BLACK EXPERIENCE IN
HISTORY AND MEMORY

# LANGSTON HUGHES

## *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*

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.

# GWENDOLYN BROOKS

## *Malcolm X*

*For Dudley Randall*

Original.
Ragged-round.
Rich-robust.

He had the hawk-man's eyes.
We gasped. We saw the maleness.
The maleness raking out and making guttural the air
and pushing us to walls.

And in a soft and fundamental hour
a sorcery devout and vertical
beguiled the world.

He opened us—
who was a key,

who was a man.

# KEVIN YOUNG

## *Money Road*

*for John T. Edge*

On the way to Money,
    Mississippi, we see little
ghosts of snow, falling faint

    as words while we try to find
Robert Johnson's muddy
    maybe grave. Beside Little Zion,

along the highwayside, this stone
    keeps its offerings—Bud & Louisiana
Hot Sauce—the ground giving

    way beneath our feet.
The blues always dance
    cheek to cheek with a church—

Booker's Place back
    in Greenwood still standing,
its long green bar

    beautiful, Friendship Church just
a holler away. Shotgun,
    shotgun, shotgun—

———

rows of colored
    houses, as if the same can
of bright stain might cover the sins

of rotting wood, now
mostly tarpaper & graffiti
holding McLaurin Street together—

*RIP Boochie*—the undead walk
these streets seeking something
we take pictures of

& soon flee. The hood
of a car yawns open
in awe, men's heads

peer in its lion's mouth
seeking their share. FOR SALE:
*Squash & Snap Beans.* The midden

of oyster shells behind Lusco's—
the tiny O of a bullethole
in Booker's plate glass window.

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Even the Salvation
Army Thrift Store
closed, bars over

every door.
We're on our way again,
away, along the Money

Road, past grand houses
& porte cocheres set back
from the lane, crossing the bridge

to find markers of what's
no more there—even the underpass
bears a name. It's all

too grave—the fake
sharecropper homes
of Tallahatchie Flats rented out

along the road, staged bottle trees
chasing away nothing, the new outhouse
whose crescent door foreign tourists

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pay extra for. Cotton planted
in strict rows
for show. A quiet

snowglobe of pain
I want to shake.
While the flakes fall

like ash we race
the train to reach the place
Emmett Till last

whistled or smiled
or did nothing.
Money more

a crossroads
than the crossroads be—
its gnarled tree—the Bryant Store

facing the tracks, now turnt
the color of earth, tumbling down
slow as the snow, white

---

& insistent as the woman
who sent word
of that uppity boy, her men

who yanked you out
your uncle's home
into the yard, into oblivion—

into this store abutting
the MONEY GIN CO.
whose sign, worn away,

now reads UN
Or SIN, I swear—
whose giant gin fans,

like those lashed & anchored
to your beaten body,
still turn. Shot, dumped,

dredged, your face not even
a mask—a marred,
unspared, sightless stump—

---

all your mother insists
we must see to know
*What they did*

*to my baby.* The true
Tallahatchie twisting south,
the Delta

Death's second cousin
once removed. You down
for only the summer, to leave

the stifling city where later
you will be waked,
displayed, defiant,

a dark glass.
There are things
that cannot be seen

but must be. Buried
barely, this place
no one can keep—

---

Yet how to kill
  a ghost? The fog
of our outdoor talk—

  we breathe,
we grieve, we drink
  our tidy drinks. I think

now winter will out—
  the snow bless
& kiss

  this cursed earth.
Or is it cussed? I don't
  yet know. Let the cold keep

still your bones.

# *Essay by* Evie Shockley

History, for Black people in the United States, is and always has been deeply charged and highly contested. The Middle Passage and centuries of slavery created a rupture in the transmission of cultural memory and related practices that would have connected the descendants of captive Africans with their ancestral past. This trauma was compounded by racist laws and customs that left the lives of the enslaved documented poorly, if at all. From the colonial period until well into the twentieth century, white people in power generally recorded those aspects of Black existence that were deemed economically or politically profitable (such as gender, purchase price, or demographic numbers), while Black people were widely denied the literacy, resources, or access necessary to maintain thorough records of their own. Until as recently as fifty years ago, the nation's history was primarily taught and promoted as a narrative constructed by, for, and about the most powerful members of the populace, in which Black people (and Black women in particular) appeared rarely, except in the most negative light.

The African American poetry tradition reflects this troubled relationship to history. Black poets have consistently used their poems to create a historical counternarrative, a corrective to the skewed one that has marginalized and denigrated Black people. Our poems regularly celebrate Black people's collective and individual achievements, shed light on figures and events whose importance is little known, record and remember injustices that have been swept under the rug, and elegize our tragedies. Poets of course draw their information and inspiration from rigorous research performed by scholars of African American history since the era of W.E.B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson. But because the archives of documentation upon which historians typically rely are so incomplete with respect to African Americans, poets often turn to memory—history's sibling—for personal accounts that are perhaps less verifiable or less central to key events, but which provide vital texture and precious details about experiences less likely to be a part

of the official record. Moreover, in places where the formal archive is most achingly silent, poets turn to their most important resource, imagination, using it in conjunction with history and memory to help us think about gaps in the record that can never be filled.

A closer look at three poems will enable us to examine a few of the myriad approaches African American poets have taken to incorporating the Black past in the poetic record. The first is Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," one of the earliest poems he wrote and published. Rivers held great significance in African American culture during the antebellum period: one could be sold "downriver," carried by the Mississippi deeper into slavery, or one could cross "the river Jordan," or the Ohio River, into freedom. Traveling by train to visit his father in Mexico, the young Hughes was moved—perhaps by the passing landscape, perhaps by the prospect of leaving the U.S. for the first time—to reflect on the fact that Black history does not begin in New World slavery. The poem speaks in a singular voice ("I've known rivers") of a collective experience:

> 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.

Hughes traces Black history back to the African continent and, further, to the area around the Euphrates known as "the cradle of civilization," before redeeming the Mississippi for a postslavery significance. The poem invites us to see the commonalities between Black people and rivers—characterizing both as "ancient, dusky," and "deep"—and thereby stakes a claim for African Americans to a venerable past, of which we can rightly be proud.

If Hughes's poem writes African Americans into ancient history, Gwendolyn Brooks's "Malcolm X" seeks to establish the terms on which one of her people's heroes, a recently fallen martyr, will be remembered. Written for Dudley Randall's influential 1967 poetry anthology, *For Malcolm: Poems on the Life*

*and the Death of Malcolm X*, within two years of the assassination of Black nationalist and human rights activist Malcolm X (El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz), Brooks's poem presents a portrait of a leader whose power emanated in part from his charismatic masculinity:

> He had the hawk-man's eyes.
> We gasped. We saw the maleness.
> The maleness raking out and making guttural the air
> And pushing us to walls.

These nearly violent images of Malcolm X might echo the way he was portrayed in the mainstream (white) media, but in Brooks's hands, they show him to be the embodiment of a crucial Black Power– and Black Arts–era imperative: self-determination. Brooks's portrait draws upon her own memories of the impact of his displayed confidence and uncompromising authority upon Black people, herself included ("We gasped"). Ready to take control of their own destiny, African Americans equated his "maleness" with a longed-for sovereignty. The poem amplifies the desirability of Black empowerment through the sonically exuberant compound adjectives with which it describes him ("ragged-round," "rich-robust") and the penultimate stanza's sexually suggestive metaphor: "He opened us— / who was a key," unlocking the political power within Black people.

The title of the third poem, Kevin Young's "Money Road," places us on a literal and metaphorical route to the scene of one of African American history's most visible and lamented tragedies of the past hundred years: the lynching of Emmett Till. In 1955, in Money, Mississippi, Till was brutally beaten, murdered, and submerged in the Tallahatchie River by the husband and brother-in-law of a white woman who accused the Black teen of flirting with her. Young's poem begins in nearby Greenwood, Mississippi, with a pilgrimage to bluesman Robert Johnson's "muddy / maybe grave," setting up a link between Till's death at 14 and Johnson's at 27, both coming far too early in their young lives. Money Road is another connector, not only naming the highway that leads from the one small town to the other, but also signifying the commercial interests that continue to drive structures of racism in the U.S.

The poem recounts some of what one sees along the way:

> the fake
> sharecropper homes
> of Tallahatchie Flats rented out
>
> along the road, staged bottle trees
> chasing away nothing, the new outhouse
> whose crescent door foreign tourists
>
> ———
>
> pay extra for. Cotton planted
> in strict rows
> for show. A quiet
>
> snowglobe of pain
> I want to shake.

Visual markers of Mississippi's Jim Crow past are maintained for the benefit of "foreign tourists," most of whom won't see the pain the speaker sees in the cotton field. Young's poem, first published in 2016 during the thick of the Black Lives Matter movement, invites us to look *through* the clouds of snow and fog at "things / that cannot be seen // but must be." In its stanzas we see layers of history: the antebellum era, when cotton was king; on top of it, the subsequent century of tenant farming and segregation, when Till's murderers were acquitted in a farcical trial; and on top of that, our contemporary (millennial) moment, when the poet confronts profitably marketed nostalgia for the plantation days and the "Old South," even as Black people are still being killed with impunity. Till's Civil Rights–era lynching is tethered to the slavery past *and* the purportedly "post-racial" present, Young's metaphors show us, just as a cotton gin motor was tied to the murdered boy's body *and* to cotton as an economic engine still running today.

Dominant narratives continue to obscure the contributions of Black people—especially Black women—to American history. But the African American poetry tradition offers an increasingly larger and more diverse representation of the

people, places, and events situated beyond the official record. For the foreseeable future, the poetic imagination will continue to be an essential complement to and conveyor of Black history and memory.

## *Discussion Questions*

1. Each of these poems serves a commemorative function but addresses a different subject. What are some of the ways these poems complement one another?

2. In evoking the historical experience of Black people, these poets not only speak their words and fashion their metaphors but also establish a mood for their poems. What sort of words might you use—solemn or celebratory, for example, or mournful or defiant—to describe the mood of each poem?

3. One way that poets in particular can voice a people's collective consciousness is through the fusion of imaginative and historical elements. Find specific images, metaphors, or references that seem especially imaginative and powerful. What do each of these tropes communicate about African American identity?

4. How do each of these poems, through the use of "I" and "we," position their speakers to the subjects being addressed?

5. One of the anthology's sections is called "Ideas of Ancestry." What sort of ideas about African and African American ancestry are put forward in these three poems?

6. These poems invoke and name the well-known historical figures Abraham Lincoln, Malcolm X, and Emmett Till, all of whom have been depicted widely in books, films, and works of visual art. How does the treatment of these historical figures overlap with, and possibly diverge from, what you already know about them? Do the poems confirm certain aspects of how you think about them? Do they bring out anything surprising?

**Poems for further reading**

James Weldon Johnson, "Lift Every Voice and Sing"
Richard Wright, "Between the World and Me"
Gwendolyn Brooks, "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon" and "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till"
Robert Hayden, "Middle Passage"
Lucille Clifton, "why some people be mad at me sometimes" and "i am accused of tending to the past"
Elizabeth Alexander, "Praise Song for the Day"
Natasha Trethewey, "Pilgrimage"
Clint Smith, "Your National Anthem"
Morgan Parker, "The President's Wife."