

What Kind of Times Are These? Immigrant Poets and the New Politics of Resistance

Panel Outline

Adrienne Rich writes: “I’ve walked there picking mushrooms at the edge of dread, but don’t be fooled / this isn’t a Russian poem, this is not somewhere else but here.” This panel is about English language poets from Eastern Europe writing about the parallels between their homes and the US: nationalism, hateful ideologies, and narrow stereotyping against the bad or dangerous other.

Olga Livshin will begin the discussion on writing poetry in an atmosphere of xenophobic aspirations, outcries and lies, both in one’s country of origin and in the United States. Is the task of the poet *resistance*, per se—even given the violent acts that surround us? Or is it, on the contrary, a constructive task, such as to create a complex, nuanced vision of the home country and/or the United States?

Olga will also ask questions related to representation. Does the poetry of refugees and immigrants from Eastern Europe primarily speak for the hybrid poetic self? To whom does this poetry speak, and how does it reach out, enabling complex encounters with readers who may not be immigrants or refugees?

Larissa Shmailo will read poems about fascism, labor camps, and Hannah Arendt's concept of the banality of evil. She will discuss the personal history of her family during the Ukraine's collectivization and mass starvation and their working for the Germans / internment in the Dora-Northausen labor/concentration camp complex. Issues of guilt, complicity, and survival will be seen as relevant to the current state of the United States. Questions for the moderator: When does normalization turn into abetting? How much is

one a victim, and how much a volunteer? "Yes, there are camps at the border, but if the peanut butter cups taste so good, can it be that bad?"

Lana Spendl is a refugee from the Bosnian War; as a child, she lived in Slovenia, Croatia, Spain, and ultimately the States. She will discuss how the sense of never feeling self-evident within these cultures became a space of authority from which to interrogate the projections placed on her. In addition, Lana will speak from her experience as an writer of poetry, memoir, and short fiction. How does each genre become an appropriate vessel for different shades of feeling surrounding the displacement experience?

Mariya Deykute will talk about her experience with the hierarchy of othering, her family's navigation of the post-Soviet discourse and current-American discourse (especially as a current expat-American resident of the Republic of Kazakhstan); the dangerous appeal of nostalgia and revisionist history; the way the state transforms political ideology into personal mythology and the way such ideology warps families and echoes as generational trauma. She will read poems about the Great Patriotic War; starvation; Russian as a colonizing agent; English as a colonizing agent; grandmothers; and the universal practice of selectively ignoring what happens to other human beings in one's country.

Anna Halbertstadt will speak on the topic of bilingual poets and immigration. Some of the authors that she draws on include Nabokov, Celan, Tsvetaeva, Venclova, and Zagajewski. She will discuss some of the following topics:

1. The mother tongue and acquired language(s) and the underlying reasons for their choice in writing and translation.
2. Psychology and transitions from language to language.
3. Lev Vygotsky on language acquisition

4. Lithuania and its history of Holocaust denial, continuing at present and ethnic cleansing.
 5. The role of literature and theater in dealing with this open wound in the Lithuanian-Jewish relationship.
 6. Tomas Venclova, Ruta Vanagaite, Marius Ivashkevichius, and Gintaras Varnas. Growing up in the Soviet atmosphere of secrets and lies.
 7. Vilnius as Jerusalem in the North, major center of Jewish Culture between the first and second world wars.
 8. Moshe Kulbak, Avram Sutzkever.
 9. The creation of *Vilnius Diary*, collaborations with Lithuanian poets.
- Anna will also read a long poem about Vilnius.