The “Odessa Text” in Yelena Akhtiorskaya’s *Panic in a Suitcase*

Yelena Akhtiorskaya’s debut novel *Panic in a Suitcase*, published in 2014, focuses on a Russian-speaking Jewish family from Odessa who settled in Brighton Beach in the early 1990s, while one relative, a prominent poet, stayed behind in Ukraine. The plot partially reflects Akhtiorskaya’s own experience of growing up in Brighton Beach. The fictitious poet in the novel is modeled on her uncle Boris Khersonskii. Having been born in the “real” Odessa and grown up in “Little Odessa,” Akhtiorskaya has a unique vantage point to juxtapose the Black Sea city with its American simulacrum on the Atlantic Ocean.

This paper will investigate the novel’s relation to the “Odessa Text,” which has left an important legacy in twentieth-century Russian literature, giving prominence to such features as the city’s southern location, sensuality, humor, vibrant commercial activity, and criminal ingenuity. While Odessa’s storied ethnic diversity, including a substantial Jewish element, has nowadays largely been reduced to a hotly contested Russian-Ukrainian binary, the multicultural and Jewish Odessa lives on in the so-called Russian-American immigrant literature that has sprung up since the turn of the millennium. A prominent example is Ilya Kaminsky’s highly acclaimed poetry volume *Dancing in Odessa* (2005). As I will argue, Akhtiorskaya deconstructs the image of the “Odessa poet” proffered by Kaminsky and others. Her book could be characterized as a sort of “anti-Odessa novel” that engages the clichés and mythologies of the “Odessa Text” in order to ironically subvert them. Akhtiorskaya has expressed displeasure at being associated with the genre of post-Soviet immigrant fiction. However, given that the mocking of immigrant self-exotization has itself become a staple of Russian-American literature, she has perhaps more in common with these writers than she is willing to acknowledge.