

A Commentary on The New Jim Crow: A Reading of Oral History

By Nancy Callahan

A rare opportunity came to the University of Alabama and Tuscaloosa on the evening of December 2, 2016, when Billy Field and his UA honors history class presented *The New Jim Crow: A Reading of Oral History*, in the theater of Ferguson Student Center on the UA campus. From Sylacauga, Field also teaches filmmaking and screenwriting. Before coming home to Alabama, he worked in the Hollywood movie industry and writes occasional scripts for television. He also is on the Tuscaloosa Mayor's Task Force on Civil Rights History, begun in 2016.

It was the hallmark of the semester on behalf of 12 students to gather oral histories of local civil rights soldiers, then re-tell the stories of their demoralized, "Jim Crow" lives as black persons segregated from predominant, rigid, often hateful, at times murderous, white society. They also read memories of civil rights workers here seeking to desegregate the humiliating Tuscaloosa County Courthouse "whites only" and "colored" water fountains, driving "Bloody Tuesday," June 9, 1964. They further delved into modern Tuscaloosa and this nation's legal disparities between the haves and have-nots, and flaws pertinent to legal consequences of drug use and addiction, "the new Jim Crow." As the play pointed out, the United States has more individuals in prison than any other country, including the People's Republic of China.

One year prior to the Selma to Montgomery March, Bloody Tuesday was the day when First African Baptist Church, on Stillman Boulevard, skirting the city's West End, held a mass meeting in the church, to plan a march that would follow that meeting from there to the Tuscaloosa County Courthouse. The participants would then drink from the "whites only" water fountains. In his speech inside the church, its pastor, Rev. T.Y. Rogers, Jr., told those present not to stop marching, even if the next person were to get hit. "Just keep on going."

When they began to march out, Rev. Rogers, in the lead position, was the first to be arrested. Some continued to march. Others went back into the church or were still there because they had not yet gone outside. Then the police broke up the march by bludgeoning those in the street with clubs and tear-gas canisters; and tear-gassing those inside by shooting the canisters through the stained-glass windows, glass shards hurling through the holy setting.

All the victims were arrested and shuffled to jail, Jim Crows; and-or taken to Druid City Hospital's emergency department, to be "treated" for injuries incurred during that shameful, dispirited expression of white power over blacks, Jim Crows.

One such victim was Maxie Thomas, beaten on his face, and especially on his right eye, with a baseball bat. As we heard from his student-read recollection, a doctor sewed stitches on the cut-apart skin without medicine to deaden the surgical pain and without antiseptics. Here Thomas was, 52 years later, in the audience with his wife, Dora, and a scar on that eye.

Another was Willie Welles, a Stillman College educator and member of the civil rights history task force. As she earlier told that group, she was active in the pre-Bloody Tuesday civil rights movement at Stillman, a historically black college begun in 1876 by the Presbyterian Church. During the bloodbath she was jailed. Now, she was seeing herself as in a mirror while the readers rolled out her past.

One more was the Reverend Joseph W. Davis. With similar background, he is currently president and CEO of an insurance company. On this evening, he was in “the Ferg,” looking at and listening to himself via stage actors.

Throughout, mostly black-and-white photographs, larger than life, of the Bloody Tuesday chapter, were shown behind the readers, as if in a moviehouse. Primarily Caucasian, coached by their teacher, they did more than read. Dressed alike, in black, they walked as if they were marching, made eye contact with one another and the audience, and got fighting mad at Michael Carr’s role of Thomas Dartmouth Rice, the actor who coined the phrase “Jim Crow.” Carr is a professor of theater at Shelton State Community College.

From time to time, Jim Crow the white man slinked onto the stage, trying to prove the correctness of his false beliefs. The other actors took him apart. They slowed down when the script called for icy emotion and sounded like the beats of marching drums punctuating stories spawning fury. Best of all, they emoted empathy for the oral historians.

The unfolding also was enriched by the singing of Clemmie Hilton, a local black musician providing movement songs. Despite the horror unloaded on the audience, Hilton’s silky soprano and overall countenance threaded that horror with serenity, beauty, and hope. I *had* to meet her after the play. “Who *are* you?” I asked several times. She hesitated to say. “But who *are* you?” Finally, “I just sing all the time.” Her close-up face showed purity matching her gospel-blues style. Laborn Brown, one of the few black student actors, made his mark with a plaintive rendition of *Poor Man’s Justice Blues*, music and lyrics by Elmonte Slim, back-up by keyboardist Andrew Duncan.

For days after the play, even now, I have not been able to forget Maxie Thomas’s patched right eye, bashed by a baseball bat. My memory of having seen it as a gargantuan photograph on the big screen behind the actors is haunting. And every time my heart shoots it to my head, I recall Thomas sitting three rows ahead, wiping tears as the stage brought back that abominable act. The visual recurrences of the patched eye and the gracious elderly gentleman with closely cropped white hair, wiping his tears, nailed even deeper the insanity of those times into my conscience.

That insanity was not new to me. Growing up, in 1964, I went with my mother and younger brother downtown on a Sunday afternoon near First African, established in 1866, to witness a civil rights march pre-Bloody Tuesday. We were not in the march but felt our presence stood for our movement belief. Later newspaper accounts of Bloody Tuesday were too hard to grasp; they made no sense. Like a child, I had to pretend they did not happen, a classic Sigmund Freud “defense mechanism.” Then in 1965, in school, I almost craved being in the Selma to

Montgomery March, climaxed later that year by the national Voting Rights Act – a titanic, newsmaking force in comparison to historically obscure Bloody Tuesday. But as a teenager trying to keep up my grades pre-college, with no money, transportation, or promise of safe travels to Selma and beyond, alone, with likely bad consequences from delinquent school absences, I had to stay put.

Ironically, my father, A.K. Callahan, was at the other end of that march, inside the state capitol, a member of the Alabama Legislature, the House of Representatives. The house was in session. During lunch break, he mingled with marchers who had entered the capitol to use the “colored” restrooms. He also noted presence of Hollywood stars, including Dan Blocker, “Hoss Cartwright” of the then-popular *Bonanza* television series.

Earlier, he introduced and led to passage two statutes designed to lessen Jim Crow, of which I am aware. In 1949, he brought into being an act that, in short, de-hooded the Ku Klux Klan, which the Klan did not appreciate. It made “concealment of identity” in public places illegal, with the exception of “participating in the celebration of a legal holiday.” Along with stiff penalties, it was signed into law by Governor James E. “Big Jim” Folsom, Act Number 139.

Another was prompted by a trip he made as vice chairman of the House Committee on Mental Health, to Searcy Hospital in north Mobile County. Now closed, it was the state facility for black persons who were experiencing mental illness. In a setting of Old South magnolias, he was irate, finding flies everywhere: outside, inside, and on the patients. They even swarmed into the legislators’ automobiles. Daddy went back to Montgomery and, through legislative action, got rid of the flies. That all had to be enough for me, a white girl, at least for then.

Regarding Thomas’s patched right eye, spanning his forehead down most of that side of his face and a slither of his nose, I talked days hence with Kitty Whitehurst, a white, Northport attorney sitting close to me during the performance. Said she, “I cringe with shame and horror when I hear the stories or see pictures like in Billy’s play - the lynchings, the “colored” water fountains and restrooms, the “whites only” restaurants, and injuries such as the ones to Maxie Thomas from a baseball bat wielded in hatred and scorn. How can we be so inhuman to other human beings?”

Whitehurst was open to saying more. “I was delighted to see Maxie Thomas, Willie Welles, and Joseph Davis in attendance. Their personal stories are a cornerstone of the play. Only by keeping the stories of older black Americans alive can we hope to prevent history from repeating itself. We already are seeing some of that in the many shootings of unarmed black men, the resulting demonstrations, protests, riots, and police shootings.

“Slavery,” she added, “is one of the most hideous institutions mankind ever has invented. The remains are obvious in the stubborn, pervasive ideas of white supremacy and separation of the races. Billy’s play was meant to be thought provoking, and it was. If it starts or contributes to a new conversation in this community about what it means to be black in America, it is a step in the right direction. We cannot afford to allow the facts to be ignored or forgotten.”

After talking to Whitehurst, I revealed to producer Field my obsession with the photo. He suggested I take a look at the original, in the Thomas Linton Barber Shop, downtown on T.Y. Rogers, Jr. Avenue. Rogers [1935-1971] was pastor of First African during Bloody Tuesday and a prominent movement figure, having been sent here by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1964, to represent the SCLC executive in local civil rights issues. On the late afternoon before Christmas Eve, I walked in unexpectedly. Linton was just finishing a customer's cut, another barber sitting in the adjacent chair, no more customers. The shop was unlike any historical warehouse I ever had seen, from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, with King Tut's mummy and possessions; to the mausoleum-museum in Santa Clara, Cuba, holding the remains and personal effects of Dr. Ernesto "Che" Guevara, a Fidel Castro partner in crime.

The walls were jam-packed with framed symbols of the city's civil rights movement, including those from Bloody Tuesday and events sparked by that unthinkable blight on history. It was also laden with mugs of every kind. "I use them when I shave my customers," said Linton, who has pastored the down-the-way Church of the Lord Jesus Christ for 60 years. "I think I have about 900 now. I got rid of hundreds."

One wall included the Thomas photo. He explained that Field had taken a picture of the picture, then blew it up for the play. "I didn't attend due to a conflict." But he admitted to having been the leader of Tuscaloosa's civil rights movement during Bloody Tuesday times. "I had to call Dr. King for help after everybody was injured and put in jail."

He led me into the back of his business, saying it used to be a beauty shop. When Autherine Lucy, the first black student to integrate the UA [1956], was expelled not long after her admission, she had no place to go. "So she came here." Her expulsion was by the UA board of trustees, a decision feverishly advanced by its chairman, Hill Ferguson, despite objections from the governor and UA president. Having been a trustee since 1919, Ferguson stepped down 40 years later and the board honored him with a trustee "emeritus" title. Then in the 1970s, the new student center was named for Ferguson by the board of trustees from that era. [For seething details of Lucy's student days, read *The Schoolhouse Door: Segregation's Last Stand at the University of Alabama*, by E. Culpepper Clark, University of Alabama Press, 2007.]

Automobiles sardined with escorts brought Lucy to the Linton shop. She was "all messed up" because students had assaulted her with raw eggs in protest against her enrollment. "We men stayed out. Only ladies took her into this area. They put her in a [cosmetology] chair," he pointed to a second space in the back of the old beauty shop, "took off her clothes, and cleaned her all up from her hair and face on down. Then, five carloads of people armed with guns drove her away. She needed that much protection."

During those times, the Ku Klux Klan typically targeted certain blacks traveling in one vehicle only; those targets were easy to shoot and otherwise harm, with one Klan car directly behind and another immediately in front. Klansmen found black caravan travel more challenging; they could not tell in which vehicle the person of interest was traveling.

Framed photos and write-ups honor Lucy there on the walls. [A biographical article about her is in the online *Encyclopedia of Alabama*, by James P. Kaetz, of Auburn University. It is accompanied by a photograph of Lucy standing with Rosa Parks and Eleanor Roosevelt.]

In the barbering arena again, I saw a photo of a black female positioned above the Thomas eye-patch picture. It featured her face only, eyes closed, a hopeless, suffering look. She was lying in bed in the hospital from Bloody Tuesday handlers. I could hardly take in the sight of her but the old civil rights leader, a museum himself, let me capture with camera her photo and that of Thomas. I had wanted to ask him how he felt every time he saw the Thomas reminder, and I did stumble and stutter it out, but for no answer. We both realized that cruelly, it was one of countless reminders. It would have been impossible for him to single out one person or event on his walls more worthy of his oral reactions than another.

While walking to my car, dusk upon me, I seemed to become enfolded by a slice of my student years at the University of Alabama in Birmingham, the early 1990s. I was counseling students at Ensley High School and a teacher told me that a member of the faculty was Autherine Lucy. During a lunch break, I sped to the cafeteria and found “Mrs. Foster,” introduced myself, and thanked her for what she had done. Born in Shiloh [Marengo County], the daughter of a sharecropper, she was a woman of self-confidence, social grace, and an everflowing channel of peace.

I realized the barbershop block was a short walk to Greenwood Cemetery, laid out in 1821, and with the burials of early, prominent blacks and whites. Rows of short, look-alike monuments were capped with Christmas wreaths. I eased over to find out more. They were graves of unknown civil war soldiers. Directly across “T.Y. Rogers” was First African, facing Stillman, the current building dating from 1907, with a different kind of warring history. A Christmas wreath was also hanging at its front door.

Until the play was over, I wondered about what I considered to be a small crowd. “Where is everybody?” I thought to myself. After its conclusion and the enthusiastic Field led discussion, I realized all there had a purpose: a yoga instructor and an accountant, white females, two rows behind me; a Jewish couple on the front row, asking questions about the civil rights history task force; a white, female, UA professor of constitutional law; other attorneys scattered about, members of the task force, and several blacks and whites unknown to me.

As Field sought feedback, Maxie Thomas and Joseph Davis, seated far apart, stood and dialogued with one another. “Where do we go from here?” Students, still on stage, processed what the semester taught them. Intimacy had permeated the milieu, a night no one ever would forget. So had the power of synergy.

Outside, minutes later, the students were departing the Ferg. I talked to a friendly, longhaired, blonde female. “When I signed up to take Mr. Field’s honors history class,” she revealed, “I couldn’t believe it when he said on the first day that we would have to write and act in a play. It was so hard, but I feel proud now to have been a part of it.”

Inside, as the talk continued, Elmonte Slim, son of a professional clarinetist who began his own musicianship in the Sylacauga High School Band, and has written decades of songs, was thanked for his contribution by Field, his hometown friend. Slim seemed shy under spotlight as the audience cheered, but his comments caused me to seek him out later. “Elmonte Slim” is a musical pseudonym for Paul Whitehurst, a white, Northport attorney married to Kitty.

As it turned out, he had met with Field’s class to make them aware of specific issues within the new Jim Crow. “I talked about how oppressive the criminal justice system is to poor people,” he said. “In particular, I emphasized how the bond system enriches the bondsmen at the expense of poor people’s families. It also forces people to plead guilty to crimes, often felonies, to get out of jail on probation. I played my song for them and was pleased they used it in their presentation. Leborn and Andrew did a much better job with it than I do.”

He figured that many of the students were from affluent backgrounds. “I was struck by their compassion for the people they met and their experiences. I hope they will take this with them as they grow older to help them influence others. I know they couldn’t cover everything, but I wanted to see more about the drug war which really causes so much of the unfairness in the system. Interestingly, the black community strongly supports the drug war as much if not more than the white community.”

Parts of the play still inflame my memory and stoke my growth. Before we all sang *We Shall Overcome*, that poignant, movement days anthem, we were asked to hold hands with those around us. The regal Hinton held hands on stage with the readers, leading the piece. On my row was a black lady with whom I connected, moving side to side with the hymn’s progression. “Deep in my heart, I do believe.”

Upon its conclusion, we looked at each other, not knowing what to do next. Then, with impulse, we opened wide our arms and fell into each other with a long, silent, uninhibited, heartfelt, glory hallelujah hug. I never got her name, but the hug let me know we were and still are sisters.

Thank you, Billy.