Reflection on Emmett Till and Civil Rights

Valerie Oswald-Love

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Thursday was Emmett Till day on the schedule. I was learning so much each day in “The Most Southern Place on Earth” workshop, but this was the day I looked forward to more than any other. I had just learned of him right before I left for Mississippi and was haunted by the indelible imprint on my brain from accidentally seeing a photo of his corpse during my online research. This would be the day we learned the real story of the 14 year-old black boy from Chicago who was brutally tortured, murdered, and thrown into the Tallahatchie River for whistling at a white woman. Perhaps I had been excited about that day because I thought it would be like solving a mystery, and we would learn first-hand some new pieces of the puzzle. I was intrigued by our upcoming visit to the Sumner courthouse, but on the morning of Emmett Till day, I awoke with anxiety. I realized that this would be the day I would learn more about the murder of an innocent boy, a mother’s only son. This would be the day I would be on or near some of the very sites Emmett had been, like the dilapidated ruins of the Bryant’s’ grocery store. As the mother of two young boys, I knew this was going to be very tough, and I would somehow be mourning privately and deeply in my heart for the rest of the day with Mamie Till.

As we drove through the flat, monotonous fields of Delta heat, I began to panic a little in the bus. Could I handle hearing the story live from the two men we were about to meet? Wheeler Parker and Simeon Wright, Emmett’s cousins, were waiting for us in the very courtroom in which the murder trial took place 60 years earlier. Simeon had been in the same bed as Emmett the night he was ripped away into the darkness by his abductors, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam. Upon a quick scan of our bus before we left, I worried that I was the only one feeling an odd combination of claustrophobia and dread. I pulled myself together and tried to focus on the huge privilege of meeting these live witnesses before us. I felt my first chill of the day upon entering the Sumner courthouse, rehabbed to look just as it did a half century earlier during the trial.

Simeon and Wheeler calmly presented their eyewitness accounts from that August day at the Bryant’s’ store, and I listened with as much reverence as my swelling anxiety would allow. I felt an instantaneous respect for them, not just because of the horrific ordeal they endured many years ago, but because they had forgiven those who inflicted the nightmare upon their family. After they spoke, they graciously offered to sign copies of *Simeon’s Story* and take pictures with us fellows. Again, my nerves took over as I smiled between them for a photo. All I could think was “I’m so sorry for what you went through,” and “Thank you, thank you, for telling your story.”

I cannot relate to what Mamie Till or any other black mother has gone through, raising a child knowing he will face adversity, discrimination, and in Mamie’s case, unthinkable violence. I will never know what that kind of injustice feels like. But ever since I learned of Emmett’s story, I have thought of him constantly. That handsome face of a goofball boy on the brink of turning into a man. That proud look on the faces of both mother and son, a look that shows they were each other’s world. Each day we entered the academic building that housed our main classroom on the Delta State University campus, the first thing we saw was the Emmett Till exhibit. His story—and pictures of grinning Emmett, newspaper articles of the trial, and Roy Bryant jubilantly embracing his wife after his acquittal—lined our walk to the classroom for the week. Every day, I stopped to look with simultaneous unease and strong interest. With each day of new knowledge of the history of race relations in the Mississippi Delta, my own concept of the civil rights movement and race relations over my lifetime shifted.

Sometimes it shifted rapidly, like thousands of image cards flapping in a giant shuffling deck. I was rapidly revisiting what I thought I knew. I thought of my upbringing in a northeastern Pennsylvania coal town where everybody looked the same, and the mere appearance of a person of color tightened spines and made people clutch their handbags and children closer. I thought of my own encounters driving through Philadelphia with my family when I was a child, and how my parents tensed up and acted fearful as they stopped in a black neighborhood to ask for directions. I thought about Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown all over again, but this time they were not just sad, distant news stories.

I thought I knew a lot about civil rights, Martin Luther King, even the recent events in Ferguson and Baltimore. But my time in the Delta, especially that spent learning about Emmett Till and the true daily nightmare of living under Jim Crow law, illuminated where my understanding was sorely lacking. I learned regretfully, yet importantly, that I had been reacting to race issues of the past few years with some degree of sorrow and empathy, but not nearly enough fire, passion, or possibly even rage. I had no idea how repressive and dehumanizing Jim Crow was until I read and heard the stories of those who lived through it. For that ignorance, as unintentional as it was, and for skimming over the many stories of racial violence and injustice and figuring there was nothing I could do, I am embarrassed, if only in a way I can understand. It seems inconceivable that I had never heard of Emmett Till before I was accepted to this workshop. I do not teach history, yet I can’t believe that a story this important escaped all of my previous learning.

Emmett Till’s story was the catalyst for my awakening. I have thought of him ever since I returned from the Delta. Sometimes I have had nightmares. Mostly, I have been inspired to keep reading, researching, and educating others. I have interviewed colleagues in the history department (as I am a world language teacher) about their coverage of the civil rights movement, and begged to be involved when the time to teach it comes. I have asked family members if they ever heard of Emmett Till, and lent out *Simeon’s Story* to them as a starting place. My Spanish students will learn about Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, and others critical to the civil rights story. I’m not sure how yet, but it will happen.\*

On the way to the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis on the next-to-last day of the workshop, we learned on social media that the Supreme Court had legalized gay marriage. Some people openly wept and contacted relatives to share the news immediately. Throughout the day, I witnessed a flood of celebratory posts on Facebook and couldn’t wait to express the joy I felt with my loved ones back home. As I walked through the museum, from Rosa Parks and the Freedom Riders to the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, I fought back tears of my own. The courage and perseverance of all those commemorated, as well as so many more who were not, moved me to make a promise to teach civil rights somehow. It is always relevant. It is always necessary to learn more so that we can participate and not stand by hoping someone else will fix things.

Every morning during the workshop, I ate breakfast in my hotel watching the news of the aftermath of the Charleston, South Carolina Emanuel AME mass murder by a racially motivated white shooter. I read President Obama’s eulogy a few days later. I watched the members of the congregation declare their forgiveness for the murderer. By the end of the workshop, a woman had scaled the flagpole at the South Carolina State House and successfully removed the Confederate flag there. I was witness to extraordinary things during my time in the Delta, and there was no way I could return home the same person.