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Escaping a migrant metropolis
Post-Soviet urbanization through the art project Nasreddin in Russia

Olga Jitlina, Anni Kangas, Daria Krivonos, Elisa Pascucci and Anna Tereshkina*

This article narrates the politics of escape from borders and labour discipline in a post-Soviet migrant metropolis drawing on the art-activism project Nasreddin in Russia. It explores the relation between control and autonomy in urban migrations through a trans-aesthetics: a set of visual and verbal stories weaving together experiences and outcomes of the art project with academic debates on late capitalist urbanization. The encounter of artistic practices and migrants' embodied, everyday struggles to inhabit the city, it is suggested, has potential for disrupting the disciplinary and exclusionary effects of capitalist transformations and migration enforcement. This is made visible through transient spaces of escape in which the everyday lives and social worlds of migrants, constrained by the precarization of labour and by the multiplication and diversification of bordering practices, are reclaimed through laughter, mobility and care. This point is illustrated by focusing on three such spaces and practices: trickster politics in the housing market, acts of disidentification and care work on the city 'as a body.' The article offers a methodologically innovative contribution to ongoing debates on aesthetic political economy, cities and borders and artistic and activist interventions in global cities.

* In collaboration with Zarnigor Omonillaeva, Inna Perheentupa and the Nasreddin Collective

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Introduction

'The Soviet Union', poet Hassan Holov suggests in the first issue of the magazine *Nasreddin in Russia*, 'was smashed into smithereens like a giant pot in which there was nothing to cook.' Holov's words evoke the shock-economy like disintegration (Klein 2007) through which new configurations of borders and mobility came to define the post-Soviet space. In the post-Soviet metropolis of Saint Petersburg, these re-configurations unfolded—and continue to unfold—through the transformation of property rights, resulting in unfinished privatization and 'splintered gentrification' (Bernt 2016). The morphing of imperial legacies and Soviet pasts into new kinds of transnational capitalist relations also had its effects on migrant workers. Value is now extracted from migrant bodies in 'ubiquitous border situations' that resonate with processes that have affected cities across the post-Cold War world (cf. Graham 2009; Lebuhn 2013). Dispersed, shifty, tricky, time-consuming, unpredictable and ridden with arbitrariness and ambivalence—and sometimes deadly violence—practices of everyday bordering seem to be everywhere in migrant Saint Petersburg. They saturate the spaces of everyday life, also expanding into the domestic, reproductive and affective spheres (e.g. Kuznetsova and Round 2018; Nikiforova and Brednikova 2018; cf. Reeves 2013).

This article approaches the urban re-configuration of borders through the *Nasreddin in Russia* art project. The project is animated by a collective of activists, artists, migrants and scholars and focuses on labour migration mostly in Saint Petersburg but also in Moscow. Started in 2014, and still ongoing, the project has so far produced five issues of a printed magazine as well as several audio-visual exhibitions and performances. The project was initially inspired by a homonymous satirical magazine published in Tiflis and Baku from 1906 to the 1930s. The magazine draws its name from Nasreddin Hodja, a trickster-like folk character said to be known across the Muslim world 'from Bukhara to the Balkans' at least since the Middle Age (Oğuzhan 2017). What marks Nasreddin Hodja as a trickster is that he is 'a jolly, smiling character, with many peculiar qualities. [...] He never avoids offering his thoughts on a given subject [...] ridiculing both others and himself' (Asilioglu 2008, 3). While Nasreddin's jokes are optimist in tone, they are told with a tongue-in-cheek humour. This yields quite complex lessons as exemplified by a joke that Zarnigor Omonillaeva, one of the members of the Nasreddin collective, has embedded into her short story published in the fifth issue of the *Nasreddin in Russia* magazine:

> Once Nasreddin was driving his friend in a cart. Noticing a road sign, his friend shouted: 'Mulla, we are going to a wrong direction!' Nasreddin responded: 'You always think the worst. Why don't you rather focus on how fast we are racing!' (#5, 23–24).

As a transcultural figure that most of the participants to the Nasreddin in Russia project could relate to, the character has been used in the project activities as a prompt or 'provocation' (see also Pangrazio 2017) to encourage discussion and generate new knowledge. One of the first experiments of the project was a

set of playful joke contests around the question 'How would Nasreddin react to everyday situations that migrants face in St Petersburg?' Several of the stories included in this article were initially narrated in these contests.[1] But beyond such a rather instrumental use, we suggest here that the character of Nasreddin Hodja is also an embodiment of *postcolonial/postsocialist trickster politics.* In addition to being grounded in the specific trickster traditions of Central Asia or broader Central Eurasia, Nasreddin resembles the dialogic trickster figures discussed by authors such as Sandoval (2000), Haraway (2004) and Tlostanova (2017). He also calls to mind Lugones's (2003) playful travellers who—juggling between cultures—are able to play across 'worlds' and their possibilities and to do so in a non-arrogant, loving manner. Of particular relevance to us is Tlostanova's (2017) discussion of postsocialist tricksters. Tlostanova writes about tricksterism in the context of the reception of Zorikto Dorzhiev's art exhibition in a gallery of Buryat art in Moscow. She takes up the dialogic trickster figure to make sense of the failure of both Moscow's art connoisseurs and the Buryat diaspora to relate to Dorzhiev's art. According to Tlostanova, postsocialist tricksterism involves making gentle fun not only of aesthetic judgements derived from Western art theorizing but also of assumptions of an imagined Buryat authenticity. Nasreddin Hodja is indeed such a trickster figure dwelling at borders and giving rise to 'a new trans-aesthetics' (Tlostanova 2017, 131) or to what Sandoval (2000, 79) refers to as 'coalitional consciousness' enabling persons from different backgrounds to work together and learn from each other.

In this article, the trans-aesthetics of Nasreddin Hodja takes the form of a set of coauthored stories (see also Nagar 2015) on Saint Petersburg as a 'migrant metropolis' (De Genova 2015). In the first and second sections, we situate our project in relation to debates on urbanization, migration and politics, with particular attention to the notions of migrant metropolis, global cities, and the political economy of late capitalist urbanization. We then move on to narrate, through words and images, how Nasreddin's politics of escape play out in the rental housing market of a rapidly gentrifying Saint Petersburg. Subsequently, we engage the work of the city's migrant street cleaners, and their at the same time intimate and subversive relation to urban imperial legacies and contemporary tourist economies. In the conclusions, we highlight how our trans-aesthetics, a set of co-authored stories, contributes to urban research by exposing and disrupting the colonial continuities and epistemological hierarchies that bind both capitalist urbanization and—all too often—its academic critique.

Escaping (in) a migrant metropolis

The notion of metropolis—as variously articulated by Weber (1966), Simmel (1969), and Benjamin (2002)—stands for an idea of a city that is closely tied to the capitalist economy, and yet not reducible to its functions. In their article 'Writing the world from an African metropolis', Mbembe and Nuttall (2004, 351) argue for a rehabilitation of the notion of metropolis. Such rehabilitation would recognize that a city, while a 'function of circulation and circuits', and as such 'fundamentally in contact with elsewhere' (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004, 351), is not only a string of infrastructures, technology and legal entities—although

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some renditions of the city through the global city concept may seem to suggest so (e.g. Kangas 2017).

In Mbembe and Nuttall's conceptualization, metropolis has an 'underneath' whose key figure is the migrant worker, 'living in places and circumstances not of his or her choosing' and 'constrained to experience the metropolis as a site of radical uncertainty, unpredictability, and insecurity' (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004, 364; see also Simone 2004). In a similar way, De Genova's (2015) work on the migrant metropolis foregrounds the constitutive role of transnational migration in the production and transformation of urban space. The notion directs attention to the ways in which borders extend into the interior of nation-states, creating spaces of differential inclusions. It probes what kinds of spaces are produced at the intersection of specific cities and migrant historicities (De Genova 2015, 5).

Saint Petersburg is a migrant metropolis in many senses of the word. With six million inhabitants, it is the second largest city in the Russian Federation, a country that remains one of the main destinations for migrants in the world, in terms of numbers as well as one of the major states from which remittances are sent (International Organization for Migration 2020, 26, 37). Saint Petersburg attracts labour migrants mostly from former Soviet Union republics that share a visa-free regime with Russia, its largest migrant groups being from Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (FMS 2016). Migrants mostly work in construction, street retail, public transport, cleaning and care sectors with a growing demand for workers as Saint Petersburg experiences a decline in the share of its working-age population (Tkach and Brednikova 2016).

Saint Petersburg's status as a migrant metropolis reflects the role of the city in the flows of 'global' or supranational capital and the associated class-based proletarianization of migrants (Abashin 2014, 80). At the same time, contemporary labour migration to the city can be characterized as a 'postimperial phenomenon' reaffirming the division of labour between the former centre of the Russian empire and its periphery (Abashin 2014) or supporting De Genova and Roy's (2020) characterization of today's global cities as reconfigurations of colonial relations. Due to such postimperial connections, migratory mobilities to Russia from the former Soviet Republics are visa-free. However, remaining a 'properly documented migrant worker' in Russia is more challenging. After entering Russia, migrants have to obtain a residence registration and a work permit known as *patent* within 30 days of arrival. In order to acquire a *patent,* a migrant worker has to pay a fee and obtain a set of documents such as health insurance, medical certificate and pass a test of Russian language and history. There is also a monthly fee associated with the *patent*. Various more or less shady, profit-seeking intermediaries offer their services to those trying to navigate in the documentary regime.

As a result, many non-Russian migrants seeking legality are forced into illegality, often by employers, landlords or different sorts of middlemen (Round and Kuznetsova 2016, 1017; see also Malakhov and Simon 2018; Urinboyev 2017). Moreover, in the racial order of the post-Soviet Russian national discourse, migrants from Central Asia are not only racialized as the Muslim Other but often rendered synonymous with migrant 'illegality' (Brednikova and Tkach 2012, 39; Teper and Course 2014). Compounded by active ethnic

profiling by law enforcement (e.g. Human Rights Watch 2019), the obtainment of regular permits and documents would be of particular importance for migrant workers. However, as the trickster stories of Nasreddin also vividly illustrate, the space of ambiguity surrounding the governance of migration in urban Russia creates fertile conditions for the subordination, precarity and disposability of labour.

While ubiquitous urban borders that the above described documentary regime generates are effective mechanisms of capture, the migrant metropolis is also a space of reformulation and reconstitution of the global urban society (De Genova 2015, 7). As such, it is a tentative response to Harvey's (1996, 434) invitation to 'probe the frontiers of possible urban worlds.' Foregrounding the force and vitality of migrant struggles, the notion of the migrant metropolis also directs attention to the possibility of escape—to the disruptive force of migrant struggles as well as to differential spaces that they generate, forging more equitable worlds out of the contradictions of contemporary cities (De Genova 2015, 3, 7; Lefebvre 1991, 52). In Nasreddin's trickster stories, such differential space emerges through the creativity of the excluded, as well as through play, festival and love, and carnivalesque inversions of the social order (Edema 2016; Lehtovuori 2016; Shields 1999, 183–185).

The trans-aesthetics of Nasreddin resonates with the way in which contemporary critical social theory has approached escape, care, laughter and fluidity as central elements in the constitution of workers' political subjectivities in late capitalism. The more capitalism needs mobility to reproduce and sustain itself, the argument here goes, the more mobility itself may become a force that can disrupt mechanisms of control. The analysis of this dynamism has been done primarily by theorizing nomadism, exodus and desertion as strategies to counter late capitalist power (Hardt and Negri 2000) and by highlighting the prefigurative politics of the so-called 'mobile commons' (Bishop 2012; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013). Scholars writing in this vein have suggested that escape and subversion—not control and subsumption—are the founding moments of capitalist political modernity. Cooperatively crafted affective networks of care have been foregrounded as key practices of commoning that enable people to stay mobile (Bishop 2012; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013). This has highlighted the need to look into how people work with and transform the material conditions they live through, as well as what practices allow them to remain mobile, sustain a life and make trajectories for escape. As Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos (2008, 43) write, 'people do not escape their control. People escape.' This notion is not intended to romanticize movement and migration but to importantly remind that migration is a creative force fueling societal transformation and challenging forms of governance that the state and capital reproduce.

While echoes of such politics of escape permeate the art-research project we are engaged in, Nasreddin's trickster politics also alerts us to critiques of the fetishization, romanticization and essentialization of mobility and nomadism, which, as Cresswell (2010) notes, are at least as wide-ranging as their philosophical celebrations. In a similar vein, Mezzadra (2010) warns of the limits of the Eurocentric perspectives that inform radical theorizations of migration, mobility, nomadism and escape (see also Papadopoulos, Stephenson,

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and Tsianos 2008). Instead of referring to the trope of escape as a totalizing reading system informed by a European epistemological gaze, Nasreddin's trans-aesthetics contribute to these debates through a form of 'critical relationality' (Davies 1994). Carole Boyce-Davies takes up the notion of critical relationality in her discussion of the ways in which women of colour relate to hegemonic Western theory. Critical relationality, she suggests, 'argues for … multiply articulated discourses, which operate braid-like or web-like as a series of strands are woven' (Davies 1994, 41).

Rather than theorizing escape routes as a set of narrow ontological paths, we read Nasreddin's escape as a *postcolonial/postsocialist trickster politics* (Tlostanova 2017, 129–131; see also Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006). By this we mean a materially and historically rooted narrative of escape as 'transitory presence'—or, in some instances, strategic absence—within shrinking, hostile and violent urban public and private spaces. These spaces may be marked not only by corrupt practices of border enforcement and other forms of police arbitrariness, but also by the 'dull discipline of work' (Khalili 2016, 596). Thus, rather than simply juxtaposing 'local knowledge culture' or authenticity and global/Western theorizations (cf. Mama 2009, 63), we redescribe the migrant metropolis of Saint Petersburg through the trans-aesthetics of Nasreddin Hodja. We offer a set of coauthored stories that trouble the distinctions between 'inside' and 'outside' or 'global' (as general) or 'local' (as grounded). As Richa Nagar reminds, without such troublings—or 'muddyings'—alliance work where 'academic knowledges intersect with knowledges that are produced in and through struggles in sites that are not bound to the academy' would not be possible (Nagar 2015, 12, 18; see also Sandoval 2000).

Art, multilocational coauthorship and urban research

In 2014 a group of Saint Petersburg-based creative workers, activists and migrants from former Soviet Union republics, mainly Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, started to hold regular meetings. As one of their first experiments, they engaged in a playful joke contest around the question: 'How would Nasreddin react to everyday situations that migrants face in Saint Petersburg?' Since then, the collective has worked on issues such as xenophobia and labour exploitation, but also humour, family, kinship and social reproduction as experienced by migrants through urban transnational practices. This has resulted in poems, drawings, videos and short stories some of which have been published in the *Nasreddin in Russia* magazine. Reflecting the project's trans-aesthetics, the magazine is multilingual: There is content in Armenian, English, Kyrgyz, Russian and Uzbek languages in its five issues. The project developed in a socio-political and cultural environment that is captured by Hassan Holov's description of the Soviet space as 'a giant pot' in which the rising powers *chose not to see* anything worth cooking, anything to be spared from violent capitalist restructuring, mentioned in the introduction to this article. The metaphor points to the limits of commonly used 'shock' and 'disintegration' images, and hints to a lively and fertile world of remainders. It is an urban world in which precarious, *engagé* young artists struggle to 'avoid getting

stuck in the sterile white cube' (Lomasko 2017, 9) of the global contemporary art industry, and often live next to migrant workers.

Soon after its constitution, the Nasreddin collective met a group of researchers in international relations, geography and sociology then based at the Universities of Helsinki, Tampere and Turku all sharing an interest in the politics of global cities, capitalist expansion and artistic production, as well as in the geographies of migration and mobility. The coauthored stories of this article are a fruit of these encounters. They bring together artistic renditions of jokes and narrations by the migrants with academic reflections. The resultant trans-aesthetics forms part of an attempt to 'talk across worlds' (Lugones 2003; Staeheli and Nagar 2002).

We see this approach as a contribution to debates on the role of art in research on cities, cityness and urbanization (Jones 2011; Serino 2012) as well as aesthetic international political economy (Belfrage and Gammon 2017). For instance, *contra* definitions of the slum according to a set of technical parametres, Jones (2011) suggests that 'political art' can offer new vocabularies and voices, challenging the aesthetics that underpin views of the slum (Jones 2011; see also Serino 2012). McLean (2018) highlights the role of arts-based research or 'radical arts practice' as a critique of the totalizing knowledge claims put forth by the planetary urbanization thesis. While theories like planetary urbanization enable critical analyses of globalized geo-economic processes, McLean (2018) writes, they are not well equipped to account for lived experiences, situated or relational knowledges, or intersectional inequalities. Arts-based research forms part of her call for urban 'research journeys that embrace humility, dialogue, taking risks, and possibly [fail]' (McLean 2018). Our embrace of 'multilocational coauhtorship' is thus an attempt to open up the horizon of urban theory to knowledges that 'evolve in sites of struggle that seem distant to the academy' (Nagar 2015, 12).

Such a project would be impossible without 'a critical self-reflexivity that is attuned to our institutional and geopolitical positions' (Nagar 2015, 17). This has meant acknowledging and living through the asymmetric relations that characterize a collective such as ours, which brings together academic funding issued from a Northern European liberal democracy and workers—creatives, builders, laundry workers, carers and many more—laboring precariously in the large cities of the former Soviet Union (cf. Nagar 2015, 17; see also Mountz et al. 2003). Moreover, conceptualizing this research as multilocational coauthorship forced us not only to discuss the politics of authorship but also to face the limited accessibility and value of an academic journal article written in English for those whose stories this article builds on. Our project has not been able to escape 'extractive academic tendencies' (Tilley 2017, 28), but working with the trans-aesthetics of Nasreddin is still an attempt to challenge the idea of such a thing as 'raw' knowledge existing 'out there' and waiting for academic refinement generally by scholars in the Global North (Tilley 2017, 28). This has meant approaching Nasreddin's stories not as mere data, but rather as part of an integrated research process that troubles the temporality and categorizations of established qualitative methodologies (Fine 1992; Swarr and Nagar 2010). Without the sharpness of the migrants' jokes and stories and Olga Jitlina and Anna Tereshkina's artistic reworking of them, this article would not have been possible.
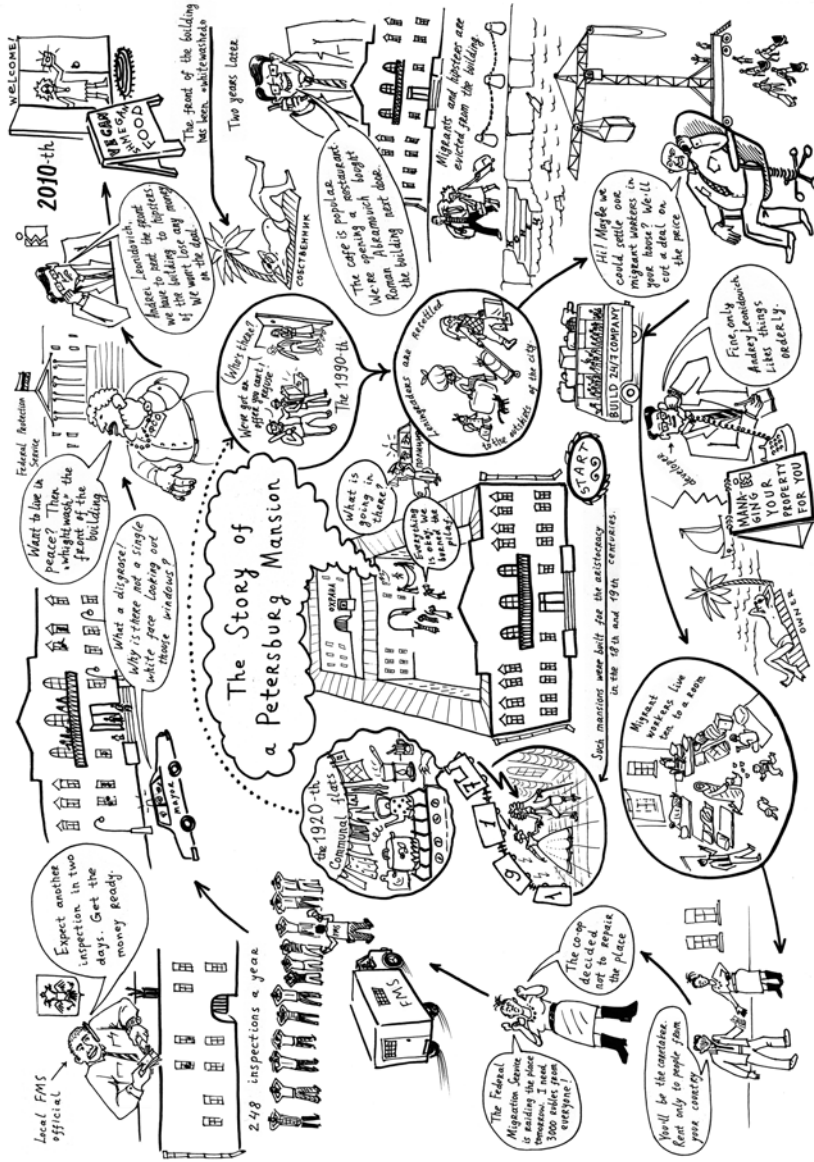
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Figure 1: The story of a Saint Petersburg mansion (Issue #4, 4–5). Drawing: Anna Tereshkina.

Playing the board-game of migration

Anna Tereshkina's drawing entitled 'The Story of a Petersburg Mansion' published in the first issue of *Nasreddin in Russia* offers an example of reading 'capitalism through migration' and 'sovereignty through mobility' (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013, 184; see also Moulier Boutang 1998). Illustrating the history of an 18th century mansion in the historical centre of St. Petersburg, the drawing uses a circular visual format similar to a board game (see Figure 1).

During the imperial times, the mansions of Saint Petersburg were owned by the nobility, who lived in those parts of the house that were closest to the street, while their servants were housed in the back of the block. After the 1917 revolution, the mansions were seized by state authorities and became communal apartments. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the housing stock was transferred from the state to municipalities and tenants were able to claim ownership of their apartments, leading to privatization and the emergence of a new housing market (Attwood 2012; Vihavainen 2009). In the drawing, the post-Soviet owner of the 'old, beautiful but fairly dilapidated mansion' (Issue #1, 5) is ironically depicted as relaxing under a palm tree, on a beach, presumably at a tacky holiday destination. Over the phone, he instructs a broker in Saint Petersburg, 'to rent only to people from (her) own country.' Unconcerned, the broker goes on to arrange mattress space for the migrants working for 'Construction Company 24/7.' The scene effectively captures the transnational dynamics of Saint Petersburg's capitalist urbanization, in which rich developers jet set freely across continents, migrants live in cramped dormitories, and the construction sector plays a prominent role in incorporating migrants into productive relations (cf. Buckley 2014, 339). In the next scene, ten migrants living in a single room are shown dealing with arbitrary rent-extraction, which constitutes a 'citywide state of exception' in migrant workers' lives not only in Saint Petersburg (Round and Kuznetsova 2016, 1017) but also in other parts of the world (Penglase 2009; Simone 2004). The chain of abuse is temporarily disrupted when a restaurant serving 'vegan shmegan food' opens in the building, in the 2010s, after an official from the Federal Protection Service announces that the façade of the building needs 'whitewashing.' In the final scene, hipsters move in.

The drawing based on the stories and jokes told by the Nasreddin in Russia joke contestants exposes how, in the post-Soviet space, the 'insertion of migration into labour' (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013, 180) takes place through the proliferation of borders in the urban everyday. Developers, state officers, social workers, migrants and their country (wo)men, acting as brokers and caretakers, contribute to these decentred practices of spatialized control. This nearly ubiquitous border has a 'sinewy and cross-cutting texture', marked by 'different intensities of control' (Burridge et al. 2017, 245)—from the ambivalent, complicit 'care and looking after' provided by brokers, to the enforcement apparatus of the Federal Migration Service. However, although often violent, the dominance is not inescapable. The drawing displays this by making fun of middle-aged wealthy proprietors sunbathing on exotic beaches.

The transnational mobility offered by wealth does not offer protection from Nasreddin's trickster politics, which here takes the form of ridiculing the

exploiters' ungraceful bodies lying on a beach. In another comic published on the cover of the first issue of the *Nasreddin in Russia* magazine, a police officer tells Nasreddin: 'Pay 5 thousand rubles or you spend the night at the precinct!', to which Nasreddin promptly replies 'What a cheap room! Is that the price for a month?' Daring a cynical joke on his dismal housing conditions, Nasreddin at the same time exposes a system that reduces his body to labour power and his existence to survival in hyper-precarity. He shows that he is fully aware of that system, and knows how to trick it. Nasreddin ruthlessly mocks the game, while—as a proper trickster—he continues to play it. His satirical humour arises from embodying the flexibility, adaptability, vulnerability, and precarity of labour upon which contemporary capitalism is predicated, and turning them into 'being cunning, deceitful, persistent, opportunistic, imaginative, a trickster' (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos 2008, 245).

On other pages of the Nasreddin magazine, moments of lightness and fun experienced by bodies that are not yet productive in the capitalist system also offer glimpses to spaces of escape. 'Illegal dorms for migrant workers', Nasreddin recounts, are usually located in decaying buildings that are 'filthy and unfit for habitation.' Yet, 'the courtyards of such houses are almost the only remaining public spaces in the city where one can let children play unattended all day long.' Even in conditions of impoverishment and decay, moments of sociality, conviviality and solidarity emerge—moments that are not entirely subsumed into the space and time of labour (Simone 2012, 2018). An illustration of this is offered by Ilhamjan Abdukaharov's short story 'The Inert Person' published in Issue #3 (10–12). The author recounts his friendship with 'Misha' (originally Mohammed), his co-worker from various petty jobs. Misha is a bit lazy, an 'inert' character. Failing to meet the standard of productivity expected from migrant labour, he often

Figure 2: Galya: 'Misha, a father-in-law should look nice and spiffy. Brush your hair and put on a clean shirt.' Misha's t-shirt had faded from the sun's warmth. Galya gave him a white t-shirt to wear (Issue #3, 10–12). Drawing: Anna Tereshkina.

risks getting fired. Abdukaharov's short story develops into a tale of relations and networks of care among people whose limited rights in the migrant metropolis render them cheap and disposable workforce (cf. Bishop 2012). When Misha is, again, about to get fired, his co-workers convince the manager to let him keep the job promising to take full responsibility for his actions. The story culminates with a scene of Misha's daughter's wedding taking place in Kyrgyzstan. Labouring in Russia, Misha is unable to attend the event in person. This makes him sad and depressed. However, his coworkers rush in to help. On the day of the wedding they all gather around a laptop computer in a warehouse where they work. A connection to the wedding party is established through Skype. Even Galya, the bad mouthed manager eager to sack Misha not only joins the event but wants to make sure Misha looks like a proper father-in-law appearing through the computer screen to his loved ones in Kyrgyzstan (see Figure 2).

Rather than treating the figure of the migrant as something given, naturalized and ahistorical, the artwork produced by the members of the Nasreddin collective traces instances and spaces through which both a specific migrant figure and migrancy as a precarious position are produced. Through them, it then explores moments of excess, possibilities for political alliances and solidarity across social categories. This may involve highlighting similarities between variously positioned people, as in Anna Terehkina's drawing (Figure 1) showing how capital accumulation through real-estate activity treats people. The drawing's Russian family carrying their belongings (the 'Leningraders', see Figure 1) calls to mind the privatizations of the 1990s. Many ordinary people who had acquired ownership

Figure 3: Landlady: 'The room is 10 thousand for Russians but 15 thousand for foreigners.' Nasreddin: 'I am Russian! I was just away on vacation for a long time' (Issue #1, 2). Drawing: Anna Tereshkina.

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of their rooms in the former Soviet communal apartments migrated to the suburbs, or even further in the region as the members of Russia's nascent capitalist class—businesses, banks, construction companies—began buying apartments in the city centre. Twenty years later, gentrification continues and both migrants and precarious hipsters are expelled from the mansion after Roman Abramovic buys a house in the vicinity. Contrary to the idea that migrant and national workers compete with each other, here Nasreddin's trickster politics brings to the fore individuals' common positions as workers beyond a national frame, foregrounding their similar relation to capital and city space.

This point is further illustrated by Nasreddin playing the game of 'passing' or making himself unrecognizable. In Abdukaharov's 'Story on the Inert Person'

Figure 4: Nasreddin: 'In my neighbourhood there are skinheads and anti-skinheads. But I get along with everybody.' Artist: 'How are you able to get along with everybody?' Nasreddin: 'Simple. We beat the shit out of each other.' (Issue #2, 8) Drawing: Anna Tereshkina.

we encountered Muhammed who started using the name of Misha after he migrated to Moscow. Another illustration of Nasreddin playing with his name and his Russianness is provided in Figure 3, which jokingly deals with the fact that rental prices for migrant workers are often inflated in Russia's migrant metropolises (e.g. Reeves 2016, 100). Moreover, in public debates migrant workers from Central Asia are discussed in xenophobic terms (Brednikova and Tkach 2012, 39). In one of the joke contests held during the collective work on Nasreddin, a participant told the story of Dima and Roma who realize that they are actually Dilmurat and Abdurahim, only to then take on a third identity as Dilmitry and Abduroman (Issue #2, 3).

Faced, again, with skinheads shouting 'Russia for Russians' in the St. Petersburg metro, Nasreddin responds by saying that 'I am actually a new Russian', ironically playing with the notion of *novyie russkie* (new Russians), which usually refers to the wealthy business classes that emerged during Russia's transition to market economy (Issue #2, 7). Such acts of dis-identification, as a form of politics, go beyond 'becoming native'; if integration is about immobility, dis-identification is about continuing mobility in the sense of being more than one (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013, 180). In one of the comics published in the second issue of *Nasreddin in Russia* a sweatsuit-wearing Nasreddin is engaged in a dialogue concerning skinheads with the artist Olga Jitlina (see Figure 4). Here, 'passing' by making oneself unrecognizable and indiscernible revolves around speaking the masculinized language of the urban working class: solving fights with fists if necessary.

In a short story published in the fifth and most recent issue of *Nasreddin in Russia,* Zarnigor Omonillaeva recalls a Nasreddin joke that she learned in her childhood and that revolves around Nasreddin first attending a wedding party dressed as a beggar and then returning to the same party wearing a gown made out of the finest silk (Issue #5, 22–24). Nasreddin's explanation for the fact that looking rich, he is treated with more hospitality is that the hosts of the wedding think that 'it is the hungry ones who are dressed as if they were rich.' In her short story, Omonillaeva relates this trickster story's lesson to her experiences working as a human rights activist and legal aide to Moscow's migrant women. With the paradoxical lesson of the joke, she reflects on the difference that one's appearance can make in Russian courts and what this means for the notions of justice and equality.

Street cleaning: living and loving the city

> It was the love at first sight. (…) When I got off the train, not even half an hour passed that I understood—I am here forever. (…) Through the proud flawless beauty, I suddenly saw your helplessness. You could not take care of yourself on your own, you were ashamed to admit it but you needed me, you needed me so much! (Issue #4, 6).

Even if migration starts from movement and relocation, its target is not relocation, but the transformation of social space (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2007, 225). A transformative approach to space also informs the personified way in which Nasreddin addresses the city of Saint Petersburg. In Issue #4,

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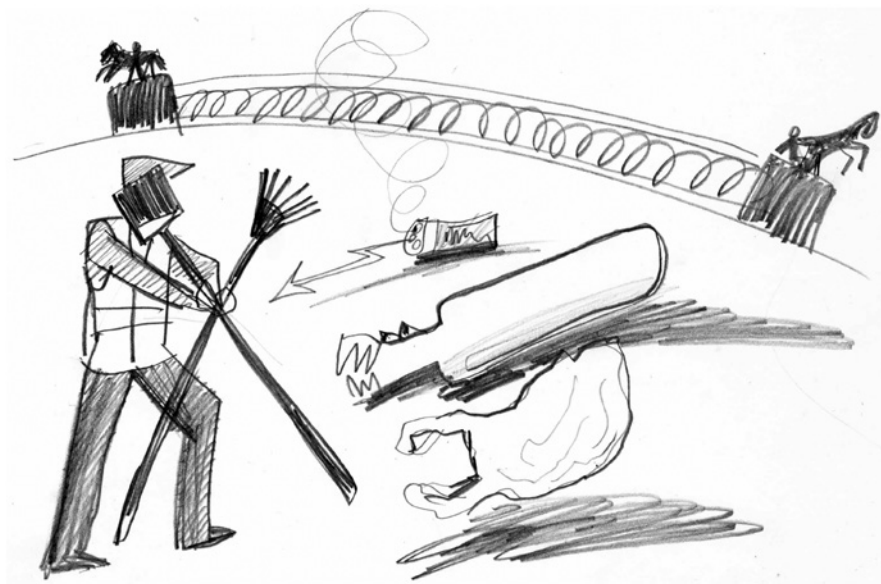
Figure 5: The invisible cleaner of Nevski (Issue #4, 8). Drawing: Anna Tereshkina.

the theme of invisible (re)productive labour is addressed through a representation of Nasreddin's affective, embodied relationship with city spaces. In the poem opening the issue, Nasreddin narrates the city as a human body requiring care (cf. Twigg et al. 2011; Vaittinen 2017). In the drawing that accompanies the narration, trash and automobiles are also personified, but take on a malevolent appearance. The invisible cleaner of Nevski (the main street of Saint Petersburg) is depicted as heroically defending the city from such malevolent forces with a broom and a dust pan. The worker's connection to the city is enabled by the spatio-temporality of street cleaning work, which differs from that of the visible day-time economy. Street cleaners are not part of the idealized and romantic image of St Petersburg, but they are, nonetheless, essential to the creation and maintenance of the image of the city as 'familiar to everyone' (cf. Herod and Aguiar 2006, 427).

Nasreddin narrates the mechanical and routinized labour of cleaning through the metaphor of nocturnal affective care. The city becomes a living body being cared for by a migrant worker, and, in so doing, its space is transformed. On the one hand, this embodied, intimate personification brings to the fore the value of invisible reproductive labour, which enables the day-time productive economy to function. To enable day-time production, somebody needs to make the city usable and comfortable for the corporate and tourist economy, ensuring the 'perfect look' of the canonical cityscape of Saint Petersburg (see Figure 5). Narrating the city through the trope of love enables differential space to emerge: The night time during which Nasreddin takes care of the needs of the city counters the rationalized space of capitalist production. On the other hand, this narration puts care and intimacy at the heart of the relationship between the worker and the city. The latter needs somebody to work on its emotional and affective 'needs'—it requires someone to heal its wounds and bruises, as Nasreddin narrates.

This story of night labour, love and care subverts the power relations embedded in a division of labour where migrants take up the otherwise 'unwanted', undignified work (see also Wills et al. 2009). The imperial city now calls and craves for Nasreddin's help. The notion of 'pride' is a familiar trope that refers to St Petersburg's legacies as an imperial city, the cultural capital of Russia and a popular tourist attraction. This 'proud flawless beauty' now admits to Nasreddin that it cannot function without the invisible labour of migrant workers.

The disruptive potential of this story vis-à-vis activist and critical scholarly narratives of urban globalization cannot be understated. In the global city hypothesis, global economic restructuring is seen to make a handful of cities attractive for the operations of footloose capital. In such command and control centres of the global economy, there is a demand for low-paid migrant labour to service the needs of the professional and managerial elite (Sassen 1984). By recounting his story through the trope of love and caring for the city, Nasreddin exposes how these narratives, even when told from a critical standpoint, may hide the centrality of maintenance and reproductive work, and cast migrants in the role of servicing the professional and managerial elite seen to constitute a city as 'global.' By narrating attraction towards a city differently—through a migrant's 'labour of love' and care for the tired body of the city—Nasreddin is able to escape, to momentarily desert the regimes of subordination and subjection of this post-Soviet global city, articulating a different kind of migrant metropolis into being.

In the Bronze Horseman video by Olga Jitlina,[2] Nasreddin's trickster politics further twist the roles assigned to street cleaners in the migrant division of labour. The video first shows a set of migrant women on the Senate Square of St. Petersburg, the famous site of the 1825 anti-slavery Decembrist revolt. The women are shown cleaning and taking care of the Bronze Horseman—a statue of the city's founder Peter the Great and an iconic element in the touristscape of the city. About halfway through the video, the tone changes. The cleaners throw away their brooms and buckets and begin to wildly laugh at Peter. Towards the end of the video, these women workers acting silly become part of the touristscape: they are being photographed in front of the statue in the company of tourists from different parts of the world.

These moments of coming together in public space highlights that in Nasreddin's trickster politics organizing is not formal militant mobilization against one's oppression. Rather, it refers to the creative force fueling societal transformation and alternative forms of existence (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013, 192). News by the Utopian News Agency operating under the slogan 'news the way it should be' have been published in the *Nasreddin in Russia* magazine. The news point out ways of liberating the city centre for public use, constructing a 'model of a cozy and humane city-as-home whose residents are not tied to a particular place' (#1, 7). Such alternative forms of existence go to the heart of the Nasreddin project. Its visualizations, narrations and performances are about sharing urban space in ways that challenge the capitalistic logics of the migrant metropolis as well attempts to confine cultural and artistic production to sterile 'white cubes' (Lomasko 2017) or 'new creative sanctuaries' (Gabowitsch 2016). This is how Nasreddin's trans-aesthetics creates conditions for what Papadopoulos and Tsianos refer to as 'thick everyday performative and practical justice', practices that make everyday mobility and justice possible

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(Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013, 192). Parks and courtyards of big apartment houses offer a sanctuary, becoming spaces for members of different social groups to meet, share anecdotes and socialize. Counter spaces vis-à-vis the abstract capitalist spaces of production and consumption are imagined through laughter and jokes. Nasreddin's organization, then, is about 'changing ordinary existence in a way that allows people to move when they want or need to and to maintain a liveable life when they reside in a certain place' (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013, 192). For Nasreddin, this means living on the streets of St Petersburg as if it was one's home: brushing one's teeth, drying one's hair and roaming the city in a bathrobe and slippers (Issue #1, 7).

Conclusions

In this article, through the trans-aesthetics Nasreddin, we have narrated Saint Petersburg as a late capitalist or neocapitalist post-Soviet migrant metropolis—a lived urban space in which the racialised inequalities that mark transnational labour mobilities intersect (De Genova 2015; Mbembe and Nuttall 2004). Arguments about the ubiquitous borders saturating the interior of the nation-state and shaping urban spaces of the everyday, while not new, have been the starting point of our narration. However, our main intent was to narrate how Nasreddin reinscribes Saint Petersburg as a migrant metropolis through his trickster politics. In these concluding reflections, we wish to emphasize the importance of abstaining from overstating the novelty of such dynamics—especially in postimperial contexts such as Russia and the city of Saint Petersburg. As has been argued on the notion of a migrant metropolis, 'a critical approach to migration may have something significant to contribute to formulating a rigorously *postcolonial* approach to what, for better or worse, we have come to call globalisation' (De Genova 2015, 3).

As evidenced by Anna Tereshkina's housing board game, by acts of dis-identification as well as by the street cleaners' intimate relation with the monumentality of imperial Saint Petersburg, Nasreddin's post-Soviet trickster politics are located within the logic of global coloniality (Krivonos and Näre 2019; Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012). These stories vividly demonstrate the continuity of the relations of dominance and subordination in the contemporary forms of racialized capitalism and labour that constitute the postsocialist Saint Petersburg as a migrant metropolis. An act of laughing right in the face of the city's key imperial-tourist landmark calls attention to how imperial geographies continue to enable the functioning of urban capitalist spaces. While underscoring such continuities in global coloniality, Nasreddin's trickster politics also pushes the limits of Western philosophical geographies of urban mobilities and nomadism. Deleuze and Guattari famously framed their ontological 'nomadology' as 'the opposite of history.' They argued that the latter is 'always written from the sedentary point of view', and through a state-centred lens (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 25). Challenging such onto-epistemological nomadism, Nasreddin's trans-aesthetics offers a historicized 'nomadology.' In it, mobility is part of the embodied struggles that mark post-Soviet capitalist urban spaces and that are rooted in the cultural geographies of Nasreddin Hodja. Here, Nasreddin's

tricksterism extends the notion of escape to the border spaces between Europe and Asia. This helps *deprovincialize* peripheries like Central Asia by showing that although not easily visible in the global formation, these spaces are essential to the functioning of the migrant metropolises of late capitalism (cf. Chakrabarty 2000; Mbembe and Nuttall 2004, 351).

We have suggested that Nasreddin's trans-aesthetics emerge from what Richa Nagar refers to as 'multilocational coauhtorship' and defines as an effort to 'produce knowledges that can travel meaningfully and responsibly within, between, and across worlds' (Nagar 2015, 14). It is a gesture toward making social research more receptive and inclusive to a variety of voices and aesthetics. Multilocational coauthorship suggests a 'reconfiguration of research cultures' so as to incorporate actors who do not necessarily identify as researchers (Marres 2012, 76–77; Toyosaki 2018). While this article has been an attempt at talking between worlds and 'muddying the waters' (Nagar 2015), working on it has also made us more aware of the structures and political economies of knowledge production that bind us—of the coloniality of academic knowledge production. Moreover, as we are here writing primarily for an academic audience, for a journal that is published in English and behind a paywall, the risk of objectifying, re-capturing and extracting value from the figure of Nasreddin remains high. There is a continuing need to rethink how the sharing of knowledge is better compensated and stories returned to the 'intellectual commons' in a more effective way (see also Tilley 2017).

In conclusion then, we choose to abstain from overly final—and overly cynical—judgments on what actually does or does not amount to politics or resistance in Nasreddin's tongue-in-cheek attempts at escaping the migrant metropolis of Saint Petersburg. In addition to subverting and mocking the modern polity, empire, and the Federal Migration Service, Nasreddin, we believe, mocks and tricks academics and artists as well for their totalizing attempts to structure the world through theoretical labels and categories. The night before the exhibition on the fourth issue of Nasreddin opened, construction workers from Uzbekistan labouring next to the gallery venue visited the art space, and picked up a couple of copies of the issue. We later found the magazines in a trash bin right next to the entrance to the metro station. We interpret this episode as another escape from the fixation on control—whether it is by state, by academic knowledge or artistic production. Here, Nasreddin poignantly reminded us of the limits of the academic knowledge production apparatuses and the sterility of the 'white cube' of the art industry. As artists and researchers, we did not avoid being laughed at, mocked and tricked by Nasreddin.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1   for a video of one of the meetings, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3Vi-bopqpOg&feature=youtu.be.
2   https://youtu.be/RU68DUQL6_c.

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