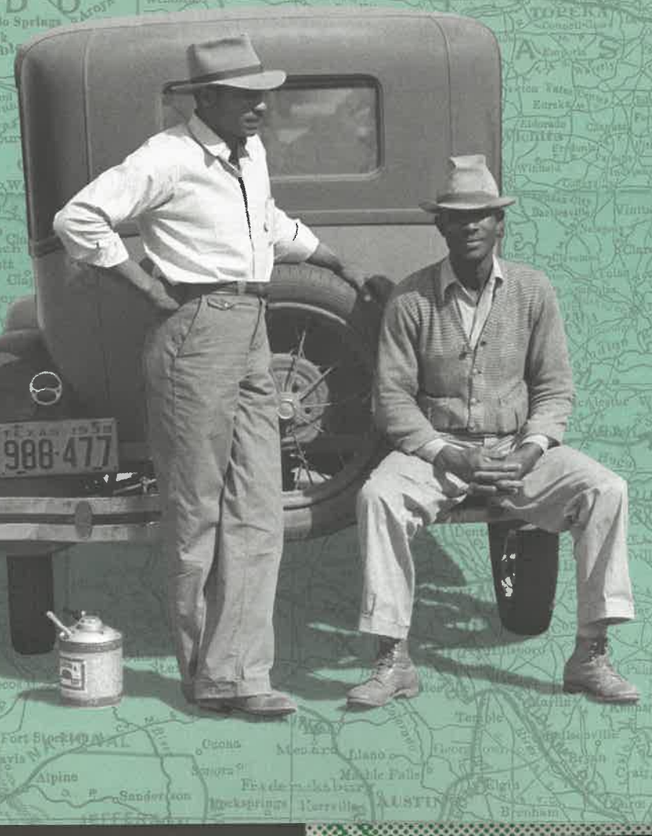
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OVERGROUND RAILROAD

The GREEN BOOK and the ROOTS of BLACK TRAVEL in AMERICA

Candacy Taylor

ABRAMS PRESS, NEW YORK

INTRODUCTION

ARE WE THERE YET?

"Don't you dare say a word." Ron was sitting in the back seat as his father pulled the car to a stop at the side of the road. His father had told him to be quiet before, but this was the first time Ron felt the words reverberate to the pit of his stomach. Moments later, the sheriff stood over the well-appointed 1953 Chevy sedan complete with all the modern features you read about in the magazines.

"Where did you get this vehicle? What are you doing here? And who are these people with you?" the sheriff asked.

Ron's father answered, "It's my employer's car." He pointed to his wife, sitting upright and expressionless in the passenger seat. He pretended that she wasn't his wife and said, "This is my employer's maid, and that is her son in the back. I'm taking them home."



Ron at age seven

The sheriff took a long, hard look at Ron's mother and then angled his eyes to the back seat. A young Ronald sat tight-lipped, too afraid to turn his head or even take a breath. "Where's your hat?" the sheriff barked at Ron's dad.

"Hanging up right behind me in the back seat, officer."

The sheriff waved. "All right. Move on."

As they drove north across the Tennessee border, a sad, eerie silence hung in the air. The jovial conversation they were having right before the sheriff pulled them over had stopped dead. And although there was no discussion about what had just happened, the gravity of the situation was clear. Ron watched Daddy and Mama exchange knowing glances and then turned his head to look at the black, unassuming cap that had been hanging next to him in the back seat ever since he could remember. It wasn't until that moment that he realized why he had

never seen his father wearing it. Mama wasn't a maid, and Daddy wasn't a driver. He had a good job with the railroad, and this was their family car. Until that day, Ron never paid attention to that cap, but now he realized that it wasn't just any hat. It was a chauffeur's hat. A ruse, a prop—a lifesaver.

During the Jim Crow era, the chauffeur's hat was the perfect cover for every middle-class black man pulled over and harassed by the police. If Ron's father had told the sheriff the truth—that he was driving his own car and that they were a family on vacation—the sheriff wouldn't have believed him. He would have assumed the car was stolen. In the event that the sheriff did believe it was Ron's father's car, the rage and jealousy he might have felt at the thought of a black man owning a nicer car than a police officer might have triggered a beating, torture, or even murder. From that day on, Ron noticed these hats strategically placed, like unarmed weapons, in the back seat of nearly every black man's car.

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STANDING IN THE KITCHEN between the sage-speckled countertop and the wall-mounted oven, I listened to Ron's story, stone-faced. "Everybody had one," he said, referring to the chauffeur's cap. "And you always kept it in the car." And then, without any provocation, other stories about his days growing up in Tennessee tumbled out. Ron talked about his cousin slipping out of town in the middle of the night because the Ku Klux Klan was set to lynch him. I listened with a knot in my stomach, trying to swallow my rage and sadness before tears filled my eyes. I didn't want my emotions to distract him from telling his story.

Ron Burford was my stepfather. I had known this man for more than thirty years, but this was the first time he had told me anything about the pain of growing up in the Jim Crow South. And it's not that he was a quiet man; Ron loved to talk. He could talk for hours. My mom and my sister and I would try to scoot out of the kitchen before he started in on another one of his long Southern yarns, ones that we had heard before. But it wasn't until I started

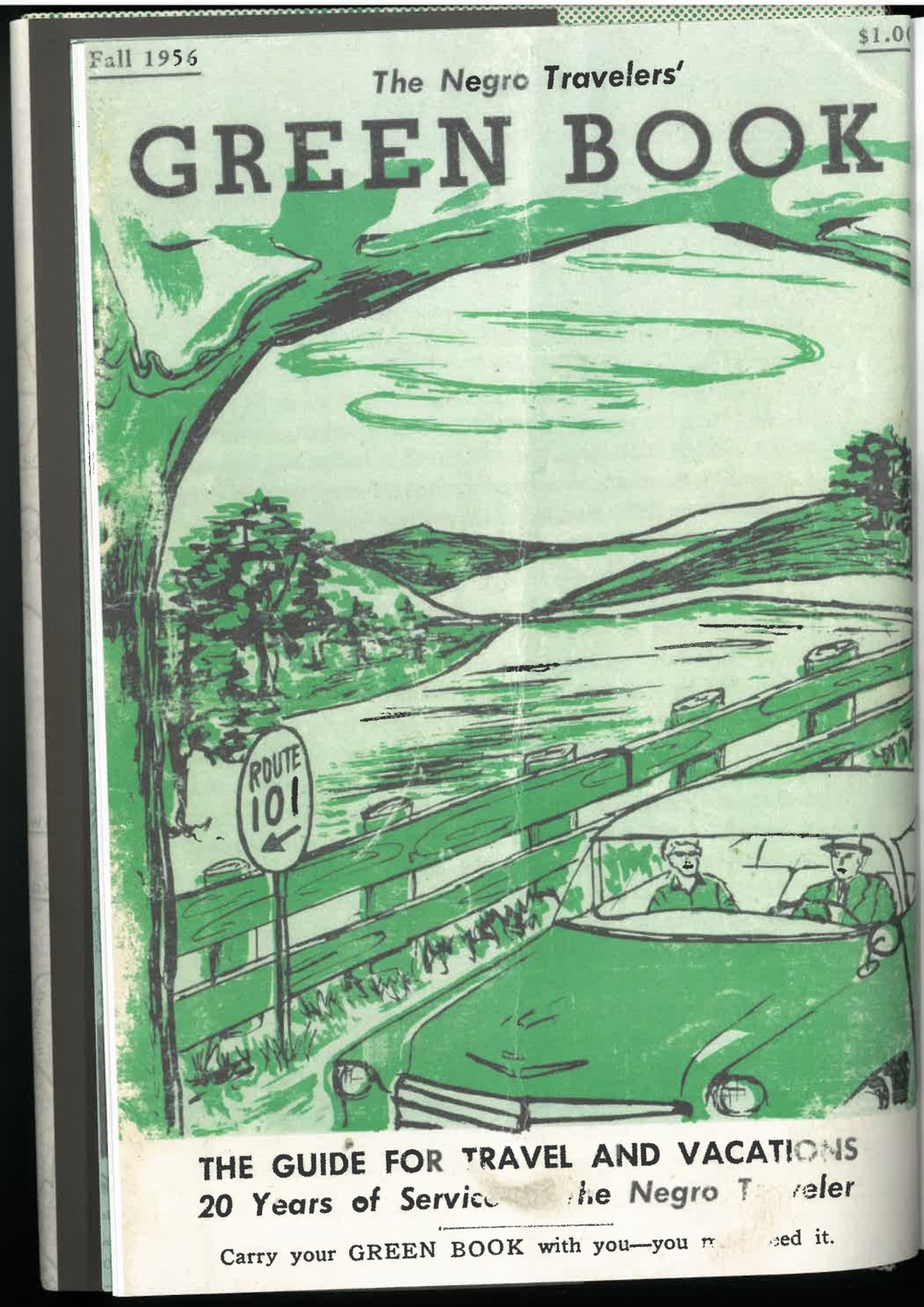
this project that he shared these stories with me. It was only then, at the age of forty-six, that I realized I had earned his trust. This was a huge accomplishment, because after what he and most black men of his generation had lived through in this country, he felt he couldn't trust anyone.

I think Ron started to trust me around 2014, soon after I called home asking about the *Green Book*. I had just seen a copy of it for the first time, tucked away under glass at the Autry Museum of the American West, in Los Angeles. It was a travel guide that was published for black people during the Jim Crow era. I'd never known such a thing existed. Right after leaving the Autry, I called my parents in Columbus, Ohio, and asked Ron if he had ever used the *Green Book*. He said, "I'm not sure; probably. There were a few black guides back then."

He was right. There were about a dozen other black travel guides, but the *Green Book* was in print for the longest period of time and had the widest readership. Victor Hugo Green, a man with a seventh-grade education, published the first *Green Book*, in Harlem in 1936, and he worked on it until his death in 1960. His wife, Alma, took up the mantle and kept the *Green Book* going until 1962. In 1965, Langley Waller, an engraver and former writer for Harlem's newspaper the *New York Amsterdam News*, published the last two editions of the *Green Book*, the 1963–64 and 1966–67 editions. (There was no 1965 edition.). Although these are distinctly different in design, scope, and tone from the original, what never wavered throughout the life of the *Green Book* was the courage and security it afforded black people, so they could pack up their cars and go.

Listings in the *Green Book* blanketed the entire United States, and later editions included Canada, the Virgin Islands, Europe, and Africa. The guide was distributed by mail order, sold by black-owned businesses, and made available through a savvy media campaign led by Esso gas stations (which operate as ExxonMobil today). It was successful due to word of mouth but also as a result of an ambitious grassroots operation of a national network of mailmen led by the guide's creator, and fellow postal worker, Victor Hugo Green. This multipronged marketing strategy was so effective that by 1962, the *Green Book* had a circulation of nearly two million.

The *Green Book* was published during a time when car travel symbolized freedom in America, but since racial segregation was in full force throughout the country, the open road wasn't open to all. When black motorists picked up a copy of the *Green Book*, they were greeted by the words "Just What You



Just What You Have Been Looking For!!

NOW WE CAN TRAVEL WITHOUT EMBARRASSMENT

Use the Order Blank for Extra Copies or Give to a Friend

OPPOSITE PAGE *Green Book* cover, Fall 1956

ABOVE "Just What You've Been Looking For!!" *Green Book*, 1948

Have Been Looking For!! NOW WE CAN TRAVEL WITHOUT EMBARRASSMENT." The *Green Book* was called the AAA guide for black people, but it was so much more. The businesses listed in it were critical sources of refuge along lonely stretches of America's perilously empty roads. To stay safe, black folks never left home without a plan, props, a cover story, and a copy of the *Green Book*.

Given the violence that black travelers encountered on the road, the *Green Book* was an ingenious solution to a horrific problem. It represented the fundamental optimism of a race of people facing tyranny and terrorism. When I first saw it, I was struck that something so simple, and so practical, could be so powerful. Not only did it show black travelers where they could go, but it was also a compelling

marketing tool that supported black-owned businesses and celebrated black self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship.

In the early 1930s, right before the *Green Book* was first published, black Americans had banded together to create the "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign. Once they understood the impact of the reach of their collective economic power, the campaign galvanized black communities to boycott businesses that wouldn't hire them. So when the *Green Book* came along, it became the perfect vehicle to carry this effort forward because it was practically a Yellow Pages of black-owned businesses.

By 1930, blacks in the United States owned approximately 70,000 small businesses, and over the *Green Book*'s nearly thirty-year reign, it listed more than 9,500 of these, including hotels, restaurants, gas stations, department stores, tailors, nightclubs, drugstores, hair salons, haberdashers, sanitariums, funeral homes, real estate offices, and even a dude ranch. More than 80 percent of the listings were clustered in traditional African American neighborhoods such as Harlem, South Central Los Angeles, and Bronzeville in Chicago. The majority were black-owned, but there were also black-friendly white-owned establishments, such as Macy's, Brooks Brothers, the Drake Hotel in Chicago, the Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles, and even Disneyland.

Although the *Green Book* provided safe accommodation for black travelers, this solved only half the problem. Getting there could be a dangerous, life-threatening proposition. Not only did black motorists navigate a country with thousands of "sundown towns," all-white communities that banned black people from entering the city limits after dark, but they also couldn't eat, sleep, or buy gasoline at many white-owned businesses. Even Coca-Cola vending machines had WHITE CUSTOMERS ONLY printed on them. To avoid the humiliation of being denied basic services, many black motorists were forced to travel with ice coolers, bedding, portable toilets, and full gas cans. Herbert Sulaiman, of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, remembers as a child smelling the odor of gasoline coming from the trunk. "You don't forget smells," he said.

Despite the dangers, black motorists hit the road anyway, venturing out on the desolate two-lane highways that connected urban and rural America. It wasn't until I started this project that I understood why each time I left for the airport after visiting my parents in Ohio, Ron would try to load me up with food for the trip. I'd say, "No, thanks. I can just pick something up at the airport." Until I started writing this book, I hadn't realized what a



"Next Services 100 Miles," Wonder Valley, California

privileged statement that was. Black folks of Ron's generation never left on a trip without taking food because there was no guarantee they would be served anywhere. Ron knew, intellectually, that times had changed, but his survival instincts had never left him.

While working on this book, I came to understand why Ron was so guarded, especially around white people. When I was young, he had never talked about the rules that governed his life growing up in the Jim Crow South. Later, he told me that he had been taught to never look a white person in the eye. And if a white person walked toward him on the street, he would

have to cross immediately, or there could be grave consequences—like what had happened to his cousin who had a KKK lynch mob after him. As a teenager, I would roll my eyes at Ron's relentless suspicion of people, which I felt verged on paranoia. But after hearing his stories, I finally understood why he had every reason to doubt, question, and side-eye a situation that didn't pass his smell test. I don't think all his fears were warranted, but now I wholeheartedly understood why he had them.

Ron died the week I started writing this book. He lost his life from complications due to exposure to Agent Orange during his service as a marine in Vietnam. His voracious lifelong love affair with Southern food, or what he called "good living," also likely contributed to his death.

It was heartbreaking to lose him at such a pivotal point in the project, but when people die, it calls us to look back on their lives, and it wasn't until he died that I realized how much of Ron's life experiences touched nearly every chapter of this book. We talked more the year before he died than we had at any other time in our lives. I suspect he knew he was dying, but he didn't tell anyone. When I was home visiting during this period, almost every evening, at a time when he would normally have gone downstairs to his man cave, instead, he would sit with me on the couch and show me pictures and tell me stories.

Ron was so proud of the work I was doing. He told me this book had to be the most important thing in my life. "Don't worry about anything else," he said. "Don't let anything distract you. You don't need to be out there gallivanting," using his favorite word for what I did. "Just sit still, be quiet, and write this book." I had already written two other books, but he and I knew this one was different. After learning about the *Green Book*, I, a black woman who has driven over half-a-million miles documenting American culture over the last twenty years, never looked at travel, or even America, the same way again.

As I grieved Ron's passing, I wrote every morning, watching the sun rise across the Bisbee, Arizona, mountains. I recounted all the conversations we'd had, and just like that, as Ron guided me through every page, he went from being my guardian to being my guardian angel.

The year before Ron died, Donald Trump's presidential inauguration sent Democrats over the edge, confirming that their worst nightmare was coming true. Later that year, white supremacists stormed Charlottesville, Virginia, and murdered thirty-two-year-old protester Heather Heyer. "I'm not surprised," Ron told me over the phone. In a calm, steady voice he said,

"People don't want to see what's right in front of them." I didn't say anything. I just let the sentence hang in the air. After passing the sixth Confederate flag that day while driving through upstate New York, I wasn't surprised, either.

Most Americans, however, were stunned. They insisted that this wasn't the America they knew. They were confused, and devastated that the country they were so proud of was not living up to its promise of "freedom and justice for all." Many of my black friends called me and said, "Well, here we go again" and "This is nothing new." But most of my white friends called me in tears. They were incensed by Trump's racist rhetoric and terrified that we were losing the progress we had made as a country since the election of Barack Obama. I shared their anger, but I wondered why they hadn't already felt outraged. One white friend said, with hysteria in her voice, "I'm afraid they're going to round up all the Muslims!" I said, "Where have you been? For the last forty years, black folks have been rounded up and imprisoned under the watch of President Bill Clinton, the Bushes, and Barack Obama. No one seems to care about that."

Once I hit the road scouting *Green Book* listings, I drove nearly forty thousand miles on America's two-lane highways, across acres of wide-open plains and deserts, over mountains, and along coastlines, but I also passed miles of blight and boarded-up buildings in Baltimore, Detroit, Chicago, and Cleveland. After seeing communities decimated by poverty, crime, and destructive government policies, I was bewildered, brokenhearted, and then furious that human beings were living in such inhumane conditions.

Ron was my comrade while I was on the road researching this book. We spoke regularly on the phone, and as he requested, I texted home every day, giving him detailed accounts of my travels. He was worried for my safety, and I couldn't blame him. He had every reason to be concerned, but he never discouraged me from doing this work. Instead, he supplied me with a stun gun, a knife, and a canister of Mace. And then he taught me how to use them.

On the road, I was verbally threatened, chased by dogs, physically lunged at, and nearly physically assaulted. I understood the risks, and took things one day at a time. The only moment I really feared for my life was when I was scouting *Green Book* sites on the South Side of Chicago. Fifty-three people had been shot the same weekend I was there. Although I was trained in Model Mugging (a program of self-defense for women), and Ron had taught me self-defense techniques, there was nothing I could do to stop a stray bullet. On the days when I was too nervous to get out of my car



to pump gas, or the times when it was too dangerous to stand on the streets to photograph sites, I thought, Isn't this ironic? The whole point of the *Green Book* was to keep black motorists safe on the road, and it's eighty years later, and I can't find a safe place to use the bathroom.

As I crisscrossed the country with a knife under my seat, a stun gun in the car door pocket, and Mace behind the gear shift, the words Victor Green wrote in his introduction to the *Green Book* rang through my mind: "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

ABOVE Author standing in front of Clifton's, a former *Green Book* restaurant in Los Angeles, California

FOLLOWING PAGES
Wonderland Liquor, a former *Green Book* site in Baltimore, Maryland

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."

Despite the overt racism Victor Green must have experienced during his life, when he wrote this introduction, he had reason to be optimistic. Just a few years before he created the *Green Book*, the concept of the American Dream was born. It was defined by James Truslow Adams in 1931 as "a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position." It was an ambitious goal, but Americans from all races and classes wanted to believe in the American Dream. Remember, there was no established civil rights movement in the 1930s, no Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., so to be a black business owner during the Jim Crow era was the highest expression of the American Dream.

It took another thirty-three years before Adams's dream of social equality would be written into law as the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Unfortunately, Victor Green died in 1960, so he didn't live to see racial integration. But if he had, it may have broken his heart, because after integration became law, racism continued to shape America's social, political, and physical spaces. The Federal Housing Administration redlined neighborhoods, denying housing loans to blacks and preventing them from accessing the same wealth-building opportunities freely given to whites. More recently, there have been brazen attempts to dismantle the 1965 Voting Rights Act. And unconstitutional policing policies such as "stop and frisk" have caused the prison population to skyrocket 700 percent, and today, as a result, nearly one in three black men is incarcerated.

When I talk about the *Green Book*, some people say, "Thank god we don't need that anymore." And yes, it is true that we have made progress, but some of the communities that were once safe havens for black people are now just as dangerous as the sundown towns blacks were avoiding during the second wave of the Great Migration. As I drove through neighborhoods where *Green Book* sites once thrived, I could see the indelible scar that mass incarceration had left on these communities. I believe that a century from now, people will look back on this time in disbelief and wonder how we could stomach locking up nearly one-third of the black population. I believe this era of mass

incarceration will prove to be at least as horrific, barbaric, and shameful as segregation was during the Jim Crow era.

After surveying the tragic spectacle of ruins and poverty in dozens of cities and rural communities throughout America, I can't help but think that this was not the future Victor Green imagined. It was during these trips that I realized that if we want to understand the historical role of the *Green Book* and its residual impact today, it shouldn't be reduced to being merely regarded as a travel guide that was needed during a shameful chapter in American history. While photographing the Hampton House in Miami and patiently waiting for a young prostitute, naked from the waist down, to walk out of my frame, I realized I wasn't interested in presenting the *Green Book* as a historic time capsule. I wanted to show it in the context of this country's ongoing struggle with race and social mobility, because the problems black Americans face regarding police brutality, homicide, unfair drug sentencing, and mass incarceration are arguably just as debilitating and deadly as the problems the *Green Book* helped black people avoid more than eighty years ago.

Clearly, we still have work to do, and not only in the government sector—since the *Green Book* ceased publication, racism persists in the travel industry as well. In May 1994, the restaurant chain Denny's was successfully sued for making black customers wait longer and pay higher prices than white patrons. At fifty-four million dollars, the settlement was the largest and broadest of its kind. More recently, home-sharing start-ups such as Noirbnb and Innclusive were created in response to widespread discrimination experienced by black Airbnb customers. In Missouri, the NAACP initiated a travel advisory in response to Senate Bill 43 that was passed in the Missouri Legislature which found that black motorists were 75 percent more likely to be pulled over than white motorists. Soon after that, the NAACP announced another travel advisory after numerous complaints of unfair treatment of black passengers on American Airlines.

During this time, I was inundated with media requests to discuss the NAACP travel advisories, and I was still getting regular calls from friends who were terrified at the state of the country. I knew things were serious and that we needed to push back and demand our constitutional rights, but I wasn't panicked. We had survived this before.

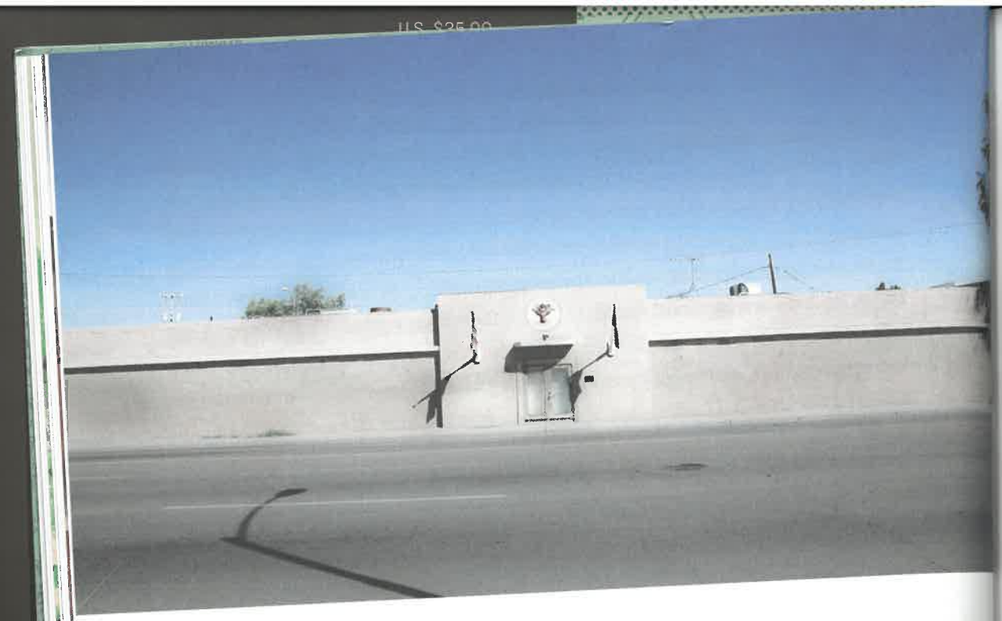
One of the gifts of the *Green Book* is that it shows an annual record of black travel during America's most turbulent decades of racial conflict lead-

ing up to the civil rights movement. As I looked closer at American history, I saw that racial progress has never traveled in a straight line. It's a cyclical, reactionary process that swings back and forth like a pendulum. For this reason, I have chosen to examine the *Green Book* editions chronologically. I want to show why it wasn't surprising, especially to Ron (and others like him), that right after Barack Obama left office, America elected a president who was embraced by white supremacists. But I don't want to give Trump too much credit. Although he exacerbated the problem of race and division, he didn't create it. If anything, his presidency showed Americans the hate that has been hiding in plain sight, both in our communities and in our government policies. Still, after his election, I was excited to see people out in the streets and outraged.

The *Green Book* deserves special attention now because our past and current policies shape how not just black people but people of all races and gender identities navigate this country. During my research for this book, I learned so much about America just by getting off the interstate and driving through neighborhoods. Photographing *Green Book* sites gave me a greater understanding of and insight into the guide that I never would have had merely reading it in my office at Harvard University. On the road, I felt the tenor of a bygone era and saw a new cycle of grit and survival along Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevards and in the dilapidated houses on dirt roads across the nation.

With the *Green Book* in the rearview mirror, I saw America for what it is, not what it imagines itself or even aspires to be. Nearly every podcast on my Stitcher app covered Trump's refusal to denounce white supremacy in response to Heather Heyer's murder in Charlottesville. Those news reports conjured thoughts of Trayvon Martin, Philando Castile, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Alton B. Sterling, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Walter Scott, and Eric Garner. It was their memories that fueled my journey to drive for months working sixteen-hour days. After scouting more than 3,600 *Green Book* sites, I realized that most of my well-meaning liberal friends in the coastal cities had never seen the poverty that millions of Americans are living in. By the time I got to Detroit, after leaving Los Angeles and driving across the country, I was in tears.

Once the sadness subsided, I found strength and resolve in the *Green Book* buildings that are still standing. *Green Book* sites range from A-frame houses to simple storefronts to Spanish Colonial hotels. Regardless of



Elk's, a *Green Book* nightclub in Phoenix, Arizona

their stature, these former safe zones are symbols of refuge that redefine sanctuary, the agency of place, and the story of race in America. After three years of scouting nearly five thousand *Green Book* sites, I learned that less than 5 percent are still in operation and more than 75 percent are gone. That is why it was so important for me to document the ones that are left.

In most traditional African American neighborhoods, *Green Book* buildings were destroyed in the name of urban renewal, and many of the remaining sites are in ruins, and others have been leveled or radically modified beyond recognition. While traveling, I ran a tight ship, following a mapping system in which I could scout thirty sites a day. Since most of them are gone, there were times when I would drive

for days and not find a single one. On the rare occasion when I did find a *Green Book* listing that was still in business, it towered over the sidewalk like a rare and beautiful force of nature. It's incredible that any business would survive up to seventy years. Given that most *Green Book* businesses were owned by black families, to find one that is still operating was reason enough to celebrate. The sites that are still with us symbolize survival: They endured the times the pendulum swung forward and a wrecking ball swung back. These businesses survived urban renewal, gentrification, and white supremacist policies. And the people in these communities survived underfunded schools and overfunded prisons. All of this cemented my faith that we would survive Trump.

Green Book businesses are powerful. They shape the narrative of black mobility and tell a story that is not all about struggle. These sites of sanctuary symbolize black ingenuity, resourcefulness, strength, entrepreneurship, and resilience. They carry a cultural memory with them and reveal the untold story of black travel, offering us a rich opportunity to reexamine America's story of segregation, black migration, and the rise of the black leisure class. To honor and celebrate these places, I have included a *Green Book* site tour at the end of this book. I hope you visit these businesses, as a witness, and reflect on this history.

When you go to these sites, remember that America is a messy collection of customs, traditions, values, and belief systems that have been shaped by capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. Hate is hard to understand, and our relationship to it is deeply layered because history is fleeting, ephemeral, and slippery, and it changes according to who is telling it. The past is usually presented as a buttoned-up, simplified, and often sanitized story that sidesteps the turbulence and whitewashes the journey, making it look like one smooth ride—one where we learned from our mistakes, righted our wrongs, and kept getting better. But this isn't how it happens. For every major push forward for black equality, there was a swift and urgent "whitelash." So, are we there yet? Hardly.

This is not a book about the history of road-tripping and black travel. It's more of a pilgrimage toward understanding a country so blinded by symbolism that it can't or won't tackle the pervasive, relentless forces that created the environment for the *Green Book* to thrive in the first place. It is a book that I hope will show how we got here and why, after all this time, we still have so far to go. ◆