

# “On stage, everyone loves a Black”: Afro-Ukrainian Folk Fusion, Migration, and Racial Identity in Ukraine

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In the harsh snowy days of late November, 2004, I joined hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian citizens on Maidan Nezalezhnosti, Independence Square in Kyiv, to protest the unfair presidential election which had been rigged in favor of the corrupt government-sponsored candidate. I was there as an international election observer and was simultaneously researching the role that Ukrainian-language popular and folk music were playing in the protests, dubbed as the Orange Revolution (Helbig 2006). Music has had such a long history of politicization in Ukraine that newspapers printed the names of Ukraine’s most well-known musicians and the candidate they supported, either the opposition candidate or the government-sponsored one (Klid 2007). These affiliations were based less on political ideology as they were ruled by ethnic identity, language choice between Ukrainian and Russian, regional identity, and religious identity. Among the performers on Maidan Nezalezhnosti were an African-Jamaican duo calling themselves “Chornobryvtsi” (Black-Browed), performing Ukrainian folk songs dressed in Ukrainian folk garb for the crowd. The passion with which the crowd embraced Chornobryvtsi made it clear that outsider validation of Ukrainian ethnic identity and culture was at the root of the protests. The crowds’ chants of “Chor-no-bryv-tsi! Chor-no-bryv-tsi!” signaled an embrace of non-Ukrainians who supported Ukrainian language and culture, perceived by protestors to be under threat by the Russian-oriented policies of the political regime. The role of African and Jamaican musicians in that critical historical moment also brought forth the role of migrants and foreigners living in Ukraine in Ukraine’s ongoing political and cultural identity struggles, in terms of its vacillating leanings between more pro-Russian and pro-Western ideologies and policies.

Since the 2004 Orange Revolution, the highly mediatized involvement of African musicians in Ukraine’s pop-folk music scenes has broadened the contemporary public sphere beyond the ongoing ethnic Russian and ethnic Ukrainian culture wars since Ukrainian independence in 1991. The continued popularity of African musicians helps foreground issues of pluralism and multiculturalism that reinforce the notion of Ukraine as a patchwork quilt made up of many different ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups, including ethnic Russians, Russian-speaking Ukrainians, ethnic

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Ukrainians, Crimean Tatars, Roma (Gypsies), Armenians, and Jews. African folk musicians' appearances on talk shows, at folk music festivals, at public city events, in newspapers and on the Internet, have influenced the ways that people speak about ethnicity and race, albeit with a greater sense of conflation of identities as regards people with dark skin. It is common for locals to refer to musicians from Africa as African American or to use "African" and "African American" or "Afro-American" interchangeably when speaking or writing about performers from the African continent in the media. Musicians from Africa capitalize upon the popularity of U.S. popular music genres associated with African Americans, conflating the widely marketed stereotype of "African American as musician" to localize their social acceptance via Ukrainian folk music idioms. Are Africans accepted in their own right or only to the extent that they adhere to more localized cultural norms, such as participation in Ukrainian folk-influenced music? How do Soviet-era and contemporary attitudes regarding Africans and African Americans influence levels of inclusion for African migrants in post-Orange Revolution Ukraine?

African musicians, who have moved to independent Ukraine to study and make a living, engage with more than half a century of African and African American presence in the Soviet Union. As early as the 1920s, a handful of African Americans traveled to the Soviet Union, enticed by propaganda regarding the building of a socialist society based on equality and respect for all races (Carew 2008). Personal experiences, documented in memoirs, reflect the relative failure of the communist system to overcome social racism and cultural exoticization of African Americans by local Soviet populations (Khanga and Jacoby 1992; Robinson 1988). By the 1950s, however, the Soviet Union, guided by the ideology that socialist society was not as racist as its capitalist Cold War enemy, the United States, began to extend educational scholarships to growing numbers of students from the African continent to study in the Soviet Union. Couched within rhetoric of equal opportunity, the educational offers were motivated by the Soviet government's hopes of developing African Communist allies in world affairs (Quist Adade 2007:153–157). The predominantly male students came from Uganda, Kenya, the Congo, Nigeria, and were allowed to stay in the Soviet Union for the duration of their studies. Students were expected to return home upon completion of their studies. No opportunities were extended to them to work and seek Soviet citizenship. Many students fathered children with local women but were not allowed to stay together as families. Referred to by the term *mulat* (mixed blood), most of these children grew up without knowing their fathers, who had been forced to return to their home countries. Thus the educational opportunities became a double-edged sword, offering

education, but denying Africans and their descendents the basic equal rights that socialist rhetoric had promised.

The silenced histories of Africans and African Americans living in Soviet spaces form the backdrop for recent migrations from the African continent to countries such as Russia and Ukraine. Independent Ukraine is now home to significant populations of Africans who have moved for reasons of economic betterment (Ruble 2005) and religious outreach, as in the case of Nigerian pastor Bishop Sunday Adelaja, whose mega-church Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of All Nations is the fastest growing church in Ukraine (Wanner 2007). Contemporary migration patterns place Ukraine as the fourth largest migrant-receiving nation-state in the world, following the United States, the Russian Federation, and Germany (Mansoor and Quillin 2006:3). According to a 2005 study conducted by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, there were 6,833,000 foreign-born people residing in Ukraine, a figure that constitutes 14.7 percent of Ukraine's population of forty-eight million (Ruble 2008:5).

The rate of population change has greatly influenced the broader inter-racial milieu and the ways in which local populations relate to newly-arrived Africans living in their midst. Racial violence against African students and migrants has risen dramatically in the last two decades. Eighty-eight percent of Africans who were surveyed by researchers from the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies in 2001 stated that they would not have moved to Ukraine had they known "what experiences were in store" (Ruble 2005:164). Despite such statistics, many have worked to gain citizenship and change the mindsets of the local populations. Bishop Sunday Adelaja has organized public lectures and awareness programs regarding racial discrimination. African soccer players playing in the Ukrainian league have also spoken out about racial equality.

Alongside sports and religion, music has played an increasingly important role in bringing attention to the African presence in Ukraine. Various musical groups, mostly comprised of students from East Africa, particularly Uganda, have participated in a series of television interviews, newspaper interviews, and have been featured in local performance venues and clubs. In interviews, these young performers share experiences of racism in Ukraine and try to find ways to connect with their audiences. One seemingly successful way has been to incorporate Ukrainian language folk music as the basis of performance. Two groups in particular, Chornobryvtsi (meaning "Black Browed" and also "Marigolds") based in Kyiv, the capital, and Alfa-Alfa, based in the university city of Kharkiv in eastern Ukraine, have gained significant popularity by performing Ukrainian folk fusion music. Alfa-Alfa has begun to incorporate original compositions in Russian,

the lingua franca of popular media in Ukraine, and to expand beyond the marketing niche they created by hosting “Africa”-themed R&B dance parties in Kharkiv, where they have lived since completing their studies.

This article focuses on the ways in which music groups like Alfa-Alfa attempt to positively shape African migrant-related discourse in Ukraine. By fusing stereotypical images of Ukrainian, Russian, and exoticized images of “Africa,” they work to garner a public voice for all migrants of color from the African continent living in Ukraine. Issues of citizenship and long-term cultural acceptance are at the forefront of their concerns. These young musicians have drawn on their folk music-based popularity to comment on escalating racial violence, discrimination, and anti-migrant attitudes in Ukraine. What might an analysis of what the media has dubbed “Afro-Ukrainian” folk music tell us about the relationship between music, migration, and race relations in a postsocialist society? How might musically reconceptualized ideas of Ukrainian folk music influence public attitudes towards migrants living in Ukraine today?

### Music and Politics in Postsocialist Ukraine

The influx of African migrants who came to Ukraine in search of economic betterment in the early 1990s expanded African presence in Ukraine beyond that of student populations. African musicians, who perform in Ukrainian folk costumes, present themselves in interviews as potential citizens who are willing to go to great lengths to assimilate and accept the cultural practices of people living in Ukraine. These musicians attempt to alleviate contemporary racialized anxieties regarding growing migrant populations, while simultaneously working to overturn Soviet-era discourses regarding Africans as transient actors without legal claims for citizen rights. African musicians involved in folk music scenes present themselves in television and newspaper interviews as spokespersons for all African migrants living in Ukraine. The general public has responded positively to accepting Africans on stage. As Bawakana Michael Kityo, lead singer of the Kharkiv-based Afro-Ukrainian folk music group Alfa-Alfa, observes, “On stage, everyone loves a black.”

I first came across images of the Kyiv-based Afro-Ukrainian group Chornobryvtsi on the Internet while conducting research on the political impact of music during the 2004 Orange Revolution (Helbig 2006). Their performance of Ukrainian-language folk music was politicized alongside the actions of other Ukrainian-language folk and popular musicians who used Ukrainian-language music to garner support against pro-Russian government policies. Chornobryvtsi performed for protestors in Kyiv during the Orange Revolution precisely because they sang in Ukrainian and not in

Russian. Continued research led me from Kyiv to Kharkiv, where the group had originated. Kharkiv is home to one of the largest populations of migrants and foreign students in Ukraine. The city boasts a musical network that connects African musicians associated with folk music idioms to the city's interracial hip-hop and reggae scenes. I befriended the members of Alfa-Alfa, the Kharkiv-based Ugandan group performing Ukrainian folk music with whom Chornobryvtsi had performed in the past. In 2009, I visited the families of Alfa-Alfa members in Kampala, the capital of Uganda, in order to gain a better understanding regarding the role of folk music in political discourse. I researched the ways in which African students, migrants, and their families related to ongoing ethnic tensions in Ukraine through the prism of inter-tribal relations in their home countries.

African presence in Ukraine's folk music scenes has wide-reaching socio-political effects due to music's long-reaching influence on local politics. In the Soviet Union, ethnic Ukrainian popular musicians fought against Moscow's linguistic and political oppression by using the Ukrainian language and various anti-government topics in their lyrics (Bahry 1994; Wanner 1996). This Soviet-era ideology, regarding the power of popular music, has carried over into the first decades of Ukraine's independence and casts musicians into political camps.<sup>1</sup> Musicians have a great deal of power to influence the direction of various social and political movements. During Ukraine's movement for independence, Ukrainian-language musicians composed satirical songs making fun of socialist living conditions. The 1989 Ukrainian-language song titled "Brekhunets," the liar, is also the local name for the radio system that was built into Soviet-era apartment housing. The song, sung by Andriy Panchyshyn, member of the musical theater group Ne Zhurys (Don't Worry), popular in western Ukraine during the movement for independence, comments on the lack of truth in Soviet government propaganda.

"Brekhunets" (The Liar/Soviet Kitchen Radio), 1989 (excerpts)

Lying from birth,  
The end has come.  
My Soviet kitchen radio,  
Chokes on the truth.

My ear wilts from the truth,  
Even in the program Chas (Time)  
They finally say: It's not so bad over there (in the West)  
And it's not great over here.

Truth to the right, truth to the left,  
Truth from a-top, truth from bellow...  
It's an epidemic,  
More dangerous than AIDS.

Perestroika will burn,  
In a fiery hell,  
And the kingdom of clear lies  
Will rise again.

Musicians from this time also composed songs with nationalist overtones and revived Ukrainian-language repertoires from WWI and WWII-era struggles for independence (Bahry 1994). During the anti-government-corruption campaign in 2004, commonly known as the Orange Revolution, some musicians rallied for the opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko in the Ukrainian language while other musicians supported the government candidate Viktor Yanukovych in Russian. Ukrainian-language musicians, including the Afro-Ukrainian group Chornobryvtsi, performed for the hundreds of thousands protestors on Kyiv's Independence Square (Helbig 2006; Klid 2007).

Folk-based music in Ukraine, such as Afro-Ukrainian folk fusion, taps into a postsocialist revival of musical genres categorized by scholars and journalists as “newly-composed folk music,” fusion folk, folk revival, and *aventyka*, a category defined by ethnomusicologists as pre-Soviet village-based music genres and performance practices recorded in villages, or recreated by folk performers.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the African musicians with whom I conducted my research began their careers as hip-hop and reggae musicians. They were enticed by local producers and musical entrepreneurs to dress in folk costume to capitalize on the growing folk music revivals. The ethnic Ukrainian producer for Alfa-Alfa in Kharkiv, Vladyslav Zyuban, also known as DJ Fixa Mixa, states that his motivation in creating the folk fusion group was more economic than political.<sup>3</sup> However, this *proyekt* (project), as Zyuban referred to it, took root and evolved into a social phenomenon with wide-reaching, socio-political consequences. According to Bawakana Michael Kityo:

No one was interested in redoing the Ukrainian music in a modern style—hip-hop, R&B, reggae, all these kinds of styles. We started it. Truly. That's a fact. We made the Ukrainian artists realize that their music is still beautiful,

it's still informal, it still unites people. And they could welcome us now that we are also respecting and loving the culture, speaking the language. (Interview with Bawakana Michael Kityo, Kharkiv, June 7, 2008)

This representation of Africans performing in the Ukrainian language, dressed in modernized Ukrainian folk costumes, appears to be typical only in Ukraine in terms of postsocialist folk music scenes. Spurred on as an Internet phenomenon via YouTube videos and websites, it is now fashionable in Ukraine to hire Africans in Ukrainian garb to perform at birthday parties and to host them on talk shows. In 2007, Chornobryvtsi appeared as contestants on a talent show titled *Fabryka Zirok* (Factory of Stars). Viewer reactions to their appearance on *Fabryka Zirok* were generally positive regarding the group's Ukrainian-language repertoire, though some comments on the Internet were reactionary, stating that they don't play original music, but rather "monkey" (*mavpuvaty*, a word used to negatively describe "copying") Ukrainian folk music in different styles. The reference to "monkey" is rooted in racialized discourse that stems from Soviet-era representations of Africans in the public media and satirical magazines (discussed later). Historian Maxim Matusевич notes that Soviet cartoonists drew relationships between African American jazz and its "jungle nature" (Matusевич 2009: 70). In the Soviet satirical magazine *Krokodil* No. 17 (October 1964) for instance, a popular musician is depicted as a monkey playing a guitar, racially branding African American musicians and their music, as well as those who participated in American and African American rock and jazz scenes in the Soviet Union (*ibid*).

Today, Chornobryvtsi, and groups similar to them, have a significant number of performance opportunities and enjoy relatively positive media coverage. Whether performing on television or at folk festivals, in western or eastern Ukraine, the more-than eight Afro-Ukrainian groups I have identified on YouTube and local Ukrainian television talk shows and news broadcasts share a similar repertoire, namely, widely popular folk-influenced songs sung in the Ukrainian language, performing in modernized Poltava-region and Carpathian-region embroidered shirts and blouses. In a highly publicized event, a group of African migrants sponsored by a non-governmental organization performed at a Hutsul folk music festival in the Carpathian mountains in 2006 (Horodnytska 2006: 12). In the article that ran in the Lviv-based *Vysoky Zamok* (High Castle) newspaper, the performers were identified as "Afro-Americans." The article positioned the musicians as cultural outsiders who appreciate Ukrainian culture and help strengthen the tenuous position of Ukrainian-language music in Ukraine.

While it is difficult to precisely assess how many such Afro-Ukrainian fusion groups exist in the territories of Ukraine, this is viewed as a relatively

acceptable form of cultural expression within African migrant communities, among ethnic Ukrainians and Russians living in Ukraine, among the Ukrainian diaspora in North America, and among viewers in countries such as Uganda, where Afro-Ukrainian musical clips have been featured on local television. What accounts for the widespread support and interest in this cultural caricature of Africans and Ukrainians? In what ways does this particular form of folk-fusion influence race relations and policies toward African migrant workers and students in Ukraine? Aside from Africans, why have no other migrant groups participated in this type of folk-based fusion and what does this reveal about intercultural and racial relations in Ukraine?

### Race, Caricature, and Performances of Blackness

Musical fusion projects that feature African youths dressed in Ukrainian folk costume, singing ethnic Ukrainian folk songs, function socially and politically in a variety of ways. They tap into a long history of cultural representations that are rooted in a highly stratified relationship between ethnic groups in the Soviet Union. An internal exoticization of Others was prevalent in Soviet media, such as films, literature, and political cartoons. Ethnic Ukrainians were oftentimes caricatured as country bumpkins in Soviet film adaptations of Nikolai Gogol's *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka*, written in 1832. It was the indirect goal of Russophile Soviet cultural policy to manipulate Ukrainian folk expressions, such as embroidery, village traditions, and folk music, to reinforce identities of ethnic Ukrainians as peasants in socialist discourse, and to present them as backward and culturally less developed than ethnic Russians (Koropec'kyi and Romanchuk 2003). Similarly, Roma were represented as exoticized nomads, deeply steeped in their cultural practices through films such as *Tabor Ukhodyt v Nebo* (Camp Descends To the Heavens) (Helbig 2009). Satirical magazines published in the Soviet Union, such as *Krokodil* (Crocodile, established in 1922), and its equivalent *Perets* (Pepper) in the Ukrainian SSR, lampooned Africans as "Mawgli," creating a popular cartoon character based on Joseph Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* (1894). Depictions of Mawgli-inspired characters still appear on chocolate ice-cream wrappers in Ukraine and Russia, indexing the visual relationship between *shokoladnyi* (chocolate) and skin color as racial identity (Matusевич 2007:393). Africans were also caricatured as children or black puppets. In *Krokodil* No.4 from April 1984, "Africa" is depicted as a small child policed in handcuffs by larger Soviet authority figures. This satirical Othering of Africans in political cartoons reinforced





**Example 1:** A promotional picture for Alfa-Alfa, an Afro-Ukrainian folk fusion ensemble based in Kharkiv, Ukraine. Used with permission.

a costumed, caricatured lens through which all Others were depicted and socially categorized.

Alfa-Alfa and Chornobryvtsi consciously choose to sing in Ukrainian so as to create a connection with the local population. Though Ukraine's media sphere is more supportive of Russian-language expression because Russian is the lingua franca in Ukraine's major cities, the visual incorporation of ethnic Ukrainian folk costumes strengthens their attempted connection with ethnic Ukrainian segments of the population. Alfa-Alfa's linguistic ability to sing in Ukrainian reinforces these efforts. They use Ukrainian folk music to bring attention to their physical blackness, oftentimes choosing songs that incorporate the word *chorny* (m.) or *chorna* (f.) meaning black. The Ukrainian folk costumes and the presence of ethnic Ukrainians in their videos function in juxtaposition with their dark physical features and woven hair braids. The visual element is crucial in reinforcing the fusion aspect of their music and their music videos are oftentimes played on television, and shared among listeners via YouTube, Facebook, and local social sites. Musically, they often rap parts of the folk song or remake the well-known songs in reggae style. The Ukrainian-language folk song that propelled Alfa-Alfa to fame, "Rozpriahajte Khloptsi Koni" (Harness Your Horses, Men), was released with an accompanying video on the Internet and on local television in Kharkiv. The song narrates the story of a man who meets his love but is rejected for having loved another. The video does not depict the story literally but introduces a subtext of dark-skinned beauty. It begins

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with a group of Ukrainian girls dancing *khorovody* (ritual dances) near a river, wearing ritual Ivan Kupalo (St. John's Eve) wreaths associated with the magic midsummer night's eve when girls seek their fate in love. Among them is Adong Becky Prossy, the African female singer from Alfa-Alfa. Her husband, Bawakana Michael Kityo, rides through the village on a horse, drawing on animal tropes that depict masculinity in Ukrainian folk songs. As Michael describes it,

Ok, this is the story. I am a Black man, living in Ukraine. And I fall in love with a Ukrainian girl. That girl is a twin, and I am confused about who is who. But in my mind I know that the one I am in love with has a beauty mark. So I go to their village, searching in the village, where is my *chornobryvaya* (Ukrainian, translated as black browed beauty). I come across the twin that I'm not in love with, and I'm like, is she the one, could she be the one, because I have a bouquet of flowers for her. Then when she speaks, she speaks so-so close and alike with the one I'm in love with, but then I look close to her, and I find that she doesn't have the beauty mark. So I'm, like, oh, you know, I have to go, I have to keep on looking. I move from village to village, I don't find her. Then, towards the end, I find my love sitting at the lakeside, then that's when I meet her. (Interview with Bawakana Michael Kityo, Kharkiv, June 7, 2008).

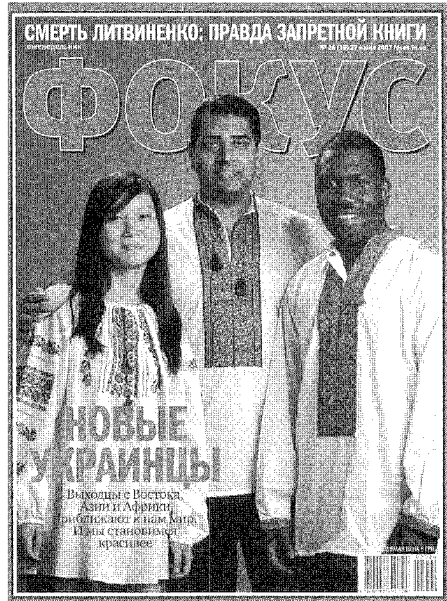
Michael's interpretation of the song as reflected in the music video differs from the song's traditional lyrics, which focus on the love of one peasant woman and a warrior man (most probably a Cossack, who is typically referenced in folk culture with a horse). Michael adds a literal interpretation to the term *chorna* (black) to describe the young woman and weaves a story in which he chooses the dark-skinned girl because she is the more beautiful of the two. The video (not the traditional song lyrics) represent a courtship between two Africans dressed in folk costumes by the river in a Ukrainian village setting. Young love represents hope and a future of settling down among a group of people who have a different skin color but wear similar folk costumes. Though the visual narrative implies assimilation in terms of language, folklore, and regional traditions, the video narrative is interjected with Michael and Becky dressed in white costumes decorated with black, red, and yellow stripes that index the Ugandan flag. The musicians appear to embrace the ways of their new homeland but simultaneously reinforce their Ugandan identity. The singers incorporate hand gestures, body postures, and side-to-side body movements from hip-hop that place the singer in a physically framed relationship with the imagined listeners. They clearly depict a difference between the narrative, as it unfolds in the verses, and the Ugandan identity rooted in popular music associated with the refrain.



**Example 2: A publicity photo of the Afro-Ukrainian group Chornobryvtsi, featuring Rastaman Davis and Steve D in Cossack-inspired costumes. Used with permission.**

Similar to Alfa-Alfa, Chornobryvtsi—comprised of Steve D from Uganda and Rastaman Davis from Jamaica—attempt to connect to their audiences by utilizing Ukrainian-language folk songs as the base of their repertoire. In the early 2000s, Adong Becky Prossy and Bawakana Michael Kityo from Alfa-Alfa, and the two musicians from Chornobryvtsi, performed together as students in Kharkiv. The group split and Steve D and Rastaman Davis formed Chornobryvtsi and moved to Kyiv. Having performed for protestors at the 2004 Orange Revolution in Kyiv, Chornobryvtsi has had a wider-reaching audience than Alfa-Alfa, putting on concerts in cities such as Lviv, a city in western Ukraine known for its strong ethnic Ukrainian nationalism. While members of Alfa-Alfa feel they have a wider audience because they have marketed themselves on their own Internet site ([www.alfa-alfa.com.ua](http://www.alfa-alfa.com.ua)), Facebook, and were the first Afro-Ukrainian group to produce a CD, Chornobryvtsi are at an advantage because they live in Kyiv, which is the center of Ukraine’s growing music industry.

Members of Chornobryvtsi feel that their music opens a dialogue between Africans and the local population regarding acceptance and tolerance. Rastaman Davis of Chornobryvtsi states, “We are trying to show the Ukrainians that it is not bad, and not so difficult to live together as one people.” (Interview with Rastaman Davis, Kyiv, August 24, 2006). Chornobryvtsi fuses reggae rhythms and hip-hop elements, such as sampling and rapping, to



Example 3: The cover of the June 29, 2007 magazine Focus No. 26 (39) features migrants from Asia, the Middle East, and Africa wearing Ukrainian embroidered shirts. Used with permission.

create new arrangements of Ukrainian folk songs, their most popular being “Tyzh Mene Pidmanula” (You Deceived Me).<sup>4</sup> In “Tyzh Mene Pidmanula,” an elderly white male sculptor works on a statue of a white young female nude that comes to life in his dreams. She deceives him by turning back to stone when he awakes. Steve D and Rastaman Davis are not part of the unfolding song plot as depicted in the video, but rather feature themselves during the song’s refrain, “you deceived me and brought a young man out of his mind.” They are dressed in contemporary clothes and sit on a hood of a car in a European old city location that is difficult to pinpoint. When Chornobryvtsi perform their repertoire live, however, they wear traditional Ukrainian outfits that combine elements of hip-hop and Cossack culture, including the *zhupan* (overcoat) and *sharavary* (long flowing pants). In so doing, they revert back to the old meanings of the songs by not adding a secondary story line made possible by the music video.

The group draws on reggae as part of their musical fusion, explaining that reggae has a long history on the African continent.<sup>5</sup> In their understanding, reggae promotes peace and a laid back attitude towards relations between people. For them, reggae lyrics focus on the beauty of love, highlighting positive qualities of character, and acceptance. Members of Chornobryvtsi and Alfa-Alfa note in interviews that reggae musicians shun violence and do not condone personal tensions, whether on a personal level or in terms of inter-group interaction. They incorporate reggae into their folk fusion

because they argue that in their home countries reggae musicians are considered politically neutral commentators on inter-racial tensions, economic unfairness, and inequality that they attempt to overcome through messages of peace and love.

What messages have audiences interpreted from Afro-Ukrainian folk fusion music and what ideas have performance groups such as Alfa-Alfa and Chornobryvtsi introduced into public discourse? For one, the wide marketing of these groups in the Ukrainian media has influenced representations of other “Ukrainianized” migrants. The July 29, 2007 cover of Ukraine’s Russian-language magazine *Focus*, titled “New Ukrainians,” reinforces the socio-political salience of ethnic discourse within an increasingly racially diverse country. This representation of migrants wearing ethnic Ukrainian garb points to the complex ways in which the migration is seemingly being recast in terms of ethnicity and less so in terms of racial identity. In the magazine cover, the Ukrainian shirt/blouse symbolizes an ethnic layer that the newcomers wear. The costuming creates a familiar point of departure to observers and presents the foreigners as more similar than different to the local population.

Furthermore, the cover of *Focus* magazine aims to reinforce a pluralist, multicultural identity for independent Ukraine, one that is in opposition to policies in other former Soviet Republics, such as the increasingly Russo-centered concept of the Russian Federation as promoted in recent politics by former President and now Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Additionally, it introduces the idea that migrants accept ethnic Ukrainian culture as part of their identity to increase their potential acceptance as citizens of Ukraine. The subtitle on the cover states “migrants from the Middle East, Asia, and Africa bring the world closer to us. And we become more beautiful.” While the emphasis still lies on categorizing and relating to Others in terms of outward appearance, it builds on Orange Revolution discourses of inclusion. In other words, migration-rooted discourses in the cultural realm are interpreted as positive, enriching, and breaking the boundaries of access and information that have kept Ukraine relatively isolated from globalizing cultural processes.

### “Afro-Ukrainian” Concepts of Ethnicity and Race

How does the participation of African musicians within Ukrainian folk music scenes influence the nationalizing rhetoric of folk revival movements throughout the country? The term “Afro-Ukrainian” has become common in political discourse in response to the highly mediatized term that journalists and television announcers have used to describe the presence of Africans in

Ukrainian folk music scenes. The prefix “Afro” has gained common usage in Ukraine, while less so in other postsocialist countries, such as Russia, where African musicians do not participate in folk-based music genres. Perhaps a certain flexibility regarding the nominator “Ukrainian” exists because in Ukraine, differences in religion, language, and customs throughout the country allow for strong regional identities, but a less cohesive national identity. In Russia, the centralized system of government and religion leaves less room for the inclusion of racial, religious, and cultural difference, and a less tolerant policy of accepting people as Russians. In this sense, “Russian” continues to serve as a marker of ethnic identity but does not imply that a person is a citizen of Russia. There is increasing discrimination towards foreigners in Russia and it is very difficult for migrants to gain citizenship. In 2007, the Russian government issued a ban on foreign workers in Russia’s large indoor and outdoor food and clothing retail markets (Osborn 2007). Such markets, similar to the Barabashov Bazaar in Kharkiv where many migrants work, are one of the primary sources of income for a significant majority of people in many urban centers throughout the former Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup>

The racist outlook regarding migrants may or may not be directly related to Soviet-era ideologies regarding foreigners. Concepts of race were identified in Soviet policy as rooted in physiological traits that did not necessarily correlate to behavior or specific needs (Hirsch 2002:33). Soviet anthropologists and scholars rejected German ideas associating concepts of race with immutable behaviors and genetically transferrable traits. They believed that social reform could improve the human condition and that every being could be molded into a Soviet citizen (*ibid*). In many ways, this is why the Soviet Union appealed as a utopian society to African American migrants in the 1920s. Anthropologists Keisha Fikes and Alaina Lemon report that color-based racial slurs prevailed in popular culture despite the Soviet state’s positioning as a racially-inclusive society (Fikes and Lemon 2002:516). Cultural stereotypes that fell outside official discourse associated dark complexions with “naturalized proclivities,” such as “cleverness in the market,” “hot-blooded” temperaments, and “clan-like” family networks (*ibid*). Ethnically-defined frameworks of difference have influenced the development of minority politics in Ukraine and all groups continue to be viewed through the prism of ethnicity. However, a confusing race-based discourse is gaining ground in reaction to the increasing presence of migrants in the postsocialist sphere. It is common for politicians and the general public to state “Ukrajina chorniye,” which translates to “Ukraine is becoming (physically) darker.” The emphasis on physical attributes regarding *rasa* (race) in relation to specific behavior (associated with migration) seems

to conflate Soviet associations of race with physical appearance, cultural associations with specific behavior, and postsocialist minority discourse categorizing difference along ethnic lines, particularly in terms of language and culture.

## Looking Ahead

This article highlights some of the complex ways in which national, political, and cultural policies regarding migration influence the ways in which Africans stake claims for themselves in Ukrainian society. More research is needed to fully analyze how other migrant groups, such as the Chinese and Vietnamese, are faring in the country's changing racial and ethnic dynamics. It seems that discourses relating to Africans differ from those relating to other migrants. I have experienced great difficulties in finding scholars wishing to collaborate on African music-related research projects in Ukraine. My colleagues have shared that their hesitations are rooted in a fear of being physically close to people with black skin. They have used the words "*strashny*" (scary) to describe African men in particular. In contrast, Chinese migrants are readily accepted into Ukrainian conservatories, and music teachers from Vietnam living in Kharkiv have successful careers as private music instructors among the local population. This means that Africans have been racialized into a specific rubric of Others based on locals' fears of physical blackness. This might explain, in part, why Africans are the only migrant group that has participated in folk fusion music projects. They must work harder and must appear more willing to recast themselves as those whose social circles they wish to join. By dressing up in familiar outfits and singing well-known songs, they attempt to put their listeners at ease.

Preliminary research indicates that concepts of *rasa* are specific to ideas about Africans, though extensive ethnographic research has not been conducted to date among other immigrant groups in Ukraine. Thus far it seems that delineations based on physical appearance reinforce prevailing concepts of Africans as transient agents who should not attempt to seek citizenship and social acceptance in Ukraine. Ukrainians often state that there are only a handful of Africans in Ukraine, pointing to groups such as Chornobryvtsi and *mulat* singers like Gaytana (Haitana), whose mother is Ukrainian and whose father was a student from the Congo. Racial killings of Africans, particularly young men, go unreported in the national media. Musicians site such heinous crimes as motivators for their involvement in Afro-Ukrainian folk fusion. This practice gives Afro-Ukrainian folk music groups a way through which they can gain a voice in a society that is not ready to welcome them. The drawbacks for such representations are many and such

performance practices reinforce caricatured, staged identities. Nevertheless, the positive impact these groups have had in garnering cultural support has gradually begun to shape inter-racial relations in more positive ways, particularly in staking an African presence in Ukraine's public sphere.

### Notes

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1. As already noted, during the Orange Revolution, newspapers published the names of the country's most popular musicians and the political party they supported, either the pro-Russian governmental party in power or the pro-Western opposition party that led the government protests. See Klid 2007.

2. The close alignment of newly-composed folk music, village-based genres categorized as *avtentyka*, and folk-influenced popular music with anti-Russian, postsocialist frameworks has been widely documented by scholars, particularly as regards the 2004 Orange Revolution, where music was one of the most influential cultural forces in garnering opposition support against the pro-Russian leadership in power. The role of non-ethnic Ukrainians and non-Ukrainian citizens in such socio-sonic movements has not been analyzed, particularly in terms of pluralist discourses of inclusion that have attempted to guide Ukraine's closer relations with the European Union (Helbig 2006, Klid 2007).

3. Interview with Vladyslav Zyuban (DJ Fixa Mixa), Kharkiv, June 4, 2008.

4. The video for "Tyzh Mene Pidmanula" by Chornobryvtsi is available on YouTube.

5. The history of reggae on the African continent from the origins of reggae in Jamaica, and in Africa reggae's popularity grew immediately. In addition to the lyrical and also politically-charged elements within reggae that connect Jamaica to the Rastafarian culture and Ethiopia, the musical rhythms typical of reggae are similar to the rhythms of various musical genres throughout Africa.

6. Ukraine's overall level of economic growth is much stronger than in the 1990s, but foreigners find it difficult to work through the legal workings of business dealings and very few have been successful in starting their own businesses. Primary economic occupation is trading at the bazaar. Kharkiv's sprawling Barabashov Bazaar, built on restricted vacant land above a subway station named after Akademik Barabashov, offers a glimmer of financial opportunity for the local population and foreigners. While trading at the bazaar may seem like a limited opportunity for economic advancement, Kharkiv locals say that the Barabashov Bazaar is the biggest in "Europe" and can allegedly be seen via satellite pictures. This discourse attests to the importance that both migrants and Kharkiv locals attribute to the bazaar itself, which employs 80,000 vendors from twenty-three countries (Ruble 2008:6). Kyiv's largest market in the Troeshchyna neighborhood employs migrants from Afghanistan, Turkey, and Iraq and had 20,000 workers by 2000. Odesa's Seven-Kilometer Market spans 170 acres. 16,000 vendors serve more than 150,000 customers. The market's central administration is comprised of 1,600 workers (Ruble 2008:6). This high percentage of foreign presence in petty-trade, a large employment for local populations as well, has contributed to the perception of foreigners as economic competitors.



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