



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Opponent's Report on the PhD Dissertation of Františka Zezuláková Schormová

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

Submitted in 2020 at the Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

I. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation

This is an excellent dissertation. It provides new ways of reading some of the most significant African-American literature of the twentieth century, from the Harlem Renaissance through the Black Arts Movement, by examining poets such as Langston Hughes in the framework of their interactions with Czechoslovak writers, translators, critics and the reading public through an in-depth and illuminating study of Czech translations of these writers as well as some of the most significant Czech and American anthologies of Black writing in the twentieth century, centered in part around the life and work of Abraham Chapman, also known as Abe Čapek. Based on extensive reading and personal research in Czech and English conducted in the Czech Republic and the United States, this is an important and valuable study that has the potential to make a lasting contribution to Anglophone and Czech literary studies, questioning the narrative of rupture from the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement; complicating the “interpretive monopoly” of Czech figures such as writer, editor and translator Josef Škvorecký on the threshold of Czech and Anglophone literature; and reframing twentieth-century African American literature from a transnational perspective.

II. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects

The dissertation is well written, interesting, deeply informed and insightful about the topic and the larger framework of twentieth-century Anglophone literary studies, especially concerning Cold War history, translation and transnationalism. Each of the chapters of the dissertation and their individual sections are fruitfully researched, logically structured and convincingly argued.

1. Structure of the argument

The dissertation is lucidly written and structured. Chapter one lays the foundations of the study, beginning in Prague and making an interesting case for the Czech capital as a center of



FACULTY OF ARTS Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Black transnational literature in the world republic of leftist letters. This chapter also introduces Abraham Chapman, who will be a focal point of the study, and his relationship with Richard Wright. The second chapter then opens up to a wider discussion of anthologies of African American literature that were translated into Czech during the Cold War, highlighting not only how anthologization is never a neutral process, but also, intriguingly, how a communist like Chapman's idea of America was very different from the idea of America cherished by Czech translators of American literature under communism. The third and final chapter considers anthologies of African American literature that were published after Chapman returned to the United States, and also focuses on the problematic exclusion of women from these anthologies in the US and from the narrative of underground literature in Cold War Czechoslovakia. This final chapter especially brings this very specific study into a more universal framework, increasing its relevance and impact for Anglophone studies. The dissertation is successful in its task of complicating the narrative of Black literature in the Cold War both from the Czech and American perspective and opening up new possibilities of reading this literature and its formation with an awareness of the problematics and complexities of transnational literary discourse, canonization and translation.

2. Formal aspects of the dissertation

The writing is clear, detailed and coherent throughout the dissertation. The titles of the chapters and sections are condensed and stylistically pleasing as well informative and authoritative. As can be expected in a work of this length, a few typos are to be found, such as on page 55: "although **they** were female translators from English, they seldomly translated poetry." Or on page 67: "Although professionally trained translators arrived only when the program in Translation Studies at the University of 17th November was established in 1963, **translators such as Škvorecký or were experts in language and linguistics.**" Or on page 104: "writes Justin Quinn. **It is** also..." Or on pages 118 and 128: "**Stephen** Delbos."

3. Use of sources and/or material

The bibliography in this dissertation is rich and includes published books and articles, unpublished dissertations, archival documents, personal correspondence with relevant individuals and unpublished book manuscripts in both English and Czech within the framework of twentieth-century literature, literary translation, transnational studies, and Cold War history. The study casts a wide net, taking into account relevant and sometimes surprising



FACULTY OF ARTS Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

source material that increases the relevance of the study and the potential of its contribution to the critical discourse.

4. Personal contribution to the subject

The research that contributed to this work is one of the dissertation's strong points. As detailed in the conclusion, research took place both in the Czech Republic and in several cities in the United States, in both English and Czech. The author consulted valuable and in some cases rather overlooked original papers and correspondence at Harvard, Yale, the University of Massachusetts, and Brown University. The author deftly uses these primary and secondary sources to propose an original, organically formulated contribution to the field.

III. Questions for the author

In light of the above comments on this accomplished dissertation, I would propose the following questions to be addressed during the defense:

1. In the final chapter, you pose a very intriguing question that you immediately back away from answering: *“Could Prague be one of the centers of African American writing of the time? This suggestion might seem far-fetched, but artifacts such as Chapman’s Czechoslovak anthology indicate how difficult it is to draw a line demarcating ‘ours’ and ‘theirs’ in literature, whether this is on a national, linguistic, or, more problematically, racial level.”* Upon further consideration, would you answer that question about Prague in the affirmative or the negative? Why?
2. Chapman is an interesting figure who, like many anthologists of the period, seemed to promote certain valuable authors who may not have received such recognition otherwise, while at the same time obscuring other authors, often women. Overall, do you see Chapman’s contribution to Anglophone literature as more positive or negative, and why?
3. The sections on Langston Hughes’s interest in Czech translations of his poetry make an interesting case for the transnational nature of his writing. Do you think that Black Anglophone writing today is more or less transnational that it was in Hughes’s day? Why?

IV. Conclusion

I recommend the submitted dissertation with the tentative grade of pass.