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International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work

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## Lab UA: Terra Incognita

Tetiana Troitskaya

Panel: The Shape of Your Paragraph: Genre and Its Constraints

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**Tetiana TROITSKAYA**

**Lab UA: Terra Incognita**

A decade before the beginning of a new century, the last generation of the broken Empire would have called pure Ukrainian texts a literature of non-existence. Told in a variety of forms, the Ukrainian story, reflecting the past, sounded alien to the hungry reader in the chaos of “Independence.” The old Ukrainian male texts were predominantly about characters with a mixture of depression, despair, and bad luck, with the usual choice of someone to blame—a feature of postcolonial literature. Those to blame were men from Moscow or Poland—or simply landlords.

While male writers continued to suffer from melancholy and depression, the playful nature of Ukrainian women generated texts of a new age. The natural national habits of laughing at everything and violating the rules were reflected in the freedom of crossing the borders of genre and topic, and the desire to flirt with the audience. The first work of this kind was a scandalous novel written in 1996 by Oksana Zabuzhko called *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex*, the most influential Ukrainian book of the years of independence. The main trick, admitted by G. Grabovych, is that “sex is only in the title, it is ironic to the reader: without sex there is no bestseller.”

Thus, Ukrainian fiction has never been vulgar. It has never been a literature of the body; it has always been a literature of the soul. High poetry and figurativeness, superstition, lyricism, and the pathogenesis of loneliness—these are the main traits which form a Ukrainian paragraph. Ukrainian female characters love secretly. The main message is that “true love should be hidden from the eyes of the public.”

The fiction of every previous age had always been bound to the canon—Classicism, Romanticism, Realism, and their variations dictated the shape of artistic work. The authors who challenged the accepted forms became innovators, and automatically wrote their names in the pages of history. The first generation of unprecedented freedom gave birth to a galaxy of writers whose constant literary experiments erased genre borders so bravely that we no longer speak about drama, novels, or poems—we’ve got the term “text” instead.

The genres of modern Ukrainian works are identified twice—by the authors themselves, and by literary criticism. If the most widespread hybrids in literature in general are double texts, which actually combine two equal genres (a novel-essay, a novel in letters, an epistolary novel, a memoir novel, a novel-reportage, a novel-testament, a romance diary, a novel-confession), the modifications of Ukrainian authors are semantically remote from the traditional forms. We have an “alleged novel” by O. Irvanets, “instead of a novel” by Y. Andruhovych, a “small novel” by G. Tarasiuk, a “novel-meditation” by V. Stefanyk, a “stream of consciousness” by E. Pashkovsky, a “novel-symphony” by M. Matios, a “novel-game” by L. Riznyk, a “novel-mosaic” by R. Diduha, a “novel-palindrome” by O. Sharvarka, a “novel-sonata” by A. Bagriany, and many others.

The craving to express oneself in unconventional ways was inherent to Ukrainian nature even in the times of rigid forms. In 1911, Lesya Ukrainka created *A Forest Song*, which was actually a drama-extravaganza, a drama-poem, a drama-myth, a drama-fairy-tale. Her first step of freedom was to write in Ukrainian, which almost no one had done before; her second step was to break the mould of styles. Another icon was Lina Kostenko, who still creates. Her physical face was unknown to the public until 2010, when she came out with her first work of prose, *Notes of a Ukrainian Madman*. Her experiment within the frame of a new genre—the novel as a combination of fiction, internal diaries, chronicles, and

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Tetiana Troitskaya (Ukraine), Subodh Sarkar (India), Galit Dahan Carlibach (Israel), Henriikka Tavi (Finland), and Yusi Avianto Pareanom (Indonesia)

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contemporary journalism—was considered a failure. Still, it was a prophecy for current events. The inimitable images of her poetry have given shape to my thoughts about today's reality.

The Ukrainian literature of today is still an untold story, a terra incognita, with its own laws and images. Sometimes it forgets itself in playing with suddenly obtained freedom; sometimes its formulas are too complicated. Often, Ukrainian artists, like Les Podervyansky, manipulate classical images. The masks for his genius are plays on Shakespearean plots, countless texts of world literature, chronotopes, historical allusions, and philosophy. His messages, wrapped in slang, are caustic; his voice is so loud that it had to be turned into humor so as not to deafen. True Ukrainian thought still needs to be heard, not by the ears, but by the hearts and souls of those who haven't lost their ability to perceive. My Planet, are you listening?