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Alexander Pushkin and Gannibal: A Self Reclamation

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ALEXANDER PUSHKIN AND GANNIBAL: A SELF RECLAMATION

By

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This thesis is dedicated to all scholars of color who have dedicated themselves to a language where they are seldom seen. Your voice matters.

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Caroline Pryor

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	vi
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. PARALLEL BIOGRAPHIES.....	9
3. LITERARY ANALYSIS	16
References.....	32
Biographical Sketch	34

ABSTRACT

Alexander Pushkin, the father of modern Russian literature, has influenced every great contemporary Russian writer. His timeless poetry and insightful prose make him a leading voice in Russian culture. And yet, during his lifetime, Pushkin dealt with racism and discrimination because of his ancestry, traced back to his African great-grandfather, Abram Gannibal. In combating negative framing of his identity and his ancestry, Pushkin reveals a defense and reclamation of self seldom seen in contemporaries of his day. In asserting ownership over his ancestry, he takes back his narrative and dignity. Through his literary works and personal texts, Pushkin shows how he navigated his blackness in a world that sought to undermine it.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Despite the central place of Alexander Pushkin in Russian literature and Russian and Slavic studies, the role of his African ancestor Abram Gannibal in shaping his writing and identity remains understudied. Why has so little attention been devoted to the study of his ancestry? Is his blackness considered of little importance in relation to his own body of work? Is the overwhelming whiteness of the field stopping scholars from exploring the identity of the man behind the text? How did he understand himself, in terms of race? How did his contemporaries perceive him? This essay probes the influence of Pushkin's understanding of race on his writings. In analyzing relevant materials both published and unpublished, letters, and historical accounts, this study will demonstrate how Pushkin operated differently from his peers, as if the navigation of his blackness in primarily white spaces compelled him to combat negative stereotypes. It will be argued that Pushkin's works "My Genealogy" and *The Blackamoor of Peter the Great* serve as a vehicle for him to reclaim his own narrative, however fanciful, and reassert ownership of the framework of his ancestry.

In the exploration of Pushkin's racial identity through his texts, I hope to impart the importance of what they reveal about self-reflection. The field of Slavic Studies is vast and rich, however, its studies of Pushkin's racial experiences remain inadequate. An inclusive approach to race, racial identity, and race relations improves and expands the quality and insight needed to promote a more inclusive, accessible space for all scholars.

Before analyzing Pushkin's various works in which he mentions his ancestry and connection to his famous forebear, an examination of Imperial Russia must be undertaken. What

conditions allowed for the rise of Abram Gannibal and Pushkin? Did Western Europe influence Russia's attitudes toward Africans? If so, how? The explanation to this array of questions constructs the world in which our subjects, Pushkin and Gannibal, resided and lends insight into their unique status and the circumstances that propelled them into the foreground of Russian consciousness.

During the 18th century, Russia's interactions with the outside world were in line with the initiatives of Peter I. His desire to modernize Russia in the style of his Western European counterparts heavily informed most of his policies during his reign. As Allison Blakely's book *Russia and the Negro* explains, "Peter I's conscious imitation of certain Western techniques and styles included the importation of black servants for his court, a practice continued by all his successors." (1). In his quest to revamp Russia's role in international relations, Peter I's first interactions with black people came from regimes whose views on Africans justified black servitude. In their view, the subjugation and exploitation of blacks for service in the court was considered a much-improved alternative to the "savagery" of Africa.

This means that the presumptions, stereotypes, and racism held by Western Europeans also influenced the viewpoints of Russian nobility. In her essay *Pushkin and Gannibal: Ethnic Identity in Imperial Russia* Miriam Grinburg asserts, "At court, these Africans were met by the prejudices espoused in European encyclopedias and journals filtered throughout Russia which engraved stark portraits of Africans and their mannerisms into the minds of educated Russians, one such encyclopedia claiming that "Negroes [are] closer to animals (monkeys) than the representatives of other races.'"(61). The perpetuated myth of animality was no doubt accompanied by additional negative framing of black people by also emphasizing the myths of heathenism and hypersexuality.

The major difference between the more established Atlantic Slave Trade and enslaved peoples brought to Russia was economic demand. North America's wealth and economic growth were wholly dependent upon the availability of free labor that was facilitated by Great Britain. The Russian tsars used black people as decoration and a show of status. Blakely affirms, "It should be pointed out here that there was no significant practice of Negro slavery in Russia. In fact, all authorities agree that by the late eighteenth century chattel slavery, which had been widespread in earlier centuries, no longer existed, at least in the Russian parts of the empire." (13).

This use of black servants as decoration and novelties during this time can be seen in Alexander Griboyedov's 1823 play *Woe from Wit* (*Горе от Ума*) as a barometer for how Russian nobility viewed these individuals. As a satire, *Woe from Wit* reflects the most regrettable attitudes and practices of its age, including the attitudes that the nobility held toward the black servants that served in their courts. In Act III, Scene X of *Woe from Wit*, in which "blackamoor" servants are mentioned, the old woman Khlyostova's commentary provides us with some understanding of how an unenlightened, elderly member of the Russian nobility understood this type of servitude.

Хлѣстова

Легко ли в шестьдесят пять лет

Тащиться мне к тебе, племянница?.. мученье!

Час битый ехала с Покровки, силы нет;

Ночь — света преставленья!

От скуки я взяла с собой

Арапку-девку да собачку, —

Вели их накормить, ужо, дружочик мой;

От ужина сошли подачку.

Княгиня, здравствуйте!

(Села.)

Ну, Софьюшка, мой друг,

Какая у меня арапка для услуг,

Курчавая! горбом лопатки!

Сердитая! все кошачьи ухватки!

Да как черна! да как страшна!

Ведь создал же господь такое племя!

Черт сущий; в девичей она;

Позвать ли?

София

Нет-с; в другое время.

Хлёстова

Представь: их, как зверей, выводят напоказ,

Я слышала, там... город есть турецкий...

А знаешь ли, кто мне припас?

Антон Антоныч Загорецкий.

Загорецкий выставляется вперед.

Лгунишка он, картежник, вор.

Загорецкий исчезает.

Я от него было и двери на запор;

Да мастер услужить: мне и сестре Прасковье

Двоих арапченков на ярмонке достал;

Купил, он говорит, чай в карты сплutowал;

А мне подарочек, дай бог ему здоровье!

Khlyostova

It's not a joke for me at sixty five, my dear,

To get to you, it's such long and tiresome way!

I drove an hour from Pokrovka over here,

I'm exhausted, and the night is just a doomsday.

I took this blackamoор girl with me

And the little dog -- to keep me company.

Let someone feed them alms from the supper tray.

Good evening, countess.

(sits down)

Well, Sofia, my love,

You want to see the kind of blackamoор I have?

The kind of creatures God creates!

The curly hair. The hunch of shoulder blades.

She's angry, has the habits of a cat.
She's as black as pitch. She looks so bad!
I'll send for her, if you allow,
She's there in the girl's room.

Sofia

No, not now.

Khlyostova

Imagine, they're exposed like animals for show...

I hear... there's a city somewhere in Turkey...

Who got the girl for me? Do you want to know?

Anton Antonich Zagoretsky.

(Zagoretsky steps forward)

He's a liar, gambler, thief, a man of no esteem!

(Zagoretsky disappears)

I keep my doors locked up for him.

He's good at doing a service: sister Praskovya and I,

Two blackamoor children we have each received.

He says he bought them at the market. It's a lie.

God bless him anyway! I've got a gift.

In this exchange, we see Khlyostova eager to show off her new “blackamoor girl,” who, along with a dog, keeps her company on a long journey. This indicates the value she

attributes to her slave girl and the spectacle of blackness she wishes to perpetuate through her descriptions of the young girl's dark skin, textured hair, and angry temperament. Khlyostova calls her a creature, further dehumanizing and deemphasizing the young girl, and openly admits that she was likely stolen away from her home, with no sense of remorse or empathy to the girl's situation. While this portrayal is a gross exaggeration typical of satire, the application of a set of preconceived notions about the appearance and character to blackness and the characterization of black bodies as spectacle is likely not unattested in the perceptions of Russian nobility, as implied by Griboyedov's text.

The Russian empire had no need for imported slaves. This does not mean, however, that Russians had no opinion on the African slave trade. Russian intellectuals and the creative intelligentsia maintained a very enlightened position on chattel slavery. Alexander Radishchev spoke out against the practice in 1790, referring to slaves as "unfortunate victims". (Blakely 29). Alexander Pushkin also expressed support of the abolition of slavery referring to slaves in America as "my Negro brethren" (Blakely 30). The year before his death he wrote on the matter:

"For some time now the United States of America has drawn the attention of Europe's foremost thinkers. It is not due to political events: America has been quietly fulfilling her destiny, up to now safe and flourishing, strong with a peace fortified by her geographical situation, proud of her institutions. But recently several thoughtful minds have investigated the morals and decrees of the Americans, and their observations have awakened anew questions which were assumed to be already decided long ago. Their respect for this new nation and its code, the fruit of the most advanced enlightenment, wavered sharply. They were amazed to see in democracy her disgusting cynicism, her cruel prejudices, her intolerable tyranny. All that is noble, unselfish, everything elevating the human spirit is suppressed by implacable egotism and

the starving for satisfaction (comfort); the majority, an outrageously repressed society; Negro slavery amidst culture and freedom; genealogical persecutions in a nation without nobility;” (Blakely 30).

Many Russian assessments of slavery were directed toward the institution of slavery in North America, rather than as a reflection on how slavery was institutionalized for black slaves imported to Russia. Russia certainly did not have the economy of scale of black slaves in comparison to North America, however there is little information on this topic. Perhaps it is because serving the Russian aristocracy was a much more humane form of servitude than the American institution of slavery. Gannibal’s meteoric rise is a testament to how the differences between the institutions of servitude in Russia and the United States allowed for individual exceptionalism.

CHAPTER 2

PARALLEL BIOGRAPHIES

Abram Gannibal lived an extraordinarily unique life, especially for his time. His ascent from lowly sentry to the top ranks of the Russian military as a naval engineer and general made him a leading intellectual figure of his generation. An adequate understanding of Gannibal is integral to demonstrating how his famous progeny, Pushkin, understood his relationship to blackness and provides us with some of the foundation upon which this argument is built. The resilience, determination, and intelligence exhibited by Gannibal throughout his lifespan affirm the notion that despite societal impediments, one can achieve greatness if given the opportunity. While there has been some debate on the topic of his exact origins and self-proclaimed royal lineage, there are some facts that have been independently verified and paint a picture of his rare trajectory.

Prior to Gannibal's arrival to the Russian court in 1705, he lived in Africa and was taken captive by the Turks after his people lost to them in battle. According to Gannibal, he was the son of a prince. This is an assertion reiterated many times over the course of his life as demonstrated by his written correspondence. While some older historical accounts attribute Gannibal's origins to Abyssinia (modern day Ethiopia), further scrutiny is required regarding the murky timeline of events that led up to his arrival in Russia.

N.K. Teletova's article *A. P. Gannibal: On the Occasion of the Three Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of Alexander Pushkin's Great-Grandfather*, highlights a modern theory regarding Gannibal's origins. According to this work, Gannibal's birthplace was in Logon, a region in present day Cameroon. In reference to the early German biography of Gannibal written

by A. K. Rotkirkh in the 1780s after Gannibal's death, Telenova corroborates, "He echoes Gannibal himself, who declared in 1742, in a petition to the Empress Elizabeth: "I, your humble subject, am an African by birth, born into the high nobility there. I was born in the domain of my father, in the town of Logon; in addition, my father ruled two other towns.'" (51). Russian historian Dieudonné Gnamankou also confirmed that Gannibal's birthplace was likely in Cameroon (52).

Why have previous biographers shied away from the idea that Gannibal might not have been from Abyssinia? It could be due to the limited information that A.K. Rotkirkh worked with at the time of his publication on Gannibal's life. Among Europeans, philosophical discourse on race was strongly inclined to strict hierarchy. Those involved in the Enlightenment subscribed themselves to one of two prevailing theories on race at the time: polygenism and monogenism. The former theory proposed that all races originated from different places and had fixed temperaments, abilities, and worth. The latter proposed that all of humankind originated from one common ancestor and developed into racial categories.

The more popular theory of 18th century philosophers was polygenism. This helped to support the expansion of colonialism and subjugation of black people. In the 19th century, after European colonizers discovered the impressive advancements of places in Africa such as the Egyptian Empire, a distinguishing racial category was fashioned. Instead of including all peoples from Africa as members of the Negroid race, certain groups were placed into a sub-category of the Caucasoid race: Hamitic. In her article *The Hamitic Hypothesis; Its Origin and Functions in Time and Perspective*, Edith Sanders references how Europeans created the Caucasoid Hamite, "The travellers found a variety of physical types in Africa, and their ethnocentrism made them value those who looked more like themselves. These were declared to be Hamitic, or of Hamitic

descent, and endowed with the myth of superior achievements and considerable beneficial influence on their Negro brothers.” (528). Abyssinia was among those who were deemed to be a part of the Caucasoid Hamite category.

According to the European standard of racial hierarchy, the Negroid race is at the bottom. In reference to the emergence of racist ideology developed during the eighteenth century, the article *The Telltale Black Baby, or Why Pushkin Began The Blackamoor of Peter the Great but Didn't Finish It* Catherine Nepomnyashchy contends, “This was the point at which the attribution of physical and psychological variety in human beings to climate and levels of civilization, causes that could be meliorated and therefore overcome, gave way to “racial” thinking, the conviction that the “races” of humankind were the result of permanent, irremediable genetic differences—including intelligence, aptitude, and moral worth—and the corollary belief that some races were superior to others in a clearly defined hierarchy.” (155). If Gannibal’s roots are attributed to Sub-Saharan Africa (Cameroon), the assumption of the Negro’s low intellectual capability upon which white supremacy asserts itself becomes completely invalidated.

With the purported myth of Abyssinia debunked, we can examine the life of Pushkin’s ancestor. Around the age of seven years old, Abram Gannibal was taken into slavery. Before arriving in Russia, he likely worked for a Turkish sultan for around one year and then traveled with two other *arapys* (Negroes) to be gifted to Peter I. Abram was subsequently baptized in 1705 and Peter I became his . The two shared a very close familial relationship up until Peter’s death in 1725. Under Peter the I’s tutelage, Gannibal was well educated, particularly in math. Abram accompanied his tsar on several military campaigns and in 1716 he studied in France under the orders of Peter I. He joined the French Army in 1718 and received further education in

military engineering, a topic largely unfamiliar to Russia at that time.

Gannibal returned to Russia in 1723 and taught younger engineers and officers at Preobrazhensky Regiment. After the death of Peter I in 1725, Gannibal was exiled to Siberia. Although Peter I was succeeded by his wife Catherine, Prince Menshikov was her primary advisor and harbored hostility toward Gannibal. Around 1730 Abram took the surname Gannibal. Prior to this he was known as Abram Petrov. The next year, he married his first wife, Evdokia Dioper, a woman of Greek descent. Their marriage was an unhappy one because Evdokia was forced into marriage with Gannibal. Gannibal suspected his wife of infidelity, and his suspicions were confirmed upon the birth of their first child, a white baby. Outraged at this spectacle and his new public status as a cuckold, Gannibal divorced his first wife and had her thrown in jail. Afterwards, she was sent to a convent.

Due to the lengthy process of divorce, Gannibal utilized extralegal methods to marry his second wife Christina von Schonberg. They were “married” in 1736 and had eleven children together. Political connections finally leaned in his favor in 1741 when Empress Elizabeth became the successor to the throne. She granted him his Mikhailovskoye estate in 1742 and retired there at the end of his military career. He was given several promotions and high ranking positions in the Russian military. He oversaw many national construction projects and retired from service in 1762. He died at an old age in 1781. Little did he know that his descendant would not only gain national recognition for his poetry and prose, also immortalize the contributions that Gannibal made to Russian society.

Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin was born on May 26, 1799 to Nadezhda Gannibal and Sergei Pushkin. He lived a life of relative privilege due to his social class and he had access to quality education. His parents, members of the aristocracy, spent little time with him and his

siblings in favor of social engagements. Naturally, this meant that Pushkin developed a strong affection for his nanny, Arina Rodionovna. He also had access to tutors in his youth but and spent the majority of his time with her. In 1811, he was admitted to study at the Lycée in Tsarskoye Selo. This was the most elite education one could receive during this period.

The Lycée was where young Pushkin spent his formative years. It is where he began to write and develop his literary style through verse as well as opinions on politics. Due to his uncommon outward appearance, he was the subject of some ridicule. According to Richard Gustafson's essay *Ruslan and Ludmila: Pushkin's Anxiety of Blackness*, his classmates often called him "*frantsuz* (Frenchie), which... [referred] to Voltaire's characterization of the French as a 'mixture of monkey and tiger.'" (100). This dehumanizing sentiment reinforces a lack of community and inclusion caused by his mixed ancestry. His peers viewed him as an unidentifiable animal mixture.

This negative framework comes across in some of his unpublished works produced during his adolescence. Gustafson further affirms this interpretation by citing Pushkin's 1814 poem *Mon Portrait* in which he refers to himself as having the appearance of a monkey (100). Pushkin's utilization of derogatory language as it relates to his outward characteristics indicates his lack of confidence and embarrassment surrounding his blackness as a youth. He was the only person of mixed African ancestry in his area and he mirrored the attitude and biases of his peers because it was the only interpretation of himself that he knew.

Pushkin's classmates were not the only contemporaries who had opinions on his physical characteristics. The assessment of Pushkin's attractiveness and personality was enmeshed in philosophies that were in direct opposition to the humanity of Negro populations. As stated in Grinburg's article, "In her diary, Dolly Khitrovo, the daughter of an Austrian ambassador whom

Pushkin met at a party, claimed that Pushkin “is a mixture of the physiognomy of a monkey and a tiger, he is descended from an African race—there are still some hints of it in his eye and there is something savage about his look.”” (64). In this context, it is clear that Khitrovo sees Pushkin as sub-human, echoing Voltaire and other racist philosophers.

In the introduction to the novel *Under the Sky of My Africa*, Nepomnyashchy and Trigos inform, “Viazemsky, for instance, testifies to the physical resemblance of Pushkin and his younger brother Lev... ‘Their mother’s African imprint left a visible impress on them both.’” (15). The use of the word impress has harmful connotations here. It implies that blackness is something of a stain, a mark, something that is *done* to you as opposed to being *part* of you. Viazemsky’s interpretation of the visage of the Pushkins illustrates the uphill battle for recognition and acceptance in Russian society.

This characterization spreads to his personality as well. Any outburst or intense negative emotions exhibited by Pushkin were accredited to his “African passions”. The idea that people of African heritage had more trouble managing their emotions than other races supports the casual hostility faced by successful black people at that time. Based on the examples given, one can easily understand how young Pushkin’s self-esteem and self-worth were rooted in internalized racism. The historical fantasies played out in his later works such as *The Blackamoor of Peter the Great* aided him in the exploration of self.

Upon graduation from the Lycée in 1817, he served at the Collegium of Foreign Affairs. Due to his talented writing, he spent much time enjoying literary circles. His liberalism surfaced in his works and eventually landed him in trouble. The tsar became displeased with what Pushkin produced and had him exiled. During this separation from his colleagues and friends, he pens *Prisoner of the Caucasus* and begins *Eugene Onegin*.

He also spent time at his family estate in Mikhailovskoye where he continued *Eugene Onegin* and where he wrote *The Blackamoor of Peter the Great*. His time spent in exile allowed for solitary self-reflection and analysis of his famous ancestor. After his petition to reenter society was accepted, he married Natalia Goncharova in 1831 in Moscow. Natalia Goncharova was considered among her peers to be the most beautiful woman in Russian society. This meant that she received attention from gentlemen even after her betrothal.

Unfortunately, the unparalleled beauty of Natalia cost Pushkin his life. He was very sensitive to class and his family history and origin. Georges d'Anthès began openly flirting with Natalia and the news of their interactions spread among the nobility. In an effort to restore his reputation and defend his wife's honor after she was inappropriately addressed by Georges d'Anthès, Pushkin challenged him to a duel. In this bout, he suffered a fatal wound that ended his life in 1837.

There are several similarities in the life of Pushkin and the life of Gannibal. They were both exceptionally talented in their respective professions. Conversely, they were the subject of criticism regarding their ancestry. In their professional lives they excelled, and in their private lives they searched for belonging. The pressures of nobility and social status made them both sensitive to reputation, and when those reputations were threatened, each individual became offended and needed a way to restore their honor. After Abram Gannibal became known as a cuckold, he divorced his wife for her infidelity and remedied the situation by “remarrying” and having children of his own. For Alexander Pushkin, the threat of potentially being a cuckold pushed him to publically defend his reputation.

CHAPTER 3

LITERARY ANALYSIS

Pushkin's literary works in which he most explicitly discusses his race are his unfinished prose *The Blackamoor of Peter the Great* and in his poem "My Genealogy." Both of these compositions pay homage to Pushkin's great grandfather and serve as a vehicle through which we, as readers, perceive the topic of race and identity manifested in an individual who was compelled to connect negative self-image with family legend. Save for his siblings, Pushkin's navigation of identity was a singular journey with no predetermined destination. In order for him to truly gain a sense of self, he needed to grapple with how his race impacted his human experience. Leaning on the stories of the past to process his present provided Pushkin with the perfect impetus to recontextualize the narrative of his family's legacy.

It is important to note that the poem "My Genealogy" was written in direct response to an affront to Pushkin's heritage. A contemporary of Pushkin, Faddei Bulgarin, cruelly insinuated that Abram Gannibal was traded by a skipper for a bottle of rum and did not come from African royalty. Bulgarin called into question the validity of the legend of Gannibal with this scathing critique. If he associated Gannibal with worthlessness and insignificance, the implication leads the reader to believe that Pushkin's familial pride is merely a façade. It commodifies his forebear and undercuts the success of his lineage.

This understandably enraged Pushkin, who would not let this insult go ignored. He circulated his own response to this accusation in "My Genealogy" which he references directly in his poem's postscript. In the eight stanzas of the poem that precede the postscript, Pushkin responds to Bulgarin's attacks on "aristocratic" writers who published in Baron Del'vig's

journals *Severnnye Tsvety* and *Literaturnaya Gazeta*. The last two couplets of the first stanza state in no uncertain terms that Pushkin regards himself as a petty bourgeois, not a distinguished figure or a member of the aristocracy, whether social or literary:

Не офицер я, не асессор,
Я по кресту не дворянин,
Не академик, не профессор;
Я просто русский мещанин.
I am not an officer, nor an assessor,
I swear I am not a nobleman
Not an academic, nor a professor
I am but a Russian petty bourgeois.

The last line is repeated in various forms at the conclusion of each stanza, becoming a refrain: “I am, brothers, an insignificant petty bourgeois,” “I was born a petty bourgeois.” Excluding himself from Bulgarin’s class of aristocratic writers, Pushkin acknowledges both Bulgarin’s negative characterizations of his character and his lower social standing. It is in the postscript to the poem that Pushkin turns to race, precisely in order to refute Bulgarin’s attacks and redeem himself and his social standing. The shift from a negative characterization of class to a positive characterization of race presents a striking contrast.

Thomas J. Shaw’s publication *Pushkin on His African Heritage: Publications during His Lifetime* presents the text of the postscript with translation as follows:

Решил Фиглярин, сидя дома,

Что черный дед мой Ганнибал
Был куплен за бутылку рома
И в руки шкиперу попал.
Сей шкипер был тот шкипер славный,
Кем наша двинулась земля,
Кто придал мощно бег державный
Рулю родного корабля.
Сей шкипер деду был доступен,
И сходно купленный арап
Возрос усерден, неподкуплен,
Царю наперсник, а не раб.
И был отец он Ганнибала,
Пред кем средь чесменских пучин
Громада кораблей вспылала,
И пал впервые Наварин

Figliarin decided, sitting at home, that my black granddad Gannibal was bought for a bottle of rum and fell into a skipper's hands. // That skipper was the glorious skipper by whom our land was set in motion, who in mighty fashion set the course of state to the rudder of his native ship. // That skipper was accessible to [my] granddad, and the blackamoor purchased cheaply grew up diligent, unpurchaseable, a confidant to the tsar, and not a slave. // And he was the father of the Gannibal before whom amid the Chesma billows the armada of ships flamed up, and Navarino first fell. (90).

By utilizing the skipper referenced in the original text, Pushkin reinvents the historical account in dispute. He suggests that the skipper was Peter the I, and not some happenstance stranger. He also emphasizes the close relationship his great-grandfather developed with the revolutionary tsar. Furthermore, he defies the reductive remarks regarding Gannibal's worth by declaring that he is unpurchaseable. He makes the narrative his own. He turns the affront into an asset by restoring his lineage to glory. Shaw supports, "Then, with regard to Abram Gannibal's son Ivan, it speaks of two feats in 1770: his being in charge of fire control in the Russian fleet that destroyed the Turkish fleet in Chesma Bay off the coast of Turkey, and his commanding Russian troops that landed and captured the important Turkish fortress on the Greek mainland at Navarino, *for the first time* (three years before the poem was written, Navarino had been conquered again by Allied forces in the Greek War for Independence)." (91).

In this way, he reasserts the important role the Gannibal family played to Peter I while actively opposing the former inaccurate characterization purported by those who wish shame and embarrassment on him. Pushkin is proud of his great-grandfather, the accomplishments he achieved throughout his lifetime, *and* his African roots. He transforms Bulgarin's contentious words into a strong defense of his ancestors and his character. Pushkin reconstructs the story and maintains ownership of his family history and in doing so, maintains ownership of himself.

It is worthwhile to note that while the poem shifts from a negative characterization of social class to a positive portrayal of his ancestry and race, the form of the poem likewise changes. The first eight stanzas are repetitious, and address Bulgarin's initial insults directed toward aristocratic writers. Following the Soviet structuralist scholar Yuri Lotman's "law of three quarters," the first half of the poem establishes a structural inertia in both theme and form, repeating Bulgarin's accusations and reframing them (Lotman, 50). In the third quarter of the

poem, which can be defined as the last two stanzas of the poem preceding the postscript, Pushkin turns to the figure of his great-grandfather, representing a violation of the repetition that characterized the first two quarters. Finally, the postscript, as the fourth quarter of the text, presents a new formal structure and a new presentation of his grandfather and race. This formal and thematic shift is accompanied by a shift from contempt and shame to pride.

Exploration of identity is exceedingly apparent in the Pushkin's unfinished prose *The Blackamoor of Peter the Great*. This partial story recounts the life of the fictional Ibrahim Gannibal, a Moor in the service of Peter I. Spanning seven short chapters, we follow Ibrahim's career as he is left behind in France to study military engineering. He becomes the town novelty because the women find him amusing and vie for his attention at parties. He takes up a passionate affair with a local countess who has his child, and upon his return to Russia after the completion of his studies, he courts a young, eligible maiden. Throughout the text, the reader becomes privy to Ibrahim's reception into society based on the preconceived notions of his peers and the musings of Ibrahim himself as he maneuvers his way through social life.

One of the main themes of the piece is belonging. While Ibrahim has adopted the mannerisms and customs of the nobility, he still gets treated like a foreigner. He constantly becomes the other, the spectacle, a novelty item. In the translation of this short story by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, included in *Novels, Tales, Journeys: The Complete Prose of Alexander Pushkin*, his alienation is captured: "He felt that for them he was some rare sort of animal, a special, alien creature, accidentally transported to a world that had nothing in common with him. He even envied people whom nobody noticed, regarding their insignificance as happiness." (5). These feelings of estrangement boil down to perpetually looking in from the outside. Ibrahim's education and fluency in French do not matter. He cannot escape his

blackness and what it means for those around him.

Much like Pushkin and Abram, Ibrahim remains endlessly aware of his status in the social sphere. At his core, he would most enjoy being treated like everyone else. In the first chapter, Pushkin specifies, “The countess received Ibrahim courteously, but with no special attention. That flattered him. Ordinarily, the young Negro was looked upon as a wonder, showered with greetings and questions, and this curiosity, though hidden behind an appearance of benevolence, offended his self-esteem.” (Pevear and Volokhonsky 5).” Yet again we come across another example of how Ibrahim’s ancestry functioned in society. Pushkin’s assessment regarding questions and curiosity hidden behind an *appearance* of benevolence sheds light on the extremely astute observation of performance that marginalized people are sometimes required to participate in for the entertainment or amusement of those in the majority.

However, the performance itself poses another set of problems that create a quagmire regardless of the chosen path. The aristocracy and nobility undoubtedly conducted their own series of tests at such parties for Ibrahim, perhaps testing his intellect and cleverness, purposely trying to prove racist theories about the inferiority of black people. Ultimately, they fail to recognize and acknowledge his humanity. These types of interactions are likely exhausting and demoralizing for the questioned party.

Themes of personhood, alienation, and othering lead us to examine this work as a fiction that functions as a biography. Pushkin/Abram/Ibrahim become intertwined and inseparable when dealing with these issues. In his review of works by Ina Schabert and Bettina L. Knapp, Philip Stevick writes on this topic, “But more importantly, the idea of fiction as biography suggests the whole range of vexed questions involving self and other, “intersubjectivity” as the phenomenologists put it, the ability to enter into the self of the subject.” (824). Here we see

Pushkin maintaining his distance while inserting and analyzing elements of his own psyche through his fictionalized ancestor.

Both Pushkin and Gannibal encountered alienation and othering because of their ancestry. It was a constant reminder of a difference that was generally frowned upon. They were both victims of the white gaze. That is to say, in this case, they were both incessantly working against negative stereotypes attributed to them based on the racist and prejudiced views of high society. Ibrahim affirms his feelings of isolation in his farewell letter to Leonore, “I have neither fatherland nor family.” (Pevear and Volokhonsky 10). This story arc is reinforced when Ibrahim is advised by the duc d’Orleans to stay in France. He is told, “Russia is not your fatherland. I don’t think you’ll be seeing your torrid birthplace ever again; but your prolonged stay in France has made you equally alien to the climate and way of life of half-savage Russia. You were not born Peter’s subject.” (Pevear and Volokhonsky 8). This is one of the only times in the novel where a character recognizes Ibrahim’s right to his own personhood.

Ibrahim’s decision to return to Russia and court a maiden stem from his lack of familial ties. He has been robbed of any connection to his biological family, so he must create his own. He must create a space for himself in a world that does not fully embrace him. This is a connection Ibrahim shares with the author. In his essay *How Black Was Pushkin? Otherness and Self-Creation* David Bethea states, “It is my argument, however, that the purely personal insecurities and feelings of injustice at being judged for what he had been born with rather than for who he had become (and was still becoming) were *worked through* thanks to the creative rewriting of Gannibal’s life in *The Blackamoor*.” (Bethea 142). Thus, Pushkin’s ancestry is not an impediment to his self-expression; it is an advantage.

In order for Pushkin to work through his blackness, he would need to utilize a medium

that was entirely his own to confront and focus on the multifaceted layers of his existence. The idea of working through as defined by historian Dominick LaCapra refers to subjects who distance themselves from experienced trauma to try and make sense of what has happened to them. In an interview, LaCapra observes that “The attempt to elaborate narratives that are not simply redemptive narratives, but more experimental, self-questioning narratives is also a form of working through.” (31). Distance is required not so much to disconnect from the experience of trauma and redeem one’s encounter with it, as to confront it and reconstruct it through formal and thematic experimentation. Racism as trauma is a subject matter that should be examined as it pertains to Pushkin’s experience. Based on his writings, it would seem that he did not suffer from racial trauma as it is traditionally defined, but he did suffer from race-related stress. How Pushkin articulated his experience of othering and organized those experiences into his creative works constitutes both a formally and thematically formulated response to race-related stress. Pushkin’s writing from a position of outsidership and self-questioning manifested itself throughout his publications. “My Genealogy” and *The Blackamoor of Peter the Great* are both redemptive and reflective, and show the reader how Pushkin worked through his feelings on race on this platform.

Another subject addressed in the text occurs when Peter I arranges Ibrahim’s marriage to Natasha, a young girl from a boyar family. Despite his high level of education and military standing, the family was repulsed at the idea of miscegenation. Russian nobility was highly influenced by Western European views on race. Nepomnyashchy articulates, “I would contend, however, that not only did Russians— relegated by these trends in racial classification to the undesirable, peripheral status of what Martin Bernal terms “fringe Europeans”—have a stake in this philosophical trend, but that Pushkin’s African ancestry placed him in a particularly vexed

position in this regard.” (158).

Appearances are everything. In protest to Natasha and Ibrahim’s union, Tatyana pleads, “Brother dear,” the old woman said in a tearful voice, “don’t ruin your own child, don’t deliver her into the clutches of that black devil.” (Pevear and Volokhonsky 25). Comparing Ibrahim to the devil denotes the virulent racism and apprehension towards black people during this time. Gannibal couldn’t have been more Russian if he tried. He was baptized in the Russian Eastern Orthodox faith, he learned the Russian language, fought alongside the tsar and dedicated his life to military service. It has nothing to do with Ibrahim as a person, and everything to do with Ibrahim as a *black* person.

Only after Ibrahim charms her family does Tatyana concede “Too bad he’s a Moor, otherwise we couldn’t dream of a better suitor.” (Pevear and Volokhonsky 31). Ibrahim starts the novel uncertain about his worthiness to be in love or have a family. He shares his intimate thoughts with Leonore. “Why strive to unite the destiny of so delicate so beautiful a being with the wretched destiny of a Negro, a pitiful creature, barely worthy to be called human?” (Pevear and Volokhonsky 10). Ibrahim has internalized self-loathing and pity because he does not believe he has a right to find happiness.

His feelings change later in the novel. He begins to understand that his outward appearance should not prohibit him from the next stages of his life. Ibrahim muses, “Why not? Can I be destined to spend my life in solitude and not know the best pleasures and the most sacred duties of man only because I was born below the fifteenth parallel? I cannot hope to be loved: a childish objection! Can one believe in love? Can it exist in a frivolous feminine heart? Renouncing sweet delusions forever, I have chosen other enticements – more substantial ones. The sovereign is right: I must provide for my future. Marriage to Rzhevsky’s daughter will

connect me with the Russian nobility, and I will stop being a stranger in my new fatherland.” (Pevear and Volokhonsky 27). Ibrahim resolved to make himself a home to secure his legacy.

Ibrahim’s relationship with Countess D results in the birth of a black child. As this is a historical fiction loosely based off Abram’s real life, an analysis of the portrayal of this event aids in our understanding of how this version functions for Pushkin. In contrast to Abram Gannibal’s real life public reputation as a cuckold, Ibrahim makes Countess D’s husband a cuckold in private, and switching a black baby for a white one solves the problem quickly. This inversion of the offspring is the most apparent reclamation of dignity, of self. The baby represents a reflection of the self. It shows the importance of seeing yourself in your posterity. It is your connection to the future. This inverted parallel serves to reinforce the influence of blackness.

While there is a fair amount of discrimination Ibrahim faces in his daily life, he also illustrates a shining example of black excellence for the audience. He is educated, charming, and successful in spite of his situation. In *Pushkin’s Historical Imagination* Svetlana Evdokimova acknowledges, “Ibrahim is emblematic of the intersecting of boundaries of race, social status, citizenship, conventions, traditions—all social institutions Peter was trying to reshape. Thus, the very choice of the character—whose personal merits, education, and devotion are opposed to tradition, race, and social origins—is already a historically accurate characterization of the epoch. The character here represents a historical milieu and becomes translucent to allow the historical process to penetrate through him.” (151). He is a perfect model of what can be achieved when afforded the same opportunities as his peers. His very existence negates preconceived notions of racial hierarchy. Unbound by societal expectations, Pushkin’s Ibrahim soars.

This tokenization, despite its honorable intentions, has problems that warrant a discussion. To say that Ibrahim has become translucent due to his race and capability downplay the point of the novel. To ignore race and say that his trajectory is historically accurate for the epoch is an oversight. Ibrahim was working against a plethora of forces that his colleagues would never have to face. He was an excellent man, but that does not make him the poster child for progress, nor does it imply that his race was invisible to those who promoted him and admired his achievements. If anything, such a positive characterization of race may equally derive from prejudice, demonstrating how fetishization and even the positive prejudices held by Ibrahim's contemporaries were inhibitors to the progress that this era claimed to have achieved.

How does Pushkin employ his blackness? *Blackamoor* is the largest of his works in which he focuses on race. In this context, it bears similarity to "My Genealogy" in that it highlights his famous ancestor. Bethea observes, "Blackness was for Pushkin both something real, given (he cared about surfaces), *and* something styled, something to be worked with." (Bethea 122). He provides us with his interpretation of what Gannibal was like and how he experienced reality. Through his works, Pushkin demonstrates his anxieties about his blackness as well as his pride in his great grandfather's lineage. Pushkin shows us through his literary style how his blackness influenced his self-image.

Blackamoor is Pushkin's catharsis. He transplants his own feelings into those of his fictional ancestral character. Only two excerpts of this story were made available to the public when he initially wrote it. He did correspond with colleagues regarding certain story arcs and characters, but for the most part none of his contemporaries saw his writings on Gannibal while he was alive. Therefore, I believe it served as a medium through which Pushkin reclaimed himself during his exile. He studied his grandfather extensively before mirroring the story after

him. Nepomnyashchy relates, “For one thing, Pushkin appears to have begun seriously to gather information about his great-grandfather’s biography while in exile at Mikhailovskoe, the estate granted to Gannibal by the Empress Elizabeth after he had returned from his own exile from the centers of power. Pushkin’s stay at Mikhailovskoe, moreover, afforded him a number of opportunities to learn about his great-grandfather’s life.” (153).

Aside from this portion of a novel, Pushkin only provides bits and pieces into his musings on race. Shaw observes, “His mentions of, or allusions to, that ancestry always occur in a larger context; they form only *passages* or *parts* of longer works, even when the entire work is only a short lyric.” (81). For Pushkin, race is but one facet of his human experience. However, even if it does not have a central hold on the subject matter, it adds dimension to the overall theme of the autonomous Romantic subject and aids in contextualizing meaning. For “My Genealogy,” the context was a defense of family history, restoration of an accomplished family lineage, and a reframing of his own biographical legend. Pushkin reworked the implications regarding his heritage and provided his own narrative. For *The Blackamoor of Peter the Great*, Pushkin created a literary sphere in which he could explore his thoughts and feelings on race. As a young boy, Pushkin harbored negative ideas about his own self-image. As he grew older and learned more about his forebear, his pride in his ancestry strengthened and eventually shone through in *Blackamoor*. He took a family legend and repackaged him into a historical hero. Ibrahim is a sympathetic character who communicates Pushkin’s anxieties and hopes. He shows us who we can become even if we are forced to start over.

The glimpses Pushkin provides us with are characteristic of the Romantic fragment. In *Pushkin and Romantic Fashion* Monika Greenleaf identifies the fragment as Romanticism’s, and Pushkin’s, genre *par excellence*. According to Greenleaf, Pushkin regarded all texts as

fragmentary and in contingent relation to one another. Only by assembling his fragmented texts could the Romantic subject be perceived as a whole with a coherent biography. While Pushkin, like his contemporaries, wrote on the fragmentary nature of human experience, he regarded the fragments of his lyrical self and his ancestry as part of a whole, an entity, his family tree. His great grandfather was recounted to him in family documents and by his great uncle. His writings had race interwoven into various texts, but race was not explicitly central to his work until *The Blackamoor*. Even in his exploration of race evident in *Blackamoor*, Pushkin only published two excerpts from the whole, demonstrating that as a Romantic fragment, it is very much of a piece with other incomplete presentations of the lyrical self in his work. There was likely no intent on Pushkin's part to "complete" the story of his illustrious ancestor and the biographical parallels he shared with him.

One of his most famous works, *Eugene Onegin*, (Евгений Онегин) demonstrates how Pushkin expressed his feelings toward his ancestry in bits and pieces, further bolstering his affinity for using fragments in his work. In stanza 50 he writes:

Придет ли час моей свободы?
Пора, пора! — взываю к ней;
Брожу над морем, жду погоды,
Маню ветрила¹ кораблей.
Под ризой² бурь, с волнами споря,
По вольному распутию моря
Когда ж начну я вольный бег?
Пора покинуть скучный берег
Мне неприязненной стихии

И средь полуденных зыбей,³
Под небом Африки моей,⁴
Вздыхать о сумрачной России,
Где я страдал, где я любил,
Где сердце я похоронил.

Will the hour of my freedom come?
It's time, it's time! I appeal to her;
I'm wandering over the sea, waiting for the weather,
Manyu sails ships.
Under the ruse of storms, with waves of arguments,
On the loose freeway of the sea
When will I start free running?
It's time to leave the dull coast
I'm hostile to the elements
And amid the midday ripples,
Under the sky of my Africa,
Sighing about gloomy Russia,
Where I suffered, where I loved,
Where I buried my heart.

In this epic, Pushkin expresses his own desire and longing for his ancestral homeland and exhibits his immense pride in his heritage.

Something else that speaks to the influence of the epoch is the title that was posthumously chosen for the story. In its original publication, this work appeared in *Severnnye*

Tsvety and *Literaturnaya Gazeta* as “Chapters from a Historical Novel,” reflecting the fragmentary nature of work from the outset. The appendix to the Academic of Sciences edition of his works informs, “Настоящий исторический роман Пушкина, в рукописи не имеет названия. Печатаемая отрывки, Пушкин озаглавливал их: «Главы из исторического романа». Название дано редакторами при первой публикации романа в 1837 г., после смерти Пушкина.” (The present historical novel by Pushkin did not have a title in the manuscript. In the printed excerpts, Pushkin called them “Chapters from a historical novel.” The title was given by the editors upon the first publication of the novel in 1837, after Pushkin’s death.) (513). After reading Pushkin’s work, it seems unlikely that this is the title that he himself would have chosen. Given the intentionally fragmentary nature of the work, Pushkin’s working title “Chapters from a Historical Novel” accurately characterizes his intent to present the work as a manuscript in progress.

I hesitate to accept the name *The Blackamoor of Peter the Great* as the true title of this work, not only because it reflects an editor’s wish to present the story as completed and canonical, but because Ibrahim/Abram Gannibal was so much more than his relationship to the tsar. He was an accomplished and well-rounded man of his time. While his education and upbringing were overseen by the tsar, denoting his ownership to the tsar minimizes Ibrahim’s agency over himself. The use of the term “blackamoor” in the translation of the Russian “arap” (Negro) lends visibility to contemporary readers about the editorial sensibilities of Pushkin’s time. There is little ambiguity left to today’s reader who encounters the title “Peter the Great’s Negro,” a title which forces the reader to confront the lexical and ethical values of a time in which ownership of an individual whose distinguishing characteristic is his race is not questioned, and in which posthumous canonicity and completion are more desirable than the

fragmentary autobiographical snippet that Pushkin intended. Unfortunately, there is no way to know where this story would have gone. But what is plain in the text to me is that Pushkin would not have named his historical novel “Peter the Great’s Negro” or any other variation of the sort. Again, it warrants being recontextualized and renamed. Perhaps the Epic of Ibrahim, or the Origin of Gannibal, or even Pushkin’s proposed title “Chapters from a Historical Novel,” would have sufficed as adequate characterizations of this story. Once again, the narrative has been taken from the author, his voice forever silenced.

Alexander Pushkin spent much of his life dealing with feelings of isolation due to his black ancestry, and with his literary writing, worked through the social reception of his blackness that often led him to feel alien in his social circles. Despite the feelings of solitude and difficulty finding spaces in which he felt a part due to his ancestry, it was precisely his ancestry that led him to draw upon the Romantic tendency toward fragmentary biographical narratives that could be pieced together to represent his own discontinuous experiences of alienation. It is precisely through the fragment and the practice of working through that he demonstrates how his poetic and narrative interpretation of this experience could lead to triumph over biographical facts. His is the one voice that binds all Russians together. In exploring his feelings of isolation and lack of community, he gave the entire country a binding sense of unity and commitment to the beauty of language. His mastery of his craft, which includes his engagement with working through the trauma of racism through fragmentary biographical narratives, is the foundation upon which his countrymen after him built their voices.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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