

Decolonizing the Second World

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Tlostanova, Madina. *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art: Resistance and Re-existence*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. xi + 224 pages. ISBN 978-3-319-48444-0. Hb. €88.39.

What does it mean to be postcolonial, postsocialist, post-Soviet, and post-dependence at the same time? How is it possible to read cultures being in the condition of multiple “post-ness”? In her 2017 volume, Madina Tlostanova concentrates on the intersections of postsocialism, postcolonialism, post-dependence, and decolonization both in a political and theoretical sense. Her approach to read politically, culturally, and historically post-socialist cultures along with postcolonial contexts ties her to postcolonial/postsocialist criticism—propelled by David Chioni Moore’s 2001 pioneering essay “Is the Post in Postcolonial the Post in Post-Soviet?: Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique”—with the aim of constructing a theoretical framework for the analysis of postsocialist environments. Even though she criticizes the unreflective application of postcolonial theory in reading postsocialist or post-Soviet environments, Tlostanova’s earlier works also center on attempts at finding—creating—an appropriate analytical framework for the study of the “ex-second world” (20). However, instead of, or, rather, parallel to, the deconstructing attitudes of postcolonial/postsocialist discourse, Tlostanova argues that for an understanding of postsocialist, or to use her own term here, post-dependence geo-political areas—and especially for their own self-reflection—a more affirmative and empowering decolonial perspective is necessary.

From this respect, the title of Tlostanova’s volume proves to be misleading, since one of the core aspects of *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism* is the critique of existing theoretical frameworks used for the analysis of postcolonial/postsocialist environments, which is followed by her own concepts of engaging with these cultures/histories/political arenas from a decolonial standpoint. After these extensively theoretical endeavors, Tlostanova provides more “practical” examples of her approach as she analyzes various works of art from lesser-known and marginal, postsocialist, post-Soviet, non-European countries, such as Azerbaijan or Tajikistan.

The first chapter examines the consequences of the end of the USSR. Instead of using the words “fall” or “regime changes,” which imply a certain passivity, Tlostanova terms this radical turning point “a leap into the void” (1). Her choice of words emphasizes the participation of (post)socialist

subjects in the change and reflects on the epistemological crisis that followed. As she argues, the sudden demise of the Soviet world left people with “a new reality of multiple dependencies and increased . . . invisibility to the world” (2). She also highlights the lack of scholarly self-reflection from within the postsocialist countries, which she regards as an essential factor in resolving the postsocialist perplexity. She points out that the theories and methodologies used for the analysis of the postsocialist world (from Cold War era Soviet Studies to even the more elaborate postcolonial/postsocialist approach) are all of Western origin and, therefore, inseparable from colonial connotations and the risk of intellectual self-colonization if applied by postsocialist scholars. Instead of the temporal overtones inherent to these trends, she suggests the concept of “global coloniality” (17) as a starting point for the “decolonial option [which] is a critical analysis of modernity and its darker side—coloniality—tracing the genealogy of modernity’s violence in relation to its internal and external others, and restoring the alternative genealogies of decolonial struggles in order to offer ways of delinking from modernity/coloniality and decolonizing our being, knowledge, perception, gender, and memory” (17).

In the second chapter, “How to Disengage from the Coloniality of Perception?” Tlostanova furthers her decolonial standpoint into the world of art, contrasting aesthetics—which she reckons as based on value judgment, universalized taste, and rational logic—with decolonial aesthesis, which is engaged with sensory perception, the affective turn, corporeality, and pluriversality. She defines decolonial aesthesis as “a conscious and self-reflective critical movement for the development of practices of subversion and emancipation of experience, corporeality, and the sensations produced by our bodies, from creative mechanism, norms, and limitations of (post)(alter)modern/(post)colonial aesthetics” (33). She argues that aesthesis should be applied as a ground for analyzing postsocialist works of art, since Western aesthetics, due to its universalizing, normative nature, disregards these non-Western pieces as, by definition, lower in the aesthetic hierarchy.

In the following chapters, Tlostanova mainly focuses on a very diverse corpus of works of art and occasionally on individual artists. She also incorporates shorter theoretical evaluations, which are closely connected to, as well as become necessary underpinnings of the analyses of the artworks that surround them. The most noteworthy idea is the concept of “tempo-localities” (93) coined by Tlostanova herself after the critique of Bakhtin’s chronotope and Foucault’s heterotopia. She reprehends the two concepts for concentrating on either time or space and points out that the scrutiny of postsocialist realities requires both a temporal and spatial/local awareness at

the same time. She uses the term “tempo-locality” to emphasize how time and space are interrelated and to define how “memory is materialized in most unexpected places” (98).

In her analytical chapters, through the works of photographers, novelists, directors, and curators, she investigates decolonial aspects of the contemporary museum; the tempo-localities of war, “unhomedness” (100), the cemetery and the idyll; the trickster figure (named “qalandar” (to differentiate it from the Western trickster tradition); the post-Soviet case of mimicry and metamorphosis; and the corporeal trauma of rape. She mostly concentrates on artists from non-European post-Soviet countries; however, she also introduces post-dependence examples from non-postsocialist yet postcolonial contexts, which serve as an emphatic reminder of the similarities between the postcolonial and postsocialist tempo-localities. In most chapters, these do not divert attention (neither the reader’s, nor the analyst’s) from the main focus of the text; that is, the postsocialist condition. In “Coloniality of Memory at the Postcolonial/Postsocialist Juncture,” the extensive analyses of Haitian-American writer Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) and South African author Achmat Dangor’s *Bitter Fruit* (2001) disrupt the previous balance of postsocialist and postcolonial environments; therefore, the chapter is more about postcolonial memory than “Memory at the Postcolonial/Postsocialist Juncture” (157) as promised in the chapter title.

Although the title, *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art*, does not appoint the spatial dimension of Tlostanova’s corpus, the readers’ expectations are driven by the overall focus of postsocialist cultures and also by the cover photo, taken by Romanian visual artist, Ciprian Muresan, titled *Leap into the Void, after Three Seconds* (which is echoed in Tlostanova’s first chapter). His oeuvre is prevalently embedded in his Romanian background, especially affected by the revolution and transition period of the late 1980s and 1990s. The photo portrays an emphatically Eastern European environment, reflecting on lingering but unprocessed violence and trauma with an unconscious person in its foreground, and with another cycling away, without looking in the direction of the apparently lifeless body.

Turning a blind eye on postsocialist trauma and the lack of self-reflection is something Tlostanova emphatically argues against. She calls for the necessity of recognizing the post-dependence condition of ex-second world countries and the creation of a methodology from within these cultures both in art and academia as a means of decolonization. As a scholar of Russian origin, her personal involvement in the intellectual decolonization of postsocialist countries is central to her work, not only in *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism*, but through her entire oeuvre. Her attachment to the cultural

background also shines through some anecdotes of her own life, and also by repeatedly using the first person plural when discussing post-Soviet environments and cultural experiences.

Controversially, what Tlostanova does not reflect on is her present situation: although she grew up in the Soviet Union (Moscow), graduated from Moscow University, and is still a Russian citizen, from the 1990s she has been continuously invited to spend time as a visiting or residing scholar at Western universities. *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism* owes a lot to the period she spent at two Swedish universities (Linköping and Södertörn University). However, it is only in the “Acknowledgements” that she mentions these Western influences, while in the text she emphasizes the necessity of a decolonial perspective and self-reflection. Her skepticism and recurrent criticism towards employing post-colonial theories in the reading of the post-socialist environment seem ambivalent without a more open disclosure of her own scholarly position being inspired by these intellectual trends. Furthermore, while proposing a decolonial approach, it should not be forgotten that Palgrave Macmillan is a Western publishing company, and Tlostanova pays attention to describing the works of art in detail probably unknown to a Western audience. Similarly, while she suggests that the artists chosen for analysis are the most appropriate candidates for the decolonization of the post-dependence subject of the post-Soviet environments, many of these artists have received Western scholarships, or they exhibit in the West, while being peripheral, impeded, or even unknown in their own countries.

Owing to her insider position and extended knowledge about the analyzed works of art and cultures, Tlostanova is able to minutely differentiate between the multiple and intertwining “post-nesses” of marginalized and (to a “Western” outsider) lesser-known cultures. Her point of view is extensive, yet never universalizing. She pays attention to local details and differences, and, apart from the ambiguities described above, successfully argues for a decolonial position in understanding postsocialist environments. Since *Postcolonialism and Postsocialism in Fiction and Art* is a balanced repertory of possible adaptations and deconstructions of postcolonial and postsocialist theories, practical examples of decolonial thinking, impressive reviews and close-readings of artworks, it is a useful and enjoyable text for researchers and students of postcolonial and postsocialist studies and also for art enthusiasts who take interest in the Eurasian borderlands.