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Awake in America: Poetry and the Ghost of Democracy

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In this essay, I wish to revisit what I regard to be among the most compelling expressions of the notion of the American dream. In the work of certain poets. Reading, as I invariably do, close to the bone of texts, you will forgive me if at certain moments I find myself contaminated by the enthusiasms and tonalities of these writers. But such is the risk of any twofold attempt at dreaming and reading.

Let me first turn to a poem by Langston Hughes entitled, “Harlem,” which first appeared in a book called *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, published in 1951. Reading this poem, I couldn’t help but hear between its lines the famous “I Have a Dream Speech” by Martin Luther King Jr. spoken during the historic March in Washington twelve years later. I was drawn especially to the contrast in tone and substance between these two versions of the American Dream. In their differences, they appeared to illuminate each other’s particular truth. Listen first to Hughes’ short, taut lines:

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?¹

Where Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech soared with the thrilling cadence of gospel prophecy — "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed:...that all men are created equal" — Langston Hughes' poem probes insistently, like the base line in a jazz song. As African American intellectuals, both King and Hughes repeatedly riffed on the motif of the "American Dream," hearing in it a promise of freedom and justice that had been betrayed and thus stood in need of urgent redemption. This dream, as Hughes' poem suggests, is nothing abstract at all. It is rather something terribly sensuous, vulnerable and mortal, prone to disease and decay if not properly cared for. What's more, it cannot simply be laid to rest "like a heavy load," for a dream deferred is bound to "explode." Questioning what becomes of a dream deferred, Hughes raises the specter of a sudden, unnamed violence, one that seems to come from nowhere and no one. In this sense, Hughes differs decisively from King. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream expressed the hope of a lasting awakening and sudden epiphany when "freedom [will] ring" all over the nation. It would be a day when "All of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: 'Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!'"² King's messianic invocation of "freedom" was at once deeply democratic and inescapably Christian in its conceptual generosity and categorical specificity. Langston Hughes — of mixed race parentage, raised partly in Mexico and fluent in Spanish, a cosmopolitan thinker, a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance, a fellow traveler with, though never a member of the Communist Party, a poet, a novelist, and a journalist — spoke of the American Dream in somewhat different tones. In the poem above, he

¹From *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Vintage Classics, 1994), p. 426.

²Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream." Address delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, 28 August 1963.
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adopts an approach more syncopated than lyrical, culminating not in a vision of utopia but in a hiss of fright, a foreboding of terror. It is, of course, a kind of messianism, too, but of a negative sort: the promise of things to come, to be sure, but things that come with a destructive force rather than with a constructive future. It is a promise of a future without a future, and therefore the promise of the end of promising. Neither hope nor despair, neither dream nor awakening: just an explosion. Hughes' reluctant prophecy is thus a contrapuntal anticipation of King's. Read today against the background of on-going events, it also seems like an eerie message about our future, presaging the disaster of falling Towers, the invasion and occupation of the sites of the most ancient civilizations, the spectacular inhumanities of prison torture and burning corpses amid the cascading lies and unaccountable greed made possible by the fakery and fraudulence from on high. In contrast to Hughes, we can think of King's "American Dream" as a mighty hope: that the spirit of freedom will keep history safe from defeat and assure the eventual victory of the truly righteous and just. But with Langston Hughes, the "American Dream" is transformed into a wakeful agony of betrayal and neglect, of lives unrecognized, sufferings unanswered and deaths unmourned. What becomes of a dream deferred is that there is an explosion, and with that explosion, there follows...what? Life? Afterlife? Or perhaps ghosts? Hence, not the spirit but the specter of freedom? Or simply, as the last line of the poem makes graphically clear, more "?", that is, the unending explosion of uncertainties about the coming of what is to come, and with it, the future of democracy, the possibilities for justice? For freedom and justice seem more remote and more impossible when even sheer survival is severely jeopardized, and life lies festering like a sore, stinking like rotten meat, turning into a crusty, sugary, heavy load.

The explosion of uncertainties, however, does not make for utter hopelessness. We can think of it rather as a prelude to knowing about things, including the things pertaining to oneself. More precisely, uncertainty allows one to know that one does not know, that one knows nothing, and knowing nothing, one can begin to know again. With uncertainty comes the possibility of renewal, though renewal of what and of whom remains as yet unknown. This is the other side of what I take to be Hughes' wakeful agony: a keen alertness to what one does not know and therefore is in no position to have, much less become. Take

for example the matter of citizenship in the U.S. or in any other country for that matter. A person travels, arrives at the airport or at the border, and is subjected to interrogation by officials as if he or she were a suspect in a crime that is always yet to be committed. At the threshold of the nation-state, one always finds oneself the object of routine suspicion whereby one's innocence and identity are subject to doubt. One thus comes to share the liminal status of everyone else waiting in long lines to enter the country, potentially guilty unless otherwise proven innocent. Despite tightly scripted greetings and highly bureaucratized conventions of welcome, moments of doubt invariably infiltrate the exchange between oneself and the official. Asked impersonally about one's identity, one isn't always so sure what to say (and this is perhaps why we carry passports and other documents that can speak on our behalf and thus relieve us from having to say anything for ourselves). Confronted with the other's insistent questioning, one is infected momentarily by the former's doubt. Knowing that one does not know who one is in the face of the other, that one is therefore uncertain of what it means to be a citizen of this or that country, of what belonging to this or that community might entail, of how to speak this or that common language in this or that proper accent: such is the uncertainty that haunts the migrant. It keeps him or her off-balance: displaced, de-centered, detoured, deracinated, disconnected, disoriented in so far as one finds oneself unmarked, unrecognized, unloved, unhinged and unknown to and by the other, and thus to and by oneself.

Crossing the border into the United States, the migrant enters the country as if in a dream. He or she, if she has never been there before, is initially stunned by the sheer size and physicality of the country, amazed at the architecture of efficiency that bespeaks of rationality and speed, allowing for rapid connections as well as disconnections. It is this architecture that comes across as the structural equivalent of freedom, permitting vast movements over great expanses of space. People and things are relentlessly ordered into portable packages ready to be loaded, unloaded and reloaded across the infinite networks of transportation and communication that delineate the infrastructure of the country. But here comes the first paradox that tempers the migrant's initial amazement at the material artifacts of the American Dream: freedom of movement and the liberties of circulation are possible only by being held up at the border and subject thereafter to

control, surveillance and discipline. Constant policing and paranoia are the costs of automobility and autonomy. "Ah," the migrant waking from his jet lagged slumber says to himself, "I didn't know that." And with that knowledge, other bits and pieces of knowing begin to emerge.

Let us suppose, to move our story along, that the migrant comes from a Third World country, perhaps even the Philippines. Chances are the texture and tone of social relations back home would have been marked by the pronounced conventions of deference and hierarchy. The ignorant, the poor, those who are female and those who are young would have been expected to know their place and defer to the educated, the rich, and those who are male and adult. Even the most enlightened among them who are apt to speak out against inequities of all sorts would never think twice about sharing a meal with their maids or engaging in like social intimacies with the drivers of pedicabs, the fishmongers at the market, or the beggars on the street. Indeed, the very language of rule and privilege remains distinct from the rough speech and marked accents of those below, reflecting and reproducing unequal relations. Everyone back home seems to collude in reaffirming and naturalizing the hierarchies of thought and affection.

Once in the U.S., however, the migrant comes in for a rude awakening. Everyone — black, white, rich, poor, Jew, Gentile, Latino, Latina, gay, straight, Asian, disabled, young, old, men, women — seems not only capable, but more importantly, feels entitled to address everyone else, expecting to be recognized and respected. What's more, this expectation of recognition and respect is enshrined in the fundamental law of the land and is the subject of constant, often shrill assertion in the public sphere. Along with the anonymity of crowds and the frenzy of purposeful activity, "America" seems to bubble over with raw democracy, literally the power of the "demos," or "people." This extraordinary ordinariness of democratic culture is what Walt Whitman once called "the wild smack of freedom." Whitman's unabashed love for this shock of liberty no doubt led him to write that "the United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem...not merely a nation, but a nation of nations.... moving in vast masses. Here is the hospitality which forever indicates heroes..."³

³From *Whitman: Poetry and Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1982), pp.

Of course inequality and injustice are everywhere in the U.S., as pernicious and confounding as anywhere else in the world. America is far from the exceptional city on the hill even if many people believe it to be so. Still, the migrant cannot help but be impressed at the broad insistence on the absence of classes in the country, or better yet, the unshakeable national belief that social inequities based on race, religion, class, gender, sexuality, disability and age, will one day be overcome, and that no injustice is insurmountable. We already saw a version of this in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s stirring speech. In Walt Whitman, we hear not just the promise of democracy but the seductively confident assertion of its actual existence:

[T]he genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislators, nor in ambassadors or authors, or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors.... but always, most in the common people. Their manners, speech, dress, friendships. The freshness and candor of their physiognomy; the picturesque looseness of their carriage.... their deathless attachment to freedom... their curiosity and welcome of novelty... the air they have of persons who never know how it felt to stand in the presence of superiors...the President's taking off his hat to them not they to him — these too are unrhymed poetry.⁴

These lines from the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* were written in 1855, eight years before the *Emancipation Proclamation* while America remained half-free and half-slave. The emergence of a truly democratic culture at the basis of American citizenship would require a cataclysmic Civil War. And this emergence is far from complete, as democracy in its fullest sense seems always yet to come. The migrant surfacing from the depths of Whitman's poetry will doubtless find much that is troubling in the contemporary scene: the popular consent before the surrender of civil rights and *de facto* submission to the most intrusive inspections in the name of some ill-defined notion of security; the popular eagerness to delegate authority and defer to the judgement of those who wish to wage war, expending countless lives,

⁴*Ibid.*
<https://archium.ateneo.edu/budhi/vol11/iss1/1>

while enriching themselves and their cronies. The migrant would be dismayed, no doubt at the seeming alacrity with which Whitman's "common people"-- those who constitute the "genius" of the United States with the "freshness and candor of their physiognomy" and their "deathless attachment to freedom"—tolerate so much injustice along with the feeble justifications used to explain them away by those responsible for committing such acts. Here comes another paradox that shakes the migrant up, keeping him in a virtual state of insomnia: that in the name of freedom, the bodies of citizens become tokens for shoring up the power of certain groups and certain ideas; that such bodies are ground into a homogenous mass of voters and workers, and having lost their singularity, are then compelled to shop and consume themselves back into some recognizable identity and some modicum of self-esteem; and that the bodies of those who are not quite citizens, those who live on the fringes of social recognition by virtue of their status or appearance, find themselves heirs to a history of bondage and forgetting. In this setting, Whitman's "democratic vistas" seem more distant and unreachable than ever, and democracy itself mutates into a ghost in search of a body from where to speak.

Once again, Langston Hughes comes to the rescue, providing us with the ironic counterpoint to Whitman and a poetic body with which to welcome the ghost of democracy. In a withering response to the assertion that America is "home to the free," he responds with a flurry of questions:

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?

Surely not me? The millions on relief today?

The millions shot down when we strike?

The millions who have nothing for our pay?

For all the dreams we've dreamed

And all the songs we've sung

And all the hopes we've held

And all the flags we've hung

The millions who have nothing for our pay—
Except the dream that's almost dead today.⁵

These lines, from the poem “Let America Be America Again,” were written in 1936, just a few years before another great war was to engulf the world, and at a time when a veritable class war was raging in the United States. And yet the power of its diction is such that it continues to resonate with us today. Hughes’ question, “who is free?” brings with it its complement, “who is not free?” It is a question that continues to bedevil America and wherever the shadow of America falls. The migrant is no doubt similarly haunted. Amid his daily struggles to navigate the sea of everyday life, all too often reduced to the flat, deceptive sense of “freedom of consumer choices,” he or she finds himself or herself occasionally called by the ghost of democracy. It is a ghost that never stops visiting, returning again and again to haunt individuals and their communities. With each visitation, the ghost of democracy reveals the great gaps between the ideal of freedom and the reality of its confinement in the form of hyper-individualism that leaves little room for collective responsibility. The “unrhymed poem” that is the United States is thus also a jangle of contradictions, as the white noise of hypocrisy and mass delusions make their way from the top to the bottom of society, only to loop back up and out again. On the one hand, there is the grand refusal to naturalize and nationalize social inequality through the instruments of the federal and local governments and the concerted efforts of citizens; on the other hand, there is the avid promotion of capitalist competition that is bound to produce unending inequalities, and by shrinking the resources of state institutions assures the attenuation of an ethics of citizenship. On the one hand, there are endless pronouncements on American commitment to human rights and human dignity; on the other hand, there are on — going reports of the dehumanization of non-Americans, of systematic torture and humiliation of those captured in destitute prisons or held up at dusty checkpoints. Freedom and unfreedom,

⁵Langston Hughes, “Let America Be America Again,” in *The collected poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Knopf, 1994), pp. 189-191.

generosity and neglect, unconditional rights and contingent liberties, one existing side by side with the other, make up the discordant tunes of the American Dream. And it is precisely this discordance that one hears whenever the voice of democracy's ghost speaks.

The ghost of democracy never rests. It won't let the migrant sleep — or for that matter, anyone else who is truly awake. It speaks through the poems of Whitman and the speeches of King, but also in the urgent questions of Hughes. For despite the latter's contrast with the first two, he nonetheless joins them in invoking the tenacity of a certain hope and the durability of a certain dream in the imaginative life of the United States. Here is Hughes again:

O yes,
I say it plain,
America was never America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

Out of the rank 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 plains—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!⁶

"We, the people," Hughes says, quoting the opening lines of the Declaration of Independence. Who is this we, and what must it redeem? In some ways echoing the capaciousness of Whitman's vision, Hughes' "we" necessarily includes not only those "persons," as Whitman says, "who never knew how it felt to stand in the presence of superiors," but just as important, those who might say plainly that "America was never America to me." And yet, it's precisely from this position of having been rejected that "we" can affirm an oath, one that must always be renewed well into the unforeseeable future: that "America will be!"

⁶*Ibid.*

and will be more than the “rank and ruin of our gangster death,/ the rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies.” It will be this promise that will bind us, that will make us into the agents of redemption. Such is the voice of democracy’s ghost speaking in and through those who find themselves possessed by the American Dream. It is a dream that regards the making of history as the remaking of historical agency. At its worse, it leads to the hubris and cruelty of imperial adventures abroad and the philistinism of collective indifference at home; at its best, it shakes us, whoever we are, from our parochial slumbers, and forces us to pay heed and perhaps extend a welcoming hand to the coming specter of democracy. Surprised by democracy’s ghost, we might imagine it singing to us in a song once sung by Walt Whitman:

...I give you my hand!

I give you my love more precious than money,

I give you myself before preaching or law;

Will you give me yourself? Will you come travel with me?

Shall we stick by each other as long as we live?⁷

⁷“Song of the Open Road” in *Whitman: Poetry and Prose*, p. 307.