

Interview



“Geo-corporeal politics of knowledge”: An interview with Madina Tlostanova

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Introduction by Mateo Villamil-Valencia

On a bright afternoon in late March 2025, Madina Tlostanova and I sat on the rooftop of the Niagara building in Malmö, Sweden, to discuss several aspects of her work and the intellectual connections to the academic efforts of the Nordic Network of Global South Urbanisms (NEGSU). During our conversation, we addressed the dialectical logic of the capitalist city and the tensions and potential exits of modernity/coloniality. Specifically, we talked about the interstices through which scholar and activist intervention create decolonized spaces, where social transformation accelerates in what I would call are centripetal trajectories (Villamil Valencia, 2024). Madina reflected on the colonial mandate of urban design(s) and its systemic dehumanization. In contrast, we also reflected on current and historic reactions to hegemonic urban regimes, the possibilities of human agency, and the ability to adapt and adjust. Malmö is a great example of such a process. I perceive a creolization of the urban dynamics in Sweden's third-largest city, as people reshape them to fit the actual needs of its inhabitants.

On the other hand, Abdelkebir Khatibi's (1983) double critique was useful to illustrate the dynamics of current decolonial movements: it warns us about both nativist essentialism and Western assimilation. In Madina's example from Kazakhstan, the intervention of an art center, a *decolonial gesture*, questions the monopoly on knowledge and representation. In addition, we talked about the Sámi people and the need to connect with their intellectual struggle and to establish different sorts of networks: among migrant scholars, with local activists, and through the lens of global South perspectives. The context suggests that a path toward decolonization involves embracing impurity and complexity as María Lugones's (1994) seminal work suggests. Against the increasing hyper-specialization of knowledge, anticolonial scholars from the South must advocate for a more holistic understanding of the city, and to value messy, non-homogenous, and entangled subjects and interactions.

Lastly, when asked about a particular dimension of global South urban communities that she finds distinctive, Professor Tlostanova recalled the power of traditional knowledge related to healing, curing, and strengthening bodies and souls.

Interview transcript (edited)

MVV: Okay, well, first of all, thank you, Madina, for being here, for accepting this interview. First, if we think about the idea of this “geo-corporeal politics of knowledge”, how is the capitalist/colonial city at odds with what you call the most personal, effective, and embodied forms of inhabiting places?

MT: Okay, it's a very interesting and complex question, of course. Because I think that decolonial thought, the way it was first formulated wasn't really focusing on urban environments, or specifically on the cities. In contrast with postcolonial studies, where the postcolonial city has been for a while the center of attention. So, it's somehow new, and I think that in some ways, it's part of a larger decolonial framework that deals with designing precisely, and with rethinking the pluriverse... And it comes through that kind

of channel, so to say. But I think that it's a very important part of coloniality/decoloniality thinking, because urban design and urban management are very much connected with modernity/coloniality as a set of frames of worlding, of seeing the world, of relating to the world. And in that sense, it actually works right into the gist of how coloniality defines the self and disciplines itself in certain ways. And, not only the self, but the environment in a broad understanding. I think that if we can discuss colonial cities, we, to some extent, can also discuss ways of decolonizing city spaces, and colonial urbanities. Although I would be very critical about the idea that we can decolonize the city – we cannot. It's a process. We can do it for a while, but it's never coming to any concrete, finished results. So, it's more about activism, urban activism, epistemic activism, and design activism, trying to create these spaces within the city that would be more decolonized, with more decoloniality features than the usual modern colonial city.

MVV: How does the colonial/capitalist city conflict with the “geo-corporeal politics of knowledge”? Is the act of inhabiting also at odds with the colonial/capitalist city, and how would you describe this contradiction?

MT: I agree that there is a contradiction, because you see that some of these framings and some of these designs are not human friendly, let's say, or not friendly to certain cultures and certain temperaments. But at the same time, I think human beings are amazing in the way they adjust and change things. So that we can *creolize* things in a broader understanding of the terms. So, we always change environments to somehow fit what we need. And this is what happened in all these imperial designs that we were discussing, but it also happens in Malmö, and that is why I like Malmö, for instance. Because it's one of the places where you see this in action. And that's what gives the city its vibrant quality and its human quality to me. In that sense, it is very different from many other places in Sweden. And this multicultural quality, which is very important also, this diversity of cultures, can be felt here. Although there is a certain contrast with the buildings, I think it's not about the buildings, it's more about what people do with them.

MVV: How can we use Abdelkebir Khatibi's double critique to understand diverse, and so-called “super-diverse,” urban settings such as Malmö?

MT: Oh, that's a good question! How do you use the *double critique*? Because, of course, when Khatibi originally used the term, remember that he was speaking about the global coloniality of knowledge, especially in reference to the global North that was orientalizing Morocco and generally the North African cultures. And then the local frameworks and mechanisms and institutes of discrimination, the traditionalism and the interplay of that. I would say that a lot of people now use it also in Europe, speaking about the interplay of imperialism and internal nationalist movements, how they clash, and how there is this kind of balance that needs to be kept. But in terms of urbanity, it's hard to say. Because the only way sometimes is... I mean, we're not going to go and destroy the imperial buildings, right? They are there. We can destroy maybe some monuments, as it happens all over the world. But in general, I think it's more a way of changing something in how we perceive them and perhaps changing some details in these buildings in the way they're structured. And by doing it, we can question their monopoly on knowledge production,

and how they are representing themselves – as seriously as they do. I have an example from Kazakhstan. I collaborate with people there who are making a very interesting project called Tselinny. And Tselinny is a center for contemporary art that was created about 10 years ago or so. And now they're finally moving to the real building that was being reconstructed for many years. And the building is like an old Soviet movie theater, which was called Tselinny. It was a project of the 1960s under Nikita Khrushchev, when we were forcing people to go to Kazakhstan, which is a steppe area, and develop agriculture there because there was a belief that we were going to grow corn, grains, and all that. It didn't work in the end, but it was very popular. So that's why it was named after this movement, and it was full of this modernizing spirit. Then, of course, it went out of business and now the building has been given to this center. And they want to keep the title because it's connected with certain colonial socialist histories, but at the same time to change it. They told me that maybe they will remove one letter from the title. Maybe they will do something else with the building to show that they are not entirely accepting the legacy, but at the same time they don't want to just erase it and, for example, destroy the building. And that, I think, is very complex. There are very entangled histories and relations with what happened. Maybe at this point this is the only thing they can do. I would think that it will be interesting to see projects like that also in this part of the world... How people can work in a decolonial way, not by destroying, but by doing some decolonial gestures to buildings.

MVV:How can we connect or reconnect anti-colonial intellectual endeavors with locally grounded histories?

MT: First, locally grounded histories are also very diverse, and some of them are more mainstream and are trying to also fit into the mainstream, Western sort of understanding. And there's a lot of that in this region. But there are also others, like, for example, if we speak of Sweden, Norway, or Finland, a Sámi story. There are indigenous Sámi people here who are still struggling now with this settler colonial state, and they are losing everything: their lifestyle, their land, everything. So, it's an ongoing struggle and now it's more visible than before. I think this is a local version and example of an anticolonial struggle which is still active. In many ways, it does connect with what is happening in the global South with indigenous groups. And it provides something very unique and different because it's a European indigenous people living in the north of Europe... Right? And that is not very visible in Canada or in Australia or in the US in Indigenous Studies. In that sense, they add something really unique. We probably need to have more collaborations with Sámi so they are not left alone in their struggle as well. There is so much in common between the people who are more or less migrant scholars, or newcomers from the global South, with them, because in the end we all are in this position of global South "representatives" in the North who are trying to carve a space for ourselves and also make sense of what we do. There should be some collaborative links and connections with them. But also with local people. I mean, there are also some movements, activists, and organizations in Nordic countries. Their problem is that they are very detached from global South perspectives, and they don't know the language of that. I mean, it's known in academia, maybe, but not among the activists. So, that also needs to be more developed, I

think. And it's one of the tasks that we have also as researchers. It's very hard though, because the university, again, functions on its own level... Somewhere, right? So, you don't just go there and meet with them. You must somehow become connected. Still, when I do have a chance to meet such people, I see that there's so much in common, so many things in common between us, but we all exist in our own spaces, and that is a problem. And for me, I mean, again, for instance, it is a problem. I don't want to write about Sweden, because I feel like I'm a foreigner here and will always be. So, I feel I don't have the right to criticize Sweden. But I can write about how we feel as foreigners in Swedish academia, which I do. I mean, the forms of intellectual discrimination that exist here... But to write about Sweden as an object of analysis? I cannot. Yes, I agree, sometimes it creates an issue of... you are displaced in a certain kind of strange space, right? And then you keep writing about the South, or you keep writing about something else, and then... how does it work? How do you keep your connection with that? That is an issue for all of us, but I think we need to work more on creating these collaborative spaces with what we have here, and maybe make an effort to learn more, first about these kinds of organizations and movements, and then try to make an effort and connect.

MVV: I found these very interesting two concepts in your work, complexity and impurity. How do we embrace and explore complexity and impurity in a useful manner?

MT: Well, I don't know if we explore it or use it, but it's there. Complexity is a fact of life. But the problem is that, again, academic framing prevents us from realizing the complexity of the world, of the crisis, because it's disciplinarily-organized and areas-organized, and each discipline studies from its perspective, very specific, very narrow, a set of issues. And it doesn't go elsewhere. And if you do interdisciplinary research, it's still difficult. It's not that easy, because most of the knowledge is organized within disciplines. I think this is one of the major issues with knowledge production, generally modernity, and it continues to be so. So, in order to even be aware, fully aware of the complexity, you must to some extent abandon that frame that we are taught in the university and elsewhere. Because in most cases, we're not even able to realize that complexity. I guess in that sense, it must go back to some more holistic knowledge, and that's very hard, because knowledge is utterly specialized. So, the more specialized it becomes, the less we understand the world. And unfortunately, the current trends of artificial intelligence and data collection... We can collect all sorts of data, but see, we know now more about the world, but understand increasingly less, because we don't know how to interpret all that data. We can only store it, and that's what I see as a problem. And that's why you need several disciplines, and you need people who cross disciplines to even start understanding anything.

And impurity comes right there. Right? It cannot be about the purity of a discipline, defending the borders of your disciplines. Or countries, or whatever. You know, identities are very messy. And I think that it was María Lugones, Argentinian philosopher and feminist, queer thinker who wrote about it first in one of her articles, which is actually very old. She wrote it before *the decolonial option*^[1] came into view, where she talks about impurity. And she uses, as usual, metaphors from the kitchen. She talks about her mother who was teaching her how to make mayonnaise, and when you make it, you can actually

make *one mistake*, and then it doesn't work, because you use oil and you use eggs, and they don't mix very well, or if they do, then you don't have the right consistency, because mayonnaise is not a mixture, it's an emulsion. So, she was using this metaphor to explain what she meant. [Coloniality] is not that you completely assimilate and become something new, and it's not homogenous. It's always impure. It's always in different states and conditions. That is what she meant, and she always insisted on this impurity. I think it is such a disliked concept by modernity because it requires clear-cut visions.

MVV: What aspects of the so-called non-Western or “Global South” societies do you find most compelling, interesting or enjoyable?

MT: Well... It's difficult to be original here, because food is one of those things that work on the most basic level. For me, it would be food, but I wouldn't go there. I think it's more the sense of *life*, *liveliness*, and *presence of life* that sometimes I lack. Also, I'm into herbs. So even living in Russia, which is a very unpleasant and cold place... But somehow it has kept this. You can go to the apothecary, and you can buy different medicinal herbs. So, instead of taking chemicals, if you have a cold there, you can make this or that herb. And this is knowledge that you have known since childhood, and that is what I totally miss here, where whatever happens to you, you have to take paracetamol. It is depressing to me, because there are so many other options in the world, but they somehow disappear.

MVV: Thank you. It's been very nice. Thank you.

MT: Thank you for the wonderful questions.

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Madina Tlostanova is a feminist thinker and fiction writer, and a professor of gender studies at Linköping University in Sweden. Her interests include decoloniality, feminist theories from the Global South, the postsocialist human condition, fiction and art, and critical future studies. Her most recent collection of essays and speculative fiction is *Narratives of Unsettlement. Being Out-of-Joint as a Generative Human Condition* (Routledge, 2023). Currently, she is working on a monograph on the stateless future.



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