

CDIPS Final Project
2021-2022 Cohort
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“Reimagining Russia: Place, Identity, and Environment in Contemporary
Russian/Russophone Literature”
Towards a Decolonized Contemporary Russian Literature Course Design

Part I: Executive Summary

The porousness of “contemporary literature” as a concept – in terms of periodization, genre, and critical frameworks – provides educators and students the unique opportunity to contribute to ongoing discussions about canonization and literary aesthetics. In spite of this, until very recently, the majority of scholarly and pedagogical approaches to Russian contemporary literature (defined at UC Berkeley as literary production spanning the period from 1953 to present) have privileged on a narrow body of texts by dissident and postmodernist writers deemed to be of particular literary value. In practice this approach recreates the existing, narrowly defined conceptualization of Russian literature as emerging from a narrow intellectual circle of predominantly male, ethnically Russian writers based in Moscow/Petersburg or in Western diaspora. In recent years, scholarship has increasingly sought to expand the definition of Russian literature and culture to account for the geographic, ethnic, and experiential heterogeneity that the Russophone world encompasses and to interrogate the role that literature has played in the construction of Russian exceptionalism—a concern which has been amplified as a result of Russia’s most recent invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. My project seeks to demonstrate the unique opportunity that the Russian contemporary literature classroom presents for equity-minded educators seeking to extend these discussions to the undergraduate classroom. It does so through a syllabus that considers Russophone contemporary literature as a unique landscape of texts that seek to reconsider cultural assumptions about Russia as a place. By presenting students with multiple frameworks (gender, ethnicity, environmental, urban) and scales (regional, national, transnational) through which Russophone contemporary texts consider place and placing them in dialogue with canonical Russian texts from the 19th and 20th centuries, students will come away with alternative ways of seeing and understanding Russian/Post-Soviet space and place and can begin to interrogate dominant discourse about Russian literature and empire. In addition, it also encourages students to actively apply this newfound cultural knowledge in an interdisciplinary context through engagement with a variety of theoretical and primary sources in both informal class discussions and in an ongoing formal research project. Finally, by encouraging students to think critically about the role of culture in constructing our own conceptions of place, the course offers students with strategies for interrogating spatial biases in their own lives.

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Part II: Analysis

Russia is the largest country in the world by physical landmass and its population – the ninth largest in the world – is among the most diverse, with nearly 200 distinct ethnic groups represented in the 2010 census.¹ More broadly, Russian remains widely spoken as a regional *lingua franca* and among ethnically Russian minority groups across nations belonging to the former Soviet Union and amongst the Russian-speaking diaspora abroad. In spite of the incredible geographic and ethnic diversity of the Russophone world, many Russian language and literature curricula remain extremely narrow in focus, teaching a narrow canon of writers and texts from predominantly Russian ethnic backgrounds and working primarily from Russia's two cultural capitals of Moscow/Petersburg. My project seeks to utilize the flexibility of the contemporary Russian literature curriculum to provide students with a fuller understanding of how Russian literature and its subsequent canonization by cultural scholarship have constructed a dominant real-and-imagined geography of Russia that has shaped the cultural imagination of Russian national culture and empire. Juxtaposing contemporary texts written from a broad range

¹ "Russia." *The World Fact Book*. Central Intelligence Agency, 18 August 2022. Web. 29 August 2022. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/russia/>

of national, ethnic, gendered, and geographic perspectives with earlier “canonic” literary representations of Russian space, the course’s primary objective is to teach students to think critically about their own conceptions about space and understand how literature can be used as both an instrument of power by dominant cultures, and also a means of resisting dominant discourse about everyday life.

I envision this course as an upper-division undergraduate literature seminar targeted as an elective course for Slavic languages and area studies majors and minors. Although the course texts will be taught in English translation, I therefore assume that most students will have some basic background in Russian literature and/or history and that many will have at least basic knowledge (1 semester) of the Russian language that can provide cultural and linguistic context for some of the discursive questions of the course. As an upper-division course marketed to juniors and seniors, I also assume students will possess the critical reading skills to begin engaging with accessible readings in literary scholarship and critical theory, although if it becomes apparent that students are struggling with these readings, I will reassess how to approach the theoretical component of my course. While I will provide all course materials and lectures in English, I will also encourage students with intermediate or advanced language to work with Russian language research sources whenever possible so that they may begin to apply their language skills in a more professional setting.

I have designed the course to be taught at a broad range of institutions, including small liberal arts colleges, private research universities, and public universities offering undergraduate seminar-style courses for majors. (I currently teach lower-division coursework at UC Berkeley, which has a small Slavic major and is therefore able to offer such seminar-style courses of 10-15 students for upper-division majors and minors.) The seminar style of the course will foster a supportive scholarly community through a discussion-based curriculum through which the group can discuss culturally-sensitive topics in a safe space. It will also allow students to take a more active role in their learning by allowing ample time for collaborative work such as group projects, peer writing workshops, discussion leader assignments, and apply course concepts to their own academic and professional interests through a scaffolded independent research project. I am strongly committed to advancing equity, inclusivity and diversity both in my research and teaching, so I have also designed assignments to be somewhat flexible to allow the instructor to apply whichever culturally-relevant pedagogies fit best for their institution and department.

Proposed Content:

Since the course is marketed as a semester-long (14 week) upper-division course for Slavic literature or area studies majors, I assume some prior knowledge of Russian history and/or basic knowledge of Russian literature and culture. The first week of class will therefore be focused on helping students map their existing knowledge of Russia and the Russian-speaking world as a space as well as the assumptions/narratives that helped form this knowledge. Through a combination of short lectures and excerpts from primary texts that they will unpack as a group, I will then provide basic context for the primary conceptual questions of the course, namely some brief theoretical background from cultural geography on the general relationship between literature and space (i.e. “real” vs. “imagined” space) and how the question “what is Russia?” emerged as a major concern of Russian literature. (We will discuss the specific iterations of this question throughout the various units of the course.) Following the introductory week, the

course will then be organized conceptually in four units (2-4 weeks in length) according to various ways through which contemporary Russophone writers have responded to and reimagined Russian literary space. Each unit will introduce first students to 1-2 short “canonical” readings from Russian literature about the topic before spending the remainder of the unit on contemporary literary and visual texts that reimagine Russian space in some way. I have selected units to broadly reflect a variety of regional, ethnic, national, and environmental ways of viewing space, which I hope will correspond to a wide range of student interests and experiences. The four units that I have currently developed for this course include:

- A unit on Russian literary regionalism (as reflected through the Village Prose movement) of the 1960s and 70s as an environmentalist response to Soviet settler colonial models that privileged a center-periphery, extraction-based understanding of space. For the sake of time, I will focus on Siberia as a regional case study due to Siberia’s pioneering role in both the development of Russian literary regionalism and as an epicenter of Soviet environmental activism. However, I will make students aware of similar movements in other regions (the far North, western Russian provinces, etc.). I will also discuss the complicated relationship between Russian regionalist literature and Russian nationalist politics.
- A unit on Russophone literature by writers belonging to minority nationalities. Students will first learn about the history of Soviet nationalities policy as it applied to culture and the arts. Then, they will read two works by late-Soviet writers Chingiz Aitmatov (Kyrgyz) and Yuri Rytkheu (Chukchi) through the lens of Indigenous studies to understand how national writers during the late-Soviet period were working through questions of identity and the colonial gaze.
- A unit on post-Soviet war literature from Ukraine and the Caucasus. Students will read two Putin-era novels in dialogue with 19th-century romantic era texts about the regions to understand how Russian literature constructed discourse about empire and nation that we are still working through today.
- A unit on the “new Russian city,” which focuses on post-Soviet texts that reimagine urban space in various ways representative of the post-Soviet experience (urban migration, the dystopian decline of the Soviet industrial “monocity”, invisibility in the provinces, and class stratification in residential urban outskirts). Since I assume most students will have familiarity with the cultural significance of Moscow/Petersburg, we will not be reading any traditional “Moscow/Petersburg texts”. Instead, we will discuss these concepts in class in relation to the texts we read.

For each unit, texts will be paired with short, accessible theoretical readings in spatially-oriented disciplines such as cultural geography, phenomenology, Indigenous studies, and environmental studies, as well as articles by prominent scholarship in Russian literature and history. My aim is to give upper-level undergraduate students a firm grounding in discipline-specific literature as well as practice applying concepts from other disciplines to their original readings of cultural texts. I also plan to include structured activities that incorporate short excerpts from related primary texts such as historical documents, maps, and visual arts to give students hands-on, guided practice incorporating such sources into scholarly discussion of literature.

The first half of the course will culminate in a creative close reading assignment on mapping. Students will be asked to select a recurring concept or theme (such as gender, identity, emotions, water, etc.) from the texts we have discussed in class that they believe is important for

understanding space in a new or interesting way. They will then be asked to come up with a creative visual representation of how that space is mapped in two or more of the class readings, which they will explain in brief write-up of the project (citing quotes when appropriate). The write-up will include a personal reflection in which they think about their relationship to the text as a reader and how the process of reading closely has affected their own attitudes or ideas about the topic they have chosen, or about space/place more broadly. An acceptable visual representation could include a realistic drawing of a map/atlas, a video “tour” of a space, a collage, tags superimposed onto Google Earth or other GIS software, etc. The visuals and their explanations will be uploaded digitally into a class atlas to be shared with other students, while the personal reflections will remain private. The project is intended to be open-ended to play into the students’ strengths and interests and help them connect class concepts to their own lives and experiences. The students will be encouraged to draw on their findings and on their personal reflections for selecting a research project during the second half of the course.

During the second half of the course, students will complete scaffolded exercises to prepare for a final research paper, the findings for which they will present during the last week of class. Students will select a text, author, or set of historical documents (such as maps or travelogues) to focus on while considering the questions: how does this text construct the Russian-speaking world as a place? Is it responding to pre-existing ideas or trying to create something completely new? How does it convey these ideas/images to a reader and how might this help us understand space in a new way? After completing an in-class research workshop with a librarian, students will work with peer review groups who share similar interests to compose a research proposal, annotated bibliography, and outline for their paper. They will also be invited to an optional revision workshop during reading week, which I will plan during regular class time to allow as many students as possible to attend.

Finally, each student will be asked to serve as discussion leader for a class period of their choice, which they will select during the first week of class. The discussion leader will be asked to present one interesting paragraph-length passage from the primary reading for the day and three broader discussion questions (which can include secondary readings if there were any) to frame class discussion. They will also be asked to briefly research and present one significant reference to the outside world from the reading (with visuals if possible) and provide some general context/interpretation for its significance to the day’s discussion. This task is intended to help students learn to independently develop questions for critical inquiry and practice researching significant contexts and intertexts while they read.

My main objectives for students in the course are:

- 1) To broaden and complicate their understanding of the Russian-speaking world as an inhabited place, thinking beyond dominant models of center-periphery or ethnic Russian colonizer vs. colonized ethnic Other.
- 2) To deepen students’ understanding of how culture influences and is influenced by our perception of space and our surrounding environment and to sharpen their critical thinking and reading skills to understand how this applies to their own spatial relationships and experiences.
- 3) To develop analytical skills for understanding, synthesizing, and applying concepts from artistic, historical, and scholarly texts, in a variety of mediums and disciplines including critical theory.

- 4) To identify personally and professionally meaningful questions for scholarly inquiry to be answered through original, independent research.
- 5) To clearly articulate their ideas using a variety of written, verbal, and visual strategies through presentations, group collaboration, and creative/scholarly writing.

Part III: Design

Performance Objectives: In this course, learners will

- Broaden and complicate their understanding of the Russian-speaking world as an inhabited place and learn to think beyond dominant models and binaries such as center-periphery or ethnic Russian colonizer vs. colonized ethnic Other.
- Think critically about how arts and culture influence discourse about space and how this knowledge can be applied critically and creatively in their personal and professional lives.
- Learn how to apply concepts from within and outside of their discipline to better understand and explain their own original ideas and observations.
- Research and explain their findings verbally and visually through presentations and collaborations and in writing through formal essays and informal reflections/write-ups.

Learning Assessments

- Students will occasionally complete assignments that allow them to play a more active role in determining the direction of class discussions, including through group collaborations (eg. peer review and research workshops) and in the formal capacity as class discussion leader for one class period.
- Students will produce a creative mapping assignment to allow them to think about the relationship between text and space, the role space plays in their own lives, and how creative practice can be used as a tool for asserting/reclaiming agency and influencing cultural narratives.
- Students will complete a scaffolded research project that models best practices for conducting original research in the humanities, including identifying an initial research problem/question, drafting a research proposal, creating an annotated bibliography, outlining, drafting/revision, and a presentation of findings.

Strategies, Activities, Methods

- Reading and research best practices will be modeled throughout the semester via informal class activities (eg. reading excerpts from historical documents together or discussing research methodologies employed in a scholarly article we read for class) and formal class assignments (eg. guided, scaffolded research activities) in preparation for the final research project. Campus resources such as the library, the writing center, and office hours will be modeled for students through in-class visits and one-on-one check-ins with the instructor (usually completed in the hallway during peer review workshops). This will “hold students to high standards while offering them new intellectual challenges” while also providing enough structure and support for first generation students and dependent learners to gain agency and independence as learners (Hammond 19).
- Students will be given regular opportunities for self-reflection about both course content and their learning process through an open-ended class “journal” entries (a 10 minute

free-write to be completed once a week in which students reflect on class readings/discussions and/or their research process in the format of their choice. Formal assignments will also be designed to have an informal creative, personal and/or metacognitive component (culturally-responsive pedagogy).

- My assignments will be informed by equitable grading practices, designed to reward student growth and skills acquisition rather than to reward or punish a student for performance. In practice, this means that although I will be grading student writing using a letter grade system, I will create an environment in which they can succeed by balancing final paper grades with smaller in-class and homework assignments geared at skill-building, self-reflection (metacognition) and peer feedback, which will be graded primarily for completion. This will also allow students to receive multiple forms of feedback prior to submitting the final version of an assignment. In addition, I aim to supplement all paper grades with constructive feedback and incorporate flexible grading practices, such as revision/resubmission.

Alignment

Objective	Assessments	Strategies/Activities/Methods
Broaden and complicate their understanding of the Russian-speaking world as an inhabited place and learn to think beyond dominant models and binaries such as center-periphery or ethnic Russian colonizer vs. colonized ethnic Other.	Class discussion leader Creative mapping assignment	Class discussions, interdisciplinary readings, Anti-Oppressive Education, phenomenology-based reading/learning
Think critically about how arts and culture influence discourse about space and how this knowledge can be applied critically and creatively in their personal and professional lives.	Creative mapping assignment Class discussion leader Free-write warm-ups	Class discussions, self-reflection assignments, culturally-responsive pedagogy
Learn how to apply concepts from within and outside of their discipline to better understand and explain their own original ideas and observations.	Class readings Class discussion leader Research project	Class discussions, self-reflection assignments, scaffolded research project assignments, culturally responsive pedagogies
Students will complete a scaffolded research project	Research paper	Scaffolded assignments, self-reflection, peer review

that models best practices for conducting original research in the humanities...	Final presentation Scaffolded assignments (research proposal, annotated bibliography, etc.)	workshops, tours of campus resources, equitable grading practices.
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Grading

- Formal projects (research presentation, papers, class discussion leader) will be graded with a rubric and supplemented with written feedback.
- Most formal projects will have a self-reflection component so that students can learn about and inform me of their own learning practices.
- The research project grade will include scaffolded skill-building exercises, including peer review assessments.
- Smaller assignments will be graded for completion (baseline evidence of engagement with the assignment and its learning objectives).

Part IV: Development

Student Resources:

- Since this is ultimately a course about space, we will be thinking a lot about maps and cartography. Early in the course, students will learn how to search the rich collection of maps available in the public domain via digital library resources such as the Library of Congress, HathiTrust, World Digital Library, and the Russian National Library, as well as Google Earth.
- A repository of class resources, including mandatory class readings, optional recommended reading (organized by subject) and writing/research guides will be maintained on the class Learning Management Software (LMS, currently Canvas). Students will be encouraged to consult with resources there for various assignments.

Instructor Resources:

- The theoretical framework for this class is primarily inspired by scholarship in two major disciplines: cultural geography and Indigenous studies.
- Cultural geography: For geography topics that don't directly relate to my research (primarily focused on phenomenology and environmental humanities), I have consulted with *The Cultural Geography Reader* (ed. Patricia Price and Timothy Oakes, Routledge, 2008), an anthology of readings in various sub-fields of cultural geography including landscape, phenomenology, ecocriticism, etc. Occasionally I have selected short readings directly from this text, but more often, I've used it as inspiration to guide my research for the course.
- Indigenous studies: Mark Rifkin's *Beyond Settler Time*, Chadwick Allen's *Trans-Indigenous*, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* have provided inspiration for my theoretical approach to the class. All three scholars propose alternative methods for reading and researching Indigenous history and literature by decentering colonial theoretical and methodological frameworks and engaging

- Indigenous knowledge systems and phenomenological approaches to space and history
- My department has expressed support for this course. I also hope it will appeal to departments whose job listings emphasize an interest in candidates committed to diversity and inclusion in their pedagogical and research practices.
 - Since this course is about the relationship between literature, experience, and the spatial imagination, I don't anticipate any of the readings or topics to be highly controversial, since it is focused on helping students understand space from a variety of heterogeneous literary and theoretical perspectives rather than advocating for a singular perspective or worldview.

Part V: Implementation

Policies and Procedures

- Students are expected to follow the university code of conduct, including its guidelines on cheating and plagiarism. I generally link to the code of conduct on my course website and go over policies on plagiarism on the first day and throughout the research process.
- In order to make my course more accessible for first-generation students and other underrepresented groups, I try to explain and model class procedures, explaining common academic jargon and etiquette that they may encounter at the university or later on in their careers. For instance, I explain that "office hours" are also "student hours" – a time my office door is open for students. I also build informal one-on-one meetings into class time during the first few weeks of school so students can understand what office hours are like (and that they aren't threatening).
- I try to take a flexible approach to late work. Although late work gets penalized, I try not to be overly punitive in that penalty if the student has demonstrated learning in the assignment, and I excuse late work in most reasonable situations. I also offer reasonable extensions so long as the student gives me proper notice (barring emergency circumstances).
- I try to use equitable assessment practices whenever possible (see Part III).
- On my class LMS, I try to make my website accessible for a variety of learning styles and make my materials there as accessible as possible (OCRing PDF files, using proper contrast and readable fonts for powerpoints, etc.)

Logistical Considerations:

This syllabus was designed for a hypothetical classroom based on my own experiences teaching at a flagship public university and learning in seminar-style courses at an elite private SLAC. In both of those environments, upper-division seminars required 150-200 pages of reading per week – including theory. However, in the event that that format/workload is not appropriate for a given student body, it can be adapted: novel-length readings can be replaced with shorter works by the same writer (all have thematically-appropriate shorter works available in translation), theoretical readings can be excerpted and explained in class and individual units can be simplified to account for a shorter or tighter semester.

Part VI: Evaluation

- I will ask students to complete an anonymous, informal survey where they can answer open-ended questions about their experience thus far in the class. The survey will be conducted online to ensure confidentiality. Depending on student feedback and the degree of the changes implemented as a result of that survey, I may circulate another shorter survey at the end of the second month. I will also personalize the mandatory student evaluations that my university circulates to reflect my own values and concerns as an instructor.
- In addition, in order to maintain a community of trust, I generally do occasional informal one-on-one check-ins with students (conducted in the hall during peer review workshops) to see how they are feeling. While I acknowledge that not every student may feel comfortable sharing their experiences in this format, the aim is instead to provide them with a safe space in which they can get to know me as an instructor and to encourage them to see my office as a safe space.
- I generally keep my teaching notes organized in a Scrivener file along with my lesson plans, course research notes, and other planning documents. After each lesson, I usually file a brief note with the lesson plan reflecting how the class went, what seemed to work well and what didn't. I also offer suggestions to myself for how I might do something differently the next time.