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**Fairytale Cynicism in the Kingdom of Plastic Bags:
Mapping Power and Powerlessness in
Chelnochovsk-na-Dniestre, Ukraine**

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Spring 2003

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I am speaking with Dima about how life has changed since the end of the Soviet regime in the southwestern Ukrainian town of Chelnohovsk-na-Dniestre.¹ Here's how he punctuates our conversation: "You can say now that you don't like the president." In an afterthought that follows quickly on the heels of this, he adds: "You can't say that you don't like the mayor, but you can say that you don't like the president." Earlier in our conversation, Dima had referred to the mayor as "Marquis Karabas." When I failed to understand the reference, he had said: "Don't you remember, from the fairytale 'Puss in Boots'?" And he recited: "Whose forest is that? Marquis Karabas'. Whose fields are those? Marquis Karabas'. Whose house is that? Marquis Karabas'."2

If my account sets off from the departure point of Dima's parodic fairytale, it is because his words bear eloquent witness to a phenomenon of profound importance in Chelnohovsk-na-Dniestre: power there, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, has become so localized that it is expressed, time and again, as entrenched in the very landscape of the place. This idiom, in which many in Chelnohovsk are fluent, is saturated by an ironic cynicism summoned up to account for and accommodate a powerlessness that is dug so deep into contemporary life in this place that it too, is often articulated in terms of landscape. The goal of this paper, which will reflect on a few such vivid formulations, is the same as the goal for my dissertation as a whole: to move toward understanding sense of place as a native category that goes beyond the cognitive, being at once palpably felt and physically located. It is to understand a folklore that reverberates in the valley of Chelnohovsk-na-Dniestre, and that is constantly forged to trace the lines of the place as an unromanticized, but deeply native *rodina*, or homeland. (This is a folklore that has little in common with the quaint, archaic qualities often attributed to folklore. Rather, it is an idiom vital to life in Chelnohovsk.)

Over the last decade-and-a-half, anthropologists have begun to grapple with one of the discipline's greatest and most persistent paradoxes: namely, that ethnography, while being inextricably embedded in a particular place, has tended to efface that place—to treat it as context in which a given set of practices and beliefs inhere. This new emphasis on place has added

another dimension to an ongoing conversation in anthropology on how to steer clear of the ethical and epistemological pitfalls of portraying the people at the source of our work as immersed in an unbridgeable “otherness.” Engaging with the work of cultural geographers and spatially oriented sociologists,³ a number of anthropologists have turned their sights on the role of place in a contemporary world characterized by diaspora, flux, and blurred boundaries—a world in which it is no longer feasible to maintain the illusion of monolithic cultures fixed into circumscribed settings around the globe. In an effort to unbound the locales within which these subjects have been “incarcerated” by ethnography,⁴ these scholars have proposed that we theorize place through such categories as “multilocality,”⁵ “ethnoscapes,”⁶ or “partially overlapping or non-overlapping collectivities.”⁷ While the recent focus on place is vitalizing, these theories manifest a number of intrinsic limitations. First, they are centered on a priori theoretical constructs seemingly even less informed by local (and trans-local) perceptions than the traditional works they critique. The result has been an anthropology of place that—with certain notable exceptions⁸—pays precious little attention to the phenomenology of place: that is, to the ways the places in question are experienced by those who dwell in them. Moreover, with all of its emphasis on flux and flow, this literature tends to indulge in a new kind of social relativism—one that blinds itself to the imbalances of power, wealth, and privilege that delimit mobility, rendering certain places incontestable centers, and others, undeniable peripheries. Finally, this perspective has the paradoxical effect of discounting the impact of emplaced experience, dismissing the local as an antiquated foil to the fluidity of contemporary life. Global space is read as suppressing local place. And yet, in the context of the dissolution of boundaries and the explosion of global flows, locality remains a crucial point of reference and center of gravity for belonging. Indeed, some have argued⁹ that perhaps globalization has not diminished the importance of the local, but rather, intensified it.

Such would seem to be the case in Chelnohovsk-na-Dniestre, where global flows—of people, information, and cultural and material products—and physical presence on a newly-international border have only magnified the sense of importance of place there. The effect has

been a retrenchment and hardening of identification to the immediate place in which people have lived for generations. Knowledge of elsewhere—indeed, preoccupation with elsewhere—has become integral to the experience of dwelling in Chelnohovsk. Focus on displacement—on what it was or would be like to be out of Chelnohovsk—and on “elsewhere” as an organizing category of thought, is an inextricable element of being-in-place there. If I speak here of “the people of Chelnohovsk-na-Dniestre,” then, I do so—perhaps seemingly paradoxically—in order to begin to move away from generalities. I make statements about *Chelnochovchanye* as a community—in part, because this term exists and is used so often by people in Chelnohovsk as to indicate its relevance to their lives, and in part, in order to challenge generalities about “post-Soviet” or “Ukrainian” subjects. In Chelnohovsk-na-Dniestre, we find a town that is at once far more provincial than the sites in which most of the emerging ethnography on Ukraine is based,¹⁰ and perhaps, in some ways, more cosmopolitan. (And I consciously use the term “cosmopolitan,” with its loaded Soviet legacy, to indicate a connection to elsewhere that may indeed interfere with certain kinds of connections to nation or state, but that at the same time has deep implications for how life is lived in place.) I would contend that “Ukraine” simply is not the most culturally resonant category in Chelnohovsk. That which has profound cultural resonance—and relevance—in Chelnohovsk-na-Dniestre is “Chelnohovsk-na-Dniestre.” And Elsewhere.

* * * * *

Dima’s account of the state of things in Chelnohovsk-na-Dniestre, Ukraine, one of many brilliant emic analyses I have been treated to on the topic, certainly seems to concur with that of those scholars of Eastern Europe¹¹ who would regard the post-socialist distribution of power in the region as dispersed among more-or-less independently functioning fiefdoms. In this case, the rapacious lord of the land fabulized by Dima is the mayor of the town, Mykola Mykolaivich Kruchko, whose political career in Chelnohovsk-na-Dniestre does indeed seem to amount in large part to a consolidation of power carried out through a claiming and grasping up of places

on the landscape, for as far as the eye can see. During his second reelection campaign in the spring of 2002, in a seeming caricature of Soviet iconography, and one that was taken to a degree that perhaps only Stalin enjoyed in his lifetime, a banner adorned by a much-larger-than-life-sized hand-painted image of Kruchko's face could be seen physically draping his power across the main road into the city. During the same campaign, an equally oversized image of the mayor went up on the town's House of Culture, and scaled-down versions of this poster could be seen mounted in shop windows and taxicabs throughout the town.¹² The banner was removed after the elections, but the gargantuan poster has remained, along with many of its more diminutive counterparts. But Kruchko's power, of course, extends far beyond the iconographic.

Since his rise to power in the early 1990s—and his influence in the town gained official stature in 1994, when Kruchko won his first of three successful bids for mayor—Kruchko has come to own numerous enterprises, including (but not nearly limited to) “Kru-tika,” a factory and firm producing a number of items, but most notably, tiles for paving sidewalks; at least one gas station located on the edge of town; Chelnochovsk's principal hotel; and the most luxurious and popular restaurant in the town. The restaurant is officially registered under his (estranged) wife's name, and the hotel is said to be registered under the name of his mistress, but Kruchko makes no bones about being the proprietor of these high-profile and prestigious local landmarks. In choosing a name for his restaurant, for example, he did not mince words, entitling it—in a flourish that legitimizes his own entitlement and places him in the context of a long line of newly legitimated (or legitimated anew) monarchs— “*Nikolai Dvorets*” (Nicholas Palace).¹³

These are the sites that everyone knows of, but a walk through the city streets is likely take one—beknownst or unbeknownst to the walker—past numerous others. Walking to the town's bus station one day, for instance, I approached a veterinary kiosk and got close enough to notice the Kru-tika name on it. Kruchko's appropriation of territory also takes more camouflaged, if not exactly subtle, forms. Those small entrepreneurs in the town with whom I had established a relationship of trust acknowledged to me—obliquely and yet unequivocally—that they regularly paid tithes to the mayor, and that they fully understood that should these tithes

cease, their business would be brought to a halt, as well. These same entrepreneurs also made it clear that the mayor himself had reprimanded them for the eyesore that the sidewalks in front of their shops presented (sidewalks whose paving dated back to the last Soviet-era restoration), and commanded them to tile the area in front of their business. This demand has been made on those who rent their shops, as well as those who own them, and of course, the town's only tile concession is Kru-tika. In the spring of this year, the town's taxi stops—theretofore simply designated non-privatized stopping spots on the local landscape—were summarily auctioned off by “the City.” Nothing was built there, nothing produced. These particular points along the lay of the land in Chelnochovsk simply and suddenly became, in the spring of 2002, the private property of particular individuals. By the time the taxi drivers and the other residents of the town learned of the auction, the new owners had already laid claims to the deed. These new owners, Mykola Mykolaivich's son (also named Mykola Mykolaivich), and three other men closely associated with the Kruchko family and commonly recognized as “*banditi*,” or mafia, would heretofore collect dues from the local taxi drivers for granting them the privilege of stopping there. The Kruchko family, it is commonly recognized, profited (at least) twice off of this auction.

It must be said that this occupation of the landscape with the markers of power is accompanied by an equal and opposite force—an emptying out of place that is felt as testimony of communal and individual powerlessness. No doubt the most concrete example is the disappearance throughout the city of metal fixtures, and it is not only likenesses of Lenin that have vanished. Garbage now forms hillocks in the streets because the bins that once stashed it are no more. Gaping holes are left where manhole-covers used to be. The Ferris wheel, the merry-go-round, and all the metal attractions that once filled the city park, have been removed, leaving a void at the park's center. (Rumor has it that the mayor is planning to build a house for himself there.) No one in Chelnochovsk disputes the mutual understanding that these (once) fixtures have been plucked and sold as *metalalom*, to be melted down and sold again. When I walk into the fabric store, Alla greets me from behind the counter. With restrained disbelief, she

asks whether I am finding my time in Chelnohovsk-na-Dniestre interesting. When I say that I am, she replies: “What, does anything exist in Chelnohovsk? We’re lucky we exist.” She asks me where I’ve been, and when I say I’ve come from the city park, she continues: “What, do we have a park? There’s nothing there...Before there was a Ferris wheel, rides. None of that is there anymore.” Shortly thereafter, I find myself standing in the city park with an acquaintance who had enough *blat* connections—including close ties to Kruchko—to make a successful career for himself on the black market during and following the period of perestroika, but who has become a rather hapless schemer since the dissolution of these powerful links. He looks around, and remembers aloud what used to be here. He points to the empty space left by the disappeared Ferris wheel, by the other rides that are gone now. It’s all been disassembled, he says, sold to be melted down. But he has an idea: to sell the Soviet tank that stands as a monument on the banks of the Dniester. “Imagine,” he ponders, “how many tons of metal. It would have to fetch at least three or four thousand dollars. You know how easy it would be to melt it down, with the Kirov Machine Factory right there across the street?” He doesn’t know why no one has thought of it yet, he says, but he’ll “have to suggest it to Kolya” (Mykola Mykolaivich Kruchko).

Other emptyings of the city are even more haunting. There was the reduction to ashes of the houses (on the street leading up to the border, a street which has become prime business real estate) of those who purportedly had refused to sell these houses, in a spate of fires that broke out in the spring of 2002. There was the flight of almost the whole population of the town, some 33,000 in the summer of 1995, when the rumor of a deadly impending flood swept through town. (That flood never did occur, and—in another undisputed communal explanation—the *Chelnohovchanye* hold that the alarm was intentionally raised by someone who wanted to rid the border of its customs agents, in order to traffic over the border something more substantially incriminating, or more unwieldy, than the contraband that is said to pass daily over that stretch of river. This ruse, they declare, could not possibly have been executed without the support of someone very highly placed in the power structure of the town—indeed, without the mayor himself.) There has been the emptying of all but some 200 Jewish residents of a town in the heart

of territory once confined as the Pale of Settlement, a town that refers to itself often as “*evreyskiy gorod*” (a Jewish city), and was, less than a decade ago, home to thousands of Jews.

These once-residents, for whom it finally became advantageous to have their “nationality” (their ethnicity) emblazoned on their passports (as it was until recently) have been able to obtain visas to emigrate to the West, as have those in their immediate families. Others have had a harder time of leaving Chelnohovsk, but many have left nonetheless, performing long hours of manual labor on construction sites in Portugal, risking (and serving) jail time for trucking alcohol around the (dry) Arab Emirates, investing huge sums of money in fictive marriages to those—largely Jews—who are in a position to be granted a visa to the West. There is more than a sense—rather, a distinctly and almost ritualistically incanted certainty—that those who have remained have done so because they have been left behind; there is nowhere for them to go. Even—or rather, especially—those who enjoy wealth and power in Chelnohovsk are commonly understood to be awaiting the moment when they might parlay these means into a ticket out of there, and even the most influential *Chelnohovchanin* is not immune from such speculation. One the contrary, during Kruchko’s tenure as mayor, there have been three—alleged—attempts on his life, all of which are widely understood in the town as having been engineered by the Kruchko himself, in order to establish the grounds on which to seek political asylum abroad. Chelnohovsk feels both profoundly cut off from (much of) the world, and bombarded by it—as much in the returns (whether temporary or permanent) of those who have left (and in the phone calls and packages and news that circulate among the transnational Chelnohovsk community that has resulted) as in the images and information of global popular culture that cross its television screens. The result is a communal gaze that is at once profoundly inward-looking, and always and forever looking elsewhere.¹⁴

* * * * *

My eight-year-old friend Vladik asks me what he should draw for me. I suggest that he draw me a map of Chelnohovsk.” There is much I could say about the map Vladik produces, but what is

truly striking is that it is empty. (And Vladik, like almost any eight-year old boy in Chelnochovsk, knows every crevice of the town.) When Vladik presents his drawing to me, I urge him to fill in the map of his city with the places that he loves. He disappears, and when he comes back, his map of Chelnochovsk is still empty. He tells me to turn it over, and when I do, I find a sketch of some tall buildings, with the words “I love America” scrawled in their midst. His image lies across a sketched ocean. I ask him once again to fill in the Chelnochovsk side of the map, but his only response is to fold up into an airplane this image of his town with America as its reverse side, and to send it flying.

Vladik’s gaping void is echoed over and over, in verbal maps drawn by *Chelnochovchanye*. Listening to these, I am sometimes reminded of the famous *New Yorker* (magazine) map that locates New York City at the center of a receding rest of the world. Only in Chelnochovsk, it is the reverse: here is a group of people who draw a map on which they plot themselves at the margins. Even the most formulaic greetings are often met with rhetorical questions that derail the purported normalcy of such discourse. The ingenuous question “How are things?” might well be answered by way of another question: “How can things be here?” just as “What’s new?” is likely to be countered by “What could be new in Chelnochovsk?” A woman who comes to our house to measure us for hand-knit sweaters (a gift from our friends) turns out to be one of my husband Borya’s former classmates. When he asks her “How are things?” she replies, “How can things be in Chelnochovsk? Like in the finest houses of Paris (followed by a well-worn Russian expletive beginning with the Cyrillic letter Б)” Not infrequently, someone, upon greeting us, will launch into a much lengthier monologue on the lamentable state of things in Chelnochovsk. One evening, we run into another former classmate of Borya’s. This old acquaintance speaks, uninterrupted, at great length, and her spontaneous oratory contains numerous questions that await no answers: “So you’ve come back? What is there to come back to? How are things in America? How’s Mama? Papa? And you? Have you set yourself up well? Are things good there? Here, there’s nothing good, and won’t be anything good...” When she finally pauses in her monologue to find out where in the United States we live, Borya explains

that we have lived in both New York and California, and that it is unclear where we will return after leaving Chelnohovsk. His narrative is a bit zigzagging, so he follows it up by asking if she understands. “Understand?” she repeats the question, “What I understand is that you live in America, and we’re going to stay here and rot further...” And she returns to her stream of lamentations. Likewise, an elderly woman I meet for the first time in Chelnohovsk’s storefront Jewish community center asks me how I find the town, but before I can respond, proposes her own answer: “It’s a hole in the ground, right?” When I disagree, she is surprised: “And we consider it a *yama*, just a pit.” Of course, Chelnohovsk literally is in a “*yama*,” a valley, and the geographical and metaphorical doubling is lost on almost no one.¹⁵

* * * * *

But let us turn to a place on the landscape incontrovertibly occupied by the “Marquis Karabas,” one that marks his power perhaps more conspicuously than any other: his restaurant *Nikolai Dvoretz*. The scene is a wedding, and it is captured on a videocassette that was sent to me by the bride and groom. The wedding took place in August of 2002, in the newly renovated restaurant owned by Mykola Mykolaivich Kruchko, on the momentous day that the restaurant reopened after renovations. We find Kruchko risen from his place at the table in his own, eponymous palace, to toast the young couple. He stands in front of the shiny replica of the David he has installed in his newly renovated restaurant. (Amusingly, Kruchko’s head happens to be level with the David’s loins—a coincidence, no doubt, but a suggestive one, given that Kruchko is widely reputed to have lustily helped himself to more than pieces of land.) He hails the young couple as follows:

Dear Lenchka, Vadim. Esteemed parents. Esteemed guests. *Chelnochovchanye*. Those who have traveled here, who grew up here and lived here. Those who live here. I’m very pleased that the city of Chelnohovsk-na-Dniestre has...its place in the difficult hierarchy of government life. I’m doubly pleased to be able to work with such a wonderful person—our Lenchka... (He speaks of Lena’s beauty and intelligence, and wishes the couple a bright future together)....I want you to make your parents happy, and to be the pride of our Chelnohovsk-na-Dniestre. After all, it is (this city) that raised you: our streets, our “Pizza”(café) our other establishments,

our (nightclub) “Zero,” in short, our establishments, our City Hall (mayor’s office), which has made of you such a serious woman. Let’s drink (“*gor ’ko*”) to the young couple.

Kruchko’s wishes to the couple are bracketed by his telling metaphorical mappings, which—among other things—collapse geography and power, beginning by locating Chelnochovsk’s place as within the hierarchy of government life and ending by appropriating the glory of—and even the credit for—this occasion through the trope of landscape. His speech abides by wedding convention in overtly celebrating the couple of the day, but yields to political rhetoric that places a rather unconventional demand on the couple: be the pride of the city. And if the bride and groom are to be the pride of the city, he suggests, it is because they have wended their way to this momentous event via the streets of the city, whose landmarks culminate in the mayor’s office itself.

If Kruchko can be found staking his own claims to power through the idiom of landscape, he has others do his bidding for him as well, others who can sketch even more fictitious allegorical geographies. Here at Vadim and Lena’s wedding, for instance, he has the master of ceremonies (his employee at *Nikolai Dvorets*), who sets the scene for the occasion in a fairytale land. In a segment that appears earlier on this tape, the bride and groom—having descended the grand staircase in *Nikolai Dvorets*—stand before the assembled guests, and the master of ceremonies addresses the crowd:

You know, when I first set eyes on this beautiful couple, on these guys, an old, old, fairytale immediately came to mind. And I’d like to take you all by the hand and lead you into this beautiful, magical land called love. In our kingdom, in our state, lived a beautiful queen. One day, she fell to daydreaming, and thought: how happy I would be if I had a little girl with lips scarlet as blood, a face white as freshly fallen snow, with hair black as ebony. That’s what the queen thought, and probably the good fairies heard her wish. Because her wish came true. And the parents... named her a beautiful name: Lena. The years went by. The girl grew up and turned into a beautiful woman. But her heart slept. And only the kiss of a handsome prince could wake her. And such a prince came along. He was not a foreigner to her. He lived, and was born, here in our city...

The master of ceremonies' transcendental metaphors transmogrify into concrete references, grounding the lofty qualities they represent in a local landscape that is at once physical and political. The formulaic geography of the standard Russian fairytale opening—"in *some* kingdom, in *some* government"—is subtly redrawn here as the transcendental myth gets located in "our" kingdom, "our" government. Lest that "*gosudarstvo*" be understood to signify "state," the setting is quickly localized. The prince/groom is of local provenance, having spent his whole life in "our city." This touch not only diverges from the traditional telling of the tale, in which the prince who wakes Sleeping Beauty comes from a foreign land, but elides certain details of the real-life situation: Lena was born and raised in the town of Potoki, on the other side of the Bridge of Friendship, and now has, therefore, Moldovan citizenship. (She is, in fact, employed in the mayor's office illegally, registered under the name of a woman with Ukrainian citizenship). The official and unofficial hurdles that the couple had to clear in order to actually get married—as a result of the new gravity accorded to this place on the map where the Dniester separates Chelnohovsk from Potoki—made their lives a post-Soviet bureaucratic nightmare for months prior to this evening. And yet, nonetheless, Potoki is unanimously understood in Chelnohovsk as inevitably here, the inescapable other half to the inescapable Chelnohovsk-na-Dniestre. Also left out of the story is the fact that the couple is counting the days until they are issued the documents that will allow them to leave Chelnohovsk for Germany. All of a sudden, in the space of this speech, the inbred nature of Chelnohovsk, the valley that has hermetically sealed in those who haven't managed to escape it, becomes enchanted.

* * * * *

On the outskirts of Vinnitsa, on our way back to Chelnohovsk, after running two red lights because Dima has failed to notice them from the angle at which they are hung, we come to a stop before a third one, waiting for the right of way. The traffic light consists of the usual red, yellow, and green lights descending vertically, but the green light at the bottom is flanked by two other green lights, forming a row of lights joined to the standard column in an upside-down T

formation. This structure is hung high over the right side of the road, so that it is virtually invisible to the driver of any vehicle on the road. Borya, sitting in the passenger seat and craning his neck to make out the signal, wonders out loud about the logic of such a roadside installation. The question touches off a brief but telling lesson in political history. “What do you want?” is Dima’s response. “Our ancestors were...” Here he pauses for a long moment. “Who were those nomads who wandered on the land in the time long before Kievan Rus?” he asks. “*Istorik!*” he remarks, mocking himself, a history teacher turned auto-parts dealer searching the recesses of his memory for the proper name of his national forebears. Finally he finds it: “*Skify,*” the Scythians. “Do you know the story of the Scythians?” he asks, and he embarks on his own telling of it:

The Romans came. They wanted to conquer the territory, and so they had to fight the Scythians. So they set an appointment to meet at a field and do battle. The Scythians showed up, but while they were waiting for the battle to begin, they caught sight of a herd of wild boar. They wanted to eat them, and so they forgot about the battle, and set off after the boar. The Romans understood whom they were dealing with, so they went off, and left the Scythians alone. They put up a few fortresses in the Crimean, and went back to Rome.

We continue on the highway back, its two lanes merging into one at certain segments, before dividing again into two as it cuts through the empty beauty of the fields of the Podolia, many of which lie barren. (“Nothing grows here,” Dima remarks. “Nobody cares.”) A few kilometers before we reach Chelnohovsk, a 600-Series Mercedes passes us. “He’s come to congratulate Kolya (Mykola Mykolaivich Kruchko),” Dima says, and seeing our quizzical glances, he adds, “Well, where else could he be going, driving a 600-Series Mercedes with Kiev plates in this direction? To Vindichany, you think?” Not five minutes have passed before a Toyota Land Cruiser whizzes past us in the other direction. “There goes Burchuk,” Dima says, referring to a high-profile legislative candidate favored by Kruchko, and later disqualified by the regional election commission for filing an inaccurate financial report, “That’s his car.” “*Proyikhav po syolam,*” he remarks, switching to a Russian satirically sprinkled with Ukrainian words, “He drove through the villages. Gave out newspaper to the grannies. The grannies had something to wrap their eggs in. They voted for him, our *Skify* did. Such is our country.”¹⁶

Dima's political commentary begins at a traffic light on an urban periphery, and wends its circuitous route through the Scythian steppes—a detour of more than two thousand years—before it comes to a halt back in the present in a nearby village marked by popular manipulation and unquestioned poverty (both of material conditions and of political imagination to hold out for better than a newspaper bribe). In so doing, it collapses history, politics, and space into an amorality play, endowing local and contemporary hopelessness with farther-reaching, national and primordial roots that are inseparable from the land itself. Dima's social critique plots out a deeply cynical origin myth in which power and powerlessness are scanned on and embedded in the landscape.

* * * * *

Alexei Yurchak has argued that during the period of late socialism, cynicism was rooted in an understanding of official ideological representation as inconsistent with lived experience. The result was the cultivation of a “pretense misrecognition” that allowed the Soviet subject to navigate the incongruities of the system and of his own participation in it. This pretense misrecognition frequently yielded to joking interactions that released “repression anxiety” by channeling it into “winks of recognition” of this very incongruousness.¹⁷ Notably, for Yurchak, this cynicism of the “normal” late socialist subject did not entail a complete refutation of Soviet ideals, but rather, a reflection on the considerable gap between those ideals and reality.¹⁸ According to Yurchak, the central role of this ridicule in addressing the “social incongruous” was supplanted in the late 1980s by the “analytic discourse of glasnost.”¹⁹

And yet, in post-Soviet Chelnohovsk-na-Dniestre—where an ideological vacuum remains in the space where official Soviet representations once stood, a space which has been filled by the logic of truisms identifying power with might—ridicule flourishes. The arbitrary and self-serving nature of the distribution of power in the town is so thinly whitewashed that the violence underlying it shows plainly through. In fact, the cloaking of the self-interested workings of power in Chelnohovsk, with Mykola Mykolaivich Kruchko at the helm, is so patently fictive

that one often finds it articulated in a genre that no functioning adult is expected to take at face value—that of fairytale. *Chelnochovchanye* tend to respond in an idiom that bears much of the humor found in its Soviet counterpart, but little of the equivocality: a cynicism of mythic dimensions. This discursive genre—a kind of anti-fairytale that maps the contours of a disenchanted land—is mythic in both senses of the word: It assumes the form of a metaphysical legend, and the narrative it imparts is unverifiable.

* * * * *

Dima is still at the wheel, and we have almost completed our journey back from Vinnitsa. We have already passed the sign demarcating the city limits, and are making our way down into the valley of Chelnochovsk-na-Dniestre. Out here, on the elevated outskirts of the town, Dima shifts his chin toward a hill at our left. He says he has proposed to Anya, his wife, that they buy that piece of land up there and build a house to live in. “Anya would be queen of the mountain,” he says. “Like the princess on the pea (*na goroshine*), only princess on the mountain (*na gore*). There, she’d be the most authoritative (*samaya krutaya*) in the town. There’s nothing cooler (*kruchshe*) than that in Chelnochovsk.” (He’s playing on words here, of course, with *krutoi* simultaneously signifying steep and authoritative). Borya joins in: “But she wants to be in the center (of the town). She wants to be in the Kirov (factory) neighborhood.” Dima counters: “She wants to be ‘*na Birzhe*,’ on the ‘Exchange’. We’ll have to pitch a tent there.” He is referring to the political, social, and symbolic center of the town, triangulated by the City Hall on one corner, the billiard hall on another, and the “Pizza,” (the most popular café, where much of the high and low drama of the town gets played out) across the street. The *Birzha* is formed by the nexus of those landmarks, and at one particular spot on the sidewalk, one can see—at any hour—a congregation of “*krutiye*,” the authoritative men in the town associated—marginally or more than marginally—with the shady activities inseparable from power. We continue our descent into the city. As we pull into the center of town, Dima is moved again to poetry: “Kingdom of plastic bags!” he declares Chelnochovsk, with ironic emotion. “We have ‘American Beauty’ here

everyday. The dance of the plastic bags!”²⁰ Then, as he parks the car in front of the auto parts store he co-owns with two other men from the town, he cries out, “Hello, my motherland!”

Dima’s inverted fairytales are perhaps extraordinarily eloquent, but they are, nevertheless, couched in a genre to which many *Chelnochovchanye* repeatedly turn, to express a sense of place that perhaps cannot be expressed without great subtlety of humor. The absurdity of official fairytales is time and again parodied as obscenity, in ingenious spontaneous riffs on the genre that invert the attribution of enchantment to the valley of Chelnochovsk-na-Dniestre. If the master of ceremonies’ speech went through the motions of endowing the mayor with a power of mythic dimensions—a power that cannot be uprooted from the very land itself—other *Chelnochovchanye* can be found to endow cynicism itself with mythic dimensions, sketching an iconography of the absurd that begins to account for how it feels to live in Chelnochovsk-na-Dniestre, Ukraine.

I would conclude with just one more such vivid representation, and let it have the last word. The scene is the following: I am at a “*devishnik*,” an all-female party at Dima and Anya’s house to celebrate their daughter’s seventh birthday. The guest of honor has long ago gone to bed, and the women still sit at the table, drinking, telling stories and jokes, toasting. One of the women pronounces a toast. It’s a toast about the end of the world, and it goes something like this:

The end of the world is coming to Chelnochovsk. A black cloud hangs over the city. It moves toward The Big Tent (restaurant). *Bak!* The Big Tent is no more. It moves toward *Nikolai Dvoretz*. *Bak! Nikolai Dvoretz* is no more. It moves toward our window. It peers in, and we are sitting here cozily at the table, drinking. So I’d like to drink to this: that no matter what happens, even the end of the world, we don’t give a fuck.

NOTES

¹ The material drawn on in the following paper was gathered primarily during my most recent dissertation sojourn in the town of Chelnohovsk-na-Dniestre, Ukraine, from February through August of 2002. It has been informed, as well, by experiences and discussions I had on two earlier trips to the town—in the summer of 1998 and the summer of 2000. My relationship to Chelnohovsk began nine years ago, long before my first trip there, when I met my husband, Borya, an émigré from the town. Borya has accompanied me on all of my trips to Chelnohovsk (or rather, I have accompanied him). My mode of research, therefore, has been far from that of the legendary model of the “lone wolf” anthropologist. Many of the interactions and relationships I have been drawn into have sprung from long-term relationships Borya has sustained throughout his life. Thus, in addition to my ten months of fieldwork in the town of Chelnohovsk-na-Dniestre, my project draws on years of correspondence with the town, correspondence that I have often participated in, and time spent among members of the Chelnohovsk diaspora in Tel Aviv, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Milwaukee, and especially New York City. Besides traditional ethnographic participant observation and directed interviews, my research is based on videos, letters, diaries, poetry, and other cultural artifacts produced in and about Chelnohovsk, some of which were shared with me in the town, and others of which reached me from across borders.

Out of concern for those who speak and are spoken of here, I have changed most of the identifying names, including the name of the paper’s main character—the town itself. By any name, however, “Chelnohovsk-na-Dniestre,” remains a very real place in the world, and its place in the world is of profound importance for those whose lives are located there. I could not, therefore, seek to disguise the terrain on which “Chelnohovsk” is lived. Rather, since this paper is about mappings in and of the city of Chelnohovsk-na-Dniestre, and I will begin by placing the town on the map in a rather conventional (if approximate) fashion. Chelnohovsk is located in the southwest of Ukraine, at the intersection of a geographical and political border where the Dniester River divides Ukraine from Moldova. The Bridge of Friendship, which has long connected Chelnohovsk to its other half, the Moldovan town of Potoki, and which was so nonchalantly permeable during the Soviet period, is now choked with the social and economic charge of international crossings. This paper moves on to present other maps—visual and verbal—that would appear less conventional; it aims, however, to explore some of the conventions located in those maps.

² The verbal exchanges on which this paper is based were carried out either in standard Russian, or in a highly Russified Ukrainian (or, more accurately in this case, a slightly Ukrainianized Russian) often called *surzhyk*. Over the past decade, nationalist linguistic policies have been exceedingly successful in introducing a newly codified Ukrainian into the official sphere. Still, in certain parts of Ukraine, all but the youngest generation (out of which Ukrainians are being efficiently forged in the school system, in large part through language) tend to express themselves in non-official circumstances in a language considered by most to be standard Russian. This situation tends to be the case in the urban areas of southwestern Ukraine, where during Soviet times Russian served not only as a high-prestige acrolect, but as a lingua franca for an ethnically and linguistically diverse citizenry. Nonetheless, even in cities like Chelnohovsk, Ukrainian is quickly gaining ground, as people of all generations are increasingly finding themselves immersed in the language not only in governmental, commercial, and educational settings, but even in their own homes, as they watch television or interact with their children. For more extensive discussions of contemporary linguistic negotiations in Ukraine, see Laada Bilaniuk, “Gender, Language Attitudes, and Language Status in Ukraine,” *Language in Society* 32 (2002), and Rebecca Golbert, “Language, Nation, and State-building in Ukraine: The Jewish Response,” *In Language, Ethnicity, and the State*, ed. Camille C. O’Reilly (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

³ Manuel Castells, “The New and the Self: Working Notes for a Critical Theory of the Informational Society,” *Critique of Anthropology* 16 (1996); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989).

⁴ Arjun Appadurai, “Putting Hierarchy in Its Place,” *Cultural Anthropology* 3 (1988).

⁵ Margaret Rodman, “Empowering Place: Multilocality and Multivocality,” *American Anthropologist* 94 (1992).

⁶ Arjun Appadurai, “Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology,” in *Recapturing Anthropology*, ed. R. Fox (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991).

⁷ Akhil Gupta, “The Song of the Non-Aligned World: Transnational Identities and the Reinscription of Space in Late Capitalism,” *Cultural Anthropology* 13 (1992).

⁸ Steven Feld and Keith Basso, *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and Keith Basso (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996); Caroline Humphrey, “Avghai Khad: Theft and Social Trust in Postcommunist Mongolia,” in *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies After Socialism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Fred Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place and Politics Among the Western Desert Aborigines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Stefania Pandolfo, *Impasse of the Angels: Scenes of a Moroccan Space of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); James Weiner, *The Empty Place: Poetry, Space, and Being Among the Foi of Papua New Guinea* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1991).

⁹ Saskia Sassen, “Whose City Is It? Globalization and the Formation of New Claims,” *Public Culture* 8 (1996); Charles Piot, *Remotely Global: Village Modernity in West Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Laada Bilaniuk, “The Politics of Language and Identity in Ukraine,” in *University Microfilms International* (1998); Adriana Petryna, *Life Exposed: Biological Citizens After Chernobyl* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Catherine Wanner, *Burden of Dreams: History and Identity in Post-Soviet Ukraine* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 1998).

¹¹ Michael Burawoy, “Transition Without Transformation: Russia’s Involuntary Road to Capitalism,” *East European Politics and Societies* 15 (2001); Caroline Humphrey, “Icebergs, Barter, and the Mafia in Provincial Russia,” *Anthropology Today* 7 (1991); Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹² This poster foregrounds Kruchko, superimposing his smiling portrait (in black t-shirt and brown leather jacket) over a landscape photograph of Chelnohovsk taken from the Potoki side of the River Dniester. Topped only by the words (printed in Ukrainian): “Our City (is) my Pride!” this enlarged photographic bust of the mayor looms large over the hills and buildings of his town, and from behind his broad shoulders, one glimpses pieces of the river, of the Bridge of Friendship spanning it, and of several of the distinctive houses located on the Potoki side. When a friend presented me with an autographed copy of this poster, another friend present in the room cried out, pointing to these landmarks: “Look, he’s even annexed a piece of Potoki!”

¹³ “Nikolai” is the Russian form of the Ukrainian “Mykola,” and of course, the given name of the last czar of the Russian Empire. Interestingly, the official/unofficial split in linguistic valuation can be glimpsed at work here as well. While the mayor’s public persona is always denoted through the Ukrainian version of his name, and all of his official addresses are delivered in (a recently polished) Ukrainian, he is most often heard speaking in Russian in less official settings, as he does in the wedding toast mentioned later in this paper. Banking on significant cultural capital, Kruchko’s Russian naming of

his restaurant is, nonetheless, only possible because—like so much else—he has carried it out in his unofficial capacity, even as it buttresses his official position.

¹⁴ In a rhetorically telling encapsulation of this phenomenon, *Chelnochovchanye* sometimes reflect on the inbred and omniscient inescapability of their town by nicknaming it “*Rayon Melrose*” (Melrose Place), after the American serial that (dubbed into Ukrainian) has enjoyed great popularity in Chelnochovsk. Tellingly, this mild epithet underscores the town’s extroverted glance—its register in which faraway places perform important conceptual roles—even as it disparages the town’s inevitably introverted perspective.

¹⁵ One man, in the business of selling mobile phones, comments on the metaphorical equation of existential and topographic conditions in his town, as he commiserates with my struggles to obtain an internet link. “What can you expect in a *yama* like this?” he says. “I can always predict if my customers will get a connection. I look up at the weather, and I can feel whether they’ll get a connection out of here.”

¹⁶ In the elections that had taken place several days earlier on March 31, 2002, Anatoliy Burchuk had finished third, enough to qualify for advancement to the next round of elections to be held in July. He was, however, disqualified from this later round, due to irregularities in his financial records. In Chelnochovsk-na-Dniestre itself, Burchuk was by far the forerunner, and seemingly the only candidate in the race. Shortly before the elections, he had purchased the town’s preserve factory (a industry that had been running at greatly diminished capacity) from the city government, and he had Kruchko’s vocal and unwavering support. Throughout the months leading up to and between the elections, Burchuk’s posters hung prominently in private enterprises and public spaces throughout the town, beside the ubiquitous posters of Kruchko, posters which constituted the only publicity for any mayoral candidate to be seen in public, despite the fact that Kruchko had to competitors for the position. In the weeks leading up to these elections, we frequently spotted luxury cars with Kiev license plates parked by the City Hall, or in front of Kruchko’s private holding *Nikolai Dvorets*. These cars were pointed out to me on numerous occasions by various people, who all suggested that they belonged to “*shyshki*” (“pine cones,” or, in other words, big wigs) from Kiev who had come to lend their support, and extract support in turn, from Kruchko. When Dima notes that the Mercedes belongs to one of these political and economic operators, he is making an educated guess. When he identifies the Land Cruiser as Burchuk’s, he is dealing in even greater certainty. In Chelnochovsk, it is popular practice to identify people’s presence and movement by noting their cars in City space. Driving down the main streets of this small city, or on its outskirts, *Chelnochovchanye* often greet one another with a honk, and people will often report on the whereabouts of an acquaintance by citing the location of the latter’s car on the landscape. The identities of particular local cars is almost as widespread social knowledge in Chelnochovsk as the identity of their owners, and unfamiliar cars often attract attention. Needless to say, Burchuk’s high-end transport attracted plenty of attention, and *Chelnochovchanye* came to easily identify it soon after its appearance on the scene in early 2002.

¹⁷ Alexei Yurchak, “The Cynical Reason of Late Capitalism: Power, Pretense, and the *Anekdot*,” *Public Culture* 9 (1997).

¹⁸ Alexei Yurchak, “Soviet Hegemony of Form: Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45 (July, 2003).

¹⁹ Yurchak, “The Cynical Reason of Late Capitalism: Power Pretense, and the *Anekdot*.”

²⁰ Dima is referring here to a memorable scene from the sardonic 1999 film “*American Beauty*.” Although the movie theaters in Chelnochovsk-na-Dniestre have closed their doors since the collapse of the Soviet regime, VCRs are found in many households there, and *Chelnochovchanye* have access to a

wide range of films, whose pirated versions can be rented in several of the town's shops. Although its syntactical form is inverted, the semantic content of Dima's cinematic comparison recalls one made some two years earlier by another friend, Zhenya. We were at Zhenya's house, and had just watched the film "Great Expectations" (the 1998 adaptation starring Gwyneth Paltrow and Ethan Hawke). Borya remarked that the film had been good until the "Hollywood ending" came along to ruin it. "And what kind of an ending do you want?" Zhenya retorted. "A *Chelnochovskskoye* ending? You want them to show how they cut the salami on the table?"