

Tlostanova, Madina Vladimirovna. *What does it Mean to be Post-Soviet?: Decolonial art from the ruins of the Soviet empire*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. 160 pp. 21 black-and-white illustrations. Notes. References. Index. \$22.95, paperback and e-book.

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From Uzbekistan to Estonia and from the Caucasus to eastern Kazakhstan, the former Soviet Union is a territory of vast multitude, marked by disrupted narratives, where commonality, connectivity and solidarity are often projects from the past, distinct from the fragmented cultural and geopolitical realities of the present. From the very first pages of her latest book, Madina Tlostanova throws the reader inside an imaginary of ruins, inhabited by both the repressed ghosts of the Soviet and Russian Imperial projects and by reinterpretations of the shared commonalities of those eras. Three conversations about art theory and practice form the core of the book. Their protagonists are three post-Soviet “others”: Estonian photographer and visual artist Lina Siib; “the lone ranger of Uzbek contemporary art”, painter, sculptor and video artist Vyacheslav Akhunov; and Moscow-based writer Afanassy Mamedov, brought up in an Azeri-Jewish family in Soviet Baku. Together, these interviews with contemporary critical thinkers illustrate the lasting effects of Soviet era politics on public consciousness in the presently independent republics.

With her protagonists, Tlostanova argues that, at the intersection of contemporary art practices from across Eurasia, the present may be better understood through a critical interpretation of the past. Yet the presentation of public history in non-European former Soviet territories in Central Asia and the Caucasus remains subject to state monopoly, which has until recently largely resisted any truly critical approach to the Soviet-inspired mythology of providential modernity. At the same time, the Eastern European republics find themselves caught between disenchantment with the hierarchical neoliberal modernity of Western politics and a contradictory relation with the Soviet past. Both Siib and Akhunov discuss Soviet colonization and Russian imperial policies to describe the social and political confusion of current post-Soviet societies.

In *What Does It Mean to Be Post-Soviet?*, Madina Tlostanova distinctively and candidly assumes her unique position as a Russian-born minority scholar working in the Global North and thinking with voices from other post-colonial spaces (including Walter Mignolo, Rolando Vazquez, and Catherine Walsh) to find language that may illuminate collective blind spots. This pursuit is not new to those already familiar with Tlostanova's work in cultural studies and decolonial theory. As in previous recent works, most notably *Postcolonialism and postsocialism in fiction and art – resistance and re-existence* (2017), Tlostanova uses critical theory, art history and a conversational, existentially-centered approach to history to learn from the post-Soviet everyday bruised by dialectic struggles with the past.

In these previous works, Tlostanova has grappled with the legacy of post-socialist studies, interrogating the capacity of discipline-based frameworks to explain the complex intersectionalities from across the former socialist space. Her latest book's subtitle,

*Decolonial Art from the Ruins of the Soviet Empire*, indicates Tlostanova's distinct vision of the political potential of art. The emphasis is on "decolonial": how could "post-Soviet" become a useful, inspiring category for future imaginaries or projects across real or imagined boundaries, overcoming the stereotypical associations of a geopolitical cultural area studies handle? Using numerous examples from the works of contemporary artists who creatively juxtapose socialist heritage with present day identity and expression in public space, she simultaneously validates the idea of that populations who have undergone colonization share an imaginary and critiques the postcolonial framework, which, she argues, tends to see such debates solely in the context of their locality, thus overlooking possibilities for global conversations about historical structural inequality.

In the introduction to this book, Tlostanova applies the decolonial option—a less prescribed way of understanding experience and theory, which relies on ontologies of the colonized, occupied and oppressed, to chart contemporary art coming from artists based in former Soviet provinces, whose works interrogate identity, race, gender and class. Tlostanova grapples with the paradox of writing about imaginary from within an ontology defined by "futurelessness" —opaque time, officially closed to interpretation. This makes the theoretical stakes clear: true to the goal of "decolonial aesthesis", rooted in local, indigenous knowledge (as opposed to the normative, taxonomical "aesthetics" serving the project of modernity), the author and her interviewees seek ways to make experience speak through art, overcoming the mere rendering of a fractured past and a disenchanted present. Performing a critical recuperation, she excavates History from the standpoint of works of art which stimulate a subversive conversation between conflicted presents and contested pasts.

This entry point, connecting what may seem to be at first disparate voices, not only decrypts the book for readers who might not be familiar with contemporary art in the former Soviet space, but it also offers valuable departure points to scholars and practitioners from across the humanities and the arts, who might consider some of these works relevant for their research interests.

Liina Siib discusses her ethnographically inspired photographic series, “A Woman Takes Little Space”, which comprises portraits of women from suburbs or peripheral neighborhoods of Tallinn, in their workplaces. The discussion flows across varied perspectives on the production of space, connecting Homi Bhabha to Walter Benjamin. Drawing meaning from the Estonian everyday to explore conceptions of individuality and space, juxtaposing the Soviet past with Estonia’s present place in the European Union, Siib reflects on change, stillness, and empathy, and the emancipatory potential of home, public and body ethics.

These themes recur in Tlostanova’s conversations with Russian language novelist Afanassy Mamedov and Uzbek artist Vyacheslav Akhunov. Among the three distinct conversations, Tlostanova creates a sense of companionship, a constellation of thought. By connecting the literary world of “the unhomed writer” Mamedov with William Faulkner’s American South, but also with spaces and temporalities explored by other authors concerned with spirituality and the postcolonial experience, such as Salman Rushdie, J.D. Salinger and Herman Hesse, Tlostanova explores the affective charge of language and its potential to become a home for the refugee, nomad or immigrant.

This latter conversation, in particular, at times brings to mind George Orwell's 1946 "Politics and the English language" and should be familiar to contemporary readers from the English language (postcolonial) space. Mamedov discusses the impoverishment of language under the burden of vagueness, generality, and a public discourse dominated by state-sanctioned standards, uncritically promoted by media outlets besieging the silent masses. Promoting an ahistorical language, or an ahistorical art (as Akhunov explains), does little to counter the confusion of the post-Soviet individual, whose lived (private) experience of history can hardly be reconciled with narratives they are supposed to perform in public.

Tlostanova does not truly seek to give the definitive answer to the question of post-Soviet-ness. Rather, the success of the book is due to the fact that the author's positionality remains exploratory. She makes that clear in the conclusion to the book, "People are Silent": it is "beyond the TV-fridge dichotomy", in seriously candid critical conversations about the past and present that the future may be liberated and redeemed. More than anything else, "What Does it Mean to Be Post-Soviet?" ultimately reads as an invitation to artists and thinkers from the post-socialist space to use their voices and inspire a more inclusive public sphere.

In showing that regaining critical awareness of heritage and affirming individual agency by giving a voice to imagination and affect are necessary conditions for countering narratives of oppression, Madina Tlostanova weaves what may become a model for critical theory of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With its focus on praxis, space sharing and a forensic approach to cultural difference, inspired by Socrates, Walter Benjamin, as well as West African and Native American narrative traditions, Tlostanova and her

collaborators convincingly substitute the illusion of “the happy future” for a performative questioning of the past, which scholars and artists are invited not to replicate, but to reflect on in their own inquiries and pursuits.