



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

9 November 2020

**Supervisor's Report on
African American Poets Abroad:
Black and Red Allegiances in Early Cold War Czechoslovakia**

**Doctoral Thesis
by Františka Zezuláková Schormová**

Františka began her doctoral research in Fall 2016, and proved during its course to be a resourceful and enterprising student. She was awarded a Fulbright Research Scholarship to Harvard University, with Stephanie Burt at the Department of English, and Jonathan Bolton at the Department of Slavic Studies. She has also been a PhD Fellow at the CEFRES Institute, and won a fellowship that enabled her to study for one month at Oxford University with Tessa Roynon. She has participated in academic conferences, publishing both articles and reviews in leading journals, and also during the course of her studies, she has written for generalist literary outlets, finding ways to bring her specialization to a wider audience.

But her thesis is the focus here. Much transnational literary criticism at the present time presents conclusions that mostly fold back into a national framework, i.e., what can a particular transnational phenomenon tell us about Irish or US literature? Františka's approach does indeed tell us many interesting things about US literature, demonstrating that one must follow literature *out* of the US into different languages and nations if one is to understand it fully. Thanks to her research we have an enhanced account of the internationalism of US literature in the 1950s, especially African-



FACULTY OF ARTS Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

American poetry. She also shows how several important negotiations were channeled through Prague – Langston Hughes’ responses to his Czech translators being just one instance of this. Her work also tells a good deal about Czech literature, precipitating a broad reassessment of the “great generation” that came to the fore after World War II, showing that works in Czech during the period cannot be understood without broader linguistic and cultural contexts.

The work concentrates on cultural agents (poets, translators, and editors) who negotiated passages across the Iron Curtain during this period. By focusing her subject still more sharply on African-American poets, paradoxically this has allowed her to open the theme of the thesis still further, and encompass the decolonization process that was underway in the 1950s. Thus, she has had to familiarize herself not with one but two very different cultural contexts (and their languages) – the US and Czech. In itself this would have been a tall enough order. But she has done this emphatically not for *comparative* purposes, but rather to follow the *transactions* between these two arenas, at a time when most cultural communication (on official, unofficial and semi-official levels) drew on the considerable abilities of the actors involved to deceive. It is difficult to understand a situation when most of the protagonists – some of them among the best literary minds of their generations – are trying to mislead outsiders, each other, and sometimes even themselves. Because these writers, editors, and translators worked so hard to cover their tracks, it has seemed for decades to cultural historians that nothing was actually happening. Františka’s work, along with that of several that of other researchers in the area, demonstrates how erroneous this idea is. Much was going on, we just had to learn how to see it; Františka’s work teaches us how.

She follows the official networks of publishing institutions, with their “shadow cabinets” of translators and editors who were working against the Communist authorities, as this is cross-hatched by the journeys of several key figures from the US (above all, Abraham Chapman/Abe Čapek); and also, she illuminates the ways that this



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

is complicated by allegiances to what was then referred to as the “Third World,” or the decolonizing nations with which Communist Bloc countries were forging contacts. In recent years, the study of decolonization is one of the most dynamic areas of cultural research (and arguably, political events); Františka’s work refines our ideas of this process, by showing that it cannot be understood purely in First World/Third World terms, but that we must take the Second World into consideration if we are to understand these cultural exchanges.

The thesis, as submitted, will transform Czech ideas of Cold War culture, but also has the potential to intervene in wider debates, as this period now comes under scrutiny by a generation of cultural critics informed by the transnational aspects of US literature. In her conclusion, she looks back over her research, the places it has taken her, orienting it in the present, and she does this persuasively and with *éclat*. While the ostensible subject is niche-like, the implications for how we read US literature and more generally how we understand the circulation of literature in the world literary space in the second half of the twentieth century are significant. It is my hope that when revising her thesis for submission as a book, Františka will draw out the connections with these patterns. She has a compelling and granular account at the center of her PhD; this is an excellent basis upon which to build an important intervention in the larger debate. In my view, it marks the entry of a outstanding scholar in the field.

I recommend that this excellent thesis go forward for defence.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Justin Quinn', with a horizontal line underneath.

Justin Quinn, Ph.D. (Associate Professor)