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Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, Nicole Svobododny, Ludmilla A. Trigos, eds. *Under the Sky of My Africa: Alexander Pushkin and Blackness.* Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006. xvi + 417 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8101-1971-0; $89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8101-1970-3.

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Under Too Black a Sky

This book is controversial and this controversy comes from the very first lines of the foreword by Henry Louis Gates Jr., who writes: "Scholars believe that as many African slaves were sold across the Sahara Desert, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean as crossed the Atlantic Ocean" (p. xi). He does not indicate the source of his claim, but most scholars have a different opinion. He claims also that Alexander Pushkin's grand-grandfather Abram Gannibal was born in Cameroon and taken as a slave across the Sahara to Constantinople. This claim is repeated in other parts of the book; thus, one of the contributors, Richard C. Borden, refers to "the discussion by Catharine Nepomnyashchy and Ludmilla Trigos in the introductory essay" on this issue (p. 191). However, their introduction contains no discussion of this matter whatsoever; they just unequivocally write that Dieudonne Gnammankou, a scholar from Benin, "has definitely established" that Gannibal came from an area in Central Africa" (p. 31) and that his research on Gannibal's origin is compelling (p. 32). In any case, this is just one version, rejected by many scholars, especially in Ethiopia, which for almost three centuries was universally regarded as Gannibal's homeland.

The book consists of an introduction and thirteen chapters, which are rather uneven. Some can be regarded as serious contributions to Pushkiniana, others are not much more than an exercise in Afrocentrism and an attempt to discredit anything connected with the Soviet Union. In spite of three prominent editors, the book is not free from repetition. It is difficult also to support the editors' decision to retain translations of the same Pushkin verses from Russian that vary (and not just "slightly," as they claim) from chapter to chapter "due to the authors' translation preferences" (p. xxvii).

The work's Afrocentism, understood apparently by some contributors as "blackcentrism" (if there is such a word), forces them to distance Pushkin from Ethiopia (which is perhaps seen as not black enough). Unfortunately, it looks like some authors are not aware that their position might be construed by some readers as close to "racism in reverse."

A degree of what some might term arrogance is also visible in some sections. Thus, the authors of the introduction, who happen to be the first and third editors, claim that both Nikolay Gogol's belief that Pushkin was an "expression of Russian soul," and relevant words by Grigoriev and Dostoevsky on the matter were nothing else but an attempt to prove that "Russia could be deemed worthy to join Western civilization on equal footing" (p. 19).

These authors show a lack of knowledge of the Soviet Union's relations with Africa. It is just impossible to understand what they mean by a phrase: "As the African countries sought greater independence" (does this mean Africans enjoyed a measure of independence under colonialism?), "the Soviet Union endeavored to strengthen its ties with them to Communism in the region" (p. 26).

The chapter entitled "Ruslan and Ludimla: Pushkin's Anxiety of Blackness" by Richard F. Gustafson leaves a rather strange impression. Wherever something "black" ("chernyi" in Russian) appears in Pushkin's verses, such as the black dress of a monk (in the Orthodox Church monks are divided into categories, "black" and "white," and this is reflected in their dress) or black ink, he sees it as expression of Pushkin's "blackness". For Gustafson the beard of a dwarf in Pushkin's poem "clearly functions as a phallic symbol, a gigantic penis" (p. 112) and the hero Ruslan's sword, which he used to cut off the beard, is a symbol of phallus (p. 114). So, a phallus cuts off a penis? This may seems too much even for Freudians and post-Freudians.

Much more professional is a chapter by Thomas Show, who rightly says that Pushkin was "proud of both

sides [Russian and African] of his family genealogy" (p. 79). Show is also correct to state that "Neither Pushkin … nor other Russians of his time made any distinction between negr [Negro] and arap [Blackamoor], that is between blacks from different parts of Africa…. By arap or negr or mulat(ka) [Mulatto] Pushkin included all black Africans" (p. 80). This is a much more appropriate intellectual approach than an exercise by David M. Bethea, on "How Black Was Pushkin" (pp. 123-149).

In his interesting chapter entitled "Making a True Image: Blackness and Pushkin Portraits," Richard C. Borden appropriately notices that "his portraitists and other eyewitnesses have left testimonials to the changeability of the poet's appearance." However Borden's exercise in finding differences between early and late Soviet representations of Pushkin is hardly convincing, as well as his claim that Soviet artists presented Pushkin as "a warrior-hero, implicitly Bolshevik, gazing determinately into a Radiant Future he will help build" (p. 195).

The chapter by Olga P. Hastly on the place of Pushkin in the pages of *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, published from 1923 to 1949 in New York, is a remarkable piece of work. Having discussed this issue, she pointedly reminds readers that "had Pushkin, a century after his death, appeared in the United States not on the pages of Opportunity but in the flesh, he would have been barred from all areas designated 'for whites only' and subjected to incalculable indignities" (p. 244).

Alexander Mihailovic's chapter on Paul Robeson's participation in the 1949 Pushkin Jubilee in the USSR is typical of those academics who just cannot see anything positive in the Soviet past. He does not bother to prove his claim about "the pressure [from "Kremlin" authorities] to portray Pushkin as ethnically and racially pure" (p. 311). This reviewer was still in primary school at the time of that jubilee and I vividly remember that at that time, like always, for us Pushkin was a Russian poet of (partly) African origin and we never thought of him as "pure" or otherwise. Besides, Mihailovic apparently "forgets" that it was during the "Soviet period," with its eradication of illiteracy (and, by the way, both my grandparents were illiterate, like most Russian peasants before the 1917 revolution), that Pushkin's works became known to virtually verybody in the USSR and to many abroad due to the publication of millions of copies of his translated masterpieces. Indeed, Robeson had good reason to say that "the Soviet Union gave Pushkin to the world," even if Mihailovic calls his statement "deceptively blithe and ahistorical" (p. 323).

Equally wrong is Mihailovic's claim that "Official Kremlin policy at that time [in 1949] toward Africa dictated aggressive and paternalistic Soviet involvement" (p. 319). It would not be wrong to say that "at that time" (as distinct from late 1950s and afterward) the "Kremlin" had no specific policy towards Africa whatsoever.

As to Caryl Emerson's chapter about the dismal failure of an opera, "The Blackamoor of Peter the Great," written by an emigre composer Arthur Vincent Loure, it is just irrelevant to the main content of the book.

The book contains a number of mistakes and misjudgments whose origin is difficult to comprehend. Thus, N. Teletova, a Russian scholar, calls Tsar Peter's grandson, Petr Alekseevich, who was born in October 1715 and officially ruled from May 1727 to January 1730, "young Tsar Aleksasha," whereas Aleksasha was a pet name of Alexander Menshikov; and writes about Gannibal's knowledge of "corruption and thievery" of the 11-to-13-year-old child tsar Faddei Bulgarin (p. 63). A Russian journalist of Polish origin is called "democratic" (pp. 123 and 135), even though he was a paid agent of the tsar's police. Typing errors are there too, for example, "princess" in Russian is *knyazhna*, not *kiazhna* (p. 108), the words "without hero" are in Russian *bez geroia*, and not *dez geroia* (p. 359), etc.

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