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The Nomadic Experiment of a Steppe Land Flâneuse

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Ulaanbaatar is no Paris. Strolling is not a Mongolian gait. Speed and chaos animate the streets, and the metropolitan foreigner, however practiced in flânerie, stumbles before the onslaught of horses. Multi-horse-powered land-cruisers, that is, the vehicle of choice in this city of nomads. Even the main thoroughfare with traffic lights fails to channel and control the charge of wheels. The dubiously named Enk Taivny Örgön Chölöö, or "Peace Avenue," can be crossed on foot only one lane at a time, as drivers run the lights from all oncoming directions at every chance. With heart-gulping trepidation, I watch from the Avenue's crumbling curb as an elderly woman in a luminous blue *deel* (an embroidered, calf-length cloak) launches herself with her cane into the torrent. No one stops as she stumbles between islands of air to the Avenue's opposite bank. When she safely arrives, she kicks up her heels as if pursued by a wolf. How can I, a seasoned flâneuse, affect to follow her? To carry on walking with my usual languor and tactical inconspicuousness is blatantly undoable against this urban tsunami. Mobility is the soul of Mongolia, yet no place on earth so challenges my mobility as does its capital, the "Red Hero."

Unheroically, I teeter at the edge of Peace Avenue's commotion and absorb a turbulent rusticity unbecoming to postmodern urbanity. Most world cities, I muse while contemplating my next move, exhibit a fashion-model's cool glamour to lure the "global flâneur." Once the inner-city's arch non-conformist, the flâneur now sets the standard for inter-city cruising. A man-about-the-megalopolis, he delights in global travel and he boosts his venture capital by becoming streetwise in emerging market centers, especially those of "developing" nations with novel technologies of urban self-aggrandizement. From Shanghai to Dubai, world cities solicit and display his tasteful cosmopolitanism; their bright

lights fail, however, to allure the flâneuse, who lacks the flâneur's expense account and whose peripatetics entails the least expensive *savoir faire*. Ulaanbaatar, on the other hand, is so far removed from the society of the spectacle that it makes no overtures to the global flâneur. No urban design beckons his speculation. Yet its geopolitical obscurity, together with its rugged eccentricity, appeal precisely to the curiosity of the global flâneuse.

And more than curiosity spurs the flanks of my flânerie. The old woman's bold legwork incites my kinetic reflex to move, if not against the traffic with the flâneuse's characteristic dilatoriness, then astride it with exploratory acceleration. I retreat to the sidewalk and pick up my step, my aimlessness still intact. I feel open to this runaway calamity and oddly unhampered by my appearance, so obviously Western and female with my backpack and hesitant perambulation. As a pedestrian, I pass with ready-made invisibility, whereas nothing excites the nomadic gaze so much as the racy SUVs lined up for sale on the few central parking lots. Land cruisers are hot; streetwalkers are not. If "UB," as the natives speed-speak Ulaanbaatar, lacks the commercial seductiveness of world cities, it also lacks the mannequins, models, movie stars, fetish body parts, and other simulacra of commodity femininity. The traffic in mobility trumps the traffic in sex, having driven prostitution off the street to somewhere less horse-powered. Unimpeded by wolf whistles, lewd glances, and opportune groping against which I customarily barricade myself, I let go my lust for pure mobilism. *Yari*! Welcome to the steppe.

Remote yet well connected with the outside world, UB maps an intense crossroads between nomad autonomy and sedentary modernity.

Figure 1. Map of Mongolia. CIA

I see this directly on the streets before me, in the juncture–or collision–between a billboard advertisement posted by a local furniture-making company ("ANUN") and passers-by who look nothing like the people in the poster. The poster models sit sedately on a surreally elongated sofa, men at one end in suits and hard hats propped against UB's skyline and women at the other in skirts and blouses against some bland domestic interior. Conversely, waves of live men and women roll beneath the billboard with heedless outgoingness, that, together with their traditional and cosmopolitan dress, undermines all that is sedentary and homogeneous. As I start to reckon my global positioning, I see how UB is located midway between metropolitanism and pastoralism, or, more precisely, between urban mobility and "mobile pastoralism" (to borrow a term from Anatoly Khazanov). Less a hustler's city on the make than a nomad's city on the hoof, it has borne a history of unusual movability.

Founded in 1639, as Örgöö, on site of the Da Khuree monastery, the city moved from place to place until arriving at the present site in 1778. Composed entirely of felt tents, or gers, the city could and would be transported to greener pastures when the grass became too dry. When cornerstones were eventually laid, the city became geographically fixed. Yet still, it remains unsettled. Besides the ceaseless and belligerent traffic, there are seasonal migrations of city populations to and from the country, and the

unstoppable spread of gers into the surrounding valleys and along the Tuul River. Many of the city's inhabitants do not migrate here to stay but only to winter. Or, they stay long enough to get the training and education that will make them more economically mobile, before they commence with a seasonal relay between their rural homelands and urban careers. Since Mongolia has no privately owned land, newcomers are free to homestead in the city and to tap into its limited and over-taxed infrastructure, namely its coal-fueled electricity and aboveground plumbing. Cities generally facilitate sedentariness, whereas, paradoxically, UB accommodates semi-nomadism. To say the least, it is differently mobile and mobilizes differently than other cities. Even the flâneuse, that most urbane species of human, is moved by its nomadic affects.

Speed, I swiftly discover, affords a semblance of sovereignty for an otherwise unaccommodated pedestrian. But it contradicts the slowness that the flâneuse needs to stake out the city's labyrinthine prospects. Many roads veer off Peace Avenue and great is the chance of getting lost–that is, in both the mundane sense of failing to find one's way and the sublime sense of losing oneself to the city's everyday mysteries. The chances of getting lost in the first sense are increased by the fact that street names are signposted only in Mongolian Cyrillic and well above my literacy level in this language. Add to this the fact that Mongolians get around without addresses that in any case are absurdly minimalist (e.g. "Microdistrict 14, Building 3, Flat 27") and totally meaningless to outsiders like me. Although chances are good for getting lost in the second sense, they increase only with distance from the tourist-trafficked center that entails, simultaneously, increased difficulty in navigating by foot. She who strays beyond Sukhbataar Square and its bordering cafés, bars, discos, boutiques, restaurants, galleries, museums, government and university buildings in search of the Mongolian quotidian, drifts into a bewildering maze of subdistricts and microdistricts, and their archipelagos of gulag apartment blocks and ger encampments. Though I desire to wander through these myriad districts, their residential density and intimacy, as well as the roadless range between them daunt me. Hiring a car or a bicycle is no option, for

there are none to rent. Hiring a taxi is an option, but at the cost of self-propulsion. Then again, without enhanced mobility the flâneuse is hobbled on this horse-powered stage. I succumb and hail a taxi, though I am not sure that the jeep that pulls over is officially licensed, since in UB every set of wheels is up for hire. Nevertheless, for a set rate of tögrögs per mile, my flânerie gains ready passage.

Where to go? I wonder. I can't ask the *jolooch* (the driver) to randomly cruise the neighborhoods. Without speaking Mongolian, how can I explain my desire to flan so that it not be mistaken for blatant voyeurism? Ah, but what's the difference! My next impulse is to follow the crowds to some forum of congregation, where I can mingle and view the urban ordinary askance. This does not mean the tourist crowds that mill about the State Department Store with its compendium of Mongolian mass-produced crafts and souvenirs and its outdoor patio for city-watching over local beer and *buuz* (steamed mutton dumplings). Instead, I tell the driver to take me to the Narantuul Market, that reputedly on windless, summer days like this, assembles mostly Mongolian crowds of as many as 60,000. They come to check out the "black market" in smuggled blue jeans, portable electronics, and "real" vodka as well as seriously practical merchandise. The driver swings onto the perimeter road of Narny Zam and heads towards the Namyanju Street junction. I am saved from a trek along the sidewalkless shoulder where pedestrians are fair game. But we are funneled into a traffic jam short of the market gates. From the jeep, I leap into the mayhem of vehicles, some parked, others idling, and most steering directly into the milieu to pick up or drop off passengers who are keen to avoid more legwork than necessary. Once off and running, the unruly masses careen in all directions into a maze of stalls.

Swept into the turbulence, I become a woman of the crowd. I frantically scan the scene for niches of reprieve, but among the infinite kiosks I find no gallery to duck into. Even as I flounder, I can discern that this is not a city farmers' market bringing fresh produce from the country but a hybrid market hawking both urban and rural wear and ware. All around me are racks of men's and

women's leather jackets and brightly-colored *deels*, as well as mounds of baseball caps and traditional Mongolian hats: fur *loovuz*, felt *khongor* hats and silk domed hats–high-brimmed for women, low-brimmed for girls, and spike-topped for men. Once past the jackets and hats, I stumble across the shoes: running shoes, business shoes, high heels and hand-made leather *gutuls*, or riding boots, with curved toes and heels for fitting into (and out of) the stirrup. Gutuls, I learn counter-intuitively, are most popular for promenading the city during Naadam's summer festival, and plastic croc-like slippers are most popular for slopping about outdoors, especially around the animal paddocks. At first, it looks like global gear dominates local fare, but then the circuses of watches, sunglasses, t-shirts, and cameras cannot ultimately compete with the bazaars of riding tack with their variety and abundance of bridles and halters, crops and whips, and long-poled uurgas or lassos, and, of course, saddles–painted Mongolian, tooled Western and English dressage saddles--as well as basic Russian saddle-like machinations made of rebar and wooden slats.

It is the horse that animates this crowd, I muse, as the equine theme elaborates all around me. Barrels of *airag* (fermented mare's milk) refresh the marketeer at every furlong, while horsehead fiddles (*morin huur)* clamour among the displays of musical instruments. Images of horses appear on CDs, calendars, wallets, placemats, mouse pads, clock faces, and postcards. Surfacing to the top of one postcard pile is a booklet of "art postcards" called "Horse, My Friend." In terms of quantity and variety, top among the hats is the horseback rider's cowboy hat. It would be easy to liken the crowd itself to a herd of horses. Though a herder, not a herd, mentality, seems to steer each nomad on a singular course through the "stockades." A trick, I discover, to navigating this crowd is to become both herd and herder: to go with the stampede and range above it, which my Westerner's extra height allows me to do. Another trick is to project my moving body along a line of flight that curves between other moving bodies, just as the nomads do, thereby avoiding physical contact while keeping apace of the pack. Perhaps, I become a woman of the horde–the Mongol horde of steppe land modernity.

I ride the crowd to the market's edge and wonder why stop here if, already, I am half-way to the country and if it is from the country that Mongolians–even urban Mongolians–derive their sense of the nomadic quotidian? Or, so I guess after glancing through Sharavyn Gerelsaikhan's "photo album," *One Day of Mongolia*, which I find in a market kiosk. Gerelsaikhan's 247 photos compose a series, or montage, of "daily" activities, including protesting, rebelling, rioting, voting, reveling, praying, wrestling, horse racing, horse parading, herding, shearing, tanning, butchering, milking, mining, cooking, dung collecting, dancing, feasting, drinking, marmot trapping, wood chopping, eagle hunting, and ger building and dissembling. Except for protesting, rebelling, and rioting, which are confined to the urban stage, and mining that is now scarifying the mineral-rich, northeastern provinces, all the other activities are essentially pastoral, though many are carried on in the city (wherever gers dominate the landscape). Gerelsaikhan's series alludes to B. Marzan ("Witty") Sharav's famous and eponymous painting, of which a booklet of postcards has been made and that I happen to find next to Gerelsaikhan's "photo album." As I leaf through its facsimile, I see that the painting details hundreds of scenes of country "goings on": it is a bewildering composition (or colorful cacophony?) of nomadic life in all its variety of labor, festivity, and animality across different grassland, desert, and mountain terrains and over changing seasons. Of all these activities, only one would be anachronistic today, namely felt making, which was a prime pastoral activity until the Russians transformed it into a factory industry. Otherwise, the nomadic quotidian that Sharav painted in 1908 still prevails in Gerelsaikhan's 2008 production, as if eighty years of communist modernization has had little effect.

In theory, I could explore most aspects of mobile pastoralism *within* the nomadic city. But I veto such a plan, remembering not just the difficulty of strolling the ger suburbs but also how UB capitalizes on *One Day of Mongolia* as a tourist gimmick. Even if I were able to outride the downtown traffic, my chances of seeing the nomadic quotidian have already been exploited. I recall Hotel Mongolia's version of *One Day of*

Mongolia that it sells to patrons in a packaged "three fold show," complete with a mini Naadam (featuring wrestling, archery, and a winning horse prayer song–in place of actual horse racing), a folklore concert (throat singing), and an open-air fire festival (a shaman's dance). I recall, also, eating at the "One Day of Mongolia Restaurant," where I first savored *bansh* and *khuushuur* (boiled and deep fried mutton dumplings), while viewing scenes from Sharav's painting on the restaurant's walls. This tourist replica and regimen does not move me. How could it? If I want to feel the pulse of everyday nomadism and experience mobile pastoralism in its many environments and terrains, then to the country I must go.

I taxi back to Sukhbataar Square, the city's central balcony, from where I can scan the encircling panorama for a way out onto the steppe. Paradoxically, the Square's cement grid offers the pedestrian the only smooth space for ambling with a vista. Here the flâneuse can slow down and look around, taking in the mostly Chinese façades of the surrounding architecture. Bordered by the new Government House to the north, the Central Cultural Palace and State Opera and Ballet to the east, the Mayor's Office to the west, and Peace Avenue to the south, the Square mobilizes public affections that shift mercurially from revelry to revolution to pacifism. (A riot was to break out shortly after I left for the central steppe and only days before Naadam. Supposedly ignited by pro-democracy forces in protest of the recent reelection of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party–the old rearguard party that has retained power since the Soviets were deposed in 1991–it resulted in four deaths and numerous injuries). My scanning collides with the statue of Sukhbataar erected in the center of the Square. UB's eponymous Red Hero, Sukhbataar is memorialized for forming alliances with Lenin's bolsheviks and liberating Mongolia from Manchurian oppression. He is mounted on a horse, which in turn, is mounted on a rock, and his sword is drawn as he commands imaginary legions. But the orbit of my eye sails over him, hailed by the giant, cosmic face of Chingghis Khan engraved into the northern slope of the sacred mountain beyond. The face looks back at the magnificent bronze Chingghis seated at the entrance of Government House, which like every ger opens south

towards the sun. From center to periphery my eye travels the imperial arc of Mongolian autonomy. How ironic that this 13th century warrior-emperor should orient my gaze, and that of every metropolitan Mongolian who looks ahead by looking back to this eternal man of the hour. Since toppling the Soviet regime and installing their own perestroika, Mongolians view Chingghis as their cultural and spiritual leader. His reign over earthly and celestial spheres eclipses Sukhbataar's merely historical fame. Every Nadaam, a ceremonial calvary parades down Surguuli Street on the Square, bearing the symbolic replicas of the Khan's *sulde*, or spirit banner, made of horsehair from the finest horses and spiriting the city with a spectre of nomadism that once conquered the globe. I hail a jeep and point to the Khan on the mountain. The driver grins and revs.

My first step onto the steppe is, ironically, machine-driven. Yet four-wheeling is fast becoming an acceptable supplement, or even substitute, to four-hoofing. It speeds the transition between urban and pastoral landscapes that now unfolds before me as a passage from dense ger suburbs to *ails* (scattered ger settlements) to the vast steppe where *ails* of two or three gers sporadically dot the countryside. We cross the Tuul River and head east past women and girls who huddle along the roadside, selling bottled airag, goat hides, sheep heads, and slabs of mutton, as well as livestock for those who like their meat really fresh. We pass the portrait of Chingghis who keenly considers my rural retreat. I am not a passive passenger. The highway transmogrifies quickly into a dirt track that is so rough that my feet bounce off the floorboards, and, to ground myself, I grasp the jeep's handgrip with both hands. As the steppe spreads wider and wider before me, I search creatively for a perspective. In vain. Plateaus encircled by mountains encircle us. The track ahead vanishes through a gap in the nearest range, only to stretch onto the next plateau and through another gap and onto the plateau after that, again and again.

Chingghis disappears from my rear view mirror, as we rock and roll, racing barely ahead of the hurricane of dust raised by our wheels. But then, the metal dome of what looks like a giant helmet looms into the foreground, ascending from the hill beyond the one

we now climb. Under the helmet there arises a fierce set of eyes, and beneath these, another set, equally fierce. A man's head. A horse's head. A gargantuan, aluminum Khan, mounted and armed, emerges into full view. I am stunned by not just the suddenness of this apparition but also its colossal incongruity, as if the Panthéon had just erupted onto the plains. Before us: another monumental Chingghis, this time presiding over classical herder terrain. Rising from the middle of nowhere, he is visible from everywhere on this vast steppe.

I marvel at Chingghis's providence. What is the secret to his enduring sovereignty? Long vilified by western Enlightenment history as the barbarian king, against whose hordes the Chinese built their great wall, he has recently enjoyed reappraisal, not only in Mongolia but also around the world, and in popular culture as well as scholarly circles. As I was leaving for Mongolia, two blockbuster movies, Sergei Bodrov's *Mongol: The Untold Story of Ghenghis Khan* and Shinichiro Sawai's *Ghenghis Khan: To the Ends of Earth and Sea* were released in North America. Both movies base their scripts on *The Secret History of the Mongols*, or the story of how Temüjin *cum* Chingghis Khan, with heroic perseverance and against all odds, was able to unite Mongolia's warring tribes into a fluid and effective war-machine. The manuscript of *The Secret History* was only recently rediscovered and deciphered, after circulating underground and in code over centuries of Chinese and Russian repression. With the declaration of Mongolian autonomy, Chingghis has been enjoying a national and spiritual resurrection. Abroad, his rising reputation is more puzzling. Though credit for his rehabilitation must go to those international and interdisciplinary teams of scholars who have been busy decoding and translating the manuscript, and producing surprising new interpretations of the Khan's achievements. If they are correct in their reading, we are now to understand that, in addition to warring and conquering, Chingghis introduced the first modern form of globalization and vastly improved the status of Mongol women.

But what the Mongols especially revere about Chinnghis that the outside world has yet to recognize is that the strategies he

used to assemble a nation, and later an empire, were progressive *and* nomadic. I sense this from seeing how present nomadic culture thrives alongside economic globalization. Contrarily, the cultural revolution imposed on Mongolia by Russia and China merit no such reverence, or so I detect from the steady dilapidation of Soviet infrastructure and the overt disgust shown for all things Chinese. Lenin and Mao both coerced Mongolia into centralization with methods of collectivization more stratified than Chingghis's processes of unification. Both state totalitarianisms tried to replace nomadic culture with sedentary bureaucracy, and herding with collective farming. Both failed, the Chinese especially, since they leave the degraded grasslands of Inner Mongolia as a telling legacy. No wonder that today's nomads look back to Chingghis who perfected nomad arts and science, including those of war, to unify the country and conquer the world. Or so I am led to believe by Jack Weatherford's New York Times bestseller *Ghenghis Khan: The Making of the Modern World*, which I have brought along as my primary reading. According to Weatherford, Chingghis's mounted battalions covered ground at unfathomable speed, tearing up the boundaries, walls, hierarchies, and hegemonies in their path. In razing feudal fortresses, farms, and cities, they also destratified the land, decentralized states, and opened borders. They mobilized free trade between countries who had never before been in contact, traversing the pan Asian steppe with caravans of merchants, mathematicians, musicians, linguists, philosophers, architects, engineers, stone masons, metallurgists, and more, back and forth across Inner Asia into the far reaches of Persia, Arabia, China, India, Siberia, and Europa. Transcontinental traffic was set in motion.

Today, Chingghis's comeback aspires to achieve the global presence he assumed in the 13th century, though often in the mundane form of commodity fetishism. His visage is stamped on beer labels, juice cartons, vodka bottles, cigarette packages, company signs and corporate exports. Yet, his is the only face of globalization that emblematizes the survival of nomadism. Before me now, he rises astonishingly high and large against the grassland's infinite horizon. To the Mongols, his name is not

Ghenghis, which is a Persian pronunciation, but Chingghis, which in Mongolian means "wolf." He is the Mongols' "wolf totem": an anomaly of pastoralism thriving ferociously in this age of urbanism. It then strikes me: sedentarism not urbanism is the enemy of nomadism.

I decide to trade the jeep for a horse and wander the central steppe within riding range of Karakorum where Chingghis set up his portable capital in 1220. (Permanent structures were erected only after his death in 1226). We re-cross the Khan Kentii Mountains and drive through UB onto the highway leading west out of the city towards the central steppe. The highway quickly downgrades to a dirt road that, in turn, splits into multiple single tracks running beside each other like pack animals. We drive fast– faster than I can judge which track to select, the *jalooch* seemingly guided by the smoothest feel under the wheel. Beyond the tracks no further infrastructure remains to be seen. No buildings. No fences. No signposts. Only the odd *ovoo* with its luminous-blue, silk-lined rock-cairns linking earth to sky and invoking Shamanic-Buddhist rites of passage. Nothing corrals the passing of animals, clouds, and Soviet-built vans, indestructible remnants of the former regime. Land-cruisers, for all their popularity, never go far outside the city, their mechanism being too complex for trouble-shooting on the steppe, where there are few, if any, garages. Most tour companies supply their main transport vehicle (the dependable Soviet van) with a back-up carrier of extra parts and fuel. From out of nowhere, another jeep and then another catch up to us, and forming a kind of light brigade, we charge three abreast across the steppe. We are surprised by a reverse charge of oncoming vehicles that pass between and around us, including trucks heavily loaded with mounds of raw cashmere, caravans of ger families, followed by stealthily plodding ox-carts hauling all the trappings of a ger ail.

We cross into the big earth and big sky of Arkhangai *aimag* (province) where massive herds of "the five snouts" seem to sprout up spontaneously from the ground. The billowing-bellowing spread of sheep, goats, yaks, and camels, are nothing, however, compared to sweeps of horses, running in herds of up to a thousand head. Mongolia is the only country in the world where horses out-

Figure 2. Tracks across the Steppe. Photograph: Dianne Chisholm.

Figure 3. Ovoo. Photograph: Dianne Chisholm.

populate humans, as many as thirteen to one. Horses seem to own the landscape. For, as far as I can survey in one steady pan, there are horses in vast numbers–from random herds grazing quietly on the far horizon to crazed, stallion-spurred platoons that trample the steppe at mid-range, to bundles of ditch-water bathers right beside our track. The artsy-horsey landscapes of "Horse, My Friend" acutely mimic this country of horse-love, where horses are given free rein and camels are consigned to heavy-transport duty. In Gerelsaikhan's photo album, all the snouts are featured and always with human handlers, who clearly regard them as companion species. Only the horse appears in portraiture: at intimate close-range and at aura-enveloped long-range. I've heard it said that a nomad is as worthy as the quantity and quality of her or his animals, horses above all. There are even songs in the nomadic repertoire of *magtaal* (hymns of praise) that are to be sung from the horse's perspective, like the one my driver now sings–the *takhin magtaal*–dedicated to the native horse of the Gobi. I wonder what will happen once my flâneries involve a horse. For never, to my knowledge, has the flâneuse wandered so far from downtown nor by any other means than *au pied*.

By the geothermal springs of Shivert, I exchange my jeep and driver for a horse and herder. With map and charades, I arrange to ride southeast to Karakorum over 120 miles of mixed terrain. The herder, or *malchin*, is a young man of twenty-one. As is customary for steppe nomads, *Bagi* wears dirt-splattered riding boots and a sky-blue tunic over which he has thrown a coarse, earth-colored *deel*. The horse, or *mori*, he presents me with is "angry," or so he warns with a malicious frown, and by which he means spirited, as I discover once I take the reins. A pinto gelding, my horse, like all Mongolian horses, has no name but that of his color *khuren alag* (brown and white), which, along with descriptors of temperament and speed, is a primary quality of horseness. Since neither of us can speak the other's language, the *malchin* and I also go nameless. Curiously, I will soon realize, our namelessness helps me become impersonally attuned to our moving assemblage of human and animal bodies. It also helps to abolish any illusion that I am mistress of my horse.

In a bound, the *malchin* leaps on his high-pommeled, brightly-painted wooden saddle, while I fumble to launch from the stirrup, a thick circular iron ring best fit for *gutuuls* not flat-soled street-walking shoes like mine. The pinto chews on the bit as if to spit it out, wildly wagging his neck with impatience. The bridle, I note with skepticism, is a ramshackle rawhide affair, and the reins are long, weathered strands that double as a whip or a tether. Whipping is the human part in gait shifting. Mongol horses can be whipped into full gallop from standing still, and into accelerations beyond that. With extra gaits at higher velocities, they are bred to hyper-extend themselves over incredible distances. Does this pinto, I dare wonder, descend from the beasts that powered Chingghis' war-machine with unrivaled stamina and speed? Here on the steppe, globetrotting construes terrifying meaning.

I am now vaguely mounted. I know and the herder knows that this flâneuse is no horsewoman. So, too, does the horse, and he is testy with my uncertainty. Into the horses's twitching ears, the *malchin* croons *choo choo*, and we take-off at a bolt. We are galloping already yet he whips his bay into faster fury. Swiveling on the saddle and standing upright on the stirrups, he faces me: a grin-grimace smeared above a ruddy brown torpedo. Does he confront me with mockery? No. He wants to race. He whips ever more staunchly, churning horse legs into speed butter. My hands, my knees, the soles of my feet grip reins, mane, pommel, and stirrups in clumsy succession, as my body disassembles in a chaos of contortions. But, whoa: a new coupling of parts repairs my actions and intentions with intuitive mobility. Satisfied, the herder loosens the vise of his gaze and twists his body forward. With our staging grounds far behind and open steppe ahead, flâneuse phenomenology enters a new phase of nomadic mutation. It begins at the core. My body loses unity, but recovers a centre of gravity that feels "not me." In this new assemblage that is part horse, part saddlery, part grasslands, and part sky, "I" am also only a part. Or, to put it another way, "I" am literally, spatially and temporally, beside myself. When *choo choo* escapes my mouth in *malchin* fashion, it triggers a geo-physiological ballistics. My eyes project from their sockets and land level with the horse's hooves,

or snout, in either case stretching my sights along an equine axis. The horse neck torques sideways against the main thrust of the animal's musculature. It throws a signal from the horse brain commanding my focus to become coordinated with the moving horizon. Eyes do. The neck reining stops and a flow of perception begins. The flat indifferent plain promptly morphs into a plane of micro contours and fractal topography. Eye, hoof, and steppe converge in a deft dance of moguls. Unshod, like most Mongol hooves, these hooves tread the grassland with keen proprioception. Detailed arrangements arise under hoof that could never appear under wheel or foot: flowering arcs of diverse grasses, rhizomorphic networks of burrowing mammals, and intricate relays of pasturing herds. Creature populations traverse each other in spreading entanglements: furrowing mice, holey marmots, swarming stubble-grazing insects, circling thermal-riding kites, ger settlements plotted at varying intervals, mountain ranges corralling ever-new convolutions of desert, forest, and plain. At a gallop, the steppe composes a landscape of intertwining mobilities, not all of which are natural or native.

In fact, what opens before me is a meshwork of nomadic pathways and global communications: a frontier of some sort in the making, minus the usual fringe of wilderness. The steppe is open but not wild. Apart from the kites and the occasional eagle's nest, we encounter no wild animals, not even their tracks. I know that in some parts of Mongolia, notably Inner Mongolia, grassland wolves have been hunted to extinction and that the expanding range of domestic herds has forced the withdrawal of the nomadic and ubiquitous gazelle to a reduced territory on the eastern steppe. The grass still grows wild. But no blade is immune from the grazing of a "snout." Then again, this unfenced country strikes me as far from tame. Does it not escape the sedentary grid? Does it not experiment with new ways of becoming mobile and pastoral?

Pastoralism, I observe, is a mix of animal and mechanical mobilities. The many *ails* we pass on our four-day ride are equipped with land-roving, load-bearing machines. Trucks, jeeps, and vans work alongside camels and bulls to transport gers, supplies, and equipment. Parked among the bactrians there is often

Figure 4. Gers, satellite discs, and motorcycle. Photograph: Dianne Chisholm.

a motorcycle. Satellite discs are pitched beside the gers between milk pails and butcher blocks. Throughout the day on our dusk-to-dawn ride, we join a ger family for *tsai* (tea) and *aruul* (curds). Then, I chance to witness a daily orchestration of global distraction and rural labor. During breaks from working–which for men is herding, gelding, branding, killing, and butchering, and for women milking, shearing, cooking, churning, collecting dry dung, stoking the fire, and caring for kids of both kinds–folks tune into satellite TV and a sporadic transmission of various Mongolian, Chinese, Russian, and Japanese programs. In pace with the erratic comings and goings of viewers, there is an anarchic surfing of channels. Best reception more than any personal choice decides what will be watched.

The flâneuse-horse-steppe assemblage in which I take part also experiments with mobility. A "becoming-nomad" of sorts, I am carried outside my accustomed domain with unaccustomed motion. Together, horse, steppe, and woman conjugate speed,

distance, horizon. So smoothly we operate, this "angry" horse and I that the *malchin* starts to test us with more challenging terrain. From open grassland we veer into mountains up ridges lined with larch forests, winding our way through feathery-limbed trees and stirrup-high underbrush. When the forest bogs down, we break for the river and its coulee maze, slip sliding across sandstone cliffs before submerging in water so deep we must swim with our arms around the horses' necks. Then, back onto the grasslands at breakneck speed. For all my meandering across city grids and boundaries, nothing compares with this traversal of ecological zones. Moreover, geo-eco-anatomical mobility entails social mobility. My anonymity does not change, but there is a shift in how I am perceived. To nomad passers-by, as well as to the *malchin,* I am more than a female foreigner. I am a woman-behorsed. Makeshift and improvised as it is, my horsemanship grants me status. This mobility I enjoy owes nothing to masculinity.

As far as this brief outing shows me, Mongolians of both sexes and all ages are competent riders. If herding is the exclusive occupation of men, excellent horsemanship is expected of everyone. Riding seems to be a great gender leveler, even where traditional gender roles hold sway. Girls, as well as boys, once they see us coming, leap on their horses and gallop out to greet us. Children under ten, including girls, jockey in Nadaam's brutal, multi-day, cross-country horse race. Even little children, who are still just learning the legwork of running across moguls, fling themselves boldly on the back of horse. I will later confirm my observations by watching a number of recent Mongolian films, like *The Story of the Weeping Camel* (2003) and *The Cave of the Yellow Dog* (2005) by Mongolia's internationally-acclaimed female director, Byambasuren Davaa, that use children's animal-borne adventures as a primary vehicle for showing the colorful range of steppe life. In *The Cave of the Yellow Dog* a pre-school age girl, played by a rustic amateur (as Davaa uses nomads to play themselves), goes looking for her runaway dog on a horse four-times her size. As she trots out of sight of home territory and into a storm, she is well over her depth. But with confidence in and on

her horse, she strikes across the tumultuous landscape until she stumbles upon the ger of a woman shaman and is rescued from exposure. If there is a moral to this passage it might be: "have horse will travel and behold wonders despite dangers."

From a more pragmatic angle, I observe that nomad children ride long distances to attend school at rural community centers As we say in the West, to be mobile one must be educated. But in Mongolia, the reverse also holds true: to be educated one must be mobile. Put another way, the steppe mobilizes education. How else do I explain that, despite its internal remoteness, Mongolia boasts a 98% literacy rate? Also difficult to explain is the fact that more women than men move to the city to attend university and to become professionals and who are especially adept in foreign languages. Many of the young nomad women I meet on the central steppe indicate that they are here to help their families move the animals to summer pastures before returning to UB to continue with their other careers. Would a girlhood of riding across the grassland prepare Mongolian women with a mobility that extends to the economic sphere? Is their economic mobility not further prepared by a girlhood of seasonal migrations and the interval training this entails in taking down, moving on, and setting up, the rigors of which are mostly conducted by women? I later learn that the reason given for this "reverse" gender ratio in higher education is that men, unlike women, can find good paying country jobs to supplement herding by working with heavy machinery. Hence, parents who wish all of their children to be well employed send their daughters to university in unprecedented numbers. Such reasoning encourages a steppe land woman to become more flexibly mobile than her brothers. But a nomadic girlhood already prepares her to move on and keep moving in optimally sustainable ways. Having ridden the steppe with its vast horizons before her, how could she not look further afield to the world's larger prospects? Knowing how to move her livestock and livelihood to greener pastures, how is she not best fit to adapt to a globalizing economy and ecology?

Back on the steppe ahead of me, Karakorum emerges into view. We enter town along the Orkhon River, where people are

bathing and washing their horses and land-cruisers. The country seems to close in on itself, as we canter past wooden enclosures of gers, huts, and livestock. But it also hooks up routes to myriad points across the country. Dirt tracks converge onto the dusty main road that connects UB in the northeast to Khuijert and Arvaykheer near the Gobi in the south. Lining it on both sides is a jumble of shops, offering basic roadside conveniences: tire shops, tack shops, butcher shops, several restaurants, and saloons selling *airakh* and *airag*. Camel caravans and horse-drawn wagons load up with gear, liquor, and meat, while riders tether their horses at the truck stop, next to vehicles gassing up. The scene strikes me as more "wild west" than Inner Asia, until I see a sandal-shod lama shuffle down the road. He is heading, I expect, to Erdene Zuu Khiid, the country's first and most treasured Buddhist monastery. From mid-town, I can make out the turrets of the monastery's fortress. In 1586, Atbai Khan built the monastery next to where Chinnghis Khan's ger palace once stood. The more I learn, the more I marvel at the Khans' cosmopolitanism. Accordingly, Karakorum once hosted as many as twelve different religions, while, as the capital of global trade, it hailed merchants from every country that could be connected to it by overland routes. Today, the town still has the feel of a major cross-roads, though most traffic arrives from and departs for UB, to where I must presently return. Time to say "*bayartai*" (farewell) to the *malchin* and the pinto. I dismount, and with spirited horse legs, I stride over to the truck stop to where I expect to hire a "taxi."

Fourteen hours of driving roughshod later, I am back in UB. Stepping onto Peace Avenue, I find the charge of traffic much less assaulting than when I first arrived. I am to stay at the flat of a friend of a friend before flying home to Canada. Following directions, I find the flat in a typical gulag apartment block not far from Sukhbataar Square and next to the State Circus. Sparsely furnished, it is aptly nomadic, though it is not so sparse as to lack a spare room with a writing desk. The flat is rented, I am told, from Elizabeth Chatwin, who, among other things, is the surviving wife of author Bruce Chatwin. Though the former Chatwin is wholly unknown to me, the latter is famous for having invented a free-

style form of travel writing and for penning such bestsellers as *Songlines* and *In Patagonia*. He is, perhaps, less famous for proposing to write a popular investigation into "The Nomadic Alternative," that was to explain to himself, and Westerners like him, the cause of his compulsive restlessness. In a letter to his editor at Jonathan Cape, Bruce Chatwin outlined an ambitious book project that he never completed. Instead, he transcribed forty pages of unsynthesized nomadic notations into the narrative text of *Songlines*, thereby executing the intervention that was to become the trademark of his rambling genius. Now that I'm stopping awhile in his wife's Mongolian *pied-a-terre*, I'm compelled to think over what I can remember of "The Nomadic Alternative" with my own nomadic hindsight.

I especially wonder about Chatwin's assertion that nomadism is escapism, an essential, human impulse to flee the metropolitan grid for the defamiliarizing outback. Chatwin was no flâneur: he felt entrapped by the city's domestic regimens and civil routines. Instead, he aligned himself with nomads– literal nomads, that is, like the aborigines with whom he traveled in Australia, as well as literary, classical nomadologists, like Herodotus or Aristeas of Proconnessus, in whose historic footsteps he wrote and walked. By equating nomadism with escapism, Chatwin came precariously close to propounding a naive romanticism. But he complicates the idea with insights into nomadic territoriality. Whether they are hunter-gatherers or herder-pastoralists, nomads are wanderers, who broke out of the forest in pursuit of nomadic and migratory animals. They are also, he recognized, profoundly territorial: they belong to the land and the land belongs to them, though it remains unfenced. Nomads territorialize the land by traversing it repeatedly, and by doing the legwork that is required to know it intimately, as well as by mapping its invisible songlines–its rhizome of animal-geographical-spiritual interconnectivity–in tune with changing landscape ecology. Chatwin may have found in nomadism an "alternative" for all who suffer the urban *ennui* of modernization. But he did not prescribe the invasion of nomad territory by metropolitan masses in need of mobility therapy. What territoriality, then, becomes the metropolitan Westerner who

undertakes the nomadic alternative? How can Chatwin's alternative be "nomadic," if it entails only de-territorialization? How can nomadism be an alternative for urbanites whose "territory" is precisely the city from which she supposedly seeks escape?

I return to the idea of the flâneur–not the heroic flâneur of Balzac's era, when the metropolis was a revolutionary experiment in industrial anthropology, but the defeated flâneur of Baudelaire's era, when revolutionary experiment gave way to commercial expansionism, and the city lost its edge of transition. From the mortifying boredom of bourgeois urbanity, Baudelaire took flight to the city's underworld of public women where he could voyage in sublime evil. He lost his soul but he extended his territory, and he intensified his urban affections. Conversely, Chatwin escaped the city to cultivate his restlessness in the remote elsewhere. Thus, his restlessness characterizes less the nomad than one dispossessed of his lands–a dispossession that, paradoxically, he romanticizes as "nomadic." He did not, to my knowledge ever travel to Mongolia. Had he come here, not to escape but to open the parameters of his metropolitan experience, he would have seen how nomadism and urbanism are not so essentially opposed.

From his vantage as a metropolitan Westerner, which is also my vantage but one I own, Chatwin might have seen that what makes Mongolia so radically different from other "developing" countries is precisely its thriving mix of nomadism and urbanism. He might have seen, even in the post-Stalinist '60s and '70s, that nomadic life in Mongolia is not the exception but the norm. Mongolia bases its autonomy on a sustainable nomadic culture, economy, and ecology that dates at least as far back as Chinnghis Khan. Nomadic territoriality encompasses both city and country, wherever "mobile pastoralism" moves across the land in its various phases of production and distribution. Of a population of two and a half million, one million practice nomadism all year round, while the rest are seasonally nomadic. The steppe belongs to everyone, both women and men, and it is neither publicly nor privately owned. It belongs to nomadic communities who traverse it with their herds, following complex and flexible land-accords between

neighboring *ails* and *aimags*. True, Mongolia's one big city does little to accommodate the flâneur. But then, flânerie was never supposed to be easy. On the contrary, Ulaanbaatar moves the flâneuse to step well beyond that urban domain to which she has become habituated, and with precisely nomadic mobility. The city's women who straddle the global and the local with adaptive, nomadic fluidity also mobilize her. Flanerie may be fast becoming an anachronism of Western reality (as Baudelaire projected) but here, in Mongolia, nomadism is entering a second era of globalization--this time spearheaded by women."

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