Relationality and uprooting:
towards a Caribbean reading of ex-Soviet Central Asia

Relacionalidade e desenraizamento:
para uma leitura caribenha da Ásia Central ex-soviética

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Abstract This article offers a new way of understanding ex-Soviet Central Asia based on the intersection between my own ethnography and the thought of Édouard Glissant, who elaborates on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of rhizome. My argument is that it is possible to analyze Central Asian identities, how they are lived and displayed, politically without recourse to the role that the State plays in everyday life, turning the approach centered on the anthropology of the State on its head. Relationality is presented as the rhizomatic alternative in a non-essentialist analysis of identities that function independent of any State influence from above.

Resumo Este artigo oferece uma nova forma de entender a Ásia Central ex-soviética a partir da intersecção entre a minha própria etnografia e o pensamento de Édouard Glissant, que elabora o conceito de rizoma de Deleuze e Guattari. O meu argumento é que é possível analisar as identidades da Ásia central, a forma como elas são vividas e exibidas, politicamente sem recorrer ao papel que o Estado desempenha na vida cotidiana, virando do avesso a abordagem centrada na antropologia do Estado. A relacionalidade é apresentada como a alternativa rizomática numa análise não essencialista de identidades que trabalham de forma independente de qualquer influência de cima para baixo vinda do Estado.

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1. Introduction[1]

The principal aim of this article is to provide a sociolinguistic approach that lets the reader engage with me in a novel exploration of identities in contemporary Ferghana Valley. I will show how the sense that people seen in Ferghana as "coming from China" is the result of an emic perspective.

What follows is a South-South conversation (Caribbean-Central Asian) that, while it does not neglect Madeleine Reeves' (2014) critical vision of State-Society interactions in border zones, explores the issue differently. Though her critique of romanticization by anthropologists who follow a logic of "people against the State" is very relevant, the State is not everything that exists. In order to move beyond the classification of States according to Global Northern Standards (as if Global Northern States never incurred in "failures" to citizenship), I prefer a Mexican perspective, namely "people despite the State". Whether that is a marker of "failure" or not, is not even relevant to this article.

Let me start with some ethnographic comments that better explain why I became interested in the Ferghana case. In the summer of 2016, I arrived in the southern Kyrgyzstani city of Osh, where the first national congress of Kyrgyzstani anthropologists was to take place. There were few foreign academics, I was the only Mexican at the event. I was staying in an apartment that my anthropologist colleagues and I rented together.

I do not speak Kyrgyz, the language I usually communicate with my colleagues in Central Asia is Russian. However, because my colleague-roommates were all Kyrgyz, at home everyone spoke Kyrgyz and I was totally immersed in this Turkic language during the days I spent in Osh. This served me well because, unlike the region where I did my fieldwork in previous years, the border region between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Jiménez-Tovar, 2014), where Russian is the lingua franca used for interethnic communication, in the city of Osh, Southern Kyrgyzstan, Russian was only heard in specific contexts. Uzbek is the predominant language, even more than Kyrgyz, the "national" language since 1991. In other words, Osh, despite being a frontier city with diverse populations, showed no similarities in terms of linguistic landscape with my previous research area in the border region of southern Kazakhstan and northern Kyrgyzstan. These differences are in part connected to regional variations. In geographical terms, the north and south of Kyrgyzstan are very different (Figure 1). The north is "rich" and has common borders with Kazakhstan, a neighbor whose economy has greatly expanded in recent years. Southern Kyrgyzstan, where the city of Osh is located, is poorer and shares borders with countries that are not very affluent (Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), or else have experienced political instabil-

[1] Terms in Russian are romanised using the ALA-LC system. For terms in *putonghua* I use the system *hanyu pinyin*.

Figure 1. Political map of Kyrgyzstan. Source: http://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/commonwealth/kyrgyzstan_trans-2005.jpg; accessed 10 July 2021.

ity (especially in the case of Tajikistan and the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China [PRC]).

My visit to the city of Osh occurred at a time when I was researching a concept that has permeated the entire ex-Soviet[2] region since the 1990s: *evroremont*,

which refers to a type of interior decorating using a style, materials, and furnishings from Western Europe. I was told by my colleagues that I should go to the Taatan market, where construction materials were sold and where most of the traders were from the PRC. When I arrived in Taatan, I found a rather large complex two thirds of which was occupied by traders from the PRC. Figures 2-7 show that some of the recent changes in this part of ex-Soviet Kyrgyzstan are evident in the Taatan market area. While there are vendors of all ethnicities and one is generally made aware of the linguistic diversity of the region, the food, the language,

[2] Although over the course of this century the word "post-Soviet" has become the standard term for talking about the former territories belonging to the Soviet Union, I prefer to avoid it in my own work. More generally, post-Soviet is confined to a broader body of scholarship on those regimes where "actually existing socialism" occurred. The term post-Soviet, however, seeks to emphasize a specificity that prolongs an internal colonialism within the ex-socialist bloc. Within the former Soviet Union, the *pre-* and *post*-Soviet are confused in a very complex way. There are people who never properly felt part of the Soviet project and there are people who still consider themselves Soviet. In

this sense, the prefix *ex-* is the most neutral option (cf. Jiménez-Tovar, 2021).

Figure 2. Arriving at the Taatan market. Osh, Kyrgyzstan, 2016.

Figure 3. Parking lot in theTaatan market. Osh, Kyrgyzstan, 2016.

Figure 4. Advertisement offering *evroremont* in front of a Chinese truck. Osh, Kyrgyzstan, 2016.

Figure 5. Passage with containers in the Taatan market. Osh, Kyrgyzstan, 2016.
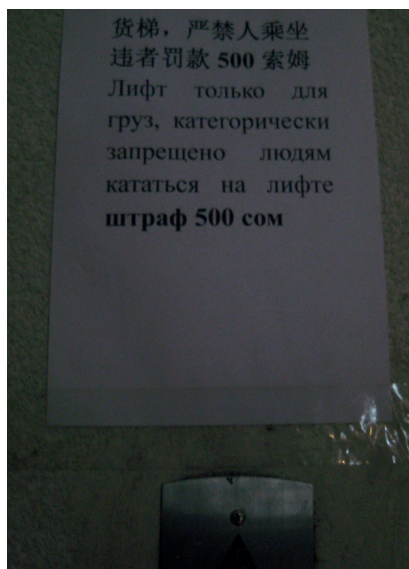
Figure 6. Warning in Chinese and Russian: "The elevator is for cargo only. It's strictly forbidden for people to ride in the elevator. Fine: 500 som." Taatan market. Osh, Kyrgyzstan, 2016.

Figure 7. Chinese characters written in the dust on a window in the Taatan market. Osh, Kyrgyzstan, 2016.

the smells, and the Chinese graffiti taken together gave more of an impression of being in the PRC than in Kyrgyzstan.

I went into a textile shop, where some old women were asking the saleswoman questions about a quilt. The old women, one Ukrainian, one Tatar, were born in Uzbekistan, but had been settled in Osh for a long time. Both women spoke Russian, the saleswoman spoke *Putonghua* (Mandarin Chinese). The Russian speakers asked about materials and prices, the Sino-speaker said she did not speak Russian, that her husband, who was usually there, had fallen ill, and they could come back later if they wanted. But the old women did not understand *Putonghua*, so they kept insisting. In desperation, the vendor called the owner of the neighboring stall, who understood *Putonghua* but spoke another language, also Sinitic, which I was able to identify as gansu Dungan.[3] The "translator" finally informed the two old women about materials and prices. Then the old women, who lived in a nearby missionary community, took the opportunity to give all of us some leaflets with evangelical propaganda. The Chinese woman said she was not interested because she was a communist

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3   The Dungans speak pidgins that incorporate elements of Russian and Sinitic languages and have also borrowed terms from local Turkic languages, especially Kazakh and Kyrgyz. I will go into further detail on the Central Asian Dungans below. But the reader should note that, in referring to them and their history, I use capital letters to refer to place names (Gansu, Shaanxi, Ili, Osh) and lower case letters to refer to Dungan groups (*gansu*, *shaanxi*, *ili*, *osh*).

and an atheist. The Dungan "translator", for his part, did not take any leaflets because he declared he was a Muslim. As for myself, I accepted the brochures and told the women that I would visit them later. I asked the Dungan about himself. He came from Bishkek, as his accent indicated, but worked as a trader transporting kitchen materials from the PRC to the Dordoi bazaar in Bishkek, and from there to Osh, where traders from the Uzbekistan side of the border bought various consumer goods and took them to markets all over Uzbekistan. Osh is crucial for Uzbekistanis to source all kinds of Chinese goods (Chen and Jimenez-Tovar, 2017). He would not give me more information about himself; instead, he gave me the phone number of a local Dungan named Umid.

After the market, I visited the two evangelical elderly women, and they invited me for lunch. They told me that they liked that evangelical community because its members came from all over the world and because it offered an opportunity to meet people with similar religious beliefs and different ways of being from those of the Soviet period. Later, I had a dinner with Umid, a tall, dark, slim man. We hit it off right from the beginning. His openness stood in stark contrast to the suspicious attitude of other Dungans I had encountered before and with whom I usually needed more time before starting to converse in a relaxed manner. He was born in Osh, part of the small community of Dungans who had come as far south as Kyrgyzstan when they started

moving away from the territory of the Chinese Qing empire in the nineteenth century. After having dinner with Umid's family, I returned to the apartment I shared with my colleagues. Thus ended my day exploring the city of Osh.

What I have described so far offers a snapshot of the complex ethnic and linguistic realities of this part of Southern Kyrgyzstan and more generally of many parts of the ex-Soviet region of Central Asia. The dissolution of the Soviet Union led to the creation of new states and to tighter border control between countries, and this led anthropologists who study Central Asia to approach the reconfiguration of the multi-ethnic landscape of the region through the lens of the anthropology of the State, especially with regard to questions related to the everyday consequences of new institutional structures and new nationalist discourses (Jiménez-Tovar, 2017). As I mentioned earlier, the aim of this article is to move away from a state-centered study of Central Asia (Reeves, 2014; Reeves et al, 2014) in order to offer an alternative reading of the multiethnic environment of the Ferghana Valley, where the city of Osh is located.

Reeves (2014) has provided us with a magnificent ethnographic account of Ferghana Valley, where nomadic and sedentary worlds have been meeting since ancient times. As relevant as her work is, it is Soviet-biased and looks to the linkage of Ferghana with Moscow and other parts of the Russian Federation seeking "continuities" with the immedi-

ate Kyrgyzstani past at the expense of "Persian" and "Chinese" connections that have played such a large role from antiquity up to and beyond the disintegration of the Soviet Union. I am more interested in how diversity creates even more complex identity-making and negotiation on an everyday basis. Focusing on the state is of little help in our attempt to embody a historically constituted and diversified geo-body. It is high time to broaden the anthropology of Central Asia.

This new reading will draw on the work of influential figures in Caribbean social thought and cultural commentary. The late Édouard Glissant (1928-2011) is certainly one of them. His work is particularly fertile in the discussion of the cultural effects of colonialism. Likewise, such a reading would necessarily align itself with the World Anthropologies approach proposed by Gustavo Lins Ribeiro and Arturo Escobar (2009 [2006]), which questions the centrality of Northern academic discourses in shaping the direction of the social analysis of the Global South. The World Anthropologies approach encourages anthropologists based in Southern regions to break away from the vertical discourses set by Northern Euro-American institutions in order to develop more horizontal South-South scholarly conversations. My approach is not that of an anthropologist of the North going South, but rather, my interpretation involves a South-South intellectual dialogue.

In section 2, I will present the general theoretical framework that will be used to analyze the diversity of the Ferghana Valley, drawing particular attention to the notion of rhizome in Glissant's interpretation of Deleuze and Guattari's famous conceptualization. In section 3, I move on to consider the way in which the Soviet Union managed its cultural diversity; and in the following sections (4-6), I will offer an ethnographic analysis of contemporary ex-Soviet realities that draws on Glissant's theoretical framework. In the final section, section 7, I would like to provide some concluding reflections on the importance of South-South conversations and the relevance of combining Caribbean social thought with Central Asianist anthropology.

2. Uprooting

The first trap of studying identities is that they are understood in terms of "belonging" and as processes of identification. Here we need to think "belonging" as a relation of alterity, or the way that otherness is produced and managed. In the production of otherness, the differentiation is about who "belongs to us" and who "belongs to them". But the distinction between "us" and "them" is neither absolute nor pristine or clear. We can belong differently throughout our lives depending on a whole web of social relations. Chun (2017) has shown us that a process of identification, or the way that identity is produced, is when the sense of "belonging to us" means that people included in that category see themselves as "being

the same." The one who constitutes "the other" is the one who is not the same, the one who "belongs to them." I just said that there are degrees and ways of belonging, since alterity is contextual, and identities change across time and space throughout our lives. Anthropology is full of studies that pay attention to this. In this article I propose to see, not the degrees of belonging, but the lack of it.

The trap of belonging obeys a cognitive dichotomy, whose poles, Deleuze and Guattari (2004[1988]) call the arborescent and the rhizomatic. The arborescent refers to universalist, homogenizing, and prescriptive thought; the rhizomatic refers to thinking which is particular, heterogeneous, and diverse. The contrast between the arborescent[4] and the rhizomatic[5] produces a tension that reveals very different perspectives of the world. Belonging, then, is arborescent: within the rhizomatic there are no fixed belongings. Roots and rhizomes can be both identified with the origin, but origin and belonging are rather different things.

I take advantage of the tension between arborescent and rhizomatic perspectives but following another author. For Édouard Glissant (2017 [1990]), a

Martinican author, Black, and simultaneously "French" by citizenship, this dichotomy speaks to two types of nomadism, one "circular" and the other "arrowlike." In the first case, circular nomadism is one which obeys the needs of a productive cycle adapted to the environment and could well be applied to the Turkic peoples of the Kazakh-Kyrgyz steppe,[6] a region where pastoral nomadism has traditionally been practiced. Reeves (2014) mentions that several cities in the Ferghana Valley were well known as nodes of the trade routes of linked to known as "the Silk Road." Sima Qian, Historian of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.), mentioned the "Celestial Horses," also known as "Ferghana Horses," that were much appreciated among the Chinese. Ferghana horses were tamed by nomads and were traded to sedentary people and traveled as far as Xi'an (cf. Watson, 1961). This trade followed a kind of circular logic.

On the other hand, "arrowlike" nomadism is one of expansionism, of colonial domination, and extension into new territories as an act of collectivere affirmation and the need to subordinate the Other as an indispensable requirement for the configuration of the self. Arrowlike nomadism obeys an arborescent logic; circular nomadism would be considered

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[4] The one that has a unique root, ultimately definable and defined through this rootedness, seemingly based on an "essence".

[5] A subterranean plant that produces both roots and shoots; the new roots give place to a new rhizomatic structure, like ginger. Rhizome, a "mass of roots," is a sort of compound without a defined root because it is made up of several roots and shoots that intertwine, connect, and communicate.

[6] This was the denomination of this area of the world when the first Russian imperial explorers arrived during the 19th century; before Kazakhs and Kyrgyz were classified as two different ethnicities during the Soviet period (1922-1991) (Levshin, 1996 [1832]).

as part of a rhizome.[7] Colonial expansion and the administration of cultural diversity in Central Asia, the process deeply discussed by Reeves (2014), is an arborescent phenomenon; the convergence of nomadic and sedentary traditions, in a context of religious, linguistic and lifestyle diversity is a rhizomatic phenomenon that has been taken for granted only as a historical outcome, but has not been theorized as I am doing in this article. We can see the rhizomatic explanation as a reading that is alternative to the kind of approach offered by Reeves.

Glissant's work (2010 [1991]) has its origins in the islands invaded and colonized by France, especially Martinique, which, as an overseas department, seems to be a French "anomaly", although, he does not claim that to be a prerogative of that particular region or case. Ultimately, one of the premises here is what I would call absolute uprooting. Uprooting, losing any sense of roots, would be rhizomatic. The uprooting of a people is to suppress a sense of clear or defined origin. For Glissant, creolization is the rhizome of absolute uprooting, which leads to the absence of any roots at all. Absolute uprooting is the principal constituent of the Glissantian rhizome: it starts from the traffic of slaves, who, coming from various regions of Africa, were denied the right to a memory or the ability to have nostalgia

for a place of origin. The result of this was to generate a common language, inside the ships, that would disrupt French and become the language of this new community (Glissant, 1997 [1969]).

Paul Gilroy's work on the slave trade, which had a wide resonance during the 1980s and 1990s, particularly because it presented a different vision for the study of diasporas,[8] deals with similar topics, but following a theoretical path alternative to Glissant's view of creolization as a product of this forced displacement. In Gilroy's (2014[1993]) work such displacement led to the formation of a sense of community among English-speaking Blacks who, in their resistance to racial oppression, developed common cultural traits. Although both authors start from the same premise, their interpretations are different. This is clearly demonstrated in the reading of a specific device: the ship. For Gilroy, the ship is where a new identity would be forged, Anglophone negritude, which would involve mixing and in which Africa as a general root common to all slaves would be preserved. Moreover, the "slave" ship for Gilroy is the laboratory of European

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[7] These kinds of nomadism are of a different nature than the nomadism mentioned by Deleuze and Guattari (2004 [1988]), who consider everything nomadic to be rhizomatic.

[8] The diasporic condition has to do with the feeling of a "lost home," the "broken" origins that become the framework of interpretation and interaction that diasporic people have to face on a daily basis (Safran, 1991; Tölölyan, 1991; Cohen, 2008 [1997]). During this century, the study of migration from this perspective has received harsh criticism and began to be seen, mainly, as a political expediency (Brubaker, 2005; Mavroudi, 2007; Diener, 2008; Lainer-Vos, 2010; Jiménez-Tovar, 2016).

modernity. Overcoming Eurocentrism in the interpretation of the relations of domination would be an act of vindication, whose possibilities of freedom are accessible to all of humanity, not only to Anglophone Blacks, but the vindication is something that started amongst Blacks. The paradigmatic case that Gilroy offers us is Black music and its profound influence on popular culture around the world: it is easy to hear "Africa" in rap, jazz, blues, ska or reggae.

Glissant's ship is of a different kind. It is a womb that simultaneously contains life and death, a womb that breaks with "the origin" and transports the slaves to Caribbeanness as it travels over an abyss (the sea). Unlike Gilroy, Glissant (2009) leaves no room for diaspora of any kind, thus, absolute uprooting should not be thought of retrospectively and from a theoretical point of view as a tragedy or a motif of sociohistorical trauma; on the contrary, the arrow (the motif of uprooting) needs roots, identities, and belongings to justify its existence. Thus, denying roots and embracing the rhizome is an emancipation from the oppression that represents feeding the desire to embody well defined identities. In this, Glissant owes much to Franz Fanon, but his solution is not to analyze racial humiliation by the white and the colonizing, but the overcoming of such a dichotomy. Such humiliation is dangerous when it is normalized and internalized in the subjectivity of the (ex)colonized. Fanon "denounces", but Glissant "heals" the hu-

miliation by concluding that the ex-colonized have no need for the recognition of the ex-colonizer. On the contrary, both ex-colonizer and ex-colonized are part of a network of relations that transcends each of them in their chaotic nature and frees them from any rigidity in the way of displaying the self. The Antillean rhizome is seen as the overcoming of hierarchical cultures and cultural hierarchies.

Caribbeanness requires a mixture of dissimilar, sometimes even contradictory elements, but not in the way of "hybridization",[9] rather through the key category in Glissant's work: the Relation (Glissant, 2010 [1991]).[10] Through the Relation, the heterogeneous communicates and combines, always in an unpredictable way, and gives rise to something new, in a chaotic sense of unanticipated and non-hierarchical recombination called the "Whole-World" (Glissant, 2017 [1990],

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[9] This can be viewed as a critique of Homi Bhabha's (2002 [1994]) decolonial reading of Fanon's work. The decolonial is a denunciation of the colonial relations of domination. It contains a wide-reaching description of the victimization vis-à-vis the crimes of the "white man". Bhabha's notion of hybridization points to an uncomfortable mixture, but it is an effect of the colonial enterprise. For his part, Glissant's reading of Fanon's work, in which the ex-colonized would have greater power of agency, is anti-colonial. Creolization is not a mixture-assimilation as in Bhabha, but a transcendence of the relations of domination where the "white" is but one more component in a Whole-World. Hybridization is arborescent because it seeks the origins of each mixed element; creolization is rhizomatic and diverse.

[10] I write "Relation" with a capital letter to refer to the Glissantian category, the lower case is used for relationships such as contact or interaction in general.

2020[1997]). Glissant says: "You speak to me in your language, but I understand you in mine". Whole-World is the concept used to describe the fact that in each individual the whole world is present, human and non-human, tangible and intangible, in a series of relationships that we cannot define, because trying to define them requires an arborescent logic. Instead, they are part of a subjective, poetic experience particular to each person. The mechanics of the Whole-World is Relation. The right to intuit things, not to seek to define them with an objectivist language, is what Glissant (1997 [1969], 2009) calls "opacity". The clear, the defined, the arborescent, is, in Glissant's view, continental thought. The rhizomatic, the opaque, the creolized, he terms "archipelagic" thought (Glissant, 2010 [1991]). Something that the reader should not lose sight of is the tension between the interpretations of Gilroy and Glissant regarding forced migration and the uprooting it produces. Gilroy, in contrast to Glissant, employs a motif of another type, diasporic rootedness: a lost root that does not correspond to the Caribbean region but to Africa, which becomes a macro-root whose expression is blackness. In Glissant, uprooting actually allows the construction of a non-predictable dialogue, where heterogeneous elements do not merge, but interact and (re)combine constantly and chaotically.

In her ethnography *Border Work: Spatial Lives of the State in Rural Central Asia*, Reeves (2014) tells us the story of what people have to do to live in a border region in which distribution of water can be the origin of violence. The immediate cause would seem to be ethnic. Ferghana's porous borders are presented as the consequence of Soviet actions. Ferghanians themselves are presented in a way similar to the way Gilroy presents Africans affected by the slave trade, both groups now configured in a diaspora whose individuals recall a macro-root, a black diaspora on the one hand, and a pre-Soviet identity on the other. Ferghanians are marked by a violence perpetrated by the Soviet State and the difficulties that they have to overcome in a colonial situation under the failed strong state.

Even though one constantly hears about the Soviet past while doing fieldwork, I was able to find many individuals for whom that memory is not inherently related to their own identity and, by embracing diversity, situate themselves in a more Glissantean framework. The description I provided in my introduction of the Taatan market shows us something closer to Glissant's framework than to Gilroy's. An arborescent reading of Ferghana is problematic. When looking at Central Asia, we need to imagine an archipelago whose ocean is the immense steppes and deserts that surround inhabited zones (Boulnois, 2004). We need to see Ferghana as a small sample of this larger archipelago, recognizing the existence of significant variations from "island" to "island".

3. Soviet? Rooting as uprooting and rerooting

The year of 1917 is very difficult to interpret. It can be seen as the consummation of the communist-oriented revolution in the former Russian empire, or as the beginning of one of the greatest political-social experiments in history. 1917 represented the beginning of an alternative to the capitalist system (Fitzpatrick, 2015[1994]; 2016[2015]). I should mention two additional dates to make it clear why 1917 should be relativized when viewed retrospectively. The first of these dates is 1919, when the Third International, or *Komintern*, to use the Russian abbreviation, threw over the Second International's more orthodox form of Marxism. Second International was not against colonialism because it would be a mean to spread capitalism all over the world and, by doing so, to spread the revolution. Leninism saw in anticolonial struggle a way to spread Marxism and Socialist regimes in those places where capitalism was not properly developed. The *Komintern* had a very clear objective: to export the revolution to other parts of the world. It was with Komintern money that Communist Parties were founded all over the world. Between 1919-1922, the *Komintern* held an annual congress to discuss possible strategies to bring the revolution to places where capitalism had not fully developed (Schlesinger, 1977 [1967]). The Komintern supported the rise of various "national liberation movements" around

the world, as well as the development of social theories based on Marxist revolutionary ideals (Schram and D'Encausse, 1974 [1965]). These developments culminated in the creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1922, our second additional date, and one that is particularly important when it comes to relativizing the significance of 1917.

The year of 1922 can be interpreted as the beginning of a decolonial experiment, but it can also be read as the beginning of a new arborescent process of domination. One of the reasons for creating the USSR was that it was necessary to develop a new political framework to accommodate diversity. After the revolution, one could not artificially preserve the map of what was once called the Russian empire and mechanically decree that this would now be "Russia". 1922 demonstrates the willingness of the new Soviet elites to "decolonize" the Russian Empire, although sovietization was, in many ways, of a coercive nature. The design of the Soviet Union was full of violence towards Soviet population, violence whose wounds are still fresh. It is a pain that is far from healing.

Soviet authorities had little information about the ethnic and cultural diversity within its borders because the only imperial census, taken in 1897, only included questions on local spoken languages and practiced religion. This meant that the Soviets had to create new tools to measure ethnic and cultural diversity, and as Cadiot (2007) shows,

Soviet censuses was more complete and included questions on language of birth, language of parents, languages spoken at home, ethnic self-ascription, religion practiced, and place of origin of the respondent and his or her parents, among others. All these questions would serve as a basis for at least getting an idea of the ethnic and cultural diversity within the Soviet territory.

In this way, a sophisticated census design was put in place, by trial and error, creating a complex system of new ethnic categories. These categories placing Soviet ethnicities on a scale of social "evolution," in which they would be further away from or closer to being able to assume communist status, the ultimate goal.

These categories served as a guide for the Soviet authorities to "grant" the right to a people of a territory of their own. I list them from the most "evolved" to the most "backward": *natsiya* (nation), *natsional'nost'* (nationality), *narodnost'* (the closest in English would be "peoplehood") and *plem'ya* (tribe) (Hirsch, 2005).[11] These ethnic categories were part of a progressive assimilation plan (*plem'ya* into *narodnost'*, then to *natsional'nost'*, and finally into *natsiya*). Once all Soviet citizens were, culturally, part of one *natsiya*, they would be ready to eradicate the "national stage". The "national stage" was the period during which nationalism could be seen as an aspect of the democratic-bourgeois

revolution, which, as long as it obeyed a capitalist logic, sooner or later, would need to be suppressed before reaching communism.

In the meantime, all traditional arts and cultural performances were encouraged in the USSR, as long as they were "national in form, but socialist in content". This has led several authors, such as Terry Martin (2001), to look at the USSR as a regime where affirmative action was practiced. Of all these categories, only *natsiya* and *natsional'nost'* had the "right" to have "their own republic" in those regions where they constituted a demographic majority. Some *narodnost'* were able to have autonomous regions, but they were not granted the right to secession. This very complex process took a couple of decades, the 1920s and 1930s (Hirsch, 2005; Fitzpatrick, 2016[2015]).

In the same period, in addition to censuses and maps, a campaign was carried out that investigated the languages and traditions of each ethnicity living within the USSR. After this campaign, languages began to be standardized and the folklores studied by Soviet ethnographers became "official" (Hirsch, 2005; Pavlenko, 2008). The name given to this campaign is disturbing: *korenizatsiya*. The suffix *-zatsiya* denotes a process; it is equivalent to the suffix "-tion" in English. *Koren'* means "root" in Russian. So, while in English this term is usually translated as "indigenization", in this article I opt for the most literal translation possible: rooting. *Korenizatsiya* as rooting entails both a

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[11]   Given the specificity of these terms, I will continue to use the Russian version and not its English translation, which may be imprecise.

process of uprooting from the pre-Soviet past and a process of re-rooting in the new Soviet present and future.

It should not be forgotten that the creation of the USSR was a bid to invent a new human being, the *sovetskii chelovek* (the Soviet human being) (Shteiner, 2002), who, regardless of his ethnic and cultural specificity, would follow a very particular type of ethics: Marxist-Leninist. In turn, all Soviet citizens were grouped under the term *sovetskii narod* (the Soviet people) (Hirsch, 2005). The root created by the *korenizatsiya* was the Soviet one. At first glance, it would seem that the *sovetskii narod* is a sort of rhizome, however, to the extent that its elements, although heterogeneous, had been previously delimited, this umbrella category lacked opacity. Moreover, this heterogeneity was conceived in order for it to disappear. This has served as the basis for contemporary nationalism throughout the ex-Soviet region. Such nationalisms tend to reproduce the aforementioned arboreal identities within the borders drawn during Stalinism (1927-1953), period during which global communism was renounced in 1943, when *Komintern* was suppressed to implement Stalin's Socialism in One Country. Today, the Soviet vocabulary based on ethnicity is still used and there is a mixing between the meanings given by Soviet ethnographers and the new requirements of present-day "capitalist" nationalisms (Davenel, 2012).

For the purpose of this article, I must mention one last historical element, also from the Stalinist period. During World War II, the fear that the different peoples of the USSR would collaborate with the Germans or the Japanese led to mass deportations to Central Asia, Kazakhstan being the main destination. Entire peoples of the most diverse ethnic origins and affiliations — including Koreans from Siberia and the Russian Far East, Germans settled in the Volga region since the 18th century, Turks, various Caucasian ethnicities — were deported to Central Asia (Diener, 2004; Westren, 2012; Fietzpatrick, 2016[2015]). After the war, some of these migrant populations did not receive permission to return to their places of origin, especially populations coming from the Caucasus — the "historical enemies" in the Classical Russian literature.[12] This very brief historical sketch suggests that there is in Central Asia a breeding ground of diversity that is similar to the one described by Glissant and Gilroy in their work on the forced displacement of Africans to the Caribbean, which created a diverse and culturally chaotic region. I now turn to the story of displacement of the Dungansat Taatan market to begin sketching out a Caribbean interpretation of local frameworks of ethnic and cultural diversity.

4. The Dungans

The Dungans are Sinophone Muslims who came to the former Russian Empire

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[12]   A wonderful example of this can be found in the novel *A Hero of Our Time*, published in 1839-1841 by Mikhail Lermontov.

as refugees after their flight from Qing Dynasty China (1644-1911). During the last third of the 19th century there were several Muslim rebellions in the north-west and south of the empire. While the rebels shared the same religion, among them, they created a multicultural mosaic. In the first ethnic classification in Qing China, in which five "peoples" (min, 民) had been identified as Muslim, regardless of their particular history or the language they spoke, all were grouped under the name *hui* (*huimin*, 回民) (Jiménez-Tovar, 2016). The Muslim rebellions were, above all, among those *huimin* who spoke Sinitic and Turkic languages. These rebellions were not motivated by cultural, but rather social factors related to the Qing Empire having been very much weakened after two opium wars and a series of internal difficulties. Nor were Muslims the only ones to rebel. A very complex history of ethnic classifications has meant that, today, the Sinophone *Huimin* are now called, on the Chinese side of the border, *Huizu* (回族) and, on the ex-Soviet side, Dungan (дунгане).[13] For their

part, the Turkic-speaking *Huimin* have now been classified, on both sides of the border, as Uighurs. Although there was a wave of migration from the Qing Empire to the Russian Empire, these *Huimin* have a complex history of migration between the two parts of Asia, so it is very difficult to claim that they are entirely "Central Asian" or entirely "Chinese".

Ding Hong (2005) said that in the case of Sinophone Muslims, on the Chinese side of the border, their main distinguishing feature is Islam, while on the ex-Soviet side it is language. When I did my own research on the Dungans of Kazakhstan, I was able to identify three main sub-groups, depending on the province of origin, which implied that they spoke different Sinitic languages and, also, had some ritual differences that, although very subtle, were very significant in the internal differentiation among the Dungans (Imyarova, 2019). These groups are the *gansu Dungans* (located in Zhalpaktobe, Kazakhstan, and in the Dungan communities settled around Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan); the *shaanxi Dungans*, whose epicenter is the city of Tokmok, in northern Kyrgyzstan, and who live on both sides of the border be-

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[13] When Dungans arrived in Semirech'e Province, Russian officials recorded their presence with the word *dungane*, and the ethnonym was made official in 1924 by Soviet authorities. There are many hypotheses about the origin of this ethnonym, which can be classified into two main groups: a) *Dungan* is a phonetic derivation of a term used by Dungans themselves when they arrived in the Russian Empire. Hypotheses based on this assertion further suggest the possibility that the term was a geographical reference to the route of migration from Gansu and Shaanxi into Central Asia along the east coast (*dong'an*东岸); east of Gansu (*donggan*东甘); past Tong (*Tongguan*

潼關 or *Dunhuan*敦煌), or to the agricultural military colonies (*tunken* (屯垦) created as the Qing Empire expanded into Xinjiang in the mid-eighteenth century; b) *Dungan* is a phonetic derivation of two possible Turkic terms: *tunggan,* a phonetic adaptation of the Chinese *tunken* (屯垦) described above or, *turupqalghan* (to leave behind) and its short version, *tughan*, both of which are translations of the Chinese word *hui* meaning 'go back, come back' (cf. Jiménez-Tovar, 2014).

tween Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; and the *ili Dungans*, who live in Zaria Vostoka, a neighborhood in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The *ili* Dungans were originally installed in the form of a military colony (*tunken*) near the Ili river in Xinjiang. They had been sent from Gansu by Qing imperial authorities to guard the border, which had been invaded during the 18th century by Turkic-speaking *Huimin*. In Kyrgyzstan there are Dungan communities in Karakol (Figure 8), located in the east of the country, near the border with China, but these Dungan communities are a mixture of *gansu* and *shaanxi*.

The description above refers to the region where I have been doing ethnographic research since 2008, with field research stays in Kazakhstan (2008, 2011-2012, 2013), Kyrgyzstan (2008, 2013, 2016) and the PRC (2012). During this research, the Dungans of Osh were always described to me as very different from those settled on the Kazakh-Kyrgyzstan border, both *gansu* and *shaanxi*. First of all, the Dungans of Osh, who arrived there in the last third of 19th century from Shaanxi, no longer speak a Sinitic language, but have assimilated, linguistically speaking, to the Ferghana valley, meaning that depending on the family, they speak Uzbek, Kyrgyz, or both languages, but not *shaanxi* Dungan or Russian, although in school they would acquire some knowledge of the Russian language.

This state-of-affairs stands in stark contrast with the situation of the communities I investigated in other areas,

Figure 8. Dungan communities in Central Asia.

where Sinitic languages are still spoken, though in fact, there are some Dungans whose everyday language is now Russian with the Sinitic language subordinate. Along with language, their oral tradition is also different. Dungan oral traditionis a mixture of Chinese, Persian and Turkic compound. Due to linguistic loss, the Dungans of Osh no longer have the Chinese component. In addition, the specific features of Chinese Islam, with all its complexities and internal divisions, are not found among the Dungans of Osh. When it comes to food, the Dungans of Osh bring to their tables dishes from Uzbek and Kyrgyz culinary culture.

It is important to note that during the *korenizatsiya* of the Soviet period, when the Dungans of Osh were classified as a *narodnost'*, the folklore and language that were recognized as "official" was gansu. At the time, children had a few hours of weekly classes studying Dungan language in school and that language was gansu. It was in this way that the *gansu* aspect of Dungan culture became arborescent, leaving the *shaanxi* and *osh* dimensions in a situation of opacity. It is evident in the internal division among the Dungans that there are two tendencies: anarborescent one, represented by the *gansu*, and a rhizomatic one, represented by the *shaanxi* and the *osh*. The forced migration in the 19th century, during the particularly harsh winter of 1877-78, in which many people died crossing the Tian Shan mountain range by foot, was extremely traumatic for Dungans. This certainly recalls the abyss

that Glissant speaks of, except that, instead of the sea, the Dungan abyss is a mountain range which has become very important in the worldview of the nomadic and sedentary peoples of the region.

The Dungan migration was so traumatic that it severed ties with "China" for more than a century. There is no Gilroy-style diasporization here, but absolute uprooting, Glissant-style. During the Soviet period, the *gansu* were the only ones to receive their own root, leaving the *shaanxi* and the *osh* in the same rootlessness with which they first arrived in the Russian empire. Although it happened differently for each, the *shaanxi* and the *osh* entered into a relationship that creolized them. In the case of the *shaanxi*, they preserved more features of the Islam practiced in China in the 19th century, but, at the same time, incorporated Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Russian characteristics into their diet, language and kinship system. Therefore, even though shaanxi Dungans understand each other, their language presents dramatic variations from village to village.

In the case of the *osh*, they left the category "Dungan" empty as a marker of a particular ethnicity, which has served as a "refuge container" for other ethnicities. However, even though the *osh* Dungans no longer have "Chinese" features in their culture, and, despite many decades of inter-ethnic marriage with local peoples, they are still seen in Ferghana as "coming from China". Let us have a look of how it works in Ferghana.

5. Ferghana in the heart

Ferghana is a place of creolization whose common thread is the Glissantean Relation. First of all, Central Asia is the area through which, historically, multiple trade routes have passed. These routes have often been portrayed as a space where cultural exchanges between empires took place. This position is in line with civilizing discourses that attribute superiority to centers of imperial formations. The problem with thinking about cultural zones in this way is that it follows a center-periphery logic, and in this logic, central Asia occupies a peripheral position in a passive relationship.

However, historians of Central Asia have raised the question of whether the region examined in this article is merely a periphery of the empires that surround it or whether, on the contrary, these empires were able to shape themselves and acquire power precisely because of the exchange that Central Asia favored (cf. Frank, 1992). Like Braudel's Mediterranean, it has even been suggested that the Central Asian steppe is a kind of sea that interconnected the vast Eurasian continental plateau (Boulnois, 2004). That is, with its oasis cities located between steppes and deserts, Central Asia can be thought of as an archipelago (Glissant, 2009).

If only one word could be used to define Ferghana, it would be "heterogeneity", which was the result of, yes, the imperial expansions towards Central Asia: of Persia, Alexander the Great, the Chinese empire, the Mongol empire, the Russian empire, etcetera. On the other hand, we must also recognize a rhizomatic mobility whose protagonists would be merchants, present at all stages of these trade routes. Other rhizomatic characters would be Muslim, Buddhists, Manichaeans, Orthodox Christians, and Zoroastrians pilgrims, just to mention some of the religions that have intercommunicated through this region. These merchants and pilgrims, naturally, would each speak a particular language. All these differences and diversities obliged Central Asians to learn how to communicate among each other, a process in which each group would try not to lose their own specificity while still trying to influence each other.

In her major work historicizing the category of "Central Asia", Svetlana Gorshenina (2014) shows how these "centers of culture" also needed Central Asia as the zone to designate as "barbarian", and upon which the arrow, the invasion, the domination, had to be imposed. Circularity, in Glissantean terms, in early 20th Century Central Asia, however, seemed to continue to function harmoniously given the absence of an identitarian need to expand via conquest, rather, local population was used to be subject of big empires. Social flux there was based on an impulse to exchange. In other words, given the diversity described here, the Relation in Central Asia would admit opaque identities rather than clear ones. It is contemporary na-

tionalism that has sown the "need" for arborescent identities.

At the time of mapping the territory, the Soviet authorities decided to "split" the Ferghana Valley in such a way that the borders between present-day Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan converged at this area (Reeves, 2014). Giving it ethnic regional autonomy was not even contemplated because there was no ethnic group in the valley that appeared to be a majority, the only valid criterion for granting autonomy (Hirsch, 2005). The inhabitants of the valley did not try to lay claim to such autonomy either. For although the valley belonged to several federated republics, all of them were part of the USSR. In other words, the valley was simultaneously part of several separate countries and of a larger unit, the USSR, an entity that contained them all. These borders did not echo much in the lives of the valley's inhabitants even after the USSR disintegrated (1991). The problems began at the turn of the millennium when the countries in question began to control of their national borders more rigorously. Families started to be cut off from each other by borders and had to go through passport control to visit each other.

The partitioning of Ferghana by more strictly controlling borders, i.e., the taking away of territoriality from local populations to give primacy to the nationalisms of Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and Tajiks, represents the confluence of three arborescences that threaten the contemporary Ferghanese rhizome. The

ethnography of this process of convergence offered by Reeves (2014) became a classic in Central Asian studies, but this reading has limitations, as I have been mentioning throughout this article. Studies like Reeves's fail to account for the very unique modes of interaction in the Ferghana Valley because they are too focused on the arborescent while offering an ethnography that describes a very rhizomatic logic. Reeves's focus on trajectories of individuals is fascinating and provides a wonderful overview of international mobility, but it is too Russia-centered. The reader gets the impression that Moscow is the destiny of Ferghanian migrants even though Taatan market shows a much wider interconnexion.

Such an arborescent approach neglects the fact that survival is not a mere exercise in belonging. Stated plainly: Ferghana makes more sense if it is understood in terms of its Caribbeanness and its rhizomatic elements. Given the context of this Ferghanian Caribbeanness, the solution to the interethnic conflict, produced and reproduced by a discourse of arborescent identities, will only be found in the rhizomatic relations that make the valley a creolized space.

In 2010 it was reported that the Tokmok and Bishkek regions were undergoing inter-ethnic confrontations involving Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. A few days later, clashes of a similar nature, but on a larger scale, were reported in Osh. A study giving the details of the incident in Osh is discussed at length by Akiner (2016). For

purely analytical purposes, I will outline some information that I was able to collect in my fieldwork in Tokmok (2011) and in Osh (2016).

In the Tokmok area, the testimonies I collected in 2011 indicated that the aggressions were indeed orchestrated by Kyrgyz, but that they were not against Uzbeks, but against Uighurs. It turns out that a dairy plant that provided work for several families on both sides of the border between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan was burned down. People who had cows at home sold milk to the factory; also, many inhabitants of the neighboring multiethnic villages went to the plant daily to work. It took a couple of decades (from the disintegration of Soviet Union, in 1991) to build up the factory, which was founded by an Uighur. Before the fire, it supplied fermented milk, sour cream, butter, and cheeses to the whole region on both sides of the border. After the Kyrgyz attacks on the plant (my informants said that it was Kyrgyz nationalism that provoked envy at the success of an Uighur), the Uighur and his family left the town, and the former employees went in search of the perpetrators.

I believe that in the case of the Tokmok area, the conflicts are related, at least covertly, to the fact of "coming from China", a stigma that affects Dungans and Uighurs alike throughout the Central Asian region. In Kyrgyzstan, the reason for this comes down to a poem. *Manas*, an epic recounting the war between the Chinese, the Uighurs, and the Kyrgyz in the

10th century, has made the Chinese and the Uighurs the historical enemies of the Kyrgyz. *Manas* became the pillar of Kyrgyz nationalism after independence (1991) (Gullette, 2010). Uighurs and Dungans are seen as the enemies, but in different ways. The Uighurs are seen in a worse light than the Dungans because, militarily, they came close to dominating the Kyrgyz. On the other hand, while the Dungans are also viewed as "coming from China" by locals, they are not equated to the Chinese in the poem, who are now classified as Han, the ethnic majority in the PRC.

The conflicts in Osh are equally complex as those in Tokmok. According to my discussions with colleagues and my own fieldwork in Osh, conflict is constant in Ferghana. In addition to the above, the conflict between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks can be extended to the Uighurs. For historical reasons that, for brevity, I will not outline here, there is quite a number of cultural similarities between Uzbeks and Uighurs. The animosity is more exacerbated in the case of the Uighurs: both because of their Uzbek "affinity" and "coming from China", as well as being the historical enemy in the poem *Manas*. Due to the systematic oppression of the Uighurs in the PRC, it is better for local governments to use the word "Uzbek". A colleague told me that in the Osh conflicts, the attacks were carried out, for the most part, against the Uighurs.

We should remember, however, as I have already pointed out, the Caribbeanness of the Ferghana Valley means that

in daily life there is great flexibility in the way ethnicity is displayed in this region. So that while there is an official system of classification, there is also a high degree of flexibility in the ways in which ethnic labels can be used or deployed. This is greatly facilitated by the large number of intermarriages that, historically speaking, have been the norm in the valley.

This disrupts the "ethnicity" of the Dungans of Osh, who, as I have already mentioned, have suppressed their "Chineseness" and have "assimilated" to the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, so that they can no longer be linked to the enemies of the Kyrgyz hero Manas. Absolute uprooting: "coming from China", but not being Chinese, nor Kyrgyz or Uzbek either. The Dungans of Osh are the epitome of the rhizome. In fact, after the 2010 conflicts, many Uighurs and Uzbeks have preferred to declare themselves Dungans in everyday life in Osh. This is not the case in northern Kyrgyzstan, where Dungans face considerable animosity from their Kazakh and Kyrgyz neighbors.

6. The luxury of the steppe: Umid

To return to the opening of my story at the Taatan market, I had been given the phone number of Umid, a Dungan from Osh who took me to his village. Like Dungans in other parts of Central Asia, the *osh* prefer to live "compactly"[14] and

remain a community. Despite intermarriages, patrilineality has been the way of deciding the ethnicity to which a person is ascribed since the Soviet period: a person, regardless of his or her mother's ethnicity, will be officially registered in his father's ethnic group. At the same time, patrilocality ensures that people officially classified as Dungans live in the same place. One characteristic that the Dungans borrowed from their Turkic neighbors is the tradition that the youngest male child, whether married or not, is the one who will have the obligation to take care of the parents in their old age. This gives him the right to inherit the parental home. The older siblings, male and female, will have to look for another place to live. At the same time, the other children do not have to face the economic burden of supporting and caring for the parents. This trait is shared among all Dungan sub-groups in Central Asia.

Umid is the youngest son in his family. A man who, in 2016, looked about thirty years old. Both his parents are Dungan, although his father was born in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. Umid's father was still young when his grandfather moved to Osh. His mother was born in Osh. Umid's father says that he did speak

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14   I use this emic term employed by Dungans when they explained their society to me. It is a

literal translation of the Russian *kompaktno*. This term refers to the fact that they like to live together in the same place. The osh are the only Dungans who do not practice widespread endogamous marriage. Although marriages between cousins do occur, as is the case especially among the shaanxi dungans, interethnic marriages are more common in Osh as long as the couple is Muslim.

some Dungan with his grandparents, but at home they spoke mostly Uzbek. Once in Osh, he learned to speak Kyrgyz. Both being Turkic, the switch between languages is not that complicated. Umid's father writes poetry, but in Uzbek: "if it is written by a Dungan, it is Dungan poetry, even if it is written in Uzbek", says Umid's father, whose poem in a local newspaper can be seen in Figure 9. As for Umid, he speaks Uzbek with his father, but is much more comfortable speaking Kyrgyz. I spoke with them in Russian and could not help but notice that the father's command of this language was much better than his son's. Although, as Umid later told me, his Russian has improved over the years due to his job trading used cars.

Traditionally, Dungans were peasants, but the disintegration of the Soviet Union brought with it the challenge of subsistence in a chaotic context in which states could do little to support their citizens. In addition to the weakness of the new states, a production and trade network that interconnected the entire former USSR collapsed and it took several years for that network to reconfigure and facilitate economically beneficial exchange. In that context, vegetable production allowed Dungans to position themselves quite well during the 1990s in local markets: the Dungans produced food, something that everyone needed. With the turn of the century, the situation started to change. It was then that the Chinese began to fill the vacuum left by Soviet Russia and to view the whole of

the former USSR as a market. Since they speak Sinitic languages, the Dungans began to collaborate with the Chinese and act as their translators. Then the Dungans — the Uighurs followed a similar path — began taking advantage of their family networks in Xinjiang, Gansu and Shaanxi in order to become petty traders. Umid followed a similar pattern as his contemporaries. He became a trader, though he declined to work with Chinese goods. This decision was influenced by the fact that his mother tongue was not Sinitic. Instead, Umid found a growing niche throughout Central Asia: cars.

Figure 9. Publication by Umid's father in a local newspaper: a Dungan poem written in Uzbek. Osh, Kyrgyzstan, 2016.

I mentioned at the beginning of this article that during my 2016 trip I was interested in exploring a kind of taste in interior decoration, something known throughout the Russian-speaking sphere as *evroremont*, which, as I indicated above, is thought of as "European". *Evroremont* began to affect tastes in other things as well, including cars. In the beginning, there was a particular thirst for German cars, with Mercedes Benz being the most coveted. Owning a Russian car, for example, was considered to be a marker of poverty, or being ignorant about automobiles. While German cars were the most sought-after during the 1990s, tastes began to change around the turn of the century. A second wave of used cars began to arrive in massive volumes, first from Japan and later from South Korea. These are the cars Umid specialized in. He even knows some Japanese, and he speaks perfect Korean. He learned Korean while living in Japan, telling me that the Japanese language was too difficult for him, not to mention the fact that Korean was easier to learn through his interaction with the car traders from Korea that he met in Japan.

Umid said that the Japanese began to put more restrictions on dealers buying their cars, even if they were used. In addition to the legal paperwork, the taxes that Umid and other car dealers in Asia had to pay increased exponentially so that traveling to Japan ceased being a viable option. So, Korea became the main hub for buying the Japanese cars that Umid and his colleagues then sold in ex-Soviet Central Asia. When he started, he would transport the cars himself by driving them with his assistants all the way from Russia to Kyrgyzstan, preferring to travel through Russia rather than through the PRC. The cars were delivered from South Korea to Russia by sea.

Within five years, Umid was performing the transactions remotely and the cars were shipped by the same partner Korean company. That was in the first decade of this century. By the time I interviewed Umid in 2016, the used car trade in Kyrgyzstan was no longer as profitable as it once was. The Kyrgyz economy had entered an extreme depression after 1991, when industrial activity ceased and the only natural resource the country could exploit was water. The country's citizens could no longer afford to buy Umid's cars. Moreover, the market had become saturated. In any case, Umid continued to take advantage of his contacts in Japan and Korea and longed to take his family to live in Korea once his parents passed away.

– "Everything is modern there", he told me, convinced.
– "And why not China?" I asked him.
– "It does not have the technology that Japan and Korea have, and the Chinese are less civilized".
– "But you are Dungan, don't you come from China?"
– "That was many years ago. I have nothing to do with that. Besides, I am Muslim. I care about my connection with Allah. I do not care about nationalities or languages".

7. Belonging: that impossible wish

The elements are now laid out to allow us to return to the counterposition of the two authors I began to discuss above who have based their thinking on absolute uprooting: Paul Gilroy and Édouard Glissant. Gilroy represented a new way of thinking about roots. Africa would become the macro-root of a diaspora made up of English-speaking Blacks. Glissant opted for the renunciation of any root whatsoever. For him, it is the Relation and creolization that allow access to the Whole-World. Gilroy, in this counterposition, continues to insist on belonging at a macro scale. In Glissant's notion of arborescence there is no room for belonging: it is a fetter that limits the individual from exercising the Whole-World.

In the ethnographic analysis presented in this article, the Ferghana Valley is described as a space of creolization in Glissant's terms. I decided to explore a "problematic identity" in contemporary Central Asia: that of people broadly seen as "coming from China". It is my belief that the rhizome of what Chineseness is constitutes a key to understanding the arborescences of current nationalisms in Central Asia. In a former section I compared Gilroy's thought with Glissant's; both of them have produced models that mirror what it means to be someone "coming from China" in the Central Asian context. Let me explain.

During the 1990's, theories of the "Chinese" diaspora were based on the framework of Gilroy's "Black diaspora".

Tu Wei-ming (1991), produced a parallel reading that equated the experience of former slaves with the experience of the coolies and their descendants in the Americas. The experience of slavery inherent in black identities, as well as the accompanying stigmatization of racism, was compared to the stigmatization that Chinese in the Americas had suffered. Chinese presence around the world, according to Tu, needs to be understood in terms of that stigmatization, something that "binds" people of Chinese descendance around the world. Following Tu Wei-ming, Chinese diaspora studies broadened in scope to include all areas of the globe. Tu's particular interpretation of overseas Chinese, however, has created a deep divide in the study of "Chinese" identities (Ang, 2000; Chow, 2000; Chun, 2017). One point that most critics take up is that it is not possible to speak of a Chinese diaspora in Gilroyian terms because the cases taken as examples are not the product of forced displacement and in many places there is not necessarily a sense of community to be had. "China" is an empty term that denotes a space, a civilization, and a culture, but it is so broad — as an analytical term — that it defines nothing at all, says Chun (2017), so, we have to "forget Chineseness".

The critique among scholars against using the criterium of Chineseness, however, is not directed at Gilroy, but rather at Tu Wei-ming. New approaches to Sinophone (Shih, 2011) as an open signifier that would replace the relative vacuity

of Chineseness rely a lot on Glissant as the key author. Gilroy and Glissant are opposite theoretical foundations in the current debate of what "China" and "Chineseness" constitutes. It makes a lot of sense to bring them to Central Asia when we try to explain the theoretical complexities of the meanings and implications of being someone "coming from China". I mentioned two cases of that category: Uighurs and Dungans, though my ethnography pays more attention to Dungans.

Osh Dungans broke off from using "China" as their origin, although they look at it as part of themselves, along with other identities (Islam, Central Asia, etc.). As for other Dungans in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, we can see two tendencies: those who were re-rooted after having been derooted in Soviet times, along with other ethnicities, during the *korenizatsiya*, and the ones that were derooted and whose rerooting was not their own. The first ones were the gansu, the second ones were the shaanxi. According to *korenizatsiya* premises, the shaanxi would need to assimilate into gansu culture. In turn, from Soviet times onwards, the gansu became the cultural elite, and, so far, they have kept this place. Talking to gansu Dungans, they usually tried to show me how "culturally advanced" they are in comparison to shaanxi Dungans, who they described as "savages" (ru. *dikii*). Gansu intellectuals often told me that they had a more cosmopolitan, urban, "soviet" culture. Shaanxi Dungans, in turn, complained often that they were never entitled to write in their own language, and that the classes in Dungan they had at school were useless, since they never used the language again and simply forgot what they had learned. The loss of the Sinitic component, in the case of the osh Dungans, made both gansu and shaanxi Dungans to describe them as "poor" (ru. *bednii*) because "they had no culture already: they are Kyrgyz". The division inside the Dungan universe, however, is something that other identities around are not aware of. Gansu, osh and shaanxi Dungans, all of them, "come from China". Nonetheless, my ethnography shows that "coming from" does not equate to "belonging".

The Gilroyian-inspired "Chinese diaspora" does not apply in the case of Umid and the osh Dungans. Umid does not feel he belongs to an original root in China; he is part of a series of local relations (in Osh as his city of residence, and in Kyrgyzstan as his country) and a series of transnational relations (with other ex-Soviet ethnicities, and in his travels to Korea and Japan). Umid speaks whatever language the context demands and has abandoned the folkloric requirement of holding on to an "official identity". It is the same with the whole household and it is also common in the whole village. In fact, there is a rupture of identity in the sense of imagined community: to be recognized by the Other as oneself, or to look at Others as one's own. Umid's "identity" — along with osh Dungans' identity — is Whole-World.

Knörr (2010) added to the criticisms of the way creolization was discussed in

Caribbean thought, in particular, when she states that they sound more like "good intentions". Glissant falls into those good intentions when he tries to defend Martinique's creolized culture while denouncing the identitarian subordination of Martinicans who want to become Frenchified. In Glissant's view, Martinicans suffer because they do not belong, however they might try, to the arborescence that dominates them. Belonging is an arborescent trap, I conclude from Glissant's comments.

Glissant (2009) tells of having discovered the Relation when he first arrived in Paris and lived with other "French" colonial subjects: Vietnamese, Senegalese, Moroccans, Martinicans, Guadeloupeans. This intellectuality constituted a rhizome. But the ordinary Martinican described by Glissant sounds quite arborescent. That is why someone like Umid is so relevant in his "exceptionality". Umid is representative of himself, although he is quite similar to other osh Dungans, and, at the same time, does not embody the characteristics of all Central Asian Dungans. Umid is a Whole-Worlder. Ferghana was already a creolized space to which creolized identities of Muslims "coming from China" arrived, none of this has to do with clearly defined, arborescent identities. There are other actors who choose to be rhizome, or archipelago, and therein lies their true freedom.

Acknowledgements

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