Or Does It Explode?

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Abstract
"How Langston Hughes' poem “Harlem” still gives us a lens through which to understand racial relations in America.”

Posting about poetry, Ferguson, Missouri, and race relations from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

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*In All Things* is a publication of the *Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service* at Dordt College.
Each fall, just as literature teachers and professors everywhere, I consider what current issues I can connect to the poems we will study in my freshmen literature classes. This year, Ferguson, Missouri, loomed. However, here in the upper Midwest, and especially in my classes where one out of thirty students is Black, we can feel pretty far removed from Ferguson, even though the issues of Ferguson seem endemic to the American experience: Trayvon Martin is none too far in our rearview mirror; Rodney King and the LA riots are like a mirror image from the early 90s; and Civil Rights is planted deep in the American psyche. In short, this explosive pattern seems part of our collective identity, which is why Ferguson was such a likely connecting point for literature. Enter Langston Hughes’ poem “Harlem,” which, more than sixty years since it was first published, continues to offer students—and all of us—a helpful lens for understanding race relations and conflict in places like Ferguson, Missouri, and throughout America.

Significantly, Hughes’ poem starts us in place: Harlem. However, that the poem represents Harlem in some way is not at first apparent to many readers, meaning that the title of the poem is something to which we must return at the end of the poem. Likewise, Hughes’ first line is a sort of thesis or controlling question for the rest of the poem, though it’s also a speculative, seemingly private question, asked perhaps by a speaker on the front step of an apartment building in Harlem: “What happens to a dream deferred?” In just a few words, Hughes has tied us up in place and language. A “dream deferred” was one of Hughes’ overriding themes, and “dream” is a hard word to read without considering how it tends to hitch itself to the adjective “American” or to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, “I have a dream,” in which he used “dream” as a sort of counterpoint or calling out of the American dream. But when the poem was published in 1951, Civil Rights was about a decade away. “Deferred” itself, however, begs for a larger audience with the American dream, especially considering how official the word “deferred” is, conjuring a “deferral,” a very authoritative action. Though private in tone, “What happens to a dream deferred?” is a very public and enduring question.

In the body of the poem, the speaker attempts to answer his own questions with questions, ushering us through a number of similes that help us consider various responses to or fates of “a dream deferred”:

Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore— And then run? Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over— like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.

As image-based poems usually do, “Harlem” relies on us to turn its images around in our minds, appreciating the nuances of each: here we have the disintegration of something originally sweet; here we have the pain, pus and disgust of an infected wound; here we have the almost palpable stench of putrefaction; here we have something encased and sticky but still sugary and redeemable; here we have burden that grinds its bearer down.

Of course, the plethora of images are themselves a type of encasing, the spinning of language around an absence, since the “dream deferred” remains undefined and abstract. “Harlem” itself is the “crust[ing] and sugar[ing] over” of a negation—something that was but has been denied. One can read the poem as a congeries of images collected around a type of abortion, an act of creation in response to abstraction, negation, even nothingness (or even as a response to evil if we take non-being as evil). However, if the
poem is making something ugly or empty into something beautiful and promising, then it also represents the danger of art: it’s covering over something that, like an infected wound, must be dealt with openly. However, if the poem is making something ugly or empty into something beautiful and promising, then it also represents the danger of art: it’s covering over something that, like an infected wound, must be dealt with openly. In “Harlem,” then, we see both the blessing and temptation of art.

But this is where “Harlem,” the title and the community, comes into play. Hughes, the microphone of Harlem, the phonograph needle of Harlem, is there to record Harlem, to let the voices of Harlem come through. It’s “Harlem” that prevents the poet from making something beautiful of Harlem at the expense of making something true of Harlem. The last line of the poem, a line of italics, which Hughes often used to represent another voice, interjects a somewhat different answer to the original question:

Or does it explode?

The line is shorter by half than the rest of the poem’s images, notably unpoetic; it as such explodes upon us out of nowhere. And where the first speaker’s images rely on simile, the final line relies on metaphor—instantaneous metaphor: the dream deferred has gone from dream to explosion just that fast.

I first read “Harlem” as an undergrad, somewhere in the latter half of the 1990s. I saw it then as a prophecy about Civil Rights, which much of America seems to have experienced as an explosion a decade after Hughes published the poem in Montage of a Dream Deferred. In the late 1990s, I also read it in light of Rodney King and LA riots of 1992.

Now, in 2014, I asked students to read “Harlem” in light of Ferguson, Missouri, another place that would have us hear something about the conditions of their community. Once again in Ferguson we saw an explosion stemming from a dream deferred: the dream inherent in the life of Michael Brown, and the collective dream of a community whose voices cry out in response to the forces of deferral.

When I taught the poem, a few of my students resisted this interpretation; they say more of the fault lies with the people of Ferguson than the poem lets on; they want to distance themselves from the forces of deferral; this is part of why the explosions keep occurring, I hint to them—because we think of a dream deferred as a no-thing but not as an abortion or as an evil, and we think we are guiltless.

Other students see the final line not only as an explosion of violence but as a cultural explosion, as the appearance of something new and vibrant that changes the world. I can’t deny this reading, especially considering what Harlem was and continues to be for black artists, a site of explosion that continues to pay dividends in cultural currency to many Americans, black or white. However, just like the poem itself, which wraps its art around the no-thing at the heart of the poem, the cultural explosion of black culture that continues in America should not blind us to the continued conditions of a dream deferred. Ferguson also reminds us, in the age of Beyonce and Jay-Z, of this reality.

“Harlem,” then, continues to be a helpful lens for American race relations. In Ferguson, it may even seem like explosion is a metaphor we’re locked into. No doubt this is at least partly because of the way media
cover the event and the way we view it: explosions get more press than the daily conversations that also happen across race and class lines across the country. Internationally, too, there are other possibilities for dealing with racial conflicts, as Nelson Mandela’s Truth and Reconciliation Committee taught us. But in many places in America, as the conditions of a dream deferred persist or arise anew, we seem doomed to repeat explosion, in Ferguson and elsewhere.

There’s still another distancing that happens for students—and all of us—in reading “Harlem,” however: one that reduces the lessons of “Harlem” to black and white in places far away. That’s nowhere more true than here, in the upper Midwest, where the racial conflicts of immigrant labor and the reservation system remain volatile issues that we keep mostly on the periphery, where they grow ripe with possibility or danger. “Harlem,” and the lessons of our poetry as a whole, can help keep in view the dream deferred in places like Ferguson, Missouri, or Sioux City, Iowa, or Pine Ridge, South Dakota.

If we’ll let them.

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