

Soul to Soul: Americans' Discovery of Yelena Khanga and the Promise of Russian-American Relations

Author: Meredith Roman

Issue: Vol 6, no. 1 (2022)

Abstract:

This essay analyzes US press coverage of the Black Russian journalist Yelena Khanga in conjunction with her 1992 memoir *Soul to Soul* to illuminate how discussions of racism remained central to the late Cold War competition for moral superiority and the nascent Russian-US rivalry that replaced it. Khanga's *Soul to Soul* challenged the dominant US (mis)representations of the USSR and her own life story which impeded closer relations between the two countries that her own family proved possible. Khanga advocated that the "connected differences" between Russia and the United States serve as the basis for greater cooperation, solidarity, and respect.

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Meredith Roman

In November 1987, Yelena Khanga, a Black Russian descendant of the interwar African American migration to the Soviet Union, first arrived in the United States as part of a three-month journalist exchange program between the *Moscow News* and the *Christian Science Monitor*. Khanga's American ancestry and English-language skills had previously inhibited her from traveling outside the U.S.S.R. However, under the democratizing reforms of Mikhail Gorbachev her family background no longer posed an impediment to foreign travel. On this and subsequent visits to the United States, Khanga garnered significant attention among American audiences who were excited to discover her existence as a Black Russian with U.S. ancestry.¹ After receiving a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship in 1990 to research her family's history, Khanga wrote *Soul to Soul* with U.S. journalist Susan Jacoby about her family, life growing up in the Soviet Union, and her experiences navigating U.S. society as a Black Russian woman.² This essay marks the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of Khanga's 1992 memoir by exploring how her life story challenged Americans to complicate their perceptions of life in the U.S.S.R. and confront an important history of African Americans' engagement with the Soviet experiment. Analysis of U.S. press coverage of Khanga in conjunction with *Soul to Soul* reveals that discussions of racism remained central to the late Cold War competition for moral superiority and the nascent Russian-U.S. rivalry that replaced it.³

1. Khanga is the granddaughter of Bertha Bialek, a Polish-born, Jewish-American labor activist and Oliver Golden, an African American communist who led a team of Black agricultural specialists to the U.S.S.R. in 1931 to help develop the cotton industry in Uzbekistan. Khanga's mother, Lily Golden (b. 1934) married Abdullah Hanga, a revolutionary leader from Zanzibar who was studying in Moscow in the early 1960s.

2. Yelena Khanga with Susan Jacoby, *Soul to Soul: A Black Russian American Family 1865-1992* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992). Jacoby worked as a freelance writer in the Soviet Union between 1969 and 1971. She authored two books *Moscow Conversations* (Coward, McCann, & Geoghegan, 1972) and *Inside Soviet Schools* (Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 1974) based on her experiences there.

3. On the framework of a rivalry, see Andrei Tsygankov, *The Dark Double: US Media, Russia and the Politics of Values* (New York: Oxford University Press), esp. 2-7.

A year before Khanga's first sojourn in the United States, historian Allison Blakely published his groundbreaking study *Russia and the Negro*.⁴ Blakely's seminal 1986 monograph signaled the birth of a scholarly discourse on the Black diaspora in Russia. Facilitated by the collapse of the U.S.S.R. in 1991, literary scholars, linguists, anthropologists, and historians have answered Blakely's call to take seriously African-descended people's connections with the Soviet Union and its tsarist Russian predecessor.⁵ This essay builds on and contributes to this innovative scholarship by turning our attention to Khanga herself. Khanga's interactions with American audiences and her ideas about Russian-U.S. relations at the end of the Cold War have received little scholarly attention.⁶ Khanga carried on, in reverse, the legacy of interwar Black migrants to the U.S.S.R. who wrote about their experiences with Soviet anti-racism to envision the America to which they dreamed of returning.⁷ Khanga used *Soul to Soul* to reclaim ownership of the representations of her life from the U.S. press and challenge hegemonic U.S. (mis)understandings of the Soviet Union that inhibited closer relations between the two countries that her own existence proved possible.⁸ The world that Khanga envisioned through her writing recognized the "connected differences" between

4. Allison Blakely, *Russia and the Negro: Blacks in Russian History and Thought* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1986).

5. See, for example, Vladimir E. Alexandrov, *The Black Russian* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2013); Hugh Barnes, *The Stolen Prince: Gannibal Adopted Son of Peter the Great, Great-Grandfather of Alexander Pushkin, and Europe's First Black Intellectual* (New York: ECCO, 2006); Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Maxim Matusevich, ed. *Africa in Russia, Russia in Africa: Three Centuries of Encounters* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007); Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, et. al, eds. *Under the Sky of My Africa: Alexander Pushkin and Blackness* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2005); Dale E. Peterson, *Up from Bondage: The Literatures of Russian and African American Soul* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); and Meredith L. Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928-1937* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012).

6. In the epilogue to her 2002 monograph, Kate Baldwin discusses Khanga's agency as the popular host of the 1990s talk show *Pro Eto* (About It) that broke societal taboos surrounding discussions of sex. See *Beyond the Color Line Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters between Black and Red, 1922-1963* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 253-4, 259-62.

7. See, for example, James W. Ford, "In the Soviet Union, There is No Compromise with Race Hatred!," *Liberator*, October 20, 1932, 8; Chatwood Hall, "A Column from Moscow," *Chicago Defender*, December 15, 1934, 10; Chatwood Hall, AFRO Editor is Dinner Guest of Red Minister," *Afro-American*, September 21, 1935, 1-2; Langston Hughes, "Going South in Russia," *The Crisis* (1934): 162-163; and Homer Smith, *Black Man in Red Russia* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1964).

8. Khanga represents a long tradition of Black women using writing to counter their "disfiguring" in the U.S. press. On this tradition, see, for example, Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Patricia Morton, *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* (New York: Praeger, 1991); and Margo V. Perkins, *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000).

Russia and the United States as the basis for greater cooperation, solidarity, and respect.⁹

Narratives of friendly cooperation between Russia and the United States have been overshadowed by equally long histories of Cold War conflict and American efforts to “save” Russia.¹⁰ Journalists on both sides of the Atlantic have played critical roles in explaining the “other side” to their readers. Many U.S. journalists have contributed to the dominant representation of Russia as America’s “dark double.”¹¹ In the case of Khanga, American reporters often emphasized how she exchanged her Soviet propagandistic view of U.S. racism for a more nuanced, “truthful” reality that Soviet anti-racist propaganda obscured. Conversely, some journalists and readers were less willing to relinquish the “dark double” representation of the Soviet Union in favor of the more complex portrait that Khanga articulated. They expressed skepticism about Khanga’s testimony regarding her life as a Black Russian in the U.S.S.R. (especially her insistence that she was made more aware of her race in the United States and was never threatened with racial violence in the U.S.S.R.) and insinuated that she was hiding the truth. Khanga attributed such skepticism to the reflexive American Cold War assumption that everything about the Soviet Union was inferior to the United States. Such conceit, Khanga observed, deluded some Americans into thinking that only Russians needed to learn from America without acknowledging that Americans could learn anything from Russia. She moreover expressed frustration – much like the many male Soviet foreign correspondents who preceded her – with pervasive U.S. perceptions of warlike forces coming from Moscow alone.¹²

Apart from challenging American readers to interrogate their assumptions about the Soviet Union, Khanga used *Soul to Soul* to claim an unequivocal

9. For the phraseology of “connected differences” see Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007). Scholars have researched some of these “connected differences” in modern Russian-U.S. history. See, for example, Amanda Brickell Bellows, *American Slavery and Russian Serfdom in the Post-Emancipation Imagination* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020); Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Margaret Peacock, *Innocent Weapons: The Soviet and American Politics of Childhood in the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

10. See, for example, David S. Foglesong, *The American Mission and the “Evil Empire”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Victoria I. Zhuravleva, *Ponimanie Rossii v SShA: Obrazy i Mify, 1881-1914* (Moscow: Russian State Humanitarian University, 2012); Andrew Jenks, “Androgynous Coupling and the Engineering of Peace: A Cold-War Romance in Space,” *Journal of Russian American Studies* 5, no. 2 (Nov 2021): 78-111; and Norman E. Saul, *Distant Friends: The United States and Russia, 1763-1867* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), *War and Revolution: The United States and Russia, 1914-1921* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001), *Friend or Foe? The United States and Soviet Russia, 1921-1941* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006).

11. Dina Fainberg, *Cold War Correspondents: Soviet and American Reporters on the Ideological Frontlines* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021); Foglesong, *The American Mission*, 6, 11; Tsygankov, *The Dark Double*, 2-12, 97-104.

12. Fainberg, *Cold War Correspondents*, esp. 9, 178-80, 239-241, 244-245.

connection to the African American ancestry of her grandfather, Oliver Golden, that was not matched by a similar level of attachment to either her grandmother's Jewish ancestry or her African father's roots. Khanga's inclination to privilege her roots in Black America was fueled first and foremost by her family's experiences, but it was reinforced by defining elements of late Soviet society.¹³ While anti-Semitism had coexisted with official anti-racism for decades, fascination with American culture grew exponentially under Perestroika as did resentment with Africans as a source of Soviet economic woes – a development that Khanga herself captured in a *Moscow News* article.¹⁴ In the United States, Khanga felt an immediate affective connection with African Americans and candidly admitted to feeling “that I am somebody” upon seeing her great grandfather's former land in Mississippi.¹⁵ This newfound sense of “somebodyness” and rootedness that Khanga shares in *Soul to Soul* counterbalanced the feelings of displacement and alienation that she experienced in her Soviet Russian homeland – feelings common to women writers throughout the Black diaspora.¹⁶ Alienation with their U.S. homeland had, of course, inspired her grandfather and other Black Americans to seek affirmation of their humanity in the U.S.S.R. Since most African American migrants to the Soviet Union who wrote about their experiences were men, Khanga's account provides a valuable Black woman's perspective on the complicated, lived experience of Soviet anti-racism under late socialism.¹⁷

13. Khanga's relationship to her Jewish ancestry is no doubt informed by her grandmother's ambivalence towards her own family for rejecting her marriage to Oliver Golden. She acknowledges that Bertha's communist politics that opposed bourgeois nationalism and Stalin's anti-cosmopolitan campaign further contributed to her grandmother's “reticence about her Jewishness”; Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 144.

14. Yelena Khanga, “On the Way to a Soviet Diploma: How Do Foreign Students Live?,” *Moscow News*, September 17, 1989, 7. On the increasingly negative depictions of Africa as an impediment to Soviet Russia's placement atop a civilization hierarchy with the West, see, for example, Rossen Djagalov, “Racism, the Highest Stage of Anti-Communism,” *Slavic Review* 80, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 290-98; and Charles Quist-Adade, “From Paternalism to Ethnocentrism: Images of Africa in Gorbachev's Russia,” *Race & Class* 46, no. 5 (Apr-June 2005): 79-89.

15. Karima A. Haynes, “Soul to Soul How a Black/Jewish/Polish/Russian/African Woman Found Her Roots,” *Ebony* (December 1992): 44-46, 48, 50, 135; Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 34-35. Khanga's insistence that she felt like she was “somebody” echoes the line of a famous poem that civil rights activist Jesse Jackson recited in his speeches. Interestingly, Khanga interviewed Jackson when he visited the Soviet Union. Yelena Khanga, “According to the Rev. Jackson,” *Moscow News*, February 12, 1989, 1.

16. As scholar Carole Boyce Davies observes, many Black women writers from throughout the Diaspora do not romanticize home and family but speak of alienation, “pain, movement, difficulty, learning and love in complex ways.” *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 15.

17. A notable exception for the late Soviet era is Andrea Lee's travelogue *Russian Journal* (New York: Random House, 1981). As a young, Harvard-educated Black woman who accompanied her husband to the Soviet Union for his dissertation research, Lee offers brief commentary on the limits of Soviet anti-racism. See Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon, “Andrea Lee's ‘Russian Journal’: A Tapestry of the Late Soviet Era,” *Kennan Institute – Wilson Center*, February 19, 2021 <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/andrea-lees-russian-journal-tapestry-late-soviet-era>. None of the Black female sojourners from the

By articulating a deep emotional-historical connection to her African American ancestry without disavowing her Russian homeland, Khanga found true belonging in the intersection of the two worlds of the United States and Russia rather than their separation.¹⁸

Discovery and Disbelief

Most U.S. journalists discovered Yelena Khanga when she was one of the only Black reporters who covered the historic Reagan-Gorbachev Summit in Washington, DC (December 8-10, 1987) as a member of the Soviet press corps. Prior to the historic Summit, the *Boston Globe* had reported Khanga's arrival in that city together with Nikolai Garkusha of the Novosti Press Agency. Foreshadowing a major point that Khanga makes in *Soul to Soul*, she and Garkusha acknowledged that they have much to learn from U.S. journalism but rejected the position – rooted in the assumption that the Soviet press was simply a disseminator of communist propaganda – that American journalists have nothing to learn from Soviet journalists like themselves.¹⁹ The *New York Times* emphasized Khanga's discomfort with her instant celebrity status at the Summit and exasperation that her American counterparts, who followed her around, made a fuss that she was a Black reporter who was a Soviet citizen.²⁰ In a lead article on the Summit, *Jet* magazine reporter Simeon Booker highlighted the exclusion of African Americans from the Capitol Hill delegation that met with Gorbachev despite their prominence in past decades as advocates of global peace. A photograph appeared at the end of the article of William Davis, the Russian-speaking, Black American diplomat

interwar period published book-length accounts of their Soviet experiences. Some of their testimonies can be found in archival collections as in the case of Louise Thompson Patterson, or in short, published articles. See, for example, Margaret Glascow, "I am Among My own People in My Own Country," *Negro Worker* 5 (July-August 1935): 32-34 reprinted as "Negro Mother, Now a Shock Worker," in *60 Letters: Foreign Workers Write of Their Life and Work in the USSR*, eds. N. S. Rosenblit and R. Schüller (Moscow: Co-operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the U.S.S.R., 1936), 10-14, and Louise Thompson, "The Soviet Film," *The Crisis* (February 1933): 37, 46. Erik McDuffie's study remains the best at accessing Black women's experiences with the Soviet experiment; *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). Khanga's mother did not publish her memoir until a decade after Khanga. See Lily Golden, *My Long Journey Home* (Chicago: Third World Press, 2002).

18. Khanga upholds the tradition of Afro-Europeans who used diasporic connections to forge a sense of belonging unavailable in their white majority homelands. See, for example, Tiffany Florvil, *Mobilizing Black Germany: Afro-German Women and the Making of a Transnational Movement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020).

19. Khanga also refused to attribute the popularity of the *Moscow News* to its adoption of so-called Western modes of reporting. See Carey Goldberg, "East meets West – press division," *The Boston Globe*, November 24, 1987, 2.

20. Andrew Rosenthal, "Western Scramble, Meet Eastern Scramble," *New York Times*, December 9, 1987, B6. Rosenthal noted that Khanga's grandfather was "a Communist from Mississippi" who "led 14 other American blacks to settle in Uzbekistan in the 1920's." The errors in the details of Khanga's grandfather's history are emblematic of early reporting on Khanga and indicates how unknown was this history of Soviet-African American relations among mainstream audiences.

conversing with Khanga, who is identified as “the granddaughter of the first Black to migrate to the Soviet Union in the thirties.” While Khanga’s grandfather was certainly not the first African American to migrate to the U.S.S.R., the political and economic context that informed U.S. Blacks’ interest in the Soviet experiment is not the focus. Instead, Booker places emphasis on Khanga’s isolation from other Black people growing up in Soviet Russia. He quotes Khanga as saying “‘I have never seen so many Blacks in my life as in Washington. I want to learn more about American Blacks than the concept in my country that they are the homeless forgotten people on the streets.’”²¹

The association of African Americans with impoverished victimhood reflects the dominant, undynamic representation of U.S. racism in Soviet propaganda that did not allow for a sophisticated analysis of how racial capitalism produced a Black middle class who enjoyed living standards that exceeded those of most Soviet citizens. Khanga’s education in the “truth” of U.S. race relations was facilitated by Lee Young, a Black businessman, who invited Khanga to Los Angeles to meet other Black professionals after he read about her in *Jet*. Khanga would come to affectionately call Young her American father. Itabari Njeri of the *Los Angeles Times* catalogued the firsthand experiences that Khanga claimed gave her a more nuanced understanding of U.S. racism. In addition to the absence of Black reporters covering the Reagan-Gorbachev summit, Khanga was disturbed to discover that the white residents of Plymouth, Massachusetts considered it a great place to live precisely because Blacks did not reside there. Moreover, her visits to the homes of white and Black families, she noted, were pleasant but eerily segregated affairs with the hosts denying that they harbored any racial prejudices. Khanga expressed dismay that some Americans (like Jimmy “the Greek”) foolishly correlated athletic ability with race, and frustration that a television program misquoted her as saying that Alexander Pushkin was Black. Instead, she had stated that Pushkin’s African ancestry did not exclude him from being embraced as Russian. While Khanga was realizing that “U.S. Race Relations Aren’t Just Black and White,” Njeri reported that attendees of the reception which Young co-organized with the Black Journalists’ Association had difficulty reconciling their preconceived notions of the Soviet Union with Khanga’s testimony. Khanga quite strategically refrained from claiming that Blacks experienced no racism in the U.S.S.R. but did state that they were neither poor (since unemployment was absent) nor part of the Soviet Olympic team because most whom she knew were studying at the conservatory or in university science programs.²²

21. Simeon Booker, “126 VIPs Chosen for Historic White House Dinner during Summit,” *Jet Magazine* (December 28, 1987-January 4, 1988): 4-6, 8. Khanga expressed a similar desire to dispel this undynamic depiction of Black Americans in Linda Feldmann, “Soviet Reporters Try American Journalism,” *Christian Science Monitor*, November 27, 1987. The U.S. government selected William Davis to work as a guide and spokesman for the progress made in U.S. race relations at the 1959 American National Exhibit in Moscow; Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians*, 189-94.

22. Itabari Njeri, “Black Russian: Moscow Reporter Discover that U.S. Race Relations Aren’t Just Black and White,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 8, 1988, 49-50. Despite the racism that African students confronted in the U.S.S.R., they did not live in

Njeri's documentation of the audience's skepticism regarding Khanga's testimony about the Soviet Union was a common theme in U.S. press coverage. Some articles explicitly affirmed that this disbelief was the correct or natural "American" response. Since Khanga's life story could potentially inspire American audiences to think that they could learn something valuable from her experiences, an article appeared in U.S. newspapers under different titles such as "Soviet system isn't devoid of racism" and "No Soviet racism?" which disabused readers of any such notion. The piece, which has no author, admonishes readers against believing what Black Russians like Khanga say about racism in the Soviet Union since they are not speaking authentically. As the article warns, Soviet leaders send Black Russians like Khanga to the United States with the objective of "spreading a little disinformation to hoodwink the gullible." The article calls "laughable" and a "whopper" Khanga's statement that she is made more aware of her skin color and was more of a curiosity in the United States than in the Soviet Union. The author singles out one quotation from Khanga to then speak the "truth" to American readers about the experiences of non-Slavic Soviet nationalities and African and Asian students in the U.S.S.R.²³ The article concedes that the United States has "similarly blatant problems with racism" but relativizes such problems by remarking that "there are few countries anywhere without some racial or ethnic problems." It concludes by self-righteously declaring that "the lie that the Soviet system has somehow expunged this curse (racism) from Russian life must not go unchallenged."²⁴

By stressing its widespread nature, the unsigned article depicts racism as a "curse" that is impossible to "expunge" rather than a calculated human invention that systemic anti-racist policies could begin to dismantle. It also employs a common anticommunist device of dismissing Soviet individuals' testimony as inauthentic propaganda unless it affirms dominant U.S. images of life in the

impoverished conditions vis a vis Soviet citizens. While earning degrees in a variety of academic fields they often received higher stipends and had greater freedom to travel than their Soviet counterparts. On the experiences of Africans in the Soviet Union, see, for example, Julie Hessler, "Death of an African Student in Moscow: Race, Politics, and the Cold War," *Cahiers du Monde russe* 47, nos. 1-2 (January-June 2006): 33-64; Constantin Katsakioris, "Burden or Allies? Third World Students and Internationalist Duty through Soviet Eyes," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 18, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 539-67; Maxim Matushevich, "Expanding the Boundaries of the Black Atlantic: African Students as Soviet Moderns," *Ab Imperio* 2 (2012): 325-350; and Anika Walke, "Was Soviet Internationalism Anti-Racist? Towards a History of Foreign Others in the USSR," in *Ideologies of Race: Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union in Global Context*, ed. David Rainbow (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), 284-311.

23. On the diverse experiences of non-Slavic nationalities in the Soviet Union, see, for example, Adrienne L. Edgar, "What to Name the Children?: Oral Histories of Ethnically Mixed Families in Soviet Kazakhstan and Tajikistan," *Kritika* 20, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 269-90, and Jeff Sahadeo, *Voices from the Soviet Edge: Southern Migrants in Leningrad and Moscow* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019). On African and Asian students, see f22 above.

24. "Soviet system isn't devoid of racism," *South Idaho Press*, November 27, 1989, 5; "No Soviet racism?" *Hawaii Tribune-Herald*, November 22, 1989, 10 ("Reprinted from the San Diego Union").

U.S.S.R. (as in the case of the hallowed Soviet dissidents).²⁵ Soviet citizens like Khanga are thus rendered incapable of testifying authentically to their experiences as *individuals*.²⁶ While her family's privileged status among Moscow's cultural elite and the uncertainty of Perestroika made it necessary for Khanga to exercise caution in what she said publicly, this caution did not automatically render her testimony disingenuous and deceitful as the unnamed author claimed. Instead of expressing an openness to exploring the complexities of Khanga's experiences, newspaper articles like this one reassert America's superior position in the nascent post-Cold War competition. Any individual who asks what the United States could learn from the successes and failures of state socialist approaches to racism is thus "gullible" and "hoodwinked" by those deceptive "Soviets" to whom the truth is inimical.

Even after Khanga published *Soul to Soul*, some journalists simply ignored her commentary and moralized in simplistic fashion that racism in the United States was no worse than the Soviet Union. For example, journalist Sonya Bernard of the *Battle Creek Enquirer* erroneously reported that all the other African Americans who traveled to the U.S.S.R. with Golden immediately returned to the United States after their first work contracts expired – unlike Khanga's grandparents – because they "found Russia just as racist as America."²⁷ Bernard bolsters her contention that the U.S.S.R. was "just as racist as America" by mentioning Khanga's encounters with racially prejudiced attitudes in the United States, but then adding that her experiences in the Soviet Union were not any better. In the U.S.S.R., Khanga was frequently viewed "with suspicion" and faced "conflicts as the result of racism." Bernard fails to explain, however, that Khanga – who became a national tennis champion and graduated from Moscow State University – identifies ideological xenophobia not anti-Black racism as the source of these conflicts and suspicion which she would have elicited even if she was white.²⁸ By disregarding Khanga's nuanced discussion, readers are misinformed that life in the Soviet Union can be viewed through the binary lens of U.S. race relations. Russian society, by Bernard's account, also remained static with no measurable

25. See especially Benjamin Nathans, "Talking Fish: On Soviet Dissident Memoirs," *The Journal of Modern History* 87 (September 2015): 579-614; and Fainberg, *Cold War Correspondents*, 219-220. See also Clint Buhler, "The Artist-Nomad," *Journal of Russian American Studies* 3, no. 1 (May 2019): 5-21.

26. Khanga insists in *Soul to Soul* on the authenticity of her feelings: "One thing was certain: As a black Russian in America, I felt like more of curiosity than I ever did as a black Russian in Russia"; *Soul to Soul*, 214.

27. A few men returned but this was because of the harsh living conditions and concerns over malaria. Most of the men did not leave until 1937 when given the ultimatum to assume Soviet citizenship. George Tynes, like Golden, decided to assume Soviet citizenship and remain in the U.S.S.R. See Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians*, 107-112.

28. Sonya Bernard, "Black Russian Journalist to Speak Here," *Battle Creek Enquirer*, August 17, 1996, 11. Such articles are especially egregious since other articles captured this complexity by highlighting the institutionalized nature of anti-Semitism and xenophobia over the systemic anti-black racism of the United States. See, for example, Janette Rodrigues, "Russian Journalist's Black, White Story Enthralls," *Dayton Daily News*, March 15, 1994, 9.

change in the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities between the Soviet and post-Soviet period, or even within the Soviet era.

Articles that did not contest as duplicitous Khanga's testimony regarding her experiences with racism in the Soviet Union could draw criticism from readers. This is exemplified in a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* in response to the renowned U.S. historian Eric Foner's review of *Soul to Soul*.²⁹ The reader, identified as Bernard Bellush of Great Neck, Long Island, accused Foner of writing an ideologically charged review that "seeks to praise, and thus spotlight, the author's observation that as a child she rarely encountered racism, but that it 'is now growing in Russia not only because of conflicts among the former Soviet Union's many nationalities, but also as a byproduct of increased contacts with the United States.'" Bellush proceeds to recount how in 1966, when Khanga was only four years old, he visited the Soviet Union and encountered a graduate student-tour guide who ranted about the threat that the Chinese "'yellow peril'" posed to Slavs. Bellush concedes that this graduate student may have not been representative of all Soviet graduate students. However, he expressed absolute certainty "that Soviet racism, which took many shapes and forms (of which he provides no additional examples), was clearly evident throughout my journey. And this was some time before Yelena Khanga became aware of the sociological and political worlds about her."³⁰ Bellush's white American patriarchal condescension which denied Khanga the ability to be a reliable witness to her own experiences as a Black Russian woman elicited a concise but pointed response from Foner. Foner questioned how Bellush's brief experience as a tourist could discount "Ms. Khanga's actual experience of growing up as a black Russian." Foner also rejected as unwarranted the charge of ideological bias which he argued revealed Bellush's disappointment that neither he nor Khanga were sufficiently "anti-Communist." Foner hoped that the end of the Cold War could lead to balanced analysis of the Soviet Union's history without efforts to score "political points," and praised Khanga's memoir as a "step in this direction."³¹

The anticommunism that fueled skepticism of Khanga's commentary about the Soviet Union also shaped the dominant representations of her grandparents. U.S. journalists deradicalized the Goldens by giving little to no attention to the anticapitalist politics and dreams of economic and racial justice that motivated their 1931 migration to the U.S.S.R. For instance, Diane Lewis of the *Boston Globe* identified U.S. employment discrimination and Vladimir Lenin's letter inviting U.S. workers to contribute to the socialist project as the impetus behind Oliver Golden's decision to form a delegation of African American agricultural specialists. Notwithstanding the fact that Lenin had been dead for seven years when Golden supposedly answered the Bolshevik leader's call, Lewis invokes a common trope in U.S. political culture that attributes any Black radical

29. Eric Foner, "Three Very Rare Generations," *New York Times*, December 13, 1992, BR14.

30. Bernard Bellush, "Letters: 'Soul to Soul,'" *New York Times*, January 10, 1993, BR30.

31. "Eric Foner replies," *New York Times*, January 10, 1993, BR30.

initiative to outside white manipulation.³² In this way, Golden lacked the agency to dream of lending his technical expertise to creating a more just, antiracist world.³³ Similarly, journalist Robert Maynard identifies the story of Khanga's grandparents as a riveting one worthy of an Academy Award winning film. The "great Russian revolution" in which they had placed their hopes, however, "in many ways has been a disaster." The implication is that the Goldens' story is a riveting one because the discrimination against interracial marriage that they fled is triumphantly in America's past while the revolutionary movement in which they had misguidedly placed their hopes was a "disaster."³⁴

Chicago Tribune reporter Andrew Fegelman likewise eschewed discussion of the Goldens' communist politics. The desire to engage in their work as scientists while being paid well (especially by Depression-era U.S. standards) coupled with the threat of lynching and legal lynching (as exemplified in the 1931 Scottsboro case) encouraged Golden and his colleagues to migrate to the Soviet Union.³⁵ Fegelman provides a refreshingly more honest overview than many of his U.S. contemporaries of the racial injustices that constituted U.S. push factors – minimized as "American phobias" in at least one newspaper article. He even quotes historian Allison Blakely as one of his sources.³⁶ However by concluding that "pragmatism, not politics, led many to emigrate," Fegelman glosses over the communist activism of Oliver Golden, as the group's leader, to frame the story in a "common sense" manner that naturalizes the primacy of individual self-

32. Scholars have debunked this stereotype of African Americans and Third World liberation activists as weak-minded "dupes" of Moscow. See, for example, Carole Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); David Engerman, "The Second World's Third World," *Kritika* 12, no. 1 (2011): 183-211; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); and Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998).

33. Diane E. Lewis, "A Black Journalist from Russia Dreams of a Cooperative Effort," *The Boston Globe*, November 30, 1992, 52. See also Itabari Njeri, "Black Russian: Moscow Reporter Discover that U.S. Race Relations Aren't Just Black and White," *Los Angeles Times*, February 8, 1988, 49-50, and "Black Soviet Journalist Looks at American Society," *The Modesto Bee*, February 11, 1988, 33 for a similar argument.

34. Robert C. Maynard, "Yelena's story: A search for U.S. roots," *Detroit Free Press*, March 31, 1991, p. 53, Robert Maynard (The Oakland Tribune), "Black Russian Seeks Mississippi Roots," *Clarion-Ledger* (Jackson, Mississippi), March 31, 1991, 71. On Cold War triumphalism in U.S. politics, see, for example, Beth Fischer, *The Myth of Triumphalism: Rethinking President Reagan's Cold War Legacy* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2020).

35. Nine African Americans teenagers were sentenced to death on trumped up rape charges. On the Scottsboro protest in the U.S.S.R., see Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow*, 91-123.

36. For "American phobias" from which the Goldens wanted to protect their daughter, see Elizabeth Kendall, "From Mississippi to Moscow," *Newsday*, October 11, 1992, 151. Despite the minimization of U.S. racial violence, Kendall provides a more incisive overview of Khanga's memoir than most, emphasizing the need to confront the truth of our histories, her grandmother's "refusal to condemn Communism and her resistance to its propaganda" and Khanga's willingness to admit and adjust her preconceptions.

interest.³⁷ The *collective* dream for humanity that Golden and more well-known Black freedom fighters like W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes, and Louise Thompson Patterson associated with the Soviet experiment is elided.³⁸ Such reporting furthermore obscures the feelings of internationalist solidarity that informed Golden and other African Americans' interest in witnessing if not helping fellow persons of color in Soviet Central Asia liberate themselves from the legacies of tsarist oppression.³⁹

Although some U.S. journalists acknowledged that racial violence motivated Black Americans' migration to the U.S.S.R., they assured readers that the U.S. racism which Oliver Golden and others fled in the 1930s paled in comparison to the violent oppression of the Soviet Union. To illustrate, a review of *Soul to Soul* in *The Nation* criticized Khanga for failing to contemplate the legacy of her grandparents' decision to unknowingly exchange one form of oppression in the United States for a more "terrifying one" in the U.S.S.R. Such a blanket assertion trivializes U.S. racial terrorism as an insignificant, more humane alternative to Soviet political terror even as the reviewer acknowledges that Khanga herself lived a relatively privileged existence in the Soviet Union. Decades after the interracial Golden would have returned to the United States, civil rights activist James Meredith staged the March Against Fear in 1966 – during which he was shot – to expose the culture of fear that still violently circumscribed Black citizens' mobility, and functioned "as a paralyzing weight, 'the excess baggage of the American Negro's mind,' whether a resident of New York or the Deep South."⁴⁰ Ignoring the everyday reality of anti-Black violence in the United States to reinforce the dominant image of the Soviet Union as *the* ultimate space of unfreedom, fear, and state-sanctioned violence is an unfortunate and enduring Cold War legacy that reifies white supremacist understandings of rights and freedoms.⁴¹ More recently, scholars have established a framework that acknowledges the mass violence and immense suffering of the Soviet Union especially under Stalin's leadership without minimizing or obfuscating the real terror and violence of anti-Black racism.⁴²

37. Andrew Fegelman (Chicago Tribune), "The Unknown Exodus: U.S. Blacks Who Went to the Soviet Union," *Tallahassee Democrat*, July 8, 1990, 9, 14.

38. See, for example, Charisse Burden-Stelly, "W.E.B. DuBois in the Tradition of Radical Blackness: Radicalism, Repression, and Mutual Comradeship, 1930-1960," *Socialism and Democracy* 32, no. 3 (2018): 181-206.

39. Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 77. This interest in Soviet Central Asia persisted in the 1950s in connections forged between leaders and intellectuals from this region with activists and intellectuals from throughout the Global South. See, for example, Rossen Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema between the Second and Third Worlds* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020).

40. Quoted in David Johnson Thornton, "The Rhetoric of Civil Rights Photographs: James Meredith's March Against Fear," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 457-488, 462.

41. Joshua Rubenstein, "Black in the U.S.S.R.," *The Nation*, December 14, 1992, 750-752 (quotation p. 752).

42. See, for example, Thom Lloyd, "Congo on the Dnipro: Third Worldism and the Nationalization of Soviet Internationalism in Ukraine," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian* 22, no. 4 (Fall 2021): 781-811, 795.

The Quest for Understanding & Belonging

Khanga used *Soul to Soul*, much like the few articles she published in the *Christian Science Monitor*, to respond to and correct the pervasive misperceptions that she discovered many Americans had of the Soviet Union which U.S. press coverage largely reinforced.⁴³ Khanga was often asked how an intelligent man like her grandfather could have been “duped” by communism. Fatigued by this frequent inquiry, Khanga emphasizes that during the interwar decades the “Communist Party was the only institution in white America that recognized Oliver Golden’s unusual capabilities and saw him as something more than a potential cook or waiter.”⁴⁴ Moreover, the only social spaces where her grandparents, as an interracial couple, felt physically safe and had their dignity affirmed, she explains, were among fellow members of the Communist Party. In discussing her grandparents, Khanga writes with a deep empathy and warmth that the U.S. press could not convey. She foregrounds how the feelings of pain and humiliation that they experienced in the United States inspired their political commitment to changing the world through their communist politics and transatlantic migration to the Soviet Union.⁴⁵ While Khanga wants American readers to understand the dehumanizing violence of U.S. racism from which her grandparents sought refuge, she does not necessarily romanticize their experiences in the U.S.S.R. Khanga claims that her grandfather who fled the violence of Jim Crow could have easily been murdered in the Stalinist terror had he been at home when the NKVD came looking for him in 1937. In this way, Khanga alludes to the tragedy that the same country that allowed some African Americans like her grandfather to feel fully human for the first time in their lives was also responsible for mass murder and political terror that did not necessarily exclude them.⁴⁶

In addition to contesting the “duped” African American stereotype by

43. Khanga established this pattern of admitting to the shortcomings of her own preconceived notions of Americans while responding to the problematic assumptions that she encountered among Americans in two articles in the *Christian Science Monitor*. These articles curiously omitted mention of race. See, Yelena Hanga, “Moscow on the Charles?: A Soviet Views Boston,” *Christian Science Monitor*, December 24, 1987 and “Soviet Visitor Tries to Reconcile Conflicting Images of America,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 4, 1988.

44. Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 63-64.

45. On the significance of feelings and emotions to Black women’s first-person narratives, see, for example, Mary Phillips, “The Power of the First-Person Narrative: Ericka Huggins and the Black Panther Party,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 43, nos. 3 & 4 (Fall/Winter 2015): 33-51.

46. Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 90-91. Khanga does not discuss the racism for which many white American communists in the interwar era were notorious despite the Party’s official commitment to Black equality. See, for example, Roman, *Opposing Jim Crow*, 54, 155-176. Lovett Fort-Whiteman who fell out of favor with Soviet authorities and some African Americans in Moscow is the only known African American victim of the Great Terror. His tragic fate continues to inspire investigation. See Joshua Yaffa, “A Black Communist’s Disappearance in Stalin’s Russia,” *New Yorker*, October 18, 2021 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/10/25/a-black-communists-disappearance-in-stalins-russia-lovett-fort-whiteman-gulag>.

foregrounding the racism that imperiled Blacks' lives in the interwar era, Khanga problematizes many Americans' tendency to reduce all Soviet authorities' actions to propaganda. Individuals who patronizingly dismiss Soviet recruitment of her grandfather and his colleagues as a propaganda stunt, she explains, reveal their ignorance of the conditions in the U.S.S.R. in the early 1930s. Soviet leaders recognized that they needed foreign expertise to modernize the country and paid these men salaries unavailable to them in the United States. The propaganda factor, Khanga posits, was a bonus. Since many sent money to family in the United States (receiving permission from Soviet officials to do so), many of the men, contrary to the erroneous reports of newspapers like the *Battle Creek Enquirer*, renewed their contracts.⁴⁷ While prejudices existed between and among ethnic Russians and Soviet national minorities, Golden and his colleagues, she stresses, were not its targets. They faced neither the real threat of physical violence nor the indignities of segregation in the United States. Khanga emphasizes how much it meant to her grandfather and Joseph Roane, then the group's only survivor whom she interviewed, that Soviet citizens came to their defense when white Americans demanded their expulsion from public places and hurled racial slurs at them. Khanga laments that the measurable increase in anti-Black sentiment in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s makes it unlikely that most present-day Russians would act similarly to their interwar ancestors by actively defending Black Americans from racial insults and violence.⁴⁸

To further disrupt the truth-lie binary that shaped some Americans' understanding of the United States (purveyors of the "truth") in relation to the Soviet Union (purveyors of "lies"), Khanga comments on how insincere U.S. political rhetoric sounded to an outsider.⁴⁹ She provides the example of one U.S. politician who delivered a belligerent Cold War speech warning that Gorbachev could not be trusted until he realized that Khanga was a Soviet journalist. Then, as Khanga puts it, this politician completely changed his rhetoric to advocate friendship and cooperation between the two countries. Not dissimilarly, at the Reagan-Gorbachev summit, Khanga objected to the suggestions of a U.S. journalist that it was Gorbachev who was stalling over an arms control agreement. She asked him why many Americans insist that Soviet authorities alone act with ulterior motives and should always be the first to concede during negotiations.⁵⁰ By relaying these experiences with individual Americans, Khanga hopes to inspire readers to reflect on their own assumptions about the supposed inherent

47. Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 77-79, 85.

48. Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 238-239. On the increased violence directed against persons of color in the late 1980s and into the twenty-first century, see, for example, Joy Gleason Carew, "Black in the USSR: African Diasporan Pilgrims, Expatriates and Students in Russia, from the 1920s to the First Decade of the Twenty-First Century," *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 8, no. 2 (2015): 202-215, 211-214; Sahadeo, *Voices from the Soviet Edge*, 169-203; and Nikolai Zakharov, *Race and Racism in Russia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

49. On this binary in Cold War political culture, see especially, Fainberg, *Cold War Correspondents*, esp. 267-269.

50. Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 212, 214.

“otherness” of Soviet Russians and recognize the default position of innocence that U.S. leaders frequently adopt.

The assumption that Soviet officials were incapable of speaking and acting without duplicity also affected Khanga who disputes the allegations that her public talks were disingenuous exercises in Soviet propaganda. She focused mostly on the positive aspects of living as a Black Russian in the U.S.S.R. (with the exception of her hair problems) not because she was adroitly mouthing a Soviet anti-racist script, but because most of her negative experiences were deeply personal.⁵¹ She often felt uncomfortable discussing such painful matters with her mother let alone sharing them with audiences of American strangers. Moreover, Khanga like countless others, was uncertain of the longevity of Perestroika. As someone whose family enjoyed considerable prominence among Moscow’s cultural elite, she had no desire to bash her country before crowds of Americans some of whom harbored preconceived notions of Russians as oppressed victims who desperately wanted to defect to America’s freedom.⁵² Khanga points out that her complex feelings about her homeland were not unusual but comparable to those which many African Americans possessed towards the United States.⁵³

The deeply personal feelings of belonging and disbelonging as a Black Russian that Khanga refrained from disclosing during her public lectures she revealed in the pages of *Soul to Soul*. Unlike most other Black Russians who had white mothers, Khanga benefitted from having a strong Black mother who raised her to take pride in her African and African American roots while still being solidly rooted in Russian culture. However, while Khanga saw her mother having healthy, romantic relationships with Russian men, she feared that no Russian man would be interested in her romantically because she lacked her mother’s height, lighter skin, and more stereotypical white features.⁵⁴ She was reticent about sharing these feelings of “sadness and confusion” because of the “no excuses” standard that governed their household, but also because she wanted to shield her mother (and grandmother) from her own pain. As Khanga elucidates “to suggest that I was wounded in any way by the color of my skin would wound them even

51. Khanga published an article about a new beauty salon in Moscow that catered to persons of African descent who had no place to have their hair done. She closes the article by insisting “We want to help people of African origins live up to the motto: Black is beautiful”; “For the First Time: Black is Beautiful,” *Moscow News*, July 30, 1989, 14.

52. When Khanga asked a refusenik why he planned to leave the U.S.S.R. since he was advancing the cause of human rights, he remarked on the prevailing fear that all the progress and changes could easily be reversed; Yelena Khanga, “Their Desk at the Visa Office,” *Moscow News*, July 22, 1990, 11. On the contested meanings of glasnost and the necessity of a non-teleological approach to Perestroika, see especially Courtney Doucette, “Glasnost in the Mailroom: The Soviet Subject in Gorbachev’s Perestroika, 1985-1988,” *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 48 (2021): 171-188.

53. As she writes, “I loved Russia in spite of her shortcomings, in the same way, I was beginning to understand, that most blacks love America in spite of its failings”; *Soul to Soul*, 220.

54. Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 124, 158-9. Only after her third Russian boyfriend helped pin her hair did Khanga put aside fears that no Russian man would have any interest in touching her hair (194).

more deeply; leaving the sore spots alone was easier on all of us.”⁵⁵ Khanga further reveals that although she was exposed from a young age to the glossy photographs of *Essence* magazine for Black women she only began “to believe that there might be more than one kind of beauty, that blonder and whiter weren’t necessarily better” after she viewed VHS recordings of Diana Ross and Donna Summer as a college student.⁵⁶

Khanga added to these personal *Soul to Soul* revelations by signaling out the relationship with her second Russian boyfriend Volodya as playing the most important role in permanently disrupting her feelings of belonging as a Russian. Volodya abruptly ended their relationship when he realized that marriage to a woman with U.S. ancestry was unfeasible if he wanted to advance his career as a Party member and military officer. Khanga emphatically rejects many Americans’ claims that Volodya’s actions were the result of anti-Black racism.⁵⁷ Even if she was the descendant of a white American, she stresses, then Volodya would have ended the relationship since any high-ranking position that required political reliability and international travel was closed to anyone with foreign roots. Khanga’s insistence that xenophobic repressive Soviet politics were to blame for Volodya’s actions rather than racism did not of course lessen the pain of losing her first true love and conviction that she belonged in her Russian homeland. At the same time, Khanga acknowledges that her Black American ancestry which rendered her an outsider or “odd duckling” in the Soviet Union also afforded her insider access to educational and social opportunities of the Russian intelligentsia that most children of Russian-African relationships did not enjoy.⁵⁸

Among African Americans in the United States Khanga found the sense of emotional belonging that was missing in her Soviet Russian homeland. She identifies music especially blues and jazz music as the diasporic resource that first allowed her to bridge her African American heritage and Russian culture. This diasporic connection was deepened by her direct interactions with African Americans during visits to her maternal grandfather’s homeland. A random encounter that she had in Boston exemplified the affective community that she found in Black America. An elderly Black man who asked Khanga about the bus to Fenway Park prefaced his question by referring to her as “sister.” When she responded that it was the correct bus but that he was mistaken because they were not related, he remarked that regardless of where Khanga was from in the world, her Black ancestry made her his “soul sister.”⁵⁹ Although she felt a strong sense of rootedness among Black Americans, Khanga does not romanticize this connection by portraying her relationships as free of tension and misunderstanding. For instance, Khanga recounts how she inadvertently offended an African American female friend because she did not ask for permission to bring a white acquaintance

55. Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 148-9, 158.

56. Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 188.

57. See, for example, Gary Lee, “A Child of Many Cultures,” *Washington Post*, December 20, 1992.

58. Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 158, 186, 227.

59. Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 147-9, 210.

to an all-Black social gathering. Khanga felt badly for wounding her friend but comments that she too was wounded by the realization that she could not bring her own white grandmother to her Black friend's house without asking permission. Khanga thus mourns the fact that her grandparents' relationship would still have rendered them as not quite belonging in the post-Cold War United States of the early 1990s.⁶⁰

Indeed, the disapproval of interracial relationships that many Americans expressed made Khanga increasingly reticent to discuss her grandparents. On those occasions when she did, Khanga found herself insisting that her grandfather was not one of *those* Black men who was obsessed with white women. She offered as "proof" Golden's previous marriage to a Black woman who tragically died while studying in Moscow in the 1920s.⁶¹ Khanga relays her shock at the hostility that she personally experienced from some white and Black Americans because she dated a white male colleague. She acknowledges that dating a Black man was socially more acceptable in the United States but adds that it still came with some complications. An African American man whom she met in Boston categorically declared that she was "too dark" for him to date. The complexity of American race relations, Khanga confesses, made her feel most at home with interracial families like that of Lee and Maureen Young.⁶²

As her reflections on interracial relationships demonstrate, Khanga is heartfelt in observing how racism distorted human interactions in the United States. Especially poignant is her discussion of how she discovered firsthand that many white Americans had been taught to fear or view Black people as a threat to their safety – an experience that was foreign to her as a Black Russian woman. When she randomly stopped a white female stranger in a New England town to ask her for directions, Khanga recounts how the woman shrunk back with a look of fear. Khanga henceforth tried to avoid this experience by asking only Black people for directions. As she laments "Something terrible happens to the human soul when you constantly feel you have to prove you're not a threat to others." On those occasions when she did have to ask a white person, then she made sure to approach with deference. Khanga contemplates with empathy how much more intense and frequent that soul destroying look of fear must be for Black men in America.⁶³

By recounting this experience, Khanga illuminates how the long history of criminalizing Black people in the United States manifested in everyday interactions that caused her to alter her own thinking and behavior. She stops short, however, of addressing how this criminalization justified the structural racism that left Black communities disproportionately incarcerated, unemployed, and without access to equitable housing, health care, education, and equality before

60. Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 173-4, 258.

61. On Jane Golden's death and Moscow funeral, see Harry Haywood, *A Black Communist in the Freedom Struggle: The Life of Harry Haywood*, ed. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 25-27.

62. Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 218, 276-7.

63. Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 246-7.

the law in their dealings with police officers across the country.⁶⁴ By focusing on individual acts of U.S. racial prejudice not on the widening racial inequities of the 1980 and 1990s that thwarted the struggle for Black equality, Khanga perhaps sought to counter Soviet propaganda's undynamic depiction of African Americans as universally impoverished victims.⁶⁵ Yet this equation of U.S. racism with the acts of individuals mirrors her discussion of racism in the Soviet Union. In both instances, Khanga, who never claims to be a scholar of the history or lived experience of racism in either country, concentrates on the things that she and her family experienced (or witnessed).

Since most U.S. commentators focused on Khanga's observations regarding race, the admiration she expressed in *Soul to Soul* for American feminism was largely overlooked. Such an omission reveals that the fight for gender equality did not carry the same significance in the late Cold War competition for moral superiority as did the still contentious terrain of race relations. The fact that Khanga was raised in an all-female household by her "two mothers," as she calls them, no doubt informed her critical appraisal of the Soviet Union's lack of progress on gender relations when compared to the United States.⁶⁶ Khanga derived inspiration from seeing strong women like Kay Fanning, the editor of the *Christian Science Monitor*, occupying positions of power without sacrificing their feminine appearance. Khanga credits her American experiences with helping her understand the intersection of the personal and political, and for giving her the theoretical framework to criticize the sexualization of Black women in the U.S.S.R. about which her mother had warned her as a young woman. Although she

64. Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019); Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

65. See, for example, Justin Gomer, *White Balance: How Hollywood Shaped Colorblind Ideology and Undermined Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #Black Lives Matter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), esp. 72-73, 94-96. The Reagan administration also launched a domestic war on drugs (when rates of drug abuse had declined) that overwhelmingly criminalized and targeted African American communities. See Carol Anderson, *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Nation's Divide* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), esp. 98-137.

66. Feminists in the West had previously used Soviet progress on gender equality to advance their struggle for women's liberation. See, for example, Sue Bridger, "The Cold War and the Cosmos: Valentina Tereshkova and the First Women's Space Flight," *Women in the Khrushchev Era*, ed. Melanie Ilic, Susan Reid, and Lynne Attwood (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 222-237. Khanga's praise of Russian women's strength may have partly been in response to a letter to the editor of the *New York Times* from Anya Yermolenko (identified as a Soviet journalist working in Denver). Yermolenko criticized Khanga for depicting Soviet women (Yelena Khanga, "No Matryoshkas Need Apply," *New York Times*, November 25, 1991, A19) as either young, beautiful, and seeking work as high-end prostitutes or old, shriveled, and reduced to doing dirty jobs. Yermolenko argued that most women exist in between these two extremes and unlike men women were the ones doing all they could to keep the country from the brink of disaster. Anna Yermolenko, "Women Keep It Going," *New York Times*, December 11, 1991, A26.

laments that Russian women lagged behind the feminist gains of their American counterparts, Khanga praises their strength, fortitude, and perseverance which she insists resembles that of African American women.⁶⁷

Khanga's emphasis on women's equality likely contributed to her affective distance from her East African roots. When she visited her father's homeland in 1991, Khanga expressed dismay that Islamic influences muted the voices of Zanzibari women like her paternal grandmother and reduced them to subordinate positions. Although she was afforded honorary male status as a "European woman" that allowed her to speak freely with then President Amour, she immediately "understood the humiliation my mother felt, so many years ago, when my father allowed her to serve at dinner but not to speak."⁶⁸ Abdullah had even refused to take Lily and Yelena home from the hospital because he was angry that she had not given birth to a son. Khanga credits her mother for instilling in her an appreciation for the context in which her father was raised as the reason she holds no animosity to his memory. Khanga also gained respect for her father's passionate commitment to educating the men and women of his country after she met some of his former students who expressed gratitude for his efforts.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, the gender politics of her father's homeland, reinforced by the increasingly negative depictions of Africa under Perestroika and the heightened fascination with U.S. culture, encouraged Khanga to find diasporic belonging not on the African continent despite her direct paternal lineage (and mother's professional expertise in the history of African music) but in the United States among Black Americans.

Dream Deferred

Soviet leaders' interest in condemning U.S. racial violence and forging connections with African Americans like Oliver Golden made a remarkable family history like Khanga's possible. Americans' discovery of and fascination with that history in the late 1980s, early 90s did not however serve the productive purposes that Khanga envisioned it would for Russian-U.S. relations. Khanga models in *Soul to Soul* a personal openness to adjusting her preconceptions of Americans and learning about herself and her Soviet Russian homeland from her American experiences that she hoped U.S. readers would emulate. In addition to the commentary on Soviet Russia's lack of progress on women's rights discussed above, these lessons included the painful realization that her experiences as a Black Russian woman were quite privileged and her advocacy that Soviet television emulate its U.S. counterpart (which she first voiced in a *Moscow News* article) by having non-Slavic nationalities represented in national programs.⁷⁰

67. Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 156, 161, 172-3, 181, 210-212, 231, 278-9.

68. Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 270-1.

69. Golden, *My Long Journey Home*, 104; Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 268-272. Hanga, a political leader in the briefly independent state of Zanzibar, was assassinated shortly after Zanzibar unified with Tanganyika to become Tanzania in 1964 under the leadership of Julius Nyerere. On Tanzanian efforts to build socialism and its ujamaa villagization program, see Priya Lal, *African Socialism in Postcolonial Tanzania: Between the Village and the World* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

70. Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 222-223; Yelena Khanga, "Our Man on TV," *Moscow News*, May 13, 1990, 3. She adds that for too long all the "ethnic wealth" of the country has been

It would be all too easy in 2022 to dismiss as naïve Khanga's hope that Americans' engagement with her family's story would inspire respect for the differences between Russians and Americans, and recognition of their shared humanity. Yet Khanga emphasized that her dream of Russian-U.S. solidarity, which she shared with her grandparents, could only be realized if it was founded on mutual respect rather than inequality. She identified as a major impediment many Americans' unwillingness to recognize that they could learn something from Russia. Khanga also rejected as smug some American politicians' inclination to lecture Russians about their fledgling democracy without acknowledging that their more than two-hundred-year democracy still faced problems. She highlighted as evidence the then recent acquittal of the police officers who brutalized Rodney King (which she connected to the police violence against her grandfather decades earlier) and the hopeless desperation that fueled the subsequent unrest in Los Angeles.⁷¹ Khanga's 1992 commentary resonates in the arguments of present-day political scientists like Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes who contend that the dominant discourse of the late 1980s, early 90s which celebrated the triumph of liberal capitalist democracy as the end of history helped silence critics in the West who sought to improve the liberal democratic model and fueled a sense of moral superiority over the populations of Russia and East Central Europe that bred feelings of resentment rather than solidarity.⁷² To be sure, two years after *Soul to Soul's* publication, Khanga warned readers of the *New York Times* that some Americans' greed and arrogant disregard for Russians' perspectives and interests (that included not inviting Soviet veterans to the 50th anniversary D-Day celebration) was fueling anti-American sentiment not among the perennial American haters like leaders of the Communist Party, but among everyday Russians who "not long ago were warm toward the United States." During the Cold War the Kremlin was the driving force behind negative attitudes towards the United States but now with the United States identified as a "friend," Khanga cautions, those attitudes were emerging organically from below.⁷³

Khanga's family history serves as a sobering reminder that the present-day Russian Federation is far removed from what the preeminent African American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois had celebrated as "Soviet Russia's 'Refusal to be

concentrated in the urban centers of central Russia and that Russians cannot adequately understand non-Russians based on their interactions with the merchant-traders.

71. The acquittal of the four Los Angeles police officers occurred on April 29, 1992 and yet Khanga's last chapter is dated "New York, 1991." *Soul to Soul* was released in October 1992 so Khanga likely worked on this final chapter beyond 1991.

72. Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes, *The Light that Failed: Why the West is Losing the Fight for Democracy* (Pegasus Books, 2019). Scholar Ronald Suny argues that the major lesson of the Soviet experiment is that there can be no socialism without democracy while the main lesson from the present-day political landscape in Russia and the United States is that genuine democracy requires socialism; *Red Flag Wounded: Stalinism and the Fate of the Soviet Experiment* (London: Verso, 2020), esp. 15-16.

73. Yelena Khanga, "Overrun by Ugly Americans," *The New York Times*, August 20, 1994, 23. On the growth of anti-Americanism, see, for example, Boris Sokolov, et al. "Disillusionment and Anti-Americanism in Russia: From Pro-American to Anti-American Attitudes, 1993-2009," *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (September 2018): 534-547, esp. 536-537.

White.”⁷⁴ Different forms of solidarity antithetical to the dream of Khanga, her grandparents, and DuBois have emerged in the past decade. White supremacist organizations in Russia and the United States have forged alliances with members of the latter praising Russia as a “white man’s paradise” where non-whites, women, and members of the LGBTQI+ community know their “rightful” place.⁷⁵ Yet beyond the realm of extremists, the Kremlin-controlled media’s condemnation of Black Lives Matter protestors as violent criminals bore a striking resemblance to the commentary of members of Russia’s liberal opposition and conservative media outlets and politicians in the United States.⁷⁶ Moreover, memory laws in Russia and the United States sanction the telling of distorted, self-righteous histories that deny the violence of Stalinism and slavery-Jim Crow in order to obscure their present day legacies and instill pride in ethnic Russians and white Americans whom such legislation casts as the *real* victims of discomfiting histories of their respective nation’s “shortcomings.”⁷⁷ These twenty-first century expressions of Russian and white American superiority render it even more imperative that we revisit the dream that Khanga and her grandparents had the capacity to imagine of a Russian-U.S. solidarity that disdained chauvinism, war, and violence, and fostered “a language through which we can respect differences while embracing common humanity, a language to speak *dusha v dushu*, soul to soul.”⁷⁸

74 Christy Monet, “The Afterlife of Soviet Russia’s ‘Refusal to be White’: A Du Boisian Lens on Post-Soviet Russian-US Relations,” *Slavic Review* 80, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 316-326.

75 Natalia Antonova, “Russia as a ‘White Man’s Paradise’ & Other Scary Reasons Why Trump Adores Putin (and what to do about it),” *The Conversationist*, January 22, 2019 <https://conversationist.org/2019/01/22/russia-as-a-white-mans-paradise-other-scary-reasons-why-trump-adores-putin-and-what-to-do-about-it/>; Michael Edison Hayden, “U.S. White Nationalist Group Linked to Pro-Kremlin Propagandist,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, October 6, 2020 <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/10/06/us-white-nationalist-group-linked-pro-kremlin-propagandist>

76 See, for example, Ilya Budraitskis, “Russia, George Floyd, and the End of the Imaginary West,” *open Democracy*, June 12, 2020 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/russia-floyd-imaginary-west/>; Djalalov, “Racism, the Highest Stage,” 290-2; Sean Guillory, “Despite Its Complicated Past, Soviet Antiracism was Ahead of the Historical Curve,” *The Moscow Times*, June 17, 2020; and Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon, “The Curious Case of ‘Russian Lives Matter’” *Foreign Policy*, July 11, 2020 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/11/the-curious-case-of-russian-lives-matter/>, and “Russia as a Mirror of American Racism,” *The Conversationist* September 17, 2020 <https://conversationist.org/2020/09/17/russia-as-a-mirror-of-american-racism/>.

77 Timothy Snyder, “The War on History is a War on Democracy,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 29, 2021 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/29/magazine/memory-laws.html>.

78 Khanga, *Soul to Soul*, 297.

About the author:

Meredith L. Roman is an Associate Professor of History at SUNY Brockport, and the author of *Opposing Jim Crow: African Americans and the Soviet Indictment of U.S. Racism, 1928-1937*. Her current research focuses on the intersection of race, gender, human rights, and state violence in the Soviet Union and United States during the Cold War.