Between the Posts, Into the Void: Making Sense of Feminism and Decolonization in Bishkek and Almaty

Accepted version of an article published in Central Asian Affairs: Victoria Kravtsova. "Between the Posts, Into the Void: Making Sense of Feminism and Decolonization in Bishkek and Almaty", Central Asian Affairs 9, 2-4 (2022): 403-424

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Abstract

The specificity and variety of the experiences of feminist organizing in the former "second world" is rarely explored in the studies of transnational feminist praxis. This paper explores the (queer) feminist discourses of the region, described as the most "distant Other" of the former USSR – Central Asia. I look at the ways artists, activists, and academics from two cities in the region, Bishkek and Almaty, articulate their understandings of feminism from an intersectional and decolonial perspectives. I argue that local (queer) feminist activists are producers of unique knowledge(s), bound neither to a "return to tradition" nor to accept ready-made solutions from the "West," which positions itself as an "origin" of contemporary debates on gender. By engaging with the inner coloniality of the feminist movements in the former USSR, the article contributes to the transnational debates on the inclusivity of feminism(s).

Keywords

feminism – decolonization – gender – Central Asia – postsocialism – postcolonialism

Introduction

By the 1990s, the nations formerly colonized by the "West," also described as the "third world" had developed post- and decolonial vocabularies to articulate their relationships with former colonial powers.[1] At the same time, after the

1 I write such terms as the "West/East," "Global South/North," "first/second/third world" in quotation marks to highlight their constructed and arbitrary nature.

fall of the communist regimes, the newly independent countries of the former "second" or "postsocialist" world, became a "void" in the global structure of knowledge production, intended "to join it through processes of democratization and Europeanization."[2] In the temporal economy of neoliberal capitalism, respect towards LGBTIQ* rights and gender equality became one of the markers of "modernity" and thus, democratization.[3] Globalized gender discourses came to the postsocialist countries in the 1990s "as part of a so-called transition to democracy," conceptualized as inherent to the "West".[4] Right-wing political movements have adapted this vocabulary, insisting on defining feminist, LGBTIQ*, and anti-racist activism as "Western" imports.[5] This idea was also internalized by postsocialist feminists themselves in the form of the so-called "lag discourse," in which "feminism in the former USSR is constructed as necessarily foreign to and rejected by local women."[6]

In the former USSR, the "lag discourse" regarding the "West" coexists with the legacy of "imperial difference" of the Russian/Soviet Empire, which exercised colonial domination over its own "internal Others".[7] This article looks at the region described as "Central Asia" – the part of the USSR, in which Russian/Soviet colonialism took most obvious forms.[8] This region, neither fully postcolonial nor entirely postsocialist "has for a long time been exemplary of a Soviet

2 Madina Tlostanova, "Postsocialist ≠ Postcolonial? On Post-Soviet Imaginary and Global Coloniality," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 48, no. 2 (2012); Lesia Pagulich and Tatsiana Shchurko, "(Re)Thinking Postsocialism: Interview with Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora," *Feminist Critique*, no. 3 (2020).

3 I write LGBTIQ* with an asterisk at the end to highlight the multiplicity of identities and perspectives that this abbreviation contains. By "temporal economy," I mean the division of different parts of the world into more or less developed and, thus, also positioned differently in time: while some are heading into the future, others have to catch up.

4 For example, Allaine Cerwonka, "Traveling Feminist Thought: Difference and Transculturation in Central and Eastern European Feminisms," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 33, no. 4 (2008): 811; Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizielińska, eds., *De-Centering Western Sexualities. Central and Eastern European Perspectives* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011); Robert Kulpa, "Western Leveraged Pedagogy of Central and Eastern Europe: Discourses of Homophobia, Tolerance, and Nationhood," *Gender, Place, & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, no. 21 (2013); Katharina Wiedlack et al., eds., *Queering Paradigms VIII. Queer-Feminist Solidarity and the East/West Divide* (Wien: Peter Lang, 2020).

5 Roman Kuhar and David Patternote, eds., *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).

6 Redi Koobak and Raili Marling, "The Decolonial Challenge: Framing Post-Socialist Central and Eastern Europe Within Transnational Feminist Studies," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 21, no. 4 (2014): 332.

7 Tlostanova, "Postsocialist ≠ Postcolonial? On Post-Soviet Imaginary and Global Coloniality."

8 Madina Tlostanova, "The South of the Poor North: Caucasus Subjectivity and the Complex of Secondary 'Australism'," *The Global South* 5 (2011); Yulia Gradskova, *Soviet Politics of Emancipation of Ethnic Minority Woman. Natzionalka* (Cham: Springer, 2018).

colony in the texts of Western sovietologists."[9] Today, it remains the most "distant" Other of the former USSR, perceived as "exotic" and "underdeveloped" both in the former center of the Empire and in the "West." The same dynamics apply to local feminist movements.[10] For instance, the authors of a podcast about queerness from St. Petersburg in an episode about Kyrgyzstan described the country as "Muslim," "closed," and "traditional."[11]

The way post-Soviet decolonial and national(ist) struggles are entangled with feminist discourses of the former USSR, as well as the inner inequalities of post-Soviet feminisms have been observed in, for instance, Ukraine and Russia.[12] Activists and scholars from Central Asia are also active in these debates, bringing to light the past and present (queer) feminist struggles in the region.[13] Examples of that include the work of Altynay Kambekova, Zhanar Sekerbayeva, Syinat Sulanalieva, as well as other authors of the publication

9 Madina Tlostanova, "Between the Russian/Soviet Dependencies, Neoliberal Delusions, Dewesternizing Options, and Decolonial Drives," *Cultural Dynamics*, no. 27 (2015); Olga Zubkovskaya, "Postkolonial′naia Teoriia V Analize Postsovetskogo Feminizma: Dilemmy Primeneniia (Postcolonial theory in the analyses of the post-Soviet feminism: dilemas of the application)," *Ab Imperio*, no. 1 (2007): 395.

10 Sergey Abashin, "Natsii I Postkolonializm V Tsentral′noĭ Azii Dvadtsat′ Let Spustia: Pereosmyslivaia Kategorii Analiza/praktiki [Nations and Postcolonialism in Central Asia 20 Years After: Rethinking Categories of Analysis/praxis]," *Ab Imperio*, no. 3 (2011): 195.

11 See Victoria Kravtsova, "Post 1169," *Ode to fluidity*, 08.11.2020, accessed Jan. 19, 2021, https://t.me/odetofluidity/1169.

12 For example, Maria Mayerchyk and Olga Plakhotnik, "Between Time of Nation and Feminist Time: Genealogies of Feminist Protest in Ukraine," in *Feminist Circulations Between East and West/Feministische Zirkulationen Zwischen Ost Und West*, ed. Annette Bühler-Dietrich (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2019); Lesia Pagulich, "New Lovers …? As Patriots and Citizens: Thinking Beyond Homonationalism and Promises of Freedom (The Ukrainian Case)," in *Queering Paradigms VIII. Queer-Feminist Solidarity and the East/West Divide*, eds. Katharina Wiedlack et. al. (Wien: Peter Lang, 2020); Lana Uzarashvili, "'Ty Dolzhna Byt′ Luchshe, Chem Oni': Kak Rabotaet Rasizm V Rossii ('You Must Be Better Than Them': How Racism Works in Russia)," accessed December 15, 2020, https://she-expert.org/istoriya/ty-dolzhna-byt-luchshe-chem-oni-kak-rabotaet-rasizm-v-rossii; Vanya M. Solovey, "Feminism in a Subaltern Empire: Russian Colonialism and Universal Sisterhood," in *Feminist Circulations Between East and West/Feministische Zirkulationen Zwischen Ost Und West*, ed. Annette Bühler-Dietrich. (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2019); Olya Reznikova, "Rol′ Kategoriĭ 'Gender' I 'Race' V Issledovanii Postkolonial′nosti V Rossii. Oplakivaemost′ I Chechenskiĭ Feminizm," in *Na Pereput'e: Metodologiia, Teoriia I Praktika LGBT I Kvir Issledovaniĭ*, ed. Alexander Kondakov (Saint-Petersburg: Tsentr Nezavisimykh Sotsiologicheskikh Issledovaniĭ, 2014); Elizaveta Vlasova et al., "Obstacles and Dreams of Feminists in Russia," accessed January 20, 2020, https://feminisms.co/zine/intersectionality/.

13 I refer to my interlocutors as (queer) feminists. Even though not all of them identify as queer, many do, and I find it important to highlight their struggle to challenge the gender binary and to counter the reduction of feminism to the questions of (white) women's rights.

"When the Field Is Also Your Home."[14] My article builds on the work of these local activist-scholars. In the paragraphs below, I analyze the ways local activists work on the intersection of gender justice and decolonization, situating (queer) feminism in the context of "neither postcolonial nor entirely post-Socialist" Central Asia.[15]

In the first part of the article, I explain my usage of terminology, methods, and positionality. Then I review literature on past and present gender discourses in Central Asia. In the empirical part I outline different ways in which activists, scholars and artists from Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan and Almaty in Kazakhstan situate (queer) feminist ideas in their contexts. The strategies of "decolonizing" feminism used by my respondents focus on overcoming dependency on both Russia and the "West" and challenging the coloniality present in their own approach to feminist work.

Terminology

I want to define several terms that are used in this paper: (1) coloniality, (2) postsocialism, (3) post-soviet, (4) race, and (5) whiteness. Even though there is no agreement among scholars on whether the USSR can be described as colonial, I argue that a significant amount of work written in support of this position allows me to also adopt it.[16] Like decolonial scholars, I want to understand

14 Altynay Kambekova, "Stuck Between the Past and the Present: Coloniality of Queer Activism in Central Asia," accessed November 22, 2020, https://feminisms.co/zine/colonialism-queer-central-asia; Zhanar Sekerbayeva, "Queer Activism in Contemporary Kazakhstan," *Perekrestki* 1–2 (2017); Syinat Sultanalieva, "Escaping the Dichotomies of 'Good' and 'Bad': Chronotopes of Queerness in Kyrgyzstan," in *Decolonizing Queer Experience. LGBT+ Narratives from Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, ed. Emily Channell-Justice (Lanham: Lexington Books: 2020),55–72; Diana T. Kudaibergenova et al., "When Your Field Is Also Your Home: Introducing Feminist Subjectivities in Central Asia," *Open Democracy*, October 7, 2019, accessed January 22, 2020, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/when-your-field-also-your-home-introducing-feminist-subjectivities-central-asia//.

15 Svetlana Peshkova, "Central Asian Women's Contextual Politics: The Case of Muslim Women in Uzbekistan," *Contemporary Islam: Dynamics of Muslim Life*, no. 14 (2020): 249.

16 Madina Tlostanova, "The Janus-Faced Empire Distorting Orientalist Discourses: Gender, Race and Religion in the Russian/(Post) Soviet Constructions of the 'Orient'," *Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise* 2, no. 2 (2008); Tlostanova, "Postsocialist ≠ Postcolonial?"; Vitaly Chernetsky, *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures: Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization* (Montreal, London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007); Sergey Abashin, "Nations and Postcolonialism in Central Asia: Twenty Years Later," in *Development in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Migration, Democratisation and Inequality in the Post-Soviet Era*, ed. Sophie Hohmann et al. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014),80–97.

the functionings of coloniality – the condition of epistemic and geopolitical inequalities that remained in the aftermath of colonialism.[17] Writing about the former USSR, Tlostanova defines coloniality as a product of double imperial/colonial difference, which meant that the Russian/Soviet empire not only felt itself inferior to the West, but also projected colonial tendencies onto its "internal Others."[18] "Decolonization," thus, refers not only to the actual struggle with the (former) colonizers for sovereignty over land and resources, but also the ways of liberating oneself from internalized coloniality. Today, the term "decolonization" is used so widely that indigenous scholars doubt whether it is not becoming harmful to the decolonial struggle.[19] Though agreeing with this critique, I still believe that these debates need to gain broader recognition in the former USSR. At the same time, it is also important to approach "decolonization" with caution, not reducing it to a metaphor.[20]

Both the USSR and its predecessor, the Russian Empire, acted as colonial powers towards the nations of Central Asia. However, revealing the problematic nature of the Soviet project does not mean that we cannot pay attention to its emancipatory aspects in the early 20th century, such as the promotion of gender equality, which was also led by local activists from Central Asia.[21] Furthermore, in the framework of the "West"-dominated globalized neoliberal economy, we can speak about "postsocialism" as a global condition, articulating the fact that "coloniality and colonialism did not successfully write over

17 Madina Tlostanova, "Can the Post-Soviet Think? On Coloniality of Knowledge, External Imperial and Double Colonial Difference," *Intersections*, no. 1 (2015): 40.

18 Madina Tlostanova, "Can the Post-Soviet Think? On Coloniality of Knowledge, External Imperial and Double Colonial Difference," *Intersections*, no. 1 (2015): 39.

19 Eve Tuck and K. W. Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.

20 Anna Engelhardt, "The Futures of Russian Decolonization," *Strelka Mag*, March 18, 2020, accessed March 20, 2020, https://strelkamag.com/en/article/the-futures-of-russian-decolonization?fbclid=IwAR2KJwmBwzaJRH73mUTSRX7q4o8dVbKPSjdlE9nOwW1hbwrP5o0aU2fhjRg.

21 Tatjana Schurko, "'Zhenshchina Vostoka': Sovetskiĭ Gendernyĭ Poriadok V Tsentral′noĭ Azii Mezhdu Kolonizatsieĭ I Ėmansipatsieĭ ('The Woman of the Orient': The Soviet Gender Order in Central Asia Between Colonization and Emancipation)," in *Poniatiia O Sovetskom V Tsentral'noĭ Azii*, eds. Georgy Mamedov and Oxana ShatalovaBishkek, 2016), 178–209; Anara Moldosheva, "'Naberites′ Khrabrosti I Prochtite Vse!'. Perepiska Rabotnits Zhenotdelov Kyrgyzstana 1920-Kh Gg. ("Summon Your Courage and Read, Everyone!": Correspondence of the Workers of Women's Comittees in Kyrgyzstan in the 1920s)," in *Poniatiia O Sovetskom V Tsentral'noĭ Azii*, eds. Georgy Mamedov and Oxana Shatalova (Bishkek, 2016), 210–269.

the lifeworlds that preceded it and continued despite it."[22] The concept of postsocialism also puts my work in a dialogue with scholars from Eastern and Southeast Europe. My own research, at the same time, refers to the so-called "post-Soviet" space that comprises only the countries of the former USSR. It is important, however, to omit generalizations about both the former USSR and the region of Central Asia. As Nargiza, an activist and NGO-worker from Kazakhstan said, "there are common problems, but these are very different contexts. When international organizations put all Central Asian LGBT-activists at one table, it is useless. It is like 'all Asians look the same'." This study refers only to the activists' experiences in urban Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

In my work, I operate with such categories as "race" and "whiteness," which were used by my interlocutors. For instance, Kazakhstani artist Olga and Kyrgyzstani researcher Irina said that they consider themselves *belye* (white) in comparison to rural women who usually speak only one language and do not have the privilege of urban upbringing and education. Following Todorova, who researches entanglements of anti-racism and feminism in Eastern Europe, I argue that even though the construct of "race" was invented in the framework of "Western modernity" and then "copied" elsewhere, it has long established itself within postsocialist societies.[23] It is also important to highlight that racialization, the process in which a group of people is being ascribed certain characteristics based on their appearance or, for instance, way of speaking, works differently in different parts of the former USSR.[24] For instance, the natives of Central Asia, North and South Caucasus are racialized differently than indigenous peoples of the Volga-Ural region or Siberia or those from Ukraine, Belarus or Moldova or persons who migrated to the (former) USSR from the countries of Africa and Asia. Both race and whiteness are constructed differently in each situation and cannot be analyzed outside of this context. However, I believe that it is possible and necessary to pay attention to their workings in the postsocialist countries, developing the not-yet-established vocabularies needed in order to attract attention and fight racism.

My analysis focuses on what I have defined as "feminist networks" – groups of activists, artists, academics, and other persons with (queer) feminist views who occasionally (e.g., during a feminist march or an exhibition) form situated

22 Lesia Pagulich and Tatsiana Shchurko, "(Re)Thinking Postsocialism: Interview with Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora," *Feminist Critique*, no. 3 (2020): 91–112.

23 Miglena S. Todorova, "Race and Women of Color in Socialist/Postsocialist Transnational Feminisms in Central and Southeastern Europe," *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism,* no. 16 (2017): 114–141.

24 Madina Tlostanova, "The South of the Poor North: Caucasus Subjectivity and the Complex of Secondary 'Australism'," *The Global South* 5 (2011): 66–84.

solidarities. My interpretations of feminist activism are rooted in the literature on transnational feminist organizing, from which I derive the application of such terms as "first," "second," and "third" world to the realm of feminism.[25] The term "first world feminism," thus, refers to the ideas developed by white feminists in the "Global North," while "third world feminism" – to black feminists and feminists of color based in both "Global North" and "Global South." "Second world feminism" is used to describe the ideas and activities of activists from postsocialist countries. In the course of the interviews, my interlocutors often used such terms as "radical" or "intersectional," meaning the strands of feminism they or others identify with. For instance, many defined themselves as "radical" feminists (though noting that they were trans*-inclusive) in opposition to those who identified as "intersectional." Both terms have been developed in the "West" but have already gained independent meanings in the countries of the former USSR, mainly representing the polarized positions on the questions of sex work and pornography: while intersectionality is positive towards both, radical feminism believes that these phenomena must be completely eradicated. Among my respondents, there were also those who defined themselves as eco- or decolonial feminists or preferred to omit any identification.

Methods

This article is based on 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews with activists from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan conducted in the fall of 2019. Most of them took place in person in Bishkek and Almaty. I chose these two cities since preliminary inquiry had proven them to be home to the most active feminist networks in Central Asia. I found the respondents with the help of snowball sampling.[26] In Bishkek, I talked to representatives of local NGOs – *Bishkek Feminist Initiatives*, *Indigo* and *Labrys* – and individual activists, artists, and scholars with feminist views. In Kazakhstan, interviews were conducted with grassroots activists from *KazFem*, individuals who run a local community center and a feminist festival *FemAgora*, individual feminist artists, and the team of an NGO called *Feminita*. I also interviewed several persons who engage with

25 M. J. Alexander and Chandra T. Mohanty, eds. *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997); Valentine Moghadam, *Globalizing Women: Transnational Feminist Networks* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005).

26 A nonprobability sampling technique when one respondent connects you with other members of the community in question.

both decolonial and feminist ideas but who do not call themselves feminists. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, all the names used in the article are pseudonyms.

I conducted the interviews in Russian and translated them into English. The process of translation always distorts the meaning, which puts limitations on the collected material. Another limitation of this research is my non-local origin of an activist-scholar without ancestral ties to the region. Research on and about Central Asia has often been done by outsiders. Such research did not directly benefit local communities and is perceived by Central Asian scholars and activists as knowledge extractionism. In my work, to avoid replicating these dynamics, I try to center the perspectives of local activists and limit the scope of my own interpretation.

Throughout the paper, I mention the occupation and ethnic background of the interlocutors. I use "Kyrgyz" and "Kazakh" for those who belong to the "main" ethnic groups of the two countries and "Kyrgyzstani" and "Kazakhstani" for persons with other backgrounds who live there: Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Jews, Russian Germans, natives of other Central Asian countries, etc. My sample does not fully reflect the diversity of local societies – for instance, not represented are persons of Uighur or Korean origin. Mentioning the background of the person, however, I do not make any conclusions about its influence on their views or political practices, as the study does not allow to trace such correlations. Also, making such statements would come into conflict with the goal of my study: to stay reflexive of the inner inequalities of the former USSR, but not to create new essentialist constructs which connect certain characteristics, actions, or ways of thinking of a person with their ethnic background.

Writing about Gender (Activism) in Central Asia

There is a broad spectrum of research on gender history of Central Asia. Most of it is devoted to the early Soviet policies of the emancipation of women, the most well-known of which is "unveiling."[27] Historians debate the role that

27 Forexample, Gregory J. Massel, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Womenand Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919–1929* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974); Deniz Kandiyoti, "The Politics of Gender and the Soviet Paradox: Neither Colonized, nor Modern," *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 4 (2007): 601–623; Douglas T. Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan. Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling Under Communism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006).

the Soviet policies played in the lives of local women, perceived "as the most secluded segment of society in the USSR."[28] Several studies revealed the paradoxical nature of the Soviet policies, where placing "women on equal terms with men in all aspects of political, social and economic life was concurrent with promotion of motherhood as their natural and national duty."[29] Scholars also highlight the particularity of the policies towards women from "national republics."[30] Describing how the Soviets systematically destroyed existing family structures and refashioned social values, some works focus on the way women's emancipation was appropriated to legitimize colonial domination.[31] Other scholars, apart from showing how the colonizing state imposed its control on local women, highlight the active role they played in the project of Soviet emancipation.[32]

The literature on gender discourses in post-Soviet Central Asia demonstrates the way it has shifted after the collapse of the USSR, when elites of the newly independent states began to promote a "strategic redeployment of notions of cultural authenticity in the service of new ideological goals."[33] Apart from the studies that focus on the influence of religious and national(ist) discourses on the lives of local women, there is a significant amount of literature on gender NGOs and international institutions and the effect they have on their

28 Elena Kim, "Re-Feminizing the Post-Soviet Women: Identity, Politics and Virginity Ceremonies in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan," *Journal of Gender Studies* 29, no. 6 (2020): 707.

29 Ibid.

30 Gradskova, *Soviet politics of emancipation of ethnic minority woman. Natzionalka.*

31 Elena Kim, "Re-Feminizing the Post-Soviet Women: Identity, Politics and Virginity Ceremonies in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan"; Kandiyoti, "The Politics of Gender and the Soviet Paradox: Neither Colonized, nor Modern."

32 Schurko, "'Zhenshchina Vostoka': sovetskiĭ gendernyĭ poriadok v Tsentral'noĭ Azii mezhdu kolonizatsieĭ i ėmansipatsieĭ ('The woman of the Orient': the Soviet gender order in Central Asia between colonization and emancipation)"; Moldosheva, "'Naberites' Khrabrosti I Prochtite Vse!'. Perepiska Rabotnits Zhenotdelov Kyrgyzstana 1920-Kh Gg. ['Summon Your Courage and Read, Everyone!': Correspondence of the Workers of Women's Comittees in Kyrgyzstan in the 1920]."

33 Kandiyoti, "The Politics of Gender and the Soviet Paradox: Neither Colonized, Nor Modern," 603; Elizabeth A. Constantine, "Practical Consequences of Soviet Policy and Ideology for Gender in Central Asia and Contemporary Reversal," in *Everyday Life in Central Asia: Past and Present*, ed. Jeff Sahadeo and Russell Zanca (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Juliette Cleuziou and Lucia Direnberger, "Gender and Nation in Post-Soviet Central Asia: From National Narratives to Women's Practices," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (2016): 195–206; Svetlana Shakirova, "Zhenshchiny.SU – Zhenshchiny.KZ: Osobennosti Perekhoda (Women.Su – Women.KZ: Particularities of the Transition)," in *Gender: Traditsii I Sovremennost'*, ed. Sophia V. Kasymova (Dushanbe: Shkola Gendernogo Obrazovaniia, 2005); Mohira Suyarkulova, "Fashioning the Nation; Gender and Politics of Dress in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (2016): 256.

employees.[34] These works are important, as they reveal the multiples structures of oppression that influence the lives of women and queer people in Central Asia. However, focusing only on oppression might create an impression that local women have only two alternatives – to accept either the (neo)traditionalist discourses of local nationalists or the "Western" gender models promoted by international institutions. This maintains the image of the region as the most "exotic" Other of the former "second" world. I argue that more research is needed that could highlight the agency of local women from different perspectives. I join such scholars as Sekerbayeva and Sultanalieva who discuss (queer) feminism in the region, as well as Kudaibergenova, Satybaldieva, Tlostanova, and Peshkova who write about women's activism, the agenda of which differs from "Western"/globalized definitions of gender equality, contributing to the theorization of the place of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in transnational (queer) feminist debates.[35]

(Queer) Feminism in Bishkek and Almaty

Bishkek and Almaty are home to very diverse feminist communities. Because these cities are relatively close in terms of distance, feminists from both cities

34 Meghan Simpson, "Local Strategies in Globalizing Gender Politics: Women's Organizing in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 26, no. 1 (2006); Yulia Schulte, "Benchmarking the Progress of Democratization in Kyrgyzstan by Defining the Roles and Functions of NGOs," in *Kyrgyzstan Today: Policy Briefs on Civil Society, Migration, Islam, Corruption*, ed. John Couper (Bishkek: Social Research Center, American University of Central Asia, 2008); Jean Féaux de la Croix, "How to Build a Better Future? Kyrgyzstani Development Workers and the 'Knowledge Transfer' Strategy," *Central Asian Survey* 32, no. 4 (2013): 448–461; Joanna P. Hoare, "Doing Gender Activism in a Donor-Organized Framework: Constraints and Opportunities in Kyrgyzstan," *Nationalities Papers* 44, no. 2 (2016); Elena Kim et al., "Making the 'Empowered Woman': Exploring Contradictions in Gender and Development Programming in Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey* 37, no. 2 (2018): 228–246.

35 Zhanar Sekerbayeva, "Stifled Monstrosities: Gender-Transgressive Motifs in Kazakh Folklore," in *Decolonizing Queer Experience. LGBT+ Narratives from Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, ed. Emily Channell-Justice (Lanham, 2020); Zhanar Sekerbayeva, "Queer Activism in Contemporary Kazakhstan," *Perekrestki* 1–2 (2017); Sultanalieva, "Escaping the Dichotomies of 'Good' and 'Bad': Chronotopes of Queerness in Kyrgyzstan"; Madina Tlostanova, *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Madina Tlostanova, "Postcolonial Post-Soviet Trajectories and Intersectional Coalitions," *Baltic Worlds*, 1–2 (2015); Elmira Satybaldieva, "A Mob for Hire? Unpacking Older Women's Political Activism in Kyrgyzstan," *Central Asian Survey*, no. 37 (2018): 1–18; Svetlana Peshkova, "A Post-Soviet Subject in Uzbekistan: Islam, Rights, Gender and Other Desires," *Women's Studies: An inter-disciplinary journal*, no. 42 (2013) 667–695; Peshkova, "Central Asian Women's Contextual Politics."

often interact with each other. For instance, when feminist marches were prohibited in Almaty but allowed in Bishkek, Kazakhstani feminists travelled to Kyrgyzstan to take part in *demonstratsii* (march, protest) there. Despite some connections, the two networks also possess differences, linked to the varying historical, political, and institutional contexts of the two countries. Below, I mention some of these differences, but this study should not be perceived as comparative, but rather focuses on entanglements and intersections.

Most interlocutors from Kyrgyzstan have reflected on the proliferation of women's rights and LGBTIQ* NGOs in the country. Many of the local feminist activists either work or have worked in one of these organizations and experienced their impact on feminist activism. Several activist-scholars talk about the so-called "NGOization" of feminist activism in Kyrgyzstan – its "elitism" and detachment from the needs of women, especially those from the most marginalized communities.[36] In the interviews, several local feminists confirmed the conclusion made by researchers that NGOs and international institutions have an impact on (queer) feminist activism.[37] For instance, Maria and Kanykey, who were born in Kyrgyzstan, but also lived in Russia and Belarus, considered activism in Kyrgyzstan less *iskrenniy* (sincere) than in these countries. They believed that grant requirements became more important factors in local activism than the actual needs of LGBTIQ* and women.

The presence of international institutions might also be a reason why intersectionality, a strand of feminism adapted and promoted by international institutions, was a common self-identification for feminist activists in Kyrgyzstan. Here, as well as in other parts of the former USSR, the distinction between "radical" and "intersectional" was understood in terms of their positions towards pornography, sex work, and, sometimes, trans*persons. For instance, one of my respondents said that it was impossible to find a "radical" feminist in Bishkek, but in Almaty there were many. A more important issue for the respondents in Kyrgyzstan was the misunderstanding between them and the "older" generation of women's rights activists, who self-identified as *genderistki* (genderists) and opposed the inclusion of LGBTIQ* rights into the feminist agenda. Several Kazakhstani respondents noticed the same generational divide, but this was not a subject of concern for the majority.

The composition of feminist networks in Almaty differed from that in Bishkek. In Almaty, feminism was more represented by grassroots activists and artists, not NGO-workers. This might have influenced the way local

36 Sonia E. Alvarez, "Advocating Feminism: The Latin American Feminist NGO 'Boom'." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1, no. 2 (1999): 181–209.

37 Kim et al., "Making the 'Empowered Woman'."; Hoare, "Doing Gender Activism in a Donor-Organized Framework."

activists defined their feminism: most of the interlocutors preferred to omit identification with any particular strand of it. The representatives of a local feminist NGO, *Feminita*, were the only ones who described themselves as intersectional. In Kazakhstan, there were also such big projects as *FemAgora* festival and *TEDxAbayStWomen* which did not represent any particular feminist agenda, but rather, united everyone under the heading of women's rights. As mentioned before, several respondents compared Kazakhstan to Kyrgyzstan and said that radical feminism was much more common for the former. To prove the "radicality" of local activists my interlocutors recalled a situation at a 2019 feminist march in Almaty, when a group of sex workers were pushed out for advocating the legalization of sex work. Meka, a researcher who graduated from the university in Bishkek and then moved to Germany to continue her research, described Kazakhstani feminists as generally more "into debates" than those in Kyrgyzstan. She connected this to the stronger influence of feminist discourses from Russia on the feminist community in Kazakhstan.

Despite these differences, respondents from both countries had a similar awareness about the postcolonial power dynamics present in the relationships between feminists from the "periphery" and "center" of the former USSR. Interviewees from both countries mentioned having faced "colonial" attitudes while interacting with their "colleagues" from Russia. Several expressed the opinion that Central Asian feminist activists were very familiar with the nature of feminist struggles in Russia, but "there was no reverse discourse." Ayrin, a Kazakhstani activist, noticed that the news about the local LGBTIQ* and feminist communities usually get reactions from people in Ukraine or Kyrgyzstan, but never from Russia. Aykanysh, a Kyrgyz trans*activist and NGO-worker, criticized "the segregation between whites and everyone else" during an international LGBTIQ*-conference she attended in Europe. Suleima, a Kyrgyz researcher and activist, noticed that at such events, people from Central Asia are often treated like "smaller brothers or sisters."

Gulyaim, a Kazakh activist, mentioned being invited to a podcast in Russia where the hosts asked her to speak about "Kazakh" issues, while another feminist from Almaty, whom Gulyaim described as *belaya* (white), did not receive similar questions. Several respondents spoke about the traumatic experiences they had while interacting with feminists in Russia. Nika, a Kyrgyzstani activist and NGO-worker, participated in a feminist festival in St. Petersburg and witnessed how activists from Bahkortostan, one of the Russian republics that still lives through colonization, did not receive any space for themselves, as if the organizers "seemed to forget that Russia had its 'Asian' part." Ayrin, an activist from Kazakhstan, told me about the negative experience she had with a Russian media outlet in Central Asia, which published her poem about bride

kidnapping connected to her mother's experience. Ayrin's words were distorted so that her mother's story would seem much more "dramatic and exotic."

Though annoyed by such cases of ignorance and coloniality, most of my respondents agreed that there was a need "to rethink the past, but not with the purpose of finding a cause for revenge," as Olga, a radical feminist and artist from Almaty, has formulated it. According to her, rethinking the past involved asking such questions as "who was the colonizer and who was colonized, what led us to the current situation." However, asking them often resulted in a conflict between local activists: what for some was decolonization, others perceived as nationalism.[38] However, those Kazakh and Kyrgyz activists who were accused of nationalism insisted on their activism being a normal expression of the wish to separate from the legacy of the Russian/Soviet empire. As Aliya, a Kazakh NGO-worker and activist said, "Russians as the former colonizers have to accept responsibility for their past – it was not their fault that this was their legacy, but it is a fact they have to admit."

Decolonization as Localization

Most of my respondents confirmed the opinion of Altynay Kambekova that Central Asian (queer) feminist activists were caught between the lasting effects of Russian/Soviet colonialism and the new dependencies on the "West."[39] For most of them, however, "Western" colonialism was incomparable with "Russian," as the latter relied on actual (physical) violence and the former – only on epistemic.[40] Nevertheless, decolonization still implied challenging the internalized inequality and actual discrimination with regard not only to Russia, but also to the "West." Most interviewees agreed that feminist debates in their current form were linked to their "Western" history. For them, however, feminism was a "global story," as Suleima from Kyrgyzstan described it. Many interviewees mentioned the universality of "the patriarchy" as a reason why feminism couldn't be defined as "Western." Regina, a curator from Kazakhstan, said: "it is funny when people criticize the Western logic. […] Everything exists in a very complex web of connections and it is impossible to treat the Western thought as simply Western."

A strategy to defend one's self-sufficiency regarding the "West" offered by respondents from both countries was to localize or adapt feminism. The word

38 For more on this, see my forthcoming article.
39 Kambekova, "Stuck Between the Past and the Present."
40 Solovey, "Feminism in a Subaltern Empire," 87.

localizovat' (localize) was used by some respondents, while others preferred *adaptirovat'* (adapt) or *iskhodit' iz mestnogo konteksta* (begin from the local context). Most of my interlocutors agreed that there was a need to situate feminism. Daria, an artist from Kyrgyzstan, said that it was crucial for her to understand that feminism was an ideology, and its postulates were not "universal laws." For Aizat, an NGO-worker and researcher from Kazakhstan, a decolonial approach to feminism meant being aware of the context from which any idea originates, as "[f]eminist theory did not come out of nowhere." Nastya, the editor of one of the biggest feminist *Vkontakte* groups in Kazakhstan, mentioned that Central Asian activists often "use examples that have nothing to do with the local context."[41] Marina, an artist from Almaty who now lives in Europe, believed that the popularity of the debates on sex work among local feminists was linked to them "simply exporting ideas from the West." Intersectionality was also criticized for being poorly adapted or inappropriate for the local context, as here race and class worked differently than in the US.

My interlocutors' strategies to situate feminism were different and sometimes contradicted each other. It was defined as taking the agenda "from the local context," having "a specific approach," looking "for local practices of solidarity," and speaking "about the universal, but from the local." The issues specifically relevant for Central Asia included domestic violence, *kelinizatsia*,[42] bride kidnapping, the role of Islam, and poor access to social services and financial resources. Most respondents, especially in Kazakhstan where language debates were especially strong, agreed that situating feminism meant using the local language instead of English or Russian. For Aizat, a Kazakh activist, researcher, and NGO-worker, speaking about gender in Kazakh could help restore the popularity of the language. She also mentioned how language might give one a new perspective on local culture: while Russian was not gender-neutral, Kazakh and Kyrgyz were. Language was also mentioned as a tool of making feminism more inclusive, as those who did not speak Russian were usually less privileged – for instance, mothers with many children and residents of rural areas. In this case, localization became an antidote to the "savior" attitudes, for which "Western" feminists have been criticized.[43] Several other respondents agreed that creating local interpretations of feminism was

41 Russian social network, similar to Facebook.

42 *Kelin* (can also be spelled *quelin* or *gelin)* is a term used to describe the newly wed daughter-in-law. Moving to the husband's house, she has to obey all orders of his relatives and do a lot of work around the house. *Kelinizatsia* or kelinization is widely criticized in Kazakhstan.

43 For example, Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015).

a way to counter the elitism of theory that, as Nastya from Kyrgyzstan said, makes one "treat the rest of the society with arrogance."

Some of my respondents have contrasted *intuitivnie* (intuitive) or *estestvennie* (natural) forms of local feminism with the "radical" ones that exist in the West. Aizada from Kazakhstan, for instance, mentioned that Central Asian feminism was supposed to be "softer" than that in the "West," as the region follows "a different road." Cholpon, a journalist and blogger from Kazakhstan, believed that a "softer" version of feminism already existed here in the form of the "mainstream Western #metoo kind of feminism." Making feminism "softer" was, again, a way of challenging the "elitism" of urban activism. Zumrud, an activist of the Kazakhstani network against domestic violence, criticized "the politics of gender mainstreaming in the West" by mentioning how in Kazakhstan men could and needed to be included into the local feminist agenda. For Syinat and Maya from an LGBTIQ* NGO in Bishkek, involving men in feminism was also crucial for the development of the local feminist discourse. Begayim, a researcher from Kyrgyzstan based in the West, mentioned the inclusion of men into the feminist agenda as the main method for localization: "We cannot completely exclude men here. And women, they also perpetuate misogyny and patriarchy. It is annoying when a guy tries to act as a gender expert, but we cannot exclude anyone." Ada, a researcher from Almaty, said that "we cannot let feminism be that 'clean' elitist version of it, it must have something for everyone. We need to broaden the agenda so that as many men and women as possible could get it."

This approach to situating feminism echoes decolonial thought from Latin America and Africa.[44] A group of scholars and artists from Kazakhstan even identified as "decolonialists," putting themselves into the context of the globalizing movement. In the interview, Fariza described in positive terms such practices as the role of *kelin* (the newly married wife) and *kalym* (money one has to pay for the bride). She, as well as Kazakh artist Ada, adopted a position in which uplifting women in Central Asia meant rejecting the ideas usually described as "feminist," as they were "no more than a variation of imperialist politics" of the USSR.[45] As Fariza said, "we need to get rid of the image of 'the oppressed woman' that NGO workers usually have." Though the feminist activists I interviewed would agree with this statement, they still found such

44 Madina Tlostanova, *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Deirdre Byrne, "Decolonial African Feminism for White Allies," *Journal of International Women's Studies*, no. 21 (2020).

45 Zubkovskaya, "Postkolonial′naia Teoriia V Analize Postsovetskogo Feminizma (Postcolonial Theory in the Analyses of the Post-Soviet Feminism)," 213.

strategies, as advocated by Fariza and Ada, inappropriate. Maria, an activist who had just returned to Bishkek after studying in Russia, meant that most local feminist activists were too "liberal," as they considered "alliances with men" possible, believing that "men are able to change the situation, as people listen to them better." For Maria and other activists, "inviting" men into feminism meant giving up on the ideals of the movement by accepting the fact that men were needed, even here. However, for their colleagues, also queer feminists, it was possible and necessary to have cisgender men as allies. This reflects a tension present in feminist communities across the world, where those who support alliances with men are mostly coming from Black, Indigenous, and of Color communities. They see a need to build solidarities with cis men based on the common experience of discrimination along one or more of its intersecting axes – race, ethnicity, and/or class.

Kyrgyz activist and NGO-worker Nika told me that believing that a "specific" feminism was needed from Central Asia was an instance of colonial thinking, as it reinscribed the hierarchy between "Russians" and Central Asians: "Russians here are perceived as if they were allowed to do whatever they want and have no problems, and when Kyrgyz people do something – it is 'Wow, so cool!'" Some of my respondents also criticized the tendency to look for feminism in the *dokolonialnoe* (precolonial) past of the countries. Madina, a scholar and activist from Bishkek, said that trying to find any "truth" in the "precolonial" was not productive, as the only place where "precolonial" could be found was the colonial archive. Several other interviewees also found using "tradition" to promote feminism inappropriate as gender relations among their ancestors might have been different, but in any case, not equal. As Asiya, an activist from Kazakhstan, said: "if we want to liberate women, we need to destroy all traditions."

Most interlocutors, however, agreed that certain "appeals to tradition" were possible and even necessary for local feminism, if it is done with caution, as "tradition" can easily become an instrument of oppression. As Cholpon, a journalist from Almaty, said, one can "study the precolonial, but to understand why we are who we are, not who we want to become." Aliya, a Kazakh NGO-worker and activist, believed that one could distinguish between "rituals, ornaments which can coexist with feminism without controversies," and those that "have the potential to repress and need to be identified and countered." For Katerina, an artist from Kyrgyzstan, this was a way of countering anti-feminist "traditionalists" with their own tools. The methods of integrating tradition into local feminism included, for instance, the use of historical figures and traditional folklore (e.g., fairy tales, legends, and myths). This was done by (queer) feminist activists in both countries, who created projects about the early Soviet

activists for gender equality and historical figures like Alay queen, Kurmajan Datka. Zhanar Sekerbayeva, a researcher from Almaty, published an academic article that revealed queer motives and gender-nonconforming protagonists in Kazakh folklore.[46] For Gulzada and Aykanysh, activists from Kyrgyzstan, another gesture of resistance was to wear traditional clothes to a feminist march or add traditional patterns to a trans* flag.

While speaking about local traditions, some of my interviewees described the nomadic peoples of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan as more prone to equality than the settlers' nations of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Some scholars critiqued this assumption. For example, Suyarkulova described this phenomenon as "'nomadic exceptionalism,' the view that maintains that nomadic women were less oppressed than other Muslim women" in Central Asia.[47] Northrop argues that the absence of female veiling and seclusion practices among the nomads cannot be equated with the equality of women in nomadic societies.[48] Though counterposing nomadic and settler nations, most of my respondents still agreed that even if women had different status among the nomads, it was wrong to build a hierarchy of gender discourses between theirs and settlers' societies.

What Does It Mean to Decolonize?

Multiple, and sometimes competing, perspectives on situating feminism reveal the complex reality that Central Asian (queer) feminists have to navigate. New and old geoeconomic dependencies and unresolved postcolonial traumas imply that feminist debates intersect with those about tradition, language, and identity, often leading to conflicts.[49] While both Kazkh and Kyrgyz, as well as other indigenous (queer) feminists experienced the trauma of losing their language and traditions, in Kazakhstan, the debates about it seemed much stronger and had more impact on local feminists. Here the inter-feminist debates centered on the meanings of decolonization and its relationship to nationalism. For Fariza, "decolonization" meant getting rid of feminist rhetoric in its current form, as it mimicked the Soviet project of *osvobozhdenie* (liberation)

46 Sekerbayeva, "Stifled Monstrosities: Gender-Transgressive Motifs in Kazakh Folklore".

47 Suyarkulova, "Fashioning the Nation," 256.

48 Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia*, 134.

49 I use this term used by Deborah Cowen and Neil Smith in "After Geopolitics? From the Geopolitical Social to Geoeconomics," *Antipode* 41, no. 1 (2009) to highlight that dependencies and political struggles of states cannot be seen outside of the context of global neoliberal economy.

of the oppressed woman of the Orient. Other feminist activists were critical of this position. Aizat, a Kazakh activist and scholar, described it as a "denial of the problem and certainly not decolonial feminism." Another Kazakh activist, Gulyaim, accused Fariza of revanchism and a lack of intersectional sensitivity: "A woman who got education in the West, who received all the benefits of a white woman, – also due to her knowledge of Russian, – is somehow rejecting this past and talking about horses and sheep intestines. This is ordinary xenophobia."

Nargiza, a Kazakh activist and NGO-worker, called the approach of "Fariza and other patriots" "a denial of the fact that we have ever been a colony – not decolonization, but a Lacanian relationship." She believed that this interpretation of decolonization was developed in dialogue with the book *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands* by Madina Tlostanova, which focused too much on criticizing the USSR.[50] Also critical about this book were those interlocutors from both countries who took part in the activities of "SHTAB" – an institution that existed in Bishkek from 2012 to 2016.[51] Founded by Oxana Shatalova and Georgy Mamedov, it focused on redefining Soviet legacy through its emancipatory aspects. For those who supported the idea of "queer communism" promoted by SHTAB, Tlostanova's uncompromising critique of the USSR did not seem like the right approach. The position of "decolonialists" was also criticized due to its focus on the "national." For Aizat, a Kazakh scholar, activist, and NGO-worker, it was impossible to frame decolonization in "national" terms, as to decolonize meant "to look at history from another point of view – neither Soviet, nor national, to be proud, not ashamed of the fact that we have two languages in our thinking."

For most interviewees, decolonization meant to practice independent thinking, create a "self-sustaining, worthy cultural model," and cultivate the ability to speak "from nowhere." As Madina, a scholar from Bishkek, said, one must stop serving as a "native informant" for the "West" and find the courage to "teach them something as well from a universalist position." Decolonization was also described as similar to emancipation, as both meant regaining subjectivity and recovering oneself as a subject. For Madina and Irina, scholars

50 Tlostanova, *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands*.

51 Samuel Goff, "SHTAB: The Queer Communists of Bishkek Bringing Politics and Art Back Together," *The Calvert Journal*, December 11, 2017, accessed January 2,2020, https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/9356/new-east-100-shtab-queer-communists-bishkek; Shtab, "Manifest Kvir-Kommunizma [Queer Feminism Manifesto]," accessed February 13, 2020, http://www.art-initiatives.org/ru/content/manifest-kvir-kommunizma-0; Georgy Mamedov and Oxana Shatalova, eds., *Ponîatiia O Sovetskom V Ŝentral'noĭ Azii* (Bishkek: Shtab-Press, 2016).

from Bishkek, as well as for Aizat from Almaty, the re-appropriation of the Russian language was crucial, as the language did not "belong" to Russia – its history was colonial, but the experience and practice – local. In the same way, accepting the responsibility for the Soviet experience was also named as a way towards regaining subjectivity.

Though the relationship to the Soviet legacy differed among my interlocutors, for most of them, who were urban-educated and multi-lingual, to decolonize meant to bridge the divide between representatives of urban and rural communities and set oneself free of theoretical dogmatism, substituting the hierarchical relationship of helping "Other" women with the process of mutual learning. With this goal, the "decolonialists" chose to uplift rural women by redefining local traditions and gender roles as unoppressive. The same impulse guided feminist activists and NGO-workers to think more about intersectionality and decolonization. Laila, an activist from Kazakhstan, defined feminism and decolonization as "mutually enriching," as both "move the gaze away from centre to the periphery." Nargiza, an NGO-worker, activist, and scholar, told me how, while working in rural areas, they were treated as "colonizers," even though they were Kazakh. During this work, she understood that "the most interesting answers you get from those who never read Butler or any other theory." Daria, an artist from Bishkek, had similar thoughts after engaging with rural communities. For her, as well as for Alina, an activist, and Fariza, a scholar from Kazakhstan, to decolonize meant "to bring to the front the agenda of those women you usually cannot hear, like mothers with many kids." Nargiza proposed to "consider the fact that women's experience in Kazakhstan is not a unitary experience" and create "some kind of intersectionality inside of intersectionality." Begayim, a Kyrgyz scholar, believed that decolonization "must happen at the regional level and begin with the common in cultures and local values." Several activists offered to put an end to generalizations and develop "individual strategies in each concrete case."

The fact that class was one of the main reasons for local activists to talk about feminism as intersecting with decolonization proves that inequalities present in Central Asian societies are also reflected in feminist activism. Most of my interlocutors were privileged in the sense that they received an education in an urban environment, they had access to academic literature, and knew several languages – they represented the "elite" described in the literature about NGOs in Kyrgyzstan.[52] The elitism of feminism, however, should not be blamed on the activists and scholars themselves, but rather on the way global economy of knowledge production and development institutions are structured – based

52 Kim et al., "Making the 'Empowered Woman'."

not on the local needs, but on the demands of the economic system.[53] My interlocutors "often grew up in the metropolis, and, through their linguistic and cultural competence, can easily belong to mainstream society, yet are constantly reminded of their inferiority and eventually choose not to assimilate."[54]

Activists with academic or artistic backgrounds believed that one of the most important characteristics of feminism was its "variability" and "rhizomatic nature." They interpreted "decolonization" in line with the most cutting-edge gender studies theories. For Madina, a scholar from Bishkek, as well as Rada and Marina, artists from Almaty, "queerness, non-normativity [was] a very important part of decolonial thinking." For Rada, queerness is "a word for those who do not want to define themselves in any particular way," was similar to creolity as interpreted by Afro-Caribbean philosopher Edouard Glissant.[55] Feminism and decolonization were also defined in a posthuman sense – as "practices of emancipation that not only humans, but animals have to use." For Rada, "radically inclusive queer feminism" meant paying attention to "environmental or climate-related issues." Artists from Almaty, Olga and Saltanat also believed that "from the beginning feminism comes together with the environment" and that feminist and environmental problems were linked, as "capitalism stands on cheap labour and cheap nature."

Respondents who had no academic background could not speak about "decolonization" using the same language. Their thinking about feminism was directed more to the logics of discrimination that exist outside of, not within, the feminist community – for instance, the Islamization or traditionalist agenda of the government. However, intersectional sensitivity was present in the responses of all my interlocutors. Even if they had conflicting views, they strived for the same thing – to destroy all hierarchies and structures of oppression. The decolonial approach to feminism, which "moves the gaze away from the centre to the periphery," shows us that it is possible not to prefer theory over lived knowledge. This idea guided (queer) feminists in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan in their search for a genuinely inclusive feminism at the intersection of multiple interpretations of decolonization.

53 Yulia Schulte, "Benchmarking the Progress of Democratization in Kyrgyzstan by Defining the Roles and Functions of NGOs," in *Kyrgyzstan Today: Policy Briefs on Civil Society, Migration, Islam, Corruption*, ed. John Couper (Bishkek: Social Research Center, American University of Central Asia, 2008); Silvia Federici and George Caffentzis, "Globalization and Professionalization in Africa," *Social Text 79*, no. 22 (2004).

54 Tlostanova, "Postcolonial Post-Soviet Trajectories and Intersectional Coalitions."

55 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1990).

Between the Posts-, Out of the Void

In this article, I showed how historicized and situated experiences of (queer) feminists from Bishkek and Almaty became a ground for the production of knowledge and political action. Feminist thinking in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan reflects the inequalities and power differences both outside and within the feminist movement. The perspectives I encountered during my research in Bishkek and Almaty demonstrate that local feminists are not dependent on the ideas from either "Russia" or the "West," but practice "critical border thinking" rooted in both their local histories and ideas from the "first," the "second," and the "third world."[56] My interlocutors pursue "low-key, small-scale [activism that] evokes feminist time through its simultaneously anti-nationalist and anti-colonial, anti-militarist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist agenda."[57]

One of the central issues for local scholars and activists was to develop intersectional sensitivity and to learn to reconcile the ideas they received from academia or international institutions with the local realities. For instance, as Aizat mentioned in the interview and Altynay Kambekova wrote in her article, such practices of queer visibility as "coming out" might not be the best strategy for people in Central Asia.[58] However, this does not mean that they are not "queer enough." A symposium entitled "V Teme" that took place in Bishkek in 2018 aimed demonstrate how queer people in the countries of the former USSR have always created their forms of queer solidarity independent from the narratives of emancipation prescribed by the "West."[59] The diversity of meanings attached to decolonization communicated by the interlocutors also escaped any singular interpretation, intersecting with their personal histories and professional affiliations. Apart from the fact that those with an academic background had access to particular terminologies such as *posthuman* or *Xenofeminism*, it is impossible to derive any correlations between the respondents' ethnic or professional identity and their views. For instance, both Kazakh and non-Kazakh respondents spoke negatively about the national(ist) approach of "decolonialists" and persons both with and without academic background believed that feminism needed to be inclusive to men. I believe that the intersection of these positions creates fertile soil on which new

56 Tlostanova, *Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands*, 205.
57 Mayerchyk and Plakhotnik, "Between Time of Nation and Feminist Time," 66.
58 Kambekova, "Stuck Between the Past and the Present."
59 Labrys Kyrgyzstan, "Symposium 'V Teme'," Labrys Kyrgyzstan, 19.10.2018, accessed January 2, 2021 https://labrys.kg/news/tpost/trgce737hi-otkritii-priziv-k-uchastiyu-v-simpoziume.

(queer) feminist ideas can grow, produced by "border dwellers who switch codes and identities as a way to survive and resist," shaking the stereotypical images of gendered and oppressed Central Asian subjects shared and spread by "Western" and Russian researchers and activists.[60]

Considering the spectrum of opinions of the interlocutors, it is impossible to reduce the complex debates on feminism and decolonization in Bishkek and Almaty to a single narrative. In the end, as Olga, an artist from Almaty said, "decolonization is not a point to be reached, but a process everyone is going through – the mass production of new meanings and storytelling." Her perspective, as well as those of other interlocutors, represent "not a master plan for liberation but a myriad of delinkings" and create an "unclean, non-identitarian, undifferentiated deep" of meanings.[61] I believe that learning from activists, scholars, and artists from Central Asia is crucial for feminists from different parts of the former USSR, especially those from the center of the ex-empire, as it can help us unlearn our often ignorant and colonial attitudes. They remind that our present is still filled by "practices and discourses of orientalization, colonialism and racism," which might dominate over those of emancipation and solidarity.[62] Further unpacking of the ways in which activists, academics, and scholars from Central Asia interpret and create feminist ideas can make a valuable contribution to the transnational feminist debates.

60 Tlostanova, "Postcolonial Post-Soviet Trajectories and Intersectional Coalitions," 41.

61 Walter Mignolo and Wanda Nanibush, "Thinking and Engaging with the Decolonial: A Conversation Between Walter D. Mignolo and Wanda Nanibush," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 45 (2018): 27; Lesia Prokopenko, "Exit from the Colony. Farewell to the Empire," Intermodal Terminal, accessed February 10, 2020, https://intermodalterminal.info/exit-colony-eng.

62 Solovey, "Feminism in a Subaltern Empire: Russian Colonialism and Universal Sisterhood," 87.