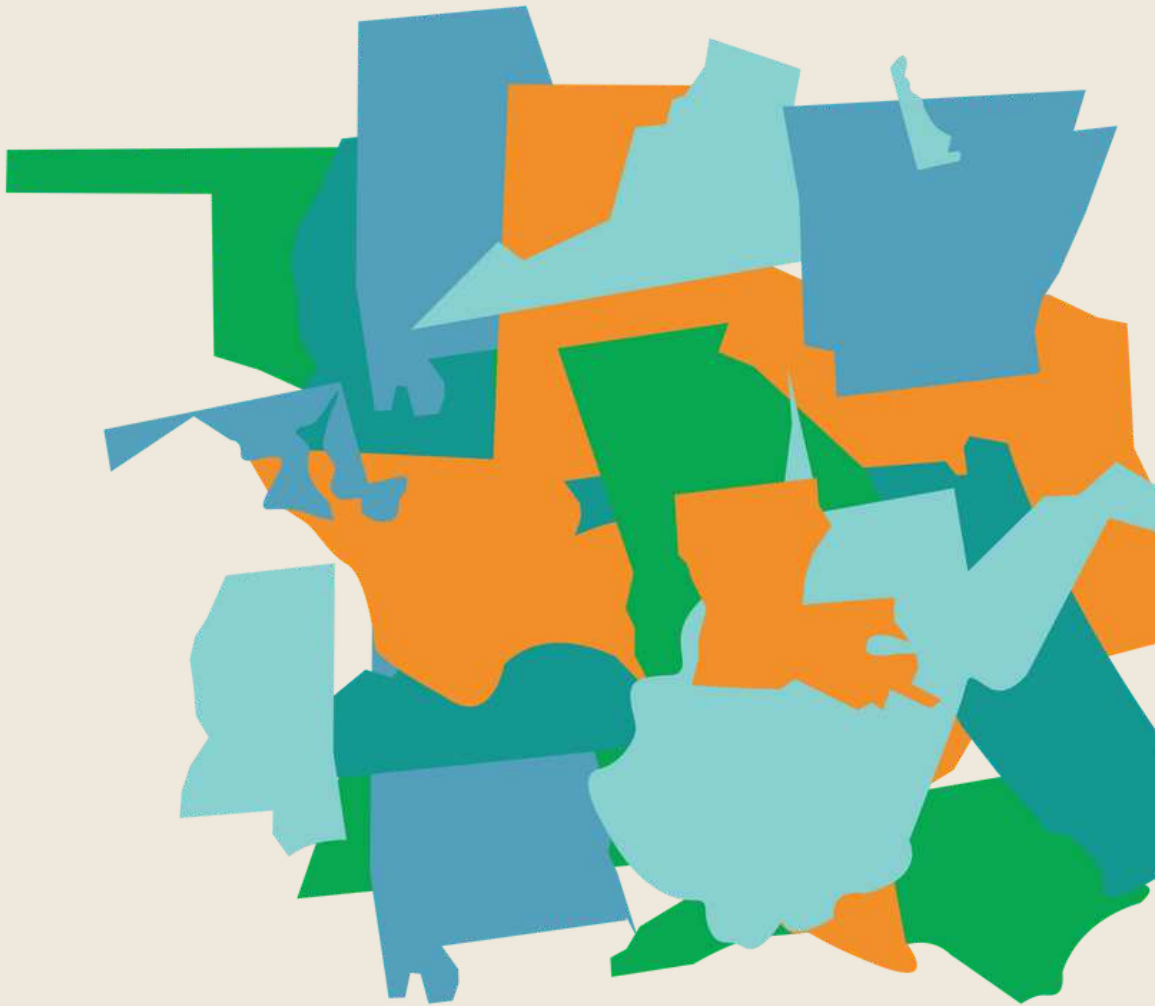


# South Summit 2022

Creating a  
Southern Legacy



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We are a fertile, rich,  
complex, humid, dirty,  
diverse, loamy range of  
people and stories of art.  
And we contain within us the  
legacies of ourselves.

- Darcy McKinnon | New Orleans, Louisiana

# What is South Summit?




**South Summit is a convening of Southern filmmakers, storytellers, funders, and institutional stakeholders held in an effort to seed conversation and action around creating, resourcing, and amplifying film & media content in and about the American South.**

South Summit 2022, presented by the New Orleans Film Society May 3-5, 2022, brought together local, regional, and national media makers, arts funders, and institutional stakeholders, to engage in robust critical conversations and actions around creating, resourcing, and amplifying film and media content that shapes both extrinsic and intrinsic views of the American South.


This field-building summit discussed critical issues facing both artists and institutions working in the American South. South Summit spotlighted those working outside the financial and media industry nexus concentrated in New York and Los Angeles—including how we create, navigate, and share power and resources to build a stronger Southern film community.

In its fourth iteration, South Summit 2022 expanded previous summits' focus on envisioning what it means for Southern filmmaking to thrive, contextualizing and curating film at the intersection of social justice and Southern identity for the cinema, gallery, and museum space, as well as how we reclaim and sustain power as individual artists and as a community.



South Summit 2022 featured sessions that explored the concept of [Southern legacy](#), [what it means to be Southern on an individual and communal basis](#), as well as [how we—as artists and collaborators working in and around the American South—can leave behind a legacy of change and community](#) in this place we call home.

The 2022 online summit offered an opening keynote talk by Darcy McKinnon, four panel discussions, a break out session, four presentations by featured artists, two presentations by featured organizations, and a documentary workshop. It also included four commissioned essays, released concurrently with the summit, by Southern artists Cierra Chenier, Ryan Craver, April Dobbins, and A.J. Riggins



# Key Lessons + Takeaways

## Why We Stay

In her opening keynote presentation, New Orleans–based documentary filmmaker Darcy McKinnon proclaimed, “The South is diverse, and it is rich, and complex, and difficult, and dark, and hard. And we choose to live here in part because we do not want to live in places where we can pretend that the work of our society is done.”

One of the most frequent questions asked of up-and-coming filmmakers born and/or based in the American South is when they will leave it. There is an expectation held both by outsiders and those who reside within the region that success can not be achieved here due to a perceived lack of opportunity when compared to the industry-dominated presences in New York or Los Angeles. And while financial and professional resources do still tend to be more abundant in those places, more and more filmmakers have committed to rooting or re-rooting themselves in the South and investing in the rapidly growing community of artists and thinkers based here. Moreover, they’ve unlocked a newfound pride in doing so.

Over the course of the three-day South Summit, filmmakers spoke to what shaped their identities as Southern artists and one of the most persistent themes was their absence from the region. In a panel featuring filmmakers commissioned to write freely on the 2022 theme of Southern Legacy, Ryan Craver, a filmmaker from Mooresville, North Carolina, whose work explores queerness in the Southern family, considered how his relocation to New York impacted his ideas about Southernness.

“I’d been so isolated. Away from the South in New York, in a pandemic... Am I even Southern anymore? All I write about and think about is the South. But when you haven’t lived there since you were 25, it’s a conscious choice at a certain point to be a Southerner. And I do choose it,” said Craver during the panel.

The spark for Craver’s essay, “Daughter By Her Choice,” was his unexpectedly coming across his name in the obituary of a woman from his childhood. In the essay, he contemplates the empty gestures of keeping in touch with family, layered identities, and the legacy of Southern surrogate mothers in the wake of his own grief.

### [Opening Keynote speech by Darcy McKinnon](#)

“The South needs a new legacy, crafted around the diverse and rich complexities that truly make up the place(s) we call home. When people are more familiar with popular culture than they are with history, our job as storytellers is to bridge the gap through the art we push into the world. As we ask politicians, teachers and leaders to critically examine the narratives of history, we must ourselves open up to a radical reimagining of the South’s problems.”

### [Jose Torres-Tama Performance: The United States of Amnesia](#)

Visual and performance artist José Torres-Tama’s spoken-word piece is an effort to preserve the legacy of Latin American reconstruction workers who have helped to rebuild New Orleans but disappeared from the cultural memory of the city. It explores how undocumented immigrant workers that continuously rebuild are disappeared in current books of local history.

### [In Conversation: Zac Manuel and Nic Brierre-Aziz](#)

Two New Orleans natives, award-winning filmmaker Zac Manuel and interdisciplinary artist and curator Nic Brierre Aziz explore key moments in the city’s history that have informed their artistry, and the intersection of historical and popular culture iconography as a tool for social commentary.

### [Building Legacies of Support](#)

How do you build lasting legacies of support that uplift Southern communities from within? ITVS celebrates the role South-based organizations have played in fostering connections between filmmakers in the South and national partners.



At the start of the essay, Craver explains that he missed the obituary of Peggy Kreider, a close family friend who had been something of a surrogate mother to his step-mother, in part because it was lost in a sea of text messages from home that often simply read "Miss you" or "Love you."

He writes "I came home only to sit at the occasional holiday dinner table, surrounded by people who increasingly looked like strangers. I began to wonder who the 'you' in the 'miss you, love you, are you coming to Thanksgiving' texts really was, because these people didn't know me. 'Are you still alive?' I was just alive, an adult body, breathing and eating sweet potato pie, testament only to the fact that there was once a child named Ryan."

But it was that distance from home and that former version of himself that Ryan came to ponder once he left for New York. In the panel, other filmmakers joined him in noting that sometimes to truly know a place is to leave it. But a part of them stayed here, and more often than not, led them back.

Return was also a key factor in "Confessions of a Prodigal Southerner," an essay from Alabama-born and Miami-based filmmaker April Dobbins, who fled Alabama for Philadelphia in her younger years. "The dream was always to leave," said Dobbins in the panel. "There's something about exploring yourself outside of the place where you're always held accountable for this performance... There's a liberation in being anonymous in the city. You can explore. You can experiment." But that experiment didn't go as imagined for Dobbins. She would later leave Philadelphia amidst the end of a relationship and return to her rural Alabama community as a single mother—something that, at the time, was shameful for her.

The defeated return home made her contemplate the stories that Southerners present to outsiders versus the ones they keep for themselves. The opening lines of her essay read, "When I write about the South, it is almost always a lie. Not a direct lie but a lie of omission. People only welcome the stories that they expect to hear from Southerners."

"Once I started telling stories, real ones, I alluded to trouble, always leaving out the details. Subterfuge is, after all, a Southern art form... How would it feel, then, to tell an uncensored story, one that moves out of the abstract to render me fully human?"





Despite constant pushes for legislation that is actively harmful to queer communities, the 2019 Williams Institute reports that the highest percentage of queer identified people in the United States live in the South. Despite a long-standing legacy of racism at almost every systemic level, the South has the highest concentration of Black people in the United States. *"There's a generative friction that I find from living in a place where the politics and policies of the state do not align with myself, and that requires constant conversation and reflection and push-back, and art. It's necessary that it's front and center in our work, whether it's fiction or nonfiction,"* said McKinnon in her keynote address.

There is work to be done in the South. As McKinnon says, it is complex, and difficult, and dark, and hard. And that work is in part what mobilizes the many Southern artists who stay or return here. It is a place that demands of its artists constant interrogation, reflection, and soul searching. But a much simpler answer to the question of why Southern artists stay is that the South is where their most personal stories are and always will be. It is a place that hosts the people they love and have loved them. The language and mannerisms through which they speak.

"When will you leave?" Instead, Southern artists turn this question on its head to explore their legacy and what holds them here. Even when they are apart.

## Undoing Legacies of Extraction

No conversation about the American South can be divorced from its shameful legacy of slavery, disenfranchisement, and terror. This has long been a region known for its fertile resources, be they crop or culture. But who cultivates those resources? And who reaps the benefits of them?

While there is no simple answer to the question of who has the right to tell a story, it's a question continuously and rightfully asked. *Extractive storytelling is the practice of entering a community one does not belong to to tell a story with a personal or political agenda that does not take into account the lives and experiences of that community.* It is a continuation of a long-standing tradition of the South being mined for its resources—and culture is a unique, complicated resource.

Over the course of the three-day summit, independent filmmakers and industry leaders spoke to the legacy of extraction in filmmaking about the South and Southerners.

### Writers on Southern Legacy.

Four Southern born artists, Cierra Chenier, Ryan Craver, April Dobbins, and A.J. Riggins share excerpts from their commissioned essays exploring Southern Legacy for the 2022 South Summit. Using the written works as a guide, this conversation invites the audience to reflect on their own understandings of the personal, familial, communal, and historical legacies of the American South.

### Featured Artist: Yuts Presents NORCO

Norco is a sci-fi Southern Gothic Adventure that immerses the player in the sinking suburbs and verdant industrial swamps of Louisiana's petrochemical hinterlands. It is the first game from the collective Geography of Robots, created by Norco, Louisiana-born-and-raised writer and designer Yuts.

### Featured Artist: Juan Luis Matos presents Brief Friendly Reminders.

Miami-based filmmaker and multidisciplinary artist Juan Luis Matos presents "Brief Friendly Reminders" of our collective power.

### Elements of Documentary Workshop with Zac Manuel and Vashni Korin

What is the lifecycle of a documentary? Filmmakers Zac Manuel and Vashni Korin share their insights and experiences of producing a documentary from the initial idea to its eventual release and beyond.

### Featured Artist: Andy Sarjahani

Arkansas and Louisiana-based filmmaker and photographer Andy Sarjahani takes us on a personal journey about legacy and upbringing.



Darcy McKinnon recapped her memories of the media's portrayal of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. "All we had was a TV screen. We were depending every day on the media coverage of this place... [Reporters] were well-intentioned but were playing into all the long-held stereotypes. That this place was primitive, ignorant, lazy, tragic, lost... We were all desperate for a glimpse of home and staring at televisions that were not treating us back with care."

Public television access came up frequently in regards to not only its history of extractivism and exploitation, but its incredible potential to reach mass audiences and dictate cultural understanding. In the ITVS-led panel, "Building Legacies of Support," Executive Producer of Reel South, Rachel Raney exclaimed, "I'm a firm believer in what public television has to offer in that it's free and accessible to people all over the country. The truth is, the lion's share of the programming on public television comes from two or three very large stations on the east coast. They make wonderful programming, but I spend a lot of time trying to develop programming from the network that comes from the American South."

That east coast concentrated programming makes for not only the exclusion of Southern voices that people like Raney are working to address but also means that both the national and regional perception of the region is largely dictated by outsiders. Beyond the exploitation and harm McKinnon mentioned recalling post-Katrina New Orleans in the news, there is a cost of culture.

In a conversation with multi-disciplinary New Orleans artist Nic Brierre Aziz, South Summit presenting filmmaker Zac Manuel referenced McKinnon's keynote, in which she stated, "More people are familiar with popular culture than they are with historical fact." Manuel asked himself what defined fact within the context of Southern legacy, and who got to shape it. He broke down his own understanding of Southern legacy into at least four categories—time, memory, symbols, and idols.

The last two—symbols and idols—have not only shaped his approach to filmmaking but were also a part of his inspiration to become a storyteller. He wanted to change or add to the readily available symbols and idols that he had seen growing up. "The things that we symbolize in our culture also become the things that we believe to be powerful." He continues on to speak about the popular iconography he grew up with in media pertaining to Black American existence in the South in particular.





"What I'm thinking about is the balance of imagery that we remember in our collective consciousness, or collective unconscious, of being Black Americans. What are the images of Black families in the deep South that are represented in the media? How many of those images represent what my family looked like?" Not many, Manuel explained. But their conversation pinpointed the need for deeper exploration. Nic Brierre Aziz offered, "Everything that we see holds weight. A lot of the symbols I'm interrogating through my work are things we've subconsciously ingested, we haven't really been told the weight of them."

So what is the story of Southerners, if not the story of their disenfranchisement? "The deep sincerity and love that people have for one another but also the rifts that make families dynamic and nuanced and complex. How many of those visualizations were separate from just actually being in slavery? There's a lot of representations of the deep south when you talk about Black Americans that are actually just depictions of slavery," said Manuel.

More often than not, it takes filmmakers from within the regions to go deeper than those depictions. And even where motivation to do so may fall short, accountability demands. In her keynote, McKinnon says, "When we make films about the complex place that we know well, and the places where the people who live here will call us out on our crap, we're forced to see beyond the surface textures and into the emotional realities."

Much of the iconography and symbolism that Zac Manuel has created as a filmmaker is a textured, emotional mirror to the humanity of people in the Black South that he's always known and how that humanity is extended to one another. From the spiritual moments of solitude found in TODAY I SANG TO THE RIVER to the affection, care, and pride displayed in THE CUT. Because of his work and the work of other voices from the region, Southerners can look to new icons and symbols invested in their own humanity, rather than outside agendas.

#### [Panel: Return to Center feat. Indie Media Arts South](#)

The Indie Media Arts South (IMAS) Screening Series featured Southern filmmakers from historically underrepresented communities. With their first edition, co-presented at South Summit, IMAS showcases 5 original films under the theme "Return To Center", as beauty queens, a lost boy, a cultural preservationist, a birth doula, and an atypical basketball superfan, focus your attention on two equally key meanings of life: care and self-determination. It's with this theme that the filmmakers crafted their films and that they have been curated

#### [Our Strange New Land](#)

For the book, Our Strange New Land: Narrative Movie Sets in the American South, Alex Harris photographed over 40 film sets throughout the south as a way to portray the creative imaginations of a new generation of southern filmmakers. In this panel, Harris joins three directors represented in his book (Roni Henderson-Day, Faren Humes, and Nicholas Manuel Piño). He shows some of the photographs made on each set as filmmakers discuss their creative processes.







## Southern Stories and Voices are Essential

The South continues to grow rapidly in size and each day brings about a new, sudden shift in American history. Filmmakers are among the many artists in the South advocating for the value of their perspectives and how they are crucial for understanding the bigger picture of the country's politics, economics, culture, and much more. Darcy McKinnon's keynote acknowledges that the story of the South is a baseline for understanding so much of the American experience. She argues that it grants southern filmmakers a huge responsibility to be honest, vulnerable, accountable, and loud.

*"It's our collective power staying here, as storytellers based here, where many of these lies are being formed actively. That's where we can push back,"* says McKinnon, "Collective storytelling is what we need. We need the combination of voices. Our overlapping, independent storytelling's existence depends on each other." That collective strength is reliant upon the organizational spaces that will commit to doing the work of fostering it.

ITVS's "Building Legacies of Support" panel featured representatives from southern-based film organizations doing monumental work in building upon the independent film scene in the southern region.

The panel, moderated by ITVS's Sherry Simpson, included Austin Film Society Director of Programs Erica Deiparine-Sugars, Southern Documentary Fund Programs Manager Chris Everett, Reel South Executive Producer Rachel Raney, and New Orleans Film Society Director of Documentary Programming and Filmmaker Labs Kiyoko McCrae. Each spoke to how their specific organization is working towards creating a substantial culture of independent film in the region and building upon the existing legacies of storytelling in the South.

"We encourage [filmmakers] to think about what success for their projects are, and success for themselves as they're thinking about their careers," said McCrae of New Orleans Film Society's filmmaker development programs, The Emerging Voices Director's Lab and the Southern Producer's Lab. "We try to support their unique aesthetics, practice, approach to filmmaking, and how they want to define themselves as storytellers who continue to live and work in the region."

She also spoke to how often regional support led to national support for filmmakers and the importance of investing in those new voices.





As McCrae points out, so much of the access that Southern filmmakers have to the industry presence comes from the willingness of mentors and advisors to help guide them by sharing their stories, experiences, networks, and resources.

"It's great when we have folks who have had success in their careers who have a reciprocal relationship with the organizations that have supported them and want to return and help other filmmakers in the region by being mentors, or by being part of the network," Deiparine-Sugars added. "We're grateful for those filmmakers who have really exciting careers right now and still consider themselves Texans and want to come back and work with new filmmakers who are just on the cusp of doing something different in their career."

The work that these organizations and others are doing throughout the South provides an infrastructure through which creative voices can be birthed and flourish. That work may look like building studio facilities, and media centers for the public. Or it may be facilitating spaces for community and mentorship that encourages a culture of lifting as one climbs throughout the industry. Whatever the level of support may be, investing into the organizations who have built relationships with emerging and established Southern Filmmakers helps the region grow and is a step towards correcting a history of southern extractivism in media.

Darcy McKinnon's keynote address ended with a rallying call for Southern filmmakers to assert their worth in the industry and find pride and importance in their contributions as artists. "See yourself as an essential part of the work in the South and carry that with you where you go, because you can always come back home here."

”

**"I inherited my love for storytelling from my grandmother who retold stories my entire life, who increased her details as you aged and could process those things. So a lot of my work deals with memory, but entering those memories and empower myself and other characters as a means to grow. My identification as a Southerner comes from my grandparents. Though they migrated to Ohio, they never parted with their Southern ways."**

**-Roni Henderson Day**



## Action Items

### For Artists

- Use an authentic voice, don't just produce what you think others will like. Remember your voice and perspective is unique and has value.
- Seek compensation at the same levels that your peers on the east and west coasts do. Ask them the going rate for the work you're doing, and propose those rates.
- Share resources with others when you can. Remember that mentorship and network is crucial to regional success for many. Recall those who have helped you and pass the torch when you can to be supportive to other emerging Southern filmmakers.
- Challenge images. Work to not perpetuate stereotypes when working with individuals or groups.
- Have intent and care during projects. Who/what are you working with and what is the goal?
- Our communities are able to give us strength, support, and resources in our projects. As artists it is our responsibility to uplift our communities by advocating for them in return, whether that's through our work or by continuing this legacy of kindness and hospitality with all those that we meet.

### For Arts institutions + Organizations

- Create avenues for success. Allow artists to follow their spark, especially those with limited access, such as people of color, the geographically isolated, artists with disabilities, and those belonging to the LGBTQ+ community.
- Be aware of the projects your institution is facilitating. Are you showcasing a diverse range of experiences? Are they true and accurate for the people or groups being represented?
- Facilitate spaces where community can be fostered and grow, be they physical or virtual. Hubs can be essential for the sustainability of artists within the region. Non-Southern institutions can look for ways to support the organizations within the region that are fostering those communities.
- Ensure that mentorship is available and accessible for emerging artists located outside of the traditional funding and infrastructure nexuses.
- Understand that media has a political and social impact on the communities and regions that are being represented. Is your institution helping create positive change for the South?





Many of the answers we seek to the most complex issues of our nation—racism, poverty, health, prison systems, etc—are hidden here in the South. If we don't tell our stories, who will?

- Kenna J. Moore | New Orleans, Louisiana



## Featured Artist: Zac Manuel

During this years South Summit, New Orleans-based and -bred filmmaker Zac Manuel presented a selection of his work, featuring NONSTOP, THE CUT, and THIS BODY, as well as an excerpt from his upcoming feature debut, BLOODTHICKER.

In addition to this, Manuel participated in a discussion with Nic Brierre Aziz which explored key moments in the city's history that have informed their artistry, and the intersection of historical and popular culture iconography as a tool for social commentary as well as a documentary workshop with fellow filmmaker, Vashni Korin.



Zac Manuel is an award-winning filmmaker and the son of a touring jazz musician and a community builder at the Department of Housing and Urban Development. His work in documentary and music video explores intimacy, Black masculinity, class, identity, and legacy. His cinematography and directing credits include:

ALONE (NYT Op-Doc; Sundance 2017 Jury Award Winner – Best Non-Fiction Film), BUCKJUMPING (New Orleans Film Festival 2018, Winner Best Cinematography), THE EARTH IS HUMMING (Field of Vision; SXSW 2018), AMERICA (Sundance 2019 Jury Award Winner), TIME (Sundance 2020, Oscar 2021 Shortlisted), THE CUT (New Orleans Film Festival, True/False 2021), and THIS BODY (PBS broadcast 2021).

Zac is a fellow of True/False's inaugural PRISM program, a grantee of the Tribeca All-Access Grant Program, the IFP Documentary Story Lab, the #CREATE Louisiana Grant, the Southern Doc Fund Production Grant, and the NBCU Original Voices Fellowship for his debut documentary feature, BLOODTHICKER.





Darcy McKinnon (LA)



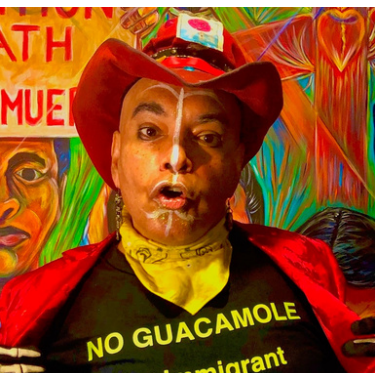
Vashni Korin (LA)



Zac Manuel (LA)



Andy Sarjahani (AK)



José Torres-Tama (LA)



Juan Luis Matos (FL)



Yuts (LA)



A. J. Riggins (NC)



Cierra Chenier (LA)



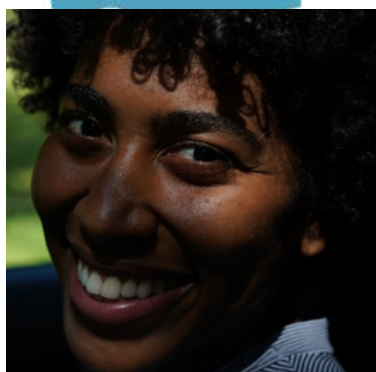
Ryan Craver (NC)



Faren Humes (FL)



April Dobbins (FL)



Cydney Tucker (GA)



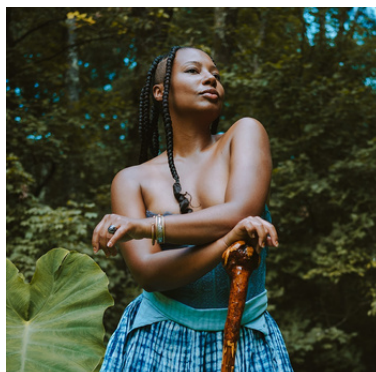
Isaac Udogwu (SC)



Jasmine McCaskill (MS)



Sai Selvarajan (TX)



Gabrielle Carter (NC)



Curtis Caesar John (SC)





Alex Harris (NC)



Roni Henderson-Day (SC)



Nicholas Pino (LA)



Rachel Raney (NC)



Erica Deiparine-Sugars (TX)



Nic Brierre-Aziz (LA)



Chris Everett (NC)



Sherry Simpson (CA)



Kiyoko McCrae (LA)



Zandashé Brown (LA)

### South Summit Outreach Partners:



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Denton Black Film Festival

Hayti Heritage Film Festival

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PATOIS: The New Orleans International  
Human Rights Film Festival

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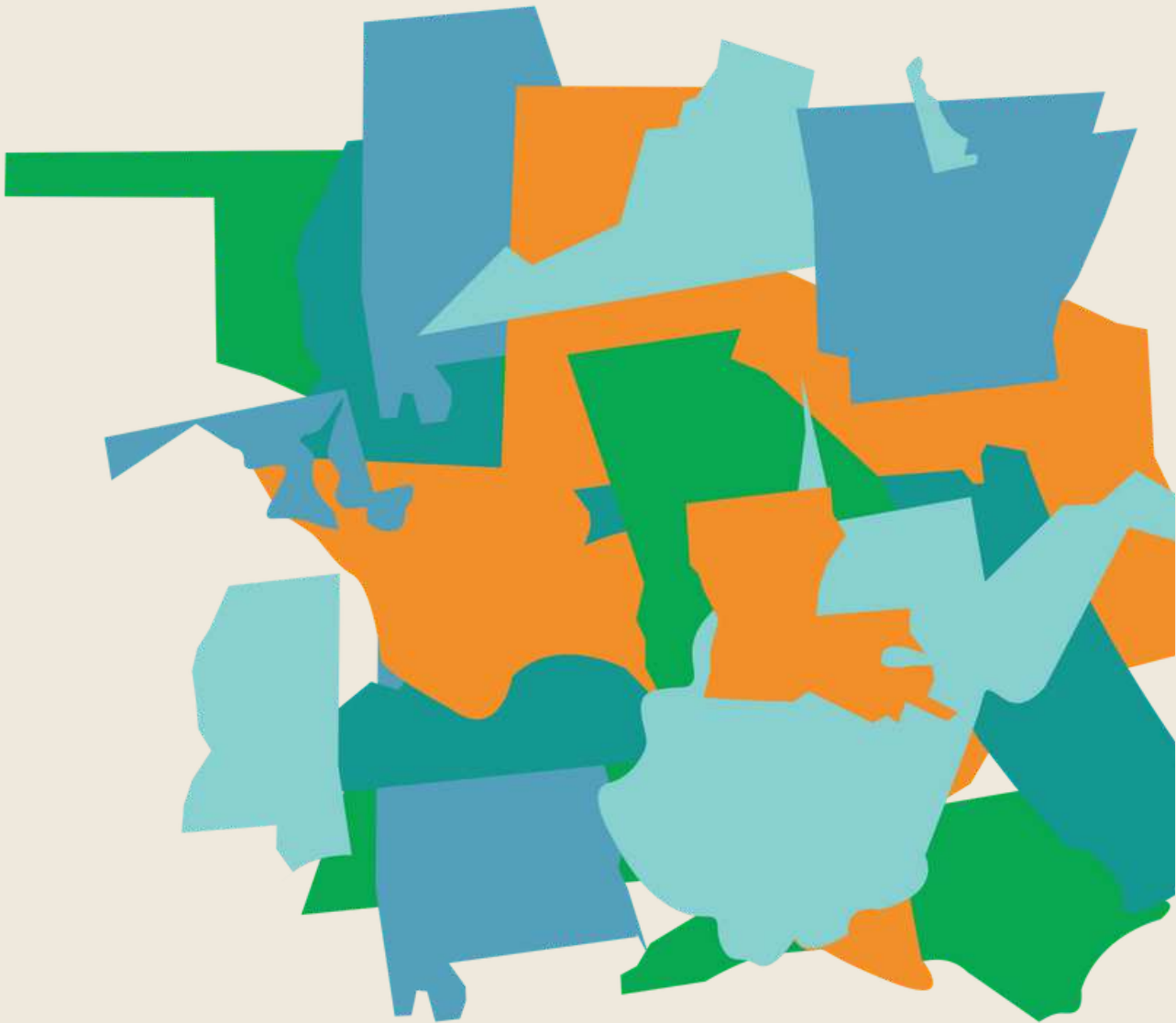
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# South Summit Essays

The following four pieces on southern identity, place, and authorship were commissioned by the New Orleans Film Society for the 2022 South Summit.



# Black New Orleans Will Be Free: What Today Requires & What We Leave Behind

Cierra Chenier

I come from an old place at the bottom of the map, strategically located at the curve of the Mississippi River and surrounded by bayous, swamps, lakes, and wetlands. The resourcefulness and intellect of Indigenous people allowed for this once swampland to exist, developing a portage called Bayou Road that connected Bayou St. John to the river through the highly-elevated land European colonizers deemed the "original city," now known as the French Quarter. From Indigenous people, the French learned the land, waterways, and crop cultivation techniques necessary for survival.

The beauty in our landscape tells a story in this old place at the bottom of the map. Spanish moss delicately flows on centuries-old oak trees stained with blood on the leaves. Just one year into the city's colonial history, Black men, women, and children were trafficked from the coast of West Africa to build the city's foundation. The same river that positioned my city as a major, multi-million dollar port also brought my people downriver en masse during the domestic slave trade. Enslaved people drained the swamps, built the levees, crafted the ironwork, laid the brickwork, cared for the children, worked the sugar, indigo, cotton, and rice fields, cooked the food, and created traditions out of survival that eventually birthed a culture. We have always fought for and redefined our freedom here; from maroon colonies, slave rebellions, to our large, unique population of gens de couleur libres (free people of color).

This old place at the bottom of the map is geographically South. When proximity and culture overlap, we are considered the "northernmost Caribbean city." Our roots are undoubtedly African, Indigenous, Creole. You hear every bit of the French, you see the Spanish. Our present is intertwined with contributions from Haitian, Cajun/Acadian, Italian, German, Irish, Vietnamese, Mexican, and several other immigrant groups. Hardly "American" to some and yet, we are the very backbone of American culture. I come from New Orleans, the N.O., 504, the place everyone wants a piece of. This is where we move second in line to the beat of our own drum, walk with our dead, and live each day with a joie de vivre (joy of living). We gave the world jazz and exist as the artery from which later art forms and musical genres developed. We follow traditions as old as the city itself, eat good good, talk hard hard, and move through these corners, banquettes (old sidewalks), and faubourgs (suburbs) with a divine aura. Our neighborhoods stand on former plantations and climate change makes way as we still try to recover from the last storm. The afterlives of slavery and racist policies haunt our livelihoods in the forms of mass incarceration, over 150 chemical plants in our surrounding communities, and long overdue concerns of poverty, trauma, and displacement.

See, I come from a place where people hardly go too far, and when they do, it keeps them coming back. I descend from a lineage of those who for some reason, whether by choice or circumstance, stayed where they were rooted. Eight generations and counting on this Louisiana soil sha (cher), I've made the conscious decision to do the same. I am a testimony to the survival of a race, community, and city. I view it as a privilege to still live where I'm rooted given centuries of challenges that have threatened our existence here. The hardships endured and sacrifices made by those before me will be avenged through the freedom of their children. Black New Orleans will be free. The question in post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans is: how do we get there?

The exploitation of my home has left me wanting to selfishly cling to every part of what Katrina couldn't get her hands on; constantly examining what is lost, what is needed, and what can be contributed. As a Black New Orleans writer and historian, I believe in history as the key to liberating minds and planting the seeds needed to liberate us in totality. The James Baldwin quote tells us, "You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read" and as history tells it, we've been here before. Fortunately for us, there were people throughout the course of this region's history who were exactly what the moment needed them to be and made decisions towards freedoms they knew they may not ever live to see. Everyone has a role to play and a responsibility to bear—are you the new ancestor? The new colonizer? Are you contributing to exploitation or emancipation? Are your decisions collective or individual? What are you willing to give up? What side of the line do you stand on? What did freedom mean then? How do we redefine freedom now?

Systems must change. Systems must go. The paradigm must shift. Black New Orleans will be free—from oppressive systems, agents of white supremacy, environmental racism, gentrification, poverty, and pain. I believe this because I have to. How history will remember us will be reflected in what we leave behind. The legacy that I hope to leave is that I was exactly what my city needed me to be at this moment, that history will remember me well because I decided to learn from it. I hope to leave a record, a reflection of the times, and a clear indication of what side of the line I stood on.

I come from an old place at the bottom of the map, where Charles Deslondes purposefully led over 200 enslaved people up the river road, chanting "Freedom or death!" during what would become the largest slave revolt in American history. The 1811 German Coast Uprising began in Louisiana's St. John the Baptist and St. Charles Parishes (where my familial roots also lie) and was destined for the city of New Orleans. Inspired by the Haitian Revolution, their goal was to capture New Orleans (the seat of the territory's government), overthrow slavery, and establish a Black republic. They made it as close as Kenner, just minutes outside of the city, before being captured and brutally executed. Although their goal was defeated, their determination for freedom is infinite.

Historically, culturally, and spiritually, New Orleans has functioned as a source, an origin, "the place or thing that something comes from or starts at." As the country's once largest slave market, our battle for freedom has always been a constant one. The intent of the 1811 Rebellion identified New Orleans as a catalyst for change, with the assertion that freedom here makes freedom possible elsewhere. I believe that we can and will be just that. My home, and yours, depend on it.



Cierra Chenier is a writer and historian born and raised in New Orleans. Driven by the love for her city and enabled by cultural memory, she created NOIR 'N NOLA, a digital platform preserving the history, culture, and soul of Black New Orleans. Recognitions and presentations include: Essence Festival 'Cheers To Her Brunch', VH1 'Growing Up Black: New Orleans', Fox 8/WVUE 'Creating Black History', NOLA Tech 2020 honoree, Carnegie Mellon Race & Inclusion Resource Guide, and Secret Los Angeles' '35 Influential Black Voices Shaping American Culture.' Her work is self-published through NOIR 'N NOLA and featured in various publications such as Essence Magazine. Chenier serves as a resource for and about Black New Orleans. Through her historical analysis and interpretation, she elevates the past to form necessary connections towards her community's present and future. An overview of her work can be found at [cierrachenier.com](http://cierrachenier.com)

# Confessions of a Prodigal Southerner

April Dobbins

When I write about the South, it is almost always a lie. Not a direct lie but a lie of omission. People only welcome the stories that they expect to hear from Southerners.

The land is wild and unruly. The green chokes the winding orange of the dirt road. Wildflowers and briars rear up in the warm months. The dogwood blossoms splatter the forest like spent snowballs.

I meander from page to page, waxing poetic about the pastoral like a bootleg Thoreau.

The kudzu is ravenous. Its eager tendrils devour everything — forests, homes, entire hillsides. In the summer, the heat burdens us all. The smell of honeysuckle hugs the breeze. At night, the darkness out here is astounding. Stars crowd the sky.

I labor over precious sentences. By the end, I want to slice them up and smash them. I want to stop playing at this game but I cannot. The natural world has its own allure. Busying myself with the wilderness is distraction.

The loneliest year of my life, I followed my mother around the farm like a clumsy anthropologist. I made it my business to document everything. She did not mind me writing, but she hated the camera. In truth, I hated it too, the way people changed in front of it — straightening up and holding their breath. With both pen and camera, no matter the documenter, the audience is still full of outsider eyes. So, we guard our Black Southern selves. I did not want the burden of record keeping, but the records were all that I had. Once I started telling stories, real ones, I alluded to trouble, always leaving out the details. Subterfuge is, after all, a Southern art form.

How would it feel, then, to tell an uncensored story, one that moves out of the abstract to render me fully human?

The year my daughter turned three, I turned 30. After several false starts, I packed up my car and my daughter, left her father and Philadelphia, and moved back to my childhood home in Alabama.

There was no victory in my return. I spent my formative years plotting Bible Belt escapes, and once out, I pitied those stuck in the South. When I spoke to Alabamians, both friends and family, condescension glutted my newly acquired city tone. I was the one who got out, and I vowed to never return, so coming back as a broke, single parent was especially damning.

Without the glint that nostalgia lends, the old house was dull and small. Time had rendered every room obsolete. Garish wallpaper accents sullied every space: Mallard ducks in the bathroom, geese in the kitchen, gardenias running the length of the stairway. The place was fully furnished with other people's possessions, some familiar and others not. Though the house had been vacant for years, outdated clothes and shoes filled the closets. Old shopping bags and newspapers crowded the pantry. I did not have the motivation to make space for myself, so I lived amongst these tired things as if they were my punishment.

I cried every day for a year. I cried while cooking dinner. I cried in the shower. I cried watching most movies. At work, I teared up throughout the day. When my mom came by the house to check on me, I righted myself as much as I could, but she could see the funk on me.



Each season came bearing familiar infestations. In winter, daddy longlegs covered the front door in clusters of hundreds. I dusted them off to make a way for my daughter and me to get inside. Fall, millipedes traversed the house each night on a weeks' long march to God knows where. They climbed the walls and reeked of cyanide. There were thousands of them. In the spring, red wasps made nests in the air vents and came barreling out, angry and frantic. I chased and killed them as my daughter screamed through tears. In the summer, the rattlesnakes hid in the flowerbeds and the front yard. Each night, I beat a path from the car to the front door with my daughter on my back and a garden hoe in my hands — ready to strike.

At night, the coyotes stalked the surrounding woods for hours on end, yelping like spirits in distress. Scrappy, the aging Saint Bernard that came with the house, charged into the woods repeatedly, barking as if under siege. I paced at all hours — checking the doors and windows. There was nothing to see outside but darkness — not a speck of light for miles and miles.

One day, a loved one came by with a gift; it was a .38 Special. The long-nosed revolver once belonged to my mother. I caught glimpses of it in her glove compartment when I was a child. "You can't be living out in these woods with nothing on you," he said. "Here's something for you to hold." The wooden handle was heavy in my hand. Giving a crestfallen woman a gun is a special kind of cruelty.

When my grandfather asked me why I left my ex, I explained and then steadied myself for a dressing down. "Well," he said gently, "I learned a long time ago that if a man is drowning and you can't save him, don't let him drown you." Though I appreciated his support, I didn't know how to tell him that I was drowning, nonetheless.

We exist upon a multitude of layers. We walk with closed eyes and ears because listening to this land, to its spirits, will set fire to your heart, and we can't live every day with a smoldering core that pulses ash and flame. We can't make our catfish and hushpuppy dinners with all that fire in us. We wouldn't be able to tend our cows or pick our okra without setting our hillsides ablaze. If we let that fire burn, we would char our children, our spouses, our dear friends. Instead, we cope by piling as much as we can on top of the history. We lose ourselves in football. We build churches on every corner. We create a decadent cuisine that pulverizes our other senses. Deftly navigating the rubble of our ancestors' temples in such a way that neither destroys nor acknowledges, we assemble new things and set out to render them holy.



Born and raised in Alabama, April Dobbins is a writer and filmmaker based in Miami. She is completing a master's degree in arts education at Harvard. Her work has appeared in Miami New Times, Sugarcane Magazine, Calyx Journal, Cimarron Review, Cura, Marr's Field Journal, Philadelphia City Paper, Redivider, Sojourner: The Women's Forum, Thema, and Transition magazine - a publication of the Hutchins Institute at Harvard University - to name a few. An overview of her work can be found at [aprildobbins.format.com](http://aprildobbins.format.com)

# Daughter by Her Choice

Ryan Craver

Had Peggy Kreider's obituary come to me in a newspaper to be unfurled in poetic morning light over earl grey, I might have read it sooner. But it came as a link in a text message, so it sat in my phone for a week. Opening a text is one more thing to do in the maddeningly unstructured profession I report on my self-employed tax form as "filmmaker." My North Carolina family asks, "What do you do all day?" I lamely explain that my life has become my work. And life is work; it's hard. I still imagine that one day, I will start waking up at 5am to exercise, cook three meals a day, clean the house, raise the kids I'll never have, and somehow write a new screenplay. The reality is that I'm thirty-one; share a tiny, cluttered New York apartment; and after suffering the death of the grandma who raised me and grief that spread over two years of an isolating pandemic, I can barely delete all the fifteen-percent-off coupons from my inbox — much less respond to another "miss you" text.

"Miss you too."

"Love you too."

You might say these text exchanges are empty gestures: less than actually 'catching up,' but better than outright asking, "Are you still alive?" One of my sisters might have called them empty gestures in a conversation we had a few years ago. She's an Appalachian woman now, and she told me how she'd astral projected to different universes, sought ancient forms of healing in crystals and herbs, and joined communities of witches who helped break generational trauma. Despite my initial whiplash, I chose to believe her. She was confident, grounded — hands tattooed in runes and mystical patterns. She changed her name from Kayla to Kira to symbolize her rebirth and explained that our family could make the effort to know her as an adult, not just assume she'd stick around because of shared blood.

At the time, I agreed. I was angry, and as the gay older brother, I felt I had the monopoly on suffering in our dad's family (we only share a father biologically). My real life — two long-term boyfriends, an engagement, the subjects of all my writing and films — wasn't allowed in the door. I came home only to sit at the occasional holiday dinner table, surrounded by people who increasingly looked like strangers. I began to wonder who the 'you' in the "miss you, love you, are you coming to Thanksgiving" texts really was, because these people didn't know me. "Are you still alive?" I was just alive, an adult body, breathing and eating sweet potato pie, testament only to the fact that there was once a child named Ryan.

When I got around to reading Peggy Kreider's obituary, I was surprised to find my name: Ryan. Did I ever tell you about Peggy? I doubt it. My step-mom Lisa used to take us to go swim in her pool and eat deformed Mickey Mouse ice cream pops. I want to say she had a thing about not peeing in her pool, which was probably directed at my younger sisters, but I took it personally. When I went inside to pee, I remember thinking, this must be what it's like to live inside a cigarette. She liked to smoke, so much that her deep, peppery aura still burns my nose ten years since I last saw her. I only saw her once after she retired to a single-wide outside Holden Beach, but she was the same. She had an impossibly raspy laugh, two skeleton arms that poked out of her tank tops, and leather-tan skin. In the South, we love these women; they are everyone's grandma. They will call a stranger "baby" even if he's a grown man. They alone hold the secret to a pound cake that is good.

Peggy's obituary reads that she was survived by "Daughter by her choice, Lisa H. Dancy of Concord, NC, as well as her children Ryan, Kayla, and Kyndal." The phrase "daughter by her choice" to describe my step-mom moved me. I felt strangely proud that Lisa had earned that spot in someone else's life — her legacy. It took me a long time when I was a child to piece together their story: Lisa had once dated Peggy's son, who died young. Out of their shared loss, each gained a second family. I remember Lisa and Peggy's phone conversations, going on for hours into the night, spanning decades. I remember Lisa's lullaby Southern accent — ye-es, no-o — her cigarette smoke trailing up through the lampshade and spinning out the top in wild tendrils.

When I was little, I'd watch Lisa from the floor. I slept on a pallet of blankets in the living room when I stayed at my dad's. Now, I wonder what they talked about. Family. Church gossip. Keeping marriages together. I think about Kira and her coven of witches, and I realize she is just like her mother, despite that they are always at each other's throats. But whether they are astral projecting or praying, they are women who want the best for their family. The depth of knowledge of the human condition that exists in these pockets of Southern women — congregating on front porches, in Walmart parking lots — rivals the ancient Greeks. A coleslaw chorus.

Theirs is a philosophy founded on kindness, forgiveness, and above all, hospitality. A stranger took in Mary and baby Jesus, Peggy took in strangers, and Lisa took in strangers. Growing up, there was a period when she housed girls who needed a place to stay. I remember a quiet girl who had to take care of a baby doll for health class. A girl with a metal rod in her spine. A German foreign exchange student.

When Lisa's daughters would fall asleep on the pallet beside me, she and I would talk into the night too, about life, death, government UFO cover-up conspiracies, and if Barney the Dinosaur was getting too liberal. She was my step-mom since before birth (a story for a different time), and she never made me feel less than her "bonus son." When her husband, my father, didn't want to give me a Christmas present out of homophobic bitterness, she slipped me a hundred. She made an effort to come out to the car to meet my boyfriends, and later, to come stay with us in New York. She and my father have been divorced for a few years now, but I'm still listed in Peggy's obituary as Lisa's child. And I am. By choice, hers and mine. The kind of uniquely Southern (some may say white-trash, sprawling) lineage based not around shared blood, marriage, location, or even interests, but simply love. In this way, I see the "empty gestures" differently now. The 'you' in "miss you, love you" — in Lisa's at least — isn't empty, it's unconditional.

Lisa became Peggy's caretaker in her battle with cancer. She'd pack up her car and drive down to the beach. She was with Peggy in her final moments. She told me this a few months ago, right after Peggy died.

It has been three years since my grandma died. I packed up my life too, and I moved back in my childhood home to take care of her. I witnessed how quickly most people clear out when you're near the end. The Lisas of the world are vital. They carry us from one generation to the next. I hope to carry a part of her legacy.

I've been down on myself — in grief, in isolation. I forgot who I was telling stories to. I felt that after I lost my grandma, I lost my audience.

Telling this story, I remember: I've never felt I was telling stories to. I felt I was telling stories for.

So Lisa, this one was for you.



Ryan Craver is a filmmaker from Mooresville, North Carolina, whose work centers on queerness's place in the Southern family. His work has been supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation via partnerships with Columbia University (MFA '20), Tribeca Film Institute, and SFFILM. *Truck Slut*, his first short film, premiered at the 2018 New Orleans Film Festival and was a special mention at the Palm Springs International Shortfest for 'Best Emerging Filmmaker.' He's currently developing *Truck Slut* as a TV series with S/B Films.

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# When Scars Blossom — A Confrontational Letter

A.J. Riggins

Born and bred in the backwoods of the backwoods.

What we have now is true, but I have a confession. I once hated you...

Let me explain.

I remember being ten years old. Our house sat isolated in the middle of a long dirt road. No other humans in sight. Surrounding us were turkey houses and cow pastures. Those were the neighbors. I would lay next to the window at night and listen as your singers chant. Those crisp and harsh tones carried through the blades of the fan.

Tranquility.

But moments of peace were often followed by your teachings.

Yes ma'am. No ma'am.

Yes sir. No sir.

Firm handshakes and locked eyes.

This education wasn't a choice. It was expected, mandatory.

I obliged.

As a child, it came with the territory. Growing up here meant a unique understanding of southern etiquette. These rules aren't documented or spoken, but they are followed.

Like the southern ebonics that flow.

The sugar that dissolves in our tea.

The fatback left on the stove.

That's just how it be.

There would be times you would make me mad. Like why couldn't you make up your mind about the temperature? A 40-degree Eve followed by a 75-degree Christmas never made any sense to me.

Still doesn't.

Despite this, I adored you.

But what happened as I started to come of age? You exposed things that poked at an inner rage.

The warm winters didn't let the plants lie dormant, so the pollen became unbearable.

I thought all of your children could be friends, but our separation became irreparable.

And I still wanted to adore you, but the education you instilled in me became challenged by the knowledge I gained of you.

The truth is, this was a place where Jim Crow still soaked in the soil as the sun baked on our brows.

A place where white moms with black sons caught gazes of how.

This was a legacy many of us weren't prepared for. Stories of our ancestors that ran headed North.

Oh. Wait...

This wasn't what you wanted to hear? A rant about your flaws. The stereotype and truth about the microcosm of America.

I get it. Hold on, please.

In the mirror: "You started off like you said you would but took a turn. What's wrong?"

A beat.

Damn, I'm caught. Using the objective to vent about the subjective.

Scared? Maybe. Okay, yes, but continue to hear me out.

I fell from a tree of the emotionally aloof. Every trial. Every trauma. I have tattled just for proof. But with you, I felt free, so can you understand how it might feel when you had nothing for me?

I was one of your children from out yonder, left isolated with the mind free to wander.

I waited and waited with my horses held. That is until I had to leave...

During my first year away, I carried a daily fever from the change. A bit shocked by the cultural range.

Remember the education you gave me? Well, deference unrelated to age isn't a bell you ring. And apparently, I had an accent you didn't tell me was a thing.

Look what you've done to me. Lost. Miles from adolescence, yet still searching for acceptance.

But all wasn't bad. I enjoyed exploring Mother Nature and eating new foods. Posting them to social media with captions like "New Life Experiences #Thingsweneverhad."

I began to see the world through a new lens. A perspective I doubt I would've gained if I never left you. But little did I know there was a rut that was churning inside.

It became hard to get out of bed. To look in the mirror and smile with emotions I no longer had. I would return to you, but you pushed me away again.

I remember lying in a room. Alone. It's dark and loud. Screams bellowed from the walls but not a face in the crowd.

The exterior costume became heavier to wear. Taking it off revealed a desolate soul, exposed vulnerabilities and scars from the scare.

That is until the light of story showed me the power of self. Learning to take a passion, a skill, and project it through glass.

As a glorified nomad, I would come back to you again. This time with self-discovery as the plan.

This journey helped me understand what you wanted for me. Through my eyes, you have always been the belle of our land. But the scars endured as a boy needed to blossom as a man.

You also needed time to heal. Vestiges of your haunted legacy that didn't reflect the values, opportunity, and love you have to give.

We both have learned that legacy doesn't have to be the baton from previous generations. Our traditions and values can remain intact, but it's okay to start anew.

The ground has cockled enough from the water flow. You live with me, and I live with you. Smiles are no longer hard to grow.

The scars are now of virtue, like dogwood in the bloom.

My opening words carry weight no longer. The truth is, I've always loved you.

A.J.



A native of North Carolina, A.J.'s work as an independent filmmaker explores the human condition through the lens of persons of color in the South. His professional contributions as a creative producer combine this unique perspective with hybridized skills to help companies build awareness through human stories focused on culturally-relevant moments. His recent short film, *The Boys Outside*, is an official selection of the 2021 New Orleans Film Festival and received support from the Filmed in NC Fund. His independent work has also been featured at the Charlotte Black Film Festival and on Film Shortage and Retrospective Jupiter. An overview of his work can be found at [www.ajriggins.com](http://www.ajriggins.com)





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