WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE POST-SOVIET?

ON DECOLONIALITY A SERIES EDITED BY
WALTER D. MIGNOLO AND CATHERINE E. WALSH

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE POST-SOVIET?

DECOLONIAL ART FROM THE RUINS OF THE SOVIET EMPIRE

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Ultimately, in the war between the refrigerator (rising food prices) and the television set (the war in Ukraine), the refrigerator is likely to win.
—*The Economist*, December 17, 2014

INTRODUCTION

A Futureless Ontology?

I was writing this introduction at a very complex and rapidly changing global geopolitical moment when the very future existence of Russia as a separate state was becoming problematic. I was writing from the relatively safe position of chaired professor at a Swedish university, but I was and will always remain a product of the Russian and Soviet imperial legacies—a postcolonial other with ancestors originating in the Russian Orient and the Russian South—the two darker colonial spaces that are seldom taken into account in any imperial-colonial discussions. Therefore, I am a person from the darker side of the Russian/Soviet modernity/coloniality. In this book I focus mainly on the experiences, sensibilities and creative work of the postcolonial artists who happen to be at the same time postsoviet. Yet I would like to start with a few preliminary remarks on the evolution of the Russian imperial difference that, in tandem with the failed yet never buried Soviet modernity project, has led to today's stagnation, anomie, and looming disintegration.

The Imperial Difference Once Again

In several works coauthored with Walter Mignolo and in my own texts I have touched upon the specific nature of external imperial difference and Russia as a graphic example of such a difference (Tlostanova 2007, 2014, 2015; Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012).[1] To put it simply, starting from about the sixteenth century a global imperial hierarchy appeared in the emerging world system. Within this hierarchy several imperial leagues were formed and transformed in the course of time. In the post-Enlightenment modernity Spain, Italy, and Portugal moved to the position of the South of Europe and hence to the *internal* imperial difference that never collapsed into absolute or insurmountable forms. The Ottoman sultanate and Russia, on the contrary, became the zones of *the external* imperial difference, as they were rooted in different (from the core European norm) religions, languages, economic models, and ethnic-racial classifications. Both internal *and* external imperial others were never allowed to join the first league and become equal to Great Britain, France, or the United States today.

One might think that these markers ceased to be valid anymore. Yet in reality they continue to flourish and affect the global geopolitical relations, classifying people and defining the validity of their lives in line with the original matrix of modernity and its rigid human taxonomies and hierarchies. A terrorist act in Paris is unconditionally regarded, and represented, as a tragedy in both global mass media and social media, whereas the deaths of thousands of civilians daily in the Middle East go practically unnoticed. A quiet decay of Russia as the largest remnant of the Soviet empire would also remain completely uninteresting to the world which is indifferent to the fate of several dozen million people who have all become hostages of the inhumane regime. It is only the looming global nuclear threat and the neo-imperial geopolitical ambitions of the Russian administration, which is trying once again to break into the first league previously irremediably losing in its imperial status, which still keep Russia on the front pages. The pragmatic security discourses then remain the only justification for the rest of the world to continue paying attention to this faraway region pushed more and more out of the world system, and reduced in its rank from the semi-periphery to an ultimately peripheral status.

What is at work here can be called a rule of regressive turning of imperial difference into a colonial one, when a second-rate empire, in the imaginaries of the winning rivals, is regarded as a colony, soon starts to realize this

status, and react in aggressive and negativist ways. Thus the failed Soviet modernity shifted into the colonial realm in relation to the winning neoliberal modernity/coloniality, yet retained some traces of its own, internal imperial-colonial structures and hierarchies, the most obvious of which is the colonizing attitude to the non-Western, postcolonial, post-Soviet others. But the very realization of this difference by the imperial ideologues allowed them to use this argument in their favor. And the Russian imperial revivalism acquired an opportunity to take the forms which externally resembled anticolonial struggles, at times appropriating the decolonial arguments, and trying on the role of the victim in global geopolitics. This is what is now taking place in Russia in its efforts to pretend to be a postcolonial subaltern and thus justify its revived imperial expansionism. But the wolf's fangs stick out of its sheep's clothing.

The Russian imperial difference triggers its specific schizophrenia, which is different from the classical Duboisean double-consciousness (Du Bois 1903) in its clearly negative stance. The imperial double-consciousness in contrast with the colonial one is unable to mutate into anything constructive; it either has to go or it has to be radically transformed into a different model. Russia is choking on its own rejection and fury addressed to both the stronger imperial rivals and the weaker colonial others.

Imperial difference in itself is evidence of the agonistic and rigidly hierarchical nature of modernity/coloniality. At its core is an implied and delocalized reference point that originally lay in the heart of Europe but has now shifted toward the Anglo-Saxon world, with its heart in the United States. The rest of the people are taxonomized along the human scale of modernity in relation to their proximity to this vantage point. Some are assigned a status of the forever catching-up agents or even voluntarily define it as their goal. Others are placed into the ghetto of absolute otherness and are withdrawn from history and modernity. As for the post-Soviet, and wider post-socialist, condition, in the past twenty-five years it has demonstrated the growing dispersal tendencies which remap the former Socialist subjects and position them along different vectors and within different alliances in the new world order where the precarious Socialist semi-periphery is rapidly sliding into a more and more chronic peripheral condition.

The post-Soviet trajectory of Russia and a number of its former colonies shows that they were first lured by the carrot of the catching-up modernization and even, in the case of the European semiperiphery, by the promise of getting back to the European bosom, but these models were

grounded in false evolutionism. With different speeds and to different extents of realization of their failure most of these societies grasped that they would never be allowed or able to step from the darker side of modernity to the lighter one, from otherness to sameness. The only move they could count on is comprised of the small steps along the endless ladder of modernity that ultimately led nowhere yet always enchanted with a desired but unattainable horizon. A number of postsocialist communities started cultivating bitter reactions of disappointment in the European, and wider Western, project, and their critiques resembled, and even openly borrowed from, postcolonial arguments (Lazarus 2012; Slapšak 2012).

The East European countries were interpreted within the global neoliberal modernity/coloniality in a progressivist rather than Orientalist manner: they were considered to be reformable and eventually subject to European assimilation, yet always with an indelible difference. The postsocialist people were offered to accept, without question, the existing global hierarchy in which everyone is assigned a precise, fixed and never questioned place, and is afraid of losing that precarious position by being associated with countries—such as those of the global South—that stand even lower. The postsocialist countries' almost unanimous refusal to accept refugees, a position supported by both their governments and their populations and often verbalized in exclusionary, racist forms, should be interpreted not only through a simple economic rationale and the specific mythology of Eastern Europe acting as a sacrifice to inhuman communist regimes, but also, and more importantly, be interpreted as a trace of the modern/colonial rivalry that, in the case of these "new" Europeans, is not alleviated by discourses of welfare, charity, or solidarity.

Postcolonial Rhetoric Borrowed by Post-Socialist Countries

The appropriation of postcolonial and, at times, decolonial rhetoric in relation to the postsocialist countries in the increasingly unipolar (in despite of all the proclamations of multipolarity) world, has gone quite unevenly. In postsocialist Eastern Europe it was faster, more successful, and less censored because the liberating rhetoric logically shifted from the old dependence on Russia and the USSR to a critique of the new dependence on Western Europe and the United States without touching the interests of the new national elites. The discourse of postcolonialism was not only harmless, therefore; but was even somewhat useful for the newly indepen-

dent states. The postsocialist intellectuals started to write about the subalternization and peripheralization of Eastern Europe and Central Europe and on the sensibility of European poor relatives who were forced from their real socialism into the real neoliberal capitalism, with no hope for success or, sometimes, even for mere survival (Kołodziejczyk and Sandru 2012; Pucherová and Gáfric 2015). Postsocialist artists such as Ciprian Mureşan and Tanja Ostojić have addressed the metaphors and imagery that intersect with postcolonial sensibilities, often through projecting these artistic means onto the contemporary global coloniality.

However, these sentiments did not lead to any wide-scale state Socialist renaissance movements, or even to simple nostalgia for the bygone Socialist days. One of the reasons is that in the Socialist system, these societies were already aware of their colonial status and humiliation due to the Soviet occupation. Being oppressed and then nostalgic about an earlier, albeit different form of, oppression would indeed be strange. The schism in relation to the West and efforts to merge with it in any function once again followed old, imperial borders. An interesting example is Ukraine, which was divided in its political preferences not only in accordance with the Russian population distribution during the Soviet years, but also along the older Austro-Hungarian borders with Russia. The Baltic countries provide another complex example: although they are unhappy about the harsh economic problems they now face and about the mass-migration of their populations to Western Europe, they are reluctant to revise their attitude that the Soviet occupation caused all of the problems. The Baltic littoral continues to see Germany and the Scandinavian countries as an El Dorado for the Baltic postsocialist migrants, even if their motherlands historically have had quite a painful and complex predicament of internal European colonization initiated by these same Western European role models (Kalnačs 2016a).

The situation of the non-European post-Soviet former colonies—in Central Asia and in the southern Caucasus (with the significant exception of Georgia)—is much different. Here the postcolonial and decolonial discourses of any political kind are tabooed, because the symbolic power and influence of the failed Soviet empire remained quite significant there until very recently. Therefore, any critique of Russian and Soviet expansionism is banned. In many cases it has also continued until now. Sympathies have often stayed on the Russian side and lingered in the mutual past, even if this past was highly mythologized and invented. In many cases this was

a tactical position more than a sincere belief. And only the latest serious economic crises, international isolation, and the terminal decline of the Janus-faced empire (Tlostanova 2003),[2] which is now hastily swapping its masks, shifted the situation in a drastic way. As a result, the Central Asian and Caucasus states and regions, some of which are still formally part of the Russian Federation, started looking for other partners and coalitions, including those in the Middle and Far East—the partners, which before used to be kept in reserve as the association with the old Russian and Soviet metropolis was simpler and, possibly, safer.

In the non-European post-Soviet former colonies and in the Russian Federation itself, art seems to be among the very few remaining ways to reflect critically on the intersection of the decolonial and de-Sovietizing impulses. No postcolonial or much less decolonial revisionist models have been allowed to go into circulation, and in the context of the Russian Federation's annexation of Crimea in 2014, theorists, politicians, and activists have been cut off from the use of any such potentially dissident tools. In the latest Russian reactionary wave, the old familiar logic is reproduced: as in the time of Leo Tolstoy, art, once again, fulfills the function of the missing, strangled, or co-opted critical social theory, philosophy, and political activism. The list of artists performing the important tasks of critical reflection includes, among others, Evgeny Antufiev, Aslan Gaisumov, Vladimir Dubossarsky, Shifra Kazhdan, Sergey and Tatyana Kostrikov, Taus Makhacheva, Anton Nikolayev, Anatoly Osmolovsky, Pyotr Pavlensky, Timofey Radya, Egor Rogalev, Anna Titova, and Alexander Vinogradov.

The most doomed situation is in Russia itself, which has suffered under the imperial difference syndrome for several centuries (certainly long before it attempted to build state Socialism). Russia strove to fit into the logic of catching up and tried to build a separate Socialist modernity, with its own coloniality sharing the main premises of modernity at large, such as racism, Orientalism, progressivism, the rhetoric of salvation, a fixation on newness, asymmetrical divisions of labor—that is, generally the coloniality of being, gender, knowledge, and sensibility. The Russian empire was dominated culturally, technologically, intellectually, and in other ways by the core European countries, yet it subsumed other peripheral spaces, making it a clear case of semiperipherality.

The lighter side of Soviet modernity was grounded in ideological and social differences that were used to build human hierarchies. Its darker colonial side mostly reiterated the nineteenth-century racist clichés and

human taxonomies mixed with hastily adapted historical materialist dogmas. Today's Russia is still nonhomogeneous, and the restarting of its "parade of sovereignties" is threatening to dismantle the country forever. Secessionism inside the Russian Federation is not only ethnic, cultural, and religious but also clearly economic, as it is linked with an uneven regional redistribution of resources, with the pillage of the provinces in favor of Moscow, with the articulation and development of often militant regional identities and ultimately, with their urge to become independent. The latter tendency can be witnessed in the cases of Altay, Tatarstan, the Volga region, and Yakutia, as well as parts of Siberia, and has already become the focus of attention of several contemporary art activists.

The concept of internal colonization, which has become popular thanks to Alexander Etkind's book *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience* (2011), is now acquiring a different and less historically and contextually bound meaning, which Etkind himself may have not intended. He compared Russian serfs to African American slaves and Amerindians, pointing out the lack of racial difference between masters and serfs in the case of Russia and claiming that the category of "estate" acted as a substitute for race. Rather the whole Russian model can be viewed as a case of zoological coloniality, following the nineteenth-century Siberian dissident Afanasy Shchapov (1906), to whom Etkind devoted one of the best chapters of his book. Shchapov meant a parallel annihilation of fur-providing animals and the indigenous people who were forced to hunt those animals, under pain of death, during the early colonization of Siberia. Today this model of dehumanizing and equating human lives with mere instruments of thoughtless natural resource extraction covers the entire population of the Russian Federation, regardless of our ethnic/racial, class, and religious belonging.

Once again, the Janus-faced empire is trapped between its two masks: the servile visage that, following Frantz Fanon's logic (1967), could be identified as Russian faces and Western masks; and a patronizing mask meant for Russia's own, non-European eastern and southern colonies and former colonies. Today this configuration is complicated and changed in a new geopolitical situation in which the lives of ordinary citizens of all religions and ethnicities are seen as dispensable. At the present moment when a handful of Russian state oligarchs have already completely pillaged the remnants of the Soviet economy (which was not the most efficient but still was created by the collective efforts of the Soviet people, not by a handful of properly connected tycoons) and pumped the profit into their foreign bank

accounts, and when oil and gas production stopped to be sufficiently gainful, they turned to looting the deprived population as the only remaining source of easy profit and to physical elimination of both the weak and the dissatisfied.

I Come from Nowhere, or Back to the Same Sensibility after Twenty-Five Years

Today, dwelling in a quiet Swedish town I am often reflecting on the fact that more than half of my life took place in the post-Soviet waiting and survival room from which there is obviously no way out and that has slowly turned into a place to wait for the other world beyond life and death. This is probably the main human existential result of twenty-five post-Soviet years. I indicate them with two very personal milestones which nevertheless are directly connected with the gist of the post-Soviet human condition.

In the year of the Soviet Union's quiet collapse I was an exchange student in the United States. After my study abroad program I was going back home and I realized that I had a passport from a nonexistent state: the USSR. Certainly I was allowed to leave the United States,—albeit with an ironic smile—and let into the newly established Russian Federation with a habitual gloomy suspicion. Moreover, Soviet foreign passports remained valid for almost ten years after the collapse because there were simply too many passport blanks previously produced with a typical Soviet imperial grandeur and planning economy zeal. They had to be used in spite of the fact that no such country existed any more. But while I was standing in the passport control line at the poorly lit and dirty Sheremetyevo International Airport—which was only starting to be filled with exiles and refugees, the bits and pieces of empire striving to break free from its still tenacious hands—I suddenly felt that for us, the holders of such passports, the very passage of time had changed. The sea of time almost palpably went around us and left us behind, discarded in some cases as if we were fish suffocating on a dry, sandy shore. Twenty-five years have passed, and today the same sense of disintegration is clearly in the air once again. And I have no idea what will await me if I decide to use my now Russian passport sometime in the near future to visit my place of birth. Could recent history repeat itself so soon, especially since we have never learned its lessons?

The past twenty-five post-Soviet years have been marked by a strange reverse logic for former inhabitants of the USSR, a logic that falls outside the

usual modern progressivism, typical for the relations of the global North and South. We woke up one day to find ourselves in a new condition that was chosen for us by someone else. It was a condition of a dinosaur that somehow did not die in due time and had to languish in the back yards of history, which at that point indeed seemed to have reached its climax and come to a standstill in the eternal consumerist paradise. Yet even those Soviet people who honestly believed in their opportunity to change and join the world, and who hastily started working toward this condition, soon realized that the road from our own history into the real world was quite long and hard, and maybe it was even a dead-end.

We woke up to a new reality of multiple dependencies and increased unfreedoms in which the previous Soviet unfreedom was not at all lifted, but, on the contrary soon acquired new forms that combined economic exploitation with the lack of rights and renewed ideological control. That is, although the external forms changed, conditions remained the same in their repressive essence. In fact, it was a story of the suddenly cancelled Socialist modernity that left its voluntary and involuntary participants and agents in ruin and unable to rejoin history. According to one respondent in *Secondhand Time* (2013, 91), by the Nobel Prize–winning author Svetlana Alexievich, "Socialism has ended, but we are still here." The post-Soviet people became equivalents of a losing race and bound to disappear or merge with the global South.

The Soviet immigrant Boris Groys, now a social and art theorist in Germany, stresses the paradoxical direction of the path taken by most post-socialist countries: "The post-Communist subject travels the same route as described by the dominating discourse of cultural studies—but he or she travels this route in the opposite direction, not from the past to the future, but from the future to the past; from the end of history . . . back to historical time. Post-Communist life is life lived backward, a movement against the flow of time" (Groys 2008, 155). Groys thinks that the state Socialist modernity in a sense was a leap *against* the course of the world history, an attempt to transcend it. The more difficult and crashing it became for us to be later sent back to the usual course, speed and direction of history and to change the radical Socialist progressivist model to a milder version of the forever unattainable Western ideal; why we continue to plod slowly and endlessly along instead of leaving the drudgery behind and leaping into the new and wonderful future in one jump. This shift was interpreted

by many people as a way backward, and used by the neo-imperial ideologues as a justification of their revanchist appetites. In purely religious or secular Soviet forms, the Russian empire had always aimed at taking a revenge for the losing battle with the West and ultimately erasing the imperial difference.

The state of being expelled from history reiterated the general logic of modernity, with its habitual operation of translating geography into chronology (Mignolo 2000) and assigning whole groups of people living in the non-Western spaces to other times or, rather, positioning them outside the only sanctioned course of time and the only appropriate way of life. Yet in the post-Soviet case, it was not the downtrodden premodern "savages" on whom the Western modernity could practice its civilizing discourses. Rather, it was an other state Socialist modernity which failed and was subsequently rendered nonviable, while its voluntary and involuntary practitioners had to be instructed on how to become fully modern (in the only remaining neoliberal way) and, ultimately, fully human. The progressivist paradigm has had an inbuilt feature of always keeping a sufficient lag between the modernizing catching-up ex-Socialists and the first rate Western/Northern subjects.

Soon it became clear that post-Soviet people seemingly sent to the end of the queue, in fact, were simply squeezed out of history, because the catching-up would never end in overtaking. We found ourselves in the void, in a problematic locale inhabited by problem people. And it was this situation of having nothing to lose that shaped today's dangerous postimperial *ressentiment*. Yet in speaking about a generalized postsocialist person, Groys neglects the colonial difference inside the external imperial difference—the darker side of (post-)Soviet modernity marked by Orientalism, racism, othering, and forced assimilation—and indirectly denies the fact that Soviet progressivism meant one thing for Russians and something else for Uzbeks and Georgians. Thus, their present trajectories cannot be parallel or identical by definition.

As stated earlier, the hidden Russian inferiority complexes typical of external imperial difference have led from time to time to lapses into imperial jingoism and revanchism that have now reached an extreme manifestation in which a new political identity is being made out of stigmatization. In other words, Russia is effectively saying, "If the West calls me barbarous, I will behave so." In the past several years, this sentiment has been accentu-

FIG. INTRO.1 Egor Rogalev, *Situation No. 2*. Odessa, 2011. Archival photographic print in various editions; dimensions variable. From the photo series Synchronicity. Courtesy of the artist.

ated and cultivated more and more frequently in the official Russian discourses, stressing that Russia is not Europe, and elevating the previously marginal neo-Eurasianism to an almost official state ideology.

The Russian Wolf in Postcolonial Sheep's Clothing

In its present hysterically aggressive stage, Russia is trying to jump out of the catching-up model, in which it has existed at least since the seventeenth-century reign of Peter the Great, and trying to make the world stop viewing the imperial difference as a colonial difference, thus turning itself once again into a respectable partner for the global North. This very impulse is quite deceiving as it does not try to question the logic of modernity/coloniality as such, but merely alters Russia's position in it. This humble goal is camouflaged as anticolonial pathos and a critique of the West,

which is skillfully used by the Russian administration to brainwash a population that is already distracted by serious economic and social problems and marked by "defuturing" tendencies (Fry 2011, 21). This imperial appropriation of postcolonial rhetoric also targets the Western left, who reflect on the Russian situation from safe positions and often praise President Vladimir Putin's escapades for their anti-Americanism. However, that position remains blind to the fate of those at whose expense the dangerous neo-imperial attacks are made. It erases political and economic repression, increased poverty, completely destroyed social state, and the looming extinction of a huge country that has become a hostage to its insane and reckless regime.

It is not possible to separate the Russian face from its underside. And the same way as modernity is not possible without its darker colonial side, the second-rate imperial démarches and efforts to carve a safer space in the modern/colonial system are impossible without infringing on human rights and looting their own populations, the would-be citizens who are objectified, once again, as the instruments of the zoological economy. As a trade commodity, fur was simply replaced for a while by oil; now it is the turn of the population itself to be sacrificed and skinned by the state. After the last bits of property are taken away from the animalized subjects of the collapsing regime, the depopulated territory most likely will cease to be interesting to anybody—most of all, to its own power elites. Therefore, the ugly and scary mask of the imperial Janus, which once was turned in the direction of the non-European colonies, today is turned toward every citizen, whether they are applauding the neo-imperial rhetoric or prefer their refrigerators to television sets.

The Russian imperial difference, characterized by the empire's status on the second tier and the constant presence of stronger Western rivals, has generated multiple colonial differences among its colonized subjects, which might actually find colonization by a first-rate empire more attractive.[3] It is important to understand how this configuration is evolving in the world in relation to other, more global processes; how the post-Soviet people revolt against an obvious injustice of the modern power asymmetry but often do so in dangerous rightist, revanchist forms that are carefully planted by state ideologues to later make food for powder out of its own citizens in neoimperial military operations such as the infamous denied war with Ukraine.[4] Those who disagree also find themselves in a paradoxical situation both inside and outside the country: while abroad, we are often still held responsible for the sins of Putin's regime, while at home we are branded as a "fifth column" and persecuted as traitors and foreign agents.

Today the Russian Federation's state ideologues are desperately feeding the impoverished population with an unappetizing soup of discourses drawn from imperial narratives that are quite different both contextually and temporally. They range from almost theocratic statist models of sacred geography superseding geopolitics, grounded in the sanctification of the state and the ruler and aggressive territorial expansionism masked by various spiritual justifications, to revivalism of the Socialist and, particularly, Stalinist "grandeur," which attempts to glue disjointed and emaciated people spread over a gigantic and unmanageable territory together via memories of military valor and sports and space-exploration accomplishments of the Soviet *époque*. But efforts to reanimate national and imperial mythological consciousness have not been particularly successful. Their main axis—the invented interconnection between Russia's territorial vastness and its grandeur—is increasingly shattered by growing secessionist sensibilities and the development of regional identities and imaginaries in various parts of the country. They feel themselves as the new old colonies of Moscow, and more and more actively discuss different possibilities of separation and survival on their own or with the help of different partners—from Western Europe to China and Iran. One more imperial card that is now being played is the Russian language as a unifying force. Appeals to a linguistic unity of the "Russian world" are present in various neo-imperial agendas—right, left and centrist—from Alexander Dugin to present day National Bolsheviks.

Another recurrent element of Russian imperial mythology is the false narrative of Russia as a savior of suffering nations. This myth is still successfully employed in imperial propaganda for both Russians and a number of presumably liberated people, such as those in several countries of the former Yugoslavia and in Bulgaria, who juxtapose the imagined Orthodox Slavic community with a demonized Ottoman yoke. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the tragic and shameful events that followed in Ukraine and Syria (and the preceding neoimperial war in Georgia) were grounded in similar false arguments of defending the Russians or their brother nations living in someone else's territory or destroying civilians under the pretext of fighting terrorism. At first, many post-Soviet people took this rationale at face value, having fished out of their unconscious the all too familiar conservative and revanchist servility and a sickening allegiance to those in power, which still lie very close to the surface. Yet today's Soviet renaissance is another simulacrum, an empty shell with no meaning, a playful revival of Stalinist Russia, where mortal fear and deadly conviction

are normalized once again, but go hand in hand with cynical corruption, demagogic invectives, and typical arguments of timeservers living out of their suitcases. Artists were the first to detect and critically address this falseness, such as the Ukrainian poet Serhiy Zhadan, the Russian writer Vladimir Sorokin, the directors Kirill Serebrennikov and Andrey Zvyagintsev, the Georgian novelist Zaza Burchuladze, and the Crimean film director and activist Oleg Sentsov, and others.

The Black Legend, Russian/Soviet-Style

In our effort to understand the evolution of the external imperial difference today, we should take into account that at every stage of its evolution it has been marked by the logic of the Leyenda Negra (black legend),[5] which was well tested in the rivalry between the British and Spanish empires. "Black legendism" also flourishes in Russia today, and no one has yet attempted to problematize it. The Janus-faced empire represents itself as good, spiritual, kind, and fair, in opposition to its Western and non-Western rivals. This is expressed in Russia's habitual stigmatization of the double standards of the West. Yet these accusations themselves are grounded in morally dubious and logically flawed assumptions that exempt Russia from the zone of responsibility for its own actions—that is, if the West does not comply with its own laws and rules and if it violates human rights, why should Russia bother to comply with international law? However, on the global scale, it does not matter who violates human rights—European countries, the United States, or Russia, who could trigger a global disaster. What does matter is how we can learn to live together in this world without infringing on other people's rights and then justifying it by pointing our accusing fingers at others.

Strangely enough, the logic of self-justification by accusing others is supported by many leftist intellectuals who do not seem to be aware of the fact that discarding the legitimacy of international law—however imperfect it is as such or how irregularly it is implemented—could easily lead us to destruction and violence for their own sake or as an intimidation tool. But does it really make sense to blackmail the international community with constant military threats? If so, we will soon have a Hobbesian society of war of all against all. Or maybe we already live in that society. Would it not be better to abstain from claiming that everyone is equal in violating the laws and instead act maturely by trying to formulate laws, and global mechanisms for their implementation, that would not infringe on

anyone's rights? We have to find a global way of negotiating our common future on this planet in order to have any future at all. And the global coloniality needs to be globally dismantled instead of trying to carve a better space in its perverse hierarchy or paying it back with equal violence and lawlessness.

Alas, the external imperial difference continues to reproduce the black legend logic at all stages of its evolution. Thus, Russia applies a technique of looking for Western faults while ignoring or shadowing its own deficiencies. This has occurred throughout history and could take constructive forms of borrowing and improving the Western accomplishments. As the semiotician Yuri Lotman has demonstrated, with the Byzantine Empire acting as an equivalent of the West, Russian thinkers claimed a better understanding and implementation of Greek doctrine than the original Orthodox Christian Church. Later, Russian interpreters of the French enlightenment once again claimed they better understood the main principles than the French. The Bolsheviks also borrowed their main tenets from Western socialist and communist doctrines and then altered them to suit their purposes and presented this alteration as an improvement (Lotman 2002, 273).

The false mythology of the Russian/Soviet imperial liberating mission has also acquired the form of a "black legend" and was grounded in the opposition of Russia, presumably helping other nations break free of evil and mercenary Western empires, which were oppressing poor people in India, Africa, and the Americas. The Russian religious philosopher Vladimir Solovyev pointed this out in 1888 by drawing attention to the double standards of the Janus-faced empire:

> We wanted to liberate Serbia and Bulgaria, but at the same time we continued to oppress Poland. This system of oppression is bad in itself, but it becomes much worse due to the crying discrepancy with liberating ideals and disinterested help that Russian politics has always claimed to be its style and its exclusive right. These politics are necessarily drenched in lying and hypocrisy that take away any prestige. . . . One cannot—with perfect impunity—write on his banner the freedom of all Slavs and other people while simultaneously taking national freedom away from the Poles; religious freedom away from the Uniats and Russian religious dissenters; [and] civil rights away from the Jews. (Solovyev 2002, 247–48)

These words are still true today. In accordance with this double standard, Russia continues to "liberate" nations in order to colonize them or make them useful in establishing or reconfirming its geopolitical dominance. The lack of any collective repentance or massive intellectual de-imperialization are contributing to Russia's defeat today.

The Perishable Soviet Renaissance Minus the Future

The fact that we cannot bury the past and start living in the present is linked not only to our acquiescence to being made into victims once again but also to our inability and unwillingness to think critically and finally shelve Soviet modernity/coloniality in an archive or museum. Easily revived inferiority complexes, together with memories of imperial grandeur and the deification of power in its personalized forms that equate the ruler, the state, and the country, are immediately channeled by imperial ideologues and their mass-media henchmen to prolong the agony of the regime and prevent the collapse of the falling empire for a little longer.

The reanimation of the Soviet modernity project—which in essence, if not in its form continued the aggressive messianism of Russian Orthodoxy—is being used to extend the fragile status quo. And the belt-tightening rhetoric with universal justice as its fake goal seems to switch on in the collective unconscious memories of earlier liberating discourses: from the biblical "the last shall be first" to *L'Internationale*'s "We are nothing; let us be all." But an important difference, or even a deliberate deception, is at work here: no one today is promising happiness even in the distant future, to say nothing of the possibility of any future per se. The Soviet discourse used to present the ideal future as an open and unrestrained utopia, at least until the mid-1960s when it became obvious that communism would not come any time soon and the Soviet ideology shifted toward the past.

Yet at the core of state Socialist utopianism for a long time stood the idea of universal happiness and consequently the happy future. It is true that way too soon utopia became sealed and exclusionary. But the social contract of the Soviet people was in many ways linked to this imagined future happiness that they were offered to exchange for the hardships and difficulties of their present. Today the belt-tightening rhetoric is not compensated any more by any promise of the universal happiness in near or distant future. What we are offered instead is merely a symbolic compensation in the form of phantasmal superiority. The worn out victory-in-defeat

discourse and the inevitable post-apocalyptic triumph, in the Russian case are transferred entirely to the spiritual realm or even to hereafter. Those who do not believe in the other world ruin themselves by drink or leave this forcefully galvanized dead world for good.[6] It is not surprising therefore that the lion's share of artists, writers and film directors in contemporary Russia work with dystopian genres.

The favorite cliché of Russian media borrowed from one of President Putin's speeches, likens the country to a slave who after twenty-five years is finally getting up from his knees. Yet few options are being left open for the slave who has been deceived into believing that economic stagnation and lack of prospects for the future mean liberation from the West. It is really a choice between the slow and miserable vegetation and survival in the shrinking and stagnant economy, and the all-too-familiar Russian "meaningless and merciless revolt" (Pushkin 1960, 387), which would be immediately suppressed by the masters. Therefore, the shelf life of false liberation discourses such as the Kremlin's current imitation of ideology is quite short.

Those who used to be nothing at all times—before the 1917 Revolution, in the USSR, under Yeltsin and Putin—are more and more aware of the deception of the false exchange imposed on them by those in power. But what can they really do, and how can they really influence the political, social, or any other sphere of life in Russia today? This bitter awareness of the impossibility to change anything is perhaps the most hopeless feature of contemporary Russian social and political reality. However, even the simplest consumerist and previously pro-status quo minds have started to demonstrate signs of doubt. Those who were ready to exchange their rights and freedoms for a relative economic well-being and the infamous deadening stability, which was replaced far too quickly with state-of-emergency rhetoric, are not happy anymore, and this emerging new reality cannot be ignored.

When I was writing the first draft of this introduction, one of the central Moscow streets—Tverskaya—was blocked by protesters. They were not hungry medical doctors or teachers, starving retirees or miners as it happened in the 1990s. They were relatively well-off middle-class people who took bank loans in hard currency because the interest rate was lower than the ruble mortgage. With the rapid devaluation of the ruble, in which their salaries are paid, they have lost everything. One can accuse them of greed and say that this is their own problem. However, it is revealing that these middle-class victims of devaluation understand the direct relationship between the state's predatory politics and their own personal problem with the

banks. A video shown often on social media networks features a desperate woman wearing a mink coat yelling from a picket line across Tverskaya, which leads to the Kremlin, "Maybe we should give Crimea back—do we really need it?" Crimea is indeed needed only symbolically, and the destiny of the Crimean people once again demonstrates Russia's typical treatment of human beings as expendable material.[7] It is more important to destroy the enemy than to save the hostages, civilians or soldiers. The lacking rights paradigm and dispensability of human lives have remained the main features of the Russian imperial difference.

To describe the nature of nationalism, Benedict Anderson (1983, 86) applied the metaphor of the narrow skin of the nation-state that is too small to cover the body of the old empire. In the case of the Russian/Soviet empire, this metaphor was further twisted as in the end the old skin was removed and the new one never appeared. Or rather, a number of the pieces of the old empire attempted to reuse fragments of the old (Soviet) skin by renovating it with ersatz ethnic-national ornaments but, in fact, keeping the old Marxist stagist paradigm intact. (A good example is Uzbekistan, whose recently deceased President Islam Karimov managed to preserve a hybrid Soviet-feudal regime for almost three decades.) Russia itself has long been in a vulnerable and unstable position, unable to weave itself new clothes or recycle its old ones. Soon it became clear that the bombastic innovation initiatives always clash against the persistent Soviet-Russian rigid structures and post-Soviet cynical corruption, leading to nothing. Today the half-collapsed empire is being hastily covered with this worn out cloth marked by a serious cognitive dissonance of harsh neoliberal logic, dusted with fundamentalist nationalist and imperial rhetoric which is worded in a distinctly populist way (Matveyev 2016).

There is no teleology and no point of arrival anymore. And no one is ready to suffer in this world or in their lifetime for the sake of some abstract utopian happiness of the future generations or even of some otherworldly bliss. The resource of waiting for the wonderful future in the conditions of present deprivation and humiliation is completely exhausted. History did not end after all; it bypassed us. The vastness of space almost always prevailed over time in Russian history (except during a few swooping and mobilizing efforts to force history to jump); today, the preeminence of wilderness that was never properly cultivated or tamed is coming forward once again. As post-Soviet Russia falls out of modernity, in its Western and Soviet versions, it is coming to a standstill.

Although the post-Soviet societies have lived in a state of crisis for the past twenty-five years, the present crisis is rapidly turning into a crisis of legitimacy in which epistemic, existential, and cultural—not just social, economic, and political—elements come forward, reinforcing anomie, dissociation, and extreme willy-nilly individualism among the inhabitants of the collapsing empire. This is a peculiar form of individualism that is grounded not in human or civic dignity or responsibility but in sheer physical survival of the poor and deprived as they come face to face with the hostile world and repressive state-oligarchic capitalism. In spite of all propagandistic clichés and false myths imposed from the inside and outside, today's post-Soviet everyman is not the proverbial Socialist collectivist or a proponent of the Russian *sobornost* as a utopian "communal" ideal, opposed to liberal "commonwealth" and Marxist "commons." These confused people, who just a few months ago proudly wore their patriotic Saint George's ribbons and were capable of uniting only against someone but not for anything, suddenly are ready to fight collectively for economic and social well-being and demand that the power they have always supported finally fulfill its part of the social contract.

The inflated paroxysms of patriotism by the dying Russian state are in fact efforts to fill a vacuum of beliefs with empty semantics and artificially unite the dissociated masses under the banner of some fragile collective identity, even though they share little more than growing repression, common territory, and language. Such enforced reunifications are tactical and essentially short term, which the imperial ideologues realize better than anyone else. The infusion of neoimperial ideology and policies are needed only until those in power can finish their marauding projects and escape, leaving the nonviable *homo post-soveticus* to perish and make room for other communities.

In *Secondhand Time*, Alexievich attempts to understand what constitutes our post-Soviet existential condition. In interview after interview, she reveals recycled, secondhand beliefs and experiences that do not help to build anything new in the ruins. Today Alexievich's metaphor will acquire even more sinister overtones because the secondhand time of the Socialist modernity is being miraculously resurrected in the most sickening elements of the authentic Soviet reality. Yet it is a repetition with a difference: in the original Soviet world, everything was deadly serious, including the peoples' genuine, and hence more powerful and terrifying, feelings and beliefs. Soviet people went easily to their doom for the grand ideals, however false. Today's Russian citizens, by contrast, are offered only a bad theatrical

FIG. INTRO.2 Egor Rogalev, *Situation No. 29*. Moscow, 2011. Archival photographic print in various editions; dimensions variable. From the photo series Synchronicity. Courtesy of the artist.

performance—a cocktail of Stalinism and fascism with strong Orthodox Christian and fundamentalist nationalist ferment.

The Soviet utopia always retained a powerful element of messianism and the utopian teleology of building a new and wonderful world. Consequently, future stood in the center of its grand narrative. It was a special future equally happy for everyone and built to last forever, even if the Soviet state wanted to make everyone happy by force without asking their opinion. This hope supported the exhausted people for a while in the 1990s, allowing to believe in the possibility of future changes and the necessity of enduring hardship for the sake of the wonderful tomorrow. The revival of imperial rhetoric today cannot persuade anyone because it lacks an essential feeling of stability, the confidence of coming and staying forever in which the Soviet époque was grounded before. Today's return of the Soviet rhetoric is a case of a "bad faith" from the start. It is a conscious self-deceptive technique or, in Lewis Gordon's understanding, a rethinking of the Sartrean *mauvaise-foi*: "bad faith which is such because it in effect is an effort to perform a variety of

contradictions the consequence of which requires lying to ourselves, making ourselves believe what we don't believe, using our freedom to deny it, asserting the very human effort at human evasion" (Gordon 2000, 157).

The present appeals to tighten belts or die in the service of someone else's interests in the multiple wars in which Russia is engaging as it follows its petty imperialist and short-term tactical agendas and bullies the West with fake criminal style hysteria are needed only to distract attention from one more episode of money laundering or economic failure. These appeals, however, almost never call for a wonderful future in any foreseeable time or in this material world, much less for any egalitarian future as it was the case in the USSR—at least on paper. The present administration realizes that no one would believe in such promises any more. The wonderful future is cancelled, and by way of compensation we are offered to be happy with the symbolic victory over the imagined enemies, and practice spiritual and religious superiority and aggressive Messianic zeal, uncompensated with anything in this material world. People deprived of any future, do not cherish their lives and therefore are easily manipulated and become potentially dangerous. Not surprisingly, many discourses popular in contemporary Russia revolve around eschatological premonitions with an accent on the dream of a new paradise with its center in Russia. In fact, this is the logic of a fanatical sect whose victims and hostages in this case are the whole population of a still large postimperial country which is sick with a syndrome of the lacking future and missing hope.

We are not even sure if this future would ever come. But what is to be done in such a situation, is something everyone decides for themselves. Knowing that victory is impossible and our efforts to fight are doomed, at least in the near future, makes some of us leave the country and others reconcile and busy themselves with mere survival. But there are also those who continue to speak up and act against, knowing that they will never win yet also rejecting the continuation of the slavish existence. Even today there are spheres in which decolonial thinkers are able to continue their internal activism, which is destructive to the existing deadening system and aimed at future existential resurgence—and, eventually, the emergence of a freer individual who can enter a dynamic correlational network with other people and the nonhuman world. This is a meticulous and step-by-step work on decolonizing people's minds and bodies and offering them different options and various optics of looking at the world and at themselves from the critical edge of modernity and coloniality. This

could potentially lead to independent thinking, and to new coalitions grounded not in ideology or stale geopolitics, but in other alter-global modes of thinking and being marked by a realization of our common destiny as humans and striving to build a world in which no one would be an "other" anymore.

Art as an Effective Decolonial Force

This book focuses on a specific kind of decoloniality linked with perceptive mechanisms of aesthesis and further shaping not only of aesthetic and ethical but also, inevitably, of political stances and agency that may become powerful mechanisms in decolonizing thinking, being, sensing, and corporality. After analyzing various spheres of decoloniality in the past decade, I have come to the conclusion that contemporary activist art that is closely connected with corporality and affectivity—and, consequently, with the intersection and problematizing of epistemic and ontological links—is the area in which the most effective decolonial models emerge. It is this sphere that gives some hope for the post-Soviet future.

Unfortunately, the nature of the post-Soviet regimes—and particularly of Russia—is for the state either to crush or to co-opt any direct forms of social and political protest. Activists who do make it into public space are generally unable to offer radically decolonizing agendas. Instead, they continue to exist within the old logic of political parties and movements, which tend to be highly ineffective in the struggle against global and local forms of coloniality. Moreover, openly political movements are immediately persecuted, and critical social and political thought—even that which is purely theoretical—is banned, marginalized, or forced into exile.

Activism-cum-art—or "artivism" (Nikolayev 2011)—practices are becoming more effective in the conditions of the impasse and stagnation of most social protest movements unable to influence the economic or political decisions. The artistic influence seems less immediate than any open social or political dissent, yet it slowly works for the implementation of the future radical changes through altering our thinking, and setting our consciousness free from the global neoliberal or local jingoistic brainwashing. Art in its visual, verbal and synthetic forms remains a crucial intersection of being and knowledge and it is in the sphere of aesthesis untouched by any normative aesthetic distortions that the most promising decolonizing models start to emerge.

Activist art does not, however, exist in inherently safe space. It is also subject to repression. But it has at least two advantages: art is metaphorical by definition and therefore slips more easily out of power's grip; and the vagueness of metaphors, along with their ability to multiply often contradictory meanings allows artists adjusting to new censorship and double-think situations.

According to Judith Butler (1997, 15), censorship is always ineffective and unsuccessful from the start because any utterance is always multisemantic, particularly in the realms of art, fiction, film, and the humanities, where the multiplicity of interpretations is axiomatic. At the same time, open protests against censorship do not always solve the problem as they cannot shatter the system as such. On the contrary, we then build ourselves into the system and play according to its rules, instead of overcoming the system through its subversion from the inside or delinking from the system and creating something independent. The advantage of art is that it is able to discuss the utmost questions without sliding into obvious propaganda and open and univocal political engagement.

Indirect protest tactics and strategies of undermining power structures from within have become well developed in postcolonial, posttotalitarian, and postdictatorship art. Even Soviet censorship was an interactive process, grounded in a peculiar and complex complicity of the censor and the censored. Censorship obviously "inhibited and provoked . . . authors" (Levine 1995, 2). It also acted as an impetus for stylistic innovation among artists and helped develop in audiences a heightened sensitivity to the hidden and the implied. The censor is always tormented by the "monologic terror of indeterminacy" (Holquist 1994, 22) because it is not possible to fix meanings once and for all, to cement interpretation in unequivocal aesthetic, political, or ethical ways. Multiplicity of interpretations, complex interconnection of negation and assertion in any censorship, and reiteration as its main principle, lead to restating of the very utterances censorship seeks to banish.

There are certainly many opposite examples of the obvious repressions against the activist artists such as Pyotr Pavlensky, Pussy Riot, activist art festival Media Impact, or Vyacheslav Akhunov. But art still has more chances to avoid the punishment of repressive systems and offer a wider specter of interpretations and opinions than any purely political and rationalized forms of protest. In contrast with social theory, the immediate and often nonrational affective form of art, is able to better and faster convey the vague and undefined sensibilities of protest and affirmation of another way of being that social theorists cannot formulate using their bulky and

slowly changing methodological apparatus—or that they are afraid to formulate as they remain loyal to their rigid disciplinary frames.

Obviously, contemporary art seldom appeals to mass audiences even if the majority of artists I will refer to in the book are far from being elitist or living in any ivory tower. They are able to actively engage with the critically thinking part of the educated and responsible people, who still reside in the postsocialist countries. These are the people who attend exhibitions of contemporary art and are ready to discover something new and relate it to their own experience. Such art initiatives are often closely linked with social and political movements and protests never completely merging with them.

This book offers one possible view of decolonization in post-Soviet aesthesis. I hope that, in the future, more decolonial reflections on the post-Soviet imaginary will be done via other spheres that are not necessarily connected with art. However, art is the most promising sphere in the realization of decoloniality in the present post-Soviet space.

Beyond the TV-Fridge Dichotomy

The art and artists discussed in this volume offer the exhausted post-Soviet person a way beyond the dichotomy of the TV set and the refrigerator, a way into a different dimension in which there are other notions and beliefs besides bread and game. They are not proposing to place the TV set inside the empty refrigerator, but rather to delink from this false, imposed logic and see that there are many other options in the world and some of them we can even initiate ourselves and start doing it already now. In this regard, the post-Soviet condition must not be seen as a lamentation of the lost paradise, but rather as a way to re-existence in a changing world in which many worlds would correlate and where the experience of Socialist modernity and its specific trajectory would shape one of the possible open models, intersecting but never entirely merging with others, and where the previous hierarchical relations of the state, the market and the artists would finally give place to other forms of communication, praxis and production of meanings. The art of the postsocialist world remains an effective means of such a collective cathartic therapy, which is likely to help post-Soviet citizens better understand ourselves and our place in the multiple and complex world in the making and never again slide into the vicious circle of forever dependent existence.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. The term "colonial difference" refers to the complex differential between empires and their colonies. Colonial difference is studied much more thoroughly than imperial difference in postcolonial theory and decolonial thought. Although the empire-colony dichotomy has been criticized time and again for its black-and-white simplicity, and a number of thinkers have attempted to complicate and problematize this binary in more dynamic reciprocal forms (see, e.g., Bhabha 1994; Ortiz 1995), the colonial difference in general has remained the most obvious, visual, and immediate representation of the power dynamics of modernity/coloniality.

Imperial difference disrupts the presumable homogeneity of imperial spatiality and complicates it by drawing attention to various complete or partial losers that, for various reasons, failed to fulfill their imperial missions in the post-Enlightenment modernity. As a result, they occupied second- or even third-class places within the modern imperial hierarchy and increasingly competed among themselves rather than with the winners. Occasional attempts to move up from the second division to the first, an interesting example of which was the USSR, invariably have been prevented and punished by the first-class imperial powers. Even if they retained economic and political independence, the losing empires were colonized intellectually, culturally, and existentially, often via efficient self-colonizing tools.

Similarly to colonial difference, which is sustained through the paradox of an essentially unattainable ideal of progress and an ultimate merging with imperial sameness, the sphere of imperial difference has repeatedly slid into an endless logic of catching up. Second-class empires have developed collective inferiority complexes and unhealthy compensating mechanisms, as well as besieged-camp ideologies and victory-in-defeat myths. Not incidentally, the liminal empires marked by imperial difference were located in Eurasia, which contains the most complex cultural, ethnic, religious,

and economic intersections and nodal points. Usually these empires lacked important features of the successful modern imperial profile, such as Western Christianity, increasingly in its Protestant forms; capitalism, increasingly in its industrial, not mercantile, varieties; racial hierarchies that easily distinguished between subjects and so-called others; and last, but not least, the alphabetical and linguistic affinity, which seriously affected symbolic belonging to the ruling club.

2. I coined the term "Janus-faced empire" in the early 2000s in an attempt to explain the neurotic Russian imperial configuration as a polity that has never been allowed into the Western club but secretly, or openly, wants to be accepted. Today, the "Tatar dressed as a Frenchman," as the Russian imperial historian Vasily Klyuchevsky (2009) has described this identity, is lapsing into yet another chauvinistic cycle by bragging about its exaggerated "Asiatic" qualities. The devious and unreliable imperial Russian Janus has also been manipulative and strangely adaptable to different conditions, successfully imitating and appropriating other imperial models to balance its difficult divided positionality.

An imperial paradox, this Janus has been rich yet poor, providential yet failed, and always struggling and never quite succeeding in appropriating certain elements of modernity/coloniality. To survive, it has had to wear different masks for different partners—European and non-European. In a way, in the presence of Western Europe it has always felt like a colony and compensated for this by projecting an image of the Russian/Soviet colonizer as a champion of civilization, modernization, and, later, specifically socialist modernity into its own non-European colonies. Moreover, a complex internal hierarchy of intercolonial differences generated a variety of masks the empire wore to address each of the colonies. When Russia/the USSR was looking in the direction of its European frontiers (Finland, Poland, the Baltic littoral), it acted like an unconfident colonizer that was unable to practice imperial superiority or carry out civilizing missions because of its own lower position in the hierarchy of modernity. Looking to the East and to the South—the only remaining directions for its imperial expansion in the post-Enlightenment modern era, Russia/the USSR wore a different mask: that of a distorted "white man's burden," which Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1977, 35) described when he wrote, "In Europe we were hangers-on and slaves, whereas in Asia we shall go as masters." A special case of the complex interplay of the external imperial and colonial differences in the Janus-faced empire was represented in Russia's relations with the intermediary cases of Ukraine and Belarus, whose difference was deliberately erased and silenced to enhance the insecure Russian sameness. The inconfident Russian imperial identity asserted itself by denying the existence and forcefully assimilating these East Slavic ethnic cultures.

3. Arguments about whether it would be better to be colonized by Great Britain or by Russia and self-defensive statements about how lucky we are that we do not live in Afghanistan are typical illustrations of this sensibility in Central Asia.

4. "Make food for powder" is an idiom used by William Shakespeare in *Henry IV*. Falstaff says: "good enough to toss; food for powder, food for powder; they'll fill a pit as well as better." It is normally used to describe combatants who are cynically treated as unimportant lives who are easily sacrificed on the battlefield.

5. La Leyenda Negra (The Black Legend) was originally a biased representation of Spain in the historiography of its more successful European imperial rivals (Greer, Quilligan, Mignolo 2008). Here it is used to denote a general style of argumentation meant to demonize the adversary to construct a positive self-representation, habitually used in geopolitical rivalry.

6. Immigration has reached unprecedented numbers in Russia in the past several years and continues to grow. The latest wave has been more politically than economically induced—or, at least, the two factors play equal roles. In a sense, the regime is using the still open borders as a safety valve, to let off the steam. If dissidents, who also tend to be highly educated professionals, are able to leave and are doing so, the threat of revolution is considerably reduced.

7. In the months that passed between writing the first draft and the final version of this book, many more social and economic protests were taking place in the Russian provinces (but not so much in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, with an important exception of the schoolchildrens' and students' dominated revolts in the spring of 2017). Among them was the Krasnodar farmers' march on the Kremlin in the late summer of 2016, which was stopped abruptly and violently persecuted at a great distance from Moscow. The farmers, driving tractors, were protesting unlawful seizures of land and harvests by large businesses supported by corrupt local bureaucrats and police, which were leaving thousands of people bankrupt. Another example is the strike by truck drivers that was renewed on a massive scale in the spring of 2017 against the Platon electronic toll system, which assesses fees based on the weight of a truck's cargo and could lead to economic ruin for many truckers who own and operate their vehicles as independent contractors.

In these and other protests, the protesters have wanted to take their social and economic claims directly to the president; they believe that he is not aware of the iniquity that is being created and that, once he finds out, he will restore justice. Thus, rather than Russian government, the protesters target local officials or the West as their enemy. This reflects the stale Russian foundational political myth of the good tsar and the bad boyars that played such an important part in Stalinist times. Paradoxically, these protests are pro-Putin.

CHAPTER 1. The Decolonial Sublime

1. Rancière titled one of his latest books *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (2013). However, in many ways it reiterates his original take on aesthetics.

2. Similarly to other concepts, creolization, which was originally coined outside the West and linked with particular local histories, was fruitfully theorized in the Caribbean tradition and later appropriated by Western theory as a fashionable term. It was subsequently used in mainstream texts mostly in its positive and quite superfluous interpretations, celebrating the fusion of cultural forms and their egalitarian interaction. In this case, persistent power hierarchies in the production of cultural patterns and the absorption and deformation of dependent cultures by dominant cultures, are virtually ignored. Paradoxically, in celebrating creolization Bourriaud appropriates and distorts it, erasing its asymmetries, painful struggles, and element of resistance.