Concerning the Death of Marco McMillian

I spent every summer for the past fourteen summers in Jackson, Mississippi. I attended and later worked at Strong River Camp and Farm, a traditionalist summer camp painted by visions of canoes and arrows. These summers spent freezing in a cold river and baking under Dixie sun are some of my most cherished childhood memories. At the end of my last summer, I stood by a pond overseeing children splashing in muddy water while their compatriots slathered their faces and tongues with raw honey, right from the comb. Sun filtered through blueberry vines and illuminated greenery like patchwork. This land, this little cosmos, felt tranquil and idealized, like it had been captured in oils on a canvas and was not a reality laid bare before me. Swimming languidly below the surface of this ideal, however, is a repressed history of hatred and cruelty made manifest. The abject history of poverty and race in Mississippi is no secret. It is burned into our cultural consciousness. This is the land of lynching and minstrel shows, the land of domination and enslavement. Recently, a new museum dedicated to the civil rights movement as it existed in Jackson and Mississippi at large opened downtown. President Donald Trump gave the opening remarks: “The Civil Rights Museum records the oppression, cruelty, and injustice inflicted on the African American community, the fight to end slavery, to break down Jim Crow, to end segregation, to gain the right to vote, and to achieve the sacred birthright of equality here. And that's big stuff. That's big stuff. Those are very big phrases. Very big words” (Trump par. 8). They are very big words indeed. Jackson is one of few capital cities in America where blacks outnumber whites. The population is 79.4% black and only 18.4% white (Census). The division is stark, to say the least. The wealthy whites practice the expected self-segregation, the construction of “gated communities” and “developments”. The black population, meanwhile, disperse in kind throughout the city. Another factoid about Jackson is that it is desperately poor. The median household income for a family in Jackson is markedly lower than the national average. But one can only truly understand the poverty that has stricken this city by travelling through its outskirts. The suburbs and expanses of unhappy land that extend out from the perimeter of “Jackson” are dotted by twisted metal and abandoned cars, broken telephone lines and stinking waste from failed agricultural endeavors. It is the kind of sad, hopeless land that reflects back in the eyes of those who call it home. On February 27th, 2013, Marco McMillian’s body was found in this hypothetical and consuming space between swampland and veritable economic annihilation. McMillian was a young, black, and gay Jacksonian who had somehow managed to wriggle loose of his hometown’s grip. He made his way to Washington D.C. and had begun headway on a promising career in the body politic. Until he decided to return home and run for mayor. McMillian was found next to a levee in these outskirts of town previously discussed, strangled and beaten. His body was then soaked in kerosene and set alight, his flesh adding smoke to the cloud of industrial smog rising up from the corners of the city. McMillian was killed in an act of hate for being visibly gay and visibly black in a city that can, sometimes, allow one or the other but never both. His was both a figurative and a literal lynching, in a time where such things feel, to whites at least, like relics of a bygone era. All of this reflects on my time spent here and casts a dark pallor over my memory. My Mississippi is a far cry from the *real* Mississippi. How funny it feels to stand in a place that has convinced itself of progress, yet black and queer bodies are still subsumed by the hatred sewn into the soil upon which we stand. Pastor Jimmy Glasper of the Jackson New Jerusalem Baptist Church (McMillian’s home church) said it best: “The devil is running rampantly, seeking who he may devour” (Terris par. 1).

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