



KAROLINA KRASUSKA

Uniwersytet Warszawski

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1693-3377>

Metageographical Style: Post-Soviet Space and Jewishness in Anya Ulinich's *Petropolis*

Metageograficzny styl: poradziecka przestrzeń i żydowskość w *Petropolis* Anji Ulinich

Streszczenie: Artykuł wprowadza kategorię metageograficznego stylu do analizy wybranych powieści poradzieckich żydowskich pisarzy północnoamerykańskich, którzy budują nowe konfiguracje przestrzenne w odniesieniu do byłego „Drugiego Świata”. Owe rekonfiguracje są dobrze widoczne w porównaniu ze współczesną nieemigrancką żydowską literaturą amerykańską, a szczególnie w porównaniu z powieściami post-holokaustowymi. Teksty literackie, które zachęcają nas do przemyślenia na nowo zakorzenionych przestrzennych i regionalnych podziałów geopolitycznych osadzone są jednocześnie w przestrzeni USA, jak i byłego Związku Sowieckiego. W ten sposób tworzą osie podobieństw oraz ich braku, które nie pokrywają się z hegemonicznym podziałem przestrzeni na „Pierwszy” i (były) „Drugi Świat”. Jako przykład, artykuł ten omawia *Petropolis* Anji Ulinich, ukazując transregionalne powiązania między miastem na Syberii, z którego pochodzi bohaterka książki, Żydówka afro-Rosjanka, a jej pierwotnym celem imigracji w USA — Phoenix w Arizonie.

Keywords: żydowski, poradziecki, imigracja, przestrzeń, region, Stany Zjednoczone

Метагеографічний стиль: постсовєтське просторство і єврейство в *Петрополісе* Ані Улініч

Резюме: В статті використовується категорія метагеографічного стилю для аналізу вибраних романів постсовєтських єврейських письменників із Північної Америки, які створюють нові просторові конфігурації по відношенню до колишнього „Другого світу”. Ці змієни конфігурації добре видно в порівнянні з сучасною неімігрантською єврейською американською літературою, особливо з романами постхолокасту. Літературні тексти, які заохочують переосмислити укоренившієся просторові і регіональні геополітичні роздієлення стосуються як просторства США, так і території колишнього Совеєтського Союзу. В результаті вони образують осі схоєства і їх недоедунков, які не євпадають з єгеомоністським роздієленням просторства на «Первий» і (колишній) «Второй мир». В якості приємера в цій статті розглядається «Петрополіс» Ані Улініч, показуюєя трансрегіональні зв'язи між єгородом в Сибірі, звідки єпроєходить єгероїня книги, Аєфро-русская єврейка, і єє єпервоначальним іміміграційним напрямленням в США — Єєнікс в Арізоні.

Ключевые слова: єврей, постсовєтський, іміміграція, просторство, регіон, США

If my work or my story can be considered anomalous it is only that [Irving] Howe didn't account for it. He, like many others, didn't, and probably couldn't, have anticipated that there would come another immigration from Eastern Europe in numbers sufficient enough to engender its own literature — really just a new branch sprouting from the old tree. The fact is that I have more in common with the writers Howe included in his anthology than with most of my contemporaries

— writes David Bezmozgis in his essay *The End of Jewish American Literature, Again*, alluding to the influential diagnosis suggested by Irving Howe in 1977¹. David Bezmozgis's piece with its claim of exceptionality or today's "anomalous[ness]" of his writing may be read as an attempt of self-stylization and another step in branding literary texts produced in English by Russian-speaking Jews in the US since the turn of the century². Yet in his next move, Bezmozgis firmly inscribes his work into the lineage of Jewish American writing while distancing himself from its current mainstream in the US, all of which he encapsulates in the metaphor of "a new branch from the old tree".

Bezmozgis's metaphor of "a new branch from the old tree", used in the context of the new, late twentieth-century waves of immigration from the former Soviet Union, points to a renewed spatial dynamic in contemporary Jewish North American writing.

¹ The research and writing of this article has been supported by the NCN grant no. 2018/31/D/HS2/02124. D. Bezmozgis, *The End of Jewish American Literature, Again*, "Tablet", <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/184354/bezmozgis-american-jewish-literature> [15.06.2020]. See also I. Howe, *Introduction*, in: I. Howe (ed.), *Jewish American Stories*, Penguin, New York 1977, pp. 1–17. Howe suggests calling Jewish American literature a "regional literature" per se based on its immigrant locale in the US (5).

² I am using here the tag "post-Soviet Jewish American writing" stressing its prevalent interest in (post) Soviet conditioning and Jewishness, and considering it — as, for instance, Bezmozgis suggests in his essay in the opening of this article — as a part of Jewish American fiction. The rubrics employed by Slavic Studies scholars include "Russian hybrid writers" (Karen Ryan), while Adrian Wanner uses the category "Russian-American" in the context of a transnational Russian diaspora. Adam Rovner underscores "multiply hyphenated identities nesting like matryoshka dolls" of "American Jewish Russian" writers, cf. see K. Ryan, *Failures of Domesticity in Contemporary Russian-American Literature: Vapnyar, Krasikov, Ulinich, and Reyn*, "TransCulturAl" 2011, vol. 1, no. 4, pp. 63–75; A. Wanner, *Moving Beyond the Russian-American Ghetto: The Fiction of Keith Gessen and Michael Idov*, "The Russian Review" 2014, vol. 73, pp. 281–296; A. Rovner, *So Easily Assimilated: The New Immigrant Chic*, "AJS Review" 2006, vol. 30, no. 2, p. 317. I believe that these tags are not essential and definitive, but rather contingent on the interest and interpretative contextualizing strategies of particular scholars and indicative of multiple disciplinary contexts these texts can be productively read in. All of the writers considered below — largely a generational cohort born in 1970s — write in English, which is considered also a new condition of this generation of specifically Russian American writers in general, see a text in general reference book: M. Tadevosyan and M. D. Shrayner, *Russian American Literature*, in: E. Nelson (ed.), *Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature*, vol. 3, Greenwood, Westport, CN 2005, pp. 1940–1951. If we limit "post-Soviet Jewish American writers" to this cohort, which I believe is heuristically beneficial, it is English language writing. Otherwise, it would need to include, for instance, work by the poet-artist Marina Temkina or David Shrayner-Petrov.

Namely, the authors that can be inscribed into this trend, such as Anya Ulinich, Lara Vapnyar, Gary Shteyngart and Bezmozgis himself — to mention just the most prolific writers — in various ways make the world region of the former Soviet Union, or the post-Soviet space, a defining feature of their work. While some of them may address American regionalisms, their defining trait is their being firmly in a dialogue with specific localities of the post-Soviet space. In this way, they may be read as attempting to question the unity of the “post-Soviet”, which in turn allows them to interrogate the hegemonic metageography of the first and (ex)second world or, in other words, commonplace divisions and received gendered meanings conventionally assigned to these spatial categories. Consequently, the spatio-temporal adjective “post-Soviet” in what I call “post-Soviet Jewish American literature” may be read as a strategically essentialist term employed to question the metageographies inherent in a good deal of contemporary mainstream Jewish American fiction, but which itself invites deconstruction as a misleadingly homogenizing category³.

To illustrate the “anomalousness” of the engagement of this group of writers with post-Soviet space — to invoke again Bezmozgis’s words — this article proceeds in three steps. First, it elaborates on the spatial affinities and disaffinities between post-Soviet writers and some of their mainstream Jewish American counterparts, notably recent post-Holocaust fiction. Approaching them as the “branch[es] sprouting from the same tree”, I trace their contrasting metageographies of the (ex)second world using Anya Ulinich’s short story *The Nurse and the Novelist* as an argumentative template. Second, I sketch variations on what may be called a metageographical style in post-Soviet Jewish American writers or their narrative production of the meanings of space. The texts that seem to intervene most effectively into the received notions of geopolitical space and regions are set both in American and post-Soviet spaces and places, so that they narratively forge regional affinities and disaffinities beyond the hegemonic spatial divide of the generalized first and (ex)second world. Also, they feature female post-Soviet Jewish protagonists that seem to effectively function as a litmus test for metageography. Consequently — and as a third step — this article concludes with a transregional reading of Anya Ulinich’s *Petropolis*, juxtaposing the place of origin

³ For the 1985 formulation about “a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest”, see G. Chakravorty Spivak, *Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography*, in: D. Landry and G. MacLean (ed.), *The Spivak Reader*, Routledge, London 1996, p. 214.

of its Jewish Afro-Russian protagonist Sasha Goldberg, the town of Asbestos 2 in Siberia with her initial immigrant American destination — Phoenix, Arizona. Creating transregional affinities of the borderlands, *Petropolis* goes beyond a restaging of the surface fascination with the gendered stereotypical Other and attempts to reconfigure such an exoticizing gaze. It functions as an example of how a focus on the production of post-Soviet space in this branch of Jewish American writing provides us with a broadened imagined — but not imaginary — geographies of American Jewishness.

Metageographies of Jewish American Writing

The quickly acquired prominence of post-Soviet Jewish American writing may be linked to its geopolitical positioning. Namely, this writing was an especially useful ground to celebrate “hybrid” identities with when the trend began in the early 2000s because this literature was culturally both close and far enough. This trend in literature is a variation on the hegemonic Ashkenazi tradition and as such easily could enter the canon of Jewish American literature⁴. The discursive construct of the “Soviet Jew”, re/produced in these texts, emerges as an updated version of a well-known figure of *Ostjude*, or Eastern European Jew, with its classic traits of primitivism and orientalism, so well-known from early twentieth-century Jewish American writing⁵. Even if this writing reveals deep-seated prejudices embedded in the concept of mainstream American Jewishness, these diagnoses echo earlier European and American writing from the last century.

Further, even if post-Soviet Jewish American writing is a variation on this well-known theme with a certain difference based in the geopolitical locatedness of these texts, the bent it introduces into the tradition of Ashkenazi writing may also be domesticated; that is, cast using well-known vocabulary within Jewish American literary studies. Namely, we can view this body of writing as a finally emerged twin of American Holocaust postmemory writing: the literature produced by ex-Soviet Jews, many of whom are the

⁴ On the tacitly assumed centrality of Ashkenazi culture in the US, see D. Kandiyoti, *What Is the “Jewish” in “Jewish American Literature”?*, “Studies in American Jewish Literature” 2012, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 48–60.

⁵ See S. Senderovich, *Scenes of Encounter: The “Soviet Jew” in Fiction by Russian Jewish Writers in America*, “Prooftexts” 2016, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 98–132.

descendants of Jews who were spared from the Holocaust in the East of Russia, the missing loop on a chain, as it were.

Yet, the relation of this literature to contemporaneous third generation American literary postmemory may be rather that of an “evil twin”⁶. Post-Soviet Jewish American writing — both directly and by association — exposes the basic tenets of how the post-Soviet space functions in this Holocaust literature. What is now the post-Soviet space is often rendered in the convention of magical realism, beyond the rules of socio-cultural logic, or as multi-mediated text of memory⁷. For instance, in Nicole Krauss’s highly acknowledged *The History of Love*, Eastern Europe is mostly recreated only within survivors’ memories of the long lost world. The only trace of its being in fact an existing political entity is a side note about a failed relationship of an adolescent protagonist with an immigrant post-Soviet Jew⁸.

Anya Ulinich makes a related diagnosis regarding contemporary American Holocaust literature in her short story, *The Novelist and the Nurse*⁹. Talking to the titular novelist — the author of a successful Holocaust novel *The Butterfly* and a thinly-veiled Jonathan Safran Foer, Ulinich’s character, the nurse suggests: “Where no one remembers the Jews, no one remembers the Jews”¹⁰. This short statement problematizes the unarticulated dissonance in *The Butterfly* between Holocaust memory in the US and the prevalent

⁶ Talking about an evil twin, understood as a constellation sharing a lot of characteristics with the other element of the pair, but through their slight displacement revealing its underlying aporia, I am influenced by: S. Stryker, *Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin*, “GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies” 2004, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 212–215.

⁷ For different ideological uses of magical realism, see e.g. E. L. Arva, *Writing the Vanishing Real: Hyperreality and Magical Realism*, “Journal of Narrative Theory” 2008, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 60–85 and M. Valdez Moses, *Magical Realism at World’s End*, “Literary Imagination: The Review of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics” 2001, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 105–133. While, for instance Arva in narratologically oriented writing analyzes magical realism as a useful aesthetic mode for representing trauma, “keep[ing] alive the illusion and the mystery inherent in phenomenal knowledge” (75), Valdez Moses’s cultural approach sees it as a kind of “sentimental compensatory fictions that allow, indeed encourage, their readers to indulge in a nostalgic longing for and an imaginary return to a world that is past, or passing away” (106). I believe that Valdez Moses’s point is especially valid when using magical realism backs up hegemonic metageography.

⁸ N. Krauss, *The History of Love: A Novel*, WW Norton & Company, New York 2006, also see my *Narratives of Generationality in 21st-Century North American Jewish Literature: Krauss, Bezmozgis, Kalman*, “Eastern European Jewish Affairs” 2016, vol. 46, no. 3, pp. 285–310. This contrast is only amplified by critical distance to the theme of the Holocaust in post-Soviet Jewish American fiction. E.g. Anya Ulinich in *Petropolis* briefly defamiliarizes American memorial culture as does Bezmozgis extensively in his short story *The Animal of Memory*, cf. A. Ulinich, *Petropolis*, Viking Penguin, New York 2007, D. Bezmozgis, *Natasha and Other Stories*, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York 2004. Boris Fishman’s *Replacement Life*, fully focusing on the theme of the can be also read in this vein, see B. Fishman, *Replacement Life*, Harper, New York 2014.

⁹ A. Ulinich, *The Nurse and the Novelist*, <https://pen.org/fiction-short-story/nurse-and-novelist> [15.06.2020].

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

attitudes and partly institutionalized forgetting toward anti-Jewish atrocities in post-Soviet space. For the Russian immigrant nurse in Ulinich's short story, this novel — strongly reminiscent of *Everything is Illuminated* by Safran Foer — seems to be based on the seeming transnational continuity of memorialization. Contrary to that, Ulinich reproaches such a projection of the US memory culture on Minsk with its Belarussian characters. She seems to make a categorical and provocative argument that "Where no one remembers the Jews", or where there is no politics of memory centered on Jewishness and the Holocaust, "no one remembers the Jews", or no individual would be interested in remembering and helping to build the memory of any Jew. In other words, and on a broader plane, her statement may be read as radically juxtaposing the early 21st-century spatio-temporal political reality with the fictional reality of the novel. Indeed, Belarus, for instance, remains one of the Eastern European countries with the least record of institutionalized Holocaust memory building¹¹.

Ulinich only further underscores this disconnect addressing the titular golden charm in the shape of the butterfly, a material witness with its distinct aura and a prompt for the memorial journey. We hear her character say: "Let me tell you a few things... Jewelry gets lost very easily. I mean, these are tiny things"¹². Further, the nurse's climactic *bon mot* in the short story follows the classic Saidian anti-orientalist logic exposing the constitution of the self through the other: "In your novels, past calamities are nothing but milestones of self-discovery"¹³. "Past calamities" are here historical events that are appropriated for individual identity construction and molded accordingly. This, in turn, leads to the flattening of their local characteristics and conditioning, putting them outside of historical change, frozen in the time of the Holocaust, or rather, the dominant narrative of the Holocaust¹⁴.

¹¹ Cf. M. Kucia, *The Europeanization of Holocaust Memory and Eastern Europe*, "East European Politics & Societies" 2016, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 97–119, esp. 113–114. If we follow the parallels between the novelist in the short story and Safran Foer, Ulinich changes the setting of Foer's novel from the Ukraine to Belarus. Yet for these two locations the argument proposed here still holds. A complementary critical perspective on how Eastern Europe is used in non-immigrant Jewish American literary texts, including Foer and Dara Horn, see J. Lambert, *Since 2000*, in: H. Wirth-Nesher (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Jewish American Literature*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, pp. 601–621.

¹² A. Ulinich, *The Nurse and the Novelist*...

¹³ *Ibidem*. On "material witness," see e.g. O. B. Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst and Boston 2003, p. 115.

¹⁴ I recognize the function and aesthetic value of these works of literature, but, at the same time, I want to draw attention of what kind of power relations they seem to reify. What I call here "flattening of the local context" is especially well visible in the protocols of constructing Holocaust museum, see, for instance, M. Hirsch and L. Spitzer, *Incongruous Images: "Before, During and After": The Holocaust*, "History and

Just like Ulinich's short story — with its impersonal, universalizing title — seems to function as an *exemplum*, the imaginary novel *The Butterfly* in this short story stands for the whole framework of representation that follows the established patterns of assigning meaning to geographical entities or of metageography¹⁵. Eastern Europe — Belarus in this case — can be rendered as this space without local characteristics and outside of historical change: in short, as oriental. As Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen emphasize in their critique of metageographical entities, the concepts of Orient and the East historically overlap while being defined by the hierarchical contrast to the cultural, political and/or economic self-definition of the West¹⁶. The discursive movement of Orient eastwards, to encompass China, Korea, Japan and peninsular Southeast Asia, nowadays precludes us from talking about the lands of East-Central Europe as “Europe’s Orient” as such anymore, but the orientalizing discursive traits still persist¹⁷. In this respect, the case of Belarus, invoked by Ulinich is especially telling. Belarus belongs to the post-Soviet and post-Holocaust world and may be included in the newer chronologically post-socialist designations of East-Central Europe, but — as a part of the former Soviet Union — its status in the metageographical imaginary is more determined by its proximity — also political proximity — to post-Soviet Russia and Russia’s “liminal position” between Europe and Asia, or even between West and East¹⁸.

Post-Soviet Jewish American fiction and the (re)writing of space

What, then, does Jewish American fiction written by post-Soviet immigrants offer in positive terms in relation to rethinking global

Theory” 2009, vol. 48, no. 4, 9–25. On East-Central European conditioning of the Holocaust in its multiple articulations, see J.-P. Himka, and J. B. Michlic, eds. *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE 2013.

¹⁵ M. W. Lewis and K. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1997.

¹⁶ There are many sources discussing the orientalizing of Eastern Europe with the classics including L. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1994, M. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009. Other, also newer, work will be address later in this article, but Lewis and Wigen are especially useful here because they offer a universal critique of geographical entities and their discursive genealogies.

¹⁷ M. W. Lewis and K. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents*. . . , p. 55, 58.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 48. The plethora of spatial terms mobilized here – post-Soviet space, Eastern Europe, East-Central Europe, the East, Orient, among others – and their frequent overlapping does not suggest their exchangeability. I am mostly talking about the post-Soviet space, i.e. the territory of the former Soviet Union because of how of the Jewish American fiction I focus on here – and its authors – has been conditioned politically, institutionally, and culturally by the (former) Soviet Union. Yet, at times it is useful to use other regional designations and their complementary imaginary.

spatial divisions? This fiction has the potential of intervening into metageography on two different, but interrelated levels. These levels are parallel to the theoretical interventions into postcolonial theory once it has traveled to consider the locations of East-Central Europe and Russia: the first one draws attention to the diversity of the broadly post-socialist and, here more specifically, post-Soviet space, while the other tries to re-imagine larger geopolitical divides beyond the Cold War map.

The emphasis on diversity and, as Madina Tlostanova puts it, imagining “ex-second world as a diverse, contradictory, non-homogenous, semi-alterity with its unique intersectionality” is central to the project¹⁹. This formulation stresses that what has been stabilized by the Iron Curtain as the East, should not be made uniform again by a simple application of postcolonial theory to the “ex-second world” with imperial Russia/Soviet Union simply stepping into the shoes of a Western imperial power, as early critics suggested²⁰. This would, first, run the risk of making uniform the post-socialist/postcommunist countries and regions, as well as Russia/Soviet Union itself²¹. Second, such a move would simply equate Russia/Soviet Union with a Western empire: instead of nuancing meta-geography, it superficially revamps the valences ascribed to Russia/Soviet Union. In contrast, Tlostanova imagines the characteristics of the second world empire as multiple power asymmetries:

In the case of Russia/the Soviet Union and its colonies, in my view, it will be a narrative of a Janus-faced empire which always felt itself like a colony in the presence of the West, as the imperial difference generated Russia’s secondary status in European eyes and, consequently, as open or hidden orientalization²².

Such imperial asymmetries are especially meaningful if we turn to literary texts directly juxtaposing a particular (post)Soviet space with a US American regional setting. Such staged literary juxtapo-

¹⁹ M. Tlostanova, *Why the post-Socialist Cannot Speak*, in: S. Broeck and C. Junker (eds.), *Postcoloniality-Decoloniality-Black Critique: Joints and Fissures*, Campus Verlag, Frankfurt a. M. 2014, p. 169.

²⁰ D. Chioni Moore, *Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique*, “PMLA” 2001, vol. 116/1, pp. 111–128. For a critical view on Chioni’s text along these lines, see: M. Tlostanova, *Postcolonial Theory, the Decolonial Option, and Post-socialist Writing*, in: D. Pucherová, and R. Gáfrík, (ed.), *Postcolonial Europe? Essays on Post-Communist Literatures and Cultures*, Brill, Leiden 2015, pp. 28–29.

²¹ On different valences of “post-socialist” and “post-communist,” see e.g. A. Dingsdale, *New Geographies of Post-socialist Europe*, “Geographical Journal” 1999, vol. 165, no. 2, p. 146.

²² M. Tlostanova, *Why the post-Socialist Cannot Speak*, p. 169. Because of these larger global asymmetries, some scholars re-working postcolonial framework in reference to post-socialist Europe and post-Soviet space call it post-dependence studies. For an institutionalized post-dependence studies network, see: http://www.cbdp.polon.uw.edu.pl/index_eng.html. [10.09.2020].

sitions become an injunction for comparative readings of “posts”. As Dorota Kolodziejczyk and Cristina Șandru, referring to Katherine Verdery and Sharad Chari, suggest, reading postcolonialism and postsocialism together can be epistemologically beneficial because of various kinds of overlapping of the two, which can also help us to further expose the conditions of the constructedness of “Three Worlds”²³.

While Post-Soviet Jewish American fiction has the potential of nuancing our understanding of metageography and expanding the spatialized notions of American Jewishness, the function of the post-Soviet space and its relation to American settings varies and seems to be evolving. To be sure, some of the texts are exclusively set in the US and are to a small degree engaged in rethinking the hegemonic spatial divide sketched above, although they may be actively attempting to rewrite the mental social map. Good examples of this would be David Bezmozgis’s *Natasha and Other Stories* (2004), Nadia Kalman’s *The Cosmopolitans* (2010), Boris Fishman’s, *The Replacement Life* (2014). Their settings are most often urban East Coast, with the exception of Bezmozgis’s Toronto, which reflects the regional and locational factual prevalence of post-Soviet Jewish immigrants and the classic locale of Jewish American fiction²⁴. As such, these novels propel further however here geographically limited Jewish “urban regionalism”²⁵.

Another group of texts is set exclusively in the (former) Soviet Union as, for instance, Ellen Litman’s *Mannequin Girl* (2014) or David Bezmozgis’s *The Betrayers* (2014), and some of Lara Vapnyar’s short stories. These novels and short stories directly focus on particular places and regions and could be engaged in rewriting the metageography of the post-Soviet space by exposing its diversity and its inherent regional power relations and how these conditioned localized versions of Jewishness. Yet, these texts most often focus on the emblematic location of Moscow, rather mirroring the hegemonic geographic horizon of expectations.

²³ D. Kolodziejczyk and C. Șandru, *Introduction: On Colonialism, Communism and East-Central Europe—Some Reflections*, “Journal of Postcolonial Writing” 2012, vol. 48, no. 2, p. 115. See also: K. Verdery and S. Chari, *Thinking between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography after the Cold War*, “Comparative Studies in Societies and History” 2009, vol. 51, no.1, pp. 6–34.

²⁴ J. D. Sarna, *Toward a Comprehensive Policy Planning for Russian-Speaking Jews in North America*, <http://www.brandeis.edu/hornstein/sarna/contemporaryjewishlife/russian-speakingjewscomeofage-jppi.pdf> [15.06.2020]. See also: Y. Klots, *The Ultimate City: New York in Russian Immigrant Narratives*, “The Slavic and East European Journal” 2011, vol. 55, no. 1, pp. 38–57.

²⁵ Cf. W. R. Ferris, D. Dash Moore, J. Shelton Reed, T. Rosengarten, and G. J. Sanchez, *Regionalism: The Significance of Place in American Jewish Life*, “American Jewish History” 2007, vol. 93, no. 2, p. 116.

Finally, a grouping of novels from the subgenre can be read as directly renegotiating the spatial divide between the US and the former Soviet Union by them being set in both spaces and they include Anya Ulinich's *Petropolis* (2007) — the focus in the remainder of this article²⁶. To be precise, this renegotiation is enabled by setting the novel in specific regional spaces and places in the US and in the post-Soviet space, and forging links based on this precise setting and the interaction with them and in them²⁷. Ulinich pairs together the borderlands of Siberia and the Southwest, that is Arizona, only later to engage more a traditional locale of Jewish American fiction such as Chicago and New York City. The novel uses a female protagonist to test the meanings — gendered meanings — assigned to the (ex)second world. Because of the long-standing orientalizing and thus feminization of the post-Soviet space, female protagonists seem to function as a litmus test, as it were, of metageography. The alternative links between these regions and landscapes are forged within what can be called a metageographical style of this novel. Namely, the meaning assigned to the spaces are crafted and rewritten via aesthetic narrative means.

Transregional alliance of the borderlands

Anya Ulinich's *Petropolis* is an American immigration tale of a nominally Jewish, Afro-Russian teenager, Sasha Goldberg, born and raised in the industrial Soviet and post-Soviet Siberian small town, which she flees from, leaving behind her mother and her baby

²⁶ Other literary texts — novels, graphic novels, memoirs, and short stories — set in both spaces include: Gary Shteyngart's *Absurdistan* (2006), Lara Vapnyar's *The Scent of Pine* (2014), Yelena Akhtiorskaya's *Panic in the Suitcase* (2014), Anya Ulinich's *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel* (2014), Sana Kraskov's *The Patriots* (2017), Keith Gessen's *A Terrible Country* (2018), Boris Fishman's *Savage Feast* (2018), Maria Kuznetsova's *Oksana, Behave!* (2019), selected short stories by David Bezmozgis from *Immigrant City* (2019). For a discussion of *Absurdistan* and some of the literary texts that I included in the first category (set exclusively in the US on the East coast), see: Anna Katsnelson, *Transnationalism in Contemporary Post-Soviet North American Literature*, "Twentieth-Century Literature" 2019, vol. 65, no. 1–2, pp. 145–166.

²⁷ If we think about negotiating spatial networks, two other directions are possible to conceptualize, which are not the focus of this article. First, linking based not directly through spatial coordinates, but intertextuality, as, for instance in Irina Reyn's *What Happened to Anna K.*; for a discussion of this direction that argues that "similar to postcolonial and other diasporic writers, Russian-American writers' intertextual use is inextricably linked with a negotiation of cultural identities," see Y. Furman, *Hybridizing the Canon: Russian-American Writers in Dialogue with Russian Literature*, "Canadian Slavonic Papers" 2016, vol. 58, no. 3, pp. 205–228; here: 205. Another direction would be designing a larger network of locations, including the Western and Central Europe as in Michael Idov's *Ground Up* or Gary Shteyngart's *Russian Debutantes Handbook* and *Super Sad True Love Story*; however, these works are rather not interested in intervening into the existing metageographical scheme.

daughter. As Adrian Wanner has noted, Ulinich uses various American and, some of them more generally, Western clichés about Russia and Russians, which includes setting a part of the novel in the Russian Northeast and thus “tap[ping] into the Western fascination with the quintessentially Russian ‘heart of darkness’”²⁸. Indeed, Ulinich creates an unapologetically somber depiction of Sasha Goldberg’s home town, Asbestos 2 as a space of forced exile and a forsaken promise for the country’s economic upheaval. Yet, *Petropolis* goes beyond this restaging of the surface fascination with the stereotypical Other and attempts to reconfigure this exoticizing gaze, by pairing the Russian borderland location with the American Southwest where Sasha emigrates to first²⁹. Her metageographical style manifests here precisely as this pairing of the borderlands within a “post-frontier horizons,” to use Stephen Tatum’s phrase³⁰. In doing this, Ulinich’s novel is able to ask questions about the relationships between the regional and global, as well as the meaning of global transregional affinities and the place of Jewishness within these locations.

Asbestos 2 is the initial setting of the first part of the novel where the readers encounter Sasha Goldberg. Later, when Sasha is already in the US, Ulinich revisits it in its media representation, TV and newspaper, and also Asbestos 2 returns a few times with Sasha’s trips back to Siberia. Such a composition is key because throughout the novel Asbestos 2 remains a point of reference, a dynamic geopolitical location defined by familial ties and determined by historical contingencies. It is not a recreated site of memory or Pierre Nora’s *le lieu de memoir*. Rather, it is staged as a space of lived experienced, lived or “real environment”, of memory, *le milieu de memoir*, even if, in some instances, visually mediated for the protagonist³¹.

The first part of *Petropolis* — providing us with snippets of Sasha Goldberg’s family story — retraces the key elements of historically varying imperial symbolic geography of Siberia. Within Russian metageography, Mark Bassin distinguishes three layers of meaning invested in “Siberia” since the 18th century: first, casting

²⁸ A. Wanner, *Out of Russia: Fictions of a New Translingual Diaspora*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL 2011, p. 168.

²⁹ Apart from Phoenix, other parts of the novel are set in urban centers, well-known in Jewish-American literary imaginary, that is Chicago and environs and New York City, mostly Brooklyn. My claim here is that the initial American setting of the novel is crucial for her self-perception as a migrant. The character’s relocation to Chicago and New York City is predicated upon the support system among fellow Russian immigrants and on her genealogical ties to her father living in New York City.

³⁰ Cf. S. Tatum, *Postfrontier Horizons*, “MFS Modern Fiction Studies” 2004, vol. 50, no. 2, pp. 460–468.

³¹ P. Nora, *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire*, “Representations” 1989, vol. 26, p. 7.

the Russian Northeast in positive terms as a national “gold mine” or economic powerhouse; second, in negative, cultural terms, as the grim space of forced exile, and third, in revolutionary terms, as an alternative promising frontier, a space of renewal³². Bassin sees these three levels of geographical meaning as ordered partly chronologically: it is especially the case with the transition from Siberia signifying the gold mine to being cast as a place of detention or prison in the early century. Yet, particularly in the 20th century, these domains of signification overlap, thus creating together a “multifarious” cultural space with a range of meanings depending on the ideologies in the center³³.

Similarly, these metageographical tropes converge in the protagonist’s family story: Sasha’s family story relives the exile trope with her maternal grandmother, Evgenia Nechaeva, having been deported from Leningrad in 1941 as “the Wife of the Enemy of the People” after her professor husband had perished³⁴. The penitentiary past of Asbestos 2 as a former administrative center for the Gulag — previously one of myriad of Stalinskys in the Soviet Union — continues into the early 1990s as a site of a prison, Strict Regime Colony³⁵. The prison’s proximity shapes the environment of Asbestos 2 as the former felons — often together with their families — tend to stay in town after serving their sentence. And it also shaped Sasha’s mother, Lubov’s romantic choices. She was dreaming about any outsider, “a man without tattoos, a scientist on his trip”, an image that she found in Sasha’s father — an orphan Afro-Russian army recruit who was raised by prominent Muscovite Jew, Victor Goldberg³⁶. Second, the renaming of the town as Asbestos 2 in the post-Stalin era points to the initial cultural and economic significance of Siberia as a trove of natural resources, specifically renewed under Stalin³⁷. Asbestos mine and asbestos mill define the town economy and for a time provide employment for Sasha’s mother. Finally, the story line of the Kotelnikov family

³² M. Bassin, *Inventing Siberia: Visions of the Russian East in the Early Nineteenth Century*, “American Historical Review” 1991, vol. 96, no. 3, pp. 763–794, esp. 770–777. Bassin explicitly states that he is reading Siberia along the American critique of the American frontier. Such anti-imperial approaches seem to provide the most progressive perspective on the Russian North-East, providing also a starting point for ethnographic research. For an approach to Siberia as a “contact zone,” generally more in tune with most progressive strands in New Western Studies, see E.-M. Stolberg, *The Siberian Frontier Between “White Mission” and “Yellow Peril,” 1890s–1920s*, “Nationalities Papers” 2004, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 165–181. However, this kind of approach does not correspond to Ulinich’s metageographical style.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 766.

³⁴ A. Ulinich, *Petropolis...*, p. 56.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 59.

³⁷ A. Wood, *Russia’s Frozen Frontier: A History of Siberia*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2010.

— including Sasha’s boyfriend and father of her daughter — can be read as embodying a failed promise of renewal in the borderlands. The family, who were from European part of Russia living on a “miserable” collective farm volunteered to come to Siberia to build the Baikal-Amur Railroad³⁸. Yet the construction plans never materialized and a group of three hundred people ended up living in tents and then giant concrete pipes, “barrels” next to the town’s trash dump³⁹.

Consequently, Ulinich establishes Asbestos 2 as place with conflicting valences. On the one hand, it functions as a “postapocalyptic place” that “grew out of the demise of civilization”, an “ugly little town with a miserable name”, “a place unsuitable for living”, even before its economic post-Soviet collapse that we witness later in the novel⁴⁰. On the other hand, Ulinich — narrating its story centered around an intelligentsia family — makes an effort to stage its cultural institutions and its inhabitants — and Sasha’s — engagements with the arts. As she puts it: “Occasional exiled dissidents and descendants of the postwar shipment of ‘landless cosmopolitans’ provided the necessary culture”⁴¹. While Sasha’s mother, a local librarian, is one of the elements of this “necessary culture”, so are Sasha’s art classes in the makeshift atelier AFTER EATIN or “world-famous” icon painter Alufiev living in one of the barrels at the dump⁴². This can be read as satire on intelligentsia, willing to see and tend to culture under any circumstances and against all odds: Lubov marries Victor Goldberg because he knows his Mandelstam. But also this staging of Asbestos 2 seems to channel the utopia of the borderlands with the vision of this “necessary culture” and high art transcending class constraints.

Ulinich envisions Asbestos 2 as stratified rather horizontally with regard to social class, but historically highly improbable romance and marriage in the novel between Sasha’s mother and an Afro-Russian Victor Goldberg — raised up to a certain point by a prominent Soviet Jewish engineer — and its product, Sasha serve as a focal point of racial and ethnic tensions. Giving Sasha her father’s conspicuously Jewish-sounding name Goldberg her parents hope to obscure her being black. It may be a spoof on identity politics *à la américaine*, but still serves as a functional tool to expose natu-

³⁸ A. Ulinich, *Petropolis...*, p. 49.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 62.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 69.

ralized norms of Jewishness and Russianness on both in Asbestos and Phoenix.

This utopian traces of the otherwise “post-apocalyptic” Siberian frontier are crucial for forging a “trans-regional alliance” between Sasha’s place of origin and her first destination in the US⁴³. After giving birth to her daughter, Sasha leaves the baby with her own mother to go on and study art at a renowned school in Moscow. Her stint in the metropolis is embarrassingly short: soon she signs up for an international bridal agency “Kupid’s Korner” catering to Americans and finds herself, a “mail order bride” with a study visa on her way to her fiancé in Phoenix⁴⁴. For Sasha Goldberg, Phoenix is “a perfect place to erase herself”⁴⁵. There is seemingly nobody around who can interpellate her into her earlier pre-established identity. What she sees, is a perfect urban utopia: “At a distance, a cluster of tall buildings stood wrapped in a brown haze, but roads dominated the scenery: straight, wide, impossibly even, flanked by equally perfect, empty sidewalks”⁴⁶.

Sasha’s becoming “unseen” is also predicated on the ethnic make-up of the border region: with relatively scarce post-Soviet immigrant population and the racialized ethnic Mexican other, in Ulinich’s narrative, she is able to stay invisible, just “a very dark Jew”⁴⁷. Channeling her fiancé and also referring to her fellow post-Soviet Jewish immigrant friend Marina, Sasha notices: “He probably figured Sasha was one those black Russians, the way Marina’s neighbors from the Palisades assumed Ukraine was full of Mexicans, asking Marina what language Mexicans spoke in Donetsk”⁴⁸. These apparently empathetic lines of thinking point to the domesticating of the post-Soviet space: they assume that not only parallel, but exactly the same strands of imperial logic are dominant there⁴⁹.

While Ulinich mimicks dominant imperial metageography she encounters in Arizona, Sasha’s character points to transregional parallels between Arizona and Siberia based in their environment and gender relations. In the few instances that Ulinich refers to the environment of the South West, she suggests that its natural con-

⁴³ I am borrowing this phrase from Carrie Tirado Bramen who talks about forging such a link between the regions within the US, see *The Uses of Variety: Modern Americanism and the Quest for National Distinctiveness*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 134.

⁴⁴ A. Ulinich, *Petropolis*. . . , p. 109.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 117.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 109.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 134.

⁴⁹ Ulinich has a localized corrective, as it were, to this kind of parallelisms: later Sasha transferring in Moscow, points out that now “black” in Russian metropolis denotes origins in Caucasus, see *ibidem*, p. 280.

ditions do not even seem natural. Namely, Sasha “imagined that aliens had abducted the people here, while the wind from their spacecraft killed and mangled the plants, leaving an occasional is squat cactus, a crooked palm tree, and evergreen hedge...”⁵⁰. It on this level of the degree of prodigious human intervention into the adversarial environment in the American Southwest that she perceives its resemblance to the Russian Northeast: “Whose idea was it to build the city here? You can’t open the windows, you can’t go outside for five months”⁵¹. The question that her friend, Marina asks consecutively “Are you telling me it’s worse than Siberia?” is answered in the negative. This difference thus is only produced after a potential for comparison is suggested.

Casting Sasha as a transatlantic mail order bride, Ulinich may be playing into the imaginary of Russian women as a commodity, but this pre-arranged relationship can be read within a broader logic of regional affinity and the relative gender non-normativity at the national geographic peripheries. As the bridal agency employee predictably suggests, Neil and other Americans come to Russia to find unspoiled traditional femininity in women, potential future wives. Sasha is advertised according to their expectations, as an orientalized “Passionate Dark Beauty”⁵². Yet gender relations in Asbestos are far from the eternal femininity of the bourgeois ideal — with “the failure of domesticity” being but one of its manifestations⁵³. For various historically conditioned reasons and with the short-lived exception of her father, Sasha’s multigenerational family in Asbestos consisted of female members only. Moreover, this gender imbalance extends further to encompass seemingly all men in Asbestos 2, who are not destined to survive. It is a reverse of the standard gender imbalance in early settler communities, sometimes resulting in the necessity to systematically import brides⁵⁴. However satirically, with sending off Sasha to Arizona, Ulinich narratively repeats both the move of importing brides to the once male-dominated peripheries. At the same time, to an extent, this plot development emulates her own mother’s accidental un-

⁵⁰ Ibidem.

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 121.

⁵² Ibidem, p. 109.

⁵³ For “failure of domesticity” as a defining feature of femininities in the subgenre, see K. Ryan, *Failures of Domesticity*.

⁵⁴ On gender imbalance in 19th-century Southwest, see E. Jameson, *Bringing It All Back Home: Rethinking the History of Women and the Nineteenth-Century West*, in: W. Daverell (ed.), *A Companion to the American West*, Blackwell, Oxford 2004. On earlier “importing” brides to Siberia, see A. Wood, *The Frozen Frontier*, p. 233. On western space as “gendered male,” see K. Comer, *Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women’s Writing*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC 1999, p. 27.

ion with her father, a non-native Asbestonian who almost literally happened to fall into her lap. In this post-Soviet world — understood as a narrative framework extending into the US — not only sentimental tiny golden charms have no chance of surviving, but also their prerequisite, idealized heteronormative romantic love, does not have a place.

* * *

Metageographical style in *Petropolis* works primarily on the level of setting, character construction, and plot development. In addition and as if in conversation with Ulinich's short story *The Novelist and the Nurse* discussed earlier, *Petropolis* explicitly refuses to use magic realism. Commenting on reading tea leaves by a local clairvoyant in Asbestos 2, the narrator explains: "Even as a young child, Sasha had no patience for magic. At one point, her intolerance for proper fairy tales limited her reading choices to saccharine accounts of Lenin's boyhood and blood-soaked war stories"⁵⁵.

Post-Soviet Jewish American literature, this "new branch from the old tree", and also *Petropolis* as its example, may not seem very "Jewish American". In my analysis of *Petropolis*, I purposefully focused on Sasha's first immigration destination where — characteristically — her negotiation of Jewishness does not take place in the context of American Jewishness. Later parts of the novel hyperbolically demonstrate her conflict with the dominant mode of American Jewishness with the ultra-rich suburban family of the Tarakans that hold her almost captive as their "pet Soviet Jew"⁵⁶. However, metageographical style that especially sets the tone in the first parts of the text, works hand in hand with this staged contrast between what Jewishness is in the US.

The dominant metageography with its clear divisions and hierarchy is the prerequisite of some mainstream prominent Jewish American literary works, as well as partly American Jewishness as such. Renegotiating metageography, for instance crafting specific transregional affiliations, post-Soviet Jewish American literature intervenes into the dominant mode of American Jewishness. These texts envision what it could look like when it is strongly secular and with current regional genealogies in the "post-Soviet" space. What I have called "metageographical style" encapsulates how spatial meanings can be effectively reconfigured through aesthetic means — in this case, narrative constructs in a novel.

⁵⁵ A. Ulinich, *Petropolis* . . . , p. 79.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 230.