

# NOT ON NATIVE GROUNDS

WERNER SOLLORS  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY, USA

## ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the significance of foreign experience for American writers. Differentiating several types of this experience, diplomatic service, expatriate experience, war service, and academic lecture tours, the paper analyzes the specific effects of foreign experience on three American writers, William Demby, Allen Ginsberg and Yusef Komunyakaa.

## KEYWORDS

twentieth-century American literature; identity; adjustment; international theme; cultural ambassadors; William Demby; Allen Ginsberg; Yusef Komunyakaa; Prague

For J. J.

For American writers, crossing the boundaries that enclose the United States means experiencing changes in identity, as the sense of national, racial, ethnic, and class belonging undergoes a transformation in places where social norms are subtly or dramatically different, requiring an adjustment from previously unquestioned norms of ordinary conduct. Gender roles and racial and political fault lines differ; beliefs in human perfectibility, in the power of money or in the power of inherited traits vary considerably; and it is these variations that have intrigued American writers who chose settings outside of the United States and tested American norms in contexts where they might only be partly accepted. Linguistic reorientation, and a rethinking about what may be specifically American are associated with writing that pursues the “international theme.” Invisible Men came to be seen in new ways, and American heretics could perceive their own Americanness in foreign settings.

In the nineteenth century many of the major writers had such experiences. Looking back, one is surprised to see how many writers spent long years abroad in the diplomatic service: among them are Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and William Dean Howells as well as Frederick Douglass and James Weldon Johnson. It is a tradition that seems to have fallen into oblivion; perhaps Barack Obama will go back to it?

Since the 1920s writers have gone abroad as Bohemians and expatriates, taking advantage of good exchange rates for their dollars or going on spiritual or artistic voyages: Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Anita Loos, Claude McKay, Henry Miller, and Richard Wright are among the most famous examples here.

In the past half-century or so, American writers have gone to other countries for a great variety of reasons. Ralph Ellison spent the year 1956/1957 at the American Academy in Rome and traveled and lectured in Europe, an experience that affected his sense of being: "The Africans I've met in Paris and Rome have seen me as an alien," he commented later. "They see most American Negroes this way. I never really got into contact. I won't have anything to do with racial approaches to culture."<sup>1</sup> William Demby led an Italian life for more than twenty years, an experience that entered his novel *The Catacombs* (1965). The pattern of gender relations he finds (still) in Italy contrasts with an American or Nordic male ideal as a Master that manifests itself in misogynous sadism, a "slow and subtle form of killing one's woman." "At the origin of this sadism there is the emancipation of the woman and the anguished position of the male," he diagnoses an American malaise that the Italian setting reveals to him.<sup>2</sup> Reading Italian newspaper reports on the Algerian War, Demby is revolted by terrorism: "Plastic bombs! The cheap anonymous weapon of cheap anonymous killers. . . . But what revolution can ever succeed based on the traumatic use of psychological terror? . . . But, I ask, is such riskless anonymous terrorism really effective as a political instrument?" In the dystopian fantasy scenario he spins from this mediated newspaper reflection "here in Rome" in 1962 he imagines a global terrorist scenario that he takes home to New York in his mind, for "suddenly all of us can be terrorists—a young woman, verging on insanity because of disillusionment in love, drops a poisonous pill in a metropolis' milk supply center; a thrill-seeking youth, nourished on cheap intoxicating drugs and comic books, surreptitiously drops a powder in the fuel tank of a proud Boeing 707 Intercontinental Jet; . . . a disgruntled unemployed electrician, angry with the light company for cutting off his electricity, secretly cuts a wire and the elevators of a great skyscraper in New York come to a halt between the sixty-third and sixty-fourth floors; the plague year is here."<sup>3</sup> One wonders whether perceptions like Demby's would have emerged in an American setting.

Rarely were American writers now diplomats, though they did in some cases serve as "ambassadors of culture," most especially in visits to the communist world during the cold war years.

One such writer was Allen Ginsberg whose visit to Czechoslovakia in 1965 had a broad national and international resonance. He was crowned the King of May in Prague, created a cultural flurry that strengthened the pre-1968 dissidents, and was finally expelled by the authorities who found him an annoyance. "Prague is lovelier in miniature than Paris almost," Ginsberg

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1. Harold Isaacs, "Five Writers and Their African Ancestors," in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, ed. Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 64.

2. William Demby, *The Catacombs* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965), 62–63.

3. Demby, *The Catacombs*, 10–11.

reflected on his experience on numerous occasions, most famously perhaps in the poem “Kral Majales.”

“Kral Majales” is a poem in Ginsberg’s Whitmanian manner with long sprawling sentences and anaphoric lines and other forms of repetition that goes to the kill (in 1965 Prague) right in its opening lines, but seems as skeptical of Capitalism as it is of Communism:

And the Communists have nothing to offer but fat cheeks and eyeglasses and  
 lying policemen  
 and the Capitalists proffer Napalm and money in green suitcases to the  
 Naked,  
 and the Communists create heavy industry but the heart is also heavy  
 and the beautiful engineers are all dead, the secret technicians conspire for  
 their own glamour  
 in the Future, in the Future, but now drink vodka and lament the Security  
 Forces,  
 and the Capitalists drink gin and whiskey on airplanes but let the Indian brown  
 millions starve  
 and when Communist and Capitalist assholes tangle the Just man is arrested  
 or robbed or had his head cut off. . . .

Soon comes the complaint about Communist Czechoslovakia seen through the lens of modernist art (Cézanne) and fiction (Kafka).

For I was arrested thrice in Prague, once for singing drunk on Narodni  
 street,  
 once knocked down on the midnight pavement by a mustached agent who  
 screamed out BOUZERANT,  
 once for losing my notebooks of unusual sex politics dream opinions,  
 and I was sent from Havana by plane by detectives in green uniform,  
 and I was sent from Prague by plane by detectives in Czechoslovakian  
 business suits,  
 Cardplayers out of Cézanne, the two strange dolls that entered Joseph K’s  
 room at morn  
 also entered mine, and ate at my table, and examined my scribbles,  
 and followed me night and morn from the houses of lovers to the cafés of  
 Centrum—  
 And I am the King of May, which is the power of sexual youth,  
 and I am the King of May, which is industry in eloquence and action in  
 amour,  
 and I am the King of May, which is long hair of Adam and the Beard of my  
 own body  
 and I am the King of May, which is Kral Majales in the Czechoslovakian  
 tongue,  
 and I am the King of May, which is old Human poesy, and 100,000 people  
 chose my name, . . .

After an interlude with global-religious chants, Ginsberg returns to the fact of the arrest and the origin of the poem itself:

And *tho’* I am the King of May, the Marxists have beat me upon the street,  
 kept me up all night in Police Station, followed me thru Springtime  
 Prague, detained

me in secret and deported me from our kingdom by  
airplane.

Thus I have written this poem on a jet seat in mid Heaven.<sup>4</sup>

Almost a decade after the beatnik frisson was at its peak in the United States the repressive regime of the CSSR gave Ginsberg's satirical and surrealistic and at times self-absorbed lines a deep political meaning in Prague, where he read in the "poetic wine restaurant" Viola. Ginsberg's poem may have been hard to get hold of in Eastern Europe after his expulsion from Prague, but the poem is now available in numerous versions on the world wide web, one of them even with a sound track of Ginsberg's own reading of the poem.<sup>5</sup>

Let me conclude with another reading by an American poet whose big first foreign experience was the Vietnam War. I mean Yusef Komunyakaa, who addresses linguistic, cultural, and geographic disorientation in the extreme context of the war. In his poem "Starlight Scope Myopia," for example, he gives an account of Viet Cong fighters who "move under our eyelids."

. . . What looks like  
one step into the trees,  
  
they're lifting crates of ammo  
& sacks of rice, swaying  
  
under their shared weight.  
Caught in their infrared,  
what are they saying?  
  
Are they talking about women  
or calling the Americans  
*beaucoup dien cai dau?*<sup>6</sup>

The Franco-Vietnamese phrase *Dien Cai Dau* that also serves as the title of the 1988 collection in which "Starlight Scope Myopia" appears seems like a riddle that throws into question the self-understood position of the speaker of the poem. In 2004, accompanied by his translator's Czech versions of the poems, Komunyakaa gave a reading in the very same café Viola where Ginsberg had recited nearly four decades earlier. Meanwhile, the CSSR had ceased to exist and Prague was now in the Czech Republic, and the tension in the room came not from political dissidents but from the pleasure of hearing the clear phrasings of Komunyakaa's lines in two languages.

The translator was, of course, none other than the Silesian whom we are celebrating in this new *Moravian Journal of Literature and Film*. He had important personal interactions with Ellison and Demby, a lifelong friendship with Allen Ginsberg, and his personality was shaped by his own Moravian

4. Allen Ginsberg, "Kral Majales," in *Collected Poems, 1947–1980* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 353–54.

5. Allen Ginsberg, "Kral Majales (I am the King of May)," 1965, <http://www.sniffylinings.com/kingofmay.html> (accessed November 30, 2008).

6. Yusef Komunyakaa, "Starlight Scope Myopia," in *Dien Cai Dau* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 8–9.

borderlands life and his many border crossings, most especially to the United States. He was responsible for the 2004 event where he pointed especially to Komunyakaa's blues and jazz cadences in such refrains as "but the no-good blues / come looking for me" which he translated as "ale ta zlobivá dáma blues / už mě zase má," so as to create Czech "bluesy" and "slangy" effect.<sup>7</sup> One can await with interest the Komunyakaa poems that will undoubtedly result from what must have been for him another forceful experience—hearing his own poetry read in two languages—an experience that took place, need I add?, not on his native grounds.

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#### ADDRESS

Werner Sollors  
 Harvard University  
 Barker Center  
 12 Quincy St.  
 Cambridge, MA 02138  
 USA  
 sollors@fas.harvard.edu

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7. Josef Jařab, "Translating Yusef Komunyakaa into Czech: A Personal Confession," *Callaloo* 28, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 693.



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