

Knowing Their Space: Signs of Jim Crow in the Segregated South

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Figure 1
Peter Sekaer, Movie Theater, Anniston,
Alabama, 1935-6. Courtesy of Peter
Sekaer estate.



"They had black, well it was "colored" back then, on one side and "white" on the other, and we had our place on the bus, we had our water fountains for coloreds and our bathrooms for coloreds . . . we figured that's just the way it's supposed to be."¹

"Jim Crow" was a character portrayed by the black-face minstrel, Thomas "Daddy" Rice, whose stage performances in the 1830s and 1840s typified many whites' view of African-Americans throughout the nineteenth century. Jim Crow segregationist signs, believed to have been named for this character, are emblematic of southern white leaders' unrelenting effort to enforce African-American subservience after slavery was outlawed.² Spread across a vast region of the southern United States, these visual communications systems confirmed the re-marginalization of African Americans in the aftermath of the Civil War and subsequent Reconstruction. Four generations of Southern blacks endured Jim Crow laws; only now, some 50 years after the height of the Civil Rights Movement, are scholars beginning to examine the ubiquitous signage that kept this system of oppression in place.³ Although these Jim Crow signs have

1 "Oral History Interview with Sheila Florence, January 20, 2001, Interview K-0544. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007)," http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/K0544/excerpts/excerpt_1126.html (accessed September 01, 2008).
2 Robert R. Weyeneth, "Architecture of Racial Segregation: The Challenges of Preserving the Problematical Past," *The Public Historian* 27 (Fall 2005): 11-44.
3 Elizabeth Abel, *Signs of the Times*, (Berkeley: University of California, 2010).

begun to be considered in spatial and semiotic terms, an important alternative is to view them through the lens of design history. Design historians have paid scant attention to Jim Crow signs as artifacts, or as parts of processes or systems, but doing so illuminates important aspects of the signs' function and appearance, examining how their style made them meaningful and authoritative. Even more important, when recognized as a feature of communication design history, they remind us how often design is used to enforce social regulation (see Figure 1).

To many blacks and whites living in the South, racial stratification might have seemed "just the way it's supposed to be." However, segregation and the signs that expressed it were consciously legislated and designed. Moreover, just as they were rarely considered by contemporary scholars and social critics of the time, they are rarely examined by design historians today. Nevertheless, these signs can also be read as an early and practical example of *wayfinding*. These signs confirm how design—whether of individual letterforms and or of complete signage systems—must always be involved in critical discourses of social, economic, and political power.

A Missing Design Legacy?

Jim Crow signs existed in the United States for nearly a century, but the signs themselves have utterly disappeared from public spaces. Even documentation of their once ubiquitous presence is rare. After scouring private and public archives, scholar Elizabeth Abel has uncovered little more than 100 photographs of these signs.⁴ As Abel suggests, both the signs and the photos of them might have been destroyed after Jim Crow laws were overturned; most likely many of them were simply thrown away.

One likelihood is that the very ubiquity of such signage has worked against our remembering it today. As Abel notes, Jim Crow signs were considered "about as worthy of documentation as telephone poles or traffic signs, and typically appear, if at all, only in the background of the places or events whose documentation was the primary goal."⁵ Despite their once pervasive presence in the American South, the little visual documentation left has led design historians to overlook this aspect of visual communications history. Nevertheless, Jim Crow signs illustrate how maps, signs, and other wayfinding devices, while providing critical information, also can pervade our consciousness and subconsciousness and subtly shape our choice of action.

Understanding Wayfinding

An outgrowth of urbanism and mass transportation, large-scale wayfinding systems have emerged in the postwar period. Architect Kevin Lynch's 1960 publication *The Image of the City* introduced wayfinding as a distinct field of study by analyzing how people

4 Ibid., 107.

5 Ibid.



Figure 2

Esther Bubley, Anonymous, A Greyhound bus trip from Louisville, Kentucky, to Memphis, Tennessee, and the terminals. Sign at bus station, Rome, Georgia, 1943. U.S. Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, LC-USW3- 037939-E.

perceive, remember, think, speak, and solve problems while trying to navigate urban spaces. Building on Lynch's seminal work and noting that wayfinding is anything but static, designer Paul Arthur and architect and environmental psychologist Romedi Passini argue that wayfinding is more than generating a static mental map of a spatial situation: it is a form of spatial problem-solving based on understanding and comprehension. It involves knowing where you are in a building or an environment, identifying where your desired location is, and understanding how to get there. Successful wayfinding systems do not rely on architecture or barriers alone; instead, they require the consistent identification and marking of space. Often seen as essential to the design process, wayfinding today is applied to relatively small-scale projects, including rural hospitals in Nebraska, as well as to the planning of entire cities under construction in the Gulf states. Above all, wayfinding is conceived as a form of communications that guides the movement of large numbers of people, allowing them to perceive, engage and navigate through physical and conceptual space.⁶

Unfortunately in design studies today, wayfinding is a practice-driven field. Designers generally resort to a positivist conception of wayfinding that aims to protect wayfarers from the uncertainty that can occur when, in the words of geographer Reginald Golledge, "even momentary disorientation and lack of recognition of immediate surrounds" causes them to feel lost.⁷ Passini, for instance, emphasizes how "wayfinding difficulties and disorientation are highly stressful even in benign cases when the user of a setting is merely confused or delayed. Total disorientation and the sensation of being lost can be a frightening experience and lead to quite severe emotional reactions including anxiety and insecurity..."⁸

Because wayfinding is deeply infused with an ardent positivism, linking the field with something so loathsome as racial segregation may seem unwarranted or even quixotic. Wayfinding today is intended to help, not hinder, an individual's passage. Arthur and Passini admit that "it is unlikely that a person will actually die from the stress of getting lost." With the result that "we have tended to downgrade this problem as being relatively unimportant."⁹ In this study, I explore Jim Crow signage within the larger design tradition. As theorists like Kevin Lynch and practitioners like Otl Aicher were developing the beginnings of wayfinding thought and systems, this earlier, if only partial, system of wayfinding was being dismantled. Although the Jim Crow system predates the more modern ideas of wayfinding, its function and execution are best understood as an early example of the spatial decision making that wayfinding now represents (see Figure 2). Counter to Arthur and Passini's view, however, segregation signs were, in fact, part of a larger racial caste system that made them a life or death

- 6 With the 1960 publication of *The Image of the City*, (Boston: MIT Press, 1960) architect Kevin Lynch highlighted how individuals perceive, remember, think of, and describe public space. Based on "Perceptual Form of the City," a study funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and conducted at MIT with designer György Kepes from 1954 to 1959, Lynch's analysis of how people perceive, remember, think, speak, and solve problems while trying to navigate urban spaces introduced wayfinding as a distinct field of study.
- 7 Reginald G. Golledge, *Wayfinding Behavior: Cognitive Mapping and Other Spatial Processes* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 5.
- 8 Romedi Passini, "Wayfinding Research and Design," in Jorge Frascara, *Design and the Social Sciences: Making Connections*, (New York: Taylor and Francis Press, 2002), 97.
- 9 Romedi Passini and Paul Arthur, *Wayfinding: People, Signs, and Architecture* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1992), 6.

issue. In the larger design context, segregation signage involves a complex negotiation—both guiding individuals and molding their behavior. Jim Crow signs clearly inscribe space, but what “way” did these signs help people to find?

Space and Jim Crow Geography

As the relatively recent development of critical geography has pushed geographers from studying landscapes and objects to examining the space around them, historians have begun to re-examine notions of segregation in the South. French sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre studied the “production of space” as a largely theoretical construct.¹⁰ A Marxian philosopher, Lefebvre argued that space can be social as well as geographical, and conceptions of space have a cultural and highly changeable basis. Insisting that conceptions of space can deny individuals’ and communities’ “rights to space,” Lefebvre argued for greater understanding of the struggles over and meanings of space. Building on these insights, geographers have begun in the past 30 years to urge an examination of lived experience and the spaces that shape ordinary life.¹¹ In that light, scholars explore the evolution and effect of Southern segregation, noting that it reflects a complex constellation of issues revolving around racialized space. For example, Lawrence Levine suggests that slaves created a metaphorical separate space for their own cultural forms, and that “slave music, slave religion, slave folk beliefs—the entire sacred world of the black slaves—created the necessary space between the slaves and their owners and were the means of preventing legal slavery from becoming spiritual slavery.”¹² Meanwhile, in *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South*, historian Elizabeth Grace Hale argues that segregationists in the twentieth century tried to establish not metaphorical but literal black and white spaces that shaped patterns of living; she sees this landscape of territorialism and exclusion as both driven and challenged by capitalist expansion in the South.¹³ For Hale, “consumer culture created spaces—from railroads to general stores and gas stations to the restaurants, movie theaters, and more specialized stores of the growing towns—in which African Americans could challenge segregation. . . . The difficulty of racial control over the new spaces of consumption, in turn, provoked an even more formulaic insistence on ‘For Colored’ and ‘For White.’”¹⁴

More recently, Elizabeth Abel provides a rich discussion of segregation, examining for instance the “science” of racial difference; in doing so, she considers the Jim Crow signs and the rare WPA photographs that documented them as part of a semiotic system. Looking at archival photographs of the signs today, she argues, “we can chart the changing intersections among a specific disposition of racial terms, the angles of vision they afford, the photographic practices they enlist, the modes of resistance they

10 Indeed, Lefebvre introduces the notion of the production of space as something that “sounds bizarre, so great is the say still held by the idea that empty space is prior to whatever ends up filling it.” Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 15.

11 This notion is linked to the German phenomenological concept that geographers have adopted of *lebenswelt* or “lifeworld.” See J. Eyles, *Sense of Place* (Warrington: Silverbrook Press, 1985) and David Seamon, *Geography of the Lifeworld: Movement, Rest, and Encounter* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979).

12 Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 80.

13 Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage, 1999).

14 *Ibid.*, 125.

galvanize, and the critical perspectives they engage.” While she focuses primarily on photography’s “ostensibly neutral practice of observation,” Abel strives to reveal “a more charged interaction with the cinematic camera, [as well as] a politically engaged photojournalism” that documents this signage. By concentrating on photographs of Jim Crow signs rather than on the signs themselves, Abel’s analysis engages the process and purpose of photography; in so doing, she includes signage as one part of a larger “mode of expression” made by “public officials and private individuals, professional signmakers and amateur scribblers.” She concludes that the photos of Jim Crow signs are a form of “American graffiti.”¹⁵ Meanwhile, the signs themselves, far from being a subversive form of public communication casually scribbled on abandoned walls, represent a particular aspect of a design tradition—one that not only involved intentional design, but that carried a power and intent that can be linked to larger legal systems (see Figure 1).

Jim Crow Law

Jim Crow laws were relatively rare before 1895, when the African-American Homer Plessy lost his Supreme Court suit against the State of Louisiana. Plessy’s lawsuit was intended to bring attention to an 1890 Louisiana law that dictated segregated transport; ironically, the authority and publicity of the Supreme Court judgment helped concretize the concept of “separate but equal” spaces, providing firm legal footing for institutionalized racism in the United States. Southern segregation signs reflect a pervasive patchwork of local and state laws that formed a racialized order throughout the region.

In the decade following the Plessy ruling, state and municipal legislators throughout the South passed a spate of new laws that regulated daily life;¹⁶ these mandates were so pervasive that the phrase “Jim Crow law” first appeared in the *Dictionary of American English* in 1904.¹⁷ Many of the most prominent segregation laws dictated separate spaces on public transportation, including trains, streetcars, and trolleys. By 1909, 14 state legislatures enacted laws in which passengers were assigned separate coaches, compartments, or seats on the basis of race.¹⁸ These laws were first enforced by conductors and ticketing agents, whose duties included maintaining segregated spaces; railroad companies could be fined as much as \$100 a day for violating segregation laws.¹⁹

But Jim Crow legislation did not end there. By the time the United States entered into the First World War, laws in Southern states ordered racial segregation in marriage, education, and health care. Laws also molded the shape of daily life in other ways, as state and local prohibitions prevented different races from renting in the same building and required that movie theaters seat the races separately, that amateur baseball teams play on diamonds

15 See Abel’s first chapter, “American Graffiti: The Social Life of Jim Crow Signs,” 36.

16 For more on Jim Crow laws at the state level, see Pauli Murray (ed.), *States’ Laws on Race and Color* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997).

17 C. Vann Woodward and William S. McFeely, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 7.

18 Richard Henry Boyd (ed.), *The Separate or “Jim Crow” Car Laws* (Nashville: National Baptist Publishing Board, 1909), 6.

19 North Carolina Railroads (ch. 60, art. 12, secs. 94-98, inclusive; secs. 101 and 103, and 135-37, inclusive).



Figure 3
Danny Lyons, Segregated Taxi, Birmingham,
Alabama, 1960, Magnum Photos, NYC16911.

separated by two or more blocks, and that restaurants install partitions at least seven feet high between areas reserved for white and non-white diners.

In the post-Civil War South, reformers argued that transportation, education, and infrastructure would transform this impoverished region. Little did they anticipate, however, that the very trains, street cars, parks and hospitals that these reformers helped introduce and develop would become part of complex systems of racialized wayfaring. The rapid growth of cities like Atlanta shows just how closely Jim Crow segregation followed Southern urbanization. This emblem of the New South also became one of the most segregated cities in the nation. Jim Crow became the very public face of new civic ordinances that extended not only to public spaces under the city's jurisdiction (e.g., parks and libraries), but also to privately-owned ones like saloons and restaurants. Legislation mandated that black barbers could not cut the hair of white women or children under 14, and separate Bibles were required for white and black witnesses in the Atlanta court system. In cities like Atlanta and Birmingham, taxis had to be labeled by race "in an oil paint of contrasting color," and laws stipulated that drivers had to be the same race as their customers (see Figure 3).²⁰

Separation of Public Space in the New South

For whites and blacks, most day-to-day activities in the American South were carried out in racialized space. Mark Schultz notes,

²⁰ Woodward and McFeely, 116.

however, that race relations in the rural (as opposed to urban) South were marked by a “culture of personalism,” which shaped racial interaction on the basis of close relations and custom, rather than on the law.²¹ In these settings, Jim Crow space was rarely labeled; tradition alone, for instance, clearly dictated that blacks were to step aside for passing whites on a sidewalk. Many small towns enforced Saturdays as “Black People’s Day,” when town business districts were given over to weekly shopping trips by African Americans flush with Friday paychecks. County fairs often sold tickets marked “colored” to African Americans, and they would be open to whites on Tuesdays through Fridays, thus leaving Saturdays for blacks. Wilhelmina Baldwin, a teacher from Waynesboro, GA, remembered that the entire town became white after dark: “They also had a curfew for blacks. If you were just a run-of-the-mill black, your curfew was at 9:30. If you were, you know, what they called an educated black, you could stay out ‘til 10:30. If you stayed out beyond 10:30, you had to have a written statement from the chief of police.”²²

Because race relations were relatively settled in less densely populated rural and farming districts, wayfinding systems in these areas were often unnecessary. Most residents living in these small communities were born there, and few feared getting lost, either in physical or social terms. Outsiders who stumbled into small and often isolated towns could read the unwritten signs that signaled segregation. George Butterfield, an African-American Supreme Court judge and then congressman in North Carolina, noted that, “when you live in the South and have been in the South all your life, you could find [places to eat and sleep] instinctively.”²³

Nevertheless, as the towns and cities of the new urbanized South grew, residents encountered unfamiliar problems; here, where strangers could casually meet and interact, traditions were not established. Complex racialized spaces had to be negotiated, and expectations for behavior had to be articulated. Restaurants frequently erected wood screens through their dining rooms, and train cars were sometimes designed with panels that divided carriages into two distinct compartments; in a Virginia courthouse and along a South Carolina swimming shore, ropes separated the black and white sections of the court and the beach.²⁴ And, as architectural historian Tim Weyeneth has demonstrated, large-scale building projects increasingly dictated the terms and conditions of racialized space²⁵ as specifically-designed schools, libraries, hospitals, mental hospitals, homes for the aged, orphanages, prisons, and cemeteries were built across much of the South in the first half of the twentieth century. In Richland County, SC, for instance, the 1940s remodeling of Columbia Hospital by Lafaye and Associates included the construction of a smaller, separate hospital two blocks away from the main, whites-only complex.²⁶ When building such

21 Mark Schultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy: Beyond Jim Crow* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 6.

22 Wilhelmina Baldwin, Duke University archive. See also James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: The New Press, 2005).

23 George Kenneth Butterfield, oral history interview, July 19, 1994, Behind the Veil project, use tape 12, tray C, Tuskegee, AL., Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

24 Weyeneth, 21.

25 For more on exclusion in Southern architecture, see Weyeneth, 13-15.

26 Weyeneth, 16.

completely separate spaces was deemed too costly or otherwise inefficient, structures were commonly designed to include both separate and shared spaces under a single roof. Hospitals, for instance, would have segregated wings, public housing would be divided into separate districts or even units, and public parks were fenced or roped into grounds and facilities designated as “white” or “colored.”

Although no urban planner designed fully segregated cities, architects clearly planned buildings that not only included separate black and white spaces but also ensured segregated routes for finding those spaces. For example, architectural drawings of cinemas designed by Erle Stillwell in North Carolina, reveal not only separate African-American seating areas but also carefully planned systems of diversions, including entrances (for a similar configuration, see Figure 1), and passageways explicitly designed to lead non-whites away from white-designated spaces.²⁷ When Stillwell designed Raleigh’s Ambassador Theater in 1938, he planned for African Americans to enter the building at a side entrance. Patrons climbed a discrete staircase that led them to a landing housing what Stillwell’s plans called the “colored” box office. Up another flight of stairs, African Americans could find toilets, a small room for the use of “colored ushers,” and balcony seats.²⁸

Although the Ambassador Theatre was torn down in 1979, the relatively complex passage by which African Americans entered the movie house from the street, then found the “colored” box office, then found their seats and separate facilities suggests just how byzantine Jim Crow wayfinding could be. Recalling a less carefully planned theater in Waynesboro, GA, Wilhemina Baldwin described exiting a matinee showing of a film in the late 1930s; white patrons insisted on not even seeing African Americans who’d attended the same show. “There was usually nobody there. We’d go to the ticket window, buy our tickets, and go upstairs (to the segregated seating for blacks). And likewise there was nobody there when we would come out. Well, one day there was a little white boy. . . eight or nine years old. . . he was standing there, with his hands across the door. . . and so when we got to the bottom of the steps I said ‘excuse me please.’ He said ‘Niggers can’t come out till the white people get out.’” At least a decade older than the boy, the movie-going Baldwin talked the boy down but recalled seeing other African Americans obeying his directions.²⁹

Blocked doors, the construction of isolated buildings and the erection of barriers were useful but only effective for a limited time to segregationists. Similarly, duplicate architectural features such as entrances, exits, elevators, and stairwells, might have served immediate racist ends. However, if they lacked specific labels to indicate their function, such structural elements lost their significance.

27 *Going to the Show* (www.docsouth.unc.edu/gtts) is a digital library project that documents and illuminates the experience of movie-going in North Carolina between 1896 and 1930. It should be noted that women, too, were segregated from men in a similar way. And, as Elizabeth Abel notes in “Bathroom Doors and Drinking Fountains: Jim Crow’s Racial Symbolic,” *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Spring 1999): 448, court rulings “endors[ing] separate car laws often cited gender separation as a model for racial segregation.” For example, the state Supreme Court of Pennsylvania cited the analogy of the ‘ladies’ car,’ which is ‘known upon every well-regulated railroad’ and whose ‘propriety is doubted by none.’”

28 The pressure to accomplish this separation was clear; as a point of pride, many theaters explicitly advertised themselves as “white” theatres. Those theaters that did admit blacks rarely stated so, but even they abided by norms of racial segregation. If provided at all, seating for African Americans was usually relegated to theater balconies; railings or other barriers were commonly installed to separate shared balconies. For more, see Robert Allen, “Going to the Show: Mapping Moviegoing in North Carolina, Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/gtts/index.html> (accessed November 27, 2010).

29 Oral History Interview with Wilhelmina Baldwin, July 19, 1994, use tape 12, tray C, Tuskegee, AL, Behind the Veil project.

When President Franklin Roosevelt inspected the construction of the Pentagon in Arlington, VA in 1941, he questioned the inclusion of “four huge washrooms placed along each of the five axes.” The astonished president, a native of New York, was informed that Virginia’s segregationist legislation “required as many rooms marked ‘Colored Men’ and ‘Colored Women’ as ‘White Men’ and ‘White Women.’” Military officials, heeding larger issues of waste and inefficiency, ultimately disregarded the local law; signs were never mounted on the doors and the duplicate spaces lost their initial meaning.

Finding the Way to Jim Crow Space

While Arthur and Passini suggest that wayfinding is a form of spatial problem-solving, they insist that successful wayfinding systems do not rely on architecture or barriers alone; instead, they require the consistent identification and marking of space. Without signage, the Pentagon’s Jim Crow bathrooms lost their meaning. Reading the plans of Raleigh’s Ambassador Theater, with its carefully designated “colored box office” and room for “colored ushers,” makes clear how the architect created a labyrinth of passageways that guided African-American customers away from whites. But without labeling, the theater’s maze of passageways would have been incomprehensible.

As a field, wayfinding was in its infancy when Jim Crow laws and signs were at their height. However, as the older Jim Crow signs make clear, by the early twentieth century, public signage could construct complex systems when supported by custom and law. Of course, segregation was so pervasive a system that whites also abnegated a degree of freedom by embracing it. They, too, arranged their shopping around “black days” in town and avoided taking colored taxis. Jim Crow signage dictated both white and black space. The white writer and sociologist Kathryn DuPre Lumpkin recalled, “as soon as I could read, I would carefully spell out the notices in public places. I wished to be certain we were where we ought to be. Our station waiting rooms—‘For Whites.’ Our railroad coaches—‘For Whites.’” White passengers could be ejected from trolleys and buses when they chose to sit in the back rows. Jennifer Roback, for instance, points to the case of J. M. Dicks, a white Augusta, GA ironworker who violated state segregation ordinances by insisting on sitting in the back of a streetcar in May 1900. Arrested by the train’s conductor, Dicks explained to the court “When I got off from work yesterday afternoon I was feeling tough and looking tough. . . . I saw some ladies up ahead and did not want to sit by them looking like I was.”³⁰ Calling the conductor a “d--- fool,” the passenger was faced with a perplexing situation: violating social custom on the one hand or transgressing the law on the other.

30 Jennifer Roback, “The Political Economy of Segregation: The Case of Segregated Streetcars,” *The Journal of Economic History* 46 (December 1986): 902.

Despite the limits that also affected them, whites—especially men—were often accorded a degree of flexibility in infringing on segregated spaces. For example, where African Americans were strictly prohibited from whites-only passenger cars on trains, the colored cars could double as smoking cars (for whites) or as spaces where the white crew could lounge and relax. Ticketed white passengers could pass through the Jim Crow cars, but African-Americans were often prohibited from walking through those set aside for whites. Indeed, public space was often deemed “white” by default, unless otherwise designated.³¹

Even when signage clearly circumscribed white behavior, the legal system often treated white’s infractions lightly. For instance, when a municipal judge heard the case of J. M. Dicks, the Augusta, GA ironworker who insisted on sitting in the colored section of a city street car, the judge publicly belittled the conductor and arresting officers for their lack of judgment and dismissed the case.³² Jim Crow signs dictated the decisions and actions of both black and white Southerners, but there was no doubt who ultimately held power in these situations.

Decision-Making in a Jim Crow World

Especially for African Americans, finding the way to one’s “own” space in the Jim Crow South clearly could be a complex and counter-intuitive process. However, failing at it also carried high stakes. While theorists today describe wayfinding as a process that can keep people from being lost and afraid, in the Jim Crow South, mistaking a turn or using the wrong facilities could result in violence or death.

Passini suggests that wayfinding involves a hierarchy of decision making that begins long before an individual starts to move through space. Choosing a destination—that is, deciding to move from point A to point B—is a high-order decision. The scale of the trip is unimportant; the resolutions to shop at a store down the street or to take a trip across the country both reveal that a high-order decision has been made. In the South, the very choice of where one could and could not go was complex; a host of semi-public spaces (e.g., white churches, beauty parlors or funeral homes) were simply off limits to blacks. Indeed, most African Americans in the rural South relied not only on signs but also on a series of learned codes of conduct, habituated through years of living in racialized space and passed from one generation to the next. This learning was part of what black activist and academic Cleveland Sellers calls a “subtle, but enormously effective, conditioning process. The other people in the community, those who knew what segregation and Jim Crow were all about, taught us what we were supposed to think and how we were supposed to

31 As Tim Weyeneth notes, “much of the time signage was unnecessary because white space was commonly recognized and acknowledged by both races. The white university and the white library had no need to post a sign. No black man traveling to a southern city would seek to stay in its major hotels. In a small town everyone knew that the white doctor did not welcome black patients into his office.” Weyeneth, 14.

32 As a municipal judge, the magistrate who heard the case insisted that he didn’t have the authority to enforce the state-wide segregation law (Augusta at this time was working on a city ordinance to the same effect, but it was still in proposal stages). Roback, 902-3, note 25.

act. They did not teach us with words so much as they taught us with attitudes and behavior. There wasn't anything intellectual about the procedure. In fact, it was almost Pavlovian."³³

As an early, if incomplete, form of wayfinding, the Jim Crow spatial system complicates Passini's theory. In his view, wayfinders make high-order decisions in a sociological vacuum; but unlike Passini's empowered wayfinders, African Americans who understood the shaping of Jim Crow space automatically formed their higher order decisions around Jim Crow exclusion. Certain destinations were automatically off limits; others were simply avoided. Remembering these limitations, Wilhelmina Baldwin recalled how her parents shielded their children, avoiding taking them to public spaces dominated by whites. "There were just certain things that we did not do," she recalled. "For instance, going to wherever we went out of town, they took us. We never had to go to the bus station for anything. Until I got to be 10 years old, they didn't take me to buy shoes. They bought my shoes. And if they didn't fit, they'd take them back and get another size. They bought the clothes for all of us like that. So we didn't get into the stores to have to deal with the clerks and whatnot."³⁴

Planning Action in Jim Crow Spaces

African Americans in the Jim Crow South might have practiced a highly selective decision-making process, but as Passini reminds us, wayfinding involves more than choosing where to go. Having fixed a destination, the wayfarer then begins executing a series of lower level decisions that make that action possible. For most wayfarers, this planning involves designating a route and developing an action plan. Again, African Americans chose their routes with care. Long distance car trips through the South were often experienced as a gauntlet. African American wayfarers needed "exquisite planning," carefully weighing the need to stop for gas and food in segregated gas stations and restaurants, and often driving for three or four days without stopping, loading up on cold cuts and stuffing ice boxes and lard buckets full of ice to provide rudimentary air conditioning.³⁵

Even planning simple routes around one's hometown could be fraught with peril, and many African Americans chose routes that avoided white spaces altogether. As Ralph Thompson recalled, his parents warily planned his childhood visits to Memphis. His mother, for example, took elaborate precautions to sidestep the "things that would be embarrassing, when they couldn't fight back. . . If we went downtown and they had the colored drinking fountain and white drinking fountain, my mother would always tell us to drink water before we left home. So we didn't get caught into drinking water out."³⁶ Dr. Charlotte Hawkins Brown ran the Palmer Memorial Institute, a missionary-funded school in Sedalia, NC, and

33 Cleveland Sellers, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 10.

34 Oral History Interview with Wilhelmina Baldwin, July 19, 1994, use tape 12, tray C, Tuskegee, AL, Behind the Veil Project.

35 Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010), 196.

36 Ralph Thompson interview, *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South*, William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, Robert Korstad (eds.) (New York: The New Press, 2001).

she taught her students to develop action plans that worked around Jim Crow restrictions. Taking her students to the movies, for example, she'd rent the entire cinema for the day and avoid the segregated upper balcony.³⁷ But no amount of careful planning could erase the ubiquitous presence of the signs that shaped the very environment in which African Americans lived their daily lives.

Wayfinding in Action: Lower Order Decisions

Indeed, in the Jim Crow South, signs were used to separate the races on a limited, local level, room by room, seat by seat. Segregation was most tangible when confronted in person, as a wayfarer moved toward his or her destination. Moreover, even if an African-American bus passenger momentarily mixed with white passengers on a crowded platform, that passenger would constantly remain aware of the larger spatial system intended to eventually isolate him or her in a specific section of the bus itself or station.

According to Passini, a journey is begun with a high-level goal but enacted by low-level decisions. Wayfaring, comprising simple actions like "walk down the hall" or "open this door," combines observation of local features (e.g., stairs and doors) with previous acquaintance with a space (e.g., earlier instructions or consultations with a map or guide). As Reginald G. Golledge notes, this navigation can be a "dynamic process," as the wayfarer absorbs information from the environment, his or her original action plan is "constantly being updated, supplemented, and reassigned."³⁸ Finding one's way through streets and intersections or corridors and stairs may seem relatively simple; for most wayfarers, deciding what turn to take or which stair to follow, or choosing whether to continue or to stop and acquire information from the environment is clear and negotiated with relatively little thought. Navigating a route in the Jim Crow South, however, required African Americans to maintain constant vigilance.

Jim Crow signs exerted their most devastating power at precisely this level, consistently challenging and deflecting African Americans' action plans. Indeed, higher level destinations could be chosen while knowing where one would and would not be welcome. However, confronted with "white only" trains and waiting rooms, African-American wayfarers were faced with immediate lower level decisions. Segregation signs in the South filled multiple roles, but in wayfinding terms, they can be broken into two general types: identification signs and directional signs.

Identification Signs

Often called "the building blocks of wayfinding,"³⁹ identification signs mark out spaces by displaying their name or their function. Since the mid-nineteenth century, in rapidly growing cities like New York and London, public signage proliferated, labeling space

37 Charles Weldon Wadlington, Charlotte Hawkins Brown and Palmer Memorial Institute: What One Young African American Woman Could Do (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 186.

38 Golledge, 7.

39 Ibid., 48.

and addressing passersby.⁴⁰ Simple labeling techniques (e.g., posted street names and addresses, room numbering signs, name plates, and other forms of labeling) became ubiquitous in the United States after the Civil War. But the marking of Jim Crow space was more specific and relied on fairly consistent terms of identification. Clearly understood labels like “colored only” and “whites only” were most common, although some relied on more cursory words, such as “white” or “black.” Such signs routinely rerouted travelers.

Directional Signs

Coupled with exclusionary phrases, like “Whites This Way” or an arrow with the words, “Colored Dining Room in Rear,” Jim Crow signs not only identified, but also directed. Usually mounted on walls or placed overhead, directional signs dictated who could drink at which water fountain or where to sit in a restaurant (see Figure 4).

These directives could also be complex, involving a sequential process of multiple decisions, such as entering a train station through the “right” door, buying a ticket at the “right” window, finding the “right” waiting room, moving from that waiting room to the “right” platform, then finding the “right” train car. At this time, signage systems meant to control behavioral actions (e.g., turning left or going up stairs) were still in their infancy. But simple graphic prompts, such as prominent arrows or the Victorian letter jobber’s pointing finger, or manicules still had the power to shape decisions.⁴¹

Jim Crow Laws as Signage: Substance and Make

The Jim Crow system may seem monolithic today, but it was actually held together through a patchwork of legislation, and it varied not only from state to state, but even from town to town. While individual signs could convey an indisputable authority, it took time for them to develop a consistency that would resemble a carefully planned wayfinding system developed by designers. Essentially, segregation signage filled multiple functions; at once, it indicated the existence of laws intended to guide individual behavior, it educated both whites and blacks about where they should and should not be, and it served as references for train conductors, police officers, and other authorities in case of confusion. Some Jim Crow legislation specifically called for signage to be installed and these statutes often dictated such particulars as the size of the lettering, the medium, and the placement. For example, to “promote comfort on street cars,” a 1905 Tennessee law, authorized “large” signs to be kept in “a conspicuous place,” (Acts of Tennessee, Chapter 10 No. 87). Some laws were even more specific. A 1904 Mississippi law, for instance, ordered the size of street car signs to be eight by twelve inches high (Laws of Mississippi, 1904, Chapter 99, 4060).

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- 40 David Henkin, “Word on the Streets: Ephemeral Signage in New York,” *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 195.
- 41 Gillian Fuller, “The Arrow—Directional Semiotics: Wayfinding in Transit,” *Social Semiotics* 12 (2002): 231.
- 42 Acts of Tennessee, Chapter 10 No. 87.
- 43 Laws of Mississippi, 1904, Chapter 99: 4060.
- 44 For example, in order to “promote comfort on streets cars,” a 1905 Tennessee law, authorized “large” signs to be kept in “a conspicuous place,” (Acts of Tennessee, Chapter 10 No. 87). Some laws were even more specific. A 1904 Mississippi law, for instance, ordered the size of street car signs to be eight by twelve inches high (Laws of Mississippi, 1904, Chapter 99, 4060).

Figure 4

Anon. Showing how the colour line was drawn by the saloons at Atlanta, Georgia. 1908, Courtesy of The New York Public Library. www.nypl.org.



local transit authorities, or individual business owners. It was not uncommon for individuals to go beyond the law by creating and placing signs on an ad hoc basis; for instance, no state or local law regulated the race of patrons using a Coca Cola machine at a sporting goods store in Jackson, TN, despite its being marked “White Customers Only!”⁴⁵

Although Jim Crow signage clearly was part of an elaborate system that created separate Jim Crow spaces, the signs that made up this network varied in style and content; indeed, where wayfinding devices today aim to be uniform and predictable, Jim Crow signs were stylistically diverse. Dating from a period when graphic design was still coalescing as a self-identified profession, individual designers or firms were rarely associated with these communications. Initially Jim Crow signs were often the work of local or itinerant sign painters or skilled itinerants whose work included advertising murals and lettering on shop windows and vehicles. Many of these signs reflect their painters’ pride in their craft; Jim Crow signage often includes decorative flourishes and other embellishments that seek to anesthetize the regulatory message. For example, the decorative sweeps and italicization of an Atlanta saloon sign from 1908 reflects a degree of elegance often displayed in late Victorian signage (see Figure 4); in this case the sign tries to integrate “white only” with the business’s name, “Cohen & Union Beer.” Similarly, a 1939 photograph of the sign for “The Gem Theatre: Exclusive Colored Theatre” reveals an ornamental italic subscript that reinforces both its Anglicized spelling “Theatre” and preferential description “Exclusive” (see Figure 5). In both these cases, the aestheticized letterforms seem to be an attempt to mask the blow of segregation by “prettifying” it, domesticating it, or at least making the regulatory message more palatable. The politesse of a hand-lettered sign on a North Carolina

45 See Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Visual Materials from the NAACP Records. Call LOT 13087.

Figure 5

Russell Lee, Gem Theatre Sign, Waco, Texas, 1939, Courtesy of the Library of Congress U.S. Farm Security Administration/ Office of War Information, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, LC-USF33- 012498-M2.



Figure 6

Jack Moebes, Jim Crow sign being removed from a Greensboro, NC bus, in response to a court ruling, 1956. Copyright Jack Moebes/Corbis.



bus read "NORTH CAROLINA LAW/White Patrons, Please Seat(sic) From Front/Colored Patrons Please Seat(sic) from Rear/NO SMOKING" using an italic script to suggest an effort at elegance that matches the decorous use of "please" (see Figure 6). In some African-American owned establishments, however, such signage could be cursory and grudging. A haphazard collection of signs hanging on a mixed-use living quarters and juke joint for migratory workers in Belle Glade, FL, for example, includes one clearly hand-painted sign stuck off to the side, reading "COLORED ONLY," followed by the phrase "POLICE ORDER" (see Figure 7).

Institutionalization and Mass Production

In the early years of Jim Crow signage, the use of ink and paint was sometimes legally stipulated; an 1898 Tennessee law, for instance, insisted that such signs not only be placed in a "conspicuous place," but that they be painted or printed.⁴⁶ Widespread demand ultimately led to the mass manufacture of Jim Crow signs, and

46 Acts of Tennessee, Chapter 10 No. 87.



Figure 7 (left)
Osborne, "Colored Only: Police Order," Belle Glade FL, 1945, Copyright/Corbis.



Figure 8 (right)
Russell Lee, "Man drinking at a water cooler in the street car terminal, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma," 1939, Courtesy of the Library of Congress U.S. Farm Security Administration/ Office of War Information, Prints & Photographs Division, Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-80126.

by the 1940s, such signs were standard retail products commonly available at national chains (e.g., Woolworth's and Western Auto), as well as at local home supply and hardware stores throughout the South. The manufactured signs were quite different from the hand-drawn and -painted signs of a generation earlier, tending toward the utilitarian rather than the decorative; they were more matter-of-fact rather than persuasive (see Figure 8). Moreover, as wayfinding devices, they were not as descriptive and provided less explicit directions for users. William Kennedy, a journalist for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, reported from Jacksonville, FL in 1961, that "best sellers" were the "catch-all plain race labels, which could be tacked on any door" and simply read "white" and "colored."⁴⁷ While most manufactured signs were produced with standard industrial printing processes, including offset lithography and silkscreen, Jim Crow signs were also customized with stencils and vinyl letterforms and were printed on more permanent materials, including metal and porcelain. At the new Tennessee Valley Authority headquarters, for instance, an imposing "WHITE" sign was crafted in metal and installed above public water fountains, conveying a tangible sense of institutional authority. While the sans serif letters were clearly influenced by the spare, unadorned typographic forms of the emergent Modernist movement, their function was utterly antithetical to the egalitarian, even utopian, goals that drove designers such as Jan Tschichold and Herbert Bayer to develop typefaces that would promote universal legibility.

The tradition of hand-made, and especially painted, Jim Crow signs continued until the Civil Rights movement obviated the entire system in the early 1960s. Nevertheless, as mass-produced signs became more and more common, the increasing consistency of segregation signs' appearance began to convey a kind of uniform identity, flatly assigning races to different spaces. Nevertheless, this increasing uniformity was misleading: the South's segregation laws and customs were inconsistent and

47 William Kennedy, "Dixie's Race Signs 'Gone with the Wind,'" *Reporting Civil Rights 1* (New York: The Library of America, 2003), 627.

inconsistently applied; in addition, the signs' authoritative appearance belied a system of racializing space that, while pervasive, was far from universally understood.

Ambiguous Spaces and Incomplete Wayfinding Systems

Jim Crow segregation differs from latter-day wayfinding in several notable ways. While Passini defines wayfinding as “essentially congruent with universal design” and a formal desire for inclusiveness, Jim Crow signage was dictated by racial exclusivity.⁴⁸ Moreover, the Jim Crow system was held together through a diverse hodgepodge of legislation that varied not only from state to state, but even from town to town. The patchwork of laws was essentially reflected in the many different forms of graphic expression; the style, content, and materials used to make Jim Crow signage were wide-ranging. There was no consistent look to the signs until they began to be mass-produced. Finally, no one “designed” Jim Crow signs; indeed, the earliest signs predate modern notions of design and designer.

Not surprisingly, Jim Crow space was piecemeal and fraught with inconsistency. Some spaces (e.g., city sidewalks) proved impossible to formally regulate; rarely, if ever, was specific behavior or action in these areas dictated by signs. Similarly, while crowded train and bus depot platforms frequently included numerous “white” or “colored” signs designed to instill order in the spatial and social chaos, these spaces were often fluid, evoking both spatial and racial confusion. Indeed, the wayfinding signs sometimes added to the system's inherent dysfunctionality. Easily destroyed, moved, obscured from view or lost, the signs were anything but permanent, and the spaces they were designed to regulate remained transitory and amorphous rather than strictly defined and demarcated.

Some Jim Crow signs were even designed to serve dual purposes. Despite legal requirements to provide separate facilities for both races, some impoverished Southern towns could only purchase a single public water fountain; by default, such amenities were marked with a “whites only” sign. As Lillian Smith observed, however, “sometimes when a town could afford but one drinking fountain, the word *White* was painted over one side and the word *Colored* on the other. I have seen that. It means that there are a few men in that town whose memories are aching, who want to play fair, and under ‘the system’ can think of no better way to do it.”⁴⁹

Principal flashpoints of racial tension were the street cars and trolleys that ran in larger Southern cities in the late nineteenth century; as the journalist Ray Stannard Baker noted, what made them volatile spaces was the “very absence of a clear demarcation.”⁵⁰ Streetcar interiors created what he called a racial “twilight

48 Romedi Passini, “Wayfinding Design: Logic, Application and Some Thoughts on Universality,” *Design Studies* 17 (1996): 319.

49 Lillian Smith, *Killers of the Dream*, (New York: W. Norton, 1994 reprint of 1949), 95.

50 Ray Stannard Baker, *Following the Color Line*, *American Magazine* (1908): 30-1.

zone.” Rather than run two sets of trolleys at great expense, transportation authorities often followed the letter of the law by segregating the interior space of each tram. Local laws, such as the one established in 1900 in Augusta, GA, stipulated that African Americans must first fill seats in the rear of a car, while whites were to sit in the front seats. Although the first two seats of each car were reserved for exclusive use by whites and the last two seats reserved for blacks, the undefined middle zone was segregated according to the capacity of any given car and its relative use at any given time.⁵¹ In response, “white” or “colored” signs were often hung on strips and slid along the length of the car; if trolleys were crowded, many municipalities empowered conductors to determine the location of the car’s “middle” and to allocate seats accordingly. Indeed, conductors were often legally provided with the power to arrest and otherwise enforce their temporary regulations.

This movable streetcar and later bus signage created an unstable space that became a flashpoint for racial conflicts, resulting in fights, arrests, and even death.⁵² To illustrate, in 1917, African-American members of the U. S. Army’s 24th Infantry Battalion were ordered from Columbus, NM, to Houston, TX. Fearing the onslaught of large numbers of negro troops, local politicians tightened segregation. When the soldiers arrived in the city, however, they simply ignored the Jim Crow signs hung in movie theaters and street cars. At times they tore the signs down and at least once, at a local dance, made them objects of ridicule by wearing them; their anger at Houston’s ordinances percolated into a full-scale mutiny by August 1917.⁵³

Such uprisings occurred throughout the South. In a single year, beginning in September 1941 and ending 12 months later, at least 88 cases occurred when blacks occupied “white” space on public transportation in Birmingham, AL.⁵⁴ After the war, men, particularly African-American veterans returning from active duty—more actively resisted these signs. In 1946 in Alabama, a black ex-Marine removed a segregationist sign from a trolley; in the resulting melee, he was shot dead by the local chief of police.⁵⁵ As late as 1956, just as Jim Crow travel restrictions were being lifted from interstate travel, *Jet Magazine* announced the death of Robert L. Taylor, a 30-year-old veteran from Ohio, who dared to use a whites-only restroom on a speeding train in central Tennessee; Taylor’s body was found the next day beside the train tracks.⁵⁶ At best, Jim Crow wayfinding was based on a rigid race-based caste system; for soldiers who’d experienced spatial freedom in the North, the West, or overseas, the extent to which it shaped the lives of African Americans and their day-to-day movement was inexcusable.

51 Jennifer Roback, “The Political Economy of Segregation: The Case of Segregated Streetcars,” 901.

52 Carol Anderson, *Eyes off The Prize: The United Nations and The African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 58.

53 Arthur E. Barbeau and Florette Henri, *The Unknown Soldiers* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1996), 28.

54 Robin D.G. Kelley, “‘Not What We Seem’: Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *Journal of American History* 80 (June 1993): 75-112.

55 Anderson, 58.

56 “A Fear That a Negro Ohio War Veteran, Robert Taylor, Was Slain for Using White Toilet on Tennessee Train,” *Jet Magazine*, January 5, 1956.

Figure 9

Ladies are not adults, photo by Eric Bruger, used under the Share Alike license of Creative Commons. Photograph URL: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/uw-eric/3182483073/>



Ending Jim Crow Signs

When Rosa Parks famously refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery, AL, bus to a white man in 1955, she sat in the bus's fifth row—officially the beginning of its colored section but also one of the ambiguous “twilight zones” that a conductor might transform from “black” space to “white” space by simply repositioning a printed sign. Her act of civil disobedience reflected the increasing questioning of Jim Crow segregation and the system it represented by both whites and blacks. Indeed, Parks' action was well timed; after 1946, when the Supreme Court's decision in *Morgan v. Virginia* ruled segregation illegal on interstate bus travel, Jim Crow laws were increasingly challenged at the local level.

In considering the system under the rubric of wayfinding, defined as spatial problem solving, a critical need is to identify just whose problems wayfinding actually addresses. For the whites on Parks' bus, Jim Crow signs directed African Americans away from white space, thus perpetuating a sense of racial entitlement. Of course, this study of Jim Crow signs as wayfinding signals is more than a historical exercise in remembering the forgotten past and more than a theoretical exercise in overlaying the two systems. More critically, this study is intended to prod us to consider more recent wayfinding systems that perpetuate similar entitlement. In South Africa, for instance, racialized wayfinding was explicit and carefully controlled during that country's long-standing system of apartheid. Meanwhile, in other countries, most notably in Saudi Arabia today, gender-specific wayfinding systems continue. Whether applied to hotel gyms and pools which are off-limits to women, or McDonald's restaurants, which are restricted to women and families, the Saudi kingdom has shaped a complex system of spaces for women and aims to guide them toward it (see Figure 9). Segregation signs not only point to separation in public space; they

also serve as reminders that both law and signage are “designed” and that “designers” have a role to play in thinking critically about their purpose. We have no record of what figures like Aicher and Lynch made of the Jim Crow system; in some ways, this system might have been the underbelly of or the precursor to the universal signage and systems that began to develop just as the segregation system was being dismantled. In modern public spaces, strangers can meet and mix in an informal manner. Traditional mores are no longer relevant and residents must be guided through unfamiliar spaces.

The most pervasive designed systems are often invisible to those who follow them; if Sheila Florence simply assumed that segregated racial spaces were “just the way it was,” she would never have reflected on the powers that shaped Jim Crow signs. Signage systems have hardly disappeared; but for designers today, the fundamental issue is not just in noting them or designing them from a disconnected, disinterested position. The real question is about how well we know our own spaces and the power that resides in them.