

Black Mobility and Safety in the U.S. Pt. 1

MAS.S76 - Special Subject in Media Technology

MIT Media Lab

Instructor: [Ekene Ijeoma](#)

Units: 0-9-0

Prerequisites: None. Enrollment by permission of instructor only. **To request permission, fill out [this form](#).**

Class Materials: There is no required textbook for this class. All readings will be available online through the links in this syllabus.

DESCRIPTION

"What if Blacks have the right to sit anywhere they want on the bus, but no bus runs past their home?" — [The Dream Revisited](#) ([Asana Link](#))

"Jim Crow racism [is] typically associated with bigoted individuals, institutions, and backward American states, if not a long-gone past, and colour-blind racism differently maintain the same racial hierarchy." — [Black Lives. White Backgrounds](#) ([Asana Link](#))

"Simply reversing the flow of injustice is not justice. That is vengeance, that is not our mission." - [Baratunde Thurston](#) for TED ([Asana Link](#))

The Negro Motorist Green Book was created by Victor Hugo Green. He started publishing it in 1936 when Jim Crow had legalized segregation and racialized spaces were highly visible. It listed "safe" places for Black travelers or as John Williams describes "[places] Negroes can stay without being embarrassed, insulted, or worse... [Black] people have a way of disappearing on the road." In 1966 when The Civil Rights act abolished segregation, Green thought the U.S. was moving towards a place of "equal opportunities and privileges for Blacks" and stopped publishing his book. However, five decades later, Black Americans are still fighting for racial equality and disappearing through the "New Jim Crows" of mass incarceration (e.g. Kalief Browder) and police brutality (e.g. Sandra Bland). So, the U.S. still isn't where Green thought it'd be when he stopped publishing his book.

In 1900, W. E. B. Du Bois mapped the state of Black life through a series of hand-drawn charts and maps. Now, at Poetic Justice, we're mapping the state of Black mobility and safety today through a series of big data and oral history powered publications and multimedia installations, titled The Green Book Project. It will reimagine the Negro Motorist Green Book for "traveling while Black" in this era of "New Jim Crows".

COURSE STRUCTURE/OBJECTIVES

In this discussion-based seminar and workshop, we'll be exploring the various modes of being Black (physically, mentally, socio-economically, politically, etc), doing anything while Black (e.g. 'driving while Black') and [systemic racism](#) through a series of words, images and sounds: readings (articles, books), screenings (films), listenings (songs, poetry readings), viewings (artworks, exhibitions, locally in-person and/or online), guest lectures, and discussions.

The seminar will be split into two semesters, with the following schedule:

Part 1 (Fall Semester)

1. Week 1 (Sept. 5): Introduction
2. Week 2 (Sept. 12): Racial Progress Part 1
3. Week 3–4 (Sept. 19, Sept. 26) Birthing while Black
4. Week 5–6 (Oct. 3, Oct. 10) Breathing while Black
5. Week 7–8 (Oct. 17, Oct. 24) Sleeping while Black
6. Week 9–10 (Oct. 31, Nov. 7) Eating while Black
7. Week 11–12 (Nov. 14, Nov. 21) Walking while Black
8. Week 13 (Dec. 5) Fall Semester Wrap-up
Final Project Due Dec. 19

Part 2 (Spring Semester)

Part 1 isn't required for Part 2 however Part 1 students will have more priority for Part 2 registration.

EXPECTATIONS AND GRADING

Students are expected to actively participate in this course. This includes completing all the readings, preparing questions and comments for each class, and debating issues with respect and openness. Students are expected to complete the following assignments:

- Weekly In-Class Conversations (25%) — Students are expected to participate actively in class discussion each week with contributions that demonstrate knowledge of assignment material and critical thinking of the subject matter. Assigned readings should be completed before class.
- Assignments (25%) — Assignments will involve writings, drawings or other activities based on in-class workshops that feed into the final zine project. [Assignment Guidelines](#).
- Final Project (50%)

Group Agreement / Code of Conduct

As a class, we will create a group agreement that addresses respect and etiquette in the classroom. Students will be responsible for maintaining this standard throughout the semester. MIT has a variety of students with different backgrounds and cultures. With this comes varying amounts of privilege and awareness, so it is important that we practice patience and empathy in the classroom. We must all continuously learn, be open to criticism, develop a consciousness about these discrepancies, and actively seek equity and allyship in the classroom and beyond.

COURSE PART 1 (FALL SEMESTER)

[Note: PDFs of readings can be found in this folder. In the event the web link is paywalled or otherwise inaccessible, please request access if you are in the course.](#)

Week 1 (Sept. 5): Introduction

Week 2 (Sept. 12): Racial Progress

Over 150 years after the end of slavery, more than 80% of Black adults say the legacy of slavery still affects Black Americans today.¹ The current era has been referred to as “post-racial”,² but racial disparities persist in all aspects of life from learning to walking down the street. So how much “racial progress” have we really made? We introduce the course by looking at how racial policies may have changed, but the lives of many Black people have not. We discuss how maybe new ideas of racism e.g. colorblindness are just as bad as the old ones, and how 21st-century racial oppression operates through insidious mechanisms that are more difficult to see and place. We discuss how contemporary systemic racism continues to be visible in the toll it takes on individual Black people, physically and emotionally.

References

1. (Skim) [The Negro Motorist's Green Book](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (15 min)
2. [“50 Years after Kerner” \(EPI\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — recaps progress on equity in last 50 years (1700 words - 11 minutes)
3. [How to be Antiracist: Chapter 1 “Definitions” \(read via Kindle free sample or PDF in folder\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (30 min)
4. [Living while Black \(CNN\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (browse or skim the links) — viral stories of Black people being reported to police (max 15 minutes)
5. [Cooper: Being a Black woman in America \(NBC\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — personal essay (900 words - 6 min)
6. [The \(colorblind\) defense \(WaPo\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — the origins of “I don’t see race” (1000 words - 7 min)
7. [“Black America Again” \(Common ft. Stevie Wonder\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — song on black mobility today (6 min)
8. (Optional) [Race in America — Introduction \(Pew\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — survey on perceptions of race (2900 words - 20 min)
9. (Optional) [Film: 13th \(2016\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — incarceration as new Jim Crow (1 hour 40 min)

Estimated Time: 1 hour

Discussion

1. How have the mechanisms through which racism operates changed over time?
2. In what ways can racism be hidden through rhetoric and perspective? Explain by coming up with your own examples of the “colorblind defense” from recent pop culture/politics/media.
3. What are areas where progress on racial inequities has stalled in the last century? How do realities differ from conversation/narrative in these areas?
4. What do stories about “living while black” add to our understanding about the Black experience in the U.S. today?
5. How do authors such as Brittney Cooper relate ideas of race with individual freedom versus structural disadvantage?

¹ Horowitz, Juliana Menasce, et al. “Views on Race in America 2019.” *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project*, Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project, 14 June 2019, www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/04/09/race-in-america-2019/.

² Harvey, Paul. “Post-Racial America? Not Yet.” *Books and Culture*, 2009, www.booksandculture.com/articles/webexclusives/2008/november/081103.html.

Week 3 (Sept. 19): Birthing while Black Pt. 1 In the U.S., Black infants are more than twice as likely to die as white infants, and Black women die at three to four times the rate of white mothers.³ This week, we consider the effects of structural racism on creating a family while Black. We look at how infant mortality is exacerbated by structural inequalities, such as disparities in healthcare and discrimination in the medical field. We seek to understand how systemic barriers faced by Black women over a lifetime become a question of life and death.

References

1. [A Life-or-Death Crisis \(NYT\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — overview of research on Black birthing (10057 words - 1 hour)
2. [America is failing its Black mothers. \(Harvard Health\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — newer research (5375 words - 36 min)
3. [Cotton: I Was Pregnant and in Crisis. All the Doctors and Nurses Saw Was an Incompetent Black Woman \(Time\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (1700 words - 11 min)

Estimated Time: 1 hours 47 min

Week 4 (Sept. 26): Birthing while Black Pt. 2

References

4. [As a black mother, my parenting is always political \(Nation\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — looks back at history of black motherhood and ahead at raising children (4224 words - 28 min)
5. TED Talk: [The Problem with Race-Based Medicine](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — racial bias in medicine (14 min)
6. Photo Essay: [The Black midwives changing care](#) ([Public Link](#)) ([Asana Link](#)) — a cultural respect-based clinic (1880 words + 15 min for pictures, 28 min total)
7. [How to be Antiracist: "My Racist Introduction" \(10 pages\), "Chapter 2: Dueling Consciousness" \(11 pages\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (21 pages) (Please purchase the book as specified in the email sent to the class)
8. (Optional) [Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism](#) ([Asana Link](#))
9. (Optional) [If AI is going to be the world's doctor, it needs better textbooks](#) ([Asana Link](#))

Estimated Time: 1 hours 10 minutes

Discussion

1. How is the Black birthing crisis an issue of justice? How do the health challenges faced by Black mothers relate to freedom and autonomy? What individual rights are threatened by the Black birthing crisis?
2. How has racism colored public response to the issue of Black birthing, from public perception/awareness to governmental policies to medical treatment/research?
3. How do issues raised by the Black birthing crisis affect other aspects of Black life? Can you find other examples of "weathering" and its impact on Black health over a lifetime?
4. How and why do historical stereotypes continue to affect the healthcare of black patients?

³ Villarosa, Linda. "Why America's Black Mothers and Babies Are in a Life-or-Death Crisis." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 11 Apr. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/04/11/magazine/black-mothers-babies-death-maternal-mortality.html.

Week 5 (Oct. 3): Breathing while Black Pt. 1

African Americans and other people of color breathe 38% more polluted air than whites in terms of nitrous oxide (which comes from car exhaust and industrial fumes).⁴ Black people in the U.S. are susceptible to worse air quality, unclean water and polluted environments. A 2007 report found that conditions were worsening in terms of the proximity of Black communities to hazardous waste sites, mainly due to weakening government regulation and lack of environmental justice infrastructure.⁵ This week, we study how the legacy of segregation and other structural disadvantages directly impact the way Black people breath and drink. We seek to understand how racism remains present in invisible forms — as particulate matter in the air or toxic material in the water — that deeply impact the well-being of Black communities.

References

1. Song: [Mercy Mercy Me \(Marvin Gaye\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (11 min)
2. [Five things to know about environmental justice \(American Progress\)](#) ([Asana Link](#))— overview (800 words - 5 min)
3. [If you want clean water, don't be black \(CityLab\)](#) ([Asana Link](#))— water issues, data-focused (1600 words - 10 min)
4. [Fighting environmental racism in North Carolina \(New Yorker\)](#) ([Asana Link](#))— toxic waste sites (1500 words - 10 min)
5. [How to be Antiracist: "Chapter 3: Power" \(9 pages\), "Chapter 4: Biology" \(12 pages\)](#) ([Asana Link](#))

Estimated time: 36 minutes

Week 6 (Oct. 10): Breathing while Black Pt. 2

References

6. [Being black in America can be hazardous to your health \(Atlantic\)](#) ([Asana Link](#))— profile of Baltimore woman (7500 words - 50 min)
7. [Crumbling pipes, tainted water](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (4000 words - 26 min)
8. Song: [Till It's Done \(D'Angelo and The Vanguard\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (4 min)
9. Video: [Environmental Racism is the New Jim Crow](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (1.4 min)
10. [Black Bodies. Green Spaces \(NYT\)](#) ([Asana Link](#))— op-ed paired with artist's photo series (1740 words - 12 min)
11. [How to be Antiracist: "Chapter 5: Ethnicity" \(13 pages\), "Chapter 6: Body" \(12 pages\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (25 pages)

Estimate time: 1 hour 34 minutes

Discussion:

1. What are ways in which Black Americans have created oral histories and knowledge around environmental justice in the absence of governmental policies or scientific research?
2. In what ways is environmental racism visible versus invisible? What factors determine its visibility?
3. What does the environmental justice movement tell us about the Black community's historical and present relationship to nature?

⁴ Townes, Carimah. "Why Air Pollution Is A Racial Issue." *ThinkProgress*, 7 Apr. 2014, thinkprogress.org/why-air-pollution-is-a-racial-issue-745d90a8c8f9/.

⁵ "Toxic Wastes and Race and Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty." *United Church of Christ*, 2017, www.ucc.org/environmental-ministries_toxic-waste-20.

4. Discuss how the issue of Breathing while Black ties into some of the other issues we consider in this course (such as Birthing or Sleeping). What cycles and feedback loops are created between these issues?
5. What does the public response to the issues of Breathing while Black reveal about the challenges Black communities face in achieving fair media narratives, governmental representation or medical treatment?

Week 7 (Oct. 17) — Sleeping while Black Pt. 1: Fewer Black Americans are able to sleep for the recommended six to nine nightly hours than any other ethnic group in the United States.⁶ The sleep gap can be traced back to the time of slavery, when slave owners enforced sleep deprivation, and is exacerbated today by the many environmental stressors Black people face. By studying sleep, we look at how systemic inequity (in healthcare, in schools, in the workplace) becomes manifested within the body — and we discuss what it takes to recover or escape from these constraints.

References

1. [The sleep gap and racial inequality \(The Atlantic\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — overview article (5600 words - 37 min)
2. [Study on race and sleep \(WaPo\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — newer studies (1200 words - 8 min)
3. [Reparations for Black People Should Include Rest \(Vice\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) & [Black Power Naps](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (2200 words + 15 minutes browsing, 29 min total)
4. [An Inequality Stretching Back to Slavery \(LA Times\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — historical context (1500 words - 10 min)
5. [How to be Antiracist: “Chapter 7: Culture” \(11 pages\), “Chapter 8: Behavior” \(15 pages\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (26 pages)

Estimated time: 1 hour 25 min

Week 8 (Oct. 24) — Sleeping while Black Pt. 2:

References

6. [Napping While Black \(& Other Transgressions\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — op-ed on the Yale arrest (1200 words - 8 min)
7. ["Loitering Is Delightful" by Ross Gay \(Paris Review\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (900 words - 6 min)
8. [Do race-based stressors explain the achievement gap? \(Science Daily\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (1100 words - 8 min)
9. Audio: [Freakonomics - The economics of sleep](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — Brownsville case study, Sherman James interview (45 min)
10. [How to be Antiracist: “Chapter 9: Color” \(15 pages\), “Chapter 10: White” \(14 pages\) “Chapter 11: Black” \(15 pages\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (44 pages)

Estimated time: 1 hour 7 min

Discussion

1. How is the Black sleep gap, and the “right to do nothing”, tied to the history of race in the country?

⁶ Reiss, Benjamin. “Op-Ed: African Americans Don’t Sleep as Well as Whites, an Inequality Stretching Back to Slavery.” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 23 Apr. 2017, www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-reiss-race-sleep-gap-20170423-story.html.

2. How is the contemporary racial sleep gap related to larger systemic stressors experienced by Black people?
3. How are perceptions of the “right to rest” shaped by race? How do stereotypes of Blackness influence the way Black rest is understood?
4. What are ways the writers/artists we read about this week reclaiming the right to rest?
5. How does a lack of rest limit Black mobility in other areas of life?

Week 9 (Oct. 31) — Eating while Black Pt. 1: The age-adjusted prevalence of high blood pressure in Black people is 42% (compared to 30% for white people).⁷ At the same time that black families are proportionately more than twice as likely to be food insecure (22%) as white families (9%).⁸ This week examines racial disparities through the lens of food — we link the contemporary norms around food in Black communities to the how the history of slavery influenced black diets and how the aftermath of Jim Crow affected food access. We seek to understand how the daily act of eating continues to be shaped by racial discrimination, and contribute to widening racial disparities.

References:

1. Video: [Gospel Brunch \(SNL\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (6 min)
2. Video: [Soul Food \(Black-ish\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (5 min)
3. [Southern Diet Blamed For High Rates Of Hypertension Among Black Americans \(NPR\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (1200 words — 8 min)
4. [Birmingham's Hot Restaurant Scene Won't Fix Its Food Deserts](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (2500 words — 17 min)
5. [Fast Food Chains Disproportionately Target Black Children \(Atlantic\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (1000 words — 7 min)

Estimated time: 55 minutes

Week 10 (Nov. 7) — Eating while Black Pt. 2:

References:

1. [The sugar that saturates the American diet...](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (4800 words — 32 min)
2. [Black salt \(Slate\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (1300 words — 9 min)
3. [Black vegans step out](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (2200 words — 15 min)
4. [Want to eradicate hunger in America? Take on racism](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (1800 — 12 min)
5. [How to be Antiracist: “Chapter 12: Class” \(15 pages\), “Chapter 13: Space” \(15 pages\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (30 pages)
6. (Optional) [Audio: Fried Chicken \(Atlantic\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (47 min)

Estimated time: 1 hour 8 minutes

Discussion:

⁷ Obasogie, Osagie K. “Blacks and Salt: Should the Dietary Guidelines Single out African-Americans for Low-Sodium Diets?” *Slate Magazine*, Slate, 18 Apr. 2011, slate.com/technology/2011/04/blacks-and-salt-should-the-dietary-guidelines-single-out-african-americans-for-low-sodium-diets.html.

⁸ Kaufmann, Greg. “Want to Eradicate Hunger in America? Take on Racism.” *The Nation*, 4 Feb. 2019, www.thenation.com/article/hunger-food-insecurity-racism-mariana-chilton/.

1. How do diets in the Black community contribute to negative lifestyle outcomes, such as in terms of health or performance?
2. How have diets in the Black community been shaped by historical and present racial disparities, such as housing practices or direct racism?
3. Examine the ways in which institutional responses to food issues in the Black community have failed to acknowledge the larger shaping forces of racism.
4. What do issues related to food tell us about how the effects of discrimination tie together multiple topics we have studied — such as tying food to sleep to housing etc.

Week 11 (Nov. 14) — Walking while Black Pt. 1: “All the white people move away from me when I’m walking to school,” says Nicole Fleetwood’s eighth grade son in her essay “Raising a Black boy not to be afraid.” Studies show that Black boys, even at a young age, report feeling unsafe when walking. In this unit, we read first-hand accounts and research studies to understand how larger barriers of social and economic mobility can be felt viscerally and physically while walking. We look at how the policing of Black people in public, neighborhood segregation, and other issues converge to make Black people feel fearful being outside.

References

1. [Walking While Black \(LitHub\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — essay mixing experience and scholarship (4400 words - 29 min)
2. [Walking While Black \(ProPublica\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — study of racially biased pedestrian ticketing (1700 words - 11 min)
3. [Walking while Black in the “White Gaze” \(NYT\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — Obama era race relations (2250 words - 15 min)
4. Poem: [“You And Your Partner aka Babysitting” by Claudia Rankine](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — half page poem (15 min)
5. Art: [The Peril of Black Mobility](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — about William Pope.L’s crawling performances (1700 words - 11 min)
6. [How to be Antiracist: “Chapter 14: Gender” \(12 pages\), “Chapter 15: Sexuality” \(8 pages\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (20 pages)
7. (Optional) Excerpt from [Open City: a Novel \(Teju Cole\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — first-hand account

Estimate time: 1 hour 21 min

Week 12 (Nov. 21) — Walking while Black Pt. 2:

References

8. [Walking while black in Ferguson \(LA Times\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (1200 words 9 min)
9. [Raising a Black boy not to be afraid \(Lithub\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) — personal essay in response to data (3500 words - 23 min)
10. [The White Space \(Elijah Anderson\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) Sections: “The Black Space”, “The White Space” (pages 11-15) — sociology paper about white spaces (1500 words - 10 min)
11. [As Cameras Track Detroit Residents, a Debate Over Racial Bias Ensues](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (2000 words - 13 min)
12. [How to be Antiracist: “Chapter 16: Failure” \(16 pages\), “Chapter 17: Success” \(11 pages\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (27 pages)

13. (Optional) [Beggars Can't Be Choosers](#) ([Asana Link](#))

Estimated Time: 54 min

Discussion

1. How do various first-person authors discuss the physical and psychological experiences of walking while Black? How have their experiences affected their identity and self-perception?
2. What is the significance of walking? How do these authors relate the right to walk to freedom, safety and personhood?
3. Who becomes involved in the policing of Black pedestrians? Consider how Fleetwood and Rankine's pieces discuss policing, as performed by the police and by individuals and even by parents.
4. How is the policing of Black pedestrians tied to control of public spaces?

Week 13 (Dec. 5) — Fall Course Wrap-Up

References

1. [Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (8000 words - 53 min)
2. [Science: The 'Colorblind' Approach to Racism Doesn't Work](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (1700 words - 11 min)
3. [W.E.B Dubois' Data Portraits](#) (skim) ([Asana Link](#)) (15 min)
4. Anchor Text: [The Negro Motorist's Green Book](#) (skim) ([Asana Link](#)) (15 min)
5. [How to be Antiracist: "Chapter 18: Survival" \(11 pages\)](#) ([Asana Link](#)) (27 pages)
6. (Optional) [How Politicians Use the Civil Rights Movement to Obscure Ongoing Racism](#) ([Asana Link](#))
7. (Optional) [How Racism Relies on Arbitrary Hierarchies \(Lithub\)](#) ([Asana Link](#))

Estimate time: 2 hours 5 min