

5 Racist Phrases To Remove From Our Civil Discourse

The way we talk to each other impacts how we treat one another. So, let's unpack this



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[Nov 2](#) · 7 min read



White people doing the CakeWalk | Photo Credit | Pinterest

Down South, you hear a lot of racist speech, and we hear it so early in life that we often don't realize where these phrases come from. But, despite the learning curve, we shouldn't be so naive as to believe no one means to cause harm when they [chew the fat](#). Trump, for instance, [often compared](#) his impeachment inquiry to "[a lynching](#)."

A White man should never use this term, even when he feels the world is out to get him. Lynchings were not just about being falsely accused, the tradition was about torturing people, and most of the victims were Black. Using that term is demonstrably insensitive to the [thousands](#) of Black people lynched by White people in the South. And while Trump's rhetoric clearly crossed the line, folks need to realize that some other phrases, less evident, are just as cruel and disrespectful to Black people and our civil discourse.

1. "Imma beat you like a runaway."

In New Orleans, I've heard the phrase "Imma beat you like a runaway," numerous times. They said everything but the "slave" part out loud. It wasn't until I read Solomon Northup's autobiographical novel, "[Twelve Years a Slave](#)," in high school that I began to understand the experiences of Black people trying to escape White slavers.

Northup tried to escape more than once. He waded through Louisiana marshland and faced severe beatings when he failed. Finally, white Southerners who stole his free papers sold him into slavery and forbade him from telling anyone he was born a free Black man. As I read his story, I thought of all the Black people in the South who couldn't escape — those brutalized for pursuing freedom, those in my own family.

[Fugitive slave laws](#) gave White men and women the power to treat Black people as property rather than people. And the Supreme Court, in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, [claimed](#) that "no Black could claim U.S. citizenship or petition the court." The dishonorable Chief Justice Roger Taney used the [5th amendment](#) as justification for his ruling, claiming Black folks were not people at all, just property.

Someone would say, "Imma beat you like a runaway," as a warning of an impending brutal beating. However, this phrase should be off-limits because it triggers and brings back memories of Black people facing the most inhumane punishments simply for wanting freedom.

2. "No comments from the peanut gallery."

The phrase "no comments from the peanut gallery" comes from New Orleans. "Its [first documented usage](#) in 1867, in the Times-Picayune review of a variety show: *It is useless for us to repeat our praises of Johnny Thompson, Billy Reeves, and others of the company, as negro delineators; they 'out Herod Herod' and put the darkies in the 'peanut gallery' fairly to the blush.*"

The peanut gallery referred to those in the back of the theatre, usually during a Vaudeville show. And throughout the Jim Crow south, Black people often found themselves sitting in the back of places, segregated, and marginalized, and the liberal arts were no exception from the rule.

New Orleans is known for its [brown paper bag test](#), which let light-skinned Black folks experience privileges denied to darker-skinned Black folks. Anyone who couldn't pass for White sat in the back of the theatre, and White folks did not want to hear their comments about what they saw.

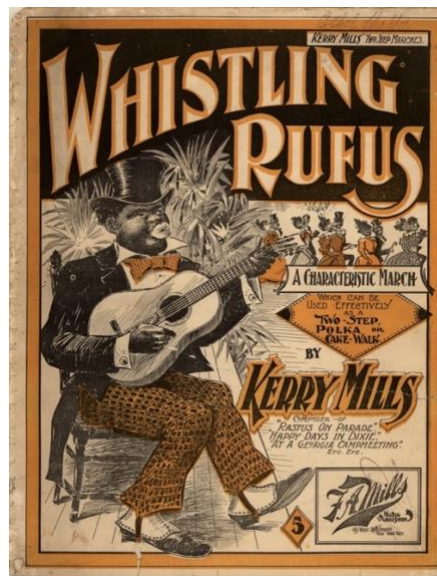
"No comments from the peanut gallery," diminishes the voices and perspectives of Black people. There is nothing harmless about sending "the darkies" to the back and silencing them. So, despite Howdy Doody's show, the term "peanut gallery" holds anti-Black racist connotations, making the phrase unworthy of civil discourse.

3. "cakewalk" and "that takes the cake."

The terms "cakewalk" and "that takes the cake," may sound innocent enough, but sadly, they're not. A phrase that has come to mean "easy" or "without much effort," referred to a very Southern tradition that dates back to the Antebellum slave era.

"The cakewalk originated as [a dance performed by enslaved Black people](#) on plantations before the Civil War." White slaveowners often forced Black couples to dance, competing for cake. Initially, this dance started as a "Grand March." But, the dancers would add their own style, making it an authentic African American tradition. They used this opportunity to mock the White slave owners' mannerisms, but most White slavers had no idea.

While it might be assumed that slave owners would punish their slaves for this mocking behavior, in fact, many owners actually encouraged it. According to the ragtime musician Shepard Edmonds, who described the stories of his formerly enslaved parents, "They did a take-off on the high manners of the white folks in the 'big-house,' but their masters, who gathered around to watch the fun, **missed the point** ([National Museum of American History](#)).



Advertisement for Sheet Music from Sam De Vincent Collection | [National Museum of American History](#)

White people performed the cakewalk at minstrel shows, mocking Black people, who were ironically mocking them. They wore Blackface, solidifying harmful stereotypes about Black people. The cakewalk is the product of Black people complying with the demand of the enslavers in style — there was nothing easy about pleasing White people.

When someone says, "that takes the cake," they use a phrase that slave owners used when a Black couple won the cakewalk. Often, the slaveowner would [pick a piece of cake for them](#), refusing to let them choose the one they wanted. Afterwards, the rest of the couples got absolutely nothing for their efforts. Cakewalk imagery was also used on sheet music, advertising, prints, and toys, with African Americans being depicted as cartoonish and racist stereotypes ([National Museum of American History](#)).

4. “Eenie, Meenie, Miney, Mo”

In America, even our nursery rhymes are laced with racist traditions, which is why we have to be very careful about the ones we sing to children. For example, you may have heard, "Eenie, meenie, miney, mo, catch a tiger by his toe," but the original version was undeniably racist:

“[Eenie, meenie, minie mo](#). Catch an nigger by the toe. If he hollers, let him go. Eenie, meenie, minie mo.” [An alternate version](#): "Catch a negro by his toe/ If he hollers make him pay/Twenty dollars every day."

Despite the obvious n-bomb in the song, the goal was obvious here — to hunt Black people. How else can you explain catching a Black person by their toe? In the alternative version, White people bragged about forcing Black people to pay them consistently. Notice, there is no reason attached, as in debt owed. Just like the mafia shook down store clerks for "protection," White folks wanted to tax Black people just for existing.

White folks need to stop singing this nursery rhyme, and changing "negro" to "tiger," doesn't help. The tradition of racism travels with the verses, so we should remove this phrase from our civil discourse. Racism is passed on from one generation to another, and it takes conscious effort to stop perpetuating anti-Black racism.



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5. "sold down the river."

If you live South of the Mason-Dixon line, you've probably heard the phrase "[sold down the river](#)," which has come to mean betraying someone. But, what it originally meant was betraying Black people by selling them into perpetual bondage.

Slavery wasn't isolated to the South, but even White folks knew that slavery in the South was characteristically crueler. According to [NPR reports](#), "masters in the North often solve their misbehaving slaves, sending them down the Mississippi River where conditions were [much harsher](#)."

New Orleans had [the largest slave market](#) in the United States. So chances are, if you got "sold down the river," you would end up passing through the crescent city, where White folks would

sell Black folks to work on plantations throughout Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Texas, and Georgia.

In the story of Solomon Northup, mentioned earlier, White men took his "[free papers](#)," which proved he was born a free Black man. So, yes, we can all agree that selling someone up the river is a form of betrayal. However, we shouldn't use this phrase out of context because it is inseparable from the American slave trade and mocks the experiences of those who lost their lives and livelihoods in a despicable system of human trafficking.

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Offensive words come in all shapes, sizes, textures, and flavors. It's a faux pas to believe that all racist terms and phrases will contain a racial epithet. The verbiage of the slaveowners lives on in America, a reminder of the skeletons in its closet.

The best way to avoid racist language is to carefully consider the phrases we use and where they come from. Unfortunately, without critical analysis of what we say, these racist phrases will continue to pass down from one generation to the next. Black people deserve to live in a society that doesn't diminish their lived experience, so we must remove these phrases from our civil discourse for common decency to win the day.