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An Analysis of Racial Issues in Mississippi Using A Sanderson Farms Advertisement

“[my friend] finally got matched with a roommate.”

“But she told me her roommate was {whispers} a black girl.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Well [my friend] needs to room with a normal Mississippi girl. I realize that sounds racist but it’s just a cultural difference.”

“But wait, why can’t a black girl be a ‘normal Mississippi girl’? I mean, [my friend] told me that her roommate is originally from Mississippi.”

“I know you aren’t used to thinking this way, but in this culture it’s just different.”

Last year, when my friend was looking for a roommate at Mississippi College, a family member and I had that exact conversation. This was one of the first times I had ever recognized racism within my own family. Don’t get me wrong, I know this person wasn’t trying to be racist, and I know that they love everyone equally. This person is one of the most loving and compassionate women I know, but this dialogue brought to my attention the segregation that continues to exist within Mississippi.

When I was in high school looking to apply to colleges, I googled “universities in Mississippi”. One of the results that came up was “Jackson State University.” I was born in Mississippi but did not grow up here, so in my naivety, I asked my grandparents about the school. Their response: **“No, you don’t go there. It’s a black school.”** My mind immediately began asking questions like “wait I thought we ended racially based segregation back in the 60’s?” When I asked my parents about it they both just brushed it off as a cultural difference. They explained to me that in Mississippi, white and black people tend to stick with one another out of choice, and that it’s best not to challenge that.

Before I go on, I should probably give a little background on myself. I was born in Mississippi, and I am, at least on the outside, Caucasian. On the inside, though, my situation is little more complicated. You see, I grew up in Latin America, specifically in Costa Rica, Perú, and México, so a lot of my personality comes from the Latin culture; I speak fluent Spanish, my favorite food is tacos, and I basically have no sense of timeliness. My entire childhood consisted of clashing cultures, so this idea of segregation was pretty foreign to me. When my grandparents referred to Jackson State as a “black school”, I thought maybe this meant that the college only

admits African American students, so I went to their website to find out. To my surprise, the website says that while 90% of the students are African American, about 6% are Caucasian. Growing up in Mexico, I'm used to being a minority and am pretty comfortable in that role, so I decided that if I didn't find what I liked in other schools that I would apply to Jackson State. I honestly didn't understand why this was such a big deal, I mean, we're all human, right?

And then I moved to Mississippi and saw for myself what my grandparents were referring to. I had been around Mississippi throughout my life, coming back for vacations and Christmases, but I had never seen it like this. Driving around Jackson, I noticed the stark difference between the cities and the suburbs, and part of that difference had to do with who lived there. Within the inner city, in what appeared to be the poorer part of town, the population was mostly African American, but in the suburbs like Brandon (where my grandparents lived), I noticed a predominantly white population. I specifically noticed this at my grandparents' church, where I counted maybe five or six African American attendees in the crowd of about three hundred. Comparing this to my church in Mexico, I would estimate that our congregation was 60% Mexican and 40% American, so I was used to a diverse setting. I'm not saying that all churches in Mexico are like this because that's not the case at all, but one of the reasons why my church in Mexico was so special to me was because of the racial diversity.

The more I became acquainted with Mississippi culture, the more I realized that there are "black churches" and "white churches", "black neighborhoods" and "white neighborhoods", and sometimes hearing others refer to these terms made me wonder if we have truly come that far since the segregation of the 1960's. My friends explained to me that this is different because this is voluntary segregation as opposed to forced segregation, but is it really voluntary?

According to Data USA, in the workforce, African Americans tend to earn less than their Caucasian counterparts for doing the same job. There was a trend of white workers earning \$3,000 to \$5,000 more than black employees doing the same job. While this doesn't seem like a large difference, African Americans make up about 87% of the poverty in Jackson, and I can't help but assume that the wage difference might have something to do with this.

In the two examples I gave previously, the desire to stay apart is prevalent. For my mom, it made sense for my friend's roommate to be Caucasian because to her, that is a "normal Mississippi girl". In the Jackson State example, the idea of me being a part of a historically black university shocked my grandparents because it was weird for them to see someone like me, a white student, considering pushing social norms to attend a black university.

But I'm not here to discuss **why** there is segregation in Mississippi, I'm here to state that **it exists**. Whether you're white or black, there is a tendency to stick with your own race in everyday life, and there isn't a lot of integration unless it's necessary. This is natural and a part of human nature, and I don't think there is anything wrong with spending time with others of your own race. I mean for example, my family would regularly gather with other Caucasians

because it was nice to talk about things such as cultural struggles with people who understood what we were going through. But a problem arises when people refuse to integrate at all, and I see this happening in Mississippi, specifically in Jackson. Though Mississippians would argue that they have put the days of segregation behind them, there is still tension between the black and white cultures.

This tension is evident even in the way in which companies advertise to Mississippi families. Here is an ad I found in Mississippi Magazine for Sanderson Farms:



At first glance, this just seems to be a wholesome, family-oriented ad, but this ad draws upon the already existing apartheid and by doing so, reinforces it. I'm going to focus solely on the two men standing in front of the barn to defend my claim, and by the end you will see how even businesses like Sanderson Farms mirror the culture of Mississippi, specifically regarding segregation.

To start, I'll state the obvious: there is a Caucasian man and an African American man. "Oh, how diverse", you might be thinking, but my argument is that they are actually advocating for less diversity in the household. The first question that arises is which households are looking at these ads? Who is Sanderson farms actually advertising to? I found the ad in Mississippi Magazine, a publication for all things related to Mississippi including recipes, furniture, weddings, history, and more. On the cover of this particular issue, a beaming bride poses with a bouquet of white flowers, and the other issues' covers contain pictures of food, furniture, weddings, and women posing amongst them. The covers indicate the primary audience of

Mississippi Magazine: middle and upper-class women from Mississippi, specifically mothers. So Sanderson Farms is aware of whose attention they're trying to grab, and they take advantage of this.

Generally, middle and upper-class Mississippi mothers who would pick up this magazine are white. I say this because of the economic statistics I mentioned earlier; the middle and upper-class families in Mississippi, especially in the Jackson area, are most likely going to be white. Sanderson farms milks this for all it's worth, appealing as much as they can to their audience by feeding off of the tendency of Mississippians to trust their own race more than others.

The ad presents two main characters, a white man and a black man, both smiling and at first glance they seem to just be two guys advertising chicken. But an analysis of each man separately shows that Sanderson Farms wants their audience to see the white man first and the black man is only there to mask the racial tension that is embedded in Mississippi culture.

One of the first details I noticed which differentiated the two men was their clothing. The white man is in a solid colored shirt while the black man wears a plaid shirt. Flannel shirts are inexpensive, comfortable, and easy to find because for a long time they were known as a working man's clothes (Sri). The fact that the African American is the one wearing the work clothing insinuates that he is the worker while the white man is the leader. There is also a sense of white superiority in the way in which the figures are positioned in the ad.

First off, the white man is more centrally located, so the audience's eyes immediately go to him. Because of where he is positioned, he is bordered by a completely black background on one side, making him even more prominent. He stands slightly in front of the African American man, so Sanderson Farms clearly wants him to be the focus.

The African American stands slightly to the right. His presence is not as obvious as that of his neighbor because of his location and the fact that he is standing behind him. When the audience looks at this ad, their eyes go to the white man and then to the text of the ad, and the black man is only there to show that Sanderson Farms doesn't discriminate against race.

But my question then is, why not have the two men stand side-by-side? Why can't they both be centered? The answer is because the white mothers most likely to look at this ad are more comfortable looking directly at someone of their own race. The black man has a friendly, almost laughing smile on his face while the white man is arrogantly smirking, and yet Sanderson Farms knows that no matter what facial expression the two men are making, the white mothers look at race first.

The position of the men not only speaks about the trust issue in regards to race, but it is a metaphor for Mississippi's society as a whole. The statistics I gave before stated that African Americans make up 87% of the poverty in Jackson and 37% of the entire state (talkpoverty). Caucasians make up about 13% of the poverty in the state, so it's safe to say that white individuals are more likely to stay out of poverty based on the statistics. However, I've heard it stated time and time again by fellow Mississippians that white and black people are equal in Mississippi's economy. I'm arguing that actually, white people are better off, and they are

slightly in front of the black Mississippians in regards to success. In the ad, the white farmer is standing slightly in front while the black farmer (dressed in a worker's clothing) stands behind him, but not so far behind him that it's obvious. The difference is slight and can be easily ignored; I'll admit I didn't notice it until I looked closely. But the difference is there, nonetheless, and just like in Mississippi where we like to think that everything is equal and race doesn't matter, the fact is that race does play a part in economic standing, and you don't need statistics to see that. You can go into different parts of Jackson and see where most of the white and black people live, and my point is proven. There is ignored inequality whether people want to admit it or not, and even something as seemingly insignificant as a Sanderson Farms Chicken advertisement portrays it.

Racial segregation is still very much a real problem in today's Mississippi. As someone who grew up surrounded by clashing cultures, the separation is especially obvious to me. I couldn't go to Jackson State because it was a "black school", my mom didn't want my friend to have an African American roommate because of the "cultural differences", and even in something like a chicken advertisement, the distrust of the other race is evident. I don't think that white people are the only ones feeding the tension; I think it's a two-way street. And I also don't fault Sanderson Farms for using what is for them just sales technique, I blame Mississippi's deeply-rooted refusal to integrate on both sides. While I may not have grown up in Mississippi, I'm passionate about seeing it overcome its past. I believe in Mississippi, and I hope to see the day when our issues are no longer exploited for sales purposes.