

## Rachel Blau DuPlessis: On "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"

The Congo, called by Lindsay the "Mistrel River," and astir with cannibals and witch-doctors, is reinterpreted as a pastoral, nourishing, maternal setting in Hughes: "I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep." "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" was composed in 1920 on the train to Mexico when Hughes was still in his teens (eighteen to be exact), and published a year later in *Crisis*. This poem was written as an internal dialogue with his father whose "strange dislike of his own people" baffled and disturbed Hughes, and, of course, implicated his son as object of that dislike (Hughes 1940, 54-56; Rampersand 1986, 37-40). In this poem, Hughes joins affirmative blackness to a universal human quest, by putting into a global context the racial stresses and demands of the United States.

The poem (as is well known) lists four key rivers, all "ancient as the world (Hughes 1926, 51; dedicated in *Weary Blues* to W. E. B. Du Bois). Three of the four flow through regions of colored peoples; they are "rivers in our past"?the word "our" is marked (Hughes 1940, 55). The fourth is a river still reverberating with the past hundred years of American history; it is the river on which, Hughes says, Lincoln "had seen slavery at its worst, and had decided within himself that it should be removed from American life (ibid.). With an "I" strongly indebted to Whitman as mediated by Sandburg, and with a diction drawn from spirituals, Hughes describes the the Mississippi down which he was traveling as he wrote the poem, as having a strong racialized meaning both by its often brown appearance ("I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset"), by the possibility of a cross-race mixing or single-race affirmation of different colors ("muddy" turns more "golden" -- a word appearing in "The Congo" as well), and by its historical meaning under slavery.

Thus Hughes journey doubles Lincoln's, and the concern with slavery, in the context of Hughes relationship with his father discloses a crisis of autonomy on a personal level, and a political rejection of a black man identifying with whites, for a white man (Lincoln) identifying with blacks. In contrast to the voyeuristic fantasies of "The Congo," this poem is a statement about vocation, an emancipation into blackness: "My soul has grown deep like the rivers" (Hughes 1926, 51).

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