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Jim Crow in the Soviet Union

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The reader of Langston Hughes’s writings on the Soviet experiment is bound to be confused. In the 1930s, during the peak of Stalinist repression, Hughes produced volumes praising the Soviet Union, particularly the Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan where, as he writes in the second volume of his autobiography, I Wonder as I Wander (1956), “the majority of the [Soviet Union’s] colored citizens lived” (123). When Hughes penned these words, his sporadic involvement with the Communist party and the Soviet project belonged to a former era. Two decades earlier, Hughes had published A Negro Looks at Central Asia (1934) soon after his first visit to Uzbekistan. In this incendiary work—notable for its contrast with Hughes’s later writings—Hughes compared the American South where “the colour line is hard and fast, Jim Crow rules, and I am treated like a dog” to Soviet Uzbekistan where “Russian and native, Jew and gentile, white and brown, live and work together” (Hughes, A Negro Looks 5–7). The entire narrative of these sketches, originally published in the prominent Moscow newspaper Izvestiia, is structured by such contrasts (Chioni Moore 1118). Images of Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama, where cotton has lost its value in the post-Depression economy and the factories are closed, are juxtaposed to an exotic Soviet paradise where “textile mills now run full blast” (12). Hughes’s scathing critique of the politics of share-cropping and indentured servitude in the American South is followed by a programmatically positive and, some might argue, willfully blind account of Soviet Central Asia where “everybody lives better than they did before” (26). At the time of Hughes’s writing entire classes of people, the kulaks (or landholding peasants), were being dispossessed of their homes and livelihood. “Here, in the Soviet Union,” Hughes enthusiastically exclaimed, “all the ugly barriers of race have been broken down” (18–19). Hughes predicted that Russian and Turkmen boys growing up in 1930s Central Asia “will never know the distorted lives full of distrust and hate and fear that we know in America” (19).1

The 1930s Soviet Union, particularly in Central Asia, the territory Hughes knew best, appeared to Hughes as the fulfillment of an otherwise unrealized and unrealizable American dream. A panorama of Uzbek students learning to read the Latin alphabet which the “mullahs who formerly controlled education deemed unholy” (25) is counterpoised to an American Bible Belt where “hundreds of Negros are lynched . . . and farces of justice like the Scottsboro trial are staged” (27). Hughes did not note—in part because he did not know, but also in part because he chose not to see—that the replacement of the Arabic
script by Latin and later Cyrillic was part of a systematic campaign to suppress Central Asians’ rich Islamic heritage. In certain respects, this coercive Soviet “enlightenment” was simply a twentieth-century extension of Tsarist Russia’s colonial policies.2

In Langston Hjuz She’rlari, an Uzbek collection of his poems published in Tashkent in 1934, Hughes memorably eulogized the month that changed world history:

Then October
Came to clean
The world’s shoes,
To purify
The mercenary minds.
Look: here
Is a country
Where everyone shines,
Stomachs full
From their arms’ toil.
Under the Soviet sun.3

If the Bolshevik revolution in October 1917 “cleaned the world’s shoes” in Hughes’s estimation, the significance of this month was not so overwhelmingly positive for the millions of Soviet citizens who were killed, tortured, exiled to GULAGs, systematically dispossessed of their lands, and deported. Hughes’s “October” resonates with the oeuvre of Vladimir Mayakovsky, a revolutionary poet whom Hughes cites as a source of inspiration (A Negro Looks 27). As every aficionado of Russian literature knows, Mayakovsky, the most eloquent herald of the revolution in its earliest phase, was ultimately one of its many victims: persuaded that the Soviet experiment had culminated in failure, Mayakovksy killed himself on April 14, 1930. Eight years later, Sanjar Siddiq, the poet who translated Hughes’s poems into Uzbek, was executed in a Stalinist purge.

The optimism of Hughes’s essay on Soviet Central Asia resonates with a near-contemporary Marxist pamphlet originally composed in Yiddish by S. Almazov but most widely disseminated in English translation as Ten Years of Biro-Bidjan, 1928–1938. Biro-Bidjan was created in 1927 as a secular Jewish homeland to protect Soviet Jews from the pogroms that haunted the Tsarist period as well as to facilitate the Soviet project of categorizing peoples according to their ethnicities. Criticizing the “capitalist-imperialist lands” that assimilate all ethnic minorities and “erase the individual character of each minority group, destroy all vestiges of a native culture, and institute a melting pot, whereby to establish uniformity” (7), Almazov argues that the Soviet Union has developed superior strategies for dealing with difference. He illustrates his point with examples that underscore the fortuitous convergence of technology and social development in the first modern Jewish state.

Almazov makes his case for the success of Soviet policies by citing from a speech delivered by Bolshevik leader Mikhail Kalinin in 1926 to a group of Jewish farmers. “The Soviet Union is not a country consisting of a large and specifically dominant nationality,”
Kalinin affirmed. Nor is it “a confederacy carrying with it the contents of the Russia of old.” Drawing on the double reference of soviet to the name of a specific new political formation as well as to a confederacy of equals, Kalinin declared that this newly formed country was “simply a union of all nationalities which have entered the soviet” and that it was imperative to “find a place for every nationality” in this experiment in collective organization. On October 25 1938, the year Almazov published his homage to Soviet Biro-Bidjan, Kalinin’s wife was arrested, tortured, and banished to a labor camp deep within the Central Asia he had extolled as a land of freedom and progress (Vasil’eva 122). As with Hughes’s writings, the contrast between the text and the world is jarring: Kalinin never tried to save his wife. Instead he maintained his silence as Stalin and Beria executed the Soviet Union’s most gifted and courageous intellectuals.

Langston Hughes’s silence is qualitatively different from Kalinin’s and Almazov’s duplicity, for Hughes had little direct knowledge of Soviet realities. And yet, the pronouncements of this triumvirate of pro-Soviet ideologues merit closer inspection. In retrospect, we inevitably wonder how much prior generations knew concerning the atrocities that seem to have passed before their eyes, and ask whether greater knowledge would have altered their silence. In some respects, Hughes lived in blissful ignorance of the atrocities that transpired in the country he so ardently eulogized. In other respects, his silence was strategic, and was not solely the product of ignorance. Knowledge of Soviet atrocities would not have blended well into the narrative Hughes wished to compose. Nor would it have helped Hughes fight racial segregation in the United States of America. Understandably, this latter task was his primary goal. At times, it caused him to view the Soviet experiment through a tinted lens.

Hughes’s silence is thus the result of the politics intrinsic to any act of storytelling. It is an inevitable product of a narrative encounter with another civilization. Illustrating that the stories we tell about our others are almost constructed by default to serve our selves, Hughes told himself and his readers a story that served the needs of 1930s and 1950s America. Now perhaps it is time to tell America, including African America, a different story, one cognizant of a post-Soviet and postcolonial polity, one that envisions the political priorities of these vastly distinctive realms as part of a common global endeavor. The troubling silences of Hughes and of so many other progressive intellectuals who chronicled the Soviet Union from within and without during the years of purges and forced deportations teach us what tools must be deployed to make sense of the peculiar doubletalk of the USSR’s Jim Crow.

Soon after graduating college and moving to New York City, I walked into a building in West Harlem where I hoped to rent a room. I noticed a box covered with Cyrillic letters: an oversized box of books, packaged for shipment to Irkutsk on Siberia’s easternmost edge, not far from Japan. I conversed with the owner, who introduced herself as Ludmila, a Slavic name that contrasted with her wide Asian eyes and amber skin. I complimented Ludmila’s elegant blouse. She told me she had recently purchased it from a boutique shop.
in Soho. Although Ludmila seemed more assimilated to American culture than I was, after a few minutes of small talk, during which she learned that I was pursuing graduate studies in Russian literature, we switched at her prompting to Russian.

“Have you been to Russia?” she asked me in that foreign tongue.

Having just returned from a sojourn in St. Petersburg during the magnificent White Nights, I launched into a recollection of the beauties of the Neva River, of the long boulevard Nevsky Prospekt, and of the Hermitage’s magnificent pastel façade. As yet ignorant of the full range of nuances attaching to the term, I asked Ludmila if she was Russian (russkii). She smiled and nodded vigorously. I decided to move in.

As it turned out, Ludmila was not Russian at all, even by her own accounting. Her affirmative answer to my question had been a polite means of accommodating my ignorance. Ludmila belonged to the Turkic-Altaic group called, in Soviet nomenclature, Khakas. The ethonym Khakas has been widely contested, especially after the debate that burst onto the pages of the journal Sovetskaiia etnografiia (Soviet Ethnography) in 1992.

One participant in that debate, the eminent ethnographer Victor Iakovlevich Butanaev, maintained “only a person who does not know the Khakas language could assert that the indigenous inhabitants of the Khakasian SSR [Soviet Socialist Republic] use the ethonym Khakas to designate themselves in their everyday life” (“The Question of the Khakas Ethnoym” 70–71). In a sharply argued polemic, Butanaev noted that in the Khakas language the term khakas refers not to the people to whom the Soviet state assigned the name and who call themselves Tadar (from the Turkic self-ethonym, rendered in Russian as Tatar), but rather to the Kyrgyz, who were referred to as Khiagasy in the chronicles of the Chinese T’ang Dynasty (618–907 CE). On Butanaev’s accounting, the authentic name for the people now referred to as Khakas is in fact the entirely unrelated ethonym Khoorai (alternately spelled Khongorai). An interesting attestation of both the intermingling and the distinctiveness of Kyrgyz and Khakas respectively is the fact that medieval burial sites are today referred to in the Abakan region as Kyrghys sookter—Kyrgyz graves (Butanaev, “Ob etnogeneticheskikh sviaziakh” 179).

Butanaev’s illuminations of the constructed nature of modern ethnic identities powerfully correlates with other post-Soviet regions, such as the northwest Caucasus, where the indigenous people who collectively refer to themselves as Adyga are called Circassians in English, after the Russian cherkasskii. This terminology derives from the fact that, as Charles King suggests, “early Russian informants probably gathered their nomenclature from neighboring peoples who used a variant of that term” (134). Through processes that strikingly parallel what Benedict Anderson has called the “systematic quantification” method introduced in the 1870s by census-takers across the Indonesian Archipelago, and which resulted in “the fiction of the census . . . that everyone is in it, and that everyone has one—and only one—extremely clear place” (170), the non-Russian inhabitants of the Russian empire’s outer-lying regions came to be defined, and not only linguistically, by the nomenclatures of their neighbors. These recently fabricated nomenclatures will likely persist far into the future.

This confusion of names speaks volumes for the distributions of power that determine who has the right to speak and in what contexts in Russia’s Siberian territories. Ethnographer Kira Van Deusen has detailed the many ways in which most contemporary Khakasians are products of Soviet modernity. Most live in “concrete city apartment blocks” far from
their native villages; they are “doctors, lawyers, carpenters, cooks, and herdsmen—but many are unemployed” (164). “Like everyone in Russia today,” Van Deusen notes, “they are concerned about whether they will receive their tiny salaries and pensions at all and about how to help their children get through school and live in a changed world” (164). Practical exigencies do not leave much time for worrying about the future of Khakas culture. The younger Khakas generation partially understands but cannot speak the language they nonetheless call their native tongue, thus suggesting that this language will be a museum artifact by the close of this century. This state of affairs produces a situation comparable in terms of spiritual alienation if not physical brutality to the horrors that Langston Hughes and Richard Wright witnessed while growing up in the Deep South.

Nearly a decade passed before I realized just how strange my opening gambit—Are you Russian?—must have seemed to Ludmila. The Kuzhakov’s hometown was Abakan, in Central Siberia. The city’s name, which in Khakas means “bear’s blood,” is crisscrossed by the Abakan River that flows into the Yenisei on its way to the Arctic Ocean. Abakan is officially Russian territory, but that does not mean that its inhabitants are Russian. The difference between Russian citizenship and Russian ethnicity sounds esoteric to an American ear, which, forgetting its country’s history, is weakly attuned to essentializing alliances between ethnicity and the state. In the United States, anyone who has citizenship or is naturalized is automatically “American.” In the former Soviet Union, including the Russian federation, the difference between being a citizen (rossiiskii) and a member of an ethnic community (russkii) is as crucial as one’s name, one’s livelihood, and one’s identity. It makes all the difference when it comes to getting promoted, entering the university, and even to such mundane things as making friends and falling in love. Russkiis marry russkiis, while rossiiskiis must become russkii if they wish to ascend the ladder of social success.

Vladimir, the son of my New York landlady, taught me a great deal about his native country. He is the subject of, and motivation behind, this essay. I have spent many years immersed in the culture, language, and literature of the country where Vladimir was born and where Langston Hughes traveled in search of a refuge from Jim Crow. Yet certain aspects of this country’s history continually elude me. Unlike me, Vladimir could never bring himself to say that he despised Russians, although he certainly had no desire to return to the country that was at once his homeland and an alien territory. Years after our parting, soon after the birth of his first son and his marriage to another American woman, Vladimir told me that he would be the last Khakas in his lineage.

Russian was the language of our mutual love, the language of our shared secrets, and the language of his most painful memories. Does this mean that Russian was Vladimir’s native tongue? That depends on how “native” is defined. This definition in turn depends on who has the power to define. I was about to write that Russian was Vladimir’s native language, when I remembered a day we spent together searching for an apartment in New Jersey. Vladimir was quiet as usual while I negotiated with the aggressive real estate broker, who clearly was not new to the business of selling homes to impoverished homebuyers. Vladimir had only one question, which he reserved for the end of our meeting with the real estate agent. He asked in fluent English how far the Newark apartment was from the train station. Without so much as glancing in his direction—although he was standing right in front of her—the real estate broker asked me where “he” was from and what language “he” spoke.
“Americans,” I imagined myself responding, “are vulgar and stupid when it comes to relating with foreigners.” Instead I opted for politeness. I explained that “he” was from Russia and that “his” native language was Russian. In America, I added silently, the foreigner exists only in the third person.

“No,” Vladimir interrupted my conversation with the real estate agent, “my native language is not Russian. I am Khakas.”

Surprised as I was by his reaction, my first instinct was to disagree. I tacitly assumed that my linguistic norms defined the terms by which anyone, Vladimir included, must be measured. In English, “native” refers to the language you speak best. It is a matter of destiny rather than choice. A Chinese person who does not speak Chinese cannot claim Chinese as a native language. A Punjabi who speaks Hindi better than Punjabi is by definition a native speaker of Hindi, ethnic nuances aside. The native language of a member of the Choctaw Indian nation is English, if that is the language spoken best.

Such logic possessed hypothetical cogency to my untutored ear, but it did little to elucidate the ambiguities of Vladimir’s identity. When I recall how vigorously Vladimir—who never spoke of being Khakas, who had dedicated his adult life to cultivating a self his Soviet education had denied him—protested my claims, the shallowness of my reaction stuns me as much as does my inability at the time to grasp the obvious. I can only claim to have been blinded by the same malaise that marred Langston Hughes’s vision during his fortuitous journey across the new Soviet Union. Whatever important work Central Asia did for Hughes rhetorically as a foil to America’s Jim Crow, this strategic contrast had the negative effect of preempting the poet’s ability to perceive racial discrimination in non-American contexts. A native language, Vladimir taught me, is not the language one speaks best. It the language in which one is most at home, in which one can be most fully oneself. Vladimir could not be at home in the language that had colonized him.

II.

I didn’t learn what I know about Soviet racism from the words Vladimir spoke to me. I learned more from observing his averted gaze whenever we broached the subject of Moscow subways. In sibilant Russian, Vladimir recalled how he was mocked for the brownness of his skin, for not being white, for his Mongoloid eyes. He was told he was dirt, denied the right to be in public places, and stared at suspiciously on the buses, subways, marshrutkas (minivans), and tramvais (trolleys) that crisscross Moscow’s urban topography. In one breath, Vladimir would speak of discrimination, and then of how he did everything in his power to leave the country, and how he would never return, even though he was an illegal alien in America and could be deported any day. I would rather die in Guantanamo, Vladimir said, than go back to Russia. America is my home. For all his opposition to the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and for all his hatred of war in general, certain fates appeared to Vladimir even worse than torture by American officials.

I learned the most from Vladimir’s silences. I had difficulty understanding why Vladimir was not angry with his persecutors. Had there been hate, coming to terms with his grief would have been easier, for me if not for him. The worst part for me was that Vladimir
had reconciled himself to the degradation; he accepted it like any other kind of destiny. Racism, he knew, wasn’t right, but he felt that there was nothing he could do to change it. And so instead of getting angry, Vladimir internalized the hate. He became the hated other whom the Russians feared and despised.

“They wouldn’t sit next to me on the bus,” he said once, repulsed by his childhood memories.

“They looked at me sideways, from the corners of their eyes, and called me yellow.”

“They told me to go back to China.”

Vladimir told me all of this as though it were normal to be hated for the color of one’s skin. Adding another layer to his palimpsest of imaginative identification, when he arrived in America, Vladimir told everyone he was Chinese. In a certain Soviet sense he was right—if one rejects the reading of the majority of scholars who maintain that the Khakas who are discussed by the T’ang Dynasty chronicles were in actual fact Kyrgyz. You can’t be Chinese, I maintained, seeking to clarify an impossibly confused category. You are Siberian. You are Turkic. You have your own unique ethnic identity. You don’t even look Chinese. You are too tall.

“I am shorter than Yao-Ming,” Vladimir said, referring to the Chinese athlete who had been recruited by the National Basketball Association. Vladimir and his Chinese friends never tired of watching Yao-Ming score. He smiled with pride every time he observed a fellow Asian dunk his way to success in his adopted country.

On Vladimir’s prompting, we took to calling each other Vladimir-san and Rebecca-san, adding the Japanese honorific used by his Chinese friends to denote respect. These suffixes blended into a new Russian-English idiom with the Spanish Harlem-inflected Ebonics that came drifting through the door of our apartment overlooking 137th Street and Amsterdam Avenue. Our words hovered over borderlands, severing speech from non-speech, sense from meaning, sound from belief. I do not think that anyone on earth could have made sense of what we said to each other, had their ears chanced to feast on our words. We ourselves did not understand the meaning people make together when they find a language in which to speak to each other. Our language, composed of many tongues, evolved by itself until it was impenetrable to the world outside, until it was impenetrable even to ourselves. These words formed the space of our intimacy. Once they started flowing from my tongue, I knew I was in love, more in love than I had ever been before. One reason why I could not let go of Vladimir, in spite of our incompatibilities—most significantly of all, his ardent desire for children that conflicted with my equally ardent desire for none—was that I did not want to relinquish the polylingual idiom we had forged together, this confounding of racial and ethnic difference, this language of our intimacy.

It took me a long time to think of Vladimir as Asian or to understand his belief that nativity in language is a matter of choice rather than destiny. At the beginning of our acquaintance, Vladimir seemed more Russian than Asian in his cultural affiliations, his accent, and his movements. I initially scorned his attempts to define himself as non-Russian as mere wishful thinking. “Your hair is brown. Chinese people have black hair,” I pointed out on more than one occasion, as though his hair color was a non-negotiable fact of destiny. “My hair is Chinese,” he retorted. “No one in their right mind would think of you as Chinese,” was my response to this inane debate. But finally, I came around to Vladimir’s point of view. Vladimir had the right—or, perhaps more profoundly than the right, the duty—to
choose his native speech. Vladimir was right about the politics of speech, and about the
necessity of choosing our linguistic destinies. Even though Russian was the language he
knew best, I finally came to understand why Vladimir’s native language was not Russian.

After living with Vladimir for two years, and listening to him tell of his difficult ado-
lescence among Russians, I do not believe that there is a cure for the person who has lived
at the wrong end of racial discrimination for most of his or her life. It is easy to arbitrate
morality, to separate wrong from right, and to propagate strategies for the creation of
moral equivalencies. The liberal benefactor is an always-available option. But the liberal
benefactor benefits more from helping than do those whose burdens such benefactions
are slated to ease. This is why I almost never spoke with Vladimir about his experience of
being colonized, and why the language of his colonization coincided until the end with
language of our love.

III.

The Francophone intellectuals Aimé Césaire and Albert Memmi have observed that the
psyche of the colonizer is as corroded by the colonial relation as is the psyche of the colo-
nized. To adapt Hegel, the master is the slave of his own dialectic. He who discriminates
suffers most from the blindness of his imagination. I wish the historical silence among
white witnesses to black oppression had been filled by some kind of consciousness, of a
void if of nothing else, not because I want to connect with a (absence of) color brandished
on my body like a sweltering iron pressed into a slave’s back, but because I want to track
the discriminations performed in my name. I want to know what forms of life and of
knowledge color, or rather the lack of color, has severed me from. Like the person who
scribbled in Guha’s book about the experience of being a colonized subject of British-ruled
India, I have been colonized.

There may be only one quality that members of all races share, inasmuch as they iden-
tify according to their races: the experience of having been denied the freedom to choose
their identity. I was denied the chance to know a Vladimir who did not internalize the race
hatred projected onto him. I was also denied the observation of his strength in the face of
adversity. Instead, I witnessed a courageous man bow to discrimination, as though he
deserved it, as though he was inferior, from childhood onwards. The fact that I have not
and could not know Vladimir outside a colonial framework, and that therefore our love
was so troubled and incomplete, means that I too have been colonized.

IV.

January 2004. Annoyed by the books I am reading about the Chechen war, in which all
Chechens figure either as Islamic fundamentalists or wild mountain men, I determine to
seek a world beyond the pale of newspaper headlines. Although I have access to no first-
hand knowledge to counter the media’s hollow representations, I know that the images
that circulate daily across my computer screen bespeak colonial distributions of power. I decide to go to Chechnya, to see for myself what the media has shielded from my eyes. When my students ask me what I am doing for winter break, I tell them, I am going to Chechnya, a country they are unable to locate on any map.

When we discuss my travels years after we parted, Vladimir tells me it was I who brought his attention to the Chechens first. I supplied him with music and news stories and brought up the subject whenever we were together. My memory tells a different story. I remember him telling me about watching the Chechen war from his home in Siberia, many thousands of miles away from Chechnya, but still in the clutches of the same imperial grasp. I remember how his eyes lit up whenever Shamil Basaev (d. 2006) captured the international media’s attention, and how he smiled to himself when Shamil finally appeared on a widely distributed video clip, with the words No Terrorism emblazoned in black block letters across his T-shirt. I observed Vladimir’s guarded admiration for the Chechen guerilla fighter in his pre-terrorist phase.

What enabled Basaev to take hundreds of Russians hostage in Buddyonovsk hospital in 1995 and then to enter into negotiations with Prime Minister Primakov? Such negotiations constituted a de facto recognition of Basaev’s own legitimacy. Surely, if Basaev were merely the warlord the media called him and if the Chechen people lacked a just cause, then this event could not have captivated spectators from Central Asia to Siberia, not to mention Basaev’s own Caucasus. Vladimir remembered these incidents from post-Soviet history, and we meditated over them together. I returned to the Russian sources and wondered if, buried in these mass-produced sound bites, there was a suppressed history deserving closer scrutiny.

When Vladimir observed the Chechens achieve freedom and independence in 1997, an event televised even in the Siberian borderlands, he was eighteen years old. He had already begun making plans to abandon Russia forever, and was only waiting to see what his mother was going to do. The Chechen’s victory filled him with jealousy. Why could his people not equal the Chechens in bravery? Why did the Khakas consent to their own annihilation? Vladimir once told me that the Khakas comprised only ten percent of Abakan’s population. That percentage dwindled every year as Khakas intermarried with Russians, assimilated into mainstream society, and, if they were lucky, left Russia forever. As with the Native Americans, the land that formerly belonged solely to the Khakas is now occupied by settlers, who not coincidentally hold all the prestigious posts in the universities and professional institutions. Khakas who succeed professionally do so only by passing as Russian.

Back to January 2004. Our relationship was dwindling to a close, or rather moving towards a different stage. With Vladimir on my mind, I purchased a ticket to Moscow, then boarded a train to Vladikavkaz, home to the Russian military base for the war in Chechnya. The capital of North Ossetia, Vladikavkaz shares a border to the south with the Republic of Georgia. I had not been to Russia for five years. The last time I was there was during the Clinton administration’s bombing of Belgrade in 1999, when Russia sent legions of troops to support the Serbs. The convoy of Russian soldiers was so heavy that many civilian flights departing from Moscow’s Sheremetovo airport were cancelled, forcing me to decamp on a dirt-specked floor swarmed with the iron-gilded boots of the Russian military. With the same shrill sense of fear that Vladimir later shared with me, I
promised myself during those twilight years of the Balkan wars that I would never again set foot on Russia’s godforsaken territories. In the intervening years, Russia became an expletive I used to curse anything truly hated. My visceral aversion did not prevent me from returning half a decade later, albeit to the Islamic Caucasus, a part of Russia that had yet to be fully Russified.

Now, in January 2004, I journeyed by train and bus across Russia’s southern tip for weeks, my mind skewed. I hopped buses at random, hid from the police, and hoped that my unregistered passport would not be checked. How does one register one’s passport in a police station, as one is required to do by law, when faced with the ubiquitous fear of being arrested for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or, in a best case scenario, of being forced at gunpoint to pay an astronomical bribe? I slept in Daghestani bus depots and Ingush refugee camps. I talked to a few among the hundreds of thousands of displaced people waiting to return home, fearful that their homes had already been destroyed.5

I only know about being on one side of the race divide. I do not know as much about being discriminated against as I know about discriminating. I know what it feels like to realize that the banality of your world (growing up in a white suburb, where your so-called friends mirror each other with glasslike transparency) is pre-scripted by powers over which you have no control, but for which you are the ostensible beneficiary.

V.

Over time I managed to disabuse Vladimir of some of his patriotism for his adopted country. The first time he drove me to school, I noticed a bumper sticker replica of an American flag on his black Nissan Maxima, the first car he ever owned. (The Russian Volga that he drove during his adolescence hardly counted, he explained; its horsepower was less than a bicycle’s.) I refused to sit in his car until he scrapped the last trace of that flag off his bumper. He readily complied, and eventually decided that he preferred to drive without the American flag.

Vladimir told me that our relationship marked the beginning of his awakening to the violence of America’s past, and to how his adopted homeland appeared historically to be more in love with oil than justice, hypocritical in its manipulation of rhetoric to enslave the formerly colonized, and how its techniques of enslavement were not in the end as superior to Russia as he had believed during his Soviet childhood. In the winter of 2003, Vladimir drove me to a march in Washington, DC. We marched down Pennsylvania Avenue, accompanied by hundreds of thousands of peace activists, hoping to forestall the US invasion of Iraq. At the time, I did not believe that the war that loomed on the horizon could ever actually happen. I was naïve. Until the bombs started to rain in Baghdad, another war seemed beyond the pale of possibility. As the bombs exploded a few months later across Iraq and Afghanistan, I learned that, in the aftermath of 9/11, the specter of terror licenses actions that no other abstraction can justify. Notwithstanding these minor incursions into his American dream, Vladimir remained a patriot to the end of our acquaintance. Our love blossomed and faded in the shadow of America’s wars.
In his immigrant’s affection for his adopted country, Vladimir wanted to see America as a land of opportunity. He was a refugee from an even more desecrated territory. His patriotism was most in evidence when he thought I was not watching him. I caught him sometimes gazing nostalgically at the many symbols of the American dream. He loved to eat at McDonald’s, and to watch action-adventure movies, particularly *Terminator II*. Arnold Schwarzenegger had been his hero during his childhood in Abakan. I was not prepared to accompany Vladimir in these acts of admiration, even out of love of him. When it came to entertainment, an interest in American rock music was the only thing we had in common, and this was only because the best rock music has been traditionally anti-American. Just like an American capitalist, Vladimir even thought he could buy my love through flowers and others goods sent from abroad.

I can never forgive Russia for what it did to Vladimir. I can never be objective about a country that has stood between me and love. Russia is for me, before it is anything else, a colonizing empire, and after America, the most destructive power on earth. Even after decades of anti-colonial movements and the collapse of its own empire from within, Russia openly claims a still-unchallenged right to the possession of territories acquired by conquest. Not even America, and certainly no European country (Israel not being physically located in Europe), is so unabashedly ruthless in dealing with its annexed territory. Of course, the comparison works in America’s favor only because the Native Americans who lived in this country before the Europeans arrived are now almost completely decimated as a population. There are now not enough Native Americans to inhabit the great swaths of land over which their civilizations once flourished and which are now inhabited by white folks.

Russia’s claims to Chechnya are not as diplomatically articulated as, for example, American politician’s justifications for invading Iraq in the name of spreading democracy. Russian leaders simply argue that Chechnya is Russian territory and that Chechen sovereignty is an affair internal to the Russian state. All rebellions, according to this logic, are by default immoral and based on the false reasoning of self-determination. No lip service is paid to indigenous rights or to the political freedom of the oppressed. No demand is made by Russia’s citizens to acknowledge the Chechens’ right to self-governance. To return to King’s analysis, one reason for the seeming impossibility of Chechen sovereignty is that Russian identity was itself forged on the Caucasus frontier: “Georgian habits of toasting and speechifying, the buttery sweetness of Armenian brandy, the silky curls of an astrakhan hat, and the legendary beauty of mountains became part of the way in which Russians—and later Soviets—imagined themselves” (135). This modern Russian self, forged against the background of the corpses of the Caucasus’ slaughtered mountaineers, was the image the USSR most frequently projected to the world. This is the image Langston Hughes helped to shape when he praises the October Revolution in verse. The topography of the Caucasus, and Chechnya in particular, has facilitated the birth and development of Russian literature. In the absence of territorial sovereignty over the Caucasus, Siberia, and Central Asia, Russia risks losing her literary and political identity.

Postcolonial consciousness is only possible in societies that have severed the colonial knot or sublimated this relation in some definitive way. But what of the contemporary colonies that still spot the globe, and which are most densely concentrated in the former Soviet Union: the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Siberia? How can the age of colonialism be
assumed to be over when more than three hundred thousand Chechens have died over the past twelve years because they did not want to be incorporated into another post-Soviet, Russian Empire? And when at least as many have lost their homes and currently wander the earth, plumbing the depths of Siberia in search of work, or navigating the limbo of European underworlds as refugees, hangers-on, confusing people with their very existence just as they are themselves confused about their future? How do we prevent those whom colonial rule has difficulty assimilating from haunting us? ask the NGOs. They crowd against us, denying us room to breathe. In what way, shape, or form does three hundred thousand deaths for a territory that is still officially Russian read like a “post” colonial narrative? Rather, the story of the Chechen conflict reads more like an ominous message to the many other non-Russian peoples of the former Soviet Union. Freedom is a risky business, this message says. You are safer, and probably better off, enslaved.

VI.

Vladimir thought that if we were married, everything would be all right. He would become a citizen, and we would buy a house together. We would have children, lots of them. He would work hard, and support me, like a good American man. He planned that I would become his wife, a word that implies a form of political domestication that makes me cringe. When he proposed marriage, I screamed at him and told him he was out of his mind. He purchased a gold ring for three hundred dollars, a much higher price tag than he could afford, although I had explained many times that I hated jewelry. I told him he had made a major mistake. I said that his gift and his proposal were clear evidence that he would never understand me. I told him how oppressed I was by his America, just as he had been oppressed by my Russia. I told him that I hated the land of the free and the home of the brave. I told him that he was best off growing up, and getting out of my life. And yet here I am, writing about Vladimir and wishing for the story of our intimacy never to end. There is no question that I loved him, and continue to love him, more than any other man I have ever known. Someday I think I will even be able to forgive him for loving my country too much. I will forgive the innocence of his American dream. Langston Hughes was grateful to find in Central Asia a society inhabited by “colored folks,” where discrimination loomed only beneath the surface, and not openly as in American public spaces. He therefore overlooked the failings of the Soviet experiment. Like Hughes, but in reverse, Vladimir’s desire for a citizenship in a country that did not sanction discrimination in the ways that had brutalized him during his Soviet childhood made the flaws of his adopted country fade into the background. Jim Crow in America made Hughes see the USSR as a space of racial equality. Jim Crow in the USSR made Vladimir see the United States as a space untainted by ethnic discrimination.

When I think of how difficult it was for me to speak to Vladimir about the colonization of his soul, I see how colorblindness has inflected my present. I could not fully absorb the histories of slavery and colonialism that fell outside the framework of my formal education. As a people, Americans tend to learn what they need to know about their country’s history too late, and by accident rather than in school. No less than Russians, Americans
fear the invocation of their country’s dark pasts. We falsely imagine that we can avert the racisms of the future without confronting the racisms of time past. We remain unprepared for the new forms of prejudice that are actively transforming our post-9/11 world.

VII.

In 2004, the same year I traveled for the first time to Chechnya, I taught an introductory course in freshman composition to students enrolled in New York University’s School of Continuing and Professional Education, a division of the university that catered to students who could not enroll full time due to their work schedules. This was the first teaching experience of my life. My students were all my age—twenty-four—or older. Half were black, Latino, or otherwise racially mixed. Although they were earning good salaries at the time of their enrollment in a program that cost them many times more than the salaries of the adjunct faculty who taught them, most of the students came from underprivileged backgrounds. Unlike their counterparts in NYU’s main college, their parents rarely if ever paid for their college educations.

One student in particular captivated my attention. My devotion to him was undivided, at a time when I had yet to learn that the first rule of good teaching is impartiality. The majority of my students were enrolled in the program in the hopes that a BA degree would lead to promotions in their Wall Street corporations and brokerage firms. Randall was different. Like many of my students, he was from an underprivileged African American background. Unlike the other students, he was interested in talking about this difficult past during class. Randall handed in the first assignment at the beginning of the second class. I had asked my students to write their own essays in response to James Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son.” Far more boldly than anyone else in class, Randall wrote of being left homeless for his sixteenth birthday and locked out of his house by his mother, a drug addict who contracted HIV while shooting up on heroin. The essay opened with a stunningly beautiful image of snowflakes falling in February, the lily-white color of purity, on the deserted Brooklyn pavement. As I read I was filled with jealousy and awe, wishing I could write like him, my student, whom I was supposed to teach. I asked him to speak with me after class.

“Randall,” I told him after the other students had dispersed, “this is amazing. You should write more.”

Although Randall stopped turning in papers and started making excuses, I continued to be undivided in my devotion, to the detriment of pedagogical neutrality. I didn’t want to penalize a student who had done me the honor of turning in a work of genius on the second day of class. Finally, near the end of the semester, Randall handed in his final assignment, one month overdue. In this essay he told how his mother betrayed him by dying, how she kicked him out to make room for her boyfriend, also a drug addict, when he was still a teenager, how he loved her so much that he hated her. The essay concluded with Randall’s high school graduation, when his mother showed up for the event she had promised to attend, but only when it was almost over. Less than a week after his graduation ceremony, his mother died of AIDS. The essay was called “The End of Happiness.”
“I am so grateful to you, Professor,” he told me. “I never would have had the courage to confront my mother’s memory had this class not forced me to write about her.”

The sentences in Randall’s second essay meandered over the page like a river bloated with oil. I was disappointed. The issues he dealt with were important, but his writing lacked the spark of life. But I didn’t tell him that. I encouraged him, because he had moved me on the second day of class with the brilliance of vision. If he tried hard enough, I believe Randall could have succeeded, but, lured by the material rewards of a corporate career, he soon abandoned his brief flirtation with creativity for the sake of a job as a computer programmer at the financial services corporation Morgan Stanley. The last time we spoke, Randall boasted that he was on the verge of promotion to the position of manager of the customer service division.

Randall was proud of himself. He was proud of how much he had achieved compared to his parents, who had never completed high school. I was happy for him. But I also wanted to provoke him to question his satisfaction with himself. I wanted to express my doubts about his success, because I believe he could do more with his life than grow rich. Maybe there is something about being black, I suggested to him, something about having to prove to the world that you can overcome your origins, that you too can be rich and have a job just like the white executives, that makes you fear your own artistic talent? This was all I could say, by way of encouraging him to follow his heart rather than his wallet.

Not knowing how to respond, Randall smiled. We said goodbye, never to see each other again. It was not in my power, as it turned out, to prod a young professional climbing the promotion ladder at his corporation towards starvation, even for the sake of a literary dream. No doubt Randall was able to suppress his desire to write for reasons that had nothing to do with being black, but I suspect that his background and his need to succeed beyond what his family had achieved factored heavily into his decision to constrict his imagination. The rich, colorless white man has leisure to write (think Wallace Stevens and James Merrill). Randall had to be financially solvent. He had a family to take care of, most particularly a sixteen-year old brother who was having difficulties completing high school and for whom he was the sole financial benefactor. An impoverished imagination may be an affliction to others, but colorblind ignorance leaves a more indelible imprint.

Writing of his twinned awakening in depression-era Chicago to the Communist Party and to the life of the mind, African American novelist Richard Wright recalled the “new realms of feeling” he acquired during the cold winter evenings he passed, after hours of backbreaking labor, reading, or rather devouring books for the first time in his life. Thanks to his encounters with Dostoevsky, Proust, Stephen Crane, and Gertrude Stein, an “attitude of watchful wonder” became the new pivot of Wright’s new life. “Having no claims upon others,” Wright recollected, “I bent the way the wind blew, rendering unto my environment that which was my environment’s, and rendering unto myself that which I felt was mine” (333). Wright came slowly to feel during those desolate Chicago nights that the books he read belatedly, as the world around him struggled to eat, were his patrimony, although his social station forced him to fight for the learning they enshrined.

The life of the mind was dangerous for Wright. In part, this danger was an inevitable result of his native country’s long history of racial discrimination, but the reasons also penetrated deeper than specific historical factors. Born in Roxie, Mississippi, Wright moved to Memphis while still a young child. Everywhere he lived during his childhood, reading
was unknown. Reading was something rich people did, rich people who were mostly white and went to school. Instead of books, the path to success in Wright’s world was paved by coins, or, if one was lucky, dollar bills. In his autobiography Wright lamented, “If one aspired at all, it was to be a doctor or a lawyer, a shopkeeper or a politician” (329). For his fellow townsfolk, the most valued pleasure was racing with cars, the most cherished experiences were imparted through whiskey, and the highest prizes were other men’s wives. Such was the fenced-in world into which one of America’s greatest novelists was born. Not only in Wright’s scenario is there an evident relation between the coming-into-being of the American novel and economic deprivation.

It should come as no surprise that once he was able to receive literary knowledge in the dark, exhausted hours between work and sleep, Richard Wright was ambivalent towards his inheritance. He decided ultimately against accepting Remembrance of Things Past into his personal spiritual academy. In spite of its “subtle but strong prose” and its “vast, delicate, intricate, and psychological structure . . . of death and decadence,” Proust’s novel stupefied him. The French modernist chronicle of the soul’s ascent through the levels of Parisian infernos crushed Wright with hopelessness. Wright wanted to document his world as Proust had done, but the “burning example before [his] eyes,” the specter of the “Negro in America . . . doomed to live in isolation while those who condemn him seek the basest goals of any people on earth” (332) convinced him that he could never generate a Proustian world in words of his own. The delivery of Wright’s inheritance was off by a decade, if not by a lifetime, and he did not know how to receive it once it came. It was not that the books were misdirected or the goods damaged; rather, he had to find them by himself, alone, and he did not know where to look. Wright had no training, no education, no background in literature. His sole expertise lay in the art of surviving America’s segregated South as a young black male. He taught himself to write as he taught himself to read: word by word, page by page, entirely, secretly, alone. When I read Wright’s autobiography for the first time I felt that I was reading Vladimir’s life-story, painted in the dark red hues of the American South rather than the pale blues of Siberian Abakan.

Access to learning carried a heavy price for Wright: the gift came too late. The more he read, the more he discovered how much had been denied him, by virtue of his race, his class, his station in life, how broken had been his experience of the world, and how limited his horizons. Learning was a mixed blessing. “Having been thrust out of the world because of my race,” Wright reflected for the first time in his life, “I had accepted my destiny by not being curious about what shaped it” (288). Every scintillating page stimulated new kinds of pain. Reading Dostoevsky was suicide. Wright became angry, bitter, and resentful, not only of individuals but of the entire social structure into which he had been thrust, of his country, and of the universe. He joined the Communist party, and believed in its program more fervidly than Hughes, until he became disillusioned with Marxism too.

In 1940, Wright published a novel, an American classic, about a black man who murders a white woman. It is called Native Son, and it foregrounds the contradiction that has structured this essay, between feeling like a native in a foreign land, and feeling like a foreigner in one’s country. This theme is also the burden of Baldwin’s prose, both in “Notes of a Native Son,” the essay that inspired Randall, and in his novel Another Country (1962). It cannot be coincidental that the twentieth-century African American experience has been so persistently articulated in terms of a dialectic between exile and nativism.
Notably, Wright and Baldwin could only invoke the term “native” with irony, referencing a disjunction similar to, though not identical with, the one that conditioned Vladimir’s invocation of his native tongue.

This problem of not being at home in one’s own country that so structures African American literary consciousness also explains Hughes’s colorblindness in his writings on Central Asia. As he narrates in his two autobiographies, Hughes canvassed the world in search of a home. Instead of obtaining knowledge about a foreign country—as the trope of the grand journey in centuries past assumes—Hughes sought a place for himself and his people in history’s grand narrative. As the decades progressed, he became persuaded that even given its many flaws, the United States could be made to accommodate the African American experience. In the light of his newly acquired faith in America’s possibilities, the Soviet Union ceased to be a useful cognitive foil in Hughes’s quest for racial equality.

I do not know what it means to be Randall, pressured to abandon the life of the mind in favor of material gain to demonstrate to the world, his family, and his self that his mother’s death did not mark the end of everything. I do, however, know what Richard Wright means when he writes of the pain belated knowledge brings, the pain that is every American’s inheritance, whether or not she recognizes it in time. Perhaps the most painful aspect of such knowledge—of reliving the denials which have created the conditions for your existence—is the conviction it instills that texts are the most effective, and in certain respects the only, medium through which suppressed histories find their afterlives.

For many centuries, colonialism has created boundaries between groups and alienated people within those groups from each other. On one side of its partition is fear, the terror of the close but foreign, and the concomitant need to mandate and regulate, to segregate—and thereby contain—its power. On the other side is the regret caused by not knowing the histories that preceded and made possible your entry into the world, and that conditioned and constrained your citizenship, your race, and your identity. A just education would have forced you to see everything that you are never given to know. Not having received such a bounty, you are compelled to claim such knowledge on your own, hoping against hope that it is not already too late.

NOTES

1. With respect to Hughes’s knowledge of Soviet atrocities, David Chioni Moore has studied the Hughes archive thoroughly and found “no evidence . . . [that] Langston was aware of the eventual liquidation of so many that he knew in Central Asia” (1133). The best testimony to what Hughes might have seen during his Soviet sojourn is contained in the accounts of contemporaries who traveled through the region during those same years, for example Arthur Koestler, who was more guarded than Hughes in his praise for the Soviet experiment.

2. Scholarship on Russian and Soviet Central Asia oriented to the postcolonial condition is still in its infancy. Harder and Eschment and Khalid chart paths for the future.

3. The English text given here is Kevin Young’s rendering of Sanjar Siddiq’s Uzbek translation, as the original English text is now lost. See Hughes.

4. All names of personal acquaintances have been anonymized to protect their privacy.

5. A narrative of this journey has been published. See Gould.

6. In the vast bibliography on Russian literary engagements with the Caucasus, the most noteworthy and accessible monographs in English are Layton, Ram, and Grant.
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