Ashley Smiley: You're tuned into 90.7 KALX Berkeley. My name is Ashley Smiley and you're listening to The Graduates, the interview talk show where we talk to graduate students here at UC Berkeley and around the world.

Today I am joined by Brian Egdorf, a PHD candidate in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literature. Brian, welcome to The Graduates. We are happy to have you here today.

Brian Egdorf: Hey, how's it going?

Ashley Smiley: It's going pretty good. I thought we'd start with some general information for our listeners. What are Slavic languages?

Brian: So Slavic Languages and Literature is our department, really represents a huge swath of kind of human history and human culture and literature, and also language. I would say that we're really tied through language. The Slavic languages quite simply are a group of languages divided into East, South, and Western Slavic languages. Anything from Czech to Bulgarian, Russian, as everybody has been hearing a lot in the news about, but also Ukrainian of course, and just a whole ton of, kind of shared kind of cultures in this region.

Ashley Smiley: Okay. And have you always been interested in Slavic languages and literature?

Brian: So I think that, you know, as a budding undergraduate many, many years ago I took Russian mostly because I had Ukrainian grandparents growing up and I never spoke Ukrainian. My mother never spoke Ukrainian. But we kind of had this very interesting family, side of the family I would say, that was still kind of connected to these older traditions. Yeah, I guess it is this kind of interesting part of my family that I always wanted to know more about and also speak to. So I know that I have relatives in both Ukraine, Russia, and also across Western Europe, and it was just this very interesting side.

Ashley Smiley: So what do you study here at UC Berkeley? And could you tell us a little bit about the process for studying your subject?

Brian: So yeah, in the realm of Slavic Languages and Literature, you would never imagine that actually a lot of graduate students are working on Russian literature, mostly because again, it is such a huge literary culture and has had such a huge effect, but to be honest, that's where the jobs are today in Russian literature. Unfortunately, it's very challenging I would say to study other Slavic languages, and so that's just academia today. There's less money to go around. And so more students are pushed into certain regions and certain languages.

My interest in Russian was actually primarily in the Russian novels, so that's what I work on today, 19th century novel. I've always been interested in novels and what they do, and the interesting ways that we can use them as a comparison between different national cultures. So my research always kind of reaches into, you know, the English novel, the French novel, those kinds of things. But I've always been interested in the Russian novel because of the complexity of characters, and feelings, and thoughts that those characters have.

Ashley Smiley: Yeah. Could you give us a few examples of some Russian novels that you know, particularly spark your interest?

Brian: So I actually remember the first time I read "Anna Karenina" when I was a, you know, very, you know, 17 year old college student. I was reading it. It was an entire course on this one novel. I remember we had this really terrible blizzard in Bloomington, Illinois when I was reading this novel and I...

Ashley Smiley: How many times did you read this novel?

Brian: I mean it's funny because you know, you read and you reread the same novels, but also you reread some of the same parts, sometimes at the expense of other parts. I've found that maybe one of the difficulties in this field is that we have to teach certain novels and read the certain novels at the expense, maybe of others, you know, interesting texts that might be out there.

But I would say with the Russian novels, I'm endlessly interested in their complexity, especially because I work on things related to character's consciousness. I would say that this is really a broad, you know, broad stroke here, but the complexity of Russian characters allows me to keep rereading them. And if you take a novel like "Crime and Punishment" or "The Brothers Karamazov"...

Actually it's kind of funny, you know, I have an earthquake preparedness kit in my, after one of the earthquakes I was like, "Oh I have to do this."

Ashley Smiley: That' fair.

Brian: And I have some spare contacts, I have you know, maybe, I don't know, pair of glasses, I have, you know, maybe spare pair of underwear or something like that, and I have "The Brothers Karamazov."

I can imagine myself, I always imagine what novel, if I had to pick, would I pick to read over and over again for the rest of my life. Like, you know, house is burning

or you know, we have to get on a ship and leave the country, what text would you carry with you?

I was packing to go teach English in France for a year and I could not bring a lot of novels, and this was kind of before the days of like iPads and electronic texts. And so I picked the fifth volume of Proust because I was like so intrigued by this text. And just like in, you know, almost in love with the language and I could imagine myself always returning to those passages. Always returning to those idea no matter where I went. So "The Brothers Karamazov" is now that text. I don't know if that was a great choice and maybe if there was an earthquake I would make a different choice.

Ashley Smiley: Yeah. I want to go back and revisit what you mean by complexity in novels because-

Brian: Yeah.

Ashley Smiley: - that could mean a lot of things and-

Brian: Right.

Ashley Smiley: - in some-

Brian: And it does mean a lot of things.

Ashley Smiley: Yeah. And in some ways I'm wondering, and maybe people in the audience are wondering, how much do you think these novels are influenced by the history that they were created during? For instance, you know, nowadays, especially with what's going on in politics, I feel like a lot of artists or musicians, you know, they use that information and then kind of use like media as a filter to interpret that. And you know, maybe historians from the future will, you know, look back and say, when was this piece of music created? Or when was this book written? Is it useful for you to explore more of like the history that influenced the novels?

Brian: So I think this is actually a very valid and interesting question and I think about it a lot pedagogically when I'm preparing for class, and what am I going to bring to my students to help them understand the major issues that are described in this text.

And clearly like, I think that a valuable investigation of the context, the historical context is extremely important, especially in the period that I work on. You know, there's massive social change going on in Russia at that time. There was, you know, a lot of reforms and failures of reforms.

Actually during one of Dostoevsky's novels, there was a rising suicide rate. There was just like a lot of massive social change, especially, the liberation of the Serfs in the 1860's. So you can't not look at this.

On the other hand, I think that Russian novels have a really great way of being these texts that you could probably not even think about the social historical, cultural context.

I kind of imagine the ideal novel is a novel that you uncover in 2000 years and read it for its depth without having any reference point. And that's why I would choose "The Brothers Karamazov" again.

Ashley Smiley: Do you think that you would be able to do that specifically because they were written taking into historical context? Like you said, some of these novels were written during a social upheaval or some revolution, and like nowadays even we can relate to big changes in policy and big changes, socio politically speaking, so then in the future if someone says like, "Oh well I can relate to this novel, it's timeless. It's something that is standalone, but the reason it's that way is because it's like very connected to humanity."

Brian: Yeah. I think that most of the huge changes in, you know, philosophical thought or literary ideas or innovations of those sort, happen in times of real crisis where you have to think about what it is to be, you know, human, what it is to believe in something like God or you know, what do you think society should be? It's really during times of crisis that those questions kind of surface, I would say.

Ashley Smiley: So you are multilingual, you speak French, Russian, Czech, German, of course English. Did you learn all of these languages throughout your life or have you mostly developed them through your academic career?

Brian: So I learned language in school. French I learned in high school, and then I became a French major because I really loved the culture. They always say that French is your second culture or something like that. And in a lot of ways I was really lucky to be able to go there and experience that culture.

I would say that I was always looking for something else. Something maybe more connected to my roots. I would say that French and Russian are my most important. I learned Czech because I came to Berkeley on a FLAS, a FLAS is the Foreign Language and Area Studies Grant from the U.S. Department of Education, and it funded a couple of years of study at Berkeley and I took Czech. It was a very interesting and important part of my intellectual trajectory.

Ashley Smiley: It seems like your propensity for learning new languages has really allowed you to explore several versions of like novels being both translated, and in their original texts.

Brian: Yeah.

Ashley Smiley: So do you travel for your work? And I know you may have access to literature here in the United States, but if you ever want to, you know, go look for original or earlier versions of texts that may only exist in archives in other parts of the world.

Brian: Yeah, I mean I love traveling. You know, I spent that year in St. Petersburg doing that M.A., it was a European M.A. I was there as kind of an exchange student.

It was a very long year. It was the coldest winter in Petersburg in 40 years, or no, since 1940 I think. It was extremely cold.

Ashley Smiley: Like how cold are we talking?

Brian: Negative 30 Fahrenheit. You would just not want to leave the house for days. So that feeling of entrapment, and actually I would say it was during that winter that the idea of my dissertation was born. I was reading on Anna Karenina again during one of these cold, snowy wintry times, and that was where I kind of, you know, first came on to what would have originally become, you know, eventually become what I'm working on today many, many years later.

I also went to Moscow a couple of times. I went to Moscow last summer to do research and I also went to Helsinki because Helsinki would never know, but you know, it was a part of the Russian Empire during the 19th centuries. They have a lot of materials from that period.

Ashley Smiley: So what do you spend your time doing when you're traveling? Do you solely go to a museums and explore what they have in their archives? Do you find yourself setting up meetings with other academics? What's that like?

Brian: I mean, a lot of times I'll take a Russian language class to just, you know, get back in the grammar.

When I'm in Russia, I love to, I really love just walking around and being as a regular person and I love grocery stores. I love food. So I would say I spend a lot of time exploring food, exploring and just meeting people, hanging out with friends. I have friends in Moscow. I have friends in Petersburg, so when I'm there I like to be as normal as I can.

My favorite place to go in Moscow is the Tretyakov which is this a very great art history museum, and they have icons in the basement. It's very amazing to see these icons that are hundreds of years old, sometimes from 1100.

Ashley Smiley: So icons? What are those?

Brian: Icons are like visual representations of different figures from the Bible.

Ashley Smiley: Okay.

Brian: Icons are important to the Orthodox faith. So basically they're flat and they display in a pictorial manner. Some aspect from, you know, that might be Christ or Mary or other figures there. They have religious connection.

Ashley Smiley: Okay. So I want to ask this question before I forget. So how and why did you end up in Berkeley, do you suppose?

Brian: That's an interesting question. I was actually deciding between a few programs when I applied and the thing that really drew me to Berkeley was just the amazing quality of the faculty here. And other programs are really great, but I was just very impressed.

Also I wanted sunshine in the winter time.

Ashley Smiley: Yes, that temperate environment is so solid.

Brian: And so I would say, because Grad school, you know, a lot of students probably on the show have said how stressed out Grad students spend a lot on their time, and weather it's just one less thing that you have to think about.

Ashley Smiley: Yeah, no, I get that. But it also kind of perplexes me because it seems that you have this thematic catalyst that helps you come up with your ideas. Like you mentioned that when reading one of Tolstoy's novels in Illinois, it was very cold and stormy almost. Or that when you're in St Petersburg it was during this like winter, like this most severe winter since 1940, but it seems like there's this growth that comes out of that, you know, in terms of how you're thinking about literature. So do you feel that in the Bay Area, do you have a connection? Like how does that weather impact your creative process?

Brian: That's a very difficult question. I would say that.

No, no, it's actually a really interesting question because it's kind of the effect of the environment on the reader. And that's a big problem that I think about. You know, I'm a reader and I'm always in some kind of environment.

I would say living in the Bay Area, not the weather is kind of this pressure, but it's the life around you that, you know, it's the price of housing, it's the price of food. It's, you know, the pressures of Grad school. But it's also, you know, the pending idea that there could be an earthquake.

Ashley Smiley: Oh yeah.

Brian: Wildfires, you know, coming around.

I think there is a really big sense that at any time, you know, the environment could change your entire life. It's not like a snow storm, but I've always had that feeling about this region that it's the pulse of the big areas, this idea that this unsettled-ness or maybe the energy that comes from that, maybe it's from the earth or something, has been a really great catalyst to, you know, my work here. But of course like being in a very intense scholarly community is going to do that too. So at least being challenged though, always getting feedback, come to Berkeley, I would say. All right.

Ashley Smiley: So I want to kind of refocus this discussion about your research, your work. Do you refer to your work as your research?

Brian: It's kind of an interesting question because I think in the humanities we've been pushed into writing more on our own, kind of the idea is that you're at this dissertation and it's all you, it's just one book. All the articles you publish are just you, it's just your idea. But all of my ideas have come through dialogue, not just dialogue with professors, but dialogue with my fellow students.

We have this great working group on campus in our department where students just read papers and we have this discussion about them and it's always been very intense on an intellectual level.

So I would say that my work, my research is collaborative in the sense that it came out of a collaborative environment, but it's highly individual in the sense that you're kind of responsible for your reading.

Ashley Smiley: Sure.

Brian: But I would say that any way you read a text is influenced by those around you. Any ideas you can't connect, you know, disconnect from the environment. I think

this reaches to that broader issue of, you know, where ideas come from when you're describing them or when you're thinking about them, you know, maybe the weather, maybe a friend, maybe you know, this complicated past, you know, maybe some people are attracted to Russian novels because they articulate, you know, a sense of anxiety that they understand, they see.

Ashley Smiley: So these ideas that you're, you're referring to, are these sometimes questions? In your department, how do you find a standpoint that you then orient around?

Brian: So what's really important, and this is a huge difference that I would say between maybe literature and other fields, is that literature is based on interpretation. It's a hermeneutic field. There's no first or last word on a novel, or a novel's meaning, as long as you have the data to back it up. And by data, I mean textual, you know, formal elements, such as, you know, different aspects in the text.

If you can come up with a valuable way of incorporating those elements into an idea, a meaning, that is our work. And I would say that if you're working on a math equation, and this is actually a professor once told me, if somebody in, you know Germany is working on a math equation, you're working on the same one and the person in Germany discovers it, your work has done.

But the thing about literature is that, you know, we might be looking at the same data but have vastly different ideas of what that data means, because of our background, because of other texts we've read, because of our particular socio-political moment.

Ashley Smiley: Context.

Brian: Context. Context is everything with literature and readers are important. You can't have a novel if there's no reader, you have to read it. And that engaging process of reading is the thing that drives our field.

Ashley Smiley: I like that. I should say that, if you're listening now you are tuned into The Graduates at 90.7 KALX Berkeley.

So in terms of your work, do you have any major findings in your dissertation so far?

Brian: So in literature it's clearly more open ended and you know, findings could be different for other people.

Ashley Smiley: Right.

Brian: But I would say that I'm working on a project that does engage with material that is less studied because I'm working on engagement and the development of brain science in the Mid 19th Century along with the development of the Russian novel.

And what I'm finding is there is an incredible amount of overlap between these seemingly very vastly different fields. This overlap happens at different ways. It happens through, you know, Dostoevsky who had worked for a journal, and his friend was translating science, or actually was a scientist, or was a doctor. So there's this incredible like personal relationships that I've found, unexpectedly.

For example, there's this one person who wrote basically the first physiology of any kind of like sensory processes in the human body, in Russian. It was in the late 1850's, and this particular figure was also kind of teaching stenography. So they are training all these people to be stenographers. I'm interested in kind of this, you know, emerging brain science, whether it had connection with literary figures. And it just so happens that the stenography teacher, who kind of made the first textbook that described feelings, he introduced Dostoevsky to his first wife, because she was Dostoevsky's stenographer.

So there's this huge kind of map, you know, web of connections between those who are creating literature, those who are, you know, kind of creating an understanding of the workings of the brain. And I would say in today's world we're used to literature and science kind of existing on two different planets almost, but, and this varied, you know, literature and science competed for attention, for understanding of complexity of human, the what they call the dusha, like the human soul and those kinds of things. And so you can't separate them. They were completely enmeshed with each other in this period.

And I think we can learn from that, that, you know, I think that we think that literary work is just like I said on a different planet, but it doesn't have to be. A scientist in this period felt that literature had a role. I'm not just talking about in Russia, I mean in France, in Victorian England. So what do we lose when we disconnect fields, when we lose that interdisciplinary link? What happens when disciplines stop talking to each other and stop taking each other seriously?

Ashley Smiley: Yeah. I think you just end up with a lot of isolationism and elitism. I mean maybe both sides, like especially with science...

Brian: Darwin read Elliot.

Ashley Smiley: Yeah, no, I think, I sometimes wonder about that, like famous scientists who made major discoveries weren't individuals who were purely scientific. These historical figures were more dynamic.

Brian: Charles Darwin's grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, he was instrumental in kind of putting language to this idea of evolution. He was first a poet. They all wanted to be poets. So, do you know of a scientist who would rather be a poet today? I'm sure they're out there.

Ashley Smiley: Yeah, no I'm totally wanting to be a poet like right now.

Okay. So do you have advice for students who want to get more interested in research in your departments?

Brian: Take our classes. Take Russian. Russian language is taught by very energetic, really interesting graduate students and others.

Ashley Smiley: Are you one of those graduate students?

Brian: Of course.

We also teach reading composition, but we, you know, our department has really great courses on people like Tolstoy.

Ashley Smiley: Yeah.

Brian: Nabokov, I don't know if you've ever read Lolita, but we have a great course on Nabokov. We have a great courses on the Russian classics, but also new things. We have a new course this semester on Russia and China. We're always reaching out into other realms.

Ashley Smiley: Yeah. I get the sense that you do quite a bit of reading, and just something that I am personally interested in is do you have any advice on how to become a better reader or how to better absorb the information? How do you read a book?

Brian: I read with a pen.

Ashley Smiley: Okay.

Brian: I always read with a pen and I underline what I think is important and I look for patterns. Patterns are really important. I think that reading twice is essential. It's not always something I practice. Texts from a different period or a different

culture, you're going to get something on the first read and then the second read you'll see other things.

Ashley Smiley: Do you always read start to finish or do you kind of pop in different parts?

Brian: Yeah, I mean with dissertation reading, you're always kind of reading the intro of things.

Ashley Smiley: Sure.

Brian: Don't ever tell anybody I said that.

Ashley Smiley: You know, for us it's the abstracts, like I read the abstract.

Brian: With novels, clearly, you know, you read it once and then you're always reading it again for different passages.

And you know there's this entire field of what they call distant reading, by this professor at Stanford, Franco Moretti, you know, using computers to read texts and look for patterns.

I'm a close reader, so I'm not a distant reader. I'm a close reader. I look extremely close. Give me a paragraph and I will write a dissertation about it.

Ashley Smiley: That's incredible.

Brian: There is that famous, I'll say, there's like a famous essay about a sentence, you know, where you can write 40 pages on a sentence. I'm a close, close, close reader.

I once heard someone say that, you know, the American tradition of close reading is very connected to Bible studying, kind of Bible close reading, but, there seems to be some validity to that. It's one school, there's other schools.

Ashley Smiley: So your work seems to focus on historical texts-

Brian: Right.

Ashley Smiley: - from Russia.

Brian: Right.

Ashley Smiley: Originating from there.

Brian: Yeah. Russian empire. Yeah.

Ashley Smiley: So how does that connect to contemporary issues or events that are happening now? Is there a connection?

Brian: I think that that is a very interesting question in the sense that we're always kind of, when we read these texts where guys kind of led to make very broad connections, you know, when the discussion is on authoritarianism, you know, all you have to do is look to today.

I'm always asked, you know, what is going on today? You know, what does this Putin figure up to? I don't have the answers. And I would say that I love that country, mostly because it endlessly fascinates me and I think politics are politics, and you know what's going on in the world has so many layers, and it would be a tragedy if we stopped sharing, we stopped internationally cooperating, mostly because I think our cultures have a lot to share.

The Russian Federation today is one of the most diverse places in terms of just the amount of different nationalities that live there, and the amount of languages, and you know, different customs. There's so many times zones. You know, it takes so many days to cross you know, it takes like 10 hours to fly.

Ashley Smiley: Wow. That is substantial.

Brian: It's not a monolithic hole, just like the United States isn't a monolithic hole.

Go there. I love it. I mean I love to go there. It's an exciting place to visit. There's always things changing, just like things change everywhere.

We're not seeing the last word. You know, this is not the end. This is not going to be how things always are and things always change. That's one thing that that country has taught me. Things change in ways that you'd never even thought they could change. Sometimes for the worst, as it has been framed, sometimes for the better. So I guess you never know, never know when that earthquake is going to hit.

Ashley Smiley: So what, we're going to move into this to this section, what we call the soapbox section. So it's essentially an opportunity for you to bring up any issues or subjects that you feel that the general public should be more aware of and...

Brian: Yeah, so I would say, maybe connected to what I was just talking about with this issue of, you know, Russia and the media and things like that. I think, you know, we have to really rethink how we judge an entire culture based on politics. You

know, we of course don't want to be judged on our political leaders just like anybody else does. But you know, something that has really kind of spooked a lot of academics in my field is this new, there's a new travel warning on Russia, they've been increased to level three. And that basically means that a lot of the grants that we could have gotten through the State Department don't exist, or we can't use them to go to Russia anymore.

So that is a huge problem. We need people to go there. We need cultural exchange.

Ashley Smiley: Yeah. And it seems that some of this fear could be alleviated by exploring more about the culture of, not Russia specifically, but just parts of the world that we don't know anything about, and just trust the media.

Brian: Yeah. I think this situation is much more complicated when you go to places. Talk to people.

I think that we have this idea of cutting things off and closing borders, putting up walls, that's going to solve our problems, but it just slows things down. It's stagnation in a lot of ways.

Ashley Smiley: Well, thank you. I think we are basically out of time, but thank you for coming to The Graduates and speaking with us about your work.

Brian: Yeah, it was great.

Ashley Smiley: Thank you Brian.

Brian: Bye.