

How to Grow out of Nothing:

The Afterlife of National Rebirth in Postcolonial Belarus

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It has been said that Imperialism's major export was identity, a phenomenon unknown previously to most colonized societies but forged in the heat of political resistance. However arguable that might be, the most widespread political and geographical export of imperialism was certainly nationality.

Bill Ashcroft

The national idea appeals to the masses because every human being wants to be a part of the elite, of the moral majority, and of the community of decent people.

Siarhiej Dubaviec

We have the adjective *Belarusian* . . . but we do not know what to attach it to.

Valiantsin Akudovich

Being free could mean many things in Minsk. For the Belarus Free Theater, it meant going almost entirely off the grid. Since its establishment in 2005 the theater had no stable location: performances

were organized around the city on makeshift stages—in clubs, apartments, or private houses. There was no booking office to buy tickets from, either. Potential viewers had to obtain the administrator’s phone number through the friends of the theater and then call to register for an upcoming show. News about the theater circulated on blogs. Friends were talking about its plays. Newspapers—the *Guardian* and the *New York Times* included¹—discussed the theater’s politics, which were highly critical of the current political regime. Yet, as an institution, the theater remained unmoored in space, ephemeral and fluid: a Flying Dutchman in a landlocked country.

Given the theater’s reputation for being a major independent artistic voice in a state known for stifling the creativity of its artists, I could not miss the chance to see the “Flying Dutchman” in person, so to speak. A Minsk friend signed me up, and on a windy winter night we went together to what looked and felt like the edge of the city. There, in the middle of a suburban residential area, in a small wooden private house, the theater presented several plays. About thirty or forty people—the whole audience—sat in the back of the room—on benches and the floor, only a few feet away from the space used by the troupe. The intimate setting amplified the impact. Without a stage and almost without props, the young actors did not appear to be reciting their lines but just sharing their personal stories, in a toned-down, conversational voice.

As I discovered later, some of these stories were indeed about their own, often traumatically complicated and vulnerable lives—about humiliation, or bullying, or unrequited love. Starting with these biographical narratives of the actors, *The Zone of Silence*, the play that was performed that night, continued with another act of poignant monologues of suffering. A die-hard communist, a gay street performer, and an armless rock guitarist shared their dramatic and sad stories. At the end of each monologue, an image of the real person whose story had just been channeled by the actor would be projected onto the wall. These staged monologues, it turned out, had been the products of oral interviews, and the interviewees’ portraits functioned as their visual signatures issued by those who had actually lived these stories. The staged coexistence of characters and their prototypes produced a strange condition of physical discrepancy



Fig. 1. Throughout the essay I use images from the series *Tabula Rasa* (2001–16) by the Minsk photographer and artist Sergei Zhdanovich, who accompanied his series with the following description: “An empty billboard may become an esthetic construct when we care to reflect on its significance. Similarly, a blank sheet of paper may be infused with the energetic potential of the unfulfilled, the unseen and the inexplicable. It attracts attention and yet goes beyond human perception. We look at it as if it were a mirror that had been painted over; thus we try to see an image or gain knowledge, but the only thing that we do manage to catch a glimpse of is the information vacuum. Nothing exists. Nothing happens. Nothing has been forgotten.” All images courtesy of Sergei Zhdanovich

and narrative unity: the life stories seemed to be personal and, at the same time, impersonated. The play was staged, yet it retained some degree of its historical power. Blending the artistic and the documentary, *The Zone of Silence* presented the imaginary and the real as one performative flow.

The most poignant segment of the play, however, had neither a verbal story nor an actual prototype. “Digits,” the last part of the show, was a sequence of short—five- to seven-minute-long—sketches in which dance, pantomime, or song were accompanied by dry statistics projected onto the wall behind the actors. In the opening episode, a young woman in a traditional Belarusian dress popped up from a large suitcase wheeled into the room by a male actor. Surrounded by three male musicians, she started an exuberant folkish dance, which quickly evolved into a striptease number. Meanwhile, a stream of data on the wall spelled out the message: 34,000 young women in Belarus were in need of employment; 13 model agencies sold Belarusian women into sexual slavery in cooperation with the Ministry of Culture; 2,842 human trafficking cases were registered in Belarus in 2007. In another segment, a passionate tango quickly deteriorated into a violent *danse macabre*, with the statistics informing the audience that 60 percent of married women were victims of domestic violence, and that for every hundred marriages in Belarus there were fifty divorces. As the play progressed, this artistic device of the narrative reversal and contrapuntal montage would be repeated again and again. The initial exuberance would always act as a misleading ploy. A fleeting moment of enjoyment—“Why shouldn’t I sing? Why shouldn’t I play?,” as one of the songs put it—would always mark the beginning of a major disaster.

This radical dissociation of the departure and the arrival, of the form and the content, of the affect and the message was chilling. The coherence of the story and the storyteller that was celebrated in the first two acts was irrevocably torn apart in the third. “Digits” had its own life. But so did the jovial songs and pantomiming bodies. Actors, dances, and statistics existed in their own enclosed worlds, not speaking to each other. Not speaking at all.

The nation that emerged in the process of this show was indeed a land of “zones of silence,” an archipelago of muted suffering and

despair. Toward the end of the performance, the whole troupe started humming onstage Michał Ogiński's "Pożegnanie ojczyzny" ("Farewell to the Homeland"), but this usually melancholic polonaise sounded not like a musical expression of a romantic nostalgia for the land that never was but, rather, like a grim and angry epitaph for the country that never would be. Or, rather, for the country that could be found elsewhere, as the finale of the show convincingly demonstrated. The gradual erasure of direct speech concluded in *The Zone of Silence* with a silent tribute. For several minutes, a completely dark room was illuminated only by the projector's ray, which cast on the wall a chain of names, one after another: Felix Dzerzhinsky, a key man behind the creation of what would become the Soviet KGB later; Alyaksandr Malinovsky, a founder of cybernetics; Chaim Azriel Weizmann, the first president of Israel; Nikolai Sudzilovsky, the first president of the Hawaiian Senate; Tadeusz Kosciuszko, a military leader who fought on the side of Poland and the United States in the eighteenth century; Shimon Peres, who won the 1994 Nobel Peace Prize; Guillaume Apollinaire, Mark Chagall, and Irving Berlin; Ralf Lauren, Harrison Ford, and Kirk Douglas, and so on. There was an underlying feature that connected these people. Despite their Polish, Jewish, Russian, French, or American names, all these people "were Belarusian by origin," as the last slide of the performance alleged. "But they all made it somewhere else," it seemed to be actually saying.² Known for ages as a place of enforced immobility (the Pale of Settlement ran here), the country suddenly reemerged as a major source of modern nomads.

In an idiosyncratic way, this performance by the Belarus Free Theater presented a striking account of the postcommunist condition: in the theater's version, the state of independence was not a reason to celebrate past achievements or to depict new horizons. Rather, it was an invitation to count losses in the past and in the present. It was a chance to document deprivation and suppression. It recalled those for whom freedom was a freedom to escape. As if in a void, unburdened by material props and stage sets, the play portrayed Belarus's present as a collection of grim lives on the brink of survival, while moving farther and farther—into the past, to reclaim compatriots who became famous elsewhere.



Fig. 2. From the series *Tabula Rasa* by Sergei Zhdanovich, Minsk, Belarus, 2001–16

Many of my Belarusian friends voiced their skepticism about the theater's depiction of contemporary Belarus. They expressed doubts about the statistics announced in the play. They also wondered about the ease with which stories offered by the theater fit the standard narrative of "the last dictatorship of Europe" that had been framing the reports on Belarus in the Western media. Yet, strategic as the theater's presentation of Belarus might have been, it did crystallize crucial themes and devices through which the past and the present are made available to the public in contemporary Belarus. Following the theater's performance, in this essay I explore similar investments in the fantasy of escape and detachment. Using materials

that I collected during my fieldwork in Minsk, Belarus, I show how the independence achieved in Belarus after the dissolution of the Soviet Union is often revealed in various configurations that foreground nonpresence, catalog absence, or perform silent distancing from recent history.

In the last few decades the figure of the incomprehensible subaltern has become a paradigmatic example of colonial subjectivity.³ Usually, the subaltern's discursive and social indiscernibility (often mistakenly equated with self-imposed silence) is understood as a doubly coded phenomenon. Subordinated to power structures, the subaltern, at the same time, unsettles these structures from within—precisely as someone who inhabits them only partially, lacking adequate discursive tools and/or access to crucial social levers. While keeping these structural dynamics of subjectivating power in mind, I want to shift the focus of my analysis a bit. Using *The Zone of Silence* as my point of departure, I will analyze forms of cultural imagination, modes of thinking, and types of reasoning in which the figure of the illegible subaltern is turned into a figure of speech, into a literary trope. The “zones of silence” that I discuss below were created *deliberately*. I am interested in tracing the origin and consequences of this apparently mute aesthetics of postcommunist postcoloniality. I am also concerned with the consequences of these attempts to envision the present in terms of absence.

My attempt to read the postcommunist condition in Belarus through the conceptual concerns articulated by postcolonial studies continues the trend that has been taking shape in the last two decades or so. David Chioni Moore, an expert on African and Afro-diasporic writers, was, perhaps, the first scholar who asked an important question back in 2001: “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet?”⁴ Since then, answers to this question have come in many forms, and the tentative equation between the two “posts” has also been significantly extended. Post-Soviet and postcolonial are routinely lumped together with postmodernist and posttotalitarian; just as the “Soviet” has been habitually equated with the “colonial.” Yet these “posts,” as many scholars pointed out, do not sit comfortably together.⁵ Their apparent family resemblance has not yet merged into a productive and convincing framework—either for

analyzing state socialism as a form of colonial practice or for understanding the post-Soviet condition as a version of postcoloniality.

In 2009 Sharad Chari and Katherine Verdery encouraged scholars of postsocialism “to think *between* posts” as a way of challenging the intellectual frameworks left behind by Cold War epistemology.⁶ Post-Cold War ethnography, these authors suggested, could be built “upon work by ‘natives,’ as analysts of their own condition, in their own terms.”⁷ The present essay responds precisely to this call. It takes the intellectual work of “natives” as a form of knowledge production that is simultaneously performative and analytical, representational and self-reflexive. I will analyze a vibrant and intellectually rich field of literature on national history and national identity that emerged and developed during the quick period of the Belarusian national Rebirth (*Adradžeńnie*), which built its momentum in the late 1980s and lost it by the middle of the 1990s. Created mostly by Belarusian writers, philosophers, and historians, these texts were rarely addressed to an academic audience. Most of them were written as highly polemical manifestos or contemplative essays. Hardly examples of balanced academic research or meticulous historical studies, these essays and manifestos create a general discursive environment that affects and structures other forms of cultural production in Belarus: their lines or terms are often quoted by the so-called *sviadomyia* (conscious), or “nationally engaged,” Belarusians. This literature is important not only as significant evidence of an intellectual nationalism that has become mainstream in many former socialist countries. In addition, many texts are a rare instance of a post-communist literature that is self-consciously anti- or postcolonial. There is no need to think *between* posts in this case: these discourses *are* postsocialist and postcolonial at the same time.

As in many other cases, this version of postcolonial and anticolonial thinking is an attempt to move beyond the state of dependency as much as it is an attempt to figure out what this dependency actually was. And this is where the legacy of state socialism is crucial. Written *after* the collapse of the Soviet Union by the authors who were shaped *during* the Soviet period, postcolonial stories of imperial domination are rarely structured by traditional anticolonial arguments about resource extraction and exploitation.⁸ The socialist

industrialism that so fundamentally transformed the territory and the population of the Soviet Union was less driven by the ideas of efficiency and financial profit. Instead, it was motivated by such goals of social engineering as the intensive cultural homogenization of a very diverse population or the rapid formation of the working class as the key support base of the Communist Party (to name just a couple). The expansion of state socialism, in other words, was primarily a way of minimizing “the indeterminacy of the demographic rather than territorial frontiers.”⁹ The universalist logic of capital was to be replaced by the universalist ideal of social equality (often understood as sameness).

This noneconomic vision of social development still defines postcolonial thinking after communism: imperial (Soviet) domination is interpreted mainly as a process through which the subjugated were robbed not so much of their *material* wealth as of their prehistory and/or the history that they could have had.¹⁰ Consequently, decolonization is rarely perceived as a striving for a different future; rather it is predominantly viewed as a “war in the name of the stolen past” (*vaina za skradzenae minulae*),¹¹ as a fight for enabling “disabled histories.”¹²

Ironically, in this respect, *postcolonies* of communism share a lot with the *colonialist* situation explored by Ranajit Guha in his studies of Indian nationalism. As Guha observed, devoid of real economic and political power, the indigenous bourgeoisie could compete for hegemony only by mobilizing “the people in a political space of its own making,” that is, by “constituting ‘all the members of society’ into a nation and their ‘common interests’ into ‘the ideal form’ of a nationalism.”¹³ After communism, “nation” performs the same mobilizing function. Acting as empire’s substitute, it “reinstat[e]s the centrality of imperial power in the already created colonial elites,” as Bill Ashcroft pointedly characterized this postcolonial dynamics, albeit in a different context.¹⁴

There are some significant distinctions, though. In their “war in the name of the stolen past,” postcommunist postcolonialists deployed “nation” as an alternative to the types of universality suggested by *both* capitalism (with its market and accumulation of capital) and communism (with its internationalism and class solidarity).

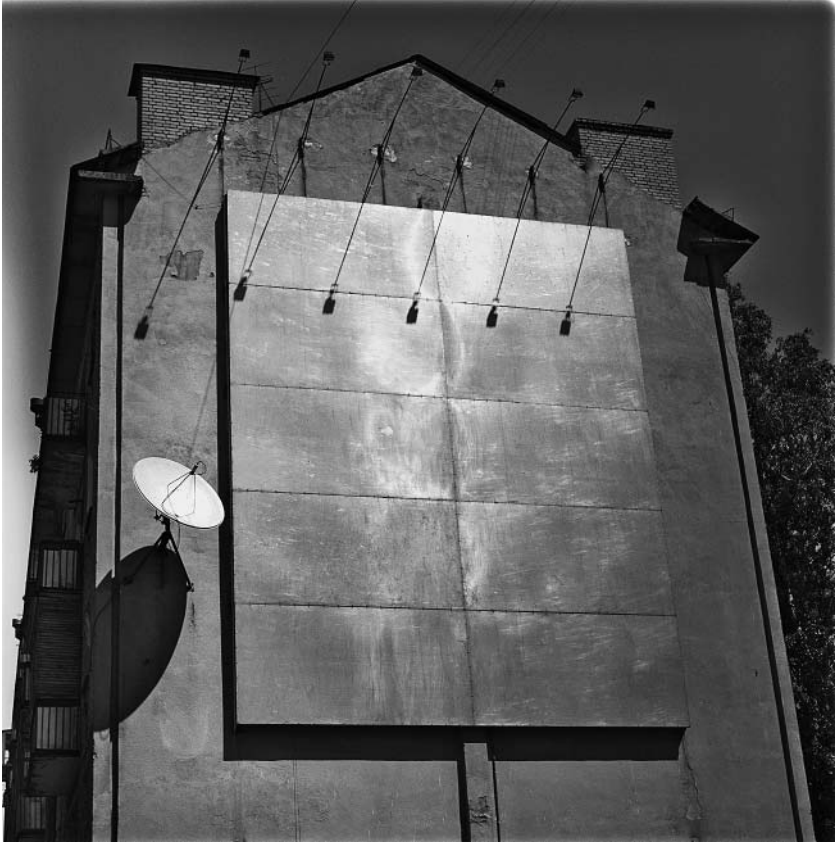


Fig. 3. From the series *Tabula Rasa* by Sergei Zhdanovich, Minsk, Belarus, 2001–16

The idea of nation as a decidedly *postsocialist* community offers a form of horizontal connectedness that can potentially transcend distinctions introduced by age, gender, class, or religion.¹⁵ Yet historiographical attempts to rescue the supposedly indigenous history from the empire's archive bring with them a serious complication. In their search for a dignifying past, Belarusian postcolonialists foreground the types of relations and social configurations that prioritize the accumulation of symbolic value and reproduction of tradition, while downplaying other forms of production, circulation, and exchange. By externalizing the radical modernism of the Soviet period as a form of colonial heritage, they virtually deprive themselves of alternative

models of modernization to rely on.¹⁶ As a result, the reinscribing of a newly independent nation in the current global context is conducted in strikingly premodern and precapital(ist) terms.

The privileging of the symbolic value, taken together with the general antimodernist stance of Belarusian postcolonialists, has another important consequence: it prescribes cultural and political relevance to decidedly nondemocratic configurations of culture and power. The inability to positively rework the legacy of communist modernity results not only in an “inability to think out new forms of the modern community” but also in a “surrender to the old forms of the modern state.”¹⁷ The nation-state emerged as the dominant model of contemporary social and political arrangement, while the nobility of the past is perceived as a major source of inspiration in the present. Nation as a form of horizontal connectedness, however, was quickly reshaped into a vertical hierarchy spread across time. Correspondingly, Belarusian nationalism was encoded as “a manifestation of spiritual aristocratism,” called upon to neutralize “the proletarian plebeization [*plebeizatsyia*]” of society, as Siarhiey Dubaviec, a leading anticolonial writer in Minsk, framed it.¹⁸ Another Belarusian writer, Ihar Babkoŭ, a key proponent of postcolonial ideas in Minsk, historicized this “aristocratic” pedigree of contemporary Belarusian nationalism even more directly. Speaking of historical predecessors of the national Rebirth (*Adradžeńnie*), Babkoŭ resolutely distanced himself from the so-called democratic populists (*narodniki*) who fought for the independence of Belarus in the early twentieth century. Instead, he described himself and colleagues as “the heirs of the Polish and Belarusian gentry [*Szlachta*] of the nineteenth century,”¹⁹ demonstrating once again that the overcoming of subalternity begins as “the long road to hegemony.”²⁰

Belarus Is a Problem. Belarus Is an Anomaly.

The Anthology of Contemporary Belarusian Thought, a thick volume of collected essays that came out in 2003, was intended as the landmark publication of texts about national independence produced after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the creation of the independent Republic of Belarus in 1991.²¹ The importance of this



Fig. 4. From the series *Tabula Rasa* by Sergei Zhdanovich, Minsk, Belarus, 2001–16

collection is hard to overestimate. For centuries Belarus existed as part of different imperial and quasi-imperial formations—be it the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Rzeczpospolita, or the Russian Empire. The only recent experience of political sovereignty in this territory was a short-lived history of the Belarusian People’s Republic, which remained independent for ten months in 1918, protected by German troops, until it was recaptured by the Bolshevik Army. In December 1922 Belarus became one of the signatories of the founding declaration that created the Soviet Union.²²

Unlike Latvia or Lithuania, which eagerly embraced their brief history of sovereignty between the two world wars, Belarus (like

Ukraine) had to produce its narratives of political independence from scratch. The anthology, then, was supposed to become the cornerstone of the archive that could document the intellectual revival in Belarus, the movement that is often referred to as *Adradžeńnie*, the Belarusian national Rebirth. More specifically, the anthology was to inaugurate “the beginning of a new Belarusian discourse,” as Aleś Ancipienka, a coeditor of the volume, explained it. The overall aim was to “localize the country and the culture . . . within different historical and cultural contexts, using different temporal scales and going beyond the Soviet Marxist discourse.”²³ This relocalization, however, was more anticipatory than actual. “Different historical and cultural contexts” had to be discovered first. Many essays had difficulty with locating Belarus *itself*, presenting it as a major epistemological conundrum, as an entity that lacked graspable languages of description and intelligible frames of analysis. For instance, Vladimir Matskevich, one of the authors of the anthology, coined the phrase “Belarus is a problem,” elaborating:

Objectively and subjectively, we describe the Republic of Belarus using the models and the terminology that we employ for describing the Republic of Poland or the Lithuanian Republic. Yet we would hardly understand anything about the really existing Belarus if we ignore the fact that the Lithuanian Republic is a success, an achievement, and a victory of the Lithuanians, while the Republic of Belarus is for many Belarusians a misfortune, an unexpected outcome, and a failure.²⁴

The presentism and the comparativism suggested in the quote are important, and I will return to them later. Here I want to emphasize two other crucial aspects. The first one is the already familiar semantic discordance created by the assumed noncorrespondence between expression and experience. Familiar “models and terminology” might be able to produce an effect of recognition (the “republic”), but, as Matskevich seems to suggest, they can hardly clarify the situation on the ground. In fact, symbolic affinities created by such models of description obfuscate radical social differences and historical distinctions: to find out what “the really existing Belarus” is, one should seek beyond the available “terminology.”

The second crucial element is the trope of “failure” as a narrative point of departure. The problematization of the country’s independence would often start with presenting Belarus as “an anomaly” that “fell out of the normal and natural historical process,” to use the description of Vasil’ Bykaŭ, one of the most prominent Belarusian writers.²⁵ As I will show below, these two basic ideas of terminological discordance and historical inadequacy would produce a crucial foundation for postcommunist nationalism in Belarus.

Taken by itself, this negative poetics of national morphology might sound familiar; given the global history of postcolonial nationalism, there is little “anomalous” about the attraction of this negative poetics.²⁶ However, its importance lies not in the content but in the social effect that it produces. The problematization of Belarus was not limited to “an arrangement of [negative] representations” (though such representations were a big part of it).²⁷ Rather, the negative emplotment transformed “a group of obstacles and difficulties into problems” that demanded specific forms of thought.²⁸ Epistemologically, this work of the negative generated a series of artistic and intellectual attempts to conceptualize the specifics of the colonial past and postcolonial present. Socially, by turning types of action and modes of representation into objects of inquiry, the negative problematization constituted itself as a motion of detachment and an exercise of freedom, as Foucault suggested some time ago.²⁹ “Anomaly,” surprisingly, resulted in autonomy. Analytical distancing produced an intellectual enclave. Valiantsin Akudovich, one of the key anticolonial thinkers in Belarus and a coeditor of the anthology, expressed this dynamic well: “Understood as an intellectual problem, *Belarus* united all those who were interested in the abstract reflection . . . ; also, it served as a laboratory, as an experimental environment, and as a testing ground where the Belarusian thought . . . could work out necessary terminological systems, logical constructions, and universal ideas.”³⁰ Concentrating around such journals as *ARCHE*, *Frahmenty*, and *Perekrestki* (*Crossroads*) and using various informal educational institutions as their platforms for debates, this intellectual attempt to turn Belarus into a problem resulted in a fundamental shift. Unable to translate their ideas, theories, and vision into political actions, Belarusian postcolonialists

transformed public politics into a politics of history, using the past as a substitute target.³¹

At the time, these postcolonial experiments with problematization looked diffused and often incompatible. However, when seen retrospectively, they do exhibit a certain logic. I will call this logic “apophatic nationalism” to emphasize the constructive aspects of negation, rejection, and withdrawal through which Belarusian nationalists express their arguments and shape their communities. Apophatic nationalism shares a lot with the idea of “antillectual resistance” developed in the early 1990s by Anatoly Osmolovskii, a Russian performer and artist.³² By superimposing *anti-* and *intellectual*, the term was meant to highlight the importance of the intellectually informed gesture of rejection. As Osmolovskii insisted, the “antillectual” described a conscious intellectual decision *not* to commit oneself to the available choices, hoping that such a refusal would precipitate new forms of organization and activity. Similar examples of mobilizing the power of rejection can be easily traced in the texts that I discuss in this essay. However, I am not interested in merely presenting yet another case of the work of the negative. Rather, apophatic nationalism allows me to reveal how a particular vision of nationhood is achieved through an extensive cartography of nonbelonging and self-erasure. One of my interlocutors in Minsk described the Belarusian nation as destined to grow out of nothing, and in what follows, I take his lead seriously. I will show that the available options are not simply rejected, and corollary examples of nonpresences are not simply listed. Instead, these instances of absence are persistently elaborated, classified, and transformed into genealogies and historiographies. Nothingness is mined as a source of inspiration. Nonalignment becomes a strategic choice. Absence serves as a form of protection. To put it simply, this apophatic nationalism creates a discursive realm in which options are absent and commitments are impossible, yet these very absences and nonpossibilities offer themselves as situations to be verbalized and as objects to be encoded.

I map out three trends of postcolonial thinking in Belarus, though the Belarusian specificity of these approaches should not disguise the structure of reasoning that could be found in other postsocialist

countries, too.³³ My analysis is not chronological, but I do try to follow the general time line from the early 1990s to the current decade. By outlining three different clusters of postcolonial thought within Belarusian antilectual nationalism, I am not suggesting that these trends proceed in a neat and straightforward fashion. Rather, their authors shaped their arguments and ideas in debates and dialogues, often sharing the same discursive and social space.

The narratives that these postcolonial writings offer are narratives of alternative history coagulated around the homogenized body of the nation. Discursively and politically, they share their imaginary space with other conservative nationalists in eastern and western Europe. And their romantic fascination with blood and soil comes from the same counter-Enlightenment sensibility that has been made so pronounced recently by the alt-right movement of the American white nationalists.³⁴ Like many nationalisms, they also want to make their nation-state great again, and the legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania looms large in their stories. Yet their inability to translate this legacy into contemporary political processes and practices of social organization results in a melancholic obsession with various instances of lack, loss, and absence.

The essay offers a close reading of texts of three emblematic figures of the Belarusian national Rebirth. Essays by Siarhiej Dubaviec (b. 1959) help me demonstrate how the process of turning “Belarus” into a problem-generating engine initially provoked multiple attempts to excavate ethnocentric historical narratives, figures, and symbols unmarred by the trope of failure and misfortune. The nation was supposed to be reborn, not deconstructed; and traditions were meant to be rediscovered, not invented. Along with this archaeological tendency, there was a more somber striving to document the experience of withdrawal from historical contexts and historical structures of the colonial past, epitomized by the publications of Akudovich (b. 1950). This antilectual trend developed in dialogue with the geo-ontological approach of Ihar Babkoŭ (b. 1964), who consciously abandoned the search for the usable historical past and focused instead on national space. Each case could be easily extended and contextualized further within a larger body of literature. However, by approaching postcolonial thinking in Belarus through

the lenses of individual authors I hope to trace the development of the apophatic reasoning in this postcolony of communism in a more effective and personalized way.

Non Sequiturs of Independence

In a 2004 interview, describing her thoughts about the postcolonial development in the former Soviet world, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasized the need “to resist the name as simply describing our identity.”³⁵ A placeholder rather than a sign, Spivak warned, the name should not draw our attention away from “a whole collection of positions without identity,” which are made incomprehensible by the homogenizing name.³⁶ For many Belarusian postcolonial thinkers, their “tests and experiments” in the laboratory of nation building were motivated by a similar striving to learn how to take names less seriously. As if inspired by Saussure, they were set to demonstrate the profound arbitrariness of signs associated with the nation in order to discover the real Belarus behind misleading signifiers. The nation’s historical and political longevity was conveyed through stories about the radical instability of its ethnonyms. Going as far back as the ninth century, Akudovich spells out the crux of this difficult relationship between names and substances in Belarus: “Historically, *we* existed under different [ethnic] names: as the Krivichi, or as the Rusyns, or as the Litvins, or as the Belarusians.³⁷ . . . Every time, *we* somehow vanished, and after each such disappearance, *we* had to explain again to the outside world who *we* were. This has created a huge problem with *our* recognition” (emphasis added). And later:

During one thousand years of its recorded history, the territory now known under the name of “the Republic of Belarus” had multiple forms of its “independence” [*samastoinasts’*]: the Principality of Polotsk [in the ninth to thirteenth centuries], the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Rzeczpospolita [in the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries], the Belarusian People’s Republic [March 1918–January 1919], and, if you will, the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic [1919–91].³⁸

Sweeping and simplifying as Akudovich's historical generalizations might be, they do reveal the cultural logic that the archaeology of the nation-state must follow to locate a nation *before* nationalism. In the quote he downplays the difference, which the constantly shifting names might have reflected. Instead, Akudovich foregrounds a fundamental similarity that this onomastic frenzy apparently hid: the allegedly stable national core—"the *we*"—that withstood all the linguistic, let alone historical, fluctuations. Despite their different names, the Krivichi, the Rusyns, the Litvins were homogenized retroactively—as "Belarusian by origin."

This privileging of the silent signified would be reversed when Akudovich discussed "forms of independence." Here fragmented history also emerged as a *sequence*—this time, of state formations (the principality, the duchy, the republic, etc.). Yet neither the type of power nor the possibilities that each of these "forms of independence" afforded were meaningful. Rather, the mere presence of signifiers of power seemed to be sufficient to claim the existence of the nation-state. What is crucial here is "the sign in action," not the sign's position within the signifying structure.³⁹ Focusing exclusively on signifiers of authority, Akudovich glossed over the absence of historical continuity by turning disparate political forms into a cyclical reappearance of the sovereign nation.

While different in their techniques, these two readings of the past produced the same effect. Disconnected symbolic forms are linked together to highlight the basic historical trajectory of the nation and its state formations. To put it somewhat differently, Akudovich's computational method of nation building relies on a simultaneous deployment of the symptomatic *and* formalist approaches to history. "The Krivichi," "the Rusyns," and "the Litvins" were perceived metonymically, as functional indicators—markers, not representations—that could be easily dispensed with because they were nothing but superficial expressions of the same invisible (national) core. In turn, "the Principality," "the Grand Duchy," or "the People's Republic" were treated in an opposite way: names here were crucial metaphors of sovereignty and power, despite the radical incommensurability that these regimes of authority suggest.



Fig. 5. From the series *Tabula Rasa* by Sergei Zhdanovich, Minsk, Belarus, 2001–16

Surpassing the available terminology, this postcolonial appropriation of history accomplished what history itself never could. This “ethnocentric colonization of the past,” as Charles Taylor calls it, radically reframed historical “zones of silence” by using available symbols of sovereignty to demarcate the existence of the nation that otherwise would remain unrepresented.⁴⁰ The names at hand might be not quite adequate, but they still could be used pragmatically—as true placeholders for the proper names that had yet to be discovered.

My personal experience of living in Belarus’s capital gradually taught me to appreciate this cultural importance of placeholder names. I started visiting Minsk in the end of the 1990s. During my

first short trip in 1999, I stayed in a hotel located on the city's main street, which was renamed Francysk Skaryna Avenue (*prospekt*) a few years earlier. A sixteenth-century scholar from what is now known as Belarus, Skaryna was famous for setting up his printing shop in Prague in 1517, where he translated and published one of the very first Bibles in Cyrillic. Skaryna himself called the translation *Bibliia Ruska*, and for many Belarusians, he and his books became the precursor of the Belarusian language and the major symbol of the Belarusian enlightenment, the key foundations of the nation's culture.⁴¹ Naming the city's fifteen-kilometer-long artery after Skaryna was a sign of bringing a better—more European and certainly more enlightened—past back. It was also a resolute gesture of distancing from the recent history: until 1991 the avenue had been named after Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik Party and the founder of the Soviet state.

The Leninist period in the avenue's life was shorter than one might think, though. It started relatively late—only in 1961. As in the case of Skaryna, naming the avenue after Lenin was an act of righting history's wrongs: from 1952 until 1961 the avenue had proudly displayed the name of Joseph Stalin. Its renaming was a reflection of the more general trend of de-Stalinization in the USSR, replicated throughout the country after the removal of Stalin's body from Lenin's Tomb in Moscow in 1961.

The history of the avenue, however, started not with Generalissimus but with a governor, Zakharii Korneev. After the third partition of Poland in 1793, Minsk and Minsk Province were incorporated into the Russian Empire, and Korneev was the first civilian bureaucrat appointed from Moscow to be in charge of the city and the province. The governor supervised the planning and construction of the street, which was called (after him) Zakhar'evskaia in 1801.

In 1812, when Minsk was occupied by Napoléon's troops, the street became known as *Novyi gorod* (New Town), referencing the area where the street began. The occupation was relatively short: within a year the French were defeated, and things and names were back to the previous order. For more than a century Zakhar'evskaia Street stayed calm. The twentieth century offered a radical break from this tranquillity.

After World War I Germans occupied the city and called the street “Hauptstraße.” But in 1919 the Bolsheviks took over the area, and the street became “Soviet.” During the Soviet-Polish war of 1919–21 Minsk was controlled by Poles, who preferred to name the street after Adam Mickiewicz, a major Polish poet (born in what is now Belarus). With the return of the Bolsheviks in 1920, the street resumed its life as Soviet, until it became Hauptstraße again in 1941, during another German occupation. World War II almost ruined the street, and following the liberation of Minsk in the summer of 1944, it went through several years of reconstruction as Soviet. Rebuilt and beautified, it became a perfect example of postwar neoclassical Soviet urban architecture and was named after Joseph Stalin in 1952, just one year before his death.⁴²

When in 2009 I arrived at Minsk to do my fieldwork, I settled in an apartment only a block from the avenue. Given the history of its names, I was not surprised to find out that the Skaryna phase was already in the dustbin of history. In 2005 President Aliaksandr Lukashenka had signed a decree that framed the avenue in an entirely new way. Under the name Avenue of Independence, it was supposed to commemorate the 1944 liberation of the city from the Nazi troops.⁴³

Objectifying the prehistory of independence, for two centuries the street functioned as a material vehicle for the symbolic presence of rotating regimes of occupation. None of them stayed for long. None of them achieved greater authenticity than the others. Masks of history, the street’s names replaced one another, creating in the end a lasting effect of semiotic transiency and political evanescence.

It is hard not to see in this exuberant history of naming a condensed expression of the topographical, political, cultural, and linguistic complexities of making Belarus’s history legible. Indeed, “Belarus is a problem.” The name is nothing but a cover for a whole collection of histories, seemingly with no firm identity attached to them.

While the street’s radical nominative instability points to the dynamic of symbolization that appears to be the opposite of the muted minimalism displayed in *The Zone of Silence*, underneath this surplus of signifiers there is a similar phenomenon of indiscernibility. There is the same discordance that relies on misleading names for

circumscribing the experience of subjection that would remain otherwise unrepresented.

Resisting signification, the multilayered colonial history reveals itself less through short-lived names than through a long sequence of their perpetual modification. The semantics of naming is overshadowed by the syntax of name shifting. Ruptures and disjunctions prevail over continuity and coherence. One historical stage does not lead to the next one; the earlier phase is not linked up with the one that follows. But somehow all these non sequiturs, disruptions, and repetitions produced in the end a long and linear Avenue of Independence, envisioned, paradoxically, by an imperial power of the East as part of a major passage to the West.

Rationally Nationalist

The avenue's complex history offers a model that helps visualize—with some adjustment—how an anticolonial historiographical project in Belarus could evolve into a project on the nationalist genealogy of the present. In its search for plausible links and appropriate connections to the past, this historiography of nationhood reconstituted—retrospectively—*multiple* paths and diverse trajectories as a single road to sovereignty. Charles Taylor reminded us some time ago that the main problem of such “ethnocentrism of the present” is not that it reformats history along ethnic lines. More important, in the process of this reformatting, the nationalization of the past naturalizes its own history by abolishing “the very terms in which it might appear.”⁴⁴ However, for apophatic nationalists, such ethnocentric homogenization of history was seen not as a problem but as a solution. Uładzimir Arłoŭ (b. 1953), a prolific Belarusian author of popular historical books for children and adults, summed up well the historically specific content of this ethnocentrism of the present: “The centuries-old tradition of the existence of the Belarusian nation and state is a position that determines the vantage point from which the new generation of professional historians sees the past now.”⁴⁵

Siarhiej Dubaviec is one of the key advocates and promoters of this statist nationalization of the past. A journalist and a literary



Fig. 6. From the series *Tabula Rasa* by Sergei Zhdanovich, Minsk, Belarus, 2001–16

critic, he was among the most active participants of *Adradžeńnie* in Belarus. In the late 1980s and early 1990s he was a member of the Belarusian People's Front, the main anticommunist force in Belarus. In 1991 he became the founding editor of *Nasha Niva* (*Our Field*), an influential weekly newspaper that united the “nationally engaged” intelligentsia through the popularization of the Belarusian language. Later, as an editor, he joined the Belarusian service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, an American multimedia information organization funded by the US Congress. Being at the center of crucial networks, Dubaviec significantly influenced the logic and rhetoric of nationalist discourse in the country. His regular audio

columns on politics and culture bridge political activism and poetic reflection, and among the authors of *Adradžeńnie*, Dubaviec combines political clarity, nationalist passion, and literary sensibility in the most vivid way.

In 1990, just before the dissolution of the USSR, one of Dubaviec's essays (included in the anthology) drew attention to the political foundations of discursive misrepresentation in Belarus. Forging a strong connection among semantic discernibility, subjecthood, and national independence, Dubaviec concluded: "Our fuzzy words cannot express our clear thoughts; our actions meet neither our purposes, nor the actions of our predecessors. . . . Perhaps, the fuzziness of our explanations comes entirely from the fact that we have no sovereignty, no independence, no political power, and no lack of subjugation. We are not subjects in the real sense of this term."⁴⁶ The fuzziness of words ought to be overcome, and the "fundamentals of rational nationalism" developed by Dubaviec were supposed to delineate the core goals of the national Rebirth. To achieve the desired clarity one has to restore "national equivalence and adequacy"⁴⁷ by defragmenting the links between expressions and thoughts, between political independence and linguistic sovereignty, between the predecessors and their heirs.

True to its name, the Rebirth movement was oriented retrospectively, and the resolute erasure of the Soviet legacy was supposed to be the main cleansing tool that could ensure the resurrection of the national language, national culture, and national sovereignty. It is highly indicative that in his history of the Rebirth movement, Siarhei Navumchik, another major figure of *Adradžeńnie*, linked the beginning of the movement with the public disclosure of the morbid information about the gravesite Kurapaty in 1988.⁴⁸ That same year Zianon Pazniak and Yauhen Shmyhalou published the essay *Kurapaty—the Road of Death*, in which they broke the news about a killing site near Minsk that hid the bodies of people persecuted during the state terror of the late 1930s and that had remained unknown ever since.⁴⁹ The Kurapaty mass grave of the victims of the purges symbolized the darkest legacy of Stalinism. It was also instrumental for reframing the communist past as the period that had derailed the nation's organic development.⁵⁰

Starting with a literal exhumation of nameless human remains, Adradžeńnie was to end Belarus's "history-as-failure" by setting nation, history, and land on a proper track. The "terra incognita,"⁵¹ or "a black hole of Europe," as one Polish scholar called the country,⁵² was to join—finally—the European family. The Rebirth meant a reconnection, understood as a strategic geographic relocalization: "Belarusians are returning to Europe," Dubaviec insisted in 1992, "and by 'Europe' we mean the West as *their* type of civilization, and by 'return'—*our* national revival. . . . Basically, to return to Europe means to return to the context, nothing more, and nothing less."⁵³

At this initial, archaeological stage of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Belarusian postcolonialists exposed misleading names and historical ruptures inflicted by various regimes of occupation. Getting rid of colonial masks and misnomers was the first step on the way to repossessing bodies, voices, texts, or spaces that had remained silenced for too long. Adradžeńnie was a retrieval, too, and key volumes of nationalist manifestos, essays, and interviews often used various metaphors of the hidden and the disappeared in their titles—from *The Unknown Belarus* to *The Belarusian Atlantis*. The Rebirth promised to "discover Belarus"⁵⁴ with a better history—be it pagan or noble.⁵⁵ Dubaviec's resurrection of *Nasha Niva* is a good example of this overall strategy of therapeutic recovery. "Resumed" in 1991, the newspaper consciously positioned itself as the heir of another newspaper with the same title, published in Belarusian in 1905–15 in Vilnius, which functioned as a major point of attraction for Belarusian writers of the time.⁵⁶ Through its politics of retrieval, Adradžeńnie appropriated the symbolic reputation of institutions that vanished. By recycling historical names, it forged a historical continuity—between different newspapers or different state formations.

There is little new in this search for the golden past that could provide a workable model for the present. Yet I want to highlight the transposition of the negative national morphology that this search makes possible. The revivalist pursuit for the fundamentals did not just supply a stream of uplifting images from the lives of medieval kings and knights. To alienate the negative experience of the past,



Fig. 7. From the series *Tabula Rasa* by Sergei Zhdanovich, Minsk, Belarus, 2001–16

Adradžeńnie relied on a discursive formula that was distinctively articulated in a 1922 play by the key Belarusian writer Yanka Kupała. Often considered the quintessential representation of Belarusian culture, his tragic comedy *The Locals* (*Tutejšyja*) depicts the life of simple Belarusians at the crossroad of wars and revolutions.⁵⁷ In one scene two ethnographers (a Russian and a Pole) interview the locals, trying to determine their national identity. At their request, Ianka, an ironic local man in his late twenties, describes the Belarusian nature in the following way: “Our nature, dear gentlemen, is very natural. We’ve got fields and forests, mountains and valleys, rivers and lakes. We even used to have a sea, which we called the Pinsk Sea. But the

occupiers ruined it. They filled it with mud. Therefore, all we are left with now is the Pinsk swamp.”⁵⁸

This vision of swamps as former seas blends temporality and spatiality, transforming landscape into an archive of failed or unrealized promises. As a result, the Rebirth’s elevating reconstructions of the noble past were inseparable from a particular postcolonial “oceanography” of former “seas” that have been filled with mud by various occupiers.

In the process of this cartography of historical “anomalies,” colonization was equated with “thingification,” as Aimé Césaire observed some time ago.⁵⁹ But this predictable process had an additional postcommunist twist. The rhetorical objectification of the colonial situation (“mud,” “swamps,” and other deficiencies) all but erased the question about colonial identity. The colonization did seem to produce a colonized space, but, paradoxically, this space was without the colonized. Scrutinizing various vanished seas and newly made swamps, postcolonial thinkers almost entirely overlooked the accompanying process of colonial subjection. Timid scholarly attempts of the late 1990s to develop a local version of Creole studies by looking at Belarusian identity as an example of a hybrid imperial formation never panned out and quickly faded away.⁶⁰

Even when Belarusian postcolonials do address the effect of colonization directly, they tend to misrecognize the issue by positivizing the already familiar trope of failure. As the argument goes, centuries of domination failed to turn the Belarusians into an exact copy of the (Russian) colonizer. Since, within this postcolonial framework, power is understood mainly through its premodern, representational function, the imperial difference between the colonizer and the colonized remains unnoticed. At best, it is perceived as a sign of resistance, not as a manifestation of hierarchy. To quote Dubaviec’s apophatic conclusion: “We have not become a part of the Russian culture . . . , despite the fact that one generation [of Belarusians] after another was trained in Russian language, being constantly exposed to Russian cultural icons and being framed by the Russophonic state and social system.”⁶¹ The fantasy of escape and the illusion of detachment did their ideological work, completely concealing the

effectiveness of the imperial domination that operates through the production of a resemblance, which “*is almost the same but not quite*,”⁶² through “an imitation which must fail.”⁶³

The dissociation from the seas muddied by the occupiers created a rhetorical possibility for claiming, or at least imagining, spaces of autonomy unsoiled by the mud of colonization. I have already shown how Belarusian postcolonialists insisted on the stability of the silent national core by emphasizing the instability of the nation’s ethnonyms. It is their essentializing move that I want to highlight now.

While starting with a profound mistrust in the power of naming, the Belarusian postcolonialists take their denomination activity in a direction that significantly deviates from the poststructuralist trajectory of the traditional postcolonial studies. Their fight against fuzzy names—their *onomaclasm*—is very limited in its thrust and scope. The imperial straitjacketing of the diversity of historically available subject positions motivates their fight against the names imposed by various occupational regimes only to a point. Primarily, the purpose of their onomaclasm is not to destabilize the semiotic uncertainty further but to reveal and recover *true* names and “the solid rock of authentic identity”⁶⁴ that have been waiting for their exact articulation underneath the mud of foreign names. The rebirth as a “return to the context” targets a very particular, highly edited context. Multiple origins and hybrid cultures that the multinamed history of the region seemed to suggest are usually dismissed in favor of identifying a very concrete *national* body: “You can discover the best of your nature and the most human side of your self only as a Belarusian,” Dubaviec assured his readers, prescribing nationality as an ontological base.⁶⁵

Misrepresentation or placeholding has to give way to *self*-representation, which could finally join the discourse and the subject, the author and the narrator, the nation and the land. In a slightly different way but just as resolutely, Akudovich outlined the convoluted logic of this archaeology of the postcolonial self aimed at uncovering the national essence beneath misleading foreign names: “[Adam] Mickiewicz thought of Lithuania as his native country, not Belarus; and he wrote in Polish. However, in essence, he was

occupied with the same thing throughout his whole life: he translated Belarus into Polish. Mickiewicz's Belarus was called Poland."⁶⁶ Rendered in Polish as "Poland," Belarus is nonetheless perceived as Lithuania. In his paradoxical formulation, Akudovich effectively captured the phenomenon of postcolonial discordance between expression and experience that I have traced so far. Dubaviec's campaign against "fuzzy words" and "misleading notions" (*padmena paniattsiau*)⁶⁷ should be read against the backdrop of this perpetual (power) play of the signifier (*Poland*), the signified (*Belarus*), and the referent (*Lithuania*).

This ruptured semiotics of the national disjunction offers a post-communist alternative to the parodic mimicry or the destabilizing hybridity that is usually associated with colonial subjectivity and its postcolonial conceptualization.⁶⁸ If anything, hybridity and discordance are perceived by apophatic nationalists as a sign of malfunction or a threat of erasure. Hence Dubaviec's moral (discursive) imperative: "We should call things by their proper names,"⁶⁹ and in a proper language. Even more than that. As the editor insisted, for the nation "language and national consciousness can and shall become cult objects. . . . One cannot build a healthy national life on the quicksand of [Soviet] pseudo-Belarusity [*pseudabelarushchyna*]."⁷⁰ National consciousness (*sviadamasts'*) and national language (*mova*) would constitute the positive pole of the Rebirth movement, while different versions of the foreign disguised in the clothes of the counterfeited ethnicity would function as the pole of its negative attraction.

The basic troika of consciousness, language, and pseudonativism that drives Dubaviec's "rational nationalism" has been used before. What is different in this particular case, though, is the speed with which the postcolonial preoccupation with *discursive* indiscernibility and *semantic* misrepresentation arrives at the vision of the *organically* defined belonging. Behind misleading terminology and fuzzy words, there is always a classic body politics in waiting.⁷¹ Significantly, in his later essays from the second half of the 1990s, reprinted in *The Russian Book* (effectively evoking Skaryna's *Bibliia Ruska*), Dubaviec almost entirely abandoned the rationalizing pretenses, framing Adradžeńnie as a standard example of romantic nationalism



Fig. 8. From the series *Tabula Rasa* by Sergei Zhdanovich, Minsk, Belarus, 2001–16

that was supposed to bring soil, blood, and soul together. In the 1996 introductory essay to the book, he contemplated:

When I started speaking Belarusian, I immediately stood out among others. . . . In time, I realized that it was my blood that demanded this. . . . One needs to listen to the call of his blood. We, people, search for soulmates as if we were looking for blood relatives. Do you smell my blood? No? Then we pass each other, without a glance. . . . We may mislead each other with words, but in the end blood will bring us together. Blood is our community. That which separates us from the environment. . . . And what about language? Language is our ancestors' blood.⁷²

These organic metaphors of the discursive—mother tongue as mother's blood—should neither mislead nor confuse. Later in the book Dubaviec leaves no doubt about the ontological status of the shared substance: “What is the national specificity . . . ? First of all, it is the blood (genetic memory), nature, climate, traditions—all this shapes the national character, or mentality. . . . Historians . . . have proved that there is the blood of the Baltic people in the Belarusians' veins. So in some sense, we are a Nordic people.”⁷³ Dubaviec's texts usefully clarify the problematic logic of his “rational nationalism” in particular and of the Rebirth movement in general. The search for expressive means outside the vocabulary imposed by occupation regimes was not limited to the simple restoration of proper names in a proper language. *Adradžeńnie* was about retrieving the forgotten past and exhuming the unacknowledged victims just as much as it was about creating a particular somatic version of the nation. A version that demanded proper bodies with a proper—Nordic?—blood, located in a proper geographic context.⁷⁴

Predictably, this fascination with clarity and purity eventually morphed into a banal racism: white nationalism never betrays itself. In a recent interview in a leading academic journal in Minsk, Dubaviec cites “the expulsion of Belarusians into emigration” as a key intellectual problem in the country, explaining that they are purposefully replaced “with those who are definitely not the carriers [*nos'bitau*] of the Belarusian mentality, culture, and language: the [migrant] Chinese, Tadjik, and the people from the Caucasus [*Kaukaztsau*].”⁷⁵ The overcoming of one's subalternity is, indeed, a struggle for one's own hegemonic position.

In the process of this reclaiming of the proper past and proper people, the idea of *building* a new—free, independent, and democratic—society becomes increasingly diffused, overshadowed by practices of excavation and discourses of return. Yet the Avenue of Independence still had its foundation in colonial history, and the change of Minsk's main street's name did nothing to modify the street's direction or its imperial outlook. The imaginary “reinhabiting” of the previously occupied contexts hardly provided any guidance for the new sovereignty. Recovered things, unearthed bodies, and restored names still



Fig. 9. From the series *Tabula Rasa* by Sergei Zhdanovich, Minsk, Belarus, 2001–16

pointed to the past, with its injustice, atrocities, and failures, while “communities of blood,” envisioned as the model of national consolidation, looked like a recipe for ethnic disasters and linguistic nightmares. By the mid-1990s, gradually exhausting the assumed function of “the conduits [*pravadniki*] of the powerful national tradition,”⁷⁶ the conservative revivalists faced the problem of their own reception. Increasingly, the creative autonomy that the authors of *Adradžennie* had so celebrated resembled a self-imposed ghetto. Belarus was a problem again.

Coding Absence

Siarhei Navumchyk, a historian of Adradžeńnie, ends his chronicle of this movement in 1995. That summer a national referendum approved major constitutional changes proposed by the new president, Aliaksandr Lukashenka. One modification radically reversed the previous language policy. The Belarusian language lost its privileged status; the Russian language was also recognized as an official language of the republic.⁷⁷ Navumchyk's choice of this event for book-ending the history of the Rebirth movement is symptomatic: for authors and activists of Adradžeńnie, the Belarusian language became a cult object and a quintessential symbol of independence. The perspective of having a second state language was perceived as a colonial concession to the usual imperial pressure. Ironically, the Rebirth did end up as a restoration, but of the wrong dynamic: "the ancestors' blood" was muddied again.

After 1995 Belarusian postcolonials tried to understand why Adradžeńnie failed.⁷⁸ Akudovich was at the forefront of this intense intellectual search. A writer and a theorist from Belarus, Akudovich was educated in the late 1970s at the prestigious Literature Institute in Moscow. He had a string of odd jobs in the 1980s in Minsk, until he became a leading critical voice of Adradžeńnie in the 1990s. As an editor, a contributor, or a sole author, he produced a series of crucial texts in which ruminations on Belarusian national identity were intertwined with idiosyncratic readings of key Western philosophers. Like Dubaviec, Akudovich also closely cooperates with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty: many of his publications originally appeared as interviews or audio columns for the Belarusian outpost of this US information company.

Well informed but decidedly not academic, Akudovich's essays tend to weave together sweeping historical generalizations, unusual cultural comparisons, polemical ripostes, and memorable *bons mots*. A controversial thinker and a contradictory essayist, Akudovich is famous in Minsk for the theme of absence that he has been persistently developing since the end of the 1990s. The titles of his three books—*There Is No Me* (1998), *Code of Absence* (2008),

and *The Archipelago Belarus* (2010)⁷⁹—have become important cultural memes.

What makes Akudovich's views especially insightful is the unusual position that he crafted for himself. His active participation in Adradžeńnie has been accompanied by his own persistent critique of this movement from within. In my interview with him in November 2009, Akudovich told me that his uneasy position of critical loyalty emerged over time—as a move from what he called “pure nationalism” (*chystyi natsionalizm*) to a “critical reflection on nationalism” that is somewhat distant yet still engaged. As he admitted, this “critical reflection revealed that all those constructions, all those ideas that looked so good in articles and essays were not destined to last in real life [*ne zhiznesposobny*]; not in Belarus.”⁸⁰

Akudovich's critical reflections are often dialogue-driven and pragmatically oriented. When read together they do make up an archive of conflicting texts and incongruous conclusions. Yet despite all their inconsistency, Akudovich's interventions are a rare example of literature in which an author's discursive contributions to Belarusian nationalism are inseparable from his or her own metadiscursive assessments of these contributions. In his texts Akudovich maintains a fascinating structural positionality of the “native noninformant” who challenges any attempts to reduce his texts to data to be interpreted by external experts.⁸¹ Unlike Dubaviec, whose ideas I discussed earlier, or Babkoŭ, whose work I will discuss later, Akudovich constantly questions his own frames of reference and categories of analysis, merging “data” and “interpretation” into a single, inseparable discursive palimpsest. In this section I reconstruct his critical account of Adradžeńnie, trying to crystallize the arguments of the movement's most forceful intellectual voice.

In a series of highly polemical essays and interviews in the early 2000s, Akudovich provided a postmortem critique of Adradžeńnie, framing it as a major conceptual and political fiasco. Creatively re-adjusting Jacques Derrida's notion of logocentrism and Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities, Akudovich retrospectively defined the Rebirth as a futile attempt to equate a textual fantasy with a social community. “We are a paper nation,” he explained later; “we are a nation that derives its mental models from



Fig. 10. From the series *Tabula Rasa* by Sergei Zhdanovich, Minsk, Belarus, 2001–16

reading literature, not from the real life experience. . . . Life would go on, independently, while literature would still be spinning off a model . . . that has little or no connection with reality.”⁸²

For Akudovich, Adradžėnnie’s discourse on colonialism was a major example of how a literary construction could be willfully mistaken for a real life experience. The Pinsk Sea, in other words, was not muddied by the occupiers; it never existed in the first place. As he explains it, to insist that Belarus was colonized by Russia was a serious “conceptual mistake.”⁸³ Not only was it historically incorrect—“by the time the Russians got here, we were already fundamentally colonized by the Poles”⁸⁴—but also

as a nation, Belarusians were formed within the Russian empire. . . . Which is not to say that the millennial history of our region is not connected with the independent Belarus. Yet this does mean that the Belarus we have today did not come about as a logical outcome of the gradual unfolding of historical causality. No, contemporary Belarus is an outcome of major breaks and gaps in the chain of historical events, which we nonetheless have artfully arranged in a linear sequence.⁸⁵

Contrary to many of his colleagues from the Adradžeńnie movement, Akudovich maintained in his writings that the colonial period was indeed the time of the nation formation: “Russia was a prison of nations as much as it was a cradle of nations. For the Belarusians, the latter is just as important as the former. . . . As a nation, Belarusians were not colonized by Russia, but they were repressed by Russian nationalism.”⁸⁶ To some degree, Akudovich repurposes here the formula “*our* national rebirth in *their* civilizational context,” already familiar from the texts of Dubaviec. Yet for Akudovich, this formula is not limited to a concrete historical circumstance. Rather, it generalizes the originary topological displacement that determined the imperial production of colonial nationality in Belarus: the context of one’s (colonial) existence is always somebody else’s civilization.

Scholars of multinational state formations (imperial and otherwise) have analyzed in detail the phenomenon of nationalization from above.⁸⁷ Akudovich adds a useful nuance in this process. His descriptions of what could be called “repressive ethnonationalization” productively highlight the empire’s dual investment in originating and substantiating national (ethnic or regional) difference and, simultaneously, in strict control over those forms and institutions, in which these differences could find their manifestations. The “system of stylistic absence” that Akudovich gradually elaborates in his work helps us understand how an apophatic postcolonial reaction to the empire’s repressive interpellation might look.

Akudovich’s almost Foucauldian perception of power, with its constitutive/subjectivating and constricting/subjecting force, provided him with a critical analytics for thinking about the aborted Rebirth. From his perspective, the main mistake of Adradžeńnie’s

authors was not that they were *too* anticolonial but that they were *not postcolonial* enough in their reluctance to take the result of the process of repressive ethnonationalization seriously. Adradžeńnie's discourse on colonialism (Akudovich's included) "artfully" homogenized disjointed histories of the past into a history of forgotten resistance and misrecognized sovereignty. The impossibility of a linear history or a continuous biography, introduced by colonialism, was ignored or glossed over. In Akudovich's view, the authors of Adradžeńnie controlled and streamlined radical historical heteronomy in the narrative about "the Ideal Belarus," which reduced patriotism to the rhetoric of anticolonial resistance.⁸⁸

Compiled out of "diverse shards of the past," this vision of "the radiant Belarus"⁸⁹ produced two grave outcomes. First came an intellectual involution of sorts. Vibrant intellectual attempts of the early 1990s to problematize Belarus quickly evolved into an esoteric intellectual enterprise. The former enclave of intellectual freedom morphed into "a Belarussian version of Castalia" from Hermann Hesse's *Glass Bead Game*, as Akudovich put it.⁹⁰ An imagined community became illusory. Secondly, there was a major problem with reception. For outsiders, this Castalia with its literary fantasies hardly looked like the ideal Belarus. Instead, as Akudovich observed, it resembled "an ideal path to nowhere [*ideal'noe nikuda*],"⁹¹ a trap that the majority of the people did not rush to join:

We invited the "Belarusian people" to join our journey to the country populated by nobody, except from historical ghosts and literary phantoms. It was only natural that they ignored our call to nowhere. Yet, in return, we began to dislike "the people," even hate them a bit. . . . For a while "the people" put up with our rebukes, until, at some point, they just got up and moved aside. Seemingly for good.⁹²

An active participant of Adradžeńnie, Akudovich in his later essays shared the responsibility for the movement's failure. His recognition of mistakes was not apologetic, though. Being too ironic and post-modernist, Akudovich could hardly agree with the fundamentalist belief in the "pristine indigenality"⁹³ of the Belarusian people, championed by such conservatives as Dubaviec. Nonetheless, he

followed the same deep belief in the normative potential and formative abilities of the nation-state. As he insisted in one interview, “it would be conceptually misleading to think that a modern democratic state can be built without a nation at its foundation. This has never happened. . . . Until we are formed as a nation of sorts [*otchasti natsiia*], we will have neither democracy, nor liberalism, nor social justice.”⁹⁴

This position brings to the fore a constitutive dilemma that reverberates through the postcolonies of communism. The constructivist understanding of the nation and the postmodernist insistence on uprootedness and decenteredness of the subject are built here into a larger narrative about the nation-state.

In *Code of Absence* Akudovich maintained that Adradžeńnie had three foundational “keystones”: anticommunism, anticolonialism, and nationalism. Without the two “anti’s,” Akudovich insisted, the third element, nationalism, would have been impossible to sustain.⁹⁵ Yet, when traced back, the discursive history of Adradžeńnie suggests the opposite dynamic. Indeed, it was nationalism, with its insistent search for “the intrinsically Belarusian” (*sobstvenno belorusskoe*) and “the Belarusian as such” (*belorusskoe kak takovoe*),⁹⁶ that motivated and sustained the anticommunist and anticolonial fervor of the Rebirth. This peculiar *mélange* of romantic and constructivist modalities of thinking about the nation constitutes the contradictory core of postcommunist postcoloniality. In this framework, some imagined communities are certainly more real than others. A fundamentalist belief in the formative capacity of the nation-state is used to justify radical constructivist gestures aimed at debunking previous historical forms of national belonging.

It is precisely the inability to tolerate the coexistence of differently imagined national communities that Akudovich singled out as the main cause for “drawing a hard borderline [*zhestkoe razmezhevanie*]” between the “fairy-tale Belarus” of Adradžeńnie and “the real Belarus” of “the people.”⁹⁷ To put it differently, the origin of the split was not Adradžeńnie’s nationalism as such but the two “anti’s” that were used as its main channels.⁹⁸ In fact, a sense of national belonging emphasized by the authors of Adradžeńnie was happily shared by many. But it turned out to be more difficult to support



Fig. 11. From the series *Tabula Rasa* by Sergei Zhdanovich, Minsk, Belarus, 2001–16

Adradžeńnie’s attempt to frame nationalism not as a mode of collective attachment—not even as a *countercultural* movement—but as an apophatic program that established and maintained itself through negation. In the end, the rejection of the Soviet history, taken together with the rejection of the people produced by this history, transformed Adradžeńnie into “one of the most interesting cases of the artificial resistance [*ikusstvennoe soprotivlenie*].”⁹⁹

It is helpful to see how in his critique Akudovich traces a fervent desire of Adradžeńnie’s authors to discover—if not to create for themselves—a *proper* subaltern group, waiting to be emancipated: the rednecks, who are “nationally unconscious (Polonized,

colonized, Russified, Sovietized, mankurtized,¹⁰⁰ servile, and beaten-up).¹⁰¹ Not unlike Vladimir Lenin's communist vanguard, the Adradžeńnie authors saw their mission as bringing consciousness to the group that was allegedly incapable of generating it on its own. "Nationally unconscious" subaltern groups were supposed to be the primary cause for decolonization *and* the object of salvation. For the Bolsheviks, the success of their ideology implied the dissolution of the proletariat and peasantry as separate classes. In a similar fashion, Adradžeńnie aimed at making the subaltern historically irrelevant. The plan to revive the national culture as "a foundation for building a national state" was predicated on what today seems like a new edition of repressive ethnonationalization aimed at producing a postcolonial zone of silence.¹⁰² Perhaps like no one else from the Adradžeńnie movement, Akudovich succinctly formulated the core colonial dilemma of postcolonies of communism. In order not to vanish again, the nation-state under formation has "to cleanse the consciousness of the commoners [*paspalitye*] from the grids of colonial legacy and inscribe on this collective tabula rasa the meaning of the Belarusian idea in Belarusian words."¹⁰³

For Akudovich, the Rebirth, then, was not limited to a resurrection of a forgotten or previously unavailable past. Decolonization was also envisioned as a forceful substitution of one past for another. Or, to be more precise, it was perceived as an active erasure of one past in the name of the one that had yet to be articulated. If "nationalism is a product of a collective imagination constructed through remembrance," as Spivak¹⁰⁴ argued, then the nationalist anticolonialism offered by Adradžeńnie was premised on selectively administered forgetting and obliteration.

These grand plans of engineered amnesia, however, faced some unexpected difficulty. The subaltern talked back, underestimated in their capacity to resist and unwilling to recognize themselves in the representations offered by the Adradžeńnie authors. As Akudovich pointed out, "the Belarusian people" embraced their newly found sovereignty, but they were hardly tempted to give up "the part of the great history that they shared with the Russian empire."¹⁰⁵ Trading the historical legacy of "the great defenders and the great builders [of communism]" for "the shameful role of the



Fig. 12. From the series *Tabula Rasa* by Sergei Zhdanovich, Minsk, Belarus, 2001–16

colonized slave who could not even liberate himself on his own” did not present itself as an attractive bargain.¹⁰⁶ Speaking on behalf of the Adradžeńnie activists, Akudovich observed the vital discrepancy between the elite’s vanguardism and their audience’s backwardness: “Totally preoccupied with the idea of Belarus’s coloniality [*kolonizovannost’*], we were in a complete denial regarding the basic fact that 90 percent of the Belarusians saw themselves not as colonized but as colonizers.”¹⁰⁷ Hence his bitter and harsh conclusion: “Adradžeńnie became an intellectual genocide of the Belarusian society of the time” because it took away from several generations of people their right to judge their own life.¹⁰⁸

Akudovich's postcolonial writings delineated the structure of apophatic intellectual critique in a particularly clear fashion. As I have tried to show, his version of nationalism emerged out of an incessant production of absences, no-names, and no-places. His anticolonialism and anticommunism might be historically imprecise and ideologically inconsistent. Yet the point of his intellectual/antilectual project is exactly to undermine any semblance of stability or consistency that one could derive from history or ideology. Every foundation seemed to be overturned, in rejection—be it historical progress, geopolitics, national culture, or, for instance, language. To list just a few:

“[Belarusian history knew] no sequential progress whatsoever . . . just only constant ruptures.”¹⁰⁹

“The geopolitical tragedy of the Belarusians has to do with the fact that they never had a great capital city.”¹¹⁰

“At its core, Belarusians are a plebeian nation since it was formed in the absence of high culture; all local elites considered themselves either Polish or Russian.”¹¹¹

“We have the adjective ‘Belarusian’ . . . but we do not know what to attach it to.”¹¹²

“We are left with nothing.”¹¹³

This list could go on. Somewhat counterintuitively, though, the cartography of failures, erasures, and losses that Akudovich has been compiling for quite some time did not lead him to despair. Instead, historical absence and cultural nothingness emerged as major sources of survival, if not sovereignty:

Perhaps our destiny is to grow out of the “nothing” that we have been carrying in ourselves for a millennium. By now, this “nothing” has already engulfed many empires, peoples, and cultures. Along with all their glorious victories and noble legacies, they disappeared without a trace. Meanwhile, protected by our own absence, we, the connoisseurs of loss and defeat, are moving along, into the third millennium, demonstrating that our Great Nothingness [*Vialikaje niama*] might be the most reliable way to experience time and being.¹¹⁴

Akudovich's antillectual journey—from the recognition of the ultimate failure of *Adradžeńnie* to the great nothingness as the basis of the nation's persistence—presents a telling example of a striving to retain the subaltern indiscernibility as a foundation of the postcolonial condition. The vision of colonialism that he offered (without clearly articulating it) has some resemblance to Guha's famous model of "dominance without hegemony." Given the specificity of Russian and Soviet imperialism, Akudovich recasts a similar dynamic of power asymmetry and failed totality as ethnonationalization through repression. Precipitated by colonization, this type of nation formation took a direction that privileged signs of absence and gestures of withdrawal: the imperial context was perforated rather than inhabited by the subaltern. As Akudovich makes clear, such absences should not be mistaken for disappearances; they are speech acts of sorts, governed by a certain stylistic, semantic, and performative code. These tactically produced "zones of silence" are approached as protective shields rather than signs of deficiency. He builds his vision of national sovereignty on the colonial ability if not to avoid the unwanted experience, then, at least, to keep it aside. This cultural logic seemed to retain its relevance after communism, too. As Akudovich suggests, the attempts of *Adradžeńnie* to renationalize "the people" through a selective erasure of history and memory provoked the same popular gesture of silent distancing in response. The imagined community did not cohere. The promised lands of the Belarusian Atlantis were yet to be discovered. The code of absence still held its spell.

Postcolonial Foundationalism

Akudovich's pessimistic view of *Adradžeńnie* did not go unnoticed by his colleagues. In their responses, many seemed to agree that since the mid-1990s the demand for "the radical version" of the Belarusian identity was indeed very limited.¹¹⁵ Some of them tried to reorient the narrative about the failed history of the Rebirth and its possible afterlife. Ihar Babkoŭ, a poet and philosopher from Minsk, has been Akudovich's most imaginative interlocutor and forceful opponent. In his essays, books, and interviews, Babkoŭ offers a

sophisticated alternative to Akudovich's preoccupation with absence. Taking the idea of nonpresence as his point of departure, he shifted attention from documenting modalities of withdrawal to the spatial conditions that enable such self-distancing. Absence re-emerged as an effect of a historically specific territorial arrangement. In this section I finish my discussion of the Adradžeńnie authors by following Babkoŭ's postcolonial take on the traditional nationalist fascination with soil and soul.

An enthusiastic reader and interpreter of postcolonial studies, Babkoŭ was the founding editor of two major intellectual journals—*Frahmenty* (1996–2001)¹¹⁶ and *Perekrestki* (2004–14). Through his translations, public seminars, and publications, he significantly influenced the nationalist discourse in Minsk, offering an idiosyncratic version of postcoloniality after communism. Like all the other writers discussed in this essay, he constructs his argument as a discursive amalgam of the romantic and constructivist approaches to the nation, heavily saturated with the poetics of negativity. However, unlike many authors of Adradžeńnie, Babkoŭ escapes the dominant tendency to see the nation exclusively as a product of the nation-*state* by focusing on spatial aspects of national identity.

What makes Babkoŭ's interventions remarkable is his open and willing embrace of strategic essentialism. Describing his approach in an interview, he was not shy about it: "I'd define this strategy of searching for identity [*samastojnaść*] as a strategy of the Belarusian fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is a search for the soil [*grunt*], for the foundation. . . . The national is not about some essence, nor is it about some idea. Rather, it is about topos, it is about a place, which gives us a sense of uniqueness."¹¹⁷ The scale of Babkoŭ's "place" can vary in his writings dramatically—from a region to a state to a geopolitical configuration. What remains constant, though, is a profound saturation of geography with ontology.

This focus on geo-ontology might look baffling at first, given Babkoŭ's reputation as an active promoter of such authors as Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, or Gayatri Spivak (whose translations into Belarusian he has published in his journals). Yet this fundamentalism is an outcome of a persistent attempt to ground postcolonial theory within an existing political context. In my discussion of Akudovich's

views, I have pointed out the predominant inclination of the Adradžeńnie authors to understand the Rebirth primarily as a form of antillectual resistance. Babkoŭ followed this tradition in full; and his search for the foundational soil may be read as a historically situated politico-intellectual attempt to locate a standpoint from which to continue his rejection of any form of colonial domination.

In 2011, at a roundtable on public protests against the heavily managed presidential election of December 2010, Babkoŭ insisted that deconstruction as a method of social critique of grand narratives of modernity was hardly helpful in Belarus. In fact, as his argument went, the authoritarian government was only eager to adopt deconstructing interpretations precisely because they deuniversalized the metanarratives of “freedom, democracy, and human rights” by pointing to those “concrete actors with their specific economic interests” who “hid behind these discourses and metanarratives.”¹¹⁸ In this context, to deuniversalize meant to discredit.

Debatable as this interpretation of deconstruction might be, it does provide grounds for understanding why the incorporation of postcolonial theory in postcommunist contexts often looks like its “hostile takeover.”¹¹⁹ Embraced by nationalist discourses, this version of postcolonial criticism approached its “post-” as “anti-,” through promising more struggle, resistance, and suffering. Understood as a form of negation, the national Rebirth results in a complicated ideological and epistemological configuration: apophatic nationalism requires a constant production of things to reject. Neil Lazarus in his analysis of resistance in African postcolonial fiction traces a similar tendency. As he puts it: “The general rhetoric of anticolonialism was reductive. It implied that there was only one struggle to be waged, and it was a negative one: a struggle *against* colonialism, not a struggle *for* anything specific.”¹²⁰

Yet the reductive anticolonialism of the 1960s that Lazarus describes had little or no alternatives. Babkoŭ’s postcolonial reasoning shows what happens when such alternative intellectual frameworks become available. Apophatic nationalism prefers to remain reductive, actively rejecting concepts and arguments that might complicate the straightforward dynamic of anticolonial resistance. With its language of “hybrid” identities and “diffused” power,

classical postcolonial theory obfuscated the targets that had originated the antillectual nationalism in the first place. Viewing anti-colonial resistance as the basic matrix for *any* political resistance, Babkoŭ highlighted grave implications of such disarming “postmodernity” in his earlier work: “The culture of resistance is built on specific anticolonial practices, anticolonial thought, and anticolonial art that can easily locate the enemy, be it Russia, Poland or conformism. Under the condition of postmodernity, where . . . everything and anything are mixed together, . . . the culture of resistance as an anticolonial culture might not survive for too long.”¹²¹ His concept of *pamiežža* (borderland)—understood as a “zone of the cultural overlapping . . . associated with the colonial influences from the West and the East”¹²²—emerged precisely as a response to this political difficulty with bringing together the anticolonial and the postmodern.

Babkoŭ is not the only one who writes about the borderland in Belarus. However, unlike other scholars and thinkers, he relies on postcolonial criticism in the most advanced way in his interpretations of borders and boundaries.¹²³ Structurally, the concept of the borderland allowed Babkoŭ to emplace “the story of the colonized” within larger narratives: the borderland was construed as a “shadow space” (*tenevoe prostranstvo*) of European modernity.¹²⁴ Narratively, it generated a series of metaphors and allegories that drew attention to the shifting and moving aspects of borderland phenomena. Retaining “the culture of anticolonial resistance,” the concept of the borderland was represented as a resistance to any stabilizing form of attachment, colonial or otherwise. Or, to use Babkoŭ’s own definition: “Cultural borderland (or the culture of the borderland) is . . . a process of balancing in between [*pamiž*] within the polycentric space of cultural diversity. . . . During the last two centuries, Belarus was originated and shaped precisely in this foggy space of inter- and transcultural binding.”¹²⁵

Certainly, the idea of the borderland has a long genealogy in this region. The notion was evoked before and after communism in different forms and variations.¹²⁶ Yet, Babkoŭ’s iteration differs from the dominant Polish version, which mythologized the borderland (Kresy Wschodnie) as an eastern frontier territory demarcated by



Fig. 13. From the series *Tabula Rasa* by Sergei Zhdanovich, Minsk, Belarus, 2001–16

military posts (*kreska* means “mark”) and protected by Polish border patrols from the Tatars or the Cossacks.¹²⁷ Babkoŭ significantly transforms this familiar narrative about control and liminality by filtering it through the classical Belarusian text *The Eternal Path: An Investigation of the Belarusian Worldview* written in 1921 by the poet and thinker Ihnat Abdziralovich (1896–1923).

In this manifesto on Belarusian identity, considered by many authors of *Adradžeńnie* to be a foundational text of modern Belarusian thought,¹²⁸ Abdziralovich offered a poetic apology for the third way, a defense of the deliberate geopolitical nonalignment: “The oscillation between the West and the East, and the essential distancing [*niaprykhił’nas’sť*] from each of them is the main feature of the history of the Belarusian people. . . . For many centuries, Belarusians were at a crossroad: one path led to the West, the other one—to the East; starting together, our roads split in the opposite directions.”¹²⁹ For Abdziralovich, neither of these directions was useful; hence his conclusion: “We should be using different roads” to arrive

at “our own, Belarusian forms of life.”¹³⁰ Borrowing from Abdziralovich the promising ambiguity of the road, Babkoŭ dispenses with the idea of arrival altogether. Being on the road, that is to say, the process of inhabiting the borderland, becomes the goal in itself. His borderland has a peculiar property, though. Despite its double exposure, this space remains strikingly unmarked. Lacking its own qualities, the borderland acts as a screen for colonial/imperial projections of the neighbors. Babkoŭ specifies this vision in the following way: “The east European borderland could be seen as the extreme periphery of the West, as its frontier in the barbarian East. Alternatively, it could be classified as the extreme periphery of the European East, as its defense line against the West’s radical projects aimed to civilize, to subject, and to incorporate this semibarbarian province into the West’s own zone of power.”¹³¹ Framing the borderland as “a zone of cultural overlapping,” Babkoŭ endows it with no voice of its own, effacing distinctive local, internal, or native features.¹³² Indeed, this is a description of yet another zone of silence, and it is next to impossible to learn what this eastern European blank screen actually consists of, or how it came about. However, unlike Dubaviec, Babkoŭ does not read this nonpresence negatively; the blank screen in this case is *not* a sign of imperial erasure of the native culture. Similarly, unlike Akudovich, Babkoŭ does not treat this functional transparency of the national space as a gesture of enforced withdrawal. Instead, following the work of Walter Mignolo, Babkoŭ sees in borderland a space that affords a position of nonalignment with regard to the dominant narratives of the West and the East, and, simultaneously a platform for their critique. For Babkoŭ, borderland is a practice of circumscribing the cultural core that is not in a rush to find its own description. It is a form of ontological nomadism. The road he traverses is an avenue of independence in the making.¹³³

Foregrounding the borders to draw attention to their disciplining and subjectivating effect, Babkoŭ at the same time reroutes this process of subject formation by rejecting the forms of positionality that this subjectivation might bring with it. To put it slightly differently, the authorial interpellation constitutes the postcolonial subject, but it cannot stabilize the subject position. Subjectivity and agency are

purposefully not synchronized here. The double exposure (East/West) complicates this condition of nonsynchronicity even more: it doubles the options but also creates the possibility for delaying the moment of choice. In fact, such a deferral becomes a key goal, and Babkoŭ explores its structural and cultural possibilities by moving from the *borderland* to the borders themselves. Devoid of its own specificity, the zone in between can exist as long as its borders are propped up from without. The easiest way to amplify the internal invisibility is to exaggerate the prominence of the external frame.

It is hard not to hear in this description of borders an echo of the Soviet experience. The borderland here is not a provincial area where the empire's centrifugal forces come to their complete halt, dissipated. Instead, every border is a product of a hard and contested delimitation. Every border is a miniversion of the Berlin Wall, with its overemphasized military presence of superpowers. "Border is a rupture of identity," claims Babkoŭ,¹³⁴ and this vantage point dramatically readjusts the outlook of the borderland, turning a periphery into a Huntingtonian "zone of a cultural and civilizational conflict."¹³⁵ What sustains the dynamism of this territory is hardly "the impulses received from the center; instead, it is the collision of essences, their differentiation and their consolidation. Near the border, essences are all the more salient. . . . This is where they are the most revealing and the most aggressive."¹³⁶

When read together, this dual understanding of the borderland—as an empty screen for external projections, and as "a zone of a civilizational war"¹³⁷ between external powers—maps out a particular postcolonial condition that is significantly shaped but not fully determined by the borders. In an unusual way, the exaggerated presence of borders described by Babkoŭ fundamentally modifies the traditional problem of colonial mimicry by inverting the typical colonial dynamic. The anxiety of resemblance¹³⁸ is approached here from the point of view of the colonized, and the flawed sameness of the colonial subject—"a copy that must fail"—is overcome through a process of radical dedifferentiation that targets not the colonial "copy" but the colonizing "original." Essentializing borders is instrumental for creating an important differential effect and allowing the core to stay unspecified. The task of demonstrating signs of

ontological difference is relegated to the colonizer. This form of production of difference sustains a specific modality of being, too. In his book of essays *The Kingdom of Belarus: Explaining Ruins*, Babkoŭ defines the postcolonial space as a “cultural landscape of fragments and ruins” that emerged as the crossroads of different powers.¹³⁹ Crucially, this spatio-cultural arrangement is not reducible to the fragmentation of the imperial presence only; equally important are the nonhierarchical and nonhegemonic qualities of these remains. As Babkoŭ insists, these fragments and ruins do not coalesce into a linear narrative, a traceable plot, or a pattern: “The fragmentation of the cultural space results in a lack of [organizing] dominants, or even in a complete historical lack of essential criteria that could reveal or generate such dominants.”¹⁴⁰ This postcolonial landscape without dominants suggests a specific form of life—without indispensable orients or stable attachments: “Being on the border is not about moving from one culture to another. Rather, it is a movement along the borderline. It is a melancholic advancement in a parallel motion with the existing cultural borders. It is a gesture of deliberate non-concordance with the available topoi. It is a strategy that neither differentiates one’s own from the foreign [*svaim i chuzhim*], nor chooses between them.”¹⁴¹ At least to some extent, this interpretation of being on the border clarifies Babkoŭ’s fascination with the strategic essentialism of soil and soul. Conducted against the backdrop of constantly rotating regimes of imperial domination, the life without dominants endows the anchoring stability of landscape with a crucial use value. The explanatory prominence of this geo-ontology is often glossed over as a result of a lack. As Babkoŭ observed, historically the Belarusians have not been very successful in symbolically mediating the space of their existence: “No cultural equivalents were available for naming this space. . . . Nor were there basic texts which could be used as an object of [national] identification.”¹⁴² The idea of the borderland, then, is an attempt to crack this code of absence—not by providing a positive disruption or a normative definition but by advancing on “the path between . . . cultural empires.”¹⁴³ In an interview that I conducted with Babkoŭ in Minsk, he pushed it even further, suggesting that this life without dominants made



Fig. 14. From the series *Tabula Rasa* by Sergei Zhdanovich, Minsk, Belarus, 2001–16

possible a certain space of freedom. “A freedom that is not about being associated with this or that fragment”—he emphasized apophatically—“but a freedom to find yourself in spaces and crevices between all these fragments.”¹⁴⁴

So far, Babkoŭ admits, this vision is a fantasy, an illusion, an attempt to build a nation not even as an imagined but as an imaginary community.¹⁴⁵ However, his vision of the borderland has precipitated new practices and narratives about the life in between, as he had hoped in 2004, when starting his journal *Perekrestki* (*Crossroads*), the crucial platform for developing postcolonial narratives and methods in Belarus.¹⁴⁶ His geo-ontology of the borderland has provided a name for the zone of silence. A name without a clear identity, it persists as a permanent placeholder, as a trace of delayed presence open to future opportunities.

With his insistence on futurity and openness, Babkoŭ drastically reforms the figure of the incomprehensible subaltern with which I started this chapter. Fundamentally antillectual in his approach, he

nonetheless reads multiple catalogs of erasure and codes of absence, compiled by his colleagues, in a strikingly positive manner. As a result, the discursive and social indiscernibility of the subaltern reappeared as a manifestation of what Mikhail Bakhtin called “interminable unfinalizability” (*bezyskhodnaia nezavershimost'*),¹⁴⁷ as an indication of the ultimate incompleteness of the subject formation that diffuses hierarchical dominants with the inconclusive messiness of life.¹⁴⁸



The examples of Belarusian postcolonial critique that I have explored in this essay do not coalesce into a single theoretical argument. However, this critique does suggest an overall arch, moving from repressive ethnonationalization (in its imperial or postcolonial forms) to an ontological nomadic wandering among ruins and fragments of various empires. Emerging originally as part of the anticolonial resistance in the late 1980s, these intellectual interventions have been predominantly concerned with questions of national history, memory, and identity, leaving issues of economic development, social equality, and political democracy aside. Often, they substitute analysis with poetic analogies, creating a romantic vision of the golden past, populated (almost) exclusively by knights and castles. Infused with ethnocentrism, this apophatic version of postcolonial nationalism is remarkably blind toward the problems of ethnic, linguistic, or cultural diversity.

But perhaps it could not have been otherwise. The political and social environment in which postcolonial debates have been taking place in Belarus is far from being conducive to free exchanges and critical engagements. Being “national” in this context often means “being against” the existing authoritarian system. In this condition, gestures of rejection become a manifestation of agency, while the “system of stylistic absence” works as a form of self-protection.

The line between fantasies of escape and real life exile could be very thin in Belarus these days. If there is one thing that this postcolony of communism made especially clear, it is this basic rule: always be prepared to grow a new life out “nothing.” Since 2011 the Belarus



Fig. 15. From the series *Tabula Rasa* by Sergei Zhdanovich, Minsk, Belarus, 2001–16

Free Theater, which I discussed in the beginning, has been working out of London. Not being able to perform what they wanted in their native Minsk, the actors preferred to join the list of all those who were born in Belarus but could make themselves prominent only elsewhere.

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Notes

1. Ravenhill, "My Highlight of 2008?"; Stern, "In Belarus, Theater as Activism."
2. For a book version of this list, see Chalezin, Kalada, and Zajcaŭ, *Adzin z nas*. See also Mal'dis, *Sootechestvenniki*.
3. Morris, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*
4. Moore, "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet?" The title of Moore's essay is a reference to Kwame Anthony Appiah's "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" In 2016 I organized the conference "Imperial Reverb: Exploring the Postcolonies of Communism" to discuss successes and failures of the dialogue between the postcolonial theory and postcommunist studies that was initiated by Chioni. (See the conference site for the materials: imperialreverb.princeton.edu.)
5. Hladík, "Theory's Travelogue"; Kudaibergenova, "Use and Abuse of Postcolonial Discourses in Post-independent Kazakhstan"; Oushakine, "Postcolonial Estrangements"; Snochowska-Gonzalez, "Postcolonial Poland."
6. Chari and Verdery, "Thinking between the Posts."
7. Chari and Verdery, "Thinking between the Posts," 29.
8. Ancipienka, "Nainoushaia historyia." See also the following collections: Annus, "Postcolonial View on Soviet Era Baltic Cultures"; Kołodziejczyk and Şandru, *Postcolonial Perspectives*; and Pucherová and Gáfrík, *Postcolonial Europe?* For an updated list of eastern European postcolonial scholarship, see the online journal *Postcolonial Europe*, www.postcolonial-europe.eu/en/essays.html.
9. Spivak, "1996," 139.
10. For an extensive discussion of a similar trend in the context of Caribbean history, see Ashcroft, *Postcolonial Transformation*, 104–6.
11. Lukashuk, "Bliskavitsa u dyiamentsu," 8 [Bel.].
12. Stoller, *Along the Archival Grain*, 20.
13. Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony*, 101.
14. Ashcroft, *Postcolonial Transformation*, 178.
15. Gapova, "On Nation, Gender, and Class Formation in Belarus"; Pershai, "Questioning the Hegemony of the Nation State in Belarus"; Bekus, "Struggle over Identity."
16. For more examples of this trend in other regions, see Stierstofer, "Fundamentalism and Postcoloniality."
17. Chatterjee, *Nation and Its Fragments*, 11.

18. Dubavets, "Nia treba dvuh, kab pachats'," 5 [Bel.].
19. "Adradzhenne i narod," 13 [Bel.].
20. For a detailed discussion of this dynamic, see Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 301.
21. For a discussion of the volume, see Shchytsova, "Negativnaia dialektika osvobozhdeniia," 85 [Rus.].
22. For a useful analysis of the pre–World War II situation in Belarus, see Rudling, *Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism*.
23. Ancipienka, "Pra knihu, vykliki i kantekest," 6 [Bel.]. Despite its very strong anti-imperial stance, the collection did not escape an ironic imprint of the imperial belonging (or colonial dependency, for that matter): written in Belarusian, it was published in Russia's St. Petersburg.
24. Mackievič, "Belarus iak filofskaia i metafizychnaia problema," 199 [Bel.].
25. Bykau, "Rozdumy pra Belarus," 29 [Bel.].
26. In *Dominance without Hegemony* Guha describes a situation in India in which "the cry 'We don't have a history. We must have a history!' [echoed] the other cry, 'We are not yet a nation. We must become a nation!'" (202). See also Dipesh Chakrabarty's discussion of the tendency to frame Indian history in terms of a lack and an absence ("Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History," 268–69). In his study of African intellectuals Neil Lazarus documents a similarly grim perception of the postcolonial development in the late 1960s (*Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction*, 24–25).
27. Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations," 117.
28. Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations," 117.
29. Foucault, "Polemics, Politics, and Problematizations," 117.
30. Akudovich, "Suchasnaia belarускаia filofsia," 15 [Bel.].
31. For more details on this development, see Filatov, "Belarus' kak pogranich'e" [Rus.]; Ioffe, "Culture-Wars, Soul-Searching, and Belarusian Identity"; and Akudovich, "Dyskurs suchasnaha" [Bel.].
32. Osmolovskii, "Ne s kem? Ni s kem! Protiv vsekh partii" [Rus.]. For more discussion, see Usmanova, "Belorusskii détournement," 97 [Rus.].
33. See, e.g., Bill, "Seeking the Authentic."
34. For more details on the intellectual aspects of the alt-right movement, see Frim and Fluss, "Aliens, Antisemitism, and Academia."
35. Hairong, "Position without Identity," 24.
36. Hairong, "Position without Identity," 24.

37. This nominative confusion is not limited to Belarus, of course. For instance, until the Soviet period the people now known as Kazakhs were usually called the Kyrgyz, while the contemporary Kyrgyz until the mid-1920s were grouped under the name Kara-Kyrgyz. Needless to say, in both cases the supranational term was used to consolidate and homogenize diverse nomadic groups into a new form of (ethnic) collectivity.
38. Akudovich, *Arkhipelah Belarus*, 26, 115 [Bel.].
39. Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities*, 68.
40. Taylor, "Two Theories of Modernity," 173.
41. For detailed discussion, see, e.g., Konan, *Skarynaznaustva. Knigaznaustva. Litaraturaznaustva*; and Mal'dzis, *480 hod belaruskaha knihadrukavannia*.
42. For more historical information about the street, see Kirychenka, *Minsk, 1960–1969*; Bohn, *Minskii fenomen*; Rakitski, "Mahistral'nyiya idei," 122; and Anikin, *Architektura Sovetskoï Belorussii*, 44–62.
43. Bibikov, "Prospekt Nezavisimosti."
44. Taylor, "Two Theories of Modernity," 164.
45. Arlou, "Ad Ragvaloda da BNR," 31–32 [Bel.].
46. Dubavets, "Padstavy ratsyianal'naha," 113, 114 [Bel.].
47. Dubavets, "Pradmova," 6 [Bel.].
48. Navumchyk, *Sem hadou Adradzhennia*, 8 [Bel.].
49. Pazniak and Shmyhalou, "Kurapaty." For an extensive discussion of this case, see my "Postcolonial Estrangements."
50. See, e.g., Pazniak, "Biazvinnaia krou ne znikae biassledna" [Bel.].
51. Akudovich, "Terra Incognita (Zamest pasliaslouia)," 366 [Bel.].
52. Razik, "Netipichnoe obshestvo," 212 [Rus.].
53. Dubavets, *Russkaia kniga*, 64, 71 [Rus.].
54. Akudovich, "Terra Incognita," 366 [Bel.].
55. The collection of essays *The Belarusian Atlantis: Realities and Myths of a European Nation* is a good example of this overall trend (Rakitski, *Belarускаia Atliantyda*).
56. Unuchak, "'Nashaniustva' i 'zakhodnerusizm'" [Bel.]. See also the newspaper's view of its own history: "Pra hazetu 'Nasha Niva.'"
57. Pershai, "Localness and Mobility in Belarusian Nationalism." See also Dzermant, "Metafizyka 'Tuteishasti.'"
58. Kupala, *Tuteishyia*, 60.
59. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 42.
60. Abushenko, "Creolity as Other Modernity of Eastern Europe."
61. Dubavets, *Russkaia kniga*, 22 [Rus.].

62. For a detailed discussion, see Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 89–90.
63. Ashcroft, *On Post-colonial Futures*, 126.
64. Ashcroft, *On Post-colonial Futures*, 125.
65. Dubavets, “Pradmova,” 6 [Bel.].
66. Akudovich, *Kod otsutstviia*, 100 [Rus.].
67. Dubavets, “Padstavy ratsyianal’naha,” 126 [Bel.].
68. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 112–16.
69. Dubavets, “Padstavy ratsyianal’naha,” 126 [Bel.].
70. Dubavets, “Padstavy ratsyianal’naha,” 124, 129 [Bel.].
71. I describe a similar attraction of Russian ethnonationalists to ideas and images of somatic nationalism in the 1990s–2000s in my book *The Patriotism of Despair*.
72. Dubavets, *Russkaia kniga*, 4–5 [Rus.].
73. Dubavets, *Russkaia kniga*, 91.
74. For the grim historical legacy of the search for Nordic roots and the desire to “nordify” (*aufnorden*) in the region, see Dojčinović, “Chameleon of *Mens Rea*.”
75. “Intelektual’naia situatsyia Belarusi,” 64–65 [Bel.].
76. Dubavets, “Padstavy ratsyianal’naha,” 127 [Bel.].
77. Navumchyk, *Sem hadou Adradzhennia*, 8 [Bel.].
78. For a brief review of these debates, see Rudkouski, “Khto zabiū belaruskae Adradzhenne.”
79. Akudovich, *Miane Niama; Kod otsutstviia; Arkhipelah Belarus*.
80. Interview (in Russian) with V. Akudovich, Minsk, November 2009.
81. For more discussion of this positionality, see Spivak, *Critique of Post-colonial Reason*, 49.
82. Rakitski, “Prachytats’ Mickiewiczza pa-belarusku,” 458 [Bel.].
83. “Adradzhenne i narod,” 14 [Bel.].
84. Akudovich, *Kod otsutstviia*, 47 [Rus.]. See also “Adradzhenne i narod,” 14 [Bel.].
85. “Adradzhenne i narod,” 14 [Bel.].
86. Akudovich, *Kod otsutstviia*, 48 [Rus.].
87. For a recent example, see Nielsen, *Making Yugoslavs*. See also Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*; and Suny, *Revenge of the Past*.
88. “Adradzhenne i narod,” 14 [Bel.]; Akudovich, *Kod otsutstviia*, 150 [Rus.].
89. Akudovich, *Kod otsutstviia*, 148 [Rus.].
90. Akudovich, “Nidze i nikhto,” 95 [Bel.]; Hesse, *Glass Bead Game*.
91. Akudovich, *Kod otsutstviia*, 148 [Rus.].
92. Akudovich, *Kod otsutstviia*, 151 [Rus.].

93. Schulze-Engler, "Once Were Internationalists?," 33.
94. Akudovich, *Arkhipelah Belarus'*, 87 [Bel.].
95. Akudovich, *Kod otsutsviia*, 152 [Rus.].
96. Akudovich, *Kod otsutsviia*, 167, 169 [Rus.].
97. "Adradzhenne i narod," 16 [Bel.].
98. Akudovich, *Kod otsutsviia*, 153 [Rus.]. Later on, in an interview, Akudovich would define the "model of Belarus" that was based on anticommunism, anticolonialism, nationalism, and Tarashkevitsa (a pre-Soviet version of Belarusian) as "a model of Belarusian emigrants" ("Adradzhenne i narod," 16 [Rus.]).
99. Akudovich, "Nidze i nikhto," 95 [Bel.].
100. The terms *mankurt* and *mankurtism* were coined by the Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov to describe subalterns who in the process of their colonization were forcefully deprived of their memory by the colonizers. Published in 1980, Aitmatov's novel was a major hit in the late Soviet Union (Aitmatov, *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years*).
101. Akudovich, *Kod otsutsviia*, 148 [Rus.].
102. Akudovich, "Nidze i nikhto," 95 [Bel.].
103. Akudovich, "Nidze i nikhto," 95 [Bel.].
104. Spivak, *Nationalism and the Imagination*, 40.
105. Akudovich, *Kod otsutsviia*, 151 [Rus.].
106. Akudovich, *Kod otsutsviia*, 151 [Rus.].
107. Akudovich, *Arkhipelah Belarus'*, 196 [Bel.].
108. Akudovich, *Kod otsutsviia*, 149 [Rus.].
109. Akudovich, *Kod otsutsviia*, 34 [Rus.].
110. Rakitski, "Stalitsa na vzbochyne," 116 [Bel.].
111. Akudovich, *Arkhipelah Belarus'*, 78 [Bel.].
112. Akudovich, "Uvodziny u novuiu litaraturnuiu," 214 [Bel.].
113. Akudovich, *Arkhipelah Belarus'*, 6 [Bel.].
114. Akudovich, *Arkhipelah Belarus'*, 195 [Bel.].
115. "Adradzhenne i narod," 19 [Bel.].
116. See the journal's site for more information (knihi.com/storage/frahmenty/index.html).
117. Babkoŭ, *Karaleustva Belarus*, 33 [Bel.].
118. "Kruglyi stol '19 dekabria,'" 45 [Rus.].
119. Snochowska-Gonzalez, "Post-colonial Poland." See also Todorova, "On Public Intellectuals and Their Conceptual Frameworks."
120. Lazarus, *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction*, 5.
121. Dyskusiia, "Sens i nonsense supratsivu" [Bel.].
122. Bobkov, "Refleksii na poliakh kritiki znaniia," 6 [Rus.].

123. See, e.g., Kravtsevich, Smolenchuk, and Tokt', *Belorusy*; and Savchenko, *Belarus*.
124. Bobkov, "Na Vostok ot Tsentra," 16 [Rus.].
125. Babkoŭ, "Etyka pamezhzha," 67, 68 [Bel.].
126. Katajala and Lalhteenmalki, *Imagined, Negotiated, Remembered*; Prusin, *Lands Between*; Gatrell and Baron, *Warlands*; Seegel, *Mapping Europe's Borderlands*.
127. For more detail, see Snochowska-Gonzalez, "Post-colonial Poland," 718n35; Gross, "Kresy"; and Ładykowski, "Poland and Its Eastern Neighbors."
128. In his introduction to *The Anthology* Akudovich praised this text as one of the highest intellectual achievements of the twentieth century ("Suchasnaia belarускаia filasofia," 12 [Bel.]). In turn, Dubaviec, in his own foreword for the 1993 edition of *The Eternal Path*, presented it as the book of the twenty-first century (Dubavets, "Pradmova," 5–6).
129. Abdziralovich, *Advechnym Shliakham*, 11, 12 [Bel.].
130. Abdziralovich, *Advechnym Shliakham*, 17 [Bel.].
131. Bobkov, "Refleksii na poliakh," 6 [Rus.].
132. Bobkov, "Refleksii na poliakh," 6 [Rus.].
133. Mignolo's essay "(Post)Occidentalism, (Post)coloniality, and (Post)subaltern Rationality" was published in *Perekrestki* in 2004.
134. Babkoŭ, "Etyka pamezhzha," 67 [Bel.].
135. Bobkov, "Refleksii na poliakh kritiki," 6 [Rus.].
136. Babkoŭ, "Etyka pamezhzha," 67 [Bel.].
137. Bobkov, "Refleksii na poliakh kritiki," 6 [Rus.].
138. More on the anxiety of resemblance and dedifferentiation, see Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 59–67.
139. Babkoŭ, *Karaleustva Belarus'*, 8 [Bel.].
140. Babkoŭ, *Karaleustva Belarus'*, 8–9 [Bel.].
141. Babkoŭ, "Etyka pamezhzha," 67 [Bel.].
142. Babkoŭ, *Karaleustva Belarus'*, 37 [Bel.].
143. Babkoŭ, *Karaleustva Belarus'*, 33 [Bel.].
144. An interview with Ihar Babkoŭ, October 2009, Minsk (in Russian).
145. Bobkov, "Na Vostok ot Tsentra," 13 [Rus.].
146. Bobkov and Tereshkovich, "Vmesto predisloviia," 8–9 [Rus.].
147. Bakhtin, "Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo," 60. In an English version of Bakhtin's work, Caryl Emerson rendered this term as "the inescapable open-endedness" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 51).

148. For a detailed discussion of infinalizability in Bakhtin's work, see Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 36–40.

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