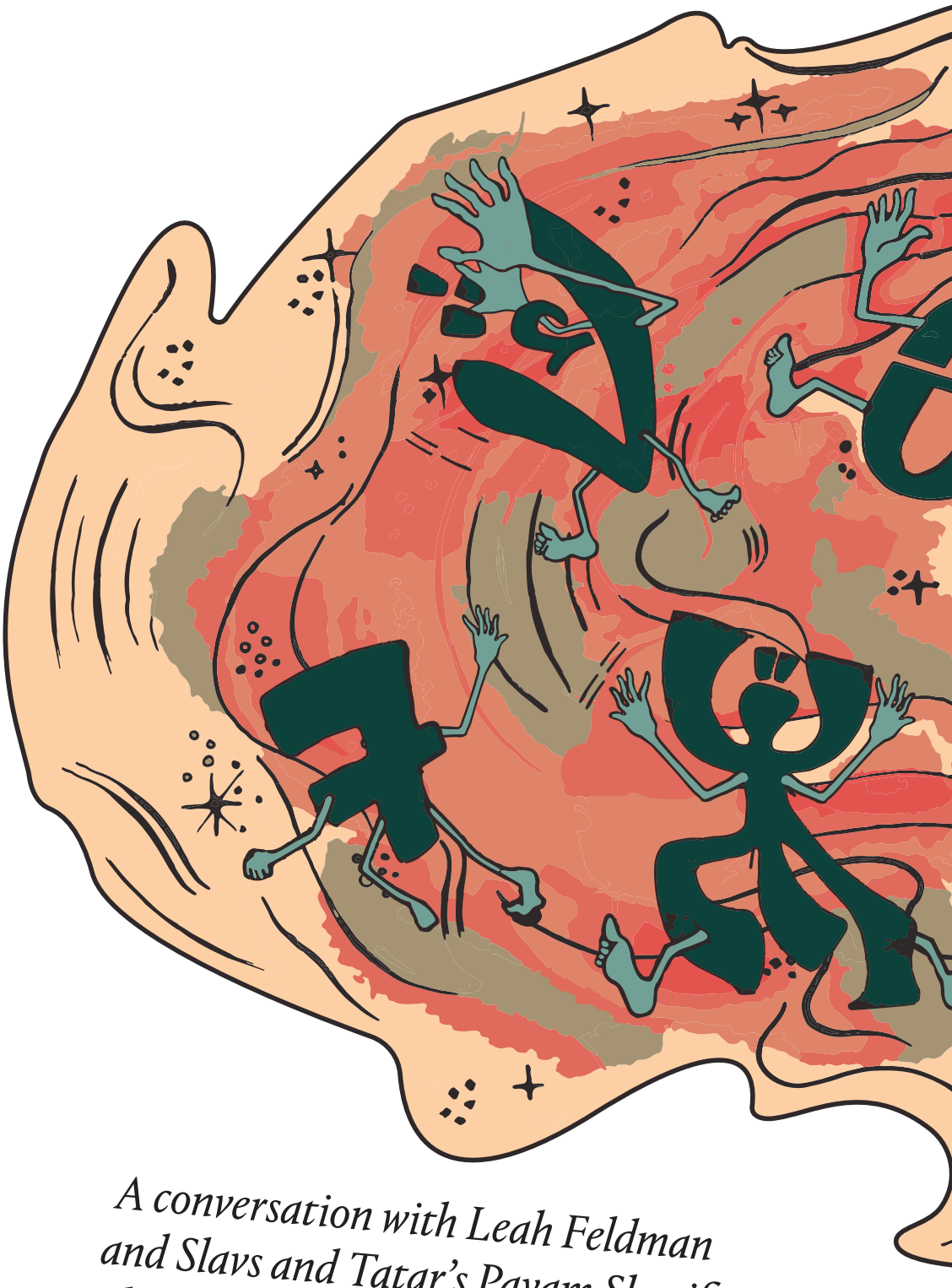
EIGHT PHONEMES AND THE STATE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE



A conversation with Leah Feldman and Slavs and Tatar's Payam Sharifi about their forthcoming sound book

Leah Feldman, University of Chicago, USA; Payam Sharifi, Berlin, Germany

ZACHARY CAHILL

Slavs and Tatars, *Azbuka Strikes Back*, 2023. Tufted wool, 70 × 50 in.

ZACHARY CAHILL — Maybe we could start with a question to both of you: What have you been working on together? Can you tell us a little bit about your project, the book?

PAYAM SHARIFI — Yeah, maybe we should start by talking about what we're not working on together. It seems like we're working on more things together than not together.

LEAH FELDMAN — Yeah, exactly. But the book is actually finished, I think.

ZC — What is the title of the book?

LF — The title of the book is *Azbuka Strikes Back: An Anti-Colonial ABCs*. Azbuka is the Russian term for ABC book used in the Soviet Empire. The book emerged from the long series of collaborations that we've been doing to rethink books and reading, and also our intertwining interests in the history of the script reforms, and how it shaped reading publics in the Soviet Union. We wanted to tell a story that was about phonemes and their relationship to different scriptural histories, specifically in the space of the former Soviet Union and under the series of reforms initiated by the Soviet Empire. And we wanted to do this in a way that was engaging and stretched our understanding of what a book is or what the form of our book should be. Payam, do you want to talk a little bit about the sound dimension? Because that was something that you all were really exploring and pushing us to think about.

PS — Slavs and Tatars has published a lot of books. We've never done a children's book before, and this is definitely the first sound book we've done, so the focus of this project was really the phonemes and different attempts to give a form to these phonemes, that is, a graphic form . . . Namely, we look at about eight sounds that didn't fit into the kind of a traditional Slavic or Russian sound palette. These sounds were given different graphic forms according to whether the language spoken was already a written language before the project of communism happened in 20th century, or according to the changing geopolitical concerns, namely that maybe it was at first in Arabic script, and then it was changed to Latin, then to Cyrillic. The eight sounds were orphan sounds in some ways, so we focused on them; some of them are kind of fricative others guttural or plosive, like the sound that you have for the word Quran, or Kazakhstan, which we write in English with a *K*. Russians will write it with a *K*, but actually it's like the *K* or the *Q* of the Quran, more of a guttural sound.

We just got the print proof back, which is really interesting for us because normally when you get a print proof, it's a blue proof, to check the visuals but this time we got a blank in the exact dimensions, no print at all, and just the sound buttons (this is the first book that we're doing that's made in China due to the technology). The technology for the board book is, essentially, a sensor where you put your finger and a sound comes out. Each spread is devoted to one of these eight phonemes and the different kinds of graphic iterations or transformations it's undergone.

ZC — So, instead of maybe hearing a cow "moo" or something, we're going to hear one of the phonemes?

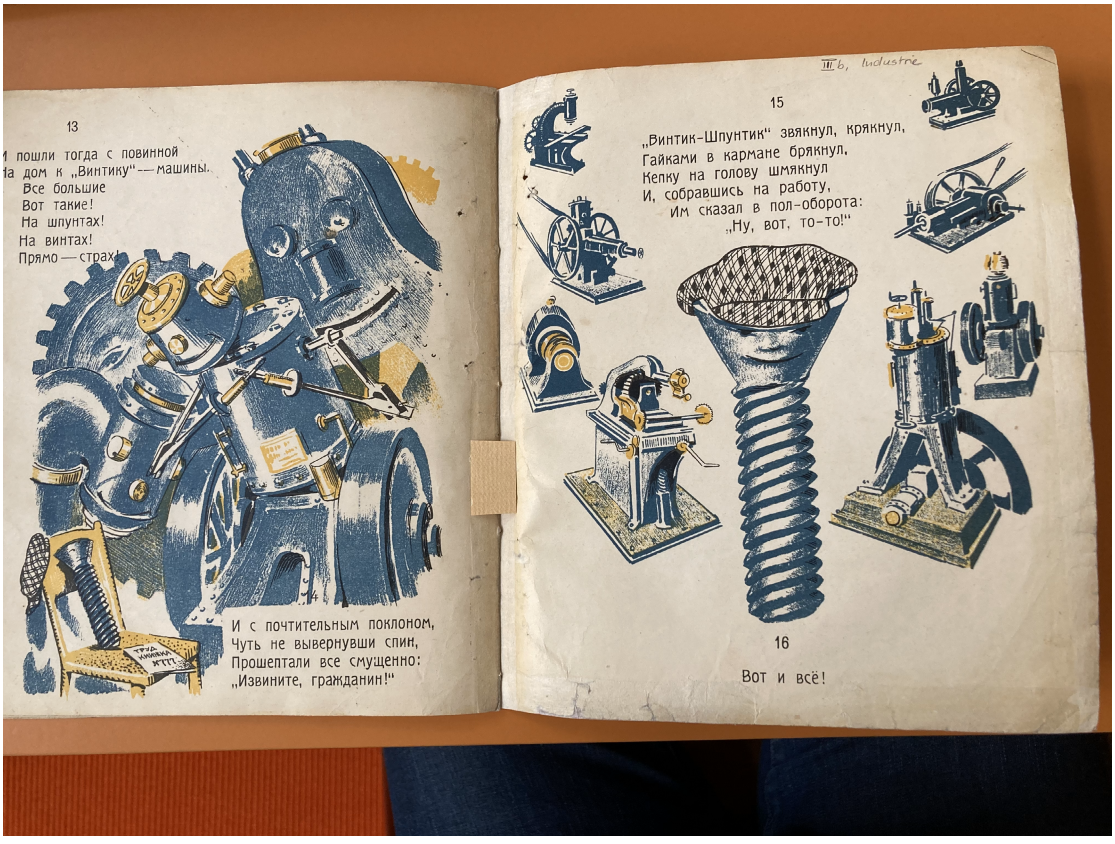
PS — Yeah, so one spread you will hear *ba-ba-ba*, another one will be . . . Leah, what's another one? Kind of a plosive *P*, right?

LF — Yes, and it's our voices alternating. We recorded them with alternating sounds, and then a DJ remixed them, so there's also a song at the end that's made of phonemes. It kind of culminates in this phoneme chorus, if you will.

PS — Exactly. It's a kind of medley, an a capella medley of all these different phonemes.

ZC — That sounds amazing. It is an instructional book, an ABCs book. Are the phonemes characters in a story? Like, personages? How do the phonemes function in the narrative?

LF — I think this is an interesting question because we talked a lot about to what degree they should be anthropomorphized, especially in the illustration. Most children's books



anthropomorphize all concepts. I think that there are characters in the narrative sense of characters, that is, they are the heroes of the story. But we were really trying not to make them too anthropomorphized. But I think I would say that the book also takes up embodiment questions through the phonemes, so, we talk about the relationship between linguistic elements: phoneme, language, and script metaphorically through the sound characters' relationship to their scriptural bodies.

PS — Labor, as well.

LF — Yes.

PS — Labor and exploitation of labor. Leah, you were key in not psychologizing the characters, but using them as vehicles to also give a bit of context to these language changes, so that there's one spread where the letters are complaining that their lines were not made . . . They were made for poetry, not for paperwork, so at some point the letters are sort of exploited and they want to go back to being free sounds, not shackled sounds by graphic exploitations. I think my favorite part of the book is when some sounds gather together and demand choral communism. This idea of sounds having a certain sort of solidarity.

ZC — Did you say *choral communism*?

PS — Choral, choral communism, yeah.

ZC — The phoneme as characters and the sound elements of the book are so compelling. I guess one question I had before I knew about the phoneme, the sound dynamic, and the choice of the board book, what do haptic attributes for the book do for what you're trying to convey? Which is to say, that so much of language and translation and transliteration is ephemeral and not haptic or physical, in so much as literally touching something. I wonder if you could talk about the choice of the board book as a way to get at what you're interested in.

LF — I think we had in mind the pedagogy of

"Vintik-Shpuntik," the story of a worker screw from the Soviet children's book archive.

the reading primer, the way that kids learn. We were thinking about a story that could play on a common medium for learning languages, right, because the board book is this object that children use to formulate words and begin to connect the relationship between the written sign and the sound and the meaning of the words. They're this pedagogical tool. And then we did research on Soviet children's books and were looking at what mechanisms, what kind of story arcs, what sort of technologies those books tended to engage and how they conditioned reading in the former Soviet space, and how they were also imaginatively reinvented in different republics against structures of Soviet colonial patriarchy. We looked at this whole archive of children's books to think about how pedagogies of reading are instrumental to the ways in which empire shapes language politics. I think it was both this kind of sensuous experience of the child psychologically being formed through the board book and this colonial history that were some of the inspirations for that decision. I don't know, Payam, if you have other thoughts.

PS — Yeah. I think it was 2022, the residency in Chicago, so I think we applied in '21 for this great fellowship. Is that correct? Definitely before the war in Ukraine.

LF — Yeah, yeah.

PS — It's just one of these many projects that seem to become only more urgent due to what happened with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We presented some of the elements of the book in Kazakhstan in May with Leah, and the response of people was almost a no-brainer, like, "Oh, this is great. We can't believe that this hasn't been done before. Why are there no children's books today to look at these kinds of language politics?" Obviously, it's not a children's book in a strict sense of the term, but I think by choosing this format . . . and the price point we decided, also, it forces it to be something which is not a traditional artist book, because it would be too easy . . . Given Leah's background and given our background, too easy to withdraw or to sort of console oneself with the typical kind of artist book publication, which has a certain kind of audience.

The format of the board book just immediately asks them to be engaged with that kind of reading, the educational, the instructional pedagogical type of learning. Long before the war, we were thinking, if you're a person from the post-Soviet space and you want to somehow impart the rich heritage of socialist children's books to your children, you've got an amazing archive of things, but they're all somehow lacking in some sense. They don't address questions of patriarchy, they don't address questions of colonial enterprise, gender . . . despite their strengths, there are quite clear blind spots to them. In a kind of naive way before the Russian invasion, it was almost theoretical, but what kind of book would you give to children of parents of the diaspora or the new generation of post-Soviet parents that isn't compromising on these elements? With the events of early 2022, of course this just became quite obvious.

LF — It's also interesting now, because the book's going to be published in Kazakh translation, and now we're facing the question of what script to print it in, because Kazakhstan is shifting to the Latin script after using the Cyrillic script for a century. So, I mean, even in our book . . . the question of what script to print the book in is going to be an interesting political question. It's not obvious in the sense that on the one hand, I mean, it seems like we will print it in the Latin script, but on the other hand, that means that for a lot of Kazakh speakers it won't be legible.

ZC — In Kazakhstan, or?

LF — Yes, because Kazakh has been written in Cyrillic, so anyone who's Kazakh-speaking has grown up reading Kazakh in Cyrillic, so they will now be learning the Latin script. It's an interesting book to think about learning a new script in your native language, and so the question of the translation and transliteration, or in what script it will be printed, will itself be a really political layer that's added onto this specific printing.

ZC — I love the idea of talking about the issues you guys are thinking about through early children's literature and its foundational role. Right? With children acquiring language, and so I think it makes sense to me that important things that authors care about would land in the children's book. I guess I was interested in how you think about authorship in a collective, and what constitutes authorship. Is design authorship as well? Are the recordings? Maybe just talk through your process.

PS — Sure. I should start by saying that when you're a collective, you're quite resistant to collaborating further because you're always collaborating on an everyday basis, so it's very rare that we [Slavs and Tatars] actually collaborate with somebody else, because you're already managing four or five people as it is. To have a kind external person, to have that work as smoothly as it did with Leah, it just doesn't happen so often, or ever. It's been quite seamless, and I think in the beginning, Leah and I sat down and really just tried to think through the story, the actual drafting of the story. Then, once that story was drafted, we handed it over to other members of Slavs and Tatars who work with an illustrator/designer, Amin Boulkroun, a young Algerian illustrator who had been an intern at the studio a couple years before and had a good sense of script and drawing. Stan and Kasia worked with Amin, the illustrator, and they art directed him, and then they would consult with us when they had questions, right, Leah? We were less involved I guess in that stage, but still involved.

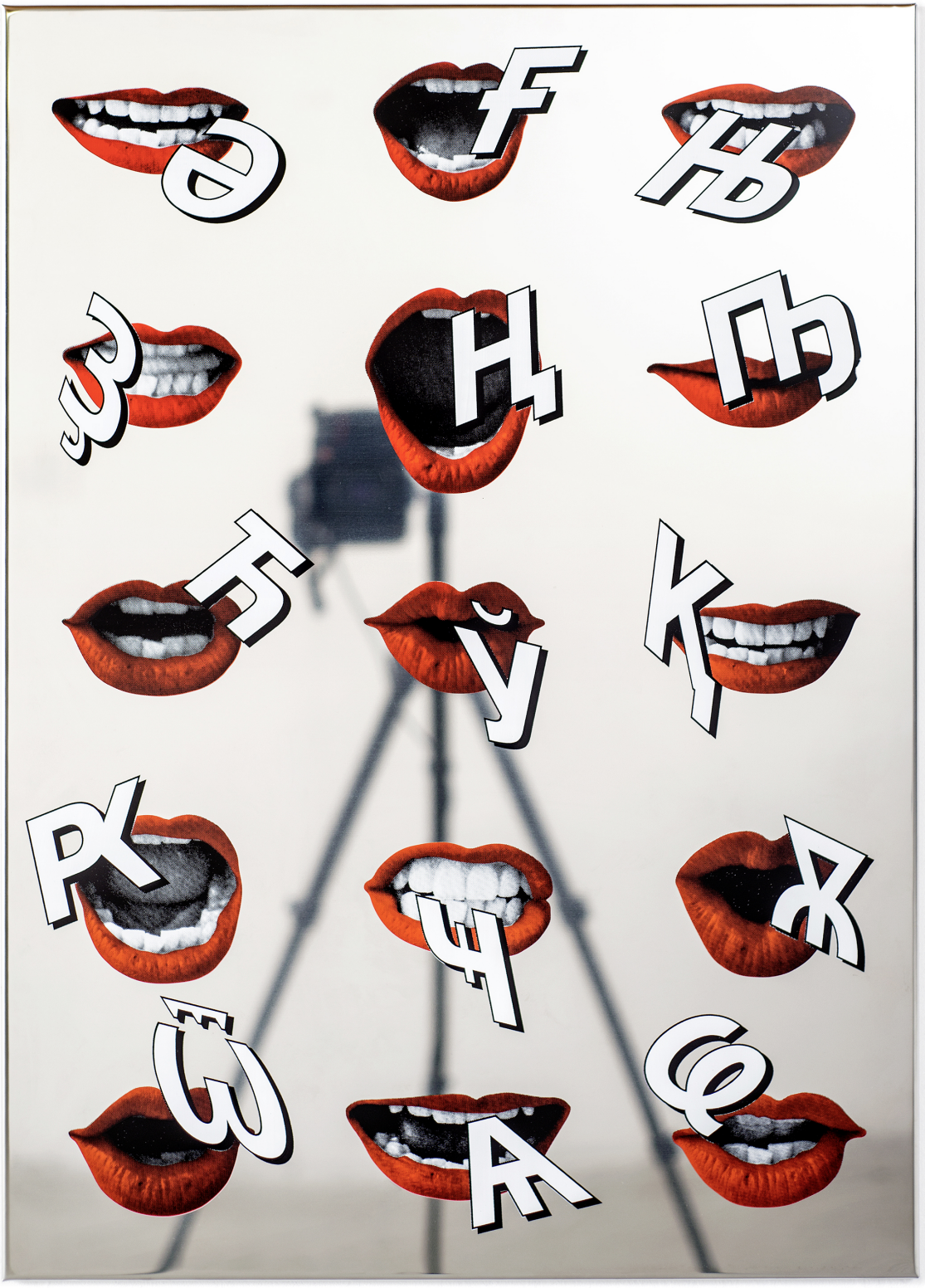
LF — Yeah. Yeah. I feel like there was a lot, I mean, a lot of different stages of different collaborations, but it was really . . . I mean, for me, it was really incredibly inspiring and exciting to be able to collaborate in that way, because in academic writing, you rarely will be live co-writing a piece. Payam and I would do research and then sit together and actually write. And then, to have that dynamic and to think with people who are working in design and illustration and going back and forth with them was incredibly inspiring and enriching. You just think about things in a different way when you see how someone takes an idea and develops it and thinks through the same kind of narrative problems you're thinking through but in colors and shapes.

PS — Yeah, and then, adding an outer ring of collaboration with the sound artist, Lubomir Grzelak. I'm closer to Leah in the sense that I don't really get involved in visuals, just because I'm not trained that way. I always enjoy seeing those ideas come to life as well, like Leah did, and then, none of us is really a sound person in the studio. We had worked with Lubomir before so this could be done remotely , but we told him what we were looking for, and actually, Leah and I went into the basement of Slavs and Tatars and just recorded the sounds ourselves. Some of the phonemes are Leah, some of them are mine, but they've been post-produced. You wouldn't really, of course, recognize our voices.

ZC — Payam, it occurred to me the other day as I was prepping for this conversation, that to me there seems to be an affinity between Slavs and Tatars work and that of the Canadian collective General Idea. Do you think about their work much?

PS — Yes, definitely. General Idea was one of the few collectives, at least that I know of, post-war collectives, that wasn't about a movement, let's say, like you had before the war, sort of early 20th century where it was much more about movements, but there was a real coherent sort of voice across very different activities, whether it was activism, publishing, making material artworks. I think that that's quite inspiring.

I think what's also unique about what they're doing is that there's this idea of, when you're working in a collective, of drowning out this quite oppressive emphasis on the individual authorship. I think that that's inextricably linked to the very notion of being an artist, that's kind of individual, lone, romantic. What they were doing was really bringing the reflection and the certain transformative potential of what we call, what we like to find ideally in art, into areas that were not necessarily art. Right? Whether it was sort of disposable things or publishing, and with hindsight, now we look



Slavs and Tatars, *Larry Nixed, Trachea Trixed*, 2015.
Screenprint, polished steel, 27.5 × 19.5 in.

at them as art, but that wasn't necessarily how they were presented originally. I think that that's something which is also very dear to us, whether it's working with a kebab shop, or working just purely in books that have an audience that's not necessarily an art audience, it's sort of how to bring all the preciousness, the formal thoughts, all the things that we associate with art, but not really always return it to art, which I just feel almost defeats the purpose in some sense.

ZC — Another question I have for both of you is, early on in your work together the word "trans" was really important to you. I believe there was a kind of arc from thinking about transliteration to translation to trans identity. How, if at all, is the word still at play in your book?

PS — I think that it's not explicitly dealt with, those kind of the slippages of this notion of trans, but I think, like Leah mentioned, this question of centering it on the body and embodiment. The physicality of what these sounds are, giving it a form, but also a lived experience. That was important in the sense also that there's a transliteration. The fact that they share this root, or, what do you call it? This prefix, I guess, this Latin prefix, *trans*, is not coincidental of course. It's very much about reclaiming this polyphony identity that stems from a seemingly singular sound, right? We think that sounds, the relation between a sound and a grapheme is somehow logical or self-evident, that *ah* should be an A, and et cetera, et cetera, but of course, very much like identity and gender identity or sexual identity, these are very much constructs, just like there are in language identity, if you will, or alphabet identities. These are obviously social and imperial and religious constructs.

LF — I think one of the goals with the narrative was to highlight the ways in which we take for granted a kind of natural relationship between a sound, script, and alphabet of a language. The book talks about the ways in which those relationships are much more playful, and the notion of trans there captures the performative dimension through which languages transform, and relate to their sonic and written histories fluidly, without referring back to a singular origin. There's no singular, natural form for a language. There are storied histories, and there's a way to relate to those social, political, and linguistic histories playfully. I think that's the arc of the book, to remind ourselves that are possibilities for play in the way that we relate to languages through sounds and their scriptural histories. And that play is political, too.

ZC — It makes me think, Payam, the work of Slavs and Tatars often centers on a specific body part, be it the tongue, the nose, which I feel does something very different than just saying the body. I'm wondering if there's something like that at play or if the phoneme itself kind of performs that function in what you guys have been working on.

PS — That's a good point. I never thought of it like that. I think that Leah really helped, first of all. We've never written fiction. I know I'm terrible at creating narrative. You would imagine it'd be the other way around with an academic being more of the nonfiction and the artist doing more fiction, but it was really Leah's insisting that we have to create a story, really. This live writing, I think, really helped. For me, that's how the body, this idea of embodiment really came into being, because it is a kind of speculative children's book, if you will. We're imagining a public . . .

I think it's important to say that, again, we're imagining a public that has somehow something in common from this vast region, and increasingly, again, due to the war, there's been a push back or increasing suspicion of any kind of project which claims to redeem any notion of commonality among these various peoples, because that commonality has almost exclusively been seen as a top-down, power-centric commonality of, let's say, the Soviet project or an Imperial project, Moscow driven, et cetera, et cetera, Cold War project. I think the notion of the whole body is somehow linked to this imagined commons or sort of social body, in some sense, that is undergoing these changes. When you create a narrative, you have to in some sense focus in on those.

ZC — Leah, I saw you nodding, did you want to add anything to that.

LF — I think what Payam said about the relationship between narrative and embodiment is really interesting. I don't often think about it in that way, but I think that you're right, Payam. There's a way in which those two are connected. I've been thinking recently about Mikhail Bahktin and his writings about Carnival, because we're doing this new project on costume, and thinking about the relationship between embodiment and costume and how the two shape each other. For Bahktin, the foundation of writing about the body and the grotesque body is always narrative, essentially. There's this deep connection from medieval literature between the way that narrative and scriptural religious texts relate to the body as a kind of holistic process. I feel like this relationship to the genesis of sound or the coming into being of letters and the process of thinking about embodiment and the way we think about narrative, and the arc of creation stories are these intertwined conceptual processes with long histories, in the study of religion and the history of the book and so forth. That's a bit abstract, but maybe there's something there about the way that we return to the body when we try to tell stories, for some reason.

ZC — What you are describing makes me wonder, can you have any subject formation, form your society and your ideal citizens without this kind of embodied narrative that you guys are talking about? I just wonder, is narrative always in play in this process?

LF — I mean, even the notion of the body politic that Payam mentioned, right? Thinking about political and social formation is always related to the notion of the physical organism. It's both a metaphor and not. I guess that's the thing that's fascinating about it. On the one hand, it is a metaphor, but then when you think about, say, the Eucharist, the cracker is also the actual body of Christ in some traditions and the body politic is both the masses as well as its representation.

PS — It goes further, say for instance here in Germany, where we live there is a nourishment from the state in a very paternalistic/maternalistic way. This extends to the question of the social contract to the social body being nourished by a regime. The government is responsible for providing nutrition or staples for the social body; essentially, providing a means of existence.

ZC — Talking to you guys makes me realize how wrongheaded my initial question was about haptic. It seems like language is always already haptic, embodied, physical. That's where it comes from. It doesn't emanate, originate from anywhere else, actually. I just never thought about it until listening to you guys talk about it that way.

LF — I think we, speaking as an academic here, put a lot of effort into trying to make thought into this abstract thing. I mean, even when students are in school, we don't talk about the way that they relate to their bodies. I remember after COVID, having people in space in the classroom was this weird thing, and the ways that we were relating to one another felt unnatural, and so even the idea of talking or speaking together in person was . . . We realized how much, unconsciously, how much thinking takes place through being in a space together or negotiating that space. It's this thing that academics or intellectuals deny so often because we think thought is only about abstract ideas. But of course embodiment is central to thinking together.