

# "Race" Toward Freedom: Post-Cold War US Multiculturalism and the Reconstruction of Eastern Europe

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In this article, I argue that the celebratory rhetoric of freedom following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Eastern Bloc must be understood as a discourse that was coconstitutive with the rhetoric of US nationalist multiculturalism of the 1990s. The demise of the Soviet-led Eastern Bloc was hailed by US politicians and dominant media as a victory of the ideals of freedom based in democracy, cultural diversity and free markets over totalitarianism and repression. In contrast to the rise in nationalism and ethnic violence in Eastern Europe, the US was upheld as a model for multicultural democracy that Eastern Europe might look to during its transitional period. One manifestation of this post-Cold War relationship was the emergence of comparisons between the Roma of Eastern Europe, who were combating a resurgence of racism in the "new" Europe, and African Americans in the US. Such parallels presumed African Americans to be a group that had already overcome injustice and could, therefore, provide a model for racial integration in a Western democracy. For instance, Kanata Jackson and Mark Whitaker, professors of business at the historically

black Hampton University, proposed that in the post-Communist marketplace African Americans could serve as "consultants" whose "unique experience in surviving slavery" qualified them to teach Eastern European ethnic minorities, such as the Roma, how to integrate into the global free market. Jackson and Whitaker's argument is representative of the conflation between multiculturalism and free markets during the 1990s that underplayed the history of racialized slavery in the Americas and persistent racial inequality that is at the foundation of the US capitalist economy. Such discourses served to relegate racism to the annals of US history.

In order to interrogate the cultural conditions that facilitated the comparisons between the Roma of Eastern Europe and African Americans in the context of US interests in spreading free markets to post-Communist Eastern Europe, I will focus on two book-length journalistic accounts that sought to envision and evaluate democratic possibilities in the former USSR and Eastern Europe at the end of the Cold War era through the rubric of US multiculturalism. They did so by refiguring Eastern Europe as a region

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newly freed from totalitarianism in which the US public could see its own racist past. The Afro-Russian journalist Yelena Khanga's 1992 memoir *Soul to Soul: The Story of a Black Russian American Family 1865–1992* connected the African and African American presence in the USSR to the history of race relations in the US by telling the story of her own family. My reading of the US reception of *Soul to Soul* that conceived of this popular text as being representative of *glasnost*, multiculturalism, and the lifting of the Iron Curtain highlights the cultural reinvention of Eastern Europe as the negative reflection onto which the US could project its national, racial, and ideological anxieties at a moment of retreat from the promises of civil rights during the Reagan/Bush era. While US readers' interest in Khanga as an embodiment of multiculturalism, which was grounded in the symbolic position of African Americans as representatives of racial injustice in US national history, demonstrated how racial diversity came to signify the possibilities for US global leadership in the aftermath of the Cold War, US journalist Isabel Fonseca's bestselling 1995 book-length account of the plight of the Roma in post-Communist Eastern Europe, *Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and Their Journey*, argued that racial and ethnic diversity in Eastern Europe proved to be an obstacle in the post-Communist transition of the 1990s. Although Fonseca's work sheds light upon the dual and contradictory processes of renewed ethnic nationalism in Eastern Europe and the transnational aims of European enlargement, it nevertheless upholds the US civil rights model, which is based in claims to equality in the law that supersedes those claims to material equality, as the only viable one for solving the problems of ethnic conflict in Eastern Europe. Gaining wide popularity in the US, Khanga's and Fonseca's texts evoke in their production and reception the multiple and often divergent voices that contributed to the refiguration of Eastern Europe in the 1990s US imaginary. Ultimately, both narratives are exemplary of how US media and popular discourses about race and ethnic conflict in 1990s Eastern Europe served to mask and displace racial anxiety and the

incomplete project of civil rights at home onto global "trouble spots."

In spite of the diverse histories of racialization in the United States and in Eastern Europe, the aftermath of 1989 forced most former Eastern Bloc nations to learn to speak the language of liberalism modeled on the legal and political meaning given to civil liberties and pluralist inclusion in the US. This particular conception of civil liberties and pluralism was based on the history of the civil rights demands of the 1950s and 1960s and was reinterpreted through the frame of multiculturalism in the 1980s and 1990s. David Theo Goldberg has argued that the major paradox of Western liberalism is that the desire to render race as a morally irrelevant category in the promotion of liberty and equality actually reproduces racial difference through materially based racial exclusions (*Racist Culture* 6). As liberalism, according to Goldberg, either denies otherness, or, in recognizing it, denies its relevance, liberal modernity erases material histories of racial exclusions "by asserting that we [the West] have largely progressed beyond . . . racist social formations of the past" (*Racist Culture* 7). Extending Goldberg's conception of liberalism's racial project, I argue that the reinterpretation of post-Cold War Eastern Europe from the perspective of US multiculturalism exemplifies the developmental logic whereby Eastern Europe was imagined as the anachronistic likeness of racist formations in the US "past." Through dominant representations of Eastern Europe as a non-Western space steeped in primordial ethnic conflict and racism, the region became symbolic in the 1990s US imaginary of its own role—having supposedly overcome a racist past—as the foremost model for "democratizing" nations.

Bearing in mind that the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and the 1991 disintegration of the USSR symbolized the victory of the global free market in the US national imaginary, it is striking that "tolerance" of racial diversity became the standard measure by which US politicians and the media represented the level of liberal development of the former Eastern Bloc countries and their potential

for political and economic inclusion into the Western family of nations. Goldberg has argued that the Western ideal of multiculturalism is based on the traditional premise of philosophical liberalism, which accepted "a pluralism of ethnic insight and self-determination provided [that] no particularistically promoted claim is inconsistent with the core [national] values" ("Introduction" 16). In the US, these core national values are rooted in the capitalistic promise of free markets and competition. According to Peter McLaren, liberal multiculturalism in the context of free markets is based on the assumption that the "cognitive equivalence or the rationality imminent in all races . . . permits them to compete equally in a capitalist society" (51). The 1990s appeals for ethnic and racial equality in Eastern Europe made from within the US, therefore, reveal that recourse to multiculturalism ultimately subordinated the material effects of racial discrimination to the demands of free market politics. Moreover, 1990s multicultural ideology in the US itself masked the incoherence between investing in free markets and promoting substantive equality.

The changes in racial meaning that took place in the US over the course of the 1980s and the 1990s marked a shift from the rhetoric of civil rights that demanded institutional inclusion to the rhetoric of multiculturalism that subsumed ongoing material disparities through the compensatory language that celebrated "ethnic" and "cultural" diversity as a sign of national maturity. Though this resignification represented the post-Civil Rights era through a narrative that Nikhil Pal Singh has described as a "civic mythology of racial progress," neither multiculturalism nor civil rights resolved the racialized inequalities that were foundational to the development of the US as a modern nation (5). Indeed, the founding of the US democracy included slavery; while the US has sought to "overcome" its racial past, racial disparities have persisted through the eras of Reconstruction and Civil Rights. According to James Lee, although the rise of multiculturalism as an ideology attempted to "reorganize the heretofore unequal representation of American life," it failed

to correct the effects of racial discrimination (xiv). Even as progressive articulations of racial difference coalesced in the 1980s through the critical work of political and cultural activists and ethnic studies departments, right wing and mainstream political and cultural discourses appropriated and coopted the language of difference for often conservative ends. That is, the language of cultural difference came to be used by conservatives in place of the older language of fundamental and essentialized racial difference to justify inequalities embedded in US society. Ronald Reagan owed his election to the presidency in 1980 in large part to Southern white voters who opposed government initiatives to compensate for past discrimination such as affirmative action (Borstelmann 259). During the Reagan presidency, the administration's trickle down economic policies widened the gap between poor and wealthy Americans, and the burdens of his cuts to social spending fell disproportionately on non-white citizens (Borstelmann 260). The rise of multiculturalism as the prevalent mode of understanding race in the US must, therefore, be contextualized in the regressive economic and social policies of the 1980s.

It is my argument that in the 1990s, racial anxieties that underlay the ideology of multiculturalism in the US at the height of its world power were *displaced* in cultural representations of ethnic conflict and racial prejudice onto the "democratizing" nations of Eastern Europe. The celebratory nature of dominant multiculturalist discourses justified US intervention in troubled regions by promoting an image of the US as a nation that in its diversity represented a microcosm of the whole world and that could, therefore, act as the defender of universal human rights across the globe (McAlister 250). Because it was critical that the US redefine and assert its political and symbolic leadership in Eastern Europe in the aftermath of Communism, 1990s media representations of democratization in newly "freed" Eastern Europe provided the narrative that has continued to legitimize US "humanitarianism" in troubled nations such as Bosnia, Kosovo, and 1990s Iraq.

## Soviet “Soul Sister”: Family Ties in a Moment of Multiculturalism

In 1988, Yelena Khanga, an Afro-Russian journalist from the *Moscow Weekly News*, traveled to the United States at the height of *glasnost* during the Gorbachev period as part of a professional exchange with an American paper, the *Christian Science Monitor*. As this was the first exchange between journalists from a Soviet paper and a US paper, Khanga was carefully selected as one of the participants because she traced her family lineage to the US. The granddaughter of American émigrés Oliver Golden, an African American, and Bertha Bialek, a Polish Jew, Khanga’s professional journey as the first journalist to officially represent the Soviet Union in the US was intricately linked with her personal journey of discovering the complexities of her own racial and national identity. Khanga’s presence as a Soviet journalist in the US evoked the liberalization of the USSR because it stood for the possibility of a free press. In addition, as a black Russian, Khanga represented the multiplicity of voices—including those with historical ties to the US—coming to the fore with *glasnost*. She thus became a minor media celebrity during her year at the *Monitor* in Boston. She appeared on ABC’s program *20/20* and on Black Entertainment Television, and her story was featured in glossy magazines aimed at an African American readership such as *Jet* and *Ebony* (McBride B.1). Relying on her “colorful” family history, the US media represented Khanga as a figure for US multiculturalism and for Soviet *glasnost*—a figure who could, at this critical historical juncture, uniquely symbolize the possibilities of reconciliation and cooperation among former enemies.

Oliver Golden and Bertha Bialek, Khanga’s grandparents, met through the Communist Party in New York City during the 1920s. Oliver Golden was the son of a slave who had become the largest property owner in Mississippi’s Yazoo County. Golden graduated from the Tuskegee Institute and, after serving in the US Army during World War I, became disillusioned with the

opportunities available in the US to a man of his education and experience, and joined the Communist Party, traveling abroad to Moscow in order to attend a special school for “agitators” before returning to the States. Bertha Bialek, who emigrated to the US from Poland after WWI, became involved with the Communist Party while working in a New York City garment sweatshop. In 1931, Golden and Bialek set sail for the USSR along with sixteen black agricultural experts from the US in search of professional opportunities unavailable to them in the States. Although they were initially stationed in Uzbekistan, after Golden’s death Bialek moved with their daughter, Lily, to Moscow. Unlike many of their compatriots in Uzbekistan, Khanga’s grandparents decided not to move back to the US for the sake of Lily, whom they did not want to expose to the racial prejudices of the pre-Civil Rights US. Lily Golden, Yelena’s mother, eventually earned a doctorate in African history and culture from Moscow State University. She married Abdullah Khanga, who was studying Marxism in Moscow during the early 1960s as an exchange student from Zanzibar, an island off the Swahili coast in what later became Tanzania. Shortly after Yelena’s birth in Moscow in 1962, her father, who was a political dissident, was assassinated in Tanzania. Yelena was raised in Moscow by her mother Lily and her grandmother Bertha, both of whom longed to visit the US but were unable to do so because of travel restrictions in the USSR. Yelena Khanga’s 1988 trip to her grandparents’ homeland was, therefore, momentous as no one in her family had set foot on US soil since 1931.

Khanga’s personal journey of uncovering her family’s roots and her experience of meeting her US relatives for the first time, as well as the US media’s enthusiasm over her family’s diverse history, elucidate the connections between the shifting racial paradigms within the US during the transitional moment of the late 1980s and early 1990s and the changes in US foreign policy toward the Soviet-led Eastern Bloc. It is no coincidence that Yelena Khanga became an embodiment of multiculturalism at this time. Having grown up in the USSR, which for the majority of

the twentieth century represented ultimate ideological and political alterity as the "evil empire" in the US national imaginary, Khanga's reunification with her black and white American families became symbolic of US domestic racial reconciliation in the post-Civil Rights moment as well as of bridging the ideological fault lines between East and West. Khanga was first "discovered" in the US as she was waiting, amidst hundreds of reporters, to hear that Gorbachev and Reagan had signed a tentative strategic arms control agreement: "This was more interesting than boring old arms control—a young black woman talking casually about 'we Russians'" (Khanga 27). This young black Russian's rediscovery of her family's American ancestry seemed to symbolically parallel the cautious beginnings of geopolitical reconciliation between the two global superpowers in the arms control agreement. The "American style publicity" that ensued placed Khanga herself in the headlines. Her mentor at the *Christian Science Monitor* complained a few weeks before Khanga's return to the USSR that, because she was the lead story herself, only one of Khanga's articles had been published in the paper (McBride B.1).

Khanga's initial journey to the US as a reporter was soon followed by a second visit, made possible by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, which funded her to chronicle her family's "roots" in the Mississippi delta and Chicago. In 1992 Khanga published a memoir based on her research, *Soul to Soul*, which was an exploration of her perceptions and experiences of being black in the Soviet Union and in the United States set against the backdrop of her family's history. "Soul to Soul," a translation of the Russian term *dusha* used to describe intimate friendships, is deployed throughout the text as a metaphor not just for Khanga's reunion with the black and white sides of her family in the US, but also for the potential of renewed US-Soviet friendship. The term "soul" itself, as Dale Peterson has suggested, is evocative of the parallels between Russian and African American cultures' conceptions of ethnic soul as "essentially multicultural and syncretic" (11). Khanga's use of "soul" as the framing mechanism for her memoir resonates with the term's ethnic

connotation, which is especially evident in the book's focus on how Khanga found a multicultural connection with African American and Jewish American cultures in the US.

Because *Soul to Soul* enabled US readers to rethink the history of racial discrimination in the US in a transnational and transcultural frame, it gained wide popularity in the context of 1990s multiculturalism. In its initial publication, Khanga's memoir was widely reviewed by the major US newspapers. Since that time, Khanga's text has become popular on college syllabi. The book has even been recommended by the American Library Association as an outstanding book for the college bound (1999 Outstanding Books). The story of Khanga's family and its multigenerational transcontinental journey resonated with the post-Cold War enthusiasm in the US for imagining Russia's inclusion into the Western family of nations following the disintegration of the USSR in 1991. On a metaphoric level, *Soul to Soul* envisions the transformation of the post-Cold War global order and US-Russian cooperation through Khanga's reunification with the Golden—the black side of her family—and the Bialeks—the white Jewish side of her family. In the spring of 1988, Khanga taped an interview with the weekly ABC news magazine, *20/20*, after which her African American relatives contacted her. Khanga writes, "I gradually came to understand what it meant to belong to a large African American family with a proud history. We were of the same blood; we shared a past even though we had been separated by time, language, and culture" (229). *Soul to Soul* thus invokes the racial connection, one of blood and family, as transcendent of the national and ideological chasms created by the Cold War. Overcoming the prejudices and intolerances of the "past," whether in the US civil rights struggle or through "democratization" in the USSR, sets the preconditions for hemispheric reconciliation between East and West—"Soul to Soul"—enacted here as familial reunification articulated through the language of race.

Khanga's familial reconciliation, however, could not be complete without an encounter between herself and the Bialek family. Khanga's great-

grandparents had disowned her grandmother, Bertha, for having married a black man. In the memoir, Khanga confesses that she was reluctant to find the Bialeks until Frank Karel of the Rockefeller Foundation urged her to complete the story of her family by meeting her white Jewish relatives. Though Jack, Bertha Bialek's brother, had concealed from the rest of the family that they had black relatives living in Russia, by the time that Khanga met the younger generation, they seamlessly integrated Yelena's blackness into their conception of the family: "You mean the big secret is that we have a black cousin? So what?" (252). The cousins' insistence that race no longer matters resonates with *Soul to Soul's* perspective on changes in US race relations on the level of the family; what was understood as miscegenation in the 1930s when Khanga's grandparents left for the USSR became a sign of multicultural unity in one family in the 1990s. A 1992 *Essence* review of *Soul to Soul* completed this narrative by describing how, at a Thanksgiving reunion of the Golden and Bialek families, Khanga and her Polish American cousin, Nancy Bialek, performed a rendition of Stevie Wonder's "Ebony and Ivory" (V. R. Peterson 42). The concluding lines of *Soul to Soul* rearticulate the dual processes in the "perfect harmony," as the song goes, of multicultural (domestic) and post-Cold War (geopolitical) healing: "We need a common language through which we can accept differences while embracing common humanity; that was my grandparents' real dream, and I have shared it from the day I first heard Martin Luther King's voice on a scratchy tape in a Moscow elementary school—a black, Russian, American, human dream" (297). Nikhil Pal Singh has pointed out that Dr. Martin Luther King, in spite of his radical activism, has become the foremost figure in the dominant US mythology of racial progress in the post-Civil Rights context (1–2). In this connection, Khanga's reformulation of her grandparents' dream, which encompassed the appeal of Communist ideology for black Americans, and her reference to the powerful symbolism of Dr. King's voice for the coming together of the East and the West in the language of post-Cold War multiculturalism, parallel the "devel-

opment" of racial progress in the US and the "development" of capitalism in the USSR.

Although *Soul to Soul* invited its US readers to imagine the possibilities of reconciliation between former enemies in the immediate post-Cold War moment, the memoir nevertheless unwittingly perpetuated the Cold War binaries it proposed to tear down. In spite of funding from Rockefeller Foundation for Khanga to explore her family history on her father's side in Zanzibar, *Soul to Soul's* limited treatment of her African heritage excludes Africa from the possibility of progress that it imagines for post-Communist nations if they can succeed in overcoming their illiberal prejudices in order to pursue the politics of tolerance, diversity, and free market capitalism. Khanga writes that immediately after her birth "the cultural rift between [her] parents grew into a chasm" (114). Lily Golden, Yelena's mother, never moved to Zanzibar with Abdullah Khanga because "his attitudes toward women were the product of a culture very different from our own. She did not criticize that culture but emphasized that she, brought up with a very different way of thinking about women's possibilities, could not adapt to his attitudes" (115). Even after Khanga herself visited Zanzibar as part of her research, she discovered that the instinctual and intimate connection she had with her American family is completely lacking in Africa. Khanga writes: "I can't claim to have experienced any special revelation about my African 'roots' during this journey. Walking along the streets of Dar, I kept waiting for a click, the sense of recognition and identification I've felt so many times among black Americans" (271). Khanga's sense of alienation from "Tanzania, a country strongly influenced by Islam" in which the exclusion of women from public participation is still prevalent thus imagines Africa as an illiberal space that is not conducive to her larger project of reconciliation through tolerance and diversity (271). *Soul to Soul's* feminist critique of Yelena's father, as well as of Islamic Africa, suggests an insurmountable cultural difference between Tanzania and the USSR, which, even though it is not yet Western is seen to espouse modern notions of equality shared by Europe and the US. *Soul to*

*Soul* thus forecloses a significant consideration of the role that Tanzania and other Third World nations continue to play in the US–European transatlantic relations.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, *Soul to Soul's* subordination of the complexities of the emergent global order of post-Cold War transition in favor of the celebratory rhetoric of new-found "freedom" in the East, the US media's response to *Soul to Soul* focused on Khanga as a multicultural figure through which the US readership could envision the possibility of westernizing and democratizing the former Communist enemy. Through Khanga's "multicultural" background, the US readership was supposed to understand its own nation's racist past that had forced Khanga's grandparents to emigrate to the USSR and its inclusive present in which Khanga was welcomed "home." *Soul to Soul's* reviewers represented Khanga's acceptance by the US public and her African American and (white) Jewish relatives as symbolic of healing the nation's past prejudices. Implicit in this narrative of acceptance was the supposition that US citizens were now enjoying racial equality in the aftermath of civil rights.

Most reviewers of *Soul to Soul* praised the memoir for addressing the complicated connections between US racial history and Cold War history.<sup>1</sup> The *Washington Post* review, titled "A Child of Many Cultures," noted that of "the contemporary characters who straddle the mighty distance between Russia and America [and who constitute] a colorful and eclectic group . . ., none of them has a saga more poignant than Yelena Khanga" (X2). The review went on to specify that Khanga's "coffee color" skin and "the cultural heritage that comes along with it" are what make her the most "poignant" in the bridging of the "mighty distance" between East and West. *Ebony*, a monthly magazine that is aimed at a black readership, headlined its review "How a Black/Jewish/Polish/Russian/African Woman Found Her Roots" (Haynes 44). Calling Khanga's book a "weave" of "multicultural strands," the article, and especially its title, implied that Khanga's multiply compounded identity was a story that in and of itself was enough to recommend the memoir as

an exemplary text of post-Cold War diversity. *Essence*, another monthly magazine targeted at black readers, praised the "multicultural saga, extending from American Slavery to *glasnost*, [as] an insightful and ironic journey not only into racial attitudes, but also into the profound cultural gulf separating Russian and American society (V. R. Peterson 42). By connecting US progress toward racial "equality" and multiculturalism with Russia's progress toward democracy, the US media suggested that Khanga's embodied multiculturalism was the ideal metaphor for Russia's post-Cold War potential for liberal tolerance.

The figuration of Yelena Khanga as a multicultural emblem who could stand as a bridge between former ideological rivals in the East and West is indicative of the shift to the transnational marketability of difference in the realm of the global free market economy celebrated in the post-Cold War transition. Shortly after the publication of her book, Khanga capitalized on her multicultural marketability to become an entrepreneur. She invited black professionals to travel to Russia and to teach Russians how to shed the vestiges of the old Communist state-run economy. Khanga observed that

Right now, Russia is one of the biggest markets in the world. Hotels are filled with foreign businessmen who are planting the roots for various spheres of business. But when I mention this to black business people, they say it is too expensive. They are afraid they might be rejected because they are black. Russians want resources and profits. If you can do that, there is no problem. (qtd. in Lewis 52)

Khanga's invitation to black business people represents a historical irony in light of the radical Afro American diaspora's past in the former Soviet Union, of which her grandparents were a part. Oliver Golden and Bertha Bialek left the US both because they wished to escape racism and because they believed in building an alternative to the capitalist model of national development. In contrast to her grandparents, Khanga urged black business people to travel to capitalist Russia

because race no longer matters—only profit. Kate Baldwin has suggested that in the context of post-Communist Russia, “Khanga’s embodiment of [the] unusual routings [of the black diaspora] reads through the screen of earlier black Americans in the USSR. But her Soviet upbringing in the 1970s and 1980s also shifts the image broadcast to new interpretive frames” (253). The rearticulation of Khanga’s complex family history also reflects the new interpretive frames of the post-Cold War moment in the context of the US, and in particular the racialized currency of multiculturalism within the global free market economy. In conflating multiculturalism with the ideals of freedom, democracy, and equality, Khanga’s vision for black business people, like Jackson and Whitaker’s, reflects how the celebratory rhetoric in the US during the 1990s failed to substantively address the changing forms of racism and discrimination in the domestic context. These US post-Cold War discourses, in their focus on developing Eastern Europe economically, politically, and culturally, in fact worked to displace US racial anxieties by positioning the US as a model for liberal tolerance. They did so by eliding domestic histories of racial inequality and uneven development in favor of marketing multiculturalism and difference to promote the free market as a stand-in for democracy.

### **Looking for Democracy: Fonseca’s Journey among the Eastern European Gypsies**

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Yelena Khanga’s journey to the US in the late 1980s and the publication of her memoir in the early 1990s occurred at the height of the excitement surrounding the fall of Communism and the disintegration of the USSR. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was not just the primary symbol for Communism as an ideology, but it was a stand-in for Eastern Europe as a whole in the popular US imaginary. Khanga was one figure who captivated the interest of the US media after

the disintegration of the USSR because, through her Soviet upbringing and her African American heritage, she evoked the possibility for former enemies to come together in a global celebration of democracy. While Khanga’s complex ethnic heritage was understood through the lens of US multiculturalism as a story about the successes of civil rights and the US victory in the Cold War, the demise of Communism in Eastern Europe actually led to violent ethnic nationalism throughout the region that only escalated as the decade wore on. The growing ethnic prejudices in Eastern Europe were of great concern to both the European Union and the United States. Because post-Cold War US discourses upheld multiculturalism as a sign of racial equality attained through the progressive march of democracy, ethnic conflict and racial prejudice in Eastern Europe eventually came to be represented as indicative of the distance separating the fledgling “democracies” and the US, the supposed model for democracy. Instances of ethnic and racial prejudice in the former Eastern Bloc thus exploded the celebratory post-Cold War rhetoric in what was dominantly perceived as a setback rooted in intolerance to the spread of free markets and “democracy” to the formerly Communist nations.

In her 1995 bestselling book, *Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and Their Journey*, the US journalist Isabel Fonseca recounted her Eastern European travels in the post-Communist period, depicting the region’s changing human landscape through her focus on the Roma, a trans-European racial minority group. Her historical and cultural account of the Romani people is set against the backdrop of Eastern European racism and intolerance. Between 1991 and 1995, Fonseca traveled to Albania, Bulgaria, the Czech and Slovak Republics, the former East Germany, Poland, and Romania (avoiding the former Yugoslavia, which was embroiled in civil war). Although her emphasis on the Roma as a transnational racial minority group required that Fonseca’s journey be a regional rather than a national one, the story of her travels and the book’s chapters are clearly demarcated along the lines of the new nationalist



borders of Eastern Europe. The structure of *Bury Me Standing* thus casts a shadow on the transnational celebration of democracy envisioned by Khanga. Fonseca offered an explanation of the present bigotry against the Gypsies by tying it to the history of anti-Roma discrimination in Eastern Europe, beginning with their migration to Europe from India, their centuries of enslavement in Romania, and the *porraimos*, the Romani term for the Holocaust and the mass extermination of the Roma by the German Nazis.<sup>2</sup> Her encounters and interviews with Gypsy communities are staged against a depressing and illiberal Eastern European topography, calling readers' attention to intolerance that seems to be rooted in the region's history and its not-so-distant Communist past.

Because the Roma are not contained by or accepted within national borders, in *Bury Me Standing* they provide the occasion for Fonseca to critique the overtly racist and nationalist "new" Eastern Europe. Fonseca cites Václav Havel as speaking a "challenging truth—that the Gypsies are 'a litmus test of a civil society'" (293). Havel's metaphorical reference to the Gypsies as a litmus test of liberal tolerance within "New Europe" constitutes Gypsiness as a marker of racial difference that measures the progress of Eastern European democracies by their multicultural inclusiveness. His formulation, which is also the underlying premise of Fonseca's text, represents the Gypsy as a metaphor for democracy as opposed to an active participant in democracy. In this frame, even though the racialized subject cannot directly contribute to the forging of democracy, the post-Communist upheaval can still lead Eastern Europe into Europe-proper—the "West"—once it disavows racial intolerance. Ironically, by adopting US-style multiculturalism, Eastern Europe must also prove that race no longer matters at the very moment it becomes "properly" Western.

Since 1989, this tension has been embedded in the US and Western European liberal concerns with Eastern European transition that have centered on human rights as a sign of democratic transition; violations against equal rights accorded

to individuals and, in particular, against racial equality measure the suitability of Eastern Europe for democracy. According to the "Freedom Rating" provided by the Freedom House, a non-partisan organization that provides the scale for classifying countries as "free," "partly free," or "unfree," there are three clusters of conditions for placing the formerly Communist "nations in transition" on a scale of illiberal to liberal that follow economic variables: (1) "freedom," which encompasses civil liberties and political rights; (2) the competitiveness and institutionalization of political parties and elections, as well as the accountability of politicians to the electorate; and (3) the rule of law (Bunce 136–37).<sup>3</sup> The "Freedom Rating" classifications establish a developmental narrative within which Eastern European nations strive to overcome the legacy of Communism—understood here in terms of the lack of civil liberties and rights—and to achieve legitimate democracy and tolerance exemplified by the West.

*Bury Me Standing*, similarly to the "Freedom Rating," attributes the lack of civil liberties, as it is manifest in ethnic and racial violence to the continued effects of Communist oppression rather than to the contemporary forces of westernization and economic liberalization. Fonseca argues that Eastern Europeans are not ready for entry into the EU, for "a sound human rights record is supposedly the ticket of admission" (145). Her assessment of the lack of Eastern European progress comes from her focus on the Roma. It is very true that 1989 marked a dramatic rise in racial violence directed against the Roma; however, Fonseca understands this development as "the violence of violated men" who had suffered the effects of repression under Communism (163). While looking out a train window in Bulgaria, Fonseca describes this landscape as "a tundra of human intolerance" (115). The Eastern Bloc, no longer a formidable ideological signifier, by the mid 1990s had become, according to Fonseca, "dud" Europe, the not-quite Europe, the Europe that has been left behind. Agnes Heller has elaborated on the centrality of the temporal in discourses surrounding Eastern and Central European transition. Heller argues that "post" in "posttotalitarian" and the

“new” in “new democracy” are both temporal markers that have contributed to the imagining of these nations as standing between past and future. While Heller insightfully points to the difficulties inherent in Eastern Europe’s state of suspense, she ultimately concludes that the transitional decade of the 1990s was one in which Eastern European nations sought to make “marriage” work between Eastern and Central Europe and Western liberal democracy (13). Articulated through the language of the liberal contract, the West thus signifies a more tolerant future, having supposedly overcome its own illiberal past.

In Fonseca’s text, Eastern Europe in the post-Communist period does not just stand at the metaphorical gateway to the West, but it is also a literal gateway for refugees migrating to the West. Fonseca observes that “in recent years, Warsaw has only ever been a stopover on the journey west. You are still likely to see washing in any public toilet—tiny tights and long, graying tube socks: whole families pegged on a movable line” (199). The mass of Gypsies camping at the Warsaw train station, waiting to cross the border into Germany, were usually turned away after long stays at the refugee camp with Africans and Vietnamese, and they had to return to Eastern Europe with no funds at all. According to Fonseca, shadows of the Cold War demarcation of East and West continued to represent an impasse for the Gypsies—“walls across East and West are sprayed with Death-to-Gypsies slogans” (208), and “the eastern terminal came to seem an emblem of the arrested aspirations of the Gypsies, a once gloriously mobile people” (206). The walls separating East and West are thus no longer ideological walls drawing a boundary between the Communist East and the capitalist, free West, but walls sprayed with racist slogans that deny Gypsies entrance to the West.

Fonseca elaborates that, ironically, while during the Communist era anyone from the Eastern Bloc who managed to cross over to the West would be granted political asylum, with the arrival of democracy it was more difficult for Gypsies from Eastern Europe to escape the violence in their countries of origin. Like their governments,

Gypsies had to assimilate to an “imported language of human rights” to be eligible for inclusion in the West (216). The geo-political shifts of the decade caught Eastern Europe in a crisis of representation; neither Eastern nor Western, symbolic both of Europe’s (illiberal) past and its (unified) future, Eastern Europe stood to remind Western Europe of its recent history of barbarism encapsulated in the two World Wars and to remind the US of its recent past of racial violence.

Eastern Europe, as Fonseca depicts it through the Gypsies, is a no-man’s land that can only signify the possibility of, rather than actualize, liberation or freedom. Fonseca suggests that, in so far as the US symbolizes a space of liberation for Third World others such as the Roma, it represents an alternative to the racial intolerance to which they are subject in Eastern Europe (217). Conscious of the privileges of her US citizenship, Fonseca addresses her freedom of mobility that stands in ultimate contrast to the status of the Gypsies: “I felt uneasy with my First World guilt,” she confesses. “In the former Eastern bloc it is great to be a visiting American. My nation’s generosity, or simply its bountiful image, was everywhere repaid to me personally. Here you yourself . . . were what many people thought they wanted to be. . . . I felt myself to be a parody of what the Gypsies were rumored to be: unfreighted, freewheeling” (209). Despite her critical reflections upon her position of First World privilege, contrasting her actual freedom to cross borders with the imagined freedom of the mythical wandering Gypsy, Fonseca does not recognize the limitation of Western institutions such as citizenship to underlie a multivalent construction of freedom. Indeed, in this instance Fonseca understands Gypsy un-freedom only in contrast to her own freedom as an American citizen in Eastern Europe. This formulation cannot acknowledge inequalities within the US, nor can it imagine alternative forms of emancipation.

The limitations of liberal discourses on racial equality and freedom in the aftermath of Communism become explicit in reading Fonseca’s report on the first ever meeting of Romani

academicians, politicians, and activists, which took place in 1992 at Stupava in Slovakia. The discussions at Stupava focused on refiguring Gypsy self-representation as a European transnational minority rather than Europe's "social problem" (297). Fonseca explicitly compares the young movement to the turbulent 1960s and 1970s civil rights mobilizations within the US, thus reading the current struggle of the Roma in terms of lessons gleaned from US history. "Among the Roma every style of politics was represented at Stupava—from black-power militancy and Bible-thumping to quiet accommodation within the *gadjo* framework" (294).<sup>4</sup> For instance, she describes activist Rudko Kawczynski as the "Eldridge Cleaver of the Romany emancipation movement," who with his "two leather-jacketed henchpersons . . . was as pompous as his carefully tilted wide-brimmed hat" (298). Fonseca's historical allusions to the civil rights movement in the US, however, also remind us of the failures of those movements to translate into lasting equality in the US as well as of the impossibility of imposing a US racial framework onto the case of the Gypsies in Eastern Europe. She writes that three American experts who lectured the Gypsies on the management of ethnic crisis "knew about Mexican Americans, about blacks and whites in America, and about ethnic conflict in general" but that they knew nothing specific about the Gypsies. In addition, "their immediate credibility had already been more comically undermined by scratchy radio dispatches announcing the ethnic riots back home in L.A." (298). The successes and failures of the US civil rights struggle in the US that erupted during the Los Angeles riots certainly point to the limits of the US model of liberal tolerance and equality under the law. Despite this ironic juxtaposition, Fonseca's recourse to the modes of US civil rights demonstrates that *Bury Me Standing* fails to imagine alternative solutions for ethnic conflict. The final image in the text, which depicts "toxic slums" scattered throughout the Eastern European landscape, serves as a metaphor for the hopelessness of the Roma in Eastern Europe (305). Bound to repeat the mistakes of the US civil rights struggle in order to be admitted

into the West, Fonseca's vision of "new" Eastern Europe, like one of the slums that she names, is a "no-man's-land," caught between the past and the future, and unable to actualize democracy and freedom that were supposed to blossom after Communism.

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## Conclusion: Liberation, Liberalization, and Democracy

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The contradictions that underlay the unstable Cold War boundary between West and East—"democracy" and "communism," the liberal and illiberal, the free and the un-free, race and multiculturalism—converged in the 1990s at the historical juncture when these political, ideological, and geographic demarcations underwent a monumental shift. While at this time the US media figured Yelena Khanga's complex heritage through the language of multiculturalism in order to evoke the possibilities of Eastern European transition, Isabel Fonseca's account of ethnic and racial prejudice throughout Eastern Europe underlined the difficulties of post-Communist transition in terms that seemed to prove that the former Communist nations had not yet learned to be inclusive and tolerant of difference. Khanga's status as a multicultural emblem whose story of familial reconciliation metaphorically reenacted the success of civil rights in the US and Fonseca's invocation of US civil rights as the model that the Roma had to inevitably follow exemplify the dominant version of US multicultural nationalism that emerged in the aftermath of the Cold War. Read side by side, these two journalistic accounts of post-Cold War transition demand a consideration of the ways that US racial ideologies continue to be coconstitutive with US geopolitics.

In April 1994, the US Congressional Subcommittee on International Security, International Organizations and Human Rights conducted the first congressional hearing on the status Roma in Eastern Europe. In his introductory remarks, Congressman Tom Lantos speculated that the

general Eastern European disappointment and frustration in the aftermath of the “euphoric” defeat of Communism led to “a search for scapegoats and a horrifying resurgence of ethnic violence” (1). While Lantos rightly points out that the decade following the liberal revolutions of 1989 brought about unprecedented ethnic and racial conflict in Central Europe and “the Balkans,” and that the Roma, in their precarious position as a non-national racial minority throughout Europe, bore a large brunt of this violence, he also suggests that ethnic tensions are the result of Eastern Europe’s failure to properly “adjust” to the free market rather than an aspect of the free market itself (1). Lantos’s introduction of four Romani activists’ expert testimonies framed their statements as pleas to the US, as the model of a free market democracy, to help the economies of the young Eastern European nations. The implication was that economic aid would facilitate the region’s surmounting of ethnic conflict and racial discrimination. Set in the early years of this triumph of “freedom” in Eastern Europe, the 1994 congressional hearing represented a moment at which US nationalist discourses, like the journalistic discourses represented by Khanga’s and Fonseca’s books, presumed that US citizens had been enjoying full civil rights for two decades and that domestic ethnic and racial conflicts had been fully resolved.

Nicholae Gheorghe, a sociologist and longtime Romani activist from Romania, most explicitly echoed Lantos’s rhetoric by linking the struggle for the Roma in Eastern Europe with the free market. Drawing on the history of nearly 500 years of institutionalized enslavement of the Roma in Romania that ended only in 1864, Gheorghe paralleled the coming of the free market to Eastern Europe after the Velvet Revolution with the abolition of slavery during the consolidation of the Romanian nation state in the nineteenth century: “the democracy now emerging in our countries, and the free market, can offer a chance, an opportunity, to recapture the skills of our people” (US House Committee 6). As Gheorghe put it elsewhere, “the chaos of the 1990s was productive—it was like a big bang”

(“In Search of a New Deal” 197). In the post-Communist world where, just as at the height of Cold War rhetoric, Communism could be symbolically compared with enslavement, “freedom” was reimagined as the unrestrained operation of free markets and free enterprise, which was presumed to be productive of civil liberties. The slippage in Gheorghe’s congressional address between the ideals of racial and national liberation and economic liberalization further exemplified the link between the US concern with global human rights, and its foreign economic interests and investments.

Through his references to “American culture” as the model that Eastern Europe should follow in its attempts at forging a “political culture of democracy,” Gheorghe implied that the US has overcome institutionalized racism and is now in the position of “educating [Eastern European] governments” (US House Committee 12). In particular, he told Congress: “your experience dealing with this problem [race] and in encountering institutionalized racism could be extremely useful in preventing such developments in our region” (12). Not only was this the sole reference to the history of slavery, institutionalized discrimination, and the civil rights movement in the US, but in framing the “problem” of race as a historical one, Gheorghe’s statement evidenced the prevailing assumption at the hearing: that since the Civil Rights Act of 1965 affirmed equality under the law, discrimination in the US became a relic of the past. Gheorghe’s statement thus foreclosed the possibility for an analysis of the US that would stress the continuing material relevance of race. In fact, in 1994, only two years after the Los Angeles uprisings, the US was called upon to aid Europe with the “problem” of the Roma, whose plight is “the disgrace of Europe” (2).

The rhetoric that prevailed at US congressional hearings on the status of the Roma illustrates how the US figures its role in mediating ethnic conflict in other regions through its self-understanding as a nation having overcome the material effects of racism by evolving into an unconflicted multiculturalist democracy. This nationalist

self-representation provides the context and justification for increased US "humanitarian" intervention in formerly "illiberal" regions. Throughout the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc signified the ideological enemy against which the US defined its conception of democracy and the "free world." Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, however, Eastern Europe has increasingly been viewed as a region that might be "saved" through Western intervention. The extent to which the congressional hearing on racial discrimination in the "new" Eastern democracies alludes to the US "past" of institutionalized racism and discrimination by focusing on the ways that the US can export its domestic lessons of the civil rights movement abroad is emblematic of the official erasure of the sedimented histories of race and racism that underlie ongoing racial inequalities over and through the shifts in the meaning of race difference in the twentieth-century US.

The 1994 US congressional hearing on the human rights abuses of the Roma reveals that US promotion of Western human rights ideals goes hand in hand with its stakes in fostering the budding free market economies of Eastern Europe. The two projects were presented as coconstitutive throughout the 1990s, and both were ultimately seen as indicators of successful and stable democracies. Reconceptualizing the US as the model for multiculturalist democracy through this transitional decade was intricately linked with US political and economic interests in its role as leader of the "new" post-Communist world order. This connection was, however, elided in representations of the US as a disinterested actor on behalf of human rights for racial and ethnic minorities in other parts of the world.

In their discussion of the possibilities for a critical multiculturalism in the aftermath of the Cold War, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner warn that "'market democracy,' which falsely substitutes free consumption for free activity and legitimate citizenship, requires a kind of criticism not grounded in identitarianism which itself can too easily fall back into the consumption of identity and other new pseudofreedoms" (109). With the rise of the global free market economy after

the demise of Communism, liberal rhetoric shifted to cover over the contradictions of poverty and global inequality that are sedimented in long histories of Western imperialism and expansionism. Similar to the operations of "multicultural nationalism" in the US, which discursively accounts for the production of "sexualized, gendered, and racialized bodies, and particularistic claims for recognition and justice" through the universalism of abstract citizenship, a transnational, though still nationalistic, discourse of multiculturalism in the aftermath of the Cold War had concealed the production of an increasingly racialized and gendered labor force concentrated in poorer nations through the celebratory and universalistic language of "democratizing" market forces (Moallem and Boal 245).

My consideration of the US congressional hearing on Roma rights alongside Khanga's and Fonseca's journalistic accounts of Eastern European transition suggests that the shadows of the Iron Curtain and Eastern "barbarism" resurfaced in the 1990s through the US discourse on Eastern Europe's racial backwardness. At this time, racism was reimagined as the reincarnation of the cultural backwardness attributed to the region under Communism. The West, led by the US, imposed its standard of racial and ethnic tolerance onto Eastern Europe and non-European nations such as Rwanda and Iraq. The US claims to racial tolerance, however, were and continue to be belied in its displacement of racial anxieties onto so-called ethnic conflicts in underdeveloped regions. As democracy is equated with the free market in contemporary Western liberal ideology, racial tolerance is a sign of a society that allows for equal competition and is a test that each nation must pass to be considered free. According to this model, the US does not just allow its national plurality of ethnicities and races to compete equally in the domestic market, but, as leader of the so-called New World Order, it offers this possibility to formerly Communist and Third World countries within the realm of the global market economy. Reconsidering the production of Eastern Europe in the dominant 1990s, US imaginary is, therefore, central to any considera-

tion of the contemporary rhetoric of freedom and tolerance used by the US to justify its ongoing aggression around the world.

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## Notes

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1. Eric Foner's review in the *New York Times* was the only one to suggest that Khanga's book fell flat in relation to the radical history of the black diaspora that it told (14).

2. In this section, I use the term "Gypsy" instead of "Roma" in order to follow Fonseca's terminology. Fonseca explains her choice to use the term "Gypsy" derives not from an impulse to exoticize the group, as is the term's historical connotation, but to convey the appropriation of the term by the Roma as an act of self-naming.

3. The Freedom House was founded in the US by Eleanor Roosevelt and Wendell Willkie around the time of the Second World War in response to the growing concern with totalitarianism.

4. *Gadjo* is a Romany term for non-Roma peoples.

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