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The Centre Cannot Hold: Imagining the Soviet Union from the Global South

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Abstract: *Postcolonial scholarship has long called for the contestation of eurocentrism in its multiple guises. In order to decentre Europe while maintaining a nuanced grasp on spaces constituted as European, I propose a reading of the imaginative production of the Soviet Union by travellers from the global South: Specifically, Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore's* Letters from Russia (1930)*, South African writers Laurens van der Post's* Journey into Russia (1964) *and Alex La Guma's* A Soviet Journey (1978)*, and Punjabi poet Amrita Pritam's* The Revenue Stamp (1974)*, to suggest how they allow us to move beyond ossified geopolitical demarcations and received power relations. Reading together the imagined worlds produced in the accounts of these four writer-travellers recalibrates the co-ordinates of centre and periphery according to a frame better understood as Eurasian. While these imaginative constructions productively reshuffle established narratives and allocations of power, "civilisation" and "culture", they also do so by falling back on binary constructions, as well as teleological progress narratives. In this sense, these narratives display a double agenda: they might invert the binary, or displace the narrative, but keep problematic structures in place. In this article, I trace how these texts may yet afford insight into how to fracture these logics in their ability to suspend momentarily narratives of progress, and point to temporary, contingent solidarities.*

Keywords: Eurasia, eurocentrism, Eurochronology, progress narratives, solidarities, Soviet Union

1. Introduction

Postcolonial scholarship has long recognised a need to decentre "Europe". Many such formulations, however, have cumulatively had the effect of producing Europe as a monolithic unit, presumptively homogeneous within itself – which, of course, is not actually the case. Narratives of the Cold War, moreover, frequently posit this global conflict as having cleaved a clear division through Europe, in which its Eastern and Western components are assigned distinct and fixed identities. In order to work towards scholarship that both heeds the call to fracture the logics of eurocentrism in its multiple formulations, and is committed to maintaining a nuanced grasp on the variously imagined normative content of "Europe", I propose an enquiry into the imaginative production of the Soviet

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Union by travellers from the global South, instantiated by voices from India and South Africa: specifically, Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore's *Letters from Russia* (1930), South African writers Laurens van der Post's *Journey into Russia* (1964) and Alex La Guma's *A Soviet Journey* (1978), and Punjabi poet Amrita Pritam's *The Revenue Stamp* (1974). In this article, I trace how these texts may yet afford insight into how to fracture the logics of prescribed progress narratives in their capacity to momentarily suspend such imposed trajectories, and point to temporary, contingent solidarities.[1]

Celebrated Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) went to Russia as a guest of the All Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries in 1930, and *Letters from Russia* is a compendium of the letters he sent home during his two-week journey there. Originally written in Bengali and published in 1931 as *Russiar Chithi*, a full-text English version, translated by Sasadhar Sinha,[2] only became available in 1960 – partially due to efforts of the British colonial government (see Bhattacharya 2017, 238).

Laurens van der Post (1906-1996) was a South African-born white man with strong connections to England, whose travelogue *Journey into Russia* (1964) gives an account of his time in the Soviet Union in 1963, during which he travelled across great swathes of Eurasia, and claimed to "have accomplished what is perhaps the longest single journey through the Soviet Union undertaken since the war by someone who is not a Communist" (van der Post 1965, xi).[3]

Alex La Guma (1925-1985) was a South African writer and anti-apartheid activist. He went to the Soviet Union in 1975 at the invitation of the Union of Soviet Writers, and this journey, along with trips in 1970 and 1973, produced the travelogue *A Soviet Journey* (1978) (see Field 2010), a text whose aim is overtly to present a positive image of the communist project being pursued there. Originally published in English by Progress Publishers in Moscow, the book belongs to the 'Impressions of the USSR' series and forms a part of the image of itself the Soviet Union was interested in presenting abroad.

Amrita Pritam's (1919-2005) autobiography, *The Revenue Stamp*, was originally published in Punjabi in 1976, and translated into English by Krishna Gorowara,[4] published in 1994. Pritam was born into a Sikh family in Gujranwala, in what is Pakistan today, and moved to India after Partition in 1947. She is widely seen as the most significant woman of Punjabi letters, having received many prestigious awards and been translated into many Indian languages. She had several opportunities to travel in the Soviet Union, but she was not a supporter of Soviet socialism.[5]

The selection of texts from the Indian subcontinent and South Africa is not, of course, by any means to suggest a sameness of experience in the two erstwhile colonies (nor in the various socialist republics the writers travel through) – but rather to look to what overlaps and discontinuities emerge in reading them alongside each other, and what these make possible. Some narratives about this space prove remarkably resilient. But differences abound, not least within the Indian subcontinent itself, and my reading is not exhaustive or representative; it

does, however, contribute to a more refined understanding of how relationships to the Soviet Union were articulated by travellers from the global South.

Reading these texts together allows, I argue, work on several fronts. It draws out how these accounts of the USSR displace established trajectories and binaries of colonial, postcolonial and Cold War narratives. In terms of (post)colonial trajectories, such a reading complicates and re-triangulates by now somewhat dated relations of the 'empire' as 'writing back' (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1989) to a presumptive centre. My line of argument reshuffles the co-ordinates according to which *centre* and *periphery* are allocated, by looking to perspectives from the global South whose structuring principle is not the colonial centre at all. These travellers produce imaginings that render colonial western Europe altogether peripheral, calling forward mappings that locate their multiple centres in relation to co-ordinates better understood as *Eurasian*.[6] The selection and juxtaposition of these accounts also serve to illustrate that conceptualising what Europe is, can, and should be is not the continent's exclusive internal prerogative, as traditional narratives of empire might have had it. In terms of given narratives of the Cold War, my analysis draws forward the capacity of these imagined worlds to resist an assumed (moral) superiority of *western* Europe.

However, while these texts contest such canonical trajectories, they maintain the logic of imposed narratives of progress, and of fixed binary distinctions. In place of locating desirable futures for the global South in the western colonial centre, these accounts oftentimes understand the *eastern* European and *Eurasian* spaces of the Soviet Union as aspirational. Rather than dissolving the logic of prescribed teleological narratives, of which western imperialism's civilising mission is only one version, these accounts then merely ascribe a different telos: one which is located in the USSR, as opposed to in the West. Relatedly, pinning a vision of the future on to Moscow, for instance, in the place of London, may contest established arrangements of *where* the centre is located, without actually questioning *how* this works. The binary logic underwriting the production of a fixed centre deemed *ahead* or *advanced*, and peripheries deemed *backward* or *behind* remains intact even if the binaries are inverted.

Nonetheless, as my readings show, there are also moments in these texts read together that suggest the ability at least momentarily to suspend such prescribed narratives of progress, and, in Amrita Pritam, to open the door to solidarities of more contingent and temporary varieties. I turn first to the reproduction of progress narratives in these texts and how such logics might yet be fractured, and second to the attempt to complicate binary models.

2. Fracturing Narrative Progress and Narratives *of* Progress

Tagore and La Guma's accounts of the Soviet Union, though nearly fifty years separate their experiences, present the most affinities with each other. Both go to the Union as invited guests, and both are predisposed to see the good in it, in the hope of taking back with them insights or strategies that can be of help to the

struggle at home. As Jawaharlal Nehru noted, for "the hundreds of millions of Asia and Africa… inevitably, the test of each move or happening is this: Does it help towards our liberation?" (Nehru 1994, 546). This is the crucial question that structures the approach of both Tagore and La Guma to their journeys in the Soviet Union; acting as a central concern that also decentralises the Eurasian spaces they travel through. The shapes in which this help might come are various: be it abstract and aspirational, or concrete and calculable. For Tagore, the most valuable inspirations are to be found in educational innovations, as he positions himself also as a teacher intending to take the practices he has witnessed on his journey back to his school at Santiniketan in Bengal (Tagore 1960, 49, 52). For a South African freedom fighter like La Guma, there was good reason to see practical potential. Moscow's facilitation of the struggle against apartheid is well-known: "[the ANC and SACP] spearheaded the anti-apartheid struggle with financial and tactical support from the USSR and its allies" (Tolliver 2014, 379). Of course, whether this should be regarded as sincere or cynical on the part of the Soviets can be disputed:

> Whether Soviet leaders were ever genuinely interested in the plight of African nations struggling under colonial oppression and later emerging as independent states or whether they tried opportunistically to augment the USSR's sphere of influence is still a subject of debate (Popescu 2010, 9).

But that the existence of the Soviet Union and the role it might play had an effect of experienced solidarity either way is clearly evidenced in La Guma and Tagore – though Tagore's visit obviously predates the Cold War.

The journeys undertaken in these travel narratives span distances ranging from Kaunas to Bratsk, and can be read to collaboratively produce a mapping that becomes *Eurasian*. This creates a unit in which 'Europe' can be relegated to a subcontinent – it might be thought of, for instance, as western Eurasia. Alexander Beecroft points out that the narrative of Europe's purported global exceptionality was a product of a "Eurochronology" that depended on the "Orientalist constructions of other cultures" (2016, 21) as well as a wilful elision of other histories. Beecroft moves from critiquing Eurochronology to proposing a *Eurasiachronology* and extending quickly to a *Eurafrasiachronology*. [7] Eurochronology is perhaps a different articulation of the 'historicism' Dipesh Chakrabarty sets out to challenge in *Provincializing Europe*: a historicism which "posited historical time as a measure of the cultural distance[…]that was assumed to exist between the West and the non-West" (2007, 7), claiming that some peoples were "*not yet* civilised enough to rule themselves" (2007, 8). This was the progress narrative implicit to imperialism's civilising mission, which did different kinds of work for the colonial project. The positing of 'historical time' and 'cultural distance' assumed and reproduced the premise of western European culture being the *most* civilised and cultured, the most *advanced* culture, the one to be imitated and striven towards.

The texts of the travellers in the Soviet Union I discuss here interrupt and contest this narrative by relocating "culture" and cultured*ness*. As such, they produce alternative imaginings not only of Europe, and Europeanness, but also of the relations between historical time and cultural distance. Tagore implicitly critiques the establishment of this narrative of '*not yet* civilised enough' when he points to the bloody histories of Europe which it glosses over when hypocritically projecting savagery on to the colonies, while these European histories display a "primitive mind of suicidal stupidity, before which our petty barbarism must bow its head in awe" (1960, 16). His findings suggest to him, rather, that this space is far less "civilised" than it pretends, and the Soviet Union, in fact, is to be lauded for its cultural production and the capacity of its citizens to participate in and appreciate such: "One cannot imagine Anglo-Saxon peasants and workers enjoying it [the theatre] so calmly and peacefully until the small hours of the morning" (Tagore 1960, 51). Tagore's observation, also to be found in van der Post, and La Guma, is that the Soviets are *more* "civilised" and/or "cultured" than Westerners. Van der Post, falling into a literary conversation with a young chemistry student he meets, is impressed by her fluency in his literary culture: "I could not imagine her counterpart in Britain or America recognising a quotation from a poem by Pasternak…Even recognition of T.S. Eliot would have been unusual" (1965, 147). Whether in terms of one's 'own' cultural heritage, or knowledge of others', this Soviet citizen proves herself in possession of more cultural fluency than van der Post could imagine he would be able to find in the West. Of a similar interaction with a hairdresser, he observes that "[b]arbers interested in poetry may exist in Britain and America but I have yet to meet them" (van der Post 1965, 277). For La Guma, being deemed more or less "civilised" is inflected most significantly by progressiveness in terms of social justice, and concomitantly, proximity to perfectly implemented socialism. As such, the "capitalist system, disguised under…'Western civilisation'" (1978, 230), which brings with it racism and colonial oppression, is presented as the source of problems to which the Soviet Union proffers solutions. These problems, created by the "West", are the cause of the "backwardness" of his native continent. Setting to one side the question of the assumptions underwriting what constitutes "culture" and "civilisation" in these texts, it is worth noting that whatever it is, they envision a world in which the Soviets have *more* of it, or are more *advanced* in it. This is an arrangement that runs very much against dominant imaginative constructions of the continent in terms of the division between its Eastern and Western components and the putative superiority of the latter (see Todorova 2009; Wolff 1994).

A significant modulation of the "advancedness" attributed in these imagined worlds is the Soviet Union's ostensible progressiveness in terms of having overcome – having moved *past*, or *beyond* – racism and sexism. La Guma observes, "[m]ost Soviets I have met find racial discrimination difficult to comprehend and it usually takes a lot of explanation" (1978, 175). In imagining a more ideal world to be pinned to a society free of racial and gender

discrimination, these texts implicitly understand racism and sexism as "backward", and posit the Soviet Union as closer to the desired outcome, as *ahead* of the pack for having overcome such discrimination. Of course, this was also an image deliberately cultivated by the Soviets, and was popularly believed among leftists internationally at the time (see, for instance, South African leftist publications during the Cold War such as *The Guardian* and *New Age* – for which La Guma also wrote). Van der Post ruptures this narrative by noting the ongoing existence of anti-Semitism in the Union (1965, 308), and troubling the assumption of its emancipation of women (1965, 118).[8]

Tagore's and La Guma's texts thus also relocate "the future", and possible role models, in ways which displace dominant colonial teleological narratives that position the West as most advanced, while "the Rest" wallows in its belatedness. Instead, the "second" world stands as a role model for and lesson in moving past the racism, capitalism and greed which the "first" has brought as an unwanted export to the colonies. It is for this, in their imaginings, that their home countries should strive; the vision of a more desirable, just future. In Tagore and La Guma, a journey to the Soviet Union is also a journey to the future, and they look here for solutions to problems produced by the "first world". Rather than suggesting that the global South try harder to emulate Western states, these texts see an alternative route to the future.

While these narratives then displace traditional colonial arrangements of "advanced" and "backward", troubling the Eurochronology that produced these colonial allocations, they maintain basic progress narrative structures. Certainly, most of the authors, especially those with communist sympathies, reveal the limits of not being able to transcend notions of teleological progress and the backwardness that is its belated travelling companion: hence their sustained use of the language of backwardness, a language which appears to make it almost inevitable that they should imaginatively produce worlds that inferiorize the peoples of Central Asia. In this sense, they too are imbricated with and implicated in a permutation of the teleologically prescriptive historicism Chakrabarty critiques.

And yet, the capacity for these texts to fracture the logic of eurocentric paradigms is evidenced, for instance, in their ability to suspend momentarily such narratives of progress. As utopian a vision as La Guma ostensibly aims to present of the Soviet Union he produces imaginatively, there are flashpoints of unease that emerge in the narrative, which also point to its capacity to fracture the logic of progress narratives. Possibly, of course, these emerge against the grain, in a retrospective reading that is possible now, when many of the truths of the USSR not revealed by the text are known. So, for instance, a flippant observation that "there is the Central Committee keeping an eye on things" (La Guma 1978, 131) rings sinister when we know about the vast system of Soviet surveillance. The ghosts with which La Guma peoples some of the places he visits figure in this larger sense of unease too. This is clear in the contrast between the ghosts that walk the streets of Saint Petersburg/Leningrad for him, and those he finds in

Akademgorodok. In Leningrad, the "ghosts of the masters stand at your shoulder" (La Guma 1978, 31): the ghosts of Dostoevsky and Pushkin. Arriving in Akademgorodok on what turns out to be a national holiday, however, seems to allow ghosts to emerge that are perhaps more disturbing than they ought to be: "It was like walking through some ultra-modern Valley of the Dead" (La Guma 1978, 190) where he finds that "a collection of great excavated heads with grotesque faces carved from stone rose out of the lawn, snarling mouths, bulging eyes" (La Guma 1978, 190). The diction – 'grotesque', 'snarling', 'bulging' – speaks to a potential for the sinister that seems incongruent with the travelogue's agenda, and La Guma's vision of this city that ought to function as a haven for academics. Similarly incongruent and, as a result, discomfiting, are his invocations of the hellish: "in the distance a tall orange flame danced in the mist, like a ghost out of Hades, as if some of the fire of hell below had escaped through a hole…one thought of biblical pillars of flame" (La Guma 1978, 202); and his stumbling upon the devil museum of Kaunas, which archives "devils from Europe, Africa, Asia, the Indies, the Caribbean" (La Guma 1978, 221). They, too, seem out of place and ill-at-ease in a text that otherwise seeks to wholeheartedly promote a utopian vision of the Soviet Union. This is imagery that, oddly enough, resonates with van der Post's depiction: "There was something satanic, too, about these mills fuming, spinning and humming away with insect industry and obsession in the heart of Asia" (van der Post 1965, 75).

Another element of this eeriness emerges from the narrative expectations produced by the book, as the story of a journey written by a writer of fiction. So when La Guma thinks he recognises a man – "I thought I saw a man whom I recognised from Cape Town, but I was wrong" (La Guma 1978, 200) – this generates a certain expectation that something should come of it; and the fact that nothing comes of it creates a sense of narrative unease. This is even more strongly the case as La Guma expresses repeatedly a curiosity about the Trans-Siberian Rail; a fatigue with cars and flights, and a yen for both a different mode of transportation and the evocative associations of this railway line: "What I wanted was to get on the Trans-Siberian Railway back to Moscow. I was tired of aeroplanes, and after all I had heard of the railway I decided one couldn't really write a proper travel book about Russia unless one had been on the Trans-Siberian" (La Guma 1978, 163). His readers are reminded that he is a writer of fiction by his excitement at the possibility of getting "some material for a mystery thriller *a là* Agatha Christie […which one could call] *Murder on the Trans-Siberian Express*" (La Guma 1978, 163). He mentions this wish to his guide a few times, but is always casually rebuffed, as he is caused to note when he bumps into a New Zealander travelling through the Union by rail: "'Trans-Siberian Railway,' I said. 'You mean there is such a thing? I haven't seen it, let alone travel on it.' I had been hinting to my companion about travelling by the railway instead of by plane, but something seemed to be distracting his attention each time" (La Guma 1978, 191). This perpetual deferral brings him to an odd note of scepticism on one occasion: "I thought about the Trans-Siberian Railway and realised that I

had not seen the Tyumen Railway Station – perhaps it was all a myth, it didn't really exist" (La Guma 1978, 200). The implication is that he has perhaps been lied to – a possibility that is entirely viable, in a retrospective reading, given the very selective and supervised tour through the Soviet Union he has been given. The note of suspicion is, again, a note of discord in the otherwise full-throated approval of all things Soviet, which seems oddly-placed. Finally, the expectation of fulfilment of La Guma's wish to ride the train, produced by a narrative build-up, is deflated when it comes to nothing – revealing, whether the text wishes it or not, that it is not the utopian space of free movement that it is otherwise constructed as being. This anti-climax, the stunting of a narrative progression intimated by the travelogue's narrative form, thus signals formally the possibility of resistance to narrative progress, and thus narratives *of* progress. While the text is overtly confident of its prescribed teleological narratives, latently it fractures the logic of the inevitability of such ascriptions.

The stories discussed here and the histories they tell – the histories these journeys seem to elicit – also deny the not-yetness of such narratives of progress, pointing to the multiple kinds of civilised*ness* at play in starkly non-Western spaces, as well as disturbing the linearity of such progress. In this way, the texts discussed here are able to "release into the space occupied by particular European histories sedimented in them other normative and theoretical thought enshrined in other existing life practices and their archives…[so that] we can create plural normative horizons" (Chakrabarty 2007, 20).

3. Complicating Binaries: Towards Empathy

I turn now to how some binary logics of *us* and *them* may also yet be complicated. In building solidarities between the Soviet Union and the global South, Tagore and La Guma both participate in producing the "first" world as a wicked West. As depicted in Tagore, this "West" pretends to being more civilised, but is in fact the home of greater barbarisms, and of a greed exported with colonisation: "The pride arising from the difference in wealth has come to our country from the West" (Tagore 1960, 8). While Tagore and La Guma relocate the "centre", in that the aspirational space of colonialism's 'civilising mission' is displaced as the Union serves rather as model to be emulated, this construction does produce and proceed from the bloc binary underwriting these solidarities. It implicitly grants and perpetuates fixed divisions of the world into communist/capitalist, East/West, and colonised/coloniser. Van der Post and Pritam, I suggest, offer two very different means to dissolve the structuring of these blocs.

While in Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg), van der Post comes to realise why it is that his experience of the Soviet Union has so often been inflected by a sense of something shared with (South) Africa. It is because the Russians are "still a relatively primitive people" (van der Post 1965, 283), and it is a primitiveness he recognises and understands from having grown up in (South) Africa. Crucially for him, however, Russians are still *Europeans*. He becomes acutely aware of this in Leningrad:

> [H]ow European the city of Peter the Great still is. Visually, of course, one could not have failed to recognise the supremely European expression of the architecture […] But despite the revolution and three generations of Soviet indoctrination, the mind, spirit, behaviour and inborn values and affinities seem still surprisingly to be of northern Europe (van der Post 1965, 281).

It is implicit that the *European* architecture of this *European* city is superior to the provincial and imitative Moscow he describes earlier; as it is that the "values and affinities" that have won out over "indoctrination" are to be treasured and safeguarded. To make the point of the Russians' Europeanness, he calls not only on his understanding of "European values" – a phrase of which we should always be wary – but also on reasons historical and ethnic: "the great Slav family to which the Russians belong, was once a vital element of the coming and going of peoples in Europe north of the Danube, Alps and Rhine" (van der Post 1965, 281). This speaks to an elided "part of their and our common history" (van der Post 1965, 281). Where once van der Post saw a radically other world, as upon his arrival in Moscow, through the lens of a shared Europeanness, he is able to produce a "common history". And it is important that the world take heed of this:

> It is urgent for the world – and indeed the Russians too – to realise that in their depths they are a part of Europe. All this talk about Russians being half Asiatic and half European seemed to me valid only in externals. The Russians are basically a European people (van der Post 1965, 282).

Instinctively for van der Post, this turn to Europe comes with a turn away from Asia; he must make the argument for Europe through an argument against Asia; the dissolution of the binary within Europe depends on the assertion of its outside border: "these wars with Europe[…]were brief and small in comparison with the wounds that Asia inflicted on Russia[…]Besides these, the wars with Europe[…] are like a series of frontier skirmishes" (van der Post 1965, 282). Conflicts between Russia and "Europe" – the stand-in terms here for communist-East and capitalist-West – are as quibbles between siblings; the true other is further East: "wary as is the eye that Russia keeps on Europe, it is casual and trusting in comparison with that long, constant, over-the-shoulder look towards the East" (van der Post 1965, 283). For van der Post, "this thin golden thread of Europeanism remains unbroken […] Even when Constantinople fell and the Turks swarmed over the Balkans" (van der Post 1965, 283). "Swarming" Turks foreshadows language used in current-day formulations against the entry of migrants into Europe: language that is dehumanising and racialized. Van der Post is trying to salvage a *Europeanness* that is clearly also a (Christian) *whiteness*, for the Russians. The implication is that recognising this is what could resolve both the Cold War, as a conflict hinging on the binary of East bloc versus West bloc, and save the Russians, also from themselves. The 'golden thread of Europeanism' is a thread of whiteness, which legitimates an affinity between

these two sides of the Iron Curtain that is not imaginable in the text with the peoples of Central Asia or Southern Africa. This Europeanness, this shared whiteness, is what binds them together, and anchors them in a narrative of ethnic and historical belonging, to a shared continent. It is thus that van der Post works to dissolve the binary within Europe by displacing it further East. Again, the logic remains in place – not to mention the racial logic underpinning this construction, which is also to be found in more current formulations.

Pritam works, I argue, more effectively to complicate bloc binary thinking by intimating solidarities of momentary and contingent varieties through her modulation of empathetic connections. These solidarities manifest personally and politically, yet they are not bound by the fixed binary model underwriting the politics of Tagore, La Guma, and, in a different arrangement, van der Post. One way in which these moments of empathy crystallise is in their capacity to dissolve the otherness that might otherwise exist between the European-Eurasian spaces she visits and Indian ones. This is in play in terms of relationships to the past, which teaches of overlapping histories of victimage when she visits a village church outside Sofia where "in 1876, 2000 men, women, and children took shelter against the invading Turkish hordes"[9] (Pritam 1996, 49), and notes that, "[a]s in Jallianwala Bagh in the Punjab, the walls too are perforated with bullets" (Pritam 1996, 50). But it also takes positive form, such as when she finds a character named Radha in a Bulgarian novel she's reading: "How's Radha a Bulgarian? Krishna was an Indian […] or was it that she fled all the way from Bulgaria to meet him in India?" (Pritam 1996, 50). This playfulness with and in literature allows her to invent Krishna and Radha as a story shared with Bulgaria – implicitly rejecting Eurocentric historicism. Pritam allows these stories to link up and merge. Another such move is made when she recalls at a museum in the Armenian capital Yerevan: "Nomads by tradition, some Armenians had written in Tamil when they had, in the course of their wanderings, settled down in southern India" (Pritam 1996, 52). In each instance, she closes the gaps between the Indian and the European-Eurasian space she is in, and dissolves otherness by noting what is, could be, and possibly always was, shared. This is powerfully the case when, in August 1968, she reads the headlines that reveal the Soviet Russian occupation of Czechoslovakia. She writes, "My self merged into millions of strange selves" (Pritam 1996, 136). Her empathy is acute; she feels herself become these others. As Martha Nussbaum has it,

> All the major emotions are 'eudaimonistic, meaning that they appraise the world from the person's own viewpoint […] the ones who will stir deep emotions in us are the ones to whom we are somehow connected through our imagining of a valuable life […] our 'circle of concern'. If distant people and abstract principles are to get a grip on our emotions, therefore, these emotions must somehow position them within our circle of concern, creating a sense of 'our' life in which these people and events matter as parts of our 'us', our own flourishing. For this movement to take place, symbols and poetry are crucial (2013, 11).

Nussbaum emphasises the work "symbols and poetry" do for the task of widening our "circle of concern". She understands the task to be one of enlarging the circle of that which we deem relevant and connected to ourselves. For La Guma, this is achieved through an international socialist community – a community that depends on a fixed binary construction of a communist-anti-apartheid us and a capitalist-racist them. La Guma's logic is premised on the bloc binaries of colonised versus coloniser, and Soviet Union versus 'the West'. Since coloniser and 'the West' are broadly understood as overlapping, the colonised and Soviet camps have obvious reason to align themselves as one communist bloc in shared political belonging *against* a monolithically construed capitalist-colonising-West. Pritam, by contrast, enlarges her (and her readers') circle of concern not to include the Soviet bloc as fixed unit, but to differentiate within that bloc and build empathy for some of its citizens.

Pritam's poetry and the human interactions she describes in her memoir reveal the capacity of poetry to portray her emotional responses to the suffering of others, her sense of these others as parts of her *us*, or her "self", and also (and occasionally thereby) make these matter to her readers. She is able to move "others" into her readers' circle of concern by showing in her poetry how they move into her own. After Russian tanks rolled into Prague in 1968, she writes a poem inspired by these events that she never finishes:

If a bullet is fired at me in Hanoi
And again………in Prague—
A sort of smoke floats in the air
The self within me aborts
And dies a premature death….

(Pritam 1996, 136; emphasis in original).

Her speaker occupies the me that is shot at. She draws connections to both Vietnam and Czechoslovakia, and places her "self" in each. This is a "language of self-estrangement" that Leela Gandhi identifies in her "politics of friendship" as a hallmark of those who "loosen themselves from the security and comfort of old affiliations and identifications to make an unexpected 'gesture' of friendship" (2006, 189). Pritam follows the unfinished poem with another about the Czechs' silent protest, called 'My Address':

Today I effaced my house number and the name of the street where I live. I wiped away the direction of every road; and still if you must search me out, just knock at the door in each street of each city of each country.
It's a curse, a benediction – both …and wherever you find a free soul, that is my home!
(Pritam 1996, 138; emphasis in original).

Neither poem is an expression of sympathy for an Other who suffers. Rather, both imaginatively take on that suffering for the self, thus circumventing the "risks of justice defined in terms of sympathy or compassion: justice then becomes a sign of what I can give to others, and works to elevate some subjects over others, through the reification of their capacity for love or 'fellow-feeling'" (Ahmed 2010, 195). Pritam's text makes it possible to imagine a world in which empathetic emotion, enabled by poetry, draws together people occupying different positionalities in friendship. This imagined world pulls India and the socialist spaces Pritam visits and hears about closer to each other without requiring the drawing of a border elsewhere (as in van der Post), asserting a willingness and a capacity to dissolve thinking premised on bloc binaries, while still enacting a commitment to others which is personal and political.

4. Keeping the Centre on the Move

Reading these accounts of the Soviet Union alongside each other instigates a broad-angle view that reveals how all the worlds imagined in these texts also exist alongside each other: sometimes they connect, sometimes complement, sometimes contradict. These varied, multiple worlds must be kept alive simultaneously: to animate their heterogeneity; and not to settle on any one world they suggest. Each of these texts does something specific, and in conversation with each other, can do something more. Tagore and La Guma together suggest how their imaginaries might complement each other across time and distance to create, despite many differences, a pool of shared aims and ideals, as both find in the Soviet Union something to be aspired to and inspired by. Van der Post, by contrast, a white voice with western allegiances but claiming simultaneous South Africanness, has a different agenda, revealing, alongside the former two, what his positioning makes him blind to, as well as what Tagore and La Guma choose not to register. Pritam, in her capacity to poetically communicate acute empathy, points to the potential of building momentary solidarities through her poetry. Van der Post and Pritam are both critical of socialism and its Soviet implementation, which leads them to formulate very different modes of critique. Pritam and La Guma together are able to point to ways to transcend fixed binary constructions and progress narratives that otherwise emerge in the texts.

Tagore and La Guma invert certain binaries and displace traditional colonial and postcolonial trajectories between colonised peripheries and colonising centre. They reject the binary construction of the "cultured, civilised West" versus the "uncultured, uncivilised East", producing in its stead a dichotomous vision of the *progressive* Soviet Union against the wicked West. Yet inversion and displacement do not equate to a dissolution of such logics. While these stories and their worlds trouble the narratives of progress sold by the imperial project's civilising mission in its various forms, they do not do away with prescriptive teleology. In the passionately communist La Guma, for one, a Marxist faith in the inevitable turn to socialism merely replaces the desired telos.

As a result, narratives of attributed *backwardness* are essentially maintained, but invested with different content. For the most part, they appear in two permutations: backwardness as having further to go on the progressive trajectory towards a socially just world; and backwardness as cultural primitiveness. In Tagore and La Guma, the Soviet Union is ahead on both counts; even van der Post opines that it is ahead culturally in some instances.

In a parallel stroke, while these reconfigured mappings may postulate different desired endgames to those of the imperial project's narratives, and as such locate different centres onto which to project their desires and aspirations – Moscow as the locus of desirable culture as opposed to London or Paris as the cradle of a coveted civilised*ness* – the logic of a (single) centre and peripheries demarcated accordingly remains intact, along with the power imbalances that this usually entails. Moreover, this rearrangement departs from the assumptions of the cleavage of Cold War Europe into distinct camps, and of narratives in which the dissolution of the USSR is read as evidence of the (moral) superiority of the Western bloc: inverting the hierarchy of which is better or more desirable, but re-inscribing the binary logic of East versus West. Ideally, however, postcolonial scholarship might take as one of its tasks also the problematizing of such fixed binaries and (colonial) logics of prescribed progress. In this paper's mapping of alternative Europes (and, indeed, Eurasias) with alternative centres, then, the implicit plurality of these centres is crucial. It is not sufficient to move from one centre to another and maintain otherwise problematic structures to produce a new fixed locus of power. Hence my interest in coproducing multiple mappings that emerge from the variously inflected worlds imagined by these texts.

However, the journey narratives I discuss here can also be read as merely forging a new fixed centre and being heavily invested in binary constructions – most clearly, for Tagore and La Guma, a communist-anticolonial *us* and a capitalist-colonial *them*. This is part and parcel of what makes their envisionings so valuable: pointing simultaneously to the limitations of their decolonial politics, and the capacity to stretch these; illuminating how the politics of decolonisation might (have) depend(ed), to some extent, on the notion of such fixed sides. The writers whose work I discuss here, who were also politically active, point to the possibility that for their politics, at least, binary thinking served a necessary purpose – most evident, for instance, in La Guma. A loosening or dissolution of Cold War binaries is moreover, perhaps surprisingly, suggested by van der Post – using mechanisms of which, as I argue, we should be very wary. Finally, Pritam offers cues to a less troubled dissolution of bloc binaries through her poetry's capacity to facilitate and illustrate momentary solidarities.

Notes

[1] I would like to thank Dirk Wiemann, Shaswati Mazumdar, and Jennifer Wawrzinek, as well as my reviewers, for their insights.

[2] It is from this translation that I develop my reading.
[3] I include van der Post in awareness of the racism implicit in his writing, as well as troubling revelations about his having impregnated a fourteen-year-old girl (Jones 2002), for the larger picture this serves, and because it allows me to articulate the mechanisms by which he produces a specific understanding of Europeanness that is essentially racial.
[4] This is the translation I work from.
[5] Each of these writers reveals moments of insight and moments of blindness: Tagore's attitude to the peoples of Central Asia, van der Post's racism, and La Guma's wilful blindness to the gulag are problematic. The purpose of this paper is to argue – with an eye to their limitations – for how reading these texts alongside each other can be rendered productive and enabling.
[6] I build here on previous work, in which I argue for *Eurasia* as a more appropriate categorical–cartographical framework for thinking this space and the connections and (hi)story-telling it stages and fosters (see Gasser 2019).
[7] While I find the addition of Africa to this amalgam inviting, I argue here for an idea of Eurasia, and not of Eurafrasia, because that is what emerges from the texts I discuss. My argument would, I believe, be enriched by texts that imagine a Eurafrasia, and this might well constitute a valuable site for further research. Nonetheless, the principles that I aim to illustrate with a concept of Eurasia are borne out also within these parameters.
[8] For more insight on this, see, for instance, Pauline Podbrey's autobiography (1993).
[9] "Invading Turkish hordes" is, of course, also loaded language.

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