

African American (Im)Mobilities in the Antebellum United States and Today

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Abstract:

Two publications shed light on past and present forms of black (im)mobilities in the United States: In *Colored Travelers* (2016) Pryor explores the journeys of free African Americans in the antebellum North before slavery was officially abolished. Bringing cultural, literary, and mobility studies together, Pryor analyzes the ways black travel was circumscribed through laws, social practices, and the creation of cultural imageries that criminalized black mobility. Examining an abundance of historical sources, Pryor's meticulously researched book reveals the complex intertwinement of race, travel, and equality — a topic that continues to be of central importance, as Miles's *The Post-Racial Negro Green Book* (2017) underscores. With a format modeled after a 20th-century travel guide for black travelers, Miles's book documents incidents of racial violence and discrimination against African Americans in the years between 2013 to 2016 throughout the U.S. She thus adds to Pryor's historical perspective by pointing to the continued criminalization of black mobility and she highlights the relevance and urgency of discussing and taking action against these injustices.

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Pryor, Elizabeth Stordeur: *Colored Travelers: Mobility and the Fight for Citizenship before the Civil War*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2016. 218 pages, 29,99 EUR. ISBN: 9781469628578.

Miles, Jan: *The Post-Racial Negro Green Book*. New Orleans: Brown Bird Books, 2017. 197 pages, 10,90 EUR. ISBN: 9780692950920.

Abstract:

Two publications shed light on past and present forms of black (im)mobilities in the United States: In *Colored Travelers* (2016) Pryor explores the journeys of free African Americans in the antebellum North before slavery was officially abolished. Bringing cultural, literary, and mobility studies together, Pryor analyzes the ways black travel was circumscribed through laws, social practices, and the creation of cultural imageries that criminalized black mobility. Examining an abundance of historical sources, Pryor's meticulously researched book reveals the complex intertwinement of race, travel, and equality — a topic that continues to be of central importance, as Miles's *The Post-Racial Negro Green Book* (2017) underscores. With a format modeled after a 20th-century travel guide for black travelers, Miles's book documents incidents of racial violence and discrimination against African Americans in the years between 2013 to 2016 throughout the U.S. She thus adds to Pryor's historical perspective by pointing to the continued criminalization of black mobility and she highlights the relevance and urgency of discussing and taking action against these injustices.

There exists a considerable body of literature on free African Americans in the United States before the Civil War that examines, e.g., the lives of free black women and men in the South (Ira Berlin: *Slaves Without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South*. New York 1974) or the struggle for racial equality and citizenship of black people in the northern states (Patrick Rael: *African-American Activism Before the Civil War: The Freedom Struggle in the Antebellum North*. New York 2008; Andrew K. Diemer: *The Politics of Black Citizenship: Free African Americans in the Mid-Atlantic Borderland, 1817-1863*.

Athens 2016). With *Colored Travelers: Mobility and the Fight for Citizenship before the Civil War* Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor makes a substantial contribution to this scholarship by analyzing the significance of travel and the efforts of free people of color from the North to seize and secure their freedom. Pryor's thought-provoking analyses of the multifaceted travel experiences of free African Americans brings cultural, literary, and mobility studies together. The black travelers of her study are abolitionists and activists who had the financial means to journey within or outside the nation to drive forward the abolitionist movement, establish networks and support racial justice organizations, conduct business or visit family and friends. Pryor shows that, although they were free from slavery, their mobility was circumscribed by mounting white opposition to black travels and demonstrates that "[t]hrough a combination of social customs, racial codes, and popular culture, U.S. whites worked vigorously to construct a system that surveilled, curtailed, and discouraged black mobility" (p. 1). Recognizing independent travel and the access to public spaces as a key element of citizenship and racial equality, free African Americans not only continued to travel despite the many obstacles but also pushed back against the curtailment of their mobility.

Colored Travelers is divided into five chapters framed by an introduction and epilogue and is structured according to the steps of a journey: The book begins with an analysis of the racially hostile atmosphere 'at home' in the U.S. (ch. 1) and follows black travelers aboard public conveyances to examine the segregation policies and the travelers' strategies of fighting discrimination (ch. 2). Railroad companies in the North institutionalized segregation by designating a separate car – the so-called Jim Crow car – for black travelers and all "those who destabilized the parameters of white supremacy" (p. 84). These segregated traveling policies were verbally and physically enforced by the vehicles' conductors as well as by fellow white travelers who saw it as their duty to take the law into their own hands. The free people of color that Pryor's book focuses on, among them Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Robert Purvis, and David Ruggles, responded to the discriminatory practices and made independent travel central in the fight for freedom and equal rights. They identified public conveyances as spaces of resistance and vehemently fought against their imposed immobility, e.g., by buying first-class tickets and refusing to give up their seats; smuggling themselves into first-class compartments and traveling in disguise; suing the railroad companies and making their experiences public; campaigning against the discriminatory practices at the state and local levels. These early activist travelers, Pryor emphasizes, "planted the seeds of a long-lasting protest tradition" (p. 45) that identified freedom of mobility as a key aspect of U.S. citizenship more than a century before Rosa Parks famously refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama.

For African Americans, spatial constraints were not only put up through laws and regulations but, as Pryor demonstrates, black mobility was also circumscribed through cultural productions and a

cultural imagery of unlawful black movement (ch. 3). While the burgeoning population of free African Americans in the North desired equal access to public transportation, white people imagined freedom of mobility as a fundamentally white U.S. American right; a notion underscored by the 1787 U.S. Constitution and the Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850 (p. 47, 85). Pryor's illuminating analysis of print media unveils how the stereotypical image of the runaway slave that equalized black movement with fugitive behavior was created. Whites "criminalized black travel by making it appear illegal, suspicious, unconscionable, inappropriate" and "deemed it aggressive and dangerous for free people of color to enter public vehicles as equals" (p. 45).

Journeying throughout the U.S. as an African American often posed the danger of physical and psychological harm and international travel was similarly challenging. Pryor details the difficulties in applying for U.S. official passports, pointing again to the linkages between travel and citizenship (ch. 4). The federal government regularly withheld passports for African Americans because international black travel posed a particular threat for the U.S. government as abolitionists' activism and the fight against white supremacy and for equal rights could not be controlled and monitored outside the national boundaries. When black Americans applied successfully for a passport and were then able to board steamships to cross the Atlantic for Europe, they often encountered a transient space characterized by U.S. American racism as well as what they perceived as European egalitarianism (p. 8). Pryor's analysis of abolitionists' transatlantic journeys also calls attention to the influence of the oftentimes transformative travel experiences to Europe that shaped black visions of freedom of mobility (ch. 5, epilogue). Travelers tellingly noted that "[f]reedom [...] was not only a legal status but also a sensory and emotional state" (p. 149).

Pryor's insightful analyses of the abundant literary and cultural examples of black travel experiences excel in highlighting the significance of independent travel for free African Americans before the Civil War and before slavery was legally abolished with the passing of the 13th amendment. Particularly impressive is the wealth of sources she consults that range from periodicals and newspapers, advertisements, interviews, slave narratives, songs, speeches, sketches, and caricatures; a task, she reveals, that was made possible by her access to digitalized archives. Her compelling writing takes readers on a journey into the past and onto the railroads, stagecoaches, and steamships to bear witness to black travelers' courageous fights against discrimination and for equal rights. The book is certainly a valuable asset for all readers interested in American history, African Americans' struggle for freedom, and the connection between race, mobility, and U.S. citizenship.

That complex intertwinement of race and travel that is presented in *Colored Travelers* is strikingly timely. Countless incidents of racial profiling practices carried out by the police reveal a continuous

criminalization of black mobility in the U.S. today. A second recent publication supplements Pryor's historical perspective on black mobile subjects in the antebellum era: In *The Post-Racial Negro Green Book* author Jan Miles accumulates data from the years between 2013 and 2016 that records race-based incidents including police brutality and racial profiling, racial discrimination, assaults and harassments, and other forms of racial violence directed against African Americans. Included are also the now infamous cases of Tamir Rice and Michael Brown. The incidents are organized state by state; and for each state, a set of data is provided that includes, among other things, the estimated percentage of black citizens, poverty and unemployment rate and imprisonment ratio for both the black and white population, active hate groups (e.g. Ku Klux Klan, Neo-Confederates and White Nationalists), the 2016 election results, and the percentage of black victims of law enforcement killings. The short entries that follow read like this: "A noose was found hanging at the Berkeley High School campus. (October 2014)" (p. 36); or, "**ZIKARIOUS FLINT** (20) was reported for having a gun. He was chased by police and shot twice in the back. Open carrying of a gun in Georgia is expressly permitted by law. (March 2014)" (p. 58). The names written in bold print and all capital letters signify the respective person had died in the incident described. Miles's aim is to provide evidence-based information that documents occurrences of racism and discrimination and the book should also serve as a reference or a tool that can be drawn on in conversations about the prevalence of racism in U.S. today as well as a starting point for further research (p. 7). As she emphasizes, "[t]his is a history book. It is an archive. A time capsule. It is a means of preserving the seemingly countless incidents that have whizzed through your Facebook and Twitter feeds" (p. 7).

The design of *The Post-Racial Negro Green Book* replicates two significant publications, as Miles points out in the beginning of the book: Its style of listing short, descriptive entries of racialized incidents is reminiscent of Ralph Ginzburg's *100 Years of Lynching* (1962), a compilation of newspaper articles that document lynchings of black Americans from 1880 to the 1960s that are presented without further commentary. The title and cover page of Miles's book are modeled after *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, a travel guide published annually from 1936 to 1967 by Victor Green. The purpose of his guide was to facilitate travel for African Americans throughout the United States (and later also abroad) by listing hotels, service stations, and restaurants that welcomed and served black customers. It also gave advice on how to circumvent violence, discrimination, and humiliation on the road. Miles uses a quote from the 1949 edition of the *Green Book* in which Green voices his belief that his travel guide would become obsolete in the near future when black Americans would be able to enjoy the same privileges as white travelers. In *The Post-Racial Negro Green Book* Green's optimistic outlook for future black travelers is juxtaposed by a second epigraph, a travel advisory issued by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 2017 that advises black travelers to use caution when journeying to Missouri due to the high number of race-based incidents that had been documented

in the state. Travel in the U.S., Miles shows from the very beginning, is a racialized concept, as skin color continues to determine the level of individual mobility, safety, and freedom. By documenting racialized violence against black Americans in *The Post-Racial Negro Green Book*, Miles inverts the original *Green Book* travel guide. Her 2017 edition highlights that despite the temporal gap to the era of segregation and the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement, black Americans do not enjoy the same freedom of mobility as white Americans. The use of “post-racial” in the title together with the original *Green Book* format is therefore a way to discard claims of a post-racial moment that had been voiced particularly during the Obama administration, the time in which the data of the book was recorded.

Colored Travelers and *The Post-Racial Negro Green Book* provide two completely different approaches that interrogate the complex intertwinement of race and (im)mobility. Together they contribute to our understanding of how black mobility was criminalized and circumscribed in the 18th century and the continuation of this criminalization of black mobile bodies in the 21st-century U.S. Both books are highly recommended for everybody interested in African American history, the denigration of black mobile bodies, and race relations in present-day America.

German Abstract:

Afroamerikanische (Im)Mobilitäten in den USA vor dem Bürgerkrieg und heute

Zwei Publikationen beschäftigen sich mit der Bedeutung schwarzer (Im)Mobilitäten in den USA: Pryors *Colored Travelers* (2016) widmet sich den Reisen freier Afroamerikaner aus dem Norden vor dem Bürgerkrieg und der offiziellen Abschaffung der Sklaverei. Pryor vereint kultur- und literaturwissenschaftliche Ansätze und analysiert, wie die Mobilität freier Afroamerikaner durch eine Vielzahl an Gesetzen, sozialen Praktiken sowie kulturellen Vorstellungen von schwarzer Mobilität als kriminell eingeschränkt wurde. Mit ihrem hervorragend recherchierten Werk zeigt sie das komplexe Zusammenspiel von Race, Mobilität und Gleichberechtigung auf, dessen Zentralität für das heutige Amerika nicht an Bedeutung verloren hat, wie *The Post-Racial Negro Green Book* (2017) von Jan Miles zeigt. Angelehnt an das Format eines Reiseführers für Afroamerikaner aus der Zeit der Segregation, dokumentiert Miles Vorfälle von Gewalt und Diskriminierung gegen Schwarze zwischen 2013 und 2016. Sie verdeutlicht die andauernde Kriminalisierung schwarzer Mobilität und ruft dazu auf, gegen Diskriminierung und Rassismus vorzugehen.

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