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Events

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# Navigating Library Collections, Black Culture, and Current Events

MAKIBA J. FOSTER

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## ABSTRACT

The work of preserving content is at the heart of what libraries and archives do best. Beyond preserving collections, historical literacy as a companion concept to the LIS standard of information literacy can give collections a second life, thereby sparking public interests, increasing contemporary relevance, and advancing a critical understanding of events in our nation's history. Looking at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture's collection of *The Negro Motorist Green Book* in relation to the contemporary social justice activism, this paper will discuss ways in which the archival collection was used to educate visitors regarding the historical roots of recent discourse around the perils of traveling while Black.

*Librarians have to decide where they want their institutions to be, which raises questions about how politically, socially, and culturally aware librarians are and how they understand themselves within in these contexts.* (Lor 2016, 122)

In the past five years, our society has entered into a heightened state of political activism where citizens are demanding that the ideas of social justice and democracy truly permeate our nation's institutions, policies, and practices. Leading this charge is the Black Lives Matter Movement, which formalized around combating anti-Black policing and policies, specifically the killings of unarmed Black men, women, and children (Lowery 2017). The movement for Black Lives has been vital to helping move our nation into dialogue about race, social justice, and oppressive systems of power by providing a platform to educate, organize, and mobilize a new generation of activists. The impact of this movement has been far reaching to the point where institutions like libraries and archives, which have tradition-

ally been understood as apolitical, are critiquing power structures that perpetuate social inequality. Answering the call of conscience and rejecting the myth of library neutrality, there are librarians and libraries that see social justice as a part of their outreach to engage communities impacted by racial and social disparities (Lonial et al., n.d.). In light of the visible activist librarian/library, the world of library and information science (LIS) is at a pivotal moment in history in terms of opening collections to stories that reflect more than the experiences of the privileged few but also using library collections to combat anti-intellectualism and educate the public by creating opportunities for historical literacy.

In the spring of 2015, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture stood in solidarity with the movement and curated an exhibit called *Curators' Choice: Black Life Matters*,<sup>1</sup> engaging the idea that the lives of Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin both spurred their generations to create and resist. The 2012 vigilante murder of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, and the failure of the justice system to convict his killer is eerily similar to the 1955 brutal murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi, where his killers were also acquitted. Despite the time span between these tragedies, the same narrative of Black bodies transgressing White spaces with deadly consequences speaks to the importance of the historical activism of *The Negro Traveler's Green Book* in 1955 as well as today's current activism (see figs. 1 and 2). The Schomburg Center's history of collecting content representing how marginalized communities found practical ways to resist and organize is exemplified with its comprehensive collection of Victor Hugo Green's travel guides, *The Negro Motorist Green Book*. These travel guides represent not only American material culture of its time but also the agency and resilience of everyday Black people. Using the *Green Book* collection as a springboard, this paper will discuss how libraries and archives can engage in the work of recovery through archival collections, thereby fostering historical literacy and creating opportunities for a better understanding of contemporary history related to race and social justice issues.

## COLLECTION AND COMMUNITY BUILDING FROM THE MARGINS

*The Negro has been throughout the centuries of controversy an active collaborator, and often a pioneer, in the struggle for his own freedom and advancement.* (A. Schomburg [1925] 2007, 327)

*The Green Book was always somewhat coy about its own purpose, maybe because that purpose was so obvious, or maybe because it was so monstrous, it was better relegated to the margins.* (Nazaryan 2017)

In the struggle for freedom and advancement, the Schomburg Center, located in Harlem, New York, has been a bulwark within the local community as well as the library and research communities with regard to its com-

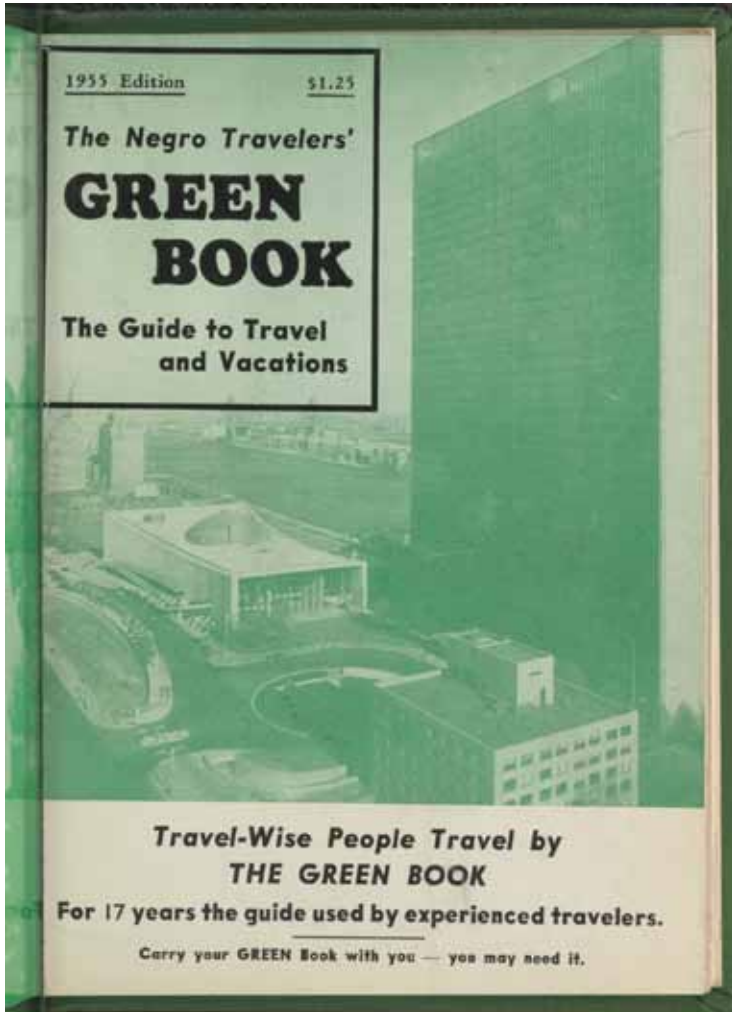


Figure 1. *Green Book* from the year of Emmet Till's death, 1955. Originally published by Victor H. Green & Co. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, the New York Public Library Digital Collection. *The Negro Travelers' Green Book: 1955 International Edition*. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/2a146d30-9381-0132-f916-58d385a7b928>.

mitment to preserving and documenting the Black experience. When the laws of the land relegated Blacks to second-class citizens, the work of the Schomburg and its commitment to community has been steadfast. Since its inception, the collection has been a testament to the idea that Black lives, culture, history, intellect, and agency matter. Over the years and to the present day, those ideas are reflected through the scholarship pro-

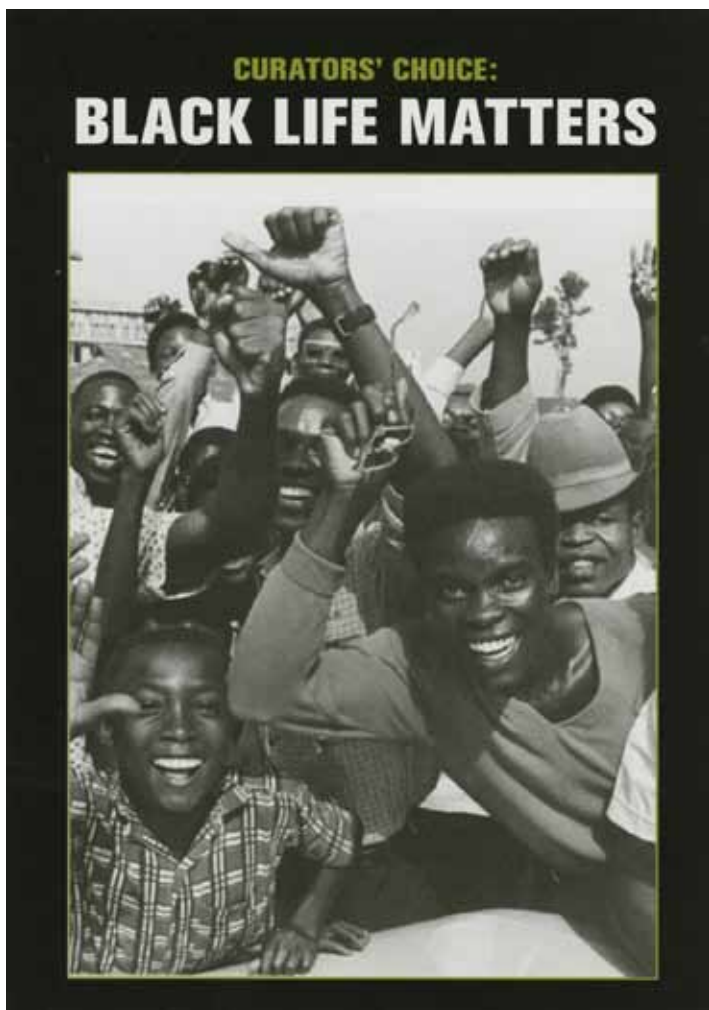


Figure 2. *Curators' Choice: Black Life Matters*, post card invitation featuring Richard Saunders's photograph of fans welcoming James Brown to Nigeria in 1970. Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the New York Public Library.

duced using Schomburg collections. Adalaine Holton (2007) describes the Schomburg Center's place in history as "the first transnational archive of black culture" with an aspirational "future imaginary—a connected web of people of African descent who might draw on each other in their minds or through their actions in their pursuit of social change" (218). For almost one hundred years, the Schomburg Center has evolved with

the times, starting as the personal collection of bibliophile and scholar Arturo Schomburg; then evolving into New York Public Library's (NYPL) Division of Negro Literature, History and Prints; and on to its current iteration. Through these various transformations, what has been constant is our commitment to acquiring content that reflects the African diaspora. With this grand diasporic endeavor, Arturo Schomburg ([1925] 2007), in his optimism, states, "There is no doubt that here is a field full of the most intriguing and inspiring possibilities" (329). At the heart of this collection is the idea that the full humanity and brilliance of people of African descent includes a remarkable past to be discovered and documented as well as a rich and complex future to anticipate. These concepts of discovery, documentation, and futurism have shaped important community collaborations and collections: for example, the Schomburg Center's leadership and participation with the preservation and commemoration of one of the most significant US archaeological sites, now known as the African Burial Ground National Monument.<sup>2</sup> This recovery work also produced content for an archival collection called the African Burial Ground Committee Files (1991–1994) as well as an online digital exhibition educating and commemorating this historic archeological find.<sup>3</sup>

The role of libraries and archives beyond the tradition of collecting and preserving artifacts should also include educational opportunities for connecting contemporary events to historically relevant content. One of the many goals of the Schomburg Center is to carry out cultural preservation work where collections, community, and current events all intersect to produce learning objects, opportunities for historical literacy, and dialogue around race—specifically Blackness. The Schomburg's collections emphasize that despite the passage of time, there is age-old content that continues to speak to the Black experience and the overall human condition. One such collection that brings all these issues and ideas into conversation is the *Green Book*.

The *Green Book*, being understood as an interesting piece of Americana and archival treasure, understandably has a feel-good narrative, but within our contemporary climate the guides deserve continued discussion as to their value not only as a practical travel resource for its time but also as a survival guide. With humble beginnings starting in 1936 as a collection of New York businesses, the *Green Book* would eventually list the entire continental United States, sharing imperative information necessary to Black travelers making cross-country or even intrastate travel at the height of segregation. Despite the uncertainty that Black travelers faced, Victor Green forged a community for the "assured protection for the negro traveler," with estimates of the *Green Book's* circulation being around two million copies by 1962. The renaissance that the *Green Book* is currently experiencing is long-overdue recognition of Victor Green and staff, who literally created alternative pathways via analog social networks, which *Green Book*

scholar Candacy Taylor calls an “overground railroad,” enabling Black people to experience dignity and safety while traveling within Jim Crow United States (Nazaryan 2017).

Similar to the climate that spurred the creation of the *Green Book*, the present-day safety of Black motorists continues to be cause for great concern due to numerous fatal police encounters where unarmed Black drivers and passengers have been murdered. According to the Mapping Police Violence Project, “unarmed black people were killed at 5x the rate of unarmed whites in 2015” (“Unarmed Victims” 2015). Surviving as a passenger or driver of an automobile after an encounter with the police or the imagination of frightened White citizens seems to have deadly consequences for Blacks whether it is 1932 with the murder of the Preston brothers (“Georgia Autoist Killed by Unknown White Assailants” 1932) or eighty years later with a similar deadly encounter for Jordan Davis and his friends or more recently Jordan Edwards and his brothers. These murders have helped to fuel our contemporary understanding of driving while Black. Claudia Rankine, author of the award-winning book *Citizen: An American Lyric*, captures these encounters perfectly in a haiku written after visiting Ferguson, Missouri, the death site of Michael Brown, Jr.: “because white men can’t/police their imagination/black men are dying” (2014). This type of ongoing public discourse has been an important vehicle in advancing a lesson in historical literacy, putting into conversation travel terrorism faced by Blacks during segregation and the present-day terror Black travelers experience. This juxtaposition of historical periods paired with historical and contemporary artifacts of the *Green Book* or social media hashtags like #IfTheyGunnedMeDown (Suggs 2014) speak to the continuous momentum where Black people have resisted, critiqued, and challenged structures within this country that deny their humanity.

## ROAD TO ACCESS AND DISCOVERY

*We earnestly believe “The Negro Motorist Green Book” will mean as much if not more to us as A.A.A. means to the white race. (The Negro Motorist Green Book: 1940, 2)*

With the *Green Book’s* re-emergence, the Schomburg joined a larger effort of scholars, public historians, and institutions to save these guides from historical obscurity by bringing them to a larger audience through digitization. Over the past ten years, *Green Book*-inspired scholarship, exhibits, performance art, and literature has aided in building awareness of the travel guides within the general public. Bringing the guides out from under history’s shadow, as early as 2007, *The Dresser Trunk Project: A Spatial Look at Segregated Travel*, used the *Green Book* as the basis for a traveling exhibit. Architects and educators designed and built eleven “dresser trunks” to commemorate the journey of Black musicians to different cities and

venues featured in the travel guide. “The trunks contain stories, photographs, maps, and computer-generated models to document the clubs, hotels, and other places musicians stayed in eleven cities along the train line, from New York to New Orleans” (NEA 2006, 118). According to the creator of the *Dresser Trunk Project*, Professor William D. Williams, the intent of the exhibit was to share these “important places of refuge for black travelers, and to use art as a way of reminding people of the importance of black business districts during segregation” (118). High profile art and culture news pieces in the *New York Times* and on National Public Radio (NPR) discussing the work of Calvin Ramsey, writer of the play *The Green Book* and the award-winning children’s book *Ruth and the Green Book*, also helped to bring the story of Victor Green and his travel guides to not only the stage for adult consumers but also to story time for young learners. These instances are only a few examples of how the story of the *Green Book* has captured the imagination and interest of the larger public.

In helping to connect the past to the present, the Schomburg’s collections have been described as “accessible to the public and relevant to present concerns” (Holton 2007, 218). As stewards of one of the most comprehensive collections of the *Green Book*, the history of how we came to hold such a large collection is a question often asked. Understanding the Schomburg’s mission of documenting and preserving content produced by and or about Black people is an indication that these guides, which were produced out of Victor Green’s offices located in Harlem not very far from the Schomburg, would naturally find an early home in the collection. There are no accession records that include definitive information on how and when the *Green Book* came into the collections of the New York Public Library, but most of the guides are believed to have been acquired through traditional collection development methods of purchase or donation. However, based on small clues of Dewey Classification markings found in most of the issues, the Dewey call numbers all seem to suggest that the guides were a part of the collection prior to 1977. 1977 marks the year that the Schomburg switched from Dewey call number classification to a fixed-order shelving system.

With technological advancements in producing high quality digital surrogates, the Schomburg understood there was a responsibility to the general public and to the international community of scholars to digitize the collection of travel guides. Hoping to build on the work of other *Green Book* digital projects—like the University of South Carolina, South Caroliniana Library’s *The Negro Traveler’s Green Book: 1956* collection or the University of Michigan’s Automobile in American Life project<sup>4</sup>—the digitization of the *Green Book* would serve a two-fold strategy of preservation and access. As a public research library, the Schomburg allows all who are interested access to its collections, which means patrons experience the materiality of content that is often missing within the museum experience of



displaying artifacts. Because access is experiential, preservation by means of digital surrogates would lessen additional wear and tear on the aging travel guides. Digitization also allowed for international access to those who are aware of the guides but limited by geography. The digitization of the guides also helped with educational outreach to those with little to no knowledge of both the history of segregated travel and the existence of the *Green Book*. However, before the digitization could take place, it would require the professional acuity of librarians paired with their advocacy to make the case for why this ephemera, of national treasure significance, needed to be preserved and shared.

## NAVIGATING ROADBLOCKS

*Carry your Green Book with you . . . you may need it. (The Negro Motorist Green Book: 1947, cover)*

In advocating for this process, there were hurdles that had to be cleared in order for the digitization process to come to fruition. The first barrier was the question of legality of digitizing the guides. The most basic understanding of copyright is the standard that anything published before 1923 is considered public domain. The general assumption was that the *Green Book* was ineligible for digitization because the publication began in 1936. However, through the diligence and a nuanced understanding of copyright acquired from a past NYPL digitization project, the chief librarian of Schomburg's Research and Reference Division knew that there was a small possibility that these guides might actually be in public domain. Working with Schomburg's digital curatorial assistant, they set out to find if the copyright term had expired and if these guides were indeed in the public domain. According to the copyright publication date rule that pertains to the period of 1923 to 1963, if there is a failure to renew copyright within that forty-year time span, copyright rules no longer apply because the rights have expired (Library of Congress Copyright Office 2004). After following necessary procedures for checking copyright renewal and expiration, it was confirmed that the guides were indeed public domain, which set the digitization strategy in motion.

Clearing the hurdle of the *Green Book* being within the public domain, the next step was to get the travel guides into NYPL's pipeline for digitization. Having made a successful case as to the benefit of digitizing the collection, the NYPL digitization team known as NYPL Labs then agreed to add the *Green Book* to the queue for their massive public domain release that included items housed throughout various collections within the New York Public Library system. NYPL Labs worked to bring high resolution scans of the *Green Book* to the online space. In early 2016, the New York Public Library announced to the world that 180,000 public domain items had been digitized and were ready for public consumption. Included

among the 180,000 items were twenty-one digitized issues of the *Green Book*. With NYPL Labs releasing the *Green Book* with the other digitized collections, the intent was to “facilitate sharing, research and reuse by scholars, artists, educators, technologists, publishers, and Internet users of all kinds” (Kimball 2016). In giving the *Green Book* a second life through digitization, those who encounter the guides have the opportunity to experience an understanding of the people and the time period previously unknown to them. For the researcher or tech-savvy user, the digitization hopes to inspire the creation of dynamic digital content for new learning, relevance, and sense-making regarding the history and lived experience of Black Americans in the United States.

## EN ROUTE TO HISTORICAL LITERACY

*The “Green Book” is obsolete. Its lessons are not.* (Nazaryan 2017)

Dedicated scholarship about the *Green Book* can be traced to the early 2000s with scholars writing about car culture and Black mobility as expressions or denials of citizenship. Foster’s (1999), Gilroy’s (2001), Seiler’s (2006, 2008), and Sorin’s (2009) scholarship provide nuanced overviews on travel using the *Green Book*. With public interest calling for more information about Victor Green and his travel guides, as public history practitioners in a public institution serving a broad cross-section of the community, we knew that we had to seize the moment of relevance and produce educational content for purposes of historical literacy and library outreach catered to the general public.

Similar to the library standard for information literacy of being able to identify, evaluate, and properly use information, historical literacy outcomes equip people with the ability to “read, reason, write, and learn with historical evidence” (Nokes 2011, 1). Historical literacy can be interpreted broadly but “has been used by some authors in the framework of, and as an analogy for historical understanding, and even for historical consciousness” (Virta 2007, 11). Bringing historical evidences or artifacts to a new audience in order to broaden the historical understanding of anti-Black practices endured by Black travelers, we set out to provide teachable moments through a pop-up exhibit, an interactive digital project, a training workshop for teachers, and a research guide.

In 2013, the Schomburg Center hosted a pop-up exhibition commemorating the 50th anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. *March! 63* showcased a watershed moment in civil rights history, but it was also curated to highlight the ingenuity of organizing a mass protest demonstration made up of thousands of people from around the country. With this exhibit, we wanted to widen the focus from known luminary figures and have attendees pause and think about what it might

have taken on the part of an individual or group planning to make that journey to the nation's capital not only in the heat of the summer but at a time when acts of racial terrorism ran rampant throughout the American South. Thus, when thinking about how people navigated their way to Washington D.C., the inclusion of the *Green Book* seemed like a seamless addition to the exhibition. Also in conversation with the *Green Book* were documents and artifacts like Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) pinback buttons from the 1963 March on Washington and a transcript of the speech given by John Lewis of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). What is also important about this exhibition is that it was the catalyst for Schomburg staff to start working toward a digitization strategy to make the guides accessible to the world (see figs. 3 and 4).

The interactive digital project *Navigating the Green Book* (Foo 2016) is what is possible in terms of creating new content that makes history come alive in an online environment. The project creates an interactive experience of mapping a trip using points of interests in the 1947 or 1956 issue of the travel guide. Building on the work of the University of South Carolina's *The Negro Traveler's Green Book: 1956* project, NYPL Labs via Optical Character Reader (OCR) scanning extracted the text and coordinated data from the 1947 *Green Book* for the digital exhibition. The experiential element of the project is intended to help to demystify what a Black person from generations past might have experienced when embarking on a road trip. However, a drawback to digital projects like this is the tendency to laude the technology while the dire historical context for the actual content can get pushed to the side in favor of celebrating modern ways of presenting the past. One way the Schomburg has tried to keep the guides from losing salience as a critique of the United States' racist practices is to provide opportunities for discussion and learning.

The Schomburg education program's Black History 360° 2016 Summer Education Institute workshopped a module on "Ethnicity, Migration and Social Change" where they featured the section "Navigating Jim Crow: Lessons from the Negro Motorist/Travelers' Green Book."<sup>5</sup> Using the *Navigating the Green Book* digital project as a discussion point, teachers were introduced to ways to integrate the *Green Book* content into their curriculum which included a variety of formats that crossed different age levels. For example, the *Navigating the Green Book* is a perfect option for teaching teenagers, who are ready to join ranks of fellow motorists, about traveling by car during segregation. For those teaching younger students, the children's book *Ruth and the Green Book* was discussed as a good introduction for elementary students.

Finally, as a public research library serving not only scholars but also everyday people who are curious about history, we strive to create lifelong learning options. *The Green Book Resource Guide* acts as a portal to more his-



Figure 3. *Green Book* from the year of the 1963, March on Washington. Published by Victor H. Green & Co. Located at Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, the New York Public Library. *Travelers' Green Book: 1963-64 International Edition*. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/666fe280-82ee-0132-31f3-58d385a7bbd0>.

torical and contextual information on the travel guides. Using the ubiquitous but well respected library learning management platform LibGuide, the research portal is not an exhaustive list of resources, but rather it is a curated guide that includes useful primary and secondary content related to traveling while Black. The research guide includes books, journals, and

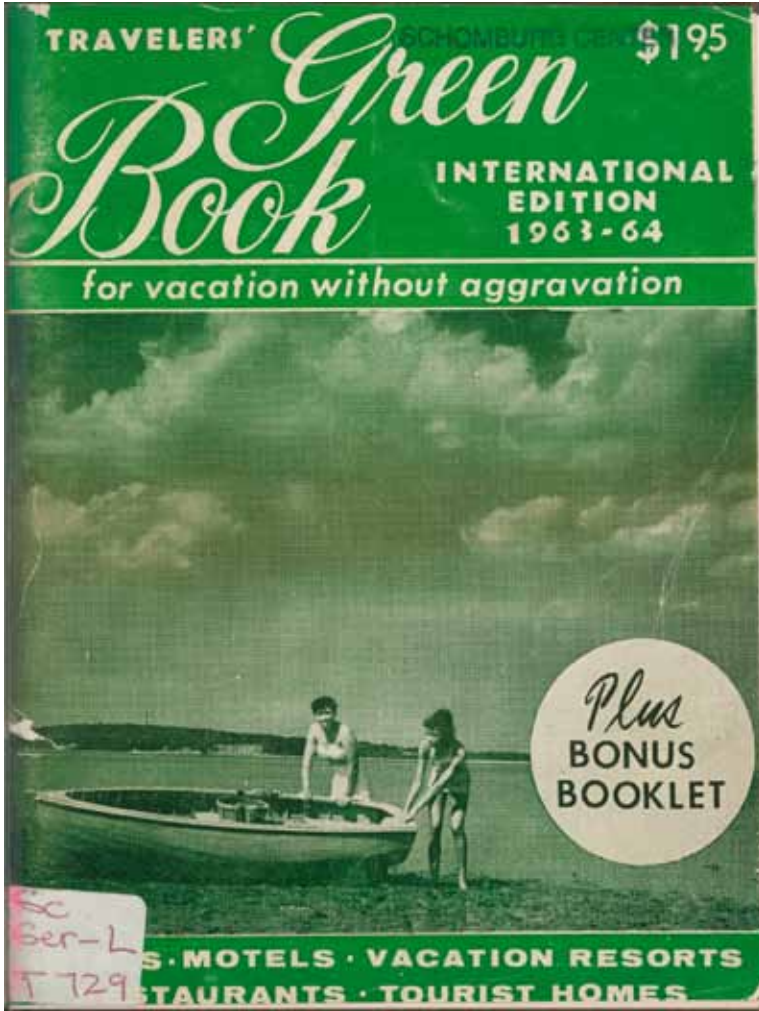


Figure 4. *Green Book* from 1963, featuring the article “Your Rights, Briefly Speaking!” detailing laws against segregation in public accommodations. Published by Victor H. Green & Co. Located at Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, the New York Public Library. *Travelers’ Green Book: 1963–64 International Edition*. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/666fe280-82ee-0132-31f3-58d385a7bbd0>.

web resources that include links to podcasts, videos, and online publications. We imagine this research guide will be useful to anyone who encounters it wanting additional resources and looking to explore different avenues to access more information and a better understanding of the *Green Book*.

## CONCLUSION

The emotional labor of connecting contemporary events to historically relevant content can be exhausting and discouraging, especially when centuries-old human rights issues like state violence, policing, and ideas of citizenship and freedom continue to be relentless and reoccurring themes within the Black community. However, those challenges support the need to create opportunities showing the linkages between past and present struggles. Our current social and political realities have all the indicators that this time period will be studied alongside other important watershed moments in our nation's history. Library and archival workers currently providing information services in the midst of these dynamic times are poised to seize the historical moment through re-imagining collections and educational outreach practices. As I've suggested throughout this article, one of our practices that we should build upon is our standard for information literacy. The incorporation of historical literacy as an extension or enhancement of information, literacy goes beyond the ability to locate, evaluate, and use information, but it encourages a higher-level engagement through the reading and understanding of history as it relates to present-day implications on the lives of patrons. When future generations look to learn from this moment in time, what will they learn from the collections of libraries and archives? As a profession, we must commit ourselves to collecting, sharing, and teaching content that will foster a better understanding of the people, the movement, and the events in all of their complexity and diversity.

## NOTES

1. *Curators' Choice: Black Life Matters*, exhibition held at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, February 2–August 15, 2015, <https://www.nypl.org/events/exhibitions/curators-choice-black-life-matters/more>.
2. For information about the African Burial Ground National Monument, see "A Sacred Space in Manhattan," on the U.S. National Park Service website, last updated June 7, 2018, <https://www.nps.gov/afbg/index.htm>.
3. African Burial Ground Committee Files (1991–1994), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, the New York Public Library. Finding aid available at [http://archives.nypl.org/uploads/collection/pdf\\_finding\\_aid/African\\_Burial\\_Ground\\_Committee\\_Files.pdf](http://archives.nypl.org/uploads/collection/pdf_finding_aid/African_Burial_Ground_Committee_Files.pdf).
4. See the University of Michigan's *The Negro Motorist Green Book: 1949* project at their Automobile in American Life and Society website, [http://www.autolife.umd.umich.edu/Race/R\\_Casestudy/Negro\\_motorist\\_green\\_bk.htm](http://www.autolife.umd.umich.edu/Race/R_Casestudy/Negro_motorist_green_bk.htm). See the University of South Carolina, South Caroliniana Library's *The Negro Traveler's Green Book: 1956* Collection at <http://library.sc.edu/digital/collections/greenbook.html>.
5. Black History 360°: The Schomburg's Summer Education Institute, July 18–22, 2016, <https://www.nypl.org/help/about-nypl/fellowships-institutes/black-history-360>. See also Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture (2016).

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