

The Way of Kinship: An Anthology of Native Siberian Literature. Ed. Alexander Vaschenko and Claude Clayton Smith. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. x, 250 pp. A note on translation. \$ 19.95, soft bound.

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This book stems from the translation and editorial work of Alexander Vaschenko, Chair of Comparative Studies in Literature and Culture at Moscow State University, and Claude Clayton Smith, Professor Emeritus of English at Ohio Northern University. With this volume, the two editors aim to present Native literatures of Siberia to an English-speaking audience. They intend to bring to the surface common themes emerging from the work of several artists from Siberia. The authors aim to address the following significant concepts: “the sacredness of the earth;” “the unity with all living creatures;” “the importance of the oral word;” “Native myth;” and “magic as power” (2010: xiv). The title of the volume, *The Way of Kinship: An Anthology of Native Siberian Literature*, well summarizes this objective, as it clearly refers to tight relations which humans have with other human and non-human beings and the earth. Another sub-theme emerging from this cooperative work regards the tension that some of the writers and artists feel against the Russian government and the present-day legacy of Soviet progressivist ideologies. Themes of loss and suffering often appear in the stories. The genres of the selected work are multiple, from prose fiction and creative nonfiction to poetry, drama, and drawings.

This volume is comprised of a foreword by N. Scott Momaday, an introduction, an introductory and a closing Evenk Invocation for Good Fortune, and selected work of twelve artists of distinct groups, embracing a territory which extends from the Ob River to Chukotka. Throughout the volume, the editors introduce the artists with a small biography before presenting their individual work. Besides prose fiction and creative nonfiction, they have selected a portfolio of drawings from Nadezhda Taligina (Khanty ethnic groups) and Gennady Raishev (Khanty ethnic group), a play from Gennady Dyachkov (Yukagir ethnic group), and poems from Maria Vagatova (Khanty ethnic group) and Leonty Taragupta (Khanty ethnic group). The volume ends with a note on the translation work, where Claude Clayton Smith explains why the editors subtly link their volume on Native Siberian Literature to the Literature on First Nations. Vaschenko in particular sees similarities between the Siberian “Wild East” and the American “Wild West” (2010:241). In fact, the two editors employ a Kiowa writer, Momaday, for their foreword. Kiowa are a nation of American Indians of the Great Plains in the United States. One might note that this project was financed by Mobil Oil Corporation at its early stages, and Exxon-Mobil continued that funding (2010:246). Although, they do not disclose this explicitly, I suspect that this might have influenced some of their editorial choices. Indeed, it remains unclear why the editors have mixed and not systematically organized the works themselves.

This assorted body of work provides texts that would otherwise be accessible only to Russian speakers. The authors therefore make a clear contribution to existing literature. Introducing each artist with a synopsis of their work and life experiences also helps the reader contextualize and appreciate their at times-political position and worldview, as these often color their stories. Some of the stories are particularly beautiful, such as those told by Yeremei Aipin (Khanty ethnic group). They demonstrate a specific relation with the earth (here referred to as the “Sitting One”) (2010:9), which is based on mutual respect and communicative practices. In

the story “The Earth’s Pain,” the mother of the author says, “If by accident you hurt the Earth - our Sitting One - you have to heal the wound instantly. You have to close the cut, so it will heal sooner.” (2010:9) The second story by Galina Keptuke (Evenk ethnic group), “The Unexpected Guest,” also demonstrates how Evenks pay careful attention to the messages brought by animals. When a goose visited her family, the family knew right away that her father had to follow his destiny into becoming either a shaman or a *nimnakanlan* (a storyteller) (2010:110). The author describes how this happened: “‘A goose!’ I cry, pointing my finger. [...] All are afraid. Why? I alone have no fear. [...] ‘Your future spirit-helper has come,’ Old Man Charikte concludes. Father is silent.” (2010:110)

Despite the positive contribution provided by the present volume, there seems to be too little theoretical investigation for the book to be directed to academic readers. In addition, some of the authors criticize the Russian government, and more context is necessary for the readers to understand these critiques. The pessimistic language employed by some of the authors risks trapping those who use it in the past and within the constraints of political and social inequalities. I appreciate that this might be the hardest step for some, as Galina Keptuke openly puts it, “if you’re not treated as a human being from the beginning, how can you become one later?” (2010:145). Indeed, I argue that it is an editorial duty to turn such direct accusations into constructive criticism.

My next critique regards the absence of an interpretation of the stories provided in the book. The editors do not reference the literature on oral narrative (memory, identity, tradition) and seem at times to reinforce an essentialist approach, which restricts the groups that they present. Furthermore, they do not provide the reader with context on the relations between the peoples dwelling in this territory, or whether there are similarities in the way in which they tell their stories. There is also no bibliography at the end of the volume. Another question that comes to mind concerns the language. The editors only at times provide a note on the language used for the stories, if it was not Russian.

Overall, I recognize the value of the translation work and need for such a volume in highlighting some of the concerns of artists in Siberia. Yet, there is room for a more theoretical presentation as well as directing the volume toward a specific audience.