Subjects, Subjectivities, and Slavic Studies: A Design for Anti-Racist Pedagogy

Erin Katherine Krafft

Introduction: In which I advocate for "I"

In the classroom, I am many things. Most immediately, I am the instructor, yes. I am also an interdisciplinary scholar of color with a PhD in Slavic Studies, and an Assistant Professor of Crime and Justice Studies. I am my experiences of being a community organizer, and of my years of rebelling against educational environments that often made no space for me. I am my experiences of somehow being drawn deeper into Russian literature and history despite the seeming distance of such subjects from my own life. I am also in the company of an extremely diverse group of students, a group of students to whom I can relate on a number of levels, as I am also my experiences of navigating education and life in general while facing multiple forms of marginalization. I am intellectually, academically, and personally situated at multiple intersections. I am, for all of these reasons and many more, invested in anti-racist pedagogy and practice.

It feels as strange for me to write of my "I" for a Slavic Studies journal as it does for students when I encourage their "I" in papers on Marxism or histories of totalitarianism. In writing this introduction, I asked myself if "I" was okay in the same way that they ask if their "I" is actually acceptable.

"Wait, so...we can really also write about ourselves?"

Yes.

As Parker Palmer writes: "*Identity* lies in the intersection of the diverse forces that make up my life, and *integrity* lies in relating to those forces in ways that bring me wholeness and life rather than fragmentation and death."[1] My identity, the identities of students, and the diverse forces that act upon us are as important in the classroom and in our learning as the texts in front of us, as our identities are the lens through which we interpret and interrogate. Integrating these identities and lenses into our studies is central to anti-racist praxis because, simply: if there is no space for students' identities and interpretations, no space to explore points of resonance and relevance, there is no space for students. In her book *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks writes that "no education is politically neutral."[2] Neither are we or our students; we are all subjects, non-neutral. Rather than playing at neutrality, I have found that, via engaging with Russian history and literature, students gain critical perspectives on hierarchies of race, class, gender, and nation in their own lives and contexts while simultaneously

---

[1] Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco, 1998), 14.

[2] bell hooks (Gloria Jean Watkins), *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York, 1994), 37.

Slavic Review 80, no. 2 (Summer 2021)
© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies.
doi: 10.1017/slr.2021.76

engaging with histories that they would not otherwise encounter, thereby both broadening and deepening their sense of both global and national landscapes and their own positions and movements within them.

The aim of this contribution is to illuminate some possibilities for practicing anti-racism in the classroom even while working with texts from Russian literature and history that do not necessarily center race. First, some crucial context: most of my students have no connection to Russia, and come to class with very little knowledge of Russian history or contemporary Russian culture or politics. I provide key texts and contexts, and our approach neither shoehorns Russian history into a simplistic mold meant to facilitate comparative US/Russia critique, nor does it position Russia as oppositional or as some sort of cinematic, historical enemy; instead, we begin by transparently rejecting both such overly-simplistic approaches and acknowledge that Russia, the US, and their transnational relations are not and have never been easily reducible to such broad strokes. Second, when I say that we acknowledge and examine our own perspectives, contexts, and differences—differences in individual experiences, as well as those of race, ethnicity, gender, class, or nation—it is not to codify those differences; rather, it is to acknowledge that those differences impact our experiences of the world in multiple and complex ways. To use the concept of the "double consciousness" developed by W.E.B. Du Bois, in which one both sees and experiences the world from one's own vantage point while simultaneously having "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others," we examine how our own and others' perspectives are created, and how they result in not only perceptions of difference but also concrete manifestations of such perceptions that may give rise to such forces as systemic discrimination, nationalism, and revolutionary movements.[3]

These examinations are necessarily dynamic and polyphonic, and dialogues co-created with students allow for a deeper understanding of contexts and histories both familiar and unfamiliar. What follows are brief examples of work undertaken with students on a handful of texts and histories that have provided particularly productive grounds for engagement that, I hope, may offer insight on the intersections of Slavic Studies and anti-racist praxis.

Case Studies

In the courses I teach, students engage with questions of state power, multiple manifestations of hierarchy and oppression, resistance movements, and other forms of social organization using theoretical frameworks and languages that are largely new to them. This is as true when we are reading Karl Marx as it is when we are reading Du Bois, Lev Tolstoi, or Aleksandra Kollontai. Yes, the relevance or historical continuity of Du Bois may be closer to their experiences today, but the process of building our understandings of historical contexts and seeing—and seeing through—our own lenses is common to our readings of all of these texts and contexts.

---

[3] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Strivings of the Negro People," *Atlantic Monthly* 80 (August 1897): 194–98, online at https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1897/08/strivings-of-the-negro-people/305446/.

Two very brief examples: Evgenii Zamiatin's *We* provides us with the opportunity to not only learn about Russia in the 1920s and Zamiatin's prescient illustrations of totalitarianism, but to access a new lens through which to analyze our own landscapes of surveillance, the criminalization of dissent, and the distance between state narratives of prosperity and triumphalism and our own experiences of exactly the opposite.[4] Tolstoi's "I Cannot Be Silent" provides us with not only a historical picture of state power and violence in late imperial Russia, but also a way to explore the transnational genealogies of philosophies of nonviolence that stretch through ancient texts through the American Civil Rights movement and continue to inform contemporary debates about protest, the death penalty, and state power.[5] The letters between Tolstoi and Mahatma Gandhi, alongside an exploration of Martin Luther King Jr.'s writings on the impact of Gandhi's philosophies of nonviolence, illustrate to students that the transnational exchange of foundational discourses on state power and resistance require us to look beyond imagined boundaries, both in our understandings of history and in our own research.[6] In both cases, for students who have previously known little of Russia, these entry points both introduce new contexts and histories, and also add new dimensions to subjects with which they are already somewhat familiar. The engagement is both academic and personal, facilitating acquisition and understanding by opening up the dialogue to incorporate our own understandings and experiences.

The writings of Aleksandra Kollontai provide particularly rich grounds for such critical and dynamic engagement; her writings on the stated principles of Marxism-Leninism, Bolshevism, and communism, and especially on the place of gender within such movements, not only allows for a critical study of the early Soviet period, but also of the relationship between socialist and feminist theories and practices in a larger sense. In particular, alongside an exploration of Kollontai's texts and contexts, we examine the Black Panther Party's enactment of the principles of Marxism-Leninism and its sometimes blinkered treatment of gender; in places of both divergence and confluence, we gain a more nuanced understanding of both.

In "Sexual Relations and the Class Struggle," Kollontai writes, "Socialists... assure us that sexual problems will only be settled when the basic reorganisation of the social and economic structure of society has been tackled," and she asks:

> How can we explain to ourselves the hypocritical way in which "sexual problems" are relegated to the realm of "private matters" that are not worth the effort and attention of the collective? Why has the fact been ignored that throughout history one of the constant features of social struggle has been

---

[4] Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We*, trans. Clarence Brown (1924; repr., London: 1993).

[5] Lev Tolstoi, "I Cannot Be Silent," in *I Cannot Be Silent: Writings on Politics, Art and Religion*, trans. W. Gareth Jones (Bristol, 1989 [1908]), 202–12.

[6] The letters, written between 1909–1910, are now public domain. They may be found in Leo Tolstoy and M.K. Gandhi, *A Letter to a Hindu: A Fascinating View on Love and Nonviolence*, trans. Aylmer Maude and Leo Wiener (2016), np; Martin Luther King Jr., "My Trip to the Land of Gandhi," *Ebony*, July 1959, at https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/my-trip-land-gandhi.

> the attempt to change relationships between the sexes, and the type of moral codes that determine these relationships…?[7]

She expands the definition of struggle to include not just capitalist hierarchies, but gendered hierarchies that capitalism—and, she fears, socialism—manipulate to their own advantage. In "Theses on Communist Morality in the Sphere of Sexual Relations," Kollontai discusses the changes that will have to happen as capitalism ceases to be the organizing structure of the family, and argues that the workers' collective needs to transform relations between the sexes in order to reinforce the strength of the collective during the transition from capitalism to communism.[8]

There is a clear consonance between the commentary from women in the Black Panther Party (BPP) and Kollontai's demand for a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary program whose praxis commits to undoing the hierarchies found in private intimacies.[9] Safiya Bukhari, an active member and revolutionary educator for the BPP by 1970, explains that the Party's Marxist-Leninist political and moral ideologies led them to reject the breadwinner/homemaker binary, focusing instead on the collective, specifically the *lumpenproletariat*, encompassing both men and women. Bukhari's writings harmonize with Kollontai's in several ways. She rejects bourgeois feminism in favor of a revolutionary scientific socialism that positions women and men as comrades, and she recognizes that it profoundly undermines the collective struggle when women are privately oppressed by these same comrades. True revolutionaries, she writes, "must exorcise those characteristics of ourselves and traits of the oppressor nation in order to carry out that most important revolution—the internal revolution."[10]

If Bukhari and Kollontai emphasize the same ideals, it is Elaine Brown who articulates a similar frustration to Kollontai's. Brown's memoirs are sharply critical of the BPP's gender politics in ways that resonate clearly with Kollontai's opposition to the New Economic Policy and what she saw as its potential to backslide into the debauchery and possessiveness of capitalism; this opposition is most legible in her fictional works of the mid-1920s in which she levels focused attacks on the hypocritical and chauvinistic behavior of NEPmen.[11] Recounting her relations with Huey Newton, for instance, Brown notes that he loudly denounced the "bourgeois socialization" that made people claim one another as "'my' man, 'my' woman," but that he was also clearly attracted to women adorned by "'bourgeois' sweetnesses."[12] Brown also graphically recounts the gendered violence and manipulation that she endured within the Party and the ways in which male leadership overlooked and even supported it, weaponizing gender hierarchies both literally and figuratively. She reports that women who asserted themselves or took on leadership responsibilities were seen as potentially counter-revolutionary.[13] This, too, resonates with Kollontai's rejection by her own Party for trying to disrupt the gendered hierarchies left in place by male leaders: in the early 1920s, she was appointed ambassador to Norway and spent more than two decades away from Russia in various diplomatic posts, returning only a few years before her death.[14]

---

[7] Aleksandra Kollontai, "Sexual Relations and the Class Struggle" in *Selected Writings*, trans. Alix Holt (New York, 1977), 237, 239–40.

[8] Kollontai, "Theses on Communist Morality in the Sphere of Sexual Relations" in *Selected Writings*, 225–31.

[9] For more on the role of women in the Black Panther Party, see Tracye A. Matthews, "'No One Ever Asks What a Man's Role in the Revolution Is': Gender Politics and Leadership in the Black Panther Party, 1966–1971" in Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin, eds., *Sisters in Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (New York, 2001), 230–56; and Robyn Spencer, "Engendering the Black Freedom Struggle: Revolutionary Black Womanhood and the Black Panther in the Bay Area, California," *Journal of Women's History* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 90–113.

[10] Safiya Bukhari, *The War Before: The True Life Story of Becoming a Black Panther, Keeping the Faith in Prison and Fighting for Those Left Behind* (New York, 2010), 60–61.

[11] See, for instance, Alexandra Kollontai, *Love of Worker Bees*, trans. Cathy Porter (Chicago, 1978).

This comparison is not comparison for its own sake, nor is it an attempt to collapse distinct histories into a single context. Rather, we may learn more from studying them in tandem than we learn separately; we find points of resonance, yes, but when we find points of divergence, this allows us to see the precise contours of both contexts in ways that we may not without laying them side-by-side. Broadly, we see two Marxist-Leninist projects that, to varying degrees, deprioritized women's equality in favor of maintaining male-dominated gender hierarchy, suggesting that despite their beliefs that women's subordination was a key feature of capitalist oppression, it was a feature that they were explicitly unwilling or incapable of excising from their separate anti-capitalist projects. When we zoom into the separate histories, however, and explore them from the multiple vantage points that this parallel study offers, we open up new approaches to examining, for instance, state narratives of "equality," public and private uses of gender norms, the relationship between gender norms and racialized histories and hierarchies, or even contemporary far-right discourses of the "traditional family" in Russia and the US and their respective political uses.

Crucially, this study of Kollontai and the Black Panther Party arose because of student interest. Using the language of the Reggio Emilia style of teaching, this may be seen as a "provocation"—something that came up and provoked the curiosity of students, making them want to investigate.[15] Yes, the Reggio Emilia style was developed for young children, but the philosophy behind it is applicable in any space where teaching and learning is happening. Responding to these provocations can be energizing not just for students, but for instructors, and it can create an environment where collaborative knowledge-building, rather than what Paulo Freire termed the "banking system," is the norm.[16]

---

[12] Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (New York, 1992), 258–60.

[13] Brown, 307–13, 357.

[14] For more on Kollontai's life, see Beatrice Farnsworth, *Aleksandra Kollontai: Socialism, Feminism, and the Bolshevik Revolution* (Palo Alto, 1980).

[15] M.A. Biermeier, "Inspired by reggio emilia: Emergent Curriculum in Relationship-driven Learning Environments," *YC Young Children* 70, no. 5 (2015): 77. The Reggio Emilia style of teaching was developed by Loris Malaguzzi in Reggio Emilia, Italy, in the decades following WWII. For more on Reggio Emilia practices and philosophies, see Carolyn P. Edwards, Leila Gandini, and George Forman, eds., *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education* (New York, 1993); and Carlina Rinaldi, *In Dialogue with Reggio Emilia: Listening, Researching, and Learning* (New York, 2004).

To be clear, this work on Kollontai and the Black Panther Party is not automatically anti-racist simply because it incorporates Black Power movements; indeed, it is possible (even probable) that histories of Black Power movements are being discussed in classrooms where anti-Black racism is present and unchecked. As Shawn Ginwright has demonstrated, it is not just about changing a curriculum to reflect the ethnic and cultural background of students, but about responding to students' needs in their lives and in the moment.[17] Of course, this is not to say that the content of curricula is not important, but rather that we cannot mistake engagement with a text for engagement with students.

Opening up to these new paths and interpretations may be difficult, intimidating even, as it may mean venturing beyond our own limits. Returning to hooks, she writes: "Many folks found that as they tried to respect 'cultural diversity' they had to confront the limitations of their training and knowledge, as well as a possible loss of 'authority.' Indeed, exposing certain truths and biases in the classroom often created chaos and confusion."[18] This chaos, however, this embrace of the productive-but-unplanned, does not have to come along with confusion, as long as we remain flexible enough to be willing to learn in dialogue, rather than mandate a linear path and insist that we and our students stay on it. This flexibility brings life to our subjects, to students, to ourselves, and to our teaching. As Gloria Ladson-Billings writes of culturally sustaining pedagogy, "if we ever get to a place of complete certainty and assuredness about our practice, we will stop growing. If we stop growing, we will die, and, more importantly, our students will wither and die in our presence."[19]

Conclusion: Inclusion, or Integration?

Nothing that we can teach, and no model of teaching, is free from marks of perspective, identity, background, or the fact that many students (and teachers) come out of classrooms where adherence to hierarchy is prioritized over active engagement. We can no more demand the omission of our students' perspectives, identities, interests, or needs than we can claim a blank objectivity for ourselves, and why would we want to? As Palmer writes, good teachers "are able to weave a complex web of connections between themselves, their subjects, and their students, so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves."[20] Weaving ourselves and our subjects together with our students and their interests can allow the creation of a space that is collaborative and co-constructive, a space that can be liberatory and anti-racist even when we are not reading texts that explicitly relate to race and racism. This kind of integration takes us beyond inclusion. Inclusion, after all (and as some of us may recognize from toothless diversity and inclusion initiatives), is too often an attempt to include individuals and groups within harmful and oppressive pre-existing structures.[21] Integration, on the other hand, means that we are creating a space *with* our students that is truly molded to fit all of us. Integration means that every student is an important figure in the class, because the process of teaching and learning is seen as not only collective, but as responding to the actual collective of people in the room, to the actual voices, perspectives, and interpretations of those who are co-constructing the process of teaching and learning and are therefore indispensable. Yes, we may know much more about our specific subjects and their histories and contexts than the students do, but there is still much more for us to learn: about our subjects, about how they echo in the present day, about ourselves in the continual process of becoming more skillful and responsive teachers, and about what—and how—students learn.

---

[16] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York, 2000 [1970]).

[17] Shawn Ginwright, "Identity for Sale: The Limits of Racial Reform in Urban Schools," *The Urban Review* 32, no. 1 (March 2000): 87–104.

[18] hooks, 30.

[19] Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: aka the remix," *Harvard Educational Review* 84, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 77.

[20] Palmer, *Courage to Teach*, 11.

In the same way that racism itself is not a discrete component of an environment that can be easily excised, but rather pervades and weaves through multiple institutional, interpersonal, and internal structures, anti-racist work is not an add-on to pedagogy. It is not a discrete component. It is a fundamental transformation of the way that we approach the complex relationships between ourselves, students, and subjects. The "I," counter-intuitively, is one way to create the "we" that becomes the collective that guides the process of learning and transformation.

---

[21] There have been many salient critiques of "diversity and inclusion" initiatives. See, for instance, Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC, 2012); and Chanda Prescod-Weinstein, "What I wanted when I called for a Strike for Black Lives," *Particles for Justice*, June 2020, at https://www.particlesforjustice.org/note, (accessed May 21, 2021).