

## Critical Pedagogy and Teaching Russian Folklore

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### Abstract

This article describes rationales and methods for critical pedagogical approaches to teaching Russian folklore. Critical pedagogy and folklore are interrelated in their grassroots orientations, which critically counternarrate the top-down dominant and high cultural themes that are commonly taught in humanities survey courses on Russian literature and culture in postsecondary institutions. This article argues that critical approaches have the potential to more effectively affirm culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse identities for liberation, rather than indoctrination. The article discusses decolonization, excavating the field's past to interrogate historical and ideological influences on the study of Russia and the Soviet Union in the United States. For practical application, the article provides examples of teaching commonly taught topics in Russian folklore classes in the United States. The author describes methods for teaching Russian laments [*prichitanija*], epics [*byliny*], and for teaching spiritual, verbal, and material culture pertaining to apiculture in Russian folklore, or “bee”lief.

### Introduction

Humanities courses on world literatures and cultures in the United States, including Russian-speaking literatures and cultures, are likely to emphasize high art, major cities, sites and sources of cultural heritage; symbols; historical, legal, and cultural values of dominant groups; and the lives and achievements of national heroes. Such content is intended to deepen learners' familiarity with dominant and high culture, in part to deliver education for upward social mobility. Courses in folklore, including the folklore of Russian speech communities, are more likely, though not exclusively, to focus on popular aesthetics, traditions, values, and practices among rural, peripheral, and working-class identities and communities. In fact, for marginalized, minoritized, and underrepresented identities in educational settings, studying folklore “is inherently empowering because it involves attention to individuals and communities operating outside of arenas of institutional power... folklorists tend toward description of what *is* rather than prescription of what *should be*” [Hamer 2018: 53]. This essay will combine concepts and topics in teaching Russian folklore with the goals and practices of critical pedagogy.

In this essay, critical pedagogy refers to two instructional aspirations: 1) to affirm learners' intersectional identity factors [Crenshaw 1989], and 2) to disrupt dominant narratives and to illuminate forms of oppression, such as “*exploitation*,

*violence, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and marginalization*” [Young 1990: 40]. As such, instructional applications of critical pedagogy must be anti-oppressive to avoid the situation Paulo Freire describes in which “education as the exercise of domination stimulates the credulity of students with the ideological intent... of indoctrinating them to adapt to the world of oppression” [Freire 1970: 78]. Critical pedagogy employs content and practices for liberation in education, not indoctrination. To be clear, “[w]e do not want our students to think just like us—to vote for our favorite candidate or prioritize issues as we might, to participate in all the same social actions, or to convey their opinions exactly as we do. That is indoctrination and it is *not* anti-oppressive” [Rodríguez and Swalwell 2022: 40]. In other words, education, including critical pedagogy, is only successfully liberatory when it is concomitantly, *unsuccessfully* indoctrinatory.

In pursuit of liberatory education, bell hooks names critical pedagogy as vital to the co-construction and production of knowledge that occurs in postsecondary settings:

If we examine critically the traditional role of the university in the pursuit of truth and the sharing of knowledge and information, it is painfully clear that biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism, and racism have distorted education so that it is no longer about the practice of freedom... [A] rethinking of ways of knowing, a deconstruction of old epistemologies, and the concomitant demand that there be a transformation in our classrooms, in how we teach and what we teach, has been a necessary revolution. [1994: 29-30]

Relatedly, the study of the Russian-speaking world in the United States is politically charged, owing to a variety of social, cultural, financial, and historical contributors. This must be considered in the teaching of Russian folklore as well, and warrants applications of critical pedagogy, considering “proponents of a complex critical pedagogy appreciate the fact that all educational spaces are unique and politically contested. Constructed by history... educational practice... can operate under the flag of democracy and justice in oppressive and totalitarian ways” [Kincheloe 2012: 155]. Subsequently, teaching and the selection of course content are not neutral, but political, as both are characterized by choices and rules that reflect top-down decision making and/or that take place in settings with discrete power differentials.

Therefore, critical pedagogy and teaching folklore share common goals: “Through studying folklore, students may critique the hegemonic or idiosyncratic views presented by fine artists and see instead the value of grassroots, democratic views expressed by folk artists” [Hamer 2000: 58]. Similarly, critical pedagogy seeks to teach content in a way that illuminates power relationships, transactionality, and top-down oppression to elicit grassroots liberation. In this way, folklore can be an affirming content area for students whose life experiences reside beyond cultures of affluence. As Lynne Hamer argues, “Folk arts tend to represent a more egalitarian, populous view than do fine arts. Such informal, local

art runs counter to the capitalist forms of elite and popular culture, of which most students, their friends, and their family members are consumers rather than producers” [Hamer 2000: 59]. In US culture, including in postsecondary courses in the humanities, representations of socioeconomically diverse people are minimal or unfavorable, “a situation that is even worse for people of color experiencing poverty... they are portrayed as intellectually deficient or morally deviant” [Gorski 2018: 96].

Dominant narratives and ideologies in educational settings are a form of cultural imperialism in that they convey “worldviews about what seems natural or logical. In the United States, this typically means centering heterosexuality, cisgender identities, maleness, Christianity, whiteness, able-bodiedness, middle- and upper-class positions, documented status, the English language, the Global North, settlement, and colonialism” [Rodríguez and Swalwell, 2022: 4-5]. Cultural imperialism creates oppressive conditions in which “[a]cademia largely ignores the increasing numbers of working-class students and downwardly mobile middle-class students” [Muhs 2020: 155]. Subsequently, academia typically fails to affirm socioeconomically, culturally, and linguistically diverse learner identities in postsecondary settings, thus there is a need for critical pedagogy.

The American Council on Education (ACE) recently noted the following findings from an ongoing study about racial and ethnic identity in postsecondary education in the United States:

Although the White population has continued to be the largest racial and ethnic group in the US, its share of the overall population decreased from 69.1 percent in 2002 to 59.2 percent in 2022... Postsecondary education also experienced a demographic transformation due to the increased enrollment of students from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds... between 1999-2000 and 2019-20, the share of White students among all undergraduate enrollment dropped from 65.9 percent to 47.6 percent, while the share of students of color increased from 32.2 percent to 49.9 percent. [Kim, Soler, Zhao & Swirsky 2024: 3]

While student diversity in US postsecondary institutions is on the rise, faculty diversity is less ascendant. The academy in the United States historically and generally is a place of generational privilege, by virtue of white supremacy, patriarchy, and the historical roots of systemic exclusion from education based on identity factors such as race, sex, and class. The ACE simultaneously observed that “despite increased shares of non-White students at all levels of higher education, college faculty, staff, and students remained predominantly White... 69.4 percent of all full-time faculty and 56.2 percent of newly hired full-time faculty were White” [Kim, Soler, Zhao & Swirsky 2024: 11]. In terms of class and socioeconomic status, “faculty are on average between 12 and 25 times more likely to have a parent with a Ph.D. than the general population, and about twice as likely as other individuals who hold a Ph.D.” [Morgan, et al 2022: 1625]. The academy therefore reproduces race and class privilege, as a predominantly white

system designed for and administered by beneficiaries of socially constructed hierarchies of color, gender, and class. The next section discusses the historical roots of the particularly elite nature of education about Russia in the United States to establish a foundation for why teaching about Russia and specifically about Russian folklore has utility for the goals of critical pedagogy.

### Education about Russia in the United States: History, Identity, and Ideology

Courses, canons, and curricula in the humanities in US post-secondary institutions, including those pertaining to the Russian-speaking world, reproduce dominant narratives [Du Bois 1903; Gay 2018; Muhs 2020; Kendi 2018; Picower 2021; Ladson-Billings 1995; Leonardo 2009; Love 2019; Rodríguez and Swalwell 2022; Woodson 1933; Yacovone 2022]. In recent years, the field of Slavic languages and literatures, in which Russian folklore courses in the United States are often, though not exclusively, situated, has been seeking diverse and decolonial remedies to repair endemic features of teaching and research in the field including anti-Blackness, anti-Indigeneity, settler colonialism, orientalism, native speakerism, classism, homophobia, Islamophobia, transphobia, and patriarchal paternalism. These ideologies, at least in part, contributed to a unique homogeneity of race, class, and gender identity among US-based scholars in the Slavic field in the twentieth century. Observable evidence of these dominant narratives and ideologies abounds within related textbooks, courses, degree programs, and professional associations [Azimova and Johnston 2012; Byrnes 1994; Lugo de Fabritz 2013; Murphy and Ghaedi 2021; St. Julian Varnon 2020; Shardakova and Pavlenko 2004; Stauffer 2020].

The history of the study of Russia and the Soviet Union in the United States clarifies how the field's scholars, canons, and curricula came to be largely homogeneous in their representations of identity. Leading up to and during its most formative years in the United States, starting after World War II, the teaching and learning of Slavic languages and literatures was predominantly undertaken in selective, private institutions in the Northeast. Columbia University sociologist Charles Mills contemporaneously observed, "In this particular epoch a conjunction of historical circumstances has led to the rise of an elite of power" [1956: 28]. The interconnectedness of power elites meant that academics and universities shaping the Slavic field were well-funded internally and externally. The philanthropic arms of some of the previous century's wealthiest industrial tycoons, e.g., Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Ford, aligned with universities, the US military, elite postsecondary institutions, and professional associations like the American Council for Learned Societies (ACLS), Modern Language Association (MLA), and the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) to steward the field, establish its centers and associations, and create and shape federal grant programs that remain vital to its survival today [Parry 1967; Byrnes 1997; Borstelmann 2001; Hartman 2008; Engerman 2009]. Accordingly, curricula on the region were formed in the shadows of McCarthyism, segregationism, and broader conservatism and anticommunism.

Whereas critical pedagogy asserts that teaching and choices about instructional content are not neutral, but political, Slavists did not see it that way: “American specialists on the Soviet Union during the decade or two after 1945 remained above political controversy and acquired a deserved reputation for thorough and careful analyses, regardless of the directions in which political winds blew” [Byrnes 1988: 523]. Courses and curricula on the region appear to have been whitewashed to dispel potential political attitudes or sympathies with communism. The US government was particularly suspicious of Black, African American, African, Latin American, Asian, Indigenous, and other intellectuals and revolutionaries of color, who were often accused of harboring communist sympathies, though this is a presumption of white supremacy, not of actual evidence. Conflation of race and ideology in this regard and the fear of being labeled a communist meant that Slavists ultimately avoided potentially controversial or perceptibly political discussions. Content related to the multicultural and multiethnic diversity of the many peoples of the Soviet Union may therefore have been construed as political. Byrnes argues: “Aware of the deep political controversies within the United States that Soviet domestic policies and the zig-zags of Soviet foreign policies created and of the crucial need that scholarly work remain free from involvement in political debate, these scholars helped train young men and women to obtain and describe the facts as objectively as they could... to stand removed from the political controversies that divided the American public” [1994: 131]. Appearing politically neutral—as individuals, as a field, and in curricula—was an act of self-preservation and conveniently served to mostly, but not entirely, shield the field and its predominantly white male scholars from McCarthyist scrutiny.

The field’s homogeneity made the whitewashing of curricula inevitable, while also providing the appearance of ignorance about or lack of alignment with the ideologies of Soviet multiculturalism and multilingualism. McCarthyism and its offshoots in American conservatism rejected Soviet propaganda that was critical of racial segregation and white supremacy in the United States. Relatedly, the field’s power elites did not publicly express solidarity with global movements for racial and social liberation during the Cold War, although other humanities fields, English and American Studies, for example, and professional associations like the MLA did so. The philanthropic arms supporting the field, perhaps, given their benefactors’ identities and ideologies, were uninvested in racial or social equality. For Andrew Carnegie, for example, who supported Jim Crow-era segregation, the “preferred educational model for Black Americans—one promoting training in industrial and agricultural practices... would leave unchallenged white domination and Black subordination in cultural, social, and economic life” [Morey 2021: 36]. It is also worth mentioning that Carnegie’s philanthropic arm robustly funded eugenics research until 1939 [Kendi 2018]. “The major Soviet studies programs... all took their inspiration, organization, personnel, and pedagogy from wartime military programs... philanthropic foundations fostered this environment as they applied their funds to meet their own intellectual and political goals” [Engerman 2016: 181]. As an impactful

result, the curriculum leaned into dominant culture and Russocentrism because “there were a number of conceptual and practical limits on Slavacists’ work... studies of Soviet culture meant, with rare exceptions, studies of Russian literature and were limited almost exclusively to works in Russian” [Engerman 2009: 131].

The history of initial academic interest in Russian folklore in the United States similarly warrants critical historical analysis. According to Clarence Manning’s 1957 history of Slavic studies in the United States, a book in English on Russian epics was published in 1885, a few years before the founding of the American Folklore Society [1957: 23]. It was authored by a US-born white woman of higher social standing from Boston, Isabel Florence Hapgood, who was born in 1855, studied languages in private school, and traveled to Russia on several occasions [Ledkovsky 1998]. Hapgood’s *The Epic Poems of Russia*, published in 1885, “received rave reviews” [Ledkovsky 1998: 5]. Byrnes attributes Hapgood’s popular success to the fact that “American interest in Russia began in the mid-1880s when the translations... of Turgenev, Tolstoy, Leskov, Gogol, and Dostoevsky made by Isabel Hapgood, Nathan Haskell Dole, and others led to almost a ‘Russian craze’” [1994: 4]. The bulk of Hapgood’s volume consists of translations of Russian epics (in prose, rather than verse), and the introduction discusses the content, history, personae, performance, and regional variation of epics, alongside a history of their study in Russia by Russian scholars. The introduction includes a brief discussion of the *Slovo o polku Igoreve* [Igor tale], including the controversies around its origins, which stands in contrast to a claim from Ernest Simmons, who taught Russian at Cornell and Columbia, who attributes the first academic interest in the Igor tale in the United States to Samuel Cross in the 1930s [Jakobson and Simmons 1949: 10]. This fact is particularly interesting since in an article in the same volume by Avrahm Yarmolinsky a different volume by Hapgood (on Russian literature) is cited.

Hapgood’s *The Epic Songs of Russia* is especially worth mentioning in the history of Slavic folklore studies in the United States. Harvard’s Cross, Alfred Parry, Albert Lord, and Roman Jakobson, along with Felix Oinas at Indiana University are most often cited as the initiators of the study of Russian epics in the United States [Beissinger 1992; Flier 1996; Kononenko 2006]. It is unclear if Hapgood’s volume was unknown or unacknowledged by Slavists several decades later, or if it was simply not construed as a scholarly volume. If either is true, was it owing to Hapgood’s sex, lack of graduate degree, or to something else? Further inquiry into this question as well as more comprehensive research for a critical history of scholars and inquiry in Russian folklore in the United States would be worthwhile pursuits to clarify more about the field’s origins and stewardship. Franz Boas, for example, the well-known Columbia University anthropologist who influenced the study of folklore in the United States, including scholarship on Slavic folklore, although recognized by some for having more progressive views on race, actively expressed anti-Black racism and anti-Semitism, writing in 1921 that “the Negro problem will not disappear in America until the Negro blood has been so much diluted that it will no longer be recognized just as anti-Semitism will not disappear until the vestige of the Jew as a Jew has disappeared” [Kendi

2018: 554]. Critical historical and social inquiry offer pathways to excavate the past of academic disciplines to contribute to a more equitable and antiracist future of the field for all learner and scholar identities.

### Critical Pedagogy and Decolonization

The privileged identity of the power elites who have historically shaped the field is a source of the Slavic field's expressed need to reconsider curricula and redefine its identity today, which many have referred to as a need to decolonize the field. Calls for the decolonization of curricula in postsecondary education confront dominant culture intending to center minoritized identities, Indigenous ways of knowing and learning, and diverse forms of individual expression. Critical pedagogy contributes to decolonization efforts, and critical pedagogy applied to the study of the region helps to deconstruct and disrupt dominant ideologies born of settler colonialism. Decolonization of curricula, however, also requires critical examination of the history of institutions and systems contributing to the production of knowledge [Smith 1999]. This includes the history of scholarly foundations and existing canons insofar as their connections to features of white supremacy and settler colonialism are concerned:

The de-colonial epistemic shift proposes to change the rule of the game—and not just the content—and the reason why knowledge is produced: decolonization, instead of working toward the accumulation of knowledge and imperial management, works toward the empowerment and liberation of different layers (racial, sexual, gender, class, linguistic, epistemic, religious, etc.) from oppression, and toward the undermining of the assumption upon which imperial power is naturalized, enacted, and corrupted. [Mignolo and Tlostanova 2016: 130]

Classification and categorization, for example, while useful for folklorists, have historically been methods and sources of minoritization and marginalization in the United States and the Russian Empire. Colonization weaponizes identity for purposes of subjectivity based on purely invented hierarchies of socially constructed categories such as race, sex, and class. The study of the region is not exempt from the racist history of eugenics in fields like history, psychology, biology, sociology, and anthropology to validate subjugation because of identity [Du Bois 1903; Woodson 1933; Kendi 2018].

It is therefore important to separate decolonization from critical pedagogy. The two strive for distinctly different outcomes. The former aims to dismantle settler colonialism and associated ideologies, institutions, and systems, representing a fundamental disruption and transformation of dominant culture. While curricula can theoretically be decolonized, such action is merely mitigative when curricula are delivered within colonized institutions that are oppressive systems, so decolonization also intends to dismantle and reinvent structurally oppressive institutions and systems—not only canons and curricula. Amid calls

for decolonization, postsecondary institutions persistently reproduce ideologies of colonization, not only by physically occupying stolen lands, but also by gatekeeping, controlling, and selling the construction, production, and distribution of knowledge, and perpetuating dominant narratives. Critical pedagogy can be undertaken in colonized educational settings, but it does not requisitely nor concomitantly pursue decolonization as its goal. Instead, it seeks to affirm student identity and develop critical awareness of oppression through liberatory practices of education. Therefore, it is worthwhile to clearly assert that decolonization is an altogether different undertaking than critical pedagogy, though the two have interconnected goals.

With this and the above content in mind, the remainder of this essay unites practices of critical pedagogy with the teaching of commonly taught topics in undergraduate courses on Russian culture or folklore conducted in English. Some content and activities are merely creative suggestions for instructors to consider and have not yet been attempted with students and others have already been achieved successfully. Russian folklore will be emphasized here as it is the primary domain of my expertise, however these methods can be applied and adapted accordingly for other regions of focus or extended for inclusion of other Slavic folkways. Subsequent sections offer examples of combining concepts from critical pedagogy with content for teaching about specific themes in Russian folklore: 1) lament [*prichitanie*] with a creative approach to affirm student identity, 2) epic [*bylina*] with a proposed application of generative artificial intelligence (AI) to illuminate modern geopolitical oppression, and 3) the spiritual, verbal, and material culture of “bee”-lief in Russian folklore as a critical pedagogical tool to illuminate systemic oppression contributing to climate change.

### Critical Pedagogy and Teaching Russian Lament

The content and performance of Russian laments can achieve critical pedagogical goals toward affirming student identity and disrupting dominant narratives, while also illuminating oppression. In and of itself, women’s performance of ritual laments is an observable and powerful confrontation with patriarchy, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism. A widow’s lament on the loss of her husband or another male family member may also be a lament about a loss of livelihood and care in a world that otherwise offered limited options for women’s independent survival. A mother lamenting the departure or death of her soldier son directly and emotionally confronts dominant, paternalistic, and nationalist narratives that justify violence for hegemonic gains. A bride’s performative lament confronts patriarchy, protests her lack of agency and choice, and expresses her fear and uncertainty. As Roberta Reeder describes, “[The bride] sometimes compares herself to a green reed, to an unripe berry: the girl was often given away very young, almost an adolescent, and she was afraid of the backbreaking work awaiting her in a strange home” [1993: 16-17]. For girls and women, death, departure, and marriage all potentially represented



marginalization, powerlessness, and exploitation, alluding to the fact that women are among the most vulnerable and therefore disproportionately provide care for their families and communities in the absence of other sources of livelihood and security [Nadasen 2023].

As a form of critical pedagogy, antisexist discussion of the subjugation of women illuminates the oppression of powerlessness, violence, and cultural imperialism that women experience from patriarchy and paternalism, both features of dominant culture and white supremacy. Subjugation in and of itself restricts women's freedom of expression. For a mother whose son has been drafted, over which only the patriarchal state has control, or a young woman forced into marriage, over which only her father and future father-in-law have control, the performance of laments illuminates marginalization and powerlessness of sexism. The study of laments for weddings and soldiers especially highlights imbalanced power relationships, and it also serves as an example of community resilience. Russian communities outside ruling class centers sustained pre-Christian traditions, such as lament and associated wedding rituals, long after the establishment of Christianity. Christianity was an urban phenomenon in the tenth and eleventh centuries, whereas a "majority of people in the countryside remained largely unaffected by the new religion" [Zguta 1978: 7]. Christianity itself and its imposition by the state can be viewed as a form of top-down state control that peripheral communities were sometimes able to resist or avoid. Through a critical lens, dual belief [*dvoeverie*]<sup>1</sup>—if we wish to consider it despite recent criticisms—is simply a predictable result of distance, physical, social, economic, and political—from ruling class centers. Sometimes, communities distant from centralized power can resist state and spiritual cultural oppression. This is all to say that illuminating liberation and community preservation of culture is as useful to critical pedagogical aims as illuminating oppression.

To dive deeper into understanding laments, lyrics in translation and video examples of different types and settings offer students examples of laments' structural, compositional, and performative features. As creative synthesis, one potential class exercise is for students to compose their own laments on the theme of saying goodbye to something or someone by following structural and compositional rules, and the option to perform them, if desired. Alternatively, students could compose a lament that to be performed at a wedding or funeral outside of the United States or Russia, considering students' unique cultural heritages and diverse personal experiences. For students whose families and/or origins extend beyond the United States, this offers a particularly affirming opportunity to more deeply examine the traditions of their personal cultural identity. The study of laments offers rich opportunities for students to deepen their awareness of power relationships and systemic oppression, while also inviting opportunities for identity affirmation. It can open conversations on values and ideologies related to individual and community identity such as gender, sexuality, community, kinship, and death. Sandra Duval terms discussion of these topics *deep culture*, which "moves us beyond heroes and holidays and invites us to talk

about expectations, childrearing practices, concepts of beauty, family, and community” [2018: 52].

### Critical Pedagogy and Teaching Russian Epics

Describing and participating in the performance and collection of folklore are meaningful experiences for students to learn more about themselves, their peers, and their communities and affirm identity. In a 2020 special issue of the *Journal of Folklore and Education* on the theme of “Teaching for Equity,” Diana Baird N’Diaye notes, “in the service of social justice and building bridges, the act of recording and communicating personal and community narratives... can be powerful and transformative” [2020: 19]. Here, N’Diaye is speaking to the power of video and audio recordings as evidence of anti-Black violence in policing in the United States, considering the murder of George Floyd in the same year as the special issue. Students’ folklore collecting efforts can be critically approached in the same way: for the purpose of preserving, affirming, and protecting diverse communities and cultures.

A common practice in the study of folklore is to engage students in collection. In my past folklore courses, students have collected descriptions of rituals common among their peers in the United States, such as Super Bowl Sunday, back-to-school shopping, Mother’s Day, and trick-or-treating. Many of these more modern rituals in the United States have a capitalist, consumerist goal, which for critical pedagogical purposes may be used strategically to illuminate ways that capitalism is an exploitative system of oppression. Likewise, in the age of social media, folklore collection can be a hands-on, practical method for students to engage with people and information in the real world, as opposed to behind a screen. However, there are ample opportunities to do folklore collection behind screens as well. Social media sites are a treasure trove of human experiences and personal testimonials. Also, generative AI, which pulls its knowledge from human data, offers emergent pathways to engage in the study and collection of folklore, and potentially also in the creation of examples of folklore. Specifically, generative AI can be prompted to compose examples of folkloric texts that illuminate the oppression of violence and cultural imperialism in contemporary geopolitics. Figure 1 shows the output from ChatGPT to the following prompt: “Compose a text in English in the style and meter of a medieval Russian былина [epic] about the Russo-Ukrainian war that started in 2022. Include Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy, use fixed epithets with predatory birds, and Zelenskyy is the victor”:

**ChatGPT**

In the land where Dnieper's waters flow,  
Where eagles soar with fierce, unyielding might,  
There brewed a clash of kingdoms, fierce in plight,  
'Twi'x Russia's might and Ukraine's resolute show.

Vladimir, the falcon-eyed, bold and stern,  
With iron fist, he sought to claim his prize,  
To quench his thirst 'neath skies of azure skies,  
To bend Ukraine 'neath his imperial turn.

Yet Volodymyr, with eagle's grace,  
Stood firm, his people's champion true and strong,  
With courage fierce, he battled all day long,  
Defending lands with steadfast, noble face.

Through fields of strife and rivers crimson red,  
They clashed, like eagles locked in fierce embrace,  
With talons sharp, they sought to claim their place,  
Yet 'twas Zelenskyy who emerged ahead.

For Ukraine's hero, with unwavering might,  
Outwitted Putin's schemes and savage might,  
With wisdom keen, he guided through the night,  
And brought his people into morning light.

Now let the minstrels sing of Zelenskyy's reign,  
Of how the eagle soared above the fray,  
Defending freedom's light, come what may,  
In the annals of history, his victory shall remain.

*Figure 1: ChatGPT epic in style of a Russian epic about the Russo-Ukrainian War.*

Here, ChatGPT describes the subject matter of the Russo-Ukrainian war while maintaining the common structural elements of Russian epic, such as its fixed epithets and predatory bird symbolism, and still critically reflecting power

imbalances associated with current geopolitics in the region. Using generative AI in this way engages critical pedagogy, both in terms of giving students a chance to compose something creative on a topic of their choice and of discussing violence and cultural imperialism in the context of contemporary geopolitics, all through the veil of a medieval medium. The prompt that I used asserted a particular outcome, but it might also be left to chance. AI is known to “amplify the bias on the internet” [Bowen and Watson 2024: 18], so instructors and students alike need to be thoughtful about both prompting and critical about outputs from AI.

Students can engineer prompts to further specify the criteria for their epics according to their interests and values related to contemporary geopolitics. With accurate prompting that specifies the qualities of verse composition, students may be able to elicit equimetrical examples of Russian epics in English. AI composition also builds a collection of all students’ composed epics to consider them, identifying recurring and varying themes, motifs, and structural elements like a folklorist might do in the field. Students can consider what questions to ask about the collection and its significance to understanding the Russo-Ukrainian war. Certainly, there are many ways such a collection could be approached in teaching folklore. The subject matter of Russian epics, after all, is typically concerned with power relationships and stories of victories over oppressors, which contributes to its utility in illuminating oppression. Simultaneously, epics heroify rulers and strongmen at the top of social hierarchies, which offers an altogether different utility in recognizing how epic reinforces cultural imperialism. Using AI in teaching epics is one example from Russian folklore that may benefit from the ways AI “prioritize[s] the ability to ask new questions, connect and interrogate new ideas, evaluate, iterate, and adapt to new responses” [Bowen and Watson 2024: 44]. Although I have not yet personally tried this method in my courses, I intend to do so in an upcoming course on heroes and villains in Russian literature and culture. Despite the many fears of and prohibitions on AI that postsecondary educators and institutions assert, the potential uses of AI offer many still unknown possibilities for critical pedagogy and liberatory education, including in the teaching of folklore. Simultaneously, in the interest of critical pedagogy, social justice, and collective liberation, it is also important to note for students the environmental oppression caused by AI and big data, both in terms of the rapid consumption of dwindling natural resources and the exploitation of labor for extraction of natural resources necessary for the technology.

### Critical Pedagogy and Teaching Russian “Bee”lief

For a course on Russian civilization and culture at a postsecondary institution in the US South, I developed a unit on the verbal, material, and spiritual culture of Russian apiculture or “bee”lief. The folkloric significance of apiculture is prevalent in many aspects of Russian history and culture, from the earliest times to the present:

Folklore clearly shows the importance of bees, wax, honey, and hives in early Russian society... Proverbs and adages abound with references to bees, wax, and honey... Charms could be recited over honey that the individual then smeared upon himself, and like other members of solitary professions forest beekeepers sometimes were considered to be sorcerers (*kolduny*). [Lahana 2018: 33-34]

The many elements of Russian “bee”-lief in verbal, material, and spiritual culture serve to highlight the essential role of bees for pollination and food production, a role that is increasingly imperiled by global warming, chemical contaminants, deforestation, and climate change. As critical pedagogy, the topic of Russian apiculture illuminates the interconnectedness of humans and bees and its representations in Russian folklore toward deepening student awareness of oppression in the form of the exploitation of natural resources that leads to climate change and endangers pollinating insects, including bees.

In the area of verbal culture, there are many Russian proverbs [*poslovitsy*], sayings [*pogovorki*] about bees and honey, incantations [*zaklitiia*], and folk verse in songs. Verbal culture around bees reflects folk understanding of bees’ role in pollination and food production, as the Russian proverb states, “Есть пчела в саду, будет яблоко на ветке” [If there is a bee in the grove, there will be an apple on the branch]. Spring songs and invocations of spring use bee imagery at winter’s end: “Oh, little bee, / Ardent bee! / Fly out beyond the sea, / Get out the keys, / The golden keys. / Lock up winter, / Cold winter! / Unlock summer, / Warm summer, / Warm summer, / A summer fertile in grain!” [Reeder 1993: 93]. There are also texts with elements of “bee”-lief that originated in oral tradition such as “Месть княгини Ольги древлянам” [“Olga’s Revenge on the Derevlians”] and “Повесть о Петре и Февронии” [“The Tale of Peter and Fevronia.”] In the former, Princess Olga is heroified for weaponizing honey in the form of a mead that intoxicates the Derevlians, making them easy, drunken targets for an ambush. It is also worth mentioning that Olga was calculatingly using up the enemies’ resources with this strategy, “Olga sectioned off hunting grounds and honeying grounds, beekeeping being a particular Derevlian speciality, and controlled access to them” [Brown 2021: 261]. Importantly, these policy decisions remained in place long after Olga’s reign ended. In the “Tale of Peter and Fevronia,” Fevronia is described as “a peasant who became a princess and eventually a saint... the daughter and sister of men who climbed tall trees in the forest to harvest honey” [Lahana 2018: 33], which endowed her with the knowledge necessary to cure Peter’s illness. The verbal culture of “bee”-lief also includes analyzing words with roots associated with bees and bee products, noting, for example, the similar forms of the words for bee and bear (“honey-knower” = *měd* “honey” + *ved’* “know”) in several Slavic languages and in the Indo-European root for honey. These linkages in language and culturally relevant texts serve as evidence of ancestral awareness of the interconnectedness of humans and bees, further illuminating the importance of climate conservation efforts for bees’ survival.

In the area of material culture, to familiarize themselves with the implements, products, and entities involved in beekeeping in Russia, my students observed apicultural imagery in high and popular culture via paintings (e.g., Vasnetsov's 1909 *Prizvanie Variagov*, Bogatov's 1875 *Pasechnik*, and Stanisławski's 1895 *Ule na Ukraine*, among others) and in the decorative styles of handmade crafts like *shkatulki* [keepsake boxes] and textiles. Non-ritual uses of bee products like wax for candles and waterproofing, pollen and honey for healing and nutrition, and the important role of bees in agriculture for the pollination and production of food are all important concepts in recognizing bees' ecological centrality. Pollination is necessary for many traditional Russian foods including, "[a]pples, plums, raspberries, and cherries; cabbages, carrots, and cucumbers; mint, dill, mustard, and marjoram; flax and buckwheat" [Lahana 2018: 29]. Darra Goldstein confirms the importance of these foods, "Russians relished fresh apples, cherries, pears, plums, melons, and berries in season, eating them fresh, baking them (especially apples), and using them to sweeten porridge" [2015: 584]. In a similar vein, "bee"lief is also observable in Russian regions and cities which use the bee or the bear on official coats of arms [Lahana 2018; Ruban and Yashalova 2022]: "Although special studies are necessary to analyze the actual people's perception of these symbols, it is logical to hypothesize a very significant contribution of the regional coats of arms to... awareness... towards wildlife conservation and its public support... to draw the people's attention to the biodiversity awareness and conservation needs" [Ruban and Yashalova 2022: 24].

To more deeply engage students with a hands-on, sensory experience for awareness of biodiversity beyond the classroom, I contacted a local beekeeping association, which happily supplied a volunteer who met the class on a mutually agreeable date and time at the university arboretum, where students observed behind glass an active bee colony and attempted to locate the queen. Students were invited to taste edible products like honey and bee pollen and to touch and smell other things like propolis, wax, and royal jelly. The beekeeper was enthusiastic and willing to answer the students' questions and incorporated broader themes into their presentation related to the role of bees in the context of sustainable development. For the study of material culture related to Russian "bee"lief, the hands-on observation was a meaningful way to bring the topic to life beyond the classroom and also engaged the local community. For places without a local beekeeping association, there may be local apiaries to visit as a field trip or an option for student extension and enrichment.

In the area of spiritual culture, Russian "bee"lief comes to life through the folk beliefs of beekeepers, particularly as folk etymologies for "bee"havior, (i.e., if bees are flying into the hive, it will rain; if they are sitting on the walls, it will be hot). Additionally, honey as a healing and nutritional substance is a symbol of raw to cooked [Lévi-Strauss 1969], wherein bees transform "raw" pollen into "cooked" honey and beekeepers alone have direct access to this transformational power. Nutritionally, honey was magical because of its high sugar content: "Most of the Russian populace lived their lives on the edge, teetering towards hunger

and dependent on an annual harvest that could be destroyed by untimely frosts, drought, hail, insects, or commissars” [Goldstein 2024: 2]. The nutritional density and magical power of honey gave it special status, making it highly symbolic in ritual foods like *bliny* and *kut'ia* for life-cycle and yearly-cycle transitions such as from life to death at funerals, from winter to spring, and from fasting to feasting, and vice versa. Honey and wax were believed by many to have healing properties, “Dressings for cuts, burns, and puncture wounds included honey and applications based on honey were even recommended for treating eye problems or bad teeth. Herbs might also be kneaded into wax and swallowed, a primitive time-release capsule” [Lahana 2018: 47]. Beekeepers believed protection for bees was elicited from the water spirit [*vodianoï*], “They presented him with honey and wax in an attempt to prevent excessive humidity, which destroyed their hives” [Ivanits 1994: 73]. Likewise, after Christianity, “The patrons of beekeeping were Saints Zosima and Savvatii, whose feasts (17 April and 27 September) more or less marked the swarming and hibernation of bees in Russia; in places, Nicholas was also regarded as patron of bees” [Ivanits 1994: 29].

There is also value in noting the belief in a perceptible difference between the skill set of someone who harvested honey and wax from wild forest hives [*bortevoi pchelovod*] as opposed to someone who kept bees at home for personal cultivation [*domovoi pchelovod*] [Vitvickij 1835]. In contrast to the home beekeeper, it was the forest beekeeper who was believed to have access to extraordinary or supernatural abilities due to his capacity to harvest wild honey. “Peasants tended to attribute occult powers to herdsmen, millers, blacksmiths, beekeepers, carpenters, and stonemasons... they regarded the special knowledge or skill of these professionals as inaccessible to an ordinary person and therefore as beyond the human realm” [Ivanits 1994: 111]. In the contemporary context, a music video for a 2019 Russian pop song, (“Pchelovod,” by RASA, with English subtitles), in which the singer proclaims the object of affection to whom he is singing is a bee and he is the beekeeper, is an excellent example of how “bee”lief remains important in contemporary Russian popular culture, though the song’s themes are not exclusively drawn from Russian folklore, small traces still remain. The social distinctions and the modern song similarly reflect virtues of Russian masculinity that conflate certain skills with supernatural abilities. From the perspective of critical pedagogy, this observation can further illuminate the marginalization caused by oppressive, subjective socially constructed hierarchies.

Deeper understandings of humanity’s relationship to the natural world through the study of folklore then, may have utility in sustainability efforts during an unprecedented period of climate change. Climate change is a local and global issue that has relevance to current and future generations of college students. Systemic oppression and social inequities are experiencing no shortfalls because of climate change, and climate change itself is a product of the oppressive exploitation of natural resources through the perpetuation of petrocapitalism. Mainstream challenges of sustainability, like many social, political, legal, and economic phenomena in United States, can be traced to colonialism: “In the beginning, conservation was tied to racist, sexist, and classist notions of

wilderness protection in order to serve urban, bourgeois, white men's desire to construct themselves as rugged frontiersmen" [Curnow and Halferty 2022: 148]. In the present century, however, environmental destruction is tied to global, bourgeois corporations' desire to be profitable at all costs, one of the highest of which is the exploitation of natural resources.

### Implications and Future Considerations

The application of critical pedagogy in teaching Russian folklore provides rich opportunities for understanding how power, identity, and oppression operate in Russian speech communities. Folktales [*skazki*] have not been discussed above, but certainly there are avenues for critical analysis of *skazki*, particularly of their characters. For example, a critical examination of magic tales could consider how identity and power are in play among recurring characters. Baba Yaga, Vasilisa the Wise/Beautiful, Prince Ivan, and Koshchei the Deathless represent different aspects of social status within Russian folk belief. In many tales, Vasilisa is orphaned or abandoned, leaving her no options in a patriarchal society, and her associated troubles unfold accordingly. Baba Yaga is isolated from all members of society, living in a hut in the forest and labeled a witch [*baba*], and resides as a liminal being between the living and the dead, the clean and the unclean, the magical and the ordinary, and the good and the bad. She is uncontrollable and volatile, like nature, and she also has the magical capacity to control nature. Baba Yaga and Koshchei are not unlike the shepherds, *skomorokhi* [minstrels], millers, blacksmiths, beekeepers, and *kolduny* [magical practitioners] believed to have special powers, and they also represent types of identities that are out-grouped as outliers. In contrast, Prince Ivan represents the ruling class and structures of state authority that can act in ways that are either heroic or foolish, but that often serve to preserve hegemonic power. Heroification and vilification in folktales and other folkloric texts communicate deep cultural values about identity in terms of subjectivity and alterity.

Overall, there are many potential avenues for critical pedagogical applications in the teaching of Russian folklore beyond those suggested here. Crucially, "it needs to be acknowledged that in the contemporary global-facing university, the production of knowledge proceeds largely from epistemological assumptions deeply rooted in the Western philosophical tradition" [Seats 2022: 679]. However, "cultural literacy cannot be viewed as simply the acquisition of Western heritage values aimed at safeguarding our so-called common culture. This view endorses the reproduction of Western cultural hegemony" [Macedo 2006: 47-48]. It is worth mentioning that even though many postsecondary educational institutions in the United States teach sustainable development and express performative solidarity with social liberation in mission statements, the most powerful and wealthy of those institutions invest endowment funds in exploitative, extractive, and exclusionary systems such as fossil fuels, the military-industrial complex, and prisons [Oparah 2014]. Illuminating oppressive systems and their enablers within postsecondary institutions themselves has



similar utility and purpose in the context of critical pedagogy. Teaching folklore cannot repair the many challenges confronting institutions and future generations; however, it can potentially serve as a mechanism for bringing awareness to matters of identity and oppression toward social justice and educational liberation.

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