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African American Poets Abroad: Black and Red Allegiances in Early Cold War

Czechoslovakia

Afroameričtí básníci za hranicemi: Černo-rudá aliance v Československu na počátku
studené války

TEZE DIZERTAČNÍ PRÁCE

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2020

OVERVIEW

The framework for this dissertation is the journey of Abraham Chapman, a US Communist who emigrated to Czechoslovakia in 1951 and returned to the US in 1963. Chapman, a problematic figure moving across the decolonizing, Cold War world, becomes a Vergil of sorts who offers a glimpse of the transnational dynamics of the era. Similar uneasy journeys have received little scholarly attention so far: examining them with all their twists and turns – here with the help of both close reading and archival research – reveals people, texts, and allegiances invisible in previous Cold War cultural histories.

While his journey serves as a framework, one cannot omit the continuous to-and-fro movement typical for cultural exchanges even in times such as the early Cold War. In order to address these, I use the theories of transnationalism and world literature. In the first chapter, Prague emerges as a crossroads for activists, political refugees, authors from the Americas, Asia, and Africa, as well as a site of congresses, meetings, conferences, concerts. While I look at Prague at the beginning of the Cold War, some of these contacts preceded the conflict, and shaped later developments. This is the case of the relation of Czechoslovakia to the African American community. In this chapter, I lay out the historical context of these contacts, such as the relationship of the Harlem Renaissance to Czechoslovak self-determination. Relying on Langston Hughes's poetry (and also his correspondence with his Czechoslovak translators and cultural figures), I also map other modes of the relationship, such as solidarity. At the same time, I examine how Hughes, who at one point became the main representative of African American writing in Czechoslovakia, influenced a poet such as Ivan Blatný. Finally, this chapter also provides

the context for Chapman's journey to Czechoslovakia, listing possible reasons why he had to leave the US.

The second chapter explores the tension between Chapman and the Czechoslovak translators and intermediaries of US literature. Here, I rely on correspondence, recollections, and interviews of translators such as Josef Škvorecký, Lubomír Dorůžka, and Jan Zábřana; in the uneasy political climate of the 1950s in Czechoslovakia, translation became a refuge for these men when careers as either academics or writers were impossible for them. Examining the complicated network of Czechoslovak Cold War publishing, here filtered through Prague streets, this chapter looks at the mediation of (African) American literature and culture during the period and the role of translation. It considers the status of African American literature, which these translators both helped to build and then exploited to "smuggle in" otherwise unpublishable works of US literature or culture. In this chapter, I read Sterling Brown's "Break of Day," and its Czech translation by Škvorecký and look at other anthologies of (African) American poetry of the era, i. e. *Americká lidová poezie* [American Folk Poetry, 1961] and compare them with *Černošská poezie: světová antologie* [Black Poetry: A World Anthology], a collection of the poetry of the Black diaspora Chapman put together in 1958 while in Czechoslovakia.

Black Poetry, forward-thinking in its explicit connection between the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist, and anti-racist agendas, was in other respects a relict of structures that were no longer in place by 1958, when the anthology came out. The webs and networks that brought Chapman to Czechoslovakia in the first place were long gone and with them, the message of international solidarity as presented in *Black Poetry*. In the third chapter, I follow Chapman's return to the US, reflecting on how travel restrictions limited contacts

between the decolonizing world and African Americans. Here, I read *Black Poetry* alongside *Black Voices*, an anthology Chapman edited ten years after his Czechoslovak one, in 1968. I compare these two anthologies through the women poets represented in them, looking at the poem “A Black Woman Speaks” by Beulah Richardson and “Deixa passar o meu povo” by Noémia de Sousa. Their Czech translations reveal how translation plays a more complex role than might be expected, enlarging circulations but also confusing and distorting. Both poems were represented in *Black Poetry* and not in Chapman’s later anthologies, reflecting the different ways he defined African American literature, as well as the shift from an internationalist framework to a national one. Relying on Brett Edwards Hayes’s take on how the various ways anthologies framed Blackness, this chapter uses *Black Poetry* to go against the narrative of the rupture of African American writing in the late 1940s and the 1950s, between the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts movement. Finally, this chapter shows that the process of rediscovery of some of these authors still continues and will require a transnational, multilingual perspective.

State of Research

This interdisciplinary, bilingual project sits at the intersection between history and literature, following reconsiderations in the studies of Cold War cultural circulations, Transnational American Studies, and Black Slavic Studies. The project follows and complements several strands of contemporary research, for instance, in the Czech context, especially work on the Anglophone community in Prague during the Cold War (Kathleen Geaney, Petr Vidomus). So far, these have been restricted to historical research: in these areas, Czech literature scholarship has focused on the study of reception that excludes the broader political implications and broader potential of publications such as Chapman's anthology. In order to bridge this gap, I use theories of transnationalism and world literature until now seldom used in the Cold War context. Also important for the dissertation is the recent interest in Czechoslovak contacts with the decolonizing world, including the role of Czechoslovakia in the colonial system. This is a development I have tried to reflect in this thesis (following the work of Pavel Barša, Filip Herza, and Marta Edith Holečková).

The current reconsiderations of the Black Atlantic and the Black diaspora led to the creation of Black Slavic studies, taking inspiration from works such as Kate A. Baldwin's *Beyond the Color Line and the Iron Curtain: Reading Encounters Between Black and Red, 1922–1963* (2002). Too often, these accounts often stay within the Cold War binary of the US and USSR, missing more nuanced perspectives that include other countries and cultural centers. They either described the calculated and well-documented use of anti-racism by the pro-Soviet structures, or they focused on the development of US Civil Rights only in the national context. The field has changed with Mary L. Dudziak's *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (2000), which provided a

ground-breaking perspective on the Civil Rights movement as an international issue with an ambivalent relationship to Cold War pressures. Other scholars (such as Mary Helen Washington in *The Other Blacklist: The African American Literary and Cultural Left of the 1950s* [2014]) have explored the tradition of US radical dissent from the 1930s into the 1960s, noting the continuities mediated through the pro-Communist Left. Although they note that this continuity was partly enabled due to the international audiences, these patterns have not yet been explored beyond the Soviet (and, in some cases, East German) context. This thesis points out how these audiences and journeys were connected on a global scale; thus, it answers the plea of historians such as Penny M. Von Eschen and Thomas Borstelmann to study the Cold War and decolonization as integrally linked processes.

Methodological and Theoretical Frameworks

Several theoretical approaches form the backbone of my project. Primarily, my dissertation draws on transnational approaches to literature and history and also world literature theory that became prominent in the last decade or two. While arguing for a diversification of the literary landscape, world literature scholarship traditionally privileges certain languages, cultures, and types of writing and rarely addresses the Cold War context. This dissertation repurposes these approaches for the decolonizing, Cold War world in which Chapman moved and argues that what Rossen Djungalov calls “the world republic of leftist letters” (based on the concepts by the French literary critic Pascale Casanova) had its own canons, practices, processes of cultural production and also its own centers, Prague being one of them.

In my project, I also draw on recent reconsiderations of translation in a wider sense. As scholars such as Emily Apter have pointed out, translation is a creative act and it is political: it entails betrayals and distortions. It has its own strategies, rituals, and its own secret passages. Together with translations, editors’ choices and accompanying texts also form the cultural discourse – its overt content and its tacit codes – in important ways. Reading translations alongside originals helps us to explore the tension between different contexts of the works and also between translation and the original texts, raising issues of adaptation and appropriation, especially important for the Czech translation of the poetry of the Black diaspora.

In order to address these areas, I combine archival research with literary analysis of individual poems. An important part of the thesis were also recollections, published diaries, correspondence, and interviews with both the Czechoslovak translators and also Ann Kimmage, Abraham Chapman’s daughter, who has written a book on her experiences in

Czechoslovakia, *An Un-American Childhood: A Young Woman's Secret Life Behind the Iron Curtain* (1996). While these sources are important for the thesis, enriching the overall picture, I have attempted to treat them from a critical distance. In the process of writing my thesis, I also have begun to experiment with narrative historicism (a term coined by Kevin Birmingham) in which the book and the story behind it become the main focus: what is in the book itself, how its author came to write it and what happened to him or her during the process. This dissertation uncovers the process of making *Black Poetry*, from authors in it to their translators, and, finally, Chapman himself, as this will vouchsafe us a better understanding of the routes of culture, as well as its uneasy allegiances and complex dynamics, across the landscape of the early Cold War.

Challenges

Finishing the dissertation in the spring and summer of 2020, I encountered new issues. How does this history speak to the current situation of African Americans and also of the Black diaspora more broadly? What are the implications of the complicated history of Czechoslovak contacts with the African Americans for the Czech support of the Black Lives Matter movement today? Moreover, in the current attempts to decolonize institutions, curricula, and language, some of the terms or concepts used in this thesis might turn obsolete. On the other hand, the question of performativity in language and localized notions of race opens a new space from which to reconsider the Cold War discourses and imaginaries of race and their implications for today. These issues are only touched upon in the thesis, but they signal one of the possible ways for continuing this project.

Global modernisms represent another possible future direction for a more complex perspective. The fascinating scholarly work that has been done on various forms and visions of modernism include Peter Kalliney's *Modernism in a Global Context* (2016) or Eleonory Gilburd's *To See Paris and Die: The Soviet Lives of Western Culture* (2018). These have also focused on broader areas, leaving the dyadic relations that are so often used in comparative literature and world literature scholarships. While I have tried to avoid focusing solely on the Czechoslovak–US cultural relations, these attempts were not entirely successful. The project could benefit for example by adding the German context and perspective. There are two reasons for this: the visits of African American figures in Germany, the translations from African American literature, and the implications of German colonialism have already been mapped by scholarship. On the other hand, the

Czechoslovak perspective could challenge the exceptionalist narrative of some of this scholarship.

Culture may be ultimately defined by how we remember the past and how we write history: in Czech public debate, this is apparent in the recent controversies concerning the anniversary of the death of Milada Horáková, executed after a Stalinist show trial in 1950, and the subsequent debates, involving, for instance, Michal Pullman, a historian and the dean of the Faculty of Arts at Charles University. In this dissertation, I have tried to approach political power in a Foucauldian spirit as a circulating, not stable entity. In the Czechoslovak context, this project has focused on the official culture of the 1950s and early 1960s – not only officially endorsed literature such as *Black Poetry*, but also officially endorsed figures such as Chapman. Contrasting them with cultural figures who were (in various forms and to various extents) oppressed by the socialist regime does not relativize this oppression but shows what we lose by only remembering these stories: here, the transnational perspective brings forward new stories and enriches (and sometimes challenges) the existing ones.

Summary of Findings

Following the structure of the thesis, I am listing the main claims of the thesis.

1. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Prague, diverse and multilingual, was one of the centers of the world republic of leftist letters.
2. Relationships between Czechoslovakia and the African American community started before the Cold War and were, in various periods, based on inspiration, solidarity, but also problematic identifications.
3. Dissent and exile were not solely the prerogative of those who traveled from East to West.
4. Czech translations of African American literature reflected various agendas, including the agenda of the Czechoslovak translators.
5. The number of Czech translations from African American literature did not mean a larger sensitivity towards the workings of race and racism and its connections to colonialism.
6. The relationships between CPUSA and African Americans was not only oppressive: one of the platforms the Party secured was the international one.
7. There was a continuous tradition of radical Leftist African American writing in the 1940s and 1950s: and Prague is where parts of this tradition can be retrieved from; this has important implications for US literary history.

Overview of Academic Activities

Fellowships

September 2019 – August 2020: CEFRES, French Research Center for Humanities and Social Sciences, Prague, PhD Fellowship

November 2017 – May 2018: Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University, Fellow, Fulbright-Masaryk Scholarship

May 2017: Oxford University, The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities, a month-long EUROPÆUM scholarship

Teaching Activities

“Reading African American Literature Now (and from Europe):” Elective seminar, Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Winter Term 2019/2020

Grants

Things in Poems – Poems of Things, researcher, supported through Charles University grant (GAUK). Main outcomes: international conference in January 2019 (supported through KREAS), a collective monograph *Věci v básních: Od Achilleova štítu po hyperobjekty* [Things in Poems: From the Shield of Achilles to Hyperobjects, Prague, FF UK], translation of one chapter.

Chapters in Collective Monographs

“Hlasy z Harlemu: Transkontinentální solidarita v poezii Noémie de Sousa” [Voices from Harlem: Transcontinental Solidarity in Noémia de Sousa’s Poetry] In: *Zamyšlení nad africkými identitami zobrazenými v básnickém prostoru* [Reconsidering African Identities in Poetry], Prague: FF UK, 2020.

“Pravidla hry: Zábranovy poznámky k detektivní próze” [Rules of the Game: Zábrana’s Translations of Detective Fiction]. In: *Jan Zábrana, Básník, překladatel, čtenář* [Jan Zábrana: Poet, Translator, Reader], Praha: Karolinum, 2018.

Essays in Journals

“Stalinův černý apoštol: Paul Robeson v Praze,” [Stalin’s Black Apostle: Paul Robeson in Prague]. In: *Soudobé dějiny*. (forthcoming, fall 2020)

Academic Reviews

2020: “Kánon a já [The Canon and I],” In: *Svět literatury*. (forthcoming, fall 2020 – review of Petr Onufer’s *Obtížná balanc: Ke kánonu anglofonních literatur v českém kontextu*)

2019: “Half-Buried Books: Forgotten Anti-Imperialism of Popular Front Modernism” *Historical Materialism*, electronic version, <<http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/book-review/half-buried-books-forgotten-anti-imperialism-popular-front-modernism>>

2018: “Forget English: Orientalism and World Literature” *Twentieth Century Literature* 64 (2): 259-264.

2017: “Švéda, Josef. Země zaslíbená, země zlořečená: obrazy Ameriky v české literatuře a kultuře (Promised Land, Accursed Land. Images of America in Czech Literature and Culture)” *Brno Studies in English*, 42 (2): 179-184.

2017: „Mariana Machová’s Elizabeth Bishop and Translation,” *Body*, Online, <https://bodyliterature.com/2017/11/17/mariana-machovas-elizabeth-bishop-and-translation-friday-pick/>

Conference presentations:

September 2019: “Cold War Secrets and African American Literature: The Story of Abraham Chapman.” Secrets: Biennial Conference & 22nd International Colloquium of American Studies, Czech and Slovak Association for American Studies & the Department of English and American Studies, Palacky University Olomouc.

March 2019: “Me, Too, but What? Socialist Sex, Translatability, and Milan Kundera.” Bad Romance: The Ethics of Love, Sex, and Desire, Harvard University.

January 2019: “All those Pretty Things: Women and Their Objects in Anglophone Poetry.” Things in Poems – Poems of Things, Charles University Prague.

November 2018: “Konceptualizace rasy v českých překladech afroamerické literatury.” [Concepts of Race in Czech Translations of African American Literature], Cesty translátologie, Charles University Prague.

October 2018: “Black Bodies White Translations: Cold War Journeys of African American Poets.” New Pathways in American Studies, Masaryk University Brno.

June 2017: “„Solidarity in Black and Red: Transnational Perspective on the Translation on Anti-colonial Poetry in Cold War Czechoslovakia.” The Hermes Consortium for Literary and Cultural Studies Seminar, Aarhus University.

Talks etc.

March 2020: “World Literature, Cold War Edition,” CEFRES Epistemological Seminar, Prague

December 2019: Political Reading of Contemporary Literature Workshop, Charles University and Universität Zurich, Prague – chair of a panel

October 2019: Social Movements and Emancipatory Politics in the Central Eastern Europe Conference, Charles University, Prague – moderator of the public debate

May 2018: “Literature Knows No Borders: US Poetry in Early Cold War Czechoslovakia,” Společnost pro vědu a umění Boston, Harvard University

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