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In this rich and vital study of post-Soviet migration to the United States, Claudia Sadowski-Smith demonstrates that a global neoliberal context has been shaping the ever-evolving fictions of racial whiteness in ways that have yet to be accounted for in recent scholarship. In the course of analyzing representations and realities of post-Soviet immigration via a captivating array of materials – including reality-television shows, memoirs, novels, and interviews – The New Immigrant Whiteness demonstrates the need to rethink the utility of received conceptions of race-based immigration and assimilation, especially before we apply them to today’s immigrants from the former Soviet Union. More generally, Sadowski-Smith convincingly argues that we should be more wary of making sharp distinctions between the former Soviet states and the United States, as their mutually neoliberal sociopolitical landscapes are becoming ever more similar.

As Sadowski-Smith explains in her introduction’s concise overview of relevant critical whiteness studies paradigms, a consensus has arisen from the 1990s work of David Roediger, Noel Ignatiev and others that numerous ethnicized immigrant groups gained acceptance into the white racial club by working their ways into it, and by taking part in the immiseration of America’s racial others, especially black people. Recent migration from post-Soviet states exemplifies a “new immigrant whiteness” because such immigrants are already racialized as white prior to arrival, arriving as they do under the guise of a “a pan-European whiteness that is supposedly shared by all those of European descent in the United States and that consolidated after World War II” (6). As always, such new configurations of whiteness are fictions that obscure more complicated realities, such as the differing ways that group identities are encoded in former Soviet states, which have their own conceptions of race and ethnicity, and the declining privileges attendant on new immigrant aspirations to American whiteness, as both popular and scholarly application of older racial paradigms to current East European immigrants commonly disregard the post-1980s neoliberal context. As Sadowski-Smith explains, this relatively new socioeconomic landscape has been taking shape not only in more “developed” countries, but also in Russia and other post-Soviet states, where a resurgent class of oligarchs also increases its fortunes with economic shock tactics, such as deregulating markets, “liberalizing” trade and driving down wages, while promoting individualized consumerism, and cutting and privatizing public services. While acknowledging that such changes often take markedly different forms in specific national contexts, Sadowski-Smith effectively contextualizes white racialization in relation to similar economic shifts that are happening in North America, Western Europe and the post-Soviet states. These convulsive changes have resulted in increasingly restive populations, which are subject to heightened surveillance, voter suppression and other antidemocratic measures, as well as the timeworn tactic of demonizing minoritized others, which politicians and compliant press outlets use to justify increased inequity and judicial abuse, and to distract attention from elite-driven state deprivations.
A significant topic addressed in this study is that of post-Soviet immigrants themselves, who often go overlooked in migration studies, despite the presence of 1.17 million of them in the United States (a number exceeding that of immigrants from Korea) (1). Public consciousness of such recent arrivals is largely fed by xenophobic depictions of threatening “Russians,” including characters on such fearmongering television programs as 24 and The Americans, and such quasi-psychotic depictions as Orange Is the New Black’s Galina “Red” Reznikov. Sadowski-Smith also finds more nuanced stereotypes on display in a pair of reality shows, which reveal the pandering agendas of their producers. On Dancing with the Stars, new arrivals from various post-Soviet states are routinely collapsed into a monolithic “Russian” identity, and then handled in celebratory ways that ultimately appeal to the show’s largely conservative audience. The success of these dancers, in the show’s competitions and thus in their personal lives, is touted by the program’s emcees as evidence of a nostalgic, bootstrapping dream of America as a land of equal opportunity for those willing to work for it. Concomitantly, the show also contrasts the success of “Russian” dancers with subtly denigrating characterizations of darker participants from Latin American countries. As in another reality show, Russian Dolls, such darker cast members also help to code the “Russian” characters as white, and thus (however counter to reality) as quick assimilationists. A central corrective point that Sadowski-Smith makes here is that the offscreen reality for such immigrants who do succeed financially is often that instead of readily assimilating, and thus relinquishing ties to their former homes (which nonwhite immigrants from other places are accused of “refusing” to do), they commonly exist more transnationally, sometimes by continuing to speak their first languages in private, and often by visiting and maintaining extensive ties to their countries of origin. These transnational realities of a new immigrant whiteness also counter the received paradigm regarding European “ethnic” immigration, which posits that ethnicized immigrants tend to readily relinquish ties to their homelands as part of the whitening process.

Sadowski-Smith also examines already-whitened conceptions of post-Soviet immigrants exhibited by Americans who seek to build traditional nuclear families, especially by marrying ostensibly white mail-order brides or by adopting ostensibly white children. The case studies here are memoirs written by adopting American parents and interviews that Sadowski-Smith conducted with post-Soviet women who emigrated to join American husbands. The quest for an idealized whiteness by those seeking to complete white families, which Sadowski-Smith casts as a particularly consumerist quest that contrasts with earlier humanitarian motivations, again obscures neoliberal realities, including “the fact that, as in other adoptee-sending countries, the rise in child relinquishment in Ukraine and Russia was a response to widespread impoverishment, the disappearance of social services, and the dissolution of family structures [which] followed the neoliberal transition from socialist to capitalist property regimes” (94). In contrast to adoptees and immigrant wives from countries perceived as nonwhite, these post-Soviet immigrants are routinely expected to assimilate and demonstrate familial happiness quickly, and they face the threat of being returned like damaged goods if they fail to do so (as demonstrated by cases of children being flown back alone by disappointed adoptive parents). In her positing of a new immigrant whiteness, Sadowski-Smith might have interviewed as well some of its ardent US-born perceivers, such as the husbands of post-Soviet wives, who may well perceive their partners through a lens that exoticizes as much as it whitens. Nevertheless, by examining the situations of these adoptees and immigrant wives, as well as those of
post-Soviet migrant academics, Sadowski-Smith effectively addresses understudied migrant groups, demonstrating that even when the hardships they commonly suffer have been considered in recent scholarship, such people “tend to be viewed as victims of criminal organizations, failed political systems, and corrupt political elites in former East Bloc countries,” rather than as people whose travails more accurately exemplify abusive neoliberal contexts in both the United States and their former homes (73–74).

The New Immigrant Whiteness has other significant insights to offer that I cannot effectively applaud in the space of a short review. Scholars, students and activists in numerous fields – including studies of migration, postsocialism and neoliberalism, critical whiteness and critical race studies, communications and literary studies – will benefit from this book’s urgent call for recalibration of extant paradigms of critical whiteness studies, which would include deeper consideration of the increasingly mutual declining circumstances of ostensibly counterpoised races and ethnicities. In a deeply contextualized analysis of Gary Shteyngart’s 2010 novel Super Sad True Love Story, Sadowski-Smith again demonstrates the utility of cross-ethnoracial analysis for understanding new configurations of whiteness, leading to a question that reads as especially pressing in these harshly xenophobic and iniquitous times: “What would happen if contemporary post-Soviet (and other European) immigrants – as well as native-born whites – were to reclaim the selective exclusion of southern and eastern European immigrants as grounds for cross-ethnic alliances for immigrant rights?” (156). What would happen indeed …

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