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Langston Hughes Society Panel
Reading Langston Hughes in the Age of Barack Obama

Invisible Hughes: Barack Obama's 2008 Democratic

National Convention Acceptance Speech

Presidential candidate Barack Obama alluded to two poems by Langston Hughes when he accepted the nomination for President at the Democratic National Convention on August 28, 2008. This presentation focuses on how Hughes's poetry was invoked by Obama as he was quickly ascending to the position of President. This provides an ideal opportunity to see how the future President himself was "reading" Hughes's poetry at the very dawn of the age of Obama.

Because the date marked the thirty-fifth anniversary of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, Obama took the opportunity to invoke what Keith Miller has called the technique of voice merging. Just as King directly referenced no one years earlier in his speech, Obama carefully alluded to King and Hughes rather than quoting them.

Hughes's poem "Dream Deferred" is mentioned overtly by Obama; however, Obama's allusion to a line spoken by King thirty-five years earlier actually has its origin in another Hughes poem. As a result of extensive research into King's speeches from 1956-1967, I will carefully trace how this phrase comes from line fourteen of Hughes's "Mother to Son." Obama presented Hughes as a speaker of dreams gone bad, as opposed to one of audacious hope. Though he thought he was distancing himself from Hughes, he was not. Obama's allusion to this portion of King's exhortation was in fact built on the very foundations of Hughes's inspiration.

This new age was much like the last as Hughes's presence in King's famous speech also went unnoticed. In each speech, Hughes's exhortation was present, but invisible for surprisingly similar reasons. Reading Hughes in the age of Barack Obama reveals that Hughes's poetry hovers behind both speeches like a watermark on bonded paper.