Learning to Unlearn
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Non-European Russian/Soviet (ex-)colonies such as the Caucasus and Central Asia are one of the typical subjects of area studies research—the proverbial subalterns who were taught to speak in the language of the Soviet modernity but presumably retained a number of unchangeable characteristics pointed toward a negatively marked “tradition.” Their interpretation within the global and local configuration of knowledge in the Soviet time and today is an interesting subject in itself. The history of the Soviet anthropology, race studies, and ethnography has been recently put at the center of the heated discussions in Russia, in the ex-colonies themselves, and in the West (Bertran 2003, Solovey 1998, Tishkov 1992, Ab Imperio, Slavic Review 2009). The development of these social sciences was marked with coloniality of knowledge within the twentieth-century Western taxonomy of disciplines and was closely linked with the construction of the social, cultural, and ethnic matrix of the Soviet Empire, with its sanctification of primordialist theory of ethnos (from the 1960s onward), peculiar federalism, theatrical multiculturalism, and hidden colonialism. Today’s critical reassessment of these concepts is important for nation-building and identity construction of the ex-colonies, for the continuing post- and neoimperial politics of Russia,
and for the Western efforts to know the other, which still mostly fall into two categories—alienation and appropriation.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the following ideological decline, area studies both in the West and in the ex-Soviet Union hastily reoriented in their interpretation of the Russian/Soviet (ex-)colonies. They stopped to erase the ethnic-racial and religious differences and hierarchies for the sake of ideological conformity in the interpretation of the former national republics. In the West, the old Sovietology could not exist any more, because its ideological core, which glued together the heterogeneous material it studied, simply vanished. Russia proper rapidly lost its significance as an object in the Western area studies configuration (Kotkin 1995, 2003, Dawisha and Parrot 1994, 1996, Aranaga 2009, Slezkine 1994, 2000, Suny 1997), while the interest in the newly independent states grew and resulted in the emergence of Eurasian studies.40 This was a geopolitical more than a purely scholarly endeavor, while the new Eurasianists in the West, largely remained innocent Orientalists of a sort with few exceptions (Suchland 2011).

In many cases, scholars who did this new Eurasian research were the same old Sovietologists or their pupils. I do not mean to criticize them but just would like to draw attention to the fact that their ideological clichés (many of which they shared with their Soviet equivalents) turned out to be deeper rooted than it seemed and linked not even with a particular kind of ideology, be it Socialism or liberalism but rather with the rhetoric of modernity as such. What lay in its basis? The familiar cult of progress and development, the false but powerful opposition of modernity and tradition and the ideal of newness, the comical scientific pretensions and the hubris of the zero point. The political scientists both in Russia and in the West are the most vulnerable to criticism (Olcott 1993, Malashenko 1993), as they reproduce either Orientalism as an alibi for the lack of real interest in comprehending the non-Western other in its own terms, reducing the other to the site of difference to explain away the need to attend to its opacity and complexity; or modernist ideology, which sees history in linear terms as moving from the primitive to the developed, confering similarity on the other as the past of the self (Shu-mei Shih 2005: 5).

In such works the Eurasian borderlands continue to be regarded within the Orientalist or progressivist frame that according to Shu-Mei Shih, cloaks the lack of the desire to know the other (Shu-Mei Shih 2005: 5). Therefore, Central Asia and the Caucasus are still largely seen as a source of exotic culture or dangerous terrorism and instability, as a new risk factor in the world
after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as a sinister “dust of empire” (Meyer 2004) of which the West has to be aware. Russian political scientists also suffer from this disease, but they are marked with the victory in defeat rhetoric and often continue to practice assertive imperial revivalist discourses.

If we consider historians, literary and cultural critics, sociologists, and anthropologists, the situation is different. A number of scholars looking for a new paradigm to interpret the post-Soviet ex-colonies, turned to the ready-made model of postcolonial studies, which, as was pointed out in Part I, is hardly adequate to define the post-Soviet experience and local histories. But most of the scholars attempted to abstain from theorizing and remain within the limits of description and meticulous source study and field study. Starting in the early 1990s, Central Asia and the Caucasus have become a popular place for Western field work specialists, who produced a considerable amount of mostly descriptive works within a wide range of quality (Sahadeo 2007, Adams 2005, Kandiyoti 2002, Kamp 2006, Northrop 2004, Beissinger 2008), typically published in journals defined as “Survey” or “Review,” which betrays their disciplinary and ideological framework. Russia, as usual, lagged behind and has started to slowly revive its interest in the study of Central Asia and the Caucasus only relatively recently (Kosmarsky 2004, Kosmarskaya 2006, Abashin 2007, Tishkov 2003, Tyomkina 2005).

Some of these new types of area studies scholars are marked with the coloniality of knowledge syndrome in a milder form and retain their ability at transcultural pluritopic hermeneutics when they “study” an alien “tradition.” This refers mainly to historians and anthropologists, particularly of the younger generation, in the West and Russia who are less contaminated by the Cold War mentality and more attuned to questioning and rethinking of historical meta-narratives. Their works are often examples of honest research that is still limited by their excessive reliance on often-biased archives (Russian, Soviet, newly (re)created national, seldom diasporic). Second, such works are still restricted by their Western methodology and primarily by the zero point epistemology lying in its basis, as well as the cult of objectivism and empiricism. Moreover, the very categories of analysis being used in such research distort the local histories they “study.” For example, they assume that the ideal for any kind of society is a well-developed Western-style civil society with clearly articulated forms of political and social struggle and resistance. All other forms of agency, historical or contemporary, are automatically discredited as marginal, pertaining to the sphere of the nonrational and therefore subhuman. Consequently, any scholar who attempts to present these irregular forms of agency or indigenous epistemology not as tradition-
alist archaic survivals to be marveled at, but as a serious form of agency projecting into the future, is automatically accused of Orientalism, romanticism, sentimentalism, and other such vices.

Finally, the limitations of even the new generation of area studies specialists of the Caucasus and Central Asia in the West and in Russia are connected with their authors’ body politics of knowledge, which alienates from them the world they strive to describe and define. Their mode of analysis is far even from “participatory anthropology,” which still may remain within the object/subject divide, to say nothing of the epistemic and political projects with indigenous agendas working with anthropologists, such as THOA (Taller Historia Oral Andina) or the Zapatistas (Cusicanqui 1990). Therefore, these works still describe Central Asians and Caucasus peoples as insects. However, there are a few exceptions, most of which belong to diasporic and border intellectuals living in the West (among them Adeeb Khalid 1999, 2007, Jeff Sahadeo 2007, Sada Aksartova 2005 and several others). For them, the problem remains their need to obey and mimic the Western scholarship rules to survive as academics in the West, which leaves them a rather narrow space for maneuvering. Some of these limitations can be eventually overcome by the scholars from Central Asia and the Caucasus provided they stop being regarded as native informants and are not restricted by Western scholarly rules in their own research. At this point, there is less than a handful of such scholars (among them Svetlana Shakirova 2006, 2007, 2008, Marfua Tokhtakhodzhayeva 1996, 1999, 2001, Sofia Kasymova 2005b, Madina Tekuyeva 2006a, Elza Bair Guchinova 2005, and several others).

Their position is often marked by the sensibility of internal others, multiply colonized by many imperial traditions and by the global coloniality as a constant reproduction of the imperial and colonial difference (see Part I). Such positioning can be found in bordering spaces, located in between Europe and Asia, Western modernity and Islam, the subaltern empires of modernity, such as the Ottoman Sultanate and the Russian Empire. The Caucasus and Central Asia fall out of the general logic, imposed on the world by several centuries of the Western European supremacy, but also out of the prevailing Arabic Muslim tradition. Moreover, being doubly or multiply colonized in epistemic as well as the economic, cultural, and political sense, these regions developed throughout the centuries their specific techniques and strategies for survival, resistance, and in some cases, positive models of thinking and subjectivity formation, which even if virtually unknown in the West and in the Muslim world at large, can constitute a way out of the contemporary dilemma—the West versus Islam.
Central Asia and more so the Caucasus are paradigmatically border spaces. “Border” in this case is a geographic, geopolitical, and ontological phenomenon, as these locales are positioned on the cracks of not just mountain ranges or deserts, caravan crossroads and between the seas, but also on the borders of empires and civilizations. Political scientist Karl Meyer, in *The Dust of Empire*, points out that “culturally and physically, Caucasia is the prototypal borderland. Its mountains, stretching six hundred miles from sea to sea, not only form the divide between Europe and Asia but also separate the two earliest Christian kingdoms (Armenia and Georgia) from Islam’s two major branches, the dissenting Shias, mostly inhabiting what is now Azerbaijan, and the majority Sunnis who predominate in the North Caucasus” (2004: 145).

Both the Caucasus and Central Asia have been always cultural, linguistic, religious, and ethnic crossroads. Various religions and ethnic and linguistic groups came one after another into these locales; some of them stayed and hybridized their cultures with those of the people who already lived there, creating a unique and complex history. For example, in the territory of modern Azerbaijan, antique Zoroastrianism gave way to Christianity, which later was replaced by Islam, when Azerbaijan became a part of the Arabic Caliphate. Central Asia, with its heart in the Ferghana Valley (a place between two rivers Amu-Darya–Oxus and Syr-Darya–Jaxartes), also has been a site of multiple religious, ethnic and linguistic mixing, starting from the same Zoroastrianism, which many scholars believe to be born there, in Khorezm, and to Buddhism and Hellenism, the nomadic polytheistic cultures of the steppe and the metropolitan craftsmen and artisans traditions, the scientific and cultural achievements, borrowed from India, China, Persia, Greece, the Middle East, and Turkey—all of them coming together in the flourishing Central Asian culture, which came under the Arabic control in the seventh through ninth centuries, finally to become Muslim under the Samanid dynasty, and in the thirteenth century, once again, being conquered by Genghis-Khan’s army. Both territories, from the start, had been the sites of intense transculturation and took an active part in the precapitalist world economy. They elaborated their own tolerant ways of dealing with this cultural multiplicity as well as strategies of survival under various regimes, which, though transformed, are alive even today in the subjectivity of the people living in these locales, even after the distorting influence of modernity brought with it concepts initially foreign to these territories such as ethnic and linguistic nationalism and the strong sense of ethnic belonging, religious and linguis-
tic purism and intolerance, racialization and ethnization, artificial divisions of major ethnicities and minorities, into “Arians” and “Mongolians,” and the like.

Therefore, the geopolitical understanding of the border in this case should be complemented by epistemic and existential rendering of this problematic, similar to the one to be found in the works of a Chicana philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa. Her border sensibility is very much in tune with transcultural multiply colonized subjectivities of Eurasian borderlands. Anzaldúa (1999) states that “a borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (p. 25). “The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for ambiguity. . . . She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (p. 101). Such a border sensibility develops in both Caucasia and Central Asia as these regions happen to be simultaneously inside and outside of the Muslim world, constantly finding themselves in the zone of clashing interests and transcultural processes between various empires and dominant cultures. This positioning gives them the epistemic potential of the border. The Caucasus and Central Asia for centuries have given birth to various models of transcultural mediating thinking and subjectivity that, even if suppressed by various empires, turned out to be impossible to completely destroy. On the contrary, a trickster sensibility of a particular kind, incorporating various cultural, ethnic, religious, epistemic traditions and demonstrating particular intersubjective models of treating the other, managed to survive and was in some cases even strengthened by the imperial control.

By “tricksterism” here, I mean the contemporary understanding of the term, which is linked with yet departs from the classical mythological, religious, and folklore meaning, when it referred to gods, half-gods, anthropomorphic animals, and less frequently, to humans with supernatural characteristics (Hynes and Doty 1993, Ballinger 1991–92). What is important is the insurgent nature of any trickster, his or her tendency to disobey the normative rules and conventions. From the classical understanding of “tricksterism” come such qualities developed and sustained in modern tricksters as ambiguity, deceit of authority, playing tricks on power, metamorphosis, a mediating function between different worlds, manipulation and bricolage as modes of existence. In this sense, trickster becomes not only one of the most ubiquitous figures of world literature in modernity and postmodernity (up to its Internet form as a Troll today) but also acquires specific
features in colonial and postcolonial traditions, where tricksterism acts as a form of resistance and re-existence.

This sensibility has a lot to do with the subjectivity of a transcultural migrant of the globalization époque, an individual who lives in the world and not in a particular national culture, who is rootless by definition, who is a wanderer with no links to any particular locality. More specifically, I mean a dialogic concept of a trickster negotiating between Dona Haraway’s (1991) and Chela Sandoval’s (2000) interpretations and also the real trickster traditions that grew out of the geo- and body politics of particular locales, such as peripheral Eurasia, where we encounter the less known in the West trickster characters such as Hodja Nasreddin, found all over Central Asia, the southern Caucasus, and the Middle East (Kharitonov 1986), and Sosruko, a northwest Caucasus Prometheus (Jaimoukha 2010). Donna Haraway’s trickster is a revolutionary form of human being who becomes an amalgam of technology and biology, the machine and the human, but also the dominant and the oppositional, the First and Third Worlds, the men and the women (1991). She takes up the Native American trickster metaphor (that of coyote) to formulate her position of radical critical “mestizaje” or a cyborg machine, which has to do with the indigenous people’s resistance, looking for similarity in difference.

In Sandoval’s dialogue with Haraway, a differential mode of social movements and consciousness depends on the ability to read a concrete situation of power and consciously chose the ideological position most adequate for opposition to this power configuration. The individual practicing such a mode is required, according to Maria Lugones (2003), to make a nomadic journey between the worlds of meaning. In her article “Playfulness, ‘World’-Traveling, and Loving Perception,” she rethinks the concept of the Western agon and playing based on agonistics, regarding love as the essence and basis for any successful intercultural and intersubjective communication. Lugones’s homo ludens is not interested in who wins and who loses and is forever ready to change the rules of the game. Therefore, such a trickster sees others nonaggressively, retaining an absolute flexibility and easily switching from one world to another, as well as a playful attitude to all worlds, including his or her own. Instead of the strict prescription of frozen social roles, Lugones stands for the flexibility and fluidity of one’s own images, for the constant process of self-creation and self-destruction as well as the creation and destruction of various worlds. “We are not self-important, we are not fixed in particular constructions of ourselves, which is part of saying that we are open to self-construction . . . . While playful, we have not abandoned ourselves to, nor are we stuck in, any particular ‘world.’ We are there creatively.
We are not passive” (Lugones 2003: 96). Finally, Lugones sees “world-traveling and identification through world-traveling as part of loving” others, and “a form of disloyalty to arrogant perceivers, including the arrogant perceivers in ourselves and to their constructions of powerful barriers between” people (2003: 98).

Differential consciousness as a trickster’s mind inclines to other principles of mobility and to metamorphosis and tranformationism. For Sandoval, a trickster “practices subjectivity as masquerade, a nomadic ‘morphing’ not performed only for survival’s sake. It is a set of principled conversions that requires (guided) movements, a directed but also a diasporic migration in both consciousness and politics, performed to ensure that ethical commitment to egalitarian social relations be enacted in the everyday, political sphere of culture” (2003: 62) Turning to the changeable trickster metaphor, which acquires concrete meanings in each cultural-epistemic locale, we can avoid the new abstract universal and attempt a mutual translation between the modern and transmodern idioms.

Sandoval and Lugones’s interpretations of trickster consciousness and playful traveling, along with Anzaldúa’s new mestiza’s consciousness of tricksters dwelling on the borders of the imperial/colonial differences, are among the brightest realizations of border sensibility in the non-West. From such experience emerges a new transaesthetics connecting people throughout the world who have suffered the colonial wound (Anzaldúa 1999). This sensibility finds parallels in the Caucasus and Central Asian subverted forms of agency residing mainly in the aesthetic realm, in the sphere of visual and verbal arts, as I demonstrate next.

III.

For the West, both the Caucasus and Central Asia remain paradigmatic anti-spaces or nonspaces—ultimately exoticized or demonized. This is quite logical, because the universal Hegelian history never unfolded in Tashkent or Baku. Even a Ferghanian Babur left his motherland in quest of fame; and only after he conquered Kabul, was he able to found the Great Mogul Empire. But in today’s global geopolitics, these remote (from Europe and America) spaces suddenly come to play a more important part in the new world order. Hence, there is a new round of struggle for dominance between various forces in these regions, where economic and social factors (from the high density of population to the low economic level, from the limited land and water resources to mass unemployment) are accompanied by ethnic
statism and, in some cases, religious extremism. It would be nearsighted to blame only the Soviet Empire for this. The USSR was the latest and most persistent colonizing agent in these locales, but the forceful Soviet modernity/coloniality itself was only an act in the larger Western modernity/coloniality play. Therefore, if we want to understand the present situation in the Caucasus and Central Asia, we would have to frame it within the march of Western modernity in all its forms, which resulted, among other things, in the decline and fall of these previously prosperous and culturally rich places. Thus, the beginning of the end of Central Asian prosperity and its falling out of the future world history was linked with the foundation of the global capitalist world economy and the looming European dominance. It was then, that Vasco da Gama’s ships blazed the sea route from Europe to India and further, to China; and the Great Silk route lost its significance, while Central Asia lost its strategic economic importance on which it had rested for two millennia and became a periphery. Even today, when the Eurasian borderlands finally became politically independent, at least partially (in case of the Caucasus), they still cannot leave the vicious circle of multiple colonization.

Up to the establishment of the global Western European dominance, the power asymmetry based on the Hegelian understanding of world history was not yet generally accepted and the “exotic” Tamerlane’s empire was not interpreted by Europeans as primitive, underdeveloped, in need of civilizing, or fallen out of history. The figure of Tamerlane is an interesting semiotic sign of transcultural exchanges between Europe, Russia, and Asia, which illustrates how Western modernity gradually turned anyone non-European and non-Christian into a subhuman through demonizing and Orientalizing and how various local versions of modernity, such as the Soviet, the Jadid, and the contemporary postindependent Uzbek one, continue to exploit the Timurids myth, supporting their ideological and geopolitical interests. This is how, from a willy-nilly equal, he soon became a standard manifestation of barbarous cruelty and despotism, marveled at in both the Western and later Czarist Russian interpretations, then went through a period of Soviet positive recycling, and today is once again recycled in Uzbekistan, often turning into a simply masquerade figure dismissed by both Russian and sometimes Western historians, who are trying to diminish Timur’s role in history to blame the Uzbek administration for exploiting the myth as a source of the new national identity (Allworth 1998, Marozzi 2006, March 2002, Abashin 2007, Ilkhamov 2005). What is important here is not even the degree of Timur’s achievements or failures as such. Tamerlane semiotics is indeed ubiquitous in modern Uzbekistan and takes disproportionate dimensions, but the act of ridiculing this imagery from the side of modernity is not inno-
cent either, as it clearly demonstrates yet another guise of Orientalism. As in case of any historical figure of the same scale, from Henry VIII to Peter the Great, we can equally easily depict Timur as a tyrant or as a benevolent monarch. What is more important is what is behind this black legend mentality, implied today in the Western, Russian, and Uzbek historian debate over Timur and his legacy. It is Eurocentrism, racism, a wish to put a wall between European (or Russian) history and the “barbarous” Orient, in short, coloniality of being and of knowledge struggling to prevent the subaltern from finding any viable historical source of agency by ridiculing it and dismissing as a superstition.

In both the Caucasus and Central Asia up to the second modernity, a variety of independent and semi-independent polities existed that alternatively came under control of various stronger agents, often successfully balancing between them for centuries. When the main colonial spaces were already divided among the large Western capitalist empires, a process of appropriation of the less attractive but still geostrategically important territories, such as Central Asia and the Caucasus, started. In the latter case, the rivalry took place between the secondary empires of modernity, marked by imperial external differences, and mainly, the Ottoman Sultanate and Russia. Both the Caucasus and Central Asia were colonized not directly by the Western capitalist empires but by the second-class empire, which was itself epistemically and culturally colonized by the West and, thus, acted as a mediator of Western modernity, albeit in distorted forms. As a result, the Caucasus and Central Asia as colonies of a second-class empire took a specific doubly subaltern space in the complex global power structure. For example, the Shia Persia, the Ottoman Sultanate, and Russia all competed for Azerbaijan in the second modernity. Russia got it after its victory over Persia in the early nineteenth century. As a result, one of the many Eurasian artificial borders was drawn on the River Arax (echoing Gloria Anzaldúa’s border semiotic interpretation of Rio Grande, which continues to bring people death, suffering, and humiliation). Even today it divides the Azeri people of northern Persia and those of Azerbaijan. A similar history is to be found in Central Asia, which after the collapse of the Timurids dynasty and several centuries of decay was conquered by the Russian Empire in the 1860s. Russia imposed on this space its own colonial model of modernization, copied from the West up to minute details, including the famous concept of the “tools of empire” and “kulturträger mission.” It is worth noting that Russia almost immediately began making a cotton colony out of Central Asia, intending to shake the cotton monopoly of the U.S. South. This project of Central Asia modernization was continued by the Soviets with larger and more violent excesses, ulti-
mately resulting in ecological and humanitarian catastrophes of the second half of the twentieth century.

It is only natural then that both the Caucasus and Central Asia were torn between modernization via the Russian Empire, via the Ottoman Sultanate model (in the case of the Caucasus) and more traditionalist Muslim Persia, and the countries of the Southeast Asia (in case of Central Asia). Their modernization model came from Russia and later from the Soviet Union, up to the 1990s, when the politically pragmatic secular Muslim state model (such as Turkey) and the renewed attempts at direct Western control, came back. Even if the West never succeeded in directly colonizing these locales, there were several attempts in modernity at establishing indirect rule over both the Caucasus and Central Asia—all of them within the logic of redistribution of colonial spaces when the collapsing empires gave a chance to their more successful rivals to gain control over their territories. This happened roughly in the period 1917–20, when the collapsing Russian Empire slackened its grip and both the Caucasus and Turkistan gained independence, if only for several years. Immediately, the Western European countries attempted to take over, but the strengthened Bolshevik Empire quickly restored its dominance. We witness a more recent example of the same imperial tactic today, when once again the West is trying to establish control over these regions—economically, politically, and culturally. However, neither the Caucasus nor Central Asia is ready to make a final choice, resorting instead to the age-old tactic of balancing, mediation, transcultural sensibility, and trickster resistance that gives them at least some potential for the future.

IV.

Here it is a good place to say a few words about the genealogy of this resisting sensibility going hand in hand with epistemic models of alternative thinking and subjectivities in peripheral Eurasia. It demonstrates some intersections with the dissenting South American indigenous models, even if, in case of Eurasia, they have not yet had a chance to be sufficiently represented on the level of the state, the public discourse, or the social structures, being confined to the sphere of the nonrational, esoteric, artistic. The reasons for such differences are linked with different ways modernity manifests itself in these locales, leading to the emergence of multiple and varied groups of “others” and, at the same time, inevitably generating the effect of resistance, which, as the Latin American experience demonstrates, can eventually become a powerful political force.
Furthermore, our use of indigeneity refers to people who were already in place when the march of modernity (directly by the West or indirectly by second-class empires, like Russia) began to interfere in their places and life. “Indigenous” then should not be limited to people whom the Europeans named “Indians” in the Americas or to Australian and New Zealand aboriginals but should be extended to all people, irrespective of their way of life, religion, or culture, who became a hindrance for the march of modernity and progress.

Therefore, the history of indigenous movements in the Caucasus and Central Asia cannot be taken out of historical context. These movements did not stay the same in some frozen form but changed together with the changing world. They were in the center of geopolitical events of the world history in the nineteenth century, acting as pawns in the struggle of several types of empire for geopolitical dominance. Both regions played a central role in the so-called Eastern question, which was a fight between European powers and Russia for control of the lands of the Ottoman Sultanate and also in the great game between the Great Britain and the Russian Empire over India. While Russia was unsuccessfully trying to win a better place for itself vis-à-vis Europe, its non-European colonies were often used to exercise the Russian imperial self-assertion that could not be expressed in the West. The indigenous people of these locales, even if they were and are used by all fighting sides—from Great Britain to the Russian Empire and from Germany to France, from the dying Ottoman Sultanate to the Bolsheviks reconquering these territories, and finally, by the Americans and the Muslim world and China today—remained completely stripped of human rights and any opportunity of taking part in nation building, generation of knowledge, and local social structures. They were and remain now the hostages of modernity/coloniality great game.

There are many examples of resistance of Central Asian and Caucasus people, such as the Adyghean Princes Union of the 1830s, an anticolonial organization of the leaders of all the Caucasus tribes, which made an appeal to the Russian authorities, asking them to stop the military actions on the lands of Adyghe (Circassians) (Zihia web-portal) and offering a project of a confederation of the Caucasus lands. Later, when their appeal was ignored and the colonization continued in its most cruel forms, they organized a volunteer corps to fight against Russia, as a result of which many of these Caucasus ethnicities were completely wiped from the face of the earth. But, the Caucasus decolonial movement did not end then, continuing well into the twentieth century—in the anti-Soviet movements of the 1920–30s, strangled by Stalin and his local disciples, jealously eliminating all alternatives to
Soviet modernity, such as Nazir Katkhanov’s Shariah Column and his vision of the Bolshevik yet Muslim northern Caucasus (Tekuyeva 2003), and today, in the new Caucasus war of the late twentieth to early twenty-first centuries (Sahni 1997, Lieven 2000, The Circassians 2008).

The same refers to many instances of Turkistan resistance, from the 1892 uprising in Tashkent and the 1898 Andijan revolt to a more massive Dzhizak uprising of 1916–17, through controversial Basmachi movements and various religious revivals to the late Soviet political organizations and groups protesting against the ecological catastrophe of the Aral Sea. Among them a special place is occupied by the Turkistan National Liberation Movement presided by an indigenous intellectual Zeki Velidi Togan (Togan 1967). Similarly to the Caucasus, this movement also started with legal and nonviolent political actions, but by the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, Togan created a Secret Society for the liberation of Turkistan and the anticolonial struggle acquired military forms (guerilla movements) on the one hand, and the underground struggle and infiltration of the Soviet structures in preparation for the major anticolonial war, on the other. In Stalin’s era, this ended with the death or defeat of all of its members except those who immigrated and attempted to continue their struggle from European capitals. Neither the Caucasus indigenous movements nor those of Turkistan ever stopped their resistance—for many decades, they continued to generate oppositional ideologies and leaders who were methodically eliminated by various imperial powers. (Khalid 1999, Traho 1956, Natho 2009).

These histories remained undocumented at large, the views of these people were erased, the oral histories (such as the Turkistan Dastan Koroglu, a story of the sixteenth century fighter for independence and freedom, used as a role model and inspiration for the early leaders of national liberation movement and the Caucasus oral history and epic tale of the woman-warrior and healer Khanifa Kazi, to say nothing of the newer documents and oral histories linked with the anticolonial movement of the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, such as the mardikor songs of the 1916 revolt) were buried, never published or mentioned in the Soviet Union.43

Both the Caucasus and Central Asian liberation movements included political and social elements, as they fought to construct Turkistan and Caucasus polities and attempted to open a dialogue with the state, using petitions, declarations, marches, and demonstrations, which always ended in bloody massacres and suppressions by both Czarist and later Soviet powers. The Bolsheviks, when reconquering Turkistan and the Caucasus, did not shun any means—first establishing contact with anticolonial and Muslim reformist movements then destroying them, often with the aid of local feudal
and parochial Islamic forces, as well as international pan-Turkic ones, who in their turn were also eliminated later in the millstones of Soviet history. In the Soviet tradition of double standards, which was much more skillful than the Czarist one in the sense of its official liberation rhetoric and the actual repressive and racist acts in relation to the reconquered colonies, the Soviet historians often called the leaders of anticolonial movements “fighters for national liberation against Czarism.” But, as soon as they turned to Soviet history, the same people were labeled as bandits, brigands, traitors, “basmachi,” “abreks,” whose destruction was thus justified. Along with the massive destruction of anticolonial movement leaders and members, the Bolsheviks also generated a massive elimination of indigenous knowledges and cosmologies, which are almost impossible to restore, especially since the new governments of the independent states are not interested in promoting the liberating spirit of these epistemologies. That is why they allow for only particular brands of Islam and sorts of ethnic culture to exist, while repressing all other forms of religious or ethnic-cultural expression today. The new/old corrected historical narrative promoted by the local leaders is often grounded in their efforts to create a strong and unified national identity and pride, which is opposed to the previous scattered tribes, conflicting tensions, small khanates—an easy prey to even such an ill-starred colonizer as the Russian Empire. Behind this postcolonial nationalism, we can easily detect familiar myths of stagism, development, newness, and other elements of the rhetoric of modernity. This creates an aftertaste of déjà vu recognizable in many official educational and cultural institutions (Abashin 2009).

V.

The tactics of the Russian and later Soviet variants of modernization in both regions were strikingly similar. They can be summarized in the motto “divide and rule.”44 The empire was afraid of a pan-Turkic or pan-Circassian unification on any grounds; and this was the reason for Islam being one of the most persecuted religions in the Soviet Union, for the borders drawn by the ruler, for the well-conceived linguistic and alphabetic reforms that deprived them of the continuity, cut off the legacy, and today prevent any possibility of having a dialogue with others of similar cultural, religious, or linguistic heritage. New ethnicities were invented, mosques closed, and the so-called Oriental women forcefully liberated—all that done to ensure the imperial dominance—but at the same time causing, particularly in the Soviet period, passive yet successful resistance to and distrust of any official authority.
Examples of this devastating imperial tactic are abundant. Russians used the Shia and Sunni opposition in Azerbaijan to make sure that they cut off the Sunni Azeris from the possible alliance with Shamil Sunnis and their descendants in the northern Caucasus. The Soviets mapped Turkistan in such a way as to prevent any attempts at Turkic and Islamic reunification, when they once again put artificial borders between artificially created republics and ethnicities, which were soon to be assimilated and dissolved in the Russian majority. Before the Russian modernization of the second half of the nineteenth century, there was no clearly defined idea of ethnicity in Central Asia (although the Jadids efforts to build it from within were already at work at the time). People were much more socially mobile and flexible. They could leave one region for another and easily change their status and identity, entering into different hierarchies, due to specific local mechanisms of mutual adaptation. It allowed for this complex cultural multiplicity to peacefully coexist. Therefore, Central Asians categorized themselves in a cultural, regional, social, economic, and religious but not strictly ethnic or linguistic sense, and only the Russian and particularly the Soviet colonization forcefully and nearsightedly introduced its own idea of ethnicity into this region, together with modernization model, based on the Soviet brand of ethnic-national identity (Northrop 2004, Abashin 2007).

The Soviets divided Turkistan ethnic-religious-linguistic unity into artificial entities. The tactic of Stalin’s deportations of the whole peoples into Central Asia (such as Meskhetian Turks, Crimean Tatars, Chechens, and Balkars) and setting artificial borders contributed to the future ethnic and economic tensions in these regions (Karabakh conflict between the Azeris and Armenians, as a result of which over thirty thousand people were reported, according to several sources, to perish and around one million became refugees, the Osh conflict and other ethnic clashes in the Ferghana Valley). This is a direct result of Russian and Soviet imperial tactic of ethnicity building. Although the modern nations in Central Asia and the Caucasus were artificially formed, the result is there nonetheless. The scholarly constructs turned into political instruments that, in their turn, were implanted into the texture of economic, social, and cultural life and began to be seen by the people as ancient and given once and for all. Therefore, for the majority of modern inhabitants of Central Asia or the Caucasus today, nations are not “imagined communities” any more. In Rasanayagam’s words, the ethnic divisions that were imposed on this region in Soviet times were not questioned by the leaders of the post-Soviet Central Asian states. Instead they stressed the validity of ethnic-territorial idea of the nation, but replaced Marxist ideology as its glue with ethnic nationalism (Rasanayagam 2004). As a result, nothing
changed in the life of the common people, who remained as powerless and vulnerable as before. An important part here is played by Islam, which has been gradually transforming itself into ethnicity both in the metropolis and in the colonies themselves as the idea of race and nation have been replacing the previous theological constructions of the first modernity. This is how from *busurmanin* the Muslim became a *Tatar* (an equivalent of the Western Arab used to define all Muslims) and an “inorodets” (literally, the one who was born an “other”) in the nineteenth-century Russian imaginary, and today—simply the *Black*—completely replacing the religious difference with the racial one. A radical ethnization, racialization, and politicization of Islam took place in a number of postcolonial spaces with a traditionally weak idea of ethnicity, where ethnic nationalism often takes Islamist forms and Islam is claimed for the new nations and interpreted as primarily a manifestation of the local culture. However, in the case of both Central Asia and particularly the Caucasus, the gap between Islam as such and the indigenous culture, epistemology, cosmology, and ethics is wider than it is often admitted. For a number of politicized studies, it is more convenient to see both regions as a fixed Islamic Orient, while in reality, as a few Western, Russian, Central Asian, and Caucasus scholars demonstrated recently (Abashin 2007, Yordan, Kuzeev, and Chervonnaya 2001, Sahadeo and Zanca 2007, Quandour 2006), religious Muslim identity is only one of the elements in the complex syncretic sociocultural and civilizational belonging of the inhabitants of these ex-colonies. In peripheral Eurasia, Islam originally acted in a similar unattractive role to that of Catholicism in the New World. However, in both locales, the indigenous peoples elaborated specific strategies of domesticating the imposed religions (be it Catholicism or Islam), by means of maintaining their form yet changing the meaning and building these religions into the wider realm of indigenous cosmologies, thus shifting the geography and biography of reason. The Amerindian religious duality, the peculiar symbiosis of Muslim and indigenous beliefs in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and even the Russian “double faith” are all examples of this essentially decolonial sentiment, which was later recast in secular terms and today can be recast once again, in rethinking of humanities from the perspective of these locales.

With the end of the Communist utopia, several models of nation building emerged on the ruins of the Soviet empire, from the meticulous reproduction of Western liberal nation-states in the Baltics to autocratic Turkmenia, to take just the two extremes. The nationalist ideologies, hastily created and put in the basis of ex-colonial countries, mostly use the Western ideological frame of the sovereign nation-state, even if filled with local content, sometimes lapsing into ridiculous examples of totalitarian and militant ethnic
nationalism. It is not by chance that all confederation projects in Eastern Europe and Central Asia or the Caucasus, which could potentially lead to a more productive way around and beyond the rhetoric of the nation-state, quickly failed, giving way at times to a maniacal race for ethnic-territorial sovereignty, the quest for roots (and often their invention), the striving to reinvent their own history and make it more prominent within the universal historical metanarrative, and consequently, the careful erasing from the collective consciousness and from the official historiography any alternative models of polity, any different cosmologies, or epistemic systems that did not fit into the new/old idea of the nation-state promoted by the new/old leaders of these ex-colonies. This is particularly sad in case of the Caucasus and Central Asia, both of which have a history of indigenous epistemologies and social models that had diverged from both Muslim or Christian and secular European modernity and later from Russian and Soviet modernization.

If they chose a confederative way of unification on the basis of indigenous social and epistemic models, the political life of eastern Eurasia would have been quite different, the same as in the case of the initial confederative projects of the eastern and central European states (the ex-satellites of Soviet Union), which were never brought to life. However, instead of the revival of indigenous epistemologies, the liberation movements in Central Asia and the Caucasus went mainly in the Islamist direction, in contrast with contemporary indigenous movements in South America. Amerindians struggle mainly for decolonization from the Eurocentered racist epistemologies in their creole rendering, while the multiply colonized peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia have to decolonize from the overall coloniality of Western modernity in its Eurocentered Western, Russian, Soviet forms and, also, to decolonize from militant Islamism, which uses the economic hardships to gain control over the ex-Soviet territories.

Nation-building processes in the newly independent states have been controlled from the outside and by the “comprador” local elites, as always happened in the imperial times and continues to happen today. Both the Caucasus and Turkistan liberation movements of the mid-nineteenth century to early twentieth centuries were originally local, not precisely religious, and dealt mainly with retaking control of their lands and their future from the Russian/Soviet Empire, seldom venturing in the global pan-Turkic or pan-Islamic direction, instigated later by European emissaries and their non-European helpers (such as the Ottoman general Enver Pasha) to spite and weaken Russia. Today, the logic does not change much, which is clearly seen in the history of the northern Caucasus movements, quickly usurped by the forces of international Islamist organizations, and sometimes indirectly
supported by the West. Here, we find mostly transmuted forms of ethnic statism. As the northern Caucasus social philosopher K. Tkhagapsoev points out, the post-Soviet space generated ethnic states based on the ethnic-clan system of power. “The space of freedom of ethnicites” proclaimed with the collapse of the Soviet system and comprising postcolonialism, neoliberalism, and traditionalism, finally resulted in ethnic statism, regionalization, and the ethnization of power. “As a result, in ethnic republics the political instrument for the implementation of reforms—which were manifested as liberal and democratic . . . turned out in fact to be the authoritarian regimes of ethnic statism—which has nothing to do with democratic principles” (Tkhagapsoev 2006).

A citizen of such states today often has to become a new nomad against his or her will (see Chapter 6 on the question of citizenship). The inhabitants of Central Asia or the Caucasus, who are so much hated by xenophobic Russians and constitute a larger part of the labor migration today, go mainly to Russia and not to the West (which is possible only for the chosen few) looking for jobs and better life, because in the modern global configuration of power, entering the world economic system as labor force is still impossible for them. These people can get to Europe or the U.S. through human trafficking or as organ donors, because only for these kinds of activities have the borders become more permeable today if one is an ex-Soviet colonial other.

With the present systemic economic crisis, fewer and fewer options are left for these involuntary migrants, even in the world of imperial difference. This problematic has found an interesting rendering in Central Asian art. Uzbek artist Vyacheslav Useinov, in his installation *A Guest Workers Flight*, presents a plane made of adobe bricks, like those still used by the peasants of Central Asia to build their houses (Useinov). The unlikely combination is shocking, as is the forced modernity in this locale. What is awaiting them on the other side of globalization migration? The worker’s overalls closely resembling the prisoners’ clothes, made of checked plastic trunks—a staple of the post-Socialist shuttle traders and refugee life. They symbolize the illegal migration status of millions of Uzbeks today, who flee their homeland to find low-paying jobs in Russia, Arabic countries, and Turkey. It is an ironic and sad way of telling an alternative history of Uzbekistan: from the adobe house through the high tech modernity to the same age-old status of a low-paid worker with no rights, whose life has no value. The motif of dispensable lives remerges in the works of other Central Asian artists such as Kazakh Said Atabekov, with his almost decolonial project “Observatory of the Bereaved,” where the bereaved act as a new subjectivity similar to Fanon’s *damnes*, or Yerbossyn Meldibekov’s imagined state Pastan, in which the dispensability of
human lives is manifested in the image of live people sold in sacks as if they were food in the market (Miziano 2006).

VI.

A telling example of suspended indigenous activism is the northern Caucasus, still remaining in the dubious capacity of a conglomerate of ethnic-federal republics and districts within the Russian Federation. Here, the Russian Empire first performed an artificial selection in the form of genocide and a massive deportation to the Ottoman Sultanate and later (in the Soviet period) “created” artificial small ethnicities and encouraged their hostility toward each other together with their accelerated assimilation. As a result there is really no spiritual reunification or even any dialogue of several million Adyghe Diaspora in the world, who are more inclined to an imagined pan-Circassian identity, and the remaining seven hundred thousand dispersed Adyghe community in Russia, who are divided by the invented ethnic identities and Soviet instigated jealousies. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, a number of Adyghean political associations emerged, aimed at territorial and political unification, sometimes irredentism, and repatriation of several million of diasporic Circassians. It certainly did not accommodate Russia, which was not planning to let the Caucasus go (although the situation and the sensibility started to change when I was preparing the second version of this chapter, so that Caucasus peaceful separation does not look so fantastic any more). For a long time, Russia considered the Caucasus to be an important strategic point and continued its typical politics of keeping the land but getting rid of its inhabitants or keeping them at a low and docile number and preferably in quarrels with each other. The diasporic Circassians, in contrast with those who stayed in Russia, are more articulate in their criticism of Russian colonialism in the Caucasus and in formulating decolonial discourses for the future. They claim the old tradition of unsubdued Circassians and a pan-Circassian identity, and they also retain traces of indigenous cosmologies, at the same time attempting to use the civil society and international organizations to attract attention to the Circassian question.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was initially not religious but rather ethnic-cultural discourses and indigenous cosmologies and ethics that were used to restate the Adyghe identity (adyghe khabze, an indigenous ethical code being one such example). However, the local elites who used this sentiment in their fight for power were a typical comprador intelligentsia of Soviet modernity origin and future collaborators in the creations of Cauca-
sus “banana republics.” Unfortunately, this virus infected the international Adyghean organizations as well, so that today, in the words of Haci Bayram Polat, the “International Circassian Association acquired an institutional face of collaborationism” (Polat 2008). As a result, the authority of local Adyghean organizations among the people quickly faded and the contesting sentiment was to be looked for in Islamism, starting in the 1990s and particularly now. The legal ways of resistance, including the media, were entirely wiped out by Russia in several years; and today, resistance has no other way than violence and the remnants of still surviving underground activities, internet sites, and the somewhat tired appeals to international organizations, usually initiated from abroad. The two contemporary forms of resistance among the Caucasus peoples are therefore the Islamic one, often on the verge of extremist, and the ethnic-nationalist one, either tamed or no less extremist and based on hostility towards the neighboring Circassian ethnicities. This is a direct result of Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet colonization of being and thinking.

In contrast with the Zapatistas and other indigenous movements in South America, digging out the erased history is not sufficiently paired with the continuing living tradition in case of the multiply colonized Eurasian spaces. There is a crudely interrupted indigenous legacy that often makes any dialogue difficult and seemingly leaves only the option of going back to a tradition that would be artificially recreated in this case. The colonial minds were systematically fed with the colonialist interpretations of history, Soviet nationalities discourses, lack of continuous literacy tradition that would help to remember, and a constant fear of the cruel master. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to decolonize. A more global power shift and a more visionary leadership are needed to make the two resistance flows—that inside the Caucasus and the diasporic one—reunite and, more important, do it without being manipulated by either Russia or the West. A long awaited process of delinking from both and building horizontal coalitions with other damnés of the world needs to be initiated as well.

This problematic has already become a subject of ironic and encoded resistance and creative re-existence in art forms in Central Asia and the Caucasus. For example, contemporary Uzbek artist Utkam Saidov in 2005 exhibited an installation called To Discover a Hero, which problematized the erased and forgotten histories inconvenient for the official Muslim interpretation of the Central Asian identity, for the Russian and Soviet modernity, and for today’s local autocratic power remake. We see seven human heads covered with a white cloth. It is an allusion to a real historical character—Khashim ibn Khakim, a white-masked leader of a Central Asian revolt against the Arabic contest and forceful Islamization, who was later erased.
from the history of Uzbekistan. He, as well as dozens of other unknown and erased heroes, symbolized by the rest of the heads, are inconvenient for power and thus remain masked (Kudryashov 2007).

VII.

What makes nearly all of the nation-building models in Soviet ex-colonies similar is the neoliberal and democracy rhetoric, based on the ideology of developmentalism, progress, and the rational building of society grounded in dependency logic, well known in South America. However, the Eurasian dependency discourse is somewhat different and deserves to be addressed. In contrast with the Russian Empire, which rather marginally but still belonged to the world system, the Soviet Empire presented itself as a case of extreme autarchy and implemented the unheard of experiment of a Socialist economic system as opposed to the capitalist one, a system that would be self-sufficient and insulated from the world market. This ideal was certainly never followed word for word, even in the darkest years of Stalinism, but it was the image of the Socialist world that was imprinted into the Western imaginary.

Everybody knows about the fatal shortcomings of an ineffective planned economy, but not many people pay attention to the fact that the Socialist economic system, even if it looked so different from the capitalist one, was based on the same assumptions of progress, teleology, industrialization, and a cult of technological development. Another neglected fact is how, within this system, the coloniality of power was expressed in the phenomenon of chronic dependency and lagging behind, which was typical for the racialized colonies. The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in the initial stagnation of certain countries (e.g., the Central Asian states) and advantages to others (the Baltics), although in the scale of the global world economy, this advantage is minimal, because even the more successful countries/survivors of the Soviet Union are still of no use to the European Union except in the capacity of cheap labor force and new markets. The hierarchy of colonial economies within the Soviet Union was not openly framed according to racist discourses, but again, through the mediated and blurred Eurocentric rhetoric, so that the more European Soviet colonies (the Baltic states, the Ukraine) were also less mono-economic, while the Caucasus or especially Central Asia were deliberately caught in a vicious circle of dependency that is reproduced today on the global scale in their being completely thrown out of the world system. Their condition copies on the next turn the imperial/
colonial hierarchy shaped in modernity. If the Russian and Soviet Empires were caught in the catching-up ideology of “overtaking and surpassing,” the colonies of this second-rate empire, marked by imperial difference, turned out to be third-rate in comparison with the colonies of the capitalist empires of modernity. Their “master” was itself a slave of a more powerful master. As discussed previously, Russia’s own status remained dubious and anyone associated with it in the past or today automatically is assigned an inferior status. This is connected to the external imperial difference of Russia. To this general configuration of the wrong master, we must also add the Muslim affiliation of both Central Asia and partly the Caucasus, which however superfluous and marginal, still adds to their stigmatized status. As a result, the inhabitants of both regions reacquire their subhuman status again and again.

Not many theorists or politicians in the ex-Soviet world want to take into account the South American unsuccessful experience of development and modernization programs. The reason lies not only in simple ignorance but also in a peculiar snobbishness of the ex–Second World in relation to the ex–Third World. Thoughtlessly following the logic of modernity with its typical agonistic approach preventing from any meaningful dialogue, the ex–Second World nourishes its imperialist and peculiar nationalist discourses, as well as a strange pride for the previously higher position on the ladder of modernity. It is scared to death to lose or endanger this position in any way, for instance, by associating with those who are still lower in the present hierarchy of humanity. This is clearly the Russian case, a difficult combination of disgust toward the global South and a fear of being associated with it, except in the paternalistic capacity; at the same time, it makes constant efforts to hide behind a rosy imperialist mythology the cruel excesses of Russian and Soviet colonialism.

Practically all newly independent states, including Russia, bought into developmentalism in its neoliberal form, which soon turned into various nationalist models, when all these states realized that they cannot find a place in the new global capitalist market, that nobody really wants them there. While preaching the gospel of the market economy as a global panacea, the West reluctantly allows the survivors of the Soviet Union to enter the world market in any capacity, except for its cheap labor force or raw resources. The non-European (ex-)colonies have been interesting to the West in the last two decades primarily as a springboard for military bases, necessary for the preparations of the righteous wars for oil. This results in devastating consequences for practically all ex-Soviet colonies and satellites, from Central Asia to Central Europe, who have little choice in maneuvering between the West,
Russia, and the economic coalitions and regional agreements of various local kinds, once again, resembling South America. In this context, it is clear why dependency theory re-emerged quite soon in post-Soviet Russia and its ex-colonies. One can often hear today the well-known ideas of protectionism, economic nationalism, boycott of the WTO, banning of natural resources export, and so on—sometimes in the radical form of dependency discourse.

However, economy in this case once again clashes with culture and ideology, when the ex-Soviet colonies follow the well-known Soviet (and modern) slogan “socialist in its essence, national in its form.” Today, it changes into “market or developmentalist in its essence, ethnic-national in its form,” which does not alter the logic of the formula itself. In the non-European ex-colonies, the ethnic-national element is more pronounced in the nation-building discourses, accompanied by some ideas of dependency theory and by the extreme authoritarianism of the ruling elites. A good example of this is Uzbek President Islam Karimov’s rhetoric, which attempts to justify the inefficient economy and authoritarian power of the Soviet type with an appeal to the mythic ancient ethnic solidarity and the construct of “uzbekness” that are largely Soviet products, invented and imposed onto these people by the imperial ideologues (Karimov 1993). The really existing institute of makhalla is effectively used by the Uzbek state in its attempts to justify the repressive policies and lack of respect for the individual, while its leader becomes a recognizable and not very appetizing “father of the nation.”

VIII.

If decolonial impulses have existed in non-European Eurasian colonies, in some cases, for many decades and even centuries, then why are they virtually absent from the political discourses and nation building today? Here, a comparison with South American indigenous movements could help. In a number of South American countries, such as Ecuador and Bolivia, in the last two decades at least, as a reaction to the multiple failure of both developmentalist projects and dependency theory, an alternative model of interculturality emerged, which was connected with questioning the sociopolitical reality of neocolonialism as it manifests itself in the present models of the state, democracy, and the nation (Walsh 2009). Interculturality is linked to decolonization as the goal of indigenous movements, and particularly, CONAIE, in whose political project emerges the idea of a plurinational state, based on “the full and permanent participation of the peoples and nationalities in decision making” and in “the exercise of political power in the
Plurinational State” (CONAIE 1997: 11). What is interesting here is that this initiative is born not on the level of the nation-state but, higher or lower, on a more global and more local level, although it attempts to change the state and the national imaginary the way it needs. According to Catherine Walsh, interculturality acts as an overarching principle signifying the construction of a different society, epistemology, state, political practice, and generally, a paradigm that is other than modernity/coloniality (2009). On the ruins of the Soviet Union are many examples of neocolonialism, discrimination, racism, lack of willingness to hear the voices of indigenous people. However, in spite of the growing grassroots resistance sentiment, the indigenous social or political organizations still do not play any significant part in the decision-making and cannot even attempt to change the state. The allowed official forms of their existence usually come to culture and sometimes to religion. The majority of such organizations and movements play a ritualistic ornamental role, while their leaders are often manipulated and tamed by those in power or destroyed if they refuse to cooperate.

One of the important differences between the northern Caucasus and Central Asia and the Zapatistas or CONAIE today lies in the religious sphere, which brings us back to the question of imperial and colonial difference. A decidedly Muslim basis of a number of indigenous liberating movements, often demonized by the official power as Islamist and terrorist, is a relatively new phenomenon, linked among other factors to the lack or erasing of any coherent other than Islam epistemology and cosmology to ground itself in and to today’s special role of Islam as an opposite to Western modernity and the global damnés. In spite of the efforts to present this Muslim face of indigenous resistance as an ancient one, it is less than half a century old. Even in the Caucasus War in the nineteenth century, the Jihad banner was not the main element of anticolonial movements, and most of them in all non-European colonies shared a wider than Islam anticolonial sentiment that was subsequently lost. The West is familiar with the story of Chechen and Dagestan resistance and with the name of imam Shamil, who presided over the religiously marked uprising in the northern Caucasus. However, in case of the Circassians, the Islamic element was not initially as important as in case of those people who adopted Islam earlier. Their resistance was persistent and continued for another five years at least, after Shamil was captured and taken to Kaluga (Jersild 2002).

The same is true in relation to the early Soviet period Turkistan indigenous movements. Turkistan National Unity was not in the least interested in the struggle between Socialism and capitalism or in the creation of an Islamic state. They declared in 1921 that they “did not want to sacrifice the
future of the old Turkistan to plans in preparation for the deliverance of the
Islamic world and to the yet unknown outcome of forthcoming struggle
between capitalism and socialism” (Paksoy 1995b). A Bashkir leader of the
anticolonial movement, Zeki Velidi Togan, wrote in a 1920 letter to Vladimir
Lenin: “You accept the ideas of genuine national Russian chauvinism as the
basis of your policy. . . . We have clearly explained that the land question in
the East has in principle produced no class distinction. . . . For in the East it is
the European Russians, whether capitalists or workers, who are the top class,
while the people of the soil . . . , rich or poor, are their slaves. . . . You will
go on finding class enemies of the workers, and rooting them out until every
educated man among the native population . . . has been removed” (Caroe

Even if often the repressive states in Central Asian countries or the Cau-
casus exaggerate the Islamist threat, one cannot ignore the growing milita-
rlistic nature of anticolonial movements and their consent to Islamism (e.g.,
Akromiya in Andijan). One of the reasons for this lies in the nature of the
Russian/Soviet colonization. It created and intensified the culture of violence
in these locales. It pushed the great masses of people out of their previous
social hierarchies, legal, and civil systems; it destroyed the traditional econ-
omy and imposed a colonial one, leaving no choice for the large groups of
people than to join either the colonizers or the guerilla movements. Finally,
it removed the indigenous ethics, replacing it by a cynical double standard
Soviet servility. But the Caucasus and Central Asian Robin Hoods, as they
were often presented by the Russian propaganda, by the early twentieth cen-
tury, turned into the well-organized and often quite-educated strata of the
local elites, who envisioned the future of their homeland as rather secular
and egalitarian (not necessarily in Western terms but sometimes in the sense
of indigenous social relations). However, this stream of anticolonial move-
ments was strangled by the 1940s, and whenever it raised its head after-
ward, it was systematically destroyed both by the Soviet and today by the new
local governments, which want to promote exclusively their own versions of
the state and Islam and are not interested in establishing any dialogue with
indigenous movements or the common people, for that matter. The pattern
of state violence and instigated fear remains dominant all over the Eurasian
space.

The 2005 tragic events in Andizhan (Uzbekistan), when not only the
armed insurgents but also a number of uninvolved civilians were killed, and
the same year Nalchik (the northern Caucasus) uprising (both with
reemergence and relapses in the subsequent years) were presented by official
propaganda of Russia, Uzbekistan, and the local governments of the north-
ern Caucasus autonomous republics, as fundamentalist, Islamist, foreign (Western or coming from the Muslim countries), and criminalized, while a number of Western media and human rights activists, on the contrary, overestimated the figures of the death toll and rendered the same events as a liberating struggle of the unarmed population raising their voices against the absolutist power and for their rights and freedoms (Kimmage 2005, Andijan Massacre 2005). Both extremes are biased. Although independent sources show that the action in both cases was indeed initiated by armed and trained insurgents, some of whom came from outside the region, the religious, economic, or even ideological content in both cases were in fact minimal. The socioeconomic demands of the impoverished population of both Uzbekistan and Kabardino-Balkaria and their annoyance with the ubiquitous corruption on every level and the lack of prospects for the future were effectively used by yet publicly unidentified forces to start a coup d’état and, if successful, another flower or fruit revolution. But, no matter what were the concrete rationale and antigovernment forces in both cases, these events reflected how easily innocent bystanders could be victimized and destroyed as dispensable lives by both the government and the insurgents.51 In neither case, we must admit, did the initiative come from the people themselves, in neither case did they actually raise their voices of their own accord. As Akiner points out, in the vacuum of a political will to solve the problems of the common people in Central Asia, “a coalition of social, political economic and religious grievances will surely emerge. This volatile compound could readily be manipulated and used as an ideological weapon by those who seek to challenge the present regime. . . . If this were to happen, it is the Islamist groups who would be best placed to take advantage of this situation. This is not because of their current strength or appeal, but because they have goals, commitment, leadership and organization” (Akiner 2005).

Today, the historical phenomena of both Basmachi and Abreks (Sahni 1997, Bobrovnikov 2000, Paksoy 1995c, Botiakov 2004) arguably anticolonial movements, originally far from religion, are often revived in Islamist forms and in the creation of networks with international Islamism, while the anticolonial resistance and possible coalitions with anticolonial movements of not fervently religious nature are downplayed. This situation is different from the South American indigenous movements, where Catholicism comes from the colonizer and is not used today as an inspiration for anticolonial movements,52 as happens with Islam, whose expansionistic nature is symbolically forgotten in this case and even forgiven, in the larger dimension, where it lost to Christianity and Western modernity and started to be used
as a banner of the global anticolonial movement. However, in the complex imperial-colonial configuration of Eurasian ex-colonies, in order to revive the indigenous movements as a source of viable epistemic models and decolonial struggles, it is crucial to remember, along with the local history of Islam and local Muslim identity, other alternative and forgotten paths of indigenous thinking, to preserve and nourish the pluriversality of epistemic and ethical models that always existed in both the Caucasus and Central Asia. It is also crucial to avoid the pattern of “going back” to true Islam or any other homogenous archaic culture, thus changing the terms of the conversation, questioning the established opposition to modernity and tradition. It is important to occupy instead the position of double translation and double critique of both Islam and Western modernity. Such a position is actively developed among the diasporic Muslim intellectuals living in Europe and the U.S., such as A. Khatibi (1990), A. Meddeb (2003), T. Ramadan (2003), and many others. It is yet to be coherently formulated and expressed politically in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Newly independent Central Asian and the southern Caucasus ex-colonies are a case of what can be called an indigenous neocolonialism (i.e., internal colonialism). Here, it is not the equivalent of the white creole elites (the Russians) that are in power today, as it seems these regions are in the hands of indigenous people, while the Russian ex-colonizers find themselves often discarded from the society and economy. But, the local regimes that are presided by the representatives of indigenous people turn out indistinguishable from the Russian or Soviet power. They reproduce the logic of coloniality, though in contrast with South America, it is a coloniality with respect to their own people and not to racialized others, which is a result of an external imperial difference with its secondary Eurocentrism as the constitutive element that spreads over the colonized as well as the colonizers. The tradition of educating the local elites as champions of Russian, Soviet, or Western modernity, who would not be interested in the least in the future of the people, coded by the elites as subhuman, is still maintained. It remains the major tactic in the psychological and ethical mechanisms of forging new political identities, a tactic that has not changed much after a caricature of socialism turned into a caricature of capitalism. It was borrowed by the ethnic elites from the colonizer and allowed them to continue the economic, legal, and cultural genocide of their compatriots, hiding behind neoliberal values and marked with suicidal intellectual dependency on the West, even if masked as the revival of ethnic nationalism. Today, when neoliberalism is discredited, this predominant tendency is starting to change. However, the outcome is not clear yet.
We are risking a fall into the well-known mistake of developmentalism if we assume that there are certain stages in the development of other-than-modern patterns of thinking and epistemic decolonization on a global scale; that some time needs to pass before these problems are understood, as happened in South America, which went through a long period of colonization and later independence; that in Central Asia or the Caucasus in due time and at some appropriate stage, the analogues of indigenous movements in other parts of the world will emerge. It is very hard to avoid the temptation of such developmentalist logic. In fact, the difference here lies not in stages but, once again, in the imperial/colonial configuration, burdened by complicated religious and ideological factors.

In the ex-Soviet colonies, the idea of civil society remains nominal, while political society is often being strangled or tamed at birth. The local grassroots organizations cannot make the state and the local power hear them, while more global coalitions invariably fail (except for the Muslim ones) due to the “zombification” of the social and political imaginary, which is tailored to see the ethnic-national project in a Herderian sense of the unity of the people, their territory, ethnicity, and language. This does not allow for the emergence of any intercultural idea of uncoupling the state and one nation. It does not mean that, in the post-Soviet space, there are no examples of border thinking. But the social/political system is constructed in such a way that they remain sporadic and doomed to stay unheard, unless some major social cataclysm takes place. Until the recent global crisis and its aftermath, the latter option did not look feasible, due to the extreme fatigue, apathy, depolitization of the population, which is sick and tired of any reforms and social projects. People are skeptical about power, but they also do not believe in the possibility of any effective resistance based on legal political ways. Hence, the culture of violence, which unfortunately has long historical roots in Eurasia persists, as does the peculiar resistance without dialogue, based on going around and beyond the power, leading a parallel life and often successfully avoiding being reduced to the will of the state (McGlinchey 2007).

IX.

The lack of models similar to interculturalism and the plurinational state in the non-European (ex-)colonies is linked among other things to the “success” of Soviet modernization, with its carefully elaborated strategies of mind-colonization of indigenous peoples, with the Jesuitical nature of Soviet ideology, which surpassed in this respect the clumsy and underreflected
The double-facedness of the Czarist Empire. The cynicism and many-faced nature of the Soviet ethnic-national ideologies is hard to match, the same way as the repressive mechanisms of the accelerated Soviet modernization, as a result of which even traces of indigenous cosmologies and ethics were erased from the collective memory and replaced with either Soviet Eurocentric progressivist discourse or, today, by ersatz ethnic nationalism. For the external world and mainly for the West, the well-developed rhetoric of proletarian internationalism was manifested, for example, in the affirmative action Soviet quota system in the national republics. The metamorphosis of the local elites into the Soviet nomenclature led to the elimination of all links with indigenous epistemologies and to the purposeful elimination of these ideologies themselves. The children and grandchildren of these elites are largely in power today, even if they turned from faithful Communists into the enlightened Caucasians or neoliberal Central Asians. The nature of this zombification was rather complex—in the West, people assumed that all inhabitants of the Soviet Union were zombified by Marxism. But, in reality, the Communist ideology was just an external shell, while the essence remained Eurocentric, chauvinistic, racist, and based on progressivist modernization, while the resistance shaped itself as anticolonial, antimodern, and often anti-Russian.

Another difference between South America and the Soviet ex-colonies, which is a result of specific Soviet colonialism, is that the latter are alienated from each other and often hostile to each other. They lack the sense of unity, which the empire gave before, but they also lack the sense of the larger community of the damnés. This prevents possible coalitions with each other and with other others, while cultural and epistemic community of non-Soviet (also nonethnic and not exclusively Muslim) type, which existed in the Caucasus and Central Asia as specific border civilizational forms before, their linguistic continuum—similar to the Caribbean case—were erased from the social, political, and cultural imaginary in the Soviet years and continue to be forgotten or forcefully replaced with straightforward ethnic and linguistic nationalism today.

The ex-colonial states of the post-Soviet periphery started their independent nation building not of their own accord, not as a result of revolution or a national liberation movement. They were just informed about their new status by Boris Yeltsin and the other two Slavic leaders, who decided to get rid of the Soviet Union without consulting the subaltern Central Asian or southern Caucasus leaders. This collapse, in itself, was an important step in the change of the global geopolitical order and the victory of neoliberal globalization, with its rhetoric of the end of history and the apotheosis of market economy.
These specific conditions also worsened the situation for the non-European ex-colonies. From dependent colonies within the Soviet Union, they turned into spaces, mostly ignored by the rest of the world, spaces inhabited by unrecorded people whose future is not taken into account by the new architects of the world. These countries have not been used for the demonstration of the market economy advantages, as happened in case of several South American countries. The Global North uses them merely as tokens of geostrategic dominance, which does not even require capital investment. As a result of flower and fruit revolutions, the previous Soviet bosses and later presidents loyal to Russia were quickly pushed out and replaced with neoliberal politicians. In post-Soviet Eurasia for more than a decade, an Evo Morales was not possible. Instead, there were the ex-Soviet bosses, the mercenary champions of Western neoliberalism, the representatives of mafia structures, or more often, a combination of all three. Today, it seems it is their turn to be replaced by a new kind of elites who, one can only hope, finally will be more responsive to the needs of the people.

The invisibility of anticolonial sentiment in the indigenous movements of the Caucasus and Central Asia has an ideological explanation as well. As mentioned previously, during the Cold War, the West did not see the anticolonial element, concentrating entirely on its anti-Soviet project. That is why, when the émigré leaders of indigenous movements called for assistance from the U.S. and Western Europe, they faced a lack of understanding on the Western part and an attempt to erase the racial, religious, ethnic, and ultimately, colonial difference. For example, the Turkistan liberation leaders were told to work in Western European centers under the auspices of Russian dissidents, which they refused to do because for them these dissidents were yet another manifestation of imperialism with a different ideology (not Czarist, not Bolshevik but liberal). Today these movements continue to be used in the opposition to post-Soviet Russia, quickly reorienting from anti-Soviet to anti-imperial rhetoric. But the arguments often remain the same, based on persistent stereotypes and old phobias, as well as the black legend logic turned against Russia. The true needs and interests of those who are involved in anticolonial movements or live in those locales are invariably ignored (Paksoy 1995b). Yet, for many Third World intellectuals and leftist thinkers from the West, the Socialist element overclouds everything else in the complex history of the Russian/Soviet Empire. They truly believe in the Bolshevik rhetoric of decolonizing and liberating the people of the “national peripheries.” In reality, the Bolsheviks wanted to keep the empire and have Communism, too, hence the massacres in ethnic republics, the persecution of anticolonial movements, labeled by the Soviets as “bourgeois nationalism”
(for which no Russian was ever sentenced), hence the economic policy based on the hidden logic of coloniality that perpetuated the chronic dependency of Soviet non-European colonies. The disappointment of many Third World intellectuals in the second Socialist world, which did not cope with its mission, has remained a serious and undertheorized complex. Yet, Third World intellectuals are seldom ready to accept the equation between colonialism and socialism (or Second and Third Worlds). The collapse of the Socialist paradigm was catastrophic not only for the Socialist world itself, it also left many parts of the Third World without a vision. A different vision was soon found (and this is a subject of a separate reflection), but what is crucial is that the ex-Soviet world and particularly Russia have become a new invisible and disabled entity. In this situation of void, it is an urgent task to finally get rid of the mythic Socialist notions and grasp the complex configuration of the Soviet Empire within the logic of the global coloniality and its local manifestations.

In the idea of the plurinational state, the anticolonial struggle merges with the anticapitalist one. But, for the majority of ex-colonial subjects in peripheral Eurasia, the anticapitalist pathos does not hold. In their minds, the only alternative to capitalism is Socialism, which was discredited forever for those who had to survive in it. The presence of other alternatives, not necessarily Socialist or Marxist, remains unimaginable for the people of peripheral Eurasia. One of the important tasks for the indigenous people is to decolonize from the mutant local neocolonial thinking. An epistemic revolution is possible in these (ex-)colonies, but to initiate it, it is necessary to combine the local and the global levels, to stop thinking in the limits of our own countries or even continents, to dismantle the chronically peripheral position of the Central Asian or Caucasus people in the world, to make them part of the informational and political space of alternative thinking and being on a global scale. This is what the leaders of the newly independent states are afraid of, enforcing a statist and clannish form of patriotism instead and plundering their countries, while using anticolonial impulses to their benefit. To build coalitions and open a dialogue with other damnés of the world, the Eurasian ex-colonies would have to shape the new elites, who would be grounded in other epistemologies than mimicking neoliberalism or narrow and aggressive nationalism and would attempt a multiple translation between indigenous, Western, and Muslim elements, as happened in case of the Zapatistas in Mexico.

In the world of imperial difference and particularly in the ex- and present Russian colonies, the situation is more complex, and the decolonial impulse is expressed more coherently not in social and political agency but
in the areas expelled by modernity from the sphere of rationality and decision making—the arts, the occult, and nonrational knowledge, meaningless in the eyes of analytical reason. Any social and political initiative would be strangled immediately by the strong state, both in Russia and in neocolonial newly independent states. For this reason, often, the diasporic intellectuals from these locales present more interesting and independent examples of decolonial thinking and truly transepistemic, transvalue, transmodern, and not just transcultural humanities and arts.

Such individuals make a virtual or aesthetic link between the erased history and the subaltern modernity. A good example is an Abkhazian by origin artist, philosopher, and spiritual Sufi leader, Murat Yagan, who was born in Turkey as a result of the nineteenth-century genocide of the northern Caucasus peoples by the Russian Empire and their massive exile to the Ottoman Sultanate. Along with being a talented artist, who studied in the West and also knows perfectly the Circassian and the Islamic traditions, Yagan is also an oral transmitter of the Ahmsta Kebzeh, an ancient spiritual tradition or knowledge of the art of living an abundant life, which originated in the Caucasus Mountains but was preserved mainly by the Circassian diaspora abroad. The goal of Kebzeh is to awaken and develop the latent human faculties under divine grace and guidance. It is an oral teaching that has been passed on through story, song, and the way of being. Yagan who received this knowledge from Caucasus elders in exile later immigrated to Canada, and for more than twenty-five years, he has been sharing it with a small group of students in Western Canada. He wrote a spiritual autobiography, I Come from behind Kaf Mountain (1984), which has been translated into many languages. Recently invited to Abkhazia, Yagan was hoping to bring back the ancient wisdom. The question remains, however: Would he stay an exotic guru of an unknown ancient philosophy in Canada and no less exotic diasporic intellectual for contemporary Abkhazians or would Kebzeh become a ground for a long-awaited decolonial subjectivity in the Caucasus?

What I just sketched, however, is an open decolonial utopia that can unfold into a specific collective subjectivity only under favorable conditions hard to imagine today. Yet, in what follows, I attempt to demonstrate a few manifestations and traces of decolonial border thinking and border identities in the Caucasus and Central Asia, where for centuries “adaptive and creative resistance” and re-existence (Alban Achinte 2006) have been expressed in the
phenomenon of transcultural tricksterism, allowing the “re-appropriation of the spirituality rooted in the soil” (Marcos 2006). After two post-Soviet decades and in spite of the aforementioned problems, the Caucasus and Central Asia still retain their particular transcultural sensibility and subjectivity. This was clearly expressed in such multicultural urban ex-colonial centers as Baku and Tashkent. Their Babylonian hybrid nature was not entirely a constructed proletarian internationalist product or the Czarist Empire colonial creation. The roots of this linguistic, religious, ethnic, and cultural tolerance and dynamic mixture were deeper than that and went far back into history, so that it is possible to talk about specific multiethnic nations of Tashkenters or Bakineans rapidly disappearing today and leaving a trace of nostalgia for the times of fruitful transculturation and mutual cultural penetration and dialogue, captured in various artistic forms, such as a Mark Weil’s (1996) documentary *The End of an Era: Tashkent* or Oleg Safaraliev’s (2006) film *Good bye, Southern City* and Azeri-Jewish writer Afanasy Mamedov’s (2000, 2010) creative Proustian revivals of nonexistent Baku of his childhood.

The big cities of the ex-Soviet Orient are still ready to embrace and accept the Russian/Soviet ex-colonizers as well as dozens of other ethnicities that have traditionally lived here or found themselves in colonial Soviet capitals as a result of major historical cataclysms of the twentieth century. For instance, Tashkent which became an unofficial capital of the Soviet Union during World War II and also a Soviet Hollywood, accepted several large migration waves, from the adventurous Russian settlers of the late nineteenth century to the Russian, Ukrainian, and Jewish families from the West of the Soviet Union, evacuated here during World War II, from Uigurs to Japanese and German POWs, from Chechens to Leningrad emaciated orphans, and later, after the major 1966 earthquake, thousands of construction workers from all over the Soviet Union who came to rebuild Tashkent. Many of them preferred to stay here afterward. The topos of such colonial multicultural cities carries traces of various traditions and imperial models—one can study it as a cultural palimpsest of different, often conflicting or merging meanings—one can find here a governor’s palace or a park from the Russian colonial times and traces of secular colonial architecture (which are almost always copies of a copy, meaning that the Russian imperial imagery was itself borrowed from the West and hence its colonial copies were double simulacra). This layer easily coincides with the later Soviet layers and the so-called old town, with its typically narrow streets, adobe houses, and fortresses (like the Bakinean Icheri-Shekher). A visual example is provided by Mark Weil in his tracing of the eleven monuments that replaced one another in the same spot in Tashkent in the course of the twentieth century, including the
monument of General-Governor Kauffman, Stalin, Marx, and finally, Amir Timur today (Weil 1996). But what is crucial in all these multicultural colonial capitals is certainly not architecture or monuments but the people. As Afanasy Mamedov wrote in his nostalgic novel about Baku, it is the people that create this transcultural mood: “the old men with their Muslim beards under the palms and the tolling of the bells at the Armenian church that sounds so close from the Jewish quarter Juude-Meilesi—a real present for Shagal” (Mamedov 2000: 110). Ten years later, in his novelette “A Cop Had a Dog,” Mamedov imperceptibly changes the mood or, even, the modality of his post-imperial, post-Soviet narrative as one of the last representatives of this fiction and this cultural and linguistic imaginary. He creates a painfully sharp and disturbing image of the lost dog, left by an Armenian family fleeing Baku in fear of massacre. The dog is adopted by the new owner of their empty apartment, an Azeri policeman who is not a nationalist and Islamist monster in Mamedov’s rendering but a full-fledged human, imperfect yet prone to love and compassion, guilt and repentance (2010).

It was modernity that ultimately made an antispaces out of Central Asia and the Caucasus, a nonspace that can exist in the Western mind only in the form of a conventional topos of some exotic parable, where stereotyped Orientals reside. But who were these people, the West never really wondered. In the case of Central Asia, they were interpreted as Deleuze and Guattari’s “nomads” at best, the abstract agents of some conventional speculative history, who just illustrated the concept of deterritorialization. However, in the East, this trickster, wondering, mediating, rootless sensibility is no news—it is just that, under globalization, it acquires an unexpected reification on a global scale. The abstract nomad turns out to be a real new Ahasuerus or, rather, an al-Hadir of the newest époque of the great migration of peoples and transcultural border subjectivities, or in a more pedestrian variant, an ever-wondering Hodja Nasreddin, who brings us back to the problematic of tricksterism.

Saint al-Hadir, or the Green Man—important for several Sufi orders, with their specific culture of respect for the other, standing in the center of the ethics of interpersonal relations—is an initially transcultural personage, a quintessence of the people who for centuries have lived between empires, religions, languages, in a complex imperial/colonial configuration, and have managed to maintain their own system of reference marked with specific philosophy of treating the other. This transcultural personage is to be found in many traditions, from India to Palestine, from the Ferghana Valley to China, and arguably, even in Ireland and the Arthurian tales. Saint al-Hadir or al-Hidr, having a parallel in Christian Ilea, in modern terms, is
the immortal protector of all migrants and travelers and is himself constantly traveling around the world, fulfilling his mystical mission. This character is of pre-Islamic origin, and among its sources are the Acadian Gilgamesh epic, the novel of Alexander, the Judaic parable about Joshua ben Levi, and so forth, hence the Central Asian popular belief that hospitality cannot be selective, for al-Hadir can come to your house in any disguise, anyone can meet him, but what one would gain depends on how pure one’s intentions are. In this belief, we find a specific philosophy of treating other people and other cultures (Catherine 2004, 2007, Franke 2000) that in Muslim rendering is associated with the concept of adab ethics.

A contemporary progressive Muslim intellectual, Omid Safi, claims that “adab . . . that most essential, basic and glorious of Muslim interpersonal codes, is the compassionate, human, selfless, generous, and kind etiquette that has been a hallmark of refined manners in Muslim cultures. Almost anyone who has ever traveled to areas that have been profoundly influenced by Muslim ethics has no doubt seen great examples of this wonderful way of being welcomed and put at ease.” But the scholar sadly continues that “it is precisely this compassionate humanness that is missing from so much of contemporary Islam” (Safi 2004: 13). Even if it is missing from many versions of contemporary Islam, it is not missing from such border spaces as the Caucasus and Central Asia and from the sensibility of the people who live in these locales. It cannot be taken to just Islam, however unorthodox. It is this inherent transcultural border element—forever open to the dialogue with the diversity of the world—that can be a way out of the persistent black-and-white binary oppositions.

I pointed out previously that, due to the Western epistemic monopoly, until now the only way of entering the spheres of philosophy, historiography, sociology, or other social sciences for indigenous people in many parts of the world has been exclusively through literature and the arts, the culture of the quotidian, the nonrational and esoteric knowledges, so that, in Caribbean writer and philosopher Wilson Harris’s words, the philosophy of history was “buried in the art of imagination” (Harris 1981: 24–25). A peculiar example of contemporary Central Asian realization of border subjectivity is to be found in case of the modern Uzbek “saint” Habiba (Allione 1997), who after a revelation that came to her in a dream, made a connection with Bahauddin Nakshbandi, a fourteenth-century founder of a Sufi order with over forty million followers in the world.55 The question is not if Habiba has real healing “powers,” it is more important to trace how she creatively mixes in her cosmology various cultural and religious sources leading to a tolerant and flexible ludic frame with a well-defined ethics, based on subject-subject
relations instead of the usual subject-object scheme. It is not surprising that orthodox patriarchal Islam is extremely hostile to such practices and such “saints.”

Several elements of Habiba’s cosmology allow us to put it into an imaginary dialogue with voices of Amerindian curanderas analyzed in Sylvia Marcos’s book *Taken from the Lips: Gender and Eros in Mesoamerican Religions* (Marcos 2006). The mystical and transcendental dimensions are regarded in both cases as parts of everyday life, demanding from the people a cultivation of their skills and abilities to decipher such invisible signs. In the outlooks of Central Asian and Caucasus healers that I interviewed for my recent book on gender (Tlostanova 2010a), like in *espiritualismo*, a dynamic religious and cultural mélange erases the possibility of any fundamentalist stable interpretation of religious or cultural identity. Various sources coexist and correlate in an explosive and fruitful, essentially decentered, interaction easily combining monotheistic, polytheistic, and pantheistic grounds as only different languages expressing the same thing and serving as a means in the mission of saving people by sharing the healing spiritual energy with them.

Habiba, Lira Karagulova, Fatima Zhakomikhova, and other modern healers in Central Asia and the Caucasus invariably stress the importance of keeping the world’s equilibrium by remaining silent when it is needed, talking when it is necessary, and acting when action is called for—always listening to the rhythms of the multiple universe. Each of them, in her own language and semiotic system, refers to the all-encompassing interrelation and interconnection of everything in this world—the people, the nature, the cosmos—where each of us represents the other. “Take a hand—we can concentrate on the differences between each of the fingers, marveling how different they are, but then we risk not noticing the movement of the hand as a whole,” says Habiba, following Nakshbandi (Allione 1997). In the revival and cultivation of this logic of respect for other cultures, religions, histories, a logic of open dialogue and fairness, still maintained in spite of any historical cataclysms, wars, and colonization, lies a possibility of intercultural understanding in the future.

Such understanding requires the shaping or reopening of a specific transcultural border subjectivity and epistemology grounded in critical thinking, which is born in between various equally questioned and destabilized models. It lacks religious or ethnic-national fundamentalism and is based on pluritopic hermeneutics. Instances of such sensibility are to be found in Central and South America, in some parts of southeast Asia and Africa, and in peripheral Eurasia, with its hotchpotch of various traditions, most of which were doubly or multiply colonized spaces. This new subjectivity and episte-
mology can be expressed in many ways—from the theology of liberation to progressive Muslims projects, from other thinking to border thinking—but is always based on questioning modernity from an in-between position of transculturation.56

Transculturation requires the inclusion of many equal cultural and epistemic reference points, the crossing and negotiation of cultures, a specific state of cultural in-betweenness. In the case of Central Asia and the Caucasus, such subjectivity has been always a norm in an ethnic-cultural, social, and linguistic sense (take, for example, the specialization of languages: Arabic was used for the official sphere and law, Farsi referred to culture and poetry, the local vernacular languages like New Uzbek were connected with the sphere of everyday communication). Here, the imperial assimilation tactic was needed, not as a way of coping with metisation (as in South America) but as a realization of the imperial principle “divide and rule.” However, behind the surface, the age-old processes of mutual interaction refusing to accept the imperial cultural hierarchy of assimilation have flourished, giving birth to new meanings and complex codes. To understand them one needs to focus on the texture of transcultural weave and not on the nature of the components, as Eduard Glissant described in relation to Caribbean opacity ([1990] 1997: 190).

Defying the continuing Western and Russian Orientalism, the Caucasus and Central Asia today offer fascinating if not numerous examples of transcultural art, fiction, cinema, and theater as the means through which to channel their border sensibility, critically rethinking the caricature or exoticist image of the East, created by the West, questioning both Western modernity and ethnic nationalist or religious fundamentalist discourses. Such is the case of the famous Tashkent theater Ilkhom57 (Ilkhom 2009). What would happen when the breath of real history and real culture and people flow into the Western Orientalist metaphors and elegant parables, where Asia (e.g., Samarkand) acts as a paradigmatic antispase in which it is suitable to have a rendezvous with Death, to quote Jean Baudrillard’s famous essay (1979)? Ilkhom, in the words of its director Mark Weil, who called himself a patriot of Tashkent and a human of the planet Earth and was tragically killed in September 2007, mixes on its stage the languages and faces of Tashkenters, their tempers and their ways of life (Antelava 2008). This theater is as transcultural and able to accommodate the unlikely opposites as the city where it stands. It remained so even at the point when Tashkent era ended and it started to change its multicultural nature. This sentiment is particularly clear in the signature 1993 production that still successfully runs today, a Samarkand fantasy based on Karlo Gozzi’s comedy Happy Beggars (I Pitocchi
Fortunati 1764). The show was built on the mutual penetration and hybridizing of totally unexpected sources and traditions—comedia dell’arte and Uzbek street theater, “maskharaboz.” In fact, Ilkhom negates Gozzi’s Orientalism, which presented Samarkand as a fantastic dystopia, a place nowhere, fallen out of time and progress, as well as Baudrillard’s beautiful and sad parable of the rendezvous with Death in Samarkand. This production, in contrast with Baudrillard’s essay from *De la Seduction*, can be called “Life in Samarkand.”

In 2005, Weil came back to this problematic in his controversial and risky *Flights of Mashrab*, dedicated to the 250th anniversary of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Mashrab emerges in this show, not in his “combed” traditional appearance of one of the most talented Uzbek poets of the late seventeenth to early eighteenth century, a contemporary of Mozart, but as a wild, naked-ass dervish of a Sufi order, a heretic castrate born in Andijan and a cheeky and arrogant wanderer who refuses to fear the power in any guise—Muslim or secular—who rejects any organized religion and cultivates intimate and direct connections between the human being and God. His life is a series of small and big acts of defiance similar to those that Ilkhom company and its director went through in the preceding two decades. Mashrab is a provocative radical and trickster who jokes with power and urinates on the khan’s throne and who does not keep silent if he disagrees, even when it threatens his life, just like Weil himself. The performance is not just transcultural (e.g., Mozart music is played using traditional Uzbek instruments); it is also palpably connected with contemporaneity, as it obviously parallels the situation in modern Uzbekistan (Ilkhom 2009).

The lingering interpretation of Central Asia or the Caucasus as exotic or threatening antispaces is just a continuing Eurocentric practice of pushing the other out of the sphere of the valuable, out of the myths of progress, linear world history, science, and the like. While what is needed is to realize that these are not just fairy-tale spaces, continuously exploited as sources of exotic imagery, but quite real locales with their own local histories and, most important, people. Life never stopped here, even if modernity went around it, leaving it behind and beyond. And to learn what kind of life it was and is, we need to listen to the people who live, feel, and think in Samarkand, Baku, Tashkent, Nalchik, Grozny, or Dushanbe. The problem remains that decolonial and other alterative thinking models are still not properly consolidated in spite of such exemplary events as the World Social Forum. What is needed is the development of coalitions of such border thinkers and transcultural multiply colonized locales on a global scale that, in spite of such technical means as the internet, still remains a problem to be solved. What is lacking is
not only financial support but also a sufficient global knowledge and global drive allowing us to embrace into the sphere of decoloniality such “others” as Circassians or Uzbeks, to name just two. A lack of communication and a void among those who have been marked by colonial difference and the colonial wound and have suffered from the same logic of global coloniality is immediately filled by ideologies that normally do not suffer from lack of resources to promote themselves on a global scale, such as ethnic and religious fundamentalism and extremism of all shades and, of course, neoliberal modernization in all its expected forms, from military bases and economic pressure to opening English-speaking universities in the vast spaces of Eurasian steppe. The Caucasus and Central Asian mentality still carries traces of other thinking and the ideal of other transcultural world of harmonious and just social structures and relations. Today, as before, this sensibility is only starting to develop a political manifestation. Yet, mainly, it is restricted to the allegorical language of the arts and the illusive culture of the quotidian, to the nonrational and esoteric realms. Some examples I have touched upon here. This gives a small hope that the voices of Eurasian others will at some point be heard in the global chorus of modernity/coloniality otherness, defying and overcoming this category as such, and that they/we will finally take part in deciding of the future of the unknown world and their/our own future in this world.