

# Author Talks: Mia Bay on traveling Black

In a new book, Mia Bay explores when, how, and why racial restrictions took shape and what it was like to live with them.



**In this edition** of *Author Talks*, McKinsey Global Publishing's Raju Narisetti chats with Mia Bay, the Roy F. and Jeannette P. Nichols Professor of American History at the University of Pennsylvania, about her new book, *Traveling Black: A Story of Race and Resistance* (Harvard University Press, March 2021). From stagecoaches and trains to buses, cars, and planes, *Traveling Black* explains why the long, unfinished journey to racial equality so often takes place on the road. An edited version of their conversation follows.

**What were some of the issues you were hoping to address for your readers with this book?**

The gap between the American dream and the American reality—the myth of the open road does speak to something that's actually central to the American experience, which is mobility, moving around, traveling for work, being dispersed from your families. But it also has a kind of mythology of being able to travel easily, being welcome wherever you go. Which is actually limited to certain people and not others.

## **The roadblocks to freedom**

**What surprised you most in researching this topic over the years?**

It was a book I never really planned to write. It was just a subject I became curious about. I first was surprised to learn when I was working on the biography of Ida B. Wells—a 19th century Black woman and antilynching activist—that one of the things that kind of got her into activism and journalism was that she was kicked out of a ladies' [train] car in Tennessee in the early 1880s.

This was before you had formal legal segregation, and the divisions among passenger cars used to be between ladies' cars and smoking cars. So I became curious about how you went from ladies' cars to Jim Crow cars. I hadn't really thought about how segregation took shape.

And then, as I wanted to know more about how segregation took shape and operated over time and on different forms of transportation, I discovered all sorts of things that kind of blew my mind. For instance, I did a lot of word searches on "Jim Crow cars." I noticed fairly early on that, especially in Black newspapers, people often were sort of counting out how many people died in train crashes, Black versus white. And I thought, "Well, why are they keeping track of the racial demographics of train crashes? That seems odd."

I eventually realized it was because, as the railroads began to move from all-wooden passenger cars to new metal passenger cars, they were using the older cars as Jim Crow cars, which meant, over the turn of the century, between let's say the late 1890s and as late as 1950, there were a lot of train crashes in which most of the people who died or were injured were riding in the Jim Crow cars.

And that was something that African Americans knew at the time and protested, but it just never got any traction. So that really surprised me, and it took me a while to even understand what they were talking about.

I was also amazed to find that there was an attempt to have racial rules of the road at one point, in the Deep South. They initially thought that when people got to a traffic light, Blacks should basically wait for white drivers to go [first].

This was not a viable system of traffic regulation. Four-way stops, for example, were kind of a disaster, especially if you had a mix of people at them. So it didn't really work out. But there was an attempt to have it. And there were certain customs, like Blacks weren't supposed to pass whites on dusty roads.

**‘I think that we need to find ways to think about traveling, be it commuting or long-distance traveling, as a right that we need to protect.’**

**On cars ‘at best, as mixed blessing for African Americans’**

The automobile was greeted with real enthusiasm by African Americans who really hoped that it would be a shelter from segregation. It started to pose problems fairly early on. Automobiles, once you use them for transportation, as opposed to riding around town, require you to have gas stations, hotels, motels, roadside restaurants. And all of that would often be segregated. So, in many ways, automobile travel became more segregated over time: restrooms in gas stations were often off limits to Blacks. In some places, the use of the gas station was off limits to Blacks because gas station owners were trying to market themselves to an audience—they imagined these white women drivers that needed to be comfortable and find that the gas station was homey and safe. So they would kind of discourage Black patronage.

And these kind of problems would just multiply over time so that, while African Americans did continue to love automobiles in a certain way, and continue to sometimes find them preferable to trains and buses, where they had many problems, they also had to do things like plan their trips in advance so that they could have places to stay, usually with friends, because there were a very limited number of hotels [for people of color].

They had to figure out where the places they could eat were, where the gas stations were that would serve people of color. They had to find out where it

was dangerous to drive, where it was safer to drive. So automobiles were challenging in their own way. And the kinds of dangers that they could pose are still familiar to us today. Blacks traveling through the South, in particular, were worried about being stopped by the police. They were worried about white hostility. All of these things could make automobile traveling dangerous.

**On the lack of affordable parking through a racial-inequity prism**

There was sometimes segregated parking in the South. Some towns had a rule that only whites could park on Main Street on Saturday, which was the big shopping day, because they wanted Blacks to do their shopping on another day.

There were work areas where whites had the paved parking and Blacks had the unpaved parking, and beaches with segregated parking areas. That underscores what is still true today, which is that parking is closely associated with money and status. And it aggravates transportation inequities.

A lot of people who can’t afford to live in New York work there. And they often live quite far away and might choose to drive into Manhattan. But they can’t because parking is just completely out of the question. Meanwhile, people who actually live in inner-city areas, if they want a job for work, have to calculate the cost of a parking space, which makes it prohibitive for many people.

Parking in inner cities, in particular, is a luxury, and it's one that's off limits to many people of color, which is one reason why levels of car ownership are lower among Blacks and Hispanics.

## **The right to mobility**

**On social media, hashtags such as 'driving while black' and 'traveling while black' remind us that American citizens trying to travel freely remains a civil rights issue, especially if you're not white**

I think that we need to find ways to think about traveling, be it commuting or long-distance traveling, as a right that we need to protect. That people should have access to transportation, that it should be equitable transportation, that there shouldn't be entire groups of people who are simply left out of mobility.

I think that that point was made abundantly clear during Hurricane Katrina, when we saw all those people stranded in the Superdome. They were people who lived in New Orleans who did not own cars. The city had not really made a plan for anyone who didn't own cars.

It had a plan that redirected highway traffic out of the city, allowing people who had cars or could get rides to drive. But if you didn't have a car, there was no plan for how you would leave New Orleans. Transportation is a fundamental service, but in this

country, we often don't think of it that way. We don't have a huge commitment to infrastructure or making places accessible to people who don't drive. All of this is also going to collide, of course, with the ongoing climate-change issues. It would be a good idea for the nation, generally, if we became less dependent on cars and found ways to move people around that involve things like buses and other forms of transportation that aren't so hard on the environment.

**On your quote, 'No need to travel back in time to travel Black'**

I think it illustrates the challenges and some of the things that we need to think about that tend to be invisible. We often don't spend that much time thinking about how people got from place to place.

One of the striking things to me in researching the book was how many whites, including whites in leadership during the segregation era, were unaware of the kind of difficulties Blacks experienced while traveling, because they, themselves, didn't experience them. For instance, President Lyndon B. Johnson was surprised when he asked a Black family that worked for him to transport one of his dogs to Texas, and they refused. And he just didn't understand why. He was finally told it was because it's hard enough to travel cross country if you're Black, but if you bring a dog, it's just really impossible.

**'Transportation is a fundamental service, but in this country, we often don't think of it that way.'**

These are the kind of things that people don't think about. I worry that, during the [COVID-19] pandemic, those of us who can afford to avoid public transportation for health and safety reasons are not thinking enough about those who can't.

We already know that funding for public transportation is in crisis. So we have things like the New York City public transportation system losing riders. So if we back away from commitments to public transportation, this would be particularly damaging to people who can't afford cars.

It's also really a terrible time in the history of our planet to up our commitment to cars. So we need to be thinking about all those things. And we need to be thinking about them in terms of helping all people move through the world in a way that is safe and equitable and, hopefully, not too damaging to the planet.

#### **On segregation and air travel**

I had no idea about [segregation on] planes. In fact, when I started writing the book with that chapter, I wasn't sure I could actually write a chapter on traveling by plane. I wasn't sure that there were forms of segregation or that I could find any evidence of them.

Then it became clear that there was a complex history of segregation on actual planes. And then a very clear history of segregation in airports and segregation at all the kinds of support facilities that you need to use planes, from taxicabs to airport hotels. That really affected early fliers. Many Blacks who first started using planes were, once again, excited. They would avoid segregation because it wasn't really that widely practiced in the air.

But then they would land at an airport and be completely unable to get a cab, or there would be a layover, and there would be no hotel for them. So all of these things were actually really difficult for Black air travelers.

#### **Any early response that has surprised you to the book?**

I've been interested and gratified by how much people want to use it to talk about modern-day transportation inequities. That is not necessarily my expertise. I'm glad that people are thinking about that.

**Mia Bay** is the Roy F. and Jeannette P. Nichols Professor of American History at the University of Pennsylvania.  
**Raju Narisetti** is the publisher of McKinsey Global Publishing.

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