

Introduction

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This “Critical Discussion Forum on Race and Bias” responds to the shock of the murder by police of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, coming on the heels of that of Breonna Taylor on March 13 in Louisville, and to the Black Lives Matter protests that erupted across the country and the world in the months that followed. How can we, in our roles as scholars and teachers, respond meaningfully to the urgent call for racial justice for Black Americans? Specifically, how can we do this from our positions in the Slavic field, which, as a contributor to this forum writes, is “an overwhelmingly white field” focused on “a region with tangential relevance to the Black experience”?¹ As another contribution points out, when AATSEEL made its “Statement Concerning Systemic Racism and Police Brutality in the United States” in 2020, it acknowledged this seeming tangential relevance with the prefacing remark, “AATSEEL does not generally make statements about public issues unless they directly relate to the Slavic Field.”² This forum aims to demonstrate that the call for racial justice does in fact relate directly to the field. Given this, it questions: how has it, and how should it, transform our teaching, scholarship and institutional practices? How are many of us, and the academic institutions we populate, part of the problem? How can we be part of the solution?

The field started confronting this need for change over a decade ago, with discussions about changing the name of AAASS (American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies) to ASEES (Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies), and likewise changing the names of university departments and other organizations to include the terms Central Asian or Eurasian. From a focus on the Russian language and the Eurocentric aspects of the Russian Empire and the former Soviet Union, scholars have increasingly turned their interests to non-Russian-speaking regions, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Scholars of the entire region, including eastern Europe, are increasingly focused on ethnic and national minorities and migration in addition to questions of nationalities and nationalism. But as one forum contributor argues, these shifts in the nomenclature and research

1. See Louis Howard Porter, “The Contingent Problem: A Counter-Narrative on Race and Class in the Field of Slavic Studies” in this issue.

2. See Katherine Reischl, Susan Grunewald, Andrew Janco, Hilah Kohen, and Antonina Puchkovskaia, “Reading Race in Slavic Studies Scholarship through a Digital Lens” in this issue.

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objects in the field did not lead to the necessary methodological shift: “my hope,” she writes, “is that this time around, the discovery of ‘race’ as a useful category of analysis will be accompanied by a thorough epistemological critique and deconstruction of the existing canons and paradigms.”³ The existing structures of the field—in particular the pervasive idea that race has nothing to do with the region, exemplary of the penchant for claiming Russian or east European exceptionalism—have for too long perpetuated what the authors of one contribution call “the epistemology of ignorance and white innocence”⁴ and what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, in a book cited by a number of contributors, has called “racism without racists.”⁵

Contributions to the forum counter this Slavic exceptionalism by centering race within their conceptually innovative research agendas. They also demonstrate, through the depth of their footnote references—often to a shared corpus of recent sources—that, first, a solid basis for a rethinking of race already exists within the field, and second, that scholars are resourceful in making use of the fuller existing literature on race in other fields. This impression is buttressed by the pioneering digital research that is detailed in one of the contributions, which concludes that “not only is there rich potential for cross-disciplinary engagement, but the work that has already been done in this field on topics such as slavery, de-colonization, anti-racism, and social justice is prominent enough to be visible in a digital bird’s-eye view.”⁶ The recourse to digital data may strike some in the field, especially on the humanities end of things, as unsuitable to the scholarly project of conducting deep and contextual readings, but accountability matters in this moment of Black Lives Matter. Digital humanities offers one tool for assessing the current and future state of racist and anti-racist scholarship in the field beyond mere impressions.

Contesting racial bias in the field will touch more than the content of our research. Some forum contributors also point the way toward necessary institutional and pedagogical transformations. One argues for the “possibilities for practicing anti-racism in the classroom even while working with texts from Russian literature and history that do not necessarily center race,” demanding that we interrogate our own identities as teachers and embrace and activate our students’ diverse identities as they confront the materials that we teach.⁷ This focus on anti-racist pedagogy forms part of a larger discussion of how bias—conscious and unconscious—causes us to marginalize diverse students and their work. What is the legacy of these impediments on our teaching and research? How have our particular institutions perpetuated disparities,

3. See Marina Mogilner, “When Race Is a Language and Empire Is a Context” in this issue.

4. See Sunnie Rucker-Chang and Chelsi West Ohueri, “A Moment of Reckoning: Transcending Bias, Engaging Race and Racial Formations in Slavic and East European Studies” in this issue.

5. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (Lanham, MD, 2017).

6. Reischl et al., “Reading Race.”

7. See Erin Katherine Krafft, “Russian Literature and History within Anti-racist Pedagogy” in this issue.

silencing diverse voices and contributing to a legacy of racism, bias, and exclusion—and what can we do about it?

Several contributions also raise the problem of the distinct resistance to Black Lives Matter within the region, especially in Russia: “Russian media’s response to George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis, and the subsequent upsurge of protests in many North American cities in the hot summer of 2020 ranged from strongly-worded disapproval of anti-racism to outright racism.”⁸ This characteristic of the region complicates any attempt to counter the perception of Slavic studies as an institution that is “overwhelmingly white” in its teaching, scholarship, and professional ties to the region. Much of the pioneering work on race in the Slavic field has centered on the earlier Soviet period, when communist internationalism promoted an explicitly anti-racist agenda, and a significant number of Black Americans saw the Soviet Union as the lone anti-racist stronghold in a racist world—whether that perception was justified or not. As one contributor notes, the Black sociologist of race, W.E.B. Du Bois, wrote in 1953 of the USSR and its sister states as “the only white countries which do not usually line up against the colored people of the world.”⁹ But this Soviet anti-racism, and the counterexample it provided to the US racism that Black Lives Matter continues to protest, did not survive into the late- and post-Soviet periods. We are therefore posed with particular challenges as a field in our attempt to respond to BLM’s demand for racial justice.

The idea for this “Critical Discussion Forum on Race and Bias,” as such a strategy of response, was suggested a year ago by Editorial Assistants (alphabetically) Elizabeth Abosch, Nadia Hoppe, and Peter Wright. We put out a call for scholars, in any phase of their careers, to submit articles on any aspect of race or bias in the profession, and/or as an object of study in Russia, Eurasia, and eastern and southern Europe. The call was kept deliberately open-ended, with the aim of asking: what does the field want to talk about right now in relation to Black Lives Matter? The collective effort of the forum organizers—Joy Gleason Carew, Christina Kiaer, and Harriet Murav—as well as the generous and anonymous work of the reviewers, and of course, the contributors, brought it to fruition.

The articles come from authors at various stages in the profession, in different disciplines, specializing in a range of geographic locations. It begins with work of a general nature that addresses the field as a whole, then moves on to examine specific figures, texts, and representations important to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A set of articles focuses on the Cold War and its aftermath, and the forum concludes with discussions of race, pedagogy, and the contingent labor market. The problem of contingent labor in Slavic studies will have its own forum in the coming year.

These articles serve as an opening to what we trust will be an ongoing re-examination in our field, profession, and research. As displayed here, the discussion of race and racialization is not a simple one, and it will be

8. See Rossen Djagalov, “Racism, the Highest Stage of Anti-Communism” in this issue.

9. See Christy Monet, “The Afterlife of Soviet Russia’s ‘Refusal to be White’: A Du Boisian Race-Conscious Lens on Post-Soviet Russian-US Relations” in this issue.

ongoing. The embedded racism and bias in normed systems and conventions can be difficult to recognize, and the effort to make the field more welcoming requires more than pronouncements of solidarity. As we re-envision how the field could be more inclusive, we will not only need to broaden subject matter. We will need to mentor younger scholars of color who heretofore might not have considered the field, and further, as one contributor argues, we will need to ensure that they, along with all of our graduates, are not relegated to contingent academic work.¹⁰ By highlighting their research, we, in turn, can encourage others from underrepresented communities. There are striking parallels between US anti-black racism and the impact of Russian and Soviet hegemony on racializing ethnic and national minorities. These parallels present exciting opportunities for collaboration, such as with the field of Black Studies, when interrogating the xenophobic responses to migration across the regions. The breadth and caliber of the work collected in this forum, and the urgent questions the authors raise, open our field to the possibilities of embracing a wider and more diverse set of perspectives.

10. Porter, "The Contingent Problem."