

Jackson, Mississippi: Modernity at Large

I moved to Jackson, MS, in 2009 and left in 2016. Jackson was my home, but I never really belonged there. It's not that I was an interloper. My roots just didn't go that deep. I could live there. I could grow there. But there was always an existential drift—always being away, not quite feeling *at home*, even though I was home. I was a 7-year tourist, in a place but not *of it*.

Place, wrote Arjun Appadurai¹, is a collection of overlapping “scapes”—mediascapes, ideoscapes, ethnoscapas, financescapes, and technoscapes. In most places in the US, especially the American South, we can add another—religiocscapes. This photo essay is my attempt to fix Appadurai's theoretical concepts in photographs framed in the memories of my experience as a privileged white man who lived in Jackson for a while but never called it home.

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1. Mediascape

The tourists gaze² here and there, or more accurately glance³. The glance is fleeting—not meaningless, but fleeting.

Often this glance is powerful, awakening some longing for Jackson—some sensibility experienced only peripherally before—something from *The Help* or, maybe, Faulkner—no, Johnny Cash; that’s it, Johnny Cash.

But the glance is myopic⁴. Trip Advisor recommended this but not that—four circles, three circles, no circles at all. Or maybe it was some other media aggregation designed to bind us together, build desire and take the uncertainty out of travel⁵.

Or maybe it was *Diners, Drive-ins and Dives* “rolling out” to Walker’s Drive-In, teasing us with its food porn.

Some media message somewhere hailed us, interpellated⁶ us, if we must—begged us to see, experience, indeed, savor Walker’s Drive-In, home to a James Beard-nominated chef in the funky Fondren neighborhood in the *heart* of Jackson.



As I wait to cross the street—imagining the fried soft shell crab—I stare right through the North State Street bus.

No one told me to beckon the bus, so I ignore it. No one told me to hail the urban poor on the bus, carried to and fro past Walker’s on pockmarked streets of crumbling asphalt with leaking water lines lurking underneath. So, I ignore them.

No one recommended that I experience *that* part of Jack-

son, *that* heart of Jackson. Not those people—the lifeblood—trekking on an infrastructure on life support.

So they become ghosts—inconvenient pauses between me and my destination.



2. Ideoscape

The Southern Cross.
The Stars and Bars.
Stainless.
Blood-stained.
The versions change—the ideas remain.

Freedom—state's rights, by God.

And heritage, yes.
Hell, yes. Goddamn Rebel Yell, yes.
Definitely, heritage.

That swaying symbol celebrates Southern culture and hails nostalgia for a time gone by—



—a time when Mississippi practiced alchemy, making gold from white cotton and black bodies

—a time when white men had what they believed was a God-given right to own black bodies, beat black bodies, rape black bodies, murder black bodies, do whatever-the-hell-they-pleased to black bodies.

Black lives mattered . . . when they were property.

This is delicate cloth—red, white, blue—sewn together with iron thread, its weight pressing against the boys shooting hoops in the shadow of Medgar Evers's home.

This is the hooded robber—flying proud, flying free—trying to steal these boys.

But these boys dream of LeBron, not the nightmare of De La Beckwith.

Hope rises, and that flag burns.



3. Ethnoscapes

There are (at least) two ethnoscapes in Jackson.

The tourist sites cater to White Jackson with the occasional detour through a civil rights landmark. For white residents, the local news stations offer the readymade narrative of black crime and black poverty. Indeed, there is that. All of it. But in the words of Chimamanda Adichie⁷, there's danger in a single story.

On a late Thursday night, I wandered into Black Jackson with a friend. I confess that I had some fear that I would get shot—not

because I was actually in danger but because the 6 o'clock news told me that someone else got shot somewhere over here, on some street on this side of town, doing something.

Single story. Mean World Syndrome⁸ and all that.

We wandered into a street party for a Lil Wayne concert set to start at 2 a.m. at Libations at Freelon's on Mill Street. This Jackson was sequined dresses and "fuck me" heels, bumping subwoofers, contagious and raucous laughter, and a pop-up entrepreneurial economy of grills, smokers and food trailers wooing us with the intoxicating smells of smoking meat—dripping fat and sweet sauce.



It was midnight—on a Thursday. And they had just put the meat on (which for those uninitiated in slow pit BBQ meant that this party was just getting started). We couldn't keep up, but, then again, we weren't supposed to.

This wasn't meant for us. We were accidental interlopers in this city we also called home.

White people say, "There's no way Jackson has 170,000 people in it." That's because 79% of those people are black⁹, and White Jackson has been trained not to see that Jackson except as painful past or fearful present.

But Black Jackson is there—not for white fear or for white pleasure.

For its own sake.

4. Financescapes and Technoscapes

When I first arrived in Jackson, I had to go to the tire shop. Now experienced, I swerve like a drunk man on Old Canton Road.

Potholes. It might be safer to scrape these streets down to the Yazoo Clay. The one-cent sales tax was supposed to help. So was God¹⁰.

Beneath the hot, sweating asphalt, rusty pipes leak then burst. Orange warning signs become permanent fixtures



of the cityscape, buoy markers for their new streams—
—we call them Riverside Drive and State Street.

A boil order here. Brown water there. Siemens promised to save us—a promise as broken as the new sinkhole on Meadowbrook Road. The water bills soared and a new geyser formed at Manhattan and Meadow Heights.

But the lights work—except when Tornado Alley erupts or when an errant truck clips a low hanging power line or when the asbestos-wrapped wires start to fray in the '20s Tudors and '50s Mid-century Moderns.

But, hey, C-Spire is running fiber. Who will be left for the high-speed data? Another 3,500 people left the city since 2010¹¹. Bad education, worse infrastructure, no jobs, so they say.



Many point fingers at the people who stick around. But we can also point at those who left, tax dollars in tow.

People like me.

5. Religioscape

As roux is to gumbo, so is religion to Mississippi.

It's not the spice. It's not the heat. It's not even the holy trinity.

Don't start on Mississippi 'til you get its religion right.

Two parts White Evangelical

One part Historically Black Protestant

One-half part Mainline Protestant

A pinch of Catholic

Dashes of "un-saved" Others¹²

Fold together gently. Don't mix. Don't ever mix.

Christianity seeps into the Yazoo clay, causing it to expand and contract, shifting the foundations of Mississippi culture. If you build on it, you can bet your walls will crack.

Cracked race. Cracked sexuality. Cracked gender. Cracked class.

Christianity is the welcoming salve for lonely souls, the calculations of candidates, and the cold shoulder hidden in a "bless your heart" if you don't belong.

Christianity drives Stewpot¹³ as easily it drives the graphic protests at the Women's Health Clinic. Christianity drips from the tongue of the governor, soothing and masking dog whistles, and Christianity harmonizes with the melody of crickets and katydids on Sunday nights.

Southern religion is as powerful as it is complex. Just like that roux.

And it's best washed down with sweet tea or bourbon (depending on the congregational persuasion).



Notes

¹Appadurai, Arjun. (1996). *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

²Urry, John. (1990). *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Society*. London: Sage

³Chaney, David. (2002). "The power of metaphors in tourism theory." In Coleman, Simon and Crang, Mike (Eds.) *Tourism: between place and performance*. New York: Berghahn Books

⁴Smith, Valene L. (1989). "Eskimo tourism: micro-models and marginal men." In Smith, Valene L. (Ed.) *Hosts and Guests: the anthropology of tourism*. 2nd edition. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

⁵Robert Mugerauer wrote: "Tourists want places to be interesting but safe, exotic but convenient, tasty but digestively friendly, full of character but antiseptically clean." Mugerauer, Robert. (2001). "Openings to Each Other in the Technological Age." In AlSayyad, Nezar (Eds.) *Consuming Tradition, Manufacturing Heritage: Global Norms and Urban Forms in the Age of Tourism*. New York: Routledge, p. 98

⁶Larrain, Jorge. (1996). "Stuart Hall and the Marxist concept of ideology." In Morley, David and Kuan-Hsing Chen (Eds.) *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in cultural studies*. New York: Routledge

⁷ https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

⁸ Media theorist George Gerbner argued that the more one watches violent television, the more likely one is to believe that the world is more dangerous than it actually is. For a popular account of Gerbner's work, see <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1997/05/the-man-who-counts-the-killings/376850/>

⁹ <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/2836000>

¹⁰In 2015, Jackson Mayor Tony Yarber tweeted, "Yes...I believe we can pray potholes away." <http://wjtv.com/2015/08/21/jackson-mayor-tony-yarber-we-can-pray-potholes-away/>

¹¹ <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/2836000>

¹²According to Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Mississippi is 41% White Evangelical, 24% Historically Black Protestant, 12% Mainline Protestant, 4% Catholic, and less than one percent of several others. Around 20% of Mississippi residents are unaffiliated. <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/mississippi/>

¹³<http://stewpot.org/>