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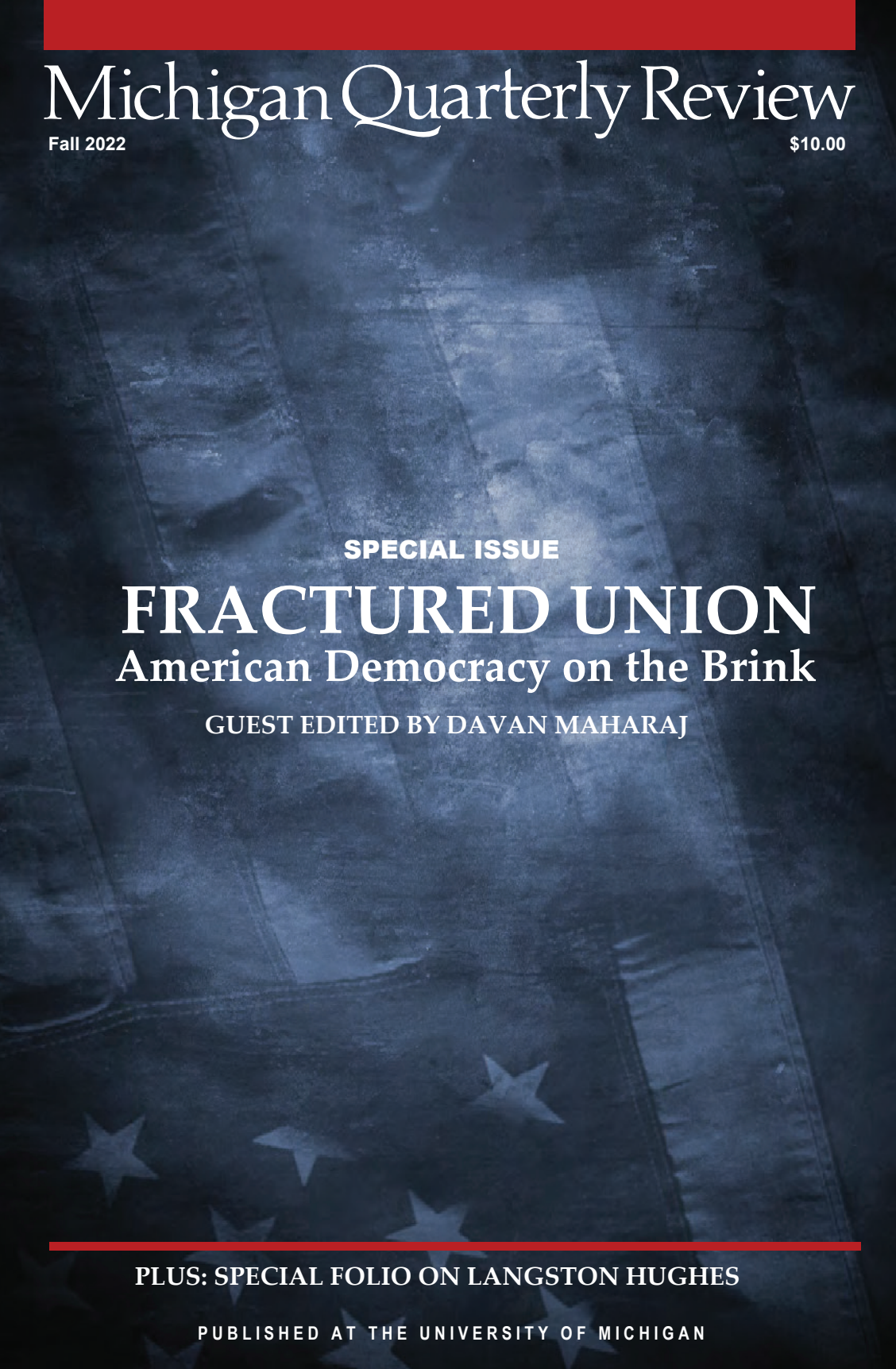

SPECIAL ISSUE

FRACTURED UNION

American Democracy on the Brink

GUEST EDITED BY DAVAN MAHARAJ

PLUS: SPECIAL FOLIO ON LANGSTON HUGHES

PUBLISHED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

EDITOR'S NOTE

KHALED MATTAWA

As we were assembling this issue and imagining the contributions we would receive, we foresaw some of the challenges that the theme of American democracy would present to our contributors. Over the ages, a great deal of ink, paper, and pixels have been spent on politics, in belles-lettres, the press, and academia. Political chatter on radio, television, and the internet fills numerous channels; in recent years, one can hardly walk an American city block without hearing people talking or disagreeing about politics, and clearly anxious about the nation's future.

Literature, however, usually plays the long game to pretty much all historical developments. This is especially so in fiction. Nonfiction and poetry are more nimble on the subject of politics but must tell it slant, as Emily Dickinson advised. But slant angles can also elude a writer.

As we fretted about the fate of our special issue, and during a slow moment in one of our Zoom meetings, Davan Maharaj, our guest editor, declaimed or exclaimed, "Why not ask writers to respond to a poem by Langston Hughes? 'Let America Be America Again'?!" It seemed like a great idea on its face, but reading the poem aloud on Zoom was an "aha" moment for all of us, a parting of the Red Sea, if you will, that widened our vision of this special issue's possibilities.

Hughes's ecstatic hope and his realistic portrait of America provide a vibrant artistic testimony that speaks to our national moment in the U.S. The poem compellingly—and retroactively—appropriates the rhetoric of our current politics and reshapes them into a message of inclusion, where speaking truth to power ignites a vision for a better future for all. "Let

America Be America Again" is a poem for the ages because it challenges poets taking up the same theme to do something different. It is not only a poem that ought to be revisited, it is a site of pilgrimage.

Inspired by the poem, we reached out to the authors presented here to write short essays that respond to it. We encouraged them to engage the poem in any manner they wished. A meditation on the poem's political and social message, a rigorous critical reading, or a personal anecdote—all would do just as well.

The response was as extraordinary as it was exhilarating. Each time a new contribution to this special folio arrived was a thrill for us. The diversity of responses and approaches to the poem certainly exceeded our expectations, and we feel, as our readers will, justly rewarded for challenging a great group of writers to ponder a great poem and the possibility of letting America be America, at last, or again.

LET AMERICA BE AMERICA AGAIN

LANGSTON HUGHES

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.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

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.")

Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,
Tangled in that ancient endless chain
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!
Of work the men! Of take the pay!
Of owning everything for one's own greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.
I am the worker sold to the machine.
I am the Negro, servant to you all.I am the people, humble, hungry,
mean—
Hungry yet today despite the dream.
Beaten yet today—O, Pioneers!
I am the man who never got ahead,
The poorest worker bartered through the years.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,
That even yet its mighty daring sings
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned
That's made America the land it has become.
O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas
In search of what I meant to be my home—
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,
And torn from Black Africa's strand I came
To build a "homeland of the free."

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.

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!

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!

—

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LESSON PLAN FOR "LET AMERICA BE AMERICA AGAIN" BY LANGSTON HUGHES

FAISAL MOHYUDDIN

OBJECTIVES:

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. Understand the necessity of working to make America a more perfect nation, one that recognizes, honors, and protects every community, especially those whose rights, voices, and sense of belonging have been challenged, denied, undermined, silenced, or erased;
2. Recognize that there is an essential place in America for critique, resistance, and rage;
3. Be more deeply committed to saying "fuck you" (preferably *aloud*)—in protest, poetry, prayer, policy-making, and in purely and simply being *present*—to anyone who dares to say *their* broke-ass version of America has no place for inclusion, equality, justice, and truth.

COMMON CORE STANDARDS:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1—Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.1.C—Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence and

actively call out bullshit; ensure a hearing for a full range of *informed* positions; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and denounce any positions rooted in bigotry, hate, and falsehood.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.1.D—Respond thoughtfully and, when necessary, angrily to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all truth-based sides of an issue; name and resolve contradictions; determine what additional information or research is required to complete the task of letting America be the America it is supposed to be; and actively refuse the systematic deferment of one's dreams.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.3—Evaluate the poet's/speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used; celebrate the poet's/speaker's honesty and rage; and respond to their call-to-action to "let America be America again" in ways that show the entire world how much of a bad-ass one can be.

KEY TERMS / BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

"[The United States of] America," "The Bill of Rights," "Langston Hughes," "Jim Crow Laws," "[The] Harlem Renaissance," "[The] Civil Rights Movement," "White Supremacy," "Pseudologia Fantastica," "Capitalism," "Make America Great Again" (and other forms of hate speech), "[American] Mythology," "Virtue Signaling," "Critical Race Theory" (why not ruffle a few more ignorance-heavy feathers too?) and "Institutional Racism" (especially in one's local school systems).

MATERIALS:

Printed copies of "Let America Be America Again" by Langston Hughes.
Highlighters—several colors.
Sharpie.
Tape (lots of it) to affix student work to the classroom walls—or to muffle any loud-mouthed bigots who find themselves unable to

quietly, respectfully process Hughes's charge to critique America's shortcomings and actively strive to address them. (Be sure to not let them leave the room; they deserve to listen along, to squirm as they face their greatest fear singing through a poem.) Save extra tape in case a spineless administrator trots through the door, demanding the lesson be halted because—well, because cowardice is how you make sure you stay employed.

An updated resume—because, well, courage and truth-telling often come at a great cost.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES:

1. Provide students background information on Langston Hughes; on the cultural and historical contexts within which "Let America Be America Again" was composed; on the long, problematic history of lies and deception that have shaped the American consciousness; and on the ever-constant struggle by members of various marginalized groups (and their allies) to tell the *truth* about America in order to make it a more perfect union that lives up to its professed ideals *for all* (minus bigots, tyrants, political con artists, and those who brazenly don "false" patriotic wreaths).
2. Read "Let America Be America Again" aloud several times, with varying levels of anger and rage, with a gathering sense of disgust and exasperation, and with a ferocity that makes it very clear to anyone who might feel uncomfortable with the poem's language and message that you simply don't [need to] give a fuck about how *they* might feel when being told that America isn't *yet* the nation it needs to be.
3. Annotate the poem, using:
   a. different colored highlighters to mark words and phrases that illustrate where the poem's speaker discusses:
      i. *exclusion* [color 1], *disappointment* [color 2], *resentment* [color 3], and *rage* [color 4].
      ii. *hope* [color 5], *vision* [color 6], and *inclusivity* [color 7].
      iii. *patriotism* [color 8], *love* [color 9], and other moments where the speaker's *Americanness* and *humanity* come through [color 10].

b. a Sharpie to cross out any moments where Hughes is trying a bit too hard to withhold his anger, to act "nice," to protect his readers (especially well-meaning White readers who virtue-signal with such vitality that they can't help but believe he isn't talking to them too) from feeling "called-out." Such crossing-out will allow his message to be even more direct and more urgent.

NOTE: Allow students who identify as Black, Indigenous and/or Native, Persons of Color, Muslim, Female, Queer, Trans, Neurodivergent, Undocumented, Jewish, Sikh, Disabled, Immigrant, Atheist, Low-Income, Economically Exploited, or any other group too often unseen or overlooked (including those overlooked even here), as well as those not afforded the full rights and protections promised to all Americans to tear the poem up; soak its shreds in water until the ink dissolves; drink down the solution (with the option to consume the soggy pulp too); and then, with darkened tongues, sing long-winded songs about self-love and pride while making the rest of the class listen without breaks for water, food, or bathroom-use, nor the option to raise their hands to make stupid comments about "reverse racism," their long-standing admiration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., their superhero-like power *to not see color* when interacting with People of Color (a power that magically exists typically only in the *presence* of BIPOCs), and/or their really cool Gay Black Muslim Friend Who Immigrated from "Africa" and Now Lives on a Reservation in South Dakota Teaching Indigenous History to the Children of Undocumented Factory Workers from Honduras.

4. Assign students to write, revise, and share poems modeled after "Let America Be America Again," in their own voices, responding to current events in the country that illustrate the presence of racism, White Supremacy, exclusion, bigotry, hate, etc., and the need to call attention to and fix these problems.
5. Ask students to share their poems beyond the walls of their classrooms—by reading them at school board meetings, staff

in-services, all-school assemblies, sporting events, PTO luncheons, and while walking through the school's hallways, refusing to stop when they are told their time is up (because their time, dammit, is "as long as it takes"); by mailing them to their local politicians, chambers of commerce, various religious institutions, and big-hearted not-for-profits; by taping them up around town—at public libraries, bus stations, grocery stores, dog parks, etc.; by posting them on their social media feeds, using the hashtags #fuckhate and #fuckyouifyoucanthandlethetruth and #nomoredreamsdeferred.

ACCOMMODATIONS / DIFFERENTIATION:

If you're honest and you know it, clap your hands! However, if you can't be bothered with truth and/or facts, and/or feel the need to offer some knee-jerk kind of rebuttal to Hughes's poem, then do us all a favor and just shut the fuck up. Or escort yourself to the corner of the classroom and spend the rest of the class period (or however long it takes) looking up and memorizing the names of the Indigenous tribes on whose stolen and occupied lands your home/school/nation sits and whose blood is on your hands, too, whether you want to accept this fact or not.

ASSESSMENT:

Students will be able to show their learning by:

1. Giving a damn—about America and Americans, especially those from marginalized groups, and about making this country as great as it proclaims to be.
2. Demanding others give a damn too.
3. Extending this sentiment to the rest of the world, to the environment, to animals.
4. Voting for leaders who actually give a damn—and prove it in their actions on a daily basis.
5. Denouncing scheming tyrants, conniving kings, and those that live like leeches—all who proclaim America is (or ever fully was) *great*.
6. Proclaiming the truth and pledging their allegiance to it.

7. Refusing to defer their dreams, to defer equity and justice, to defer visibility and inclusion.
8. Making a list of all the ways America continues to fall short of the ideals upon which it was founded—and then selecting one or more items from the list and coming up with an action plan for how they will purposefully act upon it, individually and in concert with others, and to take action with fire, flamboyance, and ferocity.
9. Telling anyone who tries to impede their efforts to get the hell out of the way because there is work to be done and still—nearly 90 years after Hughes wrote his poem—not enough people doing it.
10. To carry this work forward, with great conviction and courage, especially if your district decides to fire your ass because you had the nerve to teach such a "dangerous" and "controversial" poem at a time when *some* people (you know who you are) just want things to get back to "normal," whatever the fuck *that* means.