

THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR  
NEW YORK, NY 10007

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:** November 21, 2020, 1:00 PM

**CONTACT:** [pressoffice@cityhall.nyc.gov](mailto:pressoffice@cityhall.nyc.gov), (212) 788-2958

**TRANSCRIPT: MAYOR DE BLASIO, FIRST LADY MCCRAY DELIVER REMARKS  
AT THE RENAMING OF JAMES BALDWIN LAWN AND LANGSTON HUGHES  
PLAYGROUND**

**Mayor Bill de Blasio:** Thank you so much, Eric. And Eric, thank you. You've devoted so much to chronicling and celebrating and uplifting the extraordinary history of Harlem and of so many great people. And you're right, too many people whose names are not known well enough. And we are going to do a lot to change that. Thank you for having profoundly contributed to that work for many years. Let's thank Eric for all he has done.

[Applause]

If we were just celebrating parks, it would be powerful in this moment. We've all been through so much this year. It's been a painful, difficult year for everyone. And one of the places we found our peace and our hope is in our parks. And I got to tell you, I'm so thankful to all these good people who work to keep the parks great. It's not been an easy year for any of them, but they kept coming out there and doing the work. Let's thank them.

[Applause]

So thanks to all of them. We've had one of the things that sustains us, it's been there for us throughout. So for just celebrating parks, it's a moving occasion. We're doing something more. We're setting history, right. This is one of many, many things we have to do. We've had the joy – that was an amen over there. We have had the joy and the powerful experience, all of us this year, of celebrating a truth in this city, every time we establish one of those murals that said Black Lives Matter, right? [Inaudible] thank you for being a leader in that effort. All over the city, that has changed things to just say out loud, clearly, and in all the right places, Black lives matter. That's one thing. But there's another and another and another, and another thing we have to do. It is always our work, whether it is celebrating history or giving names, where they need to be given, whether it's the work we need to do with our young people, whether it's the fundamental reforms we need to make in policing or education. This is a time for transformation. So the people we honor now are perfectly chosen. Not just if you want to look backwards, but if you want to look forward they will inform you just as much.

I want to thank everyone for being here to celebrate James Baldwin and Langston Hughes, for all they have done for all of us. But again, it's not ancient history, their words and writings, they have been written yesterday. They could have been written after the death of George Floyd, right? They're just as powerful and current. But they call us to action. They're not academic,

they're real. And that's another reason we celebrate them. I want to thank everyone because gathering together is powerful, especially in this moment. Even with social distancing and masks, gathering together has a power. And it means something that all of you are here. And I especially want to thank a representative of the Baldwin family who's here with us, Carole Weinstein. Thank you so much.

[Applause]

And I'll be very quick before I have the joy of bringing up our First Lady. I read writing and she actually does writing. So I'm the amateur. I'm the warm up act. Chirlane and I went to a movie back in 2016. And it was powerful because the movie was devoted to bringing forward works of James Baldwin that had not yet been seen or heard, a manuscript that wasn't finished and wasn't known. The movie, very powerful title, *I Am Not Your Negro*, who has seen this movie? Any of you? Incredibly powerful, wasn't it? Because when we watched that movie, again it was like we were being told right then and there, what we had to do. And this was 2016, four years ago before some of what we experienced this year. But a reminder that some people see in a way that elevates us all.

James Baldwin was able to bring out fundamental truths through his writing that kind of cut through all the attempts to obscure or explain away the pain and the injustice. He made it raw and real and helped it to enter people's consciousness in a different way. That's an extraordinary contribution. That's why we honor him. And we honor what he did for Harlem. The greatness of Harlem, when we say that magical name, what it means all over this world is based on everyday Harlemites, but it's also based on the people who found in Harlem their truth and then made it universal for all of us.

And then Langston Hughes. We say Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes comes to mind immediately along with other great figures. But remind us of what happened here the blossoming of talent and creativity that has never been seen anywhere else in the same way. And he too was telling us what we needed to know and instructs us to this day. And with the simple question, what happens to a dream deferred? A lot of you know this poem and how powerful and how simple it is. But then as if he had a crystal ball to 2020, he said, or does it explode? The last line, or does it explode? And the answer of course was yes it does explode if it is not addressed. And in our time we have to address it. And we can. This is one small act of many. But my last point is to harken back to that renaissance. The word renaissance means rebirth. Talk about the Harlem Renaissance many years ago, but it reminds us of the human ability to create again, no matter what is thrown at us. So we now not only have to do the work of justice and we have to see this transformational moment and own it. We're now the agents of history. This is our historical moment to change the world and we can, and we will.

But we have a second mission as New Yorkers. We have to bring our city back from the coronavirus and we can and we will. We can, and we will because New Yorkers do that.

[Applause]

We make things happen and we will never be defeated. So with that, I'm going to turn to a real writer, a real poet. She's also the co-chair of our task force, the City government's Task Force on Racial Inclusion and Equity. And Chirlane McCray has been driving this entire administration and saying, this moment must be answered. And we need to build in this moment, change. The group she leads is leaders of color within every agency of the City government who have gathered together to plot a course. And that course involves putting justice and equity at the forefront of every decision made by your government. It has never been done before in this fashion, but she's taking that inspiration that she has gained from James Baldwin and Langston Hughes and all the other greats. And she's putting into action through that task force. So yes, I'm in love with her, so maybe I'm a little subjective. But I think she's the right person at the right moment to be our First Lady Chirlane McCray.

[Applause]

**First Lady Chirlane McCray:** Good afternoon, everybody.

**Audience:** Good afternoon.

**First Lady McCray:** Thank you, Bill. And thank you all for being here today. I am so grateful for this moment. Truly grateful to be here in this neighborhood where so many of my ancestors lived. It is a moment that's been too long in coming. And I think about all the pain, tremendous pain that we've experienced this year. The protests, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, the pandemic of course, this election. So much that we've been through. And I think that Langston Hughes really summed it up in one line in his poem, *The Black Man Speaks*. And he said, I swear to the Lord. I just don't see why democracy means everything – everybody, but me. Am I right? Yeah. Yeah. It's felt that way for far too long. And today is about saying again, that Black history matters in New York City. Black voices matter in New York City and Black lives matter in New York City.

[Applause]

Our children and our families are going to come here in the months and the years to come, and they're going to know Langston Hughes. They're going to know James Baldwin. And they're going to be able to say our stories matter too. Right? They're going to know our stories matter. And those names are going to live on that history will live on in them. So thank you all for being here. It's a great day.

**Mayor:** And I want to bring forth our Parks Commissioner. I got to say, this has been a labor of love for Mitch Silver. We've worked together over these years on parks equity, on investing in parks that are not just the biggest and the most famous, but on everyday neighborhood parks. And I want to thank him for that because that's made a huge difference in neighborhoods all over the city. But then Mitch came forward with a tremendous initiative to rename, to set history right, to reflect reality. And today we're talking about two of the really powerful, famous names. But there's a lot of other people that are going to have parks named after them, tremendous contributors to this city, African-American leaders, some famous, some not so famous, but all of

whom made a profound difference. And all of whom deserve to be celebrated. And Mitch, thank you for bringing all their names forward. Our Parks Commissioner Mitch Silver.

[Applause]

**Commissioner Mitchell Silver, Department of Parks and Recreation:** Thank you, Mayor de Blasio. And thank you First Lady Chirlane McCray. And thank you, all of you who have joined us here today. Mayor, I want to personally thank you. From day one, you pushed everyone who worked for the City and lived in the city to pursue a fair, more equitable and just city. So I want to thank you for that. Please, that deserves a round of applause because not every mayor has that commitment and I'm proud to work for an administration that doesn't just talk the talk, but walks the walk.

[Applause]

I would like to especially acknowledge members of the Baldwin and Hughes families. With us today representing son, Daniel Baldwin, one of James Baldwin's nephews, Ms. Carole Weinstein, thank you for being with us.

[Applause]

Daniel lives in Rhode Island and could not be with us today. Trevor Baldwin, also a nephew of James Baldwin, who is currently overseas and could not attend sends the following regards. It's definitely another proud and timely tribute to Uncle Jimmy's legacy especially in relation to the history of Harlem and in New York City. Extend our gratitude to all those responsible for bringing this landmark to fruition. And then Marjorie [inaudible] cousin of the head of the Langston Hughes Family Museum in Indiana, who could not travel to be with us today. Share that she is very appreciative of this dedication and the acknowledgement by New York City Parks.

So this summer as the news of Christian Cooper's harassment and George Floyd's death gave rise to protest across the country, we held listening sessions with staff to provide a safe space and discuss how they were feeling in light of those horrible acts and the global outcry for social change. Inspired by those conversations, and I want to thank Karina Smith and Crystal Howard who helped facilitate those reflections.

[Applause]

And who also led the group that helped with the renamings, inspired by those conversations, our commitment was renewed. In my six years as commissioner, I've been committed to creating safe, inclusive spaces for staff and for park goers. And to further demonstrate that commitment, I know we must actively recognize inequities in our parks system and look for opportunities to serve as agents for change, progress, and equity. In June, we created a Juneteenth Grove in Cadman Plaza Park. And promised to name a selection of park spaces for Black Americans with local, national, and historical relevance. And now these ten parks spaces throughout the city, memorialized Black women, men, and a Black settlement group for their contributions to the

Black experience and local relevance. As Parks Commissioner and as a Black man, the names of these spaces are very important to me. They represent a renewed effort to incorporate Black history into the fabric of our city.

Here, we honor the legacies of two beloved New York icons and groundbreaking writers who wrote famously captured the Black experience in America. I do want to stop and just share with you all those who were so supportive and instrumental. First and foremost, the Schomburg Center, the borough historians that really helped us select and do research on the ten names throughout the city.

[Applause]

Of course, special, thanks to our Parks staff. In a matter of months, we want to make sure we got this done by Black Solidarity Day, Community Board 10, the Greater Harlem Chamber of Commerce, Harlem Arts Alliance, Friends of St. Nicholas Park, Friends of [Inaudible] Square Park, City College that sits in the foreground of this majestic lawn.

[Applause]

And also Street Corner Resources. We have CM Perkins, Representative Linda Wood is here. Of course, Gale Brewer and the National Action Network. I thank all of you for making this day a reality.

[Applause]

So these two represent increased representation in our park system, as we work to address the impacts of racial and social justice. This is only the beginning of our renewed efforts to address inequities in response to community requests. We plan to rename [Inaudible] in the Bronx and other spaces next year. As we continue listening to our staff and community members, our support will evolve along the way and increase our understanding. As Baldwin once wrote, not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced. Thank you all for this very special day.

[Applause]

**Mayor:** I want to see if they have the whole list of all of the parks. I think everyone should hear them if you have them. Digital works. We're experiencing technical difficulties. We'll be right with you. But as we're getting it out – yeah, that's right. But we want people to hear it's all five boroughs. And this is important to hear all the names.

**Commissioner Silver:** So we know the two in Manhattan, which is James Baldwin Lawn and Langston Hughes Playground. In Brooklyn. It is Susan Smith McKinney Steward and Maritcha Lyons. In the Bronx, Treemont would be renamed Walter Gladwin ark. The Heritage Field across from Yankee Stadium will be renamed after Elston Gene Howard the first player, Black player to play for the Yankees.

[Applause]

In Queens, Ella Fitzgerald and Helen Marshall, the first Black Borough President of Queens. And then a beloved one that got a huge support, Reverend Dr. Maggie Howard for a Stapleton Playground. She's known as the Black Mother Theresa of Staten Island. Sandy Ground Woods will be named after a section of Fairview Park. So those are the ten names we're so proud. Please go and visit them. You'll see shortly, some will have special signs. They'll be interpretive signs. So it's not only the sign, but anyone who will visit those parks will learn about those outstanding contributions. Thank you.

###