

## Forum: Conference Debates

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Appearing occasionally as a feature of the Forum, “Conference Debates” summarizes the discussions that emerged at recent controversial conference sessions. Panel participants are invited to submit brief accounts of their positions in the light of the ensuing conversation. Panels for “Conference Debates” are selected by the *PMLA* Editorial Board.

### The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory

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#### *The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory*

“Should a homosexual be a good citizen?” Leo Bersani asked in *Homos* in 1995, expressing a gay skepticism that has dogged every upsurge of gay politics. Bersani’s doubt results from his diagnosis of “the rage for respectability . . . in gay life today.” He locates that rage in postmodern dissolutions of gay identity, in clamors for gay marriage and gay parenting, in queer antisepticizings of gay sex. “Useful thought,” *Homos* suggests, might result from “questioning the compatibility of homosexuality with civic service.” And from questioning more: Bersani makes a claim about social being itself. He hypothesizes “that homo-ness . . . necessitates a massive redefining of relationality,” that it instances “a potentially revolutionary inaptitude—perhaps inherent in gay desire—for sociality as it is known.” If there is anything “politically indispensable” in homosexuality, it is its “politically unacceptable” opposition to community. Thus *Homos* paradoxically formulates what might be called “the antisocial thesis” in contemporary queer theory.

Bersani’s formulation and others like it have inspired a decade of explorations of queer unbelonging. Meanwhile, *pace* scholarship, gay rage for normalizing sociability—to judge by the gay-marriage boom alone—has intensified. Given such divergent developments, I suggested to my colleagues on the MLA’s Division Executive Committee for Gay Studies in Language and Literature that stocktaking of the antisocial thesis might be in order. An MLA convention panel in Washington could assess scholarship’s gains from the thesis and where the thesis might be headed. It might consider whether arguments such as *Homos*’s justly connect suspicion of gay-rights politics

with subversion of “sociality as it is known.” It could ask if the antisocial thesis hedges its bets (consider Bersani’s use of “potentially,” “perhaps,” and “as it is known” in the citations above). It might probe the adequacy of evidence for the antisocial thesis that is drawn from aesthetic artifacts.

Taking on such questions, Tim Dean, Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, and José Muñoz signed on to the panel, and delivered strongly thoughtful statements, in fifteen minutes each, to a rapt overflow audience. I would like, as I am sure others would, to see the papers expanded and to see them garner a volume of responses. I take the opportunity of this postconvention print forum to initiate a few possible responses.

Did panelists overidentify the antisocial thesis with Edelman? Doing so perhaps blinkered speculation and produced unintended confirmations of his position. Disagreeing with Edelman’s argument in *No Future*, Muñoz inverts it: queers have nothing but a future (albeit they have past poets prophesying Xanadu). The inversion evokes the nineteenth-century fin de siècle idea that gays have a vocation to redeem their erotic pleasures for everyone’s future benefit. Heroic queer responsibility to democratic, anticapitalist, and anti-imperialist progress informs the pages of Edward Carpenter, J. A. Symonds, Oscar Wilde, Frederick Rolfe, and Ronald Firbank. The literary-political fantasies of those figures engendered the personae of Roger Casement and T. E. Lawrence. In fiction and in fact, at the head of the previous century, one finds an array of citizen queens. But why must a gay beast of burden perennially undertake the work of anticipatory progress? That is Edelman’s forceful question and protest; and Muñoz does not fully escape Edelman’s force.

The power of Edelman’s perspective partly derives from its bearing on a cult of family in the United States that never questions the value of biological reproduction and of children’s sensibilities. To harp on children means to harp on parenthood; both emphases leave nonreproductive eros in the lurch. Apparently, what really matters is, as Edelman has written, “a reality guaranteed, not threatened by time, [but] sustained by the certainty” of immortality. *No Future* rewrites Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion*: American family and children, and the nation, have become substi-

tutes for religion’s promises. The substitutes share an infantile belief in the life to come. In contrast, homos, Edelman makes one think, are grown-up enough to face mortality.

But just how empirical an American reality is *No Future* in touch with? One of Dean’s strong contentions is that Edelman, or the antisocial thesis generally, does not distinguish structural claims about the unconscious from empirical claims about culture. Dean also reminds us that children are perversely constituted, hence queer-friendlier than Edelman admits. Is the reminder a side blow, however, because the version of childhood that bullies American queerness is not Freudian? Dean’s most challenging idea—that the antisocial thesis is really a presocial thesis—cries out for supplementation by Dean’s *Beyond Sexuality*, in which Dean argues that the aesthetic realm matches queer eros, opening up new relational forms.

The scholarship of all the panelists traverses the aesthetic realm. That realm, perhaps, is the queerest: relational and arelational, stimulating sociability and political ideas yet largely indifferent to realizing them. In the name of aesthetics, I might most have quarreled with Halberstam’s intention to discredit Bersani and Edelman’s “negativity” on the grounds of the “excessively small archive” they appeal to—those elite white boys Gide and Proust. Halberstam thinks that Jamaica Kincaid, Valerie Solanas, and *Finding Nemo* constitute the rightly broad archive that vouches for queer eros’s political and social efficacy. I think Halberstam’s archive is only a demotic counter-snobbery for the snobbery she opposes. If, however, one takes her advice to extend the archive, what will become clear is that homosexual eros is not more arelational than its alternative. The era of Carpenter and company includes an unparalleled assault on heterosexual institutions—on marriage and children and their insurance of futures—by heterosexuals. Most literary writing from 1890–1945 does not hold a brief for defenses against time and death. An influential popular archive of fictions thus suggests an undeclared straight-gay alliance, founded in agreement about the inaptitude of all eros for sociality. The alliance, however unacknowledged, has undermined conventional models of politics, and it perhaps can locate itself only in the kind of thought that characterizes what

the philosopher Todd May calls poststructuralist anarchism. By invoking this alliance, I mean to suggest that what is at stake in the antisocial thesis in queer theory is of interest not only to homos.

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### *Antagonism, Negativity, and the Subject of Queer Theory*

Last December's MLA panel on the "antisocial thesis in queer theory" featured heated debate about the logic of (hetero)sexual ideology as it shapes our pervasive understandings of politics, temporality, and social relations.<sup>1</sup> Taking as points of reference Leo Bersani's foundational analysis of sexuality's inherent antipastoralism (see *The Freudian Body* and *Homos*) and my own, more recent contribution to the field, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, this panel brought together advocates of political negativity (Judith Halberstam and me) and those promoting a practice they defined, instead, as queer utopianism (José Muñoz and Tim Dean). More than a dust-up in the academic enclave allotted to queer theory, this discussion cut to the very core of our profession's relation to politics, history, and the humanistic subject. Though never explicitly framed as such, one question subtended the debate: do our narratives of political efficacy, historicist analysis, and pedagogical practice naturalize what *No Future* designates as "reproductive futurism," thus compelling us all, regardless of political affiliation or critical method, to prostrate ourselves at the altar of what I propose to call the Futurch?

Since spatial limitations preclude my rehearsing and responding to each of the papers, I'll dispense with the queer utopians at once to attend, instead, to the issue I take with my compatriot in negativity—that I take, more precisely, with Judith Halberstam's *account* of negativity. To dispense with the queer utopians, though, is not to dismiss their position but simply to suggest that I've already addressed that position in *No Future* itself.

Neither liberal inclusionism, with its ultimate faith in rational comprehension, nor the redemptive hope of producing brave new social collectivities can escape the insistence of the antisocial in social organization. If Freud observes of psychic structures that anxiety strikes only what's organized, we must note as well that organization depends on internal antagonism, on the self-constituting tension of negativity that forms of liberal utopianism, oblivious to their own particular ways of reproducing reproductive futurism, fittingly locate *nowhere*. Thus, proponents of liberal utopianism fail to recognize what Adorno put so well: "Society stays alive, not despite its antagonism, but by means of it" (320). Happy to earn their applause, instead, by putting the puppet of humanism through its passion play once again, they lead it in a hymn to the Futurch even while dressed in heretical drag. Delightfully drugged by the harmony, the freedom from harm, that their harmonies promise, they induce us all to nod along, persuaded that we, like their puppet, on which most humanities teaching depends, shall also eventually overcome, for knowledge, understanding, and progress must, in the fullness of time, set us free.

Judith Halberstam, to her credit, won't buy it. Colleague in arms, she joins me in responding to sociality's self-resistance, to its structurally determinative violence, and so to the inescapable antagonism that no utopianism transcends. In her paper for our MLA panel, as indeed throughout her career, the polemical energy of Halberstam's work refuses the norms that perpetuate the "comfort zone" of dominant cultural forces. Instead, she affirms an angry, uncivil "politics of negativity"—a politics in which what troubles me isn't its negativity but its affirmation.

Take, for example, her invective against what she sweepingly asserts is the "gay male" archive's "neat, clever, chiasmic, punning emphasis on style." Putting aside the considerable emphasis on style that informs her own writing, putting aside the conservative, homophobic agenda that tends to lurk behind most modern denigrations of "style," putting aside the reductive identitarianism of positing a single, coherent "gay male archive," we might ask what policing style has to do with the "politics of negativity." Or rather, and here's the important point: isn't such a policing of style, even

when aimed at destroying too-comfortable, normative social practices, the sort of reactive transgression, permit me to call it anarcho-oedipality, that pays those reassuring norms the flattering tribute of imitation? Doesn't it suppose, after all, its own reassuringly regulated order in which one can always know in advance what a given style means or allows? Doesn't it rely on a faith in the fixed self-identity of things, on their legible coherence, unmarked by the rupturing excess of what we might see as a queer remainder? Doesn't it assume that styles like "boredom, indifference, ironic distancing" admit of some positive distinction from others, like rudeness, sincerity, spite?

Could a reader of *No Future*, for example, think Halberstam wholly unironic in adducing my book as an instance of the "gay male archive"'s small range of affect—a range she pretends to believe makes no room for intensity, overinvestment, or anger?<sup>22</sup> But we can't, of course, actually *know* if she's being ironic here or not. The limit point of knowledge: *that's* the locus of negativity. Affirming, however, as a positive good, "punk pugilism" and its gestural repertoire, Halberstam strikes the *pose* of negativity while evacuating its force. I focus on her explicit embrace of punk to distinguish the point I make in *No Future* from the "antisocial" politics she locates in the Sex Pistols' anthem "God Save the Queen." Though originally called "No Future," "God Save the Queen" does not, in fact, dissent from reproductive futurism. It conventionally calls for England to awake from the "dream" that *allows for* "no future" while implying that the disenfranchised, those "flowers in the dustbin" for whom the song speaks, hold the seeds of potential renewal. "*We're* the future," it tells us, against its refrain, "No future *for you*." Ironically, given Halberstam's dismissal of style, its punk negativity thus succeeds on the level of style alone. Taken as political statement, it's little more than Oedipal kitsch. For violence, shock, assassination, and rage aren't negative or radical in themselves; most often they perform the fundamentalist faith that always inspires the Futurch: the affirmative attachment to "sense, mastery, and meaning," in Halberstam's words.

*No Future*, by contrast, approaches negativity as society's constitutive antagonism, which sustains itself only on the promise of resolution in futurity's

time to come, much as capitalism is able to sustain itself only by finding and exploiting new markets. As the figure of nonproductivity, then, and of the system's ironic incoherence, the queer both threatens and consolidates the universal empire of the Futurch. But what threatens it most is queer negativity's refusal of positive identity through a driveline resistance to the violence, the originary violation, effected, as Adorno writes, by "the all-subjugating identity principle" (320). In opposing that principle, internalized as the engine of reproductive futurism, queer negativity opposes the subject of humanistic teaching as well. It urges us to imagine a pedagogy not linked to the dominant "service of goods" (Lacan 303), a pedagogy inflected by the queer remainder that every good denies.

Approaching the humanities without any need to preserve the subject of humanism: this defines my current project, which I'm calling *Bad Education*, as well as the impulse characterizing Halberstam's work at its best. By confusing, however, the abiding negativity that accounts for political antagonism with the simpler act of negating particular political positions, Halberstam seems to misrecognize her own most effective political claims. She translates, much like the Sex Pistols, the radical challenge of "No Future" into nothing more than a reformist reproach to authority: "No future *for you*." Such a path leads us back to the Futurch, where spurious apostles of negativity hammer new idols out of their good, while the aim of queer negativity is rather to hammer them into the dust. In the process, though, it must not make the swing of the hammer an end in itself but face up to political antagonism with the negativity of critical thought. Dare we trace, then, the untraversable path that leads to no good and has no other end than an end to the good as such? If so, our chiasmic inversions may well guide us better than "God Save the Queen."

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## NOTES

1. This essay attempts to respond to the debate engaged at the MLA panel. It does not attempt to summarize the paper I presented. That paper is forthcoming in a special issue of *SAQ* titled *After Sex? On Writing since Queer Theory*, edited by Janey Halley and Andrew Parker.

2. In her MLA presentation, for instance, Halberstam read with great gusto this much-quoted sentence from chapter 1: “Queers must respond to the violent force of such constant provocations not only by insisting on our equal right to the social order’s prerogatives, not only by avowing our capacity to promote that order’s coherence and integrity, but also by saying explicitly what Law and the Pope and the whole of the Symbolic order for which they stand hear anyway in each and every expression or manifestation of queer sexuality: Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from *Les Mis*; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws with both capitals and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop” (29).

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### *The Politics of Negativity in Recent Queer Theory*

The panel “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” at the 2005 MLA convention, was intended to explore recent work in queer theory influenced by Leo Bersani’s definition of sex as anticomunitarian, self-shattering, and anti-identitarian. Bersani’s book *Homos* proposed a counterintuitive but crucial shift in thinking away from projects of redemption, reconstruction, restoration, and reclamation and toward what can only be called an antisocial, negative, and antirelational theory of sexuality. The sexual instinct, then, in this formulation, nestles up against the death drive and constitutes a force opposing what Bersani terms “the tyranny of the self.” Rather than a life force that connects pleasure to life, survival, and futurity, sex, and particularly homo-sex and receptive sex, is a death drive that undoes the self, releases the self from the drive for mastery, coherence, and resolution; “the value of sexuality itself,” writes Bersani, “is to demean the seriousness of efforts to redeem it” (“Rectum” 222). Bersani’s work, while it clearly situates itself in re-

lation to a well-defined canon of gay male aesthetic production by Genet, Proust, and others, has also been useful for the theorization of femme receptivities (Cvetkovich) and butch abjection and lesbian loneliness (Love). And the politics of Bersani’s project, to the extent that one can identify a political trajectory in a radically nonteleological project, resides in its brutal rejection of the comforting platitudes that we use to cushion our fall into mortality, incoherence, and nonmastery.

My own recent work is profoundly influenced by this particular strand of queer theory, and in *Dude, Where’s My Theory?*, a new book on “the politics of knowledge in an age of stupidity,” I try to capitalize on counterintuitive and patently queer forms of negative knowing. In chapters on stupidity, forgetting, failure, and inauthenticity, I try to expose the logic of the binary formulation that damns certain modes of knowing to the realms of negation, absence, and passivity and elevates others to the status of common sense. But on the panel at the 2005 MLA convention, I wanted to produce a conversation about Lee Edelman’s book *No Future*, which, in my opinion, makes perhaps the most powerful and controversial recent contribution to antisocial queer theory. Edelman’s polemic describes the rejection of futurity as the meaning of queer critique and links queer theory to the death drive in order to propose a relentless form of negativity in place of the forward-looking, reproductive, and heteronormative politics of hope that animates all too many political projects. The queer subject, he argues, has been bound epistemologically to negativity, to nonsense, to antiproduction, to unintelligibility, and—instead of fighting this characterization by dragging queerness into recognition—he proposes that we embrace the negativity that we, as queer subjects, structurally represent. Edelman’s polemic about futurity ascribes to queerness the function of the limit; while the heteronormative political imagination propels itself forward in time and space through the indisputably positive image of the child, and while it projects itself back on the past through the dignified image of the parent, the queer subject stands between heterosexual optimism and its realization. At this political moment, Edelman’s book constitutes a compelling argument against a United States imperialist project of hope and one of the most powerful statements of queer

studies' contribution to an anti-imperialist, queer counterhegemonic imaginary, yet I tried to engage critically with Edelman's project in order to argue for a more explicitly political framing of the anti-social project.

While other critics may well oppose Edelman's book for what they see as an antichild stance, this was not and is not my problem with the book. For me the book is limited by its own narrow vision of an archive of negativity. Edelman frames his polemic against futurity with epigraphs by Jacques Lacan and Virginia Woolf, but he omits the more obvious reference that his title conjures up, one that echoes through recent queer antisocial aesthetic production—"God Save the Queen" as sung by the Sex Pistols. While the Sex Pistols used the refrain "no future" to reject a formulaic union of nation, monarchy, and fantasy, Edelman tends to cast material political concerns as crude and pedestrian, as already a part of the conjuring of futurity that his project must foreclose.

At the MLA special session, I proposed two very different examples of antisocial theorists who articulate the politics of an explicitly political negativity: Valerie Solanas and Jamaica Kincaid. I don't have space here to detail precisely the form that their negativity takes, but Jamaica Kincaid's novels oppose the optimism of the colonial vision with a ferocious voice of despair, refusal, negation, and bleak pessimism, and Valerie Solanas articulates a deeply antisocial politics that casts patriarchy as not just a form of male domination but also the formal production of sense, mastery, and meaning.

The real problem, to my mind, with this anti-social turn in queer theory has less to do with the meaning of negativity—which, as I am arguing, can be found in an array of political projects, from anticolonialism to punk—and more to do with the excessively small archive that represents queer negativity. The gay male archive coincides with the canonical archive and narrows it down to a select group of antisocial queer aesthetes and camp icons and texts. It includes, then, in no particular order, Tennessee Williams, Virginia Woolf, Bette Midler, Andy Warhol, Henry James, Jean Genet, Broadway musicals, Marcel Proust, Alfred Hitchcock, Oscar Wilde, Jack Smith, Judy Garland, and Kiki and Herb, but it rarely mentions all kinds of other anti-social writers, artists, and texts, like Valerie Sola-

nas, Jamaica Kincaid, Patricia Highsmith, Wallace and Gromit, Johnny Rotten, Nicole Eiseman, Eileen Myles, June Jordan, Linda Besemer, Hothead Paisan, *Finding Nemo*, Lesbians on Ecstasy, Deborah Cass, SpongeBob, Shulamith Firestone, Marga Gomez, Toni Morrison, and Patti Smith.

The gay male archive—because it is limited to a short list of favored canonical writers—is also bound by a particular range of affective responses. And so fatigue, ennui, boredom, indifference, ironic distancing, indirectness, arch dismissal, insincerity, and camp make up what Ann Cvetkovich has called "an archive of feelings" associated with this form of antisocial theory. This canon occludes another suite of affectivities associated, again, with another kind of politics and a different form of negativity. In this other archive, we can identify, for example, rage, rudeness, anger, spite, impatience, intensity, mania, sincerity, earnestness, overinvestment, incivility, and brutal honesty. The first archive is a camp archive, a repertoire of formalized and often formulaic responses to the banality of straight culture and the repetitiveness and unimaginativeness of heteronormativity. The second archive, however, is far more in keeping with the undisciplined kinds of responses that Bersani at least seems to associate with sex and queer culture, and it is here that the promise of self-shattering, loss of mastery and meaning, unregulated speech, and desire is unloosed. Dyke anger, anticolonial despair, racial rage, counterhegemonic violence, punk pugilism—these are the bleak and angry territories of the antisocial turn; these are the jagged zones in which not only self-shattering (the opposite of narcissism, in a way) but other-shattering occurs. If we want to make the antisocial turn in queer theory, we must be willing to turn away from the comfort zone of polite exchange to embrace a truly political negativity, one that promises, this time, to fail, to make a mess, to fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock, and annihilate, and to abandon the neat, clever, chiasmic, punning emphasis on style and stylistic order that characterizes both the gay male archive and the theoretical writing about it.

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### *Thinking beyond Antirelationality and Antiutopianism in Queer Critique*

Shouting down utopia is an easy move. It is perhaps even easier than smearing psychoanalytic or deconstructive reading practices with the charge of nihilism. The antiutopian critic of today has a well-worn war chest of poststructuralist pieties at her or his disposal to shut down lines of thought that inhabit the concept of utopia. Social theory that invokes the concept of utopia has always been vulnerable to charges of naïveté, impracticality, or lack of rigor. At the MLA panel "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," one of my copanelists responded to my argument for replacing a faltering antirelational mode of queer theory with a queer utopianism that highlighted a renewed investment in social theory (one that called on not only relationality but also futurity) by exclaiming that there was nothing new or radical about utopia. To some degree this is of course true insofar as I am calling on a well-established tradition of critical idealism. I am also not interested in a notion of the radical that merely connotes extremity, righteousness, or affirmation of newness. My investment in utopia is my response to queer thinking that embraces a politics of the here and now underlined by what I consider to be today's hamstrung, pragmatic gay agenda. Some would call this crypto-pragmatic approach tarrying with the negative. I would not.

Leo Bersani's *Homos*, which first theorized antirelationality, inspired antisocial queer theories. Some of us came to bury antirelational queer theories at the 2005 special session on the antisocial thesis. I have long believed that the antirelational turn in queer studies was primarily a reaction to critical approaches that argued for the relational and contingent nature of sexuality. Escaping or denouncing

relationality first and foremost distances queerness from what some theorists seem to think of as contamination by race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference. In other words, I have been of the opinion that antirelational approaches to queer theory were wishful thinking, investments in deferring various dreams of difference. It has been clear to many of us, for quite a while now, that the antirelational in queer studies was the gay white man's last stand.<sup>1</sup>

I have chosen to counter polemics that argue for antirelationality by insisting on the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity. At the 2005 MLA panel, in recent essays, and in my forthcoming book *Cruising Utopia*, I respond to the assertion that there is no future for the queer by arguing that queerness is primarily about futurity. Queerness is always on the horizon. Indeed, for queerness to have any value whatsoever, it must be considered visible only on the horizon. My argument is therefore interested in critiquing the ontological certitude that I understand to accompany the politics of presentist and pragmatic contemporary gay identity. This certitude is often represented through a narration of disappearance and negativity that boils down to another game of fort-da.

My conference paper and the forthcoming book it is culled from have found much propulsion in the work of Ernst Bloch and other Marxist thinkers who did not dismiss utopia. Bloch found strident grounds for a critique of a totalizing and naturalizing idea of the present in his concept of the no-longer-conscious. A turn to the no-longer-conscious enabled a critical hermeneutics attuned to comprehending the not yet here. This temporal calculus deployed the past and the future as armaments to combat the devastating logic of the here and now, in which nothing exists outside the current moment and which naturalizes cultural logics like capitalism and heteronormativity. Concomitantly, Bloch has also sharpened our critical imagination's emphasis on what he famously called "a principle of hope." Hope is an easy target for antiutopians. But while antiutopians might understand themselves as critical in the rejection of hope, they would, in the rush to denounce it, miss the point that hope is spawned of a critical investment in utopia that is nothing like naive but, instead, profoundly resistant

to the stultifying temporal logic of a broken-down present. My turn to Bloch, hope, and utopia challenges theoretical insights that have been stunted by the lull of presentness and by various romances of negativity and that have thus become routine and resoundingly anticritical. This antiutopian theoretical faltering is what I referred to earlier, almost in jest, as poststructuralist pieties. I have learned quite a bit from critical practices commonly described as poststructuralist and have no wish to denounce them. The corrective I want to make by turning to utopia is attuned to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's critique of the way in which paranoid reading practices have become so nearly automatic in queer studies that they have, in many ways, ceased to be critical. In queer studies, antiutopianism, more often than not intertwined with antirelativity, has led many scholars to an impasse wherein they cannot see futurity for the life of them. Utopian readings are aligned with what Sedgwick would call reparative hermeneutics.

The queer utopianism I am arguing for is a kind of anti-antiutopianism, to borrow a phrase from Fredric Jameson. Anti-antiutopianism is not about a merely affirmative or positive investment in utopia. Gay and lesbian studies can too easily snap into the basically reactionary posture of denouncing a critical imagination that does not short-sightedly deny anything but the here and now. The project of thinking beyond the moment and against static historicisms resonates with Judith Halberstam's work on queer temporality's relation to spatiality, Carla Freccero's notion of fantasmatic historiography, Elizabeth Freeman's theory of temporal drag, Carolyn Dinshaw's approach to "touching the past," and Jill Dolan's recent book on utopian performance. I would also align it with Lisa Duggan's critique of neoliberal homonormativity. Along those lines, while this writing project does not always explicitly concern race, it shares many political urgencies with a vibrant list of scholars working on the particularities of queers of color and their politics. Many of these authors fill out the table of contents for the special issue of *Social Text*, *What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?*, that I recently coedited with Judith Halberstam and David Eng. Ultimately, my theory of queer futurity attends to the past for the purpose of critiquing a present. This project depends on critical practices that stave off the

failures of imagination in queer critique that I understand as antirelativity and antiutopianism.

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## NOTE

1. I do not mean all gay white men in queer studies. More precisely, I am referring to gay white male scholars who imagine sexuality as a discrete category that can be abstracted and isolated from other antagonisms in the social, which include race and gender.

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## *The Antisocial Homosexual*

Everyone knows that homosexuals throw fabulous parties. Far from antisocial, we are in fact adept at practicing sociability in its myriad forms. The burden of "the antisocial thesis in queer theory," which Leo Bersani formulated most decisively in *Homos*, is not that lesbians and gay men are unsociable but that some aspect of homosexuality threatens the social and that it might be strategic politically to exploit that threat. Homosexuality can be viewed as threatening because, insofar as we fail to reproduce the family in a recognizable form, queers fail to reproduce the social.

In this respect, the antisocial thesis originates not in queer theory but in right-wing fantasies about how "the homosexual agenda" undermines the social fabric. Certain queer theorists have suggested that rather than critique such reactionary fantasies and distance ourselves from them, we might expediently embrace them, take them on. In "Is the Rectum a Grave?," his precursor to *Homos*, Bersani contended that "it is perhaps necessary to accept the pain of embracing, at least provisionally, a homophobic representation of homosexuality" (209).

This line of thinking has been pursued by Lee Edelman in his recent book *No Future*, which focused much of the MLA panel's debate and disagreement. Instead of arguing against

the viciously homophobic representation of homosexuality as sterile, unproductive, antifamily, and death-driven, Edelman insists that “we should listen to, and even perhaps be instructed by, the readings of queer sexualities produced by the forces of reaction” (16). If there is a germ of truth in homophobic stereotypes of queerness as destructive, then we might heroically identify with those negative stereotypes in order to short-circuit the social in its present form.

Embracing the homophobic alignment of queerness with the death drive, Edelman wants to harness the drive’s negativity to his assault on “reproductive futurism.” By *reproductive futurism* he means the dominant ideology of the social, which sees it in terms of a future requiring not only reproduction but also protection and that therefore represents futurity in the image of the innocent child. Yet Freud’s theory of infantile sexuality, with its account of an original predisposition to polymorphous perversion, long ago shattered the illusion of childhood innocence. We cannot protect kids from perverts, because we cannot effectively insulate any child from him- or herself. As Freud repeatedly discovered, sexual perversion comes from inside the family home, not from outside it.

However, once the social is defined in terms of a future represented by the child, then queerness (or perverse, nonreproductive sexuality) necessarily negates that future by fissuring it from within—just as, in Lacanian terms, the real fractures the symbolic from within. According to this argument, queerness is structurally antisocial, not empirically so. By construing the sociopolitical order primarily in imaginary and symbolic terms, while simultaneously invoking the queer as real to undermine that order, Edelman’s account offers too monochromatic a vision of the symbolic; it furnishes too narrow a conception of the social; and it paints an unimaginative picture of the future.

My colleagues on the MLA panel elaborated similar criticisms of Edelman’s project. Highlighting the predictability of his archive, Judith Halberstam anatomized a more expansive, messier vision of the social that embraces negativity without foreclosing futurity. In his fascinating discussion of the New York School poets, José Muñoz outlined various possibilities of queer futurity in terms of utopia and potentiality. During the discussion period,

I pointed to Michael Snediker’s important work on queer optimism as another way of thinking about futurity beyond recent queer theoretical emphases on negativity, melancholia, and the death drive.

Reaching beyond Lacanian psychoanalytic orthodoxy, my paper focused above all on what Deleuze calls “becoming”—a ceaseless movement of being that is not coordinated by teleology and that never results in anything resembling an identity. The significance of this perspective on futurity stems from the fact that the antisocial thesis properly begins with neither Edelman nor Bersani but rather with Guy Hocquenghem—specifically, with his Deleuzian reading of Freud in *Homosexual Desire* (1972). Hocquenghem sheds light on the antisocial thesis by explaining, “Homosexual desire is neither on the side of death nor on the side of life; it is the killer of civilized egos” (150). Homosexual desire achieves that effect by shattering the imaginary identities through which we recognize ourselves and others. What I find crucial here is that the shattering of the civilized ego betokens not the end of sociality but rather its inception.

This point has been missed by many of Bersani’s readers too. The movement of coming together only to be plunged into an experience of the nonrelational represents but the first step in Bersani’s account of relationality. The second, correlative step is to trace new forms of sociability, new ways of being together, that are not grounded in imaginary identity or the struggle for intersubjective recognition. In my view, disrupting ego identity through “self-shattering” gives access to the productivity of the primary process, which is profoundly connective. Hocquenghem, following Deleuze and Guattari, speaks of bodies “plugging in,” whereas today we might speak of “hooking up”—a visceral dramatization of the promiscuous sociability of unconscious desire when unconstrained by Oedipus.

The symbolic law of reproductive futurism is not as encompassing or determinative as Lacanians like Edelman seem to think. The theory of the unconscious is a story about the underdetermination, as well as the overdetermination, of subjectivity. Nothing is more promiscuously sociable, more intent on hooking up, than that part of our being separate from selfhood. My paper concluded by arguing that queer theory and politics need a vigorously argued antisocial thesis, in order to grasp how

beyond the normative coordinates of selfhood lies an orgy of connection that no regime can regulate.

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## Are We Postcolonial? Post-Soviet Space

Annual Meeting of the American Association of Teachers of  
Slavic and East European Languages  
29 December 2005, Washington, DC

### *Are You Postcolonial? To the Teachers of Slavic and Eastern European Literatures*

You have involved yourselves in the rethinking of Soviet studies as not only post-Soviet studies but also postcolonial studies. The first wave of postcolonial studies was based on the British empire. We have a lot to learn as that model travels out of its first contained sphere into the aftermath of old multicultural empires. Does postcolonialism lead to nationalism? Is postcolonialism appropriated by the metropolitan diaspora? Is "scientific socialism" comparable to "civilizing mission"? Is the "Other Europe" movement—in Poland, Hungary, Bohemia, the Balkans, and elsewhere—manageable within a specifically postcolonial framework? Must the post-Soviet world be thought of as a new Eurasia in order for the postcolonial viewpoint to stick, as Mark von Hagen has suggested? The argument about women as the surrogate proletariat in central Asia traveled out of Soviet studies. How will that figure?

This rethinking implies that the most emancipatory vision of the Enlightenment could not withstand the weight of the objective and subjective history of older, precapitalist empires. Our current and so-called emancipatory programs do not engage with this. There might be some use, then, in rethinking postcolonialism for this new task. But it must unmoor itself from its provisional

beginnings in monopoly capitalist or mercantile colonialisms and transform itself in the process. Every postcoloniality is situated, and therefore different. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* was provoked by Kant's use of the western Australian Aborigine. How will this travel to the "European" imagination of "the Other Europe" today? How will you displace our modern notions of hybrid diasporas when you think of the restlessness of, say, Armenia?

In response to students in the Slavic department at Columbia University, I wrote as follows:

When an alien nation-state establishes itself as ruler, impressing its own laws and systems of education and rearranging the mode of production for its own economic benefit, "colonizer" and "colonized" can be used. The consequences of applying them to a wide array of political and geographic entities would be dire if colonialism had only one model. On the other hand, if we notice how different kinds of adventures and projects turn into something that fits the bare-bones description given above, we will have a powerful analysis of the politics of progressivism, of one sort or another. How do political philosophies of social justice relate to the overdeterminations of practical politics? This venerable question receives interesting answers if we

consider the irreducibility of the colonial in a situation-specific and flexible way. Additionally, if we cast our glance at the place(s) colonized (according to the rarefied formula), we encounter great heterogeneity. This provides us an opportunity to study the politics of cultural and epistemic transformation.

The problem with applying these terms to the area you cover would be merely to follow the three most powerful models of colonial discourse theory currently available, belonging to the Middle East, South Asia, and Latin America. These refer to colonial adventures undertaken by single nations as exploration and conquest nourished mercantile capitalism—followed by the expanding market needs of industrial capital. Your area displaced the political lines of old multiethnic imperial formations, Ottoman, Hapsburg, Russian. The eastern edge pushes into terrain that is even further from the single-nation model. Another great difference is the presence of an articulated ideal—versions of “scientific socialism”—which gave a seemingly greater specificity to the epistemic change. The single-nation model was accompanied by “civilizing missions” that were relatively autonomous from political and economic structures.

Historically, it has always been the powerful who have spoken or been spoken of. I don’t know enough about the area under study to go into detail here, but, as a feminist and a subalternist, I am used to looking at the pores of elite texts to tease out excluded itineraries. As we move eastward, the nature of the texts changes. Here my disciplinary commitments kick in. I want us to use the literary imagination to read sagas and chronicles. I spoke with women from inner Asia ten years ago and with folks from former Soviet Armenia more recently. They spoke of the difficulty of communication with their mothers—and, for sure, their grandmothers—because Russian gets in the way. The fracturing of gender is somewhat different from the nationalist insistence on native-language politics in the “new” nations bordering on the Russian Federation. However one approaches this, it seems to me a fertile field for real language-

based comparative literature, much more like cultural studies than like the older model of eastern European comp lit—where the discipline began. Colonial discourse and postcolonial studies have not been good with languages. The areas you study can turn this around. Your field can offer spectacular opportunities for history to join hands with literary criticism in search of the ethical as it interrupts the epistemological.

Postcolonial theory will engage analytic representations of positions other than the colonizers’ (old and new) in the model of the organic intellectual (“permanent persuaders”—Gramsci). But it is the theory that must be made to engage with this, not ourselves as academic narcissists. The gendered approach is particularly effective in postcolonial work because it often seeks to expose the patriarchal collaboration between colonizer and colonized. Feminism and postcolonial theory have a certain concern for social justice. I would like to think that this is the case for all humanities and social science work, perhaps for all work. But too narrow a definition of political commitment leads to work with the same dull litany of foregone conclusions. I have always found such “research” tedious. These are warnings from a battle-scarred veteran on the eve of your new departure.

They were students. You are colleagues. I will let you add the pinch of salt.

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***The Anti-imperialist Empire and After:  
In Dialogue with Gayatri Spivak’s “Are  
You Postcolonial?”***

Debates within Slavic studies are increasingly fueled by this question: are we now also postcolonial—“we” being some unstable combination of postsocialist citizenry, their diasporas, and the research communities that study them. How is it best to get at this question? Can we point to Soviet colonizers who have withdrawn—either physically or in terms of a systemic failure of power and

knowledge—leaving behind some distinct group to engage in the cultural reclamation project of nation building (linguistic, educational, and legal reforms; reconstructed institutions of the media and the electoral process; the emergence of autonomous civic associations)? A reasoned answer, whatever it is, will respond to this line of questioning. Let us bracket culture for the moment and address the question in geographic terms, from the outside—that is to say, external empire—in.

If we are speaking of Central Europe, the countries that—some would argue—had a status analogous in certain respects to that of Britain’s white colonies, the answer initially, of course, is yes, we are postcolonial. That affirmative is tempered, however, by an awareness that “postcolonial” might be an unlikely choice by, for example, most Czech citizens. First of all, their post-Soviet reclamation is surely aimed as much at a reintegration into post-cold war Europe as it is toward the building of the nation-state. Whether this re-Europeanization is in fact integration into an emergent empire of the European Union I will leave unaddressed.<sup>1</sup> Second, a descriptor more familiar than *Soviet colonialism*—given the geographic, historical, and conceptual proximity to Nazism—has been *Soviet occupation*. The insistence on this term—indeed, its naturalization—raises an interesting question. Is it correct to say that the Czechs, for example, were occupied but the Uzbeks colonized? If so, then for the Czechs was it the period’s brevity, the absence of a tsarist legacy, their relative technological parity with the Soviet Union, their mastery of the discourse of occupation, or our unacknowledged racialization of language that drives this distinction? Indeed, the absence from 1946 to 1967 of an alien, occupying military or governance on Czech soil further problematizes the vocabulary. These habits of thought—in the northwest sector of the Soviet empire, “occupation”; in its southeast sector, “colonialism”—suggest that the Soviet case (Eurasia, after all) is an important crossroads for postcolonialist debates, a site where familiar terms encounter each other anew. Is it worth asking, How white must one be to be occupied? And, conversely, does the vocabulary of postcolonialist debates orientalize those whom it sets out to emancipate conceptually from cold war categories of Soviet occupation?

In terms, therefore, of the question as it is posed—Are we postcolonial?—we are left as yet with an affirmative, but still deeply unsatisfying, answer.

If we have in mind the internal Soviet empire—the former fifteen republics—then the initial answer, again, is yes. But, of course, as soon as things begin to seem simple, the empire’s radical internal diversity makes this monosyllabic answer problematic, and not only for the reasons cited above. How productive is a consistent vocabulary for a radically inconsistent expansionism? This last question concerns not merely the diversity of colonized territory but also the profoundly different modes of metropolitan expansion: if, for example, in the Baltics Russo-Soviet appropriation of an already existing German elite provided one—in some respects, anglophile—model, then in the Far East Russo-Soviet missionary and mercantile expansionism provided another, more Spanish, model, which produced very different cultural symptoms. Our colleagues in other disciplines have debated this heterogeneity at length, while the humanities have been slower to address these issues.<sup>2</sup>

If we turn our attention to the Russian Federation today, a curious paradox obtains, since the federation’s internal relations with Chechnya, Bashkortostan, and elsewhere show little trace of decolonization; in fact, the historical contradictions of its disciplinary systems find themselves in crisis between the dead empire and the newly emergent one. Only the greatest optimist would claim that Russia’s civil associations—independent election monitoring, the media, veterans’ associations, environmental and public-health advocacy groups, policy research institutes, and so forth—have continued to develop. Instead (in a clumsy paraphrase of Monk Filofei),<sup>3</sup> a dynastic empire fell, a socialist one followed, and a third is now consolidating its institutions along familiar trajectories. The collapse of the Soviet Union—internally imperialist but (in its declared animosity to First World predation) externally anti-imperialist—resolved one core contradiction, but substituted another: Russia, recovering gradually from its postimperial fatigue, remains (though reconfigured) an empire nevertheless. Does that repetition, like a stubborn habit renounced again and again, nullify change? An adequate account of the current conjuncture must address the simultaneity of Soviet postcolo-

nality and Russian colonialism, their contradictions and yet their intense compatibilities.

A discussion of post-Soviet culture must proceed within these parameters, taking into account the differences between the symptoms of the contiguous empire and those of the more familiar thalassocratic model of British postcoloniality. Russia differs in its markers of modernity; the relative impoverishment of its center in contrast to its Western borders; its constructions of ethnicity, nationality, and race; its state-driven, highly centralized structure; and—as Geoffrey Hosking has eloquently argued—the relative weakness of its own national formations. Yet these conditions provide only the merest guide to the complex tasks of cultural analysis, for Russian contiguity produces not cultural homology but rather, at times, its opposite: a libidinal engagement, under certain conditions, with the great overseas empire, as is surely suggested, for example, in Aivazovsky's evocative seascapes. In a similarly contradictory fashion, the cultural tropes of landscape in cinema, literature, oil painting, and mass song—figuring, on the one hand, Russia's "unencompassability" (необъятность) and, on the other, the need for constant vigilance at the borders—share a common anxiety about the outer reaches of Russia's expanding drive, a response to its shifting boundaries as encoded cultural wish and fear. We must read these marks against the grain in two distinct fashions: first, against a postcolonialism that fits uneasily with our subject of study and, second, against our own discipline, which has understood these debates as occurring between the First and Third Worlds, with little resonance for Russia. The largest country in the world, still very much in possession of its imperial holdings, Russia remains a challenge to scholars of the First and Third Worlds who would see modernity as inextricably intertwined with capitalism, the nation-state, and liberal democracy.

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## NOTES

1. Habermas's writings on the postnational constellation and coordination of sovereign discourses might invite such a polemical response from those who have weathered the twentieth-century "friendship of peoples," with all its federalist claims. Here work by Terry Martin and Ronald

Suny has been at the center of the debates on the legacy of Austro-Hungary and the emergence of what Martin has dubbed the Soviet Union's "affirmative-action empire."

2. I refer to work by Mark Beissinger, Geoffrey Hosking, Dominic Lieven, Terry Martin, Ilya Prizel, Ronald Suny, and Mark von Hagen, among others.

3. Filofei (Philotheus), an early-sixteenth-century hegumen of Pskov's Eleazarov Monastery, is said to have written a letter containing the admonition that after the fall of Rome and Constantinople, Muscovy had inherited the burden of preserving the true faith: "Two Romes have fallen. The Third stands. A fourth there shall not be" (qtd. in Malinin, app. 54–55).

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### *Between 1917 and 1947: Postcoloniality and Russia-Eurasia*

Has the postcolonial become a new universal, one capable of subsuming under one conceptual rubric such very different historical experiences as the emergence of New World states out of the legacy of white-settler colonialism, the decolonizations of Africa and Asia, and the much more recent disintegration of the Soviet bloc? If so, what is gained and what is lost by such a way of viewing history?

Postcolonial theory has a specific political history and intellectual genealogy that are distinct, but not entirely divorced, from Soviet history. Postcolonial theory became possible with the postwar decolonizations of Africa and Asia and the related ascendancy of various national intelligentsias. The success of secular nationalism enabled these intelligentsias to reexamine the recent past, just as the subsequent crisis of secular nationalism enabled them to critique the failures of the postcolonial state and its complicities with older and newer imperialisms. The resulting proliferation of revisionist historiography and theoretical critique was further empowered by the increasingly transnational location of its practitioners, manifested most visibly by the emergence of postcolonial diasporas active in the American academy and by related shifts in student demographics.

Although Nasser, Sukarno, and Nehru clearly looked in part to the Soviet state for inspiration, the twentieth-century encounter between the

Second and Third Worlds can no longer be read as one of inspired continuity. The gap between the two emblematic dates 1917, the year of the Russian Revolution, and 1947, the year of Indian independence, seems far greater today than during the heyday of nonalignment, formulated at the Bandung Conference of 1955. Taking place some thirty years before the South Asian and African decolonizations, the first decolonization of the Russian empire was proclaimed in the name of a revolutionary socialism that would crucially equivocate on what was called the national question. The Soviet Union was expressly internationalist yet zealously territorial and expansionist, denying the autonomy of its constitutive peoples while retaining a federal structure that would nonetheless permit an elaborate discourse of local specificity. This equivocation led to the paradoxical emergence of what Nancy Condee recently called an anti-imperialist empire. If the Soviet Union was an empire, it was one that combined an exceptionally violent and coercive centralism with a paternalistic internationalism whose relation to the peripheries of the USSR was by no means purely exploitative. The subsidizing of republican economies, the indigenizing of regional party structures, and the fostering of national cultures from the Uzbek to the Armenian were pursued in tandem with the ostensibly homogenizing vision of “Soviet man.” It was surely the sustained, official Soviet cultivation of national republican elites, as much as the efforts of local nationalisms, that permitted the rapid emergence of a plethora of post-Soviet nation-states.

The distinctness of Soviet experience finds an inverted corollary in the evolution of Russian studies in the United States. A child of the cold war, Russian studies combined historical investigations that largely reproduced a centralist or metropolitan vision of Eurasian history with a study of literature that fashioned a canon out of the Russian nineteenth-century classics, the modernists, and the postwar dissidents. The influx of Russian émigrés did little to upset these assumptions, since one of their primary intellectual and existential reflexes was to counterpose politics and culture. The underrepresentation of other Soviet ethnicities in American universities and in America at large, not to mention their regional isolation from

global intellectual debates, is probably as much responsible for the underdevelopment of Eurasian postcolonial studies as the purely methodological question of postcolonialism’s applicability to the post-Soviet region.

So where does the question stand today, in our field?

In Russian literary studies, a small body of works examines the correlation of literature and empire. I will confine myself to noting two serious limitations of these works. First, they tend to read Edward Said’s *Orientalism* as a synecdoche for postcolonial criticism as a whole, in order to assert its qualified applicability to Russian studies and to make a case for Russia’s quasi-European, quasi-Asiatic particularism. This is combined with strategies of reading that largely focus on mimetic-representational categories at the expense of formal or rhetorical modes. All of this ignores a much larger body of literary criticism and historiography (e.g., from South Asia or Latin America) whose meditations on the distortions or mutations produced by the importation of Eurocentric modernizing and developmentalist models to the non-West might throw a useful light on the Russian-Eurasian region. More serious still has been our neglect of the non-Russian literary and intellectual traditions of the former Soviet Union. We remain trapped in the Petrine paradigm of Russia’s eternally anxious opening to the West; where we look to the East, we remain content with Russian representations of it.

The postcolonial question has certainly been better articulated in related fields such as Russian history and post-Soviet anthropology. In a review essay-cum-manifesto on these developments, Mark von Hagen recently claimed the term “Eurasia” as an “anti-paradigm for the post-Soviet era” that “signals a decentering of historical narratives from the powerful perspectives of the former capitals, whether imperial St. Petersburg or tsarist-Soviet Moscow” (par. 2). Von Hagen takes strategic advantage of the toponymic crisis caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union and claims for a counterhegemonic intellectual initiative a term—Eurasia—that has in fact had a relatively muddy intellectual history. Far more than other toponyms (such as those for nations and continents), Eurasia remains to this day an indeterminate category with

an uneven history of discursive elaboration, and it had a weak institutional legitimacy until its recent, rapid adoption by area studies institutes and centers in the United States. Conceived of originally in the West to describe the landmass of Europe and Asia combined, the term has been used in Russia as part of attempts to rethink the relation between the European and Asiatic regions of the Russian empire, with a focus on the central Asian steppe as Eurasia's newly designated core. This conceptual history has been marked by a rich paradox: while serving to highlight the ethnically diverse nature of the former Soviet Union, to the point of displacing the Eurocentrism of received accounts of the region, the term Eurasia has also been marked by a strong totalizing impulse, a desire for spatial unity and for a principle to guarantee this unity. To be sure, von Hagen explicitly repudiates the "faith [of classical Eurasianists such as Trubetzkoy] in the Russian Empire's self-sufficiency, its 'exceptional path,' and their understanding of Eurasia as a closed system of interrelationships" (26).

Von Hagen necessarily limits himself to the work of Western and Russian professional historians of Eurasia who have been enriched by the insights of newer methodologies. This framework neglects one vital element that could become the legitimate object of Russian-Eurasian literary studies: the intellectual or creative interventions of writers, poets, philologists, and political activists of the Eurasian peripheries, whose work constitutes a set of alternative trajectories that seldom, if ever, coincided completely with the directives emanating from Moscow. The cultural production of the reformist as well as revolutionary national intelligentsias of central Asia and the Caucasus during the late tsarist and early Soviet periods is immensely rich, ranging from the aesthetic vanguardism of the Georgian modernists to the national communism of the Tatar Sultan Galiev, whose critique of Leninist internationalism casts a more contradictory light on Comintern debates on the nationality question. This varied body of work might allow us spatially to reconfigure the convergence between politics and aesthetics that Neil Larsen has suggestively found in Lenin's critique of imperialism and the synchronous emergence of the artistic avant-garde as a new "internationale of form." Finally, let us not forget that the most imaginative critique of Russocentric

epistemology was generated by the Kazakh poet-philologist Olzhas Suleimenov, whose book *Az i Ia* (1975) influenced Soviet culture as Fanon's or Said's work did other parts of the world.

What I am proposing, then, is a renewed focus on the regions of the Eurasian periphery, a commitment to the local archive that requires careful study of languages and sources outside Russian and an ability to contemplate cultural phenomena that exceed the Petrine paradigm of Russia and the West. This project must be complemented by an openness to the kinds of questions already being posed in other parts of the globe by transnational methodologies such as postcolonial studies. Such work might point to a convergence among Slavic studies, comparative literature, and work now pursued in various area studies institutes. For the past few years, I have been learning Georgian and studying revolutionary Tbilisi as a cultural site—a site far from the storming of the Winter Palace, to be sure, but also one of multiple languages and ethnicities, where anticolonial nationalism competed with both Menshevism and Bolshevism, where fin de siècle aestheticism coexisted with the futurist avant-garde and Near Eastern forms of bardic recitation, and where perhaps more modernities, local and imported, were imagined than in Paris or Saint Petersburg.

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### *On Some Post-Soviet Postcolonialisms*

The title "Are We Postcolonial?" begs several related questions. First, who is "we"? The residents

of the former Soviet Union and its former satellites in Eastern Europe and elsewhere? The intellectual communities in those countries? The diasporas with roots in those countries? The foreign-based (especially Western-based) scholars of the region's cultures? As a citizen of a former "white" colony of the Russian and Soviet empires and as an academic now based in the United States, I would argue that yes, definitely, I am postcolonial; however, my remarks here will not focus on autoethnography.

The questions outlined above are tangled up with another, related set of questions. How does one assert postcoloniality? Is it sufficient merely to claim it, as I just did? Should a legitimization of this claim proceed by way of argumentation, or does it require a sanction from some external disciplinary authority? (In a similar vein, when some fifteen years ago many Slavic and Eastern European intellectuals asserted the need to consider their countries' cultural conditions as part of postmodernism as a global phenomenon, many Western cultural theorists voiced their reservations, and at times even strong opposition, to the assertion.) Simultaneously, other questions arise: What kinds of uses or appropriations of the discourse on postcolonialism can be documented in the cultures of this region and in scholarship focusing on them? Is a representative of an imperial culture postcolonial too? Is postcolonialism indeed a category with global applicability, as David Chioni Moore argued in *PMLA* in 2001? Is postcolonialism an appropriate designation for empirical sociopolitical reality—the broad spectrum of cultural production—or only for academic discourse? Why is it that when representatives of academic communities studying non-Russian cultures in the region asserted the need to look at the ex-Soviet world through a postcolonial lens as early as 1992 (one of the earliest such attempts was made by the Ukrainian Australian scholar Marko Pavlyshyn), they were ignored or ridiculed by the overwhelming majority of Russian intellectuals and Western-trained specialists on Russian culture? Why, a dozen years later, did many of the same intellectuals and specialists, in Russia and the West, suddenly have a change of heart?

One possible explanation for this change lies in their strategic move to stake out disciplinary authority. In terms of disciplinary designations,

a distinction between colonial discourse analysis and the focus on postcolonialism needs to be borne in mind. If the former has a venerable history in the study of the Russian and Soviet empires (Walter Kolarz's 1952 study *Russia and Her Colonies* is an example from the West), the latter is a recent and contradictory phenomenon. The remainder of my remarks will focus on the strategic appropriation of some elements of the discourse on postcolonialism by Russian academics. Throughout the 1990s, postcolonialism was perhaps the only major contemporary theoretical discourse persistently ignored by Russian academics. As recently as 1998, for instance, a Russian survey of the Western discourse on postmodernism labeled Edward Said a "well-known literary scholar of a leftist-anarchist orientation" and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak a "socially engagé feminist deconstructionist" (Il'in 107–08, 125).<sup>1</sup> As it begins to register on the intellectual radar of some Russian scholars, postcolonialism is finding a somewhat unexpected application—in support of a view that Russia, starting with Peter the Great's reforms, developed as a self-colonizing state.

The roots of this argument have been traced to the writings of the nineteenth-century philosopher Petr Chaadaev, but its rediscovery in contemporary cultural discourse has been credited to a 1990 essay by Boris Groys. The reforms of Peter I, asserts Groys,

constitute a sui generis act of self-colonization by the Russian people: one of its parts, as it were, pretended to be foreigners, in their most frightening and threatening incarnation, and started consistently and radically persecuting everything Russian and imposing everything that by the standards of that time was considered modernized and Western. . . . [A]s a result of this cruel inoculation, Russia saved itself from real colonization by a West that surpassed it technically and militarily. (358)

Aleksandr Etkind has attempted to integrate Groys's thesis with the postcolonial paradigm. In the Russian historiographical tradition, he argues, Russian colonization is viewed as being of a settler type, "an expansion of the Russian people" as it created "its own territory," while Western coloni-

zation is seen as a product of geographic discoveries and military conquests. “The notions,” Etkind writes, “are used in a way that makes Russian colonization come across as a good deed and European as bad. In the case of Europe, colonization is defined in a manner that presupposes decolonization, while in that of Russia the definition makes decolonization logically impossible” (64–65).

A critical tone barely registers in Etkind’s analysis of this model; even the conquest of the Caucasus was “not quite colonial” for Etkind, since “after the incorporation of Georgia it [the northern Caucasus] found itself inside the empire’s territory” (63). In other words, once a noncontiguous colony is appended to the Russian empire, the imperative is to naturalize it by conquering the territory in between and restoring contiguity. In effect, Etkind perpetuates aspects of Russian colonialist ideology, providing evidence of how far Russian culture still is from “find[ing] a positive, enlightened solution” to the enduring legacy of colonization, a solution Etkind calls for at the end of his essay.

Perhaps the most thought-provoking instance to date of Russian engagement with postcolonial theory can be found in Madina Tlostanova’s 2004 book *Postsovetskaia literatura i estetika transkul'turatsii* (“Post-Soviet Literature and the Aesthetics of Transculturation”). Her book, more conversant with theorizations of postcolonialism and globalization than any previous work in the Russian academy, carries a strong autobiographical investment and highlights the author’s intellectual position as a representative of russophone non-ethnically-Russian intelligentsia.

This volume’s primary trouble lies in its excessive privileging of the position of a postcolonial hybrid intellectual who is speaking to, and in the context of, the academic institutions of the former metropole and in its disdain toward all nationalist discourses of resistance. Tlostanova’s strategically difficult self-positioning as someone multiply colonized and “othered”—someone who rejects the humiliating positions of a “native informant” and of “a political activist who uses his otherness in his favor”—is productive when Tlostanova critiques the mainstream Russian intellectual discourse but is problematic in its rejection of the possibility of a meaningful politics of resistance.

Tlostanova’s interest in transnational writing in English prompts her to seek similar manifestations in post-Soviet Russia. She limits her results by solely examining conventional, plot-driven narrative fiction: the only “positive heroes” that emerge in her book are Andrei Volos, an ethnically Russian writer who grew up in Tajikistan and is best known for his novel *Khurramabad*, which allegorically portrays the collapse of the (imagined) multilingual and multicultural utopia of the Soviet project and its descent into ethnic hatred and the ruthless violence of civil war, and Afanasii Mamedov, a writer of Azeri Jewish background whose work focuses on the similar collapse of the multilingual and multiethnic city of his childhood and youth, Baku. Both writers are nostalgic for the purported multiculturalism of these colonial Soviet sites, and Tlostanova appears to find solidarity with them. Her approval of these texts contrasts with her scorn for the only non-Russian-language post-Soviet texts she considers: two Ukrainian novels, Yuri Andrukhovych’s *The Moskoviad* and Oksana Zabuzhko’s *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* (270–81; 173–82). Published months before Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, Tlostanova’s book is a paradoxical combination of a call to rethink the Russian imperial legacy, a symptomatic representation of persisting imperialist prejudices, and a cautionary instance of a strategic discursive appropriation gone awry.

Although the works discussed above constitute a somewhat dispiriting instance of theoretical travel from the West into Russia, the fact that Russian scholars are beginning to engage with the discourse on postcolonialism can only be welcomed. One hopes that the recent cultural and geopolitical realignments within the former Soviet empire sometimes referred to as the “colored revolutions” will eventually prompt a more radical rethinking, and working through, of Russia’s imperial legacy, not only by scholars outside Russia but, crucially, by those participating in the country’s internal intellectual debate as well.

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## NOTE

1. All translations are mine.

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