Lioubov Guinzbourg

Imagining America in the 21st Century: A Russian’s View from the Final Resting Place of William S. Burroughs

We are asked to love or hate such and such a country and such and such a people. But some of us feel too strongly our common humanity to make such a choice.

Albert Camus

It is a world completely rotten with wealth, power, senility, indifference, Puritanism and mental hygiene, poverty and waste, technological futility and aimless violence, and yet I cannot help but feel it has about it something of the dawning of the universe.

Jean Baudrillard, America

Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, one of the leading first-hand observers of the rise of American democracy in the early nineteenth century, insisted that Americans live “in the perpetual utterance of self-applause,” and that “there are certain truths which Americans can learn only from strangers.” From the earliest days of U.S. history, by this count, foreigners have made numerous attempts to identify and explain the assumptions, implications, and inferences about American society, and the interrelatedness of its politics, manners and values, that cultural insiders often take for granted or simply fail to notice. Such outside observers, however, have often remained sufficiently detached to see more clearly the enormous diversity of life in the United States, and tended to generalize and universalize the American experience. This has been the case with several generations of my compatriots, citizens of the former Soviet Union, for whom America has remained a fanciful “other world,” encompassing numerous tall tales, dreams, and fears. Whether it has aroused jealousy, indignation, or adoration, it has often been viewed as an antipode to Soviet reality.

For more than seventy years, the American profile in my native Russia had been excessively infused with an official ideology of class struggle, reinforced by limited access to American ideas, traits, and postures. U.S.-Russian relations were confined throughout this era to suspicion, misunderstanding, and alienation. It was near the end of this epoch that my appreciation for American literature developed into an exploration of American history, and the post-WWII societal phenomena which gave rise to American counterculture, and its condemnation of the country’s underlying social, political and religious values. I became attracted to this disaffiliation from the main-
stream, the contradictions percolating through American history, and its obstinate dissenting tradition. It was this fascination with cultural and social otherness that led me to choose 20th Century American literature as a major at St. Petersburg State University.

Throughout the intervening years, I have grown closer to American letters, managing to translate my field of professional competence and knowledge of the history of American literature into a broader context of American Studies curricula. Yet, apart from a few courses in American literature, there was little opportunity for a thorough systematic analysis of the complexity of American society and its people, its larger cultural heritage, system of beliefs, behaviors, and symbols. When I was a student, and later, when I began teaching at St. Petersburg State, the access to American historical and cultural idioms was limited. There was little or no chance of traveling to the United States to facilitate an understanding of the range of controversies and dilemmas there, the elements of exclusion and marginalization, or the uniformity and pliability of public opinion, and intolerance towards dissent and unorthodox perspectives. The notion of America had attained an unprecedented degree of pure abstraction.

Thanks to the end of the Cold War, and the impetuous and radical political changes in Russia, it has now become possible for me to challenge my professional orientation in American Studies scholarship. In 1999 I came to the University of Kansas (KU), in America’s heartland, as an exchange scholar, at the behest of the U.S. State Department, to work on curriculum development for teaching American culture back home. I found, through this experience, that the breadth of our field is as enormous as the country itself. I began to realize how challenging it can be for an outside observer to adequately assess the cultural and social diversity of the United States, and to project an accurate picture of America to the sprawling world beyond.

That first twelve-month tour in Kansas provided me the impetus to come back to the States only two years later, to add to the depth of my participation in the process of dialogic openness, and to explore the relationships between our two countries, that appeared more extensive and congenial than the Cold War legacy had initially revealed, and to discover, not without surprise, the numerous features that Russia and America have in common.

Russian-American relations have never been exclusively confined to the governments and foreign policymakers. Even in the most difficult times, relations between these two countries played out as public diplomacy.1

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1 From the very early days of the American state, relations with Russia were characterized by increasing trade and “natural curiosity about the outside world that people of both countries were developing.” It was often underestimated how much Americans actively participated in Russian economic, social, and cultural life and tended to study
When given a chance to teach at an American University, I conceived it as an opportunity to mediate between cultures and peoples, and to stagger those historical and cultural boundaries that continue to be imposed upon the cultural and political space of these two nations. For the last several years, I have taught a course entitled “America through Foreign Eyes” at this public university not insignificantly situated in a small mid-western town known as the birthplace of the American Civil War, stronghold of abolitionist John Brown, site of the bloody Quantrill massacre, dreamland of a youth Langston Hughes, home for Frank Harris’ enticing sexual adventures, and “one of the secret centers of American writing,” where Beat guru William S. Burroughs spent the last sixteen years of his life.

Russian language and culture more than any other foreigners. It is also worth remembering that American influences in Russia were essential long before anyone thought of the U.S. as the sole remaining superpower. In the course of history, the two peoples gradually but inevitably were drawing closer together. Even after the Revolution in 1917 several organizations were formed to promote cultural interchange between the Soviet Union and the United States. These organizations enhanced popular understanding of and sympathy for the Soviet Union and intended to influence official U.S. policy favorably toward the Soviet Union. The Friends of Soviet Russia was one of the first and most well known organizations. The group was succeeded by the National Council on Soviet Relations and was chaired by Corliss Lamont – in various periods a leading proponent of civil rights, a director of the National Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, which successfully challenged Senator Joseph McCarthy’s Senate Subcommittee and other governmental agencies. In spite of the fact that the group was placed on Attorney General Tom Clark’s list of subversive organizations, it survived the Cold War atmosphere of the fifties and the sixties. After the Soviet break up, however, none of the Friendship Societies previously affiliated with the Council remained active in any of the former Soviet republics. Instead there appeared a number of other grassroots U.S.-based organizations dedicated to exercising public diplomacy. Many of them are mentioned in Ruffin, M. Holt McCarter, Joan, and Upjohn, Richard, ed. The Post-Soviet handbook: A Guide to Grassroots Organizations and Internet Resources in the Newly Independent States. Seattle, London: University of Washington Press, Center for Civil Society International, 1996. On the history of Russian-American relations, the best source is the work in four volumes by Norman Saul of the University of Kansas. In Distant Friends, Concord and Conflict, War and Revolution, and the most recent Friends or Foes, Professor Saul provides a most comprehensive historic account, summary, and reference to other detailed works on the subject. The history and activity of The Friends of Soviet Russia and of The National Council on Soviet Relations documented in Jo Buhle, Mari, Buhle, Paul, Georgakas, Dan ed., Encyclopedia of the American Left. 2nd ed. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 36.

2 This phrase was coined by Romanian-American poet Andrei Codrescu who visited Lawrence, Kansas in 1987 together with many other famous writers and poets to participate in Beat Generation poetry festival ‘River City Reunion.’ The phrase was put on the Lawrence Convention and Visitor’s Bureau website: <http://www.visit-lawrence.com/visitor/arts/>
Coming from a society built upon the bedrock of Soviet ideology, having experienced first hand the consequences of an isolationist policy, I rushed to share with students my conviction that it is necessary to reconsider the assumptions that have divided the planet for centuries. For six consecutive semesters my classroom became a venue for discussing such topics as individualism and self-reliance, the persistence of religion as a public force, resentment against America’s invasive popular culture, U.S. global military dominance, unilateral foreign policy-making, and the tactics of aggressive preemption overseas. I intended to increase my students’ awareness of American influence throughout the world, to analyze the country’s role and responsibility in a rapidly changing world community, and to examine expectations of America expressed by Russians, as well as other nations and peoples.

Teaching this course allowed me to reveal my own ambivalence towards America, and the nature of the emotional, psychological, and intellectual relationship that I’ve developed with the subject of my academic interest. In the course of my stay in the United States, I am still struggling to understand and adjust to the discontinuity between the fragmented ideal of an alluring America that had once been pieced together in my imagination, and a perceived American reality not previously critically evaluated within my recalcitrant Russian mind.

It is the subject matter of my course, and a gradual recovery from my frustrations with America, that have motivated the content of this essay, written while residing and teaching in one of only two (out of 105) “blue” counties in the state of Kansas. I shall focus upon foreign, particularly Russian interpretations of American values, politics, beliefs, and symbols, and analyze changing attitudes towards America in the former Soviet Union and other East European nations. I’ll attempt to describe the disturbing contemporary trends of a new wave of fear and mistrust of the United States, expressed by Russians and other countries. I’ll also estimate changing attitudes simmering in Russia and elsewhere, as the world is overwhelmed by America’s hegemonic culture, ideology, and military dominance, especially in the milieu of a difficult process of economic recovery in the former Soviet block. I also hope to reveal the gradual shift in my own conceptualization of America.

Finally, I hope to pay tribute to a historically-dramatic community I serendipitously stumbled into with the help of the American State Department’s international public relations efforts. Lawrence, Kansas remains one of those places obscured from the global view by its geographic and political isolation. Although it exemplifies a seeming organic civil unity which foreigners seek in the United States, it has been excluded from exported imagery of America, mostly because of its incapacity to mythologize itself.
Upon my arrival, I was welcomed by generous, jovial, unassuming people, immediately taken with my origins in the former Soviet entity. To remain distinct among the natives in Lawrence is not a challenge, but rather an honor. While an embodiment of manifest foreignness, I have retained my status as an outside comparative observer, enjoying at the same time the opportunity to witness life here first hand, and measuring my experiences against my expectations.

The decades of leaden Soviet anti-American propaganda had an enormous inverse effect on the Russian people. As famous Russian dissident writer Vassily Aksyonov recollects, the combination of vague pro-American feelings, and all-out anti-American obsessions caused a segment of Soviet society, mostly intelligentsia of his generation, to start leaning, sometimes unconsciously, in sympathy with America, “in matters aesthetic, emotional, and even to some extent ideological” (16). In spite of the atmosphere of confrontation, there was a variety of forces which encouraged positive, even favorable images of the United States. Among others, there were numerous translations of American literary classics that, though chosen by conservative state agencies for their desolate themes of American reality, often presented fanciful views of America and its citizenry. Many Russians were engrossed in James Fennimore Cooper’s adventure stories, the tales of Mayne Reid, epic poems of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and other authors who collectively created a literary imagery of an ever-expanding frontier, contributing to the American mythology. Readers delved into Emerson’s doctrine of self-perfection, rejecting engagement in a continuous struggle with society, and pursuit of social change. They contemplated *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience* with Henry David Thoreau, and sought for inspiration while mastering Edgar Allen Poe’s, “psychological intensities and obscurities” (Allen 80). Others learned about Walt Whitman’s devotion to democracy in a conveyed Russian reflection of this “most American” poet’s “irregular lines and rhythms” of “soaked up Americanisms” (Allen 82–83). With the flood of books pronounced to raise Soviet awareness of American realism, Theodore Dreiser and Eugene O’Neil

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4 Allen writes that it was the young Korney Chukovsky and the older Konstantin Bal’mont who both published the first direct translations from Whitman including portions from “Drum Beats,” “O Star of France,” and “To You.” See Allen 82–84.
joined Sherwood Anderson, John Dos Passos and Sinclair Lewis in disclosing “whole new areas of American thought, [and] new regional and cultural landscapes” as well as in revealing “facets of the American character, and many new points of view regarding the American scene” (G. Brown and D. Brown 16). Russians reveled in O. Henry’s humor, his ability to capture distinct American color, and “sheer narrative charm” (G. Brown and D. Brown 11). Many curiously followed Mark Twain’s descriptions of “the life of organized American society,” and were amused by the burning indignation and piercing sarcasm that the author “derived from its mores and foibles” (G. Brown and D. Brown 12). Ernest Hemingway, Erskine Caldwell, and Richard Wright perpetuated Russian interest in their “psychological profoundity, faithfulness in observation of human relationships, [and] breath of social understanding” (G. Brown and D. Brown 21). Numerous accounts

5 The editors of A Guide to Soviet Russian Translations of American Literature note that Mark Twain’s reputation in Russia has been larger than that of any other American writer excepting Jack London. Diligently guarding Twain’s heritage, Russians went so far as to accuse “reactionary American publishers” of deliberately suppressing the writer’s anti-imperialist and anti-racist essays. The article “Twain Suppressed, Russian Charges” in The New York Times 28 July, 1947 referred to Twain’s finest satire of imperialism, his essays “To the Person Sitting in Darkness” (1901), (in the The New York Times article cited incorrectly as “To a Human Being in Darkness”), and to “A Defense of General Funston” (1902), (also cited incorrectly as “In Defense of General Funston”), which, as Twain described himself in the following essay “General Funston vs. Huck Finn,” caused the banning of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. The article in The New York Times claims that the charges are mere balderdash since both articles were reprinted several times. According to the newspaper, “A Defense of General Funston” was published in the biography of Mark Twain released by Harper & Brothers in 1924 under its modified title “Attack on Funston.” I checked Mark’s Twain’s Autobiography, edited by Albert Bigelow Paine, published by Harpers in 1924, the edition that was closest to the bibliographical description given in The New York Times. I could not locate the essay, either under its original, or modified title. I found only the reference to the infamous General Funston and Twain’s thoughts on Funston’s deceitful capture of Aguinaldo during the Philippine – American War. See Mark’s Twain’s Autobiography, edited by Albert Bigelow Paine, New York: Harpers & Brothers, 1924, 285. As for the second mentioned essay, “To the Person Sitting in Darkness,” I was able to find it in Europe and Elsewhere, the edition mentioned in the article, though the book was released not by Viking Press, as The New York Times claims, but by the same Harpers & Brothers. See Twain, Mark Europe and Elsewhere. New York: Harpers & Brothers, 1923, 250. A well-known in Russia anti-racist essay “The United States of Lyncherdom,” the title of which was used to name a collection of Twain’s essays translated and published in the Soviet Union in 1983, also appeared in Europe and Elsewhere. See Europe and Elsewhere, 239. Most of Mark Twain’s writings, speeches and interviews on the Philippine – American War were collected for the first time in only 1992 in a book edited by Jim Zwick Mark Twain’s Weapons of Satire: anti-imperialist writings on the Philippine–American War. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992.
of tramps, vagabonds, and the American “hobo” also appealed to the Russian public. Readers developed stronger taste for romantic adventures than for the explicit class consciousness not only in picaresque works of such writers as Jack London and Francis Bret Harte, but also in the autobiographical writings of poet Harry Kemp, “scholar tramp” Glen Mullin, and song writer Woodrow Wilson Guthrie. Some formed a vision of America traveling with ‘Charley,’ or following, in Yevtushenko’s words, “a drunken beatnik staggering along a well-lighted avenue” (Reilly 180). Despite the state censorship which excluded many works, America was always given a chance “to speak for herself through her literature,” especially when other avenues of cultural understanding were closed.

Jazz was another irresistible source of inspiration for those who rebelled against officially-sponsored mass ideology, in search of inner-directedness and privacy, apart from pervasive Soviet collectivism. One of the most profound books ever written on jazz, *Black Music, White Freedom*, was

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6 Reilly writes that in 1967 the poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko began to publish a series of poems about America that contained allegorical allusions to the Soviet Union. However, his allegories in such poems as “Girl Beatnik” or “Monologue of the Beatnik” must be difficult to decode in Russia, since most of the writers known as the Beat Generation, as well as their artistic vision and the whole culture associated with the Beats, had not been introduced to Russian readers for quite a while. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the monopoly of the government on publishing and translation has been replaced by a number of private publishers. They have brought out translations of those authors who had remained available only in English (unless they were translated and released in samizdat) and had been kept in so called “spets khran,” special departments in libraries where readers were allowed only by special permits, issued either in the academic institutions, or by party officials. Since the end of the 1980s the virtual flood of books has revealed to Russian readers dozens of unfamiliar past and contemporary writers. Among those authors translated in the 1990s were the Beats and their precursors. There appeared translations of Henry Miller, who had not been regarded with the deserved favor at home for a long time, and Charles Bukowski, who had been published in the States in various small literary publications for over thirty years. Kerouac’s *On the Road*, parts of which had been squeezed into literary journals in the late sixties, was finally pieced together and released in its entirety. The book was followed by *Dharma Bums, Desolation Angels, The Subterraneans*, and other works. As for the writings of William Burroughs, they had been condemned by Russian authorities on the same grounds that American zealous defenders of decency had used for banning the book from being published in the United States. It took seven years to release Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* in the United States, where it had been gripped in a vice of censorship; it took almost thirty more years to publish the translation in Russian. The book was translated by V. Kogan and released in Russia in 1993, thirty four years after its first publication in Paris in 1959. The long – awaited *Anthology of Beat Poetry*, that included poems (most of them translated into Russian for the first time) of Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, and others, was finally published in Russia in 2004.
designed and completed in Russia. Its author, Efim Barban, editor and publisher of an unofficial Soviet jazz magazine *Kvadrat* (Chorus), is also known to Russians as Gerald Wood, a correspondent and host of a jazz program on the BBC in London. Barban believes that in the former Soviet block, jazz was never considered “as merely music, or entertainment, or even serious art,” but rather turned out to be a religious precept. He explained that “jazz throughout its history in the Soviet Union, had been the object of concentrated attention on the part of the authorities (no less than religion, or any other form of ideology)” (11). Besides, he argues, it “came to be an intelligible and acceptable form of spiritual resistance to surrounding reality,” allowing adhering Soviet citizens “to realize their spiritual and emotional aspirations” (11–12). Barban writes that in the culturally-isolated Soviet Union, deprived of any form of subculture, a wide audience did not even suspect that in the West too, “jazz has always been a kind of musical enfant terrible,” and that it often was not a sanctioned “part of the cultural establishment” (12). Rather, Soviet jazz enthusiasts identified this music with an imaginary Western way of life, juxtaposing it with the absurdities of Soviet experience and officially-propagated art forms. Jazz became “a kind of musical ideological subversion” and “with its free expression, swing, and the Dionysian atmosphere of the contact between performer and listeners” (Barban 12), could not fail to attract a wide, devoted audience of artistic nonconformists.

This tendency was noted by American diplomats in Moscow, who observed that Leonard Feather’s “Jazz Club USA” was attracting many listeners to the Voice of America. S. Frederick Starr, famous jazz historian and author of the most comprehensive history of jazz in Russia and the Soviet Union, writes that in late 1954 Ambassador Charles E. Bohlen initiated the landmark program “Music USA” that made its debut in 1955 on Voice of America, with William Conover (243). Starr admits that the primary motive for establishing “Music USA” was political (244). Vassily Aksyonov also believes that in those days, at the beginning of escalated Cold War, jazz was “America’s secret weapon number one” (18). The writer recollects that

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in the 1950s and 1960s the VOA would beam a two-hour jazz program at the Soviet Union from Tangiers daily. “The snatches of music and bits of information,” Aksyonov recalls, “made for a kind of golden glow over the horizon when the sun went down, that is, in the West, the inaccessible but oh so desirable West” (18). With emphasis on individuality and personal expression, jazz “became a form of escapism, of flight from odious and depersonalized reality” (Barban 12). In a state where “natural and sincere manifestations of emotions were impossible,” jazz embodied the symbol of individual freedom. In a world where “everything was stifled by ‘social necessity,’” and where “the tiniest hint of hedonism or the erotic was outlawed,” (Barban 12), that music conveyed the images of a dreamland imbued with “American-type pool tables, Lucky Strikes or Camels, nylons, cocaine, and jazz recordings” (Starr 238).

After relocating to the United States, Aksyonov, looking back, explained the pro-American sentiments in the Soviet Union during his youth. He wrote that in the 1950s, in the atmosphere of gloomy Soviet Puritanism, America was perceived as an imaginary “hyperreality.” The principal Western attraction was its unrestrained sexual perversion and availability of consumer goods. Aksyonov confessed that people were neither alienated nor disgusted by such perspectives. When Soviets imagined the West, they thought of “sex shops with plastic genitalia, nonstop porno flicks, prostitutes of both sexes, and nightclubs jammed with beautiful people sky high on dope” (Aksyonov 96). Ironically, in the Soviet Union, any controversial or compromising effort to challenge “the horrendous conventions and pities that afflict [American] hypocritical culture” had been blocked by officials along with blatant sexuality in advertisement, television, and films. Thus, while the puritanical culture of the United States had zealously regulated eroticism and constrained notions of sexual desire and physical passion, Soviets fantasized about American’s joyous sexual liberation.8

Much water has flowed under the bridge since those times; blazing images have dimmed. Things that had “seemed better before, bigger, nicer,” “more sensible and less smelly,” for some reason have not been “quite up to snuff” (Aksyonov 5); I caught myself sharing Aksyonov’s sentiments, which he attributed to “the misanthropic miasmas heralded the onset of [his] own midlife crises” (6). Although it is still too early for me to be bewildered by midlife disillusionment, frustrations are building nevertheless. I have dis-

8 A perfect example is the ban on William Styron’s novel Sophie’s Choice in the USSR. In this and other books Styron defies American Puritanism and reveals the hurtful and alienated consequences of the lack of candor about sexual matters in the America in the late 1940s and the beginning of 1950s, which he refers to as a “sexually bedeviled era.”
covered that American literature and music seem to reveal less to Americans themselves than they do to foreigners. I’ve learned that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a favorite book of Russian children, has been challenged for its profanity and racially offensive language in countless American public schools, having been banned many times in classrooms and libraries since its publication in 1885. Upon entering an empty hall during a jazz festival at Kansas State University, I recalled Efim Barban’s dirge for the “social function of jazz.” Barban lamented that it had been taken over by pop and rock since their ‘ecstatic revelations’ “proved to be more effective for sexual sublimation than the comparatively sophisticated art of jazz” (13). My disenchantment became apparent when, in spite of Barban’s “truism”, I anticipated “pleasing” myself and my young daughter in one of the most renowned New York City jazz clubs. The mythical American jazz club had always had its own ambiance in my imagination. It vibrated with willfully harsh voices, boundless irrepressible rhythms, and spontaneous sax phrases, breathing so hard and hot. I had waited for a momentum extending to infinity, but it never came. On a recent visit to the city we could not enter the famous Blue Note to attend a performance because my minor daughter was not allowed upon premises where alcohol was served. Familiar with the disastrous consequences of alcoholism in my native Russia, I still could not digest the remnants of the “temperance crusades” which vary from state to state, seeming to reach an apogee in America’s greatest metropolis, of all places!

As for “omnivorous passions,” they appeared to be producing a profound uneasiness, due largely to the same old paradox of American Puritanism. Many foreigners, who either happened to visit this country, or derived their impressions from U.S. cultural products and values on display at home, suggest that in the States “the original sin of sexual desire seems to have been displaced by the lust of consumerism” (Montero 50). British journalist Julie Burchill noticed that it all starts “with the sequined straitjacket of sororities and fraternities, Prom Queens and Kings,” and ends up with “talk shows” where people are sharing their “deepest, darkest inhibitions and fantasies” with millions (50). Burchill comments on the discontinuity between the European and American experience, claiming that “despite their tendency to use the television screen as a cathode confessional, Americans seem uneasy with their sexuality” (50). They are open, but not relaxed, she concluded. America has remained, on the whole, prudish and puritanical. In other words, the “frozen sexual moonscape,” has not changed since William

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Styron challenged its repressive nature. Founded by Puritans, America “embraced commercial sex,” but being at the same time a country composed of promiscuous Puritans, it is never going to be “exactly at ease with itself” (Burchill 50). As Jean Baudrillard noticed in his book America, sexuality in the United States “no longer has time to realize itself in human love-relations” (23). It “evaporates into the promiscuity of each passing moment,” dispersing into “a multiplicity of more ephemeral forms of contact” (Baudrillard 23). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, American materialism has become tangible in the daily lives of its population. Sexuality, like everything else that destined to reappear as American simulation, has been gradually left behind in Russia and elsewhere as ‘a form of expression’ with its attributes everywhere on the display (Baudrillard 23).

I thus learned from Baudrillard that there is really “no need to adopt a critical stance” with regard to America. There is nothing there “to criticize that has not been criticized a thousand times before” (29). To avoid frustration and disillusionment one should not leave “the fiction of America” (Baudrillard 29).

Entering “America as fiction” has been the path of my compatriots who have developed an impossibly idealized or arrogantly distorted picture of the United States in their imaginations. America was excessively romanticized and generalized, its myth and realities have never been particularized within Russian traditionalist, communitarian mentality. When a young Vassily Aksyonov came to Moscow in the early 1950s, he discovered “whole pockets of America lovers” in the capital. He met them mostly among children of high ranking diplomats, party officials, and KGB members. In his book In Search of Melancholy Baby, Aksyonov reveals that America had a number of devoted allies among the Soviet elite, postulating that among Soviet rank and file, pro-American feelings often had an essentially material base (14). He writes that “people connected the word “America” with the miracle of tasty and nourishing food-stuffs” (14). Soviets fantasized a gigantic society across the Atlantic that “shows no intention of disappearing or disintegrating or sinking into decadence. It had no time. It turns its frenzied energy to making money, money, money, a squalid, unseemly proposition resulting in skyscrapers the likes of which the Old World has never imagined and a network of highways crisscrossing the nation. Instead of making revolutions, the workers are buying cars!” (Aksyonov 11)

It seemed as if it was there, in the imaginary world behind the Iron Curtain, where with the help of a “variety of techniques, from greater permissiveness to an increase of technical fantasies,” the official goal of Soviet society was achieved. The stage of dialectic historical development, known as communism, associated itself in the Soviet popular imagination with a prosperous life. “American bounty surpassed the wildest dreams of the Soviet consumer, plagued then and now by never-ending lines and shortages” (Aksyonov 16). As Frederick C. Barghoon concluded in his book *The Soviet Image of the United States: A Study in Distortion*, “the admiration implicit in the Soviet program of “overtaking and surpassing” America industrially and technically fostered respect for America” (30). “We have learned a lot already and have still to learn a few things from Americans,” said Minister of Food Mikoyan, upon returning from the United States in 1936 (qtd. in Barghoon 30), with typical American food products, and a fast-food automat for Moscow in tow.11

That same year, two respected and admired Soviet satirists, Ilya Ilf and Eugene Petrov returned from a tour of America, publishing in 1937 a book entitled in English translation, *Little Golden America*. Famous at the time, but largely forgotten now, it told Soviet readers what they wanted to hear about the States. The scene that unfolds along highways is a technological wonderland and consumer’s paradise of Soviet dreams, with all the supermarkets and fast food they aspired to, and still lacked (Woodward 105).

Living in a state of constant shortage was reflected upon by many writers from the former Soviet block. Thus, a noted Croatian writer and journalist Slavenka Drakulić, who has been called the Simone De Beauvoir of Eastern Europe, ironically described a Communist household as “almost perfect example of an ecological unit” (Drakulić 181). She would argue, however, that it had completely different origins stemming not from a concern for nature, but rather form a fear for the future. Drakulić explained two basic principles of such a unit; collecting and recycling. She remarked that collecting depended on different kinds of experiences in different Communist countries, in other words, on different degrees of poverty. But in almost all countries of the Communist block people would collect ‘foreign objects,’ anything from the West, “from a pencil or notebook to a dress, from chewing gum to a candy wrapper” (Drakulić 181).

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11 Barghoorn writes that when Mikoyan returned in 1936 to the U.S.S.R. after a trip to the United States, he caused such typically American products as cornflakes and tomato juice to be placed in production and sold in Soviet food stores. He also had an automat opened in Moscow which was very like its American counterpart except that it sold vodka. High-topped tables at which one ate standing were also introduced. See Frederick C. Barghoorn. *The Soviet Image of the United States: A Study in Distortion*. New York: 1950, especially 21–35.
Famous American writer from Romania Andrei Codrescu describes his visit to his native land for the first time in two decades and writes that though he had been fantasizing about his arrival as a celebrated author, he wished he had been “a Wal-Mart.” The writer sneers at the sight of himself spreading “my beauteous aisles to the awe-struck of Hermanstadt” and “feeding them senseless with all the bounty of America” (“Notes of Alien Son” 10). Codrescu asserts that the “hungry Russian’s vision of the West resembles the promise the fathers of Communism made the workers about the future. Consumerism, it appears, is the goal of Communism” (Codrescu, *The Disappearance of the Outside* 32–33). It has become the means of “satisfying the ever-growing demands of the working people.” Codrescu describes the expansion of markets, claiming that countries of the former Soviet block are “a homage to Henry Ford, not to Karl Marx” and assumes that markets have always been “primarily psychic: the meta-blue jeans arrive ahead of the real ones. Drunk on imaginary Coca-Cola, the Third World wills itself into the production-consumption cycle at a point even more menial than that eventually reserved for it!” (Codrescu, *The Disappearance of the Outside* 195)

America as a forbidden fruit exercised a significant effect on public thinking in Russia. The Soviet citizen’s fantasy of the West, with its radiant “mountains of blue jeans there, mile-high neon signs, fast cars, acres of window displays, pulsing neon jukeboxes, loose morals, plentiful spicy things” and other depravities, would make it attractive, desirable, but hopelessly inaccessible (Codrescu, *The Disappearance of the Outside* 32). That vision of a distant and alienated America, however, had relegated to oblivion the features that Russia and America have had in common. The idolized and romanticized perception of America veiled those resemblances that Walt Whitman described in 1881 as “deathless aspirations at the inmost centre of each great community, so vehement, so mysterious, so abysmic” (Whitman 259).

Meanwhile, visions of Russia and America rising to prominence, whether as rivals or as sharers of the common destiny to challenge the European dominance, had entered political and intellectual thought long before the turbulent events of the twentieth century (Ball 15). When Alexis De Tocqueville completed his comprehensive and enlightening survey in the 1840s, America was far from being the superpower it is today. Nevertheless the author predicted that his object of interest could well become a great hope for the future of mankind, and that the impact of the society taking shape could have consequences far beyond the borders of the young nation. In some ways, *Democracy in America* deserves to be read as a prophetic work. Most prophetic is Tocqueville’s shrewd estimate of the country’s future relationship with Russia, and the coming 20th century rivalry for global
dominance between two nations I have called home, preventing my soul from being “controlled by geography.”

De Tocqueville referred to “two great nations in the world which started from different points, but seem to tend towards the same end” (De Tocqueville 142). This Russo-American comparison was irresistible for Europeans, and it’s difficult to estimate whether these observers were more fascinated by the two countries’ differences or similarities. De Tocqueville alluded to Russians and Americans and concluded the first part of Democracy in America with the following:

All other nations seem to have nearly reached their natural limits, and they have only to maintain their power; but these are still in the act of growth. All the others have stopped, or continue to advance with extreme difficulty; these alone are proceeding with ease and celerity along a path to which no limit can be perceived … The Anglo-American relies upon personal interest to accomplish his ends, and gives free scope to the unguided strength and common sense of the people; the Russian centers all the authority of the society in a single arm. The principal instrument of the former is freedom; of the latter, servitude. Their starting-point is different, and their courses are not the same; yet each of them seems marked out by the will of Heaven to sway the destinies of half the globe. (142)

Half a century later Walt Whitman also noted that Russia and America though appeared so “distant, so unlike at first glance … yet in certain features, and vaster once, so resembling each other” (Whitman 259). Whitman pointed to the vast territories of both countries (by 1880 the United States had reached its full continental dimensions), and their embrace, however ambiguous, of multiculturalism, that implied “fusing people of diverse race and tongue into single national identities” (Ball 15).

The so-called “equivalency thesis,” a proposition that disclosed a surprising resemblance between American and Soviet social organization, has palpitated in political, cultural and artistic realms since the emergence of the socialist state in 1917. While many radicals, as well as conservatives, in Europe regarded America as the polar opposite of Soviet Russia, a considerable number of Western European and American intellectuals persisted in stressing similarities between the embattled giants, whatever their ideological contretemps. Oswald Spengler found Americanism and Bolshevism12 remarkably similar in their effects and controlling mechanisms. Both regimes, the philosopher believed, imposed a numbing standardization on life from controlling centers. According to Spengler, in the United States the danger came from the ubiquitous system of trusts, and in Russia from

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12 It is worth mentioning that the word ‘bolshevism’ derived from Russian ‘bol’shinstvo’ (majority). Thus, Bolshevism stands for the principle of “majoritarian rule” and coincides with America’s fundamental principle of government – popular sovereignty.
the dominant party (Ceaser 179). Spengler warned that the resemblance to Bolshevik Russia is far greater than one imagines. He wrote that “there is the same dictatorship of public opinion in America as in Russia (it does not matter that it is imposed by society instead of a party), that affects everything that is left in the Western world [of Europe] to the free option of individuals” (Spengler 68) Despite the insistence of the propagandists of capitalism and socialism that these two economic systems are radically different, Spengler would claim that both systems promote “essentially the same kind of standardization of marketing and production” (Ceaser 180). In The Hour of Decision he would be indignant at standardized types of people in these countries and wrote that both in America and in Russia “everything is the same for everyone; there is one recommended type of male and especially female when it comes to a prevailing idea of the body, the clothes, and the mind; any deviation from or criticism of this type arouses general attention, in New York as in Moscow” (Spengler 68).

Heidegger borrowed much from his predecessors in Germany, particularly Spengler, and constructed the powerful new symbols of America and Russia as “two nations embodying the two main variants of the modern situation” (Ceaser 189). Heidegger’s first reference to this symbolic interpretation of America occurred in a series of lectures in 1935, published in 1953 as An Introduction to Metaphysics. For Heidegger, America is the symbol of the crisis; it represents the greatest alienation of man, his profoundest loss of authenticity, and his furthest distance from “Being.” He also postulated that Americanism and Bolshivism both applied indiscriminately the driving principle of modernity and technology; both were shaped by the principle; and both were utterly oblivious of the ground on which the principle rested (Ceaser 189):13

Europe, in its ruinous blindness forever on the point of cutting its own throat, lies today in a great pincer, squeezed between Russia on one side and America on the other. From a metaphysical point of view, Russia and America are the same, with the same dreary technological frenzy and the same unrestricted organization of the average man ... Europe lies in a pincer between Russia and America, which are metaphysically the same, namely in regard to their world character and their relation to the spirit ... the prevailing dimension became that of extension and number. Intelligence no longer meant wealth of talent, lavishly spent, and the command of energies, but only what could be learned by everyone, the practice of a routine, always associated with a certain amount of sweat and a certain amount of show. In America and in Russia this development grew into a bound-

less etcetera of indifference and always-the-sameness … Since then the domina-
tion in those countries of a cross-section of the indifferent mass has become
something more than a dreary accident. It has become an active onslaught that
destroys all rank and every world-creating impulse of the spirit and calls it a lie.
(Heidegger 37, 45–46)

“To be a good American you have to be a goddamn liar!” echoed William
S. Burroughs, in his diary half a century later (Last Words 2).14 Although
Heidegger points out the essential “metaphysical” similarity of these two
nations and regimes, America emerged as the sole symbol of modernity
and its crisis. Americanism, he wrote in 1942, is the purest form of moder-
nity (Ceaser 189). “Bolshevism is only a variant of Americanism.” It’s the
“most dangerous shape of boundlessness, because it appears in the form of
a democratic middle-class way of life mixed with Christianity, and all this
in an atmosphere that lacks completely any sense of history” (qtd. in Ceaser
189).15

Heidegger’s rhetorical use of America as a symbol strongly influenced
such authors as Herbert Marcuse and Jean Baudrillard. After WWII,
Herbert Marcuse demonstrated, in One-Dimensional Man, how produc-
tive apparatus tends to become totalitarian to the extent that it determines
individual needs and aspirations (Tytell 7), and results in a “comfortable,
smooth, and reasonable democratic un-freedom” (Marcuse 1). At the end of
the 1960s, his famous book became a dominant paradigm in critical thought.
Marshall Berman, a noted analyst of the history of modernity, refers to
Marcuse’s criticism while contemplating the dialectics of modernism in his
book All that Is Solid Melts into Air: the Experience of Modernity. Berman
points out that Marcuse enunciated the theme that would become the essen-
tial issue of modern philosophical thought. According to Berman, Marcuse
proved that modernization of human lives at once inspires and enforces the
modernization of people’s souls and “the masses have no egos and no ids,
with souls devoid of inner tension or dynamism. Their ideas, their needs,
even their dreams, are ‘not their own.’ Their inner lives are ‘totally adminis-
tered,’ programmed to produce exactly those desires that the social system
can satisfy, and no more” (Berman 28). Berman writes that Marcuse consid-
ered not only class and social struggles but also psychological conflicts and
contradictions to have been abolished by the state of “total administration”
(Berman 28). Marcuse was caught up with the Spenglerian idea of “dictator-
ship” in the United States, a regime comparable with the Soviet system that
levels individualities into “one standardized type of American.” Because of

14 This remark was recorded by William S. Burroughs on November 17 or 18, 1996.
15 Ceaser cites Martin Heidegger’s “Hölderlins Hymnen” from Gesamtausgabe. Vol. 53.
the capacity of the “advanced industrial civilization” to “increase and spread comforts,” people “recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobiles, hi-fi sets, split-level homes, [and] kitchen equipment” (Marcuse 9). Marcuse’s descriptions of America as a “total-izing, inescapable system” have been echoed in Baudrillard’s theoretical reflections. The postmodern theorist elaborates on his predecessor’s critical perspective and also attributes the modernity and power of America to its “primitive mind-set” (Ceaser 238). Baudrillard further develops Marcuse’s prediction that “the horrors and the comforts” could both serve as the “forms of compulsion.” In his book America, “standardized people” have turned into the living dead, the malls are featured as big shopping graveyards, which dominate the artificial paradises of the suburbs: “The microwave, the waste disposal, the orgasmic elasticity of the carpets: this soft, resort – style civilization irresistibly evokes the end of the world” (Baudrillard 43).

At the height of Cold War the increasing power of military enterprise, with its bases designed to contain a new enemy, the regimentation of people’s lives, and the hysteria of rabid anticommunism were far more damaging than any native communism (Tytell 6). America saw no less censorship of artists, filmmakers, and intellectuals than Soviet Russia. The whole country was gripped by “an irrational hatred that created intense fear and repression” (Tytell 6). As John Tytell described in his work dedicated to the post-WWII literary scene in the United States, “the patriotic blood-boiling became a convenient veil assuring a continued blindness to domestic social conditions that desperately needed attention” (Tytell 6). For American Beat poet Allen Ginsberg, like for many other intellectuals in the United States and in Europe, the Cold War was “the imposition of a vast mental barrier on everybody, a vast anti-natural psyche. A hardening, a shutting off of the perception of desire and tenderness which everybody knows … [creating] a self–consciousness which is substitute for communication with the outside” (Ginsberg, “Interview with Thomas Clark” 58–59). After Ginsberg traveled to Cuba, Czechoslovakia, Russia, and Poland, he remained certain

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16 See the introduction to one of the most comprehensive studies of the creative work of the Beat writers by John Tytell, Naked Angels. It seems that history has been truly repetitive. There has always been a tension between freedom and the desire to protect society or promote a cause in the United States. The censorship, the regimentation of people’s lives, the hysterical obsession with security has been back. The current administration’s assault on civil liberties, embodied in the USA Patriot Act, has been covered up with the speculations around security. Unfortunately this scenario sounds very familiar, at least for me, a native of a totalitarian state. After all, the abbreviation KGB stands for “The Committee of State Security.” It has the same meaning/connotation as the title of the newly created Department of Homeland (State) Security.
that “there’s no human answer in communism or capitalism” (“Interview with Thomas Clark” 48).

No hope Communism no hope Capitalism Yeah
Everybody’s lying on both sides Nyeh nyeh nyeh
The bloody iron curtain of American Military Power
Is a mirror image of Russia’s red Babel-Tower (Ginsberg, “Capitol Air” 746)

William S. Burroughs, however, was not interested in discord between nations, and chose an interplanetary war as the conflict in *Nova Express*. In this way, instead of dual opposition between the two mighty states, power was exercised by a super-terrestrial apparatus of control:

[T]he nova mob is using that conflict in an attempt to blow up the planet, because when you get right down to it, what are America and Russia really arguing about? The Soviet Union and the United States will eventually consist of interchangeable social parts and neither nation is morally ‘right’ … One’s ally today is an enemy tomorrow … (“Interview with Conrad Knikerbocker, 1965” 28)

Many of those who escaped from behind the Iron Curtain expressed their disillusion with the “made-for-the-automobile urban wastelands of shopping mall America, where human beings are mere accessories of engines, textiles, and electronics” (Codrescu, *Disappearance of the Outside* 203). Andrei Codrescu warns about “the attack on unauthorized memory” and the danger for the imagination to be destroyed by “the manipulation of images” (*Disappearance of the Outside* 203). He describes the rapid disappearance of the differences between the crumbling Soviet Empire and the West. His theme echoes with his predecessors’ warnings and prophetic revelations, described above.

The comparison might seem almost unimaginable for someone who didn’t make a trip “through the looking glass.” Like other immigrants, I began to recognize my “Old World neighbors in my new American acquaintances.” Two worlds are merging in my life, and at some point it is not essential any more whether my experience is real, or whether it is only a reflection. Codrescu foresees the convergence of censorship and image-making machinery. He predicts the dissolution of the old censor that ruled in the East, into the illusionary liberty of “devious oppressive power of image-based media” in the West and declines any ideological opposition that yielded the palm to the struggle for global reality (*Disappearance of the Outside* 206).17

17 In *The Disappearance of the Outside*, Codrescu expresses his point of view that the two former oppositions of East and West will finally merge “in a new electronic globe.” He considers this trend as a dangerous one, since it is not “a good thing for human beings.” See Codrescu, Andrei. *The Disappearance of the Outside*. 
Since the Soviet Union’s collapse, which left the United States as the only power “marked out by the will of Heaven,” attitudes against American domination have taken shape. Russians began to recall what they had learned in Soviet school: “American world hegemony is merely a logical extension of the doctrine of American exceptionality and predestination. American society, based on this ideology, and Wilsonianism – with its emphasis on free trade, global democracy, and national self – determination – is just the modern cover for American hegemony” (Shiraev and Zubok 68).

A number of former human rights activists and dissidents have now become supporters of Russian nationalism. Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Gleb Pavlovsky argued in Nezavisimaya Gazeta that “the end of the cold war was a triumph of American propaganda over irresolute Soviet elites. These elites longed to share ‘universal values,’ while ignoring that those values were, de facto, the ideology of American world domination” (Pavlovsky 3).

The intervening thirty years have dispelled many illusions. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, it would have been difficult to imagine that anti-Americanism would become wide-spread among educated Russians who had formerly idealized life in the United States. But as initial euphoria began to evaporate, the rhetoric of the Cold War was retrieved. More than a decade after the Soviet collapse, historians and political scientists are wondering why many Russians are so ambivalent towards America.

Eric Shiraev and Vladislav Zubok, authors of Anti-Americanism in Russia from Stalin to Putin, survey the ideas, insights and observations of a “volatile Russian mentality.” Published in 2000, the political observers examined the extent of growing Russian anti-Americanism as an essential component of Russia’s search for a new national identity. Several writers preceded Shiraev and Zubok, expressing very similar points of view. Thus, Vassily Aksyonov, for example, also examines why so many Russians were drawn to anti-American sentiments of such intensity “as to be termed hatred.” (Aksyonov 7) He found “something oddly hysterical about it all, as if America were not a country but a woman who has hurt a man’s pride by cheating on him” (Aksyonov 7). Aksyonov sees an emerging national inferiority complex as one contributing to the spread of anti-Americanism. A Russia no longer viewed as a major player on the world stage is a disappointing revelation for those who envisioned a much different post – Cold War world.

Russian infatuation with America faded during the 1990s. Many commentators argued that Russians en masse blamed the United States for misguided economic leadership, and even explicit policies designed to weaken Russia, resulting in the comparative perception of a still-hostile, still-prosperous America. Émigrés and visitors from the East are contemplating their disillusionment. Andrei Codrescu explains that those consumer goods
which “had been imbued with religious significance,” serving as the only consolation for the traumatic emigrant experience, lose their significance when plentiful, becoming “inanimate fetish.” When this realization settles over those who had left behind their kin, their friends, “[their] smells, [their] childhood,” they “rage against” their new country (Codrescu, “Notes of an Alien Son” 10). They deplore “its rudeness, its insensitivity, its outright meanness, its indifference, the chase after the almighty buck, the social isolation of most Americans, their deplorable lack of awe before what they had made” (Codrescu, “Notes of an Alien Son” 10).

When Andrei Codrescu returned to the United States after visiting his native Romania, he “reeled about for a few days in shock.” Although he has been living in America for more than two decades, after his trip to the Old World everything seemed to be so new, “so carelessly abundant, so thoughtlessly shiny, so easily taken for granted” (Codrescu, “Notes of an Alien Son” 10).

Slavenka Draculic´ also shared her frustrations with consumerism. After touring Bloomingdale’s, she recognized the fatigue that I myself experience every time I buy groceries. Draculic´ referred to a shared alienation towards copious material goods, common among those accustomed to a world of shortages. In an American supermarket or a department store “you are murdered by variations” and “by the impossibility of distinguishing the differences” between products (121). Draculic´ doesn’t want to accept that “multiplying.” “Plentitude” doesn’t make any sense to her. It becomes absurd “to look at so many things and so many kinds of one thing,” (Draculic´ 121). Her sentiments echo those of Maxim Gorky, who had discovered in Westerners the same “immense greed, a kind of fever, a wish to buy everything” more than a century ago. Time has not treated that “primordial hunger of consumerism” eloquently described by Gorky in City of the Yellow Devil.

In his essay Gorky runs down brazen materialism, the monotony of a day’s work and the consumption of useless products hawked by ceaseless advertising. Gorky described how “in conspiracy against man … entire walls glitter with flaming words about beer, whiskey, soap, a new razor, hats, cigars … people come at its call, buy trash they don’t need, and watch spectacles that stupefy them” (28).

Draculic´ would claim that her memories would not allow the Iron Curtain to fall in her imagination long after the real one had ceased to exit. When she visited New York in the 1990s she found herself caught between two sets of values, one “where beggars are not allowed at all, and the other where beggars are the consequence of capitalism” (Draculic´ 117). She writes that she was bound to be disappointed, largely because it was very difficult to make a clear distinction between image and reality, and because it is ultimately the promise, the illusion that counts, especially in a media-satu-
rated world. Even though socialist states have collapsed, “the ideals” have not. Daraculić believes that these ideals of equality and justice, bred from the lack of ways, means, or goods necessary to establish “a real, visible, palpable class distinction between poor and rich,” were still with her when she saw poverty in America. She suggests that visitors from the former Soviet states are very attuned to visible signs of injustice. They “recognize the beggars, homeless people, bums, petty thieves, drunks, the sick, [the] junkies” and take it very personally. The Iron Curtain, according to a Croatian journalist, still exists. However, now it is made of “many facets of a different reality, of different ideals and meanings” (Daraculić 122). This prevents an instant “translation” into another pool of values that many people of Eastern Europe expect to happen. The very recent events in Ukraine, the so called “Orange Revolution” and its aftermath of political chaos, illustrated Daraculić’s conviction that the “Iron Curtains” will stay with people for a long time, “in our memories, in our lives that we can not renounce, no matter how difficult they were and how hard we try” (121–122).

Now that the bankruptcy of Soviet Communism has become evident to “everyone,” and a decent interval has passed since its collapse, the legacy of Heidegger’s America has reemerged in intellectual circles. Many argue that the conflict all along was never really about political regime forms, i.e. about Communism versus liberal democracy, but about something much more fundamental. With the diversion of the Cold War behind us, it is possible to focus on a real threat to humanity. That threat is the barren and empty humanism found in America and offered to the former Soviet block countries (Ceaser 212). As Andrei Codrescu concluded in The Disappearance of the Outside, “those ex-Communist interiors are now in their final stages of bureaucratic decay: their structures are complex ruins whose inhabitants dream only of escape. The escape they imagine is inevitably into the West, into the Eden of TV. The East spills infrequently into the West, its inert material made active by boredom” (198).

After four years in this country, the idea of the United States has changed in my own imagination. In my survey of America I’m still guided by American national literature. Although preoccupied with a deeper analysis of this country’s literary legacy, and the dynamics of cultural changes throughout its history, I never disregard my own revealing personal experience. The image of the open frontier dreamt of in my Soviet childhood has dispersed, leaving no uninhabited land. The mythic character of America is now diffused, like any other ideological mystification. It disappeared in the brightness of the consumerist smile being tamed into a conformity that filed down and pushed away all the irregularities and protrusions. As a Russian national residing in the American heartland for four years, studying American history, society and culture, I’m inclined to agree with the notion that directed
politics and constructed ideals might be imposed by the sway of the majoritarian conventional wisdom. “Tyranny of the majority,” identified by De Tocqueville at dawn of American civilization, has secured “the many” from the oppression by “one,” but it also made it equally impossible for “one” to be free from “many.” De Tocqueville was right when he warned against crushing conformist weight of public opinion that is destined to repress not only all contest, but all controversy. I have to admit the existence of the “disappearance of the outside” described by Andrei Codrescu in the following words:

The institutions began to close in, to defend the marked (marketed) territories. The approaches to the Outside were rapidly repressed, bought out, colonized, internalized, and closed. The doors of perception were locked back up … Art was pressed into service. Its task: to create a world of strange new toys to keep everyone amused while the mending of fences and the repairing of walls took place … the social doors in front of the Oedipal doors were shut by the police with new paranoid fantasies about morality and race. The geographical doors were shut by closing any but the approved tourist tracks. The twin policemen of science and religion were posted at the doors of Mystery. Gates to all experimental endeavor came clanging down all over the place. (The Disappearance of the Outside 205)

Yet, the study of alternative culture, developed in its condemnation of the mainstream conservative values, prevents me from thinking about the U.S. too simply and statically. By the good fortune of landing in the most “liberal” enclave in an otherwise mostly reactionary Kansas, the last hometown of one of the most renowned “outsiders,” Beat icon William S. Burroughs, I enjoy a diverse creative and idealistically inspired community of academics, writers, poets, artists, and dreamers (read “expatriates, escapers, renegades”) who continue to hold the bulwark of the outside, breaking the “shadows of silent majorities” in the pesthole of the evolution debate. I still hope to rediscover the intersections of dream and reality and free the image of America from “bitter rivalry, jealousy, and strife.”
Works Cited


