

Locating postsocialist precarity in global coloniality

A decolonial frame for 1989?

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Introduction

Decoloniality is a critical worldview born out of the experiences of and resistances to settler colonialism and imperial conquest. While settler and colonial logics are indeed transnational and contemporary, the year 1492 plays a strong gravitational force in theorisations of coloniality and approaches to decoloniality. The timelines of colonialism implied by 1492 appear to be both geographically and ideologically light years away from those that centre 1917 or 1989. The focus of this essay is whether and how postsocialism, in its east Europe and Eurasian contexts, is situated within or in relation to the specific genealogies (and concomitant logics) that are implied with 1492. What are the links, if any, between 1492 and 1989?

I use the idea of postsocialist precarity as a way into thinking across what are treated and assumed to be two different critiques of power – postsocialist and decolonial. Postsocialist precarity captures a critical lens that specifically addresses a variety of geo-historical experiences resulting from the dismantling of state socialist modernity and the (re-)incorporation of relatively closed economies into the capitalist neoliberal order. While that geo-historical experience is wildly heterogeneous and (re)produces many hierarchies within postsocialist Europe and Eurasia, I treat “postsocialist precarity” as a composite category in order to emphasise a point of tension/connection to a decolonial approach. Aware of the provisional nature of such generalisations, I am compelled to explore this question as a way to work through the hidden or recuperated Eurocentrism residing in “critical” postsocialist theorising, including my own. After defining postsocialist precarity and emphasising the role of borders and border-making in its production, I introduce the concept of global coloniality, paying particular attention to the role of Eurocentrism in both obscuring racial epistemologies and constructing temporal plotlines that fix rather than destabilise power relations.

Postsocialist precarity

Precarity is a term used in recent times to critique political and economic policies that promote austerity, defund public services, wager debt and profit over

environmental and human well-being, and criminalise social protests against such policies. The wide-reaching protest and cultural movements across Europe and the globe, such as the EuroMayDay annual protest that began in the early 2000s, signal that precarity is brought about by loss – namely the loss of regulated industry, formal labour contracts, and living wages (della Porta et al. 2015). Similarly, the losses brought about by the dismantling of state socialism have given new meaning to precarity. Of course, economic and social vulnerability are not new to east Europe and Eurasia as state socialist economies of scarcity and the myriad informal practices of barter and exchange illustrate. The many internal hierarchies within national economies and across them also suggest that state socialism did not prevent precarity as such. Yet, postsocialist precarity is new in many ways as it captures the loss of previous lifeworlds upon which symbolic and material forms of living were (re)produced.

While emerging out of its own set of specific geo-historical contexts, postsocialist precarity is produced by some of the same neoliberal economic practices riddling other parts of the world, such as flexibilisation, informalisation, and the reduction and transformation of social provisioning. These practices are entangled with the continued political drift towards forms of authoritarianism, neo-traditionalism, and diminished democratic returns. In addition, postsocialist precarity includes a hybrid of neoliberal forms of exploitation and social vulnerability with/in the half-life of state socialist projects, including the abandonment of socialist inspired housing and communal sociality, real estate and urban planning in “smart investments,” and the simultaneous disavowal and recategorising of socialist-era histories. While the “post” of post-Fordism is not the same experience as the “post” in postsocialist, they share a similar register of loss. In the case of postsocialist precarity, the loss is of the state socialist social contract that was overwhelmingly rejected in 1989 (Bonfiglioli 2015; Tkach and Hrzenjak 2016). A replacement for that social contract remains contested. In fact, because the adoption of neoliberal capitalist practices coincided with the dismantling of political systems, there is a *doubling* of economic and political loss and uncertainty.

At the same time, already existing internal economic and social hierarchies to state socialism adapted to neoliberal capitalist production and distribution, perpetuating asymmetries while also creating new opportunities and vulnerabilities. The many sexual, gender, ethnic, racial, and class hierarchies concealed by state socialist rhetoric of equality and assurance of employment transformed into “peripheralised” workforces that suited non-standard contract work (Standing 2011). The doubling of precarity and the adaptability of social hierarchy to capitalist production proved the ongoing necessity of informal survival strategies, some of which were practised under state socialism. For example, using informal arrangements to find work, visa documents, or to cross borders or smuggle people and goods was a practice already well known under state socialism. In the case of post-Soviet Russia in the early days of capitalist transformation, these strategies were recycled to manage the rise in non-standard contracts and a workforce at the mercy of private enterprises offering severely reduced pay or operating in arrears

(Walker 2015). The volatility of non-standard contracts and low or no wages for standard labour contracts pushed the need for informal income across former state socialist economies. Some countries have been able to stabilise economically, though even with EU membership there remain economic uncertainties in the context of growing austerity.

Borders and border work

In addition to the register of loss, postsocialist precarity captures shifting (and new) regional power dynamics. Borders play a complex role in producing post-socialist precarity including regarding how “second world” economies are situated as peripheral in both symbolic and structural ways to core economies. I will engage a more critical lens on this spatialisation of power in terms of core and periphery, but for now I want to use it to further illuminate the specificity of postsocialist precarity. Namely, the changing terms of borders and border-making in the wake of the dismantling of state socialism are significant to the production of postsocialist precarity. Two examples illustrate this: one regards the racialised border-making between the Russian Federation and the Soviet ex-colonies of Central Asia and the second regards the border work that ensued from the so-called “return to Europe” discourse.

The Soviet economic model was built on the symbolic centring of the worker. While internal divisions of labour and hierarchies existed as state socialist economic systems changed over time, those practices were either instrumentalised as necessary for socialist modes of production or/and concealed by worker’s state rhetoric. The political economy of national borders within state socialism, such as in the USSR, certainly regulated mobility, economic relationships of production and consumption, and internal hierarchies. Yet, the terms of that political economy promoted universal worker’s rights and national self-determination. Core-periphery relations within Soviet state socialism were normalised as part of socialist “development” and were institutionalised within the domesticated national borders between Soviet Federated Socialist Republics. Yet, by the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, great disparities existed between the more developed north-west and the less developed south-east, illustrated by the divide between the Baltic republics and Central Asia. For example, at the close of the Soviet experiment, 69% of the population and almost 74% of the output were tied to Russia and Ukraine, yet the GDP per person ranged from 150% of the Soviet average in Estonia to 42% in Tajikistan (Maddison 1995, 153, quoted in Dunford 1998).

The symbolic and economic terms to the borders between Soviet Central Asia and the republics of the north-west, such as the Baltics, Russia, and Ukraine, shifted with the end to Soviet interdependency. The details of how the hierarchies and relationships transformed are quite complex and certainly ongoing (Khalid 2014). Part of that transformation is that the national borders between Soviet Federated Socialist Republics, while always indeed political, had not been directly understood to be about racialised categories rooted within colonial logics. Rather, the

Soviet Union promoted the idea of a “friendship of peoples” (*druzhba narodov*) – an idea and practice that claimed to be beyond the racism and exploitation created by capitalism and colonialism. While this friendship operated under different terms than western capitalism and colonialism, it too (re)produced racialised and ethnic differences as well as related hierarchies. Indeed, as many now argue, the Soviet “friendship of peoples” was in fact rooted in ethnic and racialised imaginaries even if not overtly (Hirsch 2005; Weitz 2002).¹ Despite an anti-colonial commitment, critiques of American racism and a political commitment to self-determination, the Soviet model of friendship rested on an assumed “white” and ethnically superior Russian norm that claimed political and cultural authority and which implicitly was viewed as “first among equals” (Martin 2001). Thus, the profound changes to borders brought about by the end of the Soviet Union made explicit what was already present – the power of ethnic and racialised hierarchies.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union created international borders between the once domesticated relations between Soviet Federated Socialist Republics. As a result, the terms of core-periphery relations changed, including the removal of the veneer of “friendship”. New relations of power between former state socialist states continue to be negotiated and, in many cases, reveal the long-standing colonial logic of those borders and border-making. This is the case regarding both the treatment of labour migrants from Central Asia (and other regions) in Russia and the “migrantisation” of non-ethnic Russians in Russia. As numerous scholars and activists have argued, Russian national discourse has become increasingly nationalistic, xenophobic, and hetero-patriarchal (Arnold and Romanova 2013; Salmenniemi and Adamson 2014; Sperling 2014; Zakharov 2015). The inversion, and indeed subversion, of the Soviet sentiment of friendship is starkly illustrated by vigilante groups such as *Щит Москвы* (Moscow Shield) who hunt down “illegal” migrants in “raids”.² The daily and structural violence that many labour migrants experience, either due to official or vigilante “raids” is an extreme example of the racialisation of postsocialist precarity (Round and Kuznetsova-Morenko 2016; Salomatin 2013).

While this violence may not be the norm, it is part of a wider discourse that promotes an ethnicised notion of who is Russian (*Российский*) and that increasingly marks any non-ethnic Russian as illegal. Thus, in addition to targeting labour migrants, the racialised “othering” of migrants (as illegal or criminal) has made all non-ethnic Russians suspect.³ The internationalisation of formerly domesticated borders has contributed to new racial discourses in Russia – one that explicitly defines “Russian” as “white” and in tension to internal and external others, such as “illegal migrants,” Chechens, and newly “minoritised” groups (Zanca 2013; Zakharov 2015). At the same time, these new discourses are built on the foundation of the long-standing imperial relations that undergirded even the terms of friendship during the Soviet period.

The shift away from the symbolic language of friendship also is linked to discourses of a “return to Europe” in the former Eastern Bloc. This is the second example of border work that I suggest contributes to postsocialist precarity. As

national discourse in Russia has embraced a civilisational and racialised “white” understanding of Russian (*Росси́йский*), so too has the idea the “return to Europe” promoted a civilisational and racialised discourse in different ways in Central and Eastern Europe. At its core, we should consider how the political desire to get out of the Soviet (and Russian) yoke of power, while in many ways also an anti-imperial move, can invoke another colonial turn. That is, the turn in “returning” to Europe cannot be seen outside of the imperial projects of European empires that in fact established global hierarchies and continue to regulate the racialised borders of Europe.

Here it is important to see how the internal borders of Europe that mark former state socialist countries as Europe’s periphery are also part of the larger project of *Fortress Europe*. The influx of at least a million Syrian asylum seekers to the EU starting in 2015 illustrates this dynamic. The EU’s Dublin Regulation, which gives responsibility for registering and processing asylum applications to the first Schengen country in which a refugee arrives, placed enormous burdens on Greece and Italy (Lehne 2016). Refugees moved through alternative routes, including through the Western Balkans in attempts to reach Hungary and Austria. While some welcomed refugees, many others did not, and governments battled over an “equitable” policy for refugee relocation. The former Communist Bloc countries, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, all rejected this idea and instead militarised their borders and fuelled hostility towards refugees (Gall 2016). The same countries that claimed a “return to Europe”, in their gesture of belligerence towards refugees, performed the work of Fortress Europe. For countries at EU’s physical and metaphorical periphery and for whom “European” membership challenges forms of nested Orientalisms such as in the Balkans, the internal hierarchies of Europe are revealed as core economies of the EU quibble through bureaucratic dialogue as thousands of people seek refuge at its borders.

These multiple forms of border work produce state power as well as mark certain bodies as mobile and others as not welcome. Policies that enforce Fortress Europe manage the transit of precarious others, including migrants of all kinds, and are tied to the legacies and current entanglements of neoliberal capitalism.⁴ Dynamics within the EU also track along a racialised peripheralisation of the Balkans and to a different extent other former Communist bloc countries. The old members of the EU periphery (Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece and Spain) are joined with the new (including from the Baltics and Balkans), although those hierarchies are layered rather than consolidated. For example, in 2015 a joint activist/research statement on “Peripheralizing Europe” was made, connecting the ways that the EU “centre” both exploits and depends on its peripheral territories. The statement proclaims that

The peripheries continue to absorb the most brutal effects of the crisis of Europe. Europe’s margins are burning, not just with rapid declassing (PIIGS) and normalized poverty (the East) but also with people trying to cross mine-fields and seas and jump walls and fences, fleeing from, most often, the effects of western imperial and neo-colonial policies.⁵

The border work of a “return to Europe” both aligns with the ongoing project of Fortress Europe (which produces its own forms of precarity) and has generated new forms of precarity as that “return” produces new zones of periphery.

Global coloniality and (secondary) Eurocentrism

Postsocialist precarity invokes a certain plotline, one that (in part) focuses on the loss of the state socialist project and the effects of neoliberal capitalist transformations. This plotline, with the year 1989 serving as a key moment, obviously centres the political institutionalisation and demise of state socialism. But, what would change if postsocialist precarity were considered within or alongside another plotline, that of global coloniality? I pose this question to open-up a discussion rather than to resolve it. My own intellectual trajectory, and blind spots, are motivation for this (re)thinking. While I still agree with the analysis of precarity and human trafficking I presented in *Economies of Violence* (2015), I also have reflected on the insufficiency of my critical theorising. In particular, I want to think further about the implications of what Madina Tlostanova speaks of as secondary Eurocentrism. While my research unpacked the ongoing operations of east/west power dynamics and theorised how women’s rights campaigns are entangled in neoliberal economic practices and repressive state policies regarding mobility and borders, I did not sufficiently consider how Eurocentrism can be recuperated in critical postsocialist approaches. Namely, while neoliberal capitalism is formed out of histories of colonialism, there are important elisions regarding racial thinking in particular that occur when “global coloniality” as such is not integrated into analyses of postsocialist precarity. In this section, I engage these questions in an effort to grapple with the borders of critical theory and the unintended recuperation rather than destabilisation of Eurocentrism.

The idea of global coloniality is not an argument for an origin story. Rather, the concept reveals the “terms of evolutionary time” that European colonialism constructed in its discovery of the “New World” (Lugones 2007, 192). The terms of evolutionary time created such concepts as primitive, civilisation, and culture that even now wield political power in their contemporary guises. Decolonial scholar María Lugones explains, “Europe came to be mythically conceived as pre-existing colonial, global, capitalism and as having achieved a very advanced level in the continuous, linear, unidirectional path” (Lugones 2007, 192). The designation of primitive time or places, then, is a mythical one used to initiate a kind of global thinking that rationalised civilisational missions and conquest. Furthering this idea, Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein argue that the

modern world system was born in the long sixteenth century. The Américas as a geosocial construct were born in the long sixteenth century. The creation of this geosocial entity was the constitutive act of the modern world-system. The Américas were not incorporated into an already existing capitalist world economy – rather, its construction built the capitalist “world system”.

(Quijano and Wallerstein 1992)

Within that world system competing claims to superiority presented different European (and Anglophone) powers as winners or losers. However, competition for the civilisational centre amongst those empires and eventually nations and states who claimed to define or could claim proximity to such notions of civilisation, created a ruse for the (re)production of coloniality. For instance, national narratives that claim to be “innocent” of colonialism because they did not have colonies belies the entangled realities of global coloniality.

What then does this epistemic orientation reveal or alter about postsocialist precarity? While all regional or cultural instances of power may not need to be thread through the eye of global coloniality, it is still important to tend to the various relations and interconnections between empire and colonialism in east Europe and Eurasia and global coloniality. Furthermore, I understand that a turn to this orientation also is a turn to the Americas (including North and South America and the Caribbean) and that may seem like a re-centring of the United States and certain forms of western hegemony. I remain open to such critiques even as I explore how postsocialist precarity is implicated within global coloniality. To be certain, my understanding of the implications of a “decolonial turn” is still in process. It is a process informed by my position as a white scholar within the US academy whose training in “area studies” reproduced rather than challenged the nested hierarchies within that field, including those historically and materially produced in the region and within the US academy itself. My critical orientation to area studies has emphasised the insufficiency of traditional approaches such as Sovietology and its successor democratisation. In contrast, critical postsocialist studies includes approaches that treat “postsocialism” as contested, culturally and politically dynamic, and as globally situated (rather than just or primarily regional). Alongside this critical orientation, global coloniality challenges hidden forms of Eurocentrism that, while seemingly distant from east Europe, are in fact linked. In particular, I consider how Eurocentrism is recuperated in theorisations of postsocialist precarity, especially in the case of some (re)framings of the demise of state socialism as a postcolonial condition.

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam explain that Eurocentrism is a discursive rationale for colonialism and is “the process by which the European powers reached positions of hegemony in much of the world” (Shohat and Stam 1994, 2). Part of that discursive rationale, as Lugones explained, is the “terms of evolutionary time” that parse the globe both spatially and temporally into categories and scales of primitive and civilised. Similarly, Shohat and Stam state:

Eurocentric thinking attributes to the “West” an almost providential sense of historical destiny. Eurocentrism, like Renaissance perspectives in painting, envisions the world from a single privileged point. It maps the world in a cartography that centralizes and augments Europe while literally “belittling” Africa. The “East” is divided into “Near”, “Middle”, and “Far”, making Europe the arbiter of spatial evaluation, just as the establishment of Greenwich Mean Time produces England as the regulating center of temporal measurement.

(Shohat and Stam 1994, 2)

In both spatial and temporal terms, Eurocentrism attributes to the “West” an inherent progress, elides (and at times appropriates) non-European traditions, and minimises the oppressive practices of civilisation, democracy, and similar rationales/logics of modernity. As Shohat and Stam explain though, this description of Eurocentrism does not also mean that, as a discursive rationale, Eurocentrism is not also complex, contradictory, or historically unstable (Shohat and Stam 1994, 2).

Given that the Soviet Union was made the enemy of the “West” during the Cold War, it may seem odd to position it within Eurocentrism. Yet, as Madina Tlostanova astutely argues, Russian empire enacts a *secondary* status within/to Eurocentrism because it is both inside and outside of the western episteme. As such, she classifies it as subaltern which produces “secondary Eurocentrism” (Tlostanova 2015). She explains,

For the subaltern Russian Empire, the secondary Eurocentrism and the imperial difference with the more successful capitalist empires of modernity (Great Britain, France, Germany) comes forward in the shaping of subjectivity of both the colonizer and the colonized. On the global scale, this imperial difference mutates into the colonial one, as Russia becomes a country that allows the Western philosophy, knowledge, and culture to colonize itself with no blood shed, the Janus-faced empire that felt itself a colony in the presence of the West and, at the same time, half heartedly played the part of the caricature “civilizer” in its non-European colonies.

(Tlostanova 2015, 272)

I should note that Russia’s secondary Eurocentrism is not unique, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues that Portugal has figured in the semi periphery of European colonial practice since the 17th century (de Sousa Santos 2002). As Portuguese colonialism moved from the centre to the periphery of Eurocentrism, Portugal reproduced itself “on the basis of the colonial system” (de Sousa Santos 2002, 9). However, the Russian subaltern empire differs from the Portuguese experience because it never was imagined as or in the centre. One consequence of this is that Eurocentrism circulates as a “buried epistemology” of Russian imperial practice. That is, even as political and philosophical traditions distinguish a Russian or Slavic civilisational difference vis-à-vis the west, these traditions are still yoked within the dominant plotline of western hegemony.

For example, Susan Buck-Morss argues that the modern projects of capitalism and socialism, in their east/west oppositional locations, were in fact different approaches to the same project of mass utopia (Buck-Morss 2000). Invoking the idea of dream-worlds (and catastrophe), Buck-Morss convincingly argues that Soviet modernity was imagined, as in capitalist modernity, as a progress narrative. The temporality of revolution, of the *avant-garde*, and of economic planning sets the Soviet dreamworld within “evolutionary time”. A key feature of that progress narrative was the anti-colonial notion of “friendship of peoples” which, in addition to producing complex material realities in their historical and locational specificity, can also be read as part of what it was projected to be an alternative to, namely racial capitalism. For instance,

Soviet “friendship” was rooted in a paternalism that implicitly privileged an ethnic ranking of peoples and built economic dominance through extractive state socialism. Moreover, the ideological critique of racism and colonialism did not immunise (Soviet) Russian cultural or political thinking from anti-blackness or heterosexism.⁶ The point here is *not* that Russian or Soviet political hegemony is the same as western (dominant) forms, but that there are connections and indeed reproductions of those forms in locally and historically specific ways.

Shohat and Stam suggest that Eurocentrism is often a hidden epistemology particularly within political claims that assert to be post-imperial or post-national. For instance, one dimension of Eurocentrism is the construction of (and contestation over) racial categories. While contingent and entirely fabricated, “race” as a system of categories took shape through European colonialism. Yet, as Fatima El-Tayeb argues regarding Europe,

the geographical and intellectual origin of the very concept of race in Europe, not to mention the explicitly race-based policies that characterized both its fascist regimes and its colonial empires, the continent often is marginal at best in discourses on race or racism, in particular with regard to contemporary configurations that are often closely identified with the United States as a center of both explicit race discourse and of resistance to it.

(El-Tayeb 2011, XV)

Even in “multicultural” Europe, as El-Tayeb argues, there is a disavowal of “race” as an inheritance of European colonialism. This also is the case regarding east Europe and Russia where it is argued by some that “race” is not a relevant classification because different categories (ethnicity and nationality) are more appropriate. But the argument for the specificity of the construction and mobilisation of ethnic and national categories across the different contexts of east Europe (including the Balkans), Russia, and Eurasia need not also be a rejection of “race” as an episteme informing those varied contexts.

While it is true that some western-based scholarship has treated postsocialist east Europe as a homogenous extension of “Europe” and racial whiteness, it also is the case that to different degrees and ways, claims to “Europeanness” (as well as the rejection of it, as in the case of Russia) produces what Anikó Imre calls internalised imperialism (Imre 2014).⁷ Similar to Tlostanova’s concept of secondary Eurocentrism (though also different), Imre argues that there is a co-dependence between Western and Eastern European nationalisms. This dynamic is “haunted by internalized and rarely acknowledged traces of imperialism on both sides” (Imre 2014, 113). An illustration of this internalised imperialism is the uncritical use of a postcolonial paradigm to explain the (re)mapping of intra-European hierarchies that peripheralise new members and to critique the ongoing political hegemony of Europe. I notice this subtly produced in criticism of postsocialist precarity as well when racialisation practices that are indeed instrumental to new nationalisms in postsocialist contexts are displaced by a primary concern for unequal relations vis-à-vis Europe or the United States.

Some criticism is quick to denounce western hegemony without also critically reflecting on how that work may recuperate intra-European as well as global colonial relations.⁸

A decolonial reading of precarity

To think further about the internal imperialism that can be unaddressed in criticism of postsocialist precarity, I juxtapose two images: one is Ilya Repin's classic painting *Barge Haulers on the Volga* (Figure 2.1) and the other is an image of a post-Soviet sex trafficking victim, similar to the one depicted in the popular film *Lilja 4-Ever* (2002). In juxtaposing these two images, I suggest that the economies of race and labour in global coloniality relate to both of these two very different times and locations. In particular, an internalised imperialism recuperates Eurocentrism in both iterations of what can be understood as two representations of labour exploitation. Repin's painting represents a narrative that casts Russia as exceptional to western imperialism (and immune to its racist pathologies) while the image of Lilja and the film production constructs a narrative about the post-Soviet sex trafficking victim as an exceptional subject of global precarity. I do not question that these two images represent a material reality of exploitation and I am not providing a criticism of the artist or film per se. Rather, I refer to these images to signal the hidden Eurocentrism that can potentially be carried through the narratives that are produced by these images.

Repin was a well-respected painter, having received entrance into the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts as well as a golden medal that allowed him the right to study in Europe. He had spent time on the Volga, making sketches that he would later use to paint the now famous *Barge Haulers on the Volga* between 1870–1873. Known in particular for his participation in the *peredvizhniki* (itinerants) artist collective, the painting is often associated with a realist movement that aimed to expose human suffering and inequality in society. Here, eleven weathered figures



Figure 2.1 Ilya Repin's classic painting *Barge Haulers on the Volga*

strain to pull the distant barge with only their bodies and leather straps. The barge carries Russia's economic interests along the Volga and Don rivers while the *burlaki* earned modest wages.

The term *burlaki* refers to migrant workers, among other ideas relating to being transient. The *burlaki* represented here could symbolise what some in Russian history have called a practice of "internal colonisation". This idea suggests that, with no colonies to dominate, the Russian empire exploited its "own" people. In his analysis of internal colonisation, Alexander Etkind suggests that Russian culture produced categories of caste (*soslovie*) and not race. He states,

In a society of internal colonization that had annexed, absorbed, and exterminated its others, almost everyone was of one and the same color. To play the function of race, this society created estates, a legal category that was also similar in function to caste.

(Etkind 2012, 93)

Etkind further argues that the elite were subjected to a kind of "orientalizing" when in the late 17th century Peter the Great introduced national legislation that included a beard tax. Etkind writes, "while caste was a substitute for race, the beard was a substitute for skin color" (Etkind 2012, 102). The argument that there were/are cultural substitutes for race does not figure how the racial logics created by Eurocentrism still inform the narrative of a "race-less" empire, not as the same experience but as implicitly and explicitly invested in those logics (Tolz 2019). For example, how does the system of *soslovie* or the beard tax produce notions of Russian national consciousness that are indeed situated within that Eurocentric yoke? When Etkind refers to Alexander Herzen's term "white negroes" or "frozen negroes" to illustrate the absence of "race" in Russia, he misses how this idea is in fact a window into the racial thinking that refers and relies upon the "negro" as a gravitational force. What does it mean to use the category white? Is that not "race" after all? While Russian serfdom was a different enterprise than the trans-Atlantic slave trade, this critique of it reveals an investment in the racial logics of global coloniality.

Furthermore, the notion of "internal" also obscures how those bodies of "the same color" are projected as such. How are the myriad peoples who come to be known as *burlaki* made internal? The fertile cities along the Volga became places of European settlement, as Catherine the Great's manifesto created German colonies. From its basin in the Caspian Sea to the city of Kazan, the river Volga is a route of Russian colonial conquest that defies the race-neutral idea of "internal colonization". The expansion of Russian empire may have relied on the logic of internal (or self) subjugation but it also operated through the idea of what John Richardson calls an "unending frontier" (Richardson 2003). The *terra nullis* of America that Columbus discovered was the "virgin lands" of Russian imperial settlement – the Tatars, Chuvash, Mordvinians, Cheremis, Votiaks, Nogai Tatars, Bashkirs, Kalmyks, Crimean Tatars, Cossacks, Yakuts, Buriats, Koryaks, and Chukchi (for example) are the *terra nullius* of Russian expansion.

The second image of postsocialist sex trafficking was frequently depicted in news and other media. It featured an innocent female victim lacking agency

in her decisions to navigate formal and informal economies (Suchland 2015). I suggest there is the potential for internal imperialism (or recuperated Eurocentrism) here as well. The phenomenon of human trafficking, and sex trafficking in particular, shed light on postsocialist precarity unlike any other tragedy from the dismantling of state socialism. Numerous feature films and documentaries depicted the vulnerability and violence that many experienced in an effort to find work abroad. The film *Lilja 4-Ever* is one example and has even been used as an anti-trafficking tool to raise public consciousness about trafficking in hopes of ultimately preventing it. In viewing the precarity and violence experienced by migrants involved (or forced into) sexual commerce there has often been an obscuring of the role of the state in producing that precarity. Elsewhere I have argued that the example of postsocialist trafficking facilitated a view of trafficking that depoliticised the underlying economic arrangements that pushed women and others into dangerous migrant labour. Consequently, approaches to anti-trafficking rarely if ever address the policies of “transition” that produced unemployment, loss of wages, dispossession, and insecurity. A carceral approach to trafficking took precedence, which increased the policing of borders and informal labour, thus adding to the regulation, criminalisation, and surveillance of mobility. This is clearly illustrated by the fact that the United Nations Optional Protocol on Human Trafficking is situated in the UN Convention on Transnational Crime and Corruption.

While the film powerfully represents the violence of postsocialist precarity – particularly in its gendered form – the film also represents a narrative of trafficking that displaces how forced and exploitative labour resulting from the dismantling of state socialism is connected to, rather than exceptional to, gendered and racialised labour within that sphere and globally. For instance, Russian ethnic migration is part of a wider national and international context that includes the value and added mobility that comes from being marked or racialised “white but not quite”. This is also important because human trafficking and forced labour in Russia is largely an issue tied to labour migration from Central Asia. The dominant representations of “postsocialist trafficking” tended to separate the systems of exploitation that produce both the “white” victim of trafficking (often in Europe and the US) and the non-ethnic (minoritised) Russians and labour migrants exploited within Russia, including from Central Asia. Thus, it is important to think across these migrations and systems of oppression as I theorise postsocialist precarity as materially produced in the former Soviet sphere and as embedded in global coloniality. Finally, engaging global coloniality as a force in postsocialist precarity reveals the continuities rather than breaks between different geographic and historical forms of imperialism.

Notes

- 1 The practices of Soviet friendship produced many meanings and outcomes, not all of which are necessarily negative. For instance, many Soviet citizens understood their relationship to each other through that discourse of friendship. In this regard, Jeff Sahadeo’s work on intimate interethnic contact, including through intermarriage, is compelling.

- Using oral histories, he reveals how individual mentalities and experiences during the Soviet period were shaped by “friendship” and marriage (Sahadeo 2007).
- 2 The *Vkontakte* site for the group shows photographs and videos of raids in which non-ethnic Russians are harassed, intimidated, and violently beaten. https://vk.com/board_of_msk (last accessed January 19, 2017).
 - 3 On the racialisation of labour migrants as illegal, criminal, and diseased see Round and Kuznetsova-Moreno (2016).
 - 4 Raia Apostolova makes the excellent argument that the linguistic emphasis on Syrian migrants as refugees, and thus acceptable subject of empathy, discounts the ways that economic migrants too deserve respect and concern. Furthermore, the distinction between political versus economic migrants is in fact difficult to decipher. <https://asaculturesection.org/2015/09/14/of-refugees-and-migrants-stigma-politics-and-boundary-work-at-the-borders-of-europe/> (accessed January 22, 2017).
 - 5 The joint statement is online: <https://peripheralizingeurope.wordpress.com/coomon-statement-eng-ro-de-slo-it-cast/> (accessed January 28, 2017).
 - 6 Anti-blackness is a term that refers to a core internal logic of European racial thinking that evolved through colonialism, slavery, and its afterlives. The point I want to make here is that anti-blackness can still be absorbed even if the category of “race” is absent or takes different forms (Law 2012; Sweet 1997). Maria Lugones argues that heterosexuality or sexual dimorphism is constitutive of the colonial/modern gender system. She writes that “sexual fears of colonizers led them to imagine the indigenous of the Americas as hermaphrodites or intersexed, with large penises and breasts with flowing milk” (Lugones 2007, 195). In her formulation of global coloniality, this gender system is central to the operations of coloniality.
 - 7 Miglena Todorova insightfully argues that transnational feminist theorising in the US that has critiqued the domination of white feminism, European colonialism, and racism can problematically extend cultural and political Europeaness and “racial whiteness” to socialist countries and societies in the Balkans, her area of focus. The membership of some formerly state socialist countries to the EU, as well as broader claims to “Europeaness” feed into such views as well. She argues that “these perceptions, however, misunderstand the distinct and very different geopolitical and cultural locations of postsocialist societies in the Balkans often enfolded under homogenising banners such as ‘Eastern Europe’ or ‘the Second World’” (Todorova forthcoming). Reflecting on her analysis, I see how my own thinking has not given sufficient care to the colonial differences between (and legacies of) the ruling empires across the region including Ottoman, Russian, Habsburg, Viking, German, Polish, Swedish, and Mongol.
 - 8 For a helpful summary of some of these tendencies see Navickaitė (2014); Rexhepi (2016); Shchurko and Suchland (2021); and Todorova (2018).

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