

MARIA HRISTOVA

Imagining My Country: Pilgrimage as Postcolonial Reassessment of National Identity in Contemporary Russian Domestic Travel Writing

Maria Hristova — DePauw University (USA). mariahristova@depauw.edu

This article examines Irina Bogatyreva's novella Off the Beaten Track (2008) through the prism of postcolonial theory, highlighting the specific ways in which an author can use religious elements, such as pilgrimage, to resist the totalizing ethnic or socioeconomic narratives imposed from the cultural and political centers of the Russian Federation. The incorporation of Orthodox, Soviet and pagan elements into the text allows Bogatyreva to question and critique the established worldview and to postulate an alternative identity model based on an opposition to the metropolis.

Keywords: Neo-paganism, postcolonialism, Orthodoxy, Irina Bogatyreva, travel writing, pilgrimage, religious revival, national identity, nature.

ON June 30, 2013, President Vladimir Putin signed a bill aiming to “protect the religious feelings of believers in the public sphere.” Following the controversial Pussy Riot case, this bill caused a heated debate in Western media (Elder 2013). While it is not unusual to take steps to protect the rights of believers, as attested by similar laws in the UK, Germany, Finland, and Israel, the timing of Russia’s “anti-blasphe-my” law’s ratification points to a convergence of political concerns about antiestablishment sentiments and cultural anxieties about the role of the Orthodox Church in Russian society.

The increased visibility of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the use of Orthodox values and of religious language in policymaking are the most visible Russian manifestations of the worldwide resurgence of all kinds of belief systems. As Dmitry Uzlaner argues in “The Pussy Riot Case and the Peculiarities of Russian Post-Secularism,” this seeming intrusion of the religious sphere into the secular one is characteristic of the post-secular period and, particularly in Russia, is defined by fragmented and competing ideologies: the “pro-authori-

ty” and the “oppositional” models (Uzlaner 2014: 29). While the Pussy Riot case highlighted the potential of the “pro-authority” model to employ the language and ideas of Orthodoxy as a tool to suppress political and religious dissent, the increased visibility of religion has also been a powerful force in presenting ways of negotiating the boundaries between the secular and the sacred that offer a more inclusive vision for Russian history and society. Within the wider circle of works that explore the potential of faith, whether linked to Orthodoxy or to some alternative system of beliefs, to bring together disparate social groups, religious traditions, and historical narratives, religious travel — essentially modern pilgrimage — has emerged as a significant social and literary phenomenon. In this article, I use the recurrence of the pilgrimage motif in contemporary Russian culture to discuss how the heightened visibility of religion in its many forms creates new venues and tools for cultural producers to examine, debunk, and reassess what it means to be Russian in the 21st century. As a starting point for my theoretical frame of reference I employ Alexander Etkind’s and Indira Karamcheti’s interpretations of postcolonial theories. As my case study, I use Irina Bogatyreva’s novella *Off the Beaten Track* (2008) to examine the specific ways in which an author can use the pilgrimage motif to resist the totalizing ethnic or socioeconomic narratives imposed from the cultural and political centers of the Russian Federation. The incorporation of Orthodox, Soviet and pagan elements into the text allows Bogatyreva to question and critique the established worldview and to postulate an alternative identity model based on an opposition to the metropolis. Furthermore, the melding together of unrelated religious traditions symbolically bridges the gap between the Slavic colonizers and indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation, on the one hand, and official imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet historical narratives, on the other.

Religious Revival

The contemporary quest for enlightenment in Russian society is for the most part framed by the Orthodox Christian tradition. This is attested by a number of recent books and films that explore religious and/or anticlerical motifs, such as Elena Kolyadina’s controversial 2010 Booker Award–winning novel *The Flower Cross* (*Tsvetochnyi krest*, 2010); as well as Andrey Zvyagintsev’s Oscar-nominated *Leviathan* (*Leviatan*, 2014); Aleksei Balabanov’s last film, *Me Too* (*Ia Tozhe Khochu*, 2012); and Aleksei Fedorchenko’s *Silent Souls* (*Ovsyanki*,

2010), to name only a few. The heightened awareness of and interest in religious ideas and practices falls within the larger worldwide religious revival of the past several decades, sometimes studied under the rubric of post-secularism, that has been extensively documented and debated since the events of September 11, 2001.¹ While scholarly interest has been disproportionately focused on Islam, this global trend, however, is not limited to one geographical region or religious tradition. What is more, the growing visibility and popularity of religious practices in Russia is not limited to the ROC; rather, the increasing influence of the ROC is part of a religious renaissance in which Orthodoxy plays a focal role, but which simultaneously engages with and incorporates a number of other contemporary discourses that are a fundamental part of the post-Soviet experience: a renewed appreciation for nature, a preoccupation with ecological issues and an increased interest in the pre-Slavic and premodern past. Alongside the “traditional” Russian religions of Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, there are thus a significant number of Christian sects and local neo-pagan groups.²

Postcolonialism and Neo-Paganism³

How exactly does religion, in this case both Orthodoxy and Neo-Paganism, fit within a postcolonial and post-secularist discussion of present-day Russian culture? To answer this question, I use the post-colonialist works of Indira Karamcheti and Alexander Etkind as a framework to examine Bogatyreva’s travel account. Much has been

1. See, for example, Juergensmeyer (2003), Saha (2004), Delong-Bas (2004), and Hegghammer (2010).
2. For a detailed discussion of a particularly striking example of contemporary Russian Neo-Paganism, see Golovneva and Shmidt’s article, “Religious Conversion, Utopia and Sacred Space (Okunevo Village in Western Siberia)” (2015).
3. The term Neo-Paganism emerged in the late nineteenth century in Britain and was used to distinguish modern practices from ancient pagan ones (Hutton 1999: 28–29). It was made valent in the United States in the twentieth century as an umbrella term to designate emerging religious movements based on modern interpretations of pre-Christian polytheistic beliefs (Magliocco 2004: 4). The cultural parallels and exchanges between Western Europe and the Russian Empire in the 18th and 19th centuries allow for the adaptation of Western scholarship on Euro-American Neo-Paganism to the examination of similar phenomena in the Russian Federation at present. The main difference in the post-Soviet neo-pagan practices is that the pre-Christian traditions used as the basis of the neo-pagan mythology and rituals are those of the ancient Slavic, Finno-Ugric, Turkic-Mongol, or Scythian peoples who inhabited the Eurasian lands in the premodern period.

written on postcolonialism and postcolonial literature in English-language scholarship; a detailed discussion of the topic falls outside the scope of this article. Much less work, however, has been done to adapt postcolonial ideas to the Russian and Soviet contexts. One of the works that attempt such an adaptation is Alexander Etkind's *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (2011), in which the author argues that Imperial Russia was engaged simultaneously in a dual process of internal and external colonization.⁴ Extending Etkind's argument to the contemporary period and taking post-Soviet Russia as a type of empire, characterized by an ethnically Russocentric Slavic Orthodox ideal, leads to the conclusion that a similar dual process would be taking place at present. In other words, a Russian Slavic identity based on a male-centered Orthodox cultural tradition overshadows not only ethnic or cultural minorities within the territories of the Federation, but is also presented as a model for the majority. The outcome of the Pussy Riot case and the subsequent bill protecting the feelings of believers could be interpreted as an example of this dual process of colonization.⁵

To understand how Bogatyreva fits in a postcolonial discussion of contemporary Russian literature, I use Indira Karamcheti's article, "The Geographics of Marginality: Place and Textuality in Simone Schwarz-Bart and Anita Desai," as a model to approach women's travel writing within the context of a Westernized or Europeanized patriarchal culture. Karamcheti uses as her point of departure the idea that anti-imperialism is about "an imaginative recovery of a 'local place'" (Karamcheti 1994: 12).⁶ She examines the limited and marginalized experience of Third World women writers from former colonies. Karamcheti analyzes how these authors find ways to engage with and subvert the preexisting imagined geographies that "oppose European

4. Etkind uses Vasily Kliuchevsky's formula to describe the Russian Empire as "a country that colonizes itself. The space of this colonization widened along with the territory of the state" (Etkind 2011: 2). In other words, intellectuals and administrators in the capital imposed visions of an ethnonational Russian identity, and, later, during the Soviet Union, a supranational one, both on the non-Slavic subjects, and on the general ethnic Slavic population. As a result of this dual process of colonization, the line between travels abroad and travels within would naturally become somewhat blurred when dealing with Russian accounts of journeys through the countryside.
5. For a discussion of the largely post-factum definition of what it means to be an Orthodox believer, see Uzlaner (2014).
6. Karamcheti uses Edward Said's idea that "imperialism after all is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control. (...) Because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, the land is recoverable at first only through imagination" (Said 1993: 77).

centrality to Third World marginality, and a male center to a female periphery” (Karamcheti 1994: 144). The writers she examines shift the balance of power through a new hierarchy of geography: they establish the center of meaning in what previously would have been a forgotten or overlooked place on the imperial map.

Karamcheti’s analysis of geography’s role both in “reclaiming” a local place and in affirming an identity opposed to an imperial worldview can be adapted to help interpret Bogatyreva’s travel account. *Off the Beaten Track* also succeeds in challenging the established imagined geography of the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. The traveler or present-day pilgrim in the narrative posits a new and unorthodox center of meaning outside the urban, intellectual, and Westernized capital. The main difference between Bogatyreva’s story and the texts analyzed by Karamcheti is that the Soviet and post-Soviet experiences differ from Western ones, especially in terms of gender relations: in 1930 Stalin declared the “woman question” resolved, notwithstanding the realities on the ground (Rappaport 1999: 314). Officially, women no longer identified with domestic spaces and chores and their traditional roles were taken over by the state in the form of cafeterias, kindergartens, and laundry centers. This partially explains why, while the female protagonists in Karamcheti’s case studies remain stationary, never leaving the domestic space, Bogatyreva’s narrator, on the contrary, travels out and away from the male-dominated center to a periphery where she can reclaim a different type of space — nature — and come into her own.

The process of reimagining the periphery is, in fact, a physical rediscovery of unexplored, “wild” places unknown to the inhabitants of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Travel grants freedom from the urban status quo and allows for self-discovery and enlightenment in a manner unacceptable to the rationalistic dominant culture — through a neo-pagan reshaping of Orthodox tropes. In this way, the intersection of geography and religion becomes the conduit for the irrational or fantastic and a tool in questioning the established worldview. However, this act of leaving the center is paradoxically problematic. The shift of focus away from the capital draws attention to the “local places” and grants freedom of expression to the female narrator; however, it does so from a one-sided perspective, which leaves no room for local voices. Religious travel symbolically brings back what could be considered the “colonies” (Central Asia, the Far North, and the Far East) into the fold of the dominant Russo-centric imagination.

“Rediscovering” Russia through Travel

Irina Bogatyreva is a native of Kazan and a laureate of the Debut Prize for young authors for *Off the Beaten Track*. Since receiving the award, she has pursued a writing career, publishing several more works, including a historical-magical trilogy about the Altai Scythians, *Kadyn* (2015). Bogatyreva’s status as a promising young writer has been asserted by her participation in the anthology *The Red Arrow* (*Krasnaia strela* 2013), commissioned by *Snob* magazine and comprising works by such eminent writers as Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, Tatyana Tolstaya, Alexander Genis, Zahar Prilepin, and Olga Slavnikova.

Off the Beaten Track is Bogatyreva’s first work that explores the theme of a Russian pre-Slavic and pre-Christian past. It is a highly fictionalized autobiographical retelling of the author’s own adventures while hitchhiking to the Altai Mountains. The novella comprises several separate, but related, stories revolving around the protagonist and narrator, nicknamed Tisch (*Melkaya*), who lives in a communal apartment on Yakimanka Boulevard in Moscow, and her adventures hitchhiking with some of the other inhabitants of the commune. The main goal and reward in embarking on a hitchhiking pilgrimage to faraway sacred sites is to leave the habitual life behind and to acquire a new, more enlightened perspective on human existence. This is the premise for the central episode in the novella, which details Tisch’s trip to the Altai Mountains in search of the Enchanted Lake, where travelers are granted a moment of spiritual clarity. What is unusual in Bogatyreva’s narrative is the unique blend of realistic accounts of the contemporary Russian countryside, as well as the practical matters of hitchhiking, combined with magical elements, such as visions of imps and shamans. In fact, the writer successfully brings together the seemingly contradictory traditions of socialist imagery, Christian symbolism, and Russian and indigenous folklore.

The blending of the realistic and the fantastical in the travelogue serves to undermine “commonsense” understandings of life. The falsity of what mainstream society takes for granted in the city is revealed on the road. According to the narrator, “all the values that seemed self-evident in cities, after just two months on the road ceased to be meaningful (...) I could see how they could all be arranged like links in a chain, explaining one thing by another. (...) Where was the ultimate goal?” (Bogatyreva 2008: 212). In other words, the logical, causal, and chronological understanding of life, accepted as a given since the inception of the Enlightenment, is directly dependent on urban civili-

zation. In fact, empire itself can be seen as a project of the Enlightenment with its understanding of the world based on clearly defined and hierarchized categories both in a socioeconomic and an ontological sense. Thus, determining that an Enlightenment-like rationalistic worldview is inadequate to fulfill contemporary spiritual needs serves to undermine the very concept of empire. For example, Tisch sees an imp on the night when an attractive young woman comes to live in the commune, possibly as an expression of jealousy. She also experiences a hallucination-like vision of spirits and shamans at the Enchanted Lake. Through such episodes, the narrator carefully establishes herself against the tradition of the intellectual cosmopolitan traveler personified by Nikolai Karamzin or its reinterpretation by 19th-century intellectuals such as Fyodor Dostoevsky (on which see Arndt 2007). Tisch does not see the problem of contemporary existence in a West-East dichotomy per se, but in an overall loss of spirituality. The pagan elements and fantastical experiences in her story highlight the inadequacy of the existing worldview and the need to find a non-materialist and possibly irrational dimension to the contemporary human condition.

Religion offers the necessary frame for pursuing such an understanding of the world that goes beyond cause and effect. While it is easy to use established religious traditions to promote a monoethnic or monocultural worldview, the major monotheistic religions have syncretic origins, and Russian Orthodoxy long coexisted with elements of non-Christian folk belief in what has sometimes been described as “dual-faith,” or *dvoeverie*. Furthermore, Orthodoxy has a long and complicated history in Eastern Slavdom, beginning with the Kievan period, then spanning the history of the Russian Empire, ultimately surviving the Soviet Union’s anti-religious campaigns and retaining social significance in the present moment. The most important Christian holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, as well as a number of other holidays, are based on, and overlaid over, older, pagan, traditions. Incorporating some of the pagan elements into the Christian festivities was an easy way to adapt Church teachings to the local culture. Thus, while both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches are concerned with dogma and at present allow for very little freedom of interpretation, the Christian tradition is fundamentally eclectic. As a result, at present, it is relatively easy to find a historical and cultural precedent to serve as a model when seeking a scripted or recognizable narrative for spiritual enlightenment, while avoiding institutional structures and embracing heterodoxy. This explains the ease with which such authors as Bogatyreva are able to meld together Christian

and neo-pagan elements in order to co-opt Orthodoxy in a way that is meaningful to them.

In *Off the Beaten Track*, the neo-pagan and Christian aspects of life exist side by side. The narrator compares the landlord of the communal apartment, a hippie with dreadlocks who spends his time smoking marijuana, to a modern-day Jesus Christ because of his thin and pitiable appearance (Bogatyreva 2008: 81). Furthermore, the idea of universal love, one of the essential teachings of the New Testament, comes from Gran, the experienced hitchhiker who accompanies the protagonist on a trip to the Altai Mountains and who is another hippie and bohemian. Instead of the traditional for pilgrimage narratives quest to a holy Christian site, Tisch and her friends seek an Enchanted Lake, a place of great shamanistic power where forest spirits dwell. These examples show how Christian ideas and neo-pagan imagery are combined and reshaped in Tisch's search for a spiritual worldview.

The novella's central image of the red star embodies this process of melding different and disparate traditions into one. It appears on a night journey where Tisch and her friend are traversing Central Asian steppes of wormwood in the red car of a slightly drunken driver. In the darkness inside the car Tisch is left with the impression that the star is hanging in the sky behind them. The combined references to wormwood and the red star immediately bring to mind the Book of Revelation: "a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and (...) the name of the star is Wormwood" (Revelation 8:10–11). This Bible passage is often understood as foretelling a great cataclysm. In light of Russia's recent past, the quote could be interpreted as a reminder of all that has been lost in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet world. The red star, after all, is the essential symbol of communism and its bid for a utopian society, as in Alexander Bogdanov's science fiction novel *Red Star* (*Krasnaia zvezda*, 1908), or the red stars on the walls of the Kremlin in Moscow. The image of the star also conveys the sense of impending doom, both for the present moment, as the driver is drunk (this may be a metaphor for the state of Russia's leadership as a whole), and also for the future in general, as everything around and in front of the travelers is dark.

The fields of wormwood are also part of a long tradition in literature, both classical and Soviet. The plant, which grows abundantly in the Russian steppes and can serve as a metonym for the countryside, has a strong smell, particularly in the summer months, and is forever associated with life at the dachas or in the villages. It is a recurrent symbol in village prose, where the smell of wormwood is associated

with the home.⁷ Unsurprisingly, it is also present in folklore as a potent herb for its cleansing and protective qualities. (See for example *Polyn' protiv 100 boleznei*: 2006.) Thus, the image of the hitchhikers traversing the steppe at night brings together three layers of cultural allusions: biblical images, folklore traditions, and Soviet symbology. This process of overlaying different strata of signification succeeds in revealing new ways of interpreting preexisting symbols such as the red star. In this way, the journey presents to the reader a syncretic view of the world where seemingly incompatible cultural and historical narratives can merge into a new whole.

This key moment in the novella not only reconciles disparate cultural traditions and generates new possibilities of interpretation of existing symbols, but also highlights the larger problems at stake for the writers of Bogatyreva's generation. The very possibility of alluding to such a wide range of disparate cultural narratives speaks to historical discontinuity. As the writer shows, her generation lives at "the junction of two eras" (Bogatyreva 2008: 183), in a liminal time-space, defined by an ideological vacuum where the symbols of the previous socio-political systems have lost their significance and need to be reinterpreted in order to become once more relevant to the present moment. Bogatyreva's generation matured during a transitional period, when the past had to be reassessed and in some cases rewritten. Official Soviet historical narratives have been shown to be unreliable, with new and controversial versions of such focal events as the Great Patriotic War undermining the traditional Soviet approach. At the same time, personal history is often no longer available, with censorship, the purges, and the war having irrevocably obliterated both family members and family archives. To take an example from *Off the Beaten Track*, the protagonist cannot trace her family tree beyond her father's reminiscences: "one of his grandfathers was killed in Stalin's purges and everyone carefully forgot him. Another was 'expropriated' as a rich kulak" (Bogatyreva 2008: 184). The narrator's experience reflects the way social classifications and categorizations were already destabilized during the Soviet period, with Stalin himself being delegitimized after his death. In a similar manner, in the post-Soviet decades victims of political repressions have been "rehabilitated" and commemorated, and many of those despised as "kulaks" and enemies of the people during

7. In classical Russian literature the word "wormwood" (*polyn'*) is linked to the countryside in such famous works as Leo Tolstoy's "Childhood" ("Detstvo," 1852). During the Soviet period, wormwood is a recurring element in the Village Prose movement of the 1970s and 1980s in such works as Vladimir Soloukhin's *Grass (Trava)*, 1972).

the Soviet period have been recast at the end of the 20th century as victims of the regime.

Old social categories, thus, are seen as unreliable. The new ones, which arise in a market-oriented society based on financial success or workplace hierarchy, however, are insufficient to capture the wide range of post-Soviet identities, especially among the younger generations. These varieties of modern life are depicted in *Off the Beaten Track* through the multitude of episodic characters who, alongside Tisch, search for meaning in their lives. These include: a skinhead singer, Julia; Roma Jha, the grungy landlord who spends his life in a marijuana haze; Tolja, a poet and artist who bemoans the lack of direction and ideas in the younger generation; and Lenka, who has come from the provinces in search of a better life in Moscow. However, it is impossible for the young people in Bogatyreva's story to establish an identity within the confines of socially acceptable frameworks. The Yakimanka inhabitants have no great visions for their lives, no aims, and no aspirations to change the world for the better. They are completely disengaged from society and are often forced to undertake underpaid part-time work, such as distributing flyers or delivering documents, in order to get by. As one of the characters laments, theirs is a "generation of airheads (...) [that] don't give a toss about anything. You don't want anything, you aren't going to change anything. (...) What are you? A courier! We live in a country of managers and couriers" (Bogatyreva 2008: 175). As a result, the characters either remain in the communal apartment, going through the motions of a meaningless existence, or, alternatively, they choose to move out and embrace mainstream aspirations and chase jobs, money, and social stability.

Those that stay at the Yakimanka communal apartment are anything but part of the emerging business-savvy segment of society. They are, or feel they are, isolated and alienated from everyone else. For example, when the communal apartment owner and two others, including Tisch, are hired to play music at a soirée for rich businessmen, they choose to remain detached observers of the evening's seedy proceedings. On the way back to the apartment they have difficulty finding transportation despite the fact that they are walking along one of Moscow's busiest roads. Just as the cars speed by leaving the three young people to trudge through the rain on the side of the road, the mainstream of society ignores the Yakimanka inhabitants and leaves them to struggle through their bohemian living arrangements on the margins of urban life. Their inability or unwillingness to integrate into the mainstream prompts such individuals to distance themselves

from society and seek meaning outside of the established social hierarchy. As the story gradually reveals, it is through travel and hitchhiking that it becomes possible for them to leave the urban status quo behind and to establish a new sense of identity, one that is based on the idea of spiritual enlightenment and a different type of community — one of fellow travelers.

The hitchhikers' awareness of an imagined community of likeminded others creates a sense of belonging. Tisch articulates this idea by quoting her friend and mentor, Gran: "We and they are traveling the same road. Do you see now why we have to love everybody?" (Bogatyeva 2008: 212). In this phrase, the "they" encompasses "everybody," even those people who do not hitchhike. Furthermore, the sense of belonging is heightened by use of the plural "we" adopted by the narrator at the beginning and at the end of the story. The pronoun encompasses all hitchhikers into the same community even though the actual act of hitchhiking is normally a solitary endeavor. This counterfactual use of the plural expresses the belief held among hitchhikers that every time they embark on a journey they actively participate in a communal effort, which does not depend on the other participants' ethnicity, social status, or national identity.

The concept of a supranational community is historically linked to the pilgrimage tradition. In the Middle Ages, pilgrims journeyed to sacred sites within what they saw as a greater Christian community, which superseded any local differences in language or customs. The sense of belonging to a larger Slavic culture is encapsulated by Riccardo Picchio's concept of *slavia orthodoxa* or Orthodox Slavdom that comprises the Slavs in the Balkans and in Eastern Europe from the tenth to the fourteenth century (Picchio 1958).⁸ At the same time, feeling united to other individuals through faith in a common project is at the heart of the internationalist aspect of communist ideology. Citizens of Soviet and Warsaw Pact republics, as well as other socialist states, could in theory rely on a shared sociopolitical framework, which was meant to transcend national, ethnic and religious differences.

At the same time, religious travel is also traditionally connected to an anti-establishment worldview. To take an example from Russian history, one of the sects that renounced Patriarch Nikon's 17th-centu-

8. Riccardo Picchio proposes the term *slavia orthodoxa* to refer to an Eastern European cultural revival shaped by South Slavic texts and scholars (the "Second South Slavic Influence"). According to him, what took place in the late 14th and early 15th centuries is the transference of a certain set of spiritual values from Byzantium to Russia within a supranational religious community — the *slavia orthodoxa*.

ry liturgical reforms, the Runners (*beguny*), preached that salvation was to be found in eternal wandering. Since the Runners believed that they lived in the age of the Antichrist, society for them was innately sinful; thus, travel was a way to isolate themselves from the world and to disengage from the state (Brockhaus and Efron 1890–1907: 725). In a similar manner, the hitchhikers in the novella are not only able to perceive themselves as part of a greater community, but to also disengage with “accepted” and regulated modes of travel and behavior. Tisch and her friends refuse to be part of the materialistic cultural hegemony shaped and perpetuated by the desire to succeed in the post-Soviet free market economy. In this way, Bogatyreva frames hitchhiking in terms similar to Dostoevsky’s interpretation of wandering as the ultimate expression of Russia’s national essence and as a counterpart to the alienated Westernized elites (Arndt 2010). For the contemporary hitchhiker, however, the ethnic core of the nation might not be necessarily found in Orthodoxy, but rather in a heterodox appropriation of it, allowing for the incorporation of non-Slavic or non-Christian elements.

Religious travel or pilgrimage and wandering are more often than not connected to a sacralized view of nature. In such a binary opposition, city life emerges as the cradle of evil or, at least, of an unhealthy and shortsighted way of life. The narrator underlines this opposition by stating:

Towns were points along our way, places we were aiming to reach. Yet they were not the reason we were on the move, and neither was being on the move an end in itself. The goal lay somewhere beyond all that. (...) Suddenly everything that weighed me down fell away and the meaning I was searching for was revealed. It was only a moment, these epiphanies of mine. They arose from the contrast between the life of the city and my own, and it was impossible to hold on to them (Bogatyreva 2008: 218).

In this quote, traveling unequivocally goes beyond the physical process of displacement from one location to another. According to Tisch, spiritual enlightenment has to do more with leaving behind the known and mundane realities of life, and not so much with reaching a set goal. As she states, cities are through-points, not endpoints. She insists that there is a greater goal, a higher truth, but that it is not connected to any one place or person. This is reminiscent of the Runners and their incessant travel from one holy place to another. And like the pilgrims and wanderers who rely on alms, the hitchhikers in Bogatyre-

va's novella depend on the help of others both for transportation and accommodation.

In line with a long tradition of infusing nature with sacral meaning, Tisch outlines her understanding of nature as a sacred place where it is possible to achieve enlightenment after reaching her goal in the middle of the Altai Mountains, a mysterious and mystical place, associated with the pre-Slavic heritage of the Ural region and Siberia. She states: "from up here in the mountains with the frosty breath of glaciers I have a larger and broader view of the world than you get down there in the towns and the valley" (Bogatyreva 2008: 158). The tradition of imbuing nature with a divine meaning dates back to the Romantic period and even earlier to the religious worldview of the 16th and 17th centuries, and earlier still, to the pagan rituals of the ancient Slavs. This description falls in surprisingly easily with what Christopher Ely outlines in his book *This Meager Nature* on 19th-century Russian representation of nature: "provincial Russia was never successfully designated a *scenic* space for tourism because the Russian landscape came to acquire a special significance resistant to scenic interpretations" (Ely 2002: 5). Ely's study of the emergence of the unique Russian school of landscape painting and its connection to the establishment of national identity seems to be just as relevant to the contemporary nation-building project. His "special significance" echoes what George Nivat stipulates to be at the center of Russian identity: "the cult of the Russian space: precisely space, rather than landscape. (...) Painting was, of course, called to crystallize this feeling of space, of a void not yet shaped, of a promising incompleteness, of a layer of spirituality under the desolate surface, this paradox of 'rich poverty' so surprisingly omnipresent in Gogol and among his Slavophile friends" (Nivat 1987: 60). Ely's and Nivat's ideas overlap and point to an invisible, but implied quality of the Russian landscape — its spiritual or non-material merit. G. P. Fedotov in his book *The Russian Religious Mind* (1946) describes this as the perception of the Russian "consciousness of belonging to nature, of being deeply rooted in it" as well as "the religious appreciation of nature" (Fedotov 1946: 371). The modern perception of "Russianness" is intricately connected to this perceived link between nature, religion, and ethnic essence, whether as a tool in or an outcome of the nation-building project.

However, this very perpetuation of what are entrenched tropes of Russian identity, albeit through the lens of neo-pagan ideas and imagery, remains deeply problematic. While going away from urban centers and seeking enlightenment in nature seems to bring "authentic"

Russian experience to the forefront, in a way that undermines what are seen to be the values of the center — a rationalistic approach to life and a single-minded pursuit of material success at the price of moral integrity — the very depiction of the countryside or periphery still falls to a large extent within the accepted framework or the “imagined geography” of the center. The idea of travel as a pilgrimage to nature might seem positive, as it leads to introspection and to a deeper understanding of the meaning of life; however, conceptualizing the countryside as a locus of the divine or transcendental reiterates established clichés and highlights the juxtaposition between the spiritually fulfilling experiences on the road and the erroneous logic of urban existence. This serves to further strengthen the perceived cultural and spiritual binary opposition between metropole and periphery. As the economic imbalance between the two is real and rapidly growing, this substantiates the idea of two separate spheres of life, in a cultural, moral, political, and economic sense, that coexist alongside each other, but do not overlap. Bogatyreva’s travel account can be seen as bringing forth a local or counter-culture way of life and system of beliefs. It also has the potential to subvert, to an extent, a monolithic understanding of “Russianness.” Nevertheless, it still affirms vast spaces, poor but hospitable inhabitants, and, most importantly, an essential capacity for spirituality as inherently Russian. This can be used to justify the lack of attention to the periphery’s very real economic and social problems, reifying an idealized vision of the countryside as “authentically Russian” as a kind of compensation for its interminable poverty.

Conclusion

Politically and socially, renewed interest in religion has resulted in a number of instances of the use of religious values and language in the affirmation of certain interests of the establishment, as attested by a number of laws passed in Russia in the past several years. Furthermore, the overlap between the ROC’s economic and political interests and those of the Russian government calls for a reassessment of the transparency and rationale of contemporary Russian policymaking. As Uzlaner points out, the Pussy Riot case became “an arena for the battle between the proponents of different visions of post-secularism” (Uzlaner 2014: 54). And while the female performers lost the trial, it is important to recognize that the battle itself is ongoing. In the cultural sphere, in particular, the heightened visibility of religion has made available to cultural producers a new and nuanced range of re-

sponses to some of the major problems of the contemporary period: social fragmentation and disenfranchisement, poverty and unemployment, environmental and economic concerns. For authors such as Bogatyreva, in fact, resorting to religious themes and symbols, including elements of pilgrimage and Neo-Paganism, allows them to engage other cultural trends. Travel allows for questioning of the accepted worldview and the established social hierarchy. Furthermore, the Christian subtext of *Off the Beaten Track* is not necessarily a means of affirming an institutional Orthodox identity, but opens a way to discuss the lack of spiritual, ethical and humanistic values in urban-centered life in contemporary Russia. The narrator's worldview brings together and layers Christian, pagan, and Soviet imagery, as a way to bypass institutional doctrine and to experience a divine and depoliticized moment surrounded by nature. This connects contemporary Russian identity to the tradition of sacralization of nature. At the same time, bringing pagan and fantastical elements into the narrative serves to question the rationalistic Enlightenment or socialist worldview. Finally, travel brings to the forefront the concept of the local, the "authentically Russian" experience, by turning to nature and the countryside. Nevertheless, establishing such non-political and non-bureaucratic ties between the capital and the periphery can be problematic: while the countryside is once again depicted in terms of a spiritual cradle and locus of genuine "Russianness," the inequality between them is simultaneously reaffirmed and grows more pronounced materially and more entrenched psychologically.

References

- Arndt, Charles. (2007). "A New 'Russian Traveler' in Germany: Dostoevsky's Misuse of Kar-amzin's Cosmopolitan Legacy." *Germano-Slavica* 16: 21–40.
- . (2010). "Wandering in Two Different Directions: Spiritual Wandering as the Ideological Battleground in Dostoevsky's *The Adolescent*." *SEEJ* 54 (4): 607–45.
- Bogatyreva, Irina. (2007). "Stop! Ili dvizhenie bez ostanovok." *Zhurnal'nyi zal* ["Stop! Or Movement without Stops." *Reading Room*]. [<http://magazines.russ.ru/october/2007/5/bo2.html>, accessed on August 30, 2012].
- . (2011). "Off the Beaten Track." In Natasha Perova (Ed.), *Off the Beaten Track*. Moscow: GLAS New Russian Writing.
- . (2013). "Vyhod" ["Exit"]. In Sergei Nikolaevich and Elena Shubina (Eds.), *Krasnaia Strela* [*The Red Arrow*] (239–56). Moscow: ACT.
- . (2015). *Kadyn*. Moscow: Eksmo.
- Bogdanov, Aleksander. (1908). *Krasnaia Zvezda* [*Red Star*]. St. Petersburg: Znanie.

- Burkhanov, Rafael. (2012). "Strannichestvo na Rusi." *Vestnik Nizhnevartovskogo Gosudarstvennogo Gunitarnogo Universiteta* ["Wandering in Russia." *The Gazette of the Nizhnevartovsk State Humanitarian University*] 3: 3–11.
- Elder, Miriam. (2013, June 11). "Russia Passes Law Banning Gay 'Propaganda.'" *The Guardian*. [http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/11/russia-law-banning-gay-propaganda, accessed on September 9, 2013].
- Ely, Christopher. (2002). *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press.
- Etkind, Aleksandr. (2011). *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Fedotov, G. P. (1946). *The Russian Religious Mind*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Golovneva, Elena, and Irina Schmidt. (2015). "Religious Conversion, Utopia and Sacred Space (Okunevo Village in Western Siberia)." *State, Religion and Church 2* (2): 54–76.
- Hegghammer, Thomas. (2010). *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hutton, Ronald. (1999). *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ia Tozhe Khochu [Me Too]*. (2012). Aleksey Balabanov (Dir.). CTB Film Company.
- Juergensmeyer, Mark. (2003). *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Karamcheti, Indira. (1994). "The Geographics of Marginality: Place and Textuality in Simone Schwarz-Bart and Anita Desai." In M. R. Higonnet and Joan Templeton (Eds.). *Reconfigured Spheres: Feminist Explorations of Literary Space* (125–46). Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Kliuchevskii, V. O. (1960). *A History of Russia*. New York: Russell & Russell.
- Kolyadina, Elena. (2011). *Tsvetochnyi krest [The Flower Cross]*. Moscow: AST.
- Kuehn, Julia, and Paul Smethurst. (2009). *Travel Writing, Form, and Empire: The Poetics and Politics of Mobility*. New York: Routledge.
- Leviatan [Leviathan]*. (2014). Andrey Zvyagintsev (Dir.). Non-Stop Productions.
- Lisle, Debbie. (2006). *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Magliocco, Sabina. (2004). *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania.
- Maslova, N. N. (1980). *Putevoi Ocherk — problemy zhanra [The Travel Sketch — Genre Problems]*. Moscow: Znanie.
- Nivat, Georges. (1987). "Le Paysage Russe en tant que Mythe." *Rossia/Russia* 5: 7–20.
- Parthé, Kathleen. (1992). *Russian Village Prose: The Radiant Past*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Picchio, Riccardo. (1958). *La Istoriya Slavënobolgarskaja Sullo Sfondo Linguistico-culturale della Slavia Ortodossa [The Slavobulgarian History against the Linguistic and Cultural Background of the Slavia Orthodoxa]*. Roma: Edizione di Ricerche Slavistiche.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. (2010). *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge.
- Rappaport, Helen. (1999). *Joseph Stalin: A Biographical Companion*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

- Saha, Santosh. (2004). *Religious Fundamentalism in the Contemporary World: Critical Social and Political Issues*. Lanham, MD: Lexington.
- Said, Edward W. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon.
- . (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Silent Souls [Ovsyanki]*. (2010). Aleksey Fedorchenko (Dir.). Flagman Trade.
- Smolkin-Rothrock, Victoria. (2015, April 22). “A Sacred Space Is Never Empty’: How Soviet Atheism Was Born, Lived and Died.” Presentation.
- Soloukhin, V. A. (1972)*. “Trava.” *Nauka i zhizn’* [“Grass.” *Life and Science*] 9–12.
- Stogova, Nadezhda. (2006). *Polyn’ protiv 100 boleznei [Wormwood against One Hundred Illnesses]*. St. Petersburg: Piter.
- “Stranniki ili Beguny” [“Wanderers or Runners”] (1890–1907). *Brockhaus and Efron Encyclopedic Dictionary*. Vol. 31a. St. Petersburg: Brockhaus and Efron. 723–25.
- Tolstoy, Leo. (1852). “Detstvo.” *Sovremennik* [“Childhood.” *The Contemporary*] 9.
- Uzlaner, Dmitry. (2014). “The Pussy Riot Case and the Peculiarities of Russian Post-Secularism.” *State, Religion and Church* 1(1): 23–58.
- Windmüller, Gunda. (2012). *Rushing into Floods: Staging the Sea in Restoration and Early Eighteenth-Century English Drama*. Göttingen: V&R Unipress.