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TKAM Historical Context: Jim Crow and Lynch Mobs

Named after a black-faced character in minstrel shows, “Jim Crow” was the name of the racial caste system which operated primarily, but not exclusively in southern and border states, between 1877 and the mid-1960s. Jim Crow was more than a series of rigid anti-black laws. It was a way of life. Under Jim Crow, African Americans were relegated to the status of second class citizens. Jim Crow represented the legitimization of anti-black racism. Many Christian ministers and theologians taught that whites were the Chosen people, blacks were cursed to be servants, and God supported racial segregation.



Craniologists, eugenicists, phrenologists, and Social Darwinists, at every educational level, buttressed the belief that blacks were intellectually and culturally inferior to whites. Politicians gave speeches on the great danger of integration. Newspaper and magazine writers often referred to blacks as niggers, coons, and darkies; and worse, their articles reinforced anti-black stereotypes. Children's games portrayed blacks as inferior beings. All major social institutions reflected and supported the oppression of blacks.

The Jim Crow system was undergirded by the following beliefs or rationalizations:

- whites were superior to blacks in all important ways, including but not limited to intelligence, morality, and civilized behavior;
- sexual relations between blacks and whites would produce a mongrel race which would destroy America;
- treating blacks as equals would encourage interracial sexual unions; any activity which suggested social equality encouraged interracial sexual relations;
- if necessary, violence must be used to keep blacks at the bottom of the racial hierarchy.

The following Jim Crow etiquette norms show how pervasive these norms were:

- A black male could not offer his hand (to shake hands) with a white male because it implied being socially equal. Obviously, a black male could not offer his hand or any other part of his body to a white woman, because he risked being accused of rape.

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- Blacks and whites were not supposed to eat together. If they did eat together, whites were to be served first, and some sort of partition was to be placed between them.
- Under no circumstance was a black male to offer to light the cigarette of a white female -- that gesture implied intimacy.
- Blacks were not allowed to show public affection toward one another in public, especially kissing, because it offended whites.
- Jim Crow etiquette prescribed that blacks were introduced to whites, never whites to blacks. For example: "Mr. Peters (the white person), this is Charlie (the black person), that I spoke to you about."
- Whites did not use courtesy titles of respect when referring to blacks, for example, Mr., Mrs., Miss., Sir, or Ma'am. Instead, blacks were called by their first names. Blacks had to use courtesy titles when referring to whites, and were not allowed to call them by their first names.
- If a black person rode in a car driven by a white person, the black person sat in the back seat, or the back of a truck.
- White motorists had the right-of-way at all intersections.

Stetson Kennedy, the author of *Jim Crow Guide* (1990), offered these simple rules that blacks were supposed to observe in conversing with whites:

- ☞ Never assert or even intimate that a white person is lying.
- ☞ Never impute dishonorable intentions to a white person.
- ☞ Never suggest that a white person is from an inferior class.
- ☞ Never lay claim to, or overly demonstrate, superior knowledge or intelligence.
- ☞ Never curse a white person.
- ☞ Never laugh derisively at a white person.
- ☞ Never comment upon the appearance of a white female.

The passage of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution had granted blacks the same legal protections as whites. However, after 1877, border states began restricting the liberties of blacks. Unfortunately for blacks, the Supreme Court helped undermine the Constitutional protections of blacks with the infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) case, which legitimized Jim Crow laws and the Jim Crow way of life.

Jim Crow signs were placed above water fountains, door entrances and exits, and in front of public facilities. Here are some of the typical Jim Crow laws:

- **Barbers.** No colored barber shall serve as a barber (to) white girls or women (Georgia).
- **Burial.** The officer in charge shall not bury, or allow to be buried, any colored persons upon ground set apart or used for



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the burial of white persons (Georgia).

- **Buses.** All passenger stations in this state operated by any motor transportation company shall have separate waiting rooms or space and separate ticket windows for the white and colored races (Alabama).
- **Education.** The schools for white children and the schools for negro children shall be conducted separately (Florida).
- **Militia.** The white and colored militia shall be separately enrolled, and shall never be compelled to serve in the same organization. No organization of colored troops shall be permitted where white troops are available and where whites are permitted to be organized, colored troops shall be under the command of white officers (North Carolina).
- **Nurses.** No person or corporation shall require any White female nurse to nurse in wards or rooms in hospitals, either public or private, in which negro men are placed (Alabama).
- **Teaching.** Any instructor who shall teach in any school, college or institution where members of the white and colored race are received and enrolled as pupils for instruction shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and upon conviction thereof, shall be fined... (Oklahoma).



The Jim Crow laws and system of etiquette were undergirded by violence, real and threatened. Blacks who violated Jim Crow norms, for example, drinking from the white water fountain or trying to vote, risked their homes, their jobs, even their lives. Whites could physically beat blacks with impunity. Blacks had little legal recourse against these assaults because the Jim Crow criminal justice system was all-white: police, prosecutors, judges, juries, and prison officials. Violence was instrumental for

Jim Crow. It was a method of social control. The most extreme forms of Jim Crow violence were lynchings.

Lynchings were public, often sadistic, murders carried out by mobs. Between 1882, when the first reliable data were collected, and 1968, when lynchings had become rare, there were 4,730 known lynchings, including 3,440 black men and women. Most of the victims of Lynch Law were hanged or shot, but some were burned at the stake, castrated, beaten with clubs, or dismembered. Lynching was used as an intimidation tool to keep blacks, in this case the newly freed people, "in their places."

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Many whites claimed that although lynchings were distasteful, they were necessary supplements to the criminal justice system because blacks were prone to violent crimes, especially the rapes of white women. Arthur Raper investigated nearly a century of lynchings and concluded that approximately one-third of all the victims were falsely accused (Myrdal, 1994, p. 561).

Under Jim Crow any and all sexual interactions between black men and white women was illegal, illicit, socially repugnant, and within the Jim Crow definition of rape. Only 19.2 percent of the lynching victims between 1882 to 1951 were even accused of rape. Most blacks were lynched for demanding civil rights, violating Jim Crow etiquette or laws, or in the aftermath of race riots, but 'rape' was a convenient accusation, because *"...a mob which makes the accusation of rape is secure from any further investigation"* (Myrdal pp. 561-562). .



Lynchings were most common in small and middle-sized towns where blacks often were economic competitors to the local whites. These whites resented any economic and political gains made by blacks. Lynchers were seldom arrested, and if arrested, rarely convicted. Raper (1933) estimated that *"at least one-half of the lynchings are carried out with police officers participating, and that in nine-tenths of the others the officers either condone or wink at the mob action"* (pp. 13-14).

Lynching served many purposes: it was cheap entertainment; it served as a rallying, uniting point for whites; it functioned as an ego-massage for low-income, low-status whites; it was a method of defending white domination and helped stop or retard the fledgling social equality movement.

Many blacks resisted the indignities of Jim Crow, and, far too often, they paid for their bravery with their lives.

