

Reading Subjectivities in Post-Soviet Ukraine: The Contribution of Diasporic Narratives
to an Emerging Independent National Identity

WORK IN PROGRESS

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ABSTRACT

In the essay, “Die Weltliteratur, Milan Kundera writes:

Whether he is a nationalist or cosmopolitan, rooted or uprooted, a European is profoundly conditioned by his relationship to his homeland...

In the same essay, he argues that to view literature solely within the history of its nation (which he refers to as the *small context*) and not in “the supranational history of its art” (the *large context*) is an irreparable intellectual loss. It is necessary, he believes, to view the history of the novel as a complex and ever-expanding global network whereby it was

to Rabelais that Laurence Stern was reacting, it was Stern who set off Diderot, it was Cervantes that Fielding drew constant inspiration, [and] it was against Fielding that Stendhal measured himself.

While it appears that Kundera’s network has not been articulated beyond the western world, I, nevertheless, subscribe to his view that literature should not be “bound up with its language.” But where Kundera is interested in the continuity of global consciousness through the intertextual history of the novel, my project, much smaller in scope, is concerned with the continuity of a national consciousness through works written by the uprooted who remain “profoundly conditioned by [their] relationship to their homeland.” In this paper, I examine how diasporic narratives open dialogic possibilities (Bakhtin, 1981; Emerson, 2000) between the rooted and uprooted in ways that provide readers with a wider context for shaping an emerging democratic national identity in post-Soviet Ukraine.

Central to my project is the role of narrative in the creation of national identity in post-Soviet countries. Identity within the context of this study is seen as being constructed “from a multiplicity of conscious and unconscious interactions revealing the self as complex, emerging, and changing rather than fixed (Slattery, Krasny, & O’Malley, 2007, pp. 4-5). The writing of history has worked to define national identities and to provide representative images of a particular culture (Said, 1978; Willinsky, 1998). Kuzio (2006) describes four schools of historical writing on Ukraine including the Ukrainophile, the Russophile, the Sovietophile, and the Eastern Slavic. Notably, only the Ukrainophile and Eastern Slavic afford Ukraine more than limited recognition as a separate ethnic group. The Russophile denies the existence of Ukrainians and Belarusians entirely. Adherence to a particular perspective determines the extent to which both Ukrainians and non-Ukrainians hold that Ukraine has maintained a distinct national identity that predates that of Russia. Despite diverse perspectives on the legitimacy of Ukraine’s fifteen hundred year history, all four schools of historical writing pertaining to Ukraine are premised on the belief that there exists an authoritative account. Said (2004) argues that

narrative functions to maintain rather than resolve the tension between “the aesthetic and the national, using the former to challenge, reexamine and resist the latter in those slow but rational modes of reception and understanding which is the humanist’s way” (p. 78). This paper summarizes how forty English educators in Ukraine engage their subjectivities through the reading of selected texts by diasporic writers. Subjectivity here relates to “the experience of knowing that I am a subject of my world and, at the same time, that I participate as a subject of other people’s worlds” (Sumara, 2002, p. 64). It concerns itself with the awareness of what it feels like to have an identity—something that is representative and identifiable by one’s self and by others. Through an analysis of readers’ responses, I demonstrate how such narratives contribute to an emerging sense of an independent national identity and continue to contribute to the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) used in maintaining Ukraine’s distinct ethnic identity. In addition, the study presents democratic and hermeneutic avenues for negotiating contested political, religious, and cultural terrain and for broadening our understanding of the relationships between ethnicities and diasporas.