

Maria Czaplicka: Gender, Shamanism, Race: An Anthropological Biography

Grażyna Kubica, translated by Ben Koschalka

(Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020), Critical Studies in the History of Anthropology Series, eds. Regna Darnell and Robert Oppenheim], xix + 591 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4962-2261-9.

In some way or another, numerous anthropologists and ethnographers of Siberia have come across the name of Maria Antonina Czaplicka (1886–1921), and a few of us have read one or both of her books *Aboriginal Siberia* (1914) and *My Siberian Year* (1916). Still, many aspects of her intellectual legacy and her biography remain hardly known, hardly appreciated, and even enigmatic. It is Grażyna Kubica’s merit to have written a comprehensive biography about Maria Czaplicka, through pursuing all available traces over many years in a truly meticulous manner. This book is much more than just a biography—it portrays Czaplicka’s aspirations, deeds, and sorrows in the context of institutional dynamics and theoretical approaches of anthropology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Moreover, Kubica provides a detailed account of the difficulties of women entering British and Polish academia, and it was Czaplicka who fervently lobbied for equal opportunities for female and male scholars.

Czaplicka also took part in the struggle for Polish independence. Having grown up in Warsaw (i.e., in the part of Poland that belonged to the Russian Empire), she early on became a member of the liberal and progressive intellectual milieu, took up work as a teacher and spent time with artists and writers (she also wrote poetry). Kubica describes this phase of Czaplicka’s life intensively, explaining how she became acquainted with Bronisław Malinowski, one of the most well-known social anthropologists worldwide. Like Malinowski, and to some extent influenced by his initiative, Czaplicka received a stipend in 1910 for studying anthropology at the London School of Economics under Charles Seligman’s mentorship, one year later she moved to Oxford to study with Robert Marett. Fluent in Russian, Czaplicka set her focus on the indigenous peoples of Siberia, and her reviewing of available ethnographic literature provided the basis for her monograph *Aboriginal Siberia: A Study in Social Anthropology*. Czaplicka then commenced extensive ethnographic field research; she set out in May 1914 with three fellow travelers, among them Henry Usher Hall, to Krasnoiarsk. The

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group then went by ship down the Yenisei to its estuary. During the winter of 1914/15, Czaplicka and Hall traveled several months through the forest tundra north of the Lower Tunguska, staying mainly with Tungus (Evenki) nomadic households and relying on the help of local 'cultural brokers' (my wording). Having returned to Britain in September 1915, Czaplicka spent considerable energy on publicizing the results of the expedition, prepared the manuscript of her travelogue *My Siberian Year*, lectured at Oxford University (replacing a male colleague conscripted to the army) but also visited Warsaw and New York. Czaplicka had excellent preconditions for a successful academic career—or so it seemed. I leave it to the readers of Kubica's book to find out what led to Czaplicka's tragic death in May 1921.

Kubica strikes a good balance between captivating her readership through a lively style of writing, on the one hand, and presenting the details of her detective-like research. Kubica does not spare any criticism towards colleagues who earlier sought to compile Czaplicka's biography or at least certain aspects of her intellectual work.

The three keywords of the book's subtitle—gender, shamanism, race—receive explicit discussion and several chapters. *Race* is from hindsight the thorniest issue. Kubica speculates that Czaplicka would have revised her ideas on *race* had she had the opportunity to work closely with Franz Boas and his students (in fact, Czaplicka and Boas did discuss this option, but then Boas had to spend time and energy to defend his own position in US academia). However, Czaplicka was intellectually brought up with and sought to contribute to the study of race as an anthropological key concept, conducting anthropometric measurements and photography among indigenous groups while traveling along the Yenisei and east of it. Czaplicka was thus deeply involved in anthropological paradigms and practices that are heavily and rightfully criticized today. Yet Kubica argues that "although Czaplicka was an exponent of the racial discourse—a given at the time—she also advocated egalitarianism in this respect" (381). To some degree, Czaplicka also embraced environmental determinism, intellectually inherited during her young years in Warsaw from her mentor, Polish geographer Waław Nałkowski.

Regarding shamanism, Kubica shows that Czaplicka's writings on this subject came to be largely misinterpreted by later experts in the field, some of which saw Czaplicka as a strong proponent of the idea that shamanism goes together with "Arctic hysteria". Indeed, this assumption is a distorted version of Czaplicka's own position, to be characterized as a shift from an initially psychopathological to

a cultural-relativistic take on shamanism, at least after her 1914/15 expedition.

Shamanism also offered an avenue for Czaplicka's to explore the "third sex" among Siberian shamans, and for sure she was not the only anthropologist fascinated by this topic in those years. Kubica states that Czaplicka's thoughts on this issue may be interpreted in the light of the (significantly later) social-scientific differentiation between sex and gender, which Czaplicka implicitly anticipated *avant la lettre*.

Gender, however, is a keyword in Kubica's book mainly because of Czaplicka's efforts to get a foot in the door of an almost exclusively male academic environment. One may speculate—as participants at Kubica's book-launch event did in May 2021—if Czaplicka's biography stands for academic precarity. True, Czaplicka received a prestigious scholarship, she had the opportunity to study in London and Oxford and to lead a scientific expedition; but after the end of the Great War, she could not secure a stable academic position, neither in Britain nor in Poland nor in the United States. Not just because she was a woman: she may have felt marginal because English was not her native tongue and/or because her area of expertise, Siberia, was of little immediate interest in British or US geopolitics. Kubica succeeds well in weaving these many threads together, not ending the account with the death of her protagonist but carrying on to document how Czaplicka's ethnographic legacy came to be fragmented (Henry Usher Hall being part of that story) and how later scholars largely failed to appreciate Czaplicka's work in a coherent manner.

Grażyna Kubica closes her book with the observation that archival research on anthropologists' biographies resembles "field research conducted on the past of one's own tribe" (543). Her aim is "to reflect not only upon our own genealogy (our anthropological matrilineage) but above all on our approach to the discipline here and now" in terms of methodology, theoretical paradigms, institutional development, and research practice (543). Kubica excellently accomplishes this task, assisted by Ben Koschalka who carefully translated the Polish edition (published in 2015 by Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego) into English. I highly recommend this well-researched and well-written biography to all readers of *Sibirica*.

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Place and Nature: Essays in Russian Environmental History

Edited by David Moon, Nicholas B. Breyfogle, and Alexandra Bekasova

(Cambridgeshire, UK: White Horse Press 2021,), 343 pp. ISBN: 978-1-912186-16-7.

The past decade has seen a growing interest in the environmental history of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, and many of the current luminaries working in this growing field have contributed their work to this collection. *Place and Nature* is an eclectic exercise in place-based environmental history, a practice that puts special emphasis on the firsthand sensory and interpersonal experiences of the authors in the places they write about. The place-based history practiced in this collection frequently combines travel narratives, methodological discussions, and personal reminiscence to emphasize the embedded nature of the contributors in the places they study. The book contains fourteen chapters by fifteen authors, all of whom participated in a series of academic excursions to rural areas of the Russian Federation between 2013 and 2016 from which they drew—to varying degrees—the materials for their respective chapters. In doing so, they have provided a record of both the challenges and the historical insights available at the intersection of the theoretical and material.

The environmental history of Russia has often been presented as a bleak narrative of decline, pollution, and disaster. *Place and Nature* seeks to intervene in this declensionist narrative by suggesting that local experiences of wider trends—accessed through a place-based approach—demonstrate that such negative features were and are far from the only aspects of the relationships between humans and the environment.

The book is visually appealing with fifty-nine figures, mostly in color, and thirteen maps all in matte finish. The chapters are divided into three sections, “The Northwest and European North of Russia,” “Being There: Photographic Essays,” and “Siberia and the Pacific Far East.” In addition to exploring these topics, many contributions examine changing human relationships with water, mobility, and conservation in the Russian Empire and its successor states.

A chapter by Alexei Kraikovski and Julia Lajus examines the process of “environing,” or the process by which undifferentiated space became a culture-tinged place in the Solovetskie Islands through the construction of monastic buildings, the subsequent pilgrims and tourists who visited the site over the following centuries, and the ongoing experience of scientific research on the islands.

Andy Bruno's chapter is a biography of Northwest Russia's Lake Imandra, which places this local story in the context of world-historical developments of the Anthropocene. Drawing on scientific and archival sources, Bruno argues that while the ecology of Lake Imandra was shaped by human activity and various forms of political economy, it also shaped human development in the surrounding region.

Alan Roe's chapter mixes the biography of Vodlozero National Park and one of its dogged, ever-thwarted champions Oleg Cherviakov. Roe tells the story—common to many national parks and similar conservation institutions in Russia—of a quest to implement a model of sustainable development and the disappointments that accompanied it as years passed and critical investments were never made.

Robert Dale's chapter provides a compelling comparison of two flood years in St. Petersburg, 1824 and 1924. It explores the flood-related cultural transformation the city underwent in the intervening century, a process that built resilience to flooding events and resulted in a very different disaster in 1924 than in 1824.

Nicholas B. Breyfogle's chapter provides a strong start to the "Being There: Photographic Essays" section, showcasing a meandering tour of the sacred, mundane, and gruesome human entanglements with the Solovetskie Islands.

Catherine Evtuhov gives an account of touring several sites of industrial heritage and legacies in the Ural Mountains, providing a view of the tourism infrastructure which has grown to preserve and exhibit the remaining features of the region's industrial past.

Bryce Stewart's chapter explores Lake Baikal through both its natural beauty and the historical attempts to conserve that beauty in the face of advancing environmental degradation.

David Moon's chapter provides a further articulation of this collection's intervention in the dominant declensionist narrative in Russian environmental history by recounting a trip to a remote corner of Lake Baikal. Moon suggests that, even amid the smoke of wildfires spurred on by anthropogenic sources, the Barguzin *zapovednik*—or nature preserve—indicates that there are still stories to be told about areas and environments far removed from human activities and industry.

Alexandra Bekasova and Ekaterina Kalemeneva's chapter provides perhaps the strongest example of the collection's focus on the construction of place over time through a close reading of guidebooks for travelers on Siberia's rail network in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This chapter, in particular, will be of interest to those engaged in the study of travel and tourism.

Arkady and Tatiana Kalikhman's chapter provides a chronological narrative of political and conservation developments surrounding Lake Baikal. Though I have my doubts that the authors' arrangement of important dates and developments into a spreadsheet can "permit an objective consideration," the chapter's observation that Lake Baikal has historically been insulated from environmental degradation by inaccessibility as much as by active efforts to protect it may be of interest to those considering new approaches to nature protection in industrial, production-oriented societies.

In his chapter Nicholas B. Breyfogle makes an intervention in the ongoing focus of Russian environmental history on the activities of human actors and elite conservationists. Drawing on the work of Timothy LeCain and similar theorists, he argues for the importance of sables and other environmental features in the establishment and relative success of the Barguzin *zapovednik*.

A chapter from Elena Kochetkova provides an engaging portrait, deeply rooted in new archival research, of the struggle between industrial and conservation interests over the question of pollution in Lake Baikal.

The book closes with a chapter from Mark Sokolsky examining the emergence of a local conservation movement led by elite imperial hunters in late-imperial Primor'e. In a chilling closing argument, Sokolsky argues that the massive human dislocations in the region during the early Soviet decades were at the root of success in conserving the region's fauna. The editors of this volume have united a wide variety of subjects under the methodological umbrella of place-based scholarship. Rather than detracting from the cohesion of the work, this variety provides an example of the depth which can result from a localized approach to environmental issues of broad importance.

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Mebet**Alexander Grigorenko, translated by Christopher Culver**

(London: Glagoslav Publications, 2020), 174 pp. \$23.65 (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-912894-90-1.

William Shakespeare famously put the words, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy,” into the mouth of Hamlet. It’s unlikely that the Bard had in mind the traditions and cultures of the peoples of the Russian North, but they certainly apply to the societies that feature in Alexander Grigorenko’s debut novel, *Mebet*, now available in an excellent English translation by Christopher Culver.

Mebet is from the Nenets people and is enviously called “The Gods’ Favorite” because he appears to be impervious to harm or grief. But he is ultimately to discover that there is a price to pay for his super-human strength.

The author is a native Russian, who has spent many years living in Siberia, and has gained a deep understanding of the ways and customs of the numerous ethnic peoples who live in these remote territories of Russia’s vast expanses. The Nenets and others are traditionally nomads, wandering the flat tundra and the wooded taiga with their herds of reindeer.

Such a lifestyle sharpens senses which help these people to survive: “any man of the taiga is capable not only of spotting tracks, but also hearing the breathing of snakes, pointing to the most distant star, and distinguishing between the scents which the wind brings” (52). Mebet can do all this and more. But he is missing an essential part of his humanity: compassion. When he discovers what this is, thanks to the birth of his grandson, Sevser, it is almost too late for him to redeem himself. His grandson “became the first human being that Mebet could not imagine a life without . . . Mebet still retained his strength, and his fortune had not set on him like the summer sun, but he was no longer the same man he was before” (82).

This remarkable novel is divided into two parts. The first has elements of a classic fairy tale. Like many fairy tales, it has some gruesome moments. (Fairy tales are full of wicked witches and evil deeds, and the wolf eats Red Riding Hood’s grandmother; but this rarely upsets even children.) But it is the addition of the atmosphere of the Russian North that makes *Mebet* so unusual and fascinating for the reader, whether Western or Russian.

The second part, where Mebet faces terrifying trials, is a philosophical treatise, posing questions that face us all. As Mebet's son, Hadko, says to his father when he encounters him in the midst of Mebet's challenges, "Every man must atone for his life, either after his death, or while he is still there, on the earth . . . There is no stone, tree, bird or animal that needs forgiveness, only man needs it. He is farthest of all from truth, he alone knows what suffering is. He alone longs for forgiveness and vindication" (121–122).

The final thoughts are verbalized by Mebet's grandson, Sevser: "It is not the person who lacks the ultimate truth who is blind, but rather the person who does not even go searching for it and who believes that everything in the world is arbitrary and meaningless" (173).

In the original Russian, *Mebet* is the first part of a trilogy by Grigorenko. English readers should hope that the subsequent two novels will also be translated to help open the window wider onto this little-discovered part of the world.

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