

From the archives: The allure of Ole Miss football



Robert Nkemdiche scores a TD early in the second quarter of the Ole Miss opener on Sept. 5, 2015, against Tennessee-Martin. *Daymon Gardnernote*

Editor's note: This story about Ole Miss football was originally published on Oct. 14, 2015. Mississippi lawmakers [voted on Sunday to retire the Confederate battle emblem from the state flag.](#)

"Born and raised where them Rebel flags hang from them slaves" -- Big K.R.I.T.

THE SUN IS searing in Oxford, Mississippi. It's 11:05 a.m. on the first Saturday of September. I'm standing for the national anthem in Vaught-Hemingway Stadium. Though I left this state 20 years ago, after being kicked out of college, Mississippi is still home.

Today is officially White-Out Day at the University of Mississippi. I didn't know that. I'm wearing camouflage shorts, a black Run DMC T-shirt, a faded red sweatshirt, black Adidas with fluorescent fat laces and a Montgomery Biscuits hat cocked to the left. Tens of thousands of young white folk are wearing white Polos, those Vineyard Vines club shorts, some brown cowboy boots and more long, flowing white dresses than I've ever seen in my life.

I'm wondering who, and what, pays the price for ritualized Southern comfort and uniformity. I can't take my eyes off the backs of the student-athletes

who play for the football program at Mississippi. Their uniforms are a bright bloodred. Twenty of the 22 starters look Black like me.

I'm also remembering the first real whupping I got in Mississippi for wearing the wrong uniform.

I was 9 years old. I needed an undershirt and a jersey for football practice. Mama was busy teaching at Jackson State, so she asked one of her grad students to take me shopping after school.

There were racks of blue and white Jackson State Tigers jerseys. All the other boys on my team wore those. Behind them were these discounted practice jerseys with the words "Ole Miss" and "SEC" in white cursive above the numbers.

I had no idea where "Ole Miss" was, what "SEC" meant or that Mississippi was the last SEC football team to integrate, in 1972. As a Black boy from Jackson who lived and loved the game in the mid-'80s, college football began and ended for me with the historically Black universities in the SWAC.

Regardless of whether you lived in North or West Jackson, or whether your parents or grandparents were alums or employees of Jackson State, everyone used "we" to talk about the Tigers. And most of us had second-favorite teams of Alcorn, Southern, Mississippi Valley State and Grambling.

We didn't know the names of the white schools in our state, or the names of any players who played for or against those teams other than Herschel Walker. Honestly, we didn't even know that some of those white schools had histories of refusing to recruit Black student-athletes or play colleges and universities that did. We assumed so many legendary NFL players came from the SWAC because it had the greatest football tradition in our region. We knew that Jackie Slater, one of the most dominant offensive linemen in history, and Walter Payton, the best running back ever, played for Jackson State. We knew that Deacon Jones, one of the NFL's great defensive ends,

and Jerry Rice, the most dominant college player in the country at the time, played for Mississippi Valley State. And everyone knew the Prancing J-Settes and the Sonic Boom of the South -- Jackson State's trill dancers and thunderous band -- put on the greatest halftime show on earth. If you didn't know any -- or all -- of that, we didn't really care to know you.

Mama had never let me pick out my own clothes before. On the left corner of the red Ole Miss jersey was the same symbol I'd seen on the top of the General Lee when Grandmama and I watched *The Dukes of Hazzard* on Friday nights. Next to the jerseys was a clearance rack of white T-shirts; on the front center of each stood what looked like an old, strange white pimp.

I'd never seen this pimp before. His long, white mustache dangled over his sunken cheeks. He wore a red suit, a huge red pimp hat. His right hand was behind his back. His left leg was slung jauntily over his right leg. His left hand held a red cane. The white pimp leaned on his cane, and he looked like a less husky version of Boss Hogg.

After practice, when Mama came to pick me up, she saw me in my new Ole Miss jersey. She walked onto the field, pinched the fat under my shoulder pads and told me to get my ass in our Nova. Mama kept asking me questions about my uniform, but I couldn't understand why she was so mad.

Most of my childhood, Mama talked to me like an adult while disciplining me like a child, but this Ole Miss whupping and the accompanying staccato lesson were made for grown folk.

Mama explained to me how integral that Confederate flag on the jersey was to lynching, racial terror and multigenerational Black poverty in Mississippi. She talked about how her mother, my grandmama, worked 15 hours a day sometimes for nothing but cornmeal under the watch of white families who flew the Confederate flag.

After the whupping, and the lesson, Mama laughed when I told her that

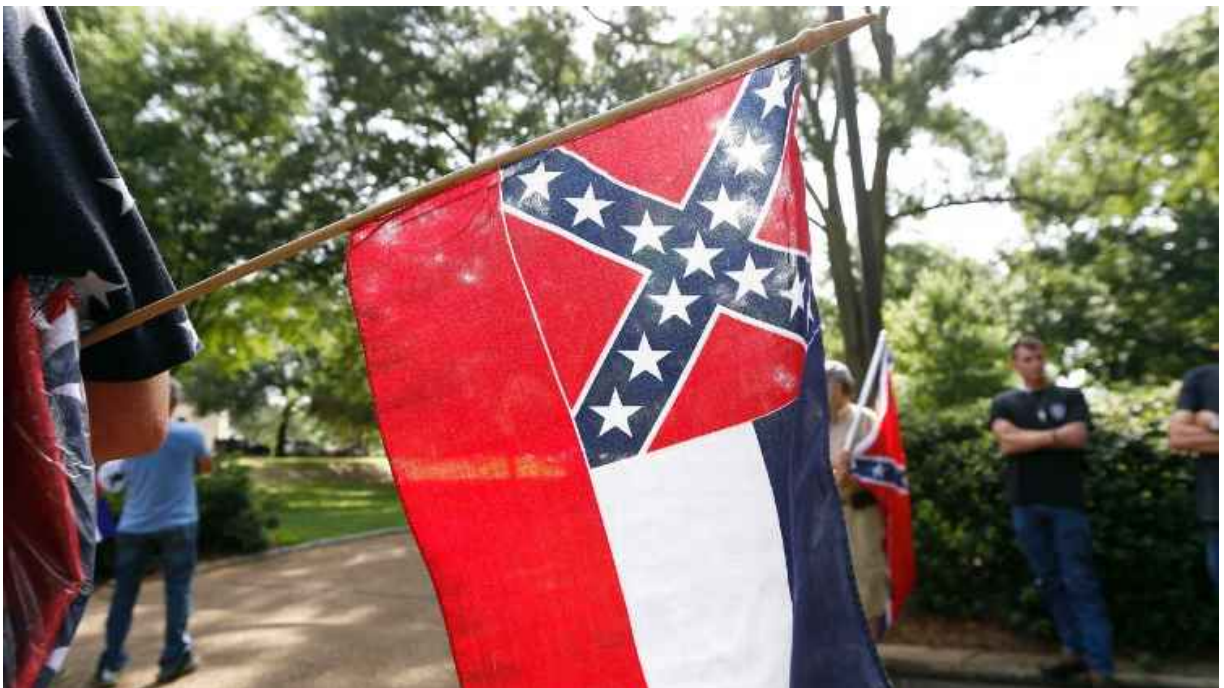
Colonel Reb looked like an old white pimp. "Pimps will never get love or attention in this house, Kie," she told me.

I asked Mama why any Black person would go to a school that glorified the Confederate flag.

"It's bigger than the Confederate flag," I remember Mama saying before we went to bed. "That flag just adds insult to injury."

I made the decision that night, as a third-grader, to never stand for the Pledge of Allegiance in any classroom that had the Mississippi state flag, the Confederate flag or any other flag that devalued the Black lives and Black labor of my Mississippi family, and our people.

I kept that promise until today at my first University of Mississippi football game. After four strange weeks of living in Oxford, I'm wondering how many more promises I'm going to break.



A person holds a Mississippi state flag during a rally sponsored by the Magnolia State Heritage Campaign, outside the state Capitol on July 6, 2015, in Jackson, Mississippi. *Rogelio V. Solis/AP Images*none

WEEK 1

I FIRST VISITED Oxford two years ago while on a book tour. Grandmama and Mama made me promise to leave town before the streetlights came on. When the creative writing program at the University of Mississippi selected me as this year's John and Renee Grisham Writer-in-Residence, my family expected the worst. I did too.

Right now, I'm eating the best squash casserole I've eaten in my life at a restaurant called Ajax Diner. Ajax is on the Courthouse Square, the economic and cultural center in Oxford. There are lots of white folk in the restaurant, and a number of illustrations of Ray Charles and other Black bluesmen on the wall. Twice I've heard, "We good, but we got to get a running game."

I keep hearing the names Nkemdiche and Laremy and Laquon and Fadol.

I'm a long way from Jackson, but the taste, the smell and the rhythm of the names uttered in Ajax remind me of home. I have lived, taught and written at a college in upstate New York for the past 14 years. In those 14 years, I've never heard a white man say, "Collards pretty good tonight, ain't they?"

That's exactly what the white man at the table next to me keeps saying. I love that his color commentary is absent any linking verbs. I feel prideful that these Oxford white folk are eating our food and talking like us, even if they don't know it.

A few Black folk who work in the kitchen come out before I leave. We nod. I don't feel as good about them eating our food anymore.

On my way back to my car, I see my first two Confederate flags in Oxford. One is flowing in the bed of a pickup truck stopped near the courthouse. The other is rigged to the top of a silver Prius with a two-by-four and layers of duct tape. The Prius has a bumper sticker that says hotty toddy.

I look back at more white folks walking into Ajax. I look around the Square. I'm amazed, not by the swarms of white folk milling around but by how, in a

county that's one-quarter Black, there can be so few Black folk downtown and so many of us at Wal-Mart. More than that, I'm wondering what it means for me to claim ownership over Black culture in Mississippi after having been away the same amount of time I lived there. The moral authority to critique Mississippi generally, and Oxford specifically, definitely belongs to someone. I'm not at all sure that someone is me.

Half a mile from home, I ask Google, "What in the world is a Hotty Toddy?"

WEEK 2

I WAKE UP and read a letter published in *The Clarion-Ledger* from John Grisham, some workers from the university and others protesting the Confederacy emblem on the state flag. They conclude: "It's simply not fair, or honorable, to ask Black Mississippians to attend schools, compete in athletic events, work in the public sector, serve in the National Guard and go about their normal lives with a state flag that glorifies a war fought to keep their own ancestors enslaved. It's time for Mississippi to fly a flag for all its people."

I reach out to Skipp Coon, one of my favorite artists and a native of Jackson, to see what he thinks of the recent conversation around the state flag, a conversation that has been reignited by the murders of nine Black folks in a Charleston AME church because they were Black.

"They can change all the flags they want," Coon tells me. "It's a false solution. It's also what Black people have always gotten. We asked for equality; we got integration. We asked for freedom; we got Reconstruction. They can change that flag and my material reality won't improve one bit."

I'm thinking about Skipp's use of the word "solution" and the letter's use of "fair" and "honorable." If changing the flag is a fair and honorable solution, I'm wondering what the writers of the letter assume the problem is.

Noel Didla, an English professor at Jackson State, introduced me to Skipp three years ago. In Jackson -- and particularly at Jackson State -- Noel, Skipp and a host of other cultural workers are demanding new kinds of structural change. I ask Didla whether she agrees with Skipp.

"I believe symbols have lasting power to immortalize human stories," she answers. "But justice, equity, structural change and truth should be the values on which undoing racism is founded. If not, the victory of bringing down the flag will remain an empty gesture rooted in white supremacy, coupled with white savior complexes. A principled and sustainable paradigm shift and nothing less is what we deserve."

I'm going to bed tonight in Oxford, Mississippi, wandering through the words of Skipp Coon, Noel Didla and John Grisham. A principled and sustained paradigm shift that justly impacts the lives of Black Mississippians would be fair and honorable. But what do I say to people convinced that in spite of 40 percent of Black Mississippians living at or below the poverty line, a shameful approach to public education in Mississippi and Mississippi being home to 246,000 children living in poverty as of 2013, my presence in Oxford as the Grisham Writer-in-Residence is proof that a principled and sustained paradigm shift has occurred already?

I'm wondering whether accepting the fellowship at the University of Mississippi was the fair and honorable thing to do.



Ole Miss band and cheerleaders on the field before the opener against UT Martin on Sept. 5, 2015. *Daymon Gardnernone*

WEEK 3

I'M ON AN elliptical machine at a gym in Oxford. I see a white man get out of a beige pickup truck and walk toward a Chinese restaurant. His gun is holstered on his left side.

Damn. This is how they do in Oxford?

While I'm looking at the armed man, a sweaty white guy walks up behind me. He sees me watching ESPN and asks who I think will start at quarterback this year, a player he calls "Machine Gun Kelly from Buffalo," another dude named Ryan Buchanan or "the little Black guy, DeVante. DeVante Kincade."

I decide right there that I'm naming both the protagonist and the antagonist of my next novel DeVante Kincade.

When I get home, I reach out to my editor to make sure she sends me some tickets for the game Saturday. She says that she's hooking me up with a photographer from Atlanta named Daymon Gardner, who turns out to be a kind and curious white dude from Baton Rouge, and that we have tickets on

the 50-yard line, two rows from the field.

I'm starting to get excited for football season at the University of Mississippi.

WEEK 4

THE DAY BEFORE the game, Daymon and I meet with three women who work at the university's William Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation. The institute is doing some of the most creative and necessary work around race in the country.

Melody Frierson, a Black Korean woman, and two white women, April Grayson and Jennifer Stollman, sit down and talk about the challenges affecting the university, region and state.

They tell me that the university is changing, maybe a bit too slowly sometimes, but that they're thankful that staff and administration are now aggressively asking for tools and the language to confront not just white supremacy but also homophobia and sexism. They highlight the crucial intersectional work being done at the Sarah Isom Center for Women and Gender Studies and the Southern Foodways Alliance.

"It doesn't mean that the Black students specifically don't suffer anymore, though," Jennifer tells me. "It does mean that they don't suffer as much as they did, and when they do suffer, they don't suffer alone. We're here. We're also seeing how the Black Lives Matter movement has positively impacted the work we do."

Melody laughs when I tell her that I'm going to the Grove the next day before the game. The Grove is 10 acres in the center of campus where thousands of students and alums drink, eat and tailgate on football Saturdays. "I'm critical of everything this place was and can still be," she says. "But I still say to everyone in the country, 'You don't know how to tailgate like we do.' You'll

see it tomorrow, Kiese. I hope you're ready to Grove."

I'm not ready to Grove.

Daymon and I leave the Winter Institute to go meet Sierra Mannie across campus. Sierra, a Black student from Canton, Mississippi, is a contributor to Time.com and the opinions editor at *The Daily Mississippian*, the school's student paper.

Near the end of our hourlong conversation, I tell her that people seem fixated on this idea of the university and the region changing but that I'm curious whether Black students have been central to or on the periphery of that supposed change.

"This is my school," Sierra says, taking her hat off and revealing this unexpectedly fresh green hair. "I understood from the day I got here that this is college, not a Confederate day camp."

Damn. This is how they do in Oxford.

FIRST GAME DAY: UT MARTIN

WE'RE LATE. WE get to the Grove around 9:30 a.m.

Tents filled with catered food are everywhere. I just passed some students making a pug do a keg stand next to a huge blowup of Colonel Reb.

"What's the angle for the story?" Daymon keeps asking me. "You think you want to talk to some people in their tents?"

I tell him that he can talk to people if he wants but that I'd rather just watch. I've never known happy things to happen to Black folk in Mississippi when asking questions of drunk white Mississippians proud to call themselves Rebels.

Daymon asks a group of older white folk whether he can take a picture in their tent. The group has white candles, a blue Rebels helmet and a huge silver vase filled with sunflowers sitting in between two mirroring pictures of Colonel Reb.

After Daymon takes a few pictures, one of the women asks what magazine he's with.

"ESPN," he tells them.

She curiously looks up at me.

"Oh, well, do y'all want something to eat?"

"Thanks," I tell her. "We good."

"You sure?" She hands us some bottled waters. "Here you go. Take these, at least. It's hot out here."

A band starts playing this mashup of "Amazing Grace," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Dixie," a Confederate anthem that originated during the minstrelsy era of the 1850s. I'm standing next to a middle-aged Black woman and Black man in matching jean shorts outfits. They look slightly less confused than I am.

The woman starts to clap near the end of the band's performance.

"You clapped for 'Dixie'?" the man asks.

"They play that one song at my church," she says.

"Right," he tells her. "But you clapped for 'Dixie,' though?"

"I'm here," she says, as the entire Grove erupts in a chant of Hotty Toddy.

"You asked me to come. I'm here."

Between the first play of the game, when Chad Kelly throws a 27-yard rope to Damore'ea Stringfellow, to early in the second quarter, when 296-pound defensive tackle Robert Nkemdiche tiptoes the sideline for a 31-yard touchdown, I fall in love with the Mississippi football team.

As impressive as the team's 76-3 victory is, watching the fair and honorable way the student-athletes listen to each other, encourage each other, critique each other on the sideline -- it makes me think I'm looking at a championship team.

I think I know what Hotty Toddy is.



Ole Miss fans and DT Robert Nkemdiche celebrate the Rebels' 43-37 win over Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, on Sept. 19, 2015. *Kevin C. Cox/Getty Images*

SECOND GAME DAY: FRESNO STATE

I'M WATCHING IN a Marriott bar outside of Detroit.

Mississippi is up by 50 in the fourth quarter when a short white man wearing a purple LSU hat sits down. "Leonard Fournette is old-school tough," he says. "He can win games by himself. We're a hard team to beat."

"We are too," I tell him, wearing the same good-luck uniform I wore to my first game in Oxford. "Chad Kelly, Jaylen Walton, that whole receiving corps, those jokers are the real deal. And our defense! As good as Fournette is, Nkemdiche is the best player in the country. Believe that. The only way we don't beat Alabama next week is if we run out of gas. I'm serious. We don't expect to lose."

We.

After the game, a 73-21 dismantling, my cellphone rings.

It's Grandmama telling me she's not coming to Oxford for Christmas. Grandmama has never been to Oxford. She just remembers how white folk went to war with themselves in 1962 over James Meredith's desire to learn in their school. Grandmama doesn't think James Meredith should have fought to learn next to folk morally beneath us. I tell her that I understand her point but that if he hadn't fought, maybe I wouldn't have even been selected for the fellowship.

"Those folk at that school won something when you decided to accept that fellowship thing," Grandmama says. "You know, I'm so glad you'll be closer to home, Kie, but you didn't win nothing."

Everyone in my family knows not to question Grandmama when she makes a proclamation, so I ask a related question. Why did she stay in Mississippi in the 1950s if there are so many parts of our state she's still afraid of traveling to, while hundreds of our relatives left Mississippi for hopes of economic freedom in the Midwest.

"The land, Kie" Grandmama says. "We worked too hard on this land to run. Some of us, we believed the land would one day be free. That's all I can tell you."

I ask her whether the land is free now.

"These white folks ate good off of our work for long as I been alive," she says. "I'm tired, Kie, and I love my life, but I know what all we worked for. I know what we supposed to have. They know what we worked for too. These folks, they know what they took."

THIRD GAME DAY: ALABAMA

I'M TRYING TO sleep on a twin bed in a tiny boutique hotel in Brooklyn. I'm here for the Brooklyn Book Festival. I want to sleep in my own bed, in my own state.

I miss Oxford.

I just watched Mississippi beat Alabama in Tuscaloosa on ESPN. Professor Derrick Harriell, whose work at the University of Mississippi is another reason I accepted the residency in Oxford, messaged me throughout the game.



Kiese Laymon at the house John Grisham donated to Ole Miss for Grisham Writers-in-Residence. *Daymon Gardnere*

Derrick's loving words about the football team's will and work reminded me that Mississippi is the greatest and the most maligned state in this country because of the force, brilliance and brutal imagination of its workers. Our literary workers, culinary workers, field workers, musical workers, educational workers, athletic workers,

justice workers and injustice workers have shaped national and global conceptions of what's possible.

Tomorrow, at the festival, I want to talk about why James Baldwin, a New Yorker born a few miles from my hotel and perhaps the greatest literary worker of the 20th century, wrote, "I was going to be a writer, God, Satan and Mississippi notwithstanding."

Tonight, I'm thinking hard about the student-athletes working on that field in Tuscaloosa.

I get out of bed to reread the letter Grisham and others wrote about the flag. I'm wondering how honorable it is to make money writing about the unpaid labor of student workers who come from families bearing the brunt of American racial terror. Instead of talking about how we can justly compensate these brilliant young workers, I feel compelled to write about whether they should perform under a humiliating state flag for a team called "Rebels."

Of course they shouldn't. Of course it's unfair, disrespectful and anti-Black. But it's also a nearly insignificant part of what needs to change.

Last month, when asked in *Time* what it would take to finally have the state flag taken down, Grisham responded, "The flag will be changed, eventually. But it's Mississippi, and change is painfully slow."

Grisham is right, and he -- as much as anyone in this country -- knows that paradigm-shifting change will remain painfully impossible in Mississippi and the nation if we insist on targeting the symbolism of the insult while neglecting and often benefiting from the ongoing violence of the injuries. American -- not simply Southern or Mississippian -- investment in the pilfering of Black American life, labor and liberty is the injury on which our nation feeds. It just is. We do not have a chance in hell of "fixing" or reforming that national truth with a local lie.

I learned that in Mississippi.

WEEK 7

I'M BACK IN Oxford, sitting on the porch waiting for Grandmama to call and tell me whether she has reconsidered coming to Oxford for Christmas.

"The Ole Miss boys, they didn't give up when they could've," Grandmama says when she finally calls. "I thought they were close to running out of gas, Kie. You didn't tell me they had so many Black boys on the team. I prayed for every last one of those boys and their mamas last night. I prayed for the white ones, the Black ones, the Mexican ones if they on the team too."

"Why?" I ask her.

"Because you live up there with them now."

I ask Grandmama if she might come up to Oxford if I get tickets to the next game, against Vanderbilt.

"Well." She pauses. "Well," she says again. "Kie. I can't bring a wheelchair to no ballgame. The best seat I can get is probably right up under this TV. I reckon I'll watch the rest of Ole Miss games on TV this year, though. To tell you the truth, I hope Ole Miss win every game. I reckon they will too."

"You do?" I ask her. "Why?"

"Because you live up there. And like I said, they didn't give up when they could have. They kept on going when that maroon and white team looked so strong. It's like they were playing on faith. Those boys worked hard and found a way to win that ballgame. That's why," she says. "For all that those boys have been through, and all the work they put in up there in Oxford, they deserve to win it all. They really do deserve that."