

America Never Was, Yet Will Be



By **Roger Cohen**

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Independence Day! For a naturalized American it is particularly poignant. It recalls the personal declarations of independence that, in a simple but transformational ceremony, subsume countless identities into the liberty, responsibility and possibility of United States citizenship under the law. I recall looking around that courtroom in Brooklyn 13 years ago and thinking simply: Here is America.

This magical capacity for reinvention lies at the root of American greatness. Other nations fetishize the past, rewrite it in blood; America's genius is the facilitation of forgetfulness. To be unburdened of history, for many immigrants, enables the pursuit of happiness.

But not for all: That pursuit, enshrined in the Declaration of Independence in 1776, was denied to blacks. They were not citizens but slaves. This, as Barack Obama put it, was America's "original sin." It would not be easily expurgated.

I began my July 4 by reading the words of a black poet, Langston Hughes, written in 1935, in the midst of the Great Depression. This, today, is not a good American moment. Truth is under attack. The law is under attack. The press is under attack. Moral depravity seeps from on high in a viscous torrent that infects everything and is hard to cleanse from the skin. It cloyes. The White House stands for white males, above all, not 325 million Americans of every creed and color. I wanted to remind myself, again, of America's spirit.

In his poem, "Let America Be America Again," Hughes writes:

Let America be America again.

Let it be the dream it used to be.

Let it be the pioneer on the plain

Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

The parenthesis punctures the myth. The American idea is a journey toward a receding destination, driven by the pursuit of perfectibility. The nation was not born of a piece with the Constitution. Its contours were outlined, with sufficient clarity and flexibility to endure, for future generations to usher closer to an ideal of liberty and justice for all.

That is why for a black man, Hughes, writing 83 years ago, "America was never America."

The poem continues:

*O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.
(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")*

The tension in the poem derives from its absence of hatred. Hughes, despite the suffering he describes, believes in the unique potential of the United States for reinvention. He states flatly that he was unequal; he was not free. So racism dictated. Yet he dreams of an uplifting reconciliation between American reality and American dream.

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For me, “sure” is the most beautiful American word. Not yes I’ll do it, or maybe, but sure I will. It’s forward-leaning and risk-embracing. It signals the space that Europe lacks. It captures America’s spirit.

Nowhere else is becoming somebody else so easy. There is space, still, to be free. Sure there is. The divisions between those who came first and those who came later are fungible.

Or so, on July 4, I want to believe. This will not be another American century. Old structures that worked are giving way to something as yet indiscernible, with its share of menace. All this may induce a sense that the American idea is lost.

But that idea has always been fought for — through slavery, the Civil War, Jim Crow, the Great Depression, McCarthyism, Vietnam. America healed from these lacerations. It cohered: *E pluribus unum*.

Toward the end of the poem, there are these lines:

*O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where every man is free.
The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME—
Who made America,*

*Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.
Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—
The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,
We must take back our land again,
America!
O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!*

Hughes, at the last, does not descend into despair. His, as Dan Rather has observed, is “a rallying cry for inclusion.” The poem leads to an oath to an unrealized idea, battered but alive, not to blackness against whiteness, or whiteness against blackness.

In this time of tribal smallness, never shrug at the assault from on high on the American idea, flawed as it has always been. In 1938, three years after the poem was written, Thomas Mann, the German writer, defined democracy as “that form of government and society which is inspired above every other with the feeling and consciousness of the dignity of man.”

Beyond all the current indignities inflicted upon it, America will be, uplifting once more in its imperfection.

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