

Jim Crow Riding Shotgun: Navigating Racial Discrimination in America

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In the years that followed the Civil War, the United States government passed the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments in an attempt to remedy many of the ills of slavery and inequalities of the nation. While these acts abolished slavery, granted citizenship, and established voting rights for males, the strides toward equality were countered by state legislatures enacting “Black Codes.” The Codes, prevalent in the antebellum South, and in some Northern states, sought to restrict the movement, political power, and social status of former slaves. In many communities, black citizens were not allowed to use the facilities—including businesses, libraries, movie theaters, and restaurants. On public transportation, black citizens were relegated to the back of trolley cars and buses or to an inferior railcar.

The infamous *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) Supreme Court decision legitimized the Black Codes. It enabled the spread of Jim Crow ideology that sanctioned subordinate accommodations, underfunded education, and created literacy tests, poll taxes, and discriminatory practices restricting travel and other facets of everyday life. Students today may not understand the restrictions these Codes placed on the average black family. Understanding the historical impact may help students place contemporary inequalities in context.

Game Changer: The Automobile

Early in the twentieth century, the invention of the automobile changed the dynamics of segregationist policies entrenched in transportation. Although the car was invented and developed in Europe during the 1800s, it was American industrialization that lowered the price, allowed for mass production, and expedited availability. Car ownership became a barometer of social success and inclusion into the American way of life for black families.¹ Families unable to purchase a home due to housing discrimination often made a car their largest purchase.² As author Cotten Seiler notes, “The car, as both commodity and symbol, affected the American economy, landscape, and social structure more than any other consumer product....”³ The freedom of the open road offered travelers “automobility” or “spatial

mobility.”⁴ While the automobility provided some upward mobility and social equality, it conversely created “a new site of racial contestation.”⁵

Challenges of Automobility

Although a car gave black motorists a break from the injustice of being consigned to the back of a bus, car ownership came with a host of other challenges. Black drivers experienced the



A family stands beside its new Oldsmobile in Washington, D.C., in April 1955. Car ownership gave black families a reprieve from the injustices of segregated bus transport in the 1950s.

Duke Ellington swings a bat in front of his “Duke Ellington: Mr. Hi-Fi of 1955” bus while touring Florida. The group is stopped at a segregated motel: “Astor Motel – Colored.”



prejudice of white insurance executives—who either denied liability and property damage coverage or forced black drivers to pay higher premiums.⁶ Black drivers had to learn to navigate dangers beyond the home community. Drivers knew the trustworthy mechanics in their own towns, where to fill up with gas, and where to get oil checked, but road trips brought uncertainty and apprehension. Not all service stations would sell gas to black travelers. If a willing station was located, restrooms might be designated for white travelers.⁷ Restrooms made available to black families were generally at the rear of the station and “were not locked, presumably because they were not attended to or cleaned.”⁸

Finding a place to eat was another challenge. Travelers of color were either refused service or “if admitted to white-patronized restaurants, required to enter by separate doors and sit at separate tables.”⁹ If supper was secured for the family, the next order of business was finding a place to stay for the night. The experience of locating lodging as a black traveler has been described as beginning as a small, almost unnoticeable cloud

in the early hours of morning and developing into a “shadow of apprehension” as the day wore on.¹⁰ The spontaneity of travel enjoyed by white families was not available to travelers of color who often spent hours anxiously wondering, “Where will we stay tonight?”¹¹ National Park superintendents declared at their annual conference in 1922 that while people of color could not be openly discriminated against, “they should be told that the parks have no facilities for taking care of them.”¹² Motel owners expressed concern about integrating their facilities, fearing they would lose white customers.¹³ When black travelers were unable to locate a spot to spend the night, they either drove deep into the night or pulled off the road to sleep for a few hours in the car—both dangerous options. An additional peril on road trips was what was known as the “sundown town.” Sundown towns (also called sunset towns) were white municipalities that publicly informed (usually by billboards or public signs) black visitors and other people of color that they were not welcome in the town after the sun had set. If black travelers found themselves stranded due to car trouble or other

circumstances, “bad things” were likely to happen under the cover of darkness.¹⁴

Ingenuity and Resources: Tools to Battle Bias

In order to combat discriminatory practices, African American travelers developed creative responses to the prejudice encountered along the highways and backroads of America. In some cases, drivers used deception to procure services or to dupe local law enforcement. When Charles Chesnutt and his family were traveling through Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, they received a recommendation for the finest restaurant in town. After being seated without incident, Mr. Chesnutt noticed the manager eyeing his table. As the manager approached, Mr. Chesnutt began to speak to his daughters in French. At that point, the manager, “evidently assuming they were foreigners, retreated in confusion.”¹⁵ Other travelers drew the attention of racist whites simply because they were driving a high-end automobile. Black drivers behind the wheel of a shiny new Buick or Cadillac “were particularly irresistible targets for trouble making whites”¹⁶ and were routinely pulled over by local police on fabricated or trivial offenses. This reality required African American drivers to have “a plan, a cover story, or even a disguise,” such as a chauffeur’s cap, to avoid attracting unwanted attention.¹⁷

To sidestep restaurant discrimination, black families filled picnic baskets with homemade meals and stored gallons of sweet tea or lemonade on the floorboard to enjoy along the journey. Additionally, resorts such as Idlewild (Michigan), Buckeye Lake (Ohio), and Arundel on the Bay (Maryland) began to appear after the turn of the century and provided safe haven vacation destinations for black families.¹⁸ Other vacationers chose to leave the country, venturing to spots such as Bermuda and Mexico to avoid the bigotry experienced during domestic travel. One traveler returned from Mexico and noted, “[F]or the first time in my life on the continent, I felt like a first-class American citizen.”¹⁹

Travel guides that offered recommendations and safety tips became important aids for African American travelers. Among the popular guides were *Hackley and Harrison’s Hotel and Apartment Guide for Colored Travelers*; *Travel Guide*; *Grayson’s Guide: The Go Guide to Pleasant Motoring*; and the most prominent of the group, *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, commonly referred to as *The Green Book*. *The Green Book*, in circulation for three decades—from 1936–1966—was created by Harlem mailman Victor Hugo Green. Initially, the book, which grew

out of the word-of-mouth recommendations of Green’s postal service peers and from friends and family, only covered New York City. Soon multiple guides were produced to cover other cities and states. The books quickly became popular because they included restaurants, motels, and private homes where African Americans were welcome to spend the night. Night clubs, barber shops, beauty parlors, skating rinks, and many other businesses ready to serve black travelers were also included. Copies of the guide were available nationwide at Esso service stations—one of the only gas stations to sell franchises to black entrepreneurs and to provide a place for African Americans to refuel and use the restroom.²⁰

Green’s book, referred to as the “bible of black travel”²¹ created an “invisible map of America” or an “overground railroad”²² that gave black travelers better control of their destiny. The *Green Book* gave African American families a sense of assurance. Civil rights pioneer John Lewis recalled a childhood trip without a guide book.

There would be no restaurant for us to stop at until we were well out of the South, so we took our restaurant right in the car with us.... Stopping for gas and to use the bathroom took careful planning. Uncle Otis had made this trip before, and he knew which places along the way offered ‘colored’ bathrooms and which were better just to pass on by. Our map was marked and our route was planned that way, by the distances between service stations where it would be safe for us to stop.²³

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his letter from a Birmingham jail, described what happened when black travelers did not have family recommendations or a travel guide “...you take a cross country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you.”²⁴ *The Green Book* and other guides were invaluable resources for black traveling salesmen, musicians, and Negro League baseball players.

The Green Book editors expressed the aspiration that their publications would become obsolete one day:

There will be a day sometime in the near future when this guide will not have to be published. That is when

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The Green Book in the Classroom

Teaching Activities

Digitized copies of *The Green Book*, among other sources, offer teachers and students an opportunity to engage in the study of this often overlooked aspect of American history. In one activity, students can plan a long road trip while considering obstacles faced by African American families and the distances one might travel to find accommodating hotels and restaurants and to ensure safety. This activity enables a perspective not often found in the compartmentalized lessons of commercial curriculum and textbooks. Bryan Stevenson, of the Equal Justice Initiative, describes the oversimplification of the study of the civil rights movement:

Civil rights in America is too often seen as a ‘three-day carnival: On day one, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus. On day two, Martin Luther King led a march on Washington. And on day three, we passed the Civil Rights Act and changed all the laws.’ Problem solved.²⁶

Investigating this episode of our nation’s history will give learners a much deeper understanding of the civil rights movement, the Great Migration, and the continuing legacy of race in America.

Discriminatory Practices in the Digital Age

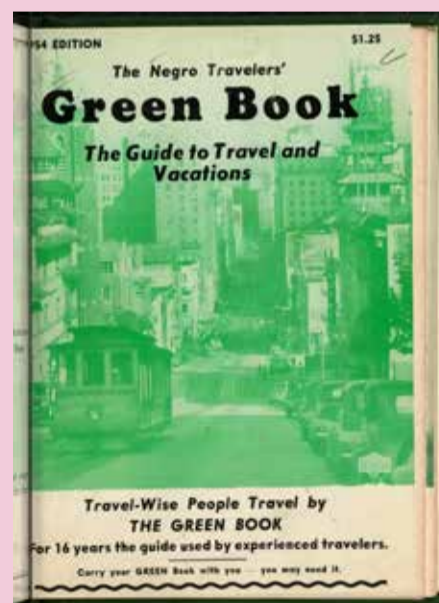
An examination of the following resources will show students how discriminatory travel practices have taken new forms in the digital age. In recent years, numerous travelers of color have filed complaints or lawsuits against the home-sharing service Airbnb as well as against ride sourcing companies such as Uber and Lyft. In the case of Airbnb, there are documented cases of home owners turning down stay requests from users of color while immediately accepting requests from white users. In other cases, next-door neighbors have called the police on African American users staying in a white person’s home.²⁷ In the case of ride-hailing apps, black riders experience longer wait times and more cancellations than white riders.²⁸

The articles in the Teaching Resources section provide more background on the discrimination encountered by travelers of color today as well as information about companies owned

by people of color that have emerged to provide a safe and welcoming travel alternative such as Innclusive (which offers “welcoming and affordable places”) and Noirbnb (“specifically created to procure safe and stress-free travel for the African Diaspora”).

After reviewing the articles and the websites of the travel companies listed, teachers can lead a discussion exploring the ways that new companies—Innclusive and Noirbnb, among others—are functioning as a twenty-first century *Green Book* to aid travelers of color. Ask students whether, or how, Airbnb’s anti-discrimination policy addresses all pertinent issues.

Some of the resources that follow detail the discriminatory practices by transportation network companies (“ride sourcing” companies) such as Uber and Lyft. Also included are their anti-discrimination policies. Have students read each one and determine whether these companies appear to have adequately addressed concerns of the riders or potential riders who experienced discrimination. Next students can brainstorm public services that might be considered “color blind” (such as the subway). List potential reasons why these services have had greater success in providing an equitable experience when other entities have not.



Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library. “The Negro Travelers’ Green Book: 1954” New York Public Library Digital Collections. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/the-green-book#/?tab=about>

Teaching Resources

Home-Sharing Services and Discrimination

Hope King, "Airbnb sued for discrimination," CNN (May 18, 2016), <https://money.cnn.com/2016/05/18/technology/airbnb-lawsuit-discrimination/index.html>

Eric Chandler Groce and Margaret Norville Gregor, "Destination Discrimination: Navigating the Highways of Segregated America with Trade Books," *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, in press.

Elaine Glusac, "As Airbnb Grows, So Do Claims of Discrimination," *The New York Times* (June 21, 2016), www.nytimes.com/2016/06/26/travel/airbnb-discrimination-lawsuit.html.

Airbnb's Nondiscrimination Policy, www.airbnb.com/help/article/1405/airbnb-s-nondiscrimination-policy—our-commitment-to-inclusion-and-respect

Innclusive, <https://innclusive.com/>

Noirbnb, <https://noirbnb.com/>

Ride Sharing Services and Discrimination

Yanbo Ge, Christopher R. Knittel, Don Mackenzie, and Stephen Zoepf, "Racial and Gender Discrimination in Transportation Network Companies," (National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper Series, Cambridge, Mass., October 2016), www.nber.org/papers/w22776.pdf.

Gillian B. White, "Uber and Lyft Are Failing Black Riders," *The Atlantic* (Oct 31, 2016), www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/10/uber-lyft-and-the-false-promise-of-fair-rides/506000/

Marco della Cava, "Blacks Face Longer Wait Times on Uber, Lyft than Other Races—Worse for Taxis, Study Says," *USA Today* (June 27, 2018), www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2018/06/27/blacks-face-longer-wait-times-uber-lyft-than-other-races-and-its-worse-taxis/735578002/

Uber Non-Discrimination Policy, www.uber.com/legal/policies/non-discrimination-policy/en/

Lyft, Anti-Discrimination Policies, <https://help.lyft.com/hc/en-us/articles/115012923767-Anti-Discrimination-Policies>

"The Constant Fear of Driving While Black" | *National Geographic* (March 25, 2018)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtOzNkr60gk

In this brief (3:36) video, law-abiding black and Latino drivers share their stories of fear and humiliation after being stopped by police, who too often see them as criminals.

Resources Relating to The Green Book

Digitized collection of The Negro Travelers' Green Book provided by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library

<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/the-green-book#/?tab=about>

Smithsonian Magazine article and embedded video clip (5:37) about documentary film *Driving While Black*

www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/history-green-book-african-american-travelers-180958506/

Middle Level Learning article (September 2014, pp.13-16) containing history, teaching resources, and lesson ideas for teaching the *Green Book*

www.socialstudies.org/publications/ml/September2014

Jerry T. Mitchell and Larianne Collins, "The Green Book: 'Safe Spaces' from Place to Place," *The Geography Teacher* 11, no. 1 (2014). This article contains multidisciplinary lesson plans and geography focused activities related to *The Green Book*, <https://cep.sc.gov/sites/default/files/Documents/CEP/Publications%20and%20Media/The%20Green%20Book%20Safe%20Spaces.pdf>

Alexander Nazaryan, "How the 'Green Book' Saved Black Lives on the Road," *Newsweek* (March 9, 2017), www.newsweek.com/2017/03/17/green-book-jim-crow-era-travel-guide-saved-black-lives-565430.html.

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we as a race will have equal opportunities and privileges in the United States. It will be a great day for us to suspend this publication for then we can go wherever we please, and without embarrassment.²⁵

Contemporary Travel: How Much Has Changed?

Despite American history's principal theme of progress, students should understand the historical narrative associated with race in our country and the institutional practices of racism that continue today. The reality is that "equality for all," a tenet of our democracy appearing in the Declaration of Independence, Preamble to the Constitution, and more recently, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, is still an unfulfilled objective. 🌍

Notes

1. Cotten Seiler, "So That We as a Race Might Have Something Authentic to Travel By': African American Automobility and Cold-War Liberalism," *American Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (December 2006):1098.
2. Alexander Nazaryan, "The Overground Railroad," *Newsweek* (March 17, 2017): 33.
3. Seiler, 1098.
4. Kathleen Franz, "'The Open Road': Automobility and Racial Uplift in the Interwar Years," *Technology and the African-American Experience* (2004): 132.
5. Jerry T. Mitchell and Larianne Collins, "The Green Book: 'Safe Spaces' from Place to Place," *The Geography Teacher* 11, no. 1 (2014): 29; Franz, 132.
6. Franz, 144.
7. Susan Sessions Rugh, *Are We There Yet?: The Golden Age of American Vacations* (Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 72.
8. Rugh, 73.
9. John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle, *Fast Food: Roadside Restaurants in the Automobile Age* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 22.
10. Mark S. Foster, "In the Face of 'Jim Crow': Prosperous Blacks and Vacations, Travel and Outdoor Leisure, 1890-1945," *Journal of Negro History* 84, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 142.
11. Foster, 142.
12. Franz, 137.
13. Rugh, 82.
14. James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (New York: The New Press, 2005), 232.
15. Foster, 141.

16. Foster, 143.
17. Candacy Taylor, "The Roots of Route 66," *The Atlantic* (November 3, 2016) www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/11/the-roots-of-route-66/506255/, paragraph 9
18. Foster, 136, 138.
19. Rugh, 79.
20. Michael Ra-Shon Hall, "The Negro Traveller's Guide to a Jim Crow South: Negotiating Racialized Landscapes during a Dark Period in United States Cultural History, 1936-1967," *Postcolonial Studies* 17, no. 3 (2014): 308.
21. Taylor, paragraph 13.
22. Nazaryan, 30, 31; Jacinda Townsend, "How the Green Book Helped African-American Tourists Navigate a Segregated Nation," *Smithsonian* (April 2016): 52.
23. Gavin Wright, *Sharing the Prize: The Economics of the Civil Rights Revolution in the American South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), 75-76.
24. The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute; Stanford University Letter From a Birmingham Jail; <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/letter-birmingham-jail>; (quote found on page 6)
25. Seiler, 1108.
26. Taylor, paragraph 29
27. Elaine Glusac, "As Airbnb Grows, So Do Claims of Discrimination," *The New York Times* (June 21, 2016), www.nytimes.com/2016/06/26/travel/airbnb-discrimination-lawsuit.html.
28. Gillian B. White, "Uber and Lyft Are Failing Black Riders," *The Atlantic* (Oct 31, 2016) www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/10/uber-lyft-and-the-false-promise-of-fair-rides/506000/.

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Eric Chandler Groce and Margaret Norville Gregor, "Destination Discrimination: Navigating the Highways of Segregated America with Trade Books," *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, in press.

Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk about Race* (New York, N.Y.: Seal Press, 2018), 85-96;

Stanford Open Policing Project, <https://openpolicing.stanford.edu/findings/>

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