

# A Close Reading of Langston Hughes' "Let America Be America Again"

by Hameed Alhilo

Langston Hughes' 1936 poem "Let America Be America Again" is a work carved out of its time; at a dark time in American history, defined by economic suffering, racial discontent, and anxiety about events unfolding in Europe and Asia, Hughes emerges with a powerful ode to the country not as it is, nor as it once was, but as it can and will be. At a time when the promises of America seemed most hollow, and questions abounded about its merits, Hughes delivers a message of hope and redemption, most powerfully asserted in the poem's closing lines:

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,  
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,  
We, the people, must redeem  
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.  
The mountains and the endless plain—  
All, all the stretch of these great green states—  
And make America again! (80-86)

Hughes' concluding stanza serves as both a microcosmic summary of the poem's message and a powerful call to action. Hughes names the land, rivers, and other natural bodies alongside the mines and power plants, as that which the people must work to redeem, to make America again. The concluding call to "Make America again!" comes at the end of a three-line sentence, with previous lines ending on dashes—building anticipation for what is to come—as an energetic call to build a new America, to save it both as a land and as a cultural entity.

The idea of "making America again" may, for readers in 2023, evoke echoes of previous Trumpite (and, to a lesser extent, earlier Reaganite) rhetoric of "making America great again!" This well-known slogan shares a formal resemblance to Hughes' call, as both are based in a recognition of the fallen present state of America and propose a project of national rejuvenation as a solution. However, the crucial difference lies in a single word: "great." To make America great again implies a past state of greatness, a Golden Age that the country has supposedly departed from, and the project of rejuvenation thus becomes a project of restoring what was in the past, despite how impossible it is to perfectly recreate the past in a world that has changed socially, technologically, politically, and economically. This notion of restoration can lead to pitfalls for the conservative project. However, Hughes' project is of a different nature.

Langston Hughes did not have naive dualist views of a blessed past against a wicked present. He did not see America as an inherently great country in the past, and he dedicates a significant portion of the earlier part of his poem to the failures and cruelties of America's past. At the beginning of the poem, Hughes complicates the initial speaker's patriotic call by inserting the character of a mumbler, who answers the speaker's optimistic rhetoric with phrases such as "America never was America to me" (5) and "There's never been equality for me / Nor freedom in this 'homeland of the free'" (15-16). When asked who he is, the mumbler responds that he is the poor white, the slavery-scarred Negro, the red Indian driven from his home, the disappointed immigrant, the exploited young man, the farmer and worker (19-38); in other words, he is the embodiment of the downtrodden and exploited, the people whom America has abused in its past. His presence completely dismisses any notion of an American Golden Age and initially seems to disturb the call to make America again.

In order to understand why Hughes is seemingly subverting his own message, an analysis of the biography of the poet, as well as the context and intended audience of the poem, may be in order. Langston Hughes, an African-American man born and active in early twentieth-century America, carried the weight of a living memory of slavery and grappled with its legacy of racism and structural inequality, which persisted well beyond the ratifying of the Thirteenth Amendment. Furthermore, the backdrop against which "Let America Be America Again" was published was 1930s America, a time of widespread suffering and despair among workers, farmers, and the poor, whose lives had been devastated by the indulgences and gambling of the rich who were not as touched by the Great Depression that they had a great hand in causing. It was a time of cultural weariness and ennui, but curiously also a time when revolutionary ideas lit a fire among the working people of the US, as this was one of the strongest eras for the American labor movement. It is this latter direction that Hughes is tapping into for his poem: Hughes, himself a communist, drew on traditions of workers' struggle to craft a revolutionary work of American revival. Crucially, his ideal America is not one that existed in the past; it is one that has not ever existed but can exist in the future. This future-oriented ideal makes America something that must be made by working towards it, not by retreating into an idealized (perhaps it might be appropriate to say "Disneyfied") version of America's past. It is in this spirit that Hughes boldly proclaims, "America never was America to me/And yet I swear this oath—/America will be!" (77-79). Hughes confronts the fact that America's past is marred by injustice but he does not advocate for its outright dismissal; instead, he propels it forward as a collective aspiration—an idealized future that must be fought for and realized through the concerted endeavors of the people.

This fight to realize America is the theme of Hughes' poem, and the final line a dramatic call to action. A final question remains: Who is being called on to make America, and who must they struggle against? The answer to the first part of the question is stated as "We, the people" (82), and from the preceding stanzas the reader knows that the people are Hughes' people: the downtrodden and abused and exploited, the honest factory worker and the steady farmer and the hopeful immigrant, people of all races and colors. Opposing the vibrant and hardworking masses are the people who have corrupted America: the exploiters and oppressors who stand opposed to the mission of making America what it should be by keeping America as is (that is, clinging to the status quo that serves their interests alone). "We, the people" must redeem America from its current state of "rack and ruin [...] rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies" (80-81) as perpetuated by the greed of the wealthy elite. Again, the resonance with Trumpian populism is there, but Hughes' rhetoric is fused with the spirit of universalism, revolutionism, and class struggle, thus making his

poem a ballad of resistance for all people struggling for a way out of the Great Depression.

Hughes' "Let America Be America Again" is a bold call not to restore a bygone America, but to work towards building the America that has always been an elusive ideal. This can only be done by those who have been disenfranchised in the past, who must unite across racial and occupational divides to redeem America and lift it out of its dark past and present into the bright future that Hughes assures us will, against all doubts and odds, be the true America.

## Works Cited

Hughes, Langston. "Let America Be America Again." 1936. *Poetry Foundation*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147907/let-america-be-america-again>