

# AFRICAN PRESENCE IN FORMER SOVIET SPACES

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■ **Abstract** This review traces accounts of African presence in the former USSR that are available in or have been cited primarily in English; many sources on this topic published in the USSR were strategically intended for Western consumption. This review tracks repetitions of tropes that link certain kinds of “blackness” to “Africa”: It observes that treating blacks in the USSR as “displaced” confirmed Soviet humanitarianism, and produced anti-Western/anticapitalist forms of Soviet nationalism and federalism. We scrutinize the ways accounts of African presence use evidence of “race remnants” that implicitly position black bodies as subjects of racial dissolution and/or cultural assimilation. This leads us to question the possibility of narrating African presence in contexts ruled by logics that wed spatial displacement/placement to racial impurity/purity. More broadly, the review addresses the utility of ideals of displaced racial communities within African diasporic criticism.

## INTRODUCTION: REPRESENTING AFRICAN PRESENCE

To identify an African diaspora in the territories of the former USSR is a curious task. African presence outside of the contexts of slavery, or in spaces beyond transatlantic slave routes, has been a rare topic of diasporic inquiry. Research on African diasporic populations has centered on the transatlantic experience, with the exception of a limited number of works that attend to trans-Saharan and Ottoman slavery (Harris 1971; Fisher 1980; Toledano 1982, 1998; Blakely 1986; Fernyhough 1988; Jwaideh & Cox 1988; Ewald 1988; Clarence-Smith 1988; Ricks 1988; Lewis 1990; Hunswick 1992; Alpers 2000; Patterson & Kelley 2000). These authors stress that manifold historical and biographical trajectories urge radical transformations in the ways African presence can be geopolitically imagined. Migrations linking the Sahara to the Caucasus, such as those connected with Ottoman colonization and slave trafficking, suggest that African-identified populations reside in the territories formerly occupied by the Soviet Union. Accordingly, we raise questions about the criteria for discerning their presence, be it memory (Harris 1971, Alpers 2000), actual physical bodies, or other forms of material evidence (Savage 1992, Hunswick 1992). This review is concerned with the epistemological

presuppositions upon which such inquiry around African presence is based. It sketches the historic processes that situate and name black bodies or materials that, within the former Soviet territories, are popularly referred to as *Negry* (“Negros”) and *Africansy* (the Russian term *chernij*, or “black,” is applied to many non-European groups). It also addresses how race more broadly is used to articulate criteria for discerning diasporic presence.

Combining the terms “Sahara” and “Siberia” might seem farfetched: The cultural and geographic representations that delimit these spaces could hardly place them farther apart in the modern racial imagination. This conceptual distancing, one that chains notions of national and territorial legitimacy to spatial origins, biological inheritance, and racial purity, represents the ways that scholars, journalists, filmmakers, and authors have publicly treated African presence in the region. We might evoke a number of historical and biographical trajectories to close that distance: Ottoman slave trafficking affected not only the entire geography of Africa but also channeled slaves to and from Eastern Europe and the Balkans, as well as to and from parts of the Caucasus contested by the Russian Empire. Better known is the genealogy of nineteenth-century poet Aleksandr Pushkin. Pushkin’s grandfather was Ibrahim Petrovich Hannibal, godson of Peter the Great and General-in-Chief of the Russian Imperial Army; some accounts argue that he was born in Cameroon (see Poe 1999) while others suggest Abyssinia (see Golden-Hanga 1966). Such trajectories, however, are most compelling if racial groupings and biological descent are treated as legitimate criteria for deciphering African presence; they fail to interrogate the social productions that make race recognizable, hence inadvertently reproducing race as real. Recognizing such occurrences within race-centered diasporic analysis, this review attends to parallel literatures that have treated race as a conceptual resource within diasporic inquiry.

Interpreting the details that constitute African diasporic presence poses a broader challenge to anthropologists. We intend this review to inspire exploration by analyzing writings about African presence in spaces not conventionally considered within reach of African diaspora. We aim thereby not only to illustrate how those writings use race as a concept but also to suggest ways to examine the work that race performs more widely within scholarship on diasporization. Diasporic populations, like any other, do not exist *sui generis*; rather, encounters among multiple subjects and institutions assign hierarchical “origins” and “placements” in space; this process constitutes conditions for diasporic subjectivity (Mercer 1994; Kondo 1997; Brown 1998, 2000; Fikes 2000). Thus, the theoretical challenge of this review is not to describe an African diaspora on former Soviet territories, per se; to merely plot dispersal over space and time would presuppose that physical movements or settlements truly evidence origins, belonging, or displacement. Rather, this review stresses the changing ways that people recognize bodies and populations as black and/or African. The authors attend to representations of dispersal or movement as tropes that legitimize images of temporal continuity and discontinuity, and thus belonging and exclusion. We build upon diaspora scholarship that has questioned impositions of predetermined collectivities that implicitly rely

upon and thus generate racial or biological ontological distinctions (Apter 1991, 1999; Scott 1991, Butler 1993; Hall 1996, 1999; Kondo 1997; Brown 1998, 2000; Fikes 2000; Gilroy 2000). Frequent population movements linked the Russian and Ottoman Empires and marked Soviet and post-Soviet states. Our goal, however, is to draw attention to the contact practices that have constituted recognition of bodies as black and African (see Butler 1993, Hall 1996). Throughout this review, we often write “Africans,” “Negros,” and “blacks” not to refer, but to report and quote: The term “black” has different valences and references in Russian, as mentioned above and clarified below.

English-language historical and anthropological discussions of movements across the former Soviet territories are crosscut by accounts of contested borders and regime shifts. They address, for instance, 1990s return migrations to the Caucasus by Circassians, driven into Ottoman territories in the 1860s by Russian forces after the Caucasus wars (Shami 1995, 1998, 2000) (on exile of Circassians and others see Toledano 1982, 1998; Karpat 1985; Holquist 2001). Others focus on forced resettlements in the 1930s of certain “border” and “diaspora” nationalities to Siberia or Central Asia, populations (e.g., Finns, Germans, Kurds, Koreans, Crimean Tatars, Meshketian Turks, Kabardinians, Ingush, Chechens, and Kalmyks) believed to possess dangerous connections across Soviet borders. Prior to World War II such populations were singled out as “suspect” or “enemy” nationalities (see Conquest 1970; Gelb 1993, 1995; Naimark 2000; Martin 2001; Holquist 2001). Related work details the returns of resettled populations (Allworth 1998, Wilson 1998, Uehling 2000, Schoeberlein 2000). Another set of writings addresses ways that state policies and global market forces under Tsarist, Soviet, and later post-Soviet regimes compromised the political-economic practices of formerly mobile communities in Siberia and Central Asia (Slezkine 1994b, Fondahl 1995, Grant 1995, Balzer 1999, Humphrey & Sneath 1999, Anderson 2000, Liu 2000, Gray 2000, Schweitzer & Gray 2000, Rethmann 2000, Ssorin-Chaikov 2000). Finally, recent scholarship discusses post-Soviet movements of Russian and non-Russian refugees from Central Asia and the Caucasus into Central Russia (Naumkin 1994, Pilkington 1997).

Most of these works address transformations in modes of constituting cultural, linguistic, and national identities (Suny 1993, Laitin 1998, Platz 2000), some of which underwrite post-Soviet racialization or diasporization (Markovitz 1997; Lemon 2000b, 2002b; Goluboff 2001). Although none deal with specifically African nationalized or racialized identities (see Wolfe 2000), they are close to the agenda at hand. They point to the primary analytic obligation of this review—to identify criteria by which state policies, media, and even scholarship used discourses of race to categorize certain people as inherently displaced, unable to claim territorial legitimacy and public recognition. In this review we examine relationships between blackness and implicit assumptions of spatial or temporal displacement, in the Caucasus in particular. Examining such textual practices will help us understand the conceptual work that blackness performs, revealing that the only thing “inherent” about blackness is that it is realized through interaction with other subjects.

Shedding light on our approach are ways Soviets and post-Soviets have deployed tropes of “Africa,” “decolonization,” “slavery,” “American Negroes,” or “blackness.” Over the past several decades Soviets and post-Soviets employed such terms for various ends as shifting circumstances located Africans and other minorities in the USSR in diverse ways. Some, defending state ideologies, attributed the term “race” to alien political orders; they rejected the very applicability of it to Soviet life in order to affirm that Soviet nationalities policy did not discriminate according to racial difference (Schneider 1942, Golden-Hanga 1966; see also Blakely 1986). At the same time, however, some Soviet minorities used terms that indexed racial discrimination abroad precisely to portray Soviet conditions as similarly oppressive (see Fax 1974, Khanga 1992). To call themselves *bleky* or *Negry* rendered their experiences of discrimination or displacement more recognizable (Lemon 1995, 2000b). Soviets deployed racial tropes in ways that were markedly dialogical; they were aware of contradictions among ways various speakers and writers appropriated or rejected them. We observe how the simultaneous production and erasure of discourses on African presence in Soviet territories rely upon the disparate signifying capacities of blackness.

## SEEKING AFRICAN ORIGINS

The spaces of the former USSR have been traversed by numerous mobile and settling populations, and many of its spaces and institutions were connected and severed by competing imperial regimes, including Mongol, Ottoman, Persian, Russian, Chinese, British, and Soviet governments. Today states recognize or deny resettlement claims to “home,” perhaps especially in the long-contested Caucasus regions, in ways reminiscent of former imperial interests. But analysis of post-Soviet debates over migratory phenomena and resettlement regulations, or claims to territory and citizenship, is not the aim of this review (see Allworth 1998, Wilson 1998, Schoeberlein 2000, Uehling 2000). Instead, we build on recent scholarship about these debates, those calling into question popular and juridical assumptions about belonging and the production of legitimate discourses of spatial origins; we draw attention to the processes that territorialize and embody races and ethnicities (see also Williams 1989, 1991; Malkki 1995; Mamdani 2002).

How is it that formerly enslaved, African populations that settled within these spaces were never accorded territorial identities (see Harris 1971), while other formerly enslaved, likewise mobile—but “non-African”—populations were? Most accounts of how Africans appeared in Russia and the Caucasus stress their non-indigenous status and rely on reports of the slave trade—enmeshed as it was with military and diplomatic relations between Russia, Turkey, Western European nations, and the United States. Christian and Muslim slave records position African slaves in the Crimea, the Ukraine, northern Iran, and near Montenegro (see English 1959, Golden-Hanga 1966, Tynes 1973, Blakely 1986, Khanga 1992), both in groups and as individual workers, freed and enslaved (Schneider 1942). Whereas

Blakely insists that “among European states, Russia was highly conspicuous for her lack of involvement in the slave trade” (1986, p. 28) because of domestic serfdom, he documents the use of small numbers of young black servants in eighteenth-century Tsarist courts, imported from places as distant as Ethiopia and Holland as slaves “given personal freedom in exchange for a lifetime service obligation” (p. 15). Blakely (1986), English (1959), and Lamont (1946) mention the presence of once-enslaved Africans in Abkhazia, presumably purchased by Abkhazian royalty in Ottoman slave ports in Turkey some time around the eighteenth century. Imperial Russians called these people *arapy*, *efiopy*, and *negry* (blackamoors, Ethiopians, and Negroes), linking their identities not only to African origins but also to Ottoman territories and circuits of influence (see Fisher 1980, Lewis 1990). According to Golden-Hanga (1966, p. 10), Russian statistical data in the nineteenth century categorized them as “Arabs” or “Jews.”

However, not all accounts of African presence in the Caucasus trace it to the slave trade. According to English (1959), African communities in Abkhazia span a period beginning before the fifth century BC. He cites Herodotus (p. 49), who wrote of the inhabitants of Colchis (a Black Sea coastal region north of Georgia’s border with Turkey) in 450 BC:

[It] is undoubtedly a fact that the Colchians are of Egyptian descent. I noticed this myself before I heard anyone else mention it . . . My own idea on the subject was based first on the fact that they have black skins and woolly hair . . . and secondly, and more especially, on the fact that the Colchians, the Egyptians and the Ethiopians are the only races which from ancient times have practiced circumcision. (Herodotus Bk II/104; see also Du Bois 1970, p. 31).

Herodotus goes on to narrate an Egyptian story about Pharaoh Sesostris leading an army northward through Syria and Turkey all the way to Colchis through the southern Balkans to Greece, returning home the same way, leaving colonists behind at the Colchian river Phasis (Poe 1999). Herodotus is not the only one to claim an early African presence: In the fourth century AD, church fathers St. Jerome and Sophronius described Colchis as the “second Ethiopia” for its black population (English 1959), and the nineteenth-century Abkhazian linguist and ethnographer Dmitri Gulia claimed parallels between Abkhazian and Abyssinian toponyms, names, and rituals to prove an ancient African origin (cited in Tynes 1973). Both visible signs (i.e., “black skin” and “woolly hair”) and less visible signs (words, customs) serve as evidence.

Soviet journalists and scholars recycle both origin accounts in their own narratives of African presence. Golden-Hanga, for instance, mentions trade routes connecting the Caucasus with ancient Greece but attributes “the greatest flow of African slaves” to the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries (Golden-Hanga 1966, p. 10). Whichever origin they emphasize, they used neither to claim that African-identified people belonged in the Caucasus. Instead, they linked specifically “Negro” blackness to Africa, treating it as a sign of displacement. This review traces how.

## READING RACE IN SOVIET AND FORMER SOVIET SPACES AND IN AFRICAN DIASPORA CRITICISM

Blakely's work falls outside canonical accounts of transatlantic diaspora by attending to Russian and Soviet spaces. He briefly recounts both Abkhazian-African origin narratives but more elaborately describes the voluntary, individual resettlements of African-Americans and Caribbeans to imperial Russia in the late nineteenth century and to the USSR in the twentieth (Blakely 1986). Lone sailors or performers from the United States chose to stay in Tsarist Russia, establishing families who would call Russia home, and later, African-American travelers and émigrés came to the USSR in search of racial equality. They and their descendents weave into their own autobiographies the stories of other Caribbean and African-American visitors or émigrés to the USSR (McKay 1937, Golden-Hanga 1966, Fax 1974, Robinson & Slevin 1988, Khanga 1992; see also Naison 1983, Quist-Adade 1996, Baldwin 2002). They and others detail how Soviet film studios, factories, and collective farms recruited (sometimes but not always through the Comintern—the Communist International, the association of national communist parties founded in 1919) African-American actors, workers, and engineers (Hughes 1934, 1956; Davis 1960; Smith 1964; Golden-Hanga 1966; Haywood 1978; Robinson & Slevin 1988; Khanga 1992). They also discuss the Soviet tours of performers (Robeson 1950, Hughes 1956) and describe the experiences of African and African-American students in Moscow universities (Davis 1960, Mulekezi 1961, Osei 1963, Blakely 1986, Robinson & Slevin 1988, Khanga 1992). Furthermore, scattered press mention accounts of 1990s movements of black-African workers and asylum seekers from various African nations, in addition to black scholars, activists, artists, state officials, and professional elite athletes from across the globe.

Demographic information on black residents and black Soviets from the early Soviet period into the 1990s is difficult to assess; for one, no such category as “Negro” appears in the Soviet census or official records. They came to the USSR for varying reasons and under differing class and political circumstances. Khanga estimates 5000 to 10,000 “native black citizens and 40,000 African students in the former USSR” (1992, p. 22). However, the racial categories and politics implicit within such quantitative demographic reasoning ought to be questioned because such enumeration synthesizes disparate motives and conditions. That this spatial and temporal flattening occurs even within an autobiography claiming a hybrid genealogy [“I am a black Russian, born and raised in the Soviet Union—at least that’s what we used to call it—and shaped by an extraordinary mixture of races and cultures” (Khanga 1992, p. 19)] illuminates a general crisis within discussions of African diasporas. As our own opening paragraph shows, to presume that persons we “know” to be black constitute the community or body under analysis constrains the project before it begins. Such logics, particularly ideals of racial authenticity, of diasporic community, or even collective resistance, commonly presuppose shared notions of cultural practice and political action (Williams 1995). More importantly, they obfuscate the practices creating that which is recognized as black. Approaches

that do not temporally and spatially situate this recognition inadvertently render blackness inherent, rather than as a dialogically realized process.

More telling perhaps are the ways Khanga (1992), Mulekezi (1961), Davis (1960), Robinson & Slevin (1988), and Blakely (1986) detail black experiences of racial isolation and misery in the USSR. Drawing from accounts of African students, permanent resident African-American Soviets, and Soviet-born persons of “mixed-nationality” partnerships, the authors provide countless stories suggesting that opportunities for economic and spatial mobility were, despite policies that officially erased racial categories, aggressively racialized. Their narratives, reflecting mainly the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras, describe difficulties in maintaining heterosexual partners or in receiving acceptance from white-identified families in Russia and the Ukraine (Robinson & Slevin 1988, pp. 299–310). They also, ironically, juxtapose the harsh classroom racism against African and African-American students in Moscow (Mulekezi 1961, Robinson & Slevin 1988) to African students’ difficulties in forming racial-national organizations in universities, as opposed to political (communist youth) ones (Mulekezi 1961, p. 101). Other stories, told by professional, Soviet-born blacks who were barred from working in the West alongside their white Soviet colleagues (Robinson & Slevin 1988, p. 304), can be compared to narratives of African Americans visiting the USSR who were blocked from interacting with the isolated “African” communities in Abkhazia (see Khanga 1992) or who found it difficult to communicate with such communities, even with the assistance of translators (Blakely 1986, p. 78). These perceptions of “blocked” diasporic process, of difficulty in connecting with others who were popularly recognized as “Negro,” suggest contradictory Soviet engagements with blackness, as we explore more deeply below.

At the level of our analysis, then, to identify African presence should entail that we rigorously assess the political processes that recognize blackness. We stress the tensions among accounts of disparately connected and separated black communities in the USSR, tensions arising from the mutually constituting celebration and erasure of black subject locations. In this review we primarily trace those celebrations and erasures in imperial and Soviet travel accounts and journalism in English; some were translated, but others were published specifically to impress Western audiences. We locate them in relation to Ottoman, Russian imperial, and Soviet policies and regime shifts.

We interpret these sources in ways to advocate inquiry into diasporic processes that neither presuppose racial-cultural collectivity nor generate some ontological biological reality that is often reproduced within the process of acknowledging or naming blackness. To accomplish this, we consider recent works in African diasporic criticism, such as Gilroy (2000). Gilroy’s concept of “raciology” traces “the history of racial metaphysics . . . as an underlying precondition for various versions of determinism: biological, nationalistic, cultural, and now genomic” (p. 52). He treats race not merely as a process that discerns how bodies are made socially meaningful, but as a site actively drawing upon murky distinctions among concepts such as biology, culture, and nationalism. Such sites, Gilroy suggests,

must be wholly interrogated before we can judge how or why diasporas “problematize the cultural and historic mechanics of belonging” (p. 123). Departing from subjective emphases on diasporic subjectivity (Gilroy 1993a,b), Gilroy prioritizes the slipperiness of deterministic logics—those that seep into the roots of our research inquiries—that make recognition of race possible in the first place (Gilroy 2000). His dialogic management of race—where blackness works as both a subjective resource and an object of scrutiny—moves us closer to taking nothing about race for granted. Notwithstanding the commonalities of racial terror that inform black subject locations (Gilroy 1993b), Gilroy illuminates how actors can perform multiple and contradictory discourses of blackness within the same political field, or embrace and deny them in the same moment.

Brown’s work (1998, 2000) on black diaspora narratives of spatial mobility and slavery also assumes a holistic approach to race as a dialogic site of discourse. A productive assessment of her two works reads them as parts of a whole. Brown (1998) observes the production of diasporic locality. She treats race as something that black subjects act upon through collaboratively repeating historic references that place them within transatlantic space and thus racialize subjectivity through imaginaries of mobility. Brown (1998) represents the possibilities of these imaginaries as “diasporic resources”—modes of reference that racially index and/or empower the dynamics of movement for black subjects. Whereas this work (Brown 1998) powerfully represents black subjectivity in practice, Brown (2000) uniquely positions blackness as a racial discourse whose referential potential cannot be realized without questioning the ongoing work of whiteness (see also Dominguez 1986), hence situating the dialogic reality of race. Here, Brown explores the ways black Liverpoolians in England “render slavery a potent signifier of whiteness” (Brown 2000, p. 341). That is, slavery as a signifier delivers the “white population beyond the reach of civilizing discourses on racial progress” (p. 341) so that slavery ceases to exclusively refer to blackness. Together, the articles suggest that diasporic subjectivity and racial positionality are mutually realized through contexts of contact, such that modes for race recognition, like slavery, can never pertain to blackness alone.

These representations of diaspora prioritize the discursive properties of race at every level of analysis. They attempt to unravel racial logics in ways that reconfigure diasporas less as groups and more as meaningful “contact sites” (Pratt 1992) that constitute power, place, and difference. In this sense, to evoke diaspora is never simply to describe subjective experiences of or within a community—it always also points to broader managements of cultural and political practice that transcend the community in question. Apter (1991, 1999) and Scott (1991, 1999) sound a similar call in connection to the conceptual status of “Africa” and “slavery” within African diasporic inquiry. Emphasizing “historic production” and “continuity,” they treat these processes as contact spaces within which the mechanics of race are made knowable within research on black diasporization. In this sense, their projects attend to the ways in which representations of temporality are implicitly embodied, or perhaps “Africanized” through politicized origins and ideals of place.



Arguably then, recent African diasporic criticism demands acknowledging the heteroglossic properties of race as a sign that can bear multiple or conflicting referents and accents within accounts of diaspora (Bakhtin 1981). Considering the goals of this review, how then do we begin to interpret texts that so variously explain the supposed anomaly of black bodies in former Soviet territory, when accounts relate African presence to visible, physical, and even linguistic evidence? We might begin by tracing the citation path of one such report of evidence. The Black Sea coast of Abkhazia, in Caucasus Georgia bordering Turkey, is the site of several black communities reported in Russian imperial newspapers and periodicals in 1913. As Blakely notes, the presence of these “Negros” in Abkhazia was discovered repeatedly, first just before World War I, then after the Revolution (see Parry 1925), then during World War II (see Schneider 1942), and again in the Brezhnev period (see Golden-Hanga 1966, Tynes 1973), “each time with amazement but often in ignorance of prior such ‘discoveries’” (Blakely 1986, p. 5). Yet each inquiry into the ostensibly mysterious origins of the Africans recycles texts and citations. One such text, a letter to the editor, was first published in 1913 in the Russian-language paper *Kavkaz*, printed in Tblisi, Georgia. It was sent by one E. Markov and was among a number of responses elicited by an article by Russian naturalist Vradii and another published by rival scholar Elius (cited in Blakely 1986). This letter, along with others, was collected and republished by Vradii in his 1914 volume, *Negroes of Batumi Province*:

Passing for the first time through the Abkhazian community of Adzyubzha, I was struck by the purely tropical landscape around me: against the background of a bright green primeval jungle there stood huts and sheds built of wood and covered with reeds; curly-headed Negro children played on the ground and a Negro woman passed by carrying a load on her head. Black-skinned people wearing white clothes in the bright sun resembled a typical picture of some African village . . . (Markov reprinted in Vradii 1914, pp. 16–17; quoted in Tynes 1973, p. 2 and Blakely 1986, p. 9).

The letter took up a debate generated by the first two articles over the numbers and origins of Negroes in Abkhazia: Were they two dozen or two hundred? Were they ancient Colchians or the descendents of slaves? Markov argues for a relatively recent arrival with the Turks, for “they always had many African slaves whom they used to bring from their colonies in Africa.” However, he anchors an otherwise surreal racial displacement, what he calls later a “chance phenomena,” to African origins not through past events or relations, but through geographic images of present space. “Negro” physical features work together with exotic vegetation and substances at the Southern reaches of the Russian empire to create a world “resembling an African village.” It is as if only transplanting an African environment to the Georgian Black Sea coast could justify the ongoing presence of black bodies.

In turn, African presence ranked the Caucasus as another Africa, confirming Russian imperial status. The 1913 debate had followed a century of colonial expansion and wars in the Caucasus. Until late in the nineteenth century much of the

Caucasus remained contested—a porous border zone in Russia’s wars with Turkey. Throughout the nineteenth century most Russophone travel accounts of the Caucasus affected orientalizing wonder. Pushkin lyricized Circassians with Byronic envy as fabulous, romantically fierce mountain tribes, and Tolstoy later eulogized Chechens to criticize the cruelties of imperial expansion (Friedrich 2002). As literary critic Susan Layton (1994) notes, literary works’ symbolic opposition of the North to the Caucasus helped confirm Russia’s status as a civilized empire among European empires. The Caucasus played a role in the Russian imagination that was analogous to the role of Africa in the British imaginary, arguably in imitation of British and French imperial fantasy.

Markov’s eyewitness account appears again in the Brezhnev era, in a 1973 article that likewise explains the supposed anomaly of a community that “continues to excite the minds of scientists who try to explain the African curly hair and dark skin color in some inhabitants of the Caucasus” (Tynes 1973, p. 2). Tynes begins by detailing for English readers the Colchian argument, citing Herodotus and Gulia, then he briefly touches on the slave-trade hypothesis and ends with an interview with a Soviet ethnographer (Vianor Pachulia) who poses a synthesis. The excited scientists he refers to, in the main, however, are not his contemporaries: Under the subheading “New Data on Africans in Abkhazia,” he quotes the 1913 articles and Markov’s letter. It seems that maintaining the anomaly of blackness required recycling familiar expressions of surprise. When accounting for Negroes who voluntarily traveled to and settled in the USSR, Soviet and post-Soviet Russia media similarly framed blackness as anomalous and displaced, as addressed below.

To locate peoples via present, physical evidence of origin or race treats the moment of “contact” as continuous and as a biological reality, rather than as a nexus of processes and conditions in which subjects discern power and difference. Some historians grappling with similar evidence in other parts of the world suggest that the disappearance of African communities once engaged in trans-Saharan slavery is the result of high rates of mortality and assimilation (Savage 1992, p. 2; Hunswick 1992, pp. 25–26). However, assertions of death, genetic integration, or residual remnants all reveal something similar about practices situating blackness: Whether racial inheritance is observed as a survival or as failing to reproduce itself, race is treated as biologically real (Seshadri-Cooks 2000, p. 19). “Negro integration” depends upon the loss of physical evidence, the disappearance of “Negroid” features, whereas their survival verifies former black slaves’ (but not white slaves’) whereabouts. This review attempts to interrogate unified determinisms that float on unclear distinctions between biology and social relations; the objective is to clear a conceptual space to analyze the dialogic ways that people use race in meaningful social practice. The stakes for understanding such uses of evidence for race remnants are quite high. What’s more, we need to challenge the ways that properties of blackness used to document African communities impose limits upon identification processes.

Across the globe various politics of blackness and “blackening” blur into each other as they transect disparate historical-political realities (see Hall 1994). No less

so in the former territories of the USSR, where persons once officially recognized as minority nationalities are being blackened, or being labeled blacks. Both dominant and popular cultural representations of such minorities blacken them, as do communities undergoing such conscription themselves, in critical, reflexive expressions of black identity. These representations and expressions, though they index local political affiliations and rifts, are a part of international discourses about race and, in particular, global ideals of blackness. Decades of Soviet reportage on racism in the United States meant that Soviets were aware of competing pragmatic deployments racializing terms in the West. Thus, many post-Soviets use the phrase “white person” (*belij chelovek*) to mean not only “pale complexioned and/or biologically European person,” but also “person enjoying civil rights” or “a normal life,” as opposed to the more usual suffering of bureaucratic constraints in a crumbling Soviet infrastructure. Conversely, non-Russian minorities (Azeris, Georgians, Roma, Tatars, and others) in Russian-dominated metropolises forged imaginary connections with African Americans, combining the logic of rights with local understandings of blackness (in Russia any “swarthy,” “southern,” and “Asian” person might be labeled *chernij*, or black): “We are *negry*,” one Romani man told Lemon (2000b, p. 75). “We are treated like second class here, like your blacks in America.”

In the following sections this review calls attention to ways diasporic analysis could treat race by examining shifts in regimes that have constituted blackness through tropes of “displacement” and “continuity.” Adding to related conversations in anthropology across colonial, postcolonial, socialist, and postsocialist contexts, it deconstructs implicit reasoning that links blood, purity, and miscegenation to spatial origins or to current territorial belonging and legitimacy (Hale 1994; Gilroy 1987; Williams 1989, 1991; Trouillot 1990; Gupta & Ferguson 1992; Alonso 1994; Malkki 1995; Amselle 1998; Fikes 2000; Lemon 2000b; Mamdani 2002) and/or to citizenship (Gilroy 1987, Stoler 1992, Wade 1993, Hale 1994, Harrison 1995, Ferreira da Silva 1998, Gordon 1998, Gould 1998, Grandin 2000, de la Cadena 2000, Fikes 2000, Lemon 2000a, Lomnitz 2001, Mamdani 2002, Brodtkin 1998). Likewise, this review builds upon analyses of displacement and continuity that explore how such categories matter to communities whose public identities are constrained by representations that oppose settlement to travel and impermanence (Gilroy 1987; Scott 1991, 1999; Apter 1991; Brown 1998, 2000; Lemon 2000b; Fikes 2000).

Whereas our approach to textual sources works through and against certain representations of “Africa,” “Africans,” and “slavery,” we by no means discount the effects of historically persistent connotations of “black” or “African” with “slave” (Scott 1991). Rather, we treat these terms as resources in a field in which various players act upon them: We wish to analyze that playing field. Hence, in the same sense in which Apter (1991) and Scott (1991, 1999) politicize “Africa” and “slavery” as tropes that naturalize “African” continuities, the following emphasizes the discursive work of crafting continuity and its absence. “Race” is a discursive regime whose real effects are negotiated into awareness by and among “producers” and “objects” alike. Recognizing Apter’s (1991) call to attend to tensions between

inventing and practicing discourses that rely upon these tropes, we focus upon state participation in the “inventive” process (Mudimbe 1988), in part because the available texts best document that process.

“Africa” and “slavery” establish a tension. They index limits of continuity, but they must also be publicly reinscribed to authorize their referential power to signify displacement or things officially silenced (see Trouillot 1990). We examine these processes by placing accounts of African presence amid disruptions to imperial regimes and the accompanying disruptions to modes of transmitting public memory. This approach both challenges readings of “continuity” and allows us to highlight the ways new regimes reappropriated “Africa” and “blackness” for new audiences (see Brown 2000); we situate the shifting ways Soviet and post-Soviet texts address both domestic and Western readers.

## OTTOMAN AND RUSSIAN IMPERIALISM

This section draws from historians’ accounts of imperial institutions, interrelations, and disruptions regulating Ottoman slave trade before and at the turn of the twentieth century. We lack oral accounts or texts to represent the voices of various agents and thus stress the political salience of African presence in available accounts. A more detailed study might, for instance, illuminate how in Russian and Turkish usage the categories black and African were variously politicized across the Ottoman and Russian empires.

To read across histories of Ottoman, Russian, and later Soviet Empires involves stressing that, although we refer to different imperial headings, they do not withstand the persistent contacts linking these regions to each other, as well as to western Europe and to Africa. Some African movements to Russian imperial territories were spurred by slave trading not only between the Ottomans and the Caucasus, but also across European-settled or colonized spaces (Clarence-Smith 1988). As mentioned above, Russian courts imported young black male servants from Holland (Blakely 1986). Some Africans en route via Europe to Turkey and to the Caucasus (particularly in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries) were likely familiar with contemporaneous European understandings of race and of blackness in particular. Another node of intersection was the steady arrival to the Ottoman Empire of thousands of trans-imperial travelers and administrators. These visitors brought their own slaves and translators, many of whom were black Africans: These slaves’ encounters with local slaves variably informed and helped situate representations of Ottoman (Tanzimat) enslavement and racializing practices (see Dorr 1999).

Britain urged the Ottomans to end slave trading in the early nineteenth century until the turn of the twentieth century, when Ottoman slavery officially ended. Ottoman slave populations included not only Africans, but also East European, Balkan, and Caucasus peoples, most particularly female Circassians. Beginning in the 1850s the British had been influential in slowing the African slave trade, but not the Circassian trade. The Russian Empire was all too happy to be rid of Circassians

and other Caucasus peoples: After defeating the Ottomans in the Crimean War (1853–1856) it devoted full attention to sweeping resistant populations from the Caucasus. Also, the Circassian refugees brought their own Circassian slaves with them into exile. The Ottomans finally responded to British pressures to suppress the trade of Africans, most decisively in 1890 with the Brussels Act—but “white” slavery continued to be deemed by Ottomans and British alike as an internal issue (Toledano 1982). All this suggests that the racial marking of slaves was a profoundly trans-imperial and trans-spatial enterprise, a process that was constituted through dialogues that connected trans-Saharan and transatlantic practices. Regardless of the ideologies discerning enslavement, blackness was constituted as a sign indexing displaced peoples; the practices of traveling imperial bodies and the disparate imperial knowledges and institutions that these bodies represented confirmed this.

The Ottoman state instituted other measures that marked and separated black bodies. The 1890 Brussels Act not only added teeth to sanctions against the African slave trade, but also called for guesthouses in former trade centers along the Mediterranean and Red Sea coasts to protect emancipated persons “in transition” (Toledano 1982, p. 247). Near some of these guesthouses the state would give former slaves land to cultivate and to build settlements. At first, they were encouraged to marry other Africans to establish communities on that land, but by 1892 only married Africans were transported to such settlements (Toledano 1982, pp. 247–53). These guesthouses and settlements thus exhibit state involvement in creating and demarcating black-African-slave communities as such.

It is difficult to know to what extent Ottoman slave trading and manumission practices affected the creation of African communities in Abkhazia or of racial categories in the Caucasus or in Russia. More research is called for in this area. From the sixteenth century until 1810, the Abkhazian coast was dependent on the Ottomans, but the Ottoman reach did not include the Caucasus. Georgia, an autonomous Christian state since the fourth century AD, battled Seljuk forces, paid tribute to the Iranians and Mongols, and battled the Ottomans before declaring itself a Russian protectorate in 1783. Although those areas never came fully under Ottoman control (see Suny 1988), up into the seventeenth century the Ottomans were the dominant power across Transcaucasia. The area then suffered economic collapse, the slave trade becoming the only lucrative trade: The population of western Georgia was drastically reduced by warfare and the slave trade. The Russian Empire annexed Georgia in 1800 and controlled the rest of the Caucasus by the 1870s, after more than a century of struggles there with Turkish and Iranian forces and with local populations. The 1890 Brussels Act, coming into effect a generation later, marks a transition period from which a trans-imperial logic of race emerged—it effectively underwrote local constructions of place and belonging.

The cultural and political impact that Ottoman imperialism had on understandings of race and of spatial belonging—not only within the Ottoman Empire, but across Russian imperial and then Soviet Eurasian territories—has yet to be discerned in its complexity. Just as relations with Britain affected racialization in

Ottoman territories, so probably did Russian-Turkish relations render lasting effects. As we address below, global politics certainly affected Soviet and post-Soviet racializing discourses. Since World War I several overlapping political revolutions seem to account for a lack of information and thinking about these complex influences. The early Kemalist Turkish Republic, taking power in 1923, tried to disassociate itself from Ottoman history, rendering it conceptually distant and mythic to contemporary society (Gülap 1995). Across the borders the Soviet state similarly disassociated itself from Russian imperial history even as it reabsorbed the same Caucasus territories that the Russian Empire had annexed in the nineteenth century—territories once linked to the Ottoman slave trade. Finally, beginning in the mid-1920s, in line with this disassociation, the Soviets codified a rhetoric of cooperative equality to officially delimit certain forms of identity and erase others. These parallel events yielded historic narratives and territorial assignments that failed to recall the dynamics of contact that had woven Africa to the Caucasus (see Williams 1991). We do not review each in equal detail but mention them here in order to sketch a context for what follows and to suggest lines for further inquiry.

To review narratives that locate Africans within these contested territories (or to explore ways contemporary non-Africans appropriate narratives of race or slavery from other spaces and extend their tropes of “blackness” to local ones) requires that we assess the production of blackness as a trans-spatial enterprise—and relate it to particular political transitions. We have addressed international shifts that affected Ottoman slave trade. We turn now to shifts from Russian imperial to Soviet governance in 1918, roughly paralleling the shift from Ottoman to secular Kemalist rule in 1923. Both transitions drew upon and disregarded productions of racial difference.

## TRANSITION TO SOVIET POLITICS

In 1921 the Bolsheviks assumed territorial control of all the Caucasus after defeating counter-revolutionary forces in a civil war (1918 to 1921). Beginning in the 1920s certain populations residing along the Black Sea (for instance, Crimean Tartars, Circassians, Abkhazians) were steadily classified as Soviet “national minorities” or “nations” and assigned autonomous districts, regions, or republics. The Russian term “nationality” carries senses closer to “ethnicity” than in English usage (though as we see below the term is multivalent): Key here are the ways policy makers and census takers used these categories and thereby cultivated national consciousness and a sense of inherent, “primordial identity” (Martin 2001; see also Suny 1993, Slezkine 1996, Hirsch 1997, Suny & Martin 2001).

After 1926 Soviet nationalities policy began in earnest to demarcate nationalities from each other (and “small peoples” from “national minorities” and from “nations”) (Slezkine 1994a, Weiner 1999, Hirsch 2000). From this period until the mid 1930s, the commissar for nationality affairs interpreted Leninist nationalities policy this way: Imperial oppressions could only be redressed by recognizing

national minorities, offering affirmative action-type education, job placements, and partial territorial autonomy. Lenin had urged that if the nation-state were to “wither away” under communism, the vanguard state should first strategically recognize oppressed nations in particular. Policies recognized nationalities based on several criteria, including common language, culture, historical, and territorial continuity. “Large nations” possessed all of these, while “minority nationalities” and small peoples might lack territorial continuity. Between 1923 and 1938 the state demarcated numerous national autonomous regions and republics, set up employment niches and quotas, and established presses and schools in almost 200 languages, which included those of many so-called small peoples and diaspora minorities that were not assigned regional territory. National minorities were to “raise their cultural level” and become politically literate in socialism through the mediation of their mother tongues: The rather Jesuitic slogan of the day was “nationalist in form, socialist in content.”

The Soviets never recognized blacks in the Caucasus as a nationality in the same way that they recognized other peoples there (for instance, some Circassians had also been slaves, but they were recognized). Soviet propaganda in the early 1930s did refer to some peoples as “former slaves” (e.g., Roma) or as “former serfs” (Russians, Ukrainians) “freed” by the revolution, but this was a rhetorical move, not a basis for recognizing groups as historical entities. However, the Abkhazian Africans were not represented as originally “belonging” to that space: That alone ought not to have prevented a nationality classification because other populations lacking legitimated territorial continuity, such as Roma and Jews, were assigned nationalities based on perceptions of linguistic, historical, or cultural differences. According to sources cited above, however, black villagers in Abkhazia spoke Abkhazian and practiced local customs; with the ostensible lack of territorial continuity, this left “color” alone to index any sort of difference. However, Soviet policy could not explicitly use such racial markers to distinguish groups; in Soviet official discourse the color bar and antiblack racism were defined as evils of capitalist colonialism. As a result, no space (neither postemancipation nor postrevolutionary) opened up for these villages to constitute themselves as a group among other groups recognized as “oppressed minorities” in early Soviet Russia. As a corollary, early Soviet nationalities policy also erased opportunities to publish or otherwise publicly recollect any distinctive experiences of Africans in Abkhazia.

In 1936 Georgia was promoted to the status of a Soviet republic, with Abkhazia formalized as one of its minority regions. But by the late 1930s Stalin (born in Georgia and not himself a native Russian speaker) had reversed several aspects of Leninist nationalities policy. The Soviet Union shifted to a federative model in which Russian would serve as the “inter-nationality” lingua franca. In 1937 Russian became an obligatory subject, and presses and schools that had published and taught in minority languages of groups lacking recognized large territorial claims were shut down (Smith 1998; Lemon 2000b, 2002b; Martin 2001; see also Kreindler et al. 1985). “Small minorities” became subsumed under the more

“advanced nationalities” (e.g., Mingrelians under Georgians) who, in turn, were accountable to Russophone institutions in Moscow. These moves would, according to party press, meld the nationalities into a “friendship of the peoples.” The friendship of the peoples even more explicitly opposed racial discrimination abroad than had earlier policy, celebrating Soviet-style, “inter-national” hybridity as an alternative. Ethnographic data and statistics showing increases in inter-nationality marriage and bilingualism (see post–World War II, Russian-language publications of the Academy of Sciences Miklukho-Maklai Institute of Ethnography, *passim*) made a hybrid utopia seem real, while museum and folk displays and film and theater stereotypes instantiated the separate nations comprising the hybrid (Slezkine 1994b, Grant 1995, Petrone 1996, Lemon 2000b).

Safeguarded by the absence of explicit racializing criteria in official nationalities policies, the state could globally situate Soviet Republican, inter-nationality politics as more civil and humane than racial politics in the West. For example, children’s books such as Samuil Marshak’s 1933 *Mr. Twister* (translated into many languages over the decades; see Geldern & Stites 1995) depicted Soviets as equally hospitable to Africans and Europeans, housing them all in the same hotels—in the story, the white U.S. millionaire visiting Leningrad is enraged by this. In the 1936 film *Circus* (directed by Alexandrov), Moscow provides a haven from cruel bigotry to a white woman from the United States and her black baby, a “new home” where, at the end of the film, an audience of circus-goers representing dozens of Soviet nationalities pass the baby hand to hand, singing lullabies in their “national tongues.” Note, however, that such narratives link African individuals in Russia to an origin somewhere else. They never link images of African communities to a more long-term presence.

However state media attempted to represent the USSR as eschewing racial categories (in order to signal opposition to racial discrimination both in the imperial past and in capitalist countries), state agents most likely did draw upon them when assigning access to education and employment and when implementing residence and resettlement policies (Abramson 2002, Hirsch 2002, Weitz 2002, Weiner 2002). Anecdotal evidence indicates that state agents in the Caucasus may have tried to erase African communities by deporting and dispersing them. Khanga (1992) notes that Svetlana Alijuevna, Stalin’s daughter, wrote in her memoirs that Khanga’s mother, Golden-Hanga, had confided in her about a visit to the Abkhazian villages (1968; see also Blakely 1986, p. 78). The frightened villagers worried that Golden-Hanga’s visit boded a relocation farther away; Blakely asserts that this suggests they had witnessed previous relocations. The years preceding World War II saw mass deportations of borderland and diaspora minorities, most notably from the Caucasus to Central Asia (see Conquest 1970; Gelb 1993, 1995; Naimark 2000; Martin 2001). Those orchestrating relocations may have used implicitly racializing criteria to remove several groups in the region, perhaps including Africans (see Weitz 2002; see also Holquist 2001, Martin 2001). The villagers thus either identified with resettled neighbors or remembered that soldiers had previously deported Africans.



Blakely (1986, p. 79) suggests that the Abkhazian blacks may have been relocated more than once to various parts of the Soviet Union, even in the 1970s. After World War II some resettled peoples returned. Such returns were no simple matter, neither was any relocation within the Soviet Union: All Soviet citizens carried passports that registered them at a particular address, and each citizen was allowed only one residence permit at a time. Registering for a permit was especially bureaucratically tortuous in desirable cities like Moscow; returning and registering in the Caucasus was likely fraught with bureaucratic obstacles as well—perhaps especially for people whom local bureaucrats may have de facto considered African, not belonging in the Caucasus. At any rate, according to Golden-Hanga's confidences, the Abkhazian blacks certainly experienced extreme poverty and lacked access to basic life necessities as well as to Soviet education and media.

## THE SPECTACLE PRODUCTION OF BLOOD IN THE USSR

Paradoxically, the ways official delimitations of national identities rejected racial criteria constrained modes to publicly recognize and engage with African blackness. In this section we discuss ways African presence was, once again, produced as spectacle, in the context of the political transitions outlined above. We have addressed such spectacle-making in imperial times. Soviet representations, even as they linked racial discrimination to imperialism and capitalist "wage slavery," echoed imperial productions and reproduced the surprise and bewilderment the imperial papers had expressed upon discovering African communities in Abkhazia in 1913. In the 1940s, Soviet media accounts extracted African presence from the Ottoman and Russian imperial histories that 1920s Soviet policies had countered. They seemingly avoided imperial inequities without tracing its historical relations in detail. As discussed above, just before World War I, while the Caucasus was still under Russian imperial rule, press representations located the African villages as somehow displaced while also displacing the entire Caucasus as Russia's Africa. Later accounts of "Negro villages" drop the latter function but echo the former: Soviet logics of territorial placement and legitimacy appropriated imperial racial discourses in new, selective ways to embed spectacle in a new set of federative and international relations.

We can demonstrate these imaginaries in a wartime article published by Soviet journalist Isidor Schneider in the English-language Soviet public relations organ *Soviet Russia Today*. It was titled, "A Negro Citizen of Soviet Georgia: The Story of Bashir Shambe, Brought from Persia into Tsarist Russia as a Slave, Now one of Soviet Georgia's Distinguished Citizens":

Following Bashir Shambe home one would note the respect and affection in the greetings received from his white neighbors . . . Walking in with him would be introduced to Bashir Shambe's Russian wife and his slender, handsome, mulatto son. The boy wears the tie of a Young Pioneer, in whose organization only the youth who show determination, devotion, intelligence and other high

qualities can hold membership. From his alert, eager and confident manner one realizes that the son of Bashir Shambe has never known that Negro blood be a bar to opportunity and to full participation in the life of the community (Schneider 1942, p. 148).

Shambe's distinguished citizenship is realized in a nonracist environment, brought about by transformations to Soviet forms of government. The phrase "the son . . . has never known . . . Negro blood [to] be a bar to opportunity" suggests that it is solely the political environment that alleviates otherwise certain suffering. Here, "Negro blood" is treated as real, and it is only the father's luck to have been brought to future Soviet territory (as an African can never be of it) that allows both to experience blackness without injury to spirit or body. As Seshadri-Crooks (2000, pp. 8–9) argues, race is treated as a neutral factor in human difference, as if racism (in the same conversation) merely misappropriated that factor.

Schneider distinguishes between race and racism earlier in her article when she quotes Shambe describing his life as a young slave in (Teheran) Iran, a country with a long history of conflicts with Tsarist and Soviet Russia:

My new master was what could be politely described as whimsical. He decided to make me serve as a clown to entertain him and his guests. He instructed me in Persian dances. And he trained me to grin, opening my mouth as widely as possible and exposing my teeth. To laugh at my white teeth, showing against my dark skin, seemed to him remarkable entertainment. To grin before him and his guests, whether or not I had anything to grin about, became one of my chief tasks (Schneider 1942, p. 149).

Ventriloquizing Shambe, Schneider criticizes racist practice abroad. However, note that she shuns the category of race only insofar as notice of Shambe's body causes his suffering; she problematizes race only when the misguided visually index it. By contrast, in a section in which she marks race as invisibly "carried in the blood," inherent difference is commonsensical and legitimate.

Schneider continues Shambe's story as a Georgian prince visits Persia and decides to take him back to Georgia. He asserts that life in Tsarist-controlled Georgia was no different than life in Teheran, establishing imperial tyranny as the culprit in racist practices (149):

The next day I was delivered to my new master . . . To heighten what he considered the comic effect produced by his Negro servant my master bought me a white donkey to travel on . . . I was given a corner in the dragoon stables to live in. There I slept and ate. The promised education was forgotten together with other promises. My mother and I never saw each other again. My work was menial and my Georgian master, like my Persian masters, used me as an object of sport. Then the Revolution came . . . Finally the Mensheviks were defeated. Georgia became a Soviet Republic. If this meant real freedom and a new life for the Georgians you can imagine what a liberation it meant for me. To be accepted as an equal, to live as a human being and not as an object

of sport for bored rich people . . . You can understand with what eagerness I volunteered in the Red Army (Schneider 1942, pp. 149–50).

In juxtaposing this narrative of the past against that of present opportunities for Shambe's son—for whom “Negro blood” is irrelevant to education and organizational affiliation—the journalist affirms Soviet republicanism as the political solution to inhumanity, to racial and class segregation, and even to the destruction of the family. Recall that the article appeared in an English-language publication, aimed at a Western, English-speaking audience: Most important for its discursive positioning is not that Shambe's original enslavement occurred in Tehran rather than somewhere in the West, but that a Soviet journalist recoils from antiblack racism and champions the liberation of “Negros.”

Of equal importance is that Shambe himself is not represented as a cultural participant in any broader community of Africans or blacks. Instead, the story emphasizes his comfort with white neighbors who honor and respect him. Such narratives resonate strongly with many Soviet assimilation tales, stories highlighting intermarriage and inter-national harmony and showcasing individual minorities as successful professionals within a broader, Russian speaking Soviet world: the hard-working Gypsy sports scholar or Chuvash surgeon. Yet Schneider never describes Shambe or his son as simply Soviets. Thus, however else they may have experienced their locality and however else their neighbors may have addressed them, this text's coherence rests upon identification of “Negro blood.” Being “Negros” before anything else, though “Negro” was not a recognized nationality category, their figures imply an inherent relationship between race and nation (see Gilroy 1987; Williams 1989, 1991; Kondo 1997). Just in the moment when the journalist uniquely prizes their citizenship, she simultaneously indexes them as displaced.

Schneider's 1942 use of terms such as “blood” is not isolated: We can situate it within a broader frame of Soviet racializing discursive practice. We outline this frame by examining textual evidence from the past alongside the ways post-Soviet actors reproduce discursive practices that circulated in the Soviet past. In the 1990s many post-Soviet scholars argued that race was not a relevant category in the USSR because the relevant terms in official and academic use were not race but *natsional'nost* (nationality, ethnicity) or *narodnost* (folk identity, ethnicity) (cf. Hirsch 1997, Weitz 2002). As detailed above, these terms had particular uses in official policy. In many arenas, however (and as Schneider's article illustrates, including officially sanctioned media), Soviets did infer biological and inherited essences, drawing both upon external signs and nonvisible signs such as blood. Additionally, terms such as nationality were deployed to do the work of racial categories (see also Balibar 1989). Such practices have been amplified in post-Soviet times, as in this statement by an organization called Russian National Union (1995, p. 1): “[T]here are even people who . . . rush to mix with the Jewish nationality and expect all kinds of beneficial results. [A] man and wife who are both Russian and happen to want healthy, racially whole children are automatically labeled fascists.” Connections and slippages among such categories change

over time, and to project current configurations retrospectively would be unpersuasive. We can, however, assess how recent articulations strategically echo previous discursive practices for new audiences and new state interests and advocate more research on how changes in state policy and in international relations play into these strategies.

However firmly the Soviet state declared itself against racism, numerous racializing slurs circulated not only outside official discourse, but also among those who populated state institutions such as prisons and the army, at least from Stalin's time. Roback's multilingual dictionary of slurs, published just after World War II, gives numerous Russian colloquial pejoratives turning upon skin color and bodily features and linking biology to geography (Roback 1946); so also do dictionaries collecting Soviet prison slang of the 1960s (Rossi 1992[1987]). From such collections one can only hypothesize the actual social encounters through which terms such as *chernozhepy* ("black asses") or *negativy* ("photographic negatives") circulated beyond state disciplinary contexts in other social realms. Still, these collections belie attempts to explain post-Soviet racial thinking merely as imports from the West or to dismiss it as resurgence from the distant, imperial past.

Under Soviet rule, officially sanctioned cultural texts and unofficial popular discourse linked dark complexions to naturalized proclivities such as "cleverness in the market," "lusty dispositions," "hot blooded" temperaments, "traditional" patriarchal social organizing, and "clan-like" family networks. Anything isolated as a difference can be made to signal some ostensibly essential nature that connects generations. "Race" can be marked by accent or grammar (Irvine & Gal 2000), by forms of kinship, through spatial relations, or by other cultural practices. In 1990s Russia, post-Soviets often spoke of these traits as being carried unseen "in the blood" (Lemon 2000b, 2002a; also see Butler 1993, Hall 1996, Seshadri-Crooks 2000). Since at least the 1960s, Soviet films and television established a motif for detecting hidden identity "in the blood," playing on the trope of connections "under the skin" without naming those connections as "racial" (though some did use the language of "genes"). In Soviet times hybridity was presented as joyful—and not only by official media; counter-cultures, too, played with hybrid identities (see Rayport 1998). However, by the 1990s the problem of discerning racial and national identities intersected anxieties about authentic motives and values under a shifting regime, worries about cultural loss commonly aired in ethnographic and journalistic accounts of minority communities. Taxonomic dissolution had similarly vexed physical anthropologists in nineteenth-century Russia, who found "some Finns to be Balts, some Balts to be Slavs, and some Slavs to be Turks" (Slezkine 1996, p. 828). This slipperiness has been used to support arguments that Russian society is less racist than others. Yet reference to bodily forms and skin color were never the only racializing practices there or elsewhere: Observe the sliding discourses around hidden percentages of blood in the United States or the unmasking of genealogies in Nazi Germany. The accounts of displacement that we have traced here attest to still other slippery modes of making races.

## THE DIASPORIC POLITICS OF RACIAL DISSOLUTION AND SPATIAL ORIGINS

Soviet political and social life was in part constituted through sliding engagements with blackness. The process of representing black individuals (from Pushkin's grandfather to Paul Robeson) as graciously welcomed, juxtaposed against official representations and policy that erased permanent black or African communities, representing them as not originally belonging, situates one of many playing fields within which Soviet federalism globally opposed capitalism and antiblack discrimination. This simultaneous celebration and erasure importantly confirmed Soviet civility while productively linking Russianness to whiteness. Both sorts of representation, each spectacular anomalies, worked as mutually constituting technologies; they internally managed distinctions among nationalities while globally representing Soviet identity. Effectively, this denial and erasure crafted both the invisibility of African communities existing in Soviet territory since imperial times (or earlier) and the celebrity of Soviet black émigrés, represented as short-term or individual residents in Russian space.

Khanga's perception of the ways Africans living in Abkhazia were kept apart from African Americans who chose to resettle in the USSR is telling. Khanga (1992) argues that when African Americans learned about and tried to connect with these communities, state officials made such meetings difficult. What could be read as an effort to silence (and as discussed above, disperse and dilute) the black Abkhazian can be observed against the accounts of Africans and African Americans who voluntarily relocated to the Soviet Union. These contradictions highlight processes constituting both discrete Soviet nationalities and the Soviet federalism that subsumed them. Curiously, then, the emergence of these tensions around blackness seems to have been ratified by the increasing presence in the USSR of Western blacks and African nationals who sought opportunities to experience their humanity without racial prejudice. Soviet-era voluntary émigrés played key roles in producing temporally situated images of blackness in Soviet space. Travelers and short-term residents sympathetic to the Soviet regime and to communist ideals, people such as W.E.B. Du Bois (1968), Paul Robeson (1950), Harry Haywood (1978), Langston Hughes (1934, 1956; see also Moore 1996), and William Patterson (1971) became living examples that Soviet press drew upon to depict the USSR as a place deemed desirable by U.S., Caribbean, and black-African intellectuals (see also Osei 1963, Fondem 1978, La Guma 1978).

Davis' (1960, p. 68) observation that Lily Golden-Hanga, daughter of such émigrés, did not recognize the name of Dr. Martin Luther King, while every Russian "loved" Paul Robeson, is significant. Blakely suggests that this sort of selective knowledge of prominent black intellectuals signaled implicit racism in Soviet nation-building (1986, p. 141): Soviet media depicted "Negros" abroad as victims only, acknowledging only the structural effects of racism. Other Soviets thus could conceive of them neither as people or communities successfully challenging U.S. racial politics nor as their own intellectual equals. Fax (1974, p. 167), however,

reports that a decade later Uzbek children greeted him on the street by exclaiming “Angela Davis!” and “Mohammed Ali!” and raising a black power salute. Clearly, then, mundane Soviet engagements with international discourses about race were already, by the early 1970s, more complex than analysis of official media alone might show. What’s more, Russian youths’ post-Soviet appropriation of “skinhead” behavior, targeting Africans and other “blacks” in Moscow—in concert with other globally circulating skinhead ideologies—underscore what is at stake in understanding these engagements and articulations over time (see Banerjee 1998, Williams 1998). To confine post-Soviet interpretations of blackness to former Soviet territories, for instance, would neglect the new circumstances of contact, not to mention the various alignments with and against international racial discourses that shift during regime and global media transformations.

Assessment of the discursive production of African presence in the USSR poses important challenges to research on diasporas. We have focused on references and indexes of discontinuity and impermanence and of spatial displacement. Understanding the interplay of these representations—which rely upon origins and blood to mediate continuity—sheds light on the popular and bureaucratic regimes that safeguard racial practices that create the diaspora in question. We assume this approach in an effort to question that which race or racial community come to signify, both in political usage and at the level of analysis. The objective has been to think through how to avoid analyses of racialization that impose a predetermined sense of collectivity, one that implicitly relies upon and thus generates ontological biological distinctions. Within this process we question how, in acknowledging “black community,” we come to create that which we refer to as black within diasporic analysis. These questions are raised not to suggest that black subject locations should not be treated as existentially or socially real. Rather, we aim to locate that which situates and confirms a black condition (be it forced labor regimes or citizenship practices) in an effort to recognize how we conceptually imply that a community or body is black (beyond obvious references to discrimination) within our analyses. As the particularities of African presences in these areas of the world are still to be fully explored, we hope this review will spur such exploration in ways that continue to clarify how race is treated and reproduced within diasporic criticism. Not interrogating how race is treated and deployed in any particular moment of articulation risks not only leaving African and other diasporic scholarship content with ambiguous readings of race, but also inadvertently reproducing race, even as it is questioned.

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