Federal Government

In 1927 “Billboard” Jackson established the United States Department of Commerce’s Division of Negro Affairs under then-Secretary of Commerce and former United States President, Herbert Hoover. Described as “one of the most important federal appointments for the Negro which has been made since Emancipation,” Jackson’s duties included working with local Black merchants, compiling information about Black businesses for the Commerce Department’s files, and promoting its services and successes in a number of venues. Jackson had previously worked for sixteen years as a U.S. Railroad Service traveling investigator and was one of only two Black ranking officers in the U.S. Military Intelligence Bureau during World War I.

Billboard Magazine

James Albert Jackson earned the nickname “Billboard” in the early 1920s when he was invited by Billboard Magazine to edit a new feature section on Black musical entertainment, thus making him the first African American to write a regular column for a national White publication. Jackson had cut his teeth in show business working as a minstrel interlocutor, circus barker, and assistant musical comedy manager around the turn of the century. Prior to his job at Billboard, he had written for a variety of Black newspapers and was widely considered the most prominent Black entertainment writer in America. According to experts, Billboard’s choice of Jackson was based on his reputation for knowing everyone in the burgeoning Harlem Renaissance entertainment world. Some credit “Billboard” Jackson with playing a key role in bringing about the groundbreaking 1920s Black musical Shuffle Along.

Esso Standard Oil

In 1934 “Billboard” Jackson was hired by Esso Standard Oil Company as a “special representative to the black community.” The Esso position started on a three-month trial basis but Jackson ended up working over twenty years for the company and was widely regarded as a “legend in the field.” Taking on a new moniker, “the Esso Man,” Jackson’s activities included consulting “around the circuit, cementing relations with the company’s Negro dealers, their customers and Jackson’s own 40,000-plus friends.” One of these dealer-friends was Ellis Marsalis Sr., the grandfather of Wynton Marsalis, who in 1936 opened the first Black-owned Esso service station in the state of Louisiana. The station was known as the “Bill Board Esso.”

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In his 1932 Opportunity magazine article, “Through the Windshield,” Alfred Edgar Smith lamented the circumstances of African American automobile travel. “Good roads behind,” Smith observed, “but where will you stop tonight?” Prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964—ending segregation in hotels, motels, restaurants, theaters, and other public accommodations—Jim Crow haunted Black travelers throughout the United States. Even outside of the South, uncertainty about where segregation laws were enforced and observed was often unsettling as the laws themselves. Black motorists could not simply expect to be served, or allowed to use the restroom in the business establishments they came across while on the road. Each stop brought with it the rising apprehension of possible refusal.

During the opening decades of the twentieth century, automobile travel reshaped American society and culture. These small “roadside billboards” offered advantages of speed and convenience, lowered travel isolation, and guided city dwellers with unprecedented options for scenic escape. In doing so, they expanded possibilities for recreation, business, and residential living. “Quite rapidly, motorized vehicles came to be associated with picturesque notions of freedom and individuality. For a growing number of Americans, consumption had become a means of expressing program, status, and citizenship, and no commodity epitomized this more than the motorcar.”

Whereas the benefits to automobile travel were recognized throughout U.S. society, African Americans in particular were writing about an escape from the humiliations of segregated public travel. Throughout the 1920s, Smith referenced publications such as Opportunity and The Crisis, and Black newspapers like the California Eagle, published regular columns reporting on the road trips of Black automobile travelers and advocating for increased ownership. A 1926 California Eagle article, for instance, begins as follows: “There perhaps never has been a time when conditions offered a better opportunity to the person desiring an auto than are obtainable now.”

By the 1920s and 30s, automobile travel came to encompass both the traditionally small-town, well-educated, Black professional class and an emerging and increasingly mobile Black working class, who were exiting the South in pursuit of new opportunities offered by the war-time economy. These Black Americans who owned cars imagined themselves as well-off, or at least well-off on their way. Their prized motor vehicle and the freedom it offered through automobile travel, and by large, signaled an embrace of the American dream—something the American system was working for them.

In the face of such optimism, Smith’s question of where to spend the night—and related questions about where to eat or where to use the restroom—remained. Some of the greatest humiliations for this budding class of Black economic surrounds family travel, where the most frequent everyday difficulties had nothing to do with meals or lodging, but concerned restroom use. While on-the-road needs could be packed and relatively long distances could be navigated by possessing and utilizing through “how shall parents instill a sense of dignity and pride in their children, explain being turned away from a gas station restroom, being sent around back to a filthy and neglected outhouse, or going to the bathroom on the side of the road like an animal?”

Introduction

An issue dedicated to the career achievements of James A. “Billboard” Jackson (1878-1960) opened the 2019 September/October issue of Opportunity. “Black motorists who owned cars imagined themselves as well-off, or at least well-off on their way.”

I was tryin’ to get outta Kentucky
when I made a mistake,

Didn’t calculate my cash or how much it
would take to make the dash

outta money, outta luck, harassed

by passin’ bourbon trucks


during the opening decades of the twentieth century, automobile travel reshaped American society and culture. These small “roadside billboards” offered advantages of speed and convenience, lowered travel isolation, and guided city dwellers with unprecedented options for scenic escape. In doing so, they expanded possibilities for recreation, business, and residential living. “Quite rapidly, motorized vehicles came to be associated with picturesque notions of freedom and individuality. For a growing number of Americans, consumption had become a means of expressing program, status, and citizenship, and no commodity epitomized this more than the motorcar.”

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In the face of such optimism, Smith’s question of where to spend the night—and related questions about where to eat or where to use the restroom—remained. Some of the greatest humiliations for this budding class of Black economic surrounds family travel, where the most frequent everyday difficulties had nothing to do with meals or lodging, but concerned restroom use. While on-the-road needs could be packed and relatively long distances could be navigated by possessing and utilizing through "how shall parents instill a sense of dignity and pride in their children, explain being turned away from a gas station restroom, being sent around back to a filthy and neglected outhouse, or going to the bathroom on the side of the road like an animal?"
first appeared. Conceived of as early as 1936, the Negro Motorist Green Book debuted as a local New York City publication in 1936, and in response to overwhelming demand began being distributed nationally the following year. The Green Book was put together by an indifferent New York City postal worker, Victor H. Green, who was able to use the National Association of Letter Carriers connections—for who knew local areas better than postal workers?—as well as his resourcefulness to compile the necessary information. As the publisher and namesake of the Green Book, Victor Green has received the bulk of recognition for its appearance and subsequent success. Yet it is through exploitation of its literary roots that James A. Jackson, throughout his vennela career, contributed so much to establishing the Green Book as a venue, including possibly even Green himself. References to “James A. Jackson,” also known by his colorful nickname “Billboard Jackson,” can be found throughout the pages of the first fifteen years of the book—strongly suggesting that Green and Jackson had a productive working relationship. Through the specifics surrounding Green’s initial compilation remains less than history, Jackson with his “most complete and authentic” tact, by all indications, had to be one of Green’s earliest informational contacts. During the mid-1930s, both Green and Jackson were living in New York City. When Green crossed the newly opened George Washington Bridge each day to work as a letter carrier in Hackensack, New Jersey, starting in 1934, Jackson had been hired as a “special representative” of the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey. Aside from customary introductions and articles on car driving, the second written piece ever appearing in a Green Book edition was a 1934 article by S. Frederic Morrow titled “James A. Jackson.” In the piece Morrow details the latter’s historic association with Standard Oil. 8

The Standard Oil Company of New Jersey has given every reason for the Negro to look upon the company and its affiliates with favor. The company accorded courteous service, and members of the race have found employment in positions of consequence and responsibility. The following year, when the Green Book continued its introductory “Card of Appreciation,” “Mr. James (Billboard) Jackson—special representative of the Standard Oil” was the first person thanked; and by that customized cover of the Green Book stated, “This copy presented with the compliments of James A. Jackson, the ‘Esso Man.’”

Book stated, “This copy presented with the compliments of James A. Jackson, the ‘Esso Man.’” Later editions (1943 and 1944) would include photographs of and discussions with Jackson and present Wendell P. Allen, Clearly, Jackson’s role was felt as a possible endorsement, or at least a cooperative arrangement, for an industry that was creating a new market for a new segment of the population. All the while, Green was also receiving other kinds of support in a very different, but equally essential sense. The Negro Motorist Green Book became a level of collaboration between him and Green. Indeed, the book’s completion may be seen as a response to the growing demand for a guidebook that would allow for travel in the United States by Black Americans. As the guidebook continued to grow, it included information on accommodation, restaurants, and other services for Black travelers. The book also featured photographs of Black Americans, highlighting their experiences and accomplishments. It served as a resource for Black travelers during a time of segregation and discrimination in the United States. The Negro Motorist Green Book was not just a travel guide, but a symbol of the struggle for civil rights and equality. It helped to challenge the Jim Crow system and to pave the way for the civil rights movement. Today, the Negro Motorist Green Book remains a significant historical document, reflecting the experiences and contributions of Black Americans during a time of great struggle and change. The book’s importance is recognized not only by historians but also by those who continue to study and remember its legacy. It serves as a reminder of the ongoing fight for justice and equality, and it challenges us to remember the past and to build a better future.
An Autoethnography of Black Automobility: The Ongoing Search for James 'Billboard' Jackson

Anthony Kwame Harrison (Virginia Tech)

Before they took her house away and chased her off the land to start a Klan

The T-Shirt

I was thinking of having a t-shirt made that said, “New Castle, Virginia – 100% White”; and on the back it would say, “We’re Trying to Keep Politics Out of This. Just the Facts.” According to Wikipedia, this is a fact. The t-shirt idea was inspired by my drive through Craig County, Virginia — and New Castle, its county seat — at 8:00 on a cold January morning. I was on my way to Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, to photograph the childhood home of James ‘Billboard’ Jackson and to visit the Centre County Library and Historical Museum, where I hoped to uncover details about Jackson’s elusive personal history and career.

In 1920 Billboard Magazine made the unprecedented decision to hire James Albert Jackson to edit a “new feature section... devoted to black performers, artists, managers, and agents.” This commitment to Black entertainment occurred during one of the most racially volatile periods in the history of the United States. The years between 1883 and 1923 witnessed the greatest number of anti-Black lynchings in U.S. history, with more than fifty reported lynchings every year except for 1917—the year the U.S. entered World War I. Following the war, an estimated 250,000 African American veterans returned from overseas with newfound claims to citizenship and enlightened views on the possibilities for societal race relations. Their assertive strides and insistences on being respected were met with hostility, violence, and the vicious terror of White Supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, which had experienced a revival following the 1915 release of D.W. Griffith’s film The Birth of a Nation.

Post-war racial terror peaked during the summer of 1919, dubbed “Red Summer” in observance of the blood that spilled from the approximately two dozen anti-Black race riots occurring between June and September. The timeliness of Billboard’s hiring Jackson (the following year) was not lost on its founder and editor, William H. Donaldson, who just a few weeks before Jackson’s page was to debut announced:

Beginning on November 6, 1920, a new feature section, written by a black man and devoted to Black performers, artists, managers, and agents... This commitment to Black entertainment occurred during one of the most racially volatile periods in the history of the United States. The years between 1883 and 1923 witnessed the greatest number of anti-Black lynchings in U.S. history, with more than fifty reported lynchings every year except for 1917—the year the U.S. entered World War I. Following the war, an estimated 250,000 African American veterans returned from overseas with newfound claims to citizenship and enlightened views on the possibilities for societal race relations. Their assertive strides and insistences on being respected were met with hostility, violence, and the vicious terror of White Supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan, which had experienced a revival following the 1915 release of D.W. Griffith’s film The Birth of a Nation. Post-war racial terror peaked during the summer of 1919, dubbed “Red Summer” in observance of the blood that spilled from the approximately two dozen anti-Black race riots occurring between June and September. The timeliness of Billboard’s hiring Jackson (the following year) was not lost on its founder and editor, William H. Donaldson, who just a few weeks before Jackson’s page was to debut announced:

Beginning on November 6, 1920, a new feature section, written by a black man and devoted to Black performers, artists, managers, and agents, was appearing... weekly... We feel that the professional artists and entertainers of the race have fairly won this recognition... We are according the representation gladly—even enthusiastically.

Through this position at Billboard, Jackson acquired his lifelong nickname. In editing “J. A. Jackson’s Page,” the section came to be known, Jackson both chronicled and catalyzed the formation of the early Black entertainment industry, helping to legitimize the artistic standing of entertainers such as Bessie Smith, W.C. Handy, Fats Waller, Gertrude Saunders, and Paul Robeson. Jackson used “The Page” to influence national

Ku, and Klux, and they traded in their horses

Now they’re drivin’ by in 4 X 4 trucks with tiki torches
Pack a pistol in your office set to use it when the brawl starts.

Reflecting on his lengthy career, "the famous Billboard Jackson," as he came to be known, suggested that his years "on the road, might have been concluded" much earlier had he made more money. Between his time at Billboard and Esso, Jackson established the U.S. Department of Commerce's Division of Negro Affairs under then-secretary of commerce and future U.S. President, Herbert Hoover. Jackson served admirably in this position for six years—even staying loyal to Hoover at a time when many African Americans were outraged by his "Southern" campaign strategy of reuniting Black leaders and replacing them with Whites. Still, his tenure in the commerce department was marred by efforts to conceal his identity and gestures of disrespect. This was apparent as early as his "disastrous first day," when Jackson reported in a letter to Associated Negro Press founder, Claude Barnett, that "everybody seemed somewhat chagrined at my presence." Jackson's inauspicious arrival included: learning that he had been relegated (or more accurately segregated) to an auxiliary office space in the old Railway Administration building, being given the title "Assistant Business Specialist" rather than the customary title of "Commercial Agent," and at least once being referred to as "not a Negro but a dark-skinned foreigner." A decade later, Jackson's Page—published annually between 1936 and 1950—contributed to Jackson's expendability.

A decade later, Billboard Jackson would play a key role in establishing the Negro Motorist Green Book—published annually between 1936 and 1950—which directed Black motorists to over two hundred U.S. establishments "where they might spend the night," often as early as their "disastrous first day." When Jackson reported "the Green Book's publication" during a "disastrous first day," he was somewhat chagrined at my presence." Jackson's inauspicious arrival included: learning that he had been relegated (or more accurately segregated) to an auxiliary office space in the old Railway Administration building, being given the title "Assistant Business Specialist" rather than the customary title of "Commercial Agent," and at least once being referred to as "not a Negro but a dark-skinned foreigner." A decade later, Jackson's Page—published annually between 1936 and 1950—directed Black motorists to over two hundred U.S. establishments "where they might spend the night," often as early as their "disastrous first day."
promoting the Commerce Department to Black retailers throughout the coun-
try, Jackson would be disrespected in a
telegram from President Hoover that
addressed him as “John J. Jackson.”12

Given this treatment, it may come as
little surprise that despite his impres-
sive career accomplishments—which
extend well beyond the scope this
piece—Jackson’s status as a pioneer of
racial integration has been relatively
unacknowledged in United States
history. His curious absence from
African American history seems more
perplexing.

My interest in Billboard Jackson started
about 10 years ago while researching the
history of Billboard Magazine for an
article on hip hop. In subsequent years,
I gave a handful of conference papers
and invited presentations, trying to
piece together the details of Jackson’s
intriguing career. So around 2015, when I
learned that the Pennsylvania Historical
and Museums Society had erected a his-
torical marker dedicated to Billboard
Jackson in his home town of Bellefonte,
my interest in traveling there was fur-
ther fueled.

An assortment of published scholar-
ship details Jackson’s three major career
trajectories. These each deal with one
particular career, only briefly mention-
ing others. For example, Anthony Hill’s
Pages from the Harlem Renaissance
exclusively focuses on Jackson’s work
at Billboard.13 Robert E. Weems and
Lewis A. Randolph’s “The Right Man:
James A. Jackson and the Origins of U.S.
Government Interest in Black Business”
details his Commerce Department
position.14 And various books includ-
ing Juliet E. K. Walker’s The History of
Black Business in America, Stephanie
Capparell’s The Real Pepsi Challenge, and
Jason Chambers’ Madison Avenue and the Color Line briefly mention him
as “the dean” of the first generation of
“black special-markets men.”15 My long-
term project involves putting these
different careers in conversation with
one another.

Billboard Jackson’s indispensable con-
nection to the Green Book has never to
my knowledge been acknowledged. Yet,
a few years ago when I recognized him
staring back at me from the PDF pages
of its 1949 edition, things immediately
fell into place. An important element
of Jackson’s Billboard Magazine work
involved steering traveling Black per-
formers towards welcoming businesses,
guest houses, and eateries. Thus a service
once aimed at facilitating the mobility
of Black entertainers by the 1930s got
extended to the cultural and auto-
mobility of Black travelers in general.

**

James Albert Jackson was born in
1878 and died in 1960. Accordingly, we
can think of his life as spanning the
Jim Crow era. The troubled times of the
Trump presidency have ushered in a
reinvigoration of visible White suprem-
acy—marked by the August 2017 events
in Charlottesville, the NAACP-issued
travel warning for people of color in
the state of Missouri, and an overall
post-Election rise in hate crimes—that,
for some of us under fifty, feels closer
to how we imagine Jim Crow than any-
thing we’ve experienced in our lifetimes.

12. Weems, R. E. & Randolph, L. A.
“The Right Man,” 266, 270.
the Harlem Renaissance: A Chronicle
of Performance. New York: Peter
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The History of Black Business in
America: Capitalism, Race,
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Macmillan Press; Capparell, S.
(2007). The Real Pepsi Challenge:
The Inspirational Story of
Breaking the Color Barrier in
American Business. New York:
Wall Street Journal Books;
Avenue and the Color Line: Africans
Americans in the Advertising
Industry. Philadelphia, PA:
University of Pennsylvania Press.
6
A colleague told me that some of her Black students were concerned about returning to Floyd, Virginia (93.29% White according to Wikipedia), for their leadership retreat after encountering rebel-flag-waving White supremacists on horseback there. When I told a woman I met at an awards ceremony that I would be going to Floyd for a wedding, she advised me to get out of town before sundown.

The eighty-plus years of Jackson’s life also mark a period when White America established thousands of “sundown towns”—defined by James W. Loewen as “organized jurisdiction[s] that for decades kept African American or other groups from living in [them] and [were] thus ‘all-white’ on purpose.”16 Loewen documents how, even into the twenty-first century, there are towns where Black Americans do not feel safe. Among several examples, he recounts a story of a thirty-year old Black woman stopping at a gas station to ask for directions in then-all-White Mount Sterling, Ohio (now 97.5% White according to Wikipedia), and being told “Girl, you don’t know what danger you’re in” by the station manager.17 Even then it was in response to noise complaints rather than transformed racial views. Loewen tempers his listing of contemporary sundown towns by noting that just because the census shows no Black families reside in a town “does not prove that African Americans cannot live there. Only continued incidents prove that.”18

While riding with a white colleague to a conference in Greenville, South Carolina, several times large pick-up trucks pulled up behind his liberally bumper-stickered minivan—with stickers reading “Obama-Biden,” “Clinton-Kaine,” and “Stop the Pipeline”—riding our asses, aggressively passing, and at least once honking. In the Southern United States, the political stakes of driving are ever-present, introducing a new dimension to typically interpersonal and situational expressions of road rage.

And it’s not my obligation educatin’ fools what that’s about...
Rather than taking Interstate-81 two hundred miles North to Harrisburg, then taking US-40 fifty miles Northwest and another fifteen miles on US-322, I chose the secondary route: the slow journey that predates the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways. I did not use GPS. Charting my course via the anti- Presidential Election results County Map, I chose the reddest route possible:

US-460 to VA-42 to VA-159 to VA-64 to VA-66 to US-29 to US-50 to US-22 to WV-42 to County Highway 5 to US-52 to WV-29 to WV-9 to US-52 to PA-655 to US-22 to PA-26 to PA-150

The following fieldnote excerpt was written at 6:30AM in the Blackburg McDonald’s on the morning I set out:

Route 42 takes me into the heart of Craig County. I have been told that Craig County has the highest KKK per-capita population in the state. I have been told that they have a statue of the founder of the KKK in the town hall. None of this is confirmed but it signals the Red America experience that I have decided to go after. For much of the trip, I will be straddling the Virginia-West Virginia state line. Based on my map calculation, once I leave Montgomery County [where Blacksburg is located], the trip is completely Red until I reach Centre County Pennsylvania and Bellefonte.

I don’t know what it’s like to grow up in a 100% White town. But I recall once—only once—spending a night in Craig County, just outside New Castle, and being told by a group of locals that they “like [my] kind of people.” When I asked if by “my kind of people” they meant Black people, one of them said, “No. Jamaicans.” At the time I wore my hair in dreadlocks.

That was on a Saturday night in a dark field. It was about a dozen of us and a quarter barrel of beer. I had traveled to Craig County to attend a small unofficial music festival hosted by a friend of a friend with strong hippy-like inclinations. The only other Black guy at the festival, a local musician who drummed for two of the afternoon bands, had left around sundown. While the neo-hippies danced to some local jam band at the other side of an enormous field, I had been enticed to the far end by the promise of beer. My local hosts—a few dressed in camo pants and baseball caps, one wearing a Washington Redskins jersey—were clearly out of place at the festival but comfortable enough in the fact that this was their home.

I remember one of the guys showing me a scar on his back as he turned, lifted up his shirt, and in the most casual way possible told me to ignore his rebel flag tattoo. I did. I also recall one of them pulling me aside and in a hushed whisper telling me that they wanted to and that they could make me feel so good.

When I shared this story (minus the indecent proposition) with students in my Introduction to African American Studies class they told me I was a fool. But oddly enough, I never felt uncomfortable or in danger. That was another time. I think it may have been 2006. I was different then. Things were different then.

Asa Jackson, Race Against the Sun, 56 cm x 76 cm, oil.

“Race Against the Sun portrays a black man driving through the Confederate South passing through a “sundown town” as a rush to exit town before the sunsets. The piece portrays the disease, anxiety, and fear that Black Americans experienced during the Jim Crow Era, prior to desegregation.”

And charge it to the company account, the racial mountain that I’m climbin’ each and every time I’m rhyming while I’m drivin’
A childhood friend once told me that he thought my family was the first Black family in the village of Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts. This is debatable. I know of a few other Black families living there in the 1970s when I was in elementary school. But I didn’t know them when I first started school.

In first grade, I was in the same class as this friend’s younger brother. The following year, little brother told me, somewhat proudly, that his mother had requested that we not be in the same class. Twenty years later I was in his wedding.

It was also in first grade when I first heard the word *nigger*. “Are you a nigger?” the kid in the urinal next to me asked. I said no. I didn’t know what the word meant but it felt like something I didn’t want to be.

That word—not the endearing version that Black people say to each other but the racist one that comes out of White lips—echoed in my head as I drove North from Blacksburg to Bellefonte. As I counted Confederate flags and tuned in to *John Boy and Billy’s The Big Show*—conservative morning radio with its crass ethnic humor like Rabbi Myron Bergstein’s movie reviews or the Indian Dog Psychiatrist.

What are the experiences of Black bodies moving through defiantly White spaces? How do the usual occupants of such spaces react? How does my particular Black subjectivity approach and respond to these situations and interactions (both real and imagined)? And what boundaries—imposed by others and/or ourselves—limit the kinds of journeys we are willing to make?

Some of my most telling experiences occurred prior to setting out. Genuine concerns for my personal safety came up the few times I discussed my project with friends and colleagues. When I shared an abstract for a paper based on this research that I planned on presenting at the 2018 International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, a friend responded: “This looks like a fascinating trip, and I applaud the risk you are taking both personally and intellectually. I really look forward to hearing about it when you present. Do be careful out there—as you aptly note, this is a troubled time indeed, and the movements of a non-white traveler in those defiantly white spaces will always involve a degree of danger.”

When I told my teaching assistant about my planned trip, she asked if I could have a "safety car" follow me to make sure I made it through okay. At times I wondered if it would be better if something happened or nothing happened.

In the end, it was probably closer to the latter—depending on how you define something. My auto-ethnographic journey brought a peculiar kind of autonomy. For much of it, I was alone in my unmarked rental car. The tangible interactions through which I could learn about myself, and about structures of race, class, gender, and political affiliation, notably all occurred with white women service workers and can be counted on one hand. My miscalculation may have been expecting the highways of rural Appalachia to somehow be...
active on a cold Wednesday in January. What was perhaps most notable about all my interactions on this journey were the surprising gestures of kindness shown by service workers, working their service jobs. I cannot know their story but they seem like people that if I knew I would care for.

Just after 11:00AM there was Terry, the chatty cashier at a Sunoco station in Monterey, Virginia, who cupped my hand in giving me my change. The words that passed between us did not go beyond the usual customer-cashier formalities. She mostly talked with her co-worker and the two regulars in the store at the time. But her small, almost imperceptible touch made me feel welcome as I took my change and left.

Around 3:45PM I pulled into the Potomac River Grill, just across the Potomac River in Hancock, Maryland, for lunch. My server, Amy, welcomed me to take a seat anywhere, sheepishly asked if Pepsi was “okay” when I ordered a Coke, gave me courteous and attentive service—not wanting to interrupt my writing but twice checking to see that everything was okay. She also wished me a good evening when I left.

Two hours earlier I had tried to stop for lunch at the Mountain Top Restaurant in Romney, West Virginia. The restaurant was connected to the Exxon Station at the Sunrise Summit Commercial Plaza. Walking towards the door from my car, I noticed two older women approaching from the opposite direction. Just then another woman popped her head out of the adjacent Exxon Station door and with an air of familiarity explained, “Sorry ladies. We’re not open yet. We’re behind.” On the door there was a sign that read “Closed – Reopening on January 2nd.” I walked past the restaurant and entered the Exxon Station door, thinking that since I had stopped I could at least get coffee. But once inside, I had a hard time locating the coffee station. There was a cooler with soft drinks, racks of chips and candy, but I saw no coffee. When I asked about it, the woman hesitated at first but then said, “Oh, I can get it for you.” She went back to the under-construction restaurant, returning a minute later with a Styrofoam cup of coffee: one dollar and fifty cents.

The only moment when I might have had the heart-racing experiences I had imagined, and maybe even hoped for, was back in New Castle at 8:00AM at the crossroads of Routes 42 and 311. The local Gopher Market gas station is clearly a morning coffee spot. The parking lot was full with mostly pickup trucks. A bigger guy with light hair and a baseball cap walked out towards his jeep, coffee cup in hand. A smaller guy, in what seemed like a 1990s sporty car—maybe a late-model Firebird—pulled in, got out, and greeted him. They both looked to be in their mid-twenties, on their way to work. I turned left and kept driving. My coffee from McDonalds was still warm and I didn’t need to use the bathroom yet.

CODA: As I was getting set to leave Blacksburg at 7:20AM, sitting in my car in the McDonald’s parking lot, it suddenly dawned on me that my biggest challenge might be finding service-station bathrooms on secondary highways—something that I just take for granted on the Interstate. Indeed, two hours later, and a little over an hour past New Castle, I would find myself racing down VA-159, just outside of Crow, Virginia, contemplating pulling over to the side of the road to urinate. The following is a transcript of an audio-journal recording I made at approximately 9:30AM:

They know I’m not from round here, and racists in the rear view...

Are closer than they appear, like 1919’s the year
Damn, I really need to piss. I didn’t think it would be my challenge on this trip. Yeah, I was thinking more about stepping and figuring out where to turn left and right and a little like the map. But I realize how much of a luxury highway systems are with bathrooms in every gas station and exit signs telling you exactly where to get to and how fast to go. I feel there has to be a gas station around here but I haven’t seen one in about thirty, forty miles and the last one I saw wasn’t really a place with a bathroom. It looked more like a general store. So, I figured I would just go on to the next town ten miles farther but there was nothing there, at least not on the main highway that I was on. So, maybe locals know, but I don’t know. So, I’m trying to find a bathroom almost at the point where I don’t find one, in this next interchange, I might just look for a place to pull off but how did it come to this? You know? And... this is just me, an adult, making my own decisions. If I was with kids saying, “I need to use the restroom...” Man... Those kids would... Yeah, I would’ve been using one probably back in New Castle. But that was early. That just felt too early, but we’ll see.

A few miles down the road I would thankfully come across a Marathon Oil station, with a polite sales clerk and rebel hats for sale along the back wall. I didn’t bother to ask. “I’m going to use your restroom,” I informed her after purchasing five dollars worth of gas. “Oh yeah, sure,” she replied. Upon leaving, I realized with some disappointment that my secondary highway travels had brought me up against Interstate 64 and that, far from a remote gas station, the Marathon Oil I had found was, in fact, just off the Interstate.

Acknowledgements:
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It’s another Red Summer in this southern state’s heat wave we’re under.

Asa Jackson, Safety Map, 56 cm x 76 cm, oil.
“Safety Map is a depiction of the Negro Motorist Greenbook published by Billboard Jackson providing a map for safe travels for Negroes during the time of segregated America and Jim Crow laws. The black dots represent safe places (hotels, safe houses, gas stations, restaurants) along the road that served as stopping points for traveling Negroes. The green lines connecting the black dots symbolize the map and pathway taken by travelers. The white represents white America, and all of the un触achable and unsafe places that Negroes were unable to go.”

It’s a global warming warning get your work done in the morning.
BlakeHite (aka Blonde Baby Shoes) is CEO of Candlewax Records, founded in 2013. In 2007 he released his first musical collaboration with Anthony Koweit Harrison (together calling themselves “The Acorns”) as a Candlewax Records full-length CD. BlakeHite currently produces several artists who have all released recordings on Candlewax Records.

Kevin Earley is an artist and mental health advocate based in Northern Virginia. He is a graduate of Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York where he studied fine art. He can be reached through social media at @birdboogie or via his website, www.getthatworm.com.

Anthony Koweit Harrison is the Edward S. Oggy Professor of Humanities and the Gloria D. Smith Professor of African Studies at Virginia Tech. He co-edits Race in the Marketplace: Crossing Critical Boundaries (Phipps-Maxwell 2015) and has recorded and released music as a member of the Beige Tine Collectives (San Francisco) and The Acorns (Washington DC).

Asa Jackson is a visual artist and curator from Hampton Roads, Virginia. Jackson studied sociology at Boston University. In 2019, he and colleagues founded the Contemporary Arts Network, an arts advisory and special projects unit that leads municipal and private projects. In 2018, Jackson was appointed to be a state commissioner with the Virginia Commission for the Arts and currently serves on the board of the Peninsula Fine Arts Center in Newport News, Virginia.

Corey J. Miles recently completed his Ph.D. in Sociology at Virginia Tech and will soon join the Department of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire as an Assistant Professor. He received a 2018-2019 Access Subvention Fund.

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Richard Bundschuh is a photographer and videographer from Washington, D.C. He enjoys creating portraits, landscapes, and lifestyle photography. The ultimate goal is to use his photography to impact artful youth and to capture life’s best moments. Follow his Instagram @grapicnycap for more common.

Out of all the questions this experience encountered, “Why hip-hop?” was the most pervasive. At a time when Black and brown people exist in a structure of surveillance alongside a resurgence of overt racism, why am I studying hip-hop? As a self-identified activist why wasn’t Trump’s America, I would have conceptualized this as part of the social processes that organize a small southern town and not representative of the United States as a whole. After all, I am a sociologist, and we believe that racism is located within institutions and has become largely covert and even polite. But I did attend those counter rallies and Donald Trump was the president in 2018, so those answers did not ease my anxiousness about the flags that continuously flashed before my eyes. I wondered, could it be that racism has been normalized and maintained within societal institutions and upheld by racialized ideologies and language to the degree that society has developed rhetorical scripts to justify overt racism as it did in the past? Maybe overt racism never left and contemporary sociologists are blinded by the eyes of presentism in such a way that even anti-racists can’t see what choices not to hide?

We’re trying to keep politics out of this. Just the facts.

Cause the midday sun is scorchin’

when the reigns come they’ll be pourin’

On my ride from Virginia to Raleigh, North Carolina, for the preliminary stages of my fieldwork for my dissertation research, I felt the excitement of being able to take on the role of a researcher. As I drove down the highway I thought about all the connections I would make, all the stories that I would hear, and how I would tell a nuanced narrative of hip-hop in rural north-east North Carolina. While driving and simultaneously preparing myself for the first major research project of my career, my GPS warned me of an accident ahead with step-and-go traffic and redirected me to drive through a town called Fancy Gap. As I cruised through this town in a span of 30 minutes, I passed more than 30 Confederate flags waving hopefully and effusively in the wind.

Maybe if I hadn’t attended both the Ku Klux Klan and Alt Right counter protest rallies in Charlotte, Virginia, a few months prior, I would have understood these flags to be symbols and relics of the past that unified Americans clung to in search of an identity. Maybe if this wasn’t Trump’s America, I would have conceptualized these flags as part of the social processes that organize a small southern town and not representative of the way in which we symbolically construct the United States as a whole. After all, I am a sociologist, and we believe that racism is located within institutions and has become largely covert and even polite. But I did attend those counter rallies and Donald Trump was the president in 2018, so those answers did not ease my anxiousness about the flags that continuously flashed before my eyes.

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The Metaphysical Difficulty of Traveling While Black to the Field

Corey J. Miles (Virginia Tech)