My paper today will consider the case of Russia in the early 1990s in order to disentangle a less local phenomenon that Judith Halberstam has called the “insidious linking of perverse modernity and the perverse body in certain instantiations of globalized thinking.”¹ How do so-called “unhealthy” fiscal economies give rise to “unhealthy” economies of desire; and concomitantly, in Jacqui Alexander’s words, how do “enemy-production and sexual perversity go hand in hand”?² In the ensuing talk, I envision the communist and the queer as vitally and inextricably co-implicated in the formation of twentieth-century Western modernity--conditioning its possibility even as they are forcibly excluded from participating in it; compelled to collude in the negative production of a heteronormative citizen and nation.

My study concerns post-communist society in transition. Capitalizing on the economic metaphors of queer theory, I examine the simultaneous incursions by American LGB activists and economists onto post-Soviet soil in their potentially parallel attempts to reform sexuality legislation and enable the country’s switch to capitalism. By applying pressure to these interventions by Western agents, I want to note certain dangerous effacements that occur under the sign of global democracy. To this end, I call up the multiple but unmarked embodied histories that haunt the terms of “shock therapy”--the course of treatment prescribed by Western advisors to cure the socialist economy with capitalism in the 1990s. In the longer work from which this paper is culled, I look at the
experience of homosexuals in America during the Cold War; the excesses of Russian psychology in its disciplining of political dissidents in the late and post Soviet periods; as well as the more contemporary threats to the post-communist queer body that induce its search for asylum. Today I will concentrate on two exemplary figures of shock therapy: Dr. Richard Sachs, the Harvard economist who championed shock therapy in Russia; and Alla Pitcherskaya, a sexual refugee from the Russian Federation who fled violent persecution in the form of shock therapy as involuntary psychiatric treatment.

I. Economic Shock Therapy

In 1992-1993, no-longer socialist Russia attempted its “return to Europe” by converting to capitalism almost overnight. A cohort of Western economists worked with President Yeltsin to implement shock therapy, a series of rapid reforms including de-monopolization, liberalization of currency and trade, and price destabilization. This accelerated approach to marketization arguably lies at the core of neoliberal economics—first formulated as a quick fix for the post-WWII German economy by the major players of globalization: the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the US Treasury. Then and now, shock therapy should not be considered a neutral mode of economic reparation. On the contrary, it pathologizes non-capitalist experiences of the twentieth century, diagnosing them with developmental delay, and thereby authorizing violences rhetorical and real that allow “backward” nations to “catch up”. In this scenario, Soviet Russia seemed all the sicker for having wittingly opted out in favor of a “new narrative” for modernity—“the emancipation of humankind through Communism.”

Shock therapy operates under the assumption that countries suffering from cases of perverse modernity require the brutal but beneficent doctoring of the West. In
Russia, it would do double-duty as “the Cure that harms”—at once a generous dose of economic medicine and also a punitive political reckoning with America’s deposed Cold War foes. For this reason, the US media proliferated with discourses of post-communist societies in transition that luxuriated in a sadistic medical lexicon. Consider the following headlines: “Rx for Russia”; “Is Capitalism the Cure?”; and Sachs’s own “Life in the Economic Emergency Room”. Tellingly, the New York Times printed an article on Sachs and shock therapy in its “Health” section. The following representative news item run by The Seattle Times in 1992 basks indiscreetly in this rhetoric of violent remedy:

Poles offered up their communism-rotted economy to ‘shock therapy.’ And today, Russia signed on for a similarly drastic course of treatment…Russia is in for considerable unpleasantness. There will be unprecedented unemployment and a flush of inflation. There will also be confusion, fear and gross inequities, not to mention noxious side effects like bank swindles, street crime and fast-buck artists in shiny new cars….Shock therapy will probably work in Russia, albeit with nagging aches and pains. As Russians brace themselves for free-market reality, there is strong evidence here in Eastern Europe’s most populous country that the capitalist cure is taking and the worst is over… while the severity of the illness may differ, Russia and Eastern Europe share many of the same basic economic diseases…Polish leaders have a nagging backache that is sure to afflict their peers in Russia.”

Shock therapy produced pains more tangible than these verbal violences of American journalism. In fact, it “[wiped] out the savings of most Russians” and contributed heavily to the country’s still-mounting health crisis. In such a way, it laid bare the expendability of certain bodies on the path to globalization. Its atrocious effects should compel us to question which kinds of violence are tenable or even commendable in the experience of what Vinay Lal has termed modernity’s “total violence”; and further which personal and political bodies must bear its brunt.

II. Alla Pitcherskaya and the Movement of Post-Soviet Queers

In the midst of this abrupt transition to capitalism, the nascent Russian gay rights movement similarly hoped for lightning-fast change. The sudden liberalization of the
post-socialist social landscape was seen as a direct consequence of the economic shift. As Sachs and others contend, capitalism and democratic freedom are inseparable. As some queer theorists argue, homonormative gay subjectivity is premised on capitalism and consumption. Russia was represented as having eagerly opened itself up to the free market and all the personal and sexual freedoms that advanced capitalism bring. As one New York Times journalist put it, “privatization yields privacy”—apparently a novelty for reformed Soviets—and with it the possibility of Western-style private identities, around which Western-style identity politics could then coalesce. The American gay rights activists agreed that only after communism could Russia’s sexual minorities be free.

By condoning this naturalized link between capitalism and queer identity, the well-intentioned Western activists dangerously replicated the assumptions of the shock-therapeutic economists: their movement to construct a global economy of gay desire mirrored the efforts of US financial imperialists to enforce a global capitalist economy. They relied on the same cultural teleology to justify a gay and lesbian rescue mission in the former second world. Accordingly, they represented Russia’s same-sex lovers as politically invisible, deprived of self-consciousness, and “still [stuck] in a cold war,” having not yet been “[brought] into the more tolerant embrace” of “the new Russia, in the throes of a great democratic awakening.” As a corrective, they introduced incipient Russian radical groups to sophisticated brands of strategic essentialism rehearsed through decades of American identity politics. This moment of activism coincided with the golden age of gay tourism in the early 1990s, which, as Alexander has argued, traveled with the same colonial agenda implicit in heteronormative consumption practices, relying on the fixity of the Orientalized other in their native land to enable the mobility of a
universal gay subject figured as white, wealthy, and male. In the final section of this paper, I will consider how certain perverse bodies are frozen on the fringes of democracy, even as gay and lesbian Americans are suddenly proliferating Russia and other Eastern European sites suddenly freed up for consumption by the collapse of communism.

Alla Pitcherskaia—a self-described lesbian, political dissident from the former Soviet Union, and immigrant of the newly-created Russian Federation—would wage a legal battle against the Immigration and Naturalization Service and Board of Immigration throughout the 1990s. She had endured a lifetime of violent discrimination in Russia: continuously charged by the militia with hooliganism and “[interrogated] about her sexual orientation and her political activities,” routinely beaten in their custody; no longer able to sustain a job; and expelled from medical school for her sexuality. According to her testimony, “she was kidnapped and assaulted, her friends were beaten, her car was burned, and her apartment was burglarized. When she asked police for help, they refused to send their officers to defend ‘perverts.’” In addition, she underwent involuntary psychiatric confinement for lesbianism, having been diagnosed with “sluggish schizophrenia,” a mental imbalance with few to no perceptible manifestations, save for such psychotic “behaviors” as an “excessive valuation of the West” and a desire to be anywhere but the Soviet Union, which was deployed extensively during the Soviet period for the compulsory and punitive treatment of sexual and political dissidents.

Before the Court of Appeals, “Pitcherskaia provided evidence that many lesbians in Russia were, and continue to be, involuntarily ‘treated’ and involuntarily confined in psychiatric institutions solely because they are lesbians. This ‘treatment can include electroshock treatment and sedative drugs.” The issue of psychiatric persecution carried
a particular emotional charge for Pitcherskaia, whose own former lover had been “forcibly sent to a psychiatric institution for over four months [in 1985 or 1986], during which time she was subjected to electric shock treatment and so-called ‘therapies’ in an effort to change her sexual orientation.”¹⁵ She arrived in America as a “visitor of pleasure” in 1992. Soon after her departure, her mother apprised her that the mafia had destroyed her business and murdered one of her co-workers. It was at this point, on “On June 2, 1992, [that] she applied for asylum on the basis that she feared persecution on account of her own and her father’s anti-Communist political opinions.”¹⁶ Later she would argue that she was also “persecuted and feared future persecution on account of her political opinions in support of lesbian and gay civil rights in Russia.”¹⁷

Her application for asylum was rejected by the BIA on the grounds that she had never truly been the subject of persecution. The following cringe-worthy passage lays bare the BIA motivations for denying Pitcherskaia a supposed safe-haven in the US:

The BIA majority did not make a finding as to Pitcherskaia’s credibility because it found that, ‘even if her testimony is essentially credible,”...Pitcherskaia had not been persecuted because, although she had been subjected to involuntary psychiatric treatments, the militia and psychiatric institutions intended to ‘cure’ her, not to punish her, and thus their actions did not constitute ‘persecution’…

In a language that uncannily capitulates the logic of the concurrent program of economic shock therapy, Pitcherskaia—like post-socialist Russia itself—is forced to undergo a “cure that harms” as it allows the pathological body access to (hetero)normative geopolitics. Neither Pitcherskaia nor her native land have truly suffered, for the reward of democracy far outweighs the painful process of rapidly correcting modernity’s perverse bodies.
By denying that Pitcherskaia had actually endured persecution in her involuntary treatment, the BIA sought to perform multiple acts of personal and collective amnesia: it commanded Pitcherskaia to forget her painful experience as a lesbian in the Soviet Union and the Russia Federation—of violent and involuntary treatment, of incessant and police-choreographed gay-bashing, of her lover’s brutal, shock-therapeutic encounter with late-Soviet psychiatry, of the homophobic slaying of her friend and co-worker. The BIA ordered her to disregard her more recent and local mishandling by the organs of US immigration; in addition, it attempted to efface the intersectionality of Pitcherskaia’s sexually and politically dissident positionality (her disidentification not only with the communism of the Soviet state, but—implicitly in her post-collapse request for asylum—with the capitalism of the US-assisted CIS). This ruling also sought to preserve the myth of America’s committed history to human rights by obscuring its own legacy of homophobic shock therapy and other violent but “curative” psychiatric practices.

Furthermore, it revised the US relationship to historical enemies as embodied in asylum-granting practices, which had typically been extended to refugees from nations with whom the US had hostile relations (frequently communist ones), and denied those from countries “supported politically, economically, or militarily” by the US. In the case of Pitcherskaia, now that the US is “friendly” with Russia, the sexual dissident does not have to do the work of a global human rights movement: no threat to non-Third World queers in this post-Cold War economy can be said to exist. In the words of the BIA, “recent political and social changes in the former Soviet Union make it unlikely that she would be ‘subject to psychiatric treatment with persecutory intent upon [her] return to the present-day Russia.’” Shock therapy serves here as a barometer for the
barbarism of communist Russia by imaging that only Western democracy grants its
subjects sexual self-determination. But, as Judith Halberstam argues, “for those
subjects…who find themselves quite literally placed beyond the reach of federal
protection, legal rights, or state subsidy, democracy is simply the name of their
exclusion.” Ultimately, Pitcherskaia’s denial reveals shock therapy’s role in securing
the domination and exclusion of queer bodies by the institutions of power that determine
citizenship in the US and abroad. In all of these instantiations, shock therapy proves
most potent not just as a tool of violence but of violent forgetting.

Despite our now seemingly endless distance from the era of bipolar politics,
shock therapy has hardly receded from the international horizon. Its more recent
manifestations as a means of rebuilding the Iraqi infrastructure in 2004, and as a
resurgent form of psychotherapy convey how the cultural amnesia induced in order to
perpetuate the myth of global democracy requires constant and unending iteration. Shock
therapy does not belong to a “then and there” opposed to a “here and now,” but needs to
be rethought in the urgent and transnational terms that Jacqui Alexander proposes of a
“here and there,” “then and now.”


4 While, according to most Western commentators, Russia’s transition to capitalism was tantamount to its reformation into an acknowledged form of modernity, Prem Shankar Jha notes how, on the contrary, shock therapy’s “de-industrialisation” of the “modern” Russian economy entailed “what one writer on Russia has called the de-Modernisation of a twentieth-century state.” See Stephen F. Cohen, “Look what’s happening to Russia under reforms,” International Herald Tribune, Aug. 21, 1998. Jha later elaborates on this violent politics of pre-modernization: “Shock therapy had thus succeeded in reproducing in Russia at the end of the twentieth-century, a condition not unlike that of Europe in feudal times.” Prem Shankar Jha, The Perilous Road to the Market: The Political Economy of Reform in Russia, India and China (London, UK: Pluto Press, 2002), 57.


9 This notion that Russian and all the more Soviet culture lacked a concept of privacy was by no means an off-shoot of shock-therapy era thinking. Consult Svetlana Boym, Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

10 David Tuller describes the synchronicity of Soviet Russian calls for queer and capitalist reforms. “Our queer delegation had arrived in Russia at an auspicious moment. [summer 1991] Control of events was clearly slipping from Gorbachev’s grasp, and the ultimate success of his reforms was in doubt. During the past year, the Soviet leader, hesitant and fearful, had swung back and forth between the Kremlin hardliners, urging him to impose order by force and the democrats and the capitalists yearning for more freedom and open markets[...]. Amid these developing freedoms, a tiny gay and lesbian rights movement percolated noisily.” David Tuller, Cracks in the Iron Closet: Travels in Gay and Lesbian Russia (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1996), 15.


12 See Jasbir K. Puar, “Circuits of Queer Mobility: Tourism, Travel, and Globalization,” GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies 8.1-2 (2002) 101-137; as well as Chapter 2 of Alexander, Pedagogies of Crossing. We will pause for a moment on the question of Orientalism, and consider its implications for the post-socialist Russian case. In as much as Orientalism operates with metaphors of sexualized landscape and the geographic penetration of Oriental countries by hegemonic powers of empire, then Russia under Communism, with its abrogation of travel and visitation offers the ultimate sexualized imperialist conquest. Breaking Mother Russia’s seventy-four-year impenetrable hymen and vanquishing the most resolute virgin to global capitalism promises the ultimate neo-colonial orgasm.

13 Pitcherskaia v. INS, No. 95-70887, United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, 118 F 3rd. 641, June 24, 1997 Filed.


15 *In re Pitcherskaia*, 2

16 Ibid., 3. Indeed, her own father, an artist and political dissident, had been arrested for “antigovernment activities” and died in prison in 1972.

17 Ibid., 1-2


19 *In re Pitcherskaia*

20 Puar has made this observation in the case of the American relationship to queerness in the post 9-11 Iraqi context. She asks that we “consider instead how the production of ‘homosexuality as taboo’ is situated within the history of encounter with the Western gaze. The Orient, once conceived in Foucault’s ars erotica and Said’s deconstructive work as the place of original release, unfettered sin, and acts with no attendant identities or consequences, now symbolizes the space of repression and perversion, and the site of freedom has been relocated to Western identity.” Jasbir K. Puar, “Queer Times, Queer Assemblages,” in *Social Text* 84-85, Vol. 23, Nos. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 2005), 125.

21 Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place*, 35.