Introduction

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INTRODUCTION
Balkan Transnationalism at the Time of Neoliberal Catastrophe

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The collapse of Real Socialism ushered in the unification of two Europes. United Europe as a new political entity without a previous history which has formally denounced colonialism and anti-Semitism, it somehow deserves a clean slate and the right to shift ownership of its colonial histories to former colonial subjects and their national histories. On the one hand, East Europeans denounce any role in the Europe’s colonial history, on the other hand, neoliberalism figures today as Europe’s internal neocolonialism. In the case of the Balkans, the neoliberal normalization of the unruly Balkans failed both at the periphery and at the center. Today’s economic nationalists are now euro-autocrats and the most vocal proponents of fiscal conservatism, austerity, the Protestant work-ethic and the ultimate “Europeanization.” This special issue of the neoliberal Balkans interrogates a neocolonial reconfiguration of the entire region as a massive social overhaul, which includes at once global integration and local social disintegration.

Endless neocolonial wars, genocides, refugee crises, sovereign debt, global warming, racism – all define the present conditions of global crisis, of what
Walter Benjamin would have called the catastrophe of European Modernity and what Naomi Klein calls disaster capitalism, to signify a time of the accumulation of problems for which there are no solutions other than staying the course of planetary destruction. In retrospect it appears that after defeating Fascism and Stalinism, western liberal democracy succeeded in rendering the catastrophe of its becoming as a unified destiny of a diverse world. Europe as a whole and the Balkans as its Southeastern region, while fully conscious of geographic and economic globalism, display a shocking absence of global colonial awareness. The very idea of a United Europe rests on the creeping assumption that because the European Union is a new political entity without a previous history and because it has formally denounced colonialism and anti-Semitism, it somehow deserves a clean slate and the right to shift ownership of its colonial histories to former colonial subjects and their national histories. For their part, East Europeans denounce any role in Europe’s colonial history. The present unification of two Europes overpowers the significance of Europe’s colonial past and obligations.

The collapse of real socialism forced the historiographies of the victorious liberal democracies and of the defeated socialist regimes to begin articulating a United Europe as a new historiographic project rendered as a place of shared and overlapping histories. According to Maria Todorova, post-Cold War Europe “emerges as a complex palimpsest of differently shaped entities, not only exposing the porosity of integral frontiers, but also questioning the absolute stability of the external ones” (2009, 202). What makes the Balkans such an easy fit in this new postcolonial Europe without colonies and race is the very notion, argued by Todorova, of the Balkans’ lack of colonial and racial history – the Balkans are white Europeans and were never colonial space—and yet the Balkans had racial laws during World War II, sent their Jews to concentration camps, and had official racial discourses about racial minorities such as Jews, Roma, Muslims and other ethnic minorities. The reality on the ground seems somewhat different. Instead of “the porosity of integral frontiers,” barbed wire and immigrant camps defend today’s European frontiers from undesirable races (De Genova 2017, 20) and, as David Goldberg notes, this itself is a mode of racialization: “Racial europeanization has rendered race unmentionable, unspeakable if not as reference to an anti-Semitism of the past that cannot presently be allowed” (2006, 339). Underneath EU sovereign unity looms an administrative war on immigrants as spatial–racial enemies in which the Balkans holds the frontline. By becoming a part of the EU’s legal system, the Balkans cannot any longer claim colonial and racial exceptionalism.

The integration of the Balkans into European economic, political, and legal institutions, also known as the “Europeanization” of the Balkans, represents a massive social overhaul, which includes at once global integration and local social disintegration, a neocolonial reconfiguration of the entire region.
We should mention some of the aspects of this double-edged process in order to illustrate the extent to which what is known as disaster capitalism fully applies to the present economic, political, and cultural reality of the Balkans. A critical response to this crisis calls for a transnational perspective—one that engages the global crisis at a national context and treats national themes and crises as variations of the global crisis. The neocolonial reconfiguration of the Balkan political sphere can be summarized as the loss of national sovereignty to the geopolitical interests of the West’s financial capital, and the totality of political praxis on the local level. The new Hot-Cold War with Russia and Nato’s nesting military industrial complex in the Balkans adds to the perennial trauma of past wars urging fragmented ethnic groups to relocate resources from reconstructing their ruined societies to intensifying militarization and further exposing their “bare lives” to collective vegetation, slow death, and the birth of a new zoëpolitics of massive unemployment. On the cultural level, categories of “race,” “whiteness,” and “internal colonialism,” which were not part of the Balkan “Ottoman legacy,” have entered the Balkan postcolonial discourse-geography. Although these categories hold discursive locations as “stereotypes,” today they are the product of a neocolonial economy of debt: financial capital captures labour through the schemes of unpayable debt and coerces labour to surrender its national sovereignty and submit itself to its debtor as a forced labourer, which is another definition of race and colonialism. To understand today’s Balkans as the site of economic subjection, as a domain of new technologies of the Balkan Self, as one indebted to global capital, one must examine such dispositifs; for example, some economic techniques, intensities, and forms of financial “colonization” and their underlying condition of possibility equal to the production of race; in other words, a set of problems, solutions, and their critique calling for categories and knowledge-apparatuses which transcend Balkan exceptionalism.

Considering the shift of ideological and interpretative schemes in light of the neoliberal totalization of the Balkans, the aim of this special issue of Interventions is to demonstrate the ways in which the analytical categories of race, financialization, corporate culture, colonialism, Orientalism (“Yes, we are the lazy Balkans!”), etc., common to liberal democracies as well as to postcolonial analysis, could be applicable and constitutive of a new Balkan discourse-geography not only theoretically but also historically. For too long the national paradigm dominated Balkan historiography and ignored the global perspective and regional transferability of categories suggested by Gramsci, Said, and the theories of the Global South. For example, it is historically arguable that there are links between Balkan nationalism and colonialism, between the birth of Black Power in the United States and Balkan nationalism, as well as between Balkan nationalism and Zionism. The national emancipation of the small Balkan nations from the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires
and their federalist aspirations had served Leon Trotsky’s “permanent revolution” as a model for the creation of a Black Republic in the American South and the subsequent creation of a workers’ federation with White America. The Balkan national liberation from Ottoman rule inspired Zionism’s hopes to do the same in Palestine – the participation of Balkan Zionists in the ethnic cleansing of the West Bank arguably reconstitutes race relations into a new type of race relations between the victims of the Holocaust and the victims of the Zionist colonization of Palestine, which makes Said’s Orientalism internal to Balkanism and vice versa. As a result of the victory over Nazi occupation under the rule of Tito, Yugoslavia became a model for anticolonial liberation throughout the Third World, as well as one of the centres of non-alignment.

And finally, how should we understand the “transnationalism” of the Balkans? Because of these structural changes at the global level, Balkanization may figure as a possible global discursive grid of social disintegration caused by global neoliberal totalization. As presented here, transnationalism should be understood as a discourse that wishes to exploit certain elements of the contradictions of this term; “nationalism” is a local and political desire to be particular, while “trans” refers to a plane of global and universal interconnectedness; put together they make “transnationalism,” which reverses the universal–particular, cosmopolitan–parochial binary. This may already appear as a completed task, since postcolonial discourse had already provincialized Europe. The difference can be described in terms of a “colonial boomerang effect,” Balkanism, as a discourse invented by Enlightenment Europe to represent in contrast to its colonial race its internal race has returned home to roost. While postcolonial analysis demythologized Europe as a universal scheme of Modernity and as the cosmopolitan centre of the world by arguing the schemes of modernizations extended beyond Europe by way of global capitalism and are still subject to local “translation,” Balkan transnationalism argues the provincialization of Europe is also self-inflicted and internal as much as it is external, in that Europe provincializes itself in and through a process of self-Balkanization as the “boomerang effect” of Europe’s orientalism.

A few introductory notes about the essays in this special issue. Miglena S. Todorova’s essay “Foreign Investment Inflows to Former Socialist Countries in the Balkans: Mapping Global Capitalism” examines the ways in which capital investments from Germany, Holland, Italy, India, China, and Russia fragment the unitary structures of the Balkan postsocialist economies into profitable “economic zones” for the acquisition of local skilled labour. Rather than function as stable zones of industrial production, the Balkan postsocialist economies offshore labour in India and China and are stepping stones for India and China’s entry into EU markets. These economic changes alter the preexisting socialist ethnic, racial, and educational
landscape, while exhorting its geopolitical interest on the local governments and supporting local anti-minority politics on the international scene much as they do in India, China, and Russia. Such dramatic changes caused by the new neoliberal economy point to the fact that in the neoliberal Balkans as well as elsewhere the economy is not a segment of society but rather its totality; the global economy of debt preconditions the creation of surplus value by way of using the narrative of fiscal capitalism to depoliticize class resistance and convert labour into “human capital” taxed for its colonialization.

More than any of the other Balkan countries, Greece experienced the most dramatic exposure to the neoliberal economy of debt and to the racialization of labour. Radman Šelmić’s transnational comparative analysis of the Greek and Thai financial crises, “Financialization in the Crypto-Colonies: Greece and Thailand,” ventures into unpacking the racist pattern of global capitalism, converting its economic peripheries’ “crypto-coloniality.” The global financial authorities – the IMF, the European Commission, and European Central Bank— shifted the blame from the centre to its economic peripheries, and alluded to the racial inferiority of the two indebted nations in order to protect the unleashed greed of financial capitalism as the true cause of the “financial crisis.” Rather than class conflict, the relation between the financial centre and its peripheries is defined in racial terms, whereby a nation’s relation to financial capital, fiscal or non-fiscal, Germans versus the Greek, American versus the Thailandese, differentiates by means of economic rational populations as superior or as racially inferior.

The full scope of the Balkans’ neocolonization cannot be properly analyzed if colonial history and the experience of the global South is not considered in the Balkan neoliberal context. Neocolonialism and the racialization of labour did not come only from outside the former socialist countries, but certain predispositions congruent with Eurocentric identification prominently figured in the Balkan humanistic version of Marxism. On this topic, Nikolay R. Karkov and Zhivka Valivicharska’s essay “Rethinking East-European Socialism: Notes Toward an Anti-capitalist Decolonial Methodology” offers a critical framing of East European socialism within global colonial history in order to draw a critical parallel. Borrowing the methodology of decoloniality from South American postcolonial theory for their case study, they select the most advanced works of Bulgarian Marxists Petur-Emil Mitev, Maria Dinkova, and Svoboda Puteva, and Yugoslav Praxis philosophers led by Mihailo Marković, in order to show how their discourses on socialist modernization and progress recycled Eurocentric presuppositions of universal subjectivity as fully realized in a “holistic socialist Man.” The absence of a global colonial perspective in their discourses, they argue, is not surprising given that the Marxist humanists’ discourse fell prey to ethnocentrism vis-

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à-vis their Muslim ethnic minorities on behest of their ethnic majorities. By qualifying Muslim populations as inherently backward and an obstacle to socialist progress, these Marxist philosophers, by trusting their modernist bias, justified and supported nationalism and state policies of ethnic cleansing of Bosniaks in Yugoslavia and Turks in Bulgaria.

Racial formations in the Balkans are a transient phenomenon but one racial category remains persistent: the Balkan Roma. The Balkan cinema has gained global prominence with films featuring Roma. Three little-known films, Revolution Eternal (2016) by American artist and filmmaker Megan Daalder, Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker (2013) by Bosnian director Danis Tanović, and Shanghai Gypsy (2012) by the Slovene director Marko Nabersnik, all about the Balkan Roma, are the focus of Sunnie Ruck-Chang’s essay “Roma Filmic Representation as Postcolonial ‘Object’.” Rather than seeing Roma as an indigenous population, these three films illustrate filmic “racial formations” of Roma as a “thing” “objectively” different and non-assimilative to the space of its residence. What makes film technology so suited to the persistence of Romani racial formation is their visual “expression of difference,” as something immediately evident and alien to its social habitat, aiding in turn the timeless objectification of Roma as a thing-in-itself. As an “unruly sign,” the Roma’s filmic representation also, Ruck-Chang points out, accentuated in the time of socialist cinema contradictions between the socialist anticolonial stand and the internal racialization of its citizens. The fact the objectification of Roma in the Balkans does not differ from that by other Europeans accentuates the intra-European racial consensus vis-à-vis the Roma.

While ethnic cleansing in the breakup of Yugoslavia captured the attention of global media, little attention was given to what is known as “administrative ethnic cleansing” of the ex-Yugoslav citizens living in Slovenia, also known as the Erased. The name signifies the state’s method of administrative erasure of their administrative identities, most of which were guest workers from southern Yugoslav republics and which were perceived by the state and nationalist populace as a threat to national security. Sara Pistotnik and David A. Brown’s essay “Race in the Balkans: The Case of Erased Residents of Slovenia” provides a critical examination of the state’s racial formation of these former compatriots as a part of a racial reordering of the new Slovene state as a means for the Slovenes to self-Europeanize. The authors argue the configuration of former-Yugoslav immigrant labour, no longer figuring as a class and as a source of political power but as a race, has established a precedent “for the treatment of persons regarded as foreign, in many other situations, including the ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015, namely with restrictive laws and barbed wire on the border.”

Immigrants traumatizing Europe’s host populations still dominate the European press, but little has been reported on how Europe traumatizes
immigrants. A study on mental illness in Sweden, for example, has shown that refugees in Sweden are 66 per cent more likely to develop schizophrenia and 3.6 times more likely to develop psychoses than the Swedish-born population. One of the causes of such asymmetrical traumatization, Tomislav Z. Longinović’s essay “The Migrant Crypt: Cultural Translation Across the Balkans” argues, is Europe’s lack of “cultural translation,” by which he refers to the translation of a language as one “way of life” deeply rooted in the immigrant intimate space, into another, European intimate “form of life.” Europe’s borders, fancies, barbed wires, and foreign languages reveal Europe’s ineptness to accommodate “non-Europeans” and the lack of awareness of “cultural translation” as a striking case of European colonial amnesia, which only intensifies and pathologizes the gap between Europe’s exterior and the foreign intimate interior.

Changes in ways of life induced by postsocialist neoliberal conditions naturally cause ruptures in existing discourses and conceptual apparatuses. For too long the categories of state, ethnicity, and class had dominated the socialist discursive landscape as the only agency of Balkan social histories. The clash between neoliberal economic globalism and postcolonial analysis over the Balkans’ discursive geography at the turn of the century has given prominence to the categories of coloniality as a global historic condition and to race as its operative category, so making the Balkan exceptionalism and color-blindness no longer analytically sustainable. In this regard, Catherine Baker maps out in her essay “Postcoloniality Without Race? Racial Exceptionalism and Southeast European Cultural Studies” the trajectory of the Balkans’ critical race studies beginning with seminal works by Maria Todorova on Balkanism and Milica Bakić-Hayden on “nesting Orientalism,” both in dialogue with Edward Said’s Orientalism. Inspired by Said as well as by varieties of postcolonial, postsocialist, and race feminist studies outside the Balkans, Bakić-Hayden argues Balkan studies took a postcolonial turn with the emphasis on race as a category habitually foreclosed from the Balkan historiography as well as from European postcolonial studies. Given the colonial legacy of Eurocentric color-blind colonial amnesia, Baker ventures to claim that not only is it time for the Balkans to recognize its role in racial formations but, on the flip side, the Balkans’ race studies, her argument suggests, might be an important postcolonial vantage point as Europe’s internal neocolony for rupturing European racial consensus.

How is it possible that the former socialist countries formed on class and anticolonial solidarity, societies with no colonial histories, turn out today to be the most racist, unless race and racism have always existed in some capacity? Informed by Michel Foucault’s (2003) genealogy of European race discourses, Dušan I. Bjelić’s essay “Toward a Genealogy of the Balkan Discourses on Race” examines the discursive formations of the
Balkans’ racial ambiguity of ethnic and class identifications, looking at how Marxism converted race into revolutionary class and how interwar Balkans eugenics converted ethnicity into biological race. In this regard, the Balkans race is an index of ethnic and class ambiguities which erupts internally in times of crisis and war. While agreeing with Maria Todorova that the western racial stereotype addressed to the Balkans does not alone constitute the reality of the Balkans as race, the author instead stresses that the genealogical locus of the Balkans race is the ethnic or class self-racialization vis-à-vis either ethnic minorities or class enemies. While ethnicity and class are categories of belonging, race, on the other hand, is a function of discourse on war over ethnic space, thus the Balkans race is a relational and transient category of power. Hence, the Balkans race is always an ambiguous and transient phenomenon of crisis because the Balkans can be both a superior and inferior race.

References


