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From Belarus to Black Lives Matter: Rethinking protests in Belarus through a transnational feminist perspective

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Abstract

This article examines the lack of solidarity between the Black Lives Matter protests in the U.S. and the anti-authoritarian uprising in Belarus in 2020. Specifically, I explore how distant geographies and feminist communities can relate to each other and thus challenge the rise of right-wing conservatism, white supremacy, and neoliberal authoritarianism. This article relies on auto-ethnography and the exploration of public media, political essays, and scholarly contributions discussing the meanings of the BLM and Belarusian protests. Through critical self-reflection and by deploying the concepts of ‘exile’ and ‘transnational feminist solidarity,’ this article suggests a possibility for alternative transnational feminist connections attentive to the complexities of global power relations and uneven east/west interconnections. Rethinking the current possibilities for solidarities may lead to seeing how the uprising in Belarus and the BLM protests have points of connection on the grounds of state-sanctioned violence, neoliberal enclosures, suppression of political dissent, and their racialized/colonial roots. However, forging transnational solidarities also requires a certain work of reflection on how political protests may uphold global racial/colonial logic and overshadow racial violence. Therefore, in this article, I foreground how post-Soviet vulnerability may help disrupt the status quo or the privilege of whiteness instead of reinforcing it.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter; Belarus; transnational feminist solidarity; exile; racial logics

1 Introduction

During the Summer of 2020, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 public health and economic crises, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in the U.S. and anti-authoritarian uprisings in post-Soviet Belarus erupted. These moments of political dissent are, in many *foundational* ways, incomparable. However, as a Belarusian citizen who happened to be in the U.S. at that time, I witnessed and experienced these public outcries simultaneously. To me, both these protests made apparent urgent transnational connections and the need for radical care and feminist solidarity. Yet, there were no tangible signs of solidarity between these protests.

In fact, many in Eastern Europe, including Belarus, expressed hostility and disdain toward the BLM protests. In the U.S., public commentaries often positively portrayed the Belarusian uprisings as peaceful and democratic making them distinct from the ‘unruly’ BLM protests. Both these reactions rely on the logic rooted in anti-Blackness and its transnational circuits in pro-democracy mobilizations.

This disjuncture between political dissent in the U.S. and Belarus is a problem this article aims to understand. I examine how distant geographies and communities can relate to each other and thus challenge the rise of right-wing conservatism, white supremacy, and neoliberal authoritarianism. Looking at the current examples of political dissent in the U.S. and Belarus, I inquire how (if at all) transnational feminists in the U.S. can forge the connection between them, and how or if feminists in Eastern Europe also can articulate the solidarity link. Drawing on my experience of queer feminist activism in Belarus, this article also relies on the exploration of public media, political essays, and scholarly contributions discussing the meanings of the BLM and Belarusian protests. While I participated in the BLM protests in person thus also grounding my analysis in participant observation, I could not take part in the protests in Belarus. However, a significant role in my critical reflection also belongs to activists from Belarus and other post-Soviet spaces whom I contacted online to discuss the questions of political dissent and feminist solidarity. By analyzing diverse sources and foregrounding critical (self-)reflection, this article intends to suggest a possibility for alternative transnational feminist solidarities attentive to the complexities of global power relations and uneven east/west interconnections.

This article approaches solidarity as a praxis that refers to experiences of coming together, staying close, longing, caring, and making collective claims on the future that offer other possibilities for organizing and political protest against racism, imperialism, heteropatriarchy, and neoliberal authoritarianism. I begin this article with a discussion of the analytical potential that the concept of ‘exile’ may have for understanding and approaching political dissent in Belarus and its possible solidarities. The sections that follow zoom in on the protests and how they relate to each other. First, I analyze the BLM protests and situate them within the context of Eastern Europe and specifically Belarus. Second, I explore the Belarusian protests and the meanings that diverse actors ascribe to them. Finally, I develop the connections of possible solidarity between the two moments of political dissent, discussing the limits of such solidarity and the disjuncture between the protests. This discussion leads me to inquire about the grounds and ethics of transnational feminist solidarity.

2 Thinking from exile

I approach the BLM and Belarusian protests from the perspective of someone who is part of a post-socialist queer feminist political diaspora. This perspective is informed by the conditions of authoritarianism, heteropatriarchal politics, and the attendant anti-LGBTQ politics in Belarus that have created different forms of political suppression and prompted exile across national and sexual boundaries. Since the second half of the 1990s, the constant suppression of political dissent in Belarus, as well as growing economic challenges, has driven more and more people to flee the country, searching for safer spaces or better possibilities to study and work. For me, moving from the east to the west became a way to access knowledge while struggling with the consequences of activist burnout. However, exile means not

only the crossing of the physical borders but also making exilic spaces within the country in an attempt to find communities and areas free from state surveillance and control (if that is possible at all). Thus, exile refers not only to the experiences of the forced border crossing but a persistent condition of non-belonging, political dispossession, mental isolation, and psychological distress. In this sense, exile encompasses social and cultural dislocation when daily life-worlds are greatly disturbed, regulated, and suppressed.

Yet, while exile emerges as a painful condition entailing loss of ground and communal belonging, the experience of physical and mental border-crossing, uprooting, and displacement has the potential to develop solidarity ethics attentive to difference and global power relations. For example, my mobility as a queer feminist activist and scholar from post-Soviet Eastern Europe spurred me to question how power, privilege, oppression, and knowledge production are distributed in the region and globally. Growing up in Belarus, I understand the stigma of othering that many Eastern Europeans experience and how it affects knowledge production and forging solidarities. At the same time, in addition to the authoritarian push, the gravitational pull of the West and U.S. empires draws diasporas into the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. I consider it essential to reflect on how Eastern Europe and its populations are implicated (though in uneven ways) in the hegemonic systems, namely the projects of whiteness and liberal capitalist heteropatriarchy (Koobak et al., 2021; Pagulich, 2020). Therefore, my transnational path, pertaining to different forms of exile, the feelings of burn-out, and self-reflection of multiple complicities, opened up the possibility to connect my story as a queer feminist scholar and activist from the post-Soviet space to radical feminist struggles in the U.S. to suggest a possibility for alternative east/west bridges. Acknowledging the vulnerabilities that I have as a queer person from Belarus, along with white privileges I hold in the U.S., I suggest such solidarity that opposes whiteness and challenges racial/sexual order. As ‘for Eastern European immigrants, the issue is less about whether, how, or at what point we become categorized as white Americans and more about how we relate to whiteness, and what it takes to recognize whiteness as an identity based on the systematic discrimination of others’ (Nachescu, 2019, p. 197).

Participating in the BLM protests as a witness and ally, as well as following the protests in Belarus from a distance while engaging with activists, taught me about the necessity to center marginalized struggles and forge transnational connections that are important for communal survival against global geopolitics. Perceiving these protests through the lens of an anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist East European queer feminist, I sensed the necessity to see how global injustices unevenly interconnect the regions while overshadowing the possibility for radical solidarities. Overburdened with Cold War dichotomies, we are pushed not to see the differences internal to either the west or the east. Many post-Soviet anti-colonial gestures to disrupt Russian and western dominance often disregard radical movements that resist and challenge global coloniality while coming from the geographic west. Yet, for many post-Soviet subjects, these movements are often overshadowed by the operations of a hegemonic imperial totality, within which the subaltern struggles are a part but not a critique of this totality. Similarly, many radical struggles in the west or the global south neglect difference within the former Soviet spaces and the complexity of intra-imperial formations. The former Soviet spaces are often seen as predominantly white, striving for democracy or enchanting nationalist aspirations. Multiple Soviet and post-Soviet experiences remain invisible. Trying to overcome this binary, I imagine the connection between the mutually overlooked communities to inquire if there is any possibility for a relationship.

I suggest that thinking relationally against comparison or analogy, as well as romanticization or nostalgia attached to either the Soviet project or western liberal democracy, has potential for community engagement based on a shared understanding of collective survival under conditions of global coloniality. I approach solidarity not as a structure but as a praxis that contains relational ethos.

Scholars writing about exile from the point of view of diverse migrant communities emphasize its role in forming flexible identities and subjectivities and seeing the broader implications of regional issues for the global configuration of power. Thus, for instance, Ball notes that despite the uprooting and dislocations experienced by many Palestinians, 'diasporic space has also emerged as a site of creative energy from which many authors and filmmakers have sought both to affirm structures of belonging, and to engender new, imaginative forms of community' (Ball, 2012, p. 131). This vision follows Ahmed's idea that exile may facilitate the emergence of the 'community of strangers' that, drawing on the experience of loss and displacement, does not aim to replace the lost home but mobilize communities to forge connections. Specifically, Ahmed notes, 'Alliances then are not guaranteed by the pre-existing form of a social group or community, whether that form is understood as commonality (a community of friends) or un-commonality (a community of strangers). Collectivities are formed through the *very work that has to be done* in order to get closer to other others' (Ahmed, 2000, p. 17).

Thus, the experience of exile encompasses the movement across physical and cultural borders in order to forge connections by sharing political commitments and caring for one another. This vision not only challenges such solidified categories as a home, nation, belonging but also reflects the complexity of the movement itself. To move or travel/cross the boundaries does not necessarily entail only movement across the physical borders. In her book *Frictions*, Tsing focuses on two entangled meanings of the word 'to move': as a movement across physical borders and a move 'to open one's heart' for a 'commitment of love' (Tsing, 2005, p. 213). The scholar offers to think about movement as mobility when '[w]e see the landscapes we know in relation to other places' and as mobilization when 'we are moved to change how we think at both local and global scales' (Tsing, 2005, pp. 213–214). Specifically, Tsing sees political activists' travels as moments of mobility against the constraints of global power and as moments of mobilization interconnected with forging relations and transforming ways of thinking and being. Similarly, I suggest that the experience of exile may lay the ground for developing compassion, care, and radical openness to other struggles for social justice while securing the connection to local place-based claims. Notably, against those movements that 'glorified movement in the spread of liberalism,' Tsing foregrounds transnational collaborations inspired by communal survival and social justice against the violence of global capitalism.

Importantly, following Tsing, I also consider that alternative forms of solidarity should not rely on the language of liberal modernity or secure homogeneity but use the difference as 'a pre-established frame for connection and an unexpected medium in which connection must find local purchase' (Tsing, 2005, p. 246). My focus on forging solidarities across differences also relies on how Mohanty defines solidarity as a process of 'mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests' in which '[d]iversity and difference are central values' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 7). The scholar notes, 'Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 7). As such, transnational feminist

solidarity becomes ‘the most principled way to cross borders—to decolonize knowledge and practice anticapitalist critique’ (Mohanty, 2003, p. 7). Mohanty also emphasizes that solidarity should resist ‘the Eurocentric assumptions of Western feminist practice and its too easy claiming of sisterhood across national, cultural, and racial differences’ (Mohanty, 2003, p. 12). Instead, Mohanty suggests ‘antiracist feminist engagement with the multiple effects of globalization and on building solidarities’ (Mohanty, 2003, p. 12). Likewise, I suggest that thinking from exile and employing own fragilities may entail transnational feminist solidarity against right-wing conservatism, white supremacy, and neoliberal authoritarianism.

The feelings of vulnerability, precarity, and estrangement that many in Belarus experience may open up new political leeway to engage with the transnational geographies of injustice to overcome epistemic and political limits imposed by the post-Cold War east/west dichotomy. Thus, for example, Antonina Stebur, a curator and researcher from Belarus, writes: ‘When fragile bodies are excluded not only from political life but from life in general are endangered, and beaten, made to worry about loved ones, forced to illegally cross borders – then networks of support and solidarity built on mutual recognition of our fragility become an important instrument of resistance. This, I believe, can lay the foundation and provide the potential for a new understanding of power -- not as privilege and violence, but as a function of care for the weak and the excluded’ (Stebur, 2021, para 19; see also Kavaleuskaya, 2021; Shparaga, 2021). Similarly, I foreground how the reflection of one’s own vulnerability and insecurity may prompt seeing the process of healing, not in terms of repairing, fixing, or returning but through forging new forms of belonging, political kinship, and accountable interrelation.

This take on fragility and estrangement also allows us to challenge macro-narratives about the political protest that focus solely on leaders and political institutions and occlude embodied experiences and multiple forms of dissent that emerge in response to state violence. The shift to other arenas of political protest, namely daily life-worlds of communities and micro-practices of relation, crafts new understandings of dissent and thus has the potential to reconfigure the relationship between different geographies and subaltern struggles. In this sense, I share Mohanty’s commitment to ‘make clear that cross-cultural feminist work must be attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes’ (Mohanty, 2003, p. 223). Mohanty emphasizes the need ‘to return to the radical feminist politics of the contextual as both local and structural and to the collectivity that is being defined out of existence by privatization projects’ and ‘to recommit to insurgent knowledges and the complex politics of antiracist, anti-imperialist feminisms’ (Mohanty, 2013, p. 987).

Therefore, I suggest that the rise and persistence of nationalist ideologies, state-sanctioned injustices, and post-Soviet vulnerabilities, affected by operations of western and Russian imperialisms and global capitalism historically and now, could have laid the ground for solidarity between the Belarusian uprising and the BLM protests. Rethinking the current possibilities for solidarities between distant geographies anew or otherwise may lead to seeing how the uprising in Belarus and the BLM protests have points of connection on the grounds of state-sanctioned violence, neoliberal enclosures, suppression of political dissent, and their racialized/colonial roots. While pointing to different productive convergences, I also suggest that these ‘new’ solidarities require a certain work of reflection on how, for instance, the Belarusian uprising upholds global racial/colonial logic or solidarity with the BLM movement overshadows racial violence in the local context. For example, as some admit, it was easier for many European politicians and media to express solidarity with the

BLM protests in the U.S. than to address the persistence of racial violence in Europe (Rorke, 2020). Thus, forging such solidarity links could have helped cross the east/west binary and thus tackle the Eurocentrism and ethnocentrism that contribute to the othering of Eastern Europe and the negation of racialized lives in the post-Soviet region. Specifically, the east/west binary precludes seeing how the predominant ethno-nationalist projects in Eastern Europe cultivated by far-right conservative groups and authoritarian governments while fashioning themselves against the liberated west, in fact, find a lot in common with similar groups in the U.S. (Graff & Korolczuk, 2021). Within this context, I see white supremacy as a planetary project with its regional and local manifestations, interconnected with the structures of white supremacy while the political imaginaries stay limited (Böröcz, 2021; Mills, 2015). The solidification of far-right politics and authoritarian governments across Eastern Europe has fueled racist anxieties and coincided with the rise of incarceration and criminalization of non-white communities, while neoliberal-right governments endorse politics that leave many in dire situations on the outskirts of survival. This trend is similar to neoliberal politics and white supremacist police violence in the U.S.

Within this context, to forge the solidarity link between the Belarusian uprising and the BLM protests requires seeing the complexity of post-socialist times-spaces and acknowledging the multiplicity of political practices in the former Soviet region and beyond. This effort involves a feminist positionality that challenges the othering by the west, as well as the desire of Eastern Europe to fit in, that forecloses the possibilities for transformative east/west solidarities. Body fragility and precarities which many in Belarus experience daily could have been the point to think about the state violence, not as a manifestation of the local but a part of a global. Suppression of dissent in Belarus with the usage of technologies of torture and surveillance is nothing new to many parts of the world, including the U.S. Authoritarianism as a part of neoliberal transformations shares many similarities across geographies. Experiences of violence, control, and forced exile produce avenues for relations. I suggest that focusing on the multilayered nature of the political struggle, as informed by continuing violence, lays the ground for forging radical connections, and generates genuine care about injustice (rather than simply the desire to be normalized).

In other words, solidarity as care for the other may emerge only based on the robust reflection of global power dynamics and transnational operations of racial/sexual difference. Seeing one's own vulnerabilities along with complicities in power relations is not an easy task. For instance, Roediger suggests that the concept of solidarity implies a certain 'uneasiness' as it requires a reflection on 'what and whom solidarity leaves out and how it is premised on those leavings out, [...] how solidarity works across differences in kinds and degrees of oppression, and [...] if the presence of solidarity is the logic of things or if for long periods it may be a treasured exception' (Roediger, 2016, p. 224). Therefore, in this article, I foreground how post-Soviet vulnerability may help disrupt the status quo or the privilege of whiteness instead of reinforcing it while also attempting to comprehend why the solidarity link between the BLM and Belarusian protests could not have happened.

3 Black Lives Matter

Throughout the Summer of 2020, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests unfolded in the U.S. following the police murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and many other Black people.

However, the severe police violence is a part of long-lasting histories of criminalization, incarceration, and disenfranchisement of Black communities. The 2020 protests were the most recent mobilizations of the Black Lives Matter movement, a global movement launched in 2013 by three Black women – Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. By addressing the anti-Black violence caused by white supremacy, racial capitalism, and state authorities in the local context, they connected local concerns to global ones pointing out the necessity of transnational visions of freedom. Despite the severe weakening of the left and the disillusionment in state socialism since the 1970s, escalated by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the BLM movement builds on liberation struggles of the past, exemplified in Black Internationalism, the Black Power movement, anti-apartheid struggles, and the Tri-continental movement, all of which fought against state violence, global capitalism, imperialism, anti-Black racism, and white supremacy (Blain, 2020; Mahler, 2018). By drawing on the legacies of these struggles, the BLM movement sparked a global response and forged diverse networks of solidarity within the U.S. and abroad. While some participants of the BLM may not be in exile, the lingering afterlives of historical colonialism and slavery bring an echo of exile and diasporic consciousness into the movement, thus producing different instances of non-belonging as a ground for effective connections and solidarities. Specifically, during Summer 2020, the BLM protests reignited conversations on how systemic racism, colonial violence, economic injustice, state-sanctioned police brutality, and disregard for racialized women and queer people operate not only in the U.S. but worldwide.

Yet the BLM protesters confronted a lot of violence, suppression, and backlash from white supremacist law enforcement, far-right militant groups, and conservative media in the U.S. Many opponents of the protestors employed Cold War-era rhetoric, fueling fears about communist infiltration and thus continuing the long-lasting practice of associating Black struggles with communism and ‘un-Americanism’ to suppress dissent and evacuate radicalism from political movements (Heideman, 2020; Onion, 2019). In addition, many public and official commentaries in the U.S. positively portrayed the Belarusian uprising as peaceful and democratic compared to the ‘unruly’ and ‘anti-social’ BLM protests. While expressing support for democratic activism in Belarus, U.S. officials also authorized the surveillance and suppression of BLM protesters who opposed police brutality and racial and sexual oppressions.

This differential attitude reflects the antinomy of liberal humanism that ‘translates the world through an economy of affirmation and forgetting within a regime of desiring freedom’ (Lowe, 2015, p. 39). Privileging the Belarusian uprising in favor of the BLM protests contributes to the racialization of freedom when claims for freedom are supported due to the protesters’ alleged proximity to Europeanness/whiteness (Hooker, 2009). This asymmetrical attitude also builds on the homogeneous perception of Eastern Europe as predominantly white with a trajectory more akin to the first world. Such perception somewhat contributes to why U.S. transnational feminists and feminists of color also do not see points of connection. Consequently, it demonstrates how the post-Soviet region can be homogenized and employed to support the status quo of white supremacy and racial capitalism. We can see similar processes in the recent U.S. leftist commentaries on the Russian war against Ukraine that reproduce the monolithic and homogeneous perceptions of whiteness and imperialism. These perceptions prevent many U.S. activists from grasping not only authoritarian repression within Belarus but also multiple entangled imperialisms and the power relationship between Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine (Artiukh, 2022a; Artiukh, 2022b; Bilous, 2022; Brom, 2022; Dutchak, 2022; Shchurko, 2022).

Unsurprisingly, many in Russian-speaking communities both in the U.S. and post-Soviet Eastern Europe and Eurasia also expressed hostility and disdain toward the BLM protests. Their negative commentaries seem to support the status quo as the U.S. has maintained it, while the BLM movement challenges the foundations of global capitalism, white supremacy, and the suppression of dissent. The BLM movement strives to center women, Black immigrants, queer folks, incarcerated people, transgender, and the disabled (Garza, 2014; Issar, 2021; Ransby, 2018). The negative commentaries may also reflect the dissatisfaction with how the BLM protests challenge the post-Soviet subjects' long-lasting idealization of Euro-American liberal democracy and the market economy. The levels of hostility expressed by many post-Soviet subjects sparked various public discussions amongst U.S.-based scholars about racism and colonialism within the former Soviet region. Yet, these topics did not provoke substantial public debates within the region itself due to a wide-held assurance that structural racism does not exist in the former Soviet area and that all post-Soviet subjects have equally experienced both the violence of the Soviet state and the emancipatory power of state socialism. Unsurprisingly, we can see the continuations of racist comments in other instances as well.

For instance, in November 2021, Belarusian authorities facilitated the flying in of migrants to threaten the west with refugees. While denouncing the authoritarian regime and police violence, many in Belarus also expressed hostility toward migrants from Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Cameroon and even suggested that police violence should be directed not toward peaceful Belarusian protestors but toward migrants. While the authorities manipulated the EU's racial anxieties and fashioned Belarus as a protector of Europe from migration influx, Poland and Lithuania increased border patrols to prevent the migrants from crossing into the EU. Allegedly, the abuse of migrants by Belarusian authorities could have become a point of solidarity. Yet, in fact, it revealed the convergences between racial anxieties expressed by the protestors, the authorities, and the EU. Complex geopolitics and global capitalism link distant geographies while violent logics travel across borders finding sympathy among communities aiming to construct not the communities of care but structures of entitlement.

The revival of the east/west dichotomy with its progressive narratives after the collapse of the Soviet Union influenced the trajectories of transnational solidarities. This revival allowed the U.S. to posit itself as a beacon of freedom and democracy in comparison to totalitarian state socialism, thus occluding how 'the systematic oppressions [have been] built constitutionally into the creed of American freedom, and at the root of its democracy' (Baldwin, 2016, p. 178). Within this context, the BLM protests disrupt the displacement of systemic oppression and anti-Black racism, confronting white supremacist violence and problematizing the erasures of radicalism from the political protest. In Eastern Europe, the east/west binary feeds 'return to Europe' sentiments that perpetuate the centrality of Eurocentrism, fuel the rise of nationalist and right-wing groups, and solidify capitalism and liberal modernity as the only viable options (Atanasoski, 2013). For example, the BLM protests sparked discussions in Europe, including in Eastern Europe, of why racial mobs, hate crimes, and police violence resulting in Romani deaths are mostly absent from mainstream media and agendas of civil rights organizations (Baltzar, 2021). Eastern Europe often claims its ethnic homogeneity and 'racelessness,' thus disregarding the operations of racial logics within the region and rejecting the necessity for solidarity with the BLM movement (Warsza & Sowa, 2022).

These post-Cold War geopolitics offer a limited repertoire for the post-Soviet region to be in relation to the world. Even anti-imperialist and anti-colonial feminist narratives in Eastern Europe, while holding a largely negative political view of western and Russian

dominance, still do not see reasons to support those who dissent from the U.S. government, thus disputing the very possibility of transnational solidarity with radical movements in the geographic west as well as the global south, or in non-European parts of the former Soviet region. To this point, I may recollect Tlostanova's apt note that the juxtaposition of the post-colonial and the post-socialist 'is too often done not for the sake of solidarity with the global south, but for negotiating a better place in the modern/colonial human hierarchy and in order to not be seen as post-colonial others' (Tlostanova, 2018, p. 23). While illuminating the violent histories of different imperialist formations that operated over Eastern European territories, including the Soviet Union, many post-Soviet Eastern European feminists adopt post-colonial rhetoric along with 'a rather jealous attitude to anyone who attempts to take their place as the main 20th century victims of communism' (Tlostanova, 2018, pp. 23–24). In other words, Eastern European feminist activists may articulate an anti-colonial and anti-imperialist agenda to claim subaltern status while neglecting the geographies of race and the global power dynamics that are instrumental to post-Soviet nationalisms. Focusing primarily on the othering of Eastern European/Slavic subjects and unequal relations vis-à-vis the west negates any robust engagement with the question of who speaks for the post-Soviet subject and displaces non-Eurocentric socialist practices and racialized hierarchies within the post-Soviet region. Therefore, Tlostanova underlines that true solidarity may happen only along with 'refusing to compete for a higher place in modernity, or for a tag of a victim' (Tlostanova, 2018, p. 23).

The negligence toward the BLM protests also contributes to the erasure of past moments of radical interconnectedness between Eastern Europe and Black struggles (Böröcz & Paraszka, 2020). One can think about Eastern Europe's active participation in the worldwide solidarity campaign 'Free Angela Davis, and All Political Prisoners!' in the 1970s (Roman, 2018). Or about Black activists' involvement in the Communist International and their travels to the Soviet Union in the 1920–30s (Baldwin, 2002). Furthermore, some scholars elucidate feminist solidarity links during the Cold War between East European women from state socialist countries and women in the Global South (Gradszkova, 2021). However, while these past links can become reference points for creating radical solidarities today, I contend that the revival of these solidarities also requires new kinds of work and reflection. Drawing on the past legacies of transnational solidarities, Todorova proposes that to develop 'successful transnational feminist collaborations, collectives, and political alliances between post-socialist women in central and southeastern Europe and Black women and other women of color in the Global North and South will require critical conversations about how race and racial globality have constituted socialist and post-socialist women and subjects' (Todorova, 2018, p. 136). While sharing this idea and considering how many post-Soviet subjects have put proximity to whiteness over solidarity with Black people, I also aim to foreground how the Belarusian uprising produces alternative formulations of political dissent.

4 Belarusian protests

During the Summer of 2020, there was a surge in protests in Belarus against the authoritarian government that has been in power for 26 years since 1994. This uprising, triggered by the falsified presidential election of 9 August 2020, has unfolded as a continuation of a long-lasting public outcry against falsified elections, oppressive and unjust laws, economic

crises, and numerous acts of repression. Importantly, these protests were also sparked by the inability of the current government to handle the COVID-19 public health crisis. While the government refused to recognize the existence of the pandemic, there were grassroots organizations and community initiatives that consolidated material and human resources to support health workers. The 2020 protests faced an unprecedented level of state and police violence.

Demanding the complete overthrow of the paternalistic authoritarian regime, new and fair elections, the release of all political prisoners, and accountability of the state actors for the perpetrated violence, protesters also called for solidarity from the international community. What interests me is how this call for solidarity gets situated within transnational discussions about the post-socialist condition. From the one side, the context of the 2020 protests encompasses the desires of many in Belarus to be accepted into western liberal and capitalist modernity. The violence perpetrated by the state is seen as incongruous to European democratic values and thus as a remnant of some old Soviet-style regime. However, from the other side, there were alternative practices of political dissent that the dominant post-Cold War narratives had overshadowed.

The east/west dichotomy developed initially by the European Enlightenment (Wolff, 1994) and then reworked by the Cold War through the opposition between communism and capitalism contributes to the vision of the post-Soviet as a standstill time-space, contaminated by the socialist past but striving to 'return to' or 'catch-up with' western colonial temporality. Within this narrative Belarus becomes 'the last dictatorship in Europe' (Ackermann et al., 2017). This discourse creates some myths about Belarus as an aberration to liberal democracy, some still 'living [Soviet] dead' in the present, notwithstanding the purposes for which this discourse is employed. Blagojević and Timotijević note that the discourse of return to Europe grows not only 'from the inside, recreating the position of the one that failed, one that is lost in translation, one that strayed in its evolution' but also from 'the outside, performing its colonial gaze into the East' (Blagojević & Timotijević, 2018, p. 73). The post-Cold War geopolitical imaginary produces the former Soviet spaces as amorphous and homogeneous semi-alterities ascending to whiteness through the promise of liberal modernity and racial capitalism. This leads many transnational experts, even on the left, to conclude that Belarus's political dissent is only a linear movement along the infamous binary from communism to capitalism.

For instance, Slavoj Žižek, a Slovenian-born Marxist philosopher and cultural critic, argues that the protests in Belarus aim 'to align the country with Western liberal-capitalist values' (Žižek, 2020, para 3). Žižek does not consider any other possibility beyond the infamous post-Cold War 'transit' narrative, according to which Belarusian protests are nothing else but an effort of 'freedom-loving masses' to overthrow 'the last dictator in Europe' following the 'joyful enthusiasm for democracy' (Žižek, 2020, paras 3–4). Furthermore, he states that although it is crucial to support the protests against 'an eccentric authoritarian leader,' it is also necessary to recognize that Lukashenko achieved 'economic stability, safety and order, with a per capita income much higher than that in the "free" Ukraine, and distributed in a much more egalitarian way' (Žižek, 2020, para 4). Therefore, Žižek suggests that while the protestors try to 'catch-up' and align with 'Western liberal-capitalist values,' it has been Lukashenko who has 'offered a safe haven against the ravages of wild liberal capitalism (corruption, economic and social uncertainty)' (Žižek, 2020, para 5). Pointing to the rise of nationalism in Ukraine and Hungary, Žižek reinstates, though critically, only one unfortunate post-state socialist path to a future characterized by the rise of nationalism and neoliberal restructuring.

Even though variations of the ‘return to Europe’ narrative may predominate the public discussions about the Belarusian protests, Žižek’s statements ignore the diversity of local experiences and overshadow how authoritarianism is an outcome of neoliberalism. Seeing Belarus as an exceptional case of authoritarianism within the liberal west, Žižek also misconstrues the situation in the country and misreads how the current form of authoritarian governance, distinctly neoliberal and capitalistic, masks its practices through empty declarations and falsified statistics (Vozyanov, 2021). Populist Lukashenko formally declares continuity between the Soviet command economy and his economic policy but, in fact, allows for many neoliberal transformations to happen in the country and facilitates the accumulation of wealth and capital in the hands of a few individuals that lead to state privatization, precarization of the labor force, and the devastation of the social services as state support for education and health care wither (Artiukh, 2020; Shchurko, 2018).

In this thinking, I share Zhang and Ong’s vision of neoliberalism as ‘as a set of malleable technologies and practices that can be adopted and reconfigured by different political regimes in an effort to suit their specific social conditions without radically altering the overall political apparatus’ (Zhang, 2012, p. 660). Scholars explain that ‘rather than asking whether China or Vietnam is becoming neoliberal or not, we might be better served by asking how Chinese or Vietnamese political and social actors make use of neoliberal ideas and techniques for their own ends’ (Zhang, 2012, p. 660). Specifically, they show how ‘privatizing norms and practices proliferate in symbiosis with the maintenance of authoritarian rule’ (Ong & Zhang, 2008, p. 4). The fact that the Soviet command economy was not detached from the capitalist accumulation and contributed to global capitalism complicates this picture even more (James et al., 1986). Specifically, many features familiar to capitalism, such as centrism, state control, intense industrialization, progressivism, heteropatriarchy, and the politics of ethnic difference, riddled the state socialist project (Tlostanova, 2010).

Those post-Soviet transformations that have taken place in Belarus, where imperial subjection, state socialist legacies, and global capitalism traverse, give rise to multiple experiences and practices that do not neatly fit the ultimate antagonism between capitalism and socialism, often understood as homogeneous clear-cut singularities attached to specific geographies. The negligence that Žižek demonstrates in relation to the post-Soviet transformations in Belarus correlates with the post-Cold War progressive temporality, where the only desire that the post-Soviet dissent can have is a return to European liberal democracy. By contradicting mass political protests as inevitably liberal with Lukashenko’s model of governance as the anti-capitalist project, Žižek narrows down socialist imaginaries and possibilities for political protest. Žižek also envisions dissent through the prism of macro politics, focusing on institutions and political leaders and denying the agency of local communities struggling for a livable future against state violence. This approach also relegates all local life-worlds solely to the question of political apparatus while ignoring the transnational operations of post-socialist capitalism. As Olia Sosnovskaya, an artist and researcher from Belarus, notes, ‘the notion of a “catch-up revolution” – one which catches up to capitalism – [...] is commonly used to patronize and devalue political uprisings outside the West [...]’ (Sosnovskaya, 2020, para 8).

The protests in Belarus included grassroots organizing that promptly developed new practices of political dissent and networks of mutual aid and solidarity to support local communities. As many scholars, activists, and artists from Belarus underline, the current protests, drawing inspiration from local histories of resistance against fascism, imperialism,

and authoritarianism, are decentered, horizontal, localized, spontaneous, and agile. Protesters generate new forms and structures of organizing and cultivate mutual aid, community care, and networks of solidarity (Koziura & Bystryk, 2020). Focusing on these features of the current protests, local actors attempt to challenge habitual modes of thinking about post-Soviet Belarus and privilege the open-ended temporality of these protests. Similarly, as the art curator and researcher Antonina Stebur and the artist and writer Alexei Tolstov emphasize, ‘in the situation of the proposed choice ‘between two evils’ – the implementation of authoritarianism and the establishment of neoliberalism – we want to articulate the very possibility of an alternative model, which is now being born from a technical basis and new alternative infrastructures. It is about the realization of a utopian, but possible future horizon’ (Stebur & Tolstov, 2020, para 8).

This approach strives not to diagnose the possible ‘failures’ of the movement but see the important differences within that allow for new visions of the politics to emerge and develop. Alas, one can notice the investments of many protesters into a liberal democracy, the desire of conservative groups to restore a patriarchal, national, and Christian community pertaining to ‘proper’ Europeanness, and/or a ‘weaknesses’ or ‘side-lining’ of unions and leftist groups in the protests (Shmidt & Solomatina, 2021; Zaika, 2021). However, there are also important legacies and practices that speak to the heterogeneity of the protests. For example, the roots of the Belarusian uprising, among other things, lie in post-Soviet histories of grassroots organizing where women and gender non-conforming people played a pivotal role. Under conditions of severe economic, health, and political crises, women’s and queer people’s long-lasting experience in grassroots organizing and mutual aid in ecological, human rights, LGBTQ, women’s, and feminist organizations mobilized people for political protest and facilitated the creation of multiple grassroots initiatives (Fürst et al., 2020). Nowadays, under conditions of severe oppression, activists create underground networks and spaces of support and mutual aid that strive to escape state surveillance.

I suggest that focusing on the multilayered nature of the political struggle, informed by the violent histories that continue into the present, apparently generates sensibilities to really care about injustice (than just the desire to be normalized) and lays the ground for forging radical connections. Thus, several events and publications attempted to put the Belarusian uprising in relation to the past and current insurgencies in Serbia, Turkey, Rojava, Mexico, Hong Kong, Kyrgyzstan, Nagorno-Karabakh, Thailand, Nigeria, Armenia, Catalonia, Chile, France, India, Iraq, Lebanon, and the United States. One can also think about the exhibition ‘Every Day. Art. Solidarity. Resistance’ (2021) organized in Kyiv by Belarusian artists and devoted to the quotidian temporality of the struggle, vulnerability, and networks of solidarity. These different attempts foreground micro-practices of resistance, inquire about the power of vulnerability, and strive to connect diverse experiences of anti-imperialist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist dissent occluded by the expansion of the western episteme and the rise of ethno-nationalist projects.

5 Conclusions: Forging solidarities

In this article, I reveal how thinking and writing from exile, caused by physical and/or epistemic crossings, open up avenues for forging ethical transnational relations, attentive to multiple operations of power relations both locally and globally. In my exploration of

solidarity practices, I rely on transnational feminist approaches that challenge global hegemonies through solidarity practices while also placing alliances and 'networks under critical scrutiny to diagnose how power operates in asymmetrical and multidirectional ways' (Tambe & Thayer, 2021, p. 13). Transnational solidarity as a praxis involves 'the active linking together of hitherto geographically and/or socially distant and disparate place-based struggles through the construction of connections between actors, places, and mobilizations' (Masson & Paulos, 2021, pp. 61–62). Yet, importantly, this active linking across geographies necessitates the reflection of the global structures of capitalism, imperialism, and racism. Furthermore, transnational feminist solidarities do not assume that differences between communities are non-existent or equitable; conversely, differences and multiple asymmetries in power relations are the ground of forging solidarity.

The predominance of western liberal feminist epistemologies, together with unattended imperial relations within the region, affect why post-Soviet feminist scholarship and activism often ignores how the complex interplay of ethnicity, racialization, class, and gender operates in the former second world, thus perpetuating Eurocentrism, Russo-centrism, or ethnocentrism and neglecting experiences of non-white, non-Slavic, non-European women and queer people in the region (Shchurko & Suchland, 2021). Furthermore, in the U.S., 'zombie McCarthyism,' keeping alive the memory of anti-communist purges at the beginning of the twentieth and mid-century, pushed many scholars and activists to break ties with Eastern European or Eurasian genealogies. The 'post' Cold War momentum has marked a continuation of Eurocentric racial logics akin to liberal capitalist modernity on a global scale, with its Anglo-American epistemic authority and fear of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movements (Atanasoski, 2013). By bringing in the diverse contexts within which the Belarusian uprising and the BLM protests unfolded, I address why the solidarity between these struggles have not developed. However, following post-socialist feminist interventions into transnational feminist inquiry, I also challenge this post-Cold War binary that prevents us from seeing transnational interconnections and entanglements between distant communities (Tlostanova et al., 2019). I address the complex factors that impede possibilities for connection to articulate that solidarity between uneven and distant communities can and should develop. However, this premise requires radical questioning of the operations of the post-Cold War binary that sustains global geopolitics.

I privilege place-based struggles that strive to connect across differences and asymmetries not to erase difference but to resist global power relations. This vision grounds not only on recognizing how the difference functions within the post-Soviet region but also how the difference is entangled with global racial/sexual logics that reproduce practices of dehumanization and violence worldwide. Looking specifically at Belarus, I foreground such an analytical perspective that utilizes the experience of multiple forms of exile to develop transnational feminist sensibilities attentive to global interrelations and interdependences. I suggest solidarities that spread beyond immediate communities to connect beyond prescriptions of national belonging or state borders. At the same time, I do not claim vulnerability as the ground of solidarity to articulate any 'commonness' in diverse struggles. Instead, following the visions of many activists and artists in Belarus, I suggest that experiences of vulnerability may spur the political rejection to reinforce the domination and engage with deep asymmetries of power and connections across differences.

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