Topographies of Anticolonialism: The Ecopoetical Sublime in the Caucasus from Tolstoy to Mamakaev

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The tenderness and ecstasy we experience in contemplating
time... is the awareness of this unity with everything that is
hidden from us by time.

—Lev Tolstoy

Notwithstanding that ecocriticism and postcolonial studies both originate
in questions of place, these areas of inquiry all too frequently pursue parallel
trajectories that converge only in the rarest of instances. Rob Nixon is one of
the few ecocritics to straddle the colonial divide through a framework that
incorporates cultures as wide ranging as the Caribbean, South Africa, the
Middle East, and Indonesia. Nixon has enumerated four axes along which
ecocriticism and postcolonial theory most commonly diverge. Ecocriticism
in Nixon’s account traditionally strives for purity, continuity between place
and space, and a coherent national identity. The combined result of these
three variables is historical amnesia. By contrast, postcolonialism, fractured
by the very conditions of its emergence, has tended to embrace hybridity,
displacement, transnationality, and historical recovery as its critical agenda.¹
These historical differences have meant that the lineages of Edward Said
on the one hand and of Rachel Carson on the other often run parallel but
have rarely converged.

Other ecocritics supplement Nixon’s observations concerning the
consequences of the unwarranted divide between postcolonial accounts of
globalization and ecocritical accounts of local devastation, which among other
problems, conditions the geographic provincialism of ecocritical inquiry.
Lawrence Buell acknowledges that the divergence between ecocriticism’s place-based orientation and postcolonial theory’s diasporic situation has led to a narrow focus on “individual nations’ literary histories” within environmental studies and that only recently have the latter’s problematics begun to be contemplated “intensively in comparatist terms.” Greg Gerrad similarly notes that the provocative juncture between “environmental critique” and “the postcolonial politics of resistance to economic globalisation” has “barely been broached.” For Graham Huggen, ecocriticism continues to be “a predominantly white movement” that lacks “the institutional support-base to engage fully with multicultural and cross-cultural concerns,” while “ecologically related contributions to postcolonial criticism have tended until fairly recently to focus on . . . ‘settler cultures.’” Adding her voice to this chorus of critiques, Ursula Heise bluntly observes that whereas the “environmentalist ambition is to think globally,” “monolingualism is currently one of ecocriticism’s most serious intellectual limitations.” The “spatial amnesia” that Nixon diagnosed and that many of his fellow ecocritics deem a contributing factor to ecocriticism’s geographic provincialism is tied to an equally persistent linguistic tunnel vision. Monoglossia will unfortunately remain the norm for ecocriticism so long as the “moral imperative of the local typically opens out not into the specificities of the international but into transcendental abstraction.” No discipline or scholarly method is better suited to help ecocriticism overcome these linguistic and geographic lapses than comparative literary inquiry.

As ecocriticism becomes increasingly visible in comparative literature, its geographical provincialism will gradually come to appear unsustainable. The most influential postcolonial interventions into ecocriticism have thus far engaged primarily with South Asian, African, and Middle Eastern archives. They have encompassed the writings of Arundhati Roy, Ken Saro-Wiwa, and Raja Shehadeh, each of whom has brought forward vernacular landscapes “shaped by the affective, historically textured maps that communities have devised over generations, maps replete with names and routes, maps alive to significant ecological and surface geological features.” But the literary canons of contemporary South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East do not encompass the range of ecocritical literary engagements across the world, many of which move across these regions without inhabiting any single one. One of the most notable if least discussed loci for the ecocritical imagination is the Caucasus, a region that has served as a home for peoples of multiple religions and ethnicities since the beginning of recorded history. This article introduces the Caucasus’s ecocritical imagination through the framework of comparative literature.
If comparativism has yet to flourish within ecocritical discourse about literature, the same cannot be said for the literary traditions themselves, which engaged with the physical environment long before ecocritical thinking was formally recognized. Like many colonial and postcolonial literatures, the Russian encounter with the Muslim mountaineers of the Caucasus has generated an archive rich with possibilities for literary comparison. The Caucasus was the most common destination for political dissidents during the early tsarist period. Since its topography was memorialized in its early stages by Pushkin, Lermontov, and other Russian romantic poets, it is not surprising that when Russian poets took to imagining the Caucasus, they envisioned a colonial encounter shot through with the sublime.

Defined in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790) as a faculty situated in the perceiving mind which “proves that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense [Masstab der Sinne],” the sublime was soon grafted onto a particular ideology of power. As Harsha Ram recounts, over the course of the long nineteenth century “a romantic myth quickly developed around the Caucasus, replete with spectacular mountain scenery and ethnographic color, combining the artist’s need to flee the suffocating constraints of civilization and a paradoxical awareness that this path to freedom had first to be cleared by the tsar’s armies.” The romantic aesthetic was thereby yoked to the imperial mission, and hunger for power was harnessed to the quest for the sublime. Out of this convergence, a discourse Ram has influentially termed the “imperial sublime” was forged.

As rich in ecological and linguistic diversity as the Caribbean, South Asia, and the Middle East, the Caucasus, situated between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, adds another dimension to the ecocritical archive of authors who could not afford to luxuriate on romantic landscapes denuded of human habitation. Drawing on the poetry and prose of writers who navigated between native and imperial idioms, this article details what the literatures of the Caucasus can contribute to a postcolonial ecocriticism that actively engages precolonial archives. In exploring alternative relations between the literary imagination and the physical environment, it contests the provinciality of North American ecocriticism while challenging postcolonial theory’s anthropocentrism. I begin by examining the legacy of Russian romantic poets who helped to constitute a poetic discourse shaped by imperial power. After briefly discussing this precedent, I turn to Lev Tolstoy and Magomed Mamakaev, two authors who contested and complicated their predecessors’ imperial entanglements, in the first instance by contrasting nature’s peaceful silence to imperial corruption and in the second instance by showing how rocks speak.
The Imperial Sublime

As in other postcolonial contexts, the imperial sublime was forged in the Caucasus in the aftermath of a series of brutal colonial incursions. “During the final stage of the Caucasus wars, in the 1850s and 1860s,” notes Charles King, “clear-cutting of forests was pursued with particular vigor, creating a vast and lasting denuded landscape in parts of the north Caucasus.”

Slash-and-burn techniques were accompanied by the destruction of the mountaineers’ physical environment along with their domestic arrangements. “Crops were burned or ordered ploughed under,” notes King, while “herds of cattle and flocks of sheep and goats were slaughtered or stolen.”

These acts of destruction were propelled by an official ideology, which held that the annihilation of the Caucasus’s natural resources was a legitimate reaction to mountaineer rebellions. As Aleksandr Petrovich Ermolov, Russian proconsul to the Caucasus (1816–1827), recalled of his own expeditions, mixing past and future as if prophesying that the effects of his actions would be felt last for many generations, “Rebellious villages were destroyed and burned, gardens and vineyards were cut to the root. The traitors will not be able to return [these villages] to their original condition for many years. They shall be punished with extreme poverty.”

Famously linking the force of imperial rule to its ability to instill fear, this same Ermolov proclaimed his desire that “the terror of my name should guard our frontiers more potently than chains or fortresses, that my word should be for the natives a law more inevitable than death.” During the decade of Ermolov’s reign, a series of fortresses, including Groznaia, Vnezapnaia, and Burnaia (names meaning “terrifying,” “sudden,” and “stormy,” respectively), were constructed along the Caucasus mountain range, overlooking the mountaineers’ villages—and often displacing the mountaineers—in order to better instill fear. From the Russian vantage point, destroying the mountain landscape was a means of subduing the local population. Meanwhile, hoping to delay the destruction of their natural environment, the mountaineers cultivated “sacred groves” that were intended to be protected from cutting and instituted “prohibitions against felling trees by river heads, lakes, and streams.”

Given the imbalance of military power, however, it was inevitable that the mountaineers’ precautions would be powerless to forestall the destruction of their natural environment.

In the early years of the Russo-Caucasus wars, few Russian writers vocally opposed these strategies of conquest. Instead of attacking Ermolov’s systematic deforestation of the Caucasus, Aleksandr Pushkin, credited with being the first Russian poet to create “vivid descriptions
of Russian landscapes” that were “closely connected with his characters and their milieu,” prophesied the mastery of nature by colonial armies in terms emblematic of an entire era.15 “Submit and bow your snowy head, Caucasus” Pushkin proclaimed in the concluding lines to his poem “Captive of the Caucasus” (1821), “Ermolov marches!”16 In aligning the subjugation of landscape with the destruction of local sovereignty, Pushkin perpetuated a romantic opposition of nature to civilization and of civilization to barbarism. As Susan Layton contends in her history of Russian literature’s entanglement with empire, in these concluding lines, Pushkin’s “snow-capped peaks function as the head of a body politic,” with the mountains serving as a metonym for the imperial state.17 Like Ermolov’s invasions, Pushkin’s jingoistic celebration of conquest was an early installment of “a prolonged political tragedy whose textual record stretches from classical Russian poetry to contemporary debates in the national media.”18 While the tradition inaugurated by Pushkin and later developed by his younger contemporary Lermontov is an important inaugural moment in Russian culture’s engagement with the Caucasus, these poets’ prejudices—which, without being monolithic, do collectively constitute a form of Russian orientalism—have not gone uncontested by later writers.

Nature Against War

More promising from the point of view of postcolonial ecopoetics than the romantic tradition, which regarded the path to freedom as one that had to be cleared by the tsar’s armies, is the postromantic stage in the Russian literary engagement with the Caucasus. This moment of ambivalent critique in Russian literary history is most thoroughly exemplified in the short stories of Lev Tolstoy. In the words of anthropologist Paul Friedrich, “Tolstoy’s Caucasus works are an outraged critique of Russian high society and tsarist imperialism, colonialism and atrocity–ridden war against the Chechens and other peoples of the Caucasus.”19 Out of his experience as a soldier in the tsar’s army, Tolstoy generated Russian literature’s most “sustained attempt at prosaicizing and desublimating” the literary discourse that came to constitute the “imperial sublime.”20 While prior to Tolstoy, the sublime was associated with an empire that instrumentalized its power in order to legitimate its conquests, after Tolstoy the sublimity of the Caucasus’s mountainous landscapes was more frequently deployed to expose the senseless brutality of colonial conquest.
Tolstoy responded to Pushkin's “Captive of the Caucasus” with a short story bearing the same name as Pushkin's poem. Tolstoy's “Captive of the Caucasus” (1872) parodies Pushkin's narrative clichés. As John Bayley notes in commenting on this text, “Tolstoy's unspoken point is that Pushkin falsifies,” both by simplifying his characters and by invoking unlikely turns of plot. Unlike Pushkin, Tolstoy is determined to “give such a situation just as it would have been.” Decades prior to the publication of his parody of Pushkin, Tolstoy had taken up the theme of the Caucasus wars in stories such as “The Raid” (1853) and “The Cutting of Wood” (1855) and in his novel The Cossacks (1862). In each of these texts, “most of what passes for courage” among the Russians who have arrived to conquer the Caucasus “stands revealed as mere show,” while more genuine bravery is evident only in the mountaineers. Like the posthumously published Hadji Murad (1912), Tolstoy's early Caucasus fictions were based on his two-year experience of serving in the Caucasus. Replete with ethnographic footnotes informing the reader about the history, languages, and customs of Russia's enemies, these texts impart to Tolstoy's fictions a semblance of verisimilitude appropriate to nonfictional discourse and often associated with ecocritical writing.

Even more significant than the ethnographic style that Tolstoy introduced to Russian literary prose through his historical allusions and footnotes is his complex handling of mountain topographies and his nuanced rendering of his characters' changing relations to their physical environments. One of the most suggestive of Tolstoy's many evocations of the Caucasus occurs in The Cossacks, focalized through the world-weary protagonist Olenin, who arrives in the Caucasus from Moscow. Olenin exhibits many of the anti-mountaineer prejudices articulated by Pushkin and Lermontov, with the difference that his character changes over the course of the narrative, as the stereotypes that had blunted his perception are replaced by direct contact with nature. As a cynical urban Russian, Olenin at first approaches the mountains with the assumption that “the extraordinary beauty of the snow peaks, of which he had often been told, was as fictitious [такая же выдумка] as Bach's music and love, neither of which he believed in.” Until he confronts the Caucasus, Olenin regards nature as an acquired taste that, like all civilizational accouterments, is not worth cultivating. Olenin's attitude changes radically when he sees the mountains looming twenty paces away from him, “pure white gigantic masses with delicate contours, the miraculous outlines of their peaks gleaming sharply against the far-off sky” (13).

While basking in the “infinitude” of the mountains' beauty, Olenin is suddenly overwhelmed by an awareness of his mortality. He fears that the alpine panorama will turn out to be an illusion, with no more perduring
claim to reality than the many fleeting pleasures that have hitherto suffused his life. He shakes himself in order to dispel the specter, but the mountains stand firm. The mountains gradually overtake Olenin’s consciousness, as he is gradually “penetrated by their beauty” and begins “to feel” (“почувствовать”) their majesty (13, emphasis in original). This transformation, which remains incomplete by the novel’s end, sets the stage for a new ecocritical sublime that is taken up in earnest in the Soviet period, by Russian, and even more particularly, by non-Russian Soviet writers.

Well before the Soviet era, Tolstoy had begun juxtaposing images of the physical landscapes of the Caucasus with the destruction wrecked by war. Nowhere are these images more forcefully juxtaposed than in “The Raid.” This early story, which is Tolstoy’s first literary account of the Caucasus wars, repeatedly contrasts a sublime mountain landscape resonant with “beauty” (“красота”) and “power” (“сила”) to the theater of war, which stimulates “hatred” (“злоба”) and the “desire for revenge” (“мщение”) and foments among the soldiers the “desire to annihilate those who resemble them.”

Because nature is “an unmediated expression of beauty and goodness,” then all that is unkind, Tolstoy’s unnamed nature-loving narrator declares, ought to “disappear when touched by nature.”

Like Olenin, who doubts the reality of love because civilization has only exposed him to its simulacra, the narrator’s comrades-in-arms find their lives subject to protocols that lack any intrinsic meaning. The emptiness of the regulations that guide their conduct is brought into relief through Tolstoy’s ironic descriptions of mundane events, as when a convoy of troops marches toward a stream while a battalion commander sits “on a drum in the shade, his full face expressing the greatness of his rank” (17–18). Elsewhere we read of an adjutant who “wished to rise to the rank of captain as soon as possible and to obtain a comfortable position, and for that reason became the mountaineer’s enemy.” Here the narrator’s use of a reflexive form of “made” in “he . . . made himself the mountaineer’s enemy” (“сделался врагом гоцев”) subtly reveals the interplay of freedom and cowardice. While the grammatical subject in this sentence is the adjutant, in Russian, the verb also bears the reflexive ending “ся” (“sya”), implying that the subject is also the object of his actions. Hence, the subject of this action is also the object. The adjutant is semantically passive inasmuch as he is the grammatical object, but he is culpable in rousing the mountaineer’s hostility inasmuch as he is the grammatical subject.

Semantically, when he makes himself an enemy of the mountaineer, the adjutant is performing an act of self-alienation. In becoming the mountaineer’s enemy—or alternately, in making himself an enemy of the
mountaineer—the adjutant becomes an enemy to himself. The narrator does not say all of this, of course, but his grammatical usages imply this much. Although Tolstoy does not state explicitly that the commander is filled with an exaggerated sense of his worth or that the adjutant has wasted his life due to his corrupt value system, the lengths these officials go to to elevate their rank in the military pecking order suggests the entrenched conservatism of the social arrangements that govern Russian life at home and abroad.

The artifice of language belongs to the same order of falsification as the officers’ attempts to aggrandize their rank. In one of his rare discursive asides, the narrator of “The Raid” explains that the truly courageous person has no need to spoil a deed with words because “when someone feels capable of performing a noble deed, no talk is needed” (37). His assertion reinforces a contrast drawn earlier, in an incendiary passage that was deleted by the censor and remained unpublished throughout Tolstoy’s lifetime, between a mountaineer who has lost everything to war and a Russian officer who, because he has risen high in the ranks through his corruption and therefore has much to lose, is a coward in battle. While the forsaken mountaineer is ready to “tear off his tattered jacket, drop his gun, and draw his sheepskin cap [папаха] over his eyes while singing his death song [предсмертная песня],” the Russian officer rushes into battle “singing French songs.”

Whereas the Russian officer dramatizes his encounter with war through European fashions, the first fighter, more courageous precisely because he has lost everything and has nothing more to lose, has no recourse to language. Even as he underscores the fact that the mountaineer who heroically arms himself with a sword (кинжал) instead of a gun is also an enemy whose specific goal is to kill Russians, the narrator leaves his readers to conclude that the greater share of nobility belongs to the mountaineers and that his fellow Russian soldiers are by contrast weak and cowardly. Later lamenting his fellow soldiers’ reliance on foreign phrases to accentuate the poetry of war, the narrator expresses his disapproval of Russian officers who turn to “vulgar [послые], pretentious phrases that pretended to imitate antiquated French chivalry” (37) by way of giving evidence of their courage. A courageous action speaks for itself, Tolstoy’s contrasts imply. Language by contrast inhibits the attainment of courage and can even falsify the reality it proposes to describe.

Nature is also susceptible to the mimetic impulse that drives human usages of language. When the Russian troops pause to rest by stream, the tall poplars settle on the transparent clouds “crowding around the snowy peaks” and create a mountain range of their own “as if imitating” the Caucasus itself during sunset (19). But whereas the first kind of mimesis, of a battalion commander who projects his rank onto his subordinates and of
an adjutant who acquires enemies in order to boast when he returns home, makes the actors look foolish and constitutes a waste of human energy, the second kind of mimesis, whereby a cloud imitates the mountains’ physical chains, is suffused with the ecopoetical sublime that attends the best writing about the Caucasus.

Indeed, the paradox of war unfolds in the text as an oscillation between the natural (естественный) and unnatural (неестественный). Only war’s persistence as an “unnatural occurrence makes it seem natural, and [only] a feeling of self-preservation makes it seem just.”28 In rendering the unnatural natural, the regime that upholds “civilization” through violent conquest licenses the destruction of the ecosystem and promulgates an ethical standard inimical to that of the mountaineers, whose ethics are shaped by their relationship to their physical environment. Colonial rule legitimates its violence in part through the artifice of language. By contrast, as Tolstoy reflected in a diary entry composed in 1906, the contemplation of nature instills an “awareness of the unity with everything that is hidden from us by time.”29 Human artifice crafts differences among humans that otherwise would pass unnoticed, while nature merges these differences into a holistic experience of the sacred.

With more ambivalence than in his later antiwar fiction, which tends to rely more on discursive statements than on the poetics of indirection, in his early stories about the Caucasus, Tolstoy conveys the brutality of war primarily through the juxtaposition of images. The narration of one particularly brutal attack, in which, as the narrator of “The Raid” makes clear to the reader, he did not participate, concludes with a revealing comparison. “The spectacle was truly magnificent,” the narrator begins in language suffused with admiration (31). However, the image that follows subtly puts to rest any lingering admiration on the reader’s part for imperial conquest. “Only one thing spoiled the general impression for me,” the narrator states, which was “that this movement and the activity that attended it, along with the screams, was entirely unnecessary” (31). The comparison that follows goes even further in damning the gratuitous destruction of the physical environment effected by imperial warfare. In watching the “magnificent spectacle” of war, the narrator is involuntarily (невольно) reminded of “a man swinging his arms vigorously to cut the air with an ax” (31). Implicitly, this comparison makes the soldiers’ cutting of wood a metonymy for the large-scale forest clearing that attended the conquest of the Caucasus.

Not coincidentally, the image of a man wrecking destruction with an ax that features in “The Raid” is the dominant motif in “The Cutting of Wood,” a story published soon after “The Raid,” and to which it is juxtaposed in
most collections of Tolstoy’s short fiction. Compared to “The Raid,” “The Cutting of Wood” is less obviously an indictment of the destruction of the natural landscape effected by the tsar’s troops. However, the very fact that its dominant motif is anticipated in Tolstoy’s earlier story places it within a lineage of Tolstoyan texts that frame the conquest of the Caucasus within an anticentralist ecosublime that critiques of prior representational canons.

“The Cutting of Wood” is called “Рубка леса” in Russian, “рубка” meaning “cutting” and “леса” “wood.” “Rub-ka,” the title’s first two syllables, resonates throughout the entire text. At one juncture, in the midst of a panoramic description of the sun rising over the mountains, we are told that “beyond the cut woods, a large field opened ahead.” The abnormality of the vacant plains is further accentuated by the “black, murky white, and purple smoke” that generates “fantastic shapes of white misty clouds floating above the plain” (60). This unnatural and uncanny emptiness is the result of the tsar’s army having enthusiastically implemented Ernolov’s slash-and-burn strategies. Later, in the neutral voice that marks Tolstoy’s early stories about the Caucasus, the narrator reports that, in retribution for the mountaineers having killed one of their soldiers, the tsar’s army “slashed” (“вырубили”) three versts of forest (roughly two miles) and “wiped away” (“очистили”) the place so thoroughly that it became “impossible to recognize” under its changed visage (72). Following the “successful” clearing away of three versts of forests along the mountains, the Caucasus landscape is denuded of human habitation. “Instead of the formerly visible borders of the forest,” writes Tolstoy, “stretched a large field covered with smoking bonfires and cavalry and infantry marching back to camp” (72–73).

In describing the clearing of the forests by tsarist troops in “The Cutting of Wood,” Tolstoy tellingly uses a variant of the verb “очистить” (“to cleanse”). Tolstoy’s verb choice is revealing because it literally evokes the opposite of what in fact transpired. “Zachistka” (derived from the verb “зачистить,” “to clean up”) currently describes the “cleansing operations” whereby Russian soldiers destroyed specific Chechen villages during the Russo-Chechen wars of the 1990s and 2000s, and thus it almost seems as if Tolstoy’s verb choice anticipates the course of a conflict that has spanned two centuries. While “zachistka” is in this sense a contemporary coinage that describes the Russian military’s human rights violations in Chechnya, Tolstoy’s early ironic usage of a variant of “очистить” suggests that nineteenth-century colonial conquests similarly engendered euphemisms associated with cleansing to describe colonial warfare. Tolstoy’s exposure of the mendacity of the colonial state’s language links tsarist imperialism with later Soviet and post-Soviet strategies of conquest.
Decades later, in his posthumously published *Hadji Murat*, Tolstoy wrote of how the brutal techniques of ecological destruction practiced by the tsarist army backfired, resulting in the deaths of Russian soldiers. He describes how two companies from the Kura regiment embarked on a “wood-felling expedition” similar to those that drive the narratives of “The Cutting of Wood” and “The Raid.” As they advanced toward the Chechen village they were planning to “cleanse,” a group of mountaineers caught sight of them and moved to attack the soldiers. As a result of this altercation, Tolstoy writes, “two privates were slightly wounded and one killed.” Meanwhile, among the mountaineers “about a hundred were killed and wounded.”32 True to his modus operandi of engaging with all sides of the conflict, Tolstoy emphasizes that the causalities on the mountaineers’ side were greater than the loss to the tsar’s army, even when the mountaineers were the aggressors.

Whereas Russian romantic poets sought freedom from the autocratic state in a bare alpine landscape that had first to be tamed and cleared by imperial instruments of war, Tolstoy’s more prosaic anticolonial poetics found in the mountains freedom from civilizational hypocrisies, with the institution of language constituting for him one of this corrupted civilization’s most promiscuous signifiers. Neither the romantic nor the Tolstoyan approach could avoid being implicated in the very institutions they criticized, in the first instance, with Pushkin and others, by glorifying colonial power, and in the second instance, with Tolstoy, by looking to language rather than action to resolve the conflict. Additionally, neither literary approach was able to fully reconcile the environmental imagination stimulated by contact with the Caucasus with the paradoxical allure of the state’s monopoly on violence and its methods of conquest.

Even when Tolstoy describes the shortcomings of mountaineer warriors such as Imam Shamil, the reader is never allowed to forget that it is the tsarist forces, not the mountaineers, who spoiled the physical landscape of the Caucasus through their techniques of waging war. Tolstoy’s varied representations of the imperial conquest of the physical and human geography of the Caucasus, the early short stories as well as the lengthier prose narratives, inspired an entire generation of non-Russian, and above all Chechen, writers, to produce their own complex narratives of colonial rule. It is appropriate that Tolstoy’s influence has been concentrated in Chechnya, since this was a place he came to love as a second home.33 In the third and final section of this article, I take up the literary genealogy leading from Tolstoy’s condemnation of tsarist conquest to the new ecocritical sublime elaborated in the Chechen poetry of Magomet Mamakaev (1910–1973).
Well into the Soviet period, and thus faced with modern technology’s different scale of ecological devastation, Mamakaev brought his imagination to bear on problems similar to those Tolstoy engaged with through his fictional writings on the Caucasus. Mamakaev’s rendering of the relation between natural landscapes and the literary imagination draws inspiration from Tolstoy’s precedent. And yet, even as he figures his poetic persona with reference to the Tolstoyan tradition, the Chechen poet polemically engages with Tolstoy’s predecessors, including Pushkin and particularly Lermontov, a poet who “amalgamated traits of various local landscapes of Russia into a single image” and died in a duel in the Caucasus mountains near Pyatigorsk in 1841.34

One of Mamakaev’s most notable poems, “Rocks Speak” (1966), is also the title of his most important poetry collection. “Rocks Speak” interrogates the nineteenth-century idea that the mountains had a baneful influence on the social progress of Caucasus peoples, a prejudice that was promulgated both by colonial officials and by a class of mountaineer intellectuals who believed in the beneficent effects of European civilization.35 Far from inhibiting the development of mountaineer society, Mamakaev suggests, rocks are as profoundly etched with modernity as are the textual remains of books, manuscripts, and literary inscriptions. “Who can say that in times past . . . you were blind?” the Chechen poet pointedly asks. With this single rhetorical question, Mamakaev addresses three audiences at once: his fellow Chechens, a pan-Caucasus readership with an ambivalent relation to Russia’s imperial past, and the mountains that frame the landscape where his texts are set.

For Mamakaev, the stones to which the poet speaks are monuments to his ancestors, witness bearers to suffering that does not always yield to expression on the page. The Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky famously derived from his analysis of Tolstoy’s poetics the premise that “art exists in order to recover the sense of life, in order to feel objects, to return the quality of stoniness to a stone.”36 Shklovsky’s formulation helps to explicate Mamakaev’s poetics, whereby the stoniness of the stones that frame the Caucasus stimulate the poet’s environmental consciousness. Just over a century prior to Mamakaev’s evocation of rocks as sentient beings, Tolstoy had described the process through which Olenin, the hero of The Cossacks, begins to “feel the mountains” (13) when his romantic stereotypes of the mountain landscape are suddenly shattered by a confrontation with the Caucasus at dawn and the stony topography outside his window undermines “his ability to assign linguistic labels.”37
“Rocks Speak” evolves a lineage from the muteness of rocks—which speak through the associations they evoke without uttering a sound—to the abundant vocality of the written page. The fifth stanza, the halfway point, initiates a turn from the rocks to the poet’s vocation:

Йирзинчу хъан чевнийн лорах со вахча,
Го ц1ийца яздийна хъан х1ора аг1о.
Ас лам чу мохь тьыхча, схъахеза аз а,
Дуй техъа айделла ц1ийн довха татол\(^{938}\)

(The permanent traces of scars and wounds are
Burning, burning on the slopes and ridges,
On the mountain slopes, they speak much
Of my ancestors’ ruined homes.)

Mamakaev’s images merge history with the poet’s present, evoking the familiar specter of tsarist troops reducing Chechnya’s forests to ashes. This devastation is remembered by the poet’s contemporaries, who see ruins in the places where his ancestors once flourished. Such histories constitute the subtext of Mamakaev’s biography as well as of his poetry, as the torching of villages is permanently engraved onto Chechen historical memory. This violence informs contemporary Russian–Chechen relations, up to and including the recent Russo–Chechen wars. But while the fire that scorches the poet’s memory is cognate with the fire used by tsarist armies to destroy Chechen forests during the nineteenth-century Caucasus wars, it also signifies poetic inspiration.

Mamakaev does not configure his relationship to the Caucasus as did poets immersed in the imperial sublime, who rhapsodized from afar. Rather, he fashions himself as a participant in the Chechens’ struggle to survive. No line dividing the poet from his people is in evidence in his poems. Far from being a leader, the poet is simply a participant in his people’s history, including in the battles that have marked Chechen history more sharply than that of any other Soviet people. This populist orientation recalls Mamakaev’s own explanation of the meaning of poetry in one of his most memorable manifestos: the autobiographical introduction to the 1968 Russian translation of “Rocks Speak.” Mamakaev states at the end of this short text that he writes poems “with a single goal: to help good people in times of difficulty and weariness, to inspire them to a noble feat [подвиг], and to call them to good and generous actions.”\(^{39}\) While the call to action resonates familiarly in the Soviet context, the first part of Mamakaev’s poetic credo is somewhat
at variance with Soviet aesthetic canons and suggests a pre-Soviet lineage in nineteenth-century Russian romanticism.

For Russian romanticism to be absorbed by the literatures of the Caucasus and inspire Mamakaev, it first had to pass through the prism of Tolstoy’s antiromantic prose. Like his romantic predecessors, Mamakaev was interested in affecting his readers’ hearts. Like Tolstoy, Mamakaev sought to effect political change by inspiring his readers to a podvig, the noble feat that features in Russian discourses about courage, and particularly in Tolstoy’s prose. Given Mamakaev’s distance from the normative canons of Soviet poetry, it is not surprising that his emotive intention has been ignored in Soviet criticism of his work. What is more surprising and unfortunate is that Soviet-era criticism has yet to be superseded by a new wave of post-Soviet engagements with Mamakaev and that this eminent Chechen writer remains unstudied outside the narrow field of scholarship on Chechen literature.40

If, for Mamakaev, the poet should console his readers “in times of difficulty and weariness,” this does not mean that poetry has only an affective purpose. Indeed, like Tolstoy’s fictions that are replete with nonfictional referents, “Rocks Speaks” accounts for historical change in the context of war. While many commentators on Chechen history have meticulously documented the Chechens’ political struggles against tsarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet rule, they have been less likely to attend to the cultural losses this struggle has entailed. Hence one value of “Rocks Speak” is that it confounds the tsarist and Soviet conceit of Chechen pasts as devoid of history and Chechen geography as devoid of people. “Rocks Speak” contests the views of cultivated Russians typified by Olenin, who, prior to his arrival in the Caucasus, regarded it as a space inhabited by mountaineers “whom he did not recognize as people [люди] on the same level as his Moscow acquaintances” (12).

Whereas Russia’s extensive textual archives are preserved in libraries and consulted by few, Chechnya in Mamakaev’s rendition has its histories inscribed on its stones, which are legible to everyone:

Чевнаш дІайирзина хІиттина моьнаш,  
Уыш ду-кх, хатІ кІорга яздина йоза.  
Ас йоьшу цуьнца хьан къайлаха чевнаш,  
Эхь-бехк а, къийсам а—бІешерийн ойла. (21)

(Immortal handwriting, scars and wounds,  
all recorded here on the conscience.  
Centuries of grief, anger, and strife,  
on the mountains’ scars I read your story.)
In this rendition, personal narratives are universalized when they are written on mountains, whereas in societies like Russia, saturated with the trappings of civilization and the advances of industrial capitalism, the script is written in advance by the historical record and there is much less room for intervening in the course of history through the kind of noble act (покров) Mamakaev seeks to incite through his poetry. A society that inscribes its stories on mountains is more likely to embrace a collective narrative that links its members to one another. That the poet knows his reader’s stories underscores the intimacy of Chechen social relations. The Chechen poet’s imagination is additionally enriched by local forms of animism, which in pre-Islamic Chechnya included the belief that “a soul reside[s] in every object, animate or inanimate, functioning as the motive force and guardian” and held that “nature [is] all alive.” The perpetual rejuvenation of nature that inflects Mamakaev’s poems and Tolstoy’s prose about the Caucasus contrasts sharply with the death-inflicting slash-and-burn policies that attended Ermolov’s conquests.

In a historical moment when instrumental reasoning circumscribes the literary imagination, Mamakaev suggests that rocks open futures that have yet to be inscribed. Meanwhile, the wounds of Chechen history possess their own script, which the poet projects onto the rocks. “Centuries of grief, anger, and strife” become legible on the mountain’s jagged edges along which the poet deciphers his people’s story. How does the poet manage this feat of decipherment? The only noun that is a viable candidate in this stanza is handwriting (хати), an Arabo-Persian derivation that functions as a partial metonym for the poet’s pen. This special script enables the poet to read, interpret, and articulate the suffering of the Chechen people in terms comprehensible to a Soviet readership far beyond Caucasian borderlands. And yet, in contradistinction to the Russian romantic tradition, the decipherment of Chechen suffering takes place not in Russia’s capital cities but in the variable topography encountered by a man roaming the mountains.

The martial imagery that follows in the sixth stanza, evoking mountains “aligned like soldiers” (“Салт санна хөөгөррв сан йехха даймнаш”) suggests further alliances between Mamakaev’s text and Russian romanticism, which constructed a discourse of the imperial sublime that correlated the Caucasus’s physical landscape to an archetypal and predetermined modality of violent conquest. Notwithstanding this convergence of mountains and militancy, the register in which the Chechen poet speaks differs radically from the registers used by his colonial predecessors. In Mamakaev’s rendering, the mountains live in the
memories birthed by the rocks that collectively comprise the Caucasus. Peace rather than war creates this continuum. Nourished by a hospitable physical environment, the rocks’ collective memories sustain the poet’s voice. The Caucasus has functioned as a battleground for conflicting representations for much of recorded history, but it took a Chechen voice to break through a received tradition of violence that legitimized the destruction of the environment and to suggest that mountains are more sublime than the tsar’s army.

The second pivot in “Rocks Speak” occurs in the seventh stanza, when the poet ceases to reverentially invoke his Chechen ancestors and begins enumerating the literary legacies that inspire his work in the present. Mamakaev singles out Lermontov and Kosta Khetagurov (1859–1906), the first major modern Ossetian poet, in a genealogy for himself:

Лермонтован сирла дош аш кхий техкош;
Кхузахь сан хъехархо—сан хьоме Коста
Лелла, дарц айдина, парг1ато хестош . . .
Цо кхузахь гулйина къонахчун ойла. (22)

(Lermontov’s pure words inspire me
here, where my dear Kosta
walked, while the storm rose, praising freedom.
Here he gathered his noble thoughts.)

The seventh stanza’s literary references replicate in miniature the poem’s overall structure. As a contribution to an emergent ecopoetics of the Caucasus, “Rocks Speak” dissolves boundaries between the text and the world, calling to mind Buell’s ecocritical amendment of Fredric Jameson’s theory of the political unconscious as the basic structure configuring realist texts. “Insofar as the *where* of existence precedes the *what* of social practice,” argues Buell, “a text’s environmental unconscious is more deeply embedded even than its ‘political unconscious.'”42 “Rocks Speak” brings forth an environmental unconscious crosshatched by the colonial encounter and a postcolonial poetics. Given the many levels at which it speaks, this poem can both enrich and be enriched by a method of inquiry accustomed to taking “the word-world linkage seriously at a time when mimesis and referentiality remains unfashionable.”43

To return to Mamakaev’s title: “Rocks Speak” challenges colonial assumptions concerning the superiority of written languages, such as
Russian, to languages that, even when they had a written tradition in the
Islamic script before modernity, were generated as if ex nihilo in the co-

nial period. While in the aftermath of the scholarship of the paradigm-

shifting work on orality by Walter Ong and others, few would deny the

permeability between oral and written texts, Soviet ideology generated a

quasi-metaphysical hierarchy according to which written, “newly written”

(“mladopis’ennii”), and nonwritten languages would be ranked on a civili-

zation scale. The ground-clearing work of collapsing distinctions between

the textual and the oral, and the revelation of their common foundations, is

inaugurated in Mamakaev’s text.

When Khetagurov gathers “his noble thoughts” while wandering in the

Chechen mountains, the landscape that was denounced by the nineteenth-

century intelligentsia (to which Khetagurov belonged) as inimical to progress

is revealed as a source of poetic inspiration comparable to literary texts.

What the cultures of the Caucasus lacked in written traditions, Mamakaev

implies, they made up for with an unwritten ecopoetical sublime. And yet

even as mountains facilitate the writing of poetry, because our response to

alpine grandeur is influenced by “inherited conventions of literature and

theology” as well as by our “conception of the world” we inhabit, they also

bear witness to human suffering.

Radically reversing the militant triumphalism of Pushkin’s epilogue
to “Captive of the Caucasus,” Mamakaev shifts the cause and effect rela-
tion between the mountains and the poetry of “civilized” Russia. In the

Chechen version, rather than being reduced to topographies drenched in

blood, the Caucasus becomes for Mamakaev’s alter egos Khetagurov and

Lermontov a source of freedom and inspiration. “I bow to you, my country

[сан Даймохк],” Mamakaev writes, “that the spirit of freedom brought

them to these heights/ [Khetagurov and Lermontov] read your inscriptions

[йоза] and responded with inspired words” (22). Mamakaev’s allusion to

the Caucasus as a locus of freedom resounds particularly with respect to

Lermontov, who in a famous verse composed the year of his death indicted

the Russia of Tsar Nikolai I (r. 1825–1855) for his authoritarian governance

and suggested that freedoms forbidden in Russia could be realized in the

Caucasus:

Прощай, немытая Россия,
Страна рабов, страна господ,
И вы, мундирные голубые,
И ты, им преданный народ.
Быть может, за стеной Кавказа
Сокроюсь от твоих пашей,
От их всевидящего глаза,
От их всеслышащих ушей.47

(Farewell, unwashed Russia,
land of slaves, land of lords,
and you, blue uniformed officials,
and you, their dedicated herds.

Perhaps beyond the Caucasus
I’ll be safe from your emirs,
from their all-seeing eyes,
from their all-hearing ears.)

Strategically deploying such ambiguities to elucidate the relation between cultural production and imperial power, “Rocks Speak” creatively challenges the triumphalism that has guided Russian writing about the Caucasus from Ermolov’s conquests onward.

Through the space it opens up for the ecocritical imagination as the basis of political critique, “Rocks Speak” privileges what Lévi-Strauss refers to as the savage point of view.48 While the rocks in Mamakaev’s poem are silent, the poet skillfully deciphers their inscriptions for a multilingual readership. Mamakaev’s poem contests the imperial cliché that oral cultures are intellectually inferior to textual cultures. At the same time, it advances a vision of poetry as a means of giving ecopoetic life to the mountain topographies that are central to Chechen identity. Bridging politics and aesthetics, Mamakaev draws together multiple strands of ecocritical and postcolonial reflection to craft an ethics that, as has recently been claimed with respect to ecocritical writing in occupied Palestine, “names a potential transcendence of barriers between peoples as a precondition of protecting the vanishing land they inhabit.”49 By gesturing toward the idea of poetry as a form of sublime transcendence, Mamakaev puts his poetics into conversation with the prosaics of Raja Shehadeh, Arundhati Roy, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Nadine Gordimer, and others who have reflected on the interface between the text and the world at the intersection of the physical environment.

In his manifesto on the future of environmental criticism, Buell holds out the hope that “the newer environmental criticism” will “press for more cosmopolitan ways of understanding the work of ecodiscourse.”50 Ecocriticism can respond to Buell’s cosmopolitan injunction by mobilizing the heteroglossic
resources of comparative literature, by carrying out in particular its mandate that this discipline extend its comparatist ambitions beyond the anglophone and European canon. When ecocriticism embraces global comparison systematically rather than sporadically, the contributions of writers such as Mamakaev, who have long been participating in ecocritical discourse even though their voices have gone unheard, will drive the discovery of what the environmental imagination can offer a world slowly emerging from the shadow of colonialism.

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Notes


33. For Tolstoi’s biographical relation to Chechnya and elsewhere in the Caucasus, see *Kavkaz i Leo Tolstoi*, ed. L. P. Semenov (Vladikavkaz: Serdalo, 1928).


35. One of the most notable thinkers to whom this description applies is Chakh Akriev; see his *Izbrannoe*, ed. Abu Malsagov (Nazran: Poligragrafiia, 2000).


40. I briefly discuss Mamakaev in “Transgressive Sanctity: The Abrek in Chechen Culture,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 8.2 (2007): 286–98, but my analysis there is restricted to a single work. A more comprehensive treatment is an urgent desideratum.


42. Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, 44, emphasis added.


44. The linguistic situation in Chechnya before modernity was analogous to that in neighboring Daghestan, where Arabic was the primary language of literary discourse but later served as a model for vernacular expression in the Arabic script. For further details, see Michael Kemper, “An Island of Classical Arabic in the Caucasus: Dagestan,” in *Exploring the Caucasus*.

45. For specifics on the typology of the written-nonwritten hierarchy of languages in the Soviet context, see I. D. Desheriev, Razvitie mladopis’mennosti iazykov narodov SSSR (Moscow: Gos. uchebno-pedagog. izd-vo, 1958). As Desheriev (who also happens to be the foremost scholar of Nakh linguistics) notes, his work is the first comprehensive study of the 'newly written' languages of the Soviet Union, and it is therefore the first text to articulate the ideology of mladopis’menost' in a coherent and authoritative fashion.


47. M. I. Lermontov, Poezia, ed. Iraklii Luarsabovich Andronikov (Moscow: Shkol’naia biblioteka, 1976), 78.

