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DIVERSE EXPRESSIONS OF THE BLACK IDENTITY
IN JACKSON, MISSISSIPPI: STORIES

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
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at the University of Central Florida
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Abstract

Diverse Expressions of the Black Identity in Jackson, Mississippi: Stories is a collection of short stories that seeks to focus on the outsiders, the pariahs, and the social outcasts of Black society in Mississippi throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. By way of emigrations and immigrations, a race of people of multiple cultures that do not necessarily identify with the ethno-racial term “African-American” has emerged in the city of Jackson. Through the exploration of historically significant events, including America’s involvement in WWI, the legislation surrounding Black History Month and the dawn of the AIDS epidemic, this collection represents a variety of Black backgrounds in an attempt to do justice to their beauty and diversity.

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Introduction

Historically, Black people have always outnumbered white people in the city of Jackson. In 1898, few, if any, property was owned by Black individuals. Only some owned the property their home stood on, but that small number increased to roughly fifty percent within the next 12 years. By 1909, over 8000 Black people owned up to one-third of the area of the town. One hundred businesses were owned and run by members of the Black community, exclusively for Black patronage (Woodard 3-6). In the early 20th century, Jackson, Mississippi acted as a haven for Black individuals within the state and without. Making a living as a Black man or woman was easier; education, while still inadequate, was better; and there were comparatively few incidents involving the encounters of Blacks and whites. In 1909, D. W. Woodard, mathematician and professor at Tuskegee Institute, made the claim that, “There has never been a lynching in Jackson” (7). While the outlook was optimistic, it is impossible to determine whether the assertion was true.

On April 6, 1917, the United States entered World War I. By 1918, 66,000 Mississippians had contributed to the war effort (“Mississippi History Timeline”). Despite the patriotism inspired across the country, the war heightened racial tensions in Mississippi. Many Black Mississippians expected things to change post-war — “war-time loyalty to yield post-war reward.” These expectations provoked white fear. By 1919, racial violence had reached levels unknown since the Reconstruction period. Denied the ballot in Mississippi and under much societal duress, Black people began to leave Mississippi for the North in what scholars describe as “the largest mass migration in the history of the United States” (Morgan).

Following the end of World War I in 1918, a recession hit the entirety of the United States, known as the Great Depression. It was characterized by extreme poverty, the closing of banks, job losses, and business foreclosures. As devastating as it was for whites across the country, Blacks had the added burden of the realities of Jim Crow. Ignorant of politics and uneducated of the same, the Black population in Mississippi struggled to make ends meet on a day-to-day basis. One survivor of the Depression said, “You would have thought that the Depression would have pulled people together, but that sure didn’t happen. Everyone went their separate ways.” All interviewees in a 1979 study entitled “A Brief Look at Blacks in Depressions, MS, 1929-1934” claim it was more difficult for Blacks living in Jackson and other urban areas of Mississippi during the Depression than those living in rural areas due to the nature of currency and self-sufficient food production. However, Blacks in Jackson did have an outlet for their day-to-day struggles: the so called “Black Mecca” of Mississippi’s Farish Street (Gordon).

Farish Street was best known for its post-World War II fame. Farish Street served as a cultural and business hub for the African American population of central Mississippi. During its heyday, the district hosted the likes of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Ray Charles. It initially came into existence following the Civil War and entered its peak during the mid-20th century. It’s slogan, “Built by and for the descendants of slaves,” lives on to modern times. Farish street was a safe place for Black business owners to practice under the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision that codified Jim Crow practices. It is said that the nine blocks that composed Farish street were so packed, one could barely get by. Today, despite several attempts to revive it, Farish Street remains deserted.

The period between 1954 and 1968 is known across the world as the American Civil Rights Movement. Both white and Black people joined the struggle for desegregation. In the state of Mississippi, the Movement began gradually across the state. By 1960, the number of organizations involved in the movement had doubled from the decade prior. Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers, after whom the Jackson city airport is named, enlisted youth into the Civil Rights effort through NAACP youth councils. The participation of youth, whether in the form of Freedom Riders or college protestors, was critical to the advancement of the Movement (Davis).

The summer of 1964 was considered the “Freedom Summer.” Its intention was to increase the number of Black registered voters in the state of Mississippi. 17,000 Black residents of Mississippi completed their voter registration, but only 1,600 of those applications were accepted by government officials. During this time, 41 Freedom Schools for Black children were established and were attended by over 3,000 Black schoolchildren throughout the state (“Freedom Summer”).

On October 29, 1969, the Supreme Court made a ruling for immediate desegregation in school districts across the nation. After the turmoil of the Civil Rights Movement, the year 1970 marked the first year that more people migrated to Mississippi than left it since World War II. By 1974, the state of Mississippi submitted a plan to desegregate universities (“Mississippi History Timeline”).

From 1975 to the turn of the century, echoes of segregation continued to influence the social and economic state of Mississippi. Between 1980 and 2000, the state once again experienced a decline in population of approximately ten percent. Despite the ruling of segregation as unconstitutional, redlining, mortgage denials, and other white resistance to integrated neighborhoods led to single-race housing projects. Around this period, the issue of the

state flag became a matter of popular contention. The Mississippi State Flag, which has since been redesigned, formerly displayed the emblem of the Confederate States, a symbol to many of racial prejudice and anti-Black principles. Moreover, the popular establishment of private schools led to a new, legal kind of educational segregation. Many were founded in response to the overturning of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. High tuition rates were put in place to exclude primarily Black students and whites who made up Jackson's lower class. In the early 2000s, while private schools remained predominately white, the Jackson Public School enrollment was roughly 90 percent Black (Wesley).

Beginning in 1970, many Black families were forced into low-income neighborhoods that developed high crime rates, unemployment, and welfare-dependent single-parent households. Since the 1970s, this financial disparity and infrastructural dilapidation has gotten increasingly worse. In addition, employer discrimination keeps Black workers out of highly skilled job opportunities regardless of the candidate's qualification (Ibitayo).

Throughout the 20th century, Mississippi experienced a great fluctuation in population demographics. From emigrations to immigrations, many different people of varied ethnicities passed through the state. Though small, there are culturally significant Lebanese, Chinese, Indigenous, and Latin American populations that have been integrated into the Black population, yielding a race of people of multiple ethnicities and cultures who do not necessarily identify with the ethno-racial term "African-American." As a Black Caribbean descendant who grew up in Jackson, I seek in my thesis to represent those like me in nature and aspect who encounter not only rejection from other races but lack of acceptance in their own.

To do this, I composed a collection of short stories featuring characters in each of the time periods mentioned above. Each character experiences history in the making, as a Black

individual who doesn't necessarily "fit in" racially. My ambition is to make history not only accessible but inclusive. I wish to educate my readers of the diverse and beautiful intricacies of the Black Mississippian identity.

Jordan's Story (1919)

When the nightmares were at their worst, Jordan remembered only colors.

Lights, sometimes. The crackle of gunfire.

He heard his own breathing, vividly. Heartbeats, rarely. The screams were oddly absent.

There was a hush on the battlefield, a hush of blood rushing in ears, of adrenaline skyrocketing.

But this was only the battlefield of his dreams.

*

A few months after he returned from the front lines, Miriam began sleeping in the bedroom of her late mother, Ruth, from whom she had inherited the house. Jordan would wake in the morning to the sound of the ancient pipes' rattle as Miriam bathed alone. He missed her presence with him in bed, the warmth of her body against his in the bathtub.

*

Overseas, the Frenchmen had called him their brother. He, who shared their native tongue. His birthplace of Guinea had never seemed further than when he had returned from the war.

In America, they called him weak. They called him stupid. They called him "boy."

English still felt foreign to him. Miriam insisted on speaking it at home, and he had done it, for her. To win her back. To know her again.

But conversation had become scarce. Meals were silent. “Goodnights” were terse. While he looked for work, she took the bus to North Jackson to clean homes and raise pale skinned children who called her “mother” by accident.

From Ruth’s room at night, Jordan heard her weeping.

*

The night she came to him, she was already naked, tear-stained, shaking in the autumn cold. Make me a baby, she said.

He touched her, and she melted into him, soft and yielding, this body he missed. He kissed her, and she sobbed.

Afterwards, he cradled her, this broken woman whose nightmares were only screams, only heartbeats, only breath and breath and breath—only her husband’s voice echoing in her ears as he sought to find the man he had left overseas. And yet, that night, in the throes of sleep, he dreamt only of a heartbeat, a baby’s heartbeat, forming in his wife’s womb.

Lynn's Story (1942)

Jackson was a dark city, but Farish Street was lit up like a beacon.

Lynn leaned against a utility pole across from Hunt and Whitaker Loans. Charles blathered on about the President, the war, the economic strain the war was taking on the nation that the President was failing to properly respond to. Her cigarette was damn near ready to go out in the November cold. She sucked on it, hard, and turned her attention back to Charles.

Men are all eyes and no ears, she imagined her mother saying.

Lynn felt the wind on her bare legs and arms. Dressed in a tea-length yellow skirt and white blouse, she wished she had opted for something warmer. She tapped ashes from her cigarette and watched them blow across Charles who, rather predictably, wore brown slacks and a matching sports coat, the same get-up he appeared in every time he passed by the house on business for her father.

Lynn grazed the goosebumps on her forearms with light fingers. Her lips are wind-chapped beneath the layers of Victory Red lipstick she painstakingly applied in her vanity mirror. She took a drag down to her cigarette's filter and enjoyed the warmth of all-too-close embers to her skin before she crushed the butt beneath the toe of her kitten heel.

Let's go, she said, or she thought she said. No one was listening to her, so she searched through the receipts in her purse for another cigarette to pass the time.

Lynn dropped the pack on the ground.

Damn it, she said. Charles went quiet.

She retrieved a cigarette from those spilled on the sidewalk, and Charles lit it for her, the match flame licking at the paper. She shivered. Charles gave her his jacket. He said she had lipstick on her teeth as the scattered Lucky Strikes tumbled down Farish Street.

Monique's Story (1986)

Monique didn't feel particularly Black today.

That morning, like every morning, she assessed her Blackness on a 10-point scale. Over coffee and toast, she decided on a 2. Earlier, when her roommate Tanya greeted her in their dorm bathroom, Monique felt her accent slip. She pretended the words were garbled because of the toothbrush in her mouth, spit mint-flavored goop into the sink, and tried again.

"Good morning, Tanya." That time, Monique sounded plain and American. She was working on it: flat Rs and harsh vowels. She remembered how she used to make fun of American girls, all baseball, blue jeans, and bubble gum. Now that she had moved to America to attend Jackson State University, she was trying her best to assimilate.

Tanya was from Batesville. When Monique had explained that she was West Indian, Tanya had said she had never been to India. Monique had covered her mouth with her hand to hide her laugh. She was certain Tanya had meant well, but the mistake had been rather funny.

As she finished her hasty breakfast, Monique checked the dorm kitchen calendar. The date read February 11, 1986. That same day, Ronald Reagan signed National Black (Afro-American) History Month into law, which Monique read that morning in the paper. The announcement was only one line.

In the 10 months since she had emigrated from her island, Monique had learned that Black meant something very specific to Americans. Black meant not-white to the white people, and not-her to the Black people. She couldn't be certain what disqualified her. When she had asked Tanya about it, her roommate had scoffed.

"If you have to ask," Tanya said, "you'll never know."

In the bathroom mirror after breakfast, Monique looked herself up and down: acid wash jeans and a pink sweater, her permed hair pulled back into a severe bun. The clock read 7:45. At 8 a.m., she had history class. Today's lesson would be on the American slave trade.

Monique reached up and removed her hair tie, then took a brush to her bangs. She picked up Tanya's dark lipstick from the bathroom counter and smeared the unfamiliar tint onto her lips. After applying a thin coat of mascara, she assessed herself for the second time that morning.

Monique felt her Blackness increase to a 5.

Alex's Story (1990)

“We don't treat your kind.”

The words echoed in Alex's ears as he returned to his run-down apartment in the city. The nurse who had spoken to him was a white woman, blonde, garishly red lipstick reminiscent of the bloody sores that had appeared in his mouth a week ago.

Your kind, she had said.

Black? Alex wondered. *Or queer?*

His roommate Obi still wasn't aware that Alex was sick. Alex was looking to move out before he had to tell him. Every hospital had turned him away, but he was certain what it was, even without the testing. Jonathan, his ex, had been hospitalized in Memphis a week before. Jonathan, however, was white.

Out of nervous habit, Alex began peeling his fingernails on the bus back home. They were brittle and too long. He was losing weight, too, and his hands seemed to always have a distinctive tremor about them.

It had begun to get exceptionally hard to keep the illness under wraps at work. He was a janitor at a local public school, which meant blissfully little supervision—yet no private restroom to puke in.

He had heard of a place near Belhaven Heights called the Sandifer House, though whether they had enough space to accept him, he was hardly sure. He counted the bus stops they had passed already and decided to hop off early.

The walk around Belhaven Heights was relaxing. It was a cool day, and the tree-lined streets cast shadows across Alex's face. He felt, for the first time in weeks, close to normal. He tried to ignore the fact that he was Black in white man's territory, though he was confident he still looked enough like a woman to pass for a maid.

On the front porch, two men played poker. They nodded at him cordially, then directed their attention back to their cards. When Alex knocked on the door, it was answered by a kindly looking white woman with deep laugh lines on her face.

"I—" he began, then stopped.

The woman nodded. "I know," she said. "And if you're looking for some place to stay, you've come to the right place."

Nora's Story (2000)

The morning she began private school, Nora reapplied her makeup three times.

It didn't matter how pink her lips were or what color eyeshadow she chose from her palette. None of that would change the fact that she was Black, undeniably Black, because despite her pale (sometimes sallow) skin, her hair exploded above her head in a dark brown afro that she had grown so accustomed to, she frequently forgot was there.

Her father, David, was white and American. Her mother, Hassana, was a Nigerian woman who had emigrated from Lagos five years before Nora had been born. Hassana refused American citizenship—she had no need for it, she argued, although when Nora had appeared, she had rejoiced in the opportunities her daughter would have on U.S. soil.

Nora did not consider herself Nigerian, nor did she consider herself white. There were days when Nora didn't even quite consider herself a girl. She was simply a person, an artist, a lover of makeup and books and her parents' cooking. She was simply 14, with few concerns, fewer friends, and eight whole grades under her belt, with her mother as teacher.

David, however, had insisted that Nora learn how to socialize with children her own age. Jackson had few rules regarding homeschooling because, as Hassana liked to claim, they had no regard for the education of their children. Nora knew the kids at church through Sunday School, but most of them were younger than her and very, very different—different enough that Nora stayed quiet, but she still had too much pride to admit that she feared them.

David pulled strings with the budget, applied for financial assistance, and finally, Nora was accepted into a top private high school in the city.

As her mother drove her to her first day of school that morning, Nora considered what kind of reception she would receive. Far from her mind were the impending, "What are you?"

and “Can I touch your hair?” In fact, she dreamt of laughter and friendship, and as her mother kissed her goodbye, she had never felt so happy in her life.

Lily's Story (2007)

When the first boil water notice was issued, Lily and her mother found out from Mrs. White at the grocery store. Mrs. White wore a crooked black wig, her wrinkled lips pursed in disapproval.

Every morning, news trucks delivered copies of the *Clarion-Ledger* to the neighborhood's doorsteps, but Lily's mother didn't read the paper, and her father had been late for a church meeting that morning on the other side of town. He had tried to kiss Lily's mother goodbye, but she had turned her head at the last second. They had argued about money the night before, and when Lily had left her room that night for a glass of water, she had noticed her father sleeping on the couch.

Mrs. White was legally blind, though she still drove her 1992 Ford Crown Victoria to the grocery store each weekend. Her son had read her the paper at breakfast, and as far as grocery store trips went, Mrs. White was keener to discuss scandalous news with anyone that would listen than she was to pick up the week's loaf of bread.

Lily and her mother finished their shopping early that day. They always wrote out a list, but Lily's mother told her not to worry about adding up the prices of each item before checkout. They had been "tightening their belts" lately, which meant they played a game to see who could estimate the price of the grocery trip most accurately.

Usually, Lily won. Her mother said she was too smart for her own good, but today, mouth set in a grim line, Lily's mother picked up something that wasn't on the list: a 24-pack of water bottles from the soda aisle. It was the last pack on the shelves. In her head, Lily added up the extra dollars and knew her father wouldn't be happy.

When they got home, Lily's mother gathered the paper at the end of the driveway, and there on the front page in big, bold letters, it read, DO NOT DRINK THE WATER WITHOUT BOILING IT FIRST. Lily's mother didn't curse much, but today was an exception.

She turned on the kitchen faucet and a muddy streak dribbled out. She left it running until the rust had cleared, then filled the pasta pot with water. She followed the instructions in the paper: Bring the water to a rolling boil, let it boil for one minute before turning off the burner. She removed the pot from the stove and set it aside to cool.

When Lily's father got home, he and her mother went into the bedroom. Lily was drawing a bath across the house, but she could still hear them yelling.

You moved us to a dying city because you were called by the Lord, Lily's mother said. But who do you love more? Your congregation? Or your daughter?

Lily couldn't make out her father's answer. She stripped off her clothes and stepped into tub. Her parents were fighting again. That wasn't new. To distract herself, she imagined little fishes in the murky gray. Though she let her fingers glide over the minerally surface, she was careful to keep her head above the water.

Red's Story (2015)

Before Red was called Red, he was called James, like his father.

Red's mother never stopped calling her son James, even after he stumbled into his best friend's apartment, covered in another person's blood with a .38 caliber and a wedding ring.

*

Red's father liked Jameson whiskey and playing cards. He was handsome, according to the pictures. He loved Red's mother more than anything else. James was shot in a drug deal before Red was born.

*

The woman with the wedding ring lived alone. She had three Pomeranians. Her husband had passed 20 years before from a stroke. She was in her seventies. Her last name was Brown.

Red knew this because Red liked the library. He liked to read the dusty tomes of the *Clarion Ledger's* collected obituaries.

*

Thomas Brown had been a lawyer. He liked Jameson whiskey and playing cards. He was survived by his wife and no children. He left behind a mansion and a large pension of money that Mrs. Brown donated to a local Christian school. Mrs. Brown kept the mansion. She also kept the wedding ring.

*

Every Tuesday and Friday morning, Mrs. Brown took her trash cans down to the curb. She lived in a quiet neighborhood on a cul-de-sac. Red lived with his mother in the projects, four blocks south. Twice a week, he saw Mrs. Brown taking out her trash on his walk to work.

*

Red told his best friend about Mrs. Brown. Red didn't own a gun, but his best friend did. A diamond piece like the one on Mrs. Brown's finger could be worth tens of thousands. Red's best friend said it was simple: Point, don't shoot.

*

Red was 17. Red had dropped out of high school in 10th grade. Red approached the mansion on a Friday morning. The .38 in his palm was hard to hold onto because his hands were slick with sweat.

*

When Red explained to the police what happened, he said the gun had misfired. When the police asked where he had gotten the gun, he said that it had been his father's. When Red's mother opened her mailbox a month later, she found an envelope containing a wedding ring and an apology.

Robin's Story (2024)

She was buried underneath a willow tree.

Her mother told her that the first willow grew in Babylon and wept for the Children of Israel as they were taken into captivity. *And the willows grew here*, her mother said, *right here in Mississippi where the slave ships landed. Do you understand what that means, Robin?*

Robin knows that she was laid to rest here at her mother's request. Her mother was stoic at her funeral. Robin swung her legs from where she sat in the branches of the willow tree and watched as they lowered her coffin into the ground. Her father had his arm around her mother's waist. Silent tears stained his cheeks, but Robin's gaze was on her mother, at the way her lips moved in prayer. Words carried to Robin on the breeze. *Deliver her from evil... Bid her eternal rest...* Robin's mother was the last at her graveside, laying her favorite flower, a peace lily, among the others beside Robin's headstone. *January 14, 2012 – March 28, 2024*, it read. *Beloved Daughter and Child of Israel.*

Robin Symphony Brown remembered what it felt like to be killed by a gun.

The whispers at the funeral say she was the sole casualty other than the gunman, though it felt strange to call him that. His name was Daniel Ferris, he was 13, and he sat one row over and two seats down from Robin in Ms. Morris's pre-algebra class. He wore mismatched socks and never had a pencil. He always smelled harshly of Axe body spray and sweat. Sometimes when Ms. Morris called on him in class, he'd turn so red, he looked purple. Robin couldn't remember him ever answering a single question correctly.

He was buried outside the city, in a grave plot near his family's home. There was no trial, no court case. He was shot by policemen at the scene. They held a vigil for Robin, or so the willow whispered. The trees said nothing else about him.

Today, Robin's mother laid flowers on the grave: white roses, a symbol of purity and innocence. She stands below the willow tree every Sunday after church and prays. Today, she said, *Give me strength, Lord, to carry on without my daughter*. Robin prayed, too, for strength, and when her mother left, she picked up the flowers and started the long walk out of town.

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