

# (Re)shaping Literary Canon in the Soviet Indigenous North

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## Ethnic Minorities of the USSR and their Literature

In Vladimir Sharov's novel *Bud' te kak deti* (Be Like Children, 2007), a satirical version of Russian history eerily reminiscent of the real history, the leader of the Revolution, Vladimir Lenin, paralyzed and having lost his coordination and ability to speak, shortly before his death forges plans at his estate in Gor'kii for a new salvation of Russia. Seeing that his project for the ultimate victory of the proletariat has collapsed, he decides that the new chosen people can only be homeless, deaf-blind-mute children from orphanages. The "child-peoples" must help with this: the Samoyedic, or Enets peoples. It is precisely the Samoyeds and impaired children—according to Lenin's sclerotic vision, a tabula rasa, innocent and not weighed down by sin—who can enter the Holy Land. Sharov's contrafactual novel bitterly mocks the utopian plans, verging on the absurd, for Sovietization of the Far North: fictitious ideologists paternalistically transform the indigenous peoples into children with whom they can without hindrance create "their own"—truly infantile—history.<sup>1</sup> I was reminded of this frightful fairy tale when I began to study the Soviet literatures of the indigenous northern peoples and their version of socialist realism. The identity of the indigenous northerners as Soviet youngster-peoples was absorbed by the authors of these literatures and simultaneously—whether consciously or not—problematized by them. How did this happen?

The distant regions of the former USSR, especially the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Far East, and Siberia, have provided fruitful material for the study of voluntary or imposed mixed identities, as well as dependencies that are not straightforward. By no means last among such subjects are the native peoples of the north: the Evenks, Nanai, Khanty, Mansi, Nenets, Chukchi, Koryak, Nivkh, Itelmen, Eskimos, and others. Their small numbers, remoteness from

1. By "indigenous peoples" I mean the smaller ethnic groups of northern Asia that were the original inhabitants of these regions in Siberia or are descended from them. They are perceived as native peoples that maintained or today still uphold their traditions (language, dress, religion, rituals, and customs). The term "indigenous," however, is a European designation for the culturally different, and is inextricably linked to the (post) colonial history of these regions. In the case of the Russian and Soviet empires, this most notably concerns the "civilizing" and disciplinary measures of the larger Slavic peoples towards the non-Slavic, shamanic or polytheistic, peoples in Siberia. In these cultures, the phenomena of "otherness" and "(self-)orientalization" bear the strongest resemblance to classic postcolonial relationships of empowerment.

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the cultural metropolises, in addition to the still strong ties to the traditions of their ancestors, have combined with the facts of forced assimilation, extermination, and the creation of a written culture from scratch in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> However, international researchers in the last three decades specializing in imperial, frontier, and hybrid cultures have hardly perceived the literature that emerged in these regions as an interesting testament to cultural dialog and synthesis of identities.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the rift between the “external” and “internal” research perspectives, which operate with different academic rhetorics and value systems, is very apparent here.<sup>4</sup> Western studies (or those following in the western vein) gravitate toward a deconstructivist view of the literary product of Sovietization: “indigenous” socialist realism; their attention focuses on various phases and the degrees of the center’s influence on the periphery, Soviet cultural policy, and the interactions between the local and the Russian-Soviet in literature. Yuri Slezkine’s monograph is a prime

2. Among the numerous works on the anthropology and ethnography of the Far North published in the last four decades, I will mention only a few: Aleksandr Pika and Bruce Grant, eds., *Neotraditionalism in the Russian North: Indigenous Peoples and the Legacy of Perestroika* (Edmonton, 1999); Nikolai Vakhtin, “Native Peoples of the Russian Far North,” in *Polar Peoples: Self-Determination and Development* (London, 1994), 29–80; Igor Krupnik, *Arctic Adaptations: Native Whalers and Reindeer Herders of Northern Eurasia* (Hanover, NH, 1999); Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca, NY, 1994); expanded Russian edition: Yuri Slezkine, *Arkticheskie zerkala: Rossiia i malye narody Severa* (Moscow, 2008); Marjorie M. Balzer, *The Tenacity of Ethnicity: A Siberian Saga in Global Perspective* (Princeton, 1999); Gail Fondahl, *Gaining Ground? Evenkis, Land, and Reform in Southeastern Siberia* (Boston, Mass., 1998); Andrei V. Golovnev and Gail Osherenko, *Siberian Survival: The Nenets and Their Story* (Ithaca, NY, 1999); Alexia Bloch, *Red Ties and Residential Schools: Indigenous Siberians in a Post-Soviet State* (Philadelphia, 2003); Peter Jordan, *Material Culture and Sacred Landscape: The Anthropology of the Siberian Khanty* (Walnut Creek, CA, 2003); Alexander D. King, *Living With Koryak Traditions: Playing With Culture in Siberia* (Lincoln, NE, 2011). A quite valuable overview of writing on Northern indigenous peoples is provided in Piers Vitebsky and Anatoly Alekseyev, “Siberia,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 44 (2015), 439–55.

3. The debates about the USSR as an empire have become the subject of a large corpus of scholarly literature in recent decades. See Mark R. Beissinger, “The Persisting Ambiguity of Empire,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 11, no. 2 (1995): 149–84; Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY, 2001). Without getting mired in these debates, I understand empire as a relative synonym of the concept of the “Soviet multinational state,” with its implied features of territorial expansion, the subordination and modernization of the territories and cultures drawn into it, and the ideology of cultural diversity. From the very moment that the USSR was established, these features were at odds with the officially proclaimed anti-imperial policy.

4. The ideological unification of national literatures in the USSR left them seemingly foreordained to be enduringly unattractive to researchers of artistic production: the periphery reproduced mediocre things, things interesting only as a product of national policy. However, in the last two decades, the non-Russian Soviet literatures of different periods have become the object of increasing scholarly interest and original research. Works by Harsha Ram on Georgian literature (“Imagining Eurasia: The Poetics and Ideology of Olzhas Suleimenov’s AZIILA,” *Slavic Review* 60, no. 2 [Summer 2001]: 289–311); by Harriet Murav on Yiddish literature (*Music from a Speeding Train: Russian Jewish and Soviet Yiddish Literature of the 20th Century* [Stanford, 2011]), and David Bergelson (*Strange New World: Untimeliness and Futurity* [Bloomington, 2019]); or by Leah Feldman on Azeri literature (*On the Threshold of Eurasia: Revolutionary Poetics in the Caucasus* [Ithaca, NY, 2018]), to name but a few publications, reveal much more complex constellations, as well as a multilayered poetics of “regional” Soviet literary production.

example of this approach.<sup>5</sup> Including the literature of the Far North in the system of ethnographic and historical knowledge developed in various periods in the capitals, Slezkine exposes the agency of the northern peoples in Soviet times basically as following Moscow's national policy and Russian traditions: "The business of writing. . . had to be based on images, themes, and tropes borrowed from Russian literature."<sup>6</sup> Despite the brilliant documentation of his observations, Slezkine here is partially reproducing the viewpoint of modernizers. An opposing perspective is often presented in the works of Russian-speaking literary scholars from the northern regions (but not only them). In these the researcher stands, as a rule, in wholehearted solidarity with the subject of his studies: the indigenous writer is the mouthpiece and defender of his own dying culture and the judge of those destroying it—the state and colonizers, the missionary of peculiar humanist values.<sup>7</sup> A tendency toward self-victimization or the zeal of new self-empowerment is often combined here with a writer clothed in the vestments of his chosen community, of an enlightened shaman (literally, or not), granted, an attire that he adopts for himself from time to time: "During a face-to-face meeting with us (in Tiumen', September 2006), Yu. K. Vella. . . spoke of the back, from which a reader, the people standing behind him (the devoté-master) can and must grasp, must understand the purpose and the nature of the speaker's language. The poet's word is addressed to the higher powers, on behalf of everyone. . ."<sup>8</sup> In these works sensitivity to the word, to tropes, to ethnic writing, and to the system of interior literary translations coexists with the lack of a more neutral and broader view of the material. Identification happens here, too, only with the other camp.

In this article I will demonstrate how in the post-Thaw period from the 1960s to the mid and late 1980s—the period of "soft" socialist realism—the northern indigenous minorities began to manifest in their Russian-language prose their own version of the canon and, at times, a limited diversity of poetics, viewpoints, and language. In a number of cases the local literature, which had not been oriented since the mid-1950s to the strict "Stalinist" template of socialist realism, resulted in artistic eclecticism: the development of these young (*mladopis' mennye*) literatures, which had been compressed into a couple of decades, became an impulse for combining or even blending dissimilar

5. Yuri Slezkine, *Arkticheskie zerkala*, 346–413.

6. *Ibid.*, 412.

7. See, among many others: Ol'ga Lagunova, "Anna Nerkagi: 'Za sebja vosklitsaiu i za vsekh,'" in Sergei Komarov and Ol'ga Lagunova, eds., *Na moei zemle: O poetakh i prozaikakh Zapadnoi Sibiri poslednei treti XX veka* (Ekaterinburg, 2003), 261–348; Viacheslav V. Ogryzko, *V szhimaiushchemsia prostranstve: Portret na fone bezumnoi epokhi* (Moscow, 2006); Sergei Komarov and Ol'ga Lagunova, *Literatura Sibiri: Missiia, etnichnost', aksiologiiia* (Tiumen', 2016). The majority of the articles in the anthologies: Petr Tkachenko, Tatiana Komissarova, and Viacheslav V. Ogryzko, eds., *Khantyiskaia literatura: Sbornik*, (Moscow, 2002) and, Viacheslav V. Ogryzko, ed., *Nenetskaia literatura: Sbornik* (Moscow, 2004) are permeated with a spirit of empathy for and solidarity with the research subject, which transforms them into semi-journalistic and at times memoiristic texts. These publications are nonetheless an invaluable source of information.

8. Ol'ga Lagunova. "Mladopis' mennye literatury Rossii: Nauchnye versii russkoiazynchnogo tvorchestva," *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis Studia Russologica* VI (2013): 120.

identities and poetics in them. The first generations of writers attempted to “attach” Soviet modernity onto the local folklore and at the same time—in the spirit of Russian village prose—reflected on this attachment the “cultural clash” that had taken place in the recent past or was still ongoing. Furthermore, I will show how the native literatures of the North reproduced the subject matrices of post-colonial writing and—in the time of perestroika—openly broached the issue of Soviet colonialism in their plots.

The study is of a transitional time: before the creators of the local varieties of socialist realism had experienced a cardinal reevaluation of their values, finding themselves at the juncture of opposite ideologies: the just-fallen communist ideology, and that of their native paradise lost in the process of modernization. This moment is marked by the phenomena of artistic (re)negotiation and redefinition (whether obvious or not) of their own cultural ties, shift of focalization, and an intensifying diffusion of cultural signs. The focus on late socialist realism in indigenous Siberia allows us to understand how the turnaround in worldview in the 1990s was prepared before Siberian ethnic writers turned into politicians and began to speak the truth about deportations, the destruction of natural resources, and the relentless extermination of their languages and cultures. This turnaround, which was paradoxically a “child” of Soviet modernization, will be briefly described in the last section.

### The Politics of the Center and the Literatures of the North

A distinguishing feature of the late-Soviet literary canon—from about the end of the 1960s—was its inclusive and thus heterogeneous nature.<sup>9</sup> Village prose, which arose after Stalin’s death, and which remained right until the late 1980s as one of the mainline currents in Soviet literature, made the truth of the indigenous Russian hinterland a positive alternative to the programmatic Soviet socialization and collective farms. For the first time, Russians were seen as victims of Soviet modernization, and the village prose writers (Valentin Rasputin, Vasilii Shukshin, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and others) became its most overt public critics. Radical neo-Slavophiles (such as Viktor Chalmaev, Stanislav Kuniaev, or Vadim Kozhinov) made village prose a vehicle of invective against the intelligentsia, Jews, and modernism, and, at the same time, a sort of fetish of neo-back-to-the-soil religious metaphysics (*pochvennichestvo*) and missionism. At the same time, the liberal camp of intellectual humanists (Alla Marchenko, Igor’ Dedkov, or Galina Belaia, among others) proclaimed the return of the *derevenshchiki* to local traditions and the “little man” as the ethical landmark of a generation.<sup>10</sup> The paradigm of late, “rustic” socialist realism,

9. According to Hans Günther’s schema, the phase of the decanonization of socialist realism lasted from 1953 to the early 1970s, when it was broadened and lost its obligatoriness: Hans Günther, “Zhiznennye fazy sotsrealisticheskogo kanona,” in Hans Günther and Evgeny Dobrenko, eds., *Sotsrealisticheskii kanon. Sbornik statei* (Moscow, 2000), 282. But this schema is oriented towards the literature of the center; in the republics, the periodization was often displaced, or the boundaries between the phases were particularly eroded, and the processes of decanonization lasted until the late 1980s.

10. See Mark Lipovetsky and Mikhail Berg, “Literary Criticism of the Long 1970s and the Fate of Soviet Liberalism,” in Evgeny Dobrenko and Galin Tihanov, eds., *A History of*

which was morally and ethnically oriented rather than party-minded, as well the construction of the myth of the spirituality of the people, thus became not so much the mark of a particular stylistic and ideological trend as a new template ultimately filled with different but simultaneously generic content.

This period of quite advanced decanonization of socialist realism, or rather the period of its new, ethnically-oriented canon, became a time of the flowering of the newly recorded northern literatures, their actual entry into the system of multinational Soviet literature. However, they had had their own short prehistory. The first works of the Far North had appeared as early as the late 1920s, and in the 1930s and 40s, the first local poets and prose writers, many of whom were Komsomol members and sometimes party members, had already received a metropolitan education and graduated from the Department of the Peoples of the Far North in Leningrad (founded in 1925). Authors such as the Evenk Nikolai Tarabukin, the Nanai Akim Samar, the Nenets Nikolai Vylka and Anton Pyrerka, the Koryak Ketsai Kekketyn, the Yukagir Nikolai Spiridonov (Tekki Odulok), and the Mansi Panteleimon Cheimetov (Evrin) frequently worked as journalists and ethnographers, contributed to the standardization of the northern literary languages, and created the very first variants of the Soviet regional canons.<sup>11</sup> Many of them died young in World War II, and some were executed during the Stalinist purges. Doubtlessly, the enthusiasm for educational and research activities in the name of progress and Sovietization among these early writers had become a template for lyrical and simultaneously (auto)ethnographical writing of the generations born in the 1930s, 1940s, and later. Nevertheless, the minor north-Asian Soviet literatures were basically a product of the Thaw: the more typical, numerous, and best known authors and texts were those that started to be published in the latter half of the 1950s and 1960s. The North came into Soviet literature as a younger student that in the first generations of its authors had already had the opportunity for individualization and self-reflection, though dressed in the clothing and speaking the language of the teacher. Even more importantly, the northern indigenous literatures started to reflect the identity crisis that was characteristic of more than a few authors, narrators, and characters of late socialist realism practically from the very beginning. The motifs and poetics of displacement, as well as the fluctuations between two worlds—ethnic and socialist—was an implicit, performative memory of the

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*Russian Literary Theory and Criticism: The Soviet Age and Beyond* (Pittsburgh, 2011).

11. There are a few studies about several of these little-known authors, for example, individual chapters of the dissertation by Alla Poshataeva, “Literaturny narodov Severa: Rol’ dukhovnogo naslediiia v khudozhestvennom opyte sovremennosti” (PhD diss., The Gorky Institute of World Literature, 1989). See a synopsis of her theses at: [https://rusneb.ru/catalog/000199\\_000009\\_000044654/](https://rusneb.ru/catalog/000199_000009_000044654/) (accessed 2/16/2022). Sergei Komarov divides the Siberian native authors into three generations: the older, born before the 1930s; middle, born before 1945; and the youngest, born after the war, see “Mladopis’ mennye literaturny v sostave literatur Tiimenskogo kraia [opyt obshchei kharakteristiki],” *Literatura regionov v svete geo- i etnopoetiki: Materialy XIII Vserossiiskoi nauchnoi konferentsii Dergachevskie chteniia—2018* [g. Ekaterinburg, 18–19 oktiabria 2018 g.] (Ekaterinburg, 2019), 302. Nevertheless, this classification is on the whole a relative one, since quite a few authors born after the war had to create texts in their own dialects for the first time. Hence, in this article I use the plural term “first generations.”

early Soviet deportations and the violence of Soviet acculturation: in the early post-Soviet years, this memory would become explicit, plainly spoken in many texts. These were the writers whose parents or grandparents—shamans, hunters, and fishermen—spoke only the local languages<sup>12</sup> while they themselves studied in boarding schools and later in higher education institutions in capitals or regional cities.<sup>13</sup> With the consciousness of a few enlightened individuals within their small culture who feared its loss, they not only created a bilingual literature but also collected the folklore of their peoples, defended dissertations on their cultures, and carried out field studies. The works of these “(auto)ethnographers” combined national myths with cultural translation and historiography.<sup>14</sup>

The peculiarity of the literatures of the Far North lay in the fact that the literary form and content inculcated from the center were the only initial template within which deviations or individualization of perspective and writing could appear, since they arose in the 1920s–30s along with it: “In contrast to their larger republican counterparts such as the Uzbeks or Georgians, the native peoples of the north were considered to be essentially ‘without culture,’ not a palimpsest but a tabula rasa onto which a new Soviet identity and way of life could be inscribed.”<sup>15</sup> The lack of a pre-Soviet written literary tradition created a situation in which literature was born as a symbiosis of folklore, beliefs, and indigenous-Christian customs and the surrogate literary tradition of the Russian-European center: the Soviet “master plot.”<sup>16</sup> Hence the departure from strict socialist realism during the Thaw and later, in the 1960s–70s, could not be even a partial return to the traditions of national writing: where re-ethnicization in the spirit of village prose could not be thought of as an appeal to the cultural past, literature often became an amalgam of (auto)ethnography and folklore, and could invent curious forms of synthesis.

12. A number of northern languages, for example, Khanty, even today exist without a unified common standard, only in dialects; in such cases, the authors use their own dialect as a literary language. On the history of the creation of the literature of the native languages of the North, which was newly created or standardized in the 1930s, see, among others, Nikolai Vakhtin, *Iazyki narodov Severa v 20 veke: Ocherki iazykovogo sdviga* (St. Petersburg, 2001).

13. Many children from “backwards” indigenous families were taken away from their parents and studied in boarding schools where they were permitted to speak only Russian. Practically all the authors from the North discussed in this article were educated in boarding schools.

14. It is worth mentioning that the promotion of the Soviet peoples’ folklore and its incorporation into the new socialist literary canon was one of the most substantial features of the multinational Soviet literature from the very establishment of its institutions. In his keynote address to the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers (1934), Maksim Gor’kii highlighted the central meaning of the folklore of the “toiling people” for the foundation of Socialist realism; see Gor’kii’s speech at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in: Maksim Gor’kii, Karl Radek, Nikolai Bukharin, Andrei Zhdanov, et al., *The Soviet Writers’ Congress 1934* (New York, 1977), 25–69.

15. Bruce Grant, “Siberia Hot and Cold: Reconstructing the Image of Siberian Indigenous Peoples,” in Galya Diment and Yuri Slezkine, eds., *Between Heaven and Hell: The Myth of Siberia in Russian Culture* (New York 1993), 231.

16. Katerina Clark, *Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago, 1981).

There was a whole system of institutions, both regional and central, ready for the higher education of the representatives of the literary peripheries. Almost immediately after Stalin's death, organizations began to be created in the capitals for the purpose of channeling (primarily in one direction) the exchange between the center and the numerous non-centers. For example, in 1953 the Gor'kii Literary Institute (founded in 1933) instituted an "advanced literary courses" program in which, as decided by the Union of Soviet Writers, young authors from the republics were supposed to elevate their cultural level and ideological conscientiousness; a new department of literary translation appeared there also, in 1955, headed by Lev Ozerov.<sup>17</sup> Also in 1953, the Northern Institute of Leningrad State University became the Department of the Peoples of the Far North at the Leningrad State Pedagogical Institute (LSPI).<sup>18</sup>

The history of the late regional socialist realisms is interesting not only as a "history of generals," to borrow Iurii Tynianov's phrase, that is, of such eminent writers as Chingiz Aitmatov or Fazil' Iskander, who perceptibly shifted the borders of the all-union multinational canon and disrupted it, but also as the history of lesser known and less meaningful authors of the ethnically "marked" peripheries.<sup>19</sup> The northern writers did not set new standards nor did they reform Soviet multinational literature. But as less distinctive and more typical representatives of the Soviet literature of this period, they allow us today to more clearly discern the nature of the late canon that engendered various forms of self-expression.

### Domestication of Modernity in Northern Soviet Literatures

Local recensions of socialist realism in the ethnic North manifested many characteristics of the so-called hyphenated literatures that have been actively studied in recent decades by the example of minoritarian and postcolonial texts in America, Spain, or France: stylistic and genre hybridity, biculturalism, and sometimes the techniques of covert resistance or compromises—in a word, the performative evidence of cultural coexistence with the Russian-Soviet mainstream. Additionally, they were examples of the appropriation of

17. The theory and history of literature also became, starting in the first half of the 1950s, a platform for a new conceptualization of multinational literature: under the editorship of Georgii Lomidze, head of the Gor'kii Institute of World Literature's Department of Literatures of the Peoples of the USSR (a department added in 1948–49), starting at this time and continuing to the late 1980s, around twenty volumes were published on the "unity and diversity," "national specifics," "development issues," and "interaction" of the national literatures. See: Georgii I. Lomidze, *Edinstvo i mnogoobrazie: Voprosy natsional'noi spetsifiki sovetskoi literatury* (Moscow, 1957); Georgii I. Lomidze, *Problemy razvitiia literatur narodov SSSR* (Moscow, 1960); Georgii I. Lomidze, *Vzaimodeistvie literatur narodov Sibiri i Dal'nego Vostoka* (Moscow, 1983).

18. Among others, the Nenets Iurii Vella and the Khanty Eremai Aipin graduated from the Gor'kii Literary Institute; LSPI's students included the Khantys Roman Rugin and Iuvan Shestalov, the Chukchi Iurii Rytkeu, the Evenk Alitet Nemtushkin, and the Nenets Vasilii Ledkov. Vladimir Sangi, a Nivkh, graduated in the 1960s from both the advanced literary courses and the Gor'kii Literary Institute.

19. Iurii Tynianov, "O literaturnoi evoliutsii," in his *Poetika. Istoriia literatury. Kino* (Moscow, 1977), 270.

what studies of empires and colonialism—starting in the 1990s and including Sovietology—call modernity.<sup>20</sup> One of the key concepts of postcolonial theory is the idea of multiple or alternative modernities.<sup>21</sup> In his remarks on various means of appropriating the present, Okwui Enwezor writes about “adapting or translating modernity into specific local variants” in China and South Korea, “a sort of quotation” of Europe in Asia.<sup>22</sup> Challenging the monopoly and universalism of the European model of progress, education, and state of civilization, Enwezor introduces the concept of “petit modernity,” which is in constant dialog and conflict with the concept of “grand modernity.”<sup>23</sup> Besides the features of the (post)colonial writing mentioned at the head of this section, its poetics is primarily manifested, as asserted by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, in the very act of creating a text in the language of the “imported,” appropriated culture, that is, in an act of (partial) identification with it.<sup>24</sup> Having graduated from the universities in Moscow or Leningrad, the northern writers had readily available exemplars of not only Russian socialist realism but also literature by Russian fiction writers and ethnographers who had traveled to Siberia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>25</sup> Hence, they on the one hand reproduced the available stylistic templates, but on the other “invented” a view of themselves as simultaneously native and alien (or at least Other).

The model of another or incomplete modernity brought to bear on the literatures of the former USSR, combined with Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin’s theory and history of (post)colonial writing, is perhaps to an exceptional degree applicable specifically to the Far North.<sup>26</sup> If the other national literatures reinvented themselves under the conditions of Soviet patronage, then

20. Among recent studies of this, see Michael David-Fox’s article about Russian and Soviet modernity and the discussion of this article: “Modernost’ v Rossii i SSSR: Otsutstvuiushchaia, obshchaia, al’ternativnaia, perepletennaia?,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 140, no. 4 (2016), 16–91. One of the most cited works about Stalinist culture as a modernization project is Steven Kotkin’s *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, 1995).

21. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities,” in *Multiple Modernities*, ed. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (New Brunswick, London, 2000); Okwui Enwezor. “Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 109, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 595–620.

22. *Ibid.*, 596.

23. “So, on the one hand, there is *grand* modernity in all its European manifestations in reason and progress, and, on the other, is what could be called *petit* modernity, which represents the export kind, a sort of quotation, which some would go so far as to designate a mimic modernity” (*Ibid.*, 596–97; italics in original).

24. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London, 1989), 5.

25. Compare, for example, how Yuri Slezkine describes the origin of the imperial view of the indigenous northerners, widespread among intellectuals in the first third of the nineteenth century, as the innocent children of nature and as savages: Slezkine, *Arkticheskie zerkala*, 95–116.

26. In the section “Reflections on Modernity in the Northern Soviet Literatures,” I will more closely discuss the literary negotiations of modernization in Soviet North Asian regions from the 1930s, such as language politics (campaigns for the elimination of illiteracy as well as Russification), non-religious education, and directives to improve hygiene conditions and promote technological progress.

those newly put into writing had to invent themselves for the first time. This was also tied to the linguistic status quo around the 1950s–60s. The single northern alphabet created in the 1930s by students and teachers of the Northern Department of the Leningrad Eastern Institute and translated in 1937 to Cyrillic did not account for the diversity and internal distinctions of the northern dialects. The first literary texts in several of these dialects had to be invented by the authors and then translated into the Russian lingua franca in order to enter the distribution system of national literatures and simply to find readers.<sup>27</sup> For example, when Eremai Aipin arrived in Moscow in the early 1970s to study at the Literary Institute, he immediately ran into a language problem: no literature in his native Agan dialect yet existed. So that the professors could read through his first drafts, he translated them to Russian.<sup>28</sup> Despite the fact that this linguistic asymmetry existed also in the other Soviet literatures, it was particularly distinct in the newly-created literatures, since the just-born “child” had often already been handed over to the “foster parents.” Unification of the original diversity, undoubtedly distinct for local perception, codification in the framework of the new “family” of literatures, and translation all became the conditions of its birth and growth. In one way or another, “the complicity between language, education, and cultural incorporation” reproduced the processes in other colonial literatures, only with different ideological prerequisites.<sup>29</sup>

The mastery of Soviet modernity, or rather the original symbiosis with it, assumed various forms in the literatures of the North. Using a few illustrative prose pieces, I will give some instances below of the embodiment and/or reflection of incomplete and occasionally contradictory acculturation, as well as examples of translation and collisions of cultures quite distinct from each other in the confines of a single text. I am also interested in ideological compromises and the sometimes idiosyncratic network (difficult to fit into a harmonious whole) of rhetorics, styles, and allusions, which reveals an “in-between” state, a sort of ideological lacuna.<sup>30</sup> On the one hand, the rift in values and convictions between nature and civilization is openly thematized on the level of the characters’ consciousness. On the other, this typical topos of regionally colored village prose, which tells about the people’s identity crisis through a single representative of it (one that is, as a rule, close to the author), reveals fissures on the level of the writing as well. These identity rifts speak

27. Klavdia Smola. “Ethnic Postcolonial Literatures in the Post-Soviet Time: Siberian and Assyrian Traumatic Narratives,” in Klavdia Smola and Dirk Uffelmann, eds., *Slavic Postcolonial Literatures After Communism* (Frankfurt am Main, 2016), 219–243.

28. Viacheslav Ogryzko, *V szhimaiushchemsia prostranstve: Portret na fone bezumnoi epokhi* (Moscow, 2006), 35–36.

29. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 4.

30. Alongside the concepts of the “third place” and “hybridity,” the multivalent concept of “in-between/ness” has acquired a wide following due to its conceptualization by the postcolonial theoretician Homi K. Bhabha. Without borrowing the ideas of anti-essentialist freedom from hierarchies that Bhabha invested into this concept (“the interstitial passage between fixed identifications. . . that entertains difference without assumed or imposed hierarchy” (Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* [London, 1994], 4), I nonetheless refer in my analysis to the situation that the (post)colonial subject finds himself in between the various types of identity and self-perception.

in the language of partial acceptance or of implicit distance with respect to assimilation processes. Furthermore, northern socialist realism is also characterized by infantilization of the narrator's or hero's voice, which is directly correlated to the stylization of one's own ethnic group as a child-ethnicity, that is, one that is immature in comparison to Russian ethnicity. This stylization was truly postcolonial: it revealed a split between internalization of the foreign paternalistic gaze and a subtle revolt against this gaze. Finally, ethical passion is characteristic of this prose, one that "merges" into a single whole the moralism of the village prose writers and the instructiveness and fable quality of northern folklore.

Among my targets are the phenomena of bilingual poetics and the cultural and linguistic translation that are manifested *within* the Russian-language texts of the Khanty, Evenk, and Nenets authors (see below). The incorporation of non-Russian and non-Soviet linguistic features into officially circulated texts inform us not only about processes of cultural adaptation, but also demonstrates an ideologically ambiguous transfer of Soviet modernity into a poetically colored, pantheistic, mythical image of reality.<sup>31</sup> Although the Northern Soviet authors wrote and published their texts in Russian in order to be understood and heard in the system of multinational Soviet literature, many of them created literature in at least two languages. A careful analysis of self-translations or other-language versions of the same text, which were part of the educational ethics of the first generations of indigenous writers, the "pioneers," could bring important insights into the specifics of their bilingualism and reveal varieties of more individual and polysemuous writing patterns.<sup>32</sup> It also could shed light on the peculiarities of literary subjectivity within different ethnic groups in the Soviet North.

The prose writer and poet Iuvan Shestalov (1937–2011), "the peer of Mansi literature," was the son of one of the first Northern communists, an organizer and chairman of a local kolkhoz, and the grandson of a shaman,

31. In my book on non-conformist Jewish literature in the late Soviet Union, "Nad andegraundom," in *Izobretaia traditsiia: Sovremennaia russko-evreiskaia literatura* (Moscow, 2021), I observe, how officially published texts, both original and translated from Yiddish, such as *Tsimbalisty* (The Cymbal Players, 1967) by David Galkin, *Moia rodoslovnnaia. Rasskazy* (My Family Tree: Stories, 1983) by Boris Gal'perin (Ber Halpern), *Domoi. Povesti i rasskazy* (Home: Novels and Short Stories, 1973) by Samuil (Shmuel) Gordon, or *Sem'ia iz Sosnovska* (A Family from Sosnovsk, 1965) by Mnutka Bruk inserted fragments of historical truths and memory of Judaist traditions into Soviet literature. Within the transformed canon of post-Thaw socialist realism, they expressed a new attention to ethnic differences, a mild nostalgia for the pre-revolutionary past, and subtle evaluations of Jewish assimilation. These texts require a reading that acknowledges the gaps between the author's intentions, (self-)censorship, and the fluctuating limits of what can be said.

32. Another possible limitation of my argument is related to the fact that here I selected only male authors for my analysis. The prose by Anna Nerkagi and Galina Keptuke that I have explored elsewhere (see, for example, Smola, "'Malen'kaia Amerika': (Post)sotsialisticheskii realizm koren'nogo Severa," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 166, no. 6 (2020): 143–55, adds to our understanding of late-Soviet northern literatures (among others, the split of female subjectivity between old local traditions and emancipatory aspirations in the course of Soviet modernization). However, the focalization, poetics, and ideological frame of female and male authors exhibit many similarities.

a “contradiction” that was frequently mentioned in articles and reviews as being significant to his worldview.<sup>33</sup> Shestalov had the biography of a completely successful exponent of Soviet multinational literature, and his collection entitled *Iazycheskaia poema* (Pagan Epic, 1971) was particularly famous: Brezhnev liked it, and it was awarded the RSFSR State Prize.

The main character of Shestalov’s story “The Secret of Sorni-Nai,” a Mansi named Sergei, is deputy of the regional Soviet: “Sergei’s father was a man of the forest. He observed the laws and beliefs of the taiga, like grandad and great-grandad, and, like all old Mansi, considered the bear to be his brother, and so he simply called it Vortolnut, ‘The Forest Dweller.’”<sup>34</sup> The traditions with which old people are associated is the subject of ethnographic sketches and folkloric side-plots. Here, Sergei’s recollections become the vehicle for an expansive description of a “bear festival,” which contains local names with an explanation or a translation for the Russian reader (for example, “Kastankhum, the leader of the bear festival”), songs, incantations, and legends, with dialogs featuring animals, gods, and spirits.<sup>35</sup> The distinctly nostalgic and reminiscent tonality of such descriptions nonetheless does not allow the reader to identify with the past, as this past is relegated to the world of the character’s childhood memories: despite the fact that the frequency and extent of such descriptions bespeak the value of “the old,” the author nonetheless localizes them in the space of fables, which do not conform to the complexity of time gone forward. This sort of *infantilization of traditions* to which I previously alluded undergoes a corrective as the plot proceeds. Shestalov, who had used local legends and traditions as educational material in his numerous books for children, in this tale for adults situates the traditions in an axiologically ambiguous space of half fairy tale, half reality, or half past and half present: “the taiga legends of the ancestors. . . come to life, enriched by the new time.”<sup>36</sup> The ambivalent and sometimes almost macaronic adjacency of, on the one hand, a lyrical yearning for the world of the beliefs and rituals of the past and, on the other, their limitation to the sphere of remnants and folklore, as the pre-Thaw historiographical canon required, creates a poetics of a gap. Thus Sergei is a bifurcated character borrowed from Russian and Soviet novels, tortured by the doubts and preoccupied with the fate of northern culture and nature. He had studied in Leningrad, and, having returned home, was torn between Mansi culture and Russian civilization, between pantheism and science, between the romance of a perpetual return and the romance of progress. Although this split does not diminish until the very end, at times it is partially conciliated in the framework of a universal philosophy consonant with the spirit of the late Soviet era, the era of a restrained quest for spiritual alternatives and a palliated atheism.

Sergei is possessed by the idea of finding traces of the goddess Sorni-nai, the “golden woman” whose existence is attested by the eccentric and holy fool

33. “Shestalov Iuvan Nikolaevich,” *Lichnosti Peterburga*, at <http://www.ceo.spb.ru/rus/literature/shestalov.yu/index.shtml> (accessed June 25, 2021).

34. Iuvan N. Shestalov, *Taina Sorni-Nai: Povest'* (Moscow, 1976), 6.

35. *Ibid.*, 7.

36. *Ibid.*

Il'lia-Aki, a humble prophet and aged baby: a spokesman for the sacred (or irrational?) world of Khanty mysticism. Instead, Sergei joins forces with geologists and geodesist-topographers, and together with them finds a different, black gold: oil. Thus, the plot of searching for a mystery and for the hidden meanings of tradition—this northern version of Pavel Bazhov's "secret tales" of the Urals and of adventure stories about searching for Indians' gold—is displaced toward the zeal for mastering the taiga and taming nature. At the story's end, while Sergei is proud of the settlement growing on the taiga, the canal and water supply systems, the hum of the machines instead of the slipping of the reindeer sleds; his heart still palpitates at the (detailed) memory of the magical rites that his mother performed after his father's death. The old Mansi have grown to love the kolkhozes, and refuse to work in a subsidiary farm, thanks to the satisfaction of their joyous work in the collective, but nonetheless "within him, a seemingly modern man, phenomena that are hard to explain would make themselves known."<sup>37</sup> Sorni-nai had failed to defeat the Soviets, but neither could the Soviets defeat Sorni-nai.

Incompletely resolved dichotomies and ethical doubts in the focalization of narrator characters were a narrative mirror of an increasingly unstable ideology and a new, tolerant canon, beginning in the latter half of the 1950s. However, the collagic nature of Iuvan Shestalov's narrative also conveys a poetics of sutures, typical in a situation where one culture is grafted onto another one that was until recently still unwritten, and that is quickly shaped in its first authors' generation. When the Bear suffers diarrhea due to the contamination of the forest, then the Wolverine reads him a lecture about how "pollution of the atmosphere has taken on a global character" and it "sharply reduces the productivity of the agricultural cultures' lands."<sup>38</sup> The Wolverine, who obviously embodies the author-journalist, becomes an activist and an educator of such dense listeners as the Bear on the issues of global ecology. Furthermore, she is politically grounded, and voices her perplexity that "the concentration of harmful substances in the air of London, Tokyo, and Brussels is dozens of times higher than the maximum permissible norms. Don't understand how they can live there. Don't understand what they can breathe. Could that be why they're gaunt and skinny, those well-trained Europeans?!"<sup>39</sup> However, when she challenges the Bear to read the forest newspaper and move along with the times, he replies, "I'd rather you scratched my back!"<sup>40</sup>

Another characteristic example is the prose of the Evenk writer and poet Alitet Nemtushkin (1939–2006). Born to a family of hunters, Nemtushkin was educated, on the one hand, in the old traditions by his grandmother, Ogdo (Evdokiia Ivanovna Nemtushkina), and on the other in boarding schools, beyond and in contradiction to these traditions. His aunt, Synkoik, was an influential shaman. Some of his relatives were repressed in the 1930s, others died from illness, and yet others (including his father) died during World War

37. *Ibid.*, 130.

38. *Ibid.*, 91.

39. *Ibid.*, 92.

40. *Ibid.*

II. He graduated from the Leningrad Herzen Pedagogical Institute in 1961 and returned to Evenkia to work as a journalist, and later as a poet and prose writer.

In the story *Mne sniatsia nebesnye oleni* (I Dream of Heavenly Reindeer, 1982), the educational plot, optimistic ethnography, and idealization of the nature of a small homeland, as in Shestalov, coexists with the magical realism of the local Aztecs and Maya—the Evenks. This text is another example of the poetics of an ideological gap, a partial (non)acceptance, but also, possibly, of intentional non-articulation of forbidden topics. This autobiographical narrative conveys the perception of a boy living in the tundra before and during war. At first this narrative also merges the child's mythological-indigenous vision of the world with the idealized stylistics of “mature,” or “adult” socialist realism: “But the Little Sun now has finished strolling about the blue meadow like a red fawn, and the time has come for him to migrate to the Warm Side of the Earth. Why does the kind Little Sun with such kind arms—its rays—visit us so little in our Night Side? You know, it's so good with the Sun!”<sup>41</sup> In the native tent (chum) it is warm, the fire burns merrily, and the kind grandmother, Eki, potters around it. We are presented a domestic space populated by spirits, rituals, local words and things that are translated in parentheses to Russian (“the Khargi is an evil spirit who inhabits the Lower World, that is, underground.”)<sup>42</sup> Grandmother Eki is a positive character because she is a bearer of traditions, but she values the education of white people and dreams of her grandson Amarcha going to boarding school and learning to “read paper.” She has the Taimen fish idol hanging in her corner as the guardian of home and hearth, but does not object to Amarcha's having hung the portrait of the chairman of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, Mikhail Kalinin, in his corner. Her daughter (the above-mentioned shaman, Synkoik) and granddaughters, upon arriving for a holiday from the boarding school, have hung Kalinin's portrait in the most prominent place. But, again, the world of childhood allows the narrator, on the one hand, to speak sympathetically and in detail about religious customs and, on the other, to situate them in the “safe zone” of spiritual immaturity and childish naiveté. The salvatory role of the domestic Spirits, however, respectfully written with a capital letter, is not refuted, but only gently brought into question when Eki asks herself if prayer has truly helped her, and not her diligent wizened hands, these “little crooked fingers.”<sup>43</sup>

The language of northern magical (socialist) realism in Nemtushkin does not engage in conflict with that of revolutionary and wartime patriotism, rather, it awkwardly alternates with it. The “remote fairy-tale city of Leningrad,” to which one must fly on “steel birds,” has made Amarcha's father “clever”; he studied there after the poor overthrew the rich exploiters.<sup>44</sup> The farther dies in the war: “He died the death of the brave on Russian soil.”<sup>45</sup> Just when the time comes to go to war, a heated debate begins among the settlement's residents about whether this is “their” war, and whether it is worth

41. Alitet N. Nemtushkin, *Mne sniatsia nebesnye oleni: Povesti* (Moscow, 1987), 7.

42. *Ibid.*, 9.

43. *Ibid.*, 33–34.

44. *Ibid.*, 24.

45. *Ibid.*

sacrificing their own breadwinners for its sake. The voices are dividing, and the call of several tribesmen rise to the defense of “all the Soviet people” (“We must defend our land!”) remains, after all, just one of the opinions.<sup>46</sup> Ultimately, only a few volunteers go to war. At the Kutu River, “everyone who did not accept the new regime gathered. Not a single man left there for the war.”<sup>47</sup> There the shaman Synkoik holds sway; she is seemingly cunning and knows how to “hoodwink the new bosses,” but nowhere in the story is she condemned.<sup>48</sup> On the other hand, one is struck by the desperate maledictions of Grandmother Eki against the Evil Sprits who have killed all her sons and left Amarcha an orphan. The addressee of the invective shifts, as it were, from the “new regime” to the forces of destiny (the Spirits) and the patriotic logic of the inevitability of the losses, but this regime itself is depicted in a very dubious light. This ambiguity, however, does not alter the affirmative rhetoric of Soviet wartime propaganda. At the end, the grandmother is “readied for the road,” which is to say buried according to the Evenk ritual, and Amarcha is prepared “for a bigger life,” for the boarding school, where “our vast country” will not forget him, will help him grow up, and will teach him literacy.<sup>49</sup>

Shestalov’s and Nemtushkin’s stories, the shape of which is typical of many texts of northern socialist realism (those of Eremai Aipin, Galina Keptuke, Vladimir Sangi, Iurii Vella, or Anna Nerkagi) did not particularly stand out against the background of other national literatures of the 1970s–80s. Besides the partial dissatisfaction with the process of Soviet modernization, and in some texts the revelation of the Stalin purges (see below)—alongside a continuing faith in the overall goal of socialist transformations—there were, I repeat, a number of peculiarities in them. First, there was an amalgamation of children’s and adults’ literature as a consequence of the fact that the authors partially reproduced the role of the “younger brothers” and partially used a defamiliarized child’s view as a device for individual ethnic self-utterance. Second was pedagogical zeal, which combined folklore ethics with socialist realist moralism. Third were the features of eclecticism and a collage quality (“quotation” of the history of the canon, as well as a hybrid of the northern indigenous *skaz* with Soviet journalistic style) that attested to the difficulties of the rapid growth of the newly-written literatures: they had to fashion contemporary prose from oral traditions.

Christopher James Fort has shown in his recently published monograph how the literatures of the Soviet republics “inhabited Socialist Realism” in different ways, challenging the forthright ties between the Russian patterns and the socialist realism from the “edge” of the empire. He demonstrates, for example, how Pirimqul Qodirov in his novel *Almaznyi poias* (The Diamond Belt, 1983), by tracing the concept of the decline of the past in the village prose and of the friendship of the peoples in the socialist realist canon, simultaneously resurrects the philosophy of Islamic national independence espoused by prerevolutionary Uzbek thinkers such as the Jadidist Abdurauf Fitrat, and

46. *Ibid.*, 37.

47. *Ibid.*, 40.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*, 148.

thus implicitly calls into question the role of Russia and the USSR in the molding of Uzbek collective identity.<sup>50</sup> Without having national thinkers as predecessors or alternative intellectual and historiographical models, writers in the newly recorded northern literatures turned to myth and the rituals of their ancestors. Since the “prehistoric” (pre-Soviet) was close in time, they could be directly overlaid onto the ideology of the present moment, and then the wolverine could hold forth on agriculture and turn into a political informer. In this respect, the northern tale becomes an iconic reflection of the idiosyncrasies of imperial influence itself, a sign of ideological adaptation, spatial displacement, and the possible forms of “creative failure” (which was the Soviet critics’ judgment of Shestalov’s “The Secrets of Sorni-Nai”).

### Reflections on Modernity in the Northern Soviet Literatures

Just as in the other national Soviet literatures, the 1960s–80s in northern socialist realism was a time of reflection on or reevaluation of history; of restoring it to memory, and of permitted correctives. The Sovietization of indigenous Siberia was accordingly not only inscribed into the very texture of prose, but was also an object of representation and analysis. History, which had until recently still been equated with Soviet history, was becoming the theme of relatively differing appraisals, fictive memories, and a special sort of metaphorization. Meanwhile, the landmarks of modernization—the creation of an alphabet, the elimination of illiteracy, the introduction of hygiene and technology, instruction in schools and higher educational institutions—are constantly portrayed as the convening and sometimes collision of two types of cultures far removed from each other—the written and the oral, the educational and the religious, the alien (good, but not always) and the native (the intimate or the backward, and sometimes both).

Iuvan Shestalov’s story, “The Secrets of Sorni-Nai,” analyzed above, contains a documentary, autobiographical narrative about Sergei, the author’s alter ego, during his studies in Leningrad. Tangential to this, the narrator makes an excursion into the early period of the northern people’s education in the capital:

1925. . . There weren’t many of them; twelve guys in all. Khanty and Mansi, Nenets and Nanai, Saami and Yukaghirs, Evenks and Chukchi. What were they going to have to do? In a matter of years, they would have to take a step across millennia. . . . The children of the taiga and tundra, who had just yesterday been illiterate, turning up in Lenin’s city, were soon reborn, as it were. No, they didn’t forget about fire and living trees, but a book awakened a new hunter in them. A page like snow. Letters like tracks. Whose tracks were these? No, not an animal’s! Thoughts had walked around on this page.<sup>51</sup>

50. Christopher Fort, “Inhabiting Socialist Realism: Soviet Literature from the Edge of Empire” (PhD diss., University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, 2019), 194–95, at [https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/153485/cfort\\_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/153485/cfort_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y) (accessed June 25, 2021; no longer available).

51. Iuvan Shestalov, *Taina Sorni-Nai*, 77.

In this quotation, the propaganda plot of Soviet historiography, reckoning the “conscious” history of the minority peoples to the moment their writing system was created, is sustained by the zeal of Soviet education and culturedness (*kul’turnost’*) characteristic of the post-Thaw period.<sup>52</sup> Beyond this, the lyrical figure of merging cultural contrasts transforms the page of a book into a snowy field of the minority homeland, and is meant to harmonize the adjacency of the hunt and education, hence also the dialog between the center and periphery. Thus the significance of the autobiographical image of the next generation’s inspired and meticulous youth (also a double of the author), who answers the teacher’s bewildered question about what he is doing: “I’m working out a method for composing verses. No one has composed them in my native language!”<sup>53</sup> Such idealization of historic facts and the insertion of modernity into a pantheistic picture of the world is becoming a characteristic device for almost all the best-known authors of native-born northern prose and poetry of the first generations.

In fact, the lyrical devices often convey a limited and naïve but positively and poetically colored picture of the natives, who view the capital as a desired extension of their own surroundings, that is, as a continuum, not a rupture. This is how the capital is depicted, as seen by a young northerner: “From their earliest years, they had all been infected by the daydream of a fairytale Leningrad, where in a ‘marvelous tent’ (*v chudesnom chume*)—the Institute of the Peoples of the North—the children of illiterate fishermen and hunters would become the ‘great people’ of their taiga nation. The dream of becoming a ‘great person’ lived in Sergei’s soul as well. He himself wanted to become a historian. Maybe the first historian of his people.”<sup>54</sup> In other episodes, the picture of the symbiosis of two distant cultures is assembled from acts and objects perceived for the first time by the natives. The teaching of writing is described thus: “like children, they drew some kind of mysterious white patterns on a black board, which were called letters”; a plane is called a “boat with wings” or an “iron bird”; the newspaper is called “loud paper.”<sup>55</sup> If letters are transformed into mysterious white patterns, then they cannot be alien to the pre-literate, mythical thinking of the natives.

A “step across millennia” was in the northern stories the subject not of a historical novel but of an autobiographical tale, and history compressed into decades or even a couple of years equated the growth of the character-narrator-author with the growth of the whole nation. And this was actually an element of the biographies of the writers themselves. Vasilii Ledkov, who was a reindeer herder’s son, “as just a tiny boy. . . helped the herders tend the reindeer, went hunting with his father, himself set traps for polar foxes and hares, and seine-fished with the adults. In the long winter evenings he loved listening to the fables and songs of the old people.”<sup>56</sup> But by the time he

52. See: Mariia R. Zezina, *Sovetskaia khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia i vlast’ v 1950-e—60-e gody* (Moscow, 1999).

53. Shestalov, *Taina Sorni-Nai*, 79.

54. *Ibid.*, 20.

55. *Ibid.*, 87–88.

56. “Vasilii Nikolaevich Ledkov,” *Literaturnaia karta Arkhangel’skoi oblasti*, <https://writers.aonb.ru/ledkov-v.n.html> (accessed August 19, 2021).

was in the eighth grade of the boarding school, he was “anxiously translating ‘Stories about Michurin’<sup>57</sup> into the Nenets language, and in the tenth, Lev Tolstoi’s children’s stories.”<sup>58</sup>

When the time of perestroika arrived, not only could Soviet history be analyzed as a process of linguistic and cultural translation, but it could also become the subject of partial revision, invective—as a sign of de-Stalinization—and even of the idea of colonization of the indigenous North. In Eremai Aipin’s most famous novel, *Khanty, ili Zvezda utrennei zari* (The Khanty, or the Dawn Star, 1987), the history of communist industrialization and the inculcation of party propaganda in one of the villages of the early Soviet North is told from the perspective of an indigenous resident, Nim’ian. The novel shows how the translation of socialist catchwords and realia into the language of the Khanty gave rise to the ideolect used in 1930s peripheral construction projects, a symbiosis of myth and modernity. It is an interesting episode of the hybridization that arose with the translation into the northern dialects of Russian-Soviet newspeak, as well as of the new realia:

Kolkhoz-khot – kolkhoz house.

Poshta and radio-khot – post office and radio station.

Myr-lavka – people’s store.

Lekar’-khot – first-aid station.

Nevremet-khot – boarding school.<sup>59</sup>

But the most interesting thing here is the reflected synthesis of a para-religious cult with early Soviet ideology. The old storyteller Gennadii Korneev incorporates the “red people” into the positive system of local folklore: as he understands, the Communist Party strives to embody the people’s (primitive!) ideal of harmony between peoples and tribes, and the leader of the revolution, Lenin, is transformed into a semi-divine being, the hero of the ancient Ostyak legends:<sup>60</sup>

[Korneev] understood the Party his own way. . . Having traveled the whole planet and gotten to know all peoples, [Lenin] returned to the main Russian city and set out to create the Party. Once he created the Party, he created

57. Ivan Michurin was a Russian botanist and practitioner of selecting breeding who introduced over 300 new varieties of crop plants. He was canonized by the Soviet regime, became an honorable member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, and was awarded the Order of Lenin and the Order of the Red Banner of Labor. Viacheslav Lebedev’s *Rasskazy o Michurine* (Stories about Michurin, 1952) became one of the most popular children’s books in the USSR.

58. “Ia vsem serdtsem gorzhus’, chto v Rossii rodilsia. . .” государственное бюджетное учреждение культуры Ненецкого автономного округа (GBUK NAO), “Nentskaia tsentral’naia biblioteka imeni A.I. Pichkova,” at [http://www.nenlib.ru/jirbis2/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=885:ledkov&catid=29&Itemid=442](http://www.nenlib.ru/jirbis2/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=885:ledkov&catid=29&Itemid=442) (accessed August 21, 2021, no longer available). See also: Klavdia Smola, “Ethnic Postcolonial Literatures in the Post-Soviet Time: Siberian and Assyrian Traumatic Narratives,” in Klavdia Smola and Dirk Uffelman, eds., *Postcolonial Slavic Literatures after Communism* (Frankfurt am Main, 2016), 219–243; Klavdia Smola, “‘Malen’kaia Amerika’: (Post)sotsialisticheskii realizm korenno go Severa,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 166, no. 6 (2020), 143–55.

59. Eremai Aipin, *Khanty, ili zvezda utrenney zari: Roman* (Moscow, 1990), 99.

60. *Ibid.*, 260–73.

the Revolution. Once he created the Revolution, he created the Soviet Regime. And he said, “People of Earth, build your future. The future must be happy. . .”<sup>61</sup>

But Aipin’s native characters take dekulakization, the arrests and executions of the 1930s to be the revenge of the Unclean Spirit. Here they call the new regime the “Red Tsar” and “The Bloody Eye”:

“He had many faces. They called him different things: ‘Samerin,’ ‘That One,’ ‘Unclean Spirit,’ ‘Impesiot,’ for he was ubiquitous, could pop up here or there in the most unexpected shape. He could descend in daytime or nighttime, late evening or early morning. . . . With every visit he took the ‘enemies of the people’ away with him. . . .”<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, the characters in Aipin’s novel compare the practices of Soviet and American colonization, and liken the fate of the Khanty to that of American Indians. The (fictitious) American researcher Katherine Jefferson arrives in the village to observe the life of Khanty culture, which is in danger of dying out. She explains to Mikul’, Nim’ian’s son, that in ancient times, before the strait was formed, the Ostyaks and the Voguls (the names of ancient Mansi) probably lived alongside American Indians. In an issue of *National Geographic* that Katherine brought with her, Nim’ian sees photographs of Indian settlements, and senses an ancient kinship between his tribe and the Indian tribes. This kinship is an echo of the socialist zeal for the friendship of the peoples, and in the context of the criticism of colonialism, it is obviously a kinship of the destinies of the global community of oppressed people: Katherine does not succeed in collecting materials because the culture of the Siberian natives and they themselves have almost died out, but the regional administration demonstrates the “official” folklore—Potemkin villages—to the visitors: “English, French, Spanish, Russian, and other colonizers. Whether they’re in America, Africa, or Siberia. They’re all identical. . . .”<sup>63</sup>

### On the Eve of and After the Fall of Socialist Realism

To conclude the article, I would like to summarize the features that made the northern literatures a typical expression of late socialist realism. A comparison with one of the most famous examples of the national Soviet literatures—that of Chingiz Aitmatov—will help us do just that.

One of the very last texts of indigenous northern socialist realism, *The Khanty, or the Dawn Star* was a sort of a local version of Aitmatov’s novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*, which was published a few years earlier, in 1980, in the journal *Novyi mir*. In a foreword to the English translation of Aitmatov’s novel in 1983, and in a subsequent article, Katerina Clark points out that this novel, as an all but ideal exemplar of the socialist realist “master plot,” was in a position to shape alternative meanings, in relation to the still-prevailing system of the Soviet literary canon, that were more appropriate

61. *Ibid.*, 272.

62. *Ibid.*, 100.

63. *Ibid.*, 305.

to what had become a new era.<sup>64</sup> If Aitmatov, by reflecting the present in a myth about the *mankurt*, came very close to the limits of the canon and skillfully used the broader possibilities of identification with him, then Shestalov, Ledkov, or Aipin remained right in the middle of the general flow. What is more, the features that regional researchers today emphasize as particularly characteristic of these younger literatures—“the high status of the author’s moral stance,” “the use of poetry and prose within the confines of single work,” “the symbioses of mytho-folkloric and literary genres”—were realized by the authors specifically *as an embodiment of socialist realism* with its ethical stance and rhetorical features, but with their own particular, sometimes idiosyncratic mergers of myth and literature (newspaper rhetoric and folklore, for instance, or socialist construction propaganda and a fable).<sup>65</sup>

Comparison of Aitmatov’s famous novel with the younger literatures also reveals another important tendency. Among the exponents of the national literatures, Aitmatov only expressed the main tendency of the 1960s–80s in a more original way—creation of local variants of the “native” premodern, returning to roots, which could just as well be an ideology of anti-Soviet conservatism as a projection of liberal de-Stalinization—and foreshadowed the various responses to Soviet history during perestroika and after the breakdown of the system.<sup>66</sup>

Paradoxically, the typicality of the texts and authors analyzed in this article bespeaks how in tune they were with the spirit of the time in which ideology was breaking down, and even more so how they themselves were formulating the collapse of the regime without in any way being the mouthpiece of dissidence. Northern socialist realism, with its ecological anxiety, as well as its statistical and ethnographic inquiries, proves in its own way that the institution of multinational Soviet literature was not only an instrument of education and control, but also provided an opportunity for potential deviations and subversions.<sup>67</sup> Equipped with ethnographical knowledge and an ethics of equality, and having learned to see their own people from without, the northern authors—just like exponents of postcolonial literatures on other continents—already possessed an instrument for the post-imperial “writing back” that soon became possible.<sup>68</sup> By the latter half or end of the 1980s, texts

64. Katerina Clark, “The Mutability of the Canon: Socialist Realism and Chingiz Aitmatov’s *I dol’she veka dlitsia den’*,” *Slavic Review* 43, no. 4 (Winter, 1984): 573–87.

65. Sergei Komarov, “Mladopis’mennye literatury v sostave literatur Tiumenskogo kraia,” 301.

66. The very same tendencies were observable in the niche of uncensored literature. The first short stories of the Crimean Tatar author Ervin Umerov, in which persecutions and deportations of Crimean Tatars were depicted, were written in the 1960s, but published only in the 1990s.

67. In the context of the debates about Gor’kii’s concept of world literature, Susi K. Frank analyzes such a possibility of subversion by the example of Gennadii Aigi’s poetry: “Imperial institutions, against their intentions, enabled authors to develop alternative, non-imperial strategies of world literature,” Frank, “‘Multinational Soviet Literature’: The Project and its Post-Soviet Legacy in Iurii Rytkeu and Gennadii Aigi,” in Klavdia Smola and Dirk Uffelmann, eds., *Postcolonial Slavic Literatures After Communism* (Frankfurt am Main, 2016), 191–219.

68. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*.

would appear that openly portrayed the ecological catastrophe of Siberia, the forced resettlements of minorities, and the extermination of entire ethnicities in the process of Sovietization. The genre of “counter narratives” of Soviet historiography would emerge, as well as various forms of ideological revision in the peripheries.<sup>69</sup> Writers would turn into politicians. Eremai Aipin, for example, would become a member of the Council of People’s Deputies and a representative of the Russian Federation’s presidential office in the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug, and would become an activist for the preservation of the disappearing cultures and nature of the peoples of Yugra; he would speak in 1994 at the 49th session of the UN from the Arctic. In 2002 he would publish the novel *Bozh’ia mater’ v krovavykh snegakh* (The Mother of God in the Bloody Snows), in which, by bringing out numerous archival materials, he would tell the story of the 1933–34 Kazym Rebellion, brutally suppressed by the Red Army, which led to the almost complete annihilation of the native Ostyak populations and their culture. The prerevolutionary period of the Christianization of the northern peoples would be depicted by a tale of the harmonious fusion of Ostyaks and Russians, by a true story and at the same time by a myth. Anna Nerkagi would become a Christian missionary, an ecological preacher, and an educator of adopted orphan children; in 1996 she would write the apocalyptic phantasmagoria “Molchashchii” (Tongue-Tied), in which she would accuse the intelligentsia of betrayal and spiritual villainy. Vasilii Ledkov would participate in 1985 in a conference of indigenous writers from all over the world under the aegis of UNESCO, and in a 1992 conference of Uralic language writers in Finland; he would go to Scandinavia to talk about the Nenets and their literature. His ecological interests would shift from the Soviet to the global North. And Alitet Nemtushkin would become one of the initiators (and president) of the Krasnoyarsk Krai’s “Arun” (Revival), Association of Indigenous Low-Population Peoples of the North. He would pessimistically title his 1990 book of prose *Doroga v nizhnii mir* (The Road to the Lower World), which means “the road to death.”<sup>70</sup>

The northern literature of the late- and post-Soviet era increasingly merged with extraliterary concerns—and this also was a curious legacy of socialist education and a continuation of the traditions of local socialist realism that fulfilled varied pedagogical and memorial functions. For example, Shestalov in 1985, for the first time after the ban, organized the “Tulyglap” Bear Festivities in the village of Sos’va (in the Berezovo Region), which were broadcast on central television; along with the writers Eremai Aipin, Tat’iana

69. See Smola, “Ethnic Postcolonial Literatures,” 223–26.

70. It is symptomatic that one of the earliest articles revealing the disastrous economic, ecological, and cultural situation of the small Northern peoples in the late Soviet era quotes critical reports by the writers Alitet Nemtushkin and Vladimir Sangi; see Aleksandr Pika and Boris Prokhorov, “The Big Problems of the Small Peoples,” *Neotraditionalism in the Russian North* (Edmonton, 1999), xxix–xl. (This is the English reprint, it was first published in Russian in 1988). This overview, authored by Russian anthropologists and experts on the Soviet North, is an impressive testimony to the time of perestroika, with its first acts of free speech and attempts to correct historical knowledge.

Moldanova, and other like-minded people, he established the “Torum Maa” (or Toruma, “God’s Land”) open-air museum.<sup>71</sup>

Late northern socialist realism already contained the trends that its literature would follow after the end of communism: journalistic writing, activism, an anticolonialist ethic, and resentment against Soviet modernization and violence.<sup>72</sup> The neo-Slavophilism of the village prose writers and their ideologues, with their imprecations directed against the intelligentsia and modernism, was echoed at the periphery in metaphysics, moralism, and the gospel of the ethic premodern.<sup>73</sup> Northern neotraditionalism and the new role of shamanism in post-Soviet Siberia, which have been studied numerous times in the last twenty years, have become the ambivalent marker of a revival and an attempt to ritually overcome the traumatic Soviet past as well as the unsettled present, that which Manduhai Buyandelgeriyn calls “dealing with uncertainty.”<sup>74</sup> The spiritual path of working with memory and the past cannot appease the angry spirits of history.

The ethnic realia that socialist realism of the North mirrored, and the writing that it invented and destabilized in symbiosis with Soviet literature are interesting not only as a cultural product but also as a statement, a marker of the subjectivity of the transitional period, never mind that the transitional period encompassed almost the entire time that Northern indigenous socialist realism existed. Study of the individual methods of conforming to the empire’s centralist policy and diverging from it can answer the question why the system of the multinational cultural canon could exist for so long—and why it nonetheless collapsed.

71. Liubov’ Miliaeva, “Etot velikii Iuvan...,” *Iugra*, last modified November 5, 2011, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20140528181518/http://www.ugra-start.ru/ugra/nyabr-2011/546> (accessed September 6, 2021).

72. The postcolonial optics on the Soviet and post-Soviet literature of the indigenous North has been sustained in recent years by both the treatment of colonialism in their texts themselves, and the comparison of poetics and themes. Articles have recently appeared in which the poetics of indigenous authors from various geopolitical spheres are compared. For example, Leonid Chekin analyzes works written in the 1960s and 70s in the Inuktitut language in Canada, in Kalaallisut in Greenland, and in the Naukan dialect in Soviet Chukotka, comparing among others Maakusi and Zoia Nenliumkina, see Leonid Chekin, “Inuitskaia literatura, postcolonial’naia kritika i problemy perevodimosti,” *Novoe Iteratnoe obozrenie* 166, no. 6 (2020): 114–42.

73. See above on Mark Lipovetsky and Mikhail Berg, “Literary Criticism of the Long 1970s.”

74. Manduhai Buyandelgeriyn, “Dealing with Uncertainty: Shamans, Marginal Capitalism, and the Remaking of History in Postsocialist Mongolia,” *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 1 (February 2007): 127–47. Although Buyandelgeriyn analyzes shamanic practices in Buriatia, her conclusions are also valid for the small peoples of the North.