



David Caplan 2004: An American in Liège

David Caplan, Fulbright Professor, soon became a familiar figure on the 6th floor. He settled in Michel Delville's office, and would work there from early morning until we had to rush out before the doors were locked at 8 p.m., with the door wide open. This invited conversation, particularly since the months he was in were also those when his favourite team, the Boston Red Sox, won the baseball championship (for the first time since 1918, if I got it right) and – alack alas – when G. W. Bush was reelected. He said the work atmosphere was definitely more relaxed and cooperative in Liège than in any US university. Well, let's hope we do not emulate our Atlantic neighbour too eagerly. What follows is derived from a paper he wrote for his Ohio university entitled "Whitman in Liège."

When in Liège Prof. Caplan was first impressed by the dereliction of the industrial surroundings ("The city has pleasant cafés that line charming cobblestone streets, an impressive opera house, and a lively jazz scene. Yet closed or underutilized factories darken the towns around it, polluted hulks that fail to interest potential investors."), next he keenly felt how close to disintegration our country is ("Coupled with the economic disparities that exist between Flanders and Wallonia, the linguistic, cultural difference raises the real possibility that Belgium could dissolve as a country."). Being with us at the time of the presidential elections he repeatedly had to explain both the situation in the US and how he stood personally. On a more professional level he was amazed at the limited knowledge our students have of US literature: when teaching Walt Whitman in the US he knows he has to work against stereotypes students may have been fed with at high school. In Liège students did not even know the name. This led him to a reassessment of Whitman's poetry, which he found – understandably in the historical context, but rather repellingly in the early 21st century – aggressively self-assertive, when not imperialistic.

As if to confirm the charges I resisted, a Whitmanesque echo entered the presidential race, befuddling the candidate I supported. While Langston Hughes's "I, Too," directly responds to Whitman, one of Hughes's formative influences, proclaiming "I, too, sing America. // I am the darker brother," "Let America Be America Again" uses recognizably Whitmanesque cadences and rhetorical devices.ⁱ Struggling to establish a campaign slogan, John Kerry quoted Hughes's poem at a number of occasions. "We need to let America be America again, so we can meet this energy challenge," he asserted. In Pittsburgh to introduce John Edwards as his vice presidential running mate, Kerry ended his speech by quoting the poem's entire first stanza, noting that "Pittsburgh knows about" "those whose hand is at the foundry." Responding to the Abu Ghraib scandal, Kerry observed:

There's a powerful yearning around the world for an America that listens and leads again, an America that is respected, not just feared and mistrusted. Abroad as well at home, it's time to let America be America again.ⁱⁱ

Kerry selectively quoted "Let America Be American Again," avoiding the poem's stinging refrain, "America never was America to me." Invoking the poem, he often alluded to Hughes's race but not to the anger that inspired his political commitments. He made Hughes sound like the Whitman of "I Hear America Singing," espousing a version of the optimism that Kinnell scorned.

"Progressives," the linguist George Lakoff notes, "are suffering from massive hypocognition," a term Lakoff borrows from cognitive science to describe "the lack of ideas you need, the lack of a relatively simple frame that can be evoked by a word or two."ⁱⁱⁱ Kerry's use of Hughes' poem and the Whitman legacy it represents illustrates this problem. Seizing on the candidate's

enthusiasm for Hughes, Random House rushed into producing a pamphlet that collected nine of Hughes's poems, with "Let American Be America Again" serving as the title and opening poem. In his preface Kerry notes that it is "[n]ot unmindful" of the poem's "duality of meaning."^{iv} Awkward and puzzling, this double negative highlights the challenge that Kerry never solved. If George Bush ever said, "Let America be America again," the slogan would cause little confusion. Virtually anyone who reads the newspapers or watches the evening news knows the past that Bush wishes to reclaim. Kerry's exhortation failed to inspire voters not because Americans dislike poetry or because they do not appreciate subtlety. Instead, too few knew what the candidate meant by "America."

To teach Whitman, I too had to grapple with my own notions of Americanness. I had to decide what to emphasize and what to ignore, facing severe time restrictions. In Lakoff's terms, I had to "frame" the issues, employing an accessible vocabulary to introduce complex issues. Settling on imperfect solutions, I decided to teach the passages I have cited, introducing the possibilities that Whitman's poetry explores. I showed how Whitman borrowed techniques from the King James translation, how, with each anaphora and parallelism, the assertion of difference, of cultural independence, inspires a richer entanglement.

And to conclude here are some short words of comments by Julie Jacquemin, a fourth year student:

In the first term of 2004-2005 the University of Liège was fortunate enough to welcome Professor David Caplan, a Fulbright Professor from the University of Ohio. He took over two courses, and I attended one of them. I am glad I did for it has been quite an enriching experience to have an American view on literature. It seemed to me Professor Caplan showed us a slightly different approach to literature through his teaching. He suggested many things rather than imposing his views on us, and through casual discussions in class opened the field to some deeper personal reflection. I also enjoyed working on various kinds of discourse such as comics, poetry of different times and moods, or movie, which each contributed to developing our awareness of US culture.

Christine Pagnoulle

ⁱ Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, Arnold Rampersad, ed., David Roessel, Associate Editor (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) 46.

ⁱⁱ David M. Halbfinger, "In Five Words by Langston Hughes, Kerry Aides Hear a Campaign Slogan," *The New York Times* (June 1, 2004) Section A, Column 1, and Dan Brown, "John Kerry's Poetic Gamble," CBS News Online, July 26, 2004, available at www.cbc.ca/arts/features/poetryinpolitics.

ⁱⁱⁱ George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate: The Essential Guide for Progressives* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004) 24.

^{iv} John Kerry, "Preface," *Let America Be America Again and Other Poems by Langston Hughes* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004) viii.