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Now That Mississippi Is in the News

By James Fallows

Nearly a year ago, when my wife Deb and I were kicking off our American Futures project, we said that one of the ambitions was to apply a "normal" reporting lens to parts of the country that don't usually get it.

The range of experience in New York or San Francisco—or in D.C. or Boston or L.A. or Chicago or sometimes Seattle or Miami or a few other places—is a staple part of American news and pop-culture coverage. But when somewhere in South Dakota, or Alabama, or Inland-Empire California, or Kentucky is in the news, it's usually because of:

a disaster, natural or man-made: tornado, shooting, explosion, flood, drought, hate crime, sinkhole; a sporting event (NASCAR, Little League World Series) occasionally or a political event regularly: any place in Iowa or New Hampshire every four years in primary season, then Ohio and Florida in the general election campaigns; a "concept" piece—"meth in the heartland," "the new economy of prisons" "climate change hits the farm"—that involves picking out some Middle American location and using it as the narrative setting for your thesis.

You've seen something like that going on in Mississippi these past few days, with more to come in the two weeks ahead. The Senate primary is the latest front in the struggle for the future of the GOP. Thus we have reports from Tupelo and Hattiesburg, op-ed pieces on the paradox/hypocrisy of America's most "conservative" states being the ones most reliant on federal subsidies, and so on. And, given Mississippi's past, plus eloquent reminders of the omnipresence of that past [from the state's most celebrated writer](#), there's an all-but-irresistible freak-show undertone to a lot of reports from Mississippi. These Southerners! Can you believe them?

I mention this as set-up to the very interesting note below, from a lawyer in the Jackson, Mississippi, area. [See [update](#) below for his identity.]

Here's a policy exception I'm making for this note: When quoting reader mail, I always cut out any specifically complimentary part. If someone says, "Great article, but I wonder about your point that ..." I will quote it as beginning, "I wonder about your point that ..." No doubt it's the WASP in me, but I figure that quoting compliments can't come across well. I'm leaving in the complimentary parts of the



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note that follows, both because they're integral to the reader's point and because, frankly, it's so heartening for my wife Deb and me to hear that what we've been *trying* to do has come across in the way we intended, at least in this case.

Now, to our reader in Mississippi:

Yesterday, a stray tweet from a friend announced you had been doing some writing about my home state so I hurried over to check things out. I haven't had time to read everything, but I want to thank you and your lovely "research assistant" for engaging with some of what is good in our state.

You may be aware the chef Anthony Bourdain, of whom I'm a fan, recorded an episode of his CNN show on the "Mississippi Delta" with stops in Jackson and Oxford too. I was appalled by it.

He was escorted around by the food writer John T. Edge (a Georgia native) and spent an inordinate amount of time in Oxford (where I was previously a resident for eleven years) with the expat writer community and fellow chef John Currence (a New Orleanian).

The most unbearable moment came when Geno Lee, the proprietor of the Big Apple Inn, a historic black-owned business in Jackson famous for their pig-ear sandwiches, announced to the camera, "I didn't know I had such a cool place until he (John T. Edge) told me so."

I cringed at the *N.Y. Times*-published taste maker "blessing" the heretofore clueless owner of a historic business. Edge spoke for Lee, the writers spoke for Oxford, Chef Currence spoke for himself and any truth about Mississippi was lost in the process. What was absent from Bourdain's show, and what is not absent from your series of dispatches, are the voices of Mississippians speaking for themselves.

I find a lot of reporting, storytelling, and documenting of the South in general and Mississippi in particular to be diagnostic and mostly hostile or contemptuous. (There's no victim complex here, I assure you, you would be hard pressed to find anyone who give you a more honest accounting of our historical cultural and political depravity which has given way to the current cultural and political malaise and decay.) The hostility is born of our state's vicious history and pretty understandable; however, I think the tendency to diagnose comes from a certain impenetrability of our society or culture.

There is a complexity of feeling and attitude that history has imprinted on most Mississippians through the generations. This is a place that the American dream went and continues to go un-lived by most, not only because of our racial history, but because of isolation, poverty and backwardness that transcends any questions of black and white and effect huge numbers of endemically poor of both races. The collective emotional damage of that history remains unresolved just as the social and economic damage does in way that is more pronounced than Alabama, Louisiana, Arkansas, or South Carolina.

What I appreciate about your series is that, and maybe you are simply performing that now rare function called journalism, in the face of that impenetrability you broadcast the voices of Mississippians working on the ground in hopes of turning the tide of history in their communities or for themselves. You may find this odd, but Higgins's quote [in [this post](#)] about Eurocopter

“changing the psyche” nearly brought me to tears. Despite the small upward or downward spikes in wealth and affluence for the small elite and middle classes (of which I am, thankfully, one), it is that image of sharecropper, white or black, Higgins invokes about which we all shudder. The shame of poverty, lack of education, civic and political failure is shame for those who experience it directly as well as the elites who have allowed it to persist uninterrupted since Reconstruction.

You hear the echoes of Higgins’ “barefoot and pregnant ... snuff in their lip” in Kimberly Sanford’s essay when she describes her sister, mother and mother’s third husband—the miscarriage, the dirty table, the work boots and worn jeans. [For about Ms. Sanford, see below.] For Kimberly, it appears the discovery of feminist criticism is changing her psyche in a way similar to that in which Eurocopter helped Higgins dream big for the GT.

These stories of discovery are the ones that get lost among the usual yarns told to tourists in Mississippi whether it be the terror of the Civil Rights Movement, the fantasy of Antebellum culture and the old Lost Cause, the friendly debauchery of the Delta planters or the very real charms for Oxford. But like everywhere else, it’s self-discovery and self-actualization that are in short supply, not images of cotton, bluesmen, bourbon, much less hooded klansman and hoop skirts.

I hope comparing your work to Bourdain’s doesn’t offend you. I only do so because both are recent depictions of life here, even if yours is journalism and his is entertainment.

I love my home state as much as an American can love the political subdivision in which he was born and raised. I do not, however, think Mississippi is a “great place.” It is not. In the present day it is a strange, tribalistic, confused and impoverished. However, I do believe Mississippi has great potential to be a better place. Thank you for sharing with your readers what many of us believe are the green shoots of some kind of economic transformation here. But more so, thank you for letting Joe Max Higgins and Kimberly Sanford speak about discovering ways forward from this dark, green, lonely place.

Sincere thanks back to the reader for this powerful and thoughtful note. Deb and I do feel as if over the past year we have learned as much about the variety of our country as we learned about China in any of our years of traveling and living there.

Update: At his request, I’ll identify the author of this message. His name is Zachary Bonner, of Ridgeland, Mississippi. He says that he would be happy to hear from like-minded people in the region or beyond. You will easily find his contact info online.



Fifth and Main, downtown Columbus.

Before I send you to the rest of the reader's thoughts, let me mention Deb's [latest report](#) from Mississippi, which is about some of the science projects developed by students at MSMS, the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, in Columbus. Again its point is to let students and teachers there describe in their own words—literally, in short videos—what they are trying to do. And if you read the powerful collection of MSMS student essays that Deb previously [presented here](#), you might be interested in this update on what is becoming of the five students she mentioned, starting with one the lawyer-reader mentioned:

- Kimberly Sanford, "As I grasp the battered storm door of my unlevelled mobile home ..." is going to Harvard.
- Rachel Jones, "The wind of my parents' perennial unemployment has blown away my umbrella ..." is going to Vassar.
- Brendan Ryan, "my favorite things about living at a residential high school four hours from my hometown is the car rides home ..." is going to Wenzao Ursuline University in Taiwan.
- Sabrina Moore, "MSMS is often referred to as the most diverse square mile in the state of Mississippi ..." is going to Mississippi State.
- Joseph Messer, "I think that home is also wherever I make it ..." is going to [Deep Springs College](#) in California.

More from Zachary Bonner ~~the lawyer in greater Jackson~~:

I feel compelled to add—I have nothing against Bourdain, in fact whether it was naiveté or hubris, but I give his team credit for even trying a show here. But, the Oxford thing is so tired when there are so many corners of the state that have never known anything but hurt.

It's a cool town for sure. I had all my discoveries on Ole Miss' campus, got both my degrees there, got married a block off the square and continued to live there while my wife finished her degree. We're both children of privilege though and Oxford is a place of privilege, although the University finally began changing that as far as the classroom goes about fifteen years ago. Oxford is a like a college town theme park, it's make believe.

My first job out of law school was in [eastern Mississippi] and I drove and hour back and forth everyday partly on Highway 78 right past the Blue Springs complex, home of Toyota. We had several cases in the Delta during my time at that firm and I can't tell you the salve watching that plant and its satellite buildings being constructed was after driving though all the empty towns to the west.

But, then, I would go home to this outlier of a place [Oxford] and all that time on the road, it gives you time to think. And then you meet people working cases, witnesses, clients, people who are neither but you have to talk to find the witnesses and clients. You know these people live in a different world than the one I live in (which is probably pretty close to yours) and not just in the existential sense. And at the same time you feel, this person and I, we are neighbors. We have kinship in some way. You are poor and uneducated and a bit afraid that the lawyer has knocked on your door, but you are my brother somehow. But we aren't really brothers because there are things out of our control that are between and impossible to decipher and correct.

The history and all it means and carries is between us—and it doesn't matter if the man is black or white in that sense. It applies either way. But we all want the jobs because the jobs take away the shame and the less shame, the more kinship. That's not really a story for a one-hour TV show hosted by a chef.

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