

Review of Rebecca Gould, *Writers and Rebels: The Literature of Insurgency in the Caucasus* (New Haven, CT and London, UK: Yale University Press, 2016), 247 pp.

The study of the literature and culture of the Caucasus has been poorly served both by regional studies departments and by national literature departments. Situated at the intersection of the broader Islamic world and the geopolitical remnants of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, “straddling the margins of each of these imperfect configurations,” as Rebecca Gould puts it (23), the Caucasus’ staggering linguistic and cultural diversity make it a challenge even to those familiar with the regions on the peripheries of the Russian Empire, and the particularities of their post-Soviet postcoloniality.

The first major accomplishment of *Writers and Rebels* is therefore its presentation of a rich corpus of literary material from the Caucasus, which fills a gap in world literary studies and provides a unique case study for postcolonial theory. Gould’s remarkable philological prowess is evident—the book provides close readings of texts in Arabic, Chechen, Georgian, and Russian, and the author’s knowledge of other regional and global literary prestige languages is clear at various points throughout. Gould’s bibliography alone makes an excellent resource for scholars of the Caucasus and its many neighboring regions, and the literary historiography which she produces is invaluable to a deeper understanding of the Caucasus over the past two centuries.

The book’s second major accomplishment is to theorize the violence which has characterized the Caucasus in the popular imagination since the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the West, and in Russia for much longer. In this capacity, Gould develops the concept of “transgressive sanctity” to show how, in responding to colonial violence, the literatures of the Caucasus aestheticized, valorized, and reappropriated violence as an anticolonial position. It is, Gould argues, inextricable from the imaginative literature in which the concept developed.

Gould differentiates three distinct Caucasus literary discourses, Chechen, Daghestani, and Georgian, in each of the book’s first three chapters. The first chapter focuses the figure of the *abrek*, or bandit, in Chechen literature, historically a social outcast and outlaw who transgressed against indigenous law (*‘ādāt*), but who became in the colonial period a national hero who transgressed instead against invasive Russian colonial law (*zakon*). The *abrek* is, in Gould’s reading, at the core of Caucasus literature’s representation of colonial and anticolonial violence: though the *abrek*’s history in the region is longer than that of Russian colonization, “only when his violence became anticolonial did it become fit for literature” (46). Subsequent chapters focus on Daghestani literature’s incorporation of the *abrek* via Islamic, rather than indigenous, law (*shari‘a*); and Georgian literature’s use of the *abrek* to navigate the moral ambiguity that arose from Georgian elites having largely cooperated with, rather than resisted, Russian rule. Each of the first three chapters traverses colonial and early Soviet history, providing detailed accounts of how these subregions of the Caucasus built up distinct but related discourses of anticolonial resistance, and how Soviet politics complicated already well-developed anticolonial literary motifs.

A fourth and final chapter departs from the literary analysis of the first three, instead discussing the personal accounts of violence which Gould encountered during her fieldwork in the Caucasus in the early-2000s. This chapter returns to one of the issues which opens the book:

the popular association between the Caucasus and violent resistance. In a sensitive treatment of Chechnya's notorious female suicide bombers, Gould shows how transgressive sanctity, the concept she develops in the book's earlier chapters, invests these women with moral authority even as it underscores the futility of their violence.

Throughout *Writers and Rebels* and most forcefully in its epilogue, Gould insists on the power of the literary imagination to produce, rather than merely reflect, political reality. To that end, she claims that the book she has written is not a "conventional historiography," which would have focused more closely on "the disjuncture between the texts engaged and the worlds they reference" (237). The literary historiography the book provides is, however, perhaps its most unique contribution to the study of world and comparative literatures, and its more conventional aspects among its most compelling. Literary texts, after all, are capacious enough to represent not only reality, but also various imagined worlds, and they commonly engage concepts with great discursive, if not material, cultural value. Gould tells a story, in some ways already familiar, about violent political resistance in the Caucasus. But hers is a story which focuses not on the violence itself but on the discourse, developed across and between colonizing, colonized, and collaborating cultures, which both reflected and produced it. That discourse may not be a "disjuncture" between texts and worlds, but a textual world—a canon in its own right—whose existence is precisely the kind of thing literary historiography can excavate.

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