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That Anti-racist Feeling: The *Underground* Sensorium of Waning Soviet Internationalism

Racial Remembrances of Futures Past

Recent Russian aggression in former Soviet territories—whether through mercenary militia deployed to repress protests in Belarus and Kazakhstan between 2020 and 2021 or the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 following the annexation of Crimea in 2014—has prompted commentators and scholars alike to reckon with the past. Imperial returns, both tsarist and Soviet, provide the predominant framework for explaining the Kremlin's strategic decisions, analyzing the Russian state's self-articulations in public displays and media messages, and even for anticipating events unfolding on the ground (Dickinson; Pomerantsev; Tharoor; Wang). Examples range from Peter the Great, to whom the Russian president recently compared himself, to the Cold War "sphere of influence" whose loss he has frequently lamented since calling the collapse of the Soviet Union "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe," in 2005. In tandem with Vladimir Putin's own historiographical exegeses in the months leading up to the so-called "special military operation" in Ukraine, observers of the ongoing invasion have increasingly come to resemble Walter Benjamin's iconic portrait of the angel of history, whose attention is trained on the wreckage of the past even as it is propelled into the future. The Cold War geopolitical framework that positioned the study of the region as an ideological battleground for history (Feldman, *On the Threshold*) thus lives on thirty years after the dissolution of the Soviet imperium, caught in a bind of binary opposition or at best a series of binaries that can only be deconstructed to produce a third—a nostalgic hauntology of the Cold War.[1]

[1] In *Spectres of Marx*, Derrida draws on the ghostly motif—also popular in post-Soviet literature—to characterize the returns of Marx and the Marxist tradition after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s amid the hyperdrive of late capitalist neoliberal economics and its attendant thought forms. Derrida's hauntology resembles the semiotics of figuration within the 1990s post-Soviet macabre—indeed lurking in the form of Mbobo's ghostly apparition.

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Such an impasse does not merely stand in the way of thinking beyond the brutal hangover of geopolitical nostalgia on both sides of the former Iron Curtain. It occludes the active and ongoing modes through which this nostalgia has been co-opted and weaponized by a new transnational alliance of white supremacist movements for the purposes of future-thinking and future-making across the globe (Feldman, "Trad Rights"). The new right has couched much of its politics in geopolitical terms dating back to the Cold War, a temporal axis that has put Russian reactionary thinkers such as Alexander Dugin at its ideological and strategic epicenter. The scholarly, intellectual branding of such worldviews has taken the form of thinking through neofascist returns to a canon of interwar thought and aesthetics. Dugin's "neo-Eurasianism," for example, combines the exceptionalism of Eurasianist politics with a call to messianic neotraditionalism, incorporating a strange body of dissident late-Soviet writing about race, ethnicity, and occult science that has gained wide popularity among new right movements in France, Hungary, and the US (Feldman, "Trad Rights"; Laruelle, "Digital," *Is Russia Fascist?*, "Iuzhinskii Circle," "Kremlin's Ideological Ecosystems," *Russian Eurasianism*). It is not that Dugin's narrative is novel: it builds on strains of Soviet and Russian imperial thought going back to the early twentieth century. Its distinctive force, however, derives from resituating a multiracial empire at the epicenter of the post-socialist economic order. In this sense, Dugin's neo-Eurasianism is in perfect synchrony with an allegedly anti-globalist globalization of late capitalist thought systems (Slobodian; Mirowski). Placing contemporary Russian politics within this new right turn—one that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet empire and its internal and internationalist politics of anti-racism—offers a crucial vantage point for understanding the white Christian and ethnonationalist rhetoric that inflects Russian military aggression in the twenty-first century.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 exposed simultaneously distinct and aligning registers in which racial, ethnic, and economic relations were calibrated at national, regional, and global scales. Even as the collapse catalyzed a breakdown of an internal ordering system of nationalities that structured the Soviet empire as a "friendship of peoples" while simultaneously concealing forms of racism within the Soviet Union, it revealed similar fissures in Soviet developmentalist discourses deployed across the decolonizing world. Of particular interest to this study is one such moment of developmentalism: the second Eastern International, which followed the invasion of Budapest in 1956 and the Prague Spring of 1968. As the name implies, the political and aesthetic contours of this movement hearkened back to the discourses of the first Eastern International, which articulated the foundational tenets of Eurasianist modernity in the wake of Soviet annexation of the Caucasus and Central Asia in the 1920s (Kirasirova, *The Eastern*; Feldman, *On the Threshold*). The second Eastern International was arguably pivotal in its rise after the Stalinist purges and Soviet assimilation policies had cemented a Russophone Soviet cultural sphere. It also coincided with decolonization movements across the global south and the use of old and new media for spreading propaganda. Radio, photography, television, and robust print runs changed the scale of the second Eastern International, capturing the sounds and visions of socialist internationalisms and translating them into digestible Russophone and Soviet cultural terms, such as socialist multiculturalism and socialist world literature, and exporting these discourses through anti-racist aesthetic forms such as socialist realism. Cameras,

microphones, and printing presses served as the driving forces for creating an affective forcefield of anti-racist socialist internationalisms, within which Nikita Khrushchev's catchphrase of "friendship of the peoples" expanded anti-racist feelings from an internal condition of the multiethnic nation-state to something akin to Hegel's world spirit. Writers and thinkers from the Caucasus and Central Asia—particularly those from non-Slavic and non-Christian backgrounds—were actively recruited to translate the states and scales of anti-racist allyship to domestic and international audiences. Even if marginalized in the cultural establishments of Moscow and Leningrad, they suddenly became hypervisible as living embodiments of an internal "friendship of the peoples" that would serve as the template for a future worldwide collective. The proximity of the "Soviet East" to the global south, a central logic for the marking and unmarking of race and ethnicity on the bodies of its internal and external others, provided these mediators with the means for translating Soviet Eurasian exceptionalism into transnational anti-racism. These global voices included the Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov; Kazakh writers Murat Auezov, Anuar Alimzhanov, and Olzhas Suleimenov; Daghestani writer Rasul Gamzatov; Abkhazian writer Fazil Iskander; and Tajik writer Mirzo Tursun-Zade, among many others. In a series of international festivals that brought together writers, filmmakers, and youth from what Vijay Prashad has called "the darker nations of the world" to the "eastern" republics of the Soviet Union—Tashkent, Almaty, Tbilisi—the aforementioned Soviet writers contributed to a robust series of publications, exhibitions, and translation initiatives that have become touchstones for defining Soviet aligned anti-imperialism, Russophonia, and more generally socialist world literature and cinema in a rich body of recent scholarship (see Khalid, "Introduction"; Kirasirova, "Sons", *The Eastern*; Caffee; Kudaibergenova 123–48; Kalinovsky; Djagalov; Feldman, "Global Souths"; Popescu, *At Penpoint*).

This scholarship on the second internationalist moment and its entanglement with aligned and nonaligned decolonization movements is crucial for understanding the role of racialization in the aesthetic ambitions of Soviet globalism. This article, however, reaches beyond aesthetic forms and performative practices to explore the contradictions of Soviet anti-racism at the interfaces of flesh and place, metaphor and materiality, ecology and affect. It focuses on the mapping of Brown and Black bodies onto the triumphalist architecture of socialist internationalism. While the proximity of the "Soviet East" to the global south served as a crucial geopolitical logic for marking and unmarking race and ethnicity both within and beyond the Soviet body politic, this study attends to built structures both adorned and utilized by such bodies: visibly marked internal and international others whose alterity had been conscripted for the material manifestation of socialist internationalism. It approaches concert halls, metro stations, sports arenas, and conference venues as precisely such immersive assemblages of bodies and senses that not just represented and celebrated socialist anti-racism through the chromatic spectrum of human forms, but also were expressly designed for feeling the transformative force of Soviet internationalism. Central to this study is the little-examined question of how racially marked citizens of the waning empire experienced such sensoria of socialist internationalism. It is their ambivalent attachments to internationalist monumentalism that the following sections investigate through a reading of Hamid Ismailov's *The Underground*—a novel that recounts the experiences of a mixed-race child navigating the Moscow metro during the 1980s and 1990s.

That Anti-racist Feeling

Soviet internationalism was driven by the sense that emotions do things in the world. My emphasis on feeling highlights the intertwining imperial logics of both socialist "friendship" and forms of attachment that were inscribed on the bodies of internal and foreign others who contributed to its construction. Feeling thus highlights a dual register of emotions that are at once symbolic and physical, visions of egalitarian sociality conveyed through the senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, and touching. This emotional activity was indispensable for the construction of socialist internationalism at festivals, conferences, and sport events, imprinted on the bodies of racialized others through alternating registers of visibility and invisibility. Anti-racist feelings followed the form of friendship, love, brotherhood, and a broader optimism around socialist internationalist belonging, an affective structure that simultaneously mimicked and substituted capitalist fantasies of a good life.[2] One might even say that emotions took on bodies in the language of socialist anti-racism. In 1975, Chingiz Aitmatov wrote that a progressivist socialist world literature could activate "seemingly imperceptible stirrings of the heart" (Aitmatov 169). An exploration of socialist internationalist feelings—these *stirrings of the heart*, in Aitmatov's terms—thus provide a logic for thinking about affective attachments that mediated conversations about anti-racism as well as the tensions made visible through the increasing visibility of race during the collapse.

The collapse of internationalist socialist feeling in tandem with the economic crises of the 1990s and the war with Chechnya marked a resurgence in violence in the post-Soviet world broadly. In cities such as Moscow, its particular targets were newly visible others: Muslim migrant workers and residents from the Caucasus and Central Asia as well as the Black and Brown bodies of immigrants and travelers who were suddenly cast outside boundaries of post-Soviet citizenship and international solidarity (Sahadeo, "Black Snouts," *Voices*; St. Julian-Varnon). Indeed, the word "black" [*chernyi*] began to be used during the last years of the Soviet Union to identify those from the formerly Soviet "East" regardless of their legal status as residents or migrants (Sahadeo, "Black Snouts," *Voices*). The collapse of the Soviet imperium manifested in everyday life through the waning affects of socialist internationalism—both in the form of anti-racist public projects and as the behavioral norms of concealing ethnic and racial tensions.

Ismailov's *Mbobo* (translated into English as *The Underground*) offers a powerful and poignant reflection on the violence that made visible the racist tensions that had long formed the affective fabric of socialist internationalism and its anti-racist feelings. *The Underground* narrates the collapse through the voice of the ghost of a child who spent much of his short twelve years from the early 1980s through the early 1990s wandering the Moscow metro. This mixed-race child is the embodied product of a brief liaison between a Soviet internal other and a representative of Soviet aligned internationalism from the global south. His deceased mother was a Siberian Khakass woman named Moscow, a *limitchitsa*, or regional migrant,

[2] My conception of structures of feeling draws on Lauren Berlant's development of Raymond William's phrase in their work on US liberalism (see Williams 1961, 1977; Berlant, *Anatomy, Cruel Optimism*, *Female Complaint*, *Queen of America*). In the sentimentality trilogy and following in *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant focuses on how intimate publics draw on shared affective components to negotiate attachments to citizenship and the belonging in the public sphere.

without a residency permit who comes to the capital city to work in a car factory located on the grounds of the newly constructed Olympic Village. His father is putatively an African athlete who briefly resides in the same complex during the games of 1980. The eponymous Mbobo defines his own identity in the following terms: "I am Moscow's underground son, the result of one too many nights on the town. She picked me up in the year of the Moscow Olympics—or maybe earlier, during the preparations—from an African sportsman from a 'friendly country'" (4).[3] The narrator's state registration states his given name as Kirill, but he is called by many other names: while his mother addresses him as Mbobo, his stepfather Gleb simply calls him Pushkin. Both parents' monikers are telling: while Mbobo sounds almost like a caricature from the numerous animated films in which Soviet children encountered their imagined African counterparts, Pushkin evokes not just the nineteenth-century poet's Black ancestry, but also the Soviet appropriation of his features as a reflection of multiethnic, multinational, anti-imperial socialist feeling. Mbobo/Kirill/Pushkin speaks from beyond his grave, reconstructing the dreamworld of the Moscow underground in stark contrast with the crumbling surface of imperial collapse. From his conception in the Olympic village to his birth and death in the Moscow metro, the novel offers an inverted trajectory of anti-racist optimism as the Soviet world collapses in tandem with eight of Mbobo's twelve short years. Set between 1984 and 1992, the waves of racial violence against the Soviet empire's internal and external others are reproduced in fantastical forms amid Mbobo's underground sensorium. Perhaps the murderous violence unleashed by the collapse was always already inscribed in the history of socialist internationalism.

The Terminal Optimism of the Moscow Olympics

It was ironic that the 1980 Moscow Olympics, the site and occasion of Mbobo's conception, was simultaneously the last major celebration of socialist internationalism and a catalyst for the Soviet Union's economic collapse. Moscow presented its selection for the games just before the 1975 Helsinki Accords in a bid for continuing legitimacy on the world stage. Its case for international acceptance emphasized the rejection of discrimination on political, racial, and religious grounds and the development of international friendship and peace through sport (see Dubrovskiy 137). Moscow embarked on a monumental construction project that included the Olympic sports complex featuring Europe's largest indoor stadium; the fabled ring buildings for housing international representatives; the largest velodrome in the world at the time; a press center; the Olympic village for housing athletes; the Cosmos hotel; and an overall massive upgrade of public infrastructure across Moscow and the Soviet Union at large (Young, "Playing to Win").[4] Militarized Olympic

[3] All Russian quotations are from the author's unpublished manuscript (*Mbobo manuscript*), but many can also be accessed in the abridged work (*Mbobo. Druzhba Narodov*). Translations are primarily quoted from Carol Ermakova's translation in Ismailov, *The Underground*, except translations from the original manuscript, which are my own.

[4] Between 1975 and 1980 the Soviet state renovated or reconstructed sixty-eight sports facilities, eighteen media complexes, two hundred forty hotels and other accommodations, and seven hundred public catering facilities across five cities, and renovated three airports, hundreds of miles of motorway infrastructure, and other facilities to provide public services (Young, "Playing to Win" 62). For a robust

parades and interviews with international athletes and spectators captured the paradox inherent in this public display of internationalist egalitarianism even as the embodied labor of athletes and migrant workers from far-flung republics supplied its ideological resources and fueled its competitive spectacles. The 1981 film *O Sport, You Are Peace*!, which could also be translated as *O Sport, You Are the World!,* (*O sport, ty mir!*) is a revelatory document of this racialized biopolitics of the Moscow Olympics. Its frames alternate between performatively multiethnic processions of Olympic delegations from the various Soviet republics and "friendly" African, Latin American, and East Asian athletic collectives, all against a background of Roman imperial kitsch. Blonde goddesses dressed in togas light the flame ahead of chariots drawn by white horses, intensifying the contrast between an invented heritage of classical antiquity and the contemporaneous benevolence of the friendship of the peoples.[5] Overarching symbols of a Roman-Aryan empire loom over socialist anti-racist optimism. The 1980 Olympics also harnessed the cosmos, the field in which imperial contestation between the great powers got sublimated in intensely affective forms and platforms, in the brutalist architecture of the ring buildings and the symbolically freighted Cosmos hotel. The voiceover at the opening of *O Sport, You Are Peace* announces, "The Olympic symbol is five woven rings. The Olympic games are the symbol of a dream where people from all five continents of our planet firmly take one another by the hand and live in peace under the clear blue sky" (Ozerov, *O Sport*). It is overlaid by footage of skydivers in multicolored jumpsuits who link hands to form the Olympic rings as they freefall over Moscow.

The hypervisibility of athletes from the Soviet east and the global south—incarnated symbols of socialist internationalism at home and abroad—both rendered invisible the bodies of migrant workers brought in from far-flung corners of the union and obscured the violence they suffered. Conscripted into the megaproject of Olympic infrastructure, the masses of *limitchiki* like Mbobo's mother Moscow were subjected to excessive disciplinary measures whose contours could only be glimpsed in the larger security structures implemented specifically for the Olympics. Fearing political violence in the wake of the Munich massacre of 1972 and the US-led boycott following the invasion of Afghanistan, the Soviet KGB and MVD placed the city into a state of martial law, deploying thousands of policemen, members of voluntary militia, soldiers, and security operatives on the streets and in the Olympic village; at the same time, under the mandate of purging "unreliable elements," ethnically suspect non-Russian migrants were relocated en masse (see Dubrovskiy; Young, "'An Honourable Task,'" "Playing to Win").[6] The games also provided the pretext for creating yet another arm of law enforcement that could operate with impunity on undesirables of any category. Otriad militsii

description of this massive construction effort, labor toward the preparation, and securitization of the games, see Young, "'Honourable Task.'"

[5] Young describes the extensive propaganda program surrounding the Olympics and its specific direction toward the "friendly" nations of the global south—Latin America, Africa, and Asia—which received double the amount of propaganda sent elsewhere. Special focus was placed on the aligned nations—Cuba, Mongolia, and Vietnam (Young, "Playing to Win" 73).

[6] Umberto Tulli argues that the Moscow games presented the first time a proposal for an Olympic boycott was framed in human rights discourse.

osobogo naznacheniia (the Special Purpose Police Detachment), created for the Olympics, would later securitize post-Soviet borders, serve in a series of armed conflicts, and repress domestic protests—all functions that it continues to serve to the present day (Young, "'Honourable Task'" 401; "Playing to Win" 67). The international boycott, propelled by the war in Afghanistan, paradoxically resulted in internal militarization through the creation of the first anti-terrorism units in the Soviet Union. Then as now, these agencies were directed not only to weed out foreign, specifically Western threats, but also to deter "anticommunist" internal elements such as émigrés and Ukrainian, Baltic, and Tatar nationalist groups (Young, "Playing to Win" 398).

There are many parallels between the 1980 and 2014 Olympics that clarify the evolution of anti-racist feeling, not least of which are acts of military violence amid imperial ventures abroad. Like the Moscow Olympics held in the wake of the 1979 Afghan invasion, the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi marked the annexation of Crimea by staging the games on occupied territory. Symbolically, Sochi replaced the 1980 chariot procession with a troika, a nineteenth-century literary motif popularized by Nikolai Gogol's famous *Dead Souls* (1842). Despite Gogol's Ukrainian ethnicity, as Edyta Bojanowska argues, the three-horse sled serves as an enduring symbol of tsarist, Soviet, and now Russian messianism—a transhistorical vehicle of imperial continuity ("All the Kings"). As for interrupting its progress, unlike antiwar activists in 1980, human rights activists in 2014—with the significant exception of the punk rock group Pussy Riot—largely avoided Sochi, partly due to waning interest and partly due to heavy constraints on free speech that made activists fear further government suppression of civil society (Dubrovskiy 143). However, following the anti–gay propaganda law passed the same year, there was a surge of momentum toward a boycott on the international stage, albeit one that largely obscured the many other human rights concerns related to the games—including the use of security measures first validated in 1980 and the abusive conditions of migrant laborers. Human Rights Watch reported widespread violations of workers' rights, including poor housing conditions, delayed payment of wages, excessive working hours, and withholding of identity documents (Young "An Honourable Task"; Dubrovskiy).[7] Additionally, that the debate over LGBTQI rights in Russia became the center of international press coverage of the games had the corollary effect of reawakening the Cold War ideological battle over Western hypocrisy around rights discourses. By 2014, socialist anti-racism had already receded to the point that the exploitation of laboring bodies was completely overshadowed by right-wing conspiracy theories about minority rights.

This interregnum between the two Olympics, during which the Soviet structures of anti-racist feeling undergo as profound a transformation as the empire itself did, shapes the underground sensorium of Ismailov's novel. Written in 2009, *Mbobo* reflects on the emergent structures of authoritarian control in the new millennium and the reconfigured regimes of in/visibility that remake both internal and external others into racialized targets of violence. The *Underground* is as if haunted by the Cold War assemblage of "friendly nations" it museumizes—Mbobo's athlete

[7] https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/11/28/a-tale-of-two-olympic-cities-moscow-1980-and-sochi-2014-a30036.

father, placed in the service of utopian Soviet anti-racism, and his mother, a migrant worker who labored to erect the Olympics' material infrastructure. The Olympic village, as the site of Mbobo's conception, is thus replete with Soviet fears of contamination that underlay the outward displays of comity even as bodies were strictly regulated within its securitized enclave. Ismailov goes one step further by highlighting how labor migrants themselves were conscripted into the dirty work of enforcement against fellow minorities: "The Olympic Games came—or the preparations, when sailcloth suits with beige jackets and dark-blue trousers were sewn for all the workers at the car factory—and they were signed up as volunteer civil patrols throughout the city. I don't remember that time, but I'd memorized my mother's tale of my disreputable conception and the nine months following, when no one had any clue as to the strange creature she was carrying" (35–36). Mbobo's account of himself as the product of the taboo of miscegenation—a "strange creature"—anticipates the inevitable foreclosures of the internationalist project. This foreclosure, moreover, is rendered in distinctly non- and subhuman terms: "And so that is how I came about, a cross between a bulldog and a rhinoceros: Kirill, by the name Mbobo. My mother died when I was eight, and I died four years later. And that is all there is to my Moscow life. The rest is just decaying, late-blown blooms of memories" (4). The opening of the novel immediately denies any redemptive aspirations that might have remained, like decaying flowers, of the anti-racist sensorium of the Moscow Olympic's public face. The reproductive logic of internationalist friendship is interrupted by the early death of Moscow, Mbobo's mother as well as the city that facilitated his generation, leaving behind an ethnically purified and terrifying vista of degeneration—one created simultaneously by the state and its own subjects who police both intimate and political relations between internal and external others.

The *Underground* sensorium of the Moscow Metro

Ismailov is among the most important contemporary poets and novelists of the twenty-first century. In another moment, he might have been a canonical figure of socialist world literature, like the statesman-poet and novelist Aitmatov, called to the service of mediating internationalist feelings. However, heavily censored and forced into exile from Uzbekistan in the mid-nineties, Ismailov for a time lived between Moscow and the UK and now resides in Prague. His novels are more widely published in English translation than in their Uzbek and Russian originals. *The Underground* recounts a story at once representative of the violence that emerged through the collapse of internationalist feelings as it is a personal account of Ismailov's experiences in Moscow. Exiled from its Russian-language original in book form, the text, like the foreclosed life span of its narrator-protagonist, can be accessed only in an abridged version that was published, tellingly, in an online journal called *Friendship of the Peoples* (*Druzhba narodov*)—an online platform bearing the stock phrase of the second Eastern International. It was published in full for the first time in a 2013 English translation titled *The Underground*. The absence of a full Russian-language publication and the novel's narrow reception in Russia only serves to underscore the discomfiting power of its portrayal of racial and ethnic marginalization. The specters of miscegenation that it summons from the ashes of

anti-racist internationalism underscores the rise of post-Soviet ethno-nationalism that lurks in the margins of Mbobo's memoirs. Ismailov's own recollection of how the novel came to be conceived over the longue durée of the collapse echoes these concerns:

> The idea of it came to me in one of the sleepless nights in my old Moscow flat (which we still keep), when I was back to it either in 2006 or 2007. So everything was the same—the furniture, the snow outside, the Moscow night—as it was at the time we lived in that flat in the 80-ies and 90-ies; but a whole life had been lost in between. When I lived in Moscow in the 80-ies I had a dream to write a book of poems about underground Moscow (that was the Moscow we knew: at this station I met my wife, at this one someone passed me my first published book, at this one I used to work, etc.), but the idea never came out then. So that night I decided to return to my 'homage' to Moscow. Coming back to London from that duty trip I frantically started to write out that feeling, making my daughter the protagonist (for the fresh outlook—she was 12 when we left Moscow for good), but when I wrote 50 odd pages, I somehow felt that I was repeating the tone of one of my earlier things and I tore apart all those 50 pages. Then the idea of Pushkin being reborn came to my mind, and that was Mbobo.[8]

Sensorial memories of the metro—relationships and affective attachments to life as an in-migrant from the Soviet Union's eastern margins—inflect Ismailov's retrieval of feelings as powerfully as they do those of Mbobo. Writing of the novel as a personal "homage" to "that feeling," Ismailov highlights his daughter's experience in 1980s Moscow counterposed against the Soviet internationalist literary legacy of the nineteenth-century mixed-race poet Pushkin.

Inaugurated in 1935, the subway system was the Stalinist pinnacle of technological modernity and urban planning. However, it also manifested the Soviet internationalist project in its very material foundations as internal minorities from Siberia, the Caucasus, and the Central Asian republics were widely conscripted to provide the massive influx of labor required for the timely fulfilment of the project. Raw materials and resources were similarly drawn from across the empire. From an aesthetic standpoint, the metro was designed as if a spectacle or museum to Soviet progress and expansion, as not only an ideological counterpoint to the West, but also one characterized by its qualities of illumination—mosaics designed to give the impression of natural light flooding from above (O'Mahony 139; see Griffiths).

The spectacular quality of the metro was underscored by its presentation of art in the public sphere as an expression of mass culture, each of the stations designed as "palaces for the people" (O'Mahony 139). In this sense, the technological modernity that the metro promised for the organization of urban life also reflected the cultural evolution of the Soviet peasant from the "backward" margins of the empire on his way to becoming a full-fledged New Soviet Man. This play on evolution and illumination at once captured the optimistic feelings of a radiant Soviet future, encoded by Stalin's famous phrase *svetloe budushchee*, while also blurring the palpable fissures between the underground museumization of socialist internationalism and the aboveground reality of interethnic relations. The underground sensorium thus allowed visitors to travel through time and space, experiencing an archeological dive into the construction of socialist internationalism and the progressivist evolution of the New Soviet Man.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the metro became an iconic space of everyday Soviet life as it also captured the residue of this monumental vision of

[8] This quotation is taken from personal email correspondence with the author from March 2020.

socialist internationalism. It was at once the site of a massive imperial project that drew on the labor and resources from its vast land empire, while also serving at moments as a space of refuge—as an accessible commuter space but also built to function as a fallout shelter after World War II. Today, amid the invasion of Ukraine as people take refuge from Russian shelling in the Kyiv and Kharkiv metros, the underground continues to signal the twin legacies of colonial violence and refuge (Lim; Faloyin). These contradictions are symptomatized in Ismailov's conspicuously fragmented and nonlinear plot. Though structured around metro stations, neither Ismailov's experience of the Moscow metro nor the narrative of Kirill/Mbobo's short life follow the aspirational trajectory of anti-racist internationalism. Instead, the underground sensorium becomes an itinerary for the reader to feel their way through the construction and collapse of socialist internationalism.[9] The dark legacy of Stalinist violence against recalcitrant republics and minority populations are inscribed in the metro's material infrastructure—which, in turn, illuminates the story of internal others who, in navigating the tunnels, capture moments of life amid the violence of the collapse. Mbobo's narrative is errant, leading the reader through a series of seemingly unconnected memories recalled through the sensorium of the metro's underground architecture. The narrative is marked by the intensity of the underground sensorium, which, as Anindita Banerjee writes of the immersive alternative reality game *Moscow 2033* set in the Metro, forms a "narrative architecture" that renders "the spatial skills of experiencing, surviving and, above all, deciding which turn to take at every crossroad of competing pasts . . . indispensable for salvaging, resuscitating and reassembling a usable narrative, a 'plot,' which simultaneously shapes the past while creating an infinite field of possible futures for both the individual and community" (76–77). From the space of the Metro's underground tunnels, the monumental legacies of Stalinist progress and Khruschevian anti-racist feeling are transformed into acts of violence on the surface of the city's streets. While marked by this imperial residue, the metro also simultaneously serves as a form of shelter for Mbobo—a "womb" space—and provides the reader's passage through its narrative architecture from station to station.

In their now canonical accounts of Moscow in the nineties, Svetlana Boym and Susan Buck-Morss turn back to the meandering narrative of Walter Benjamin's 1927 Moscow diary. For Boym, Benjamin "collects facts that are not statistical or scientific, but unfinished and imperfect slices of life, material fragments, ephemeral collages of the present." She continues, "He believes this to be the most honest critical exercise in times of confusion. Now, sixty-five years after Benjamin's visit, the *flaneur* is born again" (227). For Buck-Morss, Benjamin's Moscow diary, written shortly before his preliminary notes for the *Passagen werk*, offers a kind of utopian vision of collective fantasy on the revolutionary streets that has not yet become atomized through consumerization. Mbobo, as Benjamin's belated fellow traveler of Moscow's underworld, provides an errant insider-outsider narrative, collecting fragments of life in a web of metro stations that lead nowhere, except toward

[9] Griffiths argues that representations of the metro take on visions of the apocalyptic space-times of the Soviet collapse in post-Soviet literature; see Tataiana Tolstaia's *Kys!* (2000) and Dmitrii Glukhovskii's *Metro 2033*. In this way the metro serves as a fictional allegory for the dissolution of Soviet state power and simultaneously its extension into the center of the earth (see Griffiths; see Banerjee).

his own death. As the structure of the novel maps Moscow from the metro—a site that monumentalizes a vision of Soviet technological modernity and socialist internationalist feelings—the vision of the city is also largely withheld from the reader, who instead experiences only a distorted, inverted image of the city from its underbelly. If Benjamin captures a revolutionary Moscow that has not yet been atomized, Mbobo's birth and death through the narrative architecture of the metro renders sensible the violence of the collapse of socialist feeling.

Mbobo is conceived at Avtozavodskaya Station, named after the Olympic village car factory where his mother is sent to work. He is born at the Oktiabrskaya Station—the chapter and station name signaling the Bolshevik revolutionary dream. Ismailov writes, "The metro must be Moscow's womb, the belly from which everything springs forth. Moscow—my mother—remembers that day like a nightmare" (44). The revolutionary dream is transformed into a nightmare by Mbobo's taboo parentage. As the child of both internal and international others, his birth defies the ordering principles of the Soviet empire—one in which national peoples were to be assimilated into a Soviet multinational utopia. Ismailov returns to this vision in the chapter named "Revolution Square" (Ploshchad' Revoliutsii). One of the grandest stations, it is notable for a series of oversized bronze sculptures depicting the evolutionary progress of Marxist-Leninist history from its prerevolutionary past to the contemporary era through the making of the New Soviet Man as the archetype of Soviet modernity (see O'Mahony 140). If the passage into Ploshchad' Revolyutsii outlined the archeological discovery of that evolutionary process and its product, Ismailov's return to it in *The Underground* marks a refusal of that progressivist narrative of evolutionary futurity. Mbobo recounts a moment in which he and his mother were homeless, living between Ploshchad' and two other metro stations:

> [. . .] I did not so much understand as guess (after all, a guess is better than knowledge!) that we hadn't lost our way among those three stations, nor among three trees, but among our lives: among body, legal codex, and spirit. [. . .] It was there, and then, in that September, as we wandered aimlessly back and forth between those three endless stations that I first guessed (isn't a guess better than knowing?) that one of us would soon die. (143, 146)

Mbobo and his mother's wandering, as the subversion of the evolutionary imperial order, suspends their sense of belonging as an internal migrant and mixed-race child caught between forms of embodied and legal identity as they are made illegible within the Soviet state. The specter of death—indeed Mbobo returns to Ploshchad' Revoliutsii when his mother dies—further refuses the evolutionary project of socialist internationalist futurity.

Mayakovskaya Station, named after the poet, is known for the beauty of its ceiling mosaics whose glittering reflections lend the illusion of daylight. Mbobo describes the ornamentation of the station as an effort "to bring all possible flights underground":

> But I go down into that station, like an ant with its little load, and add a drawing to that museum of the USSR: a lone female with a narrow waist and transparent wings on her back, setting off on her flight—avoiding birds and insects, mammals and reptiles, amphibians and predatory invertebrates, and other types of wingless ants—to the melancholy dark chamber, where life stirs, white at birth but blackening by the minute . . . (184, 224)

Ismailov's palimpsestic inscription at once rewrites the "museum of the USSR" through the narrative of the life of the ant—an alternate genealogy "where life stirs" through the reversal of the Soviet project's assimilation, which in Mbobo's

narrative is instead "blackening by the minute." The winged ant, a motif that recurs throughout the novel, is an element of folklore, which at once refuses the system of categorizing species and organizing knowledge, and in its "melancholy dark chamber" counterposes the false sun of Soviet optimism.

Pushkin's Blackness and the Literary International

Ismailov presents the aboveground reality of the "Acceleration" ("Uskorenie") that inaugurated Gorbachev's *perestroika* through the estranging eyes of a child, even as the Metro becomes replete with a host of profoundly familiar literary allusions. *The Underground* blurs the boundaries between Ismailov's personal narrative of exile and Mbobo's life—ever entangled in the historical residue of the material sites of socialist internationalist feelings in the Olympic village and the metro—as his character is intertwined with a socialist internationalist literary canon. The metro is animated by an expansive literary imagination—from Khakassian folktales to Pushkin's poetic epithets to romantic freedom, the narrator's "innards: (my) thoughts, (my) experiences, (my) life, (my) veins, (my) arteries," "the subconscious of Soviet building, its collective unconscious, its archetype," and "the museum of communism and the Soviets" (166, 182, 183). Mbobo becomes himself a work of metafiction as his thoughts become intertwined with an entire canon of literary plots. He asks "which book does my mind come from? On which letters do my memories draw?" ("Iz kakoi knigi moikh mozgov? Iz kakoi litery vospominaniia?"; *Mbobo manuscript* 174). As Soviet literature is woven into the space of the metro and Mbobo's own subconscious, the novel in turn probes the boundaries of Russophone literature amid the collapse. Mbobo's life is structured around a classic Russian literary canon. This canon includes the alienated narrator of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* who critiques utopian collectivism, while the verse of Pushkin is called up as a figuration of the narrator's Blackness. Tolstoy's account of Anna Karenina's suicide under the train provides the script for Mbobo's own death. However, Ismailov's citations and allusions importantly move beyond the Russian classics of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Pushkin, including a host of allusions to the works of Soviet Russophone writers such as Abkhazian writer Fazil Iskander and Chuvash writer Gennady Aygi. Mbobo's literary intertexts rewrite a Russian-Soviet canon commensurate with the metro's affective bio-cartography.

Mbobo's stepfather Gleb, a violent drunk who works at the journal *Friendship of the Peoples* (*Druzhba narodov*) and nicknames the child Pushkin, performs a crucial task of docent and translator, both for the museum space of the metro and an imagined ideal of socialist world literature. Accompanying Gleb to the journal's offices, which share the darkness of the underground, Mbobo asks, "Is this another metro?" to which Gleb responds, "Yes, Pushkin, sort of" (17). Mbobo's naming as Pushkin evokes the canonization of the poet as the epitome of Soviet anti-racism, yet this scene strips the name of any optimism. Indeed, it is at Pushkinskaya station that Mbobo dies by suicide. The last line of the last chapter begins, "I know what black Pushkin experienced before a black death. The feeling of a great betrayal [*Chuvstvo velikogo obmana*]. As though the old countess had dealt out the wrong cards . . ." (278; *Mbobo manuscript* 176). Mbobo experiences Pushkin's death through his own experience of Blackness and with it his betrayal by the

world—by his family, his loves, by the rapidly changing city, and by the collapsing Soviet empire. But this betrayal (*obman*) is more like fraud, a trick, a sleight of hand. The card trick in question comes from Pushkin's short story "The Queen of Spades," which recounts an old countess's card trick: a bit of magic, a love betrayal, and at its core the deception of an unreliable narrator and of literary representation itself. These lines of betrayal, in turn, underscore the duplicity of the colonial legacy that Soviet internationalism attempts to conceal in Mbobo's violent consummation through the cruel optimism of anti-racist feelings—a betrayal—reinforced by the almost-daily beatings he receives aboveground from Gleb as well as the skinhead kids on the schoolyard.

Mbobo observes this waning of socialist feeling amid the "Acceleration" as new money becomes the currency of ethno-nationalism, transforming policemen into mafia businessmen, poets into murderers, kids on the playground into skinhead nationalists. His ghostly body, orphan offspring of the "friendship of the peoples," registers the emergence of racist violence alongside the coloring-black of the bodies of the Soviet empire's internal minorities amid the collapse. This ambivalent presentation of Blackness permeates the sensorium of the narrative from Mbobo's initial self-description to the final scene of his death. The last two pages of the novel call up "black Pushkin" and his "black death," figures from folktales—a black ant closing a black well, a black rooster mounting a black tree—and the scene of Mbobo's death itself in which a black rooster "cries out in a black, inhuman voice: [*krichit po-chernomy, nechelovecheskim golosom*], 'Mind the closing doors . . . '" (279; *Mbobo manuscript* 177). The amulet-like blackness of the eyes of his crush, an Avar girl called Zulya, cannot save him. Blackness pervades the figuration of the narrator's otherness, the inhuman speed of acceleration, the speeding train, the protecting charm of friendship, the shelter of the metro, folk tales, and Soviet literature itself, overtaking the narrator and the novel in a final darkness.

The darkness that envelopes Mbobo's death and refuses a vision of the future also draws on a rich tactile sensorium that underscores the present as an alternative mode of envisioning political assembly at a moment of transition. As Mbobo narrates from the grave in the opening chapter, "Chasm," nothing in this cold grave but the metro could become "your closest friend" (*Mbobo manuscript* 2). He continues: "The ground will hum, when a passing train shivers not far away, and bones begin to involuntarily beat against one another, teeth chattering in time [*stuchat' v takt*], and ants who have made their home here begin to scatter though the darkness where there once was skin" (*Mbobo manuscript* 2). The metro not only shelters Mbobo from the violence he experiences on the Moscow streets; it generates a powerful hapticity in the buzzing ground under speeding trains that reverberate across his dead body. While the above ground world brings deception and betrayal, the rhythms of the metro—that hum and tremble [gud, drozh′)—which make his dead corpse *stuchat' v takt* (knock to the beat), have a capacity to animate life.

There is something in the sensorium of collapse, *The Underground* seems to suggest, that has the capacity to generate a new literary imaginary in a hum that transcends the limits of the Russophone text and the doubled exile of its English translation. The final line in the novel is an untranslatable phatic continuation: "And yet . . . " ("Akh, uzho . . . ") (Mbobo manuscript 177). The two words begin and

end a final paragraph, as if filled only with a phatic sigh, ellipses promising something as yet unimaginable. The line, in turn, answers the novel's opening verse, which reads, "The meaning of words that have gone before is lost, although something still remains to be said . . . " (3).[10] Like the opening verse invocation, the final line does not refuse meaning but rather registers untranslatability, all the more striking in a novel that paradoxically depends on its English-language readership in print. The recognition of the difficulty of translation mirrors Mbobo's own last gasp of life as he conjures Zulya and the blackness of her amulet eyes for protection. "And yet . . . " at once empty and full of meaning exemplifies the novel's struggle to verbalize the unsaid and illuminate the unseen.

The Underground thus remaps the sensorial pathways of the metro, offering new routes for wandering that have yet to be imagined. Writing from exile, Ismailov returns to images of a lost mid-century internationalism—through the sites of the Olympics, the metro, and the socialist world literature project—and in so doing, renders visible the Black and Brown internal and external others who labored in the construction of socialist internationalist feeling. But instead of nostalgia, Ismailov offers a portrait of post-Soviet internal migration, both his own path to Moscow and then Europe and that of his characters—Mbobo's *limitchitsa* mother, his Olympic sportsman father, and he their "unnatural" progeny—as they all suffer the violence lurking beneath the luminescent surface of "friendship of the peoples."

The spectral qualities of the novel—narrated through the voice of Mbobo's ghost—recalls the haunting of the failures of the revolutionary left—the topoi 1917, 1968, and 1989—as pivots along and through which the very notion of internationalist structures of feeling can be conceived. Mbobo's spectral figuration thus highlights this alternating visibility and invisibility of the material and spectral body against the diachronic backdrop of violent internationalist returns of mid-century optimism amid the collapse. Returning to Mbobo's story in 2022, the invasion of Ukraine points to a radically new right turn that embraced late capitalist "acceleration" through a white supremacist vision—one which resonates well with a Russian-led vision of Eurasian dominance. Ismailov's *The Underground* exposes the distinctive discourses of white supremacy that have emerged through the new visibility of race during the collapse of the Soviet Union. If the deconstruction of Cold War politics can only promise the twin haunting of leftist revolutionary failure and Soviet optimism, then the task at hand is one that demands rendering sensible the narrative architecture of the collapse as it clusters around a set of ambivalent anti-racist feelings. In the darkest reaches of Ismailov's sensorium, harsh beatings and comforting thrums offer a false binary of choices. Mbobo's passage from hollowed anti-racist feelings—the failed friendship of the peoples—to the full sensation of emptiness or indeed Blackness opens the door to a set of relations at once intimate, violent, and dear.

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[10] This is Ermakova's translation from the 2013 edition. The original manuscript contains a longer poem. This is its final line: "Спасенье слов чего-то там не терпит,/ вот и не терпится на случай доказать,/ что тем распятым временем потерян/ смысл прежние слов, хоть есть чего сказать. . ." (*Mbobo manuscript* 2).

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