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Introduction: Queer Life Writing in Russia and Beyond

This piece introduces the special issue of *AvtobiografiЯ* on 'Queer Life Writing in Russia and Beyond'. It begins by reflecting on the current climate for LGBTQ+ people in contemporary Russia, noting the legislation prohibiting the promotion of non-traditional relationships, and how the Kremlin has weaponized LGBTQ+ issues as part of Russian national exceptionalism. In place of this binary narrative, which pits a gay-friendly West against a traditionalist Russia, the introduction advocates an alternative course for exploring Russia's queer culture, one that is dialogic, transnational and multidirectional, revealing how Russia's homegrown LGBTQ+ community does not exist in isolation, but within a dialogue, speaking and responding to the rest of the world. Indeed, themes of border-crossing – literal or metaphorical – often figure prominently in Russian queer life writing, and the search for gender and sexual identity in these texts is often bound up with a search for national identity. Such journeying also happens at the theoretical level, and the introduction argues against methodological nationalism, suggesting that, when used sensitively, theoretical tools that emerged in one context may prove illuminating in another. Yet queer life-writing itself tends to resist the strictures of existing narratives, genres, and language, and the queer autobiographical 'I' often defies easy categorization. The piece concludes by summarizing each of the articles in the special issues, as well as the texts in the 'Materials' and Translations section.

In December 2022, as we were finalizing this special issue, the Russian Federation passed an expansion of the 2013 law that had prohibited the spread of 'propaganda' among minors promoting 'non-traditional sexual relationships' (Federal'nyi zakon 2013). The expanded version of the law is not limited to minors, but now forbids *any* promotion of 'non-traditional sexual relationships or preferences' (Federal'nyi zakon 2022). The new law also expressly forbids, for the first time, the promotion of 'sex changes' [smeny pola] (Federal'nyi zakon 2022), using a term that is now largely considered outdated in the trans community.[1] The implications of the Russian Federation's expanded law on LGBTQ+ people

[1] 'Transition' is now preferred over 'sex change', which can be taken to suggest that medical intervention is required in order to transition (GLAAD n.d.).

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and their lives are enormous. While the law stops short of criminalizing homosexuality, it makes everyday life highly challenging for the LGBTQ+ community in Russia. Any gay couple publicly displaying their affection, any trans person posting an affirming tweet about their gender identity, any bi individual publishing a poem celebrating their sexuality: all are at risk. While the law threatens to erase the presence of LGBTQ+ Russians, this special issue reveals their long history, within the country and beyond, analysing how they have written about, agonized over, and celebrated, their non-normative sexualities and gender identities.

The emergence of Russia's anti-gay laws coincides with an increased assertiveness in foreign policy and an anti-Western stance, with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The link between Russian exceptionalism and state-sponsored homophobia has been highlighted by scholars such as Emil Edenborg, who points out that 'the Putin regime has articulated [...] a narrative where resistance to LGBT rights appears as a logical choice for states seeking to position themselves in opposition to the "liberal West"' (Edenborg 2021). Indeed, Putin regularly casts Russia as a bastion of traditional notions of gender and sexuality against 'new' ideas from the West (Moss 2017). For example, when asked at a 2021 press conference whether Western notions of gender fluidity might take root in Russia, Putin began by affirming his own view that 'a woman is a woman... and a man is a man', before going on to declare that Russian society as a whole was uniquely placed to resist the influx of such ideas, because of the country's thousand-year-long multinational and multifaith nature, which provides a 'defence mechanism against this kind of obscurantism [mrakobesie]' (Prezident Rossii 2021). Here, Putin uses the moral panic around the trans community as a wedge issue, connecting it to broader ideas on Russian exceptionalism. This official Russian narrative might be understood as a kind of national life writing, casting Russia as a heterosexual and cisgender state, preserver of faith and tradition, with the strength to resist the advances of a decadent, queer West that has abandoned its roots.[2] Yet this kind of

[2] Here I am indebted to the scholarship on gendering the nation, including Yuval-Davis (1997), and, especially, the wave of work in queer international relations that reveals how nations style themselves in gendered and sexualized

binary thinking is also present in certain Western models that pit an enlightened, gay-friendly West against a benighted, homophobic, East, and assumes that Western configurations of gender and sexuality can and should be replicated across the globe, paying little attention to local context.[3] This introduction charts an alternative course for exploring Russia's queer culture, one that veers away both from the inflexible imposition of Western models, while also alive to the dangers of exceptionalism.[4] Rather, I see the development of Russia's queer life-writing as dialogic, with home-grown elements that speak and respond to the rest of the world, not only the West. Russian queers have never existed in isolation, but have been part of a multidirectional history of transnational encounters and exchange that transgress national borders. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere (Doak 2020: 217–20), in LGBTQ+ Russian literature, the experience of sexual discovery is often figured in terms of crossing national and linguistic boundaries. To take one example, in Mikhail Kuzmin's novella *Wings* [Kryl'ia, 1906], the protagonist Vania Smurov falls in love with the mysterious half-English Larion Shtrup, who teaches him Greek: Smurov's awareness of his sexuality is symbolized in part through his initiation into Hellenic culture and the Greek language.

Of course, such border-crossing is often literal as well as symbolic, with many of Russia's leading

terms in relation to one another (Weber 1999). In relation to Russia, Cai Wilkinson has pointed out how Putin has used the image of Mother Russia under threat to create the image of paternalist and hypermasculine state (Wilkinson 2018).

[3] Jasbir Puar has offered a forceful critique of how the West has used the agenda of LGBT+ rights in the service of nationalism and foreign intervention. Puar developed the idea of 'homonationalism' to critique how the US and its allies used a rhetoric of a gay-friendly West versus a homophobic Muslim other in the context of the war on terror (Puar 2007).

[4] This transnational approach to Russian sexualities builds on my earlier work, together with Andy Byford and Stephen Hutchings, in *Transnational Russian Studies*, where we advocate a move away from 'static and unitary conception of Russia as a discrete nation with a singular language and culture' to a 'systematic and critical reflection on the various ways in which "Russia" and "Russian culture" have been historically framed and defined' (Byford et al. 2020: 2). My own chapter in *Transnational Russian Studies* examines how queer Russian literary texts might undo, rather than reinforce, the familiar gendered and sexualized narratives that pit Russia against the West (Doak 2020).

queer figures now based outside of the country, including poet and critic Dmitrii Kuz'min (now in Latvia), the artist and writer Slava Mogutin and the journalist Masha Gessen (both in the USA), to name but a few. In the current special issue, Kadence Leung's article discusses the émigré poet Valerii Pereleshin, who lived in China for a time before settling in Brazil, while Masha Beketova focuses on Ol'ga Zhuk, a lesbian author and activist recounting her experiences in Germany. In the 'Materials' section, Peter Flew's memoir shows the journey in reverse: a gay man who travels from the West to Russia in the early 2000s in a narrative of self-discovery. Most recently, Russia's propaganda laws and the war against Ukraine have prompted a new wave of queer migration, one example of which is Evgeny Pisemskiy, the LGBTQ+ activist interviewed in this special issue. For some, like Pisemskiy, the move to a new country is personally transformative: he speaks warmly about the welcome he has received in the UK. However, as Beketova points out, migration is not always a positive experience for LGBTQ+ people, many of whom face new challenges and discrimination in their host country, as well as an expectation that they will conform to an assimilationist ideal that equates the move from East to West as a move from oppression to freedom, a narrative that may not match their reality. Life-writing thus provides an opportunity to unsettle or queer the dominant narrative, and to reimagine the relationship between Russia and the West.

Yet it is not just people who travel across borders; ideas do, as well. Many of the theoretical tools that we use to analyse LGBTQ+ literature and life-writing have their origins in Western Europe and North America, and some have questioned whether it is appropriate to use these paradigms when discussing non-Western societies. Here again, I would suggest something of a middle course: to assume that all such concepts must be universalizable risks a methodological imperialism, while to say that a framework can never be used outside of its 'native' home is rooted in an insularity and exceptionalism. A more nuanced approach will tentatively examine the explanatory power of theory with a sensitivity to local contexts, always considering how lived experience might speak back to theory. Within this special issue, scholars have taken various approaches to this question. Margarita Vaysman, for example,

draws on trans theory in making a compelling case to read Aleksandr Aleksandrov (born Nadezhda Durova) as a trans-masculine figure. Brian Baer uses Susan Sontag's 'Notes on Camp' to offer a fresh reading of Sergei Eisenstein's memoirs. Both employ theory in a sensitive way to revise and queer our understanding of canonical Russian figures. However, Beketova finds limited value in queer feminist theory as a lens to interpret Zhuk, offering instead a productive discussion of what we might learn when a theory does not fit.

Indeed, a recurring theme in the special issue is that queer life-writing resists the strictures of existing narratives, genres, and language. Here I draw on the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who observes that queer can refer to 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically' (Sedgwick 1993: 8). In the case of queer autobiography, it is often difficult to identify a single, steady 'I' in the narrative who can be seamlessly attached to the narrator. Brian Loftus has even suggested that 'queer autobiography' is a 'contradiction in terms': '[i]f the genre of autobiography demands the stability of both an 'I' and its genealogy to inhabit a coherent narrative, "queer" disallows the neat articulation or possibility of either' (Loftus 1997: 73). Indeed, the queer 'I' is often playful and deceptive, switching between different masks and employing irony to resist any easy categorization. Of course, this feature is hardly unique to Russian queer writing: Jean Genet and Patrick White, to name but two, both use this style. However, whereas many Western societies have come to acquire a fixed set of emancipatory narratives, such as the coming out story, or the normative trans narrative, Russians have arguably continued to resist these narratives. Leung's close readings of Pereleshin especially foreground the importance of masquerade and formal experiment in the expression of his sexuality, showing his departure from the coming-out story. The two pieces by Evgenii Kharitonov, presented here in Martina Napolitano's translations, also offer intriguing alternatives to dominant Western narratives.

When preparing this special issue, I was conscious of the need to include as much of the LGBTQ+ spectrum as possible. Historically, LGBTQ+ scholar-

ship has tended to focus predominantly on gay men, and indeed most responses to my initial call for papers were proposals to work on gay men. I therefore redoubled my efforts to cover other parts of the spectrum, with the result that the special issue includes work on bi, lesbian, and trans voices as well as gay men. The six articles show that some commonalities across the LGBTQ+ life-writing exist, not least in terms of the shared history of marginalisation, as well as the use of formal and generic experimentation to express non-normative sexualities, though it would be wrong to assume the existence of one single 'queer' narrative that unites all parts of the spectrum. Indeed, the articles in this issue by Rowan Dowling, on the trans community, and by Olga Andreyevskikh on bisexual activists, reveal how these communities have used life-writing to forge a distinctive space in the LGBTQ+ spectrum. Yet there remains an important gap in this special issue: more work needs to be done on the experiences of Russia's national and religious minorities in relation to gender and sexuality. In the special issue, Beketova includes a discussion of Zhuk's Jewishness and the effects of multiple marginalization, but scholarship on LGBTQ+ issues among Russia's racialized minorities remains in its infancy. As a field, Russian Studies is now entering a decolonial turn, the urgency of which has been underlined by the recent war in Ukraine. It is now incumbent on scholars working on queer topics to consider how issues such as race, ethnicity, and religion intersect with gender and sexuality.

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The special issue includes six scholarly articles. First comes Margarita Vaysman's compelling re-examination of cavalry officer and writer Aleksandr Aleksandrov (1783–1866), born Nadezhda Durova. Vaysman argues that Aleksandrov identified as a man from 1808 until his death in 1866 through a close analysis of his correspondence. Based on this transmasculine identity, Vaysman suggests that it is more appropriate for scholars to refer to Aleksandrov by his male name and masculine pronouns. However, Vaysman draws an important distinction between the author's personal writings and the fiction, suggesting that while everyday life imposed a gender binary, demanding that he choose between 'Aleksandrov' and 'Durova', he

could inhabit both identities in his literary fiction.

Brian Baer's article examines the memoirs of film director Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948), which have often been neglected in favour of his cinematic output and his theoretical work. Previous scholarship has largely treated the memoirs as the product of repression, or simply mined it for references to cinema. However, Baer offers a new interpretation of the memoirs as an example of camp performance, making use not only of Susan Sontag, but also recent linguistic scholarship on 'camp talk'. Eisenstein's memoirs emerge as a new kind of queer, experimental, life-writing, showing another side of the avant-garde film director.

The link between formal experimentation and expressing queer sexuality is also crucial to Kadence Leung's study of Valerii Pereleshin (1913–1992). Leung focuses on two key works, the collection of sonnets *Ariel* [Ariel', 1971–1975] and *Poem without a Subject* [Poema bez predmeta, 1972–1976], which Simon Karlinsky had suggested constituted his poetic 'literary coming out' (Karlinsky 2013: 303). Leung, however, cautions against seeking a teleological coming-out narrative, instead suggesting that his sexuality is encoded in his poetry life-writing through strategies such as masking/unmasking, a blurring of distinction between fiction and fact, and creative appropriations of canonical poets such as Shakespeare and Pushkin.

Masha Beketova's article also explores a migrant writer who resists easy categorization, Ol'ga Zhuk (b. 1960). Zhuk's autobiographical novel *Severe Maiden: A Journey from St Petersburg to Berlin* [Strogaia Devushka. Puteshestvie iz Peterburga v Berlin, 2013] depicts the journey of a Russian-Jewish lesbian from St Petersburg to Berlin in the 1990s. Beketova's article explores how Zhuk's work resists becoming the 'good lesbian citizen' who successfully assimilates into Western society. The unsettling depictions of intimate partner violence also make it challenging to read the novel from a queer-feminist perspective. Beketova ultimately calls *Severe Maiden* an 'uncomfortable' narrative that depicts multiple marginalizations (lesbian, migrant, Russian, Jewish) specific to the post-Soviet context, and while it cannot be called an optimistic novel, it can provide a platform for queer grieving.

While the first four articles are all concerned primarily with individuals, the last two examine broader communities. Rowan

Dowling examines how trans* activists in contemporary Russia use life-writing, based on a study of materials published by the Petersburg-based LGBTQ+ organization Vykhod in 2017 and 2018. Dowling argues that these trans* stories constitute a collective autobiography that provides a sense of solidarity and a self-help resource. These trans* stories, Dowling suggests, aim less at political visibility than fostering a sense of community. Dowling also notes the diversity within trans* voices, as well as the complexity of negotiating competing and shifting sexual and gender identities, which often leads to creative linguistic experimentation within texts. Such diversity offers an alternative to the normative and monolithic 'trans-narrative' that emerged from the medicalization of trans people in the twentieth century.

Olga Andreyevskikh also explores how an activist community uses life-writing to build a shared identity, focusing specifically on how bisexual activists use confessional forms of life-writing online. She uses digital ethnography and interpretative content analysis method to examine textual, visual and video sources created by bi activists across Russia and published on social media platforms in 2020 and 2021. Like Dowling, Andreyevskikh emphasizes the power of life-writing for fostering a sense of solidarity across the LGBTQ+ spectrum, while also focusing on some of the unique challenges that bi people face. Andreyevskikh highlights how biphobia not only exists within mainstream community, but also persists even within sections of the LGBTQ+ community.

The 'Translations' section includes Martina Napolitano's Italian versions of two short works by Evgenii Kharitonov (1941–1981), a writer, director and choreographer who concealed his homosexuality in public, but wrote about it frankly in his private writings, which were publishable in Russia only after the fall of the Soviet Union.[5] A belated modernist, Kharitonov excelled at short, even fragmentary forms, with the expressive sensuality of a Joyce or a Proust. 'Racconto di un ragazzo: "Come sono diventato così"' is Napolitano's translation of 'Rasskaz odnogo mal'chika: kak ia stal takim', previously translated in-

[5] See Vitaly Chernetsky for a fuller account of Kharitonov, including a nuanced treatment of how Kharitonov engages with Rozanov, as well as Kharitonov's influence on a subsequent generation of queer writers in Russia, and the author's ambivalent depiction of Jews (Chernetsky 2007: 151–71).

to English by Kevin Moss as 'One Boy's Story: How I Got Like That' (Kharitonov 1997a). This is an account of sexual awakening in the Soviet period, more realist in style than many of his other works, yet alongside the explicit details, there are lyrical flourishes: Sasha takes a queer interest in Russia's medieval history and the lives of saints, and the narrator concludes by imagining him becoming a priest.

The second text, 'Volantino', a translation of 'Listovka', known in English as 'The Leaflet' (Kharitonov 1997b), is more typical of Kharitonov's style and shows a debt to Rozanov. This extraordinary text, no more than two pages long, is a manifesto for gay men as 'barren, fatal flowers', a people called to 'dance the dance of impossible love and to sing of it sweetly' (Kharitonov 1997b: 224–25), but heralding the end of the world. The manifesto is lyrical, playful, but also unsettling in places. The piece opens with an explicit parallel between gay men and Jews: both are oppressed yet chosen peoples; both excel in their own spheres (commerce and the feuilleton for the Jews; ballet and sensual arts for gay men). The stereotypes here, though presented ironically, remains uncomfortably ambivalent. Kharitonov's work was rediscovered in Russia in the mid-1990s and played an important role in the development of Russian queer life-writing, influencing figures such as Slava Mogutin. Kharitonov's writing deserves a wider readership and Napolitano's translations do a valuable service in bringing these works to an Italian audience.

The 'Materials' section includes two contemporary pieces prepared specially for this special issue. '*Greshniki*' is Peter Flew's lyrical reflection on the gay community in the 'half-light' of St Petersburg in the early 2000s, and on his own self-discovery through his relationships with Misha and Pavel (pseudonyms). Flew's lyrical piece depicts the shadowy, semi-secret nature of his encounters, yet it also offers a powerful demonstration of intimacy and its ability to transcend boundaries of language and culture. The second is an interview with Evgeny Pisemskiy, the director of an LGBT+ organization in Russia that was declared a 'foreign agent'. Pisemskiy shares his experiences as an activist in Russia, reflects on how the government's anti-gay laws affected his own life and work, and discusses his flight to seek refuge in the UK. Though divergent in style – Flew is delicate and evocative, where Pisemskiy is colourful and bold –

both pieces offer examples of gay men making transnational journeys that ultimately prove transformative. Flew recounts how Pavel and his mother made him a parting gift of a family icon of Tikhon Kaluzhskii, a fourteenth-century saint. The icon functions here not only as a window to the divine, but also a memento of a queer relationship, and the story of its journey to England offers a refreshing counterpoint to the Putinist view that Russian Orthodoxy provides a bulwark against an LGBTQ+ incursion from the West. Faith can unite, as well as divide.

'In the best way possible, I was a victim of propaganda', quips Pisemskiy, commenting on his personal journey as a gay man and an activist. Pisemskiy became infected with HIV through drug use, rather than sex, and seeking help from HIV support organizations led him to the LGBTQ+ community, to an acceptance of his own sexuality, and eventually to a life of community service. Pisemskiy explains how this work resulted in state persecution when the anti-gay laws were introduced: his organization was labelled a 'foreign agent' and he received personal threats, forcing his flight from Russia. Yet while the Russian state sought to exclude Pisemskiy, his life story is arguably deeply Russian, reflecting a canonical masterplot that sees great suffering as the root of personal transformation and the creation of new forms of community. This idea runs through Russian literature, from Alesha's speech at the stone at the end of Fedor Dostoevskii's *Brothers Karamazov* [Brat'ia Karamazovy, 1879–1880] to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's famous 'Bless you prison!' (Solzhenitsyn 1975: 617) statement in *The Gulag Archipelago* [Arkhipelag GULAG, written 1958–1968]. Seen in this light, Pisemskiy's narrative is not only a powerful individual testimony of a life of service, but also points the way towards a new, queer, more inclusive version of the Russian canon, and of Russianness itself.

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tury to the present day and from various parts of the LGBTQ+ spectrum. It has been a pleasure working with you all, and I have learnt a huge amount from reading your work and engaging in dialogue with you. I would also like to thank the twelve anonymous peer reviewers, all of whom provided valuable feedback and suggestions, helping to make the articles stronger.

Of course, this special issue extends into the 'Translations' and 'Materials' section of *AvtobiografiЯ* as well. Here, I would like to thank Martina Napolitano for her accomplished translations of Evgenii Kharitonov, Peter Flew for his evocative memoir of the gay community in St Petersburg in the early 2000s, and Evgeniy (Zhenya) Pisemsky for sharing his powerful personal story of activism in Russia and here in England. Zhenya has become a good friend, and our conversations have transformed my understanding of LGBTQ+ life and activism in Russia. My student intern, Callum Doyle, assisted me in interviewing Zhenya, and led on translating the interview into English. Matilda Hicklin, a PhD student here at Bristol generously volunteered help with the translation. Charlotte Hobson, Nick Mayhew, Claudia Olivieri, and Esther Jones Russell generously gave feedback on the materials and translations prior to publication. Thank you also to Raffaella Vassena, who edits the 'Materials' and 'Translations' section of this journal, for all your support.

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