

Beyond Nation? A Thrice-Told Tale from Bulgaria's Postsocialist Soundstage

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Abstract: This article juxtaposes musical and dramatic productions popularized by three prominent Bulgarian national folkloric ensembles during the 2000s to illuminate the perspectival dialogues on nation at play within Bulgarian artistic communities. While presentations by the National Folkloric Ensemble “Bŭlgare” traffic in timeworn but disturbingly powerful primordialist appeals to ethnonationalist sentiment, those of rhythmic gymnast Neshka Robeva’s company “Neshanŭl Art” sidestep and extend the concept of nation by resituating local choreography and movement in a diaspora of international venues and transnational genres. Most strikingly, through strategically composed and choreographed works that call upon diverse regional and international folkloric and popular culture styles, including those of minority populations, the National Folkloric Ensemble “Philip Kutev” is deliberately performing against gender and ethnonationalist stereotypes in favor of productions cosmopolitan in form and postnationalist in content. In so doing, they are redefining the very essence of “national” folklore in direct defiance of a lingering socialist-era cultural policy legacy, while simultaneously parrying market tensions, touristic expectations, and dwindling governmental support.

Keywords: Bulgaria, folkloric ensembles, morality, music, nationalism, performance, postsocialism, representation, reterritorialization, subjunctivity

Introduction

In her *A Thrice-Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility*, anthropologist Margery Wolf (1992) masterfully relates a single incident from her fieldwork in three complementary literary guises—as fieldnotes, a short story, and a scholarly ethnography—to illustrate how situated presentation engages different audiences, illuminates different issues, and conveys different meanings. Similarly, while conducting fieldwork on contemporary Bulgarian folkloric performance between October 2007 and July 2009, I encountered divergent multimedia productions by three rival national ensembles whose narratives, like Wolf’s tales, collectively pose a postmodernist inquiry into the politics of representation.¹ In this article, I juxtapose these staged commentaries to tease out the perspectival dialogues on nation currently at play within Bulgarian artistic communities and to interrogate the sorts of geopolitics and solidarities that they suggest. My hypothesis is that through such narratives, the three ensembles manipulate ideology and temporality (including constructions of history and memory) in equally strategic but disparate ways to dramatize conflicting “moral geographies” of the postsocialist nation whose affective resonance is cued by and then experienced through a multi-mediated counterpoint of musical, choreographic, and visual signs (Orlove 2004:2). These signs invoke, and invite viewers to imagine, social alignments within, beyond, because, and in spite of the state that refract the ongoing reterritorialization of Bulgarian subjectivity, especially as it relates to changing interpretations of citizenship.

I use “reterritorialization” here in a sense somewhat inspired by Arjun Appadurai’s “deterritorialization,” or the process (and force) by which a population may become detached

from or even stripped of its home turf, consequently emigrating and residing elsewhere—or even in multiple elsewhere (Appadurai 1996:37–39). Such displaced or deterritorialized populations, which might include migrant laborers, expatriates, refugees, and diaspora communities, among other less conventional peripatetic actors, frequently retain at least a fractured, partial relationship with their birth land, nation, and co-members of that nation, whether through return visits and personal contact, or through mediated images and products of the imagination, such as films, novels, plays, and other artistic works. These creative works help bind nation-communities together across vast geographic distances, state borders, and virtual space, thereby exacerbating the disjuncture between nation and state in the deterritorialized subject's adopted territory. The fractious relationship between nation and state becomes “a battle of the imagination” in which the state struggles to formulate a homogenous, unified nation-population, while resident nations, including deterritorialized groups, sometimes in league with compatriots or co-nationals across state boundaries, work to “cannibalize” the state in return (ibid.:39).

Reterritorialization is, therefore, not simply about the physical redrawing of state political boundaries, or the reshaping of regional or other geopolitical configurations and social formations around new axial points (supra/national power centers or structures, topographical features, loci of resources), but how individual actors and groups reimagine, re-empower, and perform themselves and their relationships to each other in realizing, enabling, or refusing this restructuration process. As anthropologist Bruce Knauft observes, “concrete notions of place and space continue to matter very much. The way that regional or global processes are selectively interpreted and actively appropriated or subsumed within existing local assertions and divisions remains extremely important” (1996:134–135). The reterritorialization of Bulgarian subjectivity with which this study is concerned, then, entails the fluid re-imagining and re-empowerment or re-inscribing of Bulgarian senses of self (at manifold levels) across multiple, overlapping territorial and geopolitical configurations following the ground shift of political transition, when the State as construct, and its established relationships to the resident nations within as well as those nations and states without, dissolved.² It is about how notions or sensibilities of Bulgarianness are being conceptually remapped, or played out in relation to other peoples and lands in the context of the postsocialist nation–state battle, and how this re-empowered subjectivity is being asserted performatively—that is, through expressive agency—in this case, through folkloric productions that speak to how Bulgarian citizenship might and should be defined and enacted. In this regard, my use of reterritorialization resonates with that of ethnomusicologist Theodore Levin in his study of post-Soviet Uzbekistan, where the term embraces “both the geographical reformulation of political territories and the socially constructed reformulation of cultural territories” (1993:51).

National Art

In April 2008 I viewed the spectacle *Bezhantsii* (Refugees), performed by Neshka Robeva's company of 34 professional dancers at the Theater of Laughter and Tears, located in Sofia's new theatre district. Born in 1946 in the northern Bulgarian city of Ruse, Robeva sustained a brilliant 33-year career as a competitor on, and then coach of, the national rhythmic gymnastics team before singlehandedly initiating, in 2000, an innovative theatrical style combining her gymnastics with ballet, modern, ballroom, and folk dance in staged dramas set to original scores involving live music and pre-recorded, electronic soundtracks. Her troupe, christened “Neshanul Art,” a pun on her first name and testament to the avowed national stature

of her work, has thus far toured at least seven major productions worldwide, of which *Refugees* and her 2010 retrospective gala, “The Party” (*Kuponūt*), are among the most recent.³

Refugees explores three centuries of Balkan emigration to Argentina. Set in the smoky, alcohol-saturated bistros of a Buenos Aires evening, it takes the tango as a metaphorical point of departure for exploring the sensibility of diasporic experience: the heartbreak of loneliness, the nostalgia for a romanticized homeland, the yearning for happiness, the passion for sweethearts abandoned and new loves embraced, and the inexorable play of destiny in steering one’s life course. The sentiments and sensuality inscribed in the tango’s sound and steps trigger a cascade of memories among an immigrant population whose ethnic composition is a microcosm of the prior Ottoman dominion. Characterized by regionally appropriate music and dance, the reminiscences of Armenians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Jews, Macedonians, Serbs, and Turks become a means of revisiting specific places and moments, and acknowledging the results of intercultural contact and rupture. Importantly, in contrast to more conservative interpretations of Bulgarian history, Robeva treats Ottoman governance as neither positive nor negative, but simply as fact—a template for intercultural admixture and contemporary performativity.

The show’s symbolically rich color scheme of red, white, and especially black unifies what otherwise might seem a disjointed slide show of ethnic abstractions merging territory, history, and society in a manner out of place and time (cf. Foster 1991:244). Bolts of gauzy red and black cloth skirt the dancers’ choreographic figures throughout the performance; in one of the show’s most artful moments, an adaptation from rhythmic gymnastics, two broad folds of black chiffon gracefully ribbon several dancers to create a stylized bow. In my mind’s eye, I immediately envisioned these as the black bows typically hung on Bulgarian villagers’ gates and doors to identify that they are in mourning. In fact, the predominance of black lends a melancholy quality to the entire production.⁴ That the show’s title is “Refugees” and not “Immigrants” further cultivates a sense of profound loss. Emigration, the show implies, is a kind of death. But it is also a metamorphosis—a kind of death from which new lifeways, alliances, and societies are born.

In music, choreography, and conception, *Refugees* uniquely situates Bulgarians within an intercontinental demographic flow, turning outward to a Balkan diaspora that has swollen exponentially in the past 20 years but which remains little examined. Indeed, I would argue that few Bulgarians today have not been touched by migration in some capacity, whether through short-term migrant labor in other parts of Europe and Turkey, or permanent emigration to cities such as Chicago, Las Vegas, and Atlanta. In my experience, this is especially true of musicians, artistic refugees displaced by economic privation and the collapse of state support for their work. The theme of this production, then, resonates strongly with contemporary circumstances, its content a metaphor of postsocialist fractures.

Throughout the production, Robeva uses rhythmic gymnastics to accentuate musical and choreographic conjunctures tethering the spatiotemporally near and distant. In one exemplary scene, the choreography of conventional Balkan and Jewish dance is melded with that of the more cosmopolitan tango against an eclectic soundtrack of regional musical idioms, jazz, and contemporary wedding music elements. A broad swath of red chiffon gracefully manipulated by the dancers suggests the wide cummerbund that is a requisite component of every Balkan man’s traditional garb; when dancing, men frequently grasp the belts or cummerbunds of those next to them, creating an interlocked dance line that is also a metaphor of community relations. Thus, the chiffon points to those social ties that bind, and whose value and fragility are so graphically illuminated by population displacement. On a more poetic level, the now taut, now supple

fluidity of the undulating fabric captures at once the ebb and flow of these social relations over time and space, and the poised tension of the tango's movements and musical gestures.⁵

Ensemble Bŭlgare's Second National Revival

Two weeks prior to viewing *Refugees* I attended, at Sofia's Palace of Culture, the fifth-anniversary gala of the National Folkloric Ensemble Bŭlgare, an enormous company of 98 artists founded by choreographer Hristo Dimitrov in October 2002 under the generous patronage of Danish entrepreneur Jan Anderson, who is married to Dimitrov's sister, Elena (NFAB 2008:5). Like Neshanŭl Art, Bŭlgare is essentially a dance troupe that has rejected the women's choirs that brought Bulgarian music to international attention early in the transition era, adopting a "Riverdance" model of more cost-efficient solo singers and instrumentalists instead.

A brief note of explanation is probably warranted here. As my previous work documents, in the late 1980s and early 1990s several professional women's choirs distinguished by their distinctive regional vocal qualities, such as that called "Le mystère des voix bulgares" (The Mystery of the Bulgarian Voices), toured North America, Europe, Australia, and Japan (see Buchanan 1997, 2006:341–425; and Silverman 2004). Although the prototype for such choirs was the women's chorus of state-sponsored folk ensembles, whose other performance forces included a (typically male) folk orchestra of reconstructed local instruments and a dance troupe, these singers and their multipart compositions were marketed as a unique form of "authentic" world music and even ethnopop. After 1989, however, state support for these sprawling, Soviet-inspired collectives diminished almost completely, prompting their stranded remains to downsize, remodel, seek private sponsors, or dissolve. The overwhelmingly successful Riverdance phenomenon of the mid-1990s, in whose productions just a handful of instrumentalists participated—including a Bulgarian *gŭdulka* (three-stringed bowed lyra) player—provided an inspiring new theatrical formula: foreground the dancers with sizzling choreographic displays, incorporate special effects, and contain the musical accompaniment to a few virtuosic soloists and a pre-recorded soundtrack.⁶

Bŭlgare is Bulgaria's first private folk ensemble and the first to be extensively bankrolled by a foreign sponsor, while also garnering the patronage of a significant number of local businesses.⁷ The group's lead vocalist, Albena Veskova, a former "Mystère des voix" soloist, is choreographer Dimitrov's wife. The anniversary gala that I viewed featured scenes from the ensemble's first three major shows: "This is Bulgaria," an artistic tour through the country's folkloric regions; "Bulgaria through the Centuries," which dramatizes key events in the nation's history; and "Albena," which spotlights the singer's talents and the lifeworld of Bulgarian women from days of yore (NAFB 2008:5–6, 10–11, 16–17). These titles, like the ensemble's name, hint at the group's overtly nationalistic and populist orientation. "Bŭlgare," as distinct from *bŭlgari*, or Bulgarians, is an archaic in-group term connoting not the country's citizenry, but a camaraderie of the dominant ethnic group, Bulgarian Slavs, who are also strongly identified with Orthodox Christianity both because of the country's early conversion (in 865) and as a result of the Ottoman *millet* system, which classified the Empire's subject population by faith. It is a term evocative of origins—one which conflates ethnicity, nation, and religion with historical claims to statehood, a trope reinforced by several of the ensemble's dramatic tableaux.⁸ Thus one friend with whom I discussed this term, a philologist by training, noted that Bŭlgare's productions "emphasize THAT *natsiya*," the nation of *bŭlgare* (in other words, the population group descending from the eighth-century intermarriage of the south Slavs and Turkic Bulgars),

rather than the country's "other *etnosi*," such as Jews, Armenians, or Roma, which in this discourse emerge as ethnicities with no national entitlement.

In the slick, glossy, 32-page promotional brochure distributed to the gala's audience, Dimitrov describes himself as deeply religious, beginning each rehearsal by leading the entire company in prayer, and attributes the ensemble's success in part to his convictions (NAFB 2008:12).⁹ For him, *Bǔlgare* seems not just a vocation, but also a spiritual mission in the guise of an increasingly sprawling and influential corporation spearheaded by the *Bǔlgare* Foundation, of which he is president. Since 2005, the ideological centerpiece of this enterprise has been his "Second Bulgarian *Vǔzrazhdane*" (or Renaissance—hereafter SBV), which epitomizes *Bǔlgare*'s aesthetic and political intentions. The *Vǔzrazhdane* was the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century National Revival era of cultural, artistic, and educational development that raised national consciousness in anticipation of the modern Bulgarian nation-state, which also entailed establishing an independent Bulgarian Orthodox church. The era's ideals were crucial to the emancipation efforts that ended Ottoman control in 1878—events that Bulgarians term the "Liberation." The fact that these efforts occasioned a revolutionary struggle to oust a (theocratic, Islamic, non-Slavic) empire prompts me to ponder against what or whose hegemony Dimitrov's contemporary SBV is directed. The chauvinistic inferences underlying Dimitrov's current campaign are hinted at in historian Mary Neuberger's observation that the socialist-era forced Slavicization and ethnic cleansing of Pomaks, Muslims, and ethnic Turks, euphemistically dubbed the "Rebirth" or "Regeneration Process" in local parlance, may be perceived as "akin to and an extension of" the nineteenth-century Revival (Neuberger 2004:79–80).¹⁰ In effect, by espousing an essentialist, more-Bulgarian-than-the-Bulgarians ideal summarized in the company's very name, the ideological assumptions inherent in Dimitrov's SBV might be considered a further performative prolongation (if not actualization) of the ethnonationalist thinking that encouraged the "Rebirth Process." "It's one thing to applaud," maintains Dimitrov in the brochure's text, speaking about how the company's shows affect their audiences, "but completely different to claim after a 'Bǔlgare' production that you reject the proposition to work abroad and [opt to] remain in your homeland [instead]." "The supercilious attitude of foreigners toward Bulgaria and our people provokes me," he persists in the same somewhat xenophobic vein, paradoxically ignoring the fact that his chief financier is Danish. "The lack of knowledge among [most] Bulgarians concerning the wealth we possess provokes me" (NAFB 2008:12).

In 2005, Dimitrov's SBV campaign was officially ignited by the lighting of symbolic fires by prominent civic leaders, including then Vice President Angel Marin, signaling ideological patronage at the highest levels of government.¹¹ These flames were passed, Olympiad-style, to every municipality and historical site in the country, originating with a torch held by a celebrated actor impersonating Khan Asparukh, who founded the Bulgarian state in 681 (NAFB 2008:22, 24). To quote Dimitrov, the SBV should "raise the self confidence and spirits of Bulgarians" at home and abroad, build pride in "the lives and achievements of [their] great fellow countrymen," and "sustain the fire lit by the ensemble in the souls of the people" (20, 23). Using sanctified language typically reserved for Liberation-era heroic icons such as Vasil Levski, in prerecorded commentary projected on a screen at the beginning of the gala, Dimitrov explained that through their performances, *Bǔlgare* was serving as "an apostle for the whole country," so as to "preserve the Bulgarian spirit and national identity." The wording here is deliberately laden with symbolism. During the Liberation movement, the leaders of revolutionary committees dispatched "apostles" to specific regional districts to foster a spirit of rebellion and spur preparation for forthcoming uprisings; these individuals are among the

revolution's most celebrated figures.¹² Dimitrov's remarks, a play on nationalist sentiment, paint Bŭlgare's ideals in a similarly activist light.¹³

The Bŭlgare Foundation is to facilitate the SBV's objectives through twelve initiatives, of which the eternal flame and ensemble itself are two, and all of which pertain to marketing a particular, SBV brand of aesthetic education (NAFB 2008:23). Seminars for young people will promote Bulgarian folklore as the "Eighth Wonder of the World," "charity spectacles" of "concrete intention" will entertain orphanages, and "elite schools of Bulgarian art" will support "young talent" in keeping with the Bŭlgare trademark. The Foundation publishes its own glossy magazine, produces the ensemble's CDs and DVDs, and seeks to restore specific historical monuments, lobby politicians to enact legislation pertinent to its goals, and promote innovative forms of tourism.

These endeavors brilliantly illustrate the "ethno-preneurism" that John and Jean Comaroff explore in their book, *Ethnicity, Inc.*, whereby the expressive materials—the distinctive products, practices, and paraphernalia—of ethnicity as culture industry become brand-name commodities laden with a self-inflected effect of shared belonging born of people "seeing and sensing and listening to themselves enact their identity—and, in the process, objectifying their own subjectivity, thus to (re)cognize its existence, to grasp it, to domesticate it, to act on and with it" (2009:26, 51). Bŭlgare is essentially patenting a particular brand of and for the in-group, folkloric "ethno-futures" invested in an identity economy marketing, in this case, local lore to local folks, who in the process become tourists in their own land and consumers of its potentially transformative wares (26). Although the results of such commodified self-identity displays can veer toward the parodic, the Comaroffs observe that they also appear to "(re)fashion identity, to (re)animate cultural subjectivity, to (re)charge collective self-awareness, to forge new patterns of sociality, all within the marketplace" (26). These goals accord well with Bŭlgare's mission of helping the Slavic majority rediscover and take more pride in a certain view of their heritage.

For example, in August 2009, Bŭlgare hosted its second Folkloric Costume Festival in the central Bulgarian village of Zheravna, an architectural preserve. Entry required traditional dress and leaving behind anachronistic personal effects such as cell phones, watches, and lighters. Participants were promised an "exceptional authentic experience" dating back 150 years and, paradoxically, a somewhat regionally inappropriate, heterogeneous mix of Rhodope bagpipes, Macedonian *zurnas*, Turkish-style wrestling, eastern Thracian firewalking, and a Dutch folk ensemble performance as entertainment.¹⁴ As anthropologist Robert Foster (1991:249) has observed, when it comes to heritage, "the state enjoys no monopoly on the objectification of the nation." In this instance, to paraphrase him, "through the consumption of ['old Bulgaria'], objectified and commodified [in the Zheravna festival as metonym], consumers are promised nothing less than the possibility of national-personification, the appropriation of qualities deemed essentially ['Bulgarian'] as attributes of personal identity" (1991:250).¹⁵

As alluded to above, prior to each number of Bŭlgare's two-hour gala, the ensemble's chief staff and lead performers provided prerecorded prefatory commentary projected on two large stage-level screens. The gala's apex, "Kocho," was excerpted from "Bulgaria through the Centuries" and introduced on screen as the ensemble's most "effective presentation." "A Bulgarian can be either free, or dead," one of the production's featured actors proclaimed dramatically to the camera. "We Bulgarians are a proud people. We can't bear to be slaves." The soloist dancing the part of Kocho then explained, in a voice choked with emotion, how proud and

moved he was to play this role; crying, he walked off the set, saying that he couldn't continue with the interview. The import of these remarks soon became evident.

“Kocho” is a folkloric dramatization of a wrenching poem by Ivan Vazov, one of the *Vŭzrazhdane*'s preeminent authors, for whom Sofia's National Theater is named.¹⁶ “Kocho” describes the heroic defense of Perushtitsa, a town in the Plovdiv district of south central Bulgaria, in the Rhodope foothills, from well-armed Ottoman *bashibazuks* under the command of Ahmed Aga Tŭmrŭshliyata during the April Uprising of 1876.¹⁷ While some 400 of the population escape by night to Plovdiv, the remainder take shelter in the town's Orthodox Church, which fast becomes the site of a pitched battle. In the Bŭlgare dramatization of this event, the actors wield real guns while Russian-influenced *Vŭzrazhdane* march songs sound in the background.¹⁸ As Ottoman irregulars bombard the sanctuary, destroying its belfry,¹⁹ the Bulgarian revolutionary leaders, including Kocho Chistemenski, a shoemaker, kill their own wives and children, lest they become victims of atrocities, before turning their weapons on themselves. In the Bŭlgare rendition, as Kocho kneels dying, shaking and in great pain over the bodies of his loved ones, their souls rise up into what I can only describe as a Bulgarian paradise. The audience hears a large Rhodope bagpipe (*kaba gaida*) and shepherd's bells (*chanove*). The scene on stage becomes a very sedately and beautifully danced Rhodope *rŭchenitsa* in 7/8, authentic in choreography, musical style, and costuming.²⁰ Kocho is reliving scenes from his life. He begins to dance happily with his sweetheart, courting her; suddenly, though, heaven disappears, the music shifts dramatically, and we realize that he is still dying. This was just a vision.²¹

Before breathing his last, Kocho relives his wedding, the gravity of this scene only enriched by the well-established resonance between weddings and funerals in Bulgaria and throughout the region, an association with which many local viewers were likely familiar.²² This part of the narrative, like the rest of the tableau, is set to a Rhodope score by composer Milcho Vasilev, who teaches at Plovdiv's National Music Academy and who was responsible for early experiments with folk orchestras, wedding music, and jazz in the late 1980s. All of its features—the large regional bagpipe; the bells, whose peals mark the drama's alternation between the gruesome reality of the church massacre and Kocho's ascension to heaven; the *rŭchenitsa*; and later, an unmetered solo ballad or “slow song” (*bavna pesen*)—are musical tropes of the region, which is often linked to portrayals of Ottoman violence in folk ensemble productions and nationalistic discourse. At Bŭlgare's official fan site, program notes accompanying the “Rodopa” act of the “This is Bulgaria” production remind us that these mountains were, “during the time of the Ottoman Empire, the arena of the largest spiritual battle between the Muslim faith and Christianity,” and during the seventeenth century, the site of compulsory conversions to Islam. This is conventional rhetoric revitalized through performance, the heavenly depiction of Rodopa only serving to enhance the sense of its violation by infidels.

At the same time, Perushtitsa is truly among the most unspeakable episodes of the Bulgarian revolution; I have no desire to belittle its gravity. Together with similar pogroms at Batak and elsewhere, it sparked British opposition to Turkish policy and eventually prompted Russian intervention, culminating in Bulgaria's emancipation (Macdermott 1962:264–93). These atrocities are chronicled in a well-known nineteenth-century eyewitness account by activist and journalist Zahari Stoyanov (1976:11, 112–41), whose writings inspired Vazov's poetry. Together, this literature constitutes a powerful node in the “ethnomyth” informing Bulgarian nationalistic discourse. My concern is that how Bŭlgare *engages* such historicized memories follows well-worn, socialist-era clichés that accord completely with the predominant views of

many east European historiographers. As historian Maria Todorova (2005:148) explains, these scholars have tended to perceive nationalism as “the central trope of the modern period and focus almost exclusively on the emergence, maturation, and victory of national-liberation struggles, a grand narrative in which other processes and events figure only as background, side-effects, or conditions that favored or hampered the ongoing progression of the national movements.” The approach is teleological, for it suggests that contemporary ethnic Bulgarians are the natural “achievement” of the history portrayed by Bŭlgare’s theatrical narratives (Foster 1991:241 after Wright 1985:148). These narratives draw upon works like “Kocho,” itself already an artistic metacommentary on the reality of the Ottoman experience, pulling them isochronically onto the contemporary stage to create a relationship of pride-full solidarity between viewers and *Vŭzrazhdane*, one that reminds them of the superiority of the *ethnic* nation, and its mutual defense contra various empire-al legacies ranging from the Ottoman to the Soviet to the mafia to the EU.²³ Returning to the Comaroffs (2009:39), Bŭlgare’s approach exercises both the primordial and instrumental positions from which ethnicity can arise, artistically inscribing “shared biology, ancestral origins, and innate disposition[s]” on the one hand (the primordial view, after Cohen 1974:xii), while on the other, responding to perceived “threats to the integrity, interests, and self-determination of persons who, for one or another historical reason, come to imagine themselves as sharing a culturally rooted destiny” (the instrumentalist perspective; after Wallerstein 1972).

Unpacking this, the perceived menace here comes from both insiders and outsiders, from the collusion of government and organized crime, two decades of economic tumult implicated in EU politics, profound social change (spearheaded by an exiled and reimported president cum tsar), assertive demands by minorities for civil rights, a significant brain drain, and a worn-out, dispirited public. Several folk ensemble insiders with whom I spoke criticized the Bŭlgare productions as lacking quality or rehashing old socialist hat. The whole thing is “a very pretty package,” said one friend, “all wrapped up in cellophane,” but “doesn’t have much value.”

Other Bulgarian acquaintances commented positively and negatively on the gala’s ideological aspects. Academic friends argued that the tableaux were “chauvinistic,” “racist,” and “stupid.” A musicologist colleague dubbed Bŭlgare’s outlook “complete totalitarianism,” and as promoting a “comfortable” version of national history. A colleague who directs an ensemble went much further, exclaiming that in the present climate of intolerance, Bŭlgare’s dramatizations were “playing with fire” and “very dangerous” in their potential to stir up ethnonationalist sentiment.

An archaeologist acquaintance compared Bŭlgare’s repertory to that of the heavy metal band Epizod (Episode), which he had followed since its underground days in the 1980s. While the band’s first recordings drew upon the French poetry of François Villon and Charles Baudelaire, in the 2000s, after some personnel changes and paralleling Bŭlgare, Epizod released several new albums with nationalistic titles whose song lyrics set poetic verses by Ivan Vazov and Hristo Botev, another venerated Liberation-era poet and revolutionary.²⁴ As in Bŭlgare’s dramatic narratives, a recurrent motif in this poetry, he submitted, is “the pain and suffering” of the Bulgarian people as they struggled for independence, and the “need to be victorious” in this process. This made Epizod’s songs, like Bŭlgare’s productions, “easy to relate to” in the difficult circumstances of the present.

For Bulgarian political scientist and east European studies scholar Emilia Zankina, a former professional folk dancer, Bŭlgare’s artistic ideology called to mind “Site Bŭlgari Zaedno” (All Bulgarians Together), a popular restaurant, a publishing house, and until it ceased

production in September 2010, a television program broadcast by SKAT national television. SKAT, in turn, founded and openly supports the Natsionalen Front za Spasenie na Bŭlgariya (National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria, or NFSB), an alternative political party whose goals, as described on SKAT's website, are “. . . to rescue Bulgaria from political, economic and spiritual ruin and preserve national values and ideals. In [SKAT's] platform the principles of unification around patriotic causes, support for Eastern Orthodoxy, [and] opposition to *chalgalizirane* [chaltaization],²⁵ demonstrative pornography, as well as the revision of Bulgarian history in the name of foreign interests, are pledged.”²⁶

“Site's” motto and activities fit well with this platform. The initiative's originator, Nikola Grigorov, has edited a series of nationalist histories, published under the Site Bŭlgari Zaedno umbrella, concerning military heroes, the Liberation, the Macedonian question, and Greek, Russian, and Serbian aggression against Bulgarian interests; these are featured at the organization's website, together with articles and historical film clips on similar themes, and his own highly opinionated commentaries (posted as “News”).²⁷ Grigorov emceed the eponymous TV program; described as a “folkloric, informational, and entertaining broadcast” directed at popularizing Bulgarian music and dance, two of its more incendiary aims were “to reveal the true history of the Bulgarian people and to expose the falsifiers and thieves of our history,” and “to unmask the butchers of the Bulgarian people, the perpetrators of the genocide continuing even today among the Bulgarians of Serbia, Greece, and the Serbo-Komintern concentration camp Macedonia.” Indeed, a full-length painting of Grigorov in Macedonian dress holding the Bulgarian flag in his right hand and that of the VMRO in his left is positioned centrally in the restaurant, while music and dance from the Macedonian region comprise the backbone of Site Bŭlgari Zaedno's entertainment repertory, affording “All Bulgarians Together” a potentially politicized interpretation of suprastate cultural or ethnic alliances.²⁸ The Gotse Delchev ensemble, directed by Asen Pavlov,²⁹ was the broadcast's signature performer, while “Site's” website promotes cassettes, CDs, and music videos of Macedonian music, most also published under the “Site Bŭlgari Zaedno” name, in which the restaurant's performers and even Grigorov himself participate.

Designed to emulate a village tavern (*mehana*), the restaurant, located in downtown Sofia, features Bulgarian culinary favorites and wines, tables set with traditional woven tablecloths and ceramic dinnerware, and live folk music and dancing, in which diners are encouraged to participate, led by costumed professionals. During the socialist era establishments of this sort provided entertainment for visiting tourists; many more appeared after 1989. What differentiates “Site” is the overt atmosphere of patriotic fervor that it cultivates: reproductions of iconic nationalistic paintings and portraits of celebrated revolutionaries and political leaders from the founding of the Bulgarian state and *Vŭzrazhdane* era line the walls, and a mustached mannequin of a late nineteenth-century Bulgarian villager stands near the bar. Bulgarian flags bracketed above tables throughout the room are removed and waved by clients when gripped by nationalistic euphoria. Zankina described how, when attending a relative's birthday party at the club, she only danced twice, because despite her training and love of the tradition, in this setting, dancing, especially good dancing, was emblematic of a “nationalistic zeal” with which she is not comfortable—an observation seconded independently by two other friends, who enjoy the club's music but cannot tolerate the ultranationalist atmosphere.

I associated “Site Bŭlgari Zaedno” with the ongoing conversion of scenic rural homes or even entire villages into resort complexes, an increasingly widespread development effort that promises excursions in authenticity and history, much like Bŭlgare's productions and the

Zheravna festival. Zankina agreed, remarking that many such vacation spots were advertising themselves as domestic or “*bitov* tourism,” where *bitov* means in the style of everyday rural life, particularly that prior to socialist collectivization, and that the restaurant exemplified another facet of this phenomenon. Before the transition (1989), she explained, the idea of spending a weekend in a kind of resort village was ludicrous. People didn’t go to the village on vacation; they went to the coast (of the Black Sea). To spend a significant sum to vacation at a village bed and breakfast was unthinkable. After 1989, nature and village life were revalued as potential tourist commodities—and not just for foreigners.

At least three other consultants, including the archaeologist above, a political scientist, and a musicologist, wondered whether Bŭlgare’s production aesthetic might be fruitfully interpreted apropos the principles of Ataka (Attack), the ultranationalist, anti-Turkish and anti-Romani political coalition that garnered more than 9% of the vote (21 of 240 seats) in the 2009 parliamentary elections (see also Popova 2011 and Silverman 2012:12–13). Like “Site Bŭlgari Zaedno,” Ataka originated as a program on SKAT TV in the early 2000s; the show’s host, Volen Siderov, established the eponymous political party, which he continues to lead, in 2005. The party was championed by SKAT until, after a falling out, Siderov launched his own ALFA TV and RadioAtaka network, available to digital subscribers and via the internet, while SKAT inaugurated the NFSB.³⁰ Ataka advocates withdrawing from NATO, new initiatives to surmount “the demographic collapse” resulting from emigration and the low birthrate among ethnic Bulgarians, and the preservation of Bulgarian language and national symbols or monuments through government sanctions.³¹ Its protectionist platform is belied by its slogan: “Let’s regain Bulgaria for the Bulgarians!,” a refrain echoing a similar slogan, “Bulgaria for the Bulgarians, Turkey for the Turks!,” which I saw protesters hoist at rallies concerned with minority rights and the “national question” in 1990, shortly after the political transition (Buchanan 2006:306–08). For the political scientist, Ataka engaged in a kind of postcommunist nostalgia that appeals to the public’s broader sense of cultural nationalism, even if the majority of that public placed its vote elsewhere. To her mind, it was this same cultural nationalism, underwritten with anti-minority sentiment, which helped account for Bŭlgare’s popularity.

By contrast, many other interlocutors took a less politicized stance, contending that the concerts were entertaining and inspiring. One close friend in Sofia, a librarian, chastised me for taking the gala’s content too seriously; to her, Bŭlgare’s objective was to “boost people’s self-confidence in this difficult time,” and that “maybe this wasn’t such a bad thing.” Members of the University of Illinois Bulgarian Students Association who attended the ensemble’s April 2009 “This is Bulgaria” show reported that it was warmly received by the Chicago diaspora, who responded to some numbers with tears.³² Viewers on both sides of the Atlantic remarked that Bŭlgare made them feel “proud to be Bulgarian.” Other Sofia acquaintances termed Bŭlgare’s SBV of great importance in stemming the tide of an ethnopop culture whose sexualized and ethnically amalgamated and Turkish properties they found deeply troubling. Pointing to the ongoing debate concerning Muslim women’s headscarves and the fact that the government had just voted against making Bulgarian language mandatory in schools, yet another dear friend, a senior administrative assistant in an academic institution, cautioned me to consider these contested issues when interpreting the content of and reactions to Bŭlgare’s performances.

And so it goes. That ethnonationalist politics remain a grave concern being hashed out in government legislation, the popular culture arena, and everyday discourse is not surprising; that Bŭlgare is discussed in this context, however, is immensely significant. For me, there is an unsettling moral lining to Bŭlgare’s productions that espouses an old-fashioned perception of

citizenship which is equal parts geography and subjectivity, and which is contributing to a larger emergent, nostalgic, protectionist, ultra-nationalist, and even xenophobic discourse that links this ensemble with Epizod, Ataka, and “All Bulgarians Together” in my consultants’ minds. Bŭlgare’s activities entertain an exclusionary “moral geography” that maps the dominant ethnos onto an increasingly pluralistic or “hetero-national” landscape,³³ using criteria which, to quote Benjamin Orlove (2004:2), “rather than being merely economic, sociological, or historical, include dimensions of ethical value.” To wit, when asked by the press whether “it is possible for folk song, creativity, [or] dance to help [Bulgarians] preserve [their] morals as a nation,” Albena Veskova replied (NFAB:18):

Yes, of course. This creativity especially helped Bulgarians survive in the grim years of [Ottoman] slavery, to preserve their faith for the future. In folk song, strength of spirit, love of Homeland, toward one’s mother, toward one’s beloved are extolled. And in Ensemble Bŭlgare’s three spectacles we demonstrate not only the beauty of Bulgarian dance and song, but also the strength of the Bulgarian spirit and the high moral values that we want to bring home to the younger generation.

Through its ventures, then, the ensemble is also promoting what I would call a moral iconography of subjectivity—a certain way of thinking about how to be Bulgarian, a certain way of *appropriate* thinking, that suggests what is a permissible and even preferred way of constituting the self, here apropos the relation of ethnicity to citizenship and belonging.

Kutev at the *Crossroad*

Such dispositions contrast starkly with those currently embraced by the Kutev Ensemble, still “the” national folkloric troupe in that they remain the only socialist-era ensemble funded wholly by the Ministry of Culture. Together with its music director, composer and *gŭdulka* virtuoso Georgi Andreev, and its chief choreographer, Ivailo Ivanov, artistic director Elena Kuteva has recently launched two innovative premieres, *Wild Strawberries* in 2003 and *Crossroad* in 2008, that purposefully divorce “national” from the “nation,” confronting audiences with an inclusionary, federated perspective on citizenship—and the ensemble’s craft—instead. This moral geography reterritorializes the Bulgarian abstraction by placing it amid overlapping, contingent, subnational, and transnational solidarities, which transcend the older ethno-national boundaries suggested by socialist-era folklore and, through the beauty of their staging, are endowed with positive value.

As Andreev asserted in one of our many interviews, the Kutev approach advocates “tolerance and friendship.” It emphasizes that “everyone who lives [in Bulgaria] shares something.” *Wild Strawberries* seeks inspiration in the country’s many minority and cross-border populations—Armenians, Pomaks, Greeks, Macedonians, Jews, Roma, and the once nomadic transhumant Sarakastani (Karakachani) herders. One orchestral composition, “The Route of the Argonauts,” features dueling solo *gŭdulkas* played in the style of Pontic lyras, a deliberate musical glance to the east, rather than the west, that sets Bulgaria’s implication within Black Sea lifeways in sharp musical relief. Andreev explains:

Many ethnic groups in the Mediterranean region use the *gǔdulka* under different names. So I used intonations from the town of Trabizond on the Black Sea's southern coast. The town is in Turkey but its population [dates] from Hellenic times, and maybe even from [that of] the Argonauts. They started from Asia Minor and then traveled along the southern coast of the Black Sea . . . This piece is a geographic musical tour.

But *Argonauts* is remarkable for more than its musical content. When I saw the work performed in May 2007, the soloists were both female: Violeta Petkova and Hristina Beleva are the orchestra's lead *gǔdulka* players.³⁴ My research indicates that in contradistinction to past gender conventions, the *gǔdulka* is slowly becoming a female instrument, even in professional circles.³⁵ But the Kutev management's decision to hire, in addition to classically-trained bassist Nora Bobeva (employed by the ensemble since the 1980s), not one, but four *gǔdularki* since 2002, and to put two of them center stage in *Wild Strawberries*, illustrates that, as Bobeva put it, they have "broken this barrier" for professional folkloric performance. That one of these *gǔdularki*, Darinka Tsekova, who has since left the orchestra, is also of Romani heritage heightens the revolutionary significance of this composition further; she soloed together with Andreev in some of its initial performances, thereby musically countering ethnic in addition to gender marginalization in a most public, venerable, and national venue.³⁶

"We wanted to create a new show revealing the ensemble's potential," Andreev told me, "and we wanted to make the show unusual, even shocking." Although the ensemble had launched a different premiere a few years earlier, in 1996, its material, he said, represented "an outdated aesthetic," and brought him little satisfaction, because "it didn't say anything that [he] really wanted it to." "It was just as if you were driving a cart," he explained.

It might be great for a museum, or for you to see what a cart once was, but it can't move down the road together with other cars. It was a morally outdated vision, in the same way. So I simply indicated that at this point, there was no sense in continuing to write ridiculously, hopelessly old-fashioned arrangements. Not only were we not helping anyone, we were beginning to rotate in an enchanted circle of one and the same things. Additionally, the public associates everything in the ensemble's older repertory with Todor Zhivkov and his regime, which, to a greater or lesser degree, repels them. They connect this sound with [political] manifestations, with red flags, with all that the Bulgarian people wants to forget.

Not surprisingly, then, both *Wild Strawberries* and *Crossroad* were met with mixed reactions by viewers in the press, online forums, blogs, and YouTube commentary, some claiming that the heterogeneous blending of "non-Bulgarian folklore," which they frequently interpreted as Turkish or Middle Eastern no matter its origin, would have the organization's creator, Philip Kutev, rolling in his grave. Here it becomes clear that, like Bǔlgare's productions, the Kutev Ensemble's recent shows have served as a touchstone for ethnonational debate framed by the stresses of postsocialist life worlds. "The music is sooner Vlach, the costumes Arab . . . I don't see anything Bulgarian in this performance," said one YouTube commentator about a *Crossroad* number portraying a Pontic men's dance (discussed below) that might be considered a further creative elaboration on the Argonautical trail. Another, suggesting that the show's "ethnic outbursts" disgraced national art, called on the Ministry of Culture to demand the resignation of

Elena Kuteva.³⁷ In other words, the show was not “Bulgarian” enough in the sense projected by Ensemble Bŭlgare. While several viewers simply lamented the absence of the old socialist-era warhorses they had grown accustomed to hearing performed regularly in years past, others congratulated the ensemble for finally having broken the mold of former stereotypes. “‘Philip Kutev’ is once again ‘Philip Kutev,’” exclaimed folklorist Georg Kraev (2008) in an incisive review, reminding readers that when the ensemble was founded in 1951, it entailed radical changes in performance practice then, too. Now, sixty years later, these earlier modifications were accepted as traditional to the point of cliché.

In a press interview published in October 2007, Andreev characterized *Crossroad* as an attempt to convey “the common roots of Balkan culture and the enormous variety of distant influences upon it over the centuries.”³⁸ “Because in practice,” he explained to me a year later, “it’s not exactly that you have a road that comes and crosses here, but rather that it’s the windiest place in the Balkans, so to speak—that place that has the most cultural encounters.” “The ensembles were blind,” he told me, “regarding what context Bulgarian music is located in. [It’s] located in the context of Turkish, Greek, Vlach music—in general, it should be taken in a Mediterranean context, because it’s a little bit broader than [the Balkans].” Ultimately, “crossroad” simply designates “parallels between endlessly distant, diametric cultures that in a given moment intersect with one another.”

Thus, while the musical reach of *Wild Strawberries* did not extend past the state’s ethnic boundaries, *Crossroad*’s content is purposefully borderless. Costumes are at once fantastical and ethnically inspired stylizations of regional and historical models. While the primary substance of the production derives from Bulgarian lore, Andreev deliberately included elements from elsewhere in part to appeal to international audiences. The show, he related, resists the “grandiose,” “pretentious,” “endless” productions typical of the ensemble in the late 1980s, which he likened to grand opera. By contrast, *Crossroad* is designed for touring; it, too, eschews a full folk choir in favor of just four vocalists. These are joined by 24 dancers and ten musicians who double their Bulgarian instruments with Greek *bouzouki*, guitar, clarinet, Armenian *duduk*, and *zurna*. The resulting timbral palette is further broadened by a prerecorded, synthesized soundtrack utilizing a full symphony orchestra and electronic samples, all of which is coordinated with impressionistic visual images projected on wall-to-wall screens behind the ensemble in performance.

Crossroad’s sixteen numbers comprise a montage linked by the notion of a soaring, wind-borne, birds-eye view of an unbordered Balkans. The show opens with a poignant solo *gŭdulka* improvisation, “Aoidos,” played by Andreev himself against imagery of an eagle in flight over a Balkan mountain range.³⁹ Autumn leaves adrift on air currents swirl gently, littering the ground like the mix of cultural influences—the winds—from which the production draws inspiration. “The Adamants,”⁴⁰ a men’s dance whose choreography emulates eagles in flight and fight, immediately follows; in Balkan folk songs, men and the poetics of manhood are often represented by noble birds such as the eagle and falcon. Andreev, emulating a blind minstrel of the past, appropriately accompanies this number by singing a west Bulgarian (Shop) epic song in whose lyrics the eagle figures prominently.⁴¹ The bird’s musical flight spans not just places, but points in time, while Andreev as Orpheus personifies living history, a witness to its events at the crossroad of Europe and Asia, past and present. “On white wings,” one of the production’s signature songs, extends the metaphor, while also illuminating the continuing importance of the Black Sea as a pivotal locus for the ensemble’s current artistry; the costumes donned by the female dancers for this piece draw upon the Caucasus for inspiration.⁴² One might argue that in

Crossroad, the metaphorical eagle, if not Andreev himself, is the Argonaut; the show's midpoint, and in many ways its musical climax, is "Toward Colchis" ("Kŭm kolhida"), his vigorous solo rendering of Black Sea lyra tunes for an equally virtuosic Pontic men's line dance (*horon*), replete with representative costuming and shoulder-shimmying choreography.⁴³

Crossroad's stylistic embrace of intercultural "breezes" is further illustrated by the lighthearted "Wind from the South Sea," which captures the Greek coastline in costuming, rhythmic groove, modality, melodic gesture, and instrumentation, combining a bouzouki *taxim* and *rebab*-like *gŭdulka* solo with an occasional shimmer from a sampled Indian *sitar* and a lyrical vocalise in an almost world pop package.⁴⁴ In conversation, Andreev laughingly characterized the result as "a little bit 'Bollywood'" and "a little bit Cypriot along a parallel from Indonesia to Greece." The solo vocals comprise only vocables, contributing to an aura of tropicalia devoid of place.

In its embrace of regional eclecticism, *Crossroad* does not reject Bulgarian lore, as several YouTube commentators have argued, but even more conventional folkloric topics are rendered in an innovative fashion. "Catharsis" portrays the ecstatic healing dance of the entranced *nestinarka*, or firewalker, who steps artfully through the coals bearing an icon of Saint Constantine or Elena in early June each year.⁴⁵ In Bulgaria, this custom exists only in the Strandzha subregion of eastern Thrace; in this musical setting, the duple meter, melodic motives, two-bar phrasing, rhythmic intensity, choreographic gestures, and prominence of the bagpipe (*gaida*) and drum (*tŭpan*) are all completely in keeping with village practice. However, the very staging of such a religious topic, with the overt Christian symbolism of the drama's final moments, in which the female soloist becomes the icon, held aloft by the male dancers, her body assuming the figure of Christ on the cross, represents a radical departure from previous norms. The orchestration, too, is innovative; rather than enveloping the bagpipes in the usual fabric of the folk orchestra, the composer employs symphonic resources to their fullest extent, the results moving beyond experiment to organic synthesis. One particularly striking illustration is the roiling bassoon line, which assists the hurtling brass- and bagpipe-propelled momentum driving the piece to conclusion.⁴⁶

The Kutev Ensemble's rendering of fire dancing is significant of the growing local attention to cosmology manifest in popular culture, theater, expanded religious practice, and the revival of older customs pertaining to nature worship over the last twenty years. "Lost Souls," which appears in the *Crossroad* program shortly after "Toward Colchis," is also symptomatic of this trend, while further illustrating the cinematic quality of Andreev's compositional style, much in evidence throughout the production.⁴⁷ Integral to this work is a two-bar Turkish *karŝilama* dance rhythm whose microrhythmic components move forward and back, "expanding and contracting like the breathing of a large animal," to quote the composer, but at a tempo slow enough that the pattern is barely discernible. The piece, he told me, represents an encounter between various systems of devotional chant that have touched Bulgarian spirituality through the centuries, from Byzantine Orthodoxy, to Turkish Sufism, to the *Dies Irae* of the Gregorian world. Both the costumes and sedate spinning of the dancers allude to the Mevlevi *ayın*—the sacred dance rite of Konya's "whirling dervishes"—but here the full white skirts representing the shrouds of the dervishes' egos are replaced by black, in keeping with the darkened, misty, midnight blue of the stage set. An Australian didgeridoo sample provides additional timbral and spiritual depth, shadowing the evocative timbre of an Armenian *duduk*, which Andreev told me serves as scribe and hence witness throughout, recording decisive events over the ages. Importantly, however, I interpret this brooding, contemplative work also as a testament to

Andreev's several artistic collaborations with Sofia's recently established Armenian chamber orchestra, his deep respect for Armenian culture, and in general, recent attempts in the Bulgarian courts to officially acknowledge the 1915 pogrom against Armenians as genocidal.⁴⁸

By 2009, therefore, the Kutev Ensemble was no longer presenting itself as the *State's* representative of the *ethnic* nation, but as an inclusive, artistic ensemble of national stature whose performances are inspired by folkloric idioms—of *multiple* resident and non-resident nations. This conceptual sea change is evident in how the group's very name has evolved since 1989: from “the” *Dürzhaven* Ensemble for *Narodni* Songs and Dances – Philip Kutev” (where *dürzhaven* signifies State—a socialist euphemism indicative of governmental sponsorship and ideological ties—and *narodni* means folk, but also [ethno]national or people's—another socialist euphemism fundamental to constructions of tradition and authenticity) to the “*Natsionalen* (national) *Folkloren* (folkloric) Ensemble ‘Philip Kutev,’” a moniker whose terminology emulates the language of international performance.⁴⁹ It has turned the socialist-era jargon of *narodno tvorchestvo* (national or people's artistry or creativity) inside out, espousing, rather, *tvorchestvoto na narodata* (the artistry or creativity of the people or nation) or even *na narodite*—of the peoples—plural.⁵⁰

These efforts have not been lost on the public. Thus, when one YouTube commentator, in response to a video posting of “Toward Colchis,” asked complainingly why the ensemble hadn't danced the *rüchenitsa*, for him, one of Bulgaria's “own” Thracian dances, a second commentator posted the caustic reply below, effectively situating this *Crossroad* number within the contemporary political and popular culture scene as well as the constraining heritage of socialist-era ethnonationalist politics from which it breaks.⁵¹

The Third BG [i.e., Bulgarian] state [est. 1878]—an infantile tsarist dynasty, socialism, *nutrodemokratsia*,⁵² a cult toward the fags, and a single propagandistic, bureaucratic “art” to serve them. Did the Tsars Asen (not Asen Pavlov) dance the *rüchenitsa*? At last someone has broken the mold. Boys, I don't know what your story is, but I congratulate you—when you hurl a stone in the bog, naturally it stinks. Continue. I'm going to start attending concerts again. As for the rest of them—let them go back to making their own little pornographic street clubs . . . Each to his own abilities.

The author begins by listing salient developments of the Third or modern Bulgarian state, which commenced with independence in 1878: the ineffectual rule of the Sakskoburggotski dynasty (whose members would technically include Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, the country's Prime Minister from 2001–05), the socialist regimes of Georgi Dimitrov and Todor Zhivkov, a democracy (or kleptocracy) of corruption governed by thugs, the public adoration of pop culture icons such as the transgendered, crossdressing singer Azis and the eroticized *popfolk* genre he performs, and just one state-sanctioned, closely administered, so-called art—that of the professional state folk ensembles and their myriad amateur facsimiles—which served as its mouthpiece. *Crossroad* plays against the grain of this heritage; dances like “Toward Colchis” disturb the static bog of socialist folklore, sending up the stench of an ideological past that claimed ownership of dances such as the *rüchenitsa*—a musical genre with analogues in Greek and Turkish Thrace—as national icons. By asking whether the Tsars Asen—members of the Asen dynasty who led the powerful Second Bulgarian Empire in its medieval heyday—danced the *rüchenitsa*, the author interrogates the conventional wisdom of socialist folklore history as

propagated by the state ensembles and their scholarly baggage. The point is that we don't know if the founders of the Bulgarian state indulged in this dance; its general origins are more likely Balkan than specifically Bulgarian. The same can be said of "Toward Colchis"; certain musical and choreographic features of this Pontic number are regionally shared. For the men of the Kutev company to perform such a dance is choreographic heresy for some, an homage to the distinctive Pontic variant of a broader regional repertory for others. Either way, the highly masculine qualities of this dance contrast starkly with the belly dancing of Azis (although it should be noted here that *popfolk*, too, draws upon the Balkan region in its musical and choreographic attributes, as belly dance suggests). The author will attend Kutev concerts in future; those uninterested are relegated to the comparatively pedestrian *popfolk* discos, men's clubs, strip joints, cocktail bars, and similar establishments that sprang up on every street corner after 1990, comprising a significant sector of postsocialist nightlife.

Beyond Nation? Performativity, Belonging, and the Power of the Subjunctive

Before concluding, I would like to hazard one more theoretical point concerning why I think cultural performances like these three productions are important for understanding Bulgaria in 2010 and what they mean. For me, the most intriguing aspect of Victor Turner's by now classic theorization of liminality (1974) is his observation that liminal states—liminal moments, really—are replete with the potentiality of the emergent and as such, are also the locus of learning, metamorphosis, and creativity. It is this capacity that allows ritual to invert, subvert, contravene, exaggerate, or transcend the normative social order, turning everyday reality inside out, and, as I have argued elsewhere, that might help us understand how citizens of the Balkans are appropriating a largely negative discourse of Balkanism—one that pivots on a regional *ontology* of liminality—as a source of artistic enrichment and political empowerment (Buchanan 2007:xvii–xviii, xxv–xxvii; Razsa and Linstrom 2004). To my mind, it is the subjunctive quality of liminality that is key here.⁵³ Liminoid phenomena, the concrete aesthetic and artistic consequences of liminal creativity, project imagined possibilities into subjunctive experiences that play out, through performance, the what if, would be, could be and could/would/should-have-been-if-only scenarios of liminal inclinations (Turner 1988:169).⁵⁴ National consciousness, I have come to think, is forged in the subjunctive mood, conceived in and apropos the crucible of the subjunctive. As liminoid phenomena, each of these productions is conjuring an alternative Bulgarian state, an alternative sense of citizenship or identity consciousness, into being. They are performative social dramas, which by dint of reflexivity, mimesis, repetition, and artistic powers of persuasion, carry a certain illocutionary force to (re)shape society (cf. Bauman and Briggs 1990:62–66 and Sullivan 1986:9). This might be particularly true of the Kutev Ensemble, whose lengthy, prestigious heritage as a national icon lends its productions considerable gravitas. In such productions, observes Thomas Solomon (2014:144), “where the social relations at stake in identity formation are made the center of attention,” performance can serve as “an arena for experimenting with, trying out, and ‘trying on’ new identities.” Performance creates “presence,” writes Edward Schieffelin (1998:194). “Performances, whether ritual or dramatic, create and make present realities vivid enough to beguile, amuse, or terrify. And through these presences, they alter moods, social relations, bodily dispositions and states of mind.”

But herein lies a twofold peril. The potential of performance to create presence or restructure social relations is only as powerful as the performance is persuasive, and the production, popular. The success of any performative act is always inherently contingent, its

effectiveness mired in the risk of poor execution or audience miscommunication. The outcome is unpredictable, even as the act itself may be directed at exploring or fixing a new reality. In Schieffelin's words, ". . . the power of performativity turns crucially on its *interactive edge*" (1998:200, and 196–98). When the artistic slips into artifice, the play of the subjunctive becomes more hypothetical, parodic, or even predatory than aspirational.⁵⁵ I mean this in two ways that are linked to audience reception and authorial or actors' intent. Audiences unable to suspend disbelief in the face of a dramatic production remain unswayed by its messages, unpersuaded of its truth-value. They understand or dismiss the production's narrative as more hypothetical, as satire, or as fantasy, a kind of artful, if not entertaining or humorous deception, to whose reality construct they do not aspire. But when performances "work"—that is, when the (often polished, well-rehearsed) strategically executed behaviors of actors, who may or may not subscribe to the tale world they enact, trigger in auditors a strong sense of identification, the resulting "suspension of disbelief" can leave publics deeply moved, inspired, entranced, thoroughly entertained, repulsed, or vulnerable to manipulation—a second peril (Schieffelin 1998:200–05). This seems particularly true when the truths or emergent realities that narratives weave dramatically affirm, refute, or play on the heartstrings of the essentialisms of belief: national mythologies, religious doctrine, sacred symbology, conventional wisdom, received histories—themselves all interrelated narrative discourses. It is in such situations, through the imaginative play and transformative possibilities of the subjunctive, that social power dynamics may be exposed and exploited, political or national consciousness aroused or redefined, and social action incited—toward positive or unsavory ends (cf. Schechner 2006:23, 26).⁵⁶ Indeed, Turner himself recognized this volatility, what he called liminality's 'darker valences and potentials,' stating that 'performative genres . . . live on the edge of volcanoes' (quoted in MacAloon 1984:14). As Patricia Sawin (2002:42) remarks,

A successful performance *moves* the audience. This can be threatening if the performance evokes feelings toward the material and/or toward the performer that are inappropriate within or contradictory to the "order of things" that benefits the dominant group. Evocation of such feelings potentially motivates challenges to the system, conscious or unconscious, by creating kinds of experiences (especially interpersonal experiences) that are not supposed to be possible or thinkable.

Each of the ensembles examined here draws upon a similar discursive pool of history and lore in fashioning their productions; indeed, there are numerous mutual influences and relationships of personnel, subject matter, choreography, and music between them.⁵⁷ However, the extent to which and intention with which they each challenge, embrace, flout, or transcend the conventional order in the realization of their artistry differs remarkably, and carries divergent implications.

In sum, the material and sonic culture of folklore supplies multivalent sign vehicles for today's artists, who mold them in presentational contexts suffused with meaning such that viewers self-identify with or reject the qualities displayed and heard to, in the words of anthropologist Katherine Verdery (1999:77), "feel themselves national."⁵⁸ "Bŭlgare's" shows traffic in timeworn but disturbingly powerful appeals to an ethnonationalist sentiment laced with postcommunist nostalgia and steeped in what Emilia Zankina terms "entrepreneurial populism" (pers. comm. 2010), by which I understand her to mean the strategic manipulation, employment, or staging, through commercial enterprises, of expressive culture, such as songs or dances,

whose multivalent significance resonates with deeply embodied, populist sensibilities learned through enculturative social institutions (such as schools) and emblematic of national consciousness, patriotism, and similar sentiments of affiliation or belonging.⁵⁹ By contrast, those like Robeva's *Refugees* sidestep and extend the concept of nation by repositioning local choreography in a diaspora of venues and genres. Most strikingly, the Kutev Ensemble, through strategically composed and choreographed works that call upon diverse regional and international folkloric and popular culture styles, including those of neighbors and minorities, is deliberately performing against gender and ethnonationalist stereotypes in favor of productions cosmopolitan in form and postnationalist in content. In so doing, they are redefining "national" folklore in defiance of a lingering socialist-era cultural policy legacy, probing reterritorialized and even supranational social formations that "transgress the national order of things" as alternative premises for situating subjectivity and understanding citizenship (Gupta 1992:64). As anthropologist Maple Razsa (2004:161, 165) observes in a recent review article addressing "competing narratives of ownership and belonging" on the Istrian peninsula, while regionalisms and hybrid identity constructs are certainly "no guarantor of tolerance and openness," they at least offer "the possibility of such relations."⁶⁰ Here's to possibilities.

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Notes

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2. For example, such geopolitical configurations might include, but are in no way limited to, the postsocialist Bulgarian state, the Ottoman ecumene, the Balkan region, the Black Sea region, Europe, and the EU.

3. I viewed "The Party's" premiere in December 2010 but cannot address it in detail here. The show incorporates numbers from each of Robeva's productions to trace the trajectory of her company's artistic and choreographic development. Its theme is celebration—a joyous, high-energy, eclectic jamboree drawing upon and innovatively fusing numerous genres of party music and dance to salute a decade of groundbreaking achievement. For further information about this and other National Art productions, see <http://www.neshkaart.com>.

4. This melancholic impression is only reinforced by the show's atypical finale, which trails away quietly like a fading memory without the flamboyant, high-energy dance number or encore (*bis*) that more conventionally concludes the productions of folkloric ensembles, including Robeva's "The Party."

5. A lengthy promotional video clip presenting excerpts from several *Bezantsi* numbers, including those discussed above, may be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSRzwR3yi98> (accessed 22 October 2014). A few still photographs and the promotional poster from the production can be seen at <http://www.neshkaart.com>.
6. The late, highly respected Bulgarian *gǔdular* Georgi Petrov joined the Riverdance company's orchestra in 1996.
7. The ensemble's promotional materials for the anniversary gala list four media partners and 23 business sponsors; of these 23, Sami-M, Sharloпов Hotels, "Fresh" Premium Natural Juices, ProCredit Bank, and the Globul mobile telecommunications franchise are described as primary sponsors.
8. I cannot help but note that in transliteration, "Bǔlgare" also looks a good deal like the French "bulgare" of the "Mystery" tours, especially as the diacritic is usually eliminated in translation—a clever marketing ploy if purposeful.
9. Three colleagues asserted that Dimitrov is a member of the Seventh Day Adventist church, and that this institution has played a role in the formulation of the ensemble's ideals, but I have been unable to independently verify this.
10. For further information about this ethnic cleansing campaign and its relationship to music and minority rights, see Buchanan 1996; Rice 1996; and Silverman 1996 and 2012.
11. More than 250 people, including then Vice President Angel Marin, under whose patronage the SBV movement would unfold, attended an initial informational meeting on 19 April 2005 in the Diamond Hall of the Sofia Princess Hotel. The first SBV "eternal flame" was lit by Marin in front of the grand hotel "Yantra" in Veliko Tǔrnovo (the former capital of the Bulgarian monarchy) on 7 December 2005. As of 2008, the movement had 1150 registered supporters, including 22 businessmen, 28 journalists, and about 100 government officials. See NAFB 2008:22, 24.
12. Chief among these figures was Vasil Levski who, until his death in 1873, was dubbed the Apostle of Freedom. See Macdermott 1962:206, 233, 243.
13. Indeed the company's relationship to Vasil Levski was unequivocally established earlier in the ensemble's history with the lighting of the eternal SBV flame: on 22 December 2006, for example, Zlatko Stoichev, mayor of Radomir, lit the town's SBV fire "together with the unveiling of a bust monument to the Apostle of Freedom Vasil Levski" (see NAFB 2008:24). On Vasil Levski as a divine figure of the *Vǔzrazhdane* and 1989 political transition, see Buchanan 2006:30–33, but especially Todorova 2009.
14. See Bǔlgare's website, <http://www.bulgare.net>, for a description of the festival (which continues annually as of this writing), its regulations, and its participants, as well as the festival's own website, <http://www.nosia.bg>, where photos and programs of past events are archived.

15. Foster's original remark is directed at advertisements for the 1983 "Fête de France," a similar cultural festival promising not just pertinent merchandise, but a sensory experience of the French national essence. I have substituted references to Bulgaria in the quotation where Foster referred to France and the French; his original text reads: "Through the consumption of 'France,' objectified and commodified, consumers are promised nothing less than the possibility of national-personification, the appropriation of qualities deemed essentially 'French' as attributes of personal identity" (1991:249–50).

16. "Kocho" appears in the anthology "Epic of the Forgotten" ("Epopeyata na zabravenite"; Vazov 1881:59–63). For an English translation, see Tempest 1976:34–38.

17. *Bashibazuks* were irregular, mercenary Ottoman soldiers and cavalry renowned for their rapacious brutality and undisciplined plundering.

18. See the ensemble's trailer for this production at <http://youtu.be/F0XRBNYMFLM>; the scene in question begins at 3:10 (accessed 29 August 2012).

19. The destruction of the belfry signaled the imminent collapse of the building; it also carries important political and religious significance, as the Ottoman regime only permitted the erection of belfries in the later *Vŭzrazhdane*. A memorial complex with bell tower commemorating the Perushtitsa massacre now sits on a hill above the town.

20. The *rŭchenitsa* is performed as a solo, couple, and line dance throughout Bulgaria in association with courtship, weddings, and other festive occasions.

21. A substantial excerpt from this scene may be viewed at <http://youtu.be/NYpBGIVP1V8> (accessed 29 August 2012).

22. See, for example, Kligman 1988 and Kaufman and Kaufman 1988.

23. On isochronism see Todorova 2005:155.

24. These include *Bŭlgarskiyat Bog* (The Bulgarian God, 2002), the rock opera *Sveti Patriarh Evtimii* (St. Patriarch Evtimii, 2004), *Nashite koreni* (Our roots, 2006), and *Stariyat voin* (The old soldier, 2008), among others. There is far more to say about this band's activities than I can address here. Briefly, their productions through the 2000s have incorporated folk song, folk musicians, a folk dance ensemble, an Orthodox church choir, period costuming, and landmark concert venues, such as Plovdiv's ancient Roman theater and the restored palace fortress, Tsarevets, in the medieval capital, Veliko Tŭrnovo. In 2011, the band launched a philanthropic effort to restore the edifice's cathedral—an additional parallel with Bŭlgare's initiatives. See <http://www.epizod.com> (accessed 24 July 2013).

25. *Chalgalizirane* denotes the widespread popularization of *chalga* or *popfolk* and the social values that it promotes. *Popfolk* is a post-transition popular culture genre melding Bulgarian musical idioms with those of other Balkan states; Romani artists and Romani and Turkish

influences figure strongly in its performance, and the dancing, women's dress styles, song lyrics, and video imagery associated with the genre have been criticized as sexually suggestive or of poor quality. Particularly in its early history, the genre's solo female vocalists were rumored to engage in prostitution, and some aspects of its production were linked to organized crime. Thus, despite its undeniable popularity, many find the genre objectionable.

26. See <http://www.skat.bg/nfsb.php> (accessed 9 August 2013).

27. See <http://www.sitebulgarizaedno.com/> (accessed 9 August 2013).

28. The VMRO is the Vütreshna makedonska revoljucionna organizatsiya, or Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization. The goals and activities of this longstanding political body, which dates from 1893, have changed over time, but have been broadly dedicated to cultivating ethnic Macedonian nationalism and Macedonian independence efforts, and acknowledging or nurturing cultural ties between ethnic Macedonians in and outside the Republic.

29. Delchev is celebrated as a late nineteenth-century Bulgaro-Macedonian revolutionary and nationalist active in Ottoman Macedonia; the city of Gotse Delchev, in Bulgaria's Pirin-Macedonia region, bears his name. Asen Pavlov is a prominent choreographer who has danced and worked with several folk troupes, including the Kutev Ensemble and the Sofia-based folkloric ensemble "Chinari," in addition to the Gotse Delchev ensemble. Interestingly, with "Gotse Delchev" he also participated in the music videos found on Epizod's first DVD (2004), which features music from their albums "The Bulgarian God" and "Men's Songs." See http://dancerbg.host56.com/horeografi_asen_pavlov_biography.html and <http://www.epizod.com/sample-page/> (accessed 26 July 2013).

30. See Televiziya Alfa, <http://www.ataka.tv/> and <http://www.radioataka.net> (accessed 24 August 2013).

31. See Ataka's "Twenty Principles of ATAKA Political Party," http://www.ataka.bg/en/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14&Itemid=27 (accessed 23 July 2013). Interestingly, in 2009 Ataka invited Epizod to perform at its March 3 political rally (Liberation Day, a major national holiday), but the band declined because of a prior commitment with Bulgarian National Radio, which subsequently fell through (Epizod 2009). The relationship between Bulgarian music ensembles or bands and political campaigns and protests in the postsocialist era is a topic requiring much more attention.

32. Claudia La Rocco (2009) of the *New York Times* was less charitable in her response to a performance at Symphony Space during the same tour, describing the production as characterized by "ridiculously simplistic and glorified historical glosses," "pasted-on smiles," and "overamplified music." "Bulgare may be a folk dance troupe," she wrote, "but this is the spectacle-over-artistry approach."

33. The Comaroffs (2009:47–48) write, "Hetero-nationhood seeks, usually out of practical necessity rather than ethical principle, to encompass cultural and religious diversity within a

civic order of ‘universal’ citizens, all ostensibly equal before the law. It embraces difference, in other words, in the capacious language of pluralism while subsuming it within a single, overarching juridico-political regime, constituting itself, so to speak, by recourse to constitutionalism”

34. For a live performance of *Via Argonavtika* featuring Hristina Beleva and Violeta Petkova as soloists, accompanied by the Kutev Ensemble folk orchestra, Georgi Andreev conducting, go to <http://youtu.be/d6hrMQJE6xQ> (accessed 6 August 2012). For information about and sample recordings by Hristina Beleva, see <http://www.myspace.com/hristinabeleva>; for Beleva’s collaborative work with guitarist Petūr Milanov, go to <http://www.belevaandmilanov.com/> (accessed 6 August 2012).

35. Female *narodni orkestranti* is a rich topic that I am treating more extensively in a separate article.

36. A lengthy promotional trailer for *Wild Strawberries* featuring an excerpt from “Via Argonavtika” with Tsekova as soloist may be heard at <http://youtu.be/B4jw4aGIRS0>, between 5:06 and 5:50 (accessed 7 August 2012).

37. The full quotation, posted by todorburgas at <http://hk.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmEqaf5OJnY> (accessed 5 June 2008) in association with the *Crossroad* number “Harpies and Asparukh”:
“This is a disgrace to our art. Philip Kutev founded an ensemble to preserve Bulgarian folklore and all of us former performers contributed to, loved, and took pride in this. Unfortunately, Elena Kuteva is leading the ensemble toward a complete collapse by tolerating the ethnic effusions of Georgi Andreev and Ivailo Ivanov. I appeal to the Ministry of Culture to consider whether it is not necessary to demand the resignation of Elena Kuteva and to try to preserve the true image of this State [*dürzhaven*] ensemble, so beloved of us all.” For additional remarks, see Anonymous 2008.

38. Balkanfolk Team, “‘Krūstopūt’: Premiera na Ansambül ‘Filip Kutev,’” accessed 9 May 2012, <http://www.balkanfolk.com/bg/news.php?id=109>; Andreev also expressed these ideas to me in our interview in similar terms.

39. To hear this performance, go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X03th3-LEOM> (accessed 25 July 2013).

40. The Bulgarian title of this number is “Neprištūpnite,” meaning those who are as impregnable—as hard and enduring—as adamant; in the context of this work, the word suggests the resolute quality of the Bulgarian epic hero or *yunak* (and by extension, of the Bulgarian people), as persevering and unyielding as the mountain cliffs, and as unassailable as the eagles who roost on them. A live performance of this number may be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4On5e_sOZE (accessed 25 July 2013).

41. The Shop epos is among the very oldest documented genres in Bulgaria; it was once accompanied by some kind of lyra, whether the *gūdulka* or the now extinct (in Bulgaria) *gusla*. *Gūdulka*, then, not surprisingly features in the accompaniment here. “Aoidos,” the title of the

gǔdulka improvisation leading seamlessly into “The Adamants,” is from the Greek, meaning an oral epic singer such as those associated with the classical Homeric epics.

42. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwMrIsWN1fA> (accessed 25 July 2013). Particularly at issue are the headdresses, whose circular, flat-topped hats and billowing gossamer veils (here, the “white wings” of the choreography) share resemblances with traditional women’s dress of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, as do the dancers’ long sleeves, which finish in a triangular point over the back of the hand. Andreev remarked several times on the Caucasus influence evident in these costumes, which reminded him particularly of Azerbaijani dress and that represent a very unusual development in Bulgarian dance garments.

43. To view a live performance of “Toward Colchis,” also now called “The Golden Fleece,” go to http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_HDV9ZmQCY (accessed 25 July 2013). Colchis was an ancient kingdom of western Georgia, located on the eastern side of the Black Sea, the home of Medea and the golden fleece, and the destination of Jason and his Argonauts on their voyage to retrieve it.

44. This number, also called simply “The Southern Sea,” can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YxZQZM308zo> (accessed 25 July 2013).

45. The custom is typically held on 2 or 3 June (21 May by the old calendar).

46. “Catharsis” may be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Erf_K1FiLF4 (accessed 25 July 2013). Such highly effective but unconventional (in the context of folkloric ensembles) sonic combinations may well emerge from Andreev’s practice of regularly creating symphonic renditions of his compositions for folkloric ensembles and instruments. Although this is also a strategic move that enhances the marketability of and performance prospects for his works, it displays his unusual ability to creatively think, compositionally speaking, in both musical idioms, separately and simultaneously.

47. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1vBfJfxAA0> (accessed 25 July 2013).

48. The composer has close ties to Sofia’s Armenian community and has both written for and performed on their April concerts commemorating the victims of the 1915 pogrom. I cautiously interpret the significance of “Lost Souls” in this context; it is an idea that finds purchase also in others of his compositions, from “Memory of Ararat” (in *Wild Strawberries*) to his chamber symphony, *Phoenix*. Collaborations between Armenian and Bulgarian musicians is a topic that I am exploring in the context of my current research on Bulgaria’s Armenian diaspora.

49. For a more detailed discussion of these terms, see Buchanan 2006:33–39 and 165–66.

50. See also Georg Kraev (2008), who makes a similar point.

51. Posted by stogerov, November 2008, “Kǔm Kolhida – ansambǔl Filip Kutev,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&hl=zh-HK&v=FiCmZ13N8Es&gl=HK> (accessed 14 November 2009). My heartfelt gratitude to Emilia Zankina for her help in translating this

passage.

52. “*Mutra*” is a slang term meaning “grimace,” “mug,” or “ugly face” that came into vogue after the political transition to describe those men, many of them formerly highly trained, state-supported athletes like weight lifters and wrestlers, who worked as security guards, bouncers, and strongmen for the newly rich mafia and political elite (which were not mutually exclusive categories), if not as the bosses of these cartels and their enterprises themselves (insurance and holding companies, pyramid schemes, café/cocktail bars, and *popfolk* and pornographic clubs, among others).

53. On cultural performance, social drama, liminality, and subjunctivity see Abrahams 1986:68 and especially Turner 1988:25, 41–42, 101–02, 107.

54. These remarks were likewise inspired in part by Maria Todorova’s perceptive observations (2005:160) about “lag,” “lack,” and temporal acceleration, or “catching up” with “one’s own ‘might have been,’” as distinctive qualities of east European nationalisms; cf. also Turino 2008:16–18.

55. That in performance, art and artifice may operate as complementary or competing frames of interpretation is an observation inspired by University of Illinois graduate musicology student, Kyle Carmack.

56. Cf. Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, second edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), 23, 26.

57. To give but three examples, Andreev has collaborated closely with Robeva; both Būlgare and the Kutev Ensemble perform the song “Kate, Kate,” but in different arrangements; and both the Kutev Ensemble and Neshanūl Art employ the choreographic technique of hoisting a female dancer in the shape of a cross, as described above. Space considerations do not permit me to explore the complicated repertorial dialogue between these groups here.

58. Cf. Turino 2008:2, where, in explaining why the arts matter, he remarks, “The performing arts are frequently fulcrums of identity, allowing people to intimately feel themselves part of the community through the realization of shared cultural knowledge and style and through the very act of participating together in performance. Music and dance are key to identity formation because they are often public presentations of the deepest feelings and qualities that make a group unique. Through moving and sounding together in synchrony, people can experience a feeling of oneness with others. The signs of this social intimacy are experienced directly—body to body—and thus in the moment are felt to be true.” This social intimacy is similar to that described by Verdery as key to the national as experiential, and which I find at work in these three folkloric productions.

59. In other words, productions are deliberately structured to play on comfortable, facile, “feel good” constructs of Bulgarianness, often dating from the socialist era, to make people take pride in or feel better about themselves, their country, and who they are in the midst of the chaos of contemporary life and the tribulations of the last two decades. An additional case in point was

the December 2010 Ensemble Bŭlgare “Unique Voices” spectacle, which Zankina and I attended together. Staged at the Sofia opera house, this production, which I will explore more fully in a future publication, concluded with fireworks, the unfurling of an enormous Bulgarian flag across the stage, and a rousing rendition, sung collectively by performers and the jam-packed audience, of “Moya strana, moya Bŭlgariya” (My country, my Bulgaria), once an *estrada* song (Soviet-style socialist light pop) popularized by socialist-era Bulgarian music icon Emil Dimitrov (1940–2005), probably in the 1960s. This scenario, which brought the crowd to its feet, was heralded by the dramatic pealing of electronically synthesized chimes, over which a disembodied voice theatrically announced, “*This is Bulgaria!*”—a borrowing from the earlier show of the same name. For a discussion of the political dimensions of entrepreneurship and populism, see Gurov and Zankina 2013.

60. In this article, Razsa reviews Pamela Ballinger’s *History in Exile: Memory and Identity at the Borders of the Balkans* (2003). Ballinger’s study untangles the range of identity constructs and historical narratives at play on the multinational Istrian peninsula during the twentieth century. Her findings prompt her to question whether it is really appropriate for scholars to acclaim the hybridity informing Yugoslavia’s supranationalism (which failed) or Istria’s regionalist discourse as a ‘progressive alternative to essentialized identities’ (Ballinger 2003:262 in Razsa 2004:164). It is to this question that Razsa’s remark responds (164–65). On hybridity and identity construction, see also Ballinger 2004.