

## Here, There, and Elsewhere: Reimagining Russian Language and Culture Course Syllabi for Social Justice

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### 1. Introduction: Uncomfortable truths

The past two decades have witnessed enrollments in American colleges and universities for U.S. residents aged 18 to 24 increase from 35 percent in 2000 to 41 percent in 2018. Within this demographic, those identifying in census data as Hispanic/Latinx increased during the same period from 22 to 36 percent, as Black 31 to 37 percent, as Asian 56 to 59 percent, as Indigenous/Native American 16 to 24 percent, and as bi- or multiracial 38 to 44 percent (Hussar et al. 2020, 125). As the student population of higher education in the United States begins to reflect the national demographic portrait in racial and ethnic terms, the need for more learner-centered, inclusive, and equitable learning opportunities is more significant than ever.

The pernicious ubiquity of systemic institutional racism, including within higher education, is at the core of the current national reckoning on race, equity, and justice. As Ash, et al. (2020) tersely put it, “Racism is ordinary, deeply ingrained, and a permanent part of Western society” (5). The “ordinary” quality of racism in the United States is perhaps the country’s most troubling characteristic within the social fabric. The persistent sociohistorical discrimination against Black and Latinx populations in U.S. education has resulted in the unjust exclusion of members of these groups from educational opportunities (Ledesma and Fránquiz, 2015). In spite of the increasing enrollments of BIPOC students in U.S. universities and colleges, the lack of engagement with the realities of racism, the white racial hegemony within leadership positions—including faculty—and especially the lack of relevant, inclusive, and diversity-focused courses, continue to perpetuate inequity and exclusion in the academy. To address these persistent inequities, Ash, et al. (2020) contend, “Institutions must find new ways to achieve their stated goals and strategies” (18).

The social injustices confronting race and ethnicity are no less evident or consequential in terms of gender, sexual identity, (dis)abilities, socioeconomic class, and other intersectional identities. Intersectionality disrupts established notions “of arbitrary binaries placed on race and gender by exploring the complexity of race and gender identities and how such complexities shape people” (Crenshaw 1989, 140). Crucially, language education plays a particularly important role in rupturing monolithic linguistic and cultural dominance by using languages and cultures to empower learners to challenge and disrupt the notions of “status, hegemony, homogeneity, lingua franca, and language war” (Tochon 2019, 264). Multilingual ability facilitates access to original texts and materials and enables direct interaction with local speakers of the language studied, permitting non-translated, unmediated critical engagement in the language with facts, ideas, and problems. By employing syllabi, methods, and materials informed by critical pedagogy, language and culture courses can become inclusive environments for cross-cultural communication, critical engagement of ideas, and expression of diverse and varied perspectives, characteristics that also support proficiency-oriented and standards-based language instruction. Instructors of Russian language and culture can contribute to the process of empowering learners who have been excluded from or denied full access to educational opportunities by making their classrooms, materials, and methods inclusive, equitable, and welcoming to all learners.

## **2. Decolonizing the syllabus, or finding elsewhere**

Since 2019 the phrase decolonize the syllabus has been embraced as a first step in addressing diversity and inclusivity in our courses. Of course, decolonization goes beyond changing content or adding diverse voices to a course (Appleton 2019). An online resource for revising course syllabi in the program in Women’s and Gender Studies at the University of Portland provides a necessary caveat: “Decolonizing syllabi must not take the form of tokenism or fetishization. . . . It is not enough to merely assign indigenous and/or minority writings, for example; rather a syllabus that includes these voices and shows how your discipline benefits from and perpetuates colonialism is a much more apt route” (University of Portland n.d.). Well-intentioned approaches to curricular decolonization, such as adding a minority figure(s) to the syllabus, while representing

a positive first step, are insufficient on their own to engage the primary tenet of critical pedagogy: criticality. As Macedo (2019) contends, “Hard sciences would not survive and evolve without a robust dose of built-in self-criticism, skepticism, and contestation. Thus criticality should inform all fields of study” (5). Macedo goes on to focus specifically on language instruction, because of its colonial history, as long overdue for critical revision. Decolonizing the world language<sup>1</sup> syllabus must be transformative both in content and manner of instruction. That is, the syllabus should change the breadth of the material we present, as well as simultaneously create new means and opportunities for all learners to interrogate and engage critically with this content.

Courses in world languages and cultures, including Russian, can engage in the process of decolonization, despite several common assumptions against its implementation. The first of these assumptions suggests that courses in world languages in general and Russian (among others) in particular are “excluded” from postcolonial, postimperial histories. Any of us who has taught “Tolstoyevsky,” that is, literature and culture courses that focus entirely on the works of the so-called Golden Age writers, has—albeit unintentionally—conveyed a view on Russian culture through a monolithic, privileged, predominantly heteronormative, historically white male lens. Indeed, even current Russian language textbooks and teaching materials that center on the “Russian masterworks” as the principal texts of instruction are complicit in perpetuating this one-sided, exclusive, and hegemonic presentation of the Russian language, people, and culture.

A related assumption suggests that only European states acquired colonial empires. Macedo (2019) dismisses this claim as “arrogant elitism” (5) that simultaneously acquiesces to the existence of imperial power and exculpates itself by proximal distance. The empires of

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<sup>1</sup> The term WORLD LANGUAGES is used here for three reasons: (1) FOREIGN LANGUAGES suggests the positionality of one language as the source or dominant tongue, while WORLD LANGUAGES is more equitable, and MODERN LANGUAGES excludes ancient and classical languages; (2) the National Standards Collaborative Board’s (2015) World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages uses the term WORLD LANGUAGES as do many state language standards commissions; (3) unlike the term WORLD LITERATURE (in the singular), which sparked a polemic between Damrosch and Spivak (2011), WORLD LANGUAGES entails no expectation of working with original materials in translation; on the contrary, it reinforces the autonomy of each language system. Any “world” or “global” perspective inherently entails an imperial and colonial legacy.

China, the Soviet Union / Russia, and the United States were certainly no less pernicious or dehumanizing than those of the United Kingdom, France, and Spain, among others. Syllabi of Russian language and cultural studies, therefore, are appropriate for decolonization and can be reimagined to reflect more fully the breadth of diversity and intersectional identities in Russia. Deconstructing the colonial history of Russian language, culture, and literature courses allows multiple and diverse voices to be both the subject and the object of instruction in order to promote equity and social justice.

The assumption that only capitalist states can be colonial empires is similarly rebutted in the critical literature. As Grande (2004) asserts: “Both Marxists and capitalists view land and natural resources as commodities to be exploited, in the first instance, by capitalists for personal gain, and in the second by Marxists for the good of all” (27). Da Silva (2007) goes on to posit: “[Both] capitalism and the state are technologies of colonialism, developed over time to further colonial projects. Racism is an invention of colonialism” (153–4). Indeed, contemporary Russia’s colonial Soviet experience is inextricably intertwined with numerous social and political issues the Putin regime faces in the 2020s, including migration, housing shortages, (un)employment, and ethnic tensions all primarily associated with other former Soviet states. These same issues may reflect the experiences of U.S. learners of Russian and serve to inform new activities in a revised syllabus.

A final proposition against decolonizing U.S. courses on Russia suggests that in order to justify the process, there would need first to exist a legacy of colonial domination between the two nations. Both of these nations fall into the category of “settler colonial nation-states,” described best in Tuck and Yang (2012) as nations that simultaneously exploit indigenous peoples in the process of settlement (7). Like the United States during its westward expansion, Russia experienced its own iteration of national “manifest destiny” in the acquisition of Siberian lands and the Far East, among other territories (Bassin 2004). Thus, both countries have colonial histories and experiences that have created racial, ethnic, social, and economic disparities in the postcolonial era. More importantly, both countries continue to perpetuate practices and institutions that widen the equity gap between white and underrepresented populations in their respective homeland. Recognizing and addressing these colonial legacies

in U.S. courses on Russia can prompt the creation of more fulsome historical and cultural narratives that better address a diverse student population.

The decolonization of syllabi whose course content reinforces and perpetuates narratives of white imperial dominance and the acceptance of these structures is an important mechanism in current efforts in US higher education to promote social justice. The carefully reimagined and critically informed Russian language and culture syllabus creates the framework for a course that offers all learners a wider range and variety of perspectives, including those of individuals and groups who have been historically marginalized. Such a syllabus also outlines the kinds of engagement and activities that stimulate critical inquiry and interpersonal communication. Tuck and Yang (2012) describe this process: “Decolonization offers a different perspective to human and civil rights-based approaches to justice, an unsettling one, rather than a complementary one. Decolonization is not an ‘and.’ It is an elsewhere (36; emphasis mine). Rather than presenting only the hegemonic narrative of power and domination or offering an “alternative” narrative that acknowledges minority and/or disenfranchised perspectives as an “and” to the majority position, decolonization insists on the creation of an elsewhere, a third place in which critical discourse and reconciliation of past and present grievances can occur. The decolonized syllabus, properly conceived and executed in class, can provide both the learners and the instructor with a road map to that elsewhere.

### **3. It's on the syllabus**

The course syllabus has long been regarded as an outline of expectations, objectives, and requirements that students use to manage and prepare for each class meeting. As such, it has also served as a contract between learners and instructors, setting requirements and offering means of engagement to help learners succeed in the course (Harnish and Bridges 2011). In the process of decolonizing the syllabus, however, instructors must also consider how the syllabus can function in the aid of educating the white community about issues of race and justice, while offering opportunities for them to begin to share power in the classroom and, by extension, in society. This process of deconstructing colonial privilege involves engaging what Freire (1998) calls *Conscientização*, or

*conscientization*, which Biermann (2011) describes as the interrogation of “the role of both structures and discourses in creating and maintaining systems of colonial domination within which we operate and by which we are located” (394). The goal here is to develop syllabi that encourage learners to engage with course content through difficult dialogues and conversations that require them to negotiate diverse perspectives and experiences (Dowd and Bensimon 2015).

The rationale for developing robust curricular activities and procedures in the syllabus for critical engagement with issues of intersectionality and identity is to supplement the more general statements on diversity in class. Though well intentioned, such attempts to address systemic racism will, according to Ash, et al. (2020), “never challenge the permanence of racism. Instead, such public responses lull the dominant White culture into thinking they are addressing the problem, thus, allowing the deeply rooted systemic racism to invisibly persist” (5). Of course decolonizing course syllabi will not, on its own, undo centuries of institutional racism; however, through thoughtful application of critical pedagogy in syllabus and curricular reform, individual instructors can become the vanguard of a larger movement toward increased diversity, equity, and intersectional inclusivity in higher education.

For BIPOC and other underrepresented intersectional identities, the content and style of syllabi are exceptionally important, given the lack of representation of minority voices and perspectives in academia. Ledesma and Fránquiz (2015), in their overview of critical race theory and K–20 education remark that such interventions can “expose how majoritarian structures have historically shaped and framed educational access and opportunity for historically underrepresented populations” (214). For BIPOC and intersectional learners, reading a syllabus that reflects texts, identities, and perspectives that align with their own is affirming and welcoming; to be not only permitted, but encouraged, to participate in critical inquiry of representative, inclusive texts and materials is empowering and transformative.

The reimagining of Russian course syllabi begins with this question: Does this syllabus encourage, if not require, critical engagement with the material? A revised iteration of the critical inquiry cycle (CIC; see figure 1), a graphic representation of a form of qualitative research that places a premium on an interdisciplinary approach to the ever-evolving process of

inquiry, offers a framework for addressing this question. This decades-old process for critical inquiry serves well the social justice goal of requiring all learners to question, dispute, and refute material presented in our literary and cultural studies courses. Engaging all learners in this process fosters the “difficult conversations” that are the hallmark of criticality. Moreover, the same framework can be employed to devise activities and materials that require learners of Russian to attend both to critical engagement with the material and to the attainment of increased proficiency in the language. As Osborn remarks: “As language skills continue to develop, the CIC [critical inquiry cycle] becomes a symbiotic vehicle through which language becomes the landscape and the medium of inquiry: Language proficiency is strengthened through the CIC and activities supporting it as inquiry is strengthened through language proficiency because the insights of speakers of the target language can be accessed through the medium of the language” (117-18).

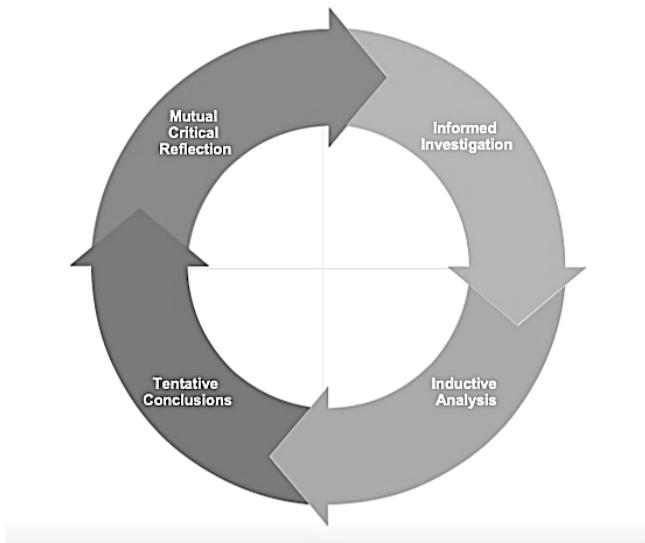


Figure 1. Critical inquiry cycle

Thus, the CIC can be an effective device not only for organizing the thematic flow of the course syllabus but also for devising activities in and out of class for examining, discussing, and disrupting assumptions and conclusions about the material on the syllabus, thus attaining critical reflection while also attending to intersectional diversity in the class.

Reimagining language and culture syllabi for social justice is not without its particular challenges. To create syllabi that require learners to engage critically and negotiate meaning with each other to achieve what Freire (1998) called cultural synthesis—the opposite of cultural invasion—requires instructors to craft ecologies of critical discourse that avoid two equally insidious learner reflexes: (1) either to continue to view the culture being studied as “foreign” or “other,” or (2) to “go native,” what Ahmed (2000) describes as “to become without becoming” (32), and attempt to take on an vestigial understanding of the culture and assume comprehension. In the first instance, the difficulty lies in ensuring that the syllabus provides the range of appropriate “texts”<sup>2</sup> that engenders divergent positional perspectives without creating an “us/them” or “familiar/other” binary divide. In the second case, the materials and activities in the syllabus should provide enough depth of inquiry to offset the “novice expert” phenomenon and allow instead for the development of learner empathy and synthesis.

For both of these cases, I return to the fundamental premise of the syllabus as a contract between learners and instructor. Here, the instructor emerges in the constructed ecology of the language and culture course in the role of contributing mediator, that is, an active participant in the discourse who asks learners to consider the source of information in question, engage with its linguistic and contextual significance, consider alternative diverse perspectives on it (perhaps in conversation with other learners in class who are different from the instructor), and only then assign meaning to it. Learners thus begin to understand that even the most compelling text, taken in context of the interlocutor’s perspective, may represent not a fact, but rather a consensus or opinion (Osborn 2006, 119). This kind of engagement is at the heart of critical pedagogy and the decolonized syllabus: the creation of an environment that provides equitable opportunities and means for learners to interrogate given materials and/or assumptions through the process of critical inquiry and the contextualization of diverse

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<sup>2</sup> The term TEXT is used in a language/cultural studies context to indicate any materials that convey meaning: print texts (including literary works, critical essays, journalistic items, etc.), still visual images (including works of art, photographs, illustrations, poster art, etc.), audio recordings (including music, podcasts, audiobooks, etc.), video recordings (including films, documentaries, television broadcasts, YouTube videos, etc.), artifacts (physical objects including ephemera and realia), and so on.

perspectives. In this way, Russian language and Russian cultural studies classrooms become beneficial ecologies for “challenging hegemonic ideologies, of liberating students from oppressive cognitive, intellectual, and sociological constructs that have thus far been created or reinforced in our context” (Reagan and Osborn 2021, 90). It is within such learning environments that issues of diversity and inclusivity can be addressed within the framework of critical inquiry as part of the newly deconstructed Russian language and culture syllabus, an inclusive plan for learner engagement that brings an array of diverse texts, activities, and perspectives to the classroom.

Another project very much in the service of creating syllabi and curricula for social justice in world language and culture education is that of the *World-Readiness Standards for Language Learning* (National Standards Collaborative Board 2015). For more than a quarter century, this collaborative has maintained and articulated goals that fully integrate proficiency-oriented pedagogy and instructional content into an array of contexts to move language and culture instruction beyond the traditional classroom in order to “open doors to information and experiences which enrich the entire school and life experience” (National Standards 1996, 49). The Standards’ “Five Cs” underscore the focus of their stated goals; in particular, Connections, Comparisons and Communities foster interdisciplinarity, cross-cultural competencies, and translingual community interaction, respectively, while Communication and Cultures inform interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational communication with appropriate references of cultural products and practices.

The recently published Russian-specific standards (Garza, Merrill, and Shuffelton 2020) reinforce the imperative to have learners in language and culture courses “interact and negotiate meaning in spoken or written conversations in Russian to share information, reactions, feelings, and opinions” (18). This standard for interpersonal communication reinforces the use of meaningful intercourse as a communicative device that requires participants to negotiate meaning while sharing opinions and information—precisely the context in which critical discourse takes place in a world language classroom. Used in tandem with materials and activities of a decolonized syllabus, the interpersonal communication standard supports the exchange of diverse positions and perspectives among learners in the class.

A final useful framework for reviewing and revising syllabi to reflect the goals and objectives of critical pedagogy can be seen in figure 2: equity-minded syllabus review (Dowd and Bensimon 2015, 68). Beyond the usual features of syllabi (including course content), assessment, grading, and expectations, the model shows how focusing on the critical pedagogical

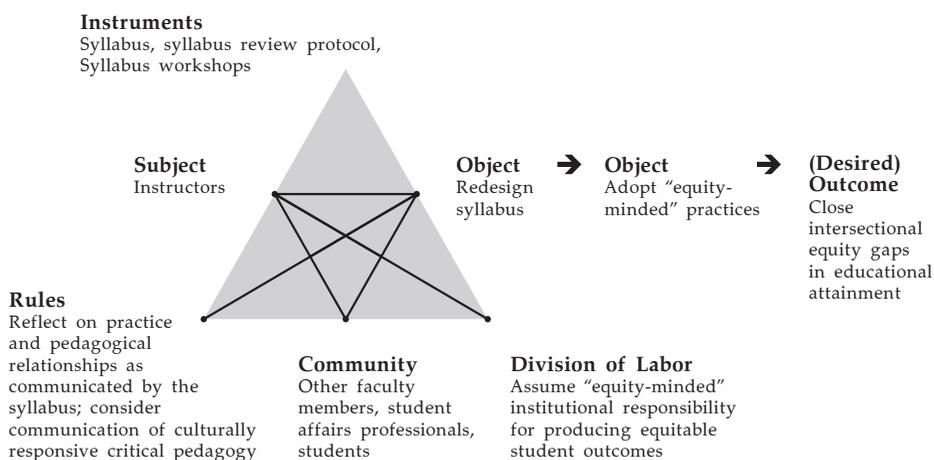


Figure 2. *Equity-minded syllabus review*<sup>3</sup>

practices of the syllabus, the academic and educational community at a given institution, and the interrelationship between learners and instructor can inform instruction and ultimately lead to the (aspirational) outcome of equity and social justice in the classroom. This model has particular utility for already established language and culture course syllabi that are undergoing review and revision for addressing equity and diversity. Of particular relevance is the “community” engagement in the revision process, encouraging departments and programs to collaborate on the endeavor, a process that models the interactive process of the inclusive classroom.

#### 4. Language matters

As philologists and educators, we understand the importance and impact that the words and language we use with our learners have in connection

<sup>3</sup> Diagram reproduced from Dowd and Bensimon (2015), *Engaging the “Race Question”*: Accountability and Equity in US. Higher Education, p. 68, reprinted with permission of the publisher (Teacher’s College Press, <https://www.tcpress.com>).

with our courses, learning objectives, and desired outcomes. Our course syllabi offer the very first lines of communication between instructors and learners. As such, they function as road maps that can encourage and promote—or exclude and impede—academic progress and success (Roberts 2016, 50). Thus, the language and tone of our course syllabi can shape learners’ first impressions of instructors and help learners understand the instructor’s attitudes and approaches toward teaching and learning. The syllabi can also establish the interactional tone and communicative affect of the learning environment.

Harnish and Bridges (2011) found that “presenting students with an effective syllabus written in a friendly, approachable tone can influence perceptions of the instructor and the course” (328). Indeed, the tone and language of course syllabi can create first impressions “that may facilitate faculty engagement with students. Such impressions may, in turn, set the stage for a more rewarding educational experience for those on both sides of the lectern” (328). Revisiting and revising existing syllabi may include altering, together with the course content and procedures, the language used in the document to establish an inclusive and positive environment in the course. Figure 3 illustrates how language use can be altered to create an ecology of equity, access, and intersectional inclusion for all participants in the course.

|              |  Exclusive/<br>Unwelcoming   |  Inclusive/<br>Welcoming   |
|--------------|---|---|
| Office Hours | Office Hours:<br>458 Burdine Hall<br>M: 9-10:30am; Th:<br>3-4:30pm<br>Or by appt.<br><a href="mailto:tjarza@austin.utexas.edu">tjarza@austin.utexas.edu</a> | Office Hours:<br>458 Burdine Hall<br>Face-to-Face: M: 9-10:30am<br>Virtual: Th: 3-4:30pm on Zoom<br>[Meeting ID: 555 273 7970]<br>I welcome you to contact me outside of<br>class and office hours. You may e-mail<br>me, call my office, or message me<br>through Canvas if you need to set a time<br>to meet. Feel free to attend either F2F or<br>virtual hours.<br><a href="mailto:tjarza@austin.utexas.edu">tjarza@austin.utexas.edu</a> |

|               |  |  |
|---------------|--|--|
| Course Goals  | <p>This course is the second semester of Intensive Russian designed to bring you to basic functional proficiency in all skills. You should be prepared to spend 6 hours a week in class and twice that much time doing homework. Students who successfully complete this course may continue to RUS 324 (Third-year Russian) and/or participate in a study abroad program in Russia.</p> | <p>Welcome to the second semester of Intensive Russian! This course will help you develop your ability to read, write, listen, and speak in Russian in a variety of situations and contexts. You will learn to perform many useful tasks in Russian, from making plans to go out with your friends, to buying groceries for dinner, or just being able to talk about your favorite book. Once you complete this course, you'll be ready to start Third-year Russian (RUS 324), and you will have enough proficiency in Russian to join one of our programs abroad this summer.</p> |
| Attendance    | <p>Your attendance to all class and review sessions is mandatory. If you must miss a class, let me or your TA know in advance. Missing more than three (3) classes will result in you being dropped from the course in accordance with the college's attendance policy.</p>  | <p>As you know from last semester, learning a language takes time and practice. Our time in class together will be spent almost entirely on giving you opportunities to use and practice the language. Therefore, you should plan to attend every class. Extenuating circumstances can arise that make your attendance difficult. Please let me know if you cannot attend class. If circumstances cause you to miss more than three classes, come see me to discuss your options.</p>  |
| Participation | <p>Your active participation in the course is crucial to your progress and success in this course. Your engagement in pair work, group work, and individual projects will be used to assess your participation in the course.</p>  | <p>All of us in this class—you, me, your peers—share the responsibility to create an environment in which we can all learn from each other. I expect everyone to participate actively in class so that we can all benefit from the insights and experiences that each of us brings to it. You will have various opportunities to work individually, in pairs, and in small groups to demonstrate your abilities to use Russian in a variety of situations and receive feedback on your performance.</p>  |

Figure 3: Examples of syllabus language [Adapted from Hamish, et al. (2011)]

An inclusive and welcoming syllabus might also include a diversity statement and a land acknowledgment statement to further establish your course as a safe and respectful space for collaboration and interaction. A course diversity statement can further set the welcoming tone and inclusive atmosphere in your class. It demonstrates your commitment to create an ecology of mutual respect, to encourage the intellectual exchange of diverse perspectives and experiences, and to value difference in your classroom. Following is an example of a diversity statement from a Boston University website on teaching writing:

In this class, we are seriously committed to supporting diversity and inclusion among all classroom community members. We proactively strive to construct a safe and inclusive environment by respecting each other's dignity and privacy. We treat one another fairly and honor each member's experiences, beliefs, perspectives, abilities, and backgrounds, regardless of race, religion, language, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender identification, ability status, socio-economic status, national identity, or any other identity markers. Bullying, hateful ideas, violent language, belittling, racial slurs, and other disrespectful or "othering" language or behavior will not be tolerated. Our class provides a safe space for free inquiry and open exchange of ideas. Difficult social issues will be confronted, and controversial ideas will be exchanged. We recognize the power and promise of language and yet are cognizant that language might be used to exclude or hurt rather than express or inform. Therefore, though we might feel strongly about a topic, we maintain respect for each other's diversity. We act and communicate respectfully toward one another, both directly and indirectly, both inside and outside the classroom (Boston University n.d.).

Land acknowledgment statements "recognize Indigenous Peoples who are the original stewards of the lands on which we now live" ("Native Knowledge 360" 2021). They add substantially to the creation of a collaborative, accountable, and respectful environment for both Native Peoples and non-Native people in the class. Following is a sample land acknowledgment statement from the University of Texas at Austin:

We would like to acknowledge that we are meeting on the Indigenous lands of Turtle Island, the ancestral name for

what now is called North America. Moreover, (I) We would like to acknowledge the Alabama-Coushatta, Caddo, Carrizo/ Comecrudo, Coahuiltecan, Comanche, Kickapoo, Lipan Apache, Tonkawa and Ysleta Del Sur Pueblo, and all the American Indian and Indigenous Peoples and communities who have been or have become a part of these lands and territories in Texas. (University of Texas n.d.)

Taken together with the careful and thoughtful use of language in the syllabus, diversity statements and land acknowledgment statements work in concert to create the inclusive environment required for executing the kinds of activities that lead to critical inquiry and respectful discussion in a course designed to promote social justice.

## **5. Finding elsewhere**

After considering ways to make the course more diverse and inclusive, and then revising the language and messaging in our syllabi, the next step in crafting a decolonized course syllabus is to revise the content to reflect the principles of critical pedagogy. As with other steps in this process, reimagining and revising course content requires thoughtful examination of the current content and/or our assumptions about what should be conveyed in the course. In discussing this introspective process of curricular decolonization and teaching for social justice, Biermann (2011) comments in regard to Indigenous perspectives, “For non-Indigenous educators, this requires a process of learning one’s own assumptions, valuing the complexity of considering a variety of knowledges, and engaging with the trail-blazing theoretical work of Indigenous scholars and thinkers as well as the complex lived realities of local Indigenous communities” (398). Reagan and Osborn (2021) call this stage “critical reflection,” remarking that it “entails the questioning of moral, ethical, and other types of normative criteria related directly and indirectly to the classroom” (200).

Because we are instructors of Russian language and cultural studies, this critical introspection is especially important to our teaching, as a significant number of instructors in our field — as for all world languages taught in the United States — are themselves native or heritage speakers of the language of instruction and may find the challenges of creating an ecology of inclusivity and equity in a US classroom to be different from

accommodations made for diverse identities in their home countries. Besides differing/conflicting language usage, cultural and attitudinal differences regarding race, ethnicity, and intersectionality complicate the teaching and learning environment. “Critical reflection is, in some way, especially important for [heritage] teachers, both with respect to cultural and linguistic knowledge” (Reagan and Osborn 2021, 205).

As social justice education “focuses on ways in which social group differences of race and ethnicity, national origins, language, religion, gender, sexuality, class, disability and age interact with systems of domination and subordination to privilege or disadvantage different social group members relative to each other” (Adams and Zúñiga 2016, 96), so should our course content, methods, and material reflect equity, inclusivity, and intersectionality for all learners. The case for revising Russian language textbooks to make them more inclusive and intersectional for both the diverse demographics of their subject population (residents of the Russophone world), and for the learners using them, has already been made (Stauffer 2020; Garza 2021a). Both of these essays suggest substantively revising existing textbooks, creating new ones, or supplementing existing textbooks with materials that foster an inclusive classroom environment of engagement and shared experience for learners and instructors.

Russian language syllabi can, even in the absence of inclusive textbooks, represent courses designed with critical pedagogy and social justice in mind. Indeed, a critically informed inclusive syllabus is essential for language courses that promote social justice while addressing proficiency and intercultural competence. The reimaged course syllabus, in addition to using inclusive and welcoming language, should engage learners with materials that demonstrate the ethnic, economic, and intersectional diversity of the Russian-speaking world.

The gender-driven structure of Russian provides innumerable opportunities to engage with nonbinary identities, gender fluidity, and queerness, from grammatical endings to gendered terms for marriage and gendered terminology for many professions. Most Russian words for nonheteronormative identities are cognate and can be easily assimilated into discussions of family, self, and/or relationships. In a similar vein, common activities using the language at the Novice to Intermediate levels, such as “talking about one’s family” are easily

broadened to include additional vocabulary to include blended families, divorced parents, same-sex parents, step-relatives, single parent homes, and so on. Conversations on the topic of nationalities can include, in addition to the identities of American or Russian, simple lexical ways of expressing hyphenated identities, such as Mexican-American, Russian-Dagestani, and so on. In the learner-centered proficiency-oriented classroom, it is not necessary for all students to master the same lexicon at the same time; in the inclusive classroom, all learners' identities and perspectives are respected. Both of these conditions can coexist in a single learning environment.

Beyond diversified and inclusive content, the Russian language syllabus can provide opportunities for engagement with the language and culture via activities that allow learners to use the language to express their identity and their positionality. Therefore, activities in the syllabus should include open-ended interactions that have no single "correct" outcome, but that instead encourage learners to use Russian to negotiate meaning and context to arrive at an outcome that is appropriate to their particular interaction. For example, Intermediate-level learners working in pairs might be asked to interview each other about themselves. But rather than the usual *Расскажите немного о себе* 'Tell us a little about yourself' prompt, each learner is asked to find out something about the other that surprised them. This simple addition to the task provides a catalyst for empathy, understanding, and perhaps even humor. While the proficiency orientation of the task remains essentially the same, the revised prompt asks each learner to engage with the other, even briefly, more personally. At higher levels of proficiency, these interventions can become more robust and engaged directly with issues of race and equity. An Advanced-level course on debate in Russian, for example, can focus on a proposition such as *Принято решение: Россия должна сократить въезд в страну мигрантам, у которых нет места жительства, работы, или денежных средств.* 'Resolved: Russia should restrict entry into the country for migrants who have no place of residence, work, or financial resources.' Such an activity would necessarily raise issues of equity, discrimination, and race among the participants. Similarly, project-based activities are useful for encouraging learners to collaborate and find mutually acceptable solutions to conflicts or impediments. These and other

process-oriented activities also work well within critical pedagogy and compliment positive proficiency outcomes.

Like those for language courses, syllabi for literary or cultural studies courses can also be recrafted to reflect equity and social justice goals. For example, an interdisciplinary course that I have taught at the University of Texas at Austin since 2004, "Chechnya 360: People, Power, and Politics," was conceived and designed to bring learners from both humanistic and social science disciplines together to examine texts and films from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present, and to consider how these works reflect the region both in literary/cultural and historical/political contexts. The original syllabus included English translations of the literary works by Pushkin ("The Gypsies," "Prisoner of the Caucasus"), Lermontov (*Hero of Our Times*, *Ashik Kerib*, "Ismail Bey," "Demon"), and Tolstoy (*Hadji Murad*, *The Cossacks*, "Prisoner of the Caucasus"); by 2010, the syllabus also included contemporary writers, such as Zakhar Prilepin (*The Pathologies*) and Andrei Gelasimov (*Thirst*). Films, including adaptations of the literary texts, such as Pronin's 1961 *The Cossacks*, Bodrov's *Prisoner of the Mountains* (1996), and Freda's 1961 *The White Warrior*, and depictions of the Chechen wars and their aftermath, such as Konchalovsky's *House of Fools* from 2002, Balabanov's 2002 film *War*, Mikhalkov's *12* (2007), and Tiurin's *Thirst* from 2013, were also included on the syllabus. The course title belied its Russocentric content and literary studies approach; indeed, the "Power" referred to in the title is a tacit acknowledgement of the Russian attempts to colonize the Northern Caucasus.

In 2019, in response to comments from learners who commented on the lack of non-Russian perspectives in a course on Chechnya, the syllabus was substantively redesigned. Texts from Chechen authors, including German Sadulaev (*I am a Chechen!*, "Why the Sky Doesn't Fall"), Apti Bisultanov ("Childhoods," "Khaibakh!"), and, for students who read French, Milana Bakheeva Terloeva (*Danser sur les ruines: Une jeunesse tchéchène*) were added. Documentary films were included to add to the diversity of perspectives on the wars in Chechnya, including *The 3 Rooms of Melancholia* (2004) by Finnish director Pirjo Honkasalo, HBO's *Welcome to Chechnya* (2020) by U.S. director David France, and, for students who understand Russian, *Vojna i mirnye* (2019) by Russian director Anna Nemzer. All three films offer intersectional perspectives on the traumatic effects of war and the persecution of minorities in the region.

After the syllabus was refashioned in 2019 to include more Chechen writers and diverse filmmakers, as well as new assignments asking learners to consider the positionality of artists who work in an active warzone, the course “moved significantly away from being a ‘Chechnya through Russian Eyes’ course to a project-based, learner-centered course on ‘Understanding Trauma and Occupation in Chechnya’” (Garza 2021b, 579). This most recent iteration of the course strives to move the course from “and” to “elsewhere”: not simply a consideration of Russian and Chechen perspectives, but rather an engagement of the learner’s critical perspectives on how narratives of war are created and depicted depending on the storyteller’s position relative to the conflict. In the end, learners in the course produced final group projects that focused on Chechens’ personal stories of war and trauma based on one of the texts—literary or filmic—from the syllabus. Each group created a media project, using contemporary images, sound, and/or film, that they felt best told the story of the character(s) they had chosen. These final projects, each successfully depicting the group’s understanding of “elsewhere,” were posted on the course Canvas site and opened for viewing and comments on the blog feature of the site.

The previous examples take advantage of the extensive use of audio and video media often employed in both Russian language and Russian literary/cultural studies courses. Because syllabi for such courses often contain information about and activities based on films and other recorded media, instructors should consider these resources as part of the overall course ecology of equity they seek to create. As with literary or journalistic texts, media and media messages are “constructed” representations of reality that include social, political, and aesthetic contexts often financed by corporations or other sources that control content (Osborn 2006, 92). Learners engaging with audiovisual media must, with mediation from the instructor, develop skills to deconstruct textual, as well as visual, features of these materials. For language and cultural studies courses, these analytic skills address the goals of both critical pedagogy and language proficiency. Learners responding to questions designed to elicit their critical perspectives on a given visual text are simultaneously performing proficiency-oriented and standards-based tasks.

Consider the following sample questions adapted from Osborn (2006, 93):

- (1) What situation model(s) do viewers bring to the video's images/text?
- (2) What is the world-in-the-video? Who are the people-in-the-video?
- (3) What do you perceive to be the purpose in the video?
- (4) How is that purpose conveyed in (a) language (spoken and gestural), (b) values and principles, (c) sociopolitical relationships, and (d) cause-and-effect relationships?

Learners, especially in pairs or small group settings, grappling with questions such as these are able to attend to the critical content of the queries and, if the video is part of a language course, to the linguo-cultural material, as well. The second iteration of my course on Chechnya, for example, asked learners in each group, as part of the write-up for their media projects, to address the previously listed questions in relation to the filmic works that they had chosen. Properly employed in the context of critical inquiry, audiovisual media can serve as powerful stimuli for the expression of diverse opinions and perspectives.

## **6. Conclusion: No justice, no teach**

As suggested in the introduction, “decolonizing the Russian syllabus” begins, but does not end, with mentioning Pushkin’s African heritage in a nineteenth-century Russian literature course. Decolonizing the syllabus requires a thorough reexamination of the entire course: content, methods of instruction, and even the language used in it; it involves a serious self-study and assessment of the commitment to reimagine these courses—some of which have been taught for years from the same syllabus—to address equity and social justice; and it demands that we broaden our own perspectives on our region, subject area, and the learners we engage to create environments for critical inquiry and self-expression. Decolonizing the syllabus acknowledges that the current state of racial, ethnic, and intersectional inequalities in educational institutions is unacceptable to us as educators, as global citizens, and as human beings. Ending the systemic racism and prejudice in US higher education is crucial to addressing intersectional equity and diversity. As Ash et al. (2020) remind us, “Only the intentional, albeit painful, steps toward power-sharing at the highest levels of higher education will lead to meaningful change that

values, affirms, and empowers historically marginalized people in higher education” (24). But change must begin somewhere, and where better than with our courses and the humble syllabus. By insisting on equitable, inclusive, and intersectional world language and culture instruction, educators can disrupt the discriminatory and disenfranchising practices that occur, often implicitly, in our classrooms.

New phases of “dog whistle racism” (Hanley-López 2014) evoking cancel culture and instigating Jim Crow 2.0 voter suppression laws offer proof that claims of 21<sup>st</sup> century colorblindness and a “post-racial America” are overstated. In a cautionary rhetorical question, Ledesma and Calderón (2015) ask, “After all, how do we call out racism when others deny that racism continues to matter” (219)? Let the reimagining of our syllabi and courses be a start to addressing the unjust and discriminatory practices within education. Our Russian language and culture classrooms should and must be safe and welcoming spaces for all learners. Decolonizing our syllabi to make them inclusive and intersectional is an integral part of our commitment and obligation to educate the current and future generations of diverse and resilient learners.

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