

ESSAY

Tractors and Translators: Langston Hughes in Cold War Czechoslovakia

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What role do tractors play in the poetry of Langston Hughes? The question might seem ridiculous, since there are no tractors in his poetry. It might then surprise the anglophone reader, and perhaps Hughes himself, were he alive, to learn that tractors appeared in translations of his poetry during the Cold War. In Jan Štern's 1950 Czech translation of Hughes's "Let America Be America Again," the hand of the multiracial, polyphonic poetic subject is "v dešti traktor svírá" ("clutching a tractor in the rain"; "Ať opět Amerika Amerikou je" 61).¹ The original poem has a plow (Hughes, "Let" 191), but there was no room for the symbols of individualized agriculture in the poetry of Stalinist Czechoslovakia, not even for the imported ones. Tractors, by contrast, represented the collectivization and nationalization of fields, the new world order, and mechanized labor. In a poem from the same period, even Přemysl the Plowman, a figure from Czech mythology, "nejde již za pluhem / raději slouží za volantem v armádě traktorů" ("does not maneuver the plow anymore / He prefers to serve behind the wheel in the army of tractors"; Biebl). If this mythical ancestor no longer plowed, neither could the speaker of Hughes's poem. In keeping with the poetic norms and vocabulary of the period, the speaker of another poem, translated by Zbyněk Kožnar, strives to become "podílníkem státu" ("a shareholder of the state"; "Demokracie"). However, for the speaker of Hughes's original, having "as much right / As the other fellow has" to "own land" ("Freedom") refers to the fact that African Americans were being denied ownership and custody of land in the United States. Tractors might not play any role in Hughes's poems in English; in the Czech translations of his poems, however, they roll over some of the racialized realities of the

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United States that Hughes points out. This essay is not about tractors in Hughes's poetry. Rather, it is about what happened to that poetry as it moved from one language and culture to another during a period of ideological standoff.

As Vera Kutzinski writes, Hughes "moved in different worlds" and "had not one life but many" (*Worlds* 2). Since the early 2000s, Hughes scholarship has explored these lives. Kutzinski in particular has foregrounded translation, looking at its importance not only for Hughes's own poetics but also as a wider cultural practice that took place through various cultural hubs. Kutzinski has focused on Hughes's contacts with the Spanish-speaking world and on the role the translations of Hughes's poetry played in postwar Germany (*Worlds*). A recent addition to this field, Ryan James Kernan's *New World Maker: Radical Poetics, Black Internationalism, and the Translations of Langston Hughes* (2022) examines the role translation played in Hughes's 1930s poetry, showing that, for Hughes, writing and translating intertwined. Through his analysis of Hughes's contacts, journeys, poetry, and translations, Kernan demonstrates that Hughes saw translation "not as a secondary activity but as a primary one" and that Hughes's practice of translation not only inspired his radical writing in the 1930s but also "informed its portrayal and practice of Black internationalism" (64, 24).

Others, such as Kate A. Baldwin and Joy Gleason Carew, have examined the Soviet relations and journeys of African American figures such as Hughes, understanding translation as a broader phenomenon. Focusing on Hughes's visit to the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, Steven S. Lee explores the attraction Soviet modernist experimentation held for Hughes and others and historicizes crucial questions of representation of the other, the authenticity of such representations, and translation. In *Between Two Fires: Transnationalism and Cold War Poetry*, Justin Quinn investigates the transnational allegiances of Cold War poetry and the role of translations and individual translators and mediators in the formation of such allegiances. A recent inquiry into Cold War translation, *Translation under Communism* (2022), edited by

Christopher Rundle, Anne Lange, and Daniele Monticelli, looks at case studies from individual Eastern bloc countries and unpacks some of the complicated connections among official structures, translators, editors, texts, and paratexts without yielding to easy dichotomies of cultural compliance and dissent.

These studies have revealed points of contact in unexpected places. Located at the center of various cultural networks that led him and his texts to different languages and regions, Hughes was a crucial figure in mid-century cultural exchange. The inspiration he took and the contacts he acquired from these cultural exchanges were foundational for his own work as a poet. Yet there are blank spaces on this translational map that still need to be explored, one of which is Hughes's connection to Czechoslovakia.

The first Czech translation of Hughes's work appeared in 1928, only two years after Hughes's first poetry collection, *The Weary Blues*, had been published. The translated poems were first published in literary magazines and later appeared in an anthology of US poetry titled *Američtí básníci* (*American Poets*), published in 1929 and edited by Arnošt Vaněček. Hughes's poems also appeared in Vaněček's second project, *Litanie z Atlanty* (*Litany of Atlanta*), an anthology of African American poetry published in 1938. These translations were a major influence on Czech poets, especially members of Skupina 42 (Group 42), an avant-garde group of visual artists and writers that was active in the 1940s. Hughes not only influenced Czech poets, Czechoslovakia also appeared in his poetry: for instance, in "Song for Ourselves," "Shall the Good Go Down?," and "Message to the President," an undated poem written during the Second World War in which Hughes highlighted "the common destiny of the Czechoslovak and the black as victims of oppression" while at the same time expressing "frustration with the privileging of European suffering over the everyday problems of African Americans" (Sabatos 65).

Dealing with the pre-Cold War period, Charles Sabatos has explored one part of the story of what happened to Hughes's poetry once it appeared in

the Czech literary space. Other scholars, such as Julie Hansen, Zornitza Kazalarska, and Marcel Arbeit, have looked at the later period, especially in connection to one member of Group 42: Ivan Blatný, a Czech poet strongly influenced by Hughes. The present essay broadens this time line, exploring poems from three translated collections of Hughes's poetry published in Czechoslovakia during the Cold War: in 1950, 1957, and 1963. The discussed material stretches across the Stalinist and Thaw periods; despite this larger historical backdrop, the cultural histories of those countries that were part of the Soviet sphere of influence differ in their time lines and dynamics. Still, many of the cultural pressures explored in this essay are not specific to the Czechoslovak situation and the Czech translations. Translation, however, is always localized and always represents distinctive sets of tensions and negotiations.

My understanding of translation is informed by Lawrence Venuti's approach to translation, formulated in *Contra Instrumentalism: A Translation Polemic*. Venuti proposes a hermeneutic model that posits translation as "conceived and performed as an interpretative act" that "inevitably varies source-text form, meaning, and effect according to intelligibilities and interests in the receiving culture" (173, 1). He argues that the dominant, yet unacknowledged, instrumentalist model removes a text from "the cultural situation and historical moment that invest it with significance as an interpretative act" (58) and puts forward the following imperatives: "STOP evaluating translations merely by comparing them to the source text" and "START examining their relations to the hierarchy of values, beliefs, and representations in the receiving culture" (x).

"The most germane questions," Kernan writes, in a similar vein, "do not revolve around whether Hughes's writings about 'the Negro' survived the violences of translation." Instead, he asks, "how did Hughes's work have to be transformed to travel across different geographies while still writing seriously about 'the Negro people'?" (22). This essay pursues this question in the context of early-Cold War Czechoslovakia. It looks at how these transformations played out in three collections of translations

and how these translations operated both within the receiving culture and as part of the broader transnational dynamic. This essay follows Hughes's poetry as it makes its way through the new challenges and vocabularies that arose during the Cold War and argues that Cold War translation emerged as a specific site of inquiry with its own challenges, contacts, and practices.

Early 1950s Publishing Politics and *I Sing America*

Obtaining what we might call a literary visa to Czechoslovakia—that is, to be translated into one of the country's languages—was not an easy task in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Following the communist coup d'état in 1948, the state gradually gained absolute control over book publishing, expropriating the nationalized and recentralized publishing houses. These changes were intended "uspokojení kulturních potřeb lidu" ("to meet the cultural needs of the people"), as Václav Kopecký, the minister of information, shared in a 1949 speech (11). Part of the reforms involved decreasing the number of new titles and increasing the number of copies: according to Jiřina Šmejkalová, between 1948 and 1950, the number of published titles decreased by half, but print runs almost doubled (*Cold War Books* 119). These reforms took place in accordance with the Soviet model of directive planning. Translations were no exception, since this model also determined how many books from various countries could be translated per year (Forstová 68).

This introduced a new set of negotiations: as Miklós Haraszti puts it, "Permission replace[d] purchase" (81). Market relations were taken out of the equation, and each title was subjected to a multilevel system of control that guaranteed "předběžné i následné cenzury" ("both preliminary and subsequent censorship"; Šámal 19): this system not only determined which books could be published but also made it possible to vet earlier decisions or to pulp books that had already been printed. Given these circumstances, publishing US literature proved to be a precarious task. Anthologies and journals were more accessible venues for those who wished to publish US poetry in translation.

Hughes was the only US poet, living or dead, whose poetry was published in translation as a collection between 1948 and 1955—a selection of his poetry, *O Americe zpívám (I Sing America)*, edited by Jaroslav Bouček and translated by Bouček, Kožnar, and Štern, came out in 1950 (Bouček et al.).

The new cultural politics led to the dismissal of official figures connected to the previous regime and to the installment of new ones. Literary allegiances were reexamined: they were either judged suitable for the new system or repudiated. Books, both Czech and foreign, were banned from libraries, bookshops, and public discourse. This, for instance, was the fate of the Group 42 poets. Hughes was forgiven his earlier poetic allegiances, but this pardon was not absolute: in the afterword to *I Sing America*, Bouček presents Hughes through the lens of a redemption story in which Hughes “rozchází se se sentimentalitou Harlemu, s kvílivou melodií jazzu, s náboženstvím” (“says goodbye to Harlem’s sentimentality, the howling melody of jazz, and religion”; 87) of the 1920s in order to join the progressive movement of the 1930s. Bouček hints that the literary visa can still be revoked when he claims that “v Hughesově poesii se čas od času stále ještě projevuje hazardní a lehkomyšlný tón” (“a hazardous and reckless tone still appears from time to time in Hughes’s poetry”; 89). But overall, Hughes has exchanged the “kvikání saxofonu a cinkot lahví s ginem” (“honking of the saxophone and jingling of the bottles of gin”) in favor of the “upřímnou a prostou lyrikou” (“honest and plain lyric”; 89). This “honest and plain lyric,” however, rested on Bouček’s, Kožnar’s, and Štern’s translations rather than on Hughes’s poetry.

Bouček’s afterword uncovers the framework through which Hughes was to be read: the context of the contemporary US radical Left. When Bouček writes about Hughes’s song “Freedom Road,” he claims that it was named after “známého Fastova románu” (“the famous novel by [Howard] Fast”; 88). However, Hughes’s song appeared in 1942, two years before Fast’s novel was published. In his afterword, Bouček also mentions a poem he translated titled “Balada pro Američany” (“Ballad for Americans”), claiming it was put to music and is now “rozšířena

mezi pokrokovou veřejností na gramofonových deskách interpretovaná Paul Robesonem s doprovodem sboru” (“widespread among the progressive public on vinyl records, sung by Paul Robeson accompanied by a choir”; 88). Robeson did record the piece. It was, however, not Hughes’s poem but a song written in 1939 by John Latouche and Earl Robinson, originally titled “The Ballad for Uncle Sam.”

What look like errors might not have been. Both the US writer Howard Fast and the US singer, actor, and activist Paul Robeson were figures familiar to the Czech audience, representatives of the United States sanctified by the official regime. Robeson had visited Czechoslovakia only a year before *I Sing America* was published.² By evoking and stressing Hughes’s connections to Fast and Robeson, Bouček not only paints a picture of a close-knit network of cultural figures but also further legitimizes Hughes’s place in the Czech canon of US literature. It was perhaps these references to the US radical leftist scene and to the abovementioned translations that made Hughes’s reappearance in early 1950s Czechoslovakia possible in the first place.

Whether the inclusion of “Ballad for Americans” in *I Sing America* was a mix-up or a deliberate choice, its inclusion points to another cultural shift accomplished through translation. When Hughes writes about the American utopia, his speakers use their positions (as racial others, members of the working class, or both) to undermine the very foundation of that utopia. By including a title such as “Ballad for Americans” and ascribing it to Hughes, Bouček puts forward a different poetics:

Silná a mladá je naše zem
My všichni z hor i z planin se zpěvem
Všech velkých dosud nezpívaných písní
Pozdvihnem víru těch kdož se bili před námi. (74)

Our country’s strong, our country’s young,
And her greatest songs are still unsung.
From her plains and mountains we have sprung,
To keep the faith with those who went before.
(Latouche)

Hughes’s critical and often ironic view is replaced with earnestness, and in this way, Hughes’s poetic

project is influenced by (and also influences) Czech poetic tendencies of the first half of the 1950s. The task of poets was to contribute to the formation of the new socialist society. Intended for the masses, their poetry was supposed to be comprehensible, appellative, and didactic (Blažíček 181).

These poetic norms also present themselves in the translations of poems Hughes did write. “America never was America to me,” says the speaker of Hughes’s poem “Let America Be America Again,” taking on the identities of various marginalized groups (189). Through the multiracial “I” and the use of anaphora, Hughes ironizes the notion of the American dream, directly targeting what Jonathan Scott calls “the Jeffersonian platitudes” (90). In their introduction to *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel label this poem as one of “the most radical poems ever published by an American, as well as some of the most poignant lamentations of the chasm that often exists between American social ideals and American social reality” (Introduction 4). In Štern’s translation of the poem, the critique of the utopian vision is almost untraceable.

Throughout his translation of “Let America Be America Again,” Štern recontextualizes the poem. In the Czech translation, “slavery scars” (Hughes, “Let” 190) become just “jizvy” (“scars”; Štern 59). This is baffling in the context of the poem (what scars?), but, more importantly, the omission also effaces the history of slavery from a poem that uses this history as a point of departure for challenging utopian visions of the United States. (Moreover, instead of reaching for the Czech equivalent of the word “Negro” [“černoch”] used elsewhere in the collection, Štern inexplicably opts for the Czech equivalent of the N-word here.) In Bouček’s afterword, the poem is used as an example of Hughes’s finding out “kde je pravé americké vlastenectví” (“where true patriotism lies”; 87). Through both Bouček’s reading and Štern’s translation, this version of the poem participates in the image of the “self-made, democracy-loving, freedom-seeking American immigrant pioneer”—an image that excludes and others African Americans (Scott 88).

Finally, there is a tendency in *I Sing America* to tone down Hughes’s expressivity. This happens on

the level of register. For instance, in “Freedom Train,” Hughes writes, “Cause freedom ain’t freedom when a man ain’t free” (324), but Kožnar’s translation of the poem, “Vlak svobody,” uses a neutral, perhaps even slightly elevated tone: “to není svoboda, když člověk není svoboden” (“It is no freedom when one is not free”; 64). Czech lacks certain linguistic means (e.g., contractions, which Hughes often used to create a more colloquial register), but Kožnar decided on standard Czech even when other means were available to achieve a register similar to the original (adjective suffixes, for instance). Other changes concern the layout of the poems and the structure of the stanzas. In “Democracy” (“Demokracie”)—Hughes later changed the title of the poem to “Freedom”—also translated by Kožnar, the last stanza of the poem, as originally published in Hughes’s *One-Way Ticket*, reads as follows:

Freedom
Is a strong seed
Planted
In a great need.
I live here, too.
I want freedom
Just as you. (Hughes, “Freedom”)

Typographically, the stanza is divided from the rest of the poem (it is placed in the middle of the page) as a concluding exclamation. In the translation, it is divided into a quatrain and a tercet, not distinguished typographically from the rest of the poem:

Svoboda—
ta může vykvést
jenom ze semene, vsazeného
při velkém neštěstí.

Žiji tu s vámi—
a vaše svoboda
ta dosud scházívá mi.

Similar regroupings occur elsewhere in the collection, transforming Hughes’s poetry into neat quatrains. Why? Because the aesthetic norms that appeared in Czech poetry at the beginning of the

1950s followed models from nineteenth-century folk-inspired poetry. As Vladimír Macura notes, the simplified rhythmic schemas of national classics replaced prewar formal experiments (63). This often meant the use of regular rhythm and end rhymes.

In *I Sing America*, the translators shifted away from Hughes's aesthetic innovations and his references to and contextualization of African American culture and history. Instead of looking at these shifts through the metaphors of erasure and loss, we can examine how they operated in the receiving culture. The translations in *I Sing America* corresponded to the standards of Czech poetry of the time. While an adjustment to the needs of the receiving culture seems to be a point of departure for translation, as Venuti reminds us (175), what is specific about this early–Cold War translation is the importance of the individual publications for the Czech literary scene. As the title of the collection demonstrates, Hughes was presented as the sole contemporary representative not only of US poetry in Czechoslovakia but also of America as such. However, the need to fit Hughes into the framework of contemporary Czech poetry meant that Hughes had to “sing America” in a high Parnassian mode worthy of nineteenth-century Czech National Revival poets, who frequently served as models for the literary production of the time. As Hughes's poetry made its foray into Czech, the African American poet in *I Sing America* came to sound a little like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

Translating Hughes Abroad and the *May* Magazine

In 1955, five years after the publication of *I Sing America*, a Czechoslovak translator named Jiří Valja reached out to Hughes. Valja had just published a short selection of Hughes's poems in a new literary magazine, *Květen* (*May*), that was already pushing the limits of what could be published in Czechoslovakia. Now he wanted to present Czech readers with “the best and the most comprehensible selection of [Hughes's] poetic work.” However, his access to primary materials was limited; even some of the poems that had been translated earlier were available to him only in

translation. As he wrote to Hughes, he unfortunately knew “only their Czech titles which I [back-]translated literally into English.” What followed were Valja's reverse translations of the titles of Hughes's poems from *I Sing America*: “The Black Man Speaks,” “Good Morning, Revolution,” “Letter to the Academy,” “Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria,” “Good Morning, Stalingrad,” “Underground Railroad,” “Freedom Road,” “Message to the President,” and, notably, “A Ballad for Americans.” (Valja, Letter [6 Sept. 1955]). Hughes, who had otherwise been hugely helpful to Valja and would provide him with translation advice, unpublished poems, and additional information in the following years, refused to send him these poems: “Some of the poems which you mention were topical poems relating to events of the times, and, as such, are now very dated” (Hughes, Letter to Jiří Valja [16 Sept. 1955]).

Hughes had faced accusations of communist leanings since the 1920s. As Mary Helen Washington writes, “Hoover decided Langston Hughes's poems were ‘communitic,’ the bureau put him on its list as far back as 1925, even though its own informants said Hughes was not a communist” (26). In 1948 Hughes was yet again accused of being a Communist, and, consequently, “*Not without Laughter* and *Fields of Wonder* were later removed from the shelves of 150 State Department–sponsored libraries in sixty-three countries” (Filreis 22). In 1953, while Hughes was being read as a representative of the United States in countries like Czechoslovakia, he was summoned before the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations led by Senator Joseph McCarthy to answer for his alleged anti-American views.

What played out during Hughes's hearing was a conversation on the nature of creative writing and literary interpretation—and also Hughes's image abroad. The committee was concerned with the presence of Hughes's books in American libraries, institutions designed to spread “American objectives and American culture” and to “propagandiz[e] our way of life and system” (United States Senate).³ It was Hughes himself who brought up the question of his poetry in translation. According to Kutzinski, Hughes was “flaunting the fact that people in other countries were, and had been, reading his work in

languages other than English” in order to reassert “his international stature along with the ultimate ineffectiveness of the committee’s attempted suppression of his written words” (*Worlds* 216). The constant threat of being blacklisted meant that by the second half of the 1950s, Hughes, as Kutzinski puts it, “became exceedingly cautious about having his name associated with anything and anyone from the 1930s Left” (218).

For this reason, Hughes was unwilling to send Valja some of his poems from the 1930s, a number of which were mentioned in his hearing as examples of his pro-communist stance. By that time, Hughes had become careful about his image abroad. His attempts to curate it did not mean he avoided contact with people abroad, even from countries that would not have fared well with McCarthy’s committee. The Czechoslovak file at Yale University’s Beinecke Library shows the wide range of Hughes’s contacts, from individual fans and literary magazines that wanted to interview him to theaters that were staging his work to people who repeatedly invited him to visit Czechoslovakia. Hughes never did visit Czechoslovakia; it was only his works that traveled there.

Czech officials would agree with US ideologues on one thing: Hughes’s revolutionary poetry could and should be separated from his modernist works. Both sides would, however, strongly disagree on which was more valuable. For Czech poets and translators who worked in opposition to the rigid aesthetic norms, Hughes would play a unique role. The poetry of the officially sanctioned US poet showed that politically engaged poetry and experimental forms did not need to be mutually exclusive. Valja’s translations in *May* played an instrumental role in this development. Under the headline “Black Man Sings the Blues” (“Černoch si zpívá blues”) appeared translations of “Wide River,” “Evenin’ Air Blues,” “Gypsy Man,” “Young Gal’s Blues,” “Gal’s Cry for a Dying Lover,” “Out of Work,” “Po’ Boy Blues,” “Down and Out,” “Homesick Blues,” and “Midwinter Blues” (Arbeit, “Hughes” 770). The titles themselves were indicative of a different focus in Hughes’s works compared with the translations that appeared in *I Sing America*.

The existence of *May* was, in itself, a sign of a changing political climate. It was on the pages of *May* that vernacular language made its reappearance: founded in 1955 as the official monthly of the Czechoslovak Writers’ Union, the magazine quickly became a platform for younger poets who were interested in the individual and the everyday, the poetic subjects that were missing in the utopian poetry of the early 1950s. These new leanings played out in the broader political climate; the mid-1950s brought not only the revelations and consequences of Nikita Khrushchev’s so-called secret speech in 1956 but also domestic developments spurred, among other things, by the Second Congress of the Czechoslovak Writers’ Union in 1956 and by speeches of cultural figures, including the future Nobel laureate Jaroslav Seifert, who demanded changes to the system and the reinstatement of silenced poets.

What did Hughes have to do with this? First, some of those who returned to the public sphere and were allowed to publish again were members of Group 42—for instance, Jiřina Hauková, who had translated Hughes’s poems. Second, Hughes’s poetry influenced *May*: Miroslav Holub, the author of the journal’s manifesto, “Náš všední den je pevnina” (“We Are Grounded in the Everyday”; 1956), refers to Hughes both specifically and through an image of a railroad bridge (553), connected in the Czech poetic imagination to both Hughes and Blatný.⁴ Third, the new translations of Hughes that appeared in *May* were a sign of shifting poetic norms. The elevated language and rigid verse structures, rhythm, and rhymes of the first half of the 1950s were now being relaxed.

Translations were not merely a demonstration of cultural change: the efforts of translators of both poetry and prose directly contributed to this cultural change. As Stanislav Rubáš notes, writing about the Czech version of J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, translated by Luba Pellarová and Rudolf Pellar and published in 1960, these translations were pioneering in their use of colloquial language: “Dějiny českého jazyka u nás psali mimo jiné právě překladatelé” (“The history of the Czech language has been cowritten by translators”; 13).⁵ The

use of colloquial language in a published translation meant that such language might also be used in local literary production. At the same time, the use of colloquialisms in new works by Czech authors could be employed to defend the use of colloquialisms in a translation. Indeed, translators shaped the history of the Czech language, but so too did the translated texts and the translated authors themselves—and through his correspondence with Valja, Hughes became an active participant in this process. Valja's choice to retain the vernacular in his translation of Hughes both shaped and was shaped by the new poetic language, contributing to a wider transformation in which local and translated works challenged contemporary norms.⁶

Black Man Sings the Blues and The Harlem Songbook

In 1957, after the “great success” of his translation of Hughes for *May* (Valja, Letter [6 Sept. 1955]), Valja published a collection of Hughes's poetry, *Černoch si zpívá blues (Black Man Sings the Blues)*. As he would later proudly write to Hughes, the title “sold out in two days” (Valja, Letter [26 Apr. 1961]). While Hughes initially refused to send Valja the poems he knew could attract the attention of the Senate subcommittee, he provided Valja with several of his collections and with other materials Valja had asked for, such as the libretto for *Troubled Island* (Hughes, Letter to Jiří Valja [16 Sept. 1955]).⁷ A year and a half later, before he finalized the collection, Valja asked Hughes for some of his latest poems (Valja, Letter [27 Mar. 1957]). Hughes obliged and sent eight additional poems, some of which appeared in the last section of *Black Man Sings the Blues*.⁸

Many of the poems in Valja's *Black Man Sings the Blues* overlap with the poems Bouček chose for *I Sing America*, but they might as well be different poems, so glaring are the differences. Only a few years apart, these translations were also created under very different conditions. In a paper on the translation of poetry, Valja writes with disdain that “[s]tále ještě se v některých případech pracuje nahonem, šest překladatelů dostane narychlo smlouvu, všichni se svorně vrhnou na básníka v šestiměsíčním

termínu a podle toho to vypadá” (“[i]n some cases, the work is still rushed, six translators get a contract, and they have six months to translate the poet, and the results look accordingly”; “Chtěl bych říct” 4). While this paper, a draft of a talk, is undated, Valja's reminiscence refers to the early years of the state socialist regime and its pressing need for new publications and translations—the atmosphere in which *I Sing America* was compiled. By contrast, in his letter to Hughes in 1955, Valja mentions being able to “devote the next twelve months to the best poetical translation possible of a representative selection of your poetry” (Letter [6 Sept. 1955]).

Despite being nine years older than Bouček, Valja belonged to a new generation of professional translators that became active in the 1950s. He was the secretary of the Translators' Unit of the Czechoslovak Writers' Union and an author of poems, short stories, and psychological novels: he writes to Hughes that he is “a writer, too” and lists his publications to date, including his novel *Zahradní ulice 70 (Garden Street 70)*; Valja, Letter [6 Sept. 1955]). Before he started working on his translations of Hughes, his translations from English had included Graham Greene, William Shakespeare, and Stephen Spender, and he also translated from Russian and French. He would go on to translate authors such as W. B. Yeats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Robert Burns, Ernest Hemingway, William Blake, Chinua Achebe, and T. S. Eliot, and in the Czech cultural memory, he is bound to his translations of William Faulkner.

When he started working on his translations of Hughes, Valja had a much broader expressive range at his disposal, a range not limited by the narrow definition of poetry of the early 1950s. Valja's translation of “Ballads of Lenin” represents perhaps the starkest contrast to early 1950s poetry. The translation follows the original: the characters from Hughes's poem—Ivan, the peasant; Chico, the Negro; and Chang from the foundries—ask Lenin to “kousiče uhni” (“move over”) in his tomb and “ať se tam vejdu k tobě” (“to give them some room”), questioning the inclusivity of the Communist movement in the same way Hughes had questioned the utopian vision of America

(Valja, “Balada o Leninovi” 71). Such a transgression would have been unthinkable seven years earlier, in 1950: in Bouček’s translation, these speakers politely ask Lenin to rise from his grave and bring them “štěstí a klid” (“happiness and peace”; Bouček, “Balada o Leninovi” 42).

Black Man Sings the Blues was published in 1957 by Státní nakladatelství krásné literatury a umění (State Publishing House of Fiction, Music, and Art), founded four years earlier.⁹ The translations were accompanied by an afterword by František Vrba, another writer, translator, and cultural intermediary who placed Hughes in the context of the global poetic avant-garde of “umělecké generace, otrásané explosemi velkých nadějí i zklamání” (“a generation of artists shaken by the explosions of great expectations and great disappointments”; 194). In reaction to the demands of the early 1950s for authors’ ideological purity, Vrba claimed the need to judge these artists by “celek jejich života i díla” (“their entire life and lifework”), not by the isolated traits of their moral character or poetry (194). Vrba insisted on the inseparability of Hughes’s poetics from his politics:

Nemůžeme ani u Hughese jeho lyriku touhy, jeho balady zklamané lásky, falešných hráčů, zabijáků či prostitutek, jeho jazzové výkřiky, smích v slzách, jeho lehký vtip a jemnou ironii, jeho rytmus a melodii odtrhávat od jeho vášnivých protestů proti rasovému útlaku, proti krutému bílému zákonu soudce Lynche a Jima Crowa, od básní, ve kterých Hughes manifestačně vyjadřuje revoluční víru.

(196–97)

We cannot separate Hughes’s lyrics of desire, his ballads of disappointed love, of false players, killers, prostitutes, his jazz outcries, laughing in tears, his light humor and subtle irony, his rhythm and melody from his passionate protests against racial oppression, against the cruel white Lynch’s law and Jim Crow laws, from the poems in which Hughes manifestly expresses his revolutionary faith.

Starting in the second half of the 1950s, translators and other cultural mediators began to capitalize

on what the Czechoslovak state structures wanted to hear in order to introduce aesthetic innovations into the receiving culture and push through certain titles. Throughout the Eastern bloc, cultural mediators gradually learned to preempt ideological impasses and used various strategies to avoid them (Lange et al. 18). Mediators such as Vrba assumed trickster-like roles to push through the publication of certain works and used various discursive strategies to defend their choices. For example, in order for a revolutionary *and* modernist Hughes to exist in Czech translation, Vrba needed to address Bouček’s interpretation of the poet’s work directly. According to Vrba, Bouček’s take on Hughes can be understood as an expression of the “zjednodušujících tendencí v našem pohledu na život literatury” (“simplifying tendencies in our view of the life of literature”; 195) that had ruled cultural politics only several years earlier. Soon after, however, some of these debates appeared anew. Toward the end of the 1950s, publishing became more difficult. *May* was canceled, and titles prepared for publication—and even some that had already been printed—were pulped. This was the fate of a 1958 publication titled *Svět jazzu (The World of Jazz)*, edited by Lubomír Dorůžka and Josef Škvorecký, which included a short story by Hughes (Poledňák and Dorůžka 130). Moreover, the already complex system of internal reports and recommendations was expanded as the political situation slowly became more repressive again. But Hughes’s poems in Valja’s translation had already won the affection of the newer generations of poets such as Josef Kainar and Václav Hrabě and songwriters such as Jiří Suchý and Vladimír Mišík. Hughes’s texts entered the popular consciousness, be it through printed poems or lyrics based on them. “Every educated person in our country knows the name of Langston Hughes,” wrote the Czech poet and translator Kamil Bednář in a letter to Hughes in September 1961, and it was no empty flattery. Valja prepared a new collection of translations of Hughes’s poetry, *Harlemský zpěvník (Harlem Songbook)*, which came out in 1963. It was a triumph: Valja informed Hughes of the book’s print run of eleven thousand copies, writing that “the

book was a great success here, especially among young people” (Letter [7 Oct. 1963]).

For this collection, Hughes provided not only his poems but also advice on particular references in his poetry. Specific references were an issue not just in Hughes’s poetry but also in US literature in general: consultations with the occasional English-speaking guest or language instructor became an important source of information for Czech translators. Even twenty years later, at the beginning of the 1980s, one translator recalled addressing an English-speaking couple at a bus stop and, on another occasion, happily discovering an English teacher from Chicago while stuck on a translation of Saul Bellow’s *The Adventures of Augie March*, which takes place in that very city (Fröhlich 102–03). “Form and meaning,” Venuti reminds us, might not be “immediately accessible to the translator without aggressive interpretation” (11). Cold War translation practices offer an apt demonstration of how inaccessible form and meaning can be. Valja, too, tried to consult with “some Americans living in Prague,” but he still found himself at a loss when it came to certain expressions from Hughes’s 1961 collection *Ask Your Mama* (Valja, Letter [15 Sept. 1961]). These terms were connected to specific figures from American and African American history, Jamaican history, and Haitian culture and to the everyday realities of living as an African American in the United States: “Pocomania,” “Bedward,” “Legba,” “Damballa Wedo,” “Ogoun,” and “John Jasper,” all of which appear in Hughes’s “Gospel Cha-Cha,” and “Kings and Queens,” in Hughes’s “Jazztet Muted.” In a letter dated 2 October 1962, Hughes helpfully provided a glossary. His explanation of the term “Kings and Queens” is worth quoting in its entirety:

KINGS AND QUEENS: The figures on the playing cards are used on the doors of toilets instead of the word MEN or WOMEN in some bars and cafes in the U.S.A. In the poem, it means toilets in cemeteries for both men and women have doors that open into the Negro sections of town. In other words, segregation is entered through the excrement houses that smell rather badly. Radio and discs and TV are played in areas of death and excrement and Jim Crow, and jazz is a scream in the midst of

this foulness—is what JAZZTET MUTED is about. Sort of like the music in Oxford, Mississippi, Faulkner’s home town, today.

(Letter to Jiří Valja [2 Oct. 1962])

A consideration of Hughes’s Czech readers led Valja to choose various translation strategies. In some cases, he added an explanatory word (for instance, the word “gods” when mentioning Damballa Wedo and Ogoun [“Evangelium ča-ča” 91]). In others, Valja replaced Hughes’s terms with more general terms: for instance, “Pocomania” and “Bedward” explained by Hughes in his letter as “a semi-Christian religious sect” and a deceased religious leader, respectively (Letter to Jiří Valja [2 Oct. 1962]) were replaced with “Černí bozi a proroci” (“Black gods and prophets”; Valja, “Evangelium ča-ča” 92). In the last part of “Gospel Cha-Cha,” Hughes refers to John Jasper:

BUT WHEN I GOT
JOHN JASPER JESUS
WHEN I GOT TO CALVARY
UP THERE ON THAT HILL ALREADY THERE
WAS THREE
—AND ONE, YES, ONE
WAS BLACK AS ME. (503)

Valja replaced the reference to John Jasper—whom Hughes had characterized as “An American Negro minister famous in Virginia who preached a famous sermon, DE SUN DO MOVE, which he often repeated” (Letter to Jiří Valja [2 Oct. 1962])—with a reference to Jesus Christ: “Ale když jsem byl až tam / Ježíši Kriste / když jsem byl na Kalvárii” (“But when I got / Jesus Christ / When I got to Calvary”; Valja, “Evangelium ča-ča” 92). The reference to Jesus Christ may have omitted Hughes’s reference to Jasper and its explosive, alliterative interjection (“John Jasper Jesus”), but it makes the speaker’s lamentation more comprehensible for the Czech reader.

While references such as “Kings and Queens” might have been understandable to a large part of Hughes’s US readership, the meaning of other terms and names would perhaps not have been. In *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, Rampersad and

Roessel provide notes for “Gospel Cha-Cha.” These notes comprise all the terms, names, and references Valja asked Hughes about in his letter, including John Jasper (“Notes” 684–95). While it is hard to compare a 1995 US edition of Hughes’s poetry with a collection that came out two years after the original collection on the other side of the Iron Curtain, this comparison foregrounds the fact that a source text may not always possess “an invariant form, meaning, or effect” (Venuti 174), especially in the case of a multigenre, multimedia project such as *Ask Your Mama*. Instead, Venuti invites us to think about whether a translation “contributes to the stable functioning of the arts and sciences in their current configuration or sets going a productive, even if destabilized, process of innovation and change” (175). This question is also applicable in the Cold War setting. Both the choice to replace a plow with a tractor, as Štern did, and the choice to replace John Jasper with Jesus Christ, as Valja did, were informed, deliberate choices. Each choice had a different effect in the receiving culture. While Bouček, Štern, and Kožnar included Hughes in the new socialist poetry of the early 1950s, Valja and Vrba built on this inclusion and used Hughes’s poetry to expand the notion of what poetry and poetic language could be under a state socialist cultural system while making the poetic references accessible for a wider audience.

“The fact that Hughes was translated differently in different target zones is to be expected. Reinvention in the practice of translation is not a choice. It is the name of the game,” writes Kernan (26). The different versions of Hughes, however, merit closer inquiry. Who were they? Who were the people mediating them? What did those people choose to omit, stress, or change, and how did these versions operate in the new space? What can these versions tell us about Hughes’s poetry, and what, in turn, do we learn about Cold War cultural translation by looking at them? In writing about post-Second World War Germany, Kutzinski claims that the translation of Hughes provided a space “to render speakable words and ideas that had become unthinkable and unsayable in their societies: that

is, nearly everything that had to do with racialized cultural differences” (“Unspeakable Things” 535). A different dynamic was at play in the translation of Hughes into Czech. In Bouček, Kožnar, and Štern’s collection, these “racialized cultural differences” were replaced by the new realities of state socialist Czechoslovakia and adjusted to its norms. Valja encountered Hughes’s poetry in a different context only several years later and pushed against these norms by foregrounding a version of Hughes that was both radical and aesthetically innovative.

As cultural historians have pointed out, the distinction between “radical” and “modernist” is a Cold War product in itself. In the US context, this rhetoric enabled the deradicalization of leftist poetry in the 1950s. According to Cary Nelson, what was originally a stance determined by the historical situation became an integral part of the cultural narrative—and the whole depoliticized canon of modernism. As Nelson describes it, the canon became the “discipline’s testimony before HUAC [House Un-American Activities Committee]” (68), and Kutzinski reminds us of the complicity of New Criticism in US anti-communist legislation (*Worlds* 206). While US critics have challenged this legacy for the last three decades or so, critics from the former Soviet satellites have struggled with a different issue. As Rossen Djagalov puts it, the oppositional intelligentsia in these regions tended to “mechanically put minuses where official propaganda had once put pluses” without challenging the divisions the Cold War had inflicted on cultural production (41). In Hughes’s case, this meant that, as late as 2006, Arbeit would condemn Hughes’s 1930s work as “pamfletická poezie” (“pamphlet poetry”; “Adoptivní” 430).

Still, the efforts of scholars such as Kutzinski and Kernan to look outside English in order to overcome the notion of “a somewhat schizophrenic Hughes who goes primitive one day and red the next” work for Czech as well (Kernan 13). Kernan invites us to read Hughes’s work “not as a series of ruptures, but as a series of engagements that wed cross-cultural poetics with Black left internationalist politics” (13). This essay enters into conversation with these scholars by considering Hughes’s engagement with Czechoslovakia. The translation of

Hughes into Czech in the 1950s and early 1960s adds to the conversation in two ways. First, the early–Cold War translations of Hughes’s poems can be seen as a source, an archive of poems that have been frequently undervalued within Hughes’s oeuvre, and continued archival work may lead to the discovery of new texts. Second, translation has been vital to the literary cultures of small languages, challenging and shaping those cultures. During the period in question, the practice and discipline of translation were, on the one hand, tightly controlled, supervised, and managed by official state structures; on the other hand, translation mediated, enabled, and shaped cultural changes. As they journeyed over the Iron Curtain, Hughes’s poems gained new political meanings and broadened the imaginative possibilities and expressive ranges of poets in Czechoslovakia. In 1950s Czechoslovakia, Hughes’s poetry in translation challenged and helped transform the poetic norm. At the same time, the dynamics between cultural mediators and official structures as well as the shifts in both Bouček’s and Valja’s translations signaled tensions that would become even more prominent in 1960s translations of US authors. References to US racism became part of the strategies used to defend publications of US proveniences, a lip service to the official anti-US, anti-racist discourse. While this discourse cannot be simplified as mere propaganda, these references were often instrumentalized by translators, editors, and cultural mediators and reduced to a bargaining chip in the game they played with the regime.¹⁰

Cold War translation emerged as an unprecedented and, in certain ways, unrepeated set of negotiations, infrastructures, and trajectories. The interactions between Hughes, his poetry, and his Cold War Czech translators occurred against a much broader background that is outside the scope of this essay, a background that was formed by more than the dyadic relationship between two cultures and regions alone. Indeed, Hughes emerged as a figure central to multidirectional, multilingual networks. In 1961, for example, he contacted Bednář—Eva Hesse, Hughes’s German translator, told Hughes that Bednář translated Robinson Jeffers—to congratulate him and express interest

in his work (Letter to Kamil Bednář).¹¹ In the correspondence that followed, Bednář recommended to Hughes the Black diaspora poets he had translated for the Czech anthology *Černošská poezie: Světová antologie (Black Poetry: A World Anthology)*, published in 1958, while Hughes was in the middle of preparing *Poems from Black Africa*, which would be published in 1963 (Letter to Langston Hughes [26 June 1961]). These exchanges present Cold War translation as a dialogue capable of bridging the otherwise tightly shut borders of ideological power blocs—a Cold War conversation across the decolonizing world. It is only sometimes that this conversation falters, clashing with the limitations of language. As Hughes writes to Valja, perhaps with a hint of his signature subtle irony, “Thank you very much for sending me your [Czech] translation of THE WEARY BLUES. My only problem now is to find someone in New York who can read it to me” (Letter to Jiří Valja [16 Sept. 1955]).

NOTES

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1. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
2. For more on Robeson’s visits to Czechoslovakia, see Schormová, “Stalinův černý apoštol.”
3. In *The Worlds of Langston Hughes*, Kutzinski dedicates a whole chapter to this hearing and to the issue of translation: “Back in the USSA: Joe McCarthy’s Mistranslations” (184–220).
4. Blatný’s second collection of poetry, *Tento večer (This Night)*, published in 1945, is particularly indebted to Hughes. Here Blatný seldom uses rhyme but relies instead on repetitions and fragments, collaging pieces of conversations overheard on the street. Poems such as “Báseň v cizím bytě” (“Poem in Someone Else’s Flat”) are dialogues with (and, at the same time, Czech variations on) Hughes’s poems, while Blatný’s other poems begin with an epigraph from Hughes. Blatný, who emigrated to the United Kingdom in 1948 and spent most of his life in various psychiatric hospitals there, would go on to develop a specific multilingual poetics. But as Hansen writes, even in Blatný’s 1945 poetry, the intertextual relationship between Blatný and Hughes “is not limited merely to allusion, genre or stylization, but can also be discovered in the poem’s linguistic and the-matic levels” (24).

5. The translation of Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* was also significant because it reintroduced the vernacular into Soviet publishing politics. As Eleonory Gilburd writes, "Salinger's colloquialisms" in Rita Rait-Kovaleva's 1960 translation helped "break with polished, normative speech" (105).

6. This dynamic also included prose authors, such as Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, whose works were reintroduced to the Czech cultural space in the second half of the 1950s. The publication of these works served as a further argument for expanding the notion of socialist realism and for including a broader spectrum of modes of expression.

7. *Troubled Island* is a historical opera about the Haitian Revolution. It was composed by William Grant and premiered in March 1949. Hughes wrote most of the libretto, which was based on his play *Emperor of Haiti* (1936). In his letter to Valja, Hughes notes that "some sections" of the libretto "might be interesting to translate as poems" and draws particular attention to a section titled "I Dream a World" (Letter to Jiří Valja [16 Sept. 1955]). "I Dream a World" was published in magazines and in Arna Bontemps's 1963 anthology *American Negro Poetry* (Rampersad and Roessel, "Notes" 661). It does not, however, appear in any of Valja's collections of Hughes's poetry.

8. Two of the eight poems, "Trinket" and "War Makers," appear neither in Rampersad and Roessel's *Collected Poems* nor in Hughes's Czech collections. A similar situation presented itself several years later when Hughes sent additional poems to Valja. Unfortunately, neither Hughes's Czechoslovak file at the Beinecke Library nor Valja's personal archive includes these poems. It is possible that the titles of these poems changed at some point, as the titles of Hughes's poems often did. Still, confronting archives from countries like Czechoslovakia with the known corpus of Hughes's poems might still bring unexpected results: if not previously unknown poems by Hughes, then perhaps their variations. A similar case already exists for Uzbek translations of Hughes's poems that have no English equivalents (Moore 1124).

9. It was this publishing house, along with its magazine, *Světová literatura* (*World Literature*, founded in 1956), that was able to push through previously unthinkable titles, and several of its editors and translators later reached a legendary status in the Czech cultural memory. For an overview of anglophone writers whose work was published in *World Literature*, see Seminová.

10. The complicated nexus that included the agendas of individual translators, their translations, official Czechoslovak discourses and policies on racism, lived experiences in state socialist countries, and the wider 1950s context of the Cold War and decolonization is outside the scope of this essay but is discussed in Schormová, *African-American Poets*.

11. The connection between Bednář and Jeffers represents another chapter in the history of exchanges across the Iron Curtain and is discussed in detail in Šmejkalová, "Robinson Jeffers's Pilgrimage."

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Abstract: The poet Langston Hughes was central to mid-century transnational exchanges and Cold War translation. This essay examines the poet’s centrality through a new lens, presenting a case study on Czech translations of Hughes’s poetry between 1950 and 1963 that draws on archival materials, especially the correspondence between Hughes and one of his Czech translators, Jiří Valja; paratexts; and analysis of translations. The essay shows how Hughes’s poetry was translated into Czech against the backdrop of Cold War publishing politics and aesthetic norms, how the translations of Hughes’s work operated in these contexts, and how Cold War translation emerged as a specific site of inquiry with its own challenges, contacts, and practices.