

Lalee's Jim Crow

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Lalee advised her great-grandson, a boy over whom she had watched since he was six-months old, “You got to go to school or go to jail.”¹ Her attempts to cajole six-year old Redman into attending first grade reflected her respect for education and the stark reality of what the alternative is for many young black men in America. Lalee's family served as a case study of life for African Americans in the United States, a country struggling to acknowledge and fix its racially-charged past and present. Both *Lalee's Kin* and *The New Jim Crow* demonstrate the way in which poor educational opportunities and high unemployment contributed the dramatic mass incarceration of African American men.

Access to education is a critical component of professional and economic advancement yet schools with high concentrations of African Americans were often underfunded and under-achieving. Throughout *Lalee's Kin*, the saga of the West Tallahatchie school system demonstrates a lack of funding and the struggle to retain quality teachers, leading to low scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and a potential state takeover. The principal believes that the problems are local, that the state cannot “come in and heal the wounds that we're suffering from. The problems are so systemic... In a sense, we've got to lift ourselves up by our own bootstraps.”² His school uses staff meetings, pep rallies, spoken word performances, and targeted lessons to pull students to their Level II goal. Educational struggles are not only part of rural life in the South; in Chicago, African American men are more likely to end up in jail than in college,

¹ Susan Froemke and Deborah Dickson, 2005, *Lalee's Kin: The Legacy of Cotton*, Princeton, NJ, Films for the Humanities, 19:30-39.

² Ibid, 13:10-14:30

and there are more black men in the state's prisons than its universities.³ Without opportunities to prepare for college and the assumption of criminality, African American men commonly find prison as their post-secondary institution.⁴

The prison system itself is part of why schools are struggling. The men who become part of the system “find it increasingly difficult to obtain education, especially now that funding for public education has been hard hit, due to exploding prison budgets.”⁵ Lalee and her family try to prioritize school, but Granny, a pre-teen girl, struggles to complete her homework while she babysits her siblings and cousins, and Lalee's limited sixth-grade literacy and math skills prevent her from aiding her family in the classroom.⁶ As *The New Jim Crow* observes, these common struggles “Could have inspired a national outpouring of compassion and support... Education, job training, public transportation, and relocation assistance could have been provided, so that youth of color would have been able to survive the rough transition to a new global economy.”⁷ Instead, Lalee relied on resources like her sister to find pencils and pens in her cleaning job to acquire the prerequisite supplies to attend the local school. West Tallahatchie is much like the urban centers where “poor African Americans are not given the option of great schools, community investment, and job training.”⁸ Lack of educational training in a challenging job market often forces black men into desperate situations.

As blue collar jobs moved to the suburbs and/or overseas, urban and rural African American unemployment increased. From 1970 to 1987, blue collar employment rates in urban centers decreased from 70 to 28% as “black men found themselves unnecessary to the American

³ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2012): 190.

⁴ Ibid, 152.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Froemke and Dickson, *Lalee's Kin*, 59:00-60:00.

⁷ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 218.

⁸ Ibid, 210.

economy and demonized by mainstream society.”⁹ Lalee did not have relationships with most of the men in her family, and she had never met Redman’s father. To supplement her disability payments, she borrowed her son’s van to sell steak, chicken, rice, and pudding to workers at her former employer, the local cotton gin. She tried to make profit during the two months of cotton season, and “The rest of the year you’ve got to root pig and die poor.”¹⁰ Unlike Lalee though, these desperate conditions drove many others to more violent actions, and “lower-class black men were hauled off to prison in droves, ... [as they were] no longer needed to pick cotton in the fields or labor in factories.”¹¹ Since joblessness led to an increase in the likelihood of violent crime for men, there was a “subsequent transfer of black youth from underfunded, crumbling schools to brand-new, high-tech prisons.”¹²

When Redman tells his family’s matriarch, “I wanna go to jail for real,” it is a reflection of the the system that surrounds him, the reality for many young black men across the United States.¹³ In an attempt to escape the cycle of poverty and lack of opportunity created by poor educational and employment opportunities, the racial caste system in the modern United States pressures African American men to employ illegal and dangerous methods of survival, creating a system of mass incarceration that reinforces stereotypes. It perpetuates the legacy of segregation and Jim Crow policies that maintained white superiority over other races. In a “colorblind” society where discrimination on the basis of the race has been outlawed, inequity puts pressures on African Americans that creates a racialized criminal underclass.

⁹ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 50, 218.

¹⁰ Froemke and Dickson, *Lalee’s Kin*, 49:10.

¹¹ Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 219.

¹² Ibid, 210.

¹³ Froemke and Dickson, *Lalee’s Kin*, 19:30-19:40.