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Ending Economic Inequality: Tinkering with the Machine and Imagining a New Society

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Spring 2018

Over the past century, scholars have attempted to describe and make sense of the gross socioeconomic inequality that now characterizes our society. Modernists tried to grapple with the feeling of loss and grief that this inequity produced by either refusing to acknowledge its existence and shoving feelings away or by trying to direct their anger at the social system causing their grief. Langston Hughes addresses his grief in the latter way and some of his poetry depicts a positive future in which the people who are now oppressed will flourish. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, scholars continue to attempt to explain and solve the inequality gap that Hughes explored in the early 1900s.

Two of Hughes' poems about inequality and disparate treatment in the United States particularly stand out to me. In the following pages, I will analyze the ways that Hughes conceptualizes relations between the rich and poor, how he represents economic inequality, and how he imagines change coming about. I will then discuss the way that the 21<sup>st</sup>-century urban economist Brendan O'Flaherty attempts to understand and provide answers for the growing inequality in our nation in his book *the Economics of Race in the United States*. Despite having careers a century apart and studying in different fields, Langston Hughes and Brendan O'Flaherty have much in common in the ways that they explain inequality and their work complements each other's. Hughes and O'Flaherty both envision futures in which systemic inequality has diminished. However, they don't agree on who can provoke this change or what this change will look like. In this paper I will present the similarities and differences between these two writers takes on inequality and discuss why economists might benefit from taking a step back from their pursuit of developing a perfect policy solution to instead consider the power that those suffering in the current economy might have to upend it entirely.

While evaluating some of the theories that O'Flaherty addresses in his book, I will also address why his policies are crucial for a fairer future and talk about the benefits of combining the views of a poet and an economist in order to better envision a fairer economy. The goal of this project was not to come up with a solution to the economic inequality that economists and poets like Brendan O'Flaherty and Langston Hughes grapple with in their work. Their work provides two different explanatory models for the same problem, and though their world views may differ, they offer two different ways of talking about the same problem, which can help create a more well-rounded picture of the issues they address. This paper explores an interdisciplinary approach to understanding economic inequality in the United States by incorporating both literary and economics-based ideas to shed light on what perpetuates the cycle of economic inequality, who has the potential power to break it, and what an equitable society might look like.

Langston Hughes came of age in the 1920s at the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance and helped shape the artistic influences of this period. He grew up in a single-mother, working class family. His father, also a black man, had internalized racism and hated black people. Hughes wanted to tell the stories of his people in ways that reflected their actual culture, including both their suffering and their love of music, laughter, and language itself. He became the first African to support himself as a writer and by aiming the content of his work towards ordinary people he helped them understand their society in their own language. For this reason, he did not differentiate between his personal experiences and the common experience of black America. By addressing his poems specifically to black people and using familiar attitudes and ideas, Hughes' poetry reached the ears of more people than many other American poets. The two

poems I've chosen reflect Hughes' ability identify with black and disenfranchised Americans and plant seeds of hope within them.

Langston Hughes' poems "Black Workers" and "Rising Waters" caught my eye because despite getting published in 1933 and 1925 respectively, the messages that they convey still hold true nearly 100 years after Hughes wrote them and will likely remain relevant over the course of my lifetime. Even once our society overcomes the gross racial inequality that currently pervades it, these poems will act as a reminder of the struggles poor black workers faced and the astronomical task of altering a vital, but oppressive, characteristic of our economy. In each of these poems Hughes describes the inequality that poor blacks in America faced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In these poems, he conveys his belief that eventually the tide will turn and justice will be served to the men and women oppressed by the current system. However, these poems from nearly a century ago have only grown in importance in the years since their publishing. Hughes and some other modernists envisioned a future in which inequality would no longer pervade our society, but change has yet to come. Hughes believes both in societies' ability to change and the feasibility of a positive future for the people bearing losses under the current system. The value of Hughes' poetry stems from its ability to rouse hope in the hopeless and encourage others to believe in the possibility of change.

### I. Black Workers

The bees work.  
Their work is taken from them.  
We are like the bees—  
But it won't last  
Forever.

This poem is an example of the many popular metaphors that Hughes created that ordinary people could easily grasp that describe the structure of economic exploitation and the

relation between classes. Hughes helps ordinary readers understand the basic structure of class relations by revealing it through poetry. “Black Workers” provides readers with a way of understanding basic economic structure by comparing black workers to bees to show that it is a system in which labor power is exploited. However, he also wants to provide black workers with hope by saying that it won’t last forever, which announces that this system isn’t a permanent fact of the world.

The poem “Black Workers” was published in April of 1933. In this poem Hughes conceptualizes the relationship between the rich and poor by comparing poor, black workers to bees and rich, white men to the force that takes the bees’ hard work away from them. In one short stanza, Hughes conveys a strong message about just how little control black workers have over their lives and the value that white men assign to each black worker’s contribution to the labor force. In his poem, Hughes implies that the bees’ work defines them. In the opening line of the poem Hughes writes, “The bees work”, which tells the reader that the bees’ labor is a defining characteristic of their existence, which suggests that white people equate the value of a black worker to their contributions to the labor force.

The use of the analogy to bees implies several things about whites’ perception of black workers. The hierarchy of a bee hive consists of a queen bee and up to 50,000 worker bees. The worker bees’ lives are committed to the service of the queen and their responsibilities include every job critical to the existence and survival of their hive besides reproduction. None of the work that the worker bees do for the hive benefits them individually, but if the worker bees stopped working the hive would cease to function. Through this analogy Hughes implies that white employers treat black workers as indistinct and dispensable despite the fact that the whole of their contributions keep the system alive and running smoothly. The bees’ labor power is their

defining characteristic; their value is limited to their contribution to the labor force. Additionally, Hughes' analogy implies an intense hierarchy that consists of one queen with thousands of subservient workers attending her every need. The worker bees live with the knowledge that this hierarchy cannot and will never change. They work solely for the queen and have no opportunities to move up in the system they were born into.

The analogy of black workers to bees also likens black workers to insects, suggesting that they serve few purposes; they lack individual identities and are useful for only a handful of labor intensive jobs. Additionally, comparing black workers to bees, which number in the tens of thousands per hive, implies that black workers have no distinctive personalities and that an outsider cannot differentiate between any of them because they contribute identical types and amount of work, rendering it useless to attempt to distinguish what each person contributes to the project as a whole. Hughes' analogy speaks volumes about the type of treatment that black workers faced in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century because it implies that those with power, particularly white people with power, exploited black workers and disregarded their personal identities. Treating black workers en masse has caused a lasting negative impact on black employment and black rights that has lasted into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and will likely persist in the next century.

Despite likening the exploitation of black workers to bees, Hughes ends with a note of hope and a positive outlook on the future of black workers. Hughes writes: "But it won't last/ Forever" to say that an economic system that relies on the exploitation of an entire class of workers cannot sustain itself. Hughes writes that this system "won't" last forever to convey his confidence in his claim. He does not go so far as to claim that he knows when the current system will collapse, but his resolute statement assures readers that regardless of how long the current hierarchy may persist, it will fall. Because this system cannot last "Forever", we cannot predict

how long it will take to bring it down. Isolating the word “forever” on the last line leads me to believe that Hughes believed it could take longer than his lifetime before a change occurred. I believe it could very well take longer than my lifetime too to bring about change that actually makes a difference in the lives of the working class. Forever is an infinite amount of time and one can choose to interpret ‘forever’ as encouragement to continue to fight against a broken system because it will not endure, or to abandon hope altogether. Hughes, however, encourages us to continue to hope, because regardless of how long it takes, the system cannot last.

## II. Rising Waters

To You  
Who are the  
Foam on the sea  
And not the sea—  
What of the jagged rocks,  
And the waves themselves,  
And the force of the mounting waters?  
You are  
But foam on the sea,  
You rich ones—  
Not the sea.

In the poem *Rising Waters*, Hughes more explicitly discusses the relations between the rich and the poor. In this poem, which appears in an anthology, Hughes conceptualizes the relationship between the rich and the poor by comparing them to the foam on top of the sea and the sea itself, respectively. Through this analogy Hughes conveys his perception of wealth inequality in America. He views it as a hierarchy in which the rich exist in close proximity to the poor working class but separate from them. While their separateness does not make the “rich ones” intrinsically better than the poor it makes life easier for it because the foam floats on top of the water, which ensures that it does not need to contend with any of the obstacles within the ocean itself.

Hughes describes the “jagged rocks” in the water as an analogy for the obstacles that the poor face in a society with such stratified wealth. The foam on top of the sea, however, does not need to contend with these forces because it simply floats along the top of the ocean, indicating that the rich labor under the assumption that they exist in a relaxed state apart from the tribulations of the poor, close enough to witness it, but separate enough to be unconcerned by it. However, Hughes describes the ocean with terms to denote strength, which conveys to readers that rich people incorrectly assume that they need not worry about the growing force of the ocean and the obstacles it contends with. The “force of the mounting waters” implies that the strength of the waves and the rising waters will one day grow large enough to overcome the foam, dispersing it back into the ocean.

The waves crashing against the jagged rocks symbolizes the eventual erosion of inequality, policy, law, and all other barriers to equality overtime. It might take years, centuries even, to break down these obstacles, but eventually the rocks will give way to the mounting power of the sea. The history of inequality and discrimination may make it seem as though it’s an immovable force and breaking it down may seem impossible, but in time, much like the bees in “Black Workers”, the system will end, the obstacles will be broken down, it cannot endure.

Hughes writes that the rich ones “are/ But foam on the sea” in order to convey that the foam assumes it can endure separately from the rest of the ocean. Hughes implies that the foam remains oblivious to the growing force beneath it and the obstacles the rest of the ocean faces while it floats above by writing:

What of the jagged rocks,  
And the waves themselves,  
And the force of the mounting waters?

These lines show a distinct separation and disconnect between the foam and the sea and thereby the relationship between the rich and poor. Through this analogy Hughes shows us that rich and poor people exist in extremely close proximity to each other, but they do not believe they occupy the same space because society has treated them just separately enough that the rich do not take into consideration the way that society as a whole could be affected by the everyday challenges that the poor face. The rich float above of the poor without any other purpose but to relax on top of those beneath them and undervalue and ignore their efforts and hard work.

In the last lines of the poem Hughes reemphasizes the mindset of the rich as the foam on the sea. He writes:

You are  
But foam on the sea,  
You rich ones—  
Not the sea.

Hughes includes these lines in order to imply that rich people believe that however close they physically exist in reference to the sea, they remain separate, but the sea and the foam are one and the same. In this poem Hughes claims that rich people do not believe that they are the same as the working class. They believe that living on the top stratum of the economic hierarchy makes them distinct from and impervious to the struggles of the working class. In reality, however, the foam that floats on top of the sea could not exist without the sea itself. The churning movements of the sea create the foam, much like the rich profit from the exploitation of the labor power of the working class. The foam is powerless because it is dependent on the sea and possesses no strength of its own. All of the strength described in Hughes' poem exists within the ocean itself. The growing power and strength of the ocean will one day disperse the foam, because ultimately the foam has no power over the vastly more powerful sea.

Hughes' metaphor suggests that the power of the sea itself will eventually lead to the dispersal of the foam, meaning that the workers' strength will eventually destroy the economic hierarchy. However, waves crashing upon the rocks and dispersing the foam will inevitably produce more foam. Hughes chooses not to bring attention to the cyclical nature suggested by his metaphor, but this aspect of his depiction of inequality should not be ignored. Inequality will inevitably breed inequality. Hughes chooses not to emphasize this point but one should not ignore the potential for the recurrence of stratified economic inequality in our society.

In these two poems Hughes conceptualizes the relationship between the rich and the poor in different ways and he also represents the causes of economic inequality in different ways. In "Rising Waters", Hughes depicts inequality as a hierarchy in which rich people are the same as the sea but do not need to contend with the obstacles that poor workers face. This elite class is produced through the exploitation of the working class. Hughes writes that the rich people ignore the issues facing the poor because the rich do not believe that they have any reason to be concerned with the forces that the barriers to advancement that poor people face in their everyday lives. The barrier between the rich and poor might look minimal, but every day the strength of the working class grows and Hughes believes the power to usurp the current system lies in the power of the poor workers. I believe that Hughes wants to say that if the rich continue to ignore that the source of their wealth lies with the working class, they will be surprised to ultimately find their wealth dispersed among the entire population when the working class overtakes them in strength and numbers. The sea has the power to create foam through its movements, but its growing strength tells readers that the sea has the potential to eventually disrupt the system completely.

Hughes others rich people and groups himself with the poor by referring to the rich ones as “you” throughout the poem. Hughes aligns himself with and shows that he’s an ally of the poor by calling out the rich one’s superiority complex. The parallel that Hughes draws between the rich and poor and the foam and the sea emphasizes the closeness of the two demographics while pointing out the rich people’s ignorance of this fact. The longer that rich people refuse to acknowledge or address the growing challenges facing the poor, the greater the force of the mounting waters will grow. As the divide between the two groups widens, the greater the resentment and frustration of the poor towards the rich will grow.

In “Black Workers” on the other hand, Hughes represents the causes of inequality as a force outside of the control of the black workers. He describes but does not name the force that takes away the work from the bees who are defined by the work that they do, but we know that this force contributes to the inequality that the black workers face. No matter how hard the bees or black workers work or how much output they produce or how efficiently they work, that work is consistently taken away from them. The poem itself does not divulge who or what takes the bees’ work away from them, but readers can infer that whatever is forcibly taking their work helps maintain the current system of inequality. Taking everything that workers produce away from them ensures that this system endures because it prevents black workers from amassing their wealth to break free of the system and the profits of their work continue to benefit the upper class instead of those who labored to produce the goods.

Black workers, like the bees, have no choice in the matter when they have their work taken from them and white people treat them as though they have no other purpose besides the work that they can contribute to the labor force. While Hughes’ poem does not explicitly suggest it, this contributes to the problem of growing inequality because the longer the black workers get

treated as though they have no individual value, the greater the gap of inequality will grow.

Additionally, when Hughes writes about the bees' work, he writes that "Their work is taken from them", which shows that the contributions the black workers are making should be regarded as their own and should not belong to anyone but themselves and yet the rich, white people take the product of black workers' hard work away from them without their consent.

This uneven distribution of power between the rich and the poor and the black workers and their employers cannot sustain itself. Eventually poor people and black workers will reach a breaking point. Hughes addresses the unsustainability that characterizes these inequality gaps by illustrating how he imagines change will one day come about. In both poems Hughes hints at or explicitly states his belief that one day poor black people will overcome the inequality that they currently face.

In *Black Workers* Hughes does not specify how change will manifest itself, but he definitively writes that the current system will not last forever. He writes that even though they are like the bees now, it won't last forever, which implies both that the black workers may not always be regarded like bees and that there will come a day that their work is no longer taken from them. Hughes believes that the way that employers treat black workers currently will change. Even though black workers are like bees now and in some ways, they will not be like bees forever, thus Hughes has pointed out the limits of his metaphor. The bees describe the current existence of black workers; they exist in a temporary bee-like state that will last for an indefinite amount of time but cannot last forever.

Hughes' choice of words in this poem represents both the endurance of the black workers and the lack of control that they have over their station in life. He writes "We are like the bees—  
/But it won't last/ Forever" which tells the reader that the bees have endured this cycle of having

their work taken from them for as long as living memory. Hughes doesn't say anything about how the system might change or what needs to occur to initiate the process of change, but we know for certain that the system of having the bees work continuously and without recognition or reward for their labor cannot sustain itself. Change will occur in the future, but Hughes and the workers cannot be sure of when.

In "Rising Waters", there is a subtler hint of the changes that Hughes expects will upend the system of inequality. Hughes describes the obstacles facing the sea as "jagged rocks", while in the succeeding lines he describes the growing force of the ocean itself. The ocean may rage against the jagged rocks for the time being but the longer the waves and the sheer force of the water flow against and around the rocks, the less jagged they'll become. The obstacles the sea encounters will erode away with time and poor blacks will prevail in the face of adversity.

The most significant line about change in this poem comes after Hughes' mention of the obstacles the sea faces. Hughes indicates that the rich should remain aware of the "force of the mounting waters". This line implies both an increasing amount of power brewing in the ocean over time and that this ever-increasing strength right beneath the surface will eventually grow strong enough to affect the foam floating carelessly on top of the sea, harming those on top without them even seeing it coming because of their willful ignorance. The title of the poem itself, "Rising Waters", indicates that some process of change has been initiated and will eventually result in a revolution of the current system. The double meaning of the word "rising", which is used to describe both the increasing force and strength of the water and also implies an armed protest against authority or some sort of revolt, suggests to readers what the future holds for the poor and the rich in this scenario.

The rich are “but foam on the sea”, and what cause for concern does the foam floating on top of the ocean have for the things which they think cannot harm them? This shall prove to be their downfall, for in this line Hughes has shed light on how he believes change will come about. The force of the mounting waters threatens the existence of the foam without it realizing. The continued growth of the power of the water will upend the parasitic relationship between the rich and the poor and disperse the rich, and their wealth, among the poor and diminish the current unequal economic distribution.

### III. Tinkering with the Machine

The images and feelings that Langston Hughes evokes in his poetry have a strong impact on readers’ hope for the future and their belief in the possibility of change. Nearly one hundred years later, many scholars still attempt to understand and discover an explanation for why the inequality gap came to exist, why it persists, and what we can do to break the cycle and provoke change. One scholar attempting to do this is Brendan O’Flaherty, an economist at Harvard University. In his book *the Economics of Race in the United States*, O’Flaherty explores “race as a social and biological construct to make a compelling argument for why race must play a major role in economic and public policy” (Cover copy). He believes that good policies can make a difference with a caveat that “no single engine of racial inequality in one area of social and economic life is strong enough to pull the entire train by itself” (Cover copy). Every aspect of social and economic inequality is interconnected and therefore changes made in one area of policy will not fix the entire economic system. According to O’Flaherty, economists attempt to start with a simple story about how people interact and draw as many implications as they can from it so we can see whether the story makes sense. In one section of his book, O’Flaherty

attempts to explain the gap of inequality between blacks and non-Hispanic whites in employment and earnings through the use of various models.

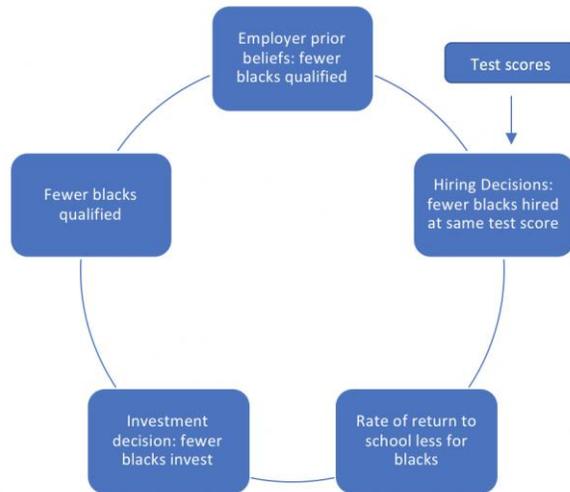


Figure 1.

One of these is a circular model (pictured above) and was first developed by Glenn Loury and Steven Coate and uses Bayesian reasoning, which allows economists to reason about a world in which people's minds are not blank slates while also taking into account that people's experiences force them to modify their beliefs. In this model, O'Flaherty explains, employers have prior beliefs about workers, employers give tests to determine a candidate's level of qualification and interpret those tests in light of their prior beliefs, and hire based on their updated beliefs. Workers decide whether to invest in honing different skills based on the results they see in the market for those skills, workers' investment decisions produce different proportions of qualified workers, and employers' prior beliefs are consistent with the proportions of qualified workers that investment decisions produce.

For example, if employers believe that blacks are less qualified than whites, then they'll require higher test scores from blacks and blacks will be less likely to be hired for the skilled job

and more likely to go into an unskilled job for which they are paid less. Other blacks then see that the investment in schooling does not pay off for them the same as it does for whites and therefore they invest less in their education than whites, which means they are on average less likely to be qualified, and employers' prior beliefs that blacks are less likely to be qualified are justified.

On the basis of this model, which describes inequality similarly to how Hughes explains it in his poems, O'Flaherty envisions the relationship between the rich and the poor like two circles. One that continuously produces fewer and fewer skilled black workers, and an outer circle of skilled workers who, through inherited privilege, do not need to contend with this cycle of digression and instead receive fair returns on their investments into qualifications for various skills. O'Flaherty believes that the only way to break out of this cycle is through radical changes made to one of the steps that contributes to the endurance of this cycle. Specifically, he believes that focusing on the education component, which actually has been a focus of policy over the past decade, would contribute to significant improvements in the level of employment and wages for minorities. However, regardless of what changes are made to break up the cycle that produces lower wages and lower skilled work for blacks, O'Flaherty recognizes that changes made to one part of the system have limited spillover effects into other spheres of life.

*The Economics of Race in the United States* discusses why race must play an important role in economic and social policy. In his book O'Flaherty discusses over a dozen spheres of life and how race affects them. He draws connections between each of these spheres and summarizes different policy options that haven't worked or have yielded relatively positive results, but he fails to help readers visualize what a more equitable future might look like. In his conclusion, O'Flaherty discusses the complicated matter of attempting to fix the system through one point of



in the same way, in fact, the others hold it back. The good news though, is that sometimes improvements in one area can have spillover effects in others. Better schools could lead to better jobs and better jobs in this generation can lead to better schools in the next.

#### IV. Imagining a New Society

What O’Flaherty does not do, however, is help us imagine the future that these policies intend to generate. He discusses a myriad of problems and potential solutions and points out all of the ways that various aspects of social and economic policy affect one another but nowhere in his book does he attempt to help readers visualize what our society might look like if we implemented policies that ended discrimination in each of the spheres of life pictured in Figure 2. Langston Hughes helps fill this void with poetry that enables readers to feel and envision what a fair society might look like. Hughes wants to give ordinary people hope and he wants to help people imagine what a fundamentally different economic system and way of life would look like. O’Flaherty’s work focuses on how to get to this future but not what it will look like and Hughes helps us imagine what the future will look like but not necessarily the way to get there. Hughes tries to name the change, he does not talk about technical tinkering with a complex system, that’s what we need policymakers for. Instead, Hughes imagines the structure of a different society. In “Letter to the Academy” for example, Hughes conveys emotional images of the aftermath of a revolution, a picture of a society in which all of the policies that O’Flaherty writes about have accomplished what they intended.

Hughes’ work aims to name the source of the destruction and violence against black people because society cannot move forward without first acknowledging the system that is oppressing them. Without addressing the source of the problem and confronting it directly, anger will continue to poison oppressed populations. In “Letter to the Academy”, Hughes describes a

Revolution that will liberate poor people. In this poem Hughes addresses “the gentlemen who have got to be classics” by writing “lovely” books about history and asks them to please step forward and speak about the Revolution. He implies that society reveres and respects these men who rose to fame by writing misleading books about history. These writers deceived hundreds of thousands of readers by sugarcoating historical events to play down the effect of problems such as economic inequality on marginalized groups. They created works of art at the expense of other people’s pain and wrote stories that censor people’s real experiences. By altering history in this way, these writers encourage readers to see beauty in violence and ignore the existence of systemic problems like economic inequality.

In “Letter to the Academy”, Hughes intensely questions the men who have written historical texts that have now become ‘classics’, texts that fail to understand or convey the toxic facets of our society. Written in 1933, this revolutionary poem calls out the people who wrote sugarcoated versions of history and distributed these false accounts to the masses. People use these texts to hide from the truth and to fool themselves into believing that society can only function by taking advantage of marginalized groups and exploiting their labor power. The “classics” Hughes refers to have led their readers to believe that the triumph of one’s spirit is more important than the triumph of their body. They want us to believe that its ok for millions of people to live in destitution as long as their spirit triumphs.

In the third stanza of “Letter to the Academy” Hughes describes what the Revolution will look like:

Speak about the Revolution—where the flesh triumphs (as  
well as the spirit) and the hungry belly eats, and there  
are no best people, and the poor are mighty and no  
longer poor, and the young by the hundreds of  
thousands are free from hunger to grow and study and  
love and propagate, bodies and souls unchained

without my Lord saying a commoner shall never marry my  
daughter or the Rabbi crying cursed be the mating of Jews  
and Gentiles or Kipling writing never  
the twain shall meet—

Hughes imagines a Revolution that liberates poor people from hunger, both physically and mentally, enabling them to grow and develop in ways that they currently cannot. In this stanza Hughes helps readers envision an uprising for change and the effects of a fundamental social transformation. Both “Black Workers” and “Rising Waters” reflect some of the characteristics of Hughes’ vision of an equitable society. In these poems Hughes implicitly discusses the intense hierarchical structure of our current economic system. In “Black Workers” Hughes equates the structure of economic inequality to the hierarchy of a beehive. One queen wields complete power over the worker bees and an even more powerful force systematically takes away the bees’ work. In “Rising Waters” Hughes compares rich people to foam floating on top of the sea, and although the foam has no power of its own, the representation of rich people as foam and poor people as the sea signifies the drastic differences in the size of these classes. Part of Hughes’ vision for the future involves the deconstruction of these hierarchies. Hughes imagines a world where “there are no best people”, which suggests a future where everyone is valued equally and power is distributed fairly. He imagines a world without feudalism, or religious discrimination, or Kipling writing “never the twain shall meet”, which refers to British imperialism and justifies discrimination by claiming that two things are too different to coexist. The society that Hughes envisions will have social, economic, racial, and religious equality. In every sphere of society Hughes’ imagines a future in which people are freed from the chains of the social constructs that have stunted their development.

Furthermore, he imagines a future in which “the poor are mighty and no/ longer poor” meaning that not only do poor people now have power, but they also no longer face destitution.

“Black Workers” reflects this idea because it implies that one day the bees’ work will no longer be taken from them. If the bees’ work is not taken, they retain possession of it and therefore gain more control over their individual labor power. By regaining control over their bodies and their work, black workers can accrue wealth and power over time, thereby slowly diminishing the gap of inequality between the rich and the poor.

In this stanza of “Letter to the Academy” Hughes also discusses all of the ways that today’s poor people could prosper if they did not live in a world that restrained them. If poor people are free from hunger, Hughes writes that they would then be free to “to grow and study and/ love and propagate, bodies and souls unchained”. In the current system, poor people suffer from both physical and mental hunger. Unchaining their bodies and souls will result in both physical and intellectual growth because up until this point they have not had access to the resources and nutrients needed to help them grow and develop. The revolution Hughes envisions will liberate poor people from both physical and intellectual hunger and allow them to flourish in all the ways that their chains had previously prohibited.

Despite the obvious differences between Hughes and O’Flaherty’s depictions of inequality in the United States, they convey similar ideas. In both Langston Hughes’ poems and in Brendan O’Flaherty’s model, the white, rich employers exist separately from the poor, black workers and contribute to inequality by helping sustain the systems that produce the uneven distribution of wealth and power. Even if rich people don’t directly interact with the system, their indifference towards poor and underprivileged minorities influences the growth of the gap of inequality and allows the system to endure. If we compare O’Flaherty’s vision of the two rings to Hughes’ visualization in “Rising Waters”, we can imagine the employers in the outer ring, indifferent towards and unaffected by the inner circle which represents the struggles of black

workers, like the foam on the sea. They are unaffected by what is happening just beneath the surface because the forces that the poor must contend with, like the forces that power the phases of the oppressive cycle in the inner circle, do not significantly affect people born with the privilege of floating on the sea and existing outside the realm of the poor.

Both writers grapple with the same problem and attempt to articulate how change will happen. Regardless of which perspective we choose to look at inequality from, we can see that because the struggles that poor, black people must face on a daily basis do not directly impact the rich or white in obvious ways, the rich and white do not care. Hughes and O'Flaherty's models of inequality also differ in who they believe will incite change. Economists like O'Flaherty believe that they can diminish the effects of systemic inequality and discrimination by crafting the right kind of legislation. However, in each of Hughes' poems that I analyzed in this paper, he implies that the black workers will play a significant role in ending the oppression of their class. Hughes is writing for everyone who's been negatively impacted by economic inequality and wants to empower ordinary working people to get involved in an actual political movement to create change. While policy may prevent employers and business owners from overtly discriminating against any one group of people, racism and the exploitation of the working class has persisted. Economic policies have limits and may not actually make a significant difference in altering an employer's behavior towards the working class. Hughes' writing suggests that policy makers should look beyond the power of legislation and remain aware of the mounting strength within the black working class. Legislation may help, but it has limits, much like the working class has a limit with how much oppression it will put up with.

This problem has persisted over centuries and certainly will persist into the next. In the future, the way that scholars and everyday people try to come to terms with the rapidly growing

inequality across the country and the way that they try to encourage others to believe in the possibility of change may look very similar to Hughes' and O'Flaherty's explanations. Regardless of our backgrounds, understanding the inequality that pervades our society and believing in change vitally affects the rapidity with which change takes place. However, whether or not people choose to believe in the possibility of change, these systems of oppression and inequality may exist now, but they cannot sustain themselves; it won't last forever. Both writers provide valuable ways of thinking about economic inequality, but there is only so much that policy can do and there is value in considering the solution to economic inequality through a broader lens, not just from the point of view of an economist. We need policymakers, but we shouldn't underestimate the power of attacking the problem of economic inequality from multiple sides. We shouldn't underestimate the power that ordinary people have to contribute to the solution and we should value the power that poets like Langston Hughes have to empower people to do so.

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