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Geocorporeality and the Unbeautiful Body in Contemporary Russian-American Fiction

1 Situating Olga Grushin in the Russian-American Cohort

The present-day cohort of Russian-speaking North American writers, generally referred to simply but not fully accurately as "Russian-American writers", consists of artists born in the Soviet Union from the early 1970s through the middle of the 1980s. Not all of them are from what is now the Russian Federation[1] but they share Russian as a first or originary language (Ryan 2013, 27). All have immigrated to the U.S. or Canada and have become English-language writers. While many of them settled in New York City and many of their works take place there (Klots 2011), their geographic range, both lived and literary, remains broad:[2] Bezmozgis lives in Toronto and his 2019 short story collection, *Immigrant City*, "is very much a Toronto book" (Ghert-Zand 2019); Moscow native Ellen Litman's *The Last Chicken in America* (2007a) is very much a *Pittsburgh* book, revolving around Russian-speaking immigrants in the Pennsylvania city to which she arrived with her parents; Anya Ulinich, who is also from Moscow, first settled in Phoenix, Arizona, with her parents and brother (Ulinich 2007b) and includes scenes from Phoenix and Chicago, as well as New York City, in her novel *Petropolis* (2007a).

These geographically anchored novels contrast with those written by Olga Grushin, whose work resists being located on a map. Grushin, a Russian-speaking American writer who is an age-group peer of the larger cohort, won critical acclaim with her first novel, *The Dream Life of Sukhanov* (2005), for which she received the 2007 New York Public Library Young Lions Award. *Sukhanov* and Grushin's subsequent novels, *The Line* (2010), *Forty Rooms* (2016) and *The Charmed Wife* (2021), explore storytelling, communication, problems of speaking and listening and, centrally, the conflicts between a person's artistic and everyday life. Grushin's stylistic variations and reliance on literary and artistic history

1 Sana Krasikov was born in Ukraine and grew up in the Republic of Georgia; Yelena Akhtiorskaya grew up in Odesa, Ukraine; David Bezmozgis is from Riga, Latvia.

2 Klots argues that the New York City group is not so much continuing the "*gudzonskaia nota*" ("Hudson note") or "'New York text' of Russian literature" (2011, 38) as conveying the "experience of adjusting to New York [. . .] that contemporary immigrant writers share" (2011, 55), regardless of their country and language of origin.

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form a conscious program of exploring uncertainty, particularly the unsteadiness of identity. There is no "typical" Grushin character, setting, plot[3] or style. Each novel suggests debts to earlier artists via direct citation (for example, Botticelli, Akhmatova, Annensky), intertextual allusion (Nabokov, Chagall, Poe, Gilman, Rhys) and blunt homage (Sorokin, Woolf, Perrault).

Viewing Grushin as a novelist of uncertainty reveals a metanarrative that evokes the upheavals of Soviet collapse, immigration and the lived experience of travelling women. While collapse and immigration provide the focus of many works by other contemporary Russian-speaking North American writers, Grushin's connection to these potential peers has been marginalised in the scholarship to date. When she appears at all in works that treat the group as a whole, it is usually as an exception or a footnote. Although Grushin shares many of the group's characteristics, her differences, specifically with respect to immigration history and ethnicity, have complicated attempts to find common ground between her work and theirs.

While the writers in the cohort share the Soviet Union as point of origin, Russian as originary language and English as language of composition, they also identify as Jewish, a characteristic that Grushin does not share (Wanner 2011, 18). For many of these writers, being Jewish motivated their departure from their country of origin.[4] Post-migration, the level at which the writers have embraced Jewish religious practice varies. However, the shift in identity affected by the way their

3 *The Dream Life of Sukhanov* revisits Moscow in the last years of the Soviet period and includes scenes that take place during the Purges and the Thaw. *The Line* refuses to name its city, country, or era yet compellingly evokes post-Stalinist Soviet life. *Forty Rooms* introduces Grushin's first immigrant protagonist and follows that character from her Soviet childhood to her American university education and her years spent raising six children in suffocating, upper-middle-class American splendor. *The Charmed Wife* moves away from direct connection to Russia or the Soviet Union: it begins in a long-ago fairytale world complete with witches and anthropomorphised mice and ends in what feels like the present day, in a gritty New York City apartment.

4 These writers left the Soviet Union as part of the Third and Fourth Waves of Russian-speaking immigration to the U.S. The Third Wave occurred in the 1970s, made possible by the relaxing of restrictions on emigration from the Soviet Union as a consequence of the Helsinki agreements of 1975 (Gitelman 2001, 183) and of the U.S. Jackson-Vanik Amendment to the 1974 Trade Act. The Amendment required that non-market economies, including the Soviet Union, ease restrictions on emigration if they wished to sustain normal trade with the United States and acquire most-favoured nation status (Moh 2010; Beyer 2013). Later immigrants belong to the Fourth Wave, which began in the late 1980s and accelerated with the Soviet collapse of 1991. While the search for economic stability has been a key driver of the Fourth Wave, a number of the writers, including Litman (2007b) and Ulinich (Stromberg 2007), note that their families' departures were spurred by increasing racism and anti-Semitism in the post-Soviet states. See also Gitelman (2013) for patterns of Russian Jewish migration from 1971 to 2007.

new societies perceive them features frequently in their fiction, memoirs and essays. From being labelled as Jewish in the Soviet world, these writers and their families find themselves suddenly, unexpectedly becoming Russian in the receiving country – opening a door to comparison to the instability of identity in Grushin's works. As Adrian Wanner acknowledges, "[t]he relation between the Russian newcomers and the American-born Jews is in fact characterized by a fair amount of friction and misgivings" (2012, 159). Poignant and often funny scenes unfold in works by Litman, Gary Shteyngart, Lara Vapnyar, Ulinich, Yelena Akhtiorskaya, Irina Reyn and others in which characters navigate the cultural chasm between observant American Jews and their own highly secular families.

Grushin took a different, unusual path to the United States. She left the USSR not as an immigrant or exile but, thanks to her father's social capital, as a student: in 1989, she became the first Soviet citizen permitted to enroll for a bachelor's degree in the U.S., at Emory University.[5] While she was at Emory, the USSR ceased to exist, making her an accidental immigrant – a status that the protagonist of *Forty Rooms* seems to share (Grushin 2016, 110). Although Wanner observes that the other writers "tend to present themselves as partially alienated strangers engaged in diasporic networks" (2011, 10), Grushin shuns the diasporic network entirely, both in her public authorial persona and in her fiction. It is small wonder, then, that Grushin is marginalised in the incisive work done on this cohort by scholars such as Yelena Furman, Yasha Klots, Margarita Levantovskaya, Wanner[6] and others. This article begins to redress that omission, presenting a reading of Grushin's third novel, *Forty Rooms* (2016), that uncovers new points of contact with some of her Russian-American peers.

In multiple works by authors in this group, the alienation caused by geographic and cultural displacement becomes visible via characters' bodies. In some cases, such as Misha Vainberg's disastrous circumcision in Shteyngart's *Absurdistan* (2006), bodily changes are made deliberately, if not willingly, to enable the character to fit into their new environment. Other characters show displacement and identity transformation through more gradual changes, some on the surface and others integral: grandfathers Grigory Semyonovich in Vapnyar's

5 Through her father, the eminent Soviet sociologist Boris Grushin, Olga met American sociologist Ellen Mickiewicz. With Mickiewicz's support, Olga was granted a scholarship to Emory.

6 Wanner discusses Grushin's first two novels, *The Dream Life of Sukhanov* and *The Line*, in his chapter in *Out of Russia* on contemporary Russian-American writers. He concludes that "[h]er approach resembles most of all" not that of her Russian-speaking age-group peers who, like Grushin, live in North America and write in English, but "that of Andreï Makine" (2011, 183), a Russian-born writer 14 years Grushin's senior who requested political asylum in France in 1987 (Wanner 2011, 21–22) and who writes in French.

story "Mistress" (2003) and Robert in Akhtiorskaya's *Panic in a Suitcase* (2014) each watch their pre-immigration status disappear after settling in the United States. Grigory's "five good suits that he used to wear to work in Russia" now are only half used, "the trousers [worn] at home and the jackets hung in a closet with mothballs in their pockets" (Vapnyar 2003, 99). Robert's diminishment shows in his body and in its changed relationship to his clothing: "The admirably, reassuringly plump Robert [. . .] was no more. He was gaunt [. . .]. He became wholly implausible as a physician. [. . .] His clothes hadn't changed, the same two charcoal suits that now looked like bunkers in which Robert was hiding" (Akhtiorskaya 2014, 39–40). Each man's physical essence has faded or been compressed in emigration.

I refer to this phenomenon as geocorporeality, a term that has only recently been used in literary criticism (Welsh 2023a, 2023b; Helm 2023).[7] Geocorporeality includes a range of devices and phenomena: direct comparisons between body and place; direct bodily reflections, both superficial and inherent, of changes in role and identity wrought by migration, such as in the examples given above; and works in which characters' bodies respond to post-migration identity transformation in more subtle ways. While the preceding examples demonstrate that geocorporeality may apply to male characters, I argue that female characters, particularly female protagonists in works by female-identifying authors, experience geocorporeality in ways that resonate with feminist theory. *Forty Rooms*, for example, features a number of firsts for Grushin that are important to my argument: the protagonist is female, and is an immigrant who leaves late-Soviet Russia for the United States. Grushin devotes sustained attention to the protagonist's body, marking a turn toward exploring feminist questions. By the end of the novel, that body becomes, in the protagonist's own words, "old [and] fat" (2016, 260). Works by Akhtiorsakaya (*Panic in a Suitcase*, 2014) and Ulinich (*Petropolis*, 2007a; *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel*, 2014)[8] also feature female immigrant protagonists whose bodies are unvarnished and at times viewed as grotesque. These "unbeautiful" bodies are all examples of geocorporeality. They provide a new way to talk about Russian-speaking American writers, one that expands the conversation to include writers such as Grushin who differ in some signal way from the major-

7 Matthew Joseph Helm's article (2023) applying geocorporeality to Bosnian-American writer Aleksandar Hemon's novel *Nowhere Man* was published as my work on the present article was concluding. Taken together, my article and Helm's suggest that geocorporeality has rich promise as a tool for literary criticism.

8 Akhtiorskaya and Ulinich are very much a part of the cohort discussed above. Both were born in the Soviet Union to Russian-speaking Jewish families, both migrated to the U.S., and both write in English.

ity. The next portion of this article describes the origin of geocorporeality, after which I analyse geocorporeality in works by three travelling women: Akhtiorskaya, Ulinich and Grushin.

2 Geocorporeality: Origin and Potential

Geocorporeality first appears as a critical term in work by Paul Higate, a British sociologist and former non-commissioned officer in the Royal Air Force who studies private militarised and security contractors (PMSCs). In the world of PMSCs, male bodies take on "a unique exchange value"; they are weaponised, valued for their physical prowess and potential both to inflict and endure violence (Higate 2012, 357). The novels I am studying, on the other hand, tend to point to the limited exchange value of the immigrant body, especially the immigrant female body: that body is valuable to its new community as an often-exoticised sexual partner and as a potential mother, a producer of heirs.[9]

In reframing geocorporeality as a way to discuss immigrant women's writing and immigrant women's bodies, I note two provocative points of contact between this new context and the highly masculinised and militarised context for which Higate developed the term. First, the sense of foreignness experienced by soldiers who return to civilian life echoes responses to immigration and exile, as in this quotation from a former soldier who asks: "When the army kicks you out at a youthful forty or so, what else do you do? [. . .] All the experience you have, whilst transferable, is in *a language and working environment that is totally alien to the majority*" (2012, 362 [emphasis mine], citing Geraghty 2007, 15). This same speaker continues, in a passage not cited by Higate: "'As someone who has sought work in the civilian sector I find it extremely hard to deal with recruiters. *I speak a different language and have a career history that is meaningless to them*'" (Geraghty 2007, 15 [emphasis mine]). This sense of alienation, of having a history and a language incomprehensible to those around them, strongly evokes the immigrant experience across gender identities.[10]

9 In Akhtiorskaya (2014), this issue is not actualised.

10 Shteyngart and Chang-rae Lee, for example, have said that in immigrant fiction, "you're dealing with an alternate society, where things aren't working well" (Shteyngart) and "where all the rules are upside down – [. . .] where people don't see you as fully human, where you don't speak the language, and where all the conduct and practices are a mystery and maybe sometimes dangerous" (Lee; both in Kachka 2014, paragraphs 80–81, 83).

Second, in his "broader aim [. . .] to locate particular bodies trained in violence in their wider political context" (2012, 355), Higate asserts that he reads very much against the grain of contemporary scholarship in security studies. As he explains, "On the few occasions that bodies do appear in the PMSC literature, they are implicitly conceived of in regard to an unfettered agency through Cartesian, individualist, and liberal humanist terms – as objects of the mind, bereft of sentience[,] that contractors have and use freely" (2012, 357). The question of bodily agency and the relation between body and mind figures in each of the works discussed below. Starting with Akhtiorskaya's *Panic in a Suitcase* and Ulinich's *Petropolis* and *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel* before turning to *Forty Rooms*, I reveal points of contact as well as stark differences across the four female protagonists and help to refine the parameters of geocorporeality for literary analysis.

3 Yelena Akhtiorskaya and Rebellious Unbeauty

Panic in a Suitcase, Yelena Akhtiorskaya's only novel to date, focuses the reader's attention on bodies and geography from the very start. The novel's first pages chronicle poet Pasha's arrival in Brooklyn from Odesa to visit family who had emigrated two years earlier. These scenes feature a pileup of clichés about poets, including a paragraph that invokes poet-as-prophet, heart pain and Joseph Brodsky in one exuberant torrent (2014, 5–6). This passage also compares Pasha's body to the dilapidated structures of early 1990s Odesa ("a pile of boards, bent, twisted, leaning; a heap, rubble, cats. Pasha's skeletal structure was a bit like that", 2014, 6), establishing an explicit link between body and place. By the time Akhtiorskaya reveals Pasha's family name, Nasmertov, 25 pages later (2014, 31; Russian *nasmert'* is "to [the] death", "fatally"), the family's aches and pains, illnesses real and imagined, and the solidity of their sticky, sunburned summer flesh have accumulated so thickly that the reader can only laugh. Pasha exemplifies the simplest iteration of geocorporeality, a direct parallel between body and place. Pasha is a determined non-immigrant, resisting his family's pleas and schemes to join them permanently in the U.S. His bodily woes are of the classic variety, literarily speaking, echoing not only Brodsky's real-life heart problems but, for example, the many creative characters in Nabokov's works who also experience heart spasms.[11]

Frida, Pasha's niece, is the novel's female protagonist. Unlike Pasha's direct parallel, Akhtiorskaya plays with the interrelation between body and place in

11 Dr. J.D. Quin (1991) lists Sebastian Knight, Humbert Humbert, Timofey Pnin and John Shade as "only a fraction of the cardiac pathology detailed in V.N.'s novels and short stories" (43).

writing Frida. Frida's "place" as the novel opens is within her family, crammed into a Brighton Beach apartment. Having left Odesa at age seven, Frida is attached to the notion of that city as "home" only through family lore and her Russian-speaking family's cultural heritage. Age nine, Frida enters the novel in a markedly unbeautiful way, with her "[t]wo giant, grimy feet pok[ing] out from under a blanket" (2014, 8). Akhtiorskaya introduces Frida in four brief sentences, situating her as simply one more detail in the chaos that unfolds as the Nasmertov family prepares for a beach day: pack the lunch, find the beach umbrella, wake the sleeping child (2014, 3; 5–8; 11). This short description, however, proves extremely rich, pushing back against stereotypical ideals of feminine beauty common both to Russian and American culture: Frida's feet are neither clean and well groomed, nor petite. In the context of cultural heritage and of feminist theory, Frida's body signals from the moment of her entry into the novel that she will defy expectations.

Frida's initial appearance evokes the positioning of a breech baby, entering the world of the novel feet first. Thus, Frida begins the wrong way round and, throughout the novel, lives uncomfortably in her body. Above all, she resists or fails at practices designed to render the body feminine. Sandra Bartky explains that "We are born male or female, but not masculine or feminine. Femininity is an artifice, an achievement, 'a mode of enacting and reenacting received gender norms which surface as so many styles of the flesh'" (1997, 132).[12] Frida refuses to engage in or actively defies the practices Bartky identifies, those "by which the ideal body of femininity – and hence the feminine body-subject – is constructed" (1997, 139). According to Bartky, "three categories of [disciplinary] practices" lead to a body being read as feminine: "those that aim to produce a body of a certain size and general configuration; those that bring forth from this body a specific repertoire of gestures, postures, and movements; and those directed toward the display of this body as an ornamented surface" (1997, 132). Frida's "giant, grimy feet" (2014, 8) provide a stark contrast to the "general size and configuration" (Bartky 1997, 132) established as desirable in Alexander Pushkin's erotic verse celebrating women's little feet.[13] That this construct of femininity comes from the most important figure in Russian literature, one whose verse is so integral to the Nasmertov family that his poem "Winter Evening" is used to test Pasha's well-

12 Here, Bartky quotes Judith Butler, "Embodied Identity in De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*", unpublished manuscript (1985), 11. See Bartky (1997, 151).

13 As Tomashevsky notes, "In the epoch when he was writing *Eugene Onegin*, we notice in Pushkin something along the lines of a cult of the little foot – a woman's, it goes without saying" (1930, 76; translation mine).

being after a near-death experience (2014, 26), signals that Frida's bodily appearance resists not only societal gender norms but the ideals of high culture.

Frida "doesn't deal well with constriction" (2014, 143) and rejects the idea that "a proper young lady must wear stockings" (2014, 143), a practice designed to feminise the surface appearance and, often, the shape of the wearer's body. Frida mortifies her family by yanking off her stockings and tossing them across the table at their dinner guest, a professor from Harvard (2014, 143–145) who may or may not be planning to translate Uncle Pasha's poetry into English. In this moment, she offends both the family and the academy. Frida's "gestures, postures, and movements" (Bartky 1997, 132) also defy the stereotypes of femininity. While early passages establish that Pasha's ugliness is linked to a frailty that is absolutely typical of a Russian poet (2014, 4), Frida is robustly unbeautiful: "She wasn't an airy little girl. There was something sumoesque in her stance", and she is often awkward or clumsy (2014, 11–12). Finally, Frida seems at a loss when confronted with practices that "display [the] body as an ornamented surface" (Bartky 1997, 132). Her mother, Marina, is expert at using makeup, nail varnish, and tweezers (2014, 165), evoking a "hypnotic purr" in her daughter as she watches this process of embellishment. Frida interacts with these tools as if they are newly unearthed, alien artifacts. As a young adult, Frida "rummaged in her mother's makeup case as if in a decorative bowl of rocks. This failed – her bones didn't tingle" (2014, 179).

Like her protagonist, Akhtiorskaya bedevils and defies expectations. She takes a Puckish approach to the tropes of Russian-American and American-Jewish literature, using her often biting comic flair to engage everything from the sanctity of Alexander Pushkin (2014, 18, 195, 237) and the power of the Russian-speaking diasporic network of New York City (2014, 88–103) to the narrow range of acceptable professions for an immigrant child (2014, 161–163, 246).[14] Coming to terms with literary history and expectations in an immigrant's first novel is hardly unprecedented but Akhtiorskaya's novel is distinguished by what Wanner views as resistance to some norms of the genre: first, to "cliché and sentimentality" because she "is cognizant of the fact that the Russian Jewish immigrant experience

14 For more on tropes, see Shteyngart commenting on immigrant writers in general ("there's a lot of this sort of endless overcoming of obstacles, racism, the triumph over adversity, and off we go", Kachka 2014). For *Panic in a Suitcase*, the most relevant tropes that Akhtiorskaya engages include transnationalism (Katsnelson 2019), particularly via Frida's return to Odesa in Part Two, anti-Semitism (Wanner 2012, 170), and "the assertion of material inferiority [. . .] accompanied by a proclamation of spiritual and cultural superiority over the decadent and materialist West" which can manifest as "identification with canonical Russian art, music, and literature" (Wanner 2012, 165).

has become a well-trod territory in recent US fiction" (2019, 138) and, second, to the Odesa myth, calling *Panic* "a sort of 'anti-Odessa novel' rather than a paean to her native city" (2019, 138). Akhtiorskaya does not just resist these expectations but exorcises them through both of her protagonists. Her own uncle, Boris Khersonsky, is an important poet. As Wanner has established, Pasha resembles Khersonsky "in many biographical details" (2019, 135), but Pasha is emphatically not the person Akhtiorskaya has called "'maybe one of the most brilliant people in the universe'" (Wanner 2019, 136, citing Hackel, 2014). In resisting cliché and sentimentality (Wanner 2019, 138) Akhtiorskaya turns Pasha into an absurd version of the sickly poet.

If Pasha is cliché made ridiculous, then Frida is cliché's antithesis: stocky where Pasha is lanky, unpoetic where he is artistic and, of course, female to his maleness. That said, the novel's early passages establish a bodily parallelism between them; both have "jutting globular knees" (2014, 12) and they arrive together at the beach ("Pasha and Frida in the flesh", 2014, 13). Moreover, both are rebellious or, as the character Renata Ostraya puts it when she meets the adult Frida, "incorrigible" (2014, 246): Pasha won't move to the U.S., and he long ago converted from Judaism to Orthodox Christianity, to his family's horror (2014, 8–11). Frida, too, fights back against her family: quitting medical school without telling them (2014, 246), defiantly wearing Pasha's Orthodox cross (2014, 136–137). Frida's family is "literary aristocracy" (2014, 244) but Frida is neither artist nor muse. As noted above, unlike the "bare little women's feet" about which Pushkin wrote, Frida's feet will not be celebrated for their beauty and delicacy. Nonetheless, her feet play an important role in the novel's conclusion. In her mid-twenties, Frida returns to Odesa for a visit. Having left as a seven-year-old, she misremembers her birthplace and blunders about the city and her own past. Her foot, which causes a running, screaming child to trip (2014, 270), becomes the catalyst for Frida's strange solo journey through Odesa, then out of the city to what had been the Nasmertov family dacha (2014, 272–281), until she "bump[s] into the Black Sea" (2014, 282).

Akhtiorskaya emphasises Frida's feet as she flees the squalid dacha. On this journey, Frida has "no choice but to trust her feet" (2014, 281) but, leaving the dacha in haste, she forgets her shoes. Her feet hurt "because those broad, veiny feet were bare" (2014, 281). The pain leads her into the sea (2014, 282). Her experience while swimming – getting caught in a storm, becoming disoriented, losing her clothing – creates a situation rhyme with Pasha's near-death experience at Brighton Beach in the novel's first chapter (2014, 25–26). Frida returns to Pasha's apartment with her feet once again bare and dirty, humiliated and nearly naked, but apparently transformed (2014, 285). She decides to stay in Odesa and write her uncle's literary biography (2014, 288–290).

While the novel's abrupt ending leaves the reader with many questions (about the true value of Pasha's poetry, which Wanner calls "a gaping void" (2019, 137), and about whether Frida will write about her uncle – or ever read his poems in the first place), the final chapters assert the agency of Frida's body. This agency resides in the same feet with which she entered the novel. Unlike Pasha's mind and body, which function independently ("his brain and body had long ago, perhaps at birth, suffered a breach, leaving his body on autopilot", 2014, 6), Frida's feet take charge. They lead her on an odyssey through Odesa that constitutes a reverse migration, as well as a rebirth. At a point when Pasha, despite his physical resemblance to Odesa, realises that "he was more alienated and excluded in his native city than his family in their new land" (2014, 305), Frida may have found a home. While growing up in the U.S., Frida "usually guessed wrong as to what interested her" (2014, 180). The concluding chapters suggest the beginning of a greater certainty, brought about by the body's shift to a new geographical space. Staying in Odesa is the first decision Frida makes that is fully conscious, and not simply "fate" or a reaction to familial pressure: "She wasn't fated to forget about medical school, to stay in Odessa; to stay was her choice, and most probably a stupid one" (289). Despite the caveat about the decision's stupidity, Frida claims agency and independence. Her feet, then, seem to have liberated her mind.

4 Anya Ulinich: Geocorporeality Made Visible

The heroine of Anya Ulinich's novel *Petropolis,* Sasha Goldberg, also rebels against expectations.[15] Similar to Frida, who finds herself surrounded in Odesa by "women [. . .] composed of light particles that simply floated" (Akhtiorskaya 2014, 284), Sasha grows up with a mother, Lubov, who epitomises the stereotypical graceful blonde ideal of Slavic womanhood. Like Frida's Uncle Pasha, Lubov provides a foil for the protagonist, embodying the things against which Sasha rebels. In their provincial hometown of Asbestos-2, Sasha is negatively marked by her height and weight (each greater than her mother would like) and her ethnicity and race: through her absent father she is both Jewish[16] and Black. Sasha's dis-

15 I am at work on a more extensive study of geocorporeality in Ulinich.

16 As Ona Renner-Fahey (2023) points out, the characterisation of Sasha as Jewish is not strictly accurate, given that Sasha's mother is ethnically Russian and there is no evidence that she has converted to Judaism. In the late-Soviet context of Sasha's childhood, however, her surname marks her as Jewish to those around her.

tinctive clumsiness, uneven gait and resistance to feminising practices express the mismatch between her body and what the people around her expect a feminine body to be. These expectations are culturally conditioned. Even when her body accomplishes a key marker of traditional Russian womanhood, giving birth, Sasha is marginalised: her mother takes the infant away to raise it herself. After a precarious journey through the U.S., Sasha ends up in Brooklyn, a location that gives her the stability to retrieve her daughter and to create a family on her own terms, one that reflects racial, ethnic, socio-economic and bodily diversity. The novel ends by celebrating this hard-won stability, allowing Sasha to walk home in the snow "without falling" (2007a, 324).

Sasha Goldberg invents her own path, and Ulinich contrasts Sasha's quiet triumph with Lubov Goldberg's death. Terminally ill and living in an all-but-abandoned Siberian city, Lubov returns to her former workplace, the now-closed library whose books had been her passion. There, she is found dead, "an open book in front of her, and a half-full bottle of cognac, both frozen in mounds of ice" (2007a, 320). The frozen book contains poems by Osip Mandel'shtam, whose collection *Tristia* initiated Lubov's connection to Victor Goldberg (2007a, 81) and thus also led to Sasha's birth. Her mother's death finalises Sasha's break with Russia, and the inclusion of the Mandel'shtam poems, one of which provides the novel's title and serves as a motif throughout, emphasises this scene as a turning point. Lubov, like Pasha Nasmertov, exemplifies geocorporeality as a parallel between place and body. In Lubov's case, both place and body are doomed. The first passage linking Lubov and *Tristia* foreshadows her fate: "Her favorite poems in the cycle were about death: both physical, personal death and the death of culture, the collapse of civilization. In their mournful pitch Lubov found a soundtrack to her misery, her thwarted desires" (2007a, 81). For Lubov Goldberg, geocorporeality means stasis – masquerading as stability – and death. For her daughter, migration and displacement result, paradoxically, in the stability that, for Lubov, is only a façade. Sasha Goldberg's body is "unbeautiful" only when viewed through the lens of stereotypical Russian ideals, and clumsy only when situated in environments that expect it to fulfil a feminine role that Sasha is either denied or resists: the snowflake fairy (2007a, 24–25), the always sexually available fiancée (2007a, 158).

The graphic narrative *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel* (2014) intensifies Ulinich's focus on the female body. In the strongly autobiographical *Lena Finkle*, Ulinich uses visual means to approach the tensions between artist and woman and between mind and body. She draws her eponymous protagonist in four distinct forms that I label pocket Lena (Lena's super-ego, a miniature woman often shown peeking out of pockets or backpacks), memory Lena (further identifiable as "styl-

ised Lena" and "child/adolescent/young-adult Lena"), duckling Lena (the bearer of adult Lena's strongest emotions) and real-life Lena.[17] The graphic narrative form allows Ulinich more fully to embody these tensions via her drawings. Hillary L. Chute remarks of graphic narratives that, "Unsettling fixed subjectivity, these texts present life narratives with doubled narration that visually and verbally represents the self, often in conflicting registers and different temporalities" (2010, 5). The idea of "doubled narration" evokes Virginia Woolf's comments in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) about the "sudden splitting off of consciousness" by which a woman "is often surprised" (1957, 101). Woolf notes that this process positions the woman "outside of [the civilisation in which she exists], alien and critical" in her perspective (1957, 101).

Ulinich alludes to *A Room of One's Own* and to Woolf herself at the start of *Lena Finkle* (2014, 6–7). Although these references appear to be wryly funny asides, Ulinich's multiple Lenas point to direct engagement with Woolf's idea. As Chute writes, "the *embodiment* inherent to comics in its processes of production – in which the hand-drawn mark indexes the body of the maker – helps to instantiate the form. [. . .] How comics' textuality takes the body seriously [. . .] is one of the central reasons it can be linked so strongly to feminist inquiry and strategy" (2018, 157; emphasis original). The narration in *Lena Finkle* is not doubled, but quadrupled, embodying a refraction rather than a binary split. Refraction allows a layering of the woman's "alien and critical" perspective. Memory Lena does not engage in this perspective but becomes its object, allowing real-life Lena to take a critical stance toward the social dominants of her Soviet childhood (for example, 2014, 18–30) and of her early days in the U.S. (2014, 50, 72–80) by supplying the captions for images that include her "memory" self. Duckling Lena supplies an alien and critical perspective simply by existing in the text. Her unfettered emotions unsettle those who witness them, above all, The Orphan, whose abrupt breakup with real-life Lena unleashes the duckling (2014, 278–281) and whose wealth and pedigree place him at the top of U.S. social dominance (2014, 229–230).

17 Anna Katsnelson reads memory Lena as a stereotyped depiction of the Jewish child in Soviet Russia, one that, for Ulinich, "is purposeful and has social value" (2016, 273). This "essentializing of Jewish ethnicity", Katsnelson notes, is a "trope Ulinich borrows from the US American graphic narrative" (2016, 274). Katsnelson indicates that duckling Lena, the "anthropomorphized animal", is also borrowed from the American cartooning tradition, and "represent[s] Lena's soul or spirit" (2016, 273); she does not address pocket Lena. Henrietta Mondry (2009) offers a thorough discussion of racist stereotyping of Jewish bodies in Russian culture, including "[t]he revival of interest in racist theories in post-Soviet Russia [that] goes hand in hand with the rise of Russian self-assertiveness" (271).

Pocket Lena challenges real-life Lena, expressing scepticism in particular over Lena's romantic and sexual relationships (2014, 41–42; 317) but also serving as cheerleader (2014, 350). Real-life Lena dominates the novel's final pages, appearing to have vanquished her alter-egos. For Anna Katsnelson, real-life Lena represents the character's assimilation into the U.S., a point at which "her ethnic identity becomes less important, as her physical features are no longer presented in caricature" (2016, 274). However, the other Lenas occasionally pop into the frame. I suggest, therefore, that Lena's reintegration may be more of a *détente*, and her assimilation incomplete.

The geocorporeality evident in Anya Ulinich's fiction supplies more information about the flexibility of the concept. As seen in Akhtiorskaya's *Panic in a Suitcase*, geocorporeality can represent direct parallels between place and body, here via the example of Lubov Goldberg. It can also signal transcendence. Sasha Goldberg's path is the opposite of her mother's. Sasha's body indicates her precarious status in Asbestos-2 and, eventually, the surprise of the metaphorically solid ground she finds in Brooklyn. Finally, *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel* features geocorporeality in its form (the "hand-drawn mark [that] indexes the body of the maker", Chute 2018, 157), in its narrative devices (the refracted Lena, present in four iterations) and in the visual transformation from memory Lena to real-life Lena.

5 Olga Grushin: The Price of Womanhood and Migration

In *Forty Rooms*, Grushin explores the tensions between artist and woman using a host of narrative techniques. Akhtiorskaya and Ulinich use other characters to provide foils for their protagonists: Uncle Pasha, Lubov Goldberg; even the three additional Lenas, who all represent the protagonist, are embodied iterations that stand apart from real-life Lena. Grushin, however, allows this exploration to play out internally, via the body and the consciousness of a single character. As noted above, *Forty Rooms* lacks the geographic specificity seen in other Russian-American fiction, including in the works by Akhtiorskaya and Ulinich previously discussed. The novel begins in Moscow and the protagonist spends time in New York City, but the geolocations are at best fuzzily outlined. What matters here are the small spaces, the rooms of the novel's title. The work opens in a most prosaic space, the bathroom, which "emerge[s] from the haze of nonbeing" as the very young protagonist skitters across the cold tile floor and into a "hot and delightful" wintertime bath (2016, 3). In her newly conscious body, the protagonist,

who at this point is also the first-person narrator, becomes aware of her mother's, her father's and her grandmother's hands as each bathes her. At the same time, she becomes an audience for their performances: the mother's songs, the father's jokes and the grandmother's stories (2016, 4). Thus, from the very beginning, this novel embodies both the act of narrating and the act of listening, marking a shift from Grushin's previous novels where storyteller and listener are often distant from, and even invisible to, one another.[18]

The embodied, integrated beginning[19] to *Forty Rooms* carries over to the start of the protagonist's life as a poet. Still in childhood, she encounters Anna Akhmatova's *Requiem*, first while the poem is being read aloud from a *samizdat* copy (2016, 24–25) and then as she reads that same fragile document to herself (2016, 27–28). This scene, saturated with liminal spaces, marks a transition in the protagonist's mode of interaction with narrative. Instead of listening to spoken narratives (the bathtime stories, or a poem read aloud), she encounters narratives as written text. Yet whether the words are written or spoken, the protagonist responds to the poem in a deeply physical, embodied way: listening, she realises that "her heart [is] beating wildly" (2016, 25). Reading those words on her own, "[m]y heart [is] painful in my chest, as if my rib cage has suddenly grown too tight for it" (2016, 27). Moments later, she is visited for the first time by her interlocutor, who eventually declares himself the god Apollo – summoned, perhaps, by the intensity of her response to Akhmatova's words. She denies Apollo's suggestion that she is "a poet [her]self" but admits that she "rhymes things once in a while" (2016, 28). The scene ends with a young girl having found her calling, inspired to seek literary immortality and aware that poetry is an embodied practice.

The remainder of the novel centres the tension between artist and woman. Apollo reappears to warn the protagonist that female artists are, "in the eyes of the masses, nothing but a gathering of perversions and monstrosities, of recluses and harlots" (2016, 68) and that those who have children are "unnatural mothers [who] lived and died by other, higher standards, the divine standards of art" (2016, 69). Apollo presents Cartesian dualism as unassailable for the female artist, calling into question the link between body and narrative that brings the young protagonist into consciousness at the novel's start.

18 In *The Line*, stories are so distanced from their tellers that, for example, characters mistake their elderly relative's late-night reminiscences for a tale being broadcast over the radio (2010, 78; 153–156). Other disembodied, late-night narratives appear in *The Dream Life of Sukhanov* (2007, 60–61; 131–132, 223–224).

19 Note that this opening section of the novel is called "Mythology" – in its own way, it is prelapsarian.

Crucially, there is a second understanding of dualism at work in this novel. Given the novel's title and its female artist-protagonist, it is unsurprising that echoes of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* abound. Grushin does not cite Woolf directly, but passages in the novel resonate with the essay, beginning – as in *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel* – with the "sudden splitting off of consciousness". A best friend-nemesis-alter ego, "the unfailingly perfect Olga" (2016, 90; see also 33–40; 169; 230–231) appears, but by the end of the novel seems to have existed only in the protagonist's mind; Grushin uses liminal states and spaces, particularly mirrors (2016, 5; 12–15; 185–189), to evoke the possibility of multiple states of being and multiple iterations of the protagonist. Most significantly, the narration of *Forty Rooms* changes from first-person to third (2016, 109). This shift occurs not when the protagonist arrives in the U.S. (2016, 57–59) but when her courtship with her future husband, Paul Caldwell, begins. The preceding pages detail the end of a serious relationship with a different man. The phone rings, and the protagonist thinks that her boyfriend, to whom she had been engaged (2016, 103, 105), has called to reconcile. Imagining the aftermath of the phone conversation, the protagonist "watched *that other girl* through the bathroom door [. . .]. I watched her flying around the room, pulling on clothes, tossing clothes into her bag, throwing on her coat, running out the door [. . .]. The girl looked frantic with the relief of happiness—happier, I knew, than I was ever likely to be now—but also somehow less real, diminished" (2016, 103 [emphasis mine]).

As this chapter ends, the protagonist rededicates herself to art, writing a poem rather than chasing happiness with her ex (2016, 105–106). When the next chapter begins (2016, 109), the protagonist is having dinner at Paul Caldwell's apartment. The narration is in the third person, and the protagonist's "I" appears only in dialogue. Grushin maintains this change until the novel's final pages, making exceptions only for interior monologue (e.g., 2016, 160–161) and additional dialogue (imagined, e.g., 2016, 283–292, or apparently real). The link between narrator and protagonist, the narrator's "I", has disappeared. The two women present on page 103 have switched roles by page 109. The protagonist-woman – the "other girl" of the previous chapter – moves into the primary role while the protagonist-poet steps back and observes.

The device of shifting point-of-view provides the alien and critical perspective Woolf ascribes to the woman's split consciousness, presenting a different understanding of Apollo's Cartesian dualism. As Grushin's protagonist-woman is drawn into the American bourgeoisie, she is subject to the feminising practices outlined by Bartky that Frida (*Panic in a Suitcase*) rejects. When the protagonist meets Paul's family for the first time, Paul dresses her up in diamonds and comments on her beauty, noting that one of his uncles "said you look like a porcelain doll" (2016, 121). Here, the protagonist displays two of Bartky's feminising practi-

ces: she has been ornamented (diamonds and, as the reader later learns, "a racy red bra, the tiniest of thongs, and stockings with a garter belt", 2016, 124) and has shaped her body to conform to American ideals (Paul's mother tells her, meaning it as praise and reassurance, that "you couldn't be any skinnier, my dear", 2016, 127). Grushin uses clothing to signal a mismatch between character and environment. Asked by Paul's mother to try on an heirloom wedding gown, the protagonist struggles with the "much too tight" dress, ripping it and losing at least one of its 48 tiny, silk-covered buttons (2016, 126–128). This scene contains a passage that links the dress to the character's displacement and points to the incompatible histories of her family and Paul's:

> Her own family was rich in stories, of course, but theirs were mostly tales of dramatic upheavals and forbidden romance [. . .] with only a few chance treasures and hardly any photographs surviving to provide illustration or offer proof; she had never even seen the faces of her great-grandparents. To her, family past was a misty realm of conjecture and imagination. The idea of mundane, practical objects – combs, vases, dresses – perpetuating the quiet remembrance of a different kind of life, the tranquil, linear progression of several generations' worth of marriages, children, traditions, took her completely by surprise. (2016, 125)

The protagonist recognises the incompatibility but, "long[ing] to become a part of someone's tangible history" (2016, 125), ignores her misgivings and the couple marry.

Paul does not understand his wife as an artist. He relates to her only as a desired, beautiful object (another acquisition in his "tangible history") and, later, as the mother of his children. Communication between Mrs. Caldwell and her husband is so deeply flawed that he does not know, either during their courtship or after decades of marriage, that she writes poetry, further evidence that the protagonist-poet who disappears on page 109 has never been an active participant in their relationship.[20] Paul's only direct encounter with his wife's poetry occurs early in their marriage. Dazed with the exhaustion of first-time motherhood, which she describes as "her temporary escape from destiny" (2016, 154), Mrs. Caldwell writes "a poem of sorts" (2016, 155) with a Magnetic Poetry kit. In this scene, the word-bodies are bugs, very much alive until she "pin[s] their slippery, wiggly little bodies to the door of the fridge" (2016, 155) to make the poem. Narrative and verbal art have been embodied processes for the protagonist from the beginning; even a poem's words are living creatures (2016, 93, 95). In this epi-

20 Paul may have encountered the protagonist prior to the poet/woman split: two earlier scenes include an unnamed man similar to Paul who approaches the protagonist with interest and is rebuffed (2016, 59, 93–95).

sode, her husband obliterates her words. Paul says, "'I didn't know you wrote poetry, ha-ha!'" (2016, 155–156). In fact, Mrs. Caldwell herself does "not remember writing" (2016, 155) this poem, suggesting that in her sleep-deprived state of the night before, the protagonist-woman had yielded, briefly, to the protagonist-poet. He reads the poem aloud, then "swe[eps] her lines aside [. . . so that] her small creation dissolved without a trace" (2016, 156). He replaces her quirky creation with his own: the prosaic "*I love my honey*" (2016, 156, italics original). While the protagonist herself had killed off unsuccessful poems in earlier, pre-split days, here her husband claims the prerogative of judgment for himself and usurps her role as poet.

The protagonist sacrifices much in addition to her poetry. Paul places his bride in a series of ever-more-ostentatious "doll's houses". As her domestic identity overshadows her artistic one, the protagonist's third-person "she" frequently becomes supplanted by "Mrs. Caldwell" (2016, 250), closing the door to any identity separate from her husband's. As "mundane, practical objects" give way to the trappings of ostentatious wealth, Mrs. Caldwell retreats ever further into her living spaces, and perhaps also into madness. Other characters change and grow, while she is stranded, essentially immured, at home. This fate represents a dark play on Woolf's essay for, in the end, Mrs. Caldwell has too many rooms, and none are truly her own.

Forty Rooms suggests that madness, virtual imprisonment and the erasure of her personal and artistic identity by her husband would have been the protagonist's fate even had she stayed in Russia. Her high-school boyfriend envisions a future as a married couple belonging to the Moscow elite that the protagonist can only see as "a succession of increasingly suffocating rooms" (2016, 53). It is not geography that conditions these elements of the protagonist's story, but social structures and gender roles common to Russia and the U.S. There are other losses, however, that stem directly from the protagonist's migration. A key part of the "splitting off of consciousness" in *Forty Rooms* is the progressive distancing between the protagonist and her own words, stories, language and cultural frame of reference. Late in the novel, Mrs. Caldwell tells one of her daughters a story about a singing princess with a beautiful voice. Apollo appears and confirms the reader's assumption that Mrs. Caldwell was talking about herself: he confronts the child, charging that "you are one of the brats for whom your mother the princess has given up her songs" (2016, 254). Mrs. Caldwell has not only lost her artistic voice, but is losing her originary language and culture. Like the soldier quoted by Geraghty and Higate, she "speak[s] a different language and ha[s] a [. . .] history that is meaningless" to the people who surround her (Geraghty 2007, 15; Higate 2012, 362). Grushin emphasises this loss when the family celebrate Christmas in their enormous new house. Having received an illustrated book of Russian folktales from his mother, Mrs. Caldwell's oldest child – the only one of the six to understand any

Russian (2016, 252) – expresses antipathy toward an image of Viktor Vasnetsov's 1882 *Knight at the Crossroads* (2016, 187–188). The painting is one that Mrs. Caldwell "had loved as child" (2016, 187) but that her son finds "scary" (2016, 188). Like his son, Paul Caldwell reacts dismissively to the painting, leaving his wife to conclude that "maybe you need to be Russian to find it tempting" (188).[21]

When Mrs. Caldwell dies, three significant things occur. The narration returns to first-person (2016, 323); the protagonist remembers "the trickle of lukewarm water down my back, and [. . .] my grandmother's voice, and [. . .] the sweet tang of the soap" (2016, 323); the narrator-protagonist walks away from what had been her body and, after an indeterminate period of haunting the space, exits the house that had imprisoned her (2016, 323, 334). This being "walk[s] empty-handed toward the shining rectangle of light" (2016, 334), anticipating "all the secrets, all the marvels of the world I am about to see" (2016, 334). This line is followed by a page announcing "Part Five: The Future", then by several blank pages, leaving readers to continue the protagonist's story for themselves.

Forty Rooms is about the intersection of and tension between art and a woman's life. Grushin fuses body and narrative at the novel's opening, then splits them apart until the protagonist loses her body to death but regains her voice to a seeming immortality. Her identity as woman, wife and mother plays a direct role in this split, one that transcends nationality, but her identity as immigrant compounds her losses. Mrs. Caldwell perfectly fits Woolf's description of "a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry [and was] thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty" (1957, 51). While Woolf is discussing the sixteenth century, in the famous "Shakespeare's sister" section of *A Room of One's Own*, the description fits a "highly gifted girl" born centuries later. Mrs. Caldwell's "own contrary instincts" and Apollo's hindrances keep her unhappily suspended between poetry and motherhood, conveying the enduring nature of this problem. Woolf's reflections on a different phenomenon, that of the shift from a woman "being the natural inheritor of [her] civilisation" to an "alien and critical" consciousness (1957, 101), indicate that Grushin's split protagonist invites a more active and critical approach to understanding Mrs. Caldwell's fate.

21 This scene finds a biographical echo in Grushin's own holiday celebrations with her children, which include "[a] few vintage Soviet ornaments from my childhood on our tree" and the celebration of the Old New Year on 14 January (Lebedeva 2021, 173), as well in her children's reaction to classic Russian stories, here shared in a social media post: "Anton Pogorelsky's 'Black Hen' (1829) is not known in English – w/ good reason, my daughter tells me (there are flogging, betrayal & much sadness) – but it was my childhood favorite" (Lebedeva 2021, 174),

6 Conclusion: Delimiting Geocorporeality

Geocorporeality in literary criticism provides an umbrella term for thinking about how place acts upon the body, whether it is the disruption of removal from a place, a response to confinement in a place or decay that parallels the collapse of place. Geocorporeality may signal the multiple displacements of migration, or it may tell a different migration story, one that promises a new beginning. This article has revealed differences in how the bodies of female characters in Grushin, Ulinich and Akhtiorskaya interact with and reflect space and place, and it has revealed a shared interest in feminist questions, allowing for conversations that include Grushin more directly in the Russian-speaking American literary cohort.

I suggest delimiting geocorporeality in literature by establishing two basic types: direct and critical. Direct geocorporeality is the type represented by Frida (*Panic in a Suitcase*) and Sasha Goldberg (*Petropolis*). As borne out by these characters and by those who are their primary foils (Pasha, Lubov), each of these novels links body to geographic location, drawing direct parallels or suggesting a fundamental mismatch. Direct geocorporeality can contain critical elements – Frida's and Sasha's distaste for feminising practices, for example, or the decay and collapse evident in the link Ulinich makes from *Tristia* to Asbestos-2 to Mrs. Goldberg – but a fundamental element of critical geocorporeality as I envision it is the split consciousness, which in *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel* and *Forty Rooms* develops ideas from Virginia Woolf. By dividing the protagonist narratively, through visual or verbal means, critical geocorporeality creates layers of reflection on the society of origin, on cultural heritage, on the receiving society and on the woman's role in one or more of these.

Both direct and critical geocorporeality demonstrate a relationship to the Russian-speaking diasporic network portrayed in the novels. Frida briefly exits the diaspora to attend a sub-par medical school in Pennsylvania (Akhtiorskaya 2014, 209) but the action of the novel occurs entirely within the diaspora (including when it relocates to the nation of Georgia for a poetry festival) or in the Nasmertovs' point of origin, Russian-speaking Odesa. *Petropolis* concludes with Sasha Goldberg having left the Russian-speaking world: her home city seems likely to disappear from the map (Ulinich 2014, 345), she never really joins the Russian-speaking diaspora in the U.S., and her father, whom she finds in Brooklyn, occupies only a marginal place in her existence. Her American partner, Jake, and young daughter Nadya form her nuclear family, with her American stepmother (now divorced from Victor Goldberg) and half-brother nearby. Real-life Lena Finkle and Mrs. Caldwell exist fully outside the diaspora. While their Russian origins matter, the primary device in each of these works is Woolf's split consciousness,

allowing them to explore personal history and the feminist questions of women's multiple roles as wife, mother, lover, artist and friend. Thus, it appears that the more diasporically situated a work is, the more likely it is to exhibit direct, rather than critical, geocorporeality. *Lena Finkle's Magic Barrel* and *Forty Rooms* both exhibit critical geocorporeality. With their distance from the diaspora, critical gaze and turn toward feminist questions, they suggest a next direction in the trajectory of contemporary Russian-speaking American authors.

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