

Black Reflections

Thoughts from the Bedrock

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Accompanying Literary Works

ONE Du Bois, W. E. B. *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*. Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920.

TWO Hughes, Langston. "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." *The Crisis*, vol. 22, no. 6, June 1921, p. 248.

THREE Beyoncé, and Lamar, Kendrick. "NILE." *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*—Music from and Inspired By, Roc Nation, 2022.

SEVEN Du Bois, W. E. B. "The Flood, the Red Cross and the National Guard." *The Crisis*, vol. 35, no. 1, Jan. 1928, pp. 5-7. The Crisis Publishing Company.

EIGHT Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.

NINE Walker, Margaret. *This Is My Century: New and Collected Poems*. University of Georgia Press, 2013.

Inspired by LaToya Ruby Frazier's photographic works of the Monongahela River, *Black Reflections: Thoughts from the Bedrock* presents an abstract river sculpture alongside a curated constellation of eleven literary, speech, and poetic works —from W. E. B. Du Bois to Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker, Toni Morrison, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Beyoncé, and Kendrick Lamar—that frame rivers as living archives of Black ancestry, livelihood, and memory.

Through reflective surface and projected image, the installation positions rivers as moral and contemplative sites where neglect, racial capitalism, and communal care converge, inviting viewers to confront ethical histories and futures embedded in waterways.

FOUR Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. AK Press, 2020.

FIVE Du Bois, W. E. B. "The Black River." *The Poems of W. E. B. Du Bois*, edited by Herbert Aptheker, International Publishers, 1973.

SIX Du Bois, W. E. B. "The Housatonic River." Speech to Searles High School Alumni, Great Barrington, Massachusetts, 21 July 1930. *W. E. B. Du Bois Papers*, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst.

ELEVEN Du Bois, W. E. B.. "Of the Sorrow Songs." *The Souls of Black Folk*. A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903, pp. 155-164.

TWO I've known rivers: I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins. My soul has grown deep like the rivers. I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young. I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep. I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it. I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset. I've known rivers: Ancient, dusky rivers. My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

One time, I took a swim in the Nile, (one time, I took in a swim in the Nile), I swam the whole way, I didn't turn around, Man, I swear, It made me relax when I came down, (when I came down), I felt liberated like free birds, I'm stimulated now, (stimulated), Plunging away 'less my body's on top, (stimulated, stimulated now), All of these currents might cost me my life right now, (right now, right now), Where danger finds me, it follows with tides, (follows with tides), Many miles ahead of me, still I'm in stride, That's some good,

I love you impossible dolphin, quietest in the river, breathing close to the surface. I'm grateful for what you remember even if you never say. And I'm keeping your name in my mouth like a river internal, like this love ever flowing. I am keeping your name in my mouth every day. All day.

ten: honor your boundaries
Yes. On the banks of this river, I surrender to the boundaries that land is teaching. Yes. I surrender to the demands of my dream for you and for myself. Which is love. Which is abundant rest. Which is a visionary world that looks so much like a dream, but when you close one eye, it opens. When you open up this close to the edge, land holds you and water moves through you. And what you thought was closed off to you opens up like possibility...If I can learn to sleep it is because my dreams are yours and for you and of us. It is because my love is an ocean, but my path is a river shaped by land that will heal us if we let it. And it flows back into the ocean anyway.

thirteen: refuse
So there is actually a digestive truth to the idea that the ancestors we lost in the transatlantic slave trade became whales...Don't sleep on sediment, at the bottom, knowledge grows...At the bottom, there is love so complicated that it doesn't dissolve, and yet we can't digest it. At the bottom, there are choices even if they seem microscopic in scale. At the bottom, who you were and what you were became a whale and please come back to me with all your scars and patterns.

seventeen: slow down
I don't know. What I do know is water. And how it rises to the surface when I think of you. Water and how it floods me when I know. Water and what it means and what it could do and how we need it.

ONE Across the river, in the greater city, where bronze St. Louis, that just and austere king looks with angry, fear-swept eyes down from the rolling heights of Forest Park, which knows him not nor hears him, there is something of the same thing, but this city is larger and older and the forces of evil have had some curbing from those who have seen the vision and panted for life; but eastward from St. Louis there is a land of no taxes for great industries; there is a land where you may buy grafting politicians at far less rate than you would pay for franchises or privileges in a modern town. There, too, you may escape the buying of indulgences from the great terminal fist, which squeezes industry out of St. Louis. In fact, East St. Louis is a paradise for high and frequent

Nature-defying cranes, grim elevators rise above pile on pile of black and grimy lumber. And ever below is the water, wide and silent, gray-brown and yellow.

What has happened? The thing that has happened in this valley has happened in hundreds of others. The town, the whole valley, has turned its back upon the river. They have sought to get away from it. They have neglected it. They have used it as a sewer, a drain, a place for throwing their waste and their offal. Mills, homes, and farms have poured their dirt and refuse into it; outhouses and dung heaps have lined its banks. Almost as if by miracle some beauty still remains in places where the river for a moment free of its enemies and tormentors, dark and exhausted under its tall trees, has sunk back to vestiges of its former charm, in great, slow, breathless curves and still murmurs.

in a sense, the spiritual center. You know we are judged by what we neglect. The new gown may be quite perfect but the other matters of dress betray the untrained and uncouth. Perhaps the very freeing of spirit which will come from giving up our attempt to do the impossible, from our ignoring of our greatest source of beauty and completeness, and degrading it with filth and refuse, perhaps from that very freeing of spirit will come other freedoms and inspirations and aspirations which may be steps toward the whole vast problem of country life and the diffusion and diversification and enrichment of culture throughout this land. Even if this vision sounds fantastic to the severely practical, certainly the cleansing of the Housatonic

will mean better health, less typhoid, safer recreation and lovelier vistas of beauty.

And so I have ventured to call the attention of the graduates of the Searles High school this bit of philosophy of living in this valley, urging that we should rescue the Housatonic and clean it as we have never in all the years thought before of cleaning it, and seek to restore its ancient beauty; making it the center of a town, of a valley, and perhaps—who knows? of a new measure of civilized life.

One woman stood all night waist-deep in rising water. A few rods away, but out of sight, her husband screamed for help. He could not be reached. After a while his screams stopped. In the morning there was no sign of him. Two young girls went to the Red Cross tent day after day to ask for news of their brother who had been taken to work on the levee at Greenville. At last the news came: he had been found drowned near the levee. The girls turned without a word and went in silence to their own tent, tears streaming down their faces. There was no sound of mourning, no lamentation in the camp. The calamity of all was too great for that easy expression.

but they are seeds in which the whole generation sleeps confident of a future. And for a moment it is easy to believe each one has one--will become all of what is contained in the spore: will live out its days as planned. This moment of certainty lasts no longer than that; longer, perhaps, than the spore itself.

She begged him for water and he gave her some of the Ohio in a jar. Sethe drank it all and begged more. The clanging was back in her head but she refused to believe that she had come all that way, endured all she had, to die on the wrong side of the river.

This Is My Century. Black Synthesis of Time III.
This is my century
I saw it grow
from darkness into dawn.
I watched the molten lava pour
from red volcanic skies;
Islands and Mountains heave
into the Sea
Move Man into the spiraled axis turn
and saw six suns and sunsets rise and burn.

TEN The Housatonic River is the natural Main Street of the Town of Great Barrington.

It should be a clear and limpid stream, flowing gently through grass, trees and flowers; flanked by broad roadways and parks as the lifestream of a town.

Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear; that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins. Is such a hope justified? Do the Sorrow Songs sing true?