

## INVENTORY / MOTORING WHILE BLACK

### Julian Lucas

When *The Negro Motorist Green Book* was first published in 1936, it was a slim pamphlet listing those hotels, restaurants, garages, and other businesses in New York City where black travelers could be sure of good service and equitable treatment. This was not the case at every establishment; the New York of the day could be as discriminatory, even as dangerous, as the segregated South. But the guide's publisher, Victor H. Green, was an experienced provider of safe, reliable transit. He was a letter carrier for the postal service, whose unofficial motto—inscribed over the doors of the Farley building in Manhattan—proclaims its commitment to freedom of movement: “Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.”

Nor would discrimination stay Green's “Negro Motorists.” Inspired by Green's own brushes with racism, and modeled after similar guides in the Jewish press, the *Green Book* offered black travelers “assured protection.” It was sold at gas stations for a quarter, and became so immediately popular that Green rented an office, hired a staff, and published an expanded second edition, which included listings for as much of the country as he and his part-time agents could cover. Readers quickly began to consider the guide an important component of black civil society: “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,” one subscriber wrote in.

The editors had aims as high as their reader's expectations. The guide they wanted to publish would be

not only an almanac of racial prejudice, but in their words, “something authentic to travel by”—a promise that you and your family would never go bedless in Bethlehem, however far afield. The *Green Book* would also serve as an optimistic window on what W.E.B. Du Bois called the nation within a nation: a parallel world of black businesses, colleges, community organizations, and social networks, all of which seemed, to some, a promise of broader transformations. Between listings, the *Green Book's* editors printed dispatches from this other world: portraits of black excellence that suggested, however vaguely, that equality would soon come. Some were inspirational biographies, like the 1939 edition's sketch of one of the guide's patrons, James A. Jackson, who began his career as a bellboy and minstrel performer before becoming a marketing specialist for Standard Oil. Others were travel essays, noting such things as the “many beautiful homes” owned by black residents of Greenville, South Carolina; the prosperity of the majority-black town of Robbins, Illinois; or the cigar-chomping panache of a black captain, employed as a pilot on a Sea Islands steamer.

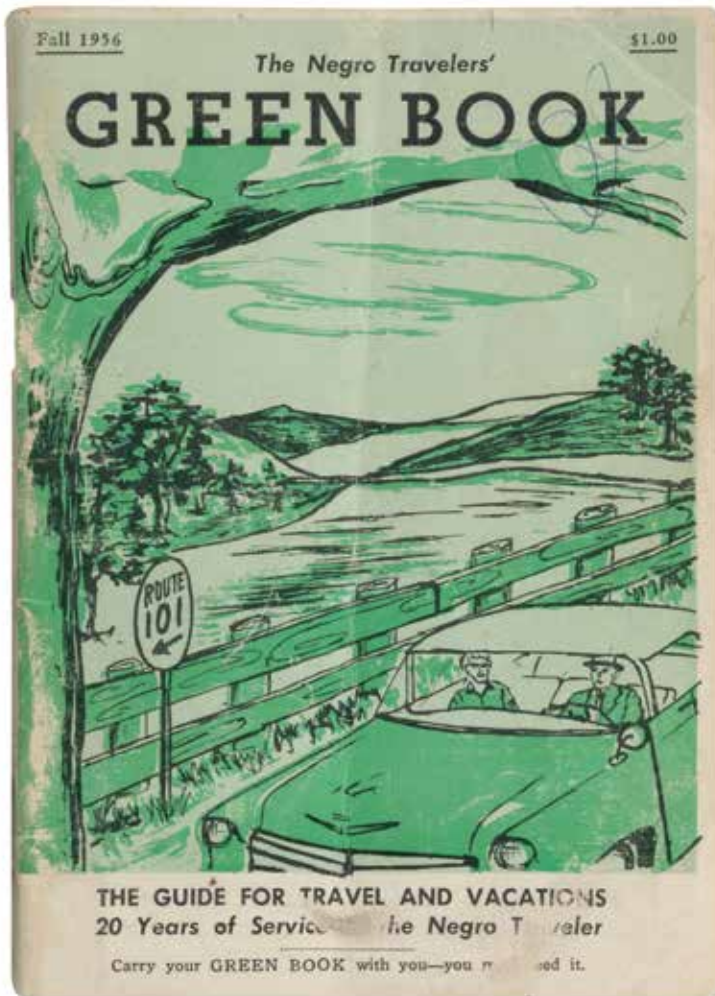
These positive sketches have a note of that tendency toward fantasy that the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier would excoriate, in his book *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957), as the vain “wish-fulfillment” of the “Negro Press.” The *Green Book* also adopted a genteel tone of euphemistic cheer, a dancing around the social realities that had necessitated the guide in the first place. Early editions are rarely explicit about segregation, referring only to the black traveler's “embarrassments,” a word that means not only occasions for shame, but in its original definition, obstacles, impediments to freedom of movement. (And what could be more embarrassing in America—the country of the car, the pilgrim, the

pioneer—than obstacles to free movement?)

The guide's editors didn't elaborate on these embarrassments; it was their job to clear them away. This was accomplished by freelance special agents, who visited hundreds of businesses and private homes each year to vet their friendliness and safety for black travelers. (Scouting for discrimination must not have been particularly enticing work; the guide was always looking for new agents.) The editors also wrote letters to towns that agents hadn't visited, asking if there were any local businesses that might be willing to be included in the guide. They were generally optimistic, reasoning that most white businesses would eventually respond to the growing economic power of the black middle class. But in a moment of rare candor, they published a selection of ambivalent replies to their letters in the 1948 issue. These show what a tepid, provisional welcome black travelers could expect to receive even in places that had—at least on the books—no segregation.

One letter from Devil's Lake, North Dakota, explained that although black travelers were welcome to pass through the town, they would have nowhere to stay overnight. Devil's Lake was all white, and consequently there was no housing available for Negro travelers. A cleverer correspondent in Montana equivocated that while local businesses were willing to serve Negroes, “they hesitate to put their names in your directory for fear of finding all touring Negroes near here over-crowding the facilities to the exclusion of old customers.” (As though the large number of “touring Negroes” was the cause of the exclusion.)

Responses like these didn't prevent *The Negro Motorist Green Book's* editors from maintaining a certain confidence, a belief that the black world's borders would, inevitably, expand. And they did. So did the



Courtesy New York Public Library.

guide: in 1947, it added a booking service; in 1952, it became *The Negro Travelers Green Book* (subsequently *Travelers'*); in the following years, it came out in special editions that included information on trains (1951), planes (1953), and international travel (1955). And for the 1956 twentieth anniversary edition, one of the editors even boasted that the guide would someday offer listings for Negro travelers to the moon.

Would this mean lunar segregation? The bleak implication calls to mind Gil Scott-Heron's song "Whitey on the Moon" (1970), a sarcastic indictment of racism in the space age. ("I can't pay no doctor bills /

But Whitey's on the moon.") But the *Green Book's* editors belonged to an earlier, more optimistic moment; it's more likely they were looking forward to the first black travelers in space. They maintained a steady hopefulness about the possibility of racial equality, expressed most poignantly in an editors' note predicting the ultimate suspension of the guide. "There will be a day sometime in the near future when this guide will not have to be published," it begins, amid the clamor of telephone numbers and business bulletins. "That is when we as a race will have equal opportunities and privileges in the United States."

The *Green Book* lasted long enough to see this happen (at least in the letter of discrimination law) and the exultant 1964 edition, published two years before the guide was discontinued, includes a brief section on "Your rights." Praising the successful young demonstrators of the Civil Rights movement, the editors go on to give a state-by-state account of changes to racially discriminatory laws. The world open to Negro travelers was increasingly indistinguishable from the world at large.

As though taking possession of this newly integrated world, the black boy on the cover illustration of the 1960 guide—now simply *The Travelers' Green Book*—gazes upon the globe: a sphere congruent in shape and equal in dimension to him. It is a simple, even sentimental, image. But it also strikingly epitomizes a centuries-long effort, in which the access of black people to geography—the right to know it and the ability to pass unmolested through it—has long been the reliable index of unreliable freedom.

The history of black people in the United States has always been, among other things, a struggle to move freely in what W. E. B. Du Bois expansively thought of as our "American world." A world filled with "embarrassments," hostile to knowledge and navigation, made opaque by the deracination of enslavement, the forced illiteracy and travel pass system of the plantation, and the vagrancy laws that, after abolition, held the so-called freedmen in place. A world that still throws up obstacles to Negro Travelers—invisible boundaries that, when crossed, can assert themselves with all the brutal bluntness of a bullet from the gun of a police officer or a neighborhood watchman. It continues, this long struggle for the freedom to move. Among its instruments, somewhere between the fugitive's forged pass and the smartphone camera, *The Green Book* takes its modest place.

## PLEASE MENTION "THE GREEN BOOK"

## GARAGES

Viaduct—101 Macombs Place  
 Colonial Park—310 W. 144th St.  
 Polo Grounds—155th St. & St. Nicholas Ave.  
 McClary's—163 West 132nd St.

## AUTOMOTIVE

The New Deal—30 W. 140th St.

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 Remodeled — Dry Cleaning

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 NR. 153RD ST.

Robert Lewis—1980-7th Ave.  
 La Fontaine—470 Convent Ave.  
 Broadway—92 St. Nicholas Ave.

UN 4-9177

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 Cor. 8th Avenue

Dyeing — Cleaning — Tailoring  
*We Call And Deliver Anywhere*

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## DANCE HALLS

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 Golden Gate—Lenox Ave. & 142nd St.

## BROOKLYN

## HOTELS

Y. M. C. A.—405 Carlton Ave.  
 Burma—145 Gates Ave.  
 T. C. U.—1124 Fulton St.

## RESTAURANTS

Dew Drop—363 Halsey St.  
 El Rose—1093 Fulton St.  
 Little Roxy—490A Summer Ave.  
 Bernice's Cafeteria—105 Kingston Ave.  
 Spick & Span—70 Kingston Ave.

## BEAUTY PARLORS

Bartley's—1125 Fulton St.  
 Lamac—545 Classon Ave.  
 Katherine's—345 Sumner Ave.  
 Ideal—285-A Sumner Ave.

## SCHOOLS OF BEAUTY CULTURE

Theresa—304 Livonia Ave.

## TAVERNS

Palm Gardens—491 Summer Ave.  
 Royal—1073 Fulton St.  
 Goodwill—1942 Fulton St.  
 Parkside—759 Gates Ave.  
 Stuyvesant—Hancock & Lewis Ave.  
 Capitol Bar—1550 Fulton St.  
 Turner's—1698 Fulton St.  
 Decatur Bar & Grill—301 Reid Ave.  
 Kingston Tavern—1496 Fulton St.  
 Arlington Inn—1253 Fulton St.  
 McGore's—1253 Bedford Ave.  
 Gallagher's Bar—249 Reid Ave.  
 Kingston Lounge—Kingston Cor. Bergen  
 Rainbow Inn—1630 Fulton St.  
 Durkin Tavern—1289 Fulton St.  
 Disler's—759 Gates Ave.  
 Elegant Bar & Grill—1420 Fulton St.  
 Verona Leaf—1330 Fulton St.  
 Frank's—Kingston & Atlantic Ave.  
 K & C Tavern—588 Gates Ave.  
 George's—328 Tompkins Ave.  
 Smitty's—286 Patchen Ave.  
 Casablanca—300 Reid Ave.  
 Tropic Moon—1304 Fulton St.  
 Buckham's—399 Nostrand Ave.  
 Ten-Twelve—Sumner & Myrtle Aves.  
 Bedford Rest—1253 Bedford Ave.  
 Country Cottage—375 Franklin Ave.  
 Bombay—377 Christopher St.  
 Bedford Lounge—1194 Fulton St.  
 Marion's—125 Marion St.  
 Capitol—1550 Fulton St.  
 Corba—1593 E. New York Ave.

## NIGHT CLUBS

Hanlew—334 Lewis St.  
 Lion's—307 Ralph Ave.

## WINE &amp; LIQUOR STORES

Yak—1361 Fulton St.  
 Lincoln—401 Tompkins Ave.  
 York—1361 Fulton St.  
 Stuyvesant—1551 Fulton St.  
 Gottesman's—41 Albany St.  
 Allen Rose—106 Kingston Ave.  
 Turner's—249 Sumner St.  
 Gottesman's—41 Albany Ave.  
 Sexton's—616 Halsey St.

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