

RYDER MAWBY  
STAFF

## The underrated American South

As a bright-eyed 6-year-old in Alachua, Florida, I would watch the world from my front porch, tending to my pet Venus' flytrap. Under the intense afternoon humidity and the comforting presence of the palmettos in our front lawn, I'd wait for the sound of the ice cream truck flying around the corner.

Walking down NW 140th Street with my mother toward our neighbor [Martha's](#) house, I'd hop over the storm drains with careful apprehension. We'd navigate the dense jungle of Spanish moss hanging off the willow trees leading up to her front porch. As we neared the front door, the glow of the house's interior illuminated my face in colorful quilts from floor to ceiling.

I loved Florida unconditionally. I loved it for its beauty, for the people there, for my roots. This was home.

Almost every time I mention my Floridian upbringing to people at UC Berkeley I'm met with a surprised, "Eww!" or a backhanded, "I'm sorry..." paired with piercing side-eye. I get it. You wouldn't enjoy growing up in rural America. At times, I didn't either. But the Southern hatred trope is exhausted and it's time we put it to rest.

After the 2020 presidential election, I saw a sudden flood of [TikToks](#) and other viral content wishing hurricanes and other horrors upon Florida because its electoral votes went toward President Donald Trump. And while I know the vast majority of these posts were meant as jokes, something needs to be said about this rhetoric.

It's easy to pretend that the institutional problems we suffer stem from a point source, which is precisely why Florida has become a scapegoat amid political turmoil. People are scared; naturally, they start pointing fingers. But this is no new phenomenon to Florida, and truthfully to the South as a whole.

Elections are no excuse to treat others as inferior because the overarching electoral system should not and cannot be used to define any single Floridian, Southerner or person in general. What you're seeing is an ugly manifestation of the South's "bad," but in reality that "bad" exists everywhere, and is a direct result of capitalism's true colors in play.

Growing up in luxurious Bel Air doesn't grant you moral superiority over someone from rural Alabama. But what it *does* give you is a legislative advantage — Southerners have constantly been handed the short end of the stick when it comes to government assistance. States in the Deep South have consistently ranked as the most poverty-stricken in the country, and their economies are [substantially weaker](#) than the rest of the United States.

Generalized hatred of the South is, truthfully, quite classist. Much of America views the South as a trailer trash wasteland when in reality this image says more about the inhumane nature of industrialization than it does about the true nature of the South. Southern states were quick to adopt the industrial push that accompanied the Industrial Revolution, which introduced a swarm of corporate predators to the region. Since then, Southerners have regularly fallen prey to corporations that exploit the South's low-wage market for capital gain.

The conceived "trailer trash" stereotype, aside from being completely inaccurate, is doing nothing but convincing Southerners that the answer to their problems

is [sticking](#) to conservative policies. I can personally attest to the fact that many Southerners feel completely detached from the rest of the United States — and with good reason. You cannot reasonably expect Southerners to adopt progressive politics when they feel so isolated.

The South's nasty reputation is not only classist but also racist. The South holds 54% of the United States' Black population. Racial minorities in Southern states have historically suffered from a nasty case of [voter suppression](#), which can be traced back to grandfather clauses, literacy tests and poll taxes during the Jim Crow era.

Despite newer legal protections against voter suppression such as the 24th Amendment that abolished poll taxes, there are newly developed voter suppression methods. For instance, there are a multitude of barriers to voting for felons, which disproportionately affects Black Americans and feeds systemic inequity.

Your unwillingness to address the institutional problems in the South acts contrary to the infographics you post to your Instagram story.

Additionally, the South gave us Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, among a long list of others who staunchly fought for civil rights. The stereotypes that you perpetrate directly hurt those in the South who need your support the most: budding activists, the driving forces of our history.

I just wish people could see my home for all of its beauty, beyond its broken politics. The South is special. Behind its egregious reputation, there exists a mystical aura of lively activism and astounding people. It's home to progress achieved, with even more progress to come.

I'm proud to call the South my home. No amount of politics can take that away from me.

*Ryder Mawby writes the Monday column on his transition from the East to West Coast. Contact him at [opinion@dailycal.org](mailto:opinion@dailycal.org). LAST UPDATED: November 15, 2020*