

UCLA

UCLA Historical Journal

Title

Navigating the Green Book: Review of New York Public Library's Digital Mapping Project

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9h991836>

Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 29(1)

Authors

St. Marie, Madeleine
Breinig, Luke

Publication Date

2018

Copyright Information

Copyright 2018 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Navigating the Green Book: Review of New York Public Library's Digital Mapping Project

Madeleine St. Marie and Luke Breinig

Navigating the Green Book is a digital mapping and archival project funded by the New York Public Library, featuring the work of Paul Beaudoin, Brian Foo, Josh Hadro, and Matt Miller.¹ The purpose of *Navigating the Green Book* is to allow site visitors to explore the data contained in the *Negro Motorists' Green Book* and similar titles in ways in which they could not with print, or digitized versions of the print, editions. Essentially, this is a mapping project that plots the locations of hotels, guest houses, restaurants, bars, clubs, service stations, drug stores, beauty parlors and other locations that would be useful to travelers. The project is aimed at the general public, but can be further broken down into two subgroups: to Black Americans specifically and to a wider American public more generally. The first sub-audience is invited to reclaim its own history by making available various digitized copies of the *Green Books* that are now out of copyright.² The *Green Books*, variously titled as *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, *The Negro Travelers' Green Book*, and *The Travelers' Green Book*, centered around both intercontinental and international movement of Black Americans and were made explicitly to keep “the Negro traveler” from “running into difficulties, embarrassments, and to make his trips more enjoyable.”³ The books list states and various cities, in alphabetical order, which a traveler might visit. Categories of friendly establishments, such as “tourist homes,” “hotels,” “taverns,” and “service stations,” are listed, providing the name and address of the establishment.⁴ These guides represent the strategies by which Black Americans navigated Jim Crow America with their bodies and minds before and during the Civil Rights Era.

The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, housed at the New York Public Library, helped to “digitize 21 volumes of the Green Books from 1937 to 1964.”⁵ These holdings are housed within the JBH Research and Reference Division, which “provides access to books, serials, and microforms containing information by and about people of African descent throughout the world.”⁶ The connection between this digital project, Black culture, and history is explicit, performing some critical aspects of Black digital humanities. The project exemplifies Alexander Weheliye’s description of Black studies as a “mode of knowledge production” which “investigates processes of racialization with a particular emphasis on the shifting configurations of black life.”⁷ Travel throughout the United States is a celebrated (and perhaps hated, depending on the age of the travelers) pastime of Americans during summer vacations. However, the *Green Books* make clear that “traveler” is a construction that is directly impacted by the color of one’s skin; the study of “travel” in the interwar period in the United States is thus not only constrained by technology, such as the advent of the automobile, but also by laws, business owners, and the degree to which a traveler may pass as “white.” *Navigating the Green Books*, then, challenges narratives about travel by centering “an African American and African diasporic experience.”⁸ The *Green Books* make this explicit, and the visualization provided by the project’s mapping tool demonstrate the narrowness of space, a marked contrast to the freedom of travel associated with the introduction of the automobile.

The project is also meant for a wider, non-Black audience. This audience is implied in the very purpose of the *Green Books* themselves. As travel guides which listed various “hotels, restaurants, bars [and] gas stations [. . .] where black travelers would be welcome,” the mapping of such routes helps to highlight the space of Jim Crow America.⁹ Racial discrimination was not only the privilege of the South—a fact the *Green Books* makes clear. Alongside the digitization effort, *Navigating the Greek Book* invites non-Blacks to see how planning trips would differ “in an age of sundown towns, segregation, and lynching.”¹⁰ The mapping tool helps to map out and visualize trips from data provided by the *Books*,¹¹ inviting the user to “see how the size of the world can change depending on the color of your skin.”¹² Although only two years of data are available (1947 and 1956, respectively), the result is a compelling look into how racism infringes on every aspect of life, even (and perhaps especially) free movement.

As a project of the New York City digital libraries, the website can be thought of as an extension of the library’s existing digital archive, which includes scanned and browsable versions of several editions of the *Green Book*. These editions are publicly available, but the mapping project adds an extra dimension of functionality. The landing page for the project provides background information on the *Green Book* and links to digital editions. The mapping interface is responsive and easy to use. The mapping function allows visitors to plot

a trip from city to city using the data from either the 1947 or 1956 edition of the *Green Book*, or to explore either on one's own. The project is completely open source, and all of the source code is available on the project's GitHub site.¹³ The key technologies used in the project were Mapbox for map tiles and routing directions; Leaflet, which provides the interactive map UI; and Open Street Map Nominatim for reverse geocoding.¹⁴ The mapping interface is quite fast and responsive compared to some other mapping projects, which is a credit to the design as it dispenses with any extraneous data. The inclusion of historical map data allows the site visitor to explore how the topography of cities and states changed over time, but how the landscape changed through the experience of a black traveler.

The design of the project is, for the most part, easily navigable and easy to digest. The main landing page includes a description of the *Green Books*, as well as information about the collection, featuring hyperlinks which take the user to quoted or featured editions of the *Green Book* or to the labs and centers which helped make the project possible.¹⁵ The user can choose to follow these hyperlinks to look at the digitized collection or they can look at the visualization of the data from the 1947 and 1956 *Green Books*.¹⁶ If the user chooses to view the map, they can toggle between the "cluster view," which shows regions of friendly establishments and businesses and provides a count of how many of these businesses are in any given area. The other option, the "heat map," endeavors to show the density of friendly places. Perhaps most importantly, the visualization of the "heat map" challenges notional understandings of "the North" versus "the South," as well as "East" versus "West." In 1947, the majority of businesses, according to the data from that year's *Green Book*, are clustered in the eastern United States, stretching both north and south. Virginia, North Carolina, and Wisconsin are notable exceptions, showing up stark white on the heat map.

However, after the Midwest, the heat map (see figure 1) becomes blotches centered on the states of Colorado, Arizona, and California, prompting the user to wonder if the rest of the states at this time were especially anti-Black, or if the publisher of the *Books* did not have information for New Mexico businesses in 1947. The project does not acknowledge this argument, but the lacunae in the heat map may allow for further research in those particular areas in Jim Crow America.

The "Map a Trip" function visualizes the data in a different way, with an explicit set of parameters meant to limit the data the search returns. Upon clicking the "Map a Trip" button, the user is asked to input destinations; the default is New York, New York to Atlanta, Georgia. Unlike the cluster and heat maps, however, the itinerary mapped only returns "a restaurant every 250 miles and a lodging every 750 miles."¹⁷ This necessarily limits the data returned by a search, which either reveals the roadtrip proclivities of the architects of the tool, or implies, perhaps, that a search which returned all available data

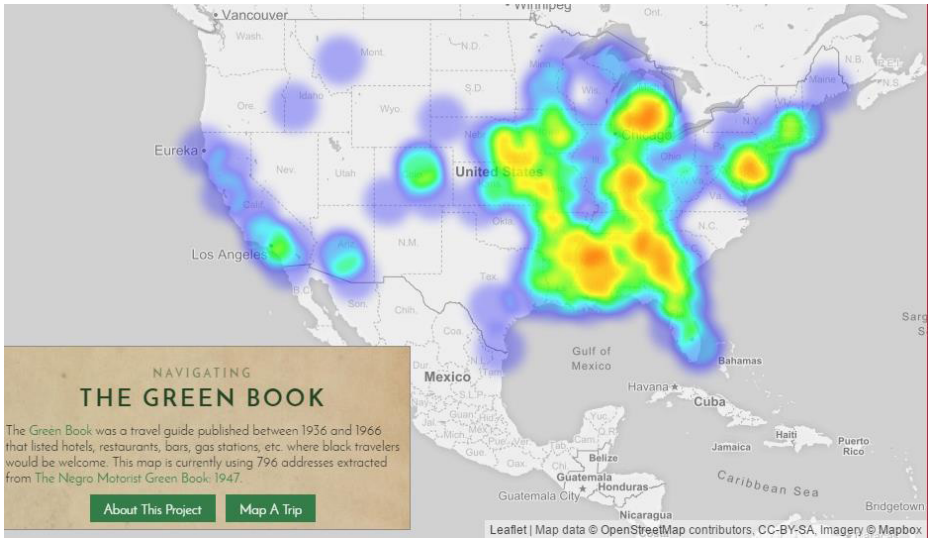


Figure 1: Heat Map. “View a Map.” *New York Public Library*.

might be overwhelming or not useful. However, it would have been valuable to see how these businesses might cluster around urban centers or along major highways and other means of conveyance. Furthermore, by limiting the data to restaurants and lodgings, the mapping function misses out on several categories provided by the *Green Books*: barber shops, tourist houses, etc. The organization of the *Green Books* implies a need for both practical use (where to stay and eat while travelling) as well as a need to provide safe opportunities for Black Americans to sightsee. The mapping tool misses out on the latter aspect by confining the data it returns.

The project’s design is clear and effective, primarily because it is so simple. The maps have functionality, and each location that is displayed on either map is connected directly to the digitized holding at the New York Public library. Once the user clicks on the holding, they are taken to the digital collections and can look at the relevant metadata, download the image, or request an art print of the object. The holdings, however, are lightly contextualized. The next step, perhaps, would be to create a more robust introduction of the context in which the project takes place, as it dispenses with the historical context in a sentence about sundown towns and segregation, quoted above. However, as the landing page of a project that is working with data extracted from an archive, it may be more useful to view *Navigating the Green Book* as a visual introduction to the archive, rather than a method for teaching about Jim Crow America more broadly.

Finally, while the simplicity of the project's design makes it accessible and easy to use, the user may eventually find themselves wanting more than mapping interface currently provides. For example, there is no way to customize the parameters of a trip (e.g. plot a restaurant more or less often) or search an area for other services. However, as the developers have provided open access to the source code, one can see that adding this type of functionality would simply be a matter of more development time (and money). All of the data from the *Green Book* is in the mapping database. One can see other types of establishments (e.g. repair shops and beauty salons), denoted by custom pin icons, when zoomed in to a city-level map view, but those types of establishments are not searchable as of yet. These are features which could be added, however, should public interest continue and funding be made available.

Overall, "Navigating the Green Book" is an excellent example of a public Digital Humanities project. The mapping feature adds an extra dimension to the digital archives, and the ability to explore the data in this way makes the research experience more experiential and immersive. It provides a way for the general public, in an era when digital mapping is commonplace, to engage with historical data in a very meaningful and human way. While a scholarly researcher might find the map's simplicity limiting, it offers a great entry point for archival research, and certainly many casual users will find themselves browsing the digitized editions of the *Green Book* after having been drawn in by the mapping interface.

NOTES

¹ New York Public Library (NYPL), "Navigating the Green Book," <http://publicdomain.nypl.org/greenbook-map/>.

² *Ibid.*

³ *The Negro Motorist Green Book* (New York: Victor H. Green & Co, 1949), 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ New York Public Library Digital Collections, "Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division," <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/divisions/schomburg-center-for-research-in-black-culture-jean-blackwell-hutson-research>.

⁷ Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habea Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminism Theories of the Human* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014), 3.

⁸ Kim Gallon, "Making a Case for the Black Digital Humanities," in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, 42-49, edited by Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press 2016).

⁹ NYPL, "Navigating the Green Book."

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ NYPL, "Map a trip," <http://publicdomain.nypl.org/greenbook-map/trip.html>.

¹² NYPL, "Navigating the Green Book."

¹³ GitHub, Inc. “NYPL-publicdomain/greenbook-map,” <https://github.com/nypl-publicdomain/greenbook-map>. The 1947 edition was scanned and OCR-ed by the New York City digital library, and the data from the 1956 edition was provided by the University of South Carolina.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ NYPL, “Navigating the Green Book.”

¹⁶ NYPL, “View a Map,” <http://publicdomain.nypl.org/greenbook-map/map.html#layer=cluster&year=1947>.

¹⁷ NYPL, “Map a Trip,” <http://publicdomain.nypl.org/greenbook-map/trip.html>.