

# President Biden, Langston Hughes, and the Expansion of the American Dream

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**N**EAR THE CLOSE OF HIS VICTORY speech on November 7, 2020, President-Elect Joseph Biden traced key moments in the history of “the American dream.” He referenced the words of Langston Hughes:

*The American story is about the slow, yet steady widening of opportunity. And make no mistake, too many dreams have been deferred for too long. We must make the promises of the country real for everybody, no matter their race, their ethnicity, their faith, their identity or their disability.*

The two poems alluded to in this excerpt (“Harlem” and “Let America Be America Again”) represent pivotal times in American history. Hughes published the latter poem in 1936—one year following the purported end of the Harlem Renaissance. And the poem “Harlem” first appeared during the Second Red Scare of the early 1950s. Author Arna Bontemps preferred to call the Harlem Renaissance “the Awakening” because the movement encouraged young artists like Hughes to practice more authentic,

comprehensive styles of depicting society. By referencing these poems, President Biden’s speech linked the intended future of the nation to an artistic tradition of evaluating controversial parts of the nation’s past.

Both poems developed in the aftermath of race riots. Financial tension during the Great Depression combined with residents’ safety concerns to spark the Harlem Riot of 1935. The crisis began after a teenage shoplifter was detained in a local store. According to Tabitha Wang of BlackPast, that riot resulted in at least sixty injuries and over \$200 million in property damages. The neighborhood acquired a reputation for criminality, but Langston Hughes complicated that reputation as he drafted “Let America Be America Again.” The poem argues for those oppressed by classism, racism, and xenophobia to collectively redeem and expand the nation’s principles. Its imagery about protecting the defenseless suggests that Hughes empathized with rioters’ appeals that the teenager’s crime should not warrant any mistreatment by police officers.

The 1951 poem “Harlem” consists of short metaphorical questions inviting readers into a conversation about lost potential. The poem shifts from overly dried treats to the revolting image of “rotten meat” before asking whether “a dream deferred” will “explode” eventually. These images may have alluded to the difficult food-packing and manufacturing positions that many Harlem residents took to survive the Great Depression. If so, the symbolic explosion referred to the literal disruption during the Riots of 1935 and 1943 as well as the further diminution of Harlem’s economic prospects after 1935.

Langston Hughes was among the artists who continued to suffer financially due to race-based hiring discrimination that he called being “blacklisted from birth.” He published a decade’s worth of satires about segregation before the House Un-American Activities Committee summoned him in 1953. But the tense questioning period made it clear that the Committee preferred for Hughes to deny any suspected radicalism in his literature, rather than expose social oppression in his responses. He avoided legal consequences by denying any Communist Party affiliation, yet the disavowal drew negative attention to other high-profile African American artists who did not cooperate as fully.

President Biden fulfilled part of the poet’s goals by referencing Langston Hughes in his victory speech and again in his inaugural address. Recognition of the perceived gap between the nation’s values and societal inequality was expressed in a major federal government statement. And the controversial context of race riots and suspected Communism did not preclude these references as inflammatory. Once treated as tangential to American politics, the “dream deferred” that Hughes drew attention to decades ago is being imagined as a means to guide and expand political approaches to “the American Dream.” A

## Selected Readings

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