirtz, in the U.S., Ukrainian immigrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were absorbed more readily into the US “melting pot of whiteness,” often viewed as part of a larger project of “multiculturalism.” However, in the Canadian context, “multicultural” referred to “visible minorities,” which emphasized racialized difference over national origin.

Problematically, national origin was harder to locate for Ukrainians, as many, particularly in the nineteenth century, immigrated from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, including Ruthenia, Bukovina, and Galicia (Kirtz 344). This absence of a unified “origin” shaped Ukrainian immigrants’—many of whom were displaced or exiled—legibility within the Canadian context. Lindy Ledohowski historicizes this federalization of multiculturalism in the late twentieth century, emphasizing the Ukrainian community in Canada’s push for state recognition of multiple ethnic identities in the 1960s and 70s, rather than the “two founding nations”— English and the French colonizers—discourse at the time (68). She observes that the image of a Ukrainian peasant emerged as part of a “founding father” narrative that positioned the labor of Ukrainian peasant pioneers as integral to producing a “great Canada”— a mythology that Ledohowski and other feminist scholars conclude reproduces the same “smatters of ugly colonialism” seen in the two founding nations discourse, thus erasing Aboriginal communities by imagining settlers as “first” peoples.

Considering the complexities surrounding the development of a multiculturalist framework in Canada in the late twentieth century in tandem with the emerging

---

categories of “ethnicities” themselves in the Canadian settler colonial context, women’s Ukrainian Canadian literature emerging in the 1980s engages forms of resistance—not unlike their counterparts in the Ukrainian national context. In other words, women writers and filmmakers in Ukraine produced more legibly subversive responses to Sovietism and authoritarianism, women writers in the diaspora drew upon the shared mythologies of ethnicity to critique and resist the violence of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and misogyny in a North American context. Although these parallels were performed under distinct political circumstances with different stakes, the similarities are particularly visible in terms of how embodied representations of “Ukrainianess” (or their imaginaries) subvert and challenge legibility to the state as particular “ethnic” subjects. To add to Ledohowski’s observation regarding the occlusion, and thus recolonizing, of Aboriginal experiences through the conflation of “ethnicities” in the Canadian context, the writing from Ukrainian Canadian feminist authors in the 1980s re-narrativizes their own history, critiquing and resisting the reproduction of racism and settler colonialism.

The emergence of “ethnic” subjectivity is not merely part of a Canadian settler colonialist project: the categorization of “Ukrainianess” signified a kind of ethnic subjectivity and multiculturalism that, while separate from English and French settlers, still aspired to embody “acceptable” whiteness. Kulyk Keefer’s “Unseen, the Cuckoo Sings at Dawn” suggests the extent to which perestroika and the dissolution of the USSR shaped Ukrainian émigré political imaginaries through diasporic representations of

63 This included to a lesser extent, 1996 novel The Green Library. Although The Green Library was published after the end of the Soviet period, I mention it in my analysis because it captures Keefer’s diasporic entanglements with questions of ethnicity and national identity during Ukraine’s transition to independence, as well as that of colonial and imperial histories of violence in Ukraine.
Soviet memory, tradition, and histories. This shift is not necessarily a direct response to
the Soviet Union’s collapse, but rather, part of a generation of Ukrainian-Canadians who,
as Ukraine opened up, began to interrogate their ancestral origins—many of which had
been borne out of war, genocide, famine, and exile—as they relate to the development of
a “multicultural” consciousness in Canada. For women-identified Ukrainian Canadian
writers, this moment was particularly significant as this was also an opportunity to disrupt
taken-for-granted sexist and heterosexist, as well as colonialist and white supremacist
structures present in diasporic communities—as evident in Kulyk Keefer’s creative non-
fiction, as well as the writing and filmmaking of Marusya Bociurkiw, and poet and
translator Erín Moure, whose works emerged later in the 1990s.

First published in the 1987 collection of Ukrainian-Canadian writing, *Yarmarok: Ukrai
nian Writing in Canada since World War II*—the first published anthology of
Ukrainian writing in Canada—Kulyk Keefer’s “Unseen, the Cuckoo Sings at Dawn”
begins with the aforementioned “Pani Zozoolya’s” arrival in Toronto. Many of the
moving pieces in this short story are relayed through hearsay and gossip within the
émigré community—further revealing the ways in which Kulyk Keefer’s writes the
emergence of histories and mythologies within the diaspora. Members of the Toronto
Ukrainian-Canadian community are about to hold a Gala Spring Concert at the Bathurst
Street Cathedral64 wherein eight teenage girls in the community will be performing.
Zozoolya is, moreover, expected to help the young women prepare for the performance
and to better “whip the cream of Ukrainian culture” (“Unseen” 96). As a way of revealing
some of the diaspora’s intergenerational tensions—tensions she herself experienced—

---

64 This is likely a reference to St. Volodymyr Cathedral of Toronto, which is on Bathurst Street.
Kulyk Keefer makes clear the distance between those born in Canada and those who are Displaced Persons (D.P.s), as the narrator observes, “[they were] spoiled shameless by the soft, safe life they’d always known in Canada…. Among the most hopeless of the students were eight teenaged girls, daughters of wealthy families” (“Unseen” 97). The story focuses on the extent to which the perception and reception of Zozoolya in the community as both an insider and outsider affirms and disrupts émigré imaginaries regarding what it means to perform “Ukrainianness,” and more broadly, the ways in which living in a state of exile contours one’s relationship to both an idea of “home” and belonging itself.

For Zozoolya, the émigré community responds to her arrival by determining not only what she can provide them with—as a way or securing their own ties to their cultural heritage— but also to confirm their beliefs about who and what she is. This is visible in the narrator’s immediate speculation about her marital status, which quickly “became her drawing card in the community”:

But as to her lack or superfluity of wedding rings— there indeed was richer dough to knead. Had she lost her husband when the Red Army blew up Khreshchatyk, Kiev’s grand avenue, whose offices, theatres and shops had been seized and then infested by the Nazis? Had he been one of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, his brains blown by a German, or perhaps a Soviet bullet? Or, like many theatrical ladies, had she never cared to have domestic salt sprinkled on her tail? Perhaps she’d been married and divorced too many times ever to keep track of all the Yuris, Borises and Mstislavs who’d wooed her. Or had she only taken lovers?

(96)
Although Zozoolya escaped Nazi occupation and forced labor camps, the question of her marital status remains at the center of her mystique—and for Kulyk Keefer, this gendered framing of the story’s exiled protagonist speaks to her own critiques of the diaspora’s patriarchal imaginaries and investments. The entanglement of brutal Soviet histories with speculation about Zozoolya’s romantic attachments reflects Kulyk Keefer’s “corrective” telling of history—gender, and the imaged attachments requisite of one’s gender, becomes a prism through which the community comes to understand political and ideological violence. These “murmurings” among the émigré community are, moreover, the origin of her nickname (i.e. cuckoo bird). These narrative parts are sutured into Kulyk Keefer’s rendering of national—as well as diasporic—histories. In particular, the interlocking genealogies and legacies of colonial, imperial, and gendered violence in Ukraine, as demonstrated through the perceived “otherness” of Zozoolya—who to the Canadian émigré community is at once legible and exoticized through her Ukrainianness, as the narrator observes how she introduces herself to the young women, “‘Gerrrrrrrls, ah, gerrrls—so! These are my promised pyooo-pills,’ she sang out, in an English more exotic to their ears than even Hottentot65 could be” (“Unseen” 98). Kulyk Keefer’s textual inclusion of accented English further demonstrates Zozoolya’s perceived exoticized position in the diaspora, reiterating the experiential gulf between Canadian-born and DP populations.

65 Likely referring to “Hottentot Venus”—or Sarah Baartman—a Khoikhoi woman who was exhibited as a freak show attraction in nineteenth century Europe. The racialized (and racist) nature of this comparison is, seemingly for Kulyk Keefer, part of how she situates the reproduction of anti-Black racist and colonialist practices within the context of the diaspora through the narrator.
Through Zozoolya, Kulyk Keefer explores the implicit proliferation and reproduction of white supremacist and ethnocentric ideas within the diaspora. This is seen most directly when the narrator reveals gossip about another DP, Pani Lishtera, “who’d become bitchier than ever with Zozoolya’s arrival.” Lishtera, so the reader is told, encounters a group of Black women (string-bag shoppers) sitting on the steps of the cathedral. The narrator observes how she “detested non-Ukrainians in principle, and her fury had been doubled on this occasion of color as well as patriotic creed.” Upon seeing them, Lishtera screams “in the same voice she used to bully her students into memorizing poetry”: “You devils, get your dirty black bums off those steps or I’ll have the police out after you” (101). As the narrator continues, Zozoolya overhears this interaction, stops in front of the steps and promptly “flung out her arms as if to defend the black women from some massed attack, and, in resounding Ukrainian, had rebuked her rival. ‘Is this not the House of God: is this not His Property?’” Equally significant to her verbal response to Listera’s bigotry are Zozoolya’s physical gestures, as the narrator dramatically describes how she “spread out her cloak so that she resembled some crimson-winged avenging angel… [she] stroked forward, thrusted her bedizened face so close to Lishtera’s that the very hairs on the latter’s purplish mole, stuck like a wad of chewed-out gum upon her chin, were reported to have trembled.” Zozoolya continues, “Did He not banish from His temple only those, Pani Lishtera, black of heart—not black of skin?” before she finally leaves to enter the cathedral itself (“Unseen” 101). Significantly, the narrator observes how “within hours everyone had heard the story and had sided with Zozoolya—for the perfection, not of her views, but of her performance,” yet at the same time, “no one envied Zozoolya, or defended her against the rotten fruit of Lishtera’s wrath: lies, rising
like green gas from a marsh and sharp-pronged digs into Zozoolya’s fallow past” (“Unseen” 101).

This exchange reflects the noticeable shift in the 1980s Ukrainian Canadian writers’, especially feminist authors’, increased interest in more openly acknowledging and responding to the sexist and white supremacist knowledges circulating in the diaspora. Such critiques of racism and ethnocentrism, as both Grekul and Ledohowski note, were part of criticisms of the language of multiculturalism in Canada more broadly. As Ledohowski describes, there was an emphasis on “nation-ness” (to borrow from Benedict Anderson) as a “legitimate value,” and this is reflected in Ukrainian Canadian authors’ pre-1980s attempts to become legitimized through a reliance on a “lexicon of ethnicity rooted in concepts of nationalism as a response to the desire to differentiate amongst racial and ethnic groups under multiculturalism” (124). It is for this reason that feminist Ukrainian Canadian authors, including Kulyk Keefer, include more deliberate representations of Ukrainian ethnicity and both its conflict and continuity with racialization in the Canadian context, in order to reveal the extent to which colonialist imaginaries have been produced and reproduced through the circulation of narratives about the diaspora’s own marginalization. Hence Kulyk Keefer uses Lishtera’s racism to dramatize the extent to which exclusionary treatment of so-called “visible minorities” (in this case, Black women) is tolerated within the émigré community. Resistance to these prejudices, as Kulyk Keefer reveals, is rooted not in an anti-racist ethos, but superficiality, reflected in the community’s siding with Zozoolya’s performance rather than her principles. A more nuanced discussion of the ways in which colonialist and white supremacist ideas have been shaped and circulated throughout the North American
Ukrainian diaspora is called for, one that acknowledges the very real ways in which the histories of minoritization of Ukrainian immigrants have shaped their position within broader North American contexts. This requires more careful discussions of the formations of race and processes of racialization not only in the United States and Canada, but in Eastern Europe as well, particularly the ways in which whiteness, and the privileges this category holds, has often emerged contingently.

**Conclusion: Imagining Viable Futures**

To return to the establishment of ideological mythologies in the context of the Soviet state (*Homo sovieticus* in particular), the operationalization and expected performances of bodies—through gender, ability, and ethnicity—was an important component of Sovietism’s state apparatuses. In the final Soviet years, these mythologies participated in and bore witness to the state’s collapse—as, again, Alexievich insists, the familiarity of this concept of the “New Soviet Person” among Soviets and the power of its mythos marked those who experienced it: “you couldn’t mistake us for anyone else” (3). What many in the West believed to be tragic figures, the work of ethnography, including the works of Alexievich and Yurchak offer more complex meanings to the experience of one’s country’s collapse and entrance into an unknown and often ambiguous “post.” Soviet citizenship allowed room for disentangling everyday life—in all its material manifestations—from one’s political reality. In my consideration of the proliferation of these mythologies, the diaspora exposes the extent to which “Ukrainianness,” as both an ethnic and a cultural category, has been formed and deployed outside of Ukraine’s national borders. The work of authors like Andijewska (Germany), Vovk (Brazil), and Kulyk Keefer (Canada) illustrates the global reach of these questions
related to identity and ethnicity—less as a biologized “unifier” than as a shared recurring rewriting of violent and traumatic histories. Ukrainians beyond Ukraine deepen the legibility of these histories and identities, furthering Ukraine’s transnational intelligibility and salience in anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist discourses. And by focusing on the contributions of women-identified writers, filmmakers, and visual artists who have actively engaged questions of embodiment, violence, patriarchy, and “deviant” sexuality, I further situate Ukraine as part of a transnational feminist discourse, representing and responding to histories of violence, colonialism, white supremacy, and misogyny.

Lisa Grekul’s conclusion to the 2016 collection of essays from Ukrainian Canadians entitled, *Unbound*, ponders the possibilities of stories, considering their mutability, flexibility, and transnational significance:

I still believe that we all have stories to tell: of course we do. I believe, too, that we’re all storytellers. But I’m not sure that we’re all writers. Or maybe we’re writers for awhile, and then we’re teachers, or filmmakers, or mothers, or academics. Some of us do, or will, find a way to be all of these; some of us don’t, and won’t. None of us, though, will be lesser for the choices we make, and it seems to me important to remind ourselves that we’re not tethered to these choices. We really do “renegotiate and reconstruct” our identities, continually. Who we are, today; what we say, in this moment, about our “selves” and our histories; the parts that we play in our unbound “betwixt and between” community—these are all necessarily provisional: subject to change, open to revision. In this, we have something vaguely in common, I suspect, with the
people of Ukraine, despite the geographical, cultural, social, and political
distances between us. (133)

The collection was edited and published immediately following Ukraine’s 2014
Revolution of Dignity— the potential legacies (many of them hopeful) of which Grekul
(and the other contributors) begins to explore. Yet at the time of this writing, these
legacies are not unfolding through Russia’s brutal full-scale war against the Ukrainian
people, to devastating effect. The possibility of a hopeful outcome remains in suspension.
It begins with the imagining of a future not only in defiance of history’s failures, but also
one that can, as Cho’s metaphor of hauntings would have it, invite the ghost inside.
EPILOGUE:

QUEER FEMINIST FUTURITY

“no stinking fsb trash/fuckers with rotten teeth and tridents in camouflage/no bad Russian air/nor nationalist Ukrainian dream”

—Friedrich Chernyshov, from “Are These Guys Gay or Merely from Moscow”

In many ways, this dissertation began in 2012, when I first arrived to teach as a volunteer in Chernihiv, Ukraine—a city just two hours north of Kyiv by bus. It was there where I met my host family, and as quickly as I entered their apartment, they welcomed me with a kiss as one of their own. Several months later, when I arrived on a freezing December morning to Lutsk—the city in western Ukraine where I spent my remaining time—my university colleague brought bread, cheese, coffee, and cookies to my apartment, already using my name in the diminutive, “Sandrutchka.” Unfamiliar as I was with the language and context, it was in these such moments that I found myself delighting in powerful feelings of belonging—feelings that have been foundational to not only my shaping of this project, but also to which I ascribe to a much wider articulation of feminist knowledge and worldmaking. When I was forced to leave Ukraine in 2014 on account of the Euromaidan Revolution’s (also referred to as the Revolution of Dignity) bloody turn, the inheritances of colonialism and imperialism became, to me, animated in the negotiation of power and the demand for sovereignty. I observed Ukraine’s alignment with “Europe” and “Europeanness”—real and imagined, and in all its tenuousness and opacity—become situated as a rallying cry, not only in this political moment, but throughout a much longer history of resistance to Russian supremacy. While this identity claim is, in many ways, a marker of Ukraine’s post-1991 liberalization, the reliance on a
Western imaginary as substantiation for both political legibility and sovereignty reproduces colonialist knowledges and subjectivities. However, given the scale and human cost of Russia’s war against Ukraine, I recognize that the urgent need for the protection and security offered by the US and the EU is both significant and measurable, and, in many ways, justifies the mobilization of this narrative. This duality merely exposes the need for further, more nuanced investigations of the complexity of these political, national, and social uncertainties.

Part of colonialism’s strategic violence is the disruption of everyday life—including citizens’ bodily integrity and security—through displacement and exile, annexation and war, and the psychological and existential tolls of a future that may not exist. Resistance, however, emerges through deeply-held narratives of being and belonging. In this regard, my scholarly examination of narrative—through film, poetry, and prose—echoes capacious and amorphous practices of storytelling. Such language travels through generations and communities and is rooted in movement through the everyday, affirming, and even correcting, histories of joy and survival. This practice of storytelling is profoundly feminist in its refutation of categorial violence and domination; it is an insistence of the continuity of life in the face of social and physical death, to borrow from Christina Sharpe. In her discussion of what she calls “wake work”—a way of mapping and collecting resistances to Black imminent and imminent death, Sharpe describes how she is “interested in how we imagine ways of knowing the past, in excess of fictions of the archive, but not only that. I am interested, too, in the ways we recognize the many manifestations of that fiction and that excess, the past not yet past, in the present” (13). While the experiences of slavery, colonialist violence, and death in the
context of Ukraine and Eastern Europe differ in many ways from those of Black peoples, Black and postcolonial feminist scholars have built a language and intellectual framework for interrogating the mechanisms of power through the systematic silencing and extermination of peoples. I see these comparative narrative intersections as productive locations for considering the erasures and violences that continue to determine the futurity and viability of the so-called “second world.”

Throughout the process of writing this dissertation, and over the past eight years as Ukraine’s political and social landscape has transformed due to occupation and war, my framing and consideration of gender in this context have also transformed as a result. My emphasis on women’s embodied subjectivities has become increasingly textured by my own concerns regarding gender’s essentialization, naturalization, and binarization. Moreover, in Chapter Three (and Chapter Four to an extent), where I begin exploring the relationship between bodies and the materiality of everyday life as part of a Soviet biopolitical project, my attention shifted from the question of what gender does or represents to what bodies can do or become in political and national projects. Likewise, I engage the extent to which this “doing”—through their occupation, resistances, productions, and vulnerabilities—emerges through ideological and political apparatuses. This is not to say that gender (and “womanness” specifically) is not an important social and epistemological analytic. On the contrary, the Soviet Union’s formation and organization of gendered difference, in addition to its deployments of patriarchal power and domination, have been integral to the continuity of violence in Ukraine.

However, as part of a contemporaneous feminist articulation of these embodied categories, I want to consider more discursive articulations of embodiment and
subjectivity. In contemporary Ukraine, trans poet Friedrich Chernyshov (1989-) writes his gender and sexuality against the state; they are a form of resistance to forms of nationalism and state violence—both of which limit trans citizens’ life chances, to borrow from Dean Spade. Born in Donetsk, and now living in Kyiv, Chernyshov came out as transgender at nineteen. Translator Tatiana Retivov, in her note on translating his poem “Are These Guys Gay or Merely,” observes that “to be trans*gender in Ukraine means to belong to a subculture, thus in his poetry there are recurring themes of otherness, unacceptability, and frustration.” She observes how this sense of displacement is multilayered, not only displaced from his city of origin, but also Chernyshov’s “internal displacement” and “self-willed exile.” For him, it is the condition of one’s gender and sexuality not accommodating the social context in which one lives, thus making him “illegible.” This resistance can be seen in his poem, “Are These Guys Gay or Merely”:

are these guys gay or merely
from Moscow
you enjoy Ukrainian Russian
mixing up the prepositions
hugging in the Tretyakov gallery
diluting Russian with Ukrainian
arguing about where it’s better

66 Chernyshov’s original poem in the Russian/Ukrainian is untitled. The English translation borrows its title from the first line.
dear

what difference does it make in what metro we’re disguised
what difference does it make from whom we run
from a redneck with the mug of a killer and a cap saying Russia
or from young skinheads with swastikas
at Lybedskaya station

He continues, describing a border crossing on a train from Moscow to Odesa:

all I can think about in my seat #31
of the moscow-odessa train with the misgendering
conductor is that
no scum with insignia
assuming that I am a foreign agent
no shmuck spewing out
his verbal officialese deliberately and carelessly
and then
surprisingly articulately asking in front of everyone
what year did I have my gender reassigned
no stinking fsb trash
fuckers with rotten teeth and tridents in camouflage
no bad Russian air
nor nationalist Ukrainian dream
no moustached customs bedbugs
Chernyshov relies on subversive, often salacious imagery as a way of building queerness into a larger critique of nationalism and colonialism as well as of homophobia and transphobia. As Retivov observes, he “seems to belong more to international than national poetry…there is a sense of breaking with the old culture, as well as traditional forms of poetry, in technique, style, as well as content.” By engaging “newness” and defying “traditional” poetic forms, and moreover, through his lived defiance of normative gender and sexuality, Chernyshov is often implicitly positioned as more “European” than “Ukrainian.” Yet this framing of Eastern Europe as always antithetical to feminist and LGBTQ+ rights risks assuming a colonial gaze, overlooking the ways in which homophobia and transphobia are also entangled in American and western European systems of domination—particularly through, as Robert Kulpa points out, the fierceness of homosociality’s cultural “built-in-ness” to national institutions. Indeed, Chernyshov is a Ukrainian poet, as he is also a trans and queer poet, and one whose work can transgress national and political boundaries.

For this reason, a future iteration of this project will include deeper engagements with queer feminist and critical trans politics as a way of recognizing the extent to which we can, through the creativity and possibilities of bodies, and as part of an emancipatory feminist project of worldmaking, imagine and create viable, livable futures. Or to quote Black trans poet and scholar Cameron Awkward-Rich, who, borrowing from Joshua Chambers-Letson’s After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Color Life, refers to transness and trans politics as a “rehears[al for] a different world, [that] makes it anew, again and again.” While this connection may not be immediately obvious, I view Ukraine and Ukrainians, who, against all odds, continue to claim and determine their own future,
as reflecting the possibilities and promise of a queer and trans insistence on newness; of imagining and believing in the attainability of a different world; and of locating this futurity in the workings and beings—as well as the silencing and erasures—of bodies.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


*Arsenal*. Directed by Aleksander Dovzhenko, Odessa Film Factory, 1929.


Astenicheskiy sindrom [*The Asthenic Syndrome*]. Directed by Kira Muratova, Odessa Film Studios, 1990.


Hrycak, Alexandra and Maria G. Rewakowicz. “Feminism, Intellectuals, and the formation of Micro-Publics in Postcommunist Ukraine.” Whither the


*Peremena uchasti [Change of Fate]*, Directed by Kira Muratova, Odessa Film Studios, 1988.


---. Stalin's Empire of Memory: Russian-Ukrainian Relations in the Soviet Historical Imagination, University of Toronto Press, 2004.


