

The source of the Nile is the Lunae Montes

The towering, glaciated peaks stretch across the African continent, synching it in a too-tight-belt that forces the coastline to balloon at the equator. The Mountains populate maps for centuries, transcribed, outlined, and traced from one representation of the globe to another — leaping from culture to culture, and always breaking the massive continent in two. Formed three million years ago as a cache of crystalline rock — gneiss, amphibolite, granite, and quartzite — pushed upward from the depths of the Earth, the Mountains of the Moon are a glittering mass of rock, crested with a perennial icy mantle.

The sun, though weak against the chill of the towering peaks, is strong enough in summer to melt the caps of ice and snow. Water trickles, a fountain pulled down by gravity. The myriad channels of snowmelt gather into a quickening stream, gradually reaching the temperate plateau. From the cryosphere, the Nile begins in drips.

The source of the Nile is lost

Or maybe, it is [the only piece](#) left to be found by a man wooed absolutely by the river's origins? We could even say [he fetishized](#) it. An explorer-autodidact, a linguist extraordinaire, [an erotica-connoisseur](#): years of a life dedicated to setting the source of a river in stone. He never did, and was certain no one else did, either. After his death, the travelers' archive — the extensive records of his extraordinary life — was [sent up in flames](#), turned to ash at his behest by a match lovingly struck by his wife (or by his sister-in-law, or by his secretary — who set the first paper alight is not entirely clear). Except, for some reason, a series of letters written of the Nile. This small cache of archival sources stand out like an ink blot on [an otherwise immolated life](#). From all that complexity of living, they are the morsel that becomes the record. Archives live like this, taking one moment and holding it aloft, letting texture, detail, and variation fall away. [Like the Nile](#), they seduce. [Like the Nile](#), they deceive. Like an archive, the Nile appears [more comprehensible than she will ever be](#).

The source of the Nile is sediment

White, nutrient rich clay sweeps along one tributary; black, equally rich clay sweeps along the other. [Swirling together](#) 1,000 miles north of the equator, forming a cradle around Khartoum, [the monochromatic sediment forms a rich, sustaining soup.](#) With annual certainty — “there is no record of the river’s ever having failed” — the water swells, carrying with it land from the center of the continent. Ninety six percent of the sediment has been swept northward from the highlands of Ethiopia, traveling thousands of miles in a watery dream. [This silt, deposited over a flood plain stretching beyond the river’s banks, is an alluvial whale fall, a veritable feast.](#) Water alone cannot ignite the Nile Valley into a verdant and vital basin: Add liquid to desert sand and watch — nothing will grow. A muddy lacquer of life force, a paste for seeds to grab hold of, to germinate from, to root in, and bloom: This is what makes the Nile a source. The water is worshipped, but [the mud, blue and white and black is what matters.](#) As a source of life in action, the Nile is churned up.

The source of the Nile is a map

Plotted and illustrated by Muhammad ibn Mūsā al-Khwārizmī in 833. The Persian polymath, astronomer in the House of Wisdom, knew Ptolemy hadn't gotten it quite right. First printed in [كتاب صور الأرض](#), the map was reproduced — perhaps slightly altered — through the centuries. See? There: the Nile staunchly branching on delicate legs, dragging water upwards into the desert, a [cartographic certainty](#) if still a geographic aporia. [Sourcing the Nile was a matter of algebra and astute calculation:](#) Behind every good map is an even better equation.

But of course, the water continued to flow, surging annually in a way no map could quite capture. And with each inscription, each copy of a copy over the centuries, mistakes and marginalia changed the Nile's path. [From careful longitude and latitude,](#) and of course a dab of artistic interpretation, she sweeps through time.

The source of the Nile is al-Sudd, سد

Physically a swamp, a wetland, a channeled lagoon, a matted mass of floating vegetation; etymologically a barrier, an obstruction, a resistance of passage. Expanding and contracting over 100,000 square kilometers from wet to dry season, al-Sudd is a heaving sodden lung, a liminal space where the Nuer people carve a pastoral life from a watery world. Setting sail at the verdant mouth of the Nile to travel upstream seems the simplest way to source the source: a liquid path that presents as an easy-to-track trail. The Sudd, however, denies passage. Tangled mats of vegetation detach in the gentle flow of the river to choke channels, moved into place by a watery, invisible hand. Heavy bottomed foreign boats, stuffed with men and supplies, get lost in the mossy mass, are turned around, flipped on their axis, inevitably blocked. The impassibility increases the impossibility of knowing the truth: Where this water comes from is a best kept secret. In reticence, the Nile is shored up.

The source of the Nile is abject world history

The undercurrent of our present, so thick with oppression and inequality.

Why was the river's source so keenly guarded and so utterly coveted through the eighteenth century? A geographic curiosity and the lure of a natural mystery is one small piece of the puzzle: profit and exploitation gives the fuller answer, as it does so often.

Enslavers knew where the river flowed, knew of the great lakes, knew of paths that brought them South to lands where [people lived with the source of the Nile](#). The knowledge was guarded not for Romance, not in an effort to preserve mystique, not to keep land and water pristine. It was guarded in the name of capital, borne on the shoulders and bodies of enslaved Africans, captured, transported, and sold. [Lives, humanity, worlds](#): devalued, discounted, uprooted.

To find the source of the Nile was to find a source of inhuman labor: enslaver caravan routes [flowed in the same direction as the river itself](#). To lay bloody hands on the Nile was to gain control over the forced redirection of people to other lands and death. The source of the Nile is this wound.

The source of the Nile is the Earth's mantle

Ask a fluvial geomorphologist and they'll tell you rivers move, rewriting their past and playing with their future. The essential forces of nature — water, earth, and wind — drive patterns of deposition and erosion with which a river mulls its course, meandering and rerouting over time. Surging floods expand a river's banks. Currents open potential new paths. Fresh new land is colonized. The Nile, however, is different. On paper, bending West makes sense. She should have done so a long time ago! But she has steadfastly held her northern course for 30,000 years. This consistency comes from the river's anchor, a routine produced through verticality. Deep inside the Earth, a mantle of molten rock flows like an ocean current, surging waves of liquid stone that sustain the topography of East Africa *ad infinitum*. The Ethiopian Highlands are pushed upward, the Northern delta tugged down: It is a seductive route for liquid to follow. From planetary rhythms, the Nile is steadied on her course.

The source of the Nile is a blank space

Incognita and *unexplored*, nestled in “darkest Africa,” the continent’s secret “heart,” illustrated either as a void, or a void within a void. Quickly, as you trace the Nile, you will lose track of where geography ends and metaphors begin. As the soft pencil lines of maps trail into nothingness, the cartographic gaze, powerful and dangerous, is laid bare. For who names *incognita*? To those beings, human and nonhuman both, immersed in the Nile, there is nothing blank about it: the texture of the topography, the prickle of the sun, the ripe smell of vegetation, the sound of secret water, all this together is a clearly defined and infinite world. To determine it as blank is to render it a piece of knowledge to be captured and nailed down, converted callously into a singular cosmology. How about, instead, upending it? Insisting that “source” is a metaphor, and letting that life and place be? A metaphor not for origins or beginnings, not for resource or sustenance, but a metaphor, nonetheless. Perhaps by refusing meaning, the Nile bursts forth.

The source of the Nile is a satellite

Or, to be [entirely faithful to the so-called “facts,”](#) a series of eight satellites sent into orbit from 1975. By overlaying and patching together this new God’s eye view, [the contours of the Nile are fully exposed:](#) You can trace her 6,695 kilometer length, pinpoint the place where the [Blue and White strands entangle around Khartoum,](#) trace the sweep of her great bend with your fingertip. You can compare her girth [in dry season](#) and wet, and see how, counterintuitively, [she swells in size](#) during the former. This lens can also be brought down to Earth. In 2006, trekking inland led not by maps or topography but rather by [a satellite-powered GPS,](#) built out of modernity’s spatial and spectral resolution, a trio of explorers — yes, they still exist! — triangulate the river’s source. It doesn’t seep forth from a lake or pour from a mountain: It [bubbles up from a muddy pool deep in Rwanda’s](#) nearly impenetrable Nyungwe Forest. There, mystery solved. [Technology does it again!](#) From the tool of ultimate disenchantment, the Nile is corralled into muck.

The source of the Nile is the dry season

During summer months when temperatures peak and the whole world seems parched, the Nile begins to grow. Like ripples from a stone tossed in a pond, the water expands north in a gradual swell. In South Sudan, the flood begins in April; in Egypt, not until July. Bursting her banks in places that have not seen rain for months, quenching the thirst of the dry and hot Mediterranean littoral, the Nile seems to defy logic: no surprise, then, that for centuries she has been seen as the source of all life; and in ancient Egypt, the causeway from life to death. Measured faithfully by a specially made Nilometer, the fruitful collapse of logic and faith is made clear: They could measure, they could predict, but with no absolute sense of where or why, they (perhaps more usefully?) worshipped and prayed. The illogical rhythm at which the river floods is precisely what makes the Nile a source in and of itself. For how to explain a river that flows north, not south; swells when all else is parched; and travels defiantly through the hottest desert? The Nile is *the Nile*: a river in which so much life is borne.

The source of the Nile is the archives

The timeless human impulse to transcribe, record, preserve and persist. [The river has a distinctive inked life](#), travelling from map to map, wading through collections, seeping in and out of lives. Was it [first mapped by Ptolemy in his famous *Cosmographia* in 150 BCE?](#) Like any source, his was dependent on others: rumors of Diogenes, retold by Marinus of Tyre. In such a game of translation — one that persisted for 40 centuries — [details are sure to get lost](#). Towards these efforts to transcribe explorers feel decidedly hostile: What [one cartographer illustrated](#), “succeeding cartographers effaced,” [the physical discoveries of explorers](#) “in a few years the ruthless map-maker obliterated.” As if the living and doing is separated from recording. As if the act of the search was not tied directly to immortality. [The maps](#) (redrawn), travel accounts (retold), re-inscriptions (amended), marginalia (added) [are the](#) vortex at the center of the [source itself](#). From these gaps, the Nile forms its teeming cataracts.

The source of the Nile is Lake Victoria

The name gives it away, huh? [An ode to a nineteenth-century Queen](#), an homage to Britain's expanding grip on the globe, [an eponym assigned by a loyal servant](#) (of course, Lake Albert isn't far away). Names, borders, boundaries: a potent tool of colonization. The immense body of water — covering 59,947 square kilometers — had a name before [a White man, guided to its shores in 1853](#), assigned it an English one: Nam Lolwe (“endless lake”), Nalubaale (“a spirit of feminine or motherly qualities”), others I don't know. And of course the water was there before anyone thought [to frame it as a Proper Noun](#). [Produced by a thrust of the Great Rift Valley](#), the lake sits in a shallow depression in Africa: a slowly sloping, not-too-deep curve formed as if a giant thumb had pushed gently into the Earth's outer shell. [Four hundred thousand years ago](#) the water began to pool in the soft indentation. It has continued to pool since, filling first with life, and then with fascination. [The lake is teeming with](#) origins. Some, such as [the newly introduced water hyacinth](#), are more nefarious than others. A cup that spilleth over a series of rocky falls, [choking out](#) the first chatters of [the river](#), the Nile morphs nameless from geologic predestination.

The source of the Nile is the search itself

A story often boiled down to legend, a tidy nineteenth-century history of bourgeois Male Rivalry: the brow of a God, the jaw of a Devil. Two able adventurers, eager for prestige, strike out into Africa to claim an Eve to their Adam: a prize against which they can define themselves the First Man. Both fall sick — one unable to walk, the other unable to see or hear. And yet, one insists he has found that ultimate secret, hidden coyly, he fancies, in “Darkest Africa.” He utters an to-be-often-repeated refrain: “The Nile is settled.” A tidy assertion that the river now has, like any good story, a beginning, and an end. And yet, despite this attempt at the absolute, the search continues. Before him and after him, above him and below him, beside him and beyond him, others search, finding new ways to be sure that *this* time, the Nile is settled. Matting together like wild roots, dark and confounding and alive, the search produces origin upon origin, a mass of beginnings that feed on and feed from each other. Organic, like the Nile; ebbing, like the Nile; confounding, like the Nile. From plurality, the Nile begins her great curve.

The source of the Nile

is the White Nile, النيل الأزرق ,
the Blue Nile, the Mountain
Nile, the Victoria Nile, the
Albert Nile, Bahr al Jabal,
Bahr el Ghazal, Kagera,
the Alexandra Nile, ጥቁር
ክባይ, the Abay, Wanqa,
the Bashilo, ዘ'ፆፀ, the
Walaqa River, the Wanchet
River, the Jamma River,
the Muger River, the
Guder River, the Agwel
River, the Nedi River,
the Didessa River,
لنيل الأبيض, the Dabus
River, the Handassa
River, the Tul River,
the Abbaya River,
the Sade River, the
Tammi River, the
Cha River, φιαρο, the
Shita River, the Suha
River, the Muga
River, the Gulla
River, the Temcha
River, the Bachat
River, the
Katlan River,
the Jiba
River, the
Chamoga
River, the
Weter
River,
the
Beles
River.

The source of the Nile

is the Thames, the
Amazon, the Colorado,
the Sepik, the Napo, the
Danube, the Volga, the
Juruá, the Pearl, the Madre
de Dios, the Irrawaddy,
the Mekong, the Lena,
the Mississippi, the
Ganges, the Yangtze, the
Orinoco, the Congo, the
Salween, the Ogooué, the
Essequibo, the St. Clair,
the Jutai, the Tigre, the
Koksoak, the Beni, the
Rhine, the Yellow, the
Waikato, the Gandaki,
the Aruwimi, the
Salween, the
Delaware, the Indus,
the Xi, the Kapuas,
the Branco, the
Niger, the Kama,
the Ubangi,
the Chindwin,
the Caroní,
and all the
other fluvial
beginnings
that spring
forth,
human-
seen
or
no.

For Opacity

The opaque is not the obscure... it is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence... Accepting difference does of course, upset the hierarchy of this scale.

Agree not merely to the right to difference, but, carrying this further, agree also the the right to opacity.

Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components.

*For the time being,
perhaps, give up this
old obsession with
discovering what
lies at the bottom
of natures.*

- Édouard Glissant