the postsocialist 'missing other' of transnational feminism?

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introduction

In April 2015, we organised a Swedish Research Council funded workshop on 'Postcolonial and Postsocialist Dialogues: Intersections, Opacities, Challenges in Feminist Theorizing and Practice'. Our interest in holding this conference arose from our shared experiences of working and living in Sweden as 'non-Swedes',[1] through our specific postcolonial and postsocialist positions. Originating from non-European Russian/Soviet ex-colonies (North Caucasus and Central Asia), Madina sees herself as both a postcolonial and postsocialist scholar, yet academics from mainstream institutions in the West/North often refuse to see her colonial difference from Russia. Suruchi's postcolonial positionality has been shaped through the legacy of her parents' anti-colonial activism in India and the spatial-colonial contexts of academic institutions in the UK, where she studied and worked. As a feminist scholar who grew up in Soviet/post-Soviet Estonia, Redi has experienced feeling out of sync in Western academic contexts where her positionality is often read as similar to the West but not similar enough, while also registering as different but somehow *not different enough*. Our respective academic journeys made us realise that there were conversations that needed to be had between postcolonial and postsocialist feminists. From Madina's experience of giving keynote lectures at the conference 'REDaktura REDacting. TransYugoslav Feminisms: Women's Heritage Revisited' (in Zagreb, 2011) and the conference 'Postcolonialism and East-Central European Literatures' (in Bratislava, 2014), we knew that attempts to connect postsocialist Eastern Europe with postcolonial discourses have been made, but that these either did not include postcolonial feminists or did not focus on feminism.

The aim of the conference was to spark and consolidate focused dialogues on theoretical, temporal and spatial intersections of postcolonial and postsocialist feminisms, investigating the echoing and untranslatable experiences, concepts and ideas between the two critical discourses. Through the energy of the conference, we quickly realised that postcolonial scholars, who were mostly from the former colonies of the British Empire, found it difficult to engage with the particularities of postsocialist contexts. Postsocialist scholars, mostly of Eastern European origin, on the contrary, seemed more at ease applying concepts from postcolonial feminism to criticise their subalternisation. Moreover, the participants' interventions demonstrated that the postcolonial feminists clearly saw themselves as an established part—if not the core—of transnational feminisms, with their own well-defined agenda in the global feminist division of

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[1] Our markers of identity changed once we crossed geographical and national boundaries. In our specific location, living and working in Sweden, we were tagged with a new category—'non-Swedish'—though in very different ways and to very different effects. For further details, please see Koobak and Thapar-Björkert (2012).

labour. By contrast, the interactions at the conference revealed that postsocialist feminists are still not recognised as legitimate representatives of transnational feminist traditions, and lack an established agenda of their own, in the eyes of their postcolonial and Western counterparts.

All the while, we are not arguing for or holding on to any kind of fixed positions of postcolonial and postsocialist feminisms, because we know from our personal experiences that there are always overlaps and border spaces between these positionalities. As feminist scholars living and working in Sweden as 'non-Swedes' and dis-identifying with Western feminist academia through our specific postcolonial and postsocialist positions, we are attuned to our 'in-between' sensibilities (see Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert and Koobak, 2016). This space is always changing, a realm where new meanings, concepts and tactical identifications are generated to destabilise and erode the established and fixed geo-cultural, disciplinary and epistemic models, be they Western, non-Western, Northern or Southern. Yet even if we acknowledge that the terms 'postcolonial feminism' and 'postsocialist feminism' are equally ambiguous, porous and not at all parallel, we need these terms in order to address a set of issues within transnational feminisms.[2]

In what follows, we will unpack some of our observations from the aforementioned conference and trace possible ways to change. In particular, we will address the main reasons for the strained dialogue between postcolonial and postsocialist feminists that we observed, taking into account the temporal dynamics, the question of race and the methodological stumbling points seen in the frame of transnational feminism.

discordant timelines

The displacement of the Second World as a 'non-region' from the global feminist agenda has been addressed by several commentators, among them Jennifer Suchland (2015). Following from Benedict Anderson's (1983) well-known concept of 'homogenous empty time' in reference to nationalism, Suchland (2015, p. 86) discusses 'feminist homogenous empty time' (the assumed temporality of global women's movements) as a dominant periodisation that erases or frames as a time lag all experiences that 'do not line up' with it. This results in difference being 'understood as points on a vertical scale of inferiority/ superiority, presence/lack or advancement/backwardness, rather than on a horizontal field of plurality in which no point has definitional advantage over the others' (Sarkar, 2004, p. 326). This temporal othering has been criticised in the context of postcolonial feminism, but it is persistent in the discussion of feminism in postsocialist countries (at least, those identified as European) because of these countries' desired unity with 'Western' Europe, even if they remain marginal to it.

We argue that the presumably egalitarian and inclusive frame of transnational feminism has failed to advance a truly comparative, cross-regional and transcultural intellectual approach. In a situation where the emergence of transnational feminisms is 'deeply indebted to postcolonial studies' (Briggs, 2016, p. 993), postsocialist feminism does not register as relevant cultural and political knowledge. Even when newer transnational feminist collections include and discuss postsocialist subjects, they do so from within a strict, Western-centric frame that continues to represent itself as universal and delocalised. Leela Fernandes (2013) argues that transnationalism emerged at a time when the old Cold War area studies that were institutionalised within the US academia started to wind up due to the collapse of the socialist system. The new transnational approaches continued to be affected by these US-centric 'optics' despite their claiming to have moved beyond such outdated dichotomies.

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[2] We use the term 'postsocialist' to refer to the post-Soviet countries as well as Central and Eastern European countries in the former Soviet sphere of influence, whereas the term post-Soviet refers exclusively to the former republics of the USSR. We prefer the term 'postsocialist' to the Cold War-era term 'Second World' because of the latter's latent ideology of a universal modernisation narrative and its elevation of the 'First World' (*cf*. Chari and Verdery, 2009, p. 18). We are aware of the important differences between the countries in the region, but we also acknowledge the need for some overarching term to refer to the shared legacy of Soviet presence across the region. Furthermore, there are many problems with the notion of 'Western feminism', which is a contested term; yet it persists. Despite our dissatisfaction with the precision of the terms, we will be using them in this article in the hope of showing the need to constantly trouble them.

The schematic juxtaposition of postcolonial and postsocialist trajectories shows that the two do intersect in various ways, but this happens at different moments in time and for different reasons. These intersections lead, nevertheless, to similar results and even possible coalitions, because ultimately they manifest different reactions to the same phenomenon of coloniality. The postsocialist temporality is different from the postcolonial one because it is viewed as an abrupt historical rupture with discredited socialist modernity, rather than as a slow progression within capitalist 'Western' modernity, as in the case of postcolonial temporality. Thus, terms such as the 'return to Europe', 'transition' and 'transformation' have inadvertently informed much of the politics in the postsocialist space.

The development of postcolonial and postsocialist discourses reminds us of a musical counterpoint: in many ways the two discourses coincide, but they developed at different historical moments and in different political contexts, which has prevented them from hearing each other (Walsh and Mignolo, 2018). The early postcolonial discourses were largely leftist, anti-capitalist and progressivist, without questioning the universalised Western norms of education, human rights, democracy and women's emancipation (Ahmad, 1992; Chakrabarty, 2000). Postsocialist discourses, on the contrary, were marked by an almost emotional rejection of everything socialist and a fascination with Western knowledge, at a time when postcolonial scholars still largely rehearsed the leftist anti-capitalist discourses and, at least indirectly, opted for socialism. Later, a number of postsocialist activists and scholars, both from Central and Eastern Europe and also the non-European former Soviet colonies, started reinterpreting the socialist legacy in a less negative way, criticising the Western infiltration of academic institutions, NGOs and other bodies of knowledge production in postsocialist countries (Shih, 2005; Shakirova, 2008; Slapšak, 2013). This happened at a point when some postcolonial thinkers were beginning to develop their anti-Western modernity discourses (see, for instance, McClintock, 1995; Mbembe, 2001; Stoler, 2010). Although objectively the two positions intersected, the traditions they had in mind were completely different and they did not hear each other, just like they do not hear each other today.

divergent understandings of race

In transnational feminist studies, racialised positionalities of 'Third World' women, shaped by historical processes of imperialism and colonialism, are often understood as sites of specific knowledge production, dissemination and consumption. This epistemic privilege falsely assumes that it is only the women of the Global South who are legitimately allowed to discuss race and racism as their authentic experience. Originating as a critique of the US/Western-centric scholarship, transnational feminism quickly became a proxy for 'women of colour', thus incorporating the postcolonial feminist agenda, yet often preserving the essentialist binaries of Cold War knowledge production. Within this logic, postsocialist feminists become trespassers when and if they focus on race or issues of colonisation in their scholarship.

East Europeans nations' 'unspoken insistence on their whiteness' (Imre, 2005, p. 82), their hesitation to identify with other colonised subjects (Kelertas, 2006), together with their desire to 'return to Europe' through processes of democratisation and Europeanisation (Suchland, 2011) have also shaped the outlook of some feminists from postsocialist countries. This 'catching up with the West' mode leaves them distanced from conceptualisations of race and racism, and perversely produces a troubling relationship to racialisation and whiteness as the invisible norm (McClintock, 1995). Furthermore, it leads to ignoring the colonial and racialised aspects of feminist struggles and thinking in other regions, to seeing them as a 'foreign' experience that has no relevance to postsocialist women and which they are entitled to reject. The aforementioned rejection of former official state socialist ideologies plays an important role in this process: proletarian internationalism and solidarity with the struggling women of the Global South are largely seen as relics of the past, discursive traces of the rejected socialist modernity. Assigning race to 'others', an aspect that has underpinned postcolonial feminist struggles, is problematically reproduced in postsocialist discourse as a tool for achieving 'whiteness' (see also Lewis, 2011). Unsurprisingly, this configuration forecloses any possibility for many postsocialist feminists to recognise a shared reality between postcolonial and postsocialist subjects, while in fact being subjected to processes of Europeanisation is precisely where their common struggles could converge.

Previously, race and racism were framed in state socialist countries as exclusively a feature of the capitalist system: the Czarist regime as Soviet modernity's own darker past (in the case of the Soviet Union) and/or the Ottoman and Habsburg empires' dark legacies (in the case of the Eastern European socialist countries). The 'eternal socialist/communist present' was invariably regarded as a kingdom of racial, sexual and class egalitarianism. This is despite the fact that the darker, colonial side of socialist modernity all the while demonstrated systemic discrimination, racial tensions and violence against ethnic minorities, forced assimilation and the elimination of cultures, histories and languages of ethnic groups that did not fall within the frame of the prescribed body politics (e.g., mass deportations under Stalin; systematic ethnic discrimination in Yugoslavia; and racialisation of Roma and Sinti populations in Romania, Bulgaria and other Eastern European socialist countries) (Tlostanova, 2010; Guchinova, 2012; Annus, 2017).

Today, some postsocialist feminists have made an important shift away from their previous unwillingness to notice race in their own experience. This shift is, nonetheless, asymmetrical as it focuses entirely on the racialisation of postsocialist peoples by the West/North, and never on their own possible involvement in the reproduction of modernity's racial hierarchies, for instance in relation to refugees, migrants and other non-European groups (for whom there is little or no sense of collective responsibility or guilt in mainstream Eastern European societies). In political discourses, Eastern European states insist on their forgotten status as 'victims' of communism, who were 'abandoned' by the liberal democratic capitalist West. As Dace Dzenovska (2010, p. 498) notes on Latvian responses to anti-racist initiatives: 'racism was thought to be the problem of former colonial powers […], rather than of the victims of colonial, imperial or socialist oppression, which is how Latvians often saw themselves'. Some postsocialist feminists apply elements of postcolonial discourse to their situation to protest against their own racialisation within the West and, indirectly, against being taxonomised at the same level as people from the Global South. Once again, postcolonial feminists might be unable to understand or identify with postsocialist women, since the former draw on a history of racial technologies that does not fit well with the imaginaries of postsocialist or post-Soviet subjects.

methodological intersections and differences, and possible ways out

The 2000s saw the first attempts to liken the postsocialist condition to the postcolonial one (Moore, 2001; Chari and Verdery, 2009), particularly in relation to the non-European, 'Muslim peripheries' of the Soviet Union (in the Caucasus and Central Asia). However, such comparisons are fraught with ambiguities, as the colonial experience in these regions differed considerably from that of countries colonised by other European powers.[3] At the same time, rather than take into account a more dynamic interplay of ideological and cultural factors—which Deniz Kandiyoti (2002) and Megoran *et al.* (2012) argue is necessary to understand these societies—Western area studies that flooded the non-European colonial spaces of the former Soviet empire have mostly applied the usual developmentalist tools. What these tensions suggest is that the deployment of either static understandings of postcolonial theory, developed in response to the experience of bourgeois Western European empires, or descriptive developmentalist tools with their implications of 'saving backwards nations and their women' is inadequate to understand the non-European colonial spaces of the former Soviet empire.

In their rethinking of transnational feminist agendas, Jacqui M. Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2010, p. 42) attempt to differentiate between 'transnational' as a *status quo*, normative category, and 'transnational' with a radical decolonising edge. How could a radical, decolonising transnational feminism engage with the darker sides of

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[3] Soviet notions of modernity and progress and the creation of national elites in the Caucasus and Central Asia parallel similar attempts by European imperialist policymakers, such as the British in India. In particular, there were similarities in relation to the state actions of the Bolsheviks on the women's question in the Muslim peripheries (see Edgar, 2006). However, Soviet modernisation campaigns aggressively intervened in the 'inner realm' of Central Asian cultural life (Chatterjee, 1993; Dave, 2007; Kandiyoti, 2007) where other imperial powers hesitated to interfere in colonial societies (Thapar-Björkert, 2015). Ultimately, the Soviet policy of accelerated nation-building in the peripheries helped to create the proverbial colonial comprador elites (including their New Women) much faster and more successfully than in the case of the British or French empires. Yet by the 1980s, if not earlier, the children of these elites were already starting to develop their own cultural and political decolonial sensibilities (Suleimenov, 1975).

both Western capitalist *and* (post)socialist modernities? Furthermore, how can this be done not in isolation but in a dynamic dialogue? We believe this can be done only through a major methodological shift away from the dominance of US and Western European academic discourses, which only allow postsocialist factual material to be analysed using Western-centric methodological tools, including the postcolonial lens.

Transnational inclusive methodology should take into account the close interrelation between being, existence and agency; the principle of relational and experiential rationality; and the building of knowledge, not outside human experience and not by presenting the problem outside the context, but through a never-ending process of learning, unlearning and relearning, humbly listening to others and entering their worlds with a loving (Lugones, 2003, p. 96) rather than agonistic perception. Such a methodology has to be grounded in complexity and relationality, complementarity and reciprocity, and with a shift from the subject-object division to a subject-subject type of learning and understanding.

Co-relationality as a methodological principle stresses the weaving patterns connecting differences rather than focusing on the 'nature of the components' as such, to paraphrase Édouard Glissant (1997, p. 190). Successful feminist coalitions across racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, ideological and other borders, based on principles of co-relations, are always in the making. They are the opposite of essentialist standpoint positions trapped in the limitations of their victimhood and unwilling to build alliances because they follow a modern/colonial agonistic logic.

Theorists of transnational feminism make the case for collaboration, but our experience has shown us that it often remains just a slogan due to the ongoing coloniality of knowledge, which divides people into knowledge producers, disseminators and passive consumers (Mignolo and Tlostanova, 2012). In transnational feminist practices that we have observed, traces of coloniality of knowledge lead to an impasse and the failure of collaborations that could otherwise become effective tools both in academic and activist spheres. This would also require merging these spheres with the idea that methodology should have a clear goal of benefitting societies that are necessarily active participants in research, and not merely its objects.

Reflecting back on the conference, we suggest that the power asymmetry in relation to transnational feminism can be shaken, if direct South-to-South and South-to-semi-periphery coalitions are developed without Western mediation. As we have argued here, academics and activists from the West/North need to stop prescribing the terms of the conversation and the categories of analysis, classifying others according to their proximity to or remoteness from the Western norm. This in effect means a refusal to start any analysis from the Western feminist blueprint and a refusal to build any position or idea into the pre-existing Western feminist template. Designing alternative canons and drawing on re-emerging genealogies are difficult but necessary tasks to carry out before we can hope to start dismantling transnational feminism's hidden binaries and persistent hang-ups. A critical analysis, taking into account the main points outlined in this article in relation to postcolonial and postsocialist feminisms, is a necessary condition for turning transnational feminist discourses into a truly alternative global theory and practice, free from the coloniality of knowledge.

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