

# Racial Etiquette: The Racial Customs and Rules of Racial Behavior 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 behavior. 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 "colored 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 centers 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, theaters, and movie houses, they always set upstairs in the so-called "nigger heaven" or "buzzard roost." Even the **annual state fairs** would have a "colored 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 behavior. 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 "colored 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 color 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 behavior 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 behavior. 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 color line and rules of racial etiquette.

This Historical Essay was written by Dr. Ronald Davis, a history professor at California State University at Northridge.

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### Learn More

- For more information about lynchings, go to the **lynching map**.
- To read about how Jim Crow Etiquette affected real people, go to the **narratives section**.

### Literature Connections

- Read the excerpt of Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, where she reflects on the one time her grandmother was called "Mrs. Henderson" by a white judge. Think about the feelings that Angelou expresses in relating that episode, and how its inclusion gives a realistic picture of their life in Arkansas.
- Read Richard Wright's *Native Son* and struggle along with Bigger Thomas as he reacts against his world and Jim Crow etiquette, with disastrous consequences.

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