

Behind the Veil

Paul Ortiz

The United States of America has never convened a truth commission to examine two centuries of racial brutality sanctioned by the state, although the Nobel Laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the former head of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, has repeatedly called on it to do so. The United States, Tutu said, “has not really faced up to the legacy of slavery or of the dispossession of Native Americans.”¹ If such a commission met to consider the country’s treatment of African Americans from Emancipation through the 1960s, it might come to the following conclusions: First, the human rights of African Americans were systematically violated during these years; second, segregation, like slavery, was a *labor system* designed to extract economic resources from African Americans in order to redistribute these assets to others. Segregation was maintained through terror (lynching, massacres, the destruction of black communities), fraud (ballot-box theft, tampering with election results, black disfranchisement), and a one-party rule that allowed the South to dominate American politics for decades.

Finally, white supremacy was marketed to the public through racial propaganda: Jim Crow postcards, films portraying African Americans as treacherous felons, and thousands of household products featuring caricatures of black women, children, and men that justified racial oppression. Underlying all of this was a distorted national history that depicted African Americans as the uncivilized wards of an enlightened white majority. The sanctity of white rule was promoted by universities, newspapers, employers, charitable foundations, and other institutions. These nongovernmental entities helped advertise, legitimize, and reproduce white busi-

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ness supremacy, not just within the United States but beyond. “Imperialism, the exploitation of colored labor throughout the world,” as W. E. B. Du Bois noted in the 1930s, “thrives upon the approval of the United States, and the United States gives that approval because of the South.”²

Segregation was a strategy of governance that implicated the entire nation. Stolen elections in the South were tacitly approved by the U.S. Congress and the North. The state-sanctioned convict lease system benefited northern firms, and cheap southern labor enriched outside investors. The cumulative legacies of segregation are all the more powerful because the system was so broadly participatory. Intellectuals, workers, middle-class suburbanites, rich people, unions, corporations, and government agencies such as the Federal Housing Administration helped build a separate-and-unequal nation. Jim Crow owed its extraordinary staying power in part to the massive transfer in wealth, governmental subsidies, educational resources, and political power away from black communities and into other communities that accepted these benefits largely without question.³

Segregation is difficult to grapple with because it cannot be relegated to the past. Indeed, Jim Crow is making a comeback. The resegregation of much of the nation’s school system is now an accomplished fact. The disfranchisement of African American voters was the deciding element in the 2000 presidential election in Florida.⁴ Five years later, the portrayal of African American flood victims in New Orleans owed much to stereotypes from the Jim Crow era. Cable television outlets and print media falsely depicted African American survivors of Hurricane Katrina as rapists, looters, and thugs and effectively pardoned the slow federal response to the crisis. This broadcasting of images that had no basis in reality was possible because most Americans have been taught a version of U.S. history in which African Americans either feature as dependent wards of the state or are predisposed to shoot down rescue helicopters. One of my students at the University of California, Santa Cruz, explained: “As a student of African heritage growing up in Santa Cruz, a predominately Caucasian town, the role my ancestors played in the development of the country was never revealed. Slavery was always downplayed in favor of glorifying Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation. How was I to regard my heritage with confidence while the environment I was raised in depicted Africans as nothing but slaves saved by a white man? Believe me no teacher ever let me forget that.”⁵

But while the U.S. government has refused to convene a truth commission to investigate post-Emancipation segregation as a system of racial and labor exploitation, there have been a number of extragovernmental efforts, including by African American educators and activists, to create a popular historical memory that bolsters collective identities of struggle and black claims to equal rights. One of the most ambitious has been *Behind the Veil: Documenting African America Life in the Jim Crow South*, which began in the early 1990s and was based at Duke Univer-

sity's Center for Documentary Studies. Headed by the historians William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstad, and initially funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, Behind the Veil (BTV) included scholars and students not just from Duke but from historically black colleges and universities including North Carolina Central University, Clark-Atlanta, and Jackson State. In 2001, BTV generated a book, *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell about Life in the Jim Crow South*, with two audio CDs of oral history linked to a multimedia Web site and an NPR documentary.⁶ The entire collection, consisting of approximately thirteen hundred interviews, family photographs, and other documents related to segregation is housed at the John Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African American Documentation at Duke's Perkins Library.

A sense of urgency animated the endeavor from the beginning. According to its first brochure, BTV's goal was to "recover the documentary base for understanding the experience of Jim Crow before this invaluable opportunity is lost." During de jure segregation, research universities amassed large collections of white-owned newspapers, manuscript collections, and other materials relating to segregation. Yet not unexpectedly, these institutions were not as rigorous when it came to collecting African American newspapers or black perspectives in general. "The historical amnesia that exists about the era of Jim Crow," BTV's brochure noted, "has resulted in a generation of young people, black and white, who know little about either the laws or institutions that separated the races, or the internal life of black communities."⁷ The project's primary research method was to gather oral histories from survivors of the segregation era, a methodology that proved not only essential considering the lack of written sources but empowering as well. As one reviewer of *Remembering Jim Crow* noted, "oral histories offer an immediacy other historic tools don't have. In simple, powerful ways, they close the psychological distance between big words like 'disenfranchisement' and daily lived oppression."⁸ Another wrote that for "some of the speakers, this is the first time they have been able to break their silence and speak out loud about the horrors they underwent growing up."⁹

Between 1993 and 1995, teams of graduate students fanned out across the South to interview black elders in scores of diverse rural, small-town, and urban communities of various sizes ranging from Fargo, Arkansas, to Memphis, Tennessee. Each summer, the graduate research directors Leslie Brown and Annie Valk (then history PhD students at Duke) coordinated oral history workshops and research seminars to ensure that the students were prepared to ask informed questions at each of the sites. I served as one of the graduate student interviewers and later as a research coordinator during BTV's archival phase. Ultimately, over thirteen hundred tape-recorded interviews were conducted with African American elders. The majority of these individuals were born before 1930. Fifty-eight percent of the informants were women. Twenty-five percent were educators, and the three next

largest occupations held by interviewees were, respectively, basic manufacturing, agriculture, and domestic labor.¹⁰

Behind the Veil researchers carried important liabilities into the field. Student researchers were viewed with skepticism by African Americans wary of cooperating with Duke University, a historically white institution identified as a major bulwark of segregation. The multiracial character of the oral history teams at times created tensions between interviewers and interviewed, as well as between the field researchers themselves. Graduate interviewers were also saddled with the heavy baggage of two centuries of academic racism. It turns out it was not that easy to close the “distance between big words like ‘disenfranchisement’ and daily lived oppression.” Ultimately, BTV owed its success to the forbearance of African American elders, historically black institutions (i.e., colleges, neighborhood associations, churches, secret societies, etc.) that guided us to interviews, and networks of community-based oral historians who helped us connect with local residents.

Conducting these interviews taught me many things. Many of the people I interviewed spoke of debt peonage, forced labor, lynching, schools with no resources, poverty wages, labor repression, and other mechanisms of domination as if these things had occurred only yesterday, suggesting that for many the transition from slavery to freedom in the United States has yet to be completed. African American elders spoke of relatives and loved ones lost or disappeared to racial terrorism. One series of these interviews conducted in Gadsden and Leon Counties in Florida allowed me to tell the story of the first ever statewide civil rights movement in U.S. history, and the mass murder of would-be African American voters in the presidential election of 1920.¹¹

Women often focused on the everyday humiliations of Jim Crow. African American mothers had the nearly impossible task of explaining to their children why they were treated with such disrespect in public. Maintaining a child’s sense of self and dignity in such an environment proved a Herculean task. Most white southerners refused to use courtesy titles when addressing black women or men no matter how old they were. Whites vowed never to “Miss’ a nigger,” and preferred degrading titles such as “Suzie” or “Auntie” when addressing African American women. Even worse, African American women were considered fair targets of white men’s sexual avarice. A fundamental premise of Jim Crow was that a white man could *never* be guilty of raping a black woman. Female domestic workers lived in a constant state of fear. Cleaster Mitchell of Brinkley, Arkansas, told me that when a black woman was attacked by a white man, “to go to the law didn’t mean anything. There was no law [for] you to go to. And I’ll tell you, one time in the South it’s bad to say, white men was crazy about black women. They would come to your house. They would attack you. They took it for granted when they saw a black lady that they could just approach her, that it was not an insult to her for them to approach her.”¹²

Malachia Andrews spoke with me in Tallahassee, Florida. He was intensely religious, a lifelong civil rights activist, and a supporter of the legendary Reverend C. K. Steele during the historic Tallahassee Bus Boycott in 1956. Andrews grew up in nearby Gadsden County, a place distinguished by rich tobacco farms and poor sharecroppers. “We were paid from fifty to seventy-five cents a day,” Andrews recalled. His father challenged the landowner for a larger share of the profits during “settling-up” time, but resistance was costly. Andrews’s family had to abruptly pack up all of their belongings and move on several occasions because they were identified as troublemakers by large growers. African Americans who challenged white economic domination in rural Florida too vigorously did so at the risk of their lives. Andrews noted: “This was dangerous. Black folks as far as they thought wasn’t supposed to talk back, challenge the big boss, I’ll say, about the harvesting, and sometimes it would cause house burning. Sometimes it would cause flogging, hanging and different things.” When African American plantation workers in Gadsden attempted to purchase their own farms in order to escape white control, “the big farmers burnt them all out, burnt out the fields, set them afire, corn fields and all these types of things in order to break them down, to have them come back to the big farm.”¹³

When I asked Andrews to reflect back on his life, he replied: “I can live, maybe not in full yet, but I’m proud of the distance that black people have come because I can’t explain it all but it was, if you allow me, it was hell back then.” Here was a man approaching the final years of his life who had every reason to be proud of the way he had lived. Andrews had fought for over a half century to end racial injustice, and he had been an organizer in some of the pivotal events of the modern civil rights movement. Yet he still *could not live a full life* because of racism. A reviewer of *Remembering Jim Crow* remarked that “these are stories that may bring a new and deeper level of understanding to those readers who don’t understand cries for reparations or the lingering anger toward whites.”¹⁴

The BTV archives contain a broad range of narratives that reveal a century’s worth of hidden and open warfare against white supremacy. African Americans’ political aspirations survived the defeat of Reconstruction, and black people resisted the onslaught of segregation in countless ways. African Americans fought Jim Crow on the streetcars, at the drinking fountains, and in the military. Black communities periodically took up arms to prevent lynching, and they organized underground NAACP chapters right under the eyes of the Ku Klux Klan. Lessons abound in the ways that oppressed peoples may organize to effect social change. The noted social-change educator Herbert Kohl includes *Remembering Jim Crow* in his suggested curriculum as a way to teach that the “struggle for civil rights and black liberation did not begin during the 1950s nor has it ended.”¹⁵

Readers and audiences that have read or listened to interviews featured in *Remembering Jim Crow* sometimes frame the narratives within a human rights con-

text. “Today,” Rebecca Skloot writes, “in a post-terrorist-attack world quickly filling with prejudice against those of brown skin or Muslim faith, *Remembering Jim Crow* stands as a reminder of the dangers of racism.”¹⁶ Anushiya Sivanarayanan compares the BTV narratives to a report sponsored by Human Rights Watch titled “Broken People: Caste Violence against India’s ‘Untouchables.’” Contrasting the report’s emphasis on the victimization and powerlessness of the Dalits with African Americans’ narratives that speak of oppression *and* resistance, Sivanarayanan insists that black informants used a “consciously developed oral tradition” to “cast their stories within a framework of emancipatory politics, clearly aware that they are speaking to a multi-ethnic, multi-racial audience that has lived through the changes brought about by legislations of civil rights, voting rights and school desegregation.”¹⁷

Sivanarayanan implies that oral narratives blending stories of suffering *and* struggle may ultimately help make audiences more receptive to histories of past atrocities that dominant societies have tried to silence. My experience of talking about the *Remembering Jim Crow* audio documentary with radio call-in audiences across the United States confirms this hypothesis. Needless to say, there are callers who deny that the Jim Crow era ever happened or who at least seek to minimize the impact its history exercises on contemporary society. However, I have also found that there are some listeners who are genuinely interested in engaging with the political content of the interviews. They want to understand *why* white southerners fought so hard to maintain their dominance, and they also want to understand the myriad ways that African Americans fought for dignity and social justice.

The political meaning of all documentary work is ultimately contested. After listening to people tell their stories of past suffering, we may offer our empathy, write up the results, and earn publication credits. In our roles as chroniclers of tragedy, however, neither oral historians nor truth commission members can guarantee that our societies will take our work seriously. Nor can we pretend that exposing injustices will move the United States to adopt policies that will repair the damages done by segregation to African American communities and to the American polity at large.

No one understands this better than the hundreds of African Americans who shared their time, family photographs, and memories with BTV. Emogene Wilson was born in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1924. She wrote for the *Tri-State Defender* in the early 1950s, where she met and fell in love with its editor, L. Alex Wilson. Wilson was a courageous reporter who had distinguished himself during the Emmett Till murder case in 1955. Two years later, he traveled to Little Rock, Arkansas, to cover the efforts of African Americans to integrate Central High School. Wilson’s dramatic portrayal of those events played an important part in exposing the depths of bigotry in Little Rock. Wilson paid a price for his courage: he was beaten so severely by a group of whites seeking to halt desegregation at Central that he later died from his injuries.¹⁸ In the course of her 1995 interview with BTV graduate

students, Emogene Wilson paid homage to her husband. But she also wanted to impress on us that the fragile civil rights gains he had given his life for were under direct assault. “It started with Reagan,” she noted, “and it progressed *backwards* with Bush and now with this—the Supreme Court now [is] just tearing everything apart.”¹⁹ Wilson reminds us that historical analysis *and* contemporary political activism are necessary tools in the struggle for human rights and social justice.

Notes

1. “Archbishop Tutu Speaks on NPR about GTRC,” Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission Web site, gtrc.blogspot.com/2006/01/archbishop-tutu-speaks-on-npr-about.html (accessed April 4, 2006).
2. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (1935; New York: Meridian, 1965), 706.
3. Cheryl Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106 (1993): 1709–91; William Darity Jr. and Melba J. Nicholson, “Racial Wealth Inequality and the Black Family,” in *African American Family Life*, ed. Vonnice McLoyd, Nancy E. Hill, and Kenneth A. Dodge (New York: Guildford, 2005), 78–85; Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas Shapiro, *Black Wealth, White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Boris I. Bittker, *The Case for Black Reparations*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon, 2003).
4. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Voting Irregularities in Florida during the 2000 Presidential Election* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2001).
5. Jeremy Lamont Austin, “Black Liberation in the African Diaspora” (paper presented at University of California, Santa Cruz, April 24, 2006).
6. William Chafe et al., eds. *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell about Life in the Jim Crow South* (New York: New Press, 2001), including the oral history CDs as part of the hardcover edition. For the NPR documentary, see americanradioworks.publicradio.org/feathers/remembering (accessed April 4, 2006).
7. Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South project brochure, Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University (n.d.), in author’s possession.
8. Lonnae O’Neal Parker, “Days of Jim Crow: An Oral History Project Fleshes Out the Meaning of the Segregation Era,” *Washington Post*, February 9, 2002.
9. Anushiya Sivanarayanan, review of *Remembering Jim Crow*, *Callaloo* 26 (2003): 901–6.
10. These statistics were compiled by the project research coordinator Alexander X. Byrd after the interviewing phase of the project had been completed. Tabulated figures in the author’s possession, n.d.
11. Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
12. Cleaster Mitchell, interview by the author, July 16, 1995, Brinkley, AR, available at Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South, John Hope Franklin Research Center for African and African American Documentation, Duke University. A more extensive version of this interview appears in *Remembering Jim Crow*.
13. Malachia Andrews, interview by the author, August 9, 1994, Leon County, FL, available at Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South.

14. Rebecca Skloot, review of *Remembering Jim Crow*, January 14, 2002, www.nasw.org/users/skloot/page6.html.
15. Herbert Kohl, "Good Stuff: The Journey to Freedom," *Rethinking Schools Online* 18 (2004), 1.
16. Skloot, review of *Remembering Jim Crow*.
17. Sivanarayanan, review of *Remembering Jim Crow*, 901–2.
18. Hank Klibanoff, "L. Alex Wilson: A Reporter Who Refused to Run," *Media Studies Journal* 14 (2000), available at www.freedomforum.org/publications/msj/courage.summer2000/contents.html (accessed April 3, 2006).
19. Emogene Wilson, interview by Mausiki Stacey Scales, July 5, 1995, Memphis, TN, available at *Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South*.

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