

Weekend Read: Mississippi's future is brighter than we think

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Good morning, Charles.

“Mississippi’s past, not its future, won the election.”

That was how W. Ralph Eubanks, a visiting professor at the University of Mississippi, assessed [Cindy Hyde-Smith’s victory in Mississippi’s special election](#) for U.S. Senate this week.

Hyde-Smith’s campaign comments on everything from [making it harder for liberal college students to vote](#) to her desire to be “on the front row” of a “[public hanging](#)” have led many to agree with Eubanks. Pictures also surfaced of her wearing a Confederate soldier uniform.

“Turns out it’s still 1951 in Mississippi,” [tweeted Andy Lassner](#), executive producer of the Ellen Show, as the race was called Tuesday night.

Yet there were some signs of change, too, like the fact that [for the first time in the state’s history all four judges on the Hinds County Circuit Court will be black](#), three of them women; and the fact that although Hyde-Smith’s opponent, Mike Espy, didn’t win the special election, he did earn 46 percent of the run-off vote in a [state that hasn’t had black leadership since Reconstruction](#).

So how does one make sense of the election results in a state with a long history of racial oppression — one that a predictable chorus has dismissed this week as a “[racist backwater](#)” whose residents are merely “[getting what they deserve](#)?”

“Mississippi is the memory America invokes whenever it wants to convince itself that racial violence and subjugation are mostly lodged in the past, that they have no space in our present moment, save in this backwoods, backward place,” [writes Jesmyn Ward](#).

A MacArthur genius fellow and the first woman to win two National Book Awards for fiction, Ward wrote an essay for *Time* in July about her [decision to return to her home state](#) to raise her children.

Ward acknowledges the racial terror that she and her family have experienced in the state, but explains, “If we suffer from a particularly Southern strain of this illness, know this is an American disease.” [She writes](#):

I remember this when the pressure of living as an adult with my family and children in the South seems like too much, when the poverty my family and community has been mired in for generations by design is too galling, too present. There are moments that would break me if they could, moments when I am all too aware of how we have been robbed of opportunities to create intergenerational wealth, when our schools fail us, when we are shuttled into the service sector, when we scabble for demeaning job after demeaning job. Days when I see one of my cousins, struggling with addiction and untreated mental illness, walking the streets shirtless and shoeless, drowning in his life, and my heart breaks. It is on days like this when a white person will interview me and ask me how to make black people want more for themselves, and I've had enough.

I want to run away, at moments like that, to someplace where there is no humidity, where the light is golden over the hills and the specter of all that we have survived and died by is not present in every flag, every street name, every monument, every vote. I fantasize about living in that fabled America. And then I remember that one cannot escape an infinite room. Moving across a few state lines is not going to help me escape this place that tells me I am less. The racist, misogynistic sentiment I encounter every day in Mississippi is the same belief that put in place the economic and social caste systems that allowed America to become America. It is the bedrock beneath the soil. Racial violence and subjugation happen on the streets of St. Louis, on the sidewalks of New York City and in the BART stations of Oakland.

I breathe. I remain. I remember that Mississippi is not only its ugliness, its treachery, its willful ignorance.

She's not the only one who believes Mississippi should not be forsaken.

“I don't know what good it does to act like an entire state is beyond redemption,” [tweeted The Atlantic's Vann R. Newkirk](#) this week, “when it's also where the biggest population of people by percentage actually being victimized by racism is.”

It's also where some of the greatest work for racial equality took place in the 20th century and is still taking place in the 21st.

“Hardworking progressives are doing a lot to turn their states around,” [tweeted Logan Heiman](#), an activist and lawyer in Charlottesville, Virginia, about Mississippi's election. “That's the work of generations. Not one electoral win or loss on one election night.”

We believe that the South — and the whole country — is ripe for transformation. We've been fighting racial and social inequality in Mississippi for decades; we're not giving up now.

The Editors