

The Green Book: “Safe Spaces” from Place to Place

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Introduction

Geographers have much to contribute to our understanding of how space is partitioned or governed by racial, ethnic, or other demographic characteristics, both historically and in the present. Herein we center our work on African American mobility (travel) in the middle twentieth century, demonstrating how spatial representations can enliven students' appreciation of past events. Specifically, we focus on African American auto culture and Jim Crow, a set of laws that enforced racial segregation in the American South. This history is fictionalized in a children's book, *Ruth and the Green Book* (Figure 1), that is at the heart of the instructional strategy we present.

Post-World War I, African Americans experienced greater opportunities for spatial and social equality. Automobile ownership, and the prospect of vacation travel, became one sign of this progress. But the automobile was freeing in other ways. Not only could one visit relatives and friends in previously distant places, but “the automobile offered African Americans escape from the Jim Crow segregation they encountered [on] trains and street cars” (Franz 2004, 134). As Seiler (2006, 1094) notes: “Automobility's promise was one of escape from Jim Crow: upward through socioeconomic strata and outward across geographical space.”

Twain mused in *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) that “travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness ...” Unfortunately for the African American traveler, the ‘Open Road’ of early twentieth century America, particularly in the

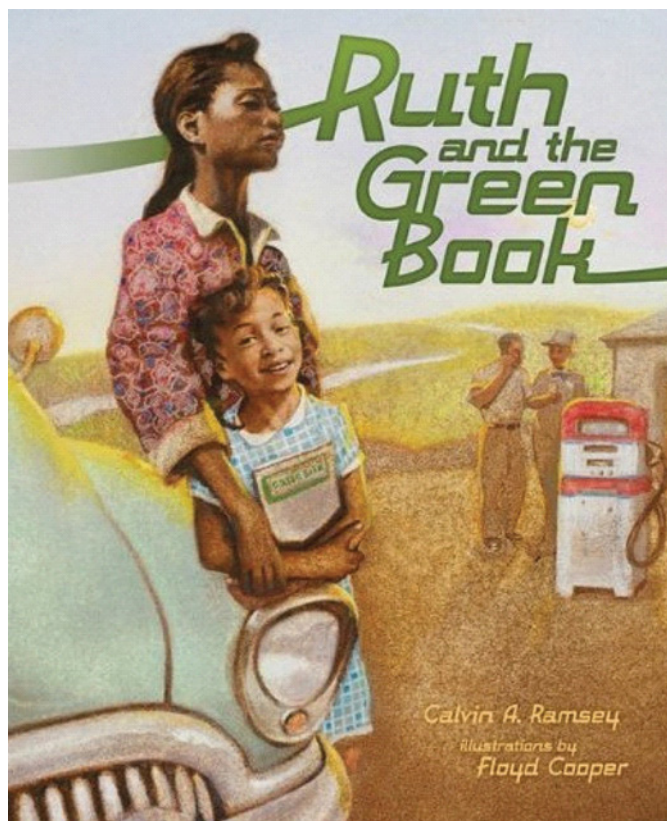


Figure 1. Cover of *Ruth and The Green Book*. Reprinted with the permission of Carolrhoda Picture Books, a division of Lerner Publishing Group, Inc. (Color figure available online.)

Lesson Plan

South, was still uneven racial terrain. White-owned hotels, restaurants, and gas stations could refuse black patronage. For white travelers, the leisure landscape was boundless. Contrarily, African Americans needed to pose questions to themselves such as: Where can I eat? Will fuel be available? Who will service my vehicle if inoperable? Where can I lay my head tonight? How will the answers to these questions change the path of my trip and at what cost?

Though not the first to consider the needs of African American travelers, Victor Green's efforts are perhaps the best known. It was his labor that assisted countless *Negro Motorists* by highlighting "safe spaces" within the leisure landscape.

Victor's Green Book

After facing numerous instances of humiliation and violence in places where discrimination was still prevalent throughout the United States, Victor H. Green, a Harlem postal employee and entrepreneur, envisioned a guidebook for African Americans to travel safely and comfortably throughout the country. Published from 1936 until the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, *The Negro Motorist Green Book: An International Travel Guide*, commonly abbreviated as *The Green Book*, functioned as a travel guide for African Americans (Figure 2). The guide helped travelers identify welcoming establishments where they could find acceptable accommodations.

The most successful and longest lasting travel guide for African Americans, *The Green Book* provided short articles, advertisements, and lists of hotels, restaurants, taverns, service stations, tourist homes, barber shops, beauty parlors, and nightclubs considered as "safe spaces" for African American travelers. Green obtained his information from readers and travel agents, and eventually began paying a dollar to writers of accepted accounts of successful motoring experiences.

As a supplement to word-of-mouth recommendations, Green wanted his guide to provide a wide variety of services to a large audience. In order to appeal to people with a diversity of backgrounds and income levels, he "advertised his guide as appealing 'to everyone,' and in pursuit of a large heterogeneous readership listed a variety of types of accommodations—from hotels and motels to guesthouses and YMCAs—at a range of prices" (Sorin 2009, 189). Green also reached out to white-owned businesses reasoning that it would be a wise economic choice for them to take advantage of the growing affluence and mobility of African Americans. The United States Travel Bureau and the Standard Oil Company contributed to the guidebook's success by ensuring broad distribution of the guide. Originally published as a sixteen-page pamphlet describing only New York locations, *The Green Book* later expanded to a paperback book of 128 pages. Nearly all U.S. states eventually were represented, along with Bermuda, Mexico, and Canada. A new, updated addition was published each year.

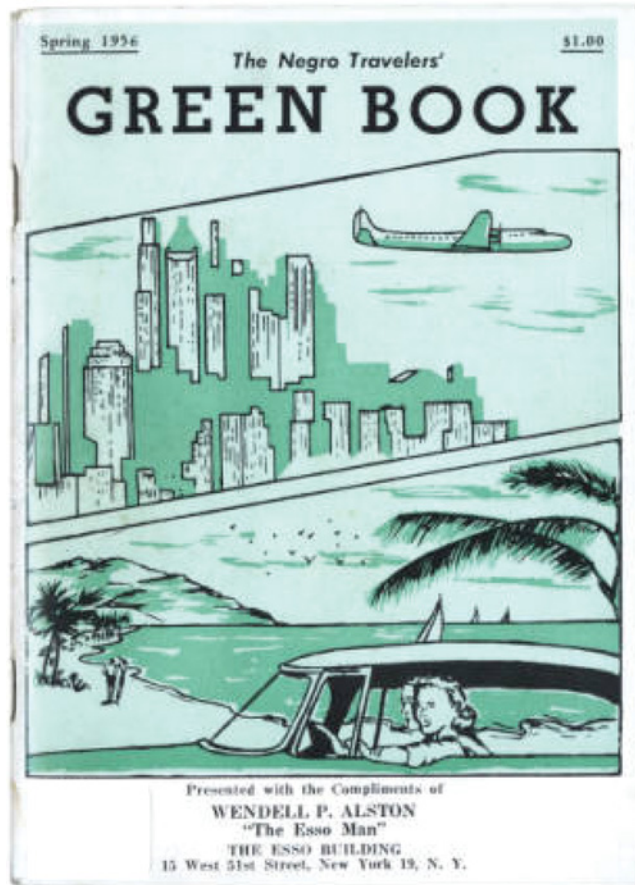


Figure 2. Cover of *The Negro Traveler's Green Book* (1956). (Color figure available online.)

Ruth and the Green Book Lesson Plan

The book, *Ruth and the Green Book*, follows an elementary-aged African American girl as her family drives from Chicago to Alabama to visit her grandmother during the 1950s. The main character is Ruth, and she is excited about her trip; her backseat companion is Brown Bear, her stuffed animal friend. As the trip progresses further south, Ruth encounters Jim Crow. She learns that Jim is not a person, but rather a set of laws forbidding blacks and whites from mixing. Her family is turned away from restrooms and hotels along their way. A gas station attendant introduces her family to *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, a guide that lists places where black people would be welcome. Ruth then takes an active part in her trip, using the *Green Book* to find "safe spaces" for her family until they reach her grandmother's home.

The lesson plan has students use *Ruth and the Green Book* to learn about "safe spaces" available to African Americans as they traveled in the United States. Students answer reading questions to uncover clues about Ruth's journey with her family. This method—mapping a story—has been used for a variety of genres, from the children's classic *Harold and the*

Purple Crayon (1955) to *The Hunger Games* (Painter 2012) to *The Grapes of Wrath* (Burg 2012).

The purpose of this lesson is to increase student learning of history and English/language arts by using geography as a medium. Geography enables an understanding of the relationships between people, places, and environments over time. *Ruth and the Green Book* references the *Negro Travelers' Green Book* as a tool for African Americans to travel to and through safe places. By translating the text onto a map, students engage in spatial thinking and visualize how travel was harder, more expensive, and less direct for African Americans during the era of segregation. These travelers were challenged to find safe and welcoming places to dine, board, and visit without facing humiliation and discrimination, which oftentimes led them far from their final destination. As the family drives through unfamiliar territory the inescapability of race for so many African Americans becomes apparent (Seiler 2006). By linking a geography-based activity to a reading assignment, students gain a greater appreciation for this unfortunate period in American history.

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Ruth and the Green Book

Lesson Plan

Lesson Overview

This lesson introduces students to the difficulties faced by African Americans during the middle twentieth century. Using the book *Ruth and the Green Book* by Calvin Alexander Ramsey, students learn about “safe spaces” available to African Americans as they traveled in the United States. Student learning is enhanced by translating textual clues in the story onto a road map of the United States. This lesson is designed as a geography, history, and reading combination for grade 5 and is adaptable for middle level instruction.

Time Required

Two class periods.

Preparation

Materials/Resources

- *Ruth and the Green Book* by C. A. Ramsey (hardback, 32 pages. Published by Carolrhoda Books, 2010; ISBN13: 978-0761352556)
- Dry erase markers (different colors)
- U.S. road map
- Transparency film sheets (to write on)
- Student Worksheet #1
- *Green Book* (1949) excerpt (Figure 4)

Standards

National Geography Standards

Element 1: The World in Spatial Terms

1. How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective.

Element 4: Human Systems

13. How the forces of cooperation and conflict among

people influence the division and control of Earth’s surface.

Element 6: The Uses of Geography

17. How to apply geography to interpret the past.

South Carolina Social Studies Academic Standards

Indicator 5-3.2: Explain the practice of discrimination as well as the passage of discriminatory laws in the United States and their impact on the rights of African Americans, including the Jim Crow laws and the ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

Standards for English/Language Arts

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

South Carolina Academic Standards for English Language Arts

Indicator 5-2.6: Use graphic features (including illustrations, graphs, charts, maps, diagrams, and graphic organizers) as sources of information.

Objectives

- The student will identify difficulties faced by African Americans related to economic and social discrimination during the middle twentieth century.
- The student will construct a map from textual clues and assess whether the best travel route was selected.

Opening Instruction

1. The teacher begins by discussing how people of different races have been mistreated by others. At various times in U.S. history African Americans were denied opportunities available to whites. These exclusions extended to education and access to services such as restaurants and hotels. The teacher may also discuss how the lack of opportunities in the American South contributed to the Great Migration, the movement of thousands of African Americans from the South to northern cities. The book used in this lesson mentions that the father of this Chicago-based family grew up in Alabama; he himself may have been part of the Great Migration.

Developing Instruction

2. The teacher reads aloud the picture book *Ruth and the Green Book*; alternatively, the students may participate by each reading a page aloud. While reading, the teacher should take time to show the illustrations to the students and allow them to comment on what they see. For example, the students may be asked about the characters' facial expressions. When are they happy? Do they ever appear sad? Scared?
3. During the reading, the teacher should pause and ask the students about the story setting. Students will revisit the answers to these questions when they begin their activity. Questions to ask include:
 - *When* does the story take place?
 - *Where* does the story take place?
 - *What* path (travel route) would the family take on their trip?
 - *Where* could the family safely stop on their trip?
 - *Where* does the family go in Alabama?

4. Once the story has been read, have the students complete the book review questions (Student Worksheet #1). This information will be useful for the activity during the second class period. Possible answers are given in Student Worksheet #1. The teacher may choose to review each answer with the class as a whole. This would conclude instruction for the first class period.
5. During the beginning of the second class period, review the answers from Student Worksheet #1 as a lesson refresher.
6. The teacher explains that the students will map the journey taken in the book. Using a road map of the United States, the students use the clues described earlier to draw the route. Remind students that Interstate highways did not exist and that back roads and smaller U.S. or state highways would need to be used. Students will use the answers from Student Worksheet #1 to complete their map.
7. Using the map, the teacher (or student) locates the beginning of the journey—Chicago. Students should place a transparency sheet over the map to draw their route. This will save the map for future use. The transparency sheet may need masking tape to hold it in place. Consider having the students draw each day in a different color with the dry erase markers. From the story students can identify five travel days:
 - Day One: Chicago to? The trip begins in the morning as they stop for lunch. They stop for gas and stop later at a hotel. The first night is spent driving and sleeping in the car. They are in southern Illinois, southern Indiana, or part of Kentucky.
 - Day Two: Kentucky to Tennessee. They stop for roadside picnics and cross into Tennessee to stay the night with Eddy.
 - Day Three: Tennessee to Georgia. They stop at an Esso station and stay the night at a tourist home with Mrs. Melody. The tourist home may be in Georgia as they are near that state's border. *The Green Book* lists a Melody Tourist Inn, but it is in Brunswick. This is far from their Alabama destination, so this is an unlikely stop (we do not know if "Melody" is her first or last name, either).
 - Day Four: Georgia to Alabama. The car breaks down and they stay one night at the Palm Leaf Inn in Birmingham (an illustration on page 24; also Figure 3). Figure 4 is page 8 from the 1949 *Green Book*. Students can see that the Palm Leaf Inn is located in Birmingham.
 - Day Five: Birmingham, Alabama, to Grandma's house. Based on the text description, Grandma's house should be within a few hours of Birmingham at most. Students should realize that central Alabama is the likely location of Grandma's house. Following the logic that Ruth's father might be a part of the Great Migration, it is reasonable to assume that Grandma's house might be in a rural area as many African Americans left those areas for northern cities.

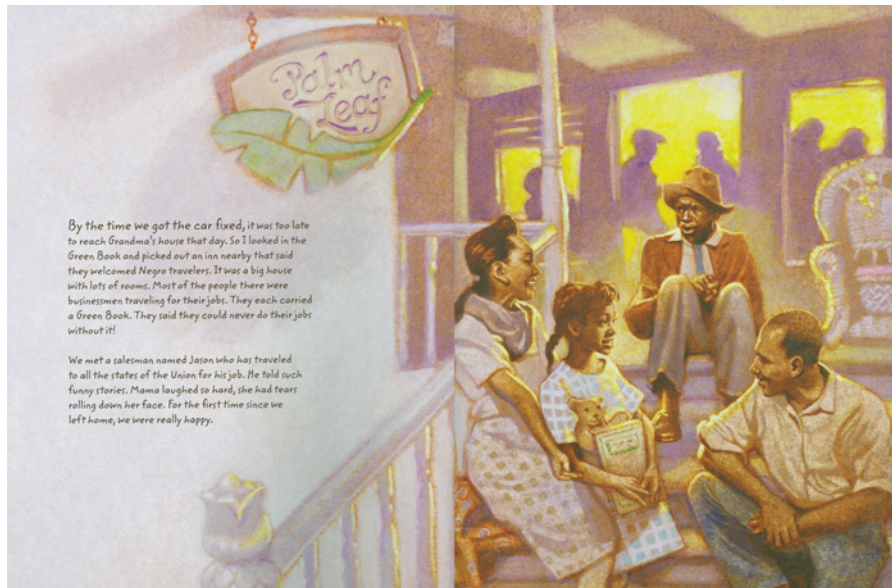


Figure 3. The Palm Leaf Hotel. A clue indicating that Ruth's family stopped in Birmingham, Alabama. Reprinted with the permission of Carolrhoda Picture Books, a division of Lerner Publishing Group, Inc. (Color figure available online.)

Concluding Instruction

- Once the map is complete (Figure 5), ask the students if they think this is the best route (shortest). How would they travel today? Students may draw a more direct Interstate highway route to compare with the “book” route. How long would their trip take today? The teacher should make sure that the students realize that to find “safe spaces,” African American travelers needed to plan their routes differently than other travelers, often making their trips longer and more expensive.

Assessment

- Students should complete Student Worksheet #1, providing correct answers for the five questions.
- For the mapping assignment, students should complete a map showing a journey that begins in Chicago and ends in central Alabama. As there are multiple routes possible, students should be able to explain their route choice.
- Informal assessment of student participation in discussion (identifying difficulties faced by African Americans related to economic and social discrimination during the middle twentieth century) is also appropriate.

Extension

As a lesson extension, teachers with a Smart Board and Internet access, or with access to a computer lab, may have

students investigate the 1956 *Green Book*. A custom Google Map with that year's listings is available through the Digital Collections at the University of South Carolina (2011). The teacher may pose a trip between two city points—for example, Charleston, South Carolina, and Raleigh, North Carolina—and then ask students how the distribution of “safe spaces” of the map would impact their route selection as an African American traveler. A PDF version of the 1956 book also is available there.

Student Worksheet #1

- When does the story take place? What clues can you use?
- Where does the story take place? What clues can you use?
- What path (travel route) would the family take on their trip? What clues can you use?
- Where could the family safely stop on their trip? What clues can you use?
- Where does the family go in Alabama? What clues can you use?

Student Worksheet #1 (Possible Answers)

- When does the story take place?
(*hint*: what is the year of the new Buick automobile? 1952). Based upon the lack of snow in the pictures, the

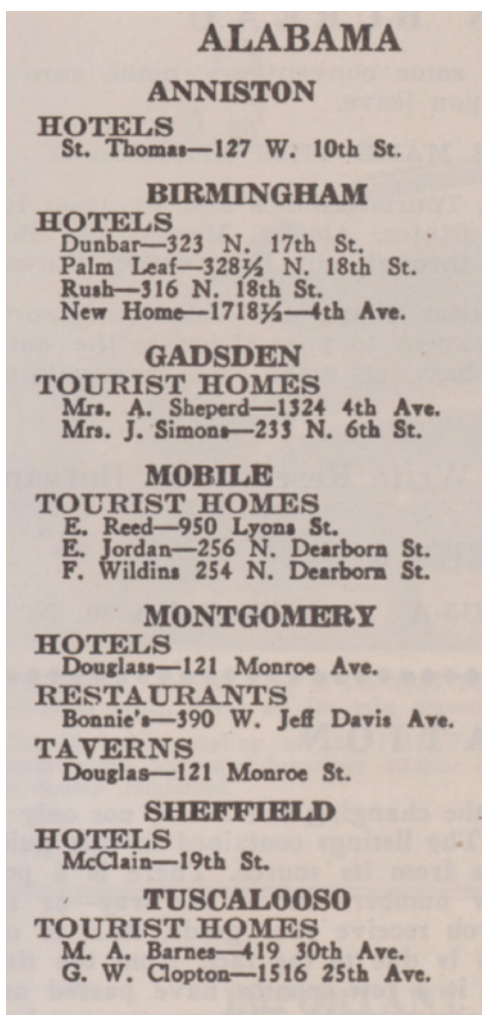


Figure 4. Alabama hotels clipped from page 8, *The Negro Motorist Green Book* (1949). (Color figure available online.)

description of green grass and trees, and the clothing worn by the family, it is probably spring or summer. Ruth is also on vacation, and presumably out of school (summertime).

2. *Where* does the story take place?
The trip begins in Chicago and ends in central Alabama.
3. *What* path (travel route) would the family take on their trip?
(*hint*: the Interstate highway system was not authorized until 1956; back roads and U.S. highways would be choices).
4. *Where* could the family safely stop on their trip?
(*hint*: *The Green Book* provided information about restaurants and hotels that would serve African Americans; the Esso Corporation was willing to offer gas station franchises to African Americans making them “safe spaces,” too).
5. *Where* does the family go in Alabama?
(*hint*: the inn is named the “Palm Leaf” in the illustration (Figure 3), a hotel in Birmingham according to *The Green Book* (Figure 4); no specific location is mentioned for Grandma’s house).

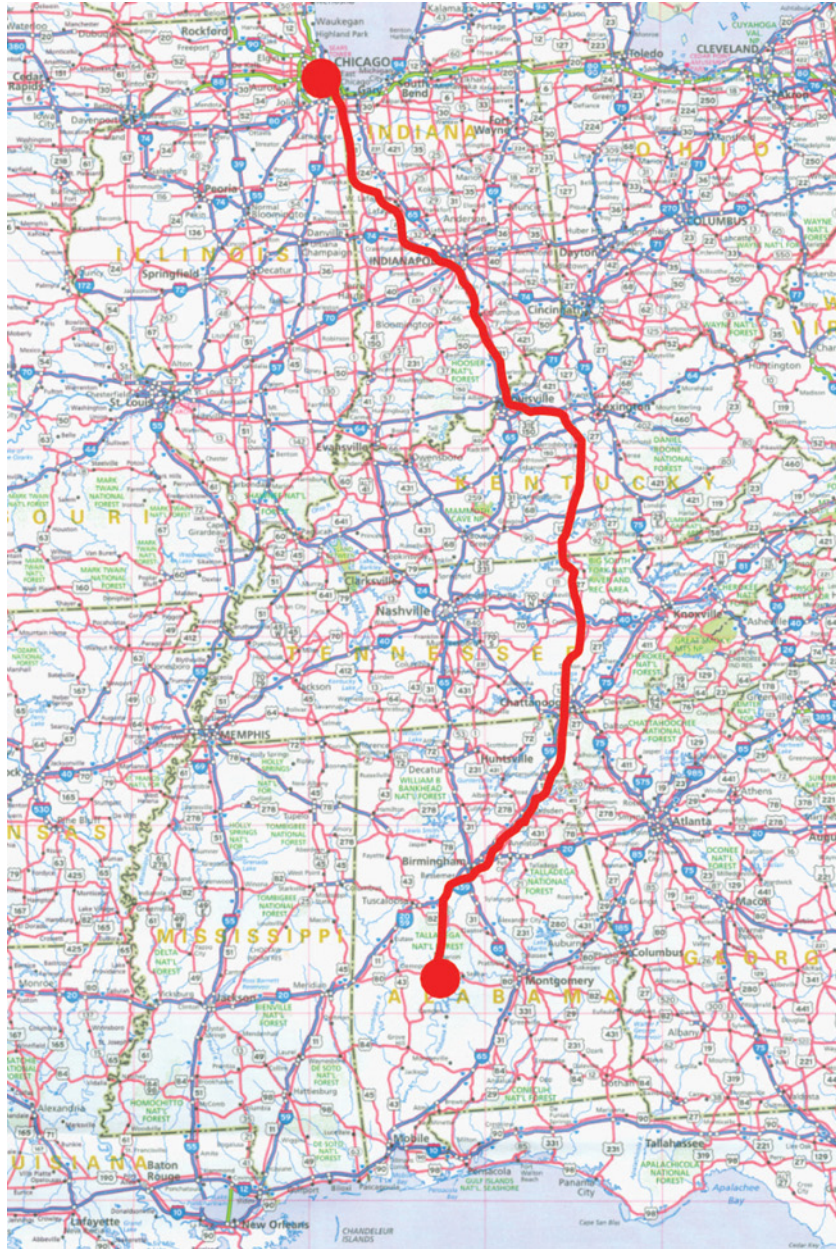


Figure 5. One possible map of Ruth's journey, clearly not the most direct route. (Color figure available online.)