

Edward Filice

Poetry Narrative

The idea behind this project was to show the extent of what are referred to in *The Warmth of Other Suns* (hereafter *WOOS*) as “James Crow” laws. These “laws” were essentially the North’s version of Jim Crow. The book introduces the term when discussing Robert Foster’s journey to California, and the motel owners that refused to give him rooms. Jim Crow wasn’t law of the land, but the owners didn’t rent him a room anyway, because he was black. At this point, when he had been turned away so many times, Wilkerson writes, “some colored people who had made the journey called it *James Crow* in California.”¹ However, rather than just focus on the de facto style segregation that many whites enforced in the North, I wanted to examine the effects of this undercover Jim Crow in the South, as well. Although the South had Jim Crow, there were countless atrocities committed against blacks in the South that didn’t fall within the confines of Jim Crow that matched more closely the idea of *James Crow*. So I wrote the poetry in two parts, the first describing James Crow in the South, and the second describing it in the North.

The poetry is structured specifically to fit the contexts of the North and South. The South portion is strictly Shakespearean sonnet style, in iambic pentameter with rhyme scheme abab cdcd efef gg. The reason I chose this goes back to something Wilkerson stated about the South, namely that “the thick walls of the caste system kept everyone in prison. The rules ... were so tightly wound...”² Thus, to match this strict, established caste system I chose a very strict style of poetry that has long been established. I wrote three sonnets for this section, the first titled “James and Jim.” In this sonnet I give examples of how James Crow is present when Jim Crow takes place. Line 3 refers specifically to the event that occurred in Marion, Indiana, when a mob

¹ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010), 211.

² Wilkerson, *WOOS*, 33.

of whites lynched two black men on an ambiguous murder charge. A poem came out about it called "Strange Fruit," which references the bodies hanging from the tree. This event is symbolic for all the lynchings in the South, and how many blacks were lynched after being jailed under Jim Crow, as is referenced later in lines 9 and 10. Line 4 refers to the fact that although there are a lot of people there performing the lynching, the nature of lynchings makes it so that no one takes the blame, so in effect no one is there performing the lynching. In addition, it refers to the fact that lynchings are never prosecuted, and no one ever names lynchers. Lines 5-6 refer to a situation that happens in *WOOS*, where a young black boy named Gilbert Elie accidentally bumps into a white boy who threatens him. His father is near and must beg the little boy for forgiveness.³ Here James Crow takes form in the caste system that places both Gilbert and his dad underneath this white child, and leaves them at his mercy. Lines 9-12 refer to the case of George Hughes, who was accused of raping a white woman, and as Jim Crow puts the word of whites above that of blacks, he was arrested. However, a mob later torched the courthouse, bombed it, and proceeded to rampage against his town, the work of James.⁴ Finally, lines 13 & 14 refer to Cordie Cheek, who was lynched for forgetting to "mister" or "sir" a white youth who was his age; however, the mob claimed that he was "disrespectful to white womanhood."⁵

The second poem is titled "James in the South," and it shows how James Crow keeps blacks from advancing socioeconomically. It starts with the reference to doctors being called "uppity" for dressing the part. This refers to Dr. Beck in Wilkerson's novel, who dressed in crisp suits and a late-model car on his house calls, as doctors do, and he was beaten for it, and called

³ Ibid., 91-92.

⁴ Ibid., 88.

⁵ Thomas J. Sellers, "An Ancient Trick Exposed," *The Reflector*, January 13, 1934, accessed November 25, 2016, http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/saxon/servlet/SaxonServlet?source=/xml_docs/rp_news/raceplace_news.xml&style=/xml_docs/rp_news/raceplace_news.xml&level=single&order=none&item=va.np.reflector.01.13.34.

“uppity.”⁶ Line 5 refers to a black man who is beaten for asking for a receipt for his water bill.⁷ Line 6 is a reference to the beatings that were laid upon the “Freedom Riders,” white and black protesters who went into the South and “test[ed] the Supreme Court’s recent ban on segregation...”⁸ The author and his friends were beaten upon leaving their bus. Once again, this is a product of James Crow, as whites had no ability to segregate due to the Supreme Court’s rulings, so they resorted to violence. Lines 7 and 8 refer to the thousands of black army veterans that got lynched after WWII. Many black men joined the service to try and improve their social standing back home; and this is precisely what whites saw it as too. Sensing a threat to Jim Crow, they lynched the blacks under James Crow.⁹ Lines 9-12 refer to Robert Pershing, who struggled in his own town to be respected as a doctor. He couldn’t operate at the hospital (not by law, as his brother was able to apply, and was rejected) and his white patients, in his words, “couldn’t quite manage to call him ‘Dr. Foster’ but spat out ‘Doc’ as if they were addressing the cook.”¹⁰ The last two lines refer to how black parents couldn’t explain Jim Crow, but they had to teach them its cruelties anyway. As the book puts it, “...grown people’s wrath gave colored children practice for life in the caste system, which is why parents ... treated their children as the white people running things treated them.”¹¹

The last poem in this series is more personal, and it follows Ida Mae, one of the book’s characters, leaving town. It was included to give the subject depth. The poem itself refers to the story Ida Mae tells in the book, in several portions.¹² The last two lines refer respectively to how

⁶ Wilkerson, *WOOS*, 231.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁸ Bernard Lafayette Jr., “The Siege of the Freedom Riders,” *New York Times*, May 19, 2011, accessed November 26, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/20/opinion/20Lafayette.html>.

⁹ “Lynching in America: Targeting Black Veterans,” accessed November 24, 2016, <http://eji.org/reports/online/lynching-in-america-targeting-black-veterans>.

¹⁰ Wilkerson, *WOOS*, 174.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

¹² *Ibid.*, 148-49, 165-70, 183-84.

the book refers to the trains as “The Chicken Bone Special,” as blacks had to bring their own food, the dining car only being open to whites,¹³ and the signs that segregated the train cars.

The second part, The North portion, is designed differently than the first part. It goes back to how the book describes life in LA. LA has a “polyglot nature,” and a “whimsical caste system and no rules that anyone could see.”¹⁴ The rules are never consistent, and minorities getting pitted against each other makes for uneven applications of James Crow. To match this, I switched up the poetry several times. I started with Shakespearean sonnet again, with one quatrain. Lines 1-4 refer to the book, where it states that past El Paso, where Jim Crow is no longer law, there still exists the prejudice and racism we’ve defined as James Crow. The segregated signs drop but no one moves for fear of what might happen. The border towns, referred to in line 3, are no different from towns in the South, as they will often segregate not based on law but based on custom.¹⁵ In addition, each reference to James Crow in this portion is “james,” lowercase, to show its more hidden nature here where it is not so desirable. Then in lines 5-10 the form is improvised, starting with six feet in the line and ending with one, still in iambs. Lines 5-8 refer generally to the difficulties of renting a room as a black person in the North; for example, Robert Foster, who, on his journey to LA, tried to get a motel room many times with no luck. He was turned away with the owners saying things like, “Oh, my goodness. We forgot to turn off the vacancy sign.” Robert knows there must be empty rooms, but because he is black, they won’t rent to him.¹⁶ Lines 9-10 refer to the fact that Las Vegas is still segregated against blacks. This is a point brought up in the book by Robert Foster, and to get in you must

¹³ Ibid., 197.

¹⁴ Ibid., 234.

¹⁵ Ibid., 199.

¹⁶ Ibid., 207-209.

have contacts, making Las Vegas full of white people.¹⁷ Lines 11-13 are in haiku form, and reference the difficulties of finding housing as a black person in the North. Specifically, it references Dr. Beck and Mrs. Beck's struggles to obtain their house. They wanted one in Los Angeles in a white community, but there was a covenant that prevented its owners from selling to black people.¹⁸ Lines 14-17 are back in the quatrain iambic pentameter of Shakespearean sonnet, but slightly different, as the lines don't quite rhyme. They reference Eugene Williams, who drifted over a "color line" in Lake Michigan, over into the "white side". White children threw rocks at him, and he fell off his raft into the water and drowned.¹⁹ Lines 18-27 are in Horatian Ode form, an obscure form of poetry with rhyme scheme ababcdecde. They are a continuation on police violence against blacks, starting with Eugene Williams. Lines 18-19 refer to when blacks demanded the police officer on the scene arrest the stone-throwers that drowned Eugene, but he instead arrested a black man in the crowd "on a white man's complaint."²⁰ Lines 20-21 refer to the East St. Louis riots, and how "the police, charged with quelling the riot, in some cases joined in..."²¹ Lines 22-27 refer to a report released in Chicago in 2016, showing distinct levels of racism in the CPD. It found that 74% of the people shot by police from 2008-2015 were black, and police unions often kept a "code of silence" on would-be whistleblowers.²² Finally, lines 28-29 wrap up with how all of this causes blacks to turn on each other, as whites and blacks, though less educated than migrant blacks, will think of them as uneducated.²³

¹⁷ Ibid., 310.

¹⁸ Ibid., 232.

¹⁹ Ibid., 272.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 274.

²² Monica Davey and Mitch Smith, "Chicago Police Dept. Plagued by Systemic Racism, Task Force Finds," *New York Times*, April 13, 2016, accessed November 26, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/14/us/chicago-police-dept-plagued-by-systemic-racism-task-force-finds.html>.

²³ Wilkerson, *WOOS*, 261-65.

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