The *Green Book*: Race, Geography, and Critical Understanding

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The American student population today is highly diverse—among those ages 13-29, almost 14% are African-American and almost 20% are Hispanic, while white students make up just under 60% of the overall population, a record low (Keeter & Taylor, 2009). Simultaneously, however, race relations in the U.S. seem to be worsening; a 2015 Gallup poll found that over 60% of those responding where "somewhat or very dissatisfied" with the state of American race relations (2015). Many Americans across the racial spectrum view the nation as moving farther away from the advances of the civil rights movement. It is difficult for social studies teachers to help correct this view, when so many Americans live in relative racial isolation. Today, almost 1/3 of African-Americans live in neighborhoods that are more than 90% black, while white Americans live in residential areas that are over 90% white (Quinn & Pasawarat, 2003). Social studies teachers are faced with a perplexing dilemma—how do we help students foster a sense of racial empathy and understanding, when they often live in such disparate and monoethnic communities?

One possibility is to give students an opportunity to explore how racial isolation and stratification has occurred throughout our nation's history. Though our curricula generally focuses on traumatic examples of this (e.g., slavery and Reconstruction) or on aspirational ones (the civil rights movement), it is useful for students to investigate how the mundane activities of American daily life are affected by race and racial discrimination. Similarly, students can use geographic knowledge to explore the manner how Americans' experiences are filtered through different lenses—not only *who* we are, but also *where* we are. This article describes the use of *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, a travel guide produced for African-Americans from 1937 to 1963, as a method for exploring the geographic and social elements of racial discrimination in the U.S.

Geography and history

Historical racial disparity in the U.S. is as deep as it is unsettling. According to the Pew Research Center, white households in the U.S. are worth around 20 times, economically, as black households (Coates, 2014). African-Americans are almost four times as likely to be arrested as white citizens, and more often live in neighborhoods systemically plagued by crime (Nohlgren & Stanley, 2014).

The inequities between African-Americans and white Americans are especially evident when considering an activity that millions participate in daily—driving. Americans have long been a nation obsessed with cars and "car culture," and examining how the car is used—and most notably, *where*—provides a window into the different lived experiences of black and white citizens.

In exploring this subject, geographic knowledge presents both an obstacle and an opportunity. American students are notoriously bad at geography (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2010). Students face difficulty in identifying "locations of current events, the

scale of those events, or why those events are important" (Milson & Kerski, 2012, p. 105). This can make it hard for teachers to empower students to see the impact of *place* on history.

However, technology now exists to help us "visit" the sites of historical and contemporary events from our classroom, and to create higher-order analysis of those sites for our students. We have the capacity to help students answer the central questions linking history and geography: "why did particular events happen at particular locations? Who controls these spaces? How are they represented and experienced" (Mitchell & Elwood, 2012, p. 141)? When we study *where* events occur, students can also question *why* they occurred there, and to investigate the "hidden history" that has been "suppressed, ignored, or deemed insignificant" (Marino & Crocco, 2012, p. 233). One source for answering such questions, regarding racial disparity in America, is the experience of African-Americans on our nation's roads and highways.

"Driving while black"

The euphemism "driving while black" is commonly used as an acerbic reference to the disparity in treatment by law enforcement between African-Americans and white Americans. In its historical context, the term first became applicable to the black experience in the 1920s, when widespread car ownership became a possibility for all Americans. For blacks, however, the automobile had a twin symbolism—"mobility and freedom" alongside a reinforcement and reminder of racial inequality (Driskell, 2015). The car was a representation of economic independence and material success; for black Americans, it also served as a way to subvert the segregationist policies of the Jim Crow era. The African-American activist and author George Schuyler, in 1930, advised blacks "who can do so [to] purchase an automobile as soon as possible in order to be free of discomfort, discrimination, segregation, and insult" (National Museum of American History, 2016). As one contemporary observer noted, "race is most completely ignored on the public highway….Effective equality seems to come at about twenty-five miles an hour or above" (Sugrue, 2010).

The independence that a car could bring also could prove fleeting. A 1957 article about travel in a black newspaper, the *Michigan Chronicle*, referenced the "complexities that arise from racial prejudice on the part of some business that cater to tourists" (Waters, 1957, p. 84). This was a mild description of what could be a dangerous, and even fatal circumstance for black drivers— how to navigate the everyday racial segregation, and often the overt hostility and threat of violence, that typified African-American life in the U.S. before the civil rights movement. For much of the nation's automotive history, "the American democratic idea of getting out on the open road, finding yourself, heading for distant horizons was only a privilege for white people," according to Cotton Seiler, the author of *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (McGee, 2010).

When driving, black motorists were careful to stay below the speed limit (though not so far below as to attract attention), because "police officers would regularly stop blacks for driving even one mile an hour faster than what was posted" (Sugrue, 2010). Night trips were more common, since it would be harder for the police to identify the driver's skin color; and interracial travel was especially hazardous, where the risk of arrest, violence, and even death was heightened, particularly in the South.

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Vacationing black families had to be prepared for any circumstance, particularly with regard to lodgings and meals. Which restaurants would serve them? Where could they stay? In the pre-Internet era, knowing where one could stop—and in which towns—could be the difference between a normal trip and a possible detour into hazard. Black motorists would routinely pack their car trunks with extra food, blankets, pillows, and even "an old coffee can for those times when [they] were denied the use of a bathroom" (Driskell, 2015). The "great American road trip," seen as a "sign of freedom," was hardly the case for African-Americans; who, not only confronted with denial of routine service, also had to be on guard about "sundown towns," where laws had been enacted to ensure the departure of black visitors by the day's end (Loewen, 2006; McGee, 2010; Kahn, 2015).

Even when conforming precisely to such racist expectations, black drivers could run afoul of trouble. The National Association for the Advanced of Colored People (NAACP), through the middle part of the century, kept a file of incidents, detailing black drivers who were accosted while behind the while. In 1948, using this data, the sociologist Charles S. Johnson described a pattern of white drivers, who would intentionally damage African-Americans' cars, in order to keep the black drivers "in their place" (Driskell, 2015). Roy Wilkins, the executive secretary of the NAACP, described to a U.S. Senate committee in 1963 the realities of automobile travel for African-Americans (Rugh, 2008, p. 68):

> How far do you drive each day? Where and under what conditions can you and your family eat? Where can they use a restroom? Can you stop driving after a reasonable day behind the wheel or must you drive until you reach a city where relatives or friends will accommodate you and yours for the night? Will your children be denied a soft drink or an ice cream cone because they are not white?

The Green Book

To traverse these obstacles, thousands of African-Americans made use of a resource that became ubiquitous among black drivers through the middle of the 20th century: the *Negro Motorist Green Book*, which was "the best known of a handful of travel guides published specifically for African Americans from the 1930s through the 1960s" (Reut, 2012). See Figure 1:

Figure 1: the covers from the *Negro Motorist Green Book*–1937, 1947, 1949, and 1960 (New York Public Library, 2016):
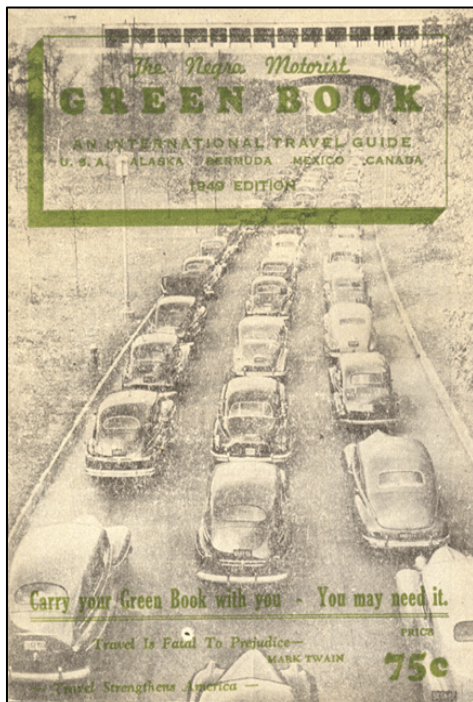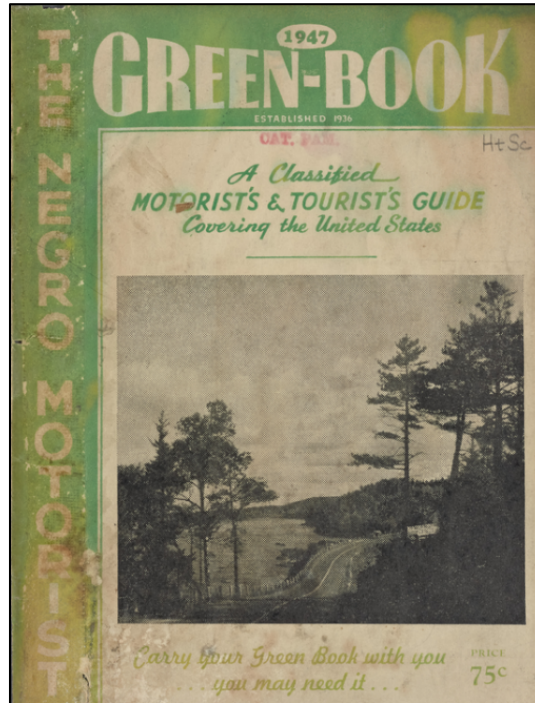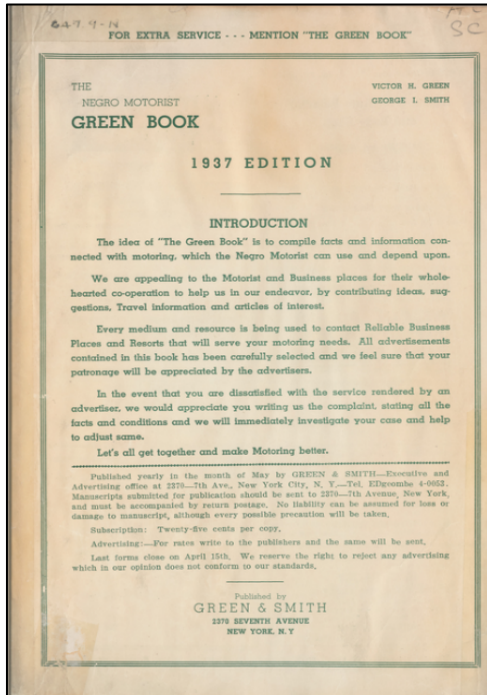
The *Green Book* was the brainchild of Victor Green, a postal worker turned travel agent from New York. The book was originally a local guide, first published in 1936, but Green expanded it to include national listings of businesses that would serve black customers, including (according to the 1940 edition), "Hotels, Taverns, Garages, Night-Clubs, Restaurants, Service-Stations, Automotive, Tourist-Homes, Road-Houses, Barber-Shops, Beauty-Parlors" (National Museum of American History, 2016). Green had gotten the idea for the *Green Book* from a Jewish publication that listed travel-oriented businesses that were welcoming to Jews. Green's position was that such a guide, as helpful as it was for Jewish Americans, would be even more crucial for black travelers, who were less able to "blend into the general population" (National Public Radio, 2010).

The guide was organized by state, and each edition (until it stopped publication in 1963) listed "service stations, hotels, restaurants, beauty parlors, and other businesses that did not discriminate on the basis of race" (Driskell, 2015). By 1941 the guide was 48 pages long (from the original 16)—by 1960 it was nearly 100 pages long and offered both domestic and international travel advisories (White, 2016). Under an agreement with Standard Oil, Esso service stations sold two million copies every year, by 1962 (Driskell, 2015). The *Green Book* provides a comprehensive look at the daily injustices faced by African-Americans navigating American roads in the Jim Crow era; conversely, they also provide a valuable teaching resource for social studies educators.

The Green Book and geographic knowledge

There are several digital copies of *Green Books* available, though actual copies are scarce; for instance, a complete copy of the 1956 guide is available from the University of Michigan-Dearborn's (2010) Automobile in American Life and Society project (retrievable at http://www.autolife.umd.umich.edu/). For teachers, a tremendous new resource arrived in 2016, when the New York Public Library unveiled a digital collection of 21 *Green Books*, ranging from 1936 to 1967 (found at http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/the-green-book#/?tab=about). These guides, when joined with modern mapping tools, provide teachers and students with a unique opportunity to trace resistance to Jim Crow-era segregation (LaFrance, 2016).

The traditional conception of geographic education—revolving around the creation and study of maps—has undergone a radical change in the era of the internet. As far back as 1998, mapping technology was being used in innovative ways—Welton (1998) described the use of an "Earthquake Mapping Project" which promoted "geographic literacy." Today, the tools available to teachers allow for substantially more engaging and high-level analysis. Webster and Milson (2011) describe the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to explore "issues of politics, population, economics, urban and rural areas, crime, human environment interaction, and migration patterns" (p. 114). Mapping tools can be used within "problem-based contexts," in which students can effectively "see" where social issues develop, where they can be confronted, and, ultimately, where they can be solved (Milson & Kerski, 2012, p. 106).

Some tools are ready to use. The University of South Carolina has built an engaging website, "the Negro Travelers' Green Book," with which students can search and filter listings from the 1956 edition of the guide (http://library.sc.edu/digital/collections/greenbookmap.html).

Students can sort establishments by type (including restaurants, inns, and so forth) or by state. See Figure 2 for an image from the website, detailing black-friendly establishments in Illinois in 1956:

Figure 2: a screenshot from the University of South Carolina's "The Negro Travelers' Green Book" website, showing Illinois businesses that welcomed African-American motorists in 1956:

Similarly, the Route 66 Green Book Project (http://www.ncptt.nps.gov/rt66/green-book/) lists properties that were listed in the *Green Book* along the historic Route 66 freeway, leading from Chicago to Santa Monica, California. Students can use data from this source, together with the NYPL's digital collection, to create their own maps, showing where intolerance and acceptance held sway at various points in American history. For instance, below are selections from the 1949 *Green Book* showing black-friendly establishments throughout Illinois (Figure 3):

Figure 3: screenshots from the 1949 *Green Book* showing establishments in Illinois that served African-American travelers:

TAVERNS
The palm—466 E. 47th St.
El Casino—823 E. 39th St.
Key Hole—3965 S. Parkway
NIGHT CLUBS
Boulevard Lounge—104 E. 51st St.
820 Club—820 E. 39th St.
Show Boat—6109 S. Parkway
SERVICE STATIONS
Parkway—340 W. Grand Ave.
Standard—Garfield & S. Parkway
American Giants—5900 S. Wabash Ave.
Roosevelt—4600 S. Wabash Ave.
GARAGES
Zephyr—4535 S. Cottage Grove Ave.
AUTOMOTIVE
CHARLES BARON, INC.
Authorized Ford Dealer
3840 MICH. AV. & 2229 MICH. AV.
DRUG STORES
Partee—4308 S. Parkway
Thompson—545 E. 47th St.
LIQUOR STORES
SAM'S LIQUORS
2255 W. MADISON ST.
Tel. Se. 3-3137

There are a variety of mapping tools that teachers can employ in conjunction with these resources. Google Maps, for instance, allows users to plot points on self-generated maps—students can use data drawn from the *Green Book* to track a route through a variety of areas (urban, suburban, and rural) that would be welcoming to black motorists. Figure 3, for example, shows a Google Maps layout featuring data drawn from the 1949 edition, showing black-friendly sites in Chicago, Illinois (Figure 4).

Figure 4: A Google Maps layout showing *Green Book* listings in Illinois
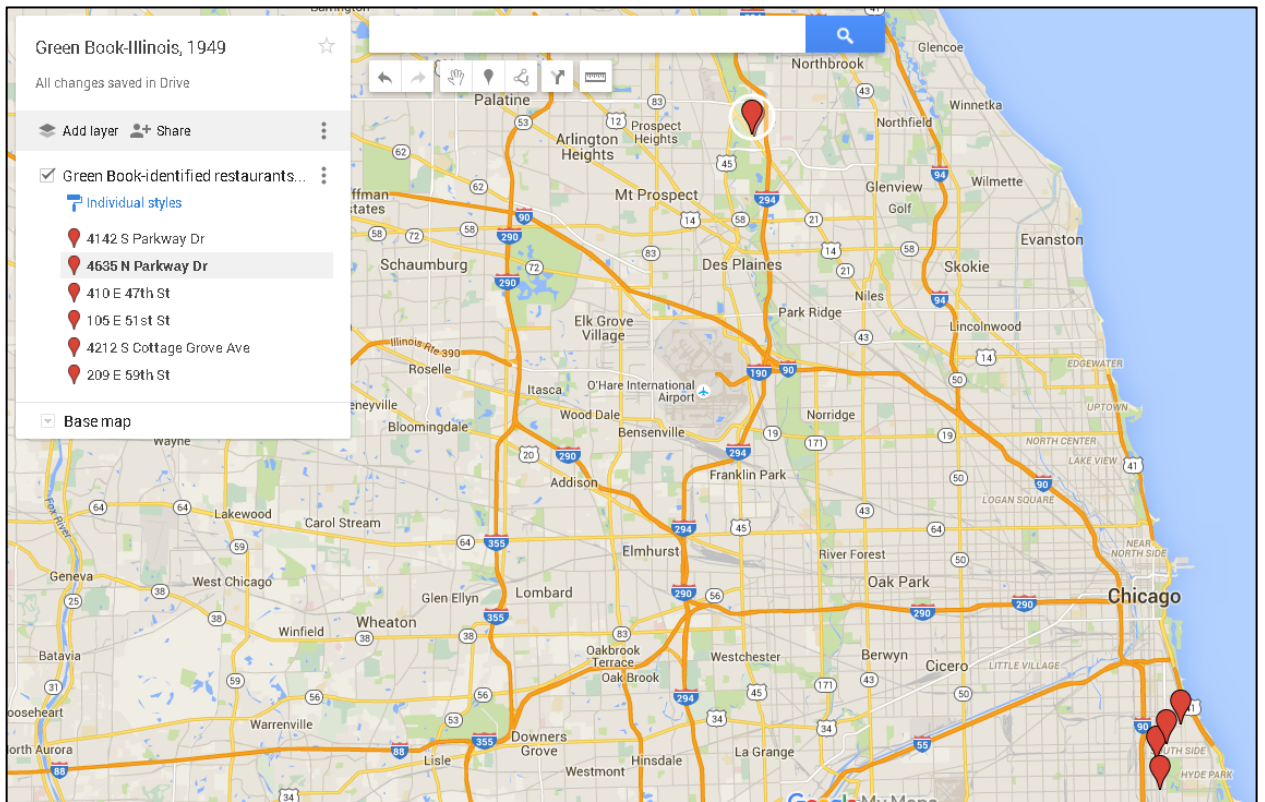
Another tool available to teachers is from the U.S. Geological Survey (www.usgs.gov). The Survey has a large collection of historical maps, along with a unique tool called "TopoView" (retrievable at http://ngmdb.usgs.gov/maps/TopoView/). This platform allows students to download thousands of USGS maps, from 1884 until 2006. The site includes this map of 1957 Chicago, which reflects the street layout of the city at that time:

Figure 5: A 1957 map of Chicago, from the U.S. Geological Survey
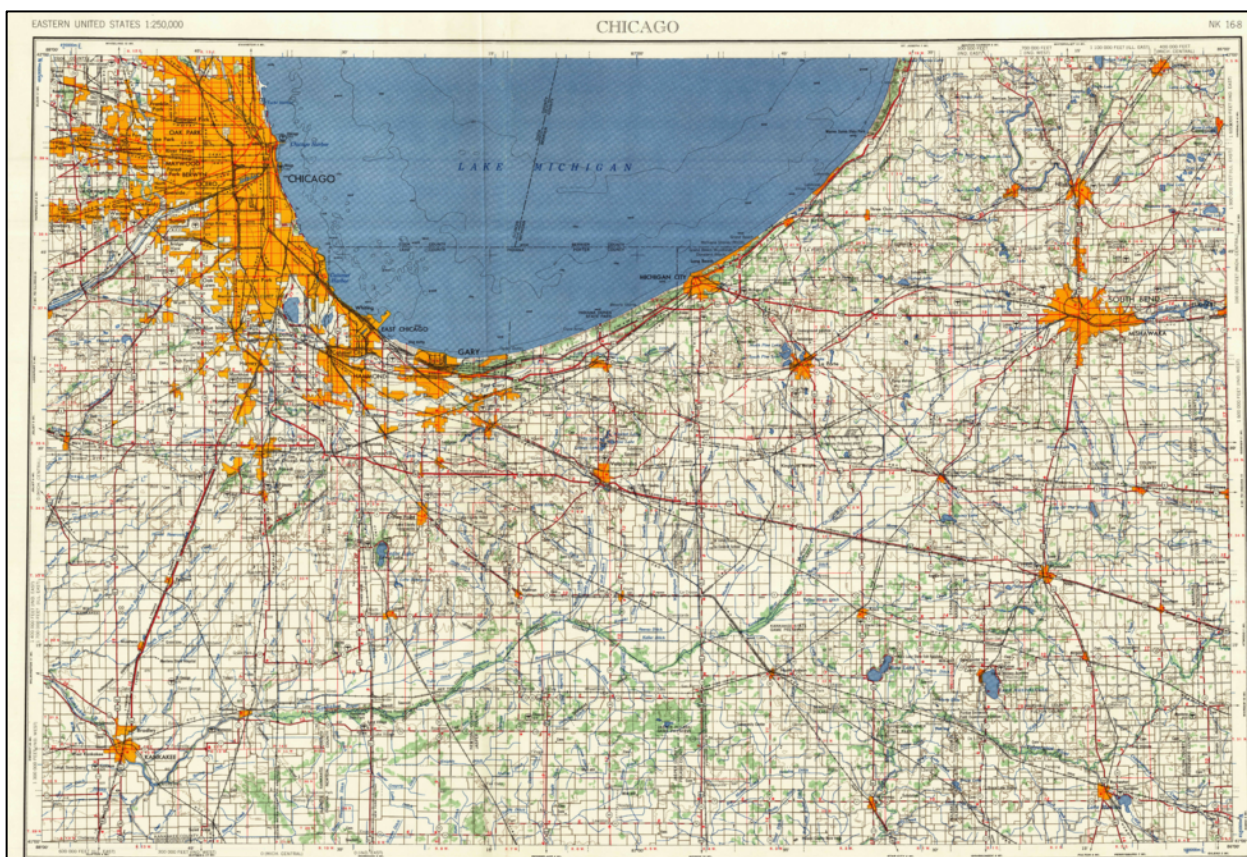
Teachers can use images like this in conjunction with Google Maps to compare how the city has changed, and whether or not *Green Book*-identified establishments are still present today. But there is another, more versatile application—teachers can download files like this Chicago map (as a "kmz" file), and then upload it as a overlaid "layer" in a Google Earth representation of modern-day Chicago. See Figure 6:

Figure 6: a Google Earth representation of a 1957 Chicago map overlaid on current imagery
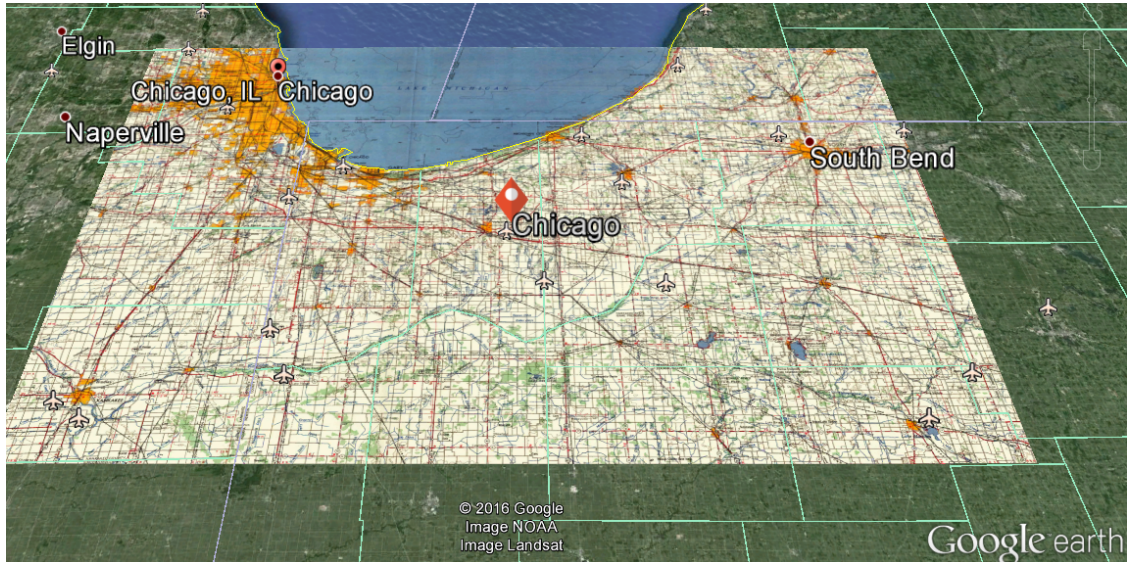
Using these tools, students can create historical and contemporary maps, showing where black motorists would (or could) travel, throughout the United States. More than that, they will have the ability to explore something for which they may have empathy but which they have not experienced first-hand—the effort involved in the mere act of traveling in the Jim Crow era.

Many of these tools present teachers with recognizable challenges—the need to select appropriate platforms for their classes, the need for available technology and infrastructure to accommodate their use, and the investment of time required for a more complex task. But students need to see how segregation was something Americans experienced in a daily sense, and not merely in the invocation of memorable events, like the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Resources like the *Green Books,* can help students bridge the gap between history and geography.

In 1948, Victor Green wrote in the *Green Book* that "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" (Driskell, 2015). After the passage of the Civil Rights Act, the *Green Book* did, indeed, stop publication. It would be inaccurate to say, of course, that the goals of the civil rights movement have been realized. But any belief that the struggles of that movement are relics of the past and thus not relevant to our society today is worse than inaccurate; such beliefs can also limit a teacher's ability to highlight the complexity of race relations in the U.S. After all, a student may reason, segregation is over—life in

America seems demonstrably, observably better than it had been. But the inability to empathize with what African-Americans endured, as a matter of course during the Jim Crow era, can inhibit both our understanding of contemporary disparities, as well as our will to address them.

In 2010, Lonnie Bunch III, the director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African-American History and Culture, said that "the lack of knowledge about the *Green Book* also tells us about the lack of knowledge many Americans have of how segregation really worked" (du Lac, 2010). An understanding of the day-to-day perils of segregation and discrimination empowers our students to spot, and to correct such inequities today. The use of geographic tools to visualize the impact of segregationist policies, through resources like the *Green Book,* makes this more likely to occur. There is, in practice, an enduring connection between the study of the past and the study of geography. Milson (2014) asserts that "American history demands to be mapped" (p. 216). When students can see *where* discrimination occurred, and explore *how* African-Americans tried to surmount it, they can begin to work towards understanding a nation not very far removed from their own.

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