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Imaginative Geography and the Perception of the Other in Russian Literature: Mikhail Lermontov and Vladimir Makanin

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Oral Presentation 3.4

**IMAGINATIVE GEOGRAPHY AND THE PERCEPTION OF
THE OTHER IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE:
MIKHAIL LERMONTOV AND VLADIMIR MAKANIN**

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This project endeavors to explore the historical perspective of the “other,” specifically the Caucasus, in Russia during two broad periods, the 19th century and the troubling episode of the more recent war in Chechnya. It proposes to compare and contrast the identification of the relationship with the other, as expressed through works of literature and contemporary journalistic accounts. Issues of “orientalism,” the Russian label for the Caucasus, will be explored with a foundation in Edward Said’s literary theory of “imaginative geography.” Said posits in “Orientalism Reconsidered” that “knowledge that is non-dominative and non-coercive can be produced in a setting that is deeply inscribed with the politics, the considerations, the positions and the strategies of power.”¹ Thus in encounters between Russia and the “Orient,” one must be especially privy to deep-seated power relations. Important also is the paradigmatic shift in the mind of the Russian protagonist between the other as alternatively an “object” or a “subject.” It is in the case of the latter that the “Oriental” assumes a human face, yet this shift does not always result in more civil relations. What is the nature of the Russian-Orient relations? Why do such encounters typically lead to disaster for the “Oriental”? Why is it necessary this be the upshot of their interactions and what, if anything, can mitigate the historical antipathy between these two adversaries? These are some of the questions this project intends raise and will endeavor to address.

¹ Said, Edward. “Orientalism Reconsidered” in Barker *et al.* *Literature, Politics, Theory: Papers from the Essex Conference*, 1976-84 (Routledge, London 1986).