

# Racial Etiquette: The Racial Customs and Rules of Racial Behaviour in Jim Crow America

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Most southern white Americans who grew up prior to 1954 expected black Americans to conduct themselves according to well-understood rituals of behaviour. This racial etiquette governed the actions, manners, attitudes, and words of all black people when in the presence of whites. To violate this racial etiquette placed one's very life, and the lives of one's family, at risk.

Blacks were expected to refer to white males in positions of authority as "Boss" or "Cap'n"--a title of respect that replaced "Master" or "Marster" used in slave times. Sometimes, the white children of one's white employer or a prominent white person might be called "Massa," to show special respect. If a white person was well known, a black servant or hired hand or tenant might speak in somewhat intimate terms, addressing the white person as "Mr. John" or "Miss Mary."

All black men, on the other hand, were called by their first names or were referred to as "Boy," "Uncle," and "Old Man"--regardless of their age. If the white person did not personally know a black person, the term "nigger" or "nigger-fellow," might be used. In legal cases and the press, blacks were often referred to by the word "Negro" with a first name attached, such as "Negro Sam." At other times, the term "Jack," or some common name, was universally used in addressing black men not known to the white speaker. On the Pullman Sleeping cars on trains, for example, all the black porters answered to the name of "boy" or simply "George" (after the first name of George Pullman, who owned and built the Pullman Sleeping Cars).

Whites much preferred to give blacks honorary titles, such as Doctor, or Professor, or Reverend, in order to avoid calling them Mister. While the term "nigger" was universally used, some whites were uncomfortable with it because they knew it was offensive to most blacks. As a substitute, the word "niggra" often appeared in polite society.

Black women were addressed as "Auntie" or "girl." Under no circumstances would the title "Miss." or "Mrs." be applied. A holdover from slavery days was the term "Wench," a term that showed up in legal writings and depositions in the Jim Crow era. Some educated whites referred to black women by the words "collared ladies." Sometimes, just the word "lady" was used. White women allowed black servants and acquaintances to call them by their first names but with the word "Miss" attached as a modifier: "Miss Ann," "Miss Julie" or "Miss Scarlett," for example.

This practice of addressing blacks by words that denoted disrespect or inferiority reduced the black person to a non-person, especially in newspaper accounts. In reporting incidents involving blacks, the press usually adopted the gender-neutral term "Negro," thus designating blacks as lifeless and unknown persons. For example, an accident report might read like this: "Rescuers discovered that two women, three men, four children, and five Negroes were killed by the explosion."

In general, blacks and whites could meet and talk on the street. Almost always, however, the rules of racial etiquette required blacks to be agreeable and non-challenging, even when the white person was mistaken about something. Usually it was expected that blacks would step off the sidewalk when meeting whites or else walk on the outer street side of the walk thereby "giving whites the wall." Under no circumstances could a black person assume an air of equality with whites. Black men were expected to remove their caps and hats when talking with a white person. Those whites, moreover, who associated with blacks in a too friendly or casual manner ran the risk of being called a "nigger lover."

Blacks and whites were not expected to eat together in public. It was okay for blacks to enter a restaurant to buy food to take out or to stand at the end of a lunch counter until their order was taken. Usually, they would then leave and wait outside for their food to be brought to them. Some places

allowed blacks to eat in the kitchen. Nor were black customers always allowed to use store implements such as plates or dishes or even boxes. Black customers commonly brought their own tin pails and buckets to be filled.

The white owners of clothing stores did not allow blacks to try on clothing as a general rule, fearing that white customers would not buy clothes worn by African Americans. Some stores did allow blacks to put on clothing over their own clothes or to try on hats over a cloth scarf on their heads. Shoes were never tried on as a general rule, but most white clerks did allow exact measurements to be made. In most towns, black customers knew which stores could be expected to treat them with respect while not breaking the rules of racial etiquette.

Many public places, parks, and entertainment centres excluded blacks altogether after 1890, frequently by law if not by custom. Signs were often posted equating blacks with animals: "Negroes and dogs not allowed." In some communities blacks could attend public performances but only by using separate entrances in the back or via an alley. In public halls, theatres, and movie houses, they always sat upstairs in the so-called "nigger heaven" or "buzzard roost." Even the annual state fairs would have a "collared day", allowing the black population to attend only on that specific day.

Law rather than custom separated the races in public transportation, but local habits of racial etiquette usually determined how the statutes were implemented. Some towns and municipalities put blacks in the rear of the streetcars while others required them up front where they could be watched by the car's operator. Custom did not allow motormen or conductors to assist black women with bags or parcels. Some municipal codes required blacks to be seated from the front to the rear while others allowed blacks to sit anywhere they wanted in the black section. In general, it was expected that blacks would give up their seats to white passengers during peak or crowded times.

Some towns required separate entrances to public buildings with blacks using one entry and whites another. In most cases, white clerks in stores and ticket stands always served white customers first, although no state or municipal law required this practice. Signs in the black section of waiting rooms at train stations, for example, customarily warned against loafing, spitting, and unacceptable behaviour. No such signs were usually displayed in the white sections. Nor did blacks generally eat in the dining cars on trains, and, if they were allowed to eat there, a drawn curtain separated the one or two "coloured tables" from the rest of the car. These rules did make exceptions, however, for black nurses and nannies who accompanied white children or elderly white people on trains and streetcars.

The colour line and the codes of racial etiquette were also strictly observed in public hospitals, with separate wards for whites and blacks. Black nurses were allowed to minister to whites but not the other way round. If a black person needed an ambulance, for example, a private, black-owned-and-operated wagon or auto would have to be obtained. No exceptions were allowed no matter the extent of the injury or emergency. A similar Jim Crow code of conduct applied even in the U. S. Army. It was not until Eleanor Roosevelt intervened in WWII that black nurses were allowed to care for white soldiers, even though a serious shortage of nurses existed. The black nurses were used prior to Roosevelt's intervention to attend to German prisoners of war rather than U. S. soldiers.

The whole intent of Jim Crow etiquette boiled down to one simple rule: blacks must demonstrate their inferiority to whites by actions, words, and manners. Laws supported this racist code of behaviour—or whenever racial customs started to weaken or breakdown in practice—as they did during the Reconstruction era. When the laws were weakly or slowly applied, whites resorted to violence against blacks to reinforce the customs and standards of behaviour. Indeed, whites commonly justified lynchings and the horrible murders of blacks during the Jim Crow era as defensive actions taken in response to black violations of the colour line and rules of racial etiquette.

## First Account Narratives: Jim Crow Etiquette

Thelma Williams...

On occasion we used to go to the downtown area when my mother went for groceries. Well, the stores were owned by whites and the customers in the grocery stores and the furniture stores and dry-goods stores, I guess, were mixed. One had problems, however, because if you went in, in front of a white customer, you were very likely to be told to wait until after that white customer was served. I've not really witnessed that, but I've heard it so often, that I'm sure it happened. Now for clothing, we would be carried in to the store, fitted and we would come out. I was not aware of the fact that wherever we were fitted the clothing was probably segregated. I know it was for adults. So it probably was for children too. So if you went into a store to buy a dress. If you were allowed to try it on, and sometimes you were not allowed to try it on, but if you were allowed to try it on you might well be taken into a supplies closet as opposed to their regular dressing room where they allowed white customers to be served.

There were these hard separation lines that you simply did not cross. Streetcars, buses, whatever they were in those days. The signs that Rosa Parks, Mrs. Parks [defied] were all over the south. [The signs directed blacks to sit in the back of the vehicle.] You sit behind this sign. And the sign was moveable, incidentally, on most buses. You could move it up or down, but the signs were there. They had to be small enough for you to move them from one seat to another conveniently. But one sign said colored and the other side said white. [And] the movies? I'm sure you've heard about the movies. and went in [through] a separate door.

Clifford Boxley...

So, I understood this. But, if there was ever a time when I was conscious of unfairness or what have you, it's when you are confronted with the first line of the oppressive system, the white police. That's your greatest fear. That's where your greatest trouble is going to come from. Or, from some "redneck" white men. You had to be very skilful and concerned, especially with shady-type white men, you know. You could discern which ones, you could tell them, you knew the type ... you know the typical ... come right up off the plantation, the overseer type. You know, dirty, unshaven, speech bad, teeth nasty or missing--those kinds of things. You don't want no action there.

So, you don't mess with white women. You don't talk back to white women. You don't sass white women. You don't even find yourself in the presence of white women alone, okay? I can work in the drug store and have a discussion with Ms. Alma, the woman who was in there. Or Glen, who is a young high school boy just like I am working there--but he's got a better position. Ms. Alma is in charge, and you talk, you know, about the issues of work. The floor is dirty, there is dust on the products, and what have you. But, you don't talk about sex. You don't talk about religion. You don't talk about politics. You don't talk about any of these things. Whether you considered that to be unfair or not, it's not a fair question, because it's not a question of our childhood.

We had to walk to school, so, you're talking about being able to survive in this Jim Crow jungle as a very young child. Skilful, skilful. If you had any money, you could catch the bus to a certain distance. You had to get in the back. You go in, and you put your little three cents or penny, whatever it is, and if the bus is full of whites, because up front whites are sitting on the bus. Your seats are all the way in the back. If it's full of whites all the way down the aisle, you put your penny or three cents in and get off the bus and go to the back door. You go to the back of the bus. If the seats are full of blacks and there are empty seats up there in the white section, you don't go, you just stand up and hold on and what have you. You don't challenge it. You know what type of communities to go right through. You know when you're interfacing with a white male what psychology to use --depending on the situation-- whether to get the hell out of there or to stand and engage in a submissive form. You knew that the black girls going back and forth to school never should be going home alone. There always was a need for a boy to be with a girl. You knew that, as soon as a white man who might have his eyes on a young black girl came along in an automobile, you were to detain him in some kind of questioning way, while the girls hurried along. All of you stayed together and then, chances are, that you are not going to be bothered.

The Jim Crow norm was to say, "Yes Ma'am," and "No Sir," especially to whites here in Natchez, Mississippi. In 1955, I dropped out of school and went to work at Gilbert's Drugstore. I used to deliver drugs all over Natchez for \$18 a week, riding a bicycle for six and a half days a week. I would never say, "Yes Ma'am" and "No Ma'am" to the whites when I went to deliver the drugs. I remember there was a cleaners down at the end of Main Street, Days Cleaners. I went to take some drugs down there, and I didn't say "Yes Ma'am" to the lady, and she called and tried to get me fired.

But then, there were times in growing up here in Jim Crow Natchez where you had to use survival psychology, especially when you came in contact with the frontline oppressors, the police. We call it "black psychology." That's the time when I would grin, shuffle, say "Yes Sir" or "No Sir," look down. All of those things that said that you were inferior, you know. But, that was a survival tactic. Even at a very young age, we understood how to survive in a racist and very violent system. You know, oppression that was supported by police and mob violence that very clearly delineated what your movements could be, what the codes of social relationships were between white and black, and the demand that blacks be submissive to white dominance. For example, the police represented the possibility of death, a beating, or jail, the works. So, you gave the stereotypical response to the police in order to avoid to being subjected to any of this horrific kind of treatment that could come down on you.

Ralph Jennings ...

He [my father] had also told us that one of the few ways that you are going to be sure to keep people away from you and from bothering you is to make them feel your intelligence without insulting them, and let me give you an idea of how we did it. I remember a friend--young lady of mine and I--were rather young. I don't remember being large enough to be standing above the counter on which clothing was placed, but she and I went into the store and we were shopping for her mother's birthday. No clerk was devoting any time to us, so we decided we'd see if we could get the clerk's attention. So we started looking at the lingerie. Now, here I am a black boy and young black lady looking at lingerie and discussing whether or not it was large enough for her mother. But when we described it, we called it "Lon jer ay"(heavy French accent). There's a heavy French residue in this community, and her (his friend) name was Mazique incidentally, which is a French name--Mamie Mazique. We watched the clerks as they paled and then flushed while we were discussing this, so we knew we had their attention. We knew that they were aware that we were there, but never came to serve us. While she and I did that, I later realized that this was one of those examples that my father was talking about. Make sure that persons feel you without insulting, without giving them an excuse for harming, and this was one of those times. We finally got served, but those were not the items we were really interested in. But we were concerned that we would not be served and that the memory of that still resides.

Fred Page...

Now when you went in the bus stations and things like that, they had different sides. One side for the colored, and one side for the whites. In the center that's where you bought all your tickets and checked in all your luggage. But as you checked in your luggage, you could look at other people face to face.

When you got on the buses, they had this Jim Crow sign there. A black banner in between you, so you go to the back of the bus, and as the bus fills up with more people, you move into the front, and the banner moves up, always separating you from the whites. You let all the white people ride in the front. We all got off the same place but went through separate doors. I would say, in certain ways, it would be a little difficult to deal with if you had never grew up from childhood with this different type of atmosphere. You had a lot of different things to think about.

I worked two weeks, and I said this isn't going to work. So she raised me to \$25 and then she raised me to \$30. But let me say this: we're talking about Jim Crow. You know when you're talking to them (white people), you pull off your hat. You talk to her, you still got to get that hat off because she asks what's wrong; you pull that hat off, you know, just put it right there like this (hat in front of him), and you listen. When I started working in the State of Mississippi, blacks weren't even allowed to stand at the commissary with whites in the state. I wasn't quite used to that, and everyone you talked to is "yas 'em" and "no 'em" and "yas 'em" giving that high honor, you know. And I started saying, "yes" and "no", but I soon got out of that. In a couple of weeks I blended back down to "Yas" and "no's'm," that sort of thing.

Edith Veitch Farris...

My family's next move was to Miami, Florida, in 1948. Like in Kentucky, the schools and all public facilities were segregated. One late afternoon after school, I decided to treat myself to a bus ride home instead of the usual long walk. I waited quite a while for the correct number bus to my neighborhood, and, finally, it arrived. I waved it down, and, once the doors opened allowing me to enter, I saw that the driver was a white man with a shocked look on his face. I couldn't imagine what was wrong for him to look at me in that way, so I ignored him, dropped my money in the fare box, and turned to find a seat. Every passenger on the nearly full bus was black, and all were looking at me. I walked down the aisle looking for a seat until I got about a third of the way and saw an empty seat by the window. The lady sitting on the aisle by the empty seat smiled a huge, happy smile at me and said, "Here, Honey, you just squeeze right on into that seat by me." I did, and she started asking me about school and my life, and I chattered gaily to her until I came to my stop. During our conversation, I heard a man seated behind and across the aisle from us say, "Why don't she git on her own bus?" I looked back at him, puzzling over what he meant, and the lady said, "Don't you mind him, Honey. He dont know no better." When I got home, I told my mother about the nice Negro lady and what the Negro man had said. My mother said, "Florida isn't like California. Florida is a southern state, so it's segregated, and you got on a Negro bus."

Nobuo Honda...

I got on a Greyhound bus in Atlanta, heading for Fort Benning, Georgia. Growing up in Hawaii, when my friends and I used to ride the bus, we liked to be in the back. We'd fool around and have a lot of fun back there, and the bus driver would leave us alone. So, when I got on the bus in Atlanta, I naturally headed to my spot in the back of the bus. The bus was quite empty when we started, but as we traveled through the rural roads toward Fort Benning, we began to pick up many African Americans. At one point, the bus driver noticed that the bus was filling up, and he stopped the bus along the side of the road. He looked to the back of the bus where he saw me sitting in the last row.

All of a sudden he stood up and waved, motioning to me, signifying to sit in the front of the bus. He said, "Soldier, come here." I had no idea what he wanted. When I reached him, he pointed to a seat up toward the front and said, "Soldier, you sit here." Being new to the United States, I did not want to argue with the bus driver so even though I didn't know the reason, I acquiesced to his order. After a few minutes sitting up front, I began to realize what was happening--that I was in the American South where they have different rules and regulations where Blacks all sit in the back of the bus. Not wanting to cause any disturbances, I just obeyed the customs and the rules of the American South. When I got off the bus in Fort Benning, I had to choose between the black and white bathrooms. Not being black or white, I nevertheless made the conscious choice to go to the white bathroom. After having been scolded by the bus driver, I didn't want to get into any more trouble. That was my first introduction to Jim Crow in the South, but not to discrimination.

Joe Holloway...

I remember that we stopped somewhere in central Texas at a Texaco gas station that also sold food and other items. For some reason, I don't recall now why, we all walked into the station's diner and took a seat to eat. The manager immediately came over and said, "Sir, excuse me."

My uncle answered, "Yes sir."

"We don't serve your kind."

"You mean you don't want our business?"

"No, I mean we don't serve or sell to niggers here at the table. You all have to go around the side of the station and we serve niggers there." And the more he talked, the more agitated he became with us. "This is Texas. I see your Yankee license plate is from California. You know we kill niggers in this town. Do you know where you are boys? This is the South. Now you all just move your collective ass to the back entrance before I call the police."

"Is it okay for us to buy gas?" my uncle asked.

"Yea, I'll take your money. It's green ain't it?"

"Uh um."

"Then I'm open for business."

As we were walking around the side of the building toward the rear entrance, we stopped to use the restroom. It was a large, clean, fully-equipped bathroom. The owner suddenly ran out of the store and blocked the entrance to the restroom. "Nigger, can't you read the sign? It says 'Whites Only.'"

My uncle asked politely, "Where is the restroom for coloreds?"

"It's there in the middle of the field. See right there, that's the one for niggers."

He had pointed to a cow patch in the middle of the wilderness. I walked to the spot, which was quite a distance from the road, and I kept hearing my Uncle Gus yell for me to watch out for snakes. The "colored" restroom was an old outhouse. The door was hanging off and there were holes throughout. Anyone passing could see everything. It stank and looked horrible.

Willie Wallace...

The big thing on Saturday mornings was the Ritz Theater up here, they had movies with cowboys. They were packed, whites and blacks. Every Saturday morning there was a matinee at these movies, and we would pay 15 cents, and you'd have popcorn and hot dogs. But like I said, we were separated. We went upstairs, the white kids went downstairs. And there was a lot of them downstairs. They were just as packed as we were, on Saturday mornings. I don't remember any other time where you would have blacks and whites in the same building. Now if the movie was something about the North and the South, the rebels and the union soldiers, then when you finished your soda pop, something would be happening, you'd just tip it downstairs. All of a sudden, whap! You'd see it come back upstairs. We'd throw a few cups, they'd throw a few cups back and that was it.

It was the movies, the only place I remember where whites and blacks came together. We didn't play baseball together. We didn't play football together. We'd play black schools in Mississippi. White schools played white schools. There's no other time I remember [when we'd be together], unless we were meeting on the street or something, or shopping at a place downtown. You weren't supposed to be in their neighborhoods. If they caught you, you were going to jail. They would question you and they would beat you. I heard people tell, what are you doing there, you stealing something? So you ain't got no business being in their neighborhood. You knew not to go over there because there's nothing over there for you. It was total separation. I had no idea coming up how we were being treated badly [and] the whites were being treated better because I never went to see a white neighborhood to see how badly we were being treated.

My father was ... he would meet some white guy when we'd go downtown. And I guess one of the things I would hate was, he would always say, "Yes sir! No sir!" You know what I mean. I was wondering why he was addressing him as "sir." He would always address them that way, my father would, he'd be "yes sir, no sir," and smile and things like that. [And] my father was just as old as [the white man] was. But ... my parents never did teach us any kind of hate, or anything like that. So I never grew up with any kind of bitterness.

All sources from: [http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/resources/narratives/Theme\\_Etiquette.htm](http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/resources/narratives/Theme_Etiquette.htm)