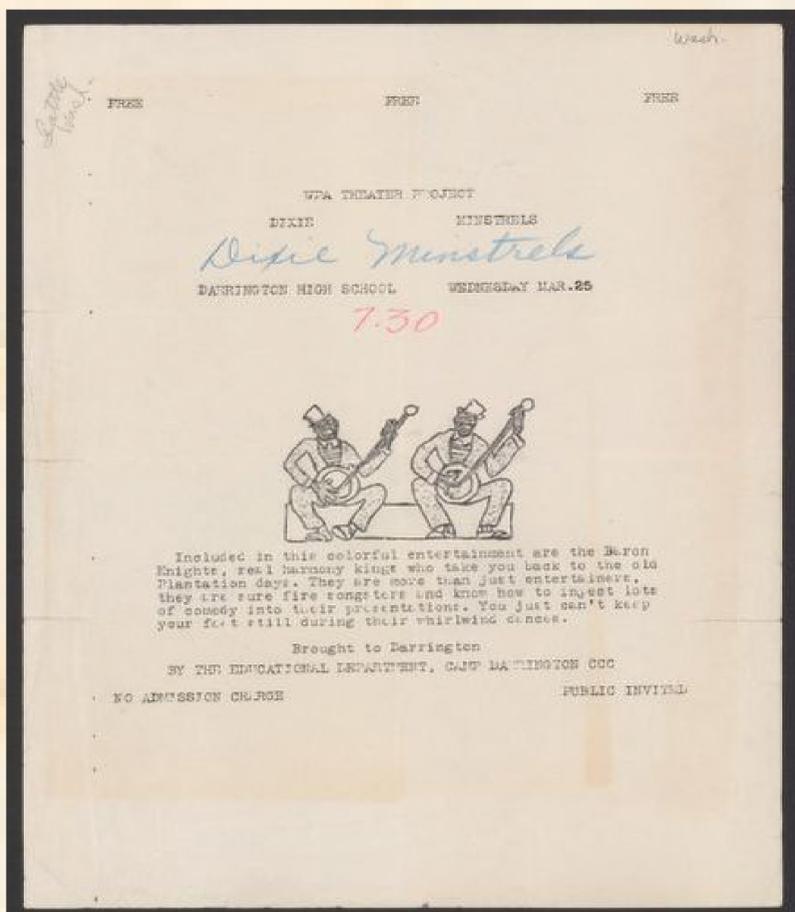


# Jim Crow as Minstrel

Minstrel shows in the United States were a form of entertainment popular from the 1830s to the early 1900s that included racial stereotypes in musical stage shows. The shows were aimed at white audiences and began with white performers blackening their faces, wearing tattered clothing, and acting out negative portrayals of African Americans.



Print entitled “Jim Crow” of Thomas Rice in his “Jim Crow” costume, circa 1833-45. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*



Program for a minstrel show held at Darrington High School circa 1935-39. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

The shows increased in popularity when Thomas Dartmouth Rice created a specific song and dance act he claimed was modeled after an enslaved man. Rice named this persona “Jim Crow” and sang “Negro ditties.” Rice was not the first to act in this manner, but he was the most popular, touring the United States and England.

By the 1840s, minstrel had become so popular that even African American performers had to don blackface to be hired. Though the advent of radio and tv in the 1920s decreased the national following of minstrel, amateur shows continued in community theaters, high schools, and churches as late as the 1960s.

# Blackface and Off-Stage Stereotypes

Blackface was more than just a style of makeup. White performers created characters that drew on negative stereotypes about African Americans that overtime solidified the connection between racism and entertainment. These stereotypes were one dimensional: lazy, ignorant, arrogant, stupid, loyal, thieves, superstitious, cowardly. On screen, popular actors including Shirley Temple, Bing Crosby, Judy Garland, and Fred Astair wore blackface.



A cigarette lighter from 1936 with blackface imagery and stereotypes, including servitude. Public domain image.



Al Jolson performing in *The Jazz Singer* (1927) in blackface. Public domain image.

Blackface stereotypes appeared in material culture throughout United States society. These caricatures included dark skin, exaggerated large white or red lips, and other disproportionately sized features. They appeared on bowls, glasses, salt and pepper shakers, ads for food, lawn ornaments, ash trays, and fishing lures among many others.

Blackface's popularity extended even into animation, where characters became minstrels themselves. The 'trickster' aspect to many cartoon characters, the plasticity of their bodies, and their apparent lack of pain were all easily recognizable aspects of the minstrel show. Early Walt Disney cartoons (including those starring Mickey Mouse) and Bugs Bunny cartoons exemplify the cartoon-as-minstrel. Both popular characters also appeared in blackface.

# Jim Crow as Segregation Laws

Jim Crow stereotypes were used to support segregation laws, or “Jim Crow Segregation.” This was de jure – by law – segregation present in the United States from the 1870s until the 1960s. Despite the 14th and 15th amendments passed to prevent discrimination, Supreme Court rulings created legal precedent for segregation.

The most famous of these cases was Plessy v. Ferguson, which revolved around a Louisiana law segregating train cars and Homer A. Plessy, an African American man who purposefully sat in white train cars. During Plessy’s trial the court made its “Separate but Equal” ruling, stating if the segregated accommodations were equal to each other, segregation was not discrimination and was legal.



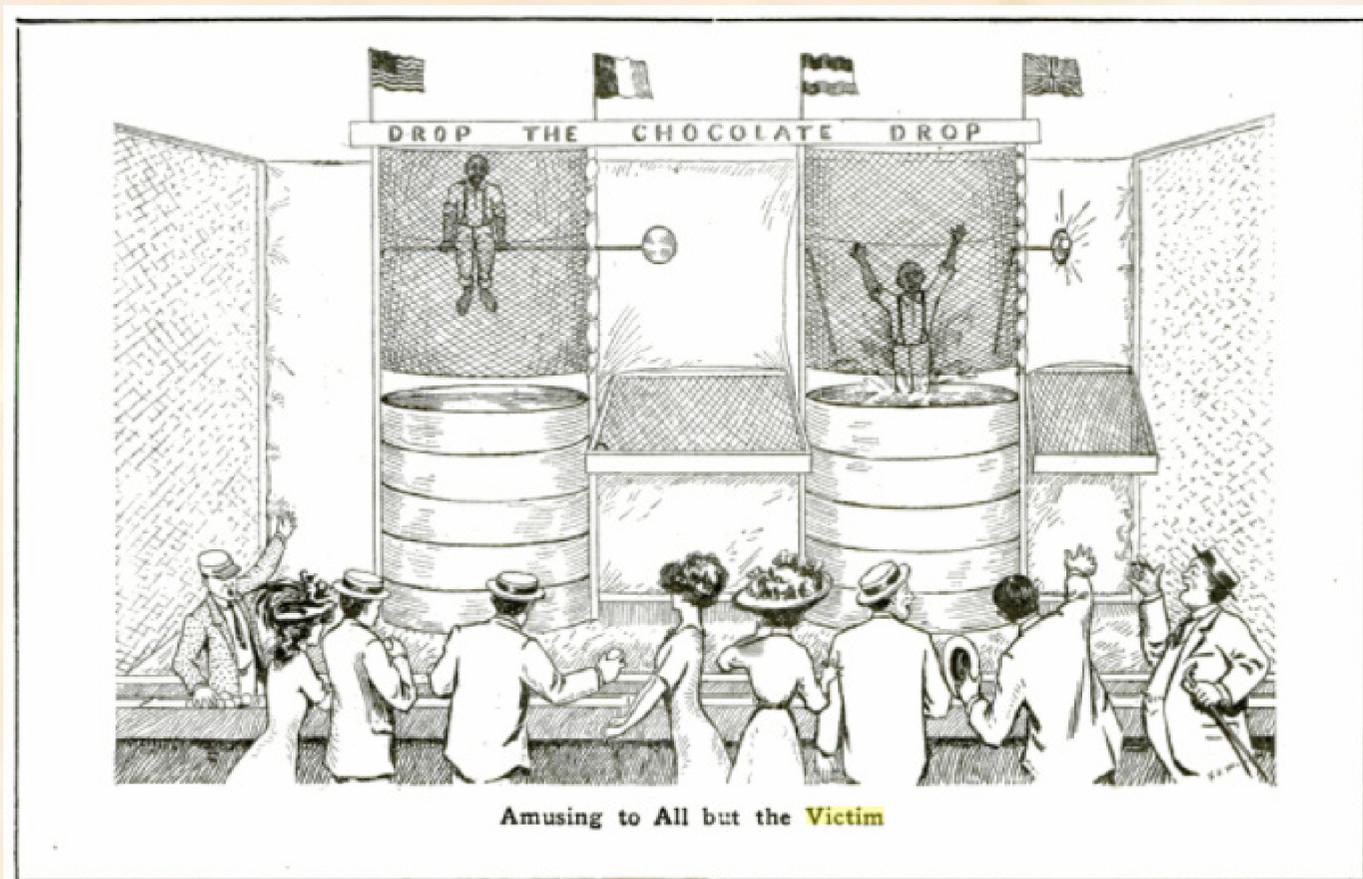
The sign for a segregated waiting room at a bus station in Durham, NC.  
*Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

This case opened the floodgates for legal segregation. Laws followed which restricted educational, economic, and personal options for African Americans. Under state laws, African Americans could not serve as barbers to whites, be buried in the same cemetery as whites, or attend the same blind wards as whites.

# Jim Crow as Segregated Society

Along with laws, social customs enforced segregation. This was de facto segregation and was the social hierarchy inherited from the period of enslavement which put whites firmly on top within society. Existing side by side throughout the U.S., de facto and de jure segregation sustained and enforced each other.

De facto segregation defined “acceptable” African American behavior. African Americans could not: be introduced to whites, shake hands with whites, address whites by first name, act smarter than whites, or claim a white person had lied, among many others. African American couples were also not allowed to show affection in public.



This illustration, captioned “Amusing to all but the victim” shows an early version of a dunk tank which employed only African American men to be dunked. *Courtesy of Popular Mechanics, 1910 on Google Books.*

De facto segregation enforced the idea of African Americans as “lesser” through entertainment. Carnival “target” games used African American men as targets for white participants to hit. Cards and board games used caricatured dehumanizing images of African Americans, while puzzles referred to images of African Americans as “chopped up.”

# Jim Crow as Violence

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth century lynching was primarily used as white-on-white crime control. In the 1830s lynching became synonymous with hanging and began to shift towards violence against African Americans. After 1900 the ratio of African American lynching victims to white victims was 17:1.



This flag hung from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's offices in New York City from 1920-38 as a form of protest. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

At this point, lynching was a systemic effort to subjugate any African American who stepped outside their “place” not as a “justice” tool. Lynching was upheld as necessary on the grounds that it protected white women from sexual assault despite the fact that only twenty-five percent of lynching victims were even accused (not convicted) of rape.

White communities often participated in lynchings, as crowds gathered to watch hours of torture and eventual deaths. These crowds would take ‘memorabilia’ from the lynching including bits of rope or even body parts, and the U.S. Postal service permitted postcards with images of lynchings until 1908 when they were made illegal with an amendment to the Comstock Act.

# Case Study: The Red Summer “We Return Fighting”

The Red Summer of 1919 lasted nearly the entire year and saw ninety-seven lynchings, twenty-five race riots, and a three-day massacre in Elaine, AK. These atrocities occurred as African American veterans returned home from WWI and African American workers began to unionize. Most incidents happened between March and November, and most of these attacks focused on keeping African Americans in their ‘place.’

Riots in D.C. and Chicago saw white mobs attacking African American neighborhoods, and returning African American veterans defended their communities. Millen, GA was the site of a race riot from April 13-15, when white mobs burned the African American church, black masonic lodges, hunted Joe Ruffin, and lynched his two sons and his friends.

Whites saw returning veterans as a threat to the racial order as African Americans who had served with distinction in WWI expected respect for their valor and sacrifices at home. Over the year of 1919 thirteen African American men were lynched wearing their United States Military uniforms.



Newspaper headline from *Macon Daily Telegraph*, April 14, 1919. Courtesy of the University of Georgia libraries.

# African American Response: Art as Critique

While their communities were being attacked, African American activists and artists brought the violence to the attention of the nation. Music like Billie Holiday's *Strange Fruit*, poetry including Claude McKay's "If We Must Die," the writings of WEB Dubois and Ida B Wells, and art from sculpture to paintings made the lynching epidemic a national issue.

Artist Meta Fuller was one of the first African American artists to depict the brutality of lynching. During the violence of 1919, she created a sculpture depicting a woman, Mary Turner, and an infant rising from the flames of a lynch mob. Turner, a pregnant woman, had been brutally lynched the year before in Georgia for denouncing her husband's murder.

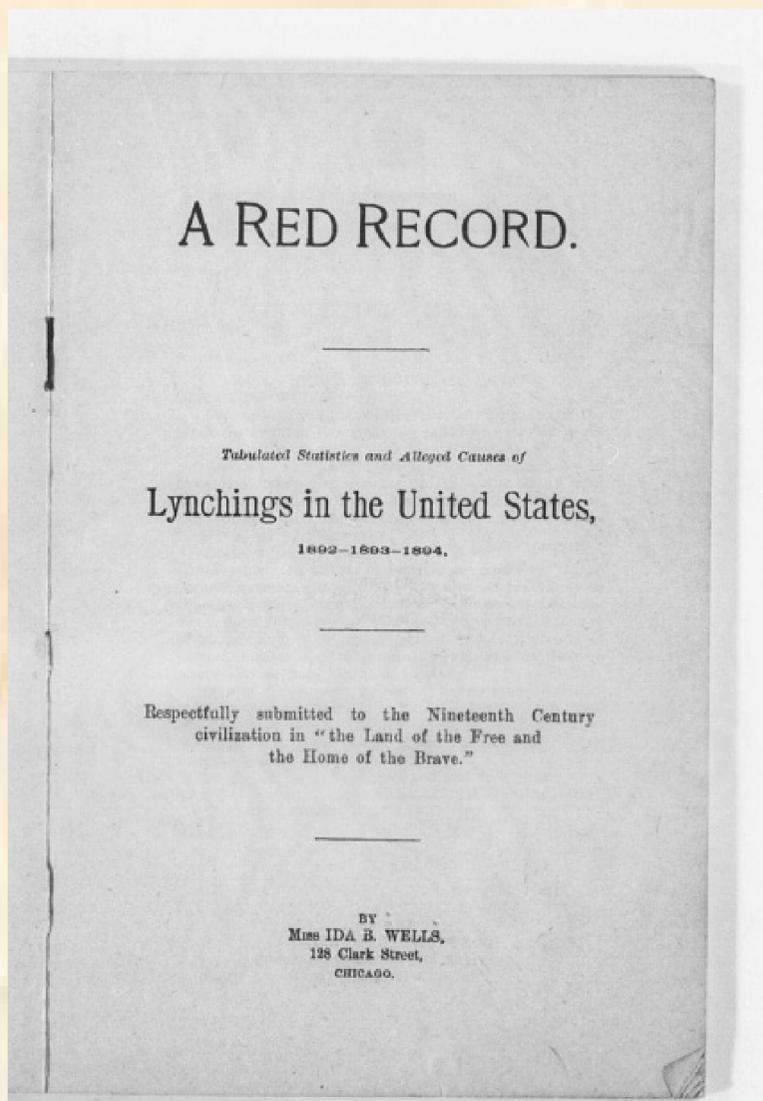
Meta Fuller's *Mary Turner: A Silent Protest Against Mob Violence*, a sculpture done after the 1918 lynching of Mary Turner. *Courtesy of Museums of African American History Boston and Nantucket.*

All of this art critiqued what was happening, often by bringing Jim Crow violence directly into the mainstream. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons headquarters in New York City hung a flag reading "A Man was Lynched Yesterday" from their building from 1920 to 1938 forcing passersby to confront the often-ignored fact.



# Art As Action

Other critiques called for direct action. WEB Dubois encouraged returning WWI veterans to continue the 'fight for democracy' in the country that disenfranchised and imperiled them. The ending line of Claude McKay's poem, written in July 1919, is, "Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!" After WWI membership in the National Association for the Advancement for Colored Persons increased at an unprecedented rate.



Ida B. Wells compiled statistics on lynching and included them in her reporting, using the facts she uncovered to disprove lynching as a 'protection' for white women. Wells also was among the voices calling for an Anti-lynch law. In 1918, Leonidas Dyer, a republican representative from Missouri introduced an anti-lynch bill to congress.



Four Southern senators (from left to right: Tom Conley, TX, Walter George, GA, Richard Russel, GA, and Claude Pepper, FL) who used the filibuster to block an anti-lynching bill in 1938. *Courtesy of the Library of Congress.*

Left: Cover Page of Ida B. Wells' "A Red Record" lynching report. *Courtesy of Library of Congress.*

Perhaps the unmitigated violence and horror of the Red Summer, followed by other race riots including the Tulsa Massacre in 1921, convinced representatives the bill was necessary, for it passed the House on January 26, 1922. It then died on the floor of the Senate during a filibuster by Southern Democrats. There have been other anti-lynching bills introduced over the decades, and none have passed.

# Further Resources

- Equal Justice Initiative's *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*
- Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University (virtual tours and website)
- *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* by Nicholas Sammond
- *Red Summer: The Summer of 1919 and the Awakening of Black America* by Cameron McWhirter
- Visualizing the Red Summer website, <https://visualizingtheredsummer.com/>
- Knoxville's Red Summer: The Riot of 1919 on YouTube
- The Tulsa Race Riot by Emory University, on YouTube
- "After a Summer of Racial Violence Across the U.S., a Century of Neglect," August 31, 2019, The New York Times
- Meta Warrick Fuller Profile on Unladylike2020 series on PBS, <https://unladylike2020.com/profile/meta-warrick-fuller/>
- The Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller Collection at The Danforth Art Museum at Framingham State University <https://danforth.framingham.edu/exhibition/meta-fuller/>
- Claude McKay profile and poems on Poetry Foundation <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/claude-mckay>
- Text of the Dyer Anti-lynching bill (1918), NAACP website <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/legislative-milestones/dyer-anti-lynching-bill>
- Text of the Wagner-Costin Anti-lynching bill (1934), NAACP website <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/legislative-milestones/costigan-wagner-bill>
- "For 100 years, the filibuster has been used to deny Black rights," March 18, 2021 *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/03/18/100-years-filibuster-has-been-used-deny-black-rights/>

# Content Warning

This exhibit contains images and discussions of extreme racism and violence. We believe that these images are educational when used to illustrate the extreme nature of the bigotry and inhumanity of the period, but they are very upsetting to witness. Please be advised before viewing.

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