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How an Artist Learned About Freedom From ‘The Negro Motorist Green Book’

By Meredith Mendelsohn

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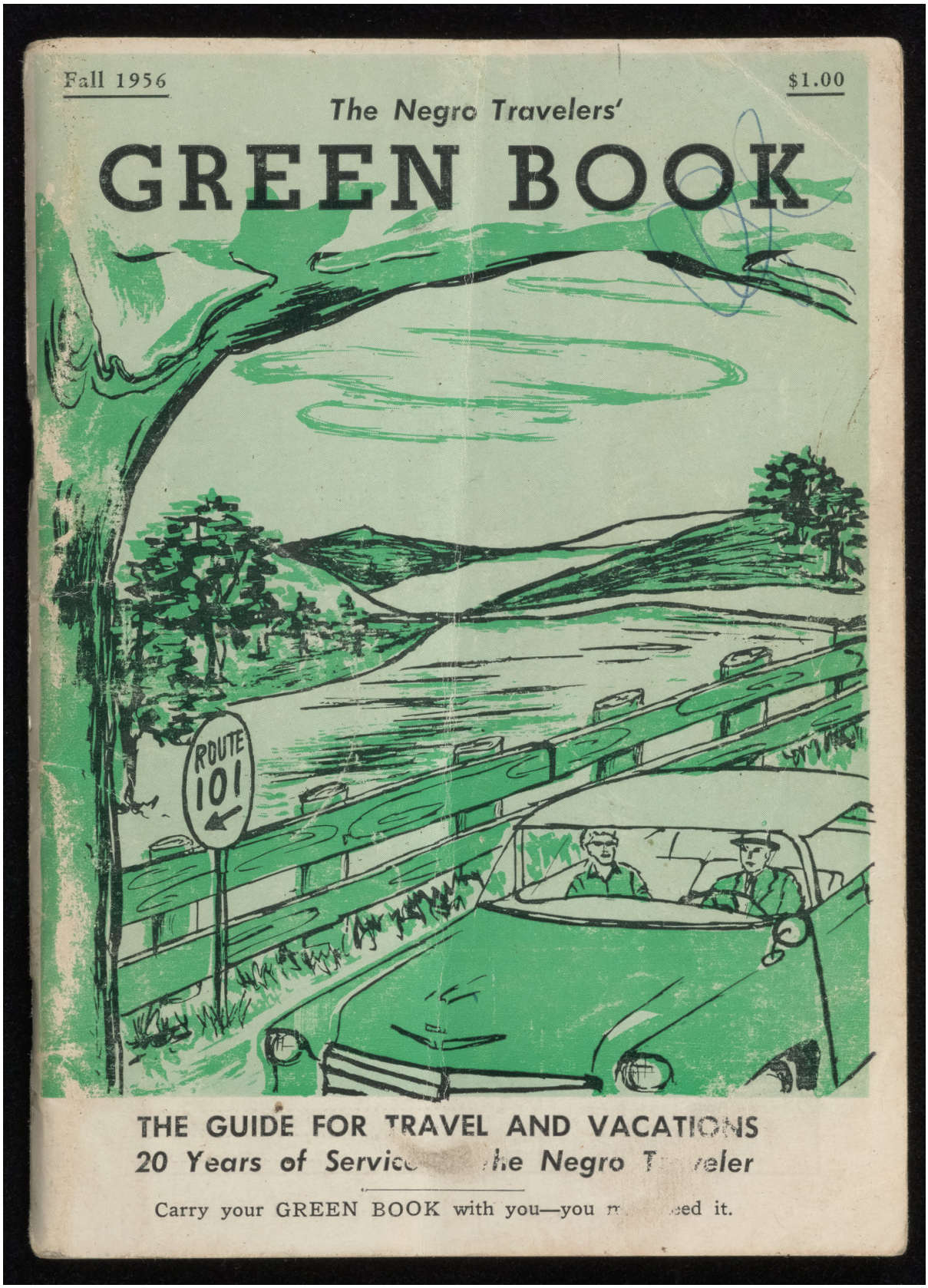
On a recent wintry morning, the multimedia artist Derrick Adams was sitting in his cozy basement studio in Brooklyn talking about distant cities and faraway times. “It’s like reading a fairy tale book. I see the names of beauty schools and men’s clubs and taverns, and I think, ‘What does that place look like?’”

Mr. Adams was referring to the establishments listed in the “The Negro Motorist Green Book,” a series of AAA-like guides for black travelers published from 1936 through 1966, and the inspiration for “Derrick Adams: Sanctuary,” an immersive installation opening at the Museum of Arts and Design (known as MAD) on Jan. 25.



"The Negro Travelers' Green Book," from the fall of 1956. New York Public Library

Widely used at a time when African-Americans were navigating physical and social mobility through the swamp of Jim Crow laws and attitudes in the mid-20th century, the Green Books, as they came to be known, listed businesses from gas, food and

lodging to nightclubs and haberdasheries that welcomed African-Americans when many did not.

While they reflect a disturbing reality of American history, the books also offered the hope of partaking in the American dream. “They enabled African-Americans to travel like Americans and to feel American,” the artist said.

Recognized internationally for his kaleidoscopic explorations of the black experience, Mr. Adams, 47, who is African-American, is the first major visual artist to use the Green Books as a creative point of departure. For him, they are not only a Civil Rights artifact and instrument of social change, but also a fascinating record of black leisure time and the built environment — subjects that are continuously percolating in his work.

A collage in progress in Mr. Adams's studio melds a modernist grid with vintage-looking fabric in a brick pattern that elicits the old establishments, building facades and travel. "I've thought a lot about barriers, and accessibility, and obstacles, and perseverance," the artist said. Andrew White for The New York Times

Published by Victor H. Green, an entrepreneurial and eloquent Harlem-based letter carrier, the guides began in 1936 as 14 pages of listings in the New York metropolitan area, culled by a network of postal workers. By the 1960s, they had bloomed into nearly 100 pages, covering the 50 states and other countries. (Mr. Green eventually changed the name to "The Negro Travelers' Green Book" when mobility moved beyond motoring to air travel.) Over the years, they were used by drivers who wanted to avoid the segregation of mass transit, job seekers relocating North during the Great Migration, newly drafted soldiers heading South to World War II army bases, traveling businessmen and vacationing families. Travelers could purchase copies at black-friendly businesses or order them by mail.

Hotel Clark, one of the welcoming hotels in "The Negro Motorist Green Book," on Beale Street in Memphis, 1939.

Few of the books remain. Mr. Adams first came across a copy last year at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library, which has a rare, nearly complete set (which they digitized in 2015). At the time, he was digging through the archive of the trailblazing 1980s African-American fashion designer Patrick Kelly, the subject of his current show at at the Countee Cullen Library in Harlem (organized with the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture), through Feb. 23.

For an art exhibition, "the curatorial challenge was how to bring all of the information in the books to life, to make it emotional and aesthetic, not didactic," said Dexter Wimberly, the executive director of Aljira: A Center for Contemporary Art in Newark, who organized the show with MAD's Samantha De Tillio (MAD's chief curator, Shannon Stratton, brought the show to the institution).

"Sanctuary" includes wallpaper printed from pages of the Green Books, but that's about the only literal reference to the guides. Mr. Adams uses them "to suss out ideas about mobility." He conjures the experience of the traveler who might have circled names in them, like Blue Duck Inn Grill, New Candle Light or Silver Moon, and reimagines what those places and the path to get there might have felt like. Anchoring the show, for instance, is a miniaturized highway, sitting around three feet off the ground.

It is a reminder that roads were among the country's few unsegregated spaces, and as cars became more affordable and wages increased with industrial expansion in the 1920s and '30s, African-Americans gained the kind of mobility they had long been denied. As the progressive sociologist Arthur Raper observed in 1940 with mild hyperbole, "Effective equality seems to come at about 25 miles an hour or above."

"Come on by Mr. Hoodwrench," a collage in progress, is meant to evoke at once an auto body shop, a suitcase and the profiles of two hooded figures. It will appear in "Sanctuary," at the Museum of Arts and Design. Tilton Gallery

But while the country's young highways were littered with free enterprise — in 1934 the writer James Agee described them in Fortune magazine as "incomparably the most hugely extensive market the human race has ever set up to tease and tempt and take money from the human race" — much roadside commerce was off-limits to black travelers. Esso was the only chain of service stations that recognized that a dollar was no other color than green, and many hotel chains closed their doors to African-Americans until the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

“You hear stories from older people about how far they had to drive to get gas or stop. Some would have to keep gas in their car when they traveled. And a pot in their trunk,” Mr. Adams said. “I’ve thought a lot about the freedom people must have felt from the Green Books, not worrying about where to stop and what’s going to be on the other side, pre-Yelp.”

The artist’s wooden, wheeled contraptions will hold hats in “Sanctuary.”
Andrew White for The New York Times

His work, while borrowing from the bright colors, patterns and geometric forms of modernist abstraction, has a very handcrafted feel. For a series of collages that surround the roadway, he used a vintage-looking commercial-grade fabric with a brick pattern to evoke the facades of buildings along the road. Bricks are one of his trademark motifs to evoke urban dwellings, jail cells and the modernist grid.

A 1940s Atlanta nightclub called the Top Hat was one of the spots that vividly captured Mr. Adams’s imagination. Hats, too, appear frequently in his work, in performances, videos, painting and sculpture, and he is rarely seen without one. On the day I visited his studio — the cellar of a prewar apartment building in the

Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, packed with fabric scraps, paint jars, books and other tools of his practice — he was wearing a black baseball cap with the initials D. A., along with a camouflage-patterned, paint-smeared apron and black clogs.

In his collages and immersive installations, Mr. Adams uses fabric and wallpaper to suggest roads and car doors. A steering wheel was made from a hat brim.
Terrence Jennings/The Museum of Arts and Design

A row of felt hoops on the wall that suggested steering wheels were, in fact, brims cut from hats, he explained, while a stack of around 20 old-time-looking driving hats — or flat caps — sat on a nearby work table. Mr. Adams was getting ready to attach them to wooden wheels and place them on the roadway at MAD. Vaguely aerodynamic, the hats strangely elicit both car and driver at once. They also hark back to Mr. Adams's memories of childhood.

While growing up in Baltimore in the 1970s, he was visited frequently by relatives driving from Virginia or New York. "My great-aunts would wear these very particular pants outfits and driving gloves and little driving hats. It was very sporty, unlike the domestic look of the women in the house," he recalled. "It was about travel culture, and it created in my mind a representation of liberation."

With the rise of airplane travel, Victor Green changed the name of his guide from “The Negro Motorist Green Book” to “The Travelers’ Green Book.”
Library of Congress

The road that bisects MAD’s gallery space follows a path up, over and down the sides of free-standing wooden doors. Visitors must pass through them to traverse the road. “I’ve thought a lot about barriers, and accessibility, and obstacles, and perseverance,” explained Mr. Adams, whose recent solo show of collages at Tilton Gallery, his longtime New York dealer, also included references to roads.

“Beacon,” 2017, by Derrick Adams, suggests the welcome after a long day of driving.
Derrick Adams Studio

The museum’s darkened room will be illuminated by small concrete houses cast from milk cartons and lit from within. Mr. Adams taught elementary school briefly between graduating from the Pratt Institute, in 1996, and earning his M.F.A. from Columbia, in 2003, and remembered how students transformed milk cartons into tiny homes, places of “nourishment, of revitalization,” he said.

Altogether, the show is a highly visceral experience, channeling some of life’s more underappreciated privileges: the freedom to stop at a diner, or to insert a key into a humble motel doorknob after a long day of driving.

“Figure in the Urban Landscape 3,” 2017, by Derrick Adams. Tilton Gallery

Mr. Adams has spent his fair share of time in generic hotel rooms: Over the past two years he has had solo shows in London, Paris, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, New York and Omaha. A major influence, he said, is Jacob Lawrence’s “Migration Series” (1940-41) — a powerful depiction of the mass movement of hat-wearing, suitcase-carrying African-Americans relocating North for industrial jobs, educational opportunities and liberation (perhaps with Green Books in their pockets).

“Figure in the Urban Landscape 12,” 2017, by Derrick Adams. Tilton Gallery

If for Lawrence liberation meant freedom from Southern oppression, for Green, the creator of the Green Books, it meant the end of his business. “There will be a day sometime in the near future when this guide will not have to be published,’’ he wrote in the 1949 edition. “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.”

Mr. Adams is quick to recognize that the liberation of Lawrence’s migrants and Green’s readers is tenuous. “The project is really timely, considering all of the conversations and issues surrounding immigration and racial tension,” he said. “Things are happening that echo what the Green Books were trying to prevent. If anything, I want people to know how important it is to have freedom to go where you want to go.”

Correction: *January 23, 2018*

An earlier version of this article misidentified the location of the exhibition "Derrick Adams: Patrick Kelly, The Journey." It is on view at the Countee Cullen Library in Harlem, not at the Studio Museum in Harlem. (The Studio Museum is presenting the exhibition.)

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