What Has Been Will Be Again: Photographic Meditations on Social Isolation in Alabama

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Social isolation is both a phrase and an experience that has defined the past year in the wake of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Jared Ragland’s ongoing photographic travelogue, *What Has Been Will Be Again: Photographic Meditations on Social Isolation in Alabama*, expressly evokes the loneliness that has characterized this period; solitary subjects inhabit these frames, and many images in the series are devoid of people altogether. One can imagine the photographer, alone, navigating deserted landscapes with only a camera as his companion, documenting the recent ravaging of the public sphere. Yet, while the theme is certainly au courant, *What Has Been* features subjects for whom social isolation is nothing new. This body of work, instead, makes a case for a long history of isolation and alienation in the artist’s home state—one that has exacted a costly human toll.

In this photographic survey that began in the fall of 2020, Ragland has been working his way across Alabama following historical routes from America’s colonial era, documenting individuals and communities whose existence has been practically defined by economic and geographic isolation. The series features landscapes shot in tiny rural towns plagued by generational poverty and the exploitation of the environment, as evidenced by dispossessed storefronts (*York; Bridgeport*), homes (*Cordova*), and infrastructure (*Hollywood*). Ragland also makes visible the often-overlooked inhabitants of these neglected places by producing powerful portraits of
lone individuals. The backlit Michael Farmer holds up a translucent sheet of plastic to the camera, which renders the African American subject as a silhouette and separates him from the viewer’s gaze, perhaps symbolically visualizing the dehumanization and segregation that African Americans continue to suffer. Sharp value contrast and a low vantage point lend a heroic nature to the subject of Kevin, a stubbled man with furrowed brow who looks off into the distance while moving a heavy load alone. In Payton, a shirtless, tattooed young man makes soulful eye contact with the camera while wrapping his arms around his own body—whether to ward off the chill of a fall day or to provide self-consolation in lieu of another human’s caring embrace. As distant spectators, we can provide little assistance or solace, but Ragland seems to insist that the simple act of bearing witness to the loneliness is important. As the viewer travels alongside the photographer, moving through his weeks on the road and simultaneously through deep time thanks to historicizing captions, a creeping realization sets in: these subjects and spaces have been deliberately left to their own devices, to deteriorate or decay. Their isolation seems less accidental or temporal, and more a product of decades of willful neglect by a mainstream America only now starting to visualize what—and who—has been pushed out of our collective frame of vision.

The feeling is reinforced by the inclusion of images that speak to the forced marginalization of African Americans, Indigenous people, and members of the LGBTQ+ population in Alabama’s past and present. Hauntingly quiet photographs accompanied by meticulously researched captions catalog sites of injustice, at once mirroring and challenging the silence of historical narratives that, for so long, have failed to speak the names, dates, and places of such raucous violence. Photographs like Jefferson County, Alabama—visualizing an ancestral home of Alabama’s First People, now replaced by a sewage plant—evoke notions of Indigenous exile, erasure, and abuse. The captions for a series of images from Carbon Hill discuss the town’s long history of terror and harassment toward people of color and the LGBTQ+ community, while the photographs themselves reflect the white nationalism that embodies exclusionary politics today. Yet the people and scenery seen here are, themselves, set apart from any sense of community; they are both complicit in and victims of cultural isolation.

The great paradox of What Has Been is that it visualizes the very real social isolation that has had tangible consequences on the individuals and communities photographed, while simultaneously revealing connections across space, place, people, and time. In images subtly subversive to the overall aesthetic of loneliness, tree branches organically entwine, messages are exchanged via layers of lingering graffiti, power lines run alongside roads that stretch out toward the horizon. More overtly, by tying together events in Alabama’s centuries-long past with present-day issues, Ragland insists that it is impossible to view our current period outside of history. The confluence of the Covid-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter movement, and seditious domestic terrorism marks our times as significant, but Ragland’s body of work shows that the isolation, socioeconomic inequalities, racism, and marginalization we’ve witnessed are not unprecedented. What Has Been speaks specifically to the mood of our moment while also asserting the timelessness of its theme of isolation by illustrating the perpetuated use of
segregation and sequestration in service of the white supremacist myths of American individualism and exceptionalism. As viewers prepare to emerge from quarantine and rejoin in a “post-pandemic” society, Ragland asks us to bear witness to the people and places who cannot so easily shrug off the mantle of social isolation.

—Catherine Wilkins

Spring Hill, Barbour County, Alabama. Michael Farmer fashions a scarecrow next to his garden on Election Day, 2020

Michael Farmer’s family has lived in Spring Hill for generations, where the predominantly Black community has faced a history of racial violence and voter disenfranchisement. On November 3, 1874, a white mob attacked the Spring Hill polling station, destroying the ballot box, burning the ballots, and murdering the election supervisor’s son. While 1,200 area Black residents voted in the 1874 election, only 10 cast ballots in 1876.¹ Today, the population of Barbour County is nearly 50 percent Black, but white officials hold 8 of 12 elected county positions. In 2016 the county had the highest voter purge rate in the United States.² “I came up rough,” Farmer says, as his father was a migrant worker that carried the family from Florida to New York season to
season. Farmer is a lifelong Democrat and military veteran who served two tours overseas in Operation Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom. When asked what he hoped might come from the 2020 national election, Farmer said, “I hope the young folks might think about what their ancestors came through to get where we are.”

Sumter County, Alabama, 2021

In 1978 a subsidiary of Waste Management Inc. purchased a landfill permit for a three-hundred-acre tract of land just north of York in a community where 90 percent of residents are Black. Since then, the company has expanded the site to 2,700 acres, creating the largest hazardous waste landfill in the United States directly over the Eutaw Aquifer, which supplies water to a large part of Alabama. Nearly 40 percent of the toxic waste disposed of nationwide between 1984 and 1987 under the federal Superfund removal program ended up at the landfill. One of its original owners, James Parsons, is the son-in-law of former governor George Wallace. The political connections enabled the company to obtain the necessary permits from the state health department to operate the dump.
York, Sumter County, Alabama, 2021

With a median household income of just $24,000 per year, Sumter County is among the poorest counties in Alabama and is part of the so-called Black Belt region of the state. The term refers to the dark, rich topsoil found in the central part of Alabama; this natural feature attracted plantation agriculture to the area in the nineteenth century. The 1860 census showed the following totals for Sumter County: whites, 5,919; enslaved Blacks, 18,091; and freed Blacks, 25. The current total population of today’s Sumter County is slightly less than the figure of 140 years ago, but the proportion of white/Black residents is almost exactly the same (25/75 percent).
Monroe County, Alabama. Along a spur of the Old Federal Road, near the site of Claiborne, 2021

Located along the Alabama River in present-day Monroe County, Claiborne was a once flourishing center of political and economic life in territorial Alabama. Serving as a base of operations during the Creek War in the early nineteenth century, Claiborne was also home to Alabama’s first Eli Whitney–designed cotton gin. Today, the Georgia-Pacific Alabama River Cellulose paper mill is located just upriver of the old town site. The mill produces specialty fluff and market pulp for consumer products that are found in more than 65 percent of US households. While in process of switching to sustainable and renewable energy sources and investing in conservation projects, Georgia-Pacific self-reported that the Alabama River Cellulose paper mill released more than 120 thousand pounds of reproductive toxins into the Alabama River in 2015.
Bridgeport, Jackson County, Alabama, 2020
Once a thriving rural town, Cordova has experienced a forty-year decline following successive closures of local textile mills and coal mines. A series of EF3 and EF4 tornadoes destroyed Cordova’s downtown in 2011, killing four and leaving the town without a city hall, police station, fire station, or grocery store. Today nearly 30 percent of Cordova’s population live below the poverty line as the town faces ongoing rebuilding efforts, with many residents looking to extractive industries and surface mining practices to bring economic opportunities, despite significant ecological risks.
Cordova, Walker County, Alabama. Payton, 2020
Sayre, Walker County, Alabama. Cassie, 2020
Macon County, Alabama. Near the former site of Fort Bainbridge, 2021

Located near several important Muscogee (Creek) towns along the Old Federal Road, Fort Bainbridge was constructed in 1814 to guard the US Army’s supply route into Creek territory. After the Indian Removal, local white landowners established a plantation using extensive forced labor of enslaved people.
The Bellefonte Nuclear Generating Station is an unfinished nuclear power plant operated by the Tennessee Valley Authority. A total of four nuclear reactors have been proposed for the site over a forty-year period at a cost of more than $4 billion, but no nuclear reactor nor electric generating plant has ever been completed. While most construction was halted in 1988, by 2015 the TVA determined that the Bellefonte’s potential power output was unneeded and moved to auction the plant. A private developer—Nuclear Development LLC, led by Franklin L. Haney of Memphis, Tennessee—purchased Bellefonte for $111 million in 2016. With plans to complete two reactor units, Haney purportedly agreed to pay Trump lawyer Michael Cohen $10 million in exchange for obtaining federal funding for the project. According to the Chattanooga Times Free Press, Haney—who had donated $1 million to President Trump’s inaugural committee—says he hired Cohen to pursue investment from a Qatari sovereign fund and that neither he nor Cohen sought to lobby Trump about Department of Energy loan guarantees.\(^7\) The TVA pulled out of the sale agreement in 2018, citing failure by Haney to obtain regulatory approvals. Haney then filed suit to force the completion of the sale, but as of April 2021 the
deal was still pending, with Nuclear Development changing tactics and promoting the completion of the plant as a means of meeting the Biden Administration’s carbon reduction and climate change goals.

Dallas County, Alabama. Perine Well at Old Cahawba, 2020

The area now known as Old Cahawba was first occupied by large populations of Paleoindians; then from 1000 to 1500 CE the Mississippian period brought agriculture and mound builders. They welcomed Spanish conquistadors into a walled city with palisades, yet the Afro-Eurasian diseases the explorers brought with them killed thousands of Indigenous people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The remaining Indigenous peoples were killed or forced to move by an even greater influx of Europeans. By the early nineteenth century, the dirt from the ancient mounds at Cahawba was used to build railroad beds, and the town briefly served as the state capital of Alabama. At the time it was dug in the 1850s, the Perine Well, at seven hundred to nine hundred feet deep, was the second-largest known well in the world, feeding cool water through a system of pipes to “air condition” a twenty-six-room brick mansion. Cahawba
became a ghost town shortly after the Civil War, largely due to recurring floods. By the late 1800s, the town site was purchased for $500 and its buildings demolished.

Sumter County, Alabama. Near the site of Fort Tombecbe, an eighteenth-century stockade built on Choctaw lands, 2021

Originally constructed by French colonialists in 1736 on the border of French Louisiana, Fort Tombecbe was positioned to hold back British intrusion into the area and served as a major
French outpost and trade depot among the Choctaw. Control passed to the British in 1763, who renamed it Fort York but abandoned the site. In 1793 Spain acquired the site from the Choctaw in the treaty of Boufouka, which ceded about ten thousand acres of Choctaw land to the Spanish.

Evergreen, Conecuh County, Alabama. Antoine, 2021
Jefferson County, Alabama. Stagnated runoff from the Valley Creek Water Reclamation Center, located near the former site of the Tally Mounds, 2020

The Tally Mounds area was first occupied as early as five thousand years ago, with a Woodland and Mississippian settlement site located along the banks of Valley Creek near present-day Bessemer. Three mounds were constructed around 1100 CE, predating those found seventy-five miles southeast at the historically preserved Moundville Archeological Park. The mounds were leveled in the early 1900s following archaeological excavation; along with the water sewage plant, an Amazon fulfillment center, outlet shopping mall, and VisionLand—a defunct theme park—are now located near the site.
In July 1905 four Black men—Jack Hunter, Vance Garner, Will Johnson, and Bunk Richardson—were arrested for the murder of a white woman in Gadsden. Although Richardson was innocent, a mob forced its way into the Etowah County jail where he was being held, beat him, and lynched him from the train trestle over the Coosa River. No one was ever held accountable for the lynching.
Talladega County, Alabama. Ruins of Mt. Ida Plantation, 2020

Destroyed by fire in 1956, the 1840 Greek Revival–style antebellum mansion was built for Walker Reynolds, who owned some thirteen thousand acres of land and several hundred enslaved persons. The plantation—located near the site of Abihka, once one of four mother towns of the Muscogee Creek confederacy—was reportedly a location for the 1915 white-supremacist film Birth of a Nation.
Uniontown, Perry County, Alabama, 2020

Uniontown is home to around two thousand people, 91 percent of whom are Black. The average annual household income is just over $30,000, and 51 percent live in poverty. The city faces a multitude of environmental issues that affect the health and lives of its residents. At the time of a 2017 report by the Alabama State Nurses Association, Uniontown had only one doctor’s office and no public transportation system, with the nearest hospitals located more than thirty miles away.
Dadeville, Tallapoosa County, Alabama. Kevin, 2020
Carbon Hill, Walker County, Alabama, 2020

Originally established as a mining and railroad community in 1863 by the Galloway Coal Company, Carbon Hill’s founders incorporated the town on February 14, 1891, nicknaming it “The Village of Love and Luck.” However, just two weeks prior a group of two hundred white coal miners on strike from the Carbon Hill Coal and Coke Co. devolved into a violent mob after hearing rumor their strike would lead to layoffs. Afraid their jobs would be given to Black citizens, the mob terrorized the town. In 2019 Carbon Hill mayor Mark Chambers published several inflammatory statements on Facebook, including a call to “kill out” the LGBTQIA community. Chambers’s posts were later deleted, and he apologized. One year later Chambers aimed racist remarks at the Black Lives Matter movement in a Facebook comment that read in part, “When you put Black lives before all lives they can kiss my ass.” Three days after publishing the comment Chambers deleted his remarks and resigned. As of 2011 there were approximately thirty churches in Carbon Hill for a population of just over two thousand residents, of which 89 percent are white and 25 percent live below the poverty line. More than 83 percent of Walker County residents voted for Donald Trump in the 2020 election.
Carbon Hill, Walker County, Alabama. Wanda and Jerry unload Trump-themed fireworks, 2020

“He’s my president. I just love him,” Wanda said as she went to kiss a box of We the People: D. J. Trump brand fireworks that guarantees “45 EPIC SHOTS.”
Childersburg, Talladega County, Alabama. Sunshine turns soil in the Commons Community Workshop Garden, 2020

As a response to recent national division and the Covid-19 outbreak, Sunshine and her husband Rusty recently bought a home in Childersburg and created the Commons Community Workshop. Through their Fearless Communities Initiative they are building a community garden in a donated downtown lot, hosting trade days, and fostering relationships with their neighbors as a means of “celebrating solidarity and strength.” The couple invited me to find them on Facebook where Sunny posts Initiative announcements, vocalizes her opposition to mask wearing and vaccines, and shares her beliefs about global child sex trafficking networks, the threat of Marxism, and the coming of the end times.
The Copena culture first inhabited the Oakville area more than two thousand years ago, and over the course of centuries the mound complex here became the center of an expanding community of Indigenous people in the Moulton Valley region during the Middle Woodland period. At the time of European contact, the Oakville mound complex was inhabited by the Cherokee people, the majority of whom were forcibly relocated after the passage of the Indian Removal Act in 1830. The abandoned, four-meter-tall burial mound, was appropriated for use as a cemetery for American settlers beginning in the 1840s. When the Bureau of American Ethnology visited the site in 1926, five mounds were documented; since then, three of the mounds have been leveled by local farmers. The burial mound remains, as does an eight-meter-high square platform mound—one of the largest platform mounds in Alabama. Some mixed-race European Cherokee remain in the area and have recently reclaimed their Indigenous ancestry after historically calling themselves “Black Dutch” to avoid discrimination. While some four thousand descendants of these people are now enrolled as members of the state-
recognized Echota Cherokee Tribe of Alabama, the tribe is not recognized by the federal government nor by any of the federally recognized Cherokee communities.
Repton, Conecuh County, Alabama. Dinosaur Adventure Land, 2021

Dinosaur Adventure Land is a Christian campground, science center, and adventure park dedicated to anti-evolution teaching. Its founder and leader, Christian fundamentalist Kent E. Hovind, takes a literalist interpretation of the Genesis creation narrative and promotes discredited Young Earth Creationist theories. Before building Dinosaur Adventure Land in Alabama, Hovind operated a similar theme park in Pensacola and served a ten-year sentence in federal prison for failure to pay taxes, obstructing federal agents, and structuring cash transactions.
Alabama has known a deep and complex past. From Indigenous genocide to slavery and secession, and from the fight for civil rights to the championing of Trumpist ideology, the state has stood at the nexus of American identity. In many ways, the state has also played a pivotal role in the history of photography. Photographs made in Alabama by Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, Marion Post Wolcott, Gordon Parks, and William Christenberry, among others, have documented poverty, labor, civil rights, and rural life and in turn formed a kind of backbone of American documentary storytelling.

Now in a time of pandemic and protest, economic uncertainty, and political polarization—and within the contexts of the photographers who have come before—What Has Been Will Be Again has led me across more than fifteen thousand miles and fifty counties to survey Alabama’s cultural and physical landscape. The project aims to illustrate Alabama’s rich beauty and fraught history, contending with how perpetuated violence and injustices masked by white supremacist myths have made their mark across the landscape.
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—Jared Ragland

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