**The History You Do Not Know:** Mirroring America in the Mississippi Delta

By Meredith Byers

My father had a favorite quotation that hung on a wall in his office in downtown Toledo, Ohio. It was a quotation from U.S. president Harry Truman and it read “the only thing new in the world is the history you do not know.” As a lifelong student and now teacher of history, I often find myself coming back to that quotation. As I look at the world around of me, nearly everything I observe and wonder about has its answers in history. Now that I spend so much of my life thinking about history and how to convey this urgency to middle school students, events in the world in the past year convinced me that there was a significant part of history that I did not know. Thanks to the National Endowment for Humanities, I had an opportunity to travel to the Mississippi Delta and learn about the history and culture of “the most southern place on Earth” in Cleveland, Mississippi.

I had never been south, but I knew there were gaps in my consciousness as both a teacher of history and a human being that needed to be filled in and that this “region of fiction and fantasy” held answers I needed to find. Beginning with the death of Michael Brown, last summer, and continuing through a rough 2015 that saw increased police brutality against African-Americans across the country, I had more questions than answers. Perhaps most disturbing was that many of the police officers who committed these crimes walked away free, which lead to understandable anger, but incited violence and riots in cities across America. This streak of violence culminated in the senseless murder of nine innocent men and women at a historically African-American church in Charleston just four days before I was supposed to leave. It was clear I had so much to learn.

I teach 8th grade History, spanning Reconstruction through the Civil Rights Movement, at a charter school in Brooklyn, New York. While most charter schools in New York City exclusively serve students who are black or Hispanic, my school has a different focus and draws from a hugely diverse section of Brooklyn. Nearly half of our students quality for free or reduced lunch and all of our students are selected through a lottery. This means we have students who live in multi-million dollar brownstones learning alongside students who live in public housing. Teaching racially charged content in this environment in 2015 has been an extraordinary challenge for me, and is one I continue to learn more about with each school year.

I received a wide range of fascinating reactions when I told other people about this trip. An African-American colleague of mine who has roots in Memphis said that she and her family hate even driving through Mississippi and that it is one of the worst places she has ever been. Another colleague commented that Mississippi would seem “slow” to me and that I would have to slow myself down in order to go there. Many friends did not know where the Mississippi Delta was or had not heard of it. There were jokes about where Mississippi was, how it came in dead-last for most quality of life indicators, the crippling poverty, the backwardness. Colleagues of mine had “driven through it, but never stopped there.” This was not enough for me. I needed to immerse myself in the South and come away a better educator and human being.

In the months leading up to my trip, I read everything on the subject I could get my hands on. Studies of race and the economics of cotton, stories of African-American children who were the first to integrate their school districts, memoirs of Civil Rights workers, histories of Mississippi and the Old South, accounts of the flood of 1927, a history of the Great Migration between Mississippi and Chicago, and modern memoirs of what it means to be black in America. I knew there was only so much I could take away from these books and that a trip down South was a key piece of this experience I needed to see.

**Day 1: Arriving in the Delta**

Thoughts went out of her head and the landscape filled it. In the Delta, most of the world seemed sky….the land was perfectly flat and level, but it shimmered like the wing of a lighted dragonfly. It seemed strummed, as though it were an instrument and something had touched it.

-Eudora Welty, “Delta Wedding”

I arrived in Mississippi on Sunday. After landing in Memphis, I picked out my car. I selected a red Ford Focus, which seemed to capture the excesses of the region I was about to explore. I headed south on Highway 61 toward the Delta. The advantage of having read so much ahead of time is that I instantly could draw on readings as I drove south. When I crossed the border and left Tennessee for Mississippi, I arrived in Tunica County. Swampland and casinos, for miles and miles. I never understood why politicians always thought casinos were the answer. I understood the talking points- job creation and increased tourism- but something about this garish palatial structures embedded in the swampy landscape filled my heart with woe. I remembered reading about Tunica- the county that was the centerpiece of the Lower Mississippi Development Commission, an organization created by Congress in 1988 to address the “social and economic misery” of the region. Tunica was the poorest, with an astonishing 53 percent of the population living below the poverty line. I passed signs for small towns and remembered a brutal lynching I had read about. I entered Clarksdale, home of the “crossroads” of highways 49 and 61 where my father insisted blues legend Robert Johnson sold his soul to the devil so he could be the greatest blues guitar player ever. This seemed laughable to me. Finally, I arrived in Cleveland.

The Mississippi Delta was once wild and uninhabited. It doesn’t have the grandiose plantations that Alabama and Louisiana have because it was such a miserable place to live. The terrifying Mississippi River cuts through the region and paradoxically the creator and destroyer of the region. The near-constant flooding of the river has created a special and amazingly fertile type of soil perfectly designed to grow cotton. As a result, wealthy planters created large plantations, but preferred to live and spend their money elsewhere. James Cobb described it as “a setting where human and natural resources could be exploited to the fullest with little regard for social or institutional restraints.”

I arrived in the Delta just before 8 pm. It was twilight. I stepped out of the car and was overwhelmed by the angry heat, which was worse than any heat I had ever experienced. I am often introduced to places by running through them, and Mississippi would be different. I laced up my shoes and ran through the fields. I was expecting cotton, but saw none of it. Instead, I felt like I was in my childhood home of Ohio, as I was surrounded by endless fields of corn. I also saw rice and soy beans. I ran up and down the Delta roads, marveling at the flatness and being able to see for what seemed like miles. I thought of the opening Eudora Welty’s “Delta Wedding,” quoted at the top of this section. I promised myself to let the landscape fill my head for this week and to make the most of this experience.

**Day 2: In which I ponder the Confederate Flag, the legacy of cotton, and learn to fear the mighty Mississippi River.**

The people of the Missisippi Delta fear two things: God and the Mississippi River.”

-Delta Proverb

The first morning, I drove to the campus of Delta State University. On my way, I noticed the state flag of Mississippi hanging outside of a local high school. I did not know that the Mississippi state flag included the Confederate flag in the upper left corner. Nor did I know that during this week, of all weeks, the debate over this symbol would consume the country and lead to a swath of editorials calling for its removal, while others continue to believe it is a hallowed symbol to the fallen soldiers of of the bloodiest war in American history. I passed the Cleveland Court House and saw a large monument to “our fallen confederate heroes.” And these symbols of tangled traditions were my introduction to Mississippi.

We met at Delta State for an introduction to the week. Our schedule had a huge range of activities- lectures, guided tours, museums, famous historical sites, and dining experiences I couldn’t imagine. We would much of the week on the bus, driving through the Delta to see different historical sites of importance. We were warned to stay hydrated, because “there’s usually someone, usually a slight female, who can’t handle the heat and gets sick or faint.” I quickly scanned the group and realized that based on this description, I was easily the person most likely to get sick or faint. I could not let that happen- there was too much history to learn. I poured my electrolyte supplement into my bottle of water and vowed to keep it with me at all times.

We went to a delicious soul food spot called The Senator’s Place for lunch. At the Senator’s Place, the participants in my workshop and I were the only white patrons. As we ate, CNN blared stories about the controversy surrounding the Confederate Flag and why this hateful symbol needed to be taken down. It was a surreal moment, sitting in Mississippi eating the best pulled pork I have ever tasted, while listening to talking heads debate the merits of a symbol that has been used to honor the South and intimidate blacks for decades. A moment of contrasts, and one that I kept in my memory as I prepared for what the rest of this week would bring me.

After the morning lecture on the Delta, we watched a documentary film called “Lalee’s Kin: The Legacy of Cotton.” The film traces LaLee Wallace, a great-grandmother and former sharecropper as she struggles to raise her children and grandchildren. It parallels her story with Reggie Barnes, superintendent of the West Tallahatchie School District, as he struggles to increase the test scores of the district. The district has been placed on probation because of poor student performance on the Iowa Test for Basic Skills. Barnes must raise the district’s scores from Level 1 to Level 2, or the state of Mississippi had threatened to take over the school.

LaLee started picking cotton when she was 6. She still cannot read. She has 11 children, 8 grandchildren, and 15 great-grandchildren. In a familiar story, as cotton begins to become mechanized and did not require as much human labor, there were little to no jobs available for these former sharecroppers. LaLee has limited skills, and therefore no other options. Her children come and go throughout the film, often leaving their children in LaLee’s care. She receives a monthly disability check totaling $494 and must support many of these grandchildren, as well as herself, on these limited means.

Throughout the film, we see Barnes’ best efforts to improve the culture of the school come up futile. LaLee’s grandchildren miss the first few days of school because their parents can’t afford new school clothes or purchase any items on the supply list. In fact, LaLee can’t even read these lists. LaLee’s trailer has no running water- we see her grandchildren going to a fire hydrant to get buckets of water which are used for cooing, bathing, and cleaning. The film illuminates the tremendous social problems of the Delta by showing LaLee and Barnes doing the best they can against seemingly insurmountable odds.

Barnes struggles to acknowledge the realities of his situation while also meeting the demands of the state. He explains that many of his pupils across grade levels are illiterate and that students come to kindergarten and they “don’t know their names, don’t know colors. And [they] have never been read to.” He wonders how these students can possibly compete with students from wealthier households who enjoy nearly constant exposure to words, sounds, and experiences that enrich their own education. The most endearing character in the film is LaLee’s 12 year-old granddaughter Cassandra, nicknamed “Granny.” We see lose her spirit and spunk because her household and childcare responsibilities leave her little time to study and complete homework. The other children fall into similar ways. Granny begs to move in with her grandfather’s house so she can have more time for school. LaLee resists the idea, knowing she will lose Granny’s help around the household, but she ultimately agrees and Granny moves away. The film ends with cautious optimism as we see Granny’s spirit come back and her grades improve after she moves in with her grandfather.

After we saw the film, Reggie Barnes came and spoke to our group. He described his struggle to raise standards of learning and educate students already hopelessly behind by the time they arrive in kindergarten. He opened the discussion up for questions and one teacher asked him what the solution to these problems might be. He bristled and said, “you aren’t going to like my answer.” He explained that the solution is to remove children from these households and place them in a boarding school-type environment suited for learning and studying. He then asked, “how do you know a different culture is better if you’ve never seen it?” which I had to stop and think about. He reflected on the idea that these descendants of sharecroppers are so isolated and unexposed to some of the most basic ways of life that removing children from their care might be the best option. “You’ve got children raising children,” he explained. LaLee’s daughter became pregnant at age 14. This daughter also became pregnant at 14. One student asked about Granny and we are told that unfortunately, she also got pregnant at a young age.

Barnes explained some of the challenges he faced as superintendent. 71 percent of households in West Tallahatchie County were female-headed, single-parent households. Many experts on poverty argue that this is the single biggest impediment to equality in America. Single-parent homes have lower household income, less education, and are often led by mothers who may not have had time to earn a college degree and get a well-paying job. Another challenge was the exodus of teachers from the district who left to teach in better-funded suburban districts. Barnes had to hire 88 teachers. When the hiring was complete, 32 of these teachers were white, which was an outrage to families in the district. Barnes said he hired these teachers based on qualifications, not race, and that his objective was to get the most highly qualified teachers to work in his district. This answer left families unsatisfied and illustrates the deep racial divide that still exists in Mississippi, and throughout much of the south.

As of 2010, Mississippi has the second-highest teen pregnancy rate in the country[[1]](#endnote-1). The combination of extreme poverty and perhaps even more extreme religiosity led to a startling lack of support for sex education. A bill in 2009 that would require sexual education in schools failed. In 2011, Governor Haley Barbour signed a law requiring all school districts to adopt a policy for teaching sex. Tunica County, home to endless casinos, had the highest birth rate and has an average of 91.7 live births per 1,000 females, compared to 39 per 1,000 for the rest of the country[[2]](#endnote-2). Even though teenage pregnancy rates have been declining nationwide, Mississippi still faces these challenges.

I wondered about this idea of culture and how one knows a culture is better if they have never seen it. I grew up as the daughter of parents who were both educated and knew what children needed to thrive- they read to me every night, they talked to me, played with me, did not let me watch too much television, fed me the right things, and enrolled me in a high-quality preschool so that I would be academically and socially prepared for kindergarten. These were so many intrinsic advantages that I had taken for granted because in the world I grew up in, this was the expectation. 14 year-old mothers in Mississippi might not know any of these things simply because they have never seen it or no one has taken the time to educate them on how to raise children and prepare them for success in school. They were the daughters of teenagers themselves and now were perpetuating a cycle of poverty and educational inequity that I had never seen before until I came here.

I wasn’t sure how to solve this problem. On one hand, it seemed compassionate to take children out of intellectually dead environments and place them in a school structure that encourages play and learning. On the other hand, the U.S. Government’s Native American boarding schools, designed to eradicate Native American culture and assimilate Native Americans, are always on my mind and I wonder at what point this benevolence becomes assimilation. How does one honor a culture, even if that culture is not conducive to learning and children are not getting the educational opportunities they deserve?

Following the discussion with Barnes, we got on the bus and drove to Mound’s Landing, site of the famous levee break that unleashed the Mississippi River and led to the wildly destructive flood of 1927. Much of the land near the River has been bought up by private hunting clubs and is not accessible to the public. Mound’s Landing happens to belong to the tastelessly named “ ’27 Break Club.” We needed special permission to drive and see it. I had read about the River and wondered why it attracted so much attention. Once I saw it, I understood. At some points, the River is as much as a mile wide and it is over 100 feet deep in certain areas. It constantly changes its course and there is an entire government organization (the Army Corps of Engineers) dedicated to containing the river.

The flood forever changed Mississippi and escalated racial conflicts in communities across the south. White families were easily able to evacuate the Delta and get to higher ground. African-American residents were forced to live in one of 154 refugee camps for months until adequate relief efforts could be mobilized. Still, abuses continued. Black refugees were not fed as well as whites and they were often charged for their supplies, while white planters were not. The “tent cities” were overcrowded, disease-ridden, and utterly miserable places to live. In a low point, white police officers shot and killed James Gooden, a respected member of the Greenville community, because he refused to work a day shift after working all night to clean up the city. A reconciliation service was held at a local church, and somehow, much of the blame fell on the African-American community. The flood also led to a mass exodus of African-Americans who were fed up with racist treatment and headed north, often to Chicago, in search of a better life and better jobs.

The sheer scope of this flood demands attention. A 100 foot section of the levee crumbled, created a crevasse. The crevasse grew to be more than three-quarters of a mile in width. At its height, the flood surge was about 130 feet high and a three-fourths of a mile wide. The volume of water discharged by the crevasse was twice that of Niagara Falls. I could not fathom this. Within two days, this was enough water to cover one million acres across seven states. At one point, the River carried more than three million cubic feet of water each second. I stared at the Mississippi and understood how it could be capable of such destruction. The water, dark and muddy, roared past me and I could tell the water was rising. Our guide said the river would rise as much as 9 feet by the end of the week. The river was a wild paradox- its water created the magical soil in the Delta tat was so ideal to growing cotton and other crops. But the capricious nature of the river meant that the entire Delta could be swept away at any time. This desire to control nature at whatever cost seemed like something I should think more about.

We ended with a catfish supper at a spot near the river. While I am not one for seafood, the catfish was so deeply fried that I could hardly taste any of the fish.

**Day 3: Immigration in the Delta, Flood Museum, Southern Religion, and a Blues Performance**

The next day, we learned about different immigrant groups who lived in the Delta. There was a small Chinese population, most of whom were male immigrants who came over in the late 1800s to help build the rail system. Unfortunately, they experienced significant racism and many descendants of the Chinese immigrants have moved on to places like Houston or California. There was also a small Jewish and Italian contingent who arrived to open shops that catered to the wealthy. In 1880, two-thirds of the merchant class in the Delta was born outside the United States. This continued into the 20th century, when Chinese immigrants owned most of the grocery stores in the Delta. Nearly all of these immigrant groups have moved on after realizing there is not anything to be had in the Delta. We visited the beautifully maintained Chinese Cemetery in Greenville and had our taste of the day, a fortune cookie. Mine read, “good luck bestows upon you. You will get what your heart desires.”

We drove through Greenville and visited their local Flood Museum., a small room someone had to open up and unlock so we could view it. There wasn’t much there- a map of the Mississippi’s path through the United States, a boat with two replicas of people sitting in it, and a timeline showing the flood’s destruction. I did not feel it captured the scope of this flood. At lunch, some of the teachers from the East Coast complained about the flood museum. One pronounced it “the worst museum ever.” My relentless drive for improvement took over and I spent the rest of lunch coming up with a list of ways to improve the flood museum. For one, the location is all wrong. The flood museum should overlook the Mississippi River. I envisioned a floor-to-ceiling glass windows where you can see and hear the mighty river and contemplate how the “life blood” of the Delta also might destroy it. I thought about assigning a each visitor a person from the flood so that visitors could track the experience of this person as they traveled through the museum. I wanted oral histories, an exhibit that clearly explains the geography behind what makes this river such an uncontrollable force, and maybe even a replica of Greenville where visitors can see a replication of the flood and imagine the sheer force of the damage it caused. I also envisioned connections to current events, like Katrina, and allowing visitors to explore how floods and natural disasters disproportionately affect the poorest members of our society. Imagine the conversations that could happen at this museum. My group mates were amused with me:

“Mississippi will love this. A white girl in aviators coming down and telling them how to run their museums.”

I suppose I was the 21st-century incarnation of a carpetbagger. But like the northerners before me, I truly believed I was right. This museum would be a game-changer for the Delta.

Our next even was a 3-hour lecture on southern religion. I spent most of this time sketching out my flood museum and thinking about how I could secure funding. The South has been called the “Bible Belt,” a term coined by Baltimore journalist H.L. Mencken. Our guest speaker, Charles Wilson, argued that the South’s religiosity is to extreme because it is a place of incredible trauma. 750,000 people died in the Civil War, roughly 2.5 percent of the American population. This would be the equivalent of 7,000,000 Americans dying in a war today. The figures, staggering enough on their own , become even more troubling when one realizes these men died for a way of life so perverse and evil. The decimating death rate of Confederate soldiers during the Civil War, the extreme poverty, and human misery has led an unusual focus on the afterlife. Southerners sincerely hope that their daily trials and traumas will be alleviated in the afterlife. Additionally, white planters were less threatened by black churches because they believed churches did not alter the status quo the way they believed the education of African-Americans might upset southern society. This extends to the Civil Rights Movement. Fannie Lou Hamer was inspired by a church sermon and famously sang a religious spiritual after she tried to register to vote and failed because of an absurdly difficult and unfair voting rights test. Hamer had a magnificent singing voice and used it to inspire others to join her cause and fight for civil rights. During the lecture, we got to see church fans, a key cooling mechanism for old churches. We also had our taste of the day, which was the Delta version of empanadas. Even though the Delta has a miniscule Hispanic population, it has put its own spin on the empanada and there are small shops that sell them throughout the region.

Following this lecture, we were treated to a blues performance by Bill Abel, a Delta musician. His music was spellbinding. He played from a series of handmade instruments and told us that the Blues were dying in Mississippi. The proliferation of casinos, particularly in Tunica and down in the Gulf Coast near Biloxi, are now the primary place where Mississippians go for entertainment. Live music used to be a staple at local bars; now it is a rarity. “Jook joints” used to have live music nearly every night of the week. Now, only a handful of these shacks remain. We will visit one, Po’ Monkeys, later this week.

**Day 4: The Day of the Blues, Civil Rights, and a Film Screening**

**“**The sober fact is we (African-American and whites) understand one another not at all. Just about the time our proximity appears most harmonious, something happens- a crime of violence, perhaps a case of voodooism, and to our astonishment we sense a barrier between. To make it more bewildering the barrier of glass; you can’t see it, you only strike it.”

-William Alexander Percy

Wednesday was the Day of the Blues. We started at Dockery Farms, a plantation established in 1895. Much of the Delta was still untamed wilderness. Will Dockery bought property and was determined to make his fortune in the Delta. Dockery had several thousand people working for him. At one point, the plantation had its own post office and schools. Sharecropping was a system that popped up following the end of slavery. Many former slaves lacked the education and skills necessary for a range of jobs. Plantation owners, desperate for a cheap labor force, came up with an idea known as “sharecropping.” Sharecroppers became tenants on plantations across the south, sometimes for the same plantation on which they had been slaves. These tenants were given an amount of land. Sharecroppers had to purchase their tools and supplies from the plantation commissary, often at exorbitant prices. They also were given contracts which, given that many of these former slaves were illiterate, were often fraudulent and full of absurd terms and conditions. At the end of the planting cycle, the tenant farmers showed what they had produced over the season. They were almost always told that they had not met their goals and would end up in debt and would have to submit to another growing season to pay off these debts. The Sharecroppers would then either run away and find a new plantation, or resign themselves to another season of playing a system so clearly rigged against them. Sharecropping went on far longer than much of America cares to realize. When Martin Luther King Jr. visited an Alabama plantation in the 1960s, he was stunned to meet sharecroppers who had never seen U.S. currency in their lives because they had only purchased items at the plantation commissary and were never paid in U.S. dollars. Sharecropping began to die with the mechanization of cotton and sharecroppers were once again left without a place to live and without skills necessary for many jobs. Many headed north to Chicago in search of better jobs and treatment as part of the Great Migration.

The Dockerys were known to be racists, but they were more fair than many of the other plantation owners during this time. At Dockery, some especially skilled farmers, including Blues legend Charley Patton’s father, had a special title and were given more land and privileges than other sharecropper at the time. Dockery Farms became a hotspot for the blues.

The mythology surrounding the Blues is something I never fully understood until I came down South. Charley Patton, one of the earliest Blues musicians, was the son of a sharecropper on Dockery Farms. Patton learned the blues from Henry Sloan, another resident of Dockery. The Blues draw on a mix of church sons, prison songs. African rhythms, and other aspects of early American folk music. Powerful and complicated vocal rhythms define this type of music and Blues musicians expressed the profound pain they experienced of being African-American in the South. Patton influenced a slew of Blues greats including Robert Johnson, Howlin Wolf, Son House, Pops Staples, and Honeyboy Edwards.

The story of Robert Johnson (1911-1938) best captures the strange mythology of the blues. Johnson met Patton, House, and Edwards at Dockery. Blues was an option to escape the horrors of plantation life and Johnson did not want the life that seemed prescribed for him. When he first arrived, he could barely play guitar. Son House described it as, such another racket you never heard! It’d make the people mad, you know.” Johnson went away for roughly six months and came back an unbelievably skilled guitarist. Son House famously commented, “He was so good! When he finished, all our mouths were standing open,” and all the men wondered how Johnson suddenly became a guitar virtuoso. Johnson claimed that he took his guitar to a crossroads and “the devil” appeared to him in the form of a large African-American man. He traded his soul for prodigious guitar skills, and became one of the greatest guitarists in music history. He also agreed that he would live only eight more years on Earth. Johnson died at the age of 27, most likely the victim of poisoning, and his death is as mysterious as the rest of his life. He has three different gravesites across the Delta. Some experts believe that Johnson’s own talent, coupled with his exposure to the great Delta Blues guitarists, explains his unbelievable rise. After driving to the Crossroads where he allegedly made this deal, it seemed impossible to deny that he had made this deal with the Devil. After listening to the pain and torture his vocals convey, and learning of his early and mysterious death, it seemed even more likely. After visiting Dockery, we went to the Crossroads, hidden behind what had once been cotton fields. As I stood on this gravel road, there was no doubt that Johnson sold his soul here.

Next, we headed to Fanny Lou Hamer’s gravesite. Hamer was tricked into picking cotton when she was a six years old. The cotton cycle often interrupted her schooling and she had to drop out when she was 12 so she could work full-time to support her family. She and her husband continued to work as sharecroppers at a plantation near Ruleville, Mississippi. In 1962, she attended a protest meeting and became interested in helping African-Americans register to vote. Even though African-Americans had earned the right to vote through the passage of the 15th Amendment in 1870, white southerners were reluctant to give African-Americans these rights and devised a series of obstacles to prevent African-Americans from voting.

When Hamer wanted to register to vote, she was asked to read a selection from the Mississippi State Constitution and provide an interpretation. She was also asked to provide the name of address of her employer and get a letter from the Registrar saying the applicant was of “good moral character.” When Hamer’s employer learned that she had tried to register to vote, she was fired and forced to leave a plantation on which she had lived and worked for nearly 20 years. Hamer devoted herself to Civil Rights work full-time and worked for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Her life was far from easy- while in prison for her Civil Rights work, she was severely beaten and sustained injuries so gruesome that she would suffer permanent kidney damage. She helped found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and testified in a nationally televised convention. Hamer’s deep understanding of the problems of Mississippi inspired her to set up organizations designed to eliminate the poverty in Mississippi. She died of breast cancer in 1988.

Hamer is buried at a beautiful gravesite and garden in Ruleville. In true Mississippi fashion, we had to drive through many blocks of shacks in order to get to the gardens. I saw people, mostly men, of all ages sitting on porches of the middle of the day. I hoped that they had evening shifts or perhaps had the day off from work, but the squalor of their housing convinced me otherwise. To me, this was an integral part of the journey. Honoring the heroes of Mississippi while showing what still has to be done to make life bearable down here. There is a life-size statue of Hamer and her tombstone features her rallying cry, “I am sick and tired of being sick and tired.” Our guide told us it was the only life-size statue of an African-American woman anywhere in the United States.

While the Civil Rights movement undoubtedly led to many reforms, it was hard for me to look around Sunflower County and feel that these problems have disappeared. Crippling poverty remains a pressing issue. There have been major gains, but it is hard for me to examine my surroundings and not bemoan how much work still needs to be done. I did some research to help me understand what I was seeing. For one, U.S. Census Data shows that the net worth of the average black family is $6,314. For white families, it is $110,500. A study from the National Bureau of Economic Research found that black men in their 20s without a high school diploma were more likely to be in prison than be employed. A staggering *New York Times* investigation found that for every 100 black women not in jail, there are only 83 men. The rest, roughly 1.5 million, are either dead or incarcerated. The largest gaps exist in the south, especially in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. In total, more than one out of every six black men ages 25 to 54 have “disappeared from daily life[[3]](#footnote-1).” Americas school finance system, largely tied to property taxes, only exacerbates this problem by providing the finest schools for the wealthiest neighborhoods and taxpayers. Children in poverty, who need an extraordinary school experience more than anyone else, receive substandard schools that are less likely to attend schools that offer advanced courses to sufficiently prepare them for college. While America has made progress by eliminating slavery, passing laws that are theoretically supposed to reduce discrimination, how can one achieve a peaceful and optimistic worldview while being surrounded by such glaring inequality.

After seeing Hamer’s grave, we drove to Indianola to visit the B. B. King Museum. I enjoyed the beautifully designed museum and enjoyed seeing how much King gave back to his community. Along the way, driving through shacks and ex-cotton fields, I wondered about this confederate flag debate. I knew the confederate flag was an intolerable symbol that had been used to intimidate African-Americans for decades. I applauded America’s efforts to begin conversations about removing this symbol, but what about all the other problems that I could not get away from during this trip? Income inequality? Missing black men? The subtle ways in which America is still segregated? Why was America not fixing these problems? I knew removing that flag would be significant for many and would represent a small victory, but how could that be enough? To me, it seemed far more valuable, and challenging, to turn our energies toward addressing the deep racial divide that still exists in America.

That afternoon, we met Charles McLaurin, a key figure in the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi, was our afternoon speaker for the day. He told us stories about Mississippi, known as the “closed society” because it was so isolated and removed from the rest of the nation. He worked for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. He told us about his work with Medgar Evers, the leader of Mississippi chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Evers wanted to bring the arduous Civil Rights battle in the Delta because he believed the large population of African-Americans could be mobilized and effect change. McLaurin told us that many of the black communities in Mississippi did not have paved streets and that traveling to these communities to help people register to vote was exceptionally difficult.

After McLaurin finished addressing the group, I asked him if he had ever met Ann Moody. Moody wrote *Coming of Age in Mississippi,* an odyssey chronicling her miserable childhood and rise to becoming one of the most significant figures in the Civil Rights movement. He said that he had and that he loved her book. I told him that I loved it too and always encouraged my students to read it. He smiled.

In the evening, we went to a screening of a film called *Barge,* an independent film about men who work on barges and travel up and down the Mississippi River. The film had been featured in some film festivals and my fellow workshop participants were eager to see it. We arrived early for a reception at the Bologna Performing Arts Center (B-PAC) and I encountered something I had not seen during my time in the Delta: the Mississippi Elite. Men in clean pressed suits and ties and beautiful women dressed in floral print dresses and carefully coiffed hair. They were every bit the well-dressed Southern elite that came into my mind when I thought of old money in the South. The scene reminded me of those wine and cheese gatherings the English Department at my college used to host and professors and students would mutually decide to avoid each other while circulating around the room with cheese on toothpicks. I took a plate of strawberries, the first time I had access to fruit all week, and picked at it while staring at all of the people around me. I knew Cleveland had a community like this- surely the presence of Delta State University meant that there was a coterie connected to the university to came out for cultural events like this one. I wondered how aware they were of the world outside the university and how they managed to be surrounded by this all the time while sitting inside the B-PAC enjoying craft beer and desserts.

We went into the theater and I hid my bag of popcorn in my purse so I could nibble on it during the film. Unfortunately, much of the film was unintelligible and the director made the curious choice to not include subtitles. From what I gathered, a group of men traveled from a small town of Mississippi to New Orleans and made it home. The men appeared to talk about the experience of being on the ship. While the cinematography and sound effects were remarkable and engaging, the narrative was nearly impossible to follow and I was very unsure of what was going on at any given moment. It seemed like this was two different films- one part beautiful filmmaking and one part journey narrative about a group of men navigating the river and trying to get home safely. The director had never managed to rectify these two different films, which explained why the final version was so incomprehensible. After the film, I went with my colleagues to a local bar and we laughed about the absurdity of the film. With a full day devoted to Emmett Till on the calendar for tomorrow, I knew that I needed the social time to take my mind off my rapidly deteriorating worldview.

**Day 5: Emmett Till**

I saw the morning papers but I could not bear to see

The smiling brothers walkin’ down the courthouse stairs

For the jury found them innocent and the brothers they went free

While Emmett’s body floats the foam of a Jim Crow southern sea

-Bob Dylan, “The Ballad of Emmett Till”

The week began to catch up with me. Any single one of these days contained an overwhelming amount of events and stories for me to process. I had never before so craved the structure of my morning runs. Each morning, I ran miles and miles through the fields and thought about the human suffering that took place on this Earth. I could not bear to think about it. I tried to make sense of everything I was seeing, the promise, the poverty, the heart-wrenching stories of suffering, and felt like I was nowhere close to unraveling any of it. The week was structured so that we met early and experienced a full day of historic sites, lectures, and conversations on the bus ride. There was very little time to reflect or process all that I was seeing. Each day, I made sure to eat dinner with my group so I could untangle some of what I had seen, but it wasn’t enough time. When I returned to my hotel room, it was often past 10:00 and I needed to get bed quickly so I could wake up at 5 and run before getting on the bus for another day. I needed time to think about everything I was experiencing, so I often looked out the window during the bus rides and looked at the communities around me and wondered how places like this could exist in the same country I had lived in. I have traveled around the world and seen miserable rural poverty in places like Honduras and South Africa and Zambia, but what I saw in the Delta bothered me more. I think it is because I live in the same country. America shouldn’t be like this. The more I read and the more I saw, the more frustrated I became. How could America believe that all men are created equal when it seemed that people in Mississippi simply did not have the same advantages as people in other parts of the country?

When I looked at the schedule for the week, I knew that the day devoted to Emmett Till would test my emotional limits. We began the day by driving to Mound Bayou, which was an idealistic, utopian society where African-Americans were still enslaved, but were given other opportunities. A slaveowner named Joseph Davis had read the works by Robert Owen, a radical Scottish philosopher who ardently believed that people were the product of their existence and that if you “give people the opportunity to live a good life, they will.” Davis wanted to test out these ideas, which is why he created Mound Bayou. Slaves could take on jobs and be compensated for their work. Many wonder why slaves did not buy their own freedom, but they would not have had options because of the Fugitive Slave Law and the lack of opportunities outside the plantation. Mound Bayou was known as the “jewel of the Delta” and had buildings like the Taborian hospital, which treated African-Americans. Its lead surgeon, Dr. T. K. M. Howard, owned a 1000-acre plantation and employed sharecroppers. An eclectic character, he bought himself and his wife a Cadillac on each birthday. He opened various public facilities, including a public zoo, and worked as a great advocate for voting rights. He eventually left the Delta and moved to Chicago, where he opened a clinic. Besides the hospital, Mound Bayou had its own United States Post Office, six churches, banks, shopping centers, and schools. Mound Bayou curbed crime through a firm belief that all members of the community must contribute positively and the town’s paper, *The Demonstrator,* promoted education and the town seemed idyllic and poised for success.

Mound Bayou began to fall apart when the Mississippi River changed its course and no longer flowed trough the town, a major economic blow to the community. Many African-Americans left the town and headed North to Chicago. Today, very little remains. The once “crown jewel” of the Delta, like so many other places in this tortured region, holds nothing but ruins.

We drove down a deserted road and came to Po’ Monkeys, the last jook joint in the Delta. These jook joints once spotted the cotton fields during the 1900s, but only a few still exist. During the sharecropping years, sharecroppers would meet at these juke joints for gambling, dancing, live music, and drinking. They represented a place for sharecroppers to unwind and relax after a long day working in the fields. Very few of these remain, and Po’ Monkeys is one of the last in the Delta. Our group was planning to go there that night. As we stood outside the cabin, our director warned us about what we would find inside. Po’ Monkeys was opened by Willie “Po’ Monkey” Seaberry, opened Po’ Monkeys Lounge in 1963. He runs the joint out of his own home. In the 1960s, juke boxes began to spread and since that time, most of the music at jook joints is from DJs or jukeboxes. “Jook” comes from the Gullah word “joog,” meaning disorderly or rowdy. We were warned that Willie, affectionately known as “Po’ Monkey” could be wild. Visitors from around the world come to the Lounge and often come bearing a stuffed monkey as a gift. These monkeys were often anatomically enhanced, we were told. We were also told that Willie liked to flirt with female guests and might try to sit on their laps or make crass jokes. None of this sounded appealing to me, but I knew that I needed to experience it so I decided to go.

After we went to Po’ Monkeys, we drove to Sumner, Mississippi, site of the Emmett Till trial. Along the way, we drove through a town called Drew, home to Archie Manning. Apparently all culture did originate in the Delta. Along the way, we watched an episode of PBS American Experience about the Emmett Till trial. Emmett Till was a 14 year-old boy who lived in Chicago. In the summer of 1955, he went down to Mississippi to see relatives who lived there. Before he left, his mother, Mamie Till, warned him about the racial caste system that pervaded life in the Delta and told him the basic etiquette that governed Mississippi- African-American men cannot look white women in the eye, have to step off the sidewalk if a white woman walks by. Emmett Till, known for liking to get attention from his peers, promised his mother he would behave. One day, Till and his cousins went to a store in a town called Money, a ridiculous name for a town that in 1955 had a population of fifty-five and a glaring lack of money. It became famous for is cotton gin. Like many other small towns in Mississippi, racism ruled Money.

Bryant’s Grocery and Meat Market was a popular spot for the children of poor sharecroppers in Money. The store was owned by husband and wife Roy and Carolyn Bryant, a lower-middle class white family. That day, Wednesday, August 24th, Carolyn Bryant, owner of the store, worked behind the counter. Approximating truth from conflicting accounts of this story poses challenges. According to Carolyn Bryant, Emmett came into the store alone. Emmett asked for candy and when she gave it to him, he allegedly grabbed it, pulled her close to him, and said “how about a date, baby?” Sexual interactions between white women and African-American created anger in the south unlike anything I had ever read. Carolyn Bryant tried to get pack to the apartment in the back of the store to find help, but Emmett allegedly put his hands around her waist and said, “you needn’t be afraid of me, baby, I’ve been with white women before.” According to Carolyn, she then walked out of the store and went to her car to presumably get a gun. When she walked by Emmett and his friends, Emmett whistled at her.

Carolyn’s husband, Roy, was outraged to hear about the story. He and J.W. Milam, a friend, later kidnapped Emmett Till and tortured him to death. After killing him, they dumped his body in the Tallahatchie Creek. When his body was found, Till was unrecognizable. The torture and time spent in the river left his body a rotting and decaying corpse barely identifiable as a human being. The only way his family could identify him was by a ring on his finger given to him by his mother before he made the trip down South.

Mamie Till courageously chose to publish pictures of her son’s mutilated body in *Jet* magazine, a leading publication in the African-American community. She also had an open casket at his funeral in Chicago. The photo ignited the Civil Rights movement and a generation of both African-American and White Civil Rights workers recall seeing the image and feeling utterly disillusioned that 14 year-old boys were murdered in Mississippi for no reason.

We sat in the courthouse in front of a panel of speakers. The FBI opened an investigation of the case in May 2004 and two of the agents who worked on the case were there. We met Wheeler Parker, a cousin of Emmett who traveled with him from Chicago. We also met Simeon Wright, another cousin who went into the store with Emmett and was sleeping in the same as Emmett when Millam and Bryant came to kidnap him. Simeon’s father, Mose Wright, testified in court that Bryant and Millam were the murderers of Emmett Till.

Simeon Wright believes that much of the story has been told improperly. In his book *Simeon’s Story,* he explains that

For less than a minute he was in the store alone with Carolyn Bryant, the white woman working at the cash register. What he said, if anything, before I came in I don’t know. While I was in the store, Bobo (Emmett) did nothing inappropriate. He didn’t grab Mrs. Bryant, nor did he put his arms around her- that was the sorry she later told to the court. A counter separated the customers from the store clerk. Bobo would have had to jump over it to get to Mrs. Bryant. Bobo didn’t ask her for a date or call her ‘baby.’ There was no lecherous conversation between them. And after a few minutes, he paid for his items and we left the store together[[4]](#endnote-3).

The FBI investigation concurred with Wright’s recollection. One of the agents explained that given the Mississippi heat, it was highly likely that the door to Bryant’s Store would have been open, or at the very least had a screen door. If Mrs. Bryant had screamed, as she claims she did, others would have heard. Mrs. Bryant and her family lived in an apartment behind the store and no one in the apartment recalls her scream.

Wright goes on to explain that after Emmett left the store, Mrs. Bryant stepped out to get something from her car. At that point, Emmett whistled at her, violating the unspoken but deeply understood caste system that defined life in Mississippi for decades. When Emmett’s uncle heard what had happened, he contemplated getting Emmett out of Mississippi and sending him home to Chicago. When a few days passed without incident, the family assumed Emmett was safe. Early Sunday morning, Mose Wright awoke to the sound of two white men asking to speak to Emmett. They told Emmett to put his clothes on and they took him away. That following Wednesday, Till’s body turned up in the Tallahatchie River

This courthouse had been the scene of the trial. Jury selection proved impartial because according to Mississippi state law, only registered male voters who could prove they could read and write were eligible to be called for jury duty. Despite the fact that somewhere around 63 percent of the population of Tallahatchie County was black, the pool of prospective jurors was entirely white. Mose Wright pointed out Bryant and Milam in the courtroom. Murray Kempton, a reporter for the *New York Post,* describes the significance of this moment and wrote that after Wright identified the murderers, he “sat down against the chairback with a lurch…he was a field negro who dared try to send two white men to the gas chamber for murdering a negro. He had come to the end of the hardest half hour in the hardest life possible for a human being in the United States.” Once Wright finished his testimony, he left the state and would not live in Mississippi for the rest of his life. Despite Mamie Till’s testimony and Wright’s identification of the killers, both Milam and Bryant walked away free. Once the jury left to deliberate, they took just over one hour to come to their decision. They sipped Cokes and took their time to make it appear as if they had actually considered the evidence in front of them.

In a tragic note to the whole story, after their acquittal, Milan and Bryant sold their story to author William Bradford Huie, who published their account in a series of magazine articles. The men admitted that they had killed Emmett Till. Shortly after the publication, both men no longer found themselves welcome in the Delta. Since they were part of a lower-class strata of whites, they were not held to the same moral standard of the upper class. Both men and their families moved to Texas shortly after.

As I listened to these stories, I tried to imagine what it must be like to live in a society where one is not protected by the law. I thought back to the PBS episode. A reporter interviewed an African-American teenager about the case. He asked if he had ever heard of the Emmett Till case. The teenager nodded. When the reporter pressed on and asked for an opinion about the trial, the teenager shook his head. The reporter continued to ask, but the teen never answered the questions. His face froze in terror. And I knew why. Any number of white people in Mississippi would want to preserve their social structure. If a white woman said that an African-American “looked at me the wrong way” or “touched me,” a lynch mob inevitably appeared to restore justice. The southern obsession with protecting women’s honor overruled any type of justice or hope for a fair trial. Equal protection under the law seemed comical. I sat in the courtroom and thought about the remarkable scope of human suffering that took place in these towns. Day after day of driving through wretched communities, of staring at shacks and abject rural poverty, continued to wear on me. I diligently took notes on the panel, trying to remember everything I was hearing and imagining how I might use it in my own history class. Emmett Till was the same age as many of my students back in Brooklyn. Mercifully, the panel ended and we left the boiling courtroom to go back to the bus and drive to the Emmett Till museum. Outside the courtroom, I saw a monument to the Confederacy. Only in Mississippi could the site of one of the most egregious events in our history also have a monument to men who believed in the “union as it was” enough to die for it.

Of all the images and sights I viewed during my trip, none of them stand out to me more than Glendora, Mississippi. Glendora is home to the Emmett Till Historic Intrepid Center (ETHIC.) The museum, housed in an old cotton gin, has been converted into a museum. Historians believe this is the barn in which Emmett Till was tortured and eventually killed before his killers tossed his body in the river. We arrived just in time to watch a brief video of about the case. At the end of the video, the mayor of Glendora walks down to the Tallahatchie River and says, “we still have problems here,” and names all the problems that still plague Mississippi. Glendora also has the distinction of being the site of the murder of Clinton Melton, a filling station attendant. A white man got into an argument with Melton, claiming that Melton had not adequately filled his gas tank, and he shot Melton. A plaque marks the spot where this happened.

After we left the center, we drove down through Glendora. Shack after shack. How fitting to drive through this ruined community while deep in thought about what I had seen. I had to wonder how such poverty can still exist in the United States today.

We stopped at a few more sites on the way back to Cleveland. First, we went to Money and saw the store, which barely stands. Other than a plaque commemorating the site, one would never recognize that this had once been a store. While in Money, we sampled koolicles, a Mississippi treat. Koolicles are pickles marinaded in red Kool-Aid and Mississippi children love them and can buy them in almost any store in the area. I could not bring myself to eat one, but my friends assured me they were as nauseating as they looked. We also stopped at one of the Robert Johnson grave markers on our drive back to Cleveland. Johnson has three different grave markers, all purporting to be accurate. This site is the one the Mississippi Blues Commission believes is the most likely spot. Then we went through the long drive back to Cleveland.

That night, we visited Po’ Monkeys Lounge. I dressed in jeans and a jacket and planned to spend the evening leaning up against a wall to minimize any opportunity that Po’ Monkey might have to say anything to me. I walked in and the shack was filled with smoke. Dozens of stuffed monkeys hung from the ceiling and there were at least 100 people in there. We were the only white visitors in the place. There was one room with a pool table and then another room with a table and chairs. I kept thinking about the glaring lack of fire codes and how quickly this place would burn to the ground should a stray spark from a cigarette hit the wooden floor or walls and ignite. I did not want my name listed on the historical plaque that would inevitably commemorate the young teachers who died in the Great Po’ Monkeys Fire of 2015.

To this day, I have never been in a social situation so foreign to me. I had no idea how to act in a setting like this. I was too afraid to talk to anyone, I did not want to dance, and I did not want Po’ Monkey to say anything to me or try to touch me, so I leaned against a wall and wondered how I ended up in a sharecropper shack in the Marigold, Mississippi. Fear of dying in a fire overwhelmed me and I left after just a few minutes. I couldn’t take it anymore- I had to get out. I went back to my hotel, watched the U.S. Championship Men’s 10,000 meter race, and went to sleep.

**Day 6: Memphis**

The Mississippi Delta begins in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg.”

-David Cohn

The next day, we went to Memphis. Our last full day with the group. On the bus, I heard about how things got rowdy at Po’ Monkeys after I left. A local man was touching the neck of one of the female teachers in our group and he ended up passing out and he had to be carried out of the jook joint by one of the teachers in our group. I thanked my intuition for my decision to leave. Our first stop of the day was the Cotton Museum. The main exhibit for the museum is on the trade floor of the Memphis Cotton Exchange. Traders once stood here and made their fortunes off of this cotton and human suffering so endemic to this region. I walked through the exhibits and watched a series of videos about cotton and sharecropping and how it changed the south. I saw pieces of cotton clothing. The whole experience disgusted me and I was grateful we had less than an hour in this wretched museum.

After the cotton museum, we went to the Stax Museum of American Soul Music. Stax, a record label founded by Jim Stewart and his sister Estelle Axton, in the early 1960s, pioneered soul music and produced hit songs from artists like Otis Redding. Despite the racial tensions of the era, Stax put musical excellence above anything else and maintained an integrated staff. Stewart and Axton were both white and many of their most successful artists were African-American. Stax artists toured across America and even Europe and received glowing receptions each place they went. Sadly, Otis Redding and four of his band members were killed in a plane crash in November 1967. Things fell apart further when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis on April 4th, 1968. Citizens rioted and looted in the streets. Even though the Stax building emerged unscathed, the racial tensions were now unavoidable and Stax was later sold to Warner Brothers.

The Stax Museum became one of my favorite spots on the trip. The museum started with a church and explored how African-American music started with church hymns and spirituals. We walked through a series of interactive exhibits and got to learn the history of the label and how their style of music seemed so revolutionary at the time. Costumes, recordings, and videos decorated each wall. I came out of the exhibit feeling crestfallen. An innovative and safe creative space for artists that put musical excellence above anything else could not last and eventually became one more example of southern ruin.

Finally, we made it to the National Civil Rights Museum. Throngs of people waited outside. As I had read, I saw large groups of families with personalized t-shirts proclaiming the 2015 Family Reunion. The first room of the museum discussed the Triangle Slave Trade. There were replicas of slave ships that were nearly to scale, showing dozens of bodies crammed in to tiny spaces. I looked up at the ceiling and the immortal words were inscribed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Plaques adorned the room with helpful facts about this slave trade, including that it was the largest forced migration of human beings in history. I walked through the exhibit and my entire curriculum spread out in front of me. The Civil War, Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws, segregation, sharecropping, and key events in Civil Rights movement from James Meredith and the integration of the University of Mississippi, burned-out buses from the 1961 freedom rides, a replica of the bus in which Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat, the March on Washington, Emmett Till, and everything else I could see. This chronological presentation ends in the room in which Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated. You can cross the street and see the room where James Earl Ray sat when he shot King. We had less than 2 hours in the museum, so it was impossible to see everything, but seeing so much history in such a significant place was deeply moving to me.

Finally, we went to the Peabody Hotel, the beginning of the Delta. Each day at 11 am and 5 p.m., a man wearing a red suit comes out with a gold-tipped cane and marches a group of ducks down a red carpet in the lobby of the hotel. This has been a tradition since 1930, when Frank Schutt, the General Manager of the Peabody at the time, returned from a hunting trip and thought it would be funny to put five ducks in the ornate Peabody fountain. In 1940, a hotel bellman with background as an animal trainer, trained the ducks to march down a red carpet. The bellman held the official title of “Duckmaster” for 50 years. The tradition has continued since then.

texted my boyfriend to explain my whereabouts and he asked “why?” A valid question to ask, and one that can only be answered by traveling to the Delta and seeing this way of life. The ducks marched down their red carpet and in that moment, the whole Delta made more sense to me than it ever had. The absurd opulence, the agony, the complete disregard for human suffering, the need to spare nothing to shape the environment into a profitable marketplace, the delusions of grandeur. The belief that tradition and heritage supersede all else. All of it came together for me in that moment and I did not know how it was possible to love and hate a place so much. I was dying to go back to New York, but part of me wanted never to leave. I spent the bus ride back to Cleveland looking out the window at the Mississippi River until I couldn’t see it anymore. My mind raced too fast to allow for sleep. I thought about my day- cotton, soul music, Civil Rights, and ducks walking down a red carpet. In all ways, a microcosm of my week.

**Day 7: Making Mojo and Heading Home**

“If we don’t know the Delta, we don’t know ourselves as human beings.”

-James Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth*

The next morning, we had a few hours of activities before this journey came to an end. It was time to make your own mojo so we could take our memories of the Delta back with us and forever live in our hearts and minds. Mojo, a key part of the mythology of the Delta, became a way to conjure the spirits we had learned and to ensure we could never forget it. We had a series of items to make our bags of mojo: ground-up bricks from the porch at Dockery Farms, chopped up pieces of Dr. King’s most famous speech, okra seeds, black-eyed peas, pasta, rice, hair from a black cat, a torn up blues record, duck water from the fountain at the Peabody, copies of the registration form Fannie Lou Hamer filled out, skin from a king snake, genetically modified cotton seeds, Mississippi River water mixed with mud from Muddy Waters’ cabin, gravel from the Taborian Hospital in Mound Bayou, chopped up funeral flowers from the Chinese graveyard, a piece of cotton, driftwood from the River, and gravel from the crossroads where Johnson sold his soul to the devil. I wrapped all of this in a piece of black cloth, designed to represent the African-American heritage of the Delta, and I tied it with blue thread, since the blues tied the whole Delta together. I added my fortune from the fortune cookie and a cap from a bottle of beer I enjoyed with my group while we debriefed moments from an unbelievable week.

We ended with a reading from James Cobb’s *The Most Southern Place on Earth.* The book proclaims, “if we don’t know the Delta, we don’t know ourselves as human beings.” I thought about these 18 counties in the northwest part of Mississippi. So much to celebrate, so much to correct. But in some ways, wasn’t it just like the rest of the country? New York City has segregated neighborhoods and schools, one of the highest gaps between the rich and poor in the world, and some neighborhoods have the same obesity and health problems as the Delta. There isn’t nearly the same level of torturous history, but it is patterns I see each day in my life as a teacher and resident of the city. New York bothered me more, masking itself as a shelter for the huddled masses while becoming an increasingly unaffordable and intolerable place to live. Maybe the South really did mirror everything in America. Howard Zinn wrote that the South is the “essence” of American society and believed it could be seen as a looking glass “in which the nation can see its blemishes magnified.”

The Delta location just magnifies everything and makes it more extreme, but these are problems America will face for years. The problems remain: lack of well-paying jobs, the mechanization of agriculture jobs, the exodus of factory jobs, residents who lack the skills to perform many of the available jobs, an astronomical gap between the wealthy and poor, racism, segregation, environmental troubles, and so on.

I said goodbye to my group and got into my red Ford Focus. I couldn’t move. Part of me screamed to leave the Delta and stop the madness I had lived with for the past week. The other part of me wanted to stay and correct all the wrongs I had seen and interpreted and misinterpreted. But I knew I had to leave. I started the long drive along Highway 61 to Memphis, where I would spend the night before an early flight home the next morning. I called my father to tell him about my bag of mojo and finally cried for the first time all week. I asked him to tell me how to live with all I had seen, and in his infinite wisdom, he told me that I could not and it was something that would always stay with me. We made plans to come back to the South as a way of keeping all these thoughts in my mind. Like Welty’s Laura McRaven before me, I let thoughts out of my mind and let the landscape in. The overwhelming heat, the whims of an unpredictable river, miraculous soil, and this society that refuses to modernize and now pays a price.

When I got to my hotel, there was a family reunion taking place in the main ballroom. While finding a parking space, I saw license plates from all over Chicago, including several from Illinois. I smiled, knowing what this meant. I fell asleep earlier than I had all week and prepared to say goodbye to the Delta.

**Day 8: Home to New York**

I woke up early and flew to Atlanta before changing planes to eventually head home to New York. As I go closer and closer to home, I thought of everything I had seen and heard during my week. Dilapidated shacks, an obesity epidemic, impoverished downtowns, Confederate flags, resilience, whispers of progress, and moments of failure as Mississippi reverts back to its racist and materialistic ways. A full week of thinking of nearly nothing else had consumed me. I was happy to be heading home, back to my comfortable and selfish summer, but was devastated because I knew everything I had learned and seen during this week in the Delta would live in me forever.

I hated the Delta, but I loved it more. I loved it more than any other place I had ever traveled to. The biblical heat and bugs, the warmth of its people, the folklore, the mythology, and the wretched history. I loved it all. Part of me wanted to stay forever and open a truly integrated charter school and make sure children in this part of the world receive a wonderful education and the ineffable cultural richness of the region. I had visions for this school, all written down on the legal pad with all of my notes and thoughts for the week.

But I knew I couldn’t do it. There were too many other things to be angry about and I knew I couldn’t live in the Delta all the time without losing my mind. Centuries of history that I somehow knew without fully understanding or knowing. So I go back to New York, heavy-hearted, but optimistic. There are questions I still cannot answer, and experiences I cannot make sense of, but I am closer than I was one year ago. Perhaps that is enough.

I vowed to come back to the South. There was still more to see. I had see South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, and Alabama. I hadn’t seen the Arkansas Delta, and I struggled to imagine what it would be like. I wanted to follow the Mississippi River throughout the country and marvel at its destructive and gorgeous power. I wanted to go to Jackson and Vicksburg and learn about the history in those places. The only way to keep the Delta in my heart was to return to it as often as I could so I would never forget what I had seen.

Somewhere over the South, I read President Obama’s eulogy to the victims of Charleston. It captured my week more beautifully than I ever could:

For too long, we've been blind to the way past injustices continue to shape the present. Perhaps we see that now. Perhaps this tragedy causes us to ask some tough questions about how we can permit so many of our children to languish in poverty, or attend dilapidated schools, or grow up without prospects for a job or for a career.

Perhaps it causes us to examine what we're doing to cause some of our children to hate. Perhaps it softens hearts towards those lost young men, tens and tens of thousands caught up in the criminal justice system -- -- and leads us to make sure that that system is not infected with bias; that we embrace changes in how we train and equip our police so that the bonds of trust between law enforcement and the communities they serve make us all safer and more secure.

Maybe we now realize the way racial bias can infect us even when we don't realize it, so that we're guarding against not just racial slurs, but we're also guarding against the subtle impulse to call Johnny back for a job interview but not Jamal. So that we search our hearts when we consider laws to make it harder for some of our fellow citizens to vote. By recognizing our common humanity by treating every child as important, regardless of the color of their skin or the station into which they were born, and to do what's necessary to make opportunity real for every American -- by doing that, we express God's grace.

President Obama said it better than I ever could. Though America had elected an African-American president, there was still so much that was wrong. All the threads of my week- the “past injustices that continue to shape the present,” the children languishing in poverty throughout the Delta, the lack of career prospects, it was all there. And still millions in America live like this. So I leaned my head against the window, stared out at the clouds, and wept.

1. http://www.livescience.com/45355-teen-pregnancy-rates-by-state.html [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. http://articles.latimes.com/2014/apr/03/nation/la-na-nn-mississippi-sex-ed-20140403 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/04/20/upshot/missing-black-men.html?\_r=0&abt=0002&abg=1 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)