

Road less traveled: Race and American automobility

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“Let’s all get together and make Motoring better.”

- Introduction of the 1937 *Negro Travelers’ Green Book*

“Watch out for the driver who crosses the White Line.”

- ‘Safe Driving Tips’ from the 1938 *Negro Travelers’ Green Book*

Abstract

The Negro Motorist Green Books were published by Victor H. Green & Company between 1936-1967. The books were references for black motorists on road trips to help them avoid dangerous towns, racist establishments, and the effects of a segregated America. This paper explores these books and situates them within the greater context of the American road. My argument is that they represent an entry for black motorists into the modern American automobility discourse. I also suggest that the ambivalent and even humorous tone used by these Green Books represents an attempt at coping with modernity while still living under backwards conditions. Finally, I briefly introduce a challenge to the claim that the Civil Rights Movement was the sole impetus to the end of needing such books. To accomplish these claims, I frame this mobility using a Foucauldian approach of genealogy and power/knowledge relationships.

Keywords: Victor Green, Green Books, Automobility, Black America, Racism, Civil Rights, Michel Foucault

Introduction

In 2014, the Autry Museum of the American West held a special exhibition entitled *Route 66: The Road and Romance*. The hall was lined with artifacts from the road as well as examples of its influence on popular culture. While the fact that it was housed inside a museum rendered it motionless, the artifacts and aesthetics gave a feeling of movement and excitement. This was a fun period in twentieth century America; full of adventure and a sense of freedom. Halfway through the exhibit, between a large gasoline pump and drawings from Pixar’s movie *Cars*, a small book sat with a brief description. It was a copy of *The Negro Travelers’ Green Book, Spring 1956 edition* (figure 1). The book, the museum text explained, was a listing of

“black friendly” establishments – hotels, restaurants, mechanics, and so on – so that black motorists could avoid racist establishments on road trips across the country.

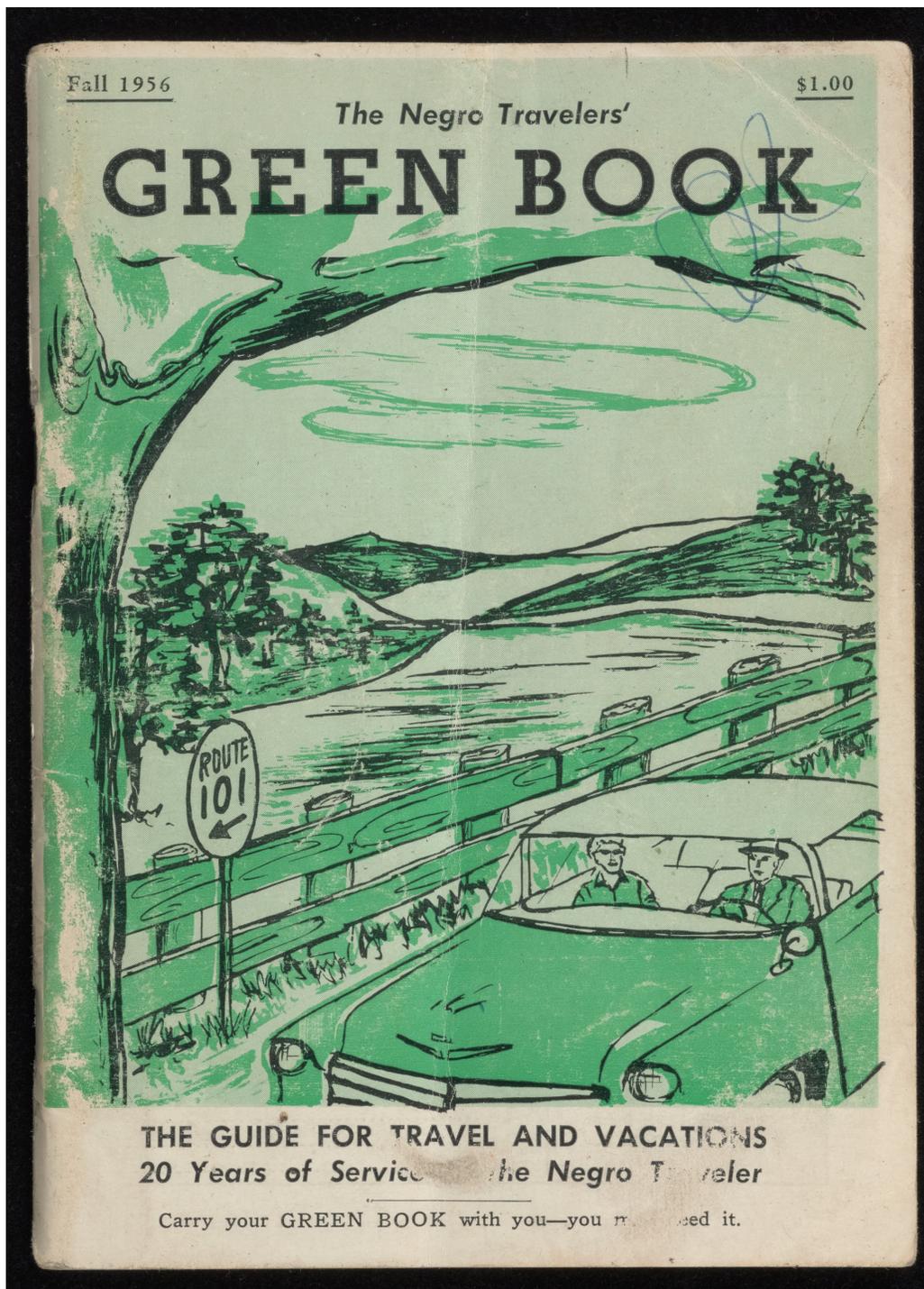


Figure 1. Cover of the 1956 Green Book. Courtesy the Schomburg Center, New York Public Library

The book represented a small portion of the exhibit, though it was not in an effort to hide this part of history. Rather, it brought a pause to the fun and vibrant nostalgia of Route 66. Among the old cars and Jack Kerouac's original *On the Road* scroll was a somber reminder that the 'road' represented a different geography for those driving onto it from the margins of society.

This paper will explore the 'Green Books' themselves and situate them within the greater context of the American road and the road trip. My argument is that they represent an entry for black motorists into the modern American automobility discourse. I would also like to suggest that the ambivalent and even humorous tone used by these Green Books represents an attempt at coping with modernity while still living under backwards conditions. I additionally want to briefly introduce a challenge to the claim that the Civil Rights movement was the sole impetus to the end of needing such books. At the same time racial segregation was being outlawed, American roads were changing and transforming the way all races drove across the country. To accomplish these claims, I will frame this mobility using a Foucauldian approach of genealogy and power/knowledge relationships (Foucault 2010b). In doing so, I am not looking to engage in literary criticism of these books, but rather to see how the books can be used as artifacts to help expose the origins of American automobility. "The search for [origins] is not the erecting of foundations: on the contrary, it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself" (Foucault 2010b, 82). As I intend to show, the existence of the Green Books helps to challenge prevailing notions of freedom and the road in twentieth century America.

The Green Books appear to be relatively ignored in terms of academic study. This could be due to the common response by white scholars of "I had no idea that something like that existed" when this paper was initially developed. That is not to say that all academics have been

oblivious to the books; a small collection of literature exists that either directly confronts racial travel guides (Carter 2008; Foote 2012; Kennedy 2013; Seiler 2007) or deals with the greater issue of American travel and African Americans (Alderman and Modlin Jr 2013; Williams 2001). The Green Books are worthy of greater study as they represent a racial ephemera of the American Road. Not only does their existence represent an extreme difference of place and space in mid twentieth century America, but their *absence* in images, media, and the overall mythos of 'The Road' also reveal a continuing racialized geography of the United States. This reflects an overall absence of true critical reflection within geographic and historic study and a production of "white supremacy" albeit in an unintentional sense (Berg 2012). In other words, to ignore race, even with the best of intentions, can reify the privileging of the white subject in the spaces we study.

The fact that the Green Books have yet to really break into academic study reflects the general dearth of black experience constituting the greater mobilities turn. Mobilities studies began to develop in the early 2000s with a conscious exploration of movement effecting society and culture (Hannam et al. 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2000) though earlier works paved the way for this scholarship (Cresswell 1993). Specifically, 'automobilities' studies have focused on the cultural play between humans and machines (Kent 2015; Thrift 2004). While gender has been explored (for example Cresswell 1999 and Walsh 2008) and we occasionally see excellent studies of race (Avila 2014; Hague 2010; Henderson 2006; Seiler 2007; also see the exciting special issue [6:1] of *Transfers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Mobility Studies*), the overall practice has been to examine (auto)mobilities in a rather monolithic sense of the driver, the pedestrian, the cyclist as a subject devoid of race or removed from the production of relational spaces (Harvey 2006). Sheller and Urry's initial call (2006) was a rejection of a "grand

narrative,” but it seems that academics can easily slip back into this paradigm despite good intentions. Even I have been guilty of this (Pesses 2010).

This is not an attempt to simply focus on a ‘black’ topic to fix the problem. Rather, I think, and will attempt to demonstrate, how a solution is for mobilities studies to adopt a Foucauldian approach in a variety of subject matter. Foucault is useful for such a task for two reasons. First, his work is spatial in nature. Time is an important factor, but he did not privilege it in the same way that he saw was occupying historians and philosophers (Foucault 2010b). This is a clear benefit for scholars of mobility. Second, he saw the study of power and its production of knowledge as crucial to an understanding of what led society to its modern form. He was interested in relations that “go right down into the depths of society; that they are not localized in the relations between the state and its citizens or on the frontier between classes” (Foucault 1995, 27). He is exploring the “specificity of mechanism and modality” that produce power, that is, to understand structures and superstructures one must study at the most local of scales (1995, 27). Through these practices that produce power, we can expose the origins of that which we take for granted, and thus gain a better understanding of uneven, racial, gendered, and queer mobilities (Foucault 2010a, 2010b). As I will show below, by exposing the power relations of the twentieth century American highway, we can get a better sense of what it was for specific motorists to travel along it.

Recently, Sheller has called for a use of Foucault’s archaeological and genealogical methods (2016). She specifically positions uneven mobilities within a Foucauldian study of territory, communication, and speed. First, she introduces the concept of a “sovereign terrain for movement” referring to “spatial designs, physical infrastructures, and symbolic impediments creating divergent pathways, differential access, and control architectures for partial connectivity

and bypassing” (16). Second, is the “disciplining of mobile subjects” in focusing on the affect produced through comfort, safety, and speed. Finally, Sheller argues for Foucauldian methods of studying institutions and media that “produce knowledge of such relations of mobility and immobility” (16). Sheller is interested in the first two aspects in her article; I am most interested in the third.

I would like to suggest from the start that the Green Books and the application of Foucauldian concepts is not about ‘repression’ in its most basic sense. Foucault himself was wary of such a simple framing (Foucault 1990). I am more interested in the positive aspects of power generated through this cultural practice. This is a Foucauldian, scientific ‘positive,’ one in which things are generated rather than destroyed. The Green Books are a product of power/knowledge and reveal the actions of subjects attempting to resist domination. To explore this, I first want to present a brief history of US highways and automobility, followed by an analysis of the Green Books themselves.

Birth of the road

The vast network of roads cutting through the United States do so with such permanence and integration into society that they belie their relative newness. American roads are a representation of, and a commitment to, modernity. In the early 19th century, traveling over long distances involved a horse and carriage traversing muddy, rutted roads. The conditions were terrible when compared to today’s standards (Conzen 1998; Raitz 1998). As roads improved, so too did their purpose. Were roads to get from point A to point B? Or were they connected to the history of America itself? Many travelers viewed the landscape with awe and felt that the forested roadside was crucial to preserving the beauty of the country; others saw the woods as a place of evil and did not appreciate the long stretches free of civilization (Raitz 1998).

Since the invention of the automobile, along with decent road networks, the “road trip” has been an integral part of American leisure and recreation (Raitz 1998). The thought was that people could now travel with freedom and spontaneity, escape from the congested city into the open spaces of the countryside, and after the construction of roads like the Lincoln Highway in 1913 and US Route 66 in 1927, motorists were now able to see the country’s landscape and thus experience the nation’s history.

The twentieth century saw a change in the American road and roadside with the mass production and popularity of the automobile. “New automobiles demanded new roads” (Jakle 2010, 405). The building of this national road network did not preclude aesthetic benefits though. The construction of the Lincoln Highway for example, the first coast-to-coast road for automobiles, was not only designed for the efficient movement of goods, but for patriotic and educational purposes. Supporters of the project were convinced that it would connect the United States, “thus revealing and interpreting America to its people” (Jakle 2010, 407). Automobility would soon become more than transportation. Not only could the road trip teach Americans about their nation, it represented a key component of middle class life by the 1930s. The private automobile “played either a contributory or a dominant role in all areas of social life: getting a living, making a home, raising the young, using leisure, engaging in religious practice, and participating in community activities” (Jakle 2010, 410).

The high-speed freeway that soon dominated long distance travel in the United States led to the “asocial” driving of the 1960s, in which “the road takes on aspects of the Kerouac Road – it is the means, the avenue, the movement and the end itself” (Brown, Jr. 1976, 25). Rather than the physical experience of controlling the machine that was the norm of the 1950s, broader highways and comfortable vehicles made that very control obsolete. Everything about the

modern road networks led to a focus of uninterrupted speed rather than violent bursts of acceleration. “Given this scale and a suitable automobile, a driver can move over the road at speeds from seventy to one hundred miles per hour without a dominant sensation of recklessness, rush, or loss of control” (Brown, Jr. 1976, 25). The comfortable efficiency has not come without a price though. As Lefebvre writes, “It is obvious, sad to say, that repetition has everywhere defeated uniqueness, that the artificial and contrived have driven all spontaneity from the field...” (1991, 75). The freeway allows one to “drive two or three thousand miles... without, in a sense, having gone anywhere” (Siddall 1987, 314).

The Green Books

The Negro Motorist Green Books, or better known as simply “The Green Books” were published by Victor H. Green & Company between 1936-1967. The roads of America were expanding thanks in part to the Federal-Aid Road Acts of 1916 and 1956 (the latter promoting interstate highways). As roads were built up, so too was the roadside, developing into a unique and growing place. This “Roadside America,” as Raitz (1998) refers to it, started without planning or mitigation. Entrepreneurs purchased land and began to experiment with marketing to get motorists to stop at their establishment. Eventually those successful invented the franchise, leading to a much more homogenous experience (1998, 380-1) and what some may consider “placelessness” (Relph 1976). Before such consistency could be found, the adventure of the unknown made the road trip enticing as well as capable of producing anxiety. Not only was the roadside unpredictable, automobiles in the early twentieth century were not as dependable and user-friendly as they are today. A white motorist had to worry about his automobile’s engine as well as finding gas or a place to rest. A black motorist had the same concerns in addition to another; he had no guarantee that if he found a service on the road that he would in fact be

served. The Green Books could alleviate some of this by listing both black- and white-owned businesses known to be racially tolerant.

The initial publication of the Green Books was not the first effort to help non-white travelers in the US; *The Hackley & Harrison's Hotel and Apartment Guide for Colored Travelers* was published seven years prior by the Negro Urban League. It stated that Black America took to automobile ownership and use in the same manner as White America, even though these black motorists existed within a different social space (Williams 2001, 73). The publication of the Urban League's travel book and Green's publications, as well as stories by black motorists, indicate that the freedom of the automobile was not universal in most of twentieth century America. It was common practice for black motorists to drive uninterruptedly on long trips, packing meals and only stopping for fuel to avoid any trouble from racist encounters (Williams 2001, 73).

The Green Books continued this project of producing a new space of tolerance on the American Road. Victor H. Green was a postal employee in Harlem as well as a civic leader (McGee 2010). It is not clear whether he was influenced by the publication of the Negro Urban League's travel guide. Most accounts suggest that he modeled his books after similar guidebooks used by Jewish Americans (Kahn 2015; Schomburg Center 1938). The Green Books could be purchased at Esso Stations, which were the only ones that actually welcomed African American motorists (Rhodes 2010). The books started out by covering New York and would eventually expand to list tolerant businesses throughout the US as well as parts of the Caribbean, Canada, and Mexico, as well as listings for parts of Europe and Africa.

There is a quiet dignity within the Green Books. The inaugural edition of the book states in the introduction:

Every medium and resource is being used to contact Reliable Business Places and Resorts that will serve your motoring needs. All advertisements contained in the book has [sic] been carefully selected and we feel sure that your patronage will be appreciated by the advertisers...

Let's all get together and make Motoring better (Schomburg Center 1937, 1).

Taken out of context, this passage would not give any clues as to the real need for such a guidebook. The banal claim of making motoring better could refer to picking up litter, investment in better road surfaces, or more detailed maps. The book is a mixture of tolerant business listings and useful tips for a motorist, including car maintenance. "Nothing is more of a killjoy when the motor starts to spit and pop and then stops" (Schomburg Center 1937, 3). Most would argue that a racist encounter in the rural American South could be worse, but the Green Book maintains an almost naïve innocence and optimism while transgressing against a white supremacy of the American road. It is precisely this fact that makes these products of modernity.

Facing Modernity

The Green Books are an artifact of American modernity. That term modernity is fraught with confusion and multiple use. I am most interested in framing this based on Michel Foucault's sense of the term. For Foucault, modernity is an attitude rather than an era, though we tend to equate it with a fixed timeframe like the twentieth century. He is speaking of "a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task" (Foucault 2010a, 39). It is also a way of coming to terms with what is happening 'now.' "Modernity is not a phenomenon of sensitivity to the fleeting present; it is the will to 'heroize' the present" (Foucault 2010a, 40). What Foucault is arguing for is that to be modern is to be engaged with a permanent critique of one's 'present' regardless of within which historic era it falls. This, I would suggest, is exactly what these Green Books are;

Victor Green was taking on his historic era and critiquing it. Green was addressing, albeit outside of the position of the intellectual, how he, a black American, fits into history, power relations, and moral subjects within their ontologies (Foucault 2010a, 48-49).

In this light, I view the Green Books as being two things. First, these represent a voice in the discourse of power and knowledge on the American Road. Second, they are a means of dealing with the anxiety produced by backwards Jim Crow laws in “modern” times.

Power/Knowledge of the Road

Foucault’s greatest legacy is an understanding of how power and knowledge are produced. Power, for Foucault, is not an assumed nor permanent thing. When applied upon a body, “power is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the ‘privilege,’ acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions – an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated” (Foucault 1995, 26-27). In other words, power must be ‘done.’ It should be thought of as a verb, rather than a noun. Not in the sense of ‘powering off,’ but rather to ‘do power’ against or upon another being. It is through social and institutional practice that one may produce such a power dynamic. Knowledge then, is the result of power. It is the construction of what objects can enter into study and be presented by ‘experts’ as known things. In other words, our body of knowledge is the direct result of a struggle over position and privilege.

The American Road as a site of power/knowledge is not exclusive to black studies. Cresswell’s 1993 work on Jack Kerouac’s 1957 novel *On the Road* reveals how the road is both a space of transgression as well as compliance. Cresswell argues that there is dualism in how Kerouac used mobility to express “a form of resistance to the ‘establishment.’ On the other hand,

mobility is clearly a central theme in mainstream North American culture, at least as important to the ‘American Dream’ as small town values and apple pie” (1993, 249). While this beat writer used mobility, it was a fast and disconnected form (Brown, Jr. 1976). The movement of Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, the two main characters of the book, is fast and frantic and the idea is to keep moving. The freeway is a perfect means to this end. The real place based events occur in urban centers, typically on the West or East Coast of the country. Cresswell provides a deft analysis of Kerouac’s resistance to the contextual national values of white post-war America through mobility, though at the same time using mobility as a means to conformity. “We are presented with a story of two people avoiding attachment to place or people at one level but madly seeking the core of another place – America – on another scale. Mobility represents a search for an American essence; haunted by the spirit of the outlaw, the hobo and the pioneer rather than the settlers, the farmers and the townspeople” (1993, 260). What to do then if you were not privileged enough to transgress society in this same way? The Green Books allow for those whose skin color makes such reckless adventure all but impossible under the discipline imposed by a pre-Civil Rights Act America.

Since the first African slaves were brought to North America, their role in the economy was unique. “As slaves, blacks were not proprietors of their labor power and did not participate in commodity exchange and consumption. The slaveholder purchased the labor power of the slave in a lump sum, once and for all” (Wilson 2007, 72). Emancipation brought the possibility of black workers to exercise some control over labor power and value, but white officials were conflicted as to how to truly integrate former slaves. Should former slaves be returned to Africa or should they be incorporated into the core of society both socially and economically? Jim Crow laws, deemed legal under 1896’s *Plessy v. Ferguson*, allowed for a racist and spatial

compromise: black laborers would work at the bottom of the economy, could spend their earnings back into the economy, but would still be kept on the margins in much the same way that they existed under slavery. These racist laws kept a “clear spatial distinction to be made between blacks and whites without working against the logic of the marketplace” (Wilson 2007, 76). This was inherently geographic and daily life consisted of practices reaffirming who belonged in which places. The official phrase was ‘separate, but equal,’ yet the application was anything but equal:

Blacks could patronize a restaurant, department store, cinema, or park as long as they waited until white patrons had been served. In the South, blacks and whites attended the same county fairs, but on separate days. Blacks could ride the city bus as long as they sat in the back of the bus, but if the bus was crowded, they were expected, like good servants, to give up their seats to a waiting white person. On the other hand, if seats were available in the white section but not the ‘colored’ section, blacks were expected to stand in the aisle (Wilson 2007, 75).

Despite the racial segregation, black workers were entering the economy as free labor power, at least in theory. By 1943, the black economy in America was estimated at \$10.3 billion (roughly \$143 billion today, or £110.6 billion), representing a time when earnings in at least some cities put blacks and whites at the same income level (Wilson 2007, 77). The 1953 Green Book boasted that its readers annually spent \$112.5 million (approximately \$1.6 billion today, or £1.2 billion) on travel (Schomburg Center 1953, 81). Of course, this is not to say that black Americans had the same economic rights or opportunities; black businesses and workers were harassed, abused, and taken advantage of (Coates 2014; Wilson 2007). It was a myth that blacks simply had to work just as hard as whites in order to succeed and capture the American Dream.

The Green Books were published around the time of this growing black economy, as well as an era of a burgeoning American automobility:

Almost universal access to the automobile promised freedom of a basic geographical kind. Geographical mobility, as it broadened opportunities through ease of reach to new places, promised social mobility and enhanced status. Here was an important American core value supported by automobiles and highways. As an individual’s fortunes waned, the opportunity of a fresh start could be had

elsewhere – if not on a western, then on a suburban frontier. In city terms, utopia lay in moving to a better neighborhood in the suburbs, as it had once meant moving west. Freedom carried, as before, an escapist theme. Americans were promised an equal right to compete for resources, not a guaranteed equal share of them. Change through mobility has seemed requisite to this competition. The ability to reach new horizons has been a necessary ingredient for success (Jakle 2010, 420-21).

While Jakle does acknowledge that Black America was not welcomed into this White American Dream (2010, 414), he tends to speak of mobility using the broad terms and ideas that we should work to avoid. This “American core value” was attainable through the consumption of automobiles. I do agree that this was a major theme of life in twentieth century America, but there never was “an equal right to compete for resources.” While black motorists worked to achieve this freedom on the frontier, they were operating within a specific discourse. After all, federal policy kept them out of the better neighborhoods promised by the suburbs. Black Americans were operating within a completely different system (Coates 2014; Wilson 2007). The redlining of Federal Housing Administration (FHA) assessment maps reveal a power/knowledge dynamic that ensured black citizens could never get at that same American Dream. These assessment maps were for financing and insurance purposes, and the federal government’s stance was that wealthy white neighborhoods represented a much better investment than black neighborhoods. Black neighborhoods were outlined in red and were given ratings of “D” or “Hazardous” (Coates 2014; Wilson 2007). This meant that black homeowners could not get loans like white homeowners, which tended to make this a self-fulfilling prophesy. Black neighborhoods were *officially* designated as a problem; a knowledge was thus produced making them the antithesis of the suburban frontier. The power of the FHA made them fail.

Black Americans could not easily switch neighborhoods, but the promise of a freedom to move through space and even within society could be had *vis-à-vis* the automobile. The Green Books represent an entry into the discourse of automobility in the United States. Symbolically,

the books were a way for black motorists to search for the mobile component of the American Dream, but it also was a literal dialogue amongst motorists and business owners. “There are thousands of places that the public doesn’t know about and aren’t listed. Perhaps you might know of some? If so send in their names and addresses and the kind of business, so that we might pass it along to the rest of your fellow Motorists” (Schomburg Center 1938, 1). Not only were black motorists encouraged to let the rest of their community know about safe places and resources, they also represented an inversion of power hierarchies on the road: “In the event that you are dissatisfied with the service rendered by an advertiser, we would appreciate you writing us the complaint, stating all the facts and conditions and we will immediately investigate your case and help to adjust same” (Schomburg Center 1937, 1). Should the motorist meet with racial discrimination or conflict, he or she could still take some control of the encounter through diverting future business.

The success of the first edition meant that a second would be published the next year. At the beginning of the 1938 edition was a letter written by a user of the previous book:

Many of my friends have joined me in admitting that “The Negro Motorist Green Book” is a credit to the Negro Race. It is a book badly needed among our Race since the advance of the motor age. Realizing the only way we knew where and how to reach our pleasure resorts was in a way of speaking, by word of mouth, until the publication of “The Negro Motorist Green Book”... We earnestly believe “The Negro Motorist Green Book” will mean as much if not more to us as the A.A.A. means to the white race” (Wm. Smith in Schomburg Center 1938, 2)

The AAA, or American Automobile Association, is today synonymous with roadside assistance and complimentary road maps. It was not always such a friendly organization, as its discriminatory practices kept black motorists from joining (Seiler 2008). What is interesting, from a concept of power relations, is that Smith is working within a formed knowledge of what constitutes a successful road trip and mobility on the American Road in general. The comparison between the AAA and the Negro Motorist Green Book is a perfect example of the power behind

Jim Crow laws. Two 'separate, but equal' guidebooks existed for these two races. AAA also represents an achievement for white motorists, and Smith then sees the goal being for the Green Books to equal or surpass it.

The very fact that this is written in such a normal tone suggests that the struggle in controlling the discourse of racial geographies in the United States had already been seized by white America in 1938. There is no sense of sadness in the fact that the need for such books exists. It is "needed among our Race" because of the racial institutions and mobilities formed prior to the Civil Rights Act.

Ten years later, in the introduction to the 1948 edition, there is a call for an end to the need for such books: "There will be a day sometime in the near future when this guide will not have to be published. That is when we as a race will have equal opportunities and privileges in the United States... But until that time comes we shall continue to publish this information for your convenience each year" (Schomburg Center 1948, 1). The tone shifts toward equality and hope, but still maintains an acceptance of how life simply is. It should be noted that this hopeful statement is written on the page just after the mention of the books improving each year until in 1941 they were 'discovered' by "one of New York's great white newspapers" (Schomburg Center 1948, 1). The fact that the books are given value by white reporting suggests that equality was still a long way down the road. This same introduction and message of hope is reprinted word for word in the 1949-51 editions.

In the 1938 edition of the Green Book, Benj. J. Thomas, listed as "former state examiner" and the "proprietor [sic] of the Broadway Auto School" writes an essay on what the automobile means to the black community.

The automobile has been a special blessing to the Negro, for the Negro is getting better wages and doing more business in the automobile industry than any other industry in the world. Take for instance 25 years ago, the average young colored

man was either doing porter work, bell hopping, running an elevator or waiting on table [sic], and the average wage at that time was \$5.00 per week. That same young man, as soon as he learned to operate an automobile, instead of paying him \$5.00 per week, he would begin at not less than \$15.00 per week, and as he progressed and became a mechanic his wages would be raised to \$25.00 per week until today, men that are good mechanics and can master the trade, both as chauffeur and mechanic, are being paid anyway [sic] from \$25.00 to \$50.00 per week, therefore, taking men out of the servant class and placing them in the mechanical class.

In New York City alone, one third of Mechanical work is being done by Colored men, and the same that applied to New York, applies to all other cities and towns through the country (Benj. J. Thomas, in Schomburg Center 1938, 11).

This actually shows the sense of freedom the automobile brings, both on the open road as well as what it meant for ‘upward’ mobility in the 1930s. This shows some of the promise of American automobility as outlined by Jakle (2010). If one can obtain, drive, and fix an automobile, he or she will move up the economic ladder. Again, this framing of what the automobile means is fixed within a specific discourse as to what employment is for black Americans at this time. There is no discussion of professional work or higher education, but rather an acceptance of their position in society. Thus, according to Thomas (who we must remember trained motorists at his school), the automobile is the best chance for a black American to earn a decent living.

There is also a conscious effort to educate readers of the Green Books in automobile safety. In the “Safe Driving Rules” of the 1938 edition, for example, motorists are given tips to help them avoid other drivers. “On a three lane highway, watch out for the driver who thinks the middle lane is his exclusively” (Schomburg Center 1938, 3). What is interesting is the ‘othering’ of motorists in some of these lists. They are written with the assumption that other motorists will be guilty of these bad habits. There are also eerie suggestions that make one wonder if there was something more subversive at work: “Watch out for the driver who crosses the White Line” (Schomburg Center 1938, 3).

The 1953 edition of the Green Books still focused on automobile travel, but featured the new opportunities for commercial air travel (see figure 2). “It is with pride... that we supply for

your knowledge and use the distinguished name of three reliable Air Companies in the United States” (Schomburg Center 1953, 2). Pan Am, American, and Trans World Airlines are featured with company histories, current service, and future plans.



Figure 2. Page 2 of the 1953 “Airline Edition” Green Book. Note that the image caption discusses the “new freedom of Americans” with no mention of race. Courtesy the Schomburg Center, New York Public Library

As usual, this Green Book is positive in tone, and does not address the fact that airlines were practicing the same types of discrimination found on the ground. American Airlines faced legal action for discrimination just two years prior to the publication of the 'Airline Edition' of the Green Books. While American Airlines denied that they practiced segregation and protested that they even employed black workers, it turned out that they had a racial policy that "was openly included in their training manual" (Biondi 2006, 87). Even prior to this, American Airlines experimented with keeping black passengers on the right side of the plane while flying within the American South. Segregation was quickly fought by civil rights activists, and was kept out of airlines much sooner than changes were made for other forms of mobility (Biondi 2006).

The 1953 Green Book glosses over this segregation, which perhaps should be read as an attempt to gain some control over the discourse. There is never a suggestion that discrimination could exist. There is a confidence of black passengers belonging on airplanes. The text is as straight forward as what one might find in a white travel guide, which may be the best sign of progress.

Anxiety in Modern Times

While modernity is an attitude for Foucault, others have viewed it as being something more physical, or at least, tangible. "To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are" (Berman 1988, 15). Marshall Berman, who notably was not a fan of Foucault's work, has

explored the anxiety produced in the tensions and contradictions modernity produces. To be modern, for Berman, is and has always been dialectical: “It is to be overpowered by the immense bureaucratic organizations that have the power to control and often to destroy all communities, values, lives; and yet to be undeterred in our determination to face these forces, to fight to change their world and make it our own” (1988, 13). Dealing with such contradiction can lead to a sense of unease or anxiety in the modern individual. Berman traces how Western intellectuals have reacted to this dialectic. While he claims that this can lead to despair, he notes the voices of Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche, who equally acknowledge the possibilities of despondency, yet still cling to “paradigmatically modernistic faith” (Berman 1988, 20). Such intellectuals often write with a voice of “hoping—often against hope—that the modernities of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow will heal the wounds that wreck the modern men and women of today” (Berman 1988, 23).

Berman’s work is useful here in helping to understand the ‘tone’ of the Green Books, a tone that initially masked the racial tensions that required the publication of such books. Victor Green produced these books, and black travelers used them, during a period of racist oppression, yet there is always hope that life will get better. The books never descend into the despair that racist encounters would seem to merit. I want to argue that the light-hearted character in the text and images of the early editions of the Green Books is a reaction to possible anxiety towards the contradictions of modernity and the difficulties produced in resistance to a power/knowledge discourse. This tone changes in later editions, shifting from ambivalence to an assertion of civil rights.

Humor is present throughout the earliest versions of these books. There is a section in the 1938 edition entitled “How to Keep From Growing Old.” It has useful advice for those hoping to

avoid their senior years, such as “always speed: It shows them you are a man of pep even tho [sic] an amateur driver” and “never stop, look or listen at railroad crossings. It consumes time” (Schomburg Center 1938, 8). Not only do the books not speak of the issues of racism and segregation in anything but the most general of terms, the humor and satire seem to suggest a way to cope with the need for such guides in such modern times.

The 1947 edition contained a transcript of sorts for a conversation had by Wendall P. Alston and James A. Jackson, two representatives of Esso, the gas stations where the Green Books were sold. The two traveled extensively in their jobs at Esso, and were discussing how useful these guides were:

‘Gee’ said [Jackson], ‘If there had been any such publication as this when I started travelling ‘way back in the Nineties, I would have missed a lot of anxieties, worries and saved a lot of mental energy which, had it been conserved and used solely to the advancement of the business interests for which I traveled, my years ‘on the road’ might have been concluded long ago, with enough savings to permit my living a life of peace and quiet, now that I am becoming an old codger’ (Schomburg Center 1947, 19).

Again, we see a tone that denies the very power struggles that require such a discussion. The two effectively dismiss the racist encounters through the humor of being an “old codger.” “This voice resonates at once with self-discovery and self-mockery, with self-delight and self-doubt. It is a voice that knows pain and dread, but believes in its power to come through” (Berman 1988, 23).

The Green Books shift in tone throughout the years. The humorous lists and light-hearted content give way to a much more assertive text. Civil rights finally get mentioned in the 1963-64 edition and the various articles and images seem to lay claim to the mobilities depicted.

The 1963-64 edition explicitly lists the state of civil rights legislation as it relates to jurisdictions around the US (2-4). “The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Urban League, the Congress on Racial Equality, the Students Non-Violence Committee, the Southern Christian Leadership Association and the other groups fighting for

minority rights make it very clear the the Negro is only demanding what everyone else wants... that is guaranteed all citizens by the Constitution of the United States” (Schomburg Center 1963-64, 2). This is followed by a list of states with bans on “jimcrow” laws in “recreational facilities” and government agencies that could be contacted should businesses not comply. Such an assertive tone never entered previous editions of the Green Books.

At the end of this edition, a section entitled “Guide Posts for a Pleasant Trip” teaches readers what to expect when traveling so that they will belong. “The first person to greet you will be the taxi driver, if you don’t drive. Before you get in the taxi tell him where you are going and ask him approximately how much it will cost to get there. If the price seems exorbitant – talk to the sky cap or red cap or an official” (Schomburg Center 1963-64, 96). We are finally seeing a true incorporation of black tourists and travelers into leisure. In the 1938 edition, we are told how driving an automobile will help black workers make more money; now black tourists are being driven in the taxis. There is no suggestion that this will happen. This is the reality of ‘now’ and black tourists need to seize it.

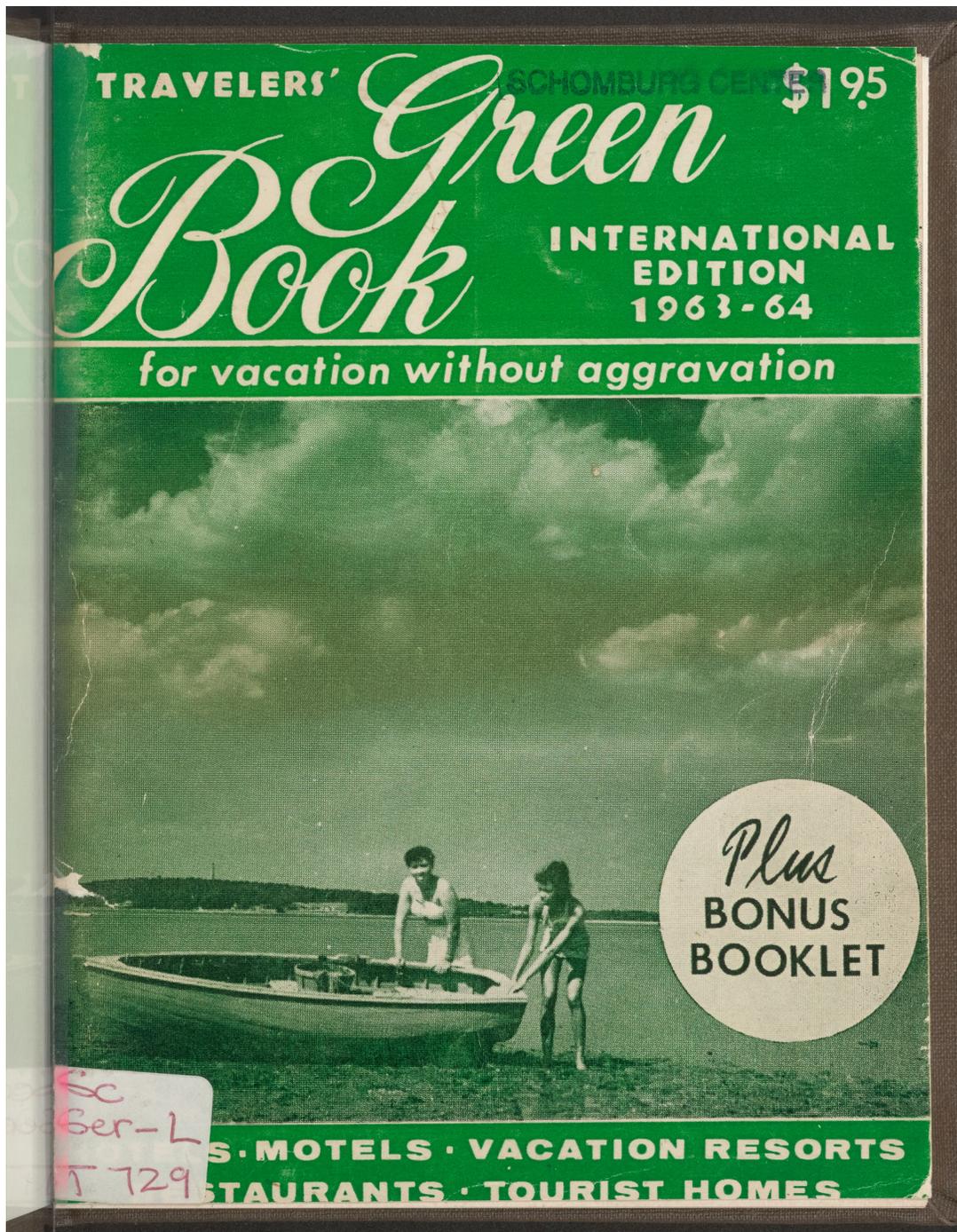


Figure 3. Cover of the 1963-4 Green Book. Courtesy the Schomburg Center, New York Public Library

Figure 3 shows the cover to the 1963-4 edition of the Green Book. The photograph is of two women in bathing suits either pushing a boat on shore or pulling it out onto the water. Either way, they appear to be engaged in normal behavior for American tourists. The cover departs

from previous editions however, in that the usual 'tagline' of "Carry Your Green Book With You, You May Need It" is replaced with "for vacation without aggravation."

Aren't we all looking for that?

Conclusions

The Green Books represent a chapter of modernity and automobility in the United States. They were more than just a useful reference; these guides were an effort to reframe the spaces and power of the American road trip.

With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the books were no longer seen as being necessary and publication soon ended (Hinckley 2012, 127). At first glance, this seems like a straight-forward assessment of their history and purpose. Legal racism would require legal resistance, and the illegality of separate, but equal segregation laws would no longer require such transgressions. It should be noted however that the books were published at a time of highway travel that revolved around an engagement with the road rather than the efficient and modern interstates (Brown, Jr. 1976). The Kerouac road of frantic speed and a means to an end was becoming the norm for long distance automobility. While the promises of a more just and equal United States could remove the perceived need of such a resource, it seems just as likely that the changing mobilities at the structural level brought about a different type of road trip for all Americans. After all, the abolishment in the 1960s of legalized discrimination did not suddenly end racism. While the discourse changed, power struggles continue to this day.

Author Larry McMurtry, while loving the nuance of difference found in the US, admits that his recent travels along the interstates of America are not the stuff of "folksy conversations" with people met along the road (2000, 12). "I drove 770 miles, from Duluth, Minnesota to Wichita, Kansas, speaking only about twenty words... The development of credit-card gas

pumps, microwaves, and express motels has eliminated the necessity for human contact along the interstates” (McMurtry 2000, 12). Automobility has become a much more contained practice, almost replicating the uninterrupted driving practiced by black motorists before the publication of the Green Books (Williams 2001, 73).

The question that should be asked then is whether the Civil Rights Act changed the spaces of the American Road, or if it was instead a repositioning of the motorist and interstate travel. This questions fits within a larger genealogy of American automobility, one that no longer assumes mobility was there for all to seize, but rather traces how the automobile and mobilities truly came into being. There was a ‘knowledge’ of the importance of the automobile at the same time that there was a ‘knowledge’ of two distinct racial spaces in America.

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