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November 29, 2020

To: Charles University, Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures
Evaluation of Ph.D. thesis, Frantiska Zezuláková Schormová, **African American Poets
Abroad: Black and Red Allegiances in Early Cold War Czechoslovakia**

Schormová's thesis offers an exciting, original, and illuminating contribution to scholarship on black internationalism and left internationalism in the twentieth century. From the outside I will state that the work merits a pass based on the research, arguments and original contributions. I strongly recommend a pass. Most of my comments pertain to future revisions for a book and articles. Based on the practices of the universities where I have primarily worked (University of Michigan, Cornell University, and the University of Virginia), I would leave it entirely to the discretion of the thesis adviser as to what, if any of these revisions should be undertaken before the final deposit of the thesis. Clearly, given the laudable ambition of the work and the limitations of pandemic library access, most will need happen deposit.

This exciting work makes an intervention at the cross-sections of several dynamic areas of scholarship. In every area, Schormová offers novel insights; each area will also be strengthened by further engagement with the extant field. First, the work is concerned with issue of cultural mediators and translations across intersecting black internationalist and Cold War projects. Relatedly, the work joins a robust and growling literature that challenges an assumption of Soviet dominance over cultural and literary networks throughout the social bloc. Third, and an area that could be strengthened, to make a tremendous contribution, the thesis explores the tensions between the mutual constructions of nationalism and internationalism.

As these are interwoven, I will address these through moving through the manuscript to point out interventions of particular importance, as well as though in need of clarification. First, I applaud the structure of the project and the focus on biography. As this is strengthened, it will serve the thesis/book well in containing the rich explorations of the contradictory and colliding Cold War and black internationalist projects. On the most practical level, if you have not yet had a fellow researcher who is able to file a Freedom of Information Act request on Chapman, you should do so immediately.

I love the important unpacking of Prague as an important cross-roads between crumbling empires and emerging geo-political formations. Here, you could push even harder to think about how the national and international were constructed in relationship to one another in the context of crumbling empires. Your point about Alain Locke's emphasis on Czech and Irish anti-imperialism is very important. And here – my tiny bit of knowledge on art and Czech nationalism suggest that you can push the idea that nationalism/internationalism emerged precisely in these imperial and sometimes trans-imperial contexts – e.g. Josef Kajetán Tyl, a prominent figure in the 19th-century Czech National Revival Movement, joined a travelling theatre as a subject of the Austrian Empire before establishing a Czech ensemble in an otherwise German theatre in Prague in the 1830s.

This is one legacy, as you suggest, by which anti-imperialism can be mired in limited national baggage. At the same time, you need to give more attention to the anti-imperialists intentions of the ethno-nation projects of the Soviet Union that attracted Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, and many other African Americans. (see especially Terry Martin and Ron Suny on affirmative action empire and Joy Carew's recent book *An African Americans in the Soviet Union*.)

Those in the CPUSA were perhaps particularly bogged down in nationalism because of the popular front politics – Communism is 100% Americanism. Not only was all left internationalism suspect from 1947 onward and severely repressed, but the CP emphasis on nationalism limited the imagination of that generation of the left. You do a great job with this on Chapman. There is far more to be said about *which* people of that generation remained ensconced in nationalism and who among them developed ties with new current so internationalism.

On challenging an assumption of Soviet dominance over cultural and literary networks throughout the social bloc, some brief comparative references to work on East Germany (Slobodian *Comrades of Color* on East Germany and the Cold War and work on Yugoslavia and non-alignment) would strengthen this point. Your brief mention of Che Guevara on Prague (footnote) should be followed as this would be after his time in the Congo and just a year before his death, further unpacking Cuban/African connections that far exceeded Soviet projects, and adding Czechoslovakia to that project.

Finally, as noted in the beginning, the contributions on cultural mediation are very important. The threads on the different institutional origins of African American vs global anthologies is important and I would like to know more. Some of the formulations need further clarification. On the one hand, yes there is an emphasis on “folk origins” and the vernacular, from the time of W.E.B. DuBois's *Souls of Black Folk*, but I would like more clarification of *who* is invested in the concepts of authenticity and when that gets tied to essentialism. Many scholars, Brent Edwards, Robert O'Meally, Robin Kelley (and myself in *Race against Empire* and *Satchmo Blows up the World* trace an African American tradition that creativity, change, and improvisation, all of which problematize any conception of the authentic. In this view, the specificity of African American culture is historically situated, not essentialist.

Or, are you saying that white cultural mediators constructed notions of authentic African American culture? That is certainly true, but be careful to clarify formulations, such as

that on page 77, quoting Comody –“black is not something to be discovered but is actively constructed and mediated by the dominant culture.” Of course, in some ways, when one considers who had the access to recording publishing etc., but the important things is to keep the white cultural mediators in tension and dialogue with African Americans pushing against essentialism.

Your discussion of the State Department programs also does not acknowledge African American agency – the entire idea came from an African American jazz world. (see *Satchmo Blows up the World*). U.S. accounts of jazz are far more varied and neither the musicians nor the State Department line up with the “line” that you suggest. All of these qualifications would simply strengthen your nuanced approach to cultural mediators, so these are quibbles about the current formulations not best serving your project, not a critique of the project per se.

Relatedly, the discussion of Skvorecky, his readings of Sterling Brown and his writings on jazz are very important and interesting. Chapman is really stuck in the worst of an ideological time warp to see jazz a reactionary. Paul Robeson loved be-bop and all contemporary jazz, but the way you follow the Skvorecky’s ideological journey is terrific. Looking forward to talking about all of this in the defense.

In short, it has been a pleasure to read this original and significant piece of scholarship. I greatly look forward to its development into a book and several articles, all of which will enrich multiple fields.

Sincerely,

Sincerely,

Penny Von Eschen

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