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The Critique of American Racism in Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*

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Abstract

Written in the light of critical discourse about the social value of literary sympathy and against the backdrop of critical whiteness studies, the article deals with John Steinbeck's non-fiction book *Travels with Charley in Search of America*. Framed by an interest in how the writer responded to the racial separation in the United States, the article demonstrates that this work, which is often dismissed as a "charming portrayal of America," is a serious intervention in all sites of discrimination and domination.

Keywords: American literature, John Steinbeck, destabilising whiteness, cross-cultural relationality

American philosopher Martha Nussbaum, among others, contends that good literature is "disturbing" in a more effective way than history and social science writing usually are (359). The key to better understanding of the issues embodied in the represented worlds of literature is imaginative sympathy, by which readers respond to the experiences of the characters with more powerful emotions, disconcertment and perplexity, and which can lead them to confront with their own thoughts and "alter some of [their] standing judgments" (363). Written in the light of this view and framed by an interest in how John Steinbeck responded to the public dynamics of racial separation in the United States in his *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962), hereafter referred to as *Travels,* the article will demonstrate that this seemingly "bland travelogue" (Parry 150) or "charming portrayal of America," as the book was introduced to Slovene readers, is a troubling critical commentary on several aspects of American society, engaging readers to dismiss some experiences, particularly the intense racial hatred, as detrimental and unacceptable.

Steinbeck became famous for his Depression-era novels *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)*, In Dubious Battle* (1936) and *Of Mice and Men* (1937), each a hard-hitting critique of the capitalist dynamics of corporate farming in California, exposing the agricultural system that produced flagrant violations of migrant workers' civil and human rights. Working as a labourer and spending a lot of time with migrant workers, ranch hands and Mexican immigrants, Steinbeck was well-equipped for sensitive depictions of their powerlessness, poverty and victimisation, as well as for their desire to retain their dignity or settle land of their own. Particularly *The Grapes of Wrath*, the cornerstone of Steinbeck's 1962 Nobel Prize award, functioned as a "distress call," arousing readers towards action to halt social injustice (DeMott 148).

Later in his career, no longer willing to be the chronicler of the Depression-era subjects, Steinbeck went afield to find new topics and new forms, which indicates that his achievement as a writer extends well beyond the modes and methods of traditional realism or documentary representation. Just when many critics were commenting that his best writing was behind him, Steinbeck drew attention with his final works of non-fiction, *Travels* and *America and Americans* (1966). The analysis of critical evaluations of the two works reveals that the former is usually described as a "private discourse" (Heavilin and Pugh vi), thus not a reliable representation of America, and the latter as a "more thorough attempt […] to analyse the nation and its people (Hughes 87). This study will show that *Travels* also deals with several key social ills of the time, including pollution and the degradation of the environment, overpopulation, the threat of atomic war and racism.

When Steinbeck was writing *Travels*, racism was a particularly searing social problem in the United States. The desire to confirm a vital sense of identity and

self-worth that James Baldwin articulated in his non-fiction book *The Fire Next Time* (1964) was expressed by a number of other black Americans experiencing the debilitating aspects of racism in the country. Reading *Travels* reveals that, despite the shift in thematic and philosophical orientation in Steinbeck's later works, the writer remained susceptible to any kind of oppression and continued to confront the social context in which "people were doing injustices to other people" (Steinbeck 1989, xxxiii). By challenging what Sara Suleri calls the "master-myth" about "the static lines of demarcation" between empowered and disempowered cultures (112), *Travels* envisages a space where alternative discourses of race can exist.

WRITING DARKNESS

In *Innocents Abroad* (1869), Mark Twain wrote that "travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness and many people need it sorely on these accounts." Steinbeck did not need travelling on any of these accounts. What urged him to set out on a few-month-long road trip around the United States described in *Travels* was his desire to "learn about his own country," as he explained in his 25 May 1960 letter to his friends Frank and Fatima Loesser (Steinbeck and Wallsten 666). His idea about the journey had been conceived about six years earlier than he loaded his truck named after Don Quixote's famous steed Rocinante and left New York in the company of his wife's French poodle Charley. As Steinbeck confessed to his literary agent Elizabeth Otis in June1954, he realized that he had "lost track of the country," having been "cut off for a very long time (Benson 767). Similarly, Steinbeck reveals early on in *Travels* that for several years, he was writing about the America he remembered, but "the memory is at best faulty, warpy reservoir" (11).

According to Sally E. Parry, Steinbeck must have felt that the America he "had known and loved was veering onto a dangerous path" (148) and it did not take him long to realize that his concerns and fears had been fully justified. Even before witnessing the country at its worst, he was bitterly disappointed by what he saw. Constantly comforting himself with the view that his perception of America was unique to his own experience, influenced by the factors in his life at a given time – the view that resembles the theories introduced by Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser of how readers participate in the creation of texts they read – Steinbeck was hoping in the existence of other realities of American society in addition to how he perceived it. As he observes not long after leaving home, his representation of the country "is true until someone else passes that way and rearranges the world in his own style" (70), recalling how his impressions of Prague

were considerably different from those of Joseph Alsop, a famous journalist he talked to during his return flight to America. However, the demonstration of intense racial hatred Steinbeck stumbled upon in New Orleans, following the integration of the city's schools, shattered the last shred of his confidence when he most needed assurance that what he had feared was not true.

Compelled by curiosity and fear to witness the scene of Southern mob violence, Steinbeck got involved in a conversation with a white taxi driver whose intolerance, savagery and crude energy fully uncovered the citizens' contempt for black Americans, hidden behind the façade of civilization and appearing under various guises, or manifested in blatant and insidious forms:

> 'Why, hell, mister. We know how to take care of this. […] Out to take them out.'
> 'You mean lynch them?'
> 'I don't mean nothing else, mister." (Steinbeck 1962, 219)

When observing the howling crowd, mirroring the racially stratified, segregated and polarized society, Steinbeck searched in vain for the faces of kind and gentle people he knew and had spent time with – of those who would not hesitate to protect "the small, scared, black mite" (223) and oppose the wilderness of segregation and disfranchisement. To his dismay, all he could see were faces of those thirsty for "watching any pain or any agony" and enjoying in it (223).

The "show of Cheerleaders," as Steinbeck refers to the cheering of the madding hordes that accompanied the insulting screaming of white women at a small black girl and the white man who "dared to bring his white child to school" (221), is in several ways reminiscent of the incident in Georgia depicted in James Weldon Johnson's 1912 novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. As the brutal execution of the mob's black victim in Johnson's novel, which robbed the narrator of his hope and left him humiliated, bewildered and embittered by an unbearable shame, so did the incident in New Orleans more than half a century later affect Steinbeck so deeply that he decided to return home to escape the ugliness he had experienced. As he writes, his journey "was over before [he] returned […] and left [him] stranded far from home" (236). Remembering the Cooper's, a decent and respected black family from Salinas, Steinbeck was not prepared for the kind of America in which the blacks were considered "an inferior race" (212) and – in Toni Morrison's words – merely allowed "a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body" (129). His perception of black identity based on his memories of Mrs. Cooper's shining kitchen, Mr Cooper's honest running of his small truck business and the three boys' outstanding performance at school did not match the derogatory representations he encountered. His first thought was that "the authority was misinformed" referring to them as "dirty," "lazy" and "dishonest" (212).

Witnessing a precarious borderline between the two races and cultures and sensing numerous areas of contestation arising from the politics of polarity, Steinbeck envisioned the consequences of the boiling tension: "Could there be no relief until it burst," he asks himself, bewildered by the most logical answer (231). In this state of mind, Steinbeck was not different from black American poet and activist Langston Hughes, who in his poem "Dreams Deferred" (published as part of the 1951 volume-length *Montage of a Dream Deferred*) asks a similar question and predicts the inevitable result: "What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / Like a raisin in the sun / […] / Or does it explode?"

Racial polarization in its overt or covert forms is not the only threat and indicator of society in a state of conflict that Steinbeck encountered on his travel across the United States, but it surely was the one that saddened and worried him most. After observing the "insane rage" of the New Orleans crowd, he writes:

> No newspaper had printed the words these women shouted. On television the soundtrack was made to blur or had crowd noises cut in to cover. But now I heard the words, bestial and filthy and degenerate. […] My body churned with weary nausea, but I could not let an illness blind me after I had come so far to look and hear." (Steinbeck 1962, 222–223)

Indeed, Steinbeck never let himself be blind for miseries arising from unbridled egoism and the arrogance of power, although several critics whose expectations were based entirely on *The Grapes of Wrath* suggested the opposite, wondering what changed the spirit and opinion of a man who had, until then, "represented the best in America" (Lustig 3–4). Neither did this journey veil Steinbeck's vision; the evidence of legal and cultural barriers of racism and the ongoing reproduction of colonial differences made him feel "helpless" (223) and "ill with […] sorrow" (224).

However, what seems to have worried Steinbeck even more than the whites' authoritative rhetoric was the recognition that the dominant European discourses that had relegated the blacks to a subordinate status were deeply ingrained not only among the whites but also among the blacks themselves. The latter's "massive psycho-existential complex," as Frantz Fanon refers to the psychological internalization of the illusion of white superiority (xvi), is particularly well seen in the episode in which Steinbeck tries in vain to establish a conversation with an old black man whom he offered a ride. Rather than being involved in a talk, the old man requests to be "let down," finding walking safer than riding with a white man (230). "I was foolishly trying to destroy a lifetime of practice," realizes Steinbeck, alluding to the deeply rooted ideology underpinning slavery and white supremacy. He recalls a similar experience years before, when his black employee in Manhattan

did not help a tipsy white woman, fearing a false accusation: "If I touched her, she could easy scream rape, and then it's a crowd, and who believes me? […] I've been practising to be a Negro [sic!] a long time (230).

Michel Foucault points out that a "limit is discovered not by tracing already existing boundaries but by crossing them." In this way, transgression "forces the limit to face its imminent disappearance to find itself in what it excludes" (35). Witnessing what George Lipsitz recognises as "the exclusionary concept of whiteness," held in place to preserve the "racialised nature of social policy in the United States" (4–5), Steinbeck conveys a similar idea through the confession of an elderly white man from the South, who admits that it is hard for whites and blacks to "change a feeling about things" (226), whereas in day-to-day interactions across the colour line, there are some acknowledgements that this can be done:

> "I have an old Negro [sic!] couple […]. Sometimes in the evening we forget. They forget to envy me and I forget they might, and we are just three pleasant … things living together and smelling the flowers." (227)

Clearly, in line with his own view that an artist has to come forward when he or she is needed (Lisca 860), Steinbeck promotes a vision of broader humanity, with no division between "man and beast" and "black and white" (227). He wanted America to be for "everyone, white and black […], all ages, all trades, all classes" (231). That black Americans will demand and reclaim what has been withheld from them is particularly evident in Steinbeck's discussion with a passionate black student, a potential "conscious antagonist," as Edward Said refers to an individual who, "compelled by the system to play subordinate or imprisoning roles within [the society]," reacts by "disrupting it" (335). The student is not satisfied with Martin Luther King's "teaching of passive […] resistance" (234). As he says, "I want it faster, I want action, action now" (234).

Although Steinbeck seems somehow reluctant to draw a general conclusion, reminding the reader again that he is not presumptuous to consider his portrayal of the South as undeniably correct, he closes his reflection in line with Walter Mignolo's view that "there are no democratic possibilities without undoing the colonial and imperial differences" (392), predicting the inevitability of change:

> "I know it is a troubled place and a people caught in jam. And I know that the solution when it arrives will not get easy or simple. I feel with Monsieur Ci Git that the end is not in question. It's the means - the dreadful uncertainty of the means." (Steinbeck 1962, 235)

In her famous speech delivered at the "First Conference of Black American Writers" in 1959, black American playwright and activist Lorraine Hansberry said:

"All art is ultimately social. One cannot live with sighted eyes and feeling heart and not know or react to the miseries which afflict this world." In line with this assertion, Hansberry used the stage to advocate a political imperative for liberation of black people from their subordination. In *Travels*, Steinbeck does not explicitly call for change but sees the inevitability of it – "The breath of fear was everywhere. I wanted to get away, a cowardly attitude, perhaps, but more cowardly to deny" (231). However, this makes the book no less important in terms of its social relevance; French critic Pierre Macherey has even noted that "what is important in the work of literature is what it does not say" (86). Steinbeck does not say but nevertheless compels readers to face up to and confront the actions that have institutionalized group identity in the United States through the creation of social structures that protect the privileges of whites at the expense of communities of colour. As other Steinbeck's works, *Travels* gives evidence that Steinbeck never ceased to denounce any kind of injustice and tyranny. Moreover, he managed to cut through readers' "self-protective stratagems," as Nussbaum refers to the self-protective strategies that keep the knowledge about people and society provided in a literary work at a distance (359), while urging them to see and react to that knowledge.

Although not as "deeply engaging" and "utterly consuming" as *The Grapes of Wrath* (DeMott 148), Steinbeck's acknowledged masterpiece, *Travels* is a powerful critical account of contemporary American society, exposing the dissonances between American ideals and reality. The book is particularly effective in dramatizing the cross-racial encounter and serves as a sort of brief on the country's political, institutional and cultural reproduction of white privilege and entitlement. By offering a reader a way of experiencing the ongoing dialectic of self and 'other' accepted by the people of the South "as a permanent way of life" (Steinbeck 1962, 231), while creating bonds of identification and empathy, Steinbeck manages to make readers see and respond to the social maladies unveiled in the book with strong emotional reaction. In this sense, and in line with Nussbaum's views about political and ethical implications of literary imagination, reading *Travels* "will not give us the whole story about social justice, but it functions as a "bridge both to a vision of justice and to the social enactment of that vision" (364).

TRAVELS ON EAST EUROPEAN MARKETS

In post-war communist Eastern Europe, literature was considered an important locus for ideological discourse and one of the paths to social progress (Čerče 2018). Literary works that were in accord with the officially promoted precepts of social realism were manipulated by communist propagandists, whereas those that

lacked historical substance of class struggle, scientific inquiry and philosophical debate or instigated any ideological doubts were subjected to fierce criticism and consigned to oblivion. In the 1940 and early 1950s, Steinbeck was among those American authors whose writing appealed to and unwittingly served the ruling communist regimes. The credit for his popular acclaim went to the social necessity and documentary integrity of his Depression Era novels, particularly *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which not only conformed to but also strengthened the bleak picture of the United States that had been systematically presented by the state-controlled media in these countries (Kopecký 205).

Travels, on the other hand, was among the works that failed to meet the criteria of political correctness. The marginalization of the book was also connected with the fact that it was published in the climate of critical antipathy and even antagonism towards Steinbeck due to his venturing into new topics and forms in his later works and his anti-communist stance in the 1950s and 1960s. In Slovenia, for example, where the only translation of the book dates from 1963, hardly any critical interest was paid to what an anonymous author of the 1964 *Knjiga* book review dismissed as a "charming portrayal of America" (9). Among those few who reviewed *Travels* were Marija Cvetko and Slavko Rupel. Cvetko observes that "many would be ashamed of this work" and reprimands the author for his "lukewarm personal involvement and the lack of intensity of his critical insight" (7). However, and despite discrediting Steinbeck on ideological grounds, Cvetko still depicts the book as a "unique piece of travel writing," highlighting the author's "caring and painful engagement with the issues discussed" (7). Rupel expressed a similarly contradictory view, lamenting over the lack of communist rhetoric and, at the same time, praising Steinbeck's sincere stance in discussing American foreign policy and its domestic problems (15).

Clearly, and unlike in other East European countries, where the writer was repeatedly under critical attacks for his ideological deviations already in the late 1940s, in Slovenia, a relatively positive reception of Steinbeck's works continued well into the 1960s. As Petr Kopecký has observed, in the early 1960s, a "small backlash against the tendency to discredit Steinbeck" was also seen in the former Czechoslovakia (211). For example, reviewing *Travels*, Czech critic Antonín Přidal argues that the book clearly demonstrates that Steinbeck "was not politically naïve," as he was dismissed in several ideologically charged reviews, and ironically concludes that he would probably have done better "by writing textbooks of political economics instead of novels" (51).

It was not until after the democratic changes in communist Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 1990s that *Travels*, just as several other works by Steinbeck that had formerly been received with scepticism, prejudice and misunderstanding or had been neglected altogether, got the possibility to be assessed from new,

insightful and politically unbiased perspectives of contemporary critical engagement. However, and although Steinbeck is currently enjoying a renewed level of acceptance, my recent statistical evaluation of relevant bibliographies (2017) has shown that, unlike several other works by Steinbeck, *Travels* has not yet attracted many translators or reviewers in European post-communist countries.

CONCLUSION

This discussion has shown that *Travels,* a presumably "charming portrayal of America," is a serious social commentary on the diversity and complexity of American society in the early 1960s. Inspiring distrust of the country's moral conventions and promoting dialogue and interconnectivity as antidotes to cultural collisions, it is no less reliable, responsible and responsive than *America and Americans*, the work *Travels* is often compared to. Given that several ethical questions about societal, political and cultural violence and abuse Steinbeck raises during his road trip continue to haunt us all in the 21st century, *Travels* participates in a larger cultural conversation about race, gender and class relations, facilitating the recognition that "difference […] does not allow for indifference" (Lévinas 61), let alone discrimination. If not for anything else, it is for this humanistic view that *Travels* deserves to be more widely translated and disseminated.

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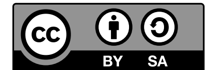

Kritika ameriškega rasizma v Steinbeckovem *Potovanju s Charleyjem*

Prispevek se ukvarja z neleposlovnim delom ameriškega pisatelja Johna Steinbecka, *Travels with Charley in Search of America.* Z izhodiščem v kritiški misli o družbeni vlogi literarne empatije in opirajoč se na postkolonialno kritiko, raziskuje, kako se pisatelj odziva na rasizem v ZDA. Končna ugotovitev je, da knjiga nikakor ni »očarljiv portret Amerike«, kot so jo omalovažujoče označevali nekateri kritiki, ampak resna problematizacija vseh oblik diskriminacije in dominantnega diskurza.

Ključne besede: ameriška književnost, John Steinbeck, destabilizacija evropocentrizma, medkulturnost