Hybridity's Failures: Lessons From the Soviet Empire

Leah Feldman

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HYBRIDITY'S FAILURES: LESSONS FROM THE SOVIET EMPIRE

I am perhaps among the last generation of scholars who carried through graduate school an odd mix of pre-2008 optimism about the resilience of the figure of the public intellectual, met with a growing anxiety about the university's saturation by late capitalist corporate ideology. I have thus always been wary of global modernisms. As the term seeks to recuperate difference, it often also centralizes modernity's locus in Europe as the fulcrum of its comparative method. This trend in literary studies captures a tension similar to what Choi Chatterjee frames as the "elite cosmopolitanism of transnational history," which she corrects through a grounding of the transnational in the personal narrative of her "autobiographical manifesto." In the process of writing my recent book, which highlights the making of revolution through Russian and Azeri literary encounters in the Caucasus, I often found myself nonetheless returning to an *Azeri avant-garde* in order to do some work toward decentering a postwar European modernity and a Russian modernist poetics. However, what did this commitment to the framework of modernism produce beyond framing my discussion of revolution in the Caucasus in a European epistemological register? As I wrote through the first decade of the twenty-first century, the stakes of my investment in revolutionary literature shifted, from making the Caucasus visible to postcolonial studies, to the task of thinking through the stakes of the multinational Soviet empire after its collapse. The central revolutionary

topos that emerged was a hybrid conception of Eur-Asia, a contrapuntal formation that served both conservative and progressive ends, the ideological aims of protonationalists, revolutionaries, and imperialists alike. I came to understand that Eurasia, as a hybrid formation, identifies a geopolitical or even geopoetic revolution, albeit one that leads not to disorientation, but to the rise of a self-contradictory imperialism; and what could be more modernist than that?[1]

My fascination with the idea of Eurasia began while studying Russian in college when I was again and again forced to watch the same Soviet film, the 1970 cult classic *White Sun of the Desert* (*Beloe solntse pustyni*), as a resource for learning idiomatic Russian.[2] The film's most memorable line became an enduring referent for expressing difficulty in general, "Vostok delo tonkoe" (the East is a tricky business). The film seemed to extend our Moscow classroom to the sprawling expanse of "Eurasia," clinging to remnants of the dream of the Soviet Eastern International through its portrait of the revolutionary civil war in Central Asia. Its popularity was similarly expansive, screened for Soviet cosmonauts before their first flight, and its characters immortalized in monuments that were erected throughout Russia and Ukraine, and craters on Venus named for them.

The film's presentation of the backward world of the proud Muslim warrior and his harem of silent, covered women set against the seemingly endless expanse of desert seems reminiscent of *Lawrence of Arabia*. The young red army soldier Sukhov fights to liberate a harem of women from the Basmachi guerrilla Abdulla. The film highlights a familiar colonial enlightenment project in the unveiling of one of Abdulla's wives, the beautiful and clever Gyulchatay. However, the film, which was written by the renowned Soviet Azerbaijani screenwriter and post-Soviet presidential candidate Rustam Ibragimbekov preserves the mythos of revolution on the distant periphery, albeit guarded in its campy heroism and Soviet-style orientalist tropes. Sukhov's red mission to abolish Abdulla's claims to the women as *property*, in turn, exposes a pastiche of the heroic Bolshevik narrative as

[1] Geopoetics suggests an inherently comparative methodology that describes the intersection between memory and geography, which Edward Said describes as "the study of human space." Edward Said. Invention, Memory, and Place // W. J. T. Mitchell (Ed.). Landscape and Power. Vol. 2. Chicago, 2002. P. 241. Drawing on Marxist geographer David Harvey, W. J. T. Mitchell frames the geopolitical, cognitive and affective dimensions of geopoetics. W. J. T. Mitchell. Geopoetics: Space, Place and Landscape // Critical Inquiry. 2000. Vol. 26. No. 2. Pp. 173–4.

[2] Director Vladimir Motyl. Beloe solntse pustyni. Moscow: Mosfilm, 1970.

Sukhov imagines himself the new patriarch of a harem of "liberated women" only to then abandon them on the revolutionary front to return to his wife, an emblem of mother Russia, as the song refrain booms, "I'm unlucky in death, maybe I'll be lucky in love" (*Ne vezet mne v smerti, povezet v liubvi*).

It was 2006 and I was studying Russian with a copy of Edward Said's *Orientalism* tucked under my arm, like a dutiful comparative literature student, wandering around Moscow asking people about the film's politics. The response was always the same: "There was no orientalism in the Soviet Union – we were part of the East," people told me. I wondered what was driving this lingering nostalgia for the exceptionality of the Soviet Union and its difference from European Empires. How was Soviet "easternness" captured in a campy Ostern (a Soviet interpretation of the Western genre set in Central Asia)? More frighteningly, as I witnessed the rise of the new right across the former Soviet empire while writing this book, I noticed Eurasia's enduring significance in the work of figures like Alexander Dugin who drew on the topos of Eurasia to justify a neo-traditionalist and neo-imperial model, a rhetorical turn back to the East through the machismo of the Soviet Ostern, except with more beards.

It turns out Said's book only came out in Russian translation that year, although as others have convincingly argued, Said's work actually builds on Russian imperial and Soviet orientalist scholarship.[3] He draws on Soviet orientalism through the work of the Egyptian pan-Arabist Marxist Anwar Abdel-Malek writing amid the Soviet second Eastern International moment. This second Eastern International drew on cultural diplomacy and translation initiatives across the Soviet-aligned and decolonial nonaligned Global South, supporting organizations such as the Afro-Asian Association in an attempt to quell anti-Soviet backlash following the 1956 Soviet invasion of Budapest.[4] However, this second Eastern International and the tradition of Soviet orientalism on which Said allegedly draws present a reductive vision of West's enslavement and silencing of the East, which in turn,

[3] See Vera Tolz. Russia's Own Orient: The Politics of Identity and Oriental Studies in the Late Imperial and Soviet Periods. Oxford, 2011.

[4] For a history of the Afro-Asian Writers Association, see: Rossen Djagalov. The Peoples Republic of Letters: Towards a Media History of Twentieth-Century Socialist Internationalism / PhD dissertation; Yale, 2011; Masha Kirasirova. The Eastern International: The "Domestic East" and the "Foreign East" in Soviet-Arab Relations, 1917–68 / PhD dissertation; New York University, 2014. In forthcoming work I frame south-south connections across aligned Soviet Kyrgzstan and non-aligned decolonial Algeria in Feldman. Global Souths: Toward a Materialist Poetics of Alignment // boundary 2 (forthcoming).

framed the Soviet Union's liminal Eurasian geopolitics and linguistic and cultural hybridity. That is to say, it framed the geopolitics of orientalism without Said's robust critique of orientalism's corporate structure, which was paradoxically so necessary in post-Soviet Russia amid the flood of the open market of goods and ideas during the late nineties and early naughts.

On the one hand, drawing on Said's debt to Soviet orientology, post-Soviet scholars announced a necessary engagement with Russian and Soviet postcoloniality. One central through line in this scholarship includes the idea of hybridity and diversity as central features of the late Imperial Russian and Soviet Empires. This entailed, on the one hand, the idea that Russian literature must be read through European cultural imperialism, and on the other, efforts to recuperate canonical figures of Russian imperial literature as postcolonial subjects, highlighting, for example, Gogol's Ukrainian identity and Pushkin's blackness.

For historians, the discourse of hybridity has been distinguished from postcolonial studies to describe the *operation* of the Soviet empire. Ilya Gerasimov, Marina Mogilner, and Sergey Glebov instead define the metalanguage of hybridity as the product of Russian and Soviet social sciences. The "Imperial situation," they write, frames hybridity through the historical use of the terms mixing (*smeshenie*) and crossing (*skreshchenie*) "as a language of self-description" and "an element of the analytical language of the project of modern imperial social sciences" distinguishing it from its use in postcolonial studies by Homi Bhabha and others.[5] The discourse of hybridity contributes to a vision of a Soviet Eurasian empire, pushing beyond the homogeneous nation as the primary, normative model of imperial hegemony. Framing the hybridity of Marrean linguistics (in its expansive racial and geopolitical scripting) through Stalin's linguistic writings and their homogenizing force, Gerasimov, Mogilner, and Glebov thus offer a compelling historical account of the moment of the Soviet linguistic turn.

However, as a comparative literature scholar, I am compelled to read errantly, tracing the discourse of hybridity across linguistic, ethnographic, and literary genres, across Turkic and Russian languages, and diachronically from revolution to post-Soviet collapse. In my work, the discourse of Eurasianism thus cannot be separated from its politicization in in the contemporary post-Soviet moment. The theory of linguistic "mixing of proximate peoples," as it gestures toward the continuity of a land empire, in the present

[5] Ilya Gerasimov, Sergey Glebov and Marina Mogilner. Hybridity: Marrism and the Problems of Language of the Imperial Situation // Ab Imperio. 2016. Vol. 17. No. 1. P. 28.

moment justifies a post-Soviet Russian annexation of the proximate other as *organic* and *natural*, most recently applied to claims for the annexation of Eastern Ukraine. Viewed from this vantage point, Eurasianism as a hybrid trope rather reveals an entangling of linguistics, material culture, and social organization similar to Said's description of orientalism, as a corporate institution drawing on the market forces of interdisciplinarity to describe, teach, authorize views, and, in turn, dominate the Orient.[6]

While it is necessary to highlight the role of hybridity in shaping a discourse of Eurasianism as a distinctive historical imperial formation, we must also insist as scholars and teachers on the very ways in which such forms of diversity have themselves become part of the colonial and orientalist problematic.[7] That is to say, we must read Soviet hybridity comparatively, as a self-contradictory modernist phenomenon, but one fashioned in disciplinary crisis, which not only frames the historical moment of revolution but also animates our site of distant reading after the collapse of the Soviet empire.

Centered on the pursuit of a romantic ideal of wholeness built on multiplicity and social collectivity, the hybridity of the Eurasian idea furnished the political ideology of the multinational Soviet state and constituted a break from the individualism and positivism that writers associated with Western modernity. Indeed, these are the same attributes that make Eurasian hybridity attractive to the contemporary right. The hybrid reinvents a language of race defined by geography and political territory, yet authorized with the organic fusion of cultures, languages, and ethnos, fashioning a more attractive language for neo-Fascists. Furthermore, Eurasia's inherent rejection of global western modernity has become a rallying cry for neo-traditionalists aimed at the ideological dismantling of neoliberal globalization as they draw on its very mechanisms of dissemination through crowd-sourced funding, open source publishing, and social media storms.

This is not to repeat the Russian Futurist rallying cry to throw "Pushkin, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy off the steamship of modernity." In tandem with my current research and teaching on the rise of an interconnected global new right centered on geopoetic formations of new forms of white supremacy, my new work has also taken me in search of more recuperative visions of transnational intersections across the "second world." Here, my interest lies not in the cultural imperialism of nonaligned nationalist or aligned Soviet

[6] Edward Said. Orientalism. New York, 1978. P. 3.

[7] See Aamir Mufti. Orientalism and the Institution of World Literatures // Critical Inquiry. 2010. Vol. 36. No. 3. Pp. 458–494.

transnational literary institutions, but rather in the failed connections that persisted across the nonaligned Global South and the aligned Soviet South.

Last fall, when I invited artists from two independent experimental theaters in Central Asia, the Ilkhom theater of Tashkent and Bata theater of Kazakhstan to the University of Chicago I was not sure what to expect. The heart of this project, for me, involved rethinking the ways in which discourses of gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity can be rendered legible across divergent political and economic regimes, from the post-Soviet communist imperial periphery to the South Side of Chicago amid its own late capitalist postindustrial economic and infrastructural collapse.

Last year I traveled to Tashkent and spent some time underground, where the independent experimental Ilkhom theater has been staging its work since 1976. The theater has survived despite the fall of the Soviet Union, transition to authoritarian nationalism, and with it, the brutal murder of its director and founder Mark Weil in 2006, allegedly for his profaning of Islamic themes in his adaptation of Pushkin's *Imitations of the Koran* (*Podrazhaniia Koranu*). The theater continues to stage controversial productions involving queer themes in Muslim cultural contexts, drug use, profanity, and nudity. Remarkably Ilkhom has been operating since 1976, receiving Soviet support for a youth theater school as it performed experimental projects in the underground black-box space. The theater also continues to offer adaptations of "world literature," despite increasing scrutiny under the nationalist imperatives of the post-Soviet regime. As such a long-running theater it has uniquely struggled to resist the forces of both Soviet imperial and post-Soviet national hegemony.

If you walk Tashkent, the feeling of post-Soviet totalitarian governmentality resonates in new applications of old modes of surveillance, from document checking to the defunding of cultural activities that betray post-Soviet national homogeneity.[8] On Ilkhom's stage Soviet-style multilingualism now frames acts of rebellion against nationalization, however, their political force does not reside in the abstract hybridity of multilingual speech acts, but rather in the staging of the conflict between a common language of a Soviet Eurasian past and the post-Soviet nationalist preset through a physical, gestural excess. This hybridity, mise-en-scène after the collapse of Soviet ideology, and its adaptation of "world literature" classics from Steinbeck to

[8] Foucault framed governmentality as forms of power regulating the body under late capitalism. See Michel Foucault. "Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976 / trans. David Macey. London, 2004.

Pushkin, imagines more fluid linguistic and gendered forms of embodiment, which had been illegible under the Soviet state. The space for play that the stage offers, and, more importantly, the community it sustains in its modest underground black-box, its walls covered with devotional graffiti from international visitors, survives by imagining alternatives to both the Soviet imperial past and late capitalist nationalist present.

Working at an elite private university located on the South Side of Chicago, bounded by police officers stationed on every corner, some days walking on the edges of the campus feels more like working in a post-Soviet totalitarian police state than an institution of higher learning. The university's climate, with an overwhelmingly white, upper-middle-class student body, remains a space in which race is both ever-present and ever-erased. Here, the dominant of cultural whiteness reflects from syllabi to the shiny, expensive new dormitories rising up, as surrounding low-income, largely segregated African-American neighborhoods fall into postindustrial collapse. The city's manufacturing jobs lost to the proximate right to work state, and infrastructural deserts continuing to make access to food, medical care, and education inaccessible.

The immediate necessity of thinking locally about this problem often makes questions of race in the Soviet empire feel remote. However, the historical moment of the formation and collapse of the Soviet empire offer a context for thinking polity between imperial and state politics. The hegemonic structure of the multinational empire, which Soviet discourses of hybridity formulated, in turn, renders visible the ways in which corporate discourses of diversity and multiculturalism have been instrumentalized in the ossification of structures of inequality in the United States. The moment between the collapse of the multinational empire and formation of post-Soviet nationalisms, in turn, offers a critique of the liberal subject as central to formations of agency, the possibilities of meaningful community, and forms of belonging outside of the totalizing structures of state and empire, the driving ideals of late capitalist modern subjectivity.

Over the course of ten days, actors from Ilkhom and Bata worked with a local electronic musician composing a collection of improvisational vignettes on the topic of translation. My role here was as a facilitator and translator, mediating linguistic and cultural differences, while simultaneously scrambling to keep apace with supertitles that were constantly shifting time notations and script with every rehearsal. What took shape was less a coherent work than a powerful reflection on the failures of translation. Here was a group of actors, each from different companies in different post-Soviet

Central Asian countries, improvising through a shared legacy of empire that was nonetheless striated by linguistic and cultural dissonance, and a musician from the South Side of Chicago, for whom all of this remained foreign and yet for whom the structures of inequality were all too familiar. The audience brought a similarly diverse set of concerns, from former Soviet immigrants to academics and members of the local community. Some retained a radical estrangement from the performance, reading physicality through humor; some understood Russian, while others were simply captivated by the layers of sonic textures. There was a moment in which one of the actors delivered an excerpt from Ilkhom's production of *Imitations of the Koran*: as another actor read the Qurʾan in English, the musician performed Pushkin through a gesture of English-Russian *skaz*, punning on his keyboard strokes – Push-King – while another actor pulled up her shirt to reveal a picture of the nineteenth century poet. She points at his hair gesturing at the musician, "he has curly hair like you," at once searching for a common idiom for a resonant racial difference as the temporal disjuncture between the figure of the nineteenth-century Russian poet and the musician performing Push-King on the South Side of Chicago at this elite private university striated this moment with layers of historical and cultural difference. As the piece became increasingly dissonant, the movements of the actors and musicians culminated in a storm of verse, as they banged on the stair rails and ran offstage screaming: "Police." In some ways the shared sense of the violence of the state's regulation of the body was one of the most resonate *sensations* that emerged. However, unspoken, it became visible precisely through the capaciousness of gesture and these sensorial modes of dissonance. These moments of complete breakdown of cultural and linguistic translation powerfully laid bare a sense of being together in space – the ways in which the materiality of the body bounded limitations and invited proximity.

This project increasingly urges me to turn away from concepts that *work*, from trying to write tidy narratives for the way my research on the former Soviet empire intersects with either my autobiography or my research. If anything, my work continues to remind me that well-kept narratives are written by victors, whether they draw their totalizing power from discourses of homogeneity or hybridity. The diminishing of the figure of the public intellectual as forms of public space disappear makes the call all the more immediate to embrace these moments of failure and collapse, which lie outside of the usefulness of corporate optimization or state mandates, which stretch beyond a singular historical moment, text, or language. For me, failure and

collapse offer a critical vocabulary for imagining transnational, diachronic intersections as sites for carving out alternative spaces of belonging, even if they only become visible in the echo of a mistranslation, blinking in an uncertain gesture, or caught in the half-light of an underground stage.

SUMMARY

Responding to Choi Chatterjee's "Manifesto," Leah Feldman contemplates influences that have formed her own ideas about transnationality and hybridity: as a graduate student, she believed in the resilient figure of the public intellectual; the Soviet eastern White Sun of the Desert, which she watched multiple times – once through the lens of Edward Said's Orientalism, another time as a trained comparative literature scholar, and yet another time as a curious observer of post-Soviet life in Moscow. Feldman's study of revolution through Russian and Azeri literary encounters in the Caucasus prompted her to reflect on the limitations of postcolonial approaches to account for Soviet and post-Soviet ideological visions. She concludes that Soviet internationalism in the "Third World" as well as Soviet internal orientalism framed the geopolitics of orientalism, only without Said's robust critique, which is so lacking in post-Soviet Russia. As a comparative literary scholar, Feldman traces Soviet and post-Soviet transnational and hybrid discourses (such as Eurasianism) across linguistic, ethnographic, and literary genres, Turkic and Russian languages, as well as diachronically, from the Revolution to the present. The final part of the essay describes the author's impressions based on travels between post-Soviet Central Asia, Chicago's South Side, and the University of Chicago's white ghetto-like campus. She reflects on the history of the Ilhom theater in Soviet and post-Soviet Tashkent and its joint performance with African American musicians in the United States.

Резюме

Отзываясь на "Манифест" Чой Чаттерджи, Лия Фельдман размышляет об опыте, который сформировал ее собственное понимание транснациональности и гибридности: идеализация фигуры публичного интеллектуала в аспирантские годы; знакомство с фильмом "Белое солнце пустыни", который она пересматривала то через при-

зму "Ориентализма" Эдварда Саида, то глазами специалиста по сравнительному литературоведению, то как наблюдатель постсоветской жизни в Москве. Ее собственное исследование революции в контексте российских и азербайджанских литературных контактов на Кавказе подтолкнуло ее к размышлениям об ограничениях постколониальной теории, не позволяющей адекватно отразить советские и постсоветские идеологические модели. Фельдман отмечает, что советский интернационализм в "Третьем мире", так же, как и внутренний ориентализм, формировали собственную геополитику ориентализма, но без острой саидовской критики – которой так не хватает в постсоветской России. Как литературовед-компаративист, Фельдман прослеживает советские и постсоветские транснациональные и гибридные дискурсы (например, евразийство) в лингвистических, этнографических и литературных жанрах, на тюркских и русском языках, а также диахронически, от революции до современности. Заключительная часть эссе представляет впечатления автора от ее путешествий между постсоветской Средней Азией, Южным Чикаго и кампусом Чикагского университета, напоминающим белое гетто. Она пишет об истории театра Ильхом в советском и постсоветском Ташкенте и его совместном выступлении с афроамериканскими музыкантами в США.