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Sarcophagus: Chernobyl in Historical Light

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In the following pages, I will guide the reader through a tour of a post-Chernobyl social imaginary, a theater of images let loose after an invisible catastrophe, summoning the social body to experience it as a turning point in history. I document a series of encounters with multigenerational Ukrainian informants to explore their experiences of the Chernobyl disaster within perceptions of historical truth. How did they experience history and Soviet state power before and after Chernobyl? How did they settle back into their bodies? What does it mean to be alive in a heavily contaminated environment controlled by science and the sovereign power of the state? These questions are the underlying basis for comprehending how individuals navigate the shock of a nuclear disaster. As an ethnographer of Ukrainian-American background, I come face-to-face with the strangeness of the disaster in light of my family's migration from Ukraine.

Chernobyl within the Context of Leninist History

The scale of the Chernobyl disaster of April 26, 1986, was massive, damaging human immune systems and the genetic structure of human cells, contaminating soils and waterway systems. The radiation released from the plant was roughly equivalent to 1,000 Hiroshima bombs (Gould 1993:331). The initial explosion caused the reactor core to melt down completely and lasted over ten days, spreading all that it could over the entire European continent, doing the most damage in Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia (Chernousenko 1992; Sich 1994). A 40-foot-thick concrete cap, built in a few weeks to restrain the spewing Unit Number Four of the V. I. Lenin Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station, was officially dubbed the "Sarcophagus."

Chernobyl occurred one month after Gorbachev instituted his policy of *glasnost*. The disaster, so uprooting, had to be reconciled with Gorbachev's political attempts to restore a society and party that were extremely corrupt and ailing by 1986. As such, *glasnost* recast Chernobyl as a political event to be con-

tained and understood within the historical project of Leninism. Gorbachev's commitment to glasnost mimicked "a kind of openness that Lenin, in 1918, had endorsed as a technique for the press to use in 'stimulating the masses into taking part themselves in solving the problems closest to them' " (Thom 1989:68 quoted in Feshbach and Friendly 1992:13). Gorbachev saw this project as the expansion of the charismatic status of the party, embodied by Lenin, to the Soviet people. By referring to the sarcophagus of Lenin's preserved body located in Moscow, naming the concrete cap Sarcophagus was meant to incite a sense of physical, moral, and spiritual rejuvenation within the Soviet population. This ideological incitement could not disguise the blinding and incomprehensible light delivered by Chernobyl. That light has become a consuming hole of the present, a rupture in historic time, systems of belief, and representation.

The name Sarcophagus was promoted not only in the Soviet press but also through a famous play, entitled *Sarcophagus*, written in Moscow by a *Pravda* news correspondent shortly after the accident and widely performed in the West. The play was intended as a chronology of events at Chernobyl. In fact, it was yet another platform on which Gorbachev could further his cause of social restoration. The play introduces one "Mr. Immortal," a nuclear power plant worker, who was in a hospital for radiation injuries due to a plutonium accident. The story highlights Mr. Immortal's rabid drinking habits and notes that his injuries and the accident itself were due to indiscretions caused by his heavy drinking (Mould 1988:149).

The play *Sarcophagus* was a product of the official apparatus of Gorbachev's Leninist vision and reaffirmed the faultless ability of the Soviet technocratic state to overcome catastrophe. The name of the protagonist, an immortal member of the *Narod* (the masses), reinstated the trope of immortality outside the Moscow center in an exploding technological device—the power plant. As a trope of Leninism, it reaffirmed not the flesh of that history, embodied in the mortified plant worker, but the original locus of that history, embodied in the death and resurrection of Lenin himself. The application of the name Mr. Immortal to the mortified flesh of the plant worker instantiated a question: When is dead really dead?

Bureaucrats who handled the Chernobyl accident narrate a different scene. Kira Serhiivna, a high-ranking official of the Ministry of Social Welfare in Ukraine,¹ organized the evacuation of thousands of individuals from heavily contaminated areas in Ukraine. She recounted a story to me from those days during and after the ten-day nuclear release. "I visited the hospitals where the Chernobyl clean-up workers, the *Chernobiltsi*, were being treated for radiation injuries. So many that I saw have already died!" Kira continued, "We [the Minister and herself] walked along the bedsides of those desperate boys, passing one bed after another, and stopped at the bed of one. He looked at me with the most piercing of looks and cried, 'Look what you have done to me!' The man was covered with radiation burns, and I am sure that he is dead now."

Kira, a stone-cold Soviet cadre, did not show any outward signs of remorse or shock but also did not discount the force of the nameless worker's indictment. On February 18, 1994, Kira Serhiivna died of metastasized cancer.

The Chernobyl event precipitated a historical question regarding the body within the place of Soviet socialist history. Could the event be written into Leninist revolutionary time, where the body's historical and physical "impulses" toward death² are overcome by the resurrecting powers of the Narod? Or would it stand outside this modern arena in and of itself? And if it did, what then?

"Sarcophagus" became commonly used by a Soviet population to identify the phenomenon of Chernobyl. The term *sarcophagus* derives from the Greek root meaning "flesh-eating" (*sarx* = flesh, *phagus* = eating), and in Greek burial practices, the term referred to an instrument for evacuating the body fluids of noble corpses in preparation for their future lives. The word suggests a change in the physical substantiality of the body, a body evacuating from itself (or eaten) through draining tombs, vacuum-suction devices, bloodletting devices, or, in the late 20th century, concrete caps.

The demiurgic image of explosion combined with the word *sarcophagus* to remove history from the site of its original meaning. But questions arise: Evacuation of whom or what? Whose flesh? The removal of the word from its original historical locus and the transposition of it onto the site of a nuclear disaster provokes a problem: What words should be put in relation to the image of the Sarcophagus for those who felt Chernobyl "in their teeth"?³

The Chernobyl disaster registered in the imaginations of Ukrainian writers, who saw something unique in its flames.⁴ Lina Kostenko (1993) and Oles' Honchar (1968) generated alternative conceptions of historical birth and sited them in the bellowing smokestacks and the red flames of steel mills, in the metallic war-torn luster of socialist Ukraine:

Madly raging zeniths, in the vaults of heaven, are whistling and wailing, the lustre of airplanes in the dishevelled sun, blinding, as if an explosion. . . . The infant, a new-born, . . . in wonder has first seen this world, witnesses it as continuous bloodshed, bloodstained face of the trench flows to the whole of the firmament, that is all red and choking in smoke, and the sun in an aureole of blood. These were his first impressions, his first gifts, that lie somewhere in the bosom of his subconscious.

And in another passage:

The heat of war hovers over and the soot falls on the gardens that chip away. Poison everywhere. . . . [Honchar 1968:14–15]⁵

The infant's gift, evoked by Honchar, is to see with fresh and untrammelled eyes the horror that will begin to lie dormant in his soul; the horror that he would suffer silently, with a "wealth of images and a holding back of words" (Kristeva 1989:224). Chernobyl continues a tradition of poison and soot but extends it into the future, invisibly and silently, without a cough.

The displacement of the Sarcophagus from its original historical locus set in motion opposing conceptions of the human outlines of the space of death: a battle between the body of Leninist history—preserved, dried out, but ideologically life-giving—and the actual mortified husks of Leninism above and below the soil, remembered in oral histories and inhabiting the ruined landscape of Ukraine: witnessed but not written. What remained of those unaccounted-for bodies, alive and dead, had been captured in fragments, fleeting gestalts, and mood swings, blocked out of view by the preserved body of Lenin. Chernobyl gathered disparate historic imaginations through images of flames and gave an image to something that, by official historical definition, had no speech. It delivered the gift of sight, like the one received by the newborn suckling images of war that were leaking poisons. Sarcophagus exposed the horror of that emptying act. The word *sarcophagus* was even spoken with some sigh of relief; something was over.

Two historical-mechanical conceptions of the body were at odds: one swollen, even cathartic in its leakiness; the other dry, chalky, embalmed, sucked out, preserved, dead. These conceptions stimulated poetic recombinations of images of the mortified bodies of famine and war that were put out of view, out of history, out of speech, with images seen in the flames. More questions arose: Who am I? How do I live? Has Chernobyl transfigured me physically and permanently? And assertions: I have been made an object of the Soviet experiment again. Kostenko spoke of the peasants who had abandoned their *khutiry* (homes) after Chernobyl: “They will not write ‘dead,’ they will write ‘not alive’ ” (1993).

Kostenko points to two events as the flesh of a modern Ukraine: the famine of 1932–33 and the Chernobyl accident of 1986. Ukrainians are called to witness a composite image of their history: the famined bodies, frozen in the theater of nuclear light.⁶ Those famined bodies reciprocate a gaze, tracing across three generations to affirm historical continuity. These silent gazes fill the stage of a more recent disaster that escapes vision. An article entitled “Bloodstained Sky Brought Forth Ukraine” (*Visti z Ukraini* 1993: 1) presents a cultural theater that seeks to “give flesh to the bitter pages of our country.” It names the year 1993 as “The Year of Grief and Remembrance,” placing the title alongside archival photos of emaciated children, huddling over their empty stomachs, prone in preparation for death.

This political need to witness a past—these bodies that gaze—overshadows the crucial practical knowledge about risk after Chernobyl. Such “need” could have been made less natural if the scale of the Chernobyl disaster had been made fully public by the Cold War military-scientific complex that purports to monitor it. The scale of the disaster is still anxiously being suppressed. And so, the need to see and be seen has recast the terms of cultural production about Chernobyl—from violations that must be called into account to a naturalization of “historical” fate. If after Chernobyl the image of the Sarcophagus displaced the structure of historical narration, images introduced in a current era of nation-building preserve unaccountability within a theater of mortified flesh.

How To Remember Now

I became interested in Chernobyl while I was researching a Stalinist prison in the Ukrainian city of Kamianets-Podilski. I was drawn to this prison, in part, because its uses changed rapidly over time, and I wanted to understand how these changes affected local inhabitants' perceptions of their historical past. The city of Kamianets-Podilski, located in the southwest border of Ukraine, was a main border-controlling point of the Soviet Union at the time of the revolution. It juxtaposes a historic "Old City" and a socialist "New City." The terrain of Soviet life—a socialist city awash in concrete housing blocks—is juxtaposed with an aged landscape of winding medieval streets.

The Old City of Kamianets once contained over 40 Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches on a relatively small land area. For the past 60 years, this city has remained in a state of ruins. One might imagine this town as a version of Yugoslavia 50 years later. Bones of those who died from hunger, war, and political repressions still lie in the underground crypts of churches. There are no Armenians left to reclaim their church, which was bombed and whose crypts are filled with bones of bodies starved or shot. There are no Jews left to reclaim the one remaining synagogue, which has been converted into a restaurant.⁷ Remaining Ukrainian Orthodox, Polish Catholic, and Ukrainian Greek Catholic groups have reclaimed ownership of religious property that was confiscated by the Soviet state under Stalin.⁸ In the heat of restoration in the Old City, a prison that was once a convent stands unclaimed on the main square. Here, repeated cycles of state terror and persecution took place. But they are undocumented in this particular border area.⁹

The terror that it took to make these ruins was underscored by the words of an 80-year-old man and native of the Old City, Mr. Pasichnyk. In the early 1950s, Mr. Pasichnyk was ordered to retrofit the prison as a textile factory. As we walked around the building in 1992, he said, "The cellars, the cellars. I had to get to the cellars to build supports for the presses. The foundations were very old and when we were rebuilding. . . . I will show you." He moved me in a gentle way to the hole to show me where he gained access to the cellars. "Dear heart, there were the cellars." At this moment, Mr. Pasichnyk began to mix the darkness of the hole with images. "The cellars were laid out in order, all in order," he said. "The skulls of adults, the skulls of children. They were exposed for a month. Do you understand? And so I moved them to the cemetery and buried all of this."

It was unclear to me whether Mr. Pasichnyk moved all of them himself. I asked, and he answered, "Alone, I moved them, as if forever."¹⁰

The unclaimed prison punctuates the present with the past processes of terror and war in this border region. Moreover, this *punctum*, as Barthes might refer to it, has no temporal markers (Barthes 1981:59).¹¹ Instead, its fragile walls create an arena of a different temporal sort. They speak to a dispossession from history. Pasichnyk does not stand in the path of history. He is moved by images; he carries them but never arrives to mark their gravesites. This is the vision of life Pasichnyk developed when he saw the carelessness with which the bones be-

neath the prison were handled: collected in bags, mixed up in the process, and dumped in chutes into the underground crypts of a nearby church. Pasichnyk became tied to a place of witnessing at the moment he saw those ill-shaped bags. He became a refugee let loose on his own land with the bones in hand.

Sitting on a ledge near the prison, Mr. Pasichnyk showed me his photographs of the destruction of other gravesites, carefully pulling them out of a folder.¹² He never asked me where I was from. Did it matter? (Pasichnyk's name means the "beekeeper."¹³)

Reminiscences from another time contribute to what counts as official historical truth in this city. The Old City still holds a part of a lingering shock of terror that is marked in the interstices of its ruins. In the new city, where prefabricated spaces were built and bodies were written down as statistical fact, the past was banished and had returned, alienated from the place of its origin and in another form. Time was no longer linear, it was something to apply, like a glue sealing a rupture.¹⁴ It became the unspoken "in-between" space of perception and consciousness: a deposit of hardened, frozen fits. The possibility for being historical and "life" were written in other places, on other stone slabs.

There were associations being made when one walked through the Old City: underhanded comments, mood swings. Sheer rage was outlawed as a part of a Bolshevik spiritual and bodily praxis. The Old City became a virtual city, present and erased, real and imagined, at the same time. One could talk about the sacred spaces as if they were there, even if half of them had been laid waste.

After exiting the interior of the prison, I walked with Mr. Pasichnyk into the street. With his finger pointing to a Polish Catholic church at the end of the road, to which the convent-turned-prison originally belonged, he noted:

The boys were throwing away bones from beneath one of our churches! Somehow, I started to feel faint, *sick*. I asked, "What are you boys doing?" "Cleaning the church!" they answered. "Are you preparing the bones for burial?" I asked. "They told us not to." Then I said, "You people are of the history department of our university? Ah! Let the man who ordered this cleaning busy himself with toilets. *Toi-lets!*"¹⁵

A structure of accountability for past historical events, which Pasichnyk was implicated in having destroyed himself by "cleaning" the bones out of the prison, was precluded from being preserved once again. Against Pasichnyk's protest, the boys kept those bones from being buried, throwing them elsewhere, keeping them anonymous, with no one there to mark their gravesites. Pasichnyk spoke from the side of the road, off the path of official history, instead of allowing himself to be taken by its force. When he saw what the boys were doing, he witnessed the possible deposition of his own image, of himself. He felt the risk of being turned into an object—at the mercy of history and at its disposal once again (Barthes 1981:14).¹⁶ Within this possibility, he presented himself in the voice of a true father, condemning the historian to clean the feces of his own bastard children.

The New City of Kamianets-Podilski

The Old City and the New City are separated by a bridge that spans 200 feet above a river canyon. The cities mark two distinct worlds of Kamianets, two distinct structures of unaccountability. The old, to the west, is peopled with occasional Polish tourists, displaced collective farmworkers, recently arrived church restorationists from the capital of Ukraine, and caretakers and parishioners of restored churches. The new, to the east, houses inhabitants who live day to day and work in nearby concrete, sugar, and brick factories. In the river canyon below are a few abandoned peasant huts, interspersed with a few functional ones. The New City is quiet, functional, and visually indifferent. The textile factory that clothed the workers relocated to the New City. Here, people go about their daily business without paying much noticeable attention to each other on the streets. In contrast, the Old City is noisy with restoration work. From the bridge, the sounds of hammering, pounding, and sawing can be heard emanating from the walls of the Polish Catholic church nearby.

In the Old City, sites of destruction are juxtaposed with pockets of intact architectural forms. By contrast, time and space in the New City have been leveled out; here and there one can see peasant huts, left unbulldozed in between housing blocks. As with the rebuilding of the churches in the Old City, what places in the New City are available to mark historic time? Only stories—recollections—which have been in private and continuous circulation since the beginnings of the Soviet state. The terror of the physical alienation lingers, or, as an American, I sense this terror for the first time. Most of the residents are not indigenous but have come from other towns to work. Only a few of the residents have the privilege of locating those stories within the empty pockets of the Old City. The rest is located elsewhere.

Within the spatial and social relations of modern Soviet life, the apartment (*kvartyra*) provides an inescapable refuge. The experiential divide separating the socialist street from the *kvartyra* can be characterized flatly as a division between private and public domains. The same division, private and public, characterizes the generational and gender lines of the family within the *kvartyra* itself.

The spatial homogeneity of socialist cities caused the site of the production of memory to shift as well. (The swarm of bees moved to another hive.) Socialist streets and socialist housing rapidly blanketed a predominantly rural place, whose inhabitants did not have the prosperity to fabricate a collective memory. The majority of those inhabitants were deported as forced laborers to the East or were exiled from the ability to speak of their experiences freely. A divide formed between oneself and the outer world, “internal experiences and external events,”¹⁷ producing new glues to connect perception with consciousness. This consciousness is different from Pasichnyk’s, which adheres to a historically unclaimed place and is a trigger for sight.

In the New City, consciousness was informed through recollection; a mobile history was narrated and tied to the body performatively. This tie was seen and registered—mobilized—for an alternate path of historical interpretation.

Space reinforced the particularity of that mobilization. The joining of perception and consciousness became real in solid bodies, and history—or the desire for one—became the glue of an erotic familial tie.

The relationship between Soviet life, space, and bodies is critical to understanding how the Chernobyl accident was believed and also to understanding the histories to which it became attached. It is the unlocatability of contamination and its invisibility that will form the core of a modern problem of how to believe.¹⁸

In a post-Soviet era, unofficial truths, mobile histories in the spaces of Stalinist modernity, have become the material of a new “openness.” These histories form relations among citizenry, relations based on the premise that recollection constitutes an important social bond. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this bonding is promoted by the government-owned Ukrainian media as a necessary rite of social, moral, and historical purification. One weekly television program consists of interviews with torturers and members of the former Soviet secret police. The program shows the pathetic nature of these Stalinist operators. One such individual, “Ivan,” can barely utter his words clearly. His voice is raspy. His skin is patchy, swelled with alcohol. He twitches nervously. The representation of Ivan’s deep and shallow topography mimics the absences and presences of the Old City. His interview occurs in a mental hospital, confining the experience to a flat, two-dimensional space. The gestures of this Stalinist perpetrator combine with his words, which are incomprehensible. He is a fugitive of the past that has finally been returned. His chain smoking makes his eyes appear and disappear behind the cloud of smoke. The spectator, by contrast, can “appear” as a historical figure and is incorporated into a community by the chance to see and to examine this impostor of the present. Confined to a box, Ivan dismembers the Soviet past and *re*-members a post-Soviet Ukrainian population.

Although confined, he is the one who is unpredictably evil and dangerous and “needs” to be seen. Specialists who see firsthand the effects of Chernobyl on health are told to stay off the airwaves because “they will needlessly frighten the population.”¹⁹ It is Ivan who rightfully occupies the role of Satan at this national historical juncture. In the interview with Ivan, the civilized body of the viewer is moved to feel power over the past through witnessing the spasmodic body of the Stalinist torturer. Ivan is the real, living, and ugly proof, so that collective suffering—collective memory—can run its inevitable course. How the past, or the need for remembering, is constructed and through what (bodily) channels this is accomplished has much to do with how individuals, former Soviet citizens, accept, renegotiate, or settle back into life *on Earth*.

While conducting research in Kamianets, I lived in the socialist New City with a family, the Strokats, in the tight quarters of their Khrushchev block apartment. The family had three members: Vitaly, a Russian Jew and a former captain in the Soviet army; Oksana, his wife, a robust Georgian woman; and Anna, Oksana’s daughter from her first marriage. We shared stories in a small six-by-six-foot kitchen, the cooking space of an outspoken, sexually liberated Georgian woman proud of her cooking and of her moral duty to feed. Vitaly, Oksana, and

Anna had direct experiences and knowledge of some of this century's worst atrocities: the Nazi holocaust, Stalinist repressions, and the nuclear catastrophe at Chernobyl.²⁰

Vitaly

Vitaly is 48 years old and speaks Russian. In the privacy of his kitchen he said to me in English, "I am a Jew." His initial self-presentation in English is an invitation to engage with him on the level of politics, history, and justice. Vitaly was born in Kamianets, where few Jews remain. He returned there after quitting the Soviet army and the Communist Party in 1975. He repeatedly stated that he detested Ukrainians, and often he pointed to a picture of his Jewish mother whose Ukrainian husband perpetrated the following unforgivable act.

Before Vitaly was born, his mother escaped Kamianets in 1942 when the Nazis invaded southwestern Ukraine and set up headquarters in Kamianets. In a survival attempt, she left her young son with her first husband and ran to a village 30 miles to the north of Kamianets. There, she hid in the attic of the peasant house (*khutir*) of a Ukrainian woman, Kulchyts'ska. After two years in hiding, Vitaly's young mother returned to Kamianets only to discover that her husband had given away their son to the Nazi prison-convent in the Old City (the same one the beekeeper knew) because he feared being incriminated as a protector of Jews. Vitaly shifted from contempt to cynical laughter as he told of his half-brother's fate. Born in 1946, after the Nazis had retreated, Vitaly recalled that as a little boy he played near this very prison, running the length of its fortified walls and catching folded notes that unseen prisoners threw out of small holes of the prison walls.²¹ Too young to read the notes, he speculated they were to family members of the incarcerated prisoners. The writings on the notes, cast out of those anonymous holes, seized Vitaly's imagination.

The fact that Vitaly introduced himself as a Jew and spoke Russian caused difficulty in our relations at first. I was raised in the United States as a Ukrainian in the home of World War II émigrés, where I spoke Ukrainian daily. My family abandoned their *khutir* during World War II, in the chaotic moment when the Soviet armies reclaimed territories of the western Ukraine from the Nazis in 1944. This liberating clash happened a day before my maternal grandmother was informed that she and her family would be deported by train to a forced labor camp in Siberia. The retreating Nazis allowed my grandmother's family to escape to Germany, where she and her husband became farm laborers. A year after they arrived in Germany, the war ended. The Americans offered housing to war evacuees in displaced persons camps under the auspices of the United Nations. Many evacuees of the war lived in these camps until 1949, at which time they were shipped to the United States, Canada, Australia, Western Europe, Argentina, or Brazil. My family came to the United States.

Stories about the violence endured by Ukrainian émigrés during World War II formed an inescapable imaginary context of the children of those émigrés, including myself. Their stories, however, were overshadowed by the claims of Jewish communities that Ukrainians had vigorously participated in

Nazi atrocities. As a child, I often wondered “who did it” myself. Public allegations like these often raised the temperature of émigrés, who identified strongly with their ethnic background and felt that Jewish claims were inflated. Most of them said they had escaped with the retreating Nazis simply to avoid death, collectivization, or deportation by the Soviets.²²

Vitaly saw the Ukrainian in me. He insisted that I learn to speak Russian, and only provisionally allowed me to speak Ukrainian in his home. (Only on this point did Vitaly exercise authority over me, making my transgression the object of attention.) This sparked a continual fuss between the women and Vitaly. Communication became very stilted, as my Russian was weak, and Vitaly was forced to renegotiate my identity within other terms. Those terms were based on the history that I had told him. As I recounted (in Ukrainian) the story of my grandparents’ decision to abandon their khutir during the time of war, Vitaly smiled and said, in English, “They were smart.”

Finally, we had broken through historical identities. Although we were shaped by radically different material conditions, we concurred, for the moment, that history was in some senses arbitrary, and here we were, the fragments of its anonymity, contracting that anonymity in English. We negotiated for the content of history, and arrived at a moment where both of us could indulge in our mutual post-Cold War fascination with each other. Here were our projections: Vitaly and Oksana were the proud “survivors” of . . . and I was an “escapee” who returned to find out about. . .

Contracts of Truth

Believing implies a pact. On public and private levels, the *act* of believing, dissimulation, played a profound and essential role in the functioning of everyday life in the former Soviet Union. Speaking half-truths became a distinct type of practice in a social structure where all power, in universities, in factories, and in government, rested with a *nomenklatura* class. They became polite conventions for men and women and an “agreed upon” dimension of basic social functioning. Believing practices were different from the ones practiced inside the kvartyra. In this context, I am interested in how individuals in the former Soviet Union drew together knowledge of historical accountability privately.

Michael Taussig (1993) has noted that the logic of private belief is structured by a social arena that embodies persons as actors in a “public secret.” Taussig states that these public secrets have violence already embedded in them through the nature of the social structure that reproduces them. He tells an allegorical story of violence, of how a group of men destroyed a women’s hut and erected a men’s hut in its place. This act, he claims, has within it an embedded structure for the production and reproduction of violence that relies on culturally specific modes of believing. That is, the defeated women became believers in the power of men. In Taussig’s story, it is sexual difference that acts as an idiom for reproducing this believing order. Taussig states, “Men act as gods, women act as believers, and men mime their belief of the women’s believing” (Taussig 1993).

In the private context of the kitchen, believing and witnessing had specific functions formalized in bodily gestures. They functioned within this Soviet family to preserve a social and historical memory of Stalinist and Nazi terror. In the home of the Strokats, I became a part of this social dynamic, a believing witness. In other words, I was not entirely a guest.

I had to pass a test with Vitaly. I showed Vitaly that I wasn't Ukrainian, an impostor in his historical terrain, but a *real* American, descended from a place where he would go if he were to leave Kamianets. I was positioned to believe and willing to be understood by him as such. Only then was it "worth it" for him to "let go" of the "fact" that I was "Ukrainian."²³ Our contract of truth was reciprocal. We met outside the structures of separately generated historical purities and recognized each other as imaginary impostors. After recognizing this possibility, we could meet in another way. With the presence of each other, we could see ourselves being seen, as objects of structures of belief, generated elsewhere and renegotiated in the kitchen.

Vitaly consumed most of the attention of his wife and daughter and me. He sought affirmation of his Soviet identity through a witness, and affirmation of himself as a man through believers. His passion for American music was our passion. Vitaly's long sermons about the virtues of bodybuilding were our interests. Vitaly became notoriously popular in this small town when he single-handedly cleared away the debris from the first floor of a housing block and opened his own weight training facility, the first one, he claimed, in southwestern Ukraine. With the help of only a few treasured American bodybuilding magazines, he built this facility from scratch, using barbells, lifts, and presses. This facility attracted men and women from all over the city, and it continues to produce self-satisfied, self-confident, swollen bodies. Often, young men and women arrived at the kvartyra to pick up bodybuilding journals that Vitaly acquired through friends. Vitaly speaks of the bodies he trains with a fatherly pride and a hint of fascination similar to that he had when capturing the folded notes of prisoners.

Vitaly committed a radical act of what he called "self-discipline" against a moral pillar of Soviet identity, which is collective, nonindividualistic. More importantly, by increasing the individualistic forces of his own body, as opposed to the collective ones of the state, Vitaly has "disassociated power" and generated a community of believers.²⁴ He has turned power into a personal "aptitude" or a "capacity" and systematized the words and images of power in an arena of performance (Foucault 1984:182).²⁵ It is the women who clear the floor for Vitaly's capacitating performance. Our complicity as a group happens within and helps strengthen a private, moral frame of reference—the kitchen—where collective indignation has been resolved through other structures of belief, and where the consensus they generate becomes the basis of good, clean, and at times hysterical, fun.

With Oksana and Anna, I would often sit and watch the American videotapes that Vitaly's friends would obtain in Moscow. He apparently had more money than the average worker. The women often watched Vitaly get dressed in

his finest outfits and shoes, in preparation for walking out on the street. As he observed himself in the mirror, we laughed among ourselves in the kitchen over the time and energy Vitaly expended on this daily ritual before he stepped outdoors. Once outdoors, the game of belief was of a different order.

Vitaly practiced charisma in several locations—the kvartyra and the gym. His practices were founded on a loss of a social tie. In the kvartyra and the gym, he could generate a set of believers of his accounts. These accounts are founded on a personal loss that cannot be articulated publicly. Vitaly's body is the instrument to articulate that loss aesthetically. He presents his body in sexualized terms. But this sexualized labor had no believers on the street, where the differences of sex have been abolished as part of state ideology and have been superseded with the sexless unity of the proletariat. The main street of the New City reinforces this unity. It is lined with state stores, housing blocks, and one semi-functional cafe.

In the United States, by contrast, streetscapes are built by private interests, but they are imagined for and animated by a "general" and sexed public. These streetscapes make the labor of becoming an individual seem unproblematic, even natural. Individuality is an exercise of freedom—everybody is doing it—and the avenues for instrumentalizing it are found in commercial streets.²⁶

American streets are animated by individuals who, more often than not, consider sexuality as a basic form of instrumentalizing the self and making that self known and believed in the public realm. American identity politicians often posit a hegemony of a heterosexual "general public" to articulate specific or marginalized identities. These identities are seen as having practices, social webs, and politics, all of which form a seamless boundary specifying a group (Bersani 1989:211).²⁷ Identities manifested under Western capitalism push toward total environments, where the individual self can be embodied unproblematically, seamlessly, and self-assuredly, and where points of contrast to this self can be put out of view, inhibiting the risk of disassociation. There is no one standing in another space to laugh.

The public—the spaces and bodies that have been mass-produced and differentiated by the mechanisms of capital—consists of believers, collectively engaged in the project of "empowerment." This project is a specific kind of hegemony that Vitaly recognizes and admires as American. Vitaly sees and embodies it from a distance. But on the main street of the New City, he is anomalous and anonymous. On my daily return from the Old City to the New City, I would often find Vitaly standing in the street, waiting. The bodily practices that Vitaly engaged in at home, and the believers that he had available to him, were not available in the streets of the socialist new town. No public space was available (except the spaces that he built himself) where Vitaly could feel like the person he wanted to be or felt himself to be.²⁸ We never talked about (the strangeness of) our outdoor meetings inside the kvartyra.

Making his self come to life required a moral conviction for which Vitaly's bodily capacity stopped short. When I spoke with Vitaly the following year, he was quite sunken and ill; he rarely went outside and obsessed over the possibil-

ity of having cancer. He linked his perceived deteriorated state to the fact that he could not leave Kamianets. He had the historical privilege to emigrate to the United States, his lifelong dream, but would not go alone for important reasons. Vitaly's non-Jewish wife was unable to find the death certificate of at least one parent, which was required in order for her to emigrate. Like Pasichnyk's witnessing of bones, Vitaly's "America" would be exiled to another existence.

As I saw these scenes, the thresholds between the kitchen and the street, between below ground and above ground, became thresholds of human nerves. Mr. Pasichnyk felt *sick* as he watched the bones of unburied people, of history as he literally saw it, being thrown away. Vitaly became a hypochondriac when he found out he would never see America, the only place where he thought he could ever conceive of himself as a historical being and as a man.²⁹ This impasse has escalated new conflicts between the women and Vitaly.

Oksana

Oksana is 47 years old and the wife of Vitaly. She was born in an eastern Siberian labor camp. Oksana's father, as a young student in Tbilisi, allegedly defamed a portrait of Stalin in a lecture hall in the university. He was carted off on a train to Khabarovsk along with five other students, including the student who informed the state police. Oksana explained that, in a fit of rage, her father and the four others strangled the tattler and threw his body off the train. As Oksana told this story, her daughter Anna kept a stern face and nodded in a matter-of-fact way while interjecting with "Yes, yes." I inquired about the moral ramifications of murder (like a good American), but Anna retained her upright posture (her civilized composure) and insisted that her grandfather's actions were correct and the only course available to him.

Gestures of enactment—Oksana's hands positioned for the act of murder, Vitaly's assortment of poses on the street and in the kitchen—were moral acts that were played out often. The moral implications of these enactments, or their verisimilitude, were negligible considerations. Rather, these enactments required believers—silent nods of the head, agreements. These believing acts were part of a familial repertoire that guaranteed access to feelings and desires that were impractical elsewhere.

Oksana, above all, was committed to Vitaly through a silent internal dialogue she had with him, beyond the surface of his swollen body. She knowingly evoked events of her past as comical, as if to provide Vitaly with an image with which he could release himself from his penitential state of loss.

There were different stakes in my relationship with Oksana. We were both women and operated as women in the household when Vitaly was around. During his absence, we talked about issues related almost exclusively to motherhood and sex. It seemed evident that Oksana and Anna were very interested in what an American woman had to say about these issues. This was, after all, one reason compelling Oksana to accept me into her household. Her sexuality was not a priori, it was learned and shaped to the aspirations of Vitaly.

In the course of one kitchen talk with Oksana and Anna, I raised the issue of abortion. “How do women perceive it?” I asked them. “It is common, but no one really talks about it,” Anna answered back. I asked, “Is it considered safe?” Anna answered, “Women do what they have to do.” I realized Anna really wanted to avoid the issue. But as her mother cooked with her back turned toward us, Anna quickly stretched across the table and whispered to me, “She has had 19 abortions.” I whispered back in shock, “What? Why?” I was caught between two worlds—American moral and medical terms (“good or bad,” “safe or unsafe”) and the other terms that Anna’s public lack of response and whispered private response seemed to suggest. But what were these other terms? Anna seemed caught between two worlds as well: the world of the believer, where having 19 abortions was considered acceptable, even normal; and the shock that she shared with me across the table, of knowing that her mother had physically survived so many repeated, and often brutal, abortions.

Anna perceived Oksana’s body to be at stake in her relation with Vitaly. Oksana had decided that good sexual relations were important to a stable relationship and refused to use contraceptives. (This is what she told me, but I had been told by her daughter that contraceptives were not available in Kamianets.) Abortion is the only form of contraception and access to it is easy.³⁰

Often, Oksana and Anna engaged in a game of outsmarting each other. Oksana often joked that she had never wanted Anna, that Anna was a problem child. Anna, a prolific reader, reminded Oksana how often she misunderstood Russian literature. When the question of children came up, we exchanged opinions about bearing children (for example, how many, when, the right man). Oksana seemed to want to steer the conversation and offered advice based on her experiences with men and marriage. After divorcing her first husband, Oksana had married Vitaly. Oksana explained proudly that Vitaly had accepted Anna “as his own.” I asked her, “Have you ever thought of having children with Vitaly?” Oksana answered back self-assuredly, “Never.” I asked, “Why not?” She answered, “Because I didn’t want him to love our child more than Anna. I didn’t want instability or conflict within this household.”

Oksana continued in a somewhat moralizing tone and asked me, “Do you know how many abortions I have had for this?” I took a chance and answered candidly, “Nineteen.” Oksana responded, “Almost 20.” She had made her very personal bargain with her own body public. I doubt that Oksana’s assertion had any relation to the pervasive hero mother image in Soviet ideology. Instead, she was telling Anna and me not to pass secrets in the kitchen. We had violated a public code of conduct: a contract of consensus that aimed to preserve dignity. (This discussion would have never happened in the presence of Vitaly. Oksana told me that he simply does not know.)

Anna

Anna, daughter of Oksana and step-daughter of Vitaly, is in her early 20s. She is a young, well-respected teacher of Russian literature at the local university in Kamianets. Following my arrival, I met Anna on a train from Kiev to

Kamianets by chance. In the course of our initial conversation, she invited me to stay with her family during my research period in Kamianets. We spent many hours talking about our lives, our work, and our interests.

In the course of a kitchen conversation, I asked to see pictures of the family from previous years. Pictures of the family's life in Tomsk where Vitaly was stationed were strewn all over the table. All three family members were present. From this mound of photos, Anna selected a picture of herself as a young teenager. I was struck by this image—Anna's deep-set blue eyes and her long braids strapped over her shoulders and trailed to her waist. After telling her how beautiful she looked, I asked Anna, "Why did you cut your hair?" Anna became uncomfortable and sad, and replied, "I didn't cut my braids, I pulled them out of my head with my hands the day of the Chernobyl incident." Her hands mimicked the motion of pulling hair.

She continued, "At the time we did not know what caused this. I stood in this kitchen as we are now, with my braids in my hands." Anna cupped her hands as if holding her braids. Vitaly left the kitchen in disgust. Oksana kept a stern face and nodded matter-of-factly while dutifully preparing food. It was her turn to believe and to act in accordance with a public code. Then the nods of the head and the upright posturing disappeared. She turned away from the stove, leaned over the kitchen table intently, and advanced the open palm of her hand toward her daughter's face, saying to me, "Do you see what *they* have done?"

There was a long pause after Oksana's incrimination. What had Oksana invited me to witness? Before the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, it was more clear who *they* were—the Soviet state apparatus. After the Chernobyl disaster, *they* entered a private zone. *They* had made their visible mark on Anna—there was no choice but to witness. At the moment when Oksana compelled me to see what they had done, it was not only an accident that she was talking about. She brought into relief her own life, her costly efforts to keep the household stable and guarantee Anna the love of a father. Chernobyl undermined the ability of this internal culture to foster and preserve the dignity of its members. In this instance, that culture of belief was revealed as a "monstrous nothing" (Kristeva 1989:223), inadequate to keep the system out.

Oksana and Anna began to argue over the precise cause of the accident. "Who are 'they'—who is to blame?" I asked. "Scientists were performing an experiment at the Chernobyl plant, they were testing its capacity, and it blew," Anna responded matter-of-factly, overriding her mother's skepticism about the state's role in the accident. Anna argued until she prevailed (meaning she silenced the witness). Her arguments were based on what she had seen on television, which contradicted initial allegations that the accident was the fault of an incompetent Ukrainian technician (Dobbs 1992:A1).³¹ Anna needed believers, in this case her mother and me. She wanted us to participate in the established structure of familial belief. Within this harmonious structure, Oksana and I were supposed to act like believers, and Anna was to mime her belief in our believing (Taussig 1993).

I was the first outsider to whom Anna told this story. Oksana was silent while I held the look of disbelief. Anna's historically new task was to make a believer out of me, to incorporate me into her world. We arrived at a moment when the violence of Chernobyl could have been absorbed and normalized within the kvartyra. My presence at the scene dislodged Anna from the possibility of making sense of this traumatic event in the way her parents could make sense of theirs.

The political and material conditions in the post-Soviet era continue to lead individuals to neglect their bodies in exchange for something: the stability of a household, authority over the "facts," survival. This exchange is the constitutive act of the public secret. It can be thought of as an act of striking a bargain and making it public in the kitchen. The price of this bargain fluctuates depending on whether one is a man, a woman, or a child, but a believer must always be present. This bargain occurs within a system of culturally available symbols, for example, symbols of what it means to be a good mother or a potent man.

In the case of Oksana, however, motherhood acts as a cultural medium that diffuses the activity of hurting one's body, a hurt that is incurred by a culture that, to some extent, relies on the commonplaceness of that hurt. But Anna, who experienced a loss of control over her body at the time of the Chernobyl accident, can directly relate her lack of control to a catastrophic instance that is indiscernible in its future effects. Anna's experience is socially and symbolically new; she has not chosen this for herself as her mother has chosen to have repeated abortions to "save Anna." Anna had no culturally available symbols to lessen her pain, to protect her emotions. The affirmative nods of the head disappeared. With the effects of radiation still unknown, invisible, and the responsibility for the accident unclear, whom or what is Anna to bargain with?

That night, Anna and I walked to a site in the Old City where a group of American archaeologists were reviewing bone artifacts salvaged from the crypt of a Dominican church. There was a discussion of "dating the mortalities" and finding the "causes of death," which Anna, in silent and scholarly protest, avoided by sitting alone under the canopy of a tree. Upon our return to the New City, Anna and I shared an experience as we crossed a bridge that spanned the canyon dividing Kamianets's Old City from the New City. This transition is a meaningful one. Literally, it is a transition from one state of the body to another, one form of history-making to another. The stone-arched bridge between the Old City and the New City hovers above a river canyon and abandoned white-washed peasant huts. As we began to cross the bridge, both Anna and I noticed the moon. We stopped and looked at it for a while.

In our musing (which was never safe from double meanings), Anna told me that the number of suicides occurring off the bridge by local inhabitants had risen that year from one to ten. She explained that most of those individuals were older and, in her opinion, could not cope with the unpredictability of the future and their lives any longer. The moon was full. As we continued walking, Anna started to repeat in English, "I am crazy, I am crazy." This startled me, but she

was unaware of my reaction and began telling me dreams of launching into flight. She loved to fly, she said, as she floated her hand over the bridge and in the night air.

My eyes moved restlessly, not knowing what part of Anna's body to look at. Maybe her eyes, because here was the linchpin of a specific kind of rationality and assurance that would at least get us off the bridge and back into this world—this world changed by radiation whose untameability had so baffled early researchers: "The neutron was a frustrating object in the laboratory. It went everywhere, refusing obedience to the electric and magnetic fields to which other particles submitted" (Heilbron and Seidel 1989:416). I became a collaborator with a natural law I didn't understand, and with a world in which survival could no longer be staked in sterile totemic systems of belief (Freud 1950:92). We were both uncertain as to whose world we wandered in. I was asking her to trust me (to believe in my belief that it is possible to live in a place where uncertainty of this kind can prevail), to locate her willingness to live in me, at least momentarily, so that we could get off the bridge.

Anna's life and mine had each gone full circle since the events of our parents that had loomed so repetitively in our lives. This repetition enabled us to speak to their truth as artifact (*arte factum*, something made with skill) and to dislodge from the feeling of automatic conviction toward a historical truth. We acknowledged each other like passersby on an old road. The effect of the war—the truths, silences, and ethnographic modes of inquiry—is a road on which to trace the force of Anna's narration of the Chernobyl incident.

The explosion at Chernobyl occurred the night of April 26. Official government announcements of the explosion, 72 miles north of Kiev, were not made until May 8.

Vitaly described to me the plans his family had made to travel to Kiev, the capital of Ukraine, in order for Anna to undergo kidney surgery the night of May 7 (no medical treatment was available in Kamianets for Anna's nephritis). The Strokats had already boarded an overnight train to Kiev by the time word had reached Kamianets. According to the family, they still did not know what had caused Anna's hair to fall out ten days earlier, nor did they imagine that they were getting closer to the source of their misery. Following their arrival in Kiev, the Strokats encountered chaos at the train station.

"Stay on the train!" one woman shouted to Vitaly as his family descended the steps of the train. Oksana recalled people pushing and shoving on the platform to get on a train, any train. One news article reports that for each train seat there were at least three takers (Bohatiuk 1986:6).

Vitaly was skeptical of the chaos. He recounted his reaction, "What is going on? Hah! These people are fools! They are trying to fool us again! Before it was Americans attacking us, now it is a nuclear disaster!" Vitaly was convinced that the people "have all gone mad" (he used the Ukrainian word *zduřily* so as to ensure my understanding and to show that he was not one of them). As an ex-military man, Vitaly knew firsthand the often bizarre population management

tactics of the former Soviet military. Vitaly refused to be manipulated. The family decided to press on as Anna's surgery was critically needed. Vitaly led the family; it moved resolutely through the pushing crowds.

Oksana explained what the family saw in the main market hall in Kiev. In her usual way, she mimed the event, inviting me with her gestures to witness what she had seen. Pretending to hold an abnormally large strawberry, she hooked her hand toward her gaping mouth, reminding me of Eve in the primal biblical scene, when Adam and Eve were cast out of paradise and made nomadic on earth. I had continually recalled Oksana's enactment after I arrived in the United States. The family refused to believe the chaos around them. This refusal to believe and the refusal to witness outside the home was a family virtue that had insulated members of the family from their political surrounding. But here, that virtue became a misfortune.

The Strokats' narrative about Chernobyl starts with a refusal to witness. Oksana presents an image of biting into a fruit she later learned was poisoned. She had always assumed that food was safe to eat. Anna's physical health had been at stake. Oksana and Vitaly have always loved their daughter and assumed that their decision to stay in Kiev would help her. Should they have stayed on the train? They returned to Kamianets knowing that the consequences of their normal actions were unknown. Their lives were overwhelmed with new uncertainties. Could their culture of belief respond to these new uncertainties? Efforts to remain dignified turned against the Strokats like a lost photograph.

In speaking with me in their kitchen, the Strokats saw themselves being seen at the moment of acknowledging the disaster.³² They spoke of a technological disaster they could not see but could only date,³³ and the only images available to them were the pictures they had of themselves in the moment of recognizing themselves as victims of the disaster. People invariably describe this picture first when asked about the disaster. It marks the moment when the blinding light of the Sarcophagus pushed into their world. It is worth turning back to the Sarcophagus and its conceptual roots to understand the nature of the Strokats' vision.

As discussed at the beginning of the article, the Sarcophagus is the structure that houses the preserved body of Lenin, toward which the Narod ritualistically processed each year on May Day. In doing so, the Narod expressed its revolutionary nature by witnessing the body of Lenin, thus tying the present to the origin myth of Soviet socialism.³⁴

This procession constituted one form of seeing death, and one conception of death, tied to a political ideology that lost its efficacy when the Chernobyl accident became public knowledge. The accident caused individuals to reconsider their own mortality, and the terms by which it was seen and recognized as such. In this article I have shown that the nature of that recognition was embedded within historical self-conceptions and truths that constituted an unofficial culture of "belief," a culture of self-imposed blindness. This refusal to "see" the state was a way of survival off the track of history. Now, since stepping off the

train in Kiev the morning of public realization, the Strokats carry their mortality as a photo in hand.

The Chernobyl accident introduced blindness into a lived time and space, not parallel to histories of state power, conquest, and decline. In the silent space of this rupture, I experienced the words and gestures of the Strokats. Here, the past is not a problem for remembering—it is the present that must be incorporated into the history of their own mortality.

This is precisely the history that has been appropriated by Ukrainian post-colonial elites. They begin with pictures of the famine of 1932–33. The silent pictures provoke questions that resonate with the space of rupture after Chernobyl: Look at these bodies, look how sunken they are; don't we have to come alive collectively as a nation? The present, which surges with questions of survival, has no words, and pictures won't do.

There is no complete historical documentation of the Stalinist genocide of 1932, where an estimated seven million Ukrainians perished through starvation. Neither this disaster nor the Chernobyl catastrophe has been fully documented and accounted for, preventing their integration into stable historical narratives and self-conceptions.³⁵ More than that, they loom so large, as unwritten texts, that they rupture the possibility of a linear comprehension of history, destabilizing the project of history-making itself through spasms, through lived experience. After Chernobyl, mortality escapes its bounds in time to pervade a national imagination.

The “mortality” of the nation is reified through images. These images are to prick the stone body into cathartic release.

“His hands were swollen too. On his fingers the swelling had burst, and the wounds exuded a transparent fluid with an extremely repulsive smell.” . . . Peasants would “sit down on the ground and prick their blisters, and then get up to drag themselves about their begging.”

Among other symptoms of starvation,

The essential functions of life—breathing and circulation—consume the body's own tissue and albumen [*sic*], the body consumes itself. [Conquest 1986:253]³⁶

After Chernobyl, the Strokats will remain unsettled on their own land and in their own bodies; new projects to incorporate them into Ukrainian history will appear as impostors. Their history is a history of the laugh, a refusal to witness old authorities and their progeny. The Strokats do not understand their mortality as a philosophical problem or as a problem of historical destiny. Nor do they understand it as a thing to be overcome, which the nation is putting forth as a national ethos projected through images of sunken bodies needing to be “filled,” resurrected, made complete in the present. After Chernobyl, the Strokats have seen themselves, their bodies and their culture of belief as they defined and acted within it for survival, turn into an artifact. They have reached the moment where their own death has been objectified and terminated as a philosophical problem. They hold it in their hands, like pictures.

I have attempted to draw out the existential and political dimensions of the effects of the Chernobyl disaster. The key determinants for much of a Ukrainian political identity rest in biological, technical, and existential realities that haunt it at present. The managerial efforts to address the consequences of the explosion are profoundly inadequate. Instead, one witnesses the continued minimization of the perception of health effects of the disaster, and the overplaying of the “psychological” effects that have become an important focus of international humanitarian aid and bureaucratic management.

Concurrently, Western elites continue to advocate the symbolic engineering of “identity” in nation-building after Chernobyl, while neutralizing bodily and historical experience as a fundamental determinant of it.³⁷ The current technical possibilities available to the population to assess personal risk are inadequate, even discouraged, and are becoming strong stakes in the formation of political identity. These identities are molded in the context of felt historical truths and demands for dignity that have developed over time. This context, experienced by millions like the Stokats, forms the basis of a perception of bankruptcy of the institutions—Soviet, national, and international alike—that have managed and promoted knowledge about Chernobyl, often in contradiction to daily lived realities.

This contradiction is highlighted by recent international attempts to disarm Ukraine of nuclear weapons. Powerful international interests currently seek this disarmament in exchange for supplies of reprocessed uranium for Ukraine’s nuclear power plants. Within this apparently peace-promoting gift exchange, Chernobyl is left unaccounted for, and the continued use of unstable nuclear reactors in Ukraine is guaranteed.

By its nature, radiation moves according to shifting winds and the prevalence of rain. It exacerbates the need for bounded truth, historical or otherwise. Respected Ukrainian scientist Dmytro Grodzinsky describes these particles, particularly cesium-137 and strontium-90, as everlasting wanderers “that cannot be absorbed in plants and are carried by the wind from place to place” (Marples 1989:27). Whoever attempts to locate these wanderers as a matter of political strategy will be subject to the critique of a biologically and experientially affected population, continuing the historical disruption between “public” and “private” realities, and the maelstrom that is the space of death. The question is, to whom do these wanderers belong, whose souls and whose memory? Who are *they*?

What does it mean to be alive in a heavily contaminated environment controlled by science and the sovereign power of the state? The invisibility of who is to be held accountable for the disaster eclipses the possibility of history as a civilizing tool. In history’s place stands the reason of the witness, the pictures inside Pasichnyk’s head.

Epilogue

“I will ask you questions about your history and major changes in your life. Where were you born, and how did you come to work at the Chernobyl plant?”

“My name is Bakun. I was born in a village five kilometers from Pripyat, in the Chernobylski rayon, where I lived my childhood. When the Chernobyl AEC was being built, I moved to Pripyat which housed workers of the plant. We lived very well, I had a three-room kvartyra. We had cars, a good apartment, there were beautiful forests all around. It was like paradise.” He said it again. “In 1969, they moved us to Pripyat, I was a driver.”

I asked, “Did you have a choice to work somewhere else at the time?”

“I could have worked on a collective farm.”

Then I turned to Bakun’s coworker, who did not tell me his name, and I asked him the same questions. The man shivered with rage as tears ran down his face: “I’m a pensioner. I get 19,000 coupons a month. What can I buy for that?” Then the man showed me burns above his ankles. “This is from radiation,” he said. He lifted his pant leg and stuck his cigarette through a ring formed from skin that had gathered up after exposure to severe radiation. “This happened at Pripyat. . . . We’re people that no one understands, in hospitals, in clinics.”

Horrified, I asked, “Do you think atomic energy should continue to be used?”

The nameless worker looked closely at me and responded, “Our memory is gone, you forget everything—we walk like dead corpses.”

Writing involves the strength of witnessing, for which my capacity stopped short. I did not return to speak with the workers.

Notes

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1. I lived with Kira Serhiivna during ethnographic field research in the summer of 1993.

2. For an excellent treatment of Leninist aesthetic attitude toward death, see Groys 1992.

3. George Veremiychik, Ministry of Environmental Protection of Ukraine, interview by author, Kiev, 21 June 1993.

4. Moreover, the event of Chernobyl mobilized dormant nationalist sentiment and ultimately led to Ukraine’s secession from the Soviet Union.

5. The translation is mine. *Sobor* was banned during the campaign of repression against intellectuals in the mid-1960s. In June of 1986, Honchar delivered an impassioned speech at the Ninth Congress of the Ukrainian Writers’ Union about the effect of the disaster on writing. He noted Chernobyl changed the way Ukrainian writers “related to the world” (Solchanyk 1992:xiii).

6. Between the years 1932 and 1933, the Stalinist famine and genocide killed approximately seven million peasants during Stalin’s collectivization campaign. The event cannot be underestimated as an important moment for modern Ukrainian historians. And precisely because it has not been written about, the famine is pivotal to

understanding what Lina Kostenko means when she writes about Chernobyl: “They will not write, ‘dead.’ They will write, ‘not alive.’ ”

7. Hitler established Kamianets as a center of one of his *reichkommissariat* in Ukraine. Mr. Pasichnyk, whom I will discuss momentarily, documented the city government’s destruction of the site, in the area of Kamianets, where the Jewish population was executed.

8. Ukrainian Greek Catholicism was outlawed and operated as the “Church in Catacombs,” while Ukrainian Orthodox and Polish Catholic believers had some freedom of expression. The Russian Orthodox church was the official church and a branch of the Soviet government.

9. In the early 1920s, the Soviets set up Kamianets as a main border patrolling point where the Extraordinary Commission to Combat Counterrevolution, the dreaded *Cheka* police, was given complete autonomy to arrest and execute “counterrevolutionaries” and individuals who attempted to escape into northern Moldavia, Romania, or Poland. During the period of collectivization in the early 1930s the *kulaks*, or the recalcitrant peasant “fists,” who refused to give up their land to the state, were rounded up, shot, or deported to forced labor camps. At the height of the Stalinist purges in the late 1930s, more peasants, Ukrainians, Jews, and anti-Bolshevik sympathizers were rounded up here, executed, or deported. And finally, when the Nazis invaded Ukraine in 1939, Jews, Ukrainians, and Bolshevik sympathizers were executed here. Continual state violence was targeted at heterogenous ethnic and religious populations on this site over a 30-year period. Police records of the arrested are stacked and rotting in the basement of a local archivist’s house.

10. Pasichnyk, interview by author, Kamianets-Podilski, Ukraine, 13 July 1992.

11. Barthes distinguishes two themes in photography, the *studium* and the *punctum*. While the *studium* produces a liking for the image, the *punctum* is a break, an expansion, a “subtle *beyond*—as if the image launched desire beyond what it permits us to see” (Barthes 1981:59).

12. After our interview, Pasichnyk showed me photos of the destruction of a Jewish cemetery in Kamianets.

13. In the Orphic tradition, bees symbolized souls, “because they migrate from the hive in swarms” (Cirlot 1971:24).

14. Citing the form of the unconscious as a “primary process,” Lacan states its form “must, once again, be apprehended in its experience of rupture, between perception and consciousness, in that non-temporal locus, I said, which forces us to posit what Freud calls, in homage to Fechner, *die Idee einer anderer Lokalitat*, the idea of another locality, another space, another scene, *the between perception and consciousness*” (Lacan 1978:56).

15. Pasichnyk, interview.

16. On the process of discovering himself as being turned into an object—photographed—Barthes states, “What I see is that I have become a Total Image, which is to say, Death in person; others—the Other—do not dispossess me of myself, they turn me, ferociously, into an object, they put me at their mercy, at their mercy, classified as a file. . . .” (Barthes 1981:14).

17. “Today I’m going to write about my internal experiences and external events. My letter will be short. As you know.” Anna Stokat, letter to author, 15 March 1994.

18. This problem was initiated with grand claims about atomic research. One researcher called it “a development that will bring man one step closer to the release of

atomic force and energy which brought the universe into existence” (Heilbron and Seidel 1989:211).

19. Valerijna Ferents, interview by author, Radiation Research Institute, Kiev, Ukraine, 26 June 1993.

20. The following interviews with the Stokrat family were conducted in their apartment kitchen between July 7 and August 5, 1992, Kamianets-Podilski, Ukraine.

21. Many of those Soviet prisoners (Ukrainians, Russians, Jews, Armenians) would be packed into cellars and shot with a string of bullets through a small hole by the retreating Nazis. Their bones would be witnessed and cleaned up two years later by Mr. Pasichnyk.

22. A Ukrainian Cleveland autoworker was deported and tried as “Ivan the Terrible” of the Treblinka death camp in a theater in Jerusalem. He was recently released from seven years in solitary confinement and has been returned to the United States.

23. I put quotes around all of these terms to reinforce my argument about the negotiating and the role that the permutation of facts plays within this context.

24. Under the Soviet regime, bodybuilding gyms were inaccessible to the general public and were strongly discouraged.

25. “Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it disassociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an ‘aptitude,’ a ‘capacity,’ which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection” (Foucault 1984:182).

26. What Vitaly sees in the American videos he collects are not images of Americans but images of self-instrumentality, epitomized by Bruce Lee and the Terminator, who still hold immense charismatic appeal in the former Soviet Union.

27. Bersani, for example, problematizes an assumption in gay politics that sexual practice should have a clear relationship to political ilk and political identity. This relationship, however, has been self-evident in Western heterosexual male ideology for centuries (Bersani 1989:203).

28. Vitaly was not only famous for his weight-training facility but also for a short-lived discotheque that he ran in Kamianets.

29. Both of these men’s lives are tied to the prison in the Old City in intricate ways. What is contradictory and curious is the following: Pasichnyk, a Ukrainian man, spoke of his anti-Semitism unapologetically but at the same time kept careful photo documentation of the city’s destruction of a Jewish cemetery, ordered by the city architect (a Jewish man) who planned a road right through it. The types of complicities between Mr. Pasichnyk, a Ukrainian, and Vitaly, a Jew, must be brought to historical light to prevent irresponsible fomentation of hatreds in Ukraine.

30. As Barbara Heldt suggests, “There is, of course, a gaping dichotomy between the rhetoric of reverence for women [in the former Soviet Union] and the actual use of their bodies in truly dangerous work, whether outside the home or in domestic drudgery. The high abortion rate . . . is also part of this disregard; contraceptive devices are in *deficit* or not used by men” (1991:163).

31. Nine years after the Chernobyl disaster, the source of responsibility is still unclear and embodied by the nervousness of the blamed technician, Anatoly Dyatlov. According to Dobbs, Dyatlov smoked so many cigarettes after the disaster that he acted “as if oblivious to further health hazards.”

32. Only in hindsight did they link Anna’s sudden hair loss with radiation.

33. "After 1986, people in the most strongly affected areas of the Soviet Union started to divide their lives in two periods: the period before Chernobyl and the period after" (Chernousenko 1992:11).

34. Every May Day, the Narod would process in a line stretching across Red Square to see Lenin's body. Subsequent Soviet leaders stood on top of the mausoleum as the incarnate of Lenin himself and overseers of the procession. Ukrainians despair over the fact that on May 1, 1986, the population was still not informed about Chernobyl and was obliged to participate in May Day celebrations in Kiev, thus exposing themselves to radiation when it was at its highest levels.

35. Previous attempts to imagine a nation have failed. In this century, it has experienced its own mortality in the form of frustrated attempts to attain self-government, unusually rapid and traumatic industrialization, and genocide (Subtelny 1988:xi).

36. Conquest's book, *The Harvest of Sorrow* (1986), was the first complete narrative outlining the deliberateness and horrors of the famine made available to a post-Soviet Ukrainian population.

37. One American foreign policy specialist recently noted, "republican elites will be hard-pressed to create real nations encompassing all the inhabitants of the state, and not just a certain ethnic segment. . . . [They] must forge thoroughly new *national* [identities] involving popular allegiance to myth and symbols that are neither narrowly ethnic nor conceptually vapid" (Motyl 1993:79).

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