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Decolonial sensibilities in Moldova: a counter-state proposal

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1. The basic premise of decolonial thought – as a movement which has emerged in the 1990s in Latin America, in conjunction with the rise of indigenous social movements such as CONAIE in Ecuador and the Zapatista Rebellion in Mexico – is that the modern world, as we know it today, is grounded on and is inseparable from a series of processes that started with the Western European conquest of the Americas. The making of the modern world is inseparable from the three centuries and a half of the Atlantic slave trade, from the rise of the Western or North- Atlantic colonial empires, the making of modern racism, the pillage and genocide of indigenous and non-Western civilizations, the creation of mass migrant mobilities through the devastation of non-Western localities, and the consumption of the Earth for the interests of a consumerist global world. The common logic underlying these distinct historical phenomena is coloniality. The long *durée* of historical colonialism and its underlying logic of coloniality have created the political, economical, and epistemological structures of inequality with enduring consequences in our present. “There is no modernity without coloniality,” Walter Mignolo has argued, noting that our world is still divided unjustly by colonial differences and by imperial differences, as evidenced in the international balance of power between the “Global North” and the “Global South.”¹

¹ Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories / Global Designs*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012.

The colonial difference encompasses what Walter Mignolo has called “the darker side of the Renaissance,” and the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano has theorized as the structuring difference between the colonizer and the colonized throughout the societies of the modern world². From the political sphere and the university to the business environments and the cultural sector, the modern world has privileged the “lighter” Western voices and points of view, while eliminating physically, reducing to non-relevance, or classifying in exoticized and de-contextualized ways the “darker” non-Western voices and epistemologies. The colonial difference is felt, experienced and understood in radically different ways by the people from either side of it, particularly by people who are racialized or whose ancestor’s history has been shattered into pieces, and only an epistemic turn could counter and heal the injustice and the impoverishment of experience created by the coloniality of power by way of such divides. For decolonial thought, the re-valorization of voices from the colonial peripheries or from the “interior exteriority of the colonial difference”³ brings new epistemic potential, rearticulating the hopes for a more democratic and just world, able to heal the colonial wound. Very often, the epistemic and political potential of such hopes are based on communal philosophies of the good life.

The imperial difference refers firstly to the modern empires that have been structured along the same modes of coloniality but which have lost power or have fallen under the domination of the other Western imperial and colonial powers (thus, the south of Europe). Secondly, Madina Tlostanova further distinguished the external imperial difference, between the Western colonial empires and non-Western, “second-rate” or “not-quite-Western” modern empires such as the Ottoman Sultanate and the Russian Empire.⁴ The momentous task of decolonial thought could then be understood as the work of recognizing and undoing the colonial difference and the imperial differences operating in given localities and historical moments.

The colonial difference and the imperial differences are articulated differently in “Eastern Europe” and in the “post-Soviet world,” as opposed to the Caribbean, West Africa or South-East Asia, though one can identify structural similarities. Also, within the “post-Soviet” world there are marked differences and power inferences, which are making this term more and more obsolete as time goes by.

² Aníbal Quijano, “Colonialidad del Poder, Eurocentrismo y América Latina”, in Edgardo Lander (ed.), *Colonialidad del Saber, Eurocentrismo y Ciencias Sociales*, Buenos Aires, CLASCO-UNESCO, 2003.

³ Walter Mignolo, “I Am Where I Think: Epistemology and the Colonial Difference”, *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, vol.8, no.2, 1999.

⁴ Madina Tlostanova, “Can the Post-Soviet Think? On Coloniality of Knowledge, External Imperial and Double Colonial Difference”, *Intersections. EEJSP* 1(2): 38-58.

As a newly independent state which has emerged peacefully in the Russian-dominated post-Soviet world, but shares a large border with Romania and a large percentage of Romanian-speaking population, and has gone through a civil war in 1990-1992 which involved elements of the Russian army, at the prospect of unification with Romania, Moldova has remained in the international space in the condition of borderlands⁵ that are constantly subjected to and traversed by the forces of greater powers. Historically, in the making of the modern world, the Romanian historical principalities and Moldova have always been at the contested intersection of three major imperial forces: the Habsburgs from the West, Russia from the East, and the Ottomans from the South. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as well as the Crimean Khanate have also left significant historical traumas, as did the Romanian Kingdom in the interbellum period. However, in the recent paradigmatic period of the post-Soviet transition to capitalism and liberal democracy - which makes the object of the present paper - Moldova's borderlands have been the contested site of a continuous game of push-and-pull from the greater powers from the West and from the East: in particular Romania and the European Union from the West, and the Russia from the East.

Moldova's size and positionality make it an environment prone to the internalization of bigger forces: from west Romania comes the big ethnic brother, which adds to the major pulling power of the European Union; however, Ukraine has also been a neighbor with a "big brother" attitude, with whom Moldova shares its longest border from the north all the way to the south, and the all-important commercial relations to Kiev and Odessa. From the east, Russia has exerted push-pressure through the military presence of the separatist region of Transnistria, through the social role played by the sizeable Russian-speaking population, and through various political interferences. Furthermore, Türkiye also plays an important role in Moldova through its support offered to the people from the Turkish-speaking autonomous region of Găgăuzia, and through its important economical role in the region. As a result, the coloniality of power is articulated in Moldova through at least three forms of external imperialities, corresponding to structures set in place in historical duration and contemporary actuation, each manifesting different forces and purposes, from the west, the south and the east. A decolonial approach in Moldova would have to carefully take into account the balance of these forces and the communal responses of the local population, which is something that has not been done yet in social sciences and critical studies. Consequently, I have been guided in my approach by looking at decolonizing sensibilities in cross-sectorial and trans-generational ways. The focus on one cultural sector or one generation would miss the entanglement of colonialities. I am looking at innovative manifestations of resistance against the colonial difference and imperial difference, carrying the potential of ethical and epistemic renewal, beyond the limits of modern disciplines of knowledge and crossing different domains of work, in the wider network of

⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

social, institutional and familial relations. I also relate the new voices to the preceding generation of cultural initiatives which have articulated decolonial sensibilities, which in our case is the women's collective Teatru Spălătorie.

2. Teatru Spălătorie is a women's collective that has been formed in 2010 and has become over the past decade a centerfold of the independent cultural scene from Chişinău. For the purposes of this research, even if they are not the "new voices" any longer, the work and input of Teatru Spălătorie has been crucial in order to establish a continuity in the local scene, and to trace organically the local emergence of decolonial sensibilities in the independent Moldovan cultural scene. From 2010 to 2017, the self-managed space of Teatru Spălătorie has been one of the main venues from Chişinău for hosting public debates, independent initiatives, or organizing protests, and it was a safe space for meetings for the LGBTQI+ community, acting thus as a congregational platform for critical voices addressing the contemporary transformations of the Moldovan society. Furthermore, the specific methodology of Nicoleta Esinencu and Teatru Spălătorie has always involved documentary work in preparation for original plays, encompassing research and interviews, while also bringing to the stage the marginal voices with relevant stories to tell, refusing thus to reproduce the colonial anthropological position of the expert that extracts knowledge from the local informers. Thus, Ion Borş, one of the young collaborators, performed both as an actor and as a witness, from the position of his second job as a bus driver on the Chişinău-Roma route, evidencing the devastation and confusion left behind by the post-Soviet migration of the work force to the west, in *Independent Moldova - Correction* (2013). Cătălina Bucos, one of the foci of the present research, was also invited to perform on the stage of Spălătorie in *The Abolition of the Family* (2019), a painstaking and intimate documentation of family histories and histories of women traversing the paradigm- shifting years of the 1980s-1990s. As a catalyst of critical voices from Moldova, the work of Nicoleta Esinencu and Teatru Spălătorie evidences the organic orientations of local decolonial sensibilities: the migrant consciousness sensible to international hierarchies and pressures; the women's collective sensibility to the destruction of the communal and of the social fabric; and the rejection of the ethno-nationalist pressures, racism, and heteronormative brutality, both in Soviet and post-Soviet history. In this sense, *American Dream* (2014) and *Requiem for Europe* (2018) are plays that have made local history by bearing testimony to the relevance of migrant consciousness, while *The Gospel After Maria* (2018) and *The Abolition of the Family* (2019) have brought to fore the standpoint of women.

3. Following the analysis above and the orientation points provided by Teatru Spălătorie, for the purposes of this project, my research highlights the work of four women. Each have been confronting real-life difficulties, silencing or marginalization, yet have come into their own public voice with a pointed critical acumen. A visual artist, a journalist, an educator and an ecological cultural worker are composing this complex assembly, and their heterogeneous activities are evidencing continuity with the work of Teatru Spălătorie.

Cătălina Bucos is a visual artist and filmmaker who currently studies media arts and film at the Academy of Media Arts Cologne, and is one of the prominent activists of the local social movement *Occupy Guguța*, which has coalesced different groups involved in urban activism in

Chişinău. Cătălina Bucos collaborated with Teatru Spălătorie by courageously bringing her own family history on the stage in the play *The Abolition of the Family* (2019). She responded to the precarious conditions of the artists in Moldova by creating her own workplace. She is the founder of ARTA Gallery and a member of the 10/90 Studio; she responded to the precarious conditions of the artists also by generally developing the resourcefulness and schemes of survival of an artist who is able to adapt to social and economic realities, and is able to work in a variety of media, from photography, film and performance, to traditional printmaking. Becoming a jack-of-all-trades is a classical survival scheme of the Eastern European artists. Conceptually, Cătălina Bucos describes her work as “socially engaged contemporary art,” developing a particular attention to social phenomena affecting Moldova such as the mass migration to the West, the relations of Moldova with Transnistria as well as with Ukraine, and the need to bestow more value on the daily life of regular people.

In her work *3000*, she reacted to the scare tactics used by local populist politicians who claimed that an opening towards Europe would mean that 30000 Syrian migrants would come to Moldova. In response, Bucos miniaturized 3000 faces in a large linocut print that reversed the message of the politicians by spelling with grand letters “Bine aţi venit” (“Welcome”). The painstaking work of engaging in this visual performance points to Bucos’s orientation: the point of view of an ordinary citizen, shown to be more generous than the state, and which is articulated already from a migrant consciousness even within the country – proof of the condition of borderlands of Moldova. In the series *Alive monuments*, Cătălina Bucos likewise invited artists from Transnistria to become bigger public personas, to make a public manifestation by creating with their bodies “monuments” in the public space of the capitol Tiraspol. In *The Door*, an ordinary residential building from the city Ivano-Frankovsk, Ukraine, is given an augmented spiritual dimension through a superimposed video projection of the entrance to a local Greek-Catholic church during the day, while the residents go on with their lives. In all these works, Cătălina Bucos evidences a discomfort with the powers that be which is manifest in the relation between the state and the ordinary people, and uses art as a way of turning the gaze towards the latter, while also pointing to places of passage (crossings) as sites of transformation, and to the city as a site for reclaiming communal experience. While still at the beginning of her journey, the artist shows a sensibility for the potential of resistance and epistemic renewal from the exterior of the state, an organic regional solidarity, and a significant degree of trust in the local resources of ordinary people. While in the language and rhythm of “contemporary art” this series of performances may seem scattered gestures, taken in their potential togetherness, these directions could form a decolonial orientation that counts on a communality emerging without the state.

A more pragmatic orientation, and one explicitly from the exterior of the state, is taken by **Lilia Nenescu**, who is a feminist activist and journalist with a marked presence in the Moldovan civil society and public sphere. Lilia Nenescu also collaborated with local artist and curator Tatyana Fedorova in a visual series focused on women’s solidarity during the COVID lockdown. Having worked in the civil society of Moldova for the past decade, Lilia Nenescu has

recently pioneered a study on the conditions of work for women in the NGO sector, a domain that prides itself on representing progressiveness and modernization, particularly in the post-Soviet transition to liberal democracy. In the Moldovan NGO sector, 62% of the employees are women⁶. Lilia Nenescu emphasizes that the NGO sector, which constitutes the 8th sector of the global economy, enjoys a particular visibility in Moldova, having been blamed of Western colonization both by ethno-nationalists (pro-Romanian) and by pro-Russian locals. In her work, Lilia Nenescu shifts the ideological perspective of both sides to the realist analysis of the condition of “atypical work” without social protection which actually prevails in the sector, and points to the “schemes of survival” and the resourcefulness of women against all directions of colonial erasure, from the west and from the east. Seen from the standpoint of women, the NGO sector is more open to women workers, but reproduces systemic inequalities. Most of the local women are working without contracts, from project to project, in precarious conditions, and have to engage in hidden collateral work to maintain their already meager position. Furthermore, Nenescu points to the coloniality of power which is manifest in the misbalance between the donor organizations and the field-operating local NGOs, a structure which is making the decision-taking centers invisible for the regular employee. As it turns out, Moldovan women are free to work and to speak in a given frame of reference of the civil society, but not really to make one of their own, and there is a ceiling that cannot be broken by the institutions of the liberal civil society. A different frame of conversation and institutional philosophy is needed. Consequently, in a similar vein to Cătălina Bucos but with other means, Lilia Nenescu points to the potential of informal practices and ordinary people, and to the city as a resource for communal revival. Together with fellow activist and social theorist Vitalie Sprînceană, she has produced an illustrated book for children which is re-imagining the city of Chişinău as an ecological commune⁷. The narrative device of a retrospective view from the year 2050 is used to emphasize the radical difference between the current direction of neoliberal urban development and the alternative landscape of an ecologically-sound city. In a related other study⁸, Lilia Nenescu emphasizes the colonial connection between the “civilizing” ideas of neoliberal urban development, on one hand, and the dominant practice of penalizing people for planting urban gardens, and of rejecting any informal urban initiatives of people, which are

⁶ Lilia Nenescu, “The Working Condition of Women in the Moldovan NGO Sector”, ISS Annual Conference, Babes- Bolyai University of Cluj, March 23-25, 2023.

⁷ Lilia Nenescu, Vitalie Sprînceană, Alexandra în Chişinăul anului 2050, Platzforma, Chişinău, 2020.

https://issuu.com/platzforma/docs/alexandra_patrat_reduss

⁸ Lilia Nenescu, “Grădinăritul urban: de la penalizare la încurajare”, Soros Foundation Moldova, Chişinău, 2022, https://soros.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Studiu-final-Lilia-Nenescu-G15176_compressed.pdf

categorized as “illegal” or “deviant from normality.” Instead, she argues for an epistemic turn that considers informality as a critical answer of a creative population to the incapacity of the state and of the local administration to answer to their needs. A decolonial turn to the communal and the vernacular would encourage instead a practice such as urban gardening and would look to engage in a conversation at the level of needs with the practitioners of the wide field of informality, instead of simply making their initiatives illegal. Once again, Lilia Nenescu’s orientation evidences a significant level of trust in the local emergence of communality from the exterior of the state, and a manifest resistance against the coloniality of power exerted in the field of waged work and at the level of official ideologies.

A similar orientation but from a different positionality is brought by **Elena Sîrbu**, who is a Roma educator and activist. She collaborated with Teatrul Spălătorie for the play *Die Abschaffung der Familie*, premiered at HAU Berlin in October 2019. On stage, Elena Sîrbu offers a critical insight on the familial history, the oppression, but also the resourceful agency of Roma women from Moldova in the Soviet Union and in the post-Soviet times. In the absence of a public debate on decoloniality in Moldova, Elena Sîrbu has expressed her concerns and aspirations through the language of human rights. As an educator aiming to instill change in the public sphere, Elena Sîrbu coordinated the bilingual (Romanian-Russian) *Zoralé jiuvlia* publication (2017)⁹, bringing to public consciousness the life stories of ten Roma women from different regions of Moldova, and acting thus also as a mediator between different generations and historical times. The scenario of the “success stories” follows the Western-liberal recipe of providing individual models of inspiration, but the actual stories of the Roma women presented by Elena Sîrbu are suggesting that the struggle for autonomy of the Roma women needs a completely different frame of conversation. Thus, the “success stories” of the ten Roma women from Moldova are actually showing that the term “marginalisation” is a misnomer, since the Roma women are facing first of all barriers against their access to the public, cultural and economic spheres. As a rule, the featured women are individual exceptions in their field of work, which only emphasizes the systematic character of the racialization of Roma within the post-Soviet Moldovan society. Elena Sîrbu also brings vital testimony with her contribution to the *Abolition of the Family* that the racialization of Roma women has taken a new character in post-Soviet Moldova, in direct relation to the Eurocentric, “pro-European” character of the aspirations of the majority population: thus, the Roma people are facing group preconceptions from a “civilized” perspective about them being “not European”, backward, “holding back” the rest of the society. In other words, the Roma population is feeling strongly the colonial difference which is dividing internationally the West and the East, but works like an invisible border traversing the wider Moldovan society itself. Furthermore, the Roma women are facing internal as well as external barriers. While the external barriers are due to the racialization of Roma people in the Moldovan society, and are manifested in the programs of internal

⁹ Elena Sîrbu, UN Women, *Zorale Jiuvlia. Istorie de succes ale femeilor roma*, Chişinău, 2017.

colonization of the Roma communities developed and exerted by the state, the internal barriers come from the pressures placed on women by the conservative members of the Roma community itself. The latter are an inheritance from the communal resistance against the colonization of the state, but are manifested today through gender control, namely the expectations of early marriage and a traditional life as household caretakers. Such expectations are demanding the abandon of schooling and education, and are coming with manifold histories of domestic violence, and of mothers left alone without any protection. Here, by choosing to highlight the standpoints of an aspiring professional boxer, a lawyer and migrant worker, Elena Sîrbu's emphasizes both the double character of the Roma women's struggle for autonomy, but also a strategy against the restricting and oppressing forces. Thus, the manifest desire to be an independent woman, but also to uphold Roma traditions can be accomplished by bypassing the state and finding a place in the international sphere, whether in the field of professional boxing, in international law, by teaching English, or through migrant work.

However, as underlined above, the international sphere is not a solution in itself, since it is already divided unjustly through racialization and inequalities. Elena Sîrbu also shows how the plight of migration has affected the Roma community as deeply as the rest of the Moldovan society, making instead a case for the return of the migrants, and for upholding the communal revival and the communal strength against both the patriarchal internal traditionalists and the external racists. Elena Sîrbu's decolonial sensibility evidences thus the double character of the struggle of Roma women, which shows the unacceptable limits of the Western-centric liberal platform of human rights, as expressed through the vehicles of the state and of the non-governmental organizations. Elena Sîrbu's journalistic contributions¹⁰ are further bringing evidence that, for Roma women, working within the language of the human rights and with the instruments of the non-governmental organizations is a compromise that tends only to one side of the struggle (against the internal pressures of conservative traditionalists), while enforcing the more general preconceptions in the wider societies and sowing further mistrust and dispersion within the community.

Listening to her voice and to the voices of the other Roma women with whom she has fostered autonomous conversations, one learns: 1) that the standpoints of Roma women should be crucial in the process of a decolonial democratization of Europe and of the Moldovan state, since they bring a unique synthesis of the facets of the coloniality of power that are still manifest in the international space, at state level as well as internalized in the local community; 2) that the external help by way of projects of modernization of the "traditional" Roma community is a compromising alliance which produces individual exceptions but radicalizes the internal traditionalists who come from a long-durée historical resistance against the state, and against any attempts to destroy the communal ways of the Roma; such compromising alliances may be bringing momentary success but are adding additional pressures on the Roma

¹⁰ Elena Sîrbu, Radio shows, TRM 1, 2022-2023.

community and particularly on Roma women; and 3) that the autonomy and well-being of Roma women depends to an extent, due to their extremely precarious situation, on a process of decolonizing the state itself, and thus on allied forces intervening from the exterior of the state, but more so on a process of empowering the women who want to bring change within the communal rather than to modernize and to “integrate” outside the community. What Elena Sîrbu’s work and the voices of Roma women are emphasizing in different and sometimes oblique ways is the need for a different frame of conversation, and a path towards well-being that starts with reclaiming and revaluing the Roma communal tradition from the standpoint of Roma women. The latter can be understood as a demand for a decolonial revival of the communal strength of the Roma community. Instead of incessantly cutting down parts of the community through integration and modernization (while the remaining parts fall under pressures of ghettoization and racialization), such a decolonial sensibility counts on the internal potential of renewal of the communal ways of the Roma.

Another double character of the coloniality of power is emphasized by **Rusanda Curcă**, who is a cultural worker, farmer, and environmental activist based in the village of Hîrtop. She has been a mobilizing force in the creation of the Coalition of the Independent Cultural Sector of Moldova, and a pioneering voice in bridging contemporary arts in rurality and in the marginalized sectors of the society, particularly by using the instruments of social theatre, documentary photography and music. Thus, for Rusanda Curcă, “art is about talking about the issues we are facing.” Curcă practices a coalitional approach within the cultural sector and the wider society, arguing that “diversity in nature is making you think about the diversity in our human world.” Working in coalitions is a way of growing communality. In her own activities she brings to fore the rural standpoint against the disparity between rural and urban areas in Moldova, situating it on the background of the international dimension of political and economic domination through migration. The emergence of gaping urban-rural disparities and the creation of entire zones of inequality and acculturation is a recent phenomenon that has appeared in the context of the neoliberal turn of the Moldovan state and of the mass migration of the Moldova workforce, both towards the West and towards the East. Rusanda Curcă underlines the crucial importance of communal resistances against the competing modernizations of the power blocks from the east and from the west¹¹. She stresses the importance of creating one’s own working place and ensuring food sovereignty, bringing thus home, in a sense, Lilia Nenescu’s “schemes of survival,” by pleading for a coalitional return to communality, in a remarkable conjunction of thinking and doing.

¹¹ “The Future Is Now: Conversations with Ambrose Idemudia Joshua and Rusanda Curcă”, HowlRound Theatre Commons, 2022.

4. While a public debate on decolonizing the state has not happened yet in Moldova, the decolonial sensibilities emphasized here, from different fields of work and with different intensities, have all in common the attention paid to the West-East divide that has been splitting the society of Moldova and constitutes the main local articulation of the coloniality of power, determining the distribution of colonial difference and imperial difference. However, in Moldova, this divide is situated in the global international space rather than being analyzed as a product of particular empires, since the attention is guided by the migrant consciousness, namely by the experience of being forever in the borderlands, rather than through the monocultural experience of the citizen's rights. The experience of being crossed by frontiers that have been cut by bigger forces has fostered a resistance which is pronounced against the state in general, at a higher level of generalization, rather than against a specific imperial force. However, and most remarkably, this generalization does not produce in a given cases a creeping focus on domination, on the contrary: all the four women showcased here are embracing coalitional approaches to feminism, and are investing their efforts in a revival of the local communal strength, rather than the fight against empires. This budding orientation constitutes a decolonial potential that deserves further support.

(Dis)Solutions.
Mapping of decolonial discourses in Kazakhstan.
A project by Goethe-Institut.

