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The Green Book: A Representation of the Black Middle Class and Its Resistance to Jim Crow through Entrepreneurship and Respectability

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in American Studies from The College of William and Mary

by

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Introduction

‘We drive for hours and hours. We get hungry. But there’s no place on the road we can stop and go in and eat. We drive some more. It gets pretty hot. We want to wash up. But the only bathroom we’re allowed in is usually miles off the main highway. We keep going’ ‘til night comes—‘til we get so tired we can’t stay awake anymore. We’re ready to pull in. But it takes another hour or so to find a place to sleep. You see, what I’m saying is that a colored man’s got enough trouble getting across the South on his own...’ (Rugh 89)

This was Gene Williams’s response when his employer, Senator Lyndon B. Johnson, asked him to take the family dog along with him as he and the other African American employees drove across the country to Washington DC. While Johnson and his family comfortably flew between Texas and Washington DC, Williams and the other employees were relegated to a lengthy, uncomfortable, and even dangerous road trip. However, after this particular discussion Senator Johnson became an advocate of civil rights in Congress and later the White House as President of the United States, eventually driving the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Rugh 90).

Williams and Johnson’s other employees were not alone in their experiences. Despite hopes that the private automobile would provide an escape from the racism and discrimination present in the public spaces of trains and buses, black motorists during the mid-20th century continued to confront Jim Crow laws and a pervasive system of racial hierarchy while on the road. Many roadside establishments throughout the country such as hotels, motels, gas stations, and restaurants refused to serve African Americans. In Isabel Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of the Great Migration*, she recounts the story of an African American man and his family migrating from Beaumont, Texas to California. In 1953, the man had
his wife, grown daughter, and three grandchildren in his car as he made his way across the country. After driving all day and late into the night, he sought out a motel. The first motel turned the light-skinned man away after he revealed to the manager that he and his family were African Americans. Other than one of the grandchildren, Jules, the rest of the family could theoretically pass as white. Tired and humiliated, the man decided to check in to the next motel, pass as a white family, and sneak Jules in by carrying him under a blanket. Despite his young age, the child understood the fear in his grandfather’s voice and obeyed his orders, somehow knowing “how imperative it was that he not let a patch of his brown skin show” (Wilkerson 202). It was already difficult enough for Jules, who stood out from the rest of his family, to know that he was different, but to be sneaked into a strange place, in the middle of the night like “contraband,” brought racism to a whole new level for the child. According to Wilkerson, “That is how they managed to get a bed for the night. But it was said that the memory stayed with Jules and that he was not quite the same after that” (Wilkerson 202).

Incidents such as this left invisible but deep scars for those African Americans who tried to travel across the country without knowledge of where they would be accepted or whom to trust. It was in this environment of racism, discrimination, and constant anxiety that African American families packed the automobile, planned vacations or business trips, and set out on the “open road,” which was incidentally not so open after all. In order to help them navigate this environment, Victor H. Green, a New York postal worker, published The Negro Motorist Green Book in 1936. At first a local guide to black-friendly establishments in
New York, *The Green Book* (its shortened title) evolved into a national travel guide exclusively for African American travelers and vacationers. The guide's state-by-state and city-by-city listings provided black motorists with the names and addresses of restaurants, hotels, guest-homes, and businesses that would accept their patronage, most of which were owned by African Americans. *The Green Book* quickly became an essential part of the African American community. One letter published in the 1939 edition exclaims, "'The Negro Motorist Green Book will mean as much if not more to us than the A.A.A. means to the white race’" (Seiler 1102). Earl Hutchinson Sr. in his memoir, *A Colored Man's Journey Through 20th Century Segregated America* also writes, "The ‘Green Book’ was the bible of every Negro highway traveler in the 1950s and early 1960s. You literally didn’t dare leave home without it" (87). The general acceptance of the message that “you didn’t leave home without it” is reflected in *The Green Book*’s circulation of 2,000,000 copies in 1962 alone (Sorin 181). Initially begun as one postal-worker’s small experimental business venture, *The Green Book* developed into an essential part of the African American driving experience for 28 years.

The popularity and longevity of *The Green Book* is explained not only by its provision of essential services but also the ability of the publishers, Victor Green and his wife Alma, who took over the role in 1952, to adapt the guide to the changing times. Its expansion to a national guide and later an international guide was only one way in which the book remained current as African American vacationers dispersed throughout the world. By its twentieth anniversary edition, *The Green Book* covered the United States, Mexico, Canada, Bermuda and parts of South
American and the West Indies (Green ed. 1956, 6). As flying became a more common and popular method of travel, the *Green Book* dropped “Motorist” from its title, changing it to *The Negro Travelers’ Green Book*, and included black-friendly airlines in its advertisements (Sorin 267). “Victor H. Green & Company” even opened its own travel bureau in 1947 called the “Vacation Reservation Service” where they helped vacationers make advance reservations at any resort or hotel (Dashiell 6). Through the company’s services, effective business decisions, and advertising, *The Green Book* became an essential part of African American travel.

However, with the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the desegregation of public accommodations, the editors of *The Green Book* ceased publication, and the travel guide suddenly became a relic of America’s past. Either because African Americans felt a need to forcibly remove reminders of living through Jim Crow or simply because *The Green Book* was an everyday article tossed away along with maps and other guides, it soon disappeared from America’s consciousness. However, *The Green Book* reemerged from obscurity at the turn of the century in several scholarly publications, Toni Morrison’s novel, *Home* (2012), and even a children’s book, *Ruth and the Green Book* (2010) written by Calvin Alexander Ramsey.

In his discussion of the Federal Writer’s Project (FWP) in *Real Folks: Race and Genre in the Great Depression*, Sonnet H. Retman argues that, “literary critics and historians have tended to focus on the fact of the project [FWP] rather than the content of its actual writing or the ideological implications of its existence” (117). Research on *The Negro Motorist Green Book* thus far resides in a similar sphere of
fact and function, rather than content and implications. Writers and historians have effectively positioned The Green Book in its historical context and have articulated its function as a travel guide (some would say survival guide) for the average African American motorist. Works such as Cotton Seiler’s “‘So We as a Race Might have Something Authentic to Travel By:’ African American Automobility and Cold-War Liberalism”¹ and Gretchen Sullivan Sorin’s dissertation, “Keep Going:” African Americans on the Road in the Era of Jim Crow (2009), have placed The Green Book within the frameworks of the Cold War and African American automobile consumption respectively. In Are We There Yet? The Golden Age of American Family Vacations, Susan Session Rugh discusses how segregation and discrimination limited African American travelers’ claim to citizenship, which she argues was closely linked to family vacations in the years following World War II. In her chapter, “Vacation without Humiliation,” Rugh specifically discusses how The Green Book created a limited space for African American vacationers to engage in this ritual of American citizenship and how discrimination while on the road influenced the Civil Rights Movement.

However, with so much emphasis on “how and why it was used,” historians overlook the community and the culture that The Green Book promotes within its pages. In this thesis, I argue that The Green Book is not just a simple guidebook. It is an expression of a marginalized minority, the voice of the “other” during an era of oppression, violence, and subjugation. Retman argues that the FWP’s state guidebooks “served as a conduit for selling something much larger: the nation itself”

¹ Seiler’s article can also be found as a chapter in his book, Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility (2008).
(Retman 113). I argue that similar to the FWP’s guidebooks, *The Green Book* sold something larger than safe passage in Jim Crow’s country. Through its photographs, articles, advertisements, and editorials, *The Green Book* promoted a certain type of behavior and ideology that resonated specifically with the African American middle class. Through a close reading of *The Green Book*’s 1949 edition and the beginning of the 1956 edition, I will tell the story of the black middle class—a marginalized group that aspired to fully participate in the “American Way of Life” despite the discriminatory and racist practices of Jim Crow America.

Section I: *The Green Book* and Automobility

As one looks upon the cover of the 1949 edition of *The Green Book*, one will see a photograph of traffic on an unmarked highway. Bumper-to-bumper, the automobiles appear to be crawling at a snail’s pace. The sepia coloring of the photograph hides the distinct colors of the vehicles, leaving one with an impression of similar automobiles, which are spread across three lanes driving off to an unknown location past the horizon. The identity of each individual driver is obscured by the angle of the shot, catching only the rears of the cars. Together, all of this reminds one of anonymity, uniformity, and mass production. The traffic, though irritating and frustrating to the modern driver, represents something else in this snapshot—the popularity and accessibility of the automobile in American society as well as the mid-20th century drivers’ open access to the road. Though the location

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2 Though *The Green Book*’s publication spanned over 25 years, I only have access to these two editions (and cover photographs of the 1940, 1948, and 1952 editions) due to limited resources, budget, and time. However, based on secondary research and a working knowledge of Victor Green’s intentions in publishing this travel guide, I can say with confidence that the 1949 edition along with the 20th anniversary edition (1956) are representative of the publication in its entirety. Furthermore, *The Green Book* remained in the hands of the Green family, thus the guide’s purpose can be generalized through its entire run.
(Westside Highway, New York City) of the photograph is credited on page two of *The Green Book*, the absence of indicators or signs in the photograph itself gives the impression that this highway can be any highway in the United States. The ambiguity of the highway’s location stresses the notion that automobility (a reference to the automobile as the primary means of transportation and as a result, a cultural influence) is a national movement. ³ Strategically placed as the cover to a travel guide, the photograph, says to the reader, “Everyone is on the road, why not you?” Though in reality access to automobiles and highways were limited at this time by class, race, and gender, the cover of *The Green Book* acts as a universal advertisement for automobility, which signifies both geographic and social mobility via the automobile. To the average African American motorist, this picture means even more—privacy, security, and mobility in a world where up until this point, movement and travel were circumscribed by race.

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³ For a more complete history of American automobility, see Cotton Seiler’s *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility.*
Figure 1: The Cover of *The Green Book*’s 1949 Edition

Since the rapid westward expansion during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, travel and movement have been closely linked with American identity and citizenship. Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous thesis, “The Significance of Frontier in American History,” presented in Chicago, July 12, 1893, during the World Columbian Exposition, articulates a unique cultural affinity to movement, which he argues largely influences the character of American citizens. According to Turner, this character is shaped by the exploration and discovery of new frontiers. He states, “Each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from
the bondage of the past; and freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society” (38). The experience of discovering new frontiers and “field[s] of opportunity” gave American citizens a sense of unrestrained freedom and superiority disconnected from both prior generations and other countries, which ultimately fed into a strong sense of nationalism. In other words, movement into western territories and a taming of the “Wild West” translated into a perceived ability to succeed in all fields and a sense of predestination as a world leader. However, from the point at which this thesis was presented in 1893, which marked the closing of the Western frontier, to the present day, the notion of the “frontier,” as an expression of American citizenship, has evolved into a more abstract concept of movement and exploration. For instance, on May 25, 1961, President John F. Kennedy pointed out into space and claimed that to be the “new frontier.” Yet, despite this national call to outer space, over the course of the 20th century, because of the growing popularity of the automobile individual travel, road trips, and vacationing marked the new frontiers for the average American citizen.

This frontier was complicated, however, for those who were not afforded the right to travel, to move westward, and as a result were denied active citizenship. “Travel” itself implies a degree of freedom and mobility for the individual traveler. Yet for over two hundred years, African Americans bound by slavery, could not claim such freedom of travel. Even within the thirty years between the conclusion of the Civil War and Turner’s thesis, African Americans found their movement limited by oppressive racism and poverty. Turner’s suggestion in 1893 that travel acts as a “gate of escape from the bondage of the past” was cruelly ironic for African
Americans who, despite emancipation found themselves still barred from the American experience of leisurely travel, mobility, freedom, and citizenship.

After the Emancipation Proclamation and the conclusion of the Civil War, African Americans still faced an overbearing restraint on travel. Though the limitations of slavery were removed, the expectation of servitude remained. This is seen prominently in the customs and rules of train passage during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even prior to the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), where the court upheld a law in Louisiana providing for separate railway carriages for white and black passengers, many states and private railroad companies formally segregated train cars. It was only after *Plessy v. Ferguson* that the customary practice was nationally codified as "separate but equal."

However, either as a result of racism or the high costs associated with providing two equal facilities, the separate rails cars were not equal (Johnson 45). Rail cars for African American passengers, also known as "Jim Crow cars," were usually dirty and rundown and some people even shared passage with the baggage car. In *Patterns of Negro Segregation*, published in 1941 sociologist, Dr. Charles S. Johnson concludes that, "The cars provided for Negroes are almost invariably older and less well equipped, and frequently in such condition as to defy cleaning" (45).

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*Patterns of Negro Segregation* by Dr. Charles S. Johnson resulted from an extensive study conducted from 1938 to 1941 by Johnson, his staff, and students of the Social Sciences of Fisk University. Johnson’s work examines the variation in responses to segregation based on geographic and class differences. The value of this study to my research lies in its collection of interviews, which reveals different perceptions across classes within African American communities.
Wilkerson provides a vivid description of the travel experience that many African Americans faced in the early 1900s:

On the railroad, the Jim Crow car was usually the first car behind the coal-fired locomotive that belched soot, fumes, and engine noise. It was the car that would take the brunt of any collision in the event of a train wreck. It was where the luggage and colored passengers were placed, even though their train fare was no different from what white passengers in the quieter rear of the train paid for the same class of service. (192)

Regardless of paying the same fare, African Americans were subjected to conditions that constantly reminded them of their inferior status in American society. Sometimes, railroad companies went to ludicrous lengths to prevent physical contact between the races. For instance, in Wildwood, Florida, George Starling, a young African American migrating from his home in 1945, climbed aboard the train with “a railing divided the stairs onto the train, one side of the railing for white passengers, the other for colored, so the soles of their shoes would not touch the same stair” (Wilkerson 5). Those individuals who were allowed to ride with white passengers were usually servants or nurses riding along with their employers. It was acceptable for African Americans to travel with white families as long as it appeared that they were in a servile position. This was a common scene in segregated public spaces, where integration was acceptable as long as the racial hierarchy remained status quo. Only when it appeared challenged did white passengers or individuals object to the presence of African Americans.

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5 See Isabel Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns* for a more extensive look at the dynamics of race relations in public spaces such as trains.
With the advent of the automobile, mass consumption, and the emergence of a middle class after World War I, travel transformed into a private experience of luxury for many Americans. Unlike the train, the automobile allowed travelers to have flexible and personal itineraries, no longer constrained by railroad routes or stops. The automobile permitted Americans easier access to more of the country, which brought the concepts of “exploration” and “discovery” to an individual level of luxury through family vacations and road trips. As a result, during the 20th century more Americans actively claimed what Rugh calls, “mobile citizenship” (Rugh 13) where citizenship was based on knowledge of the United States through travel, vacations, and road trips.

For African Americans, the privacy and autonomy associated with the automobile presented new opportunities to engage with this “mobile citizenship.” It was no longer necessary for African Americans to subject themselves to the Jim Crow cars on trains in order to travel. In 1936, sociologist Arthur Raper, based on his study of Greene and Macon counties, Georgia noted, “the opportunities provided by the automobile provide a basis for a new mobility for white as well as Negroes, based upon personal standards rather than upon community mores—upon which the individual wants to do rather than what the community does not want him to do” (Raper 175). Those who could afford automobiles jumped at the chance to escape the humiliation and degradation associated with Jim Crow cars. One upper class African American from rural North Carolina expressed this idea in an interview with Johnson: “Of course Negroes ride in the Jim Crow coach here. Everybody knows that. You'd better ride in the Jim Crow coach. But I don't ride in it; I just don't ride
trains now. I use my car and drive anywhere I want to go. That’s one of the reasons I have a car; so I can go when I please” (Johnson 270-1). John A. Williams, an African American writer for The Holiday and author of This is My Country Too, a travel narrative recording his cross-country road trip in 1963, similarly articulates the importance of the automobile at the beginning of his trip: “there was the car, a nine-passenger job with over four hundred horses hidden under the new white hood. Red upholstery, whitewalls, automatic. A gas-eater? Perhaps, but comfort and power” (21). Comfort, autonomy, and power, claims previously denied to African Americans, were now available through the purchase of an automobile.

For both white and black Americans, the automobile became a status symbol representing that one had “made it” in a society where mass consumption and consumer products strongly indicated one’s place in the world. For African Americans, the ability to “make it” despite discrimination and Jim Crow laws held a greater meaning. Possession and consumption of luxury goods such as automobiles, especially more expensive automobiles such as Cadillacs, signified not only wealth and economic stature but also a personal victory against racism, where the public act of driving one’s automobile placed one on the same social level as white Americans. As the article, “Why Negroes Buy Cadillacs?” published in Ebony in 1949, indicates, for the African American consumer the “indulgence in luxury is a vindication of his belief in his ability to match the best of white men. It is the acme of dignity and stature in the white man’s world” (34). For a marginalized community, constantly barred from active participation in public consumer rights such as eating
out or going to a movie, driving in an automobile became a visible sign of accomplishment and entrance into the African American middle and upper classes. Meanwhile, many white Americans saw this increase in visibility of black drivers as a threat to white supremacy. Though most individuals threatened by this only expressed their resentment and fear in words, others took action. In May 1952, *Ebony* published an article about the “Queen of R&B,” singer, and songwriter, Ruth Brown. Entitled “Ruth’s Cadillacs Cause Unpleasantness in South,” the article discusses her encounter with an FBI agent in Atlanta:

In Atlanta an FBI agent stopped her as she drove into the city and examined the car. “Is this car yours?” he asked her. She produced her ownership certificate. The FBI man explained he thought it was one of a shipment of Cadillacs recently stolen in the region. “Well, I paid for this one,” Ruth replied brusquely and drove off. (56)

The “unpleasantness” of the situation is in reality a frightening circumstance where even a federal agent fell subject to the prejudice of “driving while black.” Wilhelmina Baldwin recounts a related story where the police chief forced an acquaintance to return her new Cadillac on the grounds that an African American could not drive such an expensive car:

She bought a Cadillac. The police chief in Waynesborough [Mississippi] asked her where she planned to drive that Cadillac. She said, “I planned to drive it where I live. I live in Waynesborough.” He said, “You can’t drive that Cadillac.

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6 “Unpleasantness,” similar to “embarrassment” is a middle class euphemism for discrimination and racism. These terms are typically found in African American middle class publications such as *Ebony, Jet, and The Green Book*. I will discuss this further in Section III of this paper.
Not in Waynesborough.” So she took the Cadillac back and bought a
Chevrolet. (Baldwin)

Though both black and white motorists saw the automobile as an indication of
economic stature, provoking both pride and resentment, its symbolic value is only
half of the story. The other half is a darker tale of escape, fear, and discrimination,
where the automobile functioned as a mobile home with the potential to provide
safer passage (both physically and psychologically) for its African American
passengers.

The editors of The Green Book were fully aware of the dangers of travel for
African Americans. On the cover of the 1949 edition, they caution motorists to,
“Carry The Green Book with you—You may need it.” In a time before GPS, smart-
phones, and Google maps, this seems to be a casual way of saying, “Bring along a
travel guide and a map so you do not get lost.” However, for black motorists in the
mid-1900s, “You may need it” referred to a scenario far more dangerous than simply
getting lost. Despite the privacy, autonomy, power, and comfort associated with
automobile ownership, African Americans soon discovered that drivers still risked
discrimination, physical injury, and even death while on the road. Cotton Seiler
describes the road as “represent[ing] a form of 'bad faith' whose promise of
universality and uniform access masks an ascriptive hierarchy” (1092). In other
words, the promise of the “open road” was corrupted and tainted by Jim Crow laws,
discriminatory practices, and segregation.

It is easy to understand the necessity of a travel guide such as The Green Book
in the racially charged South, but African American motorists found it useful in
northern cities as well. As African Americans motorists took to the road and traveled further from their neighborhoods, many discovered that racial codes and practices varied by state, region, or even town. Though racism and discrimination was very much a part of the general American landscape during the publication of *The Green Book*, the extent to which this prejudice was practiced was unpredictable, especially in the eyes of the average black driver. In *New Black Middle Class*, Bart Landry attests to the necessity of *The Green Book*:

> Although such a resource [*The Green Book*] was indispensable in the South, it was also useful in the North where middle class blacks faced the dilemma of the unexpected; at times, they were not at all sure how to behave or how whites would behave toward them. They experienced the conflict of a fixed status in some areas of life and the right to compete in others. (58)

It was the not knowing where or when one could get his or her next meal, night’s sleep, or service for the car that left many with intense anxiety, especially in areas such as northern cities where the Jim Crow laws were not as explicit.

This intense anxiety and fear was not unwarranted, for many African American travelers came back with similar but equally horrifying stories of racist encounters. For instance, Joseph Holloway recounts his first road trip as a child:

> As we were about to leave after getting our gas, the owner walked over to the car. He looked serious but not so mean now. He said to my uncle in a voice kind of under his breath but clear, “Boy I’m going’ give you some friendly advice. You niggers be out this town by nightfall. I would not like to see something happen to your family. I can’t tell you much, but by nightfall y’all
better be gone from here.” It was nearly dark and we just wanted to get back on the road. (Holloway)

Unfortunately, Holloway’s experience was indicative of a typical “sundown town.” A sundown town, its name derived from signs usually posted at the corporate limits reading, “Nigger, Don’t Let the Sun Go Down on You in ____,” was a community that prevented African Americans and other minority groups from residing in or visiting it (Loewen 4-5).

However, it did not take an entire town to exclude black motorists. Individual hotels and restaurants along highways also refused service on account of the color of one’s skin. Many gas stations forbade African Americans from using their public restrooms. According to Johnson, due to the added expense of establishing separate bathrooms, many gas stations preferred to ignore the needs of black patrons, including restroom service (Johnson 72). In 1962, John Easterling lodged a complaint against the Mobile Oil Company as a result of the attendant’s refusal to allow Easterling’s wife and daughter to use the restrooms. He writes:

While the attendant was putting in the gas, we saw signs for ladies and men rest rooms, knowing the south we ask for rest rooms & were informed they didn’t have rest room facilities for coloured ... [The women and children] were on their way to the ladies rest room, that was in plain sight ... [They] had to be called back, we then had to stop on the highway like animals. (Rugh 72)

Incidents such as these forced black travelers to come up with creative solutions in order to avoid such embarrassment and abuse.
The most common adaptation to the racialized road for African Americans was the stocking of automobiles to include not only the basic necessities such as food and water but also pillows, blankets, maps, travel guides such as *The Green Book*, spare automobile parts, and portable toilets. For instance, Henry Hutchinson recalls that his family packed a coffee can to use as a “pee can” while Valerie Cunningham’s father went so far as to bring a “portable potty” and toilet paper, even for short trips (Sorin 57). Sorin writes, “The car became an extension of the safe home environment and the safe black neighborhood—a home on wheels” (55). The need for a “home on wheels” required African Americans to consider the purchase of an automobile in a different light compared to the customary white automobile owner. A larger, more expensive car did not necessarily indicate wealth or status. Contemporary studies and articles assumed that the trend of African Americans purchasing a more expensive automobile in comparison to white Americans in a similar income bracket had to do with only status. For example, Allison Davis, Burleigh Gardner, and Mary Gardner conclude in *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class* (1941), “The purchase of expensive automobiles is certainly equally exaggerated among colored groups in this country as compared to white groups of similar income, and for the same purpose, namely, that these economic symbols have higher social value than in most white communities” (243). However, first hand accounts indicate that black motorists considered space and reliability as well. Bill Gwaltney remarks based on his memories of traveling as a child, “I think the enthusiasm for larger cars in the black community relates to the need to have a good place to sleep should you encounter
trouble along the road or be unable to find the colored hotel” (Sorin 59). In the 1949 edition of *The Green Book*, Ford’s advertisement reinforces this need. It points out not only the automobile’s style but also its durability and size: “A precedent has been established in the low-priced automotive field by combining handsomeness and beauty with durability and comfort ... The new Ford’s functionalism has been extended to the roomy seats—57 inches wide in front and 60 inches in the rear, plenty of room for six persons” (5). Though function and size appeal to the average automobile customer, the emphasis on such aspects take on significant meaning when one takes into account how the automobile (virtually a second home) functioned in the travels of African American motorists.

The automobile, a status symbol and shelter for middle and upper class African Americans, propelled forward travel and the movement of a community otherwise blocked by a pervasive system of racism. Removed from the humiliation and discrimination associated with public transportation, black motorists could take advantage of more opportunities such as traveling sales positions or vacations. However, despite the luxury and privacy of an automobile, the expansion of travel shed light on other perils such as discrimination at roadside hotels or restaurants or unexpected entrance into sundown towns. Rather than stop driving all together, African American motorists adapted to the circumstances including packing automobiles as second homes and using guides such as *The Green Book*. 
Section II: Patronizing Black Owned Businesses, the Black Middle Class, and Racial Uplift

Previous literature depicts *The Green Book* as solely a travel guide for African American motorists. As a result, research revolves around travel, the automobile, and the practical function of the guide. However, when one considers that the automobile was primarily a middle-class purchase and also sparked the need for *The Green Book*, it becomes more apparent that a middle class entrepreneur such as Victor Green would purposefully tailor and publish the guide to the taste and needs of his readership. Thus, with this in mind when looking through *The Green Book*, specifically at the advertisements, editorials, and photographs, one develops a new understanding of the guide and its ideological implications as a black middle-class publication. It is not just a travel guide. Rather, it is an all-encompassing physical representation of the black middle-class community’s goals, accomplishments, and values.

This section will discuss the composition of the black middle class during the mid-20th century, the history of this group’s development, and how the intersection of race and class impacted the formation of unique ideologies, expectations, behaviors, and formal institutions. I will focus on entrepreneurship and African American businesses (advertised in *The Green Book*) as byproducts of this intersection between the realities of segregation and middle-class aspirations. The middle-class African American-owned business represented more to the community than a simple service; it represented the future advancement of the race and acted as a visible symbol of African American success despite Jim Crow. In the next section, I will shift to the behavior and expressions of the black middle class as
evident in the rhetoric of *The Green Book* and other primary sources as indicative examples of the group’s approach to segregation and racism. Whereas the previous section laid down the foundation for why *The Green Book* was necessary during the mid-20th century with the emergence of the automobile, the next two sections will not only position *The Green Book* in the context of the black middle class but also build up to a discussion of how class as represented in and by *The Green Book* impacted this group’s approach to integration and civil rights.

According to historian Benjamin P. Bowser, “Being middle class is itself a high-wire act, where actors rise and fall based on larger relationships between the wealthy and powerful and between the poor and powerless” (1). Yet, in American society up until 1964, the formal hierarchal system was legally broken down further by race. For instance, a white lower class individual was more powerful than a wealthy African American. This hierarchal system was the remnants of the institution of slavery where all African Americans regardless of status as free or enslaved were considered below white Americans. In other words, a lower-class white farmer claimed a higher standing in society than a plantation owner’s slaves as well as a free wealthy African American. This claim gave a white individual power based on race and social position while disregarding economic wealth.

With the end of the Civil War came the potential erosion of this socio-economic culture. Freed African Americans could now enter the workforce and displace white workers, especially in trade professions such as artisan work, the service industry, and farming, skilled positions previously held by slaves in the South. However, with the abrupt close to the Reconstruction era, this race-based
hierarchal order was restored when white employers and politicians placed limits
on the professions and jobs that were open to African Americans. For instance,
professionals such as doctors, dentists, and lawyers remained scarce throughout the
late 19th century due to “southern mores, which soon defined all but a few
professions, such as minister and schoolteacher, as inappropriate for blacks”
(Landry 31). Those African Americans who achieved an “elite status,” were given
such an honor based on their lighter-skin complexion and served the white upper
class (Landry 30). Such elite positions included, “catering, tailoring and
dressmaking, hairdressing, shopkeeping, blacksmithing, boot and shoe repairing,
cabinetmaking and barbering” (Branchik 40). However in the South, most African
Americans remained impoverished as sharecroppers or tenant farmers. As skilled
black craft workers migrated to northern cities, they soon discovered that craft
positions were typically reserved for white immigrant workers. These conditions of
racism and social taboos created a system where most remained impoverished yet
any type of success was dependent on service to white Americans. The lack of
variety in job opportunities across classes (such as middle-class craft work)
prevented African Americans from establishing a traditional class system comprised
of upper, middle, and lower classes. Rather during the 19th century, the composition
of the African American society was sharply divided by the elite who served the
white upper class and the poor masses.

However, from 1915 to 1945, as a result of an increase in immigration, the
elite found their status threatened as more service positions shifted toward white
immigrants. For example, in Detroit, black barbers decreased from 55% in 1870 to
7.3% by 1910 (Landry 36). Meanwhile, as the elite’s standing in the white community declined, the migration of southern blacks to northern cities created exclusive African American communities within these cities. According to Landry in *New Black Middle Class*, by the time the elite accepted the inevitable movement away from white upper class neighborhoods, they found “that other blacks had preceded them in forging a base within the black community” (37), who served the urban African American population. These service-oriented industries typically included “undertaking, banking, insurance, tailoring, grocers, shoeshine parlors, dry good stores, shoe repairs, real estate, dry cleaning, laundering, and cafes” (Bowser 50-1). Jobs and businesses predominantly operated by white middle class Americans and immigrants were now functioning at the hands of African Americans within these segregated communities. This marked the beginning of a broad tripartite system and the emergence of a distinct black middle class. Though not equivalent in wealth or economic stature to the white middle class, this class represented the relative median between the elite and the impoverished masses within the segregated African American community.

Despite limited access to economic means and opportunities in the larger American market, the black middle class expanded and strengthened as the century progressed. By 1936 and the release of the first edition of *The Green Book*, the black middle class, comprised of religious leaders, business entrepreneurs, postal workers, and various professional positions, possessed a relatively large base and emerged as leaders of African American communities. This mix of religious, business, civil, and professional positions reflects the economic ambiguity of the
black middle class. Though new economic opportunities played a part in the emergence of the black middle class, there was also emphasis placed on behavior and ambitions as the class’s base solidified. For instance, Horace R. Cayton and St. Clair Drake in *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, claim that a white-collar professional, a common laborer and a post-office worker can reside together in the middle class because of their ambition and desire to “better his condition” (524, 662). As a result of this emphasis on behavior and desires, Bowser claims that the black middle class became “a class by virtue of its own self-identification” (56). Similarly, Cayton and Drake characterize middle class African Americans from a social-standpoint as, “People interested in maintaining a stable home life, who want to marry and raise a family, who take steady employment when they find it. ... During the leisure time he sees nothing wrong in enjoying life, in playing cards, dancing, smoking, and drinking. ... He believes in ‘Negro business’ and admires a Race Man” (714). For the most part this description overlaps with a general description of the white middle class where both share the central tenets of economic as well as familial stability, a respectable “front” (expressed through restrained public behavior), and “getting ahead” (Cayton and Drake 661-2).

However, poised between economic as well as social mobility and the restraining nature of segregation, the black middle class developed a unique ethos where these traditional American middle-class values were expressed in terms of racial uplift.

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7 Similar to Johnson’s *Pattern of Negro Segregation*, Cayton and Drake’s work is used as a contemporary piece where emphasis is placed on the perceptions and conclusions drawn from oral histories and interviews within the text. One should note that it is a period piece with its own biases and prejudices. However, this does not detract from its value. The value rests on gaining insight into the perceptions of the African American community during the mid-20th century.
and the belief that the advancement of the race will come from the success of “Negro Business,” the “Race Man,” and respectable public behavior.

Cayton and Drake’s extensive study of Bronzeville, the African American neighborhoods on Chicago’s South Side articulates how participation in the black middle class translated into a code of ethics, which focused on race advancement. Cayton and Drake depict this relationship between race, class, and social values through a hierarchical pyramid of the African American community (See Figure 2). The pyramid is comprised of the upper, middle, and lower classes as well as “the underworld of the Black Ghetto.”

The African American classes are divided further by the perceived characteristics and values of the class such as participation in church, clubs, race leadership, and “shady enterprises” (Cayton and Drake 711). The proportion of each sub-division within each level reflects the perceived prioritization of that value for that class. For example, Cayton and Drake place the largest proportions of “Clubs and Society” and “Race Leadership” within the middle class. While “Clubs and Society” reflect the general middle-class values of “belonging” and “conventionalized recreation” (662), “Race Leadership” reflects the class’s perception that their behavior and leadership modeled the ideal way of life in terms of racial advancement (Cayton and Drake 714). Cayton and Drake’s inclusion

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8 Please note that these conclusions and the structure of the pyramid were crafted by interviews and the general perceptions of the Bronzeville community. Furthermore, as African American sociologists and writers, Cayton and Drake were most likely of the middle or upper classes, which may result in the glorification of these classes on the pyramid. However, it is interesting to note that the positioning of the pyramid revolves around “the language of race advancement and community participation” (Cayton and Drakes 714), two characteristics of the black middle class. For instance the “underworld of the Black Ghetto” is defined as a group that had no redeemable qualities in the language of race advancement and community participation. The authors further the belief that the black middle class was the ideal representative group both within and outside of the Bronzeville.
of the social dynamics within a depiction of class structure emphasizes the significance placed on behavior, social groups, and positions within the black community in relation to economic standing.

![The Strength of Class Controls]

Figure 2: “The Strength of Class Controls” (Cayton and Drake 711)

Though middle-class African Americans considered themselves model race leaders through their example of respectability and stability within the black community, others criticized the black middle class for intentionally perpetuating segregation in order to maintain economic and social power. In *Black Bourgeoisie* (1957), E. Franklin Frazier accused the black middle class or the “black bourgeois” of creating a make-believe world to retreat to in order to “escape the disdain of whites and fill its wish for status in American life” (25). In *The Negro Family in the United States*, Frazier writes:

[B]ehind the walls of racial segregation, where they [middle-class African Americans] enjoy a sheltered and relatively secure position in relation to the
lower economic classes, they look with misgivings upon a world where they
must compete with whites for a position in the economic order and struggle
for status. ... They prefer the overvaluation of their achievements and
position behind the walls of segregation to a democratic order that would
result in economic and social devaluation for themselves. (326)

Frazier concludes that this claim for racial advancement through “Negro Business”
was a façade, which ultimately preserved the economic power and prestige of the
black middle class within the segregated communities. Even Johnson writes in
regards to the black middle class, “This class often accepts segregation but resents
discrimination” (233). Indeed, middle-class African Americans encouraged other
African Americans to patronize black owned businesses and industries. They joined
exclusive African American societies and clubs. The Green Book, published by a
middle-class postal worker, encouraged black vacationers and motorists to support
African American establishments, attend exclusive African American social
conventions (Green ed. 1949, 6), and visit exclusive African American communities.
During the mid-20th century, the black middle class definitively turned inward and
built within the segregated communities. However, is it fair to label this focus on the
black community as deliberately upholding segregation when there is evidence of a
desire for integration as exhibited in Green’s statement?

In the following discussion, I put forth the argument that the black middle
class engaged in what I shall call, “temporary separatism.”9 Unlike traditional black

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9 This is not to be confused with the use of the same term in feminist literature. Though the
term is not widely used, when it is used, there does not appear to be a general consensus on
its definition. Scholars have used “temporary separatism” to describe a geographic
separatism promoted by leaders such as Marcus Garvey, which concludes that the races cannot live together, “temporary separatism” places an impermanent time limit on the separated geographic space or, in this context, the segregated African American community.\textsuperscript{10} In other words, the black middle class strengthened a separate black community through business and leadership as a means to achieve integration. The logic follows that successful black businesses resulting from black support and patronage would inevitably expand and could then employ more African Americans. The employment of more African Americans in financially stable positions would create a larger and economically sound black middle class. As a result of this larger black middle-class base, African American leaders theorized that white business owners could not continue to ignore the potential profits resulting from serving a large black middle-class consumer base.\textsuperscript{11} Actions and institutions that appeared to be exclusionary and even segregationist such as the patronage of black businesses were in fact a temporary reprieve from discrimination as well as a patient fight to disassemble segregation through economic pressures. Though scholars such as Thomas Sugrue in \textit{Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for}

\textsuperscript{10} For a more extensive discussion of the historical perspective on black separatism, see \textit{Black Separatism in the United States} by Raymond L. Hall.

\textsuperscript{11} In \textit{Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North}, author Thomas Sugrue expands upon the concept of approaching the Civil Rights Movement through a market lens. He labels this as a push for “equal consumer rights,” where the right to spend your dollar is a gateway right leading to the acquisition of a broader range of rights as citizens of capitalist America.
Civil Rights in the North and Suzanne E. Smith ins To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and African American Way of Death analyze this market approach to the civil rights movement in the context of northern cities and the function of funeral parlors, such extensive analysis of this “temporary separatist” mindset has not yet been applied to The Green Book.

This complex condition of appearing exclusive and race-oriented yet laying the groundwork for integration is expressed in the contents as well as through the function of The Green Book. Though The Green Book directed middle-class African American motorists and vacationers to black-owned restaurants, businesses, hotels, and communities, Green and the other editors hoped that one day The Green Book would become unnecessary and archaic. This mindset is articulated in the introduction of the 1949 edition:

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. It will be a great day for us to suspend this publication for then we can go wherever we please, and without embarrassment. But until that time comes we shall continue to publish this information for your convenience each year. (Green 1)

Despite editors’ claim that they hoped to one-day cease publication, The Green Book fell under fire in the later years of its publication for perpetuating segregation in its promotion of African American businesses, hotels, restaurants, and services (Rugh 84). The fundamental question then is, how can the editors of The Green Book look forward to a day where African Americans can travel freely while at the same time
publishing a travel guide that limits (possibly eliminates) contact between the races while on the road? As a black middle-class publication, *The Green Book* promotes a “temporary separatist” mindset as the method of choice in claiming equal rights. It is in the following discussion of middle-class businesses advertised in *The Green Book* that one will see this travel guide as an expression of a particular philosophy professed by the black middle class. Through its promotion, advertisement, and support of the ideals and services of the black middle class, *The Green Book* strengthened the African American consumer market through vacation and travel.

One would expect a typical travel guide to list places where one can stop to eat, sleep, and maintain the automobile; tourist attractions and recreational activities; and possibly even businesses providing personal upkeep such as clothing stores, barbershops, and tailors. *The Green Book*, like most travel guides, lists these “travel necessities” in order to accommodate the average African American traveler. However, *The Green Book* also advertises other types of businesses alongside the restaurants, hotels, and service stations. For instance, in the 1949 edition, *The Green Book* contains a listing under Biloxi, Mississippi for “Funeral Homes” (38). It seems odd (and even morbid) for a vacation and travel guide to include a funeral home’s address in its contents. So why did Victor Green and the guide’s other editors include such a listing? The inclusion of such a listing uncovers an intricate story about funeral homes, middle-class entrepreneurship, racial uplift, and the development of a second market specifically for African Americans as a response to discriminatory practices.
The African American owned funeral home is one example of a middle-class service business that developed as a result of Jim Crow laws and segregation. The irrational and white supremacist fear of physical contact between the races forced African American entrepreneurs to establish separate funeral parlors and burial services within black communities. As it developed over the late 19th century and the course of the 20th century, the African American owned funeral service became an iconic symbol of middle-class entrepreneurism, respectability, and racial uplift.

From a business perspective, the funeral service industry economically thrived under Jim Crow segregation. Limited by racist practices and discrimination, black families relied on African American funeral directors to properly serve and bury a deceased loved one. By the turn of the century, African American funeral directors served over ninety-five per cent of the black community (Smith 50-51). By 1953, Ebony reported that “Negro undertakers gross[ed] more than $120 million” per year (“Death is Big Business” 17). A local funeral home’s success was typically reflected in its fleet of hearses and automobiles. In To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death, Suzanne E Smith claims, “the reputation of the most successful black funeral homes in the country was directly associated with the style, make (usually Cadillac), and color of their limousines and hearses” (87). However, the economic success of the funeral home industry is only a portion of its overall impact on the African American community. Funeral directors, similar to other middle-class entrepreneurs, used the economic success and their position in the community to advance the fight for equal rights.
During a time where the mainstream American media circulated gross caricatures, black face, and overt racist images of African Americans, entrepreneurs and leaders worked to improve the public image of black Americans. African American funeral directors used their services and industry to put forward an image of respectability. For instance, Smith writes, “they maintained a high level of decorum at their funeral homes in an effort to cultivate respectability for the race” (80). A funeral home’s investment in Cadillacs not only indicated economic success but also acted as a status symbol for the deceased individual’s family. In Ebony’s article “Death is Big Business,” a Chicago mortician recounts a story, which affirms the relationship between funerals, status, and automobiles. The morticians states, “People nowadays don’t want to ride in anything but fishtail Cadillacs. Recently a family refused to ride in a funeral I was conducting in a 1947 Cadillac. They insisted they would ride in nothing older than a 1952” (“Death is Big Business” 17).

Furthermore, Ebony also reported in the same May issue, that the funeral home industry invested more per year in Cadillacs than on caskets (“More Money Spent For Cars Than Caskets” 18). Rather than completely invest in caskets (objects that are buried and not necessarily on permanent display), the funeral industry invested in the status symbol of a Cadillac for its patrons. Such an investment sent the message that even in mourning and in the face of segregation, African American patrons took pride in the success of the deceased and even themselves in the ability to afford such transportation. This insistence on a prestigious new Cadillac reflects how patrons as well as funeral directors set a high standard in presentation at a funeral service.
In “Many Happy Returns,” an article published in the 1956 edition of *The Green Book*, Victor Green’s motto is, “If Negro-owned business is good ... it can be better with advertising” (Dashiell 6). The proclamation, “It can be better with advertising” does not exclusively refer to economic success. Green and other middle-class entrepreneurs considered middle class business to be the key to the advancement of the race. Advertising these businesses promoted the black middle class approach to civil rights through market power and respectability. Black funeral directors also utilized advertising in order to circulate positive images of the black community amongst its members. These positive images fostered racial pride. Many funeral homes distributed fans and calendars, which “featured images of pious black families praying in church, young children adoring their mothers, and other idyllic scenes of black domestic life” (Smith 93). Other fans included photographs of political leaders such as Booker T. Washington and messages that advocated the self-help and industrial philosophy of Washington and middle class entrepreneurs (Smith 94). This type of focus on racial uplift through advertising and reputable presentation leads Smith to claim, “one of the most important contributions of black funeral directors to African American culture was the way they used their role as community leaders to promote the respectability of the race” (Smith 93).

However, funeral directors’ attempts at racial uplift did not exclusively revolve around the presentation of respectability. Many successful funeral directors reinvested their money in philanthropic causes and cultural events in order to support the black community. Many funeral homes acted as safe places where community members, secret societies, fraternal orders, and civil rights groups could
meet (Smith 90). In addition to providing a safe space, according to Smith, “many black funeral directors used the profits from their funeral business to fund entertainment and leisure venues meant to counter the humiliations from Jim Crow segregation” (Smith 91). This understanding of the multiple uses of funeral homes clarifies Green’s inclusion of a funeral home in his vacation guide. The funeral home industry represented the ideal middle-class business venture with its economic success as well as its support and influence within the community. Furthermore, local funeral homes also provided entertainment and space for social gatherings, a place the local traveler could visit.

In *The Green Book*, Green further emphasizes the funeral parlors’ status in the black community in the caption of a photo taken in Chicago. The caption reads, “Metropolitan Funeral Parlors with the Mutual Assurance Company to the south...are monuments to Negro business. The visitor is impressed with the sheer beauty and dignity of the edifices” (Green ed. 1949, 23). Green’s use of the words “monuments” and “dignity” emphasizes the pride associated with successful black owned businesses such as Metropolitan Funeral Parlors and Mutual Assurance Company. The inclusion of this photograph is significant in its inclusion of both companies. With the economic success of their funeral homes, many funeral directors expanded their businesses into other facets of the service industry. For instance, “More Money Spent For Cars than Caskets,” describes how Smith and Gaston, which was the largest single African American undertaking establishment in the nation as of 1953, expanded its industry to include six other businesses. One of these businesses included an insurance company with over 600,000 policies (“More
Money Spent For Cars than Caskets”). The African American owned insurance company was a natural expansion for many funeral directors who could now sell burial policies to the living and direct the burial services of the deceased. The inclusion of Mutual Assurance Company and Metropolitan Funeral Parlors in The Green Book’s photograph is not a coincidence; in fact both companies were founded by funeral director Dan Jackson and later run by Robert A. Cole, nicknamed by Chicago residents as “King Cole” (Smith 99).

![Figure 3: Metropolitan Funeral Parlor (Green ed. 1949, 23)](image)

Originally named, Metropolitan Funeral System Association (MFSA), Mutual Assurance Company was created in response to the needs of the black working class who required burial insurance but could not pay the fees charged by Liberty Life, a black middle-class insurance company (Smith 95). This relationship between funeral homes and insurance companies represents more than an entrepreneur’s
potential for profit in expanding his business. Rather as Smith eloquently states, “In African American culture, death was never simply the end of life and funerals were never simply occasions to mourn. This fact explains ... why serving the living is such an essential feature of the African American way of death” (Smith 14). In other words, funeral directors did not just bury the dead; they also provided services to the living such as prestigious transportation, a display of respectability through advertising, space and funds for entertainment, and even other businesses such as insurance companies. Green’s inclusion of a “funeral home” listing as well as a photograph in the 1949 edition signifies to his readers that these “monuments” to black business are important facets in the present success of the African American community. Green effectively advertises his support for the work of funeral directors and subsequently insurance company owners. The work of these entrepreneurs embodied the central tenets of the black middle class, respectability, economic stability, and civic responsibility.

Green’s support for insurance companies resurfaces on page twenty-two of the 1949 edition where there is a simple photograph of Chiagco’s 35th and South Parkway. The photo includes the edifice of a large building, with a bold lettered sign “Liberty Life.” The caption describes Liberty Life Insurance Company as the “third largest Negro insurance company in America. It employs 110 people in Chicago alone” (Green ed. 1949, 22).
Insurance companies were primarily a middle-class business venture and Liberty Life Insurance Company specifically worked with middle-class African American policyholders. The caption’s reference to Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company’s size and the Chicago office’s employment of 110 people indicates that there is a significant value placed on the accomplishments of Liberty Life. Both Ebony and Jet, black middle-class publications, published numerous articles over the years about the prestige and success of Supreme Liberty Life Insurance. On April 15, 1954, for example, Jet publicized the net worth of the company, which at the time totaled $14,601,106.30, with a claim of over $122 million in insurance policies and a payment of $8 million to beneficiaries. The company also employed 1,100 individuals and had offices in twelve states (“Chicago Insurance Firm Assets Hit $14,601,106”). In January 1961, Ebony published a feature article, “Negro Progress
in 1960,” which recorded “the collective gains made by Negroes in 1960...in nearly all important phases of life” (82). Under the “Business” section, the article claims, “The most significant step toward expansion of Negro business in 1960 was the merger or consolidation of several large Negro-operated insurance companies and the resulting financial strengthening of the firms involved” (85). In this merger, Chicago’s Supreme Liberty Life Insurance Company purchased several insurance companies and as result claimed nearly $160 million worth of insurance. Ebony's connection between African American progress and the financial strengthening of this company reinforces the middle-class approach to civil rights where Ebony's article “Negro Progress in 1960” places the merger’s impact on racial progress alongside the Greensboro sit-in, the election of President John F. Kennedy, and pending school integration cases led by the NAACP. The Green Book’s inclusion of a photograph of Supreme Life Liberty Insurance Company coincides with other middle-class publications’ support for entrepreneurism as a way to combat Jim Crow.

The black middle-class philosophy of “temporary separatism” is easier to grasp in the previous examples of African American-owned businesses, where separation is limited by time and space. In other words, patronizing a black business does not eliminate all contact with white Americans and individuals could further civil rights through other approaches such as protests, marches, and visible confrontations. This elicits the question; did Green and other middle-class individuals fully enact or support “temporary separatism” as an effective approach to integration? The Green Book also promoted exclusive African American
communities, which theoretically could act as permanent oases from Jim Crow laws, discrimination, and humiliation. The 1949 edition of The Green Book includes an article advertising the merits and accomplishments of Robbins, Illinois, an exclusive middle-class African American community. Robbins’ success exemplified not only the values of respectability, stability, and restrained public behavior but also acted as a physical representation of race leadership. Such support of Robbins, an exclusive African American community, coupled with Green’s insistence that black motorists will one day travel without fear or embarrassment reinforces the utilization of “temporary separatism” as a method to integration.

Robbins, Illinois, hailed as “the fastest growing town in the state of Illinois,” was located seventeen miles outside of Chicago, and as the author exclaims was, “OWNED AND OPERATED BY NEGROES” (Sheppard 26). Its success and distinguishing characteristics earned it an entire article in The Green Book 1949 edition, the only city to have such a distinction. In the article, “Robbins, Illinois Steps Out In Front,” George W. Sheppard attributes the growth and success of Robbins to three factors: its location near Chicago, the town’s scenic spots such as picnic grounds, which makes it “an ideal place for summer outings,” and finally “good, sound, practical business” on the part of the government (Sheppard 26). The emphasis on outings and business echo a middle-class ethos of economic stability. Through “good, sound” business practices, one can accrue wealth and consume luxury goods such as picnics. This public exhibit of summer outings, similar to the purchase of an automobile, reinforces one’s class standing in society. Furthermore, the image of a picnic resonates with a controlled and enjoyable luxury,
characteristics typically associated with the middle and upper classes. At night, Robbins provides “night spots that would do justice to Chicago or New York’s brightest” (Sheppard 27). Recall that Cayton and Drake connect these night spots (compared to lower-class apartment parties\textsuperscript{12}) to the pleasures of a middle-class African American: “During the leisure time he sees nothing wrong in enjoying life, in playing cards, dancing, smoking, and drinking” (Cayton and Drake 714). Unlike lower-class entertainment, these night spots provide a public place where middle-class African Americans can enjoy social gatherings, but always with a level of decorum expected of a respectable member of the community. Robbins’s ability to provide such public spots is a testament to its success as a black middle-class community.

Included alongside photographs of insurance companies, monuments, baseball parks, and a funeral parlor, Robbins appears to be another site to visit as an exhibition of racial uplift and communal solidarity.\textsuperscript{13} As Sheppard writes, “IT IS WORTH THE TROUBLE TO GO OUT AND TAKE A LOOK AT AN EXPERIMENT OF AN EXHIBITION OF WHAT NEGROES WORKING TOGETHER CAN DO [original emphasis]” (Sheppard 27). This declaration resonates with the final resolution of

\textsuperscript{12} Cayton and Drake classify the typical elements of a lower-class gathering:
Among the lowers, a party tends to be casual and spontaneous. Informal groups of friends and acquaintances are always ready to ‘have a ball’ on a moment’s notice...When they wanted to dance they simply ‘pitched a boogie-woogie’ at home using the radio or a Victrola for music. ... Lower-class people will publicly drink and play cards in places where people of higher status would lose their ‘reputations.’(Cayton 609-10)

\textsuperscript{13} Cayton and Drake elaborate on this demand for solidarity: “Race consciousness breeds a demand for ‘racial solidarity,’ and as Negroes contemplate their existence as a minority in a white world which spurns them, they see their ultimate hope in presenting some sort of united front against that world” (Cayton 723).
the Fourth Conference for the Study of Negro Problems, led by W.E.B. Du Bois in May 1899 where the focus was African American business enterprises. The resolution states, “The mass of the Negroes must learn to patronize business enterprises conducted by their own race, even at some slight disadvantage. We must cooperate or we are lost. Ten million people who join in intelligent self-help can never be ignored or mistreated” (Du Bois 50). Robbins, incorporated in 1917 is the byproduct of this self-help mentality, where the success of the town is a result of cooperation and sound business practices. Theoretically, if more communities followed the example of Robbins, then the success and accomplishments of “ten million people ... can never be ignored or mistreated.” The Green Book’s vocal support of Robbins through its extensive article echoes this mentality.

Through its photographs and articles of iconic middle-class institutions, The Green Book endorses the values, behaviors, and goals of the black middle class. Yet, similar to the general critique of this social group, The Green Book is misunderstood and interpreted as primarily a tool to cope with Jim Crow laws rather than a long-term assistance in forcing integration. The shelters provided by black businesses and communities seem to eclipse the idea of strengthening the black middle class in order to naturally demand equality via a competitive capitalist market, where demand of a particular segment (African Americans) becomes so great that the market can no longer exist without the segment’s support and consumption. The Green Book in promoting and advertising middle-class establishments within its pages, facilitated this economic approach to the Civil Rights Movement. Simply put, place respectable middle-class African Americans on the road to support this “ideal”
way of life, which will subsequently strengthen this group’s power until the white American market is forced to compete and accept black patronage.

**Section III: “Embarrassment,” a Middle-Class Euphemism for Racism**

Despite the extensive discussion of the market approach to integration in the previous section, “temporary separatism” is not exclusive to the function and services of businesses and African American communities. This restrained, indirect approach to the Civil Rights Movement also extended to the behavior and self-presentation of the individual middle-class African American. To be a part of the black middle class, one needed to follow a code of conduct, which always put forth the image of respectability. This self-presentation, resulting in part from pride, was also used to counter racist perceptions of the black individual in white American society. Similar to the use of advertising by black funeral directors in order to disseminate a particular image of the African American community, Green claimed that *The Green Book* placed “ambassadors of the race” on the road each year as a way to combat racist stereotypes and prejudices. Thus, the success of “temporary separatism” relied on both the large-scale economy of the black middle class as well as the small-scale presentation of the individual middle-class African American. Similarly, *The Green Book* did not solely advertise the success of businesses and communities in order to advance this market approach to integration. Through its rhetoric in advertisements and driving instructions, *The Green Book* supported a particular image of the black traveler, which ultimately reflected the black middle class way of life.
In “Section One,” I used *Ebony’s* article, “Ruth’s Cadillacs Cause Unpleasantness in South” as evidence of discrimination while on the road. The use of the word “unpleasantness” in the title is peculiar considering that this mild word, equated with discomfort, is used to describe a racist and threatening encounter. A similar use of mild language to discuss the ugliness of Jim Crow laws, discrimination, segregation, and racism appears throughout *The Green Book*. For instance, in the 1949 edition’s introduction, the author writes, “With the introduction of this travel guide in 1936, it has been our idea to give the Negro traveler information that will keep him from running into *difficulties, embarrassments* and to make his trips more *enjoyable* [italic emphasis added]” (Green 1). Does difficulty and embarrassment truly describe the feelings of anxiety and fear that African American travelers described in their accounts of road trips and vacations? Similar to *Ebony*’s use of “unpleasant,” *The Green Book*’s use of a mild-mannered rhetoric seems to downplay the serious nature of the circumstances under which African Americans traveled.

Why did these publications choose to use such language, especially at a time when many African Americans were fighting to make the world understand the severity and cruelty behind Jim Crow laws? The connection between Ruth Brown’s “unpleasantness” in the South and *The Green Book*’s rhetoric can be found in the audience of these publications, the black middle class. While Cotten Seiler claims that the rhetoric of *The Green Book* evolves from post-WWII and Cold War nationalism, “liberal antiracism” (Seiler 1092), and racial uplift, I argue that *The Green Book*’s language is more properly positioned in the general ideologies and behaviors of its audience, the black middle class. Though I do not entirely dispute
that the Cold War played a part in the construction of language and behavior in the
wake of the Red Scare, Seiler’s analysis does not adequately explain the use of the
word “embarrassment,” which was consistently used by African Americans prior to
World War II.\textsuperscript{14} However, through an examination of black middle-class values and
behavior, it becomes evident that words such as “embarrassment” and “difficulties”
are in fact middle-class euphemisms for “racism.” The use of restrained mild
language to describe racist encounters reflects two facets of the black middle-class
identity. First, the use of the word “embarrassment” from a literal standpoint
focuses on the individual’s loss of pride or dignity, which strikes at the core of the
middle-class tenet of respectability. Second, the tone of these words represents the
controlled, restrained nature of the black middle class, once again emphasizing an
individual’s respectable “front.”

First, I will discuss how the literal use of the word “embarrassment” reveals
the black middle class’s focus on self-respect during racist encounters. In their study
of Bronzeville, Cayton and Drake conclude:

The middle class is marked off from the lower class by a pattern of behavior
expressed in stable family and associational relationships, in great concern
with “front” and “respectability,” and in a drive for “getting ahead.” All this
finds an objective measure in standard of living—the way people spend
their money, and in \textit{public behavior}. (662)

\textsuperscript{14} See “Part II: Behavioral Response of Negroes to Segregation and Discrimination” of
Johnson’s \textit{Patterns of Negro Segregation} as well as “Chapter 22: The Middle-class Way of
Life” in Cayton and Drake’s \textit{Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City} (vol. 2)
for interviews and discussions where middle class Africans described their reactions to
racism as “embarrassed” or “ashamed.”
With such an emphasis on public behavior, the use of the word “embarrassment” in a middle-class publication such as The Green Book becomes clearer—for to be embarrassed requires an observer or observers. It requires a public act that causes discomfort or anxiety. The public display of inferiority and shaming is assumed to undercut the achievements and core values of a typical middle-class individual. It is a matter of maintaining dignity, self-respect, and pride based upon the economic stability and social status that comes with being a part of the American middle class. For example, one African American woman living in Baltimore during the 1930s cites pride as her reason for avoiding the downtown shopping area: “They treat you so cool I rather not go. ... It hurts my pride to spend my money with white folks that don’t want it” (Johnson 291). As mentioned earlier, one way to distinguish the middle class from the lower class is “the way people spend their money” (Cayton and Drake 662). Similar to other middle-class African Americans, this woman reacted negatively to the fact that she could not spend her money in the white market without the experience being tainted by discrimination. This reality questions the legitimacy of her status as a middle-class citizen. If she cannot spend her money in its equivalent to the white middle class, than is she really a part of the middle class? Previous works such as Johnson’s Patterns of Negro Segregation labeled this solely as an “avoidance tactic,” where the only purpose was to protect one’s pride (Johnson 267-93). However within the concept of “temporary separatism,” I take this woman’s response one step further and analyze her action in supporting black businesses as a result of discrimination. This woman like other middle-class African Americans could have chosen to shop at other “friendly” white
businesses, instead she chose to promote the “double duty dollar,” which according to Cayton and Drake is “making the dollar do ‘double-duty’: by both purchasing a commodity and ‘advancing The Race’” (431). Rather than constantly fight this reminder of the racially charged dollar, this woman like other middle-class African Americans chose to turn inward and support black owned businesses, which not only avoided “embarrassment” but also promoted racial solidarity.

_The Green Book_’s listings and purpose in publication allows blacks travelers to patron at African American owned businesses while preserving their dignity and self-respect as middle-class citizens. For instance, Wendell P. Alston (Special Representative of Esso Standard Oil Company) writes in his essay, “The Green Book Helps Solve Your Travel Problems,” “It was the idea of Victor H. Green, the publisher, in introducing the Green Book, to save the travelers of his race as many difficulties and embarrassments as possible” (Alston 4). The use of the word “save” places significant weight on the psychological damage as a result of these “embarrassments.” The use of “embarrassment” reappears in an advertisement, where the publishers proclaim “Just What You Have Been Looking For!! NOW WE CAN TRAVEL WITHOUT EMBARRASSMENT” (Green ed. 1949, 81). Similar to Alston’s assertion that Green “save[d] the travelers of his race,” the shift from singular second-person “you” to plural first person “we” reinforces the image of this guide as a service to the race. Green and the publishers as middle-class African Americans are able to provide “what you have been looking for” through their genuine understanding of the dangers and difficulties that black travelers face while on the road. This continuous focus on service and racial solidarity is confirmed later
in the next line, which reads, “Use the Order Blank for Extra Copies or Give to a Friend” (Green ed. 1949, 81). Similar to Sheppard’s article about Robbins, Illinois where he encourages travelers to “pitch in and help” (Sheppard 27) support the community, Green also encourages his readers to lend a hand to friends by giving them a copy of The Green Book. Furthermore, comparable to black funeral directors who used their profits for philanthropic and social causes, Green encourages readers to pass The Green Book along to friends and even offers free copies as part of his own philanthropic services (Green ed. 1949, 1). Though the advertisement encourages racial solidarity, the use of “embarrassment” focuses the audience from the entire race to a specific segment—the middle class. Yet, similar to the analysis of the Baltimore woman, if taken one step further, the use of “embarrassment” in this advertisement directs the black middle class to the next line, which encourages the reader to “give to a friend” and to help Green “save” motorists from “difficulties” by patronizing black businesses.

The use of such restrained, moderate, and subtle rhetoric led critics such as Frazier to assume that middle-class African Americans in feeling humiliation or embarrassment, expressed an inferiority complex, which ultimately supported white supremacy.15 However, this assumption ignores the influence of class values on an individual’s tone in both language and behavior. For example in his account of his response to discrimination in a restaurant, a middle-aged African American says, “I was plenty hot, but I didn’t show it. When you show it you lose your point. That’s

15 In Patterns of Negro Segregation, Johnson concludes that there is a certain level of acceptance of racial inferiority and the racial hierarchy by middle and upper-class African Americans despite their attempts to “seek recognition” of their accomplishment such as “education, property, and a sense of values” (Johnson 263).
what they are trying to do—make you hot so you’ll cuss and start something; then they can have you arrested for disturbing the peace” (Johnson 59). Middle-class African Americans such as this individual found it counterproductive to express anger or overindulge in emotions. Though appearing like accommodation and subservient, middle-class African Americans articulated this behavior as “respectable” and working within the system in order to dismantle it.

For instance, Rugh cites several instances where middle class travelers, when refused service, challenged racism by writing letters of complaint to the NAACP or the offending businesses. Rather then argue or challenge the discrimination on the spot, travelers composed eloquent letters expressing the injustice and humiliation experienced as citizens and consumers. According to Rugh, “By writing a letter of protest, they were making claims to rights of public accommodation that they thought were due them as citizens of the United States” (Rugh 79). Johnson includes a story in his study about a group of African American businessmen who are refused service in a Chicago restaurant. Rather then insist on service directly, these men left and lodged a complaint with the sheriff of Robbins, Illinois. According to Johnson, “They went to the near-by town of Robbins (an all-Negro town) in the same county, and swore out a warrant for the manager’s arrest” (Johnson 61). The manager of the restaurant remained in prison in Robbins for several hours before his lawyer collected enough money for bail. Though the manager was released, the judge insisted that the businessmen had achieved their goal because “No other white

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16 For further reading on the effectiveness and popularity of lodging complaints via letters, see “Chapter Three: Vacation Without Humiliation” of Are We There Yet? The Golden Age of American Family Vacations by Susan Sessions Rugh
person wanted to spend a couple of hours in the jail over at Robbins” (Johnson 61). Through an indirect and conservative legal approach, the African American businessmen and the sheriff of Robbins challenged the discriminatory practices of this one particular manager.

This restrained and moderate tone as a reaction to racism comes through in The Green Book’s traveling tips, which include safe driving rules. In “Safe Driving Rules,” The Green Book lists fifteen tips for safe driving. For as an average white motorist, the rules appear to be a general education in defensive driving; rule two states, “When the other car passes you, watch out that he doesn’t cut in on you” and rule five is, “Watch the driver ahead—you can’t be sure whether or not he’ll signal when he turns” (Green ed. 1949, 80). However, the African American motorist needed to always be aware of the racialized road, its dangers, and risks. In providing these “Safe Driving Rules,” Green reminds the individual to be wary while using the controlled and euphemistic rhetoric of the black middle class where “cut in on you,” “parked-cars,” and “reckless driver” represented racist encounters and Jim Crow laws.

“Watch out for the driver who crosses the White Line” (Green ed. 1949, 80) is the number one rule listed under “Safe Driving Rules.” Compared to the other rules, this one is more explicit in its capitalization of “White Line,” which emphasizes the line between the races as well as the physical line painted on the road. Green uses capitalization in order to drive his message home rather than say explicitly, “Watch out for white drivers who are looking to cause trouble with you.” This was an unfortunate and common encounter where disgruntled and racist individuals would
seek out black motorists in order to scare, taunt, or even harm the individual as a way to restore the racial hierarchy, presumably threatened by an African American owning an automobile. For example, in an interview with Johnson, a farmer in Arkansas claimed, “They [whites] drive so wild and crazy here that you have to be on your toes. ... You know how far you would get with them in any kind of argument about right or wrong. The best thing I know is to stay on the right side, and as far out of the way as possible” (Johnson 272). This guarded sentiment is also echoed in Green’s fourteenth rule, which states, “On a three lane highway, watch out for the driver who thinks the middle lane is his exclusively” (Green ed. 1949, 80). The use of “exclusively,” suggests arrogance and dominance, which in the context of the guide and the time period refers to white motorists. Green’s “Safe Driving Rules,” not only reminded travelers of the dangers that one may encounter while on the road, but also suggested that by in following such rules, these travelers could avoid accidents or situations, that might undermine the presentation of respectability.

As much as the success of bringing about integration through “temporary separatism” depended on African American businesses, it also relied on the individual. The middle-class emphasis on respectability influenced middle-class African Americans’ approaches to every day encounters with racism and discrimination. Even in limited encounters such as vacations, when travelers experienced racism or discrimination, they clung to the ideals of the middle class. Rather than argue or confront in the moment, many filed a letter of complaint with the NAACP or offending institution. They believed that respectability through mild language and restraint would ultimately counter the prejudices of white Americans.
Thus, the word “embarrassment” as used in *The Green Book* reflects both the actual feeling of shame deriving from a loss of respect as well as this expression of tone, which reflected the mild-mannered approach to equal rights professed by the black middle class.

**Conclusion: A Call for a New Approach to Studies of the Black Middle Class**

In the 1956 edition of *The Green Book*, Victor H. Green thanks his customers for their “generous support” over the past twenty years. After his statement of appreciation, he continues on to say, “Through this guide a number of white business places have come to value and desire your patronage. ...We trust, in the future, your faith will be justified as in the past; and in so doing, you will tell others of your satisfactions” (Dashiell 7). Through the increase in vacations, travel, and patronage of black owned establishments, *The Green Book’s* readers brought about social change via the “double-duty dollar” (Cayton and Drake 431). *The Green Book* was not simply a travel guide or a passive coping mechanism in the face of Jim Crow laws, but rather an offensive attack against discrimination and segregation via the respectable black middle-class traveler’s claim for consumer rights. Within the vacation industry, *The Green Book’s* readers established a viable and competitive African American market segment, which ultimately forced white business owners to accept and event court. Within the confines of travel and vacationing, *The Green Book* and black motorists used “temporary separatism” to integrate this particular market.
In this thesis, I moved away from previous scholars’ analysis of *The Green Book* as solely a coping mechanism in the face of Jim Crow and I focused on its ideological implications. Through an extensive discussion of its black middle class readership, I redefined *The Green Book* as a tool that actively fought discrimination over the course of twenty-eight years. This logic applies to the black middle class as well. Past criticism such as Frazier’s *Black Bourgeoisie* and a general lack of understanding of this group’s intentions and desires have most likely deterred scholars from engaging in an extensive, well-rounded discussion of the African American middle class, specifically how the ideologies, behavior, and goals of this community shaped the Civil Rights Movement. I have begun such a discussion via *The Green Book*, entrepreneurship, and rhetoric. Through these lenses, my analysis not only repositions *The Green Book* in the framework of an active struggle for equal rights but also placed the black middle class in a similar framework. It is critical that future scholarship engages in a dialogue about how the intersection of class and race influenced the Civil Rights Movement; otherwise groups such as the black middle class will remain not only misunderstood but also a marginalized minority within American Studies.
Works Cited


