

# ON DECOLONIAL SHELTERS, OR WHAT TO DO WITH PROBLEMATIC SCHOLARLY INHERITANCES?

VICTORIA DONOVAN 

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SHORTLY AFTER I TOOK UP my current post at the University of St Andrews, I inherited a Soviet-era library. The former inhabitant of my office, a scholar of Russian literature, had gifted it to me on his retirement. I'd never owned 'a library' before. Growing up, we'd always got our books from 'the library'. This library, my library, was thus a source of professional pride. The complete works of Solzhenitsyn and Dostoevsky that adorned its shelves seemed also to adorn me. The musty smell that greeted me when I opened the office door seemed to tell me that I had arrived at a much sought-after status. A lectureship. A library. A destination.

The feeling didn't last long, however. Even before I'd given the question of colonial epistemic violence much thought, I'd begun to feel oppressed by the dusty tomes. The fact that the books were almost all written by men, for a start, and that they gave off a distinct whiff of Soviet intelligentsia snobbism, made me feel increasingly alienated by them. After I started working on the Ukrainian East, also known as 'Donbas' – a heavily industrialized region of Ukraine whose mineral resources were depleted by colonial extractivism and which, since 2014, has been devastated by a Russian war waged in the name of the '*Russkii mir*' – my library took on a more morbid quality. Several collections by Ukrainophobe poets, imperial blockbusters exploring the mysterious depths of the Russian soul and canonical Soviet works celebrating ideologies of limitless industrial growth revealed themselves as weapons in a cultural arsenal. I began to wonder if this really was my library after all. Or if, more worryingly, this library was beginning to own me. Why was I guarding these books so carefully? Why was I affirming their status as a hallowed literary canon?

I am not the only one to have fallen out with my Soviet library. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Ukrainian critics have been writing about what Sasha Dovzhyk calls the condition of 'ingrained colonial inferiority' brought about in part by the Russocentric literary canons that they were forced to assimilate.<sup>1</sup> Describing the dusty Soviet tomes that fill her country house near Kharkiv, the researcher and writer Viktoriia Grivina thus explains how, growing up, she always felt excluded from the pages of these books. By contrast with the 'majestic' Petersburgs and Moscows where many of these stories were set, these works subtly conveyed to Grivina her homeland's lack of worth, that Kharkiv was

‘too small, too insignificant, less photogenic even than “provincial town N”, which Russian writers seemed obsessed by’.<sup>2</sup> Dovzhyk recalls her own experience growing up in Zaporizhzhia, a southeastern city with Cossack heritage. She remembers the history books taught by teachers who ‘[made] the runaway serfs-turned-warriors sound hopelessly parochial’. ‘I knew this feeling of inadequacy intimately’, she adds.<sup>3</sup> Like Toni Morrison’s Black girl who dreams of having blue eyes like her white doll,<sup>4</sup> these books projected ideas of insufficiency and lack onto their Ukrainian readers. By denying them the language with which to articulate their own sense of self and place they stripped them of their agency, subjectivity and voice.

AS SCHOLARS IT IS NOT ONLY LIBRARIES that we inherit. We also inherit scholarly apparatuses for which we are also supposed to be grateful. One of these apparatuses, which the authors of the article defend, is that of ‘scholarly impartiality’. Articulating their concerns that ‘epistemologies orientated exclusively towards power relations’ risk eroding this institution, they advocate for ‘a balance between developing analyses that are meaningful to *us*, while avoiding unreflectively projecting our own tacit cultural assumptions onto what we are studying’.<sup>5</sup> The problem with this approach, as feminist scholars have been pointing out for decades, is that the idea of a scholarly ‘us’ is also an inherited fiction. As Donna Haraway reminds us in her article ‘Situated Knowledges’, this ‘us’ is the authoritative ‘view from above, from nowhere’ which obscures the fact that it too is situated, in privilege, power and tradition.<sup>6</sup> Like my Soviet library, this ‘us’ does not have room for everyone. It cannot accommodate those who, in Audre Lorde’s words, are forged ‘in crucibles of difference’.<sup>7</sup>

‘Our’ field of Central and East European studies is fracturing and, for some, this development seems fraught with dangers. The authors encourage us to come together, to combine ‘emic and etic perspectives’, empathetically to internalize ‘the Other’s perspective’, pending Bakhtinian ‘*zavershenie* [consummation] from without’.<sup>8</sup> But what if we substitute the Moldovan-Ukrainian filmmaker Kira Muratova’s ‘chiasmus’ for Bakhtin’s ‘consummation’? The quality that Irina Schulzki describes as the ‘[effacement] of the ontological difference between the fore- and background, between humans and things, centre and periphery, presence and disappearance’.<sup>9</sup> Chiasmus involves chaos, disorientation, cacophony. This radical disordering of things might also seem fraught with danger. But it reveals itself as emancipatory. It is in this radical delinking from the established order of things, this undoing, that the possibility of doing differently is asserted. We might link chiasmus to what the Circassian-Uzbek decolonial feminist Madina Tlostanova has called the ‘decolonial option’. For Tlostanova, this ‘option’ involves a similar process of undoing and redoing: ‘deautomatizing and delinking from the Western epistemic premises, naturalized cognitive operations, methodological clichés and disciplinary divisions, and consequently, attempts to build a different conceptual apparatus to launch or set free an alternative world perception’.<sup>10</sup>

How might we choose to delink from inherited academic practices to make knowledge and community differently? How can we replace the libraries that exclude with libraries that welcome difference and set free alternative world perceptions? Here,

I find it useful to think with the queer feminist and literary theorist Sara Ahmed. Ahmed talks about books, her books, as ‘feminist shelters’. ‘I often think of books as houses’, she writes. ‘They are built out of stuff. They create room for us to dwell’.<sup>11</sup> Ahmed uses citations as the ‘bricks’ from which to build these book-shelters. She attends to the politics of citation: the way that certain bodies are included in our references, acquiring authority, respectability, canonical status, while other bodies are excluded, rejected as not serious enough, not worth listening to. In her *Living a Feminist Life*, Ahmed adopts a strict citational policy: she does not cite white men.<sup>12</sup> With this blunt instrument, she makes space for the many Black feminists who have not been attended to, who have been missed out by scholars observing convention, citing the canonical works that are required by institutions such as peer review. Ahmed uses the metaphor of ‘path-making’ to describe her process, calling her new paths ‘desire lines’:

If we can create our paths by not following, we still need others before us. By not citing white men in this book I gave myself more room to attend to this ‘before’. So: I cite the many women who have contributed to the intellectual genealogy of feminism, including work that has been too quickly (in my view) cast aside or left behind; work that lays out other paths, paths we can call desire lines, created by not following the official paths laid out by disciplines. These paths might have become fainter from not being traveled upon; so we might work harder to find them; we might [need] to be willful just to keep them going by not going the way we have been directed.<sup>13</sup>

The decolonial criticism that colleagues from Ukraine and other parts of ‘our’ region have been producing since Russia’s full-scale invasion is forging such new ‘desire lines’. This scholarship is building new roads to knowledge through powerful critiques of institutionalized epistemic inequalities and by centring feminist decolonial scholarship from Europe’s East and Central Asia. Mila O’Sullivan, Tereza Hendl, Olga Burlyuk and Aizada Arystanbek’s recent article ‘(En)countering Epistemic Imperialism: A Critique of “Westsplaining” and Coloniality in Dominant Debates on Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine’ is an important contribution in this regard.<sup>14</sup> Exposing the epistemic injustice, epistemic imperialism and coloniality of knowledge that have informed Western International Relations debates in response to Russia’s invasion, the authors advocate for structural changes to eliminate institutionalized ‘westsplaining’ and recentre situated and indigenous knowledge about nations and communities affected by Russian colonial violence. This research builds on an emerging corpus of work that has explored connected questions of the racialized and gendered hierarchization of knowledge and its reproduction in transnational culture and politics by among others, Olga Burlyuk, Botakoz Kassymbekova, Olesya Khromeychuk, Diana Kudaibergenova and Darya Tsymbalyuk.<sup>15</sup> It is in this writing that new scholarly apparatuses and infrastructures are being formed; it is here that the new libraries are being curated.

Decolonial scholars are not just writing about structural changes; they are also enacting them in their academic practice. Disengaging with existing scholarly

infrastructures, such as the institution of peer review which, through the imposition of ‘scholarly impartiality’, as Tsybalyuk has powerfully argued, allows their contributions to be dismissed as ‘too traumatized and emotional’, these researchers are creating new path-making practices.<sup>16</sup> Rejecting scholarly associations that in practice exclude them from their conventions through prohibitively expensive registration fees and visa requirements, they are building new shelters.<sup>17</sup> Recognizing their absence in the colonial libraries that exclude them, decolonial scholars are building their own counter-hegemonic databases, archives and resources. I have been privileged to support Ukrainian colleagues with a number of these initiatives, such as the ‘Reesources: Rethinking Eastern Europe’ project led by the Center for Urban History of East Central Europe in Lviv, which aims to ‘diversify primary materials, challenge grand narratives, and create new approaches to teaching and learning about the region’.<sup>18</sup> Such initiatives, which encourage rather than resist the fracturing of the universalizing scholarly ‘we’, are the ones that will transform ‘our’ field, bringing new possibilities for the future.

IF NEW DECOLONIAL AND ANTI-COLONIAL LIBRARIES are being curated, the question still remains: what to do with the old ones or, to paraphrase the title of Viktoriia Grivina’s article, what to do with all the problematic Russian books? Grivina offers the view from Kharkiv:

On a hot summer day, I take a bunch of [my Soviet books] to a newly opened Media Café in central Kharkiv. The books are then taken to recycling, money used to support a local military division that didn’t let Kharkiv be occupied. Perhaps, we will have to use the other Russian books to make fires, if more attacks on the energy infrastructure take place in the upcoming winter. What I know is that my library is slowly growing with Ukrainian books, and I finally begin to recognize myself and the great wild river of Donets on their pages.<sup>19</sup>

In some cases, Russia is destroying its bibliographical legacies itself. In an essay published in the Ukrainian *Solomiya* magazine in 2022, Dmytro Chepurnyi, a curator and cultural manager displaced from Luhansk in 2014, described encountering a bookshelf at his wife’s grandparents’ house in the village of Moschun, which was hit by a missile in Spring 2022:

The missile smashed an old book-shelf – novels by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Fadeev, Ostrovsky spilled out. All of them, of which millions of copies were published during the Soviet era, lie mixed with dust after the explosion. It is difficult to breathe here because of fiberglass particles in the air. I carefully gather these books and put them in boxes, wiping the dust from them. Apparently, this is how hegemony collapses.<sup>20</sup>

My own Soviet-era library has not been pulped. Instead, I’ve started installing works of Ukrainian contemporary art directly onto the bookshelves, allowing the volumes to become an ornamental background in an act of Muratovian chiasmic reversal. Some of the art works, which I bought during a trip to Lviv in August 2023, my first visit to Ukraine since the start of full-scale invasion, are beautiful reproductions by the self-taught Mykolaiv artist, Dmytro Moldovanov. Moldovanov used to paint

Pirosmani-like rural scenes featuring exotic animals, fields and bright starry skies. Now he paints the same animals but under skies filled with missiles or next to buildings engulfed in flames. When I walk into my art-filled office these days it no longer smells musty. There's a fresh breeze that flows through it that tells me that I'm part of a transnational community of intersecting solidarities and care.

*University of St Andrews*

*UK*

*Vsdz@st-andrews.ac.uk*

*ORCID 0000-0001-5987-0965*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Sasha Dovzhyk, 'Mother Tongue: The Story of a Ukrainian Language Convert', *New Lines Magazine*, 23 February 2023, <<https://newlinesmag.com/first-person/mother-tongue-the-story-of-a-ukrainian-language-convert>> [accessed 23 December 2023].

<sup>2</sup> Viktoriia Grivna, 'What to Do with All the Russian Books', *Fiery Scribe Review*, 19 October 2023, <<https://www.fierscribereview.com.ng/2023/10/what-to-do-with-all-russian-books.html>> [accessed 23 December 2023].

<sup>3</sup> Sasha Dovzhyk, 'Mother Tongue'.

<sup>4</sup> Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Plume Book, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Andy Byford, Connor Doak and Stephen Hutchings, 'Decolonizing the Transnational: Transnationalizing the Decolonial', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 60.3 (2024), in this Talking Point.

<sup>6</sup> Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 13.3 (1977), 575–99 (p. 582).

<sup>7</sup> Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour*, ed. by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), pp. 94–104 (p. 103).

<sup>8</sup> Byford, Doak and Hutchings, 'Decolonizing the Transnational'.

<sup>9</sup> Irina Schulzki, 'Touch and Sight in the Films of Kira Muratova: Towards the Notion of a Cinema of Gesture', *Frames Cinema Journal*, June 2023, <<http://framescinemajournal.com/article/touch-and-sight-in-the-films-of-kira-muratova-towards-the-notion-of-a-cinema-of-gesture/>> [accessed 23 December 2023] (video essay).

<sup>10</sup> Madina Tlostanova, 'The Postcolonial Condition, the Decolonial Option, and the Post-Socialist Intervention', in *Postcolonialism Cross-Examined: Multidirectional Perspectives on Imperial and Colonial Pasts and the Neocolonial Present*, ed. by Monika Albrecht (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 165–78 (p. 167).

<sup>11</sup> Sara Ahmed, 'Feminist Shelters', *feministkilljoys* <<https://feministkilljoys.com/2015/12/30/feminist-shelters/>> [accessed 23 December 2023].

<sup>12</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Living A Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Ahmed, 'Feminist Shelters'.

<sup>14</sup> Mila O'Sullivan, Tereza Hendl, Olga Burlyuk and Aizada Arystanbek, '(En)countering Epistemic Imperialism: A Critique of "Westsplaining" and Coloniality in Dominant Debates on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 45.2 (2023), 171–209.

<sup>15</sup> Olga Burlyuk and Vjosa Musliu, 'The Responsibility to Remain Silent? On the Politics of Knowledge Production, Expertise and (Self-)Reflection in Russia's War Against Ukraine', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 26 (2023), 605–18; Botakoz Kassymbekova, 'On Decentering Soviet Studies and Launching New Conversations', *Ab Imperio*, 1 (2022), 115–20; Olesya Khromeychuk, 'Where Is Ukraine?', *The RSA*, 13 June 2022, <<https://www.thersa.org/comment/2022/06/where-is-ukraine>> [accessed 23 December 2023]; Diana Kudaibergenova, 'When Your

Field Is Also Your Home: Introducing Feminist Subjectivities in Central Asia', *OpenDemocracy*, 7 October 2019, <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/when-your-field-also-your-home-introducing-feminist-subjectivities-central-asia/>> [accessed 23 December 2023]; Darya Tsybalyuk, 'What My Body Taught Me about Being a Scholar *of* Ukraine and *from* Ukraine in Times of Russia's War of Aggression', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 26 (2023), 698–709.

<sup>16</sup> Darya Tsybalyuk, 'Erasure: Russian Imperialism, My Research on Donbas, and I', *Kajet Digital* (2022), <<https://kajetjournal.com/2022/06/15/darya-tsybalyuk-erasure-russian-imperialism-my-research-on-donbas/>> [accessed 23 December 2023]; see also Darya Tsybalyuk, 'Academia Must Recentre Embodied and Uncomfortable Knowledge', *Nature Human Behaviour*, 6 (2022) <<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-022-01369-9>> [accessed 23 December 2023].

<sup>17</sup> See the recent announcement about the founding of the RUTA Association for Central, South, Eastern Europe, Baltic, Caucasus, Central and Northern Asia Studies in Global Conversation, an association which 'aims to transform the regions' positions from objects of study to active and visible epistemic agents'; Iryna Skubil, 'Announcement', H-Ukraine, 30 November 2023, <<https://networks.h-net.org/group/announcements/20014639/announcement-ruta-association-central-south-eastern-europe-baltic>> [accessed 23 December 2023].

<sup>18</sup> Center for Urban History of East Central Europe in Lviv, *Reesources: Rethinking Eastern Europe*, <<https://edu.lvivcenter.org/en/>> [accessed 23 December 2023].

<sup>19</sup> Grivina, 'What to Do with All the Russian Books'.

<sup>20</sup> Dmytro Chepurnyi, 'Unpacking my Library', *Solomiya*, 2 (2022), 104–05 (p. 105).