CHAPTER 8
TOWARD A PEDAGOGY OF JIM CROW:
A GEOGRAPHIC READING OF THE GREEN BOOK
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ON THE SPATIAL NATURE OF JIM CROW

The term “Jim Crow” refers to a racial caste-like system that began as early as 1877 with the end of Reconstruction and operated primarily, but not exclusively, in the southeastern United States. While Jim Crow is often identified with rigid laws that marginalized and excluded African Americans, it actually represents a broad array of formal and informal social, economic, and political practices that segregated blacks and whites and justified rampant racism, intimidation, and violence toward African Americans. By the early 20th century, Jim Crow was an established way of life that created separate and unequal schools, transportation, and public accommodations; deprivation of political and economic rights; and frequent instances of lynching and false imprisonment. Racial mixing was not only frowned upon but made unlawful in many states.

In short, the Jim Crow era created a series of complex social geographies characterized not only by white supremacy and hostility but also black resistance, creativity, and self-determination. While white supremacy was certainly violent and highly public, it also exerted itself in smaller yet no less humiliating ways, even dictating where blacks could walk on sidewalks. Likewise, African-American resistance was not always confrontational or overtly political (e.g., boycotts) but included everyday social and spatial practices that defied Jim Crow. Not until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s were legally based (de jure) racial segregation and disenfranchisement successfully challenged and dismantled, although not entirely.

We say “not entirely” because the shadow of Jim Crow hangs over the United States today. Even without lawful authority, de facto discrimination and unjust racial outcomes continue to affect communities (e.g., Alexander, 2012; Inwood, 2011b; Lipsitz, 2007). Point-in-fact, the gradual re-segregation of public schools (Reardon, Grewal, Kalogrides, & Greenberg, 2012) and the disproportionately large number of people of color in prisons are two contemporary illustrations that speak to the very real ways U.S. society remains divided. Scholars such as Alexander (2012, p. 13) argue that America’s criminal justice system represents the “New Jim Crow,” a system that purports to be colorblind but “creates and maintains racial hierarchy (and inequality) much as earlier systems of control did.” Regardless of whether or not one agrees with this contention, it is generally accepted, that “[t]he contours of racial inequality today flow directly from the racial and spatial heritage bequeathed to us from the past” (Lipsitz, 2007, p. 17). No system has arguably done more to shape the contours of race, space, and place in the history of the United States like the Jim Crow system of segregation.
Although Jim Crow is important to making sense of past and continuing patterns of racial discrimination, the subject has not received significant attention from geographers until relatively recently. Over the past 10 or so years, scholars have examined the historical geography of Jim Crow in a variety of contexts—from studies of how segregation shaped the creation of communities, state parks, and even civil defense evacuation plans (Alderman & Brown, 2011; Leib & Chapman, 2011; O’Brien, 2007) to nuanced examinations of how racial hierarchies were produced and negotiated through the commemorative performances of white elites, the development of “underground” African-American tourism, and the everyday legal challenges facing blacks (Algeo, 2013; Hoelscher, 2003; Inwood, 2011a.

As a growing number of geographers suggest, Jim Crow was a spatial system as well as a social one. White supremacy and, in turn, black subjugation required the making of places and other geographic expressions of control that legitimized the power and authority of whites, reinforced the supposed inferiority of African Americans, and maintained the wide chasm between the races. The dividing and regulating of public spaces along racial lines were not simply an outcome of Jim Crow. Rather, these landscapes worked to materially institutionalize racial inequalities and make them appear normal, when in fact they were the product of overt racism.

**TOWARD A PEDAGOGY OF JIM CROW**

If Jim Crow has been under-analyzed by researchers in geography, then our literature on teaching and learning can be accused of even greater neglect. This circumstance is surprising because geography educators increasingly engage issues of social justice within the classroom (e.g., Hankins & Yarbrough, 2009). The neglect extends well beyond geography, however. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), the United States has done a dismal job of including the history of racial discrimination and civil rights into state educational standards and curriculum frameworks. Only 6 of the 50 states currently mention Jim Crow in required curriculum content about the Civil Rights Movement (Shuster, 2011).

We suggest that teaching the African-American struggle against racism requires a foundational understanding of the nature of Jim Crow and its economic, political, and cultural dimensions. Because of the inherently socio-spatial nature of Jim Crow, geography teachers can play (and arguably must play) an important role in advancing a “pedagogy of Jim Crow.” A pedagogy of Jim Crow should address how racial discrimination was constructed and contested on a daily basis, how it operated and expressed itself socially and spatially, and how white supremacy has consequences and legacies in contemporary social life. Along these lines we offer some conceptual and practical advice on how to teach this essential chapter in U.S. historical geography. As we discuss in the next sections, critically examining Jim Crow involves exploring not only racial oppression but also the active resistance of white supremacy. These relationships reveal themselves in sometimes surprising ways like traveling, tourism, and mobility.

**THE NEGRO MOTORIST GREEN BOOK**

While there are many ways of teaching students about the forms of racial control and challenge of the Jim Crow era, we discuss the value of one important and, until recently, forgotten archival resource—*The Negro Motorist Green Book*. Published annually from 1936 to 1965 by New York postal employee Victor Green, the *Green Book* was a travel guide intended to help middle-class African-American
travelers avoid discrimination by identifying accommodations that would welcome them. Arranged by state, city, and street address, the book’s listings included lodging, restaurants, barbers, beauty salons, taverns, and other institutions, many (but not all) owned by blacks. Green developed his lists of businesses through Postal Workers Union contacts he had across the country, his own travels, and input from travel agents and the general public. Black travelers were encouraged to send letters to Green if they found a hospitable establishment not listed in his guide, an early form of crowdsourcing. Green’s guide, endorsed by the black marketing divisions of the U.S. Travel Bureau and the Standard Oil Company, responded to growth in car ownership among African Americans who saw the automobile as a means of escaping Jim Crow segregation on buses, trains, and streetcars and believed that vacation travel was a “material signifier of racial progress” and middle-class respectability (Franz, 2004, p. 133).

In compiling destinations and services friendly to black motorists, Green engaged in a “counter mapping” of the U.S. landscape of travel and automobility (Figure 8.1), disseminating knowledge that challenged the dominance of white supremacy and guiding black motorists around and through Jim Crow discrimination. Even with the help of the Green Book and other guides like it and the individual autonomy the car provided, African-American motorists still had to navigate carefully America’s roads and cities, facing harassment from police and other drivers. The trip could turn dangerous if African Americans stopped in “sundown towns,” all-white communities inside and outside the South that barred minorities after dark (Loewen, 2005). Thus, the “open road” was better characterized as a “contested terrain” for black travelers (Franz, 2004).

![Figure 8.1. Cities with establishments listed in the Green Book, 1949. Cartography by Richard Kennedy.](image-url)
At least two archival copies of the *Green Book* are available online for classroom use. A 1949 version is available as an Adobe Acrobat (.pdf) file from the Automobile in American Life and Society online resource, made available through the University of Michigan. The University of South Carolina Digital Collections Department has a 1956 digital version. Many of the 1956 listings are geocoded through a custom *Google Map*, which significantly expands the possibility of students conducting geospatial analysis of *Green Book* businesses. Google Street View is a powerful tool to search the addresses of *Green Book* establishments, allowing students to discover the relics of businesses, if they indeed remain, and providing a glimpse into the remains of segregation-era African-American business districts and neighborhoods. Focusing on the *Green Book* affords students the opportunity to think about how particular urban environments have changed through space and time.

The *Green Book* is simply a directory of accommodations with advertisements and some short stories and photographs. Students may struggle to make sense of it as a classroom resource. We suggest the *Green Book* be introduced as a cultural text that can be read and interpreted for the purposes of understanding the social and geospatial nature and impacts of Jim Crow segregation and how African Americans, as an oppressed people, reacted to this racism by trying to make a place for themselves. For the remainder of this essay, we identify and briefly develop three interpretive frameworks—racial politics of mobility, black counter-public spaces, and commodity activism—that instructors can employ in helping students read the *Green Book* as a narrative from and about the Jim Crow era.

**INTERPRETIVE FRAMEWORKS**

The *racial politics of mobility* is a framework that we have used to interpret Jim Crow through the pages of the *Green Book*. Travel is not simply an abstract journey from point A to point B. Rather, geographic mobility is physical movement invested with social meaning (positive or negative) and embedded within structures of power, including white supremacy (Cresswell, 2006). Mobility can also be envisioned as a resource that allows social actors and groups to access socioeconomic opportunities. This framework recognizes that access to mobility and its accompanying opportunities is not socially neutral, but historically shaped by one’s racial identity and place within a racialized hierarchy. Finally, mobility can be (re)constructed in ways that either control or empower historically marginalized groups such as African Americans.

Maintaining white supremacy during Jim Crow required the production of black immobility. A long history exists of whites severely restricting and tightly regulating the movement of African Americans as part of a larger strategy of social control—beginning with enslavement and continuing through the Jim Crow era and even now with the racial profiling of drivers by police. Thus, the *Green Book* should be read as a chapter in that larger history of African-American mobility struggles. While the *Green Book* was intended to facilitate black travel and circumvent segregation, it simultaneously documents the contours of racial oppression and black vulnerability. The very need to have such a guide speaks loudly to the hostile social landscape that African Americans had to traverse, even though the automobile insulated them somewhat from confrontation with whites.

Rarely (if ever) did the words racism and discrimination appear in the *Green Book*, but its pages testify nonetheless to the anxieties felt by black motorists. Notice the emphasis on protection offered in the 1956 version of the *Green Book*:
The White traveler has had no difficulty in getting accommodations, but with the Negro it has been different…. We are now and shall always continue to be interested in your welfare. Your cooperation will enable us to reach the summit of our goal and further our efforts in giving ASSURED PROTECTION FOR THE NEGRO TRAVELER (Green. 1956, p. 3, original emphasis).

The Green Book did not inventory all African-American-friendly establishments during the Jim Crow era, but the geospatial pattern of these businesses suggest how easily black families on the road might find themselves with limited protection from Jim Crow and nowhere to eat or to spend the night. Mitchell and Collins (2014, p. 31) offer a lesson related to the Green Book that illustrates the challenges that black motorists had in finding “safe spaces” during Jim Crow and how their travel could be longer, harder, more expensive, and less direct than their white counterparts. In describing his classroom use of the Green Book, Foote (2012) mapped establishments listed in Denver to show the extent to which black travelers were geospatially and socially confined to certain parts of the city and how other areas were effectively off limits to them. The Green Book, therefore, exposes the tension between mobility and immobility that characterizes the African-American geographic experience, particularly during Jim Crow.

The right to move across space on one’s own terms and to resist efforts to constrain one’s mobility has long been part of the African-American struggle for equality and justice—from escaping slavery to the post-emancipation Great Migration out of the South, from the freedom rides of the Civil Rights Movement to more recent transportation justice campaigns. The Green Book not only speaks to the obstacles and inequalities that the Jim Crow landscape presented to black motorists, but the document is also part of the larger story of how African Americans survived, navigated, and reshaped this landscape in ways that were creative and anti-racist. A critical reading of the Green Book requires that students understand its place within the larger historical geography of American social justice activism, a word that refers to organized political movements as well as a politics of everyday, informal resistance. This informal resistance is especially imperative in recognizing that the oppressive racism of the Jim Crow era did not go unchallenged and that an oppositional African-American culture did not simply begin with the Civil Rights Movement.

We have used two frameworks to help students read the Green Book for threads of Jim Crow-era black activism and resistance. The first of those frameworks is black counter-public spaces, which recognizes a rich history of African Americans claiming places of racial segregation as their own and transforming them into locations where black identities, cultural traditions, and political debate could flourish separate from and in opposition to the white-dominated public sphere (Inwood, 2011a). Many of the street addresses listed in the Green Book lead back to black counter-public spaces, helping to understand the contradictory impact that Jim Crow segregation had on African Americans. Green Book listings for Atlanta, Georgia reflect the prominent historical black counter-public around Auburn Avenue, once known as the “richest African American street in the US.” The Green Book led travelers to establishments along Pettigrew and Fayetteville Streets in Hayti, North Carolina, now part of Durham and the location of over 200 black-owned businesses during Jim Crow. Several of Chattanooga’s listed establishments in 1956 had a 9th Street address (now Martin Luther King Blvd.). Known during Jim Crow as the “Big Nine,” the street was home to many black entrepreneurs and blues artists, including Bessie Smith (Figure 8.2). These and many other counter-public spaces represented points of black
power and self-determination in the face of white supremacy. Later, because these spaces were relatively free from white society’s gaze, they proved to be important incubators for the more formal political protests waged during the Civil Rights Movement.

The second resistance framework important to interpreting the Green Book is commodity activism (Wilson, 2012). Commodity activism refers to those instances in which African Americans circumvented white-controlled forms and locations of consumerism to avoid discrimination. Wilson (2012) argued that the popularity of mail order purchases and pre-packaged brand consumption among African Americans during Jim Crow was resistance to being treated so badly by white storeowners and the practice of these owners cheating black customers on the measurement of purchased food and goods. Similarly, a larger political value surrounded African-American travel consumption using the Green Book.

![Green Book business listings](image)

**Figure 8.2.** *Green Book* (1956) business listings for Atlanta, Georgia and Chattanooga, Tennessee.

The very act of locating and patronizing the guide’s establishments provided motorists a way to mock Jim Crow, to support black-owned enterprises, and to avoid inflated prices, poor service, and inedible food from the few white establishments that would serve them.

To read the Green Book as a form of commodity activism, one must recognize that consumerism is not simply an economic practice but also a social and political one, a way for African Americans to demonstrate their importance to the overall U.S. consumer society. Several pages of the Green Book, especially in the 1956 version, showcased Esso gas stations, which distributed copies of the guide and, unlike many other companies, sold franchises to African Americans (Figure 8.3). An important subtext of the Green Book was the ideology of racial uplift, now considered a patriarchal form of activism in
which black elites believed that racism could be conquered by convincing whites of the material and moral progress of African Americans (Franz, 2004). Frequently reaching out to white-owned businesses, Victor Green used his guidebook to promote an image of empowered and stylish black consumers and entrepreneurs that he hoped would convince whites of the absurdity of not “taking advantage of the growing affluence and mobility of African Americans” (Mitchell & Collins, 2014, p. 30). As part of a wider commodity activism, Green’s guide offered a representation of the economic agency and sophistication of the black community, albeit only the middle class segment, that clearly ran counter to the crude Jim Crow stereotypes of African Americans as not being fit for citizenship and equality.

**Figure 8.3.** *Green Book* (1956) photo of the grand opening of Esso gas station, Memphis, Tennessee.

**USING THE GREEN BOOK IN THE CLASSROOM**

Because the *Green Book* was not originally developed as an educational resource, its usefulness in the classroom can be enhanced by reading it alongside other texts about Jim Crow and the African-American mobility struggle. Documentary film, oral histories, and online resources can be powerful ways of providing students with valuable background information and emotional perspective to assist in applying the foregoing *Green Book* interpretive frameworks. For instance, the documentary *Banished* (Two Tone Productions) chronicles the historical “racial cleansing” of three communities and the forced out-migration of African Americans from those places. The video illustrates white supremacy’s control of the movement and settlement of African Americans during the Jim Crow era. *The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow* (PBS) is a web site that allows students to listen to and read firsthand accounts by individuals who experienced Jim Crow discrimination. Some of these personal accounts are drawn from Duke
University’s Behind the Veil Project, which produced the compelling book-CD set Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell about Life in the Segregated South. These accounts provide insight, specifically, into the discrimination faced while traveling and shopping at stores.

For a look into transportation as an arena for racism and struggles for civil rights, students might be encouraged to view the “Awakenings” chapter of the Eyes on the Prize (PBS) documentary series that examines the famous Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955–1956. Before Montgomery, a lesser known bus boycott campaign was conducted in Baton Rouge in 1953 that greatly informed the resistance in Alabama and has been analyzed in the documentary Signposts to Freedom (Louisiana Public Broadcasting). This Louisiana story highlights a rich legacy of grass-roots African-American community activism that existed alongside and in opposition to white supremacy. The film Freedom Riders (PBS) and its supporting educational web site, recounts the 1961 struggle of black and white activists as they deliberately challenged segregation in interstate bus travel. An online essay by historian Thomas Sugrue, accessible at the Automobile in American Life and Society web site, provides a helpful review of the relationship between African Americans and the car—from Jim Crow to the present. The radio documentary Back of the Bus: Mass Transit, Race, and Inequality (American Radio Works) discusses the more contemporary fight for equal rights on America’s roads and transit lines and the race and class disparities that still persist. Finally, YouTube offers several video segments that address police racially profiling black motorists, a phenomenon commonly called “driving while black.”

To gain perspective on the types of counter-public spaces that African Americans fashioned in reaction to segregated and discriminatory restrictions placed on their travel and tourism, students can view and analyze film resources such as A Place of Our Own (Firelight Media Inc.)—the story of Oak Bluffs, a middle class black-oriented resort community on Martha’s Vineyard. A major segment of the documentary Are We There Yet? America on Vacation (History Channel) describes Idlewild, a vacation and retirement community in western Michigan that was called “Black Eden” during its heyday. Across the coastal eastern United States a wider geography of segregated beaches also emerged during Jim Crow, and these served as important places in the relationship between African Americans and water as well as water sports, a relationship often forgotten by historians and historical geographers but examined in the documentary White Wash (Trespass Productions). African-American recreational areas Carr Beach, near Annapolis, Maryland, and American Beach, near Jacksonville, Florida, are the subject of recent documentaries Gone But Not Forgotten (Maryland Public Broadcasting) and An American Beach (Wild Iris Productions), respectively.

While placing the story of the Green Book within a larger African-American historical geography through the use of supporting resources and narratives is valuable, it is also critical to develop active learning activities that allow students to explore and emotionally reflect on Jim Crow and the racial politics of mobility as directly as possible. Indeed, Alderman, Kingsbury, and Dwyer (2013) have recently called for an “empathetic pedagogy” when teaching about racism and civil rights struggles. Such an approach encourages students not only to know about the everyday courage and sacrifice of African Americans but also to identify with the feelings of a people of color from the past and in the present. In pursuing an empathetic approach to teaching the Green Book, teachers might consider the benefit of role-playing or simulated educational experiences, although ensuring they are conducted in ways that are socially respectful to the historical actors and groups involved. At the end of the day, a
white, privileged student living in the 21st century will not be able to empathize completely with African Americans seeking to survive and possibly overcome Jim Crow discrimination in the early and mid-1900s. Yet, it is worthwhile to get students as close as possible to caring with and about people of color from the past, to become sensitive to their everyday struggles and social geographies, and how they experienced and resisted white supremacy.

Building upon Mitchell and Collins (2013), students could be asked to put themselves in the position of an African-American motorist during Jim Crow. Ask small groups of students to use the Green Book to work together in planning and mapping out an itinerary for traveling from a northern or midwestern city to a southern city, a not uncommon journey for blacks who visited family after making the Great Migration out of the South. A consideration of the availability (or unavailability) of black-friendly accommodations and the sometimes large distances between these places allows students to empathize with the hardships of black travel as well as personal sacrifice that went into circumventing and thus resisting white supremacy. Remind students that African-American motorists did not only have to plan carefully their trips more than their white counterparts but often exercised a number of strategies for survival, such as closely controlling their speed for fear of being pulled over by police, avoiding unfamiliar pathways or notoriously hostile destinations, travelling at night when it was more difficult for police to identify drivers of color, and packing food, fuel, and toilet paper in the event of not finding safe, black-friendly hotels, service stations, and restaurants.

Teachers might also consider the value of assigning a creative writing and reflection exercise that asks students to assume the role of a black driver during the Jim Crow era. Instruct students to write a letter to Victor Green, the developer of the Green Book travel guide, explaining the types of barriers and experiences encountered on America’s roadways as an African-American traveler, drawing from their own compassionate instincts and class discussions, oral histories, and documentaries. This letter to Victor Green should also have the students relay their gratitude to him, providing an opportunity to reflect and internalize what the Green Book meant to the middle class black community—practically, politically, and symbolically—from their perspective. The word “perspective” is important here. Other ways instructors can help students engage the geography of white supremacy and black resistance empathetically is assigning them the task of interviewing local, older African-American leaders who would be willing to recount their Jim Crow journey stories. Finally, in thinking about the legacy of Jim Crow and how the U.S. travel market remains racialized and marginalizing, students can conduct a visual content analysis of photographs in contemporary tourism brochures for their state, measuring the extent to which African-American travelers are invisible or made to appear not to belong in those representations of tourism and transportation.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Jim Crow and white supremacy have received limited attention from geographic educators, and these topics are neglected within the curriculum of many states. We not only advocate for the development of a pedagogy of Jim Crow and offer possible classroom resources in the Green Book, we also use this approach to diversify our curriculum and classroom experiences. If read critically and in the context of Jim Crow’s dialectic of white racist control and black anti-racist resistance, the travel guide advances
student understanding of the racial politics of mobility, black counter-public spaces, and commodity activism.

An important aspect of this pedagogy of Jim Crow is recognition that racial injustices and anxieties did not end with the victories of the Civil Rights Movement. African-American mobility remains constrained, and transportation racism continues—from the inequalities of highway building to poor public transportation services (Bullard, Johnson, & Torres, 2004). African Americans remain somewhat “apprehensive” tourists and rely, consciously and subconsciously, on the travel strategies developed during the Jim Crow era. Compared with whites, African-American travelers are less likely to go to unfamiliar places, engage in unplanned situations, or travel alone. Given the highly discriminatory history of mobility in the United States, it is not surprising to learn that feelings of racial acceptance continue to affect the tourism choices of African Americans (Carter, 2008). The publication of black-oriented travel guides continues to be a response to what is perceived as a neglect of African-American heritage and spending power by the mainstream and largely white-centric tourism industry.

REFERENCES


