

# When the archive sings to you: SNCC and the atmospheric politics of race

*cultural geographies*  
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## Abstract

Through our engagement with the 'Freedom Singers', we advocate for approaching the archive through the racial politics of atmosphere to understand both the affective, emotion-laden practices of the past and the affective work carried out by contemporary researchers within the archive. This atmosphere provides an important pathway for identifying and analyzing the relationality and encounters that advance a fuller study of the black experience and define what (and who) constitutes critical actors in that story. The Freedom Singers and their politico-musical legacy, while lost to many members of the public and even many scholars, offer an important lesson in broadening our appreciation of civil rights practice, as well as the practice of archival research itself. This piece contributes to broader understandings of the archive as an affective space and the role of affect in analyzing archive materials.

## Keywords

affect, atmosphere, civil rights, emotional justice, race

## 'Discovering' the freedom singers

The Freedom Singers arose out of the mass meeting culture of the US Civil Rights Movement (CRM) of the 1960s, when dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of activists and interested community members would gather for rallies and sing African-American spirituals and protest songs.<sup>1</sup> Music long played an important role in the CRM as a way to raise spirits, occupy audiences while speakers ran late, and drown out the racist insults of white supremacist protestors.<sup>2</sup> The Freedom Singers formed in December 1962, inspired by a suggestion from folk singer Peter Seeger after

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**Image 1.** Pamphlet advertising the Freedom Singers recording on Mercury Records.

hearing the performance of four African-American students from Albany State College. Seeger suggested to James Foreman, a prominent organizer within the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), that the Albany group should travel across the country, singing protest songs, bringing attention to the movement, and perhaps most importantly raising funds for SNCC's voter registration drives and direct actions against racial segregation in the United States. Over a span of 9 months in 1963, Freedom Singers Cordell Reagon, Bernice Johnson, Rutha Harris, and Charles Neblett traveled 50,000 miles across 40 states.<sup>3</sup> They performed at colleges, elementary and high schools, concert halls, living rooms, jails, political rallies, and ultimately at the March on Washington in August 1963. The musical group contributed to a live folk festival album and recorded a studio album with Mercury Records, before disbanding because of other commitments (Image 1).<sup>4</sup>

Until conducting archival work at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City in Summer 2017, we knew little of the Freedom Singers. This is perhaps not surprising,

given the scant attention that SNCC has received within geography, even among those few who study the CRM. While this short-lived musical group fulfilled important promotional and philanthropic objectives, their artistic practices represent much more and relate powerfully to the growing interest in atmosphere, emotion, and affect among cultural geographers.<sup>5</sup> In particular, the Freedom Singers illustrate the role that music and musical performance played in creating a collective sense of purpose and in countering the apprehension and uncertainty that permeated many of the CRM's most violent and dangerous moments.<sup>6</sup> They also demonstrate music's capacity, as a material and political practice, to appropriate and transform the 'atmosphere' of fear and intimidation central to the perpetuation of white supremacy.<sup>7</sup>

Our exploration of the Freedom Singers in and through the archive raises questions about the analysis of music as a form of civil rights activism, the atmospheric politics of (anti)racism, and the archive's role in recovering what Katherine McKittrick calls a 'black sense of place'.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, the archive is not simply a record of past emotion and affect, and the Freedom Singers prompt us as two white male scholars to reflect critically on how we understand, use, and interpret the archive and how these archival moments in turn affect us. Following the work of scholars examining 'the capacity of record keeping processes, or of records or the physical place of the archives to engender psychological and physiological responses in those who encounter them',<sup>9</sup> we reflect here on the affective turn in archive research and the role of affect and emotion in understanding the archive (Image 2).

As we have suggested elsewhere, archives have an affective capacity and power, allowing researchers to connect with and hopefully do justice to the emotional historical geographies of marginalized groups.<sup>10</sup> Our archival engagement with the Freedom Singers prompted us to (re) consider the important and largely under-analyzed role of emotion and affect within geographies of race relations, something clearly recognized by other scholars as well.<sup>11</sup> The political potency of white supremacy, while certainly supported by *de jure* discrimination and violence, also relies upon the active creation of an atmosphere to affect negatively and often brutally the psychological well-being, sense of dignity, and sense of belonging of people of color.<sup>12</sup> The affective power of this atmosphere has roots in a wider historical geography of racialized violence, inequality, and debasement that African Americans experienced generationally and came to anticipate as a fact of life.<sup>13</sup> But the power of these atmospheric politics of racism was never complete, and it was through key practices, including the singing of the Freedom Singers, that affective control of white supremacy could be challenged, if only temporarily, through the creation of an atmosphere of black defiance, hope and self-determination. Our time in the archives with the Freedom Singers offered us an opportunity to enliven and breathe emotion and feeling into our understanding of the work and experiences undergirding civil rights protest. Admittedly, as scholars who have not directly experienced the racism that we study, these affective aspects of the CRM might seem revelatory to us, while being ordinary and well known to colleagues of color and to those activists who lived and continue to live in vulnerable communities. Nonetheless, we hope that what we present here helps drive home how *and that* being black in America has *always* been an emotionally (and politically) charged existence and that resistance can also involve often joyous acts like singing.

## Affective archive research

Our emphasis on affect flows from work by Deleuze and Guattari, who argue that affect is a 'bloc of sensations that is to say a compound of percepts and affects'.<sup>14</sup> Our insights into the affective politics of (anti)racism and civil rights activism connect with their focus on three key elements or sensations that 'function as a material force intensity affecting bodies as affect':<sup>15</sup> resonance, vibration, and distension. Being attentive to these three elements is important for any scholar entering the archive and in particular for those, like us, who focus on how antiracist atmospheres form



**Image 2.** Pamphlet advertising a Freedom Singers concert at Howard University.

culturally and historically, how these atmospheres structure race-based social practices, and how we as scholars connect with and engage the archive materially and intellectually. Below, we discuss how we worked through SNCC's archival traces and how these traces affected us in terms of vibration, resonance, and distension. As we suggest, engaging the Freedom Singers was not a mere process of collecting data, especially since we stumbled upon this musical group while looking for different information at the time. We entered the archives at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture with the intent of locating background information on SNCC's Research Department and specifically that department's role in collecting and analyzing geospatial data and information as part of SNCC's battle against white supremacy. This unexpected but rewarding engagement with the Freedom Singers came by virtue of our own bodily, emotional, and political interactions with these archival collections. In this respect, the archive was not just a vehicle for understanding the political-emotive atmospheres of the past that SNCC workers created through music but also

intimately involved in creating the atmosphere within which we worked and understood civil rights themselves.

Brian Ott, in working through the idea of affect, explains that the concept of vibration is a ‘simple sensation’ that is more ‘nervous’ than ‘cerebral’ and that is reflected in the rhythmic oscillations in bodies and objects.<sup>16</sup> The archive’s vibration is an experience to which most cultural geographers can relate. When one enters the archive for the first time, there is a sense of anticipation and nervous energy that comes from what has previously been unknowable, at least to oneself. As we physically handled, combed through, and read the SNCC archives, the Freedom Singers evoked an affective turn within us, prompting us to dig deeper into their musical activism amidst the mass of collected documents and photographs. Perhaps the vibration to delve deeper came from the sensation of encountering something we did not know about and expect, or perhaps we were moved by our false initial assumption that information about a musical group was somehow out of place in an archive largely devoted to the political work of voter registration campaigns in the Deep South. As we turned the pages and read the source material, however, the nervous energy of entering the archive and encountering something unexpected was transformed into a palpable need to know the Freedom Singers’ story and significance to the CRM itself.

The second affect that Ott describes and which we found important to understanding how we came to see and interact with the Freedom Singers archives is resonance. According to Ott, ‘two sensations resonate with each other so tightly in a clinch of what are no more than energies’.<sup>17</sup> Explaining the concept, he argues that it is important to think about how resonance can refer to the way excitation can be transferred across bodies, the capacity to excite or be excited. Of course, in the archive when one finds a key piece of evidence or a document that opens up new ways of thinking, this event can excite the researcher. However, we argue for a deeper reading of the concept, one that attends to the archive’s affective capacities. Before entering the archive, it is impossible to know exactly how the materials – particular phrases, documents, and photographs – will come together and catalyze a particular set of affective responses. Despite its strict catalogued appearance, archives, in reality, are loose collections of de-contextualized and seemingly unconnected materials organized into broad thematic folders or categories. This physical order can create a setting in which different archival traces resonate with each other for researchers, moving scholars beyond their original narrow focus to engage more broadly and more relationally with the human experiences archived in primary source materials.

Our realization of the Freedom Singers’ political, antiracist importance was not made by simply locating isolated mentions of these SNCC activists within the archival record. Instead, the affective resonance of the Freedom Singers came from the manner in which their archival records were physically found alongside and squarely in the middle of the same subject folders that held strategy documents for the grass-roots, community organizing that we have come to associate with SNCC. As we worked and moved through the archive, finding musical concerts advertised and discussed just pages away from inventories of businesses to boycott provoked us to see relationships between civil rights activities that we had previously not thought about in relation. In particular, through the very process of working in the SNCC archives and being affected by this process, we were able to push against conventional framings of civil rights resistance as only those moments that involved overt, public demonstration or direct action projects. The Freedom Singers’ unexpected situating within SNCC’s broader political archive prompted us to consider the critical question of how musical performance was *part of* rather than *apart from* the larger universe of activist work and strategizing by SNCC.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Freedom Singers’ archival traces have prompted us to work through the idea of distension, or the way in which ‘two sensations draw apart, release themselves’, and become a kind of ‘void that sinks between them’.<sup>18</sup> This affective state is related



**Image 3.** Leaflet advertising the freedom singers and their work on behalf of SNCC.

to the fact that despite our best efforts, the archive is only ever partially knowable not only because of the separation of time and distance but also because of our own positionality. The Freedom Singers resonated with us in a particular kind of way *because of* our initial ignorance, an ignorance that partially stems from our own life experiences and engagements. Those who come to know SNCC or the CRM more broadly through lived experience or even stories told from one generation to another might not have been surprised to find material about singing alongside material about boycotting. This situation raises interesting questions about not only archives' reproduction of material displacements but also their affective resonance. As McKittrick argues, contemporary understandings of blackness and geography often locate black subjects as 'naturally dispossessed', and this positioning has the effect 'of making black geographies disappear'<sup>19</sup> and marginalizing the perspectives and contributions of black people to the making of space and place. Our experience in the archive demonstrates that ignoring the full range of cultural practices central to surviving and resisting white supremacy led us to almost miss an opportunity to more explicitly and fully define a black sense of place. As a result, we see the Freedom Singers as an invitation to expand upon not only our conceptualization of the labor of civil rights activists but also, through the archive collection around the Freedom Singers, our conceptualization of the emotional geographies that are part and parcel of archival work and collections (Image 3).

## Toward an atmospheric engagement with the archive

McKittrick argues that black geographies are in danger of disappearing because of the ways that contemporary geographic scholarship renders 'the spaces of the dispossessed (black geographies) always and already violent and violated'.<sup>20</sup> To work against this loss of black humanity, she argues for a focus on how human relationality itself provides an outline to understand 'difficult histories of encounter' which can be 'sites through which 'co-operative human efforts' can take place and have place'. We have advocated here for engaging the archive through the racial politics of atmosphere to

understand both the affective, emotion-laden practices of the past and the affective work carried out by contemporary researchers within the archive. This atmosphere provides an important pathway for identifying and analyzing the relationality and encounters that advance a fuller study of the black experience and define what (and who) constitutes critical actors in that story. The Freedom Singers and their politico-musical legacy offer an important lesson in broadening our appreciation of civil rights practice and the practice of archival research itself. Drawing on our experience of unexpectedly encountering the Freedom Singers in the archives, we call on cultural geography to take the emotion, affect, and atmosphere of the archive seriously in our analysis and understandings.

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