

Race-ing the Russian Nineteenth Century

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This article argues that just as we “gendered” the study of nineteenth-century Russian culture a few decades ago, the time has come to “race” it, that is, reexamine it in view of its engagements with ideas about race. This is not to equate the overall prominence of gender with that of race in Russian culture, but to suggest that the resulting reconfiguration of our object of study is similarly urgent and would be comparably productive. While the topic of race has so far drawn predominantly historians and anthropologists working on the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, it is essential that the culture of the Russian nineteenth-century—the time when modern ideas about race were elaborated and gained cultural prominence that has proven long-lasting—become part of this reappraisal. This article makes four methodological points that might guide such work.¹

Race and Nineteenth-Century Russia

But first: what is race? The diverse intellectual, scientific, and historical genealogies of race are most commonly linked to slavery and global colonialism, which mobilized European thinkers to conceptualize an emerging picture of human diversity by recourse to Enlightenment-style taxonomies popularized by naturalists such as Carl Linnaeus. Bodily typologies gave rise to racial hierarchies of inferior and superior “races” into which all humanity was divided, with white Europeans obligatorily at the top. Subsequent race “science,” using the lens of skin pigmentation, “physiognomy,” facial angles, and cranial sizes, biologized conceptions of culture and human behavior. Racial commonalities, by and large considered to be inborn and heritable, were thought to determine mental and physical aptitudes and to trigger or prevent civilized behavior. Of course, we now know that race, in the sense of a biological, heritable template of human abilities and proclivities, does not exist. As a false and pernicious descriptor of human difference, race has been

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1. The pioneering literary studies of race in nineteenth-century Russian literature are Catherine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, Nicole Svobodny, and Ludmilla A. Trigos, eds., *Under the Sky of My Africa: Alexander Pushkin and Blackness* (Evanston, 2006); Henrietta Mondry, *Exemplary Bodies: Constructing the Jew in Russian Culture, since the 1880s* (Boston, 2009); and Harriet Murav, “Jews, Race, and Biology,” in Deborah Martinsen and Olga Maiorova, eds., *Dostoevsky in Context*, (Cambridge, Eng., 2015), 122–30. See also Edyta M. Bojanowska, *A World of Empires: The Russian Voyage of the Frigate Pallada* (Cambridge, Mass., 2018), 213–61. I thank the Harvard University Press for its permission to reproduce fragments of this book in this article.

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called a “dangerous trope.”² To study race is to study the institutional, social, and cultural impacts of a pervasive fiction, in whose shadow we still live.

Glancing at the “forest” of race as a phenomenon of western societies, while conducting inventories of the “trees” in our own Slavic backyard, always seemingly more complex, risks an ineluctable slide to Russian exceptionalism (imperialism is another casualty of such bifocalism). This should be resisted. First, “there was no clear-cut nineteenth-century idea of race”—not in western Europe, not anywhere.³ Race was a landscape of clashing theories, classifications, and controversies. Both fixity and malleability were central to how race was understood and mobilized for the distribution of social entitlements and economic privileges.⁴ Sometimes, racialism and racism operated without a stable terminology of race. At other times, the discourse of race blurred or coopted ethnic, linguistic, and national distinctions. Jews, Celts, the Irish, the Chinese, Hottentots, Anglo-Saxons, Slavs, Europeans, and Teutons have all at some points been called “races.”⁵ The heterogeneity and “messiness” of racial discourse does not excuse reluctance to engage it; such reasons never stopped us from engaging the discourse of the nation, just as heterogeneous.

Both popular and scientific ideas about race arrived in Russia bundled with Europe’s other intellectual products. Historians have debunked the notion that race was a marginal concern in imperial Russia: “Not only were practices of race more prevalent in Russia and the Soviet Union than previously thought, so too were explicit vocabularies of race.”⁶ Modern conceptions of race reached Russia in the 1830s and were soon adopted by intellectuals of all political stripes. By the 1860s the word “*rasa*” (race) appeared in dictionaries (it was interchangeably used with *poroda* and *plemia*).⁷ Russian physical anthropologists studying the empire’s diverse populations felt uniquely positioned to contribute to pan-European race research, not least because

2. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Introduction: Writing ‘Race’ and the Difference It Makes,” in Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Kwame Anthony Appiah, eds., *Race, Writing, and Difference* (Chicago, 1986), 5. Following Gates’s warning against essentializing race through critical practice, I imply distancing quotation marks around “race” throughout my article.

3. Michael Banton, *The Idea of Race* (London, 1977), 5.

4. Ann Laura Stoler, “Racial Histories and Their Regimes of Truth,” *Political Power and Social Theory* 11 (January 1997): 198. For an overview of intellectual debates, see Michael Banton, *Racial Theories*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Eng., 1998).

5. Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain, 1800–1960* (Hamden, 1982), xvii.

6. David Rainbow, “Introduction,” in David Rainbow, ed., *Ideologies of Race: Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union in Global Contexts* (Montreal, 2019), 10.

7. Vera Tolz, “Diskursy o rase: Imperskaia Rossiia i Zapad v sravnenii,” in A. Miller, D. Sdvizhkov, and I. Shirle, eds., “*Poniatiiia o Rossii: K istoricheskoi semantike imperskogo perioda*,” vol. 2 (Moscow, 2012), 161–62; (see also, in the same volume, Karl Hall, “Rasovye priznaki koreniatsia glubzhe v prirode chelovecheskogo organizma: Neulovimoe poniatie rasy v Rossiiskoi imperii,” 194–258). “Tribe” was also used interchangeably with “race” in western racial thought (Banton, *Racial Theories*, 39). For an anthology of tsarist-era writings on race, if lack of scholarly apparatus and the editor’s championing of racialism can be overlooked, see V.B. Avdeev, *Russkaia rasovaia teoriia do 1917 goda: Sbornik original’nykh rabot russkikh klassikov*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 2001).

the cradle of the Caucasian race was a region of the Russian empire.⁸ In the Russian context, race, ethnicity, and nationality (*narodnost'*) formed “a single conceptual field,” which Vera Tolz has traced from Petr Chaadaev to Nikolai Nadezhdin and beyond. Theories of culture, including language, were biologized; the concept of race, conversely, relied heavily on culture. Although the tsarist regime never adopted race as a category of official institutional practice and was “less tainted” by moral culpability than its western peers, it promoted racial consciousness and racist attitudes. Yet while questioning Russia’s purported exceptionalism, historians have also identified characteristic inflections of Russian racial thought, which tended toward the liberal end of the European spectrum. These include a predominant belief in monogenesis, in the environmental conditioning of races and their malleability, lesser purchase of racial hierarchies or crude social Darwinism, as well as a more permissive attitude toward miscegenation, which, however, waned post-1870s.⁹

The implications of historians’ work for literary scholars are enormous, especially regarding the fluid boundaries between race and nationalism, by no means unique to Russia. For if we need to rethink *narodnost'*, permeating so much of nineteenth-century Russian culture, having overlooked its racial entanglements, the enormity of this task cannot be overstated. Similarly, we may need to refocus our postcolonial lens to more fully account for the role of race in the representations of imperial Others.

Yet the goal of this article is not to sketch research agendas; the existing analytical work on this topic has not yet reached a critical threshold to afford this reflection. My goal is to facilitate such analytical work. A fuller account of my own practice appears in Ch. 5 of my book, *A World of Empires: The Russian Voyage of the Frigate Pallada*, on which I will draw to illustrate my points.¹⁰ This book takes Ivan Goncharov’s imperial bestseller—the travelogue *The Frigate Pallada* (1858), describing a voyage around Africa and Asia—as a lens on the global operations of imperialism.¹¹ In the current article, I wish to promote the reading strategies that get at deeper operations and wider enmeshments of race. Mere red-flagging of racial bigotry will not do. We need to explore the affective mechanisms and textual structures of racial logics, their cultural, social, and political wellsprings and estuaries. What can

8. Marina Mogilner, *Homo Imperii: A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia* (Lincoln, Nebr., 2013), 5–6.

9. Vera Tolz, “Constructing Race, Ethnicity, and Nationhood in Imperial Russia: Issues and Misconceptions,” in David Rainbow, ed., *Ideologies of Race*, 29–58; Nikolay Zakharov, *Race and Racism in Russia* (Houndmills, 2015), 29 (the source of the “less tainted” quotation); Eugene M. Avrutin, “Racial Categories and the Politics of (Jewish) Difference in Late Imperial Russia,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 8, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 16; Mogilner, *Homo Imperii*, 7. On the permeability of ethnicity, nationality, and race, see also Eric D. Weitz, “Racial Politics without the Concept of Race: Reevaluating Soviet Ethnic and National Purges,” *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 6–8. On attitudes toward miscegenation, see Tolz, “Constructing Race,” 38–41 and Willard Sunderland, “Russians into Yakuts?: ‘Going Native’ and Problems of Russian National Identity in the Siberian North, 1870s–1914,” *Slavic Review* 55, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 806–25.

10. Bojanowska, *A World of Empires*, 213–61.

11. Ivan Goncharov, *Fregat “Pallada”: Ocherki puteshestviia v dvukh tomakh* (St. Petersburg, 1858).

literature tell us about the operations of racialized understandings of human difference? I am suggesting, in short, that we read racial ideas and images for their deep structure rather than surface, heeding Henry Louis Gates's call "to deconstruct...the idea of difference inscribed in the trope of race, to explicate discourse itself in order to reveal the hidden relations of power and knowledge inherent in popular and academic usages of 'race.'"¹²

Racialization instead of Race

In connecting discourse and power, the concept of racialization is a more supple tool than the essentializing category of race. As an interactive and dynamic process involved with "making, doing, and becoming," racialization connects discourses of race with social relations and political practices, revealing how racialism becomes socially consensual.¹³ Yet the concept of racialization is also useful in analyzing the discourse itself. For a literary critic, it provides an opportunity to discuss authors and characters as "making" and "doing" race, operations of special vividness in the thickened social and political contexts of realist texts. These texts rarely feature stable and clear-cut categories of races but often do plenty of racializing.¹⁴ By shifting from category to process, we also become attuned to the creeping racialization of ethnic groups and nations.

Let us take the example of Ivan Goncharov's ambivalent portrayal of Asians in *The Frigate Pallada*. Initially, he claims that the bodies of the Chinese are "almost the same" as Russian bodies. Yet he subsequently stresses difference when evoking the images of the repulsive "dark yellow" Chinese bodies and "physiognomies," prematurely aged and "lacking the expression of energy and manliness."¹⁵ Moreover, such racializing comments are layered on fairly elaborate ethnographic depictions of various Asians, who are possessed of culture, beliefs, customs, and manners—the things Goncharov's racialized Africans largely lack. So were Asians for Goncharov a race or an ethnicity? Such a question betrays an expectation of a rigid mental template of races and of categorical purity rarely encountered in cultural evidence. Analyzing racialization and its functions is more productive. In this case, these functions

12. Gates, "Introduction," 6.

13. Zakharov, *Race and Racism*, 3, 33, 65–70; Avrutin, "Racial Categories." Avrutin defines racialization as "ways in which social attitudes and administrative practices constructed, validated, and justified a hierarchy of human difference" (16). On race as a discursive practice that sometimes indexes without naming (by the Jakobsonian mechanism of a nonreferential linguistic function), see Alaina Lemon, "Without a 'Concept'? Race as Discursive Practice," *Slavic Review* 61, no 1 (Spring 2002): 54–61.

14. Toni Morrison analyzes subtle operations of whiteness in American literature in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992).

15. Ivan A. Goncharov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v dvadtsati tomakh*, vol. 2 (St. Petersburg, 1997; hereafter *PSS*), 257, 261–62. Soviet criticism praised *The Frigate Pallada* for its profound humanism and sympathetic portrayals of all ethnicities. Even the nadir of Goncharov's racism—his struggle to detect human kinship with one prisoner in an African jail, an example I will spare the *Slavic Review* readers—failed to temper these rosy assessments. While Goncharov's attitudes to human difference fluctuate widely, this generalization is untenable and ethically irresponsible.

included shoring up projections of (white, Russian) racial superiority, promoting European imperialism, and dealing with the psychological burdens of processing what appeared to Goncharov as a dizzying spectrum of human difference. Racialization additionally allows us to speak of degree. Instead of a litmus test, we embrace the metaphor of a dial: something that can be cranked up or dialed down, as the need arises.

Race as Ideology

Race is not only, and not always, a question of perception or meaning-making, but also ideology. Racialized representations are modulated by concerns of class conflict, nationalism, imperialism, or geopolitics, so it is essential to probe their specific political investments. As a classificatory system, race was about evaluation, ranking, hierarchy, and therefore power. As a discursive practice, or a language for describing difference, it was instrumentalized in pursuit of political and social goals, or implicitly informed them. This leads David Rainbow to emphasize race as ideology.¹⁶

Ideology need not imply doctrinal coherence. As analysts of colonial discourse established, ideology can work not only by reducing and containing meaning but also by proliferating it, a semantic capital that increases ideology's political utility.¹⁷ This is especially pertinent in the case of the Russian empire, which resisted systematizing its multilayered diversity because to do so would hamstring the sinews of power and control.

Such ideological dimensions are on full display in Goncharov's travelogue. Let us return to the vagaries of the writer's racialization of Asians. While liberally racializing the Chinese and the Japanese, Goncharov checks this impulse when describing the Asians of the north: indigenous Siberians. Yet he displays no such compunction in his letters. These disparate examples clarify the difficulty of making arguments about Goncharov's perceptions. Which are the real ones? After all, private letters can also be communications with concealed agendas rather than outpourings of sincerity.

Nonetheless, the existence of letters that jar with the book at the very least shows a reluctance to racialize Russia's Siberian subjects for a public audience. The historical context strongly suggests these reasons were ideological. At stake was the question of Siberia's status within the imperial polity, lingering late into the nineteenth century: was it, or could it become, an integral part of Russia? As I argue in my book, while Russian imperialism, like any other, devoted considerable energies to marking difference, it also featured powerful currents of enforcing confluence, whereby the entire multi-ethnic population of the Russian empire was in the process—fitful, but inevitable—of becoming Russianized (the term was *obrusenie*). This assimilating

16. Rainbow, "Introduction," 9–10.

17. Mary Louise Pratt, "Scratches on the Face of the Country; or, What Mr. Barrow Saw in the Land of the Bushmen," in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, 160; see also David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham, NC, 1993), 11.

impetus discouraged the “othering” or vilifying of minorities, since all were, in a sense, Russians in the making.

That is what Goncharov does in his book. Yet he abandons such discretion in the private letter, describing a Russian girl in Yakutsk in the following way: she is “very white,” her cheekbones, thankfully, “do not resemble shafts (*oglobli*), and her hair is not replaced by bear fur—in a word, she’s a Russian.” In a clear link between nationality and race, the girl’s Russianness emerges as a somatic difference from indigenous Siberians, whose ursine appearance indexes their low placement on the racial ladder of being. *Her* (Russian) whiteness is in a symbiotic relationship with *their* racial otherness, each constituting the other. When recycling this passage in his book, Goncharov expunges the racialization, presenting this Yakutsk settler as simply “a very pretty girl, completely Russian.”¹⁸

Intersections with Class, Sexuality, and Gender

Race interacts not only with other forms of groupness, such as ethnicity and nation, but also with such socially constructed identities as class and gender. Some environmental theories of race held that harsh living conditions, unremitting labor, and poor protection from nature were the cause of primitive societies’ darkened complexion. To a lesser degree, this phenomenon was thought to be observable also among the laboring classes of industrialized Europe. Class, in other words, produced race.¹⁹ In nineteenth-century British writing, race and class are often “covertly interchangeable or at least analogous” according to Patrick Brantlinger, who calls race “a surrogate class system.” Conquered races, judged to be capable of manual labor only, were designated as a new proletariat, whose task it was to build white civilizations worldwide.²⁰ *The Frigate Pallada*, for example, reduces black Africans to bodies with labor value.

Goncharov vividly captures the dynamic interplay between class and race when describing his entrance to a Cape Town hotel. He charts his progress from the street to the hotel’s domestic core as an ascending gradient of whiteness among those he encounters:

At the entryway, on the lowest step, we were met by a completely black servant, followed by a Malay servant, not completely black, but not white either, his head covered by a red scarf. In the vestibule, we encountered an English servant woman, somewhat whiter, and beyond that, on the stairs, a beautiful girl of about twenty, decidedly white. And finally, an old woman, the hotel proprietress, *nec plus ultra* white—that is, gray-haired.²¹

18. B.M. Engel’gardt, “Putevye pis’ma I.A. Goncharova iz krugosvetnogo plavaniia,” *Literaturnoe nasledstvo*, vol. 22–24 (1935): 423; *PSS*, 2:659.

19. Craig S. Wilder, *Ebony & Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities* (New York, 2013), 188.

20. Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914* (Ithaca, 1988), 184. On the synergies of capitalism and racism, see also Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (New York, 2008).

21. *PSS*, 2:135.

This miniature quest to the hotel's whitest inner sanctum superimposes racial hierarchies on social ones. The spectrum of class becomes the spectrum of color, whereby the English and Malay servants differ less by the type of color than its degree. A dilution of whiteness at lower social rungs explains the color difference between the English servant and the young English girl, who is the proprietress's daughter. Spatial arrangement reinforces the racial/class hierarchy in this vignette. The black servant is out on the street, "on the lowest step"; the white owner's daughter is inside, at the elevation of the stairs. To enter the interior means to approach the heart of whiteness. Playing with his own metaphor, Goncharov color-codes the old proprietress through her hair rather than skin, defining gray as the highest form of whiteness. She is the whitest person around in the combined senses of race, class, property, and age. The passage is a perfect icon of a reigning nineteenth-century racial hierarchy and its class and economic correlatives. It also reminds us that race is not only a discursive tool for constituting Europe's "others" but also its white selves.

This passage also brings us to the interpenetration of race, sexuality, and gender. Since sexuality was the mechanism for preserving or eroding racial difference, women, according to Ania Loomba, "demarcate both the innermost sanctum of race, culture, and nation as well as the porous frontiers through which these are penetrated." Whiteness construed itself as the domain of heteronormative patriarchy and bourgeois domesticity. White male avengers took it upon themselves, in Gayatri Spivak's pithy phrase, to "save brown women from brown men," seen as sexually violent and barbaric. Alternatively, such men were portrayed as effeminate, sexually promiscuous, or deviant.²²

The very idea of race was gendered. Race scientists drew analogies between deficient and low-weight female brains and those of lower races. As Nancy Stepan puts it, "lower races represented the 'female' type of human species, and females the 'lower race' of gender."²³ Asians are such a feminized lower race in *The Frigate Pallada*, lacking manly vigor and energy. The puny silk-robed bodies of the Japanese men appear gender-ambiguous to the Russians, who—true to an Orientalist stereotype—suspect them of homosexual leanings. Such gendering sent an ideological message, to return to my earlier point, by portraying the Japanese as easy military targets and potentially compliant subjects.

Deconstructing Race

A critique of race should attend to the anxieties and insecurities lurking underneath racial hierarchies and biases, their projections of confidence

22. Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 3rd ed. (New York, 2015), 155, 160. On the close relation between race, sexuality, and gender, see also Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (New York, 1995); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York, 1995); and Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis, 2003).

23. Stepan is cited in Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 161.

notwithstanding.²⁴ Literary texts sometimes fracture under the weight of their racial discourses' intellectual certitudes, pretense of disinterestedness, and moral blindness. Readings against the grain help bring those to light, exposing the flimsy basis on which racialism stands. This returns to Gates's idea that the task of writing about race lies in deconstructing its trope and revealing the power relations concealed therein.

Such a moment appears in *The Frigate Pallada*. On one of his ethnographic sorties to the countryside surrounding Cape Town, Goncharov meets three African women whom he asks to identify their "tribe." One of them replies:

"Fingo!" she said. "Mozambique," she then shouted. "Hottentot!" All three women began to loudly guffaw. It wasn't the first time I have heard this brazen guffaw (*khokhot*) of black women [...] If you ask a black beauty any question, such as her name or directions, she will lie, and her answer will be followed by her and her friends' laughter. "Bechuan! Kaffir!"—the wench (*baba*) kept on shouting at us. Quite a wench, indeed. Dressed exactly like our wenches: a kerchief on her head, something resembling a skirt around her waist, like in a *sarafan* [sleeveless Russian peasant tunic], and a shirt on top, sometimes with a scarf on her neck, sometimes without. Some women from the brown tribes are astoundingly similar to our suntanned village old women. The black ones, however, bear no similarity to anything (*ni na chto ne pokhozhi*): all have thick lips, protruding jaws and chins, eyes black as tar, their whites yellowed, and a row of very white teeth. There is something terrible and evil about a smile on a black face.²⁵

The flow of this passage is instructive. The black woman refuses to gratify the white man's obsession for tabulating Africans, likely a tedious ritual of her daily life in the British colony. Rather than make herself more transparent, she puts up a smokescreen. The shouting makes defiance palpable. She foils Goncharov's classificatory zeal and makes him into the butt of a joke, thus reversing the expected power dynamic. The white man's befuddlement becomes a merry spectacle for her African female companions.

Momentarily thrown off-kilter by such audacity, and possibly feeling unmanned by the black woman's derision, her Russian analyst initially dissolves the barrier of race by asserting the uncanny similarity of lighter-skinned African women to their sunburnt Russian equivalents. Yet rather than ennobling, perhaps this comparison already pivots toward putting the woman in her place. The well-practiced class superiority of the Europeanized elite over Russian peasants, and in this case layered onto a gender hierarchy, propels the assertion of racial superiority over the African woman. Class prejudice, in other words, trains one for racial prejudice. This prejudice materializes in Goncharov's comment about the radical racial inferiority of darker-skinned blacks whom he depicts through a grotesque racial template.

For the proper unfolding of the colonial script, the natives must be put in their place. The real-life African is ungovernable. While allowing her assertion

24. In this, racial discourse operates similarly to colonial discourse, its close twin; see Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York, 1994), esp. Ch. 4 ("Of Mimicry and Man"), 121–31.

25. PSS, 2:130.

of agency to slip in, Goncharov must nonetheless suppress it to recover a sense of his own superiority. So he makes her discursively governable by deploying scurrilous racial rhetoric and transforming her weapon—her laugh—into the “terrible and evil” smile of all black people. To merely record the conversation without such commentary would imperil the writer’s image as a European white man in control of the situation. Racial debasement helps him reassert his privileged status. And the narrative is his tool for remedying the perceived disrespect he suffered in the actual interaction.

For Goncharov, the story is a lesson on Africans’ irrationality and rudeness. Yet despite the shackles of Goncharov’s colonial gaze and authority, the woman’s alternative, accidental story—of noncompliance, evasion, and disrespect—blooms between his lines. Reading this passage against the grain allows us to recover the woman’s agency, expose the psychological mechanism of racialization, and render some reparative justice to its subjects—however “tiny” this gesture may feel.²⁶ It is the least we as humanists can do.

Race in the Classroom

Yet it is not all that we could do. Further scholarly work on race in our field depends in large measure on changing our graduate and undergraduate education. At the graduate level, the inclusion of race in the Slavic PhDs’ critical toolbox will spur new research. It will also equip them to teach, say, Zora Neale Hurston alongside Tolstoevskii, a likely task, given the job market’s increasing demand for generalist nimbleness, at least in North America. While familiarity with western critical race studies is important in this pedagogic reorientation, we will be most effective when race-ing Slavic studies from within: by encouraging young scholars to reconstruct multiple local contexts and traditions that informed the semantics and deployment of race in specific situations.

Most importantly, we need to ensure that “Russian culture,” as a subject in a twenty-first century university, is appropriately updated in view of our own evolving understanding of it and the general trends in the humanities. Such updating would respond to our students’ evident and legitimate interests and concerns, likely increased by the traumatic events of the past year.²⁷ There is no reason why students curious to investigate the concept of race should not be able to do so in Slavic departments. Prior to becoming socialized in the Slavic field’s old assumptions and interpretive habits, our students are often alert to the racialization of Russian literature’s Jews or Roma or “Tatars” (a frequent catch-all for Asian imperial subjects). This is a classroom conversation we must be ready to enter.

26. Gates, “Introduction,” 6.

27. At my home institution (Yale University), Ethnicity, Race, and Migration is among three most popular humanities majors, surpassing all foreign language and literature majors combined.