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Russophonia: Writing the “Wide Russian World.”

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Research Abstract

I received funding from the Title VIII Research Scholar Program to support the completion of my book entitled *Russophonia: Writing the “Wide Russian World.”* The book, which is based on material from my 2013 doctoral dissertation, focuses on non-Russian writers whose works explore life within the geopolitical, cultural, sociolinguistic, and virtual spaces shaped by the Russian language—a phenomenon I have termed “Russophonia.” In the summer of 2016 I undertook a three-month trip to sites in Russia and Kazakhstan in order to research two new chapters for the book and revise existing ones. Over the course of the trip, I analyzed archival materials and library holdings, consulted with local specialists, and in some cases, conferred with writers themselves. By the time I arrived home in September 2016, I had researched and outlined my two remaining book chapters, submitted book proposals to six academic presses, given a presentation at a Kazakhstani university, and submitted two article proposals to peer-reviewed academic journals. This fall I have given two public lectures at the University of Arizona on my findings, and in November I will also present a paper at the Association of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies as part of a panel I organized on Russophone literature. Finally, I will continue to share my experiences with colleagues and students at the University of Arizona, particularly in the courses I am currently teaching on the Russian language, area studies, and film. Additionally, on the basis of my findings, I have proposed a new special-topic course on minority

literatures and cultures in Russia, to be offered in the Department of Russian and Slavic Studies in the fall of 2017.

Research Goals

My book traces the development of Russophone literature in the Imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods, and in my trip I set out to uncover new material in all three areas. My first goal was to research a chapter on the nineteenth-century Kazakh poet and philosopher Abai Kunanbaiuly (1805-1904), who worked as an intermediary between the Russian imperial apparatus and its colonized populations while also synthesizing local literary forms with elements from Russian and Western European literatures. In Kazakhstan today, Abai is considered to be the father of modern Kazakh literature, due to his ability to bridge Kazakh and Russian oral and literary traditions in his works. My specific goal was to determine the role of Abai's Soviet-era biographer, Mukhtar Auezov, in creating and propagating this particular view of Abai and his legacy in the 1930's and 40's.

My next goal involved Russophone writing in the twentieth century, particularly the Soviet Thaw period of the late 1950s and 60s, when decolonization and the beginnings of a postcolonial consciousness in literature and criticism coincided with Soviet attempts to exert influence over the newly independent states of the Third World. With these issues in mind, I focused on the poetry of the Russophone Kazakh writer Olzhas Suleimenov (b. 1937), who enjoyed the ample privileges of a state-sanctioned writer, but who eventually used his position of privilege to raise awareness of Soviet oppression and ecological violence. By investigating documents held in the Russian National Archive of Literature and Art in Moscow, I set out to track the involvement of Suleimenov and other Russophone writers in the Soviet Committee for Relations with African and Asian Writers, an organization that

sponsored international conferences and oversaw the publication of postcolonial literature in Russian translation.

My final goals were related to new book chapters on contemporary Russophone literature and identity building in the independent post-Soviet states, as well as in new “locations” online. One chapter analyzes two schools of Russophone poetry that arose from the print culture of Soviet Central Asia, but today maintain a parallel and equally significant presence online: the Tashkent School and the Fergana School. Although many writers from these schools have emigrated either to the West or to the Russian metropole, they continue to assert a poetic distance/difference from Russia in their online iterations by coordinating readings and literary events on social networking sites such as Facebook, LiveJournal, and Vkontakte, by archiving the history of their poetic circles in online web anthologies, and by circulating their work in online publications. I intended to meet and interview members of these poetic schools in Central Asia and in Russia, as well as to obtain original editions of their works for future analysis. A related goal, also on the topic of migration and the role of Central Asians in contemporary Russian culture, was to interview theater director Vsevolod Lisovskii, who staged an award-winning series of plays based on the lived experiences of migrant workers in Moscow—written and performed by migrant workers themselves.

My final and perhaps most demanding goal was to compile new research for the final chapter of my book, which analyzes the works of contemporary indigenous writers of Siberia and the Russian Far North in the context of global indigenous studies. In particular, I focus on writers involved in the activities of the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), which, along with North American and Scandinavian indigenous organizations, holds Permanent Participant status in the transnational Arctic Council. The organization’s activities have formed the basis for several well-publicized struggles with the Russian federal government in recent years, including the forced shutdown

of the organization in 2012 and the arrest of its former vice president in 2013, followed by its controversial re-opening under United Russia party leadership shortly thereafter. By examining the fraught relationship between Russia's federal government and its indigenous population, with indigenous writers and culture workers at its center, I hope to shed light on contemporary struggles over transnational environmental stewardship, resource management, international diplomacy, and identity politics in the post-Soviet era. I set out to conduct interviews with current and former RAIPON representatives at the organization's headquarters in Moscow, and also to investigate works of literature by RAIPON-affiliated writers held in regional libraries and archives in Moscow, Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk, Vladivostok, and Yakutsk. Most importantly, I sought to consult with experts at North-Eastern Federal University in Yakutsk, which facilitates the teaching and research of indigenous languages, cultures, and literatures through several of its departments and interdisciplinary institutes.

Research Activities

My research activities took place in the cities of Astana and Almaty, Kazakhstan, and Moscow and Yakutsk, Russia. I began my work in Almaty at the National Library of the Republic of Kazakhstan, where I collected information from a recent compilation of scholarly articles on the work of Olzhas Suleimenov, as well as works of contemporary poetry by members of the Fergana School, a group of Uzbekistani poets, and Musaget, an association of Kazakhstani poets. Among my other important findings here were several different editions of Mukhtar Auevov's biography of Abai Kunanbaiuly, both in the original Kazakh as well as in Russian translation, and a series of Auevov's articles published in Kazakh literary journals in the late 1930's.



The original Russian translation of Mukhtar Auezov's novel *The Way of Abai* (1945) and a collection of scholarly articles dedicated to it (1945). Property of the National Library of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Astana.

These articles, which are the earliest documentary evidence of the formation of the Abai legend in the Stalin era, were the key to my next stage of research at the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the President's Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the State Museum of Rare Books, and the archive of the Mukhtar Auezov House Museum.

Of no lesser importance during my time in Kazakhstan was my consultation with Kazakhstani scholars, particularly Diana Kudaibergenova, a Cambridge-trained sociologist who specializes in national identity building in post-Soviet space, and Svetlana Ananyeva, a research fellow at the Mukhtar Auezov Institute of Literature and the Arts (Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan). Dr. Ananyeva's area of expertise is the interface of Russian and Kazakhstani literature, and she helped me immensely both by recommending relevant scholarly works and also by introducing me to local writers and literary translators such as Kairat Bekbergenov, Raushan Burkitbaeva-Nukenova, and Pavel Bannikov. Most importantly, Dr. Ananyeva acquainted me with Marat Auezov, who is the son of my research subject Mukhtar Auezov and an influential writer and scholar in his own right. While staying in Kazakhstan, I also took a short trip to the capital city of Astana in order to meet with colleagues at Nazarbayev University and Eurasian National University. The immediate purpose of these

meetings was to outline a collaborative project—a special section of articles on Abai Kunanbaiuly—for publication in a Central Asian studies journal.

The second part of my trip took place in the Moscow and Yakutsk, Russia. In the initial phases of my work in Moscow, Andrei Gorbunov, my mentor at the International University of Moscow, was instrumental in helping me to narrow down my research questions and locate materials at the Russian State Library and the State Archive of Literature and Art. He also assisted me in preparing questions for my interviews with theater directors, writers, indigenous activists, and local scholars. Additionally, he aided me in seeking out specialists on the Indigenous literature of Siberia during my two-week trip to Yakutsk. (I had initially planned to travel to the cities of Vladivostok and Iuzhno-Sakhalinsk as well, but the indigenous literature collection at the Russian State Library proved to be sufficient for my purposes, so I was able to divert more time and resources into working in Yakutsk instead).

My research activities in Yakutsk consisted of work at the National Library and the National Archive of the Republic of Sakha. Among with archival research and meetings with faculty at the Institute for Humanities Research and Indigenous Studies of the North (IHRISN), I also made discoveries relevant to my project at the Writers' Union of Yakutia and the E. M. Yaroslavsky State Museum of the History and Culture of the Peoples of the North. I am particularly grateful for the generous and encouraging help of Viacheslav Shadrin, a longtime indigenous rights advocate and research fellow at IHRISN. Thanks to Dr. Shadrin's immense wealth of connections in the Yakutsk academic and artistic community, I was able to meet and interview local reindeer-herder poets, language pedagogues, journalists, television producers, professors, and writers.

Important Research Findings

My investigation into the literary links between the Kazakh writers Abai Kunanbaiuly and Mukhtar Auezov yielded a great deal of useful information, particularly in terms of the role the Russian language and literature played in the establishment of independent national literary traditions in the Stalin era. My findings from the rare books wing of the National Library of Kazakhstan, particularly articles by Mukhtar Auezov and other key figures in the Kazakh literary press in the 1930's, have been instrumental in my work on the development of Abai's posthumous reputation. The process of canon-building in the Soviet Kazakh literary tradition was well underway in the 1930's, but it reached a critical moment in 1937, when All-Union centennial celebrations of the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837) were accompanied by a number of translations of his works into Kazakh, as well as biographical and critical articles discussing his contemporary relevance to Soviet Kazakhstan. At the same time, records of the Kazakhstan Writers' Union, which I uncovered at the National Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Archive of the President, provided a chilling behind-the-scenes look at the politically charged processes of publishing and building literary traditions under Stalin. This glimpse into the bureaucratic underbelly of early Soviet Kazakh literature revealed that the "triumphant" unity of the Kazakh and Russian literary traditions, which Abai and his works came to represent, was founded on suspicion, denunciations, arrests, death, and untold suffering. Nevertheless, in spite of the complex processes underlying his Soviet-era canonization, Abai and his works have come to represent resilience and reconciliation—of East and West, of past and present—in contemporary Kazakhstani culture. As a result, my analyses of these works of literature in their transnational and socio-political context will take into account the full spectrum of triumph, tragedy, and cultural cross-pollination that accompanied them.

Another important set of research findings stemmed from my interview with Vsevolod Lisovskii, a Moscow-based writer, producer, and theater director. His acclaimed play *Akyn-Opera* premiered at the experimental Moscow venue Teatr.doc in 2012, earning a Golden Mask award in 2013. As indicated by

its name, Teatr.doc is known for its pioneering documentary aesthetic, focusing on what the organization's director, Elena Gremina, has termed "eye-witness theater [*svidetel'skii teatr*]." ¹ Since 2010 Teatr.doc has produced shows featuring the experiences of migrants, and in 2012 even hosted a celebratory "Day of the Migrant," which Gremina described in the following way: "Our whole life is permeated by migrants who are working various unskilled jobs. They clean streets, drive taxis, nurse the elderly. They barely speak Russian, and naturally, there is tension, which, I believe, is beneficial to the powers that be."² In my interview with Lisovskii I discussed three plays in connection with Teatr.doc's migrant-themed repertoire, with particular focus on the ways each play explores the "tension" between Moscow's migrant population, its native-born residents, and the "powers that be."

The first play we discussed was *The Moldovans' War for a Cardboard Box*, directed by Georgii Tsnobiladze, whose ironic title evokes the persistent conflict over territory in the post-Soviet state of Moldova. The text of the play was written in 2003 and based on actual event of a murder in the Moldovan migrant community, thus bringing the "documentary" aspect of Teatr.doc's repertoire to the forefront. In preparation for writing the script, the playwrights interviewed the migrant workers involved in the incident, and based the narrative on their accounts. The performance itself was staged within a sparse set of cardboard boxes, the materials from which the migrants' world is made, even as they engage—both literally and figuratively — in the construction of Moscow's post-Soviet landscape. The actors' portrayal of the tragic event spurs what one reviewer has called the "birth of the human" in the depiction of migrant workers.³

It is namely this forceful assertion of the visibility and humanity of migrant workers that Lisovskii stressed as the overall goal of his migrant-themed projects. The next piece we discussed was

¹ RIA Novosti, "Den' Migranta Proidet v moskovskom Teatre.doc." (Nov. 24, 2012), <http://ria.ru/culture/20121124/912009529.html>.

² Ibid.

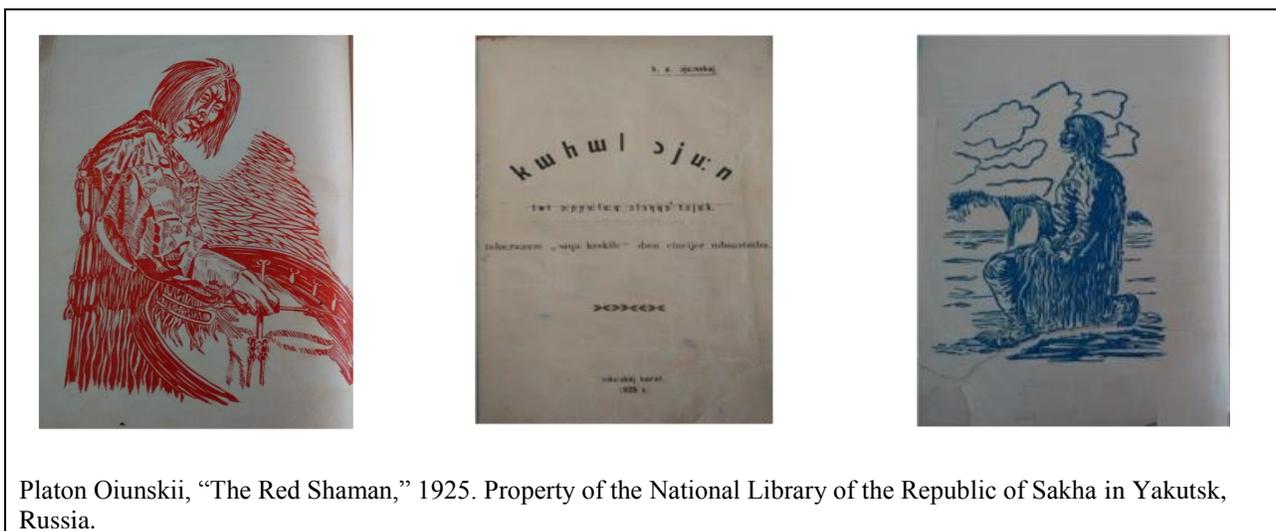
³ Svetlana Shchagina, "Voennye poteri," *Peterburgskii teatral'nyi zhurnal* (June 2010), <http://ptj.spb.ru/archive/61/on-teatr-61/voennye-poteri/>.

Akyn Opera, whose title refers to the word for a Central Asian folk bard, an *akyn*. The stars of *Akyn Opera*, most of them hailing from Tajikistan, were performing arts professionals in the Soviet era before migrating to Russia to work in manual labor jobs. *Akyn Opera* consists of traditional Central Asian folk music and tales, interspersed with the performers' own monologues of their lives as laborers in Moscow. By juxtaposing ostensibly "national" performance genres with intercultural lived experiences, the performers achieved a unique synthesis of folkloric, autobiographical, and documentary elements. Elena Gremina also remarked on the project's potential to positively impact the performers' own lives: "there is a social component to this project for the actors - the ability to be an artist for one night, after working on a construction site the whole week."⁴ However, Lisovskii's post-facto assessment of the piece was less optimistic. The performers were not able to continue their careers in the arts; instead they returned to obscurity in their low-status manual labor jobs after *Akyn Opera's* run ended. Lisovskii also mentioned his attempt to overcome the inequalities inherent in the medium of theater, noting that he had originally planned for the piece to expand beyond the prescribed space of the stage into marginalized "migrant" spaces, with special performances held in workers' dormitories, scrap-yards, and construction sites. In this way, he hoped to bring the privileged world of the stage into dialogue (and conflict) with the marginalized world of migrant labor. But due to lack of interest and failure to secure permission to enter these spaces, this plan was never realized. Summing up his experience with *Akyn Opera*, Lisovskii even referred to his own role in the production as that of a "colonizer" and an "exploiter" for interfering in the lives of his cast members, and for ultimately failing to make a positive impact. Yet this has not completely deterred him from the migrant theme—he continues to produce projects that draw attention to the voices of Moscow's marginalized populations. During my stay in Moscow I was able to attend Lisovskii's current migrant-focused project *Trowel [Shpatel']*, a one-man "migrant-ballet" starring Aman Karamatdinov, a classically trained performer from Kyrgyzstan.

⁴ Ibid.

The remainder of my work in Moscow and Yakutsk was focused on the history of indigenous literature in Russia, with additional focus on the role of literature in contemporary processes of cultural preservation and revitalization of indigenous identities. I was also interested in meeting contemporary writers and activists to discuss social and political issues facing indigenous communities. Most helpful in Yakutsk was my consultation with Iulia Khazankovich, a professor in the Department of Philology at North-West Federal University in Yakutsk, who is the author of four monographs on indigenous literature of the Russian Federation. Professor Khazankovich's recommendations led me to the discovery of two early twentieth-century Yakut writers whose works, as well as their tragic fate under Stalin, form a parallel to the Kazakh writers I had investigated earlier in my trip. I plan to include an in-depth discussion of these writers in my book chapter on contemporary indigenous writing. Platon Oiunskii and Petr Chernykh-Yakutskii were Russian-educated members of the Yakut intelligentsia, and founding members of the Writers' Union of Yakutia. Oiunskii's poetic work "The Red Shaman" (pictured below), was published in 1925 in the Yakut language, and printed in a short-lived Latin script that Oiunskii himself helped to develop (the Cyrillic alphabet became mandatory in the 1930's). The work begins with an epigraph to Maksim Gorky, the writer who served as a mentor to both Oiunskii and his colleague Chernykh-Yakutskii. (The same epigraph appears in Chernykh-Yakutskii's 1930 Russian translation of "The Red Shaman," which was banned soon afterwards for ideological reasons). Oiunskii's work is hybrid in its genre and form, re-casting Yakut religious rituals and cosmology within a Soviet teleological framework. The titular figure of the Red Shaman, who summons revolution even as it hastens his own obsolescence, serves as an early literary record of the contentious relationship between Soviet visions of modernity and the drive to preserve traditional culture and lifeways. Another work I discovered, Chernykh-Yakutskii's 1924 short story "Bad Medicine," explores the same dynamic, but with significant differences in genre, plot, and tone. Here, revolutionary fervor gives way to

despondency, as a psychologically tormented Yakut man seeks out a ritual cure that results in his gruesome death. In my conversations with scholars, writers, and other culture workers of Yakutsk, I learned that the writers of Oiunskii and Chernykh-Yakutskii's generation, whose works gave voice to indigenous peoples' struggles under the Soviet system and, in the case of Oiunskii, paid for it with their lives, were enormously influential in the development of indigenous literature and identity, and the central problems they explored in their works still resonate in Russia today.



Platon Oiunskii, "The Red Shaman," 1925. Property of the National Library of the Republic of Sakha in Yakutsk, Russia.

Co-curricular Activity

At Nazarbayev University I gave a presentation on my research as part of a summer session lecture series put on by the School of Humanities and Social Sciences. Attendees included students and professors from Kazakhstan, China, and the United States. By the end of my time in Kazakhstan and Russia, I was able to draft and send out book proposals to six academic presses, and I am currently awaiting the results.

Another important connection I made while in Moscow was with Eleonora Shafranskaia, a professor at Moscow City Pedagogical Institute. A scholar on Central Asian literature in the Russian language, Professor Shafranskaia is known for her work on colonial and postcolonial literary production,

in particular her groundbreaking study on literary production in Uzbekistan and Central Asia, *The Tashkent Text in Russian Culture* (2010). During her time at the Tashkent Pedagogical Institute in the early 1990's, she mentored the three poets who went on to found the contemporary "Tashkent School" of poetry, which is the focus of one of my book chapters. I was fortunate enough to meet and spend time with two of members of the Tashkent School, Sandzhar Ianyshv and Sukhbat Aflatuni, who provided me with insights into their poetic processes and assisted me in my interpretations of key works. (Here it is also worth mentioning that Sukhbat Aflatuni serves on the editorial board of the Russian-language multicultural literature journal *Druzhba Narodov*, and was able to share additional insights on contemporary Russophone literature from an editor's point of view. Also, to the delight of the Tashkent School and its loyal readers, his recent novel *The Adoration of the Magi* was just shortlisted for the 2016 Russian Booker Prize.)

Conclusion and Plans for Future Research

Though I spent only three months in the field, I was able to make a significant amount of progress on my book as well as lay the groundwork for related publications, presentations, and teaching. I gave my first public presentation of material from this trip on October 10 at the University of Arizona Poetry Center, as part of the annual lecture series Tucson Humanities Week. In conjunction with this year's theme of "Refuge," I presented on indigenous literature and migrant theater in contemporary Russia. Later in the semester, I gave a talk on my Central Asian material as part of the Fall Colloquium Series at the University of Arizona School of Middle Eastern and North African Studies. Finally, in November of this year I will be presenting a paper on the panel "Russophone Writing in the Putin Era: Towards a New Minor Literature?" at the annual convention of the Association of Slavic, East European, Eurasian Studies in Washington, DC. In addition to my book, I am also currently working

together with Kazakhstan and UK-based colleagues to curate a special section of a Central Asian Studies journal dedicated to the Kazakh poet Abai Kunanbaiuly (currently under review). I am also contributing an article on the teaching and research of Kazakh literature internationally to an upcoming volume published by the Mukhtar Auezov Institute of Literature and the Arts.

In closing, I would like to once more take the opportunity to thank American Councils and the U.S. Department of State for supporting this research trip. I have no doubt that the new research avenues and professional connections I made will be the basis of many other projects in the future, and I look forward to sharing the results with my colleagues and students.