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Politics in poetry allows for a unique point of view on topics that affect the author and in turn, the reader. This can be done on topics such as human rights or even racism. In Jay Parini's "Preface", he implies that poetry is not made to be political (xii); however, he fails to consider that what is being written is an actual reality for most. This is further expanded upon in the poems "Let America Be America Again" by Langston Hughes and "Southern History" by Natasha Trethewey through their experiences, themes, and tone. The poems "Let America Be America Again" by Langston Hughes and "Southern History" by Natasha Trethewey both provide a unique reality on history and life for a marginalized group in America pre and post-Civil War.

The theme of racism and oppression in Langston Hughes' works can be directly correlated to his experiences in his everyday life. In Hughes' work, "Let America be America Again", he lets it be known that due to the treatment he's received from society has made him feel as if America is not his home. Around the time the poem was written in 1935, Hughes was undergoing constant harassment from the Government due to him coming to the defense of others who were facing injustice (Miller). Despite the treatment he's received, Hughes still hopes that America will be, "The dream the dreamers dreamed." (Line 6). Hughes believes that due to

the racism that America upholds, the original dream of America being the “Land of the Free” has not been achieved, and it will not be until equality comes naturally for everyone. In comparison, Trethewey has undergone similar circumstances living in the South as a biracial child, and later on as a teen.

Natasha Trethewey was born in Mississippi to an interracial couple, whose commitment to one another was illegal (Tory). Growing up, she received hate from her white counterparts, which seeped into different parts of her life, including her time in school (Tory). “Southern History” recalls a time in which southern education was heavily influenced by the merits of slavery. The narrator recalls her teacher “quoting... a lie” about the treatment of slaves, insisting that things were better during this time (Trethewey 2;13). Lies are also prevalent in the poem when Trethewey uses imagery to describe how the textbook taught them that slaves were “better off under a master’s care” (Line 4) due to the treatment they received. This shows that Trethewey found it hard to break away from the microaggressions and racism during that time. Both authors use differing themes to convey the dangers of the false narratives sprung onto them.

Although they have differing themes, The American Dream and false narratives are used to convey the same thing; that the things they were told or taught were not true- or in Hughes’ case did not apply to him. According to Hughes, “America was never America to me” (Line 5) and “It was never America to me” (Line 10), the lines use repetition to portray how the American dream is a lie to him due to his race and social status. However, Hughes also speaks for a majority of America, in particular lower-class Americans and immigrants who were promised the American dream, only to learn that “finding only the same old stupid plan Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.” (Lines 24-25). Hughes is explaining that many came in search of a better life through having the American dream, only to discover that those in power will not

allow them to get ahead. This further proves that the idea of the American dream was only for those who already had power. Similarly, Trethewey speaks of the false narratives taught to her in school.

Trethewey further expands upon the theme of false narratives by introducing media influenced by the Lost Cause ideology. Around the 1920s, The Lost Cause came about to push the false narrative that slavery was justified, as well as attempted to revitalize a southern way of life. This ideology trickled into media as well as education in the south, which influenced Trethewey's writing about what she was being taught. The narrator recalls watching *Gone With the Wind* in class and her teacher calling it a "true account of how things were back then" (Line 11). *Gone With the Wind* was a movie that came out in 1940 that falsely portrayed life between slaves and their masters. The movie glorified the relationship and contributed to the harmful narrative that slavery was not as bad as people thought (Schuessler). The narrator knows that this version of history is false, and criticizes her teacher, however she does not speak out.

Both poets use tone to communicate their feelings of criticism towards those in power. For Hughes, those in power include the Government and those who experience the American dream, which during this time was rich, white men. Hughes uses similes to convey this feeling of criticism. He compares those in power to "leeches" (line 69) who have been driving hard workers, who seek the American dream, into the ground for their own gain. Trethewey criticizes the teacher, who symbolizes the school system, for actively teaching and protecting a lie. This is shown through line 10: "*History, the teacher said, of the old South- a true account of how things were back then.*", which is broken up to emphasize the lie being told by the teacher, and how the narrator criticizes him for it. Despite having a tone for criticism, Southern History's tone is also complacent to the circumstances. For example, "no one raised a hand, disagreed. Not even me"

(lines 5-6) indicates that the narrator knew what was being taught was a lie, however did nothing to counter the teacher. Hughes is on the opposite end of the spectrum, while Parini acknowledges Hughes' blunt tone in his works, he does not consider the implications of being a person of color in America (Politics 124-125). Due to this, the tone of *Let America be America Again* conveys frustration and bitterness towards the way things are. Hughes claims he was, "torn from Black Africa's strand I came to build a 'homeland of the free'" (line 49). The word "torn" carries a negative connotation and demonstrates the bitterness the narrator feels. Despite this, Hughes still feels hope that America will be the America it was meant to be.

Ultimately, politics in poetry are the realities of those that write about them. Hughes' and Trethewey's realities were shown in their poems through their themes of racism, the dangers of false narratives, and their tones of criticism for those in power. "Let America be America Again" and "Southern History" perfectly expressed their experiences as people of color in America, and allowed the reader insight on those experiences.

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