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Celeste Williams

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# Mississippi Goddam

Celeste Williams

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*...Problems as deep-rooted as 100-year-old trees that jut up on the flat horizon. I won't be the same after I have seen this place. ... This place is burned permanently in my mind.*

Dear Mississippi:

I wrote that more than 30 years ago, when I was a news reporter, sent with another reporter and photographer to live for the better part of three months in Tunica, then the poorest place in the continental U.S.

I'm thinking of you now, you fertile, poor, problematic, indelible state. I am thinking you now, in this time of reckoning. In the context of, well, everything.

Back then, Jesse Jackson toured a neighborhood called "Sugar Ditch," a row of shacks existing alongside an open sewer, and declared it "America's Ethiopia" — meaning that it shamefully reminded him of an African country which at the time was experiencing the ravages of famine and extreme deprivation.

The mighty Mississippi River, for which you are named, ran its course to the Gulf of Mexico just over giant levees. On exploring hikes, I found graves marked with flat, crooked stones, scratched with unintelligible names just down the road from manicured, fenced cemeteries of dead white people. There was a diner where no Black resident ever ate, though they worked in the kitchen. It wasn't that there was a "Whites only" sign; folks just knew.

You had, and still have a way about you, Mississippi. You rate continually at the top of "worst" lists; at the bottom of lists of "best."

I have seen your past, Mississippi; I see you now.

And in this year, 2020, a year of cascading upheaval, I gaze upon you, my mouth agape in amazement. For you decided to delete your state flag — the one with the Confederate battle emblem in the upper left corner — a red field topped by a blue X with thirteen white stars.

Those stars represented the group that left the Union. Because you and the others wanted to keep owning people who worked for free.

Black people.

You came to my mind during a storm, a storm where seemingly unrelated events converged like air currents in the jet stream. A worldwide biological contagion collided with a racist murder gone viral, and was followed by a mass awakening like no other, marked by protestors of all colors proclaiming with fists raised, "Black Lives Matter!"

You, Mississippi, were in the midst of this global recalculation of meaning; this reckoning.

As you might ask in your Southern drawl, *You reckon?*

Yes. You lost the war. The Union was saved. Slavery abolished (kind of).

(I am going to digress for a moment here, because of the parenthetical “kind of” above. I have a friend, a reporter with whom I worked in Memphis. She recently discovered a 1940 Census record of her father, who sharecropped on a Mississippi plantation. These lines caught her eye: *Hours Worked Week Prior to Census: 48; Class of Worker: Working on own account; Weeks Worked in 1939: 52; Income: 0*. Read that again. INCOME: ZERO.)

Your white supremacist legislators in 1894 put the losing war emblem on the upper-left corner of the Mississippi flag.

Your “heritage” argument, excuse me, is bullshit. You put it there to let African Americans know who was still in charge of their lives — that no, no, Black lives did *not* matter.

And you rained down terror to cement the point. You pretty much retained slavery (see above), allowed vigilantes, some dressed in sheets, to terrorize and murder innocents, you re-enslaved others through imprisonment and murdered those who dared to even whisper a desire to vote.

I hear you need a new flag.

Your new flag should take into account all of those martyrs and heroes, including my friend’s father who worked for nothing, and nameless dozens, more likely thousands, who died on your soil, and those whose names are scratched on those gravestones and those permanently etched in your history — though you have tried to erase them.

I’m thinking of Emmett Till, Goodman, Schwerner and Cheney, Medgar Evers. Those are the ones you might remember. How about those you have tried to forget? The Southern Poverty Law Center names many of them, including Rev. George Lee, who was murdered attempting to register voters; Mack Charles Parker, an innocent accused of raping a white woman; Cpl. Roman Duckworth, a military police officer on leave who was mistaken for a “Freedom Rider;” Johnnie Mae Chappell, murdered by whites who were looking for a random Black person to shoot; Wharlest Jackson, promoted to a job previously reserved for whites, blown up when a bomb exploded in his car, because he apparently forgot — that he lived in Mississippi.

I recall Tunica’s public high school — an old, brick structure that needed many repairs, out and in. That’s where all the Black kids went. And I recall Tunica Institute of Learning, a gleaming building near the edge of town where all the white kids went. It was the private school.

The superintendent of the 98-percent- Black public school was white; he sent his children to the 100-percent-white private school. The schools had separate homecoming parades and proms. He told me it wasn’t polite to question the obvious.

He told me this in an interview, during which he rudely put his stockinged feet up on his desk. “Segregation was a matter of custom,” he said before launching a dark line of masticated tobacco into a spittoon.

Still, the Black people in this seemingly God-forsaken place had hope. I remember that, too.

I remember Emma Carter, the youngest of Minnie Carter’s ten children, graduating from that segregated high school. Mrs. Carter did not finish school, but made sure all of her children did. She was afraid that she would say something wrong when I spoke to her.

But her words were poetry:

*"It's joyful to be in the land of the living to see your baby grow up. I just can't explain it. You just feels like, like a burning lighting up on you, like you got a new religion, know what I mean? And with the baby coming out, it's just like it's all coming together."*

After I left, Tunica had a strange transformation. In the early 1990s, Sugar Ditch was bulldozed, and its racist reputation was attempted to be turned under like a tilled field by planting casinos and golf courses. And history was sanitized to the point where a researcher would have to dig deep to even find the week-long series of stories I and my colleagues wrote about the place.

More than a quarter of Tunica's residents remain poor. The casinos are going bust; population is plummeting. Some new housing for the poor was built, but many still live in shacks that are a stark window to your ugly past, Mississippi.

But your flag. Gone. After several failed attempts to get rid of that banner, this time, because of The Reckoning, its scrapping succeeded in record fashion.

Congratulations, Mississippi. To paraphrase Nina Simone at the end of her song (ending with no punctuation):

*"...Everybody knows about Mississippi goddam, that's it"*

So, what now, Mississippi?

What now, America?

*Goddam.*

Sincerely,

**Celeste**