



Episode 7: A Place to Put It

Alvin Hall:

The Negro Motorist Green Book was published from 1936 to 1967. I was born close to the midpoint of the period of its publication. So I was almost a teenager when the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, legally ending segregation in public places and banning employment discrimination.

I know first-hand that this did not instantly change people's everyday behavior in communities across America. African Americans who had lived through and survived segregation and Jim Crow knew this. They talked about how deeply held many beliefs were and how individuals and communities were likely to hold on to practices that were familiar and comfortable.

The emotional legacy from this restrictive, tense time in America is not something that can easily disappear. Coping and survival techniques had been developed and shared among Black people over decades. This collective knowledge could not, would not be forgotten with the signing of the Civil Rights Act. It would continue to be passed on by the previous generation to me and my contemporaries. And my generation would share them with the next through intimate conversations, advice, and patterns of behavior.

This is *Driving the Green Book* from Macmillan Podcasts and I'm your host, Alvin Hall. In this episode, we'll explore how this history still sits in the lives of people we met as my producer Janée Woods Weber and I drove the Green Book from Detroit to New Orleans.

African American studies professor Kefentse Chike, at Wayne State University in Detroit, shared with Janée and me stories he had heard about traveling in the South. His words also got me to reflect on my childhood trips from south of Tallahassee, Florida.

Kefentse Chike:

I heard people talk about when they traveled South they had to oftentimes pack their own lunches because they couldn't stop to eat once they got so far in the South. I heard stories about the classic shoebox lunch. They would put the fried

chicken and biscuits and whatever else in a shoebox. And when you got so far down South, this is what you resorted to. Even if you weren't going by car, you did this on the bus, as well.

Hall:

I did this and my parents did this when we would go to visit our relatives in Lake City, Florida or Thomasville, Georgia. We would pack the shoebox with fried chicken and teacakes and grape and orange Nehi soda in the trunk of the car or in something with ice in it in the back. That's what we did. And those ladies who made that food had to be chemists because that food could not spoil in the heat.

Chike:

So you grew up in New York?

Hall:

No, I grew up in a village in the Florida panhandle. I grew up in the Deep South during segregation. When I went to visit various relatives you had to pack all of that. You'd have a can of gas in the back of a car in case something went wrong.

We didn't have a car. It was my Uncle Son who drove the car or his truck, depending upon what vehicle he had at that time. And we would all pile into one car and go there and it was always one drive. We'd leave early in the morning and then drive and make sure we got there before the sun set.

Chike:

That was another thing. You didn't travel at nighttime, or you tried not to.

Hall:

Kefentse's stories brought me back to my own childhood and taking road trips to visit relatives. While he spoke, I could almost smell the shoeboxes full of food. It stimulated memories of my mother's voice telling us to eat carefully as we placed the boxes on our laps. She did not want us to mess up the freshly cleaned clothes we were traveling in. It reminded me of listening to my uncle humming a hymn or spiritual to himself as he watched his speedometer and the cars on the road. Occasionally, when he spotted something concerning ahead, he would say to us in a firm voice: "Y'all need to be real quiet now."

Eventually, one of the adults would say "It's all fine. It's all fine." And we could talk again.

When we reached Lake City, Florida, where we went to visit my Uncle Louie and his family, we would jump out of the car and become rambunctious kids again, finally freed from the

car, where we had been well behaved for a long, long time. And we always knew that Uncle Louie's wife would have chicken and rice for us on the stove. We would crowd around the table in their dining room. I remember my grandmother would always say, "Well, you know the Lord saw us through this trip again."

In a few days, there would be talk about the trip back home and how the adults would get ready for it.

While my relatives didn't use the Green Book because this was only a one-day drive, what my parents and uncle carried with them was the perceptions of our community's collective on-the-road experiences. This was true for Black travelers from the North, South, East, and West.

Dr. Eva Baham:

All over the South, the story was the same. Even in our little town, the story is the same. This is regarding my sister not wanting to go to Mississippi. African Americans could not show that they were elevated in any way, especially in a socioeconomic status, than the poorest white person. And the poorest white person had the right to do anything to you that they wanted to do without retribution, without punishment, or anything. And so African Americans learned, as we see here with this book, how to be proactive in avoiding that.

Hall:

The vulnerability associated with being on the road driving long distances deeply worried some people. Unintentionally attracting a white person's attention could be dangerous. Dr. Eva Baham of New Orleans explains some of the reasons why.

Baham:

The fear of being stopped in the night or the day—especially a woman with children—[the fear] of being assaulted or [possibly] raped, having a car blown up or stolen, or of being stranded, [that fear] was so great that it was best to avoid traveling through there.

The backstory I think to [*The Negro Motorist Green Book*] is that here we [see a proactive way to support people in many ways]. The dark side is what could happen if you went away and you strayed off this path. [This book] tells you in emotional ways what our people had to put up with.

Hall:

There is another less-talked-about reaction to the Green Book's existence. It says more about the widely accepted, government-sanctioned practices that made the book necessary than about benefits it provided to the people who used it.

William Williams, who teaches architecture at the University of Cincinnati, explains:

William Williams:

When I talk to people they all remember the Green Book and now they kind of remember it fondly. I think at the time they probably thought of it more as a necessary evil. It wasn't something that they were proud of. It's just something that you had to have.

Janée Woods Weber:

Did you ever hear any stories from anyone about using the Green Book or what might have happened to them if they didn't have a Green Book?

Williams:

There are several stories. There's actually a good friend of mine here, a guy named Mike Burson who's also an architect. We're like less than 1% of the whole population of architects in the country. But, Mike Burson was from just outside of Illinois and he went to travel to his family down in South Carolina and he remembers that his family was dedicated to the Green Book. I mean they didn't go anywhere without it.

And I know when I grew up, and I'm a little bit younger than him, but I do remember my family always, *always* packed our food. When I was a little kid I kind of just wanted to stop at Stuckey's or something like that.

Hall:

I remember Stuckey's! Stuckey's and their pecan rolls.

Williams:

That's right. I just wanted to stop at the Stuckey's and get some food.

Weber:

And mom would say no?

Williams:

They were like, "Nah, we already packed our food."

Hall:

While the Green Book told you where the safe havens were, word of mouth in your community spread information about places to avoid, whether it was the sundown towns along the routes you took on highways or a mall in an adjacent community. In Detroit, Jamon Jordan, an avid historian and local tour guide, talks about his teenage outings to local malls and the advice his grandmother gave him about keeping himself safe.

Jamon Jordan:

By the time I got to be about ten or eleven years old, we were beginning to take buses to go to the mall with our mom, and then eventually by ourselves. Me and my older brother, we would catch the bus to the mall. We were told clearly that Jim Crow still exists in the Detroit area. You do not go to Fairlane Mall. Fairlane was in Dearborn.

Dearborn had this long history of segregation that extended even into the '70s and '80s. The mayor, Orville Hubbard, was a staunch segregationist from the 1930s. He died in the 1970s—he died a segregationist. He had been the mayor for forty years in Dearborn and he had a phrase, a motto called: Keep Dearborn Clean.

Hall:

The effects of Jim Crow and segregation lasted decades beyond the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 that outlawed the practice. The daily impact on peoples' lives continued.

Jordan:

So we had places that were, for all intents and purposes, official sundown towns that surrounded the city of Detroit. You don't have maybe official sundown towns, but you have unofficial sundown towns, even right now. There are areas outside of the city of Detroit that if you're driving and you're African American and you're not on the main drag—a big street like Woodward or a big street like that—the police will be called and you'll be pulled over and they'll be like, "What are you doing over here? Why are you here? What's the purpose?" You'll be harassed and you'll get the message that you shouldn't be there. So no, it's not officially a sundown town, but that's exactly what it really still is.

[AD BREAK]

Hall:

As we drove the Green Book, Janée and I talked about works we knew that had been inspired by the publication. Nearing our last stop in New Orleans, we were eager to meet

Jan Miles. I brought her book, *The Post-Racial Negro Green Book*, with us on the road trip. This is a state-by-state almanac of atrocities against Black people.

Weber:

The original Green Book has been out of print for quite some time now. What inspired you to create *The Post-Racial Negro Green Book*?

Jan Miles:

I had actually started compiling incidents of racism around 2015 because somewhere around 2012 and 2013 I started seeing an uptick. Then there were more and more incidents and they were coming through the news cycles so quickly. At some point, it occurred to me this is actual contemporary history. These are important incidents and someone should be preserving this. I didn't see anyone else doing it, so I started doing it.

At first, I was doing it on a little website and then I realized, because my background is in book publishing, it would make a lot of sense if I put it in a book. I just happened to have a facsimile copy of the *Negro Motorist Green Book* and I had been working with another book called *A Hundred Years of Lynching*, which is documentation—sort of like what I did—compiling actual new stories of lynchings and I realized if I put those concepts together it would be really impactful. So that's how it happened.

Hall:

Listening to Jan talk about how she developed the book, I wanted to know what common thread emerged as she brought all of the information together.

Miles:

Someone I know referred to [my book] as an inverse Green Book and I thought that made a lot of sense. When I started it, I think my intention was to do it for us. I was doing it for Black people because it's our history and I didn't want those incidents and those people to be forgotten in these fast news cycles that we have. But once I was done, I thought that it would be a really good educational piece for white people who are not as aware, or who aren't receiving the same kind of information through their news cycles that Black people or people who are social-justice-affiliated are receiving.

Weber:

Do you think that we still need a Green Book that shows Black people, African Americans, places where we can be safer?

Miles:

Yes, to a certain extent. I think that would be helpful and I actually know people that are working on projects like that. They're doing it using the technology of today, like creating an app of places that are Black-friendly. I think Diddy and some partners announced last year that they were going to be putting something like that out, but I know people personally who are also working on those kinds of projects.

Hall:

I know encountering facts about the terrorizing and destruction of Black bodies would take a toll on me. So I wondered how Jan manages the emotional trauma of her important work.

Miles:

It was a very long process, and it's interesting that you ask that because at times it was emotionally draining, but I feel that as the process went on it became, for me, actually cathartic. Because normally we're receiving this information all the time. We're seeing it in our newsfeeds or hearing about it. And you don't have anything to do but internalize it. So for me, I actually created a place to put it. It was actually sort of healing to be able to say, "Alright, this thing happened and now I've put it down in this book and now I move on." So I think it actually was a good exercise for me.

Hall:

Jan's phrase "a place to put it" made me think about my conversation with T. Marie King, a community organizer in Birmingham, Alabama. Her family had been touched by racial terror.

As she talked about how she became aware of the Green Book and why it undoubtedly saved lives, she also reflected on how her relatives dealt with the family's history in Alabama.

Janee and I wondered how does her family deal with this? Where do family members place this horrific truth in their collective story? As she talked about how she became aware of the Green Book, she also reflected on how her relatives dealt with the family's history in Alabama.

T. Marie King:

I remember coming across a magazine that had an article about the Green Book. I remember asking my grandmother about it and she said, "Oh well, that's what Black people used to safely travel."

“Oh, okay—well, why?”

“Well, you had something called the Klan and, you know, they didn’t care too much for Black people.” So she had a way of really breaking it down, but we never went into depth about it. And I found out later that was due to the things that they experienced in Lowndes County, ‘cause there’s books and information on “Bloody Lowndes” about how badly the Klan acted in Lowndes county.

Hall:

I understand the silence of T. Marie’s relatives. When I was growing up, I would sometimes ask questions about the past. A relative would often respond with a question: Why do you want to know about that? The statement that followed this question was always said so firmly, so resolutely as if to make it unforgettable. “That’s *my* past, not *yours*. You need to focus on what’s in front of you because that’s where *your* life is.” It became a guiding principle in my life.

Because T. Marie’s family lived the “trouble” that the Green Book tried to prevent in the lives of travelers, she speaks from a knowing point of view.

King:

For my grandmother to be a part of that community at that time, I’m sure there was trauma that she carried and didn’t want to delve into. And then recently, maybe two or three years ago, somebody produced a small play on the Green Book that I went to see that told it from a different perspective, but it was still a good story. I think it was an opportunity to introduce people to the Green Book who may not have truly been aware of it or understood the necessity of it. I think a lot of times people hear things in passing and it’s like, “Oh yeah, I’ve heard that.” But not truly knowing that people’s lives depended on this publication.

Hall:

When Janée and I first set off on our journey to drive the Green Book, our first interview was actually in Brooklyn, New York with artist Derrick Adams. He had created paintings and sculptures inspired by the Green Book for an exhibition called “Sanctuary,” at the Museum of Art and Design. He had researched the Green Book and its creator, Victor Hugo Green, as well as the publication’s history and impact—all to produce artworks that capture the intent, the symbolic elements, and the effect of the Green Book.

Derrick Adams:

The research that led me to the direction of the Green Book happens all the time when I’m making work. Like I said, my first [instinct]—which I think happens for a lot

of creative Black people—is to go first on the negative experiences that we’ve had in general in America. But I also make an effort to find what else happened that was opposite of that, at that time, that no one knows about.

Hall:

Based on what Victor Green chose to emphasize, as well as what he chose *not to include* in the Green Book, his focus on the positive is similar to Derrick’s.

Adams:

I thought the Green Book was not only an important tool of navigation, it was a design project. And it was a successful design project publication because it was historic. It’s an archive. And you know, a lot of young people are making these zines these days...

Hall:

Derrick’s connecting the Green Book to zines was a thought-provoking surprise. He made me consider how the act of information sharing that shaped the Green Book has evolved and been adapted by young people today.

Adams:

I don’t think they always think about the purpose of what they’re making and how can it be more impactful than just an idea of expression. I’m not saying that all young people just do it for expression. Some people are effective in a way of using zines for a lot of different levels of awakening and awareness. But this Green Book was a zine basically, in a way. It was just a directory with a bunch of information and people put things in it. But it had such an impact.

Hall:

Victor Hugo Green said that he wanted there to be a time, and he believed there would be, when *The Negro Motorist Green Book* would no longer be necessary. I asked Jan Miles, the author of *The Post Racial Negro Green Book* if she can imagine a time when she would stop cataloging events.

Miles:

Not in my lifetime. I don’t see it. I don’t foresee an end to it. Maybe in someone else’s lifetime. If I had a child, probably not in that person’s lifetime either. I don’t know how we fix this.

Hall:

Jan's statement may feel pessimistic, but it is a truthful statement about the persistence of racism and institutional bias. The prejudices don't seem rooted in a geographic place, but in people's psyches.

Many Black people talked about how diverse groups of people thrived together when they lived in more inclusive communities, especially during the time the Green Book was published. That is, until their neighbors, often newly-arrived Europeans, moved to segregated areas and began to experience the benefits that being white in America offered. Little by little, many of these people acquired the anti-Black prejudices that permeated their new environment. Sometimes it was demonstrated quietly in the complicity of silence in the face of inequality. Sometimes it was more blatant when people began taking on the behaviors and language of white privilege, even white supremacy.

I can't help but wonder how people made this change inside themselves, in their hearts and minds. How could they justify excluding, even degrading others, when at some point in their lives or their family's history, they too had been mistreated because of their racial, ethnic, or religious identity? Did they forget, suppress, deny, or carefully revise their own stories to excuse their acceptance of prejudice? Or were they so relieved to have finally been accepted as members of the white majority that they were happy to embrace the privileges that status bestowed—including the privilege of feeling superior?

When we look at our country's ongoing struggle with racism and inequality today, it is clear that these behaviors continue to persist within our society, and it's no wonder the Green Book was necessary for so long, and that the struggle for racial justice continues.

That's all for this episode of Driving the Green Book. Join us next week as we head to Birmingham, Alabama to visit one of the best-known, upscale places for African American travelers to stay and an epicenter of the civil rights movement—the A.G. Gaston Motel.

CREDITS

Special thanks to Derrick Adams, Dr. Eva Baham, Kefentse Chike, Jamon Jordan, T. Marie King, Jan Miles, and William Williams.

Driving the Green Book is a production of Macmillan Podcasts. It is created, narrated, and produced by Alvin Hall and edited by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams. Sound design and original theme song by Cedric Wilson at Lantigua Williams & Co. Field production by Oluwakemi Aladesuyi. Janée Woods Weber is the associate producer with additional production support by Jasmine Faustino, Michelle Margulis, Morgan Ratner, Emily Miller, and Becky Celestina. Kathy Doyle is the Macmillan Podcasts Vice President.

Subscribe to Driving the Green Book on Apple Podcasts. While you're listening, you can also explore the road trip locations behind the show using our custom Apple Maps Guide. Find a

link to this experience, curated music playlists, details about my upcoming book, and more at drivingthegreenbook.com.

If you'd like to share your own stories about the Green Book with us, email us at greenbook@macmillan.com. We would love to hear from you.

Safe travels.