

THINKING TOGETHER

DECOLONIALITY AND BORDER THINKING: PERSPECTIVES ON A PLURICENTRIC WORLD

Hosted by Madina Tlostanova (RU)

With Walter Mignolo (AR/US) & Catherine Walsh (EC)

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One of the devastating consequences of modernity is a consistent cultivation and maintaining of the economic, social, cultural, ethical, epistemic and ontological bondage – in decolonial terms, a global coloniality of power, of being and last but not least, of knowledge. Therefore decolonizing knowledge and learning to unlearn in order to relearn on other than modern/colonial grounds is the central task for border thinking. Border thinking is marked by a shift in the established geography of reason, a shift from its Western place contaminated by the hubris of the zero point to various intersecting liminal and exterior positions marked by the colour of skin (and hence the colour of reason). Border thinking is also characterized by gender, sexuality, religion, by the geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge, of being, and of perception. Today's world more and more openly celebrates and endorses its universal pluriversality in which the principle of many intersecting and interacting worlds, cosmologies and visions comes forward. The more important it becomes to master the tools of decolonization and setting our minds and bodies free from the constraints of modernity/coloniality.

This session of *thinking together* will concentrate on a number of key concepts of the decolonial option having to do with epistemic decolonization in knowledge production and intersecting in multiple ways with activism and art. This refers to border thinking, grounded in delinking from the modern/colonial matrix, the body-politics and geopolitics of knowledge, being, gender and perception, to decolonial aesthesis as opposed to explicit aesthetics, to pluritopic (multi-spatial hermeneutics) and the imperial and colonial differential the way it is being reiterated today. (Madina Tlostanova)

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Key Publications: *Multicultural Discourse and Late 20th Century US Fiction* (Moscow, 2000, in Russian); *Post-soviet Literature and the Aesthetics of Transculturation* (Moscow, 2004, in Russian); *From the Philosophy of Multiculturalism to the Philosophy of Transculturation* (New York, 2008, in Russian); *Decolonial Gender Epistemologies* (Moscow, 2009, in Russian); *The Sublime of Globalization? Sketches on Trans-cultural Subjectivity and Aesthetics* (Moscow,

2005, in English); *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, in English); *Learning to Unlearn. Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas* (Ohio State University Press, 2012, co-authored with Walter Mignolo). Currently she is working on a book on decolonial aesthetics.

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Reading Materials Decoloniality and Border Thinking

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[video interview](#)

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–**Mignolo, Walter: Spirit out of bounds returns to the East: The closing of the social sciences and the opening of independent thoughts.**

In: *Current Sociology Monograph*. 2014, Vol. 62(4) 584 –602.

–**Decolonial Aesthetics**

Social Text. Periscope.

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Post-Soviet Imaginary and Global Coloniality: A Gendered Perspective

Interview with Madina Tlostanova

Transcription of a video-interview with Madina Tlostanova
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1) Decolonial Option

Kronotop: *How does decolonial option position itself in contrast to the majority of postcolonial discourses in order to radically question the existing system of knowledge and disciplinary spheres? In what sense does decolonial option attempt a conceptual denaturalization and what are the problems of its concern?*

Along with colonialism as a specific socio-historical configuration you point out that we need to speak of global coloniality, which as you say marks today's ex-third-world, ex-socialist and western subjects alike. How does global coloniality function and what does it mean to be a void in the global coloniality?

Tlostanova: If the postcolonial discourse, particularly in its high brow poststructuralist theoretical versions, has managed today to become quite legitimate and well known in the world, the decolonial option remains relatively low key. There are many reasons for that, including the geopolitical and geo-historical explanations, one of the most important ones being connected with what you are asking about – the decolonial attempt to radically question the existing system of knowledge production, disciplinary spheres and epistemic modes and methodologies. In effect it is an undermining of the modern Western system of knowledge, and, what is crucial, an undermining from the position of exteriority in Enrique Dussel's understanding – that is, from the outside, conceptually created from and by the inside. This is a qualitative shift, not a quantitative one, which is often the case with postcolonial studies relying heavily on Western concepts and methods by simply applying them to the analysis of a different post- or neo-colonial material. This relatively new material is *studied* in postcolonial studies by (ex)representatives of the third world – the Diasporic non-Western scholars, and by means of postmodernist or in some versions Marxist analytical means, or with a minimal variation/deviation.

Many scholars have already criticized the almost exclusively Anglophone nature of postcolonial studies and as a result, the predominance of postcolonial theorists from the ex British colonies. Another problem with postcolonial theory is its reproduction of the typically Western syndrome of universal travelling theory which attempt to sell its contextually bound insights as applicable to anywhere and anyone. It should be

stressed here that the point is not to simply add Central and South America, Eastern Europe or the Caucasus, Central Asia and Siberia to the postcolonial discourse. Rather the point is to question the Western monopoly of knowledge, the very methodology of applying such a ready-made travelling theory created in the West, even if by the ex colonial others and those who chose to wear this mask, to the rest of the world with its multiplicity of local histories, and trajectories of relations with modernity/coloniality – Western, Soviet or global today.

So when I say that decolonial option attempts a conceptual denaturalization I mean precisely going into those epistemic spheres which postcolonial theory seldom questions or even notices because it does not aim in the end at undermining the fundamental logic of modernity and its disciplines. Even the most original examples of postcolonial theorizing tend to interpret the other through the concepts of the same and seldom the other way round, and in this sense they remain loyal to and inadvertently reproduce the coloniality of knowledge. One can hybridize Lacan with an Indian colonial history and subjectivity and create rich and polysemantic concepts in the vein of Homi Bhabha, or fuse deconstruction with neo-Marxism and non-Western feminism in a fascinating way to create Gayatri Spivak's very original theorizing. But you notice of course that the geography of reasoning here always starts with the West and not with the rest. Postcolonial discourse in other words is always already justifying itself before the West and translating its no doubt noble intentions and ideas into the conceptual language which the West would recognize and accept. The decolonial option delinks from this self acquitting mode when it starts not from Lacan but from Gloria Anzaldua or from the Zapatistas, from the Caucasus cosmology or from Sufism. For example when I was writing *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands* I did not write the book *about* Central Asia or the Caucasus, not in order to *compare* them with South America, much less to *apply* Latin American theory to Eurasian reality, but to analyze the underlying colonial matrix of power which reveals the fact that these "areas" are linked to Western hegemony by the logic of coloniality – an indispensable part of modernity. I attempted a shifting in the naturalized geography of reasoning. Postcolonial studies would not formulate their task like this because they remain

“studies,” that is, they are confined within the frame of the modern division into subject (who is studying) and object (which is studied) and often take research to application of Western high theory to local material.

Turning to the second part of your question now, one of the major differences between postcolonial studies and decolonial option is precisely that postcolonial studies too often stop at describing or criticizing colonialism as a specific social, historical, economic configuration, whereas decolonial option offers the crucial concept of global coloniality as the constantly present underside of modernity. It emerged as a conceptual and ideological matrix of the Atlantic world that, since 1500, has expanded all over the globe, as a specific kind of imperial/colonial relations which brought imperialism and capitalism together. Now it is interesting that in some cases like in Russia or the Ottoman sultanate – that is, the sphere of imperial difference, capitalism (as well as race) was not even a necessary requirement, as the global coloniality in these locales has worked more profoundly and persistently in the spheres of being, thinking, and knowledge. In other words one does not have to be colonized in a classical economic and political sense to have a colonized mind, to be a slave of modernity with its typical discourses of development, progress, newness, that are present in both Socialist and Capitalist versions of this macro-narrative. For me the central element of global coloniality is the idea of classifying humankind in relation to the colonial matrix of power and the ontological marginalization of non-western and not quite western people. This equates indigenous people in the new world with enemies of the people in the Soviet Union or Muslims as terrorists today. In all cases modernity justifies violence and the negation of the human rights of those who are branded as not quite human (i.e. not quite European, not quite Soviet, not quite Christian, not quite White, not quite heterosexual, etc.).

Global coloniality today attempts to zombify everyone in the world attempting to present its human taxonomy as universal, given once and for all and unquestionable. The same refers to social and economic models which are products of global coloniality. Why then the global economic crisis is causing many commentators to discuss the ways to save capitalism, as if there are no alternatives, or save the banks and the corporations and not the people whose lives both in the West and in the rest become increasingly dispensable?

The post-soviet subjects who in contrast with Spivak's subalterns have never even attempted to speak, are indeed a void in the new world order. We are not interesting or promising to anyone – the West has won in the Cold War and dismissed us as the losers. The third world either interprets us as traitors of the wonderful

communist idea or quickly and successfully reorients itself to other non-socialist modernities (a good example is India). A dialogue with the Western left does not take us anywhere because the post-soviet people would continue to be allergic and skeptical to any Marxism for a long time (with an exceptions of the younger generation of thinkers whose Marxism has more to do with the Frankfurt school than with Stalin or Lenin). In the global economy grounded in coloniality the post-socialist again cannot compete with other others, cannot joint the world proletariat (the global South) or the world capital (the global North), so to say, remaining the absurd poor North.

Of course I am generalizing here for the sake of clarity. But in reality post-soviet subjects occupy quite different places in the global coloniality and look for various alternative allegiances in this new logic. Thus, one cannot lump together the experience of a Slovenian anti-communist dissident artist switching to anti-capitalism and joining forces with the European old new left, a Belarusian nationalist fighting with Lukashenko regime quoting Heidegger on every step, a post-Soviet Jewish writer becoming truly cosmopolitan after 1991 whose only link with his place of birth is Russian language, a Chechen insurgent losing everything and everyone in the non-ending irrational war, or an Uzbek peasant who spent all of her hungry life in the cotton field giving birth to deformed children as a result of defoliants spraying and eventually turning to self-immolation as the only way out. These people are all post-socialist. Yet they have different local histories and different understanding of their situation, aims, roles and prospects in the global world. Some of them can hope to eventually join modernity even if not in the capacity they would like to. Others are destined to disappear and never be given a chance to step onboard, always rendered subhuman and taxonomized as the global South today. Still others would reach a critical understanding of their position and decide to delink from modernity and its myths. In my view the Russian position in this respect is the least promising. It will remain a void and soon is likely to disintegrate.

2) The Border Position

“I think therefore I am” / “I am where I think”

The conscious position that you have chosen as an internal and colonized other of the Russian/Soviet Empire is border thinking and border epistemology. Can you explain to us what is border thinking and border epistemology and why it is necessary for us to think in this terms? How do you theorize the temporal-spatial fractures that border position articulates?

What is the relation between critical theory and border thinking, and in what sense the border thinking displaces

and “subsumes” the critical theory and why this shift is necessary?

I would not even say that I consciously chose border thinking. Rather it chose me! When you are the border, when the border cuts through you, when you do not cross borders in order to find yourself on either side, you do not discuss borders from some zero point positionality, but instead *you dwell in the border*, you do not really have much choice but to be a border thinker. Here Gloria Anzaldua’s dictum is really unmatched: “To survive the Borderlands/ You must live *sin fronteras*/ Be a crossroads”. Anzaldua calls this painful position “una herida abierta” – an open wound – between the lighter and darker sides of modernity/coloniality. For a Chilean-American playwright and human rights activist Ariel Dorfman it is being a bridge between the North and the South. For British-Caribbean writer Caryl Phillips it is the belonging to the airport as an ideal transit border state of someone whose home is in the Atlantic. For Argentinean diasporic philosopher Maria Lugones it is a journey along other peoples’ worlds with a loving perception which allows the border subject to flexibly and easily switch and juggle different models in her essentially non-aggressive ethical and communicative stance.

As for me, indeed my origins make me a border person more easily than others and being the border and thinking from the border has been my leitmotif both in scholarly works and in fiction. My recent novel *Zalumba Agra* is precisely about border dwellers and thinkers from different countries and époques. For trans-diasporic people like me it is hard to define my own body-politics of knowledge, my local history does not correlate with my native language. I speak the imperial tongue and am ignorant of colonial languages that were supposed to be my native ones, my ethnic composition is discordant with my cultural, ethical and social, as well as religious persuasions. I am a postmodern/postcolonial trickster with decolonial stance, with no land to territorialize in and with an explosive mixture of contradictory values hard to unambiguously taxonomize in any essentialist way. But this is precisely a symptom of global coloniality generating millions of lives marked by such imperial/colonial discordances and paradoxes. What is important is how to create not merely a negative or aggressive resistance out of this unfortunate situation but also a re-existence, in Adolfo Alban-Achinte’s terms – an other world growing out of border thinking grounded in the painfully experienced, consciously worked on and eventually transcended geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge. In other words, my enunciation is not in the disciplines. It is built on the experience of being born and educated in the entanglement of the Western invention of modernity/tradition, that is in the exteriority, of living and thinking as a racialized *other* in Russia. I do not

mean a banal identity politics here but rather an identity *in* politics grounded in a double consciousness and an assertion of the epistemic rights of the wretched.

Now what is border thinking? For me the most important element is the self-conscious liberation from the zero point epistemology which withdraws the knowing subject from the world and turns this world into the object of study. In other words, border thinking negates the monotopic subject-object type of cognition and knowledge production which has been legitimized by modernity. Border thinking allows us to question the myth of modernity, or its rhetoric, if you will, grounded in the idea of never questioned progress and development and forcefully making everyone happy according to a particular and rather provincial idea of happiness as consumption and material accumulation. As Walter Mignolo wrote in one of his articles, it is a peculiar “enchantment of modernity” which learned to play, I would say, a logical trick – it justifies itself using itself as the model and reason for justification, or in semiotic terms, its locus of enunciation is inside itself.

When we speak of temporal-spatial fractures and the shift in the geography of reasoning that the border position articulates we mean that this imminent radical intellectual shift will be marked by the color of reason in Padget Henry’s words and not merely the color of skin, and inevitably by the Duboisean double consciousness and the assertion of epistemic rights and disobedience of the other who refuses to be pigeonholed inside the constructed tradition, as the dark other of modernity. For me the key feature of border positionality is precisely this relational dynamic double critique of both ethnic-national and global Western stances. I mean a balancing of modernity and transmodernity as overcoming of modernity rather than coming back to some imagined authentic primordialist static past. For border thinker it is crucial to expose how and why modernity invented tradition and then re-inscribe what the West has taken to mere tradition onto the texture of Dusselean transmodernity. Border thinking and border vision are grounded in an eternal negotiation of inclusion and exclusion, outside and inside, rooted in irremovable contradictions – neither here nor there or both here and there at the same time, in the manner of conjunctive polisemantic logic or non-exclusive duality. Such a positioning is always more nuanced and complex in the way it reflects reality than any monocultural or monolingual stance. It is grounded in multi-spatial or in R. Panikkar’s formulation, “diatopic hermeneutics”. I would not say that it is *necessary* for us to think in these terms but there is certainly a growing number of people in the world who can think and live only in this pluritopic way. So again, it is not a question of conscious choice as

much as a result of a lacking choice and various ways of building one's reexistence out of this lack.

As for critical theory, it is no doubt a very important part of what Walter Dignolo identifies as internal imperial critique, that is a critique of the darker side of Western modernity performed from the inside, from European interiority. And this condition of belonging to Europe determines its limitations and blindness towards a number of intersecting otherness markers such as gender, race, sexuality, religion, etc., as well as its engrained universalist solipsist missionary syndrome. In a sense what Horkheimer did in his critical theory was by that time already expressed by intellectuals in the colonies from the position of border thinking but of course their developments were ignored by the West who knew about colonialism but could not imagine coloniality and much less non-European decolonial responses to it. So what happened was that European imperial critique erased and silenced for a while, made invisible the decolonial border thinking that was also a critique of modernity but from the side of coloniality or imperial difference, as in case of Russia or the Ottoman sultanate.

To sum up, border thinking feeds on a similar impulse that Horkheimer's critical theory but does it from an opposite and multiple positionality of coexisting universals or pluriversality to use Walter Dignolo's term. Border thinking thus more fully reflects the pluriversality and complexity of life worlds and local histories and is more radical than critical theory as it delinks from the hegemonic history of Western civilization and its established categories of thought. Pluriversality as I see it is a metaphor and a principle grounded in the belief that no one has access to the absolute truth and there is no such a thing as objective universal knowledge any more. Therefore we speak about decolonial option and not a decolonial *project* or *theory* – it is an option among other options that constitute the complex texture of today's pluriversal world where many worlds coexist and cooperate and where a reciprocal decolonial solidarity is gradually being shaped. Pluriversal principle aims at sustaining and taking into account the multiplicity of life paths, knowledges, subjectivities, and visions existing in the world. It is an equality-in-difference and it stresses the possibility of coexisting and interacting of many worlds in one pluriversal transmodern world.

3) The Colonial Matrix of Power

As you point out, liberal and marxist thinkers, political theorists and economic experts alike, all accept that current global economy is capitalist, but a decolonial thinker would be with neither of those who save capitalism nor with those who criticize it from the post-

leftist stance. The core analytic concept of de-colonial thinking is not "capitalist economy" but the "colonial matrix of power". How do you define the colonial matrix of power and its diversification through its reproduction today?

Again, the colonial matrix of power or coloniality of power is not my term. It is one of the founding concepts of decolonial option and it was coined by a Peruvian philosopher A. Quijano back in the early 1990s. The way I understand the colonial matrix of power it is the most devastating consequence of modernity – a consistent cultivation and maintaining of the economic, social, cultural, ethical, epistemic and ontological bondage. Throughout the last five hundred years this tendency has been expressed globally in various forms, yet essentially it can be taken down to the fact that the West/North has determined the single norm of humanity, of legitimate knowledge, of social and economic systems, of spatial and temporal models, of values and cultural norms, while all other people and knowledges have been classified as deviations, dismissed to alterity, to nature, or subject to various changes with the goal of making them closer to the western ideal.

Not much has even changed today in the conditions of the global economic crisis that is making everyone vulnerable and not exempt from the logic of the exhausted modernity sacrificing human lives to save capitalism and modernity. Within this rewesternizing conservative trend neoliberal progressivist forms of the rhetoric of modernity prevail and corporate capitalism continues to be regarded as the only possible and the most effective economic form. This new edition of coloniality continues to fetishize power, whereas its often dramatic refashioning of some familiar discourses of modernity does not cancel their unfair and exclusionary nature. Thus technological triumphalism continues to ignore the unaddressed questions of social injustice, distribution, inequality, representation and appropriation.

Polycentric capitalism and the idea of polycentric multipolar world seems to be more attractive as a working transitory model for humanity. It is a de-westernizing model in the sense that it is grounded in an axiological revision of neoliberalism and efforts to accept its economic aspects while preserving the value systems of respective non-Western societies. However, this model is still progressivist and developmentalist which is clearly seen in the rhetoric of such alliances as BRICS, the Union of South American nations, etc. undermining the absolute US superiority but not questioning the teleology of the market. For me the problem with de-westernization is that its processes are still grounded in concrete geopolitical power interests and reflect the present stage of division and remapping the world. Honest capitalism, globalization with the human face, polycentric

capitalism are just temporary letting off steam but there is no guarantee that this situation does not soon collapse into yet another misanthropic model of dispensable lives. For human lives remain equally dispensable and deprived of all rights in all existing scenarios – under the unipolar hegemony of the North and under the suppression by various neocolonial regimes and local centers.

A more attractive though hardly realizable scenario of the future is a radical delinking from any forms of modern paradigm – economic, social, axiological, epistemic, existential. This is clearly seen in non-systemic social movements and intellectual events and institutes who act in between and beyond the market and the state and think outside the rhetoric of modernity. A good example is the Zapatistas or Vandana Shiva's Earth Democracy. Instead of the catchy idea of alternative modernities we face here the idea of alternatives to modernity as such in all its manifestations from power to gender, from perception to being.

4) Soviet Modernity

In the enfolding of global modernity/coloniality you speak about Soviet modernity: In what way it refashioned the rhetoric of modernity and reproduced the logic of coloniality? How do you explain the darker colonial side of Soviet modernity and the racialization processes within Russian/Soviet space?

The key concept for the understanding the continuity between the Russian empire, the Soviet Union and today's Russia is the imperial difference which indicates various losers who failed to or were prevented by different circumstances and powers from fulfilling their imperial mission taking second class places. They were intellectually or culturally colonized by the winners and developed a catching up logic, inferiority complexes and ideologies of the besieged camp or victory in defeat. Russia is a paradigmatic case of such a Janus-faced empire – an empire with a long and unsuccessful history of external appropriation of certain elements of modernity on a different basis – non-capitalist, non-Western, not based on Western Christianity or Latin-derived language.

The Russian/Soviet empire on the one hand strove to build its own variant of globality/modernity – an Orthodox kingdom and later, a Soviet world (although the basis for this model was still Western in its origin). On the other hand, the concrete strategies of building the Russian/Soviet modernity had to be attuned to the Western one as it has always been a dependent and mimicking modernity. This has alternated periodically with the rejection of everything Western and the retreat into the jingoism that we also witness today. The Janus-faced Russia always felt itself a colony in the presence of the

West, an “out-of-place Tatar dressed as a Frenchman”, in a historian Vassily Kluchevsky's words. And it compensates this inferiority complex in the non-Western colonies by projecting the image of the Russian/Soviet colonizer as a true European and a champion of civilization, modernity, socialism, etc.

Russia as a second class empire has always been in the condition of global coloniality vis-à-vis the West. This coloniality has not been obvious, yet it remained ubiquitous, manifesting itself mainly in the spheres of being, of knowledge and of thinking. Russia/USSR have appropriated and transmuted (not always consciously) the basic aspects of the Western empires of modernity, then projecting them into the Russian colonial difference, generating the mutant forms of the main vices of modernity – secondary Eurocentrism, secondary Orientalism, secondary racism.

Now, the Soviet empire was not different from the Czarist one in this respect because the Bolsheviks wanted to have communism and keep the empire as well. So they simply reformulated the main developmentalist slogan in a more radical way – “to catch up and leave behind”, while also escalating their global geopolitical appetites. The fundamental for coloniality racial discourses in the Soviet Union were masked by a more intricate ethnic and religious configurations, while the Soviet empire chose to present itself to the world as the empire of “affirmative action”, in T. Martin's words. But the real Soviet tactic in the non-European colonies became even more cruel and dehumanizing than in Czarist times, based on methodical elimination of all alternative thinking and being.

Modernity in the twentieth century was implemented in two forms – the liberal/capitalist and the socialist/statist one. Each of them had its own kind of coloniality. In the darker colonial side of the Soviet modernity a second-rate type of the Soviet citizen was constructed in spite of the proclaimed internationalist slogans and an overt goal of racial mixing of the population in order to create a future Soviet Mestizo/a with an erased ethnic element brought up on Russian culture and on Soviet ideology. Proclaiming the goal of making everyone look identical and erasing the colonial status was not the same as actually allowing the colonial to claim his/her equality. The empire did not want to accept the erased differences that it itself promoted on paper. As a result a very problematic Soviet colonial identity emerged which had a lot in common with Duboisian double consciousness and unhomed identification.

The inseparable connection of race, class, gender and sexuality in the construction of modern imperial and colonial discourses remains intact in the Russian case, though it changes at various stages of Russian and Soviet expansion from romantic Orientalism, through

quasi-scientific positivist racism to commodity racism and to Soviet pseudo internationalism with its underside of transmuted racism and finally, to the post-Soviet revenge of zoological racist discourses. If in the Western world coloniality of power is closely linked to and starts from capitalism, in case of Russia coloniality of power is borrowed in secular modernity as an already established and naturalized ideological and cognitive system, with racism at its core. Racial discourses were also unconsciously borrowed from the West together with the whole package of the rhetoric of modernity, finding their way into the Russian scholarly, scientific, literary, intellectual discourses generating violence and humiliation.

Even if race was not a well developed or conceptualized category within the Soviet discourses, the boundary between biology and culture here was always blurred. What was more important was the tactic of assigning a permanent and inerasable identity of each group member, with a number of predictable and hereditary behavioral models. The latter was used as a basis for superiority and pride in case of Russians and led to deportations and forceful displacement, annihilation of the whole ethnicities, including the elderly, the infants, and even the graves of the ancestors—in many other cases such as the Chechen case. What was stressed was the impossibility of reforming the enemy-nations. What difference does it make which arguments were used to explain the Russian superiority—their “development” or their correspondence to the socialist ideal or the discourse of the White man’s burden? Racism remained racism.

As Eric Weitz correctly puts, it in the Soviet Union “ontology determined politics”, i.e. if one was born a Korean, a Crimean Tatar, a Chechen or, finally, a Jew one had to think and act in a particular manner. Even in relatively harmless cases when no repressions and deportation were involved, this racial politics led to the forced Russification and the erasing of cultural memory and history of the whole peoples. The double-face-ness of the Soviet discourses combined an external ideological lack of racism and its constant internal presence in the actions of the Soviet empire and its citizens.

5) Gender Discourses: Decolonial Feminism

You mention three models of modernity/coloniality in relation to the Russian/Soviet space; the Czarist imperial model, the Soviet model and the neoliberal model. In what way the gender discourse was/is articulated in relation to this models and what was/is its specific functioning within the coloniality of power?

How do you define the binary gender matrix (the colonial femininity and masculinity) from your border position and in relation to the need of decolonization of mind? What can you comment on the sensibility of non western cultures about the comprehension of intermediary transcultural and transgender concepts?

Could you speak about the necessity of building gendered coalitions across the post-socialist space and point out some examples? What does decolonial feminism attempts to do and in what way it presents the new critical potential in the struggle against racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia?

The generally accepted scheme which is currently still in use in gender theorizing of the post-Soviet space is the so called tripartite gender model grounded in one of the major elements of the rhetoric of modernity – the opposition of modernity and tradition. Within this scheme the Soviet woman occupies an intermediary space between the traditional (backwards) and emancipated (Western, modern). This is clearly a progressivist vector model with a universalist notion of patriarchal nature of traditionalist societies as the main impediment for women as such. The legitimacy of modernization in either Soviet or today – neoliberal form for any woman is never questioned. This peculiar enchantment with the rhetoric of modernity is obvious in the texts, written by non-Western feminists of Central Asia and the Caucasus who are stubbornly clinging to the Western feminist thought and Eurocentric stereotypes in the analysis of their own culture, which is a clear sign of what Maria Lugones called coloniality of gender. And even if Central Asian gender activists claim that there are no negative or positive emotional characteristics in the interpretation of traditional and emancipated women, it is clear that if we continue to use the opposition of the modern/versus traditional we would not be able to avoid the Eurocentric bias and delink from coloniality of gender. The binary model is inevitably grounded in vector teleology—from tradition through the Soviet half-tradition and half modernity to today’s Western emancipation.

A deconstruction of this model is a necessary condition for decolonizing of gender and of being. I think that the most promising gender discourses go beyond the frame of this tripartite model and are based on difference, mixing and delinking from vector teleology. These border gender patterns are based on a double critique of different variants of modernity, and various half forgotten ethnic-cultural-religious models. In any attempt to problematize a simple tripartite scheme of traditional-Soviet-Western woman, a crucial and understudied phenomenon is the (post)colonial gender tricksterism where the (post)Soviet and the (post)colonial merge and it becomes possible to balance on the verge of

resistance and act around and beyond the power structures to avoid censorship and policing. I have attempted to analyze this phenomenon in *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands*. This model does not answer the Western gender stereotypes which rob women of the richness of their worlds and creative possibilities, of their potential multidimensionality, always enhanced at the borders of cultures, languages, religions, epistemologies. Here even the initial set of gender roles may be different from the Western dichotomy and generate more complex models. (Post)colonial gender tricksterism exists today both in the ex-metropolis and the ex-colonies. What needs to be stressed is the multiplicity and constant movement, the tension and the changeability, within which coloniality of gender is questioned again and again by specific relational forms of resistance always connected with human memory – to paraphrase Maria Lugones.

As for the binary gender matrix or in other words, the colonial femininity and masculinity, here a paradox was and still is at work based on blaming the colonial others in mutually exclusive vices, thus building a negative self-identification. Racialization then works through gender, and colonization itself comes to be symbolized as an act of rape or violence. The colonial gender paradox is based on the self-negating definition of the darker side of femininity and masculinity, which prevents working out any positive identity. The colonial man is at once feminized (castrated) and presented as an essential rapist and an aggressive animal threatening the chaste White lady. The non-White woman, in turn, is regarded as sexually available and willing to be raped, essentially lacking chastity or honor as such. In the Russian colonization of the Caucasus and Turkistan, this perverse yet naturalized ethics was recast in particular ways, connected not with race but with essentialized ethnicity and Islam, which was early translated into symbolic race (Muslim equaled non-White and often subhuman). The paradox of colonial masculinity and femininity was different from the West, because the gap between the Orientalist European fantasy and the reality of the Caucasus and Turkistan conquest was too obvious and based on the secondary Orientalist ideologies always poisoning any victory for Russia.

The modern/colonial gender paradox functioned with a twist in the case of the Russian/Soviet non-European colonies: Men were seldom feminized or symbolically castrated and their aggressive macho overtones were consistently stressed, while the Russian colonizer was often paradoxically prone to mimicking the Caucasus savage, compensating his own need for masculinity. The Oriental beauty stereotype functioned almost identically with its Western master narrative version in the Caucasus (women as sexual goods), while in Turkistan

the colonizer's disappointment from the lack of access to harem erotic exoticism led to a discourse of "the fox and the grapes," grounded in inferiority complex in relation to Europe and its original Orient. The labor economic exploitation element of gender/race discrimination was absent until the Soviet times.

As many scholars have demonstrated, gender itself is a Eurocentric category and the fixed gender binarism is far from being the only possible way of human social classification and division. In many societies and locales before the Western colonization, categories of seniority, professional and clan principles were more important than biologized gender. In decolonial discourses this coloniality of gender, the assumption that the whole world must operate according to White middle class Christian housewife model, is constantly questioned and deconstructed. I will give you one example from the Northern Caucasus: in Adyghean society women were far from being constantly and always discriminated against. Their roles changed dynamically through life, from a relative condition without rights typical for the young wife, to the respected mother of the family with grown-up children and grandchildren who took an active part in the decision making. Adyghean cosmology retains traces of gender parity, women's active participation in politics, their well-defined property rights, the specific gendered division of labor, which was never based on coding one (female) labor as less prestigious than the other (male), even the predominance of female over male in certain spheres, as a result of a longer sustaining of feminocratic systems. Many local histories manifested such traditions of gender egalitarianism and lack of fixed gender divisions. In the social life of Adyghean community the guiding principle of fluidity and flexible contextuality of gender roles was linked with seniority: the older wise women were no less but often more respected than men and connected with a number of sacred acts and rituals that only they could perform (healing, the control of rain and thunder, rituals at the building of a new house, the initiation rituals, even the woman warrior roles in exceptional situations, etc.).

Linguistic gender binarity is also largely a Western phenomenon which has to be corrected when we venture into non-Western and non-modern societies. The sexist power of Russian would be more blurred and less dimorphic than English (compare for example man-woman, where the root concept is man, while a human being is identical to man, and a Russian less binary *muzhchina* (man)-*zhenshchina* (woman)-*chelovek* (human being)). A more pronounced discrepancy would emerge in case of Turkic or Caucasus languages. This does not mean that there is no sexism or seeing women as others of men (although such variants also exist) in these cases, it just means that the principles of linguistic gender

identification need to be contextually investigated in their own terms and not in terms of universalized Western linguistic sexism. Perhaps the best example of this deeper than applied linguistic cognitive difference is provided by Sylvia Marcos in her analysis of the Zapatista women. For them the world is indivisible and inseparable from human beings, it exists in and through the human beings. In Toholabal language there is an inter-subjective correlation between the first and third person, a structure with no direct or indirect objects. This is totally different from European languages with their subjective correlation. So when someone speaks in Toholabal she does not represent herself or as in Western languages, but becomes involved in inter-subjective relationship with other people, nature, cosmos instead. And all of these potential actors are intrinsically present in any utterance.

Finally the Western dichotomous heterosexist hierarchies ignore, erase or distort various transgender and transsexual models and forms that have existed in many non-Western cultures for millennia. This happens because coloniality of gender refuses to understand the possibility of mutually supplementing and not mutually exclusive oppositions allowing for the existence of only solid categories of men and women. In case of Central Asia this refers for instance to such an interesting phenomenon as *bacha* (young boy) cross-dressed performers who entertained the grown men audiences with skilful androgynous singing and dancing at various public events. The Russian empire ostracized and later banned this practice presenting it as manifestation of Asiatic baseness and a direct result of female seclusion and inaccessibility. But the later Soviet Uzbek female dancers in fact repeated the *bacha* bodily movements and aesthetics in the artificially created national Uzbek dance.

Contemporary Uzbek theater *Ilkhom* revamped this transsexual aesthetics in a virtuoso transcultural, transmedia, and global performance *Ecstasy with a Pomegranate* which told a real story of a Russian by origin artist Nikolayev who fell in love with Turkestan and with young *bachas*, adopted Islam and became a Sufi Usto Mumin – the gentle master in whose paintings suprematism mingled with Persian miniature aesthetics and with homosexual imagery. *Ecstasy* is truly a border performance, always balancing on the edge of various art forms, languages (they use Anzaldua's type of bilingual repetition with variation when a phrase is first said in Uzbek then repeated in Russian but with a deviation), rhythms (traditional Uzbek mixing with Caribbean), symbols (e.g., queer semiotics interchanges with Sufi). Along with its aesthetic importance this show also demonstrates that the dichotomous structure of gender roles is largely a Western phenomenon naturalized due

to modernity worldwide and erasing the non-Western cultures' sensitivity and intuition in grasping intermediary, transcultural, trans-value, and transgender models.

Now let us turn for a moment to gender coalitions of the postsocialist space. Why is it important? Because here we have separate local histories, trajectories and genealogies of gender struggles, feminism, gender models, which were different both from the West and from the ex-third world. I do not mean that we need to preserve or idealize them, yet at the same time we should not simply erase them and start from scratch – from the indoctrination by the Western feminist models which would be precisely the sign of coloniality of thinking. The common postsocialist geopolitics and body-politics of knowledge, of thinking, of perceiving – gives birth to a possibility of a dialogue and of coalitions in the struggle with global coloniality. Recent examples include an interesting conference “REDaktura REDacting. TransYugoslav feminisms: Women's Heritage Revisited” in Zagreb, in the Center for Gender Studies which I took part in; the Polish project intersecting gender with both postcommunist and postcolonial through the newly coined concept of post-dependence studies in University of Wroclaw. Similar events but on a smaller scale take place in the Caucasus and Central Asian gender studies, although in those locales the coloniality of thinking is even harder to fight with, because the Western feminist discourses are mediated by the Russian derivative feminists who continue to practice the Janus-faced empire model and impose their condescending attitude onto the gendered subalterns. I believe that we need to develop a separate post-socialist discourse as such which is yet poorly conceptualized, and then we will find more confluence points for coalitions, including the gender sphere. But again, this should not be a conservation or absolutization of this common experience. The post-socialist condition should be regarded in complex and dynamics with today's dispersion of ex-socialist subjects in different directions – from the urge to become real and not second-class Europeans to the gravitation in the direction of the global South.

As for decolonial feminism, it is not a separate school or a trend. It is rather an awareness of global coloniality and a specific border state of mind which is detected in a number of theorists such as Chela Sandoval, Maria Lugones, Shu-Mei Shih, Nawal el Saadawi, Trinh Minha and others. They in many ways continue what was started rather long ago by women of color feminists, but do it in a much more theoretical way in the sense of creating their own theory, concepts, ideas, often with their backs to the Western feminism, that is from the decolonial delinking positionality. At the same time this decolonial gendered theorizing almost always goes hand

in hand with various forms of activism, intellectual more than purely political. Many of the categories and terms coined by decolonial gender activists are global and pluriversal and allow to conduct a meaningful dialogue between quite different regions and locales of the world. Among them coloniality of gender and the modern colonial gender system, the paradox of colonial masculinity and femininity and others. Today when global coloniality effects everyone, these categories become the new pluriversals in the struggle against racism, sexism, homophobia and trans-phobia. They are targeted predominantly at decolonization of thinking, of consciousness, at the revolution inside the subject. It does not necessarily push us in the direction of political activism, but it leads to serious shifts in our optics, in the way we interpret the world and relate to others. And finally having decolonized the consciousness this way, we can hope to decolonize the world.

6) Decolonial Aesthetics

For decolonial option one of the most important processes is the transformation of subjectivities and articulation of decolonial subjects which implies changing our imaginaries, decolonize our minds. What is the relation between decoloniality and art, how do you define decolonial aesthetics and what is its critical potential? Why it is necessary to develop decolonial "communities of sense" and what does this mean?

We have to be very careful with words such as *aesthetics* when speaking about decolonial option. Aesthetics is a Western and imperial notion which we need to decolonize in order to start conceptualizing and understading decolonial art. That is why a concept of decolonial *aesthesis* was introduced by Walter Mignolo in 2009 and developed since then by many decolonial thinkers and artists including myself.

If decolonial phenomenology deals with a Duboisian question of what does it mean to be a problem, decolonial aesthesis linking reason and imagination through epistemology, focuses not on Caliban's reason but on Caliban's art, and not on decorative and ornamental art (which before was the only kind of creativity allowed for Calibans), but a full-fledged art quickly becoming an important part of contemporary socially and politically engaged art scene. When Caliban turns from an object, a decoration highlighting the sublime of nature into a subject with his own agency and aesthesis, the usual connection between the beautiful, the sublime and particular phenomena, actions and events, signifying them, takes a different meaning – an object acquires a voice, an ability to suffer, to experience humiliation, and eventually to build an alternative world out of this misery and tenacity, and to react to this

experience through aesthetic means. Decolonial art focuses on demonstrating the under-side of Western beautiful and sublime and gives subjectivity and creativity back to Calibans.

Imagine a Caliban painting an ironic Miranda's portrait, making her look like his mother Sycorax. Of course he can not be accepted in Prospero's reference system without being conveniently labeled a stylizing painter or an authentic (naïve) ethnic artist. One of the common mistakes in the interpretation of decolonial art is this Eurocentric progressive heresy which sees such art as a call for going back to some essentialist pure identity fallen out of contemporary market. In reality decolonial artists are more complex in their pluritopic hermeneutical connections than any exclusively Western or non-Western ones. Being truly border subjects they constantly play on, delink and re-link in a complex conceptual and at the same time spontaneous way with various Western and non-Western models from the position of exteriority – the outside created from the inside. Decolonial art is grounded in non-exclusive duality principle which is to be found not only in multi-semantic logic but also in many indigenous models. The crucial drive here is *overcoming* in existential or Zen-Buddhist sense, *transcending* in Kantian sense, and *trans-modern delinking* in decolonial sense. After delinking the subject needs to re-link and here resistance gives way to re-existence.

The decolonial sublime sets our perception free in order to push the subject in the direction of agency – ethical, political, social, creative, epistemic, existential. The subject peels off the colonizing layers of Western normative aesthetics and acquires or creates his/her own aesthetic principles growing out of her local history, geo- and body-politics of knowledge. An individual communicating with such art learns to grasp the enormity of the decolonial sublime and identify it in its entirety. This is possible only when one is able to detect, feel and recognize the global coloniality as a darker side of modernity in various phenomena, people, events, institutions, works of art. In order for the decolonial art to be understood, we need to add our own experience of being othered and objectified, to the decolonial sensibility, education, knowledge. The decolonial "community of sense" – to paraphrase J. Ranciere's concept in a pluritopic way – requires an active rational and emotional effort, a certain knowledge and critical thinking tools, an analytic ability to link various decolonial experiences metaphorically through art, indeed an active understanding versus a passive sensibility.

The decolonial viewer does not experience fear, as in Kant's aesthetics, but rather feels solidarity, indignation, participation, and dignity, resistance no to the forces of nature but to the logic of modernity/coloniality. The global

coloniality is illuminated for him/her then in an image or a metaphor momentarily lighting up the trajectory of further decolonization. Decolonial sublime attempts to heal a colonized mind and soul setting a person free from colonial inferiority complexes and allowing to feel that she is also a human being with dignity, is also beautiful and valuable the way she is. The target audience of decolonial art is internally plural and its collectivity is grounded in difference and not sameness. It is a plurality as difference often embodied in an unstable elusive institution or event created for a day or for an hour. It can be a solidarity and a participation even against her will, grounded in the shared exclusion and a strange feeling of one's own non-being, non-existence for the world in any sense, which is acute for the post-Soviet space, where the resources are scarce and the politics of physical survival and servility towards the criminal state dominate. There are no recipes against this, other than delinking and disobeying. And most of decolonial artists here are confined to the position of subversive tricksters and negotiators, creating little by little, a decolonial trans-modern pluriversal community of sense. This is the case with the art practices of Eurasian borderlands.

I will give just one example – Taus Makhacheva – a diasporic artist with Russian citizenship, Western education and Daghestani (Northern Caucasus) ethnic

roots. In her video-filmed performances she examines the unstable boundary between the same and the other, acceptance and rejection, drawing attention to our efforts to merge, mimic, assimilate, or leak into the other, no matter if it is another person or a community – natural or social, rural or urban, real or imagined. In *Delinking* (2011) she plays on this decolonial term. Taus was attracted by the idea of delinking from European thinking and ways of receiving knowledge and stressing the fact that all cultures have their own different systems and practices of transmitting knowledge, of cultural and intellectual evolvement, while the world uses only the sanctified Western academic system. Makhacheva's face was intricately painted with henna using Indian, African and Middle Eastern ornaments. As soon as the face was covered with ornaments the spaces where the skin was still visible were filled with more inscriptions until the whole visage was coated with green mass. After it got dry and was washed off the face changed its color to orange-brownish and stayed so for a week – a new mask, a new mocking identity – tentative yet obviously leaving a trace. The changing face color as a space for pluritopic overlay of different epistemic and aesthetic systems became a complex metaphor for decolonial shifting of the geography of reasoning and recreating a decolonial community of sense.