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## #Creekshed - Paddling Toward Reparations

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# City Wilds: Paddling toward reparations

Booker Creek, a stadium nobody likes and a city's unresolved conflicts.

By Thomas Hallock



*Thomas Hallock*

Rapids through the Roser Park neighborhood of Booker Creek. The next great urban whitewater run?

I drop my kayak into Booker Creek, at a patch of grass mowed by the city, not far from Tampa Bay. I paddle under 10th Avenue South. The creek runs a block or two underground, then comes out by Bayfront Hospital, just off the tourist map of downtown St. Pete.

Hemmed by the Roser Park neighborhood and shell mounds upon which the hospital was built, the creek cuts diagonally through a poor part of the city, from Campbell Park to Tropicana Field. Past the Trop, at First Avenue South, it sinks again into culverts and fragments under I-375.

St. Petersburg's street grid makes nature easy to overlook. If not for a dip in the pavement on First Avenue South, by the Fusion apartments, one would never know the creek exists.

(Surely that building has moisture issues. I checked reviews for Fusion online; miraculously, no mildew.)

Booker Creek is a lesson in forgetting. Its most scenic stretches formerly ran through Campbell Park, once part of a black middle-class neighborhood leveled for I-175. The Trop's parking lots were the Gas Plant District, a poor but thriving remnant of Jim Crow-era segregation.

On the creek, I portage over several waterfalls. I check out cooters in surprisingly clear pools. I chat with people I overlook in my everyday life, some homeless. At its mouth, the creek's self-appointed caretakers tell me, manatees nosh on the unmowed grass.

Past the first culvert, I reach the steep banks of Roser Park. Concrete struts and live oaks flicker above me. The current is challenging but peaceful. From the sound of rapids, I could be in North Carolina.

West of MLK in Campbell Park, however, weeds clog up the channel. I tip my kayak. A portage costs me a water bottle. I put on a life vest, take the battery out of my camera and double-check my dry bag.

I paddle through a ficus tree. A curtain of tendril tips, thick with mud, halts my progress. I shoulder into this cesspool of silt, discarded soda bottles and decaying Styrofoam.

The ficus roots seize my oar.

I yank myself forward but the ficus and air potato vines pull me back into the filth.

If you want to know a place, study its litter.

At the bottom of the creek in Campbell Park, I see a sign for Eritha Akilé Cainion, Uhuru candidate for St. City Council. The black socialist Uhurus have come under fire of late for disrupting civil debate. I was out of the country and missed the outrage.

(Online friends, knowing my sympathy for the Uhurus' message, sent me links without comment.)

Cainion and affiliated mayoral candidate Jesse Nevel have dared to utter the "r" word

Cannon and animated mayoral candidate Jesse never have dared to utter the F word.

## *Reparations.*

Given the city's history, readable in the watershed, reparations make sense.

Consider this sequence in time-lapse:

Campbell Park homeowners were bought out in the 1970s to clear space for the interstate. The city razed the Gas Plant neighborhood in the early '80s to build a stadium — for a baseball team that did not yet exist.

Fast forward three decades. The Trop gets imploded (which will happen) and I-175 becomes a landscaped parkway. The health consequences of a toxic gas plant on prior residents remain unexamined. Developers make a killing from the 85-acre Trop site, what the *Tampa Bay Times* calls "the most valuable piece of downtown real estate in the bay area." Poor black neighborhoods in St. Pete plod along, cut off from the same revival.

Big profits, my crystal ball says, will be made from past wrongs.

If not reparations here, then where?

Reparations, according to the [International Center for Transitional Justice](#), must be material and symbolic. Not a handout, reparations include all stakeholders in dialog (not just wealthy developers or politicians) to compensate for past injustices — Jim Crow, failed housing, an interstate that splits a city and worse.

Whatever happens with the stadium site, the city and Rays ownership stand to gain.

So why not a cut, with honest recognition for earlier wrongs, to heal a divided community?

North of Campbell Park and now under the highway, I portage through a bed of *Corbicula* mussels, a nasty invasive that clogs up sewers. I paddle through the overgrown Rays Garden and hoist myself over one last waterfall.

At First Avenue South, the rapids disappear into a long tunnel. My arms itch with filth. I am thirsty.

I will go no further.

Letting the current carry me back over the shoals, I drift through the former Gas Plant neighborhood.

As I float downstream, a yellow-sireded golf cart emerges from the bowels of the Trop. A security guard parks on the bridge by the main gate.

I brace myself for light interrogation, though I have broken no laws.

Look straight ahead, I tell myself.

The rapids carry me through the stadium lot. I square my shoulders and reset my thoughts.

I paddle forward, stealing downstream.

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