

“what if” about “the river” by adrienne maree brown. A response paper. Krista Taves. 11/24

In brown’s futuristic story, “the river”, Detroit is being swallowed by a river that has become slick and polluted and yet still powerful, like a siren song. Don’t touch the water. Just don’t. How might this story be unpacked using the “what if” questions in which Karen Armina grounds her paper.

I grew up across the river in Southwest Ontario, a mere 45 minutes from Detroit. Most tv and radio is Detroit-based. We have the most American accents in Canada. Many of us get our weather in Fahrenheit, not Celsius. The perception of Detroit as a dangerous city is amplified by nightly murder reports, warnings not to go to places like Belle Isle, and an almost complete lack of awareness of how structural racism works in either country, cementing for many white Southwest Ontarians a sense of arrogant superiority.

This is what came to my mind when brown introduces the water woman: “she had been born not too far from the river, in chalmers, on the east side. as a child she played along the river banks. she could remember when a black person could only dock a boat at one black-owned harbor. she remembered it because all she’d ever wanted was to be on that river, especially after her grandfather passed. when she was old enough, she’d purchased the little boat, motor awkward on its backside, and named her **bessie** after her mama.” She lives much of her life in that boat, traveling to Belle Isle daily, circling its harbors, keeping Detroit, her city, in her gaze.

We also kept Detroit in our gaze. Many of our people work in Detroit’s hospitals, universities and factories. It’s good money. Good American money. And yet, there is a direct connection between Anti-Americanism, one’s proximity to the US and one’s economic dependence on it. Still, many of us bask in Detroit’s operas, concerts, the zoo, the Ford museum, Greenfield Pioneer Village, Cobo Hall, Comerica Park, cheap gas, booze and international flights. Should we cheer on the Red Wings because they’re closer or the Maple Leafs because they’re Canadian?

What if we organized life in our communities around an ethic of love?

The water woman “tried for years to keep an open heart to the new folks, most of them white, the city needed people to live in it and job creation, right? and some of these folks seemed to really care. but it could harden her heart a little each day, to see people showing up all the time with jobs, or making new work for themselves and their friends, while folks born and raised here couldn’t make a living couldn’t get investors for business, she heard entrepreneurs on the news speak of detroit as this exciting new blank canvass. she wondered if the new folks just couldn’t see all the people there, the signs everywhere that there was history and there was a people still living all over that canvas.”

What if we remembered the past and allowed it to guide us in imagining the future?

Belle Isle is known as Wah-na-be-zee (Swan Island) to the Chippewa and Ottawa nations, for the swans who return to its marshy breeding grounds every summer. The First Nations began living there more than 1000 years ago. In the 1700s it was settled by the Anishnaabe who became fur trading partners with the French. In 1759 after the British victory in Plains of Abraham, France high-tailed it out and English settlers moved in. Belle Island was a strategic stronghold. In 1763 a large alliance of First Nations led by Chief Pontiac, with the goal of driving out British settlers and the British Army from the Great Lakes Region, reclaimed the island but lost it soon after. No one could predict that the American Revolution would see the arrival of 1000s of Loyalists who received free land in Ontario as their reward. In the War of 1812, which Britain and Canada declare a victory and America declares a tie, Belle Isle was a desired prize, but it stayed with Detroit.

After that Belle Isle was dotted with mansions and harbors for Detroit's elite. By the 20th century it was a public park owned by the city. When bridges were built for golf carts, it became a party spot for camping, drinking and drugs. The nightly news shared the devastation. Pundits would ask, "When are they gonna clean up this park?"

brown speaks of this bridge in "the river." She takes "the hipsters" to see the sunken ruins but not to the bodies found every morning which are largely white and not from Detroit. Is the river swallowing those who come and do not understand?

In 2012, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, under whose leadership the water source for Flint shifted to a lead poisoned river, considered appointing an emergency manager because Detroit was a hot mess. Black Detroiters protested it as once more stripping black control and black land from black communities. "If Detroit is a black city then Belle Isle is black land."

What if we reclaimed our right and responsibility to dream wild and articulated a bold and powerful vision on behalf of our future descendants?

Within sight of Belle Isle is the Ambassador Bridge, the highest traffic border crossing between the two countries. The University of Windsor sits in its shadow. You can feel the rumbling of heavy trucks through the floors. When we buy cucumbers and organic mushrooms at our local groceries, they are likely grown in greenhouses outside Windsor by Central American migrant workers who can be paid below minimum wage. The produce they tend is carried across that bridge.

What if we practiced compassion and affirmed our connection to a global community?

The Renaissance Towers glisten like gold when driving to Windsor. In "the river" they are "abandoned squatted towers ... the tallest ode to economic crisis in the world." They were already wrecks in the 80s, poorly designed with structural, electrical and water problems, half empty. This past July it was announced that they may be demolished.

In the heyday of the auto industry, those living downwind woke every morning to cars covered in black dust. Industrial gases are now released at night so people can't see the ugly black/blue/purple/green/orange/charcoal plumes. Southwest Ontario and Detroit are designated

internationally as cancer hotspots because of the auto industry, the drift from oil refineries upstream, and the nuclear powerplants. Sometimes the river has been slick and glowing.

“What’s up with the river?” the water woman asks a friend. He answers, “Detroit’s in the river....It’s like an ancestral burying ground. Like a holy vortex of energy,” and she disagrees. “didn’t feel dead....felt alive and other.”

The questions in “How to survive” are world building prompts. What if there are also world cleansing prompts?

As the water woman guides Bessie around the island, she watches a boy touch the river and scream and a hungry person catching the glowing fish for dinner. And yet, there is still the song of the river, and the weeds under its surface sway.

Weeds that thrive in toxicity tell the story of what is being filtered and renewed.

The mayor and his posse of hipsters gather for an August cocktail. The river, glistening with toxins, draws itself into a “sickly and bright green” wave moving with precision and accuracy towards the mansion. As the water woman watches the wave approach she screams, “the island’s coming! the river is going to eat all you carpetbaggers right up?”

These “Detroit as a blank canvas” hipsters are doused in water that could dissolve them if it wished. The mayor and his wife are gone. All that’s left are “Heeled shoes, pieces of dresses and slacks phones and cameras floated” and very confused wet mostly white people.

“she still went out in her boat, looking over the edges near the island, searching inside the river... for some clue, some explanation. and every now and then, squinting against the sun’s reflection, she’d see through the blue, something swallowed, caught, held down so the city could survive. something that never died.”

What if we experienced home as a feeling, taking it with us wherever we might go?

This Christmas I’ll fly home.. Depending on how the plane approaches the Detroit Airport, I might see the whole panorama of that shimmering blue ribbon and the dot of Belle Isle, which was taken over by the Department of Natural Resources in 2013, two years before Brown published this story.

Perhaps it will be a sunny day and the river will glisten. I’ll drive across the Ambassador Bridge, look down at the University as trucks laden with produce and auto parts rumble overhead, and with the glittering Renaissance Center receding in the rearview mirror, head home.

Sources

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