Glimpses of checkered history *(New Orleans to Atlanta)*

Chronicling a 6-day road trip tour of historical sites in the deep south:

New Orleans-Baton Rouge:

At 8:30 AM, my son and I took the trolley from the French Quarter down Canal St. to pick up our rental for the next 6 days from the Enterprise outlet. While we were hoping to get a sedan with Georgia plates by which we could avoid the interstate drop-off fee—a sum almost equal to the total for the rental fee itself— we were informed that wasn't an option. At the same time, we were shown the only vehicle available in our budget category: a dinged-up Hyundai Santa Fe with Ohio plates.

Yet we were not disappointed. Those minor irritations evaporated with the news that we could rent the car a day earlier at the same rate. That meant we could make use of the non-refundable tickets to the Creole Plantation tour which I'd bought online a few weeks ago. When I discovered that the plantation was a long way out of town and unreachable by public transportation, I was almost resigned to forfeiting the tickets. Now we would be able to both take the plantation tour and visit Baton Rouge before driving north.

By mid-morning, M. had the GPS set on his Iphone and we were driving westwards through bayou landscape towards Vacherie, the site of the Laura plantation. More than an hour's drive from New Orleans, the plantation was on a back road among fields of emerald green sugar cane a stone's throw from the leveed Mississippi.

We presented the Groupon tickets to the white lady at the giftshop and were given the option to wait for an hour for the next tour or join the current one already 10 minutes underway. We opted for the latter and hurried out from the air-conditioning chill into the scalding humidity. We caught up with the tour group just as the stragglers were mounting the steps of the Creole master's "big house". We noted that among the dozen members of the tour was an Amish family with a clutch of blonde children— boys in neat overalls and kerchiefed girls.

Our guide was a slight young African American looking studious in black frame glasses. Over the following hour, she detailed the history of Creole families who owned the sugar cane

plantation from the time of the American Revolution until the mid-20th century. We learned that the plantation, originally named *l'habitacion Deparc* after the first owner, was renamed 'Laura' after the colourful widow who ran the estate into the turn of the 20th century. Most prominent among the photos displayed throughout the manor was the portrait above the living room fireplace in which a party-costumed Miss Laura held a devil's trident.

Fortunately, unlike plantation tours of earlier days, the Laura tour was not aimed at evoking cheesy *'Gone with the Wind'* sentimentalism but rather attempted to provide glimpses of a microcosmic slave economy. Thus, we were led behind the mansion to the cabins of the slaves whose labour supported the apparent indolence of the Creole masters. Outside the cabins, the guide described the stifling and dangerous work of cutting and the processing sugar cane.

"Slaves were sometimes maimed in the machinery," she said, "Hand amputations were not uncommon."

She drew our attention to the glass-topped display before the cabin wall containing a copy of the plantation estate book, *circa* 1850. It listed the names and ages of the human chattel. In her almost academic monotone, our guide then described how the status of the workers scarcely improved in their transition from slavery to indentured labour.

"There were very few opportunities for freed slaves in Louisiana, she said. "Most of them had no choice but to stay on the plantations."

With that, our group solemnly stepped into the doorway of the slave cabin. As the guide faced us from the back wall, citing statistics about the lives of the slaves in their scant time outside of grueling labour— in a moment of carelessness, I pulled out my Flip camera.

"No filming!" she said sternly pointing at me. The others turned in a momentary glare of admonishment. Indeed, we had been warned earlier. (Duly chastened, I immediately put it away).

Moments later, back outside in the steam bath humidity, the guide delivered her concluding remarks. Following behind the braid-bouncing Mennonite girls, we made our way through the lush tropical flower garden back to the gift shop.

Having learned that the Uncle Remus *'Brer Rabbit'* ['*compair lapin'* in Creole French] folktales originated in this area of Louisiana, I purchased a picture book for my little granddaughter. Afterwards, we drove away from Laura Plantation silenced by our glimpse of a dark history, without nuance or shades of Confederate grey...

From Vacherie, we headed west to the state capital at Baton Rouge. The streets were eerily quiet. Looking for a place to eat, in the heart of downtown we stumbled upon the air-conditioned farmers' market. Although it was mid-afternoon and most of the food stalls closed, there was one veggie stall, staffed by 2 hip young white guys listening to Jimi Hendrix's *Purple Haze*. The salad they served me up was the most delicious repast had since leaving Canada. Unfortunately, M. found nothing to his liking, so I chowed down rather guiltily as he sat across poking glumly at his I-phone.

From the farmer's market, we walked a few blocks to the Louisiana State Museum. When we saw a meter reader on the street slipping tickets under windshields, I realized that with our meter a few blocks away near running out, we'd have to make our visit quick. So it was, we rushed—even though the Civil rights era section deserved at least another 30 minutes. Yet even in the hurried walk through, I got a few video clips: one of the Cajun display (a quick tribute to the Acadian compatriots of my natal province) and another of the statue of the Hughie Long (the cracker-monarch of *All the King's Men*) in front of the adjacent legislature building. Although our parking meter had expired, we escaped getting ticketed.

On the highway back to New Orleans, the famished M. finally got some nourishment from a Christian-principled Chick-fil-a fast food outlet which thankfully raised his spirits…

Back in the Pelham Hotel in the French Quarter, we took an hour's rest before CNN, then wandered out for the final night on Bourbon St. Saving on the food budget, we washed down slices of pizza with Budweiser's back at the preservation jazz bar. As with last night at the same venue, we were treated to a wonderful Dixie and jazz ensemble. This night it featured piano, clarinet, tuba and a lead trumpet. (The trumpeter, a talented young African American, directed his attention to the blonde flapper gal who sat adoringly at the front table).

With the early start scheduled on the morrow, we reluctantly left after the 2nd set just as the bar was filling and the band warming up.

New Orleans– Jackson, Mississippi:

M. woke at 7:00 AM with stomach pains from the contaminated pizza. Fortunately, after coffee and breakfast sandwiches, he was well enough to continue with the day's plan. While I waited with luggage in front of the hotel, M. took the streetcar down Canal St. to pick up the rental car across from the Medical Centre where we'd parked all night to save the exorbitant $40 Pelham concierge fee. He was back by 9:30 AM whereupon we set off for Jackson, Mississippi.

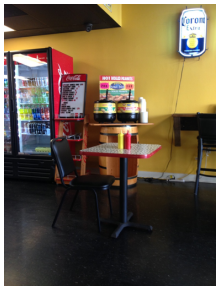
Just beyond the city core, we crossed the long causeway of hazy-blue Lake Pontchartrain to the accompaniment of "*I'm a Man"* by Howlin' Wolf. Through the morning we travelled up the bayou country accompanied by my selected play list (largely Blues classics featuring Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters *et. al*.) blaring from the car speakers. As we drove north on the arrow-straight the #55 freeway, the subtropical bayou gradually gave way to red-dirt Mississippi. Further north, the live oaks and pine forests blended into deciduous not unlike the temperate forests that stretch as far north as southern Ontario.

At Crystal Springs, we took the secondary highway # 27 west to the outskirts of the city of Vicksburg: the site of the second most decisive strategic victory of the Union in the American Civil War. We turned off at the National Battlefield Memorial site and parked among the array of out-of-state license plates. We stopped in the interpretative center barely long enough to use the washroom and then drove up to the battlefield security gate.

Set amid thick forest, with vehicle pull-offs at the various state memorials around the 8-mile circuit—the battlefield park was obviously designed for the convenience of lazy Americans in their cars. Ribboning through gently rolling hills, the empty paved road would have been perfect for a bicycle tour, even in the August humidity.

In our hour and a half drive around the park perimeter, we stopped at a number of the strategic 'redoubts' and 'redans' as well as at the memorials: the grandest being that of Lincoln's state of Illinois. While the graves sites of both the Union and the Confederate dead were reverently marked, the more lavish memorials were erected by the Union states. There was a sense that it was federal jurisdiction which vouchsafed the meticulous upkeep of a site that would have been as soon forgotten by white Mississippians. After all, the Union assault on Vicksburg was a grinding campaign of attrition in which the rebels were eventually routed. The final siege and capture of Vicksburg resulted in Union control of shipping on the lower Mississippi shipping and marked the beginning of the end for the Confederacy...

After exiting the park, we drove briefly through the streets of Vicksburg looking for a restaurant. Although Old Man River was a shining grey ribbon seen from back on the bluff of the battlefield park, from the city the view of the Mississippi was obscured by the dyke stretching along the riverfront. At the same time, there was hardly a single pedestrian on the streets and most of the storefronts appeared to be shuttered. With no further reason to linger in Vicksburg, we turned eastwards towards the state capital of Jackson where we had booked an Airbnb for one night…



Barely 45 minutes later, we were in the middle of Jackson and still looking for a restaurant. The first impression of the downtown core was of another eerily empty and hollowed out American

city. As we walked along the cratered sidewalk, M. searched on his Iphone for a restaurant. The only one we could find within walking distance was a near empty take-out place a block from the downtown Jackson State University campus…

There were no other customers but at least the place wasn't closed. The African American lady leaning out from the counter scowled upon our entry. We took a seat at one of the metal tables beside the curious boiled peanut dispenser (a southern specialty?). While we waited to be served, M. text messaged, and I looked at the old hairdresser calendars on the yellow wall. Even as she took our order, the lady kept glancing towards the door. After an uncomfortable 30-minute wait, we gobbled greasy fish and chips.

When we paid the bill (leaving a generous tip), eager to consume something fresher, I asked if there was a grocery store nearby where a few bananas might be had:

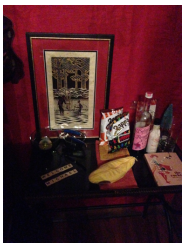
"No grocery stores here," the lady said, still looking into the street, "Only place to buy bananas is Walmart. That's 2 miles outside of town."

Even though I may well have been one of the first whites to have ever entered that snack bar door, I took the lady's brusqueness only as annoyance for being interrupted when she was preparing to close early…

Back navigating with M.'s iPhone GPS, we drove up State St. to the nearby Mississippi Museum of Civil Rights. Adjacent to a museum of Mississippi history (presumably geared for whites) the combined entry fee was $20 but we bought tickets only the Civil Rights side. Although slightly miffed in remembering that the impressive state museum in Baton Rouge was free— we were left with no doubt the charge was well worth it.

The exhibits spared no detail in depicting the dark story of race relations in Mississippi. There were artifacts of culturally embedded racism such as KKK paraphernalia, Jim Crow signage and 'Mammy and Sambo' knick-knacks. The high-tech displays included sound and video clips documenting such horrific events as the assassination of Medgar Evers in '63 and the murder of the Cheney, Goodman, Schwerner in '64. Yet most impactful was the exhibit chronicling the gruesome murder of the 14-year-old Emmett Till in '55. There was even a grisly photo of the open coffin at his funeral. M. was not alone is blinking away a tear.

Still, it was a little sad that there were more security guards than visitors in attendance: the latter mostly elderly African Americans. Even granting that a mid-week afternoon in sweltering August was hardly conducive to Civil Rights history lessons, one wondered just how many white Mississippians had even darkened the museum's doors.



Upon leaving, we solemnly proceeded to our Airbnb. It was in an older house on a leafy street among run-down 'character homes' in what might possibly have been one of the few more liberal white enclaves of the state capital. The old manses now fronted by potholed asphalt might have been familiar to Eudora Welty or even to Faulkner. The neighborhood was also oddly reminiscent of a white suburb of Salisbury, Rhodesia, prior to its rebirth as Harare, Zimbabwe.

After we rolled our bags over the broken sidewalk and rang the bell, the host, a 30ish white lady, smiled at M. whom she recognized from his Airbnb booking photo.

"This way, dad," said M., making clear our relationship as she directed us to the separate entrance.

She stood smiling by the doorway as we took in our bags.

"Could you recommend a place nearby for dinner?" M. asked.

After she gave her suggestions, I glanced at M. "Thanks for that. And is there a grocery store nearby? Somewhere we could get fresh fruit or yogurt?"

Probably disappointed with such a mundane query from visitors stopping for a once in a lifetime night in her home city, she nonetheless gave clear directions to a suburban 'boutique' grocery store.

On the way, we stopped at a gas bar where I joined a queue of impatient customers witnessing a mini confrontation at the front of the line:

A black girl was confronting an old East Indian man at the till ("Gimme my $7 change or I will call the police!" yelled the girl). In Hindi, the seemingly confused old man pleaded help from the younger man, behind him, possibly a son. It occurred that perhaps Jackson was just as tensely divided between immigrant and native as between black and white…

Following the recommendation of our Airbnb host, we drove to a restaurant called the 'Pig and Pint' for our evening meal. We sat at a corner picnic table on the patio with an empty table between us and the other diners—all white. Although they ignored our presence, their vibes were not hostile. The food was underwhelming: the $9 salad consisted of shreds of grated carrot mixed in limp leaves of watery lettuce.

By 8:00 PM, we were back reclining amid the artsy décor of our Airbnb. It seemed a valiant effort of the host, possibly a rare liberal in the environs, to demonstrate that not all white Mississippians were redneck yahoos. The bookshelf displayed southern literary classics: Flannery O'Connor, John Kennedy Toole, Faulkner—along with more recent works of Yankee literary lions like David Foster Wallace. Touching along the spines of the bookshelf seemed akin to brushing the blossoms of rare flowers amid the backwater wasteland.

Through the evening, I leafed through the art magazines while M. lay on the other sofa texting and sipping beer. Had we been a little more adventurous and a little less fatigued we might have gone out for a drink. I crawled into bed at 9:30 PM, wondering why I didn't ask the hostess about a Blues venue instead of where to buy bananas…

(Jackson, Mississippi-Montgomery, Alabama)

On the way out of town in the morning, we pulled up to the side of the legislature building (the stars and bars still flying high above the cupola) expecting to take a brief walk around the grounds. As M. checked our bearings on his iPhone app, a cop car pulled up behind. A few heartbeats later, the patrolman in ranger hat stepped to the car window.

"See the sign?" He gruffly pointed. "No stopping here!"

"Sorry, we've just checking directions," M. smiled.

"Sorry," I chimed in.

He stood by as we reversed, possibly frustrated that we had not given him Yankee lip and made his day.

Without the slightest regret for getting out of Mississippi sooner than planned, we drove straight for the nearest entrance to freeway #20, the route east towards the Alabama border. Just as #55 north from New Orleans, the divided highway was arrow straight and smoothly paved— a sharp contrast from pot-holed municipal streets.

Through long stretches of pine forest there was surprising little sign of townsites or even farmland. We did pass by pulp mills and several logging trucks with loads precariously balanced—but saw no cotton fields…

After a quick stop for breakfast sandwiches at a MacDonald's in Meridian, Mississippi, I took the wheel and soon turned off onto highway #80 towards Selma, Alabama.

In Selma, we pulled into a side street just a block from where the Edmund Pettus Bridge traversed the Alabama River. It is an iconic site of American Civil Rights history— having been the location of the Alabama police attack in 1965 on Martin Luther King and fellow marchers. We crossed to the north side of the busy road, and then in respectful silence, walked eastward across the bridge. M. seemed to want to stride ahead alone before pausing to let me catch up. Realizing I would have done exactly the same as a young man deep in reflection, I took no offence…

After crossing back along the opposite side of the bridge— we walked several blocks to see the historic Browns' Chapel where Martin Luther King preached in the early 1960s. Whether or not it was the heat of August that kept the Selma inhabitants indoors, the downtown was— even more so than Jackson, Mississippi or Baton Rouge, Louisiana—eerily empty. Along with the Twilight Zone atmosphere was the desolation of boarded up shops along the main drag of Broad St. The rusted hulk of a burned-out car in front of a church on adjacent Selma Ave. testified to the shameful history and present economic blight.

Having no appetite for fast food, we choose to get lunch in a place called Organpi Farms' grocery just a block from the bridge. We sat at one of the few tables in the tiny restaurant attached to the grocery. The décor was artsy African American and the large lady behind the counter friendly. We were the only customers. I was initially enthused to see a 'vegetarian garden delight' on the menu— but it turned out to be a scoop of mac and cheese amid a bed of kale drenched in a sugary vinaigrette. I would have been better to follow M. in ordering a chicken burger…

Our route from Selma to the state capital of Montgomery was on secondary highway #14. Compared with the flat swampy land traversed on the drive north from New Orleans along the Mississippi, the road east from Selma along the Alabama River curved though scenic farmland.

We got to Montgomery in late afternoon and checked into the Red Roof Motel near the freeway and on the city outskirts. After a short rest, we drove downtown and walked up Dexter Ave., the main street, leading to the steps of the Alabama state legislature.

The core of Alabama's capital, on first impression, was a welcome contrast with the shabbiness of Jackson, Mississippi. Just as anticipated from a recent PBS documentary— some local businesses, with tepid support of the municipal government, were attempting to revitalize the city center with focus on its history in the struggle (needless to say ongoing) for Civil Rights. As

the PBS feature pointed out, such a plan was an honorable departure in a state historically infamous as the most bitter holdout against racial integration under the pugnacious Governor George Wallace.

In more recent months, with the opening of new museums, restaurants and gift shops along pedestrian-friendly (even wheelchair-friendly) walkways, the downtown core has been slowly transforming from an abandoned shell into a more tourist-friendly destination. Within our initial stroll, we encountered several blue plaques commemorating civil rights history: including the Rosa Parks bus stop and the Martin Luther King Memorial Baptist church.

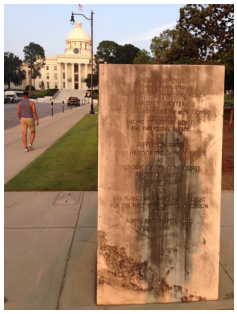
One of the blue plaques was in front of a humble diner bearing the marque of 'Chris's hotdogs'. In an online description we were informed that the place had not only hosted famous patrons over nearly a century but had also served both black and white customers— even in the Jim Crow era. It seemed a natural choice for dinner. We ordered the famous 'chili dog', which had apparently been a favourite of such diverse regulars as Hank Williams, Martin Luther King and even George Wallace.

From our modest booth, we scanned the dingy wall lined with framed photos of famous visitors––including presidents from F.D.R. to Obama. Despite the marginally edible fare, we were touched by the atmosphere.

After the meal, we walked back up Dexter Ave. and up the steps of the capital building to take a closer look at the monument to the Confederacy at its right side. It was a massive structure featuring military statuary around a tall obelisk topped by a sword-wielding female figure. It was erected, apparently, in the same era as were most Confederate monuments throughout the south. That was at the end of the 19th century when the United Daughters of the Confederacy—with the encouragement of the KKK— engaged in the orgy of Confederate 'lost-cause' sentimentalism while celebrating the triumph of Jim Crow under the guise of states' rights. Little wonder that for most African Americans the memorials represent nothing less than a declaration of re-enslavement by alternate means…

As M. walked around it with arms folded, I took a few photos. We then turned around and walked back along Dexter Ave. to our car parked on a side street. We stopped to read another, much more weathered, plaque. It proclaimed the spot where in 1861, *'Dixie'*— the short-lived national anthem of a short-lived republic— was first played during the inauguration of President Jefferson Davis. Just half a block below this fading sign was a new blue Civil Rights history plaque in front of the Martin Luther King Memorial Baptist church. Pausing there before the tidy red-bricked edifice, I wondered just what impact these Civil Rights history markers were really having on white Alabama. The adherents of the values of the old South, recast as stalwarts of the Republican Party, might well be reassured that those new plaques still fell under the long shadow cast by the Confederate Memorial obelisk.

Awash in all this troubling history, we made our way back to our room in the Red Roof Inn…



From the moment I'd first heard about Legacy Museum on a PBS Newshour segment, I knew it would be a highlight of the road trip in the deep south that M. and I had long planned. Along with the tickets to the Laura Creole Plantation, I got a pair of Legacy Museum tickets online. The limited availability of mid-week tickets a month in advance certainly attested to the popularity of the recently opened museum. Precisely 15 minutes before our designated time of 9:30 AM, we pulled into a metered parking space on Coosa Street across from the site.

With the screening and pat down before admission no less thorough than airport security, one wondered whether threats had been received from white supremacists. In any case, the handful of white attendees, including myself, received exactly the same screening as the African American visitors. It seemed a noteworthy reversal of the common practices beyond the walls…

Generated by both high-tech wizardry and stark realia, the immersive experience that followed was more of emotional pummeling than of enlightenment. The hammering of the conscience began in the revelation that the museum itself stood upon ground where African slaves were once penned up prior to being auctioned. That fact was drilled deeper by cries of despair heard immediately upon entrance. In descending a darkened walkway, one passed dimly lit pens from which the ghostly cries grew louder. At that point, hologram-ghosts of men women and children loomed up pleading from behind the bars. Then into harsher light, one passed a bank of glass booths. Each was installed with phones simulating those of prison high security 'visiting' areas. In randomly picking up a phone, one saw a life-sized video of a prisoner behind the glass, who proceeded to tell a true story of unjust incarceration.

In subsequent galleries, the gut was further wrenched. Unsparingly depicted was not only the Jim Crow era in the in the south, but the more subtle institutional racism practiced in northern states. Then came blood-chilling display of photos of lynchings. In the final gallery were multiple shelves of jars lined up like farm cellar preserves. Each jar was filled with soil taken from one of many hundreds of sites of known African American lynchings.

The finale coda near the exit was a tribute to the continuing resistance of the Black Lives Matters movement.

Like fellow visitors, I exited into the bright sunlight still reeling. Yet at the same time I wondered how many most in need of the experience would ever enter therein?

As we walked towards the car, I tried to break the silence of the previous hour.

“So, what are your impressions, M.?”

He blew out a held breath. “We can talk about it later.”

As customary, I aimed to respect the privacy of his thoughts, while attempting at some level to reassure him of our common commitments. I reminded myself of our unspoken mutual agreement that his ‘identity’ as an African Canadian (despite a mixed parental heritage) must never be a barrier between us. Also was the thought (not to be dwelled upon) that we do share the experience of *otherness*— although of a different order. Perhaps that is another unspoken belief strengthening our bond. Meanwhile, how many 26-year-old sons would choose the companionship of their fathers on a journey like this?

“Jesus!”

The turn to the sentimental was lurched away by the parking ticket in the windshield wiper. Most annoying was the fact that our meter had expired less than 5 minutes before we were ticketed. The meter-reader must have literally stood over the meter waiting for it to run out. Was it some cracker bastard, seeing our Ohio plates and eager to stick it to Yankees who would visit a museum that denigrates the Old South?

However infuriated, I resolved that the presumed peckerwood would not have the satisfaction of ruining our day. Nonetheless, I immediately decided that the $30 fine would be paid for by the cancellation of the planned visit to the Hank Williams museum.

Another emotional hammering was to come a half hour later at the National Memorial to Peace and Justice:

Opened at the same time as the legacy museum, the Peace and Justice memorial was also featured on this year on a PBS Newshour segment. In its linkage with the jars of soil at the Legacy museum a few blocks away, the memorial is essentially the first in the USA commemorating the known 4,400 African American victims of lynching. In an interview (watched on Utube) the director, one Bryan Stevenson, acknowledges that African Africans were not the only victims of lynching in the dark annals of American history. Yet Stevenson chose to memorialize only African American victims (still the overwhelming majority) to bear witness to the ugly evidence that for nearly a century lynching was primarily used by whites as the most violent tool of intimidation in enforcing the social codes of black inferiority.

Coming with a pre-conception of the structure of the memorial, I was nonetheless overwhelmed by its sheer scale: the names of all the known victims were emblazoned on 80 hanging coffin-shaped iron boxes, each one representing a county of the USA where their murders had occurred.

As one walked downwards into the semi-circular concourse, one passed each 'coffin'— first standing at ground level and then gradually suspended— giving the chilling effect of terrified victims pulled upwards to helplessly dangle. In the adjacent walls were names with terse inscriptions, *e.g.: 'Mary Turner, Lowndes Co., Georgia. For denouncing her husband's lynching was hung upside and burned by a white mob along with her unborn child.'*

The sustained shock of inconceivably cruel death represented by every coffin and inscription passed was scarcely soothed by the waterfall at the far end of the concourse.

On departure, I glanced into the faces of a group of older African Americans, having just arrived by the tour bus parked outside. Judging from the gold embroidered patches on shirts and blouses, it was probably a church group. They pushed along grave faced, some supporting one another. It was not unlikely that a few were descendants or relatives of the victims honoured therein. Undoubtedly, African Americans from all over the country will continue to make pilgrimages to the Legacy Memorial. It was also encouraging to consider that African Americans would be joined by 'liberals' and international visitors in affirming this shameful history. Still, it was telling that most of the license plates in the cars parked outside the memorial were from out of state.

In mulling on a final impression, it struck me that the Legacy Memorial at ground-zero of the old Confederacy is a powerful bridgehead. Its very creation— as intended— challenges those who willfully ignore or belittle the monstrosities of slavery and Jim Crow. Still undeniably the white

southerners who vociferously defend their Confederate monuments and uphold the 'lost cause' legacy of the Civil War remain firmly in control. Their political power extends not just to the southern statehouses but to Washington— and most certainly—to the presidency itself. As many have observed, white southerners through the Republican Party are now effectively waging and gaining the upper hand in a renewed civil war…

The final dismal thought in walking back to the car was that a MAGA supporter walking under the Legacy museum coffins was less likely than snow falling in hell…

After brunch at an African American café (grits were a little greasy), we searched for an unmetered street on the periphery of downtown. We parked near what looked like an abandoned warehouse and walked towards the Alabama River front through the old Union railway station. With the shutdown of the Amtrak passenger train service, the station hall had been converted into a city visitor's center and gift shop. We picked up a few free maps and brochures at the visitor's center then wandered into the doorway of the gift shop. Within a few seconds of tentatively lifting up an angel confetti globe, I realized that the merchandise was largely 'Christian devotional'.

"Where're y'all from?" asked the older white woman at the desk.

"From Canada," I said, glancing over at M.

Her smiling hesitation signaled readiness for a chat with an uncommon visitor.

"Thank you", I said nodding towards the shelves as we ducked out.

In the celestial ding of a silver bell above the closing door, I felt a little contrite for my dismissive reflex. Perhaps I missed an opportunity to challenge my own assumptions about white southern evangelists, AKA, the American Taliban…

From the visitor's center, we walked past the bronze Hank Williams statue and museum— the entry fee having been lost to a parking ticket. Amid the afternoon swelter we headed up towards Washington Ave. guided by the visitor's map. Just a block behind the domed Alabama state legislature building was a white mansion with green trim. The black brass plaque at the curbside identified the location as "the first White House of the Confederacy", occupied in 1861 by President Jefferson Davis.

We ascended the portico steps and stepped into the faint museum mustiness. In the anteroom, a smiling silver-haired man whose duty it seemed was to personally greet all visitors asked if we'd

like some cold water. Slightly shivering in the sudden air-conditioning, we accepted the proffered bottles and proceeded into the semi-dark interior. There was no admission fee. I swallowed in the hesitancy that we were effectively accepting the hospitality of the United Daughters of the Confederacy.

We went quickly from the ground to the upper floor, peering over the velvet doorway ropes into each room. The furnishings of the domicile of the kingpin of the Confederacy were not particularly regal. The heavily draped and be-cushioned interiors could well have been a museum reconstruction of the 18th home of a genteel United Empire Loyalist in Canada. In that thought, I recalled that many of those 'Loyalists' were from southern states and some brought with them into northern exile, domestic slaves...

As we emerged at the bottom of the staircase back near the entrance, the silver-haired attendant stepped forward with a smile:

"I'm Bob," he said. "So where you folks from?"

We're from Canada."

Bob accompanied us out onto the veranda and then down the steps.

"I'm from Albany New York, myself. Not too far from the Canadian border."

With no other visitors in sight, he momentarily stopped up with us at the bottom of the steps.

"So, what brings you here?"

I mentioned our interest in both the history the American Civil War and of the Civil Rights movement. Expecting a chilly reaction, I revealed that we had earlier visited the Legacy Museum and the Memorial to Peace and Justice.

"That's an excellent museum, he said. "Our history is checkered."

Surprised that a presumed volunteer at a Confederate shrine would admit to ambiguity in the 'Lost Cause'— I countered with another tidbit of checkered history.

"I was surprised to read that after the Civil War, Jefferson Davis stayed with his family in Canada for a few years. In Quebec."

"O yes, he was an interesting character, he nodded.

Perhaps to further addle our stereotypes— before we walked away, our momentary host at the first Confederate White House shook our hands…

Even with energy flagging in the humidity and heat, we still managed 2 more museums: the Mississippi Museum of Natural History (an excellent display of aboriginal history) and finally an

older Museum of Civil Rights. The exhibits in the latter were largely displays incorporating historical photos and names. Most memorable was the security screening before entry: even heavier than that in the Legacy Museum.

Around 4:00 PM, heat-fatigued if not benumbed by the surfeit of dark history, we made our way back to the parked car. Before holing up for the night, we dropped into the Family Dollar store where I picked up water and batteries. It was sobering to realize that such stores are the mainstay suppliers of many Americans who find even Walmart too expensive. At the Walmart in the same mall we picked up for supper, sub sandwiches.

Finally, we stopped off at a supermarket called the Higgly Piggly (with the 'GG' in Piggly' burned out) where we got a 6-pack beer along with yogurt and bananas for breakfast. It was depressing to find the produce bins half empty and the veggie offerings overripe or wilted. The dilapidation seemed to provide further evidence that in the reign of suburban Big Box emporia, inhabitants of the inner cities of the south— largely African American— have limited access to fresh nutritious food.

This thought was interrupted by the venomous stares of a scrawny white boy and girl from the front seat of a junk heap. White supremacists? The alarm faded in the reassessment of a near-broke cracker couple possibly arguing about whether to spend their last few bucks on gas or on a 6-pack at Higgly Piggly…

Back in our twin beds at the Red Roof Inn motel room, M. nursed his 6 pack and tuned to a sports channel. With no new Trump outrages to fume over, I shut off my laptop and slept.

Montgomery, Alabama-Atlanta, Georgia:

On the drive northwest towards Atlanta on freeway #85, we listened to segments of the *"Pod Save America"* and the *"The Wilderness."* podcasts. While interesting, I wondered again why my son, just graduated from a top-notch Canadian law school, was so preoccupied with American politics. Did he feel that Canada was too small and parochial for his ambitions?

Just over an hour into the drive, we took secondary highway #80 so as to pass though the small city of Tuskegee, Alabama. It was the birthplace of the famous black American scientist, George Washington Carver and the home of the famous WWII Tuskegee Airmen Corps. Notoriously, it was the site of a study of syphilis in the '30s-'50s, which could well have been undertaken in Nazi Germany. Even when an experimental drug regimen was found to be effective, the cure was deliberately withheld from the control group of African American men so that the long-term ravages of the untreated disease could be studied.

Bracing for another hollowed out Selma, we were pleasantly surprised to find a tidy and seemingly prosperous college town with red brick college buildings somewhat reminiscent of a Canadian university town. We stopped across from the town square only long enough for M. to get a coffee. The square was humming with a Saturday morning market. In the throb of music from loudspeakers, shoppers milled around stalls selling handicrafts all and baking. What a contrast that lively spirit struck with the deadness at the center of Selma! Still, right in the middle of the leafy square— at the center of a city whose population was apparently 96% African American— was a statue of a confederate soldier. Almost incredulous, I fumbled to take an iPhone photo as we walked past. M, for his part, gave me a disapproving stare but did not hold back my arm…

After looping back onto the freeway that widened as thickening traffic slowed to a crawl, we entered a different world. After 3 days in what seemed the largely rural or sparsely populated deep south— through the final 1½ hours into Atlanta we were back in an urban-scape that could have been Boston, Toronto or Vancouver…

With the aid of trusty GPS, we found our way to the Carter Centre Presidential library which happened to be close by the Airbnb we'd booked.

As expected, Jimmy Carter was not a popular draw on a Saturday afternoon in Atlanta. Indeed, more interesting than artifacts was guessing the origin of the sprinkling of fellow visitors. It appeared that the few folks wandering therein were elderly Midwestern Methodists, possibly honouring Minnesota's Mondale, the Vice President of the era, as much paying tribute to the one-term president himself.

In viewing the odd knickknacks (Jimmy's baby mug and spoon along with a gift to Roselyn from Anwar Sadat) I was reminded of omissions that would have better illuminated the era of the 'failed' Carter presidency: *e.g.* photos of Jimmy's irritating grin, hawk Brzezinski (who killed détente) with his Woody-Woodpecker brush cut and a genuine 6-pack of Billy Beer… Still, both

M. and I had no trouble in paying tribute to Carter's uncommon decency: especially as a white southerner of his era.

After a Wendy's burger we found our way to the Airbnb only to find a barking dog and a mess. The host, a 30ish white guy, arrived 15 minutes late. Apologetic, he bade us watch TV in his living room upstairs while he cleaned up.

After a rest, we walked to the Ponce Market Centre. The multicultural crowd in the pricey upmarket mall could have been at home in Boston or Toronto. After a stroll among the cyclists, roller-bladers and joggers along the Atlanta beltline trail behind the mall, we circled back to the room. On the way, we stopped at a gas station market to buy a few jumbo cans of beer. The black cashier took payment from behind thick Plexiglas and made change through a metal tray. His 'thanks' was issued though a microphone.

Back at the Airbnb, I settled in to watch a Netflix movie, while M. prepared to head out to a sports bar. He promised he'd be gone for just a couple of hours. Before he left at 9:00 PM by Uber cab I urged him to be mindful that Atlanta was not Toronto…

At 2:30 AM, I jolted awake to the blaring TV. The twin bed on my left was still empty. Tormented by horrific imaginings, I got up and dressed. At 3:30 AM, I was pacing the room and about call the police when the door rattled and M. crashed in. With scarcely a mutter he collapsed fully clothed on the bed. I shut off the light in profound relief.

M. woke with a hangover in mid-morning and sheepishly revealed that he left his cell phone at a bar. My first panicking thought was that without his GPS we could not possibly negotiate the Atlanta freeway spaghetti back to the airport where the car was due at 6:00 PM.

He then assured that he remembered both the name and the location of the bar he had found through an on-line recommendation.

We immediately packed and drove to Edgewood Ave.— seemingly a hipster scene with colourful murals in front of art studios and coffee shops. We parked a block away and walked back to the 'the Church of the Living Room' (Painted on the window: '*no open or concealed bibles allowed on the premises*). The place was closed. After M.'s repeated knocking, a cleaner came to the door. He said that the place would not reopen until late afternoon. While M. believed that the phone was still in the bar—it was clear that we would have to cancel the trip scheduled for the day.

Our plan had been a visit to Stone Mountain Park. It was not the massive bas reliefs Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis I'd wanted to see— but rather the reactions of the crackers making their pilgrimage there. Now without GPS, we decided to play it safe by spending the afternoon in the Motel 6 we'd booked near the airport and then returning to the Church of the Living Room at 5:00 PM…

Luck was with us: in returning in late afternoon to Edgewood Ave., M. recovered his phone which had slipped under a cushion where he's been sitting. However relieved in the crawl through heavy traffic to the Hartsfield-Jackson international airport to drop off our rental—I still reflected with a measure of regret on what we'd missed on the 6-day trip— apart from Stone Mountain:

Apart from the transactional quips in restaurants and hotels, how many enlightening exchanges with locals could be counted?

There was a 10-minute chat with an older African American Uber Driver on our first day in New Orleans. He opined that the worst US President after Trump was Grover Cleveland, due to the legal enshrining of 'Separate but Equal" during his administration. If I had maintained typical passenger silence in the drive from the airport to the French Quarter, I would have the missed the fact that the notorious Plessy vs Ferguson U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 1894 originated in the case of a man of mixed race being kicked off a 'whites only' railway car in the very neighborhood we were driving through.

Then there the interesting 3-minute exchange with 'Bob' on the steps of the White House of the Confederacy. Still, he was from New York…

All other interactions with the native southerner were merely transactional and the memorable ones were not particularly warm. (*e.g.* the somber guide in the Laura plantation and the brusque lady in the snack bar in Jackson). Still to be noted was the friendly Airbnb host in Jackson and the transgender black desk clerk at the Pelham Hotel in New Orleans who addressed me as "sweetie" … On balance though— even in travels where I spoke hardly a word of the local language— I have gained clearer impressions of *human* landscape than during the previous 6 days…

It was with that reflection I entered Subway across from Motel 6 while M. ordering his dinner at the adjacent KFC. Moments before, we'd shuttled from the nearby airport where we dropped off our rental (Luckily, with no new scratches).

The customer ahead of me, pudgy in golf attire, looked rather like the good ole boy paddler raped by a hillbilly in '*Deliverance'*. In a Georgia drawl he ordered a ham and cheese.

"No vegies!" he said, grimacing into his cellphone.

Before fixing his sandwich the East Indian girl, working solo, asked me for my choice of bread.

"I'm in a hurry!" the good ole boy barked.

"Serve, the gentleman first," I said.

The young woman asked me again.

"I *said* I'm in a hurry," the pudgy man barked louder.

"Well, I'm in no hurry so you can take care of this gentleman first," I said.

Intimidated, the girl hurriedly slapped together his ham sandwich then asked what kind of dressing he wanted.

"I *told* you already in *plain* English!" the good ole boy shook his head and then looked over, expecting me to join in with his "stupid foreigner" smirk.

The thought of defending a harassed minimum-wage worker was tempered by awareness of concealed-carry laws. However tempted to ask why he wasn't wearing his MAGA hat— I simply looked away...

Yet that would be the tiny incident that served to solidify my impressions just a few hours before the flight back to Canada. As the silver-haired host in the White House of the Confederacy cryptically observed: there is a checkered history in the south. But the checkering is not as he might have wished to imply. There are no shades of grey here: only a stark contrast of black and white.

Over a century and a half, the 'values' upon which the old Confederacy was built have morphed and evolved: but at heart they remain no less virulent. Even though white racism may be marginally shifting from African American to immigrant, the tumours continue to suppurate and metastasize. One might depressingly conclude that in its new guises the old Confederacy is in ascendency— not just in the south— but throughout the U.S.A...

With that final thought I smiled at the cashier and left a tip in the counter jar.

-2018, Aug 20-26