

**The Most Southern Place on Earth... For How Long? Reflections on the  
Changing Culture of the Mississippi Delta  
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As a sophomore at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi, I signed up for legendary history professor Dr. Charles Sallis' *Southern Mythology* class. While the course provided me with many deep insights and memorable quotes, perhaps one of my favorite moments occurred when Dr. Sallis lectured about Mississippi. "I am not worried about the coming of the apocalypse," Dr. Sallis would tell us with a wry smile, "because it will come to Mississippi twenty years after it comes to the rest of America." While I learned a great deal from Dr. Sallis that semester, perhaps the most important thing I learned is that change has sometimes been a long, arduous process in the place that I grew up. I also learned that when we tell the story of my home state, it is essential to tell it in its entirety. The struggles that the State of Mississippi has undergone in many ways serve as a microcosm of the struggle that America has undergone throughout its history. In order to fully comprehend and take pride in the great strides that Mississippi has made over the last several decades, it is crucial to understand how far the state has had to come in many areas.

Throughout my week as a participant in the National Endowment for the Humanities' *Most Southern Place on Earth* workshop, my experiences constantly reminded me of the great change that has come to the Mississippi Delta over the last few decades and the workshop provided me with stories of the people who helped to facilitate that change. I listened with pride as Charles McLaurin discussed his work in the Civil Rights Movement, and I was overcome with emotion when I realized that I was in the room with a friend and contemporary of Fannie Lou Hamer – one of my heroes since I began to study the Civil Rights Movement in depth as an undergraduate student. As a native of Jackson, I listened to his stories about growing up there – including his discussion of being jailed for attempting to attend the Mississippi State Fair. As he spoke, I realized how the work of those who came before me radically shaped the city that I grew up in (as well as the State Fair, which I attended so many times as a child). I marveled at the story of Reggie Barnes, who believed so strongly that school could be a means out of the crippling poverty that continues to plague the Delta that he devoted his life to working as an administrator in Delta schools. I took pride as we traced the origins of the Delta blues and studied the effect that this art form had on so many areas of the country. I listened as we talked about the diaspora of Mississippi Delta residents – how the culture that they took from this area played such a crucial role in the growth of culture of cities like Chicago and Detroit in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Our course also allowed me to think about how those other areas came to influence the Delta as many people came back to Mississippi later in the century as the "reverse" or New Great Migration occurred. As I spent the week listening to and experiencing the story of the Delta, I began to realize that Mississippi – especially the Delta – has changed in so many ways since the days of the "closed society" as historian James Silver characterized it in 1964.

While my week in the region helped me realize the great changes that had occurred over the last half century in the Mississippi Delta, I also witnessed another

phenomena that I had not expected when I first arrived in Cleveland. While events and changes over the last fifty years have brought the Delta closer to the rest of the United States (and the rest of the world), this “globalization” of the Delta seems to have created an unintended consequence – there are some beautifully distinctive cultural characteristics of the Delta that are beginning to fade away. When Ms. Cathy Wong spoke to us about her family – as well as many Chinese residents from the Delta – leaving for other parts of the country, I realized that there was a unique facet of the Delta’s heritage that would be gone soon and that this loss would permanently change the culture of the area. I remember being overwhelmed by sadness when she shared with us that she would be buried there someday and she didn’t know who would take care of the cemetery when she was gone. I experienced these same feelings when we met at the Hebrew Union Temple and listened to Ben Nelken discuss the dwindling Jewish populations in cities throughout the Delta. His reflection that not only Jewish families – but families from all different backgrounds – were leaving the Delta when jobs and industry left the area made me wonder what cultural aspects of the Delta might be lost in the coming years and in the coming decades. I heard this same sentiment from Mr. Bill Abel as he explained that while the blues was thriving throughout the world, no one was learning to play the distinctive Delta country blues that he played and knew so well. I detected sadness in his voice as he contemplated the idea that the strain of blues that he had spent his life learning and playing might die out someday soon. Finally, our time at Po’ Monkey’s lounge forced me to think critically about the changing culture of the Mississippi Delta. Our class spoke at length with Dr. Brown about the dwindling number of Delta jukeboxes, and I realized that some day when Mr. Seaberry passes away, it is possible that one of the great distinctive cultural features of this region – the country juke – could be lost forever. Even Po’ Monkey’s Lounge as it exists today seems fundamentally different than it had been in previous years. As we discussed in class, there seemed to be more tourists than locals coming for the establishment’s “Family night.” While some visitors treated the experience with the hospitality that they should by greeting and conversing with Mr. Seaberry when they came in (we were, after all, guests in his house), others pushed by him as if they were visiting a Hard Rock Café or some other tourist destination. I began to wonder if some of the essence that made Po’ Monkey’s so special for so many years was already beginning to fade by the time I arrived that Thursday evening in July. All week I witnessed reasons why the Mississippi Delta could rightfully be called “The Most Southern Place on Earth,” but at the cemetery, at the synagogue and at Po’ Monkey’s that evening, I couldn’t help but wonder for how long that term would continue to apply.

Throughout the week, I began to understand that the Mississippi Delta would have to walk an incredibly perilous tightrope act between change and tradition in the coming years. On one hand, the region needs to continue to build on its impressive track record over the last half century of providing economic and political opportunities to all of its citizens – including many who had been left out of the process for far too long during the Jim Crow era in the south. However, the Delta must double its efforts to preserve the culturally distinctive aspects of its heritage that have produced such great art, literature and music over its history. As we drove by entrances to now-closed casino properties on Highway 61 – the “Tunica

miracle” as it was called when they sprung up almost two decades ago – I realized that the gaming industry would not be what would sustain this area economically for the next half century. I realized that tourism, however, could be the real “Delta Miracle” that could help this region thrive. People from all over the United States (as well as the world) want to come experience the area that influenced the writing of Tennessee Williams and the music of Charlie Patton, Robert Johnson and Muddy Waters. People want to see the piece of land that Fannie Lou Hamer cared about so much that she devoted her whole life working to improve it. People want to stand on the platform in Tutwiler where W.C. Handy first heard about “the Southern crossing the Dog” and they want to stand outside Bryant’s Grocery in Money where a horrible tragedy led to the beginnings of one of the great social movements in United States history. I spent my week in Cleveland believing that tourism will be the great future of the Delta. We can already see the state working hard to capitalize on it with the Mississippi Blues trail, the Mississippi Freedom trail and numerous museums popping up in every town that we passed as we crisscrossed the Mississippi terrain. The State of Mississippi understood the importance of its culture when it rerouted the new path of State Highway 8 between Cleveland and Ruleville so that the remaining buildings at Dockery Plantation would continue to stand.

The people of the Mississippi Delta have a difficult – but exciting – task ahead of them. The region must find a way to continue to integrate itself into the global community – showing the world the great progress that it continues to make – while finding a way to hold onto the distinctiveness that has made it “The Most Southern Place on Earth.” While it will present unique challenges, it should also present new opportunities for this region as the people of the Delta share their home with the world.