Sa’ed Atshan: Now I know that, at some point you discovered an interest and what became a real passion, for the study and the learning of the Russian language, as well as an interest in Slavic studies, and, European studies, Eastern European studies. So, how on Earth did you discover this intellectual curiosity?

Kim St. Julian-Varnon: Honestly, this obsession I had started in sixth grade, I was home sick, I had perfect attendance every year. But, I was sick at home, and there was this eight hour long documentary on the History channel, called Russia land of the czars. And by the time I finished this eight hour long documentary, my fever had broken, and I was obsessed with Russia. And, I never had a chance to like engage this obsession, until I went to Swarthmore, and I was looking at the course catalog, and it had this first year seminar called Angels of Death: Russia under Lenin and Stalin.

And I was like, this is my life's work right here.

Atshan: Wow.

St. Julian-Varnon: So, I took the class and I was obsessed with it, it was with Dr. Weinberg, and I decided that I needed more of that in my life. So, I took more European classes and more Eastern European classes. The idea of nations and nationalism really interests me, and so, part of wanting to be a Soviet historian is learning Russian. And, I was taking French at Swarthmore, and then during my study abroad year, I took Russian, because I was doing some research over the summer at Swarthmore, and I heard Professors Cybil and Forrester speaking Russian on the phone. And I just fell in love with the language, and decided, okay, I'm going to do this, I'm going to focus on Soviet history.

So, I started taking Russian, and I love it. I think it's fascinating, I cannot tell you that this is a healthy obsession. But, I love it.

Atshan: And so, how many people of color are in this field?

St. Julian-Varnon: Not-

Atshan: And what is that like?

St. Julian-Varnon: There are very few people of color in the field, there are more now than when I was doing my undergraduate work. It's weird because Swarthmore has been really good at producing Slavicists who are people of color.

And, when we go, we went to the Slavic conference my senior year, and we started meeting other people of color who were working in Slavic studies, and most of them are doing Russian and Slavic literature and languages. So, I was kind of the only person doing history, but to see other people of color doing it, and we didn't fill, there are probably about a handful of us, at that point.

And I was talking to them at Swarthmore, I was like, yeah my best friend Jackie, who's also a black woman, like, yeah, we take Russian. And then there was Latavia who took Russian, she was two years older than us, and she was doing a full [inaudible 00:03:45]. So, like yeah, swat, this is kind of normal, where you have black women speaking Russian.

And then there was another girl taking Russian, she was a Freshman when we were Seniors, and she was black, and she was taking Russian. And so, we go to these Slavic conferences, and they're just kind of obsessed with this PSE powerhouse of Russian that Swarthmore has, and they asked us how Swat did it. And, we just said, they let us. They never told us we couldn't. The idea that our skin color was somehow strange to speaking Russian, never came up.

And so, I think that, that has helped, and I'm part of a group that helps to spread diversity in Slavic studies to all people of color, but also LGBTQ community, because it's very small, and Slavic studies is still predominantly non people of color. So, predominantly male. And, as more and more people are getting into it, I think it's becoming more diverse, though we still have a long fight.

And, being a black woman who's doing Soviet history, I think I'm one of two or three that I know about around the country. So, I think it's important and I'm glad Swarthmore let me do that, and never told me I couldn't do it, or that it was strange that a person of my color would be doing something like that.