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## LAND OF MAKE BELIEVE

It is the Emerald City. Scroll through any online list of “top small cities” in the United States, and you’ll likely find Greenville, South Carolina. Talk to citizens who have lived in the city for ten to thirty years, and they will tell you why.

So the story goes, when the decline of the South Carolina textile industry began, a handful of local businessmen and government officials led Greenville through a decades-spanning strategic revitalization project. Michelin and BMW moved their major operations into the Greenville area in the late 1970s and 1980s. Hotels and banks set up shop in the city’s downtown—a downtown which Max Heller, a World War II-era Austrian Jewish immigrant who served as Greenville’s mayor in the 1970s, helped to beautify. The Swamp Rabbit Trail, which replaced a rail line left over from the Carolina textile industry’s heyday, was completed in 2010 and still is being extended today. This paved, multiuse path runs through the heart of the downtown—notably, through the downtown’s lovely Falls Park, where nearly year-round visitors and residents walk and bike along the Reedy River as it rolls down from the high places. Waterfalls exist all over this region of South Carolina, which is called the Upstate, largely due to the Blue Ridge Escarpment north of town, where the land precipitously drops 2,000 feet—or rises, depending on your orientation. The road that used to run above the downtown falls has given way to the stunning Liberty Bridge, a curved pedestrian suspension bridge completed in 2004. The bridge is the most recurring symbol on municipal signs and Greenville’s travel brochures. Greenvillians like to note that no one knew the falls were there before the Liberty Bridge project. I’ve been told that other small cities send teams to Greenville for consultation, to see how much of Greenville’s success is translatable.

My spouse, Lynn, and I moved to this New Southern city at the end of the summer of 2014. I often had heard the phrase “New South” in reference to Greenville and places like it. It is as unwieldy a descriptor as “modern,” with which it seems to be helplessly synonymous. According to my sources, the South started being “New” sometime between 1866 and next week. We rented an apartment on the southern terminus of the Swamp Rabbit Trail—about a

five-minute walk to Nicholtown, a historic African-American neighborhood located on the opposite side of the Reedy. In 2011, Nicholtown was connected to the main trail by a series of spurs and short footbridges. We moved intentionally to this part of the city. We knew the Swamp Rabbit would be our major exercising and commuting route. We had a hunch that this particular section of the trail, and its connectors, would also afford us access to a Greenville that Wikipedia pages and Chamber of Commerce brochures did not feature.

There are a few people who use the connectors. Our local section of the Swamp Rabbit, which extended from the enormous First Baptist Church to the YMCA, was one of the most racially diverse public parts of the city. But the traffic basically ran one way—Nicholtown to the main trail. And it seemed understood that people who crossed over from Nicholtown eventually crossed back. In two years and several thousand miles of hiking, biking, and jogging both sides of the river, I saw about five white faces on the Nicholtown side. On two different occasions during 2014, our first year in town, I biked over graffiti on the main trail near a major Nicholtown spur—swastikas, the number 777, and an arrow pointing up the spur with “GHETTO” written under it. The local press did not cover these incidents.

Within months of our moving to the Emerald City, Jacqueline Woodson won a National Book Award for *Brown Girl Dreaming*—a work of poetic non-fiction based partly on Woodson’s experiences splitting her childhood between Brooklyn and Nicholtown. In November 2014, Woodson garnered national press after Daniel Handler cracked a watermelon joke about his friend and fellow author at the awards ceremony. Poet Nikky Finney—a South Carolina native who recently had won her own National Book Award and who recently had returned to the state to head the University of South Carolina Press—wrote a well-publicized response. So did Woodson herself, in the *New York Times*. The local press covered none of this. In fact, as I scoured local archives in 2014, I learned that Greenville proper had (or claimed) scant knowledge of Woodson. I myself only knew about the award-winning Nicholtonian, a gay African-American woman from my new hometown, because of the connectors that linked me to non-Greenvillians, non-southerners.

In the summer of 2015, press coverage of Palmetto State symbols and competing southern nativities increased. The primary catalyst was the murder of nine black members of Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, committed by a Confederate flag-waving man named Dylann Roof—though at the time of

the shooting, the nation already had been talking more than it ever wanted to about race, after the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, and, among others, Walter Scott in Charleston. In South Carolina, one effect of Roof's actions was the removal of the Confederate flag in front of the Columbia State House—first by an activist named Bree Newsome, later by state fiat. The flag had been flying on the grounds, by state fiat, since 1962.

After the lowering in Columbia, other southern states began announcing their own monumental redecorations. The press coverage of the removals waned after a few months, but I, like all southern citizens on the ground, knew that the symbols themselves did not wane. Confederate flags became more prominent features of the landscape. They flew from pickups, SUVs, and even the occasional Toyota coupe. Greenville's Main Street—the charming downtown thoroughfare, the brainchild of Greenville's bootstrap Jewish mayor, designed to recall the Vienna from which he had to flee the Nazis, was a favorite avenue for vehicles waving these flags, especially on the weekends. One would even hear car horns sound out, in *Dukes of Hazzard* fashion, "I Wish I Was in Dixie." Of course, the uptick in the Confederates' visibility had a bit to do with my new perception. I was probably noticing more. But it was not solely new light that increased the number of cars in the parking lot of the Dixie Republic, a store just north of Greenville, on the way to the mountains, that peddles Confederate wares and that had appeared nearly vacant on all of my former commutes. I had kept notes on that site since I moved to the area. Things had changed, visibly.

Greenville County is large; like many "urban" Southeastern counties, it contains sizable rural areas. It reaches from the mountainous, sparsely populated border of the Carolinas all the way south of Greenville proper. This means, among other things, that whites in the city of Greenville have some handy local scapegoats when society turns indecorous. In 2015, when we saw flag-waving, "Dixie"-blaring trucks barreling through our downtown, it was easy to convince ourselves that these were simply the right-wing fundamentalist hicks who had come in from the county's hinterlands for the day—and to the hinterlands they would return, at last, to find a lonely hill on which to die. The Dixie Republic was unincorporated in this New South, and it would remain that way.

The Vanishing Confederate, planned for perpetual obsolescence, was and

is a comforting character in every New Southern narrative. He is a myth. Racism—even the virulent, violent, Confederate variety—is not simply a phenomenon among the “uncultivated” hewers of wood. It probably was not mountain folk who tagged Nicholtown’s portion of the Swamp Rabbit Trail with the figures of white supremacy. Dylann Roof grew up in South Carolina’s largest metropolitan area, and his family attended a mainline Protestant church, not a conservative congregation led by a graduate from, say, Greenville’s fundamentalist Bob Jones University. To be clear, to call the Vanishing Confederate a myth is not to say he does not take on flesh. If you travel much in northern Greenville County, you will meet incarnations of him (“he” will be mythically male in most public incarnations). It means, rather, that the Vanishing Confederate is a necessary and necessarily misallocated character in the tale the New (white) South tells about itself.

In New Southern cities, it is convenient to think of the race problem as a “country” problem because the country is assumed to be dying, the cities growing limitlessly. The New South has bought the nearly ubiquitous American equation of “urban” with growth, growth with progress, urban-growth-progress with inevitability, rurality with stasis, and rural-stasis with imminent, inevitable cultural death. That which seeks to thrive in the hinterlands will fail. That which seeks to thrive in the cities will succeed. According to the *telos* smuggled into the American equation, beefed up by an old white southern conservatism that believes “whatever is, is best,” these failures and successes not only *will* happen; they *should* happen. If racists—at least, the *real*, problem-causing racists—do not live in the city, New Southern whites may breathe a sigh of relief. They may congratulate themselves for being on the right side of history.

Although this New Southern vision contains some innovations, it also recapitulates the time-tested logic of southern white mythology: in the southern Eden—any southern Eden—there is not a “native problem,” because problems *as such* are caused by intruders in the garden, interlopers and outside agitators. Usually, the intruders have been (and still are) nonwhites of any region, or northerners. But once a people commits itself dogmatically to the myth of its paradise, no population is too sacred for displacement. Once one begins drawing the boundaries to contain perceived purity and innocence (and, in the case of autocrats, loyalty), one will find that one cannot draw the circle tightly enough. In Greenville, in the New Southern Eden, the wrong kind of white southerners—the Confederates who in former days were the very people fenc-

ing in Eden from the inside—find themselves banished. Knowing what some of these Confederate populations have perpetrated, and plan to perpetrate, one is tempted to say that the ways of the Lord are true and just.

But qualifications are in order. First, believers in and beneficiaries of the New Southern myth cannot and will not *entirely* banish the wrong kind of white southerners, the vestiges of the Old South. The power of the New South myth depends too heavily upon their presence. They need to be Vanish-ing, not Vanish-ed, Confederates. If they actually vanish, the myth vanishes with them. This is why people who fancy themselves white moderates in the South will wince a bit at the removal of Confederate symbols: they do and do not want this to happen. Unlike believers in the Old Southern myth, believers in the New Southern myth do not want to believe the white South *always* has been innocent. Rather, they wish to believe their South perpetually is becoming innocent—redeemed, sanctified—by virtue of what they no longer believe or whom they no longer allow in polite company. If I am a New Southern white, the Confederates are the symbols of guilt that I must keep constantly before my consciousness. *They* are the guilty party, not me, never me. The Vanishing Confederates must remain before me merely as phantasmic symbols, passing objects of my polite disdain—not as actual, present, confederated human beings (how much of this also rehearses the ways white northerners have regarded the white South). I must be able to drive past the Dixie Republic—which, I will delight in telling my visitors, is not located in *my* city—cluck my tongue, and keep driving. If I fully acknowledged the humanity, the real presence, of the Confederates, I would have to treat them as worthy of open, active, constant confrontation or as humans who possess complicated histories, whose lives pose a serious set of challenges to my own. I would have to face myself. For the sake of New Southern white identity and its founding myth, I must keep their full personhood unacknowledged. I need, not a Lost Cause, but a Losing Cause. I need some monuments at which to scoff; I need to defer the inward turn.

Unlike my African-American neighbors, if I am a white New Southerner, I can afford to assume the Vanishing Confederates' presence is basically symbolic—that their flag-waving has no flesh to it. They pose no physical danger to my church, my family, my home—provided my disdain remains polite and private, and provided I keep my church, family, and home as unofficially segregated as they currently are. The Dylann Roofs of the world did not target my church;

unless my sector of Christianity came to incarnate something more meaningful, they never would. As long as the Vanishing Confederate was not *too* present to us—and recent signs suggest he is understandably unhappy with this condescending arrangement—he was of tremendous help to us. We cheered the lowering of the Confederate flag at the South Carolina State House, knowing full well what remained on the grounds, knowing that nothing about the removal changed our neighborhoods, our places of employment, our leisure spaces, or our decisions where to send our children to school. Some of us said we believed that black lives mattered, knowing full well we never would test this belief with our own lives. We probably heard sermons vaguely denouncing Confederate-variety racism in our churches; we nodded accordingly. None of this mattered much. The myth of our identity as New Southerners—predicated almost entirely on being “not Old Southerners”—was more preferable to us than acknowledging either the humanity of black people, or the harder, nastier humanity of the Confederates. The myth made our lives easy. It did not make our lives good. Until whites in and of the New South learn to prefer the latter to the former, to opt in hope for southern friction over southern comfort, racial reconciliation will not happen.

Nativities were in strange motion in the Emerald City. I regularly biked to Greenville’s downtown to work in one of the city’s many coffee shops. A vibrant slam poetry collective—comprised largely but not exclusively of young African Americans—regularly hosted readings in a mini-theater in one of these establishments. Usually, though, I worked among people of my tint. Because it was downtown—near the Falls, near the banks—the coffee shop was the site of all kinds of activity, business and leisure. The conversations generally had four themes: money, choice local food and alcohol, college football, and Jesus—in that order of frequency, though the themes often bled into one another, and often they combined into a fifth, synthesizing theme: the excellence of life in Greenville. That the themes were so taken for granted suggest they were the centering values of all individual and corporate life. The need to rehearse these themes in public also suggested this population was trying to speak itself into possession of something that eluded it or that it only possessed tenuously. New money is always anxious money. Football and Jesus were simultaneously of ultimate concern and, given how they came across in conversation, profoundly inconsequential.

The occasional iterations of German and French in Greenville's downtown bespoke a transplant population, though it was unclear what *transplant* meant in Greenville. Michelin and BMW had existed in the region for decades, and since New Southerners seemed to believe that an economic policy that brought multinational corporations to the South—that, in fact, *required* their presence—was essentially, or especially, southern, who would not count as local? The overwhelming dominance of southeastern accents suggested that, even if many citizens were not Greenville natives, they were native southeasterners. I heard Greenvillians narrate themselves as crossers of great divides because they hailed from Charlotte, Augusta, Columbia, Spartanburg, or some other city within a two-hour drive. Among the mover-and-shaker class of Greenville's white population, you would be hard-pressed to find someone who has no connections to nearby Clemson or Furman Universities. You'd think the people who attended, say, Emory University in Atlanta had visited the moon.

Certainly, this narcissism of small differences was not limited to the Southeast: listen to many lifelong New Yorkers talk about their home neighborhoods. However, white Greenvillians' overtures to cosmopolitanism were especially misplaced because conformity in the city was so total. The will-to-sameness was so cartoonish that it sometimes seems like a giant, *Truman Show*-style ruse—as if every white person has conspired in a kind of self-parody, to madden the uninitiated. A standing army of white men in standard-issue bright polo shirts and khakis patrolled Greenville's downtown. White women had a few more options: jeans-and-heels combos, sundresses, Bedazzled sandals. Orange was a popular color because of Clemson, but anything bright would suffice. The parts in men's hairs could not have varied from scalp to scalp by any more than a half-centimeter. Everyone was trimmed as neatly and as uniformly as the blocks in Max Heller's pristine sidewalks.

And everyone was ever in sales mode. Sometimes the commodity was some stock Jesus. More often it was some business venture. Always it was oneself. There was hardly a corner of the Emerald City's white quadrants where one would not find a swarm of young Silas Laphams and Willy Lomans, on their way to a final act whose outcome they had no equipment to predict. These were incredibly polite and friendly people—very adept at small talk, provided the subject matter strayed little past the stock topics. If that happened, they went horribly dim.

The midwestern Calvinist in me balked at the dogmatic sunniness, all the

pastel propriety. New Southerners seemed hell-bent on either erasing shadows or refusing to comprehend them. Their lives exhibited a confusion of manners with morals—a confusion whose long-term fatality did not register with anyone because manners made life easy. Couple this with a failure to differentiate between ease and simplicity, and you have a multitude who acted as if the easy life, the good life, the simple life, and the unexamined life were one and the same. A popular T-shirt among whites in the region, printed by the Simply Southern apparel company, read, “Preppy, Classy, and Happy Never Goes Out of Style.” I took this mission statement to function descriptively and prescriptively. I took the verb choice, which reduced the plural subject to a singularity, to be significant.

People rarely broke character in white Greenville, but I listened long enough in the public spaces to catch glimpses behind the glistening veil—to witness, in fleeting moments, the sad upshot of these confusions, the singular subject broken again into plural: the soft sobbing of a woman wondering to her friend what she was doing wrong in her marriage, the recounting of the disastrous family weekend outing at the lake (man-made, of course), the despair of individuals aghast that the wise investment, the kitchen makeover, the day-drinking at the pool, the matriculation of the child into the “good school,” all added up to an onerous weightlessness. The reaching, the perplexity, in the voices suggested that these pitiable individuals experienced a radical dissonance between their habits, their material circumstances, and their feelings: *Preppy . . . Classy . . . why not Happy?*

The materially-well-situated-yet-miserable white person was not unique to the New South. But the Greenville version was especially sad and toxic because of the relentlessness of that affected southern sunshine. Whatever flimsy conceptions of the good life existed among my similarly-situated midwestern white neighbors, or my better-situated mid-Atlantic white neighbors, even their sunniest days were a bit overcast, and they seemed to know it. They were always a little frustrated by their “good” lives, and they carried themselves as if they possessed a vague sense of the costs. They certainly did not seem obliged to appear happier than they were all the time. But the desperation and shock in the Greenville voices, when character broke, suggested that these people had bought the lie: *Preppy-Classy-Happy—Description, Prescription*. Had I cast them as the players behind the *Truman Show* ruse? Maybe they were, in fact, Truman. Maybe they were both: maybe that lamp they themselves had hung

in their sky had become to them the actual sun, and they did not—they *could* not—believe it would burn out, that it was an unsustainable energy source. It was, indeed, a powerful lamp, which was why public life was ordinarily so sunny, and why, in those moments when the clarifying darkness pushed back the obfuscating light, these people were thrown back particularly hard. It was unnerving to witness them experiencing this, for where they experienced dissonance, I heard a horrifying harmony. I heard irruptions of lucidity in lives that, in ordinary time, were apparently bereft of self-criticism, of the very sort of interiority that would have revealed the lie and saved them some distress. *Without labor on the center, what will come of the surfaces*—I wondered in 2015—*are these lives horrifying because they are not sustainable, or because they are—because They Never Go Out of Style?*

The New South, like the Old, prides itself on being slow. Some versions of southern slowness are admirably countercultural and redemptive—eschewing the fast-paced life in favor of stillness and nonattachment, cultivating “absolute unmixed attention”—what Simone Weil claimed was the definition of prayer. I found this kind of slowness most prominent among Greenville’s older white women. If you wanted to talk Quaker mysticism, Buddhist meditation, Catholic contemplative practices, or if you wanted to find the white people in town who were truly working to transform the racism of the Emerald City, you would have done well to begin your search among the senior women. My own 25-50 year-old demographic was, as everywhere, the free market darling, but we were not the Emerald City’s prophetic nodes. The biblically literate will not be surprised by this. God’s chosen are usually shamefully old or young by the reigning standards, and those who are called at thirty are dead by thirty-three. Granted, not true of all of the senior whites in Greenville, but it was usually the southern white elderly who slowed and stilled themselves rightly to feel the fire in their bones.

Unfortunately, the prevailing form of New Southern slowness is torpor. The mystics might call it acedia: spiritual sloth: radical inattentiveness: dullness. Gregory the Great claimed acedia often produced a “roaming unrest of the spirit” that made one susceptible to perverse titillations that temporarily warded off ennui. I was astonished by how much alcohol New Southern whites consumed. Their addiction to alcohol was only matched by their addiction to college football—an enterprise that consumed entire weekends

and God knows how much of their mental space. The downtown stretch of the Swamp Rabbit Trail—choice real estate—runs past the city’s high-end art galleries. When I first moved to town, the standout window display was a four-by-four-foot oil painting of the sideline-barking, be-headsetted cranium of Clemson football coach Dabo Swinney. Swinney is famously and loudly a Christian—a fact which would have been unusual for most of Christian history, when spectator sports (not to mention violent gladiatorial matches) were anathema. Gone are the days of Augustine, who lamented the devolving of his friend Alypius, a Christian law student in Rome. As Augustine tells the story, some of Alypius’s fellow students dragged him against his will to the coliseum to watch a gladiator battle. Alypius resisted participating at first, even covering his eyes, but the enticement of the violent spectacle, and the frenzy of the other spectators, was too powerful. When Alypius left the coliseum, “he was [. . .] no longer the same man who came in, but was one of the mob he came into, a true companion of those who had brought him thither.” By the end of my tenure, Swinney was replaced in the window by portraits of similar dimensions: Marco Rubio, Donald Trump, Darryl Strawberry.

Emerald-City individuals might have particular team loyalties, but everyone *must* commit to the general loyalty. One hardly could exchange three words with a white Greenvillian without possessing some gridiron knowledge. Even in leisure, uniqueness was of no value. The goal was belonging, at all costs, in all things. As far as I know, no serious discussion of the 2015 Confederate flag controversy, or any of the subsequent controversies, has fully reckoned with white southerners’ peculiar obsession with flying *any* flag in public, year-round. It makes sense; for a people who want cheap solidarity, flags are the perfect shorthand. Try counting the number of gaudy, gas station-purchased Clemson flags stuck in the car windows on any given Greenville road, any given day. Count the number of houses in Greenville’s upwardly mobile white neighborhoods ruined by the emblems of some southern university. One effect of the 2015 Confederate flag controversy was an uptick in huge pickups cruising Greenville’s Main Street, with gigantic American or Palmetto State flags waving in their beds (I must say, South Carolina’s state flag is quite sharp). I read this as a well-intentioned counter-protest to the Confederacy, but it did not seem to occur to anyone that the obsession with waving any banner, all the time, might be part of the sickness.

No one questioned you if you brandished a flag in public. If you bran-

dished a book or notebook, however, you had to prep for polite inquisition. Every place I have lived (Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, even *North Carolina*) I have found a critical mass of people who, like me, enjoyed reading and writing in public—parks, coffee shops, etc. Greenville was different. I remained an anomaly even in places where I was regular. *What are you working on all the time? Why are you reading so much?* The questions become more frequent if I was working, say, during a weekend, holiday break, or a Clemson football game. I never knew what to say. It was difficult to have a short, friendly conversation about what I thought made time free, about how freedom and vocation could converge. The interviews did not last long. But I suppose people understood enough. I served well as a mascot for the city's cosmopolitan self-perception. In my favorite haunts, how often I felt those sidelong glances, so perfected among southern whites, followed by distant, oblique, lukewarm remarks, so perfected among southern whites, on the "funkiness," "the bookishness," the "artsiness" of Greenville. Some alien work was afoot. But it was white work; it must have been good for business. I hated the thought that I was a mascot for such a broken people; I hated the thought that I deserved to be.

By many counts, New Southern whites are unimpressive people, but that is not what separates them from other people. Most of us, anywhere, are not that impressive, much of the time (remember—Greenville frequently appears on *national* lists of great American cities). The problem is the profundity and the nature of the chasm that yawns between reality and self-perception in the New South. New Southern mediocrity is especially toxic because of the myths that mask it. These people move in the world as if they are the salt of the earth, as if they themselves have built something infinitely better than any northerner, or especially any Confederate, could imagine. The haughtiness was rarely overt, and perhaps not self-conscious. But if you were not of this genteel population, you could feel it.

Among the most difficult things to stomach in the New South were the peacans to hard work, individuality, self-reliance, and the efficiency of the private sector. They were tough to stomach when one met hardly three distinct persons in a thousand. They were tough to stomach when they came drawling out of the mouths of such an inattentive population, in a place where everything took five times as long as it did in other places (this inefficiency made me hurt all the more for the southern Laphams and Lomans). They were tough to stomach when everyone seemed to be working for the weekend, when "hard

work” was defined so narrowly as to exclude the more rigorous forms of self-criticism and holistic growth that gave life meaning, that made other lives better. The protest might come that New Southerners are just *selective* with their labor. *Isn't there a CrossFit facility on every other block of Greenville? And isn't business booming in Greenville, after all?* This is only a reasonable protest if one believes that moving any shiny thing around—kettle bells or capital—until one vomits, gets an ulcer, or gets bought out, counts as unique, or hard, or efficient work. This does not strike me as a reasonable assessment. It is nothing more than plantation laziness integrated with the most pernicious forms of Yankee industriousness: ennui in composite. And the myth of the self-made man, of the independent, free-thinking individual, apparently prevails in the New South because such an individual is a rare occurrence. The New Southern anxiety over the opposite myth—the person who supposedly receives undeserved handouts and consequently misuses them—comes as no surprise. If you are habituated to using resources carelessly and unoriginally, you may assume everyone else would as well.

New Southern mediocrity in Greenville was cloaked not only in the outward signs of socioeconomic election, but also, most importantly, in the Protestant God. By the time of my arrival, Greenville's uber-conservative Bob Jones University had lost some of its former social capital, but it remained a useful foil for the city's white evangelical and mainline Protestant populations—BJU: that fundamentalist stronghold that did not allow long hair on men, that made it through the entire twentieth century without permitting mixed-race dating. BJU was virtually synonymous with backward thinking and religious stodginess. Exactly what was transpiring on the ground at Bob Jones when I was there might have belied some of the crude stereotypes. But that did not matter. Religious fundamentalism functioned for New Southern Christians primarily as a symbol. To seem inclusive in comparison to the fundamentalist God, one's God did not need to be very wide. The official God of New Southern Greenville was the “God-of-not-Bob-Jones,” which from what I could surmise usually meant worshipping a “God Without Thunder,” as John Crowe Ransom, that unregenerate southerner, once termed it—a God who never would call you to trouble the cultural waters. This apophatic, “not-that-God” religiosity even worked for Bob Jones's hip younger alums, who talked with eye-rolling love about the once-and-current stodginess of their alma mater (when I first wrote this sentence, I was overhearing a conversation between two twenty-something BJU alums. Acknowledging that he used to be really conservative,

one announced, with a great deal of self-satisfaction, that he now drank alcohol and had “atheistic” friends. If you teach your students to come out and be separate, they might).

If white Greenville had not so believed its own hype, it would have been a good deal more beautiful, lovable, and hype-worthy. But it preferred to stand by its self-assessment as a diverse, cutting-edge, mature, theologically and aesthetically astute—“progressive?”—place. This was not simply a matter of willful self-misperception, though. White Greenville stood by its self-assessment because, by some metrics, it was true.

When Lynn and I decided to move from New Jersey to South Carolina, we knew we would be living either in Greenville or Clinton. The latter was a town of about 8,000 people, though it seemed much smaller (8,000-person cities in New Jersey usually were adjacent to at least ten other cities of comparable size. Not necessarily so in South Carolina). Clinton was the home of Presbyterian College (PC), a bucolic small liberal arts college, where I had accepted a two-year faculty position. Clinton was about a 45-minute drive south from Greenville—an easy commute, against traffic on a nice road, but still a bit of a haul. Lynn would be working on her writing during our time in South Carolina, and she was good at working at home. We were a single-car family. At least one of us needed to be able to bike or walk to any relevant daytime destinations, so living in one of the towns between Greenville and Clinton would have been the worst of all possibilities. Housing options were more limited in Clinton; we were not interested in a house, and apartments were scarce. And our first impression of Greenville was extremely positive—no surprise, since Greenville was built for us, the young white professionals who enjoyed multiuse trails, urban green spaces, and whatever else supposedly accompanied such amenities. By the time we arrived in the region, there were already several junior faculty commuting from Greenville to PC. We chose Greenville. I carpooled with colleagues and had a great time. I loved the college.

I never regretted our choice to live in Greenville. Unimpressed as I eventually became with most of its citizenry, I was under no romantic misapprehension that life in small-town South Carolina would have been necessarily easy or good. Clinton was in Laurens County, whose Republican Party leaders had decided in 2012 that all party candidates should sign a document to endorse a narrow definition of family (and to adopt a conspicuously pointed

stance on the consumption of pornography). I sometimes walked through the cemetery of Clinton's First Presbyterian Church, wading in a bog of C.S.A. crosses and apparently-fresh Confederate flags. If I had to make the choice again, Greenville still would lure me; that says a great deal about the boundaries of my current vision.

Notwithstanding all of the Confederate and Victorian awfulness in Laurens County, I never could muster the same sort of revulsion to Clinton's white citizens that I could to their New South cousins up the road. I knew I could not be the former's friends, and maybe not their neighbors. But I also saw that, despite all of their puritanical attempts to level the culture of the place, most of their lives were not easy. Clinton possessed for me a grim dignity. There, one could not get around mortality. Even the fairly well-heeled in Clinton had to travel those old, poorly funded roads, had to drive through that moribund downtown, alive by the grace of the probably-Presbyterian God. There was no mansion on a hill in Clinton so high that its owner did not have to wait in traffic for the freight trains, which ran right through the downtown, on some days as frequently as every hour. There was no Clinton community so gated that one could lock oneself completely in, or others completely out.

Unexpectedly, I came to see that Clinton, Philadelphia, and New York—all places I had worked, lived, or both—resembled each other more than any one of them resembled Greenville. The former places were flush with resistance. Resistance, in fact, was the irrepressible reality in both remote and truly urban spaces. Although I am aware how differently the resistance of metropolises and villages would fall upon me were I a person of color, or coded as sexually non-normative, it remains true that in the big city, the isolated small town, and the country, you will find yourself quite unnecessary if you are even halfway awake, whoever you are. If you want to survive, you had better make your peace with your fundamental insignificance, with the daily risks of living. The people who are most skilled at making their peace with these realities are the people who not only survive but thrive in such places. One learns to use the resistance to grow and to connect with one's surroundings. One becomes, in fact, wedded to the very structures that offer the resistance. It is a precarious wedding—not at all romantic. But some emerge transfigured. I rarely drove to Clinton without remembering that, not much farther south than Laurens County, in an even more remote corner of the Palmetto State, James Brown was born, nearly dead when he emerged from his mother's womb.

Greenville, and the New South it represents, is neither country nor city, neither hot nor cold. It is designed to absorb white people of a particular socio-economic and socioaesthetic class and use them as cogs in a wheel of tasteless luxury and borrowed virtue. We take the deal because most of us, most of the time, simply want life to be good enough—easy, frictionless. Here is where our white residents from the hinterlands become so handy to our narrative again. We use them, in their semi-presence, to convince ourselves that our choices are extraordinary, our successes set us meaningfully apart, our culture is higher, our contributions are advances. We also selectively carry aspects of the culture of the hinterlands with us to convince ourselves we are still as tough as our hinterland ancestors were. You will find the big pickups in Greenville. They do not live on farms, but each white Greenvillian is apparently issued a dog—the loyal animal that does not talk back, whose dependence on its master is so clear that, whatever its pedigree, one may regard it as “a rescue.” You will find in Greenville the good ol’ boy swagger. We consume a modern version of country music, which thematizes the leisure of rural whites but packages it for people who have abandoned the kinds of labor that gave such leisure at least a modicum of dignity and pathos: pontoon boats, high school football, and drinking parties in the middle of farm fields, all without the encumbrance of decreasing wages, backbreaking labor, and disappearing agrarian spaces. Everything but the burden.

No, I could not have lived in Clinton. But I could not participate in the scapegoating that I heard places like Clinton receive from whites in Greenville—and sometimes from citizens of Clinton, too. When I told people in both places that I worked in Clinton but lived in Greenville, and they responded with a “well-of-course” laugh and nod, I felt a pang of shame and could not help but think of the words of the prophet Jeremiah: “Oh that I had in the wilderness a traveler’s lodging place!” The 2015 Confederate flag controversy clarified some matters for me. Laurens County had its share of embarrassing political postures, but it was the state legislators of Greenville County, not Laurens County, who voted against removing the flag in Columbia in 2015. The Confederate flags in Clinton Presbyterian Church’s cemetery disappeared the very moment I saw an uptick in such flags in Greenville.

I do not know what will come of Clinton, or towns like it. But when I search my tradition, I cannot avoid the sense that America’s fate, its moral inheritance, is tied up with how we reckon with these places—places and people

we would rather not think about. I think about this all the more in 2017, living in New York City, watching people of my class walking our pure-breed dogs, drinking our lattes, and tossing around criticisms of the current administration and its supporters as casually as we play fetch. I cannot escape the feeling that, unless something changes, it will not go well for those of us at ease in Zion.

On December 31, 2015, Lynn and I traveled to Columbia, South Carolina. For some time, the state capital had hosted a free concert to ring in the new year. The main stage was set up on Gervais Street, right in front of the State House. Lynn and I drove down because the headliner was one of our favorites: Ms. Lauryn Hill. She was scheduled to play the final hour, before midnight, at which point she would break for the big countdown, then perform another small set to take the Palmetto State into 2016.

We could feel the positive energy in the crowd. Pre-show, I felt happy (and a bit old) as I heard African-American parents explain to their preteen and teenage children who Lauryn Hill was and why she mattered. Judging by the many young people who sang and rapped along with Hill during the show, many already knew her music.

The cadre of speakers who addressed us before Hill's performance must have been briefed on how to handle the translucent heaviness, the import of the iconic former Fugee performing where the Confederate flag had hung, where Bree Newsome lowered it. Like much of the South Carolina low country, Columbia had experienced unprecedented, catastrophic flooding the previous October. Many Columbians were still trying to recover, as was evident by the many relief organizations who set up tents and asked for donations at the concert. On New Year's Eve, the flood provided speakers a convenient, seemingly apolitical problem to cover the state's other 2015 crises. *We've been through a lot this year, but we got through and we're stronger for it*—a refrain so safe, so proud, so partially true, after the southern fashion. When Lynn and I drove into Columbia earlier that day, the Saluda and Broad Rivers were raging again. On this occasion, they did not spill into the streets.

I now live in New York City—by a number of standards, the ultimate Emerald City. Indeed, it is green, and I am green in it. It is difficult to separate natural and artificial hues. I try not to perpetuate the sentiment so in fashion among non-New Yorkers, and even among those New Yorkers who establish their cos-

mopolitanism via self-deprecation: “Well, New York has [racists, homophobes, injustice, etc.] just like everywhere else.” Such statements are true, but they gloss too much. And sorry, America, we have to stop pretending. In important ways, New York is probably better. It’s probably better if you are gay. It’s probably better if you are not a Christian. It’s probably better (none of my relatives believe this) if you are elderly and without family caregivers. White New Yorkers are more visibly full of themselves, more vocal with their imagined omniscience because life in the city requires paying at least a little attention; they are not lazy. Many of them at least have some productive guilt. The bar for white America is so low, it is refreshing to find such a group, if you’ve lived among the alternatives.

Still, white life in New York can look frightfully as broken as white life in Greenville, just with a more sympathetic voting record. We have to do better. If the templates available to me, as a white man, are (a) the backwoods, arms-trafficking, squirrel-eating fundamentalist who waves a Confederate flag on his lawn to signal his heritage *and* his hate, or (b) the urban trafficker in private equity who eats at the choice restaurants, attends a “progressive” church, waves only the polite flags, spends most of his weekends day-drinking local beers, walking the pure-breeds under his charge, and meditating, with the constancy of a desert monastic, on Clemson football—or, only a tick better, on self-congratulating *New York Times* op-eds—if these are my only templates, then we are in a state of moral catastrophe. I am unconvinced that making it off the rural farm on which my father grew up, only to accept the comfortable, disinterested, spiritually vacuous life of the young professional class, can be counted an improvement in my cultivation. I am unconvinced that in the long run, the latter option makes me a better neighbor to people unlike me: my black neighbors, on whose behalf I am only willing to speak theoretically, or my white, “unreconstructed” neighbors, with whom I rarely *truly* speak. I get to silently ignore the first group, silently despise the latter, and be proud of myself in both cases. I dehumanize all parties in the process.

I believe there are other options. If not, we have to create other options, to do a new thing, to accept what have been unbecoming thoughts. It may be that New Southerners, living under the shadow of the shattered and shattering Confederate monuments, have a unique role to play in the transformation. It will be costly, though. The entire interior and exterior of the landscape of New Southerners must change. New Southerners must put themselves in more sub-

stantive proximity with their literal white and black neighbors, against whom they define themselves. It may be happening in 2017, as the Confederates increasingly insist they are not Vanishing. Whites living in the New South may protest that the changes will introduce dangers into their lives. They are not entirely wrong. But it is time to recognize the soul dangers the New South already has posed to its ostensible architects and beneficiaries. It is time to address the paltry models of the good life that have had purchase with them—with us. There yet may be a better southern rebellion awaiting instigation—one that will be worthy of national memorialization. If you teach people to come out and be separate, they might.

The New Year's Eve concert was a grand success. Lauryn Hill was late to the stage, but only by a half-hour. Her concert certainly was not the most egregiously delayed event to happen on the State House grounds that year. The next day, Lynn and I returned to the site, to see it in the light of day. The stage was gone. All that remained in place was that which was designed to remain in place. The entire landscape was an Old South monument; there were numerous statues of, by, and for Confederate generals, Dixie's daughters, and Jim Crow statesmen. On the side of the State House opposite the New Year's Eve stage stood a statue of Strom Thurmond. Centered perfectly on the building, nine feet tall (not including the pedestal), Thurmond's statue was in mid-stride, walking gracefully away from the State House—a posture his antecedent never learned. It was all there for the Confederates: an Old South in unobstructed dormancy—frozen, cold, inanimate, unmistakably *there*. It was there for me, too. Here were icons to focus my meditations, my hatred, my belief in my own moral evolution. As I drove away, I shook my head as I watched the site shrink in my rearview mirror. I was headed north to the place I was calling home: the Emerald City.