

OTHER RUSSIAS

Homosexuality and the
Crisis of Post-Soviet Identity

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CHAPTER 1

RUSSIAN GAYS/WESTERN GAZE

MAPPING THE (HOMO)SEXUAL LANDSCAPE OF POST-SOVIET RUSSIA

An imaginative geography, in other words, governs the cultural differences related to civilizational contests and national or ethnic divisions (the East / West as Kipling understood it), as well as the world political contests of the Cold War, as perhaps Nikita Khrushchev or later Ronald Reagan rendered them.

—Timothy Brennan¹

When the first English edition of Ivan Bloch's *Sexual Life in England Past and Present* was published in 1938, the publisher seemed to feel an obligation to explain why a book on England written by a German should have been translated at all: "Readers might justifiably wonder why any publisher in this country should issue a history of English morals written by a foreign author."² The answer, he goes on in the preface to say, "is as simple as it is surprising. No comprehensive history of English morals in the English language has ever been published."³

Until the late 1980s, the same could be said of sexual life—in particular, homosexual life—in Russia, where the Soviet regime "repressed sex as a cultural language and commercial practice."⁴ Widespread sexophobia, if not explicit homophobia, created conditions both institutional (homosexual activity was criminalized from 1934–1993) and attitudinal that were adverse to public discussions and representations of same-sex desire. In 1989, a mother whose son had been imprisoned for homosexual activity complained in a letter to the weekly paper *Literaturnaia Gazeta* that she could find no one to ask for advice

while “our press maintains an embarrassed silence.”⁵ Moreover, she could find virtually no information on the subject in Russian medical literature. “Why,” she lamented, “is science silent?”⁶ This broad repression of sexual discourse has produced a variety of silences that has complicated attempts to map the landscape of male (homo)sexual desire in the Soviet period.⁷

That task was further complicated by the rarefied climate of the cold war, which made discussions of sexual life in Russia especially susceptible to Western fears and fantasies. “During 74 years of Soviet rule,” wrote Donovan Hohn in a review of contemporary Russian fiction, “Russia became a fantastic landscape in the American imagination, home simultaneously to Pasternak’s snow-covered dachas and Solzhenitsyn’s gulags, to gray-suited apparatchiks and gray-haired babushkas, to ballerinas and beautiful, murderous spies.”⁸ The few Western scholars who took on the topic of homosexuality in Russia during the Soviet period often found their work evaluated through the lens of political ideology, as either an apology for the Soviet Union or as anticommunist propaganda. The treatment of homosexuals was seen to gauge the modernity of the Soviet experiment.⁹

The politically charged atmosphere surrounding the issue was evident in a now-famous exchange that took place in the Gay Sunshine Press in the late 1970s. The “controversy” began with a charge leveled by Simon Karlinsky at John Lauritsen and David Thorstad, the authors of *The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1904–1935)*. Lauritsen and Thorstad exaggerated Soviet tolerance of homosexuality in the 1920s, Karlinsky asserted, through “ignorance or willful disregard of the historical facts,” basing their conclusions almost exclusively on official documents.¹⁰ Karlinsky’s criticism, alongside his belief that “Stalinist practices were indeed the logical outgrowth and extension of Bolshevism,” and his interpretation of the last two decades of tsarist rule as a kind of golden age for homosexuals and lesbians (reflecting the attitude that “gay is good”) led Lauritsen and Thorstad to brand the Berkeley professor a “cold warrior” and his thesis “anti-communist.”¹¹ Two years later, in an article titled “Revisionism Revised,” Karlinsky would state unequivocally that “viewed from a Russian perspective rather than through the prism of Western gullibility, the October Revolution of 1917 emerges as the event that halted the gradual dawning of gay visibility and acceptance of homosexuality in Russian society.”¹² However, that conclusion, Dan Healey notes, was “necessarily . . . founded on a limited base of published sources.”¹³

The end of the cold war led to the opening of Russian archives, permitting unprecedented access to official (legal documents and medical studies) and unofficial (diaries, letters, and samizdat literature) accounts of homosexuality in Russia. The availability of archival materials and the influence of 1970s revisionist social-historical interpretations of the Soviet period generated a number of excellent scholarly works, such as Laura Engelstein's *The Keys to Happiness: Sex and the Search for Modernity in Fin-de-siècle Russia* (1992), Eric Naiman's *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (1997), and Dan Healey's *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (2001). These studies challenge cold war interpretations by treating sexuality in the decades immediately before and after the October Revolution as a complex and contested discursive construction, deeply implicated in the way Russians imagined their relationship to modernity and the West.

While the opening of archives changed our views of the history of homosexuality in Russia, the opening of Russia's borders inaugurated a new period of Western contact with Russia's "sexual minorities." Already in the late 1980s, "American journalists and graduate students flooded the country," promising new representations of homosexuality in Russia that would no longer be restricted by the traditional political and ideological categories that had shaped Western perceptions during much of the cold war.¹⁴ Some Western scholars in the field of gay and lesbian studies hoped that Russia and the countries of Eastern Europe might provide local alternatives to the hegemonic model of gay and lesbian community that had been produced and institutionalized in America. As Ken Plummer wrote in 1992,

There are many countries—particularly in the African, Arabian, and Asian continents—where the globalization of homosexuality has hardly moved. And, although barriers are breaking down between East and West as I write, there are still many questions to be posed about homosexuality in the former Soviet Union. It would be dangerous to suggest a convergence in homosexual lifestyles across the world—into one true universal gayness. Further, each national and local culture brings its own richness, its own political strategies, its own uniqueness. Along with globalization comes an intensification of the local.¹⁵

Plummer's comments, in situating the opposition of local versus global along the traditional East-West divide, with Russia poised on the border, begged the question: Would the capital of world communism become a local alternative?

The Russian feminist scholar Olga Lipovskaya has argued that in the ideological vacuum created by the end of the cold war, “we have started to create a new mythology on both sides: East and West.”¹⁶ While the new world order did appear to be organized around the opposition of East and West, this “mythology” was far from new. “It was Western Europe that invented Eastern Europe,” writes Jeffrey Wolff, “as its complementary other half” in a model imagined geographically in terms of core and periphery.¹⁷ Eastern Europe, as a culturally constructed unity, was identified as economically and culturally backward and situated between the enlightened and developed West and a barbarous, backward East. “It was Eastern Europe’s location, within Europe but not fully European,” Wolff notes, “that called for such notions as backwardness and development to mediate between the poles of civilization and barbarism.”¹⁸ The invention of Eastern Europe allowed the West to imagine the alterity between itself and the East along a scale of development, which provided the West with “its first model of underdevelopment, a concept that we now apply all over the globe.”¹⁹

Russians, uncomfortable with being consigned to the political and economic periphery in the developmental model of East and West, imagined alternatives. Leon Trotsky’s theory of “combined development,” for example, provided Russia with a theoretical explanation for what it hoped would be a shortcut to modernity.²⁰ The economic and political development that occurred in the West sequentially, in stages, Trotsky argued, coexisted in Russia, making possible Russia’s immediate transition to socialism. Russians also challenged the sexual geography produced by the East-West binarism, imagining instead what Dan Healey describes as a “tripartite geography of perversity.” This geography, contends Healey, produced a “comparatively innocent Russia interpolated between a ‘civilized’ Europe and a decidedly ‘primitive’ or ‘backward’ East, [which] permitted and permits Russians to imagine their nation as universally, naturally, and purely heterosexual.”²¹

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, pornography, erotica, and talk of sex and sexuality (including homosexuality) flooded the media, presenting a serious challenge to that tripartite geography. It turned out that, in Laura Engelstein’s words, “There is sex in Russia—and always was.”²² A Russia that was neither innocent nor sexless (nor entirely heterosexual) lost its unique position within the tripartite geography described above and was increasingly imagined within a more traditional geography of East and West. When Russia is situated on the periphery of Western Europe, with its modern, egalitarian homosexuality (the “global gay”), the Russian “gay” community appears as

underdeveloped or in transition. On the other hand, when Russia is situated in the East, where sexuality was imagined as premodern—that is, not yet institutionalized as gay or straight—(homo)sexuality there appears to be radically different, polymorphous, a potential erotic alternative to the Western model of exclusive hetero and homosexual desire.

This geography of (homo)sexuality dovetails rather neatly with a divergence in Western theoretical approaches to the study of homosexuality, which have also been imagined as a geography: “The one [tradition is] largely psychoanalytic and European in character, the other more sociological and most developed in America.”²³ Dennis Altman describes the first tradition as stressing, “as did Freud, the inherent polymorphous nature of sexual desire. . . . The other tradition, clearly the dominant if often unarticulated view of most gay Americans, stresses the existence of a separate homosexual identity, culture, and lifestyle and blurs the links to sexuality in general.”²⁴ Theory and practice are hopelessly entwined to the extent that Europe and America are seen to denote not simply the geographic origins of these theoretical discourses but the sites at which they are most fully institutionalized and embodied. In any case, as global gay culture with its presumption and projection of a separate homosexual identity becomes more visible in Western Europe (Amsterdam now vies with New York and San Francisco as the capital of the “global gay”), it comes as no surprise, perhaps, that the border dividing sexual identity and polymorphous sexuality would move farther east.²⁵ Eastern Europe, and Russia, in particular, have become contested ground in the theoretical debates over the nature and future of (homo)sexuality.

The first Western dispatches from post-Soviet Russia tended to celebrate the new visibility and liberation of gays and lesbians and the birth of a Russian gay and lesbian subculture. David Tuller writes, “I was one of the cheerleaders who, as a journalist, transmitted news of these happy developments back home [to America]. The implications were clear: with a little help, and sooner than we thought, the Russian gay movement and community would come to look more or less like our own.”²⁶ However, Daniel P. Schluter noticed that while Western reports on homosexuality in Russia in the early 1990s “generally seem to support the notion that gay community institutions are forming, read closely and objectively, actually they show a very mixed record of results.”²⁷ Enthusiastic headlines proclaiming the liberation of Russian gays were often followed by reports documenting the continued intolerance of Russian society and the reluctance of Russian gays and

lesbians to engage in activism. "That contradiction in these reports," Schluter concludes, "is what is most accurate about them."²⁸

Eastern European feminists also cautioned that optimism over the "transition" was distorting reports on gender-related issues. Dimitrina Petrovna argued that many media claims regarding Eastern European women were wrong, namely, that "the revolutions of 1989 opened up a transitional period—transition from totalitarianism to democracy, [and that] this transition implied a positive change in women's situation."²⁹ Western accounts of the transition period were marred, Stephen F. Cohen argued in *The Nation*, by the general tendency on the part of Western journalists to get Russia wrong. According to a 1996 survey, American correspondents in Moscow admitted to looking at events there "through the prism of their own expectations and beliefs."³⁰ Western journalists in the 1990s, as Cohen puts it, "were certain Russia needed the 'same basic model' that America had [and] worried constantly that Russia might opt instead for a 'path of its own confused devising.'"³¹

By the mid 1990s, it had become clear that there would be no broad-based gay and lesbian activist movement in Russia: gay and lesbian organizations were plagued by infighting, still relied heavily on Western financial support, were unable to sustain their publications, and failed to attract significant membership. Elizabeth Wolfe summed up the situation in Russia's largest English-language newspaper, the *Moscow Times*: "Many gays and lesbians in Moscow agree that no movement exists and opinions are divided over whether it should, or could."³² Although it had been only a few years since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the repeal in 1993 of Article 121 of the Criminal Code, which criminalized sodomy, it appeared that enough time had passed to declare that the Western model of gay and lesbian activism had failed in Russia, at least for the time being. Schluter, like a number of other Russia-watchers, concluded that Russia was "like America in about the 1940s and 1950s" and would need more time to develop community institutions.³³ While Schluter's collected his survey data in 1991, he published his book in 2002, which allowed him to evaluate his data with the 20/20 vision of hindsight: "Taken as a whole, events in the ensuing period have supported both my conclusion and my prediction."³⁴

While some Western observers lamented the failure of an American-style gay and lesbian movement in Russia, others were ready to see in Russia an alternative and liberating construction of sexual desire. In his book *Same-Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe*, the historian John Boswell includes two photographs from twentieth-century Russia.

One is a photograph of the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev kissing the East German chancellor, Eric Honecker, on the lips; the other is a Soviet postage stamp from 1968 “showing the grateful reception by the peasantry of Russian soldiers returning from World War II,” also involving a kiss on the lips.³⁵ The stamp, Boswell explains, “was not shocking to Russians, who entertained less horror of homosexual interaction than did their Western contemporaries.”³⁶ While Boswell may be correct in saying that Russians would not have been shocked by this ritualized greeting, it does not necessarily follow that Russians are more tolerant of homosexual interaction (in fact, survey data suggest otherwise). Michel Foucault and other scholars, especially those who study the history of homosexuality or homosexuality outside the developed West, note that “homosexuality as a distinct category is historically linked to the disappearance of male friendship.”³⁷ This would suggest that the persistence of practices linked to traditional male friendship, such as kissing on the lips, attests not to a tolerance of homosexual interaction but to the absence in Soviet society of homosexuality as a distinct and visible category.

In his introduction Boswell justifies including photographs of *modern* Russia in a book about *premodern* Europe by arguing that romantic love is a construct of modern (i.e., Western) Europe and that its corollary—a horror of homosexuality—is not known in cultures on the other side of this “epistemological divide,” which include “residents of the Middle East, South-East Asia, Russia, other parts of Asia, and South America.”³⁸ However, the only research Boswell cites to support his claim in regards to Russia is, bizarrely enough, Louis Luzbetak’s 1951 study *Marriage and the Family in Caucasia: A Contribution to the Study of North Caucasian Ethnology and Customary Law*. Boswell, it seems, conflates Russia with her colonial possessions in the Caucasus.

Boswell situates this epistemological divide not only geographically along the traditional, sexualized axis of East and West but also historically along the axis of premodern and modern. The East is, Boswell contends, largely free of that “salient horror of homosexuality characteristic of the West since the fourteenth century.”³⁹ Throughout his introduction Boswell suggests a profound epistemological resemblance between the “other [contemporary] cultures” mentioned above and “premodern Western societies,”⁴⁰ thus situating the alterity of those contemporary cultures in our own past. Russia, it appears, resembles Western Europe before the fourteenth century, that is, before the advent of modern homophobia.

In his introduction to *The Penguin Book of International Gay Writing*, the American writer David Leavitt expresses a similar dissatisfaction with the American obsession with labels and naming, preferring instead what he calls the European concern with “experience itself.”⁴¹ “For the surprising thing,” Leavitt contends, “is that not naming can often prove to be as shocking—if not more so—as naming. To allow experience simply to happen on the page—to ascribe to it a factitious innocence that the world will not allow—is to unshackle that experience from centuries of persecutions and disguise.”⁴² In support of this position, he quotes from the novel *It’s Me—Eddie* (*Eto ia—Edichka*, 1979), by the Russian author Eduard Limonov. In discussing the narrator of the novel, Leavitt writes, “Unlike the Americans he encounters, he would never call himself ‘gay’ or even ‘bisexual,’ yet he is willing to pose questions from which even the most ‘out’ among us would shrink.”⁴³

In *One Hot Summer in St. Petersburg*, the British author Duncan Fallowell also represents Russian (homo)sexuality in post-Soviet Russia as an erotically liberating alternative to Western-style gay identity. His novelistic travel account is the result of time spent in St. Petersburg in the early 1990s, when Russian society was undergoing rapid and dramatic changes. For Fallowell, who does not speak Russian, Russia is a libidinous place, a hallucinatory psychosexual landscape of seething passions, and Petersburg is an “improbable dream city,” “the sexiest town I’ve ever been in.”⁴⁴ According to one Russian he meets, in Russia “the unconscious is in volcanic eruption.”⁴⁵ Fallowell’s description of Russia evokes all the traditional “oriental” motifs: it is inscrutable and erotically charged. Fallowell’s Russia is clearly situated on the other side of the epistemological divide drawn by Boswell. “I think Russia is very funky,” writes Fallowell. “I didn’t think it would be. But it’s the funkiest place in the world.”⁴⁶ Even Ivan the Terrible appears queer: “I think Ivan [the Terrible] has his funky aspects. For example, he took both male and female lovers.”⁴⁷ Such a portrayal of Russia is perhaps partially determined by the author’s first encounter with Russian culture—a recording of Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade*, which he heard at the age of 13 and which “slaughtered” him with its “intoxicating power.”⁴⁸ This Russian evocation of the exotic East becomes for Fallowell an evocation of Russia’s own exoticism: “The effect of this music was not at all to act as an introduction to the *Arabian Nights* or the Islamic world, but to imprint on my imagination the idea of St. Petersburg as a place ineffably fabulous.”⁴⁹

The object of Fallowell’s romantic interest, which is the book’s organizing principle, is a nineteen-year-old Russian, Dmitrii, who is

serving in the army and claims “never to sleep with men.” He makes an exception for the English visitor, and after they have had sexual contact, Fallowell’s experience of Russia changes. The author now feels that he has “connected” with Russia, that he is no longer merely a tourist: “The luminous pieces come together and fuse. My life here achieves focus, meaning, direction.”⁵⁰ He adds a few pages later, “There is a confidence now. I feel earthed, connected, thoroughly entitled to be here.”⁵¹ The experience of the foreign is entirely eroticized. Finding himself an object of flirtation from virtually every Russian he meets, he declares, “They can’t help it with foreigners.”⁵² Conflating sex and tourism, he concludes that “the secret of the chance [sexual] encounter [is] to take a holiday from yourself.”⁵³

In the end, however, Fallowell locates his disorientation and liberation not in the experience of travel but in the experience of Russian-ness. He explains why Russia is so liberating for him near the end of his book, in a lengthy and disconnected series of thoughts on Russia, the point of which is that Russians inhabit identities less rigidly than Westerners do. “People’s sense of identity is liquid,” Fallowell writes, “Russia itself is a liquid.”⁵⁴ Although he is referring here to identity in general, he makes clear throughout his book that sexual identity in particular is more fluid there than in the West. The evidence is the willingness of Dmitrii to sleep with Fallowell, a Westerner who showers him with gifts and promises to arrange a trip for him to London.

Another Westerner who went to Russia in the early 1990s hoping to experience “a world (I imagined) of fraternal affection, bonding, and the odd dip into homoeroticism,” was the Canadian filmmaker Steve Kokker, an avowed “military chaser.”⁵⁵ The romantic image he had of a “sexually fluid generation” was, however, challenged by the harsh realities of post-Soviet life. As Andrei, one of Steve’s native informants, explains, “In the case of young sailors and soldiers, I know many who sleep with men simply because they have no money. I mean, imagine getting next to nothing for six months! It’s as if our social structures are leading young military men into homosexual prostitution.”⁵⁶ Nonetheless intrigued by what he perceived to be a different, more fluid, relationship between male friendship and homosexuality, Kokker hoped to capture that peculiarity of Russian culture in a documentary film.

In that film, which he titled *Berioza (The Birch Tree, 1995)*, he and a Russian friend, Sasha, invite a handsome young soldier, Nikolai, back to Steve’s apartment with the lure of vodka and a place to stay. An effusive Russian from the provinces, Nikolai is willing to pose for Steve’s camera. Shirtless and wearing a holster across his shoulders,

he flexes his athletic body while Steve films him. Later, when Nikolai, lying next to Steve in his bed, says “good night” matter-of-factly and turns over to go to sleep, Steve is perplexed. He then proceeds to offer Nikolai a massage, but when he makes a sexual advance, Nikolai puts an immediate and unequivocal stop to it. Steve, it seems, had incorrectly interpreted Nikolai’s sociability, and at their next meeting, Nikolai, now uncomfortable and distant, insists that he has never felt homosexual attraction and cannot understand homosexuality between men, which he has never witnessed before. He insists that there was none of that in Kamchatka, where he grew up, or in the military academy where he now studies. Kokker underscores his own confusion by splicing into this final interview scenes of an exuberant—and somewhat intoxicated—Nikolai showing off for the camera: Hadn’t this behavior suggested an openness to homosexual relations?

Two years later a somewhat more leery Kokker returned to this subject in his film *Komrades!* (1997). As in *Berieza*, Kokker attempts to explore the relationship between the Russian culture of male interaction and bonding, or homosociality, and homosexuality. The film is organized around a series of interviews Kokker conducts with Russian soldiers he has invited back to his apartment, offering them food, vodka, a bed, and a shower. After showering, they are interviewed one at a time in a rather provocative pose: They lie on their stomachs naked atop Kokker’s bed, suggesting that the friendly hijinks of the young soldiers might lead naturally and unselfconsciously into sexual contact, as it does in countless locker room scenes in gay pornography.⁵⁷ However, when Kokker raises the issue of homosexuality, their reaction is no less unequivocal and a good deal more violent than Nikolai’s. One of the soldiers explains that they are infuriated by homosexuals because homosexuals are “on the outside” (like Nikolai, they seem to believe that there are no gay people in the military) and so could sleep with women but choose not to, while they—the soldiers—want to sleep with women but can’t. And so, he tells Kokker, when they come across homosexuals, they beat them up. This admission is certainly one of the reasons the reviewer of the film on the Web site <http://www.filethirteen.com> describes it as both “homoerotic and disturbing.”

The idea that Russians do not recognize and inhabit exclusive and restrictive sexual identities (such as gay and straight)—for which Kokker failed to find and record the confirmation he so earnestly sought—is a thread that runs through the work of many of the writers and scholars from the West who have attempted to understand the construction of (homo)sexuality in Russia. Tuller, chronicling his experiences in post-Soviet Russia, provides historical and political background,

accounts of gay and lesbian activism, and portraits of individual Russians who represent for the author different and often contradictory examples of the construction of (homo)sexual desire. Six major characters—Sveta and Lena, Ksiusha and Volodya, Kevin Gardner and Tuller himself—as well as a host of casual acquaintances, describe their (homo)sexuality in a variety of ways that challenge and confuse many of the assumptions Tuller held when he arrived.

Gardner, Tuller's roommate, is a dedicated American AIDS activist who points out that the absence of a gay and lesbian community in Russia complicates AIDS prevention. His Western-style activism serves as a foil to Tuller's increasing sensitivity to the cultural specificity of (homo)sexual desire in Russia. Tuller's travels in Russia challenge his concept of the universal applicability of gay and lesbian identity politics and enact a cultural confrontation between an educated, white, urban American gay man and a Russian (homo)sexual culture that has developed in a vastly different discursive landscape—shaped by repressive political, legal, and medical institutions on the one hand and by unofficial networks of close-knit friends and anonymous sexual contacts on the other. Tuller attempts to rein in his fantasies with accounts of the difficulties faced by Russians: "It would have been easy to romanticize the secret pleasures of a divided existence had I not also witnessed the damage it wrought."⁵⁸ The divided existence to which he refers is one that is split between closeted homosexuality and the heterosexual world of marriage and children. Tuller punctuates his personal journey of sexual liberation—he falls in love with a lesbian and dresses in drag for the first time—with chilling insights into the dangers faced by homosexuals in post-Soviet Russia. He includes, for example, the results of a 1989 survey of public opinion that recorded intense hostility toward homosexuality, with over 30 percent of the respondents expressing the view that homosexuals should be "liquidated" and almost as many wanting them "isolated."⁵⁹

Sveta and Lena are among the first Russians Tuller meets. They are a lesbian couple who have been together for years, and while they support the repeal of the law criminalizing homosexual activity, they reject activism and regret the increasing visibility of gays and lesbians in Russia. As Lena puts it, "I don't want to fight for the rights of lesbians—they never repressed lesbians here because no one ever knew that they existed. . . . No, the problems for lesbians only start when they fight for their rights. Because now the Russian public knows the word. They know that lesbians exist."⁶⁰ While reluctant to support a gay and lesbian activist movement, Lena nonetheless declares that she "has attained some kind of lesbian identity," complicating any simple

correlation between a rejection of activist politics and a rejection of exclusive gay and lesbian identities.⁶¹

Lena and Sveta represent one explanation for the failure of gay and lesbian activism in Russia while providing an example of a lesbian lifestyle easily recognized by a Westerner. Not so Ksyusha and Vitya, who represent for Tuller the “fascinating, troubling inscrutability of [Russian] identity.”⁶² Their sexuality not only challenges Tuller’s assumption about homosexual desire but inspires new desires in him. Vitya is a man who is attracted to lesbians and so defines himself as “an inverted male-to-female transsexual.”⁶³ Tuller is surprised by Vitya’s story—“It was weirder than anything I had imagined”—and confused: “His confession unsettled me: this tall, sexy man . . . a lesbian transsexual?”⁶⁴

Ksyusha, too, comes to represent for Tuller the radical alterity of sexuality in Russia. Ksyusha is, in Tuller’s own words, “a lusty, haunted dyke” whose sexual appeal attracts men and women alike and who refuses to restrict her sexual liaisons to members of one sex; she also inspires in Tuller “an unexpected longing . . . somewhere deep within.”⁶⁵ Ksyusha and Vitya (along with Masha Gessen, “a walking contradiction” for Tuller) challenge Tuller’s conception of Western (homo)sexual orthodoxy: “But in America, the land of the free, the binary concept of sexuality has still held sway. A person was either homo or hetero, and the laws of identity politics demanded an unambiguous declaration; . . . only the growing number of self-styled queer activists appeared eager to defy altogether the imperative to categorize.”⁶⁶ With obvious irony, Tuller declares that the “land of the free” isn’t as free as we think; he realizes while in Russia that “sexuality is far more subtle than the rigid categories, the concrete bunkers, that we create to circumscribe it” in the West and invites us here to read Russia as queer *avant la lettre*.⁶⁷ “For through my travels and interviews,” Tuller explains, “and, especially, my weekends at the dacha—where we partied, chugged vodka, and chatted all night—I experienced, in startling and unexpected ways, a different kind of sexual freedom than I had found in the golden gay enclaves of New York and San Francisco.”⁶⁸ Edmund White praises Tuller’s account for “the alternative it presents to American-style lesbian and gay culture.”⁶⁹

The combination of familiar and inscrutable elements leads Tuller to situate Russia at the midpoint of the traditional, ideologically charged East-West continuum: “In the end, Russians fascinated me because, ever squeezed between East and West, they seemed recognizable enough to render mutual understanding possible—and so alien that full comprehension always eluded my grasp.”⁷⁰ Sexually, this in-betweenness appears to be reflected in, among other things,

the surprising number of bisexuals Tuller meets there—so many, in fact, “I figured they couldn’t all be making it up.”⁷¹ By constructing Russia, or some part of it, as radically different from the West, Tuller avoids the blatant imperialism of first-generation post-Soviet Russia-watchers, who saw the country’s salvation in its adoption of Western values and models, while reflecting his personal discontent with the construction of sexuality in the West.

In *A Queer Geography* Frank Browning expresses a similar discontent: “Somehow the exclusionary categories of gay and straight that I had constructed in my mind prevented me—and I believe a vast number of my generation—from enjoying multiple desires in multiple ways.”⁷² He, too, found liberating alternatives abroad. The emphasis here on freeing one’s own personal erotic potential leads Browning to declare in his introduction to Tuller’s book that “even more fascinating [than the emergence of a visible gay and lesbian subculture in Russia] is what happened to the personal gay world of David Tuller, Castro resident and partisan, who came back from Mother Russia changed in how he understood and experienced his own sexual passions.”⁷³ Ignoring Tuller’s ambivalence and reservations, Browning imagines Russia rather like nineteenth-century British and French writers and travelers imagined the Orient as “a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe” (or, in this case, America).⁷⁴

Laura Essig’s *Queer in Russia: A Story of Sex, Self, and Other* is also the product of time spent in Russia in the early 1990s. Essig, a sociologist, sets ambitious goals for herself in this book: to examine gay activism in Russia in the late 1980s and early 1990s; to present a history of queer sexualities in Russia throughout the twentieth century, offering a periodization à la Foucault; and finally, to suggest the limits of her own theoretical models. In doing so Essig seeks to fill a very serious gap in scholarship on gay life in Russia, produced by the fact that until only recently Russian scholars have been largely uncomfortable with the subject while Western scholars have often ignored Russia in their compilations, anthologies, and histories. The leading Russian sexologist, Igor Kon, noted in the preface to his book *The Sexual Revolution in Russia*, “The current Russian sexual scene is described mainly by journalists, who do not offer any serious historical or sociological analysis.”⁷⁵

Essig raises a number of important issues that must be confronted in any discussion of (homo)sexuality in Russia but does not always provide convincing evidence to support her claims. For example, in discussing the policy of the Soviet medical establishment, wherein women sexually attracted to women were often diagnosed as “transsexuals”

and then given the necessary permission to undergo a sex-change operation, she ignores the important work on the subject by A. I. Belkin and I. V. Golubeva, among others. Moreover, she relies heavily on the research and opinions of Dmitrii Isaev (as does Tuller), which are in fact, according to Igor Kon, of marginal significance in the Russian medical establishment.⁷⁶

Essig's main contacts were Moscow-based activists, many self-proclaimed radicals, such as Evgeniia Debrianskaia and Yaroslav Mogutin, who had been exposed to Western theoretical writing on sexuality and to Western gay and lesbian communities. Her reliance on these activists is perhaps too great as they tend to overshadow accounts of gay and lesbian life outside the two capitals—St. Petersburg and Moscow—and those from nonactivists. Moreover, their criticism of American-style gay and lesbian activism before it had a chance to take root in Russia can be seen as evidence of what Engelstein has described as the “precocious dissatisfaction” of Russian intellectuals, who in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “produced a critique of capitalism and bourgeois culture before either had a chance to develop on Russian soil.”⁷⁷ In any case, it is certainly misleading to read critiques of the Western model of gay and lesbian community by radicals alongside the reluctance of provincial gays to come out, as evidence of a common rejection of gay and straight identities.

A more fundamental problem, however, involves the theoretical concepts Essig employs. She researched and wrote the book at a very specific moment in the evolution of queer theory, when a theoretical assault was being mounted on the idea of gay and lesbian identities. Invoking Judith Butler's critique of gay and straight identity as elaborated in her concept of performativity, Essig presents Russia as the embodiment of that critique—Russians are uncomfortable with exclusive gay and straight identities and, therefore, are “queer” (a term for which there is no real Russian equivalent).⁷⁸ She then focuses on “public” acts of queerness—which range from male homosexuals referring to each other with feminine pronouns to her own dressing in male drag. She does mention in her introduction two women acquaintances who live together as a couple and define themselves as lesbians (like Tuller's friends Lena and Sveta) but excludes them from her study as they are not “out” in public. By ignoring closeted gays and lesbians and by describing Russian resistance to Western-style identity politics as “queer,” Essig produces Russia as sexually radical.

Overall, Essig's work is marked by a profound ambivalence over the central thesis that gay and lesbian identities have failed to emerge in post-Soviet Russia. At one moment Essig appears to lament the fact;

the next, to celebrate it. On the one hand, she admits that the concept of fixed gay and lesbian identities has been politically valuable in the West, and so she regrets their absence in Russia. On the other hand, drawing on the queer critique of exclusive gay and straight identities, Essig interprets their absence in very positive, almost utopian, terms. She imagines Russia—as Boswell, Leavitt, Tuller and Fallowell have done—as the land that, happily, sexual identity forgot. Sexual subjectivity—the term Essig uses to describe (homo)sexual desire that is not constructed and constricted by the gay and straight binarism—is presented as a liberating alternative to homo and hetero identities: “Sexuality in Russia is too fluid to be ‘trapped’” and “subjectivity is not nearly as strict a taskmistress as identity.”⁷⁹ She describes “true identity” somewhat scornfully as conferring “safety,” contradicting her earlier argument that identity constructs gays and lesbians as targets of legal and medical intervention,⁸⁰ and considers Western treatment of transsexualism as more repressive than the Russian: “The Russian experts are more likely to categorize individual bodies as incorrectly sexed, rather than forcing every body into the hetero/homosexual divide of our own society.”⁸¹ She ignores the fact that the Russian approach to transsexualism was built on the not-so-queer belief in the perfect alignment of gender with biology, not to mention the superiority of the masculine over the feminine. Essig concludes that “it is not obvious that a system that offers only two sociosexual choices (straight or gay—and sometimes bi) is more liberating than one that offers other possibilities. We all wear our own straightjackets.”⁸²

In a rhapsodic passage from the book’s final chapter, Essig admits to having been influenced in her depiction of Russia by a desire to find an alternative to Western gay and straight identities: “This is a record, *perhaps a fantasy*, of a world of multiple desires and flexible identities that was not yet colonized by Western notions of sex and its meaning. I will leave it to future scholars to decide whether that world has disappeared forever.”⁸³ If the Russian construction of (homo)sexual desire may be receding into the past, the victim of Western colonization or at least development, elsewhere it appears as an image of our future, as, for example, when Essig uses Dana Haraway’s term “post-identity politics” to describe the work of Russian activists, which she finds illustrative of the “coalitional and contingent politics envisioned by many postidentity thinkers.”⁸⁴ Russia is alternately premodern (innocent of Western colonization) and postmodern (emblematic of a world from which gay and straight identities have been eliminated). Had Russia perhaps skipped a stage in its sexual history, moving directly from premodern polymorphous sexuality to queer?

That Essig's Russia is indeed part fantasy is suggested by the results of Schluter's research. He surveyed over 400 Soviet citizens in 1990–91, and 72.5 percent identified themselves as "gay" [*goluboi*], 24.2 percent identified themselves as bisexual, and only 1.9 percent made use of the category "other."⁸⁵ Moreover, he discovered that almost 65 percent of those surveyed were "out" to someone, and most had come out on their own initiative. The number out at work was significantly lower than the number out to nongay friends or family members, which almost certainly reflects a lack of protection from workplace discrimination.⁸⁶ Lest the violence of Russian homophobia be lost in a vision of erotic liberation, over 31.4 percent of those surveyed claimed to have been victims of gay-bashing, and 12.1 percent would not say.⁸⁷

In the final section of the book, Essig sets out to critically examine the theoretical categories she uses and to "break down the division between 'truth' and 'fiction'" upon which her work apparently rests by introducing a piece of fiction into her study of (homo)sexual desire in Russia.⁸⁸ The fictional account presented by Essig involves a dream in which the narrator—a non-Russian, presumably Essig herself—meets a Central Asian woman whom she initially takes to be a man. Significantly, there are no Russians in this piece of fiction, which purports to unveil something about the private sexual selves of Russians. Essig, in her final chapter does for Russians what the concept of sexual subjectivity would do for gays and lesbians: she erases them.⁸⁹ Ironically, in doing so she reproduces that geography of perversity (an innocent—here, absent—Russia between a decadent West and a debauched East) that produces Russia as the heterosexual alternative.

HOMOSEXUALITIES

It is clear that the traditional opposition of East and West may continue to structure the Western gaze, producing by-now-familiar patterns of blindness and insight, whether we employ the original developmental model (an enlightened West as goal for a backward East) or invert it (a premodern East as an erotic alternative to a modern West). However, we can resist this mental mapping of East and West. For instance, we can refuse to homogenize either Russia or the United States. Both Tuller and Essig present a rather simplistic picture of America, one that looks very much like New York or San Francisco, against which Russia appears very different indeed. In fact, one of the first comparisons Tuller makes of Russia and the West is based on a handful of Russians he meets at a conference and the "admittedly unscientific sampling of

my acquaintances back home."⁹⁰ One need only look at Neil Miller's *In Search of Gay America* to find other versions of the gay and lesbian experience in the States. In Selma, Alabama, for example, not a single gay or lesbian resident was willing to meet with the author, despite a pledge of anonymity. Furthermore, "all but one of the seven or eight gay men [Miller's contact in Selma] was acquainted with had wives and, in most cases, children," and "there were no gay bars in Selma, no gay, lesbian, or feminist groups, and no gathering place."⁹¹ Stephen O. Murray makes the point that "not all of those involved in homosexual behavior consider themselves or are considered by others as *homosexual* (Reiss 1961, Humphreys 1975, Weinberg 1978), even in a city such as contemporary San Francisco in which *gay* is clearly recognized as a category for persons, some of who are involved in formal lesbigay organizations."⁹² And, as Kokker's Russian informant reminds the Canadian, "in America it's only in certain cities, in certain areas where gays are free to act openly."⁹³ Reducing homosexuality in the West to the "gay ghettos" of large urban centers ignores the variety of homosexualities there and encourages us to look for alternative constructions of (homo)sexual desire in foreign lands.

The tendency to reduce the range of homosexual experience in the West is often accompanied by a tendency to reduce the varied theoretical landscape of the West, ignoring an increasingly audible critique of the ethnic model of gay and lesbian identity, one that is reflected in, among other things, the birth of queer studies. Moreover, that critique is by no means limited to the academy. Marjorie Garber documents the opposition to the rigid categories of identity politics launched by bisexuals in the early 1990s: "Bisexuality—and even now the much-recycled concept of 'bisexual chic'—has moved steadily into the mainstream, fueled by music videos, talk shows, sitcoms, and advertising, as well as sexual practices."⁹⁴ Camille Paglia has argued that "a gay versus straight opposition simply perpetuates a false dualism. . . . Surely the real revolution is to establish the fluid continuum of human sexuality and to win acceptance from heterosexuals of the presence of pleasure-promising homosexual impulses in themselves."⁹⁵ Stacey D'Erasmus asks, "Has sexual identity—gay, straight or bi—outlived its usefulness?"⁹⁶ This certainly challenges Tuller's assessment that very few in the United States are willing "to defy altogether the imperative to categorize." Acknowledging the critique of gay and lesbian identity within contemporary Western discourse on (homo)sexuality may also help to problematize the construction of Russia as the "queer" Other of the West.

The mapping of (homo)sexual desire in a nation that spans eleven time zones, that contains a variety of ethnic peoples and cultural

traditions, and whose population is increasingly stratified along lines of class, region, and education is not a simple task. The increasing availability of survey data and the proliferation of Russian discourse on the topic of (homo)sexuality in the late 1990s points to the necessity of speaking of Russian homosexualities or, as Lev Klein puts it, borrowing a term used by Mikhail Bakhtin, “a polyphony of homosexuality.”⁹⁷ Even a cursory glance at the statistics and the discourse reveals that various models of homosexual desire coexist in a discontinuous and nonunitary way—as they do in the West;⁹⁸ that the use of terminology to describe (homo)sexuality is not consistent and much of it is borrowed from the West and is often used “to describe a rather different reality”;⁹⁹ and that the question of homosexuality is for Russians often inseparable from the burning question of Russia’s place in the new world order and of Russia’s relationship to modernity itself.

Moreover, for many Russians in the early postcommunist years, the material conditions were not present to support the expression of an exclusive “gay” identity. Among other things, the shortage of housing throughout Russia and the absence of safe gathering places, such as bars and clubs almost everywhere except in Moscow and St. Petersburg, not to mention the absence of legal protections, work against gay and lesbian visibility. Essig acknowledges that “the current economic and societal crises . . . have stifled the growth of queer identity politics,” noting in particular the absence of “‘gay’ geographic spaces” and a “‘gay’ economic base,” but then goes on to list the absence of a “clearly defined identity around which to organize” as the most important factor of all.¹⁰⁰ Here Essig places “gay” identity itself among the material conditions that would support its emergence, as if a fully formed identity could precede those conditions.¹⁰¹

ROLES AND IDENTITIES

While acknowledging the heterogeneity of Russian discourse on (homo)sexuality, the Western observer may nonetheless be struck by the conspicuousness of sex roles (active and passive) in the articulation of (homo)sexual desire by Russians across the political spectrum.¹⁰² Imagined in terms of traditional gender categories, active and passive sex roles are often seen to define one’s character, behavior, and appearance, and serve to confirm cross-gender—that is, heterosexual—attraction as natural and dominant, even among members of the same biological sex. Moreover, these roles can appear no less rigid and exclusive than the Western categories of straight and gay that Essig and Tuller bemoan.¹⁰³ “Homosexuals (male and female),” writes

Enikeeva in *Sexual Pathology*, a work typical of post-Soviet popular psychology, “are divided into active (that is, playing the male role) and passive (playing the female role).”¹⁰⁴ While some are able to switch roles, “in the majority of cases,” Enikeeva asserts, “there is a stable preference for a specified role.”¹⁰⁵ She then goes on to explain that these roles are reflected in one’s appearance, personality, and choice of occupation and warns that heterosexual men who play the passive role in a homosexual relationship are as a consequence deprived “of all initiative and freedom of choice,” making it impossible for them to leave the relationship and reenter into heterosexual relations.¹⁰⁶ A sex role, it seems, is destiny. This is certainly no less an identity than the “egalitarian” one produced by the modern gay and straight opposition. Nevertheless, as recently as 2006, the Russianist Luc Beaudoin declared that the “gendered construction of Russian gay men is somewhat more fluid [than the construction of American gay male identity], drawing from the masochistic well of sexualized suffering.”¹⁰⁷

Olga Zhuk suggests that the Soviet gulag system is responsible for the pervasiveness of the active-passive model of (homo)sexuality in Russian culture. A significant portion of the population passed through Soviet prison camps, where they witnessed or experienced this most extreme and violent form of (homo)sexuality based on sex roles and articulated in terms of gender and power.¹⁰⁸ Harlow Robinson noted that, “even today, most Russians tend to perceive homosexual couples in rigid ‘active-passive’ categories that developed and flourished throughout the GULAG.”¹⁰⁹ The same theory was put forward by Kokker’s Russian informant Denis; and Klein, too, insists that the culture of the gulag exerts an enormous influence on all of Russian culture.¹¹⁰ The idea that the gulag not only influenced the construction of homosexuality but also the number of homosexuals in Russia was advanced by Yaroslav Mogutin, who made the rather extravagant claim that the gulag has produced twice as many gays in Russia than there are in “more normal countries.”¹¹¹ Another, more probable, legacy of the gulag was pointed out by Robinson: the association of homosexuality “in the minds of most people with criminality and punishment.”¹¹² Evidence of this can be seen in the preference of Russians for the legal-judicial term *gomoseksualist* over the medical term *gomoseksual*.¹¹³

It bears mentioning that sex roles as they are practiced in prisons are deeply sexist in that it is the passive “female” role that is stigmatized. As Klein recounts: “it’s only the passive role that’s reprehensible”; “[to the lowest caste] belonged many of those who had ended up in prison on sexual grounds (especially those imprisoned for sexual perversions, always as the passive partner)”; and “active partners even in prison enjoy

higher status than their passive counterparts.”¹¹⁴ Klein acknowledges the degraded status of the feminized passive partner when he imagines how the police will threaten an acquaintance into providing evidence against him: “His pregnant wife will be informed that he is a faggot who was used as the passive partner.”¹¹⁵

The opposition of active (masculine) and passive (feminine) speaks to the centrality of traditional gender categories in imagining homosexuality in Russia. A. O. Bukhanovskii, the chair of the department of Psychiatry and Clinical Psychology at the Rostov State Medical University, went so far as to declare that “there exist only masculine and feminine identities; a homosexual identity, much less a transsexual identity, simply doesn’t exist in nature.”¹¹⁶ Bukhanovskii, by the way, is considered to be one of the leading Russian experts on the subject of transsexualism.¹¹⁷ To the extent that active and passive roles reflect a traditional and rigid gender binarism, they can hardly be considered “queer.”

Igor Kon is one of the few observers to directly link the discursive prominence of the gender-based model of (homo)sexual desire to the profound sexism of Russian society, something that neither Essig nor Tuller is willing fully to explore.¹¹⁸ Essig mentions the tendency on the part of Russians to describe their sexuality in terms of active and passive, but she considers these terms “very specific.”¹¹⁹ Tuller, to his credit, raises the question of sexism and mentions the failure of feminism there but seems uncomfortable with the consequences. When he asks his friends why the number of female-to-male transsexuals in Russia should so outnumber male-to-female ones, he dismisses as “a typically jaundiced theory” their interpretation that it is due to the sexism of Russian society.¹²⁰ Ultimately, he trivializes the articulation of sexuality through gender categories by reducing it to “heterosexuality in drag” and declares it another weird theory.¹²¹

Certainly recognition of the centrality of gender roles in the construction of (homo)sexual desire would have allowed Tuller to better understand such phenomena as: Vitya, who wants to “make love like a woman,” describing himself in gendered terms as an inverted male-to-female transsexual; Doctor Isaev’s discovery that most “innate” Russian homosexuals display a marked sexual preference for heterosexual male partners over homosexual ones; and the attraction of some highly visible Russian “queers” (Debrianskaia, Mogutin, Limonov) to right-wing, nationalist discourse and fascist aesthetics, not to mention the exclusive attraction of Kokker’s gay Russian friends to heterosexual “military guys, not gays.”¹²² Moreover, a careful examination of the ways in which Russians employ the terms “active” and

“passive” suggests that they may not be as specific as Essig believes. Kokker’s Russian friend Andrei, for example, who identifies himself as gay, considers himself passive in relation to the soldiers he sleeps with, although “in bed I tend to be more active than they are, come to think of it.”¹²³ Clearly, his definition of himself as passive has more to do with gender—he considers himself less masculine than the soldiers—than it does with specific sex acts.

Altman remarks that “Western romanticism about the apparent tolerance of homoeroticism in many non-Western cultures disguises the reality of persecution, discrimination, and violence, which sometimes occurs in unfamiliar forms.”¹²⁴ To imagine Russia as a sexually liberating alternative to the West may indeed disguise some all-too-familiar forms of persecution, discrimination, and violence that are associated with sexism. Despite the loudly proclaimed crisis of the Russian male, statistics reveal that Russian women have in many respects been the biggest losers in the postcommunist “transition” and that traditional sexism is rampant. As Hilary Pilkington has noted, the move to the market in the post-Soviet period has only “reinforced essentialist sex roles.”¹²⁵ The organization of sexuality on the basis of an exclusive male–female gender binarism with a “staunch pro-family ethos” almost guarantees continued discrimination against homosexuality.¹²⁶ “What has emerged in the literature,” Lynn Attwood notes, “is a highly conservative model of gender relations and sexual behaviour which provides no space for alternative lifestyles, and which could hardly be expected to tolerate alternative sexual orientations.”¹²⁷ This heteronormativity, according to which sexual desire is the product of gender differences, insures that homosexuality will continue to be defined in the Russian popular imagination as a mismatch between gender and biological sex and as queer only in the sense it was employed in the world of pre-World War II New York described by George Chauncey: “Most men were so labeled [as ‘queer’] only if they displayed a much broader inversion of their ascribed gender status by assuming the sexual and other cultural roles ascribed to women.”¹²⁸

The relationship between sexism and gender-based homosexuality is perhaps nowhere more visible than in the hyperbolic views expressed in *The ABCs of Sex*, written by the media-hungry politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy with Vladimir Iurovitskiy, the title of which is a parodic allusion to Nikolai Bukharin’s classic political tract *The ABCs of Communism* [*Azbuka kommunizma*] (1921). The stated purpose of this curious work is to contribute to a reevaluation of sex among Russia’s young people. The authors encourage Russian youth to shake off its sexual modesty, the product of decades of Soviet repression, and to

see pleasure as good in and of itself. This attitude is initially reflected in a tolerant attitude toward gays and lesbians. It would be “immoral [*nenravstvenno*],” they argue, “to deny to homosexuals the joys of sexual pleasure.”¹²⁹

In a chapter dedicated to homosexuality, Zhirinovskii and Iurovitskii, not surprisingly, divide homosexuals into active and passive. A man who is active is a “man-man,” while a man who is passive—even in heterosexual relations, allowing the woman to mount him, for example—is considered a “man-woman.”¹³⁰ The conflation of gender and sex roles in this discursive construction becomes obvious when Zhirinovskii and Iurovitskii, like Dr. Bukhanovskii, challenge the very existence of a man-man who is *exclusively* homosexual: “It is much more difficult to explain the existence of active homosexuals who are not excited by women, who cannot physically have sex with a woman. This is one of the secrets of the sexual psyche. In any case, *if such people exist*, then we cannot condemn them to a sexless existence, denying them the joys of sexual pleasure.”¹³¹ To be a man-man, it turns out, is to be both active and heterosexual. Zhirinovskii and Iurovitskii’s tolerance of homosexuality is in the end quite limited. It must not challenge the statistical norm: heterosexual sex.

EAST AND WEST

In *The ABCs of Sex*, Zhirinovskii and Iurovitskii contend that homosexuals in America, through the spread of propaganda, have gained too much visibility and power. America’s exaggerated support for the rights of its sexual minorities, they explain, has made it “not only a sexually backward country, it is a country that is conducting a politics of sexual terrorism against normal sexuality through government support of abnormal forms of sex. This is very dangerous insofar as this country is the (self-proclaimed) leader of the modern world. And the struggle against the pernicious influence of the US in the area of sex and sexual ideology is for Russia (and for the whole world) an urgent one.”¹³² Gay and lesbian activism—along with laws against sexual harassment—are invoked by Zhirinovskii and Iurovitskii to symbolize the backwardness and “anti-sex attitudes [*antisexual’nost’*]” of the West; the West, they suggest, is the real inheritor of the sexophobia of the Soviet Union. In making this claim, they, too, invert the developmental model that posits the West as the goal toward which the East is transitioning. For Zhirinovskii and Iurovitskii, the modernity of the West, like that of the Soviet Union, is a false modernity, which has produced sexual repression—an indicator of cultural

backwardness for the authors—and so should not serve as a model for a postcommunist Russia.¹³³

Zhirinovskii and Iurovitskii propose to solve Russia's economic problems by looking East, to Thailand, "the most highly sexually-developed country in the world."¹³⁴ Russia, they suggest, should be turned into a site of sexual tourism, capitalizing on the "enormous sexual potential of Russia, whose men are known for their sexual power and women for their beauty and attractiveness."¹³⁵ They end by presenting two happy scenarios from this new sex economy, which feature a Russian banker, with a wife and a mistress, who is open to the idea of screwing his wife's young male lover, and an American businessman, who takes a sex tour of Russia and deflowers a Russian virgin, lending tacit support to Dimitrina Petrovna's claims that "the male businessman seems to be the addressee of all the media [in postcommunist Eastern Europe]."¹³⁶

Zhirinovskii and Iurovitskii imagine the economic "backwardness" of the East as the reason for its highly developed sexual culture, whereas they see Western economic, legal, and political development (in particular, gay activism and sexual harassment laws) as retarding sexual desire by policing or restricting the (male) gaze. Their embrace of a patriarchal vision of a sexualized, premodern East as an answer to Russia's economic marginality vis-à-vis the West must be read as a rejection of modern liberalism and as a call for the "liberation of the dominant class."¹³⁷ Jirina Smejkalova-Strickland recounts how some Czech intellectuals after 1989 "celebrated the arrival of 'postmodernism' as an alternative to a 'modernist' project of building communism," which diverted the observer's gaze from those developments that were disturbingly early modern or premodern, such as "privatization, primary accumulation of capital, and the repeal of formerly quite liberal abortion laws."¹³⁸

Homosexuals, too, have a stake in challenging Russian sexism, one of the chief causes of that society's profound homophobia. Imagining (homo)sexuality in Russia as radically other, as already queer, is to forego an opportunity to examine critically and deconstruct its hierarchical male-female and East-West binarisms, which render lesbians largely invisible and produce male homosexuals as "passive," "women in men's bodies," "members of a third sex," and "receptacles of male sperm." Without such analysis, studies of (homo)sexuality in Russia will appear, at their best, as "a collection of generalized personal impressions" and, at their worst, as a "liberating" alternative to modernity.¹³⁹

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