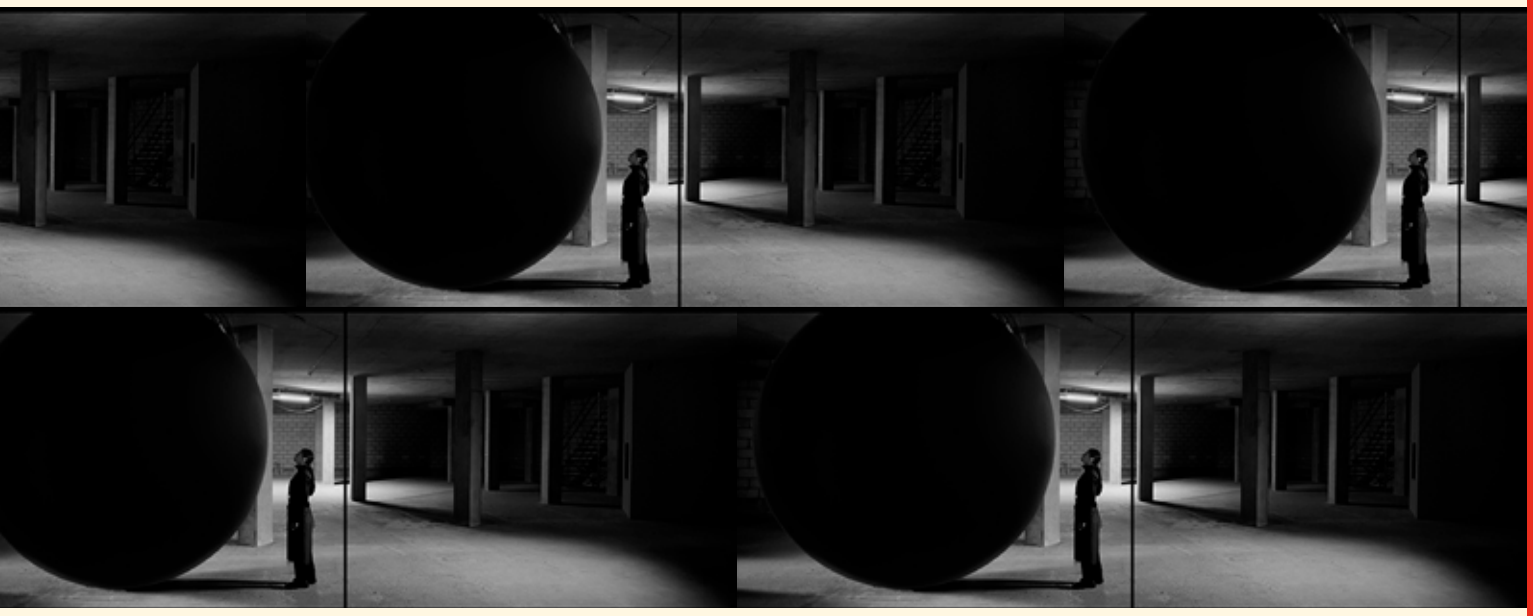

Image from the video *In Vitro* by Larissa Sansour.

THE DEADLOCKS OF MEMORY AND THE (NO LONGER) POST-SOVIET COLONIALITY, OR CAN MEMORY BE DECOLONIZED?

by **Madina Tlostanova**

abstract

The article reflects if it is possible to decolonize memory in the former Soviet republics that have been gradually moving centrifugally towards different political allegiances. It is needed to go beyond the postcolonial/post-Soviet national optic and consider inter-imperial (Doyle) and non-nation-state post-imperial (Burbank and Cooper) models and other unrealized alternatives. The article focuses on coloniality of memory critically engaging with various concepts including "dismembering" (Thiong'o), "mankurtism" (Aitmatov), "Myalism" (Brodber), "multidirectional memory" (Rothberg), "double critique" (Khatibi), "species memory" (Kaiser and Thiele), and the "third way" (Wynter). It sets the goal of tracing possible paths for rethinking of what it means to remember in a human way and what it takes to engender a global mnemonic transversal network of solidarity for refuturing.

KEYWORDS: coloniality of memory, the no longer post-Soviet, victimhood narratives rivalry, multiple critique, relationality.

"No one bears witness for the witness."
Paul Celan

The (no longer) post-soviet in the title of this article is my desperate attempt to overcome the still prevailing urge to lump all the former Soviet countries together in some distant past, ignoring the dynamics of their present and future by marking them with the empty prefix "post-". This prompts us to reflect once again on the pitfalls of the euromodern conception of time and the uneasy place it reserves for those who are left behind. For the last several decades major contemporary Western theorists of temporality have insisted on the cancellation of the future. This is how Bifo Berardi formulated the problem in his book of the same name.[1] Mark Fisher offered a metaphor of the horrible corpse of the past that we cannot leave behind.[2] Derrida[3] suggested the idea of hauntology that keeps human societies bound to previous unfinished

scenarios. Lisa Baraitser[4] addressed current temporality as "enduring time" – a time that came to a halt and stopped becoming. Aleyda Assmann came up with the idea of "interrupted" time[5] as a form of betrayal of modernity's initial impulse of linking time with perpetual and accelerating movement understood as progress and development, of reaching a social utopia, which replaced religious eschatology. Indeed, falling out of progressivist teleology leaves people confused and unsettled.

However, these typically decontextualized Euromodern reflections acquire a special disturbing meaning in the case of the former Soviet republics who in the early 1990s experienced a painful exclusion from the course of the petrified global history and found themselves in an impasse from which they emerged with divergent allegiances, dreams, and ideas of the past and the future. The early post-Soviet congealed time was a result of the sudden cancellation of the previous progressivist narrative. The latter stemmed from Euromodernity yet was always positioned as different and opposite to and rejected by its capitalist rival. The lost continuity of the Soviet myth, even in its negative form, intensified the sensibility of the void[6] and led to ossification of the early post-Soviet cultures into incoherent collages of contradictory ideological remnants. The next three decades gradually took the former Soviet countries away from this impasse and led them in different directions and towards old and new loyalties and differently framed problems of national identity, ideology, and contemporaneity facing the challenge of inserting themselves back into the larger historical time and global order. The latter becomes increasingly problematic in the current disjointed time, a temporality pregnant with catastrophe which has not happened yet, but whose scale and consequences are already known and, therefore, belong to the past[7]. This temporal aberration cancels the possibility of a simple rejection of one model of modernity in favor of the other that is deemed more correct or authentic. Therefore, the post-Soviet impasse results not in a happy ending of fully joining Euromodernity on equal terms but in many cases, in a nervous condition of a semi-peripheral anxiety that does not have a choice but to juggle several different victimhood narratives and practice its trickster's skills in order to have any future.

"THE EARLY POST-SOVIET CONGEALED TIME WAS A RESULT OF THE SUDDEN CANCELLATION OF THE PREVIOUS PROGRESSIVIST NARRATIVE."

MOREOVER, THREE and a half decades that have passed since the collapse of the state-socialist system, have been filled with many violent conflicts and several wars, hope and disillusionment, poverty and inequality, centrifugal efforts to separate and go their own ways, and a bitter realization of the inescapable new or old/new dependencies. The process of emancipation from the Soviet commemoration regimes and building alternative, mostly national ones, has been continuously marked by exhausting monument wars, archival fever, and weaponization of archeology.[8] This newest history hardly allows to continue putting the former Soviet republics together under the "post-Soviet" umbrella misnomer. It dismisses the experience of the last thirty years as a result of which multiple and diverse groups who had a misfortune of being born on the territory that was claimed by the Russian/Soviet empire as its own and therefore did not have a choice to not be part of it, have been finally able to choose alternative allegiances and, in some cases, restore their forgotten histories and memories (linked with other empires, with national histories or alternative political and cultural coalitions). Can we insist today that the memory of Soviet repressions including its colonialist versions is a sufficient condition for uniting all former Soviet colonies into a community, particularly that they have radically different trajectories towards their current conditions and their ideas/ideals of the future are extremely divergent as well? Can a Soviet version of coloniality be a good enough reason to link Ukraine and Kazakhstan, Chechnya and Estonia? Yes and no.

What do we share if anything?

The post-Soviet coloniality is not a homogenous, unanimously shared belief or a human condition but a specific, complex, heterogeneous form of modernity control grounded in the Russian and later Soviet imperial matrix and its current distorted resurrections. Its major characteristic is mimicking secondariness, a chronic catching-up mode, a learned inferiority that periodically explodes into rebellion against the demonized West[9]. A constant adjustment of the imperial tactics (including memory censorship) to the incredible variety of peoples and cultures that the empire attempted to swallow in its eternal rivalry with other modern empires had led to diverse and contradictory policies and hence, to different experiences and memories of the Russian and Soviet coloniality by the colonized nations. Having a complete arsenal of Western colonialist tools at hand, the Russian empire and later the USSR adapted them to their own changing needs in different regions and local historical contexts which were always inevitably reacting to the global situation.

Thus in the case of the North Caucasus the local population was depicted by imperial propaganda as uncivilizable savages and a losing race that must leave the historical stage to give its territories to Russians, while in the case of Ukraine the tactic was more of a forced affinity and "Russification"[10] as a specific violent official imperial nationalist assimilatory tactic of eliminating memory, identity, language, dignity, and turning Ukrainians into a special sort of inferior Russians with a cultivated gratitude for being allowed to assimilate. In several former Soviet colonies, the memory of preceding unions, alliances, and dependencies as well as periods of national sovereignty overweighs any Soviet/Russian allegiances and materializes in attempts to rejoin with these former allies or patrons at least in revamping the glorious memories of the past. In other cases, such opportunities were

The Museum of Victims of Political Repression, Tashkent, Uzbekistan. PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

limited or severed by the empire early on and national independence remained solely a matter of political mythmaking. Therefore, the trajectories of the post-Soviet decoloniality also differ a lot which is reflected in the collective memory construction, preservation, manipulation, and resurrection. The Janus-faced Russian/Soviet coloniality[11] remains the common denominator of these diverse experiences and trajectories but its concrete forms can be very different which often confuses the current inhabitants of the no longer post-Soviet postcolonial countries. Their newly constructed national interpretative frames and ways of joining global neoliberal modernity inevitably alter their view of the Russian and Soviet imperial/colonial past and neo-imperial present. A community based on difference and variation is at work here. It requires a special optic of discerning possible elements of alternative worlding(s) in the interplay of our differences and the forced affinity of the imperial dictate.

The genealogy of museums focusing on the Soviet/Russian rule in the former Soviet colonies is a good illustration of the variety of the approaches to the collective official take on memory, in most cases promoted by the current national ideologies. These context-specific memory reservoirs demonstrate the impermeability of the post-Socialist and postcolonial narratives in relation to each other and their subsequent merging. Originally most of these institutions were called the museums of Soviet occupation. Examples include Kyiv, Tbilisi, Tallinn, Vilnius, Riga, in whose titles the word "occupation" is key yet none of which address specifically the colonial sides of the Russian/Soviet rule accentuating the full statehood of these countries prior to the Soviet upsurge. Yet occupation as the organizing museum principle remains limited as it erases the imperial/colonial traces of the Soviet techniques in relation to the occupied. Interestingly, it is the Central Asian museums of the Soviet political repressions that have allowed the use of the colonial and anticolonial rhetoric and included the pre-Soviet history of these regions' colonization and resistance. For instance, the Museum of Victims of Political Repression in Tashkent starts its narratives in the 1860s when the Czarist empire annexed Central Asia (not yet divided into the modern nation states) or the Kazakhstan museum of ALZHIR – the Akmola camp for the wives of traitors of the motherland which also extends the terrible history of a concrete camp into a much broader discussion of Kazakhs' suffering from Russian/Soviet colonialism.

THE LOGIC OF representation in these museums as well as generally in the modern museum as an institution, fully corresponds to the idea of coloniality of museum and (im)possibility of its decolonization that has been widely discussed in the last two decades.[12] There is no room in this article for a detailed replication of the long-recognized opinion of museum decolonizers, including the author of this text,[13] that museum as a colonial institution, transmitting a specific version of worlding, acts in progressivist logic[14] and follows a rigid vector scheme of historical development from colonial to national. In accordance with this framework the pre-independence past is represented in simplified and exclusively negative terms and often appears in a small set of myths and tropes which are then illustrated in museum expositions.

The dark memory of the Soviet past is then safely musealized whereas the wonderful present and magnificent future are carefully detached from the traumatic history and framed exclusively in the current national paradigm which is highly selective in remembering the past and attempts to overstate those features

that have to do with the presently relevant allegiances and erase those that are disappearing, gone, or deemed shameful and inappropriate. In a broader sense of nation building as such this rationale is insightfully analyzed by Laura Doyle in her recent *Inter-imperiality. Vying Empires, Gendered Labor, and the Literary Arts of Alliance*[15] and convincingly illustrated by Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă in their analysis of Transylvanian identity building.[16] In accordance with this logic, completely or partially freed from the Soviet dictate, the post-Soviet postcolonial nations are immediately drawn into the legitimized competition among the often-weak nation-states for the sake of survival. After it takes an established official form, the former anticolonial nationalism starts to discourage the "non-arrogant perception"[17] of and the genuine interest in the other(s) as it continues playing the modern/colonial game grounded in agonistics and fixed on essences while ignoring relations and hence, ultimately reproduces the logic of coloniality.

Inter-imperiality and postimperial non-nation-state alternatives

A convincing way to interpret this uneasy entanglement is the above mentioned Laura Doyle's idea of inter-imperiality which claims that "most nations, including European nations, have emerged in relation to past and contemporaneous empires (although Europeans have typically traced their origins to one empire and erased their borrowings from others). To grasp the conflicts of the national or transnational, we [...] need to study the legacies of this multiply inter-imperial history."[18] Doyle focuses on selectivity in the construction of national identities, histories, and memories based on a careful erasing of certain colonial features and nurturing of others depending on what empires they come from. The same logic is found in the no longer post-Soviet cases when often the main bitter question remains which empire is more prestigious to be conquered by and consequently, which imperial legacy is more important to remember. Doyle accurately captures the hidden complexity of the current collective sensibilities typical for the societies that went through multiple and entangled experiences of politically, socially, existentially, aesthetically, and epistemically repressive regimes grounded in modern/colonial unfreedom and violence. Often these societies, including the no longer post-Soviet ones, tend to come up with complex and at times conflicting responses to the wiped out or severely censored memories in their post-dependence phases where it is hard to cope with the traumatic and uncomfortable but also "desubstantialized past that is never dead and never the same".[19]

WITHOUT A CAREFUL investigation into these historical entanglements that always spill over the national borders, the no longer post-Soviet colonies will not be able to fully grasp the complexity of the present or much less imagine a future. In this respect, the danger of the closed national consciousness is its provincialism, a lack of interest in the memories and lives of other(s), and consequently an absence of efforts to see parallels and intersections, as well as affinities in the ways resistance was performed within the space of Soviet coloniality. The imposed nation-state normativity immobilizes any transversal solidarity, encourages a top-down relation via the new superpowers and disqualifies any models that could go beyond the opposition of the nation-state and the empire in the collective memory and political imaginary.

The no longer post-Soviet postcolonial nations further complicate the earlier problem of massive postimperial establishment of postcolonial nation-states instead of quickly discarded alternative transversal global projects of political organization beyond the nation-state and the empire such as Eurafrica and Afroasia.[20] By the time of the collapse of the USSR the postcolonial nation state was already fully normalized and appeared to be an attractive model although pitfalls of the post-Soviet post/neocolonial nation building became obvious quite soon. Importantly it was Eurasia as the third postimperial non-nation state model that was quickly revamped in the post-Soviet space in its most neo-imperial top-down toxic version supported by the current Russian ideologues as a justification for their invasive appetites and a source of dangerous geopolitical imaginaries.

Perhaps for the no longer post-Soviet nations the singular focus on the troubled pasts should give way to a more stereoscopic dialogue with full awareness of the previous traumas but not paralyzed by them. It is impossible to provide a recipe for such a dialogue because it simply does not exist. It needs to be created every time anew and relationally. However, a prerequisite for such a dialogue is a refusal to focus exclusively on the past or on going back to some idealized past and a willingness and readiness to collectively politically imagine a future[21]. This task is inevitable if we wish to be able to see what is still relevant, what has not disappeared in the folds of the past, and what can birth a future. Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind reflect on this difficult step, divergent from common standpoint reasonings but honest to life that cannot be caught up in the tenets of memory, in their artistic speculative fiction project *In Vitro*[22] based on intergenerational debate on the value of memory and the dilemma of the stern loyalty to the past and the need to live on. The younger character in the film who does not have direct personal memories of the disaster, claims that at some point one needs to let the past go to be able to start the dialogue from scratch and see what will not disappear in the present, what will remain important. Under all the differences and increasingly divergent paths are the no longer post-Soviet countries still interested in finding out if there is something important in their shared imperial/colonial pasts that matters for the present beyond shallow nostalgia or indignant damnation? Particularly that this present is a grim moment of the major redivision of the world and it is already clear that on the next turn of redistribution of power and selection of allegiances, the former Soviet republics/colonies are likely to completely erase from their collective memories the uneasy details of the former Russian/Soviet loyalties and dependencies.

Is it possible to truly decolonize memory?

In the current reactionary climate of extreme right, nationalist and populist sensibilities on the rise, when calls for decolonization are often hijacked and trivialized by a wide spectrum of ide-

ologies with hidden or open imperial agendas as well as status quo liberal stances, it is important to realize that memory cannot be decolonized once and for all. Decolonizing one's personal memories is a private self-reflexive process, for personal memory is emotional, affective, capricious, and ultimately untrustworthy: we remember not what happened but how we felt about what we think happened, in a specific context. Even testimonies of the devastating massive historical crimes and tragedies such as genocides, the Holocaust, ethnic cleansings, forced deportations, are never simply factual. As Jacque Derrida famously pointed out, bearing witness has both a political and a poetic dimension, which makes it unreliable and prone to manipulation. When the actual time is "kneaded into the dough of memory"[23] it is often unrecognizably transformed.

COLLECTIVE MEMORIES are difficult to decolonize because they are highly politicized and contested instruments of ideological control on many levels. Imperial and postimperial, national, continental, civilizational and other narratives of greatness and legitimation immediately switch on their repressive and defamatory selecting mechanisms (often under the fake decolonizing umbrella) at the very emergence of decolonial processes of collective memory (re)making. Ariella Azoulay's concept of "potential history"[24] may be useful here as it asks us to unlearn imperial modes of thinking, the archive, the museum, the document, and ultimately, history itself. To unlearn imperialism, Azoulay suggests that we reject a temporality that consigns violence to the distant past and instead attend to its still-present potentialities. In other words, it is about seeing the living traces of the toxic past in the present. But should not it also be about an optic of scaling which allows seeing that the momentary political goals serving particular narratives today, tend to change their meaning at medium and long distance, and then the ultimate final decolonization is impossible and can even turn into an exclusionary repressive discourse at the next historical turn.

"WHEN THE ACTUAL TIME IS 'KNEADED INTO THE DOUGH OF MEMORY' IT IS OFTEN UNRECOGNIZABLY TRANSFORMED."

The collective traumatic experience intersecting the Soviet and colonial dictate often remains unspoken whereas the reliable witnesses, as in Celan's poem "Ashglory" quoted in the epigraph,[25] are not those who survived to tell the story but rather those who perished, often leaving descendants who are paralyzed with fear, drowned in silence and invisibility, marked by epigenetic traumatic memory which is carried by/in human bodies even when there are no witnesses left.

A critique of coloniality of memory

Rather than aiming at the impossible complete decolonization one can turn instead to a comprehensive critique of coloniality of memory – an effective and violent instrument of euromodernity as a repressive onto-epistemic system that controls people through imposing specifically constructed and legitimized memory models and excluding all other ways to remember. Coloniality of memory leads to extreme forms of brainwashing and biopolitical control disciplining and suppressing the most personal, affective, and corporeal forms of remembering.

Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o envisioned coloniality of memory through metaphors of dis-membering and re-membering which allow to feel the material/corporeal element in memory subjected to Euromodern memory violence:

> **'They are enactments of the central character of colonial practice in general and of Europe's contact with Africa in particular since the beginnings of capitalist modernity and bourgeois ascendancy. This contact is characterized by dismemberment. An act of absolute social engineering, the continent's dismemberment was simultaneously the foundation, fuel, and consequence of Europe's capitalist modernity'[...]'An even farther-reaching dismemberment: that of the colonial subject's memory from his individual and collective body. The head that carries memory is cut off from the body and then either stored in the British Museum or buried upside down'[...]'Of course, colonialists did not literally cut off the heads of the colonized or physically bury them alive. Rather, they dismembered the colonized from memory, turning their heads upside down and burying all the memories they carried.'**[26]

This "turning the heads upside down", emptying them of previous notions and memories and filling up with different ideas, narratives, and commemorating rituals, assigning the people with dismembered memories a predetermined subordinate and silently obedient place, is what coloniality of memory has been doing for centuries. The metaphor of dismembering captures the disorientation of the divorced bodies and souls, minds and feelings, the brokenness apart, which does not allow one to be fully aware of one's self in its complex entanglements with the world. This artificially enforced alienation, severance, fragmentation and dismemberment manufactures incomplete people who are forced to living someone else's mind because their own is delegitimized and discarded.

The process of healing the colonial wound, in Anzaldúan terms,[27] does not have an ultimate resolution. Decolonization of memory is an open-ended process with no concrete attainable results. It requires from the people who remember, to be multiply critical, self-critical, honest, unafraid of uneasy discoveries and contradictions, welcoming impurity[28] and pluriversality and learning to live with and encompass complexity without trying to simplify it or fit into habitual binary schemes.

No Myalists for Mankurts?

But does not this dismembering metaphor as a memory control colonial devise sound very familiar to the people originating

from the post-Soviet space? Does it not resemble the once famous novel by Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years?*[29] The most disturbing and memorable metaphor in the book is the story of Mankurt. When Aitmatov constructed this word using the existing linguistic elements and a passing mention in the epic *Manas* of a terrible torture resulting in destroying the enemy's memory, the concept immediately caught on. It perfectly reflected the late Soviet atmosphere of ethnic renaissances and another round of awakening of the "national consciousness" among the non-Russian peoples of the Soviet Union. Metaphorically, the story of Mankurt confronted a dangerous colonial distortion that due to censorship could not be directly addressed by sociology, psychology or historiography of the time. The Mankurt syndrome was what many people felt but were afraid to mention or had no words to describe it. Ultimately the story was an unintentional decolonial intervention accurately detecting the signs of coloniality of memory.

IT IS SYMPTOMATIC that in the novel there is no way out from Mankurtism. It is irreversible. And even motherly love is unable to restore memory to her son who turned into a Mankurt. Here lies an important difference of Aitmatov's model from many well-known Anglophone and Francophone postcolonial novels, in which a major part of the narrative is about the hard work of reinstating the distorted and destroyed memories, stolen souls, histories, relations with ancestors, human dignity, and ability to independent thinking. Thus, Jamaican writer Erna Brodber in her novel *Myal*[30] famously uses Myalism as a specific liberation exorcist magic that brings the protagonist back to interrupted relations with ancestors, memories, and the healing power of community and roots. The dominant creative impulse of Myalism is the overthrow of imposed idols and the careful restoration of the expelled and trampled "spirits" of one's rejected past. Aitmatov's novel is also about this task, yet he seems to realize that it is impossible to expel the evil spirits of oblivion and submission, which the Soviet coloniality allowed to sprout too deeply into the fabric of Mankurts' memory. Currently Kyrgyz platform *Esimde* (Remember)[31] attempts to revamp the image of Mankurt through introducing the metaphor of "Mankurt's dreams". It seems to be one more attempt to make the process of Mankurtization reversable and by means of dreams allow the Mankurts to have a loophole into the life that they forgot about due to coloniality of memory.

Is "multidirectional" memory enough?

If memory cannot be decolonized once and for all then we are likely to work for a long time on refining the ways to complexify, nuance, deconstruct, and contextualize multiple memories. Michale Rothberg's idea of multidirectional memory[32] as a way of putting together the Holocaust and the anticolonial memories is a good way to describe what needs to be done. Multidirectional memory points to a potential coalitional ability to see different histories and positions sharing the same historical space. Importantly, it also claims that major historical narratives and the prevailing interpretations do not necessarily have to displace one another or compete with one another. The heterogeneous pluriversal past cannot be represented in a linear and clean simplicity of the imperial or national history book effectively sealing the past as something over and done with, yet also should not reproduce the romanticized versions of the imagined originary stories to which one can supposedly return, miraculously overcoming the burdens of coloniality.

This multidirectional, nuanced, and complex perception of memory does not fit into the current simplified populist trends in historical revisionism, both national and neo-imperial, and demands to go beyond a mere giving voice to the forgotten and erased historical narratives and traumas and mechanically adding them to the undisturbed larger histories of greatness. Memory work with the darker and forgotten imperial/colonial/Soviet pasts, although important in itself, should lead to a change in the present way of thinking and agency, to revamping or establishing critical thought and doubt instead of self-confidence and complacency. Memory collections and archives, even the most inclusive ones, are useless if they do not help us radically rethink the very principles of making sense of the world, including the way we remember.

A convergence of seemingly isolated narratives needs to take place in the case of anti/post-Soviet and anti/post-colonial drives that are still often being interpreted separately and in a competitive way. In the case of East European thinkers and artists such a convergence has already taken place[33], but for the post-Soviet space at large it is still a new and uneasy realization and not many commentators are able to correlate Euromodernity/coloniality and its specific Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet forms which clash with global coloniality yet paradoxically continue to be derivative from it. Therefore, collective memory selection process inevitably becomes complex and cannot be grounded in a binary choice or singularly in accordance with the newly selected frameworks that tend to erase and simplify the actual links and multifaceted historical connections.

Double critique revisited in the context of "competitive victimhoods"

The intricate interplay of conflicting memory regimes in the no longer Soviet ex-colonies requires a decolonial double or multiple critique in the interpretation of historical and current narratives, which has been gradually shrinking everywhere in the recent decades. The idea of "double critique" was formulated by Moroccan thinker and writer Abdelkebir Khatibi[34] and targeted both Eurocentric or Orientalist discourses and ethnocentric local narratives. Double critique refuses to see just one enemy – the homogenized West, and idealize anyone who is criticizing this imagined West including petty dictators and autocratic regimes. This approach is equally attentive to local sources and circumstances of discrimination and inequality, which need to be scrutinized in relation to the larger forces of oppression. The same logic is true in reverse. Double critique prevents us from idealizing Euromodernity and extrapolating all its darker irrational sides to the opponents of the West. Thus, this approach attempts to question binaries and strives to maintain multiplicity,

complexity, and impure entanglements, each of which remains a subject of critique.

DOUBLE CRITIQUE approach does not divide humanity into clear-cut victims and perpetrators following a dynamic intersectional approach instead according to which, in Patricia Hill Collins's words, "a matrix of domination contains few pure victims or oppressors".[35] In critical memory studies Michael Rothberg formulated a similar idea of "implicated subjects"[36] who are neither victims nor oppressors but rather not always voluntary participants in social orders that generate the notorious binary divisions. In the no longer post-Soviet histories and collective memories this approach entails a critical conceptualizing of at least two but in fact many more forms and levels of imperial control, such as the global Euromodernity as a set of onto-epistemic but also social, economic and political frames, which gets entangled with specific, often contradictory and insecure local imperial histories of the less successful modern empires and their internal and external colonial others, and importantly, their current evolvement into different forms of nationalism and neo-colonial regimes and essentialized identities[37].

Taking this critique further, Łukasz Bukowiecki, Joanna Wawrzyniak and Magdalena Wróblewska in their analysis of recent artistic urban memory activism in Poland coined the terms "duality" or "dual decolonial option" to claim that artists "not only directly address the legacies of foreign dependencies, but in addition, and with an eye on the future, seek to destabilize nation-oriented essentialist interpretations of those dependencies[...]working through the national myths that have emerged in the aftermath of the period of foreign dependencies".[38] In the Polish case the double critique is targeted at both the historical trajectories and current traces of various foreign influences and the often-contested developments of the post-dependence national(ist) imaginaries that prefer a one-sided victimhood stance.

"COMPETITIVE VICTIMHOOD"[39] is not a uniquely East European phenomenon as Jie-Huyn Lim argues in his account of global transnational trend of victimhood nationalism. Lim points out the dynamics of under- and over-contextualization in national victimhood constructions leading to politically biased results:

> **If the over-contextualization inherent in historical contextualism gives rise to historical conformism of whatever happened in history, the de-contextualization results in a form of a-historical justification of the historical aftermath. Indeed, the spectres of de-contextualization and over-contextualization hovering over the victimhood controversy make historical reconciliation vulnerable to politicization.**[40]

Therefore, it is important to open victimhood nationalisms to a rigorous multilayered critique to avoid the absolutization of one enemy and blindness in relation to other factors and levels of coloniality. Such an approach can at least potentially trigger transversal dialogues among the no longer post-Soviet subjects many of which continue to experience current neo-imperial Russian advances, as well as navigate the intricacies and limitations of the so-called European choice, while others (and particularly Central Asian countries) face the reality of yet another reproduction of their racialization and orientalization both by Russians but also by the West and sadly at times, by the former fellow sufferers from the Soviet regime who have made a European choice. The double critique injection is therefore much needed in the case of the no longer post-Soviet memory regimes.

Rethinking the human: from group memory to "species memory"?

There is one more take on memory that begs to be considered if we want to follow the open-ended decolonial re-membering path to the end. It is "species memory" as opposed to group specific memory, as formulated by Birgit Kaiser and Kathrin Thiele in their insightful reading of Sylvia Wynter's essay "1492. A new World View".[41] One of the major decolonial interventions which retains its value despite some recent disappointing political utterances of the leading decolonial scholars[42], is thoroughly questioning the binary structure of modern/colonial thinking that divides the world into us and them, nature and culture, human and animal, men and women, modernity and tradition, subject and object, victim and perpetrator, the colonizer and the colonized. Once we do more than lip service to this decolonial move we cannot continue accepting the milder revisions of memory studies such as including more forgotten and erased voices and testimonies, taking into account the multi-directionality of history and memory or even turning the tables in historical reinterpretations of victims and perpetrators which would still be based on the same violent logic of othering and dehumanization. The problem of such revisions is that they are deeply grounded in coloniality of thinking and therefore cannot come up with anything but mere accumulation of memories and archival materials or constructing narratives of reconciliation including synthesizing of conflicting models of memory, as a form of dialectical sublation. These acts are not sufficiently decolonial as they merely adorn the existing structure with diversity, complexity, and inclusivity, yet do not "change the terms of the conversation".[43] They do not attempt to destabilize the main modern/colonial principles of relating to the world, to other people and other species. The endless victimhood rivalry so typical in current memory battles

"DOUBLE CRITIQUE PREVENTS US FROM IDEALIZING EUROMODERNITY AND EXTRAPOLATING ALL ITS DARKER IRRATIONAL SIDES TO THE OPPONENTS OF THE WEST."

Images from Aslan Goisum's film *Keicheyuhea*, 2017, HD video, color, sound, 26 minutes.

is only a logical result of such unchallenged modern/colonial ethico-onto-epistemic regime.

Therefore, it is important to revisit Sylvia Wynter's reflections on possible ways out of the normalized modern/colonial understanding of what it means to be human. Rather than arguing for inclusion she calls for discarding this principle and coming up with new and multiple stories of origin(s) that would not be grounded in coloniality and therefore, would not exclude anyone or anything to begin with. Wynter's "third way"[44] is an effort to go beyond the existing binaries by starting with a deeper transformation of our very conception of humanness. She avoids offering a single correct understanding of what it means to be human, for there should be many different and relationally entangled narratives of humanness (for Wynter human being is famously first and foremost a story-telling animal – Homo Narrans) which can emerge only as a result of a profound reconceptualizing of ourselves in the world, in history and consequently, in memory.

This enormous task is more relevant now than ever when the world is in a futureless dead-end thanks to the dominant narratives of humanness that Wynter so effectively denounces in her work. Coming up with many alternative pluriversal stories of what it means to be human could attempt to offer various paths towards refuturing. But for that we need to combine the forces of memory and political imagination. Kaiser and Thiele formulate it as a temporal paradox: "The future will first have to be remembered, imagined".[45] One could add that the future, in dialogue with the complexity and plurality of the living past, would have to be grounded in political responsibility but also in a political form of love for often a distant and opaque other,[46] and in restoring dignity to living beings, not only human, and their right to remember their past, decide their present, and imagine their future.

Decolonial artistic memory work

Such unconventional tasks are best handled not by academia or politics, but by potentially participatory artistic forms of inquiry and agency, often intuitively working out relational worlding principles grounded in complex memories and plural pasts. Artistic memory work should not be mistaken for mere illustration of memory issues or much less a promotion of one correct way to remember. Rather it acts as a specific mode of knowledge production and multiplication of memory paths and traces. As Wilson Harris reflected in relation to Caribbean fiction and art, philosophy of history remained there "buried in the art of imagination".[47] The reasons for this primacy of the art of imagination in decolonizing memory lies not only in the imperial censorship that is harder to maintain in art than in other spheres, but also in the free mode of artistic expression which is less subject to logocentric rational logic of modernity and its positivist verificationist cognitive criteria. Indeed, imagination works where historiography cannot, and art takes over where archives fail us.

"INDEED, IMAGINATION WORKS WHERE HISTORIOGRAPHY CANNOT, AND ART TAKES OVER WHERE ARCHIVES FAIL US."

Artists come up with powerful metaphors of memory that speak directly to the audience's affects, their reminiscences of smell and taste, sound and image, their spatial and corporeal intergenerational links. Andrii and Lia Dostlievs' poignant series "I still feel sorry when I throw away food – Grandma used to tell me stories about the Holodomor"[48] that links the memory of the hushed up genocidal catastrophe to everyday life of contemporary people where there are no special places of commemoration for the famine victims, and Saule Suleimenova's plastic bag collages[49] recapturing the key moment of national history and trauma, artworks, that are as stubbornly resilient as memory itself, are materialized indications of the same painful yet healing mnemonic sensibility.

"March 18th, 2018 – breakfast. Couscous and fried egg leftovers", "April 18th, 2018. A handful of old raisins". Images from Lia Dostlieva and Andrii Dostliev's artistic project "I still feel sorry when I throw away food — Grandma used to tell me stories about the Holodomor".

PHOTO: DIOCESAN ARCHIVE OF VIENNA (DIÖZESANARCHIV WIEN)/BA INNITZER

Alexander Wienerberger. *Hungry girl from Kharkiv*, 1933.

One of the most haunting and disturbing artistic renderings of the no longer post-Soviet/postcolonial memory and the ultimate failure to re-member or return to one's culture that is no longer there or perhaps never was to begin with, as in Afro-pessimist stance, comes through many of Aslan Goisum's works but especially in his film *Keicheyuhea*.[50] Here the spatial memory and the recognition of once familiar humanized landscape, now completely reclaimed by nature, is the only thing left for the protagonist – the artist's own grandmother who is taken for the first time in over seventy years after the deportation to the place where her village used to be, to search in vain for any remaining signs of her familial memory and history. The audience unwittingly plays the role of the missing "witness for the witness", when it observes how this silent witness of Soviet crimes painfully journeys back to speech and to memory only to realize that there are no words to describe the unhealed wound. It aches for an act of exorcism and healing yet "some things can be left unsaid" as the artist's grandmother bitterly concludes in the film, because it is painful to talk about them, but also because of the inadequacy of language to express the suffering and the realization that in the end, a space abandoned by the people is just a physical landscape devoid of any human meaning, while its own memories will remain unknown to humans for indefinite time.

Coda

Like the process of memory decolonization this article is open-ended and does not have a clear-cut conclusion as the task of rethinking what it means to be human and therefore, what it means to remember in a specifically human way is just barely formulated. In front of humans lies an enormous field of opportunities and responsibilities to engender a mnemonic transversal network of solidarity which would be based on a fundamentally different principle from the current alienating group divisions and rivalries. The multiple memories of the increasingly no longer post-Soviet spaces, people, plants, animals, mountains, rivers, and other forms of life will hopefully take their due place in this giant memory network in the making.

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