Book Discussion

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Notes on Eternal Return

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Diana Kudaibergenova's study, *Rewriting the Nation in Modern Kazakh Literature*, takes an innovative social approach to the history of nation-building in Kazakhstan through a detailed analysis of the interrelationship of writers, narratives, and institutions. Beginning with pre-revolutionary intellectual circles and continuing through the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, Kudaibergenova situates the process of nation-building as a kind of eternal return, in which the twentieth century's shifting social and political dynamics led writers to engage in a constant re-evaluation of the past and a re-imagining of its significance to the nation's present and future. Each successive wave of Kazakh writers and nation-builders reassessed what came before, rethought what it meant to be a nation, and built new literary paradigms to fit a changing and often perilous social, political, and intellectual landscape. In this way, the development of Kazakh literature—and with it, Kazakh national identity—follows a trajectory similar to the movement of nomadic steppe dwellers: writers pack up and transport common narratives, genres, symbolic systems, memories, traditions, and linguistic and aesthetic features, each unpacking occurring in a different configuration, depending on the demands of the new environment and the creative vision of each individual within it.

These writers' attempts at telling and retelling the story of the Kazakh nation are not only the content of Kudaibergenova's study but the rhetorical structure of her argument. The book's chapters are organized chronologically, with each chapter focusing on an overarching "narrative" of the Kazakh nation as expressed by a single writer or group of writers as well as the afterlife of each narrative in the present day. Works of contemporary Kazakh(stani) artists are an additional rhetorical thread Kudaibergenova uses to bind these visions of

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the nation together. For example, the chapter "National Survival, Alash, and Modern Kazakh Literary Debates" is embellished with images from Syrlybek Bekbotaev's 2014 Red Filter series, which consists of digitally manipulated photographs of members of the Kazakh intelligentsia who fell victim to the Stalinist Great Terror. This visual content serves as a visceral reminder that literary nation-building was more than just a matter of competing imaginings—it was often quite literally a matter of life and death. Kudaibergenova's extensive interviews with surviving writers further solidifies this point, a methodology that lends insight into the intricacies of the creative process and draws attention to the personal, human toll of generations of political violence and oppression. Each chapter also features lengthy quoted passages from key works, translated from Kazakh into English (often for the very first time), which convincingly support the argument that the Kazakh national idea is the result of ongoing attempts to create narratives of cohesion and continuity in the face of constantly changing social and political constraints. Due to this remarkable variety of content, Kudaibergenova's study will be a useful resource for university instructors preparing courses on Central Asian literature and cultural studies as well as Soviet literature and history.

Naturally, any scholarly attempt to engage with such a broad, complex topic raises as many questions as it attempts to answer, and this volume has certainly opened the doors to new discussions about the role of literature in nation-building. One question that immediately comes to mind concerns the origins of the national idea among competing elite circles in the final years of the Russian Empire. Kudaibergenova asserts that "modernity and modernization became the guiding principles for Kazakh literature in the twentieth century" (Kudaibergenova 2017: 2) but also that "literature and its development became the focal point of modernization and the creation of the self" (5–6). I would be interested in a greater exploration of the forces underlying this mutually constitutive relationship at the onset. How did the first generation of Kazakh national elites come to occupy the positions of privilege that enabled them to engage in modernization and nationalist discourses? Did writers' proximity to Imperial—and later, Soviet—powers lead them to prioritize certain narratives or types of cultural content over others? Is elite discourse on the nation shaped or problematized by "bottom-up" or subaltern narratives, and if so, how has this relationship evolved in tandem with changing political circumstances?

This leads to another line of questioning about the internal diversity of the Kazakh experience and its reflection in literature. Kudaibergenova's closing chapter discusses the novelist and critic Gerold Belger (1934–2015), whose German ethnic heritage and close familiarity with both Kazakh and Russian cultures relegate him to a paradoxical position in the Kazakh literary canon: "I have lived in Kazakhstan for more than sixty years but I am not a native of

Kazakhstan even if I were to live here another sixty years," he writes in a passage quoted by Kudaibergenova (193). Yet at the same time, he declares that "Kazakh language, Kazakh culture, Kazakh mentality is my inescapable pain [...] I was filled with everything Kazakh since my childhood, Kazakh-ness entered my flesh and blood" (195). Belger's reflections on his own Kazakh-ness pinpoint the inherent difficulty in establishing a consistent and enduring national identity that resonates across a heterogeneous human landscape. Kudaibergenova deals with this issue in her analysis of Belger's 2002 novel, *Tuyuq Su*, which is set in a World War ii-era village populated by ethnic Kazakhs as well as an array of internal deportees: Poles, Chechens, Koreans, Crimeans, Uzbeks, and Germans. One central plot line follows the temporary adoption of a German boy by a neighboring Kazakh family and his subsequent alienation from his biological mother when she returns home from a labor camp. The implications are clear: when it comes to group identity and national cohesion, experience and imagination can accomplish what blood and soil cannot. At the same time, however, state power and institutions have the power to both make and break human bonds. This raises a further question: to what degree do the grand narratives of the Kazakh national idea bump up against unofficial counternarratives? How do these narratives simultaneously negotiate "top-down" ideologies of nationalism and multinationalism as well as informal, unexpected instances of "bottom-up" cultural fluidity, such as can be found in Belger's novel?

Kudaibergenova's book is an important contribution to the study of Kazakh literature and national identity. Her main argument about the dynamic nature of "the national consciousness and the national imagination" (210) seems especially relevant today, in an era of renewed blood-and-soil nationalism in cultural and political discourse throughout the world. For this reason, her work will be beneficial not only to scholars and students of Kazakh literature but to any reader interested in learning more about the perpetually unsettled relationship between identity, culture, and power.

A Scholarly Touchstone on Kazakh Literature

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Diana Kudaibergenova's *Rewriting the Nation in Modern Kazakh Literature* is the book I wish I could have read as a graduate student. Kudaibergenova's

account of the evolution of Kazakh literature in the 20th century spans from the poets and novelists of the Alash movement in the early 20th century, through the Soviet era, and on into the literature and art of independent Kazakhstan. In telling this tale, Kudaibergenova draws upon original readings of literary texts, extensive archival research, and her own interviews with many of the authors themselves. The book is likely to become a key text not just in the study of Kazakh literature but of the various literatures of Soviet Central Asia. Kudaibergenova's key concern is the ways in which succeeding generations of Kazakh authors used their poems, plays, essays, and novels to imagine and reimagine what it meant to be Kazakh and, thus, what form a "Kazakh literature" ought take. This debate entangled within itself both diverse literary inspirations—the authors discussed here drew upon (and recorded and transcribed) the enormous corpus of Kazak oral literature, were influenced by Russian literary models, and saw themselves as in dialogue with the anti-colonial literature of Africa—and the fraught political history of Kazakhstan during the Soviet era. Kudaibergenova begins with the writers of Alash before moving on in the second and third chapters to the varying ways in which writers such as Sabit Mukanov, Beimbet Mailin, and Saken Seifullin sought to craft a distinctly Soviet-Kazakh literature during the twenties and thirties. In Chapter 4, Kudaibergenova turns to the author and scholar who would become the canonical Kazakh literary intellectual of both Soviet and independent Kazakhstan, Mukhtar Auezov. Her discussion of Auezov's novel *Abai zholy* (the way of Abai) uses close reading of the text itself, archival records of contemporaneous debates, and criticism of Auezov's work to reveal how a text now most often read as a celebration and memorialization of 19th century Kazakh language and culture could also be read as proof that Auezov truly embraced a Soviet conception of literature. In 1934, Auezov's earlier play *Khan kene* (1924) was criticized as problematically nationalist; in 1939, Sabit Mukanov praising Auezov's play *Aiman-sholpan* with the words (as recorded by Kudaibergenova): "I am very happy to see you [now] among the Soviet writers;" with *Abai zholy*, the author was celebrated not just as turning to Soviet poetics but as carrying that style to a height previously unknown in Kazakh literature. The novel's eventual escape from this frame seems to reflect the difficulty of fitting what Kudaibergenova shows to be a notably complex and historically detailed text within a single
critical narrative.

After her discussion of Auezov, Kudaibergenova moves on to the literature of the postwar period, examining Ilyas Yessenberlin's series of historical novels in Chapter 5 and Mukhtar Magauin's exploration of the archive in Chapter 6. Chapter 7, "Internationalism, Post-Colonialism, and Kazakh Soviet Literature in the 1960s and 1980s," turns to the works of Marat Auezov, Anuar Alimzhanov,

and Satimzhan Sanbayev and traces the various ways in which these authors' works, in Kudaibergenova's words, exposed "their Otherness in the world where they were supposed to represent the triumph of the indigenous decolonized writers of the Soviet Union" (127). A notable virtue of this discussion is that it does not confine the analysis of Kazakh writers and their literary style to a story of the influence of Russian language literature but, rather, seeks to place them within a broader comparative history of postcolonial literature. In 1958, the first Asian-African Writers Conference was organized in Tashkent, with a series of subsequent conferences held in other Central Asian cities. Kudaibergenova describes the thoughts of a young Kazakh writer, Anuar Alimzhanov, as he travels by train to the Tashkent conference and shows how his later works explored resonances between the history of Kenya and of Kazakhstan. Alimzhanov's later novels and short stories took as their subjects everything from 19th century rebellions in Kazakhstan to the childhood of the Kenyan political leader (and first president of independent Kenya) Jomo Kenyatta. A key question for future scholarship will be the precise contours of this history of influence and inspiration: who from Africa and Asia attended these conferences, and to what extent did their works influence the literatures of Central Asia? The question is particularly intriguing given that writers from Africa were simultaneously crafting an anti-colonial literature that at times looked specifically towards the Soviet Union. In Kenya, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's formula for a decolonial literature included both a broadly socialist realist style and (eventually) a wholesale rejection of writing in the English language that was itself inspired by Marxist theory. The South African writer Alex la Guma not only looked towards the Soviet Union as a political model but even travelled to Soviet Central Asia in 1978, meeting some of the authors whose works Kudaibergenova analyzes.

A parallel question concerns the resonances between these writers and literature elsewhere within the Soviet Union. Kudaibergenova includes a long summary and analysis of Satimzhan Sanbayev's novella *Belaia Aruana*, in which Myrzgali, a Kazakh veteran of the Second World War, raises a white dromedary camel he has taken from his own homeland, the Mangystau plateau in south west Kazakhstan. The camel continually seeks to return to its lost homeland, refuses an attempt to breed her with a male Bactrian camel, is only induced to do so once blinded, and finally dies when, on a final flight to Mangystau, she attempts to jump over a half-remembered ravine and falls, "desperately moving her legs as though she was still running" (137). Kudaibergenova closes her analysis by noting the parallels with Chingiss Aitmatov's *I dolshe veka dlit- sia den'* (1980), a work that is itself often analyzed as emerging from the pan- Soviet genre of *Derevenskaia proza* (Village Prose). Like other writers of this

genre, Sanbayev's story of the blinded white dromedary's dream of Mangystau suggest Soviet modernity as a space that traumatizes and blinds, and he summons themes of nostalgia for a lost rural homeland; unlike other writers, he also seems to view this nostalgia as a potentially lethal fantasy. The white dromedary, after all, in the end dies because she leaps a ravine unaware of the gap between the dream Mangystau of her mind and the real ground beneath her feet. Sanbayev's novella thus suggests the ways in which broader surveys of late Soviet literature would be enriched by consideration of the works of Kazakh writers.

In her final three chapters, Kudaibergenova takes up the works of Olzhas Suleimenov, discusses the national imagination at work in the Zheltoqsan protests, and finally closes with a long and detailed analysis of a writer whom Kudaibergenova credits as her own mentor and guide through Kazakh literature, Gerold Belger. Collectively, the book when finished stands as both a detailed and fascinating story of the history of Kazakh literature in the 20th century, one likely to be a scholarly touchstone for years to come.

Modern Kazakh Literature in a Socio-Historical Context

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The book *Rewriting the Nation in Modern Kazakh Literature: Elites and Narratives* is a very timely reflection on what it has meant and means to be a Kazakh. As a Russian-speaking Kazakh who lives in the US, I went a long way to understand who I am: A Kazakh, A Russian, a Soviet, or a mixture of every era that my nation has experienced. I'm grateful to Dr. Kudaibergenova for providing me with a source through which to answer this and many other questions regarding my national identification.

Consisting of ten chapters, Dr. Kudaibergenova's book takes us through an insightful journey to understand how modern Kazakh literature was part of the nation-building process in Kazakhstan. Integrating theories of modernity, sociology of literature, and hermeneutics, she specifically focuses on Kazakh national narratives within the literary texts and their developments within the past two centuries (the twentieth and the twenty-first). Based on this solid analytical framework, she masterfully illustrates to us how national narratives were imagined and re-imaged by the leaders of Alash Orda, Kazakh writers

during Stalin's era, Kazakh authors during Soviet era (through the literary works of Auezov, Yessenberlin, Magaun), and the internationalization of the Kazakh literature in the sixties and eighties, finally bringing us up to modern time with the works of Suleimanov and Belger.

What makes this book stand out is that it has a chronological element and focuses on the major themes of Kazakh-ness, as (re-)imagined by the Kazakh elites. For instance, the theme or pattern of nationalistic narratives examined show the debates among the Alash leaders and *Aiqap* intellectuals regarding the modernization of the Kazakh nation and, thus, how Kazakh-ness came into an existence at the beginning of the twentieth century. Or, how the national narratives of overcoming nomadism as "backwards" prevailed after Stalin's regime killed the new Kazakh elites (i.e., Alash leadership). As a result, *Rewriting the Nation* allows us to fully understand how political processes, development of the literary genres, and national narratives are tightly intertwined by focusing on national literary narratives of Kazakh-ness. This well- thought-out perspective provides the reader with an opportunity to interpret the examined national narratives in connection to the major political and intellectual players of the historical time. Through her solid theoretical framework and excellently selected examples, Dr. Kudaibergenova skillfully shows the patterns national identification as imagined and re-imaged within literary texts, providing the readers with a systematic and comprehensive overview of the nation-building process over the past two centuries.

Uniquely, Dr. Kudaibergenova is able not only to focus on the literary texts but also brings to life the Kazakh authors who produced these texts, solidly situating them in their socio-historical context. I particularly appreciate this aspect; these brave thinkers who tirelessly searched for the Kazakh identity under the state dictatorship and censorship have become real people with real-world challenges. For example, the life trajectories of such great Kazakh thinkers as Mukhtar Auezov and Ilyas Yessenberlin are described in detail, illustrating the impact of their life experiences on the view of the Kazakh identity put forward in their literary masterpieces.

While indulging in reading this excellent analysis, a few reflecting thoughts occurred to me. In Chapter 7, the theme of internationalization (i.e., when the young Kazakh writers started finding commonalities with other colonized states in the world) is very insightful as it allows us to situate the postcolonial discovery of the Kazakh identity at a more global level. In this light, I wonder if similar, more global ties could be traced in the themes presented in the previous chapters. For instance, were Alash leaders influenced by the any foreign players such as the Europeans and US? Was there any possibility for the Kazakh elite connect with writers and thinkers from the Southern America or Africa during the bloody Stalin era?

As a sociolinguist who constantly works within the bottom-up approach, I was wondering if there might be some perspectives of everyday people included into the analysis. Do everyday people perceive the themes that Dr. Kudaibergenova created in a similar manner? Or, what about the modern social media and everyday Kazakhs? Do people draw on these national narratives (as these materials are getting more accessible in digital format) and do they view them in similar way as the author? In other words, I was wondering if there a way of inter- textually usage of the national narratives nowadays by reaching back to them.

To summarize, Dr. Kudaibergenova's book is a great guide for the wide audience interested in understanding how Kazakh writers, thinkers, activists, and their literary works played and are playing a tremendous role in shaping Kazakh identity. By combining several analytical methods, Dr. Kudaibergenova provides a solid analysis of the nation-building process through the examination of literary texts and biographies of the authors. Her work is an insightful and timely resource for scholars and students engaged with political sciences, literature, history, and sociology.

Timeless Nations: Power in the Steppe

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I am grateful to all three reviewers for their close reading and insightful comments on this book manuscript and to the editors of the *Central Asian Affairs* journal, Marlene Laruelle and Erica Marat, for providing this platform. All of these comments are neatly placed in my current research and publication plans and I am grateful for the questions and comments raised in these three reviews and for the opportunity to read them and expand on my ideas.

Rewriting the Nation was born out of questions about Time and Self in light of tremendous transformations in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries— in the world as a whole and in Eurasia specifically. I wanted to dedicate complex study to the processes of meaning-making, with further research agendas forming around the study of power and nationalism across the vast region of Eurasia and beyond my native Kazakhstan. Often, it is difficult to frame or announce the bigger picture in which each of your publications is a piece of the puzzle. I am happy, therefore, that in many ways, *Rewriting the Nation* was able to provide a direction to my further exploration in the study of power and

nationalism, meaning-making, and analysis of institutions, elites, narratives, and selfhoods.

The question of Time is key in these further explorations of the power of identity and the power to identify, construct, and reconstruct meaning. In my overall work, I'm aware of my focus on grand narratives and the mechanisms of elites' decision-making in the production of meaning over time and often by the means of nationalist narratives. The question of who decides upon the dominant discourse prior to its normalization in the wider public is key to my overall research and theoretical agenda. This focus is intentional, first dissecting the power field—following decision-making process, elites' inevitable competition against each other, and competing discourses—and then its dominance over other meaning-making spheres and actors. Only then do I transfer focus to non-political actors and their counter-narratives. *Rewriting the Nation* aimed to discuss this mechanism of meaning-making through examples of nationalistic narratives in literature, written both by politically engaged writers (Sabit Mukanov) and those who remained "outside" the political decision-making circle even after independence (the post-Soviet writings of Mukhtar Magauin, Gerold Belger, and Murat Auezov), though they were invited to be part of the symbolic cultural elite.

I strongly believe that culture is not only inseparable from political discussions, it actively forms it; culture is everywhere, and its influence is both inescapable and all-pervasive. It was my aim to bring out different dimensions of understanding regarding where narratives about nations come from and to analyze the identity of the "writers" of these narratives. In doing so, I was selective of nationalistic narratives and their authors, and, as I write in the preface to the book, my aim was not to make a comprehensive list of Kazakh literary works. The aim of *Rewriting the Nation* and my overall research was to focus on the revealing effects of modernity that overlapped with nationalism, which then influenced every generation of cultural elites and writers of the nation in their aspirations to make their nation greater, older, and grander.

My sociological interest in exploring historical texts stemmed from the methodological necessity of using depth-hermeneutics to explain the complex contexts of the periods and the writer's own positions in a given system as well as the outcome of their work despite systematic challenges. Time spent in literary archives proved fruitful in expanding my own understanding of Time itself—an aspect of my research that I am interested in exploring further in my social theory work. Thus, I hope I was able to demonstrate how diverse texts, methods, archives, and textualities can be used across disciplines to foster further complex debates on these issues.

Rewriting the Nation opened up grand venues for my research agenda. As noted above by Gabriel McGuire, there is a great space for exploring literary

genealogies and the transfer from traditional oral literature to written literature through examination of different literary traditions and the accommodation of oral literature within genres of novel or even opera. These explorations were significant in the 1930s across the whole Eurasian space, and a comparative study of these transformations in Tajik, Uzbek, Kazakh, or Caucasian fields of cultural production would be a great addition to the growing fields of comparative literature, cultural studies, and history. I also find McGuire's comment on anti-colonial literature to indicate an interesting direction for further exploration of dialogues among Asian, African, and Eurasian writers and artists, which are, in some way, still ongoing. I am intrigued by a possible comparison of post-Lenin memorization in contemporary art work in Uganda to the artistic explorations of the Soviet past in Kazakhstan's art field, currently preoccupied with Stalinist traumas and the obsessions of Tashkent's and Dushanbe's flee market dealers, who lament the fact that most of old Lenin's busts sold out in the 1990s. In this rhetoric, which is driven by the co-existing relation of aesthetic exploration and marketization, Lenin often reads as a remnant of the colonial rather than anti-colonial era.

Thus, the discussion that started off seventy years ago between African, Asian, and Eurasian cultural elites in the heart of Tashkent continues in a different paradigm, where Angolan artists' works on Lenin and anti-colonial fervor are placed closely beside the works of Lithuanian artists exploring the KGB's legacy in 1950s Lithuanian villages (as shown in a recent Swedish exhibition on Memory and Trauma, for example). So, my question, stemming from further research in this field of contemporary meaning-making, is guided by explorations of these intercultural dialogues and inspirations, as Gabriel McGuire writes.

Right now, in my current fieldwork, I am particularly interested in dissecting the power discourse from below by focusing on "responses" from non-political actors and elites, even in spaces where civil society is weak or absent. In these contexts, alternative voices and discussions come through unconventional and often unexpected performances, exhibitions, artist's studios, and the breaking of old networks and adaptation of the new ones, including digitalization and social media in Kazakhstan (as raised by Aisulu Kulbayeva in her review). Focusing on in-depth narrative interviews, hours-long discussions, and participant observations of this new, non-conformist public sphere across Eurasia, I am particularly interested in studying the complex dimensions and networks of meaning-making and contesting power paradigms in the imaginations of post-Soviet citizens of these new states and old nations.

Digital access to literary texts, as rightly pointed out by Kulbayeva, creates proximity to cultural knowledge and is often performed transnationally. I

myself accessed numerous digital libraries in my search for original literary texts while away from Kazakhstan and continuously do so even now,[1] though it is a pity that many more literary works have to await further digitalization and scanning. However, adding audience responses to nationalistic narratives in *Rewriting the Nation* would have made it into a different book—one that I did not intend to write yet. Exploring the question of whether "people draw on these national narratives," as posed by Aisulu Kulbayeva, would create a dis- tinct argument for categorizing and placing vast audiences into different time periods, perceptions, contexts, and memorization. I can reveal that many of these discussions emerged during my fieldwork and even after the publication of the book, and I did reach out to different people in various forms of re- search. To mention the most common response, *Abai Zholy* by Mukhtar Auezov was cited by many respondents in Kazakhstan as the key text in Kazakh literature comparable to Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and was described as a source of knowledge about Kazakh culture and language. In contemporary literary contexts, the discussion about the dominant language in which each text is read is inescapable; there is a division between Russophone and Kazakhophone readers where, for the latter, Mukhtar Magauin and Mukhtar Shakhanov remain not only popular contemporary writers but also strong points of references for the discussion of political debates, especially concerning the nationalist-patriot agenda and the role of Kazakh language. As I hinted earlier, my current research deals in great detail with reflexivity and subjectivity, which will hopefully allow me to form this complex picture of power relations, Time, meaning producers, and society in my upcoming works.

Further, Naomi Caffee's review posits important questions about the forces that initially brought these writers of the nation, discussed in the book, to the position of power and privilege from which they created these discourses. Indeed, the power of meaning-making in this case belongs to elites, both pre-Soviet and Soviet. From fathers of the nation Akhmet Baitursynov and Alikhan

1 In two of my most recent publications, I focused on the digital aspect of recreating powerful discourses about the nation. My chapter, "Mankurts, Kazakh 'Russians' and 'Shala' Kazakhs: Language, National Identity, and Ethnicity Revisited," in *The Nazarbayev Generation*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Lexington Books, 2019) focuses on the dystopian, online novel *Mankurtstan*, Kuanysh Bazargaliev's contemporary art works *When All People were Kazakhian*, and Gulnur Mukazhanova's art series *Mankurts in the City*, all of which are widely avail- able online in digital repositories. Likewise, in my most recent article, "The body global and the body traditional: A digital ethnography of Instagram and nationalism in Kazakhstan and Russia," *Central Asian Survey 38*(3), 363–380, I discuss further methodological applications of digital narratives as sources of greater power and online mobilization of discourses of nation-ness and shame.

Bokeikhanov, the leaders of the Alash movement,2 to the Soviet cultural elites who managed to "forget" the Alash movement almost until the end of perestroika, these are national elites. However, their proximity to power was not *per se* the only decisive element in making them the elites. Perhaps what is missing in my narration in the beginning of the book is an exploration of the complex networks of educators, enlighteners, publishers, and innovators. Edu- cation played an important role in shaping these men of *belles lettres*. Alash movement members propagated education and enlightenment in their literary works (the focus of *Rewriting the Nation*, Chapter 1), in their academic and scientific oeuvre (which continues to influence certain means of knowledge production in the Kazakhophone sphere), and through their political engagement (notwithstanding the publication of important newspapers). Historians produced many important contributions to the study of this period, among them the work of local historians Dina Amanzholova, Gulnara Kendirbay, Peter Rottier, and others. Making the cover of *Rewriting the Nation* the distorted image of the Alash movement leaders was a message to today's Kazakhstan: there is still a need for a sufficient study on Alash beyond turning them into symbols of post-independent propaganda and posters.

Coming back to Caffee's question about the proximity to power, there are parts of *Rewriting the Nation* where such proximity is discussed contextually. Networks played an important role in establishing certain writers' careers and, most importantly, in pushing publication of certain texts forward. I went through a great number of archival pages containing writers' discussions about publishing and translations plans in which top editors or top writers in the hierarchy of the Writers' Union of Kazakhstan and the USSR sustained significant powers. This was particularly the case in the period between 1936 and the early 1950s, the period of heightened Stalinist terror and the rise of loyal Soviet writers who produced countless, faceless texts on coal production, sent for "fieldwork" to the industrial sites and railroad construction sites to write about the glory of the Soviet modernization project. Many of these archival pages contain criticism and citations from denunciation letters when certain writers rejected the idea of writing about the railroad. Some even debauched while in the field, which, of course, invited severe consequences. I tried to depict this time as the period of machines because, contextually, it read just like that. The system of the Writers' Union at that time was like a machine that kept on producing more and more "industrial writers," most of whom did not

2 whose depiction by Kazakhstan's leading contemporary artist, Syrlybek Bekboyaev, I chose for the cover of the book (minus the third original member of the photo—writer Myrzhakyp Dulatov).

remain in the golden collection of Kazakh literature. As a machine, it kept on reforming and deforming those who did not obey to behave accordingly. Names of yesterday's heroes and those whose "proximity to power" allowed them to build the initial form of the Writers' Union were disappearing from the newspaper pages and from the notes of the Union's meetings and writers' discussions overnight. Instead of repeating the names of repressed—an act that was highly condemned—the survivors of the regime called them collectively "the betrayers of the nation," though this same nation was described vaguely and amorphously at the time. The situation, however, changed after Stalin's death and the thaw that followed. The content of literary work from that time was still guided by the Soviet framework of socialist realism and, in many more cases, by propaganda, but there was also a narrow space for alternative dis- courses that eventually became the popular nationalistic narratives I analyzedin *Rewriting the Nation*.

The question pops in again and again about "bottom-up" narratives in the elite discourse about the nation. Most of the writers I surveyed in *Rewriting the Nation* often cited the necessity to write for the nation and for the people of that nation—the ordinary folk—forming sentiments of what Aisulu Kulbayeva described in her review as "what it has meant and means to be a Kazakh." Some of these writers, Yessenberlin and Magauin in particular, managed to achieve "changing political circumstances" even during the Soviet period, expanding the space for heritage and historical imagination about the Kazakh nation.

Finally, the point on counter-narratives and the states and sorts of "bottom- up" perspectives mentioned by Naomi Caffee in relation to Gerold Belger's novel brings me back to my own ongoing research on post-Soviet power relations defining nations from above (elites and the nationalizing regimes) and contesting these from below. There is a constant contestation of power in making meaning and defining the nation, the citizen, and who the citizen is not. In post-Soviet period, for example, political elites appropriated national discourses, taking the discourse away from both the cultural producers and the widely defined "society." These political elites form coalitions based on dominant dis- cursive networks and frame the ideational regime that keeps them in power in both democratic and non-democratic contexts. I develop this argument further in my forthcoming book from Pittsburgh University Press, *Toward Nationalizing Regimes* (coming 2020), where I study the rise of nationalism in Latvia and Kazakhstan after 1991, specifically choosing these divergent cases of accommodating the so-called Russian-speaking minorities after the collapse of the Soviet Union. To this idea and the tension rightly pointed out by Naomi Caffee in her discussion, I combine the vast canvas of power relations by

developing this argument in every publication, where my most recent work deals with the new non-conformist public sphere across Eurasia formed by new cultural producers who defy the post-Soviet state and its nationalizing regimes.3 The short answer is this: there are dominant discourses propagated by the nationalizing regimes and political elites through the means of the states' institutionalized power web where there is a possibility for alternative discourse to form a counter-narrative and counter-space, as long as there is a stronger community and/or a defined movement of like-minded non-conformists to support it. Following *Rewriting the Nation* (2017) and *Toward Nationalizing Regimes* (2020), where both manuscripts largely focus on the tension between dominant and dominated, I am preparing an expanded and a detailed explanation of what allows the dominated groups to break through the powerful networks and institutionalization of meaning, not from above but from below.

To conclude, I want to once again thank Aisulu Kulbayeva, Gabriel McGuire, and Naomi Caffee for their comments, which precisely point out to the questions I am currently analyzing and writing about. I am grateful to all three of them for providing good "food for thought" and insightful questions. My overall exploration is interdisciplinary as much as my sources are diverse, and I hope the manuscript finds its audiences and readers. There is a great space for further research in this area for historians, literary scholars, anthropologists, cultural studies scholars, feminist scholars, and those who are, like me, social theorists in the making.

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3 Please see Diana T. Kudaibergenova, "Punk shamanism, revolt and break-up of traditional linkage: The waves of cultural production in post-Soviet Kazakhstan," *European Journal of Cultural Studies 21*(4), 435–451.