


On the Threshold of Eurasia: Revolutionary Poetics in the Caucasus. Leah Feldman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018). Pp. 176. \$63.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9781501726507

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On the Threshold of Eurasia: Revolutionary Poetics in the Caucasus not only challenges the disciplinary boundaries so many scholars take for granted; it also offers a new theory for understanding cultural and political entanglements in the Caucasus, a region too often dismissed as peripheral from the perspective of 20th-century area studies. It has much to offer students of Islamic/Turkist modernist and Eurasian cultures both within and beyond the Russian Empire, and scholars of colonial and postcolonial culture more broadly.

The book brings to Eurasian studies a rare theoretical sophistication. In dialogue with a range of postcolonial and comparative literary theory, Feldman frames Caucasus revolutionary culture in terms of Bakhtin's chronotope of the threshold. As a chronotope, or time-space, the threshold describes both a transitional temporal moment and a liminal geographical space. The theory of the chronotope enables Feldman to engage a range of Caucasus cultural production across time (the scope of the book is, in reality, much broader than the 1905–29 moment she takes as her focus), and to encompass an archive of texts produced across the Russian Empire and in multiple Eurasian languages. More than expanding “coverage,” however, Feldman's focus on the threshold enables her to formulate a novel method for reading literature from imperial borderlands in Eurasia and beyond. This approach is refreshing, particularly in its refusal to project contemporary nationalisms onto the past, or to abide by borders that had little purchase for the intellectuals at the heart of Feldman's project. Feldman lays emphasis not on *national* literary histories, but on *supranational* encounters.

Temporally, the threshold conveys the transitional status of the period between 1905 and 1929 in the Caucasus and elsewhere in Eurasia. Bookended by the triple revolutions in Iran (1905), Russia (1905), and the Ottoman Empire (1908) and the Stalin revolution of the late 1920s, the intervening years were a kind of threshold, a moment of modernization and modernity, and also, in the Russian-governed portion of the Caucasus, a moment of transition (*translatio imperii*) between two forms of empire: the tsarist and the Soviet. Through her readings of modernist poetry in Azeri Turkish and in Russian (ch. 3–4), Feldman demonstrates how writers in the Caucasus dared to imagine a revolutionary new anti-imperial order, and how that revolutionary discourse paradoxically helped to consolidate Soviet colonialism in the region. This argument brings nuance to our understanding of the tension between Soviet official anti-imperialism and the ongoing reality of Eurasian empire.

The figure of the threshold also facilitates the remarkable interdisciplinary scope of *On the Threshold of Eurasia*. For Feldman, the threshold refers to both “an aesthetic topos and a social praxis.” As an aesthetic topos, the threshold takes shape in Feldman's analysis through close readings. In a series of chapters focused on Russophone and Azeri-language literature, Feldman sensitively analyzes works in a range of genres, from parodic prose (ch. 1) to romantic poetry (ch. 2). The first chapter, for example, examines how Azeri writers translated Russophone Ukrainian writer Gogol's parodic mode nearly a century after his death. For Feldman, temporal precedence does not imply intellectual or aesthetic superiority. Instead, in dialogue with a range of translation theorists, Feldman shows how Azeri writers reappropriated and reinterpreted Gogolian satire in entirely innovative ways. In adopting the poetics of Gogol, thinker Celil Memmedquluzadeh forged a novel vision of Muslim (anti-)



imperial identity in the revolutionary moment. Perhaps the most fascinating example deals with the reappropriation of Russian Orthodox sobornost in terms of Shi'i passion plays, or *ta'ziya*. The analysis enables Feldman to show how Azeri writers created a kind of secular messianic discourse through revolutionary theater.

Close reading is at the heart of *On the Threshold of Eurasia*, but the book goes beyond literary analysis. The figure of the threshold also organizes Feldman's examination of the social lives of cultural production in the region. The most focused discussion comes in Chapters 3 and 4, which examine early Soviet literary institutions in Transcaucasia alongside their poetic production. Special attention is given to BakKavRosta (an early Baku-based propaganda division, staffed by leading lights of the Russian avant-garde), the Red Pens (an Azeri literary collective), and the Narkompros (the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment that supervised both these institutions). These institutions facilitated "literary encounters between Moscow and Baku," and, as Feldman discusses in Chapter 4, they also offered venues for Nazım Hikmet's early encounters with the Russian avant-garde. Aptly selected illustrations, including images of revolutionary Azeri publications and a fascinating photograph of Vladimir Mayakovsky with the Red Pens, amplify Feldman's analytical claims.

Although Feldman stresses the threshold as a space of encounter, she avoids romanticizing that encounter. She pushes back specifically against a strain of Western scholars who see the ostensibly anti-imperial Soviet culture as a model of inclusivity (22). To the contrary: Feldman stresses that literary encounters in the Caucasus were "reciprocal, though unequal," and that they reinscribed empire as much as they resisted it. This is a welcome move. Still, from the vantage point of mid-2022, at times one wishes the book were more direct about the precise nature of individuals' relationship to Russian empire and Soviet coloniality. In Feldman's analysis, Mayakovsky and Memmedquluzade both represent "heterodoxy and heterology," and their different positions within imperial hierarchies are at times occluded: another reader might interpret Mayakovsky and Pushkin as colonial ideologues and Memmedquluzade as an intermediary. Still, her willingness to rest in complexity, and to resist an overly rosy view of Soviet anti-imperialism, is to her credit.

The example of Nazım Hikmet, appearing at the end of *On the Threshold of Eurasia*, demonstrates the broad potential impact of Feldman's story. The Caucasus, after all, was situated at the threshold of at least three land empires: the Ottoman, the Iranian, and the Russian. I found myself thirsting for a more extensive discussion of how the Caucasus threshold connected to other Eurasian Muslim thresholds – in Crimea, for example, or in Central Asia, which also hosted a chapter of the Red Pens. A more robust engagement with other Eurasian thresholds in the Russian Empire, or with Persian and Ottoman Turkish culture (let alone Armenian, Kurdish, etc.) would likely go beyond the scope of a single monograph. But Feldman's sensitive, linguistically and historically informed analysis of the binary axis of Azeri and Russian should inspire scholars of intellectual, cultural, and literary history far beyond the Russian Empire and Soviet Union.

On the Threshold of Eurasia is sure to spur productive discussions on culture and empire in many a graduate seminar, and will provide theoretical grist to historians and literary scholars in a range of areas. I recommend the book enthusiastically to scholars, graduate students, and advanced undergraduates in comparative literature, Eurasian studies, and modern Middle East studies broadly construed.

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