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Between imagination and reality: A complementary approach to "Harbin note" through diaspoetics and cultural semiotics

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Abstract. In the study of Russian émigré literature, an inherent Russian-centric perspective persists. Diaspoetics, with its meta-critical attributes, offers a means effectively to address this limitation. Central to its focus are the concepts of 'imagination' and 'reality' in diaspora identity. Across its developmental stages, diaspoetics alternately emphasizes objective identity definition and subjective identity construction, each approach presenting distinct strengths and weaknesses. However, from the perspective of Juri Lotman's cultural semiotics, culture as a self-conscious individuality inherently unites subject and object. The tension between 'imagination' and 'reality' finds resolution in the literary creation of the metaphor "Harbin note", which emerges from the unique diasporic space of Harbin. Consequently, within the interplay of the mythological geographies of "East" and "West", the identity of the diaspora community simultaneously embodies opposition and achieves unity.

Keywords: diaspoetics; cultural semiotics; Russian émigré literature; "Harbin note"; identity

From the late 19th century to the 1940s, the city of Harbin in Northern China emerged as one of the three major hubs of the Russian émigré community following the October Revolution, nurturing one of its most vibrant cultural spheres. Situated on multiple boundaries – both geographical and semiotic – the city occupied a unique liminal space: physically located in China yet architecturally and culturally Russian in character; peripheral to both Chinese and Russian cultural centres yet forming its own cultural hub; both an imperial outpost and a wartime refuge. These contradictions forged Harbin's singular spatial duality across geopolitical, cultural, and existential dimensions. It was

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within this exceptional creative milieu – rare in both Russian and world literary history – that the "Harbin note"[2] took shape. Yet this same liminal condition that enabled its creativity simultaneously constituted its marginality. Despite the accelerating globalization and the rise of transcultural paradigms, its significance for understanding transnational literary creation remains substantially underestimated and underexplored. This critical oversight can to a large extent be attributed to the epistemological subjectivity underlying the frameworks of conventional Russian émigré literature studies.

Russian émigré literature (*литература русского зарубежья*) represents a binary division within the broader framework of Russian literature, categorizing the creative subject as either an emigrant or not. The term '*зарубежье*', meaning 'beyond the border', inherently reflects a Russian-centric perspective rooted in a "within the border" stance. This subjectivity manifests in two key ways. On the one hand, it is reflected in the positioning in literary creation: the reality of the Other depicted in Russian émigré literature is inevitably mediated by the collective cultural consciousness.[3] On the other hand, it is evident in researchers' positioning in literary studies: the study of Russian émigré literature seeks fully to uncover the value, achievements, and influence of Russian literature abroad – yet this very value system is itself culturally determined. Due to the dominant focus on the West in émigré studies, the Eastern branch, for which the "Harbin note"

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[2] This term arises from an analogy by scholars of Russian émigré literature in the Far East, who juxtaposed the literary scene in Harbin with its contemporary counterpart in the West – the well-known "Paris note". The "Paris note" was a concept coined by émigré writer Boris Poplavskij (2009: 49) to describe the "solemn, luminous and hopeless" literary phenomenon among Russian exiles in Paris, while the "Harbin note" is essentially a retrospective "scholarly construct" (Proskurina 2021: 11). The term "Harbin note" was first proposed by Chinese scholar Yingnan Li (2002) and has gained scholarly recognition in both Chinese and Russian academic circles (Proskurina 2021; Zabiyako, Efendieva 2009; Zabiyako 2007).

[3] This finds typical exemplification in Arsenij Nesmelov's poem "The legend of the dragon" (Li 2005 Vol. 2: 145–147), where the positive depiction of a "thousand-winged/flaming dragon" as China's protector creates profound semiotic dissonance. This representation contrasts fundamentally with the concept of '龙' ('*loong*' – aquatic, wingless, yet capable of flight): the evil sememe inherent in the Western '*дракон*' ('dragon') symbol is in contrast with the auspicious connotations of the Chinese *loong*. The poet's attempt to express the Chinese *loong*'s concept (signified) through the signifier '*дракон*' creates a disjunction of signification. When decoded through different cultural codes at the pragmatic level, this generates diametrically opposite meanings, resulting in either profound cultural misreading (for Western audiences) or unintended irony (for Chinese audiences). This semiotic rupture renders debatable certain Far Eastern Russian émigré scholars' assertions regarding the literature's reflection of "authentic" reality (Li 2019: 14). It should be noted that all translations to English in this article are by Zhihao Zhang unless noted otherwise.

stands, has long been marginalized[4] – a perspective exemplified by Gleb Struve's (1996: 247) dismissive label of it as "provincial".

The present article emerges from critical reflections on the limitations in current frameworks of Russian émigré literature studies stated above. The fundamental question remains: having moved beyond traditional frameworks, what approach should we adopt toward this unique yet profoundly complex cultural and literary phenomenon? Should we comprehend it through objective, stable criteria – an external sociological perspective – or as a continuous flux of identity construction shaped by subjective imagination – an internal psychological perspective? Or is it possible to find a way out of the enduring debate over the objective–subjective/imagination–reality paradox in migration studies? Most crucially, what methodological approach should guide our engagement with the concrete cultural and literary texts?

These questions can be addressed using a complementary approach through diaspoetics and cultural semiotics, where the literature itself is subjected to "trial" on a metalanguage level:

> The meta-critical activity of talking about this site, of engendering the genre as a secondary critical witness bearing witness to the testimony of other witnesses, other critics, who actually engender the event (diaspora) and themselves as its subjects (diasporists) through a diversity of statements, I would like to, without any further delay, call *diaspoetics*. Diaspoetics is the meta-critical art, the *techne*, of witnessing the witnesses of the event called diaspora criticism. (Mishra 2006: 14)

This approach aligns with Lotman's cultural semiotics: "The qualification of a fact as an event depends on a system of concepts" (Lotman 1977[1971]: 235). What constitutes an event is shaped by subjective perspectives, and descriptions can only reflect what the "witness" deems worthy of recording.

This study adopts a dialectical integration of theory and praxis, using theoretical approaches to guide empirical analysis while employing practical evidence to extend theoretical boundaries. Thus, it pursues dual objectives: theoretically, it moves beyond traditional frameworks of Russian émigré literature studies by exploring the complementary potential of diaspoetics and cultural semiotics in analysing diasporic phenomena; practically, it re-examines the "Harbin note" as a cultural rather than purely literary phenomenon within this new paradigm, utilizing this particular, representative yet marginalized case study to generate

[4] Even as recently as in 2023, a Russian scholar noted that "if new research results emerge, they primarily focus on Western Russian émigrés, while Eastern Russian émigrés continue to await dedicated researchers" (Savchenko 2023: 53).

substantive empirical insights. To achieve these research objectives, this study is structured in three integrated sections. In the first section a foundational understanding of Harbin's diaspora through diaspoetics is established. The second section demonstrates how cultural semiotics supplements diaspoetics at ontological and epistemological levels while addressing the latter's inherent subjective–objective paradox. The third section provides methodological enhancement by applying cultural semiotics as operational tools for diasporic literary analysis, supported by concrete textual examinations.

1. Diaspora: between objectivity and subjectivity

The term 'diaspora' (Russian: '*диаспора*') derives from the Greek word '*διασπορά*' ('*diaspeir*', '*diaspeirien*'), which originally denoted the 'scattering' of seeds.[5] In the 1980s, the term 'diaspora' began to gain acceptance in China, but it remains relatively uncommon in Russian literature studies in China, and its usage is often semantically ambiguous and overly broad.[6] To some extent, this practice stems from the academic tradition of Russian literature studies, which essentially situates the study of diaspora literature within the established framework of émigré literature. However, most diaspora scholars oppose the overgeneralization of the concept, as not all émigrés exhibit diaspora characteristics, whereas all diasporas are, by definition, émigrés. Consequently, all works of diaspora literature fall under the umbrella of émigré literature, but not *vice versa*.[7] As Zhongju Yang (2021: 16) observes, "not all immigrants can be considered diaspora groups with diaspora consciousness; diaspora groups are distinctive communities". Diaspora literature, therefore, refers to literary works produced by diaspora groups that reflect their 'diasporic' identity through transnational experiences such as displacement, sojourn, and migration.

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5 Initially, the capitalized 'Diaspora' specifically referred to the 'Great Diaspora' of Jews exiled from their homeland by Babylon. With the progression of globalization, the lowercase 'diaspora' has evolved to encompass the dispersion of diverse ethnic groups.

6 To date, the primary translations of the term have included '流散' ('diaspora') (Kun Liu, Yongtao Peng, Yan Liang, Nuan Li, Fenglin Xu), '流亡' ('exile') (Jiezhi Wang), and '离散' ('dispersion') (Zhijie Wu, Hongyu Gong). The majority of translators have equated '俄侨' ('Russian émigrés') with 'Russian diaspora' (Chuanyong Peng, Chuanhuai Peng, Wenxia Liu, Xuetao Bai, Gang Jin, Yamin Wang, Xuechen Pang, Xueping Qu, Wenxia Liu). In contemporary Russian scholarship, the term '*диаспора*' ('diaspora') is often used interchangeably with '*эмиграция*' ('emigration'), '*рассеяние*' ('scattering'), and '*зарубежье*' ('émigré community'). In this paper, the term 'diaspora' is adopted consistently.

7 For instance, Ivan Bunin's *Dark Avenues* belongs to émigré literature, but not to diaspora literature as it was written abroad but does not reflect the experience of diaspora life.

According to Sudesh Mishra, diaspoetics has evolved through three developmental "scenes" (Mishra 2006: 15–18): "the scene of dual territoriality", "the scene of situational laterality", and "the scene of archival specificity". While these scenes are not hierarchically ordered, they collectively represent the diachronic progression of diaspoetics research perspectives. "The scene of dual territoriality", influenced by structuralism, focuses on exploring and defending the stable coordinates of the homeland and host territories. "The scene of situational laterality", with its post-structuralist leanings, seeks to dismantle the constraints of "territorial dualism" and aims to construct diaspora identity from a cultural-psychological perspective. In contrast, "the scene of archival specificity" does not strive to establish a universal theory of diaspora; instead, it engages in archaeological research on specific diasporic communities. Together, these scenes reflect the evolving and multifaceted nature of diaspoetics as a field of study.

"The scene of dual territoriality" asserts that the spaces of the homeland and the host country shape the identity consciousness of diaspora groups. In 1991, the inaugural issue of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* marked the formal beginning of diaspoetics research. In his seminal article "Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return", William Safran (1991: 83–84) defined diaspora groups using six key characteristics. Building on this foundation, Robin Cohen, in the 2023 edition of *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*, introduced the concept of the "nine strands of a diasporic rope" to further refine the definition.[8] Based on these external, tangible criteria, Cohen proposed a typology of diaspora, categorizing it into six types: (1) victim diaspora; (2) labour diaspora; (3) imperial diaspora; (4) trade diaspora; (5) deterritorialized diaspora; and (6) incipient diaspora.

Proponents of "the scene of situational laterality" reject the use of objective, static coordinates and universal measures rooted in logocentrism to define 'diaspora'. Instead, they emphasize the fluidity, diversity, and context-dependent nature of diasporic phenomena. This perspective remains highly relevant in the era of globalization, as it captures the dynamic and multifaceted experiences of diaspora communities. Stuart Hall, in his influential article "Cultural identity and diaspora" (2005), draws on Jacques Derrida's concept of '*différance*' to explore the construction of diasporic identity through strategic 'positioning'. Hall argues that cultural identity is not a fixed essence but an ongoing process, addressing both 'what it is' and 'what it becomes'. It is not predetermined but emerges from history as refracted through imagination. As Hall (2005: 446) states, "Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but

[8] Namely, 'dispersal', 'expansion', 'retention', 'idealization', 'return', 'distinctiveness', 'apprehension', 'creativity', and 'solidarity' (Cohen 2023: 3).

a *positioning*." Since the turn of the 21st century, diaspora scholars, influenced by this post-structuralist approach, have increasingly focused on the "imaginative" dimensions of diasporic identity construction.[9]

Although these two scenes emphasize different aspects, they are not entirely opposed. One of the six characteristics Safran initially identified included elements of subjective construction, namely, "they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievements" (Safran 1991: 83). Just as structuralism naturally evolves into its counterpart, post-structuralism, "the scene of dual territoriality" inherently laid the groundwork for "the scene of situational laterality". It would be reductive to claim that either the former or the latter scene embodies a purely objective or subjective approach to diasporic phenomenon; in practice, they invariably incorporate elements of both. However, it is less contentious to position them as representing two poles of an idealized theoretical spectrum – namely, the enduring object–subject dichotomy that continues to inform diaspora research paradigms. Prior to advancing our theoretical framework, it is methodologically prudent to assess the Harbin diaspora through these dialectical prisms to the explanatory strengths and limitations of each approach and to establish the epistemological necessity for moving beyond this binary opposition.

Based on realistic, objective criteria, the first wave of Russian emigration, encompassing both the Western and the Eastern branches, can be defined unequivocally as involuntary according to Gabriel Sheffer's (1986: 9) framework, and it aligns precisely with the classification of the victim diaspora in Cohen's typology, since it emerged as "a direct consequence of the White Army's defeat in the civil war from 1919 to 1922" (Yakimova 2009: 9). Simultaneously, the Russian victim diaspora in general also displayed characteristics of a labour diaspora: the demographic composition of the diaspora population was predominantly characterized by a majority of working-age males;[10] most European nations considered the labour value of Russian emigrants when accepting them (Raeff

[9] This shift is exemplified in works such as Vijay Mishra's *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (2007) and Brian Axel's "The diasporic imaginary" (2002). The latter in particular advances a rigorous critique of 'model of place', proposing instead the more dynamic concept of the 'diasporic imaginary'.

[10] Demographically, individuals aged 25 to 45 comprised about 65 to 70% of the diaspora, which is significantly higher than the proportion of the same age group in pre-revolutionary Russia and Soviet Russia – 34% and 38%, respectively (Sabennikova 2023: 99). According to a 1921 investigation in Yugoslavia, "69% of the Russian émigrés there were men, 66% were between 19 and 45 years old, and 70% of the men were single, though most women were married" (Raeff 1990: 25).

1990: 29), which allows us "to regard them as labour migrants" (Sabennikova 2023: 99). Similarly, the Russian diaspora in the Far East, particularly in Shanghai, also exhibited such characteristics (Buzuev 2012: 42–44).

When examining the shared psychological foundation of the Russian diaspora, the "Green Lamp" Society proves indispensable. Initiated by Dmitrij Merezhkovskij and Zinaida Gippius as an "incubator of ideas" (Terapiano 1987: 38), it played "a prominent role in the intellectual life of the First Wave of Emigration" (Terapiano 1987: 38). Gippius's renowned speech at its inaugural meetings articulated key diaspora ideals and significantly influenced émigré identity formation. She rejected the notion of exile as a "meaningless accident" (Gippius 1927: 40) or emigrants as mere "victims of unfortunate events" (Gippius 1927: 41). Instead, she framed exile as an inevitable act of divine will – a means to compel emigrants to endure the pain of rootlessness, to grasp the essence of true "freedom", and ultimately to serve the motherland (Gippius 1927: 41). In doing so, Gippius imbued "exile" with a fatalistic, messianic significance, creating a "myth of exile and return". The shared experience and collective mission of "exile" transformed the entire Russian diaspora into what Benedict Anderson (1983) termed an 'imagined community'.

While enduring the shared sociological and psychological realities of exile, the Russian diasporas in Harbin and Paris developed distinct identity constructions, shaped by the mythologized histories of their respective diasporic experiences under different "lateral situations".

The history of the Russian diaspora in the West, epitomized by the Paris diaspora, traces its origins to the tradition of the Russian elite emigrating abroad. Beginning with Alexander Herzen, a steady flow of dissident intellectuals migrated to Western Europe. Consequently, after the October Revolution, "most Russian refugees viewed themselves as continuing the legacy of the political émigrés of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who had gone abroad to pursue their fight against the tsarist regime" (Raeff 1990: 4), while fearing they might "become "become 'regular immigrants'" (Raeff 1990: 5). At least that was the case for the making elites.

However, it remains contentious to claim that the vast, yet silenced majority of Russian refugees necessarily conformed to the cultural mythologies constructed by the intelligentsia who occupied the cultural centre of the diasporic community. In Europe, the collective "imagination" of exile starkly contrasted with the harsh realities faced by the "invisible" on the cultural margins,[11] the

[11] Only 2–3% of those evacuated from Istanbul were illiterate, compared to a 78.9% illiteracy rate in Russia in 1897 and an average of 50–55% in most European countries at the time.

contradiction between the "myth of exile" and the grim realities of daily life, "pride" and "transcendent humiliation", "sweet hopelessness" and "the search for a beggar's paradise" (Agenosov 1998: 38) is vividly captured in the "Paris note" of the younger generation with its prevailing tones of despair and gloom. "Pretend to be Brazilian, Czech/But don't mention you're Russian!" – a young poet Don-Aminado (1994: 67) expressed this marginalization in his poem "After everything". A similar pattern emerged in Shanghai, despite the city's minimal pre-Revolutionary Russian population. Unlike their culturally significant presence in Harbin, the Russian émigré community achieved little of comparable impact after relocating to Shanghai. Many worked in nightclubs within the Shanghai concessions and adopted pseudonyms to conceal their Russian identities (Il'ina 2014: 232), reminding of the marginalized status of the Paris diaspora.

If the Paris diaspora ultimately represents a classic victim diaspora – historically singular before and after the Revolution despite its dramatic expansion and the proletarianization of its intelligentsia, thereby reinforcing the tension between its idealized "myth of exile and return" and its harsher realities – then the Harbin diaspora's distinctiveness emerges precisely where this paradigm diverges. It all comes down to the city's unique history – both real and mythologized.

The history of the Harbin diaspora traces its origins to the colonial activities of the Russian Empire. In 1886, Tsar Alexander III issued a declaration emphasizing the strategic importance of the Far East, marking the inception of Russia's Far East policy. The construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway commenced in 1891, further solidifying Russia's ambitions in the region. In 1896, the Qing government was compelled to sign a series of unequal treaties with Tsarist Russia, including the Sino-Russian Secret Treaty and the Chinese Eastern Railway Contract. By 1898, Harbin, as a crucial hub of the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER), began to be developed by the Russians. While the CER was nominally a Sino-Russian joint venture, it functioned as "a tool for Russia's exclusive aggression against China" (Ma 2010: 42). "The construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway allowed Russia to establish a complete colonial system in Harbin" (Ma 2010: 51), transforming the city into a unique hybrid space: "[…] geographically, it is located in China, yet it also resembles a part of Russia" (Linnik 1995: 149–150), its domestic infrastructure, administrative bureaucracy, and numerous educational institutions making it "more like a provincial centre of the Russian Empire than a Chinese city" (Böhmig 2007: 161).

Although many Russian emigrants were significantly more educated than ordinary labourers, with approximately 40–50% of Russian refugees engaged in intellectual work before fleeing Russia, around 90% of Russian emigrants in the West resorted to manual labour after their exile (Jovanovich 2005: 144; Sabennikova 2023: 99; GARF, F. 5764, Op. 1, D. 89, L. 8.).

Russian emigrants who arrived in Harbin before the October Revolution voluntarily participated in the Russian Empire's Far East expansion policy, receiving substantial compensation in the process. This group can be defined as an imperial diaspora according to Cohen's typology, characterized by state sponsorship and support (Cohen 2023: 85). However, after the October Revolution, the collapse of the Russian Empire shattered these imperial ambitions, leading to an influx of Russian refugees into Harbin and transforming the community into a victim diaspora. In contrast to the classic victim diaspora paradigm – typically characterized by traumatic displacement – the Russian émigrés driven to Harbin by the Red Army perceived the city as a "place of their own people" (Arustamova *et al.* 2021: 73). This sentiment was vividly illustrated when the renowned Chinese writer Qiubai Qu, during his journey to the Soviet Union, asked Russian acquaintances in Harbin about their life in China, to which they replied, "We have never been to China. Do you think Harbin is China?" (Qu 2021: 43). Yet precisely because Harbin is undeniably part of China, the remnants of the White Army found refuge there, escaping the Red Army's advances. This sense of "our own" reflects an imagined "home" that Harbin, as a Chinese city, provided to the diaspora group in an otherwise alien environment. Within this imagination, the objective history of Russian "colonizers" was diluted and erased.

Leonid Markizov, a former Harbin Russian émigré, substantiated "the traditional Russian scholarly point of view on the beneficial influence of Western (Russian) civilization on the development of Northeast China" (Buzuev 2012: 18). In his article "Everything remains for the people (On the centenary of Harbin)", Markizov discussed the impact of the CER on Northeast China, comparing it to the Japanese occupation, and argued that "Russians were not colonizers, nor were they enslavers of the Chinese people, instead, they made a contribution commensurate with the capabilities of the time to the scientific, technological, and economic progress of the region" (Markizov 1997: 122). However, in 1999, scholar Meng Li from the University of Chicago challenged this perspective in her article "Harbin – A product of colonialism", published in the same journal. She acknowledged the undeniable significance of the CER for regional development but emphasized that not all its consequences were positive (Li 1999).

It can be argued that it is not so much that the diaspora group deliberately denied their identity as colonizers, but rather that, from their perspective, the colonial characteristics of Harbin were absent in their imagination due to their cultural dominance within the diasporic situation. This reveals the typical mythologization of Harbin's colonial founding history – a process that acknowledges the historical fact of Russians building Harbin, while simultaneously overlooking the colonial activities of Tsarist Russia. These two aspects, however,

are inseparable, representing two sides of the same coin. It is therefore impossible to reject one while accepting the other. Instead, this phenomenon can be understood as a form of "strategic positioning" rooted in imagined history, shaped by the lateral dynamics of the diaspora. This positioning allows the diaspora group to navigate their identity within a framework that reconciles their historical legacy with their present realities.

At this juncture, there are two key contradictions:

First, while the Eastern and Western diasporas shared the common experience of exile and could both be classified as victim diasporas – a classification that aligns with the gloomy tone of the "Paris note" – the "Harbin note" exhibits, as renowned researcher of Russian émigré literature Vladimir Agenosov (1988: 55) pointed out, a strikingly "masculine" style, a characteristic typically absent in victim diasporas. From the perspective of "the scene of dual territoriality", one might attribute this difference to the "a priori attributes" of the distinct "host country" cultures in the East and West. However, this explanation fails to account for the stark contrast between the Harbin and Shanghai diasporas, both of which were situated in China. This discrepancy underscores the limitations of relying solely on the objective, external identity definitions proposed by "the scene of dual territoriality".

Second, if we shift our focus to the internal, subjective identity constructions within the diaspora group, we find another contradiction. While the Paris diaspora's identity as 'exiles' aligns closely with their lived reality, the Harbin diaspora's identity as 'exiles' is overshadowed by their perception of Harbin as a "home", to the extent that the experience of exile itself was diluted. They perceived themselves not as "refugees in China" or "random elements", but as "pioneers of Russian culture, who, at the cost of many sacrifices and efforts, have won a certain and very honourable position" (Taskina 1998: 106). This creates a tension between their imagined identity and their historical reality. Moreover, the colonial identity of the Harbin diaspora is often downplayed or ignored, despite the undeniable historical presence of Tsarist Russia's colonial activities in the region. This fluidity and contradiction in subjective identity construction emphasized in "the scene of situational laterality" highlight the limitations of relying solely on internal, subjective perspectives, as they fail to provide a definitive answer to the question of 'what it is', which partly led to the debate between Meng Li and the former Russian émigré.[12]

[12] Meng Li's article provoked a series of polemical responses from former Harbin Russian émigrés (Taskina 1999; Kirsanov 1999). This study views the debate as a product of cultural mechanism rather than substantive evidentiary source, and, accordingly, refrains from direct engagement with its contentions. However, one crucial observation must be made: Meng Li's distinction between pre- and post-1918 Harbin remains analytically valid, representing

From the above analysis, we can conclude that the Paris and Shanghai diasporas exhibit a high degree of generality, while the Harbin diaspora represents a unique and particular case. Historically, the evolution of diaspoetics reflects a progression from broader, universal frameworks to more individualized and specific approaches – a shift from top-down, generalized models to bottom-up, context-specific analyses. The third stage of diaspoetics, "the scene of archival specificity", emerged in response to this need for specificity, emphasizing detailed, archaeological research into particular diasporic phenomena.

Inspired by Michel Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, the third scene transcends the previous two by shifting from generalized theorization to concrete case analysis, and from idealist theoretical constructs to materialist analysis of historical discontinuities. This study concurs with its scientific premise of identifying and analysing specific diasporic cases while resisting overgeneralized theoretical constructions of diaspora. Yet two fundamental limitations of this paradigm remain: firstly, it strategically avoids engaging with the core epistemological dichotomies between 'subjectivity–objectivity' and 'imagination–reality' that fuelled prior debates, achieving its transcendence through methodological particularization rather than through dialectical synthesis – what might be termed a circumventing rather than an overcoming of these contradictions; secondly, while successfully focusing on particular cases, the paradigm encounters the persistent challenge of addressing the part–whole relationship in cultural analysis. As Lotman's insightful analogy reminds us, "any putting together of individual steaks would not create a living calf, any summing up of the simplest texts would not create a holistic cultural phenomenon" (Lotman 1994: 499). The third scene's fragmentary methodology cannot adequately explain how singular cases participate in the dynamic evolution of cultural systems, while presenting the methodological challenge of potentially endless analytical subdivision without a unifying framework.

This article advances cultural semiotics as a complementary approach to the limitations inherent in diaspoetics, offering new ontological, epistemological and methodological perspectives on the subject–object problem in literary and cultural studies.

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fundamentally antithetical typological categories – a differentiation largely overlooked by nostalgia-driven Russian émigré narratives.

2. Cultural semiotic synthesis: Culture as a self-conscious individuality

Lotman's scholarly thought demonstrates remarkable depth and breadth, drawing upon multiple disciplines. While biological sciences constitute a relatively small yet crucially significant portion of Lotman's work, Kalevi Kull's (1999: 127) observation about the enduring importance of biological holism or organicism in his intellectual trajectory holds particular relevance. This organicist perspective was manifest early in his structuralist period (e.g. Lotman 1977[1971]: 12), and became increasingly prominent from the 1980s onward, most notably inspiring his seminal concept of the 'semiosphere' through its dialogue with Vladimir Vernadskij's 'biosphere' theory. Thus, Vernadskij's own indebtedness to Friedrich Schelling's philosophy, especially *Naturphilosophie*, passed on to Lotman (Priimägi 2005). Meanwhile, Mihhail Lotman (1995) has documented Russian humanities' profound engagement with the philosophy of German Romanticism (including Schelling[13]). He also identifies Friedrich Schiller's thought as providing "the premise for overcoming subject–object dichotomies", while acknowledging Alexander von Humboldt's significant impact (M. Lotman 1995: 219). These German Romantic thinkers themselves drew substantially from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's biological morphology, creating an intellectual lineage that, mediated through Alexander Potebnya's work, ultimately influenced Russian Formalism – itself a major source for Lotman's theories.

This brief genealogy suggests Lotman's organicism ultimately derives from 19th-century German Romanticism, in my point of view particularly Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* and identity philosophy.[14] Where Claude Lévi-Strauss developed a Kantian-inspired structuralism that treated culture as a static, transcendental object of analysis ("Kantianism without a transcendental subject"), Lotman's cultural semiotics represents a dialectical advance. Through his formulation of the concept of the semiosphere, Lotman reconceptualizes culture as a dynamic,

[13] However, while acknowledging Mihhail Lotman's argument regarding Hegel's predominant influence in Russia and Juri Lotman's Kantian orientation, this study refrains from engaging in this longstanding debate. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that Schelling's philosophy undoubtedly occupies a significant position in the development of Lotman's organicist thought.

[14] The absence of explicit references to Schelling in Lotman's works should not be interpreted as a lack of philosophical significance. As Mihhail Lotman (1995: 215) documents, Juri Lotman possessed profound knowledge of 17th–19th century European philosophy; his scarce direct references to Humboldt did not preclude the latter's substantial influence (M. Lotman 1995: 222). By the same principle, Schelling's philosophical framework – particularly his organicist conception of nature and identity philosophy – must be recognized as operating within the deeper architecture of Lotman's thought, despite its infrequent surface articulation.

self-referential, and autonomous sign system. This intellectual breakthrough emerges from his creative reworking of Schellingian philosophy: while jettisoning its metaphysical foundations, Lotman adapts and materialistically transforms Schelling's core principles of identity and organicism, thereby overcoming the limitations of static structuralist paradigms.[15]

In his article "Culture as a subject and its own object", Lotman (2019[1989]) articulates a critical dissatisfaction with two predominant approaches to traditional studies of culture and history that have manifested in diaspoetics: while one puts accents on the object and the other emphasizes the subject, both remain fundamentally constrained by an unresolved subject–object dichotomy. To address these limitations, Lotman conceptualizes culture as an intellectual entity (monad) and advocates for an examination of the subject–object relationship from a holistic and organic standpoint; he articulates that the model "subject–object" is "only a relative and one-sided abstraction"[16] (Lotman 2019[1989]: 92). Now, through the lens of cultural semiotics we will return to the contradictions in the Harbin diaspora that left unresolved by the three scenes of diaspoetics.

Lotman posited that space, like natural language, functions as a primary language. At its core, diaspora involves movement from one space to another, making spatiality its fundamental attribute. However, objective space is continuous and infinite, rendering it inaccessible to direct perception by the discrete human consciousness. Consequently, the very notion of "moving from one space to another (e.g. from the West to the East)" necessitates the discretization and symbolization of continuous space by consciousness, indicating an "essential differentiation between geographic and semiotic movement" (Märtsin 2023: 2). Diaspora space, therefore, is a semiotically and culturally mediated construct, composed of proper names such as 'West' or 'East', 'Russia' or 'Harbin', and 'Paris'. The relationships between these spaces are not continuous but rather topological, defined by the symbolic connections between these named entities. This conceptualization aligns with the mythological understanding of space, where the space "is conceived not as a continuum of features but as an aggregate of individual objects bearing proper names" (Lotman, Uspenskii 1975: 23). Just as "heaven", "earth", and "underworld" exist as distinct, non-continuous realms, "East" and "West" are similarly perceived as independent and divided spaces within the diasporic imagination.

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[15] This preliminary philosophical mapping makes no claim to comprehensiveness, representing instead a starting point for more specialized inquiry.

[16] While adopting Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's monadic framework heuristically (not metaphysically), the article's central claim – culture's dual subject–object ontology – opens productive analytical avenues.

The spatial dimension of the Harbin diaspora is defined by its geographic and semiotic movements from "West" to "East", and its self-identity is inevitably constructed through a dialogue with the Other – the perceived simplicity and primitiveness of the "East". This dynamic compels the diaspora to continually grapple with the enduring question of "East and West" inherent in Russian culture, where, as Lotman observes, "East and West in the cultural geography of Russia invariably appear as rich symbols, based on geographical reality, but in fact imperatively dominating it" (Lotman 2002[1992]: 746).

This domination is most prominently demonstrated in the symbolic opposition between Moscow and St. Petersburg. The "North–South" attributes of Moscow and St. Petersburg are entirely overshadowed by the cultural emphasis on "East–West". This prioritization of "East–West" reflects a subjective cultural choice, rooted in the premise that "East and West" possess discrete semiotic properties extracted from the continuum of reality. Meanwhile, the semantics of "East and West" extend far beyond mere geography; they function as equivalent oppositions encompassing 'ancient–new', 'history–myth', 'centripetal–centrifugal', and 'native–alien'. Rather than suggesting that "East and West" inherently express these opposing semantics, it is more accurate to say that these dichotomies, embedded in the psychological structure of Russian culture, are projected onto the symbols of "East and West". This relationship is fluid and evolves with the dynamic development of culture, imbuing it with a significant degree of arbitrariness. Over time, "East and West" have become formalized as symbols. As a synthesis of signifier and signified, they operate at a higher level, constituting the expressions of other contents. This aligns with Roland Barthes's concept of myth in the "second-order semiological system" (Barthes 1972: 113).

Lotman's 'secondary modelling system' transcends Barthes's natural-language centrism by integrating mythological consciousness with equally primary spatial (visual) and linguistic systems. Building on this framework, Lotman distinguished between "real geography" and "mythological geography" (Lotman 2002[1992]: 744). Real geography is a given objective; mythological geography, on the other hand, emerges as a semiotic spatial construct within the collective subjective imagination and does not always align with real geography. The "East and West" as mythological spaces are intrinsically linked to geographic spaces, making them simultaneously subjective and objective – a mediated unity.

This mythological understanding of space enables "mythological space to model other, nonspatial (semantic, value, *etc.*) relationships" (Lotman, Uspenskii 1975: 23), granting "East and West" the capacity to function as equivalents for abstract, non-spatial oppositions. The assertion by Harbin diasporic writers that "[t]here is not and cannot be Western urbanism in the East, because there

are no 'urbans', no cities" (Yakimova 2009: 30) constitutes not a purely objective observation, but rather a semiotic construction predicated on binary non-spatial structural oppositions such as "natural–artificial" that constitute signified of the formalized "signifier" (East–West) on a higher level.

However, this structural formalization remains incomplete, since mythological systems operate through finite, concrete elements that resist full abstraction. Following Lotman's observation that "mythological consciousness is fundamentally *untranslatable* onto the level of another description, is closed within itself, and consequently is comprehensible only from within, not from without" (Lotman, Uspenskii 1975: 27), we recognize that even abstract, universal concepts remain tied to the concrete expressions of "East and West" within Russian culture. Therefore, the concept of "East and West" represents a psychological projection of Russian culture's internal concepts onto external objective reality. It is a self-contained construct, closed within Russian culture. As Lotman posits, "A foreign civilization acts as a kind of mirror[17] and reference point for Russian culture, and the main meaning of interest in the 'foreign' in Russia is traditionally a method of self-knowledge" (Lotman 2002[1992]: 748). The traditional Russian East–West conflict, while ostensibly a discussion about the external world, is ultimately a narrative about Russian culture itself. Like all myths, it serves as a means for Russian culture to explore and define its own identity, using the symbolic opposition of "East and West" as a framework for self-reflection and understanding.

Therefore, when we examine the contradictions between the first and second scenes of diaspoetics through the lens of cultural organicism, we see that subjectivity and objectivity are not absolute dichotomies: human culture is objective to the individual but subjective to the culture itself (Poselyagin 2021: 229–230). On the ontological level, culture is perceived as an individuality, a holistic entity constituted of thinking structures that function as "cultural individualities" (Lotman 2019[1978]: 43). The integration of the separate "cultural individualities" is achieved through two fundamental mechanisms: meta-description and creolization. Crucially, a culture's meta-level self-description establishes its own boundaries and, in doing so, manifests its self-consciousness (Lotman 2009: 172). On the epistemological level, culture takes itself as the object of thought in the process of self-consciousness, and this reflexive activity

[17] Scholars of Russian émigré literature (e.g. Zabiyako, Dyabkin 2013: 153) occasionally favour the 'prism' metaphor over Lotman's 'mirror' – a significant distinction, as the prism implies a fundamental separation between subject and object. I would propose to replace 'mirror' with 'glass', a more apt metaphor that not only reflects both the 'Self' and the 'Other' simultaneously, but also serves as a boundary.

simultaneously establishes its own subjectivity, thus, the subjectivity and objectivity of diaspora are identified at the level of cultural consciousness.

This unity is first and most vividly manifested in artistic creation, which occupies a privileged position in Lotman's cultural semiotics, serving not merely aesthetic functions but constituting fundamental cognitive instruments: art as a "form of cognition" (Lotman 1977[1971]: 2), a "means of acquiring knowledge" (Lotman 2009: 152), and culture as an "organized mechanism of cognition" (Lotman 1970: 6). This epistemological conceptualization of art directly parallels Schelling's philosophical elevation of art as the "organon of philosophy", wherein artistic creation embodies the dialectical synthesis of conscious and nonconscious activity that exhibits in the subjective, in consciousness itself. The concurrence of the two (the conscious and the nonconscious) without consciousness yields the real world of objects, and with consciousness the ideal world of art (Schelling 1978[1800]: 12).

The literary practice of the "Harbin note" demonstrates how the inherent tensions between subjective imagination and objective reality, as well as between individual and collective identity within the Harbin diaspora, achieve harmonization. Therefore, the semiotic analysis of the literary text of the "Harbin note" reveals a unique semiotic conjuncture that bridges conscious and unconscious dimensions, thereby providing a crucial methodological complement to diaspoetics.

3. Pathways to "identity": semiotic conjuncture in the "Harbin note"

The formation of the "Harbin note" cannot be reduced to mere stylistic or thematic choices often highlighted in émigré literature studies, nor can it be fully explained through the genealogical inquiries – such as literary influences and traditions – that have long dominated the field. Rather, it emerges from a deeper cultural semiotic conjuncture: the meeting point of conflicting historical narratives, cultural memories, and identity myths. This section traces how the self-referential semiosphere of Harbin itself, along with three key mythological constructs rooted within it – the "Cossack" of the East, the "Columbus" of the West, and the synthetic vision of "Eurasianism" – functioned as pathways through which the diaspora negotiated its dual identity. Each of these symbolic formations served to mediate the tension between imperial memory and exile reality, collectively shaping the psychological and artistic contours of the "Harbin note".

3.1. Harbin: mythological semiotic space

The overall tone of Harbin diaspora literature is fundamentally shaped by the contradictory nature of the city's semiotic space itself. From a diachronic perspective, Harbin represents both a "pearl" of Russian culture, forged by the imperial diaspora in history, and a refuge for the victim diaspora in reality. This dual identity reflects the city's transformation from a symbol of Russian colonial ambition to a sanctuary for those displaced by revolution and war. Synchronically, Harbin occupies a unique position as the "West" of the "East" – a borderland distant from the cultural and political centres of both "East" and "West", yet simultaneously serving as the cultural hub of this peripheral region. Harbin, as a unique semiosphere of both imperial ambition and place of exile, situated both on the cultural margin and in centre, functions as both the semiotic prerequisite of literary creation and the primary object of this literary creation.

Harbin has often been referred to as the "St. Petersburg of the East", and the two cities share striking similarities.[18] More significantly, the founding histories of both cities have been deeply mythologized. Just as the ongoing mythologization of St. Petersburg's origins has shaped its unique cultural identity, Harbin's colonial founding history has also transcended mere historical facts, evolving into a collective cultural memory. Arsenij Nesmelov, in his poem "Poems about Harbin", echoed Peter the Great's declarative tone when naming St. Petersburg, writing: "Here we will build a Russian city/Let's name it – Harbin" (Li 2005 Vol. 2: 88). However, this poetic assertion diverges from the historical reality of Harbin's origins. While the etymology of Harbin's name has been a subject of debate, it is certain that the name has no linguistic or historical connection to Russia. According to research by Chinese scholar Fenghui Ji (1993: 128), the name 'Harbin' derives from the Manchu word meaning 'flat island'.

In "Myth – name – culture", Lotman and Uspenskii explore the profound connection between proper names and mythological consciousness, stating that "the identification of cognition with the process of nomination" (Lotman, Uspenskii 1975: 24) is one of the most distinctive features of mythological consciousness. Within this framework, assigning a proper name to something previously unnamed is seen as an act of creation, while renaming symbolizes rebirth. To know the true name of something is to grasp its essence, a concept

[18] Both were constructed outside Russian territory at the time of their founding, both are artificial cities designed with strategic intent, and both serve as crucial nodes connecting Russia to the outside world, combining military, economic, and cultural functions. Notably, the two cities even share many street names, further underscoring their symbolic and architectural parallels.

reflected in both Eastern and Western folktales, where heroes often uncover an opponent's true name to gain power or conceal their own names to avoid danger. In this light, Nesmelov's imaginative act of Russian pioneers naming Harbin can be interpreted as a mythological creation, embodying the "creation myth". By envisioning Harbin as a Russian city and bestowing it with a name, Nesmelov not only asserts cultural ownership but also seeks to capture the essence of the city within the diasporic imagination.

It is widely known that the area where St. Petersburg stands was seized by Peter the Great from Sweden during the Northern War. What is often overlooked, however, is that this land originally bore the Swedish name '*Nyen*', and the act of renaming it symbolized a true rebirth, marking the transformation of the territory into a new cultural and political entity. This history bears a striking resemblance to Harbin, which was also a product of expansion. However, in the case of Harbin, the act of renaming exists only in the poet's imagination. The poet's intention was to depict the Tsarist Russian migrants who built Harbin as "creators" akin to Peter the Great, but Nesmelov inadvertently preserved the commonality of both cities as products of expansion, which manifests the collective unconsciousness of culture. Nesmelov's "creation myth" engenders an "autocatalytic reaction" in cultural semiotics, where the diaspora's identity imagination generates new myths that, in turn, reinforce and perpetuate that imagination. In this way, the mythologization of Harbin is both a product of the diaspora's historical circumstances and a catalyst for further cultural narratives.

Meanwhile, many members of the diaspora group developed profound emotional ties to Harbin during their exile. Aleksandra Parkau, in her poem "Memories" (Parkau 1937: 105), drew a symbolic connection between Harbin and St. Petersburg, blurring the boundaries between the Songhua River and the Neva River. In her poem "Flood" (Parkau 1937: 138–139), she further explored this linkage. Descriptions of St. Petersburg's floods have long been a central motif in the "St. Petersburg text", a literary tradition that captures the city's vulnerability to natural forces and its symbolic resonance as a site of both grandeur and fragility. Parkau's depiction of a suddenly silent Harbin, disrupted by flooding, evokes Pushkin's imagery in "The Bronze Horseman", where the Neva's floods symbolize the tension between human ambition and natural power. Yet, in Parkau's vision, the flooded Harbin also conjures the mystical phantom of the "Kitezh" city – a legendary Russian utopia said to have vanished beneath the waters to escape destruction. This dual allusion to St. Petersburg's floods and the myth of Kitezh reflects the diaspora's complex relationship with Harbin.

The St. Petersburg myth inherently incorporates a variant of the eschatological myth (Lotman 2020[1984]: 126). Parkau's poem draws a parallel between Harbin

and both St. Petersburg and the mythical Kitezh, creating two semantically opposing metaphors: while St. Petersburg symbolizes inevitable destruction, Kitezh represents salvation and transcendence. These seemingly contradictory metaphors are unified within the victim identity construction of the Harbin diaspora group. On the one hand, many Russian emigrants were acutely aware that their presence in Harbin, likened to a Russian "island" in a Chinese "ocean", was destined to be "submerged" by the tides of history. This sense of impermanence and vulnerability is poignantly captured in Nesmelov's poems, such as "Poems about Harbin"(Li 2005 Vol. 2: 88–90), "To posterity" (Li 2005 Vol. 2: 119–120), "Laomaozi" (Li 2005 Vol. 2: 122–123), "Epitaph" (Li 2005 Vol. 2: 129–130), "Builders" (Li 2005 Vol. 2: 172–174) and "Old tomb" (Li 2005 Vol. 2: 220–221).

On the other hand, Harbin also served as a sanctuary and a source of hope for many emigrants. As noted, "Harbin has been a warm place of salvation for many emigrants over the years" (Arustamova *et al.* 2021: 73). Poets like Valerij Pereleshin and Elena Dal' regarded China as their second homeland, finding solace and renewal in their adopted land. Parkau's comparison of Harbin to Kitezh reflects this duality, expressing gratitude to the city for "preserving the Russian soul" through "hours of testing" and "the fatal hour of turmoil and distress" (Parkau 1937: 181–182). In this way, Harbin becomes both a site of impending loss and a place of spiritual refuge, embodying the complex interplay of despair and hope that defines the diasporic experience.

It can be said that the tone of Harbin diaspora literature emerges from the tension between the historical imperial diaspora and the actual victim diaspora. The imperial myths crafted by the fathers had not yet faded when the sons found themselves exiled to Harbin. On the one hand, this diaspora group undeniably consists of victims and exiles: they were driven out by the Soviet Red Army and subjected to the encroachments of militaristic Japan, enduring prolonged existence in an alien environment. On the other hand, they were profoundly shaped by the mythologization of Harbin's colonial founding history. As a result, their identity construction is perpetually caught in the tension between 'colonizer' and 'exile', rooted in two semantically and typologically opposing diasporas.

However, as an "intellectual whole", a "cultural individuality", the "Harbin note" must "integrate contradictory semiotic structures into a bounded unity. Opposing tendencies must be eliminated in that single structural whole" (Lotman 2019[1978]: 39–40). And the integration is eventually achieved, creating three unique, seemingly incompatible yet paradoxically cohesive identity constructions in Harbin diaspora literature: the "Cossack" myth, symbolizing the East; the "Columbus" myth, symbolizing the West; and "Eurasianism", which attempts to reconcile the two.

3.2. "Cossack" myth of the East

Agenosov (1998: 55) wrote that "[a] characteristic feature of the Far Eastern branch of Russian literature is its stern masculinity". Aleksej Achair (born Aleksej Gryzov, 1896–1960) was a central figure in Harbin diaspora literature, serving as the leader of the prominent literary group Churaevka, an accomplished poet, and one of the key architects of the masculine "Harbin note". It has been claimed that "[o]ne of the most important things for A. Gryzov [i.e. Achair] himself was the desire to preserve the historical and cultural roots of the Russian Cossacks during the years of emigration, in a foreign land" (Yakimova 2009: 30). At a time when the Cossack theme was marginalized in Soviet official literature, Achair articulated the primary mission of the Russian émigré Cossacks: "To raise good fame by telling and showing, to restore a good name and expose slander, to protect a good name from malicious denunciation" (Yakimova 2009: 31). This theme of masculinity and cultural preservation was not unique to Achair. In the mid-1930s, a magazine titled *Иркутский казак* ('Irkutsk Cossack') was published in Harbin, featuring works by Russian émigré poets such as B. Sakin and Ivan Tomarevskij, who also explored the Cossack theme. Notably, this "masculine" theme extended beyond male writers. Mariya Volkova, for instance, made the Cossack a central focus of her work. In her first poetry collection, *Pesni Rodine* ('Songs to the motherland', Volkova 1936), and her second, *Stihi* ('Poems', Volkova 1944), she intricately wove together themes of the motherland and the Cossack.

The origin of the Cossacks remains a subject of debate, and no scholar has yet provided a definitive answer. However, "among the various theories about the origin of the Cossacks, the most reliable one is that Cossack settlements were formed outside the borders of Russia and in conditions independent of it" (Gordeev 2006: 8). Many scholars, particularly the influential French-Russian historian Andrej Gordeev, argue that the Cossacks' origins are closely tied to the Turkic Polovtsian tribe (known as the Kipchaks in China), the Mongols, and the Golden Horde (Kipchak Khanate) they established. The term 'Cossack' is widely believed to derive from the Turkic language, meaning 'free man', a definition that aligns with their historical role as independent frontier warriors. In this sense, the Cossacks can be seen as a product of the "East", though not the East that China represents, but rather the East as conceptualized within Russian cultural and historical frameworks.

The Harbin diaspora group believed that "the Cossacks saw their historical mission as being the vanguard of Russia and remaining so despite the changed historical circumstances" (Yakimova 2009: 31). However, from another perspective, this sense of mission is deeply tied to the construction of diaspora

identity. On the one hand, Tsarist Russia's continuous colonial activities in the Far East led to the foundation of Harbin, while the Cossacks, with their Tatar-Mongol origins, played a crucial role in expanding the Russian Empire's territory. In this sense, the two are fundamentally analogical, both embodying the spirit of frontier expansion and imperial ambition. The collapse of Tsarist Russia and the subsequent end of its imperial projects caused the "decline of the Cossack spirit" that Achair and other poets lamented. On the other hand, the symbol 'Cossack' etymologically also carries the connotation of 'wanderer' (Fasmer 1986: 158). Historically, the Cossacks roamed the borderlands of the empire, a role that resonates psychologically with the Harbin diaspora's experience of exile. However, unlike their ancestors, the diaspora no longer enjoyed the glory and purpose of their forebears. Achair's poem "Forefathers" (Yakimova 2009: 32) exemplifies this by intertwining the Cossack theme with patriotism and exile, reflecting the diaspora's longing for a lost sense of identity and mission.

The masculine Cossack symbol in Harbin poets' works thus serves as a projection and a semiotic conjuncture of the tension between the myths of colonial history and the harsh realities of exile, subjectively signifying semantical values such as kindness, strength, and piety, while objectively denoting the peripherality and expansionist legacy of the Cossacks. Without this psychological and historical foundation, the theme would lose its vitality.[19] This duality – combining conscious ideals with unconscious historical echoes – more authentically captures the psychological structure of the diaspora group. Through their literary texts, Harbin poets not only preserved the Cossack myth but also redefined it within the context

[19] While the Cossacks, described by Raeff (1990: 5) as "basically peasants", were marginalized in European centres such as Paris where the liberal intellectuals dominated, Shanghai's Cossacks gained unexpected influence despite being "disdained by fellow Russians" (Wang 1993: 195). Under General Glebov's leadership, the Far Eastern Cossack Division secured prominence by guarding Shanghai's Anglo-American Concession during China's Northern Expedition, subsequently forming "Russian Company of Shanghai Volunteer Corps" (Wang 1993: 50–51) and the "Cossacks' Union of Shanghai" which became "one of Shanghai's most effective and largest Russian émigré organizations" (Wang 1993:502–504). Their relative affluence contrasted sharply with other destitute Whites. As ultrarightists, they maintained elevated status through military capital (voluntary corps, collaboration with fascists, mercenary services for the warlords, arms trafficking *etc.*) – effectively becoming the "regime's backbone" in the East, as in their historical role. However, within Shanghai's cultural hierarchy dominated by Western European powers the Russian refugees in general faced such marginalization that British (not Chinese) authorities initially barred their disembarkation. Consequently, "Shanghai neither cultivated nor attracted accomplished Russian writers or scholars; Harbin's literary and academic elites either remained, repatriated to the USSR, or transited briefly through Shanghai *en route* to third countries" (Li 2007: 30).

of their exile, transforming it into a means of navigating their complex identity and historical legacy.

3.3. "Columbus" myth of the West

The image of Columbus served as a potent symbol for the Russian diasporic writers. Taking Nesmelov as a representative figure, Anna Arustamova *et al*. observe:

> The image of Columbus appeared repeatedly in the works of A. Nesmelov. The writer was attracted not only by Columbus's courage and strength of spirit but also by the possibility of a happy ending to a dangerous journey. Therefore, hoping for the future, he called Russian emigrants "Columbuses". (Arustamova *et al*. 2021: 86)

The image of Columbus embodies Nesmelov's understanding of diaspora life. Exile in a foreign land is like drifting at sea. Columbus, on the one hand, symbolizes the brave struggle against fate as well as indomitable willpower, representing the Russian diaspora group's turbulent exile journey in the unpredictable historical situation. On the other hand, he also symbolizes the spirit of exploration, constantly searching for a new world, which aligns with the diaspora group's situation of wandering and hoping to find a new place to settle:

> The plot (or motif) of crossing the ocean and sailing to the New World was mythologized in Russian literature and associated with the idea of a "new life" awaiting Russian people in America, as well as with the Russian past, which was gradually fading from their memory. (Arustamova *et al*. 2021: 88)

Other poets of the same period also incorporated the Columbus image into their creations, such as Ol'ga Skopichenko's (1993: 107) poem "Gently turn the calendar pages...".

When diasporic writers from Harbin constructed their self-identity through the mythologized image of Columbus, they subjectively portrayed an optimistic spirit of resilience and adventurous exploration. However, from an objective historical perspective, Columbus's establishment of the first colony at Navidad marked the inception of the European colonial era. The so-called "New World" had always existed; its "newness" was merely a construct of Western colonizers. Thus, the image of Columbus fundamentally embodies a subjective, Western-centric worldview. It is through the mythologization of the colonial history that later writers were afforded a more positive and optimistic creative milieu. The fundamental tension between 'colonizer' and 'exile' identities is semiotically

encoded within the 'Columbus' symbol – a Western-originated figure subsequently expelled from the West yet destined to explore the East, evoking direct parallels with Nikolaj Gumilev's 'conquistador (the Spanish colonizer)' imagery, wherein Gumilev himself emerges as the undisputed spiritual leader of the Harbin diaspora writers.[20]

It becomes particularly evident when contrasted with Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovskij's contemporary portrayal of Columbus. In his work "The discovery of America (Christopher Columbus)", Mayakovskij (2014: 183–189) satirically declared that he would "close" America, "gently wash" it, and then "open (discover)" it anew. The Soviet poet neither mythologized Columbus nor drew parallels between himself and the explorer. While acknowledging Columbus's fearless spirit, Mayakovskij simultaneously critiqued the alienation and distortion of individuals within the society of Monopoly Capitalism – a system built upon the colonial capital accumulation initiated by Columbus. The rejection of colonial elements constitutes the most fundamental distinction between Mayakovskij, representing Soviet Russia, and the White Army émigré poets of Harbin, rooted in the Russian Empire, in their respective engagements with the 'Columbus' narrative.

In summary, both the Cossack and Columbus myths are the semiotic representations rooted in the bipolar opposition of 'colonizer' and 'exile' identities within the Russian Harbin diaspora community. One the one hand, their content is fundamentally the same: they function as a mediator that synthesizes the reality and the imagination, neither reflect the actual East or West but rather a series of culturally constructed concepts associated with "East and West" within the Russian culture. Paradoxically, on the other hand, their expressions are diametrically opposed: the Cossack myth originates from the Eastern land-power empire, while the Columbus myth stems from the Western maritime empire. Thus, the coexistence of the Cossack and Columbus images in Harbin diaspora literature vividly illustrates the contradictory yet unified East–West conceptual framework inherent in Russian culture. This duality was further articulated and amplified in the burgeoning Eurasianist ideology of the early 20th century.

3.4. Eurasianism as "synthesis"

Eurasianism (*Евразийство*) originated from Vladimir Solovyov's historical-philosophical reflections on the "East and West" issue. The "Eurasianists"

[20] The Harbin branch of émigré lyric poetry of the 1920s–1940s has long been defined as "Gumilev's" (Zabiyako 2004: 54).

(*Евразийсты*) are regarded as the direct inheritors of Solovyov's synthesis of Eastern and Western thought. As one scholar notes,

> "Eurasianism" and the "Change of Landmarks" movement (*Сменовеховство*) emerged as central directions of Russian émigrés' spiritual exploration in the 1920s and 1930s, closely tied to their urgent mission of reforming Russia and their growing awareness of the crisis of Western modernity. (Buzuev 2012: 32)

Within the Far Eastern diaspora community, the leader of the Eurasianists was undoubtedly Vsevolod Ivanov, whose intellectual and literary contributions played a pivotal role in shaping the movement's ideological and cultural trajectory.

"An important unifying principle of the Eurasianists was anti-Westernism [*Антизападничество*], which carried a deeper, predetermined significance: the search for Eurasia's functional uniqueness and the discovery of its distinct missionary path" (Yakimova 2009: 82). Ivanov's ideas are primarily articulated in his seminal work *We: The Cultural-Historical Foundations of Russian Statehood* (1926), published in Harbin. At its core, the book argues that Asia possesses a profound historical legacy and that the Grand Dukes of Muscovy are the rightful heirs of Genghis Khan; thus, Asia is the cradle of Russian statehood. Evidently, both "anti-Westernism" and "the Asian origin of Russian statehood", much like Gippius's speech on the shared mission of exile life, represent attempts at cultural self-awareness. During this process, a mythological manifesto is constructed, serving to unify the group and solidify their collective identity.

However, Eurasianism, rooted in Solovyov's historical philosophy, is not without its flaws. As Solovyov argued, in the development of human history, three distinct concepts dominate and shape its trajectory: Eastern civilization, characterized by Islam; Western civilization, defined by Catholicism and Protestantism; and Slavic civilization, represented by the Russian nation and dominated by Orthodoxy, which is "chosen" to unite the two.[21]

As a prominent philosopher whose ideas influenced later Eurasianists, Solovyov's synthesis of "East and West" functions more as a cultural myth than a genuine philosophical synthesis. As Lotman (2002[1992]: 745) perceptively observed,

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[21] The exclusion of China from Eastern civilization stems from his assertion that history is "movement", whereas China is "immobile" (Solovyov 1914[1883] Vol. 4: 20). Consequently, China neither participates in nor contributes to the common history of humanity: "The vast Chinese Empire, despite all the sympathy Danilevsky held for it, has not contributed – and likely will not contribute – any lofty idea or great feat to the world; it has not made, and will not make, any eternal contribution to the common heritage of the human spirit" (Solovyov 1914[1888] Vol. 5: 103).

> In general, it can be noted that cultural models that subjectively perceive themselves as innovative – and even more so, as unique and without precedent – often appear in research analysis as the most archaic and traditional. That which defines itself as "never having existed until now" very often turns out to be "always having been existing" – a constantly active model.

This mythological "synthesis", on the one hand, fails to resolve any substantive questions and ultimately devolves into tautologies such as "Russia is Russia". On the other hand, it remains fundamentally trapped within the abstract dualism of "East and West", a construct deeply rooted in Western cultural thought, and thus cannot genuinely transcend this dichotomy.

In reality, the East–West opposition, as conceptualized in the Western tradition, has never been a part of traditional Chinese cultural thought. Consequently, Chinese cultural frameworks are not structured by such categorical distinctions. Furthermore, the positive and negative values attributed to "East" and "West" in Solovyov's framework are dialectically unified within any culture; they are not unique to either East or West but are instead projections of inherent values within Russian culture onto these abstract categories. In this regard, Solovyov's perspective is more reductive than the "cultural–historical typology" of Danilevsky, which he critiques in his writings. Although Danilevsky's approach cannot entirely avoid the discrete division of cultural organisms, it rejects the premise that "civilizations exist between the two poles of an abstract scale", thereby sidestepping futile debates over which culture is superior. Instead, it embraces a progressive vision of "beauty in diversity", offering a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of cultural development.

Harbin diaspora writer Ivanov's perspective on the "East and West" issue demonstrates a nuanced and non-reductionist approach; he transcended Solovyov's historical philosophy by turning entirely to the East. He argued that every patriotic Russian should embrace the Eurasianists, asserting that "only by undergoing a complete reassessment of the history of the East will we find ourselves" (Ivanov 1926: xiii). At the same time, influenced by Oswald Spengler, he provocatively asked, "Why should this be a Eurasianism movement, and not simply an Asian one? That is what I cannot understand" (Ivanov 1926: xiii). Ivanov emphasized that Europe and Asia are not comparable entities and thus cannot be conflated within the same conceptual framework. He contended that Russia should not seek an abstract, static balance between Europe and Asia but should instead align itself with Asia, allowing this alliance to catalyze genuine cultural progress for Russia. As long as authentic culture is produced, it is neither Asian, European, nor Eurasian – it is distinctly Russian.

In the context of exile, Ivanov criticized the Eurasianists for their preoccupation with divisions between "East and West", their neglect of the immense potential of the East, and their ambivalence between "exile and colonization" and "downfall and arrogance". Instead, he advocated for practical efforts to address the inherent shortcomings of Eurasianism. His emphasis on practical action stood out in an era marked by decadence and nihilism. By leveraging cultural and historical arguments to assert the Mongolian roots of Russian statehood, Ivanov sought to avoid historical nihilism and fundamentally deconstruct the superficial eclecticism of Eurasianism.

However, just as "anti-Westernism" cannot exist without the concept of "the West", Ivanov's "Asianism", emerging from the framework of Eurasianism, remains constrained by the categories established by Eurasianist thought. Consequently, while many of his ideas are compelling and well-reasoned, their foundational premises remain unstable, leaving them vulnerable to the same critiques he levelled against the Eurasianists.

Through a cultural semiotic analysis of Harbin diaspora literature, we observe that the myths of the 'Cossack', 'Columbus', and 'Eurasianism' simultaneously fulfill the diaspora group's identity imagination and preserve the identity realities excluded by this very imagination. In the 'Cossack' of the East and the 'Columbus' of the West, we encounter opposing representations unified by a shared core. Conversely, in 'Eurasianism', which attempts to synthesize this East–West opposition, we find an eclectic representation underpinned by a divided core: achieving only nominal synthesis through the semiotic amalgamation 'Eur+asianism' while remaining bounded by the underlying oppositional categories. This exploration reveals how the contradictions between the subjectivity and objectivity of diaspora identity, between imagination and reality, and between consciousness and unconsciousness, are dialectically integrated within artistic creation.

Conclusion

The meta-critical attributes of diaspoetics offer a valuable framework for overcoming the subjective limitations inherent in traditional Russian émigré literature studies. This approach enables the revelation of the distinctive characteristics inherent in the "Harbin note" phenomenon – a culturally representative yet marginalized literary formation whose significance has been obscured by the self-descriptive mechanisms of the cultural centre. The evolution of diaspoetics mirrors a fundamental epistemological shift: a movement from logocentrism to

decentralization, from objectivity to subjectivity, from commonality to individuality, and from universality to specificity. However, the three scenes of diaspoetics remain persistently entangled in the subject–object debate, especially when confronting culturally specific and complex phenomena such as the "Harbin note".

This paper proposes complementing diaspoetics through Lotman's holistic and organic cultural semiotics: ontologically, culture as a self-conscious intellectual individuality functions as a subject and its own object; epistemologically, subjectivity and objectivity achieve identification through the cognitive process of culture; and methodologically, the semiotic conjuncture of consciousness and unconsciousness becomes accessible through the analysis of their textual crystallization – the literary text.

Through the complementary approach to the "Harbin note", we identify Harbin as a unique diasporic space that operates simultaneously on geographic and semiotic levels. Diachronically it occupies a position between two typologically opposing diasporas – the historical imperial diaspora and the actual victim diaspora; synchronically it exists as the periphery of both West and East and the centre of this borderland. And the "cultural individuality" of the "Harbin note" integrated these opposing tendencies within the literary creation, producing three seemingly incompatible yet paradoxically cohesive identity constructions: the 'Cossack' myth symbolizing the East, the 'Columbus' myth symbolizing the West, and the Eurasianism attempting to reconcile the two. In literature, the inherent contradictions of diaspora identity achieve resolution through the dual process of conscious and unconscious creative activities that without consciousness yields the objective world of reality, and with consciousness the subjective world of imagination. Thus, imagination rooted in reality and shaped by historical narratives, alongside realities and histories overlooked by conscious thought, coexist seamlessly within intricate literary myths.

Finally, this paper proposes two points for further discussion: First, if it is widely accepted that the "Harbin note" holds less literary influence compared to its contemporary counterpart, the "Paris note",[22] then as a unique, complex, and contradictory cultural phenomenon, its immense research potential has yet to be fully recognized. Second, in order to explore this phenomenon in depth, it is essential to move beyond the influence of cultural subjectivity at the metalanguage level. Diaspoetics not only enriches our understanding of Russian émigré literature but also aligns with a broader semiotic approach that seeks to reconcile seemingly

[22] "The significance of Harbin writers for the global development of Russian culture should not be overstated." (Agenosov 1998: 54).

opposing forces within a cohesive cultural framework. This paper highlights the complementary strengths of diaspoetics and cultural semiotics in this regard, offering a promising research perspective for future studies.

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“想象”与“现实”之间——“哈尔滨音调”的流散诗学与文化符号学互补性研究

俄罗斯侨民文学研究中存在着固有的俄罗斯主体性视角，而具有元批评属性的流散诗学可以较好地克服这一视野的局限，它的核心关注之一是流散族群身份的“想象”与“现实”，其不同发展阶段对客观的身份界定与主观的身份建构既各有侧重，又各有不足。而从洛特曼的文化符号学看来，具有自我意识的文化思维机制本就是主客体的统一，在哈尔滨这一独一无二的流散空间中，“想象”与“现实”的矛盾在“哈尔滨音调”的文学创作中得以消解，在“东与西”两极神话地理的拉扯中，流散族群的身份既呈现出对立又完成了统一。

Kujutluse ning tegelikkuse vahel. Täiendav lähenemine “Harbini noodile” diaspoeetika ja kultuurisemiootika kaudu

Emigratsioonis loodud vene kirjanduses püsib visalt olemuslik Vene-keskne perspektiiv. Oma metakriitiliste joonte tõttu pakub diaspoeetika vahendit tõhusaks tegelemiseks sellise piiritletusega. Selle huvi keskmes on “kujutluse” ja “tegelikkuse” mõisted diasporaaidentiteedis. Oma arenguastmeid läbides rõhutab diaspoeetika vaheldumisi objektiivset identiteedidefinitsiooni ja subjektiivset identiteedikonstruktsiooni, millest mõlemal lähenemisel on selgelt eristuvad tugevad ja nõrgad küljed. Kuid Juri Lotmani kultuurisemiootika vaatevinklist ühendab kultuur kui ennastteadvustav Individuaalsus iseeneses subjekti ja objekti. “Kujutluse” ja “tegelikkuse” vaheline pinge leiab lahenduse “Harbini noodi” kirjandusliku metafoori loomises, mis kerkib esile Harbini ainulaadses diasporaaruumis. Selle tagajärjel kehastab diasporaakogukonna identiteet “Ida” ja “Lääne” mütoloogilise geograafia vastastiktoimes samaaegselt vastandeid ning jõuab ühtsuseni.