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PLEDGE





A SIGN LEFT ON U.S. HIGHWAY 80 IN LOWNDES COUNTY, ALABAMA. PHOTO BY LAUREN S. HUGHES.

The stretch of U.S. Highway 80 between Selma and Montgomery is a scene from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Celie and Shug looked on a landscape just like it from their front porch in rural Georgia, shades of green pasture merged with color-changing sky—cobalt, white, slate, and peach.

Those characters, Black women-loving-women of the 1930s, could probably tell me stories of White terror, Black rage, and resistance that rivaled what happened here, in "Bloody" Lowndes County. They would remind me that the names of Black men marking roads here—Frederick Douglass, Langston Hughes, John Hulett—tell proud but partial stories of art and activism. We women fought right beside them, and when necessary, against them, they'd say.

They would insist to me that Black freedom is never settled fact, never a battle of the past.

Past is always present.

I am in a rental car, periwinkle economy class, driving up a Lowndes County road framed on either side by hovering trees. It is a cloudless Sunday morning in August 2015, three weeks after a police officer assaulted Sandra Bland for acting free in her own car, then sent her to die in a Texas jail cell. Kindra Chapman died in an Alabama jail two days before; the police convinced her parents she'd taken her own life. After this year—after even just this summer—I am convinced that death by police does not require police force.

But this is not on my mind as I drive. Everything I see, in almost every direction, was growing. There are some interruptions—a Hyundai factory, Koch Foods, a sign for Sabic Innovative Plastics in front of what looks like an ancient smokestack—signs of past and present capitalism. I recall the black clay soil—the original capital—and how slaves worked it to cultivate a thing called King Cotton. To say I would not be in this place without that soil isn't exaggerated. People don't stumble over my last name here; almost everyone I talk to knows someone by the name Purifoy—a church member in Tyler, a well respected teacher in White Hall. My grandfather's family was forced to migrate here—likely from a trading block in Montgomery—to serve the King and build the nation.

I pull off on the side of the road to take pictures. As I pull back onto the road, I see the sheriff's car in my rearview mirror.

We are the only people on this two-lane road, and I can only drive straight ahead.

"It's okay," I say under my breath. I don't remember the speed limit, so I try to drive steady at 50, both hands on the steering wheel, never looking back at him for too long.

Suddenly the landscape feels dangerous. Unless cows can tweet, there would be no witnesses. It had never been like this. Fearing police is not the same as mistrusting them, and I hadn't realized I'd crossed that line.

But it is so easy to make Black women disappear—even when people fight for us. Especially when we fight for us. Even seeming irritated about a police stop can be a capital offense. Asserting our personhood offends patriarchy, White supremacy, and whatever other norms we upend just by daring to live, just by making ourselves seen and heard.

I want to go home.

This road does not want to let me go. There is nothing but trees, ditches, and gated ranches ahead. I cannot slow down because he is right behind me; I cannot speed up because I don't want to give him a reason. He could pull in front of me if he wants, but he doesn't. I don't know what he wants.

I want to go home.

There is a flashing stoplight and a fork in the road. I slow down as I approach the intersection. I signal and make a full, legal stop. I wait—what feels like almost too long—and slowly turn onto another county road even more remote. I look back one more time, and watch him drive straight ahead.

I exhale.

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“We’re going to tear this county up. Then we’re going to built it back, brick by brick, until it’s a fit place for human beings.”

— Stokely Carmichael, Lowndes County 1965

I don't know exactly when my grandpa left the Alabama Black Belt for Detroit, but I do know that what he left behind was an environment unsuitable for his survival, much less his freedom. Thirty years before Stokely Carmichael uttered those words—a promise to a murdered White ally—Black sharecroppers in the region joined unions and organized strikes for livable wages, erasure of fraudulent debt, and better living conditions. Local Whites—individuals and organized mobs—lynched and maimed many in retaliation. They silenced a generation.

The decision to leave was never a real choice—in this place, as in many

other Southern places, there was little meaningful difference between fleeing Jim Crow and escaping slavery. What was legally permissible was not socially acceptable, and Black folk often fled in secret, for fear of being captured like runaway property.

Those who made it to Detroit did not forget those who would not or could not leave Lowndes County. When local residents like Lillian McGill and John Hulett got organized and broke the 20-year silence with the Lowndes County Christian Movement for Human Rights in the 1960s, members of the diaspora supported their fight for voting rights, political representation, equitable education, fair housing, and access to federal resources. They were well aware that this fight could not be won with non-violent direct action—they sent guns and ammunition for self-defense, tents and food when registered voters were evicted from land they had sharecropped for decades, supplies for the freedom school that formed as students boycotted inequitable public schools. They helped prepare these fighters to survive the violence they fled, to remake the county into a place they might call home again.

But as my grandpa, his children, and I all realized in different places both in and out of the South, there is more than one kind of violence. The quick, casual manner in which bullets and military weaponry inhabit Black spaces, or penetrate Black bodies, often detracts from the more gradual breaking of Black people and spirits in the gray spaces of hostile isolation, invisibility, and apathy. The racism that greeted my grandpa in Detroit, like the colorblind racism that greets his grandchildren across America today, operates by slow violence—the kind that hollows hope and kills life.

I don't know if Detroit was a "fit place" for my grandpa—he died before I could know him. He returned to Alabama late in his life, where he encountered Black elected officials running Black towns and sitting on county commissions—something unimaginable in his youth. It is a certain victory that he and others of the diaspora were able to come

home again, to see themselves in power..

My “homecoming” is bittersweet. I do not consider this region my home, but it is where I come from. The circumstances of my visit were different—I went for work, not family. But the two overlap the longer I stay—everything I learn about Lowndes County for work matters to the lives of my family members, whether I know them or not. The slow violence of racism was everywhere—in landownership, in housing, in sanitation, in the water—to say nothing of the schools or the chambers of political power. Or the still-fast violence of White terrorism—in and out of uniform.

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A few years ago, *Radiolab* ran a story about hookworm. Dickson Despommier, a parasitologist at Columbia University, detailed the Rockefellers’ involvement in “eradicating” the parasite and other related parasites across the South. Long story short, in 1910, John D. Rockefeller was interested in the Southern economy and invested money to research health issues impacting the workforce. Despommier says that wealthy farmers were targeted for an intervention supposedly because the loamy soils on which they lived were easier for hookworms to move through than the heavy clay soils where money-poor farmers, and Black sharecroppers, lived. The discovery that people were infected with hookworm by defecating above ground led to construction of hundreds of thousands of outhouses. Hookworms can only travel up to four feet, so digging an outhouse pit six feet deep would prevent human contact. By building outhouses across the South, Despommier argues, the Rockefellers were able to reboot the Southern economy, bringing the once severely anemic and lethargic workforce back to life.

A year ago, at a talk by a retired teacher and Lowndes County activist named Catherine Coleman Flowers, I learned that doctors recently detected hookworm in many Black patients in the Alabama Black Belt. Part of the cause stemmed from the heavy clay soils—which do not

percolate water well enough for septic systems to function properly. Custom tanks are cost prohibitive, so when the regular tanks fail, raw sewage collects in front and back yards, or backs up into houses. Many properties have no septic systems at all. Rather than work towards a solution—using public funds to extend sewer lines or to install smaller cluster systems—the state arrested and fined people for endangering public health.

I can think of few things more humiliating and counterproductive than making criminals of people who can't afford to properly dispose their own excrement. Black shame and disempowerment are rationalized as contributions to public health. And if we consider these events in the narrative of the Rockefellers' Southern business strategy, we can guess that profit motives, rather than health considerations motivated the choice to target wealthy farmers, (mostly White), for intervention rather than money-poor farmers [read: Black]. If hookworm can travel across heavy clay soils in 2015, is there any reason to believe it could not do so in 1910?

I went to Lowndes County because skeptical as I am, it was hard for me to understand why any American state in the 21st century would accept such clear, widespread, and reparable risks to public health in the absence of some major barrier (financial or legal) to a solution. This is where policy really matters—or so I thought.

In the late 80s, the Reagan administration replaced several federally administered infrastructure grant programs with state administered low-interest loan programs, like USDA's Rural Assistance Loan program and the EPA's Clean Water State Revolving Loan Fund. This one shift in policy clarifies two things. One, access to credit can trump access to clean water and sanitation, even in the most dire situations; and two state prerogatives can direct the flow of funding for politically strategic, rather than health strategic purposes.

We know enough history to understand that both of these things do the most damage to Black folk in Lowndes County, the larger Alabama Black Belt, and similarly situated places across the country. Many Black officials here don't apply for funding because they know they do not have enough credit, and even when their credit is good enough, it can take them over a decade to receive the funding to complete even small infrastructure improvements. If they default on any loan, they cannot apply for another until the first is fully repaid.

The consequences for Black property, Black wealth, Black towns, are devastating. Houses are worthless without functioning sewage disposal, regardless of other improvements. Properties can be condemned by the state and then resold to the highest bidder. Businesses do not establish in places without infrastructure. Town governments cannot survive without a tax base. Towns become unincorporated. And unincorporated communities are ineligible for infrastructure funding because they don't have town governments.

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I take an Atlanta-bound flight from the Montgomery airport, three weeks after I arrived. The sun hasn't yet risen on the land that I photographed in the first week, the land that my grandpa returned to in his last days. I found out he lived in an unincorporated communities—I wonder if his house—if it was still his—has a functioning sewage system. I wonder if he believed these kind of problems would be gone by now. I wondered about the limits of Black patience, of so-called Black resilience. I remembered that these are never real choices.

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