

## Editorial. Two Dialogues on Self-Decolonization

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## Editorial. Two Dialogues on Self-Decolonization

Shura Dogadaeva, Andrei Zavadski

This editorial comprises two of the conversations that the issue's editors have had during its preparation. The work involved numerous exchanges and discussions, and not only between the two editors, but among all *The February Journal's* team members and the issue's authors, but these two dialogues mark the starting point of our engagement with this topic, and some kind of an interim conclusion, at least what pertains to the contributions presented here. The first conversation took place in late February 2023 and was published on 16 March that year. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine had been going on for over a year, bringing unfathomable violence, and we had just founded this journal, which gave us a tiny sense of purpose. It is first and foremost from this place that we were speaking when formulating the issue's topic. It is our new awareness (as painful as it is to admit it) of the necessity to decolonize/deimperialize ourselves that was driving us, even though the eventual CfP was addressed to a broader public. We have chosen to publish this first conversation in an almost unchanged form, to indicate where we were coming from: on a few points we have elaborated, some verbs have been changed to the past tense, to ensure an easier read, but the core of the dialogue remains intact. The second conversation took place in the weeks prior to the issue's publication, following a year of discussions with authors and the journal's editors. It seeks to highlight what we have learned in the process. Perhaps most importantly, the contributions we have received from across the world unequivocally demonstrate that the task of (self-) decolonization is more pertinent than ever and requires various breaks with academic convention: in terms of the role of the personal in scholarly writing, with regard to the use of innovative forms, genres, and media, and in other ways. As already mentioned, the conclusions that we make are only interim: the work that still needs to be done abounds, including within ourselves.

### Dialogue One (16 March 2023)

**Andrei:** So much is currently being said about decolonization. The term is used—and, as we currently see in Eastern Europe—also abused a lot. But what does decolonization mean in practice? How does one engage in decolonizing oneself? In this special issue of *The February Journal*, I would like to focus on approaches to practical self-decolonization.

**Shura:** I agree. But when I think about this, I cannot help but wonder whether I have the right to engage in a self-decolonizing practice. Shouldn't I, a citizen of Russia and, in one way or another, a product of its imperialist culture, shut up and listen? Shouldn't I limit my own agency in this regard?

**Andrei:** Decolonizing the self is, in my opinion, one of those tasks that require our immediate and active attention. As somebody who was born and grew up in Belarus, I 'belong' to both the colonized and—in a way, especially if we consider Lukashenka's current politics—colonizing sides, I think we consciously have to challenge this 'belonging.' Ultimately, such work should result in redefining our own subjectivity and thus altering the way we perceive others. It is our primary task, I feel.

**Shura:** But how does one deconstruct one's 'belonging'? It is a very abstract term. Belonging to something often means substituting one's own experience with a 'collective,' 'universal' one. Unless you are a white heterosexual male, which is likely to make your personal experience close to the 'universal' one. But does it mean, then, that closely listening to myself might lead to a change in how I relate to others?

**Andrei:** If we consider belonging—but also theory, knowledge, and so on—to be a construct imposed by a historical white-male-heterosexual instance and by—more often than not—imperialist thinking, then it is exactly what colonizes, corrupts us, resulting in a colonizing gaze (as well as discourse and behavior) that we exercise upon others. By decolonizing the self—for instance, through dissecting our own experience—we question our belonging and other similar constructs, challenge and deconstruct them, and thus decolonize/deimperialize our relationship to others. That's how I see it at least.

**Shura:** Personal experience allows one to think *outside the box*, giving this idiomatic cliché a literal meaning. If 'culture,' 'knowledge,' et cetera are constructs, they confine us within boxed realities. Reflecting on your own experience makes you realize that this box has walls, but they are not as strong as it might seem and can in fact be brought down. Utilizing one's personal experience for this purpose might seem like a narcissistic trap, but I don't think it is. Rather, it is about the fact that any personal experience is always much more than 'universal,' 'universalized' experience. Here, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's figure of 'Anti-Narcissus' comes to mind. According to Viveiros de Castro, anti-narcissist thinking includes such features as *interspecific perspectivism* (the ability to see any thing or being as a subject) and *ontological multinaturalism* (an inversion of the Occidental multiculturalism), and not only presents an alternative to Western objectivist epistemology, but also can contribute to the 'decolonization of thought' ('Cannibal Metaphysics...'). I think autotheory (Fournier 2022; Vaneycken 2020; Wiegman 2020) is a great method to free the self from imposed colonizing constructs.

**Andrei:** How do you understand autotheory? For me, it is not simply about *reflecting* on your personal experience and sharing such reflections with others: this would make one part of the identity politics discourse. Moreover,

a person engaging in an autotheoretical practice of self-decolonization might, as our editor Isabel Bredenbröker points out, have to resist negative identity politics, that is, outside efforts to keep this person within the confines of one prescribed *identity*.

**Shura:** Definitely. You know, I love this phrase from Paul B. Preciado (2021), who writes in *Can the Monster Speak?* that '[t]o be branded with an identity means simply that one does not have the power to designate one's identity as universal.' Autotheory isn't about branding oneself with an identity, it is about deconstructing the 'universal,' of which Preciado speaks.

**Andrei:** So, it is about relating your personal experience to the one declared as 'universal,' not with the aim of making the former fit in, but rather loosening and shattering the very structure of the universal. Once these epistemological structures are in ruins, voices and experiences that did not fit in become much more audible. By decolonizing the self we are able to listen, hear, and perceive others and their unique experiences. I think my own practice of decolonizing the self started when I realized, some time ago, that I was queer. Luckily, this realization did not make me doubt my own sanity (which sadly happens to a lot of LGBTQIA+ people), but prompted closer attention to my personal experience. Analyzing it against the 'universal norm' into which I was supposed to fit, I grew more skeptical of 'the universal' rather than doubting my own experience. Which, in line with intersectional thinking, made me more attentive to other marginalized voices around me.

**Shura:** My practice has its roots in reading groups that I conducted with young adults at a Moscow museum between 2019 and 2022. We read texts on Stalinism, genocide, World War II, and similar topics. I soon realized that my participants did not have the language to talk about traumatic past events. I understood this as a consequence of the (post-)Soviet education system, which had seen little transformation, if any. It made me reevaluate my own education and reexamine, among other things, historical science as a practice of colonization. I started listening to these young adults very carefully, and this act of listening made them try hard to formulate their own thoughts, rather than simply reproduce school-taught narratives.

**Andrei:** This reminds me of the opening to Maggie Nelson's (2015) *The Argonauts*. On the novel's very first page, she invokes Wittgenstein's idea that the inexpressible is contained, albeit inexpressibly, within the expressed. By listening to what your students express you are able to get a sense of what they cannot express.

**Shura:** Listening is actually an essential practice for a teacher: it allows her to challenge constructions like 'knowledge' or 'belonging,' which, in turn, challenges and transforms the types of relationships with others that are imposed by these constructions.

**Andrei:** So, it would be interesting to learn how individuals engage in self-decolonizing autotheoretical practices and what manifestations these practices acquire in artistic, pedagogical, activist, academic, and other fields of life.

**Shura:** Yes! And not only discursive practices: we need to consider what is beyond discourse (even though Judith Butler would crucify us for suggesting there is anything non-discursive). Perhaps there are artistic, performative practices out there that work with affects, emotions, and bodies, aiming at self-decolonization. The question here is: What would this inquiry add to what we know about decolonization already?

**Andrei:** In her contribution to an edited volume on silence (reviewed in *The February Journal's* Issue 01–02 (Veselov 2023)), Ana Fabíola Maurício (2023) critiques the discourse of postcolonialism and postcolonial theory for imposing onto an individual from an oppressed group a kind of responsibility to be that group's voice and representative. In other words, the individual's personal experience is seen as secondary to the collective experience of the group. I believe that engaging in autotheoretical self-decolonizing practices is a way to emphasize individual experiences and to challenge established theoretical approaches.

**Shura:** In our call for papers, we therefore invited authors who are developing autotheoretical self-decolonizing practices in their academic, artistic, activist, pedagogical, and other activities. We were particularly interested in submissions that use different genres and forms of presentation, as well as ones that stem from different geographical, epistemological, and other contexts.

### **Dialogue Two (30 March 2024)**

**Andrei:** What have we learned while working on this issue of *The February Journal*?

**Shura:** Perhaps most importantly, it has shown us that dissecting one's personal experience is a vital form of academic knowledge creation. Analyzing one's background, values, positioning, and even more so, emotions as a scholar is at least as important as larger, more 'outward-looking' research.

**Andrei:** The axiom in academia is that the personal cannot be objective: where the scholar comes from should only be invoked to emphasize their subjective bias that might question or even discredit the knowledge they create. But it is obvious that this axiom is not enough for undoing the Western academic paradigm. What is needed is closer attention to the self, by means

of which structures of knowledge can be challenged and our relationships with others altered. Such a kind of self-decolonization requires a painful and hyper-honest process of digging within oneself, in a kind of archeology of the self which retrieves knowledge internalized over time.

**Shura:** Exactly. Decolonization cannot *not* begin with oneself. That is perhaps this issue's key finding. In a way, it is not even a finding: the practice of looking at oneself in an analytical and theoretical way had been exercised long before autotheory was invented. Franz Fanon (1952/1967), in *Black Skin, White Masks*, did it; Audre Lorde (1982), in her 'biomythography' *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, did it... But academia still resists acknowledging personalized writing because this might demand its (academia's) complete revision.

**Andrei:** It is worth noting here that within some disciplines, this process has been underway for some time. In anthropology, for instance. Implicated in the colonial-imperialist project, anthropology has been working to undo the damage it has done and to reinvent itself by 'troubling' that which for a long time was seen as axiomatic (see von Oswald and Tinius 2020; Margareta von Oswald's (2022) monograph is also reviewed in this issue by *The February Journal's* editor **Isabel Bredenbröker**). Since the 1960s, this process has increasingly involved critical self-reflection on the part of anthropologists. In this issue, **Sofia González-Ayala** offers an interesting perspective along those lines by reflecting on the understanding of anthropology as a discipline within the Colombian academic community and on herself as a white-mestizo/mestizo anthropologist working in the museum sphere.

**Shura:** Such self-reflection is exercised first and foremost to contextualize—or 'trouble,' if you will—the material gathered in the field. And this is of course important, as our analyses always contain the personal. As for the personal information and reflection that are analyzed as part of the (ethnographic) material, it is still not very welcome in academic research and writing. Yet, if we are truly honest with ourselves, we can dissect our own experience in a much more rigorous and hands-on way than externally collected data, and autotheory allows us to treat the personal as a field of inquiry. What is needed is a certain ruthlessness with yourself, as **Nicola Kozicharow** keenly observes in her contribution to this issue.

**Andrei:** Another important thing that this issue demonstrates is that there is no well-defined boundary between the self and others. As Pasha Tretyakova, our junior editor, has observed, the differentiation between the two does not hold up, as even self-decolonization is relational and does not happen in isolation. I've also been astonished by the critical importance of innovative forms and genres for self-decolonizing work. To some extent, we understood this already when working on this issue's call for contributions: hence our decision to present it in the form of a dialogue between two editors, with

which we intended to make the call more personal. And yet, as several of our contributors emphasize, form is at least as important as content.

**Shura:** Right. The rigidity of form is inherent in conventional academic writing, but when we are questioning colonialism/imperialism and their legacies, formal rigidity does not work. Inherently intertwined with colonial pasts and postcolonial presents, it prevents us from exposing them. Breaking with formal conventions, as **Libby King** does in her brilliant autotheoretical essay on (post)coloniality in Australia, allows for uncovering these. It's as if she is using a specific form to express the inexpressible, to go back to that Wittgensteinian idea that you brought up in our previous conversation.

**Andrei:** Some authors have turned to media other than the written word for this purpose. **Melanie Garland** uses sound to contrast and intersect past-present histories of the European diaspora in the 'Global South.' Her contribution consists of a sonority piece and accompanying essay. Through voice, narrative, and sound archives, the sonority part seeks to challenge the linear narrative by playing with fragments of the past and present. Garland invites readers to engage in the practice of listening and thus partake in its 'subversive... pedagogical power,' to use Kozicharow's words. In turn, **Anatoli Vlassov** strives to decolonize his own body through choreographic practice—and goes as far as to invent a performative technique called *Phonesia*. This technique, as Vlassov writes in his article, allows him 'to rebalance the dynamic between body and language, embodying resistance against language oppression through the medium of dance.' These are two examples of how self-decolonization can benefit from media going beyond discourse.

**Shura:** This issue also underlines that it is not only personalized writing and innovative genres, but also Indigenous insights that are important for self-decolonization. They undermine the homogeneity and restrict the uniformity of Western academia. **Keren Poliah and her co-authors** uncover the fragmented identity of members of minoritized ethnic groups in the academic context of the United Kingdom. Based on testimonials of international postgraduate doctoral researchers at a British university, the essay presents three experiences of self-decolonization, placing Indigenous ways of conveying communities' truths and painful pasts at its center. In Poliah's words, decolonization is 'as an act of love and care for others.' Care is also important for the approach of González-Ayala, who analyzes the representation of Colombia's Indigenous peoples (Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, and Palenquero communities) in the temporary exhibitions' hall of the National Museum in Bogotá.

**Andrei:** Indigenous knowledges and heritage are at the core of **Sela Kodjo Adjei's** article dedicated to the Ghanaian spoken-word poet and musician Yom Nfojoh's record *Alter Native*. Adjei analyzes Nfojoh's complex system

of poetic and musical references, both traditional and contemporary. In combination with the vulnerability that Nfojoh exercises, these aspects render his musical practice a self-decolonizing practice.

**Shura:** I find it important that Adjei demonstrates how Nfojoh's practice intertwines with and impacts his own artistic search and self-decolonizing efforts. Adjei also speaks of decolonial healing, which resonates with Poliah's and González-Ayala's arguments.

**Andrei:** This issue also contains some remarkable reflections on scholars' positioning within Slavic/area studies in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. **Sofia Gavrilova's** essay is a strikingly honest analysis of the author's own imperialism. As a researcher of Russian origin working in 'Western' academia while researching Russian issues, Gavrilova is describing her painstaking efforts at reassembling her identity as a scholar after the war began. A central question of the essay is that of voice as opposed to silence. Should Russians (both Russian citizens and ethnic Russians) speak, she asks based on her research in Georgia—and ponders a possible answer. One of the essay's peer-reviewers concluded their commentary as follows (cited here with permission of both the reviewer and Gavrilova): 'I would like to express my gratitude to the author for her honest and really timely text, which I am sure will resonate with many colleagues.' As somebody who has worked on Russia a lot, I concur very much.

**Shura:** So do I. In a similar vein, Nicola Kozicharow highlights how easy it is to go with the flow in academia and how events like Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine can dramatically change that. Kozicharow reflects on 'Russian art history,' which tends to present a direct homogeneous narrative concealing violence, appropriation, and exploitation of Indigenous arts in the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Kozicharow also challenges the term 'Russian art,' which has been used as a universal in Soviet and post-Soviet art history. When I was a student, I attended various courses on art history—and the term 'Russian art' was never questioned by my professors. It is only much later, reflecting on my education, that I was able to deconstruct this term and realize how it works. As a term, 'Russian art' is part of the colonial ideology's 'great heritage' that those in power strive to preserve and protect, so it is simply impossible to apply different critical approaches to it.

**Andrei:** I am also impressed by the decisiveness with which Kozicharow undoes herself, her identities, her family history, and her academic path. She talks about experiencing 'epistemic doubt,' which, accompanied with and even facilitated by displacement and illness, turns into a deeply emotional and embodied practice of self-decolonization.

**Shura:** While working on this issue, I understood, among other things, that the post-Soviet is an inherent part of my education and experience as a

researcher. And I now see that, despite having spent a lot of time and energy to acknowledge, understand, and analyze this, there is still a long way to go. But at least I have identified a starting point for autotheorizing, which helps me to reflect on my own research practice and academic background.

**Andrei:** As for me, I have continued to reflect on the Belarusian part of my identity and its relationship to Russia, a process that started during the 2020 protests in Belarus and intensified with Vladimir Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Although I had always perceived identity in a multiperspectival non-essentialist way, I realized that I had neglected my Belarusianness, and that, at least to some extent, this had happened because of the knowledge structures in which I had existed. Yes, my identity, as that of anybody else, has been plural and complex, but relying too much on the idea of cosmopolitanism led to my sidelining parts of it, even if this was an unconscious process. Now I understand that external factors, as well as internal ones, account for what happened. This reflective process has started within me, and I will see what it brings about.

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