


PLACES IN THE SUN

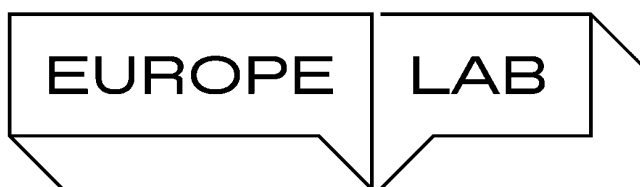
Post-colonial dialogues
in Europe and beyond



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Contents

Introduction

Part I. Decolonialism in the West, Something Old, Something New

1.1	Reflections on the Black Lives Matter mobilisations in Europe: Keeping the Conversation Alive <i>Thomas Yaw Voets</i>	8
1.2	Brussel Eza Lola: Belgium and the Failure of Top-Down Decolonisation <i>Valentin Luntumbue</i>	20
1.3	Colonialism Must Fall: Reflections on Student Activism in UK Universities <i>Nupur Patel</i>	38
1.4	“Was Kant a racist?”: the public discussion on Germany’s belated intellectual decolonisation <i>Robin F.C. Schmahl</i>	57
1.5	Colonial Legacy in the Americas: Effects on Latin American societies and Indigenous peoples <i>Ibrahim Sultan</i>	74
1.6	Anti-blackness and the “Unsayable”: A Philosophical Investigation <i>Han Asikbia</i>	90

1.7	Looking beyond nation branding: the prism of hegemony and Orientalism. <i>Jessica Gosling</i>	100
1.8	Colonial Imaginations and Post-colonial Realities: The Cameroonian Diaspora and the 'Anglophone Crisis' <i>Hilary Koum Njob</i>	115

Part II. Understanding Post-Socialism through Post-Colonialism

2.1	Post-Colonial Offerings for Post-Soviet Beings: Tools and Tactics for the New World <i>EastEast</i>	130
2.2	The Eternal Empire: Decolonising Russia <i>David Saveliev</i>	142
2.3	Russia, heir to an odd empire <i>Nadya Kamenkovich</i>	158
2.4	The Aryan Alliance? Nazi Eastern European Imperialism within the Censored Dutch Press <i>Jonas Lammens</i>	169
2.5	On superiority and inferiority in academia: an autoethnography <i>Olga Burlyuk</i>	193
2.6	How Post-Colonial is Post-Soviet Central Asia? <i>Jakub Stepaniuk</i>	209
2.7	The abduction of Europa – Europeaness in Central and Eastern Europe <i>Valentin Luntumbue</i>	221

Part III. A Dialogue of the Second and Third Worlds

- 3.1 The Non-Aligned Movement, the Soviet Union and decolonisation in Africa
Adrian Waters 234
- 3.2 Yugoslavia's place in the Sun? Modernist architecture and economic relations
with non-aligned countries
Davide Denti & Dino Huseljic 252
- 3.3 Finding your way back: A discussion with Madina Tlostanova
Laura Luciani & Valentin Luntumbue 270
- 3.4 In search of Basebya Gilbert: Exploring the experience of African students in the
USSR through fiction
Sandra Muteteri Heremans 292
- 3.5 Black Poland: History of the Polish Black Community, current status and
perspective
Żaneta Kubicka 307
- 3.6 "Look East": the Zimbabwean Reaction to Neo-Imperialism
Malaika Newsome-Magadza 318
- 3.7 Russia-India BFFs? – A Conversation on Popular Imagination
John Alulis 336
- 3.8 From Mapping to Meaning – Visual Perspectives on Postcolonialism
Stephan Raab 347

Contributors

Partners

The Institute for a Greater Europe	378
The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum	379
Europe Lab 2021	380
<i>Places in the Sun</i>	
<i>Bodies Unbound</i>	
<i>Yesterday was Warmer than Today</i>	

3.3 Finding your way back: A discussion with Madina Tlostanova

Laura Luciani & Valentin Luntumbue

Pr. Madina Tlostanova (Linköping University) is a professor of postcolonial feminism and one of the foundational figures of the decolonial movement in academia. Her research focuses on both the post-Socialist world and the Global South, and she has been involved in countless projects related to decolonising the arts and the university across the world. She accepted to sit with us for an interview.

Both in the West and in the East, decolonial discourse has been gaining steam in the last decade, though it seems that this is restrained to Academia. So, our opening question would be: what are in your view, the differences between decolonisation in Central and Eastern Europe and decolonisation in the West and the Global South. Do you think they differ or converge on some points?

First, not sure what you mean by decolonisation. For me, coming from decoloniality, I do not use terms like decolonisation, because they are from a different paradigm. I've been working as part of the international decolonial collective for more than 20 years by now and for us decolonisation has ended. You can talk about it as a thing of the past, which was important between the 50s and up to the late 80s, or in the early 90s, when the socialist system collapsed. Then a shift happens and that's why Aníbal Quijano, a prominent figure in decoloniality, comes up with the idea of colonialidad, instead of colonialism. As Catherine Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo tell in their latest

book on decoloniality¹, it became clear that the state cannot be democratised and decolonised: that shows a sense of defeat, the realisation that all these postcolonial nationalisms and efforts to build countries in this anticolonial manner did not work. And the socialist utopia, the last grand social utopia of the 20th century, the dream of equality and social justice also collapsed. At that very dark moment, modernity/coloniality group comes with this idea of shifting the focus from the actual political struggles of decolonisation to *decoloniality*, as a more epistemic thing, from more political struggles to the ways of changing the minds with which people think, perceive the world, as well as their corporeality. And that shift was very important to me. I work in academia and I hate academia, but since this is my way of connecting with reality and changing something in that reality, this kind of epistemic rather than political activism suits me. Although I am constantly thinking about how to change this and how to bridge this gap between academic and real activism – the social movement of the people who are struggling for the rights to their lands, to water, to their languages. This rift has also grown lately. That's why there are internal conflicts in Latin America, in the Andean countries, between social movements who actually make decoloniality happen in their everyday struggles and those who sit in universities and write about it. Even if we try to be nice and inclusive and try not to hijack from them, but rather to work with these movements, listen to them and be humble, still being a part of a neoliberal university forces you to do certain things that are not acceptable if you try to be decolonial.

Decoloniality has become in the last 6–7 years a fashionable term, a new fad, and I find it really unfortunate. 20 years ago, when I was writing about it in Russia, everybody was dismissing it. I remember when I wrote my dissertation about the US multiculturalism, and all my colleagues who had never heard

1 Mignolo Walter and Walsh Catherine, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2018.

the word would make fun of me saying “what do you mean *multikulti*, is it about *multiki* [cartoons]?”. It was horrible. Then all of a sudden after I went to Sweden, and I have been living here for almost 6 years now, there is this kind of renaissance. People start writing, “we would like to do a conference, and decolonise this and that, decolonise university and museums, decolonize health and sexuality”. But when I start reading all of these calls for papers, I see very often they do not have a clue of what is the genealogy of decolonial struggles, how it connects with very crucial historical events, like the Bandung conference. They just hijacked the term, ran away with it, and use it in a problematic way. Often what these neophyte decolonialists mean is deconstruction or critical thinking, but they say ‘decolonise’ rather than criticise or problematise. In reality, it has nothing to do with the struggle, with the ‘colonial wound’ as we would say in the decolonial movement. For us, the most important thing is where are you speaking from, what is your positionality. And I don’t mean that only people of colour can talk about it. The point is that if you are a privileged white European, you have to think about this positionality in a critical way and connect it with coloniality, this darker side of modernity, and see how you are implied in that. And nobody really speaks in that sense, it’s always “coloniser or colonised”, reductive dualities when the matter is very intersectional, changing and relational. In some ways we are in a better position, in others we are worse off, but this all has to be part of our discourse.

It is interesting you asked about the differences, as I don’t find many between Sweden and Russia. In Russia, it is suddenly very fashionable to write about decoloniality. But when I see who writes about it I am often speechless, because I don’t see how some of those people have the moral right to do that. The same goes for Sweden. They get a huge grant to open some centre for the study of colonial or postcolonial encounters or whatever, but then you see that it consists of white Swedes, who conduct the historical study of colonialism and don’t see the problem with that. They don’t understand the

gist of decoloniality. First of all, it begs the question of the master's tools, and not dismantling the master's house, to paraphrase Audre Lorde. I think that is important. In Russia, it is a bit twisted: there is a lot of discourse that wants to sound critical but in reality, is very supportive of Putin's regime, and they hijack the postcolonial arguments to criticise the West, which I find very problematic. Many of my decolonial colleagues do not get it, we argue a lot. For them, the most crucial thing is that the second-rate empires like Russia are anti-Western and especially they are against the US and that is enough to justify their geopolitical behaviour. For me this is not a real justification, it has to be more nuanced and complex. And I don't see much difference between the US, which has become, at least under Trump, a failed state with still recurring globalist phantom aches, and some smaller but vicious regime like Russia under which many people suffer. I mean, who really cares under which regime you are colonised?

Maybe if we speak of the so-called post-Soviet countries that are not European, this for me could be a genuine source of decoloniality, not brought by books. Mignolo says it also emerges through sensibility, feelings, the links with the ancestors... This is something the post-soviet non-European ex-colonies started reflecting upon 30 years ago and now comes the younger generation that is not brainwashed anymore into believing they were liberated by the Soviet regime, and also is very disillusioned with the West, neoliberalism and what happened in the last 30 years. They are capable of formulating their decolonial stance themselves, which is more important than trying to take some concepts and apply them to your experience.

Indeed, anticolonial or decolonial discourses are being appropriated by a lot of right-wing governments in Central and Eastern Europe to position themselves against the West, EU or US hegemony, and strengthen at the same time their authoritarian agendas. Do you see any way out of this co-optation?

Unfortunately, there is no way out, we don't own what we write. People can take ideas and run away, nobody has any guarantee against that. We can continue writing, organising events and talking with people, but it's more important to make something tangible. That's why I'm interested in these communities of change, that can actually do things, better the social, cultural, economic life of communities. Especially now that global problems step in, like climate change, migrations caused by politics but also by said climate change... and there are a lot of things people could do instead of or along with writing books.

Academia works in a way that reinforces this gap between itself and real life, and all disciplines are built on this growing gap. Academic disciplines only write about themselves and deal with their own problems, rather than trying to face real problems and real people. I find it fascinating that in Latin America this gap between academia and social movements is not as tangible as in Europe or in Russia. Of course, there are some people who are comfortably nested in academia in Latin America as well. But the academic bubble is somehow leaking and it is easier to find cases where activists are also academics, very successful ones, and their being activists is not criticised but actually valued. There are cases like that in Latin America, and I know that in some countries in Africa as well.

How should we reconcile those two slopes of decoloniality? Let us say one is epistemology and the other one is material conditions. Should we all be Zapatistas or *Sem Terra*? Is that a model?

But that is exactly the problem, not everyone can be that. In Latin America, it can happen, but not in many other places. This is another critique of mine I have been writing a lot about lately, and trying to confront other decolonialists with this issue. It is easier if you have kept your connection with your indigeneity, you can always go back to that, not in the sense of time but of reviving these aesthesis and reconnecting with this existence

– re-existing. But what about others, who have no connection to their indigeneity? What are they supposed to do? I’m an indigenous person, I am Circassian from the Caucasus... but I don’t have many connections to my indigeneity, I am too modernised/colonized. I didn’t have a chance to study my language when I was a child because of forced russification. I was brought up mainly on Western culture and I am an English Major. Even Russian literature is foreign to me, I know American literature better.

How does one find one’s way back to one’s culture? I’m very interested and I learnt a lot about my culture, but I am not affectively connected to it. I can understand it rationally, but I cannot connect. There are more and more people like that: this is how coloniality works, it changes your brain and messes with your ontology and with your corporeality. For example, I love the works of Rolando Vazquez, a Mexican theorist living in the Netherlands, but for Rolando this is easy. He still has this connection to his ancestors in Mexico, other people do not. It would be wonderful if we could all be Zapatistas, but unfortunately, we have to find more complicated ways and entry points into decoloniality. I am also against the idea of authentic communities: when I say communities of change, I include indigenous communities by all means, but I actually mean very mixed communities. Designers, scholars, activists, from all over the world who would gather together to solve concrete problems in concrete place. It doesn’t mean that only people who were born here are allowed to participate. No, this is exactly what allows this neo-colonial or postcolonial nationalism to set in.

What you find in many Central and Eastern European countries is very similar. They will tell you there was never colonialism here, “we never colonized anyone nor were we colonised”, but if you look historically, it was just a different kind of empire that colonised them: the Ottoman, the Russian, the Habsburg Empire... It’s just not overseas colonisation. Despite that, it is very similar in its basic dehumanizing forms, and to explore that

historical resentment they use postcolonial theories. They feel like newly colonised populations that were accepted to become Europeans, but on which terms? They realise now that they are constantly in this position of poor relatives and second-rate Europeans, who always have to out-West the West and prove they are more democratic than the West. And that also causes resentment. If you go to these countries, you see so many people emigrating permanently or seasonally. Take for instance, Latvia or Estonia. A huge percentage of the population is abroad looking for better opportunities. This is not a happy feeling: either staying home being independent but feeling colonised, or being forced to always compete, race and catch-up with somebody. But this is the logic of modernity/coloniality.

Talking about the North Caucasus, to what extent is the decolonial discourse articulated there nowadays? How does it relate to the colonial crimes committed by the Russian Empire and the Soviet empire, like ethnic cleansing, mass deportations, genocide?

As you know, the North Caucasus is still a colony, right? They are watched by a big brother three times stricter than people in Russia proper whatever that is. Things you would be okay saying in Moscow are not okay to say or write in the North Caucasus. Friends and colleagues tell me it is very dangerous: activists are arrested, detained, taken to courts, organisations are banned. Recently there was this case of Martin Kochesoko, a cultural activist who was mainly defending the language rights. But he was accused of extremism, the authorities planted drugs on him and put him in prison. People do fight, there are a lot of protests but nothing happens, because the way law enforcement act there in the Caucasus is very different from in the metropolis. They are still treated as a colony and a most dangerous one at that taking into account the most recent Chechen experience. But not only that. This reminds me of the history of the long Russian colonisation of the Caucasus – the war that lasted for more than a century and the Circassian

genocide and then the way the remaining people were treated after their defeat, the way they were disciplined into obedience and forgetting. However, in the last several years there are clear shifts, changes, Caucasians are in quest of their histories and start to see them as histories of colonization and today – as the ongoing coloniality. Now I encounter the younger generation of researchers, activist, artists who use anticolonial and even decolonial concepts in their discourse, but previously and even quite recently, it was still unimaginable. When I first started writing about decoloniality, people in the Caucasus didn't protest but just dismissed it saying they never were a colony: "you cannot compare us with Africa or India" was their argument. They were convinced by the Soviet national politics that they were free and culturally independent. This was an important part of the Soviet brainwashing – to persuade the colonized people that they were liberated, while in fact they were recolonised. In North Caucasus as well as Central Asia and the South Caucasus, there was a very short period of time when these countries became independent from the Tsarist Empire in the early 20th century. They wanted to have their own states, but then the Bolsheviks came and you know how it all ended. Part of the Bolsheviks' story was to say that they liberated these national outskirts of the empire (as the cliché of that time went) and gave them all their rights. But the Soviets largely continued the traditions of the Tsarist Empire in the region.

That lasted for a long time, but now it is changing because there is a new generation of people who think critically, very often know foreign languages, and read texts in other languages including the postcolonial and decolonial works and not just those written in Russian or translated into Russian. Russia is also one of these empires which suffers from colonial amnesia and refuses to see itself in the role of the coloniser. Plus, as I said, it is very hard to imagine any serious organised social movements because when such a movement emerges, people will be immediately persecuted, arrested, even killed. A lot of activism happens outside Russia, and mainly

in the diasporas. The North Caucasus has huge diasporas around the world. My people, the Circassians, are one of the world's largest diasporic group of people. When you tell people about the Circassian genocide, they don't know that today most Circassians do not live in the Caucasus, but reside in Turkey, in Syria, in Jordan, in Israel, and other middle Eastern countries, but also in Europe and in the US. There are several millions Circassians living all around the world, and only half a million living in Russia in three artificially created republics. But this story is largely unknown.

About the diasporas: when we went to Abkhazia, we were surprised to see a lot of Turkish products in shops. We realised that Turkey was one of the only countries that actually trades with the so-called republic of Abkhazia. Despite decades of Turkification, the Circassian Abkhaz community in Turkey has been emigrating back to Abkhazia since the end of the 20th century. Do you think that the Circassians living in Turkey could support attempts at getting more autonomous? Of course, the case of Abkhazia is complicated, but can the diaspora play a role in the autonomy struggles in some of the regions of the North Caucasus?

It is a complicated issue because there are so many different political interests that clash here. All of these diasporas live in different specific countries, they all have citizenships of different countries, and they have different relationships with those countries. That's why they have to keep a balance. This urge and activism to support independence movements has been strongly manifested several times in recent years, but the question is: do they really want independence, and on what terms? This is an ideal situation that every anticolonial struggle wants in the end, but if you look at the Caucasus and try to imagine what kind of future they could have, then it becomes more of a problem. They are still surrounded by great powers, just as 200 or 300 years ago, it's like being pawns in the crisscross of several chess

power games. That's what the Caucasus has been for centuries. They had to play against Russia, against Turkey, against Persia, and now it's the EU as well. It is a nightmare, I'm not sure at this point many people want complete independence. They realise it would be very hard for them to survive being independent in the present conditions and in reality they would just change the masters. Although, I do think that if we imagine an ideal future, the Caucasus as a region should be independent but as a whole, not divided by artificially created ethnicities in smaller states. Because I do believe that the nation-state is a very outdated concept. Historically, the Caucasus was this pluriversal entity which did not have a state or states but it had a certain kind of pan-Caucasian identity, that a lot of people argue against today, but I think it still does exist. It's not linguistic, sometimes in the Caucasus they speak different languages from one village to another, but they are all multilingual and aware of each other's traditions, cosmologies, ethics. There is a cultural affinity, an affinity for ancient sources and a common folklore. All of that still somehow exists, but is being destroyed with these artificial divisions that become quickly ontologised. People start believing after a while that "we are different because there's a border between us" but in reality, they are not. I don't really think these small ethnic denominations have a future. The history of many postcolonial nations shows that. I am familiar with diasporic groups living in other countries and it seems that they have gradually changed their tactics. At some point, they were very strict about authenticity and the purity of blood, and refused to mix with other ethnic groups. But then they realised it is not possible in today's world nor good for them to keep on thinking like this. Caucasian diasporas today are cosmopolitan, they are aware of the pitfalls of extreme nationalism. They have many unfortunate examples at hand. Look at India, for instance, and the kind of regime we find there today.

Many of these Caucasian ethnicities have been there for thousands of years. They are indigenous peoples of the Caucasus. And it shapes people

in certain ways. First of all, you can sense it in the way people connect to the land. Once I was reading a very interesting text by a Balkar writer – Balkars were one of the indigenous Turkic speaking ethnicities that were deported by Stalin to Central Asia. The Balkars live very high in the mountains, at altitudes not many people can survive. The types of houses they build, the way they connect with reality is shaped by this fact. So, this writer was born in exile, in Central Asia, and then Stalin died and his parents took him back home when he was already a teenager. And he wrote “*first my parents lived in my motherland, and then I moved to live in their motherland*”² because those two landscapes were so drastically different. In Central Asia, they lived in this flat steppe. Old mountain people were going out looking for some stone and saying “*o blessed stone, you remind me of my mountains*”. And then he comes back, well not back, but to the Caucasus, and he sees this vertically oriented landscape. An entire world is organised according to the mountains and their verticality, rather than flatness. It’s a completely different way of looking at things. This is something that probably connects all people of the Caucasus, irrespective of their religion or language. And you can see how it’s expressed in everyday things, even in how we make up metaphors – which would be very different from Russians or Central Asians. For me, that is something that we have to think about much more than we do.

Academics like Viacheslav Morozov have been talking about Russia as a subaltern empire³ for a few years now. Some have been getting flak from Caucasian colleagues saying “it doesn’t matter if you are colonised

2 The writer is Boris Chipchikov who addressed the trauma of collective deportation and return, and the pitfalls of long-going cultural coloniality in a most complex, aesthetically rich and politically powerful way. See: <http://www.elbrusoid.org/articles/karachay-balkar-lit/358893/>

3 Morozov Viatcheslav, *Russia Postcolonial Identity. A Subaltern Empire in a Eurocentric World*, Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, 2015.

by a subaltern empire, you are still getting colonised". It gave way to lively exchanges. Where do you stand in that debate?

First of all, I have been using the term "subaltern empire" since 2000, much before Morozov wrote anything⁴ of the kind, but that's fine. I also pushed this further and suggested to call Russia a "Janus-faced" empire, which is even worse. It's not just subaltern, it has two faces or masks: one looking to the West, one looking to the East. For me, this is the gist of the external imperial difference. It's an empire with an inferiority complex in the presence of the West, and also an empire that desperately wants to be in the first league but never succeeds. It is subaltern in how it doesn't have its own system of values and it therefore dependent on the Western one even when it criticizes it. It is not colonised in the literal sense by the West, but it is completely culturally, epistemologically, aesthetically. It was doomed to be peripheral or semi-peripheral in the world system and, in that sense, Morozov is certainly right, but we look at it differently because I look at this situation from a colonised position and he looks at it from an imperial position even if critical. He uses this argument indirectly to justify what happens with Russia and in Russia, which I don't really like. I think it's perhaps even worse when such a subaltern empire with no conceptual core of its own, and constantly looking for the West's approval while competing with it at the same time in a clearly hopeless way, realises that it doesn't have a place among the masters and at the same time goes to its own colonies and acts in the most cruel and savage colonialist way, mimicking the original Western colonisers but doing it often caricaturistically. Because that's what it did, if you look at the policies of the Russian Empire in the Caucasus, in

4 See e.g. Tlostanova, M. 2003, *A Janus-Faced Empire. Notes on the Russian Empire in Modernity Written from the Border*. Moscow, Blok; and then Tlostanova, M. "The Imagined Freedom: Post-Soviet Intellectuals Between the Hegemony of the State and the Hegemony of the Market" which was published in the special issue of *The South Atlantic Quarterly: Double Critique: Knowledges and Scholars at Risk in Post-Soviet Societies* (No 105/3, 2006, pp. 637-660), that we co-edited with Walter Mignolo.

Central Asia and previously in Siberia, we see it's a mixture of British and French colonialisms with additional local atrocities added in. But what is important indeed is that the Russian empire never questions the terms of the conversation, it just tries to change to content, as Mignolo would say. It accepts the imposed Euromodern terms.

And exactly, as the Caucasian activists and thinkers said, it doesn't matter who was the coloniser, the first or the second-class empire. It does not really matter if the coloniser also felt colonised. For example, take Dostoievski who in the 1880s wrote in his writer's diary about the colonisation of Central Asia: "*In Europe we were hangers-on and slaves, in Asia we shall go as masters*". This is this double-face-ness at its clearest: "I felt like I didn't belong in Europe, but now in Central Asia, I become the real serious coloniser". This is also true about the Caucasus, although it happened a little bit earlier and the tactics were different. When colonising the Caucasus, the Russians were using the rationale of the *Wild West*, and it was very similar to what happened with Amerindians in the future United States. At first, they divided the Caucasians into reservations you were not allowed to leave. You were given specific documents. All these places that exist now in the Caucasus, the villages, small towns, the majority of them did not exist prior colonization. Local populations were reshuffled and the old ancestral places that were connected with traditional memories were destroyed or renamed. New villages were built in reservations where the people could be constantly under surveyance. Similar things continued during the Soviet time. I remember my father telling me that during WW2 and immediately after it in Nalchik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria, his family was perhaps the only Kabardin family living in the main street, and in his class, he was the only Kabardin pupil. So, the capital of this presumably national republic was supposed to be free of indigenous people as any settler colonial city. They had to live in the villages while the Russians lived in the city. The same was true of my mom who went to school in the centre of Tashkent,

Uzbekistan, in its so-called European part. There were three Uzbek girls in her class, the rest were not. She told me that teachers and non-Uzbek pupils always looked at the three girls as if they were some savages, they mostly sat separately. There was obviously some unofficial segregation as well. So, you have to be careful with Morozov's book even if it is very good. The question for me is where does he stand exactly in that argument. But especially problematic for me is Etkind's book⁵, about the so-called internal colonisation, a very problematic and at times overtly racist concept.

On internal colonisation: in later years and especially last summer, when the governor the Khabarovsk Krai was arrested, people in the Russian Far East started to echo some decolonial talking points, saying that these peripheral regions are colonies, all their resources are shipped away to Moscow and they don't get anything in return. Do you think that this framing is legitimate, considering this internal colonisation, but also the fact that the Russians now saying these things are themselves settlers?

They are legitimate in the sense that this is what is happening. It's not really connected with ethnicity anymore, rather than with the bad functioning of the Russian state and the way it pumps resources. But I am not sure they should use "colonisation", "colonialism" in this case. Perhaps they can use modernity/coloniality instead. For me, it is something different, and at the same time if we look at this region, not only in Khabarovsk Krai, but also in Siberia, Altai, there are indigenous movements that are against this extractivism. They are against extractivism not just in economic terms, but also regarding their knowledge, the destruction of their languages, of their habitat... and that for me makes more sense, when it comes to connecting it to the decolonial movement and decoloniality. There is an

5 Etkind Alexander, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience*, Cambridge, Polity, 2011.

intricate connection, a link between the land (land as pedagogy, land as a way of looking at things following Canadian indigenous thinker and poet L. Betasamosake Simpson) and its people, that the modern industrial state is destroying. So that makes sense.

But regarding this particular regionalist political movement, we are talking here about the former white settlers or their children. They have no connection to this land, at least not the same as indigenous people would have. But their reaction on the other hand is very similar to the white settler colonies such as the US that were similarly offended with the British empire and at some point, fought for independence. So, the whole discussion then moves to a more pragmatic and modern/colonial interpretation of the failure on the part of the state and the subsequent revolutions and independence movements. What is important for me here is to never mix white settler colonialism and its anticolonial movements and the racialized dehumanized local indigenous groups and their anticolonial struggles. These are two different agendas. The whole argument of internal colonisation therefore become racist as it erases millions of dispensable lives making only one story important. It is still based on a human taxonomy that was created in the 16th century and that dismisses huge populations from being human and incidentally it also follows an old Russian imperial historiographic story launched by Karamzin just decorating it with bits of fashionable postcolonial theory. But what it ignores is this dehumanization, that happened with African slaves, with the indigenous people of the so-called New World, and also with Circassians. What do we find in Etikind's book? It is apparently okay to speak about the peasant population, the serfs, but he is not interested at all in what happened to the actual colonised people. What happened in Siberia, where the majority of the population was simply killed? When the Russian Empire started its march to Siberia, the majority of the indigenous peoples were destroyed or forcefully assimilated. Today they have Russian names and don't remember themselves who they

were – that’s the saddest thing. They can’t go back, even if they wanted to. They have nowhere to go back to. There are no traces left of their ancestral memories because whoever could tell them anything about it, died already, and the Soviet regime was very instrumental in that sense, it was stricter and more purposeful than other regimes. You can often see this apathy, this lack of belief in the future. And internal colonization erases all these complexities, So I think that it is a very problematic concept.

A question related to your work as a feminist scholar. You argued in a book⁶ that most gender and feminist activists in post-socialist Eurasia agreed to apply Western feminist paradigms to the local material, without taking into account the particular socialist experience. Do you think that the precariousness of gender activism in the region we witness today is still linked to this tension between the coloniality, the gender paradigms coming from the West and the legacy of the communist past? Are feminist movements trying to overcome this and articulate a different gender discourse?

There is no general rule here. In some countries in Eastern Europe you find very interesting, powerful movements. Depending on what kind of situation they had under socialism they have different views on that. For instance, countries of former Yugoslavia had a much more positive experience of socialism, and are sometimes nostalgic of that time, which I can understand because their socialism was very different from the Soviet one. They had dialogues with Western feminists as early as in the late 60s and 70s, and already then they were showing them that “our agenda is different, we have had for a long time many rights that you are just dreaming about. We don’t have to be identical with you, we have a different agenda”.

6 Tlostanova Madina, *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

If we look at Russia, there is a great gap there between the actual movements and academic feminists, which I find uninteresting. The few who are still working in two-three institutes are critical, but their critique is very conventional, they are very Western in the tools they use. But the movements are great: there is a younger generation of women, people of different genders, non-binary. These are grassroots movements, very rarely connected to academic schools of thought, and they do their own educational initiatives. It's amazing that so many people are coming to these lectures, they are asking questions, they're interested in changing something. And they are also very active politically, they go out and protest, they help women, they organise against violence. This is something which could not have been imagined 10 years ago. It's even more interesting in Central Asian countries, with whom I collaborate now through art initiatives, and there too they discuss decoloniality in gender terms. There is a strong connection between feminism and decoloniality. Most of the artists are women, and they do amazing things. In that sense, the situation is changing.

We just finished writing a book, a collection about postcolonial and postsocialist feminist dialogues... or lack thereof.⁷ We were struggling with that book with my two colleagues, Suruchi Thapar-Björkert who is originally from India but works here in Uppsala University, and Redi Koobak, who is originally from Estonia and now is a post-doc in Bergen, Norway. We started with a conference more than 6 years ago and we wanted to invite people from the Global South and former socialist countries. Eastern Europeans were eager to apply postcolonial terms to their critique and see their positionality through this lens. But very few people from the Global South were willing to come. We were really puzzled with that at

7 Koobak Redi, Tlostanova Madina and Thapar-Björkert Suruchi (eds.), *Postcolonial and Postsocialist Dialogues. Intersections, Opacities, Challenges in Feminist Theorizing and Practice*, Abingdon-on-Thames, Routledge, 2021.

first. We thought it was due to a lack of knowledge about socialism... but the few feminists from the Global South that we managed to get were very socialist, they believed in socialism as an ideal structure of society. For them it was a shock to see postsocialist women criticising what they had, saying “we had our own way, but we are not defending it. We don’t want to be seen as products of belated western thinking, and we don’t want to be homogenised with the global South because our experience was different”. There was this puzzlement and only when putting this book together we started finding more authors from, or connected with, the global South. We also have two wonderful young authors from China, although feminists from China usually don’t take part in these discussions. First, because they still have socialism, even if it is just an empty shell, so they don’t speak about postsocialism as people do in Eastern Europe. But at the same time, in China too they had this influx of Western NGOs and Western understandings of gender studies. At first, they were very attracted to it, but then they realised that they were orientalised: they were seen either as heroes, Mulan warriors, or they were seen as victims of oppression. And there was nothing else. This is how Western feminism interprets this difference, let’s say.

Socialist women were responsible for a certain set of issues within the global feminist division of labour, as Jennifer Suchland convincingly pointed out: marked by their ideological difference, they were responsible for the so-called peaceful co-existence paradigm. Women from the Global South were supposed to deal with racial, religious, ethnic, and cultural difference in the same logic. And women from the North spoke about theoretical issues, equality, democratic forms of governance. But when it all collapsed the socialist feminists were left with no agenda, and they could not join any of these groups. And then there is this awakening: “we need to revisit our own history ourselves, we don’t want somebody from the West to come and tell us what happened to us”. We have to really think hard about it, and not

to romanticise this past. The way the notorious “women’s question” was solved was particularly cruel and partial in the Soviet Union and especially in the Soviet non-European colonies.

Circling back to the beginning of your last answer, what do you think the space for cooperation is between people who fall into decoloniality in the broad sense in Central-Eastern Europe and the same decolonial people from ‘Third World’ countries and diasporas? Is there space for cooperation? And also, is it possible to be decolonial without being anti-capitalist?

I think there should be a space because there is so much in common. These are two different angles of modernity/coloniality and if we look at the population of the world today we will realise that the majority of us are postcolonial or postsocialist... or both, like me, for instance. We cannot erase our history or pretend it’s not there, and not take into account these horizontal links. It has to be horizontal and transversal, not just somebody from the West who comes and says “this is the theory” and then you apply it to your reality. It’s much more interesting what we come up with if we have a dialogue among ourselves without the Western medium. That’s why there are more and more projects like that now and I think they are super interesting. The problem is that some of them are very descriptive and very historical. I don’t like when people just say “oh you know in the Soviet Union there was this organisation of the *Friendship between Asian and African countries and the Soviet Union*, so let’s go to the archives and dig it out!” as a perfect example of racial and social equality. First of all, Soviet archives are problematic. Second, it was a tool of the Soviet soft power, and many of such organizations were actually created to brainwash people from the Global South into socialism. Yet there was also genuine interest, people found each other through such ideologically loaded organizations, and some of them who are still alive remain to be friends, they still remember the time when it was actually possible to have a dialogue bypassing the

Western dominance. We could revive this in interesting ways, but it would have to happen through grassroots activities, not through somebody at the level of the state or international institutions creating an organisation like that again.

About capitalism, as Anibal Quijano writes very convincingly in one of his first overtly decolonial works, capitalism is an essential part of global coloniality. Marxists however tend to overestimate the economy. Capitalism is at the core, but there are other nuances that should be added, and this is why coloniality also has the concepts of race and gender there, which are not often discussed in classical Marxism. But at the same time, this is the easiest way to explain it to the broader population who do not think they are colonised or colonisers, because capitalism is a more mainstream equivalent of modernity and coloniality, with this marketisation of everything at its heart. This is something everybody experiences, and it is also true in academia.

In your book⁸ *“What Does It Mean to Be Post-Soviet?”* you discussed the role of art in decoloniality and in constructing different futures in the post-Soviet space. In Western Europe, we also see more and more efforts being put into decolonising museums as spaces where imperial aesthetics and knowledge are re-produced. Which connections do you see between these movements in the post-Soviet space and in the West?

I think there are a lot of them. Actually, I find more connections and dialogues in the art world than in the academic world. I found this out long ago, when we first started to write, in my decolonial group, about

8 Tlostanova Madina, *What Does It Mean to Be Post-Soviet? Decolonial Art from the Ruins of the Soviet Empire*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2018.

decolonial aesthesis. There were several art events, exhibitions in which we were first formulating these ideas, back in 2009, 2011 and later. I found that there were international communities of artists, from the West, from the Global South, from semi-peripheries, they very easily mingled and sometimes created projects together, installations, video-art... for them it was really a borderless world. I started thinking about why it was so easy in the art world, including also the museums and curators, and why it was so difficult in academia. I think that it's partly because academia deals with words, with articles, and when you write an academic article it's boring, it's logo-centric, you have to follow certain rules... And it also affects what you write: you cannot write your dissertation as a poem or you cannot write it from the position of a shaman. You will have to pay for that if you do. So you first have to break yourself, to force yourself to do it in a certain way. While if you are an artist you don't have to: you work with images, with metaphors, with symbols, and often something that cannot be formulated in this logo-centric way can be done in a project, and it would tell much more to the people who would come to this exhibition, they would just grasp it... or they won't, if they don't have this sensibility for coloniality. You don't need to explain anything with words. And it's also universal in the sense that you can bring it to Russia, to New York, and people would just read it. So that was one of the reasons why I wanted to write about art in that book. I thought that in many cases just watching a 10-minute video of Taus Makhacheva⁹ is enough to understand how decoloniality works in the Caucasus in the the Daghestanian case, as she's trying to work with images and with the ideas of decolonising museums.

In Europe, as you know, this is a very widely spread movement, there are so many curators and museums that work with this, and it's very interesting

9 Taus Makhacheva is a Moscow-born artist of Dagestani descent. Her performance and video works critically examine what happens when different cultures and traditions come into contact with one another.

that many artists who are Russian originally, or from the Russian colonies I mentioned, work with European museums and curators, and what they do is amazing. I prepared several texts for such artists' books, catalogues, exhibitions and the curators were all Western. But they were very attentive to understanding what they were actually dealing with. There are wonderful examples in Europe, like the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in the Netherlands, to which the annual decolonial summer school has moved two year ago. So, I think there is a future there, in this kind of collaboration through art across borders.

Contributors

Places in the Sun Team

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Valentin M. Luntumbue is a Belgian civil servant, independent researcher, and writer. Graduated from the Natolin campus of the College of Europe after studying history, sociology and international relations, Valentin is also an EEAS alumnus and a former academic assistant at the College of Europe's Bruges campus. An advisor within one of Belgium's many federal entities, he also teaches African history in a Congolese diaspora school and acts as the IGE's editor-in-chief.

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Elena Ruxandra Seniuc read for an MSc in Russian and East European Studies at the University of Oxford and holds a bachelor's degree in Criminology from Durham University. She is mainly interested in transnational security threats and asymmetric threats, with an ever-growing passion for the field of strategic studies. As an avid history reader, she is eternally fascinated by her country's multicultural inheritance and its tumultuous national-communist past.

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Adrian Waters was born in Rome in 1996 and has lived and studied in both Italy and the UK. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in History and Politics from the University of Kent (Canterbury, England), a Master of Arts in History from University College London and a second-level master's in International Public Affairs from the LUISS Guido Carli university in Rome. In 2018–19 he worked as the secretary of the Institute for a Greater Europe, for which he continues to contribute articles on topics related to European politics. At the time of publication (July 2021), he is completing a traineeship at the Democratic Governance Division within the Council of Europe.

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Robin F.C. Schmahl studied MENA studies, philosophy, political science and history in Munich, Cairo and Berlin. He received his MA at LMU Munich in Islamic and Arabic studies in 2019 with a focus on critical IR theory and human rights in the Middle East. He has worked for the Bavarian Academy of Sciences, the German Orient Institute in Beirut and the German Embassy in Abu Dhabi. Currently, Robin is a PhD candidate at FU, Berlin and a member of the Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies, he holds a research position at the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient in the *Historicity of Democracy in the Arab and Muslim Worlds* research program.

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David Saveliev grew up between Russia and the US and graduated from Johns Hopkins University with a degree in International Relations and Film Production. He is currently pursuing an MPhil in Russian and East European studies at the University of Oxford. His dissertation will focus on protest movements in the former USSR and their international impact; as a journalist and filmmaker David covered war and protests on the ground in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, USA, France, Hong Kong and more. David's research interests are leftist politics, revolutionary movements, cyberspace, and paths to improving the US-Russia relations. In his free time David likes to read, travel, draw and collect obscure memes.

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Jonas Lammens was born in Ghent, Belgium and moved during infancy to East Anglia in the United Kingdom. His academic interest surrounding Nazi Europe was sparked by the epic stories of his Great Grandfather, Marcel, who experienced first-hand everyday Nazi Imperialism in Flanders. Jonas studied History and Politics (BA) at Exeter University, where he discovered postcolonial theory, before rekindling his native roots by studying International Politics (Msc) at KU Leuven. A keen and vocal activist, Jonas now lectures in modern history and politics at The Colchester

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She explored in previous work her (family) archive. This archive embodies an (abandoned) life in Rwanda and turned out to be a materialised testimony of larger political stories. This re-visiting of familial archive

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