



# A. K. RAMANUJAN'S INSIGHTFUL OBSERVATIONS ON VARIOUS ASPECTS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: LOOKING BRIEFLY AT THE DIARY ENTRIES

“A place may seem quite simple until you start noticing things.”

(Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World* 62)

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## INTRODUCTION

In their joint Editors' Note to the published anthology of some of Attipat Krishnaswamy Ramanujan's (16 March 1929–13 July 1993) diary entries titled *Journeys: A Poet's Diary* (2018), Krishna Ramanujan and Guillermo Rodriguez succinctly describe him as “the writer who wrote with all he had in his ‘travel bag,’ who traversed temporal, intellectual and cultural spaces with a natural ease” (Ramanujan, *Journeys* IX)—a man who noticed even the minutest matters which drew his immediate attention, and jotted assiduous notes about them in his diary/journal.

A. K. Ramanujan, recipient of the prestigious Padma Shri Award (conferred by the Government of India) in 1976, and the MacArthur Fellowship (sponsored by the John D. and Catherien T. MacArthur Foundation of the USA) in 1983, is widely known as poet, translator, linguist and folklorist. He belonged to the class of intellectuals who were cosmopolitan and interdisciplinary in their approach. After he completed his MA from the University of Mysore, he spent a few years teaching English in different colleges in India while carrying on with his passion for collecting folktales from the oral traditions (including dialects) of rural people in South India.

On receiving the Fulbright Travel Fellowship during 1959–1962 and the Smith-Mundt Grant, to continue with his studies in linguistics, he undertook a transnational voyage across half the globe, leaving Bombay on 1 July 1959, and arriving in the United States on 28 July 1959.

He subsequently received his PhD in Linguistics in 1963 from Indiana University. A year earlier, in 1962, he joined the University of Chicago as Assistant Professor in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilization, where he worked for the rest of his life, and played a key role, as an Asian American, in developing the South Asian Studies program there. Other institutions in the US where he taught include Harvard, University of Wisconsin, University of Michigan, University of California at Berkeley, and Carleton College.

This article looks at the early travel memoirs of his tryst with the United States of America, written in the style of disjointed diary/journal entries in prose and verse—which may be considered as an important documentation of an outsider’s (during the early years of his stay in the USA) perception of the country, along with jottings on his discovery of elements which forged his future academic journey. The article is roughly divided into two sections: (1) the first will cast a brief glance at his observations recorded during 2–27 July 1959, during his maiden voyage from Bombay to New York (including a small land-trip through France), (2) the second will take a longer look at the early entries on his travels, interactions and observations as a scholar and teacher, on the United States of America, following his arrival on 28 July 1959.

In addition, it should be noted that, henceforth, A. K. Ramanujan shall be referred to as AKR, since this is how he was commonly known, and it will also help us avoid confusion of calling him by his first name, ‘Ramanujan,’ as though it were his surname. In the name of a Tamil man, the first of the two initials stands for the place of origin of his family, and the second is his father’s first name. His first name comes last. The method firmly established the principle of rootedness in the place of one’s origin besides tracing his genealogy. This practice imbues the person with a sense “not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (Eliot 44), in concurrence with T. S. Eliot’s idea of the “historical sense” (44). This sense of being grounded in one’s tradition propelled AKR’s immediate engagement with the USA on his arrival there. His inner self, with whatever knowledge it had accumulated, responded to the outer environment in which he found himself.

As a result, although the purpose of his travel to and across the USA was primarily academic, he made plenty of observations on different aspects of the country, many of which serve as pointers towards the development of his attitude to the country where he would spend a major part of the rest of his life. The fundamental operative principle for him in these observations was the *akam-puram* paradigm, with which he was comfortably familiar. To put it briefly, this complementary

pair provides the functional distinction between the inner world of the individual and the world without the individual. It is extensively employed in classical Tamil poetry, which AKR already knew and some of which he translated into English later on in the two anthologies, *Hymns for the Drowning* (1981) and *Poems of Love and War* (1985). In a broader sense, this paradigm establishes a distinction between the mother-tongue tradition, which is used in the *desi*, or domestic/local/regional sphere, and the father-tongue tradition (used for communication with the world outside this domain)—which may be the *marga*, i.e., the national/interregional world, and/or the *videsi*, i.e., the international world. This has always been AKR's lens for observing affairs in the USA. His early life in India, his multicultural (mainly Tamil, Kannada, Sanskrit and English) childhood, education, hobbies and work shaped his Indian way of thinking, about which he wrote in "Is there an Indian way of thinking? An Informal Essay" (1999).

The article shall focus on AKR's diary entries in English to explore his observations on and experiences of life in the US. Some of these entries have been published in *Journeys: A Poet's Diary* (2018); and others, still unpublished and preserved, are in the archives (Regenstein Library, University of Chicago). This ununiform record of his journeys, both literal and psychological, creates intersections which invite its reader(s) to shared experience(s) of intercultural transaction, with AKR playing the role of the 'hyphen,' as he forged a bridge between two cultures: eastern and western, ancient and modern. The meeting of his inner self, the *akam*, with the new country he entered, the *puram*, followed by the interface and intermingling of the two, forms a major part of his diary. These travel writings go beyond mere descriptions of what he observed—they are cultural artifacts left behind by a transnational traveler, literally and metaphorically.

An individual's first experience is naturally estimated with the help of the extant knowledge at his disposal which serves as a toolkit. Without exception, the same process is markedly noticeable in the diary entries made by AKR—his 'Indianness' serving as the kit to observe and measure America. On this note, a look at the diary entries—the non-fictional records of his observations and impressions—may be undertaken.

#### DIARY ENTRIES EN-ROUTE TO THE USA

On 1 July 1959, AKR boarded the *Strathaird* in Bombay, with the ocean liner calling at Aden, Port Said, Malta and Marseilles. He also undertook a land-journey through France to reach

Southampton, where he boarded the SS *Queen Elizabeth*, which took him to New York on 28 July 1959. He wrote in detail about experiences and observations during this journey in his “Travel Diary, 2 to 27 July 1959, Bombay to New York” (*Journeys* 46–76).

The first-ever travel overseas, and also to the USA, the land which promised, among other things, academic flourishing, was full of excitement as well as anxiety for the young man of thirty, who was aware of his shortcoming in this matter—that a ‘modern’ Indian was “not modern enough to be entirely abreast of Western ideas, because books d[id] n’t come too fast to India” (*Journeys* 58). This maiden voyage, which Rodriguez describes as “his landmark passage to America, as an insecure Fulbright scholar in 1959, discovering all that a new world could offer to a young ambitious writer and scholar from India” (*Journeys* XXVII), was his passage of initiation to the culture of the country he was to inhabit for the rest of his life—a transition from the familiar world he knew and loved (his interior landscape, *akam*) to the initially unfamiliar country which he was to encounter, explore and experience (the world outside his self, the *puram*). The first voyage brought forth this dialogue between the *akam* and *puram*, about which he wrote: “But then, every journey is a disentanglement, a flutter of adieu among the mast ropes. [...] As one is disengaged from the family, the familiar, everything puts on the stranger-look of a symbol [...] a ship is a floating island. It’s self-sufficiency disturbs you: it has everything except a cemetery (there is always the sea)” (*Where* 117).

His premonitions surfaced once more in the entry of 26<sup>th</sup> July, a couple of days ahead of his arrival: “I hope I’ll not find myself in a ‘cultural’ vacuum, without artists and writers who know other artists and writers and are busy with creation and criticism. I’d run into an air pocket if I did, and gasp” (*Journeys* 75). He also has his share of anxieties about finding his way in a new place: “Everyone has introductions to people in the US; only I don’t” (*Journeys* 75–76). With these apprehensions he set foot on US soil.

For as long as he was voyaging from Bombay to the USA, the worlds of the two ocean liners, *Strathaird* and SS *Queen Elizabeth*, were the foci of his observations. One could conveniently refer to this experience as a trailer of what he expected to see when he arrived in the US.

#### DIARY ENTRIES IN THE USA

The entries which AKR made after he arrived in the country are varied and unorganized (‘ununiform,’ as already pointed out)—

an assortment of quick jottings, incomplete sentences, longer descriptive writings, an occasional poem, diagrams, anything he found 'note'-worthy. These reflect his eagerness to record his impressions about everything he found to be new and different. It must be remembered that AKR's experience of field-surveys for collecting different folk-literature in the oral tradition in South India had come alive during his interface with the highly diverse range of experiences he had in the USA, and his diary entries were like field-notes for future reference. These stand in distinct contrast to the method adopted by another alumnus of Maharaja's College in Mysore, R. K. Narayan (1906–2001), nearly thirty-three years older than AKR, who at the age of fifty visited the USA for about nine months in 1956 for the first time, and made journal entries about his travels there. These travel writings were later edited and published in a book-form titled *My Dateless Diary: An American Journey* (1964), in which R. K. Narayan recorded in a linear manner a primarily chronological documentation of his personal experiences, observations and interactions with different individuals in the USA. Still, AKR's range was certainly wider in scope, as he put down everything he found interesting—big or small, personal or public, local or national, academic or extra-curricular, and so on.

In his Note to the section of the diary titled "A Young Poet-Scholar in America," the editor of *Journeys* comments on the entries made from 30 July 1959 onwards, saying, "Some of his first writings in America are amusing – and critical – reflections on a culture that exhibits its material wealth and progressive ethos, and displays very different ways (for an Indian of the time), of understanding human relationships and time" (*Journeys* 79). R. K. Narayan wrote in the "Foreword" to his travelogue: "America and India are profoundly different in attitude and philosophy, though it would be wonderful if they could complement each other's values. Indian philosophy stresses austerity and unencumbered, uncomplicated day-to-day living. America's emphasis, on the other hand, is on material acquisition and the limitless pursuit of prosperity" (n.p.). While negotiating this difference which he, too, experienced, AKR continued to make notes in his diary about the various topographies of the USA he could trace, some of which are the geographical/temporal, cultural and the intellectual topographies (as indicated by the editors of *Journeys* and mentioned in the introductory citation of this article), which shall be closely looked at.

**Geographical Topography:** The terrain would certainly draw his first attention. So, in two days' time since his arrival in Bennington College, AKR made a diary entry on 30 July, titled "Geography & Am. Life" (Diary n.p.), using the technique of measuring the *puram*

by contrasting it with the *akam* to analyze the geographical features of the USA. He understood that the physical geography had formed the background for the colonial incursion therein, resulting in the foregrounded political geography he found on his arrival. Three pages of entry also take into account riverine and railway transport, lakes, mountains, soil conditions, commerce and industry, urbanization—the amazing range of observations and jottings points towards his methodical and meticulous perception of the outcome of European domination over the so-called wilderness. Contrary to the Indian tendency to evade documentation, he had developed an enthusiasm to put almost everything down on paper. Here is an excerpt: “Lakes—canals + main – railroad. Entrances developed in colonial days—another entrance up the Mississippi from Florida to the twin cities of St. Paul + Minneapolis. All 3 converge in lakes near Chicago” (Diary 30 July 1959 n.p.). Right from the beginning, therefore, AKR’s mind played an inevitable mediatory role between the *akam* and *puram*: between what he already knew from his Indianness and education, and what he gradually discovered in America (possibly he was trying to trace similarities/ dissimilarities between European colonization in India and the USA).

What emerged from this interface is his cosmopolitanism, which interrogated the impulse behind the famous/infamous ‘Frontier’. The Frontier has been the focus of much academic writing, a very important work being a book written by Frederick Jackson Turner, an American historian, titled *The Frontier in American History* (1962), whose first chapter is his 1893 speech “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” which was delivered at the conference of the American Historical Association. In this chapter, Turner writes about the expanding Frontier: “This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character” (2–3). Almost seventy years later, AKR wondered: “In most countries a frontier is a place where you stop, where there are guards and govt.: exc. in America, here it meant new land and no govt. Claiming new land by homesteading” (Diary n.p.). He seems to question the “Frontier Thesis” of Turner, who maintained that “The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics” (37). Turner opined that the present America could be possible because it took up the challenge of taming a wilderness and allowed the American spirit to flourish. This has been pointed out by Henry Nash Smith in the final chapter, “The Myth of the Garden and Turner’s Frontier Hypothesis,” of his

book, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950), where he analyses Turner's inspiring speech in this manner:

We have been transferred from the plane of the economist's abstractions to a plane of metaphor, and even of myth—for the American forest has become almost an enchanted wood, and the image of Antaeus has been invoked to suggest the power of the Western earth. Such intimations reach beyond logical theory. They remind us that the wilderness beyond the limits of civilization was not only an area of free land; it was also nature. The idea of nature suggested to Turner a poetic account of the influence of free land as a rebirth, a regeneration, a rejuvenation of man and society constantly recurring where civilization came into contact with the wilderness along the frontier. (296)

Almost at the same time as AKR was questioning the role of the burgeoning Frontier, Rachel Carson, the American biologist and conservation activist, wrote an influential work *Silent Spring* (1962), warning the world about the disastrous effects of endangering nature by anthropocentric interventions.

Yet another outstanding human intervention in nature involved mining, about which AKR observed: "Mining craze for gold + silver in the west. MT's [Mark Twain] trip to Nevada made him a writer. It was the sense of the vastness + freedom of the west which made him a writer" (Diary n.p.). AKR's concerned diary entry seems to anticipate what the environmental critic and author, Lawrence Buell puts forth in his 2001 book, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*. Focusing on "the rapidity and vastness of the scale of this country's environmental transformation" (9), Buell says that the change in the place was to "a degree of modification so profound that we shall never again encounter a pristine physical environment" (3). This anxiety stemmed from the feeling that "[t]he more a site feels like a place, the more fervently it is so cherished, the greater the potential concern at its violation" (56).

The concern with the 'settlement' engendered 'violation' of the "pristine physical environment" (Buell 3) has led to environmental activism. AKR wrote about one such engagement in an 18 August 1959 entry titled "A Garden Club Meeting in New England" (*Journeys* 82–83)—about how the redwood tree got its name 'Sequoia' after a brave Cherokee chief-tain, and adds information about the anthropocentric encroachment upon the redwood trees, which he calls "fairy-tale botany" (*Journeys* 82), across the planet, except in the Sierras of the California coast, and how the Club was trying to save and protect them by associating with the Save the Redwoods League, which was an old organization.



Taking a quick look at a different entry (a personal experience), one finds that on 8 November 1959 he documented his first experience of winter snowfall, on his way to “Alpha House to register for a driving lesson” (*Journeys* 109). In a graphic paragraph on human reception of the annual natural phenomenon, he says that he “walked through a chilly wet day. Came out to see the air filled with ashen flakes and the ground covered with an even spray of white snow” (*Journeys* 109). One may wonder about how AKR, a man from a humid tropical part of South Asia, felt about the experience. So, here is what he writes:

I look at things avidly, feel insensitive and rage at my insensitivity that cannot register for ever all the designs, the colour contrasts, the masses with their veins showing. The world looks like a woman, beautiful and inviting, but already someone else’s wife. (*Journeys* 109)

The typical ring of AKR’s voice is evident in this piece, serving as an excellent example of the *akam-puram* paradigm, which enabled him to recognize and acknowledge the beauty of other (extra-self) presences. AKR’s records of these different aspects express an acknowledgement of plurality which celebrates cultural liquidity.

*Cultural Topography:* In his book *Culture in a Liquid Modern World* (2011), Zygmunt Bauman, a sociologist and philosopher, puts forth the idea that “The universality of humanity does not stand in opposition to a plurality of forms of human life: the touchstone of a truly universal humanity is its ability to accept such plurality and to make it a force for good, enabling, stimulating and maintaining an ‘ongoing discussion about a common conception of welfare’” (66). AKR’s ‘notes’ evince his personal approach of “universality of humanity” (Bauman 66) towards the American cultural milieu. However, at the same time, his writings express his awareness of and concern about an opposing tendency among most Americans to bring about a uniformity in matters related to culture, which goes against Bauman’s proposition about “a common conception of welfare” (66). America was caught between a tendency to celebrate and uniformly establish a typically ‘American’ culture (which was that of the powerful white-skinned settlers), and an impossibility to realize it owing to interfaces with other vibrant and different cultures, e.g., the Native American, African American and Asian American cultural presences.

One of the things he soon discovered about America (which has also been reiterated by R. K. Narayan) was that life was fast and mechanization made this speed possible. He wrote a long account, “On the Road to Albany,” on 23 August 1959 (*Journeys* 84–87), which included his



observation on electronic devices having entered the public domain and Americans being comfortably accustomed to them. Conversation had resorted to long distance communication, both ways *via* telephone, and one-way *via* television. He thought that the television had killed the art of conversation. In his signature style, following his close observations of American life, he wrote:

America, they say, is oriented towards the future – hence the ulcers of the ambitious, the psychiatric beds that number more than all the other sickbeds, filled with people who saved time for a future – it’s like the hire-purchase system, a beautifully leased-out future, built up out of whole bricks of the present, building up a wall and not a house. (*Journeys* 85)

In the same entry, with his fine sense of humour, he also writes about the Americans’ so-called fascination with the past, which, he says, they enshrine in “splendidly window-dressed” museums (*Journeys* 85), also chipping in that these “*ancient monuments* [were] twenty-five years old” (*Journeys* 85, emphasis added). Putting the two together, the linguist concludes that “Americans love the past as much as the future – apologize aggressively to the Oriental for their lack of it; every Indian feels an antiquity before them” (*Journeys* 86). Albany seemed to put forth a message which made him apprehensive. So, he put it in this way:

[...]The way Americans are preserving every bit of the past, and even every bit of any present that promises a future – we’ll soon have a country cluttered with monuments, yesterday will swallow up the day before, and between yesterday and tomorrow there may be no today at all.

They are proud to have a strain of Indian blood in them – it’s the Gulf Stream in their Atlantic; they are eager to preserve Indians for anthropologists and linguists who have done a great deal for them. (*Journeys* 86)

The lack of a sense of the past (what T. S. Eliot called the “historical sense” 44) has, according to AKR, a damaging effect on the American mind, which he analyses in this way in the same entry:

This is what the American’s sense of a lack of the past is doing to his past; he either writes minute and ten-volume histories about Abraham Lincoln, and the two big wars in all of America’s history, or goes away to Europe or Africa or the Tahiti in search of the sophisticated or the primitive past. Or he takes all past as his past and loses America to find a (cosmic) memory. (*Journeys* 87)

According to him, “Americanism is Europeanism meeting a challenge of a new environment” (Diary 5 August 1959 n.p.), which is the exact

opposite of the condition of the American in Europe. But the theme of both is the same: an expatriate trying to achieve himself.

He sums up the American approach to history in this way:

Americans as historians—<sup>mns</sup> general sense of history—linear, not cyclical ... moving in a line towards an opener end. Unlike Gk. Roman or Eastern conception of time.



The depth of their sense of the past varies acc. to backg. The country is not of a uniform age. [...] (Diary n.p.)

In another entry of 5 August 1959, he wonders whether an “American historian” is “an American who’s a historian, or a historian of America” (Diary n.p.). He thinks that the USA is a country without any uniform age. About five days later, in an entry dated 10 August 1959, AKR wrote:

The “old world, new world” idea has an arrogant provincial ring, ignoring other worlds. The Americans “have little sense of history, little sense of continuity with the past”. Still a basic + continuing image in Am<sup>n</sup> thinking. The old world belongs to the past, its problems + injustices; America belongs to the future where the errors of the past can be wiped – this simple idealized picture of Am<sup>m</sup> widespread. i Continuing immigration, ii the long continuance of the open frontier: both keep this image valid. To the Imm., Am was the land of opportunity. The second generation of the non-Eng speaking imms, realized the Am<sup>n</sup> promise as they lost their backg. Am as a country of the future, to the later genera<sup>n</sup>s who cut themselves off from their own family + trad<sup>n</sup>s. (Diary n.p.)

So, according to AKR, they have to be taught history—historical knowledge—not as a historical way of thought, but as an academic discipline. Just as AKR, Jean Baudrillard documents his impression from his travels in *America* (1988, particularly the West): “The form that dominates the American West, and doubtless all of American culture, is a seismic form: a fractal, interstitial culture, born of a rift with the Old World, a tactile, fragile, mobile, superficial culture – you have to follow its own rules to grasp how it works: seismic shifting, soft technologies” (10). A majority of intellectuals have concluded that the Americans (particularly, the descendants of the European Americans) are caught in a fragmented notion of history.

Moving away to another set of observations, one finds him jotting down about the structure of the federal state of the USA. In a 12 August 1959 entry, he writes about the structure of the American government, the *modus operandi* of the Presidential election, bills of law, etc. Thereafter, he makes a striking comment: “It’s ironical – Am<sup>n</sup>s are now

doubting their constitution, when foreigners are beginning to respect it. Misguided Am<sup>n</sup>s want to dock it out for export” (Diary n.p.).

Thereafter, he puts down his observations on the American idea of the economic value of land, which he learns to be different from that found elsewhere. AKR jots on 13 August about “Skyscrapers not as symbol or monument but for commerce – (land has no symbolic use, as in London Buckingham Palace – symbolism + tradition control the use of land) – a dense centre. [...] Buildings don’t last very long – the land is speculated on” (Diary n.p.). Materialism continues to play a significant role in predicating political and economic matters in the mid-twentieth century and AKR notes that racism continues to manifest itself in the degradation and exploitation of colored persons, especially African Americans, who were still called ‘Negro.’ About the position/exploitation of the African Americans, AKR writes three things on 13 August 1960:

(i.) Politics – “One party put up a Negro for Presidency of Manhattan, so other parties had to—so 5 Negroes running for it – now Negro monopoly for Manhattan – till Negroes move into other pol. positions – balancing diff. interests, ...”.

(ii.) Economic life – “The most painful, dirty ill-paid jobs done by Newcomers – but the immigrants moved up – after 1924 immigration stopped. So, distribution of Negro popul<sup>n</sup> for the dirty work.”

(iii.) Culture—“Am<sup>n</sup> culture has no roots, as in a homogeneous country like France. [...] Behind every Am<sup>n</sup> there lies another country – of Europe or Africa.” (Diary n.p.)

AKR was able to discern the cultural plurality amongst the Americans, which resisted the tendency towards uniformity, which imposed the viability of Bauman’s theory of culture in a liquid modern world, and which leads us back to the idea of cosmopolitanism. It must also be remembered that these jottings were made a little over a month ahead of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s phenomenal speech on 25 September 1960, which was titled “The Negro and the American Dream,” in which he said:

[T]he primary reason for bringing an end to racial discrimination in America must not be the Communist challenge. Nor must it be merely to appeal to Asian and African peoples. The primary reason for uprooting racial discrimination from our society is that it is morally wrong. ... It relegates persons to the status of things. (web. n.p.)

It is noteworthy that AKR had noticed the complicated nuances of racial exploitation so quickly, as well as the cultural plurality of the American population, comprising mostly immigrants who had arrived

from different parts of the world for different purposes. Racism was something as clear as daylight and something unacceptable to both AKR and King Jr.

**Intellectual Topography:** The British-American philosopher and writer, Kwame Anthony Appiah, wrote in his book *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006), “And the one thought that cosmopolitans share is that no local loyalty can ever forget justifying that each human being has responsibilities to every other” (Appiah xvi), as though Appiah was echoing the responses of AKR’s intellectual set-up to its counterparts in the USA. Appiah explains, “People are different, the cosmopolitan knows, and there is much to learn from our differences. Because there are so many human possibilities worth exploring, we neither expect nor desire that every person or every society should converge on a single mode of life” (Appiah xv). Therefore, AKR took cognizance of the variety while jotting them down in his diary, which includes famous Americans, meeting whom exposed him to the intellectual world of the USA. There are different entries on his meeting Howard Nemerov, the American poet, in one of which he wrote: “He walked with me for a full hour in the sun-drenched woods among dry yellow and red leaves. He made ironic perceptive tough remarks all the time from his tallness . . . and I was grateful he let me meet him” (105). He also met Marcel Marceau, the French pantomimist, and Eleanor Zelliot, writer and South Asian studies scholar, among others (different Diary entries n.p.). He put down insightful notes on the work of Henry Adams and Henry James, pointing out that “HA not quite the artist that HJ was” (Diary n.p.). About Pre-Civil War poets, he makes a couple of short notes. On Emerson, his Diary entry was “Accept your genius + say what you think”. On Thoreau, he wrote “I’d rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself than be crowded on a velvet cushion” (Diary n.p.). Whitman, for him, was “The gt egotist, expansiveness of the ego” (Diary n.p.). Commenting on Whitman, he wrote: “urbanite who is attached to the pastoral dream – takes to the woods, and transfigures the city into a Utopia, sees it as an ideal, never held by the reality of the city – the only real democrat – ‘goes beyond good and evil’” (Diary 31 July 1959 n.p.). Harping on this, Keith Harrison wrote in his Preface to the *Uncollected Poems and Prose* of AKR that “The poet and critic, Karl Shapiro, once remarked that the only true American poets are Whitman and Williams. It was no accident that Raman was drawn to both” (x. AKR was fondly called ‘Raman’ by his friends). He made pertinent observations on two important modern American poets, Pound and Eliot. In a November 1976 entry AKR wrote about Ezra Pound’s

poetic practice, “His translations become new modern poems and his own cantos have the look of translations” (191). On 10 November 1981, he wrote about Eliot: “Eliot is a thinking poet, but he thinks in voices. It is through them he creates concepts; they develop on the page” (245).

AKR makes minute observations on the system of higher education in America in a diary entry dated 4 August 1959 (Diary n.p.). He found that it was diversified and decentralized with a non-national department of education with only a national office except in agricultural education. However, there was the American Council on Education which was a voluntary association of Deans and Presidents. AKR identified nine major types of institutions: Ivy League Universities (with heavy endorsements), State universities, Urban universities, Tax-supported (Cincinnati, etc.), Liberal Arts colleges (started as religious; different for 1. men and 2. women), Religious (Catholic – Society of Friends), Technical Colleges (Institutes of technology) and Teachers’ Colleges. He compares the “extreme decentralization” of the American system with that of the French (“central control”), the English (“the older system imitated by the younger”) and the German (“some control”). There were “Elements of uniformity”—outside the legal control, there were state grants and obligations like teacher-training, equipment and library related matters. Thereafter, he embarks on a detailed entry on further observations.

His visits to different libraries in the University of Chicago unraveled unexpected treasures from India archived there, which almost awaited his coming across them for further study and research. One of these was an anthology of Tamil classical poetry, made by U.Ve. Caminataiyar, which AKR found in the basement of Harper Library. It triggered his engagement with these great poets, who came to have an indelible influence on the formation of his own poetic and critical sensibility founded on the *akam-puram* paradigm. His translations into English facilitated access to these poems for a large number of readers. He gradually adopted the role of a mediator between the Indian and American cultures.

A short excerpt will be pertinent here, from a long poem of 186 lines, “A First Flight to New York,” dated 13 April 1960, in which this famous Indian poet writes about his first-ever air-plane ride, where the collage of geographical, cultural and intellectual topographies manifests itself:

New York – lines of fire, like  
an electric heater and  
green dot configurations –

vast – ocean of stars of  
 red yellow green, sparse,  
 clustered and guided into  
 lines, with caravans  
 slowing through them –  
 gradually plotted into  
 squares – as if somebody’s  
 nerve impulses were diagrammed  
 and translated into flickers  
 and paths and ganglions –  
 a ship on the wharf with  
 green  
 and yellow lights smeared  
 into long bars on the water.  
 Liberty statue in a ring of  
 uneven lights, names in  
 pretzels of neon – a forest  
 full of blinking green  
 eyes.

(Journeys 96–97)

Written in the style of Sangam poetry, this poem highlights an Indian’s impression of the USA, the Statue of Liberty being one of the foremost features of this land, which promises comfort to immigrants as it stands 305 feet high on Liberty Island with Emma Lazarus’s poem “The New Colossus” engraved on its pedestal.

## CONCLUSION

It may be said that AKR mapped in his diary entries minutiae about the United States of America, which might have been overlooked by the cursory onlooker, but are important for a worthwhile understanding of the country for an alert mind like his. The diary opens vistas beyond the immediate observation towards a much deeper acquaintance with the country. The observation by Harrison is one of the best ways of positioning AKR in the Indo-American scenario as a transnational traveler: “Though not without a certain vanity, for most of the time he wanted not to stand out but simply to be there, breathing, telling stories, cutting an orange, laughing outrageously, a person, an American, an Indian, both and neither. Just there” (Ramanujan, *UPP* x–xi). AKR was a traveler in the USA, for both academic and extra-academic purposes, making field-notes from his precocious observations of the geographical, cultural and intellectual topographies of the country. These ‘notes’ he called his diary/journal entries. Today, they serve as an outsider-turned-insider’s perspective of the country. The points of entry to cross-cultural dialogue

(in a structured way, not in a free-flowing conversation), therefore, “do not need to be universal; all they need to be is what these particular people have in common. Once we have found enough, we share, there is the further possibility that we will be able to enjoy discovering things we do not yet share. That is one of the payoffs of cosmopolitan curiosity. We can learn from one another; or we can simply be intrigued by alternative ways of thinking, feeling, and acting” (Appiah 97). A. K. Ramanujan may be cited as a traveler, literally and metaphorically, who witnessed and participated in the cultural and intellectual hybridity of America. He also made extremely significant contributions as an academic to the study of Indian literature (both classical and folk) in the South Asian Studies program of the University of Chicago.

*Abstract:* Attipat Krishnaswamy Ramanujan (16 March 1929–13 July 1993) traveled extensively in peninsular India, collecting folktales from rural regions. Since he was already on the move, as a folklorist and as a teacher who taught in several colleges in South India consecutively, it was not difficult for him to set sail for the United States of America when he received the Fulbright Travel Fellowship and Smith-Mundt Grant in 1959, to continue with his studies in linguistics. On 1 July 1959 he boarded the *Strathaird* in Bombay and undertook a land-journey through France to reach Southampton, where he boarded the SS *Queen Elizabeth*, which took him to New York on 28 July 1959. He wrote about experiences and observations during this journey in his “Travel Diary, 2 to 27 July 1959, Bombay to New York,” in the anthology *Journeys: A Poet’s Diary* (2018). The first-ever travel overseas, to the US, was full of excitement and anxiety for the young man of thirty. This journey was the initiation for his passage to the country which he was to inhabit for the rest of his life, as a teacher at the University of Chicago—a transition from the familiar world (his interior landscape, *akam*) to the unfamiliar country (the world outside his self, the *puram*). The article shall focus on *Journeys: A Poet’s Diary* and A. K. Ramanujan’s unpublished diary to explore his observations and experiences of life in the US. These reveal the way in which his inner self met the new space he entered, followed by his expressing, through his creative and critical self, the interface and intermingling of the two. These travel writings go beyond mere records of observations—they are cultural artifacts left behind by a truly transnational traveler—a man from a South-Indian milieu, who had been exposed to the British system of education; who was exceptionally intelligent, a poet and critic, and a keen observer. Theories that engage with the *akam-puram* paradigm, the environment (Buel), culture in a liquid modern world (Bauman) and cosmopolitanism (Appiah) will be employed as analytical tools to examine and evaluate the selected texts.

*Keywords:* *akam*, *puram*, environmentalism, culture, cosmopolitanism

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