

A Moment of Reckoning: Transcending Bias, Engaging Race and Racial Formations in Slavic and East European Studies

Sunnie Rucker-Chang^{ORCID} and Chelsi West Ohueri

Categories of race and racial formations define global systems of power and are not bound by history or culture. Nevertheless, with few noted exceptions from such scholars as Catherine Baker, Dušan Bjelić, Alaina Lemon, David Rainbow, and Eric Weitz, race as a category of analysis has largely been rejected and rendered inapplicable within the field of Russian, Eurasian, and East European Studies. This unwillingness to expand categories of critical analysis has created a void in our area and field of study, shaping a false sense of racelessness. Frameworks that emphasize such ideas as bias or even group conflict often attribute the causes of social and racial injustice to factors that are invisible, natural, or submerged beneath our consciousness.¹ With an explicit focus on race and racism, we aim to transcend these notions of bias, and draw attention to the critical importance of racial analysis in our region and its urgency in this current social landscape.

In a recent publication of the ASEEEES newsletter, *NewsNet*, Ani Kokobobo poses key questions about the naming of academic disciplines, particularly drawing attention to the name of our field, that is broadly speaking Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies.² Kokobobo's essay forces readers to contemplate those geographies, histories, and groups of people that are included within our disciplinary umbrella and those that have been excluded or receiving little attention. Such considerations are especially keen in the discussion of race in our region; while eastern Europe (broadly defined) is often assumed to occupy a place of racelessness, the region is shaped by global racialized processes that in turn produce varying forms of inequality, differences, and marginalization within the region. In this paper we particularly highlight scholarship from southeastern Europe, but our focus here is applicable for the broader field of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies.

Background

In scholarship on southeastern Europe, the categories of ethnicity, religion, nation, gender, and class have become acceptable ways of articulating identity formation. Race, however, is rarely included, despite the fact that “[many Balkan countries] had racial laws during World War II, sent their Jews to

1. Jonathan Khan, *Race on the Brain: What Implicit Bias Gets Wrong About the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York, 2017).

2. Ani Kokobobo, “What’s in a Name? Are We Slavic, East European, Eurasian, or All of the Above?” *NewsNet*, 6, no. 4 (September 9, 2020): 17–18, available at <https://www.aseees.org/news-events/aseees-blog-feed/what%E2%80%99s-name-are-we-slavic-east-european-urasian-or-all-above> (accessed May 7, 2021).

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.2021.75

concentration camps, and had official racial discourses about racial minorities such as Jews, Roma, Muslims, and other ethnic minorities.”³ The accepted fact of racelessness has become a truism of scholarship written on the region in part because countries in southeastern Europe lack a history of empire necessary for the creation of “race,” as it is conceived in prevailing transatlantic discourse.⁴ As such, nationalism and ethnicity are centered in studies of difference.

Nationalism, however, was imagined as an imported phenomenon. This idea surfaces in the 1945 Yugoslav novel *Bridge on the Drina* by Ivo Andrić, in which nationalism is explained as a nineteenth century intellectual current coming from young men who, having been educated abroad, returned to their villages with “enthusiastically revived nationalism.”⁵ After the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and his wife Sophie, however, the “Balkans” came to be viewed as a “powder keg”—spaces typifying nationalism—an idea that has only cemented over time.⁶ Nationalism has been used to explain significant historical events in the region: the formation of nation-states, irredentism, the destruction of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia,⁷ the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia,⁸ and the 1990s Yugoslav wars.⁹

Race in southeastern Europe historically defined differences. Similar to contemporary conceptions of “ethnicity,” it became a means to define a group by language, geography, and even character.¹⁰ Race and ethnicity have shared features, and, as Michael Stewart notes, the continued racial logic of *ethnicity* becomes clear when the term defines “visible minorities” who are otherwise “entirely assimilated members of the national citizenry.”¹¹ In the Balkans this includes a number of racialized groups including Roma, Afro-Albanians, and members of some migrant populations (students, merchants, refugees) among others.

These above examples help to illustrate that racialized thinking and racialized hierarchies have long existed in the Balkans and establish the local character of “race” and its historical use. As Matthias Moschel notes and Michael Stewart insinuates, however, there is a general reluctance to engage with “race” as a productive category owing to its problematic history and

3. Dušan I. Bjelić, “Toward a Genealogy of the Balkan Discourses on Race,” *Interventions* 20, no. 6 (August 2018): 906–29.

4. Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York, 1997).

5. Ivo Andrić, *The Bridge on the Drina* (Chicago, 1977).

6. Paschalis M. Kitromilides, “‘Imagined Communities’ and the Origins of the National Question in the Balkans,” *European History Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (April 1989): 149–192.

7. Ivo Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics* (Ithaca, 1984).

8. Dennison I. Rusinow, *Yugoslavia: Oblique Insights and Observations* (Pittsburg, 2008).

9. Catherine Baker, *The Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s* (London, 2015).

10. Rory Yeomans, “Of ‘Yugoslav Barbarians’ and Croatian Gentlemen Scholars: Nationalist Ideology and Racial Anthropology in Interwar Yugoslavia” in Marius Turda and Paul J Weindling, eds., *Blood and Homeland: Eugenics and Racial Nationalism in Central and Southeast Europe, 1900–1940* (Budapest, 2007), 83–121.

11. Michael Stewart and Márton Rövid, eds., *Multi-disciplinary Approaches to Romany Studies* (Budapest, 2011).

associations with biological race, eugenics movements, and the Holocaust.¹² In place of race, ethnicity and nationalism became the primary constructs of identity in southeastern Europe. These conceptual frames have become commonplace in scholarship written about the region, despite the initial beliefs that positioned nationalism as an outside concept. Nationalism became local and race external.

This reluctance to engage with race as an applicable category of analysis in the region has rendered associations with and analyses of it invalid, further advancing the notion that these countries are raceless and therefore lacking racism. This invalidation poses challenges to studying the impact of race, racialization, and racisms on minoritized and/or racialized populations in the region. It further complicates studies of regional involvement with countries that define themselves by way of their Blackness and brownness. Studies such as these require analysis beyond what the frames of ethnicity and nationalism can offer. However, the distance of the field of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (SEES) from race renders it necessary for scholars asking these questions to move beyond the field to locate theoretical, analytical, and methodological frames.

The resistance to engage race in our scholarship and teaching does not only manifest in publications or syllabi but also in spaces such as conferences. As a graduate student some years ago and a Black woman, the second author, Dr. West Ohueri, attended a Russian and east European area studies conference that was held in Moscow, and during a session on nation and nostalgia, one of the conference attendees approached the stage and asked, “When are we going to stop talking so much about minorities?” He continued, “Why do we have to talk about them all of the time; why does it matter?” At the panel’s conclusion this same person, a white man, approached Dr. West Ohueri in a defensive manner and asked if she ever got tired of thinking about being Black all the time. This type of response to race, both in the refusal to critically analyze and in the rejection of Black scholars who demand attention to these subjects, further highlights this resistance to race in our field.

Dr. Rucker-Chang came to understand fully the meanings of race as a lived reality while studying abroad as a high school student in Russia. Her story is no different than anyone else of color who studied in Russia at this time: she was harassed and chased by a skinhead. This experience stayed with her and pushed her to understand the mechanisms of race and Blackness in particular as it manifests in anti-Blackness in a region without sizable Black populations. This experience contrasted greatly with her first trip to Serbia where her host family informed her that their neighbors were once Black and that her race would not be a factor while she was in the region. These experiences have taught her to travel differently than many of her colleagues who code as white.

These experiences are not necessarily unique to either of us, but we believe that our field as a whole currently lacks broad tools to examine the role of race in our region. As a global project, race is ubiquitous, yet many scholars in our field continually perpetuate eastern Europe as exceptional, locating race and

12. Mathias Möschel, *Law, Lawyers and Race: Critical Race Theory from the US to Europe* (New York, 2014).

racism outside of our region. This resistance to the study of race and racism, and the refusal to examine whiteness and white supremacy, illustrate both the epistemology of ignorance¹³ and white innocence.¹⁴ Such practices allow whiteness to be unnamed and unquestioned even as it shapes spaces of inclusion and exclusion in our field of study. Our goal in this essay is to accentuate the need for racial analysis, but we also want to highlight how race itself is resisted and the implications this has for our pedagogical practices and the training of students and future scholars in our field.

Engaging Race and Racialization

Though there are some noted examples that situate race globally, a significant number of race scholars and theorists have approached race through a US-centric or western lens that does not critically examine race in a global context.¹⁵ Additionally, scholars such as Rogers Brubaker have cautioned against an approach to race that relies on the construction of neatly bounded groups.¹⁶ Rather than treating race as distinct from ethnicity and nation, Brubaker frames the three concepts as interrelated and overlapping phenomena.¹⁷ We maintain that a global racial analysis is both beneficial and necessary, and rather than emphasize a singular focus on race or ethnicity as an analytical concept, we underscore the need for additionally centering racialization, that is, how race operates and is produced and reproduced over time. Following such scholars as Michelle Christian, David Theo Goldberg, and Jemima Pierre, we seek to draw attention to how race is understood and interwoven into everyday social landscapes; to examine, as Gloria Wekker notes, how race is practiced.¹⁸ In doing so, we emphasize the historical and local context of our region and the varying countries within it, while also situating our region within the broader global racial order. This approach provides an entry point for inquiries into coloniality and postcoloniality, structural inequality, varying processes of othering, and whiteness and its limits, among other subjects.¹⁹

Despite generations of innocent Black women and men dying at the hands of law enforcement, the killing of George Floyd looked to be a moment of reckoning and it was, even if only for a short period of time. The murder brought to the fore, once again, how racialized hierarchies are instrumentalized as mechanisms of necropolitics of the state. In response, professional organizations and departments in North America began hosting webinars and

13. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract*, 7th ed. (Ithaca, 2014).

14. Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham, NC, 2016).

15. Michelle Christian, "A Global Critical Race and Racism Framework: Racial Entanglements and Deep and Malleable Whiteness," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 5, no. 2 (April, 2019): 169–85.

16. Rogers Brubaker, "Ethnicity, Race, and Nationalism," *Annual Review of Sociology* 35, no. 1 (2009): 21–42.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. Neda Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race* (Stanford, 2018).

seminars to highlight scholars working on race and racialization. In SEES fields, these events brought to light the stunning absence of scholarship on social justice and racialized violence as well as the overrepresentation of scholars from racialized communities working in these spaces. While these events have proven incredibly useful and informative, they highlight a lack of SEES scholars who engage with race in meaningful ways both in scholarship and pedagogy.

As noted earlier, studies of race primarily center on transatlantic contexts, which is a significant factor in arguments about why race and race studies are incompatible with our region and therefore scholarship written about it. Because race is “never just one thing,” it morphs to accommodate the context in which it exists.²⁰ It is simultaneously universal as it is an expression of power hierarchies within global contexts, but also specific as local contexts inform how race manifests, and which groups are racialized. However, because of the deep history of the dehumanization of colonized people and the exportation of meanings assigned to them as non-human, these ideas have become global, narrowly delineating certain individuals who code as Black by a set of definitions assigned to them from the outside. Their experiences and the ways that people define them become inflected and informed by these hierarchies that were created from empire, reinforced and distributed transnationally by global powers. As such, the signifier of Blackness, particularly as a facet of the Black diaspora, has come to have transnational significance. It is sustained through coloniality, cultural products, and global flows of information. The hierarchy of Black and white even persists beyond its western origins, as Charles Mills notes, in local *de jure* and *de facto* constructs. In fact, in some Balkan contexts, these differences even manifest in the use of the same terms: “Black” and “white.”²¹

Mills’s writings on the racial contract draw attention to the racial criteria that shape categories of white and non-white.²² By focusing on racialization and social processes, we additionally gain insight into the shifting forms of whiteness and how the notion of what it means to be white has changed over time. In doing so, we are able to ask questions about the sociopolitical and sociocultural construction of race and whiteness in a peripheralized Europe, highlighting the ways that whiteness is shaped by global understandings of power but also produced in varied ways across differing contexts.²³

Global Contexts and the Urgency of This Moment

Despite the growing analysis of race and racialization in scholarship in our broader field, there still remain few scholars actively researching in this area

20. David Theo Goldberg, “Racial Europeanization,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29, no. 2 (March 2006): 331–64.

21. Chelsi West Ohueri, “On Living and Moving with Zor: Exploring Racism, Embodiment, and Health in Albania,” *Medical Anthropology: Cross-Cultural Studies in Health and Illness* 40, no. 3 (April 2021): 241–53.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Catherine Baker, *Race and the Yugoslav Region: Postsocialist, Post-conflict, Postcolonial?* (Manchester, 2018).

and resistance to centering race in SEES scholarship persists. Scholarship focusing on race has a comparatively longer history in Soviet and post-Soviet studies, however. In this literature, it is possible to trace Soviet entanglements with the Global South as well as Black American cultural icons and common individuals traveling, working, and visiting the Soviet Union on their quest to find a society free of racism or fair employment despite their race.²⁴ Russia, as the historical seat of an empire, renders these comparisons more in line with the traditional discussions of race and racialization, particularly regarding the relationship between Russia and non-Slavic peoples. Even in these areas, however, the applicability of race beyond its enduring relationship with “Black,” by way of various members of African diasporic communities, renders these questions outside the scope of the local. There is movement to situate these conversations within local contexts, to highlight the urgency to expand our frames of analysis and interrogate meaningfully the local character of race beyond its transatlantic manifestations.

Many aspects of the current global racial moment necessitate a more critical and comprehensive engagement with race in our region. The increasing development and mobilization of far-right parties and their discourses on immigration and hate, along with growing forms of white nationalist and neo-Nazi racist violence, are urgent matters that require local and particular examinations of racial formation. Additional phenomena such as the expanding forms of structural inequality and the racialization of Muslims provide opportunities for scholars to explore how race is deeply embedded in many aspects of the sociocultural landscape of our region.²⁵ As scholars such as Ian Law and Nikolay Zakharov continually emphasize, many of the varying racial logics that operate in our area of study are not new, but rather are shaped by historical practices of race-making and are directly tied to global racial projects.²⁶

We know from theorists Michael Omi and Howard Winant that race “signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies.”²⁷ Engaging with such scholars as David Rainbow, one task for those of us in our field of study is to gain a broader understanding of how inferiority and superiority get mapped onto certain bodies.²⁸ Though race carries different meanings throughout history and across places, human bodies are racialized globally, and as Winant reminds us, the idea that certain

24. For more on this subject see Kate A. Baldwin, *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922–1963* (Durham, NC, 2002); Alison Blakely, *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought* (Washington, DC, 198); Robert Robinson, *Black on Red: My 44 Years Inside the Soviet Union* (Washington, DC, 1988); Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2010); Meredith L. Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928–1937* (Lincoln, NE, 2019).

25. Junaid Akram Rana, *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora* (Durham, NC, 2011).

26. Nikolay Zakharov and Ian Law, *Post-Soviet Racisms* (London, 2017).

27. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 3rd ed. (New York, 2015).

28. David Rainbow, ed., *Ideologies of Race: Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union in Global Context* (Montreal, 2019).

bodily features are connected to mental capabilities, worth, and cultural patterns is incorrect but deeply rooted and very hard to reimagine.²⁹ Relying on this type of framework enables us to emphasize history and place while simultaneously locating work in our region along the global axis of race and racial formation.

Concluding Considerations

Through integrating race, we necessarily engage with fields beyond SEES, which presents greater opportunities to expand interdisciplinary approaches and theoretical frames. We gain insight from disciplines and scholars that have long analyzed race and racialization as well as other similar attendant concepts such as immigration, coloniality, and empire from both local and transnational contexts. There is much to be learned from ethnic studies fields, such as Black Studies and Romani Studies, which were created primarily because students and activist scholars pushed universities to be inclusive of the experiences and cultures of non-white racialized communities in university curricula.³⁰ Although small in number, publications in SEES reveal a sustained interest in race and racialization as a facet of history, identity formation, sociocultural hierarchies, entanglements and encounters with the Global South, and relationships between colonizer and colonized, at least in the case of the Soviet Union. In Balkan Studies, a number of recent books and articles on the Non-Aligned Movement, race intersectionality, transnational racial solidarities, medical anthropology, and a number of book publications in Romani Studies recognize race as fundamental to understanding the socio-cultural structuring of southeastern European societies and offer illustrative examples on how to center or incorporate the study of race into broader analyses of the region.³¹

By insisting on the incorporation of race into studies of any of the geographical regions in SEES, we will arm students with the tools to address race and racialization in their studies and research. This in turn will prepare them to incorporate interdisciplinary methods and critical approaches that expand the ways we understand and interact with difference. Scholars need to find ways of integrating more work on race and racialization into their pedagogical approach, broadening our analyses beyond ethnicity and nation. Furthermore, as it pertains to such matters as study abroad and student

29. Howard Winant, *The World Is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy Since World War II* 1st ed. (New York, 2001).

30. Sunnie Rucker-Chang, "Challenging Americanism and Europeanism: African-Americans and Roma in the American South and European Union 'South,'" *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 16, no. 2 (June 2018): 181–99.

31. Bojana Videkanić, *Nonaligned Modernism: Socialist Postcolonial Aesthetics in Yugoslavia, 1945–1985* (Montreal, 2020); Baker, *Race and the Yugoslav Region*; Huub van Baar and Angéla Kóczé, eds., *The Roma and Their Struggle for Identity in Contemporary Europe* (New York, 2020); Migelna S. Todorova, "Race and Women of Color in Socialist/ Postsocialist Transnational Feminisms in Central and Southeastern Europe," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 16, no. 1 (2017): 114–41; Chelsi West Ohueri, "On Living and Moving with Zor: Exploring Racism, Embodiment, and Health in Albania," *Medical Anthropology: Cross-Cultural Studies in Health and Illness* 40, no. 3 (April 2021): 241–53.

engagement with our area of study for students of color, we need to better prepare our students, both undergraduate and graduate, with strategies to confront and address their experiences as individuals racialized as non-white. This would allow students the possibility to understand and contextualize their experiences abroad, and one starting point is through the collection of the many encounters and experiences from scholars of color in our field. We additionally need to curate more mentoring events about such matters, sessions that would promote the work of scholars and students on the subject of race and also increase awareness about what happens when student and scholars of color study abroad in predominantly white spaces, not as isolated events, but as reflective of systemic manifestations of the racial sociocultural orders of the countries they visit. As we have argued elsewhere in this essay, these discussions need to explicitly focus on race and racism, not simply bias, to move toward a better understanding that this is endemic and not simply the result of bias or cultural misunderstandings. Finally, we need not overlook the roles that whiteness plays in our region broadly defined, nor do we need to forget the ways that whiteness has shaped and continues to shape practices of inclusivity across our discipline.