Along the Racial Rail
Atlanta Transit Then and Now

Annette Bowen

BEFORE YOU READ: What do you think the author means by the “racial rail”? What do you know about the different experience whites and blacks in the U.S. have had using public transportation?

I was born in an era of racial division. Before momma adopted me in November 1958, she wanted to take an excursion downtown. On this one particular Saturday, as momma boarded the bus, she was harassed and called the “n” word and spat at by someone with a wad of chewing tobacco in their mouth.

Later, when I was about six years old, we’d ride the bus downtown and pick up a few items from Roy’s Fish Market, Planter’s Peanut Store, or Kessler’s Department Store. To a child, the bus was a welcome weekly field trip. Following the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, a federal judge ruled in 1959 that all buses should be desegregated. We were allowed to sit in the front of the bus, but momma was only comfortable sitting in the back. I asked her why we didn’t sit in the front. She told me about her experiences as a black woman relying on the bus.

She didn’t want me to have those types of experiences, so she avoided any confrontation and went to the back of the bus.

From childhood, mass transportation evolved from streetcars and old, clunky orange buses to newer, diesel-fueled, state-of-the-art buses and rapid rail trains. Some could argue the addition of these shiny “toys” has made traveling easier, but it has not been good news for all travelers. MARTA (Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority) has placed subway stations where riders could easily access the major tourist attractions: The King Center, The Georgia Aquarium, College Football Hall of Fame, The Georgia Dome, Downtown Atlanta Entertainment Corridor, and Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, to name a few. But for people trying to get to work, mass transit does not work so well. According to MARTA’s chief executive officer, only “18% of jobs are
accessible by transit for Metro Atlanta residents and 33% for those living in the city.”¹

Unfortunately, racism is still alive and well in the Atlanta transportation system. For example, researchers point out that “MARTA’s railway route design still prevents blacks from accessing employment opportunities in richer, predominantly white counties.”

As a long time rider, I’ve noticed how some MARTA stations are monitored by police more than others. Where there are tourists, there’s police. Coincidence? I think not.

As a child, riding the bus was a treat even if we did have to deal with racism. Now, I ride out of necessity. The excitement has dissipated into mundane feelings. The racism is still there, but it’s not as obvious. We are still riding the racial rail!

Sources: 1. Keith Parker, 1/21/15 via <www.politifact.com>

Annette Bowen is a student at Literacy Action in Atlanta, GA. She attributes her writing zeal to Diana Brace, reading teacher extraordinaire. She says, “Ms. Brace’s enthusiasm for teaching makes you want to learn!”

AFTER YOU READ:

1. According to the author, what did racism in public transportation look like back then? What does it look like now?

2. Read the “Separate but Equal” box on this page. Look up the date of Plessy v. Ferguson. How long did that decision stand before it was struck down by another Supreme Court decision? What Supreme Court decision reversed Plessy v. Ferguson?

3. Read student perspectives on race in Issue #42 of The Change Agent (cover image on right). Learn the history and “science” of race, as well as people’s stories about the significance of race in their lives.

Separate but Equal?

In 1892, Homer Plessy, a black man, was jailed for sitting in the white car of the East Louisiana Railroad. Louisiana had just passed the Separate Car Act. This law made it legal to require blacks and whites to sit in separate sections of the train. A black civil rights organization decided to challenge the law in the courts. They asked Plessy to deliberately sit in the white section. He was arrested and the case went all the way to the United States Supreme Court. The case was called Plessy v. Ferguson. Plessy lost. The Supreme Court decided that separate facilities for blacks and whites were constitutional as long as they were “equal.”

– adapted from <www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events_plessy.html>