

Making sense of feminism and decolonization from the perspectives of the former USSR



*image by SHTAB (Bishkek)

Victoria Kravtsova
MA International Relations
victoria@dekabristen.org

Points of departure

- no broad discussion on racism, colonialism and decolonization in Russian-speaking feminist debates (Reznikova, 2014; Solovey 2019)
- “lag discourse” (Koobak and Marling, 2014) regarding the West + “double coloniality” of the post-Soviet space (Solovey, 2019)
- the tension between feminism / decolonization / nationalism
- contestation of intersectionality and feminism as such - also by those who support “decolonization” (Tlostanova, 2012; Peshkova, 2020)



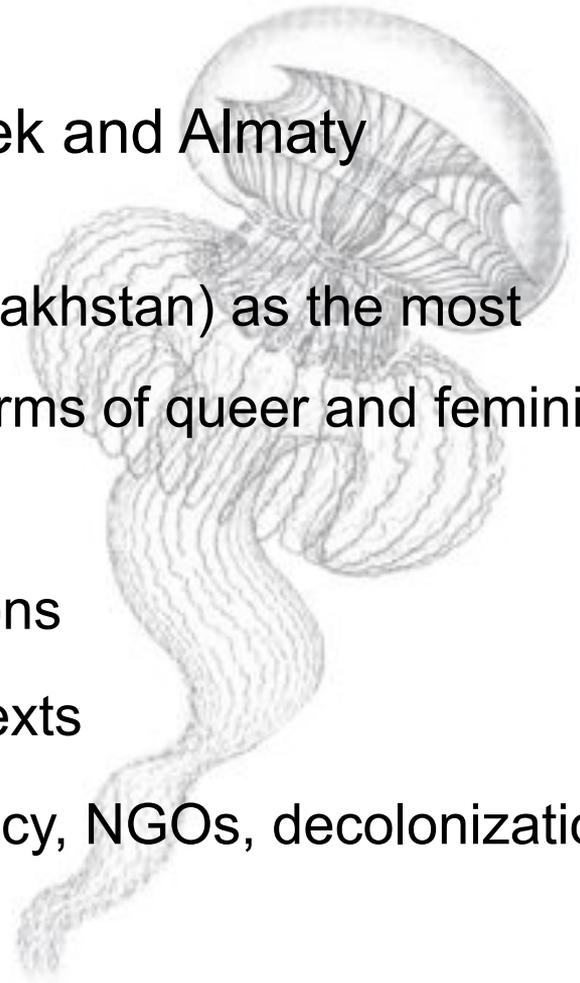
MA “Between the -posts, into the void: making sense of feminism and decolonization in Bishkek and Almaty”

- feminist methodology: engaged research, reflexive towards my own position, trying to benefit research participants
- method: case study of Bishkek and Almaty (based on Madina Tlostanova’s (2010) Gender Epistemologies and Eurasian Borderlands), snowballing for respondents
- data collection: in-depth semi-structured interviews (50), participant observation
- data interpretation: mix of open and directed coding, content analysis



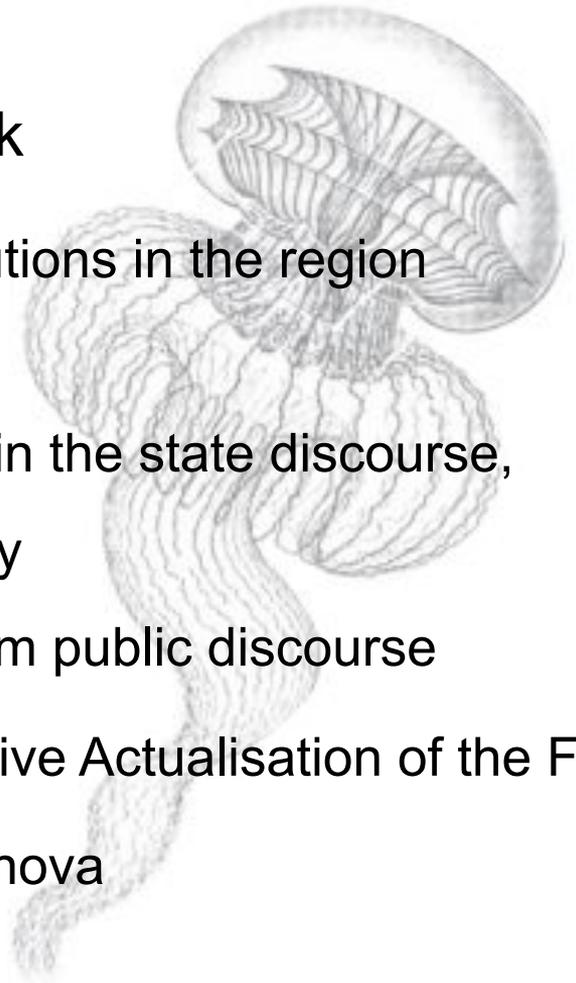
Feminism and decolonization in Bishkek and Almaty

- Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) and Almaty (Kazakhstan) as the most representative cities in the region in terms of queer and feminist networks
- close connections between two locations
- different institutional and political contexts
- different relationship to the Soviet legacy, NGOs, decolonization



Feminism and decolonization in Bishkek

- the biggest number of international institutions in the region
-> NGOization, intersectional feminism
- neutral relationship to the Soviet legacy (in the state discourse, academia, art), search for national identity
- discourse on decolonization is absent from public discourse
- influence of SHTAB, School for the Creative Actualisation of the Future
- unclear or negative relationship to Tlostanova





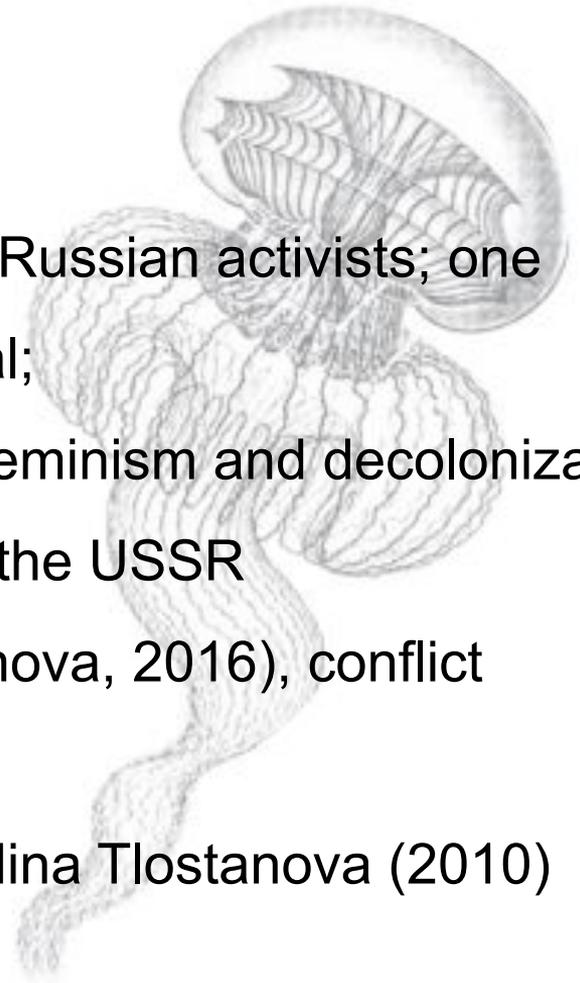
Л. Ильина. Счастье. 1967



Жанар Секербаева. Химеры города Z

Feminism and decolonization in Almaty

- activists (KazFem) - “radical”, ties with Russian activists; one feminist NGO (Feminita) - intersectional; active artistic community dealing with feminism and decolonization
- predominantly negative relationship to the USSR
- “political postcolonialism” (Kudaibergenova, 2016), conflict between feminists and “decolonialists”
- positive reception and influence of Madina Tlostanova (2010)





KazFem, Almaty, 2018



Almagul Menlibaeva, Aspan Gallery

What understandings of feminism and decolonization circulate within the feminist networks of the two cities?*

Feminism and decolonization can be combined. Decolonization is an attempt to move the gaze away from center to the periphery, feminism also says that we need to pay attention to those groups that have always been under oppression. That we need to entitle them with rights. We usually look at the centre, not onto the margins. And here it is different – not empire, but the colonial territories, not city but villages. Feminism and decolonization both work in this direction, they are mutually enriching.

Zhanar Sekerbayeva, Almaty

*See more at: <https://feminisms.co/zine/kyrgyzstan-decolonization-feminism>

We need to localize feminism. The power of feminism is in its variability. Kazakhstan is also not similar – we have different conditions in the country, and you cannot say that there is one recipe for all women. The general context of the post-Soviet, of the colonized and newly dependent – it applies to everyone. But there are thousands other things that make our lives unique. And academic knowledge does not help. We need to build relationships with the Western universities, and talk about ourselves, and go to the local communities, but to what extent do they want us there? Like I come with my education to them to teach them how to live. How to accept difference...but who asked you at all to accept it.

Leyla Zuleikha, Almaty

Decolonization must happen at the regional level. I wouldn't like it if it would always be based on ethnicity. It is a mistake to say that Kazakhstan consists of only Kazakhs and Kyrgyzstan of only Kyrgyz. Like what do we do with Uzbeks living in those countries then? One has to begin with the common in cultures and local values. Russians in Issyk-Kul feel themselves as Issyk-Kul people, in comparison, the Chuy Russians feel themselves foreign according to a study on Youth Gender perception by UN Women Kyrgyzstan, 2017. Here identity can differ from region to region and the common would be, let's say, the Soviet background. We have Turkic-speaking people and Persian-speaking Tajiks, mostly sunnis. It is important not to homogenize the identities from “the mythic Orient”.

Zarina Urmanbetova

The access to information, realities, privileges, priorities is different. I have a privilege to be involved into feminism, to get the information... I see mothers with many children who went to protest as feminists - they have no time to read theory, but they went to the streets long before us, privileged women. The problem of many of us is that we have read a lot of things in the books and feminism in our heads is in such vacuum condition that all the divergencies seem to be non-feminism. In the regions there is no feminism, there is no language in which it can be operationalized. When we try...even intersectional feminists, no matter how critical you are – it all falls into pieces. Maybe what we need is some kind of intersectionality inside of intersectionality – the fact that we are a postcolonial country does not mean that all women* here are the same.

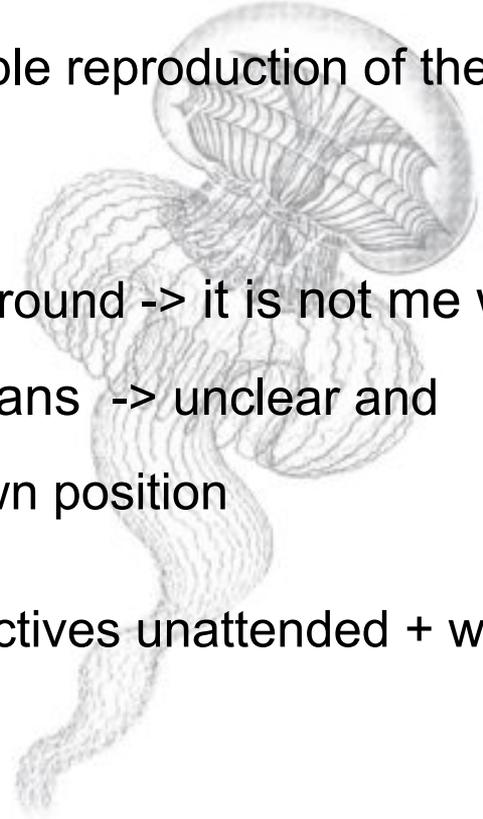
Altynay Kambekova, Almaty

Decolonial option/choice is a search for one's own esthesis based on the sum of everything that we have. I am not against including pre-colonial experiences, I am against freezing them. Developing a language that works with the past, but has nothing to do with revanchism is the decolonial option. There are no solutions, but mass production of new meanings and storytelling.

Zoya Falkova, Almaty

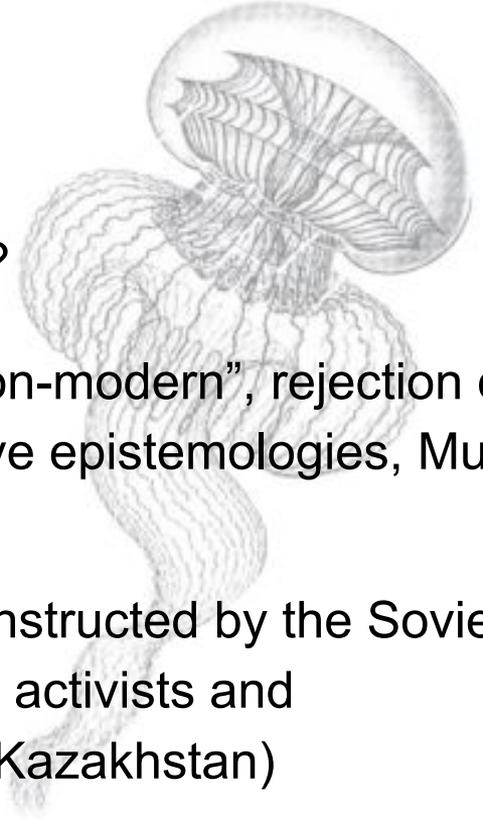
Problems

- personal sympathies and political views -> possible reproduction of the criticized binarisms and essentialisms
- influence of my Russian origin and activist background -> it is not me who can tell local feminists what decolonization means -> unclear and vague conclusions, no clear formulation of my own position
- snowballing sampling could leave certain perspectives unattended + what counts as feminism / feminist activism?



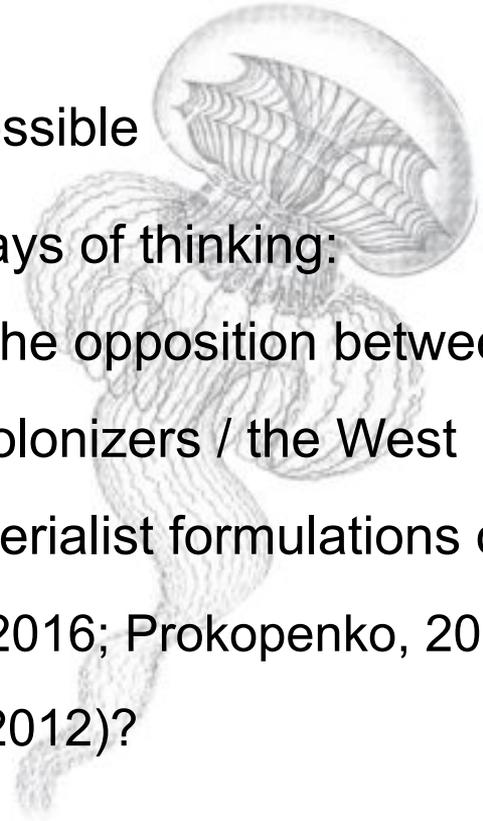
Feminism vs decolonization?

- search for the “precolonial” epistemologies
- decolonization = desovietization? = nationalism?
- division of lines of thought into “modern” and “non-modern”, rejection of the first (e.g. intersectionality) for the later (e.g. native epistemologies, Muslim feminism)
- image of the oppressed woman of the Orient constructed by the Soviet authorities = discourse of contemporary feminist activists and NGO-workers (influence of Tlostanova, 2010 in Kazakhstan)



Feminism + decolonization?

- finding equality in the precolonial past is impossible
- decolonization means getting rid of certain ways of thinking:
savior-ism, elitism, binary thinking (including the opposition between tradition and modernity), “looking up” on ex-colonizers / the West
- postmodern / queer / posthumanist / new materialist formulations of decolonization (Zubkovskaya, 2007; Braidotti, 2016; Prokopenko, 2019)
= depoliticization of the concept (Tuck & Yang, 2012)?



To decolonize oneself is not to go back to something that existed before colonization. To decolonize (oneself, a place) is to engage in a non-hierarchical relationship with the universe as a unity of phenomena — of matter. It urges us first and foremost to learn from the diverse experiences of resistance (as sites of continuous repression).

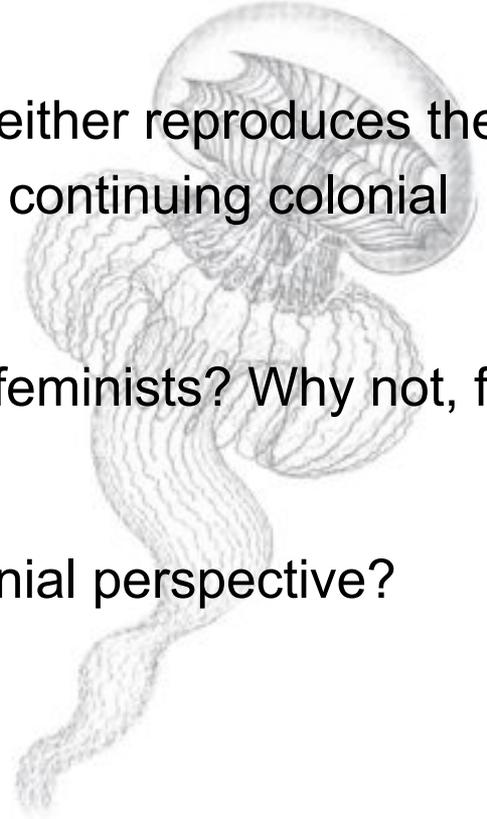
Xiang Zairong in Lesya Prokopenko (2019)

What does it mean to decolonize?

Is there an understanding of decolonization that neither reproduces the dichotomy of tradition and modernity, nor obscures continuing colonial violence and logics of discrimination?

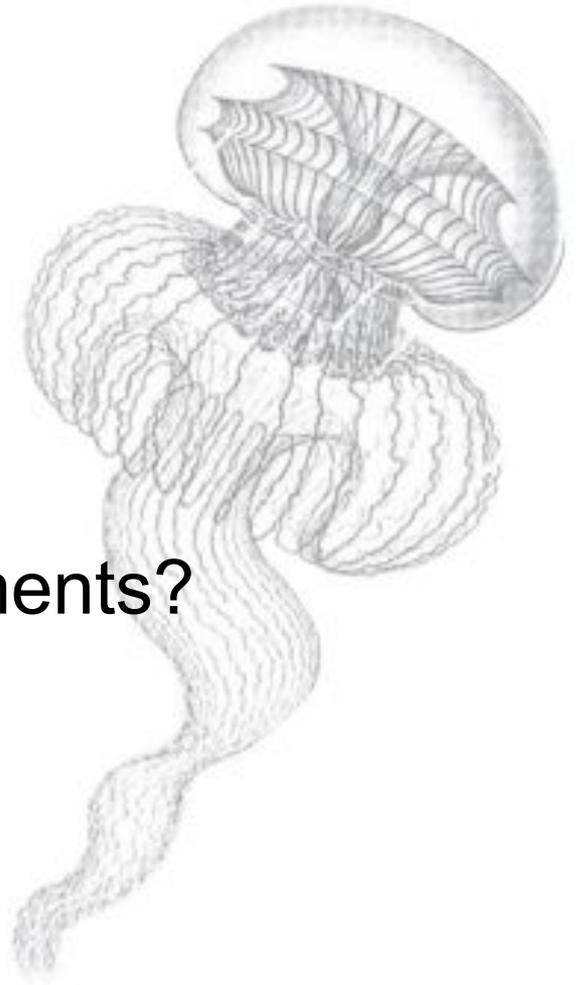
Is decolonization a useful approach for ex-Soviet feminists? Why not, for instance, intersectionality?

What is feminism / feminist activism from a decolonial perspective?



Thank you!

Questions, comments?



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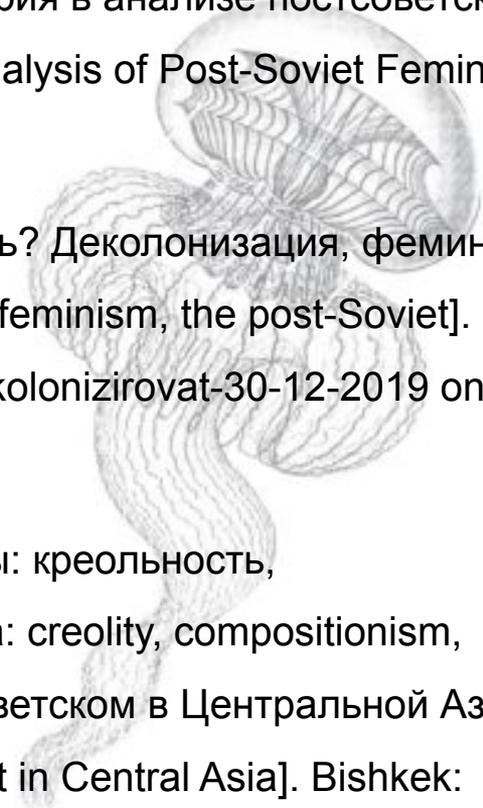


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