I have taken away many things from this past week, and as a I struggle to organize my thoughts, I come back to James C. Cobb’s quote from the *Most Southern Place on Earth,* “…the Delta actually functioned as a mirror within a mirror, capturing not just the South’s but the nation’s most controversial traits in mercilessly sharp detail.” This quote was not just read, but was retold many times during the week. However, I struggle with whether or not we were successful in making the connections between Delta history and the nation’s racial history or current climate.

My week-long experience in the Delta has reinforced my passion that teaching history without real world application or connection to the present is dangerous. It doesn’t help break down stereotypes or illuminate issues of privilege and responsibility. I feel that our week in the Delta missed the true cultural exchange that could have been afforded to the 32 White teachers coming from all over the country. We were presented with wonderful and rich history, but didn’t hear the voices of the 70-80% black population that remains. While definitely an interesting man, I don’t know if it’s fair to put the sole responsibility of being the ambassador of the Delta on Willie “Po’ Monkey” Seaberry. I’m sure there is a greater diversity of opinion and personality among Delta Blacks, which we didn’t get to experience. I can’t help but feel that in some ways our juke joint experience reinforced stereotypes. We were voyeurs in a sense, and didn’t have authentic experiences with local people. I feel this was a missed opportunity.

It is my belief that when these connections to current events are not made, one is left to make inferences about why some succeed and others do not. The historical implication that black property owners could not keep up with cotton price fluctuations leaves many to infer that the political and legal changes did not affect property ownership. Rather, their ability to successfully navigate the pitfalls of farming in an unstable market place did. It would have some assume that Whites were just better at avoiding those pitfalls or did a better job understanding market fluctuations, which isn’t true. As Cobb states*,* there were aspects of Black political and economic power that were taken away through the maneuvers of White planters.

Charles McLaurin’s explanation of life in Jackson, Mississippi during the 1950’s was wonderfully eye opening for me. He stated that being in Jackson, he was segregated growing up in a way that never required him to understand the racist mores and etiquette between Whites and Blacks in the South. It wasn’t until he worked for a White proprietor that he came to understand the tenuous situation. I believe that this was not unlike the experiences of people in major Northern cities like Chicago and Milwaukee. There were just larger segregated neighborhoods within the city, with the same racial economic and social practices. The White riots of 1919 in Chicago were set off due to the lynching of a Black boy who historians say floated too close to the White side of a Lake Michigan beach. My grandfather bought a home in what was a newer White neighborhood in Chicago; White because Black families were not sold homes in this neighborhood and would never have been given loans despite fiscal viability. He worked in a Black neighborhood, at a factory where most of the Black residents were not allowed to work, except in a few low-level positions. My very good friend was born to parents from Mississippi and raised in Milwaukee, and in the 1970’s was part of the first Black student group to desegregate the Milwaukee Public School system. These are just a few of many examples of the North mirroring the problems of the South.

The Great Migration of African-Americans north from the Delta is not a story of South “bad” and North “good”. It was a diverse and varied process that saw different waves of migrants, all facing similar biases and roadblocks. The thesis of our last presentation was the “blooming” of Black migrants in the North taken from Richard Wright’s quote from *Hunger*, that states

I was leaving the South

to fling myself into the unknown . . .

I was taking a part of the South

to transplant in alien soil,

to see if it could grow differently,

if it could drink of new and cool rains,

bend in strange winds,

respond to the warmth of other suns

and, perhaps, to bloom”

Wright encapsulates the migrant dream, but its important to note that he doesn’t state “to bloom” but “perhaps, to bloom.” The migrant experience that Richard Wright portrays in *Hunger* is not paved with gold, but rather more echoes Nicholas Lemann’s stance in *The Promised Land.* It was a chance, an anticipation. But, as Wright goes on to discuss in much greater detail, it was not without its limits and its own set of racial mores and practices by which to abide. Currently in the Delta and in Northern cities like Chicago, Black segregation and economic disparities mirror one another. For some, the tough choices of migration continue today. When working with urban youth “stuck” in the cycle of poverty and violence that this segregation perpetuates, some families perceive the quiet life of rural poverty more appealing.

I appreciated the former Superintendent of the Tallahatchie School District, Reggie Barnes’, candor about his experiences in the Delta and couldn’t help but think about Jonathan Kozol’s book, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools*. I am specifically reminded of his critique of the East St. Louis schools in the late 1980’s*.* Again, the similarities far outweighed the differences. Mr. Barnes’ point about doing work in your own backyard was an important message because, again, there truly is a ghetto in every American city.

This experience has inspired me to pursue the creation of a curriculum that connects the 21st century racial climate to the history of civil rights in America. To examine civil rights without looking at ourselves and issues of racial privilege is a disservice. In my experience, many feel it’s safe to talk about the brutal murder of Emmett Till, but shy away from discussing the current racial climate because it’s “too polarizing”. The struggle for civil rights is about much more than water fountains and bathrooms. In my experience teaching history, presenting it that way has no impact on students’ understanding of the present. Instead, they wonder, after the signs were taken down, “Why didn’t they just get over it?” Similarly, we will not arrive at an important understanding of our world by deciding whether the Black side of the Clarksdale Greyhound station was sufficiently bad.

As one of my colleagues stated during our personal debriefings, those are tough conversations to have. I agree, but I am optimistic that these are conversations that people can handle and need to start being exposed to if we really want to change things for the next generation. When I mentioned my concerns about the program to another colleague, they questioned whether that was the intent of the program. Again, when teaching about racial history I don’t think we should ever have to question its connection to the current racial climate in America.